

## Chapter Seven

### Interlude: Schmidt Kitchen

Call it a habit, a tradition, or “We’ve always done it like that.” Whatever the rationale, people tend to follow routines. Rachel and Deborah were no different. They had always alternated chores and chatted while working close together. This morning, Deborah washed the dishes, and Rachel dried. Deborah, being all businesslike, finished everything with a fierce efficiency. Rachel dried and put away the utensils and tableware in a less efficient manner. Both women still worked towards a renewed friendship. They were in no hurry to point fingers and demand the other change. Deborah sat at the table, sipping tea, and flipping through the family cookbook.

“I’ve been thinking,” Deborah mused. “Jonathan needs to hurry up and make the announcement for Rebecca’s wedding.” There came the sudden metallic clatter of silverware hitting the floor. She spun around and saw a stunned Rachel and the clean cutlery scattered across the floor. “Rachel,” Deborah asked, “are you well?”

“Don’t surprise me like that! You can’t be serious about their wedding; you don’t even like saying Kevin’s name.”

Deborah stood and helped Rachel gather up the scattered silverware. She said, “I’ve figured out Mr. Butcher’s game. He’ll continue to dally with your daughter for as long as he can. The sooner you set a date, the sooner he’ll abscond.”

“Abscond? No one talks like that.” Rachel dropped the silverware into the dish pan and ran the hot water.

“It is exactly the right word. Look it up.”

Rachel rewashed the silverware, but after a few minutes she paused and turned to Deborah. She said, “Would it be too sinful to offer a wager?” Deborah glanced up in interest, and Rachel continued. “You have that marvelous sewing machine, and I need new curtains. I say Kev will marry his Becks.”

“Curtains are boring, but what room?”

“All the rooms and *you* buy the fabric.”

"Ouch! Do I get to pick the fabric?"

"If you pick what I like."

"Hmmm, what do I get when I win?"

"You get to say, 'I told you so' as often as you'd like."

They shook on it.

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Klaus Hanslein Senior:

At the sound of car tires rolling onto the cracked asphalt parking lot, Joey the Mule stood up from his chair. With a practiced gesture, he cracked the blinds enough to allow him to view the parking lot.

"Boss?" he called to me. "It's your lawyer."

A minute later, there came three slow knocks on the steel door. Joey glanced back to me, and I nodded. Before opening the door, Joey studied the outside scene through the peephole for a moment.

Joseph Waters entered the room. He paused while Joey closed and secured the door. Waters knew the drill and waited while Joey gave him an exhaustive and intimate pat-down.

I called out from my seat behind the desk, "The fucking president doesn't get as good security as I do." Waters grunted and rose up onto his toes when Joey frisked between his legs. Joey did not have a gentle touch. After the search, Joey straightened and waved Waters towards me. Joey went back to his seat by the wall, but he kept his eyes on my lawyer.

"What do you have for me, Joseph?" I said.

"Klaus, I got all the details. The DA dropped by my office for a little chat. Keep in mind he knows I work for you. The State Police assigned your old friend Pittsenbargar to supervise the arrests."

"Pittsenbargar!" I stood up so fast my chair fell over. Rage consumed me, and I kicked the chair half way to the wall. "That fucker has been harassing me for years."

Alarmed by my outburst, Joey stood up from his post by the door. He reached into his coat and removed his revolver.

I waved Joey back then turned to Waters. I said, "He's the fucker that harassed me about Naomi. How the fuck could I know he was a distant relative of hers."

Joseph stood and picked up my chair. I took it and plopped back down behind my desk. Joey checked outside before holstering his pistol and sitting back down.

Waters returned to his seat and continued. "The DEA and the FBI are now involved. Young Ronald Thomas is in protective custody, and in a very secure location. Ronald Thomas has not talked, yet. But his court appointed lawyer is trying to work out a deal."

"Ronnie doesn't know shit."

"Ronnie can tie you to the cabin."

"What about the shipment? Is there a chance it'll be inadmissible?" I asked. It embarrassed me how hopeful I sounded.

"No, not at all. Your son gave Pittsenbargar two perfect reasons to conduct a full search of the premises. One, he escaped instead of getting arrested. The search warrant for Junior and Mr. Thomas gave the police the authority to search the premises. Two, your boy got into the shipment and smoked a lot of your pot. The burnt pot smell gave Pittsenbargar the reasonable suspicion he needed to get a separate search warrant for drugs."

"Jesus Christ, I should have put a bullet in Junior's head."

"Well, allowing him to hide in your drug warehouse wasn't one of your better ideas. But it might even get worse."

"What could be worse than this?"

One of the three TracFones on my desk rang.

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Kevin Butcher:

"Kevin," Mrs. Schmidt asked. "I know you're leaving for work soon, but we need to talk about Rebecca's wardrobe."

I looked up from my notes. My boss called earlier. He apologized and asked me to come in for a few hours to go over the next week's schedule. I checked the clock, and I wouldn't need to leave for another fifteen minutes. Rachel and Deborah were sitting down across from me at the table. I tried and failed to not grimace at Deborah's presence. Rachel noticed and said, "Deborah has promised to behave herself, can you do the same?"

Before I could reply, Deborah spoke up and said, "Pretend I'm not present, Mr. Butcher. I can assure you, I will be doing the same regarding you."

I ignored Deborah and replied to Mrs. Schmidt, "I'll be fine."

Rachel pursed her lips. She didn't like my adamant refusal to "normalize" my relations with her sister-in-law. This morning at breakfast, Deborah asked me to pass a serving tray to her. I ignored her request as if she hadn't been present. Rebecca covered for me and passed the tray herself, but my inaction had not gone unnoticed.

Several moments passed, and I didn't add anything. Deborah and I avoided looking at each other, but we both kept watch with our peripheral vision.

Rachel placed several catalogs onto the table. "Would you prefer Rebecca to dress in a more contemporary fashion?"

A serious and well thought out reply would be best, but I could not resist an opportunity to needle Deborah. I adopted a sober expression and replied, "Thank you for asking. Yes, I would like Rebecca to dress in a worldlier fashion: mini-skirts and tight jeans, please."

For someone pretending to ignore me, Deborah, the self-proclaimed defender of virtuous women, could not have reacted better. She sat up and slammed the table with both hands. Her eyes blazed with a self-righteous fire. She said, "Over my dead body! She is not one of your whores to be put on display."

The sudden outburst took Rachel by surprise. She looked shell-shocked. Had she been a Vietnam War veteran, she might have dived under the table for cover. "Alpha Foxtrot Uniform, you're dropping the

cluster bombs too close!" Deborah's rant took on an all-new pitch, somewhere between strident and something only dogs could hear.

Rachel dropped her head into her hands. She took a few deep breaths and glanced up at me. "You had to do that? You had to set her off?"

Even Deborah had limits. She ran out of original invective and began to repeat herself. The lack of support from Rachel also served to undermine her, and her words began to falter.

I said, "One morning while Rebecca and I ate breakfast, Deborah searched my bedroom drawers."

This gave Deborah another opening, and she seized upon it. "And I found something didn't I?" She smiled the smile of the righteous.

"It was a rude and unnecessary invasion of privacy!"

Rachel raised her hand and Deborah and I both quieted. "Both of you need to settle down." She turned to Deborah and said, "Kevin was trying to get a rise out of you, and you allowed him to succeed." Rachel then turned to me. "If you want Rebecca to wear miniskirts or booty shorts or whatever they're called, speak with her about it. Whatever games you want to play *after* the wedding, will be between the two of you."

"Rachel!" Deborah said, "You shouldn't encourage him."

"What? You act as though you've never worn a miniskirt." Rachel's eyes widened, and she clasped a hand over her own mouth. Deborah's face showed her shock and betrayal.

I said, "Deborah's worn a miniskirt?"

Rachel glanced at Deborah, still shocked and betrayed, then down at the table. "We were young and curious. I bought a cute little denim miniskirt from a sale rack at the mall. We both tried it on one afternoon." Deborah turned red.

"Um, Rachel?" I asked, "You wouldn't have taken pictures, would you?"

Deborah sat up and opened her mouth, but Rachel held up her hand. Deborah sagged in defeat. Rachel fixed me with a look and said, "Young man. You are not yet married to my daughter, and while I like you,

I do not find you as indispensable as she does." She waited a moment and chuckled. "You two are so predictable. Yes, there are pictures."

Deborah sputtered, and Rachel stopped her with another gesture. "If Deborah doesn't behave, I may show you hers. If you want to see mine, you'll need to ask Jonathan."

Rachel paused to see if Deborah and I were going to behave. "I need to make something clear. Both of you," Rachel turned to match eyes with Deborah and with me before continuing, "need to stop. Your constant bickering, sniping, and passive-aggressive behaviors are wearing us out."

"But!" Deborah and I both objected at the same time. Rachel raised her hand, and we stopped.

Rachel turned to me and said, "Kevin, you need to remember bundling is a privilege." She then turned to Deborah. "We would be sad if your stay with us ended so soon."

Deborah and I remained quiet. Rachel nodded and spread out the catalogs. They featured modest contemporary clothing for women. I flipped through one and noted the knee length skirts. It didn't take any effort to picture Rebecca dressed in this manner. I said, "Rebecca would look wonderful in these outfits. I paused for a moment, my mouth dry before adding. "Maybe with ankle strap heels?"

