



SUMMARY: Three loser guys agree to be part of a reality show where they are completely made over, what they don't realize is that the show plans to change their gender as well.

THE SWAN REDUX

Part One

by Valerie Hope

I guess it was inevitable that it would happen. The hairline beat a hasty strategic withdrawal in one direction while my waistline made a quick, decisive push to form a salient where my belt buckle was supposed to be. And all the time my face drooped from its usual firm perch and what was left of my hair began to lose its color. Looking in the mirror on that bleak Saturday morning, I was left with facing what could be denied no longer. I was getting old, fat and bald. Not a combination I looked forward to.

I'd never been that much to write home about anyway. Modest in job, looks, ambition and talent, I'd lived most of my life toiling for a company consisting of people who still spelled my name wrong and frequently didn't know it at all. I drove a mid-size, mid-priced, mid-boring automobile and lived in a house that needed more work than I had the time or talent to provide. I spent evenings watching television or playing Civilization and didn't inflict myself often on the local female population.

I was pretty much a nobody.

It wasn't like this was the life I'd planned for myself. I'd wanted to have adventures. I'd wanted to have beautiful women and exciting work, beautiful houses and expensive cars. I'd wanted to summer on yachts and drink 18-year-old Scotch before bed. I'd had all the same daydreams as anybody else. I'd just gotten a much different reality.

Until Christmas. I'd exchanged a few gifts here and there, with some not-so-great friends, and had done the Secret Santa thing with some people at my office. All I had to look forward to was a paltry bonus to my check, a week of paid vacation and a store-bought turkey dinner in front of the idiot box to celebrate the closing of yet another boring, uneventful year. I came home from work and listened to my dilapidated Ford Taurus do its post-ignition sputter and cough slowly in my driveway as I got my junk mail and newspaper, turning to go back inside out of the chilly afternoon wind. I hadn't gone three steps when the video crew came from behind the caterpillar-munched bushes in front of my small porch. The klieg light in my eye made me blink and flinch as a tanned, well-muscled young woman with pale blonde highlights in her sable hair stuck a microphone towards my face.

"Are you Timothy Michael Pierce?" she asked in a polished soprano.

"Yes. Why?"

"You've been chosen to be a Swan."

Not the reaction I'm sure they hoped for. "Do what now?"

"You're a Swan. You know, the makeover show?"

"There's only women on that show," I countered feebly.

"Not anymore," the woman told me. "We're expanding our viewer base. This will be for the new season. And you've been chosen to be one of our first contestants."

"I didn't apply," I replied.

"You were chosen from a database, at random," she explained, clearly losing patience with me. "We reviewed your case and decided you're exactly what we're looking for."

"What do I have to do?" I asked, already feeling more conciliatory from the force of the adorably sexy disgusted pout she was giving me.

"Just pack and come with us," she said. "You'll be flown first-class to L.A. where we'll put you on a diet and exercise plan, we'll coach you and we'll give you whatever plastic surgery you need to become a whole new you."

"How long will all this take?"

"Three months."

"I don't know if I can take that much time off work."

She sighed heavily. I got the distinct feeling that I wasn't going to be able to ask too many more questions before she walked away and found somebody a little more grateful for the opportunity.

"I guess, maybe, if your people called my boss and told him..."

"That has already been arranged," she said. She handed me a leather folder full of documents. "Everything has been arranged."

"This is a lot of work if I'd said no," I commented, thumbing through the thick sheaf of legal-looking documents.

"We're paid to do it," she said, extending a manicured hand. "Jessica Williams, producer. Glad to have you aboard."

I took her hand in mine. It was warm and incredibly soft. "Tim Pierce."

"I know."

I gestured weakly towards the camera. "Do we need to do this again? And me be more excited or happy or something?"

She smiled, kind of cryptically. "That's not how reality TV works, Tim. Just be yourself, and leave everything else up to us."

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I'd gotten a little sleep on the plane - it was hard because I'd never flown first-class before, I didn't want to miss a second of the four-hour flight. A really attractive flight attendant smiled at me and brought me expensive booze. They played a movie I hadn't seen and brought me a

pillow and a meal that was better than my own cooking. Even if I got kicked off the show, the flight was treat enough to make it not a total loss.

We were picked up in a stretch limousine and I proceeded to have still yet more expensive booze. I was more than a little bit buzzed as I opened to the door to my new apartment for the next three months.

It resembled a very upscale hotel room - everything was decorator-catalog nice and had that unnameable sense on not being lived in. Still, it was nicer than anyplace I'd ever stayed in my life, so I wasn't complaining. It didn't take more than ten minutes to unpack my scanty belongings and I gave the requisite sense of wonder for the cameras that all the mirrors and reflective surfaces had been removed from the bathroom and kitchen. I signed several legal forms which enforced my commitment to the program and, with nothing else to do for the rest of the evening, I kicked off my shoes and settled in front of the television.

I don't even remember the show, to be honest. I dozed off almost immediately and had strange but comforting dreams which seemed to be half mine, half the shows I was watching. I couldn't really separate them in my head, but all I know is I'd never had a better night's sleep in my entire life. I woke up refreshed and invigorated like I'd never been before, full of energy and ready for the first day of the program. I was up, showered, shaved and dressed thirty minutes before the production staff arrived to take me in the limousine for my first surgical consultation.

I was introduced in the limo to two people who would be my 'guardian angels' for the next three months. Jeff was a huge black man, shaved bald, with a ready smile and a belly laugh that shook the windows. He was my security person, both to keep me out of the public eye for the duration of the show and to keep me from trying to get a look at myself before the 'big reveal' on the last night of the program. He shook my hand with a grip like an industrial vise, clapped my shoulder hard enough to knock me off balance and shoved a mimosa in my hand.

Gretchen was that untouchable, runway-model-beautiful type who looked as if the whole world wasn't quite good enough to suit her. She had perfect everything - body, face, teeth, hair, clothes - and a sexy sleepy-eyed look about her which was fuel enough for any fantasy I wanted to have. But the model aloofness stopped with her appearance. Her smile was quick and disarming and she spoke with an enthusiasm which was infectious. She was going to be my 'life coach' for the duration, checking to make sure I did everything right and didn't color outside the lines. She told me her job was to make sure I came out of this a healthy person and had all the skills I needed to stay on the course once I left the care of the staff. She seemed genuinely concerned about my well-being.

"What is going to happen?" I asked, already feeling a little mellow from the mimosa. I wasn't used to this much alcohol, and they seemed to be keeping me liquored up pretty well. Probably to make for more interesting television.

"First will be your surgical and dental consultation," Gretchen explained, checking her facts in a very expensive-looking PDA. "Next will be a meeting with your nutritionist and personal trainer. Later today you'll head to the gym for a body assessment and to figure out a training regimen. You won't start the gym work seriously until after your surgery, but you might as well start slimming down as soon as you can."

I patted my ample gut. "Agreed."

"After the gym you're going to have a meeting with Dr. Kane, the therapist, who will help you with whatever emotional problems you might have, and then an hour with me for a coaching session. After that is dinner, and the evening is yours to do whatever you like."

"Sounds like university," I mentioned.

"More like boot camp," Jeff corrected. "You have a lot of work ahead of you, man."

I accepted another mimosa. "I'm ready."

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I sat in the waiting room of the surgery center, looking distractedly through a copy of *Elle* because there was nothing else to look at. My competition had just gone in, a short weasel of an IT professional with coke-bottle glasses named Jack Becker Wright. I didn't think much of him, actually, with his tech-geek sense of humor and his threadbare *Babylon 5* t-shirt and his shabby Doc Martens. I doubted I'd have any trouble beating his ass. He did seem like a nice guy, though. I hoped the docs could convert him into some sort of babe magnet sex machine, so at least he'd get something for his troubles. Funny how I'd gotten so competitive about making and winning the big pageant at the end. I'd never in a million years thought that I'd be so gung-ho about a beauty pageant.

