

FROM THE FILES OF
Dr. Fran Mercer



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From the Files of Doctor Fran Mercer

by Michael Loucks

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I. Entry 19970108 - Bethany Michelle Krajick

January 8, 1977, Milford, Ohio

Doctor Francheska Vladimirovna 'Fran' Mercer sat in her office on a cold January Saturday, reviewing the notes she'd made as she'd spoken with Mrs. Nora Krajick. Bethany Michelle Krajick, her thirteen-year-old daughter, had been raped and impregnated, and then had an abortion. No formal police report had been filed because the young woman hadn't told anyone about the rape until she'd realized she was pregnant. By that time, there was no evidence that a rape had occurred, and the Krajicks had decided against a 'he said, she said' trial to spare Bethany the additional trauma.

Doctor Mercer leaned back, removed her wire-frame glasses, pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. Her practice in Milford, Ohio, a village on the eastern side of the Cincinnati area, hadn't developed along the lines she'd expected when she'd received her license to practice Psychology from the State of Ohio. She'd expected to do divorce and family counseling, and while she still did some of that, most of her time was now spent with teens, and most of those were girls who had been subjected to some abuse - physical, sexual, or mental. She'd developed something of a reputation as an expert in the area, and other psychologists referred patients to her regularly.

Straightening up in the leather chair, she put her glasses back on, and retrieved an intake form from her desk's lower-left-hand drawer. She filled in the basic information she knew - name, birth date, address, parents' names and wrote 'rape recovery / gross stress reaction' on the treatment line. The 'experts' didn't feel that rape was a cause for 'gross stress reaction', but Doctor Mercer felt that

the kind of trauma rape victims suffered was, in many ways, comparable to 'battle fatigue' of soldiers returning from Vietnam.

Her patient, thirteen-year-old Bethany Krajick, arrived with her mother about five minutes before their scheduled 8:00am appointment. Doctor Mercer knew, from talking with Nora Krajick, that Bethany was a good student and a cheerleader, and that the perpetrator of the rape had been a member of the school football team. Bethany's best friend was another cheerleader, named Kathy, with whom Doctor Mercer hoped to be able to speak.

Bethany was a pretty brunette, with her wavy hair styled such that it framed her face. She wore just the tiniest bit of makeup - just eyeshadow - and looked to be fit and trim. What was missing was the typical bubbly, energetic nature of a cheerleader; instead, Bethany seemed depressed and reserved, at least at first glance.

"Come in," Doctor Mercer said, standing up.

"Hi, Doctor Mercer," Nora said. "This is Bethany."

"Hi, Bethany," Doctor Mercer said warmly.

"Hi," came the very timid reply.

"If it's OK with you, we'll have your mom wait just outside the office on those couches. That way you and I can talk and get to know each other."

"I guess."

Doctor Mercer nodded to Nora, who left the office, closing the door behind her.

"Have a seat on the couch, please."

Bethany moved to the couch and sat down, and Doctor Mercer sat in a wingback chair just to the side.

"Do you know why you're here?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"Because I was raped and Mom is worried about me."

"OK. Why don't you tell me a bit about yourself? You can say anything you like, but I would like to know about where you were born, where you went to school, and about your friends and family."

It was an open-ended question, but Doctor Mercer preferred those, at least at first, to try to get a new patient talking.

"I was born April 12, 1963 at The Christ Hospital. Mom and Dad lived in Price Hill then, but we moved to Milford when my brother Ed was born three years later. I've gone to Milford schools my whole life - first Pleasant Hill Elementary, then Milford Main, and now Milford Junior High."

"What do your mom and dad do?"

"Dad is a CPA and Mom is a real estate attorney."

"And your brother? What grade is he in?"

"Fifth."

"What do you like to do in your free time?"

"Read, listen to music, and hang out with my friend Kathy."

"Is she also a cheerleader?"

"Yes. We both joined in seventh grade."

"Do you like being a cheerleader?"

"A lot. It's fun, we get to go to all the football and basketball games, and visit lot of different schools."

"Do you like school?"

"I do, especially math."

"Have you thought about college?"

"Only a little. I might want to be a CPA, like my dad. He gets to travel and do math all the time. But I'm not sure."

"Well, you're only in eighth grade, so you have lots of time to think about it. Do you have any pets?"

"No, but some day I want a parakeet!"

"A parakeet?"

"My friend Kathy and I talked in seventh grade about the perfect future - a house with a white picket fence, a husband, kids, and pets. I want a parakeet."

"Why?"

"I don't know, I just do."

"That's OK. Do you go to church?"

"No. We did when I was little, but we stopped going. I'm not sure why."

"Which church, if you know?"

"First Methodist in Milford."

"How old were you when you stopped going?"

"Around six, I guess. You'd have to ask my mom."

"That's close enough. Before you became a cheerleader, did you play any sports?"

"Softball, in sixth grade. I also bowl, if that counts."

"Do you like bowling?"

"Sure. I do OK, but I'm not great."

"Do you keep a diary?"

"Yes, but not regularly."

"Did you write about what happened to you?"

"No."

"Can we talk about that night?"

"Mom said I have to."

"Well, I think you should, but you don't have to. We can talk about other things if you aren't ready."

"No, it's OK," Bethany said with a hitch in her voice.

"Let's just talk about that day, from when you got up in the morning. Just tell me everything you can remember."

"My alarm went off at 8:00am, which is normal for a Saturday. I got out of bed, straightened the sheets and pulled the bedspread up."

"What day was that?"

"September 4th. It was Labor Day weekend."

"OK. What do you wear to bed?"

"A nightgown. It was my summer one, it's really light and soft and comes down to my knees."

"Do you wear anything else?"

"Panties, but no bra. I wear panties because my period is kind of irregular and I put pads in them."

"That's normal at thirteen. When did you have your first period?"

"On my thirteenth birthday, exactly."

"By irregular, what do you mean?"

"It could be three weeks or five weeks. Sometimes light, sometimes heavy."

"OK. Go on."

"I went to the bathroom, took a shower, then got dressed."

"What did you put on?"

"Jeans and a t-shirt. Well, my underwear, too, plus socks."

"Then what?"

"I had breakfast with my family."

"Do you remember what you had to eat?"

"Waffles and bacon."

"Do you drink coffee?"

"Gross! No!"

Doctor Mercer laughed softly, "I prefer tea myself. Do you drink soft drinks?"

"Sure."

"What's your favorite?"

"Dr Pepper."

"What did you do after breakfast?"

"It was my turn to do the dishes, so I helped Mom, then I rode my bike to Kathy's house."

"Your cheerleader friend?"

"Yes."

"And what did you do with her?"

"Just hung out, talked, and listened to music."

"Records or the radio?"

"Records."

"Do you remember which ones?"

"Only one for sure - a new album she had by REO Speedwagon."

"What did you talk about?"

"School, cheerleading, football, boys, and the party we were going to that night."

"What about boys?"

"Just which ones we liked and which ones were total speds."

"Were you allowed to date?"

"Not really. I could go to school dances, football or basketball games, or to school parties, but not on a real date. Dad says I have to be fifteen."

"Do you want to date?"

"I did; I'm not sure now."

"How long were you at your friend's house?"

"Until about 3:00pm. I rode home, so I could have dinner and get ready for the party."

"Did you eat lunch?"

"Yes, at Kathy's house."

"Do you remember what you had to eat?"

"PB&J sandwiches, chips, and lemonade."

"Did you bike straight home?"

"Yes."

"And when you got home?"

"I took a shower and put on clean clothes - a knee-length skirt and a nice blouse, and clean underwear, too."

"May I ask what kind of underwear?"

"Just plain white cotton. Mom doesn't think I should wear anything else, not even colors."

"What color was your blouse?"

"Blue, the same as my skirt. It's my favorite color."

"Do you remember what you had for dinner?"

"Spaghetti with meat sauce. Our usual Saturday dinner."

"Usual?"

"Ed and I both love it, so Mom makes it every Saturday."

"OK. Then what did you do?"

"Brushed my teeth, fixed my hair, and put on makeup."

"What makeup?"

"Eye-shadow and nail polish."

"Blue?"

"Yes!"

"What about lipstick?"

Bethany shook her head, "I'm not allowed; I use cherry lip gloss."

"What time was that?"

"About 6:30pm. Kathy's mom picked me up about ten minutes before 7:00pm and drove us to the party."

"Where was that?"

"At a football player's house on Vera Cruz Pike."

"What as his name? The football player?"

"Gary Hardoffer. He's JV."

"How many kids were there?"

"About thirty, I think."

"Was everyone in eighth or ninth grade?"

"No, there were some Sophomores there, too. It was mostly football players, cheerleaders, and a few girlfriends of football players."

"What was going on when you arrived?"

"Music was playing and some kids were dancing."

"Was there alcohol there?"

"And pot, but I didn't smoke and I only had a half a cup of beer."

"Do you like beer?"

"Not really, but I didn't want people to think I was a baby. I just sipped a bit so people saw me with a cup."

"Was that normal for parties?"

"Not in seventh grade, but in eighth grade. I think the Sophomores brought the pot and somebody got their big brother to buy beer."

"Were there any parents home?"

"Yes, but they never came to the basement where the party was."

"Who did you dance with?"

"Pretty much all the guys. That was normal, really."

"So you danced. What else?"

"Well, some of the kids had to leave at 9:30pm, but I was allowed to stay later, until 11:00pm because it was a Saturday and I was with the cheerleaders. There were about twelve people left and one of the guys suggested we play 'Spin the Bottle'."

"Had you played it before?"

"Twice."

"Was your first kiss playing 'Spin the Bottle'?"

"Yes. Those were the only kisses I had."

"Did you like playing?"

"Yes."

"Did anything happen except kissing during the game?"

"No. Some of the guys wanted more, but the girls always said 'no'."

"What happened during the game?"

"The usual stuff - I kissed most of the guys, and so did the other girls."

"Kathy?"

"Yes. She really liked playing."

"And you?"

"I did."

"Was there anyone you didn't want to kiss there?"

"Not really."

"Did you like any of the guys?"

"Yes," Bethany said quietly.

"The boy who later attacked you?"

"Yes," Bethany whispered with a tear dripping down her face.

Doctor Mercer took a box of tissues from the table next to her and handed it to Bethany who dabbed her eyes and blew her nose.

"Can you tell me his name?"

"Josh Benton."

"A football player?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what position he plays?"

"Safety."

"What happened then?"

"Well, after we played for maybe twenty minutes, he offered to drive me home. I knew he lived in my direction, and Kathy lived in the opposite. I told her I wouldn't need a ride and went with Josh."

Bethany blew her nose again, and then wiped her tears away with a fresh tissue.

"Are you OK to keep going?"

"I think so."

"What happened next?"

"When we came to my subdivision, he turned right onto Klondyke instead of left. I knew he was heading for a parking spot."

"Did you say anything?"

"No, because I liked kissing him and wanted to kiss him more. But I didn't want..."

Bethany started sobbing and took several minutes to compose herself. Doctor Mercer made notes in her notebook and waited.

"Can you tell me what happened next?"

"We parked and started kissing. He put his hand on my boob."

"Over your blouse?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell him to stop or try to move his hand?"

"No, because I liked it."

"Was the radio on?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember what was playing?"

"Don't Go Breaking My Heart."

"Go on."

Bethany took a deep breath and let it out, then dabbed her tears.

"He started pulling up my blouse. I told him to stop, but he pushed his hand up inside it."

"What did you say to him?"

"I said 'Stop!' and 'No!'," but he didn't listen. Then I felt the seat recline and he moved on top of me."

"What did you do?"

"I screamed 'No!' and 'Stop!' but he didn't listen. I felt his hands under my skirt and I tried to push him off but he was too heavy. He started pulling down my panties and I started crying and screaming 'No!' over and over, but he didn't listen."

She stopped talking, her body heaving, wracked by tears. Doctor Mercer patiently waited until Bethany calmed down enough to continue.

"I felt him against me and then suddenly it hurt bad and he started...doing it. I cried and screamed but he didn't stop. I kept trying to push him away, but he was too heavy. When he, uhm, finished, he got off me, zipped up his pants and started the car. I pulled up my underwear and just stared out the window while he drove me home."

"How did you feel?"

"Like I wasn't in my own body. I kept thinking that if he'd just been nice and asked, I probably would have done it with him. But he forced me."

"You were ready to have sex?"

"I liked him, and liked kissing him, until..."

Bethany sobbed more and once again Doctor Mercer waited for her to be able to continue.

"What happened when you got home?"

"I got out of the car and ran to the door, used my key, and went inside. I called 'hello' to my parents, then went upstairs and took a shower."

"How long did you stay in the shower?"

"Probably twenty-five minutes. But I liked long showers so nobody thought it was strange. I washed myself three times, but I still felt dirty. When I got out of the shower, I saw blood on the pad in my panties, but I knew it wasn't time for my period so I knew he'd, uhm, broken my cherry. I wrapped the pad in one of those little envelopes and put it in the trash."

"And your clothes?"

"I put them in the clothes hamper. I washed them the next morning."

"You didn't say anything to anyone?"

"No. I was so embarrassed!"

"You just pretended nothing had happened?"

"That's right. Well, until I missed my period. I thought it was just late, but then it was six weeks and I was really worried. When it didn't come the next week, I told my mom what happened."

"And she called the police?"

"No, I had the abortion before she called them. She didn't want to tell my dad at first, but then she decided she had to. So they called the police and I gave a statement. I'd destroyed all the evidence, so both the police and an attorney my dad talked to advised not to press charges because it would hurt me even more."

"How did you feel about the abortion?"

"I don't know, really. But there was no way I could have a baby."

"How are your grades?"

"Mostly B's and C's. I got mostly A's last year."

"Because you have trouble concentrating and studying?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"That's normal. I can help you with those things, if you'll let me."

"Mom said I have to come here."

"I know, but this will only work if you want my help. Do you?"

"I don't know; I guess."

"Are you still friends with Kathy?"

"Yes."

"And how do you feel about boys?"

"Scared. I never was before."

"That's normal, too. Are you scared of being around them? Or just what might happen if you're alone?"

"Both. I don't talk to any of them at all. Mostly I just talk to Kathy."

"OK. Will you let me help you?"

"I guess so, yes."

"Good. I'll arrange with your mom to see you once or twice a week. Mostly you and I will just talk, and we'll figure out how to improve your concentration and study habits. Are you sleeping OK?"

"Mostly. I sometimes wake up from a nightmare."

"About him?"

"I can never see his face in the dream, but I'm sure it's him."

"Let me give you my card. It has my office phone number on it. If I'm not here, and my receptionist isn't here, it will go to my answering service. They can reach me no matter what time it is. If you need to talk to me, or feel depressed, or think about doing anything bad, I want you to call me right away. Promise?"

"You mean wanting to kill myself?"

"Have you thought about that?"

"When I first realized I was pregnant, but not now."

"You're sure? Not at all?"

"I'm sure."

"Promise you'll call me?"

"I promise."

"Good. Let's go see your mom."

Doctor Mercer and Bethany walked out to the reception area and Doctor Mercer asked Nora to call her on Monday morning. Once Bethany and her mother had left, Doctor Mercer went back to her desk and wrote out her basic analysis, completed the intake form, and labeled a new file folder with Bethany's name. She put the form into the folder, then locked the notebook in the credenza behind her desk and picked up the phone to call her mentor, Doctor Laura Paulus, in Dayton.

"Hi, Fran. How did it go?"

"Hi, Laura. Better than I hoped. She really opened up to me and was able to walk me through the events."

"She's thirteen, right?"

"Yes. She'll be fourteen in April."

"She must be made of pretty strong stuff. What's your initial analysis?"

"She has the symptoms of 'gross stress reaction' as we discussed - trouble concentrating and studying, occasional trouble sleeping, poor grades compared to before, and fear of the opposite sex."

"What's your proposed treatment?"

"Counseling. I don't think I need to refer her for medication. We'll work on helping her focus on school work and take it from there."

"Are her parents supportive?"

"They are. They're pretty strong as well. I suggested they come in for a couples session and they agreed. Eventually we'll do a family session. The only question is her little brother."

"Does he know?"

"Not that I'm aware of. I'm thinking of not including him."

"That's probably a good choice, at least for now. You have to leave it to the parents to decide, though."

"Of course. There was one strange thing she said, and once she's in a better frame of mind, I want to explore it."

"What's that?"

"That she would have agreed to have sex with the boy if he'd just asked."

"A hyper-sexualized thirteen-year-old? Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I am, but she told me she bled from having her hymen ruptured during the rape."

"Not all abuse is penetrative, Fran. It's not normal for a thirteen-year-old to contemplate having sex and admit she was willing and ready. It happens, but it's rare. If she were fifteen, I wouldn't even blink."

"I know."

"The brother is younger?"

"By three years; he's only ten."

"That's not a likely source, but again, anything is possible. Have you talked to the dad?"

"Briefly."

"Just keep your eyes out. And remember - uncle, teacher, neighbor, and while even more rare, it could be a female."

"You had a case like that, didn't you?"

"About four years ago - a pre-teen girl being abused by a female college-age neighbor. It took me forever to get Family Services involved because they just flat-out didn't believe it."

"Are you free for lunch next week?"

"Thursday is good. Shall we meet in Kings Mills at the usual place?"

"See you at noon."

They said 'goodbye' and hung up. Doctor Mercer checked her schedule and pulled out her notes to review for her next patient. After she finished with that patient, a victim of incest at the hands of an uncle, she locked up the office and got into her Chevy to drive home. She lived just five minutes from the office, about a mile from Route 28 on McClelland Road.

"Hi, Mom!" her eldest daughter, who was ten, called out when she walked into the house.

"Hi, Sarah! What are you doing today?"

"Not much, really; my dealer was out of coke, so it's been boring."

"I never should have let you read that paper. I'm curious, do you actually know who to buy drugs from at Country Day School?"

Doctor Mercer sent her kids to private school in Indian Hill because she didn't want them mixing with her patients who were mostly from the Milford area. That would have caused all sorts of potential conflicts and potential 'dual relationships' that it wasn't worth the risk to have them in the local public school. Her husband, an aerospace engineer who worked for General Electric, made more than enough money to cover the tuition.

"No, but I know kids who would know."

"Wonderful. So much for your tuition."

"We're supposed to learn about new stuff, right? You always say that!"

"Not THAT kind of new stuff, young lady! Where's your dad?"

"In the garage tinkering with his Firebird, what else?"

"And Abigail?"

"Doing whatever it is six-year-olds do when there's a foot of snow and they're too much of a Jewish Princess to go outside!"

"We don't even go to synagogue!"

"Yeah, but you know Grandma!"

"Why are you immune?"

"Grandma's funny, but I can't take her too seriously with that Russian accent and ranting about the Communists."

"She has good reason, you know."

"I suppose. Abby is in her room."

"Thanks."

Doctor Mercer went to the garage and kissed her husband Sam, then went to change into comfortable clothes for an afternoon at home. Entry 19780525 -
Bethany Michelle Krajick

II. Entry 19780525 - Bethany Michelle Krajick

May 25, 1978, Milford, Ohio

Doctor Mercer was concerned about Bethany's growing relationship with the young man who had escorted Bethany to a 'turn-about' dance at the Junior High. It wasn't that Bethany shouldn't be dating, or even that Bethany shouldn't be contemplating limited physical intimacy, but that the young man was not prepared for what might happen. Rape victims often had problems with sexual activity, even something as simple as holding hands. A bad reaction on Bethany's part might lead to an even worse reaction on the young man's part, and cause a setback for Bethany's recovery.

Doctor Mercer hadn't met the young man, Stephen Adams, a Freshman at Milford Junior High, but Bethany had described him in detail - smart, nice-looking, a bit on the nerdy side, a member of the chess club and with interest in computers. Bethany had been a bit cagey about Steve's sexual experience, but Doctor Mercer wasn't sure if that was because Bethany didn't know, was reticent to say, or was purposefully demurring.

Bethany and Steve arrived a few minutes early for their appointment, and Bethany was shown in alone at 4:00pm. Doctor Mercer asked her receptionist, Cecilia, to make sure that Steve had the permission form signed by a parent with him.

"How are you, Bethany?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"Good. I thought Steve was supposed to come in."

"He will, but I wanted to talk to you first. How have you been this past week?"

"Fine. I saw Steve a couple of times, and I had my last final exam this morning, so I'm done for the year."

"How did those go?"

"Fine. I should have all A's."

"Very good. Tell me what you want from Steve."

"I thought we talked about this," Bethany protested.

"We did," Doctor Mercer replied with a smile. "But I'm asking again."

