

The World Turned Upside Down

Book 6 of *A Well-Lived Life 3*

by Michael Loucks

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First publication date: TBD

First revision publication date: TBD

Second revision publicantion date: TBD

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I. Who Was That Man?

December 24, 2002, Christmas Eve, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"MOM!" I screamed. "MOM! COME QUICK! IT'S DAD! HE FAINTED!"

I'd seen him sag to the floor, and he was leaning against the jamb, with some strange guy asking him if he was OK. I hurried over to Dad and he looked dazed. A few seconds later, both my moms came running to the foyer along with everyone else.

"Kara, get my bag from our room! Quick!" Mom said to Mom.

Mom dashed away and up the stairs.

"Steve?" my mom the doctor said to Dad. "Steve!"

"Sir, what happened?" Suzanne asked the guy at the door.

"I'm not sure," the guy said. "I was talking to him, he turned pale, sagged, and slid down along the frame of the door.

"What did you say?!" Mom the doctor demanded.

"I'm not sure I should share it with anyone else," he said.

"I'm OK, Jess," Dad said, sounding a bit weak and groggy.

"I'll decide that!" Mom the doctor said fiercely.

"I can stand," Dad said, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"Don't you dare!" Mom the doctor said fiercely.

My other mom came back with the black doctor's bag and Mom the doctor took out her stethoscope and blood pressure cuff and checked on dad. She said his pulse was 80, which was high, and his blood pressure was 80/50, which was low, even for him. I remembered what Grandpa Al and Doctor Mary had said, and in a couple minutes, both those would change, and his pulse would be in the low 60s and his BP up to 90/60.

"Jess, it's clearing," Dad said. "Help me up and to my study. Ask Mr. Samet to come in. I'll explain after I talk to him."

"What happened?" Mom the doctor demanded to know.

"Not now, Jess," Dad said. "I'm fine."

"No, you are not!" Mom said fiercely. "You had a syncopal episode! You haven't had one in a long time."

"I know," Dad replied. "Can we move inside and close the door, please? And invite Mr. Samet in."

My moms helped Dad stand up and move inside, and the stranger stepped into the house. I closed the door behind him, and look suspiciously at him, wondering what he'd said to Dad that had caused Dad to have what Mom called a 'syncopal event'.

"I can walk to my study," Dad said. "Please, this is very important and I have to speak to Mr. Samet alone."

"He's serious, Jess," Mom said. "Maybe you should let him?"

"Do I tell you how to handle polymer experiments?" Mom snapped at Mom.

"Jess, please," I said. "I need to do this. It's critically important."

"What's more important than your health?"

"Nothing, but I'm home, you're here, and Mr. Samet will call you if there's a problem. Please, Jess."

"Mom, I think we should," Albert interjected. "It has to be very important, or he'd listen to you."

Mom fumed, but she was outnumbered, and eventually we walked Dad to his study, and Albert brought Mr. Samet in. Once they were both sitting in the big leather chairs, I offered tea or coffee, but they both declined and everyone left the room, closing the doors behind us.

 Steve

"Are you OK?" Steve Samet asked once we were sitting in my study.

"I have a minor medical condition and one of the ways it manifests is syncopal episodes -- fainting spells. My wife is a trauma surgeon and is obviously concerned, but doctors at Mayo, Johns Hopkins, and Karolinska in Sweden don't believe it's life-threatening. It happens when my blood glucose is around what is normal for most people and I receive shocking information."

"I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't have just blurted that out, but you were suspicious and I suspected you were about to send me away."

"I was. You're going to have to explain how you ended up here, and not at my dad's house."

"Because the only document my private investigator has found so far with his name on it, along with an address, is this house. We found a marriage license in Los Angeles, but it was a dead-end because there were no property records with his name in California."

It dawned on me just then that literally everything was either in my mom's name as Judy Deye, or if my dad *had* to put his name on something, he'd used 'Ray Deye'. And I knew he'd used corporations, such as X&B Investment Corporation, to keep his name off many things. I wondered, then, why he'd allowed his name on the deed to the house. That was an interesting question to ask in the future.

"You're going to have to explain how we get from point A to point B," I said.

"Do you believe me?"

"I don't disbelieve you," I replied. "I need more information to evaluate your claim."

"I was born out of wedlock in January 1950 to Marion Fitz and Lewis B. Hano. They married in September of that year. They divorced when I was around five and my mom married Gilbert Samet, and my surname was changed. I don't remember much about my birth dad, and Mom wasn't interested in helping me find him, so I started with what I knew -- his name and birthdate, and his New York residence. So little is stored in computers, so it took quite a bit of work in archives, but eventually the investigator found enough information to connect Lewis B. Hano with Lewis B. Tobias.

"His name was changed from Tobias to Hano when his mother, our grandmother, remarried, though there is quite a bit we can't figure out. There is some evidence he was in an orphanage at some point. We also found that our grandfather married our grandmother about two months after his first wife died of Spanish Flu, and our dad, if you'll allow me to call him that, was born five months later."

"Oops."

"Yeah. Anyway, I tracked down some military records, but then everything disappeared, and there was no record at all of Lewis B. Hano anywhere. The investigator found some tenuous link between a man named Ray Adams and Lewis Hano, and when birthdates, birthplaces, and other information lined up, and through the internet site ancestry.com, he finally found the marriage certificate in Los Angeles County, along with your birth certificate and that of your brother. I guess you have a sister, too."

And he didn't find hers in Los Angeles County because she was born in Palm Springs, which was in Riverside County. Remembering that triggered a memory of my first NASCAR race at Riverside Raceway. I quickly pushed that aside and concentrated on the topic at hand.

"If all of that is true," I said, "then you know my mom's name, and should have been able to track her down. Or my brother."

"The PI said that despite searching, he found zero references to 'Ray Adams' in any public records, and wasn't sure where he might have landed, or if he was still married. Because that was a dead end, he followed your trail, which was easy. He found you in Chicago, and turned up the deed for this house, which actually has your dad's name on it. The PI called me with the information

yesterday, and I drove down from Michigan to see you face-to-face. Had that not worked, we'd have followed your brother's trail."

Which, if they could search criminal records, would have led him directly to my dad, as Jeff still lived at home.

"I'm going to guess you have a report from the PI that documents everything you just told me?"

"Yes."

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but what exactly do you want?" I asked.

"Nothing other than to meet my dad. If I could have done it without disturbing you, I would have."

"And the rest of your family?"

"Estranged," Mr. Samet said. "I haven't seen my stepdad or my mom in over twenty years, nor my siblings."

"You'll pardon me if I find this all a bit far-fetched."

"And yet, your tone and demeanor say you think what I'm saying might be credible, and you're trying to decide what to do."

"If what you say is true, it paints a very different picture of my dad than the one he's related to me, but more importantly, what he told my mom. If all of this turns out to be true, it could blow apart my parents' marriage. Is it that important to you?"

"If you were in my shoes, what would YOU do?" he asked.

"That's a damned good question," I replied. "I suspect I wouldn't be able to let it go. When was the last time you saw your dad?"

"Around 1953, or about ten years before you were born, because he and my mom separated. But you know what makes me certain?"

"No."

"Both our names are the same, albeit with alternate spelling."

"Which names?" I asked.

"You don't know?" he asked.

"Know what?"

"Your birth certificate originally read 'Steven Marc' but was corrected to 'Stephen Mark' about two months after you were born.

And with that, I knew he was right. There was no doubt in my mind.

"I didn't know that, but my Social Security Card, which was issued when I was a baby, something extremely rare in those days, had my name spelled 'M-A-R-C'. I had the SSA correct it a few years ago, to match my birth certificate."

"It was 'Steven Marc' there, too, but changed about the time your birth certificate was changed. They obviously made an error correcting it."

"Son of a bitch," I said, shaking my head. "You're not going to let it go, I'm sure, and figuring out where he is would be a hop, skip, and a jump now that you've confirmed my identity and his. Will you do something for me?"

"What's that?" Mr. Samet asked.

"Agree to not make this public? That is, don't link anything on ancestry.com, and don't reveal it to anyone else? If you agree, I'll see if I can arrange for you to meet my dad, and we'll find out the truth together."

"I have no reason to out him or reveal anything. When could I meet him?"

"Ultimately, it'll be up to him if he wants to meet you. If he says 'no', what will you do?"

"I suppose I have to honor that. Do you think he'll refuse?"

"I think if I set up a completely private meeting that nobody knows about but you, me, and him, there's a good chance he'll say 'yes'. I'll speak to him and see what he has to say. If he's amenable, I'll arrange a completely private meeting for the three of us."

"That would work."

"OK. Let me have your contact information, I'll speak to him today and try to set up the meeting."

"What are you going to say?"

"I suppose the best approach is to say that someone approached me with a proposition and I felt he should listen to it. A bit of subterfuge, but I think he'll forgive me for that. If he says 'yes', I'll get some proposed dates from him and get in touch with you."

"I can accept that, and I promise no matter what happens, to not violate anyone's privacy or do anything that would wreck your parents' marriage. What will you tell your wife?"

It wasn't 'wife', it was 'wives', which presented an interesting set of challenges, as did telling my daughter. I didn't like keeping secrets, though some had to be kept. I trusted my wives, but this information was like a container of nitroglycerin, and one small bobble might set it off.

"That's tricky, and I'm not sure. I need to think about it."

"I'll leave you, because I want to get back to Michigan."

"I'm somewhat surprised you traveled on Christmas Eve."

"You don't know that, either?"

It dawned on me, and was something I'd speculated about, and now I knew.

"You're Jewish, and so was your Dad."

"Yes."

"You just clarified something I suspected, at least based on the family name."

"Our grandfather was Jewish, and our great grandparents on our grandmother's side were Russian Jews who emigrated."

"Damn!" I said, shaking my head.

"What?"

"I have a number of Russian friends, many of them made before the Berlin Wall came down, and I never had an inkling I might have Russian blood."

"You're a true believer now?" Steve Samet asked.

"So many little things add up that did not add up before. I'm curious, but did you uncover anything about his military service or work for a government agency?"

"He was mustered out of the Naval Reserves in 1952, and his last assignment we can find was USS *Biddle*. As for government agencies, by which I'm sure you mean the CIA, that was the speculation the investigator made based on complete disappearance of records and not finding ANY records for Ray Adams or Lewis Hano between 1953 and 1961."

Dad had never mentioned *Biddle* and I wondered if that was part of some OSS subterfuge, or information I simply didn't have because Dad hadn't told me the whole story.

"I know some other details that fit," I said. "He met my mom in Las Vegas in 1961 and was there because he was friends with Cuban expatriates. I also met a man who met my dad in Cuba and knew him as Lewis B. Hano. So if we add our two stories together, I think that part is as he said. But the 1950s are a complete blank in everything I know, and allegedly he worked for the OSS, then the CIA."

"He had a TV business in New York after the war."

"I'm positive you made THAT connection?"

"Which?"

I laughed, "What are my dad's initials?"

"Oh crap!" Steve Samet exclaimed with a smile. "I missed that one! RCA!"

"Yeah," I replied with a smile of my own.

"I'll leave you to your holiday celebration. I'm assuming you're Christian?"

"Agnostic. Let me walk you out."

"Was the second blonde my half-sister?"

"No," I replied, hoping he'd drop it.

"OK. You're obviously being circumspect, and I get that, so I won't press. I very much appreciate you talking to me and being honest with me, and I've very sorry about causing you to faint."