"Mr. Pierce? The doctor will see you now."

I followed the tantalizing figure-eight scribed through the air by the remarkable backside of the nurse who led me back to the consultation. Was everybody in L.A. this hot?

"Mr. Pierce. I'm Dr. Christopher." He was a tall, imposing man with salt-and-pepper hair and a strong chin. He smiled a welcoming smile and gestured me to a seat, where my embarrassing paper gown rustled loudly.

Dr. Christopher took a pair of gold-rimmed reading glasses from the pocket of his maroon scrubs and perched them on the end of his nose before peering into my file.

"It says here that you're in great health," he commented. "That's good. That makes for faster recovery time. Now, let's talk about your face."

What followed was an incredible onslaught of medical terminology which quickly overloaded what remained of my high-school anatomy & physiology class. After about twenty seconds, I just gazed dumbly at the pictures he showed me and nodded. He made notes in my file and took measurements on my face and body, offering cryptic explanations that sounded more like *Star Trek* than the English language. He sounded like he knew his shit, so I didn't offer much resistance. Besides, he knew what was best, he was trained for this. I'm sure if he had any questions about selling online homeowner's insurance, he would have treated me like the expert. I basically agreed to everything. It wasn't my money, just my time and the pain of recovery. He shook my hand and expressed a readiness to get started and we set a surgery date for a week from then. I gave some blood for testing in a little room down the hall, peed in the little plastic cup and piled back into the limo. Jeff had gotten me a sandwich and I washed it down with a glass of incredibly good red wine. Excusing myself from jet-lag, I slipped on the headphones they'd given me, some weird motivational stuff which was supposed to help me get ahead in the program. It sounded more like New Age music to me. It was relaxing, though. I dozed, off and on, in the car, listening to the soothing music and just barely hearing

the soft voice recorded over it, telling me things about myself that I really liked hearing. A wide, happy smile spread across my face as my forehead clunked against the side window in sleep.

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I was exhausted by the time I got back from the day. The consultation at the dentist was a lot like the one at the surgeon - a lot of crazy medical talk that I barely followed. Strange how before, I'd felt reasonably intelligent and now I felt like a raving dummy. The nutritionist and the personal trainer were affable enough, and completely re-vamped my diet (which wasn't hard, I watched what I ate anyway, I just ate too much of it) and worked out a very tough but very doable exercise plan.

Dr. Kane had been the high point of the day. She had been very patient and humorous and had broken through my 'shields' in about five minutes. It was like she could read me like a book. We talked about my growing up and about my job, and had already started helping me figure out where I'd gone wrong in my life and how it wasn't too late to start correcting my mistakes. For example, I thought way too much about things. Life was a lot more fun when I just did it and didn't spend all my energy worrying about what could happen if things went wrong. I felt better about myself than I had in years. She gave me a bunch of CDs to listen to on my headphones, burned off a computer, labeled 'Motivation,' 'Love Yourself,' 'Stay the Course,' and 'Blueprint for the New You' (the last on six disks). She gave me a big hug and told me to listen to them at night while I was trying to sleep.

Gretchen, the life coach, was a little different. She started me off by running down a long list of bad things about myself, no sugar-coating. It was like listening to her tell me what a complete bastard I was. I even teared up a little. Then she made me take a pad and pencil and start writing down all the things I wanted to be. Then we took the rest of the hour and started writing out ways to get from where I was to where I wanted to go. It was exhausting - I couldn't get away with "we'll figure it out when we get to it." I had to have a plan for everything. It was more self-discipline than I'd had to use in years, and the lake of high-dollar alcohol I'd consumed in the limo over the course of the day wasn't helping my concentration. Gretchen and I only got through about a third of the list. We were going to have to tackle the rest of it over time, and then figure out a series of steps that would send me on my way. The amount of internal work I was going to have to do to accomplish this was staggering. But strangely, I wasn't afraid. I was looking forward to the challenge, to getting to know myself and working out my shortcomings. I can't say I'd ever felt that way about myself before. That alone was a major change for me.

I ate my pre-packaged Nutri-System dinner and drank some white wine, slipped on my headphones and was asleep almost instantly.

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I guess it wasn't much of a life, really. I didn't do a whole lot besides go to therapy and coaching every day and the gym twice a day for 2 hours. Other than that, I only drank lots of water and ate my Nutri-System meals and listened to my headphones or watched TV. I was making great strides in therapy - Dr. Kane had me convinced that I'd done my entire life wrong, and I needed to go back and do it all over again. She had me burn all my old stuff and get new, wouldn't let me read anything I used to read, listen to music or watch TV shows I used to watch, even wear my old clothes. A clean break was best, she told me. Leave the old life behind and don't look back. It was a little scary at first, but she told me to just listen to my

headphones when things got to be too much. Miraculously enough, the CDs helped, it chilled me out and I wasn't so upset any more. Dr. Kane told me to find things to fill up all the holes left by the departure of my old life, things I'd never even considered before. Things better suited to the "new" me.

So in the week before my surgery, I took up dance. My personal trainer was thrilled. She modified my whole exercise program to accommodate it.

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The first visit was to Dr. Carlysle, the dentist. He was a pretty soft touch, and I took pretty good care of my teeth to start with, so I wasn't worried. He cleaned and bleached them while I read a magazine - *Us Weekly*, something I'd never read before, as per Dr. Kane's orders - and then took a temporary cast and sanded the front of my teeth to prepare them for my upper and lower veneers. There was a little bit of gum recontouring that hurt a little bit, but I was relaxed. The big visit was going to be that afternoon.

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"Good morning, Tim," Dr. Christopher said. The sedatives already had me loopy enough, and hearing his voice without seeing his lips behind his surgical mask was a little freaky. I was butt naked on a table with lights shining on me and sheets draped everywhere. Nurses and other people talked softly and machines beeped and pinged just outside my field of vision. The music through the headphones - 'Stay the Course' - was working wonders. I was hardly even scared - nervous, but not afraid.

Dr. Christopher's voice floated in, disembodied, from the shining halo of light around the surgical lamp and the music on the headphones.

"First things first, Tim. We're going to start with your body, with a little new item I think you're going to like. Instead of liposuction, we're going to inject you with some little enzymes which will kill off the adipose tissue - your fat cells - under your skin. It'll eat every ounce of fat in your body and leave an oily substance which we can drain out of you with a very small incision. Then we're going to refine that oil in the lab while the surgery is going on and then inject it back into you in certain places. It's a lot more efficient than liposuction and very, very safer and a lot less painful.

"You're going to feel very hot when the enzyme starts working, like you have a sunburn or even a fever. It's normal."

I drifted in and out for a little while longer, just feeling the strange proddings and pressings inside my body but no pain.

"Now the biggest problem with weight loss this rapid is that you have a lot of loose skin afterwards," Dr. Christopher continued, more to himself than to me. "Normally we'd do a tummy tuck and cut all that loose skin out, but that's painful and leaves a pretty big scar. What we want to do is make your skin retract on its own - that way you won't scar and it should get rid of your stretch marks. We're going to use this gas laser - there's nothing else like it right now - to cause your skin cells to rupture. Your body will replace them on its own. You'll have to have quite a few of these treatments over the next three months to get your skin tightened up, but you won't be in nearly the same pain as if I gave you a tummy tuck."

There was a lot of humming and buzzing for the next twenty or thirty minutes - I had no conception of time on that table - and my skin felt like it had been burned over a slow flame, even through the haze of the painkillers.