"You'll be paying for her pedicures then?" Rachel smirked and added, "I remember hearing you weren't a 'foot guy'?"

Deborah snorted and said, "Oh, he's a foot guy, I've seen him in action."

"I was only teasing!" Neither Rachel nor Deborah appeared convinced.

Rachel said to Deborah, "It's not the worst thing."

I reached for my wallet and removed a credit card. "When you go shopping, take this along." Rachel objected, and I paused. "You don't need to use it. Clothing, especially intimates, can be expensive. You may pass near a Victoria's Secret. There is little for sale there I wouldn't mind buying for my wife."

Deborah managed a sour face. Rachel smiled and took my card.

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Klaus Hanslein Junior:

Somewhere ahead, I heard water running. Another ten or fifteen minutes trudging through the woods and I found a big-assed stream blocking my path

Was this the same stream dad and I used to fish? It didn't look deep, but the banks rose up a couple of feet above the water. If I wanted to cross here, I'd have to sit on the edge and jump down. I didn't want to get wet. Several minutes passed while I tried to make up my mind. From ahead, I heard the sound of a tractor trailer's Jake brake from somewhere across the stream. I made up my mind; a truck meant a road, and a road meant Dad could come and get me.

I used a stick to test the bank, it felt secure enough. Then I sat down and scooted to the edge. The tips of my shoes grazed the surface of the water. It wouldn't be cold this close to the end of summer. I pushed off and dropped into knee deep water, cold knee-deep water. Too late I realized I should have taken off my shoes, socks, and pants. I could have tied them onto my stick and carried them across. Shit, nothing to do but wade across.

On the opposite side, I clambered up onto the bank and through another thorn bush. I could have used my stick to push through, but my stick lay on the bank across the creek. Fifteen more minutes of hiking and I stood on the edge of a road. The black and white sign read "339". Down the road a little way, a bridge crossed the stream I waded across. Shit, if I had kept walking, I'd be on the other side of the bridge, and dry.

My stomach growled, and not for the first time, I wished the TracFone my dad gave me for an emergency was a candy bar. Wait, this was an emergency! I dug it out of my pocket and turned it on. It started up and got a signal! The phone had one number stored in the memory, and I pressed it. The phone rang three times before I heard Dad's voice. He said, "Yeah?"

Dad had one strict phone rule: never use any names. I said, "Hey, it's me."

He didn't say anything right away. Then, "Tell me the truth, what's your favorite color?"

Years ago, Dad started playing a game, kind of like "Simon Says." True answers or secure situations were amber colored answers. False answers or problem situations would be any other color. I replied, "Amber?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm in the woods along route 339."

"What happened yesterday morning?"

"I don't know. Someone pounded on the front door and woke me up. When they yelled, 'Police, open the door!' I didn't want to get busted, so I climbed out my window and crawled into the bushes. There were cops behind the cabin. I got lucky and kept crawling. Last night, I found an old hunting blind and slept inside."

"Why did you break into the locked rooms?"

Shit, how did Dad know about that? Had Ronnie ratted us out? "It wasn't me, I swear! Ro...It was the other guy; he broke into one of the rooms. I didn't do it." My last sentence sounded weak, and Dad didn't like weakness. I paused for a few moments and tried to sound tough. "Can you come and get me?"

"I've got big problems because of you and your asshole buddy. Coming to get you ain't a priority."

I swallowed; I didn't want to spend another night in the woods. "Please? I don't want to sleep in the woods again."

"You're a worthless piece of shit. If you knew how much trouble you'd caused, you'd want to be as far away from me as possible." Dad paused for a minute. I kept my fingers crossed. "Fuck it, I'll talk to someone and see what we can do. Stay where you are, and don't do any more stupid shit, got it?"

"Yes, Da...yes, I got it."

Dad sighed, I could imagine him shaking his head. "Klaus, I wish you would have been born smart." Click.

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Klaus Hanslein Senior:

I tossed the cell phone onto my desk. That worthless little shit. I should have buried him with his backstabbing mother. Fuck, I hadn't thought of Naomi in weeks. Now my memories of her flooded back: Starting from when I first saw her.

Back then Dad made us go to church. I don't know why, but hypocrisy never bothered Wilhelm Hanslein. We went to church with the same fucking sheep we sheared. No one sat near us. No one talked to us. Yet Dad strode about as if he owned the fucking place.

One Sunday, I noticed Jonathan Schmidt escorting a tall, slender woman. They mingled about, sharing in the post service fellowship. I don't know why but I felt drawn to her. She wore a normal dress, not one of those ugly shape-concealing cape dresses. As she walked, I caught tantalizing glimpses of her curves. Like a moth to a candle, I maneuvered closer. A minute or two later, I stood behind Jonathan and his new woman. The couple they chatted with took notice of my presence and made hasty excuses to leave.

"Jonathan Schmidt." I said. Jonathan stiffened and turned, his lady friend turning as well. This close I could see her pale green eyes. They complemented her honey brown hair so well. Jonathan introduced us, and the fascinating Naomi Miller shook my hand. Then they said goodbye and turned away to find their friends. My eyes fixed upon Naomi Miller as she walked away. Her lithe body moved with an exquisite feminine grace. At that moment, I knew I had to have her. I wanted to have her on my arm and in my bed. I wanted to make her scream my name and beg, and plead.

On the way home, I asked Dad about her. Dad explained he and Joseph Schmidt, Jonathan's father, had a business arrangement. He said their business wasn't worth jeopardizing over some cooch. Mom's lips tightened when Dad used the word "cooch." I waited a couple of days and asked about her again. Dad raised his fist and told me not to pester him.

My father's usual reaction to pestering involved a closed fist. Then again, Dad's usual reaction to anything except a profitable business deal involved a closed fist. Not with Mom though. Dad always used an open hand on Mom. If Dad banged Mom up, I had to do the grocery shopping until her bruises cleared up.

I kept at him and even took a few licks. Maybe my willingness to take it sunk in, but he agreed to discuss it with Mr. Schmidt. They came to an arrangement. On the following Monday Dad made an appointment and spoke with Naomi's father. They negotiated and struck a deal. Three weeks later I married Naomi Miller. Jonathan's presence was notably absent from the church.

To say Naomi disappointed me would be an understatement. I expected she'd need a few weeks to become accustomed to me and her responsibilities. I did the right thing and carefully explained my needs and her duties. In bed, I tried everything possible to light her fire, but she remained cold and unresponsive. When I asked for sex, she'd only say, "Yes, husband," and lift her nightgown. She would hold whatever position I asked for. Sometimes, if I were especially rough, like when I took her in her bottom, she would cry out. Otherwise, she lay quiet and still. Late at night, I'd sometimes wake from the sounds of her crying in the bathroom.

Once, I stormed into the bathroom. She flinched back, but I grabbed and tore away her nightgown. For the first time, I saw my wife naked. Her tears and her fear aroused me, and I bent her over the sink and took her from behind. With one hand, I pulled on her braided hair and forced her to look into the mirror. My eyes held hers while I pounded my rage into her.

A few weeks later, Naomi informed me of her pregnancy. Out of respect for her condition, I kept my distance. She bore me a son, and I named him after me. Naomi's labor had been difficult. Klaus Junior had been a breech birth, and there had been some nonsense with the umbilical cord. I again put my needs aside and gave her time to heal.

A month after Junior's birth, I'd waited long enough and took her while she bent over the washing machine. Something changed, and instead of passively accepting me, she fought. Naomi could not stop me. My only concern was to avoid giving her any visible markings. Years passed, and it became a game for me. I took her whenever, and however, I wanted. Days would pass while I waited to find that moment when she least expected it. Sometimes, I'd be gentle, other times, I'd force myself upon her. One time while visiting her parents, I followed her into the bathroom and took her in her behind. Oh, she had to sit with care that afternoon.

More years passed and even though I continued to take Naomi how or when I wished, she never became pregnant. Then I found her birth control pills. We argued for hours. Naomi admitted she used the pills because she knew I wanted more children. My rage consumed me. Later, after she stopped breathing, I called Joey, and we buried her up at the cabin. Naomi's hadn't been the first body buried there, nor had it been the last. But I never stayed at my hunting cabin again.

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"Klaus? KLAUS!" Joseph Waters looked concerned.

I blinked, and my thoughts returned to the present. I said, "Sorry, I'm tired. I must have drifted off."

Waters stood. "Well, I got to get back to the courthouse. Is there anything you need?"

"Nah, Joey's got us stocked."

Waters waited while Joey unlocked and opened the door, he nodded to me and left.

After my lawyer left, I sat back and kicked his feet up onto my desk. Junior had finally cost me more than his worth. He was a liability, and only a fool would give a proven liability another chance to fuck up. I said, "Joey, I got a problem."

"What's up, boss?"

"My kid, he's up in the woods near Route 339. I told him to hold tight, and I'd call him back."

"You want me to pick him up?"

I stood and stretched, then walked over to the windows and peeked outside. The bright sunlight stabbed into my eyes. The pain helped me clear my head. Without turning around, I said, "Nah, I need you here. You got anybody that can clean up that mess for me?" Joey didn't answer right away, and I turned to see if he had a problem.

