



SUMMARY: Two friends find themselves victims of a science experiment which turns them into women who now must deal with their new life and their changing relationship with their girlfriends.

ALL THAT GLITTERS, Part I (Chapters 1-3)

By Valerie Hope

CHAPTER ONE: 'Admit me, Chorus to this history.'

MARK TOWELED THE SWEAT from his face as he waited for Heath, his best friend, to finish his turn at the water fountain. The two men were breaking in the middle of a best-of-five taekwondo match, playing to five points a set. So far they were in a complete dead heat and decided to take a short breather before playing the deciding set. All around them the muted shouts of the lower-level classes in the other rooms sounded, but Mark and Heath had effectively blocked out everything except their competition. Perhaps competition was the wrong word altogether; both men had progressed far enough in their mastery of the martial arts to know that competition was useless and destructive. They were using each other to better themselves as individuals and their matches took place under an umbrella of politeness, true friendship, and constructive criticism.

"How's the knee holding out?" Heath asked, wiping the water from his chin as he surrendered the water fountain. Mark immediately ducked his sweating face beneath the ice-cold stream before drinking a sip. Heath began languorously stretching his shoulders and upper back working loose some stiffness that had been plaguing him through all his morning classes.

"Not bad," Mark said. "I'm restricted to kicking with my right side, which sucks, but then I seem to be able to make up for it with all the body blows you seem to be letting me have today. You sure you're not letting me win because you feel guilty?" Heath had mis-timed a leg sweep while working forms with his best friend two weeks ago and Mark had two torn ligaments to show for it.

"Not hardly," Heath said. "I'm just trying to work on the outside attacks like you talked about the other day. You were right. Once I get the timing down I'll be able to get in an extra strike in every exchange. Are you serious that nobody guards against that stuff in competition anymore?"

"I wouldn't worry," Mark replied. "Even if you get the occasional one that does, your inside attacks will still have a good chance of taking the match. You're a shoo-in at Nationals this year."

"You think?"

Mark nodded, toweling his face one more time. "Think of it, man. It wasn't eight years ago that Mr. Cooper at Washington High said we'd never amount to anything. Now we're aiming dead at making next year's Olympic team."

"Think we'll medal?"

Mark shrugged. "Why waste time thinking about it? I don't care if I win anything or not. I'm just jazzed about the chance to go and see the whole thing."

Heath took the lesson in stride. "You're right. I was just daydreaming. I mean, I always look at the faces of the winners on television, standing up there with the flowers and the medal around their neck while they play the National Anthem. I'd probably bawl like a baby right there in front of all those people."

"Me too," Mark confessed. "But seriously - you ready? I need to finish this set quick, I have to take on the eleven-to-twelve year-old class in ten minutes and I need some time to go over the lesson."

"We can quit if your knee's sore."

"Nah, I'm good for five more points."

They bowed mechanically, more from habit than any public need to express respect for one another, and settled into easy ready positions. Heath took the offensive, shifting his weight into a deceptively-relaxed looking back-stance. He stood just a mite taller than his friend, with rich olive skin and dark hair betraying his Mediterranean ancestry. His eyes were seemingly too big for his narrow face, and so deep a brown as to make it impossible to find the pupils of his eyes. His frame was broad and lean, covered by ropy muscle and raised veins. His arms and chest were covered with a fine coating of coarse black hair which was now matted against his chest by sweat. A small spare tire, the aftereffects of a deep and abiding passion for beer imported from the United Kingdom and Ireland, barely rounded the middle portion of his *gi* above his black belt, adorned with four stripes of rank and two small American flags to signify his participation in two National Championships.

It was the gold border around Mark's second flag that Heath wished to earn for himself now, which signified placing at a National competition. His friend was more compact, with pale skin and a splatter of boyish freckles across his nose and again across his chest and shoulders. He had inherited his father's legacy and was already beginning to show a receding hairline at twenty-four years old, the viscous carrot-top red hair slowly crawling back across his high forehead. But it never seemed that the girls noticed the milky skin or the retreating hair - Mark had a superb physique which had come from tireless and patient years in the gym and a devotion to the martial arts that bordered on the obsessive. That, and a freak metabolism that Heath coveted. Mark ate like a horse and it all seemed to be red meat and cheese; he drank beer by the pitcher and never seemed to gain an ounce. So his incredibly lean body seemed sculpted from white marble and he had the build of a Chippendale dancer. If not for his innate shyness he'd have no time for taekwondo because of all the dates he'd have. But Mark never seemed to be able to raise that green-eyed gaze to meet a woman's. As a matter of fact, it seemed that outside of Heath, who had been raised by a single mother in the same apartment complex where Mark was raised by a widowed father, Mark's only friends were some of the dojo staff and the children in his taekwondo classes. Heath sometimes despaired for his friend's lack of contact with others, but the tall

redhead didn't seem to be bothered. Mark selected a rigid climbing-stance to meet Heath's attack. They nodded readiness to one another and began the competition.

Any onlooker would be hard-pressed to believe that these two young men were actually best friends. Mark and Heath had long ago promised one another that they would never give the other anything less than their best effort on the competition mat and now the long-trained skills were coming to the fore as the men assaulted one another, seeking the smallest hole in the other's defense to exploit for a point.

Mark pulled a quick reversal from an outside block and managed a quick double-tap against his partner's ribs. Even though Mark's knotty fists were padded, the impacts drove the breath from Heath as he stepped away, hands high, signifying the point for his opponent.

"Nice," he complimented. Mark smiled.

"I've been working on that one for a couple weeks."

"Show me how you did it after your class."

"You got it."

They settled into their stances again. Heath chose a more conservative riding-stance, denoting a willingness to give ground and his preference for an inside attack, probably because he was getting winded - Mark knew his friend only willingly gave ground when he was tired. Refusing him the satisfaction, Mark dropped into a low cat-stance which was designed to lure an opponent out.

Taking the bait, Heath switched into an easy back-stance and feinted, reversing and spinning on his foot to deliver an easily blocked spinning back kick at Mark. But the taller Heath was ready and pivoted on his plant leg, sweeping his attacking foot high over Mark's head and driving in with a ruthless punch combination. Mark was far quicker of hand than his partner - the punches were blocked with effort, but Heath managed to end the combination with a side kick that landed heavily on his opponent's short ribs.

"One all," Mark announced, panting. "Nice move. Either you're getting a lot faster or I'm slowing down." He moved slowly back to the center of the mat, breathing hard. The kick had landed a bit harder than Heath had intended and he gave his friend a minute to recover.

"Unfortunately, I think it's a little of both," Heath commented. "I really am sorry about the knee."

"Forget it," Mark said, smiling. "It happens. Doc says I'll be back at 100% in plenty of time for Nationals. I know you didn't mean it to happen. We both zipped when we should've zagged."

"Ready?"

Mark nodded. Mark came on strong from riding-stance and pushed Heath back, destroying whatever intention Heath had formulated to go on the offensive and exploit the weak knee. Mark finally drove his friend from the mat and landed a low roundhouse kick on the thigh, leaving Heath both a point behind and with a foul for leaving the competition area.

"Damn," Heath muttered, angry at himself. "Should've seen that coming."

"It was only a matter of time before you blitzed me trying to work the bad knee," Mark smiled. "You telegraphed it with your first kick. I decided to take it to you before you could get an advantage."

"I hate having fouls," Heath grumped.

"Hell, Heath, don't count it. This is just a friendly spar."

Heath held up a hand. "They count in Nationals, they count here."

"Fair enough. Two to one, advantage white," Mark recited. They fell into ready stances again.

The next point was a draw, a quick pass where both opponents scored simultaneously. The point after was the same, showing plainly how evenly matched the two men were, even combating a weak knee and a lack of flexibility across the shoulders. Mark bent in half quickly, taking deep breaths. Both men were quite exhausted from their sparring, plus the other spar they'd played that morning and all the classes they'd taught. "Four three, advantage white. Match point," he rasped.

"Scooby dooby doo," Heath said, the signal for match point they'd had since they'd both been white-belt beginners nearly fifteen years ago. It had come from Mark's not wanting to finish an in-dojō sparring tournament because he was so tired (fighting from preliminaries all the way to finals was usually a four to six hour ordeal).

Come on, Mark, Heath had begged his friend. *You can win if you just hang in there for a little while longer. Just one more point and you'll have won. We can go out for pizza and movies, Mom says.*

I can't, his friend had said, panting. *I'm too tired.*

Would you do it for a Scooby Snack? Heath had teased. It was funny the things they'd kept with them from boyhood. Funnier still, the things they'd forgotten. Heath had trouble remembering the name of the first girl he'd ever kissed in the second grade behind the lightning-split oak tree on the elementary school playground, but he recalled with perfect clarity every second of the night his mother and Mark's dad had finally caved and took them to see *Star Wars* three days after Heath's fifth birthday. He'd been so excited that he'd thrown up in the queue for tickets.

"Enough of these foolish games," Heath hissed, narrowing his eyes at his friend. "It's time to finish this once and for all, Rutherford." With that he broke into the ridiculous "crane" stance made famous in the *Karate Kid* movies. Mark's eyes widened.

"Ah, the crane maneuver," he said. "When done properly."

". No can defend," Heath finished.

Mark tucked one foot behind the other and kowtowed, pressing his forehead to the mat in an act of ultimate obeisance. "I humbly concede. I cannot, even with all my skills, defeat a master of the crane style."

Heath could maintain his composure no longer and snorted his laughter. "I'm beat, Mark. Let's just call this one yours, okay?" Mark was holding his sides, laughing.

"You sure? You can still come back."

Heath waved him away. "You have a class and I'm picking Faith up in forty-five minutes. I need to shower and change clothes." Faith was Heath's girlfriend of seven months and Mark knew that dates were sacrosanct. She was a graduate student in microbiology at the University and he was a competition athlete who taught self-defense at schools and women's centers all around the city. Rarely did their schedules line up for long enough to have a date. Mark was a tiny bit jealous of Heath's relationship with the ultra-intelligent Faith, wishing that he had the *cojones* to get out and meet a woman of that caliber. Sure, he could probably defend himself against the most accomplished fighter in the greater metropolitan area, but when it came to women he was as meek as a kitten.

"Tell her I said hi," Mark said, trying to keep from sounding smitten. He didn't know why he tried to hide it. It wasn't like Heath couldn't read his every thought like it were printed in front of him. That was what kept him so close to his friend, even after all the boyhood fights and their growing into such different personalities: he couldn't hide from Heath. There was no need to try and be anyone other than he was. Of course Heath knew about his crush on Faith. It didn't matter. Heath trusted him not to make anything out of it, and he knew that Mark wouldn't because he was an honorable man in a time and place where honor was very rare and deserving of respect.

"I sure will. She still wants to go to 'tubing on the river with us next weekend. You can see her then." There was a note of sympathy in Heath's voice, but it wasn't patronizing. "As a matter of fact, she wants to bring a friend of hers from the computer lab out with us."

"Heath, no. You know how I am about blind dates."

"It's not a blind date. Me and Faith will be there the whole time."

"And you'll run off to make out somewhere and leave me there trying to make conversation with somebody who probably doesn't even speak the same language as I do. Remember the girl you set me up with the night before Regional Quarterfinals two years ago?"

"I was young then. Besides, this is Faith's idea, not mine. You know that she has much better taste than I do. Please? I told her I'd at least try to talk you into it."

Mark raised his eyes to the ceiling, trying to look long-suffering. "Tell you what. You meet her first. If you like her, think she's okay, then I'll go. Just in case she set me up with somebody that has a 'great personality.' You know what 'great personality' means."

Heath doubled up laughing. "Deal. I'll get Faith to introduce me tonight when I go to meet her."

"And make sure English is her first language."

"I said I was sorry about that."

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"You ready, Cassie?"

"Almost."

Faith MacAllister sighed and tried not to let her own impatience upset the meticulous work her friend was doing. Cassandra Hollister was the computer genius behind the highly-theoretical work that Dr. Tolliver, her sponsor, was doing. Faith could think up all the grand thoughts and set up the experiments, but absolutely nothing would get done without faithful Cassie to crunch the numbers and work far into the night writing the sophisticated device drivers that drove the intricate machinery that Faith relied on for results. Still, Faith could not help pacing a bit, her dark ponytail bobbing against the back of her neck. She was tall for a woman, nearly six feet in flats, and was usually the brunt of sour jokes about her sexual preference since she usually appeared in public wearing only cowboy boots, Levi's, and concert T-shirts (her preference ran to the ones with tour dates on the back) covered with one of her father's old suit jackets. Just because she rarely wore make-up or fussed over her hair, that immediately made her a lesbian. Anyway, Heath would be there to pick her up for *The Full Monty* soon enough and afterwards she'd prove to everybody that counted that she was as heterosexual as they came.

She had a slender figure which made her appear even taller than she was, but she managed to move gracefully (which was hard when she kept comparing herself to the natural grace and balance of her boyfriend, who had spent years refining the way he moved through space). She had generous breasts which she usually restrained beneath a cotton jog-bra to keep them out of her way and Heath continually made comments about what she was able to do to an otherwise uneventful pair of jeans. He also said that she looked like Nastassja Kinski with her strong jawline and wavy brown shoulder-length hair. Intelligent green eyes stared from behind lightweight round eyeglasses. She smiled rarely, but she personally thought that she had a disarming smile, and she'd never heard anyone say otherwise. It had taken some time for her to consider herself attractive; Heath had helped her very much with well-placed, sensitive compliments and help with the things that made her feel ugly, like her ungainly stride. He was quite wonderful, her Heath, and she was glad to be involved with him. If it were not for her work, she knew, she would be quite hopelessly in love with the young athlete. In many ways she envied him, having always been an over-tall, ungainly creature with awkward and clumsy movements. Also, she had never been the athletic type, preferring books and school to all the other girls who had played soccer and volleyball during her youth. She considered herself a competent third baseman in softball and could toss a mean Frisbee but other than that didn't think that she was a very physical person. But Heath had made her feel beautiful and graceful and, before long with him, she stopped needing him to remind her and began to feel beautiful and graceful herself. She wouldn't have given any man the credit before she met him, but she also knew that Heath had known exactly what he'd been doing when he undertook the construction of her self-esteem and had been man enough to step aside when she'd taken the training wheels off, knowing that she was the kind of woman who would have resented hell out of any further attempts by him to define her person. No getting around it. He was great and she hoped that he didn't feel neglected because of her work. She definitely wanted to keep him around for a while.

Cassie stood up from the Sun station and knuckled the small of her back. She was calibrating the software that ran the field generators on the other side of the lab, which required absolute precision to function properly in the experiment. A foul-up in the field generation could corrupt months of work and Cassie was triple-checking everything. She was a small girl, with curly shoulder-length dirty blonde hair that she kept knotted at the back of her head, usually thrust through with a pencil. She was overly fond of draping her petite figure with shirts several sizes too large, usually plastered over with Winnie-the-Pooh pictures (she was near-obsessed with

anything having to do with Pooh). It seemed that Cassie went to great lengths to hide herself, but several people commented that if she would spend some time paying attention to herself she would be a real knockout. Sure she had a fantastic bombshell body underneath the size XXL "Tigger" shirt she was wearing and the blue eyes that gazed tiredly from behind her eye-glasses could melt a man at fifty paces if used properly.

"I'm going as fast as I can, Faith," she assured her partner.

"Is it that obvious?" Faith asked, stopping her pacing abruptly. Sure enough, she'd been winding the tail of her shirt in between her fingers again. Faith released her shirt-tail as if it were scalding hot.

"How long has it been since you've seen him?" Cassie asked.

"Three weeks plus a day or two," Faith replied. "I've really missed him."

Cassie smiled, smoothing her hair behind one ear shyly. "Faith, I hope you don't mind my saying this, but he's gorgeous. I've always wondered what it must be like to lean your head against one of those shoulders for an hour or two."

Faith took no offense. "It's pretty nice. He's the greatest kisser I've ever met."

"Really?"

"He can make my toes curl up when he really tries. You know how they always describe the first kiss in a cheap romance novel? Well, it can happen, believe me."

Cassie's face fell and she resumed her place behind the computer. "I'm jealous."

Faith mentally kicked herself for rubbing it in. Cassie had not even had a date in five years, working like a slave first for her undergraduate degree (she'd entered college with no AP credits and had to start from scratch while all around her fellow freshmen were starting school with thirty hours of credit to their names) and then being taken on by both Faith's Dr. Tolliver and also Dr. Fresetti from the Computer Science department.

"I'm sorry, Cass," she said.

Cassie snickered, a self-deprecating gesture. "Forget it. It's not your fault."

"You're really gonna like Mark," she said, beginning her talk-up of Heath's best friend. Faith had never really gone in for the muscle-bound type, preferring a more natural-looking body like Heath's to the chiseled, zero-percent-body-fat Mr. Universe physique like Mark's. She'd thought she would hate Mark when she first met him through Heath, expecting him to be like all the other body-builders she'd known before, completely self-absorbed and dumb as a sack of hammers. But on top of being cut like a Greek god, Mark was the sweetest, shyest man she'd ever known. "Because on top of being sweet and gentle he's got a body that belongs on *Baywatch*. No kidding."

"And he wants to meet me."

Faith put her hands on her hips. "We thought you two might get along."

"Sure," Cassie said exasperatedly. They'd had this conversation before. "He can talk about how many ways he knows to break the human spine with his index finger while I can talk about the relative pros and cons of the various LISP languages. It'll be a blast."

"You know what your problem is?"

"Yep. I have no social skills whatsoever."

Faith threw her hands up. "You don't think you're pretty at all, do you?"

"The hordes of men lining up at my door are testament to that."

"Did you ever hear the one about the man whose wife left him?" Faith began. "She cleaned out his bank account and maxed all his credit cards. He's bankrupt. So he goes to church and falls to his knees, and prays. 'Dear God,' he says, 'I have never asked for anything from you before, but I'm in bad trouble here. I was wondering if, in Your divine wisdom, You might see fit to let me win the lottery. Amen.' Well, nothing happens. He manages to get back on his feet by mortgaging his house again, does okay for a few years and then he finds out he needs a kidney transplant. The doctors suck every last cent from him. So he falls to his knees in the church again, and prays. 'Dear Lord, I know last time that You didn't see fit to let me win the lottery. But I'm in real trouble now. Could You, in Your divine wisdom, see through to letting me win the lottery? Amen.'"

"But again, nothing happens. He chalks it up to the will of the Almighty, and takes on a second job to pay the medical bills. Then his house is washed away in a flood. He's destitute - he lost everything. No insurance. He goes to the church one more time, falls to his knees, and says, 'Dear God, I don't mean to question Your judgment, but You decided not to let me win the lottery when my wife walked out, and not when I needed a kidney. But now I have nothing left. Please, Lord. I'm begging You. Please let me win the lottery. Amen.'"

"About the time he says 'Amen,' a bolt of purest light beams through the stained glass and illuminates the man in a heavenly glow. Angel choirs can be heard through the church. And this deep, booming voice rings out, and says, 'Murray, will you go out and buy a ticket already?'"

Cassie snickered. "So going out with this Mark guy constitutes buying a ticket."

"It's a start," Faith said. "Besides, I don't expect the two of you to land in bed together the first night. Even if you never do, I'd lay money that the two of you will be good friends in any case."

"He's not put off by smart women like the rest of his gender?"

"Heath says he avoids women who act dumb," Faith reassured her. "Not all men are alike, Cass. I've met Mark. He's a doll. And I can't keep from harping on how absolutely gorgeous he is."

"If he's so damn gorgeous, why does he need a blind date?"

"Because he's shy," Heath said from the back of the lab. Both women jumped a little but the man's very stance calmed them. "He has trouble meeting anybody, and it'd be better if he met a nice girl straight off the bat so he can figure out that you, as a gender, don't bite unless asked nicely."

Faith met him halfway up the aisle and hugged him tight. "How long had you been there?"

"Long enough to hear the punch line," he said. "'Buy a ticket already.' That's funny. Hi, Cassie. How's the programming going?"

Cassie found herself unconsciously touching her hair, primping a 'do that was long beyond all hope. But Heath had that effect on her. "Okay. It's not hard work, there's just so damn much of it."

"You'll get it. I have faith."

"You sure do," Faith said, lacing her arm around his waist. She couldn't completely stifle her possessiveness of "her" man yet, but Cassie didn't seem to mind. Hopefully, it was because she was warming to the idea of meeting Mark. "Cassie, trust me, Mark's gonna flip over you," she said.

Cassie smiled and it made her nose wrinkle up. *Mark's not gonna stand a chance against something as cute as that*, Heath thought fondly. He really hoped this worked. He worried about his best friend, and Faith didn't come out and say it, but she was worried about her friend as well.

"I'm not gonna hold my breath," the programmer said at last. "But I am looking forward to meeting him. You and Faith have managed to at least make him sound interesting, and I admit to being curious as to just how gorgeous he really is. Faith makes him sound like a red-haired Brad Pitt in a karate outfit."

Heath snorted. "You're asking the wrong guy. I've always said he looked like Malachi from *Children of the Corn*. I try not to think of him as gorgeous. It hurts my ego."

"Ego! That's it!" Faith said triumphantly. "That's what you need, Cass, an ego boost. You seem to think you're some kind of dog. Why don't we knock off the work Saturday, and hit the mall? We can go do girl stuff. We'll get ourselves all tricked out and looking hot and these two won't stand a chance."

"That sounds like a good time," Heath commented. "Hell, I even want to come."

"Great plan," Cassie grumped. "What are we gonna pay for this shopping spree with?"

"Dammit, Cass, I don't mean we can go traipsing around wearing Donna Karan originals. But we can at least use my MasterCard to pick something up at Target that's not jeans and a T-shirt. Maybe we could find some clothes that might conceivably belong to girls or something."

Heath couldn't resist. "I hear K-Mart has come out with a new line of really racy Pooh lingerie."

Cassie flipped him the bird, laughing as she did it. "Okay, okay. I give."

"Good," Heath quipped. "The only tricks I had left involved aikido holds."

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Faith woke up slowly, not even noticing her lover's absence from the bed. *He moves like a damn cat*, she thought. *I can't even hear him coming or going half the time*. But the smells from the apartment's small kitchenette made it obvious where Heath was. Her stomach grumbled happily. Heath's omelets were legendary and it was one of her favorite parts about spending the night with him. As a matter of fact, his omelets ranked a close second behind the absolutely masterful lovemaking. A lingering, almost-pleasant soreness in her middle

reminded her of the previous night strongly enough to bring a stupid Cheshire-cat smile across her face. There was something to be said for T'ai-Chi breath control techniques. Heath could go for hours before he was done, it seemed. Faith never had to complain about being unsatisfied. Her lover had a wonderful obsession with her climax and would not satisfy his own lusts until he had satisfied hers. It was amazing to her, with her drive and desire to win the Peace Prize someday, hopefully by finding a vaccine for cancer or AIDS, that the young athlete could fill her mind sometimes with little-girl dreams of having a house full of babies and staying home. Of course, if that was what she wanted, Heath would go out of his way to do it for her, even going so far as to sacrifice his own dreams of an Olympic medal. Right now she had her sights set on a Ph.D. and he didn't stand in her way. Somehow she knew that her man, her friend, wouldn't care what she wanted. All that would matter to him is that she wanted it.

"Good morning, glory," he said, stepping into the bedroom to pick up his blue-jeans from the night before and pull them on over his chiseled legs. "It's cold this morning. Help yourself to my sweats or you'll freeze. Do you want coffee?"

She could only smile and make a happy noise deep in her throat which could have been positive or negative. Heath returned her smile and began to return to the kitchen when she stopped him.

"Heath?"

He turned, one eyebrow raised slightly. He communicated so well without words.

She cleared her throat. It needed saying. To keep it inside was unfair to them both. But the words carried such a pallor of fear around them - the words that had doomed so many relationships when they were said too soon or said when not meant. They hung in her throat for a moment while she tried to think of a reason not to say them. She couldn't find one, any better than she'd been able to the fifteen times over the last twenty-four hours she'd tried to talk herself out of making this declaration.

Her voice, when it emerged, was small and girlish. "I love you, Heath."

His face softened and his eyes radiated pure compassion. "Really?"

She shifted, looking away. "Aw, you're not gonna make me say it again, are you?"

He knelt before her, touching her face in a way that sent shivers down her spine. "I'd kinda like to hear it again once or twice before I die," he quipped gently.

She leaned forward and kissed him lightly. "I love you. I love you. I love you."

"I love you too. Always have, since the second I met you," he told her.

"First sight?"

"First sight. You were all I could talk about. Mark knew, the bastard. He stood there, laughed in that self-satisfied little way of his, and said, 'You are so in love that it's disgusting.' He knew before I did, I think. I just didn't want to say it before I knew whether or not you were ready to hear it. Sometimes those words are a death sentence, you know?"

She smiled. "How'd you get to be so goddamned perfect?" she asked.

He looked at her quizzically and smirked. "Vitamins."

CHAPTER TWO: *The Man of Tao*

MARK LAY BACK on the table, trying to ignore the draft coming up through the flimsy hospital gown which was doing its level best to make certain parts of his anatomy crawl deep within other parts of his anatomy. He didn't know why doctors insisted on keeping these damned examination rooms so cold. His knee ached hellishly and he was in a bad mood, but refused to let himself take it out on Dr. Mitchell, who was by and large a decent woman. He was grateful for her gentle touch and straightforward attitude. She never said 'experience mild discomfort' when what she meant was 'hurt.' Mark didn't think he could have designed a better doctor for himself.

She came in some few minutes later with an armload of x-rays and medical files, shutting the door behind her. Mark levered himself up on an elbow and tried to let the rancor the rainy day had birthed in him dissipate.

"How are you feeling, Mark?" she asked, sitting on the wheeled stool before the desk. Her dark, Latina hair was frizzed and messy, indicating that she was having the same kind of day as Mark.

"All in all, better," he said. "The flexibility's starting to come back - granted, not as fast as I'd like - but the soreness is still there. If anything, it's getting worse. I'm following your instructions to the letter but the pain isn't lessening."

Dr. Mitchell tapped her lower lip in thought. "Ice doesn't help?"

"Not really. It usually flares up about a half-hour after I finish working out and doesn't go away for the rest of the day. The only thing that feels good is when I stretch it out or let the hot water run on it in the shower."

She opened a file folder, exposing a glossy sheet of pictures. "I've been going over the arthroscopic pictures we took when we 'scoped your knee after the injury. I'm not gonna lie to you, Mark. It's bad. If you hadn't been in such good shape when it happened, it would have ended your career.

"The fact is, the original tears are healing but the lateral and rotational stress you place on the joint in all the pivot and spin moves you use are causing new ones. I have to be honest, I'm tempted to take you off your workouts to give this time to heal properly."

Mark sighed. "If you think that would be best."

"Mark, I know how much making the Olympic team means to you and that your time of eligibility isn't going to last forever. Tell me true, do you think you can try again in four years?"

"I'm living like a pauper right now, Doc," he confessed. "The time's coming for me when I'm going to have to get a real job. This may be my only shot. That's why I've been trying so hard to stay in the running, because I think this may be my last chance to go all the way."

"How long until the Nationals?"

"Three months."

Dr. Mitchell scratched her head. "Mark, there's nothing I can say to you to cushion this. You have a gimp leg. You're always gonna have it. If you quit now, then you'll just have a weather scanner for a knee and you'll hurt every time you go up a flight of stairs. You stay on it to the Olympics, you might be looking at something as serious as joint replacement. I can't make the choice for you, but it's my duty to let you know what your options are. You're real close to blowing your knee out, kid. Be careful."

Mark sighed. "I've been dreaming of the Olympics since I was five, doc. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your being straight with me like this. And I'm not making this decision lightly, either. I know what's involved. But I have to try. *I have to.*"

Mitchell picked up the phone and punched in an extension, cradling the phone against her shoulder as she began fidgeting with a pen. Finally, someone on the other end answered. "Dennis, this is Julia Mitchell in Orthopedics. Do you have a minute or two to come and talk with a patient of mine?"

She smiled and gave Mark a thumbs-up. "Fantastic. Thanks so much. We'll be here."

The attractive young doctor hung up the receiver and turned back to face Mark. "That was Dennis Mendoza, one of the hospital's best physical therapists. He was also a Golden Gloves champ in college. I'm going to get the two of you to sit down and design a new workout for you, to give you the maximum time left on that joint. I trust you to know what you're doing, it's all the yahoos you're going to be competing against that worry me. I'm going to let you keep working but I want it supervised. Tell Dennis what you need to prepare for that competition. I don't approve of this, Mark. I think you're taking a big, big chance here - but I think I understand. Just promise me you'll take care of yourself."

"Thanks, Doc," Mark said, sitting upright. "This means a lot to me."

Mitchell fixed him with a stern eye. "But don't go thinking you're indestructible, kiddo. I'm re-evaluating you every month until competition and the minute that knee starts to go, I'm pulling the plug. I don't give a damn if it's the day before opening ceremonies - my main concern is that you will still be able to walk under your own power when you're fifty. Got it?"

Mark extended a hand. "As fair a deal as I could hope for," he said, smiling.

Mitchell returned the smile. "Be careful, that's all I'm asking. Don't blow your knee out just because you want a medal or a trophy. Believe me, it's not worth it. Keep the Big Picture in mind."

"I promise."

About that time there was a knock on Mitchell's door. Mark began pulling on his jeans behind the screen as the doctor admitted a large Hispanic man with close-cropped hair and a thick goatee. He looked at first glimpse like a hard-ass, a real bruiser with more muscle than brains. But there was a spark of genuine intelligence behind the hazel eyes and a ready smile behind the tough-guy scowl. He stretched the limits of his hospital scrubs with a powerful, expansive physique and a generous roll of table-muscle.

"Dennis, I want you to meet Mark Rutherford," Dr. Mitchell said.

"Hi," Mark said, rising above the privacy screen and extending a hand. Dennis' hand engulfed his and his grip betrayed an iron strength. Mark traded a friendly grin while simultaneously

dreading the thought of ever being in the ring with this man. Dennis Mendoza looked like he could devour any opponent that came near him.

"Good to meet you," Dennis replied with a faint accent. "What's up?"

"Mark here is a competitive martial artist," Dr. Mitchell explained. "Taekwondo. He has a shot at this year's Olympic team but has some torn ligaments in the left knee due to a severe hyperextension he suffered about two months ago. I want you to work with him, design him a workout to correct the knee stiffness and mobility problems while at the same time allowing Mark here to train and prepare for the Nationals. Think you can handle it?"

"My plate's a little full," Mendoza confessed. "But I think I can handle it."

"Great. You guys are welcome to use my office to chat."

"I'd rather Mark come down and check out the physical therapy clinic downstairs," Dennis interjected. "That way we can think hands-on. Okay with you, Mark?"

Mark slipped his shirt over his head. "Sounds good."

The two men took an elevator down three floors while Dennis went over Mark's x-rays and arthroscopic pictures. "Nasty mess you made here, ese," the bigger man commented.

"Took a mother sweep to the inside of the knee. There was no way my friend could've pulled the kick, we'd mis-timed the whole thing and were going way too fast. Honest mistake, but the payback's a little steep for my tastes."

"Tell me. I didn't duck under a haymaker in time back during my boxing days and spent three months getting to the point where I could turn my head more than about six degrees to the left again."

"Ouch."

"So tell me what your workout's like now."

Mark launched into a detailed description of what he was doing to prepare for the Nationals. Dennis listened carefully, all the while ushering him from the elevator, down a series of hallways and into a large and well-appointed physical therapy center staffed with competent-looking therapists and full of recovering patients working on the various weight machines. Through a doorway Mark could see people working in an Olympic-sized pool under careful supervision.

"Nice," Mark commented.

"I like it. Nice to have the budget to get what we need," Mendoza said.

"So that's the workout, plain and simple. What do you think?"

"To be honest, sounds like you're over-preparing, but it sounds like you're out to win, so I won't complain. You say the sparring is the only thing you can't do without?"

"Timing is everything, just like boxing. I'm off the mat for more than a day and the timing's ruined. Sparring is absolutely necessary."

"Well, I'm going to put you in a knee brace while you spar to guard against lateral motion on that knee. It won't restrict your movement enough to notice and strengthen the muscles you'll

need. I even want you in it while you're competing. That should take care of the sparring end as long as you remember to keep your opponent away from that knee. It shouldn't even show through your uniform, so the brace won't be a giveaway to an opponent that you have a weak side."

"That's good."

"I think you should limit your road-work. There are better, safer ways for you to get your cardiovascular training. I'd rather see you here doing laps in the pool than running on asphalt streets. That alone will put a lot of miles back on your knee, even if you only swap swimming for running every other day. Or else get yourself a good bicycle."

"Okay, that sounds reasonable," Mark said. "Can I use this pool?"

"As long as you can make it in between therapy sessions, I can authorize that. I'll get you a schedule. Now then, the flexibility exercises are good - as a matter of fact, I want you to double them if you can. Don't use weights, just do twice as many. Enough hours in the day for that?"

"Easy. I've been thinking about doing that anyway."

"Weight training's the clincher. If you don't mind, I'd like to custom-design a lower-body workout for you. Scrap what you're doing and take mine on."

"Only as long as I can keep the quad-presses in the routine," Mark said. "It's the only way I can keep the height I need for the flying kicks is by constantly building my thighs."

"As long as they're seated and the weight distribution is even across both legs. Doing squats will blow even healthy knees out in no time. No more squats, ever. I'm not compromising on that one."

Mark scrubbed a hand through his hair. "This is gonna be easier than I thought."

"The only other thing I could suggest is dropping some pounds to ease the burden," Mendoza concluded. "But you don't have any extra to lose unless you want to shed some muscle mass."

"I'd rather not," Mark said. "I didn't exactly ask for the bod, it just happened, but it does help the intimidation factor in competition."

Dennis laughed, handing Mark a schedule for therapy sessions and a handwritten pool pass. "I'll get you set up with a real pass after lunch," he said. "And I want to see you once a week to hear how you're doing. You can just drop by - I'm not much on appointments and I'll find time for you."

Mark shook his hand again. "Thanks a lot, Dennis. This helps a lot."

"You'll also want to get a big-ass tube of Aspercreme or Flex-all for the first couple weeks of the new workout. It's gonna tax the knee and it'll hurt like hell for a little while."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to repay you this favor," Mark insisted.

"I will."

Mark walked out of the hospital and was heading for the bus stop when a honking horn caught his attention. Heath and Faith, looking tired but *very* satisfied, pulled up to the curb in Faith's beat-up beige Nissan Sentra. Heath wound down the window.

"How'd it go?"

Mark walked over, dodging deftly through the pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk. "I've got to make some minor changes to my workout. The ligaments have healed tight and the pressure I'm putting on the joint working is making things a little worse," he said, sugar-coating it a little. "Doc's not happy about it but she's decided it's okay to keep training for Nationals. Hi, Faith."

"Hi," she said. She couldn't keep the "I-Just-Got-Laid" smile from her face. Mark suppressed a smirk and a rude comment at Heath's expense. He didn't feel as if he knew Faith well enough to make quips like that in front of her.

"Good news, all in all," Heath said. It was clear he'd been worrying.

"Not bad."

"Have you eaten yet?" Faith asked.

"I have lunch in the fridge at the dojo," Mark said. "I was gonna try and catch the end of *All My Children* with Hector the janitor, too. You guys go on."

Heath scowled. "Nice try. But we went to all the trouble of setting up this astonishing coincidence of taking you out to Charlie's and just 'happening' to bump into Faith's friend Cassie so the two of you could meet, and you're not spoiling it by going off to eat cold overcooked pasta and watch soap operas with the custodial staff. Now get in the damn car."

Mark stepped back. "Dammit, Heath, you know how I feel about this."

"Please, Mark," Faith asked. "She's having a hard time meeting people and you'd really be doing both of us a favor. She's a sweet girl. She has a great personality."

Mark spun on his heel. "See you guys later..."

Heath caught his elbow, keeping his free arm between them instinctively to block anything that might come across as he spun his friend around. "Come on, man. Please. At least let me buy you lunch so I can start working off some of the guilt for wrecking your knee."

Mark acquiesced with a long-suffering expression. "You suck."

"You'll like her. She may or may not be the future Mrs. Rutherford, but hey - never hurts to make another friend, does it?" his friend argued. Mark couldn't fault his logic. He climbed into the car. Heath even cavalierly offered the front seat. *He really does feel guilty about the knee*, Mark thought sourly. *Poor guy. Like it was his fault.*

"How'd your classes go this morning?" Mark asked as Faith pulled back into traffic.

"Not too bad," Heath said. "Even the nine-to-ten year olds weren't too rowdy today."

"The Ritalin in the Gatorade worked, then," Mark quipped. Faith snorted laughter.

Charlie's wasn't too crowded by the time they arrived, well after the usual lunch rush. Faith even managed to find a parking space in the same zip code as the restaurant. Mark walked behind the couple, who were fairly radiating devotion to one another. Mark had fed off of the relationship his best friend had with the tall brunette, living his own romantic fantasies vicariously through the two of them. They were wonderful for one another - Heath had given her self-esteem and a sense of worth and then had stepped away (the mark of a real man, Mark believed) when the time had come for Faith to try her sea-legs. And she had dampened and sublimated the angry rage that lived in his best friend since his mother had passed away. Heath didn't have it in him to be mad at his mother, even though he needed it to finish grieving. The anger and bitterness had found other places to manifest itself and Faith was helping Heath to get it out of his heart and begin to heal. Mark owed her for that, helping his best friend accomplish a feat that Mark had been unable to help him with. Mark's knee was a result of that rage; the only thing the tall redhead could come up with to help Heath work through the grief was to give him an outlet on the mat, and bore the bruises that came of letting Heath vent through physical release stoically, hiding his pain from his friend lest guilt make Heath stop doing what he was doing.

They entered the bistro in a laughing knot, listening to Faith adeptly describe the antics of one of her fellow grad students who was quite hopelessly alone in considering himself a Don Juan. Mark pulled up short when Faith broke away from them to embrace another woman who was waiting in the small anteroom of the restaurant.

Cassie was a smaller woman than Faith, but possessed of a fantastic body which her frumpy clothing could not hide despite its valiant efforts. She had a tousled head of wild blonde hair which seemed to have a mind all its own, giving the woman a rumpled, carefree look that suited her laughing blue eyes. She had a 'Precious Moments' face with huge eyes and a small, delicate mouth which flashed into a ready smile. She looked strong and competent, but reticent. There was a slight timidity about her which made Mark want to stand between her and anything that might try and hurt her.

"What'd I tell you?" Heath couldn't help saying, elbowing his partner's ribs clandestinely.

"Very pretty," Mark mumbled, trying to read more from the woman by posture and carriage.

"I think the two of you are really going to get along," his best friend continued. "I've met her several times before and she always has struck me as your kind of person. The kind you always pick to hang around with. It's not the set-up you think, Mark-o. It's just that the two of you don't have many friends and Faith and I thought you'd hit it off. That way you won't be so lonely when I go off to spend the night with Faith."

"You're so kind," Mark remarked acidly. "But I haven't even spoken to her yet."

"No rush," Heath offered, holding his hands up to indicate that it was no longer his business.

Across the restaurant, Faith hugged her friend tightly, gratified that she'd taken her advice and at the very least worn her thick hair down which amplified her delicate good looks by an order of magnitude.

"How are you?" Cassie asked.

"Tired, but good. Yourself?"

"Okay. I finally just gave up last night and went home to bed around one in the morning. I figured I'd take a fresh crack at the calibration problem once I'd slept," she explained. Then she could hold back her curiosity no longer. "Is that Mark?"

"Yep. You likes?"

Her eye sized him up - she had to give one thing to Faith, he was indeed gorgeous. Statuesque, almost. His plain pocket T-shirt strained across a flawless physique that fairly glowed with power and grace. He flowed through the air like a dancer, every movement trained to brutal economy and restrained power. His face was a portrait of freckled plainness that had a unique but undeniable charm and the green eyes were windows into a depth and breadth of mind that drew Cassie in instantly.

"C'mon, I'll introduce you," Faith prompted.

"Not just yet. I'm not through looking at that chest."

"Nice, *n'est-ce pas*?"

"God, he looks like the cover of a Harlequin novel. Without the perfect hair."

"Come on. He's looking forward to meeting you."

A sudden, uncharacteristic vanity seized Cassie. "I can't. Not now. I mean, Christ... I look like a bus wreck." She began trying to fix her rebellious hair while deftly positioning Faith between herself and Mark's field of view. "He must think I'm a slob."

"He thinks you're a computer nerd."

"Like I said, a slob. Jesus, Faith, you said he was gorgeous but you never said he'd be... so... *gorgeous*! God, I'm embarrassed. Come with me to the ladies' room so I can try to fix myself up a little."

"You look fine. Quit being a dumb ass."

"What would a guy like that want with somebody like me?"

Faith took on a lecturing tone. "Stop that. You're beautiful. You're going to knock him dead."

"Right. Sure."

"Just relax. Walk tall. And it wouldn't hurt to push those incredible boobs of yours out a little either. Now come on, we're all getting really hungry here. Just be confident. If he likes you, he likes you. If he doesn't, it's his loss, right?"

"You know, it's kind of funny," Cassie commented, visibly relaxing. "I used to think guys were the only ones who would see someone they didn't even know and immediately start fantasizing about being in bed with them. Now I know how wrong I was."

Faith giggled. "Cassandra Hollister!"

"Oh, gimme a break," her friend scolded. "Tell me you wouldn't want to screw *that*."

"Oh, into the bedsprings, girl! But I'm taken. Mark's all yours."

Cassie steeled herself for the first impression, even unconsciously sticking her breasts out a little. He hoped Mark wouldn't notice her staring. If she was lucky, she wouldn't drool onto her shirt.

* * * * *

Faith pulled up to her accustomed spot in front of the Biochemistry Lab and reached over her seat to retrieve her backpack. Cassie had not spoken a word since they'd left the restaurant.

"Okay, don't keep me in suspense any more," she finally said, abruptly ceasing her fumbling in the back seat and facing Cassie squarely. "What did you think?"

"I don't think I've ever seen a human being eat that much in my life."

Faith laughed. Mark had put down two double cheeseburgers, a large order of fries and two giant half-baked brownies. He was gifted with one of those freakish metabolisms that gave all the food to muscle mass and never seemed to gain an ounce, no matter how much he consumed. That, and the fact that he was constantly in motion, burning up what little energy his body managed to squirrel away just by walking down the street. Mark was so active, all that food would be burned up by the end of the day.

"But what about *him*? Do you like him?"

Cassie lowered her eyes. "I didn't want you to be right. I really didn't want you to have the satisfaction. I was hoping he'd be a self-absorbed twerp who couldn't talk about anything but himself."

"And?"

"He's wonderful, all right? Happy now?"

"I knew you'd like him."

"God, who knew he read so much? That's the first time in my life I spent an afternoon in a burger joint discussing the fallacies of Western logical philosophy and being driven back on my heels in an argument because he'd read so much more about the subject that I had.

"So then I thought to myself, 'See if you can bore him. He can't be perfect.' So I launched into a description of the new Scheme compiler that even had *me* yawning. And he soaked it all up like a sponge. He even asked questions I can't answer without studying up."

"Gives you hope, doesn't it?"

"It was weird, sitting there talking about Nietzsche and Heidegger and John Locke and soaking through my panties the whole time watching the way his shoulder muscles flex when he raises a glass to his mouth to drink. Faith, thanks. Thanks for introducing me to him."

Faith opened her door. "Don't mention it. Mark's a doll and you're my dearest friend. It makes me happy that you like him. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to run upstairs to my office and call Heath to gossip about what Mark thinks of you."

"I expect a full report."

"It'll be on your desk by three p.m."

* * * * *

Mark was exercising slowly, obviously getting used to the rhythms of the new workout he'd been prescribed at the hospital. Heath, who had finished his dailies that morning while Faith taught her morning class, just stood by watching his friend work. Mark was hitting some strength-building exercises which filled his end of the conversation with pants and grunts of effort.

"So, was I right or was I right?"

"Gotta admit, Heath, she's a wonder," Mark panted as he began doing smooth, powerful pull-ups on the wall bar. His chiseled body was covered in a shining slick of perspiration. "Smart as hell."

"That she is. Apparently can get a computer to jump through hoops for her."

"Jesus, I was pulling stuff out of my ass just trying to keep up with her. I was having to remember stuff from books I haven't read since high school to keep from sounding like an idiot."

Mark pulled himself up again, the veins on his forearms prominent with the exertion. "And a looker - wow! A little time in front of a mirror and a decent dress and she could be on a magazine cover. I can't understand why she tries so hard to be such a mouse. A girl like that could have any man she wanted, as smart and sexy as she is. What on earth would she want with a head-buster like me?"

"Come off it, Mark. You know you're a great guy. She'd be lucky to have you."

"Maybe at first. Sooner or later I get on everyone's nerves. The only one I haven't driven off is you, because you're too thickheaded to know when you're on a sinking ship."

"Yeah, you're a real troll, Rutherford. I only stay around you because of pity."

In the back office, the phone rang.

"That'll be Faith," Mark said knowingly, "wanting to know the verdict. Tell her I think Cassie's great. Also, tell her thanks. As big a pain as you two have been, I do appreciate the sentiment."

* * * * *

Faith let the phone ring for quite a while - the dojo got pretty noisy and there were only two phones in the whole place, sometimes it took a little while for somebody to realize the phone was ringing when Karen the secretary had the day off. Finally Heath picked up.

"Silver Tiger Taekwondo," he answered. "This is Heath."

"Well?"

There was a long pause, evidently long enough for Heath to see if Mark was listening.

"We have liftoff."

CHAPTER THREE: Est is ein Ros entsprungen.

Cassie met Faith in front of the crowded mall at around ten the next morning, looking apprehensive. They were to meet the guys at the river in three hours and then go 'tubing for the afternoon, getting nice and sunburned and then heading uptown for dinner and dancing. Faith had been in on the Herculean effort it took for Heath to talk Mark into the dancing part, so she was planning to see to it that Cassie didn't weasel out of her side of anything.

Faith walked up smiling. "Good morning," she half-sang to her friend.

"Why are you so cheerful?"

"Because I've been looking forward to this all week long," Faith confessed. "I haven't had a chance to go out and do girl stuff since I was an undergrad. We're gonna have fun."

"If you say so," Cassie grumped. "I've always hated the mall."

"Why?"

"Too many people, bumping into each other and being rude. Not my scene."

"Ah, just walk in like you own the place and people instinctively get out of your way."

"So what are we here to get?"

"I figure we both need something nice to wear tonight for dinner and new swimsuits."

"Shit," Cassie swore. "I hate trying on swimsuits."

"I think you need a two-piece," Faith teased, ushering her into the noisy mall.

"No way," Cassie replied flatly.

"You're gonna make me haul out the big guns, aren't you?"

Cassie stopped. "What big guns? What are you talking about?"

"I talked to Heath. He gave me the inside track on Mark's opinion of you."

Cassie jumped, her fear of the worst and her curiosity battling openly in her expression. Finally the latter won out and she said quietly, "So what did he say?"

"He was wild about you. Went on and on about how great you were, according to Heath."

"Really?"

"All except for one thing."

Cassie looked crestfallen. "Which is?"

"He said - and I quote - 'she'd be a knockout if she'd just pay a little attention to herself.'"

"Mark said that about me?"

"Right hand to God."

"You're an agnostic."

"I told you he'd like you. Now, you really want to blow him away, doll up tonight."

They walked through the crowd in silence for a bit, then Cassie turned to her friend.

"You know something, Faith?"

"What's that?"

"I think you're right. I *do* need a two-piece. And a haircut, too."

* * * * *

"Faith, we are spending way too much money."

"Don't worry about it. I'm having fun. Now come out here."

"There's not a whole lot to this thing."

"That's kinda the point, isn't it? Let me see."

"I can't. I'll die of embarrassment."

"Dammit, Cass, I'm standing out here in a suit that doesn't cover as much as my underwear. Turnabout is fair play. Now get your ass out here and let me see you in that swimsuit."

"Okay, close your eyes and don't open 'em till I say so."

Faith obliged, running one last critical eye over herself in the mirror before she did so. She had chosen a tight-as-sin Body Glove affair all in black neoprene. It left nothing to the imagination and hoped that Heath would be suitably inflamed by it. Because if she intended to wear it in public she was going to have to shave her bikini line and she *hated* that.

"Open 'em up and don't you dare laugh," Cassie commanded.

Faith opened her eyes and gasped. Aside from a bare hint of peach fuzz on her legs, Cassie looked like the cover of a swimsuit calendar. She was wearing a high-cut white maillot with a bandeau top which left her whole back and most of her front bare, save for two narrow little strips which cupped her generous breasts. The salon had done a fabulous job on her hair, which now framed her face with soft-looking curls and gave her some bangs that added to her allure, setting off her huge eyes. The salon had also had a special, so both women had gotten the extra pampering of having their nails done (Cassie had never done that before and was still busily poking herself in the eye and nose every time she scratched her face with the nail

extensions they'd gotten on a whim). A shave and a little bit of eyeliner and Mark would be out tonight with a girl who any teenage boy would fantasize about at length.

"You look incredible," Faith told her. "Beautiful. Your belly is so flat, I'm jealous."

"You look great too," Cassie reciprocated, looking past her into the huge mirror. "Jesus, Faith, is that really us? We look like we should be on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* or something."

Faith hugged her friend, still looking in the mirror. "Face it, girl, we're hot."

"I never thought about it before, but you're right," Cassie confessed. "We are. And all this - I mean, the hair, the nails, the clothes - it's all making me feel. well."

"Feel what?"

Cassie blushed from collarbones to scalp. "It's all making me feel so goddamned sexy."

Faith giggled. "Me too. Feels funny, doesn't it?"

"I kinda like it. There's a weird kind of confidence that comes with the package."

"Yeah."

"I think it's time we leaned on my Visa card for the next couple," Cassie said. "You got the suits and the hair. I'll get the next couple."

"Deal," Faith said, removing the swimsuit while trying to keep the mandatory underwear from coming off with it. "Where to next?"

"I was thinking Victoria's Secret. This sexy shit is growing on me. Then, off to get the shortest, sexiest party-girl dress we can find. I plan to make Mark's eyes pop out tonight."

Faith laughed aloud. "Hallelujah."

"You any good at make-up?" Cassie asked.

"Not really. Enough to keep from looking like a street-walker, I guess."

"Wonder how much the average makeover goes for?"

* * * *

"Dear God, Mark, did you *shave*?" Heath asked incredulously.

"Yeah," his friend replied self-consciously, rubbing his face. "I got into your aftershave too, hope you don't mind. I figured since Faith and Cassie were going to so much trouble to get fixed up for the day, I should make some kind of an effort too."

"That explains yesterday's haircut," Heath concluded. "You look good."

"Think so?"

"Damn, son, you look like that Calvin Klein underwear guy."

"With pasty-white legs, though."

"The Calvin Klein guy isn't nearly as Irish as you are."

Mark stood looking over his shoulder at his reflection in a mirror for a bit. "Gotta admit, though, that new workout is doing wonders for my back. I'm really starting to get some good definition."

Heath clapped his friend's shoulder. "You look good. Really."

"Feel good. I guess it's knowing that I'm gonna get to spend some more time with Cassie."

"She really made an impression, didn't she?"

"Oh yeah," Mark nodded. "I hope I'm good enough for her. She must have some pretty high standards. I'm afraid she'll think I'm some kind of muscle-bound idiot. You know how I get when I start talking about training for the Olympics. I hope she doesn't think all I can talk about is myself."

"Dude, you've been reading nothing but books on computers for four days now, just so you can talk to her and not sound clueless. I don't think you're gonna have any problems at all."

"It's just weird. You know I've never been real comfortable around girls. Hell, that's why I spend all my time in a gym. You dated all through high school, you've had more practice at this stuff. I still don't know what I'm doing, how to act and how to treat her without either coming on too strong or putting her off."

Heath looked his best friend in the eye. "Mark, just treat her like you treat anybody else. That's what most smart women want - to be treated no differently than anyone else. She likes you - Faith told me so. She's spending a fortune this morning on new clothes for this date, that should tell you something. You're funny and smart and a real gentleman, and hell, look at yourself! You're cut like a damn statue. I know a thousand women who would absolutely drool over you."

"Stop."

Heath laughed. "Still, if you're worried about the conversation end, my advice is to wear your blue Speedo suit. She'll be too busy gawking at your body to give a flip about what you're saying."

Mark gave him a friendly shove and then blushed deeply. Still giggling, Mark peeled down the waistband of his workout shorts to show a hip barely covered by blue spandex so tight one could tell Mark's religious preference through it. Heath guffawed.

"Don't know what came over me," Mark confessed.

"I do."

"Pray, enlighten me."

Heath reclined against his door. "Cassie's smart and funny and really together, which is why you read all those books. She's strong-willed and direct which is why you're sweating over how to act. And she has the body of a Playmate of the Month."

"Which is why I wore the butt-huggers."

"Right."

Mark pulled his shorts back into position over the suit. "That's as good an explanation as any."

"Besides, don't feel too bad about having your noodle hanging out."

"Why not?"

Heath dropped his shorts enough to reveal a hip similarly clad in black spandex. "Because Faith tends to have that effect on me too." The two men laughed and went downstairs to air up the inner-tubes.

* * * * *

Mark and Heath were waiting at the river when the beige Sentra pulled up. Faith wasn't usually late, so Heath suspected that she'd been working some serious magic on Cassie. He fervently hoped that Mark wouldn't be able to last the day without at least being thoroughly kissed, perhaps more.

Faith got out of the car and hugged Mark, then catapulted herself into Heath's arms. She kissed him long and hard and whispered into his ear, "This should be good."

"Are you wearing make-up?" Heath asked her. "You never wear..."

"Shh. Pay attention."

Heath looked over to his best friend, whose face was completely blank. Heath recognized that look. It was the icy countenance Mark displayed whenever he was having to cover intense emotion.

"Wow," Mark croaked. Heath followed his gaze to where it lay. Cassie had gotten out of the car and stood near the headlights, looking very self-conscious and nervous. Her hair was no longer the windblown mess it usually manifested, but instead had been carefully shaped and the curls had a semblance of order to them. Her sandy blonde hair fairly shone in the early afternoon sunshine and framed her face to perfection. She wore a hint of make-up, enough to give her color and to accent her big expressive eyes and define her cheekbones. But the delicate features of her face were where only where the softness began. Her body was more incredible than Heath had even suspected, a graceful collection of curves that screamed femininity: a pair of ample but not over-large breasts, carried high over a stomach that was flat as a plank. Her behind was soft and rounded and she had almost disproportionately long legs. She wore a minimal bathing suit which consisted of a few tightly-stretched, strategically placed strips of white cloth which immediately set Heath's mind wondering about the parts which weren't displayed. Her skin was pale and even, save for a spray of light freckles across her upper chest.

"Hi," she said shyly. She was blushing furiously.

"Cassie? Is that you?" Heath asked.

She smiled, letting some of her tension go. "Faith and I decided to be girls for a change."

"You look great," Heath declared. "Doesn't she, Mark?"

Mark jumped at the mention of his name. "Huh? Oh. Yeah. I mean, you look incredible."

"Really?" Cassie asked.

Mark took a faltering step, trying hard to salvage the calm exterior. He knew he was coming across as a bumbling idiot, but at that moment, he didn't much care. "Really. You look completely gorgeous. I like your haircut."

"Thanks, I like yours too."

"You guys ready to go?" Heath asked from behind him, somewhere where Cassie wasn't.

"Sure," Cassie answered.

"Careful you don't step in my drool," Mark said, berating himself. "Sorry to be such a putz. I just... I guess I just wasn't expecting to see so *much* of you. You really do look beautiful."

Cassie smiled and tucked her hair behind one ear with an elegant sweep of her hand. "Thanks. I thought it would be a lot of fun to show up as a beach bunny. I don't have much experience with making guys stare. It's kinda fun."

Heath had already dropped the first of the innertubes in the water. "Hurry up!"

Mark snapped out of it somewhat and grabbed some floats for himself and Cassie. "Come on, the current's just right. You ever been 'tubing on a river before?"

"Nope."

"You'll love it. It's so relaxing."

Mark bent and pulled off the baggy shorts he'd been wearing and it was Cassie's turn to stare. Mark grabbed the 'tubes and strode to the riverbank wearing nothing but a T-shirt to protect his pale skin and a minimal little spandex swimsuit. She was reminded of her mom's coarse but very descriptive statement about men's butts in tight containers: Mark's exquisite ass *did* look like two wildcats fighting in a sack as he trotted towards the water. Cassie knew Mark was embarrassed for being so taken aback by her looks - they'd talked about that at lunch the day before, how they both tried so hard to keep looks from influencing a first impression but had such poor success, but then, she was not the least bit interested in Mark's mind right then. She had a definite and uncharacteristic urge to dispense with the innertubes altogether and make frantic use of the back seat of Faith's car. She stomped the urge down and told herself it would be better to wait, to prolong the torment so that the release would be that much sweeter.

What she failed to notice, in that quick flash of thought, is that she had already made up her mind to sleep with him. Somehow, that seemed to Cassie like a foregone conclusion.

* * * * *

The little excursion on the river was a momentous occasion for the two martial artists - they were so concerned with their physical training that they hardly ever drank except on certain

occasions. This time they allowed themselves each one ice-cold Shiner Bock at the "Tube Stop," a little bar and sandwich shop at the end of the 'tube run where they could wait for the Lions' Club volunteer bus to take them back up-current to their cars. They sat around a table under the awning (Mark was already developing the signs of a hellish sunburn despite his dousing himself in SPF 3 million sunscreen that morning before they went out - his pale skin just couldn't stand any time in the sun) sipping beers and laughing. Each of them - the muscular Mark, the rugged-looking Heath, the tall and willowy Faith and the glamorous-looking Cassie - were getting looks from the various other men and women at the bar and apparently were meeting with high appraisal. Cassie had never felt so desirable and so safe at the same time in her life. The crowning moment was when Mark was in the bathroom and Heath and Faith were dancing to the jukebox, leaving her sitting alone at the table. A bronzed, healthy-looking blonde man approached her and offered to buy her another drink. He sat just a shade too close, smiled a bit too easily for Cassie's comfort and was looking for a polite way to tell the man to back off when Mark returned from the men's room. The bar-hopper took one look at the sunburnt column of rip that was walking back to her that he left without even leaving an ego-salvaging excuse to be someplace else.

Cassie couldn't remember having that much fun in years. And the whole day, her attraction to Mark's gentle and shy manner and his amazing athlete's body was growing and growing.

He'll think I'm a tramp, she thought to herself, offering to punch the whole ticket on the first date. But Jesus, I don't know if I'll be able to keep my hands off of him, especially if he dances anything like the way he walks.

Faith finally saved her by towing her along to the ladies' room. Cassie leaned against the stall while Faith was inside doing her business and sighed heavily. Faith giggled.

"Looks like things are going really well."

"I think I'm in love," Cassie said, and it was only half a joke.

"Mark's a great guy. I'm glad you like him."

"I do. That's kinda the problem."

There was a short pause as Faith flushed the toilet. "What do you mean?"

"I like him too much. I keep looking for the catch."

"I don't think there is one, Cass. Heath talks about him like he's the Second Coming and I haven't seen anything about him that leads me to believe he's anything less than wonderful, except that he has a real tendency to be a little moody. But then, so do you."

"There's another little problem."

Faith stepped out of the stall. "Yeah?"

"It's really embarrassing."

Faith looked impatient. After all they'd been through together, Cassie should know by now not to be embarrassed about anything she might say to Faith. Taking a deep breath, she said the words she'd been thinking to herself all day.

"I don't think I've ever met a man I want to fuck more in my life."

Faith covered her mouth. "Wow."

"I mean, really, Faith. Every time he moves he makes me want to jump him. Every time he touches me I get a fresh case of liquidity of the loins. He talks to me and I daydream about his hands on me, and his lips on my neck and breasts, and spreading my legs and laying back underneath him, and... shit. I'm getting all hot again."

Faith half-smiled. "Jesus, I am too, hearing you talk like that."

"I just think Mark would think I was a total slut if I tried to do that so soon. And there's no way I could hope to get him drunk enough to sleep with me. I don't know what to do."

"Have you considered the brutal honesty approach?"

"What, you mean just come out and ask him? I'd die!"

"No you wouldn't. See how tonight goes and then when you're ready, ask him if he'd like to come home with you. Simple as that. I bet you five dollars he'll appreciate the honesty."

Cassie looked pensive. "Maybe I can't get him drunk, but I'll need a couple to work up to that."

* * * *

They dropped by Heath's apartment briefly to clean up and change clothes. Had Cassie had more experience with her own sexuality, she would have known that Mark's silence and penchant for looking at anything in the vicinity *other* than her was a blatant expression of his desire and fondness for her. As it stood, his reactions to her "new" self were devastating whatever ego she might have had before. She had taken to being sullen and withdrawn, and Faith despaired over the way things were going after the afternoon had been so great. Heath would not let her interfere beyond giving the two of them excuses to be alone together - he was adamant that the relationship was no longer any of their business.

Mark bore up well under the pressure of wanting to touch the beautiful creature he was with but not knowing how or what to do with the waves of desire flooding through him every time she looked his way. He'd decided it would be better just to step aside and pretend he wasn't interested rather than show himself as anything other than a gentleman. Surely a woman who was that beautiful was tired of having guy after guy hit on her - it was probably why she went to such great lengths to hide her body and looks in everyday life. He wasn't aware that his attempts to ignore her were only making her try harder until - suddenly - she simply quit.

It was the most attractive thing she could have done.

Now he was with the mousy creature he'd had such a wonderful time with at lunch last week, the girl who could easily converse about any one of a thousand different subjects and keep him hopping mentally trying to keep up with her. Mark warmed to her again and she started trying to act coy and play the idiot relationship games that he had given up on long ago after what he thought was his final, disastrous relationship. So they played cat-and-mouse all evening. Mark was feeling good about having finally beaten his desire until Cassie came out of Heath's bedroom in that dress.

Dress wasn't a good word. It was a simple, elegant, Audrey Hepburn affair that was more than adequate to base a religion on. Gone again was Mark Rutherford the easy-going competent martial artist, to be replaced with Mark Rutherford the stammering, drooling idiot from the riverbank. No amount of mental training or preparation could have kept his desire down.

Dinner was awkward and the dancing worse, even though the opportunity to express himself physically did relax him quite a bit. He was weaving himself into knots and starting to dread being with her, when he finally stepped outside himself and analyze his actions, like he did after competing.

He threw back his head and laughed, right out there on the dance floor. Cassie jumped and looked at him strangely. "What is it?" she asked.

"Me. You. All of this," Mark chuckled. "You know something, I don't think I've ever been more uncomfortable in my life than I've been on this bloody date. I've been tying myself in knots trying to figure out how to be close to you but not seem like I'm possessive or coming on too strong, trying not to spoil anything by letting any kind of baser emotion show and remain a gentleman, and I forgot the one thing about you that makes you so incredibly attractive in the first place."

Cassie blushed at the compliment. "Which is?"

"That you're a strong, competent, intelligent woman. And one of the hallmarks of strong, competent, intelligent women is that they have a remarkable ability to handle the unpolished truth. It's all so silly, the way I've been acting. I could have just told you exactly what I was thinking from the beginning and we could have enjoyed the day instead of playing all these pointless games."

Cassie lay her cheek against his rock-hard shoulder. "You're not the only one who's been acting like she was in junior high again," she said. "I've been so busy trying to keep from tripping over myself all day that I'm a nervous wreck."

"Okay, then, truth time," Mark announced, holding her a little tighter. Cassie melted against him as his embrace solidified around her. "When I met you, I walked away thinking you were the most intelligent, fun woman I had ever met. After today, that list goes on to include beautiful and desirable. Cassie, you're the most breathtakingly gorgeous creature that I've ever seen. Half the time I can't believe you're willing to be seen with me when you could have anyone you wanted by crooking a finger and the other half I'm trying not to let my attraction show so that you won't think I'm just like any other guy, only interested in your looks and not you as a whole."

Cassie sighed so deeply as to almost be tearful. "Did laying all the cards down like that feel as good as it sounded?" she whispered into his chest. His fingers smoothed her hair and she tingled.

"Yeah."

"My turn," she said, looking him in the eye while still remaining as close as she could. "I dressed up like this because Faith made me. At first. Then I got to like it, all the attention and the looks I was getting. I started to feel sexy and I hadn't ever really felt that way before. It was all like some kid-in-a-candy-store game to me until I you started parading around at the river in those skimpy little trunks of yours. Well, I'd been thinking about being sexy all day and when I

saw those shoulders and your butt and how incredible your body is, all I could think about was sleeping with you. I mean, I couldn't go fifteen seconds without fantasizing - it felt like everything I've read and heard about male puberty. I was terrified that you'd think I was a tramp or something."

Mark craned his neck around to look at his backside. "You like my butt? Really?"

Cassie nodded, and this time there were some tears which clung to her thick lashes. "A lot."

"Cassie, I could never think you were a tramp."

"I could never think you were just like any other guy, Mark. Guy doesn't even fit you. You're a man, with all the wonderful things that the word 'man' carries with it. I think about you and I think, 'here's a man who would never consciously hurt me, never sleep around if we were together - there's the sex thing again - never lie to me or hold anything back.' Like right now. You just told me something that any other male I could think of would have died at the stake before admitting."

"Can I make a confession?"

"Sure. The time seems to be right for it."

The music changed to a much slower Otis Redding number and he pulled her close again, planting a feather-light kiss on her scalp which made her legs go weak. "You're not the only one who has been having sexual fantasies all day. I don't think I could ever tell anyone the things that were going through my head when you stepped out of the car in that swimsuit this afternoon."

"Really?"

"You have every right to feel sexy. You *are* sexy, as sexy a woman as I've ever seen. When you bent over in the side mirror of Faith's car to reapply your lipstick as we were leaving the river is quite possibly the single most erotic thing I've ever seen in my life."

"Mark, I'm going to ask you something, and I don't want you to take it the wrong way."

"Shoot."

"I want you to stay with me tonight. We don't have to have sex or even fool around. Just let me fall asleep next to you and wake up in your arms. I wanted it before, but now I think I need it."

He squeezed her tight. Those arms which left no doubt as to their ability to crush and break anything they wished tightened around her with just enough effort to make her feel like she was floating.

"I don't think I could do that. The not have sex part, I mean."

Cassie snorted and he joined in. "Does that make *me* a tramp?" he asked, chuckling.

"Who cares? Your place or mine, handsome?"

"Major Tom gets lonely if I don't come home at night," Mark told her and lowered his lips to hers. His kiss was like a brother's at first, timid and unsure, but it gained force and tenderness as it lingered. His hands found places between her shoulderblades as they kissed and floated away on the music, while Heath and Faith watched from across the room and held hands.

* * * *

Major Tom, the old grey-and-black tabby that Mark had rescued from euthanasia at the pound six years prior, was indignant about having to sleep on the couch that evening. He would occasionally peer around the door jamb to gaze with his usual cat's detachment at the unexplainable antics of his human and the female human he'd brought home, the one with the longer fingernails that felt so good when they scratched the spot right behind his ears. His human seemed to enjoy being scratched on the back and shoulders with those nails as well, since they'd sat together on the couch in his receiving room and breathed into one another while she scratched his neck and back for nearly two hours. It was very curious at first, but after a while Major Tom grew quite disenchanted with the spectacle, and, after a thorough examination of the female's strangely-shaped shoes, decided to move on to the much more interesting job of grooming and looking dignified.

Every move Mark made that evening made Cassie fall for him a little more. He had been very protective but never patronizing for the remainder of the evening and could not seem to get enough of kissing her. He was the kind of kisser a teenage girl dreamt about, the kind that are described in the romance novels that somehow make fireworks go off when they touched the heroine. He'd made double sure that she was willing to go as far as he before he let the evening progress to the point that it would have become frustrating to stop. He was solicitous of her pleasure, pausing during foreplay several times to ask "do you like this?" or "where do you like to be touched?" Nor was he stingy with his own pleasure - he was always sure to reward Cassie with a delightful moan or a hissing breath when she did something that he particularly liked. It was hard to believe that it had been over five years for him since he'd been with a woman; Cassie thought surely he'd be all over her with the prospect of release. But he continued as if he had all the time in the world.

And then the lovemaking. He'd ministered to her with his mouth for what seemed like hours, using feather-light touches and kisses to get her warm to the idea and then applying more pressure as her passion demanded it. It was as if he could read her mind. And his movements seemed superactuated by a deeper gentleness: not a frustrating timidity but rather a sense of his being a guest in her body and he was on his best behavior so as not to upset anyone and make sure to be invited back.

As for Mark, he found Cassie to be a wonderful and responsive partner. Her moans and squeals were delicious, and she was the first woman he'd been with in his life who did not take sex so deadly serious as to be nearly professional about it. She had fun - she laughed and joked and played. Mark dedicated himself to her pleasure as he did to every practice he took in the dojo, a silent resolve to give it his every erg of effort and not to stop until she was satisfied. He couldn't resist looking at her face over and over throughout the foreplay, to simply gaze at this beautiful, beautiful woman who was with him. He didn't question his good fortune - now was the time for living for the moment and he moved with a casual slowness that he hoped would stretch the night into eternity.

When he finally entered her, it was like the two of them melted together into one being, like staring into the face of Tao and becoming transcendent while at the same time grounding them into their animal nature and subjecting one another to such amounts of pure physical pleasure

that the mind could barely process it all. Mark took great delight in her reactions to his breaking of the natural rhythm that the human body longed to establish, a trick he'd learned in competition to throw opponents but which was much more rewarding here. He lent all his mental energy to restraint of his own climax, and could not repress a flash of pride at his own self-mastery as he sent Cassie into her third shuddering orgasm before he got near his own "point of no return." He was distractedly reminded of a nature documentary about the Venus fly-trap plant which folded itself around insects unfortunate enough to land in its maw. That was exactly how Cassie's body wrapped itself around his when he brought her to climax. Mark decided that he could happily spend the rest of his life bringing this woman to orgasm, her expression and muffled cries of devotion and pleasure were so gratifying. Finally he spent himself before, he hoped, she became sore and uncomfortable. He collapsed next to her, kissing the salt of her sexual sweat from her smooth shoulders.

"My God," she breathed. "So that's what all the hoopla was about."

"What's that?"

"It's a little hard to believe in this day and age," Cassie said, "but that was the first time I've ever come before. I've only been with one man before, in college, and he wasn't nearly sensitive enough to devote himself to the kind of foreplay it took. Hell, I wasn't even that sensitive, so I figured it wasn't that big a deal and just didn't even try. I thought the sex part was just fine without the climax."

"So you liked it?"

Cassie laughed. "No, I thought you'd look cute with scratch marks all over your shoulders."

"I have to say, that in my limited experience, that was the most intense, beautiful, superb sex I have ever been a part of," he told her, enfolding her in his powerful arm and fitting himself against her back. "You are so incredibly beautiful I can't even find the words to describe it. I don't have any idea what you see in me, Cassandra Lysette Hollister, and I don't want to know. All I do know is how happy I am that you're here, now, with me."

She squirmed around in his embrace, facing him and looking deep into his bottomless green eyes. "Do you believe in love at first sight, Mark?" she asked him shyly. Shy, because she was afraid to approach this subject within herself, not because she didn't trust Mark to discuss it with her.

"I have a theory," he said gently, "that emotion isn't a thing that stops. I think every person has a different sensitivity to emotion, like a pain threshold. We feel something all the time, every second every day. It's just a matter of whether or not it's enough emotion for us to sense. Once I had it framed like that, it was easy to lower my threshold. In my world, I walk around crying, raging, despairing, and falling in love all day every day. So yes. Love at first sight is a thing I believe in strongly."

"Would it scare you to hear what I'm feeling right now?"

Mark kissed her. "Never. I want you to know that. I always want to know what you're thinking and feeling, even if it's bad. I'm not afraid of you and I owe it to you never to be."

She smiled, caressing his face. "I was never sure before, I always thought I got schoolgirl crushes and didn't have any right to use the word *love* in reference to myself. I think I know what love is now."

"You think it suits you?"

Cassie nodded. "I'm falling pretty hard for you."

Mark grinned. "I've only been in love once," he told her. "I got hurt. Badly. I wanted to die, it hurt so much, the way it just sucked the color out of everything I saw. I didn't want anything to do with love anymore if it could hurt like that. I just. shut that part of myself down. But every time I get to a deeper layer of you and think 'that's it, there can't be anything more than this,' you show me that there's another whole world waiting beyond what I've just discovered. And you made me realize something tonight that scares me almost as much as it excites me: that I *want* to fall in love again, with you."

"Think we can handle it, being such social fuck-ups?" she asked.

"One way to find out," he replied and kissed her passionately.

When she caught her breath through the growing cold expansion of emotion in her chest, she wound her arms around her new lover as he kissed away a fat tear which had gathered in the corner of her eye. No silent pleading for her to stop crying; Mark understood. Perhaps he too would cry before the emotions were through raging between them. He was strong enough to let her see it.

But first, there was a much better way for them to channel the huge flood of emotion.

She tangled her hands in his thick red hair. "Make love to me again, Mark."

He raised his exercise-hardened body above hers and did just that.

* * * *

Cassie awoke and fumbled on the low bedside table for her glasses. Major Tom was curled warmly against her side, kneading her through the linens with very sharp claws and purring good morning. His breath smelled richly of cat food, making Cassie turn away from him sharply. In the morning light streaming through the wide window of Mark's bedroom, she could see him working through the powerful forms of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, the subtle interplay of motion across his muscular back as his hands flowed from position to position awakening a sexual hunger in her that belied the pleasant soreness in her middle. Four used condoms lay in the bottom of the wastebasket next to the bed and Cassie thought smugly, *I earned my right to be sore this morning*. But unlike her sweaty, awkward encounters with Eric, her former lover, the rest of her body was not sore and abused. Mark knew just how to touch a woman and as a result her nipples weren't overly sensitive from being sucked too hard and she had no cramping or muscle fatigue from being held in awkward positions for too long. Comfortable. That was a good word to describe last night.

"You're so very beautiful," she whispered, snapping Mark from his work to face her and give her a smile that lit the whole bedroom. He knelt, popped through a quick somersault and landed

in a defensive crouch next to the bedside to give her a long kiss despite her pasty morning-breath.

"I forgot to tell you. Ever since I started training for real after high school I have this weird internal alarm clock thing going on," he said. "I'm up at six in the morning whether I like it or not. As much as I like spending time with you when you're conscious, you looked so beautiful sleeping there I couldn't stand to wake you up. I thought you should know how early I usually get up. If you never want to see me again, I completely understand."

"Thanks," she said. "I needed the lie-in."

"Yeah. You look like you didn't get much sleep last night."

She gave him a playful shove which sent him into a backwards aikido-roll from which he catapulted to his feet like a gymnast. "I'll go start breakfast while you avail yourself of the facilities. Clean towels are in the cabinet over the privy and there's a sack full of moisturizing soap and gentle shampoo that Faith left behind when Heath lived here with me. I use pretty strong soap and the like, so I thought you might prefer something more kind to that gorgeous skin of yours."

She rose, gathering the sheet around her to Major Tom's distress. "Thanks."

Mark pulled on a T-shirt and started to exit when she stopped him.

"You're really something, you know that?" she said.

"Glad you like me. You can keep me if you want."

She imitated a child's voice. "'Honest, Mom, he followed me home.'" Mark laughed.

"Do you have any plans this afternoon?" she asked him.

"I was going to work out at the gym and then spend the rest of the day making love with this fantastic girl I just met," he quipped. "Unless you can think of something better."

"It's only better if you keep the relationship as a whole in mind. Not that making love all day long doesn't have its own unique appeal," she added, kissing his neck and shoulders.

Mark raised an eyebrow.

"I've been thinking about all the wonderful reactions I got out of you yesterday, dressed to the nines like that with my hair and face done," she explained. "So much so that I'm close to deciding to parade around like that all the time just to keep you primed and ready."

Mark smiled wickedly. "That could be very nice. I've never had a movie-star girlfriend before."

"Anyhow, I was wondering if you could be talked into trolling around a mall with me for a few hours," she continued. "I'll need somebody to help me carry sacks. I'm about to become a clothes-horse."

Ω



SUMMARY: Two friends find themselves victims of a science experiment which turns them into women who now must deal with their new life and their changing relationship with their girlfriends. part two

ALL THAT GLITTERS, Part II (Chapters 4-5)

By Valerie Hope

CHAPTER FOUR: *Half a Life*

ONCE AGAIN, MARK was busy breaking all the stereotypes associated with the male gender to shards. They crisscrossed the crowded mall and he was stuck to more windows than she was. He was quick to point out things that he thought Cassie would look smashing in (he proved to have excellent taste while still being easy on a pocketbook). He paid rapt attention to the Cl  nique woman in the lab-coat in the department store, completely absorbed in the explanations of coloring and complexion. Thereafter, his choices in clothing meant for Cassie took on a learned edge. He was loath to try on clothes for himself, but not for the typical hard-wired male impulse to get in and get out of a clothing store.

"I work out constantly," he told her softly, so as not to be overheard. "I have some problems from time to time with The Squirm. You know, jock itch. I don't like to try on clothes that I'm not sure that I'm going to buy. Let's wait a day or two to get me decked out - that way I can make extra sure I'm squeaky clean in the nether regions." He more than made it up to her, though, by purchasing a pleated shirt that she was sure would look devilishly good on him straight from the rack after taking measurements at the register. And he did spend a good deal of time trying on hats with her. He was tempted to buy a white pillbox with an attached veil that he said made him look like an Irish Jackie Onassis. The girls behind the register were aghast that this muscular "manly-man" would be seen in public wearing floppy wide-brimmed women's hats with his girlfriend, but the very thought of it had them fairly humming with jealousy by the time they left. Cassie could only smile in self-satisfaction. *Eat your hearts out, ladies*, she thought somewhat vindictively. *I've had to watch twitch-skirts like you parading around for years with the men I wanted on your arms. Now it's my turn. Mark's mine, all mine, and you can't have any of him.*

They spent an unholy amount of money and Mark was as cavalier about letting her pay as he was about taking the brunt of a purchase or two on his own credit card. They had a blast, ending the day by filling Mark's green-and-primer-grey Toyota pick-up with her loot. Suddenly, Cassie started laughing.

"You amaze me," she told him honestly. "I never know what to expect from you, Mark Rutherford."

"What's brought that on?" Mark asked, his eyes laughing along with her. He was always up to hear something else about himself that could be considered funny. Sometimes Cassie found herself wondering if Mark got some grand joke that no one else did.

"You. Trying on hats and telling me that this blouse goes better with my coloring than that one. You're more woman than most women I know sometimes."

Mark gave her a serious look. "Anyone who spends his whole life being a man has only spent half his life being a human," he said. All she could do was take his face between her hands and kiss him as hard as she could, pouring so much emotion through her lips that she was sure he felt it.

"You say stuff like that and there's no way for me not to love you," she confessed.

Mark took her hand and led her back towards the mall. "Do you want to keep shopping? I'm enjoying doing all this girl stuff with you."

"One more stop," she said.

"Where to?"

"Victoria's Secret."

Mark grinned. "I've been waiting for this."

She turned to face him, walking backwards and taking both his hands. "Me too. I want you to pick out every slinky, lacy thing you've ever fantasized about seeing a woman in and then take me home and spend the rest of the day peeling every stitch of it off me."

Mark shut his eyes and she wondered what sexy pictures he was seeing behind his eyelids. When his eyes opened they regarded her with a look of purest lust that started a flow deep inside her middle.

"I like you as a clothes-horse," was all he said.

She regarded him closely. "What aren't you telling me?"

Mark cleared his throat. "There's a small problem with the ensemble I have in mind."

"What's that?"

"I've tried real hard today not to suggest anything that wasn't comfortable. I mean, I always hear women complaining about how uncomfortable some of their clothing is and I don't want to ask you to wear anything I wouldn't be willing to wear myself, so to speak."

"Tell me what it is and I'll tell you whether or not I'm willing."

Mark paused, battling with his gentleness and his lust. Finally he propositioned shyly, "What are your feelings on four-inch stiletto heels?"

"Okay, I'm willing," she said. "But you're buying."

* * * * *

Faith took Cassie aside at the first opportunity since she had barged in with a sunburnt Mark in tow bearing Chinese take-out for she and Heath. Heath and Mark were talking about martial arts on such a detailed level that neither woman could effectively join in, so they migrated to one corner of the microbiology lab long enough for Faith to rave about her friend's new outfit.

"Cassie, you look incredible! Is that new?"

Cassie looked down at herself. It was one of the outfits that Mark had sprung for, one of the ones she adored but could not afford. She wore a tight green leather-look miniskirt and a cream-colored silk blouse. A matching green leather bolero jacket hung over her chair several yards away. Through a miracle they managed to find a pair of low-heeled pumps in the exact same shade of green in another store and Mark had bought those for her, too. She smoothed a self-conscious hand over her black silk stockings. "Is it too much, d'you think?"

"My God, you look like a model in that get-up. It must have cost a fortune."

"I don't really know. Mark bought it for me and he wouldn't let me look at the price tags."

"Mark bought that?"

"Yeah. He picked it out, too."

"He's got great taste. That color is great on you."

"We spent all day at the mall, buying clothes. He told me as soon as we manage to get the credit card bills paid off we can go do it again for clothes for him. I can't wait. I think I'm going to skip electricity and groceries this month just so we can go do it."

"Waitaminnit. How did you talk him into going to the mall?"

Cassie smiled. "I told him how much I'd enjoyed dressing up sexy and making his eyes pop the other day and that I wanted him to go pick out any outfits he might like to see me in so that I could keep it up. He was in the car before I could get my purse."

Faith looked evilly at Heath. "I'm gonna remember that."

Cassie touched her hair up quickly. "God, I'm getting vain. I can't go ten minutes without this overwhelming urge to check and see how I look. It still feels like I'm going to turn back into a pumpkin."

Mark wandered up, passing out fortune cookies. Each of the women took one. Faith's said that she was a happy person who enjoyed laughter. Cassie's said that meeting adversity well was the source of her strength. Mark's just said that he liked Chinese food.

"You know, I don't think I've ever asked either of you what it is you're working on here," Mark commented, running a hand down a centrifuge. "Whatever it is, it looks impressive."

"Well, it's all still really theoretical right now, but Dr. Tolliver seems to think that every living cell has what's called a 'cell memory.' It's a barely-detectable electromagnetic impulse which tells the cell when it's time to reproduce or repair itself. For example, cancer is just breakdown of cell memory causing a group of cells to grow wildly out of control," Faith explained. "We're trying to map and identify the memories of certain cells."

"Cool," Mark said. "So this cell memory is imprinted on every cell in an organism?"

"We think so," Cassie said.

"All cells are different, though, right? I mean, blood cells and hair cells and bone cells are all structured completely different even though they are born from the same DNA."

"Right," Faith said. "We think that cell memory also tells which kind of cells to respond to certain parts of the genetic code, too, although we have to map everything first to prove it. It's what tells bone cells to structure themselves as bone cells instead of liver cells."

"Amazing," Mark said, looking around. "And all Cassie's software is to measure this little electromagnetic force? Wow. No wonder she comes home with headaches. These machines must be incredibly sensitive."

"Yep," Cassie said with more than a little pride. "I'm about to get the problem licked, too."

"So can this stuff imprint a different cell memory pattern onto a defective cell?"

"That's the point of the design," Faith said. "We're indirectly working on a cure for cancer."