"Now, Timothy, we're going to put you to sleep for a while so I can get started on your face. This will all be traditional plastic surgery, so there will be swelling and pain and a long recovery. Dr. Hadley is here as well, and he's going to get started on your hair replacement. You'll wake up in recovery, so I'll see you there."

I managed a weak "thumbs up" before the darkness took me.

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I came to slowly, out of a very strange dream. Dr. Kane had warned me that the dreams after surgery could be very violent and bloody, but I hadn't faced that this time. It had been a dream about mirrors and reflections. I was running through a maze where everything was reflected back at me, and I was trying to find out which reflection was really mine. I'd only just figured out that it was my choice to make, that I got to pick which reflection was the one that showed the me I wanted the world to see, when I started to wake up. The mellow white-noisy sounds of the CDs that Dr. Kane had made for me were playing softly in the background. A friendly-looking nurse with really nice legs was fiddling with the IV bag near my head.

I tried to speak, but it was no good. My head was swathed in bandages and my muscles didn't seem to be responding the way I wanted them to. I tried to ask what was going on, how the surgery went, but all that came out of my mouth seemed to be a high-pitched syllable that sounded something like "*grumph*." The nurse looked down at me and smiled anyway, then said something to me in sign language.

A deaf nurse. Cool. I had no idea what she was saying, but she was smiling that "put-you-completely-at-ease" smile that seemed to make it all okay somehow. She got the point across that she was going to get the doctor. She shut off the CD player on my bedside table and somehow I felt a little cold and alone when the music and noise stopped. I guess I was getting really accustomed to it.

A few moments later Dr. Christopher came in wearing a white lab-coat over his blue scrubs. He looked at me cheerfully. "Everything was a complete success, Tim. You came through it beautifully."

I tried to smile but it just felt disgusting so I just gave another thumbs-up. He smiled.

"Don't try to talk for a little while, your face is going to be very sore. There's going to be a great deal of post-op pain, you know. We had you in there for nearly ten hours."

Frustrated with trying to talk, I tried to give charades a go. The doctor looked at me quizzically, tried a few half-hearted guesses, and finally passed me a pad and a pen.

How are the other guys? I wrote.

"They're fine. Jack Wright, Jeff Hart and Ronnie Crabtree are right down the hall. They had other doctors, so I can't say they're going to come out as well as you will, but their surgeries went off without a hitch."

I remembered Jack Wright, the nerd-boy from the waiting room, and was glad that he was okay. He seemed to be a really nice guy. Jefferson Hart and Ronnie Crabtree were in the

building with me, and were really nice fellas too. Jeff was a drastically overweight data analyst from Minnesota with bad skin and a wicked overbite and an unhealthy fixation with online role-playing games. Ronnie was a stern-faced factory foreman from Kentucky with pock-marked skin and bad breath with a really fucked up sense of humor and a passion for mystery novels. We'd talked across the space between our balconies a couple of nights and they were interesting if nothing else. Again, I found myself hoping that the doctors would be able to transform them into bronzed Adonises, because there was no doubt in my mind that they would ever win that pageant. That bouquet and sash and tiara were *mine*.

Waitaminnit. Bouquet? Tiara? Where the hell did *that* come from? I guess the words "beauty pageant" had me hard-wired to think Miss America or something. I chuckled softly - it hurt to make sound - at the idea of myself in the swimsuit competition and then tried to put it out of my mind.

"Listen, Tim, I have other patients, but I'm really glad everything came out well. I'll be checking in on you on and off for the next few days to make sure there aren't any complications. If you have any questions, write them down and give them to Kim, the nurse you just saw. She'll be taking care of you, okay?"

I nodded.

"Great. And try to relax as much as you can. We're going to give you another laser treatment tomorrow afternoon to tighten up that loose skin. Don't worry, you'll be asleep while we do it. Get as much rest as you can. Gretchen and Dr. Kane will be by tomorrow morning to check on you."

I squeezed his hand and wrote *Thank You* on my pad.

"You're welcome, slugger. Glad to help. Besides, these are some pretty new procedures we're using, and you guys are great to be such willing guinea pigs."

He turned the CD player back on and the music filled my head. I was asleep again before I even realized I was tired.

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Dr. Kane was my first visitor. It was a little crazy, trying to do therapy when I had to write down all my responses, but she was such a professional that it hardly made any difference to her at all. She was urging me to forget my old life, to let the past have it and to carry on from this point like I'd been given a clean slate. I liked that idea. I made up my mind to really devote myself to that path, since she was right in that I really didn't like myself very much before and the best way to start liking myself was to put the past behind me and pretend I'd been born again. The idea of starting over, with a new body and new face and new attitude - it was all so appealing. The music seemed to help a great deal with that, as well. I found it harder and harder to remember what my life was like before I came to the show. It took time to remember what my parents looked like, hell, it even took me a second to remember what I'd gotten my undergraduate degree in.

Gretchen got there shortly before lunch, and I was immensely relieved to see her. Lunch with a jaw wired shut was a pretty grim thought, all liquefied together in a blender and served up with a straw. Today was roast beef and new potatoes. I didn't want to imagine what puking would be like with all the swelling and pain I was already feeling. If Dr. Christopher hadn't insisted, I

probably would've skipped lunch entirely. But I guess he was right - I did need to keep my strength up. With Gretchen's encouragement I persevered and choked it down, and we talked about communication while I waited for Nurse Kim to take me back to the OR for my laser treatment. Gretchen made me try to communicate with my hands, without using the pen and paper, and express myself through gesture and facial expression. It was hard to keep from laughing - God, it hurt to laugh, between the incisions on my belly and the swollen, painful face - but we got a good start. She told me to keep it up, to use the pen and paper only as a last resort. I actually thought it was a terrible idea - why turn my back on a perfectly acceptable mode of communication when it was right there, after all - but I had some long boring hours ahead of me in recovery and it would help to pass the time. I asked again about Jeff and Ronnie and Jack, and Gretchen assured me they were doing great. She even hinted that one or more of them seemed to be recovering a little faster than I was. That brought out a huge flash of competitive determination in me - who knew that loser me would have such a competitive streak, anyway? - and I resolved myself to try even harder. I was thinking about how hard I was going to work in the gym to get in shape when Kim came, injected something into my IV, and the ceiling above me turned liquid, blurred, and spun into blackness.

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Dr. Jeanette Kane looked over her notes with satisfaction, scribbling little additions in the margins of each file. It was a little hard to do this without the knowledge of their patients, but being a part of the greatest experiment of the twenty-first century was worth any twinges in her conscience, in the long run. So many miserable people and this would be the crowning achievement in making them happy, well-adjusted and contributing members of the larger society.

Ronnie Crabtree, for instance. His coworkers and friends had submitted his name to her nationwide email query. His passion for mystery novels included writing them and submitting them to an online forum under an assumed name. All his novels featured a lady detective with the qualities he most wished for himself, and his pen-name was feminine as well. Jeff Hart and his passion for online role-playing, always cast himself in the feminine role and his social awkwardness evaporated in the persona of the strong, self-assured woman. Jack Wright and his potent identification with strong female figures from fiction - his network passwords were all things like "IvanovaB5" and "PrincessXena" and the like, and the posters and collectibles which packed his dingy apartment were all reflective of his strong identification and admiration of strong women. And poor Timothy Pierce, how he only talked to the women in his workplace who dressed the sharpest and always noticed what they wore, even his Secret Santa gifts were scarves and the like which went with outfits that his coworkers already owned or complimented their complexions. The only one at the office who'd given Lancôme or Origins gift baskets to the secretaries and knew just what to pick from Bath & Body Works.