"I think he'd make a wonderful boyfriend," Bethany said quietly. "But I don't think I can be his girlfriend..."

"Because of what we talked about? What you call 'freaking out' when you try to hold his hand or hug?"

"Yes."

"How does he react?"

"He's understanding and loving, but I'm afraid I'll lose him to some other girl before I can..."

"We talked about that," Doctor Mercer said gently. "Even though you thought you were ready to have sex, and even wanted to, in the right circumstances, fourteen is awfully young. And that's not taking into account the trauma you

suffered. Don't think about that kind of thing yet; in fact, not for quite some time. Has Steve pressured you?"

"NO!" Bethany exclaimed. "He'd never, ever do that! He's been nothing but understanding."

"Then why are you concerned?"

"Because I'm not sure how long he'll wait."

"Because of what he said?"

Bethany shook her head, "No, it's just how I feel."

"I know you've avoided answering this, but has he been sexually active? I mean to your knowledge?"

"I think so, yes."

"Please don't push yourself. There's no rush. Let me have Steve brought in, and after a few questions, I'll have you step out. When I finish talking to him, I'll talk to you again. OK?"

"Sure," Bethany said, sounding a bit tentative.

Doctor Mercer pressed a button on the intercom on her desk and asked Cecilia to bring in Steve. She had him sit in a chair next to Bethany and introduced herself.

"Bethany tells me she told you about what happened to her," Doctor Mercer said. "Do you have any questions for me before we start?"

"Only to know how I can help her," Steve replied.

"That is the question, isn't it? It's really the only question, but a lot of boyfriends ask questions."

"Boyfriend?" he asked, shifting slightly in his chair, discomfited by the question.

"Sorry," Doctor Mercer said quickly. "I didn't mean it that way. I understand that you and Bethany are just friends. In the usual case, the partners girls bring in already have an established relationship. Honestly, it's not often I see a fifteen-year-old young man in this kind of situation."

"I guess I'm just clueless about how what happened affected her and I want to know what I can do to help her."

"I'd like to ask you some questions, if I may."

"I'll answer any question you ask if it will help Bethany."

"Good. Bethany, would you step outside, please. I think it'll be easier for Steve to give clear, honest answers, because I suspect he'll do his utmost to avoid saying anything that might hurt you. Steve, it's the case that something totally innocent might hurt her, even if you try your best not to. Are we agreed?"

"Yes," Bethany replied.

She got up and left the office, closing the door behind her.

"Steve, why are you here today?" Doctor Mercer asked, once Bethany had closed the door behind her.

"Bethany asked me to come."

Doctor Mercers smiled, "Yes, of course. But why did you agree?"

"Because I want to learn how to help her. A friend of mine warned me that if I wasn't careful, things could get, well, volatile, given what happened to Bethany."

"This friend is an adult woman?"

"Yes."

"Did she have some kind of trauma in her life?"

"Her husband was killed in Vietnam shortly after they married."

Doctor Mercer nodded, "OK. She's right, of course. Being the friend, or more, of a rape victim is difficult. Your answer before to my question about why you were here was only part of the answer. Is there anything else you can think of?"

"Because I've taken Bethany on a couple of dates? And I'm pretty sure she likes me, and she's afraid of liking a guy and getting close to him."

"Very good. She and I talked about you. She does like you, very much. She told me a few things, but I want to ask you myself, if that's OK?"

"It is," Steve replied.

"You don't have to answer," Doctor Mercer said, "but the more you tell me the more I can help her. And the more I can help you help her."

"OK."

"Bethany has told me some things, but I'd like to ask you for more information. If anything makes you uncomfortable, you don't have to answer. OK?"

"Yes."

"Are you sexually active? By that I mean oral sex or intercourse?"

"Yes to both of those."

"For how long?"

"About a year now."

"Was it just one or two instances? Or something more regular?"

"More regular."

"And you've been with more than one girl?"

"Yes."

"OK. I don't need more details than that. I'm sure you know, or can at least infer, that any kind of intimacy is going to be difficult for Bethany. Even a kiss."

"That's what my friend told me, but I haven't done anything like that with Bethany. We've danced, and we held hands. But I don't even think about things beyond that."

"Relax, Steve! I didn't mean to sound like I was accusing you."

"I guess I'm just nervous," Steve replied.

"It's OK. She did slow dance with you? And kiss your cheek?"

"Sorry, I forgot the kiss on the cheek."

"It's OK. And she held your hand, as you said."

"Yes. That's it, though. Honest! She was nervous about doing all of that, too. She was shaking pretty much the whole time, and when we went for that walk where we held hands, she dropped my hand when we got in sight of her house."

"She was nervous, or more accurately, frightened. Just like she was at the dance. You danced at arm's length the whole night, except for the last dance, right?"

"Yes."

"I want to change topics a bit. Will you tell me why you asked her brother to go on your date?"

"To make her parents comfortable. I could tell they were evaluating me. Her dad looked very concerned, though her mom was more, I don't know, calm, I guess, about it."

"That's very perceptive. Now, going back to the dance - tell me what you thought when you first saw her. Just whatever popped into your mind."

"I thought she was beautiful. One of the most beautiful girls I've ever seen."

"Have you noticed how she dresses?"

"Yes. Other than her hands and face, she shows no skin at all. Well, except when she wears her cheerleading uniform."

"Dressing ultra-conservatively is one way people respond to sexual trauma. As for cheerleading, that is something of an enigma with her."

"I guess inviting her to swim at my house isn't a good idea. I had thought about doing that."

"It's OK to invite her. In fact, I believe you should. I would expect her to say 'no', at least at first. Please don't take it as rejection of you, just let it go and ask again in the future. It'll be a big step for her, when she's ready to take it. Now, the last question before we bring Bethany back in - what do you want from her? Honestly?"

"A friend."

"Not more? Not a girlfriend or something even more intimate?"

"I think she can be a friend, but more than that? I don't think it's a possibility at this point. Nor any time soon."

Doctor Mercer nodded, "That's a fair answer. Let me ask you this - could you see her as your girlfriend? Do you think about her that way? It's important to tell me."

Steve smiled, "She's a pretty, desirable teenage girl. So yeah, I do think about her that way."

"Does the fact that she was raped bother you? I mean, in terms of how you see her?"

"Well, I didn't do it, and it's not like she asked for it to happen or encouraged it or anything. It's not like it somehow, I don't know, makes her dirty or damaged or anything."

"You seem to have a good understanding for someone who's only fifteen. You know, I do have one more question, well two, actually."

Steve laughed, "This sounds like *Columbo*! But sure, OK."

"I guess it does," Doctor Mercer replied with a smile. "Bethany told me she told you about her abortion. What do you think about that?"

"I'm Roman Catholic so I know what the Church teaches. But I can't even begin to put myself in her position. She and her parents did what they thought was right. That's all I ever try to do."

"That's a good answer. If she wants to be your girlfriend, could you do it, knowing everything you know?"

"I think so, yes. But I'm not dating anyone exclusively. I go out with three or four different girls, but none of them is my girlfriend."

"Which means I need to ask another question! Are you sexually active with all of these girls?"

"No. Just one. Well, I kiss all of them, but only with one of them do I do what you asked about before."

"OK. Let's bring Bethany back."

Bethany came back in and sat down.

"I had a good talk with Steve," Doctor Mercer said. "Is it OK if we talk together about what he said? If not, Steve can wait outside."

"It's OK if he stays," Bethany said.

"Well, first of all," Doctor Mercer said, "Steve says he wants to be your friend and help you. And you've said you want to be his friend. And that you like him."

"Yes."

"And you know that he's not dating anyone exclusively and doesn't want to, at least for now."

"Yes."

"My advice for you, for now, is keep things very simple. Go on short dates; double-dates with your younger siblings is a great idea. Steve should get credit for thinking of that. Spend time talking and make sure you tell each other what you think and what you feel and what you need.

"Steve," Doctor Mercer continued, "please be patient with Bethany. There will be times when she is very emotional, times when she is quiet. Don't think she's mad at you, well, unless she tells you she is. And absolutely, under no circumstances, put any pressure of any kind on her for anything."

"I've never in my life pressured anyone in that way," Steve replied firmly. "If anything, the pressure for, uh, intimate relations, has come from the girls. I know that 'no' means 'no' with no exceptions and 'stop' means 'stop right now' not stop in ten seconds to see if she 'meant it'."

"Very good," Doctor Mercer replied. "Bethany, you have to work on building trust like we've talked about. This young man has said he wants to help you. He can only help you if you let him. You took a big step by asking him to the dance, a big risk in telling him about the assault and another big step asking him here today."

"I'll try."

"Good. Steve, would you step out? She'll come out when we're finished."

"OK."

Steve got up and left the office, closing the door behind him.

"How are you feeling?" Doctor Mercer asked Bethany once the door was closed.

"OK."

"Do you want to change what you've told me about your feelings?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I asked. Did our talk, or anything Steve said, change how you feel about him? About your goals?"

"I think he can help me," Bethany said quietly. "He's patient and gentle and I think he loves me."

Doctor Mercer carefully took a deep breath and let it out. Bethany was on a trajectory which was of significant concern. She wasn't ready for what she was contemplating, even if it was months away. More importantly, evidence suggested that Steve wasn't going to make a commitment to Bethany. Anyone engaging in sex with a girl and dating others, even if he wasn't having sex with them, was not the type she'd recommend to Bethany for a boyfriend.

"Do you love him?" Doctor Mercer asked carefully.

"I think so, yes."

"Take things slowly, please. We'll talk more next week at our regular appointment. Are you going to see Steve before then?"

"I was going to ask him to have dinner at Frisch's. Just eat, and then have mom pick us up."

"I think that's fine. Just make sure you talk to him, Bethany. And listen to what he says, too."

"I will."

"Then I'll see you next week. If anything comes up before then, you know you can call."

"Thank you."

Doctor Mercer showed Bethany out, said goodbye to Steve and to Nora Krajick, Bethany's mom, and then went back into her office to complete her session notes. Once those were done, she headed home where her husband Sam was making dinner.

"How was work today?" she asked after they exchanged a quick kiss.

"I need someone like Farrah Fawcett-Majors for my new marketing campaign for Head & Shoulders!"

"For the campaign?" she teased.

"Nobody could ever replace you, Fran! Not even a smoking-hot blonde starlet!"

"I may go to the garage and set fire to that poster!"

"What do you think of 'You Never Get a Second Chance to Make a First Impression'?"

"Meaning not having dandruff on your suit or dress?"

"Yes."

"Not bad at all. Is that the new slogan?"

"Yes. How was work today?"

"Same as always, but you know I can't really talk about it. Where are the girls?"

"They better be studying for exams!" Sam declared. "Dinner is in fifteen minutes."

"Then I'm going to go change into something comfortable and say 'hi' to the girls. I'll be back to set the table."

"Thanks."

Doctor Mercer left the kitchen, went upstairs, found the girls studying in their rooms, then went to change. Entry 19830406 - Kara Anne Blanchard

III. Entry 19830406 - Kara Anne Blanchard

April 6, 1983, Milford, Ohio

"Doctor Mercer will see you now, Miss Blanchard," the receptionist, Cecilia, said.

"What about my mom?" Kara asked, tightly clutching her stuffed bear.

"Doctor Mercer would like to talk to you alone, but if you need your mom, it's OK for her to go in."

"You can do it, Kara," Mrs. Blanchard said, encouraging her daughter.

"OK," Kara answered.

She got up and the receptionist showed her into Doctor Mercer's office. Doctor Mercer stood and smiled warmly. Cecilia closed the door to give them privacy.

"Hi, Kara, I'm Doctor Mercer. Who's your friend?"

"Steve Bear," Kara said timidly. "Can I keep him with me?"

"Yes, of course. Have a seat on the couch, please. We're just going to talk."

Kara sat down on the couch, still clutching her bear tightly. Doctor Mercer sat down in a chair near the couch. She didn't have her notepad, as she had spoken with Kara's mother and knew Kara was reticent to talk. The only reason she was here was because Steve Adams, another one of Doctor Mercer's patients, had insisted she come for help.

"Can you tell me about your bear, Kara?" Doctor Mercer asked "Who gave him to you?"

"Steve."

"Was it a gift for something special?"

"For my birthday."

"And your bear's name is Steve?"

"Yes, because I called Steve 'Snuggle Bear'."

"Does your bear go everywhere with you?"

"Yes."

"What do you do, Kara? Do you go to school or work?"

"I work."

"What do you do at work?"

"I'm a receptionist. It's temporary for a girl who is having a baby."

"When did you graduate from High School?"

"May of last year."

"What about college?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"I was going to go, but my dad died."

"When did that happen?"

"The Sunday after graduation."

"Is that why you're sad?"

"No," Kara said, almost inaudibly, and clutched her bear even more tightly.

Doctor Mercer thought about the best way to move forward, and decided it might be best to start at the beginning, and, at least for the first session, stay away from whatever it was that was that appeared to have shattered Kara's psyche.

"Let's talk about something else, then. What did you want to study in college?"

"Chemistry."

"For research or teaching?"

"Both. I want to be a college professor."

"Were you a good student?"

"Yes."

"And what else did you do in High School? Any sports or the band or choir?"

"No. I sang at church."

"What church?"

"Grace Church in Milford, be we don't go there anymore."

"Where do you go now?"

"The Evangelical Free Church in Loveland."

"Why did you change churches?"

"Because the pastor of the old church is evil! He blamed Steve and his dad for what happened to my dad. He said they were sinners and that caused my dad to die!"

Doctor Mercer's hands gripped the arms of her chair. She'd had a few other patients who had suffered similar kinds of abuse at the hands of overzealous religious leaders. She wasn't a regular attendee at any synagogue, but was notionally Jewish, at least with regard to the traditions being a touchstone than as a something which controlled her life. She had plenty of Christian patients, most of whom came from mainline denominations, but Kara was the third young person from Grace Church she'd seen in the previous five years, and she knew of at least one suicide that was attributed to that pastor, though not in a way where criminal charges could be brought. On the plus side, at least from her perspective, she'd heard that pastor had been fired after his own teenage daughter was found to be pregnant.

"Do you like your new church?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about your friends."

"Susie, Josh, Ruth, and Sandy from my old church. Sandy is pregnant."

"Did you have friends besides the ones at church?"

"Some of Steve's friends."

"Were you close to any of them?"

Kara clutched her bear tightly again, and a tear dripped from her eye and rolled down her cheek. It was obvious to Doctor Mercer that she'd once again come close to the source of Kara's current mental state. Doctor Mercer thought about taking a shortcut and calling Steve in Chicago to ask him, but given she wasn't sure about their relationship at this point, that wasn't wise, and might cause other issues. Steve was usually pretty forthright and honest, but he might not even know what the issue actually was.

"Let's talk about something else, then," Doctor Mercer continued. "How did you meet Steve?"

"He sat down in chemistry class next to me."

"And what happened?"

"I told Mrs. Brewer, the teacher, I didn't want him to be my lab partner, but she wouldn't let me change."

"Why did you say that?"

"Because I knew about him and didn't want my friends to think I liked him."

"But you did?"

"Yes," Kara replied, continuing to clutch her bear tightly and seeming uncomfortable.

Doctor Mercer knew Steve's history, and she made a few assumptions, which in her mind provided more clues - Kara had been sexually active with Steve, there was an issue with one of Steve's friends to whom Kara was close, and something had happened with that friend, or with Steve, or both, which had triggered overwhelming emotions. And that pointed a direction for the questions.

"Are you feeling very sad?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"Yes," Kara replied quietly.

"How else do you feel?"

"Sick," Kara whispered.

"As in you feel like you want to throw up?"

"Yes."

"When you eat? Or when you cry?"

"All the time."

"Because of something that happened?"

Kara nodded and once again clutched her bear tightly and a pair of tears dripped from her eyes.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Doctor Mercer asked, having a general idea of the situation from her talks with Steve.

Kara shook her head.

"Did he break up with you?"

Kara shook her head again, but didn't say anything. Doctor Mercer decided to let it be for the moment, and hoped Kara would open up more in the future.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"No."

"Any cousins?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you know?"

"My dad has a brother, but they haven't seen each other since before I was born."

"Do you know why?"

"They had a big fight right after my dad's brother graduated from High School. My dad was in college then."

"What about your grandparents?"

"We don't see them too often."

"Would you come back and talk with me again next week?"

"Steve said I have to."

"I think he wants you to, but you don't have to. I would like you to. Maybe we can talk about Steve."

"Maybe," Kara said sounding very unsure.

"Would you mind if I spoke to your mom now? You could wait in the outer office, and your bear can keep you company."

"OK."

Doctor Mercer and Kara both got up and went to the door, and once Kara had sat down on the couch in the reception area, Doctor Mercer invited Nancy Blanchard, Kara's mom, into the office. They both went to sit on the couch so they could talk.

"Has Kara been depressed the entire time since your husband died?"

"Oh heavens no!" Nancy replied. "She was very happy by the end of the summer, and she and Steve were on their way to getting engaged. He was about to ask her when she walked out on him."

"Do you know why?"

"I wish I did. She told Steve some story about fornication being a sin and going to hell, but I think there has to be something more."

Doctor Mercer knew part of this story, at least from Steve's perspective, though she wasn't sure he was giving her the full details.

"Did he actually propose?"

"No. He had the ring and was going to propose on Christmas Eve. She walked out before he could ask her, and went back to Chicago. From that point on, she refused to talk to me about anything, and started dressing even more conservatively than she had before. You saw her today - nothing showing except her hands and head."

"When we talked, you said you had no idea what caused her to enter into this emotional state?"

"No. She had finally started talking to Steve again after he sent her that bear for her birthday. Ever since she received it, she's taken it with her everywhere, including to church and to work every day, though I think she leaves him in the car at work. It's never more than a few feet away, and almost always in her arms or lap. I'm pretty sure at work she puts him in the dashboard of the car and parks so she can see him from the reception desk."

"The bear is a stand-in for Steve?"

"I think that's pretty obvious, don't you? "

"I do. Has anything change in your life? I mean you, personally?"

"Not really. I'm working, but I got the job last summer, with some help from Steve calling in a favor. I'm not dating, if that's what you mean."

"Does Kara visit her dad's grave?"

"No. But I don't visit regularly. I decided to go on his birthday and our anniversary, at least for now."

"And she's been in this state since she received the bear?"

"Yes. Before that she was basically going through the motions - totally emotionless and refusing to talk. Then she got the bear and clung to him for dear life. But she doesn't appear to have any issues at work."

"Is she seeing her friends?"

"No. She was hanging out with a girl named Joyce until late last fall, but they had some kind of falling out. Kara still saw her other friends, at least until she broke things off with Steve."

"OK. I'd like to see her again on Monday, if that works for you, and then every Monday until we get to the bottom of this and figure out how to help her."

"I'm not sure if she told you, but she and Steve were sexually active."

Doctor Mercer did know that, but not from Kara. And she knew Steve was OK with her sharing that he had seen her on occasion, as he was very open about it.

"She didn't, but I was aware of that because I've been seeing Steve off and on for a few years, and he made me aware."

"I just don't get it, Doctor," Nancy sighed despairingly. "She wanted to marry him, and he was ready to propose! Why would she walk out on him? It makes no sense!"

"That's what we're going to try to find out. Now, I'll let you go so you can both get to work."

The two women got up and left Doctor Mercer's private office. Nancy and Kara left, and Doctor Mercer went back to her desk. She took out a notebook and wrote out her perceptions and thoughts about the session, then filled out a

diagnostic form, listing severe depression as the probable diagnosis, leaving the blank for 'cause' empty.

She checked the clock and her appointment book, and with only ten minutes between sessions, she really only had time to use the ladies room and refill her cup with coffee from the pot on a table in the corner. She considered calling Steve in Chicago, but decided against it, wanting to talk further with Kara before she asked Steve if he had any insight. The last thing she wanted to do was color her own perceptions based on what Steve thought the problem might be.

"Doctor?" Cecilia, said. "Kelly is here."

"Show her in, please."

Kelly was fifteen, pretty, and in her own words, a 'sex fiend'. Her parents had brought her in after discovering that she'd had sex with fifteen Goshen High School football players to celebrate her fifteenth birthday. She'd lost her virginity at thirteen, had her first threesome at fourteen, and, if she was to be believed, had more than two dozen sex partners before she turned fifteen. Amazingly, she hadn't become pregnant, nor contracted an STD. And she certainly didn't feel she had done anything wrong. The session was difficult, just as the three previous ones had been, because Kelly refused to see anything wrong with what she was doing.