"What do you think would happen if you imprinted a memory on the wrong kind of cell? Like, imprinting the memory for a liver cell on a bunch of cancerous lung cells or something?"

Faith shrugged. "There's no way to be sure, but if Dr. Tolliver's theory is right, there would be a big lump of very healthy liver tissue in the lung where the tumor used to be."

"That's a kind of scary, Dr. Moreau thought," Mark said.

"If used indiscriminately," Faith corrected. "In competent hands, it could cure everything from cancer to arthritis to overbites. It could be the next great medical breakthrough since penicillin."

Mark looked around at the room. "Incredible. I think I'll just stick to beating people up."

"We've had some spectacular results in the early tests," Cassie said. "If I can just make all this shit work in the right order and at the right time we should be ready to test the imprinting process in a few weeks. We've had Billy waiting in the freezer for months now. It'll be a big deal. Faith and I will both need lots and lots of back-rubs."

"Who's Billy?" Heath asked from where he'd been following the conversation across the lab.

"Billy's a skin sample from Dr. Tolliver," Faith announced. "Since we don't want to have to do a complete genetic work-up, we're gonna try to work a major, easily noticeable change."

"What are you going to do to it?"

Faith blushed a little. "We're going to pick up the imprint from a tissue sample from me and try to imprint it on Billy. We're hoping that Billy will become Willamina."

"Wouldn't you have to destroy the Y chromosome to do that?" Heath asked.

"Not in the original cells. We're going to imprint Billy and then stimulate cell reproduction. Billy's original cells, the ones containing the Y chromosome, should die off in a few hours and the new ones grown to replace them should be Willamina's, complete with my double-X configuration."

"Igor, go to the graveyard and fetch a brain for Master," Mark commanded Heath. "That's absolutely amazing. Where would you possibly go from there?"

Faith's eyes were fairly sparkling. "From there we re-imprint something specialized, like uterine tissue or something, to become something else specialized, like brain or liver or retinal tissue. From there we reassess the project and then, hopefully, start the experimentation process on malignant cancers recovered from actual patients. If that works, then we start working on actual cancer patients."

"Damn," Heath said. "That's unbelievable. My girlfriend gets up in the morning and goes to work curing cancer." He looked at Mark. "We need to make something of ourselves."

"I don't think it would look too bad if one or the other of us had an Olympic medal hanging 'round our necks," Mark said wryly. "I think it would look great sitting on the mantel next to the Nobel prize."

"Prizes, schmizes," Cassie said. "I'm gonna make so much cash licensing this software I wrote that I'll need to rent a warehouse just to store it all. Then I can watch you two clowns doing Nike endorsements on a TV so big it needs its own generator."

"I'll hire on as your pool boy," Mark laughed. "Every rich lady needs a good scandal to keep the neighbors busy. They can go on and on about how Cassandra Hollister carries on with that muscle-bound pool boy of hers. Who knows? Maybe I'll get other offers. You know how the wealthy are."

"We won't need to do that," Heath said. "Because by that time we'll be making really bad martial arts movies with Jean-Claude and Steven, raking in dump-trucks full of money doing back spin-kicks."

"I wouldn't bank on any juicy movie deals until you get that sweep combination down," Mark scolded. "Paramount won't offer shit to somebody who goes flat on his face every time he tries to score a point on his opponent while tripping him at the same time."

"Well, aren't we self-righteous tonight?" Heath laughed. "It's not like you're *not* the only human being in a thousand-mile radius who can execute that damn move and stay on his feet."

Mark sighed. "I keep telling you, it's easy. Quit thinking about it as difficult." He began slowly working through the steps, his muscles shifting smoothly under his clothes. "All it is, is step, drop, pivot, sweep, recover, switch feet, then lunge. Just keep working through it slow, one step at a time, then speed it up when you're comfortable with it."

Cassie jumped. "My God. That's it."

Faith turned around quickly. "What?"

Cassie scrambled to a nearby white-board and began scribbling furiously. Her handwriting was atrocious. "I've been going about it backwards! Backwards! I keep trying to sequence everything on the fly and thought the problem was that the computer wasn't fast enough to handle it!"

She smacked herself in the forehead, laughing like a madwoman. "Dumb ass! How could I miss that? I get the spectrum analysis, formulate, sequence, and *then* compress it to events on a clock!"

Faith's alarm softened into limited comprehension. "Like a macro."

"Right!" Cassie plopped very ungracefully down into a chair and punched up her Sun.

Mark stood and began gathering up the empty containers from dinner. "Do you want me to come get you in the morning, Cassie?" he asked, his voice thick with amusement.

Cassie stopped dead. "Oh Mark - I forgot completely. We were going to."

Mark held up a hand. "That can wait. You need to hit this while it's still fresh in your mind."

She stood and kissed him. "I'm sorry."

"Stop that. I had a great time with you this afternoon and I'll be by about nine o'clock tomorrow morning to give you a lift home. If that beast car of mine decides to start."

She touched his face. "You don't mind?"

"Not at all."

Any other man would have been sullen and petulant. Cassie was so glad that she wasn't involved with any other man. He kissed her again and dropped something around her hand, something with a weight. Cassie looked down to see a small sack from a store in the mall. He must have gotten it while she was in the salon or something. He *could* move like a cat when he wanted.

"What's this?"

"Open it up."

She pulled the sack wide and sorted through the tissue inside. She pulled out a fist-sized statue of Tigger holding a picture frame against his belly. In the frame was one of the small pictures that had come from the photo booth they'd crammed into at the arcade that afternoon.

"I love it, Mark. This is so sweet."

"Take care of the picture," he warned. "There's only one other and that's going in my locker at the gym. I had a great time today, Cass. I just wanted you to know that I. well, you know. Good night."

She watched him go and set the frame beside her computer. Heath kissed Faith and left with his friend, wishing them all a good night. The door shut in the background and Faith turned to face her friend.

"Things seem to be going well," Faith said.

"I slept with him last night," she confessed. "I think I'm falling in love with him."

Faith stood flabbergasted. "You do? You *did*?"

"He's so incredible I can't believe he's with me. I keep pinching myself and crying with joy when I don't wake up. I mean, I just spoiled a whole night of sex for him and he didn't even get upset! How many men are like that in the world?"

"There are the two that just left."

"I'm gonna be here all night, Faith. Go be with Heath. You're gonna be too busy to see him in a week and you need to spend as much time with him as you can, while you can. I'm fine."

"Can I get you something before I go?" Faith asked. "Anything you need?"

Cassie looked at the door where Mark and Heath had exited wistfully. "No. I think, for once in my life, I have absolutely everything I need." Faith kissed her friend's cheek and ran out the door to catch Heath before he and Mark drove away.

* * * * *

By the time Mark arrived in the morning, Cassie was still going strong, if only a little frazzled along the edges. She kissed him slowly and deeply when he entered, inhaling that wonderful scent of him - fresh, honest sweat and Old Spice aftershave as she pulled him into her arms.

"Missed you last night," she said.

"I would've stayed if I hadn't thought that I was just going to be a third wheel. My bed *did* get really big all of a sudden, though," he said softly. "I like it better when you're in it."

"I'm sorry I ruined our evening."

Mark stood up straight. "Stop that. I mean it. You don't have to be anything less than you are right now to please me, okay? I like you because you get wild ideas in the middle of the night and work on them until sunrise. That's what makes you so special to me. Besides, sleeping in an empty bed once in a while is only gonna make it that much better when it's filled."

"You are so sweet."

"Just promise me you won't feel guilty about doing what you do, okay?"

"I promise as long as you do the same."

Mark looked self-satisfied. "Haven't missed a workout yet."

"How's the new routine going?"

"It's tough to get used to doing something differently that I've done every morning for eleven years," he told her. "But the results are coming quick. My knee doesn't hurt at all and my upper back's really starting to develop nicely. See?" He pulled a quick flex that stretched his shirt tight and Cassie ran her hands greedily across the rippling muscle.

"Nice. Real nice," she purred.

"Your voice is just entirely too sexy when you talk like that," he said. "Makes me wonder if there are any roomy broom closets in this building with locking doors."

Cassie grinned like a cat having its back scratched. "I wish."

"How about breakfast? I'm starving," he offered.

"Let me just finish some things up here. Have a seat."

"How'd it go last night?"

"I solved it. I managed to get the macro-builder coded and most of it is debugged. Now it's just getting the device driver to read the macro, look up the operation it's supposed to do, and then do it."

"Sounds like a bitch," Mark commented.

"It is," she said. "But I have the advantage of having personally typed in every letter of the code on this monster. I know just what I need to do and just how to do it. Did you know that your showing that spin move to Heath last night just put this project almost three weeks ahead of schedule?"

"Really?"

"Yep. I have to talk to Dr. Tolliver and Faith, but I think that we'll be able to test this thing on Billy in about two weeks now instead of the middle of next month. I talked to Faith and asked her if it would be all right if you and Heath could come and watch the first test. After all, it wouldn't be done if not for you two."

"Wouldn't miss it. I think you and Faith are going to make history."

Cassie chuckled. "At least we'll get some credit when Dr. Tolliver makes history."

She finished up quickly, typing with blazing speed and starting a lengthy rebuild and compile which incorporated all of her work from the night before with all of her previous six months' slavery. She found it hard to concentrate with Mark's fingers idly stroking the back of her neck the whole time.

"Am I bothering you doing this?" he asked playfully.

"Like you wouldn't believe," she said. "And don't you dare stop."

"I wanna ask you something and then tell you something," he said.

"Okay."

"I was wondering if you think you could take a week off in two months. I can bring a guest to sit sideline when I compete in Nationals in April. I want it to be you. Would you come?"

Cassie nodded. "Like you said, wouldn't miss it. Why would I turn down the opportunity to see my boyfriend make the U.S. Men's Olympic Team? Give me the dates and I'll let my teachers know when."

"Great. It would mean a lot, to see you standing on the sidelines smiling at me."

She kissed him, not really taking her eyes from the screen. "What do you want to tell me, now?"

"Maybe it's not a good time. You're pretty busy."

"No, no, go ahead. Please."

"It's just that I've been doing a lot of thinking about some of the things we talked about the first night we spent together, and then how great I felt just being around you all day yesterday. I hardly slept last night for thinking. And then I came up with something, but I don't know if I

should say it because I don't know if it's a good point in either of our lives to bring something like this up, you know? It is something that could conceivably wait until after you test Billy, and after Nationals - I don't know if I should even bring it up, if it needs saying or if it would just make a mess out of an already messy situation."

"Mark, you're waffling. Just say what's on your mind. You can tell me anything."

"Think so?"

"Know so."

"Okay, then," he said, pausing to take a breath. "Cassie, I'm ass over apple-cart in love with you."

The typing stopped.

"Uh-oh." Mark muttered, staring at her expression. "I was afraid of this. I ruined everything, didn't I? I spoke up too soon, I rushed into the attack without feeling out the opponent. I'm famous for doing that - it's cost me more competitions than I could ever remember. Shit. Everything was going so well, too." He smacked his forehead, hard. "I can't believe I went and pulled a boneheaded stunt like that -"

She crushed her lips to his and pulled him tight against her, overturning several three-ring binders from their precarious perches on the edge of the desk. She kissed him until neither one of them could breathe and were forced to break apart or become dizzy.

"Do you know how long I've waited to hear that from a man who makes me feel like you do?"

Mark panted. "So you're not scared."

She kissed them both to breathlessness once again. "Silly - isn't it obvious?"

"I love you, Cassie. I love you more than I've ever loved anything in my life."

"I love you too, Mark - you're the first person I've ever met that makes me think of myself as a woman instead of a freak. I don't know what I did to deserve you, but I've been in love with you since I met you and I don't want to ever be apart from you."

As it turns out, Cassie was wrong. There was a decent broom closet with a locking door.

* * * * *

Cassie's life was full of everything pleasant and she felt like she was in a storybook come alive for the next several weeks. Her professors praised her endlessly for her work on the sequencing software and the drivers for the complicated series of electromagnetic field generators necessary to perform their groundbreaking work on the cell memory theory. She was getting compliments from all sides from her new "look," and reveling in the wonderful looks of appraisal she was receiving from every man she passed by - she felt like the cover of a magazine and Mark's every word seemed to add more mass to her burgeoning female ego and sense of self-worth.

And she was totally, blissfully in love. Now that the hardest part was over and the words were said, she could sit back and enjoy the flooding of pure, sweet, little-girl emotions that her boyfriend's every look and touch sent rippling through every cell in her body. He pressed on towards his goal of the Olympics during the day while she worked on towards making a possible cure for cancer a reality, and they came together at the close of day and filled the nights with glorious, wonderful emotion. Even their rare squabbles ignited a fire inside her that drew her closer to him. Mark did nothing dispassionately - every action and thought he took was a focus of all his drive and energy, and after a few short weeks with him Cassie really did feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

She had taken to rising with him at his usual ungodly hour to take extra time on her appearance, making up for lost time. While other girls her age had experimented with clothes and color, Cassie had been inside, cloistered behind a computer. College was spent in wordy Internet relationships and friendships with men and women who were married to the same discipline she was. She used to deride the women she'd known who spent hours on hair and make-up as vain and shallow. Now she knew the rewards of walking around looking like a million bucks. She read everything she could get her hands on about cosmetics and hair-styling so she could go days without looking the same way twice. She found a new passion for style and elegance which made her feel like a princess. It was all wonderful, and Mark never stood in the way.

Mark even managed to pass the litmus test she judged all men by: on the seventeenth of March he went out with members of his violently Irish family and proceeded to drink himself silly over the course of about six hours. Cassie was gratified to know that Mark was a pleasant, funny drunk with one annoying tendency to repeat himself. To his credit, however, most of what he repeated over and over were testimonies to how much love he felt for her. He woke up hung over and did not complain, taking it in stride as payback for his excess, worked out extra hard to make up for the beer he'd drunk, and no more came of it. Sometimes, when she looked at him, Cassie had trouble remembering life before him.

Faith and Heath had surprised them both by announcing their decision to move in together, their own relationship having progressed now that the guilt over being attached while their best friends were not now gone. The love between them was almost a tangible thing now, a scent or a color in the air when they entered a room hand-in-hand. Mark confessed to Cassie over dinner one night that Heath had been very late to a workout the week before because he had gone to Americus Diamond to price rings.

And then the exciting day came when Mark and Heath stepped behind the glass testing wall with them and watched as Cassie's software directed a roomful of machinery to direct specific electromagnetic fields onto a small sample of Dr. Marcus Tolliver's skin floating in a petri dish, hoping to prove a theory that Faith had spent six long months codifying, researching, and analyzing.

"We're at optimal," Cassie announced, reading the digitized displays she'd rigged on her program's brand-new graphical front end. "The machines are ready any time."

Tolliver looked to Faith, who was frantically taking all the base readings for Billy in the "clean" room. They would compare the data before the process to the data after to see if there were any adverse conditions left in the environment from the process.

"Got 'em," Faith announced, scratching the cowl collar of the silk blouse she'd borrowed from Cassie. To Heath's delight, Faith had begun a small obsession with looking as good as her best friend and Heath was being introduced to the joys of walking around town with a certified stunner on his arm.

"Countdown's started, Faith," Cassie said. "Back away from the glass."

Faith came behind the magnetism-dampening ceramic shield they'd constructed around the control center. Five seconds, counted aloud by Cassie, passed, and then it happened.

The lights dimmed as several bar readouts on Cassie's screen pegged out. The room was filled with a loud subsonic hum which raised the hair on everyone's necks and then it was over.

"Scientific progress goes 'boink,'" Heath whispered to Mark.

"That's it? You did it?" Mark asked.

Cassie stood up, peering through the glass at Billy the skin sample. "Faith?"

"We won't know until the skin cells start regenerating. Should be a couple hours. Give the room a few more seconds to 'cool down' and I'll go in there to check the readings. The we'll know if the process was a success when we can do a DNA analysis, which should only take another couple hours."

Mark and Heath walked forward towards the glass to get a better look at Billy and to congratulate Faith and Doctor Tolliver. Tolliver went back to the office to get a bottle of champagne as Faith began running her tests on the room.

"Hey, Cassie," Faith called. "The Tesla readings in there are still pretty high. Did the capacitors discharge completely, or is there some residual?"

"Oops," Cassie said, punching up a series of keys on the Sun station. "I forgot to take the stand-bys offline. There was still a little juice running through the apparatus. Should be off now. Another two hours until the capacitors are back at optimal."

"You're recharging this beast?" Heath asked. "Why?"

"We have to do this eight more times today on different Billy samples," Faith said. "To get a decent cross-section on our results. That's why we were gonna celebrate tomorrow night - we were gonna be here a long time this evening."

"I was kinda looking forward to a little celebrating tonight," Heath lamented, running a lingering eye over Faith. Faith, playing along, made a pouty moué at him and blew him a kiss.

"Poor baby," she said while vamping sexily. "Just gonna have to use your hand tonight."

Heath slitted his eyes and dug back at her. "I was gonna use 'em both," he told her. "Poor baby. Gonna stay here in the lab when she could be home having a three-hour oil massage like I'd planned."

Faith's coy posing stopped dead. "Three hours?"

"At least."

"Think you can handle things here without me, Cass?"

Mark threw his head back and laughed and Heath was glad to see his friend in such good spirits. In two weeks it would be their turn, when Faith and Cassie would get a chance to stand by and cheer while they cleaned up at Nationals and earned their spots on the Olympic team.

"Folks, why don't you come in here for a little bubbly?" Tolliver called from the back room.

Heath and Mark levered themselves away from the glass pane overlooking the sample tray in the clean room. Nobody seemed to notice the glowing outlines of their bodies which played along the surface of the glass briefly and then dissipated.

CHAPTER FIVE: 'There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio..'

MARK had slept fitfully and thankfully couldn't remember any of the horrible dreams that had seemed to wake him every hour on the hour. It was probably from the champagne - that stuff had always kicked his ass and given him headaches, combined with a workout that pushed his limits - he hadn't felt this sore since he'd switched over to the new, knee-friendly routines at Dr. Mitchell's urging. He woke groggily, surprised to see that the sun was already high over the tip of the skyline through his bedroom window. He never slept past six a.m.! Realizing that he was lying both wadded in every inch of blanket and sheet he could have wound around himself and also sleeping in a sodden pool of his own sweat clinched it - he'd caught something. He'd spent the last night with a fever, which explained the soreness, the chills and sweats, and the weird dreams about being lost in a huge forest with no idea where he was going or where he'd come from in the first place.

The key turned in his lock and Cassie came into his bedroom, hanging the African print silk scarf he'd given her on top of his dresser and setting her purse atop that. Major Tom wound affectionately around her silk-clad ankles as her heels clicked on Mark's hard-wood floor.

"Mark, are you all right?"

"I think I've come down with something. I know I had a fever last night."

"I think it is because you walk around outside all sweaty after you work out with Heath," Cassie said. "Faith told me that Heath was dead to the world this morning and she couldn't wake him up no matter what she tried. Whatever it is, you and Heath both have a whopping case of it."

She sat by the bedside, her pleasant weight tipping Mark to the side a little.

"How do you feel?" she asked, smoothing his hair across his forehead.

"Terrible. Weak as a kitten."

"You sound awfully stuffed up," she said. "Your voice is like an octave higher."

"How'd it go last night? Did you get done?"

"Yep."

"How were the results?"

"Well, we fried the first two samples. Apparently the theory was all wrong about how much 'oomph' to put into the imprinting process. We found out that it works perfectly using about a

tenth of the power we were originally putting into it. I reset everything and the last six samples worked like a charm."

"You did it? You changed the cell memory?"

Cassie fairly beamed. "It's amazing, Mark. The cells had changed completely and there was no way at all to tell that those cells hadn't been harvested from Dr. Tolliver's identical twin sister. And while they're changing they glow with this eerie, iridescent blue St. Elmo's Fire from the residual energy that's released after the imprinting."

"I wish I could've seen it."

"You will," she told him. "We have to do it all again for a panel of scientists in three days."

"I hope I'm still alive by then," he groaned. "God, I feel awful."

"Want me to make you something to eat?" she asked him.

"You're so sweet. I think some toast and hot tea. That's the Irish cure for cancer."

Cassie near-beamed. "You can't say that anymore. We just cured it."

"I know. I'm so proud of you. I wish I had the energy to hug you right now."

"I got the whole day off to nurse you back to health, sweetheart."

"I love you, Cass," he said. She went to fix him something to eat and he must have dozed off again, since he awoke once again to Cassie's gentle shaking on his shoulder. He came to groggily.

"Boy, that moisturizer I got at the Origins counter really works. Even the little bit I put on your sunburn has made your skin soft," she said. "Can you sit up to eat, babe?"

Mark struggled to roll over. His body didn't seem to want to cooperate and it felt for all the world like he'd been beaten soundly. Even his balance seemed off. "I need to get up and shower, that would make me feel better. And if I don't at least try to get in the gym I'm gonna lose my conditioning." He sat up in a series of short hops on his butt, leaning his sunburnt back on the headboard. Cassie had gone into the small kitchen to get his breakfast and when she re-entered she dropped the tray onto the hardwood floor with a clattering crash. Major Tom leaped away from the spot, hissing in alarm.

"Cassie, what's wrong? What is it?"

Cassie could not speak. She pointed at him while covering her mouth with her other hand.

Mark spun his head and looked into the small mirror mounted on his closet door, where Cassie was pointing, and his power of speech seemed to fail him as well. He could only gawk at the perfectly lovely pair of B-cup breasts which graced his now-sleek, slender chest.

Mark's mind switched to "deal-with-it" mode. He stared for a moment and turned back to Cassie, telling her in his firmest voice to go and call Faith immediately. Cassie nodded dumbly as Mark gathered his waning energy and swung his feet out from under the blankets. He gazed at himself in the mirror as he stood weakly, now only coming up to a height of about five foot four from his previous six foot one. The floorboards were extremely cold against his now-delicate feet.

The clean, powerful lines of his body were gone, replaced by the graceful, sinuous curves of an athletic woman. His skin was still peppered with orange freckles but now his skin was not the roughened pale of his former self but now a deep, rich cream texture that exuded softness. Small, tight breasts sat high on his chest and they responded to the cool spring morning air in the bedroom by an erection of the nipples, which stood out like small fingers from pink areolae the size of silver dollars. Mark's hairline had ceased its recession during the night's transformation and now his shock of red hair looked much fuller and softer in spite of its short, masculine cut.

His face had softened considerably, losing its strong lantern jaw and becoming slender and elfin delicate. His nose now became a gentle, aquiline slope which added to the aesthetic of his face and set off a small, petulant mouth with his mother's bee-stung lips and wide, expressive green eyes set off by long, bright red eyelashes. The freckles on his face became a compliment to his allure instead of the annoyance they'd always been. He touched his face in the mirror, scarcely able to believe that the young woman in the reflection was actually him. Long, slender fingers traced the contour of the high cheekbone and the arched red eyebrow. The scar on his right knuckle and the appendectomy scar were still apparent against the pale flesh. It really was him. It was like looking at his twin sister.

Cassie came back into the room. "We have to go," she said. "Heath has flipped out completely. Faith is scared - she told me he's wrecked the house and won't let her near him. She's nearly hysterical."

Mark shifted his mind into overdrive, electing to ignore the miraculous transformation that had completely changed his life in order to devote all his thought to his friend. "He'll talk to me," Mark said firmly. His voice may have become softer and higher but the note of command was unmistakable. "Have you left any of your clothes here, Cass? I can't go out like this trying to wear any of mine."

Cassie cast her eyes about and found a pair of her jeans atop the hamper in Mark's bathroom. "They have spaghetti sauce on them," she said as her chin began to quiver with the coming tears.

Mark laughed, and was surprised that the basso rumble he was used to hearing came out as a charming, tinkling affair. "That's the least of our worries, babe. Give 'em here."

Cassie handed him the garment and looked at him. Fat tears welled up in her eyes. "This is my fault," she moaned, starting to cry in earnest. "This would never have happened to you if not for me and Faith. God, I don't know what to do."

Mark took her firmly by the shoulders, glad that he still retained enough upper body strength in his now-deflated torso to turn her to face him. It was odd, looking up at her, since in her heels she had almost a full three inches of height on him now.

"Listen to me," he said, locking his emerald eyes hard into Cassie's tear-filled sapphires. "I need you right now, Cass. Only you and Faith can find out what's gone wrong and fix this. You're it. I need you to be strong and together right now. We can both get the shakes about all of this later. Okay? Are you with me?"

She nodded. "I can't believe it's you. You look the same, but so much different now."

He stroked Cassie's hair away from her eyes with his woman's hand. "It's me. I swear."

She composed herself, letting the hysteria flood away from her in a long, shuddering exhalation of breath. Mark crammed himself into his Speedo trunks, which made an unsightly wad in front where there used to be a manly bulge, and then pulled Cassie's skin-tight No Excuses jeans on over them. They were a little loose - Mark could see that he was a couple sizes smaller than his girlfriend. He pulled on his Everlast T-shirt, the smallest one he owned, and still had to knot it below his breasts in order to have it feel like something other than wearing a small tent.

Mark shoved his sunglasses on and grabbed his keys as Cassie collected her purse. Thankfully, she had fed Major Tom earlier, so that there was nothing whatsoever to distract Mark from the task at hand. Faith had said Heath had completely flipped out, which meant that he'd gotten violent. And when Heath was violent, there was usually only one way to get him to snap out of it.

Mark hoped fervently that his new, feminine body was up to the challenge.

* * * * *

They got to Heath and Faith's apartment in record time, Cassie squealing the tires at every corner they passed. Mark held on for dear life and hoped that his dilapidated old pick-up could take the abuse, but Cassie was the only one of them currently in possession of a drivers' license which had the correct photo and sex displayed, so she was the one who got to drive like a maniac through rush-hour traffic. Mark forced his new, strangely balanced body up the stairs three at a time, leaving Cassie behind trying to keep up and jumping on one foot as she removed her dressy shoes. He pulled up short out of a head-down sprint down the corridor to pound on the door of Heath's apartment.

Faith answered the door, her skin blotchy red and her eyes filled with tears. One side of her face was beginning to swell with a purplish bruise. She looked at Mark strangely and finally said, "This isn't a very good time right now, Miss. Would you mind coming back later, please?"

Mark shouldered through the door, thankful he still had adequate strength. He'd heard that female muscle mass was abominably low and was fearful for a moment that morning that the strength he'd come to depend on for everything had completely deserted him. He may not be anywhere near as strong as he once was, but at the very least he wasn't a stick-armed weakling. Sizing up the effort it took to push past Faith's resistance Mark estimated that she was far stronger than the average woman and could probably hold her own easily with the average, out-of-shape urban male.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she asked irritably as Mark forced his way in, running his eyes over the wreck that Heath had made from the apartment. Furniture was overturned and broken and there were holes punched in several doors and cabinets. It seemed Heath had not lost his strength either. Mark prayed to whatever forces governed his life that he could master his balance in time to keep from being beaten to a bloody, mangled pulp.

"It's me, dammit," Mark told Faith irritably. "It's Mark. The same thing happened to me that happened to Heath. Now where is he?" Faith could only look at him in amazement, dumbstruck.

"Dammit, Faith, there's no time for this. Your experiment yesterday turned me into a woman. Cassie's on her way up right now. You need to see if Dr. Tolliver's okay and set your mind to fixing this problem and leave Heath to me. Got it?"

Cassie barged through the door. "Faith, it's me. Everything's going to be all right."

Mark made Faith look into his eyes. "Where is Heath?" he asked as gently as possible.

"In the bedroom," she whispered, her shoulders shaking as she started crying, deep wracking sobs to dredge up the filth in her soul and mind and wash it away. "He doesn't even know me. He saw himself in the mirror, saw what happened, and... started yelling and breaking things. When he hit the mirror he started bleeding really badly. I tried to catch him, to help him, and he knocked me into a wall, screaming at me to get away and leave him alone." She absently touched the bruise on her cheek.

"I'll handle it, but you have to promise me something," Mark said. "That no matter what you hear or see in there, you won't stop me. Heath and I have been friends since we were children. This isn't the first time he's lost it. He has to sweat the poison out. We're gonna fight, and say horrible things, and we don't mean any of it. Just please, swear to me that you and Cassie won't get in the middle of things. Heath's not in control and he's dangerous, and I don't know if I can handle him and protect you and Cass at the same time."

"Okay."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

Mark looked over one shoulder. "Cass?"

Cassie nodded. "I promise. Be careful."

Mark smiled, and it was a smile that belonged, in Cassie's memory, on a handsome man who was the focus of her entire life right then. "Don't worry."

He gently led Faith into Cassie's arms. "Cassie will get you all fixed up. Just go ahead and cry it all out, Faith. Go ahead. Cassie will take good care of you."

Mark turned around to face the bedroom and there was a fire of anger in his stance and eyes as he strode purposefully towards the door. *I don't care how freaked or out of control he got*, Mark thought solemnly. *He laid his hands on Faith. He hit her. I owe him for that.* It was a very masculine thought, considering that he was in the body of a shapely young woman at the moment. His confidence in the abilities of Faith and Cassandra to rectify the problem was complete. He only had to deal with the problems at hand.

Heath was huddled against a far wall, staring at his arms and hands. There was a wild, cornered look in the huge brown eyes. Despite the masculine haircut, Heath had been transformed over the night into a delicate and very attractive young woman with a curvy, smooth face dominated by giant, doe-brown eyes. His dark hair was tangled and tousled but looked every bit as full and lush and soft as what had happened to Mark's. Because Heath had

carried a touch more body fat than Mark had at the time of the transformation, the feminine curves were softer-looking and the breasts a bit heavier and fuller. Heath was completely naked and his flawless poplar-wood complexion was covered in blood which emanated steadily from a deep gash in the slender wrist.

"Heath," Mark said. "You're cut. You're bleeding. You need to get it seen to."

"Who the hell are you?" Heath hissed, half-standing. "Go away."

"It's me, buddy," Mark assured him. "It's Mark. The same thing happened to me last night."

There was something feral in his laugh. "This is a dream, that's all. A weird dream."

"No, it's not. You're cut and if you don't stop the bleeding you're going to hurt yourself."

Heath stood, scooped up a brass alarm clock from the floor and threw it at Mark in one fluid motion, screaming hoarsely, "Shut up! You're a dream, dammit! This can't happen for real!"

Mark deftly dodged to one side and snagged the clock from the air as it passed. The forceful contact stung his much more sensitive skin. "Haven't you broken enough stuff for today, Heath?"

"Why are you calling me that?" Heath yelled, tears streaking his pretty-girl face and perfect skin. "Don't you see me? Look at me! Look at me, I'm not Heath! I don't know who the hell Heath is!"

Mark snapped at him, "You're acting like a child. You've broken everything in your apartment. And you hit Faith. You *hit* her. Maybe you deserve a woman's body. No man would act like that."

"How would you know?" Heath retorted. "Have you looked at yourself lately?"

"I'm Mark Rutherford," Mark said. "That hasn't changed just because my willie's been misplaced. I'm still completely the same inside."

"You're not Mark! You're not!" Heath screamed. "You're some dream! You're not Mark, you're a woman! Stop trying to trick me, you bitch! Mark's dead! I'm dead! All that's left is... is *this*!" He hefted one of his breasts in a delicate hand, smearing it with blood.

Mark eased down into a ready position, a low back-stance which seemed all wrong now that his center of gravity was so much higher. His ass felt like it was eight times bigger than before and might take him over backwards if he was not careful, and the jiggling, gelatinous weights on his chest were nearly impossible to work around. Mark cursed his carelessness. Cassie had left a bra in the dirty clothes, too, and Mark should have grabbed it to strap them down. His feet, crunching on broken mirror glass and the like, he would have to deal with later. Heath was near the breaking point and then the *real* shit-storm would begin in earnest.

"Okay, then, if I'm not Mark and you're not Heath, how would I know that I was the one who told your mom that we had a school trip so that you could spend the night with Lisa Moore in the eighth grade? How would I know that we'd both gotten thrown out of the Cub Scouts for single-handedly picking a fight with another troop? How about the time you jumped out of Scott Hammett's tree-house and cut your head open against the side of his trampoline because we were going to try and bounce over the privacy fence and into his neighbor's pool?"

Heath's reason failed and he jumped, pirouetting off of the bed in a vicious flying side kick which would have smashed Mark's head against the door jamb and probably have fractured his skull if he'd allowed it to land. He dodged and reversed, slamming the heel of his hand against the inside of Heath's thigh and forcing him down onto the bedroom floor with a wet thump. The shock of the impact made Mark's now-delicate and slender wrists ache.

"Heath, don't do this," he pleaded. "We're not built for this anymore. We could hurt one another. Please stop. We can figure this out. We just have to sit down and think straight."

"It's all that's left," Heath cried, his breath coming unevenly as he catapulted off of his delicate hands onto his feet in a deep, threatening climbing stance. "It's all there is."

Mark cracked his neck, bracing himself in this unfamiliar body for the Spar to End Them All. "Dammit, Heath, if this is the only way you'll calm down, then let's just get it over with."

Mark uncharacteristically went on the offensive, his delicate feet grinding bloodily on the broken glass and debris of the bedroom. Strength had left, in its departure, an astounding flexibility which allowed Mark to exercise some of his kicks much higher. His ankles and wrists throbbed with the force of the impacts on Heath's body and every hit that he took from his equal was not filtered through the numbing mask of male muscle mass and felt like being pounded with a sledgehammer.

The blood loss slowly leached away the strength and resolve from his best friend. Mark ended it some minutes later with a lightning-fast side step kick into Heath's slender midsection followed by a devastating uppercut delivered with the heel of his hand which stretched Heath the full length of the cluttered bed. Mark was atop his naked body instantly, ripping a section of the sheet free and binding the wounded arm tightly. Heath cried like a baby, full of frustration and helplessness and ended curling himself around his best friend, weeping bitterly. Mark stroked the feather-soft hair over and over, whispering calming nonsense as Heath emptied himself. Fat tears filled Mark's eyes by the time Faith (with regained composure) and Cassie entered the room.

"It's over," Mark said gently. "He got it all out."

"You're both black and blue," Faith whispered, afraid to break the crystalline calm that at finally descended on the room. "Are you all right, Mark?"

"Actually, no," Mark said with a sardonic smirk. "As a matter of fact, I woke up this morning with a severe case of femininity. Any idea what might have happened?"

"We think so," Faith said, sitting on the bed. As soon as her weight shifted the mattress, Heath curled himself around her, crying apologetically and berating himself for the bruise on his lover's face. Faith, unable to continue the conversation with Mark, lay sweet, motherly kisses on her lover's forehead and began cooing to him softly, repeating that everything was going to be all right.

Mark rose unsteadily - the fight had been vicious and his new body was paying the price as his old one had never done - and half-fell into Cassie's arms, where she gave him much the same treatment that Heath was receiving. They moved into the living room and half-collapsed on the couch, the only item in the room that hadn't been overturned.

"I'm so sorry, Mark, we just didn't know," she said. "God, I hope you can forgive me."

Mark wrapped his arms around her, lending her some of his inner strength. "I love you."

Cassie cried.

"You came out from behind the protective wall too soon," Cassie wept. "Remember when I accidentally left stand-by power running in the processing room? That was before we knew how little power was necessary to effect the change. You and Heath were leaning against the window while the stand-by power was on and it imprinted your cells through the window."

"Is Dr. Tolliver all right?"

"He was so far away - he said that all that's happened to him is that he's starting to grow his hair back and that his chest is very sensitive. We'd already shut everything down by the time he got back into the room with us. But you and Heath got a full dose."

Faith came back into the room at that point and was leading Heath, who looked very small in the terry-cloth bathrobe that covered him to his ankles. Faith had dressed the wound properly, but Heath still looked very pale.

"First step is to call Dr. Fisher," Faith said. "To get you both checked out."

"Faith, I need you to tell me something," Mark interrupted, taking the phone from her hand and setting it down. "I want you to be completely honest."

"What is it?"

"I know you can fix this. But I need to know if me and Heath will be back to where we were in time for Nationals. I need to know if we still have our shot at the Olympics. Please."

Faith looked at the floor. "Once we've found cell samples from before the transformation we can have a new memory template constructed from it and tested within three days if I work around the clock."

Mark saw the reluctance on her face. "But?"

"But you and Heath have lost, from looking, each about nine inches or so in height and a good hundred pounds or so in muscle mass. My guess is that the extra has been absorbed through the digestive tract to be processed as waste. If we transform you back, you could experience another growth spurt to regain the height, but you won't have the physical mass you had before. Maybe with intravenous protein you could fill out, but you couldn't regain your original muscle tone and mass by the Nationals without steroids, which would disqualify you in the preliminary drug testing."

Mark sat, and his face blank. "So I guess that's it."

Cassie draped herself over him, weeping bitterly. "I'm so sorry."

Mark shrugged her off. "It's not your fault, okay? Stop apologizing. What I need now is clear thought. I need to figure out just what the hell I'm going to do about this."

Cassie was stung, but realized that her raging guilt over the accident was an impediment to what he was trying to do. Mark was a problem-solver and when presented with a challenge he tended to focus on it to the exclusion of all else until it was battered down to nothing. It was one of the many things she admired about him and hoped one day to emulate.

"Well, the only thing I can come up with is to change back and just start over," Heath said. "I know money will be tight, Mark, but we can make the Olympics in four years. We'll just have to economize, like when my mom died. We did it once, we can do it again."

Mark's face clouded as Cassie added, "I'd be willing to help in any way I could. I should have a real good job by then and could kick in from time to time. It would be the least I could do."

Faith nodded her willingness to help as well. "We can collect samples of your 'male' hair from hairbrushes and I can get to work right away on regenning the templates to fix you back. Dr. Tolliver was completely dumbfounded when I talked to him and said that he's willing to give you guys anything you need until we can fix this. He wants to check you both out and then offered to take you both out to get clothes and the like to wear for the next couple days or so."

Mark's disappointment was nearly tangible. "I guess you're right, Heath."

Heath placed a hand on his friend's freckled shoulder. "I know I'm right. You're a fantastic martial artist, man, the best I've ever seen. Those skills don't just go away. The body will come along in time."

"No shit the skills don't go away," Mark pouted. "I think you cracked one of my ribs in there."

"Sorry. But you kicked me around pretty good, too. You're strong as hell for such a 'pretty little thing,'" he teased. "At least we won't have to worry too much on being molested while we're stuck like this. No guy could defend himself against us. We'd be the Women from Hell."

Mark's eyes took on a strange cast. "So, for now, I'm completely, down to the DNA, a biological woman. No way to tell I wasn't born like this. Right?"

Faith nodded. "You probably haven't regenerated all the cells in your body to the new template by now," she said. "You probably have loads of X-Y chromosome cells in your internal organs. And your brain. Those cells don't regenerate so you still have a completely male brain. But it's obvious that the skeletal, reproductive, and musculo-circulatory systems have been almost totally reconfigured."

"But I could pass a standard physical and no one would ever know."

"Not without a DNA test. Hell, Mark, you fooled me when you first barged in here."

Mark lay back on the couch, staring at the ceiling. "Faith, I want you to leave me like this."

His remark was met with only silence.

"I mean it. I want you to leave me a woman and I need to arrange for alternate identification. I need to become a woman legally as well as just physically. Think Dr. Tolliver could help with that?"

Heath goggled. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Dammit, Heath, I can't go back to square one, not with the Olympics so close. And you have what your mom left you, but I don't have a cent. I had everything banked on Nationals, and I have to get a for-real job after that or I can't afford to pay the bills anymore."

Cassie held Mark's hand tightly. "I said I'd take care of that."

"That's assuming we stayed together. If you paid for everything it wouldn't be long until ours was a relationship built on guilt. I don't want that. No, I want to stay like this. If I can't make the Olympic Men's Team, then by God I'll make the women's."

"But Mark, what about you and me?" Cassie pleaded.

"I wouldn't stay like this forever," he said. "Only long enough for the Olympics and then the media hoopla that follows it. Maybe I could do a few endorsements. Then, I just slip into obscurity and change back to being Mark again. I'd only be like this for about a year, babe. And it's not like I will have left you. I'll still see you every day. Hell, I'm gonna need your help for just about everything. I don't know the first thing about being a woman."

Faith looked at him hard. "You're sure about this."

"It's the only way I can see," Mark answered. "I don't want to make the decision without Cassie, but all I know is that I only have one shot at this. It's been the dream that's kept me going through the knee and the depression and everything else for the last two years. There have been mornings that the only way I could get out of the bed to go work was to hum the Olympic fanfare until I could decide it was all worth it. I need it, Cassie. I need it almost as much as I need you. Don't let me lose it. I'm begging you."

Cassie thought a long moment. "I guess as long as it's still you in there, I can live with it."

"You heard Faith. I still have a male brain, and it still loves you for all it's worth."

Faith gave Mark a sympathetic look. "I never expected this. But I'll talk to Dr. Tolliver. I'm sure he would be willing to give financial support for everything you'd need in exchange for an affidavit swearing you won't sue the University. And believe me, you're going to need a *lot* if you plan to live as a woman."

Mark stood, his balance still iffy on his woman's legs. "God, I wonder if I can ever get used to having a butt like a pillow," he said irritably. "Faith, I want this. You and Dr. Tolliver can study me to your heart's content in the meantime, gather all the data you need from me on this transformation and the one back. You're bound to need the empirical data I can generate."

Faith took Mark's other hand. "I wish it didn't have to be like this."

"Oh, God, so do I. You may never know."

"I'll call Dr. Tolliver. I'll prepare the samples for the 'trip back' tomorrow."

"And I need to get back into the gym and figure out how to fight around these things," Mark chuckled, hefting his breasts. "I have a lot of ground to cover. You and Cass might take it for granted, but it's a bitch to get the hang of moving a woman's body."

"And you're going to need new identification, a drivers' license and birth certificate and such. I think the executor of Mom's estate would be up to the task if I explain the situation."

"And - I never thought I'd hear myself saying this - a bra. I really need a bra," Mark added.

Faith's exterior finally broke and she had to laugh. "I'll see what I have."

Cassie blew her nose. "I was going to take you out and buy you a closet full of sexy clothes this week, Mark, like you did for me two weeks ago," she said. "This was not what I had in mind."

Mark did a comical parody of a woman's primping. "You'll have to let me borrow that green leather skirt of yours," he said airily, ruining the illusion by snorting laughter at the end.

"Hate to say it, but I think it will look better on you than it does on me," Cassie said. "The time hasn't been exactly right to tell you this, Mark, but you are absolutely gorgeous. I'd die for that body."

"I guess it won't do to go by Mark anymore," he said. "At least in public, anyhow."

"A new name?" Heath said meekly. "God, that sounds so *permanent*."

"It does," Mark said. "But I suppose it's the least of what I'm going to have to get used to. I guess the ladies' name that sounds closest to mine would be 'Marge.' But I hate that name," he mused. "If I was going to have been born a girl, Mom and Dad were going to name me Meghan. I guess now that I sort of *have* been born a girl, it's kinda poetic. I could go by Meg for short."

"Meghan Rutherford," Faith parroted. "Our country's next gold medalist. Not bad. Not bad at all. Y'know, I think this might even turn out to be a little fun if we keep the right attitude about it. I think my stylist could do wonders with your hair."

"Right now all I'm worried about is walking into the wrong public toilet," Mark/Meghan joked.

"And I'm wondering how I'm ever going to get used to using 'she' and 'her' in reference to the person I once wrote my name in the snow with when we were in Little League together," Heath added.

* * * *

It was amazing to Mark - *Meg*, he corrected himself angrily for the thousandth time - how fast people adjusted to the change. It sounded like magic, but once Faith was there to explain to people how the process worked and that Meg was indeed Mark, most people adjusted quickly and went out of their way to help. Mark had never thought that his younger brother, Adam, would be so understanding, but he was planning to fly up from college once his finals were over to help in any way he could. Mark -*Meg, dammit!* - hadn't given his - *her!* - little brother enough credit. He'd - *she'd!* *How am I ever gonna get used to this?* - thought for sure that Adam would have thought it ample chance to repay all the teasing Mark and Heath had given him during his childhood with interest, but apparently the loss of their dad eight years ago had made as much of a change in Adam's life as accidentally leaning against a window in a University Biochemical Research Lab had made in Meg's. Adam was now quite the proponent of the ancient Irish ideal of family and had offered to take care of anything either of them might need. He was even calling his former brother "Meg" in all seriousness by the end of the telephone conversation.

The same thing happened with Meg's Dr. Mitchell. The doc was now neck deep in all the research literature which Faith had given her, hoping to understand the problem even better. She seemed deft at taking everything in stride - she hadn't batted an eye when Heath had coarsely asked her how hard it would be to "cut these damned things the hell off of me." - and thinking of things the ex-men would need that no one else had considered. Meg was quite

glad that there were panty-liners and Nuprin available when she got her first "monthly visitor" later that afternoon. Meg spent most of her time casting looks of purest sympathy at Faith and Cassie, now understanding at last. It was only a little uncomfortable, much less than she'd originally expected given the tales Mark had heard about menstrual periods, but the worst was the stiffness and the feeling of constantly being sweaty and sticky between his - *her!* *For the millionth time, it's her now!* - legs and the perpetual feeling of needing a shower. As she and Heath were working through the new workout that Dennis Mendoza - another one who had taken the problem completely in stride - had designed for them to keep them in top shape and helping them relearn their balance, Meg caught herself thinking that periods weren't nearly as bad as she'd thought they'd be. She shouldn't have jinxed it. The cramps set in not twenty minutes later and left Meg on a couch in Mendoza's office wrapped around a pillow, hoping beyond hope that no one would touch her until this was over, because she wasn't sure she could keep from throwing up.

Faith joked that Dr. Tolliver and Dr. Mitchell would have to move in together if they expected to spend any more time together. They were both present during the physical examinations of both patients (thank God Meg's cramps had passed before she'd gotten the unparalleled thrill of trying to pee in the cup without having the ability to aim anymore) and were back with the results of the blood tests before Heath and Meg had finished in the weight room. They were padding up to spar when Faith led the two doctors in.

"You two are both completely healthy, fertile young women," Dr. Tolliver announced. "It's amazing. There are some that would think that this is completely impossible."

"Did you say fertile?" Heath asked weakly. "As in *pregnant* fertile?"

"I'm having a period, dumb ass," Meg shot back. "You'll have one too if you don't change back in time. That usually is a real good indication of being able to get pregnant."

"Keep talking, cramp-boy," Heath said. "Wait'll I get your ass on the mat."

"That's one of the things I came to ask you two about," Dr. Mitchell put in. "I'd like to ask you to skip the full-contact part of the workout today, if you don't mind, until we can get some things seen to."

"How come?" Meg asked, stripping off the back-fist pads on her arms.

"Brain cells don't regenerate," Dr. Tolliver said. "Therefore, the two of you have the same, X-Y chromosome brains you were born with. And those brains are telling your bodies to produce testosterone. The female endocrine system can only produce so much of the male hormone, you see, and you two will have it completely maxed out while your estrous cycles aren't being regulated by the brain at all."

"Meaning?" Mark/Meg asked.

"Meaning if we don't get Mark on estrogen right away, she'll look like a hairy, bearded East German women's shot-putter by Nationals," Faith said. "Your brain doesn't know to give the chemical commands that a woman's body needs. The upshot is that you will retain a great deal of your physical strength, which should have been one of the first things to go."

"What is your bench-press now, Mark?" Dr. Mitchell said.

"It's Meg now," Meg corrected. "I have to get used to it sooner or later. I used to do reps at about one sixty-five. Now I'm down to around a hundred, a hundred and ten. I dunno my maximum."

"Which is still extremely high, even for an athletic woman. There's no way for us to keep your brains from stimulating the release of testosterone. As a matter of fact, we wouldn't want that to happen because it might complicate things after the transformation is reversed. But we will have to regulate the regular estrous cycle through medication."

"Will this medication make me flunk a drug screen?" Meg asked.

"Not by any stretch," Dr. Mitchell assured. "If anything, it will make the high levels of testosterone in your system seem less noticeable. But the estrogen and progesterone in your system will not be synthetic, it will be generated by your ovaries. We're going to put you on birth control pills."

"You're kidding!" Meg laughed. "Adam's gonna love this."

"So much for being pregnant fertile."

"Be careful, thinking like that," Dr. Tolliver cautioned. "Birth control pills are far from 100% effective. Many a young mother has thought that the Pill could stop her from becoming pregnant. And the pills should, Meg, keep your subsequent periods from being quite as severe as this one."

"Good. That wasn't very fun."

"Periods seldom are," Dr. Mitchell said. "I almost wish this had happened to my boyfriend. Then he'd be a little more understanding and not try to guilt me like he does when I won't get out of bed."

"Tell me something, Doc," Meg said. "Would it be better to let the National Championship Committee know about this condition? I mean, just be completely up front about it. Sure, there'd be some clamor about me having unfair advantage, but you and Dr. Tolliver have all the tests to prove that I'm a natural girl, right?" *God, that sounded weird to say.*

"I wish it were that simple, Meg," Dr. Tolliver answered. "See, we're not ready to let this discovery become public yet. Any knowledge of this accident and its effects on you two would have the government down here in an instant. They'd effectively shut us down and it could be years and years before we'd be able to change you and Heath back to normal. No, I think we should keep this a secret."

Heath stripped off the kicking pads and sat on a weight-bench. "We'll need a lawyer to get Mark some identification so he can even apply for the Nationals. And Mark -"

"Meg," Meg interrupted.

"Meg will have to re-test for his third *dan* ranking so his belt level will be official."

"Damn. I hope I can still do the breaking forms with these flimsy little wrists," Meg huffed.

"And you'll need some evidence that you've been a woman longer than a day," Faith added. "You still move around like a guy wearing a really convincing girl suit. Somebody needs to teach you how to act like a woman."

"You volunteering?" Meg asked.

"Me and Cassie said we'd handle that part from the beginning. She's waiting for us at the lab whenever you're ready to start," she told them.

"The lab again? I dunno, Faith," Heath jibed. "You *have* been doing a lot of talking about getting a puppy over the last couple weeks. And after the last time I went to the lab, well."

"Jerk," she laughed. "Are you ready?"

"I need a shower," Meg said, standing.

"Me, too." Heath said.

"Skip it," Faith ordered. "There are some things you need to learn about that, too. There's a bathroom at the lab you can both use where Cassie and I can show you how to clean your 'equipment' and shave your legs and the like. Grab some towels. And while you're in there, Meg, take these." She tossed her a pink plastic pill-case full of tiny white tablets numbered by day.

Meg looked at hers and smiled. "No time like the present, eh? How long before these start regulating the menstrual cycle?" she asked.

"Two or three days."

"Good," she said, tossing her prescription case into the air and catching it before shoving it into her gym-bag. "Any other side effects I should know about?"

"We're not sure about the status of your body development yet," Dr. Tolliver said, "so you might expect some extra growth in your breasts and hips, but there shouldn't be anything other than that."

Heath looked stricken as he stopped staring at the birth control pills in their round pink case and started to pack a towel and a change of clothing into his gym-bag. "One morning you go to bed and all you had to worry about was jock itch. You wake up."

Meg clapped a 'fraternal' hand on her friend's smooth shoulder. "It's a brave new world, buddy."

Ω



SUMMARY: Two friends find themselves victims of a science experiment which turns them into women who now must deal with their new life and their changing relationship with their girlfriends. part three

ALL THAT GLITTERS, Part III (Chapters 6-8)

By Valerie Hope

CHAPTER SIX: A Brave New World

MEG WAS MOST preoccupied with mastery of her new body, that seemed much more pressing than anything else on her mind. Cassie was very nearly solicitous in her desire to help, and it finally took Heath, in the body of an extremely attractive young woman still, to take her aside and explain things.

"Mark's had a hell of a shock," he told her. "When that happens he goes into 'take-charge' mode. He forces everything else from his mind that doesn't have bearing on the matter at hand. That matter is Nationals. He's not going to even consider anything that doesn't help him to that competition."

"Even me?"

Heath smiled compassionately. "I'll tell you something I learned a long time ago, Cassie. Things get real black or white for Mark when he's like this. Things are either helping him or in his way. If you don't want to get pushed aside, then you'd better be on his side. I know it's rough -" he said in response to her welling tears "- but that's just the way Mark's wired up. He's so focused right now that he'll forget to eat and sleep. Just be there and help him. The minute you try to get Mark to concentrate on anything other than Nationals you're going to get dismissed."

Cassie sobbed. "I've ruined his life."

Heath's dark eyes tracked the lissome movements of the redheaded woman on the mat, flowing through forms and exercises that they'd left off years ago as men. Nothing could be taken for granted any more. "You'll never get him to admit that."

"Her," Cassie corrected. "I guess we better get used to that. Mark's a woman now."

"And one hell of a babe, too," Heath added. "Who'd've known he'd be so attractive?"

Cassie looked closely at Mark-turned-Meg, appraising. Aside from the short, masculine haircut the girl which worked through martial arts forms on the mat, she was a portrait of healthy beauty. The skin was still pale and dusted with orange freckles, but it had taken on a smoothness and a glow which only a healthy woman could possess. The bright orange-red hair was sweat-slicked around a high forehead and framed a narrow face with a wide,

expressive mouth, a long, aquiline nose and deep-set, piercing green eyes. Her carriage was slowly changing to suit her new frame and she was carrying her balance across the balls of her feet instead of through the arches. Although Meg would not quit harping on the size of her posterior, it fit her proportions well, giving a pleasant hourglass shape to the narrow waist and high, tight breasts which were now comfortably confined in one of Faith's athletic bras. She stopped her workout in the height of a form, switched her balance in the space between heartbeats and launched into a complicated series of forms which forced her to shift her balance on every other step. Her grace was breathtaking.

"Damn," she breathed, holding the final form. "My timing's gone to shit."

Cassie goggled. It had looked flawless. Surely those were only mistakes that a master like Mark could have even found, much less corrected. Heath stepped forward, whispering to Cassie. "Watch. I'll show you what I mean."

"Why don't you take a little break, Mark? You've been going strong for two hours."

Meg barely shifted her gaze. "Not now."

"Okay, then, why don't you try that *palque* you and I worked out for Parent's Day last year. It really had you hopping around. Give that a go. Also, try working out to music. It'll help you establish your rhythm." Heath began sorting through tapes near a small boom-box near the edge of the mat.

"You're right," Meg said, her expression brightening. "Good idea. Thanks."

Heath put on Metallica's *Battery*, and Meg began a much more complicated series of moves to the driving beat which would have taxed the balance of a tightrope walker. Heath stepped back to Cassie.

"See what I mean?"

Cassie nodded. "So how the hell do I convince Mark - Meg, I mean - to take care of himself?"

"Easy. Tell her that if she doesn't, she won't be in shape for the competition. That's how I talked him into going out and at least getting some new clothes with you and Faith tomorrow. I said that if he didn't, nobody'd believe he was a real girl at Nationals. See? He's kinda easy to lead around when he gets this single minded. You just have to remember to phrase everything in terms of the goal."

Cassie shook her head. "So how do I frame all the anxiety I'm feeling about our relationship to him in terms of Nationals?" Fat tears gathered in the corners of her eyes again. Heath gathered Cassie into his long, slender arms.

"Listen to me, girl. Mark's made up his mind, and I don't know if I can fault him for it. The Olympics were his brass ring long before he met you. You're not the only one this is hurting, believe me. I miss my best friend. But he needs this. And I've seen Mark sacrifice every one of his dreams for other people too many times. If it kills me, I'm going to see this one through."

"I know," Cassie said. "But I was in love with him."

"And you aren't anymore?"

"I don't know who that person is," Cassie sobbed. "That obsessive, driven creature is not Mark."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. That *is* Mark. That's how Mark copes with stress. He focuses on the task at hand. When this one's out of the way, he'll deal with another. That's how he's going to handle the whole thing, one step at a time."

"Where does that leave me?"

"Hopefully, right by his side," Heath said. "I refuse to believe you were only in love with him until things got rough. They're as rough now as they're ever going to get. If the two of you can live through this together, I fully expect you to grow old and die together."

Cassie closed her eyes in a daydreaming smile. "That'd be nice."

"Hold on to it," Heath advised. "That thought might just keep you going through the rough times that are gonna come along. Because I don't know if there's been a relationship in history that is gonna have to go through what yours is. You're gonna have to be stronger than you ever thought you could be."

Cassie looked pensive. "Think Mark will have the strength?"

"If there's anybody alive that can handle this, it's him. Or her."

"What about you?" Cassie asked. "What happens if Faith can't reverse the process?"

"Then I get used to being Heather," Heath replied glibly. "You play the hand you're dealt."

"I don't see how you can be so cavalier."

"What choice do I have? It's this or the way I was yesterday. Mark snapped me out of it at the cost of a lot of pain. I owe it to Mark to stick by him through this now."

Faith entered the dojo then, slipping in the door and looking long and hard at Mark, who was lost in the intricate dance of his discipline. The careful observer could almost see Mark's balance and timing improve. Faith ran a hand over her eyes, trying to scrub away fatigue, then turned to Heath.

"Dr. Tolliver and I managed to isolate your pattern from hair we found in your hairbrush," she said. "We'll have the sample prepared in under forty-eight hours. You'll be a man again by Wednesday."

"Go sleep. Right now," Heath commanded, and his tone brooked no argument. "I don't want you and Dr. Tolliver killing yourselves over this. I can be a girl for a couple days."

"That's just it," Faith said. "Mark, could you come over here for a minute?"

Meg stopped her workout in mid-stride, breaking out of her trance and striding purposefully to the edge of the mat. "What's up?" she asked, the melodious soprano sounding out-of-place beneath Mark's even green stare.

"We ran up against a problem," Faith announced. "We told you before that your cells hadn't all gone over into the new, female configuration. At our estimate, it will take several days for all the cells in your bodies to replace themselves according to the new pattern."

"Except the brain," Heath added.

"Except the brain. That doesn't regenerate. But there's the problem. We checked the numbers on Billy again. It seems that the second-generation female cells, the ones that were reproduced from the first batch of female cells, are imprinted very strongly."

"How strong is very?"

"It's possible we couldn't change it back without having to use so much energy that we'd fry you. And we won't know how strong the third-generation cells will be for another couple days."

"What does this mean for me and Heath?" Meg asked.

Faith's face fell. "It means that if we don't change you both back before your cells have the chance to regenerate themselves again, it's a large possibility that we won't be able to change you back at all without killing you. Mark, I'm sorry. But you can try for Nationals again in four years. I promise I'll help. We can probably even get the University to kick in, keep you in training until the next Olympics. We have the cell memories from you and Heath already in production. Our estimates say that if you're not reversed within three days, your second-generation cells will be in the majority and we won't be able to reverse the change."

"What's the chance that the third-generation won't be so potent?" Meg asked.

"Impossible to tell," Faith said, shaking her head. "But it doesn't look promising."

"So that's it." Meg said, her voice flat as a planed board. "That fast."

"I'm sorry."

Mark shot backwards, swinging a devastating punch at the heavy bag dangling from its chain at the edge of the mat. It jumped back several feet, chain-links jangling, and slipped three of the S-hooks which held it up, leaving it dangling and twisting wildly.

"Goddammit!" Meg cried.

Heath was up and had his friend by the shoulders instantly. "Mark, we'll find a way back."

"How? Huh? How do you expect to get past puberty again and be in shape for the Olympics in four years, Heath?" Meg hissed, her eyes like green fire. "We have at least two years of growing and awkwardness to deal with before we're even in the bodies we have to control. Who knows? We might end up seven feet tall once it's over. We're just assuming that everything's going to go right back to normal. What if we're mutant freaks for the rest of our lives, Heath?"

"Then we make the best of it."

"Mark, I'm so sorry. I can't ever tell you how much," Faith said.

"Stop it. Stop apologizing, you and Cassie both. It's hard enough not to try and find someplace to lay blame without your inviting it all the time. I don't want to hate either one of you. That's what will happen if I blame you for this."

"What now?" Heath asked Faith.

"We sit tight and let Dr. Tolliver work. He'll have the samples prepared and coded as fast as he can and has drawn in help from all over the state to speed things up. We'll get you changed back before it's too late or die trying."

Mark began angrily stuffing his things into his gym bag, nearly ripping its bottom out with the force. The beautiful face was blank but the emerald eyes absolutely flashed with rage.

"Where are you going?" Heath asked.

"Away. Someplace where I can train."

"Didn't you hear what Faith said?"

Meg's gaze was withering. "I heard every word. And I'm not letting this situation claim my dreams. I'm not. I'm going to the Olympics, Heath. As a woman."

"But you won't be able to change back," Cassie said.

"I'm sorry about that, Cass," the redhead said sadly. "I truly do love you. But this is my only shot. And before you ask, the answer is yes. I *am* willing to throw it all away for the chance."

"Dammit, Mark, you're being completely unreasonable," Heath started.

"It's *Meg* now, dammit. Remember that. You blow my cover at Nationals and I'll come down on you like a hammer, I swear I will. I've been dreaming about this since I was a little boy - I guess a little girl, now. And I'm not letting it just go away."

"We can figure a way around the money. You can still go," Heath argued.

Meg's reserve snapped and her face went bright red. "It's not about the fucking money, you idiot! It never was! I just didn't want to tell you the truth because I was afraid you'd spend the rest of your life beating yourself up about it!"

Heath was stunned and the rest of the room floated in a harsh silence. "What do you mean?"

Meg scrubbed tears from her eyes as a man would, with the heel of her hand. "My knee's shot. Completely, Heath. The ligaments healed tight and the only thing keeping me on the mat was the shape I was in. Dr. Mitchell gave me two years. Two years before I get a metal knee."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Heath asked.

"Because you'd blame yourself, and I didn't want that. I figured if one or the other of us was an Olympic medalist by the time it happened it wouldn't matter so much," Meg said exhaustedly. "Dammit, I wouldn't have had to tell you at all if you hadn't kept trying to change my mind about this. But once you get something stuck in your head you lock your jaws around it and won't let go for anything."

"Oh, God, Mark."

"Stop it!" Meg screamed. "All of you, stop feeling so fucking sorry for me! I'm not a charity case! I can take care of myself! If you want to atone for something, then quit crying over this and start *helping* me, for the love of Christ!" Meg's shoulders heaved hard and her eyes shut tight as she began to sob hard. "I can't believe this," she muttered angrily. "Fucking hormones have me bawling."

Cassie stepped forward to comfort her lover, but the icy gaze stopped her.

"It would probably be easiest if we stopped seeing one another," Meg said coldly.

Cassie thought her heart would stop. "You can't mean that."

"It'll only hurt us both," Meg said. "A clean break would be better."

"Than what? Me staying with you?" Cassie's voice took on a bitter edge. "You can forgive me all you want, Mark, but it'll be a while before I forgive myself. And do you honestly think I'm so shallow that I'm going to run away because we can't have sex anymore? Is that what you thought of me?"

Meg didn't try to explain anything, she just stood her ground, looking defiant.

"I wasn't in love with your penis, you fool," Cassie said evenly. "I was - *am* - in love with you. And if that means learning how to be a lesbian or whatever, then I'm willing to take the plunge. You're not going to just chase me away because things are a little fucked up right now! I'm not going to let you!"

"I'm glad," was all Meg said.

Cassie had expected bitterness, defiance, anything but gratitude. She stood stunned.

"I was hoping I wouldn't have to go through this without you."

Heath cleared his/her throat. "Mark."

"Meg."

"Meg, I don't know what to say. About your knee."

"Don't say anything. If I'd wanted you to say something, I'd've told you when it happened."

"You could have told me."

"I know. It was my choice, not yours."

"What are you going to do?"

"Train my ass off," Meg said. "Just because I have a bum knee and a pair of breasts now, doesn't mean I'm still not going to win that National title. It's a problem to solve like any other."

Faith took Heath's hand. "Are you going to go ahead and change back?" she asked.

"Of course I am," Heath replied. "I don't feel right like this."

Meg laughed cynically. "Hopefully that comes with time."

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Faith and Heath returned some time later, bearing an armload of papers which required Mark's signature. There was an affidavit which legalized Mark's intention not to sue the University for the problem and several forms legally changing his name and authorizing the University's legal department to go ahead and have new identification issued to Meghan Hope Rutherford. The

redhead paused longest over the paper which would legally change his gender to female, twisting the cheap plastic pen between long, slender fingers. With a wistful look at a picture on the wall of the first competition he'd participated in, he signed and gave his name and identity away forever. Near the end of the day, an officer of the court came to the dojo and was admitted back to the mat where Meg worked on perfecting her balance through various kicks.

"I'm looking for Meghan Rutherford," the man asked, smoothing his tie against his chest.

"That's me," replied an attractive but very butch redhead. "Can I help you?"

The para-legal extended an envelope. "Your replacement identification arrived at the University an hour ago. There was no one answering the phone here, so I was instructed by the Dean of External Affairs to deliver this to you personally."

Meg tore the envelope open and pulled out a duplicate birth certificate and social security card with the name "Meghan Hope Rutherford" printed on them. There was also a printed page with the location and procedure for getting her driver's license reissued under the new identity. Her heart skipped a beat - Meg hadn't thought this would have such an impact. It was like Mark never existed.

"Thank you," she muttered. She looked up to notice the young man appraising her figure with a sidelong glance, which she cut off with a blazing glare. "Is that all?"

"No," he said, embarrassed. "I was also instructed to give you this." He handed her another envelope, which opened to reveal a Platinum MasterCard issued by the University to its alumni. "The Dean told me to tell you to put all your relevant purchases on that card and the University would see to the bill."

The para-legal's face betrayed no comprehension of why this cute little thing in the karate outfit had just been issued a \$25,000 line of credit which the University intended to pay. *With a body like that*, he thought cynically, *she might have the goods on one of the trustees. Stranger things have happened.*

"Are you done staring?" the girl asked.

The para-legal jumped back, shocked. His was a world where charges of sexual harassment were a very real threat to a career, so he stammered an apology and tried to extricate himself from the situation.

The girl looked down at her breasts. "They are nice, though," she commented. "Hell, two weeks ago I'd've killed to get my hands on 'em. But now, they're just a big sensitive nuisance. I mean, I can't even take a good, hard shower because they can't handle the water pressure."

The para-legal goggled. "Excuse me, ma'am, but I should be going."

The girl didn't look up from her breasts. "I suppose I should find out how big they are," she mused, "seeing as how I need to go buy bras. Where'd I put that tape measure?"

The man couldn't get out of the dojo fast enough.

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Meg started the next day with a brisk workout, gradually becoming more and more used to the subtle differences in moving a woman's body through space. She showered quickly, her skin stinging from the soap and shampoo she'd been used to as a man. Letting the water wash away the last of her fatigue, she looked down at the thick reddish hair sprouting on her legs and from her armpits with disdain. She much preferred how sleek and pretty Cassie kept her legs and underarms and also how she kept her pubic hair trimmed down short to keep it from retaining her sweat and causing a bad smell. Grabbing her razor, which until that day she had used exclusively on her face, she lathered her legs and underarms and began the touch-and-go process of shaving herself for the first time. There was a minimum of bloodshed on the legs and she managed to get the bikini line and the underarms done without a scratch. Once she was out of the shower she trimmed her remaining pubic hair short with a pair of barber scissors and tossed on a pair of baggy sweats and an over-large T-shirt, restraining her boobs beneath the still-damp jog bra she'd rinsed out in the sink the evening before. Faith had lent her a pair of white Reebok sneakers which wouldn't have fit on Mark's heel to wear and she used her old Speedo trunks for underwear. Unable to resist looking at herself in the mirror, she decided that she looked like the bull-dyke's bull-dyke, with her comfortable clothes and butch haircut. The thought made her smile. If the definition of a lesbian was a woman who had no interest whatsoever in a man, then Meg most definitely qualified.

Meg trotted down the stairs and checked her mail. She was waiting for her new proof of insurance to come so she could at least drive her car. No such luck - all there was in the box was junk mail and catalogs. Running her eye over a great-looking sport jacket on the cover of J. Crew, she sighed heavily and tossed the whole lot into the garbage.

She caught the bus just outside her apartment complex (something very handy when one had a beast car like the old Toyota) and managed to make it to the DPS before the lines got too long. Presenting her new birth certificate and social security card which had been folded into her man's billfold (getting her a raised eye from the clerk), the woman behind the counter positioned her at a white line taped on the floor and walked behind the camera.

"Do you want a minute or two to fix your hair?" the lady asked.

Meg stood stunned, then slowly remembered that he - *she*, now - was a citizen of another world entirely. The last time he'd had a driver's license picture he'd been gruffly instructed to remove his baseball cap and not to smile. Shrugging, Meg looked in a small mirror beside the white line and gave her bangs a few useless tugs, unable to do much but make it look windblown. The woman shrugged and took the picture. She gave Meg her temporary license and told her that the real one would arrive in the mail some four or five days later.

Meg just managed to catch a cross-town bus and make it to the University campus, where Cassie and Faith were both waiting near the SUB. Cassie greeted her with a hug and a soft kiss on the cheek, and to Meg's surprise, he received the same from Faith.

Noting his surprise, Faith said, "Get used to that, Meg. Women actually touch one another when they meet. There's none of the usual posturing and personal space requirements that men demand."

Meg nodded, clearly taking mental notes. "Thanks."

Faith pitched her keys to Cassie. "I'm gonna have to beg off this time, Mar-Meg. Dr. Tolliver needs me in the lab today. We're going to isolate your pattern whether you use it or not, just so we can have it ready if something unforeseen happens to Billy and it becomes a medical emergency."

"Okay," Meg agreed. She was actually looking forward to spending the day with Cassie. At least Meg wasn't going to look completely awful next to her girlfriend, who had dressed down for the day in skin-tight jeans and an over-large Winnie-the-Pooh shirt. Neither woman wore makeup and Cassie's hair was pulled into a loose braid.

"I almost forgot - Cass, Xiao told me that Meg can stop by any time before lunch if she's interested," Faith said just before she left earshot. Meg looked at Cassie questioningly.

"Cassie has a friend who works in Biochemistry. Xiao has been experimenting with the effects of Vitamin E on cell growth. She's been able to make a concentrated solution which targets specific cells only. In short, he can make your hair grow out if you want."

Meg scrubbed a hand over her masculine haircut. "I dunno, what do you think?"

"It depends on what you do with it, I suppose," Cassie said, "but it will make you look like you've been a girl for a little longer than two days. You can always get it all cut off again, and I think you'd look good with long hair. Why not give it a shot?"

Meg nodded. "Just as long as it doesn't make my hair green or something, I'm game."

Cassie timidly took her hand - obviously not comfortable with the physical aspect of the relationship yet - and led her across campus towards the Biochemistry building. They took the elevator to the fourth floor and threaded through a maze of graduate labs until they walked in on a small Chinese man feeding mice. Mice with exceedingly long fur.

"Hi, Xiao, remember me?" Cassie asked.

"Oh, yeah - you're Faith's friend. Come in. And is this Mark?" the man said brightly.

"Meg," Meg corrected.

Xiao looked at her with an appraisal that was half-clinical and half-sexual. "Remarkable. There is no way at all to tell that you're anything other than what you seem. This is an incredible achievement."

"Incredible for science in general," Meg grumped. "It ain't so great for me so far."

Xiao laughed. "I guess not. Sorry. So, you decided to let me goop you?"

"What was that?" Meg asked warily.

"Goop you," Xiao explained. "The Vitamin E mixture that targets hair cells, we call it *goop* around here. You want me to use some on your scalp? Faith said you might decide to try it."

"Yeah," Meg said. "Goop away."

"Great," Xiao said. "You can use my office - I'll need you to remove your shirt and brassiere, if you're wearing one, and wrap your upper body with a towel. There should be plenty of clean towels in there. I'll go get the solution ready."

Meg squeezed herself into the cramped office and slipped off the shirt and jog-bra. Since she was right under the office's only air-conditioning vent, her nipples became stiff immediately. She pulled a beach towel off of a stack of several on the back of a filing cabinet and wrapped herself tightly. When she'd emerged, Xiao was pouring a thick, clear paste into a plugged basin. They'd set the basin on a stool at the edge of a table.

"You'll need to get on the table and lay your head over the edge. I'll have to put tape over the areas where we don't want the hair to grow so that you'll have a hairline. This stuff makes any kind of hair grow like mad. How long do you want it?"

"I dunno, haven't thought about it much. I guess about shoulder length, like Cassie's."

"You should probably take it out a bit longer," Cassie recommended. "Like I said, we can always get it cut off later. Stop it about the bottom of her shoulder blades."

Xiao nodded and patted the table, inviting Meg to lie down. She did, trying to manage holding the towel closed while she climbed up onto the lab table. He smoothed tape along her forehead and behind her ears, shaping her hairline. He had her place her hand on a strange-looking metal sphere before he pulled on latex gloves and began to rub a cold substance into Meg's scalp which caused a kind of itching tingle.

"This is just a mild astringent, to get the follicles open so the goop can get in," Xiao explained. "Next we're gonna run a mild electric current through you to get your hairs to separate and then you get dunked. You ready?"

Meg smirked. "I guess."

Cassie threw a switch, and the metallic sphere began to hum and grow warm. Meg felt the muscles in her hand contract and her hair began to stand on end. It wasn't an entirely comfortable feeling. Then Xiao slowly lowered Meg's head into the vat of icy-cold goop. Cassie stopped the current a few seconds after. Meg's scalp began to itch and tickle madly and it felt like worms were crawling along her scalp. She fought the urge to scratch.

"This is so weird," Cassie said. "Meg, I wish you could see this."

"What?"

"I've never seen anyone's hair grow visibly before."

"We engineered an enzyme that targets only cells of a certain type," Xiao said smugly. "So far we only have enzymes which bond to hair, skin, stomach and bone tissue. But we're gonna get the rest of it soon enough. Imagine, a pill that you can take which targets a headache or a toothache and nothing else. Hell, the royalties on goop alone are going to make Dr. Anderson extremely rich. I know girls who'd pay fifty bucks a bottle for this stuff."

"Basically, all the goop does is use the enzyme to carry Vitamin E and amino acids straight to the hair cells. Normal infusions of Vitamin E would make the hair grow at an accelerated rate, but the body would absorb most of it before the hair ever got any. Now the body doesn't get any at all. And the hair growth gets overdriven."

"Am I done?" Meg asked. "This stuff doesn't smell very good."

"Just about," Cassie sat.

"I'm going to need you to sit up pretty fast so I can rinse you off. Make double sure this stuff doesn't drip on anyplace that has hair on it or it'll start growing. Here, I'll help you up," Xiao said.

"Skip it," Meg said. "Cassie, hold my ankles."

Meg executed a quick and smooth sit-up, holding her body at an angle until Xiao could move the vat out of the way and replace it with an empty washtub. Meg slowly lowered her body back down and Xiao started rinsing out the hair with a small spray nozzle.

"My God, look how thick it is," Cassie marveled.

"That's the amino acid," Xiao said. "We talked to some of the scientists at Johnson & Johnson, got some ideas on how the goop can actually strengthen the hair while it's working its magic. They really gave us some great ideas. Hell, some of 'em actually make the goop work better."

Xiao finished rinsing out Meg's hair and she felt an odd sensation - a slight tug and a warm, wet weight as she sat forward. A thick, wet coil of hair now pulled at her scalp, slicking over her ears and forming a heavy, soft cylinder that sat damply between her shoulder blades. Xiao handed her a towel and she started toweling the huge mass of hair dry. It felt a million miles long.

"Xiao, that's amazing," Meg commented. "I can't believe it's my hair."

"You like it?"

"I really do. All you have to do is figure out some way to make it smell better and you're going to be a billionaire," Meg said, drawing the now-frazzled damp coil of hair over one shoulder. It stretched over her shoulder and collarbone all the way to her nipple and it was already beginning to curl naturally on the edges. Meg ran her hands down the thick hair repeatedly - it was soft as silk and the length and shininess of it gave her a strange feeling inside, one that was made of a strange mix of pride and satisfaction along with some emotions which Meg couldn't put a name to.

"It's gorgeous, Meg," Cassie said. "I'm jealous."

"You want to have a go?" Xiao offered.

Cassie blushed. "No. I'm not really the hair-down-to-the-butt type."

"Thanks again, Xiao," Meg said, wrapping her hair in the towel like a turban as she'd seen her mother do so often when she was a little boy. "I owe you one."

"Take me to dinner," Xiao said.

"Beg pardon?"

"You can take me to dinner and we'll call it even. Sound okay?" Xiao said.

"I'm not sure," Meg said.

"I understand if you're not comfortable being seen out with a man just yet," Xiao said. "I'm saying if you want to pay me back, I accept food as barter. I *am* a starving graduate student, after all. I don't want a date, I want free food."

Meg laughed, liking the slender Oriental more and more. "Deal. Hell, I might even do my hair since you're the one who gave it to me," Meg jibed.

Xiao wrote a phone number on a note-pad on one of the lab tables. "Then call me. I'd enjoy the chance to hear more about your... um..."

"Call it a condition. That's how everybody else refers to it," Meg said. She took the proffered phone number. "I'll call you. Jeez, I haven't been a girl for three days and already men are giving me their numbers."

"Get used to it, I'm afraid," Xiao said. "If Faith hadn't told me, I would never have known you were ever a man. And, I hate to say it, you're an unbelievably attractive woman."

Meg looked in the mirror. "Really?"

"I told you," Cassie said. "You're a knockout."

"I hope I'm a knockout on the mat," Meg said sadly. "Off the mat, I'd just as soon nobody ever noticed me at all."

Cassie snorted. "Oh, come off it. You're gonna discover, real soon, Meg, that one of the best parts about being a woman is being noticed. I got hooked on the feeling first time out. I bet you will too."

Meg went back into the office and put her clothes back on, snagging her hair in the bra and the shirt both. She sighed, exasperated. Sure, the hair was gorgeous, just the kind of hair he liked to see on attractive women, thick and shiny and healthy-looking. But it was too long. Meg despaired of ever getting used to it. Maybe getting it all cut off would be a good idea.

When she went back out, Xiao tossed her a small plastic sack. "Here, it just dawned on me that you'll be needing these." The sack contained several hair-bands and 'scrunchies.' "We found ourselves needing a lot of those when we first started having successes with goop. It'll keep it all out of your face until you can get a manageable haircut."

"Thanks again," Meg said.

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"I feel like a pervert," Meg said out of the corner of her mouth. Cassie had run a measuring tape all over her body (including places where Meg was sure a measuring tape had no business going at all), grabbed several things from the rack at Foley's and was ushering her back to the women's dressing room.

"Why?" Cassie asked. "You have every right to go in there."

"But they'll be naked back there."

"So will you. Get used to it. What are you going to do at Nationals, try and change in the men's locker rooms?" Cassie whispered. "Just go in there like you own the place. Nobody will look twice at you, except maybe to be jealous of your body."

Meg swallowed deep and walked into the dressing room. Through the loose slats of the partitions she could see several women in various states of undress, changing into or out of their purchases to see if they fit. Staring openly, Meg managed to get herself into one of the stalls before having to bend in half to examine herself. It felt for all the world like she had an erection. Looking down, she expected to see a bulge tenting the front of her sweat pants, but there was nothing except a damp, clinging sensation in her 'underwear.'

"Holy Jesus," Meg muttered, sitting heavily. "I can't believe this."

Cassie leaned through the slatted door. "Is something wrong?"

"I wet my pants," Meg complained. "I wet my damn pants."

"Why didn't you tell me you had to go?"

"I didn't, not at the time!" Meg stage-whispered. "I guess I'm just not used to holding it in with this equipment or something. God, I'm so embarrassed."

"Here," Cassie said, holding up one of the several pairs of 'Jockey for Her' cotton panties they'd grabbed. "Just change into these and we'll pay for them on the way out. It's not a big deal."

"Do you think we can get a plastic sack or something for my old ones?"

"I guess."

Meg stood and deftly pulled down the sweats and Speedo swimsuit in one motion, exulting in the new flexibility that the change had brought about (which was the only upshot so far of being a woman, Mark had said earlier). The swim trunks weren't exactly soaked, but they were damp and a rich, musky scent filled the small cubicle. Cassie looked at her and blushed.

"You didn't wet your pants," she said, trying not to giggle.

"All I know is that they were cold and clammy."

"Something turned you on," Cassie snickered. "It's being back here in the ladies' dressing rooms, isn't it? It got you all hot and bothered."

"Why don't you say it a little louder, Cass? I don't think some people in Chicago heard you."

Cassie covered her mouth and laughed silently. "Dummy, that's what happens when women get turned on," she giggled. "I thought you knew."

"Of course I knew!" Meg said. "Why do you think I spent all those hours with my face between your legs? It's just the first time it's happened to me, all right? In my past experience, when you sit down and there's something cold and wet in your Jockey shorts, it means you've had an accident, all right?"

Cassie tried unsuccessfully to put on a serious face. "I'm sorry," she said, and then snorted long and could no longer hold in her laughter. "I don't know why this is so funny."

"I hope you aren't behind the shielding wall when they change Heath back," Meg said bitterly. "So I can laugh at you when you get your first hard-on in tight jeans and I can watch you do the Levi's Two-Step trying to keep the thing from pulling all your pubic hair out."

Cassie fought for control, only letting small giggles out. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh."

Meg lowered her head and finally recovered her sense of humor. "Sure you should," she chuckled. "This is going to be a bitch to get used to." She pulled one of the cotton panties over her ankles and slid them up her hairless legs, luxuriating in the feel of the soft fabric against her smooth skin. They snuggled up tight against her mons veneris, forming an attractive, feminine V where formerly there had been a sizable male bulge.

"These feel nice," Meg commented, pulling the low-rise panties over her hips. The hip-huggers made her freckled legs seem even longer. "Real nice."

"You should get some silk ones," Cassie said. "Those feel downright decadent."

Meg blushed. "I don't know if I'm up to feeling that sexy. I used to watch you walking around, knowing full well that you had the laciest, sexiest underwear imaginable on under your clothes, and you had this 'I've-got-a-secret' look on your face and I knew you felt sexy and daring. I don't know if I'm up to that just yet. I don't particularly want to feel sexy."

Cassie took her hand. "Go whatever speed you like," she said gently. "However, I am a little disappointed. I was kinda wanting you to get something racy so you could teach me what you got out of seeing your lover parading around in something naughty."

Meg's blush deepened. "Maybe if it was just between us."

"It better be," Cassie warned. "Just because you have the body of a centerfold doesn't mean that you can go seducing any man you want. You're still mine, Mark Rutherford."

"What's it going to be like, Cassie? I mean, I'm still attracted to you strongly as I ever was, but is that going to go away? Are these weird hormones going to make me start appraising men's butts and forget how much I get off watching you get dressed in the morning?"

"You really are scared, aren't you?"

Meg nodded. "If the Olympics were all I had to worry about, it would be fine. But I've just started down a road that I don't know if I'll ever be able to get off of. I'm a little scared of losing you. I mean, I'm still attracted to women, but you're not. Sooner or later that will jump up and bite us in the ass, no matter how good our intentions are right now."

Cassie passed Meg a pair of jeans to try on, super-tight low-rise designer jobs with flared legs and studs up the seams. "One day at the time, lover mine," she said. "Who knows. Maybe I'll wind up liking this lesbian stuff before it's over. Maybe the sight of you in a merry widow with lace-top thigh-highs and four-inch heels will start doing the same thing to me that it does to you."

"You think?"

"I don't know. The way I figure it is this: we're both women now. And we're both in love with one another. I lived without sex for a long time and didn't have any complaints. If sex is something it turns out that we both need, well, I love you more than enough to not be threatened if you take a man into your bed. And I'm pretty sure that you love me enough for it to work the other way 'round."