"It's OK," I said. "I'm not sure it could have been avoided."

We got up, I walked him to the door, shook hands and walked to the sunroom and suppressed a sigh.

"Hi, Al," I said. "I'm fine."

"I'll be the judge of that! Your study, now!"

Fighting Al would only make things worse with Jessica, so I complied, and we went to my study where Al did a much more through exam.

"So?" I asked.

"Your vitals are in the normal range for you. Did you eat carbs this morning?"

"No. I had a few, and I mean few, last night in San Francisco because I was in the Admiral's Club and the selection was limited. I took propranolol proactively, and I slept fairly well on the red eye back to Chicago."

"Define 'few'."

"An apple with my first meal of cold cuts and cheese, with a slice of whole grain bread, that was around 5:00pm. Then around 9:00pm, a banana, cold cuts, cheese, and a slice of whole grain bread. No soda, no desserts, no candy, no cookies. Only water to drink, though I didn't drink anything on the flight because I slept, so I might be a bit dehydrated. I did drink water and a mug of tea with my breakfast of bacon and eggs."

"That's the complete truth?" Al asked.

"Yes. I followed my diet strictly in San Francisco. I even passed on the fantastic bread that Ruth's Chris serves, and had a double order of broccoli, substituting for the potatoes. I also had a decent amount of exercise."

"Then what in the seven hells caused you to have a syncopal episode?"

"Al, I can't share that," I said firmly.

"Who was that guy you just walked out?"

"His name is Steve Samet, and I just met him today. I can't tell you more."

"Why not?"

"Answering that would tell you more. I honestly cannot say."

"Steve, you know me," Al said. "I won't judge and I won't violate your privacy."

"If I tell you, you cannot repeat this to a single person, ever. I mean that. You can't even mention it to me unless I bring it up first."

"What the hell?" he asked.

"Do you agree?"

"Yes. Call it doctor-patient confidentiality because it caused a medical incident."

"Barring a deception worthy of the KGB or MI6 on their best days, the man who was just here is my half-brother."

"What?!" Al asked, his face showing extreme surprise.

"You heard me," I said. "Everything lines up and it appears my dad was married in the early 1950s, and had kids, at least one out of wedlock, under the name he said he used in Cuba, which, by the way, Felipe confirmed."

"You're sure this guy isn't some kind of fraudster?"

"Positive? No. But so much lines up."

"Out of wedlock?"

"He was born in January 1950 and my dad married his mom in September of that year."

"How did he link the names?"

"Something an investigator found on the website ancestry.com, which has old records, with more being added each day. Somehow he linked the names, then

traced the scarce facts to find my parents' marriage certificate. He couldn't find my dad because, well, of things I know about my dad, which I can't share. The investigator found my birth certificate, then found me, and found my dad's name on the deed, so Mr. Samet was sure he had come to the right place."

"I think I can see why you had an episode! What are you going to do?"

"If my dad agrees, set up a meeting for Thursday, and let my dad decide what to do after that. Maybe the guy is a fraudster, but if so, the story he spun won't help because if he isn't my dad's son, my dad will say so. Also, how hard would it be to actually track down my dad now that he knows where I live, and simply needs to trace my history, or locate my brother? The company website gives my bio and refers to Milford and Cincinnati, and names my dad as an investor and member of the Board, but with only basic details. Given that, how long do you think it would take someone to find my brother, who still lives with my parents?"

"Why didn't he go directly to your dad?"

"Everything was always in my mom's maiden name, or as 'Ray Deye'. My dad also used a corporation to hide ownership of businesses and properties. I always thought it was to keep his new identity hidden because of the CIA, but now I wonder."

"You think he was hiding from the previous family?"

"I don't know," I replied. "That's the key -- I don't know. But at this point, I'm basically forced to do something because inaction is worse than action. Fundamentally, if I do nothing, Steve Samet will absolutely try to get in touch with my dad. I'd rather have that meeting in a situation I can control than have him show up at my dad's door in the next few weeks."

"What's your plan?"

"The more I think about it, the more I think I should tell my dad what I know, rather than surprise him."

"That is probably best, rather than create a possible confrontation. If your dad refuses, for whatever reason, will this man drop it?"

"He claimed he would, but I obviously don't know him well enough to know for sure."

"What does your famous gut say?"

"That Steve Samet is trustworthy."

"Next question -- assuming your dad says 'no', are *you* going to stay in touch with this man and try to put together your dad's entire history?"

"I don't know, Al. One step at a time, OK?"

"Sorry."

"It's OK. Will you tell Jessica I'm fine? She'll believe you. I'll still have the problem of not disclosing anything."

"That's a hell of a secret to keep, if it's true."

"I know. Given you know, do me a favor, and use the subterfuge of the exam to let me call my dad and see what he wants to do. At least then I'll have an idea if I can share this knowledge with anyone else while my mom is still alive."

"Make your call."

I nodded, went to my desk and dialed my parents' house in Mason. Thankfully, Dad answered.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hi, Son. Aimee confirmed she'll deliver us to Meigs at 8:00am on Thursday."

"Great! We're looking forward to seeing you. I do have a question to ask you."

"What's that?"

"Do you know a Steven Marc Hano, son of Lewis Hano and Marion Fitz?"

There was dead silence on the other end of the line, and I knew instantly that what Steve Samet had revealed was true. Had it not been, Dad would simply have answered 'no'.

"Where did you hear those names?" he asked after about twenty seconds.

"Steven Hano, now Steven Samet, showed up at my door an hour ago, looking for Ray Adams, whose name is on the deed to this house, and who he had, through a private investigator, tied to Lewis B. Hano and Lewis Bertram Tobias."

"God damn," my dad said quietly. "What did you tell him?"

"At first, when he said the names, I said I couldn't help him. When he said he was my half-brother, I had a syncopal episode. When I recovered, we spoke for about fifteen minutes. I revealed nothing about where you live or what you do, but he knew things that you told me, that I've never heard anywhere else."

"What did he want?"

"To see you. I only committed to telling you he wanted to see you. He promised that if you refuse, he'll go away. If you do want to see him, I'll set something up for Thursday."

"That part of my life no longer exists," Dad said firmly. "Nobody was ever supposed to know. Do you know where he found the information?"

"A combination of physical records searches and an internet site. It was the internet site that gave him the clue he needed to find your marriage license in California. He did try to find other, but received no information at all. I'm surmising that meant a manual records search that was fruitless, for reasons I can deduce that include using 'Ray Deye' and 'X&B Investment Corporation', as well as everything being in Mom's maiden name."

"I was afraid there were loose ends, especially after the FBI asked you about me."

"What do you want to do?"

"Nothing. I can't reopen that chapter in my life without risking major fallout, and not just with your mom. There are other things you do not know."

"I figured. Is he your son?"

"Yes."

"I can tell him you won't see him, and my gut says he's trustworthy, but there are no guarantees I've read him correctly."

"There's a reason the Navy men don't want you to play in poker tournaments, Son! You are an expert at reading people."

"The stakes appear to be much bigger than a \$1500 poker payout."

"They are. Promise me two things, please."

"What's that?"

"You'll say nothing to anyone about this, and you won't go digging into my past. I will tell you more in about ten years."

"About that. One other person knows."

"Who?"

"Al Barton. He's actually here with me right now. Jess called him when I had the syncopal episode and I agreed never to withhold relevant information from Al about any health concerns. He'll classify this as doctor-patient confidentiality. He's the easy one; I'll have a heck of a time finessing it with Jess and Kara, but I will."

"No further than Al, Son. It has to stop there. Tell Mr...what was his name?"

"Samet."

"Tell Mr. Samet that he should cease and desist. Use whatever language you think will work. And you forget everything you heard."

"You know that's not possible. May I ask one question?"

"One, but I may not be able to answer now."

"Your maternal grandparents were Russian Jews who emigrated to the US?"

"Yes. And yes, I'm Jewish. Well, ethnically, anyway."

"Thanks. I'd say this matter is closed for discussion until sometime in 2011, when fifty years have passed."

"Thank you, Son. Do your best to convince Mr. Samet that I don't, and can't, know him, and do not want any contact."

"I'll do what I can, Dad. See you Thursday."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up.

"I infer he asked you not to say anything," Al observed. "And asked you to find a way to make this man understand he's not welcome?"

"Yes," I replied. "My problem, of course, is my natural curiosity is going to eat at me, and my dad asked for a promise that I won't dig into his past."

"I didn't hear you promise anything."

I smiled, "I actually didn't, directly, but I believe I implied it strongly enough for him to infer my compliance."

"You didn't give your word, which is what matters for you. May I give my perspective as someone who had serious complications in his life and kept them hidden?"

"Yes."

"The truth eventually comes out, and it's much better if you can manage it than allow it to manage you."

He had a point, given all the things that had happened with Jessica and him when the truth had come out inadvertently.

"Thanks, Al. That's what I needed to hear."

"What are you going to tell Jessica?" he asked.

"Hell if I know," I sighed. "Later today, I'll give Mr. Samet a call and give him what I'm sure will be unwelcome news."

"Let me know if I can help. I won't say anything to your dad unless he says something to me."

"Thanks, Al. Just make sure you give me a clean bill of health with Jess. Mary and Don will be here on Thursday, so I'm sure Jess will insist Mary thoroughly examine me."

"In your dreams, Kid!" Al replied with a grin.

"Been there, done that," I replied flatly.

"You dog!" he chuckled.

"Before she met Don."

"I assumed. Let me talk to Jess while you formulate your strategy."

He left the room, barely avoiding Birgit, who scurried in.

"Are you OK, Dad?" Birgit asked, looking and sounding very concerned.

"I'm fine, Pumpkin. Grandpa Al is going to tell your mom the doctor that I'm OK."

"She said she's going to have Doctor Mary give you a complete physical!"

"I'll mark that spot on my Jessica bingo card," I chuckled. "I assumed."

"What happened?" Birgit asked. "Who was that man?"

"Someone trying to locate somebody, but not me. As for what happened, it was a combination of limited sleep, atypical meals, my body reacting to having taken a dose of propranolol yesterday, and something surprising. Don't worry about it, Pumpkin. Everything is fine and I'm not in any trouble."

"Are you sure?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"I promise. Now, shoo, because here come my wives."

She glared at me but left the room when Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne came in, with Suzanne shutting the door behind them.

"Who was that man?" Jessica asked.

"I can't say," I replied. "I am not in any trouble, but I cannot reveal who he is or what he said."

"I know his name, Tiger. I bet I can find out."

"Jess, seriously, you need to let it go, please."

"No. You're hiding something that caused a syncopal event. You *will* tell me."

"I simply can't," I said.

"No," Jessica said sternly, and sounding annoyed, "you *can*, but you *won't*."

"We can split whatever hairs you want, Babe, but I simply can't say. And please do not try to find out anything. This has literally nothing to do with any of you, and, under the circumstances, nothing to do with me beyond being asked to convey a message."

"To whom?"

"Jess, he's not going to say because he gave his word," Kara said. "I'm positive that's the only reason he'd remain silent. We simply have to trust him that there is no risk to him or to any of us."

"He had a syncopal event!" Jessica protested. "We need to know what caused it."

"The content of the message I was asked to convey," I replied. "That's all."

"Why you?"

"Answering that would violate the confidence," I replied. "As I said to Birgit, and to Al, it was a combination of limited sleep, atypical meals, my body reacting to having taken a dose of propranolol yesterday, and something surprising."