When that session finished, Doctor Mercer's next appointment was with Robert, who at age twenty-seven had finally told someone about sexual abuse he'd suffered at the hands of a Catholic priest. His marriage had been falling apart, and he'd finally told the marriage counselor what had happened, and the marriage counselor had referred Robert to Doctor Mercer. They had discussed reporting it to the police, but as it had been fourteen years in the past, and Robert didn't want to have to testify, he'd elected just to receive counseling.

After Robert, she placed a phone call to Bethany Krajick in Madison for their monthly conversation. Bethany was doing well in Madison, and working towards a degree in Psychology. She had mostly recovered from her rape, though the recovery method was not something of which Doctor Mercer approved. Bethany was dating, but she still carried a torch for Steve, something which concerned Doctor Mercer because of Steve's apparent feelings for Kara.

After lunch, Doctor Mercer's first patient was Angie Stephens, a young woman who was struggling with relationships because of some deep-seated anxiety about sex, for which Doctor Mercer hadn't found a cause. They'd talked about Angie's friend, Debbie, who had overdosed after becoming pregnant from her only sexual encounter. Debbie was the girl she'd thought of during her talk with Kara, who was, in Doctor Mercer's opinion, the victim of the same preacher who seemed to have done a real number on Kara as well.

After seeing Angie, Doctor Mercer headed home, and after changing from her skirt and blouse into sweats, she made herself some tea and curled up on the couch with *Psychology Today* to await the arrival of her daughters from school. Sarah and Abigail were dropped off by their friend Rachel's mom, and burst into the house fully engaged in some kind of dispute.

"Ladies, what's the problem today?" Fran Mercer asked her kids.

"Sarah is in LUUUUVVV!" Abigail sang out.

"I am not!" Sarah protested. "I was just talking to Joshua!"

"By putting your lips on his?" Abigail teased.

Doctor Mercer reminded herself to remain calm and dispassionate, lest her feelings push her daughter towards behavior she preferred not to happen for a few more years.

"Abigail, go change; Sarah, please come sit with me."

"Busted!" Abigail exclaimed, then hurried up the stairs to her room.

Sarah walked over to the couch dropped her book bag and plopped onto the couch, a sullen look on her face.

"Want to tell me what happened?" Doctor Mercer asked gently.

"Not really," Abigail replied.

"Who is Joshua?"

"He's a Sophomore."

Doctor Mercer breathed an internal sigh of relief that the boy wasn't a Senior.

"Was that your first kiss?"

"That's my private business!" Sarah protested. "You said so!"

"You're right, I did say that. I thought maybe you'd want to talk to your mom about it."

"Why?"

"Because you're sixteen? Because you might have questions?"

"Oh puh-lease!" Sarah replied, rolling her eyes.

"Go change and do your homework. If you want to talk, I'm here."

Sarah got up from the couch and left the room and went upstairs. When Abigail came down, Doctor Mercer called her over.

"And you, young lady, do NOT tease your sister about boys."

"Fine," Abigail sighed. "But like, gross! Boys are SO dumb and blech! Who knows what they've had in their hands or mouths!"

Doctor Mercer laughed softly, "I think twelve-year-old boys might think the same things about you!"

"Fine with me! Just gross! It's bad enough seeing you and Dad kiss! Yuck!"

"Go do your homework!" Doctor Mercer said, shaking her head slightly in amusement.

Abigail left and Doctor Mercer picked up her magazine. Sarah's first kiss wasn't all that surprising, and it was something of a miracle that it hadn't happened until she was sixteen, well assuming that was the case. She hoped it would be three or four years before Abigail had her first kiss, but she'd become interested in boys very soon, and at age twelve, she was going to have her first period soon, and THAT would usher in a new era in the Mercer household with TWO hormone-overloaded teenagers, something Doctor Mercer did not look forward. She shook her head, laughed softly, and began reading again. Entry 19830413 - Kara Anne Blanchard

IV. Entry 19830413 - Kara Anne Blanchard

April 13, 1983, Milford, Ohio

Kara, who was clutching her bear tightly, was shown into Doctor Mercer's office and sat down on the couch. Doctor Mercer greeted her and moved to the chair next to the couch.

"How are you today, Kara?"

"OK."

"Is there anything you want to talk about?"

"No."

"How are things at work?"

"Good."

"Can you tell me about your usual day? What do you do?"

"You mean at work?"

"Start when you get out of bed."

"Well, I take a shower, and get dressed..."

"Does your bear go into the bathroom with you?"

"Oh yes, he goes everywhere, but he stays in the car when I work. But he watches me and I can see him."

"Go on."

"I have breakfast with my mom, then drive to work which is close to the house where Steve's parents live by the Klondyke hill."

"And what do you do at work?"

"Greet people, answer the phones, type, file things, you know, basic office work."

"What about lunch?"

"I eat with the engineers. They're really, really nice."

"But you do OK without your bear?"

"He's in the car, but he's there."

"Do you think you could put him down now?"

"No," Kara replied, almost frantically. "I need Steve Bear!"

"It's OK, Kara. You can keep holding him. Can we talk about Steve?"

"I guess so," Kara said quietly, clutching her bear tightly.

"You told me how you two met in chemistry class. How did you become close?"

Kara smiled just a little bit, "I accused him of being sinful with Bible verses and he quoted X-rated ones back to me."

"Which ones?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"Ezekiel 23 and Song of Songs 7."

"And how are those X-rated?" Doctor Mercer asked, though she knew the gist of what Steve had likely said.

"Well, Ezekiel talks about the size of their genitals and their uhm, ejaculation. Song of Songs talks about female anatomy, mixing navel with genitals."

"And why did he quote those?"

"To try to offend me because I was the leader of the 'Holy Rollers'."

"And what was that?"

"A group of kids who went to church and hung together at school. Kind of like Steve's group, but very religious."

"What did your group do?"

"Read the Bible and talk about church stuff, mostly."

"So what happened after the Bible verses?"

"Steve and his friend ran a computer dating service for the school."

"Did you participate?"

"No, because I thought it was sinful."

"Why did you think that?"

"I don't really know now, but then I was sure. I just don't know why."

"Then what happened?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"I told Steve I thought it was sinful and he challenged me to fill out the form and make a bet."

"What kind of bet?"

"That if we matched on more than half the items, he would win; if we didn't, I would win."

"And the bet?"

"If he won, then I would go on a date with him to have ice cream; if I won, he couldn't talk to me for the rest of the year unless I spoke to him first."

"And you agreed?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"We matched on 19 of 25. But later, I found out that most people matched on half, so it really wasn't a fair bet."

"Did you go out for ice cream with him?"

"Yes. I remember Steve telling my dad that he and I discussed the Bible so I'd be allowed to go."

Doctor Mercer laughed softly, "I suspect he had a different impression of your discussions from what they really were."

"Yes," Kara replied, giggling softly.

"How was your date?"

"Steve was his usual self and asked if he could have my cherry. I thought he meant from my ice cream, but he meant my virginity."

"What happened then?"

"I told him he was gross and we had a debate about religion. We made a bet about the Bible and he won, which meant I had to go on a real date with him, not just for ice cream."

"What was the bet about?"

"That the only place in the Bible where the words 'by faith alone' appeared, the word 'not' was in front of them. I didn't believe it, so I made the bet. I lost, so I had to go on a real date with him."

"You wanted to go on those dates, didn't you?"

"Yes," Kara replied, her voice just barely above a whisper.

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to be with him and do things with him."

"Things?"

"You know, sex."

"But it went against your religion, right?"

"Yes, but I wanted to so badly."

"Why is that?"

"Because of my dad?"

"Your dad?"

"I needed to prove that I was in control of my life and my body, not my dad."

"And losing your virginity was a way to do that?"

"Yes, because it was the one thing I could do to prove to myself I was in charge."

"When did you decide that?"

"When Steve sat down next to me that first day in chemistry class."

"Then why did you resist?"

"Because I knew he wanted me. He wanted to prove he could seduce the 'Holy Roller'. I made him work for it!"

"When did you go on that date?"

"October of my Junior year."

"1980?"

"Yes."

"And that's when it happened?"

"No way! He had to work harder for it! But he did say a real date meant a real kiss. He got one."

"And how did you feel?"

"Excited. It made me want to even more."

"What did you do on your date? Besides the kiss?"

"We went to dinner at Cork 'N Cleaver in Madeira. He wanted to go to a movie, but I wasn't allowed to go to movies."

"Why not?"

"Because my dad didn't approve and I would had been in a lot of trouble."

"More than having sex?"

"No!"

"So why not go to the movie?"

"I guess it seems silly now."

"So when did it happen?"

"January 9, 1981. We went to dinner and I invited him to my house. My parents were gone, and we went to my room."

"How was it?"

"Beautiful. It was just supposed to be sex, but he told me he loved me."

"And did you believe him?"

"Yes, but that's not why I did it. But we made love instead of just having sex."

"So you became lovers. Were you boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Until he cheated on me," Kara sighed.

"When did that happen?"

"A few weeks after we first made love."

"How did that make you feel?"

"Betrayed, but I loved him, and didn't want to stop making love with him, even though it was sinful."

"Sinful?" Doctor Mercer inquired. "You've never used that word before when talking about it."

"That's what I told Steve when we broke up - that we were fornicating," Kara said, haltingly, "and...and...and that would send me to hell."

There was something else, something deeper; Doctor Mercer was sure of it. But she didn't think Kara was ready to tell her just yet.

"So you broke up because he cheated? And because you began to believe what you were doing was sinful?"

Kara shook her head, "No. He confessed and I forgave him. We broke up at Christmas."

"So you continued sleeping with him? Even though he was with another girl?"

"He was with lots of other girls. It's who he is."

"Why were you OK with that?"

"I wanted to be with him."

"But you broke up with him, right?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me why?"

Kara dropped her voice to almost a whisper, "It was fornication. I want to go to heaven and fornicators don't go to heaven."

Doctor Mercer gripped her pen and pad tightly, but didn't show any facial reaction. She'd dealt with this kind of demonization of sex before - the threats of eternal damnation for so much as thinking about engaging in sexual activity. Ethically, she couldn't try to dissuade Kara from her religious views, but she could try to help Kara deal with the mental and emotional anguish she was suffering.

"Did you believe that when you first made love with Steve?"

"Yes."

"And you continued making love with him?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"I was at a Bible Study at my new church," Kara said, clutching her bear tightly, "and we read Corinthians where it said that fornicators and homosexuals won't go to heaven! And I want to go to heaven, not hell!"

Kara's inclusion of homosexuals with fornicators got Doctor Mercer's attention. She wondered if some kind of same-sex encounter was the real cause of Kara's meltdown. She knew Steve had engaged in what was, for a teenager, fairly extreme activities, with multiple female partners who at times engaged with each other as well as Steve. Could THAT be the source?

"Kara, was there some specific thing that happened between you and Steve that caused this?"

"No! He was always very protective of me! But that doesn't mean we weren't fornicating!"

"Do you regret having sex with him?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"I told him when I broke up with him that he should never have taken my virginity."

"Do you still feel that way?"

"I don't know," Kara sighed.

"Have you been with another man, Kara?"

"No!" Kara exclaimed. "I can only ever be with one man!"

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place. By breaking up with Steve, Kara had broken off with the only man who, in her mind, she could marry. Her attachment to 'Steve Bear' made much more sense now, but Doctor Mercer felt there was still something Kara was keeping hidden. That comment about 'homosexuals' seemed to be the key, but it could also be a false lead. That happened so often in counseling. It might well be that the only issue was Kara's view of sexual sin and her belief that she was only supposed to be with one man for her entire life.

"Then why break up with Steve?" Doctor Mercer asked gently. "If you believe you can only be with one man, why not stay with him?"

"Because I was sinning! And I had to stop!"

"Your mom told me that Steve was going to propose to you. Did you know that?"

Kara shook her head, "No. Not that day. Mom told me later."

"How long was it after you broke up that Steve sent you the bear?"

"We broke up at Christmas and I got the bear in March, for my birthday."

"Your mom said that before you got the bear, you wouldn't even talk to her, unless you had to."

"I didn't want to."

"But then you got the bear and you talked to her, but became really sad?"

"Yes. Because I knew I had ruined everything."

There was something nagging Doctor Mercer about the sequence of events and Kara's statements, which didn't seem to line up.

"Do you feel the same way about what happened today as you felt before you got your bear and as the night you broke up?"

"What do you mean?" Kara asked.

"You told me before that you regretted Steve taking your virginity, but then you told me you didn't know how you felt now. Do you still think it was sinful?"

"Maybe, but...but..." Kara stammered.

"Is there something else you want to tell me?"

"No," she said, shaking her head firmly and clutching her bear.

It was going to take some work for Doctor Mercer to get through the wall Kara had erected around something. She was tempted to ask Steve about it, but Steve and Kara weren't in a relationship and it would be difficult to have that discussion without revealing things Steve might not know. Whatever it was Kara was hiding, might actually have been hidden from Steve as well.

"Then we'll just pick up next week, OK?"

Kara nodded tentatively, "OK."

"You don't want to talk to me?"

"Steve said I had to."

"Because he's very concerned about you and cares deeply for you."

"He loves me," Kara sighed. "And I ruined everything."

"But he sent you the bear, right?"

"Yes, but when I broke up with him, he went with Stephe. She took him back."

"Took him back?"

Kara sighed deeply, "He broke up with her to ask me to marry him."

Another piece fell into place - Steve was unobtainable in Kara's mind. The bear was the substitute for what she was sure she couldn't have.

"Our time is almost up, so I think we'll leave it there," Doctor Mercer said. "See you next week?"

"Yes."

She escorted Kara out, then made her notes about the session. She checked her watch and saw that she had fifteen minutes before her next patient, so she decided to go outside and get a breath of fresh air. She was back in her office twelve minutes later and two minutes after that, her receptionist showed in her next patient.

"Hi, Larry," Doctor Mercer said. "Come in and sit down."

April 14, 1983, Milford, Ohio

"Doctor, while you were with your patient, Steve Adams called. He'd like you to call him back."

"Did he leave a number?"

"Yes, a Chicago number."

She read it to Doctor Mercer who thanked her and dialed the number.

"Hi, Steve," Doctor Mercer said when he answered.

"Hi, Doctor Mercer. I wanted to talk to you about Kara."

"You know I have to be very careful about that, right?"

"Yes, of course. I talked to Kara last night and told her I was going to call you and that you would need a release. I talked to Nancy about it as well."

"How much do you know?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"All of it," Steve sighed. "But I won't tell you - Kara has to. That's why I want to talk to you to find out what she's told you."

"You won't tell me?"

"I think that would do more harm than good. Nancy has given me real grief about it, but honestly, I'm absolutely convinced it has to be up to Kara to decide who to tell."

"That's true, though there are instances when you need to violate privacy."

"I don't think she's suicidal, Doctor," Steve said. "But if you and I can talk about her, then I think I can convince her to tell you."

"I think she wants to tell me, but she's afraid."

"I agree. She's seeing you because I insisted. If I insist she tell you, I think she will. But I need to know what she's told you and what you've talked about."

"I'll see her next Thursday and ask her to sign a release. I'll have Nancy sign as well, just to cover my bases."

"Good."

"How are things with you?"

"They're pretty good, all things considered. I bought a house together with my dad and my friends and I will be moving in next month."

"A house?" Doctor Mercer asked in surprise. "You're just finishing your Sophomore year, right?"

"Yes, but I plan to stay in Chicago when I graduate, and I'm renting rooms to my friends to help cover my part of the mortgage."

"May I ask about your girlfriend?"

"Stephie? I take it Kara mentioned her."

"Yes."

"We should probably wait for the release so neither of us have to tiptoe around things."

"Then I'll plan to call you next week to talk. Thanks, Steve."

"You're welcome."

Doctor Mercer took Kara's file from her credenza, made a few notes, then put it away. She locked the credenza, then left her office to head home. When she arrived, Sarah was putting on her jacket.

"Hi, Mom! Joshua will be here to pick me up in five minutes."

"Remember what we talked about."

Sara rolled her eyes, "If he does anything I don't like, or drinks, or has drugs, to find a phone and call you or dad."

"Honey," Sam said coming up to kiss his wife, "your mom and I are just trying to keep you safe."

"Josh is really nice, goes to our school, and his dad is on the village council in Indian Hill!"

"Which are all good things," Sam Mercer replied. "But we still want you to know we're available if something bad happens. It might not be Josh - it could be a friend of his, or a friend's girlfriend. Just be safe, Honey."

"Yes, Dad," Sarah said, rolling her eyes.

A horn beeped, sounding as if it was in the driveway.

"Over my dead body!" Sam declared.

He went to the front door and waved to the driver of the car. The driver shut off the engine and got out of the car. He was 6'2" tall, and built like a linebacker. Sam was about four inches shorter, and other than jogging in the morning, not athletic. Sam didn't care about that; he was going to lay down the law.

"We don't honk horns to summon our dates at this house," Sam said. "If you want to take my daughter out, you'll come to the door, ring the bell, and say 'hello' to us."

"Yes, Sir," the young man, presumably Joshua, said.

"Then come inside for a moment, please. I'm Sam Mercer, Sarah's dad. You must be Joshua."

Sam extended his hand and Joshua shook it firmly. They went into the foyer, and Sam shut the door.

"Fran, this is Joshua," Sam said. "Joshua, this is my wife and Sarah's mother, Fran."

"Nice to meet you, Ma'am," Joshua said.

"Nice to meet you, too, Joshua," Doctor Mercer replied. "Please have Sarah home by 11:00pm."

"I will."

"Good. Then you two have a good evening."

The kids left and Sam closed the door behind them.

"Nice recovery," Sam said with a laugh. "From honking the horn to 'Sir' in five seconds flat!"

Doctor Mercer laughed, "Just like you the first time you met my dad. The sarcastic rebel became the perfect gentleman!"

"Until he was out of sight!"

"Something we will NOT tell Sarah about!" Doctor Mercer replied firmly.

"Don't want her following in her mom's footsteps?"

"I was eighteen! She just turned sixteen!"

"Uh-huh," Sam smirked.

"Right, because YOU would be OK with her doing with Josh what I did for you the night you're referring to?"

"No, of course not! She's my daughter!"

"Double standard?" Doctor Merce asked.

"Dad's privilege! Shall we make dinner?"

"Yes. And if you're good, maybe I can remember what it was I did that night and we can do it again!"

"Oh, gross!" Abigail said, making retching noises.

"How long have you been listening?" Doctor Mercer asked.

Abigail smirked, "Long enough to know I can get extra privileges for not telling Sarah what you said!"

"Or lose them all if you do, young lady!" Sam threatened.

"Parents!" Abigail groused.

"Go set the table," Doctor Mercer said with a smile.

Abigail turned and headed towards the dining room.

"That one is going to be a terror when she discovers boys," Sam said ruefully.

"Like mother like daughter!" Doctor Mercer replied mirthfully.

"That's exactly what scares me!" Sam replied.

"Me, too," Doctor Mercer agreed.

They hugged, kissed, and headed into the kitchen to make dinner. Entry
19830504 - Kara Anne Blanchard

V. Entry 19830504 - Kara Anne Blanchard

May 4, 1983, Milford, Ohio

"Hi, Kara, how are you today?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"OK, I guess," Kara replied.

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't really want to be here, but Steve told me I had to tell you what happened."

"That's because he really cares for you."

"But I ruined everything!" Kara protested, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Steve doesn't believe that. Can you tell me why?"

"Because I walked out on him when he was going to ask me to marry him!" Kara wailed.

"And your mom tells me that he tried, from the first moment, to talk to you about what had happened. And he's done everything he can to help you get better."

"But I ruined things!" Kara sobbed.

"Will you tell me why you walked out on Steve? The real reason?"

Kara clutched her bear tightly and sobbed harder. Doctor Mercer got up from her chair and did something she usually didn't do - she sat down on the couch next to Kara and put her arm around her. Kara leaned on Doctor Mercer's shoulder and cried hard for a good ten minutes. When Kara finally composed herself, Doctor Mercer handed her tissues to wipe her face and blow her nose.

"I did something terrible," Kara whispered.

"Will you tell me?" Doctor Mercer asked gently.

"I," Kara began, then had a hitch in her breath, "had sex with someone."

Which, in Doctor Mercer's mind, certainly had the potential for causing the meltdown Kara had experienced, though given Steve's sexual ethics, most likely wouldn't have meant the end of the relationship. That was especially true given that Steve had cheated on Kara, and she'd forgiven him, and whatever else Steve might be, he was no hypocrite.

"That sounds like something you could talk to Steve about," Doctor Mercer said gently.

Kara shook her head, "It's not Steve, it's me. I sinned and I don't want to go to hell!"