She dismissed the moment's regret she felt for tricking these men by concentrating on the happiness she knew would be theirs after this grand experiment. Closing her files, she tucked them back in the cabinet before locking it, then hurried down the hall to check in on her charges.

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Gretchen came in the next day with a folder I'd not seen before, this one marked with the show's logo.

"It's the itinerary for the pageant," she explained, opening it. I sat up a little straighter and hoped I managed a smile that wasn't too horrible.

"Look, I'm not too worried about your interview, or even the formal wear competition. What does worry me is the dancing."

I sagged a little. Dancing? I'd never danced in my life. I thought I looked like a trained gorilla every time I'd tried before, and embarrassed and humiliated myself. I'd stuck to the wall with a glass of punch since junior high. And now I had to do it in front of people? Oh, God, I was *never* going to win the pageant!

"Relax," Gretchen said, patting my hand firmly. "We have lots of time. Now, we could just rehearse a choreographed routine over and over and over, but that doesn't prepare you for a mistake. I think it's better to teach you how to dance, and then teach you the choreography."

I shrugged and made a gesture from my forehead to her, saying that I considered her the expert and was willing to take it all on faith at this point.

"Great," she said. "Look, you go back to the apartment tomorrow, and until then I want you to use the time to start getting a look at some really good dancers. I brought you some DVDs to watch while you're still in the hospital. I want you to watch them all, study them, and know them like the back of your hand."

I nodded.

"I knew you would. Now look, the best dancers out there today tend to be women, so most of what you'll be seeing is women. Don't let it bother you, just pay attention to how they move. It will give you a good base to draw from when you start taking your dance lessons."

I gave her a thumbs-up. She rewarded me with a glittering smile and stuffed the first of the DVDs into the player mounted beneath the wall-mounted TV. She left me staring intently at Gwen Stefani shaking her stuff in a music video.

The music was great, but it and the white noise from the CD player beside the bed and the strain of recovery from major surgery left me zoned out, staring like an idiot at the screen as what seemed like an endless procession of Madonna, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Gwen Stefani, the Pussycat Dolls, Ciara, and the like marched through my head in a long, uninterrupted succession. I didn't even notice when they came to take me back to the dentist for my veneers and my third laser treatment. I was still staring at the video when Gretchen showed up again the next day to switch it for another, this time dancing and models on a catwalk. I was gaping at that one for several imperceptible hours when the car came to take me back to the apartment.

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The next days blurred one into the other, the busy schedule making it easier to deal with the post-operative pain but harder to feel time passing. During the morning I saw Dr. Kane and Gretchen and took beginning dance from a phenomenal young woman named Dawn Dowling who showed me how to move my body in ways I'd never known it could move. Between mega-doses of glucosamine and chondroitin, her stretching exercises and the long hours in the studio downstairs, not only did I find myself dancing well but also with no hint of self-consciousness, something I'd never experienced before. Then after lunch I was hustled off to the gym to work out with Gretchen and the personal trainer, an altogether too peppy and

motivated young man named Gabriel. He had me aching in places where I wasn't even aware there were muscles, but I had to admit I felt stronger and I certainly seemed to have more endurance. Gretchen gave me a big bottle of supplements which she said would help my stamina and to build the "right" kind of muscle, whatever that meant. She'd never steered me wrong, so I took them without question.

Nights were another laser treatment, a light dinner and a follow-up with Dr. Kane, then several hours of the videos. By the time I got into bed and got my CD player going, I was half-asleep already. I don't think I outlasted the first track on any disk by more than a few seconds. One night the pain in my face kept me tossing and turning, and I could have sworn there was a woman's voice on the CD talking to me, telling me things, but I couldn't focus enough to hear any of it. I chalked it up to a weird post-op dream like Dr. Christopher had said, and found a comfortable position. I was snoring in moments.

* * *

After a few more days of talking with my hands, Dr. Christopher finally unwired my jaw and said it was okay for me to talk again so long as I didn't overdo it. Elated, I tried it out and was surprised at how I sounded. After not hearing my own voice for so long, I hadn't remembered how high and squeaky it was. The doctor said that my voice might be a little higher because my vocal cords had tightened, plus there was the added trauma of being intubated for surgery, so it was nothing to worry about. He was right. After a while, it started to sound like normal again. I couldn't stop talking with my hands, though. I'd just gotten in the habit of it when it had been my principal method of communication. I guess it was just something I'd have to learn to live with, and it didn't bother me and didn't seem to bother anyone else. Besides, it made me more expressive, and I was always being told that I didn't express myself very well, from an early age. Maybe this would help me overcome that. Dr. Kane seemed to think so, and I was to the point where if Dr. Kane said something was a good idea, I went along with it. The woman was a *bona fide* genius and I was rapidly starting to take her word as law. The results so far in my outlook and attitude were more than enough proof to me that this woman knew what the hell she was doing.

And I'd reconnected with Jack, Ronnie and Jeff again, as we stood stiffly on our balconies, our faces wrapped like mummies out of a cheesy horror flick and our high, squeaky voices. I couldn't detect much of a difference in any of them, to be honest, except Jeff, who seemed to have benefitted the most from Dr. Christopher's magic fat-busting enzyme. He was maybe a third the size he'd been before - he'd easily dropped two hundred pounds. Normally I wouldn't have thought he should be that small, but it suited him. Hell, it looked *good* on him. Being that small seemed to fit him somehow, or he seemed to fit it, I couldn't determine which. Either way, he seemed very happy, and we all celebrated with him when he said that his back and ankles didn't hurt for the first time in years and years. We all knew good things were coming to us, we'd believed it fervently in our dark, secret places for the whole time, but it was still impossibly delightful to actually see the good happen for any of us.

I sat on my overstuffed chair in the living room and wrote in my journal for a while before I put in my DVDs from Gretchen. The bandages on my hands made me write differently, there was a bubbly circular aspect to my script and a strange flow that hadn't been there before, but I liked it, to be honest. It was pretty.

Dr. Kane and I had talked at length that morning about the whole concept of "pretty." She said it was a scary word for men, and she was right. We weren't allowed the luxury of thinking

anything was pretty. Or cute, or adorable, or anything like that. Any man who expressed a feeling like that to that extent was either gay and among friends or derided for having those feelings in the first place. It made us shut that part of ourselves off inside, that we stopped seeing *pretty* and *cute* and only let ourselves see practical and concrete. Dr. Kane said it limited us as men. She told me to make a list of things that I thought were pretty. Strangely enough, as I looked down at my list, I saw that Ronnie and Jefferson and Jack were at the top of the list. I smiled to myself. Talk about a stride. I couldn't wait to tell Dr. Kane. I was sure it would get one of those special smiles, the ones that let me know that somehow, in a way I could never be sure of, I had told her something she was secretly dying to hear. And that made me very happy.

* * *

"You've done very well, Tim," Gretchen told me as I sagged against the rails of the Stairmaster that had been my hell for the last thirty minutes. My heartbeat thudded in my ears, but it seemed stronger somehow, more *alive* than it ever had before. And at least I'd worked my way up to half an hour. When I'd first started, I could barely do ten minutes on the hated thing. My trainer wanted me up to forty-five, and I was determined to hang in and accomplish it by next week before the next round of corrective surgeries. It was hard to believe I'd only been at this for a month. Two more months and it would all be over, and something in my head wouldn't let me leave the program without having milked every single drop of self-improvement from it than I could.

"Thanks, Gretchen," I panted. "It's been hard but really worth it."

She smiled that glittering, stop-your-heart smile. "I love your attitude so much. Of all the contestants, I think you've had the most positive outlook the whole time."

