Love Out Loud

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Love Out Loud

by BackseatGaffer

Summary

Read what happens when Trinity Lutheran University is born from the ashes of Carthage College and Concordia University-Wisconsin and how its women's lacrosse team becomes a beacon of how to love out loud on a college campus.

Notes

The names of the characters are changed slightly from their NWSL/USWNT/CanWNT inspirations, but you should be able to figure out who is who based on the listing. Most of my works appear in dialogue format (two or more people speaking to one another), which makes them look more like a play script than a story.
On August 11, 2016, the Concordia University-Wisconsin Board of Regents, facing the loss of the school's accreditation by the Lutheran Federation of Colleges due to a schism of philosophy between itself, the Faculty Senate, and the Student Government Association Executive Board, voted to consolidate its academic offerings with that of Concordia University-Ann Arbor and move all programs to the Michigan campus, to be completed in time for Fall 2018 classes. The Board of Regents also voted to seek out offers from other universities for the Mequon-based campus.

On September 6, 2016, the CUW Faculty Senate voted to enter an agreement with the faculties at Carthage College and Wisconsin Lutheran College so that students wishing to transfer from Concordia may do so with full credit. Additionally, the Faculty Senate voted to pass on a resolution to the CUW Foundation seeking appropriate financial aid support for students who transfer to one of the two institutions.

During the November 10th meeting of the Board of Regents, it took up a purchase offer from Carthage College for the campus, which was approved unanimously. Five days later, the Carthage College Board of Trustees took up a motion by its chair, David Strasser, to rename the school Trinity Lutheran University upon its relocation to Mequon in 2018. After significant debate, the renaming was approved by a three-vote margin. The Board also approved a one-year moratorium on student enrollment, to take place for the 2017-2018 academic year. Additionally, the transfer agreement between Carthage, Concordia, and Wisconsin Lutheran was approved.

On July 1, 2018, Carthage College became Trinity Lutheran University in its new home of Mequon, Wisconsin. In a few short weeks, the class of 2022 would arrive on campus. The Thunder's 24 intercollegiate teams were granted membership into the Northern Athletics Collegiate Conference, with Carthage's membership in the College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin (CCIW) ending at the conclusion of the 2017-2018 academic year.

The school's women's lacrosse team, led by former Carthage coach Lauren Heberlein, would have four transfers from the Kenosha school, two hold-overs from Concordia's class of 2021, and eighteen freshmen on its roster. The four Carthage transfers (Morgan Brooks, Megan Racicot, Jessica Fisher, and Nicole Babcock) and two former Falcons (Stephanie McNamara and Samantha Mueller) would be counted on to provide leadership for the team in its first season of play.
The first day of campus life for Trinity Lutheran University started bright and early as the Class of 2022 began arriving at 8am to move into their dorms and get acquainted with campus before the school's opening service for freshmen and athletes at 4pm. Erin Matheson, a women's lacrosse player coming to TLU from Rockford, MI, was unloading her parents' minivan when the school's chaplain, Deacon Marc Schmidt, and his wife Danielle joined them.

Marc: Jim, Val, I see all of you made it here safely. You should have called us if you were going to be in town a day early. We could have gone out to dinner, the five of us.

Jim: We got in about 9:00 last night because I was needed at the museum in the afternoon and couldn't pass the task off to another curator.

Danielle: How is the bouncing, baby freshman doing today?

Erin: Good as can be. I don't know anybody here but you and Mr. Slick, but I hear that there will be a LOT of my teammates coming today.

Marc: I think I heard your team has 18 freshmen out of the 24 on the roster. Since athletes get to move in early, I'm guessing all 24 of you will be here by the end of the day. Have you seen your schedule for this evening's beginning of orientation?

Erin: We have a team meeting that will run from 7-7:30, then "bonding time" from 7:30-10pm. Us athletes are exempted from the hall meeting tonight, but will have to schedule in a time to meet with our hall director before classes start on Monday.

Marc: I need to get back to my office to work on this afternoon's opening service. Erin, stop by after you get moved in and settled. We'll do lunch together and I can give you some of the low-down on campus and what I've learned in my first month or so up here.

Marc gave Erin a hug, which was reciprocated along with a peck on the cheek. Marc kissed his wife goodbye and waved at Jim and Val before heading over to Luther Hall and returning to work on his first worship service as Trinity Lutheran University's chaplain.

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Around 11:30, Erin stopped into Marc's office in Luther Hall.

Erin: Is the chaplain in?

Marc: For most people, no, but for you, yes. Take a seat.

Erin sat down and looked around Marc's place of work, taking in the combination of religious and sports artifacts.

Erin: If I hadn't seen the proof, I wouldn't believe that you had done all that you have.

Marc: It's been an interesting life, I can tell you that. From my time at Drake to Ball State and Western Michigan, where Danielle and I met your parents, and onward to Buffalo and building my own soccer club before going into coaching education and getting through my diaconal coursework, everything has helped me get to this point, and I wouldn't change anything that has happened. Well, maybe one thing. I wish my dad had been able to see me achieve all of this. Then again, if he were
still with us, most of this probably wouldn't have happened.

Erin: Did you think you'd be here a year ago when I decided to apply for admission?

Marc: In reality, no. I didn't know that the position here would be vacant or that I'd be asked to take it on after being consecrated. Things just fell together the way they were meant to. I get to do what I've always wanted, which is campus ministry in a setting where my previous experience in student affairs and athletics can be a help to both the professionals and the students.

Erin: Ready for lunch?

Marc: Just let me get this last sentence written for my homily and then I'll be set.

Marc finished up and then the two of them walked over to Albrecht for lunch at Luther's Landing, comprised of six different mini-restaurants in a food court style setting. The pair went to their preferred counters, as Erin got a sandwich and salad from Express Deli and Marc a burger and fries from the Original Burger Company. While getting condiments for his food, Marc ran into someone from his past.

Marc: Danielle?

Danielle Dillon: Marc. Funny seeing you up in this part of the world.

Marc: Yeah. Took a job here about six weeks ago. Still getting my feet under me. I thought you were teaching elementary school.

Danielle: I was, but when Trinity advertised for a full-time assistant coach, I thought "what the heck" and put in my application. Guess the athletic director liked what he saw, as I got hired.

Marc: Congrats. You've always had the ability and confidence. Just needed the opportunity to show it.

Danielle: It didn't hurt that I took a coaching seminar last year as part of my continuing education in the district. A local coach developed a module for current and future coaches to learn the ins-and-outs of athletic administration as well as the hurdles athletes face away from the field and issues that schools and coaches face.

Marc: Seems to have helped you land the gig here.

Danielle: So what have you been up to since we last saw each other?

Marc: After I shut the club down, I took a little time off before figuring out what I wanted to do next. I couldn't really find a next chapter until after I was hospitalized a couple of years ago for anxiety and depression. Once my psychiatrist got my medication straightened out, I got into coaching education, developing the module you mentioned.

Danielle: That was your creation?!

Marc: Yep. 100% my own thinking on how best to get female coaches on equal footing with the inside track that men seem to always be on when it comes to knowing people in the business and informal mentoring.

Danielle: I know you're not in the athletic department here, so where do you work on campus?

Marc: Luther Hall. I am the school's chaplain.
Danielle: Nooooooooooo........

Marc: Yes. I was set to go to seminary about 15 years ago, but my synodical candidacy committee denied me entrance due to debt racked up getting my two master's degrees. During my sabbatical from soccer, I started the local synod's diaconate education program. I was consecrated as a deacon in June and was asked, based on my past experience in campus ministry and student affairs, to take on the position here when Carthage's campus pastor chose not to re-locate for the job.

Danielle: I better eat or I'll be late for our coaches' meeting at 1. No second training today because of the team meeting this evening following dinner.

Marc: I need to get truckin' or my goddaughter Erin will wonder where I got off to. Great seeing you again. Still as button-cute as I remember. Maybe we can do lunch sometime and you can fill me in on what's happened with you in the last three years. Opening service for freshmen and athletes is at 4 in Bonhoeffer Chapel in case you're interested.

Danielle smiled at Marc as they parted and he found Erin.

Erin: How long could a burger and fries take to be made?

Marc: I ran into a former player of mine from MUSC. She's the assistant women's soccer coach here.

Erin: Cool. You'll have to introduce me to her at some point.

Marc: I think I can do that at the All-Sports Mixer on Wednesday. Have you met your roommate yet?

Erin: No. She was at practice. I'll hopefully see her when I get back to my room. What time is service again?

Marc: 4:00. It will be VERY similar to what you're used to in your home congregation.

Erin: I should get back to see if roomie is around and to maybe meet some of my teammates.

Erin left Albrecht and went back to Augsburg to try and make a few friends before orientation started tonight.

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Erin unlocked the door to her room and saw her roommate watching television.

Cassie Kingston: You must be Erin.

Cassie stood up and greeted her roommate with a handshake.

Erin: You're Cassie, then. Cute boyfriend you have.

Cassie: Thanks. We've been together three years now. He's playing soccer at St. Thomas up in the Twin Cities.

Erin: Is that where you're from?

Cassie: Yes, Woodbury to be exact. You?

Erin: Rockford, MI, about ten miles northeast of Grand Rapids.
Cassie: What are you majoring in?

Erin: Management. Yourself?

Cassie: Marketing.

Erin: I know you're an athlete since you were already moved in when I got here this morning. What sport?

Cassie: Soccer. I'm a defender.

Erin: I play lacrosse. Defender as well.

Cassie: I'm not sure how our team will do this year. We have 14 freshmen out of 20 spots on the team.

Erin: My uncle told me that we had 18 freshmen among our 24-player roster. He also ran into your assistant coach while we are at lunch earlier.

Cassie: Danielle? She's a cutie. Of course, I don't swing that way.

Erin: It's not everyone's cup of tea.

Cassie: So you do?

Erin: Yes and no. Yes as in I THINK I do, but no in terms of any experience dating one.

Cassie: You know that women's sports tends to be a fertile ground for them. Maybe you'll get lucky and one of your teammates will be an option.

Erin: I'm not TOO eager to jump someone at the moment. Just want to get to know people here. Being from out of state, it's a little intimidating knowing no one right now.

Cassie: I guess being in a spring sport puts you at a disadvantage in that department versus the fall sport athletes. We had a ready-made group of friends when we came to campus two weeks ago.

Erin heard some commotion and went into the hall to check it out. She saw a few of the women on her floor running toward the stairwell and then through the door to go downstairs. When the person chasing all of them ran past her, she walked behind her and looked her over. Erin saw that her back was chiseled as the muscles poked around the areas that her t-back sport bra didn't cover. She also noticed a tattoo on a good portion of her right arm. She knew that the mystery woman was at least a couple of inches taller than her 5'7" self and that her backside was smokin' in her yoga pants. Erin felt a little funny and thought to herself, "They sure don't grow them like THAT where I'm from." Her stomach turned over and, once her dorm mate turned around and Erin saw her magnetic smile and piercing eyes, she quickly thought about what to say as she came walking back down the hall. Fortunately, she didn't have to make the first move.

Stephanie Lafleur: Someone as cute as you shouldn't have your jaw dragging on the floor.

Erin: Wha? Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to gape. It's just that your type doesn't exist where I come from.

Steph: Where's that?

Steph: I don't come from TOO far from there. Kitchener, Ontario, about halfway between London and Toronto. Steph Lafleur.

Erin extended her hand to Steph. "Erin Matheson."

Steph shook Erin's hand, then looked her over. "Freshman or athlete?"

Erin: Both. Lacrosse player. You?

Steph: That's one thing we have in common. I'm on the lacrosse team here as well.

Erin: You've got to be a goalkeeper, because no one would choose to be THAT buff and play lacrosse.

Steph: Score one for the pick-up artist. So, what part of you will I get to see most when we play, the back of your head or your bum?

Erin giggled, thinking "Damn! Girl got game!"

Erin: I guess you'll need to get used to staring at my backside. I'm a defender, left side mostly.

Steph: You're a bit of a firecracker, aren't you? I think we'll get along JUST FINE!

Erin: So what brings an Ontarian like yourself down here for college?

Steph: My dad works at Wilfred Laurier and I wanted to go to a Lutheran college, but not at home.

Erin: That used to be called Waterloo Lutheran University?

Steph: Another point for you. How do you know that?

Erin: My godfather told me a story about them choosing their new name so they wouldn't have to buy new stationary since the initials were the same.

Steph: That's an urban legend.

Erin: Have you met any of our future teammates yet?

Steph: The four that I was chasing down the stairs, they're all on the lacrosse team.

Erin: Guess I'll get to meet them at tonight's team meeting and bonding time.

Steph: What are you majoring in?

Erin: Management.

Steph: Physical Education and Religion double major. I'd like to work at a Lutheran college either here in the States or back in Canada.

The two of them were running out of things to say. They were saved when the scared-away foursome sauntered back onto the floor.

Steph L. (to the group): Get over here. I've got a teammate of ours for you guys to meet.

The four women came over to the two of them and introduced themselves to Erin.

Sam Mueller: I'm Sam. This is my sister, Kristie, and our best friend Steph McNamara.
Kelley Ochowicz: KO, I mean Kelley Ochowicz.

Erin: Pleased to meet you. All of you freshmen?

Sam: Steph and I are sophomores, a couple of the very few in that class.

Erin: Did the two of you transfer in after Concordia left?

Sam: No. We applied to Concordia knowing that Carthage would be moving here after our first year. We wanted to have a lay of the land before the new school came in and Kristie started this year.

Kelley: Do we have any upperclassmen on the team?

Steph M.: There are supposed to be four seniors who have come up from what remained of Carthage. We'll meet them tonight, I reckon.

A pair of students exited their room and came upon the mini-team meeting in the hallway.

Christen Prince: Hi! I'm Christen. Who do we have here?

The girls introduced themselves to Christen, who then introduced her roommate, Julie, to them since she decided to go shy around the rambunctious group.

Erin: Sorry to have to back out of this get-to-know-you session, but I need to get changed before going to the opening service. My godfather is the chaplain and it wouldn't look good if I were to miss it.

Steph L.: I should head back to my room and do the same. Catch all of you at the team meeting if not before.

Erin and Steph changed and the two of them met in the lobby around 3:45 to walk over to Bonhoeffer Chapel. While waiting on Erin, Steph met a couple more of her teammates, roommates Savannah Johnson and Morgan Andringa, as they returned from the fitness center. Walking over to the chapel, Erin and Steph were passed by a group of freshmen being a bit silly. The pair laughed at them while chatting on the way. Erin looked Steph over briefly and got a similar feeling of nausea to what she had when viewing her in the dorm hallway earlier. Steph peeked at Erin out of the corner of her eye, admiring her unadorned beauty. Once they reached the chapel, both went to open the door and their hands connected. Erin pulled hers back, letting Steph open and hold the door for her to enter. They walked into the sanctuary and found seats. Erin went to the front and spoke to Marc for a few seconds, giving him a couple of words of encouragement and squeezing his hand before going back and sitting down next to Steph. She scanned through the hymnal to familiarize herself with the liturgy for worship, then showed it to Steph, who recognized the layout as similar to the regular Sunday liturgy at WLU's chapel. Finding another common thread with Erin, Steph settled in and prepared her mind and heart for worship while waiting for the service to begin. Seeing Steph in prayer, Erin reached over and took her hand, then joined her in quiet contemplation.

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Erin and Steph walked up to the front of the chapel following service, where Erin introduced Steph to Marc. While there, she asked him if they could come over on Sunday for dinner and a break from campus, to which her godfather said yes. After the girls left, Marc headed back to Luther Hall. On his way there, Danielle stopped him and asked if tomorrow afternoon would be a good time to get together for lunch. He told her that it was a VERY good time since he would be tied-up most of the day on-campus with orientation. She complimented him on the service and winked at him before leaving to grab dinner off-campus ahead of the athletic team meetings later in the evening.
Once the pair got their food in the dining hall, Erin looked around and saw a couple of women eating by themselves. Recognizing them from earlier in the day, Steph walked over to them with Erin trailing.

Steph: Mind if we join you, Morgan?

Morgan Andringa: Not at all. It'd actually be nice to meet some of our teammates before the team meeting.

Erin: Then today is your lucky day. Erin Matheson, lacrosse defender and owner of the worst hairdo at my high school.

Morgan: Morgan Andringa, and I think I can give you a run in the rat's nest race.

Savannah (shyly): I'm Savannah.

Steph: Where are the two of you from, and why did you choose Trinity?

Morgan: Madison, and I chose to come here to do something different than the rest of my family. I think they counted that 26 members of my clan had attended the University of Wisconsin. My dad played for the 1990 National Champion men's hockey team and my grandfather was a long-time team doctor for the local high schools and UW sports.

Savannah: Fredonia, just north of here, and I came to Trinity because it's close to home. My parents are making me live on-campus because they're afraid I'm destined to be a hermit due to my severe shyness and introversion.

Steph: Kitchener, Ontario, and it's the combination of faith and lacrosse, not to mention getting away from home, that brought me over the border.

Erin: Rockford, Michigan, a suburb of Grand Rapids, and I chose Trinity over Concordia-Ann Arbor because 1) the lacrosse team plays at a higher level, and 2) the scholarship money I got as a result of going to one of the 28 ELCA colleges or universities.

Two of the jokesters that had run past Erin and Steph earlier came over and sat down.

Lindsey Hoffman: Hi, Savannah, Morgan. Haven't met you other two yet.

Steph and Erin introduced themselves.

Lindsey: Lindsey Hoffman, or as I am known in my hometown and on the lacrosse field, The Hoff.

Emily Sommer: I'm Emily, purveyor of Instagram witticisms and a sit-down comedian.

Erin: I hope you're ready to meet your match, because I am quick on the draw with the funny.

Steph (to Lindsey): Just what we need as a team of mostly freshmen, two of our players in a constant battle to out-joke each other.

Savannah: Steph, what position do you play?

Emily: Isn't it obvious with the tattoo and the guns? She's gotta be a goalkeeper.

Steph: Is my physique THAT much of a giveaway?
Lindsey: I'd have to say so.

Erin saw Christen and Julie on their way out of the hall and waved at them. Steph spied a pair of older students who looked very much alike and had on Carthage lacrosse t-shirts. She walked over to them and started a conversation.

Steph: The pair of you have to be two of the seniors that are coming up from Kenosha. Steph Lafleur.

Jessica Fisher: Jess, and this is Megan.

Steph: Are you twins?

Megan Racicot: No. In fact, we're not related at all. Just luck of the gene pool that we look so much alike. You've got to be one of the two freshmen goalkeepers we have.

Steph: Again with the quick jumping-to-conclusions. You're right, but I don't get how other players are so quick to peg me as a goalie.

Jess: You're built like a Sherman Tank. Very similar in stature to our goalkeeper at Carthage, Nicole. You'll get to meet her later at the team meeting.

Steph: I need to get back to the players I was dining with. Nice to meet you and I'll see you in a bit.

Steph went back to her table and filled in the rest of the ladies about Jess and Megan. Once everyone had finished eating, they returned their trays and left the dining hall.
A Thundering Kickoff

As the last couple of players arrived for tonight's introductory team meeting, head coach Lauren Heberlein was going through her index cards so she could put faces with names quickly. Once the clock reached 7:05, senior goalkeeper Nicole Babcock closed the door and Lauren began.

Lauren: Welcome to your new home. Tonight begins a new era in women's lacrosse both on this campus and for you players as well. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Lauren Heberlein and I am the head coach of the women's lacrosse team here. Prior to coming to Trinity, I was in charge of the women's lacrosse program at Carthage College before the school closed and was reborn here as TLU. With our season a few months from starting, and since the non-freshmen will be running tonight's bonding activities, we won't drag this part of the evening out longer than necessary. If you will, one at a time, tell us your name, position, and hometown, beginning with our four seniors.

Nicole Babcock, goalkeeper, Proctor, MN
Jessica Fisher, midfield, Wales, WI
Morgan Brooks, midfielder, St. Charles, MO
Megan Racicot, midfield, Oregon, WI
Kristie Mueller, midfielder, Evanston, IL
Stephanie McNamara, attacker, Winnetka, IL
Samantha Mueller, midfielder, Evanston, IL
Kelley Ochowicz, attacker, Fox Point, WI
Shelley Zembruski, defender, Whitefish Bay, WI
Alexandra Kramer, defender, De Pere, WI
Erin Matheson, defender, Rockford, MI
Stephanie Lafleur, goalkeeper, Kitchener, ON
Morgan Andringa, midfielder, Madison, WI
Savannah Johnson, attacker, Fredonia, WI
Lindsey Hoffman, attacker, Lakeville, MN
Emily Sommer, defender, Minnetonka, MN
Lauren Chandler, midfielder, Indianapolis, IN
Rebecca Curtin, defender, Ottawa, IL
Christen Prince, attacker, Wauwatosa, WI
Sofia Hernandez, attacker, Milwaukee, WI
Lauren: On the board are the three groups for tonight's bonding activities. Freshmen, find your leaders and together you will go to your assigned locations.

Group A: Nicole, Megan, Kristie, Emily, Erin, Morgan A., Sofia, Andrea
Group B: Morgan B., Sam, Steph L., Shelley, Christen, Becca, Lauren, Kelley
Group C: Jess, Steph M., C.J., Lindsey, Alex, Julie, Maggie, Savannah

The groups gathered and left the field house for the next part of the orientation adventure.

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Megan and Nicole led their group to the former's suite in Katharine Hall. Once all eight had found space to sit, Megan began the session of get-to-know-you games.

Megan: Before we get into our choice of icebreaker, can everyone give us your name and one fun fact about you. I'll start. I'm Megan and I have a twin sister named Rachel.

Nicole: I'm Nicole and I'm the oldest player on the team.

Morgan: I'm Morgan and my dad won a NCAA championship in hockey at Wisconsin.

Erin: Erin and I was born on St. Patrick's Day.

Emily: I'm Emily and I'm lactose-tolerant.

Erin chuckled at Emily's response.

Sofia: My name is Sofia and my middle name is Christine.

Andrea: My name is Andi and my parents are both Coast Guard Academy graduates.

Kristie: Kristie and my sister's nickname for me is Kratchet.

Megan: We will start off tonight somewhat tame, but things will pick up when we go into the second round of ABC. For those who haven't played this before, I will give a person a pair of items and they will say which one they like better, then a third item will be added to be compared to the other two one at a time. An example of this is: summer or winter, winter or spring, spring or summer. I call on......Emily to answer the first set.

Megan: Chocolate or Vanilla? Emily: Chocolate.

Megan: Vanilla or Strawberry? Emily: Vanilla.

Megan: Chocolate or Strawberry? Emily: Chocolate.
Megan: Emily, now you get to ask someone else.

Emily: Erin, Biology or Chemistry? Erin: Chemistry.

Emily: Chemistry or Physics? Erin: Chemistry.

Emily: Biology or Physics? Erin: Biology.

Erin: Morgan, Christmas or Thanksgiving? Morgan: Christmas.

Erin: Thanksgiving or Halloween? Morgan: Thanksgiving.

Erin: Christmas or Halloween? Morgan: Halloween.

Morgan: Nicole, your turn. Rain or snow? Nicole: Snow.

Morgan: Snow or humidity? Nicole: Snow.

Morgan: Rain or humidity? Nicole: Humidity.

Nicole: Andi, Coke or Pepsi? Andi: Pepsi.

Nicole: Pepsi or Dr. Pepper? Andi: Pepsi.

Nicole: Coke or Dr. Pepper? Andi: Dr. Pepper.

Andi pondered which of the remaining two to pick and settled on Kristie.

Andi: Kristie, Manolo or Louboutins? Kristie: Louboutins.

Andi: Manolo or Jimmy Choo? Kristie: Jimmy Choo.

Andi: Jimmy Choo or Louboutins? Kristie: Tough one....Jimmy Choo.

Kristie: Sofia, let's start with running or lifting? Sofia: Running.

Kristie: Running or yoga? Sofia: Yoga.

Kristie: Lifting or Yoga? Sofia: Yoga.

The first round finished up with Sofia asking Megan her preferences among a suit, a dress, and a jumpsuit. Megan answered suit over dress, jumpsuit over dress, and suit over jumpsuit.

Megan: Round two will be more invasive, because now we will see who you'd rather boink among the three choices. Erin, I'm starting with you.

Megan, believing that everyone is a little bit gay, decided to give her three women to compare.

Megan: Elena Delle Donne or Ashlyn Harris? Erin: EDD!

Megan: Ashlyn or Laurie Hernandez? Erin: Laurie. Ash is just too manly for me.

Megan: Elena or Laurie? Erin: EDD. Love her.

Erin decided not to repeat Megan's all-woman list and mixed it up with her testee.

Erin: Emily, Zach Parise or Kelley O'Hara? Emily: KO.
Erin: Zach Parise or Zach Ertz? Emily: Gotta go with my fellow Gopher, Parise.

Erin: Zach Ertz or Kelley? Emily: Kelley, my bae.

Emily: Andi, Jane Campbell or Christian McCaffrey? Andi: Janice.


Emily: Jane or Christen? Andi: Christen's cute, but Jane is more my type.

Andi: Morgan, Michael Bradley or Emily Sonnett? Morgan: Emily.

Andi: Michael or Becky Hammon? Morgan: Both are buff, both can be funny, but I'd rather have Becky.

Andi: Emily or Becky? Morgan: Becky.

Morgan asked Kristie to break down Graham Zusi, Jordan Morris, and Landon Donovan. Her response was Landon over both Graham and Jordan and Jordan over Graham.

Kristie: Sofia, would you rather have Aaron Rodgers or Jordy Nelson? Sofia: A-Rod.

Kristie: Aaron or Mallory Pugh? Sofia: Mal.

Kristie: Jordy or Mallory? Sofia: Definitely Mal.

Sofia: Nicole, Becky Sauerbrunn or Shea Groom? Nicole: Becky.

Sofia: Becky or Syd Leroux? Nicole: No question, Syd.

Sofia: Syd or Shea? Nicole: Syd.

Nicole knew Megan's tastes very well, so she chose to give her a VERY difficult trifecta to pick through.

Nicole: Megan dear, Sue Bird or Tobin Heath? Megan: Sue.

Nicole: Sue or Ashlyn Harris? Megan: Sue.

Nicole: Tobin or Ashlyn? Megan: Damn you! Can I just pick to be the meat in the middle of that sandwich?

Nicole: Sorry, girl. Gotta pick one. Megan: In that case, Tobin.

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Jess and Steph McNamara took their group of players to the amphitheater overlooking Lake Michigan. Once seated on a couple of benches, Jess introduced herself again along with Steph and gave a bit of information about playing for Coach Heberlein for the freshmen to bank away for preseason. Following that, she stated that they would be starting with Three Truths and A Lie, with the first truth being your name. She called on Steph to start.

Steph: My name is Steph. I subscribe to the Wall Street Journal. I played high school lacrosse with the Mueller sisters. I have two brothers.

Julie: I saw you with Kristie and Sam earlier, so I think that is probably true. The Wall Street Journal
Steph: That's actually true. I knew Kristie and Sam from the lacrosse circuit in the Chicago area, and we lived near each other, but we went to different schools in the North Shore. Your turn, Julie.

Julie: My name is Julie. I am a Public Relations major. My father played football at LSU. I am the only person on this team from the Pacific Time Zone.

Maggie: I heard you say you were from Phoenix, so that one's true. You wouldn't have been so specific on the second one if it was a lie, so I'm going with your major.

Julie: You're right. I'm majoring in Communication.

Maggie: My name is Maggie, short for Magnolia. My parents were Gen X versions of hippies. Anyways...I worked at a camp for children with cancer. I'm majoring in management. My mother was Miss Florida Teen USA.

Alex: You said you were from Florida, which means that one could be true. Guessing the first one.

Maggie: Actually, the pageant title is the lie. I haven't seen my mom in a dress since I was probably 6 or 7.

Alex: My name is Alexandra, but I go by Ali. My parents are divorced. I nearly died from a blood clot. I have a younger brother.

C.J.: All of them are plausible, but the blood clot thing is the most far-fetched of the three, especially at our age. That's my choice.

Ali: I have an older brother, not younger.

Lindsey: So how did you get the blood clot?

Ali told the others about breaking her leg in a scrimmage and then developing the clot while on a flight over summer vacation, resulting in a pulmonary embolism and giving her a series of small heart attacks.

C.J.: My given first name is Carolyn, but I go by either C.J. or Jane. Both of my parents are pilots. My mom went to the Air Force Academy. I am a Psychology major.

Lindsey thinks....if 1 is true, then 2 is probably true, but BOTH parents?! Could be, but I'm guessing not.

Lindsey: I don't think both of your parents are pilots.

Jane: They are. Both flew in the Navy, my dad with the Blue Angels and my mom in fighter planes. Thus, she went to the Naval Academy and not Air Force.

Lindsey: Tricky, you are. My turn, I guess. My name is Lindsey or "The Hoff". I am one of three Minnesota players on the roster. I spent my summer vacation last year on study abroad in France. My mother's name is Louise.

Savannah: First one is true. Third is probably true. Gonna guess the France trip isn't.

Lindsey: My mother's name is Linda.

Savannah: I'm Savannah. I was born in Alabama and moved to Fredonia at the age of 6. I want to
eventually become a Physician's Assistant. I earned my black belt in Taekwondo when I was 11.

Jess: You don't look feisty, so I'm thinking you don't have a black belt.

Savannah: That one is true. Going through Taekwondo helped me channel my aggressive side into something other than beating up kids on the playground. I was born in Mississippi.

Jess: Looks like I'm the last one. As I said earlier, my name is Jess. I am one of six children. I am from Wales. I was the chapter president of Athlete Ally at Carthage.

Steph: The last one.

Jess: Right. Our school didn't have one, but I'd like to start one here if I can find enough support on campus for it.

The group walked back up toward the center of campus and split off to their various dorms.

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Morgan Brooks and Sam decided to stay put with their group in the field house.

Morgan: Let's get started. Name and where you're living. I'm Morgan, but people tend to call me Moe or Bean. I live in Augsburg.

Sam: Sammy or Sam or Stretch. I'm living in Augsburg as well.

Steph: Steph and I'm also in Augsburg.

Christen: Christen or CP and I'm another Augsburg resident.

Shelley: I'm Shelley and I'm commuting.

Kelley: Kelley or KO, and I'm roommates with Lauren in Augsburg.

Lauren: Lauren and as KO said, we're roommates.

Rebecca: I'm Becca and I'm living in Katharine.

Moe: So most of this group is in Augsburg. Kelley and Lauren are roommates. Any of the others rooming with lacrosse players?

Sam: I'm with Steph McNamara.

Christen: Julie and I are roomies.

Moe: Sam, who is your sister rooming with?

Sam: She's with Ali Kramer.

Moe: We're going to play Truth or Dare. First round is all truths, then you can mix it up the second time around. No real limits, but use common sense on the first pass as we don't know each other that well yet. I'm going to start with one for Rebecca. Have you ever had a run-in with the law?

Becca: Once for speeding. A cop pulled me over after leaving Dunkin' Donuts and of course asked the question they always ask. My response was to lift up my box of Munchkins and say, "Cuz you could smell them!" He laughed so hard that he just let me go if I gave him a handful.
Moe: That's pretty funny. Your turn to ask, Becca.

Becca: Kelley, are you an only child?

Kelley: No. I have two younger brothers, ages 3 and 4. That's why I am living on-campus even though I'm from just south of campus.

Sam: Probably a smart move. You wouldn't get any peace and quiet if you commuted and were living at home.

Kelley: Christen, have you ever had a crush on a teammate?

Christen: Not yet, but I wouldn't doubt that it could happen before the start of preseason. Steph, how much can you bench?

Steph: Oh geez....another assumption that I am built like a brick s***house. Probably 125, which is near the top end for elite-level women. Back press is closer to 225. I've tried to do more, but it's not recommended.

Lauren: You just explained WHY we think of you that way. You're BUFF and you ARE built like someone chiseled you out of granite.

Steph blushed out of embarrassment because she doesn't like so much attention paid to her physique.

Steph: For that, Lauren, you get the next question. Who is the most famous person you've met?

Lauren: When the Super Bowl came to Indianapolis, I ran into Tom Brady at a Steak n' Shake across from Circle Center Mall downtown.

Shelley: Impressive!

Lauren: It was kind of cool, although my dad wasn't as thrilled as I was, considering the Colts/Patriots rivalry and Brady always seeming to have the upper hand on Peyton Manning. Anyways....Shelley, what is the farthest you have gone with someone, be it male or female?

Shelley knew she had to tell the truth, but it was kind of pathetic her run of luck in the love department.

Shelley: I once kissed one of my cousins. I know that sounds sad, but the only dates I've been on have been for school dances where you're expected to go with someone.

Steph liked the honesty in Shelley's answer, as well as the sense of loneliness and vulnerability that her description gave.

Shelley: Sam, I'm sure you and Kristie have gotten into trouble together in the past and have probably covered one another's butt to keep from being disciplined. What is the worst thing the two of you have done that didn't get you in trouble?

Sam: We were with Steph at our place a couple of months ago, just after Kristie graduated. She wanted to celebrate and got into our parents' liquor cabinet. I had one or two, Kristie drank a bit but she's a happy drunk. Steph, on the other hand, got blotto and passed out. The two of us thought it would be funny for her to wake up with a little "present", so we stripped her and then placed her hand in a bucket of warm water. You can figure out what happened.

Moe: THAT IS CRUEL! Making her piss herself with no clothes on!
Sam: She wasn't going to tell anyone because then her getting hammered would have been exposed.

Steph: You're mean and vindictive in a funny way, Sam, which means we can probably be friends.

Sam: Moe's the last one. Moe, have you ever kissed a girl?

Moe: Yes. Won't tell you when or where, just that I have. Now....onto Round Two. Kelley, truth or dare?

Kelley: Truth.

Moe: When was the first time you masturbated?

Kelley: The afternoon of 5th-grade graduation. It was the first time I had seen some of my classmates dressed-up and it turned me on. I had this itching feeling down there and tried to scratch it, if you will.

Moe: Gotta give you credit for fessing up like that.

Kelley: Only because I knew I'd get the chance to REALLY put the screws to someone. Sam, truth or dare?

Sam thought for a second and decided that speech was easier than action, regardless of the question. "Truth".

Kelley: Have you ever fantasized about a three-way with Kristie and Steph?

Sam cringed. She was seriously looking to lie about this, but then remembered the question was whether she had FANTASIZED about it, not whether she had actually done it. "Yes."

A chorus of oooooooooohs went up after her answer. Sam turned beet-red and almost cried, but got herself to calm down.

Sam: Now who can I put on the spot........Christen, truth or dare?

Christen: Dare.

Sam: I dare you to flash the group.

Christen lifted her shirt and bra to expose her breasts to the other seven women.

Lauren: Gotta say those are a fairly nice pair.

Christen blushed while thinking of who to go after. "Lauren, truth or dare?"

Lauren: Truth.

Christen: Since you said I have a nice pair of tits, have you ever sucked on someone's nipples before?

Lauren: No, but if you show them again, I might be tempted to suck yours.

Kelley: TMI! TMI! TMI!

Lauren: Steph, truth or dare?

Steph: Dare.
Lauren: I dare you to kiss Kelley.

Steph went over to where Kelley was seated and leaned down to place her lips against hers. After a few seconds, she broke the kiss and winked at Shelley, saying to her, "Just think....you could be on the other end of that if you play your cards right." Shelley covered her face with her hands to keep first from laughing and then to not show the color rising in her cheeks.

Steph: Shelley, truth or dare?

Shelley: After what the other dares have been, I'm picking truth.

Steph: What is the oddest thing you have ever used to get off?

Shelley: Good grief! I thought truth would be easier than this. Hmmm.....I took a scrub brush and manipulated the handle on it so it faced away from the bristles so that I could use it to either rub against my button and slit or put it inside me.

Steph: Dang! That's pretty kinky.

Shelley: Becca, truth or dare?

Becca: Truth.

Shelley: Have you ever done oral on a woman?

Becca: Yes.

Shelley: What's it like?

Becca: Not bad, really, especially if she's doing it to you as well.

Sam: We better wrap this up before it gets TOO graphic.

Becca: Moe, truth or dare?

Moe: Dare.

Becca: I dare you to sweet-talk someone in this group for 30 seconds. You can do anything you want to them except make contact with their breasts or love zone.

Moe looked over the group and figured out who she wanted to try her magic on. She settled on Lauren and walked over to her. Coming up behind her, she stuck her nose into the woman's hair and began whispering thoughts of what she'd like to do to her, then licked her earlobe and ran kisses along the back of her neck. Lauren leaned back into the contact and reached her hand back to rub the front of Moe's trackies. Moe stopped her come-on speech, leaving Lauren all flustered.

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Kelley: I saw you reach back and rub Moe down there. She turn you on that much?

Lauren: What she was telling me and the little pecks on my neck, plus playing with my hair...dang, that girl is GOOD!

Kelley: Well, Shelley is also really good at turning girls inside-out with just a couple of suggestions.

Lauren: How do you know that?
Kelley: She and I played on the same high school team here in the North Shore. She went to Whitefish Bay and I went to Nicolet, which is the next school district north and west. Our two schools and Shorewood combined for girls' lacrosse.

Lauren: I didn't know that. No wonder the two of you seemed pretty comfortable next to each other.

Kelley: I am surprised how badly she was eye-fucking Steph. She's usually a lot more "cool" when it comes to expressing her interest in someone.

Lauren: It looked like Steph noticed, which got her a bit flustered. I can't believe you asked Sam about her having a threesome with her sister and Steph. Where did you come up with THAT idea?!

Kelley: I was being chased along with the three of them by Steph earlier this afternoon. I noticed how they seemed to interact, like they were totally comfortable with each other and some of the touches were a bit friendlier than I'd think would occur between two siblings.

Lauren: See anything today that sparked your interest?

Kelley: I don't know. I'm looking forward to the All-Sports Mixer on Wednesday, since it should be prime scoping territory. You?

Lauren: Well......that comment to Christen was not totally for show, and if Moe was serious about her desires, then maybe there could be something out there for me.

Kelley heard a bit of screaming and moaning coming from the room next to theirs. She knew that Erin and Cassie lived on their right, but wasn't sure who was on the left. Rather than ponder it too much, she and Lauren continued their conversation on other topics.

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Morgan A.: Sav, how was your group tonight?

Savannah: Alright. We played Two Truths and a Lie. Learned a bit about the other girls, but nothing that makes me necessarily want to make friends with them.

Morgan A.: You'll have to reach out a little to get past the staring-at-them stage. Did you connect with any of them?

Savannah: I THINK I did with Maggie, and also with Lindsey.

Morgan A.: I know Lindsey and Emily are roommates. Maybe the four of us can do something tomorrow. I like Emily. She's funny. She was in my group tonight and the way she dealt with Erin trying to skewer her on who she'd rather bop was a stitch.

Savannah: Mo, you seem to have more experience dealing with people than me. How do you get yourself to say more than "Hi" to someone?

Morgan A.: I'm not as confident as it looks. In fact, my lack of confidence is why I chose a small college over the big public university. That, and I wanted to keep playing lacrosse. I usually have to script out a conversation in my head when I need to approach someone who I don't know.

Savannah: Maybe that could work for me.

Morgan A.: Can't hurt to give it a try.

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Christen: Dang, our group was totally off-the-wall!

Julie: Do tell. I could use a little entertainment tonight since our octet was pretty dull.

Christen: Our cute little commuter was trying to eye-fuck the hell out of the big, bad goalie.

Julie: Whoa! Did Steph notice?

Christen: Definitely. I hadn't seen anything that up-front since Sofia and her girlfriend at graduation.

Julie: You know Sofia?

Christen: Yes. We went to high school together and played for the Wauwatosa East/West co-op team. Her girlfriend Vanessa transferred in her junior year and was in competitive cheer at East. With Trinity not having it, I think she'll probably try out for Acro.

Julie: Are they rooming together?

Christen: Yes. They are practically inseparable. Their mothers are best friends and former co-workers, so it was natural for the two of them to be together all the time. The "feelings" came during the two years they didn't go to school together.

Julie: Back to Steph and Shelley. I'm a little skeptical that that would work out. Sure, Shelley looks like she could have any man or woman she wants, but I don't think Steph would be thinking with her lower head, especially when it looks like her and Erin are a dream pairing. Both seemed taken with each other in the hallway, and they have a common member of the staff to possibly "help" them along.

Christen: You talking about the chaplain?

Julie: Yep. I saw the two of them talking to him after service and it looked pretty chummy. Steph's looking at candidacy, which runs through the chaplain, while Marc is Erin's godfather. Now, this was before Steph would have laid eyes on Shelley, so maybe I'm misreading it, but I wouldn't doubt that them being on campus together and the third one commuting would give Erin an advantage.

Christen: Girfriend, you need to learn you some geography!

Christen pulled out a map of the Greater Milwaukee area to show Julie where everything and everyone was located.

Christen: You see Milwaukee here. Trinity is just into Ozaukee County in Mequon. My home, Wauwatosa, is the first suburb west of the city on the north side of the interstate. Where Shelley is from, Whitefish Bay, is about halfway up the north shore from the northeast edge of the city. It's an easy 10-minute drive up here once you get to I-43, or a little more time coming up Port Washington Road, so she's NOT that far away. Kelley, who played with her on the joint Whitefish Bay/Nicolet/Shorewood lacrosse team, is from Fox Point, which is maybe a mile south of the county line. My commuting from where I'm from and Shelley commuting from the Bay is night and day.

Julie: I still think she has the edge, but from our collective perspective, it looks like Steph will not have any shortage of options within the team.

Christen: Of course, it remains to be seen if any of the three swing that way, although I'm sure Shelley does from the way she stared at her.

Julie: Nothing will come to pass until Wednesday, as how you look in a t-shirt and sweats isn't the
same as in something dressier.

Christen: True, and I can't wait to check out the merchandise on this campus myself.

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Lindsey: Honey, I'm home!

Emily: Get over here, you big galoot!

Lindsey walked over to Emily's bed and plopped down on it.

Emily: Learn anything good from your group?

Lindsey: Just the random facts stuff, like CJ's parents were Navy Pilots and StephMac reads the Wall Street Journal for fun. You?

Emily: Plenty. Kristie is a Jimmy Choo fan, Megan is on the butch side of the gay market and would love to be the meat in an Ashlyn Harris/Tobin Heath sandwich, Andi would rather have Becky Hammon than my doppleganger, and Sofia is definitely into girls, turning down two Green Bay Packers for Mal Pugh.

Lindsey: What did you guys play for all of this to come out?

Emily: ABC, where you compare three items or people to one another in pairs, like A or B, B or C, A or C.

Lindsey: Who did you get to compare?

Emily: Zach Parise, Kelley O'Hara, and Zach Ertz, JJ's husband.

Lindsey: I hope you took KO over both of them or I'd be a bit disappointed.

Emily: Relax, Hoff. Of course I chose that little Georgia peach over the two guys.

Lindsey: And I suppose Parise ended up your default choice among those two.

Emily: Correct.

Lindsey: Any observations about our teammates after the first night?

Emily: Erin is funny and can give me a run for my money. Kristie is nicer on her own than when you see her around Steph or Sam. Christen and Julie would make the cutest dang couple. I think Andi and CJ are going to hook up considering that Andi's got a thing for Jane Campbell. Lastly, Goalie bae is going to have a tough time of it since I think there are two of our teammates ready to go after her. Oh, and I didn't see anyone to replace you as my maybe-baby yet.

Lindsey: Good. There MIGHT be one or two of the rest that could interest me, but they'd have to outdo your combination of hot and funny. I'll look at the Mixer on Wednesday in case one of the other teams around here has someone better than what ours offers.

Emily looked over at Lindsey and sent her an air kiss, which was reciprocated.
Friday morning was somewhat treacherous for Marc as he had five groups of freshmen come through Bonhoeffer Chapel for a quick tour and an explanation of opportunities on campus for those of faith. As his final tour of the morning wrapped up, Danielle Dillon stopped in following the soccer team's morning training session.

Danielle D.: Ready for lunch? I have until 1:30 before I need to be back in the field house to supervise lifting and cardio work.

Marc: Same here, then five more tour groups before getting to leave around 5.

The twosome walked over to Siebert for lunch and had a fun time catching up on what the past three years had brought to both of them. Marc got a little bit uncomfortable with the thoughts going through his mind regarding his former player and team leader. He shook off the initial pangs of desire, but as they walked toward their splitting-off point, his eyes focused on her wavy black hair and the way her bangs were pasted to her forehead as a result of her sweat drying. He then remembered what he had always liked about her, which is the girl-next-door face combined with a overall appearance that would tend to indicate a more adventurous side in private. Before they went their separate ways, Danielle gave Marc a peck on the cheek and asked if he would be attending Wednesday’s athletic department event. He said yes as his role at the college also included doing invocations before selected home athletic matches and the mixer would be a good chance to meet the coaches and staff of the department. With a gleam in her green eyes, Danielle went to the field house, leaving Marc a bit perplexed on his way back to Bonhoeffer.

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Erin and Steph went to Marc and Danielle's for the first of what would eventually become a Sunday tradition for the freshman defender, a time to do laundry, studying, and get some non-cafeteria food while catching up with her second set of parents.

Erin: Marc, Danielle, we're here!

Danielle: Come in, sit down. Want anything to drink, and is this your teammate/future ELCIC candidate?

Erin: Water for both of us, and yes this is. Steph Lafleur, my godmother and Marc's wife, Danielle.

Danielle: Pleased to meet you, Steph. I hope Erin hasn't given you any bad reports on me or the good chaplain.

Steph: I saw enough from Marc in his first service to get the impression that he's one of the good guys.

Marc: I heard my name being taken in vain.
Danielle: I was just asking Steph if Erin had indoctrinated her with negative information about you.

Erin: And I haven't told her anything.....yet.

Steph raised her eyebrows, as did Marc. "You have a lovely home."

Marc: It works for the two of us.

Danielle walked into the kitchen to get a couple of bottles of water for the girls and a can of Pepsi for Marc. While she and Marc were out of the room, Erin and Steph talked briefly.

Steph: The two of them seem to be good. Wonder what the situation is with your roommate's coach and him.

Erin: She's a former player of his from the soccer club he ran before going into the diaconate education program. I'm sure she knows Danielle and there's no funny business going on. Besides, it sounded like they hadn't seen each other since their last game three years ago.

Danielle returned with the drinks and Marc came back into the living room from his office.

Marc: How has orientation gone thus far? More importantly, any of the first-weekend "let's get bad" stuff happen?

Erin: It is what it is. As for the second question, what do you mean?

Marc: Things such as a couple of freshmen seeing each other at one of the events and eventually ending up in the sack or macking on each other. Underage possession of alcohol.

Steph: I haven't heard or seen anything, although Kelley mentioned some odd noises coming from their next-door neighbors' room after her and Lauren returned from team bonding on Thursday night.

Erin: That would be Kristie and Ali's room. Maybe Kristie and the other Steph have something going from home.

Steph: Could be. We can probably find out on Wednesday when we see most of the team again at the All-Sports Mixer.

Danielle comes walking into the living room to put the kibosh on Marc's interrogation.

Danielle: Marc, don't you have something better to do than grill Erin's teammate?

Marc: I wasn't grilling her. Now tomorrow, when I meet with her for our get-to-know-you session concerning candidacy, THEN I'll be grilling.

Erin: Figurative or literal?

Marc: Literal in this case. I'm bringing up the small Weber and trying my best to make food for my freshmen charges. I'm not THAT mean to put her under the bare light bulb and do a full-on interrogation.

Steph laughed at Marc's comment, now seeing where Erin learned some of her moves and how her peculiar sense-of-humor has been shaped. She thought to herself, "Yeah, she's going to be a hard one to tame for whoever tries. Does she play for us, or is she just that much of a huckster that she likes to mess with people?"

Erin: Steph, you still here?
Steph: Yeah. Got lost in my head for a second. It happens from time to time. Just a little nervous, that's all.

Marc: Relax. We don't bite...hard.

Danielle elbowed Marc in the ribs. "Excuse my husband, please. He thinks he's the second coming of Mel Brooks."

Marc: No, I don't, but I AM

Erin and Danielle: DON'T SAY IT!

Steph (to Erin): He better not end up in the same room as you and Emily. I don't think anyone would come out of that encounter with dry pants, especially the ones listening to it.

Erin: Definitely. Danielle, he quoted Frank Sinatra in his homily on Thursday talking about love being an action verb, not a being one.

Danielle: I can see where this is going. Something about doing and being, then do be do be do.

Erin: He used that one before?

Danielle: No, but I know where he got it from. It's a gag where a couple of philosophers are quoted as saying "To be is to do" and "To do is to be", then the punchline from Ol' Blue Eyes.

Steph (to Marc): And I'm going to have to deal with you for four years in a situation where you have a hand in determining if I get rostered or not. I better get used to the one-liners, although I think Erin is cuter when she runs them off than you are.

Erin heard this and swallowed hard. She then asked Marc if they could talk in private for a few minutes.

Marc: What's on your mind?

Erin: It's Steph. When I saw her the first time in the dorm on Thursday, I instantly got turned on. I tried to use some of your charm on her and got it sent back at me with a bit of spunk. I think maybe I like her, like like her like her.

Marc: Sounds like you're crushin' a bit. Do you know if she goes that way?

Erin: No. I tend to have good dar, but that typically comes from watching people for a while and picking up the mannerisms and little clues. With her, I can't put my finger on whether she is or isn't.

Marc: I can technically ask her about it tomorrow during our intro meeting, because it falls within the scope of responsible sexuality and is one of the areas where candidates can get into trouble if not disqualified. With me being new at this job and the school operating from documents that go back to predecessor institutions on this subject, I'm going to have to take the lead on pulling together what the ELCA as an institution now believes, what rules exist at our sister colleges and universities, and what Carthage and Concordia had on the books prior to the shuffling. I don't want to put her on the spot, because it wouldn't be an impartial inquiry. Maybe let the conversation play out tonight and see if anything pops out to indicate a preference. By the way, you two are dorbs.

Erin: Thanks.

The pair went back into the living room and sat down with Danielle and Steph, who had a great
Danielle went into the kitchen to check on the pork roast that would eventually be shredded for pulled pork sandwiches. Sensing it was ready, she took a pair of forks and tore the meat apart and called the other three to the table for an early dinner, since Erin and Steph along with their fellow teammates had their make-up meeting with the Augsburg hall director at 7:00.

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Following the hall meeting, Erin and Steph left Augsburg for a walk past the amphitheater to the lake bluff overlook on the east end of campus. Once there, the two scanned over the horizon before Steph began speaking.

Steph: Now that I've actually met Marc outside of campus, I feel a bit better about my chances of clearing the candidacy hurdle at the end of this year. Still not sure how I'll do when we're face-to-face tomorrow in his office, but it can't be worse than the nervousness I felt today wanting him to like me because he seems a big part of your life and support system here.

Erin: I was a bit nervous as well, because, for how comfortable I am with him, including the fact that he knows certain things that I haven't disclosed to my parents yet, actually dealing with him and Danielle in a "parent-type" situation is a bit new for me, and that includes them meeting friends and teammates of mine.

Steph thought for a few seconds on that last bit and decided to push the envelope a little. "So how do I rate in your pecking order, friend or teammate?"

Erin: I think you qualify as both, for now.

The pair turned to face one another, which followed by Erin wrapping her arms around Steph and hugging her. The embrace was reciprocated, during which Steph whispered in her ear, "In case you're wondering, I don't pull." The smile that ran across Erin's face upon hearing that could have lit up the night sky.

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The first day of classes at Trinity went by pretty quickly as professors were loathe to do much more than hand out syllabi and answer the random question from students. On the way out of Bio 101, Steph, who was in a rush to get to Bonhoeffer to meet with Marc, incidentally bumped into one of her classmates, causing her to fall to the ground. She looked down and offered her hand to help the fellow freshman up.

Steph: Sorry about that. First-day jitters and I have a meeting with the chaplain in ten minutes that, would I happen to be late, might start a chain of events that will get me thrown out of here.

Jessie Felder: Easy there. Being a couple of minutes late to something on your first day won't get you dismissed from Trinity, I'm sure.

Steph: Again, sorry about running you over. See you on Wednesday if not before.

Jessie: See ya.

Jessie composed herself and walked to her next class, Public Speaking, still a little stunned at how she was knocked off her feet like that by the goalkeeper. On the way, she saw her roommate heading for the same building as her.
Jessie: Becca, wait up!

Becca slowed down, allowing Jessie to catch up to her.

Becca: Jessie, what happened to you? Your right elbow is scraped.

Jessie (looking at it): I was leaving Bio lecture when another student bumped into me and knocked me over. God was she big. Not big as in husky or really tall, just....built.

Becca: Hmmm....maybe about 5'10", tattoo on a good portion of her right arm, smile that could knock you out of your seat it's so pretty?

Jessie: Yes....you know her?

Becca: She's one of the goalkeepers on the lacrosse team with me. Name is Steph and despite the outward demeanor, she is a very nice person.

Jessie: Seems it as she apologized twice for running me over and said she was late for a meeting with the chaplain.

Becca: Ah. All religion majors that are considering future theological education have to meet with him early in the first semester in order to get on the rostering track for their specific denomination. Learned that from my mom who went to Carthage a number of years ago.

Jessie: Girl was BUFF! Could probably have bench-pressed me if she wanted.

Becca and Jessie walked into their Public Speaking class, which would end up lasting 15 minutes. From there, the pair went to Siebert for lunch, running into the aforementioned goalkeeper with the million-dollar smile.

Becca: Steph, come eat with us.

Steph walked over and sat down with Becca and Jessie, who she remembered from the incident outside the lecture hall earlier.

Steph: Funny running into you again....

Jessie: Jess.

Steph: Nice to formally meet you. I'm Steph.

Jessie: I know, my roommate told me on the way to Public Speaking.

Becca: See...I paid attention during Truth or Dare even though I was quiet. So how was your meeting with Deacon Marc?

Steph: A BREEZE! Doesn't hurt that he's Erin's "second dad" and we had just seen him and his wife yesterday.

Jessie: Becca told me that you're a religion major.

Steph: Actually I'm majoring in both religion and physical education. I want to eventually teach and coach at a Lutheran school, so doing both will make that easier. What's your major?

Jessie: Actuarial Science.
Steph: So you'd be working with dead bodies, right?

Jessie: No. That's Mortuary Science. Actuarial Science is the quantitative portion of the insurance industry. Actuaries use math and statistics to determine how much you should pay for your policy, or whether you're a decent-enough risk to get one in the first place.

Steph: Interesting. Wouldn't have placed you for being a numbers whiz.

Jessie: FUTURE numbers whiz. Right now, I'm on pace with most of the rest of you. Haven't been to my first Calc I class yet, so maybe I'll find out that I'm not geared for this and will end up majoring in something different.

Steph: I should be getting going. Got Intro to Criminal Justice at 2 followed by Western Heritage 1 at 3 and I haven't gotten in my daily yoga time yet. That's probably why I was so frantic when I ran into you, Jessie.

Jessie: That's OK. I think seeing you get a little flustered actually makes you come across as more human than what one would get from seeing your muscle-bound physique.

Steph blushed a little. "Thanks for the compliment, but I don't like a lot of attention paid to my body, because like you said it makes me seem tougher and less human than I actually am."

The three took their trays up to the conveyor belt and then left the dining hall to go their separate ways for the afternoon.

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Kristie and Ali were in their room after dinner, a bit bored since the first day of classes didn't bring anything in the way of assignments for Wednesday. Kristie got off of her bed and went to the closet to check through her wardrobe to find something good for Wednesday evening's All-Sports Mixer. After pulling out a few options, she asked Ali to critique them.

Kristie: Can you give me an impartial opinion on these and which one would look best for Wednesday’s event?

Kristie holds up a black jumpsuit with a choker collar first.

Ali: Cute, but it's going to be pretty warm, so pants might not be the best choice.

Kristie showed off a slip dress, which received a big thumbs-up from her roommate. Not content with that yet, she put up a paisley romper, which got a tough critique from Ali. "That would work for class, but not for this, I'm sorry to say." Satisfied, Kristie returned everything to the closet and offered to help Ali with her choices. The brunette pulled out two dresses, one burgundy and one light blue-and-sand and inquired as to Kristie's opinion.

Kristie: Depends what you're going for. If you want to find a guy or gal to get with afterwards, go with the dark red. If not, the other one is classic and a good pick.

Ali: Are these things like jock meat markets?

Kristie: According to Sam and Steph, yes. We don't get to meet a lot of them when we move in and this is a good chance to nab one early before they hitch up with other ones and we're resigned to going into the general population.

Ali: You say that as though it's a bad thing to be in a relationship with a "regular" student.
Kristie: At smaller schools, it'd probably be fine, but at a bigger institution like this one, getting shoved out from the athletic bubble is embarrassing.

Ali stuck Kristie's opinion away in her mind, knowing that she'd like to get a second or third perspective on the idea.

Megan, who had a reputation at Carthage for being a bit of a Yente when it came to relationships, stopped over to Augsburg to put her two, make that twenty, cents in where it involved a budding match she sniffed out last night while walking on-campus.

Steph (responding to a knock on her door): Keep your pants on. I'm coming.

Steph opened the door and Megan came bounding in. "Megan! I take it this is not a social call since normally seniors don't hang out with freshmen unless they are either looking to hook up with one or need something from them."

Megan: I come to give and not to receive.

Steph: What are you giving?

Megan: Styling advice. Excuse me for a moment.

Megan went next door and knocked on Kristie and Ali's door, asking if one of them could come over to Steph's room to help her style her up for Wednesday. Ali took the request and went with Megan. Once back in Steph's room, Megan walked over to her closet and pulled several outfits from it, laying them on her bed.

Megan: Ali, what would you wear if you were looking to make a good impression on someone?

Ali: First impression as in meeting them, or first impression as in getting someone to chase you?

Megan: The second one. The rumor mill has this one with multiple persons of interest and I need to get her into something that will reveal her best parts and turn one or more of them on.

Ali studied the possibilities and chose a grey shift with very short sleeves as the best one to accentuate the positives of Steph's physical self and in staying with her somewhat conservative-but-enticing demeanor. After trying it on and modeling it for the pair, all three agreed that it looked very good on her. As Megan jaunted off to bring her magic to the other half of the tandem, Ali asked Steph about dating and the bubble.

Ali: Steph, can I ask you something?

Steph: Sure, Ali.

Ali: Kristie was telling me that the All-Sports Mixer is a bit of a meat market for jocks, so they can latch onto one before they're gone and then have to wade into the general dating pool. Is it THAT bad to want a "normal" person who isn't hung up on status but just wants you for you and can actually help you stay grounded in the midst of the chaos being a student-athlete can be?

Steph: I wouldn't say it's bad. In fact, I think if you find the right one, what you describe is what all women should want, a partner who meshes with you in heart, mind, body, and soul. Now, can you find one that won't see you as a conquest or a means to bettering their own standing on campus or in the world? That I'm not so sure about. The stories I'd hear from my dad about the athletes he'd talk with at Wilfrid Laurier would seem to indicate to me that a LOT of relationships in the department, particularly between teammates, can be very good and usually go on unknown to the outside world.
It's the misaligned and high-profile ones that tend to raise the hackles of people and give female athletes both a negative reputation of being two-faced and an unfair expectation of having to stay in the bubble to find someone worthwhile.

Ali: Any examples come to mind?

Steph: Not from the college world, but the women's professional sports world. Have you heard of the Philadelphia Hearts in NWSL?

Ali: You mean the club that is considered open-and-affirming and had a pair of players from Mexico that are in a committed relationship along with the teammates that played at Duke together?

Steph: Yes. They went through a vicious legal trial this past winter with one of their local media over harassment by him of some of their players as well as insinuations of indiscretions by others in the league. They didn't succeed in ending it, but he was found liable of the most egregious of the claims against him, that his actions against Julie Johnston resulted in the loss of a significant portion of her eventual divorce settlement. Anyhow, his defense strategy was to argue that female athletes brought this kind of scrutiny and borderline harassment on themselves by presenting an image that didn't comport with their actual lives and motives. It didn't work THAT well, because the prosecution was able to prove that the broad brush ignored those who had found love in the regular world and that societal pressure levied a set of expectations on women that ultimately created the athletic bubble as a forum in response to them.

Ali: What does that have to do with dating athletes versus non-athletes?

Steph: The club wanted to paint the defendant as a misogynist and homophobe when in actuality he was just the voice for a segment of the population that had been ignored and riled up over the unfairness of the bubble. The teammate-on-teammate stuff wasn't his target, but the slightly-above-average jocks who latched onto female athletes at the college level before their "power" had developed or who had in effect blocked them from a normal college experience. He called the ex-husband and ex-fiance of two US National Team players to provide evidence to the imbalance and misalignment of those relationships, and how they actually hurt women in the long run.

Ali: So what's your plan for Wednesday?

Steph: Go, look about and see what's around on my side of the line compared to the people I've already come to know here, then figure out if I want to get involved with someone and who.

Ali: And if you're a dead-pull hitter?

Steph: My suggestion there is to not go swinging for the fences on Wednesday and use the first couple, three weeks of classes to engage a broader range of options.

Ali: I think you've helped me a bit in thinking about this.

Steph: I hope you get what you want out of it.

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Megan's trip to Erin's room resulted in them selecting a skater dress consisting of a black top and pink skirt portion with a patterned lace overlay. On her way back to Katharine, the amateur matchmaker thought about what she had done and hoped that it would result in sparks flying in two days' time.

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Ever the punctual ones, Christen, Julie, Sofia, and Vanessa showed up at Buuck Field House just before 6:00. The four of them entered the main arena and looked around for others from the lacrosse team who might have come ahead of them. Seeing just Deacon Schmidt and a smattering of others, they walked over to talk with him for a few minutes.

Julie: Hi, Deacon Marc. Wanted to compliment you on your homily today on the theme of love as action, which I think I heard a week ago at the opening service.

Marc: Yes. The freshmen and athletes got a sneak preview of today's message last Thursday. I did expand it a bit to bring in topics that upperclassmen might find more appropriate to their place in the academic timeline. What sport do you play?

Julie: Three of us play lacrosse and the fourth was in competitive cheer in high school.

Julie introduced the other three to Marc, who shook hands with all of them.

Marc: Sports near and dear to my heart. Erin did competitive cheer during fall and winter and lacrosse in spring. Almost thought she'd choose cheer over lacrosse when she came to Trinity, but TLU doesn't have the competitive variety and she's not all that comfortable with the idea of Acro.

Vanessa: I'm thinking about Acro, actually. It seems like it would be a combination of cheer and gymnastics, and I have experience in both.

Marc: How do the four of you know each other aside from lacrosse? It seems there has to be some past history since you're so comfortable with one another.

Christen: I went to high school with Sofia and Vanessa at Tosa East. Julie and I are roommates.

Marc: I live a few blocks east of the Milwaukee/Wauwatosa border on Washington Blvd.

Sofia: VERY nice houses on that stretch of road. Ness and I are technically members at St. Matt's across from Tosa East. It helped with getting into school here as well as tapping into certain financial aid categories.

Marc: Not as familiar with their staff as I am at other congregations.

Marc's eyes looked toward the door and he saw Danielle come in, looking SO hot in a navy blue midi bandage dress and nude strappy heeled sandals. He wiped his brow and diverted his eyes back to the women in front of him.

Christen: We're going to try and mingle a bit. I know Erin and Cassie were close to ready when we left Augsburg, so hopefully they'll be here shortly.

Marc: Nice meeting all of you, and know that my door is always open if you need an ear.

Once the players had left, Danielle went over to Marc and checked him out.

Danielle: Haven't seen you in something like THIS before (black short-sleeve mock turtleneck and grey slacks). I like it. Smart and professional, yet comfortable.

Marc smiled. "You always know how to make your best features shine, Dani. I'm glad my Danielle isn't here or she'd be reading me the riot act for even THINKING that you're hot."

Danielle blushed, then smiled at Marc. "Well.....I wore this because I had a fairly good idea that a certain someone would appreciate seeing me in it."
Erin and Steph came into the arena and walked straight away to Marc.

Erin (to Marc): What do you think?

Marc: I think it's charming and fits with your natural style. More importantly, has your "crush" seen you yet in it?

Steph: Yes, I have, and I told her that she was beautiful.

Marc introduced Danielle to Steph and Erin, who commented that her roommate is on the women’s soccer team and was correct about her being cute, which caused her to pause for a few seconds before responding. The three women set about for other locales in the arena, leaving Marc on his own against the south wall.

Shelley and Kelley came walking in, along with Lindsey and Emily. Steph looked over Shelley from afar and seemed to be a bit flustered. Erin noticed Shelley’s intense stare at Steph and walked out of the arena into the concourse to talk herself out of how she was feeling. Marc noticed Danielle with some of the athletic administration. Seeing his gaze, she signaled that he should join them.

As Marc was talking with the athletic director and other department members about his experience in sport and how they might be able to tap it in the growth of Trinity's competitiveness and offerings, he began to feel a bit light-headed, brought on by the heat in the building and his being in the middle of a group of people with no anchoring point, since Erin was still out on the concourse. He needed to get out of there soon lest an anxiety attack creep up upon him due to the claustrophobia combined with his disorientation and the thoughts running through his head concerning Danielle. He excused himself and began walking toward the east exit when he was cut off by Steph, who said that she was going to go track Erin down since she was probably the cause of her disappearance. Marc turned around and sped his way to the north exit, staggering a bit as he got out the door, sitting down on a bench just to the right of it. Vanessa noticed the chaplain’s condition before he left and told Christen and Julie that she and Sofia needed to go after him, since she felt she was one of the few in the building that would know how to help him. The two of them rushed out the north side of the arena and sat down on either side of him.

Sofia: Marc, I know what you're feeling. I struggle with severe anxiety, especially around exams, and have the feelings of claustrophobia that come from being around a lot of people with no easy access to an exit or an anchor person to keep me grounded. Vanessa is that person for me, and she can probably help you through this. Listen to her, OK?

Marc: OK.

Vanessa: Are you on medication?

Marc: Yes. Wellbutrin and Citalopram daily and Hydroxyzine as needed.

Vanessa: Do you have any Droxies on you?

Marc: There should be a bottle inside my jacket’s inner pocket.

Vanessa sent Sofia to go look for the bottle and to bring it back to her with a glass of water. After a few minutes, she returned with the necessary items. Vanessa handed a pill and the water to Marc, who swallowed it and then finished off the glass.

Erin and Steph came around the corner, having patched up what had caused the slight spat between the two. Seeing Marc on the bench, Erin ran over and asked what had happened.
Vanessa: It looks like an anxiety attack came on while he was in the arena due to the crowd and the lack of knowing someone in the room, causing him to get disoriented and claustrophobic. He's taken his fast-acting anti-anxiety medication, but we need to get him to a quiet place so he can come down from the attack and return to normal.

Sofia: Is there another floor in this building that we can take him?

Steph: There are offices and the weight room upstairs, but there is a private room on this floor that we can hopefully access.

Steph went looking for the Friends of Concord room, which was located near the south exit. Once she found it open and empty, she ran back to the group and they walked with Marc to the room. Erin said that she would stay with him while he calmed down. Vanessa gave her a couple of tips for accelerating the return to normal, which she said she would try.

**********

Kristie and Sam were scouting the floor looking at the possibilities. After their rendezvous on Thursday night, the pair discussed finding a counter to Steph that they could be comfortable with and who they would be able to share, thus not having to rely on each other to provide that bit of togetherness. They compared their opinions and came upon an athlete that Sam recognized from last year that might be a good option. Kristie took the lead in engaging her, with Sam along for the ride.

Alyssa Norman: No. I was a student here last year, before Concordia left and Carthage came up to become Trinity.

Kristie: Actually, I was joshing you. My sister said that she recognized you from around here last year. I'm Kristie and the tall one with me is said sister, Sam.

Alyssa: I'm Alyssa. Since I know Sam is a lacrosse player, I'll assume you play as well.

Kristie: Yes. What do you play?

Alyssa: Hockey.

Sam: Gotta be a goalie. Built like two of ours.

Alyssa: Obvious, right? No one would ever confuse me for a center or wing.

Kristie: Actually, I'm glad you're a goalie. Your mask helps keep your teddy-bear cute face from getting scarred or damaged.

Alyssa blushed at Kristie's compliment. "Thank you."

Kristie: I was wondering if you'd like to have lunch with me tomorrow.

Alyssa fidgeted a bit trying to decipher the shorter blonde's intention. "Maybe breakfast would be better. That is, if you can handle being up at 7am."

Kristie: As long as coffee is available, 7am will work.

As Alyssa walked away, Kristie and Sam discussed how best to entice her to be their joint other.
Days of Thunder

Coach Heberlein met with the athletic department's academic advisor, Casey Schultz, to discuss her team's academic plans and how to address the 18-player freshman class on her hands.

Lauren: Casey, can you pull up my team's roster?

Casey went into the department's database and printed out a copy of the lacrosse team's roster, then handed it to Lauren.

Casey: Just looking at the majors, I can say that three of your players are in programs that will need five years to complete, those being Savannah, Andrea, and Sofia.

Lauren: Can I redshirt them at some point so they're able to stay on scholarship to complete their degrees and potentially play for us in that fifth year?

Casey: It's certainly doable. There are a variety of redshirt options available, even at the D-III level. The medical one everyone knows about, as well as the non-academic qualifier one. What you're asking is for the ability to redshirt a player similar to what is done on the D-I level, where you sit them out one year so you can have them here an extra season.

Lauren: At Carthage, we never even considered this, because all of our athletes wanted to be in-and-out in four years and we had recruiting classes in the 5-8 range each season. With no juniors and only two sophomores on this team, plus eighteen freshmen, we're seriously out-of-balance and getting just a handful to sit somewhere along the line will help us bring in normal size classes following this year's smaller one.

Casey: So that would be three you could hang onto for purely academic reasons. Do you want advice on who else might be a good choice?

Lauren: Yes.

Casey: The first one I'm looking at is Shelley, because her major can easily lead into graduate school here and she'd then be on a six-year plan to get her BA in Communication Sciences and Disorders and her MA in Speech Pathology.

Lauren: That sounds like a good choice. Any others?

Casey: Steph Lafleur would be another possibility, since I'm not sure she can pull off the double major along with student teaching in four years. Christen also could be in a similar bind with her interpreting practicums.

Lauren: That could give us six to go with the planned seven for the Class of 2023. Might not need to do more than just the academically-based ones then. That would bring the Class of 2022 down to fifteen and give us ten in the Class of 2023. Any ideas on snagging transfers to fill in the 2020 and 2021 classes?

Casey: You'd be better looking around campus for upperclassmen who have experience already.

Lauren: Thanks for your help. I know that you have my players seeing you today and tomorrow afternoon and that things might change after that. Can we get together again next Monday to go through that and see what makes the most sense from our end?
Casey: Sure. I'm actually excited to see a coach care enough about their players' academics to want to know at the outset if there are accommodations that might be needed to their schedule as they progress through their degree programs.

Lauren left Casey's office and went back to her own, pleased with how the first stab at juggling the roster went.

**********

Kristie and Sam were discussing the former's breakfast date with Alyssa on Thursday, as this was the first time the two of them had been away from Steph since then.

Sam: You seem a little distracted right now. Any reason?

Kristie: Just looking to see if that adorable goalkeeper we both would like to have is around.

Sam: Sounds like you two might have had a good time on Thursday morning.

Kristie: You could call it that. She was shy, but I think I was able to pull her out of that a bit with a couple well-placed compliments and sharing my experience of playing with you. She has a twin sister who's playing soccer at UW-Oshkosh and they had played both sports together coming up the youth and high school ranks.

Sam: Where's she from, or didn't you find out?

Kristie: Port Washington, which is twenty minutes or so northeast of here.

Sam: Close to here, but in the opposite direction of Chicago.

Kristie: Right. What do you think of her?

Sam: I like what I know so far, which isn't a whole lot. She's definitely nicer than our Hoodrat and I could see us getting close like you want.

Kristie: How do we go about getting her interested in us as partners?

Sam: Best bet I think is you pursuing her on your own, since you're seen as unattached and me and Steph are rooming together. Once the two of you get established, we can work on sliding me into the equation. Meanwhile, I will do whatever it takes to keep Steph from meddling, even if I have to resort to her own game of jealous girlfriend to keep her nose out of you and Alyssa's budding relationship.

As the two of them were leaving Luther's Landing, Alyssa walked in. Kristie smiled at her and asked about getting together after her academic advising session later in the day, to which she said yes. Walking toward the field house, where the sisters would split, Kristie dragged Sam in with her and stole a kiss before heading to the weight room and Sam leaving to go to her American Literature class.

**********

The first half of the women's lacrosse team's players met with Casey over the course of the afternoon to discuss their academic plans and how best to reach them. Steph Lafleur told her that she'd like to try to accomplish her plan within the standard four years, even if it meant summer classes to stay on track. Sofia was told that her plan for the MOT degree would take 4.5 years and would require year-round classes, with which she seemed to be OK. Steph McCaffrey inquired about academic options
for getting a BBA/MBA from Trinity. Sam and Kristie were waiting for their appointments when Steph walked out and sat down with them. Knowing that she wanted to figure out a way for her and her sister to graduate together, Sam worked through her mind how best to pose that question to Casey. She was called and went in to meet with her.

Casey: Samantha, you're currently a sophomore, correct?

Sam: Yes.

Casey: Majoring in English with a Creative Writing emphasis?

Sam: Correct.

Casey: Looks like you did well last year in your classes and are on-pace to get out in four years without a problem, especially since the plan your regular advisor put you on when you enrolled last year is quite solid and the succession of courses just flow together with no hassle. Keep doing what you're doing in the classroom and I'll tell him and Lauren that I see no issues with you finishing your degree on time. Any questions?

Sam: Yes. I was wondering if there would be a means of picking up a minor or another major or just additional coursework to stretch out my graduation date a year. I'd like to graduate with my sister Kristie and she's only a freshman.

Casey: It's a possibility. Have you thought about what you might want to add to your program?

Sam: Not really.

Casey: Start there. Figure out what you'd like to pursue for additional courses and see me when you've decided. Then, we can adjust your plan to add those classes or tack it on at the back if it will work that way.

Sam: Thanks.

Sam left and Kristie was called back immediately.

Casey: Having just talked to your sister, I'm expecting that you'll be just as easy in the plan development department. I see that you declared a major in Elementary/Middle School Education.

Kristie: Yes, ma'am.

Casey: I'm not THAT much older than you, so you can cut out the ma'am thing.

Kristie: OK, Casey.

Casey: Like all education majors, getting it done in four years can be a real stretch, especially if you have goals of further education or a potential shift into secondary education that requires a full major in one of the content areas.

Kristie: So I guess that rules out trying to finish it in three so Sam and I can graduate together.

Casey: She brought that issue up as well and asked about extending her degree program so she'd be here an extra year. In your collective case, it's not possible to finish off your degree in three years, no matter how much summer school you do, how many AP credits you bring in, or how big of course loads you take each semester. The field experiences have to be done in a specific sequence and can't be done concurrently with each other. She CAN go an extra year and take on another major or minor
or additional coursework or seminars in her field, but you can't speed up your program to catch her.

Kristie: Her and I will talk about this at some point so we're on the same page.

Casey: I wish the two of you the best in getting what you want. By the way, no problems at the moment with the plan that was devised at pre-orientation over the summer. You still have a little flexibility in it for fun courses, but if you change your major, plan on an additional year to satisfy any general education requirements that might differ from those in the School of Education.

Kristie exited Casey's office and she, Sam, and Steph departed. Kristie went back to the weight room to get a bit of cardio in while the other two went back to their room. About ten minutes into her elliptical training, Alyssa joined her on the next machine and they chatted for the duration of their workout.

**********

Marc was in his office preparing for Trinity's weekly service when Danielle stopped by in one of her more flirty outfits.

Danielle: Marc?

Marc: Dani! What brings you to my neck of the woods?

Danielle: I wanted to make sure you remembered that our home opener is this afternoon at 4.

Marc: It's on my calendar. I might need to be working almost right up to kickoff.

Danielle: Heavy week?

Marc: Yeah. Something I didn't realize when I took this job was how much university junk I'd be dealing with. Tomorrow afternoon, I meet with the Faculty Senate, then the Board of Trustees on Friday morning. Monday morning is a meeting with the entire athletic department and Wednesday afternoon is the Student Government's bi-weekly legislative session.

Danielle: Why do all of those groups want your time?

Marc: The athletic department one is to ask me about my experience in intercollegiate athletics and how to best utilize me in support of them here, at least that's what I believe is the case. The other three are about helping them get on the same page moving forward and removing the bitterness that came from the schism on campus and resulted in the LCMS pressuring Concordia's Board of Regents to consolidate its two campuses or lose denominational support and affiliation.

Danielle: I guess lunch tomorrow is out.

Marc: Yeah. Sorry, Deuce. Friday after the Board of Trustees meeting is open. Shall I pencil you in?

Danielle: Count on it.

**********

The women's soccer home opener at Niemoller Field was a few minutes from kickoff and a good portion of the lacrosse team came to cheer on their fellow Thunder athletes. Emily was sitting in front of Lindsey and leaning back against her, while Steph Lafleur was seated between Erin and Shelley. Kristie, Sam, and Alyssa were a couple of rows in front of them. Jessie, Becca, and Savannah were behind the Mueller sisters. Sofia and Vanessa were getting to their seats a little late due to the
former's meeting with Casey in Athletic Advising. Following player introductions, Marc gave the invocation for the new athletic season at Trinity. He asked all patrons and players to take hands. During his recitation, Danielle, standing on his left, weaved her fingers in between Marc's and gave his hand a firm squeeze at the conclusion of the prayer.

Marc exited the field and join Erin and her teammates up in the stands. Erin introduced him to those he had yet to meet thus far and he asked about how they were handling classes at this point. Most of them replied that things were going well, but Vanessa brought up the heavy science course load on her plate because of her major (Pharmacy). Savannah brought up her meeting with Casey and how she was on a five-year plan to finish with an Master of Science in Athletic Training. Sofia then mentioned her five-year plan for the Master of Occupational Therapy degree. Marc took all of this in and asked about the advising meetings.

Marc: I'm impressed that Trinity has an athletic advisor. That's something you rarely see at the Division III level. Has she met with your entire team?

Sam: I'm guessing everyone except the seniors.

Marc: Erin, what kind of questions did you get?

Erin: The standard, I'm presuming. Major, past coursework that could accelerate your program, interests or conflicts that might make you take longer to finish.

Marc: Any of you advised about stretching out your courses into a fifth year?

Steph: She told me that she didn't think I would be able to play lacrosse, finish the double major, and do student teaching in four years without summer classes. I told her that I'd do whatever was necessary to get out on time.

Shelley: She asked me about whether I was considering graduate school in the future since Trinity offers an MA in Speech Pathology and CSD majors have priority entrance to the program.

Sam: I brought up the option of going an extra year so Kristie and I can graduate together. She seemed amenable to helping me do that once I figured out how to fill in the extra semesters.

Marc: To me, from the outside, it sounds like Lauren is trying to find a way to spread out your freshman class to keep a few for the 2023 season. The students on five-year plans, like Savannah and Sofia, can easily be redshirted so they are able to stay on scholarship for the fifth year, and others who might have trouble getting done in four years are also being looked at for redshirting.

Erin: I didn't think they redshirted in Division III.

Marc: They can, but it's usually rare. The medical redshirt is the most prominent one at this level, either due to injury or because the player is taking a year off due to pregnancy. Academically-driven ones are not so common, but if you're going to have athletes on elongated timelines, it makes sense to utilize that to your benefit. I had a number of players at my club that had been given redshirts because of injuries. The small college ones decided not to use them unless they were behind academically and needed the extra time, while the Division I players for the most part played the additional season available and stretched out their academic load to graduate the following December or May.

Christen and Julie and Jane and Andi joined the rest of their team at halftime. Erin asked Marc if they could go off-campus for dinner after the game, which he eagerly agreed to. The game ended 3-1 for the Thunder with Erin's roommate Cassie picking up an assist on the opening goal.
While most of the lacrosse team and their friends went to Siebert for dinner, Erin and Marc headed to Culver's for what was presumed to be a time to catch up.

Erin: Can I be open with you about my possible love life, Marc?

Marc: You told me last Sunday that you thought you liked liked Steph, so you've already been open about it.

Erin: Well, once we got back to campus that night and had finished with our hall meeting, the two of us went for a walk out to the lake bluff overlook on the east side of campus. We talked about being nervous earlier in the day with you and Danielle because for her, it was wanting to make a good impression, and for me it was hoping you'd like her, as though you were my second set of parents. After those confessions, we hugged and she told me that she didn't pull. I got a big grin on my face. Since then, however, things have been a little bumpy. There was the misunderstanding at the All-Sports Mixer followed by us not seeing one another much over the extended weekend. I want to tell her I'm interested, but I am not sure she can see me like that when Shelley keeps being obvious about her own intentions.

Marc: You don't have to be the first to get her, just the last. Express yourself to her, say what you're thinking and feeling, ask about what you're seeing from Shelley and find out if it's all in your head or if Steph has any intentions in that direction. Remember, this is a marathon, not a sprint. You don't get any extra points at the altar based on when in your spouse's evolution you showed up. Let her screw up a bit if that's what she wants. Have fun with the freedom as well. Get your puppy stupids out before trying to forge something. In my experience, women have a bit of a metamorphosis between their second and third years of college, after they answer the question "who am I?" and move onto "where do I fit?". Nothing good tends to start before then, and a lot of bad mistakes occur when you stay in neutral as life speeds past you.

Erin: I'll take it up with her when I get back to campus. Thanks for the advice and for keeping my confidence regarding coming out to mom and dad. I don't know when I'm going to do it, but I know that now isn't the time to do so.

Marc: You can trust me to keep it under my hat and give you all the support you need or want when the time comes. Since you've opened up to me, can I trust you enough to tell you what's happening with myself?

Erin: I think so. Does it have to do with the other Danielle?

Marc: Yes. As much as I don't want her to, she is turning my head inside-out with her flirting and little touches and actions. I've always thought she was cute in that college-girl way that I have seen on every campus I've attended or worked at. This is starting to be a bit different. I don't want to hurt her feelings by asking her to back off, because frankly I like the attention. It reminds me I'm not dead. At the same time, I can't keep being tempted by her because at some point it will go past me just being self-conscious about it and will lead to my acting somehow in response to her attentions and affections.

Erin: Eeeeeeeeg. Our Danielle is a jealous woman, so if she even suspects that someone is looking at you wrong, or you acknowledging it, she's liable to go off.

Marc: I know, which is why I want to confine this to campus. It makes it easier to control if I don't have this following me home at night.
Erin: You'll need to ask yourself how you truly feel about the situation and what could happen if you don't speak up.

Marc: If I say nothing or stay frozen, she will either be offended or will think she can continue to pursue because I'm OK with it.

Erin: When are you seeing her next?

Marc: Lunch on Friday. I know I need to say something, but what?

Erin: She knows Danielle, so if she is pursuing you, she doesn't care about the fall-out or isn't truly seeking to be a long-term replacement for her. Either way, you need to fill her in on what is what.

Marc: You're right. One more thing to work out this week.

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Dinner at Siebert was a bit strained. Steph McNamara came by and joined the lacrosse team's table, draping an arm around Kristie and making her uncomfortable. Steph, Shelley, and Jessie talked a bit, but the latter two did not seem to get on well. When Erin returned to campus, she stopped by Steph Lafleur's room so the two of them could talk about their situation.

Steph: Pull up some floor or you can sit on my bed and I'll bring over the chair.

Erin climbed onto Steph's bed and sat cross-legged. Steph chose not to bring over the chair and stayed on her bed, facing Erin.

Steph: How was dinner with Marc?

Erin: Good. We talked about our collective problems with women and offered one another advice in dealing with them.

Steph: Are you saying that things aren't so rosy at home for the deacon?

Erin: Actually no. His problem is that a former player of his is hitting on him constantly. He doesn't want to hurt her feelings by turning her down, but knows that being silent about it is only encouraging her to pursue him more.

Steph: Hmmmm....tough one there.

Erin: Yeah. Then there's my problem of being in serious like with someone that I don't think I can get and even if I could, I wouldn't be able to keep because, let's face it, I'm just not up to snuff in the looks department compared to some of the women here.

Steph takes Erin's hands in hers. "You have no reason to put yourself down, Erin. I thought you were cute when we first met, and you nearly knocked me out last Wednesday. Granted, I didn't handle myself well in letting my eyes wander. As much as I would like to ask you out and start pursuing something beyond friendship with you, I'm just not ready for you. I know that I would only hurt you in the end, and I don't want that to happen. I love what I know about you, what we've already shared in our two weeks here, and that if I didn't have this lust problem, I'd be interested in a relationship with you."

Erin: What can I do to help you in this matter?

Steph: Be patient with me. Continue to love me if you do, or like me like me if that is the emotion
you're feeling.

Erin: How do you feel about Shelley, because she seems to really have her eyes on you?

Steph: I honestly don't know her well enough to have much of an opinion other than what's obvious upon seeing her. I know she is trying to let me know she’d like to get with me, but I'm not in a place where I want that right now. If I can't make myself yours, someone I know fairly well and have much in common with, then I sure the heck can't do that with her.

Erin thought for a second, then went for broke. "Can I kiss you?"

Steph smiled and replied "I'd like that very much."

Erin scooted closer to Steph and leaned in so her lips were just a couple of inches from hers. Sensing that she was not going to close the gap, the slightly-shorter brunette went the rest of the way and placed a soft kiss on Steph's lips, which was reciprocated.

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A whirlwind week of meetings for Marc finally came to an end on Wednesday afternoon when he met with the Student Government Association to discuss their concerns regarding the evolution of Trinity's proposed changes away from the policies and practices of both Concordia and Carthage.

Over the previous six days:

* He addressed the Faculty Senate, commending them for being vigilant in revising the student code of conduct regarding academic dishonesty in light of technological and distance-learning advances over the past 20-30 years while also imploring them to reach out to their students as partners in remedying the relationship between the two factions that was part of the schism and which has resulted in a professoriate at Trinity that represents a much broader ideological perspective than either of the predecessor colleges possessed. He also laid out plans for addressing the Board of Trustees' reluctance to revise the student code of conduct since its implementation following the merger of the ALC, LCA, and AELC into the ELCA in 1988;

* He threatened to unilaterally impose on behalf of the bishop of the Greater Milwaukee Synod the ELCA's Social Statements on Human Sexuality and Education as well as its Draft Statement on Women and Justice if the Board of Trustees did not act in good faith to revise the school's code of student conduct and academic policies to bring them in line with those statements;

* He was granted oversight of the adjudication of student misconduct involving members of the school's intercollegiate athletic teams by the athletic department in consultation with the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC); and

* He was informed by Danielle during their lunch get-together on Friday, in response to his questioning, that she was indeed interested in developing a relationship with him, albeit a non-exclusive one.

Marc started his remarks before the SGA by informing them that he grew up three blocks from the original Concordia College campus in Milwaukee and gave them a short rundown of his previous college stops prior to coming to Trinity. As today's agenda included motions from several students on the expansion of programs and opportunities in the near future at the school, the chaplain kept his presentation brief.

Marc: After speaking with the Faculty Senate and the Board of Trustees within the past week, I come before you to lay out my plans for helping resolve the animosity between these three bodies
and how we as a campus can be a beacon of light to the broader world. With a student body that is significantly more progressive in social mores than either its predecessor in Kenosha or the student body which inhabited this place last year, combined with a Board of Trustees that has been reluctant to bring the school's code of student conduct into the 21st century, the time has come to get both sides on the same page and craft something that accepts all students' desires to love and be loved as they are and as they want to be. Therefore, the Board of Trustees has been charged with bringing forth fundamental revisions to the code or else have the Bishop impose the ELCA’s Social Statements on the germane topics unilaterally, ones which are MUCH more progressive than Concordia's or Carthage's. I also recommend that this body work on a similar document detailing changes that they wish to see.

SGA President Chad Markham: What is your stance on the rule concerning non-marital sex?

Marc: I believe that it is impossible to enforce a rule which forbids it and that it creates more harm than good to have one on the books. Therefore, the ethic of responsible sexuality will be employed.

Markham: To what end will you go to insure such a rule no longer is invoked?

Marc: After consultation with the Bishop, he is aware that I will dismiss any charge of misconduct against a student-athlete that is not in violation of the responsible sexuality ethic. This includes same-sex relationships. Again, if such a rule exists upon revision of the code, I will utilize the Bishop's authority to negate it.

Markham: Finally, how would you address the growing trend of "friends with benefits" relationships in the college setting and their place within that responsible sexuality ethic?

Marc: Responsible sexuality is based on the belief that everyone involved in a relationship, be it intimately or superficially, have the requisite knowledge to make healthy decisions and protect both their hearts and bodies from abuse or capitulation. As such relationships exist, those who choose to engage in them are responsible for making any intimate partners they may have aware of them. Thank you.

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Motions made before the board:

* By Jessica Fisher on behalf of SAAC: 1) The creation of an Athlete Ally chapter at Trinity; 2) The founding of a Gay Athletes' Association to be open to intercollegiate athletes as well as those in aligned majors.

* By Samantha and Kristen Mueller: The creation of an LGBT Resource Center in Albrecht to be staffed by students under the direction of a director jointly hired by the VP for Student Affairs and the SGA Executive Board.

* By Vanessa DiGregorio: The development of a competitive cheerleading program, to begin at club level with plans to move to varsity status for the 2019-2020 school year.

All motions were referred to the relevant committees or departments for hearings and approval.
Friday night at Trinity had the Thunder athletes spread out around the North Shore. Sam and Steph McNamara were invited to dinner and a movie night on-campus by Jess and Megan, with Morgan and Nicole joining them as well. The co-captains felt that getting all the non-freshmen together would help with cohesion and chemistry going into the season and help in creating a positive transition following the spring campaign. Steph groused about going, not seeing the value of getting to know these older players since they'd be gone in a year, but Sam was excited, believing that getting on good with them would help her in developing her leadership skills in preparation for being one of only two upperclassmen on the squad after this season. Lauren and Kelley went down to Fox Point for the evening, while Savannah and Morgan headed north to Fredonia. Lindsey, Emily, Becca, Ali, Christen, and Julie went to the Trinity Invitational at Buuck, where the volleyball team defeated Ripon College in straight sets and North Park defeated Olivet in five sets.