"You ate carbs," Jessica said flatly.

"I had limited access to food in the Admiral's Club after the flight was delayed. As I said to Al, I had an apple with my first meal of cold cuts and cheese, with a slice of whole grain bread that was around 5:00pm. Then around 9:00pm, a banana, cold cuts, cheese, and a slice of whole grain bread. No soda, no desserts,

no candy, no cookies. Only water to drink, though I didn't drink on the flight, so I might be a bit dehydrated.

"Why would you eat bread?"

"Because there were limited options," I replied. "I didn't feel manic, I slept on the plane, something I generally never do, and I followed my diet in San Francisco, along with walking quite a bit."

"Steve, are you positive there's no threat to our family?" Suzanne asked.

"There is no threat to anyone here at the Compound, nor to Elyse and her kids, nor to my sister and her family, nor to NIKA, nor to the dojo."

"He's not an irate father?" Jessica asked.

"No. I haven't really run into one of those since High School when Kara went home with wet hair!"

All three wives laughed.

"No irate fathers here about *you*, anyway," Kara observed. "Jesse, on the other hand..."

"The irate grandmother was the bigger problem," I replied. "The upset dads complained about the sauna, and there was no sex."

"That you know of!" Kara tittered.

"I trust Jesse to tell me the truth," I replied. "Though without names or details."

"Are you sure the party he and his friends are having is a good idea?" Jessica asked.

"The party? Or the sauna?"

"The sauna, obviously! Don't be difficult, Tiger!"

"Asking Steve not to be difficult is like asking Birgit to chill!" Suzanne declared.

"There might be some truth to that," I said with a grin. "In the end, it's up to Jesse. They chose not to invite any Freshmen, and according to Jesse, Luna Alonso spoke personally with each girl. I think the kids will be discreet and we need to give them the benefit of the doubt. The problem last time was one specific girl who wasn't invited who made a claim with no actual evidence that happened to be true. I think the kids will be fine."

"Did you ask Jennifer and Josie?" Kara inquired.

"Yes. And they're OK with the plans. Jesse had discussed it with them before I spoke to them, and they agree -- the kids will be discreet and we need to give them the freedom to manage their own lives. I did make it clear that nobody who isn't currently in High School could participate, because THAT is a problem we don't need, and as I said, they already excluded Freshmen."

"So Nicholas isn't invited?" Suzane asked.

"No, and Jesse spoke to him and he's cool about it. Are we OK, Jess?"

"I'm not happy, but I'm outvoted. Again."

"Jess, it's not like that," Kara countered. "It's about trusting Steve to tell us about any threats. Would you share patient information with us if we insisted? I mean names and diagnosis?"

"No, but that's...never mind. I see your point. I just don't like it because it caused Steve to have a syncopal episode."

"Steve is happy to demonstrate that he's in good health, if that interests you in any way."

Jessica laughed softly, "Of course it does, but not all of us have insane sex drives like someone in this room!"

"I make NO excuses!" Kara exclaimed. "None! But why don't you and Steve spend some time together, just the two of you? We'll all celebrate tonight, but I think you need some quality time with your Tiger."

"What do you say, Jess?" I asked.

"Come upstairs with me," she said with a smile.

 Albert

"What do we know?" Ashley asked.

She, Birgit, Stephie, and I had come up to my room after Grandpa Al said Dad was OK.

"I know his name," Birgit said. "Steve Samet. We could search the internet and see if there is any information.

"Those 'people search' sites all cost money," I countered.

"Sure," Birgit agreed. "But we might find something."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," I said. "If Dad told you to MYOB, you should."

"I think Albert is right," Stephe said.

"I agree with Birgit!" Ashley declared. "We should know who that guy is because we don't know what he might do!"

"Don't you think Dad will handle it?" I inquired. "If there was really a threat, he'd warn us. Don't you trust him to protect us?"

"Yes," Ashley admitted. "But I still think we should know what's going on. What if the guy comes back?"

"Then we get Dad, or tell the guy to get lost," I said. "Birgit, please don't do anything foolish."

"Oh, please!" she protested.

"You are impetuous, Sis!" Ashley declared.

"Ain't THAT the truth!" Stephe interjected.

"HEY!" Birgit protested.

"If the shoe fits..." I said.

 Birgit

"Where's Dad?" I asked my mom when I went downstairs to the sunroom.

"With your other mom," Mom replied.

"Arguing?"

"Making up!" Mom replied with a silly smile.

"Is everything OK?"

"I think so," Mom replied.

"Do YOU know who that guy was and what he wanted?"

"No. Dad said it wasn't about anyone here or your Aunt Stephanie and her family or Elyse and her boys, but he couldn't say more."

"It's weird, Mom!"

"I agree, but I trust your dad and he says there is no danger."

"Are you *sure*?"

"Has your dad ever lied to you?"

"Well, no."

"And do you think he's ever lied to me?"

"Well, I don't know, but I don't think so."

"He hasn't," Mom said. "He's always been truthful, even about things that were difficult or uncomfortable for me or him. That was true all the way back in High School when we started dating."

"Can I ask a question?"

"Yes, and I'll answer if I can."

"When did you decide you wanted to have sex with Dad?" I asked.

Mom laughed softly, "The second he sat down next to me in Mrs. Brewer's chemistry class!"

"But you thought it was sinful, right?"

"Yes, I did, but my body had other ideas!"

I giggled, "I bet! I am your daughter, after all!"

"Yes, you are! I promise there's nothing to worry about because I trust your dad completely."

"Thanks, Mom."

"I wish you'd talk to me like this more often."

"I'll try."

 Steve

"How do you do that?" Jessica asked as we cuddled after an extremely pleasurable love-making session.

"Because I love you, Babe."

"I think you make girls feel good even if you don't love them!"

"Yes, but it's different with the ones I do; very different."

"I don't think I've been a very good wife to you."

"I disagree. First, you were clear about what you needed and wanted seventeen years ago, and I had no delusions. Second, you've given me two wonderful children who I wouldn't trade for anything in the world."

"Despite BOTH of them being aliens?" Jessica asked, interrupting me.

I chuckled, "They are quite a pair, aren't they?"

"That's one way to put it!"

"Anyway," I continued, "if you're referring to the way you respond to stress and to things you think put people at risk, I believe that was part and parcel of the bargain. I knew you were driven, and I knew your medical career would always be your primary focus. You knew it, too, which is why you said you wanted a guy who would curl your toes and look good on your arm."

"And the way I've treated you at times? And becoming estranged and needing rehab?"

"Jess, if I was under the kind of stress you are day in and day out in the ER, I'd have had a complete breakdown years ago. I honestly don't know how you do it. I have the advantage of being able to farm out most of my stress at work -- to my

sister, to Liz, and to Elyse. Sure, I get involved, but they handle the crap that always drove me nuts and stressed me out."

"But I ran away. Twice."

"And we forgave you both times. You were under a ridiculous amount of stress from work, keeping your secret, and things going on in our family. I'm not making excuses, simply acknowledging the causes, and why Kara and I completely forgave you. There's nothing wrong with our relationship from my perspective, or from Kara's or Suzanne's. They'd have said something if there were."

"And not wanting to have sex very often?" Jessica asked.

"Not to be a jerk, but it's not as if there isn't a nympho in the house!"

"Two!" Jessica smirked. "Birgit does take after her mom!"

"She does. But that's a whole different kettle of fish, as it were."

"If I hadn't put my foot down, would you have considered it?"

"It would be hard not to consider something our daughter directly requested."

"Don't be difficult now, Tiger, we're relaxed and calm."

"Sorry. I think a combination of what happened with Stephanie and what Birgit actually wanted made it impossible to consider. As I said, in a different world where Birgit was circumspect and hadn't broadcast her desire, and where she didn't want to displace you, Kara, and Suzanne, it might have happened. But that world doesn't exist, and if it did, that Birgit might never have even thought about it, let alone asked."

"Your whole bit about 'what if?' questions."

"What if I make love to you again?"

"Slow and sweet?"

"Yes."

II. Navigating A Minefield

December 24, 2002, Christmas Eve, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

Late on Tuesday, just before dinner, I placed the call I promised to make.

"This is Steve Adams calling from Chicago. May I speak with Steven Samet?"

"Speaking."

"I spoke to my dad and I'll just tell you straight -- he declined to meet you."

I heard a deep sigh, then he said, "Did he give a reason?"

"He said, quite specifically, he *can't* know you, and cannot re-open that chapter of his life. He didn't provide any further details. I don't know any more than you do; actually, I knew less because I had no idea Lewis Hano was married."

"So you believe me."

"I do, but I also need to hold you to your promise to not try to contact him."

"So that's it? You don't want to know the full truth the same as I do?"

"Of course I do," I replied. "All I can say is 'wait'. If you're concerned about his age, don't be, as he's the healthiest person I know except for a bit of bursitis. Even at age eighty, I think he has at least a dozen years, if not more. My counsel is to wait and see what happens. That said, I'm not opposed to piecing things

together, so long as it doesn't go against my dad's wishes to not re-open that portion of his life."

"I have to say I'm disappointed."

"I understand. It's public now, but my wife had a similar hidden past, and the revelation caused no end of discord and strife. It subsided, eventually, but not without a lot of emotional pain and suffering. I'm sure you're hurting because of what he said, but if it's true he was in the CIA, and I have evidence to back that up, then he might be required by the Federal government to stay silent about his past."

"But *you* know."

"I only know because about ten years ago, the FBI asked me about his alternate names. I had no idea about 'Hano', but I did know his birth name. I asked him, and he revealed some information, which I'm sure he did to keep me from digging, which I absolutely would have done."

"Given all of that, what did you tell your wife?"

"Nothing. Not even the reason you were here. The only person who knows besides you, me, and my dad, is my father-in-law, and he won't say a word, even to his daughter. His advice was to manage the situation rather than allow it to manage us. I'm taking that advice."

"Which means?"

"We stay in touch, we share information, and we see what happens. I wish I could do more, but I'm not about to wreck my parents' marriage and potentially open a can of worms with the Feds. I've had enough trouble from them over the years, mainly due to my Russian friends before 1991."

"They were a bit touchy about things like that. I agree with your plan. Let me provide you with an email address, and we can share information. I won't put anything publicly on ancestry.com, but you know someone will eventually make the connections."

"At the moment, a risk we'll have to take," I replied. "I don't know that my dad will be amenable to yielding on his 2011 target. That said, if someone else does make the link and connects the records on ancestry.com for public view, I think that will force the issue. I'm going to create an account there. What's your email address?"

He gave it to me, I promised to email him, we said 'goodbye' and I hung up. I had spent some time before the call writing in my journal, which was encrypted, with Katya holding copies of my encryption keys and passphrase, so it was safe. I wondered how I might go about finding information about my Russian ancestors, given Tsarist records likely didn't exist, or were found in local villages in hard-copy form only.

That was a question for another day. The real question was if I could reveal anything more to my wife and children. They knew about my dad's birth name, his Naval service, and his CIA service, at least in a general way, and revealing that we had Russian ancestors only impacted the 'Tobias' persona, not the 'Hano' persona. Of course, Felipe Rodriguez knew my dad as 'Luís Hano', so he might actually know about my dad's other family, all things considered.