Joey sat on his chair by the door, staring down at the floor. He said, "The only guy I got, the only reliable guy that won't want money up front, is someone you might not want for this."

I knew who Joey meant: "The guy from up in the Poconos?"

"Yeah."

We used the Poconos guy because he was cheap and he had a wood chipper. There was never, ever, a problem with a body. But the guy did this work because he enjoyed "playing" before firing up the chipper. Joey had checked him out. The guy even had an honest-to-God rape dungeon. I only used the Poconos guy for special problems. Problems that deserved the extra attention. "Well, give him a call. Tell him it needs to be quick, and none of his fucking around."

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Klaus Hanslein Junior:

The phone ringing woke him up. "Yeah?"

A voice I did not recognize asked, "Junior?"

"Who is this?"

"I'm a friend of a friend of your father's. He called, said you needed help."

"Yeah, I'm stuck here in the woods."

"I need to know where you are, locate a mile marker, or a landmark. Then get back off the road and call me."

"There's a bridge north of me, and another road branches off to the right, past the bridge."

"Hang on," Junior heard paper rustling, "I think I got you. Good thing 339 isn't too long. It'll be an hour, or an hour and a half. Can you hang?"

"Yeah, I'll be cool."

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Kevin Butcher:

I didn't find out until later, but as preparation for our first date, Rachel and Deborah took Rebecca clothes shopping. After I came home from work, Rachel ordered me to, "Get a shower, get ready, and go wait on the back porch. Your fiancée will come out when she's ready." Jonathan brought us iced tea, and we stood chatting about a news report concerning a major drug seizure. Little did we know how repercussions from that drug raid would impact us.

When the screen door squeaked, Jonathan's eyes opened wide. His voice hushed, he said, "Rachel has outdone herself."

I turned to see Rebecca as I'd never seen her before. She wore a loose, flowing, knee length dress and ankle strap heels. Instead of a prayer veil, she wore her lustrous blonde hair twisted up into a loose bun. Rebecca looked at me with a question in her blue eyes.

I couldn't think of anything to say, but Jonathan came to my rescue. "For a moment," he said, "I thought I had gone back in time to meet Rachel all over again."

Thank you, Jonathan! I stepped to Rebecca and took her hands in mine. I said, "You are so lovely, and your eyes are my favorite shade of blue." My fiancée lifted up on her toes and kissed me. She wobbled a bit when her heels touched back down, but I kept her steady.

"Are you sure, Kev? This dress is so short, and I'm not used to heels."

I took my girl out to dinner. Rebecca may not have realized it, but she was the most beautiful woman in the room.

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Klaus Hanslein Junior:

How the hell are you supposed to take a shit out in the woods? There wasn't anything I could sit on, and I sure as fuck couldn't build a toilet. I stripped a handful of leaves from a bush, dropped my pants, and squatted. Then I fell over and lost my leaves. Could I lean against a tree? I waddled over to a tree with another handful of leaves. This time I managed to squat without falling over.

The leaves looked like normal leaves, and I hoped they weren't anything bad. At the rate things were going, it wouldn't surprise me if I used a handful of poison ivy to wipe my ass.

My phone rang. The leaves went flying, and I almost fell over again. I managed to answer the call before it went into voice mail. "Yeah?"

"I'm coming up on the bridge, white van. Yell when you see me."

I recovered most of the leaves, wiped fast, and pulled my pants back up. Through the trees, a white van came around the far turn and slowed as it approached the bridge. I said, "Flash your lights." The van slowed more, and its lights flashed. "I see you."

"Great, come on down, and I'll pick you up."

Several minutes later, I stepped over the steel cable guard rail. The van pulled up next to me. I didn't recognize the driver and paused before opening the door. The dude behind the wheel said, "Better get in before someone comes by."

I opened the door and climbed in. The driver accelerated down the road while I fastened the seat belt.

The van driver was a youngish looking man with short curly hair and a friendly smile. I said, "You don't look familiar."

"We've never met. I'm an independent contractor. Your dad's guy, Joey, hires me for the occasional job. Like today with you." He held out his right hand and said, "Call me Adrian. It'll do as well as any name."

I shook the proffered hand. "Thanks, what's going to happen?"

"Your dad wants you to disappear. First, you need to give me the battery out of your cell phone."

"What? Why?" I reached for the door handle.

"Settle down, Junior, if your phone has a battery in it, the police can trace it. If you don't want to give it to me, I'll stop, and you can get out."

Grumbling, I removed the battery and handed it over.

"Thank you, Junior. Why don't you get something to eat and relax?"

I smiled and closed my eyes. I knew dad would come through for me!

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Kevin Butcher:

We sat across from each other at the candlelit table.

"You keep staring at me. Is something wrong?" Rebecca said.

"Your hair is different; I'm trying to figure how."

"It isn't braided. Momma brushed it out and pinned it up."

"If I understand correctly, I won't see you with your hair unbound until after we're married."

"You'll see it on our wedding night, and most nights after. You'll have to help me brush it sometimes."

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"While we were out shopping this afternoon, Aunt Deborah said you're going to abscond rather than marry me."

Our evening had gone rather well. Thrilled to be out together, Rebecca and I enjoyed a romantic candlelit dinner and a movie. Now, back home and freshly showered, we were in bed, and she looked cute and sexy in one of my button-down shirts. As we moved about preparing for bed, I caught glimpses of pale yellow cotton panties. I wore a pair of loose and comfortable cotton shorts. We both still felt excited from our first dinner date, and neither of us felt sleepy.

We got into bed and lay on our left sides spooned together, her head on my left arm and her warm butt pressed into my groin. My right hand drew little spirals and loops on her exposed legs

"Your aunt is crazy. If I'm going to abscond, I'll take you with me. I've spent too much time bending you to my will."

"Would you ever do anything like that for real?" She rolled over onto her back. Her blue eyes reflected tiny pinpoints from the LED night lights. My hand, which had been drawing spirals on her hip, now rested on her thigh.

"I'm 100% certain I wouldn't. Relationships like the one between your aunt and her biology teacher are all about power and control. The sex is one of the ways the control manifests. The largest part of what attracts me to you is you. Sometimes, well pretty much all the time, I'm amazed that you're attracted to me. If I somehow tricked or connived my way into being intimate with you, I don't think it would feel so perfect." Rebecca lifted her head up and kissed me. I slid my hand over to the inside of her thigh. Her warmth indicated her interest, and our kiss intensified.

Rebecca pulled back with a wicked smile.

I smiled back. "What?"

"I heard you asked to see Momma's and Deborah's miniskirt pictures."

Uh oh, I should have kept my mouth shut. "Ah, are you mad?"

Rebecca reached out a hand, and her fingers traced circles on my chest. "Not really, Momma thinks you asked to get Aunt Deborah wound up." Her hand drifted further down, drawing circles and loops. "I think you want to see me dressed up like Kristen. Momma and I look a lot alike."

My fingers, which had been moving, stopped. I looked down and said. "Now you're mad."

"Nope. I've figured you out. You're a man, and you can't help wanting me to do sexy stuff with you. Wearing one of your shirts, like this," She touched my shirt "or wearing a short skirt like Momma did, it's all the same thing. You," her hand went back to my stomach, "just want to see *me* wearing those things."

"You could wear nothing at all, and I'd be happy."

She rolled her eyes and smiled. "I'm sure. Well, you can see all that and more. After we're married."

We kissed, and our hands wandered. I loved the feel of her warm skin underneath soft cotton. After our kiss, I noticed Rebecca looked flushed. I said, "These nights we've bundled will always be special. I've never felt as close to anyone as I do with you."

"Momma and I have waged a very successful campaign to bind you to me."

"Are you serious?"

Rebecca grinned and nodded.

"Maybe Deborah has been protecting the wrong person?"

Rebecca's hand slid the rest of the way down. Her finger tips traced my swelling erection. I felt her lips and teeth graze my ear and my neck. The scent of wild flowers filled my nostrils. Her breath pulsed hot against my skin. She said, "Maybe she has."

My hand reached her delicate cotton panties, and I hooked a finger inside of the leg band. She gasped when I stroked her clitoris with my knuckle. I applied a slight pressure and rubbed in a circular pattern. Her mouth moved down from my neck, and I felt her teeth on my shoulder. She shifted position and hooked a foot over my leg.

She whispered, "Do you want to go first or second?"

I thought about it and offered something different. "Can we do it to each other, at the same time?" My knuckle kept up the circular pattern.

"The same time?" She pressed her mons against my hand. "Ooh, that's...you're so...ooh...bad. How do we...Ahhh." Her fingers grasped me through my shorts and tugged roughly.

I explained the mechanics of the world's oldest method for mutual oral stimulation. She only needed a moment before agreeing, "Let's try it."

There is a thing about a woman lifting her hips to help you remove her knickers. It is an intimate and non-verbal acknowledgement of the sexy time to come.

My fingers curled under the waist band of her panties and Rebecca lifted her hips. As I slid them down, I glanced up, and our eyes met. Her cheeks were rosy with a touch of embarrassment, but more with anticipation.