"I doubt you need to worry about me sleeping with a man anytime soon."

Cassie shrugged. "Maybe not. But you've yet to have to deal with female hormones, and your brain's still wired up male, with all the sex drive that entails. And you've yet to deal with being horny as a woman. It may not be as urgent as it is for men, but it's every bit as maddening."

"Does it have something to do with this weird hollow feeling in my middle?" Meg asked. "After I 'wet myself,' that's the first thing I really noticed: a hollow, empty feeling in my middle."

Cassie nodded. "It gets to where you'll do almost anything to fill it."

Meg shivered. "Next stop, hardware store," she said.

"Hardware? What do we need there?"

"Latex filler putty," Meg said simply, pulling the leotard over her smooth legs. "I'm going to spackle that damn thing shut first chance I get."

CHAPTER SEVEN: You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman.

"MEG, I'D LIKE you to meet Dr. Sandy Fisher," Cassie said. "Dr. Fisher, I think Frank Tolliver informed you about Meg's situation." Meg shook hands and silently sized up the short, gray-haired gynecologist facing him. She had a matronly, no-nonsense way about her that reminded Meg sharply of Dr. Mitchell. She decided that she liked the doctor immediately.

"How do you do?" Meg asked.

"Great," Dr. Fisher replied, her voice gravelly but gently. "I've been looking forward to meeting you. Dr. Mitchell speaks very, very highly of you. I must say, this transformation is utterly remarkable."

Meg and Cassie sat down at the doctor's invitation. "I was told that my examination will be included in the research which Dr. Tolliver is preparing, so this first time out I'm going to give you a much more thorough examination than most of my patients receive," Fisher told Meg. "I'm sorry to tell you that it will probably be very unpleasant."

Meg shrugged. "Cassie's been telling me a little bit about it," she said. "Unpleasant or no, I suppose it has to be done. I know you'll make it as painless as possible."

Dr. Fisher smiled. "I'd often hoped that many of this world's more insensitive males could have had the opportunity to undergo this exam as a lesson to learn," she said devilishly. "But from what Faith told me over the phone, there is probably no man on the planet who deserves this less than you."

"Thanks," Meg said. "I think I'll be fine just as long as you let me know what you're doing."

"I'll remember that," Dr. Fisher said. "Now, are you taking any medication?"

"Dr. Tolliver recommended that I go on birth control," Meg said. "I had my first menstrual period on Sunday morning and it was a bad one. He's trying to both regulate my cycle and to balance my hormone levels."

"Yes, I can see by your blood-work that your testosterone levels are abnormally high for a young woman like yourself - I'm sorry, does that bother you, being referred to as a young woman?"

Meg shook her head. "I suppose I have to get used to it sooner or later," she confessed. "Even if it does bother me, I have to learn to stop letting it matter. It's like getting used to the new name."

"You're a very brave soul," Dr. Fisher commented. "I'm sure I'd be a nervous wreck by now."

Meg took Cassie's hand. "I have a lot of support in this."

"Any other medications?"

"Just Tylenol, and a vitamin supplement in the mornings. Centrum."

"I am immediately going to recommend that you switch to something with calcium and iron," Dr. Fisher said. "Most girls your age have real problems with anemia and, in my opinion, you can't get enough calcium. Osteoporosis is a real danger to women, my dear. Start thinking about it now and you might dodge that bullet when you're older."

"Done," Meg said.

"Now, if you'll step back and disrobe, we'll get this unpleasantness over with," the doctor invited. "I have you scheduled for an MRI, so that I can see how your bone structure is developing, then a mammogram and a full pelvic exam. Like I said, not at all pleasant."

Meg removed her clothes in an exam room and changed into the drafty hospital gown she'd been given. Dr. Fisher led her across a hallway and into the MRI room. She was placed on the table and instructed to lie very still as Dr. Fisher and Cassie went into the next room. Soon, Fisher's rough voice could be heard over the intercom.

"Try to relax, dear," Fisher said. "This is the easy part."

The room was filled with strange hums and whirrs as the machinery moved into place. The lights dimmed and the huge torus of the imager began to revolve around her. In the background, Fisher's voice began a commentary as Meg began humming quietly to herself to offset anxiety.

"Your ribcage and spine appear perfectly normal," Fisher said. "According to your old medical records, you've lost quite a bit of chest cavity through the transformation. Do you know your measurements, dear?"

"Cassie?" Meg asked.

"We wrote them down so that we could get her some new clothes," Cassie said, rummaging in her handbag. "Here they are. She's thirty-five, twenty-two, thirty-four."

"Impressive," Dr. Fisher said. "It's amazing how attractive a girl was lurking in that DNA."

"Not so amazing," Cassie corrected. "He was a beautiful man."

The MRI machines were slowly moving down her body. "Your pelvis is that of a completely healthy and normal twenty-two year old woman," Dr. Fisher said. "It's safe to assume that your

skeletal system has completely replaced itself. Oh, dear. Dr. Mitchell wasn't kidding around. That knee is in sad, sad shape. Very bad indeed."

The machines stopped and Meg sat up. "How much of my cell mass do you think is still male, doctor?" she asked.

"Given your muscle density, I would say roughly one-third to one-half. Dr. Tolliver's guess was that much of the excess body mass was used in the formation of any new tissue your new template required."

"Wonderful," Meg grumped. "I used to have sixteen-inch biceps. Now I have these." She cradled one of her breasts in a delicate hand. "So the muscular system isn't through regenerating?"

"Hard to tell. Dr. Mitchell tells me you were very muscular as a man. It's possible that you had enough mass in your muscles that some of them haven't changed yet. But it's not likely. Regeneration rates for cells can be measured by the amount of time they take to heal. The only thing that heals faster than muscle is skin. No, I think it's a safer guess that your original conditioning and muscle tone added to your elevated strength, that, and perhaps a genetic predisposition for being a healthy, strong girl."

"Mom was a pretty strong lady," Meg said. "I guess I take after her."

"Come on, dear," Dr. Fisher prodded. "We still have a lot to do."

* * * * *

Meg had seen commercials about the importance of mammograms, but none of the ad campaigns ever mentioned that it meant having your tits squeezed in between two (very cold) metal plates. Meg now knew *exactly* how sensitive her new breasts were, cradling them gently in her arms through the paper hospital gown. The only upshot was that the procedure didn't take too long. It wasn't even really the squeezing of the breasts - the worst of it was that some Einstein had designed the thing so that a particularly sharp corner of the apparatus poked the unfortunate victim right in the short ribs throughout. Meg was sure she'd have a lovely bruise there by the end of the examination.

Dr. Fisher put the mammograms up on the light-cabinet, showing a cross-section of Meg's breasts. "What am I looking at?" Meg asked. She hadn't known a lot about breast cancer before, but it was definitely the time to learn.

Dr. Fisher pointed out things on the pictures with a capped pen. "You are the proud - if reluctant - owner of a fine, healthy pair of breasts. I don't see anything at all out of the ordinary here. The milk ducts are healthy, and the glands appear completely normal."

Meg ran her hands through her now-thick, luxurious hair, which had curled up as it dried. Cassie had expressed jealousy over her natural curl several times that day. "God. I didn't even think about being able to produce milk. I keep expecting to wake up, y'know?"

Dr. Fisher smiled. "As I said, I'm amazed at how well you've coped with this. Faith even told me that you managed to get the young lady - Heath? - that came to see me yesterday under control no less than an hour after you noticed your own change. Remarkable."

"It just needed doing," Meg said modestly.

"Outside of the knee, you're healthy as can be," Dr. Fisher said. "I can't see anything wrong with you at all, Meg. Had I not known that you'd been a six-foot-one-inch tall man seventy-two hours ago, I would never have known you were anything other than a healthy, athletic young woman."

"I guess if I can fool you, the National Championship Committee should be cake."

"One thing left to do," Dr. Fisher said. "I wish I could say I'd saved the best for last."

"Cassie says it's a cross all women have to bear," Meg said, taking a deep breath. "I guess I'd better get my shoulder under it if I'm going to be stuck being a woman."

* * * * *

The hardest part wasn't the actual poking and prodding, Meg found out. It was the utter feeling of helplessness, lying there in the sterile room with her butt perched precariously on the edge of the table and her feet restrained in medieval-looking stirrups. Dr. Fisher was very gentle and careful to explain everything that she was doing to Meg, which seemed to make the discomfort manageable.

"This is a speculum," the doctor said, showing Meg the device. It looked for all the world like a pair of narrow spoons attached to the end of a pair of barbecue tongs. Dr. Fisher was warming it in her hands and applying some kind of lubricating lotion to it. "It will hold the walls of your vagina open so I can get a look at what's inside. You'll feel a stretching, but you won't get sore until after it's removed."

"Fire away," Meg said, trying to sound confident. Dr. Fisher moved between her legs and Meg could feel the head of the instrument nosing in between the moist folds of her sex. Meg hadn't spent any time examining herself since the transformation, preferring to concentrate on the business at hand. It wasn't until the cool edge of the speculum found its way into her birth canal that it hit her hard: *My breasts. My vagina. This isn't a dream and I can't ignore it so it will go away. This is my body, and it's a woman's body.* Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. She couldn't so much feel the instrument inside her as *sense* it, and then that sensation was replaced with a tugging and a stretching which quickly crossed the line between curious pleasure and a squirming discomfort. At least the doctor's hands were warm.

"Everything looks great," Fisher commented. "Nice, healthy and pink."

It's all pink on the inside, Meg remembered the old gag, and the tears became a little harder to fight. "Your hymen is still intact," the doctor continued. "I guess we should have expected that."

"What does that mean?"

"Technically, it means there is a small membrane which narrows the entrance to your vagina considerably. Although it's not always an indication, it's considered a sign of female virginity."

The tears positively burned behind Meg's eyelids. *Oh, God. Please let me wake up.*

"This is going to be a little uncomfortable," Fisher announced. "I have to take a pap smear, which is a sampling of the mucous secretions around your cervix. We use it to test for uterine cancer."

A very masculine urge to hit something, to break something, built inside Meg's heart until it was nearly as powerful as the urge to cry. *I don't want to be a woman*, she thought desperately. *I didn't do anything to deserve this! All the poor souls who spend millions having their bodies converted over, why couldn't this happen to one of them? At least they'd know what's happening. God, if only this was some enemy I could look in the eyes, something I could fight toe-to-toe!*

A rational part of his brain spoke up. *No matter how hard you try and hit this, it's never going to fall down, kiddo. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and get used to it. Even if you didn't ask for it, you chose it. Faith offered to change you back. But this is the only road left to the Olympics.*

Meg managed to get some control of herself as Dr. Fisher began an examination of the inner and outer lips of the vulva. Meg tried not to think about anything, just lay there gently humming and trying to muster her waning patience.

Across the room, Cassie heard what Meg was humming, and had to leave the room. She never thought that hearing the Olympic fanfare would ever make her cry like that.

* * * * *

"Was it bad?" Cassie asked when Meg returned from the examination room, now clothed.

"Not as bad as I feared," Meg answered. "It's all so new to me, maybe I wasn't paying close enough attention. Or maybe I just have a high tolerance for that sort of thing after all the hell I went through over the knee. I'm starving. You want to get some lunch?"

Cassie nodded. "Sure. I thought we could eat close to the mall. We need to get you some things to wear so you won't be traipsing around in your old clothes. You look kinda like a bum in those sweats."

"You're so kind," Meg grumped. "I happen to love these sweats."

Cassie looked at him a long time with a very peculiar expression on her face. "Meg?" she asked.

"Hm?"

"Would it bother you a whole lot if I kissed you right now?"

Meg flushed. "You want to?"

"I think so."

"Babe, I've been wanting to kiss you all day. I wasn't sure whether or not you wanted me to."

In response, Cassie wound her slender arms around Meg's neck and pulled her close. Softness met yielding softness as Cassie's fingers tangled in the tangled mass of red hair. Meg let all the emotions plaguing her soul pour out through that kiss and when it was over she felt as if she'd just had a good cry.

"Okay by you?" Meg asked.

"You kiss pretty well for a girl," Cassie commented.

"You kiss the same as always," Meg said, smoothing a mischievous tendril of Cassie's hair away from her face. "Like the most beautiful, perfect woman in the world."

"Do you ever think things will be like they were?" Cassie asked, and her voice held a touch of the plaintive in it. Meg framed her next words carefully, knowing that whatever she said would be taken straight to the heart by the woman she loved.

"I don't know, Cass. All I can do is take down each day as it comes and love you for all I'm worth. I'm hoping that it will be enough for what we'll have to go through."

Cassie tightened her embrace, holding the young woman's body against her own tightly. It felt odd - feeling her former boyfriend's breasts fitting into her own cleavage, inhaling the clean feminine scent of her hair. Odd, but it had the potential to feel right if she could only let it. Trying some of the meditation techniques Mark had shown her, she let go and 'fell' backwards, into herself, blanking out everything but what her senses were taking in. The warm breath and gentle, soft nuzzles against her neck, the hands gently kneading her shoulders, the warmth and closeness. Cassie felt herself begin to get moist and heavy inside.

"We'll continue this later," she said. "I think we both have a lot of exploring to do."

* * * *

Cassie was amazed at Meg's practicality. The first thing she bought was a purse and woman's wallet, transferring over all her belongings on the spot so that she'd be able to keep up with it and still try on clothing. Since money was no real object, Meg decided to get two handbags - a little clutch purse which would go with dressy and a larger, roomier cloth affair for everyday.

Next they found themselves at the sporting goods store and Meg was browsing interestedly amidst the racks of workout clothes and dancewear. The salesgirl showed up after a few moments of browsing and asked if she could be of any assistance.

"Yeah," Meg muttered, stretching the spandex in a leotard. "I'm looking for something to work out in. I'll be weight-training so I'll need a lot of coverage."

"Do you know your size?" the girl asked.

"I think I'm about a size five, right, Cass?"

"About that," Cassie commented, busy browsing through the racks as well.

"And I also need underwear."

"What about shoes?" the girl added.

"Might as well, while I'm here," Meg said offhandedly.

The girl commented on Meg's figure and coloring and returned with two leotards, one green with purple and blue swirls, and another in blue and yellow. Meg liked them both, so she decided to get both. With that she added several pair of cotton ankle socks and a set of navy blue leg warmers. After measuring her feet, she found that she took a size 7½ shoe and was soon in possession of a brand-new pair of ladies' Reebok running shoes. They also added four cotton Jog-Bras, six pairs of cotton panties with a terry-cloth liner, and three cotton crop-tops. The total came up to around a hundred and fifty dollars, which Meg quickly put on the new MasterCard. The approval came right through and the only hard part was remembering to sign her name as 'Meghan' instead of 'Mark.' They took the purchases and began to work their way down the mall. Meg fidgeted with her purse abominably, constantly running her thumb underneath the strap.

"I'll never get used to this thing," she complained.

"Sure you will," Cassie said. "By the end of the day you won't even notice it."

"Hey, there's something," Meg said, pointing. "I always wanted to get my ear pierced before. Now I don't have any excuse at all not to do both of 'em. What do you think?"

"You sure this will work out on the expense report?"

"Doctor Tolliver said anything I needed. They certainly would help me fit in, having pierced ears."

"Then go for it."

The girl at the little 'Piercing Pagoda' cart was thrilled that Meg was interested (it had been a slow day for her thus far), and they dispensed quickly with the signing of the waivers and got right into the business of finding the jewelry that would look good on Meg. They finally decided on two matching white gold loops which barely cleared the edge of her ear for the lobes and a simple white gold stud for a second hole in her left ear. The piercing hurt a little, but it didn't have a patch on the gynecologist's exam table. Cassie bought her two pairs of earrings, a pair of dangly gold balls which she insisted would look cute on her and a huge set of gold hoops which Meg was sure would brush her shoulders if she wore them. Meg, in turn, picked up a small emerald stud and a dangly pewter feather that caught her eye. The girl gave careful instructions on how to care for the piercings and threw in a small silver ear-cuff with onyx beads on the house because they'd been so much fun. Stopping by another of the carts, Meg picked up a cheap pair of simple black cat's-eye sunglasses, since Mark's aviators no longer fit properly and made her look about twelve years old.

Cassie took the wheel for the casual wear in Dillard's, being a far better judge of what might look good on Meg than Meg herself - she'd not spent much time in front of a mirror and wasn't a very good judge of what clothes might work with her figure and complexion. No, in fact, the only woman that Meg was the least bit good at dressing was Cassie.

"Try this on," Cassie told Meg, thrusting a simple sleeveless shirt-waist dress at her in a muted green. "I'll find you a top to go with it and you can get out of what you're wearing. I think it'll be good for you to get used to wearing a dress in public."

Meg eyed the garment warily. "If you say so, boss."

There was the uncomfortable feeling of dampness and heat as Meg got good looks at the women changing in the fitting rooms, but at least she was wearing panties with a cotton liner in them now, so it wasn't so noticeable nor as cold and clammy once her ardor had died down. Again, her hair got in her way from start to finish - *I have to get Cassie to teach me how to braid my own hair*, Meg thought - but she managed to get into the dress without tearing the damn thing to shreds. Cassie intercepted her with a plain white top on a hanger.

"Did you shave your armpits?" Cassie asked her.

"Yeah," Meg said. "I thought it'd look better if I did my pits and legs. Besides, I've always liked how smooth your skin is, I thought it might be fun to see what it felt like. I kinda like it."

"Here," Cassie said, smiling fondly. "Wear this under the dress." She gave her the knit top.

"Dammit, I just got this damn thing on," she said irritably.

"Quit complaining," Cassie told her. "That's nothing. Wait'll you have to try to get into or out of a bustier sometime."

Meg shucked the dress to the waist and began to wiggle her way into the top, spitting hair from her mouth as she did so, and attempted to restore the dress. "It wouldn't be quite so hard if some idiot hadn't put all the damn buttons on backwards."

Cassie laughed. "You look adorable."

Meg cut her a sideways glance. "Stop."

"No, really. Look at yourself." Cassie maneuvered her in front of a mirror, and Meg was surprised to see a somewhat rumpled young woman staring back, wearing a green knit dress over a T-shirt. "See?"

"I hate cute," Meg grumped. "And it feels like I'm walking around with no pants on."

"You are, dummy," Cassie told her. She began tugging and smoothing imaginary wrinkles from the dress and top, her touch sending tingles through Meg's body and starting a fresh wetness flowing. "We need to get you a belt to go with this, something that shows off your figure."

"I think it looks fine," Meg said. "You really think it needs a belt?"

"Well, you said you hated cute," Cassie commented. "Put a belt with it, show off that flat stomach and those gorgeous boobs of yours and it'll go from cute to sexy in no time. For girls, you only have the choice between cute and sexy, I'm afraid."

"Well, cute isn't my bag," Meg said. "Let's give sexy a try."

They left Dillard's with a much heavier bill that time, but now Meg had a very large selection of plain print dresses, blouses and skirts. They decided against going into Parklane Hosiery next door, electing instead to head down the mall to Victoria's Secret for those types of items. Instead they ducked into The Fitting Stool to pick up shoes for all the outfits. Meg was

able to help more that time, knowing how to match colors with the outfits she'd just picked up. Cassie gave her hell for sticking to the shorter heel sizes and vowed to drag him into The Wild Pair before they left to get something a little more daring. As it was, Meg was now prowling the mall in her green shirtwaist and now had a pair of woven flats which seemed not to cover enough of her feet, and a pair of white pantyhose they'd gotten just so she could wear them. They walked for a while, letting Meg get the fit of squirming out of her system as she tried desperately to get the crotch of the pantyhose to actually stay somewhere higher than mid-thigh. Once she finally got them where they were comfortable, she was introduced to the joy of having to go to the bathroom in hose. She came out with a disgusted look on her face.

"I miss being a man," was all she said.

"C'mon, it can't be all that bad."

"Oh yeah? Think about a world where you never had to worry about which direction you wipe."

Cassie giggled. "It's all part of the mystery of womanhood."

"Up yours," Meg cursed, and gave vent to a wild bout of squirming as she locked into mortal combat with her pantyhose. "Damn things. If they didn't feel so good on my legs I'd burn 'em."

"You like the way they feel?" Cassie asked.

"All slick and warm, yeah. It's really nice. Like having somebody hug your legs all the time."

Cassie smiled. "Wait'll you get into some real stockings," she said.

Over the course of the day, as Meg picked up such sundries as a wristwatch and all the feminine hygiene products she needed, Cassie warmed more and more to the idea of expressing affection openly for another woman. They dropped off their packages (which were getting heavy) in Mark's dilapidated truck and returned inside for a second load, and Cassie found herself holding hands with Meg as they walked, and it started feeling natural despite the strange looks it gathered from passersby. Luckily, they lived in a rather liberal-minded college town which didn't frown completely on same-sex relationships, so it could have been much, much worse.

The lingerie store was an adventure for poor Meg, who didn't know the names for half the things on the racks, much less how to make sense of the morass of straps and clips and closures. The salesgirls were all more than helpful, but Meg still spent the whole time in Victoria's Secret blushed beet-red. But Cassie did have to admit she was quite attracted to the nervous redhead who modeled a white lace merry widow with attached garters and seamed white stockings.

"You're gorgeous," Cassie told her. "But something has to be done with that hair, love."

They walked out with the merry widow and a wide assortment of sexy underwear. Meg actually professed to like wearing thong panties. "It reminds me a little of wearing a jock strap," she said confidentially. So she stocked up, in all the colors of the rainbow and finally managed to acquire a suitable amount of bras ("You can't have enough," Cassie told him, "else you have to wash everything out by hand every night.") to satisfy Cassie.

"What's next?"

"I was thinking of taking you to Visible Changes to get something done to that red mop," Cassie suggested. "Unless you have something you'd rather do first."

"I just want to get out of here before the martial arts supply closes," she said. "And I thought we should go get something professional looking. I am planning to be an ambassador for my country, after all."

They made a short stop-off at Petite Sophisticate and got a very slick-looking dark grey business suit with a tailored skirt and a lovely cream-colored silk blouse. Cassie even sprung for a pretty silver necklace to go with it and an African print silk scarf that went with the outfit. Better still, the suit matched a pair of the shoes they'd already bought.

"Let's get your hair fixed and we can go," Cassie said.

"I can't help feeling like there's something I'm forgetting."

"We can always come back, Meg," Cassie said. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

"I need a personal staff," Meg lamented. "That'd take care of all of this and I'd never have to do it again. That would suit me just fine."

"You haven't been enjoying yourself?"

"It's not that," Meg confessed. "I'm really enjoying spending the time with you. And it's interesting seeing this side of life, I'll admit. I have a new-found respect for well-dressed women. It's a hell of a job. It's just that I feel like everybody's staring at me."

"All the men are," Cassie told her. "Get used to it. You're beautiful, Meg. Beautiful."

Meg blushed. "Quit it. You're embarrassing me."

"You're going to have to learn to accept it," Cassie told her honestly. "People treat beautiful women differently. There's a lot of things you're going to have to let other people do for you, because they're the sorts of things that people do for pretty girls. You're going to have to learn to accept them graciously, or you'll blow your cover. Being a woman isn't just clothes and hair and breasts, Meg. It's a whole different way of interacting with society."

"Gimme an example," Meg said, her curiosity piqued.

"Like letting men open doors for you. I know you can open them for yourself, hell, and probably tear the arms off whoever held it open for you in the same breath. You're going to have to learn that it's making that poor sap feel really good to get the door for a pretty girl and maybe she'll reward him with a smile or something. You remember how good it made you feel when pretty girls smiled at you?"

"Yeah," Meg said.

"It's time to give some of that back. And with that smile of yours, you can probably raise a man's blood pressure without even trying." They'd come to the salon, and Cassie signed Meg up for the full treatment. There was a wait of about forty minutes, so they hit a few more stores and came back. An attractive young Latina woman led Meg away and wrapped a smock around Meg's shoulders, then lowered her chair so that her head was resting in a basin and began shampooing her hair. Meg closed her eyes in bliss as the girl began working the protein-rich shampoo and conditioner into her scalp.

"Nice?" the hairdresser asked.

"I could go to sleep right here," Meg answered.

"You have beautiful hair," the girl commented.

Time to try that gracious acceptance Cassie was talking about, Meg thought. "Thank you very much," she said. "I like yours too. Is it naturally curly, like that, or did you perm it?"

"Oh, it's a really relaxed perm. I'm thinking about straightening it all out. I really liked the way Demi Moore wore her hair in *Striptease*. Do you think that would look good on me?"

"I don't know," Meg said. "I like it the way it is. It looks so soft."

"Is your hair treated?" the girl asked. "I'm gonna be so jealous if it's naturally that color."

"You know how to tell," Meg joked. "Eyebrows."

The girl laughed. "And the curl?"

"Natural, I'm afraid."

"Any idea what you want done with it?"

"I'm afraid that's more my girlfriend's department," Meg said. "She's the one who talked me into all of this. Maybe you should ask her."

The girl's hands stopped for a moment. "You mean. you're a."

"Lesbian," Meg said. "Very much so."

"I never would have guessed," the girl confessed, and started the glorious massage again. "You two don't seem the type at all, if you don't mind my saying so."

Meg smiled. "Not a bit. Actually, I'm kinda used to it. I mean, I used to wear men's clothes and wear my hair real short, but this is her first time trying to be gay," she said in total honesty. "She's still not really sure how to go about it. So I'm trying to let her get used to it slowly. I promised her I'd start trying to look more like a girl so it wouldn't be so obvious that we're together."

"That's so sweet," the girl said. "My sister-in-law is gay. She came out two years ago and I've never seen her happier. She was so worried that her parents wouldn't understand. They still don't really understand, and there was a long time where her folks kept trying to figure out where they'd gone wrong. But things are going really well now. She's living with her girlfriend now and they're trying to have a baby."

It went on like that, and Meg was amazed. The light conversation she'd been used to as Mark was competitive, a comparison of knowledge over whatever subject was on the table, be it sports, cars, women or whatever. It was her first experience with shooting the breeze as a female, and found herself quite warm to the gentle exchanging of experiences. It seemed that women actually tried to relate instead of impress.

Cassie was ushered in once the shampoo was done. The hairdresser, whose name was Angela, fawned over them both and made them comfortable again as lovers, not minding in the least when they kissed or held hands. Cassie helped Meg pick a relatively low-maintenance hairstyle from a magazine and Angela immediately agreed how wonderful it

would look on her. At Meg's mention of Cassie teaching her how to braid her own hair, Angela produced a small, convoluted piece of plastic from a drawer and handed it to Meg.

"It's called a Sport Braider," the hairdresser said. "I swear by it. I could never french-braid behind my own head until I got one. You just separate your hair in sections and just work it down, like this." She demonstrated quickly on Cassie. "You can have it," Angela added. "I have four more."

Meg thanked her, and Angela got right to work on her hair, calling over a short, pleasant-looking girl named Lucy to start the manicure that Cassie had ordered on the sly. Meg reclined on the chair as Lucy cleaned her nails and Angela combed out her thick hair and smiled like a cat in the sun. "I could get real used to this real fast, Cassie," she said.

"What'd I tell you?" Cassie said knowingly. "Nothing quite like being pampered."

"I'll never doubt your word again," Meg said.

* * * * *

They only had time to drop off the purchases (three trips up the stairs) at Meg's apartment, change clothes, and they had to be on the way to the martial arts supply across town before it closed. Cassie made herself small as the beefy karate instructors swaggered around the floor trying to impress everyone, but Meg was immediately in her element. She picked up an alternate copy of her belt certification (the people at Silver Tiger Taekwondo had been very understanding once they'd heard what had happened) and a new *gi* and belt, plus all the pads that no longer fit her.

An overbearing prick of a jujitsu instructor that Meg remembered as Lou edged her way over. "Are you interested in taking some martial arts classes, Miss?" he asked self-importantly. Meg cut a look at Cassie and then her face was possessed by a devilish smile.

"Actually, no," she said. "I already teach some."

"A pretty thing like you?" Lou said. Some of the other instructors smiled knowingly. "What style do you teach? Aikido, maybe?"

"Taekwondo," she said simply.

"I wouldn't have pegged you for a hard style like that," Lou commented dryly. "It's not suited for your body type. Especially the full contact stuff. It might bruise that gorgeous skin of yours."

"A bruise never hurt anyone."

"Tell you what," Lou said. "Let me show you some jujitsu. If you don't think the moves are more suited to your smaller height and musculature, then you've gotten a free lesson. If you do, then you give me the honor of taking you out to dinner."

In the corner of Meg's eye, she could see Cassie making gag motions. "How about this," Meg said. "We take it to the mat. Three points, full contact. You lose, you pay for my *gi* and pads. I lose, I go out with you and be everything you've ever wanted in a woman for one night."

The other instructors howled with laughter and Lou found himself painted into a corner. "Not full contact. I wouldn't want to hurt you or anything."

Meg began pulling on the new pads over her jeans and T-shirt, removing her shoes. "Full contact or nothing, Lou. Besides, I like the rough stuff."

The rest of the instructors were screaming with laughter. Meg was gratified to see Lou starting to get angry - it would make him much easier to beat. If beating was indeed all that Meg wanted to do. It was starting to look like a total humiliation was in order.

"You don't know what you're asking, baby," Lou warned, trying to sound ominous.

Meg put her arms around him and batted her eyelashes at him seductively, something he'd learned from Cassie when she wanted to get her way. "You're not worried about getting beaten by a poor, defenseless girl, are you, Lou?"

Lou stepped back, kicking off his shoes and grabbing his bag. "You know, I'm getting sick of all these women who take a couple years of martial arts and then think they're the baddest thing to ever happen to the world. Maybe I should teach you a little lesson, honey, bruises be damned."

Meg gave him a pouty moué, one of Faith's sexier little tricks. "You gotta touch me to bruise me, handsome," she said, and stepped onto the mat. Cassie looked half-worried and half-amused. Now it was time to see how well all those balance exercises she'd been doing had paid off.

Meg gave a shallow bow as one of the other instructors stepped forward as referee. "We're playing full-contact to three points. Watch your face shots. Two fouls to loss of point."

Both combatants nodded, bowed to one another just deeply enough not to be outwardly insulting, and fell into loose stances. Lou picked a forward stance which would capitalize on his height, while Meg chose a back stance which would give away next to nothing about her intentions.

"Fight!" the referee called.

Lou charged in with a slow, clumsy kick meant to force Meg to the outside where he could use a jujitsu infighting move. It was simplicity to dodge to the inside, pivot on her good knee and sweep her foot along the inside edge of Lou's outstretched shoulder. She was rewarded with the feel of impact and Lou's head snapped back sharply from the roundhouse kick's force.

"Point to white!" the referee called, separating them. "One nothing. Fight!"

Lou came in lower, growling imprecations under his breath. His anger was making him even sloppier than usual and his lunge-punch/inside sweep combination would have had him doing pushups for days if he was a white belt. Meg decided not to do anything flashy, just shift her weight over her widened hip and make use of the new feminine flexibility to drive a side kick into Lou's midsection hard enough to sit him down on the mat. The onlookers roared with laughter.

"Point white!" the ref called, laughing. "Match point, Lou. Better get something going."

"That was an illegal kick," Lou complained.

"A side kick? I learned it as a white belt, Lou," Meg said. "You're just trying to cover the fact that you walked into it like a blind man. Now come to the ready and let's get this over with. I'm hungry."

Lou stood and was fairly shaking with rage. "Bitch."

"Watch the language, Lou," the ref cautioned, "or I'll foul you. That's no way to talk to a lady and it's certainly no way to talk on the mat. Try to at least act like you have some honor."

Lou growled. "Sure, she may be quick in competition, but she'll never have it where it counts."

"And where is that, Lou?" Meg asked.

"On the street, girly girl. You pose real pretty, but those moves won't ever stand up in a real fight."

Meg's stance stiffened and she began pulling off her pads. "You just won't accept a lesson in the manner it's given, will you? Okay, big man, the stakes just got higher. I pay you ten bucks a bruise. Sound fair to you?"

"The girl's got *cojones*," one of the onlookers said. *If you only knew*, Meg thought.

"No way," Lou said.

Meg crossed the ground between them in no time. "Walk your talk, Lou. You've already proven to everyone here what a poser you are and that you don't have any right to that black belt hiding under your beer gut. I'm giving you the chance to save face. Ten bucks a bruise."

Lou began stripping his pads off. "This is gonna hurt you more than it hurts me," he said.

The referee looked a little peaked, but raised his hand. "Match point," he called.

"Scooby dooby doo," Meg muttered to herself.

"Fight!"

Lou rushed like a bull, without form or style. Meg mastered his charge, slipping beneath a punch to land a double kick from the knee to his short ribs which made him roar in pain and clutch his injured side. Pivoting, Meg brought her fists around in a devastating double loop that landed both fists on his chin in rapid succession. It seemed that as soon as the second punch landed that the heel of Meg's right hand came up beneath Lou's chin with enough force to take him to his tip-toes before her leg swept his feet from beneath him in the move that he had described to Heath the night Cassie had figured out the sequencing problem with her software. Meg even managed to land a vicious overhand chop to Lou's solar plexus as he fell, ending with the heel of her left foot pulling out of a crushing step-kick millimeters from Lou's chin.

The referee was doubled over laughing. "Final score is eight to nothing out of a three-point match," he guffawed. "If you'd landed that kick, ma'am, you'd've beaten him three times over."

Meg helped a woozy Lou to his feet clumsily. "It wasn't about the points, unfortunately. Maybe it'll teach him that 'poor, helpless women' aren't to be messed with," she said. "I'll even let him off the hook about the *gi* and pads. He'll need the money for taekwondo lessons."

The onlookers laughed and cheered. "You look really familiar," the referee said. "Have I seen you around here before?"

"I doubt it," Meg lied. "I'm Meg."

"Meg, I'm Peter," the ref said. "That was fantastic. You're welcome in my dojo anytime. I have to learn how you did the punch/trip combination move. You could end anything with that."

"It's a powerful move," Meg quipped. "If you're not careful it could change your sex."

The referee looked confused but the pretty blonde in the corner who'd come in with Meg laughed like mad. *Guess you had to be there*, Peter thought to himself. "So you'll come by sometime?"

"Maybe," Meg said. "I'm pretty busy right now. I'm in training."

"For Nationals?"

"Yep."

"You're a shoo-in, Meg," Peter said. "You've got the fastest feet I've seen since Jackie Chan."

"Thanks," Meg said, brushing her hair behind her ear shyly. "You competing this year?"

"Yeah. Hey - why don't I look you up when we're in Chicago? Would that be okay?"

Meg shrugged. "I guess so. You know how crazy the National Championships are. You'll be lucky to ever find me in all that mess."

Pete grinned at her hard. "Trust me. I'll try extra hard."

* * * * *

"You work fast," Cassie mentioned amusedly as they left the store.

Meg looked stunned. "I didn't even realize he was flirting until the end. How was I to know I was leading him on? God, Cassie, what am I going to do?"

Cassie held her hand. "He's really cute," Cassie said.

Meg shook her head. "Not to me. I've seen him in the locker room at Regionals two years ago. He's not getting that big monster anywhere *near* me with that intention."

"Relax," Cassie said. "You have something most women don't."

"Which is?"

"The ability to completely disassemble any man who tries something with you. You can relax. Besides, he seemed nice," Cassie said. "Maybe you should go out with him."

"What? Go out, like on a date?"

"Of course a date, silly. Like I said, you're a beautiful woman, and no doubt that show you put on in there is going to have Peter fantasizing about you all year. Men are going to ask you out a lot, Meg. You're stunningly beautiful. You can't turn them all down."

"Oh no?"

"No. What if that buffalo in there had won that match? You'd've had to follow through then."

"Didn't think about that."

"It couldn't hurt you to learn how to go be out with a man in public. It doesn't mean sex. Think of it like my mom told me: 'even if he turns out to be an asshole, you still get a free dinner.'"

"That's the most jaded thing I've ever heard."

"Meg, I'm serious."

Meg threw up her hands in surrender. "All right! All right! I'll call him!"

Cassie nodded in self-satisfaction. "Good."

"This is one for my diary," Meg muttered, climbing into her truck. "I have to go out on a date with a guy I used to compete against because my girlfriend made me. It sounds like the set-up to a bad joke."

"Add to that the fact that your girlfriend has every intention of lending you her clothes for the date and you have the plot to a Harold Pinter play," Cassie added, laughing.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Knees and elbows

HEATH SAT IMPATIENTLY in the small testing room, trying to put on as brave a face as his now-delicate features would allow. Faith was everywhere at once, fixing and fiddling and generally getting in the way. Finally Dr. Tolliver set her down, gently but forcefully, and readied the machinery to change Heath back to his original manhood. Faith sat exhaustedly, having worked 'round the clock to get the template prepared from Heath's hair. It had only taken her two days instead of the three she'd originally estimated. Only yesterday Meg had been browsing around the mall with her girlfriend.

They had set up a safe-room some distance away, and Meg sat behind the shielded glass with an unreadable expression on her beautiful face. She wore a simple cotton sun-dress and her woven flats (fast becoming her favorite shoes), wore her hair in a loose braid (she was getting quite good at braiding her hair after a few hours' practice - her new long and nimble fingers made it easier than it looked) and carried just a touch of makeup on her cheeks and lips (she was nowhere near confident enough in her 'artistic' abilities to venture out of the apartment with much more on than what she was wearing), which gave her a glow of health and vigor. She had already picked up the instinctive habits of crossing her legs at the knee (she'd flashed her muff to everyone in McDonald's and that had been the last time she'd sat like a guy in public) and was much more comfortable with her hands (she'd stopped crossing her arms on *top* of her breasts as she'd been used to and had long since quit poking herself in the eyes and nose with her longer fingernails). All in all, she was shaping up into quite a young woman,

under Cassie's patient tutelage. Meg thought she might be able to pass off on her own after a few more days.

Dr. Tolliver was calling ready and everyone was hunkering down behind their separate shields. Heath looked directly at Meg and mouthed "Scooby dooby doo," earning him one of Meg's rare smiles which, according to Cassie, could light up an entire room. From Meg's vantage she could see several indicators on Cassie's control station turn from red to green, and that was the only way to know that the process was over.

There was a 'cool-down' period where everyone stayed 'under cover' while the electromagnetic patterns settled down. Dr. Tolliver was taking no chances. The cell reproduction rate in his own body would have him as a total woman in a few weeks, and he was planning to undergo the treatment as soon as he was able. Some of the secondary sex characteristics were already beginning to manifest, and now the good doctor's voice was cracking in reverse. He'd been complaining for days about no longer being able to reach the top shelf in his kitchen (where he kept the all-important coffee).

Meg stood, sighing. Time to hit the ladies' room again. Since her transformation, it seemed that her bladder could not hold its load for any significant period of time as compared to the way it had been before. She stepped into the hall and pushed her way through the squeaky restroom door. *At least I picked the right one this time*, Meg thought, remembering some embarrassing situations in public for the past couple days. She locked herself into a stall and hiked up her dress with one hand, while struggling with the other to pull down her thong bikini panties and the Hanes Silk Reflections pantyhose. The tight half-slip she was wearing to keep the dress from wrapping around her legs as she walked was a little snug and resisted being pulled up, and all the while the hot, heavy pressure was building in Meg's bladder. Finally she managed to win the brief but frantic battle and plop down, feeling the heavy, feminine flow start and bring the relief that didn't change, no matter which sex one was. Meg wondered, however, if she'd ever get used to the sensation of urinating as a woman. It felt for all the world like she was 'going' with her butt, the opening was so far removed from its original starting point. Shaking off the thought, she took some paper and cleaned herself off, flushing the toilet with her foot as was the custom in men's rooms worldwide. *At least these places are a lot nicer*, Meg thought. *Men's rooms smell like men's pants. These places are clean.*

In fighting to get her clothing replaced, Meg noticed that she'd put a run in her hose with her long fingernails and swore bitterly. She left the stall and began trying to examine the damage, craning her head over both shoulders to see if she could still wear them. The door opened behind her and one of the Biology professors came in, a distinguished-looking woman that Meg had seen around several times before. The woman gave Meg a quizzical look.

"Is there a problem, dear?"

"I have a run in my stocking," Meg said. "I'm trying to see if it's noticeable."

The professor looked long and hard at Meg's legs. "Ah, I see it. It's just under the hem of your dress. Nobody will see it unless they're looking for it. Which, with legs like yours, I'm afraid might be a possibility." The woman gave her a sardonic smile that was part-amused, part-envious.

"Thanks," Meg said. *Amazing*, she thought to herself as she checked her face and hair in the mirror while the professor took a stall. *Nobody talks to anyone else in a men's room. It*

wouldn't matter in the Pope was in there, you just stare at the tile right above the urinal and don't look to the left or the right. Then you wash your hands and get out as fast as you can.

She pulled at her bangs gently, fluffing them out as Cassie'd taught her. She was glad that the goop had made her hair so shiny. So far, it was the best part about having been changed next to the natural flexibility. Mark had always had a thing for shiny, soft hair and now he had a head full of luxurious red curls that most women would kill for. Meg had despaired over the length, knowing it would become a nuisance in workouts and therefore in competition, but now that she knew how to braid it back, she decided to keep it long because she liked the way it looked so much. Same with the fingernails. The manicurist at the salon had given her some short acrylic extensions which added about a quarter- to half-inch of length. Meg had been prepared to cut them free as soon as she got home, but decided to work the heavy-bag first to see if it was tolerable. She didn't have much trouble at all, so she decided to keep them. It was a little hard to do things like dial the phone and type, but that was a matter of getting used to them. Even less than a day later, Meg felt like she'd worn her nails long for her whole life; she didn't even notice them anymore.

Meg finished primping and ducked out of the ladies' room and onto the lab floor. Dr. Tolliver and Dr. Mitchell were busy giving Heath a physical exam and Faith was checking from a sheet of numbers with Cassie. Heath's body was already beginning to exhibit the blue 'St. Elmo's Fire' that Cassie had told him about, a testament to the procedure's success. Heath should be back to normal within a couple days, eating like a horse and going through a growth spurt to regain his former body stature. Never would Heath have to fight with his pantyhose in the bathroom or check his makeup and hair before going out. He wouldn't have to face things like menstrual cramps and water retention. Tears began to gather in Meg's eyes and she ducked back out the door, just needing to get away from that place for a while. She stepped outside the Biology building and down the steps, just to get into the sun for a minute, leaning against the stone railing next to a group of men and women having cigarettes and talking about the weekend's college football games. Meg fetched a Kleenex from her purse and wiped her eyes.

"You okay?" one of the men asked, noticing her tears.

"Yeah," Meg lied. "Thanks. I just got a little bit of bad news."

"Sorry to hear it," the man said. "I'm David."

Quit it! Quit flirting with me! I'm a man, dammit! "Meg. Nice to meet you."

"You a student?" David asked.

"No, just here to pick up a friend of mine. She should be out in an hour or two."

"She's keeping you waiting?" David asked. "That sucks."

"I'm used to it," Meg said, blowing her nose. "Happens all the time."

"Why don't you come to lunch with us, Meg? We were just going to head over to the SUB to grab a burger before we've all got to be back," one of the other men in the group said.

Meg fought the urge to laugh bitterly. When he was a tall, muscular man, he'd been a threat. Nobody ever just walked up and talked to him, being afraid that he'd attack or use his muscular body to steal away their women or something. But now, Meg was finding out that

she'd have to work to be alone for any length of time. Even in the times like now, when she needed to be alone.

"No thanks," she said. "I kinda want to be by myself just now, if you don't mind."

"I understand," David said, tossing away his cigarette.

"Thanks for the offer, it was nice of you," Meg offered.

"Some other time, maybe?"

"Maybe," Meg said.

David smiled, and Meg got a strange feeling in her chest. She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something about him that made her feel kind of giddy, very self-conscious and awkward. She unconsciously began touching her hair. "I'll see you around," David said, and left with his group of friends, laughing and joking as they went. He stopped once and looked over his shoulder at Meg, and it seemed to start the uncomfortable feeling all over again. *What in the hell is wrong with me?* Meg thought with a note of panic. *Sure, he's a handsome guy, but that shouldn't matter to me, should it? How much of attraction is due to hormones, anyway? I don't want to be attracted to men. I love Cassie. I'm hers. These thoughts shouldn't even be in my head.*

Meg stood confused, pacing back and forth across the small porch in front of the Biology building, wishing there were something that she could hit to let the feeling out. She clung to that impulse. It was a feeling she was used to, and one she treasured because it was a male thing, a creation borne from aggression and strength and *yin* energy. As long as the need to strike and hit remained there was always a road back to being Mark. And no matter how long it took, she was going to get back there once that medal hung around her graceful neck.

She plucked at the floral print fabric of her dress. *These damn clothes aren't helping things,* Meg thought dismally. *If I'm trying to reinforce my masculinity the last thing I should be traipsing around in is a flowered dress and pantyhose.* Meg got a hold of herself. Half the game was being a convincing woman. Women wore dresses and pantyhose and went out with men. She was going to have to master these things if she expected to even get the chance to go to the Olympics in five months. The hard part was going to be showing the world what she had to and keeping herself strong and whole on the inside. Meg fervently hoped that her fixation on the Olympics wasn't going to end up taking away her sanity. *I shouldn't worry,* she thought. *I'm even starting to think of myself in the feminine now. Hell, it probably won't be long before these damn hormones have me considering children and china patterns.*

Cassie barged out the door, with a concerned look which faded the moment she saw Meg. "There you are," she said. "I wondered where you'd gotten off to. Heath's doing great. Are you all right?"

Right there, in front of the world, Meg took Cassie forcefully into her arms and planted a long, snail-tongued kiss on her love in broad daylight. Cassie leaned against her when she was done, panting a bit and taking a moment to regain her balance.

"What brought that on?" Cassie asked breathlessly. "Not that I minded."

"Just wanted to feel like myself again," Meg said.

"I wondered if it would be rough on you in there," Cassie said. "Just a half-inch of treated glass between you and the way things used to be. I expected you to come around the shield any time."

Meg touched away a lipstick smear on Cassie's face, grimacing inwardly that the lipstick was her own shade of dark wine instead of Cassie's more earthy pink. "I made up my mind. I can't turn back now," Meg said. "I figure once I'm past the point of no return, I'll be easier about all this."

Cassie took Meg's hand. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Cass. More than I can ever tell you."

"Well, my work here's done. Faith isn't letting anybody near Heath and plans to stay with him through the whole transformation. She'd like to say it's just for love, but the fifteen rolls of film she bought are a pretty good indication that she's also gonna try and gather a lot of data."

"Don't be such a cynic," Meg scolded. "Of course it's for love."

"You missed quite a scene in there," Cassie said. "As soon as Faith got back the skin samples and found out that they're turning male, Heath popped her the question. Had the ring and everything."

"He told me," Meg said. She snickered bitterly. "Said he wants me to be best *man*."

"That was cold," Cassie admitted. "Faith said she wasn't going to answer until they were sure he was okay, but I have a feeling she'll say yes before the night's out. I imagine that tonight will be a little bit emotionally charged for the two of them."

"Yeah," Meg mused. "It'll be nice to go through it with somebody. Probably easier than just waking up one morning, and boom, you're the other sex. Y'know, I'm not sure if I've gotten over the shock of that yet. This morning, after workout, I went into the bathroom and started lathering my face to shave automatically. Then, as if to drive home the fact that I'm not a man anymore, I started crying for a half hour. I wish I could stop that. These hormones are driving me nuts. I never used to cry like that."

"I imagine it'll be easier to control once your body balances itself out inside. Your endocrine system's still on a low boil, according to Dr. Mitchell."

"I can't blame it all on hormones, though. Sometimes I feel like I'm losing it, and crying is the safest way to let the pressure off. I guess I just don't have the emotional control I need to lock all that stuff down anymore," Meg said. "All I know is that I'm getting really sick of it."

Cassie smiled. "You mean you don't get anything out of a good cry?"

"A runny nose," Meg said. "Most of the time I'm just embarrassed about the whole thing."

"You have to realize that for a woman it's completely acceptable."

"But inside, I'm not a woman," Meg countered. "And crying like that isn't acceptable."

Cassie chafed Meg's hand gently between her palms. "If you keep trying to fight what's outside with what's inside, you're going to make yourself sick, babe. You're going to have to just let things happen naturally. Fighting it is going to turn you into a basketcase."

"It's not that easy," Meg said. "Every little thing is different. Every step I take is different. I can't even brush my teeth the same way any more without slinging my tits all over the bathroom. The external differences alone could take a lifetime to get used to. I refuse to let this change the way I think. Sure, I can behave differently, but the way I think and believe has to stay me, or Mark Rutherford is, for all intents and purposes, dead."

"You scare me when you talk like this," Cassie said.

"I'm sorry, but it's the way things are," Meg retorted. "The second I start finding no problem with crying in public is the same second that Mark gets replaced with someone different. Mark Rutherford didn't cry. He didn't notice how good other guys looked. Hell, he didn't even recognize how he looked half the time. Something inside me has to stay *me*, or what's the point?"

Cassie let her hand drop, her brow furrowed up as it did when she was thinking very hard. "How can I help you," she asked at length. "I'm not letting you go, you know that. Faith and Heath are looking at one emotionally-charged roller coaster of a night. You and me, sweetheart, we're looking at a couple years of it, and I'm not going anywhere. So you're going to have to let me in the loop. I might be able to help you more if you'd let me know what was going on before it came to a head like this."

"I don't know," Meg said. "This thing has already messed up one life, I don't want it to take yours away too. You were working and I didn't want to bother you with this. I don't want to become your job, Cass. So I don't know what I need - I still feel like you'd know better about what I need than I do. Everything's so goddamn confusing right now, I don't know which way is up."

Cassie lowered her head. "Someday, I'm going to get past feeling like this is my fault and be able to be of some use to you," she admitted.

"I look at it this way. If you'd been using female skin samples instead of Billy, I'd have to be learning how to be gay in public now. This is all an accident. Sure, it changed my life, but what if the place had blown sky-high? Or sterilized us both? What if you'd been using rat or guinea pig samples? This could all be a whole lot worse. That thought and that thought only is the reason I'm standing in front of you wearing a dress and pantyhose. I can still think, and I can still compete, so it wasn't a total loss."

"You're amazing," Cassie told him. "You're so damn *strong*."

Meg took her hand and led her away. "Thanks. You're no weakling yourself. Let's go eat."

* * * * *

The Student Union Building was crowded by the time Meg and Cassie got into the line for the salad bar. Meg felt like she had to go and greet David, making light conversation for a few minutes before she went on to join Cassie in line some distance away. Cassie nudged her companion in the ribs, smiling wickedly at her.

"Good eye," she said. "I had a thing for David the whole time I was an undergrad."

"Did you ever go out with him?" Meg asked.

"Never did. He was really taken back then, some bimbo psych major named Tina. She dumped him right before we graduated. He's a really sweet guy. He works in the same lab as Xiao."

As the two women edged past the crowded, bumping line at the grill, some overweight, hairy lout wearing sandals and a T-shirt covered with Greek letters 'accidentally' let his hand slip and catch a long and informative feel of Meg's posterior. Without thinking, Meg let her tray and silverware drop with a clatter as she pivoted on one leg, grabbing the offending hand in by the wrist and forcing it back over itself in a vicious arm-bar. The frat-rat raised up on his toes, grabbing his shoulder and wincing as his friends (who had probably put him up to it) stared on incredulously. The entire SUB was beginning to stare and laughter was coming from the nearest people.

"Did you get a good feel, or do you want to try again?" she said, loudly enough that the whole cafeteria looked at the scene with interest. The frat-boy blushed madly and tried to squirm, increasing the pain of the hold as he did. Tears were beginning to leak from his eyes and he was holding his breath.

"I'm sorry," the guy stammered.

Meg reversed the hold and the guy sank to his knees. "Next time, grab your own ass and keep your hands off of mine, you understand?" She released the hold and the offender took a deep breath, closing his eyes with the sudden relief of pressure on the bones in his wrist. Meg reclaimed a fresh tray and silverware and stomped past the knot of fraternity apes back to her place in line to a hearty round of applause from several of the patrons in the cafeteria. Meg blushed and ignored the clapping, hoping it would just go away.

"Do you have any idea how much I've wanted to do something like that?" Cassie whispered, smiling. "That was fantastic. You've just struck a blow for women's rights on campus."

"No, I just struck a blow at some jerk-off who can't keep his hands to himself," Meg growled, heaping her plate with lettuce. Cassie lost it in a snorting fit of chuckles which soon spread to Meg as well, although the redhead covered better since so many eyes were on her. As soon as she and Cassie sat and tried to eat, they were accosted by people, all of them gushing about Meg's performance and what a good thing it had been, putting those idiot Greeks in their place.

"I'll give you twenty dollars if you'll teach me that hold," one slight girl said loudly.

"Sorry," Meg said, trying to at least get a bite of her lunch. "You could hurt someone if you did it wrong. It's not something to play around with. Join a dojo, and you'll learn it in a year or two."

"You should teach," someone else said.

"I do," Meg told them. "Just not here."

Cassie whispered into her ear, "Try being a little more gracious."

"These people are starting to piss me off," Meg whispered back. "I can't eat nearly as much as I used to, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't like to eat *something*, dammit."

Meg finally diffused the situation completely by standing. "Look, folks, I'm glad you appreciated what I did. But I originally came in here to eat, not to strike a blow for women's

rights on campus," she said, borrowing Cassie's line. "I'll gladly pass out business cards from my dojo across town if you're interested in studying, but before you ask, I won't be teaching because I'm in training for the Olympics. But we have several other, fine teachers there."

Cassie shook her head. "You shouldn't worry about losing your masculinity," she whispered once Meg had seated herself. "You just dealt with that situation in the most masculine way possible."

"Sure, they're a mob," Meg commented softly, "but they don't have a patch on a class full of nine-year-olds learning taekwondo. You just gotta be firm and give them their options."

David walked up to the edge of the table, his friends clustered a short distance away, talking among themselves. "Cassie? Is that you?" he asked. "My God, you look fantastic!"

"Thanks," Cassie said, smiling and tucking her hair behind one ear. *What is it about this guy that makes women play with their hair?* Meg thought. "How have you been?" Cassie asked.

"Not too bad," he replied. "Working up in Biochemistry for Dr. Valdez and Dr. Chuang. They're trying to move Xiao's work forward and engineer a virus that targets certain cells. Hopefully we're going to find a potential cure for cancer."

"Isn't that what Dr. Tolliver's doing?" Meg asked pointedly.

"Who knows what Dr. Tolliver's doing? His labs have been locked up tight as a drum for two weeks, and Faith isn't talking. Hell, nobody's talking. I hope everything works out over there. It's a great project."

"I helped with the software," Cassie told him. "Apparently, they're having pretty good success."

David sat down. "I can't believe how great you look," he said again, looking at Cassie. Meg stood and took both her tray and Cassie's. That seemed to snap Cassie back to reality for a moment.

"Don't get up," Meg said. "I'll handle this. I'm way late for the gym. You two stay and talk, and I'll call you this evening." She practically had to force Cassie back down into her seat. "I mean it, Cass, stay. You don't want to sit around the gym and watch me work out for three hours."

David smiled and Meg consciously refused to let her hands anywhere near her hair. "It was nice meeting you, Meg. That was great, what you did over there."

"Thanks," she said. There was a brief, possessive urge to kiss Cassie good-bye but Meg forced it away from her mind. She bussed the trays and walked for the parking lot and her beat-up green truck. Cassie had been entranced by David, and Meg couldn't help thinking *What does he have that I don't* and simultaneously hating herself for knowing the answer.

* * * *

Meg was finding it easier and easier to perform the moves that had been like second nature to her for most of her life, turning through the various forms and movements with perfect power and balance, and her awkward new body was gaining in strength and grace. Every workout pushed her limits back a little farther and some confidence was beginning to return in her

ability to actually make the cut at Nationals. She'd run two classes since she'd left the dojo, the unpredictable fun of the nine- and ten-year olds and then the more mature satisfaction of the black belt class that afternoon. She'd just made the pool at the hospital, cutting the water with her new slender body as she'd never been able to before. Now she was just working for the joy of it, reveling in the maneuvers that she'd been practicing since boyhood, combating and defeating imaginary opponents as she ran through the *palque* of her discipline. It was several minutes before the jangling of the telephone could snap her out of the trance of movement she was in. She trotted over to the wall and answered the phone.

"Silver Tiger Taekwondo," she said. "This is Mar-Meg."

"Hi," Cassie's voice answered. "Are you mad at me?"

"No," Meg replied. "I'm mad at myself. Did you have fun?"

"We sat and talked for a while, caught up."

"Watching you two together makes me wish I'd gone to college."

There was a long pause on the other end. "It's not too late."

"Maybe after Nationals I'll talk about it," Meg said, trying to sound cheerful. "I have too much on my mind right now. Don't wait up for me tonight, babe, I'm gonna be here late working on the spin moves. My butt's so huge they don't seem to be working quite right."

"I think your butt is fine," Cassie said. "It's a lot better than mine."

"I'll be the judge of that," Meg said.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

"I'll get a McSomething on the way home."

"You *are* mad at me."

Meg leaned her head against the wall in frustration. "I said I wasn't mad at you."

"It was just that I hadn't seen him in a while, and I used to have the biggest crush on him."

Meg sighed. "Cassie, I'm not mad. I wasn't the least bit threatened by him and I know you're in love with me. You can talk to whomever you please, dammit, I don't own you."

"You said *whomever*. You don't get grammatically correct unless you're mad."

"If you have to know, I'm mad because I hate the way I'm being treated now. I used to be secure every time I went out the door, and now I'm treated like prey or something. I've been asked out more times in two days than I was through *all* of high school. And I don't want any of it. I wish there was some kind of armor I could wear, some sign that says 'I can take care of myself and I don't need your attention,' or something."

"Every woman wishes for that at some point," Cassie said. "It's part of it."

"I hate being the center of attention. It was actually refreshing when David completely ignored me to talk to you," Meg said. "That's why I left when I did - because nobody was paying attention."

"David went on and on about you," Cassie said. "I think he's smitten."

"His loss. I'm spoken for."

Cassie sighed. "God, I wish this hadn't happened."

"Me too." Meg decided to change the subject. "How's Heath doing?"

"Great. Eating enough for three, Faith says. Poor guy's already grown an inch and can't walk without tripping over his own feet."

"Poor bastard," Meg commented. "A boy should only have to go through the 'knees and elbows' stage once in their life. That's enough for anybody."

"They were about to take the first sperm sample when I called. Faith was going to help him."

"Sounds nice. Gives me something to look forward to."

There was a very long, awkward pause. "That's one of the reasons I called."

"What?"

"According to Dr. Tolliver's estimates, you're past the point of no return," Cassie said dejectedly. "We're not sure whether you'll be able to change back at all anymore." The news hit Meg harder than she'd expected. All she could do was stand there, holding the phone and breathing hard.

"Meg? You there? You okay?"

"Yeah. Just. hell, I don't know how I am right now."

"Do you need me to be there?" Cassie asked.

"Not unless you want to be," Meg replied.

"I do," Cassie said. "I'm on my way. You shouldn't be alone right now."

* * * *

Cassie took Faith's car and parked it behind the dojo, entering through the back door using Heath's key. The couple was fine and giddily happy, back in Heath's apartment. They'd been busily playing bed games for a few hours, delighted at Heath's slow return back to normal. Heath looked abysmally skinny and drawn but animated. Faith had told her privately that Heath couldn't have sex for more than about a half-hour before he had to stop and eat something. Ah, puberty. Cassie thought it best to leave them alone together, since her prediction had been right on and Faith had agreed to be Mrs. Heath Crenshaw as soon as she got her degree. Cassie had congratulated them both and tried to hide her own loss from their moment of happiness.

She threaded through the darkened front room, slipping between the dojo's trophy cases towards the light coming from under the door to the gym which, for all intents and purposes, was Heath and Meg's. The sounds of impact and breathing, plus the jangling of the heavy-bag

chains sounded abnormally loud in the dead silence of the school. Cassie opened the door slowly, letting her eyes get used to the bright light inside, and looked in.

Meg was working hard, her pale skin covered with a sheen of sweat. And she wasn't wearing a stitch as she pounded repeated spin-kicks into the heavy bag, making her breasts jiggle and shake with each impact. Her red curls spread behind her head like a fan as she kicked, faster and faster and faster. Her nipples stood out proud and erect as she regained her footing and resumed the attack. She didn't even notice Cassie's arrival, so lost was she in the mechanics of the discipline.

Finally she broke the mesmerizing rhythm of the sequence when the sweat began to sting her eyes and she had to grab a towel from the back of one of the Trotter weight machines. She noticed Cassie and jumped, snatching up her *gi* jacket and shrugging into it.

"Hi," Cassie said.

"Hi," Meg replied. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Just got here," Cassie said. "Having fun?"

"I was in the shower when I had an idea for a combination move. I didn't feel like putting my clothes back on," Meg explained. "I didn't think you'd be able to let yourself in."

"Heath lent me his key," Cassie said. "You looked beautiful."

The tops of Meg's breasts blushed. "Thanks."

"Look at me," Cassie said. Meg raised her clarion green eyes to hers.

"We've hit some trouble today," Cassie said. "It's been tough on us both. I figured out that I don't want to get pushed away. I would've much rather you threw a tantrum and dragged me away from David at lunch than what happened."

"I don't think," Meg started.

"Let me finish," Cassie interrupted. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're going through, Meg. I couldn't begin to guess what it must be like to have your entire life change. You're a dear for trying so hard to help me understand, but I never am, plain and simple."

"So that means we have to redefine the relationship," Cassie said, removing her jacket. She was wearing the green leather skirt and silk blouse that Mark had bought for her what seemed like a lifetime ago. "I'm willing to do it. I don't know if either one of us is ready, but it's past the point where we can put it off anymore. So social stigma be damned."

"What are you talking about?" Meg asked, grabbing up a pair of pants.

Cassie covered the ground between them quickly, taking the sweat-pants from Meg's hand and slowly nuzzling several small baby kisses on Meg's neck. She fumbled with the buttons of her blouse for a moment, then took Meg's hand in hers and placed it through the opening in her blouse and onto her soft breast. She put her arms around Meg's neck. Cassie had been a little worried about just how to go about seducing a woman, but then she realized the key was in seducing Mark. Mark liked her direct and aggressive in bed, so that was how she approached Meg. The neck-kisses were working; Mark had once told her that he thought all women had a 'magic spot' on their necks which caused their heads to crane back so that their

whole neck could be available for kissing. It must be genetic. Cassie found Meg's and the redhead's chin went towards the ceiling instantly with a throaty moan.

Meg couldn't speak, only tangle her long fingers in Cassie's hair and gently knead her lace-covered breast with the other. She began to unconsciously rub her crotch against Cassie's thigh. Cassie kissed her way around her lover's breasts until finally alighting on her nipples, bringing them to a fiery hardness with her tongue and the barest pressure of her teeth. Meg had finished unbuttoning her blouse and laid it over the preacher-curl bar, pulling Cassie's lace-clad body against hers with astounding force.

"You're sure about this?" Meg asked gently.

"Tonight's not about me," Cassie clarified. "Tonight is when you learn how wonderful being a woman can be." Cassie's hands began to knead Meg's breasts, making her breath catch. Meg's heavy, musky smell became quite noticeable.

Cassie kissed and sucked her breasts for several more minutes, bringing Meg to such heights that she had to grab one of the weight machines for balance. Judging that the time was about right, Cassie sat Meg on one of the weight benches, shucked her skirt, and knelt between her girlfriend's legs, pushing her onto her back with gentle pressure against the flat stomach. Meg moaned as her soft lips touched her sex, experiencing the desire to have something inside her for the first time. Her nipples were like iron, standing atop her bobbing breasts as Cassie's fingers and tongue brought her closer and closer to.

It was like a cup brimming over, and Meg's whole body shuddered. She didn't want gentleness then and ground her crotch against Cassie's chin, yelping and chirping as she gripped the bench hard enough for her nails to split the vinyl covering. It was like all the tension in every muscle melted into fire and flowed through her. She shuddered in a way only females could, crying, "Oh God. Oh God."

After Meg had returned the favor with gentle kisses and touches, the two lovers lazed on the competition mat for a while, Meg standing a silent vigil as Cassie decided to sleep for a bit. Her new body couldn't handle extreme temperature like it could before, and Meg was forced to pull her *gi* jacket on and fetch a wooly blanket from a nearby closet. She took a moment to put on some soft music, something to carry the tender mood of the moment without waking Cassie. She picked one of her brother's favorites, a collection of Irish folk as sung by Mary Black, and pillowed her head on her arm and the velvet of her own hair, watching Cassie's face as she slept. In the background, Ms. Black began to sing softly:

"It reads like a fairy-tale, and that's what it was;

A young man in his prime, a young girl from the cross.

The most perfect of strangers, and then the night closed in,

And the holy ground took care of everything.

Now she was a fine one, and he was a handsome man,

One look was enough, and away they ran.

They spent many happy hours and then the night closed in,
And the holy ground took care of everything.

Oh, what's the use in complaining?
In for a penny, in for a pound
I remember the loving time
And nothing else really counts.

And I recall the promise they made, with a faith I can but admire,
The she'd be the one he adored and he'd be her heart's desire.

It didn't come true in the end, they went their separate ways
He couldn't change what he was, she wasn't ready to wait
They couldn't live in the daylight, they let the night close in,
And the holy ground took care of everything.

They couldn't live in the daylight, they let the night close in,
And the holy ground took care of everything.

I remember the loving time and nothing else really counts."

Meg wept bitterly and wondered how she was ever going to get used to this. Cassie's beautiful, perfect sleeping face gave her no answers to any question. Meg buried her face in the blanket and gave vent to her emotions in the acceptable woman's way.

* * * * *

The phone rang at the dojo early, before the sun. Meg catapulted to her feet, wondering who on earth would call here at 4 a.m. on a Wednesday morning.

"Silver Tiger Taekwondo," Meg said.

"Meg? It's Faith."

"Faith? What's the matter?"

"Get over here. Quick."

"Okay, let me get Cassie."

"No. Just you. Please hurry. It's Heath."

"What's wrong? Tell me."

There was a muffled sound in the background. It sounded like a thumping. "Something we couldn't have foreseen. His brain was responding to the lack of testosterone in his system by commanding more and more production. So once his body was able to produce testosterone again, the chemical controls were telling him to absolutely flood his system with it. He's almost out of control. I need you."

"Sit tight," Meg said. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

Meg threw on her *gi* and snagged her purse, running out the door. The Toyota was kind enough to start on the first try and Meg flew through the empty streets in record time, sprinting up the stairs to Faith and Heath's apartment three at the time. Faith let her in immediately.

"Hurry," Faith pleaded. "Get him under control before he wakes up the neighbors and they call the police." She wasn't visibly hurt, but she looked very shaken.

"Have you called Dr. Tolliver?"

"Yeah. He's on his way with Dr. Mitchell and somebody named Dennis Mendoza."

Meg remembered Dennis' build and skill at boxing and breathed easier. "Good. Dennis will be a good man for this. Where is he?"

"I locked him in the bedroom. He's smashed the door to pieces but he still can't get out. You have to get him to control himself. We were making love and I was starting to get sore, so I asked him to get off of me for a moment. He just snapped. He went completely crazy."

Meg swept her hair from her eyes. "Do I have to keep him conscious?"

"Just don't hurt him. It's not his fault."

"Hang in there, Faith," Meg said gently. "Dr. Tolliver will be able to fix him right up. He can be castrated chemically for a while until his system's back under control."

Just then the bedroom door caved in before a vicious kick and Heath came out. He was naked and bleeding from his assault on the heavy solid-core door, but his angry face betrayed no sign of fatigue or calm. His shoulders were heaving with effort. Heath was stick-thin, having lost all his muscle mass to the previous transformation, but his arms were wiry with lean muscle and his stance gave away the adrenaline high he was riding. Meg was a little shocked at the complete lack of control in her best friend's eyes.

"I shoulda known you'd call somebody," Heath growled. "What now, Faith? Gonna try some other Frankenstein shit on me now? What are you gonna turn me into this time?"

"Calm down, Heath," Meg cautioned. "It's gone too far."

"What do you know, huh?" Heath spat. "My first night back with a dick and she thinks she can cut me off. I'm sick of it. Sick of being played for a sucker. I'm getting what I want."

"You'll have to go through me," Meg warned.

"You think I won't? You think I wouldn't kick your ass and then take my fill of you? You may be Mark on the inside but lemme tell you something, you got a body that screams for what I want."

"So you're gonna be a rapist now, Heath?" Meg said. "Faith called me to kick your ass. If rape's what you're doing now, I might just leave you dead."

"You think you got it in you, babe?" Heath hissed. "You're not gonna have the height advantage anymore, or the speed. Now I'm bigger and stronger."

"Sure you are," Meg said. "And you're pumped out of your mind on testosterone. It's making you nuts. You sure you want this? The shot at the title we swore we'd never take?"

"All my life I heard people asking in the background which of us was the better."

"And you can't die without knowing."

Heath rushed, and his speed was terrifying. Meg spun underneath the blazing outside punch and put her heel into Heath's midsection. But she was holding back as she always did when squared away with Heath and the kick barely fazed him. He brought a scything elbow onto her hip and sent her crashing to the hardwood floor, the shock of impact spreading through her body. She just managed to worm her way out from the stomping side-kick which followed, kicking her foot free of Heath's iron grip and catapulting to her feet. The soreness of her workout and following evening with Cassie was slowing everything down.

"That bad knee I gave you is slowing you down, *Meg*," he said, putting more venom in her chosen name than she'd thought possible. "You sure you just don't want to call this off? You're not involved in this. It's between me and Faith."

"Not anymore," Meg said, regaining her balance and recalculating her distance to account for Heath's blazing speed. "You're not touching Faith. You need to get your dick in something, you're gonna have to die trying to stick it in me."

Heath's face went acidly cold. "You got a deal, sweetheart."

The raging aggression through Heath's veins sent him back on the offensive in a wild rush that in another lifetime would have been calculated to drive Mark from the mat and no more. This time it was geared more towards broken nose and concussion. Meg should have been able to capitalize on the fact that Heath was kicking too high and take out his plant leg, but her best friend's speed was just too fast.

Time for the sacrifice fly, Meg said, and stepped shallow. Heath's spinning back kick caught her solidly across the collarbones and she was surprised not to hear one or both of them snap. The impact slammed the breath from her legs and snapped her head backwards, making her vision blur. But she managed to hold onto the leg and arrest the recovery, pivoting her weight across her hips and driving her foot into the back of Heath's knee. The man went down hard, bouncing his head on the hardwood floor. Another snap-kick and Heath was no longer interested in the fight, being much more concerned with holding his balls and trying unsuccessfully to take deep breaths.

"Good night, sweet prince," Meg panted, her vision greying out to a tunnel. He barely felt the contact of her heel and Heath's forehead which robbed her best friend of consciousness before she fell beside him, bleeding from one nostril.

Ω



SUMMARY: Two friends find themselves victims of a science experiment which turns them into women who now must deal with their new life and their changing relationship with their girlfriends. part four

ALL THAT GLITTERS, Part IV (Chapters 9-11)

By Valerie Hope

CHAPTER NINE: And I never shall play the Wild Rover no more.

MEG CAME TO with a horrible smell in her nostrils. Dr. Mitchell was checking her pupils with a pen-light and dimly heard Dr. Tolliver's voice in the background, phasing in and out between the pounding of her blood in her ears.

". should have guessed by the rapid changes in his musculature, Faith. It should have been a dead giveaway." Someone in the room was crying.

Meg wanted to go back to sleep, but strong hands shook her gently, refusing her the comfortable blackness behind her eyelids. "Come on, *chica*. Stay with us. You got a bitch of a concussion and I can't let you go back to sleep."

Several blurred and smeared images coalesced for a second into Dennis' Mendoza's face. He looked very concerned before he broke up back into primary colors. Meg ran her tongue across her teeth to see if fungus truly was growing there. She attempted to ask Dennis what had happened, but all that came out was a long, inarticulate moan.

"Meg, I'm going to give you a little adrenaline," a disembodied woman's voice said to her left. There was a pinching in her arm and Dennis' face coalesced again.

"Come on, *pelirrojo*. Stay with me. Stay here with me."

Meg dreamily decided she liked the strong arms around her. It reminded her of something.

Something forced her to sit up, and she vomited all over herself. Hands solidified from the ether that was her peripheral vision and started cleaning up the mess.

"Man, I can't believe this is really him," Mendoza's voice muttered from somewhere under her chin.

"Whu happa?"

"You took a bell-ringer, babe," Dennis told her. "We're all wondering how in the hell you stayed on your feet through it. Even the guy who landed the punch thought he'd drop you for sure."

"Heef? Okay?"

"Heath is fine, dear," Dr. Mitchell said. "We're more worried about you right now."

"Fafe?"

"Faith is okay too," Dr. Tolliver said, moving to Meg's side.

"I hurt," Meg muttered.

"You have every right to," Dr. Tolliver said. "Can you tell me what day it is?"

"No."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Heef's 'partm'nt."

"Do you remember how you got here?"

"Car."

"Do you remember where you were when Faith called you?"

"Wit' Cassie."

Dennis smiled. "I think she's gonna be fine."

"Tell me how many fingers I'm holding up," Dr. Mitchell ordered.

"Light's too bright," Meg muttered, her head lolling. "I think three. Oh God, I gotta puke again."

Dr. Tolliver managed to grab a wastebasket just in time for Meg to heave her guts up again. Once she managed to bring up what she hoped weren't her toenails, she lolled her head back and asked for water.

"I feel like shit," she commented as Dennis tipped a cup against her lips. She took a shallow sip and coughed, then rinsed her mouth and spit into the trashcan. Then she drank a little. She shook Dennis' arms from around her and grabbed her throbbing head. At least it seemed to still be attached.

"Did the air bag go off?" she joked weakly.

"Nope," Dennis said. "Afraid you're gonna get a standing eight-count."

"What'd I do to Heath?"

"We have him restrained downstairs in my van," Dr. Mitchell said. "There wasn't much fight in him by the time we showed up with the hired muscle. You'd concussed him severely and fractured his jaw."

"Didn't mean to," Meg sighed, and her eyes began to tear up.

"Hey, it was him or you, *chica*," Dennis said soothingly. "You did what you had to and didn't hurt him any more than you absolutely needed. You done real good. Real good."

Meg didn't have more than a hazy grip on herself and started sobbing. Dennis' strong arms enfolded her and rocked her gently back and forth, whispering in Spanish and smoothing her hair. Meg couldn't understand a single word, but it sure sounded nice.

Finally she got her head in some semblance of order - it was very hard to think straight - and set about dealing with the business at hand. "Help me up," she told Dennis, struggling to get her feet beneath her. "I gotta pee."

"You done good, *chica*, even though you were a head taller than me last time I saw you," Dennis commented, catching her under the arm and assisting her as she started for the bathroom at an upwind tack. "Your boy downstairs was so hopped up on his own nut-juice that he probably could've shrugged off a taser hit. You dropped him like he was a rookie."

"He always did kick too high for his own good," Meg groaned, feeling the aches and pains of her whole body as she tried to move. "I've been getting him with that same move since we were boys."

Dennis helped her into the bathroom and started to retreat.

"Where you going?" Meg asked.

"I'm gonna give you some privacy."

"Come off it," Meg said. "I may have a great set of tits, but we're all still guys here. I doubt I have anything you haven't ever seen before and I'm gonna need your help getting up and getting down."

Dennis flushed a little, but stayed where he was while Faith dropped her *gi* pants and panties and plopped unsteadily onto the toilet. "Damn," the big Latino commented. "You really are a girl."

"Down to the bone, man," Meg said, holding her head as though it might fly apart at any moment.

"Well, you can still fight, that's for damn sure," Dennis laughed. "I had to wrestle that *pendejo* down two flights of stairs and he almost got the better of me even with a concussion. I may have to take some of that taekwondo shit someday. Looks useful."

"Unless you get hit by any trains."

"How'd he get you?" Dennis asked.

"He was too fast to get inside and too jumped up to wear him down. I was straight out of bed and still a little logy. So I improvised. I walked straight into the kick and rolled the dice to see if I could stay awake long enough to take him out. Looks like I came up sevens."

"What would've happened if you'd crapped out?"

Meg blew her nose. "He said he was gonna rape me."

Dennis whistled softly. "Man, our balls make some dangerous shit."

"Where you getting this 'we' shit, *kemo sabe*? I don't got any anymore, remember? All mine do anymore is make me cramp up, retain water, and cry over long distance commercials."

Dennis laughed. "Mark, you're a marvel."

"It's Meg now," the girl said. "I gotta get used to it."

"The docs said that your buddy out there was a girl too, but he got himself switched back to normal. Why didn't you do it too? Is being a girl that much better than being a guy?"

"It's complicated," Meg said. "Basically, if I changed back not only would I go on the mother testosterone rush like Heath did, but I would have lost all my muscle mass and been about six inches shorter than I used to be. Kinda like the beginning of puberty. I have pretty much everything banked on Nationals this year. Hell, you've seen my knee. If I don't make the Olympics now I'll never get the chance again. So I figured if I couldn't go as a man I could go as a woman."

"Ballsy," Dennis commented. "I don't know that I could've done it."

"It hasn't been easy, especially because I have a girlfriend that isn't leaving anytime soon," Meg said. "There's just a whole lot of things that I'd like to do to her that I can't do anymore. It's frustrating as hell sometimes. But then, being a man in a girl's body has its advantages too."

"Like?"

Meg grinned even though it made her face hurt. "Like getting to truly enjoy the scenery in a ladies' dressing room and nobody can kick you out," she said. Dennis chuckled loudly.

"So this is all for the Olympics, then. It's so important that you were willing to give your *verga* up for it. That's what I call dedication, ese," Dennis commented. "I'll be rooting for you."

"Thanks," Meg said, wiping herself. She flushed the toilet while still seated and Dennis helped her unsteadily to her feet. She hiked her britches up with one hand and then went back into the front room. Faith was cleaning herself up and Dr. Tolliver was waiting to lead her downstairs.

"We're going to take Heath to the hospital," Dr. Mitchell said. "I want you to come, too, Meg."

"I have to tell Cassie what happened first," Meg said, picking up the phone. "I'll be right behind you." She handed her keys to Dennis. She tried to punch in the number for the dojo, but her fingers couldn't seem to get hit what they were aiming at. After a series of failed attempts, Dennis dialed for her. The phone rang for a long while before it was sleepily answered by Cassie.

"Hello?" she said, sounding confused.

"Cass, it's Meg," Meg said. "Something went wrong with Heath and I had to run to help Faith handle him. He got jumped up on his own testosterone and got a little out of control."

Dennis raised an eyebrow. "A little?"

"Is everybody okay?" Cassie asked.

"Yes and no," Meg said. "We're all a bit upset. Heath and I got in a knock-down drag-out over here and we kinda hurt each other some. Dr. Mitchell and Dr. Tolliver think I should go to the hospital with Heath and get checked out."

"Dear God," Cassie said. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

"Not bad," Meg replied. "I have a concussion and I think maybe a cracked collarbone. It also feels like I might've bruised or fractured a rib when I fell the first time. I dunno - the fight's kind of a blur. Apparently I was out for a while."

"I'll meet you at the hospital."

"Could you bring me some clothes, babe? I ran out of the dojo in just my *gi* and I threw up all over it when I came to. I'd really appreciate it."

Cassie sniffed, a testament to the fact that she'd been crying on the other end. *Is there ever an excuse for a woman not to cry, for Chrissakes?* Meg thought bitterly, feeling the wetness on her own cheeks from her recent sobs. "I'll handle it," Cassie said.

"Nothing tight," Meg pleaded. "I'm bunged up pretty bad."

"I love you, you foolhardy maniac," Cassie said, half-laughing. "Anybody tell you yet that you can be the damsel in distress and can hang up the shining armor now?"

"Not my scene," Meg said. "Besides, one of those big cone hats would look stupid on me. I love you, too. Don't rush or have a wreck, I'm fine. I'll see you at the ER."

* * * * *

The examination and MRI were uncomfortable because of the bruises Meg had to lay on. But Dennis managed to keep her laughing and talking so that the time seemed to pass until Cassie arrived. Cassie arrived in a flood of worry, taking Meg's hand and not letting go, showering her face with kisses and tender caresses.

"Shoulda known," Dennis said, smiling. "Still a guy on the inside, huh."

"Yeah," Meg said. "Cassie's still my girl, even though we can share clothes now."

"I was kinda hoping to ask you out," Dennis grumped.

"Dennis, you may be the only male on the planet I'd say yes to," Meg confessed.

"So, if either one of you lovely ladies ever needs a fag-hag for any reason, look me up."

Meg guffawed. "Fag-hag, no. Trainer, yes."

Dennis raised an eyebrow. "You serious, ese?"

"You bet I am. I'd feel a lot better with you looking out for this knee."

Dennis tapped his chin with a finger. "It'd take some reshuffling of schedules."

"Hey, I don't have a job. I'm pretty flexible, time-wise."

"Lemme get back to you," Dennis said.

"Do it and I'll give you that date," Meg promised.

"You'll wear girl clothes and everything?"

Meg grinned. "*Amigo*, wait'll you see some of the things Cassie picked out for me to wear. I'll have you drooling all over yourself. I might even wear heels and makeup."

Dennis laughed. "I wouldn't want you to put yourself out or anything."

"Putting out of any kind simply will not happen," Meg told him.

Dennis folded in half laughing. "Okay, I'll try. Let me see if I can get the time off for Nationals. We'll see how well the schedule thing works out, and then we'll go out."

"When and where, handsome?" Meg asked.

"Where? *Fonda San Miguel*, the five-star Mexican restaurant on the south side of town," Dennis said. "And we'll go when you get the gold medal at National Championship. Deal?"

"Deal." Meg rewarded him with one of her rare, genuine smiles, and Dennis' return had more than a hint of envy and want in it. For once, Meg didn't seem to mind at all.

So it's that simple after all, Cassie thought with surprise. She'd gone out with Mark because he'd treated her like an equal, a friend. It turned out that was all Meg needed, too. Since the accident Cassie had been treating Meg like a china doll, afraid that the tenuous relationship would snap if looked at too sharply and that Meg would begin blaming her if she stopped being solicitous for one second. Until last night, Cassie had felt more like Meg's big sister than the object of her love. Meg probably thought that Cassie was being so conciliatory because she needed to in order to assuage guilt - it was certainly a selfless enough motive to jive with Meg's character. So that was why Meg hadn't told her that what she wanted and needed to heal more than anything else in the world was to be treated not like a little sister, or a novice woman, or a student, but like an equal. Cassie kicked herself, mentally, for being so insensitive.

"How you feeling, tiger?" she asked Meg.

"Tiger," Meg commented. "You haven't called me that since we first slept together."

"I thought I should. It suits you."

Meg grinned and Cassie felt herself begin to un-knot inside. "Stiff and sore."

Dr. Mitchell entered the examination room, tucking her glasses into a pocket. "My dear, you're a marvel indeed," she said to Meg. "We compared your MRI and x-rays to Heath's. He kicked you hard enough to shatter his own heel. You escaped with a hairline fracture in your right collarbone. You did, however, get a nasty crack in your rib when he knocked you down the first time. The wrist you were complaining about when you got here is just a mild sprain, which should be fine in a couple days if you ice it down in the evenings."

Meg sat up. "How's Heath?"