"Well, who gets opportunities like this?" I asked, slugging water. My sweat had dampened my bandages and they weighed a ton. I couldn't wait to get them off tomorrow. "I mean, seriously. You just showed up at my doorstep and offered me a chance to change everything about myself. You shouldn't just turn your nose up at an opportunity like that."

"You're right," Gretchen said. "How are you feeling?"

"Still a little winded, but I can go on," I said honestly.

"I want fifty squats and then fifty curls," she said.

"Oh God," I laughed, "I'm going to look like such a spaz trying to dance tonight."

"Dawn says you're really talented," Gretchen said as she handed me a towel while I climbed off the Stairmaster. "She says you have it in you to be a professional dancer."

I blushed. "She's sweet."

"She's being honest. Have you considered it?"

"Honestly? I don't think I've thought much past the pageant, Gretchen. I mean, I know I've got my life and everything just waiting for me out there, but compared to this, I really don't know if I want to go back to that boring job and crappy apartment."

"That sounds reasonable," Gretchen said. "Listen, I know I shouldn't really be doing this, but if you want some help - for afterwards, you know - getting started on something different..."

"You'd do that? I don't know if I can afford you, sweetie."

Gretchen waved an elegant hand dismissively. "I wasn't offering to let you hire me. I told you. I'm impressed with your attitude. And after what we've put you through, maybe you've earned a little *pro bono* work from me."

"Wow," I said, thunderstruck. "That's huge."

"Just think it over. Seriously, just write down what you think you might want to do afterwards. The sky's the limit, and then give me your list and we'll see what we might be able to accomplish once you're done."

I hid my overwhelmed gape with a shy grin. "Well, first I have to *get done*, and I'm never going to do that with fifty squats and fifty curls hanging over my head, right?"

"There's that kick-ass attitude again," she said, patting my shoulder as I walked to the squat bar.

* * *

Dr. Christopher's office seemed really cold, but then again I didn't seem to have the resistance to extremes of temperature that I used to. I got cold really easily now. Maybe it was because of all the fat that had been burned out of me.

The doctor was working close to my face, snipping away at the thick layers of bandages that had been my constant companions for the last couple weeks.

"You're healing beautifully," he said as he worked, not quite looking at me. "I'm very pleased. There's no real scarring and the swelling is more diminished than I expected. You're a very fast healer."

"That's good, right?" I said, holding still with difficulty. To distract myself from the shiny chrome of the scissors which seemed to draw my eye, I looked instead at Dr. Christopher. He had a strong, angular jaw covered with the tiniest hint of stubble grown out from his morning shave, and unblemished smooth skin with no freckles. A tiny little scar, probably from some childhood accident, crossed his clefted chin, just a pale little sliver of white against his ruddy complexion. Strong, decisive eyes so brown as to appear black focused on the work above my eyebrows, but they caught the light and looked liquid. He had deep-set eyes and a strong brow with thick eyebrows and long lashes, the kind that made every expression he had a thoughtful expression. His shock of thick, dark hair curled mischievously across his forehead and he had the faintest hint of a lopsided smile as he worked, showing a row of perfect chalk-white teeth.

Wow, I thought to myself. I hope I look like that when they're done with me. He's really handsome. I mean really handsome. Maybe even the most handsome guy I know.

Without realizing it, I'd leaned in. My chin was jutting and all I could feel was an overwhelming desire to kiss him. My eyes widened in shock as I realized what I was doing.

I jerked back and looked him in the eyes, gasping.

"What the hell are you people doing to me?"

Ω



SUMMARY: Three loser guys agree to be part of a reality show where they are completely made over, what they don't realize is that the show plans to change their gender as well.

THE SWAN REDUX

Part Two

by Valerie Hope

DOCTOR CHRISTOPHER BACKED AWAY FROM me a half-step, favoring me with a calming look.

"Try and calm down, Tim," he said soothingly.

"I tried to *kiss* you," I said, stunned.

"Lots of patients form emotional attachments to their doctors," he said. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"It is when they're both guys," I said accusingly. "I've never had the urge to kiss another man in my entire life. What the hell are you people doing to me?"

"We're changing your life," he said calmly. "It's what you wanted, remember?"

"I didn't want *this*," I said, raising my voice. It sounded very shrill to my ears.

"What this? So you tried to kiss me. So what? Lots of people try to kiss me," the doctor said with an amused smile. "And you know what? Some of those people are guys."

"I'm not gay," I said roughly.

"I never said you were," he said. "Nobody's saying that."

"Then why would I try to kiss you?"

"Maybe because you felt close to me and it seemed like a way to express it," he said. "I don't know. This isn't my department."

He walked over to his desk and picked up the phone. "Listen, Tim, I'm going to call Dr. Kane. She'll know what to do. Then I'm going to give you something to help you calm down and finish with your bandages. By the time I'm done, Dr. Kane will be here and she'll help you figure everything out."

"I don't think I want you near me," I said breathlessly.

"Don't be silly," he said, dialing the phone. "You're in a very vulnerable and confused place, Tim, and you need some help. Anybody would need help in your position. That's what we're here for. Just try and relax. Take some deep breaths."

He spoke into the phone while I hyperventilated. "Jeanette? It's Eric. Hi. Listen, I'm in my office with Tim Pierce and we're having a little bit of a meltdown. We could use your help, do you have a couple minutes? Fantastic. I'm going to give him some Valium and we're going to try and just calm down, okay? Great. See you in a few."

He hung up the phone. "She's only a few blocks away. She'll be here in ten minutes."

He busied himself with a syringe and a little vial of Valium. I didn't want him to give it to me, but I also wanted it desperately at the same time. I'd curled up into a ball in the exam chair without realizing it.

"I want to know what you're doing to me," I said again.

"I told you. I'm giving you some Valium to help you calm down and then I'm going to finish removing your bandages while Dr. Kane gets here."

"To my head," I clarified. "What are you doing to my head?"

"Taking the bandages off," he said. I was so freaked out I didn't even notice he'd swabbed off a section of my upper arm with alcohol. I hissed sharply at the jab of the needle. He dropped the used syringe in the sharps box attached to the wall and stood back.

"Better?"

"No."

"Give it a minute. Can I keep going?"

I tried to take a deep breath, but it was like someone was sitting on my chest. "No," I said. "I don't want you to touch me."

"A minute ago you wanted to kiss me and now I can't touch you? You send a lot of mixed signals, there, Tim."

"Shut up," I said.

"Look, the bandages have to come off one way or the other," he said. He pulled a disposable surgical mask from a box atop a cabinet and threaded the loops behind his ears. "See? Look. I'm wearing a mask. No kissing."

Maybe it was the tension, or the Valium, or some combination of both. I started snickering and soon he'd joined in.

"I guess I'm just being stupid," I said, fighting back the giggles. "Yeah, okay. Keep going. I'm sorry I was such a drama queen. Sometimes I can be a real bitch."

"It happens," Dr. Christopher said, crinkling his mask with his grin. He picked up his scissors and stepped close. I closed my eyes and tried not to think about how good he smelled. I never stopped for a second to consider how I'd referred to myself. *Drama queen. Bitch.* The words had just seemed to suit me. Maybe I wasn't alarmed because I had ten milligrams of Valium in my bloodstream. Or maybe I wasn't alarmed because the words just seemed to suit me somehow. I didn't give it much thought as I drifted on the chilly high from the drug. It could all get sorted out when Dr. Kane got here.

* * *

"It was perfectly understandable to get so upset, Timothy," Dr. Kane told me, patting my hand. "I would have been upset too, if that had happened to me."

"I guess," I said, relaxed from the dose and from the immediately comforting presence of Dr. Kane. She always made me feel better, more in control. "I just feel kind of stupid about it."