While I stowed her panties where we could find them later, Rebecca sat up and pushed my shorts down. When my penis bobbed clear, she dipped down and took me into her mouth for a quick, hard suck, making it my turn to groan, and reflexively, my hands reached for her head.

She sat up and laughed. I dropped to the bed beside her, and she helped me pull my shorts off. I noticed she hadn't asked me to shut off the night lights.

"So, I crawl over you, facing your feet?" she asked while crawling on top of me.

I lifted my arms out of the way. "Scoot backwards."

She backed up, an inch or two at a time. "How will I know when to stop?"

I reached for a pillow and jammed it under my head. "I'll let you know." The tail of my button-down dress shirt passed over my head. A few more inches...another inch... I reached up and parted her cleft with my tongue.

It must have surprised her because she squeaked and then moaned as my tongue found her clitoris. My hands cupped her buttocks, and I held her in place. Rebecca lifted my penis, and I felt her lips and tongue.

We both made adjustments and compromises. Sometimes she or I paused to better savor the pleasures worked upon us. Both of us used our fingers and hands to aid and stimulate and to sometimes tickle.

"Stop it, Kev." She smacked my leg. "I can't concentrate when you do that!" I lifted my hand from behind her knee and put it to better use above.

I enjoyed three powerful sources of stimulation, her mouth on me, my lips on her, and the view. The view was everything I expected it to be, but I couldn't allow myself to become distracted, not if I wanted to last long.

My tongue took long probing licks and teasing flicks until I felt the muscles in her thighs twitch. I then focused on her clitoris and traced out her favorite vowels. Her hand and mouth slowed, then stopped. She still held me inside of her mouth. I heard and felt her moan.

I kept my strokes steady and felt her subtle pelvic shifts fine tuning my attentions. She opened her mouth and gasped. "Aaah...aah...mmm...mmm." Slowly, she collapsed on top of me. First, her head rested on me, then her chest and pelvis. Her beautiful pussy pressed against my cheek. I was in heaven.

From previous experience, I knew she could become hyper-sensitive. I stroked her buttocks and enjoyed the view while she recovered.

I felt her shift, and she sighed. "Mmm, Kev, that...that was incredible." I felt her hand wrap around me and squeeze. She lifted up and leaned forward to give my penis a lick. "I felt you getting bigger, so I know you're close." With a teasing hum, she sucked me back into her mouth. The sudden sensation made me gasp. Her mouth slid back off with a pop. "Now, don't distract me too much."

Rebecca put her mouth back on me with a will. She sucked hard, and now it was my turn to sigh and moan. I returned to giving her small gentle licks as I felt my orgasm build.

As I built, my penis swelled. Rebecca noticed and picked up her pace. The sensation of her mouth and tongue urged me closer. I reached with my lips and gently suckled her clitoris and ran the rough side of my tongue across it. This triggered an unexpected second orgasm for her, and she gasped. The sudden loosening of her lips allowed me to slip from her mouth and I started to come. My orgasm had everything working in its favor. The glorious view, this indecent position, and the wonderful sounds Rebecca made as she climaxed.

Becks sucked me back into her mouth, and she tried to keep up, but her orgasm distracted her. I didn't want this to end.

All too soon, my pulses slowed, and the tension left me. My head dropped to the pillow, and my entire body relaxed. Rebecca sighed and collapsed on top of me. I could lay like this forever. Beck stirred and sighed again. I asked, "You OK?"

I heard her chuckle, "I'm a mess, your semen got everywhere." She rolled beside me and sat up cross legged. I could see streaks of semen across her face and down the front of the shirt she wore. She looked around and said, "I think it got on the walls, too."

We took turns cleaning up in the small bathroom. Rebecca had the foresight to stash toiletries and toothbrushes for our use. The button-down dress shirt would have to go in the laundry, as would the sheets. The walls and even the ceiling could wait until tomorrow.

I helped her wash up and found a clean T-shirt for her to wear. I even helped her put her panties back on. She giggled and pushed me away after I got too friendly down there.

After I dimmed the night lights and we snuggled with each other under the covers, I asked, "What did you think?"

"Except for the big mess at the end, it was fun."

"We'll get better with more practice. Lots and lots of practice."

She rolled onto her side and wiggled her butt against me. "I could tell how much you liked it," she said. "I've never seen you ejaculate so much."

"The view did it."

"The view?" She sounded confused. "The lights! You left the lights on! You were looking at my...my...bottom!"

"You have a wonderful bottom." I hugged her tight. "You are so beautiful, and I love you so much, and you have the best bottom."

Rebecca rolled over to face me and said. "You're a terrible person, but I love you anyway." We kissed for a long, long time. Long enough I began to get interested in a repeat performance. We came up for air, and she paused a moment before asking, "It didn't look ugly, or anything, down there?"

"No sweetheart, everything 'down there' is perfect. The best part, though, is I can now say, with complete certainty, that I love every part of you."

She rolled away from me and pulled the covers up to her chin. "Are all guys the same as you?"

"Like me? Nah, I'm special." Her butt pressed back against me. I reached a hand down and traced a finger along the waist band of her panties.

"Good, I'd hate to think..." She squirmed as my fingers moved lower. Her hand stretched back and down to the front of my shorts. "On my goodness, you're erect again!"

"I can't stop thinking about your bottom. I have a perfect memory of it."

"You are every bit as bad as Aunt Deborah says." She rolled onto her back and sat up. The covers slipped down, and she reached into my shorts. "If I take care of this, will you let me go to sleep?"

"Can I lick you again?"

"No, you'll make me crazy, and there's no telling what you'll have me do!"

A little while later, cleaned up and teeth freshly brushed, we spooned under the sheets. I hugged my Rebecca to me, this time in a less sexual manner. I kissed her neck and sighed. "I love you so much."

Her hand reached down and back, patting me through my shorts. "Can you behave yourself now?"

"Yeah, I'm done. For tonight at least."

"What if I..." Her hand slid up to my hip, and she pulled me against her. Her butt began a figure eight motion, grinding against me. I groaned, and my free hand pulled her against me. She chuckled and stopped teasing. "Sometimes, I think that's all I need to do." Her hand came back up, pulling mine away from her belly. She held my hand to her breast.

A thought occurred to me. I asked, "What would you say if your mother asked if we've done anything?"

"Whenever we talk about it, I always tell her the truth, but I don't think she'll ask again so soon."

"What do you mean, 'Whenever we talk about it'?" I tried to sit up.

"Kevin! I am not the kind of girl who sneaks around behind her mother's back. Momma knows what we've done."

I felt a wild uncertainty. Did Rachel know everything? Does she know I always peek when her daughter blows me? "Wait, everything? Does your Dad know, too?" Could I run fast enough?

"What are you upset about? I don't tell her details, well not all the details, and I haven't said anything to Daddy."

I closed my eyes in resignation. "Your parents talk about everything. I am so dead."

Rebecca giggled and said, "You're going to be the punch line in a Farmer's Daughter joke."

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Interlude: Schmidt Kitchen:

Rachel Schmidt opened the refrigerator to put away the breakfast leftovers. "Rebecca," she called out, "see if Kevin is still out front, he forgot his lunch again."

"Yes, Momma." Rebecca dashed to the front door.

Deborah spoke up while she wiped down the kitchen table. "Rebecca's paramour seemed more skittish than usual this morning."

"Paramour? You and your vocabulary, Kevin is certainly not her paramour. He is a perfectly normal and attentive fiancé." Still, she thought, Rebecca and Kevin were more solicitous than usual this morning.

"Whatever. He couldn't wait to bolt out of here. He's feeling the pressure."

Rebecca stepped back into the room, and said, "Sorry, Momma, he's already gone."

"Send him a text and remind him about his lunch. Daughter, was Kevin feeling anything unusual last night?"

Rebecca stopped and blushed bright red. "Um, well, not really."

Even Deborah noticed. Rachel got up and put the kettle on the stove. "We girls should sit down over tea, and have another discussion."

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Kevin Butcher:

After work, my cell phone rang while I walked to my truck. The display read, "Andrew Schmidt." I'll be damned; Kristin hasn't screwed him to death. I tapped accept and said, "Hello?"

"Kevin, it's me, Andy."

"Sup Dude."

"Ah, what?"

"Sorry, I'm messing around. How are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm all right. Hey, is everyone OK? I guess Aunt Deborah is upset with me?"

"Far as she's concerned, you and I will have adjoining spots in the lake of fire."

"You shouldn't joke about that." Andrew took a breath. "Ah, heck, who am I kidding? After these days with Kristin, I'd go there willingly."

I could hear a rustling in the background, and then Kristin's voice. "Are you talking to Kevin? Let me say hi."

Andy asked me to hang on. A moment later, Kristin said, "Hi, Kevin!"

"Hey, Kris, are you doing OK with Andy?"

"Andy, like his cousin Rebecca, is a sweetheart. That's what I want to talk to you about."

"What's up?"

"You better treat that girl right. She's nice, and she's got it bad for you. If you're playing her, I'll hunt you down, you hear me?"

"Whoa, Kris, I'm going to marry her in a couple of weeks. I'm serious about her."

"You better be!"

"Well, how about you? Have you been good to Andy? He's not used to casual relationships."