"Not great," Dr. Mitchell said. "You didn't wreck his knee, but he did fracture his shin when he landed. You also broke his jaw and gave him a minor skull fracture. He's missing three teeth. We think he swallowed them."

Meg lowered her head into her hands. "Can I see him?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Dr. Mitchell said. "Ever since we gave him the testosterone blocker and the sedatives, he's been crying over how he treated you and Faith. He's even mentioned suicide once or twice where the nurses could hear."

"He always does that when he gets really depressed," Meg said. "It's just blowing smoke."

"We hope so," Dr. Mitchell said. "We're a little worried. We're going to send in a therapist to talk to him once the counseling center opens in an hour."

"No psychologists," Meg said. "Heath makes a practice of carving them up. Better let me talk to him, it'll be easier on your staff." She levered herself weakly to her feet.

"He doesn't want to see anyone."

"Bullshit," Meg snorted. "That's just him blowing smoke again. I've known him longer than anyone alive. He'll talk to me and I'll help him get through this. He's still my best friend."

Dr. Mitchell could see by the look in Meg's green eyes that there would be no changing her mind, so she plopped Meg into a wheelchair and took her into Heath's room. Heath was staring despondently out the window, hooked to more hoses and IV tubes than Meg cared to count. A monitor beeped rhythmically in the background.

"Hey, Heath," Meg said. "How you feeling, buddy?"

Heath turned to face her slowly, his dark eyes a little glazed with the sedative. "Mark."

Meg decided to let it slide. "Yeah, it's me. You okay, Heath? You gave us a scare back there."

"You kicked my ass again, they tell me. I don't remember much."

"Your balls were working overtime, man. Don't blame yourself too much."

"Can't help it. Hormones are no excuse."

"Buddy, you don't realize how powerful hormones are until you experience 'em from both sides of the fence," Meg said. "I'm only just starting to realize what things we do are because of testosterone."

"Are you okay? I kinda remember getting in a few good licks on you."

"Yeah, I'm all right. Just some dents and scratches."

"You really kicked the shit out of me."

"Sorry. You weren't really yourself. I tried to only do what I had to."

Heath turned back to face out the window again. "Mark, I'm sorry. This is the second time you've had to come in and lay it down because I couldn't cope. I'm sorry for everything."

"Heath, we've been the ultimate guinea pigs for everybody," Meg said. "I'm not faulting you for anything. Nothing. I don't think either of us could be held accountable for our actions right now. So you kicked me around a little. I forgive you."

"The fight's not what I'm on about," Heath said. "I threatened to. to."

"You threatened to rape me," Meg said simply and without venom. "Because you had a hard-on you couldn't think around. Like the docs said, there was more testosterone in your blood

than in the Packers offensive line. That stuff makes you do things like that. Besides, who could blame you? I mean, look at me. I'm a total babe."

Heath snorted. "I wish I could cope as well as you."

"Don't let me fool you," Meg said. "I run a great bluff, but inside I'm just as fucked up and confused as you are. I just was lucky enough to keep focused on something. If it wasn't for Nationals I'd be a gibbering mess and people'd be calling you to come and settle me down."

"I never told you this before, Mark. But I love you. You're the best friend in the world."

"I love you too, brother. Now can this be the end of all that suicide talk? You're scaring shit out of everybody," Meg smiled, taking Heath's hand. The sedatives were making Heath groggy as hell, and the conversation wasn't going to last much longer.

"It's good a place to start as any," Heath muttered. "Looks like I have a lot of making up to do."

"Atta boy," Meg said. "Now get some sleep. You'll get all this figured out. I trust you."

"You're the only one I trust anymore, Mark," Heath said. His voice was weak and thick.

"Get some sleep, buddy. I'll be here for you when you wake up."

She was.

* * * * *

There were only a few more days left for training, and Dennis was indispensable in helping Meg bounce right back from her injuries. He stepped into the dojo quietly, holding a manila envelope beneath his crossed arms as he watched Meg flow like water through her forms, no sound in the room except for her rhythmic breathing and the canvas-on-canvas squeak of her clothes as she cycled seamlessly through endless series of kicks, punches, and blocks. As it progressed, Meg began to add more and more of a tumbling aspect to the *palque*, interspersing jumps and pirouettes into the deadly chain of moves.

She caught sight of Dennis and jumped, snapped from her reverie.

"I like watching you work," Dennis said. "You make it look like a dance."

"It is, sorta," she said. "Like a combination of that and a chess game."

"How's the knee?"

"Fine."

Dennis pushed away from the wall with his shoulders and stepped closer, extending the envelope to her. "This came for you, Cassie said. It's your itinerary and badge for Nationals."

Meg took it delicately. "Jesus. I've been to two of these things on the Junior level and it still never feels like it's for real until this comes, and then my heart jumps up into my throat."

"I also wanted to tell you that Heath's on his way home," Dennis continued. "Julia - Dr. Mitchell, I mean, says he's all fixed up and shouldn't have any more problems. They're going to

bring him in weekly from now on so nothing unexpected can happen and you won't have to get beat up any more."

Meg laughed her tinkling laugh. "I appreciate their concern."

Dennis didn't leave and the pause stretched awkwardly.

"Is there anything else?" Meg finally asked.

Dennis fidgeted with his fingernails. "Not really. I just don't want to go, for some reason."

Meg looked confused. "Any idea why?"

"You just look so much like a woman, *vato*, that no matter how much I keep telling myself that you're still a guy on the inside, I still feel like I should treat you like a lady. A lady that I really like."

Meg blushed. "That's what I figured."

"I know you don't want that."

Meg looked away and when she spoke again, her voice was tiny. "I'm not real sure about that anymore, Dennis," she said. "Things are getting real confused for me. Aside from just the normal amount of confusion, that is."

"You mean you're starting to. *like* guys?"

"It sounds terrible when you say it like that," Meg laughed. "Let's just say that I'm starting to get curious. At first I thought it was just the hormones and the confusion. But now, I'm starting to notice things. About guys."

"What kind of things?" Dennis asked.

"Physical things. It's weird. I used to size guys up by looking at physical toughness. Like you, for instance. If I had to size you up, I'd take one look at those shoulders of yours and the forearms and figure that it would be suicide to let you in close enough to use 'em on me. I'd fight you with my feet."

"Sounds reasonable," Dennis said. "I used to do that same shit in the ring."

"But now it's different," Meg said.

"Different how?"

"I take one look at your shoulders and arms and - just for a second - I think about how nice it would feel to be in 'em. Then my brain catches it and stomps it away. But the brain's not catching it nearly as fast or as often as I'd like. I tried to talk to Cassie about it, and she gave me a lecture on how she didn't want to stand in my way if I wanted to experiment. I didn't want to hear that. I wanted to hear that she'd leave me and never speak to me again if I started looking at guys. But I guess that I can't help it."

"So what is it about guys you like?"

Meg blushed even deeper. "If I had to nail it down, I'd say I'm a sucker for strong shoulders."

"Me, I'm an ass man. Always have been. And that's one of the toughest things about being your trainer," Dennis said, chuckling. "For a guy, you have an ass that could stop downtown traffic."

Meg looked over one shoulder. "Yeah. It is kinda nice."

Dennis laughed. "I would have said let me be the judge of that if I didn't know you."

Meg cut him a strange, sidelong look. "Would you mind if I touched your shoulders?" she asked.

Dennis thought she was still joking. "Do you mind if I touch your ass?"

Meg lowered her eyes coyly. "Not right now I don't."

Dennis could only stand stunned. Meg stepped close to him, smelling all like clean feminine sweat and baby powder and that indefinable feminine scent which was only noticeable when they were so close. Her shy, pale hands reached up and touched the line of his shoulder and deltoid, tracing its way down over the well-defined muscles to the pectorals. Dennis reached out, pulling her closer gently, burying his face in her sweet-smelling hair and tracing the clean lines of her shoulderblades with his hands, tracing the line of her spine through the heavy fabric of her *gi* until he cupped her firm buttocks with his hands. She was breathing the deep breaths of sexual arousal, and her baby-soft exhalations tickled his neck.

She pushed away suddenly. "Whoa," she said, shaking her head. "We'd better stop."

Dennis backed away. "You're right. That was pretty intense."

Meg smiled. "Thanks for being such a good sport, Dennis." Her mind was a whirl of curiosity and feminine sensation and before she realized what she was doing, she'd raised on the balls of her feet to brush a feather-light kiss across his lips.

His hands closed around her waist and he pressed his mouth against hers. The sensitivity of her flesh felt every feature clearly - the scratchy, abrasive beard stubble, the line of his teeth through the softness of his lower lip, a tiny scar across his top lip. Meg felt as if her skeleton was becoming slightly liquid and the blood was hammering in her ears. She shoved away from him with both hands, staggering back a bit, panting and trying to keep her balance with knees that didn't seem to be working properly.

"Dammit, ese, why'd you have to go and kiss me?" Dennis muttered plaintively. "I was doing fine until you went and did that. Are you okay?"

"Wow," Meg said, eyes wide.

"Are you okay?" Dennis repeated.

"That was unbelievable," Meg said, amazed.

"You liked it?"

Meg looked at him confusedly. "Didn't you?"

"Well, yeah. Of course I did. It was real nice."

"Nice? That's the best you can come up with? You mean to tell me you didn't feel like the floor was giving out underneath you?" she asked incredulously.

"I didn't know I was that good of a kisser."

"Trust me, *vato*, you are," Meg said. "Can we do it again?"

Dennis laughed. "I don't think we should," he said. "You're taken and it's getting harder and harder for me to put the brakes on around you today. Let's just call it a learning experience."

"Just a little one?" Meg said. "I gotta see if it's like that every time."

"Tell you what, you win me the gold at Nationals and we can do it again."

Meg's eyes slitted and there was a resolution in her tone that usually only came out on the mat when she was determined to master a particularly difficult maneuver. "You're on."

* * * * *

"I thought you'd be mad," Meg said.

"Gimme some credit," Cassie replied, taking her hand as they walked along the sidewalk. "I can't help you out there other than just lending moral support. Dennis can be your trainer and watch out for your knee. You know I want to be there, Meg, but you need Dennis and I can't afford to get there on my own."

Meg lowered her eyes. "I really wanted you to come to Nationals with me. I didn't know I could either bring a guest *or* a trainer. This sucks."

Cassie chafed her hand between her palms, looking sympathetic. "ESPN2 is covering the whole thing. Me and Heath and Faith will watch every second of it on television. Dr. Tolliver has rented a big-screen and we're all going to cheer real loud so you can hear us all the way in Chicago."

"Did I ever tell you how wonderful you are?" Meg asked.

"Couple times."

"You are," Meg said, and kissed her. "I'm in love with the most wonderful, understanding woman in the world and I'm constantly being reminded how bloody lucky I am."

Cassie returned the kiss shyly, still not entirely comfortable about expressing her love for Meg in public. She just couldn't shake the stigma that had always been attached to homosexuality all through her formative years and strict Baptist upbringing. But she thought that she was getting better about it, and Meg agreed and didn't push. "Now go, and don't feel guilty because I can't come. You need a clear head so you can come home and show me your National gold medal and your snazzy new Olympic uniform."

"I love you," Meg said.

"I love you too," Cassie replied, feeling knots in herself loosening when her lover looked at her like that. It was times like this when Cassie didn't mind letting herself think that everything was going to turn out all right. "Now come on, tiger, we have to get you packed."

* * * * *

Meg stared in disbelief at the load. Before the transformation, she'd been able to pack away everything she'd conceivably have needed for three days in one Samsonite suitcase. But now - she'd taken only the bare minimum of what she'd needed and still could only barely fit it into the two suitcases, the gym bag, the garment bag and the little tackle-box makeup case. And she still felt like she was forgetting something.

"I can't believe this," she commented. It had been hard enough moving from the world of plain old Ivory soap and Prell shampoo to Herbal Essences Body Wash, Shower-to-Shower Body Powder and Pantene Pro-V shampoo and conditioner. Gone were the days of Gold Bond and Right Guard, replaced by Lightdays Pantyliners with Wings, Secret and Oil of Olay. Meg hung her head in what felt an awful lot like shame. For some reason it seemed like her inability to stuff all the things she'd needed into one suitcase was a betrayal of her former masculinity.

"It's not too bad," Dennis consoled her. "My sister-in-law usually packs some furniture, you know, just in case the hotel doesn't have any or something."

Meg snorted, picking up the two cases. "Come on, or we'll be late."

Dennis took up the remainder of the load and took it downstairs. Meg stopped to bid farewell to Major Tom, who had retreated to his meditation nook beneath the couch upon seeing the dreaded suitcases which meant his human was deserting him.

"Aw, I still love you, kitty-cat," Meg cooed, scratching behind Major Tom's ears with her long fingernails. Major Tom had very much appreciated that his human had grown its fingernails like he'd asked and that the evening pettings were greatly improved. And the human had been very kind to grow the soft headrests on its chest for his television-viewing comfort. But if the human insisted on leaving, damned if it would get a purr out of him. "I'll be back soon, and Cassie will be staying here with you, so you won't be alone. You like her. Her nails are even longer than mine."

Major Tom looked dolefully at the human, giving it an extra measure of industrial-strength cat guilt for leaving before the incomprehensible upright hairless primate thing picked up its cases and left through the door. Major Tom gave his face a swipe or two, settling his errant whiskers, and leapt into the window to look pitiful so that the human would be sure and feel terrible as it went away and left him.

Heath and Faith were waiting downstairs with Cassie, who was filling the trunk with Meg's stuff. The fact that Dennis had gotten everything he'd needed in a small duffel and a hanging bag only made her feel worse. But then, Dennis probably hadn't needed to pack four different pairs of shoes.

"You ready, buddy?" Heath asked, a hint of envy evident in the cracking baritone.

"Scooby dooby doo," Meg said, climbing into the back seat. Faith cranked the engine on the dilapidated Nissan Sentra and drove towards the freeway, the airport, and then Nationals.

CHAPTER TEN: *Back to that same old place: my sweet home, Chicago.*

O'HARE AIRPORT WAS shoulder-to-shoulder crowded, and Meg bitterly missed her former size and musculature at the baggage claim. Fortunately she was able to rely on Dennis' imposing bulk to push through the clutch of people and get her bags. She trailed along through the crowd in his wake towards the terminal exit. She showed the laminated badge that had been mailed to her to the taxi driver, who nodded and opened the trunk.

"Nationals, huh?" the driver said. "You excited?"

"Nervous, really," Meg said. "There have been some pretty major changes in my life over the last couple months and I hope I've still got what it takes."

"You look strong as a bull," the driver said, loading Dennis' and Meg's luggage in the trunk. "I don't think you're going to have any trouble at all. Besides, you're the prettiest competitor I've driven today. I'll be rooting for you."

The cabbie pulled into traffic and took them the short distance to the Drake Hotel, which was very close to McCormick Place where the competition would open the next day. The hotel was quite classy and luxurious, and Meg and Dennis were ushered up to their rooms to relax and wait out the two hours before the Welcoming Mixer. Meg stowed away her gear and took a quick shower, shaving her legs and underarms and powdering herself down, making her skin soft and sweet-smelling. Opening her suitcase and garment bag, she selected a pair of navy blue silk thong panties and a matching strapless bra which was a cast-iron bitch to put on but did fantastic things to her figure. She struggled into the underwear, smoothing the corset-like bottom of the bra over her flat, muscular stomach and snugging the lace-trimmed edge of the panties over her wide hips. She kept the presence of mind to pee *before* she put on her pantyhose, selecting a black pair with a pretty lace appliqué on the ankles. Then she shrugged into the royal blue backless dress that Cassie had bought for her, fastening the short halter around her neck and checking in the mirror to see that her bra didn't show over the low back. Satisfied, she went into the bathroom and opened the makeup kit, smoothing out just enough foundation with a small triangular sponge to cover her freckles and blending concealer over the remnants of the black eye that Heath had given her the night he'd freaked out. Nowhere near confident enough to try and deal with liquid liner, she used a medium brown pencil to line her eyes and brushed a light coat of mascara over her lashes, making them dark and long. Then she applied just a hint of peach-colored shadow in the crease of her eyelid and gave that a through going-over with the blending brush. A touch of color on her cheeks, and then a dusting of powder. She spread a glossy beige over her lips and blotted them on a piece of toilet paper. Applying a light spray of *Anaís Anaís* to her wrists and cleavage, she set about blowing her hair dry, standing bent in half and brushing it out from the roots. Once it was dry, she crushed a little mousse into it, just enough to get the bangs and sides to stand away from her face a little.

She slipped her belongings into a tiny black clutch purse and slipped into the black three-inch heels that went with the outfit. She finished off the outfit with large silver hoop earrings and a

tiny emerald stud and the silver herringbone chain she'd gotten with Cassie. Steeling herself for the bald strutting and posturing that always took place between competitors at these stupid mixers, she stepped into the hallway and knocked on Dennis' door.

He opened the door one-handed, still knotting a thin black tie with the other. His eyes widened when he saw her and he just stood there for a moment, mouth open slightly. He smelled wonderful to Meg, like Drakkar cologne and Lifebuoy soap. She'd never thought that the scents of her former life could be so intoxicating.

"You just gonna stand there or are you gonna invite me in?" she asked playfully.

"Sorry," Dennis stammered, standing aside. Meg walked into his room, the high heels making her hips and butt swivel and sway in a most feminine way, and turned a playful pirouette which caused her skirt to flare out wildly and her hair to spread behind her in luminous waves.

"You like?" she asked.

Dennis nodded. "You look incredible," Dennis commented. "I couldn't believe it was you for a minute there. Damn, nobody down there's ever gonna even consider that you were a guy before."

"Yeah, I clean up pretty nice," Meg said. "I have to say, dressing up is fun. I feel sexy."

Dennis cleared his throat. "You *are* sexy, *chica*. Real damn sexy."

"You ready to get this over with?" she asked.

Dennis tightened the tie against the collar and grabbed a grey twill-weave sportscoat from the back of a chair. "Yep. Do I look okay?" He spread his thick arms wide, showing a simple black tie down the front of a snowy-white button down shirt, and very tight blue jeans with a black leather belt to match his black bull-hide cowboy boots. Meg noticed as he turned around that Dennis Mendoza was the proud owner of an extremely nice butt.

"You're looking pretty sexy yourself, *amigo*. You'll be beating the girls off tonight."

"I doubt it. You know how competitive these things are."

Meg nodded sadly. "Thanks for coming to this. I know you're not the party type, but I really didn't want to go down there alone. I appreciate it."

"Tell you what," Dennis said, shrugging on his jacket and loading his pockets with wallet and keys. "Save me a dance and we'll call it even. That, and don't give me any guff when I smoke this tonight." He pulled a fat Honduran cigar from his inside pocket.

"You do your blessing the night before too?" Meg asked.

Dennis smiled. "I thought only boxers did that."

"Nope," Meg chuckled. "I had my first cigar the night before I won regionals in the eighth grade. I threw up for an hour straight and have never missed one since." She opened her tiny handbag and drew out a thick cigar as well.

"*Bueno*," Dennis said. "I hate smoking alone."

"Course, with this new bod, two puffs will probably knock me on my ass."

"Don't worry, ese. I'll put you in bed and won't even cop a feel. It's my duty as your trainer."

He offered her his arm and she took it, flustered. He led her to the elevators and down to the opening mixer of the National Taekwondo Championships, for better or for worse.

* * * * *

The party downstairs was poorly lit and crowded with strutting and posing martial artists, already trying to psyche each other out even though the competition wasn't even officially open yet. Meg and Dennis arrived just in time for the Chairman of the National Championship Committee to step to the podium and gain everyone's attention by drowning out the music with a blast of piercing feedback.

"Good evening, everyone!" the greying man said. "Welcome to Chicago and the National Taekwondo Championships!" There was solid applause which the Chairman held up a hand to abate.

"Anyone who has yet to receive their membership packet in the mail should go back to the table in the main lobby and get set up before we go any further. Now, tomorrow the preliminary matches start - you should know the time and location of your first match from the packet you received. Please don't forget to wear your badges -" he held up his laminated badge as an example "- or we won't be able to let you in the building tomorrow. As you know, the Nationals are a very big deal. A certain number of competitors will be chosen tomorrow to represent the United States of America at this year's Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia."

More applause.

"I hope that you take this opportunity to meet and greet your fellow competitors and judges here tonight before having to face them under more strenuous circumstances in the morning. And I would like to congratulate you all on getting this far - it's no small accomplishment to be invited to the National Competition. Good luck to you all and please, enjoy your evening!"

The music and the dull roar of hundreds of conversations resumed, and Dennis leaned his head down close to Meg's ear so she could hear him in the chaos. "I'm gonna go get something to drink. You want anything?"

"Scotch," Meg said. "Make it a double."

Dennis smiled. "Water it is. You're in training, *chica*. Don't be nervous. I mean, look at all these yahoos. They aren't going to stand a chance against you." He left her side, and she mingled around a bit, looking for fellow Texans or people she'd known from past competitions.

"You must be Meghan Rutherford," a small, blond girl with huge brown eyes said, pronouncing her name MEE-gan, which Meg hated. "I'm Susan Lewis. I'm your first match tomorrow."

Meg shook the offered hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Yeah, I asked one of the judges which one was you," Susan said. "He said that you're the only redhead in the competition, so you were pretty easy to spot."

Dennis found her then, handing Meg a bottle of spring water. "Oh, this is my trainer," Meg said. "Dennis Mendoza. Dennis, this is Susan Lewis. She's our first match tomorrow in the preliminaries."

"Nice to meet you," Susan said, shaking his hand. "Anyway, Meghan, I just wanted to find you and wish you luck tomorrow. You're probably not going to have much trouble with me out there, I don't find my stride well early in the morning. But maybe I'll catch up and see you again in the quarterfinals or something."

"Call me Meg," Meg told her, amazed that the girl's wish of good luck sounded genuine. "Good luck to you, too. I'm sure you'll do well."

Susan smiled shyly. "I hope so," she said. "Truth is, all eyes are on Lisa McByrne, from San Diego. She's the one everybody says is going to make the Olympic team with the bullet."

"Lisa McByrne," Dennis repeated. "Don't let your eyes stray too far from my Meg. She'll surprise you if you look away too long."

My Meg. It shouldn't have made her tingle all over like that.

"Take care, it was nice to meet you," Susan managed before the crowd swallowed her. The party was devolving fast, breaking into small groups of people who were busily showing off martial arts moves to one another while their trainers and coaches yelled at them not to wear themselves out or pull something by not stretching out right. The women in the party, as a whole, seemed to realize that they weren't the least bit interested at watching the men try and impress one another, so they began to migrate away. Meg excused herself, complaining about the soreness in her feet from the heels, and told Dennis that she'd meet him upstairs later to bless the competition with him. Dennis, absorbed in a conversation with one of the judges, nodded and kissed her cheek absently.

As Meg was leaving, she heard heavy steps rushing after her and she spun to face the opponent. Trotting after her, necktie flapping and coat fanned behind him, was Peter Barnett, the referee from the ill-fated match in the martial arts supply with Lou. He was yet another man she'd yet to have seen in civilian clothes, and she allowed herself an appraising once-over-lightly and was quite intrigued by her findings. Although her brain recoiled at the (what it considered) homosexual impulses, Meg had been having too much fun being the redheaded belle of the ball on Dennis' arm to spoil it by going and acting like a guy right now. She decided she could feel guilty about it all later.

"Meg," he said. "I thought it was you."

"Hi," she said. "Should've remembered I'd see you here. You ready for tomorrow?"

"I hope so," Peter said. "My first match in the prelims is Rob Holt, so my work is cut out for me."

Meg remembered Rob Holt from her Mark days in competition, a human whirlwind of a second-*dan* black who routinely chewed up opponents with his blazing speed and footwork. She gave Peter a look of pure compassion.

"Just remember to keep in a back-stance. When he gets to flying, just give him ground and wait for the right chance to step in. It's all you can do," Meg cautioned.

"You sound like you've fought him before," Peter laughed.

"Not me," Meg said, floundering. "But my twin brother did, a bunch of times. Maybe you knew him - Mark Rutherford?"

"You're Mark's sister?" Peter cried, astounded. "Jesus, I should've caught the resemblance. You two look just like each other. Except you're prettier. Where is Mark, anyhow? I figured he'd be here."

"He hurt his knee pretty bad last year," Meg said sadly. "He's out of competition for good. He moved to Dallas and has been teaching there and going to school part-time, bless his heart."

"That's too bad. He was the greatest. Did you know he's one of the only people to have ever beaten Rob Holt on the mat? How am I supposed to live up to that?"

Meg gave his arm a small squeeze. "Do like I told you. Give him plenty of room and wait for your opportunity. Rob will try to force things, but you have to fight your own fight."

"I'm gonna remember that. Say, who's first up with you tomorrow?"

"Susan Lewis. I'm not too worried about anybody on my dance card until I get to Lisa McByrne, anyway. I hear she's the one to beat," Meg said. "Do you know her?"

Peter pulled a face. "Unfortunately," he said. "That's her, right there."

He pointed out a tall, leggy blonde in a sequined dress. She was muscled like a panther, tanned and gorgeous. With her newfound intimacy of things feminine, Meg guessed that between the dress, the Italian shoes, the professional makeover and manicure and the dye job, Lisa had spent about two or three thousand dollars on herself. But she did move like something dangerous and had a throng of men around her, following her every move. Meg could tell she wasn't getting off on the attention but the control, and hated her immediately. *Good*, she thought to herself. *It'll make beating her ass that much more fun.*

"She's a real bitch, pardon my French," Peter said. "Rich as hell, drives a Jaguar with vanity plates that her father bought her. God, I can't imagine the bad press we'll get in Sydney if we have a stuck-up snob like her representing the USA. She couldn't be pleasant if she was getting paid for it."

"Well, then, I'll just have to kick shit out of her, won't I?" Meg muttered. Peter doubled over, laughing, leaning against the wall for support. Meg was confused for a moment before she remembered that some people were still shocked hearing words like that come from a pretty girl's mouth.

"I hope you do," Peter said, wiping his eyes. "I'll be rooting for you."

Meg gave him a companionable high-five. "Besides, there need to be two Texans in the Olympics, and since you're going."

Peter returned the high-five and wished her luck again before returning to the party.

Meg couldn't help getting a good look at his butt as he did so, then cursed herself for the slip.

* * * *

Dennis came knocked on her door about a half-hour later. Meg had been curled up on the balcony, enjoying the cool spring breeze and the city lights, so different from Houston and so much the same. She walked to the door, opening it to admit her trainer. He'd changed into loose jeans with the knees torn out and a Los Lobos T-shirt.

"*Odelay*," he said affably, running his eyes over her bare legs sticking out the bottom of her oversized blue Dallas Cowboys jersey with the number 8 prominent between her breasts. Meg became immediately self-conscious and fumbled around the room, looking for her sweats.

"I was downstairs scoping out your competition," Dennis said. "Looks like Lisa McByrne isn't the only one you'll have to beat. There's two more real firebrand women from the New York leagues named Amy Walters and Kim Yao. Apparently they're the double threat."

"Kim Yao's got bad ankles, according to her teammates," Meg said. "And Amy Walters is fast but way low on experience. I think I might have the edge there if I fight smart."

Dennis followed her to the balcony. "Didn't peg you for a football fan," he said, indicating the jersey. "But now that I think about it, it makes sense. That Aikman's a helluva quarterback."

"Yeah, he's got that Joe Montana thing going for him," Meg said, taking her seat on the wire-back chair. "Now Roger Staubach - *there* was a quarterback. Man, those were the days."

"Oh, yeah," Dennis said. "America's team. Now that was football. I used to never miss the Cowboys/Redskins game, back when they still had Theismann in the pocket."

"Remember the Steelers back then? With Franco Harris and Lynn Swann?"

Dennis laughed. "I grew up wanting to be Tony Dorsett."

"I always wanted to be as big as Randy White," Meg said. "Now I'd make a better cheerleader."

Dennis pulled out his cigar and bit off the tip. "Gimme a light, red."

Meg shoved over a book of matches and bit the tip from her own cigar. "This feels right."

Dennis puffed his stogie alight and passed the matches back. He waited until she'd gotten hers lit in a dense cloud of blue smoke before he took a deep pull and let the smoke out in a thin plume, trying not to think how sexy Meg looked smoking a cigar and wearing a football jersey. He didn't know very many women who even knew who Roger Staubach was, much less gave a damn. It would be entirely too easy to forget that this incredible woman was once a man and probably would be one again as soon as the Olympics were over. It would be easy to forget it all and be all over her.

"Good luck tomorrow, *pelirrojo*," he said. "You're gonna kick some ass."

Meg exhaled a streamer of thick blue smoke. "And thanks to the best damn trainer I've ever had. Couldn't have made it over the hump with you, with all the injuries. You're the best, Dennis."

"And I thought you were only working so hard because you wanted that kiss."

Meg blushed, pulling on the cigar. Dennis tried to ignore how sexy her lips looked as they wrapped around the dark cigar. "Well, the thought crossed my mind once or twice."

"I like how easy it is to be around you," Dennis said. "I'm glad you're my friend."

"Me too. We'd have been buddies if I'd never changed, I'm sure. But now, with all the stuff I've been having to deal with, I feel like you're much more than that. I consider you one of my best friends."

"Good," Dennis said.

Meg took a pull from the glass of orange juice she'd had on the table. "You nervous about tomorrow?" she asked him finally, pulling on the cigar.

"A little," Dennis confessed. "The only competing I ever did was in the ring. I still feel like I don't even know what to do out there sometimes. I feel like I should be coaching."

"If you have advice, I'm always glad to hear it," Meg said. "You don't get Golden Gloves without being able to size up an opponent. And I imagine you had to win a couple bouts, too."

"Yep."

"So speak up, if you see something. I don't care if you don't know taekwondo. You just tell me what you see and I'll figure out the rest, okay?"

"Deal."

They sat for a while longer, enjoying each other's company. The cigars were over with much too fast. Meg gave Dennis the dance she'd promised him at the beginning of the evening (her natural grace made it easier than they'd both thought for her to dance backwards) and then Dennis was demanding that she get to bed so she'd be rested for the competition tomorrow.

"From preliminaries to semifinals you'll be fighting for close to seven hours," Dennis said. "The finals are two hours after semifinals, and you'll need to get a chance to stretch out the soreness before then. Now get in bed and get some sleep. I'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning."

Meg thanked him and gave him a friendly hug before he left, climbing in her bed and calling downstairs for a five a.m. courtesy call. Then she pulled the covers over her shoulders and closed her eyes, letting the nicotine wash the nerves away and drifting off slowly, dreaming alternately of being in Cassie's arms and then in Dennis'.

* * * *

Meg managed to shake the grogginess of her rock-like sleep in a blisteringly hot shower and pulled on a Jog-Bra and a pair of cotton panties. She powdered her leg and pulled on the lightweight knee-brace Dr. Mitchell had given her and sat in the bathroom calmly taping her wrists as she'd done for so very many mornings previous. Dennis knocked on her door at fifteen after five and she let him in. He looked quite sprightly for pre-dawn in his official yellow "Trainer" T-shirt and blue jeans.

"They should've let you wear your scrubs," Meg commented. "You look different than I'm used to seeing you. Can I get you some juice?"

"I'll get it. You want some food?"

"Just fruit. I'm gonna go light until I get in the groove and my nerves settle down."

"Good plan. Just make sure there's something on your stomach." Dennis was fairly bouncing around, he was so excited. Meg grinned at his boyish behavior.

"You look like a little boy on Christmas morning," she remarked.

"Just excited about seeing my girl go and kick some ass out there," he said.

Meg liked it when he called her his girl and blushed, returning to braiding her hair tightly. She wrapped the tail of the braid in a terry-cloth band and started pulling on her *gi*. The laundry had cleaned it to a snowy white which made the embroidered Silver Tiger logo on the back stand out like a beacon. She pulled on her slippers and tied the black belt with the three stripes. Dennis grabbed the oversized gym bag full of contact pads and they headed to the elevator. Meg started by stretching out her neck and shoulders, rotating them slowly. Dennis dropped the bag and started massaging the muscles gently, working out the stiffness. Meg hoped for a moment that the elevator might get stuck between floors so Dennis could keep doing it.

"I got you something," Dennis said. "My old boxing coach gave it to me when I won Golden Gloves and I want you to have it now." He fished a box from his pocket. Meg took it and opened it to reveal a small golden ear stud in the shape of a rearing tiger.

"My friends called me *El Tigre* when I boxed because I used to roar at my opponents. It always brought me luck. I'll feel better if you're wearing it."

"Thanks, *amigo*," Meg said, fastening the small stud in the second hole in her right ear. "I feel luckier already. Now, no more talking about winning or losing, okay? Gotta keep my mind on the job."

They took a van over to McCormick Place, where a sleepy security guard checked their badges. Dennis took a 'black bag' from the dispensary table and plopped Meg's pads onto the judges' table to be checked in. Meg was busy signing in and registering.

The woman behind the registration table looked over Meg's form. "Going for the Olympics?"

"Yes, ma'am," Meg said.

She winked co-conspiratorially. "Good luck, hon. I always try to root for the Irish girls."

"*Erin go bragh*," Meg whispered, and the woman gave her hand a squeeze.

* * * * *

It was eight a.m. before all the matches were set up, all the competitors loosened up, and the TV crews set in place. The crowd began to filter in, filling the seats surrounding the competition floor spottily and raising the ambient noise level a few notches. Meg finished her limbering-up and was working through some easy *palque* and balance exercises when their referee showed up. He was a short, compact, good-looking young man with a crooked smile.

"Good morning," he said to Meg and Susan. Susan was pale with nerves. "You ladies about ready to start this morning? I can give you about five more minutes before we have to get started."

"I'm ready," Meg declared. "Susan?"

Susan's voice was very small. "I guess so."

Meg stepped alongside Susan. "Come on now. You've done this a million times."

"I'm a little freaked by the TV cameras."

"Forget 'em," Meg counseled. "Fight your own fight and don't let anybody push you. Now take some deep breaths and just let all the nerves out. I'm going to be real offended if you don't give me a hundred percent out there."

Susan's eyes shone. "Thanks. I'll give it my best."

Meg sat down and Dennis knelt to start putting on her pads. The feel of his strong hands sliding along her calves as he slid the shin-guards on was intoxicating. Next came the dip-foam boots, which Dennis finished attaching with tape, saying he didn't trust the slender laces. She laced up the torso padding herself, since it was a difficult to get them just right and not have them pinch her breasts when they settled. Dennis pulled on a neck protector as she pulled on the hitting and back-fisting pads, and he handed her the 'brain bucket' and mouthpiece when she stood. As always, being in full pads made her feel unassailable and strong and she let the feeling flow into her arms and legs, solidifying her strength.

"You're still a little stiff," Dennis said. "Feel her out before you start getting down low."

"Got it," Meg said, pulling on the headgear.

"And pace yourself, *chica*. You've got a long day ahead of you."

She stuck in her mouthpiece and bit down, then bumped foreheads with Dennis. "Next stop Sydney, right?" she asked, a nervous flutter behind her heart.

"This one's for the whole prize," Dennis said. "*Buena suerte, pelirrojo mio*."

The referee was raising the flags and calling for the competitors to bow to the judges.

It had all come down to this.

* * * * *

Susan Lewis, Rachel van Hess, Rebecca Campbell, Elaine Hayes, Sarah Pierce, Shauna Little. All of them had stood across the mat from the redheaded fury named Meghan Rutherford and not a single woman had managed a point against her so far. She took a brief, ten-minute breather after preliminaries to catch her breath and stretch as the men filtered onto the mats the women had just vacated to begin their own preliminaries. The crowd had thickened a little, and some of Meg's better moves were starting to be rewarded with an applause that filtered in through the silence Meg enforced onto her senses. Slowly, but unavoidably, she was starting to get a following in the crowd, and she began to notice that the

audiences were starting to go for food and potty stops between her matches and were by and large ignoring the men's events. Meg did manage to get word that Peter had lost his first prelim miserably to Rob Holt but hadn't been eliminated yet.

Meg came into the second round unbeaten and tied for first ranking with Lisa McByrne (also unbeaten) and one of the New York Terrors, Amy Walters. The second rank was in a two-way tie between Rachel van Hess and Kim Yao, and hanging in third with two losses was little Susan Lewis.

Susan had started coming to consult with Meg and Dennis for her upcoming matches. Meg found the little woman's uncertainty refreshing in the face of so many over-inflated egos and didn't mind taking the girl under her wing at all. In no time, Susan had hit her stride and her confidence was returning, using Meg's advice to quickly dispatch the fourth-rank contender, a wiry black girl from Orlando, Florida named Shauna Little.

"Great job," Meg congratulated her, pulling on her headgear. It had made a matted mess of her luxurious red hair, and she was finding that quirky little concerns about her appearance were starting to gnaw at her concentration like they'd never done before. But then, there had never been so many people looking at her before. "You have a great spin-kick. Use it when you go against Elaine Hayes, she's real slow on the recovery. You'll wipe her out."

"Who you got now?" Susan asked, panting and out of breath as her dad, who also doubled as her trainer, took her headgear and gave her a bottle of water.

Meg snugged the headgear around her ears and forehead. "Final elimination for this round. Kim Yao's gonna challenge me for first ranking."

"Good luck," Susan called as Meg took the mat.

"She won't need it," Dennis muttered once Meg was out of earshot. "She's in the zone."

Susan nodded agreement. "She's the best I've ever seen."

"I think that she's letting McByrne's reputation psyche her out a little," Dennis said. "She's losing her focus. I gotta talk her back to the business at hand, and soon."

Susan's dad, who was standing beside them, chuckled. "Lisa McByrne isn't what's splitting her focus, son," he said, watching Meg bow to the judges and then to her opponent. Kim Yao was wiry and intense-looking next to Meg's unearthly, cold calm.

"I'm listening."

"It's you. She can't take her eyes off you."

Dennis' eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"I think you're the only one who can't see it." Beside her dad, Susan nodded affirmation.

"Damn. I've been thinking about the matches, didn't think to look."

The older man patted Mendoza's shoulder. "This may not be the time or the place, son, but my advice is to take the ball and run with it," he said affably. "She's one beautiful young lady."

"Good eye, sir," Dennis chuckled. "Maybe after the competition we can go someplace and have ourselves a little talk or something."

Susan and her dad both smiled knowingly. "And make sure you get adjoining rooms in Sydney," Susan added, watching Meg score her first point against Kim Yao with a hammering back-fist.

* * * *

Dennis helped a very tired Meg down from the competition mat and onto a bench. The redhead was betraying discomfort in the knee and had started surrendering points to her opponents as the competition got a little fierce. She'd put down Kim Yao and relegated her to the rush for second place, which did not concern Meg a bit. She was completely focused on the 'gold rush,' the first-place spot, which was down to a pissing contest between her, Lisa McByrne, and Amy Walters, the other New York Terror. She had been gratified that Susan was doing quite well in the struggle for fourth place.

"You're looking beat, red," Dennis said.

"Don't quite have the endurance I used to," she panted, taking some water. "What time is it?"

"Eleven. One more hour to the midday break. You only have one more match before you get some time off. You can make it. Next up is a challenger for the first rank, a little Nebraska girl named Cynthia Reynolds. She's real good in the close match but doesn't have the arm length or the speed to fight outside. Keep her away from you and you'll take her."

"I don't know if I have it right now, Dennis. The knee's hurting like a bitch and Kim planted a good one in my gut last match. I still don't have my wind back."

"Is this the kind of shit you're going to pull at the Olympics, Rutherford?" said a familiar voice over her shoulder, deep and rich. It had been her voice, once. She spun around and locked her brother in a crushing hug. He was a shorter, pudgier version of what Mark had been, right down to the laughing green eyes and the face full of orange freckles. "Excuses, excuses. I hate slackers."

"Adam!" she said happily. "I thought you weren't going to make it!"

"It's a long story," her brother said. "The flight was late, and then I couldn't get a cab, and then the security guard wouldn't let me down on the floor to see you. But here I am. And you. You look - different. Fantastic. How are you, Mar-I mean, Meg? Hanging in?"

"Tired."

The judges were calling for the next competitors. Meg sighed deeply and started fastening on her headgear. "Here we go again. Wish me luck."

"Look, Meg, why don't you go kick this girl's ass and I'll buy you lunch," Adam suggested.

Meg gave him a wink, and Dennis was surprised to see the fatigue starting to melt away. "Scooby dooby doo," she said cryptically, sticking in her mouthpiece.

Meg bowed to her opponent, who also betrayed her American teacher by offering her hand. Meg shook it as best she could in the bulky pads, adding a muffled "Good luck."

"Thanks," Cynthia Reynolds said. "Should've known they'd put me against you."

"What do you mean?" Meg asked under the referee's recitation of the rules which none of the competitors really listened to anyway. Cynthia was giving her hitting pads minor tugs to seat them.

"You're tearing this thing up. All the radio announcers are saying so. Haven't you been listening? You've turned into the belle of the tournament. Lisa McByrne is furious. Look."

Meg looked to where her opponent was pointing. There was a knot of people near one of the cavernous exits in the stand-seats holding up a hastily made sign printed with "We Luv U, Meghan!" in uneven lettering done with a fading magic marker.

"Careful, or you might turn into a media darling," Cynthia cautioned.

"Just as long as Lisa McByrne's furious, then I'm doing something right," Meg muttered. Cynthia snorted laughter as she put in her mouthpiece.

"That's why all the rest of the girls - hell, half the guys, too, for that matter - are pulling for you to take the gold from her. Not that I'm going to *let* you win, though."

"Wouldn't hear of it," Meg said, falling into her stance. Amused, she cast another look at the printed sign in the stands before blanking her mind of everything.

"Fight!" the ref called.

Meg did.

* * * * *

"How do you feel about the competition up until now, Lisa?" the sportscaster asked. The statuesque blonde tossed her braid over one shoulder and towed her forehead, giving the ESPN2 camera her most winning smile and widest, most innocent little-girl eyes.

"I'm really happy with how things are going right now," she said happily. "I'm in pretty good form, and although the competition is stiff I'm feeling pretty confident right now."

"Speaking of competition, what are your thoughts on this newcomer, Meghan Rutherford? She's the only one other than you who's managed to remain unbeaten all the way to quarterfinals."

The plastic smile slipped a little and the blue eyes were far from innocent. There was a touch of acid in the refined West Coast voice as Lisa replied, "I'd never heard of her before today, to be honest. She looks like a great competitor, but I'm not too worried. Experience counts for a lot, and I don't think Meghan has had the tournament experience she'll need to finish in the top three."

"Are you looking forward to squaring off against her in the quarterfinal round after the break?"

Lisa's smooth alto was pure venom. "Yes, I am. I'm real interested to see how she performs."

The sportscaster turned back to the camera. "That was last year's National Champion, Lisa McByrne, who is in a running tie for first place at this year's competition. Now, with us, we're pleased to introduce a relative newcomer to women's taekwondo, Meghan Rutherford."

The cameras focused on a much more mature, level-headed woman, and back home in Houston a living room full of people cheered for their friend. Major Tom washed his tail.

"Great competition so far, Meghan," the sportscaster said. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, but I'm still glad it's an hour break," Meg smiled.

"Meghan, you're a relative newcomer to the National Competition. Tell me, is the size and scope of the competition affecting your concentration and timing?"

"Not really," Meg said. "It's just a matter of focusing on the job at hand."

"What are your opinions on your chances for the Olympic team?"

Meg wrinkled her nose. "There's not a person here who hasn't gone to sleep for the past three weeks and not dreamed of the Olympics," she said. "I'm not letting myself think about it. The minute I let my mind slip, I'm going to start losing matches."

"What's been your favorite thing about the competition so far?"

Meg threw the cameras a winning smile that would have her knee-deep in endorsements by Olympic time. "Aside from just being here," she said, "I guess it would have to be getting to meet Chuck Norris this morning when he opened the competition. I've been a big fan of his for a long time."

"You've amassed a nice collection of fans in the stands over the course of the morning. In fact, some of the men have been saying that they're feeling a little left out. What do you think about that?"

"I think it's kinda sweet," Meg said. "I never expected it. I hope I can keep being worth watching and give 'em some of that goodwill back after the break."

"Good luck," the sportscaster said, and Meg trotted out of the shot towards her trainer and brother. The sportscaster let the smile slip as he coiled the mike cord. "Are we clear?" he asked.

"Yeah," said the cameraman.

"Shit," the sportscaster said, looking after Meg. "I know who I'm rooting for."

CHAPTER ELEVEN: High Noon

ADAM SIMPLY COULDN'T get over how much his brother had changed. "My God, you're beautiful," he said over and over. "I saw you out there and I thought it was mom for a while. You must have to beat the guys off with a stick."

"Actually, I'm a lesbian," Meg said back. "Dennis is my acting fag-hag."

"Good thinking," Adam said. "The Olympic committee could be kinda flaky about homosexuality."

Meg was taken aback. She hadn't even thought about how the country might react to a gay athlete on the Olympic team if they found out. Hell, Meg wasn't even sure she was 100% gay anymore.

They took seats at the training table, still a mess from the hour break in the men's competition. "I wish I was out there fighting in the men's competition," Meg mused. "I could dominate my weight class."

Dennis chuckled. "They fight like a bunch of pussies," he said. "No offense."

"None taken. The only ones out there worth a damn are Peter Barnett and Rob Holt, and I could take either one of 'em on the mat," Meg said.

"You sure sound the same," Adam laughed.

"I am the same," Meg said. "All except for these." She cradled her breasts, then winced.

"You okay?" Dennis asked.

"The pads are rubbing hell out of them," she said. "I'm getting sore."

"When you take the gold you can lay down endorsements for better ones," Adam laughed.

Meg ate as much as she could hold, which she knew was for the best since she wouldn't be able to touch dinner before finals if she made it that far. Then she took a much-needed trip to the ladies' room and splayed herself on the little massage table to let Dennis work his magic.

"Seven more matches to go, red," Dennis said softly. "You have it locked up."

"Don't jinx me."

"Four quarterfinals, two semifinals, and the Big Event."

"Who do I have first?" she asked. Adam excused himself, well-versed in how well he fit in when his brother-*cum*-sister started talking shop. Meg squeezed his hand before he left and favored him with a dazzling smile, and he started to decide that he was going to like having a sister.

"First up is Debbie O'Meara," Dennis said, looking over at the tournament branch. "Then you get the winner of the Rebecca Campbell/Gina Marshall match. I'm thinking that it's going to be Marshall. That whipping you gave Rebecca Campbell took it right out of her, poor thing."

Meg managed to grab a few moments sleep on the bench, which the camera crews adored. Meg curled up on her towel and pads would be on the highlight reel on ESPN2 that evening. Dennis woke her in time to start stretching. The food had settled and Meg wasn't hurting for flexibility. Her trainer decided on a few cc's of xylocaine for the knee regardless. The fatigue was gone by the time she stepped onto the mat to face Debbie O'Meara.

"Shame to be fighting another mick," Meg said.

Debbie smiled. "All's fair in love and Nationals, girl. How about this, then: the loser buys the winner a beer after the competition. Deal?"

"Deal."

The ref started the match.

Fifteen minutes later, Meg was looking forward to the pint of Harp that Debbie was going to buy for her the next night. Debbie was eliminated from competition, so she went back into the locker room to strip off her sweaty pads and then return to cheer on her new friend.

It's so much easier with women, Meg thought fondly. *It's just as competitive, but nowhere near as driven. No man would have offered to buy me a pint when we were squared off, he'd be too busy sticking his chest out and trying to psyche me out.* Meg was surprised to find herself caring about what happened to the fellow competitors she'd gotten to know briefly, like Debbie and Susan and poor Rebecca Campbell and the accidental bone bruise Meg had put on her thigh. It was never like that before; Mark had always held a firm 'you-pays-your-money-you-takes-your-chances' attitude towards his fellow competitors. He knew that none of them would lose any sleep if they'd given him a cracked rib or a bone bruise. Not even Heath, his best friend, had shown as much concern over the debilitating knee injury he'd given her as she was now over the bruise on Rebecca Campbell's thigh. Although there were several things she missed dearly about being a man, competing was definitely more enjoyable among the women. The hugs and handshakes they gave one another before and after competitions were more genuine and affectionate. The women Meg had put out of competition were staying to cheer her on and caring about how she finished.

Rebecca Campbell had lost her match, coming over to stand next to Meg as they watched Lisa McByrne systematically disassemble Maria Denopolous, her opponent, in a shut-out victory.

"There was no call for that," Rebecca muttered bitterly. "The ref should have given her a foul for that late kick. She's not up there to compete. She's trying to beat the snot out of people up there."

"Somebody will get her," Meg said.

Rebecca squeezed her arm. "I hope it's you, Megs. I have ten bucks riding on you."

"Really?"

"You're the best I've ever seen, girl," Rebecca said honestly. "You deserve the gold."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot," Meg said. "I hope I live up to it."

Rebecca smiled. "I'm gonna go change into street clothes, Megs. I'll be back to cheer you on. Just do me one favor, will you? Kick that bitch's ass for me."

Meg stretched and limbered as she watched little Susan Lewis barely pull out a six-four victory against Kelly Haverton, her opponent, and stay in the running for the semifinals. Meg gave her a hug as warm as the look that Lisa McByrne gave them both was bitter.

"You're doing great, Suse," Meg said. "Hang in there."

"I'm tired as hell," the shorter woman complained.

"Want to know my secret?" Meg asked.

"What?"

Meg took her over to her gym bag and pulled out a portable CD player and earphones that Susan had seen her wearing off and on between matches. "Track sixteen," Meg said, pressing the contraption into Susan's padded hands as the referee called her name to step up and face her next opponent, Xaviera Anthony, the lanky black girl from Denver who was as up-and-coming as Meg.

Susan sat heavily, stretching her calves by alternately pointing and raising her toes as far as she could while her dad draped a towel over her shoulders and watered her down. Susan slipped the earphones on and paged through the disk until she came to track sixteen as Meg had instructed, and then let the song play:

"I been beat down, I been lied to,
And I don't know why I let that mean woman make me a fool;
Spent all my money, scratched my new car,
Now she's with one of my good-time buddies, they're drinkin' in
 some cross-town bar,
Sometimes I feel
Sometimes I feel
Like I been tied to the whipping post
Tied to the whipping post
Tied to the whipping post
Good Lord, I feel like I'm dying

My friends tell me that I've been such a fool
And I had to stand by and take it, baby, all for loving you
Drown myself in sorrow as I look at what you've done
Nothing seems to change, the bad times stay the same
And I can't run
Sometimes I feel
Sometimes I feel
Like I been tied to the whipping post
Tied to the whipping post
Tied to the whipping post
Good Lord, I feel like I'm dying."

Susan laughed, watching the untouchable Meg score another point. Maybe it was just the gesture of friendship from someone she admired and respected so much. Maybe she was just starting to get hysterical, or maybe it was something in Gregg Allman's gravelly bourbon-and-cigarettes voice, but her fatigue actually *did* feel like it was starting to drain away.

* * * * *

"Tonight, on ESPN2 SportsCenter: The US Taekwondo National Championships are going into the semifinal round to see who will become the men's and women's martial arts champs and win their places on the 2000 Olympic Team. For the men, it is down to last year's champion Robert Holt from Miami, Florida; Denver's Michael Easterton, Bill Hardwell from Phoenix, and Peter Barnett from Houston, Texas. But the big news is not the men's competition this year, but the women's; a fierce bid for first place has started among the leading women contenders for the women's title. Let's go live to Chicago's McCormick Place and Phil Kurtz. Phil?"

The scene shifted to a shot of the competition, which was now filled almost to capacity. The sportscaster raised his microphone and had to plug one ear with a finger before he could start speaking over the roar of the crowd behind him.

"Thanks, Mike, and as you can see, things here have gotten pretty wild. The Nationals usually draw quite a crowd from around the country, but this year it seems to have drawn a wilder variety, and they're all here to see how the women finish in this competition. The quarterfinal round has narrowed the field to four very capable ladies, who will now compete for spots on the Olympic team. Last year's champion, Lisa McByrne, an outstanding athlete from San Diego, California, is completely unbeaten in this competition and all the judges have commented that she's looking to be in better shape than ever before."

There was an insert of Lisa executing a flawless side skip kick into a woman's midsection. Even in slow motion everyone in Heath's apartment could see that the kick was twice as hard as it needed to be.

"Also in the running are newcomer Susan Lewis, a scrappy little ex-swimmer who was an alternate on the 1996 Women's Swim Team in Atlanta, and 22-year-old Hannah Stills, who you remember was taken out of competition due to a pulled hamstring in the semifinals of last year's National Championship."

"But Mike, all eyes here are riveted to the newcomer Meghan Rutherford from Houston, Texas. She has literally come from nowhere, with no competition experience on her record, and nobody's been able to lay a glove on her all day. She comes into the semifinals unbeaten and sitting on a slew of perfect scores. And, as you can see behind me, she's become the absolute darling of the crowd here."

The camera panned across the crowd, which cheered wildly and began waving signs painted with "We Love Meghan" and "You Go, Meg!" and the like. "The crowd has just up and decided that they're in love with this tall redhead from Houston and when she's on the mat there might as well not be anyone else competing. In fact, several of the other athletes, particularly the

men, have been complaining of the noise and commotion when they're trying to compete on another mat while she's up."

They inserted a clip of Meg asleep on her bench, cradled on her towel and using her torso pad as a pillow. Cassie laughed out loud at the sight. "We've interviewed her several times through the day and I have to say, Mike, that this girl is one of the most gracious, natural born competitors I have ever seen. Even the girls who she's eliminated throughout the competition are here, cheering her on and calling themselves the 'Meg Squad.'" There was another clip of several tall, athletic women in street clothes and uniforms waving a sign that read, "'Whipping Post' Rutherford All The Way to Sydney."

"We got a chance to talk to Meghan in between matches. She was with her manager, Dennis Mendoza, a physical therapist and close friend of Meg's."

Meg's sweaty but beautiful face filled the screen and everyone in the Houston apartment cheered, even the normally reserved Dr. Tolliver and his round wife Alice.

"Great competition so far, Meg," the sportscaster said off-camera. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore and tired," Meg smiled, wiping her face with a towel that Dennis offered. "But every time this crowd cheers I don't feel a thing. They've been great. I never expected to have fans or anything."

"Is the noise affecting your concentration?"

"A little," Meg said, her voice high with lack of breath and excitement. "But it kinda fades out once I'm out there, you know. I wouldn't trade them for anything."

"Everyone is very impressed with your cool head during all of this," Phil Kurtz told her. "Throughout the competition you've never expressed any joy or excitement over your winning streak."

"Well, it's hard not to feel a little bad," Meg replied. "I mean, all these girls worked really, really hard to get here and I hate to eliminate any of them. I wish there was some way we could all go to Sydney. But they're great to stay and cheer me on. I'm really enjoying it."

"What's with the 'Whipping Post' business?"

Meg looked off-camera. "I blame that on Susan," she said.

"You mean Susan Lewis?"

"Yeah," Meg said. "I let slip how I listened to that song between matches and she's been telling everybody about it. But I guess as soon as I figure out what her favorite song is I can get her back. See how she likes being called Susan 'Tell Me What You Want, What You Really Really Want' Lewis."

"What's your opinion of your chances for gold tonight, Meg?"

"One match at the time, please," Meg pleaded. "I can't think about that right now."

"Anything else you want to say?"

"Just hi to Cassie, Faith and Heath. And Major Tom. Hope you're watching," she said, waving into the camera. "Couldn't have made it here without you guys. Scooby dooby doo."

Heath guffawed and rolled backwards into Faith's lap.

* * * * *

The draw was disappointing; Meg was really hoping that she'd get to compete against Lisa in the first round. Instead it was poor Susan who was forced to go against the Ice Queen, who stood and stared daggers at Meg as she greeted and bowed to her opponent, Hannah Stills.

"Boy, am I glad I drew you," Hannah confessed. "Poor Susan."

"What makes you say that?" Meg asked.

"Lisa fights dirty as hell," Hannah said. "Haven't you heard about all the injuries she's been causing today? She damn near broke Rachel's arm in the quarterfinals."

"I didn't know that."

"Besides, if I'm gonna get beat, I'd rather it be somebody nice like you than Snob Bitch over there," Hannah added. "Losing to you would be much easier to handle."

Meg smiled. "I haven't beaten you yet, girl. Quit talking like that and gimme your best."

Hannah bowed, smiling. "You got it."

Meg's match started right after Susan's. The men's competition was already neck-deep in the semifinals and it was looking like Peter was going to be competing with Bill Hardwell for second place, since Rob Holt was rapidly making hamburger out of poor Mikey Easterton. Mark had known Mike from Junior Nationals six years ago - he was a hell of a guy. She hoped he could at least get a couple good licks in on Holt before it was all over.

Susan did her best but was no match for Lisa's savagery and longer reach. She was relegated to fighting for third place with the loser of Meg's match after a close-shave 5-3 loss. Meg hugged her hard.

"You did great, Suse. Just great. I'm proud of you."

Susan was panting as her father put a proud arm around her. "Thanks," she said breathlessly. "Now go in there and get the gold medal. Put Hannah down easy and then take that whore apart."

Her dad scowled at the language, but put a gruff hand on Meg's shoulder. "Good luck, red."

She mounted the mat as the crowd began to chant her name. It was a little intoxicating. Dennis gave her a thumbs-up from ringside and she bowed and shook hands with Hannah. It was clear that both women were saving it for the final match of the evening, whether it was for first or third place. The match was slow-paced and uneventful, a simple exchange of points to three before Meg got busy at Dennis' urging and surged ahead for a 6-4 victory. She'd made the finals. She hugged her opponent, who whispered her wishes for good luck in her ear. Then Meg waved to the cheering crowd as the PA system began to play the final bars of the Allman Brothers' 'Whipping Post.' Susan giggled and blushed.

"You made it, rookie. Congratulations," an icy voice said from behind her. Meg turned to see Lisa regarding her coolly from the bench. "You're on the team."

"Thanks," Meg said, trying to be magnanimous in the face of such bitter coldness. "You've had a hell of a day yourself. I managed to watch you a couple times. You have great form."

Lisa looked away disgustedly. "Whatever," she said. "I just came over here to warn you. You've been stealing my thunder all day long with your pasty white legs and freckles. I'm not going to stand for it. This was my day and you've all but ruined it." She said it all through a stapled-on smile that seemed to chill Meg all the more.

"I know about your bad knee," Lisa continued. "I saw the brace and heard the other girls talking about it. You better watch your left side, sweetie, because if you don't I'm taking that knee out."

"Is that so?" Meg said, her voice flat and emotionless.

"Yes, it is," Lisa said. "So either way you lose. Either I take you out of competition *and* the Olympics with a knee injury, or you have to go savage on me in front of the TV cameras to keep me from it. It'll cost you your precious reputation."

"You think I won't take you out?" Meg hissed. "I will in a second. And twenty bucks says the crowd cheers me when I do it, too."

"You're on, princess," she said. "Hope you're used to crutches."

Susan came over as soon as Lisa left. "What was that all about?" the short girl asked.

"You don't want to know," Meg growled, and Susan jumped at the acid in her friend's voice.

"Victimized by the patented McByrne charm, eh?" Susan said. "Come on, talk me through my match. Tell me what I've been doing wrong on that inside roundhouse move."

"No need," Meg said emotionlessly. "Win or lose, you're going to the Olympics."

"Huh?"

"You're going," Meg said. "Because either Lisa or I isn't going to be able to compete."

* * * * *

"Tape it tight," she told Dennis.

"If I get any tighter, you're not going to be able to bend it, red," the Latino replied. "You wanna tell me why you're so paranoid about the knee all of a sudden? Is it bothering you?"

"Lisa McByrne just threatened to sweep it out on me."

"Do what now?"

"You heard me," Meg said. "She threatened to put me on crutches."

"To your face? That *puta*."

Meg nodded. "She made a little bet with me," she said. "Twenty bucks that the crowd's gonna cheer like mad when I put her on injured reserve for the Olympics."

"You're gonna take her out? Be careful, red."

"I don't need to cheat. I can do it completely legal. She may be tough, but she's no Heath."

"How you gonna do it? This crowd's in love with the girl next door. You get savage in there and they're going to turn on you. You got a plan?"

Meg smiled, and there was no warmth in it. "I always have a plan."

* * * * *

Susan shouldn't have worried, she clinched the third place spot in an easy 5-2 victory. On an adjacent mat, Peter locked up the third place spot on the men's team. All the competitors left their mats immediately and flocked to watch the women's final round.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you will direct your attention to the center mat, we invite you to watch the final round of women's competition to choose this year's National Champion. In the white lane, last year's National Champion, undefeated Lisa McByrne from the Kim Yan Dojo in San Diego, California."

The crowd cheered politely as the lanky blonde stepped to the mat, executed a quick *palque* and bowed to her judges. Camera flashes went off in the background like moonlight on rippling water.

"And her challenger, in the black lane, from the Silver Tiger Dojo in Houston, Texas, undefeated Meghan Rutherford." Meg stepped up and bowed to the judges as the crowd roared wildly. The PA began playing 'Whipping Post' again, and Meg drained everything from her mind but the competition. The competition, and a burning kernel of anger. The noise seemed to drain away. The referee recited the rules to them both as she gave a bow just low enough to still be considered respectful to Lisa. Her mind cleared and sharpened to the task at hand, Meg stretched her stiffening shoulders and squared off in a deep, low climbing-stance opposite Lisa's high riding stance.

"Fight!"

Lisa started by feinting the giving of ground, trying to draw Meg out. Meg didn't take the bait, keeping the distance constant. Lisa caved, spinning in with a pivoting back kick that sailed harmlessly over Meg's head. Meg shoved herself backwards into a low back-stance which allowed her to easily take the return sweep across her forearms. She took first reversal to send a chop up the length of Lisa's long leg towards her pelvis. Lisa bent her knee and down-blocked, to counter the reversal that was just a feint to cover the long sweep kick Meg sent into her opponent's plant-leg. Lisa went over backwards with a startled yelp as Meg's other hand hammer-fisted into her chin. Meg had already executed and choked a lunge punch to Lisa's midsection by the time the blonde woman hit the mat.

"Point black! One to nothing! Separate!" the referee commanded. Lisa got up with a growl and returned to her start position as the crowd stomped on the bleachers deafeningly.

"Fight!"

Meg borrowed a page from Heath and came in high and fast, keeping the space between them with sweeping roundhouse kicks. She avoided any spinning kicks because of Lisa's deceptive speed. She simply didn't want to expose her back and kidneys to the woman for any length of time. Lisa blocked deftly and stepped in close, trying to score with her hands. Meg grinned around her mouthpiece as the blonde stepped blindly into her trap. Meg's kicking foot rapidly became her plant foot and her other knee shot forward to take Lisa in the solar plexus as Meg delivered a simultaneous elbow to her opponent's short ribs, a shot that bordered on legal because it was near where the torso pad stopped. Lisa went down hard.

"Point black! Two to nothing! Fighters separate!" the ref called. On the sideline, Dennis' eyes were dancing and Susan was jumping up and down like a twelve-year-old.

"Fight!"

Banking on Lisa's anger, Meg sat back in a comfortable back-stance and let the West Coast girl come right to her. Lisa came on in a blur of roundhouses that Meg deflected off her forearms. She smelled a rat, however, in the repetitiveness of the assault. Lisa was trying to lull Meg into a confidence and then smash her by breaking the rhythm. Meg didn't give her the opportunity, shifting her weight into a cat-stance like lightning and sending a simple, white-belt front snap kick between Lisa's legs as Meg blocked a high roundhouse; she felt the ball of her foot contact pleasantly with Lisa's high forehead. The blonde's head snapped back roughly and she had to step away, taking a moment to restore her equilibrium.

"Point black! Three to nothing! Fighters separate!" the ref called, holding up his little black flag. "Do you need a moment, ma'am?" he asked Lisa.

"No, I'm okay," Lisa said. And then to Meg: "That's it, girl. No more. Kiss it goodbye."

Meg added just enough fuel to the fire to make the blonde good and angry. "Come get some."

Lisa's face went ice-cold. Meg tried to make her bad knee accessible without looking as if she was. The sacrifice fly had worked for her before. She only hoped it wasn't too big a gamble.

Concentrate, Daniel-san. Focus power, she thought to herself in a fake Mr. Miyagi accent.

"Fight!"

Lisa came in low, as Meg had suspected. She shifted her weight for a side-kick in a manner that she hoped Lisa would find too good to pass up.

Her knee exploded in pain, but it was nowhere near as bad as she'd expected. She'd managed to turn her weight at the last second and take the brunt of Lisa's brute roundhouse on her shin, dropping to the mat and cradling her knee as she grimaced in pain. Dennis was by her side so fast it seemed he hadn't crossed the intervening space.

"Oh, God," Dennis moaned. "I thought she was just talking shit, Meg. I didn't know she'd really go for you like that! Jesus and Mary, are you all right?"

Meg, not letting her grimace drop, winked at her trainer. "Are they buying it?" she asked.

Dennis goggled and Meg drew him close before his expression gave her away. "You sleaze," Dennis said, trying not to laugh openly. "You're faking!"

"And the nominees for Best Actress in a Martial Arts Competition are."

Dennis made a pretense of checking Meg's knee, making a bold show of pushing up her *gi* pants to expose the monster tape job and the orthopedic brace on Meg's left knee, just as Meg had hoped. The crowd started booing Lisa and Meg was glad she still had her mouthpiece in so the smile wouldn't show. By the time Dennis had the brace off and the crowd got a good look at Meg's arthroscopic surgery scars, they were howling for Lisa's blood in a bucket.

You owe me twenty bucks, bitch.

"Foul white!" the referee called. "No point! No point! Are you all right, Meg?"

Meg sat up. "Yeah. I'm gonna be okay."

"Trainer? What's it gonna be?"

Dennis looked up; his face was a mask of concern. "She wants to finish it."

The referee looked stricken. "You sure?"

"I don't want her to, but when she makes up her mind, there's no talking her out of it. She's back in. I just want to give her some xylocaine first," Dennis said, shooting a critical look at Meg.

"Sorry, sir," the ref said. "Against the rules. She gets the shot, she's DQ."

Meg shrugged herself to her feet, testing her weight against the knee as the crowd cheered like mad. The knee hurt like hell, but it held her weight wonderfully and was still flexible as hell. Meg could tell by feel that all the ligaments were still intact. It seemed like she was just going to get away with a lovely bruise. She hobbled a bit and then executed an intentionally sloppy *palque* complete with wobbles and balance problems, then took her line and squared into a shaky back-stance as the crowd went nuts. Slowly she underwent the process of clearing her mind again.

"Three to nothing, advantage black," the ref said. "Ready fighters?"

Meg nodded and then Lisa, who got a cautioning finger from the ref.

"Fight!"

It was so quick, that Meg had to watch the replays to actually remember it afterwards. She dangled her bad knee out like bait in front of her on the pretense that it was too sore to take her weight well. Lisa dove for it with a sweeping side kick that made the crowd hold its collective breath.

Meg jumped off her good leg, tucking her arms and spinning her head around until Lisa's surprised face came into her field of vision again. In the middle of the mid-air pirouette Meg let her left foot peel away from her body and was gratified to feel the crushing impact of her heel on the side of Lisa's head. Meg landed hard on her good leg and finished with a vicious double-palm punch to Lisa's midsection which sent the blonde woman toppling backwards, unconscious. Meg's *kiai* echoed from the ceiling.

It was the move that Meg had been working on in the nude the night she'd first made love with Cassie. She'd researched it and it was completely legal. She caught her balance in a low

climbing stance, fists at the ready as Lisa hit the mat like a sack of millet. The crowd seemed to draw a breath in slow motion, and then Meg was twenty dollars richer. The cheering made so much sound that it barely registered.

"Double point black! Five to nothing! Winner black!"

Meg staggered to her feet, bowing respectfully to her unconscious opponent and then to the judges, staying to the letter of form. The judges all stood and returned her bow, and then she was swept up by Dennis Mendoza's thick, powerful arms and he was whirling her around as the PA began blasting the Allman Brothers' song yet again. Meg didn't hear any of it. Tears streaked her face.

Dennis stared up at her in wonder. "You sneaky bitch," he said lovingly. "That was fantastic."

"Dennis, thanks," Meg breathed, sniffing back more tears. "Thanks for everything."

"It was fun, red."

"Keep your door unlocked tonight," she told him throatily. "I have a debt to collect."

* * * * *

At least the photographers were nice enough to not make Meg stand through the monumental hour of pictures of America's Olympic Team. The Olympic Committee Rep had broken out the team jackets, snowy white affairs with a wraparound Stars-and-Stripes appliqué which would serve them well against the chill of an Australian July. She stood on the platform wearing hers alongside her new teammates, Susan and Hannah, Peter and Rob and Bill Hardwell, all tired smiles and breathless excitement. All the team members were sweaty, sore and red-faced, but Meg could barely feel her knee. Dreams didn't come true just every day, and she intended to make the most of this one. The medal around her neck felt warm and *right*.

"Meg," one of the reporters spoke up. "How's the knee?"

"Now's not the time to ask me," she said, smiling ear-to-ear. "I can't feel a thing right now."

Peter and Susan gave her a companionable sandwich hug.

"Any feelings on Lisa McByrne's condition?" another asked.

"I'm really sorry it had to happen like that," Meg said diplomatically. "She's a great competitor. But I saw her coming for the knee and all I could think of was keeping her back. I really didn't mean to hurt her neck like that." *Actually, I was aiming to break it.*

"Hannah, were you surprised to hear that the neck sprain was going to keep Lisa off the team?"

"You bet I was," Hannah said. "I was watching Meg's match and I didn't think she hit her quite that hard. I kept expecting to see Lisa get up and bow to the judges. When they told me she was off the team, I just stood there crying. I couldn't believe it."

"Rob," another reporter called out. "You complained about the noise in the arena tonight. Was it a factor in your competition in the end, would you say?"

Rob smiled thinly. "I guess it was more unexpected than anything else," he said softly. "I had my head in my own business, so I wasn't really aware that the women's competition was turning out to be so dramatic. Now that I've finally gotten a chance to see Meg, Susan and Hannah in action, I don't begrudge them anything. They're all fantastic competitors and I'm proud to be their teammate. I'm actually hoping Meg will teach me that spin kick combination she used to win her final match sometime."

"Only if you show me how you do that double sweep kick," Meg said.

"You like that one? I thought it up on a bus."

"I thought the spin move up in the shower," Meg confessed. "I ran it down stark naked."

Peter laughed out loud. "That's something to dream about."

"Susan, we saw you talking to Meg all through the competition today. Did her advice help you?"

Susan blushed, not used to being the center of attention. "I made the team, didn't I? Meg was great. She even took the time to give me pointers when we were competing against one another. She's like a big sister out there. She's great."

A man came from the back of the press in a huge hurry, pushing an AV cart with a television and a blinking VCR on it. Behind him, a cameraman was frantically patching in a live feed to the back of the television while a third came up and offered a headset to Meg. "We've got something special for you, Meghan," one of the men said as another cameraman trained his camera and its attendant klieg light on her. They turned on the television and after a moment of static, an image of a stringy-haired blond, bearded man appeared, his big arms covered with tattoos. Gregg Allman.

"Gregg? Can you hear me?" the AV man asked into a headset.

The singer/keyboardist's voice came over Meg's headset and the television speaker. "Just fine."

"Go ahead, whenever you're ready."

Meg was blushing furiously. She'd been an Allman Brothers fan since the cradle.

"Hey, there, Meg," Gregg said, grinning the boozy grin that Meg knew so very well from the concerts she'd attended as a tall, muscular man. "How's my number one fan?"

"I'm good, thanks," Meg stammered.

"Just wanted to thank you for the free PR. Let me know anytime you want backstage passes."

"Go ahead and drop some in the mail right now," Meg replied. "And then keep 'em coming. I love you guys. I've been to every concert you've done in Houston since 1982. My dad had to sneak me in, but I was there." She remembered well riding her father's shoulders and singing along to *Midnight Rider*.

"Cool," Gregg said, snickering. "Always happy to meet a fan. Got a deal for you."

"A deal? I'm listening." Meg was sure her voice had climbed two octaves with excitement.

"You win me a medal at the Olympics, any color," he said, "and me and the boys will fly down to Sydney and sing to you personally. How's that sound?"

Meg nodded, trying to keep a lid on her frantic excitement. She was even starting to soak through her panties, the happiness was so incredible. "I could handle that."

"I'll sing twice if you swing a gold," he said, laughing. "Good job today, babe."

"Thanks," Meg panted, nearly hyperventilating. "I did my best."

"I watched the last half when I heard about your theme song," Allman said. "You could kick my ass, I'll tell you that much right now. Remind me never to make you mad."

"I couldn't be mad at you if I tried, dude," Meg said honestly. "You've been singing me to sleep with *Melissa* for eight years. Thanks for calling." She started giggling hysterically. "This is the coolest thing that's ever happened to me. I don't know what else to say."

Gregg laughed. "Catch you later, Meg. I'll catch your act in Sydney."

The monitor went to static again, and Meg could only cover her mouth with both hands like some simpering Miss America candidate while the gathered people cheered and her teammates patted her back.

"Man, I been competing for years and Gregg Allman never called me," she heard Rob Holt whisper behind her back. She also heard Peter's whispering snicker.

"You don't have nearly so great a body," Peter shot back. "Think about it. Dude, get used to the press. This country's been primed for a female sports hero since Jackie Joyner and FloJo. Let her have it. I think it's great, and it couldn't have happened to a sweeter girl."

"You're right," Rob conceded. "Hell, I'm just glad that I'm not going to have to compete with her. Her brother was the only man who ever beat me in competition and she has all his moves plus some."

Meg couldn't stand it anymore. She turned to Rob.

"If it's any consolation, he respected you like nobody else except maybe his best friend Heath," she told him. "You were the benchmark he measured himself by. He thinks you're the best on the mat."

Rob blushed. "Wow. I never knew that."

"Yeah," Meg said.

Rob's chest swelled with pride. "Thanks for that, Meg."

They turned back to the cameras and the questions, but Meg was distracted. In the back of the room, she saw Dennis give her knowing look and hold up his room key and a twenty-dollar bill from Lisa McByrne's trainer, which he tucked into her gym bag.

* * * *

Daniel Redmond hadn't gotten six figures a year as a programming director for nothing. He knew what sold commercials and he knew what got people tuning in. And with the ratings hits lately surrounding the Olympics, the network had looked to him to give the sporting events a little more flash, a little more pizzazz and, most importantly of all, to get people watching and keep them there and not flipping over to *Will & Grace* instead. Daniel Redmond knew what kept people watching sports. Heroes were one thing, but the Olympics had never hurt for heroes. U.S. Winners, but the Olympics had never hurt for those, either. He was rapidly running out of ideas.

It wasn't until he watched the tapes of the Taekwondo championships that it hit him what might be missing, what was keeping people from watching the Olympics. The oldest method of keeping people tuned in, one tried and true since television began. Tits and ass. Nothing got remotes put down better.

He picked up the phone on his desk, looking hungrily at the luscious image of Meg Rutherford, seeing dollar signs and images of *Xena, Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. There was a real live Buffy out there, one with a centerfold body and the face of an angel. Badass girls were in.

"This is Redmond," he said into the phone. "I want to change the lineup for the Olympics. I want to bump some of the track and field events, maybe even some of the gymnastics, for Taekwondo."

A pause. "Yes, I said taekwondo."

Another pause. "Barbara, is this or is this not a television station? People will believe anything we tell them to believe. If we tell them to eat Twinkies, they eat Twinkies. If we tell them smoke dope, they smoke dope. And if we tell them that taekwondo is the coolest sport ever, then they'll watch. Don't argue with me, I know what I'm doing."

His eyes caressed Meg's form, freeze-framed in the middle of a kick to some other girl's gut. Girl badasses were in. The viewers were going to eat this up. All he had to do was put a sport that nobody really cared about on national television.

That's why he made the big bucks.

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Meg finally got done downstairs at around midnight, and not even the exhaustion of a nineteen-hour day of competition and celebration could keep her from jumping every time the air conditioning system engaged. If she could have mustered the presence of mind to take a good look at herself, Meg could have had a good laugh watching herself mutter the relative pros and cons of going to Dennis' room while the whole time digging out a sexy green sayin nightgown from her luggage and pulling it on over her slim, taut body. She pulled her hair free of the braid, perfumed her breasts, and tied her hair back with a matching green ribbon as she argued with herself. Satisfied with her appeal, she wrapped one of the hotel's complimentary robes around herself, grabbed Dennis' room key, and slipped out the door.

She was still arguing with herself when the door clicked shut.



SUMMARY: Two friends find themselves victims of a science experiment which turns them into women who now must deal with their new life and their changing relationship with their girlfriends. part five

ALL THAT GLITTERS, Part V (Chapters 12-13)

By Valerie Hope

CHAPTER TWELVE: To boldly go where no man has gone before

MEG CREPT THROUGH the door, almost hoping that Dennis would be asleep so that she wouldn't have to make a decision after all. Dennis was stretched full length on his bed, wearing only a pair of Southern Methodist University Athletic Department sweats and a white T-shirt with the sleeves torn out, watching Meg's conversation with Gregg Allman as it re-aired on CNN.

"You're on every channel, *pelirrojo*," he said as the door clicked shut behind her with a note of finality. *Do I really want this?* she thought frantically to herself. *Do I? Is it real attraction, or just curiosity? Do I really want a man to touch me like that? To put himself inside me? Do I?*

"I'm proud of you," Dennis said. "You showed 'em all. You're going to the Olympics."

"Thanks," Meg said. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Sure you could," Dennis corrected her. "I was just glad to be a part of it. Actually, you made me want to box again. Who knows, maybe I could try to get into the next Olympics with your buddy Heath."

Meg leaned against the door, hands behind her back, before she realized how sexy it must have looked. Dennis raised his eyebrows and gave her a half-smile.

"You're nervous? Why?"

"I came to collect my kiss," Meg said. "But my girl body's been having a fight with my guy brain."

"You don't have to," Dennis said gently, sitting on the edge.

Just go for broke, girl. You don't have anything to lose but your cherry, she thought to herself.

"No, I want to. I won the gold, and I want my kiss." She let the robe fall and stood in front of him in the clinging silk nightgown, and Dennis eyes widened. "For starters," she added.

"You sure, red?"

She snaked her arms around his broad shoulders, drinking in the size of him for a moment before lowering her lips to his, crushing the kiss against him. He didn't protest long, grabbing her waist with his hands and pulling her down to straddle his lap. Her long curls curtained down around their faces and the kiss seemed to go on forever. Meg was floating; she ran her hands through Dennis' short hair as his strong hands caressed her back.

Dennis moved his mouth to her neck and the tops of her silk-clad breasts, and she threw her head back to give him room to work. When Cassie touched her, it was a woman touching a body that she was intimately familiar with. With Dennis, Meg was finding that there was an underlying roughness to the touch that, instead of putting her off, made her knees go all to jelly. Was this how Cassie had felt when she'd touched him as Mark? She felt the warm wetness and caught the musky scent of her own excitement, felt the tightening in her crotch and the maddening emptiness in her middle. Her breasts became super-sensitive and the nipples stiffened to hard points under Dennis' lips. Meg came to realize that the strange feelings that Cassie had been evoking inside her in bed for the past weeks had been female desire. The combination of want and need was delicious and at that moment Meg knew what it was to want a man. She tightened her hands in his hair and pulled his lips back to hers, sliding her arms down his shoulders and rubbing his upper back in long, slow, rhythmic motions that mimicked sexual thrusts.

"Sweet Jesus, you're sexy," Dennis breathed.

Meg would have just felt silly saying anything right then. She lowered her warm and wet crotch onto Dennis', feeling the rapidly-growing length of him through his sweatpants, and she moaned at the electric contact. She rained baby-kisses along his neck and shoulders, pulling the T-shirt off of him to expose a broad, well-muscled frame covered with tattoos and a small jelly-roll of fat around his middle. She buried her nose in the sparse patch of hair between his pectorals and inhaled the sharp, masculine scent of him. She reacted on a hormonal level by beginning to rub her vulva against his thickening organ and clenching the muscles of her vagina rhythmically.

"God," she breathed. "I didn't know I could feel like this."

"You like it?" Dennis asked. "I can stop, if you're not comfortable."

Meg answered him with a deep kiss, opening her teeth so that he could probe her mouth with his tongue. His breath tasted like the beer he'd promised himself in the hotel bar laid over with fresh toothpaste. The want built higher and higher until Meg thought she'd burst with it.

"No," she breathed, panting. "All the way. That's what I want."

"Thought you'd never ask." Dennis lay her back onto the bed, stretching himself out beside her. He eased her out of the nightgown and she lay before him naked except for a lacy pair of green silk panties. Dennis looked at her with a predatory hunger which for some reason Meg found evocative as hell.

He ran his hands down her smooth body and finally cupped her sex in one warm hand while he fastened his lips onto her left nipple, teasing it with tongue and teeth while he rubbed her. There were no words to describe how wonderful Meg felt. She lay back and moaned, running her hands over every inch of Dennis' body that she could reach. When the desire reached the line between pleasure and pain, she reached down and felt his length through the sweatpants, pulling them down with her other hand and stroking him firmly through his

Jockeys. Dennis moaned and rolled his head back, offering himself to her. Slowly she eased her fingers past the elastic waistband and gripped his penis. It was warmer than she'd ever remembered her own being, and silky smooth and soft, like a steel rod wrapped in velvet. She drew it out and for a moment all her desire and curiosity turned briefly to fear.

"I can't put that thing in me," she breathed. "Dear God, it'll tear me in half."

Dennis nibbled her ear. "Don't worry, babe, it's never hurt anybody before. It just looks that way to you right now because it's your first time. Why don't you be on top?"

Meg sat up, not releasing her grip on his dick. "We need a condom," she said huskily.

"Top drawer," Dennis said, kissing her lower back. He began a light teasing of her vaginal lips with his hand which made it extremely hard to concentrate on digging through the drawer. At last she pulled a streamer of foil packets from beneath the Gideon Bible - *Nice touch*, she thought wickedly - and frantically tore the corner from one with her teeth. Slowly, not wanting to poke him with her long fingernails, she rolled the tight rubber sheath down the length of his circumcised cock. His head rolled back as she did, and Meg smiled knowingly - she remembered how good that felt when the woman did it.

Dennis wormed her panties off of her and the cool air against her vulva reminded her how very wet she had gotten. Her sharp, musky scent filled the room. Dennis dabbled his fingers gently along the length of her slit, lifting them to his lips and tasting her. "It's official," he commented. "You look, sound, feel, smell and now *taste* just like a woman."

"That's because I am a woman, silly," Meg said. "Right now I don't think there's anything else I'd rather be." She crawled atop him, straddling his abdomen and feeling his erection poking her gently in the right buttock. She knelt upright, ignoring the pain in her knee, and took his length in her small hand, rubbing it gently against the entrance to her vagina until his shaft was well-coated with her fluids.

"Stop teasing, *pelirrojo*," Dennis begged. "Put it in."

Meg put the head of his cock against the entrance to her vagina and slid back a little, feeling the barest minimum of the broad head penetrate her. Her breath caught in her throat. She was still tensing inside for the pain she knew would come when Dennis' hands clamped around her narrow waist and began to ease her down. There was a feeling of contraction inside her, and then she slipped down his entire length, feeling the crown of his penis come to rest against her cervix, deep in her belly. She gasped, holding stock-still.

"How is it? Are you okay?" Dennis asked.