In the end, computerization of historical records was going to make it fairly easy for someone to piece things together, and Al's advice to manage the situation weighed more and more on me. If the situation was revealed by anyone other than my dad or me, it could cause significant problems with my wives, as they'd think I kept them in the dark while third parties had access to the information.

That would be doubly true if the name 'Samet' was linked to the 'Hano', 'Tobias', or 'Adams' personas.

There was, in my mind, only one thing to do. Trying to navigate the minefield would inevitably lead to something blowing up in my face, and I couldn't allow that to happen. I got up, went to the Indian room and asked my wives to join me in my study.

"What I'm about to say cannot be repeated to anyone, at any time, and cannot even be mentioned to me unless I mention it first," I said. "I need all three of you to agree to that, and then I'll reveal what happened this morning."

"Why could we not mention it to you?" Jessica asked.

"Because what I'm going to say can only be spoken about in extremely limited circumstances, and it has to stay that way, and it has to be me who decides. You'll understand once I tell you, but I can only tell you if you agree. Do you trust me, Jess?"

"Yes, I trust you, and I agree."

"Me, too," Kara confirmed.

"And me," Suzanne added.

"I'm confident what I'm about to say is true, but I'm not a hundred percent sure, nor do I know any more details than I'm going to share. The man who showed up this morning is Steven Marc Samet, born Steven Marc Hano, son of Lewis B. Hano, born Lewis Bertram Tobias. He's my half-brother."

All three wives gasped in surprise.

"But..." Kara said. "No, go ahead, I'll wait until you finish."

"First, you'll note he and I are both eldest sons and both have the same name, albeit his is spelled with a 'v' not a 'ph', and Kara and Jess, you'll understand this -- his middle name is spelled with a 'c' not a 'k'."

"Your Social Security Card had that spelling!" Kara exclaimed. "Because your dad filled out that form!"

"Yes, though there's a bit more to it, but that's irrelevant at the moment. Anyway, Lewis B Hano, born Lewis Bertram Tobias, married Marion Fitz in September 1950, about seven months after the first Steven Marc was born. Lewis Hano divorced Marion Fitz, and she remarried, taking her new husband's name -- Samet -- and changing the kids' names as well.

"Kids?!" Jessica asked. "As in, you have other half-siblings?"

"I know no details other than Steve Samet said 'siblings' when he described being estranged from his family. I don't know if they were 'Hano' kids or 'Samet' kids, or a mix. In any event, everything Steve Samet said lines up with what I know, though he obviously had additional information which I didn't have.

"When I called my dad, he said that he couldn't -- and didn't want to -- know Steve Samet, and that he was uninterested in reopening that chapter of his life. He did confirm something I've long suspected, and that is that he and his family were Jewish when he was 'Lewis Tobias' and 'Lewis Hano', and, more interestingly, my maternal grandmother's parents were Russian Jews who emigrated sometime before 1890."

"WOW!" Suzanne exclaimed. "So you're at least part Russian!"

"I think, based on being half-Jewish, I could move to Israel under the Law of Return, as could my kids, because they have a Jewish grandparent."

"Unbelievable!" Kara exclaimed. "Jess, I think his syncopal event is fully explained by what he just told us."

"I think so," Jessica replied, "but I still want Mary to give him a complete physical on Thursday."

"I told Al that after he examined me. He knows, because I needed advice. And it was his advice that led me to reveal everything to you."

Jessica took a deep breath, let it out, then said, "You could tell him, but not me?"

"He's one of my doctors, and he asked because he needed to know what caused the syncopal event. I love you, but you're not my physician, and can't be, because you're my wife. After I told Al, I decided to call my dad and see what he said, which was what I told you before. Then, after thinking about it for a few hours, I called Steve Samet to tell him what my dad had said. He's sad and disappointed, but he promised not to make anything public or try to get in touch with my dad."

"You're afraid of how your mom would react?" Jessica asked.

"You know how those kinds of revelations affect families, and it's why we won't see your mom or Troy tomorrow. Imagine my mom finding out that my dad had been married before he married her, and had kids, but didn't acknowledge them, for whatever reason."

"Not good," Jessica replied. "It might even be uglier than the situation with my mom, my dad, and Troy. How did you leave it with Mr. Samet?"

"How I'm sure you expect -- I'm far too curious to simply let this go, so I'll stay in touch with Steve Samet, we'll compare notes, but keep everything private, at least until 2011 when my dad says he can discuss more details."

"Will you tell the kids about their Russian ancestors?"

"At some point, but not before the grandparents all go home. I don't want questions asked that might make my dad suspicious that I shared this with anyone other than Al. Just to put a fine point on it, my dad said not to tell anyone, including the three of you. Al counseled wisdom, and I followed his counsel."

"I don't even know what to say about all of that," Kara said. "Will you try to meet anyone from that side of the family?"

"Not any time soon," I replied. "The last thing I want is someone making this public. Steve Samet is estranged and hasn't seen any of his family in two decades, so that might be part of why he's looking for his dad, and why he wanted to stay in touch with me."

There was a knock at the door and Suzanne got up to answer.

"Mom said to come get her when the cookies were out of the oven," Stephanie said.

"I think we're finished," I said. "Let's celebrate Christmas!"

"That's after dinner, Snuggle Bear!" Kara exclaimed as she got up from her chair.

"There's more to Christmas than sex under the tree!" Jessica exclaimed.

"TOO MUCH INFORMATION!" Stephanie exclaimed, turning and quickly moving away.

My wives and I all laughed, left my study, and went to the kitchen.



December 25, 2002, Christmas Day, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

As was our tradition, our extended family Christmas celebration began at 1:00pm. That allowed Jesse to attend services after celebrating with his moms; Eduardo, Elyse, and her boys, plus Chelsea, to celebrate together; Joel, my sister, and her kids to celebrate together; and Natalie to celebrate with her parents. Yuriko, as she would until she returned to Japan, celebrated with my wives and the four kids who lived with us.

A new tradition, organized by Albert and Ashley, had everyone draw names for a gift exchange, so that everyone would have a gift to open, though I also bought a gift for everyone, including my sister's family. Of course, I'd had help from Birgit, Kimmy, and Jesse, who had either suggested gifts, or, in the case of Birgit for her sisters, actually picked them out.

We began, as we always did, with Jesse reading the Christmas story from Luke's Gospel. Once he finished, Ashley, Stephie, and Patty distributed the presents from under the tree. Patty, my six-year-old niece, who looked exactly like my sister had at age seven, brought me my gift, which was from my nephew Davy, her brother, who was eight, and resembled my dad more than he did Ed Krajick.

After presents, we ate a tremendous Christmas meal prepared by Yuriko, Kara, Birgit, and Josie, and had fantastic desserts prepared by my daughters and Natalie, with Ashley, as she always did, creating a special 'dad dessert' that was made with almond flour and Stevia. When it was time to clean up, Eduardo, Joel, and I handled the duties while everyone else relaxed with coffee or tea.

At 6:00pm, Terry, Penny, and their kids joined us for the evening, and we played games and had a light meal. Around 9:00pm, the entire clan had a Christmas sauna, with Stephie and Ashley wearing one-piece bathing suits, as they had been doing since they'd started developing, something which was common for teens in Sweden. Joel had overcome his discomfort with the Adams family tradition, and hadn't balked, which I was sure was a product of being married to my sister, who was every bit as sexually liberated as Kara and Birgit.

When we finished the sauna, everyone showered, which took some time, and then the gathering broke up, leaving just the inhabitants of the house. The kids went to bed, and my wives, Yuriko, and Natalie went to the Indian room to relax and listen to music until bedtime, when all of us went upstairs.

"Natalie should have her Christmas celebration," Jessica said as we were starting to undress in our room.

"You're sure, Babe?" I asked.

"We had ours last night and this morning! Go."

"Yes, Dear," I said with faux resignation, causing my wives to laugh.

I kissed each of them 'good night', then went to the door to the room Natalie and Yuriko shared, having heard them coming up. I knocked and waited for someone to open the door, which Yuriko did a few seconds later.

"Come in, Steve-sama!"

I stepped into the room.

"Natalie, Jess suggested you might like to celebrate Christmas in the traditional way."

They had a small tree on a table, which would suffice symbolically.

"We would both like to!" Natalie said. "Make love to us, then we'll both sleep in the same bed with you."

"Is that OK with you, Yuriko-chan?" I inquired.

"Yes!" she said happily, shedding her robe and displaying her beautiful body.

Natalie did the same, and I followed suit.



December 26, 2002, Boxing Day, Chicago, Illinois

 Albert

"Hi, Grandpa!" I called out when I saw him exit Commander Aimee's plane.

"Hi, Albert!"

"Jesse is here with the van so we can take you to Grandpa Al's house. I'll help Aimee with the ground check and help tie down the plane!"

"OK," Grandpa Adams said.

"Hi, Albert!" Commander Aimee called out. "I can use your help!"

"That's what I'm here for! I know the swabbie is useless with aircraft!"

"That's COMMANDER Swabbie to you, Cadet!" Commander Fitzmaurice, Aimee's husband, growled.

"Yes, Sir!" I said gruffly and snapped a smart salute.

"Adams, quit fucking around and get your ass over here double-time!" Commander Aimee ordered.

"Aye, aye, Commander!" I grinned and made a purposefully sloppy salute.

"You're in deep trouble now, Albert," Grandpa said, laughing.

"I know, Chief!" I grinned.

I helped Aimee do her landing and ground checks, then assisted in tying down the aircraft, which we'd use on Friday to take my Grandpas on a sight-seeing tour of the Loop and Lake Michigan shore. Once everything was set, we joined Grandpa, Grandma, Elizabeth, Commander Fitzmaurice, and Jesse in the van for the ride to Grandpa Al's house, where Grandpa and Grandma Adams were staying. Commander Aimee, her husband, and daughter were staying in the room off the kitchen.

"Did you receive your new orders?" I asked Commander Fitzmaurice.

"Yes. I'm assigned to the CNO's staff as an operations officer. I've completed the sea tours necessary for command, and this will complete my shore tours. Then it's XO of a surface ship, but not a carrier, despite that's how I served my sea tours."

"Any idea what they'll give you?" Grandpa asked.

"Garbage scow!" Commander Aimee teased before he could answer.

"Love you, too, Aimee!" Commander Fitzmaurice said. "I'm hoping for a destroyer or a guided missile cruiser. Everything on the new ships is computerized, and that's my area of expertise. Well, keeping them running, anyway."

"What are you doing in the CNO's office?" Grandpa asked.

"I'll be responsible for procurement and testing of electronic equipment. Not nearly as much fun as being at sea, but you have to pay your dues."

We dropped Grandma and Grandpa Adams at Grandpa Al's house so they could get settled. Grandpa Al would bring them to the house in about two hours for our Boxing Day celebration, and Fawn, Georg, and Analise would join us as well. Gerry and his family hadn't come to Chicago this year, as they were visiting his wife's family in Oregon.

 Steve

"I'm sorry to take you away from the gathering," Dad said, "but I wanted to ask if you resolved that matter from the other day. First, though, what did Mary say?"

She and Don had arrived earlier, having flown down let the night before.

"A completely clean bill of health," I replied. "As for the matter you mentioned, he said he'd let it be, and I believe he was sincere."

"Thank you. This is the last we'll mention this matter for the near future."

"Understood."