Shelley invited Steph Lafleur to join her at Bayshore for some window-shopping and dinner. Steph in turn invited Erin and Jessie to join her, with Erin reaching out to Kristie, who asked Alyssa out on a sort-of-official date with her since the other two members of her triad were tied up with the four seniors. Following their meal at BD's Mongolian BBQ, Steph and Shelley went into the mall while Erin and Jessie went to Barnes and Noble. Kristie and Alyssa decided to stroll the shops outside the main mall, spending some time in Bath and Body Works and Yankee Candle. Everyone was to meet at Colectivo Coffee at 9:00 so they could go to Kopp's for custard before heading back to campus or, in Shelley's case, home.

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Inside Boston Store, Shelley tried on a couple of dresses for future events, asking for Steph's opinion on them. The first was a cobalt blue sleeveless midi with a plunging neckline.

Steph: Cute, not TOO in-your-face.

The second one was another sleeveless one, this time in red with a choker collar and bare shoulders that stopped above the knee.

Steph: THAT one is a bit more dangerous. Careful where you wear that, because some guys might not take no for an answer if they see you in that.

Shelley: Or some girls, for that matter.

Steph: You one of us?

Shelley: If you mean a lover of other females' bodies, then yes.

Steph began to get just a bit nervous, as all of the little hit-ons in the past couple of weeks from her teammate have now added up to a full-on pursuit of her, complete with trying to trigger her more carnal emotions. Figuring that the best way to calm down would be to flip the tables on Shelley a bit, she went looking through the racks for something that could be used for an eventual candidacy committee interview. After a bit of searching, she came across a charcoal v-neck midi shift with long bell sleeves.

Shelley: Well, it's certainly.....you.

Steph: What does that mean?
Shelley: I think you're hotter than you make yourself out to be.

Steph: Maybe I'm not interested in turning people on. This dress is one that I'm thinking of getting for my eventual candidacy interview, and I don't think the committee will be trying to get in my pants, if you catch my drift.

Shelley paused while preparing a response, but thought better of arguing with Steph over her look. The pair went to the checkout with their selections and continued northward through the mall.

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After working their way through B&N, Erin and Jessie went to Colectivo to wait for the others and to get to know one another, since both were friends of Steph's.

Erin: How are you and Steph getting along as lab partners?

Jessie: Things are going well. She's willing to do the dirty work, and I handle the reports.

Erin: Good to hear. I know that her and I have this tightness that you and her don't yet, but she seems to like you beyond just the classroom.

Jessie: She's told you that?

Erin: No. I'm a pretty good reader of people, and how she lights up around you tells me that there's something you bring to your friendship with her that stirs her in a way that mine with her doesn't. Maybe it's because you're quieter and thus not as much in need of her attention as others are.

Jessie: You mean like Shelley?

Erin: Well, since you bring her up, yes.

Jessie: She's got no chill when it comes to chasing Steph. I know she isn't comfortable with it, but being as kind as she is, she won't tell Shelley to back off.

Erin: I'm not too fond of her, to tell you the truth. She can turn Steph's head with just a look or by wearing the right thing on a certain day. I don't like it, because I know that Steph's self-esteem isn't as high as one would expect, and that Shelley can play on that to gain her attention and ultimately her affection.

Jessie: I'm not looking for a relationship because my academic load is just too daunting to leave me time to be a good girlfriend for someone. I would, however, like to have a bit of fun while I'm here, and I think that muscular dime would be a good one to have it with.

Erin: We have something in common, in that we both want her in a more-than-friendly way. We also have something else in common, a joint distrust and slight dislike of Shelley.

Jessie: You know the saying, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", right?

Erin: Yes, and that is how we need to deal with it. After we get back to campus, come to my room with me and Steph. My roommate Cassie is away with the soccer team this weekend, so I've got the place to myself tonight. We can chat and hopefully relieve her "frustration" from being around Shelley one-on-one tonight.

Jessie: When you say frustration, do you mean what I think you do?

Erin: Probably. She will have gotten turned-on I'm sure being around Shelley and need to get the
racing thoughts about it out of her head. That's where we come in.

Jessie: You know, maybe the three of us together could become something. You know I'm not looking for something serious, so it won't hurt me to see the two of you become partners. I just want to be in on the action a bit. By the way, you're cute when you want to be.

Erin blushed. "You're not so bad yourself."

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On the way to Colectivo, Kristie and Alyssa chatted about what's starting to happen between them.

Alyssa: Thank you for asking me to join you tonight. I know that you spend a lot of time with Sam and Steph, so getting some time alone with you is a treat.

Kristie: I have a confession. I like you and am wondering if we could start seeing one another.

Alyssa got a smile on her face and looked into Kristie's eyes. "As in dating?"

Kristie: Yes, as in dating. I feel very comfortable with you. You have my sister's quiet and thoughtful demeanor, but with a cuteness that sadly to say she didn't get from the gene pool.

Alyssa giggled at Kristie's slight insult on Sam. "Funny you say that, because you remind me a lot of Amanda with how protective you are of Sam and how you stand up for yourself when imposed upon, like that night in the dining hall when Steph tried to make a bit of a scene with you in an attempt to, I don't know, mark her territory?"

Kristie: She is DEFINITELY possessive. She's also a bit amoral, in that she would have no problem seeing Sammy and I together in her midst. The only person who gets off on that idea is her, which is why both of us are against it.

Alyssa pondered what Kristie just told her, because it sounded a lot like the relationship she and Amanda share, one that is more developed than the typical bond between sisters. That declaration gave her an in-road to being the supportive partner that Kristie seemed to want and with whom the Muellers could be open about their more-than-sisters relationship.

Alyssa: What if you were to find someone who didn't press you and your sister to be sexual servants to them, but let the two of you do what you will without requiring a hand in it?

Kristie: That person would probably be able to win my heart.

Just before the pair got to the coffee shop, Kristie turned to Alyssa and kissed her on the cheek, then whispered in her ear, "If that is what you're offering, I might have to re-think how quickly I choose to move this relationship forward." She then kissed Alyssa on the corner of the mouth, causing her to turn slightly and place her lips against Kristie's, resulting in a light peck.

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Steph McNamara: Why did Kristie have to go out with all of those people?

Sam: Because we were busy and she doesn't want to be a hermit like you.

Steph: Doesn't she realize that the only people she needs here are you and me?

Sam: No, she doesn't, nor should she. It would make her a bad roommate to Ali, a bad teammate to the rest of us, and a bad classmate to the other students in her courses. Why are you being so uptight
and possessive about who she's around?

Steph: I don't trust others to steer clear of her and I can't just blurt out that I'm doing both of you, so stay away.

Sam: You know that Kristie's willing to stand up to you.

Steph: Just like I know you're not.

Sam got a call from Kristie on her way back from Kopp's, asking her to join her in her and Ali's room for some sister time. Sam left her room and went down to the lobby to wait for the group to return. When everyone got back, Alyssa, Kristie, and Sam went to Kristie's room for some bonding time, with Steph and Jessie joining Erin in her room for the same purpose.

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Sam was poring over a pad while working on an assignment for her Creative Writing class. Steph was on her side of the room catching up on the past week's copies of the Wall Street Journal and didn't notice her roommate's frustration. With the inspiration to write not coming, Sam's mind went to figuring out what to do course-wise in order to stretch out her four-year degree into five. Knowing that Steph would be no help in this regard since she would want to know why Sam wanted to do an extra year, she left her room and went down to see Alyssa, one of the few sophomores she knew at Trinity.

Alyssa: Sammy. Come in. Surprised to see you stop by, since you're usually in your own head space most of the time, not really flighty, just comfortable with your own company.

Sam: I've got an academic problem that I need some help in resolving. Since you're one of the very few here who has been operating under a combination of Concordia's and Carthage's requirements, you can probably give me the best guidance. Do you have the course catalogs for both schools as well as Trinity's?

Alyssa: You're lucky I'm organized like that. I have been trying to walk a very fine line with my own program since I couldn't take exactly what I wanted from either Carthage or Concordia's offerings and I didn't want to declare an individualized major that would pretty much parallel one that already existed.

Alyssa went to the shelf above her bed and pulled out the three catalogs Sam requested.

Alyssa: Here we go. Let's see what can be drawn up.

Sam: I met with our athletic academic advisor Casey a couple of weeks ago and asked about how to elongate my program so I can graduate alongside Kristie. She told me to see her when I had figured out what I wanted to do as far as pursuing a graduate degree or picking up a second major or a couple of minors.

Alyssa: What's your major?

Sam: English with a Creative Writing emphasis. I want to be an author of some sort, be it literature or drama or thriller fiction.

Alyssa: If you're thinking drama, maybe something in theater would be a good pairing with the English major. You know that both schools have individualized major options, where you can design your own set of courses around what you really want to study. Take a look through the catalogs and see what you might be able to pull together to get around 30 credits.
Sam: Thank you. I appreciated being able to spend time with you and Kristie on Friday night. She told me that you have a twin sister at UW-Oshkosh who plays soccer. Does Trinity play them this season?

Alyssa: They're coming here on Tuesday. Hopefully Kristie is free that afternoon because I'd like her to meet Amanda since we're going to start seeing one another. You should come, too.

Sam: I'll pencil it in my schedule. I'm sure a few of our teammates will be there as well.

Alyssa: Now I've got a question for you concerning my program and whether I can actually declare it as a major. I'm currently a Religion major with a Lay Ministry minor, but I'd like to switch to Pre-Seminary Studies since the school is now under the auspices of the ELCA. I heard from Kristie that you and her went before Student Government to request the creation of an LGBT center on-campus and that the chaplain had spoken about working to bring the school's policies and rules in line with the denomination's social statements. Do you remember what he actually said?

Sam: I had the SGA's secretary send me the minutes from the meeting so I had a record of where our request had been referred, so I have his comments and the interchange between him and the SGA president.

Sam pulled up the minutes on her phone from her email account and showed them to Alyssa.

Alyssa: Looks like the interchange was mostly on the Sexuality social statement.

Sam: He made reference to his threat to the Board of Trustees to unilaterally impose other Social Statements if they didn't bring the school's academic and student conduct codes up to date. I don't know a lot about this, so I can't tell you to which ones he was referring. Pre-Sem, huh? Looking to be a pastor someday?

Alyssa: Yes. I've been wanting to enter the pastorate for a few years now, which is why I chose Concordia/Carthage/Trinity for college, to have a better chance of getting into candidacy and seminary when the time would come. I knew that the school was changing hands after my first year, so I chose something that would keep me close to the Pre-Sem track without having to deal with the LCMS ban on women in the pulpit.

Sam: Sounds like we both need to see Casey tomorrow, and you should follow that up with a visit to the chaplain to get acquainted and start the trek to your future. Thanks again for your help.

As Sam got up and walked to the door, Alyssa followed her. Sam turned back and gave Alyssa a hug, which the goalie responded to with a peck on the cheek. She then whispered in Sam's ear, "Kristie told me about you and her and Steph. If I were her, I'd let the two of you do what you want and not try to force myself into the middle of it. I like your sister and I think I like you, too." Sam smiled at her and kissed her nose, then left and returned to her room to start her writing assignment again.

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Sam and Alyssa's meetings with Casey went well, with both able to change their academic programs to align with their professional pursuits (Sam adding a self-designed major in Theater History and Writing, with Alyssa switching to the Pre-Seminary program). Following her meeting with Casey, Alyssa went over to Luther Hall to possibly meet with Marc.

Alyssa: Chaplain?

Marc: Come in, Alyssa.
Alyssa: You remembered my name. I'm impressed.

Marc: It's easy to remember you, since you're a goalie and your first name is the same as the keeper for the Chicago Red Stars in NWSL.

Alyssa: Wouldn't have thought you to be a women's soccer fan. I played growing up and my sister Amanda plays at UW-Oshkosh.

Marc: I had a couple of players on my summer league team that played at UWO. Good program there. What can I help you with?

Alyssa: I am currently a Religion major and Lay Ministry minor, but I want to enter the Pre-Seminary program. I saw our advisor in the athletic department and she was going to switch me into it. One of my fellow sophomores suggested I see you to make sure that it went through and that I could start the process to begin candidacy.

Marc: I'm still getting my feet under me with that, but the synod knows that I take that part of this job very seriously, both in encouraging students to consider careers as rostered leaders in the ELCA and to help steer those interested through the hurdles. That's why getting those changes to the code matters so much.

Alyssa: The sophomore I referred to told me that you spoke to the Student Government last week and brought up your intention to get them to work with the Board of Trustees to revise the policies to bring Trinity in line with the positions the ELCA has taken in their social statements. The comments she showed me looked to deal only with the one on sexuality.

Marc: Because that's what mattered most it seemed to the chair. I actually have two other ones that I think are just as important to see embedded in our policies here. The sexuality one gets all the attention because it represented a major shift in thinking and ended a 10-year battle in the ELCA over the subject of non-celibate gays and lesbians serving in the church. The reason it is going to get a fair amount of focus from me is because the current code is seriously outdated and the penalties for violating it are extremely stiff, up to and including dismissal from the university.

Alyssa: Really?!

Marc: Yes. It hasn't been updated since the merger in 1988, so it is in need of major revision to align with the position of the church and the changing societal understanding of the matter. My view is that we need to move away from focusing on conduct to focusing on the motivation behind it. Thus, my taking the stance on the use of the ethic of responsible sexuality to determine whether something rises to a level of improper conduct.

Alyssa: I saw you mention that multiple times in your responses to the SGA president and I liked your explanation of how it is defined.

Marc: My preference is to have the school get out of the business of policing students' relationships except where there's been abuse or when the matter ends up in the public eye. I'm hoping that both the Board of Trustees and the SGA come up with revisions and we can sit down and hammer out a code that both sides can support, because if we can't, I WILL implement the social statement on Sexuality and, within the confines of ruling on cases involving student-athletes or with regard to recommending students to their synodical candidacy committees, will dismiss any charges against student-athletes or candidates for rostered leadership that do not violate the letter of the statement. I'm also going to press the Faculty Senate to incorporate the statement on Education and the draft statement on Women and Justice into revisions to the academic code of conduct.
Alyssa: The first one declares that everyone is entitled to the highest-quality education possible regardless of race, religion, socioeconomic status, disability, etc., right?

Marc: Yes, in a nutshell.

Alyssa: What is the gist of the Women and Justice one?

Marc: That we as a church have throughout history devalued the contributions of women through the use of patriarchy, sexism, and rules that support a view of the world that is too often centered around white, straight men. THIS is the one that, once implemented, will truly separate us from the predecessor churches and the LCMS, because it provides the justification to open up the Pre-Seminary program and its pathway to the pulpit to women. It will be presented and voted on at the Churchwide Assembly in August. I know the bishop would like to have all of this done before the end of the semester.

Alyssa: That leads me to my ultimate question, whether I'd be allowed to seek the pastorate following my time at Trinity.

Marc: Sorry if this comes off wrong, but I will consider you to be the poster child for why we will do this. You obviously have thought about your call to some extent and have done your research to figure out how to heed it without running afoul of the rules in place presently. We should schedule a time in the near future for me to get to know you and give you the practice candidacy interview that I will be giving to our freshmen in early Spring. Will you be at service on Wednesday?

Alyssa: Yes, and I think I'm going to purposefully come with Erin and Steph, because they are sisters in the faith and athletes as well.

Marc: Then perhaps I should give you a small tease of the homily. As you know, I've been talking about how love will be the way to forge this new university forward. This week, those three social statements will be the basis for explaining how love acts to bring society into balance and lift the downtrodden up, like women in a patriarchal church or our young and minority worshippers in congregations that skew old and white. The two you mention, I like both of them a lot. Of course, I'm biased as one is my goddaughter and the other is her best friend here. Did you know that Steph is also seeking candidacy?

Alyssa: I didn't know that. Guess I need to talk to her and compare notes.

Marc: You should. I think you'll get along very well, because the only people who truly understand goalkeepers are other goalkeepers.

Alyssa: True. Thanks for your time and I'll see you at service on Wednesday.

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After dinner, Alyssa stopped by Steph's room, where the two of them talked about her meeting with Marc and their current situations with women at the school. Alyssa opened up a little about her, Kristie, and Sam while Steph explained what was happening involving her and Erin, Jessie, and Shelley. They gave their impartial opinions about the options in a way that provided sisterly support for one another and fleshed out the underlying fears both women had at this point. The pair hugged before Alyssa went back to her room to call Amanda and find out if their parents and younger sister Abigail were coming down for the game tomorrow.

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The Trinity Lutheran University Thunder played a well-executed game against the Titans of UW-
Oshkosh, but their youth proved to be a weakness as a pair of late goals pushed UWO to a 3-1 win over the Thunder. Following the game, Alyssa, Sam, and Kristie waited outside the exit of Niemoller Field for Amanda. When the twins had come face-to-face, they gave each other hugs and kisses on the cheek. Alyssa introduced the Mueller sisters to Amanda and told her that Kristie and her were going to start seeing each other. Amanda congratulated her sister for her taste in girlfriends. Sam looked on and became a slight bit smitten by Amanda's smile and personality, as the first thing resembled Alyssa and the second Kristie. Amanda was pulled away by one of her teammates to get on the bus. The Norman sisters shared one more hug and flashed each other heart hands before splitting. Steph, Erin, and Jessie joined Alyssa, Kristie, and Sam and the six of them went to Luther’s Landing for dinner.
Losing The Plot

Sofia stopped by Student Health on Thursday morning for her weekly appointment with her therapist. As she was in line at the pharmacy, she noticed Steph Lafleur in front of her. Too shy to speak, she waited patiently to get her refills of Citalopram, Bupropion, and Hydroxyzine. As Steph left, she saw that the Latina attacker had been standing behind her. Remembering back to the All-Sports Mixer and seeing her and Vanessa with Deacon Marc, Steph put two and two together and understood why Vanessa knew what to do in that situation. She nodded at Sofia as she left, feeling a common thread between the two of them that would need to be taken up at some point in the future.

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Marc was in his office working on the development of a service for a pair of NWSL players whose wedding he would be officiating in just over a month, his first since being consecrated. Danielle stopped by for a visit.

Danielle: Marc, are you busy?

Marc: A little bit. I'm working on a wedding service for a pair of women getting married in Kansas City next month.

Danielle: You're allowed to perform weddings?

Marc: Yes. That is a change that came out of our last Churchwide Assembly in 2016. Churchwide diaconal ministers have the freedom to do them anywhere in the country, whereas synodical ones like myself have freedom only within our synods. To do one outside the synod requires a letter from my bishop to the bishop of the synod where the wedding will occur.

Danielle: How did you come to get the offer for one in Kansas City?

Marc: My many lives have given me opportunities to develop a large network of contacts. The creation of MUSC and the coaching module brought a number of current and future coaches across my path. When I told my network that I was finishing my diaconal education and looking to go into professional ministry, one of those contacts spread the word around to her teammates at FC Kansas City. A couple of weeks later, one of them contacted me and asked if I would do her wedding. I agreed and that's how we are where we are now. I also have one in early December for another couple from FCKC that will take place in Orlando. Both players were there for a couple of seasons before one got traded to the Blues in January and the other in June.

Danielle smiled at him and calmly scooted her chair closer to his desk, then leaned over and huskily voiced, "Marriage isn't my cup of tea. Sex, on the other hand, is a different subject. Care to see?"

Marc got tense in his chair, unable to respond verbally to the offer his former player had made. Danielle stood and backed up a couple of steps, then flipped up the front of her dress to expose her trimmed pubic area. She then walked over to the door and closed it, followed by closing the blinds on the left side of Marc's desk. She then knelt down and unzipped Marc's khakis and pulled out his member through his briefs, giving it a bit of a tugging to increase the blood flow in it and make it stiff. Once she was satisfied with his hardness, she unbuckled his belt and undid the button on his pants, followed by sliding them and his briefs to just below his knees. Danielle straddled Marc and sunk down onto him slowly, then moved back up before starting her riding of him. She whispered a few come-ons into his ear and worked to get her arms out of the sleeves of her dress before sliding down the top portion of it to reveal her above-average-size breasts. She climbed off of Marc and
turned around before sliding back down onto him. At this point, Marc began to get a bit more active, pressing up from underneath Danielle and sucking on her neck while letting his hands roam over her bare chest. The two established a steady rhythm and it didn't take much to cause Marc to orgasm inside her. Once he stopped bucking, she leaned back and rested the back of her head onto his shoulder while rubbing her clit to bring about her own climax. At the conclusion of her orgasm, she turned and kissed Marc's cheek before climbing off of him and sitting on his lap facing him.

Danielle: Mmmmmmm. That was what I was hoping for. Maybe next time, I'll give you something more at which to look.

Marc: And maybe I'll be ready to take more of the lead. I presume you're protected.

Danielle: Yes. Been on birth control for a number of years now, not because of being sexually active, but because it helped with my terrible acne.

Marc: Makes sense. I remember the first time we met, the summer after you graduated from Nicolet. You did have a few nice blotches on your face. Of course, I made a fool of myself by making an assumption about your position based on your physique, when in the back of my mind I knew what you played from reading Stritch's press release on you and Michelle.

Danielle: Yeah....was pretty bad that week since it was just after the Fourth of July and I had been cheating a LOT on my diet.

Danielle looked at Marc intently and gave him a light peck on the lips before leaving his office, leaving him sitting there a bit perplexed as to what had just happened.

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Ali had a two-hour break in her schedule following lunch and went to the Athletic Center to work out. After 30 minutes on the treadmill and a circuit of the weight machines, she went to check out an agility ladder from the equipment office.

Ali: Does Trinity have agility ladders for check-out?

Corey Herr: Yes, we do. I will need to hold your ID for collateral.

Ali handed Corey her ID and he gave her the agility ladder. She went to find an open space on the floor and found an open racquetball court. She laid down the ladder and began doing a series of speed drills. Corey looked on from the office and was impressed by her lateral dexterity and balance. 20 minutes later, she returned the ladder to Corey and got her ID back.

Ali: Are you an athlete....Corey?

Corey: Was a bit of one in high school, but never had enough talent or discipline to really challenge for playing time or to develop my skills.

Ali: What did you play?

Corey: Volleyball and tennis. I am guessing you're one because: 1) you asked for an agility ladder; and 2) you were very fluid in your movement through it.

Ali: Thanks. I have to find something to do during the off-season so I don't lose ground to the others here on my team.

Corey: What sport?

Corey: Not Alex or Lexi?

Ali: God No! I knew TOO many of them in middle and high school. I went by Alex for a while and my dad still calls me that.

Corey: Nice to meet you. What year are you?

Ali: Freshman. Yourself?

Corey: Freshman as well.

Ali: I need to get back to my dorm and shower before my 3:00 class. Nice meeting you. Do you always work on Thursdays?

Corey: Yes. 11-3.

Ali: I think I might need to remember that.

**********

Kristie and Sam's parents, along with Steph's mom, came up to visit the three of them on Saturday. The six members of the Mueller/McNamara clan went to Brookfield to eat and shop, then returned to campus. Kristie and Sam made plans to spend time with Megan and Jess and discuss their proposal for an LGBT Center and how to get it through the committee to which it was assigned. Steph was not too keen with that development and let her two lovers know that.

Steph: Why are you gone so much?! Why is it always the two of you going somewhere on your own?

Kristie: Because at times we need space from you. You know the kind of relationship Sammy and I have.

Steph: And I wish it were even closer than it is, because then I could be part of it.

Kristie: For the LAST TIME, Stephanie Ann, I am NOT going to have sex with my sister in front of you just so you can get your jollies.

Sam stepped in to try and mediate between her girlfriend and her sister, but to little avail.

Steph: So you admit that you ARE banging her, just behind my back!

Kristie: HELL NO! You can be so controlling and possessive sometimes, like you're afraid if we spend time with other people, we'll like them better and leave you by the side of the road.

Steph: Isn't that true?

Kristie: No, it's NOT true.

Steph: Maybe I should air out your dirty laundry, let people around here know you and Sam are screwing each other. THAT would put a major dent in your plans to be a teacher.

Kristie closed the distance between her and the angry sophomore, then spit in her face. Steph, even more angry now, reached back and sent her fist on a direct line for Kristie's jaw.
Erin: Sam, what happened and who did this to you?

Sam (wheezing a bit): Steph and Kristie got into a fight about her and I spending so much time on our own and away from Steph. She accused Kristie of sleeping with me and that she should inform people around here to that effect. Kristie spit in Steph's face, which led to her taking a swing at my sister and connecting with me instead.

Kristie: God that woman can be infuriating. It's bad enough that she's amoral, wanting the two of us to hook up so she can watch or participate and then hold it over our heads so that we're beholden to her. Now she's taken to being jealous and possessive.

Alyssa (to Kristie): As I mentioned to you when we went on our date last Friday, I would stay out of the way and let you and Sam be what you want to be, loving and supporting you in that. It's also why I wanted the two of you to meet Amanda, because doing some things together with us might allow you to hide your relationship in plain sight.

Sam lifted her eyebrows, not knowing that Alyssa had made a pitch to be available to both of them as she had not brought up the idea with her when she stopped by on Sunday night for academic help.

Jessie: It sounds like a mess. Sam, what are you going to do about her?

Sam: I'm going to stay the night with Kristie and Ali, try to avoid Steph tomorrow if possible, and then deal with her tomorrow night.

Steph Lafleur checked Sam over and tended to her throat, where Steph's elbow had made contact on follow-through after missing Kristie with her attempted punch.

Erin: I know it's sort of late, but let's get out of here for a bit. I know of a late-night diner on the east side of Milwaukee where we can go, eat, and chat without the possibility of ears or eyes making misinterpretations of our being together.

Everyone thought that idea was good. After Alyssa, Erin, and Steph had changed into acceptable clothes for being seen in public, the six of them left Augsburg and drove to Ma Fischer's on Farwell for some early-early-breakfast and solidarity time.

Erin took Steph and Jessie with her over to Marc and Danielle's place for her bi-weekly (or so) trip to do laundry and get a decent meal. On the way over, Erin asked Steph what she thought about Kristie's suggestion of a "date night" on Saturday. She liked the idea and asked Erin if she was asking her out, to which she replied in the affirmative. Jessie smiled on from the back seat, happy about this development. Jessie then brought up what she and Erin had discussed a few days before about the three of them sharing time. Steph was initially apprehensive, but Jessie warmed her to the idea by stating her desire to remain uncommitted and that Erin was free to pursue a romantic relationship with her. Before the three of them got out of Erin's car, they took hands and confirmed their union-of-sorts.

Erin: Papi! Where you be?!

Marc called out from his office, "In the office. Be out in a minute."

Danielle greeted Erin with a hug, then gave one to Steph and asked her goddaughter to introduce her to the third member of their party.
Erin: Danielle, this is Jessie Felder. She is Steph's lab partner for Bio 101 and is roommates with one of our teammates. Jessie, my second mom, Danielle.

Jessie extended her hand, but Danielle offered her a hug which was accepted. Marc came out to the living room and said hello to everyone. Erin went over and gave Marc a hug and kiss on the cheek. She told him that she needed a few minutes of one-on-one time, which he created by helping her with her laundry in the basement.

Marc: What's up, kiddo?

Erin: Steph and I are going out on Saturday night, like a sort-of official date.

Marc: That's great to hear. So Shelley is out of the way?

Erin: Not exactly, but Jessie and I have a plan for that. See, she feels she's too busy with school to commit to a relationship with someone, but would like to have a bit of fun with Steph if you catch my drift. So what we're looking to do is lock her up between the two of us so that Shelley can't invade and wreak havoc on Steph's mind and other parts.

Marc: So a threesome, in other words?

Erin: I guess you could call it that.

Marc scratched his head with how to respond to Erin, because what she just told him could have serious negative consequences for her potential girlfriend and herself.

Marc: I think I need to talk to the three of you about what you've stated, because it could hurt all of you a LOT if it were found out. The rules currently on the books make that kind of situation verboten, with penalties up to and including dismissal from Trinity. What's more, you and Steph would be booted immediately from the lacrosse team and she would be barred from entering candidacy.

Erin: WHOA! I did not know about any of that. I thought that when they passed the statement on sexuality in 2009, everything changed.

Marc: Well, the ELCA changed it for current rostered leaders, but most of the colleges haven't changed their student codes of conduct to align them with that statement. Carthage hasn't touched theirs since the merger in 1988, and Concordia's, which still governs residential life at Trinity, makes all non-marital sex a violation of the code. This is why we need to talk, so I can fill you in on what I'm doing and help you keep this under wraps until someone happens to revise that code.

Erin: We should go back up to the rest of the group, but I need to ask about the other Danielle.

Marc knew he could tell Erin and it wouldn't get anywhere, but felt slightly embarrassed to admit what had happened.

Marc: She came to my office on Thursday and, well, things happened. She, um, did me.

Erin: Ohhh....

Marc: I didn't mean for it to happen, but I was froze up when she flashed me to show nothing on underneath her dress. She came behind my desk and you can figure out the rest, I'm sure.

Erin: I'm sure Aunt Danielle doesn't know. How do you plan to deal with this?
Marc: I don't know, honestly. I enjoyed it. It felt good to be wanted in that way again, especially by someone as young as her. I know I should confess this to the bishop and take whatever punishment he feels is appropriate, but the act doesn't violate our school's HR policy on relationships between employees, since neither of us supervises the other or are even in the same department.

Erin: You keep my being with Steph and Jessie quiet, I'll keep your side thing quiet.

Marc: Thanks. I still want to speak with you three to make sure you don't get into hot water over it.

Erin and Marc came up from the basement and joined Danielle, Steph, and Jessie in the living room.

Danielle: Thought the two of you were digging a tunnel to escape and leaving me with these two.

Marc: Nah. Girl needed some fatherly advice and, well, you know Jim doesn't know some things I do.

Danielle: Right. Since you're back up here, can you stay put for a while? I need to go to Pick N Save to get some milk and butter for the potatoes.

Marc: I can keep these three company.

Danielle kissed Marc goodbye and left for the store. Once she had pulled away from the house, Marc asked the three women to join him in the dining room.

Marc: Erin told me that the three of you are sort of together.

Steph: Yes.

Jessie: Is there something wrong with that, Deacon?

Marc: Just that it violates the student code of conduct on the books presently at Trinity, one that carried over from Carthage, and that Concordia's policy still governs activities in the dorms.

Erin: The penalties are very harsh, Marc told me. Banishment from the lacrosse team, disqualification for candidacy, and potentially dismissal from the university.

Steph: Didn't the ELCA changed the sexuality rules a while ago?

Marc: The denomination did, but the colleges have been slow to stop acting under in loco parentis on the subject. I've already threatened the Board of Trustees that I will impose by Bishop's fiat the statement on sexuality if they don't change the student code by the end of the semester.

Erin (to Steph): Should we tell him about Kristie and Sam?

Marc: Those are the two sisters on your team, right?

Erin: Yes. Sam's roommate/girlfriend got into a fight with Kristie last night and ended up elbowing Sam in the throat after missing with a punch to Kristie's face. Since you're in charge of hearings concerning student-athletes, I told them to see you tomorrow about it if they wanted to file a complaint against the assailant.

Marc: Steph, Jessie, I told Erin that I would keep your situation under my hat for the time being in the hopes that the SGA will pass something soon that will get Res Life out of the sex police business. Having said that, you will need to be careful until an advance is made on that front. SGA meets on Wednesday, so maybe changes will come then, but if not I have an idea that I'll take up with Kristie and Sam if they come by to see me tomorrow.
Jessie: Thank you, Marc.

Steph: Yes, Marc. Thank you. My whole purpose for coming to Trinity would go up in smoke if this got out. No lacrosse, no rostering, just me as a Phy Ed. major if I were allowed to stay to get the degree.

Marc: You're welcome. Looking at the three of you, and seeing how you all seem OK with what you have decided, who am I to interfere with that? You're adults, and the school needs to stop acting like meddling parents on things that really shouldn't be their business.

Danielle returned from Pick N Save with the items she bought and the rest of the afternoon and early evening consisted of schoolwork and eating, with Marc in his office planning out the upcoming week's schedule.

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Before attending the first of their Monday morning classes, Kristie and Sam stopped in on Marc to discuss what had happened on Saturday night and get some counsel on the underlying issues which led to the fight.

Sam: Deacon Schmidt?

Marc: Come in...Sam, correct?

Sam: Yes, and this is my sister Kristie.

Marc: Have a seat. I've seen the two of you around a bit so far this semester, first at one of the soccer games and then before the SGA a couple of weeks ago lobbying for an LGBT center. I'm guessing that either Erin or Steph talked to you about what they told me yesterday and that you're here to talk to me about it.

Kristie (looking a little apprehensive): Yes.

Marc: Relax, Kristie. This is just a conversation between the chaplain and a pair of students. Pastor-Penitent confidentiality covers whatever is said here. I'm going to ask a few questions to get the framework for how things might proceed if you were to file a formal complaint against the assailant. First, tell me about your history with her.

Kristie: We grew up a couple of towns apart in the northern suburbs of Chicago and competed with and against each other throughout high school. Sam and Steph came to Concordia last fall as freshmen, with me joining them this year.

Marc: From what Steph Lafleur told me, Sam is roommates with the woman.

Sam: Yes. We roomed together last year and decided to stay together this year.

Marc: From here out, my questions are going to touch on some sensitive subjects. Remember, anything you tell me doesn't leave this room. Do either of you have a deeper relationship with the assailant beyond what you have described so far?

Sam: Steph and I are girlfriends.

Marc: Kristie?

Kristie: Her and I have a bit of a side thing going with full consent from Sam.
Marc: Thank you for declaring that. I will reckon that she was the initiator of both of your relationships.

Kristie: Yes.

Marc: Hence, the need for Sam to be OK with it.

Sam: Why does that matter?

Marc: The rule changes which I have been advocating for so far this semester will raise the level of responsibility for sexual conduct between students but will lessen if not eliminate the ramifications of having sexual encounters on-campus. Concordia's rules still govern the dorms, and they make any non-marital sex a violation of the student code of conduct. You know government, though. Always slow to act, and with so many students right now being caught in the crosshairs by the antiquated codes, there could be some real damage done at Trinity if things aren't resolved soon and a new one put in place.

Sam: I read in the minutes from the last SGA meeting that you're looking to impose the ELCA’s Social Statement on Sexuality if there isn’t a revised code forthcoming from both the SGA and the Board of Trustees. What would happen if that was put into place?

Marc: That statement would replace the set of policies currently in place. Within the statement, non-marital sex is addressed as part of care for creation, not as a form of adultery. It deals with the motives behind the acts rather than the acts themselves. It preaches responsible sexuality and open communication with whoever you choose to be intimate. I hate to ask this, but are the two of you "more than sisters"?

Kristie: No, and that is part of the problem we have with Steph. She wants us to be so and thus keep our separate relationships with her confined. She even accused us of sleeping with each other behind her back. It's why we've been, sort of, looking around.

Marc: That part is none of my business, nor should it be anyone's. Did either Steph or Erin tell you the penalties that exist should you be charged with immoral sexual conduct under the current codes?

Sam: Is that the part about being dismissed from lacrosse and possibly school if found to be having a multi-partner relationship?

Marc: In short, yes. Now you see why it's important that we get those revisions. Do either of you have a contact in the SGA?

Sam: I have the name of the chair of the committee that we have to appear before to make our proposal for the LGBT center.

Marc: That should be good enough to accomplish what I'm thinking. I want to get a moratorium placed on the potential charges coming down on various students until after the changes are made, but I don't know for sure when any of the two bodies responsible for making amendments to the code will pass something. You may want to record this or write it down, because the language is sort of specific and the procedure a bit detailed.

Sam: Fire away!

Marc: Contact your contact and bring up the idea of the code changes, asking where they are in the process of having something to present for passage. If they are not expecting to be able to bring something forward on Wednesday, tell the person that you have a request from my office to pass a motion stating that "In Lieu of an Official Revision to the Trinity Lutheran University Code of
Student Conduct, this body hereby grants to the Office of the Chaplain the purview to utilize the ELCA's Social Statements on Sexuality and Education, and the Draft Statement on Women and Justice, in the furtherance of its duties as they pertain to the adjudication of complaints involving the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics and the ELCA Candidacy Process.” In order to make such a motion and pass it, the relevant file needs to be moved for discussion.

Kristie: What would that actually do?

Marc: It will provide me with the ability to postpone or dismiss cases where the charges do not violate the Statement even if the current code forbids the actions named in the complaint. It also gives me ammunition to take before the Faculty Senate to eliminate the ban on women in the Pre-Seminary Program and the Board of Trustees to get to the table with the SGA and work something out by the end of the semester.

Kristie: Thanks for letting us come in and talk about what's happened. We don't think we want to file anything against Steph at the moment, because of the potential blowback if nothing happens with the moratorium.

Marc: All the same, I will put this into my own files for future evaluation should there be a reason to do so. Be careful out there, because once something hits my desk, I can no longer advise you of your options but rather would be sitting in judgment of the charges made.

Kristie and Sam left and walked to their classes, believing that the good chaplain had their back.

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Lauren and Megan made tracks for Siebert following their Interpersonal Communication class, as both were in need of lunch in the worst way.

Lauren: I heard from Jess that you were a bit of a Yente at Carthage.

Megan: I tend to have a good eye and nose for who fits with who and love helping make those connections happen.

Lauren: Could I get some of your thinking, then, on who might be good for myself and who you'd set up with who among our teammates?

Megan: I recall that you did a bit of a number on both Christen and Moe during Truth or Dare. Interested in either one of them?

Lauren: Maybe Moe, but she's a senior and I don't think she'd be serious about getting with someone having only a year left. Christen, however, she could be a better choice.

Megan: That is, if Julie hasn't already made a play for her.

Lauren: You think they're something?

Megan: Could be. Yea, they're roommates and Julie's from out-of-state and thus more likely to cling onto Christen early on to make her way here, but they are a bit cute and have a bit of a spark, I think.

Lauren: I guess the next thing I need to know is who is with who already in your opinion and thus who's left.

Megan: Well, Steph and Erin I think are a deal, same with Lindsey and Emily. Steph Mac and Sam I believe are carry-over from last year. Kristie seems to be spending time with a hockey player when
Kristie and Kelley were talking on their way out of their Foundations of Education class.

Kristie: Are you joining us for Date Night on Saturday?

Kelley: I don't know. I wouldn't know who to ask, my family is just down the road and my brothers apparently miss me like crazy, and I'm not very good at being "grown-up" when I need to be.

Kristie: The second part can be solved by stopping home for a few hours before meeting us at Bayshore. I think we're going to go to the Cheesecake Factory. It's a bit more upscale than some of the options there and will lend itself to a romantic atmosphere. As for the first, it doesn't have to be an official date. I thought about asking Sam to be mine, but with the trouble we've been having with our Steph, it might not be the best idea to do ANOTHER thing just the two of us. Besides, Alyssa and I are sort of seeing each other, so I SHOULD ask her.

Kelley: I probably should ask Shelley. We've known each other for a few years due to playing together for the Whitefish Bay/Nicolet/Shorewood co-op team. With her living off-campus, she doesn't get as many chances to interact with all of you. She has a bit of a reputation as a game player, but it's not really true. It's a front to cover up her own insecurity about her mix of looks and orientation, which is why she feels she has to be so aggressive with women, like Steph Lafleur.

Kristie: I hear you. Alyssa, Erin, Steph, Shelley, Becca's roommate Jessie, and I were out together a
couple of weeks ago and she was definitely making her intentions known to our lovable netminder. Wondering a bit about the potential conflict that might stir if she’s with us. Then again, we’ll have a pretty big group I think and that should quell things some.

Kelley: Sure hope so.

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Ali stopped by the Athletic Center on the off-chance that Corey was working. She was lucky in that he was on duty in the equipment office. After a couple of minutes of small talk, she mentioned Kristie’s date night gathering and asked him if he’d like to go with her. Corey asked if Ali was serious and she said she was. He accepted and they made plans to meet for breakfast on Thursday morning to interact a bit before the big evening.

**********

On Wednesday afternoon, the Student Government Association approved the founding of a Gay Athletes Association at Trinity, along with the organization's budget request for funds to host a kick-off event next Thursday afternoon at Buuck. The SGA also reported that the Student-Athletic Advisory Committee had formed an Athlete Ally chapter and would be encouraging winter and spring teams to designate one home match of their season as a "Pride Game" along with performing outreach to local high schools. At-Large representative Becky Sanderson made a motion to bring forward the file on the student code revisions, which was seconded and approved. After a couple of minutes of explanation from the Legislative Chair of the SGA, Sanderson sent a resolution to the table for consideration.

* Whereas the Student Government Association has been charged with the development of a new student code of conduct in collaboration with the TLU Board of Trustees, and

* Whereas the work of the university in adjudicating cases of violations of the present code(s) has been delayed due to inaction by both parties, and

* Whereas the Student Government Association is in agreement with the spirit of the ELCA's Social Statements, and

* Whereas the codification of these statements into formal policies requires more time than is being granted by the Bishop of the Greater Milwaukee Synod of the ELCA,

*** Be It So Resolved That in lieu of an official revision to the Trinity Lutheran University Code of Student Conduct by the close of the September 26, 2018 meeting of the Student Government Association, this body hereby grants to the Office of the Chaplain the purview to utilize the ELCA’s Social Statements on Sexuality and Education, and the Draft Statement on Women and Justice, in the furtherance of its duties as they pertain to the adjudication of complaints involving the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics and the ELCA Candidacy Process.

The representatives debated the language of the resolution and its overall intent, which Sanderson explained. Upon the completion of debate, School of Business representative Elizabeth Edwards called the question and asked for the yeas and nays. The resolution passed by a margin of 29-6, granting Deacon Schmidt the ability to use the social statements in place of the current codes in his work and in working with the Faculty Senate and Board of Trustees to adopt a new set of policies and rules that will bring Trinity Lutheran University into the 21st century.
The Trinity campus was somewhat quiet tonight as a number of students went home for the weekend. With such a large proportion of Trinity's student population coming from within a three-hour drive of Milwaukee, it was not uncommon for some of them to view college as a Monday-Friday job and spend a high proportion of their off-time back in their hometowns. This was another issue where the two founding institutions differed, as the out-of-the-way campus in Kenosha made for a student body that lived heavily on-campus and stayed on-campus for most of the semester, only departing over Fall break (which is in two weeks), Thanksgiving, semester break, and spring break. Concordia's location made it much more accessible to Milwaukee and points north, south, and west and their students tended to have a wider net of friendships at local colleges. Augsburg's hall director, Hope Stevens, had asked Marc to give a presentation to her residents on Wednesday night about building a campus community at Trinity.

Lindsey and Emily, taking advantage of some of the team being gone and in a pre-cursor to tomorrow night's gathering at Bayshore, decided to host a game of Truth or Dare in their room. Emily went up and down the floor inviting whoever from the squad she found home. In the end, the following Thunder players showed up: Steph Lafleur; Erin; Christen; Julie; Lauren; Kelley; Maggie; Savannah; and Becca and Jessie coming over from Katharine after Steph contacted them.

Lindsey: Since a good portion of our team decided to bolt from campus this afternoon, Emily and I were, let's face it, downright bored tonight knowing that tomorrow night we'd be going out with a lot of you. I, as well as a number of others, heard about the Truth or Dare session that was done on the opening night of Orientation and thought maybe we could have one tonight, only with a slightly bigger group and with people who know each other a bit now, which could make for some REALLY interesting moments. Each of you pick a number between 2 and 11, since I will be 1 and Emily 12, in turn and whichever one of you chooses the number that Emily has selected will get the first question from me.

The twelve women went around the circle selecting their number. Emily decided that the magic number would be 8 and Jessie was the lucky (or maybe unlucky) winner.

Lindsey: Jessie, truth or dare?

Jessie: Truth. Lindsey: Who do you think is the hottest person in this room?

Jessie: That's a tough one. There are so many of you that I could classify that way for different reasons. Total package, I'd have to say Lauren.

Lauren was a little surprised by her being chosen, because she didn't think of herself that way.

Jessie: Julie, truth or dare?

Julie: Truth. Jessie: Have you ever cheated on someone?

Julie pondered the question, wondering if her recent snuggle fest with Christen could be considered "cheating" on her boyfriend back in Phoenix. Thinking that it didn't, she answered "no".

Julie: Lindsey, truth or dare?

Lindsey grinned at the dare, since it was NOT going to be awkward at all. She slid a hand along
Emily's leg and up the leg hole before giving her slightly-wet pubic region a soft squeeze, which made her roommate moan.

Julie: Impressive. No qualms at all about doing it.

Lindsey: What can I say, I'm a bit of a risk-taker. Lauren, truth or dare?

Lauren: Dare. Lindsey: I dare you to take Kelley into the closet. I'll knock when you can come out.

Lauren: Roomie, let's go.

Lauren and Kelley went into the closet with Lauren shutting the door behind them.

Kelley: What are we supposed to do in here?

Lauren: They would like to see us go wild on each other, making lots of noise so they can get off on it. That's not me. From living with you so far and from visiting your family a couple of weeks ago, I know that you're really new to all this "freedom" you see around here and that were I to act around you the way I did with Christen at Orientation, it'd be overload. So I'm not going to take advantage of this situation to pressure you into something that you're probably not ready for. Instead, we can just sit here and talk, or cuddle, or just be silent together.

Kelley smiled at Lauren, seeing for the first time the inner spirit that this cosmopolitan woman possessed. She thanked her by pecking her on the cheek, which Lauren responded to by placing a kiss on Kelley's forehead. The pair embraced for a few seconds before getting up and waiting for Lindsey's knock, which came after 5 minutes.

Lauren: Maggie, truth or dare?

Maggie: Truth. Lauren: Who is the oldest person you've ever dated?

Maggie: My brother's girlfriend has an older brother who is in the Navy. During Fleet Week in Clearwater, she suggested we double-date. He was 23, I was 16 at the time.

Steph: That's a pretty big gap. Did anything happen?

Maggie: No. He was a true gentleman. Also found out later on that he was seeing someone who had been assigned to Quantico just before Fleet Week, so he needed a fill-in for the double that his sister and my brother had planned.

Julie: That's sweet. Your turn, Maggie.

Maggie: Erin, truth or dare?

Erin: Dare. Maggie: Lick the ear of the person to your left.

Erin leaned over and licked Steph's ear, making her shiver and think about how she might respond when her turn comes.

Erin: Kelley, truth or dare?

Kelley, being seen by everyone as a bit naive and sheltered, decided to choose a dare, hoping it wouldn't be TOO graphic.

Erin: Kiss the person to either your right or left.
Kelley's choices were Lauren and Emily. Sensing that Lindsey and Emily might be closer than just roommates, and having a bit of affection for her own roommate, she turned to face Lauren and kissed her tentatively on the lips. A certain spark flowed into the curly-haired woman and she banked away her thoughts of Kelley for a later conversation.

Kelley: Christen, truth or dare?

Christen: Truth. Kelley: Since I KNOW you're pretty adventurous from the last time we played, have you ever done oral on another woman?

Christen: Yes, many times. I had dated a fellow athlete at Tosa East and we pretty much did everything imaginable. We broke up because I chose to stay here for school while she wanted both of us to go to UW-Whitewater. I know it's not THAT far away, but I didn't want to deal with the intrusion that her popping in now and again would have caused, since I wanted to have a full college experience and could see my family whenever I wanted in the midst of that.

Julie listened intently to what Christen had said and felt a little bit encouraged to perhaps see where their "date" tomorrow night might lead.

Christen: Emily, truth or dare?

Emily: Truth. Christen: Have you ever stuffed your bra?

Emily: YES! Look at me! This set isn't exactly going to get anyone's attention, unlike Lindsey's or yours.

The rest of the group laughed at Emily's admission.

Emily: Becca, truth or dare?

Becca: Dare. Emily: Say one thing you would like to do to each person in this room.

Becca turned deep red because this was going to be hard, to come up with possibly eleven different things for the rest of the group. After a couple of minutes of contemplation, she answered.

Becca: Going around from my right, trib with Maggie, 69 with Savannah, eat Julie out from behind, suck on Christen's nipples, use a double-ended dildo on Lauren, kiss the back of Kelley's neck, lick Emily's breastbone, make out with Lindsey, place a hickey on the side of Steph's neck, naked cuddle with Erin, and strip Jessie.

All: WHOA!

Emily: I'm surprised you were able to come up with a different thing for each person!

Becca: I didn't want any of you to get jealous that you were getting a duplicate action from me.

Savannah, truth or dare?

Savannah: I better take truth if THAT is how far a dare can go.

Becca: If you could make out with anyone in this room, who would it be?

Savannah, being extremely self-conscious, waffled about how to answer this. She knew who she THOUGHT she'd like to do that with, but wasn't sure if that person would feel the same.

Savannah (covering her face with her hands): Maggie.
Maggie was taken aback, but used her being frustrated to check Savannah over and realized that she could see herself maybe wanting to try that out with her.

Savannah: Steph, truth or dare?

Steph: DARE!

Savannah asked Julie for a bit of help in coming up with a suitable task. With Julie figuring that Steph and Erin were "something", she gave Savannah a pretty naughty suggestion.

Savannah: Say something dirty to the player on your right.

Steph breathed deeply and caught eyes with Erin. She leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Tomorrow night, after we get back from Bayshore, I want to strip you down and give you the biggest orgasm you can imagine." She then kissed her cheek before placing a hand on her back and tucking her middle and ring fingers under, leaving the other three resting flush against Erin's spine.

Lindsey asked if anyone wanted to play a second round, which received a tepid response. Christen and Julie left first, followed by Kelley and Lauren and Savannah and Maggie. Becca and Jessie returned to Katharine, leaving Lindsey, Emily, Erin, and Steph to play a few quick rounds with each other.

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The lacrosse players on Floor 3 of Augsburg Hall spent most of Saturday hanging out in their rooms. As the afternoon started to wane, a number of them started preparing for the night's outing at Bayshore.

Lauren was ready early because Kelley was struggling with picking an outfit from her closet. Because she was so concentrated on her clothes, she had yet to see what Lauren was wearing. Once Kelley picked out her choice for the evening, she turned around and got a look at her roommate's ensemble. Kelley was almost speechless, but did find a few words to say.

Kelley: Lauren.....wow! You looked good at the Mixer, but this hot pink on you is stunning.

Lauren blushed and looked down, appreciating the comment but not able to look Kelley in the eye for fear of acting out-of-bounds toward her. Kelley went into the bathroom and showered, then dressed and fixed her hair. She came out and struck a bit of a pose for Lauren, hoping that she'd approve. Lauren got very flustered seeing Kelley in her outfit, because it played on all the cute parts of her that she found endearing and precious. Kelley walked over to Lauren and attempted to snap her out of her befuddlement.

Kelley: Earth to Lauren.

Lauren: I'm speechless, Kel. You have touched something in me that I didn't think someone could, the desire to want a person not for the physical but for how her inner beauty radiates through her outward appearance. I have a confession to make. Last night, when you kissed me during Truth or Dare, I felt something, sort of like a spark. Seeing you now, I felt something again, only stronger. You. Are. Beautiful.

Lauren took Kelley's face into her hands and kissed her on the lips, which her shorter roommate responded to in kind.

On the left side of Lauren and Kelley's room, Ali and Kristie were getting ready.
Ali: Does this look alright? I want to make a good first impression with Corey, but not be too intimidating at the same time.

Kristie: It looks good. Properly understated so you still look approachable, but also shows off some of your best features.

Ali: Thanks. I feel better getting your opinion than walking out blind. As for you, I would have thought you'd be trying to knock Alyssa off her feet tonight.

Kristie: No. I'm hoping something comes out of tonight between us, but I don't know her views on physical intimacy yet so I don't want to push too hard out of the gate. Besides, I don't know what she's wearing, and this is sort of right in the middle between what her style would seem to be and what mine is at its highest point.

Alyssa stopped by to pick up Kristie, bringing her a corsage.

Kristie smiled at her suitor and kissed her on the cheek as a thank you. The three of them headed to the ground floor where Steph, Erin, Christen, and Julie were waiting. Lauren and Kelley joined them a couple of minutes later along with Lindsey and Emily. Morgan was the last of the women to show up, followed shortly by Corey, who brought a single pink rose for Ali.

After a round of compliments on their outfits, the group left Augsburg and went to the Cheesecake Factory at Bayshore for dinner. Shelley met them at the restaurant, dressed to kill as usual. Once everyone was seated and their drink order taken, conversation began, with some of the Thunder putting the sole guy on the hot seat.

Kristie: Ali told me a little about you, like you work at the Athletic Center in the equipment office, but none of the truly important details that will help us decide whether you're good for her. Where are you from, what's your major, and are you an athlete?

Corey: I'm from Fort Atkinson, which is kind of in between a whole bunch of bigger cities. Southeast of Madison, almost due west of Waukesha, and northeast of Janesville. My major is nursing, and no I'm not an athlete at Trinity.

Kristie: Well, you pass the initial test because Ali was hoping to find a "normal" guy among the student population.

Erin: Nursing?! That's, well, a different choice of major for a guy.

Corey: My mom went to nursing school after she and my dad divorced and I got to see from her the reward of the job and also how it afforded her the ability to care for me as a single parent without the time demands a doctor faces.

Erin nodded and saw the logic in his answer, while recognizing that he was looking for a career with a certain work/life balance.

Lindsey: Did you play sports in high school at all?

Corey: Volleyball and tennis, but not very well.

Having gotten enough details on Corey, the ladies gave Ali a thumbs-up on the choice and went onto grilling other members of the group.

Christen: Lindsey, should we presume from last night's demonstration that you and Emily might be closer than previously imagined?
Lindsey looked at Emily and, following an approving gaze from her, opened up about them.

Lindsey: Emily and I began seeing each other this past summer, after both of us had decided to attend Trinity. We knew one another from the lacrosse circuit around the Twin Cities and had played against each other several times in high school. Our club coaches knew we were both headed here and suggested we travel down together for pre-orientation over the summer. We enjoyed one another's company and I found her humor to be a great contrast to my constant brooding. After we returned to the Cities, we exchanged phone numbers and hung out a few times before I asked her to join me at the WNBA All-Star Game in late July. When we came to school, we agreed to keep our options open for the first couple of weeks, but there really wasn't anyone I'd rather have gone after than her.

Alyssa: That's such a nice way to develop a relationship. Spending time together knowing that you'd be teammates here, then seeing if anything more might come about.

Erin: Can I just say, Christen and Julie, that the two of you look SO DANG CUTE together?!

Julie blushed and popped her roommate in the arm. "How many times since Orientation have we heard that?"

Christen: I've lost count.

Erin: So, are the two of you a couple?

Christen and Julie responded at the same time, with the Latina saying no and the blonde saying not yet.

Emily: Want to discuss this and come to one answer?

The two of them looked at each other and determined that they needed to talk about this after dinner somehow.

Under the table, Kristie and Alyssa held hands inconspicuously. The pair had grown closer over the past couple of weeks and were now officially together in the eyes of the team, although reluctant to display it publicly. Across the table, Shelley was quiet and looked a bit despondent. Noticing this, Kelley tried to cheer her up and encourage her to jump into the conversation.

Shelley: I feel like I'm missing something commuting. I wish I could convince my parents to let me live in the dorms, but Mom doesn't want me being "negatively influenced", which is just code for not keeping my eyes on her prize, which is an upwardly-mobile marriage and a grandbaby for her to dote upon.

Steph and Erin both chimed in with their own struggles in living their lives, as Steph's mom has yet to come to terms with her being gay, believing that she can't know that at such a young age and with no real dating experience, and Erin's parents not knowing about their daughter's sexual orientation. Shelley more or less ignored Erin's comments but took Steph's outward declaration of playing for her team as a sign that she could pursue her even harder. Kelley bit her tongue so as not to have something nasty start at the table concerning the three of them.

Moe: Lauren, don't think I forgot about what you did to me during Truth or Dare. Were you trying to turn me on or just playing with me?

Laurel: At the time, I was trying to get a rise out of you, and up until last night I was still thinking that you'd be someone I'd want to possibly get to know physically, which is why I asked you to join me tonight as my "date".
Moe: What changed?

Lauren: Someone stepped forward and left me beside myself with how I felt about her. Sorry if I misled you, Morgan.

Moe: It's OK. I'm not looking to find my Prince or Princess Charming at Trinity since I'll only be here a year before returning to St. Louis after graduation.

While waiting for the check to arrive, Shelley was giving some serious attention to Steph through her eyes, which did not go unnoticed by the goalkeeper. Despite not wanting to respond, Steph unwittingly caught eyes with Shelley, which Erin noticed. After the check was paid and everyone had gathered outside to continue the evening, Erin told Steph that she wasn't feeling well and that she planned to head back to campus. She asked Kristie if she would be able to bring Steph back to campus with her and Alyssa, to which she said yes.

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Erin texted Jessie on her way back to Trinity, telling her to meet her in ten minutes in the lobby of Augsbug. Once back, she and Jessie went up to her room, where Erin told her about what had happened at dinner.

Erin (slightly weeping): I don't get it. I thought after the three of us agreed to become a triad, Steph would not continue to let Shelley chase after her. Apparently, I was wrong.

Jessie embraced Erin and placed a kiss on her forehead. "That girl has gotta be dealt with."

Erin: The worst thing about this is that Kelley for some reason feels sorry for her and is trying to help her out by including her with us, but all it is doing I think is giving her free access to our woman.

Jessie: We need to talk to Kelley at some point and find out what the case is with Shelley.

Erin's phone rang with a call from Kristie. "Erin, can Alyssa, Kelley, and I stop by when we return to campus?"

Erin: Sure. Jessie is here with me right now, and I'd like her to be able to stay when you come by.

Kristie thought that would be a good idea since she learned from Alyssa after her girlfriend took Steph to task that she's sort of in a relationship with both Erin and Jessie and thus having everyone in the room together might allow things to be discussed openly.

After hanging up, Erin filled Jessie in on the conversation and they returned to plotting how to keep Steph away from Shelley's claws while also trying to find out where Kelley's loyalties lied.

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Kelley: Before you decide to light into me, Erin, let me say that I did not know that Shelley was going to be so brazen about her intentions related to Steph.

Kristie (to Kelley): Remember I warned you when you mentioned asking her to come that there could be some fireworks since we had seen Steph spending time with Erin and that she might not take too kindly to having her bore holes into her person with her eyes.

Kelley: True, Kristie, but I thought that she wouldn't dare try it with the two of them together in front of her, that she'd have more common sense.
Alyssa: Guess not. It's the same thing Kristie and I are dealing with with the other Steph. THAT girl has no sense at all, as her attack on Kristie and Sam last weekend proved.

Steph: Can I say a couple of things before you hang me up by my ovaries? First, I told you, Erin, that I wasn't ready for you, that I'd hurt you over and over if we started dating now because I have a problem with not being able to keep my two heads from overruling whatever my heart might want. Secondly, Alyssa, your punch in the gut about how I'm risking losing her by not telling Shelley to go away doesn't take into account the fact that I can't get out of my own head when she's casting all her attention on me. I WANT to say something, but I can't make myself do it. I'm going to confess what is truly in my mind and heart, and I hope you will choose to believe me. I do love Erin. She's the woman that I want to have standing there at the end of this journey at Trinity, but I can't risk hurting her and having her NOT be there in May of 2022 right now. I ask again for patience from you, Erin, and for you, Jessie, to help both of us ride out the turmoil that is stirring because I can't be who I would like to be right now.

Kelley: Steph, I can tell that you are shaken by the fight in your own mind and heart over resolving this. I think I can help you out a little by: 1) helping you to understand some of the why of Shelley's aggressiveness; and 2) working with Erin and Jessie to protect you from her.

Jessie: Fill us in, since you seem to know her best of anyone here.

Kelley: If you recall earlier tonight, Shelley mentioned the battle that she is having with her mom. It goes straight to her sexual identity. Her mom doesn't want her to be gay, because she doesn't believe that she can "marry up" as a gay woman. She has certain facts on her side, but not all of them. Gay women are personally the most upwardly-mobile of the four sex/orientation combinations and their median incomes are the highest of the four as well. What Mary is focusing on is the potential to find a spouse whose background will elevate her and by association the whole Zembruski family into a higher strata. Shelley is fighting against that, as you heard, and she is making bad decisions because of it.

Erin: How does her father feel about it?

Kelley: Peter is supportive of her. In fact, I heard him tell Mary once, "I'd rather she be gay than pregnant." He teaches math at a private high school on the south side of Milwaukee that is populated heavily by underprivileged students. He also coaches basketball at an MPS high school nearby. He sees on a daily basis what can happen when you allow outside influences to govern your life. In the case of his students and players, it's the older men and the street element around the girls that have the greatest potential to short-circuit their ability to succeed and escape through education or athletics the lives they currently have.

Kristie: So how do we help Steph, Erin, and Jessie fend off these non-verbal attacks against their relationship?

Kelley: Alyssa is probably the best person to give Steph the what-for when things go awry, because goalies have that weird connection, almost telepathic where they understand each other better than anyone else can. As for the other two, they can rely on me to have their back in my dealing with Shelley. I understand her and I HOPE I can be a positive influence on her to finally take control of herself and get away from the destructive behavior she exhibits. I DO NOT excuse her actions against you. In fact, at times I'm almost embarrassed to admit I know her.

Alyssa: I think we need to let the three partners here work out what they need to work out.

Alyssa, Kristie, and Kelley left Erin and Cassie's room, leaving Steph, Erin, and Jessie to further discuss their situation. Kelley returned to her room, where Lauren was waiting. After a couple of
minutes of small talk, Lauren opened up to Kelley about her burgeoning feelings for her, which led Kelley to open up in return, ending with Kelley coming over onto Lauren's bed and cuddling with her.

As Kristie approached her and Ali's room with Alyssa, they saw Ali give Corey a kiss on the cheek and enter the room. Alyssa gave Corey a fist bump as he passed her and Kristie, with the other smiling at him, happy to see her roommate and friend happy. When the couple reached Kristie's door, the two coyly tried to say goodnight before Kristie sprung forward and surprised Alyssa with a kiss on the mouth. Once her senses came to her, the teddy bear of a goalkeeper reciprocated and the pair spent a couple of minutes exchanging pecks before Alyssa left and Kristie went inside.
Marc was invited by Augsburg's hall director, Hope Stevens, to speak to the residents about how to create an open and engaging campus culture based on his experience at colleges and universities across the Midwest. Before the meeting, Marc and Hope scheduled a follow-up meeting on Friday over lunch to discuss how the two could work together to move Trinity to that middle ground, where students want to stay on-campus but also aren't doing so to hide from the world.

Marc: Greetings! I recognize some of you from my goddaughter Erin's lacrosse team, but a lot of you are new to me. Let me introduce myself. My name is Marc Schmidt and I am the chaplain here at TLU. Now you might be wondering why a campus chaplain is being asked to give a talk on campus culture. I bring a very unique perspective to Trinity. Our synod's bishop appointed me to this post because he considered me a triple threat when it came to the college setting, having experience in student affairs, campus ministry, and intercollegiate athletics. I also spent time in graduate student government and academic development. Over the past close to 30 years, I have been on campuses as small as 1200 students and as large as 35,000, with others falling inside that range. The focus, or dare I say directive, of this first year in the life of Trinity Lutheran University is to lay the groundwork for its future following the melding of two student bodies alongside a new set of students for whom TLU will be their first taste of post-secondary education. I am going to ask for participation at several points tonight, so I can get a proper feel for the audience here. Raise your hand if you are a transfer from Carthage.

Several hands went up.

Marc: Who here are holdovers from Concordia?

Sam, Alyssa, and Becky Sanderson were the only ones for whom that was true.

Marc: And the rest of you I will presume are freshmen. I asked that because those designations represent the three cohorts that are expected to be one unified community on this campus and also represent the poles from which this community will need to find common ground. Can I get one of the transfers to describe Carthage's campus environment to the rest?

Morgan Brooks: Carthage was a close-knit community. The campus was in a way isolated from the rest of Kenosha, which made it even more isolated from Milwaukee and Chicago than one would think. Students weren't allowed to live off-campus until their senior year and it felt like boarding school, to be honest, with us hidden away from the rest of the world to pursue academic excellence and to stir up as much trouble as we could amongst ourselves.

Marc: Thank you....

Moe: Morgan.

Marc: Now will someone offer up their impressions of Concordia's residential life?

Sam: Campus life here last year was at times stifling because of the war going on between the Board of Regents and Student Government over what was acceptable and unacceptable during the interregnum between Concordia merging the student body here with the one in Ann Arbor and the arrival of Trinity Lutheran University. A LOT of students left campus on the weekends because they didn't want to deal with the ever-changing rules in the dorms, and there was nothing being done to give them a reason to stick around.
Marc: Thanks, Sam. Morgan and Sam eloquently explained the two extremes of the residential life spectrum, with Carthage trending toward the "bubble" end and Concordia on the "commuter college" side of the line. These are the points from which Trinity needs to develop a happy medium, one where campus life provides a reason for students to engage in it while also allowing them to take part in all the greater Milwaukee area offers. Do we have any locals who have chosen to stay in the dorms?

A number of hands went up, leading Marc to call upon one of them to explain why they chose to live on-campus as opposed to commute.

Becky: I commuted my first two years at Concordia and it was alright, but with my academic course load picking up and being part of student government this year, I felt I needed to be on-campus full-time in order to give myself the best opportunity to succeed on all fronts.

Marc: Solid answer, Becky is it?

Becky: Right. Surprised you knew it.

Marc: I remember you from last week's SGA meeting. By the way, thank you for your work in helping us get the ball rolling on the changes to the student code.

Marc then gave a brief explanation of how residential life can lead the way in growing a vibrant campus culture, based on his experience at Drake University.

Marc: I started college at a somewhat small school in Iowa. 4000 students on a suburban campus just west of the state capitol. In order to promote a close-knit college experience, each residence hall on campus was responsible for planning and executing one all-campus event during the year. They ranged from a courtyard party on the Saturday night before the start of fall semester hosted by the "freshman dorm" to casino night in another hall to a Yacht party in another (think Love Boat in a residence hall). With a captive student audience, it helped keep students on-campus on the weekends and tied-in to what was happening outside of their own circle of friends or floormates. Before I go on, I have a question for Hope. What has been your experience so far with outside forces seeking to hamstring you in doing your job?

Hope: If you mean are mommy and daddy calling every five minutes wondering if their precious snowflakes are being good little boys and girls, then I'd say that it hasn't been as bad here this year as it was the last two years as Concordia. I would be dealing with parents on a weekly basis asking what their kids were doing on the weekends and whether I had found them with any illegal substances or in the company of less-desirable members of the campus community.

Marc: The notion of "in loco parentis" has taken a sharp turn over the past 30 years or so, I'd say. What used to be handing over parenting responsibility to the university has now become utilizing the university as their eyes and ears. It's like babysitting instead of foster care, to make an analogy. We need to allow students to f-up in a controlled environment, where one or two mistakes won't doom them for the rest of their lives or won't be used to take them away from campus because someone's ego got a bit bruised by their kid not living up to some perfect standard. Have any of you had issues with your parents being just a bit too involved in your business, or have a relationship with them where you're expected to keep them clued in on practically everything you do?

One of the students raised her hand and Marc called on her.

Cali Farmer: My mom calls me two or three times a day to make sure I made it to my classes and that I went to the dining hall for dinner and am staying up on my academics. It's infuriating. I know she cares, but this hovering from afar is a bit much.
Marc: Anyone else having this problem?

Jennifer Holland: I come from Grafton, so my parents are REALLY close. They come down a couple of times a week to take me out to dinner or to pick me up to go home for the weekend or to go shopping for stuff for me. I'm grateful that they are supportive of me going to school here, but sometimes I wish they'd let me fend for myself around here. Learn to get by on the dorm food or to catch lifts into town to do things when my roommate or dorm mates are going off-campus.

Marc: Thank you for sharing. In your cases, your parents think they are helping you by not letting you have negative experiences, but all it does is sap you of the resiliency you need to survive four years or more in a place where not everyone is your friend and not everything comes easy. In the case Hope gave, which is much more nefarious, parents usurp their kids' independence by trying to fight their battles with the university, be it dorm staff or professors or seeking medical information on them from student health, believing they have a right to know and that their checkbook dictates how far they can go in pursuit of said knowledge. My wife had to charge a student with plagiarism a number of years ago when she taught at Western Michigan. His parents came in and asked the department chair for copies of the syllabus and wanted to be pointed to the section where it said that plagiarism was unacceptable.

Erin chuckled under her breath, imagining what Danielle was like as a college instructor and also relating to stories Val had told her about her students at Grand Valley State. She also heard Lindsey and Emily laugh at the assertion Marc made.

Marc: In closing, I encourage you to get to know your roommate, your floor mates, your dorm mates, your classmates, and even go out of your way to make friends with people that you know are not like you. It will help bring this community together and will project a light on this campus that sadly is still in the midst of bitterness and resentment over the events of the past two or three years. Thank you.

Erin, Steph, Alyssa, Kristie, and Sam came up to Marc after most of the residents left for elsewhere. He checked in with Sam about how things were going with her roommate and asked Alyssa and Steph if they wanted to join him tomorrow at the Faculty Senate meeting where he would be proposing a repeal on the ban for women in the Pre-Seminary Program. Alyssa remembered what Marc had told her when they met last week about seeing her as the reason why the ban needed to be lifted and said she'd be honored to be there, with Steph saying that she'd be there as well. Before Marc departed, Erin gave him a hug and peck on the cheek in front of the rest of her teammates and friends, drawing a couple of looks before Steph went up and did the same. Marc left Augsburg for home and the ladies returned to the third floor to get back to studying and schoolwork.

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With Student Government's imprimatur in his hand, Marc's appearance before the Faculty Senate this afternoon would hopefully bring about the second legislative victory of his tenure, the repeal of the ban on women in the Pre-Seminary Program. Alyssa and Steph Lafleur would be joining him as examples of what opening the path to the pulpit to all would accomplish.

As the two student-athletes and Marc entered the lecture hall holding today's session, he saw Danielle down near the front, talking with a couple members of the senate's executive committee. He tried not to stare at her, but it was quite difficult as she was definitely turning him on with her choice of apparel today.

Once his two charges found seats, he went down to speak with the Faculty Senate secretary about his place in the agenda and the potential of calling upon either Alyssa or Steph to say a few words about the need for the repeal
Once his two charges found seats, he went down to speak with the Faculty Senate secretary about his place in the agenda and the potential of calling upon either Alyssa or Steph to say a few words about the need for the repeal. Following that short back-and-forth, he went over to Danielle and inquired about her being at the meeting.

Marc: This is a surprise. What brings you to today's meeting? Can I just say that you are making me lose my concentration just a little. Oh the things I could think of doing with and to you dressed like that.

Danielle: I am asking the Faculty Senate to grant me a waiver from the Exercise Physiology course so I can enter the MS program in Applied Exercise Science, with my education degree and past coaching experience being sufficient background to make taking that course a waste.

Danielle then leaned in and said to Marc, "I wore this knowing that you'd be here today to petition for the repeal of the Pre-Sem ban on women. If you want to get me out of it, all you have to do is ask. See you afterwards?"

Marc gulped, then replied, "Follow me back to Luther and it will be worth your while." He wished Danielle luck and offered a side hug to her, which was accepted.

The first 25 minutes of the session were spent on introducing measures for combining majors that were offered by both predecessor institutions, along with merging courses that were similar in scope and difficulty. With an omnibus academic bill in development for presentation at November's meeting that would cover most of the changes necessary to allow for student registration for Spring semester, the chair moved onto the first of several academic issues before the Senate this afternoon, the redevelopment of the Pre-Seminary Program and divorcing spiritual formation from academic preparation, as is the case in the ELCA but isn't in the LCMS.

Marc: Good afternoon. I come before you seeking to bring our academic policies regarding theological education in line with the process that the ELCA uses for candidacy and academic preparation. Under previous management here, students applied to the Pre-Seminary Program first and then, once accepted, were guided through the process of finishing one or two majors in religion and theological languages and applying to seminary, either at Concordia in St. Louis or Concordia in Fort Wayne. The ELCA’s process has those two parts divorced. Students seeking to become rostered leaders apply for candidacy through their synod's candidacy committee, based on the recommendation of their parish or college pastor, as early as the conclusion of their first year of university study. They then declare their major(s) and minor(s) in conjunction with a positive candidacy decision and apply to seminary independent of the candidacy decision. They have until they finish their junior year of seminary (Year 1 of 3) to get a positive decision from their synodical committee, thus why those two parts of the process are not tied together. Following the resolution passed by the SGA last Wednesday giving me the purview to use ELCA's Social Statements on germane topics relevant to my duties in lieu of passed legislation which revises the university's codes of Academic Conduct and Student Conduct, I penned on behalf of them and the Greater Milwaukee Synod the proposal sitting at the desk.

Senate Chair Amanda Duckworth: Clerk will read the title.

Clerk: A proposal to redevelop the Pre-Seminary Program and for other purposes.

Duckworth: The chair recognizes Deacon Schmidt.

Marc: Thank you. The main purpose of this legislation is to 1) separate the academic and spiritual aspects of pre-seminary education, and 2) bring into line the policies of the Pre-Seminary Program with those of the ELCA. As I explained at the start, presently the two parts of undergraduate
theological education are combined, but the ELCA's process divorces them, allowing for students to seek further education for self-enrichment or a career outside the walls of a congregation without having to go through the candidacy process. Passing this today will allow Trinity to be in line with the rest of the ELCA colleges and universities on this matter. The second part goes to the heart of the subject. The current admission standards and policies for the Pre-Seminary Program, inherited from Concordia, bans women from entrance, causing some to have to declare an individualized major that is nothing more than a copy of the Pre-Sem course requirements in order to then seek further education. The ELCA by way of its predecessor denominations has ordained women since the 1970s and this has never been re-visited for change or repeal since the merger in 1988. We MUST repeal the ban on women from the Pre-Seminary Program to bring our academic code in line with the expectations of this university by the denomination and the local bishop. I have brought with me today two students who are seeking entrance to candidacy this year and for whom a positive decision today means an awful lot. YOU have the power to grant them and others a true path to the pulpit. It would be a positive step in the life of this campus for its faculty to enact this rather than it come by way of fiat.

Marc took a question regarding the immediacy of this decision, asking whether it could be included in the omnibus bill scheduled for next month.

Marc: I brought the proposal directly forward today because time is of the essence if we are to allow students to declare their major(s) and/or minor(s) in alignment with the policy change ahead of registration in mid-November. I have already taken steps to incorporate the social statements into the candidacy process, and getting the academic portion of this resolved would make for a much easier second semester for all involved.

With no further questions, Marc went up to join Alyssa and Steph. After two or three minutes of discussion, Duckworth called for the yeas and nays. The proposal passed the Senate by a vote of 43-2. Alyssa and Steph hugged each other and then Alyssa went around Steph and Marc so the two of them could thank their "triple-threat" deacon collectively.

Other specific questions and proposals were taken up, which included Danielle's waiver that was granted based on previous coursework at Cardinal Stritch that mirrored the required courses for non-exercise science graduates applying to the Master's program in Applied Exercise Science. Duckworth adjourned the legislative session at 5:25, after which Marc waited outside the lecture hall for Danielle to exit.

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Once Marc and Danielle were inside his office, she closed the door and moved directly to him, pushing him down on the couch. She lifted her skirt to show she was wearing crotchless tights, which caused Marc to lean forward and give her bare pussy a teasing lick. He moved off the couch and sat her down, then knelt down and proceeded to provide her with a very satisfying orgasm from his oral ministrations.

After catching her breath, she reached forward and quickly slid Marc's slacks and briefs down, then took his member in her mouth, lubing it up and hardening it. Once she felt it was ready, she stood and the pair went over to his desk, with her sitting on it and him moving forward to penetrate her. The union of their bodies was fast and a little rough, but resulted in him cumming inside her fairly quickly, as the past two hours of watching her on-and-off at the meeting had gotten his motor revved up VERY high. Marc leaned forward and Danielle caught his lips with hers, to which he responded in kind, their first mutual peck. The pair straightened themselves out before departing for their respective homes.
Friday morning led off with Marc appearing before the Board of Trustees to "encourage" them to get moving on the changes to the student code of conduct, once again threatening to use the bishop's fiat to impose the Social Statement on Sexuality as the abiding code on the subject until the Student Government Association passed its legislation, which would then take precedence. Several members of the Board asked Marc about the statement's applicability in a university setting, which he answered by explaining the necessity of its utilization to provide a consistent standard for students who would eventually be held to it when applying to seminary, candidacy, or various academic programs at Trinity as well as getting the university out of the business of policing interpersonal relationships. He then brought up the idea of returning the campus to an older form of in loco parentis that would allow the university to self-adjudicate cases of student misconduct with intramural sanctions and then seal the records from outside inquisition.

Marc: The current landscape of university-student relations places the former in the role of a babysitter and the latter in the position of being at summer camp rather than being part of an enclosed academic environment as was the case in the past. At the moment, parents are too involved in the academic and personal lives of their student children with the university having little or no means of providing the appropriate laboratory for them to flounder without it resulting in negative consequences outside of this community. I hope to work with Residence Life and the SGA to address this through their developing a tribunal that would exist within the university, whose rulings would be limited to its four walls, and which would grant the students a higher level of privacy rights than FERPA currently yields. Only cursory information could be shared outside the institution, with all records sealed upon graduation or separation.

Dan Foxworth: Are there ANY areas where the university would be able to go outside its domain either on behalf of students or as an intermediary?

Marc: When all university resources have been exhausted in addressing a student's situation, the school may seek out independent assistance in reconciling the matter.

Mary Handelman: Will parents retain the right to hear from the university on matters concerning their children, such as violations of school policy and any run-ins with law enforcement?

Marc: I would recommend this body seek out a response on that from Trinity's Vice President for Student Affairs, but since Buckley, parents haven't had the right you suggest, as those are passed to the student upon their matriculation. The internal tribunal would put up a proper boundary between students and the outside world, where a mistake here will not follow them beyond here.

Peter Wilkins: What are possible sanctions that students could be subject to that are university-specific?

Marc: Schools have always had the right to discipline students for misconduct, but rarely would the process ever get to that point, with either outside forces or the students themselves acting to influence one or more parties in ending cases prior to resolution. In my role as the adjudicator for cases involving the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, sanctions that I might recommend would be specific to their athletic participation or areas which are ancillary to their participation. Things such as multi-match suspensions, restrictions to or from campus, and separating parties in the residence halls would be viable options. Again, they exist within the figurative walls of the university and would not be brought to bear on a student's life outside of Trinity. Same thing goes for my role in the ELCA's candidacy process.

Board chair David Strasser thanked the chaplain for his remarks, then led the Board in a discussion of their next move on the subject, being that the SGA had acquiesced to the Office of the Chaplain's
proposal on the matter and the Faculty Senate had taken up and passed relevant changes to the academic code. Board member Laura Hammond brought forth a resolution seeking a tri-partite conference involving representatives of the Student Government Association, the Board of Trustees, and Deacon Schmidt on the subject of revising the Student Code of Conduct, which passed unanimously. Chair Strasser appointed himself, Hammond, and Paul Ridgewell to meet with the SGA at a mutually-convenient time following Fall Break.

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Hope's lunch meeting with Marc produced several ideas for changing the role of hall directors from the equivalent of wardens to something akin to preceptors, where their oversight of a hall would involve engaging students in planning and executing educational and social programming, being the school's resident adjudicator for their hall's charges, and the development of a colloquium for hall directors to meet with the Vice President for Student Affairs on a regular basis to share best practices and maintain communication between the leaders.

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Tuesday's SGA meeting (moved up due to Fall Break starting after classes on Wednesday) saw the passing of several files submitted earlier in the semester, including the creation of an LGBT Student Center. SGA President Chad Markham offered a resolution thanking the Faculty Senate for repealing the ban on women in the Pre-Seminary Program and Becky Sanderson put forth a budget request on behalf of the LGBT Center for initial staffing and promotion costs along with one-half the projected costs for completing the interview process for a director. Kristie and Sam were in attendance to hear the good news along with Kelley, Jessie, and Erin. SGA Legislative Chair Michael Parsons introduced a package of revisions for the Student Code of Conduct, which President Markham had penned alongside College of Nursing Representative Joanna Loomis and College of Pharmacy Representative Richard Kilbourn. Markham provided for 45 minutes of debate on the revisions, with amendments brought forth by several representatives, most of which passed. Before a vote on the entire bill, Parsons let the body know that more than likely they would have to meet with members of the Board of Trustees to work out differences of opinion on some of the changes, which then would need to be passed identically by both bodies before it became official. The package passed by a vote of 24-11, with most of the nos a result of a failed amendment dealing with overnight stays by residents of other dorms or off-campus students. Markham appointed himself, Parsons, and Loomis to meet with the Board of Trustees' representatives and, upon consultation with Laura Hammond, set the date of the conference for Thursday, October 18. Deacon Schmidt informed both Markham and Hammond that he would prefer to meet early in the day due to his departing for Kansas City on Friday morning to officiate a wedding, to which both sides agreed, with a scheduled start of 10am.
Meet The Parents

After classes on Wednesday, Erin loaded up her car and she and Steph got on the road for the five-hour trip to her parents' home in Rockford, MI. To pass the time, the two of them played "Twenty Questions". The rules would have each person asking ten questions, with both answering them in turn.

Steph: Let's start. Favorite color?

Erin: Blue. I find that it's the best color on me.

Steph: I'll agree with you on that. I'd say mine is green, even though earth or neutral tones look better on me.

Erin: I think pink is actually a cute color on you. It jumps out without detracting from your natural beauty. What is your dream job?

Steph: Athletic Director at a small college. You?

Erin: CEO of a Fortune 100 company.

Steph: Looking to be a big shot someday? I could see it. You have the spunk and backbone for it.

Erin: I get that from my father. You're up.

Steph: What is the top concert on your bucket list?

Erin: Chicago and Earth, Wind, and Fire. They've been on tour together several times in the past and have played as close as Chicago and Detroit a few times, but I was too young to go on my own the last time they came.

Steph: Wouldn't have figured you to be a fan of their music. Mine is a bit weird. I'd love to see the original members of Leahy tour once again. They're a Celtic/Canadian group of eight brothers and sisters who broke out huge in the mid-2000s. Now that they've started families, the dads and moms are creating new groups involving their kids.

Erin: Might have to ask Marc about them since he and Danielle always attend Irish Fest and may have seen them on some occasion there. Let's see....what is your go-to night-out outfit?

Steph: You saw it a couple of weeks ago. Short-sleeve or sleeveless shift and open-toe/open-heel ankle boots. You?

Erin: Don't really have a specific one. Knee-length dress with flats or low-heel shoes tends to be what I pick more often than not.

Steph: From my perspective, what you wore for date night and at the All-Sports Mixer really is you. I got a little bit of a flutter admiring you.

Erin blushed and had to concentrate to not let the car drift onto the shoulder.

Steph: Have you experienced any major losses in your life?

Erin: Well, my grandmother died when I was 8, and she was my last living grandparent.
Steph: I had a twin who didn't develop completely and died just a few days after birth. Then, when I was 12, my aunt lost her battle with ovarian cancer. I think the one that hurt the worst was when a girlfriend dumped me because she wanted someone more like her when it came to being feminine, a la Shelley.

Erin: I'm sorry, Steph. All of those sound like really rough situations to have to go through.

Steph: I'm still here and I have a chance to make good out of it in some way, I hope.

Erin: What is your worst physical feature?

Steph: My teeth. People tell me I have a million-dollar smile, but I think that's more because of me being happy than it being photogenic.

Erin: Mine is my hair. There are days where I can't do ANYTHING with it. I'm almost afraid to let you run your fingers through it because of the knots that show up in it.

Steph: What is your "had a bad day and want to snarf down something" comfort food?

Erin: French fries, preferably with a sundae to dip them into.

Steph: Is that actually any good?

Erin: Yes! The ice cream balances out the saltiness of the fries and it replaces having to get a shake to go with them, although I have been known to order all three.

Steph: Well, mine is poutine.

Erin: That's fries, gravy, and cheese, right?

Steph: Very good! Didn't think a Yank would know that.

Erin: Hey! Michigan isn't THAT far from Canada. Middle name?

Steph: Lynn.

Erin: Named after anyone?

Steph: Yes, my maternal grandmother. Yours?

Erin: Danielle.

Steph: I can figure out where that comes from.

Erin: I'm sure you can, and yes it's true.

Steph: Favorite TV show?

Erin (slightly embarrassed): The Bachelorette. I know it's cheesy and corny and that you can't fall in love in that kind of situation, but it's easily-digestible fluff for the late spring and summer months.

Steph: Mine is everything in the Degrassi franchise.

Erin: I saw a few episodes of that on Teen Nick some years ago. It's good stuff, especially the way the first-generation characters showed up as parents of the main characters.

Steph: Point for you for having good taste.
Erin: How do you plan to make a contribution to the greater world?

Steph: Oh boy. Being that I'm out and proud of it, I want to eventually be able to fund a scholarship for LGBT athletes looking to participate in intercollegiate athletics. You?

Erin: Volunteering my time and talent to help underprivileged women develop businesses that will support them and their families.

Steph: Where do you see yourself ten years from now?

Erin: Married to a wonderful woman, maybe one or two kids, working at my dream job, and living out my passion for women's empowerment.

Steph: Ten years from now, I see myself FINALLY settled down with a special someone. Not sure if we're married or just in a long-term relationship.

Erin: What is your most embarrassing moment?

Steph: I was in third grade, and I fell asleep on the school bus, missing my stop. I had to call my parents from the bus depot to have them pick me up.

Erin (trying not to laugh): That is, well, pretty embarrassing. But does it top this? I think I was in 7th grade and was getting changed for cheerleading practice. I forgot to close my blinds completely and one of the neighbor boys walked by the window while I was putting my sports bra on. Let's just say he got MORE than an eyeful, if you catch my drift.

Steph: Ooooooooooops.

Erin: Yeah, oops, although I'm sure you would have enjoyed the view.

Steph: Bet I would have. Who was your date for senior prom?

Erin: I didn't go because I wasn't going to fake it with a guy and my parents don't know that I'm gay, so picking a girl for a date would have not really been a choice.

Steph: I didn't go either, because I had just screwed up another relationship due to my lack of control and wasn't interested in crossing paths with her.

Erin: Where is one place you've never been that you want to visit?

Steph: Disney World.

Erin: You've never been to Disney World?

Steph: Nope.

Erin: I want to visit Las Vegas one day, just for the experience.

Steph: And to get married without all the trappings of the modern wedding.

Erin: Aren't you the indecisive one! One day you can't keep your eyes on me and the next you're talking about marriage. Besides, if I wanted to elope I'd go to the chapel at the Mall of America.

Steph: Hey, I didn't mean anything by that statement, so no interjecting your own wishes into it. Just saying that it would be an easier way to get it done without dealing with the potential snags of trying to hold a traditional same-sex wedding.
Erin: Back to you.

Steph: Who do you consider a role model?

Erin: Does it have to be a living person?

Steph: No.

Erin: I could give you an obvious choice like my mom or a former teacher, but I'm going to say Marc. Watching him move from career to career to career over the past five years or so while struggling with mental health issues has helped me become more empathetic for those around me.

Steph: Mine is another Steph, Steph Labbe. She's out, she's comfortable with who she is and the way she is open about her struggles with depression and anxiety makes me aspire to be like her in a future life.

Erin: How long should you be with someone before you hit certain marks (first kiss, PDA, I love you, sex)?

Steph: I don't know that there are any clear guidelines of when you should or shouldn't advance a relationship. I kissed my last girlfriend two days after we went official, but it took me eight months to tell her that I loved her, which was the same night we had sex for the first time.

Erin: I'm not sure there is a perfect time to do any of these things. Sometimes you have to risk doing it too soon, else you never do it at all. I kissed you for the first time about two weeks after we met, but nothing has happened beyond that because I want to know I have your heart before I take those steps.

Steph: You're a romantic, which I find a bit endearing. You want love in all its forms and won't settle for something less than that.

Erin: In a nutshell, yes.

Steph: What is the scariest moment you've experienced?

Erin: The day my dad thought he was being re-activated for duty. His Army Reserve unit had been selected to go to Iraq to rotate out another Michigan one and he believed he would be making the trip. Fortunately, he had already surpassed the maximum age for active duty as a Reserve and we were spared that separation.

Steph: Don't think I can match that. My mom was in a car accident a few years ago and ended up having to be transported to the hospital by chopper. She survived and her injuries ended up being relatively minor, but you don't know that that will be the case when you hear that they need Flight For Life to come to the accident scene.

Erin: What is the worst question or dare you've been given in Truth or Dare?

Steph: You're trying to get me to confess something really awful, aren't you? Toughest question I've been asked was at a Gay-Straight Alliance lock-in. The questioner asked me if I had ever used a double-headed dildo with another person. How do you answer THAT question?!!?! Say yes and have them think you're a sex fiend, or say no and be considered a bit of a prude amongst the lesbians. By the way, yes I have.

Erin: Wow. That was BAD! The worst dare I was given was when my competitive cheerleading team went to Ypsilanti for the state finals. During the game on the bus, one of my teammates dared
me to try and get a rise out of one of the other girls. I had like NO experience at that point and fumbled my way through a come-on, which didn't work.

Steph: Last one for you. Describe the type of woman you want to marry.

Erin: The woman that I would move heaven and earth for has to be able to provide me a sense of "home" with her, as in no matter where we are, as long as we're together, we're home. She needs to show me and tell me that I matter to her, and she needs to be patient with me as I might not have her level of experience on the relationship front.

Steph: My future wife needs to be a bit more outgoing than me, otherwise I might never get out of the house. She needs to love me even when I have trouble loving myself. She needs to spark my heart with her internal beauty, which then radiates into her physical form. Lastly, she needs to stick by me as I try to gain a handle on my pseudo conscious wandering eye.

Erin: Final question. What is your biggest relationship fear?

Steph: That I will end up with a repeat of what I went through with my last girlfriend, that being a good relationship that I screwed up because I didn't have the courage to say no to someone who was pursuing me.