"You shouldn't. It was new and very strange to you. We react to new, strange things in our own way, and we try to make them things we can understand in our own ways. You get the luxury of an afterwards to try and figure it out so it doesn't have to happen again."

"What? Trying to kiss Dr. Christopher? Yeah, I'd like that not to happen again."

"Tell me something, Timothy," Dr. Kane said, sitting back. "Tell me why you wanted to kiss him. I promise I won't judge you."

"I don't know. He was just really close to me, I mean he was right there. And it just... I don't know. I remember thinking how handsome he was, wishing I was going to look like him when all of this was over. It was the first time I'd really gotten a good look at him. And while I was thinking that, it just kinda *happened*, without my even thinking about it."

"If you didn't think about it," Dr. Kane said, "then is it safe to assume that maybe that thought has always been there, in the background, and when you stopped trying to fight it and control it by concentrating on how he looked, it jumped on the chance to express itself?"

"Are you saying that I'm a closet gay and didn't even know it?" I asked.

"That's certainly possible," Dr. Kane said, smiling gently, "but pretty unlikely. Nothing in your childhood that you've told me about has led me to suspect that you're a homosexual. Most children know from a pretty early age. Sometimes they suppress or block the memory of the first time they realized it, but there are signs of that. You don't show those signs."

"So what does that mean?"

"It means it's most likely another reason. Try something with me. It may be a little scary, but I want you to bear with me."

"Okay," I said.

"Close your eyes and I want you to imagine what just happened. But this time I want you to imagine that you really did kiss him. Your lips actually touched. Will you do that for me?"

"Okay," I said, closing my eyes. I put myself back in the moment, remembering with an almost painful clarity the strong feeling I'd had in my belly while looking at the doctor's kind but rugged face, imagining what it would feel like to run my slender fingers through his thick hair. His breath smelled like coffee and mint. His eyes met mine and locked for an eternity of a half-second and our lips touched. Mine seemed to yield to his, to melt a little from the contact. My hands threaded into the thick, soft hair to knead the hard skull beneath, stroking that sensitive skin as our lips pressed harder together, willingly abandoning that first softness to a more urgent desire. Lips parted and we breathed one another's breath, and the first tickling thrust-and-parry of tongue tips began, gentle, exploratory...

I sat up, gasping, chest heaving. "Wow," I managed.

"Tell me how that felt," Dr. Kane said, pen poised to write.

"I don't know. Intense is the only word that springs to mind."

"Did it feel scary? Unnatural?"

"It was scary at first," I said, "but then it stopped mattering. And no, it didn't feel unnatural at all. It seemed... *right*, somehow. Yeah. It seemed *right*."

She smiled at me. "That's good."

"What's good about it?"

"Feeling strong emotions and wanting to express them *is* right, Timothy. It's the most right thing we do. You made a really big step tonight, whether you know it or not."

"A step towards what?"

She leaned forward. "First we have to get rid of the concept of *gay* and *straight*. It makes it impossible to analyze what happened. Will you do that for me?"

"I'll try," I said.

"Forget gay. Forget straight. When you were looking at him up close like that, you said, let's see here - " she consulted her notes " - that you 'felt something strange in your belly, like you were nervous or queasy. What do you think that feeling was, Timothy?"

"Fear," I said.

"I don't think that's true."

"What was it, then?" I asked, a little bitter. This was what I always derided psychoanalysts for in the past, telling people what they felt. I hated it when she did this, and hated it more when she was right. I knew it wasn't fear. That was what I was feeling *now*, fear about the answer to the question I just asked, and what I felt now and what I felt then were nothing alike.

"It's something I feel all the time, Timothy. Everyone feels it. Honestly, just between you and me, I feel it sometimes when I look at Dr. Christopher."

"You're talking about attraction."

"Forget gay and straight. Just be honest with me, it doesn't leave the room and I won't judge you, you know that. Be honest. Are you attracted to Dr. Christopher?"

I had to fight past a long and somewhat sullen silence to say, "Yes."

"You sound like I just shot your dog," Dr. Kane said.

"It's hard to say, that's all," I mumbled. "I didn't want to hear myself say it."

"Sometimes the truth can be a little hard to hear."

"I don't want to be gay," I said, a little plaintively.

"I thought we were going to forget that word," Dr. Kane said sternly.

"Fine," I said. "I don't want to be like this, then. Attracted to Dr. Christopher. Attracted to any man."

"Why not? You said it yourself - he's a very attractive man. What's wrong with being attracted to a very attractive person, regardless of gender?"

"I don't... I guess... you're twisting it all up."

"No I'm not," Dr. Kane said. "I'm thinking about what happened without using the concepts of hetero- or homosexual. No gay or straight, just attractive. You're way too hung up on that word. Gay. Don't use it. Don't think about it. Think about what *happened*, not what you think society thinks it means. It was one person being attracted to another. Not unnatural at all. Just what you said it was. *Right*."

I sighed heavily. "I'll try."

"I know you will," Dr. Kane said, squeezing my hand. "You always do."

"I'm running late for my dance lesson," I told her, ready to leave this room full of very difficult and frightening concepts. "I should go."

"Of course. And you can call me any hour, you know that," Dr. Kane reiterated. "But while you're dancing, Timothy, I want you to think about something. It might help you."

"What is it?"

"You wanted to kiss a man. You tried to kiss a man. You're having a very difficult time coming to terms with that because you think of yourself in a certain way and no other. Do you think that's fair?"

"Yeah," I said, abashed. She had a way of breaking things down to simplest terms like that and making you look at them hard.

"Okay, then, try to solve the problem without using gay and straight. Think about this while you're at your dance lesson. You can give me your answer during session tomorrow. What kind of person wants to - and tries to - kiss men, if they're not gay or straight?"

* * *

"Girls," I said as I entered Dr. Kane's office the next morning, before I even sat down. "Girls want to kiss men and try to kiss them."

"That's a great answer," she told me. "Sit down. How was your night?"

"Sleepless," I said. "Not even your CDs could help me. I zoned out a little watching Gretchen's videos - it was that Jessica Alba movie, *Honey*, I guess it was pretty good but I don't remember very much of it. I spent most of the night staring at the ceiling working on that answer."

"It's a perfect answer. You're absolutely right," she told me. "Coffee?"

I nodded.

"Go with me on this. The conclusions you draw are going to be a little weird, but they're going to tell me a lot about what's going on inside. Will you do that for me?"

"Sure," I said, accepting the cup from her. It was great to be able to sip coffee without all the bandages, even though the retainer over the bridge of my nose made it a little difficult to see.

"Okay, then, bear with me and give me the first answer that comes to you. Don't worry about right or wrong or even if it makes sense. Ready?"

"Yep."

"Okay, then, Timothy, are you gay?" she asked, pen in hand.

"No," I said.

"Did you try to kiss Dr. Christopher last night?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Is Dr. Christopher a man?"

"Yes."

"Do girls try to kiss men?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Would a girl try to kiss Dr. Christopher?"

"Yes. Probably."

"Would a gay man try to kiss Dr. Christopher?"

"Probably."

"You tried to kiss Dr. Christopher. But you said you're not a gay man. What does that leave?"

My face screwed up in thought. She told me not to worry about right and wrong or even possible or sensible. There was only the one answer, then.

"I'm a girl?" I asked.

"Say it again. Think about what happened last night and say it again."

I concentrated. That fireworks kiss, but this time I had long blonde hair and soft lips smeared with glossy lipstick, long eyelashes and firm breasts. I felt a stab of sharp emotion right through my head and heart. The vision of kissing the doctor from last night had felt right. This one felt *good*. Really good. The stab of emotion resolved into something that I could understand. The picture in my head of kissing Dr. Christopher and me as a girl - a *straight* girl - made me feel that way. I *loved* that picture. More than I think I've loved anything else in my whole life.