We left my study and walked to the great room just as Robert and Allison Block, Jennifer's parents, came into the house, followed almost immediately by Tom and Jill Dolan, Josie's parents. Next were Chelsea's family -- Jennie, Kent, and Colin, who I hadn't seen in some time. They were followed by Nancy Blanchard and her husband Paul, and not long after, Jake, Joyce, Joseph, and Amelia arrived, followed by Anthony, Connie, and their son Anthony, who was two. A bit later, Hope, Roger, Tabitha, John, and Danielle came into the house, and finally, Jackson, Holly, Liz, and Julius arrived.

We had a fantastic time, with the kids all enjoying time with their grandparents, who they didn't get to see very often. My mom, surprisingly, was cordial to the other grandparents, and even spent some time in what appeared to be a friendly conversation with Allison Block. I felt that was a good sign, but it was up to my mom to make the first step with my wives and me, by agreement between the four of us.

After lunch, Michael put in the videotape of the robotics competition that Eduardo had recorded, and most of the guests chose to watch the video of Michael's team winning the competition by the skin of their teeth.

"Excellent job, Michael," my dad said to him. "Is that going to be your career?"

"I think so. Computers and robots are cool."

"Andi thinks so, too!" Chelsea teased.

"Who's Andi?" my dad asked.

"A girl who has her eyes set on Michael," Elyse said. "Michael is more interested in computers and robots!"

"That'll change!" Chelsea exclaimed. "That's Andi on the team! She's cute, likes robots and computers, and is into baseball and football."

"Where were girls like that when I was young?" Robert Block asked.

"Not putting out the way I did, Bobby Block!" Allison declared, causing everyone to laugh.

"Mom!" Jennifer exclaimed. "There are children present!"

"Yes; MY child," Allison exclaimed. "And exactly where does she think she came from?"

"That was back in the dinosaur days, right?" Albert asked with a smirk.

"Listen, Bub!" Robert Block growled.

"Ignore Albert," Aimee said. "He thinks anyone older than about twenty-five is a dinosaur!"

"You said it, Commander, not me!" Albert declared.

"I'd pack a parachute for tomorrow," I said to Albert.

"You might be right," he replied.

"Well, you two were Seniors when I was in second grade," Jennie said with a silly smile. "So Albert might be onto something!"

"You went to school together?" Al asked.

"It's worse than you suspect!" Allison replied. "Fran and Sam Mercer, though she was Fran Sorkin then; Bev Thompson, who I'm sure Steve knows, because she became Bev Vaughn; Jennie, and her future husband Jim, who died in Vietnam; Alan Blanchard and Nancy Morton, Kara's parents; Carl Woody; Don Courtney. All of us were at Milford Main in the late 50s and early 60s."

"Wow!" I exclaimed. "I didn't realize you all knew each other! I bet there are some interesting stories to tell!"

"It was around 1960!" Josie said. "How interesting could they be?"

All the named people who were there laughed.

"You might be surprised," Allison Block said with a smirk. "Even without access to the Pill, teenagers were still teenagers!"

"Something true since the first human turned thirteen," I chuckled. "Nothing changes!"

"Steve, do you know a Jonathan Kane?" Jennie asked.

"I've met him a few times," I replied. "Why?"

"His mom and I are friends from back then, too. I'm sure there are other connections."

"That's when I met Kent van der Meer," Nancy said. "Alan was a member of his church."

"Someone should collect their stories and write them," Jennifer said. "I think it would be interesting. Well, so long as they leave out ANYTHING about my mom and dad having sex!"

"Oh, stop!" I chuckled. "I know you're just taking the piss, as my British friends would say!"

"What's that mean, Dad?" Ashley asked.

"Mocking, teasing, or irreverent, especially in a sarcastic way," I replied.

"So, Albert, basically all the time?" she asked with a silly smile.

"Sod off, Seppo!" Albert said in a near perfect Yorkshire accent he'd learned while visiting Jane and her family.

They'd actually be visiting for New Year's, swinging by Chicago on their way to a holiday in Florida.

"Seppo?" Connie asked.

"Cockney rhyming slang," I replied. "It means Yankee. Yank, septic tank, Seppo."

"How rude!"

I chuckled, "I believe that's the point!"

Most everyone stayed until about 10:00pm, but we didn't have a group sauna, as there were quite a few people who would not have appreciated it. That didn't stop our family from using it before bed, though, and afterwards, my wives and I made love before falling asleep.



December 27, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Well, shit," I said, looking at my calendar on Friday morning.

"What's wrong?" Jessica asked.

"I forgot that Audrey and Brad will be here late this afternoon. I need to reschedule with Nadia again."

"Bummer!" Kara exclaimed.

I chuckled, "You'll have to get your cheap thrills elsewhere! Let me see if she's online."

She wasn't, so I dialed her phone number and reached an answering machine. I let her know that something had come up, and that I was very sorry, but I'd need to reschedule. I asked her to call when she had a chance and we'd find a new day to meet.

"How upset do you think she'll be?" Suzanne asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "And, honestly, that's less of a concern because the feeling I get is this is purely about sex, with no relationship and no bonding."

"Something you've begun to avoid," Jessica observed. "It's why you've turned down the medical students who are looking to bang the hot husband of an Attending for stress relief!"

"There's also our rule about the hospital," I replied. "And that is important."

"You did consider Jessica's offer of a waiver for Allyson," Kara said. "To repay the favor she did for Jessica!"

I chuckled, "I did, and she is cute, though a bit out of my preferred age range!"

"SHE'S YOUNGER THAN ME!" Jessica growled.

"But not me!" Suzanne smirked.

"He loves you, Jess, and you know it!" Kara declared. "And you even had some private time with him the other day. I'm willing to bet he didn't think you were too old then!"

"I'm teasing, of course," Jessica said. "We know Tiger's sweet spot. I will make an exception if you want one, Tiger."

"Assuming Allyson was serious about the favor, and assuming it won't cause problems at work, invite her over in January and we'll see if we click."

"That's more important for you now than it was before," Suzanne observed. "Not that you didn't do it in the past, but ever since Emilee Krueger, you've focused on the mindfuck."

"True," I agreed, "though there have been some exceptions. That said, the mindfuck is most important."

"It sounds as if your thinking has shifted somewhat," Kara interjected.

I nodded, "It has, but only in the sense of gaining clarity. I think, after the Spring Break trip, if it happens, there will be fewer new girls; in fact, I suspect new girls will be a rare exception."

"Is this some kind of reaction to what happened on Christmas Eve?" Suzanne asked.

I shook my head, "No. but the whole 'referral' bit starting up again bothers me. This isn't directed at any of you, and it's not about Allyson, or even Keiki."

"Nadia," Kara suggested.

I nodded, "I think that's the thing that helped clarify. Granted, I don't know her, which is actually part of the problem, but I get the impression that I'd simply be playing a part in a performance, and that just feels wrong. I think, in the end, my answer to her is 'no', and I'll seek out potential subversives as I always have, but after Spring Break, new girls will be few and far between."

"I notice you keep saying 'after Spring break'," Suzanne observed with a smirk.

"So sue me," I chuckled. "Only a complete idiot would pass that up!"

 Albert

"Your aircraft," Commander Aimee said once we climbed into our seats.

"My aircraft," I confirmed.

"Take us out over the lake, then along the lakefront, as far south as Gary and as far north as Milwaukee. I'll only take over if you ask me to or there's an emergency."

"Albert flying IS an emergency," Grandpa Al teased.

"He's a natural," Commander Aimee said. "Smooth, calm, cool, and collected. If he can get jets, he'll end up at Top Gun."

"If he does a low pass by the tower, they'll put him in the brig!" Grandpa Adams said.

"Nah, he's only interested in a low pass over his Yorkie!" Grandpa Al said.

"When will you see her?" Commander Aimee asked.

"On Tuesday," I replied. "They're in Chicago for New Year's, then going to Florida. Excuse me, I need to get us on our way."

I triggered the radio, requested taxi clearance, which I received. I followed the procedures, released the brakes, and taxied to the end of the runway. I stopped, asked for clearance, and was told to hold for traffic, then a minute later was cleared to take off. I brought the engine up to speed, checked all the gauges and controls, and seeing everything was set or reading correctly, I released the brakes.

"Rolling," I said.

I followed the usual takeoff procedure, and the plane lifted into the air.

"Very smooth," Aimee said as the plane climbed away from Meigs Field. "Good enough to pass your licensing exam."

"Thank you."

I switched on the new GPS unit Aimee had installed, but only used it as a check on my navigation by landmarks and compass. We flew the route Aimee had filed, as I couldn't file my own flight plan, taking us as far south as Gary and as far north as Milwaukee, before we returned to Meigs and I received landing clearance.

"Excellent landing!" Aimee said when we touched down. "Easy pass."

I taxied to the ramp, found our slot, and stopped the aircraft. We performed our final checks, tied the plane down, then headed back to the house.

 Jesse

"Hi!" Scarlett exclaimed when she walked out of the secure area at Midway early on Friday afternoon.

"Hi!" I said, as we exchanged a quick hug. "Did you check a bag?"

"No. I'm going home on Tuesday, and we're just hanging out, so I could fit what I needed in my carry-on."

I took her bag, slung it over my left shoulder, then took her hand, and we left the terminal to head to the parking garage.

"I never asked, but what's the scoop with the party tomorrow?" Scarlett inquired.

"It's guys from the hockey team and girls from the softball team. Dad gave us the run of the main house, and everyone will be out except Yuriko, who won't bother us. My moms will be around, but won't bother us, either. We'll dance, play games, and do the usual party stuff, plus a sauna."

"Everyone wearing bathing suits, though, right?"

"No. Naked."

"How many people?" Scarlett asked.

"Thirty. We didn't invite any Freshmen, which eliminated about a quarter of both teams, and didn't invite anyone we felt was either prudish or who might publicize."

"And you expect me to be naked in front of all your High School hockey buddies?"

"Expect? No. You're invited, of course, but nobody is required to participate."

"And a bunch of High School girls are going to be naked in front of a bunch of guys, just like that?"

"Just like that," I replied.

"Is there *anything* about your life that isn't crazy?" Scarlett asked, sounding slightly frustrated.

"No. Honestly, it's up to you, and I won't be upset or bothered either way."

"But you want me to."

"I want you to do what you feel comfortable doing," I replied. "If you don't want to, that's fine. I'm comfortable doing it, it's something I've done before, and being naked in the sauna is normal for all of us."

"And that's something you'll do with your family?"

"You mean when I eventually get married? Probably. I don't agree with my dad on everything, but mostly he has the right attitude and approach."

"OK to ask where you disagree?"

"I want to marry one person, have kids, and be together as a couple for life. That didn't work for Dad, which is how he ended up in his current situation."

"What do you mean when you say it didn't work?"

"I obviously don't know all the details, but Mom One has said that the only time my dad's life was stable was when there was a trio of girls fulfilling different roles. It wasn't about sex, though he mostly had sex with them, but not always, because for a time, his sister filled the 'confidante' role. I also know Aunt Kara has her own needs, and the two of them found Aunt Jess, and, as Mom One predicted, they finally found Suzanne as the permanent third."

"And the girlfriends?"

"It's more complicated than that," I said. "Dad's relationships are complex, and sex is only part of it, and not the most important part. I explained about our Hangouts and Dad's Philosophy Club. The way dad bonds with people emotionally and spiritually nearly always leads to sex, but it's a symbol of the bond, not the bond, if that makes sense."

"And you?"