Doctor Mercer took a deep breath, being careful not to let it out in a way that sounded like a sigh. There was very little she could do about the theological issues, but perhaps she could get Kara to a place where she was at least at peace with herself. It would take some very careful guidance, so as not to interfere with Kara's religious beliefs, but Doctor Mercer had some experience in that area.

"Well, let's talk about what happened. Just start at the beginning."

"I don't really want to," Kara sighed.

"But it's the only way I can help you."

Kara took a deep breath, nodded, and bit her lip. It was a few minutes before she spoke.

"Last year, after my dad died," Kara said, her voice a droning monotone, "I was really lonely, and Steve was in Chicago. I really should have gone to college, like I planned, but my mom needed me, so I stayed in Milford. I stopped going to that horrible church, and that meant not seeing most of my friends. I spent lots of time with Steve's friend Joyce..."

Kara's voice trailed off, and she dabbed her eyes with a tissue.

"...I needed someone to talk to, and she ended up staying overnight quite a few times. Sometimes we'd cuddle, especially when I was sad. One night, last November, when we were cuddling, she kissed me."

It took every ounce of willpower Doctor Mercer had for her not to react visibly to the revelation she was sure was coming, and which was, all things being equal, the very LAST thing she might have imagined Kara confessing.

"I was lonely," Kara continued, the words coming in a rushed jumble and tears rolling down her cheeks, "and I didn't stop her. We were just lying in bed cuddling and she put her hand on my breast and kissed my neck. It felt good and I didn't complain when she kept kissing me like that. When I turned to look at her, she kissed my lips and pulled me close. I kissed her back and we kept kissing and eventually she moved to my breasts and then between my legs. It just felt so good I couldn't tell her to stop. She made me cum and then because she did it to me I did it to her. She fell asleep first and I cried myself to sleep

because I was so disgusted with myself! And because it happened in my bed, I couldn't make love with Steve there ever again!"

Doctor Mercer waited to see if Kara would say anything more before speaking.

"Did you tell Steve about that before or after you broke up with him?"

"Before," Kara said, sounding forlorn.

"And what did he say?"

"That everything was OK, but it wasn't! I had sex with a girl! I felt dirty and sinful and disgusted!"

"Had you ever done anything like that before?" Doctor Mercer asked.

Kara sniffed and nodded, "Some kissing and a bit more. But only with Steve there! He kept me safe!"

"Safe?"

"To not do things I didn't want to do!"

"Do you think Joyce forced you?" Doctor Mercer asked carefully.

"No," Kara said, sounding small. "She didn't make me."

"Did Steve encourage you to do 'a bit more'?"

"No. Joyce wanted to, but she and Steve had a fight about it because Joyce was dating someone and broke up with him because she wanted to have sex with Steve and me."

"And you didn't want that?"

"I was confused," Kara sighed. "But I told Joyce I couldn't ever have sex with her!"

"But it was OK if it was you and Steve?"

"I don't know," Kara sighed again. "It was strange but Steve was there, so I felt safe."

"It happened more than once?"

Kara nodded, "Yes. But it was kissing and touching, not...you know, oral."

"You said Steve was understanding; why break things off with him?"

"Because sex outside of marriage is a sin! Homosexuality is a sin!"

"You've always believed that?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"Yes!" Kara affirmed.

"But you chose to have sex with Steve in spite of that?"

"Yes," Kara sighed.

"Can you tell me why?"

"To prove my dad and pastor didn't control me."

"Not because you loved Steve?"

Kara took a deep breath and let it out, "I did, but I decided to have sex with him first, then fell in love with him."

"Would you do something for me?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"Maybe. What?"

"Write your story, starting from the first time you met Steve. That was chemistry class, right?"

Kara shook her head, "No, I met him before that, when he was interviewing Birgit for the Junior High newspaper."

"Then start with that. Just write what happened and what you thought."

"Do I have to write about Joyce?" Kara asked quietly.

"It would help," Doctor Mercer said.

"I guess."

"Our time is almost up, but I want to make sure you're going to be OK."

"I am."

"Remember you can call me anytime."

"Thank you."

They both got up from the couch and walked to the door. Kara's mom was waiting to take her home, and she and Doctor Mercer exchanged a look. It was

clear that Nancy wanted to know what had happened, but Doctor Mercer couldn't tell her because Kara had only given permission for Steve, not for her mom.

"See you next week, Kara," Doctor Mercer said.

"Bye," Kara said.

Doctor Mercer went back into her office and made notes about her session with Kara, then saw two more patients before she headed home.

"You look upset," Sam said when she walked into the house.

"I had a tough afternoon," Fran replied. "But you know I can't talk about it."

"From what I see in your eyes, you need to call Laura," he said gently. "Go do that. Dinner won't be ready for another hour."

Fran nodded and went to the small study she had at home, picked up the cordless phone, and dialed Doctor Laura Paulus, then sat down on the loveseat and curled her legs up.

"Laura, it's Fran. Got some time?"

"For you? Always. What's up?"

"You know the patient we've discussed? The young woman with the fundamentalist background who had a meltdown?"

"I remember. I take it you've discovered something."

"A same-sex encounter."

"That would do it," Doctor Paulus affirmed. "Consensual?"

"She was emotionally vulnerable, so I'd say not really. But she'd done some experimenting with her boyfriend and this girl, so I also wouldn't say it was completely non-consensual. It's one of those gray areas. The problem is that she's convinced she's going to hell for that encounter, and it's made her reconsider her sexual relationship with her boyfriend in that light as well."

"Tread carefully, Fran."

"I know," Fran sighed, "ethically I can't tell her that her externally imposed moral code is the problem, not her."

"She's been sexually active for some time, right?"

"A couple of years."

"How did she view that?"

"Before the same-sex encounter? I'd say she was a typical teenager with a healthy sex drive and relatively healthy view of sex, despite who her lover was."

"The very promiscuous young man we've talked about?"

"Yes. She tried to rein him in, but failed, and decided to continue the relationship, until the same-sex encounter caused her to break things off."

"I take it he didn't object?"

"I'm reading between the lines, but I'd say from what I know about him, he was more than OK with it, if you get my drift."

Laura laughed, "That kid has the makings of a legend."

"Don't start," Fran warned. "You know my opinion."

"Has he lied to anyone, Fran?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Is he functioning?"

"Straight A student with a successful business."

"Then you know the answer."

"That doesn't mean I have to like it!"

"Are we back on Bethany Krajick again?"

"You know me too well."

"And you know what she told you. Fran, she's doing well and just because she felt she had to have sex with him to be able to get on with her life does not mean you failed!"

"It doesn't feel that way."

"You know what? Come see me on Saturday. I think we need a formal session."

"Lunch afterwards?"

"Yes. See you at 11:00am."

They said 'goodbye' and Fran went to the kitchen to help Sam with dinner.

"I'm going to see Laura on Saturday."

"Good. Some of your patients just seem to drain you of energy."

"I know. Thanks for looking out for me."

"That's what a husband is for!"

"Really?" she asked. "That's all?"

"After dinner, I can show you the OTHER thing husbands are for if you want."

She kissed his cheek, "And I promise I'll make it worth your while..." Entry
19830504 - Doctor Fran Mercer

VI. Entry 19830504 - Doctor Fran Mercer

May 7, 1983, Dayton, Ohio

"Come in, Fran," Doctor Laura Paulus said. "There's tea and coffee on the sideboard, and bagels. The cream cheese is in the mini-fridge."

"Thanks."

Doctor Mercer helped herself to a cup of English Breakfast tea and a bagel with cream cheese, then sat down in a comfortable leather chair set at an angle to the one where Doctor Paulus was sitting.

"How are you feeling today, Fran?" Doctor Paulus asked.

"About the same as when I spoke to you on Wednesday."

"Remember what we talked about? About getting too close to a patient? I'm pretty sure that's the problem here. You and Bethany Krajick were too close; you are too close. And I think that's also linked to the other issue that's bothering you - your patient with an enhanced sex drive."

"Bethany's choices do not make sense, and just because he's functioning doesn't mean what he's doing is healthy!"

"And yet, the only real measure we have to use is whether a patient is functioning well - has a job or is doing well in school, has friends, is taking good care of themselves, and so on. Would you say that their behavior is putting either of them, or others, at risk of serious harm? Or that they are unable to care for themselves, complete school, or hold jobs?"

"No. And I know the next thing you're going to say - just because we don't like the outcome doesn't mean we've failed."

"Because it doesn't."

"Laura, you can't believe sex is a cure for the trauma of rape!" Doctor Mercer protested. "It isn't, and it never will be!"

"Of course it's not, but that's not the end of the discussion, either. One of our most important tasks is helping a patient overcome the trauma and return to normal intimacy. That's what a successful recovery from rape looks like - a survivor who can be truly intimate with a mate. There really is no other criterion for success. Anything short of that is coping, and sometimes that's all that's possible. But when a return to true intimacy is possible, we should seize the opportunity.

"You worked with Bethany to help her understand that rape is about violence, not about sex. Her solution to getting past the mental block was to make love with the safest person she knew, someone she could trust implicitly, and someone who fully understood that Bethany wasn't 'damaged goods'. That person, if I understand you correctly, convinced her that she was still a virgin! In other words, your treatment worked exactly the way it's supposed to work, and Bethany had a loving partner who helped her through it, which is ideal.

"Your difficulty is with the young man she chose as a partner. But if I recall correctly, they dated for quite some time before she asked him to make love with her. He's also a straight-A student who runs a successful business in his field of study. Yes, he's promiscuous, perhaps in the extreme, but he hasn't had any sexually transmitted diseases, and as far as you've said, other than his trouble with his mom, he has a positive relationship with his family as well as his

friends. I seem to recall something similar about a young woman who did her clinical internship with me."

"Laura," Doctor Mercer sighed.

"No, it's time to bring this back into the open. How many partners did you have before Sam?"

"That was different!"

"Really? You were a teenager in the late 50's and you were on the leading edge of the 'free love' movement on campus in the early 60's, long before the 'Summer of Love'! So, how many?"

"We've discussed this."

"Yes, we have. How many?"

"Five," Doctor Mercer replied with annoyance.

"And how many FEMALE partners?"

"You're a pain in the butt, Laura!"

"Yes, I am. How many?"

"One," Doctor Mercer said grudgingly.

"My point is, that regret for your OWN behavior isn't sufficient cause to object to that same behavior in one of your patients, so long as it isn't interfering with their functioning in their family, job, and society in general. And from what you've said, Sam was no monk, either. Was your first lover experienced?"

"Yes."

"So you're objecting to Bethany taking an experienced lover?"

"Philip didn't have THAT much experience!"

"This guy has really gotten under your skin! We need a name to make the conversation easier."

"Steve."

"How many partners has he had?"

"A dozen before Bethany, four times that number after."

"That's pretty impressive, when you think about it," Doctor Paulus said with a smirk.

"Oh, stop! Not you, too!"

"You were really high on Steve when you first met him and he offered to help Bethany. You said he was doing wonders for her. And you believed that right up until she said she was going to sleep with him to get past her mental block. Then he became, in effect, public enemy number one in your book! But let me ask you this - how is their relationship now?"

"That's difficult to say. They're the best of friends, and she's in love with him. But his lifestyle doesn't really allow for the kind of relationship she's dreamed about - husband, two or three kids, a house with a white picket fence, a dog, a cat, and a parakeet. The chances of him settling down are pretty much zero. She's carried a torch for him even while he played around and continues to play around."

"You don't think he'll marry?"

"Where is he going to find a woman who will put up with his kind of shenanigans? I honestly don't see him changing."

"Maybe Bethany just waits him out. She's just finishing her Sophomore year, so she's at least five years away from her practice. Guys like Steve tend to calm down after college when life gets real. I've seen it many times, especially with kids who were in college in the late 60's. Kids aren't marrying as young now as they did in the 50's and 60's."

"Maybe," Doctor Mercer allowed.

"I'll spare you the lecture and change the subject. How did things go with Michael?"

"I called him a 'Grade-A idiot'," Doctor Mercer said with a sly smile.

"Fran, you know that's not appropriate!"

"Oh, it certainly is for Mike! In a way, he's like Steve in that he wants to hear things straight. In fact, I'd say for both of them, only blunt and direct will ever be effective. The proverbial two-by-four to the temple. And, honestly, I think that's a very good thing for a kid who wants to work in the ER; it might even be mandatory for success."

"So, what happened?"

"Basically, he messed up his relationship with a girl he feels is his soul mate and is trying to figure out a way to set it right. They've known each other since

kindergarten, but didn't get together until after graduation. Then she was in a bad accident and things went downhill from there."

"Do you think she is his soulmate?"

"I think he thinks so, which is really all that matters, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. How is he doing otherwise?"

"He's doing well in school; he's a straight-A student in the honors program. He's having difficulty creating stable relationships, and I think that's a direct result of trouble with his soul mate. There are probably some residual issues from what happened with the false accusations about his sister as well. I think he has some work to do, but I believe he's going to turn out OK."

"And his sister?"

"Given the trauma she suffered, she's doing about as well as can be expected. According to Mike, she expects to graduate on time next year. She's also planning on going to junior college. He's positive she's not engaging in any risky behavior."

"I'd call that a win, I think. Shall we go back to what brought you here?"

"I'm not sure I'm ever going to get used to the idea."

"This has been bugging you for some time - why not refer Steve to someone in Chicago? He doesn't have a diagnosable illness, so you don't have an ethical obligation to keep seeing him. I think that the fact that he gets under your skin IS why you still see him. He's a challenge and you can't give up on the challenge, no matter how much his behavior annoys you. I think it intrigues you enough to want to find out what actually makes him tick."

"Have I told you recently that you're a pain in the butt, Laura?"

"About fifteen minutes ago, I think it was! So, what do you think?"

Fran sat back and considered a moment before she answered.

"Abusive mother; mainly uninvolved father who despite that served as mother's enforcer until Steve's late teens; doting sister; brother, who is mom's little angel, but who has been arrested for exposing himself to pre-pubescent children; his first lover was ten years older; the girl he claims was the love of his life died at age fifteen; an unintended pregnancy at age sixteen, but the girl's mother forced her to have an abortion against their will; there was no physical abuse, but a lot of mental and emotional abuse, and a lot of emotional trauma."

"Looking for love in all the wrong places?" Doctor Paulus asked with a silly smile.

"It doesn't feel like that. He's not lacking for good friends nor for girls who love him. I think there's something else going on."

"Any medical issues?"

"He's prone to fainting under stress, but I've always chalked that up to the fairly common syncope we see in adolescent males; that said, he's twenty and should have outgrown that by now. He was an avid swimmer at home, now he's practicing karate and advancing through the ranks. He also runs. His diet is good, though he drinks a lot of Coke."

"Regular physical exams?"

"I believe so, but I don't ask those questions. The information I just gave you is what he's volunteered during our sessions."

"And given his obvious intelligence and business success, I'll assume no mental impairment."

"No, I'm reasonably sure this is purely emotional, and a result of the abusive home situation while he was growing up. His dad did come around, as I said, and they have a decent relationship now, though they both have to be careful because of his mom."

"What's your goal?"

Doctor Mercer laughed, "Until I figure him out, I can't really say!"

"He's functioning, Fran."

"I know. You don't have to keep reminding me."

"Apparently I do. Is anything else bothering you?"

"Just that ethics prevent me from telling my current patient that her head is full of complete garbage put there by an ignorant misogynistic charlatan masquerading as a man of G-d."

"She was seeing Steve, too, right?"

"Don't start..." Fran said, with obvious exasperation in her voice.

"It seems a good portion of your practice revolves around him," Doctor Paulus said with a smirk. "But let me ask you - what better antidote to an evangelical preacher could you find?"

"Too far, too fast. At her core, she's a normal, red-blooded teenager. The problem is, her head was filled with ideas which ran counter to who she really is."

"Lesbian?"

"Probably not, but, and I can't believe I'm saying this, willing to experiment in a safe environment with a safe male partner."

"Steve?"

"As I said, I can't believe I said it. For some reason, girls feel safe with him."

"Maybe you should investigate that angle. Find out what it is that attracts the girls to him."

"I'm not sure I want to know," Doctor Mercer said, shaking her head. "But it would be an interesting avenue to pursue."

"How are things at home?"

"Things with Sam are fine and the girls are teenagers!"

"Which means what?" Laura asked with an arched eyebrow.

"They're growing up too fast."

"Sarah?" Doctor Paulus asked.

"I'm concerned she's getting too serious too fast with her young man."

"You're concerned she's doing the same things you did at her age?"

"Here's your free shot at me, Laura; this is different."

"I'll pass on the pot shot and just ask you to think about whether it really IS different or not. Is sixteen now all that different from sixteen in the 50's?"

"The world is a much more dangerous place."

"Is it, really, Fran? Or has your perspective changed? The world looks different to a parent than it does to a teenager. You know that."

"How did you handle Melissa?"

Doctor Paulus laughed, "About the same way you're handling Sarah! It took some time, but eventually I realized that Melissa was mature enough to make good decisions. I believe Sarah is as well."

"It's so easy to counsel parents and teens," Fran said. "It's much more difficult to raise your own kids."

"She'll be fine, Fran."

"That's what Sam said!"

"Just be there for her. You've prepared her well, and she'll make good decisions."

"I hope so." Entry 19840331 - Clarissa Saunders

VII. Entry 19840331 - Clarissa Saunders

March 31, 1984, Milford, Ohio

"Come in, Clarissa," Doctor Mercer said to the pretty brunette who was waiting in the reception area.

Clarissa rose from the couch and walked into Doctor Mercer's office. Doctor Mercer closed the door behind them and indicated a pair of comfortable arm chairs angled so that two people could talk intimately. Doctor Mercer picked up a pad of paper and a pencil from her desk and sat in the empty chair.

"How are things in McKinley?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"School is good and I'm pretty happy."

"Only 'pretty happy'?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"Mike and I made love," Clarissa said matter-of-factly.

Doctor Mercer was careful not to show any reactions, but suppressed a sigh. She'd been afraid that Clarissa would decide to experiment with Mike, and had been concerned about her because of the counseling she'd done with other patients who had encounters which went against their self-perceived orientation.

"How do you feel?" Doctor Mercer asked, careful to show no emotion.

"Confused."

"That's fairly normal after a first sexual encounter, and this is your first, right?"

"With a guy? Yes. I think you know I had a girlfriend."

"Yes. Let's start there. How did you feel the first time you and your girlfriend made love? It's OK to use names; I won't reveal anything."

Clarissa laughed softly. "It was a public relationship. I'm sure everyone knew what was going on, though only Mike knew the details."

"You told him about your encounter?"

"I asked him for advice on eat...performing cunnilingus."

"And?"

"He gave very good advice which I put to use!" Clarissa said, laughing softly.

"Were you nervous?"

"No. I was before the first time we kissed, but after Glenda and I kissed, all I could think of was being in bed with her."

"When was that?"

"About a year ago."

"Are you still together?"

"No, we broke up in January," Clarissa sighed.

"Was that because of Mike?" Doctor Mercer asked.

Clarissa shook her head, "No. Glenda was accepted to the Art Institution in Chicago and didn't even tell me she'd applied, and made her plans to go there without telling me."

"How did you feel?"

"Betrayed."

"How long was it between then and when you and Mike made love?"

"A couple of months. I asked him that night and he refused."

"How did you feel about that?"

"I was upset, but I realized he was looking out for me."

"Who initiated your sexual encounter?"

"Me. Mike was very, very cognizant about me being on a rebound and also about my orientation."

"Which is?"

"I think I'm most likely a true lesbian."

"Will you tell me about your encounter with Mike?"

Clarissa smiled, "It was the most loving, gentle, and strange thing I've ever experienced."

"What was strange about it?"

Clarissa laughed, "There was an erect penis involved and it went into my vagina! And sort of into my mouth."

"Sort of?"

"It just seemed strange to put it in my mouth so I just kind of held it against my lips and used my hand and tongue."

"How did that make you feel?"

"It was strange at first, but when he ejaculated it was REALLY strange. It was almost like I was drinking his life force."

"Was that before or after you had intercourse?"

"Before. There was actually cunnilingus before the fellatio."

"And when he penetrated you?"

"I told him I was about to completely freak out. He offered to stop, but I told him not to."

"Did you orgasm?"

Clarissa shook her head, "Not from intercourse, but after he ejaculated he used his mouth to give me two orgasms that I'd describe as gentle. It was more like a feeling of love than a huge release like I had with Glenda."

"What happened next?"

"We went to sleep. I didn't talk to him about it for a few days because I was trying to figure out how I felt and if I could do it again."