It didn't feel like anything. She could sense him inside her, like the speculum at the doctor's office, but there wasn't any other sensation, good or bad. She shifted her position to lay atop him (her arms were getting tired) and kiss him again, to tell him the bad news, that it didn't feel like anything. That was when Dennis pulled his hips back and made the tiniest thrust, and Meg's eyes rolled back into her head. She grabbed two fists full of the coverlet and moaned for all she was worth.

"Oh, God," she managed at last.

Dennis started a slow rhythm, with an underlying power that took him from nearly withdrawn from her to as deep as he could go. There was an exquisite feeling of fullness inside Meg and

a lovely feeling of sinful lust as she looked over at the mirror on the wall behind the television to see her reflection bobbing up and down on her lover's shaft, her breasts jiggling in seductive waves and her long red hair fanned out behind her like it was floating. She couldn't contain her yelps as Dennis drove into her, and she hoped she wasn't disturbing the neighbors. *Who'd've known I'd turn out to be a screamer?* Meg thought amusedly as her mind and body sailed away on the incredible tide of sensation.

"I can't hold it," Dennis said, and a series of short, growling cries herald the stiffening of his legs and the deepest thrust of all. Meg could almost feel the condom's reservoir fill deep inside her. She collapsed against him, clinging to him with arms and legs and letting her sweat-damp red hair cover his chest like a curtain.

"Ease up, *chica*," Dennis chuckled, the motions of his body transferred through his softening penis and into a divine friction against Meg's clitoris. "You're too damn strong. You're crushing me."

"That was incredible," she said. "But you *can't* be done already."

"I'll be back in the ring in a minute," he told her. "I'm not a young man anymore."

"I'd bet you fuck like one," Meg told him.

"You kidding? I only lasted a couple minutes that time. You're really good, you know that?"

A couple minutes? Meg thought. "Felt like longer," she mentioned.

"Well, you seemed to be enjoying yourself." He stripped off the gooey rubber and tossed it into a wastebasket by the phone. "C'mere," he told her, and she returned to his arms, as horny as before. He kissed her roughly, forcing her underneath him with his superior weight, and Meg found that the feeling of submission made her crotch even hotter and wetter than before.

She took his penis in her hand and started to stroke it, trying to will it back to hardness. "Come on, come on, hurry up," she urged.

"It'd be quicker if you used your mouth," Dennis suggested.

"Don't push your luck, buddy," Meg cautioned good-naturedly. "I may have been willing to put out for you tonight, but it's gonna be a long time before I turn cocksucker."

Slowly the thick organ began to respond to her, just when she thought there was no life left in it. It thickened and began to lengthen in the small throbbing bursts that Meg recognized from her own experience. She cupped his scrotum and caressed his length, unable to do much else as Dennis used his broad, callused to drive her towards a point which she'd come to know well thanks to Cassie's tutelage.

Oh, God, Cassie, Meg thought despondently. *What am I going to say to her about this?*

With a frightening and comforting strength, Dennis stopped his ministrations to her crotch and turned her onto her back. He knee-walked across the bed to a position between her legs, tearing the wrapper from another condom as he did so. He unrolled it down his length quickly and positioned himself at the entrance to her tunnel, keeping a gentle pressure against her hole with the head as he got his weight distributed to his own satisfaction.

Plagued with thoughts of Cassie, Meg started to protest.

Dennis entered her with one smooth, deep thrust.

Meg completely forgot what she was going to say.

She'd been so close when they'd switched positions that she was back on the brink of orgasm within two or three thrusts, her legs spread wide and her heels drumming against Dennis' buttocks as she worked his shoulders with her hands, trying to coax him deeper. She was sure that her grunting screams could be heard clearly down the hall. A sensitive soreness was beginning at the entrance to her vagina and somewhere around her cervix, but Meg ignored them temporarily. Right then, she didn't care if he flayed the skin from her, he wasn't stopping until Meg came. She wasn't adapting well at all to this dependency on her partner's endurance for her pleasure. *No, she thought, he's not going anywhere until I get my rocks off.*

Meg was a little taken aback at how long she could remain at the brink like she was. When she was a man, no matter how well-intentioned, when he felt the rising and tightening feeling in the balls, she knew she only had a few seconds until it was all over. But she'd been lingering there for a good two minutes solid and started to fear that it was as far as she was going to get tonight.

Unacceptable, she thought, worming her hand between their bodies and gently rubbing the pea-sized bud of her clitoris, now almost completely emerged from beneath the hood. The sight of it was almost too erotic for Dennis, who began to thrust harder and quicker. Slowly, the sensation in Meg's belly began to move as she pushed herself forward with her hand and Dennis' cock, followed close behind by the shuddering, cup-brimming-over feeling that she'd come to know so well. She started to relax and enjoy it as she usually did, but then it took on a new aspect she hadn't expected.

She hadn't experienced orgasm while being penetrated before, and there was just enough different about it to take Meg completely off-guard. When Cassie brought her off it was a gentle easing into ecstasy, a settling back feeling that was like being slowly immersed in water. This time it was much more explosive and sudden, and Meg could actually feel her juices flow down the shaft of Dennis' penis and onto the bedspread. Her clitoris became hypersensitive and she immediately put her hands against Dennis' midsection to stop his thrusts.

"Too sensitive," she managed, panting. Dennis withdrew without protest and pulled off the rubber, settling next to her and beginning to masturbate himself down from the plateau he'd been on when she'd stopped the bus.

"Sorry," she apologized.

"Don't be," Dennis said, smiling. "You were fantastic. It was like a roller coaster."

Feeling like she needed to repay him, she took Dennis in her hand and proceeded to give him a hand-job which felt like she'd been jerking off a penis since she was a teenager. Dennis chuckled when he remembered that she probably had.

He sat up and stripped off the condom, and Meg was getting up, pulling on her panties and nightgown with a guilty look on her face. "I gotta go," she said.

"Don't. Please," Dennis said.

"I can't."

"Look, *chica*, if it's about Cassie, she and I have already talked about this."

Meg stood, her nightgown still bunched around her shoulders. "What?"

"Cassie came to the hospital before we left for Chicago," he repeated. "She told me she knew that we'd kissed each other at the gym, and that as soon as you got in the celebrating mood that we'd probably spend the night together. She was fine with it."

"What did she say about it?"

"She said she loved you enough to trust you through some experimentation."

"Dennis, really. That was fantastic - I can't tell you how good. But I can't stay here."

"Relax, *pelirrojo*. I don't want to pop you the question. I don't even want to fall for you. I like you like you are. But Cassie and I agreed that when you got the idea in your head, it would be better if a friend was the one who went through it with you. I'm really glad you picked me. It was an honor and a whole lot of fun being your first time. I'm not in love with you. You're probably the best friend I've got, and I don't want to ruin that. Just stay here with me, all right? I don't want to be alone right now, and I know you don't either."

"There's reporters all over the hotel. What happens if I get seen coming out of your room in the morning wearing this sex costume? What will people say?"

"They'll say, 'guess she wasn't a lesbian after all,'" Dennis replied. "Lame excuse, red."

Meg put her hands on her hips, looking at him a long time before she pulled her nightgown down over her breasts and smoothed it out. "Scoot over," she commanded. "I like to sleep on the left side of the bed. And watch those elbows."

She slid in next to him and he took her into his arms. Meg wrapped her hand around his meaty forearm and just lay there, enjoying the feeling of safety. Dennis clicked off the lamp and she could feel him bury his face in her hair, inhaling her rich feminine odor.

"That was very nice," she told him in the dark. He kissed her bare shoulder in response.

"Just do me one favor," Meg asked. "Next time you and Cassie get ideas about my sex life, I'd kinda like it if you kept me in the loop, okay?"

Dennis only laughed deep in his throat and gently massaged her neck until she drifted into sleep.

* * * *

Sex might have been good, but waking up in his arms was better. Meg couldn't remember feeling so safe and warm since her childhood, when her parents were still both alive. Her mother was only a hazy memory of hands and the smell of roses. Her dad had hung on longer, but the loss of his wife had forced him to retreat into himself and he never really got

involved with his children's lives because it reminded him too painfully of what he'd lost in a car accident. When Thomas Rutherford expired from a stroke at 66, Mark hadn't been alone in considering it a blessing. Her father's biggest joy had been watching his fine sons and their achievements, Adam's grades and Mark's athletics. Meg hoped that her father was with his beloved wife, somewhere up in heaven, smiling down at their son-turned-daughter and the National Championship gold medal that she'd won the evening before.

Leaving Dennis snoring softly, Meg got up at her usual ungodly hour and gathered her things, sneaking across the hall into her own room. She lay across the bed in her nightgown, staring at the ceiling, wondering how her parents would have reacted to her transformation from Mark to Meghan. She didn't remember enough of her mom to formulate any kind of a theory, but the corner of her mouth turned up when she imagined what her Irish Catholic father would have said:

Hi, dad. Guess what? I accidentally turned into a girl last night. I've decided to stay this way so I can still go to the Olympics. Hope you don't mind.

You and your bloody Olympics. Well, girl or boy, I still love you the same. If I catch you sleeping with anybody I'll kill you and send the corpse to a convent.

Deciding she's used the sore and tender feeling between her legs as an excuse for long enough, Meg got up and showered, changing into faded blue-jeans and a green silk blouse she'd borrowed from Cassie, scooping her still-damp hair into a pony-tail. She added some color to her lips and cheeks (still being careful to use concealer to mask the remains of the shiner Heath had given her) and started down to the lobby for a bite of breakfast. Susan wandered up as she was waiting for the elevator.

"Good morning," Susan chirped. "How are you?"

"Still high from yesterday," Meg said. "You?"

"Today is yesterday," Susan said. "Who slept? Say, where were you last night? Hannah and I came by your room twice and nobody answered. Did you go someplace?"

Meg grunted noncommittally, but she could feel the color rising along her neck and cheeks. Susan picked up on it immediately and covered her mouth with her hands. "You mean you were."

Meg could only stare at the ground in embarrassment. But she knew she couldn't keep the telltale 'I-Just-Got-Some' smile off of her face. Susan was making noises somewhere between laughter and screams behind her hands. "Who was it?" Susan demanded.

"I can't say. It just kinda happened," Meg managed.

"Come on," Susan prompted as the elevator arrived. "I swear I won't tell anybody."

Meg looked both ways down the hall to make sure no one could overhear. "My trainer, Dennis."

Susan's eyes widened to the size of teacups. "The Hispanic guy? Oh, wow. He was cute."

"He's available," Meg said. "Like I said, it just kinda happened. We both talked about it afterwards, and neither one of us is interested in a relationship."

Susan leaned against the mirrored wall of the elevator. "Peter Barnett is going to be so jealous."

"Huh?"

"We got really drunk last night after everybody left. He kept going on and on about you. He told us all about that fat guy you taught the lesson to in Houston, and about how he thinks you're the most beautiful girl he's ever seen. He said when you came to the opening mixer in that dress you nearly stopped his heart. He looked all over the hotel for you last night."

Meg scrubbed her hands over her face. "Poor guy."

"What do you mean?"

"He's shit out of luck, I'm sorry to say."

Susan looked confused.

"You mean you didn't know?" Meg said. "I'm gay."

"But last night with your trainer-"

"Just happened. We were both really high from the competition, and we were talking together, and you know how things like that can happen when you're really emotional. It was nice, but it wasn't nearly enough to make me want to leave my girlfriend back home."

"Oh, wow," Susan said.

"Promise you'll keep my secret," Meg said. "You know how people get. Especially now that the media is watching me all the time. I don't want to be on the news as the 'Dyke Martial Artist.'"

"I never would have guessed," Susan said. "I mean, you're so beautiful."

Meg laughed. "Not all lesbians are butt-ugly, Suse. You should see my girlfriend."

"Wow," Susan said. "So, what did you think of sex on my side of the fence?"

Meg laughed out loud. "You certainly are direct."

"Well, I'm curious. Had you ever been with a man before?"

"Nope," Meg said. "I was a virgin until last night."

"Really? A virgin? You must have found out that you were gay real early on."

"I can't remember a time when I didn't like girls."

The elevator stopped at their floor, and Susan hustled them both through the line for the continental breakfast and into a secluded corner booth so she could get back to gossiping. Meg had to stop several times along the way to answer congratulations from others in the restaurant. To her mortification, she even had to give an autograph to a little girl and her dad, and pose for a picture.

"So go on," Susan prompted as she finally sat down to breakfast. "What did you think?"

Meg patiently buttered a piece of toast. "I don't know. It hurt a little."

"The only advice I can give you there is to keep trying, unfortunately," Susan giggled.

"But there was this point, last night, when he started getting really passionate, and he just kinda. rolled me over and *took me*," Meg said, whispering in her embarrassment. "I really liked that. I wish Cassie would learn how to do that when I'm with her."

Susan got a serious look. "Uh-oh. Poor guy."

Meg turned to see Peter Barnett enter the restaurant, looking hung-over and rumpled. He saw Meg and Susan and started their way, waving. "You should probably tell him," Susan said. "He needs to know. Meg, he's got it real bad for you. It wouldn't be fair to keep stringing him along."

"I'm not stringing him along!" Meg hissed.

Susan looked nonplussed. "Oh, bull. Last night, in front of the reporters, you kept flashing him those light-up-the-room smiles and hugging him. Tell me you weren't flirting."

"I wasn't trying to."

"Meg, I'm telling you, you were most definitely fl-Hi, Peter!"

"Morning," he said. "There you are, Meg! We looked all over the hotel for you last night."

"I went to stay with some friends in town," Meg lied. Susan gave her a wink to show her approval. "Besides, there were just too many flashing cameras and loud people. I needed to get out of here."

"I understand," Peter said. "You guys mind if I join you?"

"Sure," Susan said. "If you get me another English muffin while you're up there."

Peter smiled and left, while Susan mouthed "tell him" at Meg behind his back.

"You really think I should?" Meg whispered when Peter was out of earshot.

"Yeah," Susan replied. "I don't want to embarrass you, Meg, but you really should have heard him talking about you last night. The poor thing is one hundred percent grade A in lust with you. Hell, maybe he'll be so distraught about your sexual preference that he'll turn to me to console him."

"Who knew such a sweet face could hide such a wicked mind?" Meg giggled.

"Of course, if you liked boy-girl sex enough, you could always experiment a little with him," Susan said slyly. "I have it on good authority that the second time doesn't hurt as much as the first."

"You know, it's almost tempting," Meg said. "But I am very happily spoken for."

"Your girlfriend must really be something else," Susan said. "I hope I get to meet her."

"Me too," Meg said. "I'm going to try to talk her into coming to Sydney."

Peter walked up then, bearing a plate piled high with food. "You missed a pretty good time last night, Meg," he said. "After everybody left, Hannah, Susan, me and Rob had a little private party."

"Susan was telling me that you all mourned the passing of a fifth of bourbon," Meg said. "I'm not much of a drinker, I'm afraid. I'd probably have just flaked out on you guys after one or two."

"Cheap date, huh?"

"I used to be able to hold it better, but not anymore," Meg mused.

Peter scooted into the booth beside Susan. Susan immediately began attacking his plate.

"I should go up and start packing soon," Meg said. "I have an early flight. And I have to wake up my trainer, too. He was sleeping like a log when I came down here this morning."

Susan choked, and Peter patted her back until she could breathe again.

"What time are you leaving?" Peter asked. "It'd be a kick if we had the same flight back."

"My flight's at 12.25," Meg said.

"Damn," Peter said. "I don't leave until four."

"It's just as well, probably," Meg said. "I wouldn't be very good company right now. No, all I want to do is head straight home, unpack, change into my sweats and kiss my cat and my girlfriend."

Peter went white. "Girlfriend?"

Meg nodded. "You didn't know?"

Peter swallowed hard. "No, I didn't. I never would have guessed."

Meg looked down at herself. "Yeah, I guess I do have kind of a heterosexual vibe about me."

Susan looked sympathetically at Peter, who was still wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

"Look, Peter, I trust you enough to tell you, and Susan, too, but now that the media is paying so much attention to me, I'd just as soon my being queer wasn't public knowledge," Meg confided. "I mean, there's just no way to know how they'd handle it. Would you mind keeping it a secret?"

Peter was hiding his disappointment as well as he could. "My lips are sealed."

"Are you okay about this?" Meg asked. "You look a little stunned."

"It was just kind of a shock."

Meg's expression softened. "Look, Peter, I know you like me. Even if Susan hadn't told me, I could have figured it out from how you were acting last night. If I led you on or anything, I'm really sorry. I hope I haven't hurt your feelings. I'd really like for us to be friends."

Peter smiled ruefully. "Just *how much* did this little sneak tell you?" he said, elbowing Susan. Susan's little-girl face was a portrait of innocence spoiled only by her neck-to-scalp blush.

"Enough," Meg smiled. "I felt really terrible about it, so I had to tell you."

"I appreciate it," Peter said. "I want us to be friends too."

"Good," Meg said.

"One question," Peter amended. "Do jokes of a heterosexual nature at your expense offend you?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

Peter's face became deadly serious. "Then I will pay you one thousand dollars if you'll let me sit and watch you and your girlfriend together sometime."

The explosion of laughter from the corner booth distracted the entire restaurant.

* * * * *

Meg was frustrated that she couldn't jump straight into Cassie's arms the moment she stepped off the jet-way at Intercontinental Airport, but the TV cameras and reporters were already set up to get their interviews and pictures. Although tired and sore, she managed to be as gracious as she could, getting the business of image out of the way in as short a time as she was able. By the time she'd reclaimed her baggage and hauled it all to her truck, she was short of breath and more than happy to settle against Cassie's shoulder, kissing her deeply and mumbling fondly about how much she'd missed her.

"We have to get to Faith and Heath's place by six," Cassie told her. "They told me to take you straight there the minute you got on the ground. I figured you wanted to go home first and see your kitty."

"Actually, I was more interested in seeing you," Meg said.

Cassie crawled behind the wheel, turning the key. The recalcitrant Toyota decided to be stubborn and the venerable four-banger wouldn't turn over. Meg got out exasperatedly and went to work under the hood, running down the long list of things to check to get the truck back to life.

"Piece of shit car," she muttered.

"Don't complain too much," Cassie said. "At least you have a piece of shit."

Meg looked at her amusedly. "I didn't know you wanted a car that badly."

"Like I could afford one," Cassie said. "I couldn't even make a down payment."

"I know a way we could make a quick thousand."

* * * * *

Cassie leaned against the tile wall of the shower, still shivering from the intensity of the lovemaking she'd just experienced. "I'll swear you're getting better at this," she breathed.

Meg kissed the tops of her breasts. "I really missed you."

"I missed you too."

"Cassie," Meg said. "I should tell you something."

"What is it, babe?"

"I slept with Dennis."

Cassie smiled. "I figured you would."

"I know you knew it was going to happen. For a while I was a bit angry that you didn't discuss your 'decision' with me, but I got over it. But I still feel guilty."

"You shouldn't. It was just a matter of time before curiosity got the better of you. So what did you think of sex as a woman? Not too shabby, eh?"

Meg nodded. "It was nice. The first time hurt a little bit, but by the next time it was great."

"Just twice?"

"Gimme a break, dammit, I'd just gotten through winning the National Championships."

"I expect details."

Meg laughed. "It made me realize that I don't really want to be in bed with anybody but you, though. I mean, I wouldn't mind trying that again someday, but I'd want you to be involved. I don't ever want to do something that intimate without you there again."

"You have it pretty bad for me, sounds like."

"I do. You're my girl."

"And you're mine."

"Answer me something honestly," Meg said. "Do you miss the sex?"

Cassie smiled. "Yeah. I do. You were - *are* - an incredible lover. I miss feeling you inside me."

"If I can't change back, would you ever consider taking on another lover?"

Cassie's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, a male lover. Do you think you might take one on, just for the sex part?"

"Meg, where is this leading?"

Meg sighed, turning her head back underneath the shower spray before answering. "I was just wondering, I guess, if I still excited you. I know you're not very attracted to women physically. I also know that you can live with not being turned on by my body - I can't tell you how relieved I was when I finally understood that. But, I don't want you not to be satisfied. Really. I guess I just wanted to tell you that, if you ever get to feeling like you need to be with a man, I don't want you to think twice about it."

"Meg, that's silly."

"No it's not. I mean it. I don't think I could stand it if you didn't love me, but I understand completely if you need to look someplace else for something I can't give you anymore."

Cassie turned stern. "You're just feeling guilty. I'd sooner go and buy some plastic thing than sleep with someone else, and you know it."

Meg embraced her, and the combination of her soft body and the warm water made Cassie feel wonderful. "And I know, now, that it's not just about penetration. The actual physical sensation was real nice, but the real thrill was how the whole thing made me feel. I can try to make you feel like that with this body, but I don't think it could ever be the same. I just want you to know that you don't have to cut yourself off just to be with me. I could handle it if you took someone else into your bed every once in a while. Hell, it might even be fun to share or something."

Cassie rubbed her forehead. "What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know," Meg said. "I've just been feeling like I've been asking you to be something you're not lately. Like I've been trying to change you just so you'll fit with me. I don't want that."

Cassie sighed. "Well, if that applies to me, it applies to you too, dammit. You're trying to be all dispassionate and clinical about it, but you blush every time you talk about that night in the hotel room. You enjoyed hell out of it, didn't you?"

"Do you hate me?"

Cassie laughed. "Good Lord, no! How could I hate you for being human? Tell me something. Are you as interested in trying it again as it sounds like you are?"

"Well, there is this incredibly nice guy that's interested in me."

"Peter Barnett."

"You have a great career as a mind-reader ahead of you," Meg said.

"Oh, like it's some big secret. I saw the two of you on television, hugging and smiling at each other. To be honest, in another life I'd have been interested in jumping him myself."

"We're never gonna get together," Meg confided. "I told him I was gay."

"You didn't."

"Sure I did," Meg said. "He can keep the secret from the press."

Cassie sighed. "I don't know how well I'm going to handle people knowing about us."

Meg looked serious. "Do you want to break up? I mean, just until the Olympics are over?"

"Not on your life. I just am having trouble adjusting. I shouldn't complain - I mean, it seems like a piddling little adjustment to make in light of what you've had to get used to, but it's still really bothering me. I wish I could just get over it."

They got out of the shower and began to towel off and get presentable, knowing well that Dennis and Adam were already over and Heath's place, waiting on them to show before the celebration began. "I just want you to be happy," Meg said. "I never want to feel like I'm forcing you into anything."

"I'll let you know if that happens," Cassie said.

"You just did. You told me you're not comfortable with a homosexual relationship."

Cassie started applying her makeup. "We've been over this."

"Not to my satisfaction," Meg said, brushing her hair.

"Can we just continue this some other time, please?" Cassie said, her tone getting edgy with irritation. "We're running late and I really don't want to have a fight your first day back."

Meg sighed heavily, then stroked her shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Cassie smiled, and moved over so Meg could use the mirror.

* * * * *

Meg sat out on her balcony that evening, Major Tom in her lap and Son Volt playing softly in the background. Cassie was asleep in their bed, but Meg couldn't quit tossing and turning. Sure, it was probably for the best, but it still hurt like hell.

They arrived at Heath and Faith's apartment at about a quarter to seven. Dennis had started acting a bit more protective of Meg since their tryst, which made the homecoming a bit awkward at first, but soon just being around her friends and brother loosened the mood considerably. Even Dr. Tolliver seemed to be having a good time. It wasn't long at all before Meg, Adam and Heath were fondly remembering all the trouble they'd gotten into as children together, all the hare-brained stunts they'd pulled. As little boys, they were the team supreme: Adam was the brains of the operation and he had two strong and fearless older boys to do all his dirty work. Not that their parents had any trouble figuring out who the ringleader was whenever one of their plots backfired. Adam stayed in hot water pretty much until age fifteen.

Meg almost didn't notice it at first. It started with glances and grins, completely innocent, but by the end of the evening, Meg was sipping a beer with Heath and Dennis and casting stray looks across the room to where Cassie and Adam were engaged in a heads-together conversation which was more computer-ese than English. Cassie was as animated as Meg had ever seen her and hadn't wanted to come home. Meg and Cassie had made love once more and Meg's bitter nature was telling her that her lover had been thinking of Adam the whole time.

No wonder. Adam's like a smart version of me, Meg thought miserably, stroking Major Tom's fur as she looked at the moon through the sickly brown haze which filmed over the balmy Houston night. *Hell, if she'd met him and me both at the same time, I wouldn't have stood a rat's-ass chance with her.* Meg felt hot tears streaking her face, but decided just to let them fall. She loved Cassie - that had never changed. But she'd been worried that this strange woman that Mark Rutherford had grown to become was somehow defective, unable to deliver some crucial thing that Cassie really needed. She'd been dealing with the nagging suspicion that Cassie was just too sweet and maybe felt too guilty about the accident to simply start distancing herself from a relationship that just didn't do it for her anymore.

Strangely enough, Meg found herself wishing that Susan were there. She didn't know exactly why, but she believed that the scrappy little blonde girl would know just the right thing to say

to offset the pain and get Meg's mind back on the track. For just a moment Meg wondered if all the discussion of being gay might have piqued Susan's interest somehow, that there was a chance that Meg might lure her into bed someday. Or maybe it was just the certainty that had Mark been involved with Susan Lewis when the change occurred, there was a woman who wouldn't balk at making a decision to move on.

You know, it all makes a lot of sense when you look at it like that, Meg thought, scratching behind Major Tom's ears and eliciting deep purring. *I'm drawn to Susan because she's direct and ballsy. My favorite part of sex with a man was when Dennis just took control. That's what I've been drawn to all along, is forceful people. Cassie's a lot of things, but forceful ain't one of them.*

Maybe that's what hooked her in the first place - Mark had always had a soft spot for people who acted like they needed and wanted his protection. Meg wondered idly how long the relationship might have lasted if she'd stayed male, and in her cynical state of mind the hypotheses she was coming up with weren't promising at all. Actually, they were damned depressing.

"Hey," Cassie's sleep-thick voice said from behind her. "What are you still doing up?"

"Remembering," Meg said.

Cassie sat down next to her. "Good memories?"

"I was thinking about when we first met."

"The ill-fated innertube trip," Cassie said. "One of the more fucked-up first dates on record."

Meg smiled, eyes still on the waxing moon. "For some reason I can't stop thinking of the killer sunburn I got that day. Funny thing to remember."

"Not really," Cassie said. "I always remember my butt sticking to Faith's vinyl seats while I was wearing that itty-bitty little swimsuit and thinking the ripping noise I heard whenever I got up couldn't have been healthy. That and wanting to play connect-the-dots with your freckles using my tongue."

"And dancing. That's my favorite of all the memories I have, even more than sleeping with you. I could have danced with you all night long. The way your arms fit around me, the way your hair smelled. I could write a book just on the feelings I had during the half-hour we spent on the dance floor."

"Mmmm," Cassie said, closing her eyes. "I remember that too."

"Do you have any warm and fuzzy memories of me after I changed?" Meg asked.

"A few," Cassie said. "That time you kissed me outside of the Biochemistry building the day we corrected Heath's cell template. I don't think I'd even been kissed that passionately before. And when I saw you at the hospital after the fight you had with Heath. How small and pale and fragile you looked, and I just wanted to hold you in my arms until you didn't hurt anymore."

They sat together in silence for a little while, just being with one another.

"Come to bed, babe," Cassie urged. "It's late and I need somebody to curl up next to."

Meg gently displaced Major Tom and followed Cassie to the bedroom.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Cassie's Transformation

MEG HAD GONE into training overdrive, spending every waking moment in the gym or on the mat, pushing far past her considerable endurance and perfecting her technique until she was almost poetic in her movements. Cassie kind of missed having her around, but she could imagine the drive that must be burning in her lover's heart with the culmination of all her dreams only three weeks away. But aside from the training and the ever-present reporters, there had been little time for the two of them.

Cassie was kicking herself for having spent so much time with Adam. Adam was a sweet man, making her realize what an exceptional family the Rutherfords must have been to produce two such fine people, but being around him only reminded her of being with Mark. Besides, Adam was too smart for his own good sometimes and had a bit of a cruel streak in him that Cassie didn't care for at all. She liked him genuinely, though - he was completely absorbed in the same sorts of things she was, and they both had a common bond in their love and concern for Meg. Adam was working hard to adjust to having an older sister, having to remember things during his stay with them like leaving the seat down and being gentle and quiet during Meg's hideously rough menstruations.

It wasn't until a few days later that it finally hit Cassie what it must have looked like to Meg: her girlfriend, who wasn't entirely sure that she liked being gay, spending all this time with a man who looked just like she had before the transformation. And then the fact that Adam was so much more learned than Mark had been - Mark had always considered himself slow around Cassie and Faith, and now that Cassie was paying so much attention to a man who Meg considered an intellectual superior.

Jesus, Cassie thought. No wonder Meg can't sleep nights and is spending so much time apart from me. She thinks I want to leave her. She's trying to train for the Olympics with a broken heart.

Cassie found herself on the roof of the Computer Sciences building, sitting on the tar-and-gravel rooftop staring out at the trees on the campus, sipping coffee and (her secret vice, her once-a-month indulgence) smoking a cigarette she'd bummed off of one of the system administrators, trying to figure out the tangle of her feelings. Meg had hit a couple nerves, the night she'd returned from Nationals. It wasn't that she wasn't satisfied sexually - as a matter of fact, Cassie was finding that she was *more* satisfied because she didn't have to deal with morning-after soreness, birth control and the like - or even that she wasn't particularly attracted to Meg like she had been to Meg's previous incarnation. It was the feeling that she had to be something that she wasn't. *That* was the source of the problem.

I guess I just have to make up my mind about what I want to be and then just be it, Cassie thought to herself. It's just like with Dennis. Meg just wants to be treated like she was when she was still Mark. Especially by me. If I can't be in love with her like I used to be, then I need to move on or we'll just hurt each other. As long as Meg has the Olympics to focus on, she

can ignore the problem, but as soon as it's all over our relationship is going to turn into a time bomb.

Cassie reflected for a long while about how dull and uninteresting her life had been before she'd met Mark. Had any of that really changed now that Mark was Meg? She still felt warm and satisfied at night, Meg still made her laugh and smile like always. And now there was even a feeling of sisterhood that Cassie didn't even have with Faith. *No, Cassie thought, and the realization made something firm up and resolve inside her, it isn't just needing to be in a relationship. It's needing to be in a relationship with the woman I love. I can't love her and not be gay. And it's not enough for Meg just to admit it to myself. I have to stand up and let people know. She wouldn't be afraid. I shouldn't be either.*

Cassie stood up, flicking the cigarette over the edge of the building and brushing off the seat of her jeans. She went downstairs and shut down her system and locked her office, telling Dr. Fresetti that she'd had something extremely important come up and she needed to reschedule her class. The frazzled department head just shrugged, saying that Cassie spent more than enough time in the comp lab anyway, she could take as much time as she needed. Scooping her hair into a loose ponytail, Cassie grabbed her purse and headed across the campus, dodging undergrads on bikes and rollerblades as she made her way to the counseling center. She took a deep breath to steady herself as she looked up her location on the small building map and threaded through the building to an office which had been converted over from one of the University's historical buildings. She had to shove hard on the thick oaken door to get it to open, and stepped in.

The man behind the desk had a disarming smile, and he stood up when Cassie entered. She noted with wry amusement that his hair and clothes were better than hers were.

"Hi, can I help you?"

"I hope so," Cassie said. "Is this the 'Pride' office?"

"Sure is."

"I need to talk to a counselor," Cassie said, clearing her throat. "I think I'm gay."

* * * *

Anne Morton had been a lesbian for seventeen years and was completely comfortable with her situation, even despite all the hate and discrimination she received for the life she'd chosen. It made her feel very good inside when she was able to help young men and women make the declaration of homosexuality to themselves and stop hurting themselves by lying about it. She believed that any person who came through her door was taking their first steps towards being a more secure, happier human being. She prided herself on keeping an optimistic, bright outlook towards the people she helped.

None of that stopped her thinking that Cassandra Hollister was a miserable, tangled mess.

The attractive young woman had crept around her door like hell waited inside. Her body language conveyed fear and uncertainty as she sat across from her, knees together and hands in her lap.

"My name's Cassandra," Cassie said. "I need some help."

Anne came around the desk and sat across from her. "Hope I can give you some," she'd said brightly, trying to set her at ease. "What's the problem, Cassandra?"

"Just Cassie will do," Cassie replied. "I'm trying to figure out whether or not I'm gay."

Anne sat back. "It's not as simple as it sounds, is it?"

"God, no," Cassie said. "I mean, I'd never even thought about it until just a few months ago."

"You met someone?"

"So to speak," Cassie said. "I mean, I'd known her before, but I didn't really know she was gay. We got to be real close over the last couple of months. Very close. We've helped each other through some rough spots and she was like a sister to me."

"And you think you might be in love with her?"

Cassie smiled. "No thinking necessary. I know I am."

Anne smiled. "That's wonderful."

"But there's a problem. Meg's gay. She's not ashamed or afraid to admit it. Up until I met her, I never even gave the matter any thought. I'd never really dated much, but I was sure I was heterosexual. Now Meg is giving me all these feelings to sort through and I'm trying to figure out what she needs from me and how to give it to her and. it's all so fucked up."

Anne reached over and patted Cassie's leg. "You're very brave. It's a huge first step."

"I used to date Meg's brother. Mark was incredible. He was the most wonderful man I'd ever known. He was sweet, funny, sensitive, passionate, *built*. but now he's gone. I can talk to him, but he's not ever coming back. And now his sister. Meg's just like him - it's scary how much. It's like having Mark back, and I'm certain that I'm every bit as much in love with her as I was with Mark, but I don't know the first thing about being gay. I don't even know where to start."

"You sound like you're scared."

"I am. I see the way people treat homosexuals in this country - hell, I told the jokes and made fun in high school just like everyone else around me. I don't know if I'm up to people pointing at me and saying, 'hey, everybody, look at the queer.' I love Meg enough to chance it, but it doesn't stop me from being terrified. Can you help me?"

Anne sat back, thinking. "You have some very real, very legitimate concerns, Cassie. I can't help you fit into society. No one can. But I can tell you one thing. Being gay, almost by definition, means being honest with yourself and with everyone around you. You might be able to content yourself for a while by keeping it a secret, but if you hide and deny what you feel for Meg, even to people you've never met before, you're going to get hurt. Both of you."

"I've thought of that," Cassie responded. "And I think that's one of the sources of the friction between me and Meg right now. I think she wants - no I think she *needs* me to love her like I did Mark. Mark and I used to go dancing and hold hands in public. I'd walk around with my hand in the back pocket of his jeans. I think Meg wants that too."

"Of course she does," Anne told her. "Everyone wants to be on display occasionally. And those little things you did for Mark were ways of showing your love and attraction."

"That's another problem," Cassie sighed. "Like I told you, I hadn't given much thought to homosexuality before. And I'm not sure if I can be attracted to her physically."

Anne laughed. "Oh, Cassie, I wish I had a nickel for every time I've heard that. Physical attraction has very little to do with it. Believe me. I've been gay for my entire adult life and not once have I gone to the beach and looked at the girls in the bikinis. It's just not a big deal to most lesbians, dear. You've already said that you're in love with her. Looks shouldn't matter a bit."

"It's not looks," Cassie said doggedly. "Don't get me wrong. Meg's beautiful. Beautiful enough to keep me jealous half the time. But I believe in sex as a way to express love. And no matter how hard I try, I can't keep from thinking, 'this is another woman I'm touching and kissing.' And then any fire that might have gotten built gets snuffed right out."

"So you have made love with Meg."

"Several times," Cassie clarified.

"You've managed all those times. How?"

"I don't know, really. Most of the time I was mad at myself for being so selfish and just kinda bulldozed past all my hang-ups. Meg seems to like it when I take control, so it's been satisfying for her, but for me it was like taking a bad-tasting medicine."

"Bad-tasting? You mean you didn't enjoy it?"

Cassie raked her hands through her hair. "God, I'm confused. I did enjoy it. A lot. I don't even know why I said it like that. I wish I could just sort out how I feel."

"Well, Cassie, the best advice I can give you is to talk over this with Meg. If she's half as honest as you are, you two should be able to hammer out the problems and find a solution."

"I can't really talk to her right now. I think I've hurt her feelings."

"How?"

"We were at a party the other night. It was for Meg. There was this guy there who I had a lot in common with, and the two of us spent a lot of time talking. This guy reminded me of Mark, and I think Meg's jealous. Whenever she gets mad at me she sinks herself in her work and I can't get close to her."

"That's not healthy."

"I don't know. Meg's funny that way. I think she does get something out of getting lost in the training. I wouldn't really know, I've never been particularly athletic."

Anne's forehead furrowed. "You say Meg is an athlete?"

"Yeah," Cassie replied. "She's in training for the Olympics right now. That's why I wanted to try and figure this out on my own, so I wouldn't have to bother her when she needs to concentrate."

"Oh my goodness," Anne exclaimed. "You're talking about Meghan Rutherford, aren't you?"

Cassie looked surprised. "You know her?"

"She's been on the news all week! And she's gay?"

"She'd prefer to keep it secret for now," Cassie said, "because of the way the media might treat it. You know how the news and the tabloids are. It's the worst thing she could do to herself right now."

Anne clucked her tongue. "That's too bad. I understand, of course, and you know that everything you say in here is in complete confidence. But there hasn't been a gay female sports hero since Martina Navratilova. It's too bad she can't be open about it."

"I think it hurts her too, but she's made up her mind. I think the reason she chose to keep it a secret is more to protect me, though. I've been having trouble being openly homosexual, especially in public, and I know she's made a lot of sacrifices so that I could be comfortable."

Anne sighed. "I think I've figured something out about you, Cassie," she said. "It's obvious you're not afraid of your feelings, or your partner. What you're afraid of is that you'll be treated differently if people know that you're homosexual. I wish I could tell you that's not the case. But I do have a suggestion that might help you feel more comfortable. Do you have any gay friends?"

Cassie shook her head. "I don't have too many friends, period."

"Tell you what. 'Pride' is having a barbecue on campus tonight. There's even going to be a live band. It's going to be a lot of fun," she said, reaching onto her desk and giving Cassie a flyer printed on orange paper. "Why don't you come? You can meet some new people, and I guarantee that you won't be treated any differently because you're gay."

Cassie blinked. "Weird. I haven't actually heard those words before."

"You mean you haven't even told yourself?"

Cassie lowered her eyes. "I guess I've been trying to avoid it."

"Cassie, you have to admit it to yourself before you can admit it to anyone else. At the very least you can admit to yourself that you're bisexual. It's as big a step as admitting you're homosexual. Both take a whole lot of courage."

"I know why you call it coming out, now. I'm terrified of what's on the other side of the door."

Anne patted her hand. "Come to the barbecue. You'll be surprised what being around like-minded people will be able to do for you. I think just knowing that there are more people out there like you, that have felt and experienced the same things you're going through right now, will be like taking a huge weight off of your shoulders."

"If I brought Meg, do you think we'd be able to keep the press away?"

"Why would the press pay attention to a little campus barbecue?"

"Because Meghan Rutherford will be there. I guess I should come by myself."

Anne shook her head. "I couldn't guarantee anything, Cassie. That would have to be your Meg's decision alone."

Cassie wrinkled her nose. "I like that. *My* Meg."

Anne stood and walked Cassie to the door. "You're going to be just fine, Cassie."

* * * * *

As always, Meg's body was a blur of motion. She'd gotten a call from Peter Barnett shortly after they'd returned from Nationals and they'd decided to train together. Peter had taken the repeated poundings she'd been giving him with his usual good-natured candor, using the opportunity to pick up steps from her instead of trying to salvage his bruised ego. Not that he was any slouch, though. Heath had taken to joining them in spar as well, trying to master fine control of his awkward body. It was lucky for Meg that Peter had never met Heath before, or he might have asked questions about Heath's gauntness and lack of coordination that could have been uncomfortable.

"Point white!" Heath called from the side of the mat when Peter's foot thumped solidly into Meg's ribs, driving her back. "That's it, Meg. He got you, six to four. Nice breakaway, Pete."

Meg pulled off her headgear. She'd stopped showing any emotion whatsoever no matter if she won or lost. "Go again?" she asked Peter, toweling her face dispassionately.

Peter bent at the waist, hands on thighs, breathing deeply. "I don't know if I have it."

"Okay," Meg said. "See you tomorrow?"

"Aren't you coming to dinner?"

"I thought I'd stay here and work some more. I'm still a little slow with my left foot in this knee brace. I could use the time," she said. "Good match today."

"Is something wrong, Meg?" Peter asked once Heath left the room to look for his fiancée.

"No. Why?"

"You're acting like a robot, lately. It's just work and sleep, work and sleep. Are you all right?"

Meg stuffed her headgear into her gym-bag. "Thanks for asking, but it's personal."

"Is it your girlfriend?" Peter pressed.

Meg gave him a considering look. "I don't really want to talk about it, Pete."

Peter put his hands up, stepping back. "I understand. I just thought you might like to get it off your chest. Sometimes unloading on a stranger is easier than telling a friend."

"You're not a stranger."

Peter smiled. "The hell I'm not. I know precisely nothing about you."

Heath came out of the next room and waved goodbye to the two of them - Faith's car had just pulled up outside - so the conversation paused long enough for him to leave.

"Well?" Peter asked.

"Look, Pete, it's sweet of you to ask. But it's not really something I particularly want to talk about right now, okay? I just want to stay here and keep working."

Peter shook his head. "Look, just come to dinner with me. You don't have to talk about anything, all right? But you've been on the mat for eight hours. You need to eat. I'm starting to get worried about you, how hard you're pushing. If you keep this pace up you'll be burned out by the opening ceremonies. I just want to try and get you to take care of yourself."

Meg sat down hard on the bench, pulling off her kicking pads. "I guess you're right."

"So you'll come?"

"All right, all right."

Pete sat down across from her, removing his pads and tossing them into his own bag. Meg busied herself freeing her leg from the confining (but, Dennis was right, it wasn't uncomfortable or restrictive) knee brace, running her fingers over the livid surgery scars on her knee. She looked up to see Peter staring at her, holding one of his forearm pads forgotten in his hand.

"What?" Meg asked, snapping Peter from his reverie.

"Sorry." He began paying consuming attention to his pads.

Meg looked at him strangely. "No, what?"

"Nothing, really."

Meg looked down at herself, trying to figure out what he'd been looking at. "Is there something on my face? Do I have a booger or something?" she asked, wiping her nose self-consciously.

Peter laughed into his chest as he wrestled with his shin-pads. "No, it's not a booger."

"Then what were you staring at?"

Peter looked up shyly. "You."

Meg blushed. "Peter."

"I can't help it, Meg. You're the most beautiful woman I've even known. Most of the time, I can handle it okay just being your friend and sparring partner but every once in a while, like just now with your hair hanging loose and the light shining through it, it just climbs all over me how pretty you are."

"That's really sweet, Peter, but you know."

"Yeah, I know that you're gay. Believe me, I know. Doesn't change what I feel about you, though," he confessed. "Not that I would have a chance even if you *were* straight."

"Stop that," Meg said. "Self-pity doesn't look good on you, Pete."

Peter laughed. "Yeah, I know. I just need to blame somebody, sometimes, y'know."

Meg looked away, unlacing the other kicking pad. "Is there anything I can do to help? I mean, aside from the obvious," she asked after a long pause.

Peter looked up. "Like what?"

"I don't want to hurt you. Tell me if there's something I can do to help. I can act like a total bitch if you need so you won't ever want to see me again, like that," she said.

"Thanks," Peter said. "But to be honest, even though it's frustrating, I enjoy you too much to want to be chased away. You're far too cool to not be friends with. And who knows, maybe someday you'll decide you might want to have a fling on the other side, and I'll be right here waiting."

Meg tucked a strand of curly hair behind one ear, wrinkling her nose in a grin. "The thought occasionally crosses my mind," she said softly. "And you'd be one of the first I'd call."

"Really? You mean I have a shot?"

Meg sighed. "It's weird. I mean, there are a lot of men I'm more or less attracted to. But I just don't think I could be in a relationship with one. I don't have a whole lot of experience, but sex with men is pretty nice. I really enjoyed it the one time I did it. But afterwards, they get all protective and possessive. I hate that, I don't need it. And I wouldn't feel right walking around holding hands or kissing all the time. That feels weird and I don't particularly go in for it."

"And you feel all right when you're out with your girlfriend?"

"Well, not when we're out. She's real nervous about it. But when we're at home together, just living next to one another, that's the best. That's when I really, really like being the way I am."

"I can see that," Peter said.

"Just out of curiosity," Meg said, "what is it about me that sets you off so bad?"

"Are you kidding? What's not to like? I mean, you're funny, smart, talented, the best martial artist I've ever seen, focused and intense - a relationship with you would be like the ride of a lifetime. Every day would be a challenge and you'd never back down. I mean, I never really grasped the concept of equality until I met you. It's easy to treat you as an equal, because you're so damn *good* at everything. I think of you as a woman, but not like a *woman*, if you know what I mean. You never use those lame cop-outs that I always hear 'liberated' women use when they run up against something difficult.

"And then there's the rest of you. Don't even get me started on how beautiful you are. Jesus, Meg, everything about you is beautiful, from your hair and your eyes to your name. *Meghan*. Even the way I have to fix my mouth just to get the sounds out is beautiful."

Meg colored fiercely. "You're embarrassing me."

"Sorry. I get carried away."

"Oh, Pete, I wish you didn't have it quite so bad for me. I feel awful about it."

"Don't. It's just my stupid old heart. I'll get over it."

"Tell me something," Meg said. "What would you want out of me, if we were - you know."

"Whatever you were willing to give," Peter said, sounding hopeful for the first time since the conversation started. His eyes were bright with expectation.

"No, I mean in your fantasy. If everything went your way, and I was straight and unattached, how would you want it to be with us?" she asked. "I'd really like to know."

Peter closed his eyes. "Stormy," he said, smiling. "Big fights, big making-ups. The same kind of honesty like we're doing right now. Partners, completely on the level, all the time. That way, when the time came for us to have kids, there wouldn't be that wall there that usually springs up between men and women. You'd let me be a part of it and I wouldn't have to spend a lifetime making up for the fact that I never got to carry a child inside my body for nine months."

Meg exhaled a long breath. "You're pretty convincing. I never really thought about kids before, until recently. This doctor told me that full-contact taekwondo could one day affect my having babies. It was the first time I ever really even considered myself to be fertile."

"You'd be a fantastic mother," Peter said. "And your kids would be perfect."

Meg leaned her head back against the wall, looking at the ceiling. "That's the hardest part about being a lesbian," she said. "It's so difficult and weird to try and have a family. I mean, you have to find a father who'd be willing to go through that, and one that me and Cassie both trusted."

"I'd do it," Peter said.

Meg laughed. "That wasn't an invitation, hot shot," she chuckled.

"I know," he said. "But maybe someday."

"God, I'm sick of somedays. Someday everything will be all back to normal, someday I'll have kids, someday Heath will be in better shape, someday Cassie will get over being so hung-up, someday medicine will find a way to fix my knee. It's frustrating."

Peter patted her shoulder, rising. "I wish I could tell you different, Meg. I really do."

Meg looked at him hard. "Do you believe that you have to play the hand you're dealt?"

Peter was taken aback. "How do you mean?"

"If you woke up tomorrow and you were me. Or some other girl. What would you do?"

Peter grinned sheepishly. "Lie around and play with myself all day."

"I'm serious."

"I don't know. I guess I'd spend my time learning how to live as a woman and then get busy being a woman. I mean, if there was no way to change back, I wouldn't have a choice, would I?"

"Wouldn't you try to keep as much of your old life as possible?"

"Hard to say," Peter opined. "I'm sure there would be some things that hurt too much to try and do. For me, that would be the Boys' Club. I volunteer there. A woman could still do it, but there'd be a big stink over it, and it just wouldn't be the same. I mean, the kids would never feel right telling dirty jokes and having fart contests with a woman. I'd have to leave that behind."

Meg leaned forward, and Peter was surprised to see tears in her eyes. "You're right. I know you're right. I should get busy being a woman, I guess. It'd be easier that way."

"Meg, what is it? What are you talking about?"

Meg looked pensive for a while. "When I came out not long ago, I wanted to pretend like nothing had happened, that I was still just the same old Meg and nobody'd treat me different. But everybody treats me different. My friends, my brother, my girlfriend. Sometimes I even think the cat treats me differently. I'm starting to think that maybe I fucked up, maybe I chose the wrong path."

"You have to be what you are," Peter said. "That much I'm sure of."

"Maybe I just didn't take the time to find out all I could before I made the decision," Meg mused, more to herself than to Peter. "Pete, can I ask you a favor?"

"Name it."

"I don't want to do it if you're not comfortable with it. I don't want to hurt you."

"You'll have to tell me what it is, first."

"You remember when I told you that the part I couldn't handle about being straight was the holding hands and the kissing and all the things that men and women do in public?"

"Yeah."

"Tonight, when we go to dinner," she said, "do you think you could handle it if we acted like we were boyfriend and girlfriend? Did all those things I was talking about, just. just so I can see how they feel, whether or not they're like I think they are?"

Peter looked thoughtful. "It'd be like a dream come true, Meg."

"But it's just an experiment," she said. "It wouldn't mean anything."

"It'll mean what I let it mean," Peter said. "And that will be enough."

"Come on, then," Meg said, standing. "We'll shower and change and I'll let you pick the place."

"You go first," Peter invited.

"Oh, come on, Pete. We've been training together for a couple weeks now. You've seen me naked more times than my parents ever did. It's no big secret."

"Yeah, but for tonight, you're my girlfriend, right? You need your privacy."

Meg giggled. "I didn't think we were going to start right away."

"Go on," Peter prompted.

"No, you first," Meg said. "If we're boyfriend and girlfriend tonight, then it's my job to keep you waiting while I get ready, right?"

Peter belly-laughed as he made his way back to the showers.

* * * *

Meg actually took the time to make herself look presentable, which snapped her out of her ongoing depression somewhat. Peter took her to a nice (but not too nice) yuppie-type bistro affair. They held hands as they waited for a table. Meg felt a little silly at first, but when she noticed the looks she was getting from the other people in the restaurant, she started to loosen up a bit. To everyone else she wasn't a man-turned-woman out with another man. They were just an attractive young couple out for the evening. Other couples gave them fond and knowing looks, as if they were members of the same secret club. Peter was a perfect gentleman, and that was the hardest part - counseling herself to wait while he pulled out her chair or opened a door for her. Meg decided she could live without that, but the closeness and the rest were growing on her fast. She found herself wishing she could be this way with Cassie, but it was obvious that the looks they'd be getting wouldn't be so fond. If the feeling of being attached, connected to someone else weren't so damn nice, she never would have thought twice about doing it again. But just being out as a part of a couple reminded her of the days before her transformation, and made her miss being accepted, perhaps even envied a little. Meg found herself missing it terribly.

And there was no denying her attraction for Peter. He was shy, nervous and sweet to top off his athletic physique and his boyish, laughing features. His short blond hair fairly shone in the low light of the restaurant and when it combined with his red, sun burnt face it made him look a little cherubic. And he was fun - he played pranks and made little under-his-breath comments about other people that constantly had Meg tickled. Before the waitress had even brought their dessert Meg had realized that she'd been having the time of her life. Peter hadn't been pushing for anything, but she could tell that he was enjoying every second of his fantasy by the way he smiled at her as they cheated on their training diets by splitting a piece of cheesecake.

Meg ducked into the ladies' room before they left to go see a late movie, touching up her face and hair after she'd done her 'business.' She couldn't ever remember a time since the transformation - unless it was certain moments when she'd had sex with Dennis - that she'd more enjoyed being a woman. If someone had asked her right then if she could change back immediately and no one would mind, Meg wouldn't have been able to have an immediate answer.

The woman next to her at the mirror smiled knowingly. "First date?" she asked.

Meg nodded. "Yeah. Is it that obvious?"

The lady laughed. "You two are carrying on like a couple of teenagers."

"Neither one of us dates much," Meg explained. "I guess we're not as used to it as most."

The other woman began applying lipstick. "You look great together."

"Thanks. We're having a lot of fun," Meg said.

"I'm Terry Banks," the woman said, offering a hand.

"Meg Rutherford."

The woman pulled a double-take. "Meg Rutherford? The karate girl?"

"Taekwondo, actually," Meg said, her good mood rapidly deflating.

"Wow, it's nice to meet you. I saw you on the news. You're really something."

"Thanks."

The lady capped her lipstick and stuffed it back in her purse. "My two little girls took one look at you on television and made me sign them up for martial arts classes the next day," Terry chuckled. "They both want to be just like you."

"It's a lot of work, that's for sure," Meg said, feeling a little awkward but very proud. "They'll have to stick with it for quite a while before it starts to pay off."

"If you don't mind me asking, who's your friend out there?"

Meg decided that her hair was beyond repair with only her fingers, and fished her brush from her purse. "That's Peter Barnett. He's also on the Olympic team. We've been training together."

"No kidding you two don't date much, then," Terry commiserated. "My cousin does the biathlon in the Winter Games. He barely has time to sleep. Well, my husband's waiting. It was nice meeting you and good luck at the Olympics."

"Thanks. It was nice meeting you too."

Terry left and Meg just stood still, savoring how good it had felt to fit in like that, to be half of a couple and to be accepted by a woman as a woman. For the first time since the transformation, Meg didn't feel like some kind of impostor. It felt good to fit again.

By the time she returned to her table, the restaurant was buzzing with the news of who she was. People began to trickle over to get a better look and perhaps a word. Meg managed it with aplomb and within ten minutes she and Peter were the center of attention. Meg sighed. *I guess the date's over*, she thought disappointedly. *So much for feeling good about myself. I never should have left the gym*. At least Peter was diplomatic about it. He very patiently explained to everyone that the two of them were not dating, they were just good friends and had been training together. Meg thanked him silently for his forbearance. Word of their night out was sure to spread soon, and Meg really didn't want to have to explain herself to Cassie, because it would mean addressing issues that Cassie never wanted to talk about.

"Pete, do you mind if we skip the movie?" Meg asked from the corner of her mouth. "I kinda wanted this to be just the two of us, but it's starting to dawn on me that no matter where we go we're not gonna get any time to ourselves."

"Oh, no," Peter said. "You're not getting off the hook that easy."

"What do you mean?"

"Meg, this whole thing is as innocent as it gets. Just because you're thinking of Cassie right now doesn't mean I'm not going to milk this night for every second I can get out of it. So unless you start bleeding from your eyeballs you're going to the movies with me tonight."

Meg had to laugh. "Stubborn bastard."

"Damn right," Peter assured her. "But can you blame me? I just had an evening with the woman of my dreams land right in my lap. Of course I don't want it to end."

Meg smiled demurely. "The woman of your dreams?"

"They're nice dreams, lemme tell you," Peter chuckled. "Not ones I can discuss in public, though. But there is this one where you have this itty-bitty tattoo of a teddy bear right on your-"

"Enough," Meg said. "I don't want to know."

"Aw, be a sport," Peter urged. "Come to the movie with me."

He held the door for her and escorted her to the parking lot. Meg was fumbling for her keys (Peter didn't have a car) when she looked up at him suddenly. "I've been debating telling you this, because I don't want to give you hope for something that might not happen."

"What?"

"I am having the time of my life right now."

Peter's eyes widened. "Really?"

"All except for that holding doors and pulling out chairs shit. I could live without that."

"Good," Peter said. "Because you're so damn much faster than me I have to run to get ahead of you. It's starting to wear me out."

"Okay, what movie?"

"I was thinking about going to see *Men in Black* again."

"Shit," Meg said. "I don't have the money for a full-price."

"So?" Peter said. "I'll pay."

"You got dinner?"

Peter crossed his arms across his chest. "Meg, quit. This isn't about some social man-woman dynamic or sexism or anything. This is a friend offering to lend another friend a couple bucks. I have it, so let's spend it, okay? Next time I'm broke, you can get dinner and a movie."

"Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die, right?" Meg said, unlocking the green Toyota.

"You got it," Peter said, climbing in.

* * * * *

Meg came through the door to see Cassie sitting in the oversized papa-san chair reading a book with Major Tom in her lap. Although they'd basically moved in together, Meg was a little surprised to see her there - she'd felt sure that Cassie would have spent the night at her own little efficiency in preparation for her dissertation which was beginning to loom on the horizon.

"Hey, babe," Cassie said affably. "You're home late."

"Peter Barnett offered to take me out to dinner and a movie," Meg said.

"That was nice. Did you have a good time?"

Meg sat, stripping off her favorite woven-leather flats. "Yeah. We had fun. I didn't expect to find you here. When you called the gym and said you had plans for dinner I figured you were gonna grab something quick and head back to your place to study."

Cassie put down the book and displaced the cat, rolling out of the chair to plop down in Meg's arms, kissing her fondly. "I wanted to see you."

Meg hugged her tight. "You missed me?"

"I always miss you, babe."

Cassie got up long enough for Meg to finish taking off her shoes and get comfortable on the couch before resuming her spot. "I did something important today," Cassie continued. "It was something I had to do by myself, that's why I didn't ask you."

Meg looked a little concerned. "What is it? Are you okay?"

"I'm much better," Cassie said. "I went to a barbecue on campus. It was given by Pride."

"Pride? What's that?"

"It's the gay and lesbian student union. I hung out there until it was too dark to see and I still didn't want to leave. I talked to lots of people and I finally figured something out. Something important, and I want to tell you first before anybody else."

Meg looked deep into Cassie's blue eyes. "What is it, babe?"

Cassie took a deep breath. "Meg, I'm gay. There, I said it."

Meg looked confused. Cassie brushed some of her lover's loose red curls aside with her fingertips. "I talked to a counselor the other day. She told me that the source of the problems we've been having has been because I've been afraid to admit to myself that I have any homosexual feelings at all. But, being around all those people tonight, and none of them cared. I mean, I could have stood in the middle of the quad there and screamed that I was gay and no one would have thought any less of me. Hell, they'd probably have thought the better. I'm not afraid anymore, Meg. They say the first step is the toughest, the actual admitting it part. I got that over with and now I'm ready to move on."

"What does this mean, Cass? I mean, for us?"

"It means, babe, that if you want to kiss me and we're in public, then I want you to go ahead and kiss me. If you want to hold me or put your hand in my back pocket while we walk, I want you to do it. And I promise to do the same for you when I feel like it. See, I was just letting all

the wrong things matter. You never wanted anything to change between us just because of the accident. Now I know that I don't either. I love you, Meg. I love you more than I love anything else in the world, even myself. And I don't give a damn who knows it or what they think."

Meg looked dazed. Cassie waited, looking for a reaction through the numbness. Meg finally lowered her eyes and started to cry. It was a moment before Cassie determined that the tears weren't just letting off emotional steam, but had a more bitter root.

"I feel like such an asshole," Meg wept.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"I thought. I thought you were falling for Adam," Meg said, her voice thick with the tears. "For a while it hurt, and then I thought maybe it would be for the best. I was tired of seeing you miserable and not being able to do anything about it. So. So I."

"You what?" Cassie said.

"I went out with Peter Barnett. On a date. A for-real one, not just friends."

"And?"

"I thought I'd just feel silly," Meg said, burying her forehead against Cassie's shoulder and hugging her tight. "But I didn't. I loved it. It was the first time I've ever felt like I was really a woman instead of just some really convincing fake. We held hands all through the movie and went dancing afterwards. At first, it was a job not to think about you but as the night wore on it got easier and easier. And when we were dancing together I felt like we were the only two people on Earth, like I used to feel with you. I took him home afterwards and we kissed on his doorstep and all I could think about was how nice it was to be a girl, how different and how special.

"And then I come in and see you here, and you tell me everything can be fixed, and I blew it because I jumped the gun and didn't have faith in you." she dissolved into a fit of bitter weeping. Cassie smoothed her hair and held her close, rocking back and forth gently until Meg had all the poison out. Then she raised the redhead's face with a finger on her chin and kissed her.

"Meg," Cassie said. "None of that matters."

"It does to me."

Cassie became a little alarmed. "So what are you saying, Meg?"

"I don't know," Meg said plaintively. "I don't know what to say or do or feel right now. It's all so fucked up, I just want to go hide someplace until it's all over. Dammit, I hate feeling helpless."

"Well, what do you want to do?" Cassie asked gently, aware of her lover's fragility right then.

"I wish it could all go back to the way it was. I wish I'd never gone to Dennis' room that night, so I'd never have known what I was missing. I wish Peter didn't have such a disarming fucking smile that made me melt half the time. I wish it didn't feel so different when he puts

his arm around me as it does when you do. I'm stuck. I don't know whether to be a man or a woman, and being half-and-half is driving me crazy."

Cassie slid to the couch beside Meg, relieved that her girlfriend wasn't trying to hide it or escape into her training as usual and was finally letting all of this into the open. It must've been hard for a woman who was once a strong man who kept his own counsel and hid his feelings from everyone to make such a step. Cassie realized how she had been forcing herself to avoid contemplating what hellish adaptations Meg had been having to make day in and day out in order to maintain her masquerade. And now it wasn't a masquerade any longer - Meg's worst fear had become reality, that a woman's feelings and drives were now firmly in place in her head where before there was only predictable male pragmatism and logic. Cassie took Meg into her arms, letting her physical closeness provide the comfort that her words could not.

"I love you," Meg said. "I don't want to love anyone else but you."

"And you think you might love Peter?"

Meg sniffled, shaking her head. "I wouldn't know. It's too early, I barely know him. But dammit, how can I expect to train for the Olympics and be in the public eye when half the time I'm dreaming about the way you kiss my breasts and the other half I'm fantasizing about his shoulders? His *shoulders*, for Chrissake! What kind of dumb-assed thing is that to fantasize about?"

"Meg," Cassie said softly. "We know that you can't ever go back. You're stuck as a woman and you can't change that, as horrible as that makes me feel. You can't be a man. You *have* to be a woman. And I know you too well to think that you won't be the best possible woman you can be. Hell, even what you've accomplished in two months is more than most women accomplish in a lifetime.

"Do what you have to do, babe. I can't imagine how hard it must be for you. If you need to be with a man, then do it. It'll hurt, but I'll get over it. And nothing will change between us. Nothing."

Meg grabbed a Kleenex from the end table and blew her nose. "No. I can't do that."

"You have to make a choice."

"Then I choose you," Meg said. "I love you too much. You know, sometimes when we're together it almost feels like I never changed? That if I concentrate hard enough, I could make love to you the way I did before, like this thing had never happened. You still make me feel like that."

"That needs to change, my love," Cassie said. "If I still make you feel like a man, then I'm hurting you. I need to make you feel like a woman. It's something we need to learn how to do."

Meg leaned against her shoulder, exhausted from the emotional roller coaster. "There was a moment when I was with Dennis," she said softly, "when he rolled me over and he just. *took* me. It's like that tired old line in all the cheap novels: he really did have his way with me. I remember it was the first time I ever really *felt*, in my soul, like I was a woman. I think if you could manage to do that occasionally, if you could every once in a while just grab me and kiss me and take control, that would go a long way towards fixing that problem. That,

and-" she had to clear her throat from embarrassment, "if you could use your fingers more. I mean, everything else you do is really, really nice. But there's something about being penetrated, about having something *inside* me that makes my femininity really hard to ignore."

"Thanks," Cassie said. "I'll remember that."

Meg stood, and started shucking out of her denim skirt on her way to the bathroom. "I don't know how you've lived your whole life with such a demanding bladder," she grumped.

"I love you," Cassie called after her, feeling like Meg needed to hear it from her right then. Meg turned in the doorway, her chin over one shoulder and her red hair spilling down her back in a moment that Cassie would always remember as a portrait of Meg's beauty, and gave her one of the rare smiles, the kind that could power city blocks.

"Hey, Cass, guess what?" she asked. "I'm gay, too."

Ω



SUMMARY: Two friends find themselves victims of a science experiment which turns them into women who now must deal with their new life and their changing relationship with their girlfriends. part six

ALL THAT GLITTERS, Part VI (Chapters 14-15)

By Valerie Hope

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: 'Mama, mama, many worlds I've come since I first left home.'

"I STILL DON'T know what in the hell I should do about Peter," Meg was telling Heath. "I mean, the poor bastard's really gotten his hopes up since I kissed him the other night, and I don't want to wreck him right before Sydney. It wouldn't be fair."

"I think Pete could handle the truth," Heath said, punctuating his words with caught breaths and grunts as he struggled under the bench-press bar. His strength seemed to be taking forever to return, probably because of the testosterone blockers Dr. Mitchell had him on, but he was keeping with it with a dogged persistence that Meg could only respect.

"What about you, Cass?" Meg asked. Cassie looked up from the lap-top she was working on in the corner, starting the first draft of her dissertation. "What would you do in my position?"

Cassie shrugged. "I didn't even think about how it might affect his performance at the Olympics. You're right. It could seriously mess up his chances if you broke his heart right now."

Meg sighed. "It all just went and got so messy."

"You want my advice?" Cassie said. "I say that you should tell him the flat, unvarnished truth and then spend the night with him to say no hard feelings. I mean, it's obvious that you want to. I think you should." Ever since Meg had been encouraging Cassie to take sexual initiative, she'd found her lover to be much more open to experimentation and kink. They'd even, in a fit of pubescent embarrassment/excitement, purchased a sex toy that they could share together. Had Meg known it would feel so good, she'd have been willing to pay twice as much for it. Strange that the sex had gotten better while the living together had gotten worse. The two of them were doing pretty much everything in the world except kissing or holding hands or even sitting together. It was hard on Meg. She really needed that right now, and Cassie just wasn't delivering, however gay she was professing to be. Meg could tell her girlfriend was having to work really hard at being gay. Maybe even a little too hard, if Meg could trust herself reading this newfound feminine intuition of hers. Cassie was spending more and more time on that dissertation and less and less time having to come to terms with having a live-in girlfriend. Meg just wished Cassie would talk to her. Together, not together, it

really didn't matter, just as long as Meg could know for certain. It was the wondering that was killing her.

"You're just saying that because you want to watch," Meg shot back, amused.

"Of course I do! I think it'd be sexy as hell," Cassie responded.

"Shit, I'd even like to watch that," Heath added.

Meg went crimson. "Jesus, next thing I know you two will be trying to get me to pose for *Playboy* or something just so you can get your jollies. Depraved perverts."

"I could see you in *Playboy*," Heath joked. "They'd pay you a fortune, famous as you're getting."

"If every mother that recognized me didn't tell me that their daughters want to grow up to be just like me, scary thought, I'd do it just to shock you both," Meg said. "But, no."

Heath finished his set and sat up. "Got any ideas, Meg?"

"Hell, I don't know. I really like him and I sure don't want him to get all screwed up over me. But I guess it's too late for that. Now I'm stuck with damage control. And somehow just laying it all out on the table for him sounds like the worst possible thing I could do to him right now."

"I hate to bring it up," Heath said, "but if you were still a guy and this happened to you, how would you want to be treated? Peter has a lot in common with you, Meg."

Meg sighed. "You're right. I guess I should just be straight with him, no matter how brutal it sounds," she said heavily. "I should call him. I should get it over with."

Cassie smiled warmly at her. "I think Peter will surprise you," she said.

"I hope he will," Meg said, grabbing her purse and keys. "I'll be back in a few."

Meg pulled her venerable Everlast T-shirt over her skin-tight leotard and pushed through the door.

"Think she's gonna sleep with him?" Heath asked acerbically.

"Oh, yeah," Cassie said, returning to her paper.

* * * * *

Meg pulled up in front of Peter's apartment about thirty minutes later, thankful to be out of the thick midday traffic. She knew he'd be here, since he usually got a massage around this time instead of lunch. Meg steeled herself, making her force the issue from her mind so she didn't beat it to death or talk herself out of it. No, it was better to spit it out and then be forced to react to the consequences.

Peter answered her knock after a harsh round of banging, crashing and expletives. He answered the door wearing only a loose pair of sweatpants and a Ren & Stimpy T-shirt with the sleeves torn out.

"Meg!" he said. "What are you doing here? Did I forget a spar?"

"No," she said. "Nothing like that. Can I come in?"

Peter got a sardonic grin. "You came over here to tell me you've patched things up with your girlfriend," he divined. "I figured as much. Yeah, come on in."

Meg stepped through the door. "I'm sorry, Pete. I didn't mean to lead you on."

"Don't worry, you didn't," Peter said. "I didn't have to be a psychic to figure out that our 'date' was just so you could get back at Cassie for something. I had a lot of fun, I finally got to kiss you, and it didn't mean more than that. You shouldn't have worried."

Meg sat down on the arm of his shoddy sofa. "I know you knew," she said. "But that doesn't change the fact that I used you, Pete, and you're better than that. I came over here to apologize. It wasn't fair, and I had no right to tease you like that."

"It was a little tough at points," Peter replied with a smirk. "But believe me, I never once got my hopes up. I just hope you had as much fun as I did the other night, no matter how much you were thinking about Cassie. Because I had a ball."

"Me, too," Meg said. "I'm glad we did it and I want to do it again."

"Sure, anytime," Peter said. "Next time you pay."

"Okay," Meg said, feeling better. "Man, I'm glad you felt that way."

"Meg, I can't tell you how much it means to me that you were so concerned about how I felt. Really. As much as I lust after you, I wouldn't trade your friendship for anything."

She hugged him tight, her hands slipping a bit in the oil from his massage.

"I was just about to take a shower," Peter apologized. "Shit, you got it all over you."

Meg plucked at the oil-spots on the faded shirt. "Oh, it's not the worst this shirt has had on it."

"Give it here," Peter said. "I'll pitch it in the laundry right now. I was just about to start a load."

Meg stripped the shirt and handed it to him, noticing how his eyes clung to her curves through the second-skin green and black leotard. She crossed her arms before her breasts, unwilling to tease him any more, and Peter laughed.

"Aw, hell, Meg, at least let me have a look," he joked. "It's not like you don't get me fantasizing just by walking across a room. The least you can do is let me have that."

Meg snickered and responded by thrusting her boobs out provocatively, putting her hands behind her head for maximum effect, pushing her long red hair up like she'd seen the models do. "Look away."

Peter laughed. "Naughty, naughty, naughty," he said. He struck a Mr. Universe pose, flexing his well-defined chest and upper body. "You should have never told me you had a thing for

shoulders and arms," he continued. "Now I have ammunition enough to return fire if I have to."

Meg let her eyes drink in his form. "Oh yeah?" she chuckled, turning around and giving her leotard a solid 'wedgie' to show off her décolletage. She put a hand on her hip and looked over her shoulder at him, letting her hair hang down into her eyes as she made a sexy little pout. Peter responded by hitting a pose that made his abdominal six-pack stand out like a beacon. They stood across from one another for several minutes, Peter making provocative muscle-man poses designed to get Meg's blood up and Meg hitting every pose she could remember from the magazines that had helped Mark survive puberty. And even though they were laughing, Meg couldn't help but notice the warm, sticky wetness between her thighs and the scent that she was sure Peter could smell as well as she could and the points her nipples made through the spandex leotard. And there was no way Peter could possibly hide the bulge which was rapidly making a tent out of his sweats.

"We better quit," Meg said breathlessly, still giggling. "You're actually starting to turn me on."

"Yeah," Peter laughed. "This isn't a pistol in my pocket."

"Then you're just happy to see me."

"Meg, don't take this in any other way than it's intended," he said, "but I love you."

Meg smiled, knowing what he meant. "I love you too, Pete. You're a lot of fun."

"Yeah, I am," he said. "And you're the most honest person I know."

"You think so?"

"I do. I mean, I know so many women who would've led me on just for the fun of it. But you've been straight with me from the wind-up and there's not a lot of people - men or women - who would have respected me enough to do that. Believe me, when I say I'm disappointed that you're not straight, it's not just because I lust after your body. It's because you're the first woman I've ever met that I fantasized about falling in love with instead of just getting in your pants."

Meg blushed. "Quit it. You're embarrassing me."

"I do it on purpose," Peter said. "Because you're so damn cute when you blush."

"Pete, if it's any consolation, you've made it really hard for me to be gay over the last weeks. And it's just like you said: it's not just the body, although it is one *hell* of a nice body. It's because I could fall ass over apple-cart for you real easy."

"Okay, *now* you're getting my hopes up."

"Sorry. I thought you wanted honesty."

It was Peter's turn to blush.

Meg sat down on the couch, inviting Peter to sit across from her. "Peter, I want to tell you something, but I need you to promise that you'll not give me away to *anyone*. Not the priest in confessional, not your parents, not anybody."

"Sounds important," Peter said, sitting.

"It is," Meg said. "It's the most important thing in my life. I know it sounds hard to believe, but something happened to me several months ago that changed me completely."

"What is it?"

"I became a woman," Meg said. "I'm not Mark Rutherford's sister. I'm Mark Rutherford."

Peter half-smiled, looking for the joke.

"Seriously," Meg continued. "Cassie and Heath's fiancée were working at the university on a way to imprint cells with an electromagnetic pattern that messed with the way they reproduced. Like making liver cells turn into brain cells, stuff like that. Their first experiment was trying to turn a sample of male skin into female using Faith's cell memory. Since Heath and I were dating Faith and Cassie, they asked us to be there. Hell, who wouldn't? They were about to figure out a way to cure cancer. Anyway, their first two tries they used something like ten times too much power. The female cell memories zapped me and Heath right through the protective shield. I went to bed that night as Mark and woke up as Meg."

Peter looked numb. "But Heath's still a guy."

"I had been working for two years getting in shape for the Olympics. Then I had a doctor tell me that it was my last shot before my knees were gone. You've seen how bad a shape Heath is in right now. That would have been me if I'd changed back. Two years of training, gone, and I'd never get another shot."

"You gave up your identity for the Olympics?" Peter said in disbelief.

"That's all I'd been dreaming about since I was six, Pete. Think about how you feel right now. Wouldn't you have laid it all down for a shot at the brass ring? Be honest."

Peter nodded slowly. "I guess I would have, at that. So, like, after the Olympics, you go back to being Mark, only skinny and short? What?"

Meg shook her head. "The cell memory pattern I got imprinted with is set in my cells really strongly. So strong that to change me back would take enough juice to probably fry me. I'm stuck like this, until I'm old and toothless. It hasn't been bad, though. Not at all. It's different, but on the whole, I'd say there's a whole lot more to enjoy about being a woman. Little things, for sure, but they add up. And now I'm in a position to help women everywhere. Somehow it turned out that I'm a sports hero. Little girls are looking at me and thinking 'I can do whatever I want, *she* did.' I can really make a difference now, Pete, more than I ever could have made as a guy."

Peter scrubbed a hand over his eyes. "Wow," he said. "I wouldn't believe it if anybody other than you told me. It all sounds like bad science fiction. And you're stuck like this."

"I've stopped thinking about it as stuck," Meg corrected. "I never thought I'd say this, Pete, but I like it better the way it is now. I mean, sometimes, when I'm with Cassie, I wish things were the way they used to be. But it passes. Think of it. I get up in the morning and I can't believe what I see. For the first time in my life, I look in the mirror and think what's staring back at me is beautiful."

Peter smiled. "You got that right."

"So you see, I don't really have a choice but to be gay," Meg said. "My brain is still Mark on the inside, even though I even think about myself as Meg now. My puberty consisted of snaking my dad's girlie magazines and having hard-ons in tight jeans and my childhood toys were Star Wars figures and Hot Wheels cars. I really want you to know that it's not you. And now that all these new female hormones are running through me, I am starting to get interested in the way guys look. I mean, *really*. I've even done it once, just because the curiosity was killing me. But I love Cassie."

"You're really a girl, right down to the bone," Peter said. "All the right parts, all the right places?"

"You bet I am. I pee sitting down and cry during movies and everything," Meg affirmed.

"I knew Mark," Peter said. "The two of you couldn't be more different."

"When I decided to stay this way I was scared that everybody was going to know that I was really a guy. I felt like a poser. So I started watching all the women I saw every day, looking at how they acted and reacted and talked and moved. It wasn't too hard to imitate and soon, nobody was able to tell, even the people that knew the truth. And the hormones and the emotionality make it easier."

"This is unbelievable," Peter said. "And you and Cassie."

"Improvised," Meg snickered. "She feels like it's partly her fault. Me, I just reacted to this like I always reacted to crisis. The Olympics were the goal and this was just something to overcome so I could get there. So now I'm hoping that the way I've been acting lately is starting to make more sense."

"Yeah, a lot," Peter confirmed. "All that stuff when we went out together."

"I got real scared then, Pete. See, I'd stayed with my girlfriend through the whole thing. She was all I knew. I hadn't really gotten close to any man, and I was really hating the way men were treating me. Hell, you saw what I put Lou through. It was all because I was tired of being treated as a helpless, delicate little sex object. On top of being unfair, it wasn't what I was used to. And my man's brain tells me to knock down something that gets in my way. So I found somebody I trusted - you - and decided to see what it was like to go out, to socialize, to actually *feel* like a woman instead of an impostor."

"You did your job way too well, buddy. You made me feel like the only woman in the world. If you would have pressed, I'd have spent the night with you I was feeling so wonderful. That's why I was so weird afterwards. Because I really enjoyed being a woman who was out with a man, and it scared the bejeezus out of me. I hope you understand."

"I didn't know you as Mark very well," Peter said. "And Meg's one of my best friends. I only know you this way. I think it would be a waste of time and effort to try to know you any other way."

"I haven't changed much in here," Meg said, tapping her forehead.

"Then I missed a bet not hanging out with Mark more often," Pete said. "Because the two of you are the coolest person I know. I didn't mean to scare you, Meg - I almost wish I'd've known all this when we were together so I could have softened the blow for you some."

"Don't you get it? That's why I care for you so much, you dunce. Because you don't soften the blow. You let me take care of myself and trust me to be good at it. You don't know how irritating it is to be treated like you can't manage anything without male assistance, Pete. It's the most demeaning feeling in the world. Then I find you and you never interfere outside of lending advice. You never help unless I ask. You may very well be the perfect man."

Peter laughed out loud. "That's rich. I'll have to remember that one."

Meg joined his laughter. "I told you this so you'd know what I meant when I said I loved you. It's not just sisterly love, Peter. It's the real, honest-to-God thing. I just can't let it happen right now. It terrifies me. But, if you want to be with me as much as you say you do, then don't let anything change between us."

"Why not?"

"Things between me and Cassie are a little - weird. Tense. It used to be her, and now it's me. I don't know how long it's going to last, how long she's going to be able to pretend that she's something she isn't. But I don't want to discourage her right now because she's trying really hard and we both love one another a lot. But I can give you a guarantee here. If things between me and Cassie fall through, and you keep treating me like you treat me, then I'm going to come running to you."

She leaned forward, took his face between her slender hands, and gave him the kind of slow, passionate last-scene-of-the-movie kiss that the storybooks could only hope to describe.

". and I'll be yours," Meg finished. She stood and was out the door before Peter could even muster a thought. Meg had made it all the way to her pickup before she started to cry.

* * * *

Cassie was sitting outside the Biology building, her blonde hair a cushion as she leaned her head against the bricks, the stubborn wording of her thesis forgotten on the lap-top sitting before her. She found herself wishing she could hide her head in the sand, as Meg had said earlier, and just be someplace else until everything was over. Her reverie was snapped when Faith came through the door, looking tired and disheveled.

"Hey, Cassie," Faith said, her voice cheery but flat with fatigue. "How's it going?"

"All right, I suppose," Cassie breathed, not opening her eyes. "My dissertation and I are having a fight. Right now I think it's winning."

Faith didn't flinch at the lame joke. "What's wrong? You know this stuff backwards and forwards. You figured out the sequencing problem months ago and you were saying back then that the rest was going to almost write itself."

"It was a little easier to concentrate back then," Cassie mused.

Faith sat next to her heavily. "I take it the lifestyle change isn't working out like you'd hoped."

"Nope. I tried, Faith. I really did. And for a while there, I thought I could pull it off. But the physical thing just kept getting in the way. I mean, I'd go to bed with Meg and instead of wanting *her*, I found myself just being envious. She doesn't even know how beautiful she is."

"You're no dog," Faith said gently. "Take a look in a mirror sometime."

"You know what I miss?" Cassie said. "Remember, when Mark and I were first getting serious, how much fun I was having dressing up and looking good for him? I felt like the most beautiful woman in the world. I don't ever feel like that anymore. Every time I start to feel good about myself, I take one look at Meg and I start feeling like the ugly duckling. I miss feeling beautiful."

Faith's look was pure sympathy. "I wish Mark had never decided not to change back."

"Any news on that front?" Cassie asked hopefully.

"Nothing good," Faith replied. "The third- and fourth-generation cells are imprinted as strongly as the second. That means great news on the cancer-fighting front, but really bad news for poor Meg."

"I don't think it's that bad," Cassie said. "To be honest, I don't think that Meg minds being Meg."

"Me neither," Faith agreed. "Cassie, I'm so sorry."

"Don't be."

"It's so hard to see what you're going through and not feel awful," Faith said. "I mean, I got my man back. I could just kick Meg for being so stubborn. I guess I just didn't understand how badly she wanted to go to the Olympics. I never thought she'd be willing to sacrifice so much. That she'd be willing to sacrifice you."

"It happened awfully fast," Cassie said. "I mean, between Mark and me. I can't help but wonder how long it would have lasted, even if he'd never changed. He made me feel like the belle of the ball, but once that had worn off, what would have happened then?"

"Come off it," Faith scolded. "You loved that person enough to attempt to change your sexual preference just to be with her. No, you and Mark weren't just a flash in the pan. Anybody could have seen it. I sometimes worried that you might have trouble being second behind his training, but you never seemed to mind because he was so good about not getting in the way of your work."

"This would be so easy if I wasn't so *fucking* in love," Cassie said, a shining tear rolling down one side of her nose. "I wish I could just walk away and be done with it. But I still feel like if I leave then she'll have no one and I'll go back to being the mousy little computer nerd that no one was interested in."

"Cassie, I'm only going to tell you this once, and I never thought I'd say it. Get out. I can't stand seeing you in pain like this. Please, break it off and move on. You can still be friends - hell, it'll probably be easier to be together once the sex and love thing is out of the way."

"It's not just going to die off. It's going to take a long time to get over her," Cassie sighed.

"Then you'd better get started."

Cassie gazed into the distance. "I don't know if I can."

"Cassie, you're letting your memories with Mark and your realities with Meg completely define you. You're better than that. Meg's better than that. It's like you're a square peg in a round hole. It's going to drive you insane. And no one can say you didn't try."

Cassie closed the lap-top and stuffed it into her backpack. "Faith, I don't know what to do."

Faith embraced her friend tight, wishing she could wave some magic wand and make it all go away. Her all-important work had destroyed two lives and almost destroyed two more, one of them hers. Since then she'd re-evaluated her motivations and come to the realization that her second chance with Heath was a miracle in its own right and resolved to treat it with the care and respect it deserved. That was one of the few good things about the accident. Even Dr. Tolliver had commented that he was closer to his wife than ever. It was making them all realize the value of what they had, as keenly as a death. Faith was torn between the crushing guilt and responsibility for what happened and wanting to dance for joy that things had turned out for the best for her. Her research now sat on the bottom of the pile underneath the bridal magazines and brochures. And Heath was so happy being a man again that he was twice the man he was before. All it took was a glance at the mess of Cassie's life for Faith to remember how lucky she was.

"You have to have something in mind," Faith said. "You're not the kind of person who wouldn't have thought something like this through. What are your options?"