Kristin sighed, she paused a moment and spoke to Andrew, "Andy, be a dear and go down to the corner and buy me a diet Coke."

Andy actually said, "Yes dear," and left, I heard a door open and close.

"Kevin, why didn't you warn me about him? He's nice, like Rebecca. He makes me wish I was a nice girl."

"Kris, this might come as a surprise, but you are a nice girl. Maybe you hadn't found the right guy."

"I don't think I'm Andy's kind of girl."

"You may not be, but you don't need to make any kind of decision right now. Be straight with him. Tell him to call me if he needs to talk. Hey, better yet, tell him to bring you to my wedding. Meet the family."

"Kev, I don't know...I, I wouldn't fit in. You've heard the expression about a whore in church."

"Here's Rebecca's number." I recited her number while Kristin wrote it down. "Call her. Ask if she can hook you up with the right kind of dress." I've imagined Rebecca tarted up in a mini skirt and heels. I now added a mental picture of Kristin wearing a modest dress.

"Are you sure? I don't want to be in the way." Kristin sounded hopeful.

I thought about it, and yeah, there could be a Deborah sized problem. But I'd talk to Rachel first. "I'll talk to Rebecca's mom. She's nice, you'll see. Oh, one thing, you can't wear heels."

"What! No heels?" Kristin wailed. "Do you know how short I am? There are kids taller than me!"

"You'll be fine. Call Becks. I got to go."

"All right, I'll call her. And I'll come to your wedding, just to make sure you go through with it!"

I laughed. "Cool, I'm looking forward to seeing you there. Nice talking with you, Kris. Take care, and call us anytime."

"Bye."

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Rebecca and her mother waited for me as I pulled into my parking spot. Rebecca smiled, but Rachel looked serious.

"Let's take a little walk, Kevin," Rachel said as she took my arm and marched me into their garage. Rebecca brought up the rear, saying nothing.

"What's going on?" I glanced at both women hoping for a clue. I didn't get one.

"I have two things to go over with both of you, so listen up. First, the two of you got up to something last night and Deborah has been ranting about it all day." I glanced at Rebecca. Had she said something? Rachel saw my look. "No, Rebecca hasn't said anything. This morning, you two behaved like a pair of newlyweds, and Deborah sees sin everywhere." I opened my mouth to speak, but Rachel held up her hand. "I'm not finished yet. Second, Kevin, you invited your ex-girlfriend to your wedding."

I glanced at Rebecca. She said, "Kristin called about fifteen minutes ago, she wanted to know what kind of dress she should wear."

Rachel said, "Your ex-girlfriend Kristin. Isn't she the one Deborah refers to as the Queen of Whores?"

Wow, Kristin didn't waste any time calling Rebecca. She must be more serious about Andy than she let on. I said, "Kristin is Andrew's girlfriend. I'm confident she'll dress and behave appropriately."

"Deborah told me she's slept with hundreds of men."

I coughed. "That may be an exaggeration."

"It *may* be an exaggeration? Kevin, I'm not sure how I'll deal with Deborah. She can barely manage to speak civilly with you."

"Momma," Rebecca said, stepping beside me "if Aunt Deborah has a problem, it's *her* problem." My fiancée took my hand, intertwining her fingers with mine. "This is our wedding. We'll invite who we want. Aunt Deborah can go back home if our guests offend her."

Rachel's mouth opened and closed, she studied her daughter's face before she nodded. "You're right. Of course, you're right. Deborah has me worn to a frazzle. I don't know how I'll deal with this." She closed her eyes and took a breath. "Back to the other issue. Deborah has been ranting about you two all day. Not only to me but to Jonathan as well. Jonathan hasn't said anything to me about it, but if he does, your fun and games will end. My life would be much simpler if I moved Rebecca back into her room."

Everything cleared up for me, and I understood Deborah's current gambit. I thought to myself, Oh, that bitch, she is so fucking crafty.

Rebecca noticed my look and said, "What are you thinking?"

I turned to Rebecca. "You remember how sneaky your aunt was at our house? She'd do anything to break us up, wouldn't she?"

As the primary target of Deborah's underhanded schemes, Rebecca knew how low her aunt would go. She nodded and said, "You think Aunt Deborah's doing something."

Turning back to Rachel. I said, "You are a good-hearted, caring, and compassionate person. You love your family, and you want everyone to be happy."

Rachel nodded and said, "Of course I do, but what does that have to do with Deborah?"

"She knows you, and she knows how to press your buttons. I think she's stirring shi—" I paused and reconsidered my words. "Pardon me. Deborah is running another of her schemes. This time, she's using indirect pressure to manipulate you into separating Rebecca and me."

Rachel looked thoughtful. She nodded and said, "Hmm, now that would be devious if it's true, but I'm not sure what I can do about it."

I squeezed Rebecca's hand. "Rebecca and I will talk. We can tone things down."

Rebecca returned the squeeze. She said, "I'm sorry for making things difficult for you, Momma. But if Kevin's right, you should talk to Daddy."

"I'll talk to Jonathan."

Rachel intercepted her husband on his way to the house for supper and pulled him into the garage. Jonathan cocked an eyebrow as he took in our war council. Rachel summarized the current crisis, including my suspicions about Deborah's scheme. Mr. Schmidt nodded while he listened. He said, "First, the kids can invite whoever they want. It's their wedding. We'll give Andrew's girlfriend a proper non-judgmental Christian welcome. If Kristin and Andrew's relationship works out, we'll welcome her to the family. On the second issue, I would prefer if you, Kevin, and you, Rebecca, behaved with more propriety." He reached out to Rachel and hugged her to his side. "I am reminded of the blessings Rachel and I experienced." Jonathan jumped with a wince. He glanced down at Rachel. Had she pinched him? "Ahem, as I said, the wonders we *still* experience. I don't mind overlooking some small things."

Rachel said, "Then you'll talk to your sister?"

"Me? This is more of a women's discussion." Jonathan tried, but he couldn't meet his wife's eyes. "Oh, very well, I'll discuss it with her right now. I'm sure she'll understand."

Rebecca took my arm, and we followed her parents around to the back of the house. Jonathan asked us to wait outside for a few minutes, and we raced each other to the glider. Rebecca beat me there, but only because she cheated.

Jonathan must have gotten right to it because we heard Deborah begin to yell. "No, no, no! You must be kidding! This is nothing but a ploy to delay the wedding. You're allowing him to make a complete mockery of the ceremony. He'll threaten to fill our house with whores and degenerates. What will we do after he absconds and leaves us with all those...people?"

We sat on the glider holding hands and listening to her aunt. Rebecca squeezed my hand and sighed. She said, "I don't know what to do about her. She's so angry."

"It wouldn't matter to me if she wasn't at the wedding."

"Everyone will talk if she isn't there." We quieted because Deborah ran out of steam and Jonathan began to speak.

"I've heard enough from you about this." Jonathan's voice rang with an unyielding authority.

"You can't speak to me like that!" Deborah cried out, her voice shrill.

"I am the eldest Schmidt. This is my home, in which you stay as a guest. If you do not stop your manipulations, you will pack your belongings, and I will take you back to Ohio myself."

"How dare you! I am the only person here trying to protect your daughter. Do you know what he has done with your daughter?"

Jonathan cut her off. "Rachel keeps me informed of *everything*. While I do not approve of their—activities—they will marry soon enough. None of this will matter. You, more than anyone present, should be well aware of that." I imagined Jonathan giving his sister a significant look.

As their argument subsided, I slumped down on the glider. Rebecca took my hand and squeezed it. She asked, "Feeling like that punch line yet?"

I nodded. A few minutes later, Rachel called us in to supper.

Faced with her brother's authority, Deborah capitulated. Peace and harmony prevailed within the Schmidt household, except between Deborah and me. While no one looked our way, she gave me a look. I imagined a scene on a medieval battlefield. Two battle-weary enemy knights faced each other across a landscape devastated by war. They glared at each other but shared an honorable respect. They'd nod, and retire for the day.

Deborah's look wasn't anything like that.

Dinner was a somewhat strained affair. Jonathan frowned, in turn, at his sister, his wife, and me. Rachel frowned right back at her husband, then at her daughter, and at me. Tommy and Grainger knew something was up and they kept a low profile.

The silence became uncomfortable, then painful. Jonathan cleared his throat and said, "I've called the church about Rebecca and Kevin's wedding. Luke has recused himself from performing the ceremony."

"Why would he recuse himself?" Deborah asked.

"The church elders decided against renewing Luke's contract. His views have become more conservative than that of our congregation. I suppose Luke is busy searching for a position elsewhere." Jonathan smiled. "We, the church elders, have selected a new man, Pastor Ken. Ken has progressive ideals, and he will fit us well. I left a message for Pastor Ken concerning the wedding."

Rebecca looked upset. She said, "So we don't have a date yet?"

Rachel said, "Not yet, although Jonathan and I might drop you two off at the courthouse just as soon as your wedding license becomes valid."

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Interlude: Schmidt Kitchen

"Did you remember to take pictures while you visited with Kevin?" I asked. Cleanup after dinner went fast and I set out a plate of the anise cookies. Even Deborah seemed settled, although it would serve her right if the cookies we made from Kevin's recipe caused her some digestive issues.