"And?"

"I'm not sure. I feel like we need to have sex again for me to be sure. I've been sleeping with him off and on, but just sleeping, not having sex."

"What do you wear?"

"It started out with sweats or a nightgown or one of his shirts, but now we sleep naked."

"You said before you thought you were 'most likely a true lesbian'. Did you decide that before or after?"

"After."

"Then why think about having sex with Mike again?"

"Because I love him more than life itself! He completes me! He's my soul mate! He'd die for me!"

"I sense a 'but'," Doctor Mercer said.

"But he was born with a 'Y' chromosome. As he and I have teased each other, we both like pussy."

"But you still think you need to be with him again?"

"I have to be sure, Doctor Mercer. If I can do it, then I can marry my soul mate!"

"Do you think you might be deceiving yourself?"

"Yes, which is exactly why we aren't doing anything more right now, but will before Mike makes any decisions about his future. I can't take the risk of missing out on being with Mike."

"Have you ever been attracted to males before?"

Clarissa smiled, "No. Just Mike. And I'm not attracted to him sexually, but I am in every other way you could name."

"Sex is usually a critical part of marriage; not always, but usually."

"Mike prefers gentle lovemaking and then cuddling. It's almost as if he was a girl, if you know what I mean."

"He has some qualities which would traditionally have been called 'feminine' but I'd simply say he's a very sensitive man who is in touch with his own emotions. But Mike is also a very sexual being."

Clarissa laughed, "There are serious rumors to that effect!"

"I thought you two shared everything," Doctor Mercer challenged.

Clarissa laughed again, "OK, Mike is the dorm stud! Basically, he can have any girl he wants, and there are a lot of girls who want him. And rumor has it he's VERY good."

"Are you jealous?"

"Not like I think you mean. I don't care who Mike has sex with; I care who Mike has in his heart. And that's Angie and me. Two girls who probably can never be his wife."

"What about his Russian friend?"

Clarissa smirked, "Pure, unbridled, unquenchable lust! Those two have wanted to fu...uhm, have sex since she was fourteen and he was seventeen!"

"I have heard that word before, once or twice!" Doctor Mercer replied. "Mike's not in love with her?"

"Mike loves her deeply, but he's not in love with her. He's in love with Angie. Period. End of discussion."

"What about you?"

"It's beyond that," Clarissa sighed. "We share a heart. We always will, even if we can't marry."

"I want to ask you a question, and I don't mean to upset you, but are you a surrogate for Angie?"

"Every girl is a surrogate for Angie!"

"But you say that you're his soul mate."

"I am, and if magically, I was straight, with nothing else changing, then we'd already be married. But we both know that a 'straight Clarissa' would be a VERY different girl. Mike and I will be together forever, but it's unlikely I can be his wife, despite wanting to be in the worst possible way."

"You've talked about that?"

"Constantly. It's why I made love with him and why I'll do it again. I have to be sure I *can't* be Mrs. Loucks, and that is the only real impediment."

"You do realize that you could convince yourself that you could, only to find later that you couldn't."

"Yes, and that's why we're being so careful."

"Would you tell me more about what you said about Angie?"

"That he's deeply, madly in love with her? What's more to say? She was the one girl to whom he could make a long-term vow of celibacy. He would have kept it, too. I think the fact she refused to be his girlfriend kind of flipped a switch and sent him down the path of debauchery!"

"You don't approve? I thought you said you didn't care."

"If Mike is happy, and it's not affecting his grades or anything else, it's none of my business who he has sex with. I know all the names, and more detail than I probably should."

"Would you call him promiscuous?"

"Strangely, no. He's had a lot of partners, but he's fairly selective. He did discover at one point that all of his little sister's friends were interested and he took advantage of their very clear, very blunt offers."

"You approve?"

"What's to disapprove of? He has lovers. I've had two lovers - one female and one male. He doesn't judge me, I don't judge him."

"If you understand the severity of the risk, why are you pushing forward?"

"Because the risk of not pushing forward is I miss the chance to be with the person I love more than any other person on the earth."

"But you said he's in love with Angie."

"He is, but I'm the person he loves more than anyone on the earth. I suppose I'd put it this way - he's in lust with Tasha and in love with Angie, but he loves me. Does that make sense?"

"Different kinds of love?"

"Mike talks about three kinds, with «agape» being the most important - the one that gives completely to the other person. I know Mike would do literally anything for me; well, OK, he ruled out a sex change operation, but otherwise? Anything."

"Was that a serious discussion?"

Clarissa laughed, "No. He's as straight as they come. That said, he does engage in what our friend Sophia calls 'homoerotic play' with our friends Robby and Lee."

"Mike's experimented?!" Doctor Mercer asked, unable to contain her surprise.

"Oh, HELL no!" Clarissa exclaimed, laughing. "But he's comfortable enough in his sexuality that teasing with two gay guys doesn't bother him. He was hit on by a gay guy and told the guy he was flattered, but not interested. Mike's about as secure in his sexuality as anyone I know!"

"And you?"

"I don't have a problem with being a lesbian; it's who I am. It's who I've always been. As soon as I hit puberty I wanted to have sex with girls."

"And Mike?"

"He's different. I can't even begin to explain it."

"May I give you some advice?"

"Of course."

"Let it end here. I think, based on everything you've said, that if you move forward, you might let your heart make a decision with which you ultimately can't live."

"I'm aware of the pitfalls," Clarissa said.

"But you intend to experiment again?"

"I told Mike last night that at some point, before he makes a commitment to anyone, we put everything to a final test where he shows me every possible way we could love each other physically. Either the first time for the rest of our lives, or the last."

"You don't think you'll 'freak out' as you put it?"

Clarissa smiled, "I know what to expect now."

"What do you expect to happen?"

"That Mike and I are soulmates, but that we can't marry because I'm pretty sure I need a female sex partner to be completely fulfilled, physically and emotionally."

"If you know that..."

"But I don't. I suspect that's the case, but I need to prove it to myself. If I don't, I may regret it for the rest of my life."

"You don't think you might regret engaging in sex in 'every way possible'?"

"Even if I do, I'll still love Mike and he'll still be my soulmate."

"Aren't you worried you'll hurt him?"

"He told me he didn't think that was possible, and I'm pretty sure he's right."

"What does he expect to happen?"

Clarissa smirked, "That he'll have me in every way possible!"

"I meant after that," Doctor Mercer said tersely.

"The same thing I expect - that we'll simply be the closest of friends, go to school together, study together, do our Residency together, and practice together."

"And his wife?"

Clarissa smirked, "Well, unless she's bi, and Mike decides to leave the Church, just close friends."

"That is NOT what I meant," Doctor Mercer said, slightly annoyed at Clarissa's flip answer.

"I'm the lesbian friend, who is no threat."

"But you are."

"Mike and I won't ever cross that line."

"Given the stress of medical school and Residency, I'm not sure you can make that statement the way you are."

"The one thing I'm sure about Mike is that he's not a cheater."

"He's not the type to use drugs, and he doesn't drink except on occasion. The stress will make the temptation far worse, and if there's ever any trouble with his future spouse, whoever that is, he'll look to you for comfort and support."

"And it will be chaste."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that if I were you," Doctor Mercer said with resignation.

Entry 19891218 - Bethany Krajick

VIII. Entry 19891218 - Bethany Michelle Krajick

December 18, 1989, Milford, Ohio

"Fran, it's Bethany."

There was a hitch in Bethany's voice that made Doctor Fran Mercer immediately aware something terrible had happened.

"Hi, Bethany. Aren't you in Guam?"

"Yes," came the soft reply. "Fran, Nick's been shot."

"Shot?!" Fran gasped. "How is he?"

"On life support," Bethany replied, sounding very, very tired. "The doctors suggesting we remove him from it."

"Is someone with you, Bethany?" Doctor Mercer asked, her voice expressing her concern.

"Two military wives and the base chaplain."

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," Bethany replied with a deep sigh.

"Can you tell me about his injuries?" Doctor Mercer asked gently.

"He was shot twice; once in the stomach and once in the head."

Doctor Mercer reeled from the revelation, trying to fathom how something like that could happen, but those questions were for later.

"What did the doctors tell you?"

Bethany took a deep breath and let it out, "That the damage to his brain is so severe that it's unlikely he'll regain consciousness, and even if he does, he'll likely never recover from the traumatic brain injury."

"Do you believe them?"

"Yes," Bethany said quietly.

"Is Nicholas with you?"

"He's sleeping on a sofa here in the base hospital chaplain's office. I said that 'daddy was hurt', but at six months, I'm not sure that registers in any real way."

"You know I can't tell you what to do, Bethany, but I will support whatever decision you make. If you decide to disconnect the machines, make sure you say 'goodbye'. I'd advise against taking Nicholas into the room."

"It all seems so easy when it's an academic exercise," Bethany sighed. "Reality is so very different."

"I remember the conversations we've had on the topic. Have you talked to anyone else?"

"No. I know someone called Chicago, so I'm sure they know. But I haven't spoken to anyone. I have to make this decision on my own."

"Yes, you do. Did Nick leave any instructions?"

"No," Bethany said with a wan smile Doctor Mercer couldn't see. "Like most military men, he was averse to wills of any kind. He felt they were tempting Fate. He did fill out the pro-forma will the military has, but only reluctantly."

"Did you two ever discuss what to do?"

"No. Steve and I had quite a few discussions about it, but Nick and I never did."

"And what did you conclude?"

Bethany sighed deeply, "That if there was no realistic chance of recovery and some quality of life, we wouldn't want to be kept alive by machines."

"Thank I think you know what to do," Fran said gently. "Take some time, think about it, make your decision, and then call me, please."

"I will."

"May I speak to the chaplain, please?"

"Yes, of course."

"This is Lieutenant Commander Paul Francis," a strong male voice announced. "I'm a Roman Catholic Priest."

"Hello, Father. I'm Fran Mercer, a clinical psychologist in Milford, Ohio. How is Bethany holding up?"

"About as well as could be expected, I think."

"I take it that thing are as bad as she said?"

"She gave the most positive assessment," Father Francis said.

"I assumed that was the case. She's not religious."

"I know. She and I have had several very good talks. I'm here to support her in any way possible."

"Thanks, Father."

"You're welcome. Did you want to speak to her again?"

"After. I asked her to think it through, make a decision, and then call me once she had."

"I'll take care of her," Father Francis said.

"Thank you. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Fran hung up the phone and simply stared at the receiver, unsure what to do. After a couple of minutes, she picked up the phone and dialed Laura Paulus' number.

"Hi, Laura. It's Fran. Bethany Krajick's husband was shot and is going to die."

December 19, 1989, Milford, Ohio

"I don't really have any choice," Bethany said, sounding weak and exhausted.

It was just after midnight, but Fran had not been sleeping. She'd been sitting in her living room with her husband, Sam, with a pot of chamomile tea when the phone had rung.

"Did you say 'goodbye'?"

"Yes, but I decided to take Nicholas in with me. I just couldn't bring myself to keep him away. I won't take him in when they remove Nick from the ventilator."

"That's wise."

"I called Kathy and talked with her. She wanted to fly out, but that really made no sense. She said Steve had a fainting spell when he heard the news. I'm worried about him."

"Let his doctors worry about him, Bethany. You know he's had syncope, and you know that Doctor Barton will make sure he has the best care possible."

"I know, but I'm still worried."

"And he'd be the first one to tell you not to worry, wouldn't he?"

"Yes," Bethany sighed.

The bigger concern Doctor Mercer had was that Bethany would seek comfort in Steve's arms, or rather, his bed, and that was something which might lead to a complete disaster.

"What are your plans, if you know them?"

"I think, because of all his friends, it's best to have his memorial service at Great Lakes. Then, I'm going to bring Nick home to Milford. In the end, I think that's the best option best for me. The Navy takes care of literally everything, so I just need to tell them when and where."

"Come see me when you get home, Bethany. You're going to need help."

"I know. I just need to get through the next few days."

"If I remember correctly, one of the men he was close to on base in Chicago will come escort you and bring him home."

"Maybe. It depends on the logistics."

"Bethany, make sure you talk to someone there."

"I've been talking to Father Francis and a staff psychologist. I know the drill."

"Yes, of course, but you also know that we're often the worst patients. Please call me when you know the details."

"I will. Thanks, Fran. For everything."

They said 'goodbye' and Fran hung up the phone, then went back to sit with her husband.

"She's going to take him off life support?" Sam asked.

"Yes."

"What do you need?"

"Just hold me, please," Fran sighed, collapsing into her husband's arms.

About fifteen minutes later, she straightened up.

"I need to make a call."

"It's almost 1:00am," Sam replied.

"I know," Fran said, getting up.

She walked over to the phone and dialed a number.

"ER, Bala speaking."

"Bala, my name is Doctor Fran Mercer. I believe one of my patients, Steve Adams, might have been admitted."

"Yes, Doctor Mercer. Doctor Adams' husband was admitted for observation. I can let you speak to the Attending on duty if you'd like more information."

"Yes, please."

"One moment."

Fran listened to the canned 'music on hold' for about thirty seconds before the doctor came on the line.

"This is Doctor Miller," a male voice said.

"Doctor Miller, I'm Doctor Fran Mercer a licensed clinical psychologist in Milford, Ohio. I understand you admitted one of my patients, Steve Adams, for observation?"

"Yes, Doctor. He had a syncopal episode and was brought to the ER by ambulance. We conducted a full battery of tests with no abnormal results. He was admitted to cardiology by Doctor Washington, and he's being kept overnight on the orders of Doctor Al Barton. He'll be released in the morning if there are no medical indications for keeping him in cardiology."

"Thank you, Doctor Miller."

Fran hung up the phone and went back to sit with her husband.

"I know you can't tell me any details, but those two names seem to be linked together."

"No, I can't," Fran agreed. "But yes they are."

IX. Entry 19891228 - Bethany Michelle Krajick

December 28, 1989, Milford, Ohio

"Hi, Fran," Bethany Krajick said when she walked into Doctor Mercer's office on Thursday afternoon.

"Hi, Bethany. Can I get you some coffee or tea?"

"Tea, please."

Doctor Mercer got up and opened a packet of Earl Grey, put the bag into a mug, then poured hot water from an electric kettle into the mug. She handed the full mug to Bethany.

"Who brought you?"

"My dad. He'll come back when I call him."

"And your son?"

"With my mom."

"I know how this sounds, but how are you?"

"I honestly don't know," Bethany replied, emotionlessly. "Numb, I guess."

"Have you decided to stay in Milford?"

"I honestly think that's best. I have to move off base, obviously, and I really don't think I'm up to trying to find a place for Nicholas and me, and doing all the things I'd need to do. I thought about asking Steve to move into his house, because it's perfectly located, he has a nanny, and he'd provide all the support I need, but I decided that wasn't a good idea. That kind of left my parents' house, which I think is best; they'll help and you're here."

Doctor Mercer was relieved, as she felt that Bethany would fall right back into the pattern of her life before Nick, including restarting her sexual relationship with Steve, which Doctor Mercer believed would do far more harm than good.

"I think you made the right decision."

Bethany smiled wanly, "You've never really understood my relationship with Steve. Nobody has ever helped me the way he has."

'Or hurt you,' Doctor Mercer thought, but didn't say, then quickly pushed that thought out of her mind because it was Josh Benton, the serial rapist, who had hurt Bethany and set in motion the entire chain of events. But Steve was married, had what amounted to mistresses, and had kids, and Doctor Mercer was worried how interacting with Steve would affect not just Bethany, but his entire family. She decided to change the subject, as Bethany had already made a good decision, and there was no point in have a discussion which might cause Bethany to change her mind.

"Have you thought about practicing here?"

"Yes. I'd need to get an Ohio license, and until then, I'd have to work under supervision. I'd hoped you would do that for me."

"Bethany, you need time to grieve," Doctor Mercer said gently. "Have you even started?"

"After the funeral tomorrow," Bethany replied. "But I can't sit around in black mourning clothes."

Doctor Mercer frowned slightly. Bethany's comment about being 'numb' indicated she was suffering from psychological shock, and at some point, the suppressed emotions would come crashing through the stoic exterior. That said, allowing Bethany to see a very limited number of clients would likely help her, IF she showed she was emotionally ready.

"I agree, though I want you to take some time to mourn, and want you to spend some time with Nicholas and your family and friends. We can talk after the first of the year about the timing, but if you want to do that, I'll want to see you a few times a week for the next month. How have you been sleeping?"

"My sleep schedule has been a mess since Nick was shot. Traveling from Guam and not really having a chance to get settled hasn't helped. Last night was probably the best sleep I've had."

"And your diet?"

"I'm eating some, even though I'm not really hungry."

"Your first task is taking care of yourself, Bethany. Eating properly and getting sufficient sleep are both vital. You won't be able to care for Nicholas if you don't care for yourself."

"I know," Bethany sighed. "I just need to get through tomorrow."

"Who's escorting you?"

"Howard Pointe. One of Nick's closest friends. He's been with Nick from the time the plane arrived from Guam. Everyone from Chicago will be here."

"That's good. Do you want to talk about anything in particular?"

Bethany sighed and shook her head, "No. Let me get through tomorrow first."

"OK, but then I want to see you on Saturday. You know why."

Bethany smiled, "You do know that I didn't sleep through my classes, right?"

December 29, 1989, Milford, Ohio

"Thanks again for taking the day off to come with me, Sam," Doctor Mercer said to her husband early on Friday afternoon.

"You're welcome. Are you ready?"

"I suppose. I feel like...I don't know how I feel. What more can happen to that poor girl?"

"You've never shared the original reason she came to see you, but I can surmise. Add to that the accident and now losing her husband? I can't even begin to imagine how she's able to function. Well, I can, and that's because you've helped her."

"She has a good support network, too, though..."

She stopped because she had to maintain Bethany's privacy; and Steve's.

"What's bothering you, Fran?"

Fran smiled wanly, "You know I can't tell you."

"I wish I could help."

"You do! You're here when I need you, even if I can't talk about my patients. And you seem to know exactly what I need!"

Sam laughed, "I do enjoy it when you need to work off your stress!"

"All men are inherently pigs!" Doctor Mercer laughed. "But I love you anyway!"

"It's the testosterone! And you have never ONCE objected! And now that you're not quite so morose, shall we go?"

"Yes."

They left the house, got into Sam's car, and drove to Greenlawn Cemetery. Sam parked the car and as they got out, the hearse arrived, along with the Naval contingent. Sam and Fran walked over to join the other mourners as the coffin was carried by Navy pall bearers to the gravesite and placed on the stand with pulleys that would eventually lower Nick into the ground. A short distance away, the Navy men who would provide the gun salute had assembled, and some distance from them, a lone sailor with a bugle stood, awaiting a command to play *Taps*.

A few minutes later, Doctor Mercer saw Steve Adams and his extended family arrive. Steve was, in Doctor Mercer's mind, a double-edged sword. He could help Bethany, but if they fell back into their old pattern, he could hurt her quite badly. It was something to watch out for, and potentially discuss with Steve, though privately and without telling Bethany, who arrived, escorted by a Naval officer. She was dressed in black and carrying Nicholas, and was led to a set of

chairs where Nick's parents were already seated. The officer took his place behind Bethany, and next to her parents.

At 1:00pm, a Navy chaplain gave a short benediction, and then asked Howard to say a few words. Howard gave a short eulogy, and when he finished, the chaplain led everyone in the Lord's Prayer, though Fran and Sam refrained from voicing the Christian prayer, and instead silently prayed 'Blessed are You, Lord, our G-d, King of the universe, the Judge of Truth', the same as Doctor Mercer had prayed when she'd first heard of Nick's death. She and Sam weren't observant, but the touchstone of the rituals was comforting at time.

The officer in charge of the ceremony signaled another officer, who gave the commands to the riflemen and three volleys of rifle shots rang out, punctuating the quiet of the dull, overcast, December day. Immediately following the final volley, the bugler began playing *Taps*. Fran took Sam's hand and squeezed it, and leaned on his shoulder as a team of sailors removed the flag from Nick's coffin, and quickly and expertly folded it, and one of them handed it to an officer who brought the flag to Bethany and said the usual words to her.

With the ceremony concluded, Fran started to move towards Bethany but stopped when she saw Bethany hand Nicholas to someone, then walk over to Steve. When Steve held out his arm and Bethany lopped hers around it, Doctor Mercer frowned and shook her head. It was no surprise that she'd seek comfort and support from Steve, but as she'd thought earlier, that relationship was fraught with danger, and both of them might well be oblivious to the pitfalls. It was something to discuss with Bethany in the morning.

"We can go," Doctor Mercer said to her husband.