Erin: My biggest fear is that I would always have to worry about being "enough" for my partner. I'm not the prettiest or hottest person on the planet, and there is no real way for me to fix that.

Steph: I love you, Erin, and you are beautiful in my eyes. Sometimes I don't show it or can't say it or get caught acting like I don't care, but I know deep down that you're the person that I hope will allow me to spend a lifetime with her. Stand by me as I grow up and match my commitment to yours.

Erin pulled off the interstate just over the Indiana/Michigan border, taking US 31 along Lake Michigan to South Haven, where she took Steph to the beach. The pair walked out to the lighthouse hand-in-hand and exchanged a kiss under the setting sun, knowing that it would probably be their last bit of physical contact until they were on their way back to Mequon on Sunday save the driving to-and-from Port Huron on Friday afternoon/evening for their visit with Steph's parents.

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Almost the entire lacrosse team left campus for Fall Break, with only Moe and Nicole remaining at Trinity. Julie was invited by Christen to spend the time at her parents' place in Wauwatosa.

Julie: Chrissy, I'm a little nervous.

Christen: Why, Jules? You've met my family before. My parents like you and the dogs and you get along as well.

Julie: Those were just short visits. This will be us together here for a few days. Besides, I'm sure they don't know yet about "us".

Christen: No, they don't, and they don't need to until and unless we figure out what we mean by that.

Julie placed her head on Christen's shoulder, then kissed her cheek. "How did I get so lucky in the roommate lottery?"

Christen: A bit of luck, but I also think my preference list helped. Since I'm a local, I wanted to room with someone who wasn't, who would potentially be around for more than Monday-Friday, and with whom I could build a bit of a bond before preseason started. That last part is why I asked for another
lacrosse player.

Julie: And you ended up with me.

Christen's parents, Cody and Stacy, along with her sisters, Channing and Tyler, came home with a couple of Papa Murphy's pizzas for dinner. Over dinner, the six of them chatted about school, work, and sports. Christen filled her family in on some of the changes coming to campus, which included the new LGBT Student Resource Center, the GAA, and the ongoing process to update the school's codes.

Cody: I've been reading about the, I guess, evolution of Trinity. Can either of you tell me more from the inside of what is happening?

Christen: Two of our teammates petitioned Student Government for the creation of an LGBT Center on campus, which was approved at yesterday's meeting. Last Thursday, our school's new Gay Athletes Association held a get-to-know-you event at the athletic center. The big news around campus that is probably getting the most play in the local papers is Deacon Schmidt's work on reconciling the school's three legislative bodies to each other and the revision of the school's academic and student codes of conduct.

Cody: You know he lives just up the street on the boulevard, right? I've run into him a couple of times while out walking the dogs. We've chatted about what he's doing and why he's taking the lead in it. Has anything been finalized yet?

Julie: As of yesterday, the Faculty Senate repealed the ban on women in the school's Pre-Seminary program and the SGA had approved a set of changes to the student code that will provide the baseline for their meeting with the Board of Trustees next Thursday.

Stacy: We haven't talked about your team yet. I know Sofia is playing. Any others from around here part of the squad?

Christen: We have a couple who played for WNS Wolfpack, a transfer from Kettle Moraine, and a freshman from Ozaukee. The rest are scattered about, with Julie from Arizona, Maggie from Florida, and our goalkeeper Steph coming from Canada. A lot of us live in Augsburg, so we've gotten to know each other a bit.

Tyler: Any couples on the team yet?

Stacy: TYLER! That's not something you should be asking. I'm pretty sure that few if any players would be that open about if they are or aren't.

Julie: One of our teammates put together a "date night" which about half the team attended. It wasn't like official dates, more like "let's find an excuse to get off-campus for a few hours". There were some sparks, but I don't know really if any of the possible pairings exist outside the wishful thinking of the team's busybodies.

Once dinner was finished, Christen and Julie went for a run along the boulevard, doing two laps between 62nd and Hi-Mount, totaling three miles.

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Steph and Erin arrived in Rockford around 9pm. Val was exiting her car, having just gotten home from teaching her Wednesday night class at Grand Valley State. The three women entered the house together to the greetings of Jim and their dog, Rascal.
Jim: Everyone coming in at the same time. Did you three plan it that way?

Erin: No, dad. Just the way it worked out.

Jim introduced himself to Steph and was slightly surprised by the strength of her handshake. Val went into the kitchen to pull out some snacks for the girls while the other three chatted about school.

Jim: How are classes going for the two of you?

Erin: Nothing too strenuous. Slightly-lighter course load than what I was taking last year at Rockford, but I'm sure that will change for Spring.

Steph: So far, so good. No complaints.

Jim: Any plans for the two of you while you're here?

Erin: I think we'll hit Rivertown tomorrow, have some buddy bonding window-shopping since we haven't been able to do that yet in Milwaukee. Friday, we're going to Port Huron to meet up with Steph's parents, who are making the drive over the border from Kitchener. Saturday is up in the air, I'm guessing. Then we go back on Sunday at some point.

Val brought the munchies into the living room and joined in the conversation.

Val: Erin, it seems like our favorite bull-in-a-china-shop has been making some waves at Trinity already.

Erin (laughing): Yes, he has. Have you been keeping up with the changes?

Val: Yes. I'm glad that we chose to send you there instead of Concordia, even though that would have been closer. What he has accomplished so far in his tenure has to be inspiring to the students.

Steph: I've really been surprised at just how hard he has gone after everything and everyone. No chill in telling the Board of Trustees that he would shake up the student code on his own if they kept stalling on changes. Did you see what he did this past week?

Val: No, I didn't. Most of the news I've been getting has come from our pastor who went to school with the four of us at Western Michigan.

Steph: On Thursday, my friend Alyssa and I joined him at the Faculty Senate meeting where he, again, pushed a legislative body into doing his will, which in this case was repealing the Pre-Seminary program's ban on women.

Val: The ELCA has been ordaining women since its founding. How could Carthage not be allowing them to take part in the program?

Erin: Mom, it's messy. I get inside info at times since I know Marc outside the university, and the deal was that Carthage didn't have a major dedicated to Theological Studies, thus Trinity inherited the one which Concordia had.

Val: And the LCMS doesn't ordain women. Gotcha.

Steph: Getting that done meant so much to the two of us, because Alyssa wants to be a pastor and I want to eventually be rostered in the ELCIC or ELCA.

Erin: I think the two of us are going to turn in. I can show Steph to the guest room and get her situated.
The pair said their good nights to Jim and Val before going upstairs and spending a few minutes alone.

Steph: Think they figured out anything about us?

Erin: I hope not. I'm not ready to come out to them yet. Hope that I'll have a chance over Thanksgiving break to do it.

Steph: My dad might be able to sniff "us" out even if I don't tell him. Hope that won't be a problem. I won't divulge it if you don't want it known yet.

Erin: In your case, I'd actually like it if your parents knew. It would give me a slight bit more confidence in whatever we have while the two of us continue to feel things out.

Steph kissed Erin on the nose. "You're so cute sometimes. Hopefully, my past won't come up when we see my parents, but yes, if they ask if we're "together", I'll tell them yes."

The two of them spent a bit of time talking before Erin went to her room, leaving Steph with her thoughts as she drifted off to sleep.

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The next day, Erin and Steph went to Rivertown Crossings for a bit of window-shopping and eating. In Younkers, Steph dared Erin to find her an outfit for Trinity's Reformation Day dinner on October 27th since the two of them, Alyssa, and Julie had been invited by Marc to join him and Danielle at the event along with Bishop Emerson and his wife. Erin told her she'd take the dare if Steph would return the favor.

After around 20 minutes of hunting separately, they joined backed up with their selection for the other. For Steph, Erin went with something that she thought was right up her alley, a grey suede sleeveless shift. Meanwhile, Steph used what she had learned from Erin last night during "Twenty Questions" to choose something that she knew would fit her preferences, a navy fit-and-flare dress that stopped just above the knee and had a keyhole collar. Both were extremely satisfied with what the other decided upon for them. Once the pair found the correct sizes for their dresses and had tried them on, they went into the shoe department to look for something to match with them. Steph landed on a pair of grey suede open back/open toe ankle booties almost immediately. Erin, having no such luck finding something in navy to pair with her dress, ended up finding a suitable pair of t-strap flats at JCPenney's. The rest of the afternoon was spent wandering the mall before heading back to Rockford.

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Friday's trip from Rockford to Port Huron was fairly uneventful, with Erin and Steph doing their own version of "Carpool Karaoke" for the near three hours in the car. Upon getting to Port Huron, Erin used the GPS on her phone to direct them to Lynch's Irish Tavern, where Elliott and Suzanne Lafleur were waiting for them.

Elliott (to Steph): How is my favorite daughter?

Steph: Dad, I'm your ONLY daughter.

Elliott: See, you're in a class of your own!

Suzanne socked her husband in the arm at his joke.
Erin (to Steph): No wonder you can handle me and Marc, your dad thinks he's a comedian as well.

Elliott (to Erin): You must be Erin. Steph really can't stop talking about you when she calls home.

Erin: Yes, I would be her.

Suzanne: Pleased to meet the person who has more or less been taking care of our daughter since she got to Trinity.

Erin: I don't really take care of her. She's so strong and caring that she doesn't need a protector. Besides, big girls don't cry.

Steph and Elliott chuckled at Erin's one-liner.

Elliott: Steph, we should have met in Sarnia. I could have bought you your first drink!

Steph: DAD! I'm not sure that would have been the most appropriate birthday present.

Erin: When was your birthday?

Steph: Wednesday.

Erin: You should have told me! We could have done something either in Milwaukee or on our way to Rockford.

Steph: You gave me the best present I could have really asked for, your presence and taking me to South Haven before we went to your parents' place.

Erin: We'll have to celebrate somehow tomorrow or Sunday.

Elliott heard something in both of their voices that made him think that their friendship was closer than he had been led to believe by his daughter.

Suzanne: How is school going?

Steph: Not bad, no complaints.

Elliott: I saw on TLU's website that they are holding a Reformation Day dinner in two weeks. Are you planning to go?

Steph: Yes. The school's chaplain invited me, Erin, and a couple of other student-athletes to join him, the synod's bishop, and their wives at the event.

Suzanne: Impressive! How did THAT happen?

Steph: When I met with Deacon Schmidt just after school started, we hit it off because he used to be a soccer coach and administrator before going into coaching education. When he faced off with the Faculty Senate last week to get the ban on women in the Pre-Seminary program repealed, I and a friend of mine who wants to enter the pastorate accompanied him.

Elliott: You are making some serious in-roads at Trinity.

Erin (to Steph): Should we tell them the REAL reason why he rates you so high?

Steph thought about Erin's question and nodded to her that she was OK with the truth coming out, then took her hand under the table while she spoke.
Steph: It also doesn't hurt that he happens to be my girlfriend's godfather.

The Lafleurs were both taken a little bit aback by Steph's declaration.

Elliott: Whoa. First, I didn't know you had found someone at school yet. Second, how did you luck into that?!

Steph: Right place, right time, right people.

Erin: Marc and his wife Danielle went to graduate school with my parents and were asked by them to be my baptismal sponsors after I was born. He encouraged me to apply to Trinity knowing that it was going to be an ELCA school by the time I would be a freshman. His getting the chaplain's job was last-minute after the expected campus pastor chose to retire rather than move up from Kenosha with some of the other Carthage faculty.

Suzanne (to Erin and Steph): The two of you are "together"?

Steph: Well, together as much as two people can be when one of them has commitment fears.

Elliott nodded at Steph knowing what she meant by that.

Erin: She swept me off my feet our first day on-campus, with those piercing eyes and million-dollar smile. Her pick-up lines didn't fail her, either.

Steph: Don't act so innocent, Erin. Your game is pretty strong as well.

Elliott was smiling a bit at what he saw in front of him. In Erin, he thought that Steph had found a person who would help her stay true to her faith and would support her ambitions to work in the church. Meanwhile, the joy that resonated from his only child's face told him that this woman was incredibly special to her. Suzanne sat thoughtfully while analyzing the situation. She really wasn't overly happy about Steph continuing on with "the gay thing" and knew she'd have to talk to Elliott on the way back to Kitchener about it.

As the two couples left Lynch's, Elliott took Steph off to the side and told her that he approved of Erin and that she should do everything not to blow it like she had with her last girlfriend. Suzanne and Erin talked for a couple of minutes about her connections with the church and the things she had been hearing about Marc's take-no-prisoners tactics in his first three months on the job. When Elliott and Steph returned, he and Suzanne said their goodbyes to Steph and Erin and departed for home.

Before Erin got the car back on I-69 for the cross-state trip to Rockford, she filled up the gas tank and bought some snacks and drinks for the pair. Steph stopped her from re-starting the car by taking her hand and lifting it up to her lips.

Steph: Thank you, Erin. I can tell Mom isn't so crazy about me still thinking I'm gay, but Dad will eventually straighten her out. On the other hand, he couldn't be more delighted about you. He also told me he was proud of my acknowledging my past faults and how they could get in my way if I'm not careful.

Erin: When you said the magic words to me on Wednesday night, I didn't have a chance to respond to your confession, so I'm going to do it now. I am in love with you, Stephanie, and if you continue to show this side of you to me, I will wait you out and try my best to understand when you stumble, because I want that lifetime with you that you mentioned.

Steph leaned across the console and met Erin's lips with hers, with the two of them spending several seconds sealing their "us" before getting on the interstate.
The Muellers were together at home celebrating Sam's 20th birthday. Kristie got her sister tickets for "Our Town" at the Redtwist Theater over Thanksgiving break, while Bob and Melissa gifted their eldest daughter with a $100 pre-paid Visa card so she could buy what she wanted. Over dinner, the four of them discussed the absence of a certain somebody and what's going on at school.

Melissa: I'm surprised Steph and Gina didn't come tonight.

Sam: Actually, Mom, I didn't tell Steph that we were having my birthday dinner this evening.

Bob: Everything OK between the two of you?

Sam: Not really. She has been getting extremely jealous of the time Kristie and I spend together on campus since we really don't want to be sitting around and staring at the walls with her.

Kristie: She and I got into a bit of a fight a few weeks ago over her possessiveness and her accusing the two of us of scheming behind her back. Sammy got hurt when Steph's punch missed me and her follow-through caused her elbow to go into her throat.

Melissa: Steph does have a bit of a temper, you know. No excuse for her to go off on you like that, though. Sam, are the two of you still together?

Sam: It's complicated. I guess we are, but I've been distant since the fight and, with Kristie on-campus, I am more desiring of spending time with her than Steph.

Kristie: I'm also starting to see someone at Trinity. She's a sophomore on the women's hockey team and a Religion major.

Sam: Not anymore, Kristie. When I went to see Casey to add my Theater History and Writing individualized major, Alyssa came with me and changed her to Pre-Seminary Studies. She didn't tell you?

Kristie: No. We haven't been able to see a whole lot of each other between her practices and Steph wanting to be around constantly. I'll catch up with Alyssa when we return to campus Sunday night.

Bob: I hope your mom and I will have a chance to meet her soon.

Kristie: Come up for the season opener on the 26th against Augsburg. I think it's a 3:00pm start, and we could go out to dinner afterwards.

Melissa: Sounds like a good plan.

Sam: Alyssa's twin is really nice as well. She plays soccer at UW-Oshkosh and we got to meet her when they came to Trinity last month for a game.

Bob: So maybe sisters dating sisters?

Sam: Dad, don't jump to that conclusion yet. I haven't talked to her since they came to campus and I haven't hinted to Alyssa that I'm interested.

Kristie chalked away Sam's comment and added it to the things she and Alyssa needed to discuss on Sunday night.
At Gold Nugget Tavern and Grille, the Hoffmans and Sommers were gathered for dinner at the behest of Lindsey and Emily as the pair had made their relationship official a couple of weeks ago.

Linda Hoffman: Mark and I were a little surprised when Lindsey told us that she had gotten involved with one of her teammates at school. Finding out it's Emily, I'm much more comfortable with the idea.

Jane Sommer: Having met Lindsey a couple of times this past summer and then on move-in day in August, I felt like they might get to this point, just from intentionally spending time together up here before they went to Trinity and then by choosing each other for a roommate after pre-orientation.

Mark Hoffman: Emily, you have had a profound impact on our daughter. She smiles a lot more, has cleaned up her language a bit, and seems to be enjoying school. Still not sure why she's wanting to major in French.

Lindsey: Because I love the language and it might be a means to get into government work or perhaps teaching. There are options available for language majors and our athletic department's academic advisor is on top of things regarding how to make the most out of the classes in the catalog to get students through school and position them to get solid jobs following graduation.

Emily: Mr. Hoffman, let me back Lindsey up for a second. Dad, you should take note as well. Trinity is currently operating under three course catalogs, the one in place for former Carthage students, the one for Concordia students who stayed, and the overarching one which covers Trinity's eventual consolidation of degrees, majors, minors, and courses. Then, there is the individualized major that both schools had on the books. I'm technically undeclared as a major because the combined catalog won't go into effect until next Fall. Lindsey is in the same position in that her major exists under Carthage's catalog but not Concordia's, so she technically doesn't have one at the moment. Our advisor has planned out with us how we need to go about Spring semester in order to not waste courses between now and next Fall, hence most if not all of our courses will be ones to satisfy general education requirements. We also have a sophomore on our floor who's providing some assistance with deciphering the multiple catalogs since she's a holdover.

Bill Sommer: That's all fine and good, Emily, but what keeps you from ending up going a fifth year because the programs keep changing?

Emily: The program in place at the time of our matriculation is what we follow through to graduation. If departments add requirements, they're in place only for incoming classes, not the ones already on campus.

Satisfied with his daughter's explanation, Bill turned to grilling her girlfriend a bit.

Bill: Lindsey, what are your intentions regarding my daughter?

Lindsey: Mr. Sommer, I promise to do my best to make her happy, to honor her, to let her know that she is loved, and other things that I don't feel I can say in mixed company.

Emily lightly shoved Lindsey, not believing that she would say that last bit in front of their parents.

Bill: And Emily, how do you feel about this woman?

Emily: For someone I've only known maybe four months or so, Lindsey has come to mean an awful lot to me. She has provided me with a sense of stability being away at college and with a true friend and confidant on-campus. I can't imagine finding someone else at school that I might mesh with the way I do Lindsey.
Linda (to Lindsey): Your turn, dear.

Lindsey: Emily makes me a better person, as Dad mentioned. She touches something in me that makes my loving her easy, like I was meant to be with her. The fact that we live together at school and within a half hour of each other otherwise means that I can honestly build something with her that won't be just an at-school relationship or a back-home relationship, but can be all-encompassing. Now don't go booking a chapel for us just yet, but I can see this going the distance. That is, if I don't get sick of her jokes.

Emily thwaped her girlfriend, to which Lindsey responded by putting a mock headlock on her.

Mark: Yeah, they're a couple. Fight like one, tease each other like one, and try not to stare at one another like one.

Jane: Linda, you OK with this?

Linda: Yes. Emily does something to and for Lindsey that no one else has. You?

Jane: Definitely. Lindsey brings out the best in Emily from what I can tell, and if they do end up getting serious-serious about each other, I'd be pleased to have her as a future daughter-in-law.

Emily and Lindsey excused themselves from the table for a minute and went to the restroom. Once inside, they grinned at each other before taking hands. Lindsey said the three magic words to Emily, causing her to throw her arms around the slightly-taller woman. Emily told Lindsey that she loved her as well and the pair kissed. They then went back into the restaurant and continued their meal with the other four.
Loss Of Innocence

Fall Break boredom settled in for Kelley on Saturday afternoon. After two days of minding her brothers, she was a bit stir crazy and wanted to get out for a while. Unfortunately, all of her closest people were away (Lauren in Indianapolis, Alyssa visiting her sister in Oshkosh, Kristie in Evanston, Erin and Steph in Michigan). She didn’t want to disturb Julie and Christen's weekend with the Princes in Wauwatosa, so she posted a Tweet about her dilemma.

KMOchowicz: Bored out of my skull right now. None of my teammates are in town due to Fall Break. One more day until I go back to TLU and see @ LaurenNC12.

A few minutes later, Shelley called her and invited her to a party that some of their ex-teammates were throwing in River Hills. Having nothing better to do and seeing this as an opportunity to implore Shelley to leave Steph alone, she accepted. After dinner, Kelley went to her room and changed into a sundress and sandals. At 8:00, Shelley came by to pick her up. On the way, the pair talked about the semester-to-date and their current female pursuits.

Shelley: I know I don't say it, but I really appreciate you trying to include me with our teammates when you decide to go off-campus for the evening.

Kelley: I know that you have to be a bit unhappy being forced to commute by your mom because of her concerns about residence hall life. Things will improve for you with the girls next semester, I think, since we'll be in-season and you'll be on campus longer and we'll have road trips across the Midwest as well.

Shelley: It's more than just the ability to be around all of you that I am missing living at home. I'm missing the opportunity to find someone for myself without mom putting her 30 cents in about how I'm not doing the family any good by wanting to be gay.

Kelley: Does she NOT understand that it isn't a choice, it is WHO YOU ARE?!

Shelley: No. I wish Steph and I could actually kvetch with each other over the mom thing since it sounds like she has issues with hers over it as well.

Kelley knew that it wouldn't be a good idea for Shelley and Steph to compare notes as it would only lead to Shelley trying to get with Steph. Instead of saying something, she kept her mouth shut on the subject.

Shelley: How is it that your parents aren't giving you the third degree over your sexual preference?

Kelley: I have always had an open relationship with them, where I could ask them about anything that I wanted. When Mom was carrying Jerry, she decided to use the pregnancy to teach me about the birds and the bees, including the many ways families can be formed besides our traditional one. She expounded on it during her pregnancy with Aaron.

Shelley: See, I never got any of that from my mom. My dad was happy that I wasn't "getting into trouble", but I don't think he understood the difference between not screwing around with boys and being sexually attracted to girls. All he saw was that I probably wouldn't turn out like some of his players at Pulaski and students at St. Augustine Prep.

Kelley: Now, I haven't told them yet about Lauren and I so maybe their opinion will change when I do. They've met her before, but that was when we were just roommates.
Shelley: So you're the one Lauren said had stepped forward and changed her mind about pursuing Morgan?

Kelley: Yes. When we were stuck in the closet during Truth or Dare the night before, she decided not to take advantage of the situation and it changed my opinion of her a little. We talked back in our room afterwards and found a bit of common ground between what she was wanting and what I had to offer.

Shelley: I have to give you some cred for landing her. She's cute, but really more your speed of cute than mine. Anyways, good luck with your folks when you decide to disclose that.

Kelley: Thanks. I wish I had some good advice for how to get your parents to accept you as you are and understand that your being gay isn't an affront to them or some defiance measure.

Shelley: If you can find the right words for me to do that, I'd gladly pay you to explain it to them.

The two WNS Wolfpack alumnae arrived at their former captain's parents' house. Several of the other invitees were already there and making good headway on a Sunday morning hangover. Kelley pulled a Coke from the refrigerator while Shelley grabbed a plastic cup and poured herself a beer from the tap. Kelley kept an eye on Shelley to make sure she didn't get too inebriated. After about an hour of chilling and socializing with some of the others, Kelley excused herself to use the restroom. While she was gone, Shelley decided that, if she was going to win Kelley to her side in getting Steph, she might have to extract a bit of truth from her as to her current alliances. One of her teammates' boyfriends had a small vial with him of "truth serum" which Shelley asked him to pour into Kelley's drink. When Kelley returned, she noticed a weird fizzing coming from inside her can, but figured someone had jostled the table and shaken up the contents a bit. She finished off her soda and began to feel tired. Thinking it was from the upheaval of watching Jerry and Aaron the last two-plus days, she went to the refrigerator to get some more caffeine. About ten minutes later, she fell asleep on the couch.

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Kelley woke up about 12am, having been out approximately two hours. She rubbed her eyes and looked around. She saw that her bra was on the floor, one of the straps of her sundress was down, and she had a very wet feeling between her legs. Fearing the worst, she reached down for her bra and put it back on, then went looking for Shelley. Not finding her immediately, she went back to the couch and wrapped her arms around herself, stunned as to what might have happened. Shelley eventually came back to the living room and saw Kelley in a near-catatonic state. She helped Kelley out to the car and drove her home, not asking what had happened. Kelley thanked Shelley for the night out and then went into the house and directly to her bedroom, where she would stay until her early Monday morning return to Trinity.

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Classes were back in session on Monday morning, with the four-day weekend long gone. Exiting their Foundations of Education class, Kristie and Kelley chatted, but things changed when the blonde looked her teammate over.

Kristie: What happened over Fall Break, Kelley?

Kelley: Not a whole lot. Ended up watching my brothers for most of it.

Kristie: Kelley, something else had to have happened for you to look like this. It's the same look that Sammy gets after Steph has either run her down or verbally abused her.
Knowing that Kristie probably would understand if she was able to recognize how she's acting as a sign of abuse, she led her to a quiet place on the lower floor of Regents Hall.

Kelley: On Saturday night, Shelley and I went to a party thrown by some of our high school teammates. I fell asleep on one of the couches and the next thing I knew, my bra was on the floor, one of the straps of my sundress was underneath my arm, and I was wet "down there".

Kristie embraced Kelley and let her cry against her. "Do you know what happened?"

Kelley: No, I don't. It's all foggy. One minute I'm drinking a Coke, the next I'm waking up two hours or so later in the condition I described.

Kristie: We need to get you to Student Health to have them do a kit on you in case there is evidence of sexual assault or worse.

Kelley: I really don't want to be sitting over in Albrecht for hours hoping to be seen.

Kristie: Wait. We have a friend that can possibly help us out here. Since we're athletes, any incidents that might involve violations of the student code or the law aren't taken up by student affairs, but rather the chaplain's office. Sam and I went to him a few weeks ago after Steph tried to hit me and caught my sister instead. He took down what happened and filed it in case she did something else. We didn't make a formal complaint, though.

Kristie made sure that Kelley was OK with the idea of meeting with Marc before the two of them left Regents and walked over to his office in Luther.

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Kristie: Marc?

Marc: Hi, Kristie! How goes?

Kristie: Personally, I'm good. Unfortunately, my teammate and friend here isn't in such good straits.

Marc got up to shut the door while Kristie and Kelley sat down.

Marc (to Kelley): Don't believe we've actually met yet. I'm Marc Schmidt, the chaplain.

Kelley: Kelley Ochowicz. Nice to finally meet you. Erin raves about you to everyone in the hall.

Marc (jokingly): You might not want to spread those good words around too much. I have a reputation to uphold.

Kristie: The one about you being the slickest player in the game and tough-as-nails when it comes to stupidity?

Marc: Yes, that one. Now, Kelley, what brings you by?

Kelley: Kristie said you might be able to help me because you handle the athletic department's less-than-happy things, like the fight between her, her sister, and Steph McNamara.

Marc: Less-than-happy is a nice way of putting it. I deal with incidents of misconduct involving student-athletes, either to them or by them. I take it something occurred recently that would fall under that.

Kelley: Yes. A teammate and I went to a party on Saturday night in River Hills, hosted by some of
our high school friends. At some point of the evening, I dozed off and awoke to find myself in a disheveled state with my nether region feeling a bit, um, wet.

Marc: You're thinking someone might have violated you in your unconscious state?

Kelley: That was my first thought after coming to my senses. Kristie thinks I should go to Student Health so they can run a kit and see if anything comes up and that you might be able to cut a little red tape so I'm not there most of the day letting my mind play tricks on me.

Marc: Like sitting in the lobby wondering if everyone can read on your face why you're there?

Kelley: Exactly!

Marc: First, Kristie is right that you should go to Student Health to be examined and evidence gathered to fill in the blanks of what happened while you were out. Second, I'll call over right now and see if they can get you back into an examination room when you arrive. You might not be seen for a bit, but you'll be away from the chaos that is common for the first day after a break, when students rush in to get meds that they didn't pick up before leaving and ran out of, or to "fix" a mistake they made while back home.

Marc called Student Health in Albrecht to try and get Kelley seen promptly. Once his call was picked up, he asked for Dr. Bucholz, one of the physicians.

Dr. Rachel Bucholz: This is Dr. Bucholz.

Marc: Rachel, it's Marc Schmidt.

Dr. Bucholz: Marc! How are things on your side of campus?

Marc: Always lively. Listen, I have a student-athlete in my office presently who went to an off-campus party over break and was possibly assaulted. Can you get her away from the general population when she comes over so she's not dealing with additional feelings of trauma coming from the environment at Student Health?

Dr. Bucholz: Certainly. I'll let the front desk know to page me when she arrives. Have her ask for me personally and we'll get her into an examination room pronto. I'll handle the exam and the collection of evidence if need be.

Marc: Thanks, Rachel. Even though people think you can be like a bulldozer when it comes to patients' decision-making, I know that when it comes down to it, you're a bit of a softie.

Dr. Bucholz: Thanks for the sideways compliment, Marc. I'll let Bobby know that his opinion of me has been confirmed by our school’s chaplain.

Marc: Tell him I said hi and thanks again for being a friend to the possibly friendless around here.

Marc hung up and returned his attention to Kelley and Kristie.

Marc: When you go to Student Health, ask for Dr. Bucholz. The front desk will page her and have you brought back to an examination room.

Kelley: Thanks, Marc.

Marc: Is there anything else you remember from Saturday night that I can add to the file before sending you over to Albrecht?
Kelley: Just that Shelley didn't really drink that much. I usually have to keep an eye on her in case she gets a little too intoxicated to drive home.

Marc jotted that note down and pondered a possible connection.

Marc: Kelley, I suggest that you not be alone for a bit. It will keep your mind from slipping back into the incident and pulling your spirits into the toilet. Is your roommate back on campus?

Kelley: Yes, but I really don't want to see her at the moment since we're, well, sort of, possibly....

Marc: I get it. No need to elaborate. Kristie, can you help Kelley out with keeping her busy?

Kristie: I can try to get some of our teammates/dorm mates to be around during the afternoon. She can stay in my room so that she and Lauren don't cross paths until Kelley's ready to do so.

Marc: OK. I wish you well, Kelley, and I hope that what you think might have happened didn't.

Kristie and Kelley stood and headed to the door, with Marc behind them. They thanked him for his time and open ear, hugging him on the way out.

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When Kelley and Kristie got to Student Health, they were taken back immediately and Dr. Bucholz was paged. A few minutes after the pair arrived, she came into their room.

Dr. Bucholz: Hello, Kelley. I'm Dr. Bucholz.

Kelley: Hi, Doc!

Dr. Bucholz: Ochowicz.....you wouldn't happen to be related to Lynelle Ochowicz, would you?

Kelley: Actually, yes. She's my mom.

Dr. Bucholz: She was my dentist for most of my childhood. You go to Nicolet?

Kelley: Yes! Graduated this past spring.

Dr. Bucholz: I did as well. Class of 2003.

Kelley: Marc knew what he was doing when he called over and asked for you.

Dr. Bucholz: He's one of the really good guys on this campus. Caring, a friend if you need one, but not afraid to beat up the stuffed shirts and suburbanite slobs when it's required. Anyways, he told me that you went to a party over the weekend and lost consciousness during it.

Kelley: Yes. Can't tell you anything really except for what I was doing before I was out and what I looked like after I woke up.

Kelley went on to describe to Dr. Bucholz what she did remember.

Dr. Bucholz: Since we don't have a lot of verbal evidence, we'll need to rely on the physical kind to help us find out what happened. I'm going to do a cursory physical examination to look for damage in the places one would expect them to occur if one were sexually assaulted. Following that, I will do a scan of your body to search for fluids or other markings that aren't detectable by sight. From there, I'll collect scrapings and swabbings of the areas where the scan detected possible evidence. At the end, we'll have you go to the lab so they can collect blood and urine samples. Do you have any
questions?

Kelley: Will any of this hurt?

Dr. Bucholz: Hurt, most likely not. Some of it might tickle or arouse you if I have to collect from certain areas of your body. Have you showered since the party?

Kelley: No. I've been too stunned to do much of anything. I only returned to campus a couple of hours ago, in time for my first class of the day.

Dr. Bucholz: Then there is a good chance that if something did happen, the evidence is still on your body. Please remove your clothes so I can examine you.

Kelley did as the doctor requested. Meanwhile, Kristie was texting some of the other lacrosse players to see who could hang with KO while she was in class. Ali, Erin, Steph Lafleur, and Emily all said they could do time with her. Lauren inquired of Kristie what was happening, to which she replied that Kelley would fill her in this evening when she returned to her room.

Dr. Bucholz: One positive is no bite or scratch marks. I'm going to use this speculum to look inside your reproductive region for any damage or abnormalities. Hmmm.....you're still intact, so you most likely weren't raped. I also don't see any rug burn, so that's another indicator that if something DID happen, it wasn't nearly as severe as it could have been.

Kelley: The party was attended mostly by girls, so no penetration doesn't mean that someone didn't try to have sex with me while I was unconscious.

Dr. Bucholz: That's why I brought up the rug burn reference. It doesn't just refer to an unshaven guy doing oral on you and roughing up your skin with his hair. It also can describe the act of a female rubbing her vagina against yours.

Kelley: I guess that will be something good to know for the future.

Dr. Bucholz: Turn over and get onto your knees...fine fine, nothing there. You may return to your back. I'm going to turn out some of the lights in order to run a black light over your body, looking for any dried-on fluids or inconspicuous marks. Just relax and stay relatively still.

Dr. Bucholz ran the black light over Kelley's front and back, then took scrapings of the tip of her nose, her lips, her nipples and areolas, and her vaginal region. She also clipped a couple of matted pubic hairs, believing that some mixture of secretions existed in them. From there, she swabbed the inside of Kelley's nose, her tongue and cheeks, and the inside of her vagina.

Dr. Bucholz: I believe we have enough here to determine who or what might have taken advantage of you while you were unconscious. You can get dressed and go to the lab to have the blood and urine samples taken. I will call you with the results after they come back, hopefully by the end of the day.

Kelley: Thank you.

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Kelley stayed in Kristie and Ali's room for the afternoon, with several of her teammates stopping by to hang out with her. Around 4:00, Kelley received a call from Dr. Bucholz.

Dr. Bucholz: Kelley, it's Rachel Bucholz. The tests are back. We found trace amounts of GHB in the hair we tested, as it was too long from when the drug was administered to you to testing for us to find
it in the urine or blood samples. We did find foreign DNA in the scrapings we took from your nipples and vaginal lips, as well as the swabbing from your tongue. Piecing all of that together, my best estimation of what occurred was that someone slipped you the GHB in your drink, then once you were out performed oral sex on you as well as other acts. It is criminal sexual assault and you do have the right to press charges against the individual or individuals who did this.

Kelley: Thanks for the news, Doctor.

Dr. Bucholz: I will be sending a copy of the report to Deacon Schmidt for his files in case you do choose to pursue some course of action against the perpetrators.

Upon the ending of the phone call, Rachel sent Marc a copy of the findings along with the name of the person whose DNA was found on Kelley's body: Shelley Zembruski.

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Lauren was catching up on her Psychology reading when Kelley returned to the room. The curly-haired midfielder put the book down and motioned for Kelley to join her on her bed.

Kelley: I'm sorry that it seems like I have been avoiding you since you got back to campus. Something happened on Saturday night and I thought that I had broken a promise I made to myself for you, thus why I didn't want to face you.

Lauren: Kristie filled me in a little bit about what happened and I know that you had no control over it. When I was home over break, I did two things that should tell you how I feel about you. First, I told my parents about you, about "us". The other thing I did was inform the girl that I had been seeing before coming to college that I had found someone up here. I guess those two things mean that I am officially yours, Miss Kelley Margaret Ochowicz.

Kelley shed a tear over Lauren's confession, then took her hands and confessed something from her own heart.

Kelley: I accept your declaration of commitment, love. When I came to on Saturday night and thought the worst of what had happened, the first thought in my mind was that I had betrayed you and denied you the gift that I eventually wanted you to have, that of being my first sexual partner. Now that I know that I wasn't raped, I can once again commit myself to that promise, to let you, Lauren Noelle, be my first, and hopefully my last and only.

Kelley then rested her head on Lauren's shoulder as the taller girl stroked her hair. The two just gazed at one another for a few moments before Kelley leaned up and kissed Lauren on the chin, which was followed by Lauren kissing Kelley softly on the lips, which would lead to a bit of a romantic to-and-fro between the pair.
Tuesday is Marc's "quiet" day of the week. He uses that time to work on his homily for Wednesday, do individual counseling, or catch up on work that needs to be done. In the middle of preparing his sermon on marriage as the highest level of committed love, he received a call from Val Matheson.

Marc: Val! How did you like having Erin home, and what did you think of Steph?

Val: It was good seeing her for a few days and getting caught up on what has happened so far at Trinity. As for Steph, she and Erin seem to have a really tight friendship, something I don't recall her having with anyone here at home.

Marc: Being away from the settled life of your hometown does things to a person. They might find themselves more outgoing when they're among new people instead of taking on the role they always have in their high school clique or circle of friends.

Val: I also understand that you've been kicking butt and taking names since you were hired.

Marc: Just a little.

Val: Just a little?!?! Kirk can't seem to stop gushing about the accomplishments you've racked up in the first six weeks of the semester.

Marc: The bishop hired me to help turn this campus into a 21st-century university, the first to be created under the ELCA banner. I'm just using my skills and knowledge to stir the pot and support those who are willing to push to achieve that vision.

Val: I'm calling about Erin, actually. When she was home, it looked like her and Steph were, well, a bit closer than I'd have expected for being friends less than two months. It made me wonder if my daughter might, I don't know, like girls or something.

Marc was stuck in a serious dilemma. Confirm Val's suspicion, break Erin's confidence, and possibly stir up a firestorm for the Mathesons, or hide behind Pastor/Penitent Confidentiality to duck the question. He decided to help Val figure it out on her own.

Marc: Has she ever inquired from you or Jim about that possibility and/or how you would feel about it?

Val: No. We decided that our school district and church pastor would be more impartial in discussing those matters with her.

Marc: What are her friends from high school like, and did any of her relationships with them send off the same kind of signals as what you see from her and Steph?

Val: She didn't have a whole lot of friends at Rockford. Mostly teammates from competitive cheer and lacrosse, and I didn't sense that she felt "that way" toward any of them.

Marc: Friend-to-friend and not parent-to-pastor, how would you and Jim feel about it if she were to be attracted to women?

Val: I don't know for sure about Jim because his number 1 priority concerning his little girl is keeping all the stupid boys at arm's length from her. As for me, I haven't thought about that possibility. It wouldn't surprise me necessarily, but as for liking the idea, I don't know.
Marc: There are a number of things that I can't say about what I know about her and Steph because of confidentiality, but I can give you my impression of their friendship and of Steph as a person.

Val: I understand that you can't tell me certain things, but I would like to know what you see when you're around them.

Marc: The pair have been over to our place a couple of times this semester. They really are tight and have been since literally Day One at Trinity. I saw them together at the opening service for freshmen and athletes and they were sitting and praying together, I believe. Erin introduced me to her after service, then brought her over that Sunday for dinner and chill time. With Steph being pre-candidacy, I got to put her through the ringer the first day of classes and she held up perfectly well. Her heart is really open to whatever God wants to show her concerning her eventual career and location. Personally, if I had a child, I would want him or her to be friends or more with this woman.

Val: So if Erin IS gay...

Marc: Then you've met the kind of person she eventually might want to settle down with.

Val: And if she's not?

Marc: Then they'll be best friends for life.

Val: How do I ask her about it?

Marc: Same way you do about anything in life. You just do it. No need to dance around it because you'll only paint yourself into a corner and make it more difficult for her to be forthright. Maybe tip off your own opinion on the matter and see if it allows her to open up. Whether she is or isn't, it will be on her timing that you'll find out for sure.

Val: When I saw the two of them on Friday night after their visit to Port Huron to see Steph's parents, there seemed to be an easiness in having been together for all that time on the road and her facing her best friend's family. I don't know, it looked like how Jim and I would look after getting home from the in-laws, the relief of having gotten through another visit without killing someone and the peace of spending time together afterwards deflating and debriefing.

Marc: If that is what you are measuring their friendship by, it sounds like you're approving of Steph being part of Erin's world and vice versa.

Val: Yes, Marc.

Marc: Let time take its course. You know she has a remarkable person who she's tied to the hip with here at school, and that she has me and Danielle looking out for her as well. Be Mom and offer your support from afar, and if she has something to tell you, she will.

Val: Thanks, Marc. I knew you'd be able to give me some insight as to what I was seeing. Tell Danielle I said hi and we should find a time for the two of you to come over to our side of the lake for a couple of days.

Marc: The Packers ARE playing in Detroit on Thanksgiving Day. Maybe take it up with Jim and the five of us could get tickets for the game.

Val: Will do. Talk to you soon.

Marc: Bye.
After Marc hung up, he left his office to go to Luther's Landing for lunch. On his way to Albrecht, he saw Dani pulling out from her parking spot near the field house. He continued on and got a grilled brat and onion rings from the Grille. While eating, Dani texted him to ask if he had some time this afternoon for her to stop by. He replied that he did, but she should call him when she got back to campus since Tuesdays are his "lock-in" day at the office.

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Marc met Danielle at his office door, then closed it behind them. The pair sat on the couch and talked for a few minutes. Danielle leaned over and pushed Marc's back against the armrest, then took steps to eventually straddle him and sink down onto him. Following her climax, Danielle moved down and performed oral sex on Marc, resulting in him cumming in her mouth. Once cleaned up and dressed, Danielle lied her head against Marc and the two talked.

Danielle: Your mind was somewhere else, wasn't it? I got mine, and by the way you were good as always, but I couldn't get you yours until I went down on you.

Marc: I'm sorry, Dani. I'm obsessing a bit about the wedding this weekend. It's my first one and it involves going back into that period between the accident and training for the diaconate. I hope I do well and that I don't run into too many people from that portion of my life there, but I don't think I can avoid it.

Danielle: You've always been a rock star, Marc. I noticed that the first time we met. You were confident and made it easy for us to do our thing on the field. You'll do fine.

Danielle pecked Marc on the cheek and curled into him.

Marc: The other part I think is that I know my lust issue is going to pop up this weekend, so I put a bit more pressure on myself to perform so that I could go to KC and not be all pent-up and slip.

Danielle: So you wanted to do me so badly that you made it difficult for yourself to enjoy it, then?

Marc: Pretty much. That also means that you'll benefit the next time we see each other, since I'll be pretty stoked to take out the frustration on you in so many different ways.

Danielle: Mmmmmmm. I like that thought.

Marc: Why don't we go ahead and schedule it in? Call it a counseling session.

Danielle: I know Tuesdays are your free day, so maybe next week, mid-morning?

Marc: Sounds perfect, Deuce.

Danielle: Love you, Marc, not in the "oh my God I want to spend the rest of my life with you" way, but in the "I look up to you and appreciate what you've done for me" way. Doesn't hurt that you're also a wonderful person and a good friend, albeit with some added benefits.

Marc: I love you too, Dani. I'm appreciative that you don't consider me too old to play around with and that we're on the same wavelength about what we're looking for from each other.

Marc caught eyes with Danielle and they exchanged a couple of kisses before she left to get ready for her team's game against Alverno that afternoon.

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Trinity's weekly service was reasonably well-attended on Wednesday, partially because Marc had chosen to take on the topic of marriage as love's ultimate standard, albeit in a profoundly different way than most would expect. He proclaimed that in the year 2018, the idea of making a public, legal, lifelong commitment to someone had become a bit antiquated, what with legal advances that now allowed for power-of-attorney and adoption by single parents or unmarried couples. When Obergefell v. Hodges overturned multiple states' bans on same-sex marriage and federalize the notion that this institution was guaranteed as a civil right to all, it should have seen marriage rates for both straight and gay individuals decline, but it didn't.

"We come to the one-word question we should ask about marriage maintaining its place as an individual's bucket-list goal for a relationship, why? Why buy the cow if you can get the milk for free, right? Why possibly end up a statistic like approximately half of your parents and siblings are if it's not necessary? And why limit one's self to a single individual for time immemorial? I'm reminded of a conversation in 'City Slickers' where three life-long friends, all give or take 40, are discussing their struggles with the women in their lives. Let me show the clip of their late-night conversation."

Marc started the video and the scene of the three around a campfire is queued up.

Ed: Let's say all your life, for breakfast, you're eating from a Kellogg's variety pack.

Mitch: And a spaceship lands.

Ed: No. And then you don't get the variety pack. You pick one. Your favorite one. And you just get that one from then on. Every day, for the rest of your life, the same cereal. And then you wake up one morning, and you're just not hungry anymore. See, here's the thing. Kim wants to have kids.

Mitch: And you don't?

Ed: I tell her it's because we wouldn't have as much fun, it would hurt her modeling, but... that's not the reason. Having a kid, that's... heavy, that's a real commitment. That's saying I'm never gonna be with another woman for the rest of my life.

Phil: Wait a minute, let me get this straight. I have... no life, we're all agreed on that, right?

Ed and Mitch: Right!

Phil: Okay. And your big problem is, that you're married to this gorgeous, twenty-four year old underwear model, who thinks that the sun rises and sets in your pants... and that's not enough for you?

Ed [shaking his head]: You don't understand.

Phil: No, I don't understand!

Ed: I don't want to screw around on Kim.

Phil: So don't.

Ed: Oh... from the king of restraint.

Phil: What does that mean?

Ed: It means, that's pretty smug advice, coming from a man who mounted an eighteen year old checkout girl on the day-old bread rack.
Phil: She's twenty - and shut up.

Ed: Let me get you hot, Phil: "I need a price. Register Nine, I need a price..."

Phil: Cut it out!

Mitch: Guys...

Ed: What did you use for protection, paper or plastic?

"Ed is struggling with the notion that if he has kids with his wife, that he'll be tied-down. Phil is on the other side of this equation, wondering what will happen now that he has stepped out on his partner and produced a mini-me with someone who is young enough to possibly be his daughter and with whom he most likely doesn't see a relationship in the offing. Mitch is stuck in neutral, unsure of what he has signed up for. He has everything that a person might want in life. Great job, loving wife, responsible kids, but he's not happy really with any of it. I bring this up because I will be officiating my first wedding this Saturday in Kansas City. As someone who has been married a little over 20 years, I know that I'm not the foremost expert on really anything when it comes to answering that why question, because I've been in Mitch's shoes, and in Ed's shoes, and at one time in Phil's shoes albeit not to the extent he was. When I look at Becca and Mandy on the day and try to impart a bit of wisdom as to how to make their relationship last and why taking this step of public declaration within the confines of the laws of the state of Missouri matters, the one thing I come to is that marriage is the only form of human relationship where its members are protected from society's penchant for chicanery, and the only one that people aside from the relationship have a right to hold its parties accountable. We can't say that about family relationships, or work ones, or friendships. Only marriage has the ability to do those things. Now, I didn't show the skirmish between the three that occurred after Ed's last barb, because I wanted to save Curly's response to it for the end of my remarks, since it is really what we must do in order to show our love for our fellow man. When you see someone encroaching on a couple's relationship or you notice a person playing fast-and-loose with their vows, be like Curly. Throw a bucket of water over them and say 'You're spooking the cattle.' Amen."

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Lunch Bunch on this day brought together a wide range of Trinity students, faculty, and staff. Marc of course was there, along with Erin, Steph, and Alyssa. Corey also joined them, which allowed the three lacrosse players to get to know him outside of the formal setting that was date night. Danielle stopped by, as did Casey, Rachel, and Hope. The final member of today's post-service gathering was Tom Sinclair, chair of the Department of Religion/Theological Studies and the Pre-Seminary Program at Trinity.

Tom: Marc, that was an odd but effective way of describing why people should still seek our marriage in a society that has become a lot more liberal in its views on sex and fidelity.

Marc: That movie had an impact on me as I was going through college because I saw myself potentially in all the positions being shown. On one hand, my mind was saying that I needed to commit at less than 100% in case something better were to fall into my lap at a later date, while my heart knew it wanted the security of one person's undying love and loyalty. Phil was a case of what happens when the second part goes too far and your two heads overrule your heart.

The women at the table soaked in Marc's commentary on life and love, with some knowing about his internal struggles and others just becoming aware of them.

Rachel: How does your homily today mesh with what you have been trying to accomplish with the
Marc: The code revisions are about loosening up what is considered valid in the area of interpersonal relationships, allowing students to develop ones that meet their needs and wants without the school proscribing certain kinds. Marriage as an endgame is in my opinion the protective means of codifying publicly what people agree to with one another in private.

Steph and Erin smiled at one another at the last comment, while Alyssa asked Dr. Sinclair about curriculum changes that were being considered as they consolidated Carthage and Concordia's religion offerings.

Tom: The introductory courses at both schools overlapped a lot, so there should be no trouble with current students being able to meet their core requirement no matter which school they started at.

Alyssa: What about second and third-level courses, particularly those which align with future theological education?

Tom: We've submitted to Faculty Senate a comprehensive major and minor plan for upperclassmen so they can graduate without taking additional courses to those originally required when they began college, as well as the major that will be in place starting with the incoming class. We will also be trimming down the wide-ranging requirements that Concordia had in place for the Pre-Seminary Program now that the candidacy process is split from the program's entrance and maintenance requirements and because women will become part of the program most likely with registration for Fall 2019.

Erin: Marc, again, how do you KNOW so many people?

Casey: Oh, I can answer that. He outworks everyone to learn about and build relationships with people. Right, Dani?

Danielle: Right. He may not have a outgoing personality, but he researches people so well and so much that he can strike up a conversation with a person that makes him SEEM extroverted. His loyalty also attracts people to him.

Erin: Dani, I know you played for him a few years ago at MUSC. Did you as well, Casey?

Casey: Yes. I wasn't the best player around, most likely the least-skilled of the women on the roster, but he appreciated my strength of character and mind for the game. Plus, I'm an MPS grad so that made me a highly-prized asset to the organization.

Danielle: The two of us know each other from the club as well as the one year we overlapped at Stritch after she graduated from Alverno and was working in the financial aid office there.

Steph: So that's how he got to be one the slickest players in the game, as Erin claims.

Marc: It's definitely not because I am a great public speaker or the most engaging person around. I just know the right buttons to push and my vast knowledge on so many things gives me tools to make those connections that might pay off down the road. My getting the job here came as a result of Bishop Emerson knowing about my experience at Western Michigan and the bit I did at UWM along with him introducing me to David Strasser, the chairman of Carthage's Board of Trustees, during the interregnum. When the previous pastor decided to retire, the bishop brought me up to David along with his long-term vision for the new university, which could only be accomplished by someone with extensive experience in a college setting across multiple areas.

Hope: Which is why he's working with us in Residence Life to make changes that will hopefully
keep students here on the weekends.

Danielle: And why he was given the ability to oversee misconduct cases involving the athletic department.

Tom: And how he's been able to push the bishop's agenda through the warring factions on this campus.

As lunch broke up, Marc and Tom went back to Luther for a one-on-one meeting concerning their joint responsibilities for the Pre-Seminary Program.

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Tom experienced a slight bit of frustration at Marc's insistence that he find a female applicant to approve for the Pre-Seminary program before next week's Reformation Day dinner so that he and the bishop could announce it that night, his Scottish accent being just a bit more pronounced than usual.

Tom: I'm telling you, Marc, we just don't have any that we can admit at this time.

Marc: Not a single carry-over Concordia student or transferred Carthage one?

Tom: There are no junior carry-overs in the applicant pool, and no one from Carthage applied since the ones who would be going on to seminary already have their candidacy decision in-hand and their academic plans are set. You know I want to give you and Paul the opportunity to break the glass ceiling at the Reformation Day dinner next Saturday, but students don't usually meet the credit requirement until after their third semester here.

Marc: What if one did? Could you make a decision on that person in time? I know it wouldn't be official until after the Board of Trustees votes on the academic package on the 2nd, but that will most likely happen since they can't remove individual pieces from it and have to either vote the whole thing up or down.

Tom: If you tell me where to look, I can read through the file after I get back to my office and contact the registrar to get an updated transcript.

Marc: Can do better than that. You met her about an hour ago. Alyssa Norman. She's a sophomore but with her AP credits has second-semester standing. I can have the athletic department's academic advisor send me a copy of her transcript since she's the one who worked with her to change her major from Religion to Pre-Sem. Give me a second.

Marc called Casey and asked her to email him an unofficial copy of Alyssa's transcript. A couple of minutes later, the document showed up in Marc's inbox, which he then printed and handed to Tom.

Tom: Looks like she's been mirroring the Pre-Sem curriculum from the start. Meets the credits requirement. You know her, I reckon?

Marc: She's a hockey player and lives on the same floor as my goddaughter in Augsburg. I've already written her recommendation for the synod's candidacy committee since she should have had her file sent to them at the end of Spring semester, but Concordia was still in charge of the process at the time.

Tom: I'll look at her application and call you afterwards. Can you give me a copy of your letter to the synod or is that considered confidential?

Marc: It's not in submission to the synod yet, so it's still a draft technically. I can give it to you if you
think it'll help with your decision.

Tom: I think it might actually make my decision very easy as long as everything else checks out. Expect to hear from me within the hour.

Marc: Thanks. Paul will be grateful to have some good news to share next Saturday and I know she will be ecstatic if it comes to pass.

Tom left Marc's office and returned to his own to take up Alyssa's application.

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Marc received confirmation from Tom that he could make the announcement at the Reformation Day dinner of Alyssa's acceptance to the Pre-Seminary program, subject to the Board of Trustees' approval of the Faculty Senate's academic revisions on November 2nd. Marc called Kristie to share the news as well as get some help in pulling off the surprise announcement on the 27th.

Marc: Kristie? Marc Schmidt here.

Kristie: Marc. What's up?

Marc: I need your help. You know that Alyssa is one of my invitees for the Reformation Day dinner next Saturday, right?

Kristie: She didn't mention it. We haven't gotten too much into her faith life. That's something she'll talk to Sam more about than me.

Marc: I just got off the phone with Tom Sinclair, who heads up the Pre-Seminary Program. She has been accepted pending the Board of Trustees' approval in two weeks of the Faculty Senate's changes to the school's curriculum and program requirements. I am planning to surprise her by announcing it at the dinner. Can you help me fill out a table of eight for the event so her family can be here for it?

Kristie: Surprise, you say....Sam has Amanda's number, I think, so I can have her contact her with the news and thereby get it to her parents. My mom and dad are going to be up here the day before for Alyssa's opening game and we're going out to dinner afterwards. Maybe I can see if they'd be willing to stay over and join us and her family at the dinner. Let's see....Sam, me, mom, dad, her mom and dad, Amanda, and Abigail....that's eight. I'll get working on it.

Marc: Thanks. Anything new going on with you, Sam, and the roommate?

Kristie: Fall break was odd because all three of us were back in Illinois, but Sam chose not to invite Steph or her mom to her birthday dinner with our parents and me. Our parents know about what happened between us a few weeks ago and that things aren't the way they were before the semester started.

Marc: Remember, if you or Sam need anything, stop by or call.

Kristie: Thanks, Marc.

With the day's work completed, Marc left his office in Luther for home and a couple of hours of down time as Danielle was at the Humane Society this evening.

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This morning's tripartite meeting between the Trinity Board of Trustees, the Student Government
Association, and the Chaplain's Office started off calmly, with the SGA's three conferees presenting their student code revisions to the Board's representatives and the Board offering to the SGA its set of modifications to the existing Code of Student Conduct. Marc had planned to act as referee and impartial negotiator for the two sides, but also knew that he might have to get stuck in with some "third way" recommendations if agreement wasn't forthcoming.

Chad Markham (SGA President): Your modifications are a great start, Chairman Strasser, but they don't go nearly far enough to address our concerns about sex policing on campus.

David Strasser (Board of Trustees Chairman): A fair number of trustees feel that allowing Trinity to move so quickly away from the previous rules and in such a far-reaching way would make the school's commitment to developing upstanding and chaste leaders ring hollow.

Laura Hammond (BofT): What David is trying to say is that, we need to maintain some level of propriety when it comes to these revisions or else we lose our identity as a private university with ties to the ELCA.

Joanna Loomis (SGA): That's all well and good, Laura, but we need some movement on the policies that Concordia has in place for the dorms and entrance requirements for certain majors, and that Carthage has been loathe to revise from before the ELCA's founding.

Marc: Are there any areas where both sides can say "we can do this" or "that's a bridge too far"?

David: The part about restricting in-house visits, we can see how that is unnecessary and indicative of a nanny state in the dorms.

Joanna: The loosening of what constitutes a mutually-agreed-to relationship is what we want, but we understand that there are certain types that don't sit well with either your generation or the church as a whole, so we can give in on pushing the bounds beyond what you have laid out.

Michael Parsons (SGA): I have to speak up for my fellow brothers in the LGBT community. The agreed-to portions of our legislation by the Board of Trustees seems to constitute discrimination on the basis of sex. It gives women a lot more room to maneuver than men in terms of seeking out companionship on campus and the parameters thereof.

Paul Ridgewell (BofT): Can I be blunt? How many of us here want to see three or four guys together or want to envision those individuals in some form of "close order drill", if you will?

No one raised their hand, but Michael spoke up in defense of the idea that either the code ban the concept of multi-partner relationships for all or allow it for all.

Marc: Michael, Paul, is there a way to agree to disagree here? Both of you know that this is just the first step in a longer process, one which won't necessarily involve either of these bodies in the future.

Michael: Come again, Deacon?

Marc: This package has to pass by a 2/3 vote both bodies in identical form in order to become the standing policy at Trinity. Once that is accomplished, any expansion of those policies need only pass by simple majority the SGA, with the changes sent onto the VP for Student Affairs for implementation. We need to err slightly on the side of conservatism here, because getting 24 people in each of the two organizations to vote for this is difficult as it is without putting in seriously objectionable revisions.

Paul: I see what you're saying. In reality, the Board has to be good with what comes before it on November 2nd in order to get it on the books, whereby the SGA just needs to get it to us and can
then revisit portions after it becomes policy without having to deal with us over it.

Michael: In other words, we agree today to a document that can pass both bodies on the first attempt, with us having the ability to incrementally expand upon it, with Student Affairs getting all the phone calls and hate mail if people are dissatisfied with the outcome.

Marc: Precisely, Michael.

Chad: David and Laura, are you OK with the concept of multi-partner relationships in general?

David: I can't say that the idea is something I'd recommend, but I also understand that I grew up at a time when divorce wasn't so prevalent and where sexuality was more cut-and-dry. Who am I to say who or how many a person can choose to love in that way?

Laura: The research into the changing dynamics of relationships in the 21st Century clearly indicate that monogamy isn't the default position from which everyone then develops their most intimate of connections. I feel like actually lifting the ban on it and replacing it with Marc's concept of "responsible sexuality" would be far better than chipping away at it over time.

Michael: Which is what you meant, Paul, by saying that we could play around with what we want in it once it passes both of us the first time. I understand now why we need to perhaps trickle out that portion of the changes so that we keep your body and certain members of ours on the for side of the ledger.

Joanna: On that idea of responsible sexuality, Deacon, how do you define it and how would it be enforced and adjudicated?

Marc: As I believe I explained at the first SGA meeting this term, responsible sexuality means that all parties involved in or adjacent to a relationship are on-board with it. As for enforcing or adjudicating violations of it, that will be very much trial-and-error, since this is really a new concept and there is no telling at the moment what agreements might be supportable or would be considered abusive or harmful.

David: Do we have an agreement on at least the parts that we need to get in place for a swift approval at our next meetings?

Chad: I think we can find the votes even with the potential Title IX violation that exists with allowing multi-partner relationships. After all, we can turn around two weeks later, after you pass it, and expand the rule to include both genders.

Paul: I'm good with being able to kick THAT can down the road and not being responsible for its eventual inclusion.

Michael: As much as I hate sticking it to my peeps, this is probably the best we're going to be able to do at the moment because the Trustees are going to be a MUCH tougher body to get some of these changes past.

Laura: Speaking for the younger portion of the Board, I believe the changes put forth here best approximate what the Social Statement would allow us to do and is light years ahead of either school's current code.

The meeting concluded with everyone shaking hands and promising to fight for the unified document that had been developed. The major points of the revisions are:

* Ending the restrictions on overnight visits between occupants of the same residence hall;
* Opening up the concept of multi-partner relationships within the university community;

* Enshrining the Social Statement on Sexuality into the code; and

* Utilizing the residence hall tribunals (or the chaplain's office in the case of Pre-Sem students and student-athletes) when resolving violations of the code.

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A sizable portion of the women's lacrosse team met up for dinner in Siebert, where the weekend's plans were discussed.

Erin: We all just went home last weekend, so I'm presuming everyone is sticking around. Anyone got plans yet?

Christen: The women's soccer team plays MSOE on Saturday. Think I might want to check that out.

Julie: Can I come with you, roomie?

Christen: Roomie? We being formal, Jules?

Julie (whispering to Christen): Well, I don't know how many on the team know yet.

Lindsey: Enough with the whispering. We know you two cinnamon rolls are rubbing it out.

Emily swatted her girlfriend on the arm. "Lindsey, you didn't need to say it like THAT!"

Steph L.: I'll join you two if you don't mind.

Erin: You ditching me, bae?

Steph: No, Erin. You should come, too.

Erin: I don't know. Cassie and I aren't really hitting it off at the moment, and then there's.....HER!

Steph: Yeah, and with our friendly neighborhood big brother out of town this weekend, it might be a good chance for you to find out what is really up between the two of them.

Erin: Serious, Steph?

Steph: Yes, serious. If you're going to believe that Marc is screwing around on your Danielle with that Danielle, the least you can do is get it from the the source herself. You KNOW you can be a bit of a firecracker at times and I think you can handle confronting her if you're THAT concerned about Marc and her.

Erin: OK. I'm in.

Emily: You in, Linds?

Lindsey: You're like VISA, girl. You're everywhere I want to be.

Lauren: That covers Saturday. What about Friday night?

Christen: Maybe movie night in mine and Julie's room?

Julie: Or something more daring.....
Emily: Pass. Last time we did that, I ended up with my roommate's hand going where no one had gone before.

Julie: OK, OK. I'll come up with something else, but I want all of you to come over and hang out with us.

Steph: Can we bring others?

Christen: Sure. The more, the merrier.

Kelley: Steph, Erin, Emily, I want to thank you for staying with me on Monday until I felt comfortable enough to go back to my room.

Erin: We love you, KO! I hope everything is OK.

Kelley: It's fine, sort of.

Julie: What happened, Kelley?

Kelley: I went to a party with Shelley last weekend and was drugged. When I came to, I found that I had been messed with "down there".

Christen: Oh my! I'm so sorry, girl.

Kelley: I know I shouldn't have gone, but I was bored senseless after watching my brothers for most of break and needed to get out of the house.

Christen: You could have called me. We'd have been happy to come out here and do something with you.

Kelley: I didn't want to disturb the two of you, being it was your first extended time together with your family.

Julie and Christen got up and hugged their wee teammate.

Julie: That's so sweet of you, but next time, call! The alternative is something none of us want you to have to deal with.

Steph: I know Marc mentioned at service yesterday that he was going to Kansas City for a wedding. How does he know the two brides?

Erin: They play for FC Kansas City and are teammates of someone he worked with when developing his coaching module.

Steph: Another case of him outworking the competition?

Erin: Don't think so. More like word-of-mouth from Elysa to Becca and Mandy after he informed her that he would be eligible to perform weddings after he finished his diaconal education.

Lauren (to Kelley): Do you want to tell them, or should I?

Kelley: You do it.

Lindsey: Pay up, Emily!

Emily slid Lindsey a 10.
Lauren: What was the bet, Hoff?

Lindsey: That the two of you would be together within a week of returning from fall break.

Lauren: You're actually wrong about that.

Lindsey: Then what's the news?

Lauren: Yes, we are together, but it happened two weeks before fall break, when you sent us into your closet during Truth or Dare.

Emily: Cough it up, babe!

Kelley: Actually, I think that since Lauren got the prize, I should get the money.

Begrudgingly, Lindsey handed over her winnings to Kelley.

Kelley: Thank you. Now I can get my sweetie a Sweetest Day gift.

Lauren pecked Kelley on the temple. "You don't have to get me anything. Being with you is the best gift I can imagine."

Everyone at the table responded with "awwwwwwww".

Steph: Didn't realize that was this weekend. Anyone want to do something on Saturday night to celebrate?

Lauren: Let's figure it out tomorrow night after whatever happens at Christen and Julie's.
As his flight to Kansas City was finishing the boarding of passengers, Marc had his earbuds in and was studying the order of service for tomorrow's wedding of Rebecca Morrison and Amanda Lancaster, working through how to interject some humor within his scripted layout.

Marc (to himself): Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join these two women in the bonds of holy wedlock. Marriage is a wonderful institution, and those who choose to practice it belong in one. Seriously, the decision to marry should not be taken lightly, but rather should be done with sober judgment. I guess that means the brides should have stayed away from the mimosas this morning.

As Marc continued building the pieces (both funny and serious) of his first-ever wedding service, his seat mate sat down next to him.

Elysa Friedman (tapping Marc on the shoulder): Excuse me, but don't I know you from somewhere?

Marc pulled out his earbuds and looked over at her. "Elysa Friedman! I should have figured you'd be going to Kansas City this weekend. Just thought it might be on a later flight."

Elysa: Marc, it IS you! How long has it been, a couple of years maybe?

Elysa reached over the armrest and hugged Marc as best as she could.

Marc: Probably.

Elysa: What has you going to KC?

Marc: I'm guessing the same reason you're going, Becca and Mandy's wedding.

Elysa: Didn't know that you knew them.

Marc: I didn't until they called me, I'm guessing on your recommendation, to ask that I perform the ceremony.

Elysa: All I did was post your info in the locker room one day. What happened after that was between you and them.

Marc: I'm also doing Alex and Ashlyn's wedding in December in Orlando, as well as a big Valentine's Day to-do involving I forget how many couples. Last I saw it was four pairs, but it's possible there will be others that jump in with them by the time we get to February.

Elysa: I'm standing up for Ash. We were college housemates at UNC.

Marc: Think I remembered that. You also played together in Washington for a little while as well, right?

Elysa: Correct.

Marc: How's Aaron?

Elysa: We broke up about two months ago.

Marc: I'm sorry to hear that.
Elysa: His new job has him all over the world and, frankly, I felt he was dragging his feet on giving me the commitment I wanted as a result of his jet-set life. I'll be 32 in two weeks and the clock is ticking a little louder now than it was a couple of years ago.

Marc: I understand. Can't wait forever if you want kids.

Elysa: I don't necessarily do, but it seemed like I was wasting my time if he wasn't looking for something more than sharing an apartment during my off-season and seeing one another whenever a free weekend might occur.

Marc: Hope you get back in the game soon and find a winner.

Elysa: Thanks, Marc. Not really sure when or how just yet, but it will come. You free for lunch after we land?

Marc: I don't have anything scheduled until 4:30 when we're doing the rehearsal, so yes. Just need to check into the hotel and get rid of my bags first.

Elysa: How is the new gig going?

Marc: It's a challenge, but not much more of one than developing the module or building MUSC. More headaches and bully-pulpit tactics, however. I forgot how frustrating dealing with people could be.

Elysa: I've been spending some time at Wagner College so far this off-season and have seen in their school newspaper some of the upheaval that you have brought to your campus. A couple of their students have wondered how a school like yours is able to get this stuff done when theirs, sitting smack-dab in the middle of liberal-as-heck New York City, can't do it.

Marc: It hasn't been easy, but I have a bishop who knew that the opportunity for Trinity to be the first university created under the ELCA label required policies that mirrored where the denomination and college life are now, not where they were when most of the other schools came into being. Getting the right person to forward that agenda also wasn't a cake walk, but Bishop Emerson and the Chair of the Board of Trustees had been working together for a couple of years to set forth a long-term plan that someone with my kind of knowledge and experience could advance once on campus.

Elysa: Sounds like you're enjoying this change.

Marc: Professionally, it has been a little daunting, but personally I couldn't be happier. My goddaughter goes to the school, I have two former players on campus, one as the athletic department's academic advisor and the other as the assistant women's soccer coach, and I'm able to use all of my talents and education to impact multiple parts of the university.

The flight began its descent to Kansas City International Airport, where it would land in about ten minutes. Marc and Elysa shared a taxi to the Comfort Inn and Suites, followed by lunch at the Red Front Bar and Grill.

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A large contingent of 3rd floor Augsburg showed up in Christen and Julie's room. When everyone was gathered, Christen fired up the DVD player and put in "The Notebook". Once the movie began, the couples started to settle in with one another. Emily was lounging against Lindsey, while Kelley was wrapped in Lauren's arms. Andi rested her head on Jane's shoulder and nestled into her neck. Maggie and Morgan switched spots so that the Floridian could sit next to Savannah, leaving Morgan and Cami, Maggie's roommate, next to one another. The two of them knew each other somewhat
since Cami's sister, Savannah, played with Morgan at Madison West (Cami played soccer at Madison Lafollette), so the situation wasn't particularly awkward.

Steph, Erin, and Jessie tried to figure out how they wanted to organize themselves and followed the other trio in the room's lead, where Kristie and Sam were resting against Alyssa. Steph draped an arm over each of the women and they curled up into her. Christen and Julie quickly lost interest in the movie as their eyes were fixated on one another. Some of the players started dozing off against their persons of interest, making for a very serene atmosphere.

After the movie ended, the group splintered off into a handful of smaller ones. Erin went over to talk to Cami, who was with Maggie, Morgan, and Savannah.

Erin: Cami, right? I'm Erin.
Cami: I've heard about you from your roommate, Cassie. Glad to finally meet you.
Erin: You're on the soccer team with her?
Cami: Yes, and like her I'm a defender.
Erin: Can I ask you a serious question?
Cami: Sure.
Erin: What do you think of your coaching staff?
Cami: I like them in general, but sometimes they can rub me a little wrong.
Erin: Care to explain?
Cami: Sara seems to look at our team like a stepping stone between what she had at Carthage and where she wants to eventually go, which would be Division I. As for Danielle, I know she's not much older than the seniors on the team, but she comes across as more their friend than their coach. I even think she might have a little something on the side going with someone on the team. Also, some of their decisions over who goes on weekend road trips and who doesn't seem arbitrary. Why do you ask?
Erin: I've got a fairly negative opinion of Danielle because she seems to be trying to make a move on my godfather, the chaplain.
Cami: I see........
Erin: My girlfriend Steph says that I need to give her a chance to clear the air and tell me what really is happening with the two of them, but I don't know if I can do that without launching into a tirade over her constant flirting with and eye-fucking of Marc. A group of us are coming to tomorrow's game against MSOE and I was wondering if there would be a way to talk to her afterwards without it seeming like I'm looking to beat her senseless.
Cami: You know there are a few soccer/lacrosse roommate situations. You and Cassie, Maggie and I, Carli and Alyssa...well, that's soccer and hockey, but she's a former player and her sister plays at Oshkosh, plus she's linked with Kristie so that's her lacrosse connection. Bring your girls down to the field after the game. I'll try to work with some of my teammates and her to do something post-match that might give you a chance to talk to her in a less-tense atmosphere.
Erin: Thanks. I'm worried about Marc not being able to keep her at bay and wrecking his relationship
with his wife and possibly my parents.

Cami: You care a lot about him, I am guessing.

Erin: Yes. He knows things about me that my parents don't, that I'm afraid to tell them, like what's going on with me and Steph or my being gay.

Cami: Let me see what I can do.

Erin: Thanks again.

Elsewhere in the room, Lauren made plans with Lindsey and Christen for the three of them to take their ladies out for a romantic evening tomorrow night to celebrate Sweetest Day. Erin went back to Steph and Jessie and told them what Cami was planning to do for her. Steph told Erin she was proud of her for trying to clear the air with Danielle. She also asked her if she wanted to go out tomorrow night, just the two of them. Erin thought that was an excellent idea and gave her a kiss on the chin as a thank-you.

Things broke up around midnight, with Christen and Julie settling in for the night once everyone had left.

Julie: That was fun, even if it ended up a bit of a snoozefest while the movie was going.

Christen: I'm glad that everyone was comfortable enough to be who and what they are with those who they are with.

Julie: Kind of like we're starting to become.

Christen walked over from her bed to Julie's, then sat down and looked her in the eyes.

Christen: You know I think the world of you, and I know that you care about me tremendously. Julie Breanne, will you be my girlfriend officially?

Julie: Yes, Christen Marie. Yes, I will be your girl.

Julie closed the distance between her and Christen and placed a kiss on her lips, which led to more and ended with the two of them sharing the blonde's bed, with Julie in Christen's arms.

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A decent crowd was at Niemoller Field for this afternoon's women's soccer game between Trinity and the Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE). The Thunder have struggled in their first season, compiling an overall record of 4-12, 3-6 in the Northern Athletics Collegiate Conference (NACC). With this being the last home game of the season, the three seniors on the roster were being honored. Megan and Jessica were in attendance to cheer on their friend Abby Warner, who would be playing her final college home match on this day. Steph, Erin, and Jessie were seated about 1/3 of the way up the stands, around the midfield stripe. Behind them were Lauren and Kelley, Christen and Julie, and Alyssa and Kristie. In front were Maggie and Savannah. Cami waved to the group when she came over to their sideline to retrieve a ball, while Cassie and Carli were doing some one-touch work with one another.

Steph (to Erin): Remember, you don't need to confront her about what you're presuming is going on. Express concern if you must, but realize that you have something in common. You both care about Marc and, as such, you need to be on good terms for his sake, no matter what you might actually feel about her.
Erin: I know, but it will be hard because I get the feeling that she is looking for something more than Marc can provide and that in the end, she'll be heartbroken or worse, Marc will fall into her trap and leave wife Danielle for her.

Jessie: If I may interject. Maybe their thing is similar to mine with the two of you. Not looking for forever with either of you, not even a let's-see-what-happens. I want to have my fun without the hangups that come with being in a relationship.

Erin: Well, we can do that because we've all agreed to that. I'm pretty sure my godmother isn't in on the side thing Marc and Dani might have.

Steph: Promise me you'll give her a chance to tell her side before you beat her over the head with a baseball bat.

Erin: For you, I'll be on my best behavior.

MSOE took the game to the Thunder from the start, scoring three goals in the first eleven minutes. Several changes were made by the MSOE coach around the 25th minute, which ended up producing a pair of tallies before the end of the half.

Lauren: Christen, where should we go for dinner tonight?

Christen: Kelley's from this part of the metro. She should know what's good around here.

Kelley: My parents usually go to Calderone Club for Valentine's Day, so I'm guessing that's a pretty romantic venue.

Lauren: Easy to get to from here?

Kelley: Yeah. Straight down Port Washington Road.

Julie: Guessing Italian with a name like that.

Kelley: I'd presume so.

Lauren: Any of the rest of you want to join us four and Lindsey and Emily?

Steph: I promised Erin that we'd do something just the two of us tonight.

Maggie: I know Cami is trying to get something put together for the lacrosse and soccer players after the game. I don't know what's up with that or how long we'll be.

Alyssa: Amanda is coming down after their game this afternoon and the two of us, Kristie, and Sam are planning to go to Nisleit's Country Inn in Port. Finally introduce the two of them to our hometown.

Lauren: Sounds cozy and also sounds like a step forward for you and Kristie.

Alyssa: Yeah, you could say that. Amanda met the both of them when Oshkosh played here last month, but this will be the first chance for the four of us to do something together. I think Kristie has in her mind the possibility of getting our sisters together, which I'm not sure about yet.

The second half was rather pedestrian. The Raiders picked up a goal on a penalty kick, but with both teams playing a lot of reserves, neither side mustered a whole lot offensively. After the 6-0 loss by Trinity, Steph, Erin, Jessie, Maggie, and Savannah waited by the south gate for the players and staff to exit the field.
Maggie gave her roommate a hug once she came over to her and the others. "Sorry about the result."

Cami: It's to be expected. MSOE has won the league recently and always puts up good teams according to what Sara told us. With 14 freshmen, we're just trying to get better every day and build toward being contenders in a couple of years.

Cassie: Erin, Steph, Jessie. What did you think of our play today?

Steph: Tough to say since both teams played a lot of reserves. Not as fluid or attack-minded as you were against Oshkosh, but better than the home opener, despite you winning that game.

After the remainder of the players exited Niemoller, Danielle locked the gate and followed them to Buuck. The rest of the group came along and Erin hung back so she could talk to her.

Danielle: Erin! Thanks for coming to the game. I wish we had been a little more competitive today, but MSOE is a good team and we don't have the experience right now to keep up with them or a few of our other conference opponents.

Erin: This is probably going to be a trying year in general for the athletic program here, with the lack of upperclassmen on most of the teams and the abundance of first-year players. I wanted to talk to you for a little bit because I think we share a common interest, that being the happiness of my godfather.

Danielle: Give me a chance to get the players situated and then we can talk in my office.

The pair went into Buuck and headed for the women's soccer office. Danielle closed the door behind Erin and the two sat down.

Danielle: OK, Erin. What has you concerned about Marc and how can I help?

Erin: I don't want this to come off as accusatory, but I think you're creating a wedge between him and his wife. I see how you look at him, how you touch him, how you try to turn him on. Sometimes he can't say no when he is being given attention like that, and I'm just wondering if you're taking advantage of that fact.

Danielle: I know you might not want to believe it, but I do care about him. He's been a mentor to me in the soccer world, he showed me a level of caring that I didn't think people in the business would following the death of my best friend in a car accident four summers ago, and he was always an encouragement to me when it seemed like I would never get my ankle and foot to heal properly and would have to quit playing after my second year of college.

Erin: That's all fine and good, but the extra-friendly interest...I don't know what you're shooting for with him.

Danielle: There are some things we haven't discussed about the depth of our friendship yet, but I am not looking to replace his Danielle. I've already told him that and we're both good with where things are currently.

Erin: How can I trust that you're not using him or preying on him?

Danielle: Because I'm not into guys in that way.

Erin: Excuse me? How can you NOT be into guys if you and him are, well, bumping uglies as it were?!
Danielle was stuck as she hadn’t yet told Marc about her desire to settle down with a woman in the future, but Erin’s insistence that she was out to mess up his marriage meant she might need to say something to the freshman to get her to back off.

Danielle: Believe what you want, but I am NOT looking to steal him from Danielle. Right now, at this time in my life, I'm not ready to settle down with someone. He and I satisfy certain needs the other has. He treats me wonderfully, which is something that most people haven't done. In high school and my first year in college, I was the “fat friend” that my hot classmates would want to have along when they went out. He never saw me that way, despite his little slip-up the first time we met. My playing at Stritch, which included all the weight room work and conditioning that's done, caused the weight that had been chub to become more toned and I filled out if you will. I gained confidence from looking better, developed friendships with people who were supportive, and even started to attract attention from others. I knew that I was bi, but the way guys had always viewed me as a conquest made me not want to be serious with them. Having someone like Marc fill that small void that I have, someone who doesn't view me like a pariah or a one-time-off, who I think will be OK with being the guy friend to supplement what I want from a marriage with a woman, is a great feeling, and I think I might be able to help him with his lust problem, if what he told me about his concerns for this weekend are anything to go by.

Erin: I guess I've misjudged you a bit. My only concern was that he wouldn't be able to say no to you and that it would screw him up worse than the anxiety attacks do.

Danielle: Like the one at the All-Sports Mixer? I saw what was happening and also knew that I was partially to blame for it coming on, but I didn't have a clue how to help him, so I kept my distance. I wanted him to know that I was interested, but I wasn't going to go to the point where I pressured him into responding. Now it's more of a two-way street than it was a few weeks ago, because he knows that I care about him beyond the little bit of service I get from him. You can trust me, Erin. I need to be running since I have a dinner date with one of my best friends tonight. Marc knows her and is partially responsible for us growing closer in college than we were when we went to Nicolet together.

Erin: Guess I'll have to ask him about that. Again, I'm sorry I thought wrongly of you. He's like a second dad to me, so I have a bit of a protective streak when it comes to him.

Danielle: And to me, he's like a big brother, someone who I know has my back and who I can be completely honest with, but with that little something extra that we both need from each other.

Erin stood up and offered Danielle a hug, which was accepted. They then left the office and left Buuck, with Danielle heading home and Erin going to her room to get ready for her date with Steph.

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Steph arrived at Erin's door around 6pm to pick her up for their night on the town. She decided to ask Kristie for advice on an outfit for the night, since she seemed to be helping Alyssa embrace her more feminine side. After a few minutes of debate, the blonde fashionista selected a black sleeveless shift, which Steph paired with black open-toed ankle boots. Erin finished up her getting ready, then opened the door to see her beloved standing there.

Erin: Ummm....can we just skip dinner and go straight to dessert?

Steph gave Erin a once-over and was just as agog at what she saw, with Erin in a burgundy above-the-knee skater dress with sheer paneling on top.

Steph: Wow! Cute, flirty, yummy, but not tarty. Something tells me we might want to find someplace
close for dinner so we can get back and do something about the tension building between the two of us.

Erin kissed Steph full on the lips, then closed and locked her door and the two went down the two flights of stairs to the main floor so they could exit Augsburg for dinner at Highland House.

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Erin: Tell me, Steph. When you run into trouble with your lust problem, how do you manage it?

Steph: That's an odd question, Erin. What brought that up?

Erin: The topic came up when Danielle and I talked, because she talked about Marc having one and that he worries about it getting out of control.

Steph: Managing it, I haven't figured that out yet. What happens when I struggle with it? I make bad decisions, like a gambler does, or an alcoholic, or a drug addict. I unconsciously act out, which is why you have at times caught me getting lost looking at Shelley. It's not that I WANT to give off that, but I can't necessarily control it.

Erin: That also would explain why she gets the wrong impression of your level of interest.

Steph: Right. So what did Danielle say about Marc and his problem?

Erin: She didn't get into too much of specifics, because I'm sure it's something he doesn't want shared. They fill voids for each other that their current lives have, and they view each other as a safe person to meet those needs, because neither one is looking for it to go beyond that. The underlying appreciation they have for each other is what makes their friendship work, I guess. She shared some sensitive stuff about herself with me, while also explaining how Marc has been a healing presence for her. I feel like I need to talk to him about this, so I can better stay out of it and be on good terms with her.

Steph: When your heart is out, you are so damn attractive. I fall a little bit more for you when I see how much you care about people. I feel like if I am going to keep from hurting you with my urge to roam, I need that kind of safe person that will allow me to unleash it without expecting more or making a mess of what you and I share.

Erin: We have Jessie between us for that reason, I think. It was originally to keep you away from Shelley's advances, but in all honesty, it's a means of helping you get past the point where your urge to roam kicks in. She doesn't have the time or desire presently to be with someone full-on, but she wants to fool around some. I haven't tried yet with her because I want you to be my first, Stephanie.

Steph took Erin's hand and kissed it, then leaned over and kissed her deeply, with the two of them parting their lips to allow their tongues to dance with one another. Steph broke the kiss and told Erin that she wanted to cross that line with her, but it should be a special occasion that leads to it, not just a desire to get her rocks off. After a bit more teasing and touching, Erin asked Steph if she would stay over and they ended up falling asleep with Steph's arms wrapped around Erin's torso, holding her girlfriend close to her.
Getting To The Point

Marc returned to Milwaukee on Sunday afternoon, lucky to not be flying back to Chicago with Elysa. She was all over his mind during the two days in Kansas City and he needed to get away as quickly as possible so he could eventually release the pent-up urges that all of the weekend’s eye candy built up in him. After a quiet, non-disruptive day in his office on Monday (made possible by his listing Friday-Monday as his absence for the wedding), Tuesday promised to be the day where he could get his libido back to normal and empty out the sexual tension.

Right at 10am Tuesday morning, Dani knocked on Marc's office door. He answered it and led her inside, then quickly shut the door behind her. He gave her a once-over and was struck speechless.

Marc: All this for me, Deuce?

Dani: Well, yes and no. I have a job interview later today and decided that I didn't want to stop home in between to change. As for what's underneath, that is definitely ALL FOR YOU.

The pair shared a small kiss before Marc moved his mouth onto Dani's earlobe. She leaned her head back and offered up access to her neck, which Marc eagerly sucked upon.

Dani: Go ahead, Marc. Let all the frustration out. I know you've been waiting to get home so you could bang me silly and I want you to do just that!

Marc was getting very turned-on by her come-on talk and ran his hands up under the bottom of her dress to give her bum a firm squeeze.

Dani: Mmmmmm. Someone is REALLY looking to get lucky today.

Marc: Yes, Dani. Knowing I was coming home to this made it easy to avoid acting on the built-up tension.

Dani: Take me. Take me now.

Marc wrapped his arms around Dani and laid her softly on the floor, then hiked up her dress and pulled down her panties, which she helped him get over her peep-toe pumps. She then undid his belt while he unbuttoned his pants and slid them and his briefs down to around his knees. He rubbed his quickly-hardening member against her slit, getting her wet and him even harder, She lifted her legs to give him easier access to enter her and he pressed forward slowly, sliding inside her a bit at a time before pushing the full length in. As he began moving in and out, she wrapped her legs around his waist and grabbed his butt.

Dani: God is your ass TIGHT!

Marc: My lower body has always been pretty built. Calves you could bounce a quarter off, the aforementioned backside.

Dani tightened up her vaginal walls around Marc, which led him to pick up the pace of his thrusting. She pulled him toward her and captured his lips with hers. Following that, she whispered in his ear, “Cum, darling! Fill me up!” Her encouragement and near-begging had an effect on him and he released inside her about a minute later.

The two switched positions and Dani took off her dress, exposing a black bra and crotchless tights. She rocked her hips while rubbing her opening against the tip of Marc's member. She then leaned back onto Marc's chest and pressed her pussy onto his slightly-erect penis and squeezed it with her
lips to bring it back to life. As it hardened, she slid up and down on it. Marc slid the straps of her bra off her shoulders and unhook it to let her breasts roam free. His hands moved onto them and he rolled her nipples between his fingers. She changed positions so that she was facing him and began pounding up-and-down on his shaft, squeezing lightly at the top of her stroke when just the tip was inside her. He started to thrust up under her and sucked on her nipples, hardening them before lightly nibbling on them. She moved her left hand onto her clit and began running it feverishly to bring on her climax, after which she moved down and took Marc's cock between her breasts to get him closer to a second orgasm. She released him and pivoted to straddle his face while her mouth engulfed his bulging member. They licked and sucked on one another before Dani came with his tongue inside her and Marc exploded between her velvety lips.

Following a few minutes of cuddling and exchanging sweet-nothings, they re-attired and moved to his desk for a heart-to-heart talk about their relationship.

Marc: First, I want to say thank you, Danielle. You don't know how good it feels to have someone who understands you and knows how to boost your self-worth. Next, I think I might want this to become a bit more committed, because I am seriously enjoying what you do to me and don't really want to go elsewhere to get that.

Dani: Actually, I do know how that feels, because you've been doing it for me for a while now. You make me feel wanted, desired, and desirable as a woman, and how I respond to the idea of sharing myself with you has done wonders for my self-esteem. I think we're sort of eye-to-eye on where we want this to go. I need you to be the person I go to when I want to feel pretty or sexy, or if I need some words or acts of encouragement. I don't want some boy toy or someone who is going to hit-it-and-quit-it with me.

Marc: This past weekend was tough, not because of seeing so many hot-to-trot women in one place, but because I ran into an old colleague of mine on the flight to Kansas City. She was the one who is responsible more or less for me doing the wedding in KC and for the one in Orlando. We had lunch together after landing and I found out that she had broken up with her long-term partner a few months ago. She stayed on my mind the rest of Friday and Saturday, even distracting me a little bit at the reception. We had a couple of drinks together there and she suggested that we meet up in Orlando a day early for Alex and Ashlyn's wedding since she's in it and would be pretty tied-up once the rest of the party came to town.

Dani: Those aren't THE Alex and Ashlyn, as in Ashlex?

Marc: Same two. Elysa went to college with Ashlyn and is presently playing with the two of them in Kansas City.

Dani: You fly in some rarified air, don't you Mr. Deacon?!

Marc: Sometimes I wish some of the stops I made hadn't happened, that I could live a quieter life being happy with what I've become and achieved. Then again, I wouldn't be HERE doing what I want to do if I hadn't gone through some of those places.

Dani reached across Marc's desk and placed her hand on top of his. "I have something I need to tell you, that I was hoping wouldn't come out before we had this chance to talk, but I ended up telling this to Erin because it seemed she needed some kind of confirmation that I wasn't out to steal you away from the other Danielle."

Marc: Erin talked to you about me?

Dani: Well, about us. I really wanted to tell you this first, but I was afraid she'd make things more
complicated between us if I didn't yield up something that would calm her nerves about your fidelity to her godmother.

Marc: Deuce, you know you can tell me anything and that I won't think differently about you. I love the woman you've become since we first met and I cherish your friendship more than you'll know.

Dani: I'm bi, and when I finally decide to settle down, I'm going to do that with a woman.

Marc: So my role is to be the safe guy you can get your piece with who won't get in the way of you being with someone of the same sex?

Dani: That's a pretty good description.

Marc: If we're being honest with each other about what we need from one another, I guess I should lay out my position. What I need from you, Dani, is to be my safe outlet for the wandering eye I have. I don't want to fall victim to other women's wiles because I can't stop them from moving on me, like Elysa seemed to be doing this past weekend or how you first approached me about getting together. I need someone who has the best intentions and who has my best interest at heart. You fit that description. You are that one person who I feel I can go to when I need a bit of a release, who knows how to turn me on, and who knows how to tap into my tender side, because just boffing with you won't cut it for me.

Dani: I think that sums up how I want to be with you. I know you have this issue, and I know that it has the potential to trip you up if you don't confine it somehow. Whatever is going on between you and Danielle is none of my business, really. I saw it when I played for you, and it's probably not much different now than it was then.

Marc: You said you had an interview later. Trying to pick up some holiday money or got bigger plans that require more funds than the full-time-in-season ones provide?

Dani: Michelle and I went to dinner Saturday night, sort of a Sweetest Day thing playing on the original meaning of the holiday.

Marc: Pelphrey?

Dani: Yes.

Marc: How is she doing?

Dani: Really well. Enjoys teaching at Maple Dale. Anyways, we're looking to find a place together so we can get out of our parents' basements, if you will. I need to do something during the holiday season and early 2019 in order to make that possible since the coaching job only pays through the end of November.