"David Reed, the grad student that works with Xiao, has been trying to ask me out, and so has Meg's brother Adam. They're both pretty nice guys, but they have trouble measuring up to the one I had. I don't know how fair it would be to them if I tried to get involved."

"You know better than to think like that. Cass, you lucked out with Mark. The two of you were fantastic together and you had this near-telepathic relationship. You know that's not normal, that it's a fluke. You had it, and now it's gone. And if these other guys don't quite measure up, if they're not quite the men you need them to be for you, then you can't just throw up your hands and quit. You have to teach them and be honest. They'll come along. And you can get back to being yourself."

"I keep thinking that I'd be letting Meg down."

"I didn't know whether or not I should tell you this," Faith said, "but I think you need to hear it. Meg told Heath a couple days ago that she couldn't sleep or concentrate because you were so miserable, and that you were acting like a whole different person since you'd 'come out.' As soon as she said it, Heath told me he'd noticed how sloppy and unfocused Meg's training was getting. He said she hadn't managed jack against Peter in days. So you just might be helping things."

"Or I might blow it all to hell."

"Or it might suddenly start raining pianos," Faith said curtly. "Dammit, you have to do something. Stop talking yourself out of taking some action - *any* action - and just get on with it, good, bad, or indifferent. Because what you're doing is pretty obviously *not* the right thing!"

"You told me right after you started seeing Mark that what you loved most about him was that you could be completely honest with him and weren't afraid to tell him exactly what was on your mind. That hasn't changed just because Mark has breasts and periods now. You owe it

to the both of you to be completely straight and above-board. The longer you let it sit and fester, the more painful it's going to be for both of you when you finally have to deal with it."

Cassie wiped her eyes. "You're right. I know you're right. I've spent the last few months waiting for the other shoe to drop and it's not gonna. I should get it over with." She stood exhaustedly, shouldering her backpack and pulling out the elastic band she'd been keeping her hair back with. She walked away with a stride which combined reluctance and resolution.

* * * * *

The break-up wasn't as bad as either one of them had feared, there were actually some genuinely touching moments that insured a continued friendship. They pointedly avoided talking about the future and both seemed to treat the split as a disappointment that was necessary but very unfortunate. Meg paid for dinner and they spent the evening together crying it out, confessing the depths of their love and their hopes that everything would work out for the best. Cassie packed the few things she'd kept at Meg's apartment and left, giving Major Tom a behind-the-ears goodbye before she left. Meg watched her go from the window, waving and wiping her eyes.

It wasn't until the day after that the pain of it all hit, and Meg took it out on the mat, having to stop periodically to cry bitterly. She spent long hours trying to figure out what she could have done differently, and the only conclusion she could draw was that she would have had to sacrifice her lifelong dream of the Olympics. Maybe Cassie would have been worth it, but Meg would have had a lifetime of resentment to face. It was cold comfort, but it convinced the redhead that everything was for the best.

Peter was a jewel - as soon as he heard from Heath about the situation he was at her doorstep bearing sad movies he'd rented and decadent junk food. It was funny - chocolate tasted the same to Meg as it had to Mark, but there was something about being a woman that made it better somehow, more restorative. She'd always given Cassie hell for her tendency to turn to chocolate when things got rough like most people turned to booze. Now it appeared that she was of a similar mind. Peter sat close but never *too* close, and Meg admired his restraint. She knew that he was viewing this as the chance of a lifetime, but he was determined to let it happen rather than make it happen. He only gave her a fond, almost brotherly embrace when he left, telling her to call if things got too rough and she needed someplace to unload her baggage. Meg had other ideas.

She picked up the phone and dialed long distance. The line rang three times before a familiar, cheery voice answered. "Hello?"

"Hi, is Susan there?" Meg asked.

"This is she."

"Hi, Suse, it's Meg."

"Meg! Hi! How are you doing?"

"Not too good. I wanted to hear a friendly voice."

Meg could hear Susan sitting on the other end. "Tell me."

"I broke up with my girlfriend."

"Oh God, Meg, I'm sorry."

"Thanks. I think it's been in the works for a while."

"Was there somebody else?"

"I don't know. I think she was just needing something I couldn't give her."

There was a long pause. "Are you talking emotional, or the obvious?"

Meg chuckled acidly. "Both, I think."

"She left you for men? What a bitch."

"It's not that cut-and-dried. She was straight when I met her. She was making a big adjustment for me and I don't think it was what she really wanted. I'm trying to be happy with the good times we had."

"Are you okay?"

"I think so. It hurts."

"I wish I could be there, Meg. I'm so sorry."

"It's good enough just to hear your voice," Meg said. "If you were right here, the way I'm feeling, I don't know that I could keep my hands off of you. The last thing you need in your life right now is a rebounding queer who's obsessed with you."

Susan laughed. "I don't know, I've never had a stalker before."

"But I called to ask your advice on something."

"What?"

"There's somebody here who I'm really starting to care for. But I don't really know how to go about things. See, it's a guy. I figured maybe I could succeed where Cassie failed."

"Peter Barnett finally got to you, did he?"

"Yeah," Meg said. "He's the sweetest guy I've ever known. I don't know if it will work or not, but I think I might be willing to try. I hope I won't hurt him if I can't manage."

"Meg, all you need to do is get your mind set. If you make up your mind that you want to be straight, then I'm sure you'll knock hell out of it," Susan assured her.

"How do I let him know I'm interested?"

"I imagine the same way you let a woman know," Susan said. "Flirt a little, pay attention to him."

"I can't help but pay attention to him. I'm training with him."

"That sneak. He said he was going to try and spend every waking hour with you and it looks like he pulled it off," Susan said. "It would serve him right if you blue-balled him a couple times just for good measure, Meg. I think you're the victim of a master plan."

Meg snickered. "He sure didn't get Cassie to break it off with me. Besides, I'm so excited about just the thought of playing around on the other side that he's likely to have to beat me back."

Susan guffawed on the other end of the line. "Well, then, get him to go out with you and the rest will be pretty easy. Just make lots of eye contact and be sure he knows that he's not sleeping at his place that night. I figure anybody who looks like you do should be able to pull that off without saying a word."

"Do you think I'm doing the right thing, Suse?"

"Who can say? I think you're doing *something*, Meg. That's better than the alternative."

"Is there any advice you could give me about the act itself?"

"What, you mean sex?"

"Yeah. I think you have more experience in that area than I do. Anything I should know?"

"I doubt it. Peter seems a lot more gentle and sensitive than the dweebs I've been with. Just remember to switch positions and rhythms a lot, it feels nicer. And no matter whether you spit or swallow, just make sure you kiss him afterwards so you'll know what kind of man he is."

Meg blushed to her ears. "I don't think there will be any of that."

"You should try it, since you're busy exploring new frontiers. Men make the neatest sounds when you do that to them and afterwards they look at you like you're some kind of a goddess. Kinda like I did the first time one of my boyfriends went down on me. I told him, 'I don't care where you learned that or on who, you're never allowed to do it to anyone but me ever again.'"

Meg laughed. "You should let me down there sometime, girl. Nobody knows their way around that region better than someone who's got one herself."

Susan chuckled. "Is that a proposition?"

"It could be. It's up to you."

"Intriguing," Susan mused. "I'll get back to you. If you still feel this way after you're through with the part of the breakup that makes you want to sleep with the world just to prove you can, then we can talk."

Meg laughed. "Susan, thanks. I feel like I might even be able to sleep tonight after talking to you. You've been a lot of help. I can honestly say it would be the privilege of a lifetime to go down on so wonderful a woman as you."

Susan rocked with laughter. "You gonna be okay, Meg?"

"I don't know. It's all touch-and-go right now. I think so."

"Call me if you need me. If I don't hear from you before then, I'll see you at the Training Center in two weeks. I'm really looking forward to showing you this new combination move I've worked out."

* * * * *

Meg ducked under one of Rob Holt's lightning-fast lunge punches and made a try for his short ribs, making him twist away on the defensive as she buried his attack under a flurry of kicks and jabs. She fought the male adrenaline inside her, counseling herself to patience, to wait for the opportunity. Rob was as good as any she'd ever fought and the other members of the Olympic team in the training center in Denver were gathered around, watching the two top martial artists in the country go after one another. The set was tied, currently, both competitors giving as good as they got and the speed of the match was near dizzying. Rob was exploiting her weak knee, like other competitors would do, and she was trying to capitalize on the injury he'd had to the left shoulder several months ago, which he still complained about from time to time.

"Come on, Meg, I got twenty dollars on you!" Susan called from the side. Meg tuned it out.

Rob gave ground easily, and Meg knew it was a trap. She pulled up short, narrowly escaping being blindsided by a roundhouse which she took on her forearms. Planting her foot solidly, she fired a side-kick towards Rob's chin and was surprised to feel it connect. Rob backed away, laughing, while the crowd clapped and whistled.

"Your match," Holt conceded.

Meg stripped off her brain-bucket. "It was a close thing."

Rob gave her a high-five. "I'm glad you're on my team, red."

"Me too."

It was usually a race to see who could get their arms around her first, and this time Peter managed to edge out Susan Lewis by a small fraction. Meg's ribs creaked as they embraced her.

"You're looking better than ever," Peter told her.

"Thanks," Meg said. "You don't look so bad yourself."

"Ms. Rutherford?" a deep, polished voice asked from behind her. Meg still wasn't used to answering to the feminine title, so the voice had to repeat itself before Meg turned around to regard a tall, slick-looking man in a tailored suit standing patiently at the edge of the mat.

"Can I help you?" Meg asked.

"Don Foster, from the Hiller Agency. I tried to get in touch with you before you left Houston, but I could never get through to you," the man said. He was as polished and debonair as Errol Flynn in his tailored grey suit and Italian loafers, his wide, chalk-white smile and rugged

good looks, the direct hazel eyes and the long dark hair drawn into a little executive pony-tail. "You're a hard woman to reach."

Meg was immediately self-conscious. "Sorry. I've been in training overdrive lately."

"I understand. Is there someplace we can talk?"

Meg looked at Susan and Peter, who gave her knowing looks before walking away. "Sure, I could use some air," she said, gathering up her Olympic jacket, slipping on a pair of shoes and leading him to the door. She had to force herself not to protest when he held the door for her.

The Denver afternoon was a little crisp for Meg's taste, being Texas-born and bred, but she loved the view of the mountains just outside the training center. As usual, the parking lot was full of press vans and reporters clustered around the track-and-field center trying to get interviews with the star attractions. She decided to do a quick couple laps around the building and set off at a relaxed pace alongside Foster.

"You probably know that you're one of the hottest stars on the Olympic team this year, especially after Chicago," Foster began. "People are really starting to notice you out there. Have you given any thought to representation?"

"Not really. My mind's been on the competition."

"Then you're probably really sick of people calling you all the time, bugging you for interviews and endorsements," Foster continued smoothly. His spiel had the feel of long rehearsal but he was good enough to pull it off without sounding like an animatronic figure. "I'll tell you, Meghan, good representation will take care of those people calling you all the time, giving you back the time to train and practice. You'd be surprised what an agent will be able to do for you."

"I don't know," Meg said. "It's not too bad right now."

"It'll get worse once you win that gold medal."

"I haven't won it yet," Meg corrected. "The Koreans and the Chinese usually have the competition locked up in the Olympics. It'll be a lot of work."

"Sure it will," Foster said. "But America is watching *you*, not them. The country has Olympic fever, you're practically a household name with all this new exposure. You're going to be approached for endorsements, interviews, TV spots, hell, probably even movie deals. And if you don't have somebody in your corner who knows that business, you're not going to get nearly what you deserve."

Meg snickered. "I'd planned on just not doing anything like that."

"Really? How did you plan to get along?"

Meg shrugged. "I'm getting close to the point where I'll be too old to compete soon. And I don't know if I want to stick with full-contact taekwondo because of the danger it could pose to my health later. I was thinking of getting a job and just hanging up the gloves."

"And letting all that work go to waste?" Foster said in disbelief. "How long have you been studying the martial arts, Meghan? Fifteen, sixteen years?"

"Something like that," Meg said. "Call me Meg, would you?"

"You shouldn't let all that just flow down the drain, Meg," Foster said. "Let me work for you, represent you out there. I can talk the talk and get you some deals which will let you make something back for all that work and practice. You can let it be your career."

"I don't know if I want it to be my career," Meg contradicted.

"It doesn't have to be. The first couple deals, they'll just get you visible. Then the big ones will get made, enough to earn you a cushion, something to fall back on while you look for something else. Meg, I've known a thousand athletes like you. You probably live in a tiny little apartment and drive a beat-up car, making a pittance as a coach or something while you train. I'm telling you that you can have a house, a nice car, some investments, enough to tide you over once you can't compete anymore."

"I'm afraid if I do endorsements and all that, I'll lose my focus."

"It's my job to field all the phone calls and meetings. All I do is call you and set up times for you to go out and make money. That doesn't sound too hard, does it?"

Meg shrugged. "That's not really the focus I was talking about."

"What, then?"

"I've found myself in an interesting and kinda unique position," Meg said. "You know, the nature of the beast seems to be geared around the sports *hero*, not the heroine. I mean, look at all the problems the women's basketball team had getting started before last Olympics."

"Yeah, but look at them now, Meg."

"See, I'm in a position to be somebody that little girls can look up to. They can point to me and say that there's nothing stopping them from being anything they want to be. That's what I want to keep happening. You put me in some weird commercial wearing spandex and jiggling all over the place, you're selling to men. I don't want to do that. I want to keep telling little girls that there's nothing they can't do if they want it bad enough. As it is, my friends are finding sites on the Internet full of pictures of me. Not what I'm accomplishing, but my face and my body. You put me on a billboard, you're using my tits to sell shoes or workout clothes or whatever. I want the focus on what I'm doing out there, not how I look. Until somebody comes along who can do that, I'm off the market."

Foster's eyes were wide. "You sure get to the point."

"Why waste time?"

Foster laughed. "What you said, that's possible," he said. "It actually might be easier than the standard route. Ever thought about making a little money off your, um."

"Tits."

"Right, those. And using it to start a chain of martial arts schools geared towards girls? What about a national speaking tour? It could all happen for you, Meg, just like you want. But you've got to get in the business and start making deals. I can be your man for that."

"How many athletes do you represent, Mr. Foster?"

"Don," the agent corrected. "I have twenty-eight clients."

"And you can manage their careers and mine, too, without losing *your* focus?"

"Been doing it for years."

"As little as I want people to view me as an object, I want people to view me as dollars and cents even less, Don," Meg said flatly. "They're both equally demeaning. Tell me honestly, is all you're looking for your ten percent of my earnings or do you honestly believe what I'm doing is important?"

Don laughed again, from the belly. "Jesus," he said. "I don't think I've ever met anyone - man or woman - who lays it down like you do. Honestly, Meg, I think what you're doing and trying to get started in the country is very important. I have two daughters, you know, and I think it would be fantastic if they could learn a turn or two from somebody like you."

Meg looked at him. "Really?"

"Really."

"Then we might just have a deal, Don," Meg said.

"Excellent."

"I said *might*," Meg said. "It's going to take some convincing."

"How about this?" Don said. "Let me make some calls this evening. Nike's trying to get together some TV spots for the Olympics with the American team. I'm sure they're chewing rocks to get you to sign with them for one."

"They've tried to call me twice."

"What did you tell them?"

"I never called them back. I'm in training, I don't have time for commercials."

"It'll take four hours," Don said. "Can you spare four hours?"

"I guess."

"We'll start out with the Nike spot, and I'll get you final approval of any script they give you. And, just to let you know I'm serious, I'll do this first one for five percent. Deal?"

Meg thought a minute. "Okay, deal."

Don shook her hand. His grip was firm and steady, probably from long hours of shaking hands with professional football players. "I'll take you to dinner tonight, my treat, and give you some papers to sign, make this official. When would be good for you?"

Meg blinked. It had happened so fast. One second she was plain old Meg Rutherford, a man who had been magically turned into a beautiful woman and had lost his girlfriend but gained a spot on the women's Olympic team, and now she had an agent and a deal for a TV commercial. "Uh, my team's got the gym till seven tonight. How about seven thirty?"

"Seven thirty it is," Don said, smiling. "I'll be sure and take you someplace nice."

Meg bid him good-bye and watched him walk away, bewildered. The man was good - he'd used both an alarming personal charm and magnetism, along with a significant amount of raw sex appeal to railroad her into making a deal with him she hadn't really wanted to make. *He probably does stuff like that for breakfast*, she thought, watching him drive away. *Just as long as he knows that I'm in control*. But, the way he'd manipulated her into position, Meg might just think she was in control the entire time.

She put on her sunglasses and continued her walk around the building, lost in thought. Susan caught up with her an indefinite amount of time later, falling into step alongside the tall redhead.

"So, you have an agent now," Susan said. "Nice work."

"I think I just got railroaded," Meg said absently. "I'm trying to figure out how."

"Don't," Susan said. "Just remember you always have the final yes or no, and don't be afraid to use it or he'll have you plastered all over the country looking like a damn bimbo. I always have to be super-careful around my agent."

"You have an agent?"

"Yeah," Susan said. "I got picked up when I was on the swim team for Atlanta. Now that I'm on the Olympic team again, he decided to keep me on just in case there was any more money to be made. I'm getting pretty close to the point where I can actually go to college."

"This guy talks like he's going to make me the biggest star in the country."

"They all talk like that," Susan said. "They're salesmen. Just let them make all the noise they feel like they need to and keep remembering that you don't have to do a thing they say. In the end, you can say no anytime you feel like it. You can also fire him if you find somebody better."

"He's taking me to dinner tonight to talk some things over."

"Want some advice?" Susan said. "Wear something that will make his eyes pop. You'll be able to railroad him that way, since he'll be too busy looking at all that gorgeous freckled skin of yours to keep his mind on what he's trying to get done."

Meg laughed. "I don't know. I'm not very good at using sex to my advantage."

"I noticed. Peter Barnett would only walk barefoot through broken glass for you."

"You know what I mean," Meg said, exasperated.

"Well, girl, you happen to be talking to a master of the craft," Susan said. "If I can get myself to look like Michelle Pfeiffer with a dumpy little body like mine, just imagine what I can do for you."

"I don't know," Meg protested.

"Come on, dammit, live a little. Believe it or not, it's fun," Susan said.

Meg smiled. "I think you could manage to make an insurance seminar fun, Suse."

Susan took her hand. "We'll just have time to hit the stores and be back when the gym opens."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Broadened horizons

SUSAN RUBBED HER CHIN THOUGHTFULLY as Meg turned in a slow circle in front of her. The redhead smelled pleasantly of her recent shower and a tastefully small dose of Susan's expensive perfume. Meg was managing the four-inch black patent heels well. Her muscular legs were encased in sheer black stockings with a lacy appliqué on the ankle. The simple "little black dress" which Susan had talked her into clung deliciously to Meg's every curve, encasing her in soft fabric from mid-thigh to the turtleneck. Meg had added a little cropped bolero jacket with white trim against the Denver spring. She was wearing her hair up, the tiny soft ringlets escaping the crown to frame her flawless face. She wore just enough makeup to make her face dramatic without making her look like a tramp. A wide silver choker encircled her graceful neck and dangling hoop earrings completed the look.

"You look incredible," Susan said at length. "Like a movie star."

Meg snorted indelicately. "I wish."

"You do!" Susan protested. "I wish I looked like you."

Meg's look became lopsided. "Don't start with that. You're beautiful."

"Maybe, but I don't look like I should be on the cover of *Vogue* like you. Face it, girl. You're drop-dead, one hundred percent cheesecake. A walking hard-on."

The redhead laughed loudly. "Maybe I should parade around in front of Pete like this."

"He'd have an aneurysm," Susan said.

"I wish you could come with me," Meg said. "You're a lot more experienced in this kind of thing than me. Besides, I'd like to see you in a get-up like this, too, sometime."

Susan's cheeks colored. "You're only half kidding, aren't you?" she asked seriously. "I blow it off a lot, but you're. Meg, are you really attracted to me?"

Meg nodded. "Hell, yes. Have been since I met you."

Susan looked away. "I haven't hurt your feelings, turning everything into a joke, have I?"

"No," Meg said. "I know you're not gay."

Susan took a deep breath and faced Meg. "I'm not gay, but damn if I'm not curious."

"Really?"

"Ever since you called me when you and Cassie broke up, I've been wondering what it would be like. I mean, I really like you, Meg, and I trust you. If I was going to do something like that with anybody, it would be you. And you're so beautiful, and good at what you do, and."

"Are you okay, Suse?"

Susan cleared her throat. "That all came out in kind of a rush, I guess."

Meg stepped close and placed a gentle hand on Susan's arm. Susan could smell the perfume and the soft, comforting presence of her friend in her bones. "Don't be afraid. Not of me."

"I'm not," Susan protested. "I think I'm afraid of me."

"Everybody wonders about it. Thinking about it doesn't make you a lesbian."

"I know."

Meg leaned close, brushing a strand of Susan's hair away with long fingernails. Slowly, like a movie in slow-motion, she lowered her lips to Susan's and brushed a feather-light kiss. Meg's lips were softer than Susan could have ever imagined. Meg's hands traced gentle, tender circles on Susan's shoulders and pulled her close. Susan felt every vestige of resistance melt away and she returned the kiss. Meg's lips parted slightly and Susan explored her mouth briefly with her tongue. Meg sucked her tongue gently and bit her bottom lip, sending thrills of pleasure through the shorter blonde.

Susan broke away reluctantly. "Wow," she breathed.

"You like?" Meg asked expectantly.

Susan was having a little trouble keeping her balance on legs that no longer seemed to be functioning properly. "I've never been kissed like that before."

Meg smiled. "They say only a woman truly knows how to please a woman."

Susan shied from the intensity, taking on a brisk, businesslike tone. "I've wrecked your makeup," she said. "Sit down, I'll fix you up."

"Don't be afraid, Susan."

Susan looked away. "A long, long time ago, I tried cocaine at a party. I never touched it again because I liked it so much," she said. "I feel the same way about what just happened."

"Susan, I'm your friend," Meg said. "I'm not a vampire. I'm not going to bite your neck and you're not going to come to life again as a lesbian under my mental domination. I'd never do anything to hurt you. If you enjoyed that, if it brought you pleasure, then that makes me happy. You don't owe me anything."

"Meg," Susan breathed. "Has anyone ever told you how sweet you are?"

"Not really. I kick too many people's asses."

Susan laughed. "God, I got this feeling in my stomach when I used to sneak downstairs at night and raid my dad's liquor cabinet," she said. "I'm all shivery."

Meg grinned. "I was that way too."

"I always got this way when I thought that I was doing something wrong."

"Did it feel wrong?" Meg asked pointedly.

"It damn near set me on fire," Susan said. "I wasn't exactly thinking of right and wrong."

Meg fixed her smeared lipstick and turned, tugging wrinkles out of her dress. "I'll be back here by eleven at the latest," she said, a mischievous grin on her beautiful features. "If you're still curious." The tall redhead reached into the little black clutch purse she was carrying and set the key to her room on the dressing table, keeping it pinned to the wood with a slender finger and regarding her friend with a raised eyebrow. Susan giggled nervously, then broke into genuine laughter.

"You horny thing," Susan accused. "Gonna seduce your best friend."

"I'm not the only one who'll be getting something out of it," Meg said, smiling. "You think this dress is nice, wait'll you see what I have on underneath it."

* * * * *

Don Foster and his wife, Sarah, were waiting in front of the Olympic Training center at seven thirty sharp in a rented car. Don's eyes widened a bit when he saw Meg in her new outfit but he covered nicely. Sarah shook her hand politely, giving her a suspicious eye and her husband a meaningful glance.

"Meg, Nike jumped at the chance to get you for a commercial. In fact, they want the whole women's team," Don announced. "They agreed to giving you script approval but they're pretty adamant about you and your teammates endorsing the product. They want you in their shoes and workout gear through the whole Summer Games. I didn't want to give them an answer for that until I'd spoken to you."

Meg had opened the door for Sarah Foster before she knew what she'd done. Sarah only gave her a bemused smile and thanked her for the courtesy, giving her husband another dirty look.

"And Susan and Hannah? They agreed?"

"Hannah agreed to let me represent her two hours ago," Don said. "I talked to Susan Lewis' agent on the phone and he doesn't seem to think it will be a problem. But you're the face, Meg. The rest of the team is just icing to these people. You're the one they want. Will you do it?"

"I wear Nike sweats anyway," she said. "I don't guess I'd mind too much."

"Great," Don said. "I have some papers for you to sign after dinner. And this one's only for five percent this time, just to show you I mean business."

"One thing," Meg said. "I want you to know that competition is the first priority. The second these things start cutting into my training or affecting my performance, I'm pulling the plug."

"No argument here," Don said with a smile. "We can both only benefit if you bring home a gold medal from Sydney. Train as hard as you need."

* * * * *

Meg was back from dinner at ten thirty, having managed to get everything she needed signed and filed away to make Don Foster her agent. The Nike shoot was to take place in two days and Meg stood to make a truckload of money, more than she really knew what to do with. She was also slated to get a load of free Nike stuff in the process as well. It left her feeling a little giddy, which gave her a little bit of a start to find the door of her room open and Susan Lewis in her bed.

"Hi," Susan said nervously.

Meg closed the door behind her and stepped out of her heels, kicking them into a corner. "Hi."

"How was dinner?"

"We're rich," Meg said. "Nike's going to pay us an obscene amount of money for a commercial."

"Yeah, my agent called after you left," Susan said. "I told him that I wouldn't do it if you didn't. I guess I should call him first thing tomorrow and get everything set up."

"I was wondering if you were going to be here," Meg said, smiling. "I'm glad you came."

"I'm nervous as a kitten," Susan confessed. "But I'm glad too."

Meg hung the little bolero jacket on a padded hanger in the small closet and turned around, undoing the necklace. "Unzip me?" she asked.

"Well, I guess so," Susan said. "I was kinda hoping to make a production out of this."

"Out of what?" Meg asked.

Susan threw back the covers to reveal herself, wearing a lacy satin merry widow and sheer stockings, one of the sex-suits Meg had seen in some of the racier lingerie catalogues. Meg's breath caught and the part of her which was still male kicked in with a wave of lust. "Oh, my," she breathed throatily. "You look incredible, Susan."

"I thought I'd do it right," the little blonde confessed. "I bought this to seduce a guy two years ago. I'm relieved that I still fit into it."

"You sure do," Meg commented appraisingly, letting her green-eyed gaze wander appreciatively over Susan's firm, compact body. "You do amazing things to that little scrap of cloth. And green's my favorite color."

"I know," Susan said, standing. "You told me."

"You are sexy as hell," Meg said throatily, becoming more and more aroused as the smaller woman moved closer to her, Susan's sculpted and trained body moving like a panther. "I've been fantasizing about you for a long time."

Susan blushed. "Really?"

"You mean to tell me you have no idea how sexy you are?" Meg asked.

Susan answered by sliding her arms around Meg, her fingers pulling the zipper on the back of the dress down as she nuzzled the redhead's neck. Meg pressed her face into Susan's fragrant hair and placed her arms around Susan's shoulders, bringing their lips together in an electric contact.

The dress fell away and Meg stepped back, letting Susan see her in the skin-tight black satin bustier and g-string she'd bought, originally, to seduce Peter Barnett. Susan's eyes widened.

"Now, before you think of anything," Meg said. "What do you feel when you see me like this?"

Susan's eyes blinked. "Jealous," she shot back.

"Try again."

"Nervous."

Meg crawled slinkily onto the edge of the bed, fixing Susan with a hungry look. "Keep trying."

"Horny as hell," Susan said.

"Good," Meg said. "Horny's what I was trying for." She pulled Susan into a tight, clinging kiss and pushed her gently onto the bed, kicking the light off with her toe.

* * * * *

Meg scanned the noisy breakfast crowd in the training center, trying to keep the "I-just-got-laid" smile off of her face and wondering, idly, if any of the gymnasts on the wing with her had been kept awake last night. As soon as Meg's talented hands had gotten Susan past the nervousness of the homosexual contact, the little blonde had gotten into the spirit of the endeavor by being really, really *noisy*. Meg was sure her cries had woken everyone in that part of Denver.

"Great workout this morning, red," Rob Holt said, sitting down next to her. Rob had been the only one on the mat when Meg arrived that morning at sunrise, working the fundamentals. Meg and Rob had spent a long time in spar, working the kinks from their more complex moves.

"Thanks," Meg answered, her mouth full of cereal. "What do you have planned today?"

Rob smiled a cheshire-cat grin. "A massage. Nothing else."

"Sounds nice," Meg said.

"Yeah, I have a little crush on my therapist," Rob confessed.

"Who do you have? Maria, or Julie?" Meg asked idly.

Rob took a long swallow of juice. "James," he said.

Meg tried not to goggle. "I had no idea," she said.

"I figured your gay-dar would have picked me up long ago," Rob said. "I've been told I'm somewhat flaming at times. But I have to keep a low profile because of the press."

"Tell me about it," Meg said grumpily.

Rob chuckled. "I thought so," he said. "I just didn't have the proof."

Meg nodded. "Actually, I think I'm getting more and more bi the longer I go."

"Peter Barnett?" Rob asked.

Meg blushed. "And here I thought I was hiding it well."

"Hey, I'm all for it. Pete has a nice butt and a smile that would melt glass."

"And those shoulders," Meg added.

"Oh, yeah," Rob said. "I almost forgot about them. Although they're not so attractive when he's swinging them at your head. The rest of him's pretty nice, too. And he has it bad for you, Meg."

"Don't I know it. I tried to let him down easy at first, but he wouldn't go away. We trained together, we hung around together all the time, and next thing I know I look up and find I'm really starting to get attracted to him. I've never felt that way about a man before. It's weird."

"I had a string of girlfriends when I was in school," Rob said. "You know, for cover. I went out with this one girl, Stacy, for four months. She really liked me and was so sweet, I thought I'd try, just to try and give her something back. It was a disaster. I didn't know what to do, where to touch, and was completely turned off the whole time. I finally told her and we laughed about it for days. She's still one of the best friends I have."

"I don't think it'll be that way," Meg said. "I've been with a man before, and I was extremely turned on. I just don't know if I can go through with the everyday life stuff with anyone other than a woman. Guys are a lot of fun for sex, but I don't know if I could be in love with one."

Rob laughed. "So you're out for a boy-toy."

"I guess I am."

"Shouldn't be hard for you to find one," Rob said. "Not with your looks."

"I wish I didn't look like this most of the time," Meg said. "Everybody describes me as this gorgeous redhead. I wish they'd describe me as the National Taekwondo Champion instead."

"It's funny," Rob said. "I wonder what people would think if they knew both National Champions were queer. I bet it would set the country on its ear."

"Let's tell them," Meg said suddenly. "Both of us, come out on national television and see what happens. I didn't before because I didn't know if I could go it alone. But the two of us."

"Not until after the Olympics," Rob said with finality. "I want people watching because we're good and they want to see us win the gold, not because they watch *Ellen* every week."

"I hate that show," Meg said grumpily.

Peter Barnett walked by, his hair still wet from the shower and a laden tray in his hands. "Morning," he told them both. "Hey, Rob, you got time today to walk me through that reverse sweep?"

"Sure," Rob said, bolting the last of his food. "I'll find you after lunch." He stood and bussed his tray, giving Meg a pointed "you-two-should-be-alone" look. Peter took the vacated seat.

"How's it going, red?" Peter asked.

"Not too bad," Meg replied.

"Did you and Susan have fun last night?"

Meg choked on her cereal and Peter had to pat her back before she could swallow. "How the hell did you know?" she asked with a touch of offense.

"She told me," Peter said. "She was nervous and scared about the whole thing and she came to me while you were out at dinner last night and asked my advice. I told her to sit down, figure out how she felt and then follow her heart. Next thing I know she was getting me to help her pick out lingerie. We had a blast. By the way, that dress you had on last night damn near stopped my heart."

Meg blushed and looked down. "Pete, you're amazing. Did you know that?"

"What brought that on?"

"Here I've been stringing you along for weeks and last night you practically talked another woman into my bed," Meg said. "I don't know anybody who'd do that for. aw, shit." Fat tears began to well in her eyes and she blew her nose with a napkin.

"You okay, Meg?"

Meg nodded, the tears spilling down her cheeks, but she couldn't make words come.

"Jeez, Meg, I didn't mean to make you cry."

"You didn't," Meg said, her voice thick and high with tears. "I feel like such a bitch. I treat you like shit all the time and you're always so patient and forgiving with me."

Peter looked away and seemed to have difficulty figuring out what to do with his hands. He settled, finally, for placing an arm around her shoulders which gave her a warm, thrilling sensation.

"You don't treat me like shit," he said softly. "You're one of the best friends I have."

"You don't hate me for teasing?"

Peter laughed. "You're not. You never promised me anything, you don't owe me anything. Meg, if anything happens between you and me I want it to be because you want it, not because you feel like you should. I'm in love with you, okay? I met you, and I lusted after you. Then we spent all that time together and I found out that I'm hopelessly stuck on you. I don't have to sleep with you to keep loving you. All I have to do is keep being there when you need me."

Meg sniffed heavily, blowing her nose again. "Dammit, can you stop being so damn *perfect*? It would be easier if I could just get mad at you, but you keep doing all these wonderful things."

"Shut up, bitch, and cook me some breakfast," he said. "Better?"

Meg snorted laughter and laid her head against his shoulder. "Yeah. You men are all alike."

"Careful," Peter said. "You used to be one of us, you know."

"Yeah, and look at me," Meg said. "Blubbering like a baby because I'm starting my period."

"You're the first man I've ever met whose chin gets those adorable little dimples right before he starts crying," Peter said gently. "And the only man I've ever fantasized about serving me coffee wearing nothing but a string of pearls."

Meg said up straight and started cleaning herself up. "Peter, I hate to say it, but I have some really strong feelings about Susan," she confessed. "I mean, really strong."

"It's okay," Peter said. "Just don't ever cut me out of your life, all right? I can get by just as long as I can be near you. Susan too. If the two of you wind up together, just don't shut me out."

"Susan and I," Meg mused. "I don't think it's going to happen."

"She's confused," Peter said. "She'll figure it all out."

"I hope so," Meg said. "She's something."

"Yeah," Peter mused, a smile ghosting across his face.

"You say that like there's something I don't know," Meg said.

Peter studied his breakfast.

"Well?" Meg demanded.

"Don't let on you know," Peter said. "Two years ago, at the Southwestern Championships. We got really loaded after competition and wound up in the hot tub together. Needless to say, she didn't sleep in her hotel room that night. Then we sobered up, talked about what happened, decided that it was excess of booze, swore to be friends, and that night I didn't sleep in my hotel room."

"So you know what a great lay she is," Meg said playfully.

Peter grinned. "Oh, yeah."

"I guess I should've known," Meg said. "She thinks you hung the moon."

"And I think the same about her. If she didn't live in Mississippi and me in Houston, I'd've tried to make something out of it. We've always both kinda treated each other like an option to be kept open."

"Have you ever done it since?" Meg asked.

"What. with Susan?" Peter said. "Once. At this year's Regionals."

Meg giggled. "I was there," she said.

"No you weren't," Peter said.

"I was about six-one and weighed two-thirty-five," Meg said. "I also had a penis at the time."

Peter laughed. "I still can't believe that was you," he said.

Meg tossed her head back. "God, it's so nice to have someone who knows," she said.

Peter dove into his breakfast and Meg busied herself trying to time jokes so that scrambled eggs would come out of Peter's nose. She hadn't yet succeeded before Susan sat down at the table beside them.

"Morning," she said gaily, her smile radiant. "How are my two favorite people this morning?"

"Completely satisfied sexually," Meg said. "Yourself?"

Susan giggled. "About the same. Pete?"

"Blue balled," he said grumpily.

Meg, standing and gathering her breakfast dishes, missed the look of purest sympathy that Susan gave to Peter and the look of misery on the young man's face.

* * * *

"Hill. Olajuwon. Pippen. Hardaway. Jordan. The U.S. Dream Team. This year, we decided to give them some real competition in preparation for the Sydney Olympics," the announcer said.

Hakeem Olajuwon shot a no-look chest pass to Grant Hill who began a fast break towards the hole, picking up speed as he moved. From nowhere, a foot flew in a perfect roundhouse kick which sent the ball arcing through the air to sink through the hoop with a rip of net. The camera panned back to show the U.S. Dream Team squared off across the court from the Women's Taekwondo Team in full competition pads.

The music cranked up as the shot came in tight to tiny Susan Lewis staring down - or, more to the point, up - Scotty Pippen who topped her by at least a foot and a half. The Dreamers tried to play regulation basketball while the three women tossed them easily around the court using infighting holds and throws. The commercial ended with a tight shot of Meg loosing a snap kick high above Michael Jordan's head which took the ball from his hands as he tried to go up for a dunk.

The screen went black as Hardaway could be heard yelling, "That was a foul! A foul!" before cutting to the three women, looking thoroughly Hollywood sexy even in tournament pads, standing together in a carefully choreographed pose.

"Be a man," Hannah Stills said as the Nike 'swoosh' appeared on the screen.

* * * *

Susan was sitting down on the bleachers of the basketball arena, looking happily at the basketball she'd just gotten autographed by all the members of the Dream Team. It had been a lot of fun getting to beat up on Michael Jordan and Grant Hill, and the guys had all been great sports about the whole thing. The crew was even going to give her a videotape

they'd made of Hakeem Olajuwon lifting her up so she could dunk while Meg showed Scottie Pippen how to throw a side skip kick in the background.

It had been a good day and they'd made good money, but the high point had been getting to spend time with Meg. Susan was caught up in a huge tidal wave of emotions - most of them conflicting - over the slender redhead. Susan had always enjoyed sex and sexuality, but she'd had no idea that another woman's touch could evoke such incredible responses in her and that the sight of another woman's body could cause her to become aroused. Hell, Susan had even caught herself running an appreciative eye over Hannah Stills' figure once or twice in the dressing room.

Peter Barnett, true to his word, was there at straight-up eight o'clock to pick her up in Rob Holt's car. He plopped into the bleachers behind her and began giving her shoulders a comfortable rub.

"Hey, shorty," he said. "How was the shoot?"

"Good," Susan said, pointing to her ball. "I got Michael Jordan's autograph. Look."

Peter grabbed the ball in disbelief. "Shit, you got everybody's autograph."

"And Meg and Hannah and I got to autograph one of Hannah's kicking pads for Grant Hill."

Peter handed her back the basketball. "Sounds like you had fun."

"I did," Susan said. "What did you do?"

"Got my ass kicked by Rob six or seven more times," Peter said. "Typical day."

Susan laughed. "You have the edge on him in speed," she said. "You should work to get inside his longer reach and then use your hands. Least, that's what Meg says and I trust her analysis."

"You ever fought Rob Holt?" Peter said. "I don't have a patch on him in speed."

"You should go see Meg," Susan said. "She coached me into beating Evelyn Doyle from women's judo. I bet she could show you how to get inside Rob Holt's defense."

Peter rubbed his chin. "It's an idea," he said. "Speaking of Meg, where is she?"

"She went off with her agent, he has another commercial for her in a week. Pepsi, I think," she said. "She left about a half-hour ago. We can go whenever you're ready."

Peter stood. "Wanna go for a little one-on-one first?" Peter asked.

Susan snorted. "No way. Basketball's for tall people. But Meg left her pads. You wanna go for a little one-on-one our way?" she asked. "One match to five, loser buys dinner."

"How about one match to five, person who just got paid for a Nike ad buys dinner?"

Susan tucked her ball into her equipment bag and tossed Meg's bag to Peter. "You're on."

They toggled out quickly, Peter trying hard not to look over-long at the various sweaty underthings in Meg's bag while he pulled on her torso pad and arm-guards. He was highly amused that Meg still carried a nut-cup in her bag - old habits died very hard - and slipped it

into his jockeys. He pulled off his bull-hide boots and snugged the kicking pads over his shins.

"You stretched out?" Susan asked.

Peter pulled on Meg's brain-bucket. "Good enough," he answered. "Just watch the chin shots, I don't have a mouthpiece, okay?"

"I won't get too rough with you," Susan said.

They bowed and fell into a playful spar, concentrating on ridiculously complicated combination moves that weren't allowed in competition, showing off. Peter finished with a 5-3 victory which left Susan on her back on the mat, the victim of a lightning-fast back sweep.

"Like that one?" Peter asked, pulling off the headgear. "Rob showed it to me."

"Nice," Susan grunted. "Help me up."

Peter took her hand and she kicked out his plant leg, pulling him down on top of her. "Asshole," she grumped. "No fair using Rob Holt moves on poor defenseless me."

"Bullshit," Peter said. "You were using that wicked triple punch thingy that Meg cooked up all the time. If I can't Holt you, then you can't Rutherford me. The match is a draw. You're buying."

* * * *

Looking back, Peter Barnett should have seen that it was inevitable. He'd waited while Susan changed and then taken her to a nice-but-not-too-nice little restaurant he'd found trolling around town while being heartsick about Meg. Both of them were moody, in a turmoil of emotion centered around the tall, slender redhead with the liquid green eyes, and it wasn't long before they were talking about the situation. Susan got confused, Peter got hopeless, they both got consoling and, shortly thereafter, they both got naked. Peter propped his head on his hand and looked down at Susan's sleeping face, wondering how in the hell he'd ever gotten from Point A to Point B. Every ounce of him wished that it was Meg Rutherford he was gazing down on, watching the moonlight through his blinds play across her face; he hated himself for just discarding Susan like that. The two of them had made love frantically, with a passion bordering on the brutal in their hunger for release.

Susan rolled over and half-opened her eyes, smiling at him lazily. "Hi," she whispered.

"Hey there," Pete answered. "Did I wake you up?"

"No," Susan said. "Just a light sleeper. And you're thinking about Meg."

"I guess I am," he confessed.

"Don't feel bad," Susan said. "I was, too."

Peter had to laugh. "This is the most hopelessly fucked up love triangle ever."

"Without a doubt," Susan said. She squirmed around in his embrace to face him. "I wish you could just go nail her and be done with it. I hate what's happening to you."

"Meg's got to take her time," Peter said. "She's still getting used to the whole 'guy' thing."

Susan kissed his forearm. "Will you settle for fucking me in the meantime?" she asked.

Peter sighed in mock resignation. "Oh, I guess so."

Susan laughed and snuggled against his chest. They were both asleep in moments.

Ω



SUMMARY: Two friends find themselves victims of a science experiment which turns them into women who now must deal with their new life and their changing relationship with their girlfriends. part seven

ALL THAT GLITTERS, Part VII (Chapters 16-18)

By Valerie Hope

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: 'Be thou pure as snow, as chaste as ice.'

MEG WASN'T REALLY SURE HOW she should react - it was just too much to take in so fast. She'd gone to Susan's room to see if the little blonde wanted to go running that morning, but Susan wasn't in the showers or the gym. Meg had tried to rouse Peter, but other people on the floor had said he'd been out very late the night before and she'd decided not to wake him. She ran a few miles with Rob Holt before returning to find Susan Lewis sneaking out of Peter's room, her clothes gathered close to her chest. Meg's only feeling was a shocked numbness which left her unable to move or speak. Susan and Peter had made no attempt to speak and Meg made her way outside and was deep into the woods around the complex before she allowed the tears to come.

Before, it had been easier to resist the tide of emotion which raised like a cold bubble behind her heart, to restrain it behind walls of callousness and let it out in small portions over time. But Meg was scarcely concealed in the trees before she exploded with a small baby's wail and all the hurt and betrayal bubbled out of her in shuddering sobs.

You're being ridiculous, Meg told herself angrily. *Get a grip. You don't own either one of them.* But her male brain had little control over her now-female heart and she cried herself to exhaustion, her back against a beech bole and her hands tangled in her red curls. She wiped her eyes when the storm had burned itself out and tried feebly to compose herself before having to go and face her friends. Everyone would expect the bright, cheerful woman who appeared in training every morning to appear again, and Meg couldn't afford to let herself be sullen.

God, I wish I was a man again, she thought. *I could have just stayed with Cassie and I wouldn't be in this mess. My life was so much simpler then.* Was that it? Were women's lives more complicated than men's by nature? Meg remembered clearly how things had seemed more black-and-white to her when she'd been Mark, how he'd always been clear about which paths to take and let nothing stand in his way. Different things concerned Meg now - she was still amazed at how selfish some of her decisions as Mark seemed to her now. The brain might be male, but the woman's way was insinuating itself unstoppably into her psyche and way of life. She had trouble remembering the days when she didn't have to worry about water retention or whether such-and-such a blouse went with such-and-such a skirt.

I should just get the hell out of here, go someplace where nobody knows me, Meg thought. *I should go back home and just be a pretty girl and nothing else.* The male mind within the feminine skull rebelled at the self-pity and Meg got even angrier at herself.

This is going nowhere, she thought. *I can't think straight when I'm like this. It's like trying to think when you've got a boner.* She never realized how profound her observation was as she walked back towards the training center determinedly, wiping her eyes with the heels of her hands.

She found Peter Barnett knocking on her door timidly, still wet from his shower.

"Meg," he said nervously. "I was looking for you. Where have you-"

He was cut short as she shoved past him and unlocked the door to her room without a word. She grabbed a handful of his T-shirt and hauled him in bodily, shutting the door behind him.

"God, Meg, I'm sorry," he began, seeing her red-rimmed eyes.

"Shut up," she said roughly, pulling him close and pressing her lips to his in a crushing kiss, forcing his lips apart and worming her tongue between his teeth. His shocked gestures lacked the restraint of the times when he usually touched her, and that suited Meg fine. She clawed his shirt off over his broad shoulders, angry because its removal made her break the kiss.

He finally shoved her back more from confusion than anything else. "Meg," he said.

"I don't want to talk right now," she said. "Do you want me or not?"

Peter lowered his eyes. "Not like this."

"Like what, then?"

"I want you to want it. This is too much like revenge or something."

Meg stepped back, unfastening her loose blouse. "What have I done over the last minute to make you think that I don't want this? Doesn't attacking you constitute a little desire on my part?"

"You're pissed," Peter said, reclaiming his shirt. "You only use big words when you're mad."

"Damn right I'm mad," she said, pulling off her blouse. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"It just happened," Peter said.

Meg reached behind herself to wrestle with the catch of her bra. "Bullshit," she said. "You can stop it if you have to. You didn't want to. Neither did Susan."

"You're right," Peter said. "I'm sorry."

Meg pulled off her bra and stood bare-chested in front of him. The bulge in Peter's crotch became noticeably larger and Meg got a little power-trip from the effect her body had on him. "I'm sorry too," she said angrily, "for making you think you couldn't ever have me. But you said you could wait. I trusted you to wait, Peter."

"Hang on a minute. You didn't wait."

"I didn't promise to. You did."

Peter scrubbed a hand through his damp hair. "That is the most fucked-up logic I've ever heard."

Meg sat on her bed and pulled off her tennis shoes and socks, not bothering to untie them, and began wrestling her sweats off. When she stood before him, she wore only a pair of French-cut satiny panties and a neoprene knee brace. The scent of her arousal was very apparent in the small dormitory room.

"Are you going to get naked with me or not?" she asked.

"I'm expected on the mat soon," Peter attempted.

"Susan will understand," Meg guessed.

Peter looked at her as if she were an alien creature, but the tent in his shorts was undeniable as she slid her panties off and stepped out of them, stepping close and putting an arm around his shoulders, leaning close enough to share breath as her free hand began slowly tracing the outline of his erection through his shorts. "I know you want me, Peter. We've never kept it a secret between us. So take me, I'm yours. If me keeping you at arm's length is going to make you go to other women, then I want you to have me. I never want to feel like I did this morning again."

"Feel like what?" Peter asked, still afraid to embrace her.

"Like I'd lost you."

He brought his mouth to hers, caught up in the desperation of Meg's seduction. Her touch on his manhood became insistent and rough and made his knees go a little weak. Her finely muscled body moved against his like a cat and her every move made him want her more.

Meg was floating in a sea of emotion and desire which made it hard to be aware of her surroundings. All she cared about was making him stay with her, her fear at losing him to anything was so great. She had very little willpower left and found herself considering things which scared her if only they'd keep Peter beside her. She'd gladly quit competition, fill their house with babies or prance around the house in five-inch heels and a g-string if it would insure his faithfulness.

It came as a mild shock for Meg to realize that she'd kissed a path from Peter's neck, down his chest and to his navel and her hands were fumbling with the drawstring on his shorts. It was the way Cassie had done when she'd wanted Mark to lie back and leave the pleasuring to her, and Meg discovered a warm and exciting feeling in her chest at the thought of bringing Peter as much pleasure. She pulled his shorts and athletic supporter down and knelt, her face at a level with his engorged penis. Meg reflected distractedly that she'd never looked at a penis from such an angle before as she stroked it tenderly with long-nailed hands. She found the warm, musky smell of him intoxicating on a level she couldn't comprehend and ran her tongue lazily up the shaft, eliciting a delicious groan from Peter.

His reaction drove her over the edge and she gave in totally to her desire, kissing and caressing his length before fastening her lips over the large head and easing his penis back into her mouth. Remembering full well how he'd liked to be touched as a man, Meg applied expert ministrations to all the right spots, causing Peter to lean heavily against the door and wind his hands into her hair, moaning deep in his throat.

"Jesus," he breathed.

"You like?" Meg asked. "It's my first time."

"Don't quit," Peter said. The command in his voice gave Meg a scintillating thrill through her spine and she continued. The large foreign object in her mouth was making her salivate and his rigid penis was soon glistening with moisture. Meg's own highly-aroused state of mind was causing her to concentrate on the maddening emptiness in her own middle and she

decided to stop before he spent himself in her mouth so that she could get him inside her before she went insane.

But her timing was sadly off, and just as she was about to withdraw him from her mouth, his body tensed and his hands pushed her head roughly forward, sinking a great deal of his length into Meg's throat, making her gag a little. His buttocks clenched in spasms and Meg could feel hot liquid pulsing against the back of her throat and onto her tongue. Her own fears were unfounded as she discovered that the taste was nowhere near as bad as the time that Mark had, in a fit of pubescent curiosity, tasted his own. It had an oily, salty taste which wasn't that unpleasant. She decided to show what kind of woman she was and swallowed dutifully, even going so far as to lick the residue from the tip of his penis and her own lips. Recalling how sensitive her own penis had become afterwards, Meg stood and didn't touch him for a while, instead exploring his lower regions with tongue and fingers while he lay panting against the door.

"Dear God," he said. "That was fantastic."

"Glad you liked it," Meg said. "But I'll tell you something. I can't get used to this depending on my partner's endurance thing. You came just as I was getting ready for some fun of my own."

Peter looked up, a smug and satisfied grin on his face. "Then come here."

Meg stood and he began devoting attention to her breasts as she ground her pelvis against his muscular thigh, all the while using her hand to try and coax him back to erection. He wasn't as slow as Dennis to recover and his lovely penis was soon at attention again. Meg couldn't resist giving its crown a brazen kiss before leading him to the bed and laying him down beneath her.

"We can't," Peter protested. "I don't have a condom."

Meg was too far gone. She straddled his lap and, pushing him down beneath her, slid his length into the wet void between her legs and settled her buttocks contentedly against his thighs. She'd been very wet and it only took a moment to adjust to feeling him inside herself before she was bouncing up and down in his lap, breasts jiggling. Peter was much thicker and longer than Dennis had been and she felt full inside, a lovely satisfaction which Meg hadn't been prepared for.

"Meg, please," Peter said. "We need some protection."

"I'm on the pill," Meg said. "That'll have to do. You're not going anywhere."

Peter chuckled. "Who'd've thought it?" he said. "That you'd turn out to be such a firecracker in the sack? For a lesbian, you sure seem to like screwing."

Meg mock-punched his chest. "You call this screwing? You're just laying there. Some big strong man, letting poor defenseless little old me do all the work."

Peter got an evil little smile. "Oh yeah?"

So it was manipulation, Meg thought. *I got what I wanted.* Peter rolled himself atop her and took over, forcing submission from Meg as she spread her thighs wide and lay back underneath him.

"Come on," Meg said. "You won't hurt me. Just cut loose."

The finely conditioned muscles in Peter's back and thighs responded and he began thrusting roughly into her, making her grunt in pleasure as his pelvis slammed into hers. It was wonderful. Meg dug her nails into his shoulders and bit his neck to keep from screaming out. Her own roughness just seemed to egg Peter on and soon the modular dorm bed was scooting across the floor noisily with their combined thrusts. The cup-brimming-over feeling hit Meg again and she orgasmed with an intensity which tunneled her vision momentarily and seemed to go on for hours.

"Wow. You go tight as a tourniquet when you come," he said, panting.

"Then keep doing what you're doing," Meg panted. "'Cause I'm about to do it again."

She buried her nose in his shoulder as another spasm rocked through her and the waves had no sooner resided than Peter grunted hoarsely and pulled himself out, masturbating his orgasm onto her flat belly with his eyes screwed shut. He collapsed against her, exhausted. Meg, feeling scandalously naughty, dabbled her fingers in his semen and licked her fingers clean. The taste, frighteningly enough, was starting to grow on her a little.

"Sorry about the mess," Peter said. "I don't trust the pill."

"No problem," Meg said, grabbing a towel from beside the bed. "There's something to be said for easy clean-up. Are you comfortable?"

Peter laughed. "That's supposed to be my line."

She snuggled against him. "I can't believe I gave you a blow job."

"I can't either. And I can't believe you swallowed."

"It wasn't bad," Meg said. "In fact, I kinda like the taste."

"No way."

"Really," she said, running a finger through the cooling puddle on her stomach and licking her finger clean again. "Tastes kinda funny at first, but it's growing on me."

"Must be a female thing," he said. "I tried my own once, and I nearly retched."

Meg smacked her lips. "It's better when it's still warm," she said with kind of a sour look, and wiped the remainder of Peter's orgasm from her smooth belly. "So, you liked my first try at sucking cock?"

"Mind you, my experience is pretty limited," Peter laughed, "but that was first-rate to me."

"They say practice makes perfect," Meg suggested.

"Anytime, red," he said. "And I mean that."

* * * *

A scream ripped through the foggy city streets as somewhere in the background Marianne Faithfull was singing about how much she enjoyed being a girl. Around a corner, in a deserted plaza bazaar, Jackie Chan was desperately fighting six men armed with swords, staves and chains. Another, identical scream cut through the clamor of battle and all the men stopped and looked up to see a redheaded fury vault from a nearby rooftop, executing a triple flip before landing in the center of the conflict. Meg began working her way through Jackie's opponents methodically, devastating them with a rapid-fire barrage of kicks and throws as Jackie stood, blank-faced, watching her systematically dismember his foes.

The combat ended when Meg put down the last of the men, pausing only to wipe sweat from her sodden brow. Jackie timidly offered her a bottle of water, which Meg sent spinning over a rooftop with a reverse roundhouse which left her staring angrily at him from a ready stance. Jackie backed up a step.

"Allow me," said a voice from behind Chan, and a man's arm offered Meg a Diet Mountain Dew, which she accepted and downed in a single swallow. The shot cut abruptly to the four Dew guys, clad in their skater regalia, posing around a bewildered Jackie Chan and the words "Do the Dew" appeared superimposed over them all.

"I think I'm in love," Jackie said as the commercial faded to black.

* * * * *

Meg stripped off her headgear and flung her wild red mane, the damp and sticky hair flying in all directions in slow motion as the announcer said, "Meghan Rutherford spends forty-five minutes destroying her hair. And ten seconds bringing it back to life with Pantene Pro-V shampoo and conditioner."

Meg screwed up her face in distaste and clicked the television off. "I shouldn't have done that one. My hair has never been that shiny until they put all those egg whites in it. I've been using that shampoo for days trying to get it all out. Lucky they gave me a lifetime supply of it." She plopped down in the hotel chair disgustedly, looking at the crates of shampoo stacked against the wall of her double room at the Denver Marriott. Her training was on hold for a while, just conditioning exercises, because the next morning she flew back to Houston to be best 'man' at Heath and Faith's wedding.

"That shampoo is going to buy you a new truck," Peter said.

"Pete, there's something I need to tell you."

"Uh-oh. You have that look in your eye," Pete said.

"It's about us," she said.

"Lemme guess," Peter said. "You're gay and you can't go on like this."

Meg dropped into his lap and crushed her lips to his. "Shut up, will you?"

His arms found her waist and she melted a little. A desperate part of her brain screamed that Mark Rutherford was being held by another man, another man who was not his equal in competition, but the voice couldn't compete with the warmth and emotion running the

length of Meg's spine. And, Meg suspected, once she said what she was going to say, that voice would be dead. Strangely, she wasn't sad at all.

"I'm bisexual, okay?" she said. "And right now I'm with a man."

"You mean."

"Let me finish, this is hard enough," Meg interrupted. "Pete, what I'm trying to say is. Oh God, this is hard. I don't even know where to start, how to lead up to it."

"Just spit it out, red," Peter urged.

She kissed him again. "Pete, I'm in love with you."

He just stared.

"Aren't you going to say anything?"

"When you go so long waiting to hear something and then you finally hear it, it's like the world kinda stops for a minute," he said. "Meg, I've loved you since the moment I met you."

"I know," Meg said. "You didn't keep it a secret."

"So I'm in love with you and you're in love with me. What do we do now?"

Meg laid her head against his shoulder in a pillow of soft red curls. "I was kinda hoping you'd take me to bed and make love to me all night long," she whispered, baby-soft against his neck.

Peter lifted her in strong arms and carried her to the bed.

* * * * *

He finally collapsed against her, their sweat and the fluids of their lovemaking mingling between their bodies. Meg held him close to her, pulling his body against hers with strong arms and kissing him almost desperately.

"Are you crying?" he asked softly.

Meg nodded wordlessly.

"Why? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No."

"Why are you crying?"

"I dunno," Meg said. "Just happy, that's all."

Peter kissed her eyelids. "I know how you feel."

He rolled to her side and she snuggled her back against his chest. His lips traced her shoulder softly. "I don't think I've ever felt anything so strongly," she whispered. "It's like, once I gave in and finally said the words, every little part of me fell in love with you. It's almost like floating sometimes."

Peter gave her a squeeze. "For me it's like having both my feet on the ground for the first time in my life. Like I have something to build from where I used to be nothing but a tumbleweed."

She kissed the arm across her chest. Meg couldn't seem to hold out for ten seconds before having to press her lips against some part of her love. "Tomorrow's going to be weird," she said.

"How long has it been since you've seen Cassie?"

"Since I left for Denver. I have no idea what's been going on at home. She could be a totally different person now. Somebody I don't even know."

"I doubt it," Peter said. "People don't change that fast."

Meg laughed aloud. "They don't? One day I was over six feet tall and had a penis, the next."

"Okay, okay," Peter said. "But not anymore. Now you're my lady and I'm your man."

"Your lady," Meg said, content. "I guess I am. Nobody's ever called me a lady before."

"Get used to it, gorgeous."

She kissed him again, over her shoulder. "Well, I'm certainly not having very ladylike thoughts."

"Do tell," Peter said, smiling at her.

"It's kind of a surprise," she said. "You interested?"

"Only if you can tell me how it ends, because we only have one condom left."

"It ends however you want it to end," Meg said.

"Well, gee whiz, I'd sure hate to end up in bed with you again."

"Smartass."

"What is it?" Peter said.

Meg was blushing so fiercely that Peter could even see it in the half-light of the darkened hotel room. "I picked something up this morning, right before the shoot. I thought you might get as big a kick out of it as I did."

"Okay, let's see it."

Meg sprang out of bed. "Stay right where you are. This won't take a second." She padded across the hotel room to the bathroom in bare feet. The door closed and the light came on through the crack.

"What time is your flight tomorrow?" Peter called through the door.

"Ten a. m.," she replied. "I've already left a seven o'clock wake up call."

Peter groaned. "I don't see how in the hell you can get up so bloody early."

"Just genetics, I guess. It's - unh! - always been like that - unh! - in my family."

"Are you okay in there?"

"Fine," Meg said breathlessly through the door. "Just hold your horses. It'll be worth it."

"You're killing me here, red."

"Okay, okay, I'm done. Turn on the lights in there so you can get the full effect."

Peter switched on the bedside lamp as the bathroom door opened. "You remember how Heath and Cassie used to joke about me chucking it all and posing for Playboy back when we were training together in Houston?" Her hand came around the corner of the doorway, bare except for a white cuff around her wrist.

"Yeah," Peter said. "They razzed you pretty hard about it."

"And I said I should do it just to shock them?" Followed by her long, exquisite leg, clad in a full-length black nylon stocking and her slender foot capped with a four-inch black patent pump with a gold spike heel. Her toe extended nearly to the middle of the room before she allowed it to touch the floor beneath her hand.

"Yeah, I remember," Peter said, amused.

"Well, I saw this in a store downtown and thought, what the hell. It could probably be fun."

She stepped out and Peter was torn between laughing at the humor of it and ripping apart from raw desire. Meg balanced gracefully atop four inch stilettos which made her already exquisite dancer's legs seem even longer and curvier. The pale skin was encased in sheer black nylon and tucked into a satiny green corset which nipped her waist in to an unbelievably small area and pushed her breasts together deliciously into deep freckled cleavage. She wore a collar and bowtie around her slender neck and cuffs on her wrists. Matching green satin bunny ears were attached to a hair band and stuck out of her silky red curls and a cute little cotton tail perched high above her perfectly rounded behind. She vamped for him and Peter dissolved into giggles.

"Ain't this great?" Meg said. "I couldn't stand it, I just up and bought the whole thing. It's supposed to be 100% authentic."

Peter laughed some more and then gained his composure. "It's funny as hell," he said, "but you look incredible. That corset must hurt like hell, though."

"It's not that tight, I didn't lace it up all the way," Meg said. "It's just hard to breathe deeply."

Peter wiped his eyes. "You make a hell of a bunny," he said.

"I hoped you'd like it."

"I like what's in it more, though," Peter said.

"Well, I thought about that while I was changing back there," Meg said. "It seems we've been making love all night long, I think."

"True," Peter said, looking at the clock. "But we still have an hour or two of night left."

"But it's been nothing but make love, make love, make love. And I thought - 'with all this making love, we've completely neglected the fucking,'"

Peter guffawed. "How very insensitive of us."

"Not that I don't *really* like making love. But I also enjoy the finer aspects of a good, frantic fuck," she said, sidling towards him with a long-legged walk that oozed sexuality. There was nothing male about the creature before Peter Barnett. "So how about it, Pete? You up for fucking a Playboy bunny tonight?"

"The spirit is willing but the flesh might need a little convincing," he said, his voice throaty with desire. "Does the Playboy bunny in question give blowjobs?"

Meg licked her lips and Peter's breath caught at the sensuality of the gesture. "Maybe if you ask her nicely," she said as she sank to her knees beside the bed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: *You can never go home again*

MEG BREATHED IN THE FAMILIAR, humid air as she walked out the front of Houston Intercontinental Airport and hailed a taxi. The balmy heat and heavy air were welcome after the thin dry cold of Denver. She wore her hair tucked under a Nike baseball cap so that her telltale red mop wouldn't give her identity away. She pushed her cat's-eye sunglasses up her nose and picked up her luggage and garment bag as a yellow checker-cab pulled up to the curb.

She plopped into the back seat wearily - Meg was a white-knuckle flyer and she was always exhausted after a trip in the air. The cabbie didn't try to make conversation, thankfully, and Meg didn't volunteer anything either. She was simultaneously looking forward to and dreading seeing everyone again, especially Cassie. Because of the excitement and business of the Training Center and the new feelings she was developing for Susan and Peter, Meg had been able to ignore the constant nagging pain she felt over their break-up. She had a sinking feeling, however, that seeing the glamorous blonde would bring it all back in a flood. She wondered idly how much everyone might have changed.

The traffic was pretty light and she managed to get to her apartment in about a half hour. Slinging her bags onto the couch, Meg stripped out of her shorts and top and ran herself a warm bath, put the Chieftains on the CD player and eased into the tub for a long soak before letting anyone know she was home. As she floated on the music, Meg couldn't stop thinking about how strange everything was, how much she'd changed inside to match the changes outside. She tried to think of Peter and what she was feeling for him, and her steamy nights with Susan Lewis, but the surroundings wouldn't allow her to daydream about anything other than the time she'd spent with Cassie. A sharp stab of regret hit Meg's heart and for the first time in a long time she wished she'd elected to remain male. It was a little late for that now, of course - hell, Meg had come so far as to have dressed up like a Playboy Bunny and given her new boyfriend head - but she still wished she could have seen how the story might have ended between Mark and Cassie. Tears came unbidden to her eyes and she was still male enough inside to be embarrassed by their appearance.

"Get it together, Rutherford," she scolded herself. "You can't change anything now."

She rose from the tub and stepped to the mirror. She ran her long fingers all around her face, across her eyes and lips. It was a chore to remember what she'd looked like as Mark. She tried to envision him - lantern jaw covered with a light fuzz of beard stubble. The eyes had

been set a little deeper, the brows a little thicker. The cheekbones had been a little less well defined. The image seemed to dimly overlay the reflection of the gorgeous girl which stared back. There was still the tiny white scar, almost invisible against the pale flesh, from where he'd fallen from his bike when he was eight. The eyes were still the deep, sparkling green. No earlobes to speak of. Even the pattern of freckles was the same.

"Who the hell am I?" Meg whispered, touching her face now with both hands.

Her hands traced the outline of her long willowy neck and followed the contour of her collarbones and breasts. She cupped the smooth mounds in her hands and tested their weight and firmness. Then down the flat belly and across her pubis, around her high waist to her bottom and lower back. She tried to remember the feel of hard, well-defined muscle and the hair which had covered his pale skin. The image wouldn't come. All that was left was the soft, sensitive woman flesh which was the reality. Mark Rutherford was almost gone. It idly occurred to Meg that all her concentration on what her male body had been like was starting to make her damp and heavy between her legs. She snorted laughter at the thought.

"Go fuck yourself takes on a whole new meaning," she said, smiling. Her nose wrinkled up when she laughed and she remembered thinking how attractive that trait had been to him as a man. She shook her head roughly, tossing her curly red mane, and tried to snap herself out of it.

"This is ridiculous," she said. "C'mon, red, you should just buckle down and bloody say it."

She stood back and drew herself to her full height, staring her reflection right in the eyes. She cleared her throat and, eyes locked to her reflection's eyes, said strongly: "My name is Meghan Hope Rutherford and I am a woman. I have a woman's body and a woman's mind and a woman's heart. My name is Meghan Hope Rutherford and I." she swallowed. ". and I'm happy to be a woman."

As crazy as it sounded, it made her feel better. Something deep inside her which had been knotted up relaxed and Meg felt a tension in her heart ease just by saying the words. "I'm happy," she repeated. "I like being a woman. I like wearing dresses and sleeping with my boyfriend" - that one almost choked her up - "and kissing him and having his arms around me. Dammit, being a woman is wonderful. And you" - she pointed to her reflection - "need to quit fighting it and start enjoying yourself."

Meg blinked. "That wasn't hard," she said. "What am I saying? That's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life! I just wrote off the first twenty-four years of my life!"

Laughing, she spun around in a graceful pirouette and started pacing. "I'm going nuts," she said. "Stark, raving mad. I'm even talking to myself now. What would people say?"

She cut a very sexy, over the shoulder pose in the mirror. "They'd say, 'So she's nuts. Damned if she isn't hot as hell.' Hell, if I actually used my looks like most girls do, I could be a psychotic axe murderer and nobody'd care. Maybe I should try that sometime, acting like Lisa McByrne. Having men eating out of my hand."

"Nah," she said to herself. "I like it better being exactly who I am. Hear that? *Exactly* who I am. And who I am," she said, shooting high kicks and lunge punches in rapid-fire combinations at her reflection, "is Meghan Hope Rutherford."

She stood and looked at herself dubiously, then bent to her make-up case and took out her foundation and the applicator sponge. "Uncharacteristic," she said, smoothing the color over her cheeks in a practiced motion, "but it sure felt good."

* * * *

"God, I'm dreading this," Cassie said as she covered her careful make-up job with powder. Major Tom threaded around her ankles companionably. "I haven't seen Meg in almost two months."

David Reed came into the bathroom and threaded his arms around her waist, planting a soft kiss where her neck met her shoulder. "It'll be all right, sweetheart," he said. "Everything's going to be fine."

"I loved her, David. I really did," Cassie said wistfully.

"I know," David said. "You still do, unless I miss my guess. Just remember that she's hurting too and she's probably dreading this as much as you are. And she's probably moving on the same as you are, and making all the same mistakes as you are. Meg's human, Cass. She's probably as much of a mess about this as you are."

Cassie smiled and kissed her lover. "You're right. As usual."

"You about ready? You look ready."

"I can't believe Faith's finally going to do this," Cassie said, applying her lipstick.

"Come on, it's just a rehearsal. You don't have to start thinking the heavy thoughts until tomorrow, when the deed is going to be done. For tonight, let's just have a good time, okay?"

Cassie capped her lipstick and dropped it into her purse. "Okay," she said.

"D'you love me?" David asked.

"Silly," Cassie said, caressing his cheek. "Of course I love you."

* * * *

Heath looked with distaste at the cluster of reporters and photographers which had gathered on the steps of St. Edward's church awaiting Meg's arrival. Someone somewhere had let it out that Meg was going to be Heaths' best 'man' and the reporters had descended on the photo opportunity like vultures. He certainly hoped that Meg wasn't as bothered by this as he was.

Cassie's new red Miata pulled through the crowd and ducked into a parking spot next to Faith's venerable beige Sentra. She and David got out in a cloud of smoke and walked towards them hand in hand. Heath wasn't sure what to think about David. He was a nice enough guy, and he was good to Cassie, but Heath couldn't help but wonder if he was

good for Cassie. Ever since Cassie had finished her dissertation and graduated, taken the high dollar job at UniSys which kept her saddled with eight pagers and sixty-two cell-phones, and taken up with David she wasn't the same anymore. She'd gotten a little shallower, more self-absorbed and callous towards others. She'd bought herself the little red car and had taken up smoking. Her taste in clothes had even changed. Before, she'd started trying to look good because it made her feel good about herself and Mark had enjoyed it. Now it seemed as if Cassie was dressing to impress others. The pretty little blonde was on a power-trip and David wasn't helping that. The two of them were a textbook yuppie couple and Heath kept finding himself thinking up excuses to be someplace else whenever they showed up.

He was slowly regaining his original strength and tone, but he feared he'd never have the bulk and muscle mass he'd had before the transformation. Three days as 'Heather' had been quite enough to leave their mark and Heath would be paying for it for the next four years. A small part of him envied Meg's choice to remain as she was and go to the Olympics anyway. Four years seemed like a long, long time to him now, and Faith was making the occasional noise about his settling down and leaving off the training. Now that Faith wasn't so consumed with her work, she was noticing how much of Heath's time was consumed by training and was slowly coming to resent it.

A taxi pulled up about three minutes later and the photographers began going wild. Flashes and the sounds of babbled questions and high-speed cameras filled the air. Over their heads, Heath could just barely see a tell-tale mass of red curls exit the taxi-cab which heralded the arrival of his best friend.

The babble of questions died down as Meg clamored for attention. Through the press of people, Heath could dimly hear her say, "Look, folks, I really appreciate the attention, but today's not my day. I'm not here to answer questions or have my picture taken. Maybe later I can answer some of your questions, but this is Heath and Faith's big moment and I don't want to spoil it. So please, come back some other time, okay?"

Heath smiled. No matter how feminine a creature Meg was, she was still Mark in manner.

The reporters parted to reveal her in the slanting afternoon sunlight. Her hair was gathered up in a sinuous wave by a banana clip and her cat's-eye sunglasses perched on her aquiline nose. She wore a pair of skin-tight high-waisted No Excuses jeans and a blue cotton tank-top with a loose white blouse over it, knotted beneath her firm breasts. She'd bought a pair of black bull-hide cowboy boots, identical to her favorite footwear as Mark but in a more appropriate size. Heath's breath always caught a little when he saw his friend like that - she was beautiful. Catching sight of him, she charged from the crowd with that terrifying speed of hers and launched herself into Heath's arms, wrapping him in a rib-creaking bear hug. Heath suddenly realized that was the first time they'd touched one another since the transformations and the bitter fights they'd had in the process. Meg's exercise-hardened body brought up a reaction in Heath which surprised him more than a little. He swallowed a little twinge of desire.

"Heath, you look great!" Meg said, hugging him again. "You're getting more height back every time I see you. And you're starting to fill out again, too - you'll have Schwarzenegger pecs in no time."

"Well, look at you, Rutherford," Heath shot back. "Jesus, you're hard as a rock. The training center's really paying off! You look unbelievable. Don't take this the wrong way, but you have the most incredible ass I have ever seen in my twenty-five years of looking."

"Yeah," Meg said, looking down at the incredible athlete's body she had. "I still can't believe it's mine sometimes. Sometimes I'll catch my reflection in the mirror and think, 'Damn, I'm hot.'"

"You are," Heath said. "And since tonight is my last night as a single man."

Meg laughed, and there was a lot of Mark in the sound. "Depends on how drunk I get. I've missed you, Heath. Really missed you."

"I missed you too. Tell me everything," Heath said. "All about the training."

Meg put her arm around her best friend. "It's mostly self-coaching," she said. "We have an official coach who answers any questions we might have and researches the legality of certain moves, but she doesn't interfere with the training. Other than that, it's no different than the way we've always done it. Except there's all these other athletes competing for the equipment and there's constant track-and-field going on outside. And then all the auxiliary staff, the trainers and doctors and massage therapists. And then every other person there has an agent and there are always sales reps there trying to get us to endorse products."

"I noticed," Heath smiled. "I really dig that Mountain Dew commercial. Did you really get to meet Jackie Chan?"

"Sure did," Meg said. "I got him to autograph one of my kicking pads for you. It's in my suitcase at the apartment. Hard to believe, but he's exactly like he is in the movies. Just a little, funny hyperkinetic man. I'm sorry you missed it."

"Yeah, me too," Heath sighed.

Meg pulled her sunglasses down her nose. "Is that regret I hear?"

Heath shrugged. "A little. I'm in the middle of that 'total-life-reassessment-right-before-the-wedding' thing. I think a lot about how things might have been done differently."

"Like staying a girl?" Meg said softly as they walked.

"Yeah, like that," Heath said. "I could be going through all of this with you. Instead, I can't help but wonder if I'm throwing away my shot, y'know? I'm sure all the doubts will pass once I see Faith come up that aisle in her white dress. But right now, it's hard not to lie awake nights."

"I hate to say this, Heath," Meg said, "but I almost regret that you didn't stay in this with me sometimes. There were some times when it would have been really nice to have company, but the main reason is because being a woman beats hell out of being a man. I mean it."

"Really? I'd've thought it would all even out."

"Not really," Meg said. "So far the only downside I've come across is the monthly. I mean, I was really irked at first about the way people treated me like I couldn't handle myself without male assistance, but that's easy enough to squash by just being yourself."

"Yeah, there were some real moments when I was still a girl," Heath said. "I couldn't stop looking at myself in the mirror. It was a kick being beautiful and knowing it."

"And there is no way to describe the way sex feels."

Heath blushed a little. "Faith was very kind in that regard. We did some exploring."

"Yeah, it's nice," Meg said. "But I was talking about sex. The real magilla."

Heath goggled. "You mean, like, with a guy?"

Meg nodded.

Heath laughed. "You little minx," he said. "How's Peter doing?"

"Fine," Meg said. "He says to tell you congratulations."

Heath shook his head. "I remember seeing Pete in the locker room in Regionals," he mused. "You're a brave girl, Meg. That thing's a bloody monster."

Meg smiled lasciviously. "And it's all mine. And let me tell you something, too, Heath," she added. "Size *does* matter. Boy, does it matter."

Heath guffawed. "I can't believe I'm hearing you say this."

"No more than I can believe I'm saying it," Meg said. "But it's really hard not to tell somebody about how happy I am with him. I think I may even be in love with him."

"Really? Wow."

"The way females feel love is completely different from the way males do," Meg explained. "So it really kinda sneaked up on me because I wasn't looking for the right things. But yeah. I really think I'm falling for him. Like a girl would."

"So I guess the transformation is complete," Heath said.

"I guess so. Or at least I've stopped fighting it," Meg said.

Heath took Meg's hands. "Any regrets, red?"

Meg smiled ear-to-ear. "Not a one."

"Good," Heath said. "You ready to be my best man, then?"

"Yep," Meg said. "What exactly does a best man do, Heath?"

"I don't know *exactly*," Heath said. "But I suppose it means you hold on to the ring and talk me back into getting married every time I talk myself out of it."

* * * *

Meg dropped her purse and sunglasses on the front pew next to Faith's stuff. Father Hansen, the priest officiating the service, had just arrived and was busily trying to adjust the air conditioner so the rehearsal wouldn't be sweltering. Meg stepped outside a moment and

found Cassie outside, puffing on a cigarette nervously and pacing back and forth with mincing steps.

"Cassie," Meg said.

She turned and Meg's heart ached. She was so beautiful. A sick little smile appeared on the so-familiar face as Cassie met Meg's embrace. Meg added a friendly peck on the cheek out of habit and Cassie recoiled as if Meg had slapped her. Meg quickly stepped back, not wanting to force her presence too close to her ex-lover.

"How are you?" Cassie asked.

"I'm well," Meg said. "How about you?"

"Pretty good," Cassie said. "I guess you heard, it's finally 'Dr. Tolliver' now. I'm working at UniSys, doing a lot more of what I did with Faith."

"That's what Heath told me. Congratulations."

Cassie turned to the handsome man beside her for support, the man from outside the Biochemistry Lab the day Heath had gotten changed back to normal. "You remember David?" Cassie asked. David made his point by putting a possessive hand on Cassie's shoulder.

"Sure I do," Meg said, taking the offered hand. "How are you doing?"

"Good," David said. "You look great."

Meg brushed her hair behind her ear with one hand. Damned if the guy wasn't handsome. "Thanks. There's something to be said for round-the-clock training and your own nutritionist."

David laughed. "I saw your commercial with the Dream Team. That was great."

"Glad you liked it. We had a lot of fun making it."

Cassie offered a weak smile. "Everything's starting to work out for you."

"I hope so," Meg said. "But the Olympics are still a month away. That's still the biggest deal of all to me and I don't want to lose sight of that."

"So I noticed," Cassie mumbled venomously. It stung Meg.

Meg smiled sadly. "Oh, well, it was worth a try," she said.

"What was worth a try?" Cassie said.

"I was hoping we could try at least to be civil to one another," Meg said. "I mean, it's the most important day of Heath and Faith's life so far and I thought we could at least try to leave our baggage out of it and just be happy for them."

David, showing more sensitivity than Meg would have given him credit for, began investigating some nearby foliage very attentively. Cassie let out a long breath.

"So I'm just supposed to pretend that nothing ever happened?" Cassie asked.

Meg shrugged. "I'm not going to waste time fighting over this. I tried, it didn't work. No harm done. I'll see you inside." She turned on her heel and started to go back into the church.

"Meg, wait," Cassie said. "I'm sorry. You're right."

Meg turned around just in time to be gathered up into a tight embrace. "I've missed you," Meg whispered to her ex-lover.

"I've missed you too," Cassie said. "Meg, I'm sorry."

"Me too," Meg said. "You look good."

"Thanks," Cassie said. "So do you."

Meg couldn't stand the back-and-forth pleasantries any more. "Are you happy, Cass?"

Cassie blinked. "I guess so."

"No, really. Are you happy?"

Cassie shrugged. "I don't know. I love David. But he's not you. Or Mark. I had so much and now sometimes it feels like I'm settling. So mostly I just work and try to forget."

"That's too bad," Meg said.

"What about you? Are you happy?"

"Hard to tell," Meg said. "You know how I get when I concentrate on something. With the Summer Games so close it's hard to focus on anything else. I still hurt over you a lot, but I think I'll survive. Peter's been really great."

"So you're with him."

"More or less," Meg said. "He's a really great guy."

"Do you love him?" Cassie asked.

"Yeah," Meg said honestly. "But in a completely different way than I love you."

Cassie smiled. "I love you, too."

"We made a helluva mess, didn't we?"

Cassie snorted. "We never did anything halfway."

"When did you take up the habit?" Meg asked, gesturing to Cassie's smoldering cigarette.

"I've smoked on and off since high school," Cassie confessed. "I guess it depends on who I'm with. You didn't smoke, so I didn't. David does, and I found myself taking it back up."

"You should just decide which way you're going to be and do it," Meg said.

Cassie looked pensive. "I guess that was the whole problem right from the beginning."

Meg dabbed at her eyes with a Kleenex. "Yeah."

"I love you a lot, Meg. But I can't be gay. I tried and it hurt us both."

"That's fine with me," Meg said. "I never wanted you to be something you weren't for me. We never should have tried to keep sleeping together, I know that now. That was the biggest

mistake. But I love you now as much as I ever did, Cass, and I hate it that we've just cut each other out of our lives. It's stupid and hurtful and unfair and we're both way too good to be like that. If we can't love each other like lovers, then why can't we at least love each other like sisters?"

Cassie managed her first genuine smile since they'd seen one another. "I always wanted a sister," she said. "You don't think there's too much baggage between us?"

Meg shook her head. "No, I don't. We love each other and that has to count for something."

Cassie hugged her 'sister.' "You're right," she said. "It has to."

"We'll work this out," Meg said. "We're both grown women."

"Grown women," Cassie repeated. "Never thought I'd hear you say that."

"I'm a woman, Cassie. Just like you are," Meg said. "And I like being a woman."

"Yeah," Cassie answered, sniffing. "Me too."

"Good," Meg said, putting an arm around her. "Because I still need pointers from time to time."

* * * *

Meg was back at her apartment, full to bursting with food and wine from the rehearsal dinner. Adam was parked on the couch, watching his brother-turned-sister with curiosity as she paced back and forth with huge curlers in her hair.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" she asked at length.

"Oh, come on," Adam said. "You know how funny this will be."

Meg smiled. "Who'd've thought it?"

"Not me," Adam said.

"Me neither," Meg said. "Tell me something, Adam. Do you miss having a big brother?"

Adam exhaled loudly. "Honestly, no," he said at length. "I was always in your shadow, y'know? I could never compete with you in sports, so I had to find other things to be good at. You won the trophies and I got the grades. But I was always jealous. Now, I'm not anymore. I don't know what happened."

"It was never a competition."

"Everything was a competition with you, Mark," he said, using Meg's old name to drive home a point. "You made everything into a contest. Hell, we used to race to see who could get ready first in the morning. I always felt inadequate around you."

"I'm sorry about that," Meg said.

"We can't change it," he said, displaying the patented Rutherford pragmatism. "But lemme tell you something, *sister*. I grew up thinking that you didn't need me. But now I don't feel

that way. I got woken up at four in the a. m. to hear this strange girl telling me she was my brother. I'll never forget how completely fragile you sounded, how you hung on every word I said like I was a life-line. For the first time in my life, I felt like I mattered to you. I liked the way that felt."

Meg hugged her brother tight. "I always needed you."

Adam smiled. "It's just so much easier to see now."

"Did you know I was always jealous of you? Hell, I still am."

"Dad told, right before he died," Adam said. "I didn't believe him."

"You always made me feel dumb as a stump," Meg went on. "You're so goddamn smart and well-read, you always made me feel like some muscle-bound idiot with more shoulders than brains."

Adam laughed. "Well, you were."

"So now you just make me feel like an air-headed bimbo."