"I'm a girl," I said with a strength and passion that made even Dr. Kane blink.

Dr. Kane stood up and gave me a tight hug. "You did great, Timothy. Really great. I'm proud of you for doing that."

"What, exactly, did I do?"

"You broke free of all the set-in-stone bullcrap definitions that you had before. You can't move on to a new life if you don't shake off the preconceptions of the old one. You're going to be moving on so much more easily now. You have no idea."

"So it was a good thing?"

"It was a very good thing," Dr. Kane said. "I'm so proud of you."

I smiled, a tremulous smile that didn't know if it was wanted there. "It felt good. Really good. I don't think I've ever gone that far out on a limb before."

"I think you belong there, but that's just me," Dr. Kane said. There were actually tears in her eyes. "Listen, that's more than enough for today. I need to write up my notes from last night and you have a lot to think about. Why don't you take the morning off, do something fun. Think about everything that happened the last twenty-four hours and we'll see where we stand in the morning, okay?"

I hugged her again. "Okay," I said into her hair. "Thanks, Doc. Thanks for everything."

"You're very welcome, sweetheart," she told me, patting my back.

* * *

My mind was ablaze with fresh ideas all throughout the rest of the day. I'd never even really considered the concept of myself as a girl. It made a lot of things about myself easier to accept, even things from my life before I entered the program, hazy as they were. I didn't begin to know how to be a girl in real life, much less convince people that I was a girl, but I found that if I *thought* of myself as a girl, saw myself that way, I was happier and more able to accept myself than I ever had been before. Suddenly the fact that I couldn't lift very much weight on the machines in the gym didn't seem like a defeat, or that I tried to kiss Dr. Christopher some kind of a stigma - as a matter of fact, I began feeling a slight tinge of regret that I hadn't gone through with it. Before I knew it, I was calling Dawn and Gretchen and Jeff the driver and Gabriel my trainer and Susan my nutritionist things like "sweetie" and "honey" and "baby" and never felt a moment's hesitation or shame about it. Suddenly, talking with my hands like I'd learned while my jaw was wired shut became as natural as could be, spending evenings considering how Gwen Stefani and Britney Spears moved wasn't so strange.

It wasn't until I clicked off the DVD player - it was *You Got Served* and *Bring It On* tonight - that I made the realization, the one that struck me like a hammer between the eyes.

I *liked* being a girl. No, that wasn't quite right. I *loved* being a girl. I wanted more. I climbed into bed and pulled the covers over my knees and picked up the phone next to the bed, speed-dialed number one and waited for the other end to pick up.

"Jeanette Kane," she said.

"Hi, Dr. Kane, it's Tim."

"What's up, Tim?"

"Listen, this might sound a little weird, but... shit. I rehearsed this twenty times and now it just sounds stupid to me."

"Just spit it out, then," Dr. Kane told me. "I have an open mind."

"I know you do, that's why I called. Listen, Doc - can I have some things to wear around the apartment while I'm alone?"

"Don't you have clothes there?"

"I do, but I want different things," I said, my voice losing strength and drive as I got closer to the words that I was afraid might brand me forever. Me knowing was one thing, someone else - even someone like Dr. Kane - was something *entirely* different.

"I want girl things," I said in barely more than a whisper.

"Girl things? Like nightgowns and teddies and things like that, you mean?"

"Yeah," I said. "I looked in the Victoria's Secret catalog online, and I have a wish-list."

"You sound like you've thought a lot about this," she said.

"I have," I told her. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I felt like - I don't know, I was afraid you might try to talk me out of it. I really want to do this."

"Sweetheart, of *course* I'll get you some clothes," she said. "You should never worry that I'm going to think you're defective or sick. I'm your doctor. My job is to help you however I can with whatever you need, no matter what it is. I just wanted to make sure you were comfortable with your decision."

"I am," I said. "A little scared, I think, but I'm comfortable. I need to try this."

"Okay, then," she said. "I'll make the order tonight with next-day air and you'll have them by tomorrow night. And any time you want more, you just call me, okay? There's no need to ever be ashamed. We can get you a whole new wardrobe if that's what it takes to help you find yourself."

"Thanks, Doc." I said, the relief flooding out of me and making my voice sound slightly thick and liquid. I discovered I was on the verge of tears.

"Anything you need, sweetheart. Anything at all. Good night."

"Good night," I said, and hung up. I spent the night dreaming of satin and lace.

* * *

I could scarcely focus on my day - I buzzed through my workout even though today was the dreaded Stairmaster and zipped through my dance lessons without even remembering them, even though Gabriel and Dawn both told me that I was showing great improvement. I skipped the session with Dr. Kane - she said she wanted to talk to me this evening, perhaps over the phone, once I was "settled in" as she termed it - and my laser treatment went past in a blur. I could only think about what was waiting for me. I didn't even take my keys out of the deadbolt before I dropped my gym bag and ran to the large FedEx box on the coffee table in the front room.

Seized by a sudden flash of embarrassment, I went back and locked the door and then drew the shades. I cared a lot about Ronnie, Jeff and Jack, but I didn't want them to see this. It wasn't even that I thought they would laugh at me - I just didn't want to run the risk of anyone or anything ruining this. My hands trembling, I cut the tape on the large box with a kitchen knife and exposed the mountain of packing peanuts beneath. The invoice and the catalog enclosed

went immediately onto the floor, and I almost tossed the bright pink gift card with gilt edges before I got a hold of myself and opened it.

Dear Sweet Timothy,

I am so proud of you and all your progress. I ordered everything you had marked in the catalog and added a few things that are just from me, by way of saying congratulations. You're one of the brightest, most promising patients I've ever had and I'm so honored to be a part of your process.

Love always,

Jeanette

Smiling and crying at the same time, I wiped my eyes and drew out the first of the bundles, wrapped in clear plastic. Unable to contain my excitement any more, I up-ended the box in a crackling shower of styrofoam peanuts and gathered up every single bundle into my arms, running for the bedroom and shedding all my clothes as I went.

* * *

I couldn't tell which was the predominant emotion - fear, of being caught, of being labeled a freak; sexual thrill at the forbidden feeling of silk, satin, lace and velvet against my bare skin; anger, that I'd spent a lifetime in denial, never allowing myself to feel like this; confusion, that something so against what I'd been raised to believe could feel *this* good; and something unnameable, something like the wild uncontrollable love a teenager felt for the first time.

I wished, for the first time, that the apartment had mirrors. I had to settle for looking down at myself and wondering, the pink satin teddy barely covering my behind and the snug-fitting pink lace panties which held my nethers in a demanding caress. I had bras and panties from tame powder blue cotton all the way to leopard-print silk with push-up pads, teddies and babydolls and long nightgowns, satin pajama bottoms with matching spaghetti-strap camisoles, a knee-length sleep shirt like a pink football jersey, even a racy white lace merry widow with attached garters with matching silk stockings. Everything I'd wished for, plus some little touches that Dr. Kane had added herself. Shoes, for instance, a pair of pink satin mules. Perfume, so I could smell as pretty as I felt. Hand and body lotion, a ribbon for my hair, and an adorable little rhinestone heart pendant which I vowed I'd never take off. She'd even gotten me some clip-on earrings, the dangly kind, which brushed the tops of my shoulders. I wore the wide satin ribbon in my "hair" as such - that is, over the protective cap I'd worn since my surgeries to protect the delicate hair transplant surgery done on me by Dr. Hadley.