Marc: Totally understand it. I'm glad the two of you have developed a solid friendship. She's the kind of hype person that you need to pull you up in your down periods. Much different than Kristy.

Dani: VERY different. In a way, I'm happy that you and Brenda decided to call her on the carpet for her attitude my first season with you guys. It made me see her as she really was, which was a selfish brat who played on me because it made her look better. Michelle's a much better BFF and us losing Trina together helped forge that friendship a bit, not to mention Kevin's BS with the two of us and our battling the injury bug on-and-off. By the way, I told Erin how instrumental you were in helping the two of us with our grief over Trina's death.

Marc: It would have been a dick move and I'd have come off as a real asshole if I insisted that you
place the team above yourselves in that situation. Sudden death is so much harder to confront and work through than the gradual type. I have experience on both sides, the deaths of my father and father-in-law. In the first case, I came home from practice one day and had to break in our house. I found him lying face-down by my parents’ bed, dead from an aortic aneurysm. The other one was an up-and-down process over 28 months that started with a bacterial infection and eventually led to kidney failure.

Dani: This is why we make for such good, I guess, work spouses. We can share pretty much anything with each other and know it's completely honest.

Marc: I have a couple of things to confess that I hope will perk up your already beautiful face. One, you're the first person ever to get me off orally, and two, you’re also the only woman able to get me off twice in the same day.

Dani smiled at Marc following his admissions. "I'm sorry to do this, but I need to leave for my interview soon."

Marc: You guys play at Wisconsin Lutheran tomorrow, right?

Dani: Yes. Why do you ask?

Marc: I think us two and Erin need a clearing-of-the-air talk. I'm going to call her over to the office later to give her the what-for about her interrogation of you and suggest we go to the TLU/WLC game tomorrow afternoon and then dinner. I live sort of in the area and know a few spots for the three of us to hash this out. Can you get her back to campus afterwards since you live up this direction?

Dani: Yes. We worked through some of her concerns, but I agree that we need to bury the hatchet somewhere other than one another's back.

Dani got up and walked toward the door, with Marc following her. The two hugged before she left. He wished her good luck on the interview and to use him as a reference if need be and that he'd see her tomorrow at the game.

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After Marc got back to campus from lunch at Kopp's, he called Erin.

Cassie: Hello?

Marc: May I speak with Erin Matheson, please?

Cassie: Just a second.

Cassie told Erin that she had a call.

Erin: Hello?

Marc: Miss Matheson, this is Deacon Schmidt.

Erin: Hey Marc!

Marc: Don't Hey Marc me. This morning, I had a member of the athletic department inform me of being verbally harassed by you this past weekend. As I hope you are aware, emotional blackmail is a serious offense, one that is forbidden in the soon-to-be-passed Code of Student Conduct. You will be
in my office at 2pm to defend your actions or I will place this charge in your file, to be adjudicated once the new code is enacted.

Erin: Yes. Sir!

Erin hung up and turned to her roommate.

Cassie: What was that all about?

Erin: Apparently I have run afoul of the new code by interrogating one of your coaches about her relationship with my godfather. He has demanded I be in his office at 2:00 or he will move forward with a charge of emotional blackmail.

Cassie: Damn! Sounds like you bit off a little more than you planned going after Danielle.

Erin: I thought her and I had squared things up by the end of our talk on Saturday. Guess I should go see what Big Bad Marc is going to do to me.

Cassie: Good luck.

Erin: Thanks.

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Marc: What the HELL were you THINKING to attack a member of the athletic department's staff?!

Erin: I KNOW the two of you have banged one another more than the one time you told me about where she took you by surprise. I needed to know that she wasn't taking advantage of your inability to fend her off.

Marc: She told me that you in effect forced her to disclose highly personal things about herself lest you end up going to someone with your accusations about her and myself. That is emotional blackmail. That was specifically put in the Social Statement on Human Sexuality so that people would not be forced to hide who they are because of someone's nonacceptance.

Erin: After she told me those things, I realized I had misjudged her and her intentions regarding you. I apologized and we hugged it out before we left Buuck.

Marc: She should have never been put in the position to have to do that. I don't know if I am more angry at you for going behind my back to question her or disappointed in you for not trusting that she and I had talked about what was happening between us.

Erin: I was worried that you were going to screw up your relationship with our Danielle and possibly then me and my parents. I HAD to act so I would be able to have your back.

Marc: The three of us need to clear the air, which is why you and I will be going to tomorrow's Trinity/Wisconsin Lutheran game in Wauwatosa and then dinner with Dani afterwards. She will get you back to campus following that. Outside of my wife, the two of you are the most important people in my life, and I need you to be able to tolerate one another. Consider this penance for overstepping your limits.

Erin: Did the two of you decide this before or after you finished her off? I saw how she was dressed when she left campus earlier, and I know how that type of thing turns you on.

Marc: First, little girl, that question is out of line. Second, if you would just NOT JUMP TO
CONCLUSIONS, you would learn that there was a good reason for her attire this morning. She has a interview for a seasonal job to help her get through the holidays and eventually get her own place with her best friend Michelle early next year. Unless a coach has a permanent position at Trinity, they only get paid for their competitive season, along with a small stipend if the team uses the specified days in their off-season for training.

Erin: So you don't deny that you and her got after it today, then.

Marc: That is really none of your business, Erin. You know that I could have the book thrown at you, Steph, and Jessie based on what I know concerning your agreed-to triad. You also know that the ban on it could very well be lifted in 10 days after SGA and the Board of Trustees vote on the new code. How can I trust that you won't get your reprieve and then turn around to stab me in the back?!

Erin: Marc, I haven't told Danielle yet about you and Dani, and I wouldn't do that to you. I know that there are some things I don't know about your marriage with her, that I shouldn't go asking about. I do have your back. I hope you can believe me when I say that.

Marc: I guess I should tell you this, then. Last Tuesday, your mom called me asking about you and Steph, whether anything was up with you two.

Erin: I hope you didn't say anything.

Marc: Of course not. I wouldn't do you like that, especially when there are possibly plans in the works for you to do it on your own sooner rather than later.

Erin: What do you know that I don't?

Marc: Ask your parents. When your mom and I talked, I brought up an idea for Thanksgiving weekend. I still need to talk it over with Danielle and I don't know if she has brought it up with your dad. If things come together, that might be the perfect opportunity for you to tell them about yourself, and then about you and Steph.

Erin: Are we good?

Marc: I think so, for the time being. Be here by 3pm tomorrow, since game time is 4:00.

Marc and Erin hugged before she left, with her pecking his cheek as always.

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Marc and Alyssa had lunch together after this afternoon's weekly service, with Julie and Christen joining them.

Alyssa: Is what you said in your homily true about the number of cases of abuse on this campus?

Marc: Definitely. All three of you know of at least one of them, maybe more than one. So far this semester, I have had student-athletes come in with instances of physical and sexual abuse, implied verbal abuse, and emotional abuse masked as blackmail or extortion.

Julie: We all know about Kelley's incident, as well as the fight that left Sam with a couple of bruises around the throat. What about the other two?

Marc: You know I can't get say who or what has happened.
Alyssa: Well, Sam also gets berated by Steph and Kristie's knowledge of that and Sam's reaction to it helped her notice that something was wrong with Kelley after fall break.

Marc: I wanted to talk today about a much different subject, using this past weekend's holiday to speak about sharing one's love with those less-fortunate and those who are isolated. The prevalence of the breaching of boundaries by students around here caused me to change my mind, especially after I had spoken with an athlete and an athletic department staff member about a confrontation over the weekend.

Alyssa thought she knew who Marc was referring to, but with no clear evidence that their talk progressed into a tete-a-tete chose not to inquire further.

Marc: I am just so angry about this last one, because it is the least detectable and the most insidious form of what one might consider abuse, the emotional type. All forms of abuse rip at a person's self-worth, self-esteem, and sense of well-being. You saw that with Kelley, where she didn't even KNOW what had happened but feared the worst and allowed it to overrun her thoughts. Emotional abuse undermines an individual's sense of reality and independence and has probably the longest-lasting effect on someone because the person may not actually believe they are being harmed or have been violated.

Christen: How can someone not know they are being harmed?

Marc: Think back to childhood, Christen. You have siblings, right?

Christen: Yes. I have an older sister and a younger sister.

Marc: I'm sure there were times growing up when one of you had to barter with one of the others to keep certain things from reaching your parents. That amounts to extortion or blackmail, depending on whether the individual was attempting to shame you or just get you in trouble. This is something which the new code seeks to eliminate, particularly as it relates to interpersonal relationships. When Concordia was here, students were forced to be closeted or they could theoretically be run off campus for violating the implicit ban on homosexuality that translated from the ban on non-marital sex, as the LCMS believes that the only purpose of a same-sex relationship is, well, illicit sex. That fear of being outed was preyed upon by some students to elicit information or favors.

Alyssa: Like Steph trying to hang onto Kristie and Sam by threatening to say they are doing one another?

Marc: That would be emotional blackmail, yes.

Julie: I haven't been threatened yet with anything negative because Christen and I are a couple.

Marc: Feel blessed in that regard. It's most likely that no one has any pangs of jealousy over the two of you together. I know Alyssa is probably swimming uphill when it comes to her relationship with Kristie, as there is some jealousy on Steph's part which is what is causing her to clamp down in negative ways on her and Sam. She hasn't come after you yet, has she?

Alyssa: No, but I know that eventually she will lose control of them and I will end up having to deal with her.

Marc: If anyone tries to make you feel ashamed or guilty for how you live, don't be afraid to sic the dogs on them through a report to my office. Alyssa, can you follow me back to my office after lunch?

Alyssa: Sure, Marc.
Julie: What should I wear for Saturday night's dinner?

Marc: What you wore to the All-Sports Mixer would suffice, or something in that same vein. Don't go overboard, however, because there will be other occasions on campus that will require you to go more formal than Saturday night's will, and you should save your money for when you REALLY need to spend it. I heard about the Goodwill date night a few weeks ago and I thought it was a very clever idea as you can find really charming clothes there for very little.

Christen: It was fun doing that with Julie and a few of the others.

Alyssa: Unfortunately, I have a LOT of trouble finding things in my size that actually look feminine and not frumpy. I think I'll need to make a run down to Bayshore and see if I can get lucky at one of their stores with an outfit that looks good AND fits.

Marc: What you wore for the All-Sports Mixer was good, but I get your point. Maybe ask around those you know around Trinity who are part of that demo. They might have good tips on where to shop and how to piece together things that work but also allow you to be comfortable.

Lunch wrapped up with Julie and Christen returning to Augsburg and Alyssa going with Marc to Luther, where he asked her about some of her goals in ministry for the rest of her time at Trinity as he was starting to plan for a peer minister program as part of the chaplain's office.

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SGA President Chad Markham gavelled in its bi-weekly meeting right on 3:30pm. After a series of resolutions involving committee assignments and pending legislation, Legislative Chair Michael Parsons brought forth the main course of today's session, the conference report on the Code of Student Conduct. President Markham allocated 30 minutes of time to Joanna Loomis in favor of the legislation and 30 minutes to Richard Kilbourn in opposition Joanna yielded two minutes to Elizabeth Edwards from the College of Business.

Elizabeth Edwards: Today has the potential to be a momentous one at Trinity, for we have the opportunity to bring into the light the ability to exercise our freedom of conscience and freedom of action on the issue of interpersonal relationships. The other side I am guessing will look at this report and see what isn't in it and willchoose to vote against it because of that, but I wish to look at the positives in this legislation. Restrictions that were in place a year ago will be lifted and new ways of relating with one another will be made valid. There will also be new avenues by which we can address violations that will allow the sanctions for them to be administered in-house and not follow us from here into our post-college lives. Is it perfect? No, but we shouldn't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Let's pass the report and move this campus forward.

Kilbourn yielded three minutes to College of Education representative Bradley Phelps.

Bradley Phelps: Mr. President, I rise in significant opposition to the report before us this afternoon. While I understand Ms. Edwards' request that we not let imperfection deem this legislation unacceptable, the fact is that the bill in front of us isn't even good. The possibility of an OCR investigation for Title IX violations as it relates to the two-tier relationship standard this revised code would implement must be taken seriously. The misandry which is codified in these revisions is enough of a red flag that we should send it back to committee for further debate. I yield back the balance of my time.

Joanna gave two minutes to Brittany Bridgeman from the College of Pharmacy.

Brittany Bridgeman: I rise to echo the words of my colleague from the College of Business. We
MUST pass this legislation today in order to move it along and eventually have it be passed by the Board of Trustees on November 2nd. As Paul Ridgewell, legislative chair for the Board of Trustees, stated on October 18th, once the revised code passes their body, we can expand upon it by majority vote without it returning to them. So it's not perfect. Is that a reason to not deem what we have as a good starting point that we WILL have the ability to amend in the future, even as soon as our next meeting on November 7th? I don't believe so, and would encourage everyone to vote for passage.

After some additional pro and con arguments, Kilbourn wrapped up the hour of debate on the report.

Richard Kilbourn: Ladies and gentlemen, what tonight's vote comes down to is what kind of campus we want to be. Do we wish to be one that treats all relationships equally, or are we willing to discriminate against some of them because the idea of them makes people uncomfortable? Are we able to see past the anti-male rhetoric being espoused by the pro side to see how this legislation also harms THEM as it bans their ability to engage in certain relationships of their own choosing. The implied "Wang Rule" that is being utilized to determine acceptable and unacceptable forms of relationships should shake this body to the core. I therefore implore all of you to vote against passage and allow this body to do better with its next attempt at revising the code.

Chad Markham: Due to the ramifications of our action, this body will take a 15-minute recess before moving to a vote on this measure.

Both sides began whipping its supporters hard in search of the magic number of yeses (24) and nos (12) to win the day. While in the hallway, Michael Parsons spoke to Chad about the upcoming vote.

Michael: I'm having a hard time figuring out what to do with this report. I can't in good conscience vote for it, but I also don't want to see it be defeated.

Chad: So you're considering abstaining?

Michael: An abstention is the same as a no vote on this as it would still require 24 votes to pass it. The only option is being absent during the yeas and nays and thus not voting at all. Doing that would mean that the bill can pass with 23 votes in favor.

Chad: I understand your position, both on your own personal vote as well as the desired outcome on the legislation as a whole. I'm proud of you on both parts and will stand by you whatever heat may come from doing what you have chosen.

Following the recess, Markham called for the yeas and nays. As expected, the report passed by the slimmest of margin, 23 in favor and 11 opposed. Before bringing the day's meeting to a close, Markham directed the body's secretary to report their action on the measure to Ridgewell so the Board of Trustees could take up the measure at their next meeting on November 2nd.

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Trinity's women's soccer team lost their season finale to Wisconsin Lutheran, 5-1, closing out their inaugural season 4-14, 3-8 in the NACC. Following the game, Marc, Erin, and Danielle went to dinner at Pizzeria Piccola.

Marc: Before we chow down and I knock some sense into the two of you, I have an announcement that should make Erin quite happy. The SGA passed the Code of Student Conduct conference report 23-11, moving it onto the Board of Trustees.

Erin: Steph and Jessie will be happy with that news as well.

Marc: Now, for the reason why I called the two of you together. You are two of the three most
important women in my life and I need the two of you to get along because neither of you is going anywhere.

Dani: I have nothing against Erin, no matter what she might think. I thought we had settled this stand-off on Saturday.

Erin: So did I, but the good Deacon thought we needed to clear the air and all get on the same page.

Marc (to Dani): Erin was in the wrong on Saturday in questioning you about our relationship and putting you in a position where you were forced to tell her things about your private life that she did not have a right to know.

Erin: I realize that now, and you deserve an apology for how I acted. I'm sorry that I made you feel as though your only way to get out from under my interrogation was to "come out" about your bisexuality. It was unfair of me to do that to you, and I am truly sorry, Danielle.

Dani: Erin, I know that you were concerned about what my influence on Marc might be and whether your Danielle was privy to our getting reacquainted. You love him like a second father and if I were in your shoes, I'd probably be asking the same questions. I accept your apology and hope we can tolerate one another as members of Marc's entourage if not become friends.

Marc: Deuce, if it's OK with you, I'd like to fill Erin in on our relationship and put aside her fears as best as I can.

Dani: I'm OK with that. It might actually help her come to trust me if she knows what we have between us.

Marc: Dani and I are what you'd consider friends with benefits. Kind of like what Jessie is for you and Steph, a safe person with whom to be your whole self when you don't feel comfortable being so with one another.

Erin: I know I might be airing some dirty laundry, but I think you will understand where I'm coming from. You know that Steph has trouble with Shelley's advances and that it affects me negatively. Are you sort of in that same boat?

Marc: You can say that. Your Danielle and I have a bit of a disconnect when it comes to the emotional aspects of our relationship. It causes me to yearn for that connection with someone else, and Dani is a safe person for me to do that with. We both know what we want from our relationship and have agreed to how we wish it to go. Her friendship allows me to not stray on Danielle when I am away, like this past weekend in Kansas City or potentially when I do the Ashlex wedding in Orlando in December.

Dani: I love Marc, and he loves me, albeit not in the way I hope to love someone in the future after I have decided that I'm ready to settle down. For the time being, my friendships with Marc and my soon-to-be-housemate Michelle are the pillars I need to ride out this period in my life. He gives me something I don't want to get anywhere else, and I do the same for him. Can you understand and appreciate that?

Erin: I believe so. It's how Kristie and Sam sometimes turn to each other when they need reassurance that they can't necessarily get from Alyssa or Steph. Same with what I hear about Alyssa and Amanda.

Believing that all was settled between the three of them, they finished off dinner and checked out the Little Read Book across the street before Marc went to the Humane Society to meet Danielle and
Dani and Erin went back to Trinity.
Ali: Aunt Sharon! Odd thing to have you calling me, especially since I just saw you like less than two weeks ago.

Sharon Kramer: Are you planning to come home for Packer Alumni Weekend, which is November 9-11? Grandpa would really like to have everyone there being that this will be the first since his induction in August.

Ali: Planning on it. How many home games do the Pack have left after that one?

Sharon: Let me check.....there's the Dec. 2 game, one the 10th, and the season finale on the 30th.

Ali: I see.....so the game on the 11th is one of the "Milwaukee" games?

Sharon: Believe so, but don't quote me on that. Why do you ask?

Ali: Just know someone here whose family has the package and wondered if perhaps I'd run into him up there.

Sharon: I'll let you get back to whatever you're up to at Trinity, and I'll see you sometime that weekend.

Ali: Bye, Aunt Sharon.

Ali hung up and turned to Kristie with a quizzical look on her face.

Kristie: Something tells me that phone call didn't go like you were hoping.

Ali: It's fine. That was my aunt. She was reminding me about the Packers/Cowboys game on the 11th which coincides with Alumni Weekend for the Green-and-Gold. My grandfather wants everyone in the family to be up there for it this year to commemorate his induction to the Hall of Fame back in August. I understand where he's coming from. Took him 11 tries as a finalist to finally get in and he hadn't been that far in the process in 20 years before this past one.

Kristie: I didn't know you had a famous athlete in your family tree.

Ali: I don't talk about it because, well, you know how some people can be when they find out about something like that. You don't always know who are your real friends and who is looking to use you. Anyways, Corey told me that his family has the Milwaukee season ticket package and the Cowboys game is the 5th home game of the season, thus one of the two regular-season ones that are part of the package.

Kristie: And you're worried that you and he will somehow cross paths at the game?

Ali: Not cross paths, per se. I am sure that Grandpa will be part of the pre-game ceremony because of his enshrinement in Canton and I don't know whether to tell Corey ahead of time or let him find out then.

Kristie: You probably should warn him, because if you don't he might think you've been hiding this from him.
Ali: You're right. I should let him know beforehand, but how when I'm afraid it will change his opinion of me? I struggled with guys up home who knew about this and then would beg me to introduce them, or who went out with me because I was Jerry Kramer's granddaughter and thought there might be some benefit down the road if he was in good with me. It's why I chose to go to school down here, to get away from the environment around Green Bay where a lot of people knew who I was and how I was connected to the Pack.

Kristie: Maybe you and Morgan should talk at some point. Her family has a long-time legacy in Madison surrounding the University of Wisconsin and it's part of why she came to Trinity, to be her own person and do something different than the rest of them. I'm guessing it's not easy carrying around this burden if you will.

Ali: It'd be easier I guess if I actually liked football. He had been retired for more than 30 years by the time I was born, so it's not like I was present during his career.

Kristie: Wish I knew what to tell you. He works this afternoon at the athletic center, right?

Ali: Yeah.

Kristie: Maybe go over and do it now rather than try to find a one-on-one time to do it and then end up not doing it.

Ali: That's pretty smart, thinking about it.

Ali changed into some workout clothes and left her room for Buuck to work out on the elliptical and to talk to Corey about her secret.

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Forty-five minutes on the elliptical helped clear Ali's mind of resounding negative thoughts concerning her upcoming conversation with Corey.

Corey: Hi hi Ali bear.

Ali: Hi yourself, Corey. Do you have a few minutes to talk?

Corey: Sure.

Ali: Is your family going to the Packers/Cowboys game on the 11th in Green Bay? I think it's one of the Milwaukee package games.

Corey: Probably if it's in the package.

Ali: There is something I think you need to know before then about me and my family. My grandfather was recently inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame and there are plans for commemorating it that weekend by the Packers.

Corey thought about what he had heard. "I take it this is something you're not particularly comfortable with sharing."

Ali: Not really, because people treat me differently when they find out. I'm no longer Ali, I'm Ali Kramer, granddaughter of Packer legend Jerry Kramer. I'm not even much of a football fan.

Corey exited the equipment closet and gave his girlfriend a hug. "I fell for you before I knew about this, and it's not going to change my opinion. Do I think it's cool? Yes, but I'm not going to use you
to get to him, because I'm more worried about passing muster with your parents when the time comes."

Ali snuggled into Corey's embrace, which he held for a couple of minutes. "Thank you for not going all fanboy on me. A lot of decisions I made about college and life have been in response to wanting to be normal."

Corey: I saw that your residence hall is hosting a Karaoke Night next weekend. You going?

Ali: Most likely. Don't know if I'll sing or not. I do better in the shower than trying to belt out something in front of people. You coming?

Corey: I'd like to. Maybe I'll do a bit of research and come up with a song especially for you.

Ali blushed a little, then placed a hand on the side of Corey's face and kissed him. "I'd like that."

Carey went back into the equipment closet and Ali left Buuck for Augsburg and some studying time before Kristie returned from class.

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Following hockey practice, Alyssa drove down to Bayshore to search for an outfit for the Reformation Day dinner in two days. After looking in Charlotte Russe and Boston Store, she went outside the mall and wandered south along North Bayshore Drive, stopping in at Lane Bryant. After browsing for a couple of minutes, a somewhat familiar face asked if she needed any help.

Alyssa: I'm looking for a dress for a special dinner at my school on Saturday night.

Alyssa turned her head and saw who was standing next to her.

Alyssa: Hi, Danielle. I didn't know you worked here aside from coaching at Trinity.

Dani: I just started today. Gotta make money out-of-season if I want to go back to school and get out of mommy and daddy's soon-to-be empty nest.

Alyssa: I getcha. My parents still have three years before they get to send Abby off to college and at that point, Amanda and myself will have gotten our degrees, God willing.

Dani: You're going to the Reformation Day dinner, I am guessing.

Alyssa: Yes. Deacon Schmidt invited me, Steph Lafleur, and Julie Jacobsen to join him, the Bishop, and their wives for the event. Oh, and Erin too.

Dani: Can't forget her or she'd have Marc's head over it.

Alyssa: No kidding.

Dani: Let's see what we can do for you. You're what, 5'8" or so?

Alyssa: Yes. How did you figure that out?

Dani: I'm the same height. Your problem areas are a little bit different than mine. You carry most of your outsize frame at your shoulders and between your lower torso and your knees. Mine is pretty much isolated to my upper torso and my hips.

Alyssa: Any recommendations based on how you dress yourself, which by the way is stunning if no
Dani: Thank you, Alyssa. I LOVE this line that a few stores which cater to us "bigger" girls carry, including this one.

Dani walked with Alyssa over to the section of the store where the Girl With Curves Collection was on display.

Dani: I just adore this designer. She's a plus size woman, very proportional to us but a couple inches taller. I like to refer to this collection as "cute clothes but in bigger sizes". What size do you normally wear?

Alyssa: On a good day, 14, but most of the time 16.

Dani: I can get into a 12 with the right amount of Spanx and if I'm not planning on doing a lot of moving in my outfit, but most of the time I wear a 14. Tell me if you see anything you'd like to try on.

Alyssa looked through the racks and found a fuchsia mini-dress with a paisley pattern.

Dani: That's pretty cute. Not sure how it would work for Saturday night, since it will show off a bit of the areas where I'm guessing you'd rather not draw attention.

Alyssa: I'm going to try it on just for the heck of it. See what it DOES look like on me. Give myself a goal for the next few months, where it might look better after the hockey season than right now.

She found an olive green wrap dress that ended slightly below her knees in her size that intrigued her.

Dani: Hey, I like that. Accentuates what you do want people to notice while steering away from those parts you're self-conscious about.

As the pair searched for a third option for Alyssa, Dani pulled out a high-low dress in a dark blue.

Alyssa: That looks a LOT better than what I wore to the All-Sports Mixer and what I was thinking about wearing for Saturday night.

Dani carried the three dresses over to a fitting room and handed them to Alyssa.

Dani: Holler if you need any help.

Alyssa went inside and tried on the three possibilities at her disposal. While in there, Dani found a classic piece that she felt every woman should have in her arsenal. Alyssa came out and said that though she liked all three of them, the third option was the best one for her for the dinner. Dani showed Alyssa the jumpsuit she had pulled out and asked for her opinion.

Alyssa: Dang! That looks comfortable AND smoldering. I definitely wouldn't be considered a frumpy pastor wearing something like that.

Dani: I have it in my closet. It is SUCH a great twelve-month outfit. In summer, you can pair it with heels or sandals or even flats. In winter, booties that show JUST a little bit of a break at the ankle. It also means I don't have to go through the trouble of mixing shapewear and tights to keep warm AND make everything look good.

Alyssa: I'll take the blue high-low tonight and come back in a couple of weeks for the jumpsuit. I
probably should have something on hand for when I interview with the synod that is more "me" than the normal pastor-type clothes I see most females in the pulpit wear.

Dani and Alyssa went to the checkout counter and she rang up the sale. Alyssa asked Dani when she got off (twenty minutes) and invited her for coffee at Colectivo since she wanted to talk to her about her roommate who is on the soccer team.

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Alyssa: I'm worried about Carli. She's out most of the night on the weekends, coming home and sleeping pretty much all of Sunday, then back at it on Monday like nothing happened.

Dani: I've noticed that her play and concentration are a lot better when we're on the road or when we play midweek at home. The home Saturdays were her worst games of the season. I don't really get it, and Sara seems to not really care about it enough to make an issue of it.

Alyssa: You seem to know Marc pretty well. It looks like he is trying to involve me more in doing ministry on campus. Is it normal for him to try and pass off things on others?

Dani: He's not really passing things off. It's about empowering you to use your skills in a way where it's OK to make mistakes and then providing you guidance to help you get better. So yes, what he is doing is normal. Fall of 2014, I started developing problems with my ankle and foot but I didn't tell anyone about it. Marc had recruited me and two other members of our summer team to act as leaders for the squad heading into the following season. As the school year rolled along, I took a spill on some ice on one of the pathways at Stritch and ended up on crutches. Trying to get myself back to normal, I pushed my recovery and wound up needing surgery. All along, Marc checked on me and continued to say that I had a home with the team, even if I couldn't get on the field that summer. He gave me opportunities to use the nascent coaching skills I had acquired in practice and on the sidelines during games. I appreciated his faith in me and it led to me eventually ending up at Trinity, because unbeknownst to me, he developed the urban coaching module that I took last year through the school district where I worked, which is what gave me the confidence to walk away from teaching to become a full-time coach.

Alyssa: This time at Trinity could be loads of fun for me. I never really got encouragement in my home congregation to participate or use what I knew or felt to make a difference, partially because I was young, but largely because I was female. Seeing how he fought hard to get the Pre-Sem program ban repealed and how he has been reaching out to myself and Steph Lafleur to sort of set the new standard on this campus for women in leadership, I feel like I can trust him to guide me through here and onto seminary and the pulpit after that.

Dani: The one thing you will learn quickly about him is that he operates with a long-term vision in his mind of what he wants to accomplish and then just goes after it. You remember last week after Lunch Bunch he and Dr. Sinclair went back to his office for a talk?

Alyssa: Yes. He asked me back after lunch yesterday to feel me out on his ideas for peer ministry, which sounds a LOT like what you described about players as leaders.

Dani: He has a plan for you, I am sure, and you might be surprised at what he may have already done to get you on your way.

Alyssa: I think the two of us could become friends, Dani. We share some common interests, like the desire to look good despite Mother Nature giving us more than an ample share in certain areas of our body, and, I don't know, just seem to get on well.
Dani: Remember, I'm not THAT much older than you. I graduated college last May, so maybe 4-5 years depending on where the birthdays fall. It'd be nice to have some friendly faces on campus that I could do things with on occasion.

Alyssa: Are you a lifter?

Dani: Don't particularly enjoy it, but it did help me drop some of the chub I had at the start of college and for me it's an easy way to work out when the wheel isn't being kind to me.

Alyssa: I don't like it, but as a goalkeeper it's sort of required because of the pounding your body takes in the position.

Dani: True.

Alyssa: Maybe sometime next week, the two of us and Steph can meet up at Buuck and do a circuit together. You know how built she is, and I could use a bit of guidance on what to work on to keep my tone up once the season gets underway.

Dani: I'll check my work schedule and contact you.

Dani and Alyssa swapped phone numbers, then left Colectivo and headed to their cars for their trips home.

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The season opener for the Trinity Lutheran University women's hockey team was close to starting at Ozaukee Ice Center when Kristie, Sam, and their parents Bob and Melissa found seats near the rest of the lacrosse players in attendance. Alyssa was standing in the tunnel ready to lead the Thunder onto the ice and visualizing the various types of shots she would face in her first collegiate start. Kristie went over to the far end of the bleachers and whispered good luck to Alyssa. Being bogged down in her equipment, all the goalie could do was lift her mask and wink at Kristie, which the blonde responded to by blowing a kiss to her girlfriend. After Augsburg took the ice, the lights were dimmed and the sophomore netminder stepped onto the the surface to the opening chords of "Thunderstruck". The two teams circled the ice to get the blood flowing in the legs while Alyssa and her opposite number for the Augies scuffed up their creases with their skates.

The opening face-off was won by the Thunder and they streaked down the ice, getting a shot on net just seven seconds into the game.

Melissa Mueller: How far out can the goalkeeper come to pick up the black disk?

Kristie: She must maintain contact in some form with the crease, that blue area in front of the goal. Outside of that, she has to play the puck with her stick.

Steph Lafleur chuckled a little at Kristie and her mom talking hockey.

Erin: Stephanie.....not all of us grew up around the sport and know the ins-and-outs of it. Be sympathetic to newcomers.

Steph: Sorry. Just struck me odd, like watching the puck bunnies at Laurier games trying to pay attention when the only things on their minds were getting to one of the frat houses and trying to get on with one of the players.

Kristie: I hope you're not lumping me in with that group.
Steph: No, Kristie. You have athletic chops and a good mind. Really wish you and Kelley were in my Foundations of Ed class this term. I feel like I have a bunch of classmates who would do better as nannies than professional educators, although KO is sort of looking to be both with the ECE degree.

Maggie Dowling: Wish I had thought to bring an extra layer. Didn't realize they'd have the temperature down so low inside.

Savannah Johnson: It's an ice center, Mags. How do you expect them to keep it from melting?

Maggie: I don't know. Hadn't figured that part out.

Savannah tousled Maggie's hair and smiled at her. "My silly little beach babe."

Alyssa stopped the puck behind her net and passed it out to Alicia Chapman. She skated through the neutral zone with the puck and entered the attacking end before dumping it behind the Augsburg net. Melissa Tancill dug it out and passed it to the slot where Christine Singer one-timed a shot past the Augies' goalie, giving the Thunder a 1-0 lead.

Sam: Those two forwards just read each other so well. There were a joy to watch last season and I hope their chemistry will be good when the team gets into conference play.

Bob Mueller: What year are they, Sam?

Sam: Christine came in with me, Steph, and Alyssa, while Melissa was here the year before I believe.

At the first intermission, Kristie took orders for the concession stand and hauled Steph with her.

Kristie: Do you know about the special announcement tomorrow night?

Steph: At the dinner? No.

Kristie: Well, our boy apparently twisted the arm of the Pre-Sem Program director to have Alyssa be the first woman admitted to it. He asked me to talk to her family about being there, but NOT tell her about it. Can you keep this a secret?

Steph: Of course. I heard that she went down to Bayshore last night to look for a new outfit.

Kristie: Hmmm....wonder why. What she wore when we went out on Saturday night would have been fine.

Steph: Beats me. Erin and I got our outfits for tomorrow night when we were in Michigan over fall break. We actually dared one another to dress us, and we both picked out something that really fits the other's style.

Kristie: I know what I'm wearing. Might need to find some help for Sam since she's a giraffe and not built like you or Alyssa.

The pair went back to the stands just as the teams were coming back onto the ice to start the second period. A 3-on-1 rush brought on by Chapman drifting too far up-ice led to an Augsburg goal, tying the score at 1. With the Thunder on the power play, Singer and Tancill drifted between the sideboards and the slot, hoping to create some confusion in front of the opposing goalkeeper. A long shot from Kara Lawless was deflected in front of the net by Singer and fell to Tancill's stick for a wrister over the keeper's shoulder. The Thunder entered the locker room up 2-1.
Erin: Steph, why did Kristie pull you away to get snacks with her at intermission?

Steph: She wanted to tell me about a surprise coming tomorrow night.

Erin: Surprise? I'm thinking my lovable godfather has something up his sleeve that he hasn't told me about yet.

Steph: Well, he DOES have something to do with it. From what Kristie told me, that meeting he had with Dr. Sinclair after Lunch Bunch last week was to "encourage" him to admit Alyssa to the Pre-Sem program before the Faculty Senate and Board of Trustees act on it next week.

Erin: He's not wasting any time, is he?!

Steph: Nope. Guess when you have the synodical clout he does, you can force stuff to happen.

Erin: Like how our dorm is hosting Karaoke Night next Saturday? That probably came about from his conversations with Hope about keeping us on campus on the weekends.

Steph: Wouldn't doubt it. I think you'll like what I have in mind for it.

Erin: So now I'm challenged to come up with something better, then.

The pair glanced at one another and exchanged an "I want to kiss you but not with all these people around" look.

The third period saw the legs of both teams start to drag and few scoring chances coming in either direction. With 90 seconds left, Augsburg lifted their goalkeeper for a sixth attacker. The Augies cycled the puck relentlessly before a slap shot from the right point whistled its way past Chapman and hit the post, jetting out behind Alyssa. Lawless hadn't tightened up on her mark and she was able to poke the puck into the net before Alyssa could shuffle over to defend her right post. An additional five minutes of overtime solved nothing and the game ended in a 2-2 tie. Steph and Erin told the Muellers that they'd see them tomorrow night at the Reformation Day dinner and to congratulate Alyssa for them on her performance.

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Over dinner at Sobleman's, Alyssa was given the once-over by Bob and Melissa.

Bob: When Kristie told us a couple of weeks ago that she was seeing someone at Trinity, I was a bit surprised since I didn't think she'd have time to go looking for someone the way Sam and Steph occupy her schedule. Sam told us that you recently changed your major. Why is that?

Alyssa: When I started at what would become Trinity last fall, I declared my major as Religion since I wouldn't be eligible to enter the Pre-Seminary program until after I completed 45 credits, and because at the time the program didn't admit women. Once I got the credits threshold passed, I met with our academic advisor in the athletic department to see if I could make the switch before the Faculty Senate and Board of Trustees officially lifted the ban on female Pre-Sem majors. She went ahead and did it, then sent a note onto the chaplain informing him of it so that he could start turning the wheels with the synod about interviewing me for candidacy.

Melissa: Bob and I grew up as Catholics, so we have SOME understanding of religion, but women in the church is still a bit foreign to me. We had nuns, but they were mainly in the hospitals and the schools, not the pulpit.

Alyssa: It's still a little foreign to me as well. Going to youth gatherings with my friends from church
exposed me to women who were preaching and administering the sacraments. Both of the campus pastors in Milwaukee are women, with one based at UW-Milwaukee and the other at Marquette. Getting to know them before I started here helped me in my decision making and the new chaplain has been a big encouragement in going forward on the path.

Bob: So, tell me what you think of Kristie and why I should be comfortable with the two of you being together.

Alyssa: Mr. Mueller, your daughter is a charming woman who took me a bit by surprise when she approached me at Trinity's All-Sports Mixer the first week of the semester. I really don't know for sure what she saw in me, but I am glad that she thought I was worth getting to know. I am impressed by her heart and how she is willing to stick her neck out for people, from working with Sam to petition student government to create an LGBT Student Resource Center on campus to stepping in and helping one of her teammates who had been harmed while all of us were away over fall break. I don't want to stir up any drama by saying this, but I know I can treat her better than, well, Steph does Sam.

Bob: Speaking of Sam, she told me that you have a twin that she might be interested in.

Sam: Daaaaaad. I only said she had a twin and that she was nice. You're the one who asked if we might end up with sisters dating sisters.

Kristie: Right, pops. I was going to talk to Alyssa about that possibility, but we didn't cross paths that Sunday night and then Kelley's situation on Monday made me forget about it, I guess.

Alyssa: Well, Amanda IS single and her season is close to being over, so maybe I can encourage her to come down and visit at some point before Thanksgiving.

Sam: I wouldn't be opposed to that. I'm glad Steph is back in Illinois with her brothers this weekend. I'm not juggling her expectations of me and my desire to be around you and Kristie.

Melissa (to Sam): Do I need to talk to Gina about this?

Sam: Mom, Kristie and I can handle our own ish with Steph. We don't need the parents trying to patch up something that might not be worth patching up, no matter how much the two of you want us to tie the knot someday.

Kristie: Yeah, Mom.

Melissa: Guess I should ask you now, Kristen, about your feelings for Alyssa.

Kristie: I can rattle off the classic "she makes me want to be a better person" line, but that is honestly true. Being around her, she helps me see the world as something a lot different than the cutthroat environment we grew up in on the North Shore. I want to learn more about what she believes and continue to grow closer to her. She has done something to me that I didn't expect, and I hope I can somehow reciprocate the love she shows me.

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Back on campus, the Muellers were given a quick tour of Augsburg Hall and a peek at what their two daughters have done with their rooms. Both Bob and Melissa had kind words for Alyssa and said they hoped to see her again before they headed back to Evanston, careful not to tip off the surprise coming tomorrow night.

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The Trinity women's hockey team bounced back from yesterday's tie against Augsburg to beat the Augies 2-0 in this afternoon's series finale. After the game, Alyssa hustled back to campus in order to get ready for tonight's Reformation Day dinner. Kristie, Sam, and their parents were at the Muellers' hotel near Bayshore getting ready themselves. Steph and Erin were in the former's room dressing for their first big on-campus event as a couple, one that they would be sharing with their favorite older man at Trinity.

Steph: Now that I see the combination together, I think it looks even cuter on you than it did when I picked it out for you in Grand Rapids.

Erin smiled at Steph and thanked her for the compliment by kissing her on the cheek.

Erin: I have to admit that I did a REALLY good job dressing you for this.

Steph: You did, darling. I love this outfit, just like I love you.

Steph gave Erin a light peck, not wanting to mess up her lipstick too much.

Julie came over to Steph's room to meet up with her and Erin and compare outfits.

Julie: I know it's the same thing I wore for Date Night, but I really like this and Marc DID say not to go blowing my money on something too formal for tonight.

Steph: It looks good on you, Julie.

Julie: Christen would like me to dress a little more feminine, but I just don't feel comfortable showing too much skin. She's a knock-out when she wants to be, and I'm, well, a jock.

Steph: I know what you mean. I'm lucky in that my girl over here knows my style and can find the right piece or pieces to show it off. After all, she picked my outfit for tonight.

Julie: And I have to say it looks great on you. Did you pick hers as well?

Erin: Yes, she did.

Julie: Cute as a button, you are Erin. She did good with you, too.

As Julie measured up her teammates and fixed their makeup slightly, Alyssa arrived.

Steph: WOW! That is a LOT different than what I've seen you in before.

Alyssa: All credit for this goes to Dani.

Erin: Coach Dani?

Alyssa: Yes. She's working in the off-season at Lane Bryant at Bayshore and was in the store when I was down there on Thursday evening. This is what we came up with that I felt looked good on me and didn't show off some of my less-flattering body parts.

Steph: Maybe I should ask her for some advice on my wardrobe. If you don't my asking, what do you usually wear?

Alyssa: 16, but I can wear a 14 if it runs a little large, like the Girl With Curves Collection does.

Steph: My shoulders and back say 12 or 14, but the rest of me is in the 10 range.
Alyssa: The smallest they sell is 10/12, but you're also taller than me so you might have some success there. I'm going back in a couple of weeks to get this adorable jumpsuit that she recommended and said she had herself. Want to come down with me?

Steph: Sure. Maybe invite Sam as well since she's even taller than me but built like a rail.

Erin: Ladies, we need to be going.

The four of them left Augsburg and walked over to the Melanchthon Center for Environmental Stewardship, the venue for tonight's dinner.

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Marc, Danielle, Bishop Emerson, and his wife Lynn were seated at their table in the Melanchthon Center when the four student-athletes arrived and joined them. Marc stood up and greeted all of them with hugs, then introduced the others to them.

Marc: Paul, going from my right and around the table are: my goddaughter, Erin Matheson; Stephanie Lafleur; Alyssa Norman; and next to you is Julie Jacobsen. All but Alyssa are freshmen lacrosse players, while she's a sophomore on the hockey team. Steph and Alyssa are in the pre-candidacy process with me this year and both are majoring in Religion.

Paul Emerson: I'm pleased to meet all of you. Marc has certainly begun tackling the lack of spiritual involvement that we're used to seeing at ELCA colleges.

Alyssa: Steph and I are very appreciative of his work with the governmental bodies on this campus to help us prepare for futures serving the church writ large.

Danielle: Can I just comment on your outfits, ladies? You all look spectacular! The four of you share tips or was it all on your own?

Erin: Steph and I went shopping at Rivertown Crossings over fall break and dared one another to find an outfit for us.

Julie: I'm re-wearing something that I found locally for a team night out a few weeks ago.

Marc: I thought I recognized it from the Goodwill Date Night pictures Erin was tagged in by Kristie.

Alyssa: Danielle helped me out a lot on Thursday night while I was shopping at Bayshore.

Marc: You run into her down there or something?

Alyssa: No. She's working at Lane Bryant now that the soccer season is over. She sends her regards.

Marc: Aye. So that was the interview she mentioned on Tuesday.

Danielle: She referring to Danielle Dillon?

Marc: Yeah. I thought I told you she was coaching here.

Danielle: You probably did, but I forgot. How is she?

Marc: Doing well. It's nice having a couple of my former players here at Trinity.

Danielle: Who else is here besides her?
Marc: Casey Schultz. She's the athletic department's academic advisor.

Marc looked around the room and saw Kristie and Sam at a table on the right side with who he presumed were their parents and Alyssa's family. He acknowledged the sisters discreetly and hoped that the secret of their attendance could be kept until the announcement. Seated just to the right of their table was Tom Sinclair, who would be giving the good news to Alyssa, along with Rachel Belding, campus pastor at UW-Milwaukee, and her husband Kurt. As dinner came to a close, Marc, Paul, and Tom got up and stepped onto the balcony to discuss the order of speeches and announcements for the remainder of the evening.

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Bishop Paul Emerson: Welcome, everyone, to Trinity's Reformation Day dinner. We at the Synod are hoping that this will become a tradition as we celebrate the founding of Lutheranism and what happened in that little town of Wittenberg in 1517. To be here on the newest campus in the ELCA's consortium of colleges, universities, and seminaries for this event is truly an honor, and I would like to thank the events staff for their work in providing such a fantastic space for tonight. The first two months of the academic year here seem to have brought a lot of upheaval as the mandate to turn Trinity into a 21st-century university, the first to be created under the ELCA umbrella, was being brought forth. Our man in the muck doing this, Deacon Marc Schmidt, deserves a lot of credit for knowing when to push and when to sit back and let the system do its thing. Our first-semester goal of embedding our Social Statements into the school's Academic and Student Conduct codes appears set for completion this coming Friday when the Board of Trustees is scheduled to pass both documents. I know that he has an new agenda he wants to push now that the administrative portion of building TLU is nearly finished. Therefore, I present to you the chaplain of Trinity Lutheran University, Deacon Marc Schmidt.

Marc made his way to the podium to a hearty round of applause from the attendees.

Marc: Thank you, Bishop Emerson, for setting the stage for my remarks. As he said, our first-semester goal of bringing the remnants of Carthage and Concordia "up to code" as it relates to the ELCA's Social Statements is close to completion, which means that I can move on to focusing more on the ministry portion of my job. The creation of "Lunch Bunch", which follows our weekly service on Wednesdays, has allowed students, faculty, and staff to become acquainted with one another outside of the confines of academia and led to a greater understanding of how each part of the system at Trinity really relies on the rest of it to function properly. My partnership with the Hall Directors Colloquium has given them more opportunity to develop programming in the residence halls and create the framework for in-house tribunals to handle disputes within their individual halls. The first major step I want to take on the ministry side going forward is the implementation of a Peer Ministry program that is prevalent within Lutheran Campus Ministries on secular campuses. I have as special guests tonight a handful of students that I believe can become the foundation for that endeavor. Myself along with Pastors Rachel Belding at UWM and Jessica Sherman at Marquette will equip these young ladies to do ministry on campus amongst their fellow students. If the four of them would come up to the stage, I'd like to introduce them to you. Also, will Dr. Thomas Sinclair, chairman of the Department of Religion and Theological Studies and director of the Pre-Seminary program at Trinity, come up as well.

Erin, Steph, Julie, and Alyssa came forward and stood on either side of Marc, with Dr. Sinclair standing beside Bishop Emerson behind them.

Marc: I guess I should lead off with the mop top or else I won't hear the end of it from her parents, herself, or my wife. On my far right is a woman I have known since she was a zygote. Her father and my wife Danielle were classmates in graduate school and we were asked to be her baptismal
sponsors just after she was born. A freshman management major from Rockford, MI, my
goddaughter, Erin Matheson.

- Next to her is our resident border-jumper, coming to Trinity from Kitchener, ON. Apparently the
ELCIC thinks enough of what we're doing to allow her to get out of their grasp. A freshman physical
education and religion double major, Stephanie Lafleur.

- On my immediate left is someone who truly represents the "average student" at Trinity. Someone
who has some semblance of faith, but doesn't bring with her a lot of in-church experience or
necessarily desire a career in the business. A freshman communications major from Phoenix, AZ,
Julie Jacobsen.

- Finally, the only sophomore on this stage. She came to Trinity while the school was still Concordia-
Wisconsin and determined that this would be the place for her to pursue her passion and future
academic goals. Technically a religion major, she also plays goalkeeper for the school's women's
hockey team, which shut out Augsburg 2-0 this afternoon. Alyssa Norman.

- I now turn over the mic to Dr. Tom Sinclair, who has a special announcement to make.

Tom and Marc passed one another and the white-haired Scotsman began to speak.

Tom: I have been in charge of Pre-Seminary studies on this campus for 13 years and never have I
been more excited about the direction of the program as I am tonight. When the Faculty Senate lifted
the ban on women in the Pre-Sem program on October 4th, I was prepared to see a sizable uptick in
applications for the program, but knew that I couldn't touch them until at the earliest next semester
since applicants must complete the equivalent of three semesters of college work before they may be
considered. As usual, Marc knew something I didn't. There was a student that was a first-semester
sophomore at Trinity but who with Advanced Placement credits had already surpassed the 45-credit
minimum to apply. Paul and he were eager to prove the ban was null and void and wished me to
consider accepting a woman to the program prior to the final votes next week. After re-reading her
application and reading the draft of Marc's candidacy recommendation letter, the answer was
obvious. Therefore, I am pleased to announce that the first-ever woman to be admitted to the Pre-
Seminary program at Trinity Lutheran University is Alyssa Norman.

Alyssa looked stunned at the announcement and was frozen in place for a few seconds. Once she got
her wits about her, she walked to the podium and shook hands with Dr. Sinclair, then accepted
congratulations from her dorm mates and friends, as well as Marc and Bishop Emerson.

Alyssa: I really don't know what to say. When Marc told me to put the application in even though the
new policy wasn't official, I took a leap of faith and decided that it would be better to take a chance
on it and believe that everything would work out. There are a number of people who I have to thank
for their role in helping me heed my call and encouraging me to stick with it despite the roadblocks
that existed when I first started school here. Rachel and Jessica, you have been tremendous role
models for how women in ministry can both gain respect from men in the church and remain true to
their own selves. Erin and Steph, you have been true sisters in the faith and I look forward to
working with you, Julie, and Marc to bring his vision of peer ministry to Trinity. Marc, there are not
enough words to describe the confidence you have instilled in me to live by faith and trust that things
will turn out for the best. Dr. Sinclair, I feel blessed that you chose to make me the first woman to
start the road to the pulpit on this campus and I will not disappoint you. Finally, I have to thank a few
people who aren't here tonight, my family. Their love and support for what I wanted to do with my
future is something I cherish. I am sure they will be happy and surprised when I tell them what
happened.

Marc retook the podium. "Note that I said we have surprises, meaning plural, in store tonight. The
next one comes now. Alyssa, look over to your left about halfway back in the room. Will the Normans please stand?"

Alyssa saw her mom, dad, and two sisters standing, then looked at the rest of the table and saw Kristie, Sam, and their parents. She left the stage and went back to their table to share a moment or two with the eight of them.

Marc: As for the next one, on Sunday, December 9th, Trinity will be holding "Christmas Eve" service in Bonhoeffer Chapel. I know it's a couple of weeks early, but I believe in celebrating the traditional services within the faith community that our students rely upon for the majority of their worship experience. The basis for the service will be Holden Evening Service, which is well-known in ELCA circles. I will be putting out a blast on Monday seeking participants to construct, rehearse, and lead the service. Thank you all for coming and remember to tip the ushers. After all, the wicker baskets don't fill up on their own.

Bishop Emerson: Not so fast, everyone. Who says the good chaplain should be the only one to spring something tonight? I have a VERY big announcement to make that will prove significant for the Trinity campus and its worshiping community. When we appointed Marc to the position of chaplain at Trinity, we had a plan in place at the Synod. Based on his previous education and experience, combined with his diaconal education, we were able to petition our new graduate education partner, Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, OH, to confer onto Marc a Master of Arts in Lay Ministry, Church Administration emphasis, the degree he had planned to seek upon his acceptance to the school in 2004. I have in my hands the official diploma from Trinity signifying his completion of all requirements for the degree.

- With that part out of the way, Marc was now eligible to be considered for the office of Churchwide Diaconal Minister. My assistants and I met to take up this possibility and decided that he was worthy of the "promotion". Will Pastors Rachel Belding and Jessica Sherman, along with Assistant to the Bishop Matt Sherman, come up to bestow the Deacon's stole on Marc?

Rachel, Jessica, and Matt came up to the stage and did the honors, with the Shermans placing the new stole across Marc's torso and Rachel reading the Words of Consecration that would officially make Marc a Churchwide Diaconal Minister.

Bishop Emerson: Also in that meeting, we decided that Deacon Schmidt would be given dispensation to administer the sacraments churchwide and not just "in place" as is currently the case. This also lifts the requirement that he obtain approval to perform weddings outside the Synod. NOW we're finished. Go in peace, serve the Lord.

Crowd: Thanks be to God.

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Rachel and Marc talked after the dinner wrapped up about him and his students joining hers from UWM at Spirit of Peace (their "home" congregation, located about five blocks from where both the Schmidts and Beldings lived) tomorrow morning to promote college ministry to their worshipers. Marc told her he needed to make the rounds and find out who was in. All four of the women said they were game, but that the early morning start time might prove to be a problem, especially with only Erin and Alyssa having cars on campus. Marc offered for the four of them to stay with him and Danielle for the night, thus alleviating that problem. Alyssa told Kristie what was up for her and the other three, which led her to contact Christen and Jessie about joining her and Sam in support of their ladies.
Looking for feedback from those of you reading this. Like the relationships? No? Any hopes for the future?
Marc, Erin, Steph, Alyssa, and Julie joined with Rachel Belding's Corner House students for worship at Spirit of Peace Lutheran Church, around the corner more or less from the Schmidts' and Beldings' homes in Washington Heights. After the two services and the in-between coffee hour where the students spoke on the power of intentional community on their campuses, the Trinity foursome along with Kristie, Sam, Jessie, and Christen went over to Marc and Danielle's place for lunch and "chill time". As usual, Erin hauled her laundry over to handle that chore while there, saving herself time and money.

Christen (to Marc): My dad kept telling me you lived over by us, and that he had seen you around the neighborhood when he walked our dogs, but I didn't know that you had THIS house.

Marc: It was a lucky find. It was up for sale just as Danielle had finished her most recent degree at UWM and our lease was coming up in August. We got in with a solid number and boom, we're here. Where do you live, Christen?

Christen: Just south of 62nd and Washington, I guess. Our house is on the loop that you take coming off Martha Washington to get to Washington Blvd.

Marc: I know that little stretch sort of well. Danielle will sometimes take it when she doesn't want to wait at 60th and Vliet for the light.

Alyssa: Rachel said that she lived around here as well.

Marc: Yeah. Two blocks or so up 51st Street. Also, UWM's Campus Ministry Board chairperson lives more or less behind that big house between Hi-Mount and 51st on 50th Place. Makes for a pretty tight-knit community where if we want or need to talk shop, we invite one another over for dinner, since we're all within 3-4 blocks of each other.

Danielle came into the living room with a tray of deli meats, cheeses, bread, and condiments. The starving college students got down to making themselves sandwiches as Marc went back into the kitchen to bring out some chips and a selection of soda from the refrigerator.

Kristie: Erin has it made being able to pop over here whenever she feels like it.

Danielle chuckled. "It ends up being like once every two weeks, when she needs to do laundry. Typical college student."

Marc took his plate and went into his office to call Jim Matheson and ask about the Thanksgiving Day game in Detroit and to get his perspective on Erin and Steph's friendship.

Jim: Marc! I thought you were tied up with the kids after service today.

Marc: They're here, but I wanted them to have space to chat without my nosy ears picking up stuff they probably wouldn't want me to know. After all, I'm the one who can bring the hammer down on them if they cough up something about violating the student code of conduct since I oversee the athletic department's judicial process.

Jim: I'm guessing all the students you have there are athletes?

Marc: All but one. Six of them are on the lacrosse team and one's with women's hockey. Anyways, I'm calling for a couple of reasons. When Val called me on-campus just after fall break, she was
hinting that Danielle and I should come over to your side of the lake sometime soon. That got me to thinking about the Thanksgiving Day game in Detroit. She told me you've got tickets for it.

Jim: Yes we do. Do you want me to see if I can find something close to where we are?

Marc: If you could, that'd be great.

Jim went onto the Lions' ticket site and saw that there were nearly a full row open right in front of them. He passed this information onto Marc, which he would use later to secure a pair of seats.

Marc: Thanks, Jim. As for the second thing, Val mentioned that she thought Erin and Steph were a little chummier than one would expect from knowing one another for under two months and asked if I knew anything. Now I'd like to get your perspective.

Jim: My view is that they LOOK like they could be a couple. Erin has never out-and-out told us that she might be, you know, gay, but the looks between the two of them sent certain signals that one would usually only see between couples.

Marc: Val sort of said the same thing, that they could be together. She also said that Erin hasn't asked either of you about your opinion of LGBT individuals and that neither of you have asked her about her own orientation. Is that correct?

Jim: Yes. I love my daughter and her possibly playing for the other team doesn't change that one bit. In fact, if she does, I hope she can persuade Steph to be her girlfriend, because she seems like the kind of person I'd choose for her if I had my hand in on it.

Marc: You and Val should talk, seriously. She said she didn't know what your reaction would be if it were true, and I'm sure you probably don't know exactly where she falls on the issue.

Jim: We should, really, if only to determine how we would handle it if Erin were to come out to us. I should let you get back to the students. Keep in touch and I look forward to seeing you in Detroit in a few weeks.

Marc: Will do. Either I or Danielle will talk with Val sometime before then to coordinate things.

Marc hung up and went into the kitchen to spring the surprise on Danielle.

Marc: We don't have plans for Thanksgiving break, right?

Danielle: Not yet. Thinking of something?

Marc: Packers/Lions in Detroit. Val called me at the office a couple of weeks ago and sort of begged for us to come see her and Jim sometime in the near future.

Danielle: That sounds like fun. Do you know if WMU hockey is home that weekend?

Marc: Haven't gotten that far in the planning yet. Just got the ticket info from Jim a few minutes ago. So you game?

Danielle: Yes, I'm game. Should you or I tell Erin?

Marc: She knows that I was looking at something for Thanksgiving weekend and that her mom had called me just after fall break asking about her and Steph. I didn't say anything about them to her, or confirm anything for Jim either, but both seem to have the impression that Steph is more than just a friend to Erin.
Danielle: I guess we'll find out the truth about it when you tell her about our visit.

Marc walked into the living room and said that he needed Erin and Steph to come with him to his office. They followed him while Danielle took a seat and listened in a bit on the ongoing conversation.

Sam (to Alyssa): What was this thing that Marc mentioned last night about a Christmas Eve service on campus?

Alyssa: I don't know all the details, but it sounds like it would be similar to what you would get back home, just with a lot of college students having the opportunity to experience it together and actually lead it.

Danielle: Marc is BIG on the concept of "rites in place", that it not only solidifies the worshiping community, but gives practical experience to the students as well in leading such a high-profile event in the life of the church.

Alyssa: Our church uses Holden now and again, but not really as the basis for anything formal. Mainly as a Wednesday evening offering during Lent.

Danielle: That's pretty similar to how most use it. My home congregation used it for Christmas Eve worship a number of years ago, which is where I'm guessing Marc pulled the idea. He also loves the format of the service that we used to do at Western Michigan where it can be broadened into a communion service and the traditional trappings of a liturgy.

Alyssa: I really like it, but I don't have anything close to a decent signing voice.

Danielle: There are a couple of huge sections that are spoken-word as you know, which is what Marc handled when we did the service in Kalamazoo. Since he'll be presiding for this one, those would be the parts that he'd want his assistant doing.

Alyssa: And that would be me, possibly?

Danielle: More likely than not, yes. You're the one in this group who has declared your intent to go into the pastorate in the future and I KNOW he will try to give you as much experience as possible in your time at Trinity. He probably knows what he wants to do already and when the campus gets his blast tomorrow, you will, too.

Marc, Erin, and Steph walked back into the living room and the girls shared the news about Thanksgiving Day with the rest of the group, including the possibility of the parents getting together should Steph be able to talk hers into going to Detroit.

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Alyssa: Marc, can we talk to you privately?

Marc: Sure.

Marc led Alyssa, Kristie, Sam, and Erin back to his office. "What's up, ladies?"

Alyssa: All of us have heard and seen some interesting things about the women's soccer program and are wondering if you know what might be going on.

Marc: I haven't heard anything odd. Care to fill me in?
Erin: I was talking with the roommate of one of my teammates last weekend at a movie night in the dorms and she told me her impression of the program and some of what she saw happening.

Sam: I was telling Alyssa that I saw her roommate leaving our dorm around 10:30 last night dressed to kill and then again around 7:30 this morning nearly dead on her feet. Alyssa told me that this seemed to be normal for her on home weekends during the season.

Alyssa: I talked to Danielle about Carli's behavior and she said she noticed the drop-off in performance on those weekends, but that the head coach didn't seem concerned.

Marc: I know that Sara came up from Carthage, as did our athletic director. Maybe a bit of culture shock for you new students that is just business as usual for them. If you can, drop me a line by email tonight about what you're seeing/hearing, as well as the soccer player's view from the inside. I'll follow up on it once I receive them.

Alyssa: Thanks, Marc. You're alright no matter what Erin says about you.

Erin: Alyssa! Why you wanna make me look bad?

Marc: It's the goalkeeper sense of humor. Surprised Steph hasn't pulled that out in front of you yet.

Erin: She has, but I wasn't the butt of the joke.

Marc: Sometimes you're the windshield, sometimes you're the bug.

Everyone returned to the living room and Kristie told her sister and girlfriend that she needed to get back to campus to do a bit of schoolwork before tomorrow morning, as the busy weekend didn't afford her any time to tackle it. The Muellers and Alyssa left, followed by Julie and Christen. Erin, Steph, and Jessie hung around a bit longer waiting for Erin's laundry to finish, then went back to campus themselves.

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When Marc got into his office on Monday, he was greeted by emails from Alyssa, Sam, and Cami Leonard detailing their impressions and interactions with the women's soccer program. On his way home, he stopped by Bayshore on the off-chance that Danielle was working so he could get her side of the story. He parked in the garage on the south end of the complex and made the short walk to Lane Bryant.

Dani: Marc! Did Alyssa tell you I was working here?

Marc: Yes, she did. I thought I'd take a chance on you being here this evening.

Dani: I get off in around a half-hour. Want to have dinner together when I'm finished?

Marc: Actually, I can't really stick around to do dinner. You know, the wife and all. This isn't really a social call, either. I'll do some window shopping and meet you across the street at La Coppa in 30.

Dani gave Marc a small hug, which he returned and pecked her cheek. After spending some time in Yankee Candle and Sur la Table, he went to La Coppa Gelato to wait for Danielle, who arrived a few minutes later. Once the two had ordered and gotten their treats, they sat down.

Dani: You said this wasn't a social call, which means it has something to do with work.

Marc: Yes, Dani. This morning, I received emails from three student-athletes with observations of the
women's soccer program. I wanted to talk to you before I acted at all on them, because I felt I owed that to you as my friend and work wife.

Dani: Work wife?

Marc: Yeah. I thought we sort of settled that last week after, you know, and when we went to dinner with Erin.

Dani: We did. I just wasn't prepared to hear you call me that. So what's the scuttlebutt?

Marc: I know that you and Alyssa talked on Thursday night and she brought up concerns about her roommate. She sent me a note documenting what she had seen so far this semester. She also said that you told her Sara didn't seem to be worried about its effect on her play.

Dani: That's correct. You know as well as I do that there is only so much pushing you can do with your head coach, otherwise they'll go looking to replace you.

Marc: Same with parents who disagree with your methods or feel their kid couldn't possibly have done what you are claiming. Another one of the athletes on their floor in Augsburg talked about seeing her heading out at 10:30pm Saturday night dressed-to-kill, then coming back around 7:30 the next morning looking like crap, but not high or drunk, more like pooped.

Dani: Taking those two together, something does seem a bit off here. Anyone know where she goes on the weekends or what for?

Marc: Someone has to know, just not the ones who are feeding me this information. The rest of the complaints come from one of your own players. Most of it from what I read could be chalked up to a grudge or expectations of the program that weren't met. I'll go through them one-by-one. First, she said that there was inconsistency in terms of determining which players would not be on the roster for road matches. Is there anywhere you can certify or verify this?

Dani: We don't have anything specific that would tell you who was left back and how many times. You could go through the box scores on our schedule page and find that info. As for the inconsistency, Sara makes those decisions.

Marc: I guess I find it odd that you wouldn't travel the whole roster, especially in D-III where teams at times are hurting to even field a full first XI.

Dani: Her rationale for this, according to what she told me, is two-fold. First, she doesn't play the entire bench, so taking the full 20 would result in unnecessary expenses for the players who don't see the field. Second, the AD ran Carthage's athletic department on a shoestring, which was never the case with Concordia or with what Trinity's budget for athletics is. Again, another place where I can't fight her position.

Marc: The next one is that, though she understands your closeness in age to the players, you seem to be more their friend than their coach. Having no real access to the program aside from the games I attend, I can't say one way or the other. My experience with you tells me that this is a non-starter, since you've always acted professionally in the games I've been at and the times at MUSC where
you'd step in and lead, and there were players older than you on the roster. I'm not going forward on this one unless she were to tell me of a specific incident of such.

Dani: Again, an accusation with no evidence to support it other than possibly a misinterpretation of my personality and coaching style.

Marc: I know the REAL you, and if you're operating within that frame, there's nothing to this charge in my opinion. Which brings me to the last allegation, that you have something on the side going with one of your players.

Dani: WHAT?!

Marc: Deny it, and this claim goes nowhere. My relationship with you over the years has provided me enough first-hand knowledge to determine that this is nonsense. The trust I have in your words and actions, and the truth you have exposed to me through them, I have no reason to doubt you.

Dani: I don't know what this player saw, but I am NOT carrying on with one of our players. The only person I'm doing anything with at the moment is you, Marc.

Marc: Consider this charge defeated. I will write this player back and ask for specifics on all of these points. As for the thing about Carli, please look into it as best as you can. I know you're not on campus much now that it's off-season, but the others are worried about her as you should be as well. Sara ultimately is responsible for the program-specific complaints and it's on her to remedy these things if they are an issue.

Dani: I'll do what I can on both Carli and Sara. Gotta be careful though, or I might end up out the door for running afoul of how she wants to run the program.

Marc: Do your best. I need to be getting home, but before I do I have something to tell you. Remember when I said I was worried about what might happen at the Ashlex wedding? Well, I think I've figured a way around it. They've set their ceremony time for 11am, presumably to avoid the paparazzi. There is another wedding that I had been asked to do that weekend. The couple is so adorable and I feel really bad that I can't do it, but I'm going to try and attend it after the ceremony in Orlando. It will get me away from any potential temptation and I'll be able to enjoy the rest of that trip since I know the Ashlex one is going to be so run-of-the-mill and stuffy. I love how Becca and EJ have set up theirs. It's happening on the off-day of the 2018 College Cup, which is being played in Cary, NC, not far from where they're getting married in Wilson. They both played at Duke, so a lot of their former teammates will be able to attend, even if they're playing that weekend. Anyways, I said all that to get to this. I might need some time with you before and after that trip to manage my affliction.

Dani: I love that you trust me enough to be so open about this. It's one of the things that reinforces my desire to be intimate with you, because I know you mean it when you say that you want me to be the only one you go there with. We can talk about this tomorrow if you're free for lunch. I'm coming up to campus late morning to work out with Alyssa and Steph Lafleur.

Marc: You know Tuesdays are my closed-door day, so I can make myself free. Text me when you finish up with the two of them and I'll meet you in Albrecht.

Marc and Dani threw out their trash and walked to the south parking garage together. When they got to her car, the two gave one another a tight hug and a slight peck on the lips. Once Dani was on her way, Marc went to his car and left for home.

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Alyssa, Danielle, and Steph Lafleur met at Buuck to work out together. Following their circuits on the weight machines, the three of them walked over to Albrecht for some quick re-hydration at Luther's Landing.

Dani: The two of you left me in the dust on the machines. I knew goalkeepers could pump iron, but you, Steph, look like you could tear the machine apart.

Steph: I'm sorry, Danielle, but I don't really consider that a compliment. People get the wrong impression of me when they see the arm sleeve and the muscles, and my ability to weight-train is just something that comes naturally to me.

Dani: Sorry for my foot-in-mouth there. Guess it's no different than people believing I'm the life of the party because I'm a bit on the squishy side. I'm actually somewhat introverted, like the two of you seem to be.

Alyssa: I'm definitely in that category, which makes developing anything with Sam difficult since we both tend to enjoy our peace and quiet.

Steph: I guess I fall on the introverted side, but that's more because of my anxiety issues than liking my own company.

Dani: Steph, can I ask you a personal question about your anxiety?

Steph: Sure.

Dani: When you get anxious to the point of shutting down, what helps you pull out of it?

Steph: Sometimes, I just have to let it go and ride the thing out because it hits so hard and fast. When I AM able to catch myself before I am too far gone, breathing exercises work, or meds, or distraction. Quiet and isolation are useful, but leaving me alone isn't really a good idea.

Dani: So you need to be away from what might be triggering your anxiety, but not be by yourself.

Steph: Yes. I take it you're looking for some tools to help our favorite ego-booster if he happens to fall victim to an attack in your presence.

Dani: How did you know?

Steph: I'm fairly observant. The way you look at one another shows a connection beyond words. How you interact on the occasions when I've seen you together, there is a certain level of comfort that makes it easy for the two of you to be pals and not have it cross the line.

Alyssa: I know that Marc thinks highly of Erin, Steph, and myself, but even around us he gets fidgety when it comes to being serious, like he measures everything he says so he's not misunderstood. Yet when all of us have been at games, and the two of you talk afterwards, there's none of that.

Dani: Oh, he has those moments with me as well, like last night when he came down to Bayshore to talk to me about reports his office received concerning the soccer program. Despite us being close, he stills feels the need to preface things he tells me so I don't respond in a way that will shock him. We're meeting for lunch in a little bit to get things sort of back to normal since last night was tense as heck.

Steph: Do we need to let you go, Dani?
Dani: Sorry, but yes. Great working out with you and remember, Alyssa, that jumpsuit has your name written all over it.

Alyssa: I know. Hopefully, I can talk the other two into a trip down there so I can get it and maybe find some cute stuff for them from the collection.

Alyssa and Steph made their way to Siebert for lunch while Dani texted Marc to say she was free and that they should meet outside Albrecht to go to lunch.

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Marc: Thanks for suggesting Noodles and Company. Been needing their Mac and Cheese for a while now, but you know that it's always a pain to go off-campus for lunch alone. How was your time with Steph and Alyssa?

Dani: I think it went well. Those two can out-lift me big time. We talked for a bit while re-hydrating in Albrecht. Steph thinks you and I are just good friends, and both of them have noticed your nervousness when you're being serious, the way you rehearse mentally what you want to say so that you're not misunderstood or your words aren't taken wrongly.

Marc: After we parted last night, I had to wait a little bit before leaving the parking garage because I was in the midst of a small anxiety attack, thinking through how I was going to take what you told me and question your player without causing problems for you with her or with Sara.

Dani: That's the second one that I've indirectly caused, isn't it? There was the one at the Mixer and then this one.

Marc: Don't blame yourself. My anxiety fluctuates a lot depending on the day. After a pretty busy couple of weeks before yesterday, just getting that additional thing added to my plate sort of set me up for an eventual crash. I guess if there is something to do with you that leads to one, it is that my head and heart get conflicted about what to do about you.

Dani: I don't think I get what you're trying to say.

Marc: You're so much of what I wish I had been able to find 20+ years ago, and you're right here in front of me, and you aren't spooked-out by the age gap between us. My mind can't wrap itself around how you feel about me, and I get to overthinking it. My heart knows that you do something to me that hasn't been done in a long time. I also know that there are a couple of things that restrict the possibility of it developing further.

Dani: Oh, Marc. I didn't realize that I was having that kind of effect on you. It also sounds like you're starting to feel something different than what you had before last night, when you told me that you would probably need my help to get you through that wedding weekend coming up.

Marc: I guess I am. This, just the two of us with no pretense, this is what I'm most attracted to with you. The extracurriculars are great, too, but it's when we talk that I truly feel closest to you. The reason why I've made more of an effort to extend our office times is because I like sharing the inside me with you and having you reciprocate that.

Dani looked deep into Marc's eyes and saw the truth that lied behind his words. After a few seconds to collect her thoughts, she replied. "The love you show me, the way I feel when in your presence, I find myself surrendering to thoughts that I'm not sure I want to have, because unless something changes, they will only lead me to be disappointed."

Marc: Are you in love with me, Danielle?
Dani: I honestly don't know. I want to be, but it's a dead end waiting to happen if I am.

Marc: I wouldn't say that. I am falling for you, Deuce. I wasn't expecting it to happen. In fact, I guarded myself against your initial advances because I knew it COULD happen. I can't promise you anything now. I don't when I'd be able to. All I know is that I want you in my life and to be the only woman who has control of my heart.

Dani: This....this is something that I'm going to need a little bit of time to process.

The pair finished off lunch and went back to Trinity. Marc walked Danielle over to her car, where they embraced one another for a couple of minutes.

Marc: Call me?

Dani: Once I figure out how to respond to your confession. I love you, Marc.

Marc: I love you too, Danielle.

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The Faculty Senate on Thursday passed their omnibus academic bill that would consolidate Concordia's and Carthage's course offerings and majors/minors into the new Trinity catalog in time for spring registration, which begins on November 12. The next day, the Board of Trustees took up the academic bill, the revised Code of Student Conduct, along with general business that included several hirings by the Department of Athletics.

David Strasser: The omnibus academic bill is before the board. Is there any debate before we move to a vote?

James Garrick: Are we allowed to pull out portions of the bill for individual votes and then pass the remainder?

Paul Ridgewell: No. It must be voted up or down as a single measure. That is what omnibus means. A whole package of bills and motions wrapped into one.

With no debate forthcoming, Strasser moved for the yeas and nays. The academic bill passed 31-4. Ridgewell then brought forth the proposed Code of Student Conduct. Before moving the bill to a vote, he asked Bishop Emerson to address the board.

Paul Emerson: I am pleased to be in front of you today on this most important of occasions, as you consider the bill before you. We at the Synod are pleased with the work that the conference committee did on October 18th to come to a compromise and urge you to pass this new Code of Student Conduct.

Emerson went back to his seat alongside Marc and watched the proceedings.

Laura Hammond: Having been part of the committee which worked to build consensus with the Student Government Association on an acceptable bill, I recommend that we pass this and move the campus forward.

James Garrick: I rise in opposition to this new code. It provides way too much freedom to students on this campus to act in ways that are unholy to the point of being heathenist. When did it become intolerant to stand for traditional values and approaches to sexuality?! Why are we allowing the Synod to dictate what should and should not be allowed on this campus? Bishop Emerson, Deacon Schmidt, you have no place here other than to provide spiritual guidance to the students, which is the
proper role of the church in the university setting.

Bishop Emerson and Marc both stood and argued their points of contention in response to Trustee Garrick's speech.

Bishop Emerson: To say that the church has no role at a university under its domain is ludicrous. As the Synod funds approximately 30% of the total cost of education and provides the means of allowing students to eventually move onto seminaries and the rosters of the ELCA, we do have a role in the determination of the university's functions and policies. As Deacon Schmidt has made perfectly clear to both the SGA and this body, I will use my position as Bishop to unilaterally enforce our Social Statements if a new code is not in place by the end of Fall semester. I now yield the floor to Deacon Schmidt.

Marc: When I was appointed here, it was with the knowledge that my skill set would afford me the opportunity to make a broader impact at Trinity than just my leading worship and providing spiritual guidance to students, faculty, and staff. My role in recommending students for candidacy on behalf of the Bishop makes it vital that the rules on campus match those of the Synod on certain issues. Bishop Emerson chose to place me at Trinity because I knew my way around the university system and could be a healing presence as your board, the Faculty Senate, and the SGA attempted to reconcile following the years of antagonism between them under the Concordia umbrella. The moves by Bishop Emerson and the Synod which were announced on Saturday night signal that I'm not going anywhere for the foreseeable future, and this board will have to get used to a non-pastor as this campus's chaplain. To quote Nature Boy Ric Flair, whether you like it or whether you don't, learn to live with it, because I can be your best friend here or your worst enemy.

Marc returned to his seat to a small round of applause by some of the onlookers, including members of the athletic department and Morgan Andringa, who is doing a long-form piece on the process of revising the Code of Student Conduct for her introductory Mass Communications class.

David Strasser: As this vote is of the utmost importance, we will take a short recess, 15 minutes, to allow all trustees time to digest the bill and come to their own private position on it.

Marc and Bishop Emerson discussed what they thought were the numbers for and against at the moment.

Marc: This vote is going to be just as close as the one in the SGA, only their nos were directed at the unfairness of allowing for multiple lesbian partners but not for gay men or heterosexual individuals and this is going to be about loosening the code at all. If I were to guess, there are probably 20 for sure for it and 10 dead-set against it. It's that unknown five which will decide it one way or the other.

Bishop Emerson: Do you know anything about how abstentions are handled?

Marc: I'm presuming the same way the SGA does it, which is that they count as non-yes votes and toward the number needed to defeat the measure.

Bishop Emerson: So we need 24 yeses to pass it if all 35 vote.

Marc: Yes. The new code passed with only 23 yea because one of the representatives chose not to vote at all and left the session. Same thing would be necessary here to pass it with less than 24.

Marc talked to Gavin Winchester, the school's athletic director, about some of the things he had come across his desk and the concerns about the women's soccer program. Gavin thanked Marc for his update and introduced him to Sarah Hawthorne, who was to be hired as the assistant coach for the women's lacrosse team pending approval by the board.
Sarah: Deacon Schmidt, you are one heck of a speaker. Where does the saq come from to take on these guys?

Marc: A lot of it has to do with knowing why I'm here and who has my back if I overstep. The Bishop has given me a lot of responsibility and with it I need to prove to the governing bodies that I'm not one to mess around with. Where did you play your college lacrosse?

Sarah: Hamline, which played in the same conference as what was Concordia. This year's expansion among the NACC schools, Midwest Conference schools, and MIAC schools means that Trinity is in a more Wisconsin-based conference and Hamline's with mostly Minnesota schools.

Marc: My goddaughter Erin plays for the team here. She's a bit of a spitfire. Gets it from her dad, who's ex-military. Pleased to meet you, and my door is always open.

David Strasser called the meeting back to order, then moved the question on the Code of Student Conduct. Both Paul Emerson and Marc were nervous for the announcement of the totals.

David Strasser: On the question, the yeas are 22, the nays 9, with 4 abstentions.

The room got a bit loud as members of the gallery could be heard trying to get at certain trustees that they felt were responsible for what they believed was the bill's defeat.

Paul Emerson: Dang! Two short. Guess we better get set for Plan B, which I'll hand down on Monday.

Marc: Get it out and I'll see that it becomes the law around here. The SGA gave me the purview to use it in lieu of a revised code.

David Strasser: Order! Order! Please sit down, everyone. Trustee Ridgewell, can you clarify what the actual count is on the vote?

Paul Ridgewell: In the case of abstentions, unlike the SGA and Faculty Senate which treat them as non-yes votes, the Board of Trustees counts them as 1/2 for, 1/2 against. In the case of this vote, the yeas were 22 with four 1/2 votes, the nays were 9 with four 1/2 votes, making the total 24 in favor, 11 against, meaning that the bill passes.

Marc was a bit stunned, as he thought the bill fell 22 to 13 (9 nos plus 4 abstentions). Paul Emerson shook Marc a little to get his attention.

Paul Emerson: We did it! It wasn't pretty, and it wasn't by much, but we got both bodies to pass the bill, albeit with the nuclear option staring them square in the face.

Marc: That's two months of work I'm not sure I want to do again.

Strasser called on Winchester to present his list of hirings to the board for approval, which was done by acclamation. Following that, Strasser adjourned the meeting. Emerson and Schmidt spoke for a few minutes with Strasser while Andringa and Hawthorne stepped out into the hall.

Dani: SARAH!

Sarah: DANI!

The two friends hugged one another, then talked briefly about the meeting.

Dani: So you're now one of us here at TLU, right?
Sarah: Yep. The board approved the hirings by Gavin pretty quickly. That was the easy part of the whole proceeding. The new academic requirements and offerings got a couple members of the board a bit testy, but they passed by a huge margin if I remember correctly. Did you hear the noise out here that was coming from inside during the debate over the student conduct code and how the vote turned out?

Dani: I heard some applause, then nothing, then a huge ruckus before someone banged the gavel to get people to quiet down. Do not tell me that the campus's resident pot-stirrer had something to do with that.

Sarah: If you're referring to Deacon Schmidt, he was the one who got the applause for pretty much telling the Board that they could kiss his behind if they had issues with him. He also quoted professional wrestler Ric Flair in his closing.

Dani laughed at Sarah's story about Marc. "That guy has a bit of a swagger and a LOT of confidence in his view of the world. If we weren't friends, I'd be scared of him."

Both Pauls, David, and Marc came out of the meeting room and were stopped by Morgan for a few questions about the votes and their potential impact on the student body. Dani and Sarah watched the four of them go through their talking points before approaching Marc.

Marc: Working today, Dani, or just felt like dressing up?

Dani: Actually, Sarah and I are going to lunch now that she's officially on the staff here.

Marc: You two know each other?

Sarah: Yeah. Danielle and I went to Nicolet together and our moms are part of the church choir at St. Eugene's.

Marc: Dani, I warned Sarah about Erin. Thought she should be given fair warning about her.

Dani: Smart move, Marc. By the way, I have processed what you told me on Tuesday and I'll stop by your office after we return to campus to fill you in.

Marc shook hands with Sarah and exchanged pecks on the cheek with Dani before joining the three men behind him for lunch in Siebert.
Change Is A Good Thing

Saturday night in Augsburg Hall was the site of the first Residence Hall Association-sponsored event, a karaoke night led by hall director Hope Stevens.

Hope: Welcome, everyone, to Augsburg and our offering to the campus community this year, Karaoke Night. Books are being passed around with song lists in them. When you find one you want to perform, jot it down on the clipboard up here and you'll get your chance to belt it out for your fellow residents.

The attendees took a few minutes to look through the books, with most of the lacrosse players eager to show their teammates and ladies their vocal skills (or lack thereof). As luck would have it, the first one up was the team's music theater major, Emily, breaking out an old-time tune recently redone on "Glee" [L-O-V-E].

Emily: This song is for the straight woman to my comedic genius, Lindsey Hoffman.

Lindsey was impressed both by Emily's singing voice and by the choice of tune as it hit her right in the feels. When she returned to her seat next to Lindsey, her girlfriend kissed her on the cheek and hinted that she might get a bit more than that later on.

Next up was Sofia, who has been pretty withdrawn around the hall this semester, preferring to stick close to Vanessa due to her social anxiety. With her by her side tonight, she decided to join her fellow floormates for the festivities. She chose a song that in effect described how she felt on a daily basis in the big, bad university [Bring Me To Life].

Following her, the hall's three giants (Steph Lafleur, Alyssa, and Sam Mueller) joined forces on a Four Seasons hit [Big Girls Don't Cry]. Lindsey stayed with the Four Seasons theme by singing a song of deep affection to her Emily [Can't Take My Eyes Off You].

The team's free spirit, Morgan Andringa, took the stage to do a rendition of a Kansas classic [Dust In The Wind].

Several athletes on other teams (Alex Burris from Track, Tim Hollister from Men's Soccer, Eddie Jordan, and Mallory Putnam from Acro and Tumbling) stepped forward to perform Earth, Wind, and Fire's "Fantasy". Following a short bathroom break for the DJ, Lauren took the mic and sang a declaration of her feelings for Kelley [Only Wanna Be With You].

Kelley shed a couple of tears and snuggled into Lauren when she got back to the couch they were sharing. Hope, Jess Fisher, Megan Racicot, and Morgan Brooks then took over with a song from the Weather Girls [It's Raining Men].

Not to be outdone, the school's geek squad (Alyssa, Becky Sanderson, Liz Edwards, and Sam) channeled their love of Star Wars and Weird Al into this parody of "American Pie" [The Saga Begins].

Steph Lafleur dropped her guard a bit and chose to serenade Erin with something from REO Speedwagon [Can't Fight This Feeling].

Erin put a big kiss right on Steph's nose upon her return and told her that she had something up her sleeve for later. The volleyball team's Alanna Kemper brought some international flavor to the evening by singing a song from one of her favorite Australian bands [Beds Are Burning].
One of the Pre-Sem seniors from Canada, Stefan Fraiser, chose to drop some Coldplay on the party [Viva La Vida].

Karina Lester from the women's cross-country team pumped up the crowd with a women's anthem from Gloria Gaynor [I Will Survive].

Kelley, on the suggestion of Lauren, got up and chimed in with a recent hit that spoke to her after the incident over fall break [Fight Song].

Sam followed up on the women's empowerment theme of the two previous singers with another song of resistance [Titanium].

Ever the shy one, Alyssa went up to sing something to Kristie that was very cryptic in its meaning [Dance With Me].

Kristie stood at the end of the song to embrace Alyssa when she approached her and pecked her on the lips. Erin went next with her own cryptic serenade of the woman who has her heart [Desert Rose].

Steph banked away her thoughts about Erin's moment before the hall and her public expression of acknowledgement of her. Corey's little surprise for Ali was an oldie from the Turtles [Happy Together].

Ali grinned big at him from her seat and contemplated an appropriate response for afterwards. The two cinnamon rolls of the team, Christen and Julie, were next up, with the Latina singing a Phil Collins ballad to her [Groovy Kind Of Love].

After the song, Julie took Christen's hand and kissed it, then curled up into her embrace on their couch. She complimented her on her voice and said she had a surprise for her when they got back to their room. Cami Leonard from the women's soccer team delighted the crowd with a Eagles favorite of hers [Hotel California].

Hope started off the last song of the evening, then invited others to come up and join her in it [Lean On Me].

The lacrosse team mingled with their dorm mates and others for a bit before going back up to the third floor of Augsburg and a post-event gathering in Lindsey and Emily's room.

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When Marc got to campus on Monday morning, he checked his voicemail and listened to the messages left for him.

[From: Orlando, FL]

Deacon Schmidt, this is Ashlyn Harris. Alex and I are going to have to postpone our wedding because Servando has gotten a continuance for their divorce trial, so now it won't start until a week AFTER we were supposed to get married. Can't get married if you can't get divorced first, you know. Please call me back so I can give you more details and see if you'd be available after the first of the year should we be able to reschedule it for then. Thanks.

[From: Wilson, NC]

Marc, this is Kathy Proctor. The pastor we had selected to perform Emma Jane and Rebecca's wedding is being re-assigned out of the area and asked that we find another officiant. Therefore, I'm
wondering if you'd be available to do it. Call me at your earliest convenience as time is sort of short on getting a replacement.

[From: Glendale, WI]

Marc, Dani here. First, I'd like to thank you for Friday afternoon, both the main course and the aperitif. Getting things completely square between us was SO necessary. I'm working open today and close tomorrow, in case the girls want to come down and shop. Love you. See you Wednesday at service. Call or text if you want. Byeeeeeeeee. MUAH.

Marc took off the religious mindset for a couple of minutes to engage in a bit of self-talk over the calls. "Damn jackass! The only reason he is dragging this out is because he thinks he can prove wrongdoing on Alex's part and thus get some cash out of her indiscretions. There's no way she's taking him back. Knew he was a scrub when they got together and he's not proved any different. Really wish the Hearts' lawyer had gone after him more during his cross to deflate that puffed-up ego of his a bit. The upside, however, is that I can now do EJ and Becca's wedding and attend College Cup while there. As for Dani, maybe there'd be a way she could get clearance from Gavin to attend College Cup as well, since D-I is in Cary and D-III is in Greensboro. Good way to network with other coaches from around the country. I should return these calls before delving into work on Holden before this afternoon's intro meeting and first run-through."

Marc called Kathy back first, as it was the most important and most pressing of the three messages.

Marc: Kathy, it's Marc Schmidt.

Kathy Proctor: Marc! I was wondering if you had gotten my message since I didn't hear from you over the weekend.

Marc: I was in meetings most of Friday and didn't check my messages at all. As for your request, I'd be more than happy to preside at EJ and Becca's wedding. The one that I had accepted for that weekend is being postponed because one of the brides will be unable to get divorced before that date. Her soon-to-be-ex-husband is dragging things out and since his MLS team is in the playoffs, he has gotten a continuance until after they are over, which is the second weekend of December.

Kathy: Thank you!!!

Marc: Since it's going on the same weekend as College Cup, are the kids making some adjustments in the scheduling to accommodate for it?

Kathy: With the games on Friday, the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner are scheduled for Thursday. Will that be a problem?

Marc: No. I already had a flight set for Thursday because of obligations surrounding the wedding in Orlando. I'll check with our synod office and the student affairs office at Trinity about getting the Orlando portion chopped from it and have it be just to and from Raleigh instead of having to cancel the one and book an entirely separate round-trip.

Kathy: I'll send you a schedule of events along with who to contact about lodging in Raleigh. There is a special rate for College Cup and with two Duke alumnas and defending national champions holding their wedding that weekend, they extended the rate to include our gathering as well.

Marc: So most everyone involved with the wedding will be going to Cary on Friday for the games, then?

Kathy: That's the plan.
Marc: I'll be watching my email for your note with the info. Again, I was deeply honored that you asked me in the first place to perform it and was very sorry I couldn't take it at the time. Now that I can, I'm looking forward to linking these two together for all time. Take care, and thanks again.

Kathy: I should be thanking you, Marc. Talk to you soon. Bye.

Marc jotted down the changes he needed to make to that weekend's travel and lodging itinerary along with a note reminding him to discuss College Cup with Dani. He then called Ashlyn to go over what happened to force the postponement of her wedding with Alex.

Marc: Ashlyn, this is Deacon Marc Schmidt. I'm sorry that it took me until now to return your call. I was in meetings almost all of Friday and hadn't checked my messages before leaving campus for the weekend.

Ashlyn: That's fine. Not like we can do anything now anyhow. Damn that piece of work....dragging this out in the hopes that he can uncover Alex and I having done something with one another before she filed for separation.

Marc: Not that it's any of my business, but did you?

Ashlyn: Yes, about a week before the filing. That, combined with the post-game in San Jose were the pieces that led her to the decision.

Marc: It seems like such a nitpick that if she were to make the admission and offer a certain dollar amount as penance, the judge should be able to do the division of assets without in-court litigation since there are no children and both spouses make enough individually to not qualify for maintenance payments.

Ashlyn: THANK! YOU! I think you just gave me a bit of ammo to pass onto Alex which hopefully will end this run-around we've been getting from Serv.

Marc: You mentioned trying to reschedule for after the first of the year.

Ashlyn: We REALLY want to get it done before the end of the year, but the calendar isn't overly friendly to that.

Marc: You know you can always run to the courthouse and do a quickie one, then hold the solemnization and party at a more convenient time.