Adam laughed even harder. "And I suppose this get-up isn't going to help."

"Not a bit. But you're right. The look on Heath's face will be worth it."

"I never really told you this before," Adam confessed. "I love you. I loved you as Mark and I love you even more as Meg. I'm glad you're my sister."

Meg smiled brilliantly, one of her light-up-the-room smiles. "And I love you, too, Adam. You're my little brother and I wouldn't trade you for anything."

Adam held silent, letting the moment hang in the air between them. "Better get dressed, Meg," he said at length. "We're gonna be late."

Meg wrinkled up her nose at the clothes laid out on the bed. "You're sure this is a good idea?"

Just for a moment, Adam was the little mastermind from their boyhood, cooking up wild scheme after wild scheme which inevitably led to Mark, Heath and Adam being neck-deep in trouble.

"Trust me," he said with a half-smile.

* * * * *

Heath had promised Faith that the bachelor party would be a quiet affair. He supposed, looking at it, that it was as tame as could be expected. Besides, he knew his intended well enough to know that her 'bridal shower' was probably twice as wild as this little shin-dig. He took another contented pull off the huge stinky cigar he'd been given and put his feet up, a little unsteady from the booze.

"Hey, Heath, you ready for the main attraction?" Ronny, director of the dojo, asked as he began rewinding the cheap porno they'd all been watching. His face was flushed with excess drink.

"I guess," Heath slurred. "Just what is the main attraction?"

"Adam!" Ronny called. "Heath wants to know what the main attraction is!"

Three men moved the table Heath sat at to one side and cleared a small space through the middle of the topless bar in front of him. To Heath's somewhat inebriated surprise, none of the dancers in the milling crowd came forward to perform.

Jack, one of the other black-belt teachers and Dr. Tolliver circulated, distributing fresh drinks. Heath took his with no intention of drinking it - he didn't want to have a hangover the next day - and all the men in the bar raised their glasses.

"To your last night as a free man," Dr. Tolliver said jovially. Heath raised his glass and took a polite sip as the rest of the company downed their booze. Then the lights went down in the bar and some song with a driving back-beat came over the PA system. Four of the dancers from the club pushed a huge cake forward on a dolly towards him. It had sparklers for candles and Heath could tell that it was made mostly of wood. He laughed and hid his face. The music became more driving.

The top of the cake slid back just as the first of the lyrics began:

"Mississippi in the middle of a dry spell, Jimmy Rogers on the Victrola up high
Mama's dancin' with baby on her shoulder, the sun is settin' like molasses in the sky
The boy could sing, knew how to move, everything
Always wanting more, he'd leave you longing for

Black velvet and that little boy's smile, black velvet with that slow southern style
A new religion that'll bring ya to your knees
Black velvet if you please

Up in Memphis the music's like a heatwave, white lightning, bound to drive you wild
Mama's baby's in the heart of every school girl, "Love me tender" leaves 'em cryin' in the aisle

The way he moved, it was a sin, so sweet and true
Always wanting more, he'd leave you longing for

Black velvet and that little boy's smile, black velvet with that slow southern style
A new religion that'll bring ya to your knees

Black velvet if you please."

It really didn't matter to Heath that he liked this song a lot, because his eyes were riveted on the top of the cake. As soon as Alannah Myles started crooning, a graceful hand with long, slender fingers rose up and fanned itself out on the lip of the cake, then another. Over-long, square-cut fingernails traced the designs along the lip of the container as an unbelievably well-proportioned woman rose out. She wore dark glasses, a trench-coat and a hat. Her

hips and shoulders seemed to be able to move independently of one another and the raw sensuality of her movement made Heath force himself to remember his wife-to-be and the love they had. The woman ran a fingertip across the brim of the Sam Spade fedora and licked her fingertip. She turned around in the cake and put her hands out - on cue, two men stepped up and assisted her out of the cake and down onto the dance floor to balance evenly on seven inch green platform heels.

"Welcome to your last night of freedom, sweetheart," she said in a breathy voice which was all too familiar. Heath goggled and then began to chuckle uncontrollably. In a single motion, Meg cast off the hat and the glasses in different directions and tossed her elaborately-styled red mane out, then stripped off the trench-coat like Clark Kent becoming Superman. She was clad only in a barely-there green g-string and a belly-chain. Her breasts wiggled sexily on her chest as she started a very athletic and sensuous dance, making her way slowly towards Heath with a smoldering 'fuck-me' look in her eyes. The crowd was roaring with laughter at her antics, but there was a strong undercurrent of desire among the gathered men. Meg began to give Heath what seemed a well-rehearsed table dance, writhing in his lap and all but masturbating herself against him as she moved to the music. Finally, neither one of them could keep it together and dissolved into helpless laughter against one another and the rest of the crowd joined in. One of the dancers brought Meg a T-shirt and she plopped unceremoniously into Heath's lap, accepting both a bourbon and Coke and one of the smelly cigars being passed around.

"Figured I'd give you an evening you'd never forget," she said, lighting the stogie.

"And the wedding present is blackmail material on a future Olympic gold medalist."

"As if you didn't already have that," Meg said. "I've been working with a topless dancer in Denver getting that little routine together. Did you like it?"

"Oh, no, that's a kielbasa in my lap you're sitting on," Heath said. "I never thought I'd get a hard-on by watching my best friend dance."

Meg laughed and lowered her lips to his ear to whisper, "And I never thought I'd soak through my panties dancing for him, either." She backed up. "That was fun. I may have to do that for Pete."

Heath laughed. "You're really enjoying all this girl shit, aren't you?"

Meg nodded. "I really am."

"Good," her best friend said. "I was wondering when you'd start getting busy about being a woman. And I must say, you do make a hell of a woman at that."

Meg kissed his cheek. "Not bad for an amateur, eh?" she said before leaving his lap and joining the bachelor party. Heath watched his best friend go in wonder.

* * * * *

The wedding was a happy blur, with the myriad of unforeseen problems that usually accompanied such a ceremony. Meg was a little nonplussed at having to wear a bridesmaid

dress instead of a tuxedo (she was the best man, after all), but bore it with stoicism and managed to pop the eyes of anyone who didn't happen to be looking at Cassie or Faith. It was almost like when they'd first started out for a little while. Meg couldn't keep the tears from her eyes when her best friend swore the oath to love Faith and no other until his death and the happiness she felt for them was nearly tangible. She found herself caught up in happy daydreams of a day when she might wear the beautiful white gown and carry flowers down the aisle, and she didn't fight them as she would have a week ago. She called Peter and told him she loved him. She was completely caught up in being a girl and having the time of her life. And, according to Cassie, who was managing to catch up on the lost time with Meg, she was doing a pretty good job of being a woman. Looking back as she boarded the plane to return to Denver, waving to David and Cassie - who *did* look happy together, Meg decided - Meg couldn't remember having had a better time in her life. In either of her lives.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: *Girlish thoughts and womanly realities*

"LOOK AT ALL THIS SHIT," Meg grumped, sorting through the stack of endorsement offers which Don Foster had left waiting for her at the training center. "They want me to be the voice of a talking kitten in the next Disney cartoon. Here's an offer for next year's *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue. Dammit, I told that man that I wasn't a bimbo."

"I dunno, the Disney thing sounds cool," Susan said.

"Forget this," Meg said, scooping the whole thing back into the huge manila envelope and stuffing it angrily in a drawer. "I don't have time for all of this right now. I've already missed three days of training for Heath's wedding and I don't have long before."

"You're in top shape," Susan interjected. "You're beyond prepared for the Olympics, Meg. You want to tell me what's really bothering you, or should I guess?"

Meg sighed. "That obvious, huh?"

"You've been a million miles away ever since you got back from Houston," the little blonde said.

"I don't know how to say this gently," Meg said. "You want to know what's bugging me? Well, Suse, *you're* bugging me. Bugging the hell out of me."

"Me? What the hell did I do?"

Meg laughed. "No, no - you're not *annoying* me. Hell, girl, you're one of my best friends. I just can't seem to stop thinking about you. I feel guilty as hell about being with Peter because it makes me feel like I've just left you out in the cold."

Susan goggled. "Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"God, Meg, you should have said something."

"I had a lot of stuff to sort out first," Meg said. "Jesus, I'm confused."

"How so?"

"Seeing Cassie again just brought everything back in a flood. I mean, I love being with

Pete - don't get me wrong - but I keep wondering if that's what I am. I wonder if I even know what the hell I am."

Susan smiled warmly. "You really have it for me?"

"Yeah," Meg said. "I'd say I was pretty smitten."

Susan blushed. "Meg, I don't know what to say."

"I just don't want to hurt you or cut you out of anything," Meg said. "You're one of the best friends I've got and I'll do anything to keep from hurting you."

"You're not hurting me at all," Susan said. "Meg, you showed me some things, made me feel *really* good, but that's all. My heart hasn't really come into it yet. For me, it's a lot like you said. I think I could sleep with you at the drop of a hat, but all the kissing and holding hands and being out in public. that's not for me. I don't think I could pull off lesbian. Besides, it would give my poor dad a heart attack."

Meg laughed. "Boy was I getting some mixed signals."

Susan blushed even deeper. "Well, Meg, it's kind of hard for me not to act a little devoted to someone who makes me come eighteen times in one night. I might have led you on a little."

"So you don't mind about me and Pete?"

"I was a little jealous at first, but it was nothing a pint of Pralines and Cream couldn't cure. I think it's great. And if you're happy, if you're not lying to yourself, then I'm all for it."

Meg laughed nervously. "God, I was making a big deal out of nothing."

"Not nothing," Susan said. "You're still the best sex I've ever had and anytime you want to do it again, you just tell me when and where and if I should bring snacks. But no, I don't want to be in love with you. I'd rather just be your friend who occasionally sleeps with you."

Meg jumped up and wrapped her friend in a powerful bear-hug. "You're incredible," she said.

"Thanks," Susan said, returning the embrace.

"So, as my best friend, you think you could stand knowing my deepest and darkest?"

Susan's eyes narrowed. "Sounds serious."

"Real serious. It could wreck my career if it got out."

"Wow," Susan said. "You have my word."

She said it in such a way that Meg believed her immediately. "You ever hear of something called a cell memory?" Meg asked, seating herself comfortably for the long story ahead.

* * * * *

"Wow," Susan breathed. "You're not kidding."

"No, I'm not," Meg said. "I'm - I mean, I *used* to be - Mark Rutherford."

"I saw him - I mean *you* - at Regionals a few years back," Susan mused. "He was cut like a god. You look just like him now that I think about it. You walk the same. Jesus. This is unbelievable. And you elected to stay a girl just to go to the Olympics?"

"Wouldn't you?" Meg asked.

"I don't know. Never thought about it much," Susan said.

Meg chuckled. "Not many people have."

"Who else knows?" Susan asked.

"Me, Heath, Faith, Cassie, my brother, all the doctors at the University, Dennis Mendoza, Pete and now you," Meg said. "Not very many people at all."

"You know, it explains some things," Susan said.

"I can imagine. I've felt like an impostor for a long time. I'm just now getting to the point where I feel like I'm really a girl instead of a spy from the enemy camp."

"You do a hell of a job," Susan said. "You're more woman than most women I know."

"Thanks," Meg said.

Susan took Meg's hand. "Thanks for trusting me, Meg. I won't let you down, I promise."

"I know you won't," Meg said. "That's why I told you."

"And all this stuff with Pete," Susan continued. "Jesus, Meg, you must be scared witless."

"Gotta admit, I've never had to deal with dreaming about having another man's babies before," Meg said. "Yeah, I'm pretty damned scared. And I wish I knew enough about how women love to tell whether or not I'm in love with Pete."

"The baby thing is a pretty good indicator," Susan put in.

"Hell, that's just because I just got back from a wedding. Weddings make everybody think about the rest of their lives. Suse, you had the advantage of puberty and growing up a girl. Technically, I'm only one year old and I feel like I'm playing with a loaded gun."

"Meg, I can't imagine that love for us girls is much different than it is for men," Susan said. "You find yourself looking for stability and trust. You get possessive and jealous. You make much too big a deal out of sex. But, as cliché as it sounds, in the end you just know."

"How do you manage to keep from getting all caught up in it?" Meg asked. "It seems like every time I sleep with Peter I wake up a little more devoted to him. Somehow you just manage to rise above all that emotional junk and keep your hands clean."

Susan's face fell a little. "It's defense," Susan said. "Keeps me safe."

"Somebody must have hurt you pretty bad," Meg said gently.

"Yeah," Susan said. "I had an uncle who. well, he had a thing for nine-year-old girls. I don't talk about it much. I try to look on the bright side. It got me into taekwondo, because I swore that nobody was ever going to force me into anything against my will, ever again."

Meg folded her arms gently around her friend and they just leaned against one another for a while.

"I'm glad you're my friend," Meg said at last.

Susan gave her a gentle squeeze. "Me too, red. You're like my big sister. You're the first person I've ever known that makes me feel like there's somebody in my corner. Like if I couldn't look after myself, you'd do it for me."

"Damn right I would," Meg said. "And I know you'd do the same for me."

"Meg Rutherford, not be able to take care of herself?" Susan snorted. "That's harder for me to believe than hearing you used to be a six-foot-one Chippendale's dancer that I used to fantasize about."

"Really?"

"Oh, God, don't even pretend you didn't know," Susan laughed. "You were *gorgeous*. Every woman in the competition wanted you and Rob Holt both. But you were so cool, so above it all, and it took some getting to know you to realize it wasn't an act."

"I didn't let myself get interested," Meg said. "You know me. Eyes on the prize. Besides, I thought I was kinda homely. It took being a woman for a while for me to realize how cute I was."

"Homely?" Susan said incredulously.

"Hey, you weren't the only one with a fucked-up childhood," Meg said gently. "Mom passed away when I was little and Dad just kinda - quit on us. And I had a little brother who was twice as smart as I could have ever been. Colleges were drooling all over themselves to get Adam and I couldn't even get a state school to look twice at me. He gets a free ride to Stanford and I'm stuck teaching nine-to-twelve-year-olds at the Y and working nights at Dunkin' Donuts. All I was good at was busting heads."

"But hey - look where that got you."

Meg smiled. "I don't feel sorry for myself. I've done a pretty good job considering."

"Yeah, you have," Susan affirmed.

* * * * *

The next two weeks were a blur for Meg. She trained as she never had before, rising at four in the morning and not stopping her work until sundown. And night after glorious night with Peter, spent making love or just lying, happy, in his strong arms. She had a long heart-to-heart with her agent and set the record straight; Don agreed to filter out the 'bimbo' offers (as Meg termed them) and only give her the legitimate stuff. She did a couple interviews for the Olympic coverage and one more commercial for Reading is Fundamental for which she refused payment.

Everyone dutifully peed in the provided cups and the next day the plane tickets were issued. Susan, Meg and Hannah all got drunk the night they were issued their plane tickets and swore to be friends for the rest of their lives, no matter who finished how. The next morning they all went into Denver for their passports and wound up spending an obscene amount of money for frivolous things. Reporters followed them every step of the way as they went from store to restaurant to movie theater, stopping to sign autographs and pose for the cameras. Pictures of the three women were plastered all over the sports sections and ESPN the next morning. The press was now calling them the 'Three Musketeers' and the whole world was enchanted with the images of Meg, Susan and Hannah showing some basic taekwondo moves to a troop of Girl Scouts selling cookies. That one day sealed up their reputations as America's darlings. ABC, who was covering the Games that year, immediately began switching schedules to cover the entire women's competition and upping their advertising rates for those time-blocks.

Meg had asked Peter to be there when Dorothy Miller-McCall, the women's taekwondo coach, and Dr. Jack Heimer gave her the warning speech about the knee. The ligaments had deteriorated more and new tears were forming as fast as the old ones were healing. Dr. Heimer even went so far as to suggest that Meg not compete, but the look in the slender redhead's eyes was more than enough to dissuade him from that line of reasoning. Meg managed to get all the way back to her room before crying in Peter's arms.

"Shh, babe," Peter said gently. "It's okay."

"I don't want to lose my knee," Meg said. "I really don't."

"I know you don't," Peter said. "But it's probably going to happen. We have to face fact."

"I know," Meg blubbered. "It's just so fucking unfair."

"Yeah," Peter said. "I wish we could go back in time."

He couldn't tell whether Meg was laughing or bawling. It sounded a little of both. "If you could imagine how many times I'd thought that to myself."

"I can guess," Peter said, smoothing herself. "But look here, red. It doesn't matter what you say to me or how much you deny it, there's still a big part of you that is still Mark. I didn't know Mark well, but I did know that if he only had a few more competitions on that knee, then he'd make them the best competitions of his life."

Meg sniffled and blew her nose, then looked tearfully into his eyes and pressed her soft lips against his. "I love you, Peter Barnett," she whispered. "More than anything."

"And I love you, Meg Rutherford," he said back. "And I can't wait to see you on that stand with that gold medal around your neck. I get chills just thinking about it."

"And after?" Meg asked.

"We'll deal with after when it gets here," Peter said.

* * * * *

She'd lived the moment in her heart over and over for the past five years, but nothing could have prepared Meg at all. The entire distance from Syndey Airport to the Olympic Pavilion she'd had to fight back tears. Meg shouldered her luggage (there was a lot whenever she had to haul all her pads, and her upper body strength wasn't what it used to be) and bumped into Hannah Stills, struggling under a similar load near the back of the bus. They commandeered a luggage dolly from a porter and began to search through the mammoth housing facility for their assigned rooms.

"Y'know, you hear that accent in the movies and the like, and it's still hard to believe that people really talk like that," Hannah whispered to Meg as yet another person bid them "g'day." Meg nodded in affirmation. "It's weird to hear everybody have an accent."

"It's sexy as hell," the redhead shot back.

Hannah grinned. "That too."

Their arrival was quite nice, since the photographers had many, many more targets than just the Americans. ABC was spending the majority of their time focusing on the track-and-fielders and the gymnasts since the bulk of the coverage focused on them, giving the 'Three Musketeers' and their counterparts plenty of time to mingle and see the pavilions where they'd be competing.

"Hey, Whipping Post!" a tall and slender man cried as he passed, a freshly-assembled competition bike slung over one shoulder and one of those Star Trek aerodyne helmets. "Good luck!"

Meg grinned and gave him a thumbs-up, while adding venomously, "I could *kill* Suse for that."

"I think it's kinda cool," Hannah said. "I always wanted a nickname in school."

"Mine was Copper-Top," Meg grumped. "I like that one better than Whipping Post."

"The only one I ever had was Tape-Case," Hannah said a just above a whisper.

"Tape-Case?"

Hannah blushed beet-red. "When I was fourteen I gave my boyfriend of the time my first blowjob," she confessed. "I didn't want to swallow, so I started looking around for a place to spit it out. I finally wound up using the case from a Jethro Tull tape. Word got around."

Meg giggled. "That's terrible."

"Not so bad," Hannah said. "I *did* get a lot more popular."

"I'll bet you did," Meg laughed. "I was never that kind of girl. I was the quiet one. Nobody paid much attention to me, believe it or not."

"Looking like you? I don't believe it."

"Well, I was in the gym or the dojo all the time, I didn't put out and I never showed much interest in boys when I was in school. Most of my friends were friends of my brother's."

"Adam, or Mark?" Hannah asked.

"Both," Meg said.

"You know, you look *just* like Mark," Hannah said. "You two are a lot alike. I can't believe he never said anything about having a sister."

Meg searched her memories for previous contacts with Hannah Stills. She drew a blank.

"Where did you meet Mark?"

"I hardly knew him at all," Hannah said, "other than to ogle. But I was real good friends with Heath Crenshaw. He and I met at Southwestern in Albuquerque six years ago and did the e-mail thing ever since. I can't believe that he's not here competing, but he told me he got hurt earlier this year and couldn't make Nationals. It's too bad. He was always going on about how he wasn't as good as Mark, but I think Heath could have taken Rob Holt if he'd put his mind to it."

"You should tell him that," Meg said. "Getting married kinda shook him up a little. He was wondering about hanging it all up and just being a husband. I tried to talk him out of it - so did Mark - but he was in kind of a tailspin at the time. I couldn't stand to think of him quitting so soon."

Hannah nodded. "That would be a shame. What happened to him?"

"He didn't really get hurt, he got sick," Meg said, sticking to the story she and 'Heather' had worked up when the accident first happened. "Had to have his gall bladder removed. He lost so much weight from the surgery and the recovery that he didn't feel like he could get it back in time for Nationals."

"Still, I wish I could have seen him compete," Hannah said. "He's something."

"Yeah," Meg said. "Mark was always talking about how hard he had to push to keep up."

"He should have told Heath that," Hannah replied. "Heath made your brother out to be like a machine. Hell, you must be like him a lot. Some of Heath's descriptions of Mark fit you like a glove."

Meg was beginning to get very uncomfortable. She didn't like lying to start with, and she was having trouble not contradicting anything she might've said before. She was going to try to subtly change the subject when two lovely Oriental girls in Japanese team uniforms intercepted them, a fortunate *Deus ex machina* for the nervous redhead.

Both the women were tall and slender, with the broad and smooth china-doll faces which distinguished Japanese from, say, Korean or Chinese if one knew how to look. The taller of the two, a girl with a sweet smile and too-wide naïve eyes and her blue-black hair in pigtails, bowed shallowly and nervously and spoke up in highly-accented English.

"Meg Rutherford?" she asked.

"I'm Meg," the redhead smiled, extending a hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Hideki Norimmura," the girl said, taking Meg's hand and smiling with relief. "This my friend, Kanuka Takedoshi. We - how you say? - compete you."

"Oh, you're competitors," Meg said, smiling. "This is my team-mate, Hannah Stills."

"Hi," Hannah said warmly, taking Hideki's hand warmly between her own.

"Wanted to wish you luck in Olympics," Hideki went on. "Papers say you all three very good - competitors? Is that how you say?"

"Right," Meg said. "Good luck to you both as well."

Kanuka cut loose with a long string of rapid-fire Japanese, looking back and forth from Meg to Hideki. The taller girl translated roughly. "Kanuka say she does not remember see you or other American girls at International Taekwondo Tournament this year. She say she hope to see you all fight before she have to compete against you."

Hannah smiled and returned a compliment in very broken Japanese, which delighted the two girls to no end. They smiled and bobbed their heads happily.

"What did you say?" Meg asked.

"I told them I saw them at Internationals two years ago," Hannah replied. "I said they were great martial artists. They are. You'll have to watch this one, Meg, she's got feet faster than yours." Hannah patted Kanuka's shoulder affably.

The Japanese girls took their shy leave and wound into the public area of the women's athlete dormitories. Once they were out of earshot, Meg whispered, "That might have almost been sweet if they hadn't been trying to scope us out. I think the press may have hyped us a little too much. This competition's all about the mental game anyway."

Hannah grunted acknowledgment, having found her quarters and fishing for her room key. "I know. And the Japanese are worst about it. The Koreans, they don't really give a damn. They fight hard and win or lose, they party like madmen afterwards. The Chinese are a little more reserved, but the Japanese play those fucking mind-games all the time. I just wish they weren't so polite about it so I could get mad at them, but they're all so damn nice."

Meg helped Hannah stow her gear inside and the tall brunette walked with Meg to her quarters three doors down and get squared away. Meg then set about looking for Peter's room.

"You really have it bad for that boy, don't you?" Hannah asked.

"Yeah, I do," Meg said. "I don't even really know what it is about him. Apart from his body, I mean. There's just something about the boy that makes me go all to jelly inside."

"He's a sweetheart," Hannah said. "And he's crazy about you. That helps a lot, too."

"It does," Meg said.

"It's kind of surprising that you're together," Hannah said. "I'd heard you were gay."

"I am. Well, bisexual," Meg said unashamedly. "I just happen to be with a man right now."

Hannah didn't miss a step. "That's cool," she said. "I used to think I was, once."

"What happened?"

"What usually happens? I got right up to the point and then chickened out. I mean, I'd talked myself into it and everything, had a lesbian friend who was both willing and experienced. We had a night set aside and a place to stay, everything. I got there, we had a nice dinner, she

held my hand and then and there I just realized that I was letting curiosity get the better of me. I mean, I like boys. Why rock the boat?"

"I've liked girls since I was little," Meg said. "I can't remember a time when I didn't. Peter's only the second man I've ever been with. If he wasn't so great, I would have chalked it up to curiosity as well and probably gone back to girls. But he's showing me a whole world I might have missed."

"Yeah," Hannah said. "You're real lucky to have him, Meg."

Meg smiled and tried to keep from sounding smug. "I know, Hannah. I thank God for it."

* * * * *

They again peed in the cups, only this time the cups had the five-ring Olympic logo on the sides. It was one of the few times Meg really missed her old 'equipment.' Urine samples were much easier to give when one had the ability to aim. She tried to keep a good humor about the whole process, but there was a definite reason that she called the event 'getting her freckles wet.' But without a legitimate urinalysis on the books, the athletes wouldn't even be able to attend the opening ceremonies.

Meg tried to stick close to Hannah and Susan, because at twenty-five she was far and away the oldest woman in the room. Hannah, at twenty, and Susan at twenty-two were the only ones near her and the rest of the room was full of nineteen-year-old swimmers or worse, thirteen-year-old gymnasts. The track-and-fielders and the boxers, the only other sections of the U.S. team which Meg had spoken with for any length of time, were in another facility.

Meg stepped up to the registration desk and set down her sample cup. The woman behind the desk marked the lid with an indelible marker and said unenthusiastically, "Name?"

"Rutherford, Meghan Hope," Meg responded. "U.S. Women's Taekwondo."

The woman looked up and smiled. "So you're the redheaded terror the news has been talking about," she said in her thick Aussie accent. "Good luck to you, Meg."

"Thanks," Meg said with a warm smile. "I think I'm gonna need it."

"No worries, girl," the woman smiled back. "My money's on you."

* * * * *

"ABC returns to live coverage of the Opening Ceremonies of the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia," Jim McKay said. "The celebration of the century is well underway here in Sydney and there is an air of excitement and anticipation in the air here."

The camera shot trucked past the venerable commentator to the wild display of Australian Aboriginal dance going on in the stadium and beyond, where the athletes were gathering to make their entrance into the arena. A Highlands bagpipe corps started up and the countries

began the procession in to thunderous applause. Back in the (now-larger) apartment in Houston, Heath fidgeted nervously through the procession of countries like Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. Normally he was proud for the countries who could only send one or two representatives to the 'Games, but his mind was preoccupied with seeing his best friend as she strode through that tunnel and into those lights. He had to see Meg's face, to see what it looked like when someone's dream came true.

"The United States of America," the stadium announcer said, and the first of the competitors filed through, all of them wearing the white jacket with the wraparound Stars-and-Stripes appliqué around the torso. Heath bit back a pang of jealousy - he'd been so close - and his wife put a comforting hand on his shoulder. He covered her hand with his own, but he couldn't tear his eyes away.

"There's Michael Easterbrook, the bantamweight boxer from New Jersey who took the world by storm at the 1998 Goodwill Games," McKay went on as the camera came in tight on a tall, skinny black boy who looked like a country hick on his first visit to the big city. His eyes were like teacups.

"Behind him is little Julie Sanders and some others from women's gymnastics. They made a good showing this year in the National competition against the nearly unbeatable team from Belarus and the country's wondering if they'll have a chance at doing it again."

"And there's Tony Lafferty, out to break his own world record in the men's 800 meter five days from now. Behind him is Curt Henschel, possibly one of the best pole vaulters in the sport today. And the U.S. Ladies' Soccer team! Everybody remembers the success they had in the last Summer Games. There's Yvonne Kelly, hoping to dive for her third gold medal in the women's 20m platform."

The crowd stood up and cheered loudly as the women's softball team came in, all in a laughing knot. They'd made a big splash in the '96 Olympics in Atlanta and the Aussies were hoping to challenge them for the gold this year. A very energetic rivalry had developed between the U.S. and Australian softball teams and the venue was booked standing-room-only for their first game. Next were the volleyball players and more track-and-field. Heath was starting to get impatient - behind him, Faith gave a knowing smile and tacitly decided not to stand in his way for the next Olympics. Heath was almost trembling with the desire to be there in that milling crowd of noise and light. Faith knew that trying to keep her husband from that would be worse than killing him.

The crowd responded with a loud ovation when she finally emerged into the stadium. The camera came in tight as Meg, Peter, Rob, Susan, Hannah and Mike finally came in through the tunnel followed closely by the Dream Team and women's basketball teams. Big sparkling tears hung in Meg's green eyes but her smile was radiant. Heath would forever hold the image of her face as the camera came in tight as synonymous with happiness. She waved to the people who called her name (in the background, Bob McKay wisely called her the 'girl who put women's taekwondo on the map) and if anything, her smile got wider and more bright.

Heath wiped away a tear of his own.

"Mark, you lucky bastard," he whispered.

* * * *

Meg was exhausted from dancing and laughing by the time Scottie Pippen and Grant Hill bid her, Hannah and Susan good night at the door to the women's pavilion. Meg stumbled through the hall and into her darkened room, pausing only long enough to remove her bull-hide boots by stepping on the heels and fall into bed. She hit something firm and recoiled instantly, coming back to her feet and into a ready stance in a swirl of red curls and a stifled yelp.

"Relax," Peter said, giggling. Meg couldn't help but notice her lover's own ready stance as he switched on the light. "It's just me, Meg."

Meg unwound and lowered her hands. "You scared shit out of me, you bum."

"I know. It was great."

She flopped on the bed, face-down. "God, I'm exhausted."

"You should have grabbed a nap when you had the chance, red," he said.

"Who the hell could sleep?" Meg said, looking over her shoulder. "It's the Olympics, for the love of God. I'm barely gonna have time to see any of it, what with competition and training. Which reminds me. Isn't your being in my room after hours enough to get us both disqualified?"

"I don't know," Peter said. "None of the security seemed to mind."

"You just waltzed right in here?"

"Yep," Peter said.

"Peter, I love you, but I don't want to take any chances with the competition. If this can get us DQ'ed then I don't want to do it. There will be plenty of time later. I've already said I'll move in with you, didn't I? Can't you do without for two weeks?"

Peter stood up. "I wasn't counting on staying here, red. I just wanted to give you something and see you before you went to sleep. That's why security let me in, because I told them I had a gift for you. Once I explained that and told them I'd be out as soon as I saw you, they didn't have a problem."

Meg smiled and sat up. "What is it?"

"First things first," Peter said. He bent and kissed her, long and tender and passionate. "I love you, Meg, more than anything in the world."

She smiled. "I love you, too."

"Just wanted you to know that," Peter said, "before you look at this."

He dropped a manila folder in her lap. The return address was from the Training Center in Denver. Meg tore it open and pulled out the contents, scanning them quickly. Her pale skin

went even paler and she stared from Peter to the paper in her hand and back again, over and over.

"Any ideas?" Peter asked.

"Pregnant?"

"Yep," Peter said. "All the testing we had right before we left. Coach Miller called me because I'm the only one who could possibly be the father. I had her send me the test results so I could be the one to tell you myself."

"Oh, God," Meg said, rubbing her forehead. "What am I gonna do?"

"Cut that shit out," Peter said. "It's not a *you* situation anymore. It's a *we* situation. You didn't make that baby by yourself. I'm half responsible."

Meg looked down at her trim belly, running her hands along the skin beneath her sweatshirt. A life in there? A baby, growing and feeding from her own body? The thought scared hell out of her but there was another emotion wrapped around that, one that Meg couldn't begin to define.

"What are we gonna do?" Meg said.

"I think we should talk about all our options," Peter said. "Coach Miller gave me the number of a Planned Parenthood center we can call back in the 'States from here. We're in way over our heads here, I think. But I just wanted you to know that whatever we decide, I'm not going anywhere. Hear that? I'm with you all the way. I'm not scared of this. I love you."

Meg squeezed his hand tight. "Thanks, Peter."

Peter stood, awkward. "I guess I'd better go."

"I wish you didn't have to," Meg said dazedly. "I really don't want to be by myself right now."

"Me neither," Peter said. "But I promised the people at the door."

"A baby," Meg breathed. "I can't believe this."

"You'd better believe," Peter said. "*Mom.*"

Meg closed her eyes. "I don't need you to drive the point home, I'm scared enough," she said irritably, before adding playfully, "*Dad.*"

Peter shivered. "Get some sleep, my love," he said. "I'll meet you here around noon and we'll talk about this. But just one more thing."

He reached into his pocket and placed a closed jewelry box on the little table beside Meg's bed. "Don't open it," he said. "I just want you to know it's here. If you want to keep the baby, then, well. then you can open it. I just want to let you know I'm prepared to go that far."

Meg caught him in a rib-creaking embrace. "I love you, Peter."

"I love you too, Meg," Peter whispered into her hair. "I'm sorry I helped get you into this."

"We'll figure it all out once the shock wears off," Meg said back. "Don't worry."

Ω



SUMMARY: Two friends find themselves victims of a science experiment which turns them into women who now must deal with their new life and their changing relationship with their girlfriends. part eight

ALL THAT GLITTERS, Part VIII (Chapters 19-21)

By Valerie Hoper

CHAPTER NINETEEN: *Building character*

MEG DIDN'T GET ANY SLEEP at all that night, despite the jet-lag and the previous night's partying. She was having to deal with feelings and situations which she hadn't dreamed of preparing for; she spent a lot of time with her hands pressed against her midriff and her eyes closed, trying to picture the strange thing growing inside her, wondering what it must look like and would grow into, whether it would have her green eyes or Peter's blue ones. When she'd first changed into her new form, the thought of bearing a child was enough to make her palms sweat and her jaw lock. But as her mind had gradually accepted the fact of her own femininity, the thought of a child became less and less terrifying as she thought about it, the fear replaced with a thrilled uncertainty and a strange, glowing feeling which permeated everything she sensed. The feeling was akin to pride, but deeper and stronger - Meg didn't have a name for it.

She was up and out the door at five o'clock, continuing her strict training regimen but plagued the whole time about whether or not she might be harming the little spark in her belly with the exertion. She knew so very little about pregnancies. As soon as the medical center opened its doors at seven o'clock Meg was there to see the resident gynecologist, a lovely Australian woman named Dr. Jennifer Hansen who was very obliging to Meg's determination that the matter be kept secret for the time being. The tests which Dr. Hansen ran came up an emphatic positive - although she couldn't admit it to anyone, Meghan Rutherford was the first human being born male to be six weeks pregnant. Meg also got all the information she could find on physical exertion and how it might affect a fetus. The doctor made mention of the fact that full-contact taekwondo would not be the best thing for the baby - Meg frowned fiercely at that - but amended it that the pregnancy hadn't progressed very far along and if Meg was careful, possibly nothing would happen. Meg left the place loaded down with literature and armed against the possibilities of miscarriage because of the competition and with advice on diet, training and the like. Meg didn't know if she was going to keep the kid or not - she hadn't managed to think that far in advance - but if

that wound up being the decision, then she didn't want it hurt inside her because of ignorance; she was the wee thing's mother - *God, what a concept!* - and was supposed to protect it.

Peter was planning on meeting her around noon to eat and wander around the Games, talking this thing through, which gave Meg plenty of time to eat breakfast (with her nose shoved in a pamphlet about adoption) and shower (she dried her hair while reading up on abortion), have a good cry (how could she have let this happen? She thought she'd been so careful and so had Peter) and get dressed in a pair of jeans, a huge cable-knit sweater and her favorite bull-hide cowboy boots. She scooped her red curls up into a hasty horse-tail, shoved her sunglasses onto her freckled nose and came through the lobby to find Peter waiting. He kissed her timidly at first, unsure of how to touch her, but he held him against her body fiercely and tightly. Meg let him go before she started crying again, but was thankful that Peter held her hand tightly and walked close beside her. She had no more problems with everyone knowing that she was 'taken,' and felt a pretty overwhelming desire to let everyone know that Peter belonged to her as well. Impulsively, she slid her left hand into the back pocket of Pete's jeans as they walked and he put a warm and comforting arm around her shoulders.

"How you doing, red?" he asked after what seemed an eternity.

"Scared shitless," she replied. "You?"

"About the same," he said. His voice actually cracked.

"I went to the doctor as soon as the medical pavilion opened, just to make sure," Meg said. "It's true. I'm six weeks along. I wouldn't have even suspected for another week or so because my cycle's so unpredictable, even on the pill."

"Six weeks," Peter said. "That would have been right after we first slept together."

"I thought we were being so careful."

"Me, too," Peter said. "But we were pretty wild right at first."

Meg snorted. "Yeah," she agreed. "Back in the 'three times a day or I'm cranky all evening' phase. So I grabbed as much information as I could at the doc's. The way I figure it, we have three options and one possibility that we can't do anything about. One, I can get an abortion. Depending on how quiet we want to keep this whole thing, that might be kinda difficult, especially if we wait until after we get to the 'States. Second, I can carry to term and we can place the child up for adoption, or third, I can open that little box you left on my night-stand and make a stab at being mommy and daddy."

"What about the possibility we can't affect?" Peter asked.

"We might as well get it out there where we can both see it," Meg sighed. "Fact is, I'm in a rough sport. If I stop competing, then I can take care of the kid the way the doctors recommend. But if I stay in, even this early in the pregnancy, then the chance of miscarriage is high."

"You can't not compete," Peter said. "I don't even consider that an option."

"Both the miscarriage and abortion options will be career-enders for me, since the physical effects of either would leave me unable to compete. These Games are my last shot, Pete. I

can't terminate the pregnancy because doing it here would leave me unfit for competition and we'd never be able to keep it a secret in the U.S. Besides, I've been thinking about it a lot, and" - she shivered a little - "I don't think I can let that happen. I don't know if I could let somebody reach inside me and pull out."

Peter held her tight. "I know. I'd have stood by you if you made the choice, but I was really hoping you wouldn't pick that one. I mean, I was *really* hoping you wouldn't."

"So it looks like I'm going to carry to term," Meg said, almost relieved. "Which means, do I or don't I compete? Do I put the baby up against that kind of risk just for a moment in the sun?"

"Meg, you can't."

"I may have to," Meg said. "Peter, a gold medal will last for maybe a year before the whole world forgets. But this kid, it's going to live a long time. We may have fucked up, but we're responsible for that life now and that will mean making sacrifices. Big ones."

"Meg, I don't know if I could live with myself if you didn't compete."

Meg pressed a hand against her midriff again. "I thought so too. But there's no way to describe what this feels like, Pete. There's a little guy inside here. A living thing, and we made it, and it breathes when I breathe and eats when I eat. When I started thinking about it like that, then - as much as I hate to admit it - the Olympics stopped seeming like such a big deal."

"They were worth giving up your whole identity," Peter argued.

"That was my life. This life isn't mine. You know, it took me three hours to work up the courage to say it like this last night, but once I did it just climbed all over me how incredible this whole thing is. This is *our baby*, Peter. *Our baby*. Doesn't that blow your mind?"

Peter smiled shyly. "I spent most of last night wondering if it would have your red hair."

"Peter, I think I'm going to drop out of competition."

"Meg, stop a minute. Yeah, it's not your life. But you think about how many people have hopes and dreams riding on you here. All those little girls you've made a difference for. Heath. Cassie. All of 'em. You gave it all up to get here. To not at least give it a shot would be unfair to everyone. And could you live the rest of your life looking at " - he gulped and took a deep breath - "*our baby* and wondering what it could have been like if you'd stuck it out?"

Meg just lowered her eyes. She felt herself tearing up again.

"And the financial side," Peter said. "We have an obligation to the kid to provide. Even if we put it up for adoption, I'd still like to give a little, set up a college fund or something. You can milk a medal for a lot, Meg, enough to set up something stable for the kid. I don't think I have a prayer at a medal. But you, you can take it all home with you, red. You're the best I've ever seen. You can do this. Don't think of it as hurting the kid. Think of it like I do. As setting things up for the kid."

"It's taking a chance," Meg said.

"And learning to be a girl in three weeks and hoping nobody noticed you walking into the wrong locker rooms at Nationals wasn't?" Pete said. "Everything's a risk. If you want to keep the baby safe and sound through competition, there's a real easy way to do it, Meg."

"Pray tell," Meg said sarcastically.

Peter smiled. "Don't let anybody lay a fucking glove on you."

Meg was prepared to be angry, but she couldn't help but smile. She kissed him once, then again, harder, threading her slender fingers through his short hair. "I love you," she whispered when they broke.

"I love you too," Peter said. "Please compete."

"I have to think about it," Meg said. "I don't want to make the decision without going over every possible option. But right now, I just want to think about something else for a little while."

"Want to kill an hour trading pins?" Peter said. "I already have a Canada and a Germany, a Russia, a Belarus, a Ukraine, a France and a Nigeria."

Meg smiled, took his hand, and let him lead her away. Her mission was a failure, however. She didn't manage to stop thinking about the baby, not even for a moment.

* * * * *

Peter Barnett stripped off his brain-bucket and began wrestling with the straps of his torso pads. The men's preliminaries were over - they'd actually drawn a respectable crowd, even though most of the people there had shown to watch the women's competition - and he'd managed to dog Rob Holt's heels and stay in. Bill Hardwell had been eliminated by the Chinese champ, Zhuang Xian Li and sent down with a sprained hip - the little Chinaman hit *hard*, everyone said. Peter had actually even managed to hold his own against one of the Koreans, a scrappy little guy named Joon who laughed a lot and looked like he meant it when he shook hands after the match.

But Peter was having a devil of a time thinking about it. The women's preliminaries were starting and he couldn't see Meg anywhere. She'd been impossible to find after they'd said good-night the day before and Peter gave her all the room she needed - she had a great deal more on her mind than he did - to reach her decision. He felt a little bad about punting like he had, but he really didn't feel that he had any right to make decisions about Meg's body like that, only to stand by her no matter what.

The last few days had convinced him beyond all doubt that his heart had chosen well, however - every move that Meg made just made him fall deeper and deeper in love. Buying the ring had been more of a symbolic gesture than anything else, but now Peter found himself wanting her to open it and accept the proposal. No matter the outcome, the proposal would stand. He'd found the one woman in the world he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. Strange that she'd been a man first, but inconsequential.

Susan and Hannah were at the U.S. bench, stretching out and trying to combat the pre-game jitters. Peter dropped over the rail and tapped Susan's shoulder.

"Good luck out there, shorty," he whispered, squeezing her shoulder.

"Thanks," Susan said. "You did great. I caught your last match."

"Good luck, Hannah," he said.

"Thanks," the slender brunette said, beginning to lace up her pads.

Trying to sound nonchalant, Peter offhanded, "Either of y'all seen Meg?"

Susan shrugged. "She wasn't in the locker room. I figured she had an interview or something."

Peter tried to keep his face from falling. "Oh well. I guess we'll see her around."

"You okay, Pete?" Hannah asked.

"Don't know yet," he replied. "Do well out there."

The preliminaries were getting close - the first competitors were already taking places on the mats when she finally came out of the locker room, dressed - Peter couldn't keep the tears from his eyes - in full competition pads and *gi*, ready to compete. She moved with her customary fluid grace and power, but there was something else about her that seemed to make her untouchable and unassailable.

Maybe it's just her being the mother of my child, Peter thought fondly, standing up and clapping like everyone else in the arena. Meg waved as she took her place on the mat, greeting her first opponent, a fast and compact Canadian named Betsy Chandler. Meg dropped her bag on the American bench, hugged Hannah and Susan and then looked up into the crowd, riveting her eyes onto Peter's. Sliding the back-fist pad from her left hand, she raised it slowly beside her face, to show the small engagement diamond he'd left on her bedside glittering on her long, pale finger.

"Yes," she mouthed. "I will."

* * * * *

"If you've just joined us from the men's 200-meter freestyle, then you're in for a real treat," the ABC commentator said. "There are very few records kept in the contact sports in the Olympic Games, but we are about to see one broken which no one ever thought was possible. We're going to John Tesh in the MacKenzie Pavilion and the women's taekwondo preliminaries. John?"

The scene cut to the pavilion floor where a very sweaty and tired-looking Meg was climbing to the mat against a stick-thin Chinese girl. In the foreground, Tesh brought the microphone to his mouth and spoke in a subdued voice.

"Thank you, Ed. We're here in the preliminary rounds of the women's taekwondo competition, where the U.S. contender Meghan Rutherford is performing what everyone in

the sport, I'm told, considers the impossible. For those unfamiliar with competition martial arts, the preliminary rounds are not actual competition, but determine the ranking for the actual competition, similar to the way tennis tournaments work. The lowest five competitors are eliminated in the preliminaries but can be put back into the rotation in case of an injury, which is very common in a sport like this.

"Not only in the history of the Olympics, but actually in the history of the sport in America, no one - man or woman - has ever completed a preliminary round without a single point scored against them. Until now. Meghan Rutherford, the fire-brand redhead from Houston, Texas who took the country by storm after the National Finals in Chicago and has amassed a huge following among Olympic fans, is about to set the first world record in Olympic taekwondo history. If she can manage against Chinese champion Zhou Kim the same thing she's managed all afternoon against every other competitor, Meg will have finished the preliminary round without having had a single point scored against her."

Tesh sidled next to Dorothy Miller-McCall, the women's coach, who was watching the competition intently from the coach's box. "With me is Dorothy Miller-McCall, the women's coach," Tesh said. "Dorothy, what can you tell me about what Meg's up against out there?"

"John, the preliminary rounds are easiest on the people who trickle out during the competition," Dorothy said. "The people who keep winning have to keep competing until the whole tournament's resolved. Meg's been on the mat with only little breaks between matches for nearly six hours. Fortunately, Zhou Kim has been out there working for about the same amount of time. Both the girls are great competitors and about equally matched in skill and speed. Right now it's just a matter of who's got more steam left. Meg's tired and her knee's been acting up for the past three rotations. Even momentum like hers can't carry her forever. And facing off against the champion of the People's Republic of China is no mean feat. The Chinese and Koreans have historically dominated this competition."

"You said Meg's knee is giving her trouble. Any comment on that condition?"

"It's a pre-existing condition," Miller-McCall said. "She's had a game knee since she's been on the team. There's nothing we can really do about it except tape it up and pray that nobody goes after it like Lisa McByrne did at Nationals. But, as I said, when people get this tired they can get sloppy. Meg's going to have to rely on her training since she was a white belt in order to keep from being penalized for sloppy form out there."

Behind them, the referee motioned the two competitors to the mat and they bowed, Meg going so far as to shake hands and exchange a quiet word with her fellow. The intensity between the two women could be felt like a concrete thing. The referee gave a brief recitation of the rules while John Tesh gave a quick layman's-terms rundown of competition taekwondo for the uninitiated who'd just tuned in.

Down on the mat, Meg's breath was coming shallower and shallower. Her mind was closed off, focused on the task at hand and completely oblivious to the history she could make here. She'd gotten a few chances between matches to watch Zhou Kim, who'd beaten both Susan and Hannah in the rotations. The Chinese girl had the edge in speed and had rested more recently than Meg, who'd come straight from putting down Denise Ng from Korea to here. But Meg had the edge in power and the longer reach, which meant keeping the fight high and fast. The real thing would be to fight Zhou with her feet, but Meg's knee was hurting like distilled hell and she was uncertain how well it would hold her weight. She hoped the

pain wasn't getting telegraphed. A weakness like that would get picked up on and exploited by a pro. And there was no doubt that Meg was faced off against a pro.

"Good luck," she whispered to Zhou, after they'd bowed. "I've watched you during the competition. You're fantastic. I'm very impressed."

To Meg's surprise, Zhou responded in flawless but accented English. Her voice was breathy and soft. "Thank you very much. I have watched you also. You are wonderful to watch. Perhaps later we will have some time to learn from one another?"

"I'd like that a lot," Meg said, smiling.

"Good luck," Zhou said. "I have been looking forward to competing against you. I think it will be a great challenge. Are you ready?"

Meg smiled and wiped the sweat from above her eyes. "As ready as I can be," she answered.

They bowed and found their spacing as the referee backed out of the lane, flag raised high. "Competitors ready?" he called, looking first to Zhou in the white lane and then to Meg in the black. Both women nodded emotionlessly, their eyes fixed on one another, deep brown and flashing green.

The flag dropped. "Fight!"

As Meg suspected, Zhou opted for the all-out attack, both to capitalize on Meg's fatigue and to rob the redhead of the psychological advantage of coming into the match untouched. Meg gave ground liberally, fending off the lightning-fast kicks and punches with her forearms, keeping the movement above her waist and waiting. Just as she backed into the 'danger zone,' the spot on the mat where giving more ground would force Meg out of the competition area and give her a foul, Meg found her opening and launched into motion, stepping in deep and bringing her shin into Zhou's midsection solidly with a roundhouse. Zhou stepped back, hands raised.

"Point black! One-nil," the Aussie coach spoke up. The crowd cheered, but the audience monitors calmed them down quickly. Everything was about concentration right now.

"Are you all right?" Meg asked. Zhou nodded tiredly and resumed her stance.

"Fight!"

Meg took the offensive this time, careful not to force her opponent into a corner but making things tight for the Chinese girl. Zhou took the fight topside with a flying outside kick, forcing Meg to back away, and Zhou became a human whirlwind, launching into a hopping series of pivoting kicks which would have left any fighter a whit slower flat on their back. Meg gave ground, blocking and dodging the girl's flying feet and waiting for another opening. There wasn't one. Meg was forced to improvise, and she used what always seemed to work for her - the old tried-and-true sacrifice fly.

Keeping her hands braced out from her torso and breasts, Meg waited for Zhou's latest crescent kick to land and for the slender girl to change her weight for another and then pivoted on her bad knee, closing her eyes and hoping the kick that was coming didn't hit the baby. But her luck was in - the back pivot kick caught Zhou just above the solar plexus and the roundhouse that Meg had been fearing fell solidly across her forearms.

"Point back! Two-nil!" the referee called, and the crowd cheered again.

"Interesting move," Zhou said. "I didn't expect that."

"More luck than skill," Meg said. "You're very fast."

"Ballet," Zhou said. "My coaches make me take ballet for my speed."

"Competitors ready?" the ref asked.

They toed the line again. Meg felt as if her bones were made of liquid lead - they were twice as heavy as before and didn't seem to be supporting her body the way they should. For a moment she remembered her boyhood, a time long ago. Mark had been an eight-year-old yellow belt.

"But why, sir?" Mark asked evenly. He was careful not to whine, since he knew well that acting like a baby only got you laps and push-ups in this dojo. The same way it got you cleaning things at home. "I don't understand. We don't run from a competitor. Why do we always run laps before practice? When will we need running?"

The coach, prepared to do battle with a recalcitrant child, blinked when he discovered that little Mark Rutherford just wanted a reason to run. If he managed a good one, then Mark would run happily any time he was asked. The little carrot-top was great that way. If you could make something make sense to him, then he'd pursue it with an adult's devotion. But if it didn't make any sense, then forget it.

"It builds leg muscles and helps you control your breathing," the coach said immediately. "A healthy body is the key to the martial arts, Mark. Running is good for you, mind and body."

"Mind?" the boy asked.

"Most people don't like running," the coach said. "So forcing yourself to do it builds character. If you can make yourself do something you don't like and do it as well as you can every time, then you can do anything in the world."

"And that's what builds character means?" the boy asked innocently. "Somebody with character can do anything they want?"

The coach nodded. "That's exactly what I mean."

"So if I run every day, then I can do anything?"

"Not necessarily," the coach said, biting back a laugh. "But it's a good start."

Meg braced herself, inserting her mouthpiece. The referee heard her humming quietly to herself and smiled broadly when he picked up the tune. "Hang in, red. It's almost over," he whispered.

Meg nodded listlessly and resumed her plateau of concentration, focusing on her opponent to the exclusion of everything else while quietly finishing what she was humming:

".tied to the whipping post, Good Lord I feel like I'm dying."

"Fight!"

* * * * *

"Now here's something you don't see too often," John Tesh said, laughing. "The competitors are arguing with the referee and judges over that last pass. The judges ruled that the Zhou Kim of China committed a foul here" - they showed a stop-motion photo of Zhou firing a roundhouse into the spot underneath Meg's arm as the redhead scored a lunge punch against Zhou's left cheek - "by landing the kick outside the area protected by Meg's pads. But Meg, who is sitting on a three-to-nothing lead in the final preliminary match and has a shot at a record-setting perfect preliminary round, is arguing that the Chinese champion did *not* commit the foul and actually landed a legal blow. Zhou insists that it was a foul and that the point should not be counted. You just don't see that every day."

"That's too bad," Dorothy Miller-McCall said. "It ought to be that way. I would have been very disappointed in Meg if she hadn't contested that call. From here, it looked like a legal point."

"The judges are reviewing the replay now, and as you can see, both competitors are taking full advantage of the break in the action to catch a much-needed rest," Tesh said. The camera came in tight on Meg and Zhou slumped on the bench, breathing deeply. "We're waiting for the decision which will decide the fate of Meg's Olympic record."

"It's not about any record," Miller-McCall corrected. "What's important here is being fair. If Zhou Kim scored a legitimate point, then that needs to be acknowledged."

The referee broke away from the judges and went to the mat, where he raised both a white and a black flag - a double point. The crowd booed, and Meg was on her feet instantly, both hands raised and a fearfully angry look on her face. The crowd quieted immediately. Meg made a big show of congratulating Zhou Kim and resuming her place.

"As you can see," John Tesh said from the coaches' booth, "the crowd was not happy at all with the judges' decision to award that point. Meg Rutherford has fallen short of the perfect preliminary round, but she still stands to have the best ever preliminary round in Olympic history. And Dorothy, would you say that losing the record will affect Meg's performance?"

Miller-McCall took on a patient expression. "I doubt it. Actually, if I know Meg, not having it be an issue any more will probably be a huge load off her mind."

The camera replayed Meg's reaction to the crowd booing while Tesh went on. "Taekwondo is a sport about respect and tradition, and, as you can see, not even someone on the losing end of a call will tolerate disrespect towards the judges or a fellow competitor. Even though the crowd seemed to forget that the motion to award the point was started by Meg herself."

"Fight!" the referee called.

Meg, the better for the brief rest, came in fast and strong, capitalizing on her longer reach and bringing the point in quickly with a looping back-fist against Zhou's short ribs. They reset and ended the match in another double-point, Meg scoring with a quick side kick into Zhou's stomach while simultaneously taking a quicksilver roundhouse across her collarbones. The competitors bowed to one another and the judges and the referee raised Meg's arm to tumultuous applause. Meg then gathered Zhou up into a companionable hug which the Chinese woman returned affectionately. Meg managed to get her brain-bucket off before Susan and Hannah reached her and caught her up in bear-hugs. Meg got her torso and back-

fist pads off before she ran to the rail and pulled herself over it in a graceful motion. The TV cameras followed her faithfully as she catapulted into the arms of a tall, blonde man in a competition *gi* and laid a slow-motion *Melrose Place* kiss on him which was almost unsuitable for the cameras. The crowd around them cheered and patted the couple on their backs and shoulders.

"And here you can see what Meg Rutherford has been out there fighting for," John Tesh said, unable to keep the amusement from his voice. "I'm told that Meg's - friend there is Peter Barnett from the men's team and also from Houston, Texas."

The ABC commentator was worming in close, through the crowd as the speakers were playing the Allman Brothers tune again, just barely audible above the crowd noise. They cut into the remote just as the commentator reached the couple.

"This is Carrie Kwan from the floor of the women's taekwondo competition, here with Meg Rutherford and Peter Barnett," the little Oriental girl said. Carrie, a former women's National Champ, had been hired at the last minute as a commentator because of all the press Meg was generating. "Meg, how do you feel?"

The redhead's face was covered with a sheen of sweat and she had deep, dark circles under her eyes. "I feel pretty good," she said, her voice shrill from excitement. "I'm tired, but good."

"How did you feel about the competition?"

Meg fluffed her hair and leaned against Peter. "I've never liked the prelims," she said. "But it is a good way to feel out the competition. There are a lot of incredible martial artists out there, and I was lucky to go all the way out there."

"A lot of people think that the preliminaries are a part of the competition," Kwan said. "But they only determine ranking. The actual competition will begin day after tomorrow and will take place in a circular competition area rather than the lanes. Will that pose a problem for you?"

"I prefer the circle to the lane," Meg said. "The lane limits movement like crazy. I like the lateral movement freedom. I trained in the circle my whole life. The lane is just something I tend to try and get over with."

"Well, you really made a good showing out there," Kwan said. "How did you feel about the judges' awarding that point to Zhou Kim when you were so close to a record?"

"Record? What record?" Meg said, looking from Kwan to Peter and back.

"First perfect preliminary round in Olympic history," Peter mumbled into her ear.

"Oh," Meg said. "That was Zhou's point. She earned it and she deserved it."

"You seemed pretty angry at the crowd for their reaction to that," Kwan said. They overlaid the clip of Meg's reaction to the booing once again. "Care to comment?"

"I was furious," Meg said. "I mean, the very idea of booing the judges. I realize that we have a lot of new people looking into this sport for the first time, but they can just leave that kind of stuff outside. It might be acceptable to boo officials in other sports, but in a tae kwon match they're right underneath God and the angels. Every judge up there is a third-*dan* or higher black belt. They've earned better treatment than to get booed for a legitimate call."

"Peter Barnett, you and Rob Holt also made a fine showing in the men's preliminaries," Kwan said to Peter. "Any feelings on the men's competition?"

"Who cares about the men's competition?" Pete laughed. "I'm only here to watch Meg."

Kwan laughed. "As are most people here. But how are you feeling about your side?"

"Like Meg said, there's a lot of great competition out there," Pete said diplomatically. "I have a lot better feel for my opponents because of the preliminaries, but we also lost a teammate to an injury. Rob and I are going to have our work cut out for us out there, but I hope we give a fair showing. It's just too early to be thinking about the outcome right now. You used to compete, Carrie. One match at a time, you know the drill."

"Meg, you didn't waste much time in getting up here to see Peter," Carrie said, a light of mischievous gossip in her eyes. "Any comment about that?"

Meg looked at Peter, kissed him and smiled. "My friends will probably kill me for telling the TV first," she said, "but I found this lying on my bedside table this afternoon." She raised her left hand to display the small but respectable engagement ring.

"I didn't have time to answer yes or no before the competition," Meg explained. "So I thought I'd boogie up here and let him know."

"Congratulations!" Carrie said, giving first Meg and then Peter a tight hug. "That's fantastic!"

"So everybody who's been running those Internet sites of me will have to shut 'em down," Meg laughed. "Because my fiancé is a black belt."

Peter laughed and put his arms around Meg, leading her past the cameras and onto the floor to retrieve her stuff. They were both besieged immediately by Coach Miller-McCall and the rest of the U.S. team, who crowded around looking at the ring and congratulating them while in the background more reporters pressed in. Meg did manage to break free long enough to congratulate Zhou one last time before the media swallowed them.

* * * * *

"I kinda like Otto," Meg said, leaning against her fiancé. "Or Hortence."

"I'm thinking Grover," Peter said. "What about Helmut?"

The stars twinkled overhead. Here, on the roof of the women's pavilion, there were no reporters and no fans. It was blessedly quiet and the first time Peter and Meg had gotten alone together for days. They'd made love on a blanket under the southern stars and had spent two hours afterwards identifying the strange constellations of the Southern Hemisphere and joking about names for the baby.

"What if it's a girl?"

"Brunhilda."

"And give up shackling her with Eustace? How about this. If it's a boy, Junior. And if it's a girl, then. Junior."

Meg laughed. "Junior. Junior Rutherford."

"Junior *Barnett*."

"Oops," Meg said. "I keep forgetting that I'm the girl now."

Peter copped a feel. "I don't."

"Well, it's a hell of a reminder when you touch me there," Meg amended. "You think I should change my name when we're hitched?"

"What, like be Meghan Barnett?"

"That sounds kinda nice," Meg admitted. "Or I could hyphenate. Meghan Rutherford-Barnett."

Pete cuddled against her. "That's pretty."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. I like that. Meghan Hope Rutherford-Barnett."

"I never thought I'd be making that decision," she said. "This is all going so fast."

"You regret it?"

Meg kissed him deeply. "Not a second of it. And I'm not scared anymore. I think we're going to make pretty good parents. How about you?"

"There's a lot of ways to fuck up," Peter said. "But I think we'll do all right. I mean, I know I don't want to treat my kids like my old man treated me."

"I wish to God I remembered my Mom," Meg said. "I could use some pointers."

"I think you'll do fine," Peter said. "Hell, you're so damn good at everything else."

"This is a little different, Pete."

"Is it?"

Meg searched his ice-blue eyes for a long moment.

"No," she said at length, tracing the line of his jaw with her fingertips. "I guess it isn't."

CHAPTER TWENTY: The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat

"THAT'S UNBELIEVABLE!" SUSAN CRIED, JUMPING at her friend and pulling her into a crushing embrace. "You're really pregnant? For how long?"

"Six weeks," Meg said. "It showed up on my urine screen back at the training center."

Susan held her tighter and tighter. "And you're going to keep it? You're actually going to be a mommy? Meg, I am so thrilled for you!"

"Really?"

"Yeah, really! Jesus, how could I not be? You're going to have a baby!"

"Well, that kinda leads me to the rest of my little announcement," Meg said, pulling away from Susan. "Junior is going to need a godmother. You want the job?"

"Do I want the job. Hell, you just try and ask somebody else."

"Thanks, Suse. For some reason I thought you might be a little freaked out by this."

"Now why on earth would I be freaked out about something this wonderful?" Susan asked.

"Well, I was."

"That's because you're the mommy and not Aunt Susan," the little blonde said, turning a playful pirouette. "You cannot believe how badly I'm going to spoil your kid."

"So, Auntie Susan, can I ask some advice?"

"Sure," Susan said.

"Do you think I should bow out of the competition? For the baby?"

Susan's smile faded. "Shit, I didn't even think about that. What did the doctor say?"

"She said it's a risk. I'm not very far along, but miscarriage could be a possibility. Somebody kicks me a good one in the lower midsection and I could lose the baby. Or worse, Junior could be born messed up or dead. I don't know what to do. Pete won't hear of me dropping out, but I'm scared. I don't want to hurt the baby."

"Sure you don't," Susan said. "Jesus, so that's why you didn't let anybody lay a glove on you. You could have finished the preliminaries in half the time it took you if you'd allowed a point or two. Hannah and I wondered why you were letting so many opportunities go by. That's not your style."

"Funny," Meg said. "Now that I'm pregnant I have to let opportunities go by."

"Stop that," Susan scolded. "You know better than that. Being a mom isn't a prison sentence. You're going to have a great kid and hopefully more after that one and you're going to love every minute of them. You and Pete both. And you'll never have to worry about not having chased your dreams before you settled down, like my parents did. You're going to be a great mom."

"Thanks," Meg said, breathing deeply. "That's still so weird to hear."

"I think you should keep competing," Susan said. "The actual physical exertion won't hurt the baby. Some doctors actually think it helps for an easier labor. As for taking a shot to the stomach, you can guard against that. You're good enough not to let that happen."

"I don't know about that. Nobody's that good."

"You are, and you know it," Susan said. "Just don't let anybody near there."

"That's easy enough to do in the lane," Meg said. "But now we're in the circle."

"So? You're twice as good in the circle as you are in the lane."

"So's everybody else."

Susan shrugged. "The decision's not mine to make. You wanted my advice, you got my advice. I think you should stay in the competition. You'll have to be twice as careful, but that's part of what being pregnant's all about. You have to be twice as careful getting out of the tub in the morning."

Meg kissed her cheek. "Thanks, Suse."

"You need me for anything, day or night, you call," she said. "I know you don't have a lot to go on here and you didn't have a mom growing up. This is all really new to you. I can help."

"You're the best," Meg whispered.

"Maybe so," Susan said. "But I'm not the one that's gonna get a gold medal."

Meg gave her a stern look. "Don't jinx me."

Susan held up her hands. "All right, all right. One match at a time. But at least you're competing, or you wouldn't have gotten so mad at me."

Meg laughed. "I guess you're right. Made up my mind and didn't even know it."

"Happens to me all the time," Susan said.

* * * * *

The photo opportunities abounded the next day as Meg and Hannah wandered around the Olympics, seeing what there was to be seen. The two girls caught one of the preliminary matches for the U.S. Women's Volleyball Team and managed to get some training in as well before catching Peter's first match after lunch and then the first of the Dream Team's games that evening. Meg fell into bed very tired (Dr. Hansen had told her that she'd start getting tired more easily) and slept like a rock, waking at her accustomed ungodly hour. She called Heath and Faith as soon as she rose, since it was mid-afternoon back in the 'States and told them both about the impending marriage and the impending baby. They'd heard about the wedding on the television (ABC had broadcast it non-stop after they'd gotten it), but the baby left them both a little thunderstruck. Heath managed to take it in stride.

"You certainly don't waste time, Rutherford," he said. "You said you were really getting into this 'being a girl' stuff, but *Jesus*. I didn't think you were gonna start the family this soon."

"I didn't exactly mean to," Meg said. "I was busy enjoying some of the other aspects of being a girl and then, boink!, guess what? The more I think about it, though, the better I like the idea."

"Really?" Heath said.

"Yeah, really. I wish I could describe it."

"You're going to have to. I want to know everything about it."

"So, would you mind doing me a favor?"

"Name it, red."

"Since I was nice enough to be your best man," Meg said, "you mind being my maid of honor?"

Heath guffawed. "Wouldn't miss it. I look incredible in pink organza."

"And with that ass, you can pull off the full skirt," Meg shot back. "You'll be belle of the ball."

Heath's voice got serious. "You happy, Meg-o?"

Meg thought a second. "Yeah. Yeah, I am."

"Then so am I. Now you keep that left up. I've been watching you on TV and you never used to put up with letting your outside blocks fall so low and so far from your body."

"Yeah, well, back then I didn't have boobs either."

"Excuses, excuses," Heath grumped. "Seriously. You and Junior be careful out there."

"We will, Heath. I wish you were here."

"Yeah, me too. Four years. Not long at all."

"Naw, not long at all. Give my love to Faith and Adam."

"Sure will."

Meg hung up the phone and stared off into space for a while. It seemed so strange - she'd expected everyone to react a whole lot differently to the news. But everybody was getting past the shock and getting down to the business at hand. Then it dawned. Girls got pregnant all the time. It wasn't that out of the ordinary. And everybody, even Heath and Faith and Peter, thought of Meg as a woman now. They were forgetting that there ever was a Mark Rutherford. The thought both comforted and alarmed Meg to no end. She snugged up her knee brace and hit the track with the rest of the nuts who roused themselves at five a.m. to train and spent the whole morning lost in thought.

* * * * *

Fighting in the circle was a freedom after the restrictions of the preliminaries. Meg managed to keep her first opponent, a little French girl named Giselle Montaneau, well away from her midsection, but didn't have to let some easy points pass her by just because she was being over-defensive. The opening round only saw Meg having to defeat three opponents, her ranking from preliminaries was so high. The French woman, and Kanuka Takedoshi whom Meg had met her first day at the Games, and a skinny but tough little Russian girl named Ludmila whose last name was completely immune to pronunciation. Meg mused idly that Ludmila was just the sort of girl to whom she'd been attracted at first, but now her eye was

much more critical of form and balance instead of lingering, as it used to, on her cherubic face and glowing smile and the magnificent body the girl possessed.

"Brave new world," Meg commented to herself from the bench, where she was watching Susan's progress against a long-legged Italian girl named Migliacci. Susan was having no trouble, even with her opponent having the longer reach.

"I beg pardon?" Ludmila asked in heavily-accented English from beside her.

"Nothing," Meg said, smiling apologetically. "I talk to myself."

"I do that," the Russian said. "Is lonely to train for Olympics."

"Yeah," Meg said. "You fought well."

"Thank you. You are good fighter, too. Maybe later, you teach?"

"You want me to show you some of my stuff?" Meg asked.

"No, I mean, later. After Olympics. You teach, or still compete?"

"I don't know," Meg said. "I think I want to start a family."

"Oh, babies," Ludmila said, smiling. "Look. My little boy." She pointed into the crowd at an adorable little blond-haired boy who clung tight to his tall, dark-haired father's hand and waved.

"He's beautiful," Meg said. "What's his name?"

"Nikolai Davidovich," Ludmila said. "He is my joy."

"It's funny how all little boys look like angels," Meg commented.

"He can be devil," Ludmila laughed, "but I love him."

"Is that his father?"

"Yes," Ludmila said. "I did not know if he would come. We divorce last year. I beg him to bring Nikolai and watch me compete. He never answers. Came yesterday without telling me."

"That's too bad," Meg said. "It shouldn't have to be like that."

"Is all right," Ludmila said with a sad smile. "I marry young. I was only girl. I loved him, he loved me. We knew people change, but not know it can happen to us. Then one day, we open our eyes and see we made mistake. Not fight over Nikolai, we love him so much. But is hard."

"I can't imagine," Meg said. "I mean, I'm getting married soon. I'd like to think that I know Peter well enough to stay with him forever. But he makes it hard to think."

"Is different, loving and - how you say in English? - being in love," Ludmila cautioned. "Feels same at first, but is different after time."

"I know," Meg said. "It scares me a little."

"Is supposed to," the Russian woman said, patting Meg's arm. "Good sign to be scared. Now come. Come meet my son. Nikolai made me promise to introduce you. He think you are very pretty."

Meg laughed, standing. "Well, he's a handsome man himself."

"He speak English," Ludmila said. "You tell him and see him turn red."

* * * * *

The next day was a little more strenuous for Meg as the opening round closed. She defeated seven opponents and came into the quarterfinals undefeated. Meg eliminated Hideki Norimmura, the other Japanese girl she'd met the first day, and was shocked to see the willowy woman choking back tears when the judges awarded the victory to Meg. The Japanese coach was white with rage. The shrewish little woman paced frantically, staring daggers at Meg and looking for the least little flaw in her style which might count against her.

The opening round closed without fanfare as they put the names up. Meg was strong in gold medal contention with Zhou Kim and her teammate Xi Daopeng from China, a firebrand from Korea named Soon E, and the Canadian champ Laurie Kaiser. Hannah and Susan were both in the second-place contention, having only been defeated three times each in yesterday's preliminaries.

Meg bagged her gear and shucked back into a light peasant skirt and a sweater before heading next door to watch Peter and Rob finish up. She was glad the hype was spreading over - even though the women's competitions were getting to be standing room only, the men's competitions were starting to get some decent crowds. Compared to what taekwondo used to draw at the Olympics, it was a mob scene. Meg was also very gratified to see how many of her fellow athletes were coming over to watch. Meg had made it a point to go and watch her friends compete, especially the Dream Team (she had a little bit of a crush on Hakeem Olajuwon, she had to admit). And Meg was really starting to get into volleyball - she thought she might actually be kinda good at it, even though the amazons on the U.S. Women's Team would probably eat her for breakfast.

The men's competition was winding down. Peter was up, fighting against a tall and wiry Japanese man named Sato. Pete was down four-two and was getting a little advice outside the circle from Rob Holt and Rick Landis, the U.S. Men's coach. Meg flashed her pass to the rail-sitter and came onto the competition floor and made her way over to her fiancé. A quick look at the rankings board showed her that Rob still had one competition left that afternoon but was in good shape. Everybody's energy was being re-directed into keeping Peter in the competition.

"Hey, babe," Meg greeted.

"Hi," Peter panted, managing a weak smile. "How'd you do?"

"I'm in," Meg said. "How about yourself?"

"Sato's fast," he said. "Real fast. I can't get inside him and he's eating my lunch."

"I keep telling you, Pete, use your feet. Keep him back," Rob said.

"How much juice do you have left?" Meg said.

"Running on vapors, red."

"Then he can't use his feet," Meg said. "He'll be too slow."

"Coach, I need a competitor up here," the referee called to Rick.

"Time's up, Pete," Rob said.

"Stay back, give him ground and wait," Meg said. "He always comes in too high on his big pushes. Bait him by sticking close to the foul line. He'll over-reach to get to you and there's your opening. Get inside him and hand him his dick."

Rick's eyebrows rose. "Good plan, Rutherford."

Peter squeezed Meg's hand. "Love you, red."

"Get in there and kick that guy's ass," Meg replied, smiling.

Peter mustered a second - or perhaps third, fourth or fifth - wind and managed some footwork, keeping Sato back after the flag dropped and frustrating the Jap's chance for a quick kill. The taller American then gave a little ground, working around towards his left side and teasingly hovering near the foul line. Like clockwork, Sato came in like a tornado and his first roundhouse was sadly mis-timed and way, way too high. Peter took the kick on his forearm, pivoted inside and brought Sato down hard with an elbow to the solar plexus. His *kiai* echoed from the ceiling.

"Point black!" the ref called. "Four to three! Fighters separate!"

Pete cut his eyes to the sideline. "Again," Meg coached him. "He's pissed. He'll come on way too strong and you can take him the exact same way. Keep your left up but don't block your vision."

Pete nodded and smiled. He worked around the edge of the circle close to the foul line and sure enough, Sato came in fast and thirsty for revenge. Pete ducked under a sloppy side kick and dropped him with a reverse crescent to the midsection. The kick landed hard with a solid thump and Sato had to stop a minute to catch his breath.

"What now?" Pete whispered to Meg.

"He'll try to use your tactic against you," Meg said. "Go right up the middle, fast as you can. Drop him quick and don't let him recover. And then you get to go home and screw the head cheerleader."

Peter grinned ear-to-ear, his face guard squashing the expression into a comical parody. "Scooby dooby doo," he said amusedly, sticking in his mouthpiece. "To coin a phrase."

"Match point," the referee called. "Fighters ready? Fight!"

Sato backed to the foul line, hands at the ready, but he never got a chance to cut to either side and work the outside. Peter came on in a blur of feet and hands, using some of Meg's

choicer moves which she'd taught him in Denver. He connected with a solid skip-kick which forced Sato out of the circle.

"Match to black! Congratulations!" The ref raised Peter's hand over his head and the arena filled with applause - nothing compared to the thunder in the women's pavilion, but respectable. Olympic taekwondo never had it so good. Meg wrapped her arms around her man and squeezed him tight as Rob and the coach patted his back. She held his hand as they watched the scorekeeper move Peter's name up the tote board into the quarterfinal round.

"Congratulations," Meg whispered.

"Thanks, coach."

"No problem."

"Nice advice," Rob commented without acid. "I forgot that Pete's a lot more tired than me. He'd probably have gone down in flames if he'd listened to me."

"I'm still surprised that he listened to *me*," Meg quipped. "He never does that."

"I listened to that 'fuck the cheerleader' bit back there," Peter said, stripping off his brain-bucket.

"Figures," Meg said, shouldering her equipment bag. "I'll go get my pom-poms."

* * * * *

"Wow," Peter said, stretching the length of Meg's narrow bed. "I am sore as hell."

"You're sore as hell in the quarterfinals," Meg said, snuggling up to him. They'd both decided to forego the lovemaking because of their mutual exhaustion - six hours of competition could do that - but they'd necked like teenagers just for the sake of doing it. And besides, Meg just liked the feel of his body against hers. It felt good.

"Yeah," Peter said. "Thanks to you."

"Bull," Meg scoffed. "I didn't throw the kick that won it. *You* did."

"You could have thrown it," he said, kissing her forehead. "Every bit as well. That's what I love most about you, you know that? It's knowing that you could kick my ass any time you wanted to."

"I don't want to very often," Meg said, running her hand across his firm chest. "Only when you don't change the toilet paper roll after it's empty."

"It's a female thing," Peter said.

"It's a clean floors thing. When I need some toilet paper, Pete, I need it *right then*."

Peter chuckled and then groaned, holding his sore stomach muscles. "Don't make me laugh."

"Sorry."

"Hey, Meg, I forgot to ask. Is it all right for us to mess around? With the kid and all?"

"What do you mean all right?" Meg asked.

"I mean, will it hurt the baby if we. you know.."

Meg laughed. "Of course not. Of course, when I'm huge and fat in eight months you probably won't want to. You'll have long since left me for someone skinny."

"I'll send postcards," Peter said.

Meg felt her belly again. "I can't believe I'm gonna get all big and fat. It's like a dream."

"I'm trying to imagine you with huge knockers," Peter said. "I don't think they'd look good on you. I've never been much of a chest man anyway."

"I was always an ass man," Meg confessed. "Still am, more or less. You have a great one."

Peter laughed. "I like yours, too. But I think it's your face. You have the most beautiful face I could imagine. You make me wish I could draw, or paint or something, just to have an excuse to stare at every little tiny detail of your face for hours and hours."

"That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard," Meg said. "Thank you."

"No, thank you, Meg," Peter said. "Thanks for being with me. You could have had any man or woman you wanted and you picked me. I won't even ask why, but I'm really happy."

"Me, too," Meg said. "You make me feel *right*."

"I know what you mean."

* * * * *

The quarterfinals began almost before Meg managed to stretch the soreness out of her muscles from the opening rounds. Meg faced down China's Li Zhua for a narrow 5-3 victory and it took its toll on the knee. She just managed to defeat Laurie Kaiser of Canada before she had to go to the trainer's bench and get her leg looked at. The Olympic trainer, Pam Gooden, pulled back the neoprene brace which was now as familiar to Meg as her own skin, to reveal a swollen and red joint.

"Not good, Meg," Pam said sternly. "I told you to watch those pivot moves."

"What else could I do?" Meg protested. "Laurie Kaiser didn't make it to the 'Games because of luck, boss. She's fast as all hell. All I could do was lure her in close and then spring. To do that, I have to use pivot and back-spin moves."

"Meg, there may have to come a time when you have to choose between the victory and the knee," Pam cautioned. "Or the victory and the baby. I just hope you pick wisely."

"Cheap shot, Pam," Meg said, chastised.

"All I'm saying is that you get clear on how much winning is worth to you," Pam said. "I mean it, I've seen too many good athletes fall to pieces because they push too hard. I was one of the ones who had to put Kerri Strug back together four years ago. Sure, she won the gold medal and it was one of the most dramatic things I've ever seen - they couldn't have written a more exciting finish. She got that medal and all that glory and she'll never be able to go up a flight of stairs again for the rest of her life without pain. I don't want you to end up like that. You know, the world will not spin off its axis and into the sun if the mighty Meghan Rutherford actually loses a match."

"Pam, I don't need this right now," Meg said. "I really don't."

"I'm trying to tell you -"

"I know damn well what you're trying to tell me," Meg snapped. "Believe me, I've heard it every step of the way since I hurt that knee. I chose this life. Other people don't have bad knees like mine because other people don't spend fourteen hours a day training for one single event. If pain is the price, then I'll pay it. Because there is more than I can ever tell you invested in this competition. If I don't give it my all, then the last six years of my life have been for *nothing*. And before you start in on me, I don't intend to let any of these women get close to landing a shot near my baby. This baby's in the safest place in the whole arena, because I'm not letting *anything* happen to it.

"You can sit on your seat of judgment and tell me what's best, Pam, but I'm not going to listen. This competition is everything to me. And yes, it is worth trashing my knee for. Believe me, I've trashed worse already just to get here. The sun might not go out if the 'mighty Meghan Rutherford' loses a match, but the 'mighty Meghan Rutherford' isn't going to lose a match until she gets a gold medal."

Pam looked sullen. "I think you're making a mistake."

"I might be," Meg said. "But it's mine to make. Not yours. Tape me up."

* * * * *

It was hard not to cry - they'd been together every step of the way so far. But between the frustration of the moment and the nice, rolling boil that the pregnancy had Meg's hormones going on, she couldn't keep from tearing up when Hannah was eliminated from the quarterfinals by Soon E, the Korean champion. Hannah was disappointed, but not crushed.

"Don't sweat it, Megs," she said. "If I had to get knocked out, at least it had to be her. Getting knocked out by the Korean Taekwondo Champion is nothing to be ashamed about."

"Oh, I know," Meg said, wiping her eyes. "I was just getting used to this whole 'Three Musketeers' thing. I guess I read too much of our own press. I was hoping we'd do the gold-silver-bronze thing. I'm just being silly."

"No, you're not," Hannah said. "I was feeling the same way. I'm disappointed, but I can live with it if you and Susan stay in there. We're a team, remember?"

Meg nodded and hugged her friend. The redhead had just finished off her last opponent of the quarterfinal round and her name had been moved across the tote board into the semifinals. The four first-rank contenders were herself, Soon E, Zhou Kim and Xi Daopeng from China. The second-rank contenders were nobody she knew and Susan was trying her level best to stay in the running for bronze. The next day, the semifinals would resolve and then all lower-rank contenders would be able to challenge for a higher ranking. There, Meg hoped that her reputation as a firebrand would work in her benefit. She'd purposefully put a little 'sauce' on her punches and kicks this afternoon, so the word would spread that the redheaded *guai-lo* hit pretty damn hard and people might think twice about challenging. But Meg knew it wouldn't work. The Chinese and the Koreans had years and years of dominating this sport to uphold and they weren't about to let an upstart Western barbarian move in and take it. Meg expected she'd fight everyone who made the semifinal round except Susan. Hell, even Susan might want to take a crack at the higher ranking.

Susan eked out a narrow 6-4 over her opponent from New Zealand and stayed in bronze contention. Then they gathered at the tote-board to draw for their opponents.

Susan reached into the pot and pulled out Kelly Hadley's name, the only remaining competitor from the United Kingdom. They'd fight first the following morning. The rest of the contenders drew for their first opponents. Meg selected Xi Daopeng. The winner of that match would meet all challenges and then, if she survived, face the uncontested winner of the Zhou Kim/Soon E match. God willing, then, Meg would have to face either the Chinese or the Korean martial arts champion. She looked down at her knee furtively and tried her best to focus positive energy.

Meg managed to get changed into a pair of overalls and a sweatshirt when the men's competition across the hall let out. Peter ran out in a rush, gathering Meg up and twirling her around six or seven times before he put her down. "I made it," he said to her excitedly. "I made the semifinals."

Meg kissed him soundly. "That's fantastic!" she cried. "Pete, I'm so proud of you!"

"Keep your voice down," Peter said, looking over his shoulder.

"What's wrong?" Meg asked.

"I made the semis," Peter said. "Rob didn't."

Meg's eyes widened. "You're kidding."

"I wish I was. He was eliminated by the same guy that took down Billy Hardwell, Zhuang Xian Li the Chinese guy. He's savage. I'm gonna challenge him tomorrow once my ranking's secure."

"If he's savage, then you be careful," Meg warned. "You know how fine the line can get between competition and street brawl. Just watch yourself."

"I'll have my coach in my corner," Peter said confidently. "Our competitions are at different times tomorrow, because we'll be splitting a venue so Fencing can start up next door. Would you mind coming over and coaching me through? Rick said he was cool with it."

"I don't know," Meg said. "I can't really stand the sight of you."

"C'mon, it'll be fun," Peter laughed. "You get to watch a Chinese guy kick my ass."

"Since you put it that way, I'll be there."

"Maybe with you in my corner I might actually beat him," Peter said.

"You want to beat him? You start right here. He's not a machine. He's human, like you and me. He bleeds red and pisses yellow and sleeps, eats, breathes and farts just like us. And he can be beaten, just like us. Stop thinking of him as a winner and start thinking of him as an opponent."

"You seriously think I can beat this guy?"

"Is he unstoppable because he's in a Chinese team uniform? Was Rob? Am I?"

"I see your point."

"You can beat that guy," Meg said. "You have to beat him in your head first. Then the body will follow. Unless he's got a faster roundhouse, then you're pretty much fucked either way."

Peter smiled. "Have I mentioned lately that I love you?"

"Not lately."