"What pictures?" Deborah asked. She seemed more curious than suspicious. Hmmm, maybe anise cookies soothed the savage sister-in-law?

Rebecca answered, "Momma asked me to take pictures while I stayed with Kevin. They're stored online, and I can download them onto our computer here." There, that was more like it. At Rebecca's mention of her fiancé, Deborah's eyes hardened. I slid the plate with the remaining cookies closer to my sister-in-law. "Here, finish the cookies."

Rebecca went over to our old PC and turned it on. It took a while to start up, but soon enough the Windows XP Home Edition screen lit up. While we waited, Rebecca chattered about her pictures. "I have

pictures of the inside and outside of Kevin's, oops, our house. We have a huge queen size bed and a hot tub on the deck right off the bedroom." I checked on Deborah. She sat there munching on a cookie.

Rebecca typed and clicked, but nothing seemed to be happening. I asked, "Is there a problem with the pictures?"

"I don't know what's wrong. We didn't have any problems back at our house."

Unexpectedly, Deborah said, "Call your fiancé. He should be able to fix it." Rebecca and I both turned to stare at her. She stared back. "He said he can fix computers. Let's give him a chance to prove it."

My daughter looked as though she wanted to respond to Deborah's challenge. I couldn't allow them to start fighting. I said, "That is a good idea. Kevin's out in his trailer studying. Rebecca, could you check and see if he can give us a few minutes?"

Several minutes passed after Rebecca stepped out.

Deborah spoke, "If she's gone more than a few minutes, you may need to take a bucket of cold water to them."

I snickered, and Deborah surprised me when she joined in. I brought over a fabric catalog for Deborah to look through while we waited.

Rebecca came back holding Kevin's hand. She took him to the computer and said, "The pictures won't download fast enough."

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Kevin Butcher:

I double checked the PC, Rebecca had entered the correct URL and login. Everything seemed right.

"Hmm...What kind of Internet connection do you have?"

"Cable, like the TV. Momma, we have cable for the computer, don't we?"

"I think it's wireless or something. The cable thing is in the hall closet."

I got up to check. Sure enough, the "cable thing" *was* in the hall closet, and still in the original box. I brought it into the kitchen, and said, "This needs to be hooked up." Rachel gave me a blank look.

Deborah spoke while flipping through a fabric catalog. She said, "I don't know what a teleport server is, but I'd think you could hook that up for your future mother-in-law...Unless you need to be going somewhere?"

This is how I found myself in the Schmidts' cellar running RG-6 coaxial cable, to the kitchen.

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The Schmidts have the cleanest and best organized cellar. Shelves full of home-canned vegetables, fruits, and jellies lined one wall. I needed to ask Mrs. Schmidt if she had any elderberry jelly. Her canning equipment sat on another set of shelves along an adjacent wall.

In the center of the basement stood an ancient cast-iron wood stove. Overhead, the register vents were still in the floor, ready to allow the heated air to rise through the house. Fortunately, a newer oil burning furnace provided forced hot air heating. I guess the floor registers acted as cold air returns.

While this was far from the worst job, I soon learned it was not without its unique perils. Rebecca walking above a register was an unexpected treat. It contributed to my thoughts for later. My fun withered when Deborah walked overhead. I didn't need to see that.

Sound filtered down through the registers, and I could hear everything. The ladies were preparing for tomorrow's baking. I heard Rachel say, "For goodness' sake. I forgot to buy the peppermint oil." A cabinet door closed. "Deborah, Rebecca, is there anything else we need? I'll run to the store tonight."

"Could I come with you, Momma?"

"I don't know; your Kev might be lost without you." Rachel raised her voice. "Wouldn't you, Kevin?"

I faced towards the kitchen floor register and raised my voice. "I'll be busy down here for another hour; I can survive without Becks for almost that long. Deborah and I can use the time to chat and get to know each other."

Footsteps sounded on the floor above me, and I glanced up as Rebecca passed over. The view, however fleeting, sparked my imagination. Rebecca called down, "Do you need anything before I leave?"

"I'm good, thank you."

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Klaus Hanslein Senior:

The local radio and television stations ran hourly updates on the "Drug Bust of the Century." The Pennsylvania State Police expected a major break in the case within a few days. Except for Joey, all my regular crew had gone into hiding. The worthless bastards wouldn't answer my calls. "Fuck 'em." I said. "Joey, you and I can make one more round of the farmers, collect the money, maybe have a little fun, and head out."

Joey said, "Boss, with respect, more guys means we'll have fewer problems." He wanted to hire three or four local tough guys. We'd use them as muscle for the next day or so. After we cleaned out the farms, he'd clean up the hired muscle on our way out of town.

It made sense to split into two teams. I'd take the new guys and use them to help intimidate the difficult farmers. He'd go alone and visit the ones that paid without hassles. We'd meet outside of the Schmidt farm, and hit them as one group. After we finished, we'd dump the Rent-a-Thugs in a deep drainage ditch and make the drive up to Canada. The important thing was for us to hit the Schmidts together. Together we could neutralize the boyfriend. If time permitted, we could have some fun with the Schmidt women.

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The three new guys stood on the other side of the room while Joey filled me in. He said, "They've all done work for us in the past, and I've told them they'd get paid after we're finished."

I stood up from my seat behind the desk and called them over. "You guys will be with me while I visit some clients. You may need to get your hands dirty. Any of you have a problem with this?" They all shook their heads.

One of them waved his hand. He said, "Don't we need guns or something?"

I glanced over at Joey, and he shrugged. Turning back to the three new guys, I said, "All our clients are Mennonites. They are hard-core Christian pacifists. They don't believe in violence or anything like that. You don't need guns. Guns will make you stupid."

We split up. I took the new guys with me. At the first farm, we rolled up before they started the afternoon milking. I had two of the new guys hold the farmer while I reasoned with him. The farmer's oldest boy ran to the house and brought out the money. Shit, I was going to miss this gig. God damned Junior fucking it all up. I needed to have Joey make a call and check on him.

The sun had set by the time we finished. We waited in my Escalade, parked on the side of the road opposite the Schmidts' lane. We'd been waiting for ten minutes. Damn it! Joey should be here by now.

"Mr. Hanslein, look!" One of the new guys called out.

I turned and saw a van driving down the lane. When the van stopped at the intersection, I saw Rachel Schmidt behind the wheel. An idea formed, and I snapped out orders. "Get out and stop that van. Don't let them get away!"

All three of the new guys piled out of my SUV and tore across the road. I took my time and brought a roll of duct tape from behind the back seat. One of my guys held a knife to Rachel's throat, another guy had the daughter restrained.

I said, "Good evening, Rachel. I've got some business with your husband. You two will be my guests. Don't give us a reason to hurt you." We used the duct tape to secure their hands and cover their mouths. "Gentlemen," I addressed my men. "Do not molest the ladies, until I say so." I made sure each of them nodded.

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Kevin Butcher:

While running the cable along a joist, I heard someone knock on the front door. Jonathan's chair creaked as he rose. "Just a minute," he called. The porch light switch clicked on, and the front door swung open.

"Jonathan Schmidt, I'll be having a word with you." A new voice, deep and rough, growled.

"Klaus Hanslein." Jonathan's voice sounded cold and as inflexible as granite. "You know you are not welcome here."

"You owe me money. I have your wife and your daughter. You pay, you get your wife. You pay double, you get your daughter. Ha, I'm hoping you don't have enough to buy your daughter back."

The bottom dropped from my world. Rebecca and Rachel kidnapped? I've tried to suppress my violent tendencies, but this was too much. I turned to charge upstairs. I would...what? My Marine training came back as if I had never put it behind me. I needed intelligence on the enemy, and I needed a weapon. I wasted a second regretting my decision to leave my .45 Sig Sauer P227 behind.

Back in place below the register in the living room floor, I heard Jonathan question Klaus Senior.

Jonathan said, "How do I know you have them?"

Hanslein called out, "Make the girl say something."

From outside of the house, I heard a muffled shriek. Then Rebecca said, "No, Daddy, don't—" Her voice cut off with another shriek.

Klaus Hanslein Senior and every member of his gang would die tonight. Rebecca wouldn't approve, but I needed to do violence.

Jonathan said, "Klaus, we should settle this like men. Leave my wife and daughter out of it."

There wasn't much I could see through the register's grill. Jonathan's back blocked my view of Klaus Hanslein. It didn't matter, I'd recognize his voice anywhere. Jonathan pleaded with him. Then I heard a meaty smack, and Jonathan flinched, grunting with pain.

"You're not a man," Hanslein said. "You are nothing more than a farm animal making money for your betters. Every time you've had something of value, I've taken it for myself. You own nothing that I haven't allowed you to keep."

Jonathan stood straight. But he said nothing.

Klaus's voice calmed and became almost reasonable. He said, "Our fathers used to do business together, and they always met in your milk house. Bring the money to me there." A pause then the threatening voice returned. "Don't do anything stupid. I have men watching, and I'll know if you call the police. Fuck up, and I'll kill your wife. I'll keep your daughter alive. She'll make a fine hostage and bed warmer."

I heard the front screen door slam shut, and footsteps stomped across the wooden front porch.