"You don't want to talk to her?" Sam asked.

"Oh, I do, but I'll wait until I see her tomorrow morning."

"You're worried about that young man she's with?"

"You know I can't say."

"No, but I can surmise. You're a good counselor, Fran. You'll get her through this."

"Some days I wonder," Fran sighed.

"But I never do!" her husband declared.

December 30, 1989, Milford, Ohio

"I knew you'd react this way," Bethany said after Doctor Mercer expressed her concerns about Steve. "But it's not what you thought!"

"What do you mean?"

"I was supporting Steve, not the other way around! I'm not sure if you saw it, but the gun salute and *Taps* really hit him hard. When I talked to him, I discovered that he's stopped writing in his journals. He used them as a combination of catharsis and as a way to try to make sense of the world. He can't make any sense of what's happened."

"Nobody can make sense of a senseless act," Doctor Mercer replied gently.

"No, they can't," Bethany replied. "But Steve being Steve, he thinks he has to carry the burden of the world and he's struggling to find meaning after Nick's death."

"And you?"

"Nicolas has to be my meaning. For him and for me. That said, I do need Steve's help; and Kathy's, too."

"I'm concerned, Bethany."

"Don't be. We're in exactly the right place. He called me 'Sweetheart'..."

Doctor Mercer interrupted her, "Bethany, we've talked about this."

"You didn't let me finish! He called me that, but I pointed out that our relationship has to be different. I need him. He's been my best friend for a long, long time. I want him to be."

"I'm just afraid where that kind of intimacy will lead."

"I know. But you know how much he's helped me since ninth grade - with recovering from the rape, with recovering from the accident, and with recovering from our failed romantic relationship."

"I know, and that's what has me worried. Your 'solution' to each of those was physical intimacy."

"It was, and one of the reasons I decided to come back to Milford was that I needed some separation, but not so much that he and Kathy can't help. I briefly considered asking to move in with him, as I said, but decided that was a bad idea. I need him, and he needs me. But as friends."

Doctor Mercer took a deep breath and let it out.

"Your friendship with Steve is more intimate than most marriages, Bethany."

"I know. And that's why we couldn't marry, as crazy as it sounds."

"Have you cried?"

"No."

"You should."

Bethany nodded, "I will, when it's time."

X. Entry 19900102 - Bethany Michelle Krajick

January 2, 1990, Milford, Ohio

Doctor Mercer was in her office early on Tuesday morning, the day after New Year's. Her first appointment of the day, with Bethany Krajick, was scheduled for 7:30am, which gave Doctor Mercer about twenty minutes to drink her tea and prepare. The phone rang, and as her receptionist hadn't arrived, Fran answered the call.

"Fran Mercer," she said.

"Doctor Mercer, it's Steve Adams."

"Steve! How are you?"

"I'm a lot better than Bethany, that's for damned sure," he said, his voice a combination of anger and sadness.

"I saw you at the funeral, but you and Bethany walked away together before I could say 'hello'."

"I'm sorry about that, but as I'm sure you can imagine, I was more worried about her than pleasantries."

"Yes, of course. How are you doing?"

"I had a syncopal incident when I first heard the news. Al Barton insisted I stay in the hospital overnight for test."

"And?"

"Nothing new. They're still looking."

"Hopefully they'll uncover the root cause and treat it."

"Hopefully. Anyway, one of my confidantes suggested I see you because I'm struggling."

"With Nick's death?"

"Yes. You know I try to make sense of the world and it no longer makes sense, and I'm not sure it ever will."

"Are you in Chicago?"

"Yes. But I'm planning to drive down today to see Bethany. Kathy and I agreed that we need to help her in any way we're able to. And before you say it, that means appropriately, Doctor Mercer."

"Your definition of 'appropriate' and mine differs."

"I'm not going to have sex with Bethany," I replied. "I'm not a *complete* idiot."

"No, not *complete*," Doctor Mercer said with a soft laugh, knowing she could get away with saying something like that to Steve.

"Are you free tomorrow morning?"

"I have a patient scheduled for 9:00am. Could you be here at 7:00am?"

"I could. See you then."

They said their goodbyes and Doctor Mercer replaced the handset in the cradle of the phone. She made a note in her appointment book, then went to the large filing cabinet where she kept 'inactive' records, retrieved Steve's file, and moved it to the drawer of her credenza where she kept her active files. She'd need to review his file at home so she would be ready for his appointment in the morning.

"Good morning, Fran," Bethany said, coming into the office and closing the door.

"Good morning, Bethany. There's tea in the pot. I haven't made coffee, but you could turn on the machine if you want."

"Tea is fine, thanks. Steve got all of us hooked on tea back in Junior High."

"I just spoke to him. He's coming to see you?"

"Yes. He and Kathy have worked out some sort of platoon system, I guess. And before you say it, no, I am not planning to have sex with him, now, or anytime soon."

"Emotions combined with biology have a long history of overcoming plans in that regard."

"I trust him."

"You'll forgive me for bluntly saying I fear that trust is misplaced, given your history."

"We'll have to agree to disagree," Bethany replied. "And my request to start seeing patients?"

Doctor Mercer removed her eyeglasses and pinched her nose, then put her glasses back in place.

"You're not ready, Bethany," Doctor Mercer said.

"I can't sit around doing nothing!" Bethany protested. "I need something to take my mind off what happened in Guam. And honestly, if I can't do that here, then I think I'm going to have to go back to Illinois where I can practice."

"Have you cried?"

Bethany shook her head, "No. It's not time."

"When you are ready to cry, THEN we can talk about you seeing patients. And I really don't think going back to Chicago is a good idea."

"You never did understand my relationship with Steve," Bethany sighed.

In a sense, Fran thought, Bethany was right, but in another sense, and more importantly, Bethany was wrong. Fran understood that the relationship was a strange mix of supportive and destructive. To use a Greek myth as metaphor, they could soar through the skies together, but eventually one of them flew so high that the wax melted and their wings fell off.

Both had a history of seriously failed relationships, including their own, though to borrow another myth, somehow their relationship managed to rise from the ashes like a phoenix every time it had crashed and burned. And every time that phoenix rose, they ended up in a physical relationship, drawn to each other like strong magnets. Fran had tried for over ten years to help them come to some semblance of stability, but something always intervened - a girl, a guy, an accident, and ultimately, Nick's death.

"I think your relationship with Steve is so complex that none of us truly understands it."

"I'm not sure I can live without him," Bethany sighed. "And I don't want to try."

"What did you do this past week?"

"Spent time with Nicholas, went to the cemetery, spent time with my dad, slept, and watched TV."

"Not your mom?"

"My mom and I don't communicate. We haven't since Steve and I broke up the summer after graduation. She's still angry over that, and I'm sure she thinks it was all my fault."

"Because of Andrew? We talked about that."

"I know. I didn't say I thought it was all my fault, just that my mom still does. Dad understands. Strangely, he always has. He trusted Steve to take care of me, no matter what, from the first time they met. And Steve has never let him down."

"You need to find something to occupy your time," Doctor Mercer said.

"Seeing patients will do that, you know."

"Yes, I know. But not yet, Bethany."

Bethany sighed deeply, "Can we make a deal?"

"I offered one before."

"Then can I offer a modification?"

"What?"

"Steve's session tomorrow; make it a joint session."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"If you leave us alone in your office, I'll cry while he holds me."

As Fran considered Bethany's request, her crying in Steve's arms was probably going to happen no matter what, and having it happen here, in her office, was probably the safest place it could happen. Anywhere else ran the risk of them falling back into their old pattern, and THAT, Fran thought, would be a complete disaster.

"I think I can work with that," Fran said. "He's supposed to be here at 7:00am."

"I'll show up a bit after that, say, ten minutes. And please let me talk to him without interrupting."

"I have to keep my own counsel on that, Bethany, but I'll let you lead."

"Thanks."

Fran realized that they wouldn't make any further progress, and despite her misgivings, felt that Bethany's idea might help, though it was fraught with all kinds of danger.

"Then I'll see you tomorrow about 7:10am," Fran said.

Bethany got up, they said 'goodbye', and Bethany left the office. Fran made notes in Bethany's file, and as she had some time before her next appointment, took out Steve's thick file and began to review. She was interrupted when her phone buzzed and her receptionist announced her next patient.

"Good morning, Marcie," Doctor Mercer said when the sixteen-year-old girl came into the office and shut the door.

"Hi, Doctor Mercer. Mom went to have coffee. She said she'll be back ten minutes before we're done in case you want to talk to her."

"Have a seat."

Marcie sat on the couch and Doctor Mercer moved from her desk to the chair near the couch.

"How are you doing?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"I don't want to kill myself today."

"Good."

January 3, 1990, Milford, Ohio

Steve was punctual as usual, arriving at 7:00am. Doctor Mercer invited him in, offered him tea which he accepted, and then he sat down in the chair near her desk.

"I was surprised to hear from you after all these years, but I suppose it made sense for you to call me, given what happened. How have you been?"

"Since the last time we talked?" I said with a smile. "I could write a novel, except I don't feel like it at this point. I saw you at the interment, but I didn't have a chance to say 'hello' because Bethany took me aside."

"I saw that. I have a question for you - have you been keeping your journal?"

"I'm not sure I can at this point. I used it to try to make sense of the world, but now, after everything that's happened, I don't think that's possible."

"Which is why you're here. But why me? Why now?"

"Because I came this close," I said, holding my thumb and forefinger a millimeter apart, "to shutting down. I'd have destroyed everything. And I knew you would understand. And that you could help."

"Write, Steve. It's important. It's cathartic. All those things you can't let out to anyone else for whatever reason, write them down. If you don't, you'll drive yourself crazy."

"Isn't that why I'm here?" I asked with a wry smile.

"You aren't crazy. You're human. Nobody can go through something like this without being affected."

"It makes even less sense than what happened with Birgit. Or Stephanie."

They spoke for about ten minutes before Bethany knocked on the door and came into the office.

"What are YOU doing here?" Steve asked, totally surprised.

"We need to do this together," Bethany said, moving to sit by Doctor Mercer.

"But..." he protested.

"How can I do this after what happened? This is part of me getting through it. You and I can help each other the way we always have, but we have to keep our feelings for each other in check."

"Doctor Mercer, could you leave us alone?" Steve asked.

"Bethany?" Doctor Mercer queried.

"Yes, please."

Doctor Mercer nodded and left her office. She closed the door behind her, and sat down at her receptionist's desk. She had made a gamble and hoped it would pay off. What happened in the next fifteen or twenty minutes might well make the difference between success and disaster for a number of people. It could turn out very badly, but it might also get Bethany to a point where she could properly recover from the shock of Nick's death. And Bethany was still in shock. Once she cried, which she'd promised to do, THEN Doctor Mercer felt they could make some progress.

Steve and Bethany didn't open the door, and Doctor Mercer was concerned, so she got up and softly knocked on the door, then opened it and went in. She needed to talk to Bethany alone, and decided to use a bit of subterfuge.

"Sorry," Fran said, "but my next client will be here in about five minutes. Steve, are you coming in tomorrow morning as we discussed?"

"Yes, I am," he replied. "Thanks for today, it was helpful. Both before and after you left us. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good."

"I'll see you in a couple of hours, Sweetheart," he said.

Steve using his pet name for Bethany concerned Fran greatly, as in her mind, it was a warning sign that they might well fall back into their old pattern.

"Thanks," Bethany replied to Steve. "You can't even begin to imagine how much I appreciate it."

"I'm just paying forward what Jennifer and others did for me when something like this happened to me."

Steve and Bethany exchanged a quick hug, she kissed him on the cheek, and he left the office. Doctor Mercer closed the door and went to sit with Bethany.

"Sorry about the subterfuge, though technically you are my patient."

"It's OK. Steve provided exactly what I needed. He knew, too. As soon as we sat down, he told me to cry."

"Good. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not today, please. I need to spend more time with Steve before I talk with you about it."

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but where is he staying?"

"He's at a friend's house, but I asked him to come stay at our house, and he called Kara and Jessica to discuss it."

"Bethany..." Doctor Mercer warned with a sigh.

"Just as my friend."

"I think you're taking a huge risk, and I really wish you wouldn't do that."

"Fran," Bethany said in a soft but firm voice, "I know what I need and I know what I'm doing."

Fran shook her head, "I don't think that's true at all."

January 5, 1990, Milford, Ohio

"He held me and let my cry myself to sleep. I asked him to make love to me and he refused."

Doctor Mercer sighed, "I was afraid of that, and to be frank, I'm not convinced you two are being honest with me, Bethany."

Bethany smiled wanly, "I can see you doubting me, but Steve? He'd never lie to you about that. He's never lied to you about us, even when I tried to keep things from you. How can you doubt him?"

"Steve would kill to protect you; telling a lie to protect you doesn't even come close!"

Bethany shook her head, "You **STILL** don't understand him! He'd kill Seaman Jefferson if he had the opportunity, though I suspect he'd have to get in line. He'd have killed Josh Benton or had him killed, if I hadn't demanded he not do so. But lie? No."

"Hang on! You're saying he'd commit cold-blooded murder before he'd lie?"

"I'm telling you, Fran, you do NOT understand him. Steve may not be in the military, but it's all about honor, duty, and, for want of a better term, unit cohesiveness. When his honor is at stake, he's very predictable. When he feels he has a duty, he's unstoppable. The people he loves are worth more to him than his own life."

"But he's opposed to the death penalty - we've talked about that."

"Yes, he is, but you saying that simply shows you STILL don't get him! He doesn't think the government should have the power to judicially kill. On the other hand, duty and honor require him to kill Seaman Jefferson if he has the opportunity, unless I tell him not to, which I have. And he'll keep his word. And, just so you know, there were quite a few officers in Guam who would have gone into the brig and killed him with their bare hands if I'd asked."

"But Steve is a pacifist...that makes no sense."

"Yes, but not the way you mean. He won't initiate violence. But if someone else does, he'll end it, violently and with finality. He and Nick saw eye to eye on that - the goal of having a strong military is deterrence, and if someone is foolish enough not to be deterred, the you destroy them as quickly and violently as possible, go home, have a beer, fuck your wife, and play with your kids. So, no, Steve isn't lying and won't lie."

"I still think it's unwise, Bethany. Your history..."

"Is exactly why I knew I could trust him to hold me, let me cry, and gently refuse to make love to me. We both agree that's the right way forward. You wanted me to cry, and I found the way I could do it, and have it MEAN something."

"You have to admit that your relationship with him is very strange."

Bethany laughed softly, "Steve is very strange. And I think you should try to understand him for who he REALLY is."

"Well, I'm seeing him this afternoon, and I think I have plenty to discuss with him."

"And me seeing patients?" Bethany asked.

"We're making progress."

"Good."

XI. Entry 19911011 - Bethany Michelle Krajick

October 11, 1991, Milford, Ohio

"Fran, can I ask you something in complete confidence?"

"Of course, Bethany."

It's about Abel and Delilah. They asked me to find out if you'd be willing to counsel them."

"Them? Together?"

"Don't you think that would be necessary? Honestly, you have to agree that they want to keep the details of their story to as few people as necessary."

"I can see that, but it's not a thing we typically do except for family or relationship counseling."

"Which I think this would be. I also think that given the way the law works in Ohio, counseling is possible."

"It occurred in Ohio if I understand it correctly."

"Yes," Bethany confirmed.

Bethany knew that wasn't entirely true, but it had started in Ohio, and mostly occurred there. And that fiction could be maintained, and didn't really change the character of what she was asking.

"And you're positive that the incestuous relationship has ended and that the statute of limitations has expired?"

"Yes, and that it would be covered by the counseling exception under Ohio law as neither of them are willing to make a complaint of any kind."

"Do you know why?" Fran asked. "After all these years?"

"Because both of them are seriously affected by it, and it's affecting their quality of life and their relationships with their significant others."

"I'm not sure how wise it would be to see both of them. Who approached you?"

"Abel. I believe he's struggling with remorse, despite being positive it was the right thing to do when he was younger."

"You wrote that in your research. Are you reconsidering your findings?"

"Aren't we always supposed to do that as new information comes to light?"
Bethany asked.

"Yes, of course."

"So, what I wrote was true when I wrote it; now, I'm not so sure. I'll need to speak to both of them, preferably after a bit of counseling. If I were ever to publish something that discussed their case, I'd need to know if I had to revise my finding."

"And Abel is willing to reveal himself to me? With his real name? And the timeframe?"

"Yes, I'm positive that he is."

"And you feel he'll openly speak with me?" Fran asked.

"I'm positive."

"Let me think about it. I'll probably run it by Laura as well."

"I figured that would be the case. Thanks, Fran."

"You're welcome."

Late that afternoon, Doctor Mercer called her mentor, Doctor Laura Paulus, for advice.

"Honestly," Doctor Paulus replied, "I think you should, for two reasons. One, to verify Bethany's research; and two, because it would be a very interesting case."

"You think Bethany was mistaken?"

"I think there's something she's not telling you."

"There's a lot about this she's not telling anyone, for what I'm sure you can imagine are good reasons."

"Yes, of course, but from everything you've said, and from reading her dissertation, I have a suspicion that there is something more to this."

"And your curiosity insists that you find out?"

"You know me very well, Fran!" Laura laughed. "I just hope that it's something you can tell me, within the bounds of patient privacy."

"Depending on what I find out, I'll ask for permission to discuss it with you. What about seeing both of them?"

"I think you have to talk to the brother alone first, then the sister alone, and decide if it's wise. We can debate the ethics once you do that."

"OK. I'm going to think about it a bit more, then let Bethany know that I want to speak to Abel."

"Good luck, Fran. Let me know what happens and call if you need advice."

"Thanks, Laura. I appreciate it as always."

They said 'goodbye' and Fran hung up the phone, got up from her desk, and left the office, locking the doors behind her. Once again, she was in a stressful situation which she couldn't talk to Sam about. He'd always understood, and had provided the support she'd needed, but things would have been so much easier if she could talk to him openly. She got into her car and headed home.

"Hi, Fran!" Sam called out, hurrying to the foyer to greet her with a kiss.

"Hi, Sam. Sorry about being late, but I needed to talk to Laura and she was only available after 5:00pm."

"One of those days?"

"Yes and no. It's a bit of a dilemma, and it has the potential to be stressful."

"The girls aren't home..." Sam offered suggestively.

Fran laughed softly, "You're still as horny as that day we met at Ohio State!"

"You've never complained!" Sam protested, but with a huge smile.

"So the Jewish Princess stereotype doesn't apply?" Fran asked, taking off her jacket and hanging it in the closet.

"Well, if you've been trying to decide what color to paint the ceiling for the last twenty-six years, I'm going to be mightily offended!"

"I think I could go for a nice hot bath with a glass of Chardonnay, a massage, and your special stress reduction techniques!"

"And now you see the main advantage of having the girls out of the house!"

"I'll run the water, you get the wine!" Fran said, unbuttoning her blouse.

Sam needed no additional incentive to move. She might be close to fifty, but his wife was just as sexy as the day they'd met.

October 16, 1991, Milford, Ohio

"I believe I can see Abel," Doctor Mercer said. "Sorry it took so long. I had to think about it."

"I totally understand," Bethany replied. "I'll get in touch with him and have him call. It might be a week or two before you hear from him, depending on his schedule and how soon I speak with him again."

Bethany needed to continue the subterfuge, as Steve hadn't made a final decision as to how to handle things.

"OK. Shall we talk about your most recent new patient?"

"She's struggling with having given up her daughter for adoption. I think the major factor there is that it was a direct adoption, and she knows the adoptive parents quite well from their former church, and sees her daughter every few weeks. But that's not the biggest problem. The biggest problem is that she and her husband are unable to conceive and none of the medical treatments are working."

"That's a tough situation. Did she have trouble with her successful pregnancy?"

"Other than conceiving at fifteen and delivering at sixteen, no trouble. More likely it had to do with her very promiscuous behavior."

"An STD?"

"Not that she acknowledged. I suppose it could be HPV and she didn't know, as that often clears on its own, and we don't know how that affects fertility. And you know there's a potentially long latency period. But the why is less important, obviously."

"Are you recommending marriage counseling?" Fran asked.

"Yes," Bethany replied. "I think I've addressed everything I can with regard to her teenage promiscuity and her guilt over the situation with her daughter. I don't hold out a lot of hope, though. Her husband, if she's to be believed and I do believe her, is adamant about having biological children."

"I've seen that before," Fran said. "About ten years ago."

"Mike actually told me about that when we made his last referral."

"How is she doing?"

"About what you would expect from a twelve-year-old victim of violent rape whose dad is facing murder charges."