I chuckled, "A red-blooded American teenager! I like sex and don't see the point in forming a permanent relationship until I'm ready to settle down, which is likely four or five years from now. People change so much in High School and college that you can't really know them until around age twenty-two, or even a bit older after they've started working."

"I know that might sound like an excuse, but it's true. According to Mom One, Dad basically had a major reset the Summer before his Senior year at IIT. His friend Karin -- a girlfriend at that time -- pointed out that their relationship was a teenage fantasy, and that actually prevented them from having an adult

relationship. They were still close, but had grown apart. She forced a reset, and that helped Dad finally clarify things.

"And as much as I loved Francesca, I think that's where we were headed as well. I've changed a lot in the past two years, and will change more in the next six. Sure, people never stop changing, but High School and college are when you figure out who you are and set the course for your life. that's the fundamental reason for not wanting a committed relationship at the moment."

"And it lets you get laid as much as you want with no limits."

"Except there are limits," I countered. "And I'm learning about relationships and doing my best to discover what I need in a life partner. Girls do the same thing, and depending on their views, sex can be part of it or not. Be honest, please -- do you know exactly what you want from your life partner?"

"If I say 'you', you'll be upset."

"No, I won't be upset, I'll simply say that I'm not ready to make that kind of commitment. I like you a lot, but I'm also only sixteen. I'll be seventeen in February, and I have one more year of High School after this one, then four years of college. I won't be the same person when I graduate from UW Madison that I am now, and you won't be the same person when you graduate in two-and-a-half years.

"For you, the changes might be more subtle or less extreme, because you're twenty, but they could also be huge. Mom One didn't come out as lesbian until she was twenty, which is a pretty huge change, and didn't decide not to marry my dad until she was twenty-one, which was pretty earth-shattering for him."

"He expected a lesbian to marry him?!"

"Remember, they were boyfriend and girlfriend and planned a future together, and they made me *after* Mom One came out. High School and college were mostly a mess for Mom One until she met Mom Two at Stanford. I know that seems like an extreme case, but my point is, people change. And yes, they change all the time, but as I said before, High School and college are the most volatile times."

We reached the car, I put Scarlett's bag in the back seat, we got in, and I started the car.

"What you say makes sense," Scarlett said as I backed out of the parking spot. "But I can't change how I feel."

"And I'm not asking you to," I replied. "I'm simply saying what's possible."

"I know. I plan to get my Master's at UW Madison, which would be when you start your Sophomore year. They have a great program and that would give us a chance to be together more."

"And there's a strong probability that plan will work, at least in terms of seeing each other more. What happens beyond that, nobody can predict."

I stopped to pay the parking fee, then pulled out onto Cicero Avenue.

"Please don't take this the wrong way," Scarlett said, "but I suppose it's my fault for falling for a guy in High School who is chronologically three years younger, but acts more like someone who is even older than I am."

"Do you regret what happened during hockey camp?"

"No! It was exactly what I wanted and needed. It's just...I fell in love with you. You don't feel the same way, do you?"

"I think the only thing I can say is that I really like you, want to keep seeing you, and believe what you want is *possible*, but I don't want you to misunderstand me. It's also the case that love is more complex than most people think. I don't remember discussing it with you, but in Greek, there are six main words for 'love' and they all have different nuances. Saying 'I love you' often has very different meanings for people, even if they don't realize it. It's all based on using a single word to convey different types of love. That's why I'm not saying it -- I don't want you to misunderstand."

"I don't. I think I know what you mean and how you feel. I also think all I can do is what I'm doing, and hope for the best."

That's all any of us can ever do," I confirmed.

III. Elements of a Contract

December 27, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Ugh!" I groused at seeing the arrival board. "Delayed!"

"That's not uncommon," Natalie, who had driven me to O'Hare on Friday afternoon in Dad's BMW, observed.

"No, but I checked the SAS website AND called to make sure it was on time! They said it was, and that was only an hour ago!"

"I hate to break it to you, but the universe does not bend to the will of the self-styled Her Royal Highness, Birgit the First of Kenwood!"

"Well, it should!" I declared.

"According to you and every *other* teenage girl on the planet! But given you all don't agree who should control the universe, we get chaos!"

"Loki is a dick!" I growled.

Natalie laughed, "You and your dad love him, even when you complain about him, because he makes your lives interesting!"

"Maybe," I allowed. "I wish they'd put on the board how long the delay is going to be."

"Patience, Grasshopper!" Natalie replied. "You do need to learn to relax."

"Don't you ever get impatient?"

"I used to, but not since I met your dad. Of course, you're just as impatient with him as with anything else that doesn't go the way you want!"

"WHAT-EVER!"

"May I say one more thing?" Natalie asked.

"What?"

"Instant gratification isn't always a good thing, even though you think it is. Toddlers demand instant gratification; mature adults do not."

"HEY!" I protested.

"If the shoe fits..." Natalie said with a smile. "And you know what?"

"What?"

"You know I'm right."

I scowled at her because she *was* right, I just didn't want to admit it. I took a couple of breaths and let them out slowly, then decided to ask her about something she'd said.

"What did you mean about meeting my dad?"

"That's when I became an adult," Natalie said. "And wipe that smirk off your face, young lady, because it wasn't about that!"

I giggled, "It's *always* about that with Dad!"

"If you're not teasing or joking, you're wrong. Yes, of course, that happened, but it happened *after* he taught me how to think and act like an adult by treating me as an adult. And, despite your impetuosity, he treats *you* as an adult, with all the privileges and responsibilities that come with that. But that doesn't mean you aren't still a teenager who has limited life experience, whose body is changing every day, and who is on hormone overload!

"Remember, every other teenager is in the same situation, but your dad gives you the freedom to explore and experiment that I never had. I was still being treated like a pre-teen when I met your dad in Russia. All he did was treat me the way he treats you, Jesse, and your siblings. Yes, that led to going to bed together, but that was a symbol of what had already happened."

"You think I'm a little kid?" I asked.

Natalie smiled, "You're a teenager! It's a transition time, and you're fortunate that your dad is fully behind the transition, as opposed to how some parents you know behave."

"You're interfering with a good snit!" I protested.

Natalie laughed, "I bet you say that to your dad at times."

"Maybe," I replied, but my tone clearly implied 'yes'.

"May I point out something which might upset you?"

"Could I stop you?" I asked.

Natalie smiled, "Yes; I'm not Jesse!"

I laughed, "I love him anyway."

"I know. What I'm going to point out is that your trouble with boys is that you're impetuous. If you were a boy, I'd say you were thinking with the wrong head. But thinking with your clit is just as bad as thinking with your glans."

"You think I do that?"

"Be honest, Birgit."

"Maybe I do sometimes."

"Yes, and that's what has led to your difficulties with boys. Consider what you want, besides orgasms, before you take a boy into your bed. I'm not judging, and if you want to celebrate your fifteenth birthday by fucking the entire Kenwood Academy basketball team, that's your prerogative. If, on the other hand, you want a relationship, you have to work at that. That's what your dad does, even for the girls who come to him for an 'expert deflowering' as your coupons offered. Think about the girls you know about and his relationship with them."

"They're all close friends or treat Dad as a mentor, or both. That's you, right?"

"I also love him," Natalie said. "He provides everything I need at this stage in life. What he can't provide is what I want in the future -- a husband and a family. But I'm not ready for either of those. And when I am, then your dad will be a mentor and intimate friend, but not intimate the way society thinks."

"Society has its head up its butt!"

"It does. I'm curious, if you could change just one thing, what would it be?"

That Dad had given ME an expert deflowering! But I couldn't say that to Natalie.

"That everyone would mind their own business!" I declared.

"You are your father's daughter! That would be his answer as well."

The board switched to 'LANDED' but that meant they still had to taxi and Kjell had to clear immigration and customs.

 Steve

My mobile phone rang just before 4:00pm, and thinking it was Nadia, I slipped it from my pocket. The displayed number wasn't one I recognized, and was in the city, not the suburbs.

"Steve Adams."

"Hi! It's Libby! You said we could get together during Christmas Break so an enthusiastic teenage girl could wildly fuck you!"

I chuckled, "I did say that."

"What are you doing right now?" Libby asked invitingly.

"Waiting on some friends from Ohio to arrive, which they should at any moment."

"Bummer. I'm busy tomorrow, but what about Sunday?"

"I'm free on Sunday," I replied. "What did you have in mind?"

Libby laughed softly, "I think you know!"

"I meant the time!"

"Oh," she replied flatly, causing me to laugh.

"Nice. You seem to have adopted the Adams/Block sarcastic style!"

"How could I not hanging around Jesse, Mom One, and Mom Two?!"

"Good point!" I chuckled.

"How about 11:00am on Sunday?" Libby suggested. "My parents will be gone all day, so we can use my room and keep it private from someone you call the Neighborhood Watch!"

"You're positive your parents won't come home?" I asked.

"They're in Colorado, and their flight gets in late on Sunday."

"Then I'll see you Sunday at your house at 11:00am."

"Prepare to have your mind blown!" Libby declared.

We said 'goodbye', I closed my phone and went to the Indian room to let my wives know.

"She's seventeen, right?" Kara asked.

"Yes. And Jesse knew she was going to ask. She also plans to start attending Philosophy Club in January. She said it was time to graduate, so to speak -- her first fuck with an actual adult, then attending Philosophy Club."

"She's a Junior, right?"

"Yes, and she plans to go to Harvard for pre-law."

"So when Liz is ready to retire, Libby will be your new *Consigliere*?" Kara asked.

"Nobody knows what the future will hold!"

The doorbell rang, and I left the Indian room and went to answer it. When I opened the door, I saw Audrey, a guy, and a young woman of college age.

"Hi!" Audrey exclaimed. "This is Brad, my boyfriend."

"Hi!" I replied, accepted a hug from her and shook hands with Brad. "Welcome!"

"And this is my friend, Isabella. She drove us here, and I hope you don't mind if she hangs out with us."

"«¡Mi casa es tu casa!»" I replied. ("My house is your house!")

"«¿Hablas español?»" Isabella asked. ("You speak Spanish?")

"«Sí, pero no con fluidez.»" ("Yes, but not fluent.")

She smiled, I invited them in, and we went to the Indian room to introduce Brad and Isabella to my wives who already knew Audrey.

"How is Darla?" Kara asked Audrey.

"Still loving Germany and loving being a mom! Mark is six months old and a handful! I visited in August before school started. She just started practicing karate again."

"Let me take them downstairs and get them set in the guest room," I said.

I showed Audrey and Brad to the right-hand guest room, with Isabella tagging along.

"Cool house," she observed.

"You haven't seen anything yet!" Audrey declared. "Steve, can we give Brad and Isabella a complete tour?"

"Of course! Before I forget, I'll be busy all day tomorrow."

"No problem! Brad has never been to Chicago and Isabella is taking us sightseeing. Would it be OK if she came to the New Year's Eve party? She's twenty-one."

"She's welcome, of course. And she can bring a date, if she'd like."

"Thanks," Isabella said.

"Shall we take the tour?"

 Birgit

Kjell, Natalie and I finally arrived at the house just after 4:00pm, more than an hour later than we should have. I saw Dad coming down the stairs with Audrey, who was Darla's sister, and two people I didn't know.

"«Hejsan!»" Dad said to Kjell.

"«Hej, Steve!»" Kjell replied.

"Birgit, you know Audrey," Dad said. "This is her boyfriend Brad and her friend Isabella. Brad, Isabella, meet my daughter Birgit and her friend Kjell from Sweden."