Jonathan met me at the top of the cellar steps. He had the beginning of a nasty bruise on his cheek.

"Kevin, Klaus Hanslein is here. He has Rachel and Rebecca!"

"Don't worry. I'll get them back."

"What, how?"

I met Jonathan's eyes. "You don't want to know."

Jonathan's face displayed his emotions as he worked through the situation. I could see him resolve to fight. With his voice firm and level, he said, "God forgive me, but I'll come with you."

Deborah brushed past me and hugged her brother. She said, "You old fool; you'll do no such thing! You leave Mr. Butcher to his work." Deborah turned to me with a sober expression. She said, "We'll pray for you."

"Jonathan?" I said. His eyes lifted from his sister to me. "I hope you and your family can forgive me." He frowned but nodded. I turned towards the kitchen. Rebecca taught me the trick of lifting up on the handle to keep the screen door from squeaking. After killing the kitchen light, I used her trick and slipped out through the back door.

The night air smelled of cow manure, corn, and cows. Farm equipment rumbled and squeaked in a nearby field; Tommy and Grainger harvesting the field corn. On my way to the far side of the garage, I scooped a handful of dirt from one of Rachel's flower beds. The dirt, rubbed onto my face and arms, darkened my skin, and made it less shiny. I made my way to the shadowed gap between the garage and my trailer.

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Tommy Schmidt:

The things Grainger don't know could fill a barn. But Dad says he learns fast and doesn't complain. He didn't know the cows ate silage, or where silage came from. Today, Dad had me teach Grainger to run the rented silage harvester. After supper, Dad told us to get back to chopping and keep at it, even after dark. At least the rental harvester came with a radio we could use. Grainger and I talked while we worked.

I pressed the talk button and said, "Are you sure you want to be a farmer?"

"Hell yes! Tom, this is the best job I've ever had."

Kevin and Grainger call me Tom. I like it better than Tommy. I said, "Grainger, where else have you worked?"

"Well, nowhere. But this is still the best job."

I shook my head. Grainger didn't know what the best job was. Some nights, when Kevin wasn't sucking face with Rebecca, he'd tell her and me about being in the Marine Corps. I've never been out of Pennsylvania, and Kevin's been almost everywhere. He's been in other countries and seen things I can't even imagine. I think Kevin had the best job, ever.

One night while Rebecca and Mom ran to the store, I asked Kevin if he ever killed anyone. He didn't answer right away. When he did, he said. "Yes, I've killed people."

"What's it like?"

"Scary and stinky. Tom, we can't talk about this around Rebecca or your parents."

"Huh, why not?"

"If they knew, they might make me leave."

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"You know about the American Civil War, and General Robert E. Lee?"

"Well, yeah, we learned about it in school."

"General Lee put it best when he said, 'It is well that war is so terrible. Otherwise we should grow too fond of it.'"

"You liked it?"

"I did. God help me, but I did."

Kevin is such a bad-ass.

Grainger called on the radio. He said, "Hey, Tom, is that Klaus Hanslein's car parked by your milk parlor?"

Crap, this had to be trouble. I picked up the mic and pressed the button. "Take the harvester out of gear and put the brake on. Leave it running. Let's see if we can sneak up and see what's going on."

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Kevin Butcher

A single SUV had parked near the entrance to Jonathan's dairy operation. Car doors opened, two men exited the vehicle, one entered Jonathan's milk house and turned on the lights. The other stood apart and watched the house. Two more men exited the SUV, dragging Rebecca and Rachel out behind them. Both Rebecca and Rachel had tape covering their mouths and their wrists. Rebecca spun and tagged her captor with one of her knees. He stumbled backwards and the man restraining Rachel snickered. My fiancée's victory was short lived. When her captor recovered, he stepped forward and delivered a ringing slap to her face. They then pulled Rebecca and Rachel inside the building.

I tagged the four as Senior, Sentry, Slapper, and Snicker. Four rural gangsters would not pose much of a threat for a fully trained and equipped Marine. But I was over a year out of training and didn't have any weapons. Sometime soon, I needed to apply for a concealed carry permit then see about acquiring a suppressed pistol. If I had one of those .22 caliber High Standard HDMs, this could be over in minutes.

Slapper walked towards the lane, Snicker walked towards my trailer. Sentry took a bag from the SUV and carried it inside the milk house.

Snicker stopped at my trailer for a moment before walking towards the front of the house. As he passed, I reached out and wrapped my left arm around his neck. My right forearm completed the triangle behind his head. I locked my arms together, cutting off the blood supply to his brain. He struggled, but I pulled him backwards into the darkness. Eight seconds later, he went limp.

Now the hard part. My biggest advantage was surprise, I could not afford to lose it. If I didn't do something to prevent it, Snicker would wake up in a minute and start yelling.

When we parked my trailer, Jonathan provided concrete blocks for me to use as wheel chocks. I pulled one loose, stood, and slammed it down on Snicker's head. A quick check of his pockets gave me a weapon, a switchblade. This was one of the "Out the Front" automatic knives. I worked the action once and thought it might even be a good one.

A few minutes later, I crouched in the shadows on the other side of the house. Slapper stood near the middle of the lane, smoking a cigarette. My right hand held the switchblade. In a minute, I'd find out if it was real, or a cheap knock-off. Reaching down, I found a nice chunk of gravel. Bad guys in action movies always fell for the thrown rock trick.

Number two flicked his cigarette away and turned his head to watch it fly. At the same time, I tossed the rock, skipping it across the gravel behind him. The sound of the rock startled the hell out of him. He spun in place while uttering a curse, of which Aunt Deborah would not approve.

I launched myself towards his back. My right hand activated the knife, and I felt the snap as the blade locked into position. He began to turn towards me, but he couldn't turn fast enough. My left hand clamped over his mouth. A microsecond later, I drove the switchblade's point into the right side of his neck. With a vicious sawing cut, I drew the blade through the side of his throat. Hot blood sprayed out, coating my hand and forearm. He stumbled and reached for the wound. I dropped the knife, grabbed his wrist, and took him to the ground. It wasn't easy, but I kept my hand over his mouth while keeping his hands away from his neck. He made a horrible gurgling sound, shuddered, and went limp.

I got back to my feet and stripped off my T-Shirt. While I wiped the blood away, I cast about looking for the switchblade. The darkness and its matte finish hid it too well.

Along the way to the milk house, I stopped at the garage. Jonathan kept a pile of scrap lumber inside the doorway. I picked up one of Jonathan's failed attempts at a hand carved axe handle. It fit my hand as if made for me.

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Rebecca Schmidt:

Momma acted brave, but I knew she was frightened. When she glanced at me, I could see her concern.

My face stung from the slap, but also from having the tape torn off. I shouldn't have kicked that man, but it hurt so much when he pulled the tape from my mouth. He acted so smug, until I kicked him. Then he slapped me, and Momma gave me a look that said stop fighting. Momma didn't want me hurt, or worse. After they pulled us into the milk house, we were back in a familiar place. Everything clean and organized for the morning milking. The only thing unusual was the floor drain grill stood propped open. Daddy never did that.

They used more of the duct tape to tie us to pipes at the rear of the milk parlor pit. I took this opportunity to study Klaus Senior. He and his son didn't look much alike, except for their eyes. They both shared the same cold and selfish eyes.

Senior grinned a false grin as he strode over to Momma. He reached out and tore the tape from her face. He said, "Rachel, it's been too long since we've chatted."

Momma said, "We've never chatted, Mr. Hanslein. Please do the right thing, and let us go."

"Nonsense. Rachel, it's time we got to know each other."

"Please, Mr. Hanslein, at least let my daughter go."

Klaus ignored my mother's plea. "And here is our little Rebecca, but she's all grown up." Klaus stepped closer to me, but not close enough to kick. "She is a fine looking young woman. I can see why my son became so infatuated with her."

I squared off and measured the distance to him. If he came one or two steps closer.... They had pushed the same piece of tape back over my mouth, but it didn't stick as well. I shook the tape free and said, "Your son is ill."

"Rebecca, hush." Rachel tried to step between Klaus and me, but they had tied us too far apart.

"Your daughter is right about Junior. His illness made him a liability. I had to have him put down."

Rachel gasped, "Your own son?"

"Like his mother, Klaus Junior was defective. But I'm not too old to try again." Klaus examined me with lustful eyes. "By this time tomorrow, we'll be in Canada. Then, you and I, Rebecca, will find out what you're willing to do to keep your mother unharmed." He glanced over at Momma then back to me. "If that ever becomes boring, I'll switch you and your mother. Then I'll learn what your mother is willing to do to keep you unharmed. Oh, the three of us will have so much fun."

I couldn't stop myself. I said, "The last time a Hanslein tried something with me, I put him in the hospital."

Klaus laughed. "Did you hear that, Rachel? Your daughter's boyfriend has been a bad influence on her." His voice became serious. "Where is Mr. Butcher?"

Momma sounded confused. "Kevin? He's with Jonathan."

I worried about Kevin. He didn't know that I knew about his nightmares. His time in Afghanistan must have been terrible. When we started bundling, he used to toss and turn, muttering about Hajis and mortars, or sometimes about IEDs. I know he lost friends and that he killed many of his enemies. When his dreams bothered him, I'd hold him tight, and he'd relax. He hasn't had those dreams for over a month now.