"They're charging him with murder?"

"Under Ohio law, 'laying in wait' is sufficient for pre-meditation. The fact that the dad used a private investigator to find the guy, then staked out his house pretty much doomed him. Both of those things make any defense such as temporary insanity or 'crime of passion' nearly impossible. And given how he killed him and what he did afterwards, I can't imagine Governor Voinovich issuing clemency or commutation the way Dick Celeste did right before he left office in January."

"Wait! They're charging him with *capital* murder?"

"That's the last I heard from the public defender. Think about it, Fran. He methodically planned it, tortured the guy, emasculated him, forced the severed genitals into the man's mouth, and then drove an ice pick into his brain through his eye."

"I'd go for straight insanity. Even with all of that, the death penalty just seems wrong. Well, you know my opinion that it shouldn't exist at all, but even setting that aside, it's not right. I mean, not to defend him, but given how badly his daughter was brutalized, you'd think they'd show **SOME** compassion and only seek life in prison."

"He confessed to the police when they arrived after he called them."

Doctor Mercer shook her head, "Which is going to hurt his daughter even more."

"Yes, it is," Bethany agreed. "You know Steve wanted to kill Josh Benton, right?"

"He's told me. I'm very glad you were able to keep that from happening."

"You and me both," Bethany replied.

"How are things between you two?"

Bethany smiled, "He hasn't broken his promise to you, despite my repeated entreaties."

"You know my feelings on the matter."

"You've made them quite clear. Repeatedly."

"And yet you still think it's a good idea."

"Believe it or not, for many of the same reasons it was a good idea when I was fifteen. You objected to that, despite it being exactly what I needed."

"Your relationships after that weren't exactly healthy."

"No, but without that, I'd never have even tried. But we're off topic."

"What's your treatment plan?"

"Well, now that she's no longer on serious sedatives, to see if I can rebuild a life for a little girl who was violated in every way you can imagine by a monster. And to make things worse, being subjected to medical procedures to repair the damage. The one plus is that she'll never, ever have to testify, or even talk to the police. I refused to allow that even after they took her off the sedatives. And then

her dad did what he did. I'm not even sure how to address that with her, because at some point, she'll find out."

"How's her mother?"

"Under psychiatric care. I'm not sure she'll recover from finding her daughter and seeing what had been done. I don't think I could."

"Something I hope neither of us ever have to find out."

October 23, 1991, Milford, Ohio

On Wednesday morning, a week later, Doctor Mercer made Earl Grey tea. It wasn't her favorite, but Steve was her first appointment and she knew he preferred that particular blend. It had just finished steeping when her receptionist announced that Steve had arrived. The door to the office opened and Steve walked in, followed by his little sister. Doctor Mercer found that strange.

"Good morning!" Fran said. "I thought this was a counseling session."

"It is," Steve said. "Doctor Mercer, I'm Abel."

"And I'm Delilah," Stephanie said.

Doctor Mercer was stunned, and the shocked look on her face surely gave that away. She suddenly felt queasy and weak in her knees, because she'd been seeing Steve for nearly fifteen years, in one context or another, and had completely missed what had just been revealed. Not even an inkling. A million things crossed her mind as she basically fell back into her chair, fortunate that it didn't flip over backwards. If Steve had kept something like this from her, what ELSE might he have kept from her? Her mind boggled.

She tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come, and she realized that she'd only be babbling. She had to gather her wits and regain her composure. She took several deep breaths, letting them out slowly, then sipped water from the class on her desk.

"I, uhm, guess you better sit down," she said. "Both of you."

Steve and Stephanie sat down on the couch close to each other - too close - and Doctor Mercer got up from her desk, picked up a notebook and a pen, then moved to the comfortable chair she usually sat in for counseling. She opened her notebook, wrote the date, as well as the code names, not wanting to record them as that point, and then simply looked over at the brother and sister who were sitting on her counseling couch. Steve spoke first.

"I'm sorry to have dropped the bomb on you that way," he said, "but I'm sure you can imagine why Bethany couldn't reveal who we were, nor could I very well call you from home about this."

"I, uhm, well, yes, I see," Fran replied, still trying to regain her composure. "Did you read Bethany's dissertation?"

Steve nodded, "I attended the faculty review in Madison when she used it as her Senior project in Madison. And I read advance copies before she turned in her thesis and dissertation. I don't know if Stephanie read it."

"I read the dissertation," his sister acknowledged.

"You attended the faculty review session, Steve?" Fran asked, surprised. "And sat there and listened to them grill her about her research? On you?"

"Yes. It was fascinating, to say the least."

"And her conclusions?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"Right at the time," Steve replied. "Wrong now. I suspect she told you that."

The revelations had come to quickly for Doctor Mercer to process them, so she made some notes. The next few minutes were going to be difficult, but nowhere near as difficult as the discussion she'd have to have with Bethany at their planned lunchtime meeting. Fran wondered exactly when Bethany had known and why she hadn't put a stop to it. But that was for later.

XII. Entry 19911023 A - Stephanie Ann Adams

October 23, 1991, Milford, Ohio

I'd actually like to speak to Stephanie alone for the rest of this time," Doctor Mercer said. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," Steve replied. "I'll go to the waiting room."

"Thanks."

He got up and left the office, closing the door behind him. Doctor Mercer took a few sips of water from her glass, got up from her chair, retrieved a new, unused notebook from her credenza, wrote the date and Stephanie's name on the cover, and then, having collected her senses enough to begin, sat back down.

"Stephanie, I want you to be completely honest with me, and tell me the truth. I promise nothing you say will ever be revealed, with the exception of talking to your brother. If I need advice, I'll never reveal your names or anything else that might give away your identity. Can you promise to tell me the truth?"

"Yes," Stephanie said firmly.

"Good. When did you have your first thoughts about your brother in a way that might be considered sexual?"

"Just as I said before - when I was seven."

"And that's when you discovered the mechanics of sex, right?"

"Well, I kind of knew before, because I'd seen babies and something in my brain said 'boys go out, girls go in', but nothing more than that. And I knew you needed a man and a woman to make a baby because that's what people said and because everyone I knew had a mom and a dad. The book just confirmed how things went together. Well, and explained about the physiology of intercourse and conception."

"Prior to reading the book, did you have any thoughts about it? I mean beyond what I would call typical for a pre-pubescent?"

"Not really."

"What was your relationship with your parents like at that point?"

"Mom was already showing a lot of her bitchy personality, mostly to Steve. I felt bad for him. Dad was always cold and distant. He'd let me hug him, but I don't recall him even hugging or kissing my mom all that much, at least in front of the kids. I think, from everything I've read, he was very much the 1940s and 1950s dad in that regard. And it makes sense, given his age."

"Yes, it does," Fran agreed. "What about your relationship with your older brothers?"

"Well, the Pervert and I never really did much together and I more or less ignored him."

"It would be better if you called him by his name, please. It's Jeff, right?"

"The Perv is named Jeff, yes," Stephanie replied.

"And Steve?"

"We always got along really well. I remember being around him a lot. There's a picture, and I don't remember this, but there's a picture of me swaddled in a blanket in the back of his metal Tonka dump truck. It was his prized possession, and seeing that picture told me how much he loved me."

"Did you two hug or kiss?"

"No. Our family wasn't huggy at all. It wasn't just Mom and Dad."

"Do you remember the first time you hugged your brother or that he hugged you?"

"Probably around the time I was eight, I hugged him."

"And how did you feel?"

"Loved."

"Was that before or after you read the book?"

"After."

"Who gave you the book?"

"Nobody, really. Mom bought a set of books for Steve and they were kept in the common book closet in the hallway. I saw them and took them down."

"There was more than one?"

"It was a four volume set in a cardboard box, with the first two volumes covering puberty; one for boys and one for girls. I read both. The third volume was about

the basic mechanics of sex, birth control, and VD. The fourth was about pregnancy and childbirth. I read both of those, too."

"Did you talk with anyone about those books?"

"My friends Trish and Shelly. I showed them the books, and we talked about it. There was a lot of giggling."

"Not uncommon at that age. You didn't talk with your parents?"

"No. I'm pretty sure my parents never talked to any of us about sex. Mom just bought the books for Steve."

"He put them on the shelf?"

"I suppose, but any books that Mom bought were required to be with the shared books. The only books Steve had in his room were ones he bought with his allowance. It was like the computer that Mom insisted Steve couldn't keep in his room even though nobody else used it. Well, the Per...Jeff tried to, but couldn't make it work and only used it to try to annoy Steve."

"Did you talk with Steve about the books?"

Stephanie shook her head, "No."

"Even with you said how they made you feel?"

"I wasn't sure what he would say and I was afraid he'd reject me. I was so sure that we were supposed to be together and I didn't want to mess it up by being a little girl."

"What did you think would happen?"

"I wasn't sure."

"What did you want to happen?"

"What I said - that Steve was the person I wanted to make love to. I was positive our bodies were made for each other."

"At seven?"

"I knew the mechanics, and how they fit together. I knew I loved him. I knew he loved me."

"Did you tell anyone how you felt?"

Stephanie shook her head, "Not then. Not for a long time, really."

"So Steve didn't know then?"

"He didn't know until Jennifer and Melanie told him when we was fourteen."

"Did you tell them?"

"No. But I guess they saw what was happening, even if Steve didn't. He was pretty clueless then. I pursued him like a lioness after a zebra, but he never saw it until the girls told him about it."

"You said you wanted to be his first."

"I did, and if I'd been even two years older, I might have succeeded. But at twelve, he wasn't interested in me that way."

"And what do you think would have happened?"

"We'd have eventually run away and pretended to be married. After all, we'd have the same last name, so our IDs would have been good. Nobody would need to know we were brother and sister."

"Kids?"

"Of course. And we'd have lived happily ever after. But it didn't work out that way."

"You said he wasn't interested you at twelve. How do you know?"

"He told me. When I pushed him to be with me, he said we had to wait at least until I got my period. And then, later, when I pushed after getting my period, he said we had to wait until I developed and looked like a woman."

"So, when the girls told him, he was OK with it?"

"No. He actually totally freaked out, at least according to Jennifer and Melanie. But I guess, in the end, the combination of Birgit dying, our mom being a total bitch, and my relentless pursuit, he decided it was possible. At that point, he was more or less putty in my hands. When he came home from Sweden and I was developed, I knew I had him. Then it was just a matter of when."

"So, after that first hug, who initiated the hugs?"

"Me, almost always, until he came back from Sweden."

"What did you two do together?"

"We swam every morning and he often made me breakfast. And sometimes I hung out with him and his friends."

"Did he ask you to swim with him?"

"No, that was my idea."

"And breakfast?"

"His. Dad ate with us pretty often; Mom almost never did. She and my other brother were inseparable."

"How did you feel when you discovered your brother wasn't a virgin?"

"Horrible. But I knew how much he cared for Birgit, and how gorgeous she was, and how much she looked like a woman when I was still ten or eleven."

"You knew he was sexually active from that point?"

Stephanie laughed, "Once Melanie got her hooks into him, he became the school sex god!"

"I'm not sure that's a positive thing," Doctor Mercer replied dryly.

"Oh, right," Stephanie smirked. "Teenage boy has an unlimited supply of pussy. And all from gorgeous girls. Tell me how that's bad for HIM!"

"It was, but that's not the point of our chat. How did that make you feel?"

"I suppose it was a mixture of jealousy and desire. I was sure he was going to blow my mind when I finally got him into my bed."

"Why wait so long after he came home from Sweden?"

Stephanie took a deep breath and let it out, "Becky the Bitch."

Doctor Mercer was aware of everything that had happened with Steve, Becky, and Kara, but she couldn't reveal that without permission from Steve.

"What happened?"

"My idiot brother went full 'dumb boy' and cheated on Kara with Becky. I'm guessing you at least know who she is because of the pregnancy and abortion, and how my idiot brother couldn't break his attraction to her."

"And that caused a rift between you and Steve?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Jennifer. I was positive at that point he and I couldn't run away together, but I was sure he'd marry Jennifer, even though she'd moved away. And if he married Jennifer..."

"You wanted that to happen. Why?"

"You know how he's married to Jessica and Kara, right?"

"Yes."

"That."

Doctor Mercer took off her glasses and pinched her nose. She could feel a tension headache coming on and decided to proactively take some aspirin. She got up and retrieved the bottle of Anacin she kept in her upper-left desk drawer, got two tablets from the bottle, and swallowed them with a drink of water. She sat back down and put her glasses back on her face.

"Did either of them know you wanted that?"

Stephanie nodded, "Yes. We had a threesome."

"You what?!" Doctor Mercer gasped.

"Had a threesome. Jennifer and I made love with Steve, and to each other."

"When was this?"

"The summer after Steve graduated, but before he moved to Chicago. Jennifer came to visit after I invited Karin to visit because I was afraid my idiot brother was going to marry Kara."

"You keep calling him an idiot. Why?"

Stephanie laughed, "Because he is! Well, when he doesn't do what I think he should do. But I'm not the only one who calls him a 'dumb boy' - all the girls do, in one fashion or another."

"This threesome..."

"My idea. I wanted it. I felt it was a way to ensure Steve and Jennifer married, which would mean I could have both her and him."

"You wanted Jennifer?"

"Yes. And she wanted me. She hadn't figured out she was a lesbian at that point, but I knew. It was obvious that she loved my brother, but I knew that she was always going to need a girl. I realized I could be that girl. Well, I thought I could. You know how it worked out."

"So, what happened with Becky?"

Doctor Mercer actually knew part of the answer, but suspected she was going to find out that the situation was FAR more complex than she'd thought when she'd talked to Steve about it.

"Steve confessed to Kara, who forgave him. He confessed to me and I slapped him hard across the face and told him I'd never let him touch me. That's when the Triumvirate formed. That's been a pattern through Steve's life. There have always been three girls who were close to him, loved him, made love with him, and helped him navigate life. That was Kara, Bethany, and me. We were all royally pissed at him, and Jennifer was beside herself, but she was in Seattle at that point."

"So what happened next?"

"Steve worked on restoring his relationships with all the girls. He did a good job, and I was pleased, though I never let on. He was like a brother then, but we did discuss what I wanted. And he simply let me take my time to decide. He treated me like a princess, but he didn't make any moves. I made the moves."

"Your threat, I guess we'll call it. Was it real?"

Stephanie shook her head, "No. I just wanted him to understand how badly he'd screwed up with Becky."

"You decided the day and time?"

"And what we'd do. Like I said, he was putty in my hands. I'd done my best to tease him to make sure he'd do what I wanted."

"How?"

"Just little things - words I'd say, things I'd do. But he was adamant about never seeing me naked until that day we first made love. I wanted him to see me naked, but he refused."

"Had you seen him?"

"Yes, a few times, including when I spied on him and a girl making love."

"You watched him?"

"Yes. And I saw everything."

"Does he know?"

"Now? Yes. But not when it happened."

"Where were they?"

"In my parents' bed. Steve had closed and locked the door, and drawn the blinds on the window that overlooked the indoor pool, but you could see through a gap between the blind and the sill. He didn't realize until I told him. After that, he was careful to make sure the blind was actually below the sill."

"You tried to spy on him again?"

"Yes, and tried to see him naked whenever I could."

"But he didn't see you until that day?"

"Correct."

"Did anyone try to talk you out of it?"

"Steve, at first, but he never was able to refuse me anything. Bethany, but I convinced her that I was the one pursuing the relationship and that Steve hadn't lifted a finger or said a thing to encourage me."

"Are you covering for him in any way?"

"No!" Stephanie said firmly. "I was the one who wanted it and manipulated him into doing it."

"And now? Are you manipulating him?"

"No."

"But you said, earlier, that deep inside you still wanted him to be your lover. In fact, your husband and to father children with you."

Stephanie let out a deep sigh, "Which is why I'm here. I know it can't happen, and well, Ed is insisting I get treatment."

"You want to be with him?"

"If we exclude my brother, Ed was my first boyfriend."

"Have there been others?"

"Nobody who lasted."

"How many lovers have you had?"

"Sixteen."

"Including Ed and your brother?"

"Yes. And Jennifer. And there are some who I kind of messed around with but wouldn't call them lovers. Making out, I guess."

"But your very first intimate experiences were all with your brother?"

"Yes. We did literally everything. And nobody else could compare."

"Would you say that's why you've had so many lovers?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"Probably."

"What's different about Ed?"

"I suppose it's that he won't give up. I mean, I really like him, but he's never, ever let me push him away without fighting back."

"And he knows the details?"

"Yes."

"Has Steve ever forced you to do anything?"

"More like the other way around," Stephanie replied. "He tried to end it several times and I did whatever it took to get him back."

"And now?"

"As I said, I know it's impossible for Steve and me to be together the way I wanted."

"But you're still attracted to him?"

"Yes. But I don't think he's attracted to me."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Sad. Rejected."

"One last question, how did you feel the next day?"

"Sore!" Stephanie smirked. "I made him do it again and again even though I knew I'd pay for it the next day."

"I meant emotionally," Doctor Mercer replied, suppressing a sigh.

"Like I was on top of the world," Stephanie sighed longingly. "Everything was perfect."

Doctor Mercer made some notes in her notebook.

"I'm going to call your brother back in now."

"OK."

Doctor Mercer got up, went to the door, and invited Steve back into the office. Steve sat down on the couch, but not as close to Stephanie as he'd sat before. Doctor Mercer sat down, made a note in her notebook and then looked up.

"I need to think about this," she said, "mostly because of the distance. May I have a week?"

"Yes, of course," Steve replied.

"And do you have an issue with me talking about the ethical issues involved with someone I trust?"

"So long as you don't reveal who we are in any way, shape or form, I have no problem with that."

"Me either," Stephanie said.

"OK," Doctor Mercer replied. "I'll give you a call early next week. What number should I use?"

"My cellular phone," Steve said. "Let me give you the number."

He asked for a piece of paper and wrote down the cellular number and then handed the paper to Doctor Mercer.

"Thanks," Steve said. "I appreciate you listening and I'm sorry we dropped this bomb on you today."

"I suppose I'm the only person to whom the two of you could have confessed. As I said, let me think about it."

"Of course," Steve replied. "Thanks."

"Thanks, Doctor Mercer," Stephanie added.

"You're welcome. I'll be in touch."

Steve and Stephanie left the office, closing the door behind them. Doctor Mercer went back to her desk and gathered her thoughts, jotting down notes in her notebook. There was so much to unpack and the distance made counseling difficult, but the thing she'd said to Steve was absolutely true - she was probably the only one they could come to, and the only one who could help them. More thought was necessary, as well as a conversation with Laura, but most likely, she'd accept them as patients. Well, accept Stephanie, as Steve was already a patient and had been for nearly fifteen years.

There was one thing, though, that was truly nagging her, and that was Bethany's involvement. It had been one thing when Bethany had written about this relationship as a researcher, it was a VERY different thing now that Bethany was clearly involved and had known about it while it was ongoing. That warranted a conversation, one which Fran did not relish. She'd broach the topic when she met Bethany for lunch, but it was unlikely to be a short conversation. The phone on her desk buzzed, interrupting her thoughts.

"Yes?" she said.

"Your next appointment is here."

"Thanks."

XIII. Entry 19911023 B - Bethany Michelle Krajick

October 23, 1991, Milford, Ohio

"Doctor Mercer, Doctor Krajick is here," Cecilia said over the intercom.

"Send her in, please," Fran replied.

The door opened and Bethany stepped in.

"Ready for lunch, Fran?" Bethany asked.

"We need to talk. Cecilia is going to Andreas' Deli for sandwiches for us."

"Steve and Stephanie?"

"Steve and Stephanie," Fran replied.

"What can I get for you, Doctor Krajick?" Cecilia asked.

"Ham on rye, light mayo; regular chips; small Sprite."

"Doctor Mercer?"

"My usual, please."

"Back in fifteen minutes!" Cecilia said brightly, closing the door.

"Sit," Fran directed.

Bethany nodded and moved to a chair across from Fran. She set her purse on the floor and looked up.

"You knew before it happened," Fran said.

"Yes. They told you?"

"I spent the last fifteen minutes reviewing your dissertation. I know how close you and Steve were. Nobody had to tell me once Steve and Stephanie introduced themselves as 'Abel and Delilah'."

"No, I suppose not," Bethany replied. "I messed up."

"That's an understatement if there ever was one! In fact, I don't call condoning incest 'messaging up'! I don't call hiding it from me 'messaging up'! I don't call exploiting them for your research 'messaging up'!"

"Exploiting?" Bethany asked, reeling from the accusation.

"What would you call it?"

Bethany was quiet for a moment.