They all greeted each other.

"We're going to put his bags in my room," I said. "What time is dinner?"

"6:00pm," Dad replied. "We ordered Chinese."

"OK."

I led Kjell up to my room and shut the door. We spoke Swedish together, as was normal for us.

"I emptied the top drawer in the dresser for you, and there's room in the closet for you to hang anything, and you can put your toothbrush and stuff in the bathroom."

"I should call home and let them know I arrived safely."

"OK. Use the landline phone on my desk. Dial 0-1-1 then 46, then 8, then your number."

He followed my instructions, spoke to his mom, and then replaced the handset.

"All good?" I asked.

"Yes. Mom said to say 'hi' to your dad. Let me unpack and we can go downstairs."

"What time did you want to go to bed?" I asked. "I know it's like 11:00pm by you."

"I think around 9:00pm," Kjell said. "That's about 3:00am by me, but that way I switch my clock quicker."

"Will you be too tired to fool around?" I asked.

"You're kidding, right?"

I giggled, "That's what I thought!"

 Steve

"Is everything Audrey told me about your relationships true?" Isabella asked as we reached the bottom of the stairs.

"I suspect so," I replied. "Would you like to meet my wives and girlfriends?"

"Weird, but yes!"

"It's only just begun to get weird!" Audrey exclaimed. "If you hang out here very long, you'll have your mind blown."

"We're having an impromptu Philosophy Club meeting on New Year's Eve afternoon," I said.

"Awesome!" Audrey exclaimed. "What time?"

"1:00pm," I replied. "We'll finish around 4:00pm so we can set up for the New Year's Eve party."

"What's 'Philosophy Club'?" Isabella asked.

"Audrey didn't tell you?" I asked.

"I only told her about your relationships so we could get past that surprise," Audrey replied. "Everything else she has to discover for herself."

"And Brad?"

"Same," Audrey smirked. "That's what my sister did to me, minus telling me about your relationships! Sauna after dinner?"

"You, Etheldred," I chuckled, "are a troublemaker!"

"What did I miss?" Brad asked.

"Our saunas are usually used naked," I replied. "Co-ed."

"In your dreams!" Isabella exclaimed.

"Birgit," I called out as she and Kjell came down the stairs. "Got a sec?"

She came over to us.

"Birgit, tell my friends how we use the sauna here."

"Naked, of course!" she declared.

"Why do I think I walked into an episode of the *Twilight Zone*?" Brad asked.

I chuckled, "Because you did! Come meet my wives and girlfriends, and we'll take it from there."

[Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Matthew

"What are you guys doing while you're here?" Aunt Jennie asked after we sat down for dinner at her house on Friday evening.

"We're going to the Art Museum with Pavel, Larisa, Rachel, Abi, and Viktoria. They're also bringing a girl named April and her boyfriend Mark, and another girl named Jordan."

"Are they from the same church as everyone else?" Aunt Jennie asked.

"Yes, though Abi doesn't go to church. She's Rachel's best friend because her mom and grandma are close friends with Rachel's dad."

"That's the doctor, right?" I asked.

"Yes," Chelsea replied. "And I don't think they mentioned it last time, but Viktoria is Rachel's cousin, though, by her biological mom, not her current mom. And April is Rachel's cousin because her mom was adopted by Rachel's dad's parents."

"I need a scorecard!" Kent declared.

"You seem to handle my family without a scorecard!" I countered.

Kent laughed, "I've had time! Your dad walked Jennie down the aisle when he was a teenager!"

"That was when he met Mom, right?" I asked.

"Yes. He brought Jesse's mom as his date, and that's when I had the first clue about your family, though I didn't realize it at the time!"

"Blame the Reds," Aunt Jennie said. "They were on TV and I mentioned to your mom that your dad was watching the game. She went to see him, and the rest is, as they say, history!"

"When are you heading back to Chicccago?" Kent asked.

"On Tuesday morning," Chelsea replied. "We're going to a New Year's party at a friend's house in Oswego."

When we finished dinner, Chelsea and I offered to clean up, then spent the evening with her parents.



December 28, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Saturday morning, I left the house early, and headed to the Gold Coast, arriving at the building where Ken Thompson had his condo just before 7:00am. I pulled up in front of the building, and a liveried doorman came to the car. I lowered the passenger window, and he bent down.

"Are you here for Miss Thompson?" he asked.

"Yes."

He stood, waved, and Emma came out of the building. He opened the door for her, she got in, buckled in, and he shut the door.

"Have a nice day, Miss Thompson!"

"Thanks, Bob!" she replied.

She closed the window, and I pulled away from the curb.

"Sorry about not greeting you with a kiss, but I don't want to be public given I'm sixteen and you're thirty-nine."

"A wise choice. Breakfast?"

"Yes."

"We'll head for Bucktown Bistro for breakfast, and then, if you're still interested in making the beast with two backs, to the apartment I mentioned."

"You think I might have changed my mind? And that I wouldn't have called to tell you?"

"Do you remember what I said about that particular commitment?"

"That it was never irrevocable. But most guys would be pissed."

"I suspect you know my response."

"That you're not like most guys!"

"Correct. And you agree, otherwise you wouldn't have sat down next to me in San Francisco, continued the conversation, asked to sit next to me, and invited me to make the beast with two backs!"

"Perhaps that's my typical behavior."

"Perhaps it is," I replied. "That doesn't change my observation that you don't think I'm like most guys. You specifically said boys your age were complete idiots; you also said your mom wouldn't understand you having an older, *steady* boyfriend, implying you might have gone out with an older guy."

"And if I have?"

"It's only relevant if you believe it's relevant, and, to be clear, not any of my business one way or the other."

"You're not interested in knowing my history?"

"Of course I'm interested, but what you choose to share is up to you. Ultimately, it's a question of what you want out of our relationship."

"It takes two to Tango," Emma countered. "Don't we have to have what's called a 'meeting of the minds'?"

I chuckled, "Spoken like a lawyer's kid!"

"I *am* a lawyer's kid! A meeting of the minds, mutual consideration, an offer, and acceptance!"

"Those are the elements of a contract!"

"I'm curious why you think it's one-sided."

"I don't, actually. I know what I want from the relationship, but I don't know what you want, beyond your statement that you want to make the beast with two backs multiple times before you fly home next week."

"What DO you want besides sleeping with an underage girl?"

"You keep using that word..." I said lightly.

"And it *does* mean what I think it means! I'd like to hear your answer."

"I am always on the lookout for people who are open-minded, counter-cultural, and who think the country is on the wrong track. I bond with them, build a relationship, and mentor them. That's the most important part, and we can actually do that without sleeping together."

"And you'd be OK with that?"

"Yes."

"But you're expecting to have sex with me."

"Anticipating, but not expecting, It's a subtle difference, but an important one."

"Because I could change my mind."

"Yes. And that would not upset me in any way, shape, or form."

"Would you be disappointed?"

"Yes, but not in a way that held it against you. What I'm looking for is another member of my subversive cadre. The structure of the relationship depends on

you, your needs, and what you want to achieve, both short and long term. That could be anything from a close, ongoing relationship to a 'catch and release' situation."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It means some of the subversives I recruit choose a path that doesn't involve regular interaction; others choose to be my personal karate students; others I see occasionally because they live some distance away. The question is, what do you want? I mean, besides the obvious."

"I actually thought about some things you said, and I'm considering attending college in Chicago to study computers. I mentioned it to my dad, and he thinks computers would be a good choice, and he wouldn't object to me being around more. At least I'd get to see him regularly, unlike my mom, who is pretty much always working."

"Did you mention you met me?" I asked.

"Yes, and he said your company is very forward thinking and has an excellent reputation."

"We are a pure meritocracy and take very good care of our staff. Does your dad know you're seeing me today?"

"No. I told him I was going to have breakfast with a friend and hang out with them. He doesn't pry, so there won't be any problems."

"OK. I should probably ask what you like to eat so we can plan lunch and dinner."

"Anything is OK. Chinese, pizza, or whatever are all good. You have dietary restrictions, right?"

"Yes. Chinese for dinner, then. For lunch, Potbelly's is close and they have soup and salads, in addition to sandwiches."

"That's cool. What's your favorite thing to eat?"

I smirked, "A leading question if there ever was one!"

Emma laughed, "Pussy?"

"Tastes great and less filling!"

"Isn't filling it the point?"

"Eventually, but I did promise to do that until you could no longer stand it."

We arrived at Bucktown Bistro and were seated by the morning hostess, and Pam came over to our table.

"I didn't expect to see you until after New Year's," she said. "Earl Grey?"

"Yes, please."

"And you, Miss?"

"OJ, please."

Pam left to get our drinks.

"You must come here often," Emma observed.

"A men's group meets on alternate Saturdays. We've been meeting longer than you've been alive, though we started at Lou Mitchell's on Jackson."

"You've made that point several times."

"Just as you've made the 'underage' point several times."

"When did you actually first meet?"

"May 1986," I replied. "So about five months before you were born, if your birthday was in October, which you implied with the timing of your OB/GYN exam."

"October 22nd. When's yours?"

"April 22nd, so exactly six months offset, though 1963 instead of 1986."

Pam brought our drinks and asked Emma if she was ready to order, which she was. Once Pam had taken Emma's order, she left the table.

"You're not going to have anything other than tea?" Emma asked.

"Pam will bring my breakfast," I replied. "I've eaten the same thing every time I've been here since we first came here in July 1987. Pam knows my order, and those of the regulars in our group of around thirty guys. Only new people or irregular attendees actually have to order. Actually, I do need to correct myself -- I swapped the potatoes for fruit when the docs determined my susceptibility to syncopal events when I ate complex carbohydrates."

"You never change?"

"No. I do come here for dinner, and then I have a varied menu, usually something Alex Saunders whips up for my party."

"I guess after sixteen years, you'd know the chef!"

"Yes."

"OK to change topics?"

"Sure."

"When do you teach karate?"

"I have a regular class for my personal students on Saturday afternoon and sometimes teach the daily classes at the dojo. We don't hold classes during the week between Christmas and New Year's."

"You have other instructors under you?"

"I don't run the dojo," I replied. "I'm the most senior instructor, though."

"But you have your own students?"

"Yes. I have my own specialized teaching system that is more challenging than simple physical fitness. It's also spiritual and intellectual."

"Separate from the philosophy discussions you mentioned?"

"Yes. If you're interested in a sample, we're having an impromptu meeting on Tuesday. And if you aren't doing anything for New Year's, you're welcome to come to our New Year's Eve party. You'd have a chance to meet my wives and kids."

"Do your kids know about your lifestyle?"

"I have three wives and two girlfriends who live in the house, plus I have kids with four women. What do YOU think?"

Emma laughed, "Good point!"

 Birgit

"Are you OK hanging out with Albert, Nicholas, Peter, and Julie today?" I asked Kjell as we snuggled in bed when we woke up on Saturday morning.

"Sure. What are we going to do?"

"Lunch at Giordano's, the Museum of Science and Industry, Chinese for dinner, then see *Catch Me if You Can*, a thriller about the FBI chasing a guy who pretended to be a Pan Am pilot, a doctor, and conned people out of millions. It's based on a true story."

"That sounds good. Jesse and Scarlett aren't coming?"