Ashlyn: Another thing to tell my fiancee, the diva.

Marc: Is Alex that much of one?

Ashlyn: Not as bad as some, but her daily morning routine is about twice as long as most women.

Marc: Luckily you both have jobs that aren't 8-to-5.

Ashlyn: Anyways, would you be able to do the "second chance" ceremony if we choose to go with your option of doing the legal part as soon as the divorce is finalized and the bigger celebration at a pre-determined time in 2019?

Marc: The only thing on the schedule right now is a multi-couple wedding the third week of February.

Ashlyn: The one in Philly?
Marc: Yes. Right now, it's four couples, but that could change between now and then.

Ashlyn looked at the calendar in front of her. "Would January 19th be possible?"

Marc scanned his monthly planner. "It looks good. That's MLK weekend, so it could be a bit crowded in town if kids are off school that Monday. Send me the new details when you and Alex have them worked out and I'll put in the request to the synod office to perform it."

Ashlyn: Thanks, Marc. You're a true life saver.

After hanging up with Ashlyn, Marc called Dani and got her voicemail.

Marc: Hi Dani! Got your message and have to reciprocate your accolades about Friday. I've got an idea I'd like to discuss with you since plans have changed a bit for the wedding weekend in December. I'll let my people know your schedule in case they want to shop with your assistance. See you Wednesday. Tell Michelle and Sarah I said hi, and inform Sarah that I'm not nearly as much of a bad ass in my day-to-day life as chaplain as I am when dealing with administrative knuckleheads. Miss me. Love me. Bye!

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At 3 o'clock, Marc began the Christmas Eve Service introductory meeting. The students who showed up were: Steph Lafleur; Erin Matheson; Julie Jacobsen; Christen Prince; Emily Sommer; Sam Mueller; Corey Herr; Matt Benning; and Cami Leonard. Alyssa had hockey practice while Stefan Fraiser was off-campus at his experiential education site.

Marc: Welcome, everyone. As I mentioned in my campus-wide blast last Monday, I am a huge proponent of the concept of rites in place, both because it allows the community to experience the heightened nature of worship at those times and because it is a good means of getting practice at leading these big-time services. The Holden Evening Service, with its Annunciation and Magnificat, is a perfect liturgy for Christmas Eve as it reveals the forthcoming birth of Jesus and Mary's response to that news. How many of you are familiar with Holden?

Erin, Steph, Julie, and Matt raised their hands.

Marc: OK, so a few of you have some experience. Let's get you four taking some of the more advanced parts. Erin, do you think you and Steph can do the Annunciation?

Erin: Both of us on it? You sure of that?

Marc: Yes, I'm sure. The piece makes for a wonderful duet, with the melody starting and the second voice coming in at "You shall bear a child". I think we'll have Danielle on flute for the Magnificat and she can also back up the two of you on the second half of the Annunciation.

Steph: I'll give it a try, Marc.

Marc: Matt, for now I want to have you handling the spoken sections, after the psalmody and after the prayers. Alyssa will be doing some portion of them during the actual service.

Matt: Sounds good.

Marc: Julie, what portion are you most comfortable with?

Julie flipped through the booklet. "I think I can do the Evening Thanksgiving and perhaps that single line before the Magnificat."
Marc: That gets the individual parts handled with the exception of the prayers. We can figure that out when we get there in today's run-through. For the ones unfamiliar with Holden, I'll have you do the congregational responses alongside the "leaders".

Sam and Corey paired up with Steph, Emily and Cami with Erin, and Christen with Julie. Marc chanted the first line of the procession, with the students responding with the second. This happened twice more before all sang the Evening Hymn. Julie led the call and response portion of the Thanksgiving, then chanted the solo before all sang the Amen at the end.

Marc: Psalm 141 is done in a round. We will all start together, then Group One will continue, with Group Two coming in two measures later and you maintain your parts through the entire piece. Group One is the higher range typically, so I'd like to have Erin, Julie, Emily, Christen, and Cami take that part. Matt, Corey, Steph, Sam, and I will be Group Two.

As the group moved through the remainder of the service, Marc stopped them occasionally to correct certain notes or the pacing of the parts. Emily worked with Erin and Cami on elongating the ending of particular phrases, while Christen helped Sam and Corey on not overpowering the higher voices.

Marc: Well, that's the first run-through. I think once we add in some instrumentation, it will come together more. Danielle will be on flute and twelve-string guitar for different parts of the service. We need a piano player as well. Anyone know anyone?

Sam: Kristie and I both took piano lessons when we were younger. Not sure how much I remember, but I'm willing to give it a shot if you can give me the score to study.

Matt: I play mellophone in the marching band. Think I can take a copy of the service with me so I can see if I can play it?

Marc: If you can make it work, I'll talk to the music department about getting you a proper French horn for the evening. I'll also drop my sister a note and see if she can give me a couple of tips to help you. She plays mellophone for a band run by the morning show host on KDWB in the Twin Cities and played French horn in high school.

Matt: Thanks, chaplain.

Marc: Is this day good for everyone? In order to get some additional people involved, we may need to do this after normal business/academic hours.

Hearing most people say that it's good, Marc told them that next Monday's rehearsal would be at 6pm and thanked everyone for taking part in this hopefully new tradition at Trinity. Before he left, Marc told Steph what Dani told her regarding her schedule. Steph asked Sam to text Alyssa and see if the three of them along with Erin could meet up for dinner once she was back from hockey practice.

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Marc had a meeting on Tuesday morning with Bishop Emerson at the Synod office on Milwaukee's south side. After going over the first four months of his tenure at Trinity, the two discussed his off-campus activities.

Paul: I got your request yesterday about plans changing for the first weekend of December, that you'll now be presiding at a wedding in North Carolina instead of the one in Orlando.

Marc: Yes. The couple in Orlando had to postpone their wedding because of problems with one of them getting divorced. The ex is stretching out the process in hopes of finding evidence of
wrongdoing prior to the filing for separation. They have a tentative date for mid-January if everything can be worked out by that time. As for the one in North Carolina, it's a couple that had asked me previously to perform their wedding, but who I had to turned down because of the other one. The mother of one of the brides called over the weekend to tell me that their chosen officiant had backed out due to relocation by the synod and they needed someone to step in.

Paul: I also noticed that you are going solo, as you did for the one in October.

Marc: Yes. To me, weddings are work and I don't necessarily want to have to keep track of others.

Paul: I understand that, but I have concerns that doing these trips alone might send the wrong message both to attendees and to the media, since the ones you are doing involve professional athletes. Take Danielle with you. Let people see the two of you together. It will be good for you and will reduce any potential temptation that might exist with you on your own.

Marc: She is working that weekend, and since we're going to Michigan for Thanksgiving weekend, she really can't switch one for the other.

Paul: Take Erin or another one of the students. Call it an educational experience in practical ministry. The synod has the funds to cover it since Carthage wasn't using their allotment for continuing education or conferences.

Marc: You're serious about me having "backup" when I perform weddings outside the area?

Paul: Yes. The worst thing that can happen is someone suspecting you of using the office to engage in illicit behavior as a result of these opportunities.

Marc: I'd love to take Alyssa, but she'll have hockey games that weekend. Erin is the closest thing I have to a daughter, so that would be sort of a legitimate choice in lieu of Danielle. Steph Lafleur is my next-best protege to Alyssa and giving her a chance to shadow me that weekend might be useful in her development as a future rostered leader. Besides, Steph and Erin are pretty close and the Canadian is quickly becoming somewhat of a fixture at our place on Sundays. I'll talk to the two of them about it tomorrow after service.

Paul: I'll approve the expenses and have Matt book the hotel room and flights. You're sure about taking both?

Marc: Safety in numbers, boss. If I take only one of them, the same issue you mentioned about me going alone might get stirred up.

Paul: Good point. Anything else you want to discuss before we wrap up?

Marc: Do you think I was out of line during the Board of Trustees meeting on Friday? A letter was printed in Trinity's student newspaper yesterday stating that I had brought disrepute on the office of chaplain by taking an antagonistic position against the Board on behalf of the synod.

Paul: If I thought you were in the wrong, I would have told you so. In fact, you're doing exactly what I want done at Trinity. We HAVE to get our college and university campuses away from the cloistered refuges that they had been in the pre-ELCA days. Should I send a letter in response?

Marc: I think it'd be more effective if you wrote something for insertion in the weekly bulletin at our synod's congregations, perhaps tying in Veteran's Day and how standing up for what's right means sometimes taking unpopular positions or fighting difficult battles.

Paul: Again, you prove why I like you and want you there. You're so good with spin and attempting
to sway public opinion that you can make our tough-as-nails approach to overhauling Lutheran education and values look like evolutionary progress and not an overthrow of tradition.

Marc: I do my best, sir.

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Steph, Erin, and Sam went down to Bayshore with Alyssa after she returned to campus from practice. Following dinner in the food court, the foursome went to Lane Bryant to scout out outfits for the Christmas Eve service and for Alyssa to pick up the jumpsuit that Dani recommended to her on her last visit.

Dani: I see Augsburg's "Big Girls" are all here, along with the spitfire cherub.

Alyssa chuckled at her description of them. "I'm guessing you saw the video from Karaoke Night."

Dani: Sure did. Not too shabby on the vocals and it was quite fitting. Now, let's get you into some cute clothes in your size.

Alyssa: Guess it's my lucky day in that your store has a real-life model wearing what I'm planning to buy.

Dani: This wasn't planned, mind you. I just felt like I wanted to show off a bit and wasn't in the mood for any of my skirt-based outfits.

Alyssa: Now I don't know if I can pull off the, what, 3 1/2" heels on your ankle boots, but you said the look is flexible, right?

Dani: For sure. You can go with flats or wedges or over-the-calf boots and tuck the pants into them.

Steph: I think I might want to try that on. It'll go with open-toed/open-heeled boots, right?

Dani: Hell yeah! That would be an awesome look for you, whether for a formal occasion or a job interview. You can pair it with a blazer if you want to cover the ink and reduce the obviousness of your muscular arms and shoulders.

Dani found jumpsuits in a couple of different sizes for each of the two goalkeepers, then led them to the fitting rooms. Following that, she turned to Sam and began asking about what she was wanting.

Sam: I'm a bit conservative in my attire and somewhat self-conscious about being tall and not very filled-out. What do you think would look good on me?

Dani walked over to the Girl With Curves Collection and pulled out a couple of solid options for someone with Sam's dimensions.

Sam: Wow! Both of these would make me look like I actually have a waist instead of being a 2x4. Let me go try them on.

Sam took the dresses from Dani and went into a fitting room. While the three women were trying on their clothes and getting opinions from one another, Erin asked Dani about her look.

Erin: How did you stumble onto being such a good stylist for people of your proportions?

Dani: Remember when I said that I had been "the fat friend" that was always invited to parties to keep the hotties out of trouble? As I toned-up and got comfortable with how I was designed, I went looking for clothes that I thought were cute but not overly showy, if you will. Coming across this
collection that we carry here was the best thing for my confidence, because the outfits are designed by someone like me, with certain body parts being out-of-proportion to the rest of her. When I wear clothes that make me look good and feel good, I am much more outgoing than some people would expect.

Erin: Well, you do a fantastic job with your outfit selections. I also notice that you go a little bit out of your way to look just THAT much more sensational when Marc's around.

Dani thought about how much to divulge to Erin about her godfather's predilections, then decide to expose a little bit to her.

Dani: I guess I have some knowledge of his predilections and play to them because I know that he appreciates it and because he always compliments me on it. You know the feeling when you believe you can do no wrong in someone's eyes?

Erin smiled broadly at the question, because that is how Steph made her feel when she wasn't being chased hither and yon by Shelley. "I do, since that is how I think Steph views me, as her perfect match."

Dani: Ummm....wow. I wouldn't have thought....

Erin: I'm pretty open about it on campus, even though my parents don't know yet about either my being gay or that Steph and I are together. I guess I'm starting to become more comfortable around you and not so defensive over your relationship with Marc.

Alyssa went to the register with her jumpsuit, while Sam went searching for one of her own to go with the olive wrap dress and Steph asked Erin to help her choose a dress for the Christmas Eve service. After a couple minutes of looking through racks, the pair found one that both thought would look exceptional on her.

Once everyone checked out, they thanked Dani for her help and encouragement on their selections and asked if she'd be at service tomorrow, to which she said yes. The four of them left Bayshore and stopped at Kopp's for custard before returning to campus.
Strange Bedfellows

A nearly packed Bonhoeffer Chapel spent the lunch hour today as a community in worship. Marc's message on fake love, expressed typically by friends who use one another for selfish reasons, explored his random life growing up in Milwaukee and the luckiness of his academic and athletic pursuits in his youth. He brought up some of the slightly-famous people he met or to whom his classmates and friends were connected. His closing was that respect for people's desire to not be judged or used by others based on who they knew was the best way a person could show love for that individual. After service, the semi-regular Lunch Bunch group of students, faculty, and staff met in Siebert, with Marc being asked to expound on some of the references he made in his homily.

Steph: I know Erin tells me to never doubt the things you say, but some of those who you mentioned today seem a fair bit far-fetched.

Marc: What claims are you questioning?

Steph: The one about graduating with the daughter of the Common Council President and being long-time childhood friends with the immediate and extended families of Milwaukee's chief municipal judge.

Marc: All 100 percent true. Carrie and I had a fair number of classes together through our four years at Riverside, and my parents met the Grangers before I started elementary school, thus the decision to send me to Garfield where the five of them (Jim's two daughters and his brother's son, stepson, and stepdaughter) attended. Jim and Chris were my U10 soccer coaches as well. I didn't even mention my academic rival throughout middle and high school who is now one of the foremost researchers on breast cancer in the country. He has a laboratory named after him at Oregon Health and Science University and has recently received funding from the Department of Defense. Known him since I was maybe four or so. Don't know off-hand how my mom and his mom met.

Erin: And knowing the mayor's granddaughter?

Marc: Teri and I were in several classes and marching/concert band together in high school. Didn't know she was related to Frank until I saw his obituary since their last name was sort of common in the Milwaukee area due to the German roots of the city.

Alyssa: There are some of those types of connections here, but more times than not the individuals don't really like it being known because of the fake friend thing you described.

Marc: I can imagine. I mentioned my past not to brag or make myself look better than I am, but because it shows just how much accidents of birth put people in awkward positions. Most didn't ask for it and they usually were nowhere around when the individuals were in the headlines. In Teri's case, her grandfather had been out of office twelve years by the time she was born and her great uncle, who preceded Frank as mayor, was killed in World War II.

Dani took in Marc's description of his high school friend's distance from the events that brought renown to her family members and could empathize, as her own grandfather, who co-founded one of the most successful cancer charities in the world, has been living on the west coast for 30+ years and had been there give or take ten years before she came to be as the youngest of her parents' four daughters.

Corey: My girlfriend confided in me about something a couple of weeks ago because she didn't want me to be surprised this weekend when my parents and I are in Green Bay for the Packers/Cowboys
game, and to make sure that I wouldn't go all fan-boy upon knowing this fact. She's really uncomfortable having people know this about her because back home, her so-called friends and their older siblings would try and use her status to get in with some of the current players or the club as a whole. Can I suggest she come talk to you about it?

Marc: Sure. That's part of why I'm here, to be an ear when students have problems or issues they wish to bat around with an independent party.

Erin: How did your meeting with Bishop Emerson go?

Marc: Decently. He's encouraged by the progress made so far and the things I wish to accomplish next semester. You came up in our discussion, actually. He is concerned about me doing these out-of-synod weddings solo because it could give off the impression of trouble at home and that I'm using these opportunities to step out on the missus. Therefore, he is wanting you to accompany me on the one I'm doing in three weeks in North Carolina.

Erin: I thought that one was in Florida.

Marc: Change of plans. Alex and Ashlyn have to postpone theirs since Serv got another continuance on the divorce trial. I had planned to attend the one in Wilson after finishing off the Orlando one, but I got a call over the weekend asking me if I'd consider stepping in for their previously-chosen officiant since he was being re-assigned out of the area.

Steph: Is that one Quinny and EJ's?

Marc: You know of them?

Steph: I'm Canadian. OF COURSE I know of Rebecca Quinn. Up-and-comer for the national team, first-round draft pick of the Philadelphia Hearts of the NWSL, finalist for Rookie of the Year.

Marc: He also suggested I get one of my candidates a bit of inside exposure to that part of practical ministry. Alyssa, I'd love to take you, but you've probably got hockey games that weekend.

Alyssa: Yep. Sounds like a fun weekend. I'm sure there will be other chances, right?

Marc: Yes. A multi-couple one on Valentine's Day in Philly. I am going to need a few extra bodies just to keep things straight. Get that into your calendar. I believe we can get you back from there in time for a Friday night game. As for the upcoming one, Steph, will you consider being my assistant for the weekend?

Steph: You serious? You know that weekend is also College Cup, right?

Marc: Yes, and there are allowances in the schedule for it. Rehearsal and rehearsal dinner are Thursday so that everyone can attend the games on Friday.

Steph: Sweet! I accept.

Marc: The synod is picking up the costs. I'll talk to Paul tomorrow and let him know that the two of you are in.

After Lunch Bunch broke up, Dani and Marc went back to his office.

Dani: You said in your voicemail on Monday that you had an idea that you wanted to discuss with me.
Marc: Yes. As you heard me say at lunch, plans have changed for that first weekend of December and I'm doing a different wedding, this one in North Carolina. I looked up some things and found out that in addition to the Division I College Cup taking place in Cary, the Division III one will be played in Greensboro, which is 90 minutes or so from there. I thought maybe it'd be a good idea for you to go and take advantage of the networking opportunities available at the two events.

Dani: Very interesting. I could use a vacation and the chance to get my foot in with some of the more successful programs and coaches in the NCAA is certainly something I wouldn't want to pass up. I don't really have the cash available to join the three of you on this trip, though.

Marc: The athletic department has a line in the school's budget for conferences and continuing education. Talk to Gavin about it. You wouldn't be taking time away from the department, since you're technically off-season.

Dani: Would we get to spend some time together that weekend at all, being that you'd be tied up with the wedding and the games in Cary and I'd be going to Greensboro for the Division III one?

Marc: There is nothing going on between Thursday after the rehearsal dinner and when you'd need to leave for Greensboro on Friday afternoon, and the final on Saturday is early enough that you could get back to Raleigh, change, and come down to Wilson for the wedding.

Dani: I thought Erin was going to be your +1 for the wedding.

Marc: Technically, she is on my staff for the event and in my opinion, she should be Steph's +1 that night. Therefore, I'd like you to be mine. It would solve that big problem that comes up when I'm doing these events.

Dani touched Marc's hand and patted the top of it. "Yes, and you'd also be able to relieve the tension afterwards. I'll stop by Gavin's office before I leave campus."

Marc: What's the skinny on Sarah? Just wondering if I need to warn Erin and Steph about her or not.

Dani: Stickler for order and discipline, but a softie at the same time. She's a good bit like me, but much more the prototypical jock. Hung up on a guy she can't get, but also likes girls. We've never crossed any lines with one another, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't or she wouldn't. While I'm here, is the Christmas Eve service just for students, or can faculty and staff participate?

Marc: Of course they can participate. I WANT faculty and staff involved in the campus congregation, but they usually don't see it as "their place". Are you interested in being part of the service?

Dani: Yes. I used to sing a bit in high school and at St Eugene's, but I haven't done anything in a few years now. Is the service particularly hard?

Marc: Not if you're familiar with vespers. The man who wrote Holden is a Catholic and also wrote some pieces that I have seen used at Irish Fest mass and on occasion in Catholic churches. I can email you a pdf of the service for you to look over. Come on Monday at 6 if you think you want to give it a try.

Dani told Marc that she would be there. She then got up to leave and go to the athletic department's offices to get funding for College Cup weekend. The two embraced before she left with Marc placing a peck on Dani's forehead.

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Shelley was studying at the library before leaving campus for the evening. As she was packing up, Steph McNamara came by where she was to scan through back issues of the Economist, looking for inspiration to get her started on a paper for her Microeconomics class.

Shelley: Steph, can I talk to you for a minute?

Steph: Shelley, right? How is the commuting life going?

Shelley: Sucks to tell you the truth. Not being here in the evenings really has me behind in making friends with our teammates and experiencing college life.

Steph: It's not all sunshine and roses living on-campus, either. Too much competition around for my tastes. I'm looking at moving off-campus next year and hopefully can convince Kristie and Sam to join me.

Shelley: I know you all come from around Chicago. Anything more to your connection than that?

Steph: Sam and I are together. I mean I THINK we're still together, even though we haven't done anything relationship-wise in a couple of months. As for Kristie, I can't seem to get her to understand that she shouldn't be looking around at others when both Sam and I can provide her with the things she needs. You got anyone?

Shelley: Not yet. I WANT to get with the new goalkeeper, Lafleur, and I know she'd want me back if I could ever get her alone, but that's just it. It's like a good portion of the team hates me for some reason and are standing in my way. Even my former Wolfpack teammate, Kelley, seems to be against me after it looked like she was helping me make connections with the team. What's the deal with Kristie and that hockey player?

Steph: They're together, I guess. Don't like it.

Shelley: They're cute, but I don't see what the connection is. They don't seem particularly compatible. Kristie's a bit of a party girl, right, and Alyssa is straight-laced as they come from what it looks like.

Steph: Yep.

Shelley: Steph and Erin are pretty much inseparable, but I can't let her freakishly normal self have Steph. She deserves so much better, so much more.

Steph: Any ideas on how to get the women we want?

Shelley: I'd say keep trying, but that doesn't look to be working. Care to have lunch tomorrow and we can continue this?

Steph: Aye. Maybe we can come up with a plan to get our women away from the goody-two-shoes that seem to have their nails in them.

Shelley: Hmmmmm. I think you've given me an idea or two.

Shelley said farewell to Steph and departed Rincker to head home.

**********

Ali stopped by Marc's office to get some advice on getting through the upcoming weekend in Green Bay and becoming more accepting of her "status" without letting it turn into a means for people to
use her. The chaplain dug into his bank of acquaintances and brought up someone he knew who one would NEVER suspect of being tied to fame.

Marc: You aren't the only person in the athletic department who has this issue. A friend of mine who coaches here is tied to one of the most successful charities in Wisconsin. Around local sports circles, if her connection to it were known, it would be as much of a millstone on her as it seems your grandfather's legacy is on you.

Ali: How does she handle it, if I may ask?

Marc: By not letting it define her. Her playing career in high school and college had nothing to do with her grandfather's ties to the Bucks or the MACC Fund and her educational path to Cardinal Stritch wasn't part of a generational legacy. Her getting a coaching job at Trinity wasn't because of anything other than her experience leading youth teams and her summer league team, along with her continuing education work in the field. You make your own path with your own accomplishments. How did Corey handle you telling him?

Ali: He told me that he had become smitten with me without knowing it and that it didn't change his opinion of me or the development of our relationship.

Marc: Sounds like a winner. So how do you handle a weekend where your family will be on display and your grandfather's accomplishments will be front-and-center? You accept that you can't hide from it, you put on the brave face and then decompress afterwards, preferably with someone OUTSIDE the circle. Is Corey going to the game with you?

Ali: Not with me, per se, but he'll be there because his parents have the Milwaukee season ticket package.

Marc: Spend whatever down time you can with him. It will return you to a level of normalcy. Ask to meet his parents. Again, another activity where you're doing normal things in the midst of all the pomp and circumstance going on around you.

Ali: Thanks for the advice, Deacon Schmidt.

Marc: You're my goddaughter's sister-in-arms on the lacrosse team. No need for that level of formality with me. It's Marc.

Ali: Ok, Marc. Can I stop in when I get back to debrief if you will?

Marc: Sure. My door is always open.

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Bishop Emerson, after hearing from Marc that the athletic department refused to pay for Danielle's trip to the Division I and Division III College Cups, contacted Business Services to request that a transfer of $800 be made from the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics to the Office of the Chaplain, with the requisite continuing education budget lines for both entities revised to reflect the transfer. Later in the day, Gavin contacted the Bishop about the move.

Gavin: Paul, can you explain why you contacted Business Services to have funds removed from my department and given to the Chaplain's office?

Paul: I was told that you refused to pay for continuing education for one of your coaches despite your department having more than enough funds to handle the request.
Gavin: We're planning to send a good portion of our football coaching staff to the AFCA convention in San Antonio in January. I feel that investing in these educators will lead to a greater return-on-investment to the athletic department than sending one coach to North Carolina to hob-nob with other low-level coaches.

Paul: This isn't a business where the bottom line matters. We here at the Synod are willing to provide the funds to allow your department to fulfill its mission to its athletes, coaches, and staff. Trinity is not Carthage, where you might worry about a drop in student enrollment that could cause belt-tightening. Applications for the Class of 2023 are above that for the current freshman class and special gifts to our office ear-marked for Trinity are at an eight-year high.

Gavin: I still don't get why you didn't contact me first before going through Business Services to requisition the funds.

Paul: We were booking flights and hotel rooms for Marc and two of his student leaders for a wedding in the area and he asked that we be able to get Coach Dillon on the same itinerary as them. Going back-and-forth with you for a day or two would have been detrimental to getting a package deal, thus allowing the four of them higher per diems than normal.

Gavin: Please don't do it again, Paul. Let me run my department how I wish, and tell Marc to keep his nose out of our business aside from his role in adjudicating our athletes' misconduct.

Paul said his goodbyes to Gavin and called Marc with a report of his actions.

Paul: Everything is booked for Raleigh for you, Steph, Erin, and Coach Dillon. Gavin was none too pleased with how I handled it and wanted me to warn you to stay out of the department's business.

Marc: Is this information or a direct order from you?

Paul: If I thought you were doing wrong, I'd say so. Again, you know your stuff and have experience with bigger and smaller programs than Trinity's. He was balking at the expense because he didn't see what the return would be to the program. He also said that he was sending several members of the football coaching staff to San Antonio in January for the AFCA convention.

Marc: He'll throw money at them believing it will do what, make the program more competitive?

Paul: He didn't say, I was planning to press him on the conference thing, but I didn't have knowledge of when or where the equivalent gathering for soccer coaches was.

Marc: It's January 16-20 in Chicago.

Paul: Are you planning to attend?

Marc: Possibly for some of it, but it's the same weekend as the re-scheduled wedding in Orlando is supposed to be, so how it comes together is still in the air. If the wedding is a go, I'm planning to ask Alyssa to join me since she will need to get one under her belt before we do the big one in Philadelphia on Valentine's Day.

Paul: We can discuss those plans another time. I just wanted to let you know that things were taken care of by our office.

Marc: Thanks, Paul.
Steph Lafleur: Dad, did you get the tickets for the Thanksgiving game in Detroit?

Elliott Lafleur: Yes I did. So how are we working that weekend?

Steph: Erin and I are talking about going to Detroit for the Gold Cup final on the 18th. From there, come home for a few days and I'll try to schedule my pastoral interview at Laurier for the 20th. Then the game on the 22nd and dinner with Erin's parents and Marc and Danielle afterwards. The rest of the weekend would be at Erin's in Rockford.

Elliott: Sounds pretty packed, but it also sounds like you've thought it out. Why are you doing the interview so early in the process?

Steph: I'll be home and getting it out of the way means I can apply for candidacy next semester.

Elliott: Always the impatient one.

Steph: I should get going since I have a bit of studying to do before I turn in. Give Mom my love and I'll see you in 10 days or so.


Steph: Love you too, Dad.
A quiet weekend at home for Marc and Danielle belied an important milestone in his life. Sunday marked the two-year anniversary of his being hospitalized for suicidal ideation, depression, and anxiety. On November 11, 2016, Marc left work following a panic attack (his second in ten days) and proceeded to walk from his place of employment on the near south side to the Aurora Psychiatric Hospital in Wauwatosa, where he checked himself in. Through a combination of in-patient and outpatient therapy and medication, he was able to return to work following the holidays that year.

Back on campus on Monday morning, Marc slowly made his way through his email and worked a little bit on Becca and EJ's wedding service. Around 11am, Erin and Steph stopped by with a pair of chocolate chip muffins for the chaplain.

Erin: Danielle told me that yesterday was the two-year anniversary of your hospitalization and we thought you should celebrate it somehow. Consider these your cake. Couldn't find candles to put in them.

Marc chuckled at her, but also was touched by her thoughtfulness. "Thank you, Erin." He gave her a big hug and kissed the top of her head.

Steph: I never had it so bad that my parents thought about checking me into a psych hospital, but there have been times when I felt like I wanted to die so that the scattered thoughts and painful feelings would go away. Meds help me stay sane enough to remain on this earth.

Marc: As you know, some days aren't easy. Today, I've been going through the motions even though I have Holden practice tonight and need to make some progress on modifying Becca and EJ's wedding service.

Erin: I know it pretty well and, if Danielle is there tonight, the two of us can probably run things if you want to head home early or just sit back and watch.

Marc: Thank you. Steph, would you be comfortable taking the Assistant's parts since I would want Alyssa to do the Presider sections?

Steph: I'm pretty sure I can handle it. I guess we should let you know that we won't be at rehearsal next Monday because we'll already be gone for Thanksgiving break. We're going to the Gold Cup final on Sunday, then to my parents after that, then back to Detroit for the Packers/Lions game, with the rest of the weekend at Jim and Val's.

Marc: Sounds like a lot of fun. Are your parents going to be joining us after the game for dinner?

Steph: That's the plan. I thought the parents should meet since Erin and I are, well, sort of committed.

Erin: That will also be when I come out to Mom and Dad. Having you and Danielle along with Steph there should give me enough confidence and support to do it.

Marc: Danielle will be at the Humane Society on Wednesday night. How would the two of you like to come over and watch the Gold Cup semis with me?

Steph: You kidding? Getting to see both the US and Canada clinch their berths to the World Cup is a much better way to spend an evening than writing an essay.

Erin: I'm in, if only because I want to see the two of you go nuts over your player crushes.
Steph: Who do you crush on, Marc?

Marc: On the US, Emily Sonnett, a little bit of Sam Mewis, Alyssa Naeher, Abby Dahlkemper, Christen Press. For Canada, it's DMath, Steph, and Rhi.

Steph: Guess we have something in common, then. I adore my doppelganger, as well as Quinny, Shelina, and a bit of Kailen Sheridan.

Marc: Then that should make for a fun night, like Erin said.

Erin: We're going to head out. See you at 6, then?

Marc: I'll be there. Thanks again for stopping by and for the anniversary cake. Love you both.

Erin: Love you too, Papi.

Steph: What she said, Marc.

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Sarah and Dani came up to campus early so they could have dinner together before Holden practice. While eating in Albrecht, the pair talked about their current love situations.

Dani: Are you and Wil still, um, getting together?

Sarah: Yes. He's my best friend and I know he's like 93% gay, but I can't help wanting him. I only wish it could be more. Having to hear him talk about the luck he's not having on the bar circuit makes me want to shake him and say "Look at me! I'm ready whenever you are to take this further than just bumping uglies."

Dani: Do you think he'll eventually come around, or is that something that probably won't happen?

Sarah: I hope he does. I don't like seeing him hurt over and over by guys who don't get him or who want him to not be any portion bi. I just don't know how to convince him that I can give him the stability and love that he's seeking from a guy.

Dani: Best advice I have is to just lay it out there. Let the idea sit with him. He might not be ready for it today, but if you plant the seed in his mind about the two of you, he could eventually buy into the idea when he realizes how much you love him and to what ends you'll go for him.

Sarah: So, girlfriend, anything new happening in your love life? Namely, do you have one?

Dani: That depends on how you define having one. Am I seeing someone steady? No. Am I in love with someone? Yes. It's complicated. I don't want to get going on a permanent relationship at the moment, I'm only 24. That said, I know who I WANT to be with if it could ever come to pass. Problem is, he's married.

Sarah: Sounds like both of us are chasing guys we can't have for one reason or another. Do you at least get something out of your longing for him other than heartache?

Dani: I know I don't have a whole lot of experience in the bedroom, but I'd say he is the most caring, thoughtful, and good-for-me lover that I've ever known. He loves me and doesn't hesitate to say so or to show me so. I know it's silly to just wait and hope that somehow we can be together, but right now I don't want anything else. In a couple of years, if things haven't opened up for us to get together, I'll probably start looking for someone who will understand what he and I have and can
accept it.

Sarah: Again, sounds like we're both looking for the same thing both from our present and future. By the way, I can't help but say that I think you are beautiful, Danielle. If I wasn't hung up so much on Wil, I'd say let's get together.

Dani: Awwww. Thank you, Sarah. You're quite a catch yourself. I've slightly drooled on you from afar the past few years, but with you going to school in Minnesota and me down here, our paths didn't cross to the point where things could possibly progress. As for getting together, why not? I won't get in the way of you and Wil, and I'm pretty sure you won't object to Marc and I having our thing.

Sarah: Marc, as in the chaplain who no one wants to cross?

Dani: Yes, him. He told me to tell you that he is not nearly as bad-ass in general as he appears to be when dealing with muckety-mucks in university administration. You'll get to see the softer side of him tonight, the part where he's the reassuring mentor who makes you feel like you can accomplish anything because of his belief in you.

Sarah: So you're serious about us sort of biding time with each other while we're waiting for the impossible dream for one or both of us to happen?

Dani: Nothing can be worse than resigning yourself to a life without love because you can't have who you want but don't want to shut that door. So, yes, I'm serious. Let's try it out, at least.

Sarah: OK. Maybe it would be easier for us to bring our guys along the first time we officially go out to feel out the dynamic that we'd have alongside the ones we have with Wil and Marc.

Dani: I'm up for that. We need to get moving since it's 10 to 6.

The two coaches threw away their trash and walked over to Bonhoeffer Chapel, where they were greeted by Alyssa, Steph, and Erin. Marc was watching from a distance as things started, allowing his deputies to oversee rehearsal. As they moved through the service, Marc asked the strongest singers of the group (Emily Sommer and Danielle Schmidt) to adjust the partnerings to better take advantage of certain harmonies and vocal ranges. Matt's mellophone brought a bright sound to the score, one that will be toned-down when he plays the French horn during the actual service. Sam's work on the piano laid a strong foundation for the vocal portions of the service. Near the end of rehearsal, Morgan Andringa stopped by at Julie's request. Once Marc called time on the evening's run-through, Morgan approached him.

Morgan: Deacon Schmidt, can I have a minute of your time?

Marc: Sure, Morgan. What can I do you for?

Morgan: The Trinity Times is planning to publish a weekly feature during Spring semester highlighting who we consider to be the 15 most influential individuals associated with the school, one of which is you. When can we sit down for a half-hour or so and do an interview?

Marc thought through his schedule for the week and told Morgan that Thursday morning was probably the best time for him, which Morgan said would work for her as well. After confirming a time and location for Thursday's meeting, Morgan joined the rest of the Augsburg residents for the short walk back to their dorm. Marc, the two Danielles, and Sarah followed the last of the students out of the chapel, then went to their cars and headed home for the evening.

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Following worship and Lunch Bunch on Wednesday, Marc left campus to get home ahead of the expected throng of students who would be coming to watch the 2018 Women's Gold Cup semi-finals. The Gold Cup, which doubles as World Cup qualifying for CONCACAF (Confederation Of North and Central America and Caribbean Associations of Football), was being played in Detroit at Ford Field. Steph and Erin had gotten tickets for the final, which they were hoping would be the United States and Canada. Dani followed Marc to his place so she could help him with the incidentals and to actually spend time with him before the students arrived. Once they arrived, Marc checked on the crock pots in the kitchen (one held meatballs in barbecue sauce, the other pork shoulder to be shredded for sandwiches) and put two bags of wings into the oven. With the food reasonably handled, he went to get the living room situated and the large-screen TV turned on. Dani brought a Diet Coke and a Pepsi from the kitchen, handing the latter to Marc and sitting down beside him. With around a half-hour before the first of the guests were expected to arrive, the two of them curled up and caught up on the past week.

Marc: We haven't seen much of each other the past week, which is to be expected with you being out-of-season now. Anything new with you?

Dani: Just that Sarah and I have talked about possibly getting together. We both have certain "needs" and understand where they can be solved. We're both hung up on guys that we really can't get for various reasons, but don't want to just wait around for a miracle to happen with one or both of them. I've been attracted to her for a while, and I guess the distance allowed my re-birth to take her by surprise to the point of her calling me beautiful.

Marc: I'm happy for you. You deserve to be happy and I know I'm probably not the one that ultimately can make you so.

Dani nestled into Marc's embrace, as if to say "if you only knew".

Marc: After you sent me the note saying that Gavin turned down your request for College Cup, I contacted Bishop Emerson and gave him a run-down of the purpose of the trip and my knowledge concerning the university's budget and the plethora of budget lines that could be tapped to cover your expenses. He made a couple of calls and sent my office a transfer of $800 from the athletic department, then went ahead and booked you, Steph, and Erin together on my flight to Raleigh, along with rooms at the hotel where the teams and coaches are staying along with the Quinn/Proctor wedding attendees. Suffice it to say, when Gavin found out, he was none too pleased and sort of threatened me to keep my nose out of the department's business matters.

Dani: What's the schedule for our time there?

Marc: We're flying out at 7:05am on the 29th, arriving in Raleigh at 12:15pm, with a layover in Philadelphia. I figured maybe we'd get lucky and run into one or two of the Hearts on our way down. From there, check in at the hotel, grab lunch, and go up to Cary for the afternoon pressers, walk-throughs, and a bit of hob-nobbing before going onto Wilson for the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner. Friday morning, I want to take the girls up to Durham. The games that day in Cary are at 5 and 7:30, while yours in Greensboro I think are 1 and 3:30. Saturday, the three of us will be in Wilson from late morning on and the final in Greensboro is Noon, if I'm not mistaken. The wedding is at 6pm, so you should be able to go back to the hotel, change and all that, and make it down in time for the ceremony. Sunday is the Division I final, set for Noon due to television, of course. We fly out at 5pm, getting back to Milwaukee just before 10, with a layover in Minneapolis. Not long enough of one to sneak out of the airport and go to the Mall of America on the rail, though.

Dani: So we'd be able to have some time together Thursday night after you get back, then on Friday if I want to tag with you three to Durham before going to Greensboro. Friday night after the games
might be another open window, and there's the wedding and reception. Steph and Erin will have each other, so we can sort of be together without it drawing a whole lot of attention.

Marc: I'm really looking forward to tonight, because the first part of this week was a real bummer. Sunday was the two-year anniversary of admitting myself to the psych hospital in Wauwatosa, which made Monday difficult for me to get much accomplished. Erin and Steph brought me muffins from the grab-and-go in Albrecht in lieu of a cake, which I thought was sweet of them.

Dani looked up and pecked Marc on the cheek. "You're still here, and for that I and a whole lot of people are grateful."

Marc went back into the kitchen to check on the food. While he was out there, Steph, Erin, Lindsey, and Emily arrived, with Erin going to the kitchen to take over the preparations. Marc, having been shooed away by Erin, went back into the living room and sat down with the rest of the students. Marc remarked on the various jerseys they wore for the gathering (Steph in a Philadelphia Hearts goalkeeper jersey with Labbe 1 on the back, Lindsey with a PSG jersey, Emily in a Portland Thorns jersey with a 2017 NWSL Championship patch on it, and Dani with an old-school Carla Overbeck US National Team jersey).

Marc: Good taste in gear, Steph!

Steph: I got it just after they were released following Hearts United. I liked the blue-and-green one more than the purple-and-orange one. I'm saving my purple National Team kit for Sunday.

Marc: Lindsey and Emily, I didn't know you were soccer fans as well as lacrosse players.

Emily: Since soccer is a fall sport in Minnesota, I was able to play both soccer and lacrosse in high school.

Marc: Gotta say the two of you chose well for tonight. You two are about as cute as those two.

Lindsey: When I saw them "come out" after the final last year, I was so happy for them and hoped that I'd find someone who could complete me like that Emily does the Great Horan.

Marc: Dani, you might want to bring your jersey with you to College Cup. I'll see if Becca or EJ can get it signed for you since Carla was their assistant coach at Duke.

Dani: You're not kidding, are you?

Steph: I've already learned not to doubt him. If he says he'll do something or that he knows X or Y, believe him.

Dani: I'm well aware of that, Steph. He's introduced me to several of the bigger-name people he knows.

Marc: Now don't go putting me on a pedestal, all of you. Some of y'all have pretty high-up connections as well.

Marc turned up the sound for the ending of the pregame and told the crowd to get their plates made before the teams walked out. While they were in the kitchen getting food, Marc went to answer the door and was greeted by a former player of his.

Marc: Michelle! I haven't seen you in ages. I'd ask how have you been, but your BFF has given me updates since she started at Trinity.
Michelle entered and gave Marc a hug. "Danielle's always been a jabberjaw. It's a great balance to my nervous-around-people vibe."

Marc: Settle in, get yourself some food from the kitchen, and then come out. The walk-out and anthems are in a couple of minutes.

Everyone returned to the living room just as Canada and Haiti were leaving the tunnel. Steph was in sheer awe of seeing her heroes in larger-than-life projection. Erin tried to calm her down, but realized it was of little use. Marc put up the footrest of his recliner and warmed up his voice a little. When the Canadian National Anthem started, both Steph and Marc sung along.

Steph and Marc: O Canada, terre de nos aieux. Ton front est ciento de fleurons glorieux. Car ton bras sait porter l'epee, ils sait porter la croix. Ton histoire est une epopee des plus brillants exploits. God keep our land, glorious and free. O Canada, we stand on guard for thee. O Canada, we stand on guard foooooor theeeeeee.

CAN Lineup: Stephanie Labbe; Ashley Lawrence, Kadeisha Buchanan, Shelina Zadorsky, Allysha Chapman; Desiree Scott; Sophie Schmidt, Diana Matheson, Jessie Fleming; Christine Sinclair (c), Janine Beckie.

Sinclair took the opening kickoff, passing to Beckie, who passed the ball back to Matheson. Her first touch on the ball went to Schmidt who had tucked in ahead of her on the right side. With space on the outside opened up, Lawrence overlapped Schmidt and took her pass to the byline, where she crossed it to Sinclair, who headed the ball past the Haitian goalkeeper. Not 30 seconds into the match and Canada was ahead, 1-0, on the Canadian captain's 179th international goal, moving her six away from breaking Abby Wambach's record for most national team tallies. Marc and Steph high-fived while Michelle was a bit dumbfounded at how quickly the goal was scored. Canada doubled its lead on 26 minutes when, following the awarding of a free kick for an unintentional handball, Fleming crossed the ball into the box where Beckie awaited it and sent a header back across the goalkeeper. The world's 5th-ranked team took their foot off the gas a bit over the final twenty minutes of the half, leaving the score 2-0 after 45 minutes. Haiti came out of the locker room with a bit of extra adrenaline, causing Labbe to make a couple spectacular saves. Nichelle Prince replaced Beckie in the 64th minute and Canada got on the board again nine minutes later, as Prince's reception of a Matheson through pass drew the Haitian netminder. A simple pass from Prince to Sinclair resulted in her 180th international score. Following the score, Canadian head coach John Herdman brought on Sarah Stratigakis for Matheson. Sinclair was removed in the 78th minute for Jordyn Huitema and she found the score sheet four minutes from full-time by re-directing a Stratigakis corner kick. At the final whistle, the Canadians embraced and ran along the perimeter of the field with a Canadian flag.

Marc: Game 1 down. Went as I was expecting. So odd not having Mexico in the semis, but it means that other countries are starting to catch up.

Steph: Shutout for the Bae! So pumped to see her on Sunday.

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Alyssa arrived at Marc's just after the Canada/Haiti match ended. After being filled-in on what she missed, she went to grab some food before returning to the living room.

Alyssa: Everyone ready for a classic beat-down by the US?

Steph: Don't count your chickens just yet, Alyssa.

Erin: More trash talk between the goalkeepers?
Becky Sauerbrunn and Shirley Cruz were in the tunnel ready to lead their teams out onto the field behind the referee crew led by Carole Anne Chenard. Once the CONCACAF anthem began, the referees moved, followed by the players.

USA lineup: Alyssa Naeher; Taylor Smith, Becky Sauerbrunn, Julie Johnston, Casey Short; Lindsey Horan, Sam Mewis, Morgan Brian; Rose Lavelle, Christen Press, Alex Morgan.

The US didn't get off to the quick start of Canada, but still had taken the lead before 15 minutes expired when Press snuck into slightly-open space and one-timed a pass from Brian. In the 39th minute, the US would be ahead two, as Horan deflected a Brian cross into the path of Mewis for a low, hard shot to the goalkeeper's left.

Just after halftime, the US would take a 3-0 lead as Johnston re-directed a Brian corner kick. Costa Rica picked up a goal in the 58th minute by way of a free kick from Raquel Rodriguez. As Costa Rica pushed up for another goal, the Americans jammed the ball down their throats two minutes before stoppage time when Sauerbrunn played a 70-yard pass to the speedy Lynn Williams, who, after drawing the goalkeeper, slid a simple pass to Morgan for a 4-1 lead. The final whistle came on 90 minutes and the US secured their place in the 2019 Women's World Cup.

Danielle returned from the Humane Society a few minutes after the end of the US game and walked in to see Steph, Erin, and Marc tidying up the place after the rest of the guests had departed.

Danielle: Wouldn't have known a party had happened the way this place looks.

Erin: You know I hate messes, so why leave it to Marc and/or you to clean up after us when we can do it before we go.

Danielle gave her slightly-taller goddaughter a hug, which she returned along with a peck on the cheek.

Danielle: Substitute Dad give you any trouble?

Erin: No. Good as gold.

Danielle: Steph, do you confirm that story?

Steph: 100%. The worst thing he did was sing the Canadian National Anthem in French with me.

Danielle: Glad to know his penchant for leering was kept at bay.

Marc came into the living room and was slightly peeved at hearing his wife's accusation of possible inappropriate behavior. Once Steph and Erin left, Marc went into his office to do a little bit of work for his sit-down with Morgan Andringa tomorrow morning.
Right on 10am, Morgan Andringa was at Marc's office to do her interview with him for the Trinity Times.

Morgan: Deacon Schmidt, thank you for meeting with me. As I told you on Monday night, the Trinity Times is running a semester-long series on the school's most influential individuals, one of which is you. For starters, can you tell me how you came to this place and your current job as the school's chaplain?

Marc: I was born a poor black child.....no, seriously. I was born and raised in Milwaukee, going through the Milwaukee Public Schools system before leaving the area to start college in Des Moines, IA. I eventually got a Bachelor of Science in political science from UW-Milwaukee, then Master's degrees in political science from Ball State and sport administration at Western Michigan. As for experience, I worked in student affairs while at Ball State, in campus ministry at Western Michigan, and ran my own urban soccer club in Milwaukee for a number of years. In between all of that was a failed attempt to be rostered by the ELCA as a Diaconal Minister due to unresolved debt from my previous education. After shuttering the soccer club, I started the Greater Milwaukee Synod's Diakonia program, a two-year theological primer to eventually allow graduates to be rostered within the synod for service in churches, schools, or non-profit entities. During that time, I had also been assisting with the Lutheran Campus Ministry at UW-Milwaukee, based in the Corner House. Those connections allowed me to make acquaintance with the synod's new bishop, Rev. Paul Emerson, and Carthage's Board of Trustees chairman, David Strasser. When the synod consecrated me in June, originally I was given a charge to develop a county-wide campus ministry that would cover the smaller private schools like Cardinal Stritch, Mount Mary, Alverno, MSOE, and the like. However, when Carthage's chaplain chose not to relocate to take up the post at Trinity, Bishop Emerson asked me if I was interested in taking it as an interim, with the plan being to hire someone in time for the 2019-2020 academic year.

Morgan: We have seen a LOT of activity from this office in the first four months of your tenure. I will presume that you have a mandate from the synod and Bishop Emerson that falls in line with what has happened. Are you able to share that with me?

Marc: In short, the mandate I have been given by Paul is to use my multi-faceted education and experience to steer Trinity into becoming a 21st century ELCA university. As the first college or university to be founded under the ELCA label, Bishop Emerson saw it as his vision to leverage all that the denomination had accomplished in its 30 years of existence to enshrine its advances into the mission and founding documents of this institution. That is why the two big things we tackled at the start were revising the school's Code of Student Conduct, to bring it in line with what the ELCA had passed over the past decade in the area of interpersonal relationships, and updating our candidacy process, both to take advantage of Concordia's existing infrastructure and to repeal the school's ban on women in the Pre-Seminary Studies program, as the ELCA and its predecessor denominations have ordained women for more than 45 years. On November 2nd, both of these accomplishments came to pass as a result of votes by the school's Board of Trustees. The following Monday, the Pre-Seminary program officially admitted its first woman, sophomore Alyssa Norman.

Morgan: On October 27th, the ELCA through Bishop Emerson elevated you from Synodical Deacon to Churchwide Diaconal Minister. What is the difference between the two designations?

Marc: A Synodical Deacon is rostered within a specific geographic area and is only able to operate as one within that area. Diaconal Ministers are part of the Churchwide roster, eligible to be called to
any post within the denomination for which they are qualified. As for education, as I mentioned earlier, the synod-level program is a two-year primer of five-week courses that gives deacons an overview of ministry and theological study. Diagonal Ministers must complete a two-year graduate-level degree through one of the ELCA seminaries or one of a denomination in full communion with the ELCA. Synodical Deacons work at the pleasure of a specific parish pastor or denominational agency, with rights and duties tied to the location. Diagonal Ministers receive a time-defined call to a position within the church, and their rights and duties are not location-specific. Personally, as a synodical deacon, I was able to lead worship here at Trinity as well as being given dispensation to perform sacraments "in place". If I wanted to marry a couple outside the synod, I needed permission from both my bishop and the bishop of the synod in which the wedding would take place, as was the case on October 20th when I married a couple in Kansas City. As a diagonal minister, I can marry couples anywhere without needing prior approval and I am able to perform sacraments outside the walls of Trinity so long as it's done within my role as the university chaplain. I am also eligible to compete against ordained clergy for open positions within the denomination.

Morgan: There is a growing concern from certain corners of the university that you "don't play well with others." Is that true?

Marc: It's not true, and it's never really been true. Sure, I look like I always have a bit of a scowl and operate as somewhat of a lone wolf, but those attributes are more in line with my mental illness than with being a PITA. Let me ask you: If I was such a hard person to work with, would the SGA and Board of Trustees been able to come to an agreement on the new Code of Student Conduct?

Morgan: If they were facing down the barrel of a gun known as the Bishop's Fiat, yes.

Marc: See, only one side of that battle was facing it. The students had already voted to let us substitute the ELCA’s Social Statements for the existing code while they worked on the revisions. It was the Board of Trustees that were seeking to be an obstruction to progress, as the vote on the 2nd laid out.

Morgan: Well, your display before the vote probably didn't go over well.

Marc: With who? The students? The faculty? The synod? No. The only ones who may have taken offense to it were certain members of the Board who have been obstinate on the subject of letting grown adults test their limits within the four walls of the institution rather than wander off-campus to do so and therefore engage in riskier behavior.

Morgan: Moving on. Another role you have at Trinity is that of adjudicator for the athletic department's cases of misconduct. How did that responsibility come to your position?

Marc: My experience with intercollegiate athletics and student affairs at institutions bigger and smaller than Trinity gave me a bank of knowledge as to the need for independence in dealing with cases involving student-athletes. Asking people within the athletic department to do so creates a conflict of interest, and having student affairs do it is neither efficient, due to their own backlog of cases, nor appropriate, as the range of sanctions they could employ wouldn't effectively be meaningful.

Morgan: Have you had any cases to date?

Marc: That is privileged information which I can't divulge.

Morgan: Let's say we are sitting here on June 1st, following your first year in this position. What would your office be able to point to as accomplishments from that time?
Marc: The Code of Student Conduct, the inclusion of women in Pre-Seminary Studies, the birth of "rites in place" which will begin on December 9th with our Christmas Eve service, a newly-developed peer ministry program that will allow students to use their gifts in service to others, and getting all of our first-year students into candidacy.

Morgan wrapped up the interview, then thanked Marc again for his time before leaving his office.

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Kelley and Lauren stopped by Alyssa's room to see if she wanted to join them for an off-campus excursion to Fiddleheads. Before knocking, they heard a couple of voices inside the room, neither of which were her.

Carli Lowe: What are your assignments for this weekend, Lexi?

Lexi Millen: I have visits at 10, 12, and 2 tomorrow and 11 on Saturday. You?

Carli: 9, 12, 3, and 4 on Saturday. Luckily, I have tomorrow night off.

Lexi: Ever worried someone will find out?

Carli: Alyssa has hockey for the next few months, which means she'll be away about half the weekends. Parents are far enough away that I'm pretty free to move about and not say anything to them about where I am when I'm not here.

Lexi: I haven't been THAT lucky. When I was home for fall break, Sara sent me a message about the following weekend's activities and I had to make up a lie about what she was referring to since my mom caught part of the message. Told her it was the times of campus tours for potential freshmen soccer players. I'm a little concerned that I'll slip up or that Sara will send me something more telling at a time when I have them nearby.

Carli: The reward we get is worth the risk. Gavin has our academic schedules structured so we can stay eligible and work the crazy weekend hours we do. The money we get is outstanding compared to other off-campus jobs. Sara loves us because we're willing to do anything for the good of the department and the team. All we have to do is play nice for some of the school's benefactors and alumni and we'll walk away from here after graduation debt-free with a valuable degree and references that should allow us to land above-entry-level jobs in our fields.

Lexi: Thanks for the talk. I feel a lot better about how I'll get through Thanksgiving break without my secret life being found out.

With footsteps nearing the door, Lauren and Kelley hightailed it down the hall and back to their room several seconds before Lexi passed it.

Kelley: What the HELL was that all about?

Lauren: I guess Carli and Lexi have some kind of secret they're keeping from others here. Also sounds like the AD and their coach know about it, but are sort of in on it.

Kelley: What could it be? Money under the table from them?

Lauren: It sounded like it was a lot more than just money. Like they have some special package from the school where if they do X, Y, and Z, they will get a certain amount of income, academic help, and professional guidance for after graduation.
Kelley: If it's just that, why would they be so nervous about it getting out?

Lauren: Again, could be that the athletic department isn't allowed to do that, or it could be something else. Either way, it's none of our business. If they get their program into trouble, that's on them.

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On Saturday, Marc gave the invocation at the TLU Wrestling Invitational, the start of the Thunder's home season. Following a comfortable afternoon at home with Danielle, she left to go play with the Greater Milwaukee Fire and Police Pipes and Drums at the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight homecoming at Mitchell International Field. With her gone, Marc was able to join Dani, Sarah, and Wil for dinner at Caradaro Club, a few blocks from his house. Once their order was taken, the four began sizing one another up as it related to their baes and potential baes.

Sarah: Dani tells me that you're not as big of a bad-ass in general as you seemed in front of the Board of Trustees a couple of weeks ago.

Marc: I don't know where people get the idea that I'm a difficult person to get along with. You do what I want done and everything is fine.

Sarah: Case in point.

Marc: Actually, I am MUCH more a prodder of compromise than a benevolent dictator. I only use the stern approach when one side or the other decides to dig in unnecessarily.

Dani: Wil, how is the gig at Dewey going?

Wil Trainor: It's interesting. The internship has helped me become more aware of the variety of mental illnesses and how treatment isn't as much a straight line and much more a spiral where you'll go up for a while and then spin back down for a bit before making your next improvement.

Marc: Dewey as in the Dewey Center in Tosa?

Wil: Yes. You know of it?

Marc: My therapist is housed there and I spent a few weeks in IOP there after PHP a couple of years ago.

Wil: How often are you at the complex?

Marc: Every two to three weeks, depending on what her schedule is like.

Wil: If you're comfortable saying so, what do you have?

Marc: Anxiety and depression as symptoms of NPD.

Wil: Well, that would explain why people think you're hell on wheels at times.

Sarah: NPD?

Wil: Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

Sarah: I can see it. Arrogant, self-righteous, demanding for attention/praise/love.

Dani: That's not the Marc I know.
Marc: The club was one big ego game for me, meant to shove it in the face of clubs like the one you came up through, Deuce. I expected perfection from myself and from everyone around me, and I was such a workaholic in managing it.

Dani: Come to think of it, you were always in sort of a mood at the games, like you needed us to play hard and win in order to feel good about yourself and what you had put together, and even when we'd win it wouldn't necessarily be enough.

Marc: Pretty much. Now that I'm in a job that I love and am on the meds, I don't have those urges. The one I do have is to find that 15% or so that is missing with Danielle, and I think I've found that with a certain someone.

Sarah and Wil: Awwww.

Dani leaned over and pecked Marc on the cheek. "See why I love him."

Marc: So tell me about the two of you. Dani said that you're best friends, but you don't swing the same way.

Wil: That isn't EXACTLY true. We're both sort-of bi. She swings more both directions, whereas I only swing for her.

Marc: Also heard it's been hard on you because most of the guys out there aren't accepting of that.

Wil: Yeah, it's been a bit difficult.

Sarah placed her hand over Wil's and squeezed it lightly.

Sarah (to Marc): Dani tells me you and her are going to North Carolina in a couple of weeks. How are you getting that past Danielle and your bishop?

Marc: Very easily. She's going for work, as am I. I'm doing a wedding there and she's going to the Division III College Cup. Legitimate purposes for both of us. I also have two of my future peer ministers going as well at the request of Bishop Emerson. I HAVE invited Dani to be my +1 for the wedding since the two students are a couple. Speaking of that, have you picked an outfit yet for that night?

Dani: Yes, and I guarantee you will be floored when you see it.

Sarah: Is it the forest...

Dani: Yes, with the t-strap criss-cross open backs.

Sarah: Oooooo....you ARE going to knock him out with that. It's hot in a very womanly way. A look that he probably hasn't seen on you before.

Dani: Definitely not.

Marc took a moment to envision what Dani had described and a small part of him melted. He looked at her and smiled, then turned his eyes to the bill. After paying it, the four of them left the restaurant. Sarah and Wil decided to go down to Cathedral Square to look at the Holiday Lights display. Meanwhile, Marc and Dani walked down Vliet to Fred's Drive-In for dessert, then walked back to his house, talking along the way.

Marc: Wondering if I should tell you this, because some women don't like hearing their beaus talk
about other women and their problems with them.

Dani: Marc, I know you're married, and I know you're unhappy to some extent with your marriage. Tell me what's going on, dear.

Marc: After you left on Wednesday night, Steph, Erin, and I were cleaning up the place to get it back to normal. Danielle came home and, with me in the kitchen out of sight, asked both of them if I had been a good boy while she was gone. They answered affirmatively, even to the point of Steph saying that my only fault on the night was trying to sing the Canadian National Anthem in French with her. Danielle then responded, "Good to hear that his penchant for leering was kept at bay." I was so pissed-off at her, I went to my home office until I knew she was asleep, then proceeded to bed. The next morning, I got up early and left for campus before she woke up. That's why I called you and wondered about getting together tonight while she would be at the airport.

Dani reached over and took Marc's hand in hers. "I shouldn't register an opinion on what happened, but that seems pretty low, to tell them that you have an issue with looking at other women."

Marc: I know. She is trying to tell me not to do things that aren't exactly within my control. I can't control the observations or what I feel when I observe, but I CAN control how or if I act upon those feelings.

Dani: I know that I do something to you and for you, Marc, and I love doing it. I also love what you do to me. I'm able to play to my softer side now with you rather than just the hot-and-bothered version of myself that you saw a month or two ago. You're fast taking up space in my heart that I would not want anyone else to occupy.

Marc and Dani stopped on the sidewalk and looked into one another's eyes. He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it gently. "When we're together, I feel free. I feel alive. I feel like I don't have to hide who I am or what I want to be, because you accept me, warts and all. You're not looking to change me, or "improve" me, or contort me to some pre-determined version of the perfect man. Yesterday, for the first time in a LONG time, I allowed myself to think about life beyond my marriage to Danielle. In fact, I thought about life with you in that space. In two weeks, we'll see if there are actual legs to that idea or not."

The pair finished their walk hand-in-hand. When they got back to his place, Marc walked Dani to her car and gave her a goodnight kiss and hug, which she returned. They looked at each other again and left it at that.
Steph and Erin’s week-long adventure in Michigan and Ontario began in Detroit with the third-place and championship matches of the 2018 CONCACAF Women's Championship. Canada and the United States would play in the final, while the opener pitted Haiti against Costa Rica to determine the third team from the region to qualify for the 2019 Women's World Cup in France, with the loser playing Venezuela in a two-leg playoff for the final spot in the field.

With Haiti ahead, 1-0, at the half, Steph went to the concession stand to get Erin and herself some food before the second half kick-off. While standing in line, she noticed the woman standing in front of her wearing a Quinn 5 Canada jersey. Curious, she tapped her on the shoulder and inquired.

Steph: Excuse me, but I'm guessing you're a Canada fan like myself.

Linda Quinn: Yes. My daughter plays for the National Team and is supposed to be getting the start tonight against the US. Linda.

Steph: Steph.

Linda: Labbe fan, I'm guessing.

Steph: That obvious?

Linda: Only the keepers wear purple, and you look a bit like her.

Steph: Yeah. Also have a bit of a thing for your future daughter-in-law.

Linda: Can't believe how close we are to the wedding. 13 days from now, Becca and EJ will be married.

Steph: I'm sure it will be a beautiful day to mirror their relationship.

Linda: You a soccer player?

Steph: Lacrosse, and yes I'm a goalkeeper.

Linda: Get that a lot, I take it.

Steph: Yeah. Between me and my friend Alyssa who plays for our school's hockey team, we get a LOT of the "you have to be a goalkeeper, you're built like a tank and could probably lift me over your head one-handed". At least EJ is a little on the smaller side, so she isn't prone to as much of that as Steph or Sammy Jo.

Linda: Sounds like you follow the Hearts.

Steph: I do. Great first season in the league for them. Hoping they do better next year now that the big rookie class has a year under them.

Linda: Where do you go to school?

Steph: Trinity Lutheran University, outside Milwaukee, but I'm originally from Kitchener.

Linda: They related at all with Wilfrid Laurier in Waterloo?
Steph: Not exactly, but they're both of the same ilk. My dad is the LGBT coordinator at WLU and I didn't want to stay at home for school.

Linda: Nice to meet you, Steph, and I hope you enjoy the rest of this game. Maybe Kathy, EJ, and I will come find you between games.

Steph: Sweet. Pleased to meet you as well and congratulate the two of them for me.

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Haiti played a very defensive second half, willing to put ten players behind the ball in an effort to pull the upset and avoid the inter-continental playoff. Costa Rica's duo of Raquel Rodriguez and Shirley Cruz couldn't get free often enough from the jam-packed midfield defense of their opponents and, as time began to run out, pushed forward in search of an equalizer. In the third minute of stoppage time, a corner kick from Cruz was corralled by the Haitian goalkeeper, who quickly flung the ball out to the right flank before the Costa Ricans could get back on defense, leaving Nerilla Mondesir to tear down the sideline. Instead of cutting in on the goalkeeper, she continued to the corner flag and held it there waiting for the referee to blow the whistle to end the match, which would come just after Rodriguez made contact with Mondesir. The Haitian bench players flocked to their penalty area to celebrate their first-ever World Cup qualification with their 33-year-old goalkeeper, Ednie Limage. The victorious team took a lap around Ford Field before heading into the tunnel to return to their locker room. Before the US and Canada squads took the field, the Proctors and Linda Quinn came over to where Steph and Erin were sitting.

Linda (to Kathy and EJ Proctor): This is the goalkeeper I was telling you about. Steph, meet Kathy and EJ Proctor.

Steph stood up and shook hands with the two women. "EJ, I am a huge fan of yours. You were amazing at Duke and really took the reins in Philly while the other two were banged-up."

EJ: Thank you, Steph. I see you're also a fan of my role model, mentor, and all-around big sister, Steph Labbe.

Steph: Guess we have something in common as I consider her to be my role model as both a goalkeeper and as an out gay woman.

Kathy: Is the woman with you your girlfriend?

Steph: Yes. Erin Matheson, these are Kathy and EJ Proctor and Linda Quinn, Becca's mom.

Erin shook hands with all three of them. "Pleased to meet you ahead of the wedding. Marc is so excited about performing it and we feel fortunate that the bishop is choosing to send us along."

Kathy: Wait a minute....you wouldn't be the Erin that he always praises on social media, would you?

Erin: Pretty sure I am. Papi loves to toot his horn about me like he was my own dad.

Kathy: Wow. You said you were coming to the wedding?

Erin: Yes. Bishop Emerson wants Marc to have company on this trip, so that's my role. Steph is getting a primer on how weddings work from the other side of the altar since she is seeking to become a rostered leader in either the ELCIC or ELCA.

Linda: Do the two of you want to join us over with the Canadian families?
Steph: You're joking, right?

Linda: Nope. You're part of the crew that will make our two families one big one in two weeks, so the least we can do is let you hang and cheer with us today.

Steph and Erin followed the three of them over to the Canadian cheering section, where Kathy and Linda introduced them to Clare Herdman, Ali Krieger, Diana Matheson's sister Kathryn, and Becca's sister Jillian.

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In the tunnel, the two starting XIs were lined up, with Becky Sauerbrunn and Christine Sinclair at the head of each line, followed by Alyssa Naeher and Steph Labbe. The referee crew led by Honduran Melissa Borjas Pastrana led the teams out onto the field for introductions and the national anthems.

Terry Braverman (Ford Field PA announcer): Welcome to Ford Field for the final of the 2018 CONCACAF Women's Championship, presented by ScotiaBank. And now, the starting lineups, first for Canada. The captain, number 12, Christine Sinclair. In goal, number 1, Stephanie Labbe.

Steph, EJ, and Ali all roar at the announcement of their girl.


EJ: My bae.


Steph: Go get 'em, ladies!


Crowd: USA! USA! USA! USA!

Braverman: We ask that you all rise, gentlemen please remove your caps, for the playing of the Canadian and American national anthems.

The crowd stood and either remained silent or sung along with one or both national anthems. Steph knew the words to both and Erin had picked up the English ones for "O Canada" from her after the semifinal games on Wednesday.

The two teams exchanged handshakes with the referee, her assistants, and one another. They then took the customary first XI pictures before heading off the field to the sidelines for a last bit of inspiration.

[John Herdman]: One year ago, we took this team down in Vancouver. Tonight, we can do it again. Play your hearts out and leave it all on the field. The first part of the deal is done, us clinching the trip to France. Now we go for the seed.

{Laura Harvey}: The last time we played this team, the match was messy and a number of our players had to be held out due to violent threats against their well-being. Tonight, we show why we're still the number 1 team in the world and in this region.
The US kicked off and began pressing the ball down the semi-empty flanks left by the Canadians' pinched-in 4-1-3-2 formation. A cross from O'Hara zoomed past Press and went out-of-bounds. Kelly's throw-in was picked up by Schmidt, whose pass to Scott was moved onto Fleming. Her pass to Sinclair in the center circle was dropped back to Matheson, who used the US' high back line to thread a pass between Sullivan and Dahlkemper which Fleming latched onto. Her cross found Beckie at the near post, but her shot was parried away by Naeher, then cleared out by Sauerbrunn. An attempt down the left side of the park through Horan was tick-tacked from her to Press to Morgan, whose cross from the left skipped past Press and was shanked out by O'Hara for a goal kick. Labbe put the ball back in play with a pass to Kelly, who moved it onto Scott and then the ball went to Chapman, who put it across to Zadorsky, then to Quinn, to Scott, up to Matheson who took on Johnston on the dribble before passing it out to Schmidt. Her early cross into the box was deflected out by Gibbons for a throw-in. Schmidt threw it down the line where Kelly had overlapped her. The cross from her landed in Naeher's arms. Her throw-out to Sullivan was mishandled, allowing Fleming to snag the ball and run unimpeded at Dahlkemper. Her shot was pushed away from the net by Naeher, but Sinclair beat Sauerbrunn to the ball and poked it into the net for the 181st goal of her international career.

Steph: HECK YEAH, SINCY!

Jillian and her mom hugged, as did Ali and EJ. Steph high-fived Clare, Kathy, and Kathryn before making a slight mess of Erin's hair. The remainder of the half was a game of cat-and-mouse with the Canadians slightly withdrawn as they sought to get to the locker room ahead after 45. Borjas Pastrana blew for intermission after two minutes of stoppage time.

EJ (to Erin): What is your schedule for College Cup weekend, then?

Erin: Marc hasn't gone over it too much with us. He's done more of it with our travel companion, one of the assistant coaches at the school who is going to the Division III College Cup in Greensboro, so they could coordinate travel for her from Raleigh to Greensboro on Friday and Saturday. I think he and Danielle will want to go up to Cary for a part of Media Day provided we have time before the rehearsal.

EJ: Becca and I are planning to be up there for a chunk of it.

Kathy (to Erin): Danielle as in his wife?

Steph: No. The assistant women's soccer coach at Trinity, who will be going to the D-III semis and final in Greensboro over the weekend.

The second half started off with Morgan moving centrally and O'Hara sliding back to right midfield and Gibbons punch up on the left as the US switched into a 3-4-1-2 set. The change produced a lot more defensive control for them against the Canadian's foursome of Schmidt, Matheson, Scott, and Fleming. A free kick by Horan rattled off the crossbar and over the net. A few minutes later, substitute Lynn Williams turned Chapman inside-out before delivering a strong cross to Press who scuffed the opportunity. On 65 minutes, Herdman brought out Matheson and sent on Sarah Stratigakis, followed by Deanne Rose replacing Beckie. The fresh legs were able to get an advantage on O'Hara and Sauerbrunn, resulting in Rose being tripped up by Mewis in the box. Sinclair walked up to the penalty spot to take the kick and placed it low and hard past the reach of Naeher on her left. Herdman used his last substitute to bring on Jordyn Huitema in place of Sinclair, who left to a hero's applause from the Canadian contingent. Harvey, with her team down two, threw the dice and brought in Mallory Pugh and Rose Lavelle for Alex Morgan and Christen Press, moving Williams to the center of their three-player front line and pushing Sullivan up from defense to replace her on the
right side of midfield. Time was ticking off the clock and the US couldn't seem to make headway against a tightly-packed Canadian 4-4-2. Following four added minutes, Borjas Pastrana blew her whistle to end the match and give Canada the 2018 CONCACAF Women's Championship.

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Steph went down to the railing to try and get autographs from her idols and fellow Canadians. Erin hung back with EJ, Ali, and Jillian, while Clare, Kathryn, Kathy, and Linda remained up in their section of the stands.

Steph Lafleur: Great game, Steph!

Steph Labbe: Thanks! Want me to place my Justin Trudeau somewhere on that kit of yours?

Steph Lafleur: Across the 1 on the back?

Steph Labbe: Turn around and I'll put it right down the center.

The younger Steph turned around so that the older one could sign her jersey. She then passed the pen onto Kailen Sheridan and Sabrina D'Angelo to add their autographs. The freshman went back up to where Erin and the rest were standing, then followed them to the edge of the tunnel where EJ and Jillian leaned over and embraced Becca and Ali and Steph exchanged kisses. EJ quickly introduced Erin and Steph to Becca and mentioned their relationship to Marc. Becca shook hands with them and told them to wait for her to get her stuff and take care of her business in the locker room because she wanted to talk to them before they left.

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Becca: So you know Marc?

Erin: He's our chaplain at Trinity Lutheran University and he's also my godfather.

Becca: Gotta believe you then since you're not going to make up info like that. EJ said that you two were coming with him to Carolina for the wedding weekend.

Steph: Yes. Our bishop wants me to get some experience with seeing how weddings operate from the officiating side, and he wants Erin along to keep Marc from getting into trouble, so to speak. It's also a crash course in wedding management since we're all going to be in Philly for the Valentine's Day weddings involving some of your teammates.

EJ: I've seen what the general service looks like, but I was wondering if we could add some personal touches to it. Our wedding party is somewhat unorthodox. My brother is in it, along with her twin sister, then two female couples, and another couple where we played with one of them and Becca had classes with the other along with that aforementioned player. We haven't chosen a specific order for who is in what spot because of that, since we want the couples to stay together during the processional/recessional. Can you pass that part along to him along with some of our music choices? This way, when we possibly meet up in Cary during Media Day, it's a quick run-through on paper before we all go to Wilson for the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner.

Erin: I'll take it up with him since I tend to have more influence over his amenability than anyone else on campus or in the synod office.

Becca: Thanks.

The four women exchanged contact information so they could stay in touch as things came together
in advance of the day.
Marc's Monday was relatively tame. No big crises came across his desk and since Erin and Steph are away for the week, there weren't any surprise visits from the pair of them. Around 3pm, he sent Steph a good-luck message ahead of her interview tomorrow with the campus pastor at Wilfrid Laurier and asked if she had any last-minute questions for him.

StephLafleur: How open should I be about my sexuality or orientation?

DeaconMarc: Own it. They can't stop you from entrance based on it. You might get pointed questions about it if he knows about your past, but you can say that you're under psych and pastoral care at TLU concerning those issues. The worst he can do is recommend that we postpone entrance to candidacy. I don't know what the ELCIC's position on sexuality is relative to ours (more open, less open) or when you can start the process there, so I'm not sure how much being completely open can hurt you.

StephLafleur: I'll find out tomorrow on both ends. The three-for-all might raise a flag if I say something about it, but I don't think telling him that Erin and I are a couple should be a problem, especially if I mention her connection to you. I also plan to play you up and the opportunities I am getting under your leadership. Give everyone my best and have a kick-ass practice tonight. Erin says hi and that she can't wait to see you on Thursday when she plans to tell Jim and Val about herself and us.

DeaconMarc: Tell her that I'm proud of her and that if she needs a pep talk between now and then, give me a holler. Love the both of you and I'll see you on Thursday.

StephLafleur: Love you too, Marc.

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Rehearsal tonight in Bonhoeffer perfected some of the parts in Holden while allowing Emily and Christen to show their handle of the Annunciation in Steph and Erin's absence. Alyssa gave a strong performance on the spoken parts of the service and she and Marc began hashing out a two-way conversation on the meaning of Christmas and how one moves over time from recognizing the gifts they receive from loved ones to recognizing The Gift that was given on that special night in a stable in Bethlehem, the premise of their joint homily for the service. When the night's run-through wrapped up, Alyssa asked Marc if she could talk to him for a bit. The pair took seats in two of the pews and talked about the situation on her mind.

Marc: What's on your mind, Alyssa?

Alyssa: I'm thinking forward to my eventual pre-candidacy interview and am wondering if I have to do it with my parish pastor.

Marc: It's not required that it be done with the pastor of your home congregation, and there are a handful of reasons for the synod to give a person a waiver from that. The most obvious ones are distance from said congregation and recency of faith, where he or she might not have grown up in a church but came to their call at a later date. Why would you be seeking a waiver?

Alyssa: He and I have a little bit of history that makes me believe that he will not be an impartial judge of my ability or character. I didn't get much of a chance to use my skills at the church between confirmation and coming to Concordia. Additionally, he was sort of irked that I came here with the
intent to circumvent the school's rules, mainly because he doesn't believe that women should be in the pulpit due to their reliance on grace and reluctance to break out law when it is necessary.

Marc: That would be grounds for a waiver. If you want to make the request, drop me an email and I can run it through to Matt Sherman, Bishop Emerson's assistant that oversees the candidacy process. I can also recommend to him who you might want to have do it.

Alyssa: Can I have Rachel Belding do it?

Marc: That's probably a good choice. I could also recommend Matt's wife Jessica, who you know as well, right?

Alyssa: I guess I didn't realize the two of them were married.

Marc: I have others I can recommend as well, but I'd go with one of the two female campus pastors that you're already familiar with.

Alyssa: I'll drop you a note once I get back to my dorm. Thanks for your help.

Marc, Alyssa, both Danielles, and Sarah exited the chapel. While walking toward the parking garage, they were seen by Carli Lowe, who got suspicious when she saw her roommate, one of her coaches, and the athletic department's version of Roy Bean all together. She texted Lexi Millen asking to get together before they both left campus for Thanksgiving break.

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Carli: I think we need to be a little bit more protective of our off-campus affairs, Lexi. While walking back to my room last night, I saw Alyssa, Dani, and Deacon Schmidt together leaving Bonhoeffer Chapel. I know that Alyssa went to both Dani and the chaplain about my keeping of odd hours on the weekends and my condition following some of the all-night sessions at the Baymont. We both got a bit lucky on Saturday night not to get caught up in the sting.

Lexi: How many did they get?

Carli: They got four for minor-in-possession, two for possession-with-intent, and a couple for solicitation. Luckily, most of our "appointments" are run through Sara, so there is no cash exchange happening on-site.

Lexi: Any suggestions on how to keep all of this hushed-up?

Carli: One would be to have a specific cell phone that you use for business. That way, you don't have anything on your normal phone that can be picked up by your parents or other inquiring minds. Another idea would be to disguise the names of your callers. If Sara sends us messages from her school cell, perhaps having it listed under something other than her name will fend off detection. Separate bank account for the business transactions or requesting EBT between the athletic department's account and our student accounts so the money isn't easily traceable.

Lexi: When do you get back to campus on Sunday?

Carli: Plans are to be back sometime around 8pm and I'm not working at all over the weekend. Let the winter athletes who have to be here deal with it for a couple of days. You?

Lexi: More like mid-afternoon, if only to get away from the family. Is Brian coming back from Fort Wayne for the holiday?
Carli: Yes, which is why I'm not coming back to campus until later and why I'm not picking up any shifts Friday or Saturday night. He knows I have some kind of a deal with Gavin and Sara, but hasn't inquired as to what it is. With him gone most of the time, I can keep him in the dark on what I'm actually doing.

Lexi: Any other advice?

Carli: Be vigilant about your privacy and being watched. The whole department could be in some serious trouble if anything leaked about the side business they're doing, and I KNOW that Gavin and Deacon Schmidt are not on the friendliest of terms due to perceived interference by one in the other's affairs.

Lexi: Gotcha.

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The Trinity campus was fairly dead when Marc arrived on Wednesday morning. A large portion of the students left Tuesday evening, with those still around either locals or ones who needed to attend their Wednesday classes due to an exam or assignment submission. This led the chaplain to come up with a creative idea for the day's noon service. Since this would be the last service before Advent started, Marc chose to speak on the impending birth and put a 20th-century spin on Mary and Joseph finding out about it.

Marc: Next week starts Advent, which is a season of anticipation for the birth of Jesus. We are treated to carols and stories about his parents finding out that they were expecting, but I find them to be a little too tame for my liking. In 4 B.C., when the event occurred, the most dramatic part was Joseph re-considering his desire to marry Mary. He was told to press on and take Mary as his wife, because the child was not the product of adultery but was part of a greater plan and brought from Heaven to execute it. Now, were this to have happened 2000 years later, you might see the father act something like what you're about to see.

Marc started the video projector and the first thing on the screen was a scene from Maury where he was reading off the results of a lie detector test. The next scene was a pregnancy announcement he found on YouTube where the expectant father kept asking, "Are you serious?!?!". The final clip was the theatrical trailer from "Nine Months".

Marc: A few weeks ago, I showed a scene from "City Slickers" where one of the characters was expressing concern over his wife looking to have kids because, like Simon in "Nine Months", it would mean he'd have to "grow up" and leave behind the fantasy of eating from the Kellogg's variety pack. Nothing in life snaps a guy's head around so quickly or can be so detrimental to a relationship as the creation of new life. Coincidentally, it is also one of the top criteria women desire in a future partner, the ability to be a good parent. Joseph had no clue what he was getting into as the on-earth male parent of our Savior, but he trusted God that he would be shown how to be a father. His faith allowed him to take the risk of public humiliation and retribution over first the marriage of himself to a pregnant woman, and then the eventual raising of a child that was not his and for whom he bore no responsibility. What caused him to take this on? His love for Mary. See, we come back to the theme that has been woven through all of my homilies this semester, that love is the only emotion that can overcome hate, bitterness, fear, sorrow, anxiety, loneliness, and doubt. In a matter of hours, we all will be elsewhere with family, friends, and other loved ones celebrating Thanksgiving. You might not get along with some of them, you might have good reason to avoid them, but try to lean in a little and find something positive in that individual that shows his or her capacity to love and to be loved. Amen.

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Emily (to Marc): You are seriously funnier than Erin, maybe even funnier than me.

Marc: Thank you, I think.

Lindsey: Any other tricks up your sleeve for the last couple of weeks this semester?

Marc: You know I can't give away ALL my surprises, but I'm working on how to tie-in the various types of relationships that show up in "Necessary Roughness" to a message of looking beyond the surface features of a person to get at the inherent goodness and lovelableness of him or her.

Dani: How do you plan to do that?

Marc: Start with Paul the middle-aged quarterback and his journalism professor. They are contemporaries whose lives crossed at one point in their teens, then diverged until they were reunited at Texas State on opposite sides of the student/teacher relationship. She went beyond seeing him as a student who seemed at the outset in over his head returning to college in his early 40s to find the nugget that existed in her mind and heart from 25 years previous. Another one is Manu Manu the Slender and the team's placekicker. He was a gentleman at the outset, but in his mind she was out of his league. When she had gotten bowled-over against Kansas, he was ready to tear the player's head off. Her ability to defend herself via a swift kick to the juevos solved the problem, but his willingness to stand up for her was not forgotten, as we saw at the end of the final game when she expressed her appreciation for him and caused him to faint on the football field.

Corey: Very, very clever.

Dani: Planning anything like that for your message at Becca and EJ's wedding next weekend?

Marc: I don't think so, because there are so many positive tidbits about their relationship that I'm going to have trouble cutting it down to something that will keep those attending interested. Now, I AM going to touch on Becca's small shift to the right of the spectrum just before her senior season at Duke and how it had little or no effect on their relationship, within the confines of how two people can either grow together or grow apart, and it's a fine line between the two options.

Emily: The two of them play with our doppelgangers in Philly. What I'd give to just rub elbows with them for a few seconds.

Marc: Steph and Erin were at the Gold Cup final on Sunday and apparently Steph ran into Becca's mom at the concession stand. Long story short, the two of them ended up sitting with the Canadian family contingent for the US/Canada match, which included Ali Krieger and EJ and her mom.

Lindsey: I'm going to have to pepper them when they get back to campus about their experience. Any other big-time weddings that you're doing in the near future?

Marc: The re-scheduled Morgan/Harris one is over MLK weekend, that is if Alex can finally get Serv to settle and give her the divorce in time. Then there is a four-couple one in Philadelphia on Valentine's Day, but the possibility is for it to grow by the time I get back from Raleigh since most of the Hearts couples will be at the wedding, I'm presuming.

Lindsey: Cooooool. How do you get these kind of assignments?

Marc: A lot of it is word-of-mouth. Players will get to talking and ones that know me will throw my name out there if the subject of weddings comes up, since the professional athlete life makes it hard to develop a long-standing relationship with a congregation and its pastor. The Philly one came by way of a colleague of mine talking with one of her former coaches at North Carolina whose wife is the general manager of the Hearts.
Emily: Do you take any of the Pre-Sem students with you, or is all of this solo?

Marc: My preference is solo, but Bishop Emerson is concerned about the image presented if I am seen as unattached in these environments. So, he is in effect requiring me to use my upstart peer ministry team and Erin as “ministry assistants” if you will. I have her and Steph going to Carolina, Alyssa doing the one in Orlando, and all three of them plus my wife for the Philly ones since I will need a second officiant due to its size.

Lindsey: Any chance you'll ever marry someone from the French national team here in the States and need a translator for the ceremony?

Marc: I don't know, but you just stuck an idea in my head for next weekend. I am hoping to sit down with the Philly couples at some point and get a few things hammered out in advance of our going there the week of the wedding. One of the brides is French Canadian and is proud of her dual fluency. She would use both of them in interviews with the press when she was on the National Team. Say she and/or her future wife wants to do part of or all of their vows in French, I might just have need for a translator. Again, not sure at this point, but I'll bring it up with them.

The handful of students at Lunch Bunch departed Siebert and went back to their dorms to finish up packing for Thanksgiving break. Marc and Dani walked to the parking garage since he was heading home to grab his bags, meet his wife, and then get on the road for Detroit. The two spent a minute or two talking privately before she pecked his cheek and then his lips. He squeezed her hand and the two embraced heart-to-heart before parting for the weekend.

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Christen took Julie to General Mitchell International Airport for her flight home to Phoenix. After getting her bags checked, the two of them went up to the food court in the center of the airport to spend some additional time together before she needed to go down to her gate.

Julie: I wish you could come with me, but I need to get MY business done on this trip without you there so that when you come down over the holidays, you'll be given a fair chance of winning over my parents.

Christen: I understand what you're saying. Besides, I'm not sure Mom and Dad would have been willing to make this the first holiday I wouldn't be at home.

Julie: Promise me something, Chrissy. Think of me over break. The conversation with my folks about being gay and the talk I will have to have with Zach concerning what's happened since I came to Trinity are sure to be stressful, and I am quite conflict-avoidant as you'll learn soon enough.

Christen: You will be right here (patting her heart) the whole time. Any of our paired-up teammates doing the "meet the parents" thing this weekend?

Julie: Kelley is going to Indianapolis with Lauren since her parents know about them and she had done what I will be doing when she was home over fall break. Lindsey and Emily did the "everyone get together" thing on fall break since they live 30 minutes or so apart in the Twin Cities. Steph and Erin are getting their parents together after the Packers/Lions game tomorrow, along with Marc and wife Danielle.

Christen: As opposed to Danielle the soccer coach at school?

Julie: Yes.

Christen: What do you think of Sarah, our new assistant?
Julie: I think she's alright. A bit more of a jock-type than Lauren, but that might be a good thing when it comes to bringing discipline to the squad. I heard that she's a bit of a stickler for order, sort of Type-A, which will be a good balance for the other's go-with-the-flow approach.

Christen: I think she'll pan out. Doesn't hurt that she's coming from a more successful program in Hamline and is from the area.

Julie: What part?

Christen: I think I overheard someone say Glendale, so around Bayshore or slightly north of there.

Julie: I think I need to head down to my gate. Walk me to security?

Christen and Julie got up and walked the several steps to the entrance to D-Terminal. The two exchanged a tight hug and a light peck on the lips.

Christen: Call or text when you land and are settled. Love you, JJ.

Julie: Will do. Love you more, CP.

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Lauren and Kelley were just outside the I-465 loop around Indianapolis when the radio gave some information about Black Friday events in the area. The two women talked about going downtown on Friday to visit the Indianapolis Zoo and some of the museums in White River State Park (NCAA Hall of Champions, Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Indiana State Museum, Congressional Medal of Honor Memorial) before tackling the crowds in Circle Center Mall.

Kelley: Are you sure your parents are comfortable with us being a couple?

Lauren: They know I play for the other team and have known that since my sophomore year of high school. It IS sort of a big deal that they meet you, since I didn't really date date before going to Trinity. Instead, I messed around a bit with girls from lacrosse and soccer, but nothing like what we have, Kel.

Kelley reached over and patted Lauren on the leg. "I'm glad to be with you down here. After the boys were born, my parents and I didn't really get away from Milwaukee a lot, so being able to spread my wings a little this weekend will help with becoming more independent and less a second mom to Jerry and Aaron."

Lauren: You've grown a bit in the past three months. I remember our first night on campus where you were freaked-out by whoever it was getting it on next door and your response to me flirting with Christen.

Kelley: Didn't hurt that I started to fall for you after we got locked in the closet and you didn't pressure me into anything. I'm more comfortable with what I've seen around school and what I'm experiencing with you. I'm still not ready to go a whole lot further than we have, but I'm also interested in exploring you a little. Maybe not this weekend while at your parents' place, but eventually.

Lauren smiled at her girlfriend. "I love you, Kelley, and I want you to be able to express physically how you feel about me. I may have more experience than you, but I haven't had a total body connection with anyone, where the physical and emotional aspects are tied together. I'm looking forward to having that happen with you, when you're ready."
Lauren pulled off I-465 at the US-31 exit to drive south toward the city, where she grew up and her family still resided. As the pair traveled down North Meridian Street, Lauren pointed out some of the landmarks around her neighborhood before she turned off and headed west toward her parents' place. When she had parked the car in the driveway, Lauren took Kelley's hands, looked into her eyes, and said, "Relax. My folks will love you. Aaron and Caitlin might need a couple of minutes to warm up to you since they're not used to seeing me actually care about someone beyond the random one-offs or friends-with-benefits gigs I did before leaving for Milwaukee." Kelley smiled back, then kissed Lauren on the cheek. "If you say so."

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Lindsey and Emily pulled off I-94 in the town of Osseo, about twenty miles south of Eau Claire. Following a fill-up at the Kwik Trip where US-10 and US-53 meet, they drove into downtown in search of a place to eat. They saw a small restaurant on the main street and parked, then went in for dinner.

Emily: Nice little place. I'm guessing it's one of the big meeting places for the townies.

Lindsey: Probably. Oooooo....look at all the pies by the register. I wonder what some of the flavors are.

The waitress stopped at their table and took their order, with the two of them returning to their conversation once she had departed.

Emily: Can you believe Marc? If THAT is what church can be like, maybe I should attend more often.

Lindsey: College church definitely doesn't look like what I grew up with in Lakeville. Do you know what he has planned for Christmas Eve service outside of Holden?

Emily: On Monday, when we were rehearsing, he and Alyssa started working on the homily, which looks to be based on a comparison between the gifts we give one another and The Gift that was born in Bethlehem. I'm thinking it's going to be a dialogue between the two of them on unmet and surpassed expectations of Christmases past, although knowing Marc, he is bound to add people to the conversation and throw in a couple of one-liners from Christmas movies everyone knows.

Lindsey: Like "You'll shoot your eye out!"

Emily: Or "I pledge allegiance to the flag" from "Christmas Vacation".

Lindsey: He could also throw in something from "Natural Childbirth" with what Mary REALLY was thinking as she was giving birth to Jesus. "I. WANT. MORPHINE!"

Emily cracked up, as did a couple at one of the tables nearby.

Emily: I'm sorry we're being a bit loud. It's just that our campus chaplain thinks he's Bill Cosby and Mel Brooks rolled into one and some of the stuff he does in weekly service is funny as heck. I thought I was a comedic genius, but he puts me to shame.

Jeanette McPherson: Where do the two of you go to school?