"My mistake," Peter said, and then he kissed her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: And then there was one.

MEG SQUARED OFF BRIGHT AND early against Xi Daopeng from China, a tall and stout girl from one of the central provinces of China. Although she was plain as Oriental women ran, she moved with a suppressed and controlled power that seemed to make the floor shake behind her, like she was a tenuous cap on an erupting volcano. It was the most effective psyche-job Meg had ever experienced, in either of her incarnations. As she entered the circle and bowed, Meg found herself a little bit afraid of the Chinese woman. But as her feet and hands assumed the stances they'd been intimate with for years upon years, all the fear and anxiety was sublimated in one instant of perfect, sublime calm, where the only beings on the planet were herself, her opponent, the man she loved standing sideline and the child which grew daily inside her. Meg took a deep, cleansing breath, and when she opened her eyes, she was faced by just a simple human being. The score of the match wouldn't matter. Meg had already beaten her.

Daopeng fought simply and elegantly, just textbook moves with no wasted motion. Meg was able to keep her back with no problem but the simplicity of the attacks and recoveries made it difficult to get an opening to exploit. Meg hesitated to get flashy - the more extreme moves might force an opening, but they were hell on the knee and the knee had to take her a long way today.

Finally, after what seemed like a week-long conversation of attack-defend-recover, attack-defend-recover, Daopeng made a mistake. When two competitors were as evenly matched as her and Meg, it was usually the one who made the first all-out attack that wound up losing the match. The stout Chinese girl extended shortly, an obvious feint, to follow with a

deceptively fast looping back-spin kick. Almost effortlessly, Meg ducked beneath the kick, recovered and put a solid roundhouse into the girl's short ribs, managing to put in a double-fist lunge before she hit mat.

"Double point white!" the referee called. "Fighters separate!"

The crowds were catching on at last - the applause was loud and energetic but it didn't last long. Her fans were just now beginning to figure out how hard Meg had to concentrate in these bouts.

Daopeng answered immediately by doubling up an attack routine and forcing Meg back, leaving the leggy redhead with a point against her and a foul for being driven back out of the competition circle. Peter trotted up with a towel and whispered quickly in her ear.

"She's got you playing her game, babe," he said quickly. "She sucks you into the form and then just rides it out. Don't fall for it. Don't let her bait you. It's your fight. Take it to her. I love you."

Meg wiped her face and nodded, handing the towel back while never truly breaking her concentration. Pete left the mat and the referee raised the flag.

"Fight!"

Peter had been right - it must have been very obvious from the sideline. Daopeng was luring Meg into facing her form against form, like ritual spar for lower belt levels. They were just working *palque* and the Chinese woman was beating her by breaking cadence and speed. Wise to it now, Meg dropped low when the form said she should have dodged inside, dropped low and swept Daopeng's legs out from underneath her, landing a hammer-fist to the solar plexus with a resounding *kiai*.

Figuring it would only work the once, Meg stood back ready for anything. Daopeng came on fast and high, working Meg's upper body blocks to the limit with her speed. Meg backed around the outside of the circle close to the foul line, drawing her opponent out. Once Daopeng committed to a lunging snap kick, Meg reversed in a lightning-quick move and the Chinese woman was flat on her back with the blade of Meg's foot in her throat, the kick choked well shy of dangerous. Daopeng's eyes widened as Meg helped her up.

"Are you all right?" Meg asked.

"Yes," Daopeng said. "That happened very fast."

"We can wait until you're ready," Meg said.

"Thank you," Daopeng said, stepping back and catching her breath before stepping back forward. The last point was not even necessary anymore. Meg had clearly beaten her opponent. The final point was uneventful but met with prodigious applause and a rib-creaking hug from Peter.

"That win tasted funny," she told her fiancé. "Seemed awfully easy."

"I'd be thankful for that," Peter said.

"Now for the challenge round," Meg said, sighing. "I hate this part."

"Oh, God," Peter said, looking over Meg's shoulder. "I was afraid of that."

"Afraid of what?" Meg turned to see Susan Lewis take another hammering point from Kelly Hadley, the British whirlwind who was keeping a tight hold on the bronze slot. The judges' display showed the score at four to one, and Susan was limping a little. Meg made a bee-line for the mat, gathering in close beside Rob Holt, Bill Hardwell (now on crutches) and Hannah, all wrapped in their Olympic jackets and venue passes. All of their jackets were encrusted with country pins they'd traded - apparently, according to Hannah, that was all there was to do once one was eliminated from competition. That and have sex with people from other countries.

"Come on, Suse," Meg urged at a whisper.

"It doesn't look good," Rob said from the corner of his mouth. "She took a nasty lateral hit to the knee and she can't put all her weight on her left leg. Meaning she can't use any inside pivot moves."

"Shit," Meg said. "She's got to get in that girl's face. Suse can't give her enough time to work her inside. She knows that."

"You got a bad knee, too, Megs," Hannah said. "It's easier said than done."

They gathered tight as they watched their teammate lose the match. Kelly Hadley was quick to help Susan from the mat after the referee had raised her arm in victory and pass the limping, miserable Susan off to her teammates.

"I'm so sorry," the girl said in a thick Surrey accent. "I didn't mean to hurt her."

"It's okay," Susan said. "It's a rough sport. It can happen."

"You fought very well," Kelly said. "I hope we can have a rematch someday when you're fresh."

"You're on," Susan said. "Maybe I'll see you in four years."

Meg gathered Susan up in a motherly hug and helped her to the bench, raising up the leg of the little blonde's *gi* and pulling off the shin-pad to expose a nasty, purpling bruise beginning just above the knee joint on the outside of the leg. The joint was already swelling.

"Looks like a nice little lateral hyperextension," Meg said. "Possibly a torn ligament. Somebody should go get Pam and get her to take a look at this."

Susan wiped her eyes - Meg couldn't tell if it was sweat or tears. "Oh, well. Easy come, easy go," she sighed, her voice a little tremulous. "I was hoping I could follow you in, Meg."

"Me too, Suse. I wanted that a lot."

"Two little indians, standing in the sun; one took a knee shot, and then there was one," Susan intoned. "You know what you and Junior have to do now, don't you?"

"Yeah," Meg said. "Win the whole fucking thing."

"Right," Susan said.

"In which case, I need you to do something for me, Suse."

"What's that?"

"Find somebody that's going into town this afternoon," Meg said. "There's money in my gym bag, take as much as you need, but I need a big Honduran cigar."

"A cigar?"

"Yeah," Meg said. "Me and Junior gotta bless tomorrow's competition."

* * * * *

Meg was forced to take challenges from all comers, securing her ranking before the final round. Soon E, the Korean champion, had eliminated Zhou Kim in a blazing 5-2 victory and would be the one to beat in the final round. Meg got ample time to watch Soon's style: the challengers were only allowed one chance to compete for a higher ranking, and just as many challenged the Korean as did Meg, giving the two champions ample time to look at one another.

Kelly Hadley had wisely chosen to challenge Soon E, fearing a little rough reprisal from Meg for eliminating Susan Lewis earlier with an injury - Meg wasn't so sure she could have kept from putting a little 'sauce' on her kicks just for good measure - and was thrown down in a humiliating 5-0 shutout. But the Korean champ wasn't trying to deliver any humiliation or play psyche games. The slender, cheerful woman simply fought as hard as she could every time she took the mat. Meg was really going to have to be on her toes to stay alive against her.

Meg defeated Zhou Kim once again, then Ascensión Miralda from Brazil and Kee Yan Hanh from the Philippines to secure her contention for the gold medal against Soon E, who had also soundly defeated all comers. The winner of the Kee Yan Hahn/Zhou Kim match would get the bronze medal. It was almost over.

Soon E bounced up, her pads unlaced, and shook Meg's hand energetically. Her accent was actually American Midwestern, which is where she went to college at the University of Indiana. "I'm really looking forward to this," she said earnestly. "I've been watching you the whole competition. You're a great martial artist. I've been looking forward to finally getting to compete against you."

Meg smiled. "It's amazing that we dodged each other in the preliminaries."

"That wasn't my best day," Soon said. "I lost a couple early on and it hurt me."

"You didn't waste any time catching up," Meg said. "I'm looking forward to it as well."

"Would you like to get something to eat after you change?" Soon asked. "I like to meet the people I compete against before we square off. It takes the edge out of the competition. It's harder to hurt somebody you spend an evening talking to, you know?"

"I never thought of that," Meg said. "But you're right. But I can't, unfortunately. Not now."

"Later, maybe?"

"I guess," Meg said. "I promised my fiancé I'd sit sideline for him. If you can wait until after the men's bouts, then you and me and Peter can all go together."

Soon smiled. "Cool," she said. "I've been wanting to meet him, too. But not because of the competition. You have a good eye, Meg. He's really cute."

Meg smiled. "Yeah," she said. "I think I'll keep him. But right now I'd just be distracting him, so I'm gonna shower while the getting's good. I'll meet you sideline?"

"I'll be there," Soon said, and she bounced away into the crowd.

Meg watched her go as she sat and unlaced her kicking-pads. *She's a hundred percent right*, Meg thought. *There's no way I could live with myself if I hurt her after talking to her for five minutes. That would be a good thing to teach the nine-to-twelves back home. Not that I don't have every intention of kicking her butt tomorrow, though. She wasn't that sweet.*

Meg laughed to herself as she bagged her pads, whistling *Jessica* and wondering if Gregg Allman had bought his plane tickets for Sydney yet.

* * * *

Meg splurged - she even put on a little makeup before she went back out to sit sideline for Peter, dressed in her Olympic jacket, the super-tight low-rise jeans that she knew Pete liked so much and a baggy white tee-shirt with Cartman from *South Park* screaming profanity on the front, knotted beneath her breasts to show off her figure (while she still had it). She hadn't taken her red curls out of the tight French braid, but she had added a jaunty little red silk ribbon to the end to make it look a little better. She even added some big gold hoops to her ears. For some reason she just wanted to feel pretty for a change instead of her customary tired, sweaty, sore and pregnant.

Peter was meditating on the bench. Meg stepped behind him and began to gently massage his shoulders. His concentration didn't even break, he continued his breathing exercises until he was calm and centered, then crossed himself Catholic-style and leaned into his fiancée for a kiss.

"Congratulations," Peter whispered. "Just one more match between you and a medal."

"Yeah," Meg said. "I'm so nervous my butterflies have butterflies."

"Don't even think about it 'till tomorrow," Peter said.

"It'll be even better if you net a bronze for me," Meg said.

"If I win it will you wear the Playboy Bunny costume again?"

Meg snorted laughter. "Sure," she said. "But if you lose, then *you* have to wear it."

"No deal," Peter said. "Green's not my color."

"Do well in there," Meg said. "And think hard about who you challenge. I really don't want you going up against that Zhuang Li character. He's a beast, from everything I heard."

"One match at a time," Peter said. "First I gotta beat Georges Tourvel."

"No problem," Meg said. "I watched him yesterday. He's got no left side. Work him to the edge of the circle and then force him over. His left hand is slow as Christmas. You'll wipe the mat with him."

"Damn," Peter said. "You are so *good* at that."

"Taekwondo is my life," Meg joked.

"*You* are my life," Peter said.

"Get in the ring before you make me cry," Meg said. "It's not like my hormones are on a slow boil because of Junior anyway, then you gotta go and be all sweet and wonderful, too."

Peter kissed her before pulling on his brain-bucket. "Let's go see what kind of damage I can do."

* * * * *

He pulled it off, but it wasn't easy. Tourvel had managed to get to the semifinals by not letting anyone near his weak left side and Peter had to crawl over the man's defense to force him over. But in the end, it was Peter who came out atop the 6-4 victory, tired but feeling no pain. He pulled off his headgear and rubbed the back of his neck while studying the tote board for his challenge.

"What do you think, red?" he asked.

"Depends on what you go for," Meg said. "Looks to me like you're challenging Dave Maa for the silver, Zhuang Xiao Li for the gold, and either Fumeo Muriyaki or Billy Ng for a shot at the bronze. Maa is in good shape, he waltzed through his last match, so I wouldn't go after him unless I was fresh. If you really want to shoot for the gold, then there's only one man to beat. Else, I'd make a try for Muriyaki. He's the tougher competitor. Beat him and you'll have an easy time tomorrow with Billy Ng."

Peter sighed. "I won't even ask what you would do in this situation."

"Why not?" Meg asked.

"You'd walk in there tired and sore and beat up and *still* hand Zhuang Li his dick," Peter said. "But that's you. Me, I don't know if I have the juice to pull that off."

"Can you live with a bronze?" Meg asked.

"Hell, I never even figured to get this far," Peter said. "But there is a little revenge thing to take care of with Zhuang. I still say he injured Rob on purpose."

"Suit yourself," Meg said, leaning gently against him. "No matter who you fight, I know who I'm rooting for. But remember, if you lose this challenge you're out of competition unless a meteor hits the top two competitors."

Peter scratched his chin. "The lady or the tiger," he mused.

"Beg pardon?"

"It's an old folktale," Peter explained. "This king used to take people at random and put them in this room with two identical doors. All the guy knew was that behind one door was a beautiful woman who would marry him and behind the other was a starving, man-eating tiger. All the guy had to do was open one of the doors."

"Nice story," Meg said. "But for you, the lady's behind both of the doors."

"The moral of the story, though, is that it doesn't matter which one he picked. The real torture was sitting still, wondering," Peter said. "People would go mad staring at those doors. The only way to go on was just to pick one at random and open the damn door, come what may, just so it would end."

"Makes sense," Meg said.

"So if it doesn't matter which one I pick, then what the hell," Peter said. "If your gold medal would look good on the mantel, think how it'll look with mine next to it."

He stepped forward to the competition judges and bowed. "I cast my challenge for Zhuang Xiao Li of China," Peter said forcefully. "Might as well try."

"You're a brave man, son," the Canadian judge said, smiling. "Good luck to you."

Peter bowed again - Meg did too, the habit was so deeply ingrained - and left. "I feel better already," he said, putting his arm around her. "At least now if I go out, I'll go out in style."

Meg smiled and hugged him tight, but she couldn't help hearing in the back of her head:

Two little indians, standing in the sun. One tried for gold, and then there was one.

Just be careful, Meg thought. I have this nasty feeling you may have picked the tiger.

* * * * *

Zhuang Xiao Li was not a nice man. Every once in a while, people would make circuits of martial arts competitions whose sole aim was to win at all costs, no matter what. They often couched their brutality in terms of honor and skill, saying that worthy opponents deserved no less than their best efforts and that it was the way of the ancients to practice as if the combat was real. But that was just candy, excuses made up to draw away from the fact that the little hard-eyed Chinese man was cruel and vicious. Peter approached him in his typical open, easygoing manner and was greeted with a wall of ice. Zhuang Li seldom even acknowledged his opponents other than to bow at them before a match, because failure to do so resulted in a foul which would affect the score.

Meg's internal alarms were screaming at her as Peter took the mat against the little Chinese, squaring off carefully and taking his time. The flag dropped and they began circling, feeling one another out for weakness or opening. Peter took Meg's advice and used feinting feints - feints performed with the off hand and using less polished attacks to lure an opponent into not looking for the bread-and-butter moves which won competitions, but Zhuang Li was too quick and - Meg hated to admit it - too good. He weaved expertly around Peter's casual

lunge punch and dropped a savage first reversal punch into Peter's armpit, so close to the edge of the pads that it was almost a foul. Peter grunted loudly and went back to his position rubbing his shoulder.

"Keep him away from you," Meg urged him. "Use those long legs, dammit."

Peter tried. Zhuang just threaded through Peter's defenses and landed another far-too-solid attack, this time at the junction of two pads. Peter's grunt when the punch landed had a touch of a groan in it. Meg was at war with herself - half of her wanted to run and comfort her lover, the other half to charge the savage little Oriental and teach him a lesson about brutality in competition.

"Give him some sauce," Meg said. "Don't let him think he can hurt you and not pay for it. Hit him back, Pete. Give him something to wear home."

Peter nodded. His face was dark and thunderous and Meg grabbed his wrist, forcing eye contact. "Cut that shit out right now, Barnett," she hissed. "You leave your anger off that mat or it's going to get you hurt. Ice cold. That's how you want to be. No pain, no mad, no fear. Cold and precise, or don't fight at all. Don't you dare go in mad."

Peter blinked. "You're right," he said, breathing heavily. "But damn, that hurt."

"I know it did, baby," Meg said. "Now hurt him."

Peter tried. Meg could see that he tried. But he was outmatched. The little Chinaman was twice as fast as her gangly fiancé and had an unnerving precision. All his blows seemed to land just at the edge of a padded area or at the junction of two pads. On the fourth point, Zhuang fired a full-on crescent kick high into Pete's short ribs and Meg could hear the crack all the way on the sideline. Peter sank to one knee, grimacing, and Meg got to his side without seemingly crossing the intervening space. She instinctively put her body between Peter and his opponent. Zhuang stood stock-still, emotionless.

"Son of a bitch," Peter said. "I blew it, red."

"Don't talk," Meg said. "You've got a couple broken ribs."

"I know," Peter said between gritted teeth. "Believe me, I know. I felt 'em give."

The U.S. Trainers got there and began helping Peter out of his pads. The referee stepped forward, a look of distaste on his face, and raised Zhuang Xiao Li's arm in victory. "The match is forfeit due to injury," he announced, dropping the Chinese champion's arm as if it were leprous. Dirty fighting was allowed, but never encouraged. The general feeling of the martial arts community was that savagery demeaned the sport in the same way that "kickboxer" movies did. People like Zhuang didn't help that. "Peter Barnett of the USA is eliminated from competition."

"Shit," Peter hissed softly. "Guess I picked the tiger."

"Can you stand?" Doug Johnson, the men's trainer, asked. Peter nodded painfully and struggled to his feet. Zhuang intercepted them to bow, as was custom. But it was mocking, as well, since Peter could obviously not return it. Before the tall American could protest, a hard-faced but gorgeous redhead stepped in front of him and returned the competition bow flawlessly, but just deep enough to avoid being insulting.

"You're in the way," Meg said icily.

The corner of Zhuang's mouth twitched. "Wildcat," he mused. He added something in Chinese which Meg didn't catch, but from the corner of her eye she saw Zhou Kim gasp and lower her eyes. Meg's eyebrows lowered, and in Irish she raised serious doubts to the Chinaman's ancestry.

"What did you say?" Zhuang asked.

"You tell me first."

Zhuang shrugged. "You don't want to know."

"Neither do you."

"I wanted to check on your man and see how badly he was injured," Zhuang said. "I hope I did not hurt him too badly. Is he all right?"

"No," Meg said. "You humiliated him."

"He was out of his league."

Something in Meg snapped. "And now you're out of yours."

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly what you think it does," Meg said coldly. "It means after tomorrow, you name the time and place and then try that shit on me. I won't be so easy to hit, I guarantee you."

"Me fight you?" Zhuang said. "I don't fight women."

"Uh-huh," Meg said. "I thought you'd be afraid to face off with me."

Zhou Kim was watching intently. "You've been challenged, Zhuang," she reminded her male counterpart. "And by another of equal standing in the competition. You can't refuse it."

Zhuang laughed. "What purpose will this serve? It will not get your man back into competition or heal his side. You're exposing yourself to injury for no reason, American."

"He's not *my* man. He's his own man. And the purpose of the exercise is not to get Peter back into competition or heal his side, it's to show you that you don't deserve an Olympic medal for competing the way you do. It's unfair and destructive and it demeans the whole art of taekwondo. You should be ashamed of yourself. Maybe a good whipping from a *guai-lo*, and a woman to boot, will be enough to open your mind and eyes. And my name is not *American*," Meg hissed. "It's Meghan, or Ms. Rutherford. I'd appreciate a little respect as your challenger. Or is your honor as lacking as your scruples?"

Zhuang sputtered and Meg could swear that she saw Zhou Kim struggling against laughter in the background. "Very well, *Ms. Rutherford*. After tomorrow's championship round, I will face you. Will a single match to five points be sufficient for you?"

"That should be plenty," Meg said.

Zhuang's smile was chilling. "I look forward to it."

"You won't like it once it starts," Meg said. "Tomorrow, then."

Peter looked at Meg hard. "You didn't have to do that," he said.

"Yes I did," Meg said. "For *me*. I have a point to prove."

"Meg, I don't think I need to remind you about your little cargo payload, do I?" Peter said quietly. "That little bastard hits *hard*. Do you really think this is a good idea, getting in the circle with that animal? He's gonna try to hurt you."

"One easy way to avoid that," Meg said coldly, lending Peter her shoulder for support as she assisted him down the steps and towards the locker room. "I'm not going to let him lay a fucking glove on me. He can't hurt what he can't touch."

* * * * *

The man in the suit ran headlong from the place he'd had beside the mat by the steps towards the locker room to the outside foyer, someplace where his cellular phone could transmit unobstructed. He hit a speed dial key and motioned impatiently for the long sequence of tones to cycle and for the line to ring.

Finally. "Murray Holman. This had better be good."

The man spoke in a hurried whisper. "Murray, it's Kevin Lesh," he said. "What's slated for the 8.00 spot tomorrow night? More track and field?"

"Boxing," Murray said. "And some soccer highlights, too, I think. You called me long distance at three in the morning my time to ask me this?"

"Take 'em off, all of 'em," Kevin said. "I got the fight of the century lined up."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Meg Rutherford and that body of hers splashed up all over US prime time tearing the legs off the Chinese men's champ," Kevin said.

"Get the fuck out of here."

"Honest," Kevin continued. "You've read how this Chinese guy keeps sending people home with injuries right and left, right? Well, he up and picked on the wrong guy today. Broke some ribs on Meg's boyfriend while she was on the sideline. Barnett's eliminated from the competition and the Chinaman goes over to rub his nose in it. Well, Meg gets pissed. She wasn't three feet in front of me and she starts reading this guy the riot act in a couple different languages. Says she's out to show him that there's no place in martial arts for people playing that rough and that the Chinaman can name the time or place. He picked right after the medal ceremonies. This is gonna be better than when she K.O.'ed Lisa McByrne at Nationals this year. We're talking cover of the sports page, Murray."

"Kevin, you're beautiful. I'm calling the network right now. You set everything up."

"No problem," Kevin said. "It should only take a couple hours to get everything ready."

"Then why are you wasting time talking to me?"

* * * * *

"All right, so I fucked up!" Meg shouted. "It's not the end of the world!"

"Meg, when is it going to dawn on you what this guy is?" Peter shot back. "He's not exactly going to go easy on you because you're a girl. You de-balled him in public!"

"I don't want him to go easy on me!" Meg said. "I don't go for that 'I'm only a girl' shit, Pete, and you know it! So stop putting it up in my face. I'm doing this for both of us."

"What about the kid, Meg? This guy's a goddamn savage, and you're going to spar to five with him with a *baby* in your belly? Jesus, what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking, he broke your ribs, and if I was still Mark I'd've stuffed him for it. And think I thought, I'm still Mark on the inside. And I'm still gonna stuff him for it."

"This is about revenge?" Peter said bitterly.

"Fuck you," Meg hissed. "You know better than that."

"Then enlighten me, red! What in God's name *is* this about? Because I don't understand any of it! You've done nothing but agonize over your knee and the kid and how the competition's so tough on them, and then the first chance you get you jump in the ring with a man-eater just to prove you still can?"

"God, how blind are you?" Meg shouted. "It's not just you! Billy Hardwell has a massive sprain from this clown. Rob Holt got three teeth chipped and a hyperextended shoulder. You have three broken ribs. And the judges do *nothing*! Why? The same reason it always is in international competition, Pete! Because us 'barbarians' profane their sport. They beat shit out of us with dirty tricks and the judges just kinda look the other way. Always have. But an American boy throws a punch on the pad-line and he's reprimanded officially, fouled. It has to change."

"And why the hell are *you* the one that has to change it?" Peter yelled.

"Because I'm a first," Meg shot back hotly. "Haven't you seen it? There's not a whole lot of Americans in the crowds here, Pete. But there are a lot of people yelling for me. Brazilians, Australians, Italians, people from all over the damn world. Hell, the Ukranian women's gymnastic team sent me flowers the other day! People *notice* what I do out there, you idiot! And if I protest the treatment of Caucasian athletes in the martial arts, then the Olympic committee will look into it. So four years from now, when you come back, some bastard won't be able to walk away scot-free after breaking your ribs!"

"Oh, so now it's a blow for Caucasian rights."

Meg threw up her hands. "No matter what I do, you're gonna make it sound wrong."

"Because of one simple fact, Meg. *You're carrying our child*. It's one thing for legitimate competition, I know you can take care of yourself. But this guy took me apart like I was a white belt, sugar," he protested. "He's really damn good."

"And you don't think I can take him?"

"The caveat has always been to not let anybody lay a glove on you," Peter said. "And no, I don't think you can go five with this guy and block everything he sends your way. You're the best I've ever seen, Meg. I have no doubt you can take this clown in five. But I don't think you can take him five to nothing. I don't think anybody could."

"Wanna bet?"

Peter scrubbed a hand through his short hair. "You're impossible."

"And you're not listening," Meg said. "I'm going to take this asshole down tomorrow, Pete. With or without you in my corner. I'd like it better if you were there."

Peter looked at her long and hard. "Just promise me something," he said. "Don't let that son of a bitch touch our baby. It's gonna be hard enough to stand to one side and watch him swing at you."

Ω



SUMMARY: Two friends find themselves victims of a science experiment which turns them into women who now must deal with their new life and their changing relationship with their girlfriends. part nine

ALL THAT GLITTERS, Part IX (Chapters 22-Epilogue)

By Valerie Hope

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: The fight of the century

MEG PUT HER BARE FEET up on the balcony rail and took another leisurely drag off her Honduran stogie, her mind wandering back to the States, to Cassie and Heath and Faith and Dennis Mendoza and Dr. Tolliver, wondering what the normal people in her life were busy doing while she was out reforming the world of international tournament martial arts. Maybe Peter was right. Maybe she was going to five with this animal just to prove that she still could. Meg was as far from Mark as she'd ever been and there was no going back. From here on out she'd have to give up every shred of male life in order to be that quintessence of womanhood, a mother. Maybe challenging Zhuang Li was Mark's last gasp before dying.

No time for doubts now, Meg thought to herself, letting the blue acrid smoke curl from her sensuous lips. I threw down my glove and he picked it up. I can't back out. But even if I could, I wouldn't. Meg Rutherford spent the first twenty-four years of her life being Mark Rutherford. Mark's my friend. I love the guy. If he needs one more gasp, one more chance to be a man, then it's the least I can do, right? Give Mark the opportunity to stand for his principles one more time.

The thought made her feel better, and the challenge became less of a vengeance and more of a celebration of Mark's life and times. She actually began to look forward to the match for that reason. She took another leisurely pull from the cigar and let the nicotine relax her, wondering idly if her keeping this tradition was harming the baby in any way.

Jesus, Meg thought. Seems like everything I do has a potential for hurting the baby. I'm going to make a terrible mother. I just hope maternal instinct is genetic, because if it isn't I'm not going to have the faintest clue what in the hell I'm doing.

There was a knock at her door. Meg padded across the tile floor in her bare feet and peered through to see Susan and Hannah waiting outside. Surprised, Meg admitted them.

"What are you guys doing here?" Meg asked.

"Came to bless the fight with you," Hannah said. "But since neither one of us likes cigars, we opted for booze, if you don't mind. We just wanted to wish you luck tomorrow."

"Thanks," Meg said, smiling. "Come make yourselves comfortable."

The two women shucked their jackets and followed Meg out onto the small balcony. Hannah dug into a paper sack and brought out a liter bottle of Stolichnaya vodka, taking a generous belt from the bottle before passing it across to Susan. The little blonde stretched out her knee painfully and relaxed against the wall, sighing contentedly as the vodka burned its way to her stomach.

"How's the knee?" Meg asked.

"Sore," Susan said, "but I didn't get anything worse than a bruise. It's not a career-ender."

"Good," Meg said. "You had that bronze locked up going in. You'll get it next time."

"Oh, I don't know," Susan said. "I may try going back to swimming or something. I don't know if I want to stay in taekwondo much longer."

"Why not?" Meg asked.

"To be honest, it was you who put the idea in my head. When you started thinking about how competition might mess up your chances to have a baby, I got to thinking pretty hard. I don't want anything like that to happen to me. I have every intention of being a mom someday. I mean, tae kwon is a lot of fun, but it's not worth losing my chance to have kids."

Hannah yawned. "How is Junior doing, Megs?" she asked.

Meg rubbed her belly happily. "Quiet and peaceful right now," she said. "The doctors say he won't start kicking me for another couple of months."

"It's nice watching you glow," Hannah said. "I mean, I never used to think about babies. *Never*. I'm an athlete, for God's sake. But then I see how happy and contented you are, like you know this big secret that no one else does, and it just gets me thinking."

"Me too," Susan said. "At this rate, we'll all be baby-making machines, because every time one of us sees one of the others pregnant we're all gonna want to jump on the bandwagon."

Meg started laughing uncontrollably. "It just dawned on me," she giggled. "I'm sitting here barefoot and pregnant. Peter would shit himself."

"Hell, Megs, you make it look sexy," Hannah said.

"Thanks," the redhead replied. "You're pretty damn cute yourself, Stills."

Hannah blinked. "I keep forgetting you notice stuff like that."

"You kidding? Even Pete thinks you're gorgeous and he only likes leggy redheads," Meg said. "At least, he *better* only like leggy redheads."

"I don't know, he used to have a thing for short, energetic blondes," Susan said. "Maybe next week he'll have it bad for willowy Chinese girls or Hindi female bodybuilders."

"Ah, he knows I'd kick his ass if he did," Meg said. "That's the comfortable thing about Pete's and my relationship. Mutually assured destruction."

"Yeah, that is nice," Hannah said.

Meg's brow wrinkled. "You sound as if you have first-hand knowledge."

Hannah blushed crimson. "Well."

"Don't tell me you've slept with Peter too," Meg said. "Jesus, the boy gets around."

"No, not Peter," Hannah said. "But the thought *has* crossed my mind."

"Tell, tell," Susan said, passing the bottle.

"I just had to tell somebody," Hannah said with a wide smile. "I'm in love."

"With who?"

"Billy Hardwell," Hannah said. "He and I have been spending a lot of time together since he got injured, watching you guys compete and wandering around the Olympics together. Then yesterday, after the women's volleyball game, he kissed me. And kissed me, and kissed me. you get the idea."

Susan laughed out loud. "I didn't want to say anything, but you had that look on your face all day yesterday. Meg calls it the 'I-Just-Got-Some' smile."

"It had been almost three years since I'd been with anybody," Hannah confessed. "I'm still a little shaky in the legs. I'm glad I don't have to compete tomorrow."

"I only made that mistake once," Meg said. "Pete and I managed a quickie in the venue between the end of his quarterfinal round and the beginning of mine. I fought the first three matches with rubber legs and we haven't done that again. And I get a little, um. musky when I do that. I know the judge could smell it. I absolutely reeked of sex."

Hannah and Susan collapsed against one another in a fit of laughing. "I remember that," Hannah said between peals of laughter. "I thought it was somebody else."

"Nope, it was me," Meg laughed. "The whole *world* knows it when I get laid."

"For more reasons than one," Susan said. "You and Peter woke up the whole east wing at the Training Center one night. You should learn to be more quiet, Meg."

Meg raised an eyebrow both accusingly and seductively. She hadn't been with Peter the night in question, and she certainly hadn't been the one making all the noise. Susan blushed but managed to keep laughing. Hannah didn't seem to pick up on the exchange, which made Susan laugh even harder.

"Ah, there's no crime in being a screamer," Hannah said. "I'm a screamer myself. It just feels so damn good, I want to do something about it. Problem is, I can't concentrate long enough to speak."

"I've never known a girl who was a talker," Meg said. "I don't think they exist."

"I can manage to repeat 'Oh God' a lot," Susan put in.

"My roommate in summer camp my freshman year in high school," Hannah said. "We were counselors and Paula decided to bring home a 'friend.' I got to sit outside on the porch with the mosquitoes while she did the deed, and she talked the whole time."

"That's got to be annoying," Meg said. "Could you hear what she was saying?"

"Wasn't listening," Hannah said. "I was kinda grossed out by the whole thing. That guy she was with had real bad acne and every time I thought about somebody trying to kiss him I got nauseous."

"No fair," Susan said. "I had acne."

"Oh, gimme a break," Hannah said. "I was thirteen years old. If a guy wasn't Corey Haim or the singer from Tears for Fears, then he was gross according to me."

"I had it bad for the Tears for Fears guy too," Susan said.

Meg snorted. "Odd man out," she said. "I wanted Joan Jett. Something about those black leather pants really did it to me for some reason."

Susan, who was feeling the effects of the booze, broke into a chorus of 'I Hate Myself for Loving You,' which Hannah quickly joined while Meg provided the guitar riff. They finished only to hear a group of people a floor below them on a similar balcony applaud and request 'Freebird.'

"Sorry, don't do Skynyrd," Susan called. "This is an all-eighties weekend."

The people downstairs broke into a chorus of 'Everybody Wants to Rule the World' and they were followed by a group of Aussies across the courtyard who provided a lovely rendition of 'Who Can it Be Now?' by the Men at Work. The evening's concert ended with everyone collectively bawling out the words to the 'Safety Dance.'

Meg put out the cigar, tossing the stump into the bushes below her window and letting the smoke out in a long plume towards the night sky. "I hate to end this, guys, but I need my sleep."

Hannah stood and helped Susan up. The blonde worked through the stiffness in the knee quickly and got her weight beneath her once again before wrapping Meg in a huge hug. "Good luck tomorrow, red. I know you'll do well, silver or gold."

"That's not the important fight, though," Hannah said. "I wanted you to know that I think what you're doing is right and the reasons are right, too. That guy shouldn't be able to get away with that kind of shit. Just make sure he doesn't hurt you or Junior in there."

"Don't worry," Meg said. "I'll keep him back."

"We love you, Meg," Susan said. "Me, Hannah, Rob, all of us. We're so proud of you."

Meg felt herself tear up. "Great. Here we go again. You must be *this* tall to ride the Pregnancy Hormone Roller Coaster," she said. "I love you guys, too. I'm proud to be teammates with you."

"I don't know what we're going to do when this is over," Susan said. "No more Three Musketeers. I might leave the sport, you'll be a mommy."

"Well, I've been giving that a lot of thought," Meg said. "Peter and I are definitely moving back to Houston after we're married. But I have a lot of money now, lots more than I ever thought I'd have. He and I are going to open a dojo together. One that trains Olympic hopefuls specifically. I talked to Dorothy right before the semifinals and she thinks I'd make a great coach, and she wants to step down and have some kids of her own."

"Meg, what are you saying?" Susan asked.

"I'm saying that I'd really like you to be on the Olympic team in four years, Suse," Meg said. "You and Hannah both. Either that or on staff with me. I'm gonna be the coach."

"You bum!" Hannah cried. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I didn't know for sure if it was what I wanted," Meg said. "But I don't know if I can leave the sport, Hannah. I love it so much. But even though the knee's shot to hell, that doesn't mean I have to leave it completely. I just can't compete any more."

"Count me in," Hannah said, and Susan nodded as well.

"I love you guys," Meg said, hugging them again. "You're even welcome to move to Houston with me and Pete and help run the dojo. We're going to pay well, and I'm already getting asked to train by the Canadians too. On top of being what I want to do with my life, I think I can make a good living doing it, too."

"We'll see," Susan said. "It sounds nice."

"Now get out of here before I start crying again," Meg said, wiping her eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow morning, okay?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Susan said before closing the door.

* * * *

"Hello, this is John Tesh with Carrie Kwan, live from the Barrington Pavilion in Sydney, Australia for the finals of the Women's Taekwondo Tournament," the tall blonde man said, his image laid over a crowd shot of the people trying to crowd into the already overstuffed pavilion. "In about ten minutes, American women's champion Meghan Rutherford is going to face off against the Korean champ, Soon E, to see who takes home the silver and who takes home the gold medal."

"This is the first time in Olympic history that an American has ever had a shot at the gold medal in this event," Carrie Kwan said. "This is a sport that is traditionally dominated by the Koreans, Chinese and Japanese. The Americans and Canadians have always managed a good, strong showing, but the best we can usually hope for is a bronze."

"And the bronze medal has already been decided in an earlier match," Tesh said. "The Chinese women's champion Zhou Kim edged out Kee Yan Hanh from the Philippines for third place. The men's competition finished this morning, as well, giving the gold medal to Chinese champion Zhuang Xiao Li, the silver to James Matsusheda from Japan and the bronze to Hao Yan of China. As many of you know, Meg Rutherford issued a challenge to Zhuang Xiao Li after last night's semifinals in protest of the judges' not issuing a reprimand to the gold medalist for excessive force in competition against Meg's fiancé, Peter Barnett. Barnett suffered two cracked ribs and was eliminated from competition and medal contention."

"Unfortunately, that's sometimes just the way it goes in this sport," Carrie said. "But, as you can see from the replay, the hit is questionable - any blow that lands on an area without pads is considered a foul, and Zhuang landed his attacks right on the line here, here and here. But the judges have to take into consideration whether or not the fouls were on purpose. I want to agree with Meg, simply because Zhuang Li landed his hits repeatedly on the pad-line, almost as if he was aiming for it. And hits which fall on the pad-line, I can tell you from experience, hurt twice as much."

"But a challenge, Carrie? Isn't that reserved for the round between semifinals and finals?"

"Challenges are very common in the dojo, John," Carrie explained. "It's how students in most dojos improve their chances of progressing through the belt levels, which is very important on the tournament circuit. If you want to compete at the blue belt level and you only have a green belt, then you work extra and study and challenge a blue belt who's willing to take you on to see if you can advance. Challenges are also the traditional way to dispose of quarrels and grievances inside the dojo, which makes Meg's actions completely legal under tournament procedure. She appealed to the judges and when they wouldn't support her, she decided to challenge. It's very odd to see challenges between men and women's competition, but there are no rules against it at all. This won't affect the medal standings at all. It really doesn't have anything to do with the Olympics whatsoever."

"And we'll be bringing you coverage of the challenge between the two champions after the gold medal round," Tesh said. "Carrie, what is the difference between this competition and those before it?"

"John, the previous competitions have all been single matches to five points," Carrie said. "This is actually a tournament, where the winner will be decided on who has the better score of three matches."

"Meg's record and Soon E's record are about equally as impressive," Tesh said. "What can we expect to see down there this afternoon, Carrie?"

"Soon E and Meg are night and day as far as fighting styles are concerned," Carrie went on. "Soon E is a much quicker, more aggressive opponent with a lot of speed and energy, where Meg tends to wait for her opponent to overextend and fights much more calmly and fluidly. But I don't think that Meg is going to have the luxury of waiting for Soon E to slip up. She's got to play for three times as many points now and I think we're going to see Meg Rutherford take a lot more chances out there than we're used to seeing her take. And Soon isn't going to be able to use those whirlwind attacks which mow down opponents before they're ready. Meg's one of the best on the mat, and she's the kind of martial artist that concerns competitors the most - she's a thinker. She goes through the competition in her head a thousand times before she takes the mat, and she'll be prepared for things that would take a different competitor completely by surprise."

"Thank you, Carrie, and now let's go to the floor and Michael Hicks. Mike?"

The shot cut to one of the numerous location correspondents who were populating the venues, a bright-faced polished young man armed with a remote feed, a headset and a microphone. "Thanks, John, I'm here with Soon E, minutes before her competition. Soon, great competition so far. How are you feeling about this upcoming match?"

"I feel good," the Korean girl said. "I'm loose and in good shape and the injuries I've gathered up through the competition aren't bothering me a bit. I have a good feeling."

"Has the hype surrounding Meg Rutherford influenced your concentration any?"

"No," Soon said with a winning smile. "While I was training in Seoul this year, all I kept hearing was Meg Rutherford this, Meg Rutherford that. But let me tell you, Meg doesn't carry hype. As one martial artist to another, she really *is* that good and deserves every compliment she's gotten. I've really been looking forward to competing against her. I mean, Korea has a long and proud tradition to uphold, so I'm just going to give this competition all I have and hope I make my country proud."

"I don't see how you couldn't, Soon," the commentator said, patting the girl's shoulder before leading the remote through the crowd of photographers and venue staff to where Meg waited on the bench beside both the US Men's and Women's taekwondo teams. She was staring at the mat in concentration, holding tight to Peter Barnett's hand while he murmured into her ear.

"Meg? Michael Hicks from ABC sports. How are you feeling?"

Meg looked peaked, but managed a glittering smile. "Glad to be here. I'm a little tight right now. There's a whole lot of people watching to see how I do."

"How's the knee?"

"Not bad," Meg said. "The docs have looked at it and say it shouldn't slow me down today."

"What can you tell me about this upcoming competition?"

"It's a big one," Meg said. "Probably one of the most important bouts of my career, and up against one of the toughest competitors I've ever seen. It's going to take a lot, but it took a lot to get here and be where I am right now. Either way it goes out there, I've done what I set out to do, which was to get an American up on that stand at the end of this competition and break the lock which the Koreans and Chinese have always kept."

"And what about the challenge you've issued to Zhuang Xiao Li?"

"One match at the time, please," Meg said. "I can't think about that right now."

* * * * *

The ABC goon backed off and the camera pointed away before Meg sagged a little against Peter. "I wish they wouldn't bother me right before a match," the redhead sighed.

"You're gonna be all right, red," Peter breathed.

"I can't believe I have morning sickness," Meg grumped. "On today, of *all* days."

"Need anything, babe?" Peter asked.

Meg looked down at her belly. "Junior, you have worse timing than your daddy."

"Try to relax, Meg," Hannah said. "I'd be willing to bet that most of this is nerves. Once you're out there you'll be all right."

"Thanks," Meg said. She closed her sparkling green eyes and began to concentrate fiercely, shutting out the crowds and the noise and even the close presences of the people she loved to become coldly, strongly alone. When she opened her eyes again, it was to pull on her brain-bucket and walk to the mat to bow to the judges and to Soon E. She didn't even hear the applause which was making the rafters ring.

Meg shoved it all aside, exhaling all her tension and misery in one long breath. She felt as if she'd been beaten and fatigue clawed at her, but through force of will she managed to stand tall and look cool and unassailable. Soon asked her if she was feeling all right. Meg automatically nodded yes.

Come on, Rutherford, a voice said in her head. One that was familiar but long forgotten.

Mark?

Yeah, me, Mark said. *Come on. You can do this. We've been working towards this, both of us, for both our lives. Every road we've ever been on has led here. We're prepared.*

We have morning sickness, high-pockets, Meg reminded him dryly, idly wondering if she'd gone crazy, and if so did it really matter. A ready answer was not forthcoming.

Yeah, well, Murphy was an optimist, Mark chuckled. *We gonna let that stop us?*

Do we have a choice?

Remember when we were a boy and we played that tournament on a sprained ankle?

Yeah, Meg thought. It was the hardest-earned trophy on the shelf.

Think how much more an Olympic medal will mean if you have to overcome yourself to get it.

You still always know just what to say, Meg said. No wonder Cassie couldn't resist you.

Meg, I'm proud of you. You've done quite well with my life. Our life.

Thanks. I miss you.

I'm around. All you have to do is call and I'll be here.

Good. Why don't you stick around for this match? I could use the advice.

Meg heard laughter in her head. I was hoping you'd ask.

There was a feeling of something closing, something sealing shut and becoming impervious inside her. And the fatigue and pain melted away. Meg bowed to the judges and dropped into a deep stance, ready to fight. And fight she did.

Soon E's pattern was so long as to appear random, but after a few point exchanges, Meg and Mark saw it and picked up on the sequence. The Korean came on in a rapid-fire flurry, trying to use a blitzkrieg to force opponents onto the defensive and hopefully get the quick kill. But the storm was over almost as soon as it begun and she began to play conservative and almost sloppy. Meg recognized it as bait immediately - designed to lure an opponent out to exploit perceived weakness. Then back to the rapid-fire stuff. It was like the Korean champ was using only first and fifth gears and ignoring second, third and fourth. Using her innate timing, Meg anticipated the transition from fast to slow and came on as strong and quick as she could, using wide kicks and spins to make best advantage of her longer legs. It was the last thing that Soon E expected and it cost her the first match, 6-4. The little Korean went back to the bench deep in thought and conversation with her coach, frantically trying to redesign the strategy which had worked flawlessly the entire competition until now.

Nice and easy, Mark coached. Save the knee. Little steps and deep breaths.

Mark, are you happy with the way things have turned out?

Now's not the time, Meg.

It's important to me. I mean, for a while I thought I'd killed you. Now I find you right here, inside, doing fine. I really need to know if you hate me for taking everything.

You didn't take anything, Mark scolded gently. I gave. I decided to become you. You were the one without the choice. If anything, I should be asking you if you hate me for shoving you into a world where you didn't have the faintest idea what was going on.

How could I hate you? You're me.

Exactly. And yes, I am happy. I'm here, in the gold medal round of the Olympics. I'm going to have a baby - I never thought I'd get to feel that and it's the most incredible, humbling experience in the world. I'm in love. Not like I'm used to being in love, like we were with

Cassie, but this stuff with Peter isn't bad. It's different. The feeling of safety and being cherished is really nice. And the sex is good too.

Do you miss Cassie?

As much as you do, Meg. You were in love with her too.

I think I was in love with the idea of her. I hope we didn't hurt her too much, Meg thought.

I don't think we did. She's figuring it all out, and she has David.

He's a prick.

You sound like a guy again, Mark teased. So he's a prick. He's her prick, that's what matters.

I wish you'd let me know you were around earlier.

You were having fun. So was I. And I thought that before, when you were still figuring stuff out, that my showing up would have been the worst thing I could do to you. the last thing you needed was to be reminded that you used to be me. You needed to be you. But now - you need me. And you remember how much I like to feel needed.

I've always needed you, Mark.

Good, Mark thought. 'Cause you're not getting rid of me. You're never alone.

Love you, big brother, Meg thought smilingly. Now coach. We're up.

The redhead took the mat, pulling on her headgear and putting in the mouthpiece, sizing up her opponent anew. Soon E had the look in her almond-shaped eyes of someone who was about to try an all-or-nothing gambit. Heath had always called it the "Here-Goes-Nothing" look. It brought up a bubble of nervousness in Meg which she quickly shelved.

The flag dropped and Soon E shifted stance, dropping deep and keeping to the foul line. She was fighting very conservatively and waiting for Meg to extend. The two fighters circled warily, trying to figure out what the other was thinking.

We're going to turn into butter if we keep circling, Mark said. Somebody's got to take the initiative. I don't think it's going to be her.

Suggestions?

There was a pause. Everybody knows about the bum knee. It's a known quantity. Every expects you to show up low and quick, no high extensions. Take it in high and hard. It's a risk and exposes the knee, but she'll never expect it. Shock value alone should clinch it.

Meg pivoted inside and sprung into a lightning-fast axe kick which arced down like a scythe through the harsh lighting of the venue. Soon sank onto her heels and tried to receive the kick across the forearms, but Meg was too damn fast this time. The kick landed solidly across the Korean's collarbones.

Soon rose from the mat with Meg's assistance, and the slender girl was laughing heartily. "Mental note," she said. "Never try to predict Meghan Rutherford."

"You okay?" Meg asked her.

"Fine," Soon replied. "I grew up with three brothers. They gave me worse every day of my life."

Meg squeezed her shoulder. "Ready?"

Soon nodded, still laughing a little, and stuffed her mouthpiece back in.

I don't think I'm ever going to get used to that completely, Mark said.

Yeah, it's nice. I actually like women's competition better because nobody's measuring their dicks anymore. I actually care what happens to these people after the matches.

Meg knew that she couldn't use the same move twice or Soon E would home in on the weak knee immediately and take the match away from her. Meg had the advantage and pressed it, keeping the Korean's heels on the foul-line and working her outside blocks, but Soon's defense was flawless. Meg was forced to overextend just to reach her and as a result lost the match, 4-6.

She plopped down on the bench, pulling off her brain-bucket and Peter's arms were around her instantly. She'd been gratified to discover that broken ribs hadn't made her fiancé hug one bit less as hard. "You're doing great, red," he said. "Hang in there."

"Lost my momentum," Meg said. "She's so damn *fast*."

Fast, Mark repeated. *How do we beat fast?*

Patient beats fast. Patient doesn't work with her.

There's another way.

What else beats fast?

Faster.

We still have another really important match tonight, Mark.

And it won't mean shit if you have a silver around your neck, sister.

Lady or the tiger time, huh.

She felt Mark's sardonic grin. *Just get in there and kick her ass. We'll worry about Zhuang Li once we've sung the National Anthem up on that stand over there, okay?*

Meg stood strongly, stretched her hamstrings, kissed her fiancé and took the mat.

The entire competition, the redhead had been conservative about her knee, trying to look at the tournament as a whole instead of going match-to-match. It was an unexpected relief when she suddenly stopped letting the knee be a concern and fought the way she had before the injury. The flamboyant moves took Soon E completely by surprise, rocking her back on her heels and taking away the final match 5-3, the final point coming as a side kick which threaded through Soon E's defenses like a phantom.

Meg just stood there. The applause was deafening - most of the American athletes who weren't competing were there and all of Meg's accumulated following, screaming their heads off. She snapped out of it a little, pulling off her headgear with a toss of her wild red mane and bowing to the judges automatically. In the background, the Allman Brothers song

started again. Soon E hugged her so tight as to almost hurt and the two of them were caught up in a mob hug as they were simultaneously hit by the entire US bench.

Deep within the pile and press of people, Meg's lips found Peter's and she held him tight against her, kissing him desperately as the numbness wore off and the expanding, almost painful joy began to fill her soul. "I love you," she whispered to him. She could almost hear Mark smile.

* * * * *

She'd joked about it with Heath, long ago and in another lifetime, but there was no avoiding the tears. Meg stood atop the highest tier of the platform, alongside Soon E and Zhou Kim, her slender arms laden with flowers, and bent her head to receive the gold medal around her neck from the Olympic committee representative. The medal was much heavier than she'd imagined, but it felt good. It felt like it belonged on her neck. And as the rack was raised with the stars-and-stripes higher than the yin-yang and trigrams on white of Korea and the gold star on scarlet of the People's Republic of China, and when the orchestra began playing the "Star Spangled Banner," nothing human could have kept back the tears. Meg bawled uncontrollably, her chin dimpled with emotion as she sang her national anthem and the news cameras ate it up for the highlights films. Even the jaded sportscasters had to admit that they were hard pressed to remember seeing a more beautiful girl in their lifetimes.

In Houston, Heath Crenshaw cried too. He'd known he would.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: A matter between men

MEG RETREATED INSTANTLY INTO THE locker room to escape the reporters, sitting heavily on the bench and stripping out of her pads and *gi*. Susan entered a bit later, carrying food and water and setting it down in front of Meg.

"You'd better try and eat something," she said.

"I don't know if I can," Meg said, "but I can use the water."

Susan gave her a tight hug. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks," Meg said. "One more. I feel like if I don't win this one, the gold doesn't count."

"Of course it counts. You won it," Susan countered. "Can I see it?"

Meg smiled. "Sure."

Susan took the medal and turned it over twice in her hands. "It's heavy," she commented, running her fingertips across the surface of the medallion. "Maybe in four years I'll have one of these. Or one of *those*." She pointed meaningfully at Meg's belly.

"Maybe both," Meg said. "It *is* possible."

Susan passed the medal back to its owner. "I hope nobody ever tells you what you can't do," she said. "It's almost like you could fly because nobody every told you it wasn't possible."

"Did you see Zhuang out there?" Meg asked.

"Yeah, he's out looking moody and intense. He was giving an interview on Chinese television last I saw him. Probably telling everyone back home how he was going to crush the *guai-lo* girl."

"Let him," Meg said. "It'll just make it that much sweeter when I show the world that you don't have to be born in the Far East to be the best at this."

"One more thing," Susan said. "Peter told me to tell you that Gregg Allman just landed with the band at Sydney International Airport. They're setting up for tonight in Memorial Circle."

"Wow," Meg said, giggling. "My dad would be so jealous."

"Dorothy also says that your agent's been trying to call you every hour for six days, and you can't get into your room for all the flowers people have been sending you. Pete also says that now that the competition is over, the two of you can get a room together at a hotel if you want."

"Tell him I want," Meg said. "It would be real nice to sleep beside my future husband."

Susan smiled. "I'm happy for you, Meg."

"Oh, Suse," Meg sighed, hugging her friend. "I know you don't believe me, but I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you. Hannah and Pete and Rob too, but you in particular."

Susan sniffled. "Thanks," she said. "Wanna fool around?"

"Yeah, actually," Meg said, smiling. "But I have something I gotta do first."

* * * * *

The judges sat back down as Meg took the mat and bowed, taking up a position across from Zhuang Xiao Li. She tucked her headgear beneath one lissome arm and stood calmly in front of the men's champion, restating her challenge according to dojo custom.

"I object to this man's rough treatment of his fellow competitors," she said. "I feel that he uses more force than is necessary to win his competitions and purposefully directs his attacks towards unprotected areas on his opponents. Since the judges of his matches have not chosen to reprimand him for his actions, I call for new judges and my right of challenge to decide this grievance."

The judges nodded. "Carry on," the *o-sensei* said. "One match to five points. Zhuang Xiao Li, if you lose you will receive an official reprimand, but it will not affect your standing or take away your medal. Meghan Rutherford, if you lose then you forfeit the right to challenge this man in the future and the judges' previous decision stands. Do you accept this?"

Meg bowed low. "Thank you."

Zhuang bowed as low as necessary and no lower to the judges, and the disrespect did not go unnoticed. Even the Chinese men's coach looked aghast and whispered urgently to the rest of the Chinese men's team before fixing his gold medallist with a venomous scowl.

Keep it up, Zhuang old boy, Meg thought happily. You'll defeat yourself.

"I hope you are ready, woman," Zhaung said acidly. "Now you will find out what it is when men fight. I do not intend to treat you any differently than I would any other opponent, man or woman."

"Nor I," Meg said. "Good luck."

The Chinese champion sneered.

"One more thing," the stunning redhead added. "I didn't add this into the challenge, since it has no business in front of the judges, but it does concern you and I. If you ever land an unpadded blow on one of my teammates - *particularly* the man I'm about to marry - again, we'll do this over and over until you finally get the point. If you need to hit somebody off the pads, then you come hit me."

"A pleasure," Li said, bowing mockingly.

The compact Chinaman lowered himself into a wide riding stance, hands up and at the ready to guard from Meg's speed attack which had won the match against Soon E. Meg adopted a higher back-stance, opting to stick to her bread-and-butter until she had this guy felt out.

He came on quickly and decisively, but not fast enough. Meg grunted as Zhuang's side skip-kick fell across her forearms with clearly twice as much force as was necessary. Apparently the Chinese champion had something to prove as well. Meg took his reverse sweep hard on the wrist.

That son of a bitch! Meg thought. He's trying to K.O. me!

Then hit him back, Mark answered. You know where to hit to drop somebody. Get in there and put him away, girl. You did it to Heath and this guy's a pussy compared. No offense.

Meg grunted as she blocked another way-too-hard combination punch. *None taken.*

She slid around the next punch like quicksilver and shot a lightning-fast punch up the length of Zhuang's arm towards his exposed armpit with as much 'sauce' on it as she dared muster. He reversed his off hand and intercepted her attack, catching her wrist roughly and bending it backwards, choking her momentum and placing her balance in serious jeopardy.

When pushed or pulled, give way, she thought as she let Zhuang lead her by the wrist, falling backwards to pivot over her wide hip and snap a brutal snap-kick into the side of Zhuang's head. The Chinaman's head snapped to the side roughly and he grunted in pain as Meg pirouetted to her feet, hands at the ready.

"Point black!" the referee called. "One to nil!"

Zhuang grumbled something obviously obscene in Chinese, to which Meg responded with something equally as unflattering in Irish. The referee blinked in confusion, then raised the flag.

"Fight!"

Li came on like a hurricane, his anger apparent. Meg relaxed a little under the onslaught, taking the vicious attacks on her pads and hoping the bruises this asshole was leaving on her forearms and elbows wouldn't be too ugly tomorrow. The Chinese champ was throwing his attacks as hard as he could, an obvious object lesson for the upstart American girl, and she was weaving around them like a pro and not letting the ferocious attacks slow her up.

Then he overextended, trying to land a side-kick into Meg's midsection, which she seemed to be protecting fiercely. Perhaps she had an injury there which she was trying to guard and Zhuang decided to try for it. She rolled inside him and trapped his attacking foot, simultaneously sweeping out his plant leg with a kick and landing an axe-kick into his sternum that left him panting for breath and groaning.

Meg helped him up and whispered, "Hurts, doesn't it?"

"You'll answer for that," Zhuang growled. "I see how you guard your midsection. An injury there? Something that will hurt you when I hit it?"

Meg's eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. "One other competitor threatened me with injury," she hissed. "She's in the hospital now. You make one move towards my midsection and I'll put you in there next to her. Don't think I can't or I won't."

The referee raised the flag. "Fight!"

Zhuang didn't waste time - he came in strong, all his rock-solid kicks battering at her defenses around the midsection. On the sideline, Peter tensed hard, his hands balled into fists. He found himself hoping the jails in Sydney had comfortable beds, because if that bastard laid one hand on his baby he was going to kill him. But he was also comforted by the fact that he was sure Meg felt the same way exactly.

Meg finally deflected one of the belly shots into her own defenses and took the kick on her shoulder hard enough to spin her around and land on the mat face-down. The *coup-de-grace* came unbelievably fast into Meg's kidneys, right on the pad-line. Meg cried out as the kick landed and sprang to her feet with a murderous look in her eyes right as the ref got between them.

"Late hit, white! Your opponent was down! Foul!"

"Gimme a second," Meg told the referee and moved to the edge of the mat to remove her forearm pad, careful to let the cameras see the bruises and blood which blocking Li's attacks was causing. She taped her arms with gauze to staunch the bleeding, giving Peter a "don't-worry" look, re-padded, and took the mat opposite her opponent.

"You okay, black?" the referee asked.

"Just fine," she hissed, sticking in her mouthpiece.

"Both of you, settle down," the referee cautioned. "This is starting to turn into a brawl and I won't have it. You're here to settle a grievance, not beat each other senseless."

"I believe otherwise," Zhuang Li said.

"Then you're about to get yourself sent to the lockers and you'll lose by forfeit," the ref shot back angrily. "You too, Meg. I mean it. Settle down out there or I'm going to end this."

Meg fixed the ref with a stern look. "All due respect, sir, but this whole match is about what you're talking about right now. I've sat back and watched this guy beat the snot out of opponent after opponent and the officials have done nothing about it. I want him swinging hard. As hard as he can. So that the judges will see he's guilty as charged."

The ref thought a moment, then nodded. "All right," he said. "I can respect that. But I want to see taekwondo out there on the mat, not some bar-fight. No matter how hard you're hitting, this competition has rules and I expect not to see them broken. Understood?"

Both competitors nodded and then faced one another again.

"The score is two to one, advantage black," the ref called, raising the flag. "Fight!"

Meg's midsection and her unborn child were like beacons to the hands and feet of Zhuang Xiao Li as he sent attack after attack towards the location, only to be foiled by Meg's defense. He was sure that her arms were bruised and raw from his attacks, but she didn't show the pain and her defense never became desperate. He had to try a new tack. As long as she maintained her self-control, she would not give in. Zhuang had to make her lose that control so he could master her.

He switched tactics in mid-attack, directing his brutal onslaught now against Meg's weak knee. The redhead reacted quickly - Zhuang did have to admit that she was finely trained - and turned the sweep kick aside only to be facing another vicious jab towards the abdomen. He alternated once more, between knee and belly, and Meg's defense hesitated, just for a moment, long enough to send an outside crescent-kick crashing into the side of her head near the pad-line where it would hurt the most.

Meg fell hard, bouncing on the mat roughly. She was on her feet quickly, hands at the ready and breathing hard. The crowd booed vehemently as the referee called, "Point white. The score is two-all, advantage black. You okay, black?"

"Fine," Meg said. "Keep it going."

"Fight!"

Meg came in a little angry, and Zhuang began to realize that it might have been a mistake to chip at her self-control since it had been keeping her anger in check alongside any fear and hesitation. She brought his guard high to block a side roundhouse to his right ear before ducking inside herself and landing a double-palm punch on him. Her left hand popped his left knee right on the line with the kicking pad. The other slammed into his midsection, just below his navel. He staggered back a short step, gasping for breath from the blow to his stomach and limping a touch from the knee.

"Were those what you were aiming for?" Meg asked.

"Point black!" the referee called. "Three to two, advantage black! You okay, white?"

"Fine," Zhuang grunted. "Continue, please."

Zhuang barely had time to get into a loose back-stance before he was deep in a rising-block form to keep Meg's feet and hands away from his face. The redheaded fury was dead-set on

a knockout for a victory now, and although her anger was back under control it was superactuating her competition. She was kicking and punching harder than Zhuang Xiao Li had thought a woman would be able and was trained every bit as effectively as he was. Perhaps he'd been too quick to judge the woman.

He reversed field, ducking out of Meg's path and skirting the foul line, forcing Meg to stop her own momentum to come to him. She walked straight into his side kick, blocking it wide, but still taking a savage lunge punch right on her chin. She went down hard to her hands and knees, pulling out her mouthpiece to spit blood.

Peter was at the edge of the competition mat in an instant. "Call this match," he said.

Meg's eyes blazed emerald. "Peter, don't you *dare*."

"Not like this," he said. "Let it go, red."

"No," Meg said. "He's gonna have to kill me."

"You considered that he might?"

Meg's eyes narrowed and her voice was like a razor against bone. "Back off, Barnett."

Peter raised his hands in angry, resentful defeat. "You got it, lady," he said venomously. Meg's heart sank at the sound.

She rinsed her mouth quickly and reinserted the mouthpiece. She had to defeat her opponent by two points in order to win; she had to score at least one unanswered point or the match would patty-cake back and forth all evening. And, despite her anger, Meg had to admit it was dangerous to be on the mat with Zhuang Xiao Li.

Almost as dangerous as it is to be on the mat with Meghan Rutherford, Mark reminded her.

Any ideas, twin brother?

Stop thinking one point at a time. You want unanswered points, get 'em all at once. Finish this farce and then you can go home and screw the head cheerleader.

Waitaminnit, I'm the head cheerleader, Meg thought amusedly.

Freudian slip. I meant the star quarterback. I think.

Suggestions?

I kinda liked how you took out Lisa McByrne, Mark said. *You got the oomph?*

Think we can put enough sauce on that one to teach this dickhead a lesson?

I think we can put enough sauce on it to break his fucking neck, Mark said. *So be careful. It's like Dennis Mendoza said. You go savage on that guy and the crowd's not going to be happy. Don't sink to his level or all this was for nothing.*

Meg straightened her pads - her arms ached like hell from the pounding Zhuang Xiao Li had dealt them - and took her time getting back to the line. The ref was patient.

"You have given her long enough," Li complained. "Would you have given me so long?"

"I've had just about enough of you, white," the referee cautioned. "Keep talking and I'll foul you again and it'll cost you a point. I'm still the referee of this competition and you *will* show respect."

"He's right," Meg said, stepping up. "You did give me long enough."

"Thank you," Li said smugly.

"He's got to have an excuse, something he can blame besides himself when I beat him."

"You have not defeated me yet."

"I will," Meg said.

"You are so sure?"

"Sure enough to bet you my gold medal."

It was a contest to see whose eyes got bigger, Zhuang's or the referee's.

"You would wager your gold medal on this?" the Chinaman asked.

"Mine against yours," Meg said. "Unless you're afraid."

Zhuang's anger was apparent and Meg knew she'd just won the match. "Done," Li said roughly.

The referee shook his head in disbelief. "Black, you're crazy."

"So they say," Meg said, snugging her pads tight and backing into a cat-stance. Both her bad knee and her belly were exposed invitingly to her opponent; she could almost see Zhuang trying to make up his mind where to attack first.

"The score is three to two, advantage black," the ref called. "Fight!"

Zhuang came in low and fast, after the knee. Meg jumped and uncoiled like a flying whirlwind, turning her foot in mid-kick so that the solid heel would make contact instead of the blade of the foot like the move was designed to use. She impacted against Zhuang's head with a shock which she felt all the way up to her buttocks and managed to fire the double punch into his solar plexus as he was still moving forward under his own momentum. The Chinaman spun around helplessly and dropped the mat like a sack of stones, struggling to his feet weakly and unsteadily as Meg's *kiai* was still echoing.

"Double point black! Double point black!" the ref called. "The match is finished, five to two!"

He raised Meg's hand in victory and the crowd howled, stomping on the bleachers until the rafters rang. Meg stripped her headgear, bowed to the judges and then to Zhuang, who was being helped to balance by his trainer and coach. He barely managed to return the bow and stumbled to the bench. He took his medal out of his equipment bag and made his way back to the mat, offering it to Meg.

"Keep it," the redhead said, pushing it away. "You won that."

"*You* won it," Zhuang argued.

"I have one of my own," Meg said. "I don't want yours. All I want is a fair competition and your reprimand will go a long way towards making sure that happens. I hope I didn't hurt you."

"My coach will argue that you hurt me no more than I deserved," Zhuang said. "But I still do not believe that the way I compete is unfair or wrong. The ancients competed with no pads and wore their scars as badges of honor. I think their example should be followed."

"Would you have thought that as a white belt, getting your nose bloodied by every older boy in the class? And why, if it's such a big thing to fight without protection, did your noble houses spend fortunes on armor and castles? And again - if I hurt you, I'm sorry."

"You are not really sorry. You believe I deserved it."

Meg nodded. "You shouldn't have tried to hit me in the stomach like you did," she explained. "I wouldn't have gotten so angry. The only mistake you made was trying to hit my baby like that."

Zhuang's eyebrows rose. "You carry a child? Inside you?"

Meg nodded.

"You did not tell me that."

"Would you have treated me differently out there?"

"Of course," Zhuang said, straightening. "I would never hit a woman with a child."

"Which is exactly why I didn't tell you," Meg replied.

"You are a very strange woman, Meghan Rutherford American," he said. "I hope we never compete against one another again. I wish the best for your baby. Know - and tell your man Peter Barnett as well - that had I known I would never have pressed my attack to your belly."

"I know," Meg said. She extended a hand. "You were a great competitor. Congratulations."

Zhuang looked at her hand dubiously, then shook it curtly, a little embarrassed. The Chinese coach then congratulated her on her victory and then the celebrations started. Meg stripped off her pads on the bench and tossed them tiredly into her bag as the crowd chanted her name. The first thing she did once the tape was off was to put her engagement ring back on. She really hated being without it. It felt good on her hand.

"Scared me out there, red," Peter said, kneeling to help her unlace her shin-pads.

"I know," she said in a small voice. "Peter, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Don't," he said, laying a warm finger across her soft lips. "It was my fault. I would have reacted the same way if you'd tried to call a match that way if it was me. I had no business."

"You had every business," Meg said. "You're the father of this baby."

"And you're carrying it," Peter retorted. "Until it's out of you, it's your responsibility to protect it and I can't change that. I wish I could have carried it safe inside me while you fought out there, but I couldn't. But while the baby's your responsibility right now, I feel like you're mine. Sorry if I get possessive sometimes."

"I know the feeling," Meg said. "At least, I used to."

Peter looked over his shoulder, back to the mat. "You were fantastic out there."

"Thanks," Meg said.

"I got us a room at the Sheraton," he said. "A nice big room with a double bed."

"And room service tomorrow morning?" Meg asked.

"Anything you want," Peter said. He peeled away the bloody gauze from her forearms gently. "Your poor arms."

"Yeah, he really hamburgered 'em, didn't he?" Meg commented.

Peter bent and kissed one of the bruises, then another and another, then looked at her arms side-by-side and the expanse of welts and discolorations beneath the freckles. "Hmm," he said. "I have a lot of kissing to do tonight, looks like."

Meg put her arms around her lover. "Indeed you do, love," she whispered, putting her forehead against his. "Indeed you do." She leaned in closer and gave him the kiss which would be on the front page of every sports section in the world the next day.

* * * *

Meg felt a little stupid about having to go to bed so early, but Gregg Allman was a little more used to staying up late than she was and he hadn't had two major martial arts matches that day. But he kept his promise to sing 'Whipping Post' twice, plus 'Midnight Rider,' 'Statesboro Blues,' 'Melissa,' and any other that Meg requested. All she had to do was name the song. It was a grand party - Meg almost wished that she could have had a little drink, but now that the gold medal was hers Junior was the highest priority - and dancing with Peter while her favorite band played all her favorite songs just for her was better than any buzz she could have gotten anyway. Even bruised, tired and pregnant Meg had never felt so beautiful and so loved in her life, male or female. She big Gregg and the band a very good night shortly after midnight, did some publicity photos and autographs and then let Peter take her back to the hotel. She dressed herself in a lacy baby-doll nightie after an obscenely long shower and snuggled up against her fiancé. She'd originally thought herself too tired, but Peter had discovered - to Meg's endless enjoyment and endless fatigue - a special place to kiss on her neck just beneath her ear that, when combined with just the right pressure on her breasts just below the nipples, would get her motor revved every time. She wormed herself underneath him and guided him into the emptiness in her middle, letting herself be filled by him both physically and emotionally. She'd found, as they'd become more and more used to one another's bodies, that she became more easily orgasmic as she'd grown accustomed to being Peter's sexual partner. She'd taken great pains to let him know what she liked best and he was not stingy in giving it to her. Nor was she miserly in giving back - they'd experimented a little with some of the more 'alternative' forms of sex and had found many things that they both enjoyed thoroughly which might not have occurred to them to try, had they not been so interested in one another's pleasure. Hannah and Susan had made a big production when Meg had accidentally let slip that she'd been initiated into the 'Back Door Club,' serving her

chocolate fudge and gifting her with bags of unshelled peanuts and cans of whole kernel corn. Meg judiciously decided after that not to mention some of the other things she and Peter had tried and she almost hated to admit to herself how much she'd enjoyed some of them. Even though her favorite was just to lie face-to-face and make love to Peter with her whole body, she had to admit - privately - that she got a little charge out of anal sex and facials, and being spanked made her feel wonderfully naughty and scandalous. She'd even gotten a little Catholic schoolgirl outfit to go with her Playboy Bunny costume.

It hadn't been difficult for Meg and Peter to discover the things about one another which would make the relationship work, far less than the time it had taken in any of the other relationships they'd been in previously. Meg knew that she shouldn't bother Peter when he was trying to watch *As the World Turns* and he knew that she couldn't sleep for some reason if she hadn't watched the weather forecast for the morning. Meg knew to be quiet when she woke at her usual ungodly hour and let Peter lie in until at least eight o'clock, and Peter knew not to make any jokes that involved cruelty to animals, particularly cats. She found herself trying - and *wanting* - to please him, taking what she knew he liked to eat, or liked to see her wear, and acting accordingly. It didn't feel like selling out, which would have been how she'd thought of it as a male; she loved him and there was nothing she wouldn't do to make him happy. If it had ever felt strange to give so, Meg couldn't remember it.

So when she woke in his arms the next morning, Meg was careful not to wake him as she showered and dressed in a loose floral-print sundress, set her gold medal above the television where she could look at it whenever she wanted, and started reading her new copy of *Modern Bride* until her lover woke up and took her to breakfast.

* * * * *

The camera shot was poor quality and badly lit, the tiny little condenser microphone almost distorting with the nearby music of the Allman Brothers Band. An obviously inebriated Susan Lewis' voice narrated the broadcast in a shouted voice-over.

"This is Susan Lewis, running the all-night-long-party-cam, coming to you live from the big party in celebration of Meg Rutherford, my *best friend*, winning the gold medal and then beating the men's gold medal winner just for the fun of it."

There was a close-up of a foot. "Hannah, your shoe's untied," Susan added.

"Oh. Thanks," Hannah said from above.

"So here we are live with the redheaded freckled winner and her hunky beefy boyfriend themselves, dancing shamelessly in front of everybody like they were engaged or something," Susan said, pointing the camera so that the little klieg light illuminated Peter and Meg doing more kissing than dancing as 'Melissa' played from the stage. "Meg! Susan Lewis, Olympic Sports! Congratulations on your victory!"

Meg broke the kiss and looked at her friend quizzically. "Where did you get that camera?"

"It's Rob's. Now shut up, I'm trying to interview you. Any words for the folks at home?"

Meg cut a ridiculous muscle-builder pose. "Follow your dreams. You can reach your goals. I'm living proof. Beefcake. *BEEFCAKE!*" she screamed in her best Cartman. Peter grabbed her from behind and lifted her into the air, tickling her in the short ribs. The redhead squealed as Susan handed off the camera to a bystander and joined the fray. What looked like Hannah Stills and Billy Hardwell joined shortly after, and then Rob Holt vaulted to the top of the pile-up as a professional voice-over filtered in to narrate the scene which had now devolved into a muddled shot of several people's feet.

"That was the scene last night at the celebration of Meg Rutherford's amazing double victory in the women's taekwondo finals yesterday," a deep, practiced voice announced. The shot dissolved to a small interviewing stand overlooking the Olympic village. The customary jacket-and-tie interviewer was set up in a canvas director's chair, pointing the microphone at a very sunburned and tired but happy Meg, wearing a denim skirt and her new Allman Brothers Band tour shirt beneath her Olympic Team jacket, now covered with country pins.

"This is Larry Gant, CNN/SI SportsCenter. With me is Meg Rutherford, the first American gold medallist in taekwondo, a sport historically dominated by the Koreans, Chinese and Japanese. Meg, thanks for being with us today. How are you feeling?"

"I'm good," she said, looking radiant.

"You made quite a showing yesterday," Gant said, a smile on his face. "Not only did you take the first gold medal in taekwondo in US history, but then you turned right around and fought the men's gold medallist, Zhuang Xiao Li of China, in a protest challenge against a bad call against Peter Barnett."

Meg nodded. "I know how iffy it must have looked at first, my challenging after Peter got hurt," she said. "Everybody thought I was charging in to get revenge for him hurting my fiancé. And believe me, that was no small part of it. But keep in mind I'd watched Zhuang Li put three other competitors out of that tournament, including both other members of the US Men's Team. Rob Holt had as solid a shot at that gold medal as any other competitor out there."

"So now that the challenge is finished and Zhuang Xiao Li has been officially reprimanded, what now? What happens to Olympic taekwondo?"

"Nothing yet," Meg said. "The challenge was issued on the grounds that Li wasn't reprimanded the instant he caused the injury to Pete. All I did was get the judges to do what they should have done the instant he got his ribs broken. Now, hopefully, the judges of international competition will start cracking down on that kind of conduct since, at last, there's a precedent for it."

"How do you respond to the public support you've gathered for the challenge, Meg?"

"Like I do to most of the publicity I've gotten," Meg said with a smile, "I try to ignore it. Don't get me wrong, I'm really glad that so many people are interested and enthused about my accomplishments. But I started in this sport when nobody knew what it was, so I've never done this for anyone other than myself. The fans are great, but I have my own life to lead. I just hope that my winning the gold and the challenge against Zhuang Li kicks off more women like me, so we can finally start a move towards getting equality instead of just whining about it."

Gant cleared his throat. "What do you mean by that?"

Meg shrugged. "I've seen my whole life how women - smart, capable women - who could be out there doing something about discrimination and harassment and glass ceilings who'd much rather sit around with like-minded people and complain and moan about how unfair things are. The fact is, we didn't have a hand in the establishment of the current system. Boys made the rules on this playground, and rule number one is fight for what you want. So whining and complaining about unfairness won't solve anything. Going out on the playground and showing up the school bully - and I don't mean Zhuang Li, I mean a basically unfair system - might start the ball rolling."

"You certainly don't shy away from controversy, do you?"

"I guess not," Meg snickered. "All I want is for some little girl to see me and think, 'hey. I can do whatever I want to do and nobody can stop me so long as I work hard and fight for it.' I've never once settled for second best out of myself by saying, 'Oh, well, I'm just a girl.' Girls can do anything. And I've tried to avoid the stereotype that the insecure throw up against strong women, that I'm butch and I really want to be a man. That's not the case at all. There's nothing I'd rather be than exactly what I am, and I'm as feminine as I can be. I'm engaged to a wonderful man who makes me feel beautiful and unique and we're never going to have problems with infidelity because he knows I won't let him get away with it any more than he would me. People have asked me if I'm a feminist, and I guess the answer is yes. But I think that the biggest and most important part of feminism is being a woman, and that's the part I work at hardest."

"Well, Meg, I'm not alone in thinking you do a wonderful job of it," Gant said. "And on behalf of a country that is very, very proud of you, congratulations on your gold medal and your hard work, and on your upcoming marriage."

"Thanks," Meg said, her smile returning.

"What can we expect to see out of you in the future?"

"I'm going to have to talk to the doctors very seriously about my knee," Meg said. "I think I'm due to retire from competition very soon and Peter and I want to open our own dojo at home where Olympic hopefuls from the US and Canada can come and train. I've spoken with Dorothy Miller-McCall about taking over her position as women's taekwondo coach. And I'm also giving serious consideration to being a mommy."

"Well, whatever you do, we're sure you'll be the best at it," Gant offered. "Thanks again for being with us tonight. Now we return to the Harris Gymnasium and the women's basketball finals."

* * * *

A group of young boys were busy playing football on a sandlot, tossing the ball back and forth as they tried to pick teams from the roughhousing mass. An adorable little girl with a cap of blonde curls and overalls stepped in, pushing her hair out of her eyes to ask, "Can I play?"

One of the boys, a cherubic little black boy, sneered, "Girls can't play football."

"Can too," the girl retorted.

"Have you ever played before?" a little tow-headed blonde boy asked.

"No," the girl admitted. "But that doesn't mean I can't do it."

"You're just a girl," said another boy. "Why don't you go play with dolls or something?"

"Let her play," the tow-headed boy spoke up. "She'd make the teams even."

"Okay, but *you* have to pick her," the black boy said, while behind him three boys began chorusing the "sitting in a tree" rhyme as the teams split up.

The tow-head showed the girl how to hold the ball in a tailback's cradle. "You hold it like this," he told her. "I'm the quarterback. When Joey hikes me the ball, run out there and try to get open so I can throw it to you. That tree over there is the endzone. Try to cross it before you get tackled."

"Okay," said the girl.

The boys ran the play into a happy chaos. Through the middle of it, the girl slipped around her coverage and ran a post. The towheaded boy connected with a quick pass. The little girl cut up-field and threaded through the defense for a touchdown without a hand on her.

"Man," the black boy said. "She's fast."

"Yep," the quarterback said smugly, "and she's on *my* team."

Meg stepped in front of the camera as the children regrouped for a second play. "Nobody gets everything right the first time they try," she said. "But that doesn't mean they can't do it. It doesn't matter if you're a boy or a girl - everybody deserves the same chances. So give a girl a chance. You'll be surprised what you might find. We could be looking at the next Heismann trophy winner out there. Or the Nobel Prize, or the Pulitzer."

The camera pulled in close as Meg sat down on a park bench. "Or even the next Olympic gold medallist," she finished with a smile.

The little girl charged into the shot, throwing her arms around Meg and giving her a crushing hug. Meg laid her cheek against the top of the little girl's head, smiling.

"Expect the best from a girl," she said. "And that's what you'll get."

EPILOGUE: *.and they all lived happily ever after.*

The girl flowed smoothly, all raw power and grace, fluidly in and out of the complicated moves. Her balance never wavered as her dainty little feet spun and leaped through the dizzying patterns. She finally came to rest in a finishing position, chin thrust high and arms in a graceful arc above her head. She seemed a statue carved out of alabaster, the only movement disturbing the portrait her long, straight red-gold hair drifting down to lay in a lustrous curtain across her shoulders and back.

The portrait shattered - the grace evaporated as the head lowered and the china-doll face split into a wide, guileless grin in an open, freckled face.

"What did you think?"

"That was gorgeous, April," Meg told her daughter, her own grin mirroring the younger. It was the same face, narrow and delicate, but for a few laugh lines creeping into the flawless porcelain of Meg's cheeks. "I can't wait to see you do it in front of an audience."

"Oh, God, Mom, I don't know if I can do it in front of anybody else," April said breathlessly, toweling the sweat from her face. "What if I mess up?"

"Then you'll recover," Meg said, putting an arm around her daughter's narrow, coltish shoulders. "Everybody messes up, sweetie. It's just a part of life. You just can't go around being scared of it all the time. You'll never get to do anything worthwhile if you don't take a few chances."

"You're talking about Dad again, right?" April said with a twinkle in her eye - her father's blue, not her mother's green.

"I guess I am," Meg said, blushing a little. "But that doesn't mean I'm wrong about that."

"I'm just freaked out," April said. "I've never been in front of an audience before."

"There's nothing to it," Meg said. "Just close your eyes and make them all go away."

"I tried that. Maybe that only works in the martial arts."

Meg chuckled. "It can work just as well for a ballet recital, sweetie. Or a cheerleading tryout on Thursday. Just go in there and do your best. If you try your hardest, even if you mess up, then to hell with what everybody thinks."

April squeezed her mother tight around the waist. "You always have better advice than Dad. He said to take a couple Valium before and I'd be fine."

"You do know he was kidding, right?" Meg said, half-serious.

April took that tone that twelve-year-old girls had, the one that bespoke the fathomless stupidity that all adults had in the eyes of their children. "Of course."

"Besides, me and your father - if I don't kill him - and your sister will all be there, and we won't care if you mess up. We just want to see our baby girl up on that stage."

"Did you ever wish I'd gone into the martial arts like you and Aunt Susan did, Mom?" April asked, suddenly serious. "I mean, competed and stuff?"

"That was never your thing, baby, I knew that," Meg said. "I didn't want to push you into anything. If you or Hayley wanted to get into taekwondo like me and your father did, that would be great. But we're just as happy with a daughter who wants to ballet dance, or cheer, or gymnastics, or - what's Hayley going to be this week?"

April smirked. "She's trying to decide between being President or being a hobbit."

"I love you no matter what you do, April," Meg said.

"I love you too, Mom," April said. When April was around her friends, then Meg was just a big embarrassing nuisance, but when it was just them in the quiet dojo underneath the house, she was as affectionate as she'd been since the cradle, so long ago.

"I guess there's only one other thing I can tell you about your recital, honey, and your tryout on Thursday, something I learned in competition," Meg said.

"What's that?"

"Wear a pad," Meg said seriously. "When I got really nervous or excited and had to jump up and down a lot, sometimes when I landed I'd pee a little bit. It's really embarrassing."

April blushed beet red but nodded. "I've done that before. I had to tie a sweater around my waist. Can you take me to go get some pads?"

Meg stroked her daughter's strawberry blonde hair. "You can have a couple of mine. You know where they are, I know you've been practicing."

"You knew?" April said, abashed. "Oh, God."

"It's no big deal, honey," Meg said. "You have to learn about that stuff sooner or later. And it's probably going to be any day now for you. You can practice all you want. I had to practice too, way back when. It's part of growing up."

April breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm just really glad you found out instead of Dad. I think I would have died if he knew."

Meg paused, her mouth full of thousands of things to say, thousands of lessons to teach - how men and women weren't that different, how April's mother knew considerably more about being a man than her twelve- or nine-year-old daughters suspected, and that their father was as open-minded, tolerant, knowledgeable and supportive of what it took to become a woman as any man Meg had ever known. She had it all to say, all to teach.

"Well, us girls gotta stick together, April," was all that came out.

Ω