"No. He's having a party for his hockey team and the girls' softball team. Matthew is in Ohio with Chelsea, and my sisters are having their own thing at Amber's house next door, but it's girls only. And Michael is hanging out with his friend Andi, her dad, and Eduardo. Tomorrow we're hanging out with Jesse and Scarlett and some of his friends."

"Cool."

"Do you want breakfast?"

"I'm famished! Someone wore me out last night, and I was already tired!"

I giggled, "I promise to wear you out every night!"

"I won't object!"

We got out of bed, showered, dressed, and went downstairs to have breakfast.

[Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Matthew

"Can someone explain the complicated relationships?" I asked as we walked from the parking garage to the art museum.

"Jordan's mom is my dad's sister," Rachel said. "Viktoria's dad and my biological mom were brother and sister. My mom died the day I was born, and my dad remarried. April's mom was adopted by my paternal grandparents when she was fourteen. Abi has been my best friend since I was born, and her mom and grandma are close friends of my dad, and her grandma taught my dad to play guitar. Larisa's mom is a girl my dad has known his whole life and her dad was a deacon; they actually dated for a short time. Pavel's dad is the priest of his church. Mark goes to the same church as April and Larisa."

"Your mom really died the day you were born?" I asked.

"Yes. She had a congenital defect of blood vessels in her brain, and according to the doctors, there was no way to detect it or fix it if they could detect it. Well, now we could detect it with an MRI, but still not fix it."

"So your siblings are from your stepmom?"

"Just my mom. I never knew my biological mom, so I never thought of my mom as anything other than my mom. They told me about it when I was five, though I didn't really understand until I was older. But it's more complicated because I have a half-brother who's the son of a doctor friend of my dad's."

"Why does this sound like my family?" I asked with a goofy smile.

Rachel laughed, "I've heard! But it's not quite like that. My brother Alexi's mom is lesbian, though they conceived artificially. And he doesn't call his mom's partner 'mom', he calls her 'Aunt Tessa'."

"Your family is almost as complicated as mine," I replied.

"And it gets MORE complicated," Rachel declared, "because my paternal grandpa remarried a much younger woman, and I have an uncle who is only six months older than I am!"

"My mom had just turned fifteen when I was born," April interjected. "I never met my dad because he got twenty-five years for having sex with my mom when she was fourteen and he was forty."

"Did you want to meet him?" Chelsea asked.

"Not really, and even if I did, he's not allowed to have visitors under eighteen."

"Did your mom get married?"

"Yes, right after she graduated from college. I like my stepdad a lot."

"I don't know if anyone told you, but my mom lives with her boyfriend," I said.

"How long have they been together?" Rachel asked.

"They actually dated in college, but then he went back to Spain. When he moved to the US, they got together again."

"My mom's husband isn't my dad," Larisa said. "My biological dad is a complete fanatic."

"I don't think anyone except Pavel and Jordan has a traditional family," Chelsea said. "Mark's parents are divorced and remarried."

"You do," I said. "I mean, sure, your mom was married to the soldier who died in Vietnam, but your mom and dad were married when you were born and are still married."

"True."

"And honestly," I said, "what truly matters is we all have parents who care for us."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

"You know," I said as we walked through the door of the NIKA apartment, "you never did tell me your superpower."

"You're right, I didn't!" Emma replied. "And I said I didn't reveal it to just anyone!"

"I'm not 'just anyone!'"

"You never told me yours, either!" Emma countered. "But I suspect you're about to show me."

I smiled, took her hand, and led her to the second bedroom, which was right across from the bathroom.

"I suppose it's time for a proper kiss," Emma said with a smile.

I held out my arms, and she melted into them, her firm body pressed against mine. Our lips touched, then parted, and our tongues began a gentle dance. Remembering what Emma had said, I moved my hands to cup her butt and gave it a squeeze, and Emma broke the kiss.

"Told ya' you could find it!" she declared.

"Any requests?"

"Make me feel really, really good!"

"I can do that! I hate to be crass, but STI test?"

Emma smiled, "Fortunately my gynecologist's office was open yesterday and could fax it to me."

She handed it to me and I handed it back, then, as was my practice, I showed her my card.

"What would have happened if I couldn't get it?" she asked.

"I trust you, but I'd have had to say 'no'. I'm glad it worked out!"

"Me, too! Now, make me feel good!"

Three minutes later we were both naked, and I took in her gorgeous, lithe body -- small, firm breasts capped with light brown nipples, a flat stomach, graceful legs, a smoothly shaved mons, and plump labia, already slick with her juices. I pulled down the comforter, then took Emma's hand and led her to the bed. She got in, turned on her side, and I got in next to her, lying on my side facing her.

We French kissed for a bit, then I gently pushed Emma onto her back and lowered my mouth to her breast. I spent about five minutes on her breasts before I kissed my way down to her bare mons, breathing deeply and taking in her wonderful scent. I planted several kisses on the inside of Emma's thighs, then several more along her plump labia. After those kisses, I pressed my tongue into her, coating it with her spicy juices.

Emma moaned softly as I swirled my tongue and breathed in sharply when I ran it over her clit. I closed my mouth and sucked hard, causing Emma to groan, and she began slowly rolling her hips as I pleased her to her first orgasm. Knowing we had all day, and I could keep my promise of hours of oral sex later, I moved up, grasped my shaft, rubbed my glans along Emma's slick labia, then slowly entered her. She was so wet that I had no problem sliding in until my pubic hair was pressed against her mons.

I bent down, we exchanged a French kiss, and I began fucking her with slow gentle thrusts. Emma wrapped her arms and legs around me and we began moving in sync. About every five strokes I ground against her for several seconds before resuming our movements. About four minutes after we started, Emma shuddered and moaned into my mouth as her pussy spasmed around my dick as she had her first of four orgasms.

Her fourth one was the strongest and brought me to the point of no return. I pushed deep into her tight, spasming tunnel, groaned and fired jet after jet of cum into her. When my orgasm had run its course, I withdrew, slid down, and

used my tongue to bring her to her sixth orgasm of the day. My goal achieved, I moved up and Emma and I exchanged a fierce French kiss.

"My turn," she said, breathing hard.

She gently nudged me to my back and then, following the pattern I'd used earlier, sucked on both my nipples, then kissed her way down to my groin. She grasped my semi-flaccid shaft, licked it clean, then took my glans into her mouth, sucking and swirling her tongue. It didn't take long before I was erect, at which point Emma released me, threw her leg over me to straddle me and impaled herself on my rock-hard dick.

She leaned down, and we kissed as she moved gently back and forth, rubbing her clit against me while squeezing and releasing her muscles, providing intense pleasure. A few minutes later, she shuddered as she had the first of another four orgasms, following which she began moving up and down, bringing me off, pushing herself hard against me as I pumped cum into her.

Emma stayed on top of me and we exchanged kisses until I softened and slipped from her. She gave me one more kiss, then turned, straddling my face and planting her labia on my lips. She lowered her head and once again began pleasuring me with her mouth. This time, though, she took it to completion, and after she had three good orgasms from my tongue, I had my release, cum spurting into Emma's soft mouth.

After the last spurt, she turned, we exchanged a deep French kiss, and then she moved from on top of me and snuggled close, one leg and one arm draped over me. We lay quietly for about fifteen minutes, and I savored the experience I'd just had, and looked forward to another fourteen hours with Emma.

"Did you come up with a nickname?" she asked.

"You didn't like any of the ones I suggested," I replied. "Why don't you pick one?"

"Well, she said," an hour ago 'Virgo' would have worked, but not now!"

An interesting revelation, and one that both did and didn't surprise me. Virginité did not imply ignorance, and Bethany's book described things in sufficient detail that even an inexperienced girl would know what to do. Given Emma's obvious intelligence, and her «joie de vivre» everything lined up, and I had no doubt the implication was true, and I shouldn't have been even slightly surprised.

"No comment?" Emma asked about ten seconds later, as I'd failed to respond due to contemplating the situation.

"Sorry," I replied. "I didn't expect that particular revelation."

"Does it make a difference?"

"As a young woman once explained, virginité is simply a state of being, not a thing in and of itself. There are many things we do for the first time, and they are not special because they are the first time, or the tenth time, or the hundredth time, but because they are special things to do. Sex is always special, whether the first time or after a lifetime.

"Another way to look at it is that it's a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Having sex for the first time is a ceremony recognizing that transition, a symbol if you will, not the transition. In your case, the transition occurred in the terminal at the airport in San Francisco, and we just confirmed it with a ritual."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Emma replied. "To me, it was simply time, but I can see how what you're saying actually fits."

"Out of curiosity, what caused the change in thinking?"

"I've made out a lot, and I've felt turned on, but never enough to want to go further than kissing. I thought about it, obviously, because the guys wanted more, but I just didn't feel it. With you, the second I sat down next to you a voice screamed in my brain 'This is THE guy!' and 'You *have* to fuck him!'. I can't explain it, really."

That was Kara's experience when she sat down next to me in Mrs. Brewer's chemistry class just over twenty-two years in the past.

"And was it what you expected? Please be honest; you can't possibly hurt my feelings."

"Weirdly, I believe you."

"Why is it weird?"

"The impression I have from my friends is that guys are really touchy about that subject."

"I'm not."

"You have nothing to worry about! It was everything I'd hoped it would be. And from your reaction, I was knowledgeable enough that you couldn't tell."

"The biggest 'tell' is nervousness or tentativeness. You showed neither. There are no physiological signs for most girls over age fifteen, especially if they're physically active. And there is more than enough information available in books and online that anyone can know the correct techniques for oral sex. Screwing is pretty simple, when you think about it.

"In/Out/Repeat?" Emma teased.

"Pretty much! Sure, there are positions and variations and techniques, but it's simple enough for an inexperienced girl to not give it away if she doesn't want to, so long as she's not nervous or tentative. The old wives' tales about blood and painful intercourse are just that, at least for the most part.

"Younger teens who don't play sports might have an intact hymen, but it's typically very thin and if there's pain, it's more like an injection, and goes away quickly. Painful intercourse is nearly always due to lack of lubrication, which is why foreplay is important. And yes, it's entire possible to be *virgo intacta* at an older age, but that's rare."

"You seem very well informed for a guy."

"I'm going to give good odds you've read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*."

"My mom gave me a copy when I turned twelve, right before I had my first period."

"Doctor Bethany Krajick and I met in Junior High and we're still friends. Her son and my daughter are very close, well, they will be again once he gets past the whole 'cooties' thing."

Emma laughed, "How old?"

"He's thirteen; she's twelve. They were basically a couple from the time they were little, but puberty is an awkward time. They'll figure it out and get back together."

"And you're OK with that, of course."

"Of course. My kids are independent individuals who have to make their own decisions."

"And if your underage daughter were doing what we're doing?"

"My underage daughter is allowed to have her boyfriends spend the night at the house. You do seem to like using that word!"

Emma laughed softly, "Because I figured you got off on the idea of being with an underage girl. And thinking about it, I should have told you I was a virgin to give you an even bigger thrill!"

"Actually, no, you shouldn't have. I'd have behaved differently."

"Why?"

"I have a habit of overthinking things and talking girls to death to make sure they're really ready to do what they've implied or said they want to do. And that would have been true of you, even though it was obvious to me what you wanted and that you were mature enough to make that decision."

"But the thrill?"

"Works after the fact, too," I chuckled. "What would you like to do next?"

"I believe you promised to use your mouth on me until I couldn't stand it!"

"I did!" I agreed.