Lindsey: Trinity Lutheran University near Milwaukee.

Jeanette: What brings you up this way?
Emily: We're from the Twin Cities area and are heading home for Thanksgiving break. Needed to eat before we hit the road for the last couple of hours of the trip.

Jeanette: Alan, do you remember what school Danielle's Marc is at down there?

Alan McPherson: I think Pat said that he was replacing the pastor at Carthage.

Lindsey: Carthage is now Trinity Lutheran. It moved from Kenosha to Mequon after Concordia merged its two campuses and based their school in Ann Arbor. The Board of Trustees renamed it in conjunction with the move. So you know our chaplain somehow?

Jeanette: His wife Danielle is my niece, my brother Frank's daughter.

Emily: No fooling?! Small world. Has Marc always been that funny?

Alan: I don't think so. He's always been a competitive bugger, but the funny only started coming out in the last couple of years.

Emily: Any pie recommendations?

Jeanette: This time of year, the pumpkin cream cheese is a real winner. Same with the lingonberry apple. If you're less adventurous, the chocolate cream is very good. It's Marc's favorite since he's a weakling in the culinary department. Pretty much anything on the menu is good.

Lindsey: Thanks, Danielle's aunt and uncle!

Alan: I'm Alan and she's Jeanette.

Emily: Pleased to meet the two of you. We'll make sure to tell them we ran into you up here. They're in Michigan this weekend with their goddaughter, her girlfriend, and their parents for the Packers/Lions game tomorrow and a couple of Western Michigan sporting events Friday and Saturday.

Lindsey went up to the register to pay for dinner and pick up a couple slices of pie for the road. When she returned, they said their farewells to the McPhersons and left the Norske Nook. Once back on the interstate, Emily told Lindsey that Alan had slipped her a 20 and said for the two of them to use it on coffee and snacks to stay awake on the rest of the trip.

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Marc and Danielle were passing through Ann Arbor on the last part of their trip to Detroit. The trip had been more or less uneventful, with Marc messing with the Sirius/XM radio in search of some entertainment and Danielle keeping a steady pace on the road. As they drew nearer to the Motor City, Marc began rehearsing bits of his opening for next weekend's wedding.

Marc: Friends, Blue Devils, Carolinians, lend me your ears. [Two of the attendants drop plastic ears on the floor]. Very funny, you two! I'm supposed to be the one with the punchlines. Anyways.....dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join these two women in the bonds of holy matrimony. Marriage is a wonderful institution, and those who choose to practice it belong in one.

Danielle: Seriously?! You're trotting out THAT line?

Marc: Hey, it makes everyone laugh and loosens up the participants so we can get through the ceremony without fainting or the fumbles of trying to remember one's vows or tripping over their
own words when repeating mine. I only use them in the beginning and, depending on how well I
know the couple, maybe one or two in the message.

Danielle: This is why I don't do anything but by-the-book weddings. Too many opportunities to
mess up something with the moving parts.

Marc: You know that I will probably need a second officiant for the one in Philly in February since
there are four couples taking part. Paul thinks you need to be along on some of these trips so people
don't get the wrong idea about me doing them.

Danielle: I hate the spotlight that the ones you do brings out. First, the FCKC couple, now these two
from the Hearts. In January is the reschedule for Alex and Ashlyn, and then the Valentine's Day ones
after that. Can't you do just a normal couple's wedding and not go hunting for A-list and B-list ones?

Marc: I don't hunt for them. The couples or their representatives come to me. EJ's mom called me
after their original choice had to back out. The KC ones and the Philly ones came by word-of-mouth
from one of my coaching module co-creators passing around information to the brides with the Blues
and to the Hearts' GM's husband.

Danielle: Promise me that I won't see you on Extra! or Access Hollywood doing one of these.

Marc: The worst would be video ending up on ESPNW or the NWSL website. Perhaps something
on Lifetime surrounding a game or the Week In Review.

As the Schmidts left I-94 for the short trip to their hotel, Marc moved onto the actual recitation of
vows, which was done simply and soberly but with expression and a desire to draw out the love the
couple has for one another. Following that, he jotted a few notes regarding Becca and EJ that he
would incorporate into his homily when he had access to his laptop at the hotel.
Erin, Steph, Elliott, and Suzanne made their way up the ramp to their seats at Ford Field, looking around for the other two couples of their octet. Erin saw her parents as well as her godparents seated about midway up the section of their left and scampered down to get to them.

Erin: Mom, Dad, Granola Mama, Papi! How long have you been here?

Jim: 10 minutes or so.

Steph and her parents caught up to her overly-excited girlfriend. Erin introduced Elliott and Suzanne to Jim, Val, Marc, and Danielle. Once everyone was seated, they began discussing the game amongst other things.

Marc: Elliott, who's hosting Vanier this year?

Elliott: Ottawa, so TD Place.

Marc: Seen the Golden Hawks have been close to winning OUA the last couple of seasons, but can't get past Western Ontario in the Yates Cup final.

Elliott: It's been interesting seeing our football team actually get better. How do you know so much about USports?

Marc: I'm a bit of a Canadaphile. Tim Hortons, curling, hockey, Pizza Pizza, Canadian Women's National Soccer Team. Still jealous of your kid and Erin getting tix for the Gold Cup final on Sunday.

Steph: Didn't tell you that we got to talk to Becca and EJ about the wedding a little bit and that they're going to be up in Cary on Thursday afternoon for a bit if you want to hash out some of the parts before the rehearsal.

Elliott: You're doing Becca Quinn's wedding?

Marc: Yes, yes I am. Was supposed to do the Alex Morgan/Ashlyn Harris one until it got postponed because Alex's ex isn't cooperating with having the divorce finalized before then.

Elliott: Anything in your service same-sex-specific?

Marc: I try to fashion it to be sensitive to who the participants are, so I stay away from the traditional service other than its layout and incorporate my own liturgical aspects.

Danielle: He also tries to cram in a half-dozen one-liners in the first two minutes of the service.

Marc: It's not THAT many. Just a couple to loosen up the crowd and the couple. I have one I use always, and the opening one depends on the situation.

Erin: Do I have to bring a paper bag so I can cover my head after you launch off on the funny?

Marc: I don't think so.

Steph: So what did you talk about yesterday at service?

Marc: It was a light crowd, so I did a pre-Advent message about how things would look if Joseph
and Mary had gotten the news of Jesus' impending birth nowadays. Your girls Lindsey and Emily thought that some of my stuff was pretty funny.

Erin: I told her not to get into a joke fight with you because she'd be put to shame. Any media clips on display for your message?

Marc: Just a couple. One from "Maury", a YouTube video, and the trailer from "Nine Months".

Suzanne: The campus pastor lets you get away with that?

Elliott: Suzanne, Marc IS the campus pastor, or equivalent thereof.

Suzanne: But you're not ordained, are you?

Marc: No, but our bishop put me in the position on an interim basis in July and then gave me an official call to it last month after the synod and Trinity Lutheran Seminary had reconciled my past education and experience into a two-year MA from the school.

Suzanne: Can you perform the sacraments?

Marc: I have dispensation from the bishop to do them churchwide. Same goes with performing weddings.

With that resolved for the moment, the men's attention turned onto the game, where the Packers were ahead 13-0 midway through the second quarter. An interception by Ha Ha Clinton-Dix was returned 58 yards for a touchdown and, following a successful two-point conversion, Green Bay had staked themselves to a 21-0 lead.

The second half was fairly pedestrian as the Packers used their running game to milk away a lot of time. In the end, they would win 35-17.

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With there being few places open around Ford Field on Thanksgiving for dinner, the Lafleurs suggested traveling across the border to Windsor where the full gamut of restaurants would be open. The four couples took their cars through the Detroit-Windsor tunnel and made the short drive to the Loose Goose upon reaching Canada.

Elliott (to Steph): What do you want for your first legal drink?

Steph: Maybe just a shot of something. Not sure I want to order a full drink and end up not liking it.

The waiter came over and gave the eight of them menus and took their drink order. A few minutes later, he returned with the drinks and was given their culinary selections. Once gone, Erin looked at Marc and Steph, then took the latter's hand under the table and expelled a huge breath before starting to speak.

Erin: Since most of you know this already, I guess now is the time for me to tell those who don't. I'm gay.

Val: Jim, you owe me $10.

Steph slammed her shot of Fireball down at Val's response to the news.

Erin: Mom, you knew?
Val: Not exactly, but sort of. When you told me that you and Steph were going to the game on Sunday and then to her parents' place in Kitchener, at first I didn't think anything of it. It was only when I saw them at the game earlier that I put two and two together. I take it this also means you and Steph are more than friends.

Erin: Yes. We've been sort of seeing one another since the first day at school, although it took almost two weeks for us to have that talk about whether we should officially get together or not.

Jim: How long have you known, Marc?

Marc: Her being gay, since before she applied to Concordia/Trinity since she was curious about whether she should tell the truth in her application. About her and Steph, she's felt me out on the subject since the beginning of the semester.

Steph: Val, Jim, I love your daughter SO much. She is pretty much everything I want in a future partner. Someone who shares my faith, who has the ability to keep me grounded when I have an anxiety or panic attack, and who loves me as I am without a need to match her cuteness by being someone I'm not. I will never intentionally hurt her, I will respect her ambitions and dreams, and she will never have to doubt about my commitment to her.

Marc smiled as he saw his two favorite students stand confident in front of their parents.

Jim: Stephanie, I have no doubt that you believe your commitment to her won't wane, but both of you are much too young to be making those types of decisions. What is it that you say, Marc, that things change for women especially between the second and third year of undergrad?

Marc: Something like that. I also say that you either grow together or you grow apart, and that it's a fine line between the two. It's more likely over the four years of undergrad that two people will grow apart than grow together, but it's not an absolute. Having a firm foundation in sport and faith plus having a community that will step in when there is trouble but will also celebrate the milestones with you makes it more likely that a relationship like theirs will have staying power.

Suzanne: I guess I should also register my reluctance to being OK with the two of them together. I just don't see my daughter being gay as a permanent thing.

Elliott: I'm not sure I can say it any clearer than this, Suz. Steph is gay, she's been gay since she knew what that meant, and no amount of disapproval is going to change that. She's found someone who understands her weaknesses while also being able to see past them to appreciate the woman that she is.

Val: Erin, you and Steph are tight. I have no issue with the two of you being part of one another's worlds. Just be careful you're not expecting more from one another than is reasonable.

Elliott: Steph, we've had talks about your past before and how I'm concerned about you slipping into your old habits and then making a mess out of things for yourself. I think knowing that you have people at Trinity who you are close to, who you're willing to share your struggles with, makes me a bit more assured that you can turn the corner and stay away from the mistakes made in the past.

Marc: If it helps any of the four of you, I am quite protective of both of them, Erin because she is like the daughter I never had and Steph because she's like an apprentice in helping me shape the future of the church at Trinity. With the two of them going with me to North Carolina next weekend, all the things that you might have concern about will be front-and-center and I promise you that I will have their backs as they navigate it, to guide when necessary but to let them also figure some stuff out on their own.
Elliott: Spoken like someone who works at a college.

Val: Exactly, Elliott. I take the same approach with my students at Grand Valley. Help when they really need it, but letting them be responsible for their own learning most of the time.

Erin: Trust us, everyone. We might make mistakes, we might not do things exactly as you would like, but give us a chance to grow together without having to constantly fight for your approval.

Steph squeezed her girl's hand. "What she said."

The Mathesons and Lafleurs came to a bit of a detente over their daughters being together, trusting that they had both the maturity and the support network to see them through any troubles that would come. Following dinner, Elliott and Suzanne drove north toward Kitchener while the other six went back into the US for the three hour trip to Rockford.

**********

On Black Friday, Val, Jim, Erin, Steph, Danielle, and Marc went shopping at Rivertown Crossings. After staying together for a bit, Jim, Danielle, and Erin went over to Celebration! Cinema to see the newest Fantastic Beasts film, with the other three continuing on their hunt for Christmas presents and bargains. While Val and Steph were in the women's department at JCPenney, Marc perused the kitchen area. After a trip around the department, he moved onto sports apparel. At some point, he lost sight of his two shopping partners, which with the burgeoning crowd in the store caused him to not think straight and instead of figuring out that they were probably in the fitting room, he panicked a bit and looked for a restroom to compose himself. Once he thought he had things under control, he returned to the store, but still not seeing Val or Steph, he went into full-on meltdown, struggling to get himself out of the store for some fresh air outside. He got out and walked about 10 steps to his left, then sat down on the ground and sent Steph a text.

DeaconMarc: Attack. Outside south entrance.

Steph saw the message and bolted to get to him, dragging Val with her. When the two of them got outside, they saw Marc with his eyes closed, tears running down his face, and heaving to the point of hyperventilation. Steph knelt down and placed a hand on his leg while speaking to him in a calming voice. She then turned to Val and filled her in on what was happening.

Steph: Val, Marc is having a panic attack. I need to get him someplace quiet so it can be relieved. Any idea where one might be?

Val: Maybe you can take him over to our minivan.

Steph: I think that could work. The minivan will give us a space that is somewhat serene and isolated. I've struggled with anxiety and depression for a few years now and so I recognize the warning signs and can walk him through the cause in order to release the emotions so that the attack goes away.

Val handed Steph her keys and asked how long she thought they'd be.

Steph: Based on where he is now, I'd say 15-20 minutes. I'll text you when things are calmed down and find out where you are.

Val knelt down and placed a hand on Marc's shoulder, letting him know that Steph would be with him until things improved. Once she went back into the store, Steph got up and helped Marc to his feet, then the two of them went to Val's minivan and settled in between the two middle seats, with Marc sitting on the ground and his head resting against the bench in the back.
Steph: Marc, I'm here. You're safe. Let go of the pain. I'm not leaving you.

She leaned over and rubbed his temples. "Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out."

Marc's breathing began to even out and a steady rhythm was established, even though the exhalation was quick and the inhalation wasn't as deep as he would like.

Steph: Are you OK?

Marc: I think so.

Steph: Do you know what brought the attack on?

Marc: It was similar to the one at the All-Sports Mixer. Lots of people around and losing my base person or people.

Steph: Do crowds always affect you like this?

Marc: Usually not, because I can typically pick out someone that, so long as they remain in my field of vision, provides me a means of escape should I get too claustrophobic. Also didn't help that the two I look to most to calm me down weren't around.

Steph: Danielle and Erin?

Marc: Erin, yes, but Danielle the wife doesn't really get it as to what I need when things go off the rails.

Steph: The other one asked me how best to help you if you happen to have one around her.

Marc: Which is why she's been a little more "cuddly" than on-fire hot when we've been around each other the past few weeks. I think telling her that I had fallen off the wagon for her sparked her need to understand the mental aspect of who I am on top of the emotional.

Steph: So there is seriously more between the two of you than being colleagues and friends?

Marc: A LOT more. Not to the point of out-and-out cheating on Danielle, but I wouldn't be surprised if next weekend caused another change in our friendship/relationship.

After a couple more minutes of quiet in the van, Steph texted Val and found out that she was back across at Kohl's picking up some Black Friday specials on linens. The two left the van and went back into JCPenney to wait for Val to return. The rest of their time at Rivertown went fairly well. Steph stayed close to Marc, keeping him calm and even-keeled. When they met back up with the other three, the group left the mall for their trip to Kalamazoo for the Western Michigan/Toledo football game, with the Mid-American Conference Western Division title and a spot in the league's championship game next weekend in Detroit on the line.
Carolina In My Mind

The remainder of Thanksgiving break flew by and soon Marc and Danielle were on their way back to Milwaukee, with Steph and Erin caravanning with them. Monday morning in the office was fairly productive, as Marc handled the email, voicemail, and requests that had come in over the four days he was gone. The Department of Human Resources had sent him a inquiry for addressing student-athlete complaints against faculty or staff. He wrote back indicating that his interpretation of his role is that he works in conjunction with HR to discover evidence, hear from witnesses, and put forth a report on the perceived truth/falsehoods of the testimony. Should an athlete be untruthful, his office could seek to penalize the individual for "bearing false witness”.

At 4:30, Marc went over to Luther's Landing to meet Erin, Steph, and Dani for a working dinner.

Marc: I'm glad all three of you could get together early today so we're able to discuss the plan for Thursday-Sunday. Our flight leaves Mitchell on Thursday at 7:05am, so please be there by 6:00. Erin, would you be willing to pick up Dani on your way to the airport? One less car parking there for four days means less spent by the office and thus more in per-diems for the weekend.

Erin: I can do that. What is the normal daily allowance on trips?

Marc: Typically it's $65 a day. $15 for breakfast, $20 for lunch, $25 for dinner, and $5 incidentals, like the random candy bar or soda. I'll be talking to Matt at the synod office tomorrow to finalize what the allowance is and how much of that needs to be petty cash as opposed to charging things to the synod's account.

Steph: What happens if we underspend or overspend?

Marc: Underspending is typically forfeited, while overspending means you're making up the difference or reimbursing the synod. As long as the expenses are reasonable, there won't be a lot of hand wringing over how many charges we have or when they occur. We will be getting at least two meals covered on the trip, dinner on Thursday and Saturday. As for accommodations, we will be staying at the Doubletree in Cary. Erin, you and Steph will share a room, while Dani and myself will each have our own.

Dani: Is my per-diem being covered by your office or will I be getting that from the athletic department?

Marc: Since Paul sent the funds for your trip from the athletic department's account to mine, I'm presuming that you'll be under our account for anything spent, with the same rules and regs as I and the students have. I'll take that up with Matt tomorrow as well.

Dani: I know you told me that Saturday should work out for me to go to Greensboro for the D-III final, come back to the hotel to change, then make it to Wilson in time for the ceremony. Can you give me a better breakdown of the timing?

Marc: Greensboro College is 75 minutes west from Cary. Barton is 60 minutes east from Cary. The final is at Noon. It could be tight if the game goes to kicks, but a normal 90-minute match should allow you to get away by 2:15, putting you back in Cary around 3:30. The wedding ceremony starts at 6, which means you'd probably want to be on the road by 4:45. The other option would be to come straight through from Greensboro, with Erin and/or Steph helping you get ready once you're there. It's up to you.
Dani: Another possibility is that I max myself out on Friday in Greensboro, since that would tend to be the better elbow-rubbing day, and bypass the Saturday match.

Marc: Another thing to bring up with Matt, so I know how much leeway you have under my office's coverage. I'll run out the scenario tomorrow morning before I call him because I think I have a way to make it fly.

Erin: I guess I should ask this since you brought it up sort of at dinner on Thursday night. How much "space" will you be giving Steph and myself on this trip?

Marc: If you're asking if I plan to babysit the two of you and have you with me at all times, that would be a big NO! There is a time for work, which will be on Thursday, Saturday, and should we be able to make a meeting for Sunday morning with the Philly couples, and a time for play, which you'll have in parts on all four days. You're adults. What you do on your own time, be it together or apart, is none of my business, really. With that kind of freedom comes a responsibility to use it wisely. That means I don't want to be getting a phone call from one of you asking me to bail you out of jail, because I will let you sit. You represent yourselves, the university, my office, and the concept of peer ministry.

Dani: Ladies, if I may. What Marc is telling you is the same thing he told us at MUSC at the beginning of every season. Freedom comes with responsibility, and though he won't check up on how you use it, he will expect you to be on your "A" game when the lights go on.

Marc: A prime example of this is that, in our first season, we had a player show up to a game after going on a bender in Whitewater the previous evening. Wasn't even legal. Suffice it to say, she didn't last very long in the match and ultimately left at halftime complaining of heat sickness.

Erin: Eeeek. We'll be sure not to go down THAT road. I can't imagine the embarrassment she must have felt in that situation.

Marc: Since I'm going to be giving the two of you a fair bit of time to be a couple on this trip and won't be policing how you choose to present that, I expect somewhat the same from you. Dani and I WILL spend time together, the two of us, at some point during the trip. She will be my +1 for the reception, just like you'll be each other's +1. What happens behind closed doors stays there. I'll have more info after my conversation with the synod office tomorrow. Any questions?

Erin: Is there some reason why the two of you aren't being all couple-y around us?

Marc giggled. "First, we're on-campus and that wouldn't look right. Second, I didn't know that you expected us to 'look' like we're together even though we aren't officially but sort of are but not quite. Third, your godmother could walk in at any time and jump to a million conclusions that are not true. Discretion is the better part of valor."

Dani: Does this mean that the two of you are sort of accepting of our friendship-and-a-little-more?

Steph: Marc and I talked after his panic attack on Black Friday and he confirmed that you two were more than pals. We're friends, sort of, Dani, and Marc is quickly becoming a second dad for both Erin and I, so I want him to be happy, and if you make him so, I'm OK with it.

Erin: After what went on this past weekend, plus seeing how snippy Danielle can be, and noticing how the two of you look at one another, I'm not going to be poo-pooing you over it.

Dani: Marc, I didn't know you had an attack while on break.

Marc: It was similar to the All-Sports one. Too many people, too little space, and no grounder in
sight. Steph did a great job in getting it to go away. Part of that was my trust in her since she knows what it's like to have them and feel like you can't stop yourself from crumbling.

Dani: Do the three of us need to watch out for you this weekend?

Marc: Maybe, especially if the nerves dial up or I get caught in my head overthinking what is happening around me.

Erin: We have your back. Right?

Steph: For sure.

Dani: Always.

Marc: We need to get over to rehearsal. Tonight, next Monday, then the final run-through on the 7th before showtime on the 9th.

Finishing off dinner, the four of them walked to Bonhoeffer to join the rest of the crew for Holden practice.

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Marc left campus around 3pm on Wednesday to spend some time at home alone before leaving for Raleigh tomorrow morning. An hour later, one of the school's student-athletes and her parents barged into the school's Human Resources office after not finding Deacon Schmidt in his office.

Michael Miller: Who do we see about lodging a complaint against a member of the school's athletic department?

Darlene (HR receptionist): We can have you talk with our HR director once she is free. She'll be able to take the complaint and let you know the process of adjudicating and resolving it.

Michael: Thank you.

Michael, his wife Pam, and their daughter Lexi, a member of the women's soccer team at Trinity, took seats to wait for Dr. Cheryl Baines, Trinity's VP of Human Resources. After a couple of minutes, one of the school's lab supervisors exited her office and she came out to usher the Millers in.

Cheryl Baines: How can I help you?

Michael: Alexandra, tell her what you told your sister.

Lexi: One of my coaches on the women's soccer team has been sending me inappropriate text messages, attempting to get me to meet her off-campus. We went to take this up with Deacon Schmidt, who oversees the athletic department's judicial process, but he was not in his office.

Cheryl: Do you have the messages saved to your phone?

Lexi: No, I don't.

Pam: I can get them from our cell phone service provider. It might take a day or two.

Cheryl: That should work as far as having evidence to back up your claim. Which of your coaches has been harassing you?

Lexi: Danielle Dillon.
Cheryl: I can take down the official complaint today, then will inform Deacon Schmidt about it. Once he has given notice of receiving his copy, we will place Coach Dillon on administrative leave pending the outcome of the case.

Cheryl asked Lexi a few questions about her relationship with Danielle and when the harassment began from her, taking down her answers. She asked that the phone records be forwarded to her office as soon as possible and told Lexi that she would be in touch once her and Marc had made contact about the complaint.

**********

A good portion of the lacrosse team met for dinner at Siebert, with Steph and Erin's travels over the past two weeks being the primary topic of discussion.

Steph: Erin, have you packed yet for the weekend?

Erin: Nearly done. Just trying to not let my new dress get TOO wrinkled before I get to wear it on Saturday night, so that will go in last. You?

Steph: I'm packed. Didn't have a whole lot I needed to change out from Thanksgiving week and getting to do laundry at my folks' place on Wednesday allowed me to have everything clean that I wanted to take for the weekend.

Alyssa: You two are going to have SO much fun at College Cup I'm sure, and then the wedding on Saturday night. Is this your first big event together?

Steph: I guess so. None of the other things we've done have been really a couples' thing. I'm looking forward to dancing with Erin at the reception and spending time together away from here and out of sight of the 'rents.

Erin smiled at Steph, then told the others that she was excited about the two of them rooming together for three nights with no real supervision.

Emily: I am jealous as hell that the two of you get these opportunities because of Marc. Think he'll adopt me?

Lindsey: You heard what he said at lunch last Wednesday, that there might be a chance for me to go to Philly in February if the need arose for a translator.

Steph: That would be for Rhian, right?

Lindsey: He didn't give a name. Just said that one of the brides was French Canadian and might choose to do her vows in French.

Steph: Yep, that's Rhi. Her and Diana are SO BLOODY CUTE together. Been following the two of them since I was very little. Getting to meet them last weekend was such a high for me, but nothing beats Steph Labbe signing my jersey and taking a selfie with me, Erin, and her girlfriend Ali Krieger.

Kristie: Alyssa, you're doing the Philly ones, right?

Alyssa: Yes. Me, Steph, and Erin with Marc and his wife Danielle officiating the event.

Kristie: What's your role going to be?

Alyssa: We haven't had a discussion yet about Philly. We're supposed to talk next week about the
Orlando one. Steph, what does he have you doing this weekend?

Steph: Keeping the good chaplain on point and filling gaps in the service.

Lauren: Going back to the two of you, thinking about breaking a bed or two this weekend?

Kelley shook her head at Lauren's insinuation. "They aren't going to tell you that, dear!"

Lauren: Can't hurt to ask.

Erin: Wellllllll.....we haven't talked about it, but I'm thinking that could be arranged if my girl is willing.

Kelley again acted like her innocent ears were being invaded by impure thoughts.

Lauren: Kelley, you know....WE could get up to some extracurriculars this weekend like we almost did last weekend.

Kelley covered her face so as not to let her embarrassment be too obvious.

Lindsey: Oh, Erin, forgot to tell you that we ran into Danielle's aunt and uncle on our trip home last Wednesday.

Erin: How did THAT happen?

Emily: We stopped for gas and dinner in this sort-of small town near Eau Claire. They apparently heard us cracking up about what Marc had pulled off in service with the "Nine Months" clip and the "Maury" lie detector results and it led to us talking a little. Long story short, we found out we had a mutual acquaintance in Marc and then they told us how they knew him.

Erin: That's wild. I'll have to tell him tomorrow.

Steph excused herself so she could head back to her room to do some yoga before an early night to bed, since tomorrow's 4am wake-up call would come quite quickly. Erin walked back with some of her floormates later and hung out with Lauren and Kelley for a bit before going back to her room to sleep.

**********

Sarah, Dani, and Michelle went to dinner at Bar Louie after the fashionista got off work. Over burgers and beers, the three discussed their men and what to do about them.

Michelle: Sarah, are you and Wil any closer to getting together getting together?

Sarah: Not really. I don't know what more I can do to encourage him to look at me as a potential partner. Dani, how did you catch Marc's eye?

Dani: Knowing him from the soccer club, I was aware of the tolerable relationship he had with his wife. When we ran across one another here on the first day of orientation, something just sort-of clicked in my mind that maybe he'd have some interest in being friends and my mentor here at a minimum. I didn't try to turn his head until the Mixer the first week, and knowing he wasn't going to necessarily make the first move, I had to be a bit more aggressive in my pursuit to show him I was interested. Thus why I took him the first time in his office. A couple of weeks later, after the Faculty Senate meeting I attended to get a waiver to start my Master's program, he was more responsive because he knew that I wouldn't pull away.
Michelle: I'm not really in the same position as either of you, but if you ask me, your best bet is to use what you already know about Wil and play upon it. I'm sure there are a few things that you do for him that he's not going to get elsewhere. You need to convince him to put more weight on them and allow you to build up a relationship with him based on it.

Dani: Agree 100%. I got my man interested from a physical standpoint, which developed a bit of trust between us that allowed him to open up emotionally to me. You know Wil is emotionally tied to you, and you do get at it now and again. Your biggest opportunity is to get that physical connection to line up with the emotional one. Does he ever say anything about your physical relationship with him?

Sarah: Not as much as I'd like. He will thank me for bringing that little bit of softness and responsiveness to his advances.

Michelle: Do you do oral on him? That is probably your best place to win a comparison against the guys he chases.

Sarah: Yes. I'm not as good at it as I'd like to be, but he seems to enjoy it.

Michelle: Spend more time on that with him. If you can do it better than the guys he's with, he'll start coming to you for it, and you're probably the only person he tries to penetrate since he seems like such a bottom. Focus on those things and it should tip things in your favor.

Sarah: Dani, any advice on spicing it up based on you and Marc?

dani: I have certain things that I like doing that turn him on, like going commando under my skirts and dresses. It gets me hot having nothing on down there and he gets the benefit of it. I also mix up the normal outfits where a quickie is the planned outcome and the more dressed-up ones that he'll take his time to slowly strip me out of them and make a lot more contact with me. This weekend, I'm going with a softer look for the wedding, my forest green off-the-shoulder party dress with the criss-cross t-strap heels I got for my sister Olivia's wedding. If things progress beyond where they are, I want the connection to be more emotional than physical. You have to know what Wil likes on you and what makes him respond quicker or deeper to your advances.

Sarah: Thanks, you two. Michelle, we need to find you someone so we can possibly triple at some point.

Michelle: If you see any smart guys who are looking for a post-adolescent pile of nerves, send them my way.

***********

carli: How did your visit with the parents go?

Lexi: It went. They dragged me first to see the chaplain, but he wasn't in. Then we went to HR to file a complaint against Danielle.

Carli: Why?

Lexi: My sister Jenny caught me responding to a message from Sara on Sunday and looked at my phone to see what she had sent. I got out of the house as quick as possible to come back to campus. She told my folks, who called me on Monday night to ask about it. I had to make up something and I told them that it was from Danielle and that she had been sending them to me for a while, trying to get me to meet with her away from school.
Carli: You sure you want to fight that battle? You DO know who you're going to have to convince in order to make the complaint stick, right?

Lexi: Deacon Schmidt, if I'm not mistaken.

Carli: And him and Dani are like super-tight. I wouldn't be surprised if they've got something going on that the deacon's wife doesn't know about.

Lexi: I got them off my back, and if he believes there isn't enough evidence to move forward, then the case will drop and no harm, no foul.

Carli: I wouldn't say that. If he proves you out-and-out lied, he could come forward at you with a charge of his own, the equivalent of perjury or lying under oath.

Lexi: Seriously?!

Carli: Yes, and don't think he won't do it since you're putting his coaching protege and maybe girlfriend in the crosshairs.

Lexi: How was your time with Brian over break?

Carli: Wonderful. He's planning to transfer from Concordia-Fort Wayne to LTSC in Chicago and switching from LCMS to ELCA.

Lexi: That's a bit of a jump, right?

Carli: He found that what he'd been taught here in Pre-Sem didn't line up with what he was being taught in seminary and he didn't believe in the harsher line that the Missouris took on several topics.

Lexi: When is the move happening?

Carli: At semester. He'll have spring term to get the candidacy hurdle cleared. I don't know what his committee will look like or who he has to interview with since he wasn't a student here under the ELCA umbrella.

Lexi: It would likely be Marc unless he requests someone else.

Carli: Which means the theology questions are going to be tough since he's coming from LCMS into ELCA. My guess is that the two hardest points will be his view on women in ministry and his stance on the social statement on sexuality.

Lexi: What's your stance on Brian becoming a pastor?

Carli: I can literally stay out of his pursuit until after he finishes internship, at which point I'll be out of school free-and-clear and we can talk about getting married and settling into a white-picket-fence kind of life and not what I've got going at Trinity.

Lexi: What's your schedule this weekend?

Carli: I think Sara has me assigned to a small party at the Hilton Garden downtown on Friday night and then three sessions on Saturday back up this way. You?

Lexi: Haven't heard anything yet, but guessing a couple on Friday, a couple on Saturday.
The early-morning hustle-and-bustle at Mitchell International Airport greeted Steph, Erin, and Danielle when they arrived just before 6:00. Once parked, they took a shuttle from the off-site lot to ticketing and check-in, where Marc was waiting for them.

Marc: Good morning, everyone!

Steph: Where's the coffee?

Marc: We'll get you some of that after we get checked-in.

Steph: You're the boss.

Marc walked over and pecked Erin on the forehead and Dani on the temple. "Sleep alright, you two?"

Erin: Not exactly. Think it's nerves because I want certain things to happen on this trip, but I'm worried that my girl's little problem might bum out my mood before we get to that point.

Marc: If you need my ear at some point, let me know.

Dani: Like a rock. It was probably the three Sams I had with Sarah and Michelle last night at Bar Louie that contributed to that, because I'm a little tied up in knots at the moment. I got an email from one of my players saying that she had seen Lexi, one of our freshmen, with her parents going to the HR office and overheard her and Carli later on talking about what had happened, with my name coming up and Carli giving her advice about dealing with you.

Marc: If there is something afoot, I'll see it in my email box come Monday. For now, nothing can happen without my acknowledging the notice, so put your concern on the back shelf and get ready to enjoy four days of what I hope will be fun and sun.

Marc led his traveling companions to the ticketing desk and checked their bags along with receiving boarding passes for the outbound trip. Once completed, the foursome went up the escalator and then into Concourse D to pick up something close to resembling breakfast from the open restaurants. Dani, Erin, and Steph went to Valentine Coffee Roasters for coffee, breakfast sandwiches, and pastries while Marc ducked into Johnny Rocket's for a chocolate shake and an order of fries. They took their food and drinks down to Gate D55, where they would be departing for Philadelphia in a short while.

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On the plane, Marc and Erin were seated next to one another, with Steph and Dani sharing the row in front of them. On Erin's request, she and Dani switched seats so the two couples could be together. As the plane ascended, Erin had her head buried into the crook of Steph's shoulder and Dani was holding Marc's hand as he had his eyes closed and was arched back in his seat to ride out the plane's take-off and leveling-out. As soon as the chime rang to indicate that the fasten seat belt sign had been turned off, Marc opened his eyes and reach into his laptop bag to finish up work on Saturday's service and message. Dani peeked at the document and asked him a couple of questions.

Dani: I know that at Trinity, you sort of script out your homilies, including the stuff that looks like ad-libbing with the video clips and one-liners. Do you do that as well for the weddings you do?
Marc: Generally, yes. Saturday will only be the second wedding that I'll have presided over, so keeping it scripted in front of me helps with staying on task and not trying to interject the funnies off the cuff.

Dani: What funnies do you have in store, just so I don't get flabbergasted at the jokes?

Marc: Well, I have a few in the script but they all might not be used because I need some participation on the first one, which is a line from "Julius Caesar" modified for this occasion. From there, I will rebuke slightly whoever ran with the gag. After that, I move onto a standard opening, "Dearly beloved...etc.", followed by a one-liner about the institution of marriage.

Dani: You mean the one about those who make this choice being crazy?

Marc: How do you know that one?

Dani: Heard it once from a priest at Stritch about how he uses it to get the locked-kneed grooms to loosen up so they don't faint in the chapel.

Marc: So, yes, I say that people who choose to practice the institution of marriage belong in one. At the wedding in KC, I added in one about the decision needing to be done not out of haste but with sobriety and proper judgment.

Dani: After which, you slagged the brides for drinking too much the night before?

Marc: Actually, it was a joke about the mimosas that morning, but same general theme. I'm not getting any of these past you, am I?

Dani: Let me just say that I think I know your style of humor and can see the train of thought you employ when dropping these nuggets of wisdom.

Marc: The rest of the service should run to form since there aren't any easy places to poke at someone based on who's in it and the general makeup of the attendees.

Dani: What's the message?

Marc: I go back over EJ and Becca's relationship from an outsider's perspective, mentioning the growth of the pair from EJ's first year at Duke up through their game against Virginia that won the ACC regular-season title last October to the College Cup and how Becca dissed EJ by not posting their couple picture from the banquet on her Instagram. I also talk about their uniqueness in going against the grain of their Hearts teammates, from the proposal after the draft to the choice to not be part of the Valentine's Day marriagepalooza in Philly. I close with some of my own philosophy on the subject of college relationships and how a couple has to grow together or they WILL grow apart over time in the crucible of the university, with the metamorphosis that Becca underwent just before returning to Duke last August being a turning point where EJ could have drawn closer or pulled back, similar to the Ashlyn/Ali/Alex circle, where Ash's "change" made one of them withdraw but the other one draw near, and how it affected her opinion of life and love as both happened.

Dani: Can't wait to hear how you pull all of it together. Do we have plans for after you get back from the rehearsal and dinner?

Marc: Not yet. I want to find out where some of the coaches were going to be after-hours and perhaps be there as well, with you of course. Steph and Erin not being legal means they can have some legitimate time together without us in tow.

As the plane made its descent for Philadelphia, Erin woke up from her nap and prepared for landing,
as did Steph and Marc. Ever the cautious one, Marc closed his eyes and white-knuckled the arm rests until he felt the plane coasting on the ground, then opened them up and relaxed.

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After boarding their flight for Raleigh, Marc asked Dani if he could be on the aisle for this leg instead of the window, which she agreed to. A couple of minutes later, the passenger seated across the aisle from Marc arrived. When Marc noticed that he was wearing a Philadelphia Hearts jersey, he struck up a conversation with the lad.

Marc: Hearts, huh? Going to the wedding in Wilson this weekend, I'm presuming.

Michael Bridges: Yes. My girlfriend and I are standing up for the couple.

Marc extended his hand to Michael. "Marc." "Michael."

Marc: How long have you known Becca and EJ?

Michael: I know Becca better than EJ since we were in a few classes together at Duke. I guess it would be five years, since we both started at Duke in Fall 2013.

Marc ran the math in his head....Duke, girlfriend, science major more than likely, Philly......

Marc: You wouldn't be the med student that Morgan Reid started seeing after she signed with the Hearts, would you?

Michael: Yes, I would be him. How did you figure that out?

Marc: Wasn't too hard. The jersey, you saying that you and Becca had had classes together at Duke, which made me think you might have been a science major there and thus maybe had classes as well with Morgan.

Michael: I'm sort of impressed.

Marc introduced Dani and his two charges to Michael and gave a short explanation of what he had learned in the couple of minutes speaking to him.

Michael: What has the four of you going to Raleigh? College Cup, perhaps?

Marc: Pretty good deduction. Erin, Steph, and I are going to the Division I one in Cary, while Dani is going to the Division III one in Greensboro. She's the assistant women's soccer coach at Trinity Lutheran University, where I work and the two girls attend.

Michael: Are you the head coach or athletic director there?

Marc: No, although I'm connected to the athletic department by way of overseeing its judicial function on student-athlete misconduct. I'm actually the school's chaplain.

Michael: Interesting. So how did you get interested in women's soccer?

Marc gave Michael the run-down of his past experience in the game and how Dani had played for his summer league team while she was in college.

Marc: We're staying in Cary and going to WakeMed after we check in to see the afternoon walk-throughs and the press stuff, plus meet for a few with Becca and EJ ahead of tonight's rehearsal.
Michael: You're the Marc that's doing the wedding, then.

Marc: Guilty as charged.

Michael: For someone who apparently makes full professors and PhD's quake, you appear surprisingly calm and "normal".

Marc: The reputation comes from the fact that I go 150% after everything in my sight and sometimes people who stand in the way get run over. These three can attest to both sides of me, the funny, good-natured, kind-hearted minister and the tough-as-nails college administrator. You staying at the Doubletree this weekend?

Michael: That's where the whole wedding party is booked, as well as the College Cup teams and staffs and a good portion of the guests.

Marc: We're there as well. Say...you interested in maybe pulling off a surprise on Morgan by coming along to the stadium with us after check-in?

Michael: That sounds like fun, Marc.

Marc asked Michael to switch seats with him so he could confab with Erin and Steph about it.

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Marc and his crew arrived at WakeMed Soccer Park around 2:00, with the afternoon activities underway. Duke was on the field doing their walk-through while Stanford was handling its press obligations inside the main building. Steph and Erin went to look for EJ and Becca, while Marc, Dani, and Michael waited and watched the Cardinal being put through the grind of Q-and-A's with regional and national reporters.

Becca (to Marc): So you must be the infamous Marc Schmidt.

Marc: Not too loud. I've got a reputation to uphold.

EJ: Well, Mom was right. The guy sure knows how to be funny.

Marc: Hi, EJ. It's a huge honor for me to bring the two of you together on Saturday in front of your families and friends to seal on paper and in their sight what has already been merged in your hearts.

Becca: And he's not too shabby with the heart stuff either.

EJ wiped her eye. "Michael, what has you up here?"

Michael: We were on the same flight in and got to talking. I'm here to surprise Morgan provided you can point me in the right direction.

EJ gave Michael detailed directions of where she was and he went to sweep her off her feet. Meanwhile, the wedding team and the two brides sat down to discuss the service.

Marc: The service itself is very straight-forward. The little touches I give to it, however, you really need to be aware of when and what they are, or you'll be left wondering if I have lost my mind.

Marc gave the two of them a layout of where the gags were set and asked if they knew anyone who might be willing to do the response on his opening line.

Becca: Morgan is good-natured enough and under as little pressure as possible in the wedding that
she would be an excellent choice for that.

EJ: Michael as well?

Marc: Hmmm. Think that might just be a good duo for this one, since he does seem to have a bit of the comedian in him.

Erin: Gotta give him credit, he does know how to be creative with the funny if what he plans to pull on Morgan is any indication.

Marc: Is there anything the two of you want me to add to the service that isn't in it currently?

EJ: I'd like to have two of my former teammates do a duet of "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" for my processional.

Marc: You've talked to them about it already and they have the music?

EJ: Yes to the first, yes to them having the score but I haven't been able to find someone who can play it.

Marc: I might have a solution for you. Do you think they could do the vocal over a brass quintet's rendition or would it need to be piano or organ-based?

EJ: I don't know. They'll be there tonight. What do you have in mind?

Marc: I have the Canadian Brass' version buried somewhere on my laptop since I love the way they do it. If they think they'd be able to make it work, I can have one of my assistants work with them on it while we do some of the other pieces. My plan for the rehearsal is that we'll do a quick-paced run-through of the processional/recessional plus where everything happens in the service, then we'll work on the parts that need more of a personal touch or have potential snags.

Steph: Before I forget again, when Erin and I ran into them in Detroit and we talked a little about the service, they mentioned having a slightly unorthodox wedding party and that we'd need to plan with that in mind.

Becca: Thanks for bringing that up, Steph. We have eight people standing up. My sister, EJ's brother, two couples from our team, and Morgan and Michael. We want the two female couples to stay together going in and out, but our witnesses are my sister Jillian and Morgan Reid. How do we line them up in order to make this flow?

Marc: Hmmmmm. I'm going to have to see it in-house to give you any advice on it. I'm sure you don't want the two of them entering together with the guys dragging in at the end. I think I have two possible solutions, but it will require thinking a little outside the box. I'll talk it over with Steph and Erin on the way down to get some outside opinions on it. Any other questions or ideas for the service?

EJ: I'm good. You, Becs?

Becca: Think I'm good as well.

Marc: One final thing. Are either of you changing your name?

Becca: I will be taking hers.

Marc: And EJ, do you want me to use the initials or the full name when I speak of you in the
message and as the service goes on? I WILL be using the given first and middle when I have you repeat the words of intent after me. Same goes for Becca.

EJ: I hadn't thought about that. My preference I think is for you to do what is most comfortable for you, be it more formal or less formal.

Becca: Keep mine on the familiar side except where it makes sense to stretch it out.

Marc: OK, thanks. For me, it's a feel thing. I like to keep the ceremony intimate, thus more familiar language and references, but sometimes it doesn't work. How I do it in the rehearsal will most likely be how I will do it on Saturday, but be prepared if I have a change of mind on the day.

Marc looked at his watch and saw it was 3:30. "Guess I should let the two of you go in case you need to do anything before the rehearsal. It will also allow us to stop back at the hotel and change before driving down to Wilson."

EJ: See you again in about 90 minutes, then.

EJ and Becca left. Erin went to find Michael while Marc and Steph searched for Dani. When all were found, the five of them drove the short distance back to the Doubletree to change and leave again for Wilson. Marc asked Dani to send him a text with what others are doing tonight so he knew what they might want to do after he got back to the hotel. The two parted after a warm embrace and a small peck. Dani went to the in-house restaurant for dinner along with a few of the coaches she met at WakeMed, while the other three left for the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner.

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On the drive from Cary to Wilson, Marc, Steph, and Erin went over the service one last time along with the areas in the rehearsal where some assistance from them would be needed. Just before 5:00, they pulled up at Howard Chapel on the campus of Barton College and went inside to get the wedding rehearsal underway.

Marc: Greetings, everyone! For those who don't know me, I'm Deacon Marc Schmidt, chaplain at Trinity Lutheran University just outside Milwaukee, WI. We don't have a WHOLE lot of time to get everything worked out tonight, since I think some of you are expected back in Cary or Raleigh for the College Cup banquet tonight. Becca and EJ got a bit of my shtick earlier today in terms of how the service will go. We will start with a quick run-through of the ceremony from beginning to end. How we line up now may not be how it will be on Saturday or even in 20 minutes, but this is the order that I want everyone to process in for starters.

*Brides' relatives not part of processional (parents, grandparents, siblings et al, spouses/partners of the participants)
*Participants not part of processional (readers, musicians, ushers)
*Couple 1
*Couple 2
*Couple 3
*Couple 4
*EJ and Kelly

Marc: Becca and I along with the two vocalists for the processional will be up on stage, with Becca and myself in the center and the other two at the corners above the piano and organ. My liturgical assistant, Steph, will be working with the ladies on the duet while we run through the rest of the service and the processional/recessional elements. Are the two of them here?
Mary Love Taylor and Brooke Heinsohn made their presence known to Marc and he sent Steph over to lead them outside the sanctuary so they could put together the vocals and the accompaniment for "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring". Meanwhile, Marc had Bill and Linda Quinn and Kathy Proctor along with Becca's sisters Lauren and Erin and Dawson Proctor's girlfriend Laurel process down to their seats in the front row on either side of the aisle.

Marc: Who wants to go first of the four pairings? This is just to make sure you can walk in a straight line and not trip over yourself or your partner.

Morgan Andrews and Sammy Jo Prudhomme, teammates of the brides, decided to go first, followed then by Morgan Reid and her boyfriend, Michael Bridges. Next was Becca's twin sister Jillian and EJ's brother Dawson with Savannah Jordan and Sarah Troccoli concluding the wedding party's entrances. Finally, at the top of the aisle were EJ and her father Kelly. They waited until Savannah and Sarah had taken their places at the altar before proceeding forward. Once the pair reached the front, Kelly handed EJ over to Becca, who walked with her up the stairs to stand before Marc.

Marc: I will save the one-liners for the actual day, but right at the start I quote Marc Antony from Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" and what I need is for one or two of you to throw down plastic ears. Becca and EJ thought Morgan and Michael would be the right individuals for this. Any objections?

Michael: What do you mean, throw down plastic ears?

Marc: I'll provide you with the prop. When I finish my line, "Friends, Blue Devils, Carolinians, lend me your ears", the two of you will deliver the punchline by lending me these ears. I will then mockingly chastise you for it, then move on to the start of the actual service.

Morgan laughed. "I think I saw something like that in 'Robin Hood: Men In Tights'".

Marc: Wouldn't doubt that's where I got the idea for this. Next, I will say what you've heard a hundred times at weddings, the "Dearly Beloved" opening. I however punctuate the ending of the statement giving the benefits of marriage with a slight dig against the people in front of me. The line is "Marriage is a wonderful institution, and those who choose to practice it belong in one."

Sarah and Morgan Andrews burst out laughing, which started Becca and Jillian giggling.

Sarah: So what you're saying is that people who want to get married must be crazy.

Marc: More or less. My two assistants this weekend are part of our newly-founded peer ministry team at Trinity Lutheran and they can attest to me using the campfire scene in "City Slickers" to talk about why marriage still matters in a culture where it really isn't necessary anymore. Right, Erin?

Erin: Is that the one where one guy accuses another of boinking someone on the day-old bread rack?

Marc: Yes.

Sammy Jo: Is the entire service one one-liner after another?

Marc: No. I only use them at the beginning to loosen up the wedding party so no one faints during the ceremony. Now, the guests can hyperventilate all they want.

Dawson snorted, then put his hand over his mouth to stop from outwardly laughing at Marc.

Marc got serious and moved on with the service. "If it is your desired intention to bind yourselves one to another, please turn and face each other, then repeat after me." The brides acknowledged his command and faced one another.
Marc: I won't have you actually repeat the words today. Otherwise, you'll officially be married. Next are readings. Are you having any and if so, do you have people to do them?

Becca: We have two readings we wanted, and our mothers will be doing them.

Marc: Linda and Kathy, can you come up to the lectern and do your readings?

The mothers came forward and read their chosen passages, then went back down to their pews.

Marc: After the readings, I will give my message on the subject of love growing together over time versus the trend of it growing apart. Becca, I will be giving you a little needle over the haircut, but also use it as an example of how your relationship with EJ was so solid and in-tune that it didn't affect her feelings for or attraction to you. From there, if you have specific vows you want to say to one another, you can do that. Otherwise, we will move on to the ring exchange.

EJ: Currently, in the set-up here at the altar, the person who has my ring for Becca is at the end of my line.

Marc: We'll correct that when we do the full processional/recessional. Are you planning any special music during the ceremony?

Becca: No. The only thing that either of us wanted was Mary Love and Brooke doing the processional duet.

Marc: I make my pronouncement of the two of you being married, ask you to do what you will, preferably something that can be seen in mixed company, and allow you to face your guests. You will then recess out of the sanctuary. Where is the reception being held?

Kathy: Hardy Alumni Hall, due west and a little south of the chapel.

Marc: Walkable?

Kathy: It's less than two blocks probably.

Marc: Then my suggestion is to lead the congregation out of the chapel and over to Alumni Hall where you can do your receiving line or whatever you have planned between the ceremony and reception.

Steph, Mary Love, and Brooke came back into the sanctuary ready to be part of the proceedings.

Steph: We were able to get the right pitch and speed set up and found the correct volume level for them to sing over the instrumentation.

Marc: What about the power spots in the third stanza?

Steph looked at Marc confused. "I don't know what you mean."

Marc sat down for a minute with the two vocalists and went over that section, where there is a key change and the low brass becomes more pronounced, moving from a hymn-like piece to something more triumphant.

Marc: Can either of you hit that level of resonance?

Brooke: I have the lower, more commanding voice. Reckons since I'm a goalkeeper. I know what you're referring to, and I think I can make that sort of "awestruck" sound.
Mary Love: If Brooke can nail that, would I be able to do harmony behind it?

Marc: I don't see a problem with that. I just feel like there needs to be that commanding presence as EJ nears the altar, like the roof of the chapel opens up and you have the voice of God belting out that stanza.

Marc went back to the front of the altar and, after a quick discussion with Steph and Erin, gave his suggestion for how to handle the processional and recessional so that the couples would stay together going in and out, but the witnesses and ring carriers were in their necessary positions at the front.

Marc: Becca, EJ, remember I said I had a couple of ideas for how to handle your requests for the processional, but that they might be a bit unorthodox?

Becca: Yes.

Marc: I came up with a better one that I think will work out best. Care to give it a try?

EJ: You're the preacher, so order is really your domain.

Marc asked the wedding party to gather around the altar and for Steph to grab him some paper to diagram his idea.

Marc: We have three couples of the four pairings for the wedding party, and the two brides want them to process and recess together. They also have chosen Jillian and Morgan Reid as their witnesses and ring bearers. Therefore, they need to be right next to the brides at the altar. Also, with Dawson presumably on EJ's side and Michael on Becca's side, they will need to move around to end up where they should be for the ceremony. Hence, we will have different orders for the processional and recessional. Steph, can you stand at the bottom of the stairs, and Erin, can you go to the entrance with the wedding party, EJ, and Kelly to get them situated to come in?

Marc made a very quick sketch of the order and movement for Steph and Erin to work from, then stood back and watched how it played out. The processional started with Morgan and Michael, followed by Savannah and Sarah, Morgan and Sammy Jo, and Jillian and Dawson as the last couple before the bride and her father. When Morgan and Michael reached the front, they took up positions on either side of Becca. Savannah and Sarah stood to the outside of the first two, with Morgan and Sammy Jo doing the same. As Jillian and Dawson neared the stairs, Michael moved from his position to the end of the line on his side, while the three women on Becca's right moved down to leave a space for EJ. Jillian filled in the space on her sister's left and Dawson went to the end of the line on his sister's side of the altar. EJ and Kelly stepped off right as Dawson reached his destination, with a methodical approach to the altar. Becca did as before and met EJ at the bottom of the stairs, with the couple processing to their places following that.

Marc: It looks like what I drew up might actually work for the processional. Now, recessional will be a little different. Becca and EJ will depart first. Dawson and Michael, I want the two of you to come to the center from your ends. Michael, you will stop parallel to Morgan while Dawson continues onward to join with Jillian. You then will continue on and join your Morgan, with Morgan and Sammy Jo and Savannah and Sarah being the last two couples up the aisle, followed by myself. Is there a recessional piece planned?

EJ: We chose "The Call To Dance" because we will be proceeding from here to the reception site where there WILL be dancing. Becca loves the group that does it, so I gave in on this since she's letting me have the processional I want.

Marc: Only wish I could get Donnell, Doug, and Erin together to do this for you.
Becca: Don't tell me you know Leahy.

Marc: Seen the entire band in 2007 at Milwaukee Irish Fest plus numerous viewings of their live concert from Gatineau, then Donnell and Natalie with their pianists in 2009, then Doug and his kids twice in 2016, and Donnell, Natalie, and their kids this past year. You know Erin and Maria are former soccer players?

Becca: Noooooooo.....

Marc: I have a couple of versions of that song on my laptop. You'll only need about 90 seconds of the piece to get everyone gone, so we can play with that on Saturday. For now, let's see how the movement works on getting you all down and out.

Becca and EJ went down first, followed by Jillian and Dawson. Marc stopped after them because the spacing was too tight. He directed the remainder to wait until the previous couple passed the first set of pews before starting forward. The rest of the recessional went off flawlessly from there.

Marc: We need to run the processional first with the brass and then with the vocals over top of it.

The new processional order went through the motions, with small stops to note when EJ should enter and what pace she should take getting to the altar. After a decent go of it with just the music, Mary Love and Brooke added their vocals to it and the "pop" that Marc had wanted to hear came through loud and clear.

Marc: I think we're good. Sorry this went a little longer than you probably expected, but I feel like everything is ready for Saturday. Now, who's hungry?

Kathy, Linda, and Bill looked at one another and nodded at the comment, knowing that college students (and those just slightly out of college) are ALWAYS hungry.

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Back in Cary after the rehearsal dinner at Pup's Steakhouse in Wilson, Marc, Steph, Erin, and Dani were contemplating what to do with the rest of the evening. Dani told Marc that a number of coaches were planning to go to Champions Bar in Mooresville (15 minute drive from the hotel) for Ladies Night and karaoke. He thought that sounded like fun and an easy place for the two of them to be inconspicuous. While Steph and Erin debated their options, Marc handed Steph $30, a portion of the per-diem the pair didn't use due to dinner being provided that evening.

Marc: Take the money, go over to the mall, and spend some face-to-face, one-on-one time together. Browse, get coffee or ice cream, and just be a regular couple without worrying about what others are thinking. And remember, I don't want Cary's finest calling me to bail you out.

Erin: Got it, Marc.

The two hugged Marc before he and Dani left for Mooresville. While in route, the pair discussed plans for Friday and Saturday.

Marc: Have you decided what you're planning to do the next two days?

Dani: If it's OK with you, I'd like to pass on the two finals on Saturday and spend more time in Greensboro tomorrow.

Marc: As long as you attend the D-I final on Sunday, I don't see how there could be a problem. The games if I recall right are 1:00 and 3:30 for the women, 6:00 and 8:30 for the men, provided there's
no overtime or penalty kicks pushing back the start times. By the end of the third game, you should have had a chance to hit up and schmooze with everyone there and can come back to Cary. So would you be traveling with us on Saturday or coming down later on your own?

Dani: I think I'll use the time you're gone to relax and get prepared for the wedding. Are we planning to, well, you know....

Marc: My thoughts are to do that on Saturday after the reception, since I am sure I will want you SO BAD and I don't want to risk not being able to rise to the occasion by busting off tonight or tomorrow.

Marc then filled Dani in on his moderate dysfunction, brought on by an undescended testicle that wasn't removed from the left side of his lower torso until he was 15 and some presumed nerve damage from the surgery.

Marc: This is part of why I'm still a little cautious when it comes to us getting together for a romp, because I can't always be sure that I will be able to perform, and the psychological damage from Danielle's ridicule of me when I couldn't perform causes me to be reticent in putting myself out there like that.

Dani placed her hand on top of Marc's leg. "Before you left for Kansas City, we had an occasion where things didn't go as planned. When you explained then about your performance anxiety, I took it to heart and knew that you were a bit fragile in that part of your being. I've tried to be understanding and mix in things that would help you be more attracted to me and to get enough of a rise out of you so that we could bond like we would want. I can't imagine blaming you for something that is pretty much a physical problem, and I know that your heart wants to make that connection with me. We'll cross that bridge when or if the time comes, but know that I value our friendship more than to base it on whether you're perfect in bed. I will say that, when it's working, you're a bit of an animal and I want to feel you touch every last part of me."

After arriving at Champions, Dani went to the bar to get herself and Marc drinks while he looked around for a friendly face in the coaches' brigade.

Marc: Sam! Haven't seen you in a few years. How's life in Terre Haute?

Sam Schumer (Indiana State asst. coach): Marc! Wouldn't have expected to come down here for College Cup. What have you been doing with yourself since you shuttered MUSC?

Marc: I got into coaching education, then did our synod's diaconal education program. I am currently the chaplain at Trinity Lutheran University on the old Concordia campus.

Sam: Chaplain? Like a priest or pastor?

Marc: Well, yes. I'm not ordained, but I do have dispensation from our synod's bishop to administer the sacraments and perform all rites within the church. I'm actually here to perform a wedding for a pair of Duke alumnae, one of whom is local, who play for Philadelphia in NWSL.

Dani came over to where Marc and Sam were talking.

Sam (to Dani): I recognize you from somewhere. Did you play college soccer in Wisconsin?

Dani: Yes. I played at Stritch from 2013 to 2016.

Sam: It makes sense. I was the women's coach at Ripon College before moving on to Indiana State.
Dani: I loved the players we got from your school for our team at MUSC. Paige, Brandi, Jessie O'Connor.

Sam extended his hand to Dani, which she shook. "Sam Schumer." "Danielle Dillon."

Sam: Are you coaching anywhere at the moment, Danielle?

Dani: Yes. I'm the assistant women's coach at Trinity. Just completed my first season. We didn't do particularly well, but with 14 freshmen out of 20 players, it was expected.

Sam: Going to the College Cup games here tomorrow and Sunday?

Dani: Just the Sunday one. I'll be in Greensboro tomorrow for the Division III semifinals. Good chance for me to make acquaintance with other coaches at schools like TLU.

Sam: Excellent. Take advantage of talking to whoever you can and don't just limit yourself to the women's coaches. Some of the men's coaches oversee their school's women's program as well. I did it at Ripon for a couple of years and I know Kevin did it at Stritch before he went to Drake.

Marc: How did Abby and the kids adjust to the Indiana countryside?

Sam: Sully was a bit perplexed because there weren't any hockey rinks nearby for him to continue his development, or so he thought. Hadley was too young to have gotten attached to Ripon as a place. Abby was able to land a job at Terre Haute Regional Hospital not long after we re-located and is loving the slightly-slower pace from what she knew in Fond Du Lac.

Marc excused himself to go get a copy of the song book and a few slips of paper for him, Sam, and Dani. He returned quickly and the three looked through the discography for suitable tunes for them to perform. Once they made their selections and wrote them down, Dani went up to the DJ and handed them to him.

After around 15 minutes, Sam was called up to the microphone.

Sam: This goes out to all of the guys who are using this weekend to "get lucky". [Get Lucky]

Marc was called up next and professed how he was feeling about his relationship with Dani. [Desert Rose]

Dani thought through what she had heard come from the depths of Marc's soul and knew that she had made the right call on the song she planned to sing to him. [My Guy]

Marc listened intently and retreated into his own head, not sure of what Dani might be meaning or if he can reciprocate the commitment that seems to be forthcoming from her. Once she finished, he went to the bar to get another round for the three of them.

Marc: How is Erin Swanson panning out at Indiana State? I was very happy to see her end up with you. Had planned to suggest to her dad that he send her to Ripon, but he thought she had enough talent to reap a scholarship of some sort.

Sam: She had a fairly normal first season. Saw a decent amount of playing time, but mostly in specific situations where she could make a difference. Hopefully, we'll see improvement in the spring season and she'll be ready to challenge for a spot in the first XI when we open camp for next fall.

Marc looked at Dani and hinted that maybe they should head back to Cary. They said farewell to Sam and left Champions.
Marc and Dani entered her room, with him closing the door after he was inside. Marc went to sit down at the table on the far side of the room, hoping that Dani would follow him. The pair sat in silence for about two or three minutes, then Marc began to open up.

Marc: I really don't know what to do with you, with us. I have been SO close several times in the last two weeks or so to crossing that one line which would move our relationship into treacherous territory, and though I've stayed behind it I want to cross it and go further.

Dani: I understand the feeling. I have wanted you to crash your lips against mine and pour your love into me, but I know that you're afraid of what will come if that happens.

Marc: Yes. If we don't cross that line, it's still mostly a sexual relationship between two really close friends. If we do, it becomes a competing relationship to mine with Danielle and yours with Sarah. I am mentally stuck between knowing that you're the best thing that's happened to me and my vows both to the church and my wife. I feel like I can't forsake any of them, yet I will have to in order to reconcile things with myself.

Dani: Marc, I am so deeply in love with you. Nothing would make me happier than to have you spend the night with me, but that for sure would be too far, too fast. So what do we do?

Marc: I am fairly sure that I will fall sometime before the weekend is over. What I need is to make sure that, when I do, the trail doesn't follow me back home. I need to know that the other members of our party will not make mention of my eventual slip-up after we return to Milwaukee.

Dani nodded, thinking that she will need to have a talk with Erin sometime before all four of them return to the hotel on Saturday night. "You should probably go so that the temptation to act doesn't get out of control."

Marc agreed and the two of them walked over to the door. Marc wrapped his hands behind Dani's neck and looked into her eyes, the same way he did after their date two weeks ago. Dani looked back into Marc's and leaned slightly forward in case Marc chose to cross that friend/lover line. Instead, Marc took one of her hands and held it between his, then wrapped his fingers through both sides of it and lifted them to his mouth. She looked down, lost for a second in the emotion of his gesture. When her gaze returned to Marc's face, she kissed him on the cheek slowly and lovingly. He turned to open the door and left her room for his own next door.
College Cup Friday

The Trinity Lutheran ministry trio went up to Durham on Friday morning, where Marc showed the others Krzyzyewskiville outside Cameron Indoor Stadium, where the Blue Devils' most passionate fans would camp out for men's basketball season tickets and perhaps receive a pizza delivery from the man himself, head basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, the winningest men's basketball coach in NCAA history, along with the Duke Diet and Fitness Center (one of the country's leaders in no-frills weight loss) and the Duke Divinity School. They also hit a couple of eating establishments near campus before heading back to Cary. A fair number of the wedding party were at the hotel along with several members of the Hearts, making plans for tonight's semifinals pitting UCLA against Virginia and Duke versus Stanford. Marc saw Morgan Andrews and quickly talked to her about getting word around to the rest of the Valentine's Day brigade about meeting with him on Sunday morning to get some things laid out in-person. Becca was excited about tonight's match-ups as she would get to see her alma mater in the nightcap and her Canadian National Team roommate and bestie Jessie Fleming in the opener. Steph and Erin chatted with EJ for a couple of minutes, getting some insights on things she and Becca have planned for the reception so they can possibly steer their beloved father figure and the object of his affection toward one another.

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The opener in Cary got off to a furious start as UCLA and Virginia combined for five goals in the first 23 minutes, with the Bruins ahead 3-2. Cavalier midfielder Zoe Morse turned Jessie Fleming inside-out near the touchline and drove toward goal, her shot smothered by Teagan Micah.

Steph: God is that Morse making Jessie look bad.

Marc: You mean worse than Mother Nature has?

Erin: OOOOOOOOOOOOOO! That's mean, Marc, but funny.

Marc's deadpan one-liner was heard by a couple of people near the Duke supporters' section, causing one of them to send a text to someone in the Virginia supporters' section at WakeMed Park.

DMatheson8: DANG! Someone near me just dropped a major put-down on Baby Canada. It was so funny it got both me and Rhian to laughing.

HucksterSonny: Funnier than me?

DMatheson8: Maybe. Come over between games?

HucksterSonny: Yep. By the way, did Mo talk to you about meeting with the other Philly wedding couples on Sunday since the officiant and his team are here?

DMatheson8: Yes. You thinking about joining us on 2/14?

HucksterSonny: Possibly. I for sure want to sit in on your meeting and see what might be happening. Lindsey and I haven't settled on a date yet for sure.

The rest of the first half was frenetic, but nothing came of it and the Bruins went into the locker room hanging onto a one-goal lead. The second half opened with Ashley Sanchez and Jessie Fleming on a goal just 55 seconds into the stanza to put UCLA up 4-2.

Erin: Those two for UCLA are really good. Think either will play pro?
Marc: It should be illegal for Fleming to be playing college soccer, she is that much beyond the rest of the field. Has a Women's World Cup and an Olympic Games under her belt already and is probably the third-most-dangerous player on the Canadian National Team at the moment behind Sinclair and Beckie. Teams are probably already lining up ways to tank this upcoming season in order to grab her number 1 in the 2020 NWSL draft.

Steph: Any idea if Jessie and Ashley have something off-the-field?

Marc: Haven't heard anyone trying to get the two of them together. Hear more with Mal Pugh and each of them. Also hear that those two aren't really friends, but you can't tell that from the way they play together.

Marc got a message from Danielle in Greensboro.

DaniPDillon: Time down here has been good. Just starting Game 3 as the last one went ET. Leaving at the half for Cary. Missing you, but looking forward to tomorrow. Text when you're on the way back and I'll meet you in the bar at the hotel. XO.

He smiled at the text and wrote her back.

DeaconSchmidt: Miss you as well. Definitely looking forward to knocking you out of your chair in my full regalia and the slick-and-smooth look at the reception. Love you, Deuce. See you when I get back. <3<3

The Cavaliers were able to pull back a goal in the 68th minute and had gotten a penalty kick opportunity inside the last minute of play, but Micah correctly guessed on Taylor Ziemer's shot to preserve the Bruins' 4-3 win and secure a place in the College Cup final on Sunday against the Duke/Stanford winner.

Between games, Emily Sonnett went over to visit with Diana Matheson and a couple of the other Hearts in attendance.

Emily: So where is the jokester?

Diana: I think it's the guy in the blue sweatshirt next to the two wearing the college lacrosse jackets. Have a seat and let's see if he starts cracking stuff off.

Steph and Erin needled Marc over Dani's text to him, to which he gave back some ribbing over what he knew the two of them wanted to do on this trip.

Marc: Just because the two of you are drooling at the possibility of breaking a bed or two this weekend doesn't mean that I am eager to listen to it, nor to have the synod pay for the repairs.

Emily chuckled. Turning to Diana, she said, "That's gotta be him. Too good of a comeback."

Diana and Emily moved into the next section, taking up seats just behind Marc, Steph, and Erin. Before either of them could interrupt the back-and-forth between the three of them, Becca and EJ came over.

Becca (to Steph): How are you enjoying yourself?

Steph: This is great. You two staying over here for the second game?

EJ: Better believe it. Morgan Reid and a couple of others should be coming over closer to kickoff.
Emily: Becca! You know these three?

Becca: Yes.

Marc turned around to see who was behind him and nearly choked on his own tongue, as it so happened that his very favorite player on the planet for the last 10+ years was not three feet away from him.

Steph: Marc, you look like you've seen a ghost.

Marc: No, Steph. Just the greatest 5'0 player to grace a football field. The legendary D-Math!

Diana blushed slightly. "I'm not THAT good, sir. Just feisty and funny."

Erin looked at Steph as if to say, "You shouldn't have done that, Diana."

Emily: Not as funny as me, D. After all, you DID hand over the court jester outfit to me.

Marc mentally went through his bank of spicy repartee so he could prove to the two Hearts comics that they aren't in his league.

Marc: Sounds like you're laying down a challenge as to who is the funniest. I'm sure you heard me drop some of my off-the-cuff quips earlier. Want more?

Emily: Bring it.

Marc: I think I need to have Jessminder's auntie come to town to help you girls get ready for tomorrow night. After all, if she can turn mosquito bites into mangoes, I'm sure she could help you, too.

Diana cringed but laughed at the same time. "Zing, Sonny!"

Marc: You're not getting off the hook, dear Diana. Why do you treat that gem of a future wife of yours like scurvy? Maybe because she can get under your skin in TWO languages!

Erin: Sorry, ladies. You shouldn't have gotten him going.

EJ: I really hope no one coming tomorrow has a pacemaker. They may not survive the first few minutes of the ceremony if Marc starts getting on a roll.

Emily extended her hand to Marc. "Truce?"

Marc shook Emily's hand. "Truce."

Diana: So, Marc, how did you get to be so funny?

Marc: Listening to Carlin, Cosby, Jeff Dunham, Robin Williams, plus going on feel for some of my one-liners. Steph and Erin can attest to a lot of my oddball witticisms. I will say that you two have had your moments. Diana, your video with Rhian for UNICEF was a good laugh because she is SO deadpan and straight-person that it's almost as funny as you making fun of her for it. Meanwhile, Emily, you and Kling at last year's Stand Together banquet giving out the not-so-real Thorns awards, including a needle on your own Lindsey for her Messi obsession, made me roll. Not to mention, it was probably the first time I saw you as something other than a mean center back.

Morgan Reid, Michael, and a number of other Hearts players came over to the Duke supporters' section for the second game of the doubleheader with their Blue Devils facing Stanford. Becca
introduced everyone to Steph, Erin, and the deacon.

The nightcap followed the tenor of the opener, with the Cardinal getting goals from Tierna Davidson and Jordan Dibiasi inside the first fifteen minutes to run out to a 2-0 lead over Duke. The rest of the first half was a series of counterattacks from the two teams, with an Ella Stevens tally bringing the Blue Devils within one after 45 minutes. Duke got an equalizer from Kayla McCoy at the 57 minute mark, but a quick response from Catarina Macario put Stanford back ahead. A free kick by Stevens with 94 seconds left in regulation rocketed off the Cardinal's crossbar and went out for a goal kick. That would be the last chance for Duke as Stanford won, 3-2, and punched their ticket to face UCLA in the College Cup final on Sunday.

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Back at the hotel in Cary, Marc stopped in at the Park Bar and Grill where Dani was waiting for him. They went up to his room to catch up on the day that was.

Marc: How did your time in Greensboro go?

Dani: Very well. Got to see some good soccer and talk with a number of coaches from our region. Macalester hosts a three-day tournament over Labor Day weekend that I hope Sara will consider as part of our non-conference schedule, and I was invited by the coach at Kalamazoo College to consider a home-and-home with them for 2019 and 2020.

Marc: Nice. I did my Sports Administration internship there. Also got my first taste of professional religious leadership there as part of the school's chaplaincy board.

Dani: Got any contacts still at the school?

Marc: The school's volleyball coach and Phy Ed chair was our chaplaincy board's coordinator. If Trinity wants to get a multi-sport contract worked out for say, soccer, volleyball, and lacrosse, she might be the best person to run it through.

Dani: I'll have to pass that info onto Gavin. How was Cary tonight?

Marc: The two games were off-the-hook. Total of 12 goals between the four teams. It's UCLA and Stanford for the title on Sunday. Got into a bit of a joke-off with Emily Sonnett and Diana Matheson.

Dani took a moment to gather her thoughts before moving onto a more serious subject with Marc. She scooted closer to him on the bed and rested her head against his shoulder.

Dani: I'm a little worried about tomorrow night. Some of the people there know you're married. How do I pass myself off as your "date" without getting you in hot water or causing a mess when we get home?

Marc stroked Dani's hair while forming his response. "From a general look and age perspective, you, Erin, and Steph could easily pass as siblings. If I get questions about Danielle, I'll answer them truthfully, that she had to work this weekend and isn't overly comfortable at the higher-profile weddings that I perform. Besides, Paul and Matt knew you were coming to Raleigh with the three of us and that it was possible that you'd be going with us to Wilson tomorrow."

Dani looked up at Marc and kissed his cheek. "Thanks for the reassurance. Tomorrow is going to be a different environment for me than at Trinity, and I will need to see how I respond to it."

Marc: I'm sure you will do fine. Have fun at the reception and with Steph and Erin. I tend to be a bit of a stick-in-the-mud at them, preferring to watch what's going on than to participate in it. I will
guarantee that we'll have at least one dance together, and after we get back here, we will have our own private spin of the floor, and the bed, and maybe the desk..."

Dani shoved Marc lightly. "Stop it, you're turning me on and the liquid courage from earlier isn't helping me stay away from acting on impulse. We should call it a night."

Marc walked Dani to the door, where the two of them embraced and then slowly separated, with her leaving to return to her room.
Wedding day started for the foursome from Milwaukee at the Park Bar and Grill inside the Doubletree, with Marc going over the service with his assistants a final time before they would leave for Wilson around noon.

Marc (to Steph and Erin): Are both of you sure about your parts in the run-up and within the ceremony if needed?

Steph: I'll be helping you vest up and handling the soundtrack for the processional and recessional, if I remember right.

Erin: Keeping the participants calm and the entry order correct seems to be what I'll be concentrating on, right?

Marc: Correct on all accounts. I don't think any of you have seen my full set of vestments, so that will be a surprise for some of you, and Steph, you'll get a good idea of how they are supposed to be worn. I'm going to talk to the Bishop next week about getting proper attire for our liturgical assistants because I definitely want you two and Alyssa to stand out a bit when we go to Philly.

Erin: Promise me that you'll keep the jokes tame and not go too hard after the brides, party, or guests.

Marc: They're not meant to be harmful, just witty.

Dani (to Erin and Steph): Would you girls like some assistance with getting ready?

Steph: I could sure use a second set of eyes and you know my outfit best of everyone here.

Dani: You brought the jumpsuit?

Steph: Yes, with a contrasting blazer. Used it for my pre-candidacy interview last week in Waterloo and thought it'd work for today as well.

Erin: I might need a bit of guidance on accessorizing and maybe my make-up. I don't like wearing a lot of it, so it's hit-and-miss when I do.

Dani: I'll do what I can to help you look great both for the event as well as one another.

Steph and Erin smiled at Dani. "Thanks. We should head back up to get started if we're leaving at 12."

Erin, Steph, and Dani left Marc to get ready for the wedding. Marc spent a few minutes reading through his homily and deciding if there were other thoughts he wanted to add about Becca, EJ, and their journey. As he walked to the elevators, he was stopped by Diana, who inquired about tomorrow's meeting for the Philly couples. Marc told her that he was looking at 9:00 since the final at WakeMed was scheduled for noon. She said she'd pass the word onto the others and that she looked forward to seeing what was up his sleeve for today's wedding.

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Since getting Erin done up was going to take longer than Steph, she went ahead and showered first of the pair. While out of earshot, Steph and Dani talked.

Steph: Any advice on how to, um, make the first move on Erin physically?
Dani: Do you know that she's interested in, well, being intimate with you?

Steph: I know she is, but I also know that she has very little if any experience in that part of a relationship. I don't want to turn her off by being too aggressive, but I also don't want to just let this opportunity slide by and then we're waiting until possibly after finals on campus if one or both roommates are gone before us. This is a special occasion, and I told her that I wanted to wait for one before taking that step.

Dani: Since you do have the experience, perhaps entice her to be the initiator. She'll be able to keep things from getting over her head and you'll get a bit of a road map as to what she might like.

Steph: You going to give her that advice if she asks you?

Dani: Yes. When you're not that well-versed in the physical part of a relationship with another woman, it's probably best to take what you already know gets you going from self-exploration and do that on another person. I can't say I've had THAT many female partners, but this was the advice I got from one of my older sisters when I told her that I was bi, or at least thought I was.

Erin came out of the bathroom changed, her hair still wet. She went to slip on her heels and then stood before the other two women in her black and silver below-the-knee sleeveless dress.

Steph took a bit of a gulp, unsure of what she might say. Dani jumped in to get her friend off the hook.

Dani: Erin, for someone who I know doesn't dress up a lot and isn't really girly-girly, you look extremely cute but totally feminine when you do. I'd probably be copying your look if I wasn't so heavy up top and with the hips to match.

Erin blushed a little bit, then thanked her for the compliment. Steph, finally able to speak, told her what she thought.

Steph: Darling, you look fantastic. I ought to go get myself prepared or I might act on what I'm thinking about and we're going to end up being late if that happens.

Erin chuckled, then gave Steph a serious stare that seemed to say, "Later, my love."

Steph went into the bathroom to do her thing, leaving the other two in the main room. While Dani was working on Erin's hair, the two of them conversed.

Dani: It looks like you've already made an impression on Steph with your outfit. Maybe we can kick it up a little more with a cute do. You are really attractive in that cute-girl-next-door way, and I mean that sincerely.

Erin: Thanks again, and I know you do. Since you've been around a bit more than I, how do I go about letting Steph know that I want her "that way"?

Dani: That is almost a question better answered by Marc, because his advice would be so straightforward. "You just do it." Seriously, you flirt a little and you engage in a bit of visual foreplay tonight at the wedding.

Erin: In other words, eye-fuck her?

Dani: No. It tends to make a person uncomfortable to be stared at like that. Visual foreplay involves more getting the emotional aspect of your relationship to translate into physical desire.
Erin: This come from experience or just based on what you've seen with others?

Dani was unsure if she should share with Erin about her and Marc's evolving relationship, which she hoped tonight would end up moving to the level where the emotional and physical blended.

Dani: A little from experience, some from what I've seen and heard, and a bit is I think wishful thinking.

Dani decided that she would give Erin a French braid with a knot at the back. As she was working on it, Steph came out in her outfit [black jumpsuit with a grey blazer and black open-toed booties].

Erin: Saw it last Tuesday, and you still rock it like a star, bae

Dani: Dang does that work for you, like I said it would when you bought it.

Steph: I think I need you to go through my closet sometime and give me more suggestions. Ooooo...I like what you're doing with Erin's hair. As if I needed any more thoughts of her loveliness going through my head.

Dani: I'm just about finished. Let me add a couple of pins to hold everything together, and.....done.

Erin: Wow! I love it.

Steph: I'm just going to keep mine as is. Good look for me, frames my face well, I think.

Dani: Totally. Since I've helped you two out with a few things, can I get your opinions on my outfit and maybe what I should add to it?

Erin: You wanting to get our favorite man a little flustered tonight?

Dani: Not flustered, because that could lead to an attack. I don't think I've played to my more romantic side around him, going for heat over heart. I brought an outfit that is more demure if you will, but still a good bit flirty. Come over to my room and take a look?

The three of them left Steph and Erin's room and went to Dani's on the other side of Marc's. Dani went to the closet and pulled out her dress and shoes for the night, laying them out on her bed.

Dani: It's an off-the-shoulder, so envision it on my arms just above the elbow and everything above it exposed.

Erin: The shoes are really cute. Not as dominating as some that you wear.

Steph: It's hot, but like you said, more "womanly" than some of the other things you wear.

Erin: How do you plan to go with your hair?

Dani: I usually go with the half-in-front, half-behind when I wear this. My curls cover one of the shoulders while leaving the other uncovered. Another option is the messy bun behind the right shoulder.

Erin: Hmmm....ever thought about a side braid over the left? I know Marc is a bit of a sucker for that, and in my opinion it would accentuate the softer look you say you're seeking.

Having heard all the voices coming from Dani's room, Marc went there to pick up his students and leave for Wilson.
Marc (to Erin and Steph): I've got to say, you two together could pass for sisters, but you also look like an adorable couple.

Erin pecked Marc's cheek, followed by Steph. Marc made sure Dani had directions from the hotel to Barton College, which was followed by him giving her a kiss and the girls thanking her again for her help. After stopping at their room to get their purses, Erin and Steph waited for Marc to exit his room with his vestments, dress clothes, and laptop bag. Once everyone was ready, the three of them went downstairs to leave the hotel and drive to Barton.

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The crew arrived at Howard Chapel just after 1pm and were greeted by the chapel's custodian, who directed them to the sacristy. Marc hung up his two garment bags, one with his vestments and the other with his outfit for the day, then headed into the sanctuary to get a feel for the lighting, the temperature, and the acoustics with no one in the building. Around 1:30, a good portion of the wedding party and associates arrived at the chapel. Marc asked Kathy Proctor about photos and other pre-ceremony obligations of the brides and their attendants so he knew when he'd be able to test run the recessional with the music with a couple of volunteers. Once that was clarified, he informed her that he and his assistants were going to leave briefly to grab lunch but should be back no later than 3:00.

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After returning to Howard, Marc went into the sacristy to change into his grey slacks and blue short-sleeve mock, leaving his black jacket hung up. He would wait until closer to the ceremony to put on his vestments (the alb, stole, and dalmatic).

At 3:00, Marc, Steph, and Erin met with Mary Love and Brooke to work on the music and pacing for the processional and recessional. As the four women exited the chapel, the deacon timed and paced out the distance from the altar down to the floor, then from there to the exit at the back of the sanctuary. With that information, he used the other four to simulate those two parts so that everything would come off correctly when the time came.
With pictures in the sanctuary and around the chapel completed, Marc took in the scenery one last time before going back into the sacristy and vesting up for the ceremony. Steph joined him after a couple of minutes and looked at Marc's robes for the wedding.

Steph: You have to wear ALL of this?

Marc: I don't HAVE to, but I choose to use it when I am in formal environments or when I'm assisting a pastor at a service.

Steph pulled Marc's alb off its hanger and held it open. He slid his arms into the sleeves and zipped it up. Following that, he held the overlapping front portion on its left side and walked Steph through tying the cincture around his waist. The next step was placing the deacon's stole over his left shoulder and binding it at his right hip. After that, Steph removed the dalmatic from its hanger and had Marc get into it. Once it was fully on him and draped over his body, he and she took a look at the combination.

Marc: As you see, the full outfit is a bit heavy, which is why I wait until the last possible moment to change.

Steph: Would I be able to choose my colors for the various parts?

Marc: Some of it depends on liturgical season, some is personal preference. Despite the dalmatic (royal blue) and stole (purple) being different colors, they both correspond with Advent. The traditional one for weddings is white, but if I were to choose not to wear the dalmatic, I want to have some color in the regalia.

Steph: You said you were going to try and get us vestments for when we assist you with weddings or at weekly worship. How would we be attired in that case?

Marc: Alb and cincture. I'd like to get something university-specific as well that we can use on-campus, in the school colors. I'll bring that up when I visit the synod offices on Thursday. We still have to get Peer Ministry approved as an official student organization by SGA on Wednesday. I'll talk to you, Erin, and Alyssa about it after rehearsal on Monday and I'd like to have the three of you stop into my office after lunch bunch on Wednesday to put you through a simulation of the hearing.

Steph: Ready?

Marc: I was born ready.

**********

Erin was out in the Howard Chapel lobby waiting for the participants to come out from their dressing rooms and to put out any last-minute fires that would affect the service. Around 5:40, Dani arrived, looking as stunning as the other two had imagined when they were critiquing her outfit earlier in the day.

Erin: If I may, you look good enough to eat. If you weren't already with Marc and I with Steph, I might be tempted a little bit.

Dani blushed at Erin's compliment and sort-of pick-up line. "I don't know whether to be flattered or a bit scared that you have picked up the wandering eye from those around you."
Erin: If you can say that you'd copy my look if you had the body, I can say that you have the potential to turn me on if I weren't already committed to someone. I see you're going half-forward, half-back tonight.

Dani: I didn't want to deal with the possibility that the braid would frizz up or come out of place on the drive over. Is there someplace where we can get my mop under control enough so I can put it into the side braid you mentioned?

Erin and Dani went just inside the sanctuary and to one of the back corners. Erin took Dani's brush and got her hair fully loosened from its snarls. Erin then brushed everything toward Dani's left shoulder, where she split it into three strands and quickly interlaced them, tying it off with a piece of forest green ribbon put into a bow.

Erin: Beautiful. Marc will love it. I just hope he doesn't see you before the ceremony starts, as it might make him lose his concentration. Sit with me back here, since I need to coordinate the processional?

Dani: Sure. It will probably keep me out of his line of sight.

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Becca had come back to the sacristy to meet with Marc and Steph before the three of them would step out into the sanctuary.

Marc (to Becca): How are you feeling?

Becca: Somewhere between throwing up and fainting.

Marc: Relax. This is going to be no harder than what you did on Draft Day in your thank-you speech. In fact, the first part will be easier since I'll give you the words to say. The only thing you might need to worry about is not being able to keep a straight face, and having a small chuckle with your wife and friends isn't the worst thing that can happen.

Becca: When you got married, how did you handle the emotions of watching your wife come toward you?

Marc: We did ours outside at a scenic overlook and just gathered in front of the pastor when the time arrived. No processional or anything. Only suggestion I have is to intentionally look at either Kelly or at the back of the sanctuary with only intermittent glances at EJ until you need to walk down and meet her. Otherwise, you're going to lose it.

Becca: Thanks, Marc. Showtime yet?

Marc: Just about. I'm going to take a quick peek out to see if everything is in order for the processional. Steph, this would be the time to get to your post with the soundtrack.

Marc and Steph left the sacristy and observed the congregation. Steph went to her place on the left side of the sanctuary where Marc's laptop was plugged-in and on a table so she could start the processional music at the appropriate time. Marc looked at the back to see Erin getting the non-party processors organized for their eventual walk to their pews and posts. His eyes then looked to his left where he saw Dani and took a deep breath as her look for tonight had him in a bit of a spin. He quickly walked back to the sacristy.

Marc: Cancel my previous advice. Seems I just got an idea of what you might end up going through. Actually, stick with it. It'll be the only way you'll be able to keep it all in check.
Steph chose to put on a bit of background music for the pre-processional, a piece called "In The Morning Light". Marc and Becca came out from the sacristy and took up their positions in front of the altar. Once Mary Love and Brooke had gotten to their spots on the corners of the stage, Steph switched to the instrumental of "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring". Morgan and Michael started down the aisle on the opening note of the piece, with each couple in succession stepping off eight measures after the previous one. EJ and Kelly looked at one another after Jillian and Dawson left the doorway. She leaned into him, then straightened up and the pair processed toward the altar. When they were four pews from the front, Becca descended the stairs to meet them. Kelly gave EJ's hand to Becca, then kissed both of them on the cheek before joining Kathy in the front pew with the two brides moving ahead to their place in front of Marc at the altar.

Marc: Friends, Blue Devils, Carolinians, lend me your ears.

Morgan and Michael dropped a pair of plastic ears onto the stage, which caused a slight murmur in the pews.

Marc: Very funny, you two! I'm supposed to be the one with the punchlines. Anyways...Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join these two women in the bonds of holy matrimony. As children of God and beloved daughters of their parents, both Becca and EJ have arrived at this moment full of hope and in the deepest of all possible love with one another, which they seek to codify through the reciting of vows and exchange of rings before all of you here today. Marriage is a wonderful institution, and those who choose to practice it belong in one.

Several of the people in the pews had to stifle their desire to burst out laughing at the last comment. Marc then moved onto the first part of the actual service, the declaration of intent and vows.

Marc: If it is your intent to unite yourselves one to another in wedlock, please turn and face each other and repeat after me.

Becca and EJ turned to face each other, holding hands and beaming.

Marc: I, Emma Jane,/Take you, Rebecca Catherine,/As my lawfully wedded wife,/To have and to hold,/From this day forward,/In the good times and the bad,/In plenty and in want,/When I am down, and when I am up,/And forsaking all others,/Commit myself to you/Until we shall part by death.

Marc: I, Rebecca Catherine,/Take you, Emma Jane,/As my lawfully wedded wife,/To have and to hold,/From this day forward,/In good times and bad,/In plenty and in want,/When I am down, and when I am up,/And forsaking all others,/Commit myself to you/Until we shall part by death.

Following the I Do's, Kathy Proctor and Linda Quinn came up to the lectern and gave their readings, which led into Marc's message about love growing together in an environment and at a time in people's lives where their exploration usually leads to it growing apart.

Morgan handed EJ's ring for Becca to her, while Jillian gave her sister EJ's ring.

Marc: Repeat after me. With this ring, I thee wed.

Both brides recited the words, with EJ going first followed by Becca as they slid the bands onto one another's finger.

Marc: In the presence of God and in front of these witnesses, by the power vested in me, by the state of North Carolina, I now pronounce you wife and wife. You may kiss your bride.

Becca and EJ smiled at one another, then sealed the deal with a soft and tender kiss.
Marc: What God has brought together, let no person separate. Ladies and gentlemen, may I present Rebecca and Emma Jane Proctor.

Steph queued up "The Call To Dance", after which Becca and EJ walked down the stairs hand-in-hand and started their trip back up the aisle, followed by Jillian and Dawson, then Michael and Morgan, Morgan and Sammy Jo, with Savannah and Sarah going down last. Marc walked out behind the last couple and, as he got toward the back of the chapel, winked at Dani before exiting the sanctuary.

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The reception for Becca and EJ's wedding was underway at Hardy Alumni Hall. Toasts were made by Jillian, Morgan Reid, Becca's sister Lauren, Duke head coach Robbie Church, Philadelphia Hearts general manager Wendy Gebauer Palladino, and a combined one by Steph Labbe and Ali Krieger, the brides' mentors with the Hearts. Of course, there was the glass-clinking and the request from the couple for people to be more creative if they wanted them to kiss. Becca's national team bestie, Jessie Fleming, along with her UCLA teammate Ashley Sanchez came forward and did a duet of "L-O-V-E", a bit off-key but with fervor. After the plates from dinner were taken away, a number of people gathered at the bar in the corner of the room while waiting for the dance to begin.

Marc (to Dani): This is a LOT better than the reception at the wedding I did in KC.

Dani: How so?