"It was legitimate research," Bethany replied defensively.

"Really? If this isn't the epitome of a 'dual relationship' I don't know what is! You were intimate with him while you were doing your research by your own admission! You call him your best friend! You know better! Do you realize what could happen if your PhD advisor or committee found out? Or the licensing board? YOU KNOW BETTER! You broke the rules. You violated protocols. It was unethical. Do you understand that?"

"What are you going to do?"

"That's not an answer, Doctor Krajick," Fran said sternly.

"Yes," Bethany replied. "I understand."

"Do you realize the position you've put me in?"

"I'm sorry," Bethany replied.

"You're sorry," Fran sighed, shaking her head. "Sorry enough to repudiate your research? Sorry enough to give back your PhD? Sorry enough to surrender your license?"

"But it happened before I completed my undergrad degree!"

"The incest? Yes. Your research? When did that finish?"

"When I turned it over to the PhD committee," Bethany admitted.

"You knew the rules, the protocols, and the ethical guidelines."

"Yes."

"And yet you violated them. Why? To make a point that NEVER should have been made? And which, obviously, is incorrect?"

"It happened, Fran. I can't undo it."

"No, you can't. You've put me in a very difficult position. If I do what I'm supposed to do according to the code of professional ethics, you'll never practice again."

"Fran..." Bethany pleaded, interrupting with tears forming in her eyes.

Fran held up her hand, "Let me finish. That is what I am supposed to do. But if I do it, I can't begin to imagine the adverse effects on Steve, and you know where Stephanie not getting help will lead - prison for her brother and suicide for her. I told them I have to think about it, but I don't see an alternative way to prevent that outcome except counseling them myself. Fundamentally, if I don't, I end up destroying three lives; three lives of people I care for. And probably even more, as it would affect Steve's family, his business, your brother, your son, and who knows who else. The State of Ohio, and I'm certain Illinois as well, believe that kind of destruction is warranted; I don't, at least in this case. Well, assuming you answer my next question the way I expect you to."

"What?" Bethany asked with trepidation.

"Your research, as suspect as it is, reports things accurately?"

"Facts," Bethany sighed, "but clearly not conclusions."

"Clearly," Doctor Mercer replied flatly. "But it matches what Stephanie insists to be true. And knowing the mental and emotional abuse Steve suffered, he was putty in her hands. But you know what? That's on you, too! You, Melanie, and Jennifer helped not only make him who he is, but literally groomed him for his little sister! Think about that 'fact', Doctor Krajick!"

"Shit," Bethany sighed. "Maybe I **should** give up my practice and my license."

"Then I suppose I would have to as well, because I completely missed it. I'm being harsh on you because I have to, but I'm also being harsh on myself. Ask yourself this question - is that girl of fifteen or sixteen the woman who is twenty-eight?"

"I want to say 'no', but you know how I feel about him. That's never changed."

"And is the source of never-ending drama in your life, and the reason you come to me for counseling! Your relationship with him was nothing but destructive."

"Not after I married Nick."

"And yet, you've fallen right back into the same pattern, haven't you?"

"He's my best friend in the world," Bethany protested, tears dripping from her eyes and rolling down her cheeks.

But it wasn't any normal friendship, at least not in Fran's mind. Bethany's connection to Steve, whatever it was, was so deeply embedded in her psyche that there was no way to separate them. It wasn't conjoined twins, it was as if their souls had merged. Counterintuitively, that merger had been an impediment to being a couple, though Steve's penchant for having multiple girls loomed large as well. Fran knew, though, that Bethany had played a key role in Steve's development with regard to sex and relationships, and in that way, Bethany was, after a fashion, partly responsible for who he was.

That said, as Fran looked back, she wondered if Bethany could have survived her rape without Steve. Not just someone like Steve, but the unique 'soul' that could directly interact with Bethany's, support her, and give her energy. The problem was, that energy seemed to destroy all boundaries and lay waste to all social standards. And it provided for what amounted to magnetic attraction between them, something that nothing could seem to attenuate.

Breaking that hold was dangerous, as Fran had seen in the past. It had led to self-destructive behavior by Bethany, including her long-term affair at college, the disastrous relationship with Andrew, and her clinging to Steve after Nick's murder. It was only Steve's sheer willpower which had kept him from fulfilling Bethany's request to make love after Nick's death, though Fran knew it wouldn't last, and they might have already consummated. Again.

"I warned you about your relationship with him twelve years ago. If you had listened, things might have gone differently."

Bethany was fighting hard not to begin sobbing, but she was slowly losing the battle.

"I can't change what happened," she said, her dripping tears spotting her light blue blouse.

"No, and I'm not one to say 'I told you so', but actions have consequences. You have to figure out a way forward."

The sobs won out.

"I can't live without him," Bethany wailed.

Fran felt badly that she was making Bethany cry, but she also felt it was necessary. And she had one more harsh thing to say.

"Then you have to stop enabling his behavior. Period. That has to end today. If you want to keep your license, it ends today. It would be better to distance yourself from him completely, and to not be intimate, either his way or in the usual sense of that word. And, if you want to keep your license, you will work closely, under my supervision."

"I don't enable him," Bethany protested weakly.

"Do you call him out? Do you identify the areas where he crosses the line of accepted behavior?"

"But that's his entire life! He doesn't care about norms, social or otherwise."

"Obviously. But do you do ANYTHING to rein in his most egregious behavior? Or do you simply go back to his bed?"

The sobs gave way to what could only be called bawling. Bethany put her face in her hands, and cried hard, her body shaking as tears ran freely. Fran hated herself for how she was making Bethany feel, but it was her own fault for not having been tougher on Bethany over the years. Bethany had, much like Steve, chosen self-medication over treatment, and now the chickens were coming home to roost.

There was a soft knock at the door and Fran got up, rather than call out. She opened the door just far enough to take the food and drinks from Cecilia, then closed the door. She went back to her desk, set the food down, then moved next to Bethany and put her hand on her shoulder.

"Bethany, you know I care for you, right?"

"Yes," Bethany replied, her body heaving.

"And you know I only want what's best for you?"

"What you think is," Bethany replied, finally getting control of her crying.

"We can talk this out, and I promise I won't be as tough, but you had to hear it from me. I've held my tongue long enough. This situation with Steve and Stephanie basically forced my hand. Blow your nose, use the powder room, and we'll have lunch."

Bethany took some tissues from the box on the shelf, blew her nose, then went to the small powder room off Doctor Mercer's office. She washed her face, blew her nose a few times, washed her face again, then went back to sit down. She wasn't particularly hungry, but she knew she had to eat, so she unwrapped her ham sandwich and began eating. Doctor Mercer had her usual pastrami on rye.

"I can't lose my license," Bethany said after she'd eaten about half her sandwich. "It's who I am!"

"I know that," Fran replied. "But the ethical breach is unconscionable. Frankly, as I said, the only reason I'm refraining from doing what I ought to do is that the destruction it would cause would be so great! I can't imagine another set of facts that would lead me to that conclusion, but these do."

"You really think Jennifer, Melanie, and I groomed Steve?"

"What do YOU think?" Fran asked.

Bethany sighed, "I suppose we did."

"And, in the process, you taught HIM how to do it."

"He does NOT groom! The girls all come to him! All he does is treat them as equals and adults."

"And you don't think someone with his experience and, I hesitate to say this, training, doesn't understand how to subtly encourage the girls? Don't you think

your behavior, along with that of your friends, taught him exactly how to go about seducing anyone he chose, without them even realizing it was happening? And if he's still interested in teenage girls, he has the advantage of at least ten years of life and probably close to fifteen of experience. You can't ignore that, even if the teens are mature."

"No, I suppose not. But Steve isn't a normal case."

"No, he's not, and I bear some responsibility for who he is as well. I inadvertently helped make him who he is. I'm sorry I made the 'grooming' accusation, but you have to agree it looks that way. Well, in hindsight, obviously."

"True."

"There isn't much we can do about the past, but in the present we're not talking a normal twenty-eight-year-old going after a normal eighteen-year-old!"

"Are you saying Steve is a predator?"

"I wouldn't, because he's so careful about consent, which is perhaps the ONLY thing you got right in your relationship with him. Perhaps he's not stalking his prey, but he's certainly lying in wait."

"They pounce him, Fran. You know that."

Fran nodded, knowing she was being overly harsh, but she felt she had to be, at least to make a point.

"How about this - he has the ability to create the perfect conditions for girls to walk into his lair, willingly, mind you. But there's still the significant disparity in experience which has to make you question the consent."

"This doesn't sound like you, Fran," Bethany protested.

"No, I suppose it doesn't. I don't think it's true in the general case; I think it's true with Steve. And that's what we're talking about here."

"But not with his sister."

"No, but I believe it was that entire experience with you and your friends and his sister that taught him exactly how to be successful in his pursuit, without seeming to pursue."

"I suppose," Bethany reluctantly agreed.

"As a mental health professional, I have to say he's not good for you, Bethany, but I know you disagree."

"Nobody has been by my side, and accepted me for who I was, and done more to support me, care for me, and love me than Steve."

"And Nick?"

"Is special, and had he lived, things would have been different. Steve and I had a very healthy relationship after I married Nick."

"So you admit before it wasn't?"

"Using your standards, Fran, not mine. But Steve knew what I needed, which is why he introduced me to Nick. And he knew what I needed when Nick died, which is why I was so frustrated. I know you disagree with me, but the only reason I'm alive and am building a practice here in Milford is because Steve was there to pick up the pieces every time. Every single time."

"But don't you see how he's at least partly responsible for causing the problems from which he helped you recover?"

"You mean like assigning my husband TDY to Guam? You mean like shooting my husband in the head?"

"Bethany..." Doctor Mercer said, her voice indicating a light reprimand.

"I'm not lashing out, Fran. I would NOT have survived that without Steve and Kathy. And my accident? It was Steve who got me through it; he sure didn't cause it or do anything that led to it! I was driving home to see my parents. Yes, I stopped to visit him on the way home from Madison, but I'd have made that drive no matter what. And while I know you disagree, vehemently, I was only able to be properly intimate with Nick because Steve helped me survive my rape. And Steve is NOT responsible for my affair in Madison in any way shape or form!"

"I'd ask why you defend him, but you just explained why you feel that way. But, Bethany, you have to see that so much of your life has revolved around him."

"You mean like you and Sam?" Bethany asked.

"I don't think that's even remotely comparable to what we're talking about! To be blunt, I'm certainly not sleeping with a married man. And before you say what that smirk indicates, to one whom I'm not married."

"You could marry your best friend; I couldn't. Fran, I need him."

"I understand why you believe that, and there may well be some truth to that, but you have to stop enabling his behavior. You need to take a step back, even if it's a small one, and use all your training and experience. You need to be the woman who has nearly finished writing her book on recovery from sexual abuse."

And speaking of that, I want to read the proofs of the chapters on incest before you send them to your publisher."

"I gave you copies when I wrote them."

"Yes, but I need to see the edited copies, and any changes you've made. You have to understand why."

"There's nothing in my book about 'Abel and Delilah', not even a hint."

"Just get them to me, please. We also need to talk about supervision, especially in cases of incest counseling."

"I've never, once, even hinted at any positive outcomes or given any support to anyone in that situation!"

"And I'm going to make sure, Bethany. I want your notes from the two incest cases you treated since you came here, as well as those from any new patients. No arguments."

"I don't have a choice, do I?"

"No, Bethany, you don't. You made your choice when you broke the rules. Now, you have to suffer the consequences."

"But you're going to help Steve and Stephanie?"

"Probably, though I want to think about it some more before I give a final answer. You are NOT to discuss this with them in any way. Period. Understood?"

"Understood. He'll be easy; she'll need to be completely rebuilt from the ground up."

"I know what to do, Doctor Krajick. And you are to keep your nose out of this. Completely. They are not your patients and you are far too close to them."

Bethany nodded, took a deep breath, and let it out.

"There is something I suppose I should tell you."

"What?" Fran asked warily.

"Steve and Stephanie had sex in my presence, and Steve and I had sex while she was in the room."

Fran dropped the remnants of her sandwich on her desk, took off her glasses and tossed them onto the credenza, put her hands over her face and leaned back in her chair. Just when she thought it couldn't get worse, it had.

XIV. Entry 19911023 C - Bethany Michelle Krajick

October 23, 1991, Milford, Ohio

Once Fran recovered from the shock, she pulled a notebook from her credenza, flipped to the first empty page, and wrote down the date and time. She took a deep breath and let it out.

"When did that happen?"

"December of 1982, right after Kara's meltdown. When Steve went missing, I drove up to Chicago and Stephanie insisted she come with me. I asked Steve to make love to me, though he was reluctant. When he agreed, Stephanie said she wasn't going to let him out of her sight, period. She sat in a bay window and watched us make love. Despite her being in the room, I felt it was the most perfect lovemaking Steve and I ever had accomplished. Stephanie said it was like watching a work of art being created. Steve called it a 'virtuoso performance', which in hindsight, means something different from what I first understood."

"He was showing off for her?"

"Subconsciously, I suspect, but yes, now, almost nine years later, I think that was the case. Anyway, when we finished, Stephanie got into bed with us and we slept together. In the morning, I woke to her orally pleasuring him and watched her do it. She moved to kiss me, after, but that was a line I simply couldn't cross."

Fran took a deep breath and let it out.

"THAT was the line? Not her watching you two have sex? Not sleeping in the same bed? Not watching her fellate him?"

Bethany took her own deep breath and let it out, "It was a close thing. I was kissing him when he had his orgasm. After we got out of bed, Stephanie and I showered together."

"Did you and she..."

Bethany shook her head, "No. It was intimate, but not sexual. It was right after that shower that she told me how she really felt about Steve - that they were made for each other; that they fit perfectly together, loved each other perfectly, and completed each other perfectly. And to the point of her not letting him out of her sight for a second, she threw an absolute fit when he left the apartment to put the sheets in the washer in the laundry room. She and I had been doing dishes, so she didn't notice. When he came back, she went off on him.

"There's something else you need to know; something I learned from reading Steve's journals. Stephanie's offer to kiss me after she'd given Steve and orgasm with her mouth was generated by lust. She admitted to him that she was so excited she didn't think about what was happening. He wrote that in his journal, and I read it at some later point, though I can't remember exactly when it was.

"But things changed later that day when Jennifer arrived. Her parents felt she needed to come to Chicago to see Steve. She and Steve refrained from being physically intimate, but Stephanie and Jennifer were together, though Steve declined to be in the room with them. Stephanie chose making love with Jennifer over Steve not leaving her sight. I'm pretty sure THAT was about ensuring Jennifer would be the girl Steve chose. It wasn't the first thing Stephanie did to try to improve Jennifer's chances."

"And that's why Stephanie did it?" Fran asked.

"Yes, but also because she loved Jennifer almost as much as she loved Steve. It was, if you'll pardon the expression, a strange relationship. In some ways, it presaged Steve, Jessica, and Kara."

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but what were the sleeping arrangements?"

Bethany smiled, "Stephanie claimed Steve, so they slept together. I was going to sleep on the couch, but Jennifer said we could share Elyse's bed, and promised she wouldn't bite...unless I wanted her to."

"You and Jennifer?"

Bethany shook her head, "No. I have done that, but not with Jennifer."

Fran took off her glasses again, rubbed the bridge of her nose, and put the glasses back on her face.

"You may as well just tell me."

"Kathy, Steve, and I on several occasions; Pam, who was my roommate at UW, Steve, and I. And, like Kara, I could do that with Steve, but never one-on-one or with anyone else. He's safe."

"I'm not sure that's a word I'd use for Steve."

"Fran, think about it. Forget social norms and Abrahamic views on virginity. If you want to have amazing, push-the-limits sex, Steve is the safest guy on the planet. If, on the other hand, you're a typical dad, lock up your daughters! And not because Steve will try to steal them, but because they'll go to him."

"And you think that's healthy?"

"To be honest, if I had my choice between complete repression of sexuality and Steve's lifestyle, I'd not only follow his lifestyle, but recommend it. And can I tell you a secret I've discovered, and one I'll discuss in my next book?"

"Next book?"

"About teenage sexuality."

"What's this 'secret'?"

"If society wasn't so repressive, Steve's list would have been WAY shorter."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because he was the one to go to for the thing which your parents, pastor, and most of society told you NOT to do, but which a few of your friends had done and said was amazing. You could have an outrageously good time with a guarantee that nobody would know unless you told them. I've known Steve since eighth grade and I can't think of a single instance where HE said anything to any guy. Sure, some guys know, because their girlfriend or wife told them. But Steve kept his mouth shut. The girls all told each other to seek him out. Even Kara heard about him from another girl and sought him out!"

"Are you arguing that Steve is a product of society?"

"Aren't we all?" Bethany asked. "Granted, in his case, mix in his mother, his sister, Jennifer, Melanie, and me, and well, yes. And leaving the incest aside, he's a successful businessman, a fantastic dad, a great friend, an expert lover, and, within the defines of his marriage, a good husband."

"You do realize that you didn't use a superlative there."

"Given the complexities of the relationships, I'd say 'good' is the right word. Actually, as an outside observer, I'd say he's a great husband for Jessica, and an OK husband for Kara. But you know what? He is what Kara needs, and she's happier than any woman I know, present company included. Jessica, well, you know what medical training does from your counseling with your doctor friend from Rutherford."

Fran nodded, "I'm still not sure how he survived. One of his friends didn't."

"Which led you to even more sessions with Laura than usual. You never told me the details, and I know you can't, but it obviously affected you."

"By that point, I considered him a colleague, even though he'd just finished medical school. And it wasn't just that, Bethany. He had his own personal tragedy as well. But we need to get back on topic. Are you sleeping with Steve?"

"We've shared a bed, as you know, but we have not been intimate in the way you mean. And, as I've said before, that's because of HIM, not because of me. Whatever faults Steve may have, he knows how to take care of me better than anyone ever has, and that includes my dad and Nick."

"How are you and your mom getting along?"

"It's not like Steve and HIS mother, but, we're not. She blamed me for breaking up with Steve, and our relationship never improved. My dad, on the other hand, has never once objected to my relationship with Steve. Dad has known I needed Steve from my very first date with him. The only thing he ever said to me was to remember that if I made vows to Nick, I had to keep them. And it was said in a loving way."

"You know I have to ask."

"And I should give you Steve's response to patently offensive questions that call my integrity into question! No. From the time I started seeing Nick, until his death, I have not violated my vows to Nick. Steve won't violate those vows, even though Nick was murdered."

"How hard are you pressing him?" Fran asked, with an arched eyebrow and a knowing smile.

"I suppose it depends on what you mean. I've asked him to make love and tried to tempt him, but never in a way that would lead to him doing anything which he felt was wrong. Does that make sense?"

"When we're talking about you and Steve, I don't expect anything to make sense except to the two of you. And you know that's part of my concern. He and Stephanie need a lot of help, and your relationship with him is very likely to interfere. That's why I asked you to take a step back."

"I know Steve, Fran. The thing you're going to have to do is keep him from becoming depressed over what happened."

"Please don't discuss his treatment with me, or with him, or with anyone else. You simply can't be involved."

"But you are going to treat them? Both?"

Fran nodded, "I think I have to. Anyway, it's almost time for my next appointment. You and I have quite a bit to talk about."

"We do."

Bethany drank the last of her Sprite, said 'goodbye' to Doctor Mercer, and left the office. Doctor Mercer made a few notes in the notebook she used when counseling Bethany, and then made additional notes in Steve's notebook. The entire situation was a mess and fraught with all kinds of danger. She finished making her notes, used her private bathroom, and was back at her desk when Cecilia announced that Angie had arrived for her session. Doctor Mercer got the correct notebook from her credenza, got up and went to the door. She opened it, and stepped out.

"Hi, Angie, go in and have a seat, please."

"OK," Angie said, moving through the door into Fran's office.

"Hi, Mrs. Stephens," Fran said, walking over to her. "How has she been?"

"She's keeping her regular schedule with church, martial arts, and work. She took her medication without arguing with me every day since her last appointment."

"Good. How are you and your husband doing?"

"About the same. Doctor Mike and his daughter stayed with Angie last Friday evening so my husband and I could go on a date. That helped a lot."

"Good. You should do that more often."

"That's what Mike said. He mentioned it to the priest at Angie's parish and there's a woman there who seems to be able to deal with Angie's situation. We're hoping they can become friends."

"OK. I'll talk with Angie. Are you going for coffee?"

"Yes. I'll be back in forty-five minutes."

"I'll see you then."

Mrs. Stephens left and Fran went back into her office, closing the door behind her.

"So, Angie, how are you doing today?"