Kevin would come for Momma and me, these criminals couldn't stop him. I hoped it wouldn't bring his nightmares back.

Klaus turned to his man. "Keep watch outside. Send Joey in as soon as he gets here."

"Got it, boss." He vanished into the darkness outside.

THWACK!! We all jumped at the sudden sound. The man who, a moment before had stepped outside, stumbled back inside and collapsed onto the concrete floor. I turned away, his face was a bloody mess.

Kevin stepped inside dirty and splattered with blood. He seemed so cold and emotionless. I don't know what I'd do if he ever looked at me like that.

Senior reached into his pocket and withdrew a pistol.

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Kevin Butcher:

When the thug I named Sentry cleared the doorway, I swung my homemade hickory axe handle. Something must have given me away because his head twitched in my direction. My axe handle hit him across his face. The shock of the impact radiated along the wood, and it almost caused me to lose my grip. The thug screamed and staggered backwards a couple of steps before falling down. I took a deep breath and released it to center myself. Calm and clear, I stepped into the light.

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Tommy Schmidt:

From our spot beside the corner of the barn, Grainger and I watched Kevin go through two of Hanslein's bullies like a fricking buzz saw. It's the coolest thing I've ever seen! The last guy, Kevin hit that last guy so hard, I thought his head would come off. Kevin is such a bad-ass!

"Grainger, go to the house, tell Dad what's going on. I'm going to get closer in case Kevin needs my help."

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Kevin Butcher:

Klaus, Rachel, and Rebecca stared at me with shocked expressions. I brandished my improvised club; bloody bits of thug clinging to the end. I said, "There's nothing like a nice piece of hickory."

Now everyone looked confused. I said, "I guess you've never seen Pale Rider?"

Then I noticed the gun in Hanslein's hand.

Rebecca had seen the pistol as well, and Klaus Senior stood only a few feet away from her. Her left foot swung up in a clumsy but heart-felt forward snap kick. Her toes connected with Senior's elbow. The pistol flew out of his hand and hit the concrete floor. Rachel stretched and kicked the pistol into an open drain. Every action happened so smoothly one might think they practiced it.

The expression on Klaus's face went from triumph to disbelief to rage. He began a turn towards Rebecca, but I smacked my axe handle against a metal pipe. The sound made Senior freeze.

"Klaus, if you take one step towards the ladies, I'll break every bone in your body—before I kill you." I took a step forward. "But if you can get past me, you can leave."

"Do I get a club as well?"

"This?" I said while brandishing my weapon; drops of gore dripped from the end. "I don't need a club for garbage like you." I tossed it behind me and out through the door. "I can take out the trash bare handed."

Klaus snorted with outrage. His hands tore off his jacket and shirt leaving only a wife-beater style undershirt. He swung his arms in a brief warm up before settling into a classic boxer's stance. Unlike his son, Klaus Senior looked competent and dangerous.

I slid into a modified version of the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program, MCMAP, Basic Warrior fighting stance. Left foot forward, chin tucked, hands up and open. As I moved into position, the elder Hanslein advanced. Senior came in with short measured steps, throwing a mixed bag of jabs and hooks. I backed up deflecting and fading, while watching for an uppercut or an overhead punch. An experienced fighter like Klaus might try and lull me with a regular stream of horizontal punches before throwing a surprise vertical knockout blow.

Years ago, Klaus Senior may have been in condition. The years and a self-indulgent diet added a layer of fat atop his muscles. He still set a faster pace than I expected, and I questioned if he could keep it up for long. Senior knew how to move. He didn't waste time throwing feints. Each of his punches would have done serious damage, if they landed. Klaus never over extended or took too large a step.

We sparred back and forth, moving in a circle with Klaus deflecting or ducking my strikes. One of my feet hit the side of the milking pit, and my sudden stop threw off my balance. Without any hesitation, Klaus threw a right jab that passed through my unsteady guard. I faded to the right, and his fist almost tore my

left ear off. Klaus believed in punching through his target. In his eagerness to take advantage of my loss of balance Klaus threw his jab too far and overextended. I stepped to my right and drove two straight strikes into his ribs. He spun to face me. Besides allowing me to score the first two solid hits, our exchange gave me something else: I'd identified one of his tells. Before throwing a right jab, he'd tighten the muscles around his eyes.

The pace of the fight slowed. Klaus's age and lack of condition had to be taking a toll on him. He threw a slow left hook, and I ducked under it. As his fist grazed the top of my head, I caught a glimpse of his surprise right uppercut. Sneaky, sneaky Klaus never expected his left hook to land. He threw it to trap my head under his arm. I managed to pull my head back enough that his fist hit my forehead. Instead of knocking me out, it woke me up.

I closed the distance leading with a right open-handed jab; he deflected it and covered. I brought my left in from the side, and my open hand smacked his right ear. His left came in under my right arm and hit my side below the ribs. He hit me so hard I backpedaled a couple of steps.

Klaus growled out his rage and frustration. "Stand and fight, pussy!"

We continued to trade ineffective punches while I waited for the squint. There, that slight tightening. I stopped moving backwards and threw a right jab. As his fist approached, my right hand slid past his, but on the outside. This deflected his jab to my right and past my head. The bone at the base of my open right hand struck the side of his chin. As Senior's head snapped back and to the left, I stepped left and ducked. His left hook counter punch whiffed over my head. My left hook smashed into his unprotected right side. From the way he grunted, I may have broken a few ribs.

Klaus danced back. If a man could kill with a look, I'd be dead. He said, "I hate you kung-fu pussies." Blood oozed from a fresh cut on the inside Klaus's lower lip. He wiped at it and grimaced, a red film of blood covered his teeth.

"I hope you're warmed up now," I said, "because I'm going to kick your ass."

I took two steps, feinted with a left to his ribs. He covered, and I smacked him across his face with my open right hand. "Wake up, old man." He tried to bull rush me, but I side stepped and kned him in his diaphragm as he went past. I planted my left foot and spun backwards; my right heel caught him on the side of his head. Klaus staggered into one of the metal stanchions. He glanced towards the door, but I blocked him. He stood, and I feinted with a low kick. Klaus stepped back, and I followed. He swung a

right hook, I inside pass punched and struck his face. If he hadn't faded back at the last second, I would have flattened his nose.

On the outside of each thigh, the Iliotibial band, runs from the knee to about six inches below the hip. It is an excellent place to land a low kick. If you hit it right you'll take your opponent down; they won't be able to stand, and the pain can last days. It was time for Klaus to feel the pain.

He squinted and threw a left jab. I faded back, and Klaus's hand missed by a fraction of an inch. I watched his eyes widen when my low kick struck the outside of his left leg. He wobbled, and his right hook follow up whiffed past as his leg collapsed. I grabbed his right wrist and elbow with both hands, stepped to the side and twisted. The momentum of his fall, and the pressure I placed on his arm, dislocated his shoulder with a "pop." I hoped the pain he experienced was excruciating.

My rage was fully upon me. This monster and his degenerate son had caused too much pain to the people I loved.

I kicked him in the balls. "That's for Rachel and Rebecca." He curled up to protect his groin, and I kicked him in his exposed jaw. "That's for Jonathan." Dimly, I heard Rebecca and Rachel telling me to stop. I would make one last kick.

An old man I hadn't seen before, ran in as I raised my leg for that one last kick. This final kick would sever the vertebrae in Senior's neck, and half of the Hanslein problem would cease to exist. Senior, his voice full of pain and rage, screamed out, "Joey, kill this motherfucker!"

The old man, Joey, stopped. I guess seeing his boss writhing at my feet surprised him. He drew a revolver from his pocket. My brain catalogued it as a Smith and Wesson model 38, the Chief's Special. It's a great five-shot revolver, but the man holding it was going to shoot me. I didn't have any good options. I had failed. Rebecca and her mother weren't going to be safe.

Tommy stepped through the doorway behind Joey. He held my axe handle like a baseball bat and swung it with all his farm boy strength. It hit Joey's head with a thunk. Joey's hand holding the revolver jerked, and the gun fired. Something powerful punched into my thigh, and the force of the impact spun me around. As I fell, Tommy dropped my axe handle and ran to his mother and sister.

Tommy must have cut Rebecca loose because a few moments later, she dropped to her knees next to me. I could see she was crying. She squeezed my hand and called my name. I tried to tell her that I was fine, but something had gone wrong. I felt light-headed and confused.

Jonathan and Deborah ran in. Jonathan ran to Rachel. Deborah glanced at Klaus Senior then spotted me lying near him. As if from a distance, I heard Deborah issue commands: "Jonathan, call 911. Get an ambulance and the police, hurry." She knelt down, clamped her hand onto my thigh, and she cursed. "God damn it! This is bad." Her hand squeezed hard enough that it should have hurt. I had no idea Deborah had such strength. She called out, "Tommy, get me the first aid kit, I need gauze. Rebecca, undo his trousers. I know you can do that. On three, help me pull his pants off; I need to stop the bleeding." My vision dimmed as Deborah counted. "One, two, three, pull!" I felt a distant tugging, and my world faded to black.