Marc: For one, I don't have one of the guests trying to get my attention in an environment where I really don't know anyone but her. Secondly, three of my four favorite women are here with me. Last, but definitely not least, I feel like the ceremony and the whole weekend up to this point has allowed me to be "me" and not the uptight guy in the pulpit that one would expect from the news that's gone around the university world the past three months.

Dani: I didn't get to say this yet, but I think your get-up tonight looks even better than what you wore to the All-Sports Mixer. Not much different in terms of color combination, but the sapphire mock is a much better color on you in a formal setting than black or something less bright.

Marc: Merci, mon amour. I haven't had a chance to let you know that my quick retreat into the sacristy before the ceremony was because I got a look at you and my head started to spin over how beautiful you looked and how it made me feel.

Emily Sonnett, Lindsey Horan, Diana Matheson, and Rhian Wilkinson came over to Marc asking about tomorrow's meeting and whether he planned to use today's order of service for the one in Philly.

Marc: The broad pieces should be similar, but I always take the couples' wishes and personal touches into account. With yours being a multi-couple one, there will need to be a bit more coordination, both before the days leading up to it and then on-site with the rehearsal. Our plan, subject to synod approval, is to fly into Philadelphia on Monday the 11th and have that evening, all of Tuesday, and Wednesday morning to get the order finalized. Two questions: Do you have a time set for the wedding on the 14th, and have you taken care of the legalities for it to be performed on the plaza?

Diana: We were thinking either 11am or 2pm, so that we could avoid the 12-1pm period. As for the legal stuff, Kristie is the one more or less coordinating all of it so I'm presuming she is handling it. You should bring both of these up tomorrow so we're all on the same page.

Marc: Of those two times, my preference would be the 11am. First, you're not waiting around that
extra three hours to do it. Second, you're also not potentially delayed by tourists or others in the plaza. I'll pitch that to the rest of the group in the morning. Now, Lindsey and Rhian, are your two ladies going to actually be able to get you out on the dance floor tonight, and will we see more than the head-bop thing from you, Rhi?

Rhian: Given the height difference between Diana and myself, it might be more the move-in-a-circle thing on a couple of the slow songs.

Lindsey: I'll get out there with the rest of the team for some of the faster stuff. As for the more romantic ones, we'll see.

Marc: One last thing. Diana, are you and the rest of your compatriots planning for a little Celine Dion tribute later?

Diana: You know it! We might be able to get some of the Americans who are with Canadians to join us, like Ali, Ashley, and EJ.

The four of them went back to their table, where they were seated with Steph Labbe and Ali and Carm and Emily Zurrer.

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Rob Bassett (DJ): Is everyone ready to party?!?!?!?!?!

A fair amount of yelling and applause came from the guests.

Rob: Will Becca and EJ please take the floor for your first dance as wives?

Becca took EJ's hand and they walked to the center of the floor. Rob then started the song they chose for this occasion. ["Amazed" by Lonestar]

After the first verse and refrain, Rob asked the rest of the wedding party to join the couple on the floor for the remainder of the song.

Rob: Next is the Father/Daughter dance. The brides have requested that ALL fathers and daughters join them and their dads for this.

Erin looked at Steph, then got up and tried to drag Marc to his feet.

Erin: I'm not going to get this chance when I get married, so I'd like to do it now.

Marc looked at the other two and thought for a second, then realized that he wasn't going to be able to turn her down and walked out to the floor with his goddaughter.

About halfway through "Because You Loved Me" by Celine Dion, Steph asked Erin if she could cut in and finished the dance with Marc.

Rob: The dance floor is now open. This next song ["Dance With Me" by Orleans] is considered a Ladies' Choice, meaning that the women get to pick their partners.

Marc looked behind Steph and saw Dani standing there, non-verbally asking if she could have this dance with him. Steph looked back, smiled at Dani, then at Marc and left to join Erin on the dance floor.

Marc allowed Dani to lead sort of, as he is normally very stiff on the dance floor. The camaraderie between the pair was unmistakable to those around them, especially Erin and Steph. Dani's smile
was radiant and she got lost in Marc's loving gaze. At the end of the song, Marc bowed to her, which she responded to with a slight curtsy. With up-tempo music in store and him having "white boy" dance skills, Marc went to take a seat and was joined by Bill Quinn, Bill Palladino, and Kelly Proctor.

Bill Quinn: Marc, you have a lovely family. The three girls look to get along really well and they all seem to adore you.

Marc: Come again?

Bill Quinn: Your daughters. They remind me of how Lauren, Erin, and Jillian were a couple of years ago when they were still in college, before life spread them out.

Marc: I'm not actually related to any of them. The two youngest are students of mine at Trinity and part of our school's in-development peer ministry program. The mop top is my goddaughter and the other woman is her girlfriend.

Bill Palladino: I figured that the third one wasn't your daughter because of the way it looked like you were having a good time on the floor and the slight bits of eye contact I was able to catch. Girlfriend?

Marc was put into a bind here, because that was literally the truth that would come forth later in the evening if things went as planned. He paused and gave an honest answer.

Marc: She is the assistant women's soccer coach at Trinity and came down here to attend the Division III College Cup in Greensboro. My wife doesn't particularly like the travel and attention of the weddings that I end up presiding over, plus she had to work this weekend back in Wisconsin. Danielle and I are friends. She used to play for a WPSL development team that I ran for a few years and is a graduate if you will of the urban coaching module I developed after shutting the club down in 2015.

Kelly Proctor: Which explains how Becca and EJ came to find out about you. Bill, wasn't it one of your former players that passed his name onto Wendy?

Bill Palladino: Yes, Elysa Friedman.

Marc: She was one of the "guinea pigs" that helped me with the content of the module. When I told my coaching network that I was in the process of finishing my theological education and would be entering the diaconate upon completion, she passed the word around I guess. It's how I got two FCKC couples to ask me to do theirs, EJ and Becca, and the group in Philly for Valentine's Day.

After a half-hour or so of upbeat tunes, EJ took the microphone from Rob and introduced a surprise for the guests.

EJ: Before we get into the cake-cutting and other "silly" parts of the evening, Becca and I thought it'd be sort of funny to embarrass our parents and those of their certain age. One of the seminal movies of their adolescence was a flick called "Say Anything". For those who haven't seen it, the story line dealt with an average student falling for the school's valedictorian, a classic mismatch. After she breaks up with him, he serenades her with.....a boombox. We don't have Lloyd Dobler with us tonight, but we found a suitable stand-in. Zach, can you come out and get this dance started?

Zach Palladino (Wendy and Bill's son) came walking to the front of the room in a trench coat and carrying a 1980's style boombox. He faced the crowd and raised it over his head, at which point Rob started the song ["In Your Eyes" by Peter Gabriel]. A large number of couples took to the floor, including the Quinns, the Proctors, the Palladinos, Marc and Danielle, Becca and EJ, Steph and Erin,
and Savannah and Sarah. As Marc and Danielle danced, he mouthed the words to her, which caused her to blush a bit. Steph and Erin got lost in one another, with both of them thinking about what they had planned to do back at the hotel after the wedding. When the song ended, Steph leaned over and lightly kissed Erin, with the slightly-shorter woman returning it. Meanwhile, the other pair were eye-locked on one another, but knew they couldn't do the same thing that Steph and Erin just had. Dani broke the tension by kissing Marc softly on the top part of his left cheek. Marc then took Dani’s left hand and kissed it just above the top of her ring and middle fingers.

Once the cake-cutting and bouquet tosses were completed, Marc and his trio left the reception to head back to Cary.

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Erin was riding back to Cary with Danielle wanting to talk with her about Marc's perceived resistance to acting on his emotions and to get a bit of advice on dealing with Steph's unintentional looking around.

Erin: I can see that Marc loves you, and that you feel the same. So why, when the chance was there to show it, did it seem like neither of you were willing to do it?

Dani: I think, at that moment, the idea of publicly doing it and possibly putting him into a bit of a jam was what froze me from going forward on it. As for him, this has been an issue for a couple of weeks now. I know he wants to take the emotional leap, but something is stopping him from doing it.

Erin: I know on Monday when we met that I said I wasn't going to poo-poo the two of you being together or what might happen outside of eyesight. I think I need to make a stronger declaration of that in case he is holding back because of my opinion of your partnership.

Dani: I thought you stated it well on Monday, that you had seen some things previously that had changed your opinion about us.

Erin: I didn't tell you about what had happened over Thanksgiving break. Marc had an attack while my dad, Danielle, and I were at the new Fantastic Beasts movie. When the three of us caught up with him, Steph, and my mom, Danielle seemed a bit miffed that he had allowed himself to get worked-up like that, as though he could control whether he would fall victim to an attack. The rest of the weekend was sort of tense, and I'm sure he was looking forward to getting back to campus on Monday to get away from her for a few hours. I said what I said hoping to release him to act on how he felt about you. I guess I didn't say it strong enough.

Dani: For what it's worth, if he doesn't move forward when we get back to the hotel, I will. I so badly want for us to be more than just two friends who love each other getting physical now and again.

Erin: You know he has the problem with his wandering eye. How do you handle it?

Dani: I don't take offense to it. He told me what Danielle had said in front of you and Steph about his desire to roam. He's going to look, there is no denying that, just like Steph is, but if there is no action toward it, or better if the feelings/desire come back on you, you shouldn't get in a tizzy over it. What I know about him, and I am sort of sure this holds true for your girl as well, is he is well-aware of the problem and consciously tries to stay on top of it. If you're worried about going all the way with her tonight only to have her unwittingly stare at someone else a little too long tomorrow, put that thought out of your head, Erin. She loves you and only you, and she has been holding off crossing that line with you because she wants you to be at complete ease with her. In fact, I suggested to her that you take the lead.
Erin thought about what Dani had said and reconciled with herself the desire to consummate her relationship with Steph later. In the other car, Marc was giving Steph a slight bit of the third degree concerning her intentions with Erin.

Marc: I heard from Erin that you and her are considering taking your relationship to another level. She has told me multiple times about her fear that you won't be able to stay away from other women. I know that you have told me about your past, a bit, and that you want to be there at the end of the road with Erin. Are you sure that you'll be able to give her the total commitment she will expect after the two of you make that jump?

Steph: I love her more than I can imagine loving another person. My heart and my spirit want her to be my one and only. My gut and the other body parts that go with it, that's another story. Can I ask you about what Danielle said a couple of weeks ago about your wandering eye. Is it true?

Marc: Yes. How do you think I ended up in this situation with Dani? I gave off the impression I was interested, she came onto me, and I couldn't get out of my frozen state to stop it. Now, I might have been able to claim temporary insanity for that, but I knew full well what I was doing when we went back to my office after the Faculty Senate meeting in October.

Steph: Have you talked to her about it, since it seems you and her are pretty much an item even if few people know it?

Marc: Yes. We had that conversation two weeks ago. I told her about what Danielle had said and gave her my explanation of what goes on in my head. I can't stop myself from observing what's around me or what my head wants to do with that information. I CAN control acting on the information.

Steph: Like I have done when Shelley has tried to get me in a tough spot with her attention. I also noticed tonight that you froze a bit after the Peter Gabriel song finished.

Marc: Yes. Dani and I have been in that "position" a few times the past two weeks, where I've wanted to kiss her full on the lips and not pull away, but my head won't let me because it will mean I am officially cheating on Danielle since the emotional connection would be there along with the physical. Earlier, the urge was there from both of us, and I was THISCLOSE to saying f-it-all and doing it, but she took the safe route mainly because of us being in public. If that happens again when we get back to the hotel, there won't be any stopping me.

Marc pulled into the Doubletree's lot, followed by Dani. Steph and Erin went into the hotel hand-in-hand with the other two arm-in-arm. Marc was intercepted by the concierge who asked if he would need any dry cleaning for his vestments. He told him that it wouldn't be necessary and thanked him for the offer. Following that, he and Dani went to the elevators to go up to his room.
Behind Closed Doors

Steph and Erin entered their room, with the latter locking the door behind her. Steph took off her jacket and hung it up, then removed her booties and rested against the pillows at the top of the bed. Erin slipped off her heels and crawled up the bed to join her. She placed a light kiss on Steph's neck, then sucked it slightly.

Steph: Mmmmm. Don't stop. Just do what you will, babe.

Erin moved up onto her jawline and then around to her earlobe, which she nibbled. Steph rolled off her back and onto Erin, then looked down and pressed her lips against hers. After a couple of minutes of this, Erin opened her mouth to invite Steph's tongue inside. The curly-haired brunette sucked softly on her girlfriend's tongue and pushed slightly at the straps of her jumpsuit, wanting to feel more of her skin against her. Steph helped Erin get the straps down her shoulders, then reached behind her and unzipped it. The top half of the garment fell freely forward, exposing Steph's pink demi bra. Erin took the initiative and unhooked it, with Steph throwing it on the floor. Despite the muscles and fierce look, the goalkeeper was not overly endowed. That meant, however, that her breasts and nipples were much more sensitive to touch, which Erin found out when she kissed the top of her left one. She then latched onto Steph's nipple and licked at it, causing her to writhe in pleasure. A kiss between the breasts brought forth an uncontrolled moan from the woman, with her holding Erin's head to her chest in response. A bit of a swirling lick around Steph's decolletage brought another moan out of her.

Steph released Erin's head and scooted down her body, where she clawed at the hem of her dress and slid it up her legs, then went down to her love zone still clothed by a pair of black high-waisted lace panties. Steph placed her mouth against her girlfriend's covered quim and kissed it before licking on it softly with Erin squirming a little at the sensation. Steph pulled the fabric to one side and got her first-ever look at Erin's pussy and the soft pubic hair she had around it. She gave her a teasing lick on her vaginal lips.

Steph: Do you want me to go further?

Erin: Yessssss.

Steph slid Erin's panties down her hips and legs, then deposited them on the floor. With her intended target exposed, the more-experienced woman kissed and licked Erin's labia and flicked at her clit, causing her to involuntarily thrust her pelvis into Steph's face.

Steph: Ouch.

Erin: Sorry. Didn't know that would happen.

After a couple more licks, Erin removed her dress and then slid the straps of her bra off her shoulders, unhooking it after that. Now completely naked, Erin pulled Steph toward her, then rolled her onto her back. From there, she pulled off the bottom half of her jumpsuit and admired the toned lower half of Steph's body, covered in just a pair of pink boy shorts.

Erin: I'm a little hungry for what's hiding behind that fabric. Care to give me a peek?

Steph: But of course, my darling.

Steph removed her boy shorts and lied back, allowing Erin complete access to her body. Erin's lips went right to Steph's opening, with her darting her tongue out at it occasionally. She placed her
hands under Steph's butt and pressed her mouth harder against her, with her lips finding her clit. She licked it at softly before sucking it into her mouth.

Steph: SHIT! Where did you learn to do that?

Erin: Maybe by practicing on the tip of my pinkie, as its the smallest and most circular of the fingers. You liking it?

Steph: YES! Maybe go a little lighter, as I'd rather not cum just now and you have me pretty close already.

Erin lightened up on the sucking and spent more energy flicking at her button. Steph draped her legs over Erin's shoulders and gripped the pillow under her head, preparing for the orgasm that was just about to happen. Sensing Steph's tension, Erin went back to sucking on her clit, which brought on a climax in very little time. After she came down from her high, Steph placed her mouth on Erin's nipple and nibbled and sucked it voraciously. Before moving to the other one, she asked her a question.

Steph: Have you ever had anything inside you before?

Erin: The handle of a hairbrush once, because I wasn't getting anywhere rubbing my pubic region by hand.

Steph latched onto Erin's other nipple and slipped a hand between her legs. She then slowly penetrated her with her index finger, moving it in and out at a steady rhythm. Erin moaned at the dual sensation, then clamped down around Steph's finger before moving back-and-forth on it. Steph moved up and sucked on Erin's collarbone, then further north onto her throat before attacking her lips once again. Steph slid a second finger into Erin, which she rode on to a knee-buckling orgasm. After she had descended, Steph took her fingers out of Erin and licked them clean of her juices. Erin curled up with Steph and the two engaged in some pillow talk.

Steph: How was your first time, my love?

Erin: Wow. That was....incredible. I never knew how good you would taste, nor how great your fingers would feel inside me. I love how I was able to make you lose control of yourself with my work on your nipples. How do I compare to the other women with whom you've been intimate?

Steph: You don't, for two reasons. One, you are just so much more giving than them when it comes to expressing your desire for me. Most of them wanted to feel good and, because I'm a pretty good licker and sucker, were able to get their rocks off without reciprocating.

Erin: And the second one?

Steph: I wasn't in love with them. I mean, I loved them in certain ways, but I didn't have that heartfelt connection with any of them like I do with you. There is one thing I am saving to do with you until I am quite sure that I won't stumble.

Erin: Stumble as in let your eyes and mind get the better of you?

Steph: Yes. It's the equivalent of sexual intercourse without the use of protection, an act called tribbing. There is no barrier between the two persons' sexual organs, which when done well can lead to the most intimate of sexual experiences. I can't go there with you unless I know that I'm not going to screw around on you, kind of like Ed in "City Slickers" describing going from the Kellogg's variety pack to just a single cereal. I am so in love with you and so much want to make that commitment to you, but sometimes I can't control what my body does by impulse.
Erin: Sounds like you and Marc are sort of similar in that way, according to Dani. I've learned after my conversation with her coming back tonight that I shouldn't hold against you the gut physical reaction you have upon seeing someone, only how or if you act upon it.

Steph held Erin closer and kissed her lips. "Enough talking. Use those magical hands of yours and finger bang me." Erin grinned and did what was requested, leading to Steph having a pulsating orgasm combined with a scream that could definitely be heard in the adjoining room, where Marc and Dani were.

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Marc opened the door to his room for Dani, then closed it behind them before letting out a huge sigh of relief, which was followed by one from her shortly afterwards.

Dani: Happy to be back here?

Marc: Happy to be away from people after almost non-stop interaction here for three days and no rest since before Thanksgiving break. What was yours for?

Dani: Passing the test I gave myself tonight. Remember what I said last night about not being sure how I'd handle being in this kind of environment with you? I think I managed it well, trying to have fun with the girls while also providing you a bit of support.

Marc: Sweetheart, you aced it in my opinion. In fact, you gave me a couple of things to really think about tonight, for you did something that truly got me *right here*. After our slow dance with the older set, and you looked in my eyes and I in yours, you acted selflessly by holding back a little and showing your love for and appreciation of me in a publicly acceptable way.

Dani: I told Erin that I so badly wanted to do more, but didn't want to cause a firestorm because you never know who's hanging around looking for missteps.

Dani took Marc's hand and tried to get him to dance with her a bit, but his stiff white guy legs weren't really cooperating. The two of them chuckled at the attempt, then hugged one another.

Marc: I think you deserve a bit of a reward for your sacrifice tonight.

Dani: What kind of a reward?

Marc put his hands behind Dani's neck, then leaned over and pecked her on the lips. "Like that." He and she caught eyes and without hesitation the two of them gravitated toward one another with their lips meeting again, and again, and again. He placed his hands on the back of her head, pulling her in closer, while she gripped onto his shoulders after bringing her arms up underneath his. Neither one moved away from this position, as the mutual satisfaction of moving their relationship forward was enough for them. Dani broke the kissing temporarily to ask Marc a question.

Dani: I take it this means we're not friends anymore?

Marc: We'll always be friends. This just gives us a new set of labels for what we are. I can't think of anything I'd like to do more right now than to feel your body against mine all night long.

Dani: Good, because that is just what I have in mind, my love. I want you to give me all of your love tonight and I want to let you know physically how much I am in love with you.

The pair returned to kissing before Dani flipped her braid behind her shoulder, offering her neck to Marc's lips. He slowly sucked on it while unzipping her dress, the fabric dropping to the floor to
reveal a forest green strapless bodysuit. She undid her braid and let her hair cascade over her back and shoulders, then pulled Marc's mock out from his pants and ran her hands up the back while making it bunch up at his shoulders. She then took it off him and laid a kiss against the upper part of his chest. Marc lifted Dani off her feet and carried her to the bed, then laid her down and softly kissed her shoulders and collarbone before running his tongue between her covered breasts. Dani pulled the front portion of her bodysuit down to expose them, which Marc was all too eager to touch with his mouth. After hardening both of her nipples with his lips, he moved down and undid the clips at the bottom of the bodysuit, freeing her womanhood for his touch. He kissed around her public area before placing his mouth over it, then sucking upon it. His tongue found its way to her button and, with a few flicks over it, he was able to get Dani to moan somewhat loudly.

Dani: Don't stop, Marc. Make me cum, lover.

Marc combined his tongue action with a soft but deep sucking on her clit, which resulted in her wrapping her legs around his head and cumming square on his face. As he caught his breath and she descended from her climax, he moved back up her body and lied against her, with him running a finger along her vaginal lips. She turned and took his lips with hers, which he reciprocated. He placed his index finger inside Dani and used his thumb to rub around her nub of ecstasy. Inserting a second finger got her to use her vaginal muscles and clamp around them, with Marc making contact with her G spot on the inside. Before long, she was having a second orgasm, causing her mouth to attack Marc's ear, after which she rolled over on top of him. She then quickly went to getting the lower half of his body unclothed, looking into his eyes and saying, "Take me, Marc. Make me yours."

Marc grabbed Dani around the waist and turned her onto her back. She spread her legs and placed her hands on his rear end as he moved forward to unite their bodies. Marc's pistoning of Dani was slow and tender, as each of them wanted to make contact with every possible inch of one another's body. The romantic pace of their sexual union eventually produced a deep and heartfelt resolution for each of them. After a short break, the pair spooned with him slipping inside her and her gripping his penis just below the tip, from where she rubbed her lips against that section and brought him off quickly. He slid out of her and held her tight. She reached back between her legs and stroked his manhood tenderly.

Dani: How long until you think you might be ready again?

Marc: I don't know. Already came twice, so it might not be up for a third run. I love being inside you, but it might be Limp Bizkit for a while. You OK with that?

Dani: To have you connected to me is what I desire most. I could lie there all night with you just resting between my lips.

The pair turned to face one another. As they moved in to kiss, they heard a scream coming from the next room.

Marc: Sounds like the girls are having a good time. Wonder which one let that out.

Dani: Gotta be Steph. Erin is too meek voice-wise I think to yell like that.

Marc: But that means she would have caused it. Guess she's not as much of a rookie as we thought.

Dani: Or she's a prodigy and is good at that stuff out-of-the-gate.

Marc: Enough with thinking of those two. You ready for bed?
Dani: I think so. You?

Marc: Yeah.

Dani reached for the light and turned it out. She then pressed her butt back into Marc's front side, rubbing against it a bit. He pressed forward and pushed the tip of his penis between Dani's lips. A little back-and-forth movement got him more settled inside Dani and the two began to wind down.

Marc: Ever think our first night together would be like this?

Dani: Never. I'm so connected to you, so in love with you.

Marc: I love you, Danielle Paige, more than I think I have anyone else.

Dani: I love you more than you'll ever know, Marc. Maybe one day we can make this more than what it is now, but for now know that no man will ever be where you are right now.

Marc wrapped his arms around Dani's waist and, after a kiss against the back of her neck, he succumbed to fatigue and fell asleep, with her following not long after.
Marc awoke around 6:30 and looked ahead of him, seeing a cascade of black curly hair. He leaned in a little and buried his nose in it, which elicited a response from its owner.

Dani: Mmmmmm. Morning, tiger!

Marc: Morning yourself, princess.

Dani: I take it you slept well after I shagged you out.

Marc: Very well. You?

Dani: Must have been good, because I'm still where I was when I fell asleep, in your arms and pressed up against you.

Dani rolled onto her other side and faced Marc. "Any regrets about last night?"

Marc leaned in and caught her lips with his own. "Not a one."

Dani: Good, because I'm so happy about what happened.

The pair spent a few minutes cuddling before Dani went to take a shower. Marc got a devilish thought and joined her in there, where the two of them got dirty and clean at the same time.

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Erin and Steph were in the bar and grill having breakfast when Marc came down and joined them.

Marc: Good morning, ladies. Hope you plan to eat heavy this morning because we've got a long day ahead of us.

Erin: Of course, Dad. We're athletes and know how to fuel ourselves properly.

Marc reached into the pocket of his fleece and pulled out a throat lozenge for Steph. "Here, thought you might need this after last night."

Steph looked at it, then figured out what he meant and turned beet-red with embarrassment.

Steph: Thanks, pops, I think.

Marc: No need to be embarrassed. In fact, the two of us wondered which one of you it was and deduced that Erin was too soft-spoken in general to be that much of a screamer. We also silently applauded her efforts as a first-timer.

Erin chuckled, then blushed. "I took your girl's advice, so she's the one who should get the kudos."

Diana and Rhian were the first of the couples to arrive for this morning's meeting with the Trinity trio. Morgan and Sammy Jo were next, followed by Emily and Lindsey and Steph and Ali, with Kristie and Steph strolling in a couple of minutes after 9.

Marc: Well, this is a bigger group than I thought I'd see, but I did tell at least one of you to spread the word in case others were thinking about being part of the festivities.
Ali: Steph and I decided last night on the way back to join you. Were you still there when she popped the question with some help from the brides?

Marc: No.

Steph Lafleur: Congratulations! Let me see the rock.

Ali showed off her engagement ring to Steph, Erin, and Marc.

Steph Lafleur: Very nice choice, Steph!

Marc: Some quick logistics information first, then onto putting pieces together for the ceremony. As I told Diana last night, our plan is to arrive in Philadelphia on Monday the 11th so we will have two full days in the city to work things out before the big day. I also informed her that I was in favor of the 11am option as opposed to the 2pm one. Kristie, she told me that you were doing most of the coordination between the couples and thus you probably would be handling the permits for use of the plaza on the 14th.

Kristie: That's correct. I should probably get on that before we get too close to the holidays.

Marc: The next thing is staffing from our side. I was already planning on bringing Steph, Erin, and my diaconal assistant to help keep things in order, along with a second officiant due to ELCA rules concerning weddings involving more than three couples. I will now need to consider contacting United Lutheran Seminary, located in Philly, about having one or two of their seniors on-call for the day if there are any surprise additions. I have a meeting with my bishop and his assistant in charge of administration on Thursday morning where we will hammer out the personnel, itinerary, and expenses. After that, I'll let Kristie know what the synod will cover, what TLU will cover, and what will be our collective fee for the event.

Kristie: After I get that from you, I'll sit down with the rest of the participants and we'll design a package for you and your staff.

Marc: Thanks. Now, about the service. What you saw last night is the base from which I will build the Valentine's Day one. The order will stay the same, but there are places to add things in that weren't done by Becca and EJ, such as separate vows to that of the words of intent or special music.

Rhian: Would I be able to do part of my vows, if not all, in French?

Marc: Yes, and I will be sure to have someone available who can translate. My wife spent six weeks at Laval on study abroad and has a workable fluency of the language, so most likely she'll be able to handle that.

Emily: Will you be injecting some of your humor into the service?

Marc: Emily, is that even a question? Of course I will. The institution bit is standard for my services, but other parts change depending on the couples' sensibilities and relationships. Based on who's part of this, I already have one or two in mind to pop off.

Erin: Are any of you planning to have attendants and, if so, how many?

Morgan: We had some discussions about this, but there was no clear consensus on whether we should or if just tapping individuals to sign the paperwork would make more sense.

Marc: That should be the first thing you figure out between now and when we see each other next in Philly. Are there plans for a reception following the ceremony, and if so where?
Kristie: We have booked the ballroom at Le Meridien Philadelphia for the reception. It is across the street from Love Park and those coming from out-of-town for the wedding will be staying there.

Marc: Send me a brief layout of what you have planned and booked between now and Wednesday. It will give me a hard copy to take into my Thursday meeting with Bp. Emerson and Rev. Sherman.

Out of the corner of his eye, Marc noticed the UCLA women's soccer team departing the hotel.

Marc: Looks like people are already heading to WakeMed, so I should wrap this up. I'm looking forward to marrying as many of you as are willing to take the plunge and we'll be in touch.

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The Division I College Cup final was a close game, with both UCLA and Stanford having multiple opportunities to win the title in regulation. As the first 10-minute period of overtime neared an end, odds-on MAC Hermann Trophy winner Jessie Fleming redirected an Ashley Sanchez cross past Alison Jahansouz to give the Bruins a 2-1 victory and the 2018 national championship.

Following the match, Erin got a picture of the Hearts' couples and Dani was able to get her Carla Overbeck jersey signed by the woman herself. With nothing left for them to do in town, Marc and his entourage went to the airport. Once the rental cars were returned, the four of them took the escalator up to the ticketing area in Terminal 2, where they received their boarding passes and checked their bags.

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During the three-hour flight to Minneapolis, Marc and Dani talked about plans for attending the United Soccer Coaches Convention.

Marc: The convention is in Chicago, so travel will be real easy. You won't have to run this through Gavin, really, because as an alumna of the Urban Coaching Project, you're eligible to apply to the organization for a continuing education grant.

Dani: That's just a fancy way of saying that you'll pay for me to go the convention with you, right?

Marc (chuckling): No, it's not, because I don't think it would take that much convincing for you to come along. The truth is that, as new licensing agreements have been signed, I have been putting the royalties into a fund to help graduates of the program take the next step in building their coaching resumes. We both know how important being seen and making connections are to gaining a foothold on the coaching ladder, and conferences are an excellent way to meet a lot of people and learn a ton in a short period of time. I would have offered the grant as an option for the College Cup weekend if Paul hadn't gone to TLU Business Services and extracted the funds out of the athletic department's budget.

Dani: So I just have to apply to UCP with my request and it will be granted?

Marc: Well, I would have to read over your application and determine how much of a grant could be given based on the cost of the conference itself, lodging, and travel.

Dani (sarcastically): Being all serious with me, after what I did for you this morning and last night?

Marc: That was personal, this is business. Don't worry too much about it. I know the costs pretty well since I have to submit my own request to Paul and Matt for them to pay the bills for my attendance from my office's account.
On the other side of the aisle, Erin and Steph were going through the pictures on the former's phone from the weekend.

Steph: You planning to post any of these to your social media?

Erin: Some of them, but not all.

Steph: If you don't post the one of us in front of the chapel, I'll steal it from your phone and do it myself. It's such a cute picture of us as a couple.

Erin: OK, I'll give you five photos from the ones I took to do with what you want. By the way, that picture is going to end up being the desktop background on my laptop, so I can look at you multiple times a day and fall for your smile again and again.

Steph leaned across the armrest and kissed Erin. "What did you think of Marc's little prank this morning?"

Erin: I thought it was funny. You know he wouldn't have done it if he wasn't accepting of you and me having that kind of relationship.

Steph: It WAS pretty funny. I know that he only hassles the people he truly likes, which is why I get a lot of his barbs.

Erin and Steph saw the other two curled up together, with Dani's head on Marc's shoulder.

Erin: Look at the two of them. So cute, so not what we saw last weekend. She's so good for him, and he for her.

Steph: I guess they prove that age is just a number.

Erin: Yeah. I hope we can do that on road trips with the team and not be self-conscious about it.

Steph: Provided Shelley isn't trying to get in between us.

Erin: Think we should warn Sarah about that?

Steph: Can't hurt. She'll be the one doing the room assignments, I'm guessing, so if she knows, she'll be able to keep us together and her away from us.

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The flight from Minneapolis to Milwaukee went quickly and soon the group was down at baggage claim waiting on their luggage. Following a shuttle trip to the off-site parking lot, Marc led Erin and the others to Oakland Gyros, just west of the airport, for a very late dinner/midnight snack and some debriefing time before they split up.
The final week of the fall semester had arrived at Trinity, with students, faculty, and staff all experiencing the stress that deadlines and end-of-term meetings tend to provide. In a quirk of scheduling, the Student Government Association, the Faculty Senate, and the Board of Trustees would all hold their regularly-scheduled meetings this week (SGA on Wednesday afternoon, Faculty Senate on Thursday afternoon, and the Board of Trustees on Friday morning).

Marc arrived at his office on Monday morning hoping to have an easy day heading into Christmas Eve service rehearsal that evening and the three days of heavy work upcoming (the three aforementioned meetings, weekly service on Wednesday, meeting with Bp. Emerson and Rev. Sherman at the synod office Thursday morning, and dress rehearsal for Sunday's service on Friday evening). Upon opening his email, the deacon saw two that stood out, one from Augsburg Hall director Hope Stevens and one from Dr. Baines in Human Resources. Having a good idea what the HR one was about, he postponed opening it and instead read the one from Hope first.

From: hstevens at trinitylutheran dot edu
To: mschmidt at trinitylutheran dot edu
Subject: TLU v. Mallory D. Putnam, AHT case number 0026

Marc,

Attached are the initial findings of fact concerning Mallory Putnam of the Acrobatic and Tumbling Team. As she contacted me to gain her release from custody on December 1, 2018, I have enforced a preliminary sanction of on-campus confinement through January 31, 2019, semester break notwithstanding.

Hope

As Marc read through Hope's report of Mallory's off-campus incident, he was struck by the location of the arrest and the charge faced, as there had been a sting at that location two weekends previous and with at least one of those arrested charged with the same crime as the TLU freshman. Rather than email her back, Marc called Hope.

Marc: Hope, this is Marc Schmidt.

Hope: Marc. I take it you've read my email about what happened over the weekend.

Marc: Yes. The penalty seems fair considering the offense and hopefully, when she appears before the court, we will be able to get her sentence from them reduced to a minimal fine.

Hope: I wouldn't have thought she'd be into that, but sometimes money or the lack of it causes people to take risks that come back to bite them.

Marc: This seems to be a bit more prevalent than I would have thought for a school in this location and a student body that, one would think, is more morally-bound than the general college student population. If something more needs to be done, I'll contact you, but for now considered the matter adjudicated and the sanction accepted.

Hope: Being that I have you on the phone, I wanted to ask you about the HR complaint that one of my residents filed against Coach Dillon.
Marc: I haven't looked at HR's notice yet, because I didn't want their next step to take place until after I had a chance to advise her of the process before she would be placed on administrative leave. What can you tell me so I'm sort of up-to-speed?

Hope: It says that Coach Dillon engaged in inappropriate conduct with the student-athlete by contacting her out-of-season with the intent to meet with her for presumably improper reasons.

Marc: Thanks. I'll call Danielle and fill her in on what will be taking place. I will get the file from HR once I inform them of receiving notice, at which time I'll find out the actual "crime" and any evidence collected in support of the charge(s). In a perfect world, the hall directors would be able to handle some of the cases that would normally fall to me, because their ability to impose sanctions at times are much better and more far-reaching than what I can do, especially with out-of-season athletes or with cases that carry over between terms.

Hope: I'll let you get onto your next project, and I hope justice will be served.

Marc: Take care, and again I'll contact you if the need arises.

Marc hung up and went back to his email, printing off the report from Hope for his records. Following that, he called Dani.

Dani: Marc! Missing me already?

Marc: I wish I could say yes to that, because it's sort of true, but I'm calling on official business. I received a notice from HR that a complaint had been filed against you by a student-athlete. Hope Stevens, the hall director at Augsburg, filled me in a little on the accusation since I had to talk to her about an incident that involved one of her hall's residents over the weekend.

Dani: So what Cali told me was sort of true, then. Who made the accusation?

Marc: I won't find that out until after I give HR notice of receiving the complaint, which I am delaying doing because I wanted to give you advanced warning and to tell you what will occur going forward. Here is the short version of what will happen.

1) Once HR is informed of my receiving the complaint, they will place you on administrative leave. It won't affect anything pay-wise since you're out-of-season, but there are two significant restrictions placed upon you while on leave. First is that you are barred from being on campus except for any official meetings you have with the case's investigator. Second is that you are also barred from initiating contact with students off-campus. That restriction isn't absolute, as your place of employment is not subject to the ban, nor are happenstance contacts in public.

2) I will receive the file from them with the actual complaint and any preliminary evidence collected. At that time, I will also find out who the complainant is.

3) I will set up meetings in my office with all relevant parties, including corroborating and rebuttal witnesses.

4) Once completed, I will send a report to HR with transcripts of those meetings along with my decision, either true bill or no true bill. From there, they can choose how to proceed.

Dani: How soon can I meet with you to get this resolved?

Marc: I would like to get as many of the interviews and meetings done tomorrow. I also want to get the complainant before me before you, so I have her accusations and evidence to work from when I question you.
Dani: Would early afternoon tomorrow work?

Marc: Maybe mid-afternoon. I want to make sure I can hear her first, so giving her the entire morning plus the early afternoon should be sufficient.

Dani: Does what happened this past weekend change anything that will happen in terms of resolving this case?

Marc: It shouldn't, since my role remains the same either way. HR’s role is to get the truth and protect its own hide. My role is to weigh the evidence and the claims of the complainant against actual fact, and to go where the path leads. The only difference in our approaches is that I can test the accuser for lying and then sanction the party if there is sufficient proof of it.

Dani: Tomorrow at 2 OK?

Marc: I think that will probably be OK. If I'm lucky, I might be able to get some of this done today before rehearsal tonight.

Dani: I suppose I should prepare for the notice coming from HR and allow you to start the ball rolling.

Marc: I can't say right now what I want to, because of this case in front of me, but you know how I feel and where my heart lies. Hopefully I can get this to go away by the end of the week so you can be back up here on Friday for the final run-through.

Dani: I know, Marc, and I too hope this can be cleared up quickly.

Marc ended the call and opened the email from HR, which sent the department a read receipt, therefore getting the process started. Following that, he left his office to get lunch at Culver's and put a slight bit of distance between him and what would arrive when he got back to campus.

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Gabrielle Castle (one of Marc’s student receptionists): Deacon Schmidt, a package came for you through campus mail while you were gone.

Marc took the oversized envelope from Gabi, thanked her, and then went back into his office with it. Once the package was opened and its contents pulled out, Marc started paging through the documents.

Complainant: Alexandra Millen

Defendant: Danielle Dillon

Summary: Complainant claimed that on more than one occasion, the defendant contacted her via text message to inquire about meeting off-campus. Complainant believed these requests to be inappropriate, unwarranted, and uninvited.

Attachments: Phone records with number of the defendant highlighted. 17 contacts by defendant in period between 10/24/2018 and 11/25/2018.

Marc put the documents aside and called the complainant to set up a meeting. Lexi told Marc that she could meet him in his office at 8am on Tuesday. He then moved on to studying the phone logs to see if there were patterns or possible corroborators or refuters that he should try to get in before his meeting with Dani at 2pm that afternoon. He lined up interviews with Erin’s roommate Cassie, Cami
Leonard, and Cali Farmer. He wanted to get one with Carli Lowe, but was unable to reach her.

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Rehearsal went well despite the absence of a couple of people. Once Marc got home, he pulled out the phone records and spread them out on the coffee table, trying to pin down what he wanted to ask Lexi about them and what he would focus upon when he questioned the others after that. Danielle saw the mini-mess in the living room and asked Marc about it.

Danielle: Bringing work home? Didn't think chaplains did that.

Marc: Well, I had two misconduct cases come into my inbox while I was gone over the weekend. One was settled by the student-athlete's hall director before I returned in a satisfactory manner. The other one involves a coach and a player from her team. Can't say any more than that. I have five or six interviews set up for tomorrow so I can hopefully get this put to bed before finals begin. Also have the SGA, Faculty Senate, and Board of Trustees this week as well as a trip to see Paul and Matt on Thursday morning.

Danielle: Remember to get some rest or exercise amidst this heavy week. You know how lack of sleep and stress combine to cause you to have attacks. Last thing I want to hear is that you're curled up in a ball in your office on Friday afternoon.

Marc: Thanks. If I get this case out of my hands by the end of tomorrow, I will be able to ride out the rest of the week.

Danielle: Well, don't stay up too late.

Marc: I won't. First interview is 8am, so I'm probably going to hit the hay now and then just leave for campus early to do what I need to do with these records before I meet with the complainant.

Danielle kissed Marc on the head and went into the bedroom, where she was joined by him about 10 minutes later.

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Marc's Tuesday began with an hour of studying Lexi Millen's phone log in his office before his 8am meeting with her. He made some notes about the times of the interactions, the days, and the frequency. Over each seven-day period, the texts seemed to be initiated on Wednesdays between 1 and 2pm, followed by one on Friday just before 8pm, a Saturday one at give or take 4pm, and a Sunday one at 6pm. The area code and prefix for the caller pointed to a cell phone issued by the athletic department at Trinity. He knew he could refute the mid-week ones, but the weekend ones could have come from Dani. With that as his starting point, Marc formulated the questions he planned to ask Lexi, Dani, and the other testifiers.

Right on the button of 8, Lexi arrived at Marc's office.

Marc (to Lexi): Come in and have a seat.

Lexi sat down across from Marc at his desk.

Marc: I received your complaint from HR when I returned to campus yesterday, along with the file of evidence. Can you describe your relationship with Coach Dillon?

Lexi: I like her as a coach and a person. She and I get along, though I'm not as close to her as others seem to be.
Marc: On the evening of October 25th, which was a Thursday if I'm not mistaken, you claimed that
the defendant messaged you to set up a rendezvous for the next evening.

Lexi: That is correct, sir.

Marc: It looks like you did not return that message. Also looks to be true for most of them.

Lexi: Correct.

Marc: Did you ever tell Coach Dillon not to contact you or tell anyone about these inappropriate
contacts before going to HR on November 28th?

Lexi: No, because I was worried that turning her down would affect my position on the team next
year. It was easier to ignore them.

Marc: What caused you to make the complaint, then?

Lexi: The number and nature of the messages became too much for me to handle on my own.

Marc: And in the complaint, it said that you no longer had the messages on your phone. Is that
correct?

Lexi: Yes.

Marc: One more thing. On seven of the occasions you allegedly received messages from Coach
Dillon, you contacted the same number within five minutes.

Marc handed a copy of the phone log to Lexi for her to see the link.

Marc: Can you clarify who you were contacting?

Lexi: That number is Carli Lowe's. She's one of the older players on the team and a friend of mine.

Marc: Thank you. That is all I have at the moment. If I need to interview you again, I'll let you know.

Lexi: Thank you, Deacon Schmidt.

After Lexi left his office, Marc went back to the log and parsed out the times of some of the contacts,
comparing them to what he knew of Danielle's schedule at Lane Bryant and non-work activities.
Finding at least two instances where the times of the messages contradicted her availability, Marc
thought he had a way to disprove the phone making the calls was actually hers. Also, he doubted that
she would have an athletic department-provided one as assistant coaches in sports other than the
majors (basketball, football, and volleyball) would not need them outside the season and, given
Gavin's reputation for being a nickel-and-dimer with the budget and expenses, it made no sense to
give them to them.

Meetings with Cami Leonard and Cassie Kingston went reasonably well, with Cami opening up
about her first-hand accounts of the relationship between Lexi and Dani (normal player/coach, but a
little frostier than that of Dani and Cali Farmer or her and Taylor Simon) and Cassie not
remembering anything out of the normal involving the coach and any of the players. With the first
piece of reasonable doubt having sprung up, Marc contacted athletes on other teams to get some
cursory information about the athletic department's cell phone distribution system.

Alyssa: Hello?

Marc: Alyssa? Marc Schmidt here.
Alyssa: Hey, Marc. What's up?

Marc: I am investigating a claim of harassment against one of the school's coaches and I need some information about the athletic department's policy for issuing cell phones. Do any coaches with ice hockey other than the head coach have one from the department?

Alyssa: Just the associate.

Marc: And are they both 262-943 numbers?

Alyssa: Yes. 943-2771 and 2772.

Marc: Another question. Do you remember what time you were at Bayshore on October 25th, the Thursday before the Reformation Day dinner?

Alyssa: I got down there around 6:30 and left close to 8:15.

Marc: Your roommate, do you know if she is particularly close to any members of the soccer team?

Alyssa: I'd say Lexi Miller is a good friend of hers.

Marc: Thanks, Lyss. I'll let you get back to whatever I separated you from.

Having gotten some solid info from Alyssa on the phone numbering system, he contacted Karina Lester from Track and Field and found out that, with the program being co-ed, the phones distributed to their coaches were sequenced in line with men's sports instead of women's. Another call, this time to Alanna Kennedy from volleyball, filled in the bottom portion of the list, with their coaches getting numbers 2779 and 2780. Taking all the information together and the list of women's sports, were soccer to be given two phones, the second one would be 262-943-2775, the number from which the calls originated.

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Danielle's 2:00 meeting with Marc was delayed slightly as he had yet to return from lunch. He arrived back at his office around 10 after 2.

Marc: Sorry I'm late in returning. I ran into Kristie on my walk back to here and asked her a couple of questions that will help me figure out who's being truthful and who's not.

Dani: I hope you're not doubting me when I say that I didn't send those messages to Lexi.

Marc: I'm not, but there are some discrepancies floating around at the moment. Have a seat and we'll get into the interview. This is going to be very formal, but you know that I won't grill you like I feel I will have to some others later on.

Dani sat down and folded her hands in her lap.

Marc: First, describe your relationship with Lexi Millen.

Dani: She plays for the women's soccer team here. We get along alright, but nothing outside the bounds of regular assistant coach/player interaction.

Marc: The night of the first contact, October 25th, what were you doing around the time of 7:50pm?

Dani: I had gotten off work at 7:30, then joined Alyssa Norman at Colectivo for coffee and to discuss concerns regarding her roommate, who is a player on the soccer team.
Marc: Did you have your phone out at all during your time with Alyssa, and were you ever alone during this period?

Dani: No and no.

Marc: Did the athletic department issue you a cell phone?

Dani: No. The only phone we have is the one Sara carries, which she also will allow senior players to use to send team-wide messages when we're on the road.

Marc: One more question. Would there be any reason for someone to possibly attempt to pin this on you?

Dani: If they were hiding something more shaming or embarrassing than a relationship with a coach, possibly.

Marc: Thank you. We are finished.

Following those words, Marc reached across his desk and laid his hand on the other side of it, hoping Dani would take the hint. Dani put her hand on top of Marc's and squeezed around it.

Marc: Now that your interview is in the can, we can talk about how I'm going to clear you of this. I have enough reasonable doubt to hopefully get HR to shelve the complaint, because there are things involving the phone logs that don't add up and other things that seem too coincidental for it to be happenstance.

Dani: What can I help you with in resolving this?

Marc: What is the number of the phone that Sara has from the athletic department?

Dani: 262-943-2775.

Marc: Hmmm. That's the number where the calls originated, which is what isn't adding up. The order of sports means that she should have gotten 2774 and only if a second one was issued would 2775 be in your possession.

Dani: And you have the numbering worked out before ours?

Marc: Yes. Hockey has 2771 and 2772, lacrosse has 2773, and volleyball has 2779 and 2780. There is one unaccounted for between yours and lacrosse's. The fact that your program only has one and that Sara allows the players to use it racks up a lot more doubt as to who actually sent Lexi the messages. Another problem is we don't have the actual content of them, so there is no way of verifying her side of the story. I'm going to send Dr. Baines my synopsis and tell her that I need more time to officially decide up or down, but that the level of doubt should be used to lift the restrictions on you until a decision is reached.

Dani: So you're saying I eventually will be cleared.

Marc: I believe so, but to do that, I need to find enough evidence that someone other than you sent the messages or impugn Lexi's testimony concerning their content. Once we finish up, I will send Dr. Baines my initial findings and hopefully you'll get notice perhaps tomorrow of the campus ban being lifted.

Dani: You're a lifesaver, Marc. If something like this got bandied about too much, I could be out of the business.
Marc: That was another thing I wondered about, whether you had had any formal conversations with people in Greensboro or Cary about openings elsewhere, since inquiries from them would be handled with a statement of your being on administrative leave, which as you know is code for "coach may have done something wrong and we're looking to see if it's true". Programs will shy away from moving forward on candidates with that kind of a red flag waving.

Dani: Any plans for the World Cup draw on Saturday?

Marc: I've got Erin and Steph coming over, and I think they're going to be inviting a chunk of their teammates and maybe some players from your team. You free?

Dani: Gotta work. Part of the deal for getting the time off for North Carolina and Christmas Eve service practices.

Marc: That bites. Hopefully you can get a break around the time of the draw and duck into B-Dubs to catch it.

Dani: Hope so. Lots of scheduling planning for June forthcoming once we know when the US plays their group matches.

Marc: Don't forget my ladies from Canada. It was so awesome to actually meet a few of them this past weekend and know that I'm marrying at least two of them next year.

Dani: Before I leave, what are the rules about us seeing one another during the investigation?

Marc: We can't. Once you walk out, I can't be in contact with you until HR makes a decision on the case. If they drop it, life returns to normal. If they go forward with it, then I in effect become the athletic department's litigator against the charges and we'll meet to discuss strategy and get testimony to build our best case in defeating the allegations.

Dani nodded at Marc, indicating her understanding of the circumstances. She rose from her chair and went toward the door, followed by Marc. The pair embraced for a bit before she opened the door and saw that Carli Lowe was waiting to meet with him. The two of them exchanged pleasantries before Carli entered Marc's office. Her rendition of the relationship between Lexi and Dani differed from that of the other players because she believed there was unspoken passion between the two. Carli also said that the calls from Lexi to her following the messages from the soccer program's phone were to console and advise her on making a formal complaint against Coach Dillon. After the formality of the interview ended, Marc asked Carli about Brian's impending transfer and when he was planning to meet with him for his pre-candidacy interview. When Carli left, Marc began developing his initial response to the charges for Dr. Baines, labeling them spurious and the testimony fraught with inconsistencies, therefore advising her to lift the campus ban henceforth and help him get another run at Ms. Millen before exams started. He saved it and then packed up to head home, satisfied with having gotten this done before the busyness of the next three days would hit.
The Next Phase

The topic of today's homily, the concept of rejected love, touched on a number of ways that people show their nonacceptance for various friendships or relationships. Marc laid out for the congregation relationships that the outside world looks at with skepticism and how their validity is not for others to judge.

Marc: Society has had a long history of defining that which is acceptable and unacceptable in the area of love. People choose to look at relationships that they wouldn't choose for themselves as somehow "wrong", or worse "evil". Around the university community, we see a variety of relationships that run the gamut and, so long as there is no harm being committed to or by any of the parties, should be allowed to exist. I want to highlight just a handful of these to bring a bit of clarity to the notion that "one should not judge a book by its cover".

The first one I want to bring up is that of Dr. Sinclair and his wife, Allison. The two met in 1981 and got married in 1987, but have rarely been in the same city full-time over the past several years. Now, some of you might wonder, "Why do that?" and look at their commuter marriage as a bad thing. I think both would tell you that it hasn't been easy on them, but their love built up over that period of time outweighs the inconvenience of being apart most of the time and both have able to achieve their professional and personal goals without their relationship suffering.

My second example is one involving three parties, a relationship that now is considered valid under the school's new Code of Student Conduct. My goddaughter is in a relationship with another woman, and together they spend time with a third. Now I know a portion of this room would look at them and deem it unacceptable, because to them the participants are in effect cheating on each other. Yes, it's not everyone's cup of tea, but does that mean it shouldn't be allowed to exist? I'd say no, because the women are adults and have laid out among themselves what the parameters are for their triad.

Another type of relationship we see in the university is the May/December type, where one partner is significantly older than the other. On this campus, one of those can be found in the School of Education, where Dr. Ben Oliphant, Chair of the Master's program in Student Personnel Administration, is married to Megan Oliphant, an assistant professor in the Department of Early Childhood Education. The pair have an age gap of 18 years, with Ben being 47 and Megan 29. Both had been hassled a bit last year after Megan was hired, believing that having spouses teaching in the same college at different ends of the age spectrum would lead middle-aged professors to consider taking on graduate assistants or waiting out undergrads for the expressed purpose of seeking out a similar arrangement, a thing that Concordia believed would contribute to infidelity and non-marital coitus. Truth is, those types of things are and have been commonplace in the university despite the ethical taboo surrounding it. What Ben and Megan have is an understanding of life that goes beyond the number of candles on one's birthday cake. Their love of Shakespeare and 70s music transcends the fact that he graduated high school the same year she was born and shouldn't be poo-pooed because it looks "odd" or because it might trigger some bucket list fantasy in a person's mind.

To close, remember that love is the most powerful emotion on the planet, and that it comes to us in ways we don't always understand. When you see a couple that looks happy but the pairing rankles you, go with that first emotion and ignore the second. Amen.

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The Lunch Bunch discussion this afternoon centered around Marc's message and its relevance to those he mentioned.
Marc (to Tom): I hope I didn't misinterpret what you told me about Allison and yourself in my homily.

Tom Sinclair: You hit it pretty spot-on. When I got the job here to head up the Pre-Sem program, she accompanied me with the understanding that her own continuing education and future career might require us to be separated at times. After a few years here together, she decided to finish off her DNP at Case Western in Cleveland, which led to her getting the appointment at UM-Twin Cities three years ago.

Marc: My sister is lecturing for two courses in their nursing school this semester to supplement the hours she gets on-the-floor at Fairview. Maybe Allison and her should meet up. Laurie is finishing her MSN through Western Governors University and is looking to get into nursing education upon completion.

Tom: Drop me her contact info and I'll pass it along to her.

Marc: Erin, did I explain your situation with Steph and Jessie acceptably?

Erin: Yes, Marc. I'm also glad you didn't give our names so that we're not targeted on campus.

Steph: Yes, Marc. Thanks for not "outing" us in your description. About the third story dealing with the Oliphants in the School of Education, was that a substitute for another May/December you wanted to talk about?

Marc thought for a few seconds and, after looking around the table, came up with an answer.

Marc: If you want to take it that way, you can, but I knew about Ben and Megan by way of Dr. Bucholz in Student Health. I sat down with Ben to get an idea of how he came to the relationship and then inquired of Megan about what attracted her to it given the age gap and her recency of attendance at Concordia.

Alyssa: What's the agenda for this afternoon?

Marc: You, I, Steph, and Erin will meet in my office at 2:00 to go over your proposal to the SGA and tighten it up. You'll head to practice at 3, which is when we'll go to Stuenkel for the SGA meeting.

Erin: How did Cassie's meeting with you turn out?

Marc: Bit of a dud. Nothing remarkable, and you know I can't discuss specifics.

Alyssa: I heard that Carli came to see you yesterday.

Marc: Yes. I asked her about Brian's eventual move to LTSC and reminded her that he needed to see me to do his pre-candidacy interview.

Tom: I need to get back to my office so I can finish writing one of my exams.

Marc: Will you be at Faculty Senate tomorrow, because I am looking to elicit some support for a hybrid program between my office, your department, and the Schools of Education, Nursing, and Health Professions?

Tom: That's why I need to get the exam done today. So yes, I'll be there.

Marc: Good. I'll have a draft proposal with me that would already have Paul's approval since I see
him tomorrow morning and have this on our agenda.

Everyone got up to leave, with Dr. Sinclair returning to his office and the other four going to Marc's office in Luther.

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Marc handed out copies of his vision for peer ministry and the constructed proposal for recognition as a student organization that his leaders would present to the SGA later today.

Marc: The concept of peer ministry is that students minister to other students, providing a listening ear and open heart to their struggles, achievements, and life in general. Getting recognized as a student organization at Trinity would allow this entity to receive funds from the university and have access to meeting space and campus publicity. The broader vision will take some time to accomplish, but the training session with Pastor Rachel, Pastor Jessica, and myself on January 26th will be the first chance to open the doors to the ministry beyond the three of you and those who we've come across this semester.

Alyssa: How are we going to deal with student leadership of this group?

Marc: For now, the three of you are the requisite officers with I as the organization's adviser. When it comes time to renew the organization for 2019-2020, we can list others. Let's get over the first hump today, then talk it out either between terms or in the first week of the new one.

Alyssa: The end of that week is the Orlando wedding, right?

Marc: If it comes off. The divorce trial is supposed to start on Tuesday, but given the delays already employed by Serv, I wouldn't be surprised if he argued for another continuance to take it into 2019.

Erin: I know you're prepping Alyssa for the pulpit and are helping Steph with developing her skills for a future job at a private college, but how do I fit into this leadership team?

Marc: Short answer is that you're glue to bind it together. Longer answer is that your experience from your home congregation makes you probably the most-qualified to serve on this team. I see you as the individual that is able to connect what we do in public ministry with the private aspects of peer ministry and link the other two pieces of the peer ministry puzzle together.

Steph: Other two pieces?

Marc: The big picture for peer ministry at Trinity is that there will be three "parts" to it. The largest will be those who take the training and are among their fellow students on a daily basis as "safe" persons for them to share with and from whom they would receive ministry-in-place. The second part will be having at least one peer minister housed in every dorm, as a religious complement to the hall director and resident assistants. The third is the group that is housed out of my office and the chapel, whose focus will be weekly worship, managing and leading the rest of the peers, and our community's voice to the church as a whole. Again, getting those parts in place and linked together will take time and probably won't be fully implemented until we return at the end of August.

Erin: I think I get it.

Marc (to Erin and Steph): Which one of you is planning to make the presentation and request to the SGA?

Erin: I will, if Steph is good with that.
Steph: Fine by me. Less off-the-cuff talking means less chance of stage fright, if you will.

Alyssa: I need to leave for practice. Good luck to the three of you and I hope to hear some good news when I get back to campus.

Erin and Steph hugged Alyssa before she left Marc's office, then they went with Marc to Stuenkel for the final SGA meeting of the fall semester.

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SGA President Chad Markham gavelled in the meeting just after 3:30. Following a vote on the minutes from their last legislative session, Markham called on At-Large Representative Haley Kendall.

Haley Kendall: As this is our final meeting of the term, we have a number of requests in front of us that involve the beginning of the next semester, with action necessary on them prior to our first Spring semester meeting on January 23rd. First up is a progress report from the Muellers on the LGBT Center.

Kristie and Sam walked up to the lectern at the front of the room and addressed the legislators.

Kristie: Thanks to the initial seed money provided to us by this body, we have been able to soft-open the LGBT Center in Albrecht and hire a part-time director, Suzanne Bidwell. Our official grand opening will take place on January 15th and we welcome all students to stop in and learn about our resources and commitment to being a voice on Trinity's campus for our segment of the student population.

Haley: Thank you, Kristie. Any questions?

With none being offered, Haley dismissed Kristie and Sam and moved on to the next thing on the agenda.

Haley: Would Erin Matheson come forward and address us concerning her proposal for recognition of a new student organization?

Erin squeezed Steph's hand, then mouthed "Wish me luck" to Marc before walking to the lectern.

Erin: Ladies and gentlemen of Student Government, I rise with a proposal for and request for recognition of the Peer Ministry Alliance at Trinity. At non-Lutheran institutions, the schools' Lutheran Campus Ministries exist outside the purview of the administration and must gain access to campus facilities and university funds by being recognized as a student organization, the same process which Jess Fisher went through to found the Gay Athletes Association earlier this year. At Trinity, peer ministry is a foreign concept as the presumption is that all who attend here are serviced by the Office of the Chaplain, with no need for student involvement in campus ministry. The three of us who have been tabbed by Deacon Schmidt to oversee this organization do so believing that students need both a hand IN ministry as well as a link TO ministry outside the pastor-penitent relationship that exists between the chaplain and the student body. We request recognition as an official student organization of Trinity Lutheran University and funds to hold a Peer Ministry training event on-campus on January 26th, where Pastor Rachel Belding from UWM, Pastor Jessica Sherman from Marquette, and our own Deacon Marc Schmidt will equip students for the work of being light in the lives of their fellow TLU classmates.

Haley: Any questions from the body?

Elizabeth Edwards: Will this organization be open to all TLU students or only those who identify as
ELCA Lutheran?

Erin: The initial training is free and open to all. If a person wishes to advance to a role as either a residence hall peer minister or a student chaplain, there would be additional requirements which will be spelled out during training.

Michael Parsons: Would Bishop Emerson have any role in determining who is selected for leadership of this organization?

Erin: No, he would not. Student leadership would be determined by the students, subject to review by Deacon Schmidt.

Chad Markham: Will the Synod be authorizing any funds or proscribing any specific direction for the delivery of this peer ministry?

Erin: To my knowledge, the Synod had allocated funds in its FY 2018 budget for peer ministry related to its plans to start a county-wide Lutheran Campus Ministry covering schools other than UWM and Marquette. As that project has yet to be initiated, I presume that those funds would be made available to us. Let me check with Deacon Schmidt.

Erin looked up to Marc, who gave her a thumbs-up and signaled to her that the topic would be taken up in his meeting with the bishop tomorrow.

Erin: Deacon Schmidt has indicated to me that those funds would be available for us and that he will address that with Bishop Emerson tomorrow morning when the two meet at the Synod office.

Haley: With no further questions, I move that we give official recognition to the Peer Ministry Alliance as a Trinity Lutheran University student organization and approve the requested funds to allow for training of interested students.

The motion was seconded by Becky Sanderson, with the resulting vote being 33 in favor and just 2 in opposition. Erin squealed slightly, then went back up to where Steph and Marc were seated. Plopping down between them, she accepted their congratulations and affections (a kiss from each of them on the cheek). The remainder of the session consisted of budget requests from other organizations, with most passing sans debate. Once President Markham had adjourned the meeting, Marc asked Erin and Steph if they wanted to have dinner with him at Remington's River Inn to celebrate their accomplishment. They duly accepted and, after Marc invited Kristie and Sam to join them, the five of them left campus with Kristie texting Alyssa and telling her to meet them at the Thiensville restaurant.

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Marc awoke at 3am, wanting to get in some work on the case involving Dani before his meeting with Paul and Matt at 9. With no smoking gun coming out of the phone logs or the interviews, he decided to take a closer look into the recent stings by Glendale police near Bayshore to see if there was any potential overlap between them and the women's soccer team. He also put in a request to Gavin for the call records of the soccer program's cell phone spanning the past six weeks. Additionally, he sent over his initial findings to HR stating that there was reasonable enough doubt for him to believe that Danielle was not the perpetrator of the calls to Lexi and asked that, while he continued to investigate, the restrictions against her be lifted. Fatigue getting the better of him, he lied down on the couch around 5:30, hoping to snag a couple more hours of sleep before needing to get ready for the day.

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Marc handed copies of his agenda to Paul and Matt before diving in on the first topic of discussion.

Marc: Issue One. Peer Ministry was approved as an official student organization at Trinity last night by Student Government. This will in effect be our campus' equivalent to LCM at UWM and Marquette and will hopefully engage the student body in a way that weekly services and Lunch Bunch and drop-in sessions with myself don’t seem to do it. SGA asked if the Synod was planning to authorize funds for this endeavor and whether you, Paul, would have a hand in determining the leadership of the organization. Erin’s response to both questions were that the students would select their own leadership subject to a bit of guidance from myself, and that the Synod had funds from the in-development countywide LCM that might be available to them. Yes? No?

Matt: There are those funds, but there is also the surplus that your predecessor allowed to build up over the last two years of his time at Carthage. With the fiscal year ending January 31 and our need to pass the FY 2019 budget inside the next two weeks, my recommendation would be for us to allocate half the surplus along with the unused monies for the countywide project to your synodical account as a gift from Marquette and UWM, as they would have been eligible for those funds were they not allocated this way in the FY 2018 budget. You can use that money for additional leadership development, or on-campus programming, or to put towards a bigger goal. Paul, you would say that these funds are one-time injections and that their usage or non-usage will not affect their allocation in this upcoming year's budget, correct?

Paul: Correct. Frankly, Bruce (Archer, Carthage's chaplain) didn't really do much after the announcement of the move happened. I like your idea of building something within the university that mirrors other campus ministries on secular campuses. Matt, have those funds transferred into Marc's account and place it under the budget line "extraordinary gifts".

Matt: So done.

Marc: With us holding the peer ministry event at Trinity on January 26th, I was wondering if we could also host the annual LCM Chili Cook-off fundraiser that evening.

Paul: Don’t see that being a problem. Matt, you think Jessica and Rachel will bite?

Matt: Definitely! It was difficult for them to find a site for this past January's one, so having Marc offer Trinity to host it with the peer ministry training is almost a godsend. It will also highlight to the synod some of the good that is happening at our newest college.

Paul: That's settled. Next.

Marc: Personnel et al for Philly. I met with most of the brides on Sunday morning to discuss my plan for that week and to get from them some information about what they have planned. At this point, we could potentially have six couples involved. I'd like to have one or two seniors from ULS Philly, ones that have already finished internship, to be on-call in case we need additional officiants for the event. Can you work with the school on that? Paul, I know you will need to talk to their synod's bishop to get Danielle clearance to officiate alongside me, so perhaps you can take that up with him as well at that time. I told the ladies that I would get back to them with a bill once I talked with you about what we're covering at the synod and institution levels.

Paul: You've got that big cash infusion coming, so you could put in to use some of that for this event. I know that Alyssa and Steph plan to apply for candidacy sometime during the Spring semester. Matt, when you talk to the people at ULS, can you possibly sign up Marc and his students for an official campus visit? We'll be able to bill some of their lodging and airfare against the budget line for candidacy expenses. You've also got the TLU budget line that has been used for the two weddings you've done to date. You can use that to cover your expenses.
Marc: So the portions that they will need to cover on top of whatever fee I charge is Danielle's airfare and lodging and a rental vehicle for the five of us.

Paul: Sounds fair. Do you have preliminary information on flights and hotel?

Marc: Yes. The hotel is Le Meridien Philadelphia, across the street from Love Park. All out-of-town guests are staying there, and the reception will be hosted there as well. As for flights, it will be American 4883 going out on the 11th, and American 4902 returning on the 15th.

Matt: I'll get that handled today or tomorrow for the five of you.

Marc: Orlando is still up in the air. I'm probably going to book everything for that out of my on-campus account and then submit for reimbursement after the fact, provided it goes off. Onto the next thing. Vestments. With students traveling with me for these weddings and my beginning to use them in worship this Spring, we need some simple robes/albs for them to use when part of these services.

Paul: How many are you looking for?

Marc: Three for starters, to cover Alyssa, Steph, and Erin. As we add more to the peer ministry team in my office, we'll need to consider additional ones in the appropriate sizes. For now, it's having those three properly vested for the Philly wedding.

Paul: Seems reasonable. We have assistants robe up in the congregations for some services, and these three are essentially your liturgical and Eucharistic assistants. What sizes do you think you'll need?

Marc: Two large and one medium.

Matt: I'll get them ordered. They'll be delivered here.

Marc: Next is the USC Convention. Paul, you and I talked about this last month when the kerfuffle happened with Gavin funding his football coaches to go to AFCA and not doing it for one of the women's coaches to attend her sport's D-I and D-III Final Fours. I am planning to attend and to use my position on the Women's Committee to help form a new action group in the organization for coaches at sectarian institutions.

Paul: Meaning schools like Trinity, Augsburg, Capital?

Marc: Yes, but it would also include possibly Marquette, Depaul, Notre Dame, Alverno, etc. The Catholics might want their own, as might the "Christian" colleges, in which case this one would be a catch-all for the rest, kind of like what UCM is for the denominations that don't have dedicated campus ministries at a school.

Paul: Would Coach Dillon be seeking to attend as well?

Marc: We've talked about it and I told her that, as an alumna of the Urban Coaching Project, she could apply for a grant from the organization to cover continuing education, which the convention falls under. Travel won't be an issue since it's in Chicago. Easy down-and-back on Amtrak and use the El to get around.

Paul: Check that off. Anything else?

Marc: I saved the biggest thing for last. An idea came to me a couple of weeks ago while at lunch with a few of our students and faculty at Trinity. The question about new academic offerings was broached and Tom Sinclair brought up how his department was trying to create more survey courses that would provide a better background for introducing religion and faith into students' eventual
majors and vocations. With these courses in the catalog, a student could easily mirror what is covered in the synod's Diakonia program yet not get "credit" for it toward something unless they declared a major or minor in religion to go alongside their "real" major. Concordia had tack-on certificates to their professional degrees whereby a person in one of those majors could take additional coursework, including some specific to faith and their major, and be licensed by the LCMS for work within the synod. My idea is that, in conjunction with the Schools of Education, Nursing, and Health Professions, which houses Social Work, the Department of Religion and Theological Studies could offer a certificate that would serve as the means by which a student could gain consecration as a synodical deacon. The four courses, taken back-to-back or over time, in any order aside from everyone starting with the first course first, would cover the same material as the twelve-course, two-year cycle that the Diakonia program does. The schools and departments would be able to offer weekly, one-hour seminars that, combined with the academic courses, would equate to the same amount of time spent in the twelve five-week courses. We have such a wealth of knowledge on campus yet the church doesn't really use it to build itself intellectually. The Faculty Senate meets this afternoon and I'm planning to float this idea among some of them. Tom said he would be in attendance as well.

Paul: My first question, Marc, is whether students who take the four courses automatically gain acceptance to the diaconate or would it be similar to our candidacy process, where the spiritual portion is considered separate from the academic?

Marc: It would actually be a hybrid. Students could take all four courses and choose not to seek consecration, like some students take seminary courses or get advanced degrees without participating in candidacy. At the conclusion of a student's third of four courses, he or she would apply to my office for the opportunity to enter the diaconate. There would be criteria, both academic and spiritual, that a student would need to meet in order to gain approval, but if the student met them, he or she would be consecrated at baccalaureate service the night before graduation, thus able to leave Trinity with the certificate and the designation. Today is about getting this into the hands and minds of the Faculty Senate for an official proposal to come at perhaps the February meeting. Now, as for the two of you, I am looking to propose this at Synod Assembly as another means of getting more bodies into the service of the church. There is a huge demand that seminary graduates alone cannot meet. Thus the creation of Diakonia and synodical deacons. Adding in a university-based program I feel will help us develop a younger and thus longer-serving set of deacons as well as give the students a hand up in the job market with the certificate to go along with their degree.

Paul: Cost?

Marc: Shouldn't really be any, since the staff would already be Trinity professors. Perhaps if you want to hold a retreat for the purposes of developing collegiality among them and doing a formal questioning of the candidates, there would be cost to that. Also, as these individuals would be part of "the priesthood of all believers" in carrying out their ecclesiastical responsibilities in the midst of their regularly-scheduled lives and not as an employed member of the synod, there should be no expense to the synod in that respect.

Matt: How does this version of diaconal education mirror the breadth of experience that those in the synod's Diakonia program receive?

Marc: Sure, this program won't have the full range of ages, disciplines, and life experiences that you find in the synodical versions, but I think that is counterbalanced by the potential for a greater fusion of the spiritual with the practical.

Paul: Before I give an opinion, see if you can get the parties on campus to agree to a discussion on the matter. If you can't get the professional side of this to see its benefit, then you're not going to get
Marc: Understood. That covers my list. Anything the two of you want to bring up?

Paul: How is the Christmas Eve service coming?

Marc: Things are shaping up for a special evening on Sunday. We have a dress rehearsal on Friday evening to lock it all down.

Paul: I've seen that there have been some incidents near Trinity involving students and criminal behavior. What is the school doing about the students and have any athletes been tripped up in this, thus increasing your workload?

Marc: One athlete was arrested on Friday night for solicitation. Her case was handled by her hall director to my satisfaction. As for other students, the move to hall tribunals hopefully has taken these dust-ups out of the hands of student affairs and resulted in speedy and appropriate adjudication.

Paul: Guess that's it from me. Matt?

Matt: I'm good.

Marc stood up, shook hands with the bishop and his assistant, then left the synod offices for his trip up to Trinity.

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This afternoon's Faculty Senate meeting was lightly attended, which allowed Marc to do some glad-handing before Amanda Duckworth called it to order.

Marc (to Megan Oliphant): Do you know anyone in the School of Nursing or the School of Health Professions?

Megan: There are a couple of nursing professors that Ben is familiar with, and I'm friends with one of the instructors in the Physician Assistant program.

Marc: Any of them here, because I have a proposal for a joint venture between your college, theirs, my office, and Tom Sinclair's department?

Megan looked around the room, but didn't see anyone. Just then, her friend Lauren came down the stairs to the floor of the lecture hall.

Lauren Fowler: Hey, Megan! Funny seeing you here at a university meeting. Shouldn't you be playing with some kids somewhere?

Megan: Well, Ben's tied up this afternoon, so he asked me to come in his place.

Megan introduced Lauren to Marc and informed him that she was the person she mentioned earlier from the PA program.

Lauren: I've heard a few things about you, chaplain. Like you can be a real menace to people who cross you.

Marc: Don't believe EVERYTHING you hear. I'm just a problem child for those who don't understand how university life is meant to evolve through the generations and mirror what's happening outside this bubble.
Lauren: Are you a regular attendee of the Faculty Senate meetings?

Marc: Yes, if only to keep up on what is happening on the academic side of the institution. You?

Lauren: I'm replacing one of our school's representatives for Spring semester since she'll be on sabbatical, so I've come to see how things operate before I start my term next month.

Marc: Then you'd be one of the people that I should speak with about a proposal that I hope to make at the February meeting.

Marc handed Lauren a copy of his draft for the certificate in practical ministry.

Lauren: Interesting....this looks sort of like the Lay Ministry certificate that Concordia offered as a tack-on for certain degrees or the Lutheran Ed/Christian Ed certification that the School of Education had in place.

Marc: The concept is sort of the same, but this would be a cross-discipline certificate that students in those schools as well as those in the pre-professional programs in Arts and Sciences can pick up. The layout will mirror the synod's two-year Diakonia program, which is twelve five-week courses. Tom Sinclair and I will work on putting the academic program together, with the schools providing a place in their curriculum for the weekly seminars to take place, either joint or school-based.

Tom Sinclair came over to join the three of them. Marc introduced Lauren to Tom and mentioned her joining Faculty Senate in Spring as an interim representative from the School of Heath Professions. Tom remarked on Megan's appearance at the meeting and was told the reason of Ben's absence.

Tom: Marc, it looks like we're just missing someone from the School of Nursing to start the unofficial dialogue on your idea.

Marc: True. Good news, Tom. Paul has tentatively signed-off on the Synod recognizing this certificate as another pathway to church service. He wants to know that we have the support on-campus for it before he will officially advocate for it and allow me to bring it before Synod Assembly for passage.

Tom: That's excellent news. The two of us should meet next week to go through our catalog and the course list for Diakonia to see what combinations we could put together for the four-course certificate.

Amanda Duckworth, chair of Faculty Senate, entered the room and took her place, leading everyone else to be seated. A series of motions were made by the various schools' representatives to modify certain parts of their graduation requirements for the current sophomore class so they are in line with what the first-year students have and the comprehensive course catalog that will go into effect for Fall 2019 registration. As there was little new business on the agenda, Duckworth adjourned the meeting after 45 minutes. Tom went back down to the floor to speak with Dr. Lydia Wingate from the School of Nursing and invited her to join him and Marc for lunch next week to discuss the proposed certificate in practical ministry.
The Last Straw

A long night in his home office led to a short night of sleep, with Marc waking at 5am to get onto campus by 7 in order to keep working on finding the proof that Lexi was out-and-out lying about the texts. A disappointment came when he got to campus yesterday after his meeting at the synod office, as Gavin was unwilling to turn over the call records for the women's soccer cell phone, believing it wasn't necessary in order for Marc to exonerate Dani. He did, however, get a bit of positive news overnight as Hope Stevens sent him the call records for Mallory Putnam's phone, which showed a number of calls between her and her roommate, Lexi Millen, that corresponded somewhat to the texts that Lexi was sent from the women's soccer cell. Still unable to find the underlying proof, he sent another note to Dr. Baines stating that it was in the interest of justice for her to lift the campus ban on Danielle. Following that, he left his office for the Board of Trustees meeting.

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From: cbaines at trinitylutheran dot edu
To: mschmidt at trinitylutheran dot edu
Subject: Re: Danielle Dillon campus ban

Deacon Schmidt,

Without some degree of certainty that the charges will prove to be false, I cannot in good conscience allow her back on campus. As for gaining access to university phone records, HR is not authorized to grant such access.

Dr. Cheryl Baines, Vice President for Human Resources

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Marc read the note over several times looking for the smallest of cracks that he might be able to squeeze through to move the case forward. After a conversation with Albert Moncrief, VP for Student Affairs, about his ability to question students during exam week (allowable from when a student's exams are completed up until they check out of the dorms for the semester), he called Dr. Baines to work this out somehow.

Marc: Dr. Baines, this is Deacon Schmidt. I read over your last response and find it to be unacceptable. With semester exams scheduled to begin on Monday, your ruling systematically bars me from moving forward with the case in front of me until possibly mid-January.

Cheryl: What's the rush, Marc? Coach Dillon isn't needed back on campus until March 1 and I'm sure you will be able to bring forth a decision before then.

Marc: If this drags into Spring semester and it is proven that the complainant perjured herself, a number of possible sanctions for said offense would be unavailable to my office.

Cheryl: Is this really about getting justice or is it about you seeking out a pound of flesh from the athlete for accusing your former player of malfeasance?

Marc bit his tongue slightly while he considered an appropriate response. "With all due respect, Dr. Baines, you are not sensing the gravity of the situation. If this gets dismissed before the semester ends, Coach Dillon would be able to attend the United Soccer Coaches convention in Chicago in
Cheryl: Maybe I don't, but that's not MY problem to deal with. If you can't close your investigation prior to the end of the semester, then you'll have to wait until classes begin in January to complete it. In the meantime, the ban stays in place.

Marc: I'm sure that President Garrett and Chairman Strasser would be pleased to know that this university's chief hiring officer doesn't work well with other parts of the community who seek to make her job easier.

Cheryl: Is that a threat, Deacon?

Marc: I don't make threats, or hasn't the past three-plus months proved that?

Cheryl: I'm done with you. Do what you want, but unless you have controvertible evidence that Ms. Millen lied about Coach Dillon contacting her and for what purpose it was, we have nothing more to discuss on this matter.

Dr. Baines hung up, leaving Marc standing with the receiver in his hand. He slammed it into the holster, then fumed over getting nowhere in solving this. With one hour left in the academic term, he began furiously running through his list of interviewees, hoping to turn up SOMETHING more substantial than his own instinct about Lexi's veracity. Unable to find any of them on-campus at the moment, Marc banged his head against his desk attempting to release his frustration over the situation.

Marc (to himself): Where am I now with this? I can't get Dani cleared before the semester ends, more than likely. That takes her out of being able to perform with us on Sunday, as well as attending the university holiday party on the 19th. If it stretches into the first week of Spring, she'll be going to Chicago in a bit of a noose since any inquiries from potential employers would be answered with her being on administrative leave, and you know that AD's are going to reject her out-of-hand with that being out there. If that happens, she has no reason to trust me to protect her and could easily air what's been going on the past almost three months. How do I get out of this?!?! I'd call Erin to have her or Steph calm me down, but they don't know about the charges against Dani and I don't want to tell them that the reason I'm freaking out is because she is in trouble and I've been unable to get her out of it.

Marc decided to take a walk before the dress rehearsal for the Christmas Eve service. Heading west from Luther, he began hyperventilating a little and having trouble seeing through the tears streaming down his face. Going further, he found himself near the entrance to campus. Being slightly disoriented, he didn't realize how near he was to it and kept walking. A car came toward him through the gate. Sixty seconds later, everything went black.

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Wil Trainor: Marc. Marc. Can you hear me? Sarah, call Dani, see if she knows who we can contact.

Sarah did as Wil requested and called Dani.

Dani: Sarah! I thought you'd be up on-campus about now with dress rehearsal tonight.

Sarah: Wil and I are, but something's happened to Marc. He's lying just outside the entrance gate.
from Highland Road, unresponsive. Based on how he looked when our car passed him, he seemed headed for the overpass.

Dani was stunned by Sarah's hypothesis and remained silent for a bit before she began weeping.

Sarah: Deuce, do you know who we can contact since I know you aren't allowed up here at the present time.

Dani: His goddaughter, Erin, who's on your team.

Dani gave Sarah the number for Erin and Cassie's room and also her cell number.

Dani: When he comes around, tell him that I love him and then scream at him for even THINKING about taking that trip onto I-43.

Sarah: Will do, but it might be a while before we get to that point. I'll keep you posted. Don't worry too much, hun.

Dani: I'll try not to.

When Sarah returned to Wil, he had gotten Marc to sit up and began to bring his breathing under control.

Wil: Marc, we're going to take you to your office. Is that OK?

Marc nodded, then rose to his feet and followed Wil back to his car. Meanwhile, Sarah called Erin.

Erin: Hello?

Sarah: Erin, this is Coach Hawthorne. I got your number from Dani because she said you were the person I should contact. Marc is in serious mental trouble, I think. He was walking off the west side of campus when my friend Wil and I passed him in his car. It looked like he was heading for the I-43 overpass just outside the gate. Can you meet us in his office ASAP?

Erin: It will be faster than that, coach. See you in a couple.

Erin hung up and ran down the hall to Steph's room, banging on the door. Steph answered and was told that Marc was in deep and seemed to be on his way to jumping off the overpass just outside the campus gate. The two of them raced over to Luther, where Wil and Sarah had gotten Marc into his office and closed the door. Erin pounded on it and called out for someone to open up. Sarah went and let Erin and Steph in, then closed the door again. The two women went to Marc, with Erin behind him and Steph on his left side.

Erin: What happened?

Marc tried to compose himself enough to give her and the rest an answer. "Overload. I've been skipping sleep to get this case against Dani cleared up and neither the students nor the administration are making it easy to do so."

Steph: Case against Dani?

Marc: One of her players accused her of sexual harassment and inappropriate behavior.

Erin: So that's why Cassie met with you.

Marc: Yes, and like I said, I didn't get much if anywhere with her because she didn't really know
anything about her relationship with the player in question.

Wil: Walk me through the events that contributed to the overload.

As Marc ran down his week of activity for Wil, Erin texted Danielle and Alyssa, telling them what was going on and that they'd be at rehearsal when Marc was stable enough to leave his office. Steph asked Marc if he had any of his Hydroxyzine with him. He told her where it was, but mentioned that it probably wouldn't do much good since the panic attack had come on and the drug needs to be taken before that point to be effective in stopping it or making it subside.

Erin: Alyssa and Danielle know we're here and that we'll get to Bonhoeffer as soon as we can move you.

Steph and Erin lifted Marc from his chair and walked with him over to his office's couch, where each of them rested themselves against him.

Erin (sniffling): Papi, why were you thinking of jumping?

Marc: As you heard me tell Wil, I have this case against Dani that I'm having a hard time getting her out from under. If I can't do it and HR ends up holding a hearing, she could be sacked and have that determination follow her around when she applies for open coaching positions. It could drive her from the profession, and she would have me to blame for it because I couldn't prove that the stupid twit accusing her was lying. I have enough proof to create reasonable doubt about the charges, but no direct implication of perjury. Even the new evidence I got from her hall director wasn't enough for Dr. Baines to lift the campus ban. With finals starting on Monday, it's likely I will have to wait until Spring semester starts to take another run at the complainant, which will hinder her ability to network at the USC convention in Chicago, having the administrative leave hanging over her head. If I can't make this go away, what would stop her from retaliating against me by telling Danielle about our gig and dropping me straight-away? I lose my job, my marriage, possibly be defrocked. If that happens, what do I have left?!

Steph: That woman loves you more than you can imagine. I'm sure when Coach called her to get Erin's number and told her what was about to happen, she probably was beside herself.

Sarah: You're close, Steph. She was stunned, then remained silent for a few before bawling. She wants you to know, Marc, that she loves you and also wants me to tear your head off for even THINKING of taking a swan dive onto the interstate.

Wil (to Marc): When is your next appointment at Dewey?

Marc: Monday afternoon.

Wil: Can you make it through the weekend without wanting to harm yourself?

Marc: Yes. Don't know how I'm going to handle everything between now and the end of Sunday.

Erin: Don't you worry your balding head over it. You have good people around you who know their stuff. Let them run free and just be there to put the bow on the gift Sunday evening.

Marc: What about tomorrow and everyone coming over for the World Cup draw?

Steph: We'll come up with another option for it after rehearsal is over and then will let Danielle know in case you and her want to come.

Marc: You sure?
Erin: Positive. You need to rest and NOT DO SO DAMN MUCH! You also shouldn't try being perfect or Superman, especially when you don't have control over all the pieces to the puzzle.

Steph: Seriously. You're literally everywhere all the time when it comes to your job. We could have managed the SGA meeting on our own, and you definitely didn't need to hang out on campus all afternoon waiting for rehearsal to happen. You should have gone home, taken a nap, then come back up here with Danielle closer to 6.

Marc: But...

Steph: No but! You need to get on and stay on a somewhat regular sleep schedule, otherwise things will keep overwhelming you. I know that from experience and I'm sure you do as well.

Marc: OK. I'll rest this weekend up until I come to campus for the Christmas Eve service. I also promise to put the judicial work on the back burner until Monday.

Sarah: Are you going to be OK enough for Wil and I to head to the chapel?

Marc: Yeah. I might need to stay here for a little bit, but these two are here, so I'll be OK. Thanks for stopping. If you hadn't, who knows what might have happened.

Wil: I'll check on you Wednesday to see how Monday's appointment went and determine whether I should make a visit up here on Thursday or Friday to follow up.

Marc: Thanks, Wil.

Sarah and Wil left Marc's office and closed the door behind them, leaving Steph and Erin with him. They reassured him of his importance to them and how, even if everything he feared would happen did, they would stand by him and still love him. The three left a few minutes later for the chapel with Marc stabilized from his attack.
Following rehearsal, Erin and Steph discussed alternate plans for Saturday afternoon to view the Women’s World Cup draw. They settled on getting a group together to go to Buffalo Wild Wings at Bayshore, then started asking around for people to join them. Alyssa, Lindsey, and Emily jumped at the opportunity. Cassie overheard their conversation and called around to some of her soccer teammates to inform them of it. Once things were settled, Erin texted Sarah and Danielle of the plan so they could pass the word on to Dani and Marc.

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Cassie, Cami, Cali, and Lexi were the first to arrive at Buffalo Wild Wings, just after 12:00, and found a couple of tables to pull together for the large group that would be coming. A few minutes later, in walked Marc and Danielle, with Steph, Erin, Alyssa, Lindsey, and Emily making it around 12:15. Steph asked their server if they could get one of the big screens turned to Fox Sports for the draw, which was done.

Steph: Alyssa, both the US and Canada are seeded this time. When do you think they’ll be lined up to meet each other if things hold to form?

Alyssa: Hopefully not until the final, but you never know. In 2015, Germany and France, the number 2 and 4 teams in the world, met up in the quarterfinals because of how their groups were paired in the bracket.

Steph: And we got England in the quarterfinals instead of a more palatable opponent.

Erin: Can you clue me in on how these things work?

Danielle: Marc, you care to give the table a lesson?

Marc: Well, the 24 teams are split into four pots, one for the seeds, then one for the four teams from Asia, New Zealand, and Colombia. The third pot has the seven non-seeded European teams, with the teams from Africa and CONCACAF in the fourth pot along with the one European team that wasn’t selected during the Pot Three placement. France’s ball in Pot One will be a different color from the other five, so it can be drawn first and placed into Group A. From there, it’s all about luck. There are also group pots, with numbers 2, 3, and 4 in them. All teams drawn from Pot One will be designated as Team 1 in their group. As for Pots 2, 3, and 4, a team will be drawn and placed into one of the groups, in order from Group A to Group F, unless a team from their confederation is the seeded team in that group, then the team will be placed in the next available group. Then, a number will be drawn from their group’s pot, which determines the team’s schedule for round-robin. In order, 1 plays 2, 3 plays 4, 1 plays 3, 2 plays 4, 1 plays 4, and 2 plays 3. The third set of matches in the group are played simultaneously to give none of the teams an advantage in playing for a specific result or colluding on a specific outcome.

Alyssa: Here we go.

Gianni Infantino (FIFA President): Bonjour, tout le monde! Hello, world! We are just a few moments away from starting today’s draw for the 2019 Women’s World Cup. We are pleased to be airing this worldwide and would like to thank the AccorHotels Arena for hosting us today.
As Infantino gave a short explanation of the draw process, Dani popped in. She found a table on the side where she could watch the proceedings without interacting with the Trinity athletes. When Steph saw her, she asked Erin and Alyssa to join her on a bathroom run, then went over to say hi to her, giving her a couple of minutes of their time and some support. Marc stayed fairly well-frozen, as he could NOT have contact with her while the investigation was ongoing. The soccer players noticed her, with Lexi muttering under her breath. Cali left the table and joined the others with her. Dani’s friends Sarah and Michelle came in and joined Dani, allowing the girls to go back to the big group in the center of the seating area.

Infantino: To get started, I will ask former France National Team player Camille Abily to pull the ball for France from Pot One, thus allowing us to place them in Group A.

Abily pulled out the blue-colored ball, then opened it and revealed "France" on the slip inside it. She then went on to pull the remaining balls from Pot One in the following order: Germany (B); Canada (C); Australia (D); United States (E); and Brazil (F).

Steph pulled out her copy of the knock-out bracket and speculated on potential match-ups. "France and Australia have the good draws, avoiding the other seeds until the semis. US/Canada and Germany/Brazil in the quarters if they win their groups, and the two winners would play in the semis."

Alyssa: Uggghhhhhh. Not how I wanted to see this thing shake down. Just hope for decent draws for their two groups.

Infantino asked Real Madrid manager and FIFA World Cup champion Zinedine Zidane to pull the balls from Pot Two. The first one to come out was South Korea, followed by Japan, New Zealand, Colombia, China, and Jordan.

Marc: Germany got the worst of that drawing Japan. 2011 champ, 2015 finalist, and 2012 Olympic silver medalist.

The third set of balls were selected by former French national teamer and WUSA star Marinette Pichon. As this pot involved Europe, it was a quick and easy process to place them in their groups, with Sweden coming out first. The next one was England, which caused Alyssa and Steph to cringe, as they would be joining Germany and Japan in Group B. The rest of the teams placed were Switzerland, Belgium, Spain, and the Netherlands. Denmark was moved from Pot Three and joined the five teams in Pot Four for the final set of selections, which were done by Claude Makelele. The first ball drawn was Costa Rica, who were placed in Group A. Next was Denmark, who joined Group C as Group B already had two teams from Europe. Nigeria was chosen next and filled the final spot in Group B, with Haiti, Cameroon, and Ghana rounding out Groups D, E, and F.

After Dani left to head back to work, Michelle and Sarah joined Marc and the rest. Michelle gave Marc a hug and said she had heard from Sarah and Dani about what happened last night. Marc thanked her for being support for Dani during this tense time on-campus with the ongoing case. Sarah asked Marc how he was doing, which he responded to with: "I'm here. I had a decent night's sleep. I promised my two daughters-in-spirit that I would NOT work this weekend until I came up to campus for the Christmas Eve service, and that's what I plan to do. Thank Wil again for me and tell him to give me a call Monday morning so we can set up a time on Thursday for him to come up so I can debrief about this mess with someone who actually can relay stuff from me to certain relevant parties."

Sarah: Meaning he talks to me and I talk to Deuce.

Marc: Yep.
Sarah and Michelle waved goodbye to the players, with Sarah shaking her head at the way Lindsey and Emily were messing with each other. Alyssa told the other lacrosse players that she needed to get back to campus to rest for a bit before tonight's game against St. Norbert.

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Steph and Erin along with Kristie and Sam went to Ozaukee Ice Center to see Alyssa and the TLU hockey team take on St. Norbert. Following a 1-0 win for the Thunder, they gathered in Alyssa's room, knowing that Carli was hardly ever around on weekend nights.

Sam: How was the gathering at B-Dubs earlier?

Erin: It went like I hoped it would. Marc wasn't running around 100 miles an hour making sure everyone was being fed and liquefied. The soccer girls were a little "meh" aside from Cali.

Alyssa: Did you see how Lexi looked like she saw a ghost when she noticed Dani was with one of your coaches?

Steph: Yeah. Wonder what that was all about.

Erin: You don't think......

Steph: It would make just too much sense if that were the case.

Alyssa: Fill me in, you two.

Erin: Dani has been accused by one of her players of sexual harassment via text-messaging. Marc's got enough doubt on the player's truthfulness and her ability to have sent those texts given the cell phone system in the athletic department.

Alyssa: So THAT'S why he asked me about whether hockey had multiple ones and what the numbers were. And you're thinking the accusing player is Lexi?

Steph: I'm thinking so.

Sam: Remember when I told you that I saw Carli straggling in the morning after the Reformation Day dinner? If I recall correctly, she didn't go back to her room. She instead went to Lexi and Mallory's room.

Kristie: Mal got busted last weekend for something and is on some kind of restriction to campus.

Alyssa: Hmmm. If Lexi and Carli are into the same thing as what got Mal arrested, then they definitely would have something to hide.

Erin: Which if she were caught on her phone exchanging messages regarding that, she could easily make up something about it being someone harassing her.

Steph: So how do we get involved here and help this thing go away for Dani and put Lexi on the hot seat?

Erin: First, we need to find out what Marc already knows and what he hasn't been able to crack.

Sam: Floor meeting tomorrow night after we're all back from Bonhoeffer. Compare notes about those three and see if anything adds up that might point the finger at Lexi and help Marc solve this before we all leave on Friday or Saturday.
The five of them made plans to gather in Kristie and Ali's room and to spread the word to their circle of influence on the floor about the meeting. Steph and Erin went back to the former's room for some one-on-one time while Sam and Kristie stayed with Alyssa to give her some congratulatory loving.

**********

People began to arrive at 4:00 for today's Christmas Eve service. Marc was working with Danielle and Erin to get the front of the sanctuary laid-out and the proper atmosphere set. Alyssa was running through her list of ideas for the three-way discussion between her, Marc, and Stefan on gifts of Christmases past and The Gift presented by God to the world in a humble manger. Matt was tuning his French Horn with Sam on the piano. Danielle joined them with her flute and the three of them ran through the Evening Hymn and Magnificat, seeking to find a stable volume to provide support for the vocalists without overpowering them. Corey, Emily, Christen, and Erin went through the Psalmody, with Christen and Erin splitting off from the other two after the first eight measures to lead the second group of this round three measures after Corey and Emily begin the first verse. Steph worked with Sarah on the Annunciation in lieu of Erin (during the service, she would be joined by her at the start and Danielle halfway through). With 15 minutes to go before service began, Marc left the sanctuary to get himself centered and to put on his Ugly Christmas sweater (a cardigan in the school's colors with huge wooden buttons and rowing oars as the major design piece on it). Sarah went to seek him out and handed him a note that she told him was from Dani. He retired to the sacristy and read it.

Marc,

I wish I could be with you and the students tonight for this important first step in making Trinity a true worshiping community, but factors beyond my control prevent that from being so. Know that I do not blame you for not getting this charge to go away already, because I know you are doing everything you can to clear my name and get me exonerated. I wish I knew WHY Lexi accused me of this instead of being honest with why she was receiving so many calls from our program. Also know that I love you deeply and I look forward to this being over so we can spend time together again.

XO, Dani

Marc folded it up and placed it in the back pocket of his pants before returning to the sanctuary, which had filled up quite a bit in his 10 minutes away. Once the bells finished chiming signaling it was 5pm, Marc began the service.

Marc: Welcome to Bonhoeffer Chapel for the first of what I hope will be many Christmas Eve services in this building. On behalf of myself and our Bishop, Paul Emerson, thank you for joining us this evening as we celebrate the night when Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph in a manger in Bethlehem. You all should have copies of the Holden Evening Service as well as candles, which will be lit following the Magnificat. Let us take a moment to bring ourselves into the holy space that is around us.

The congregation bowed in silent prayer, which was ended by Marc chanting the first line of the Procession.

Julie sang the Evening Thanksgiving, with the Psalmody following that.

Alyssa recited the prayer following the Psalmody, with Stefan reading Luke 2:8-14. Following this, Marc joined the two pastors-in-waiting to talk about Christmas and what it means now versus what it meant when they were younger.
Alyssa: As a twin, I never really had my own special interpretation of Christmas since it was always Amanda and I at the same stages in our understanding of the holiday. Once our sister Abby had gotten old enough to become enchanted by the season, I was able to see through her eyes a different sense of what it meant, which I have taken forward as I reconsider the commercial aspects of Christmas, which I would call acknowledging gifts, to focus on the spiritual dimension of the holiday, which is recognition of The Gift that was given to all humanity.

Stefan: Being that this is probably my last Christmas season before beginning my journey to the other side of the pulpit, I have thought about how I want to present to my future congregation the joy of Christ's birth. As Alyssa said, as we grow older, we begin to experience The Gift in a way that we didn't previously. I am Lutheran by birth and have heard the Christmas story many times over the years, but it took tonight's interpretation of it, how this service allows us in a small way to walk the trail with Mary and Joseph from being told of the coming birth to experiencing it, for me to grasp the change in the ancient world that this single birth brought. It helps me to appreciate both what the parents dealt with internally and what the world around them experienced as a result of His birth.

Marc: Growing up, Christmas was all about family and presents. Religion wasn't a topic in our house, and we weren't churchgoers, not even Chreasters. When I got older, both of those changed due to 1) rifts that had come to estrange individuals from one another, and 2) the economy not being particularly charitable to my parents. In those years, it was about being content where you were with what you had. My sister and I scaled back our requests in future years. It wasn't until the second Christmas after my dad was gone that my thoughts about "the reason for the season" came to change. I was in a bad place mentally, a bad place academically, and a bad place emotionally. The day after Christmas that year, my cat Cloudy was admitted for a urinary tract infection. He didn't come home, succumbing after surgery. I was a wreck and it led to some selfish and inadvisable behavior. The next Christmas was like a 180 from that one. I had met my wife Danielle about six weeks before that, we had attended my sister's wedding together, and I spent the holiday with her family in northern Wisconsin. That sense of "family" led me to see how The Gift provided a base from which to experience joy. Attending Christmas Eve service with them opened my eyes to a different view of the holiday, one which has stuck with me for the past 20+ years.

Following the Annunciation and Magnificat, Julie and Emily alternated verses on the litany and prayers, with Stefan closing by leading the congregation in the Lord's Prayer.

Erin sang the first line of the Final Blessing, with Marc doing the remainder to close out the service.

Marc: Go in peace, serve the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God!

**********

Tonight's Augsburg Floor 3 emergency meeting took place in Steph's room, as her roommate is commuting from home for finals week.

Erin: Steph and I have brought all of you together because we have a problem and need your help to resolve it. We believe that one of our floor mates is behind the false allegation against Coach Dillon and want to help Deacon Schmidt clear her of it. Do any of you know why Lexi may have made up the claims about her harassing her?

Cami: I know I said that I thought Coach Dillon was getting it on with a member of our team, but it wasn't Lexi that I had suspected.

Alyssa: I know that she and Carli are sort of friends and that her roommate got picked up last
weekend for something while they were out.

Kelley sat there wanting to speak up, but slightly afraid of what she might insinuate if she does. Lauren gave her a look that indicated she wasn’t sure whether her roommate and girlfriend should share what she knows.

Kristie: Kelley, it looks like you have something on your mind.

Kelley bit her lower lip, then found the courage to speak up.

Kelley: A few weeks ago, Lauren and I overheard Lexi and Carli talking about some kind of secret arrangement they have with the athletic director and their coach and that Lexi's mom had seen one of the texts that her coach sent her regarding their undercover activities.

Kristie: So there IS something going on with those two and I would guess Mal as well. Cami, who were you suspecting was having fun with your coach?

Cami: Cali Farmer. The two of them are always joking with each other and seem to be a little more friendly with one another than she is with others on the team.

Steph thought she and Erin might want to inquire of Cali about her relationship with Dani. Meanwhile, Sam gave her interpretation of Carli and Lexi's behavior, which Alyssa confirmed with respect to her roommate.

Erin: Kelley, you NEED to go to the chaplain with that info. Steph or I will go with you if you want. He said he has enough to raise doubt about Lexi's veracity, but without something more concrete he can't get Dr. Baines in HR to drop the case or have the ammunition to take another run at Lexi over her original story.

Kelley: I can do it tomorrow afternoon. Are you sure my info will help?

Erin: Yes! I'd like nothing more than to beat the crap out of her for what she's put Marc through the past week. Losing sleep, wanting to jump off the overpass...

Alyssa: REALLY?!

Steph: Yes. That's why the three of us were late on Friday night and we texted you about it. He had tried to walk off campus in the direction of the overpass. Luckily, Coach Hawthorne and her, I don't know, boyfriend were driving past the gate and saw him collapse just outside it.

Alyssa steeled herself against the rage that was bubbling inside her. She knew that this girl needed to go down and go down HARD!

Alyssa: Lauren, you're probably the calmest of all of us here at the moment. Any suggestions on how we can ramp up the pressure on Lexi?

Lauren: I think letting her know in a discrete way that we know she's the one who made the allegation will get her to sweat a little. I also think riding your roommate about what might have been heard could bring more pressure on Lexi to drop it or perhaps cough up some info about the secret stuff the athletic department is doing.

Erin: So what do we want to do about all this?

Kristie: The chaplain has been good to all of us here and gone out of his way at times to take care of us when ish has made things problematic. We should make an effort to show him our appreciation by
helping him to dig up whatever we can that will get Coach Dillon off the hook and land Lexi in some serious trouble. If he can make grown people shudder at his voice and demands, imagine what he could do to an unsuspecting freshman.

Steph: How many of us want to do a drop-in on him tomorrow afternoon to offer our help and to reassure him of his value to us?

The entire room nodded in agreement with Steph.

Erin: We have to do it early in the afternoon since he's due at Dewey in Tosa at 3. Right after lunch, 1pm?

Hearing no dispute, the group broke up to get back to studying for finals. Alyssa came across Cali on her way back to her room and filled her in on what they discussed (including the accusation from Cami about her and Dani being a possible thing) along with their surprise visit to Marc tomorrow afternoon.

Chapter End Notes

Just a few chapters to go in this first book of the saga.
Gotcha

Finals week has always been one of Marc's favorite times of the academic year. No, he is not a masochist. He views finals week as a good opportunity to catch up on stuff that had gotten pushed aside during the course of the semester, or to get creative on new projects that he'll carry into either the winter break or summer recess. When he arrived at his office on Monday morning, he immediately went into attack mode. First, he called Casey Schultz in the athletic department to inquire about Lexi's exam schedule, finding out that her last final was scheduled to end at Noon on Friday. From there, he called Hope to find out when she was scheduled to check out of Augsburg for winter break, being told that she was listed for 3:30pm on Friday, which is the earliest that she could depart campus. Armed with this knowledge, Marc started to develop his plan for confronting her between those two times in order to get a confession about the fabrication of her charges and to hand down sanctions before she left Mequon. Then, he went through the email he received over the weekend. He had copies of the reservations Matt had made for the wedding in Philadelphia and the USC Convention in Chicago, along with confirmation of the albs being ordered for the ministry. Also, there were a couple of congratulatory notes on last night's service and an inquiry by a Carthage graduate about earmarking funds donated to the Trinity Foundation for experiential education in peer ministry. Marc wrote everyone back before tackling the two messages in his voicemail.

From: Overland Park, KS

Marc, this is Ashlyn Harris. Tomorrow is supposed to be the big day, when we finally end Servando's runarounds and get Alex's divorce decree. Wish us luck, and hopefully we'll have good news for you on Wednesday.

Marc marked down in his calendar to contact her on Wednesday about the wedding date, as it falls during the USC Convention.

From: Augsburg Hall, TLU

Deacon Schmidt, this is Cali Farmer. I was wondering if I could stop into your office tomorrow morning after my 7:30am exam to discuss the case against Coach Dillon and to clarify my previous testimony. Either text or leave me voicemail telling me one way or the other.

Marc called Cali and left her a message that he'd be in his office all morning, so she should stop by when she had time. With his maintenance tasks completed, he pulled out Dani's note from last night and began writing a response to it.

Dani,

Last night was a success in my opinion. I wish you had been able to be part of it, but life doesn't always give us what we want. I have come up with a way to get another pass at Lexi before she leaves campus for the semester, but I can't do it until Friday afternoon. I'm with you on wondering what the big deal is that has her accusing you of something to hide whatever is coming from Sara or the other players. I was glad to see you for a few minutes on Saturday, even though we couldn't talk. I am deeply sorry for what I must have put you through on Friday night with my near-attempt. When Dr. Baines blocked my means of resolving your case, I began to think about how you might respond if I was unsuccessful in stopping this from going to a hearing, which led to a spiral of negative thinking and my jumping to the conclusion that you would have no use for me if I didn't come through in protecting your job and restoring your good name, which would lead to you ratting us out to my wife and all the negative consequences that could happen following that (no marriage, no job, loss of rostering, no purpose). I adore you and it hurts me greatly that I haven't been able to make this
Marc closed the document and went back to the case at hand. He worked to compare other things in the phone logs (both Lexi's and the ones that Hope sent him from Mallory Putnam) that might point to something below the surface information. Around 10am, Cali stopped by to see him.

Cali: Deacon?

Marc: Cali. Come on in. I got your voicemail from last night and left you a message. Did you receive it?

Cali: I didn't bother to check my phone, deciding to take a chance on you being in.

Marc: You said that you wanted to clarify some of your testimony from Tuesday. The floor is yours.

Cali: I wasn't being entirely truthful when you asked me about my relationship with Coach Dillon. Yes, it is fairly non-descript as it goes for player/coach relations, but away from Trinity it's much more than that.

Marc: My office had received an allegation from one of your teammates that she thought Coach Dillon had something going on the side with one of her players. That's why the charge from the complainant has been taken seriously and is being fully investigated. Are you saying that you are the player that was being referred to by your teammate?

Cali: I came to find out last night that said teammate WAS thinking that I was the one getting with Danielle away from the field, but it's not true.

Marc: Can you tell me what is true, Ms. Farmer?

Cali: Dani and I are....cousins.

Marc: Come again?

Cali: Dani's mom Theresa and my mom Judy are sisters.

Marc: That would definitely make you cousins. So why hide that fact? Ooooohhh.....worried your teammates will think you're getting preferential treatment because of Deuce?

Cali: Yeah.

Marc: Well, you know that kids or relatives of coaches always have it tougher on them than the average player.

Cali: Of course! Actually, she and I have more of a big sister/little sister relationship than cousins.

Marc: Makes sense. She's the youngest of four girls, and you're, I'm guessing, five years younger than her. Don't know the makeup of your family, but if you only have brothers, I can see the two of you having that dynamic.

Cali: How do you know so much.....OOOOOOOOOOOOO......I should rip your head off for putting her through all that torture on Friday night. She was so inconsolable after Sarah told her that you thought about jumping onto I-43 that I went down and spent the night with her so she wouldn't be at
home with just her parents, since I'm not sure they know about the two of you.

Marc: I've written her a note that I'll be sending down to Bayshore with my goddaughter and her girlfriend later today, since we can't see one another while the case is still ongoing, explaining my thought process on the evening and how things spun out of control mentally for me. Back to the case. Since you're on the soccer team, what can you tell me about Lexi Millen and her relationship with Carli Lowe?

Cali: They seem to be pretty close. I'll see them go out together on the weekends. Lexi seems a bit in awe of Carli, like she has some kind of pull that lets her get away with being half-asleep on the field and indisposed half the time. Alyssa Norman told me last night when I ran into her in the hall on our floor that they suspected Lexi made the charge against Dani as well as telling me about the accusation made to you about her and me.

Marc: Let me say that I'm grateful that you tipped her off to the HR charge filed against her. It gave both of us a head start on what we were to walk into when we got back from North Carolina.

Cali: One more thing before I finish. When I overheard Lexi and Carli talking last Wednesday, Lexi said that she had been grilled by her parents about a text her sister had seen her take the previous Sunday before she came back to campus after Thanksgiving break.

Marc: Which coincides with the last call made to her from the soccer program's cell phone. I think I might have something to confront her with on Friday.

Cali: Can I ask you a personal question, chaplain?

Marc: Yes, considering you have a bit of inside knowledge about me already.

Cali: Well, make that a couple. First, how do you feel about Dani, and second, what's the deal with her and players on other teams here?

Marc: Well, I'm going to tell you the same thing I told Erin when she asked me several weeks ago. I adore her and have fallen for her. She meets certain needs I have that my wife doesn't, and with her not seeking something exclusive at the current time, we're just going with where it goes. We've gone out with Sarah and her "guy", Wil, and I know that the two women are sort of biding time with each other until something changes. Now, about her and the other athletes. I know you saw Erin, Steph, and Alyssa seek her out at the World Cup draw event on Saturday. Well, she's friends of sorts with the three of them. Alyssa's twin sister plays soccer at UW-Oshkosh and she's a former player. As for Erin and Steph, I described their relationship to me earlier, so that's how they have come to get to know Dani and provide a bit of support for the two of us.

Cali: I guess that explains why those two are hell-bent on getting something done. They called an emergency floor meeting last night I figure to ask around about who knows what and how to get that info to you.

Marc: I've learned not to put ANYTHING past that spitfire or her partner in crime. Anything else?

Cali: I think that does it for me. Are you sure my info will help?

Marc: It already has. If you can, keep your ear to the ground during this week in case something else gets spilled by one of those two.

Cali: Consider it done.

Cali left Marc's office, which allowed him to go grab lunch before diving into some second-semester
planning in the afternoon.

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Marc returned to Luther around 1:00 and was greeted by a sizable portion of the TLU lacrosse team. After opening the door to his office and ushering them in, he sat down at his desk.

Marc: To what do I owe the pleasure of this gathering?

Kristie: Two reasons. One, we heard about Friday night and wanted to come by and reinforce our opinion of you and your worth. You have been a friend, a mentor, and a confidant to all of us, either directly or indirectly, and we want you to know that we appreciate you and don't want you to feel like your being here serves no purpose if you're unsuccessful in getting us out of our little jams now and again.

Sam: And second, our teammate Kelley I think has some very important information that you need to know concerning one of our floor mates and the substance behind her false allegations against Coach Dillon.

Marc: Kelley, go ahead and tell me what you know.

Kelley: About three weeks ago, my roommate Lauren and I stopped by Alyssa's room to see if she wanted to go out for coffee with us. While outside her door, we heard her roommate and another girl talking about some special arrangement they have with the athletic director and their coach and how they are being enriched by it. The non-roommate said that she had been sent a text by her coach over fall break and had to lie to her mom about the contents in it. Carli was asserting all the benefits the two of them got from their "job" in the athletic department. There was something about money, academic leniency, and career guidance if I remember correctly. Also that their job involved crazy weekend hours.

Alyssa: We came to discover that the second person in the conversation was Lexi Millen and supposed that she might be in the same situation that got her roommate put on campus restriction.

Marc: Very interesting.....if it's the same racket, then there is a lot more to dig around for on the soccer team and in the athletic department as a whole. If she has had to lie about messages from her coach in the past, she's probably doing it here. I had another member of the soccer team stop in earlier this morning with some information about this current complaint and to refute a rumor involving her and Coach Dillon.

Steph: If you can tell us, what was the crime that got Mallory Putnam arrested and sanctioned by our hall director?

Marc: I can't divulge that, but if these two are also into that, the weekend hours thing would definitely make sense, along with the time of their work. I'll dig a little, but I think you've given me the ammunition I need to get a confession, because if she thinks I know what she's covering up, she'll admit to the lie in order to keep me from learning about the activities she's wanting to hide.

Erin: Is there anything we can do for you to help bring this to a close?

Marc: Not necessarily bring it to a close, but I do have a task for you and Steph. Does anyone have anything else to add?

Lauren: Just that I am so happy we have you here at Trinity. After hearing about what happened to Kelley on fall break, the way you stepped in and had Student Health deal with her, I don't know how to thank you for that.
Marc: It's part of my job, to see all the students on this campus as my sheep. Sometimes, they need a careful combing, other times a shearing or a gentle push in the right direction by my shepherd's staff.

Marc led them out of his office, where each of the players gave him a hug and kind words. Steph and Erin went back in with him and were handed a copy of the note he wanted them to take to Dani. He also told them that they might want to strike up something with Cali Farmer as they have a mutual interest in seeing things wrap up quickly. While at lunch, Marc had gotten a call from Wil, which he returned after the girls left, scheduling a time on Thursday morning for him to come to campus for a chat.

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Stephanie Allison (Marc's therapist): Marc, how have things gone since your last visit?

Marc: Like a yo-yo. Did I see you before or after Thanksgiving break?

Stephanie: Before. You told me about the Packers/Lions game coming up and then the wedding the following weekend in North Carolina.

Marc: OK. So I brought up Danielle's accusation of my being mentally unfaithful in front of our goddaughter and her girlfriend?

Stephanie: Yes, and how that made you extremely resentful of her, which led to you going out to dinner with your not-girlfriend and her friends while Danielle was at Honor Flight and what happened after that.

Marc: OK. The trip to Michigan was fairly calm until I started mentally working on my script for the wedding the following weekend. As I'm going through the introduction and the one-liners I put in there, she starts cracking me over them. The next day, after the football game, Danielle, I, our goddaughter Erin, her parents, Erin's girlfriend Steph, and her parents went to dinner. Erin came out to her parents that night, for which I was extremely proud of her and of Steph for taking the step together and handling the questioning of Jim and Val with respect and conviction. On Friday, the six of us went out Black Friday shopping, with Steph, Val, and I browsing the mall and the other three going to see the newest Fantastic Beasts film. I got disoriented and had a panic attack. I was able to get outside the mall and then texted Steph to come, since she would know how best to get me out of my panic and to a stable state of mind. Danielle blamed me for letting myself get worked up, so I tuned her out pretty much the rest of the weekend and started focusing on the following week's activities.

Stephanie: I take it that you started to put some distance between her and yourself. I'm also guessing you used work to create it.

Marc: Correct on both accounts. I knew I only had three days on campus that week before leaving for Raleigh, then one week after that until the Christmas Eve service which was last night.

Stephanie: Tell me about the wedding and the rest of your time in Carolina.

Marc: It was definitely better than the one I did in Kansas City. I had more of a vested interest in the service's design and the couple getting married. I also had Erin, Steph, and Dani with me.

Stephanie: Let's go back a step. Dani, the "other woman", was in Carolina with you?

Marc: She was there for work, as the Division I and Division III Final Fours were taking place in Cary, a Raleigh suburb, and Greensboro, about 90 minutes away from Raleigh. We did spend some downtime together after our independent things finished up on Thursday and Friday.
Stephanie: What about Saturday?

Marc: She came down to Wilson for the wedding and reception.

Stephanie: Is that all?

Marc: Not exactly. After we returned to Cary, we spent the night together.

Stephanie: I see......any thoughts on the matter?

Marc: It was the first time in a long time that I felt "free", that I felt like my best self. I wasn't having to hide some of the things that make up me from someone because they didn't approve of them. That weekend sort of released me from the cage I've been stalking around trying to keep my marriage intact for visual and professional reasons while I allow myself to connect with someone who is frankly better for me emotionally and psychologically.

Stephanie: Any guilt over your actions?

Marc: I've been seeing you for more than 18 months already. You should know the answer to that. I have no guilt, I have no shame. I'm a mid-level narcissist for whom those two emotions don't really register.

Stephanie: I know we've talked about the disconnect you and your wife have, and how that probably won't be restored. I guess my question to all of this is why are you still in your marriage when it clearly doesn't satisfy you the way this other relationship does?

Marc: Stability. Professional pride. The devil you know being better than the one you don't. As I've told you, it's not like the marriage is terrible. It's an 85-90 on a scale of 1-100. Just that the missing 10-15% needs to come from someplace else and I've gotten tired of resigning myself to not having that part fulfilled.

Stephanie: And how would you measure your relationship with this other person?

Marc: It has the potential to be a full 100, which I've never experienced with anyone. Anyways, onto this past week. When I returned to campus last Monday, I found out that one of our athletes had been arrested for solicitation and that one of our coaches was accused by a player of hers of inappropriate conduct. I spent all of Monday and Tuesday trying to get the coach's case cleared before the busy part of the week hit, where I'd have worship, a meeting with the Bishop, Faculty Senate, Board of Trustees, Christmas Eve dress rehearsal. I was skimping on sleep in order to do everything and when, on Friday afternoon, I found out that HR wasn't willing to concede that I had enough evidence to prove reasonable doubt as to the charges, I crashed and tried to walk myself off-campus to jump off the bridge running over I-43 by campus. Luckily, one of the school's coaches and her friend, who is an intern here at Dewey, saw me collapse just after I exited Trinity and stayed with me until Erin and Steph could be notified and get to my office.

Stephanie: Oh my. That's not good. Can you tell me what caused the crash?

Marc: The overload of things on my plate combined with the lack of sleep, the several big and small attacks I had over the previous couple of weeks, and the pressure I was feeling to get Dani out from under these charges so I could go after the accuser for perjury. I put everything on the shelf for the weekend, got through the service last night with no snags, and went into the office this morning in a clearer state of mind. Doesn't hurt that it's finals week so I have a very light schedule. Some pieces of the bigger puzzle fell into place this morning. Had a number of Erin's teammates and floor mates stop by my office earlier this afternoon to offer their support in bringing this investigation to a close and
giving the student-athlete her due.

Stephanie: Which falls right into your wheelhouse of wanting and needing adoration and affirmation from the outside world, plus taking vengeance on those who cross you. I'm glad you're saner today than you were on Friday, but we need to find better ways of you coping with the stresses of your job and the inability to impose your will on every situation. Let's leave it here for now and schedule an appointment for next Monday, where we can discuss the past week and a game plan for getting through the holidays given the juggling act you're doing. Take care of yourself with the lighter schedule and don't take on more than is reasonable. I'll see you next week.

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Following Erin's 3pm exam, she and Steph left campus for Bayshore to drop off Marc's note to Dani and do some Christmas browsing. After dropping off the note and talking to Dani for a few minutes, the pair went to Kohls to look for a picture frame for their couple shot from Becca and EJ's wedding that they wanted to give Marc for his office wall or desk. While in the store, they ran into Cali.

Steph: Cali. Didn't know you were coming down here tonight.

Cali: I'm meeting my cousin for dinner at Roman Candle Pizza after she gets off work. Would you care to join us? I'm paying.

Erin: I'm not one to turn away a free meal. Steph?

Steph: Count me in. Where is it?

Cali: It's just east of here on Silver Spring.

Erin: Sounds good. Where does your cousin work?

Cali: Lane Bryant. She picked up the job so she could make some extra money and move in with one of her friends from college.

Steph: We have a friend who works there as well. Danielle Dillon, your team's assistant coach.

Cali told the two of them that she was unaware that she was working there as well, not wanting to give away their relationship until after all of them were at Roman Candle.

Erin: We have a little more shopping to do. What time should we be there?

Cali: 6:45.

The three of them went their separate ways temporarily so Erin and Steph could search for an appropriate gift for the third member of their Carolina traveling party. Stopping in at Zales, they found a locket that could be engraved with space for two pictures. A short discussion between the pair led them to purchase it with "Deuce" engraved on the back. The pictures they plan to insert into the locket are one Erin took of her and Marc during the reception and the picture outside Howard Chapel of the two lacrosse players. With shopping done, Erin and Steph went to her car and drove the few blocks to Roman Candle. When they walked in, they saw Cali and Dani seated together and walked over to their table. Dani got up and gave Erin and Steph hugs before sitting back down.

Dani: I heard that Cali ran into the two of you at Bayshore and invited you to join us.

Steph: She said that she was meeting her cousin for dinner. Nooooooooooooo.........really? The two of you, related?
Cali: Yeah. Don't you see the resemblance?

Erin: I can see a bit of it in the face, but it's not overly pronounced.

Dani: Blame that on our dads' DNA. My sisters and I got my mom's hips and my dad's shoulders. She and her brothers got Aunt Judy's height and Uncle Steve's dimples.

Steph: Marc told us that someone from the soccer team stopped in this morning with some info about the case. He also said she refuted a rumor about getting at it with Dani, the one we heard about you and her last night. What did you tell him?

Cali: What I overheard from Lexi and Carli the day the complaint was filed, that she had gotten caught reading a text from someone associated with the soccer program while home on Thanksgiving break and chose to pin it on Dani to cover up who it was from or its content. I also gave him the what-for for Friday night.

Erin: Did he tell you that he had Steph and I deliver Dani a note explaining what happened?

Cali: Yes, he did.

Dani: Cali, Steph and Erin were there Friday night and saw the condition he was in. I saw him have a couple of moments while we were in Raleigh last weekend, so things ramping up with the lack of sleep and this case and his schedule last week added up to him melting down.

Erin: He saw his therapist this afternoon and I think Wil is going to come by campus later this week to check on him.

Dani: Good. I sure hope what got dug up today will let him go after Lexi on Friday after her last final. This stuff happening in the program is getting to be a bit much. Carli's all-night escapades, Lexi lying about me harassing her to cover up calls she's getting from Sara or others, another player running with the rumor about Cali and I, the police raids over at the Baymont a few weeks ago.

Steph: There was another one while we were in Cary. One of the Acro athletes got caught in it and was placed on campus restriction by our hall director. She's Lexi's roommate, so......

Dani: Hmmmm....guessing that what she's covering up might be similar to what got her roommate busted. The first one, which happened the weekend before Thanksgiving, turned up drug dealing and prostitution along with underage drinking.

Cali: Whoa. And you're thinking Mal got caught for one of those?

Dani: Wouldn't say yes, but can't rule it out.

Steph: Dani, are we going to be able to see you before we leave on Saturday?

Dani: I'll be working Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday.

Erin: We'll try to stop down on Thursday since I don't really want my parents with us when we give you our Christmas gift.

Dani: Speaking of that, what would you suggest as a thoughtful-but-neutral gift for Marc?

Steph: He doesn't have a crucifix for his formal vestments, so something like that would be a good choice.

Erin: Ummm, I'm not sure Dani should do that considering what he REALLY wants for one to wear
under his robe.

Steph: Considering how big a joker Marc is, I'm betting it's loud and ostentatious.

Erin: Right. A crucifix the size of Flavor Flav's clock-around-the-neck.

Dani: Seriously?!?! I think I know where I can get one. The Lil' Friar shop across the street from the Basilica has crucifixes of various sizes. One of the smaller ones for one's wall would probably be big enough to meet that requirement. I'll go down there tomorrow and look.

Steph and Erin thanked Cali again for the invite and headed to Erin's car, leaving the other two to spend time together. Dani gave Cali their contact info before she left for the drive back to campus and asked her to tell Marc that all is forgiven and that she would have a surprise for him at the university holiday party next Wednesday provided she was free to return to campus by then.
Marc was on the phone with Casey and Hope again on Tuesday morning, extracting information from both of them to plan out both his Friday afternoon as well as the list of sanctions that he might hand down. Based on the two calls, he will meet with Hope and Mallory Putnam at 1pm on Friday (under the guise of needing to clarify her second-semester campus restriction before she leaves for winter break) and seek to confront Lexi following that. Should everything go correctly on Friday, the following is the sentence which will befall Lexi: 1) Academic restriction of no more than 12 semester credits in Spring Semester, to be proscribed by the athletic department's academic adviser in consultation with Deacon Schmidt; and 2) Loss of campus parking privileges for Spring Semester. With that settled for the time being, he took a walk over to the library and stopped into the coffee shop inside for a mug of hot chocolate. While drinking it near the back of the seating area, Ben Oliphant from the School of Education came in and sat down at his table.

Marc: You enjoying finals week as much as I am?

Ben: Probably. Most of the courses I teach don't set up for having structured finals, so we just use the time designated in the schedule to wrap up any loose ends from previous weeks. I heard that you used my and Megan's marriage in your homily last week as an example of a relationship the campus community sometimes sneers upon.

Marc: I did. I also gave a solid defense for it and tried to refute the slippery slope argument detractors lay out for why they consider it improper. Your story struck a chord with me because I'm dealing with a similar situation here at Trinity. My goddaughter is a first-year student and a former player of mine is the assistant soccer coach. People see me around Erin more than you'd expect for a staff member and probably jump to some very wrong conclusions, while my relationship with Dani I'm sure raises eyebrows.

Ben: The naysayers thinking you're using your position to troll the waters?

Marc: Precisely. Both of them coming here had nothing to do with me. Erin applied, was accepted, and had committed to Trinity before Paul ever asked me to be interim chaplain. I hadn't seen or spoken to Dani in three years or so before we happened to run into each other in Luther's Landing the first day of Freshman Orientation. Do I enjoy having the two of them around here? You bet.

Ben: You're probably about the same age as me, right?

Marc: A year younger. I'm 46.

Ben: And I will reckon that Dani is younger than Megan?

Marc: Yeah. She's 24. At the wedding I did a couple of weekends ago, one of the brides' fathers complimented me on my beautiful family, believing that Erin, her girlfriend, and Dani were sisters. That was a first for me so I had to have him re-iterate what he meant.

Ben: I've been lucky that no one has ever mistaken Megan for my daughter, but we do get the occasional stare and gasps when we're in public holding hands. My parents had a 13-year age gap between them, but since she was in her early 30s when they met no one really thought it that weird.

Marc: I get you. When my mom and dad got married, he was 51 and she was 27. I was 3 1/2 and my sister had just turned 1. The dynamic of having the kids made it I guess palatable. Then there is my aunt and her first husband. He was 38 years older than her. I'm used to the gap. Danielle and I are
five years apart, with her the older one.

Ben: I need to be running for a lunch meeting. Tom Sinclair invited me to meet with him and Dr. Wingate from the School of Nursing.

Marc: Then I suppose we need to get moving. We're meeting to discuss a cross-discipline certificate in practical ministry that would allow students to take what is the synod's diaconate education requirement for consecration as a synodical deacon.

Marc and Ben rose and left the library for Siebert Dining Hall and their meeting with Tom and Lydia.

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A productive meeting with Drs. Wingate, Oliphant, and Sinclair behind him, Marc returned to his office. Around 2:30, the phone rang.

Marc: Deacon Schmidt.

Ashlyn Harris: Marc, Ashlyn Harris here.

Marc: I didn't expect to hear from you today. Good news?

Ashlyn: No. The jackass's lawyer got ANOTHER continuance on the premise that end-of-year awards and National Team profit sharing might change the financial picture for both him and Alex, which would shift his contribution number as well as the overall amount of assets in the marriage.

Marc: So this fool is able to push off the settlement into 2019 because he THINKS he can get a larger take than he should. There has to be some limit to the shenanigans he can pull to deny Alex her right to be free of him. Is she there?

Alex: Hello?

Marc: Alex, can you give me a rundown of all the tricks Servando has played so far? There has to be a limit to this somewhere in the law, since he really has no grounds to keep delaying your ability to move on and marry Ashlyn.

Alex explained the multiple continuances granted to her soon-to-be-ex-husband that moved their trial date from early April to early January of the next year. "I even offered the mea culpa money in order to get this done, but he seems to be gumming up the works hoping his lawyer can find something more damaging to me than that admission."

Marc: I have a few friends in the law business. Maybe one of them can work with your lawyer to get this thing resolved. Let me ask around and see what they know or can do. Expect a call from someone by the end of the day.

Alex: Thanks, Marc.

Marc: Did Ashlyn tell you my suggestion for how to get married by the end of the year?

Alex: Yes, and as soon as we get the decree, we're going to get the license and hopefully can get hitched before the 31st. Are you still able to do our celebration on January 19th?

Marc: That is the week of the USC Convention in Chicago.

Alex: Really?! I thought it was the previous week. That is going to seriously decrease the number of
people that will be able to attend, unless I can talk Ash into doing it up there.

Marc: If you decide to do that, let me know so we can get a time and space at the convention to hold it.

Alex: Will do, and thanks again for your help.

After hanging up with Alex, Marc sent emails to three lawyers he knew in the Milwaukee area (one a former player of his, one the sister of a former player, and the third a high school classmate of his sister) with a short description of Alex's dilemma. Fifteen minutes, he got a call from Diana Prange, who said that she would contact Alex later today to set up a conference call with her and her lawyer for tomorrow morning to walk them through how to get this latest continuance tossed and a new trial date set. Marc thanked her and they caught up quickly before he ended the call and packed up to go home for the evening.

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Alyssa, Stefan, Erin, and Steph met with Marc over lunch on Wednesday to talk about the first handful of services for Spring semester and his plans to have them participate in them. Marc informed them that he would be gone on January 16th for the USC Convention and on February 13th for the wedding in Philadelphia. He said he had asked Pastor Belding from UWM to cover the January one, as the school would still be on winter break, and Bishop Emerson to preside over the one in February. He told Alyssa that she would be assisting Rachel for the first service and should meet with her to determine what parts she would handle. He then let Stefan know that he had asked Paul to let him perform portions of the February 13th service as well as deliver the homily. To close this first-ever Peer Ministry meeting, Marc asked for recommendations from the four students as to who he should consider adding to their team. Alyssa thought Corey Herr would be a good choice, while Steph recommended Julie Jacobsen. Marc said he would try to talk to the two of them before they left campus for break and gauge their interest on joining them. He found out from them their schedules for the remainder of finals week and said he'd try to see them again before they departed Trinity for the holidays.

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A very easy Thursday was on Marc's agenda. He had meetings scheduled with Corey and Julie about joining Peer Ministry, but that was it. While waiting for Corey to arrive, Marc started working on his homily for the baccalaureate service on Saturday morning, with the subject being the moving from one lifetime to the next as a result of graduation.

"Most of us up here had already lived a lifetime before any of you were even born, and some of us are on to our third or fourth already. What matters isn't how many times the sun revolves upon you, but rather what you have done during those periods of time. I'm for sure experiencing my third one as a result of my hospitalization and the subsequent change in my life's course, but I learned important things in the previous two that have allowed me to embrace this lifetime with both hands, ready to be my best me and present that and God's gifts to those around me. Some of you will leave here today after graduation with full knowledge of what is next for you, while others will leave and step into a huge void that will need to be filled somehow. Accept that, though you have been here for four or more years, you still don't know everything you need to know to get through this thing called life. And that's OK. I'm 46 and I still don't know certain things that would make living day-to-day easier, such as how to change the oil in my car, make myself food that requires more effort than throwing something in the oven or the microwave or pouring a bowl of cereal, or how to open up to those around me when I'm not 100 percent. Last Friday, I thought about taking my own life because I couldn't accept that I was not all-powerful and felt as though I would be blamed by someone close
to me for that. I got lucky in that others saw me in that condition and rushed to care for me and pull me out of that deep abyss. Even two years out from my first panic attack and near-attempt to flee the Earth, I still haven't found anyone I can trust enough to let inside my head and soul."

Corey: Deacon?

Marc: Corey! Come in and have a seat. I'm sure you're wondering why I wanted to meet with you. One of my assistants recommended you for inclusion on our new Peer Ministry team that will be formed next semester.

Corey: What exactly is peer ministry?

Marc: In short, it is being a witness to your fellow students, be it in the dorms or in class or in front of them at worship. What is your major?

Corey: Nursing.

Marc stifled a slight giggle.

Corey: Go ahead and chuckle. I've heard so many of them this semester that I'm used to it by now.

Marc: I wasn't meaning to laugh. You just don't seem the nursing type. Truth is I have tons of respect for the profession. My sister is one as you heard me say at Lunch Bunch last week, and my mother-in-law was one before she passed on this past February. I just think of how male nurses are portrayed in media, from Jerry on "ER" to Greg Focker in the "Meet The Parents" trilogy, and you don't fit that stereotype.

Corey: My mother is a nurse and I was always fascinated by the stories she'd tell me about her patients. There is a huge demand for nurses to replace those of my grandparents' generation who are retiring, but there are still not enough spaces available in schools of nursing to accommodate the potential supply or meet the current demand.

Marc: I know this story all too well. My sister and I debate how to fix this as she sees the burnout and stresses being placed on those in the field because of the shortage. I know some people you might want to talk with in the future about this, but for now let's get back to the purpose of our meeting. Just like a nurse provides more than just medical support for his or her patients, peer ministers do more than point their fellow students to resources or encourage them to speak with me. They listen to what is truly happening around them and offer their own experience and background in forming a two-way relationship with those in their midst.

Corey: But why me? Clearly, I'm not on the level of Steph or Alyssa or Erin in terms of what I can offer.

Marc: Corey, don't judge yourself by their level of experience or "faith". Those three are special cases that don't reflect the vast majority of students on this campus or in college in general.

Corey: What about Stefan?

Marc: He's three years ahead of you academically and in life, and is coming to the close of his time here. He's been prepping for the pulpit since his first day on campus, according to Dr. Sinclair, and has been focused on that for the past three-plus years. Just like you wouldn't compare what someone at 15 can do with someone at 18, you shouldn't look at him as the standard you need to meet in order to be "good enough" to be a peer minister. In fact, I can see you being a bit of a successor to him as it relates to being a male voice at Trinity within the religious campus community. Men don't necessarily come flocking to worship and aren't overly receptive of women pushing the Good Book down their
throats. However, they have just as great an appetite for experiencing God and spiritual matters.

Corey: I still don't know what I think about standing up and standing out around Trinity.

Marc: Let me make you a deal. Come to our first peer ministry meeting on January 11th. That's the Friday before Spring Semester starts. Also, sign up for the training event on January 26th. After that, if you still feel this isn't for you, let me know. No harm, no foul.

Corey: Deal.

Corey got up to leave, followed to the door by Marc. Corey exited and Julie came in.

Marc: Julie, do you have any idea why I wanted to meet with you?

Julie: One of the girls told you to get me more involved?

Marc: Sort of. One of them recommended you to become part of our new Peer Ministry team.

Julie: OK....I know a little bit about the concept since my congregation in Phoenix also served as the home for Arizona State's LCM and they had it as part of their set-up.

Marc: Good to know you're at least familiar with the idea.

Julie: I know that you think a bit highly of me as a Lutheran student here, and I have a fairly good rapport with the other three "big shots" you have in your office's arsenal, but I just don't know that I'm up to snuff compared to them.

Marc: You don't need to be at their level, just have a willing heart and do what you can to be light in the dark places at Trinity.

Julie: What if I get some overly theological question from a student? I don't have any background in that. I wasn't even confirmed since Mom and Dad switched from Episcopal to Lutheran while I was in high school.

Marc: When did you start playing lacrosse?

Julie: When I was 8 or 9. I also played soccer growing up and took ballet for a couple of years.

Marc: When did you narrow down your activities and prioritize lacrosse?

Julie: Freshman year of high school, since lacrosse and soccer were played in the same season.

Marc: At that point, how would you compare yourself to your teammates?

Julie: I was alright, but not nearly as good as the juniors or seniors or those freshmen who had specialized earlier than me.

Marc: And how did you feel about that?

Julie: Like I was playing the best I could and that I'd get better the more I played.

Marc: That's exactly how you need to view those three compared to yourself. One of them has a parent in the business, sort of. Another was born and raised in the ELCA, and the third has been working her way toward a future career in the church since she was in 10th grade I think she told me. You can't expect to match what they bring to the table based on where you're starting. I have faith in your ability to let your light shine and be a comfort to those who need it around here. Come
to our meeting on the 11th. Take the training on the 26th. You'll probably find that those you are elevating aren't as confident in their own abilities as you think they are.

Julie: I'll be there.

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After lunch, Marc finished off his homily for Saturday, contacted Paul about getting a letter from himself, Rachel, and Jessica into congregational bulletins for their December 30th services concerning Lutheran Campus Ministry, and went through Dani's application for an Urban Coaching Project grant for the USC Convention. He called the United Soccer Coaches national office in Kansas City and told them that he wished to pay for Coach Dillon's convention registration and awards banquet ticket ($364 total) by way of the Visa card he had for the Urban Coaching Project. The person on the other end confirmed the payment and told him he would receive a receipt by email of the transaction and that it would be applied to her account once they received her registration form. Following that, Marc emailed Dani from his UCP account giving her the information needed for her to register for the convention and told her that she would be granted $400 for hotel expenses, to be booked by the Urban Coaching Project on Monday. The day wrapped up with Wil stopping by to check on Marc.

Marc: Wil! Come. On. In!

Wil: You seem in a fairly good mood compared to last Friday.

Marc: I am. Things are wrapping up for the semester fairly well. I'm going to get my chance to resolve Dani's trouble tomorrow afternoon by making the complainant admit to fabricating these charges. Peer Ministry is getting off the ground. All the little tasks are getting completed and I'm looking forward to what I think will be three days of seclusion next week up here before winter break starts for me.

Wil: How was your appointment with Stephanie?

Marc: It was alright. She wasn't overly happy about Dani going to Carolina with me and us spending our last night there together. Also didn't seem particularly interested in affirming my narcissistic tendencies and how they play themselves out when I'm stressed. I'm seeing her on Monday afternoon so we can game plan how I'm going to get through the holidays isolated from Deuce and being with the wife 24/7.

Wil: So what is your thing with Dani? Sex? More than that? A future replacement for your missus?

Marc: It started with the first, then progressed past that when we learned how much we enjoyed one another's company and how accepting we were of each other's current place in life. She's not looking for forever at the present time, and I'm not really looking at the moment to leave Danielle. Life's uncertain, though, so you never know what might happen down the road.

Wil: You know about her self-esteem issues, right, and how she needs someone who can be a bit of a cheerleader for her, a praise fountain, especially when it comes to her exterior?

Marc: Yes, and I'm not shy about telling her that I think she's adorable, beautiful, sexy as hell, and how she turns me on like no one I've been with before.

Wil: You really ARE hooked on her, aren't you? I thought you were just solving her need for a big brother or "safe guy", but you seriously want to be with her, like long-term maybe?

Marc: Our relationship began with me as the safe guy, the person from whom she could get her piece
and some words of encouragement and praise, especially when it came to hating her body. What I get from her is indescribable. I had gone a long time without being able to perform and thought that that would be the way life would play itself out. She's changed that and I am extremely grateful.

Wil: I know I don't need to tell you this, but don't hurt her. The scars from high school and early college haven't completely healed and her trust in men is still a bit shaky. I know the two of you have some history together from before you both came to Trinity, which is why she trusts you and is willing to let you get close to her.

Marc: I don't plan to hurt her, ever. You've been asking me question after question about my relationship with Dani. Let's turn the tables a bit. What's the deal with you and Sarah?

Wil: We've been best friends since 7th grade. I knew by that point that I was gay, so nothing came about in terms of us being a couple. In our last year of high school, we started to experiment a bit with one another, because coming out for me just wasn't in the cards at that point. She was my first sexual partner and I love her tremendously. I know that I'm not attracted to women in general, and I AM attracted to guys. So that's where we are.

Marc: What makes her someone you can't see yourself with?

Wil: That's the confusing part. I DO think her and I could turn our friendship into a lifetime commitment, but I don't want to take the risk of starting that and then realizing that the desire I have for her isn't enough to keep me from getting some on the down-low.

Marc: Have the two of you EVER talked about your feelings for each other or what would be acceptable or not?

Wil: No. I'd just rather not know if she sees me as a long-term partner beyond our friends-and-more relationship.

Marc: Take a bit of advice, chap. TALK TO HER! Do you want to know how I came to realize that I was falling for Dani? It was when I was able to be honest with her about my dysfunction and about the pain I carried inside over it from my wife shaming and ridiculing me over it. I also told her that same day about my issues with the wandering eyes. When she didn't run for the hills after hearing about either of those, my thoughts about and feelings for her changed from friend-with-benefits and work spouse to more than that.

Wil: You sure that if I tell her what I'm thinking, she'll respond positively?

Marc: From what Dani told me once, she's been waiting for you to come around to where she is concerning your friendship and its potential to be more. The only thing you probably need to work out with her is the side piece concerning you and guys. Take her out to dinner tomorrow night, somewhere out-of-the-way and quiet. Enjoy one another's company and see if sparks fly. One more question: have you ever kissed her?

Wil: Not in the sense of it being a romantic gesture. We did it a little bit during that initial experimentation phase and we do when we're ramping up to go at it, but not in the "I like you and want to show you that" way.

Marc: Up until two weeks ago, Dani and I hadn't kissed outside of foreplay or the hello/goodbye type. I knew she wanted to go that next step, but I was afraid of it because it would mean that our relationship was no longer predominantly physical, but emotional as well, and it would mean to me that I was in fact cheating on Danielle. The last night in Cary, after we returned from the wedding reception, it happened. We looked at each other after we broke it and confirmed that things were
about to change, and that we were in agreement as to that change. Try it. See what happens. You might find that you feel nothing. She might feel the same. The only way you will find out if there are possible legs to the two of you as a couple is by taking that step. It might be awkward at first, but if it's meant to go someplace you'll figure it out quick enough.

Wil: I'm due at the clinic for a group therapy session at 6, so I best be going.

Marc: I'll walk over to the parking garage with you, since I'm heading home for the night.

The two of them went to the west side of campus where the parking garage was located and, after a bro hug, went to their cars and left Trinity for their next destinations.
Adios, Au Revoir, Auf Wiedersehen

The Friday of Finals week is always a smorgasbord of students trying to leave campus, students stuck on campus until Saturday, and other combinations of students and loved ones negotiating the campus roads to depart for winter break. This one was no exception. Marc sat back in his office and watched some of the movement happen while Monday's snowfall began to melt and cause very messy roadways and paths. Luckily, he brought a change of clothes for tonight's dinner with Danielle, the Mathesons, and the Lafleurs at the Range Line Inn. With a free morning, he penned the letter for Bishop Emerson, then sent it onto Rachel and Jessica for their comments and input. He also purchased Dani's Christmas gift (a navy tulle dress he saw on her Pinterest wish list from the Girl With Curves Collection, something he hopes she'll consider wearing for the awards banquet at the convention next month), which he'll pick up from Nordstrom on Monday.

Just before noon, Erin and Steph stopped by to give Marc his Christmas gift from them and to get some advice on how to deal with winter break and the questions that were bound to be asked by well-meaning relatives and friends. Marc was touched by the choice of picture and the inscription the two of them put on the back: "From our first wedding to (hopefully) our own, the one constant is you, our second dad. Marry us someday, please." He gave both of them hugs and pecks on the temple, then reached inside his desk to hand them their gifts from him. For Erin, he got a lacrosse pendant and chain from the Etsy shop of a high school classmate of his who previously ran a sports apparel and jewelry business. Steph's gift was a signed copy of Kate Fagan's book, Split Image, the biography of a former college athlete who died by suicide during her freshman year at Penn. Both of them loved their gifts and felt they were quite fitting. Steph told Marc that she and Erin needed to get to Bayshore to give Dani her gift before their parents arrived and told him what it was. He thought she'd love it and thanked the girls again for their support of his relationship with her.

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Inside Hope Stevens' office in Augsburg, she, Marc, and Mallory Putnam met to lay out the remainder of her campus restriction.

Hope: Mal, the dorms will open for Spring semester at Noon on Friday, January 11th. You are expected to be back on campus and checked in with me by 4pm. Beginning on the 14th, there will be slight changes to your restriction given your practice schedule and night class. I will let Deacon Schmidt explain those changes.

Marc: Mallory, for the first three weeks of the semester, your 8pm curfew will be extended to give you ample time to return to Augsburg after practices on Tuesdays and Thursdays and your class on Monday nights. However, you will be required to be escorted back on those nights by someone from Augsburg who will have to verify with me what time you arrived at the dorm. The restriction expires at midnight on February 1st, at which time you will be free to come and go like the rest of the student body.

Mallory: What about my court hearing on January 24th?

Marc: Hope and I will attend that and, with university counsel, submit your plea of no contest, requesting that the court consider your two-month campus restriction as sufficient punishment for the crime.

Marc had Mallory and Hope sign off on his modifications to the previous sanction, then allowed the freshman to depart.
Marc: Any big plans for the break?

Hope: Sleep. A LOT of sleep. You?

Marc: Nothing too big. Just need to get a jump on the start of Spring semester because I will be gone most of the first week for the United Soccer Coaches Convention in Chicago.

Hope: Before I forget, I want to thank you for your support in letting me handle Mal on my own instead of asserting your prerogative to take over the case once you returned from North Carolina.

Marc: There was no reason for me to step in given that you had a better understanding of what had happened and what would be an appropriate deterrent or sanction. I'm hoping that when we go before Judge Lindstrom on January 24th, he will see the positive action of our internal judicial process and let her off with time served.

Hope: Where are you with the Lexi Millen case?

Marc: I got a significant break in it on Monday when some of your residents stopped by my office and attested to things they heard from her that contradicted her testimony and the claims she made against Danielle. I've had to wait until today to confront her with this new evidence because of finals, but her last exam finished at Noon and you said she wasn't due to check out until 3:30.

Hope: Correct. How do you plan to do that?

Marc: That's the tough part. I can't necessarily sit around Augsburg and wait for her to show up or come to you to check out, because there won't be enough time to get a confession, send the no true bill to HR, and try her for the fabrication before the end of the day. Also, I'm sure that she doesn't want her parents to get here and have her tied-up with this.

Hope and Marc got up and exited her office, then walked to the Augsburg first-floor lobby. After a couple more minutes of conversation, Marc noticed Lexi and Mal walking out the dorm's exit along with whom were presumably Mal's parents. When the four of them came back in, Marc intercepted Lexi.

Marc: Ms. Millen, I was hoping to run into you before you left for the semester. I need you to clarify some of your testimony based on what I have learned since we last talked.

Knowing that she was stuck between a rock and a hard place here, Lexi asked Hope if they could use her office and if she would sit in on the questioning. Once inside and seated, Marc began his interrogation.

Marc: According to the defendant, the women's soccer program has only one cell phone, with the number being the same as the one which made 17 contacts with you. I was also informed that Coach Manning allowed players on the team access to that phone. How am I to believe that those text messages came from her and not someone else associated with the program?

Lexi didn't have an answer for that question other than to say, "Believe what you want. I KNOW who was sending them to me, and it was Coach Dillon, not Coach Manning or one of the players."

Marc: Without the actual transcript of those texts, there is little context from which I can make a reasonable decision as to her guilt or your truthfulness pertaining to the charges. Moving on, a number of athletes from your floor came into my office on Monday with information that leads me to believe that you either fabricated the charges or are attempting to frame the defendant when someone else may be responsible. Care to comment?
Lexi: I stand by what I said to Dr. Baines and to you.

Marc: Can you fill me in on your relationship with Carli Lowe and the arrangement the two of you presumably have with Coach Manning and Gavin Winchester?

Lexi: Ummm....what arrangement?

Marc: Two students testified that they overheard a conversation you had with Carli in which she spoke of certain benefits the two of you were receiving from Mr. Winchester with Coach Manning as the go-between. There is also supposition that the two of you and your roommate, Mallory Putnam, are part of a syndicate which is engaged in illegal activity. Ms. Putnam was arrested two weeks ago for solicitation and it is suggested that you and Carli are also into that type of activity.

Sensing defeat, and not wanting to have her and Carli's weekend whereabouts investigated or disclosed, Lexi acknowledged that the texts may not have come from Coach Dillon. After a follow-up question as to the identity of the sender, Lexi admitted that she had pinned the charges on Dani in order to cover up who had actually sent them. She then invoked her right to not answer further questions concerning the text messages.

Marc: So you are hereby recanting your previous testimony as to Coach Dillon's contacting you?

Lexi: Yes.

Prepared as always, Marc had Lexi sign a document stating that her previous testimony was false and that her updated testimony was correct to the best of her knowledge. Marc had Lexi placed under Hope's supervision until her check-out time of 3:30 and went back to his office to email Dr. Baines with the transcript of his follow-up with the complainant and his ruling of no true bill. He received a read receipt from her at 2:17pm, which left more than 2 1/2 hours for her to drop the case and him to render a decision on Lexi's guilt or innocence. Feeling good about the situation at hand, he left his office to see off some of the students around campus.

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Lauren's parents, Rita and George, had driven up from Indianapolis to help their daughter cart home some of her stuff for winter break. Upon arriving at Trinity, they parked and walked over to Augsburg, where she and Kelley were talking with Steph, Erin, Lindsey, and Emily.

Rita Chandler: I guess it's true that my daughter actually has friends at school besides her roommate/girlfriend.

Lauren: Mooooooom! I'm not nearly as much of an introvert as you tend to believe.

Kelley: Hi, Mrs. Chandler. Hope your trip up here was relatively uneventful.

Rita: It was when I drove. When George did, it was an adventure.

George: Just because I was willing to drive through the blowing snow on the Skyway without crawling at 15 miles an hour doesn't mean that I was crazy.

Lauren introduced her parents to the other two couples with them, stating that all four of the women are on the lacrosse team with her and Kelley.

George: Do you know your match schedule yet?

Lindsey: From what we've been able to determine from last year's schedule, we will open at home
the first Wednesday of March, then go south for Spring Break for a couple of games. The month of April is nothing but conference matches, I'm presuming.

Rita: Anything close to us, or don't you know yet?

Lindsey: Since the NACC is split between Wisconsin and Illinois, we'll be playing two games in the greater Chicago area against teams, with the other two teams from the city coming here.

Erin: I'll ask my mom or Marc when I see them about the rumored game against Concordia-Ann Arbor.

While they were talking, Dan and Lynelle Ochowicz along with Jerry and Aaron came walking up and the two boys attacked Kelley's legs. Lauren picked up Jerry while Kelley attempted to get Aaron off of her.

Lauren: Mom, Dad, this is Jerry, one of Kelley's brothers. The other one is Aaron. They're 4 and 3.

Rita: Awww. They're still in that mischievous-but-cute stage. Wonder how much trouble they stir up.

Dan Ochowicz (to George and Rita): You must be Lauren's parents.

The Chandlers shook hands with Dan and Lynelle, then talked for a few minutes about their impressions of their daughters' partner. Meanwhile, Lauren and Kelley went back into Augsburg to bring out some of their belongings. While on his tour of campus, Marc stopped by and greeted the Chandlers and Ochowiczes along with making fun of the two comedians in his midst.

Marc: Erin and Emily, when should I expect the two of you to do a joke-off?

Emily: Probably on our first road trip, because then we won't be competing with YOU!

Erin: Smart thinking, girl!

Marc: You take all the fun out of being the funniest person at Trinity.

Lindsey: I don't think anyone can handle having the three of you going off on each other. That sizzling dis you did on Jessie Fleming at the College Cup, I don't think either one of them could have come up with that on the fly.

Erin: I was literally shocked when it came out of his mouth, Linds.

Steph: I love Baby Canada, so I felt really bad that surrogate pops over here went nuclear on her within earshot of some of her Canadian National Team teammates. However, that was seriously funny.

Marc: How did Dani like the gift you got her?

Erin: She loved it. Told us that she'd wear it close to her heart since it had the closest rendition of a future family in it.

Marc: I have some good news. Hopefully in the next hour or so, she'll be a free woman.

Erin hugged Marc, followed by Steph. "How?!"

Marc: Based on what your teammates and Dani's cousin brought me on Monday, I was able to get Lexi to recant her previous testimony and admit to pinning the calls on her to cover up the real content and the true sender. Then, she invoked the Fifth to stop my interrogation.
Steph went to spread the news to those who had come forward and helped them. When Kelley and Lauren returned, Marc went up to them and thanked them for what they had done to help bring Dani's case to a close.

Sam, Kristie, and the Norman sisters were helping pack Amanda and Alyssa's cars when Bob and Melissa Mueller showed up.

Bob: Do my eyes deceive me, or are my two girls and the twins all together here?

Sam: Dad, Oshkosh has Dead Day today, so Amanda came down to help Alyssa get stuff moved back to Port Washington for break. Nothing more than that.

Melissa: Hi, Alyssa. Been keeping my too-cool-for-school daughter out of trouble?

Alyssa: As best as I can. She isn't THAT bad. Just when it comes to certain people does her hackles rear up.

Marc came over and spoke for a couple of minutes with the Muellers and the Norman twins, informing Alyssa about the possibility of Alex and Ashlyn's wedding happening at the Convention.

Amanda Norman: How is that going to happen if Servando keeps being able to delay their divorce trial?

Marc: I talked to a lawyer acquaintance of mine about their situation and she was supposed to talk with them about how to force the issue and get this last continuance tossed. Haven't heard anything since Tuesday afternoon, but I told them I would be at Convention the weekend they were looking to do their nuptials, and Alex seemed to think that they might move it from Orlando to Chicago in order to have the people they want in attendance at it.

Amanda: I'm going to Convention this year, since school doesn't start for us again until the following Tuesday.

Marc: Alyssa, I'll let you know what's happening when I hear from them next, hopefully with good news about them getting a new trial date that will allow them to run to the courthouse and get hitched before the end of the year.

Kristie: Sammy, you thinking what I'm thinking?

Sam (mulling): Convention is in Chicago. Amanda will be there. Alyssa might be as Marc's assistant. We live maybe 25 minutes away from downtown. I can see the two of us heading home for the weekend and then going into the city to see the two of them.

Kristie: Exactly!

With the Normans' cars packed and ready to go, the twins and Kristie and Sam walked between Augsburg and Regents so the four of them could say their goodbyes outside of others' eyes. Alyssa and Kristie took hands briefly before kissing one another. Sam then hugged Alyssa and placed a peck on her cheek, which she responded to with a light peck on Sam's lips. Amanda and Sam stood and looked at one another for a few seconds, wondering what the other person was thinking. Amanda wrapped her arms around Sam and reached up to kiss her on the nose. While she was pulling back, Sam pressed her lips forward onto Amanda's and they exchanged pecks for a few seconds.

Lindsey and Emily said goodbye to the other four in their group, then walked hand-in-hand to the former's car for their six-hour trip back to Minnesota. Lauren and Kelley went up to get one last load.
of items, this time for Kelley, and said their farewells in their room away from their families.

Lauren: How will I get through not seeing you for four weeks?

Kelley: We've got Skype. I may not be on my iPad or laptop all the time, but we can set up a couple of chat dates to get us through.

Lauren pulled out a sprig of mistletoe she had been hiding in her pocket, then held it over Kelley's head. The child-like shorter partner got the hint and immediately attacked Lauren's lips. Following the kiss, the two held one another before grabbing what they had come upstairs for, locking up their room, and leaving campus with their parents.

Marc looked at his phone, getting a little flummoxed that he had yet to receive an email from Dr. Baines that the charges were dropped. Around 4:15, he called over to HR in search of her, only to be told she had left campus for the day. Slightly angry, he was in the midst of a slow burn when Val, Jim, Elliott, and Suzanne came upon him.

Elliott: Marc, what's the good word?

Marc: If I had one right now, it would be celebration. Instead, it's consternation. HR is being a bit slow on the draw in getting me notice that the charges against one of our coaches have been dismissed so that I can then bring sanctions against the accuser.

Val: Ick. Never liked dealing with HR. They tend to not know university procedure, only their own corner of the world.

Marc: Yeah. This department is mostly a carry-over from Concordia, so there might be some set-in difference of opinion when it comes to what their policies were and what ours were and are.

Erin and Steph led their parents up to their rooms to help them get their stuff hauled out and packed. In the interim, Marc went back to his office to change and check his email one last time before leaving campus for the weekend. A message from Hope told him that Lexi had departed campus around 4:20. Marc grumbled under his breath and vowed to make Dr. Baines pay for her stall tactics that got in his way. At 4:49, he received an email from Cheryl stating that the charges against Coach Dillon had been dropped and that she was now free to return to the university community. Armed with the read receipt and the eventual response, Marc quickly read through the grievance process and decided to file one against Dr. Baines for obstruction. He then packed away his laptop and left his office to join Erin, Steph, and their parents back at Augsburg before they left for the Range Line Inn.

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Marc: Thank God THAT is over! I've never been so under-the-gun since I worked for Queen City and was literally starving trying to drum up sponsorship dollars for the club.

Erin: You definitely look better after work today than you did when we got to you last Friday.

Suzanne: What happened, Marc?

Marc: The stress of this case against one of my former players, who's also a friend and one of my on-campus proteges, led me to consider taking a long jump onto the interstate. Luckily, a couple of people were coming onto campus and saw me in my collapsed state and got Steph and Erin to meet me at my office a few minutes later.

Steph: I told him I had never gotten to that point, but there were some times when I didn't feel like living anymore.
Val: Things have been rough on you lately, haven't they? The attack on Black Friday, this most recent situation, plus whatever minor ones that come up in the course of day-to-day living.

Marc: It hasn't been easy, that's for sure. Juggling my chaplaincy, the weddings I do around the country, the other university functions that end up on my plate, working on getting our synod to expand its diaconate education program to include Trinity as a site. It's like there is always something that I'm behind on getting finished or accomplished.

Jim: Kirk is impressed by what you have done and continue to do at Trinity.

Danielle: Well, he brings a lot of the stress on himself, because he's not willing to let others do things for which he wants credit, and he doesn't seem able to stay out of the spotlight. When he took this job, I thought "FINALLY, he is going to be in a place where he won't have to bust his hump 28 hours a day to satisfy his need for being worshiped and adored."

Marc took particular offense at Danielle's comment, as this was becoming a regular occurrence, her chiding him in front of Erin and Steph. He got up and went to the restroom to clear his mind and bring his simmering anger under control. Elliott joined him a couple of minutes later, seeing him in a bit of a funk.

Elliott: Care to talk about it?

Marc: THAT WOMAN! She has been on my back about every little thing since I got back from the wedding in Kansas City almost two months ago, but it has gotten a lot worse the past month or so. She's acting like whatever is wrong with me is my fault and not that of my illness. Thankfully, I have Steph and Erin to help balance that, along with my work wife who will finally get to return to her job after the charges against her were dropped due to the accuser fabricating them.

Elliott: How long have you and Danielle been married?

Marc: 21 years. Been together just over 23.

Elliott: Suzanne and I are at a bit of loggerheads over Steph's love life. I know my daughter is gay and always has been. Her mom hasn't been willing to accept that, even though she's sort of comfortable with her and Erin being a little closer than close friends.

Marc: You're in the business of knowing that stuff, and she won't bow to your knowledge of your daughter's sexual orientation?

Elliott: No. I can't seem to figure out how to convince her of it.

Marc: I had to talk Val through realizing that Erin might be attracted to women and that Steph and her could be a thing. Maybe some visual evidence might convince Suzanne of Steph and Erin's togetherness. The few days they were together up in Kitchener, did she not grasp it?

Elliott: I guess not. The two of them weren't all over one another and kept whatever physical inclinations towards each other out of sight.

Marc: Ask the girls to show you pictures from the wedding weekend. If they don't convince her, then she doesn't want to be convinced. Any advice on dealing with Danielle?

Elliott: You need to talk it out and find out why she's sniping at you, and specifically doing it in front of Erin and Steph.

Marc: Hopefully we'll have time over the holidays to get into it.
After returning to their table, Marc mentioned the gift that he got from Steph and Erin. Elliott followed up on that by asking Steph to show him the picture that Marc referenced. Erin pulled out her phone and went to her Instagram, where she clicked on the picture and passed it around the table.

Val: Cuuuute.

Jim: Very nice.

Elliott: Oooooo. That's the same jumpsuit you wore for your interview at Laurier, right?

Steph: Yeah. When I bought it, the saleswoman said that it could work for a variety of occasions.

Suzanne: Stephanie, I have to admit the two of you look so happy together. Maybe I've been wrong about how you swing and whether this "gay thing" is just a phase.

Marc: Erin, did anyone get a shot of the two of you on the dance floor at the reception?

Erin: Sonnett took a couple for us because she couldn't get the Great Horan out there for any of the slow numbers.

Erin scrolled through her Twitter photos and found them as Emily had tagged her, then showed one of them to Suzanne.

Suzanne: Why didn't I notice this before? She and you....look like a real couple.

Steph: I guess I should say thank you, Mom. Now do you believe that I'm what I am and that Erin and I are together?

Suzanne: Yes. I'm sorry I doubted you. I just never thought of that possibility.

After Marc paid the check, the group left the restaurant and gathered in the parking lot where the goodbyes were given. Marc was kindly attacked by Erin and Steph, with each of them kissing him on the cheek. The Mathesons and Lafleurs left for their hotel while Erin and Steph followed their parents back to Glendale and Marc and Danielle drove home.
A cold but sunny Saturday morning greeted the December 2018 graduates of Trinity Lutheran University and their families. A whirlwind day lay ahead for Deacon Schmidt. Following a morning breakfast gathering with the Board of Trustees, Bishop Emerson, Rev. Matt Sherman, and TLU President Don Garrett, Marc went to Bonhoeffer Chapel to robe up for Baccalaureate Service. While in the sacristy with Paul and Matt, he caught them up on the activities of the past week, including his attack last Friday, the Christmas Eve service, the breakthrough in the case against Coach Dillon on Monday, and its dismissal yesterday. He also told the two men that he was planning to file a grievance against Dr. Baines for obstructing his ability to completely wrap up the proceedings prior to the end of the semester for no reason other than to ensure the complainant could escape wrath until mid-January.

Bishop Emerson presided over the Baccalaureate, with Marc and Matt assisting and the former giving the homily on the subject of trying to end a relationship that has gone sour on a positive note, as these graduates' careers on the Mequon campus were heavily defined by: the schism between the school's three governing bodies and the LCMS; the two-year interregnum between the proposed merger of Concordia-Wisconsin and Concordia-Ann Arbor and its completion; and this final semester under the auspices of the ELCA as Trinity Lutheran students.

Marc: When we as humans plan out our lives, we don't take into account how we will manage bumps in the road that come, with overreaction being our usual course of action. Many if not all of you came here three, four, five years ago expecting to graduate in a set amount of time and with the degree you aimed at upon your arrival. Nowhere in your thinking, I'm sure, was the fact that the school you committed to at 18 or 19 would no longer be here at the conclusion of your studies, nor that it would change hands from one part of the Lutheran family to another, with new rules and regulations coming aboard. For some of you, there was a conscious decision to speed up your studies to graduate as soon after the takeover as possible, while others chose to take an extra semester so they could graduate with the Trinity name on their diploma. You stand here today as the first leftover pieces of that schism to achieve some sense of closure through the commencement ceremony that will occur shortly in Buuck. Do not despair over what might have been, but seek to embrace the completion of this journey, and come to accept the detours that came along the way. Amen.

Paul concluded the service with the benediction and the soon-to-be-graduates left the chapel followed by Marc, Paul, and Matt, with President Garrett and Chairman Strasser behind them. The five of them went around to the sacristy, where Marc and Paul removed their vestments and changed into their civilian outfits for the graduation ceremony. Matt packed up his alb and chasuble and departed. Once ready, the three power brokers of Trinity and the bishop walked over to Buuck to find their places before graduation started at 11:30. With some time to burn prior to commencement, Marc handed Don and David his formal grievance against Dr. Baines, along with the evidence supporting his assertion of the obstruction charge. Don told Marc that he would speak with Cheryl on Monday morning and get her side of the story, then contact him with his decision. Marc thanked him for being pro-active in dealing with this matter, then went for a short walk around the facility to turn the page from the service to his two tasks for commencement, which were the reciting of the invocation and benediction. As he sat on one of the benches outside the field house and rehearsed his parts, a familiar face sat down next to him and placed her head on his shoulder.

Dani: Good morning, Deacon.

Marc opened his eyes and saw who it was, then wrapped an arm around her and squeezed. Following that, the two of them stood up and embraced, with Marc keeping his head on a swivel
Marc: Couldn't stay away, could you?

Dani: Not in the least.

Marc: When did you find out you had been cleared?

Dani: I think the email from Dr. Baines came around 5:15 or so last evening.

Marc seethed slightly, now knowing that her delays were intentional.

Marc: I'm glad she was willing to exonerate you before today's events, but I am NOT happy that she burnt off so much time in doing it that I'm going to have to pass down judgment on Lexi in January when I could have done it yesterday before she left campus.

Dani: Breathe. Nothing's happening there until then, and you got the big part done, which was getting her to recant.

Marc: Yes. Can we grab lunch after the ceremony? I have a whole lot to catch you up on from the last 10 days and only a few minutes before I need to get in place for commencement.

Dani: Of course, but we'll need to do somewhere near Bayshore since I have to be at the store at 3 and will need to change before then.

Marc: Not the healthiest choice, but Rocky's?

Dani: Sounds good. I'm going to get out of here, go home, and do what I have to do. Text me when you get wrapped up here.

Marc: Will do.

Dani took a few steps towards the exit before turning around, pulling out the locket from under her fleece, and giving it a kiss while facing Marc. He responded by flashing her the ASL sign for "I love you" and touching his heart with his hand.

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No students on campus made Monday morning a welcome reprieve from the stresses of the last several weeks. Marc spent the morning revising the letter from Bp. Emerson and his colleagues at UWM and Marquette on campus ministry after receiving input from Rachel and Jessica. Meanwhile, over in Steunkel, President Garrett was questioning Dr. Baines over her actions regarding the recent case involving the chaplain and the athletic department.

Don: Cheryl, Marc Schmidt filed a formal grievance with me on Saturday morning claiming that you obstructed his office's attempt to resolve a case under its domain.

Cheryl: Just because I wouldn't let him run roughshod over the person who accused his precious little hussy of sexual harassment doesn't mean I got in the way of him getting her off. I sent both of them notice of the case being dismissed on Friday afternoon.

Don: He stated in the grievance that he sent you the no true bill along with the transcript of his follow-up interview with the accuser at 2:03pm and received notice of your having read it at 2:17pm. It wasn't until 4:49pm that you responded to him as to dismissing the case. Why the 2 1/2 hour gap?

Cheryl: Again, he was planning rain down hellfire on the accuser and I wasn't about to allow that to
Don: What's your beef with Marc?

Cheryl: The biggest one is that he shouldn't be in the position he is. Following our meeting with you and other administrators from Carthage at the start of the year, it was my understanding that Concordia's human resources policy would be utilized to fill vacant positions at Trinity should Carthage personnel choose not to take them. When Pastor Archer decided not to come to Mequon to assume the chaplaincy, the policy in place would have interested candidates applying to HR at Trinity, with us submitting our recommendations to Bishop Emerson, who would then appoint an individual to the post. Instead, he chose Deacon Schmidt whose hiring was approved by the Board of Trustees. I feel like my office was deliberately cut out of the equation on filling this high-level position.

Don: What you're describing has never been the policy of the ELCA and doesn't jibe with its process for filling pastoral vacancies. In fact, it's the reverse of what you've described. When there is a vacancy, the bishop recruits and culls through interested candidates before submitting a name to a congregation, whose call committee interviews him or her. Following that, the congregation as a whole votes on whether to extend a call to the candidate.

Cheryl: Still, his bullish tactics have done a number on our office. This job enlargement for the hall directors that the Board of Trustees approved has required us to renegotiate with them, as they have requested a larger salary for the additional work. We are having trouble filling certain positions because the Social Statements require us to not hold a person's sexual orientation, gender expression, or relationship status against them in the application or interview process.

Don: How does allowing for a broader applicant pool make it harder for you to hire people?

Cheryl: Qualified candidates aren't applying for the posts because our policies allow for multi-partner relationships and gays and lesbians to instruct courses in professional fields where being morally upright is a requirement, such as nursing and teaching.

Don: I know you've been here a long time, but you knew when Carthage moved uptown that the rules would change.

Cheryl: But the thing is, they haven't changed. The Board of Trustees has not passed anything pertaining to our office.

Don: I suggest you read closer the omnibus academic and student conduct measures they passed on November 2nd. Inserted in the bills were directives that the Social Statements take precedence until formal changes are made to the rules and regulations of university departments.

Cheryl: Didn't know about that directive. Hopefully it hasn't caused too much turmoil from our end.

Don: Back to the issue I came by to discuss. Did you or did you not intentionally delay notification to Deacon Schmidt of the dismissal of the case against Coach Dillon so as to infringe on his ability to move forward on his case against her accuser?

Cheryl: Don, you have no clue what he had in mind. It was like he was laying in wait to destroy her academic and athletic career here as payback for accusing her in the first place. I held back on the notification until I was reasonably sure that he wouldn't be able to go kangaroo court on her prior to her departure for the semester.

Don: It was not your place to make that decision. It may have been done for the right reason, but it
was the wrong thing to do. I will have to find that his grievance has merit and can progress to a formal hearing.

Cheryl: No hearing, Don. I'll admit to my fault here so long as the sanction doesn't reduce either my position within the university or my time of service related to retirement.

Don: Given the damage done by this obstruction relative to the potential damage to the parties of letting this grievance move ahead, I am willing to accept your plea and will have a letter of censure placed in your personnel file. Should another instance of malfeasance occur, I will have to consider a stronger punishment. I'll inform Marc of my decision and offer my assistance in bringing closure to his case against Coach Dillon's accuser.
Excitement was abound for the Trinity faculty and staff on Wednesday, as the school's inaugural Holiday Party and White Elephant Exchange was set to take place this evening. Finals and grading out of the way, a number of the faculty and staff spent the day reorganizing their offices or cleaning out thousands of unanswered email messages or dealing with the inevitable whining from students who felt they didn't deserve the grade they received. Marc's day began with a joyful message on his voicemail.

From: Overland Park, KS

Ashlyn Harris: Marc, WE WON! Call us as soon as possible so we can talk about Chicago and the wedding. Thank Diana for us. Her game plan worked to the letter. Talk to you soon. Bye.

Marc let out a bit of a happy roar over that news and immediately returned her call.

Marc: Ashlyn, it's Marc Schmidt.

Ashlyn: Marc! Let's talk turkey. Alex and I discussed it and we're planning to get married in Satellite Beach, just the two of us and a few others, on the 27th, then renew our vows in front of a MUCH bigger crowd in Chicago at Convention. Can you do the renewal since you'll be there already?

Marc: It would be my honor to officiate your "second wedding". Do you know what day, time, and place you want to do it?

Ashlyn: We're thinking the 18th, either before or after the Awards Banquet. I don't think we'd be able to do it following the MLS Draft given they have so many more teams than the NWSL one, and Thursday following our draft just seems a bit packed with the Exhibit Hall opening and the Women's Coaches Reception.

Marc: MLS may have 23 teams, but their draft only go 2 rounds, which is about the same as the NWSL's, with 12 teams and 4 rounds. Now, they will be starting at 11am local time but it SHOULD be over by 3pm. 30-45 minutes to reset the room and then a short run-through would allow for a 5pm wedding to take place. As for a reception, use the Awards Banquet to feed the masses and perhaps a post-banquet dessert-and-drinks gathering in one of the nearby hotels.

Ashlyn: This is really Alex's arena. Let me get her on the phone and have you two talk this over.

Ashlyn handed the phone to Alex and she and Marc discussed some of the particulars along with who she should contact at United Soccer Coaches to get the space for the time needed. He asked her for any specific requests she or Ashlyn had for the service.

Alex: We were at the wedding you did in Kansas City in October and liked how that played out. We're both a little more fun than Becca and Mandy, so if you could allow us to interject a bit of that into the service, it'd be great.
Marc: If you want me and fun, search the Internet for highlights or snippets from Becca Quinn and EJ Proctor's wedding during College Cup weekend. A couple of clever gags, some unexpected laughter, but still professionally-done and true to the character of the couple.

Alex: I'll do that.

Marc: Tell me, Alex, how did you guys get this resolved so quickly?

Alex: Diana talked with my lawyer, Ashlyn, and myself on Wednesday morning and gave us a rundown of the steps involved in first getting the continuance halted and then proceeding onto trial. I filed the motion for a hearing on the continuance on Thursday morning, with us getting a Monday morning one before our trial judge. When my lawyer told the judge that Serv had sought this new continuance for the same purpose as the previous ones, which was to dig up evidence of infidelity by myself, and that the likelihood of him receiving any additional income in 2018 was slim and that the profit sharing I would get from USWNT ticket sales was not subject to asset division because of the separation in place, she dismissed the continuance and stated that the trial would begin Tuesday morning. His lawyer chose for some reason not to request a 24-hour or 48-hour delay in order for Serv to be able to get here. Yesterday, he was not in the courtroom and the judge threw out his counterclaim, making the case a simple splitting of assets based on the "who made it keeps it" formula. The decree was handed down by 10am.

Marc: I'm glad Diana was able to help the two of you get this resolved and that you'll be able to get married before the 31st. Drop me an email when you get things settled for Chicago. I'll contact my assistant for the renewal after I hang up with you to make her aware of the proposed date so we can arrange her travel and schedule for the weekend. Congrats again and I'll see you in Chicago.

Following his conversation with Alex, Marc called Alyssa and told her about the renewal ceremony at Convention, along with the tentative date. She told him that the plan was likely to be her traveling to Evanston with Kristie and Sam on Thursday night, then taking the El to McCormick Place on Friday, returning to Evanston sometime on Saturday for the remainder of the weekend. Marc thought it sounded good and said he would work with Matt to get her hotel room for the Friday night booked as well as a conference pass for Friday and Saturday. He asked her if she and Amanda were planning to see the Muellers during break, to which she said that they had made plans for New Year's Eve with the two of them coming up to Milwaukee to take out the twins. She asked him about his plans for the 31st in return. "I usually don't make it to 12. Stay in, watch football or something, and let you young people go be crazy."

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Around 3:30, Dani stopped by Marc's office so the two of them could exchange gifts before the university holiday party.

Dani: Erin and Steph told me that you were missing something from your vestments and suggested I get it for you.

Marc: They did, did they? Did Erin also mention why I'm missing it?

Dani: Was it because it would be ridiculous to have it?

Marc: Exactly! No way I could wear one of those outside of my robe or over my mock for weekly service.

Dani handed Marc a square box and asked him to open it. He did and found inside a blinged-out cross on a 36" chain. Marc laughed, then pulled it out and put it on. "Yeah
Bwoyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!

Dani: I take it this will work for you.

Marc: Yes. Thank you, dear. It's just what I wanted, and you'll get to see it broken out for the first time on January 18th when I do the renewal ceremony for Ashlyn and Alex at Convention.

Dani: You mean she FINALLY got the divorce from Serv?

Marc: Yep. He didn't show up on Tuesday for the trial, thus his counterclaim was tossed. Speaking of Convention, I got you something that would be perfect for you to have in Chicago.

Marc reached under his desk and pulled out a large rectangular box. "I got the idea from snooping through your Pinterest page."

Dani took the box and opened it, then gasped at what she saw inside it.

Dani: How did you find this?!?!! I've been searching for three years for this dress, but with no success.

Marc: When I couldn't find it anywhere local, I contacted the designer and asked about it. She told me that it had been released for the 2014 holiday season, but wasn't brought back for 2015. Since Nordstrom here didn't open until Fall of 2015, it was never part of their inventory so it never shows up on the website when you try to search for it in the Mayfair store. She walked me through how to find it and then place the order with pick-up being the local store. I technically bought from the store at the Mall of America, but got it delivered to Mayfair from the distribution center.

Dani: I don't know how to thank you.

Marc: Wear it the 18th and let me get you out of it, and that will be thanks enough, my love.

Marc took Dani in his arms and placed a gentle kiss on her lips that she returned with depth and longing. After breaking their kiss, Marc looked over Dani in her outfit for the party (a two-tone purple blouse and skirt combination with black tights and black over-the-calf slouch boots).

Marc: That is dang smokin', but not over-the-top scorching. Why the flat boots?

Dani: One, I wanted to actually be shorter than you for once, since resting my head on your chest is one of my favorite things to do when we're embracing. Second, this is my first appearance around here since all hell broke loose and I thought discretion was the better choice for tonight.

Marc: You're still hot, and you still make me go crazy with desire. You should head over and catch up with Sarah. I'll join you in a few minutes. Don't want the tongues wagging were we to show up together. Besides, it will give the two of you a chance to be seen together at Trinity. Keeping up appearances and all that.

Dani: Very smart guy you are. Always thinking two steps ahead of everyone. I'll take my gift to my car, then go to the Lake Shore Room. See you there.

Dani left Marc's office, followed by Marc. He walked over to Stuenkel and met up with Dr. Sinclair, the Oliphants, and Rachel Bucholz. President Garrett stopped by to say hi to the group and commended them on their multi-school certificate proposal that had been trotting around the rumor mill the past week. Sarah came over and thanked Marc for going to the mat for Dani, then asked him if the two of them would like to join her and Wil for dinner after the party. Marc told her that he had a surprise in store for Dani following their time here tonight and would have to decline.
Dani: Did I hear something about a surprise for me? After all you've done this past week, why more?

Marc whispered in her ear, "I think it's called being in love," then pecked her on the cheek. "I'll tell you more later."

Dani and Sarah exchanged hugs, then Dani took Sarah's hand in hers as they stood and talked with those around Marc and themselves. The chaplain looked at the two of them and smiled, then winked at them. Megan Oliphant inquired about the coaches' status with one another and Dani told her that they were high school classmates who went to different colleges, but got reacquainted when Sarah was hired as the assistant lacrosse coach at Trinity and that they were still in the early stages of a relationship. Marc left the group for a moment to say a few words to Hope Stevens and Amanda Duckworth, then onto Albert Moncrief before finishing up with a short conversation with Lydia Wingate, passing along Corey's name to her as someone she should come to know in her school. After a pass by the refreshment table, Marc returned to his original group.

Marc: Tom, you've seen me do worship 15 times or so this past semester. I think I might kick it up a little when we come back in Spring with what Dani got me.

He reached inside his mock and pulled out her gift, causing Tom and Ben Oliphant to chuckle slightly.

Rachel: You leaving us to be Public Enemy's spiritual advisor?

Marc: Naaaaaah. I've always wanted a cross the size of Flav's clock, which my goddaughter Erin knew was on my list of things to acquire for my formal vestments. She gave Dani the suggestion and she knew where to find one.

Tom: That is ridiculous, but it fits your on-stage style, even if we all know you're most comfortable behind the scenes.

Dani and Sarah said their farewells to the group, then left the party. Dani flashed Marc a sign saying five minutes at her car. Marc nodded and made one more pass around the room before departing himself.

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Marc's surprise for Dani was to take her to his "spiritual home" in Milwaukee, the neighborhood surrounding Oakland and Locust on the east side. Their first stop was the original Oakland Gyros, where the two of them had dinner and a raucous time exchanging stories of their high school days. Following dinner, Marc went back to his car to get a blanket, then the two of them walked hand-in-hand south into Riverside Park, stopping at the top of the hill which oversaw the football practice field behind Riverside University High School, Marc's alma mater. He laid down the blanket and the two sat on it, with Dani lying her head against Marc's shoulder. She pulled out the locket Steph and Erin gave her and opened it to reveal the pictures inside it to him.

Dani: That was a special weekend. I got to see Erin and Steph together as a couple and dang do they make a good one. I also got to spend time with you away from Trinity and we got past certain stumbling blocks in our relationship to move a step or two farther in our connection to one another. I cried a little when I saw the locket because it seemed like something my sisters and I would have given my mom on a birthday or Christmas, with a picture of her and dad on one side and one of us four girls on the other.

Marc: You saw the two of them gave me a 5x7 of that picture for my desk. The inscription on the back of it made me a little wet in the eyes, because it showed how they view me as one of the
stabilizing pieces in their early college experience and as someone they trust to help build their relationship. It said, "From our first wedding to (hopefully) our own, the one constant is you, our second dad. Marry us someday, please."

Dani: Why did you bring me up here?

Marc: This area has always been my spiritual home, the place I return to when I want to remember how life was before the illness came on and my life turned upside-down.

Marc reached into his pocket and pulled out his key chain, then removed one from it.

Marc: This key, it goes to the shed you see on the other side of the football field. Outside of a summer soccer camp I ran here, the last time I used it was May 11, 1993, the day I came home to find my father had died earlier in the day from a ruptured aneurysm. It was also the day that my heart was shattered. Since that day, I have been on a never-ending search to repair it, sometimes using masking tape, or needle-and-thread, or an iron-on patch. Marrying Danielle was a chase to heal the wounds. You got to be witness to one of my biggest attempts to heal myself, the ego trip known as MUSC. These last four months or so have been some of the best days I've had since then, partially due to the relationship I've been able to build with Erin as her home-away-from-home parent and partially because you came into my life and began patching up the broken parts, not shying away from the ugliness you might have seen below the surface. When I told you several weeks ago that I wanted you to be the only woman who has control of my heart, I meant it. Here, take this, keep it. This is the key to my healing heart, and you are the one who should have it.

Dani looked at Marc and moved in to kiss him. He caught her lips with his and the two spent a couple of minutes letting their mouths express what their hearts felt. Dani pushed Marc onto his back and tried to attack him under the moonlight.

Marc: Let's not get too frisky here. I don't want to have to explain why I have grass stains on my pants.

The two of them got up, Marc folded up the blanket, and they walked back to their cars in the parking lot across from Oakland Gyros, with Marc's hand resting against Dani's hip as she leaned into him and placed her hand into his back pocket. When they reached Oakland and Locust, they were stopped by a red light. Not wasting a moment, Marc wrapped his arms behind Dani's neck and kissed her, which to him signified him joining his spirit with hers and an official commitment of his soul to her.

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