I could only hug myself and spin in little circles in the middle of my bedroom floor, laughing and crying at the same time, loving the idea that the awkwardness of the two-inch heel on my slides would go away. I wanted more. I wanted to pierce my ears, to get a manicure, to put on makeup and false eyelashes and wear low-rise jeans. I wanted to carry a purse and wear rings on every finger, to order salads in restaurants instead of entrées and get a belly-button ring, to carry emergency tampons "just in case" around my time of the month and paint my toenails to match my cell phone. I wanted it all, I wanted so much. The opportunity to pee sitting down or get a menstrual cramp right then would have been worth trading every second of my life before this, good times and bad.

As I slipped out of my teddy and into a frilly lavender babydoll nightgown, there was a knock at my door. I stopped suddenly, heart in my throat. It felt for all the world like my father was going to come in and see his only son wearing a frilly little nightie and begin the long process of beating me to death with his leather belt. I could hardly move.

The knock repeated. Desperately, I let my nightie drop to the floor and covered myself in a towel as if I'd been interrupted from my bath. I walked across the floor - tiptoed, actually, still strangely afraid that it would be my father - and peeked through the space left by the taut chain holding my door shut.

"Hey, Tim." It was Jack Wright from next door. "Me and Jeff and Ronnie were going to play Xbox for a little while. We wondered if you wanted to be a fourth for *Halo*?"

I really didn't, I really wanted to curl up on my couch in something frilly and girly and paint my toenails and watch *E! True Hollywood Story*, but I had a secret to keep now, so I nodded. "I'll be right over, I just have to get dressed."

"Okay," Jack said, smiling. He looked at me crookedly. "You're wearing earrings."

I touched my earlobes to make sure. In my hurry, I hadn't taken them off, or the pendant sparkling on my hairless chest either. I stared at him in total shock, waiting for the gales of derisive laughter.

"Yeah," I said, my voice sticking in my throat.

"I like them," he said, turning. "And that necklace is *adorable*. You have to tell me where you got it. See ya next door."

I stood dumbfounded, holding the door open. "You like it? Really?"

He turned in the hallway. "Yeah, I do. It looks really cute on you. If you break down and do some tanning, it'll look great."

"You think so, huh?"

"I know so. So, are you coming over or what?"

I swallowed. "Hey, Jack? Do you think it would be okay if I... if I wore..."

"Wore what?"

"Would you guys laugh at me if I wore a nightie?" I asked, my voice no more than a squeak.

"I won't, and Jeff won't either. And I know Ronnie won't, cause he's wearing one right now," Jack said, smiling. He hooked a thumb into the waistband of his pajama bottoms and pulled up the yellow lace waistband of a very girlish and racy low-rise thong.

"You guys like being girls too?" I said, too amazed to even grasp the obvious.

"Yeah, it's a little hard to get used to. I caught Jeff two days ago walking down the hall for some ice wearing a black satin teddy. I asked him about it, and I realized I wasn't asking for an explanation. I was asking where I could get one."

"Victoria's Secret online?" I asked, relief spilling out of me, making me breathe hard.

"Frederick's of Hollywood," Jack said. "Great sale, you should check them out."

"I will," I said. "Hey listen, I'll be over there in a minute."

Jack smiled at me warmly, almost like a welcome, and continued down the hall. I couldn't stop the happy tears from falling as I rushed back to my bedroom and my lavender nightie so I could go play video games with the boys.

Scratch that. I was going to play games with the *girls*.

* * *

The following weeks were pure bliss. It seemed as though that now someone knew, someone not sworn to secrecy, it truly existed. It was like it was all real. Jack, Jeff, Ronnie and I spent our days separately, working out and consulting with doctors, and our evenings together, searching catalogs online for clothes and playing with makeup. Our first attempts in cosmetics were horrendous, leaving us all giggling with sore sides and faces on the floor for hours. But we got better, with help from Gretchen. It was hard not to practice on ourselves, but the no mirrors clause made that impossible. We adjusted by making a morning appointment after the gym to do one another's makeup so that we could go the rest of the day looking nice. And it was nice to see one another. I'd been facing everything alone for the longest time. Having friends and a community where I could share my problems and triumphs was wonderful, Dr. Kane's wonderful presence notwithstanding.

It was one of the scariest decisions of my life to tell Dr. Christopher that I wanted the fat injections into my hips and buttocks and to pad out the breast implants I asked for. He smiled at me fondly, congratulating me on my courage, and then began to mark all over my smaller, denuded body with a purple surgical marker, showing me where incisions and contours would be. I cried as he told me how well my body would be suited to them. But then again, I cried all the time these days, with the huge doses of female hormones I was taking in the mornings and evenings with meals. Already, only after a few short weeks of the treatment, my nipples were larger and more sensitive and my features were softening. I worried a little that I'd still have a man's face, but Dr. Christopher said not to worry, that I hadn't seen myself in a while and I'd be very happy with the results. I tried to take his word for it.

Only a month before the pageant, I went back under the knife for my implants. I was laughing and joking with the nurses beforehand, much different than I'd been the first time I'd undergone procedures with the program. It seemed like all the fear had gone out of me with this acceptance of who and what I was. It was wonderful - I realized now how long I'd been carrying it around. Dr. Kane and I talked at length about my parents, and I came to understand that I'd always been a girl inside, and I'd only covered that up to keep them happy. Now that they were gone, and couldn't control me any more, I was free to live my life however I wished. And I wished that life to be a girl's life.

Waking up with a chest swathed in bandages and with a completely different center of gravity was a bit of a shock, but I started compensating immediately. My first request was to see Dawn, so she could start putting me on an exercise plan which would teach me to walk with my new "additions" and get the sexy catwalk strut that the Victoria's Secret models had. She agreed and left quickly to do some research. I had to have the walk, the mannerisms and the

look if I was to win that pageant as a woman. I vowed to myself to work harder during the last month than I had through the first two months combined.

* * *

The recovery from surgery was quick and relatively painless once I survived the first three days post-op. Due to my late decision, I wouldn't be able to have my bandages off until the day of the pageant, and that suited me just fine. I didn't worry too much, since I had more than enough work to do. The bandages around my hips and groin, where Dr. Christopher had done some pelvic recontouring, were a little unwieldy, and they didn't let me wear the soft, snug thongs that I'd come to love feeling as I walked. He'd fitted me with a catheter so I wouldn't have problems going to the bathroom, so I guess it was only a mild inconvenience.

I worked as hard as I'd ever worked, with Dawn from sunrise to noon and with Gabriel and Gretchen in the gym from noon until night. I was determined to win that pageant. I missed the evenings with Jack, Jeff and Ronnie, but it was a sacrifice I was willing to make. I could always make it up to them later, and I was sure that they'd understand. If I knew them as well as I thought I did, they were using the time before the pageant the same way I was. I knew - I'd always known, actually - that I was going to win, but they weren't going to make it easy for me. I was glad of that.

* * *

The style consultant, Ellen, had been working on me non-stop for nearly six hours. I felt like a princess, being pampered and fussed over that way, and I dimly realized that I would have hated that kind of attention as a man. Being a girl was so much better. It was only a few hours before the reveal, and the pageant, and all that remained was to style my hair, have my bandages removed and slip into my gown and shoes. I was almost vibrating with anticipation.

Dr. Kane walked in with a bouquet of roses and kissed me gently on the cheek, so as to not smudge my makeup. "How are you doing, sweetheart?"

"I'm so good, Doctor," I gushed. "I'm better than I've ever been. I can't ever thank you enough."

"You're worth it," she said, examining me from head to toe, pausing to exclaim girlishly about my long, French-tipped nails - acrylic, for now, but beautiful - or the luxurious honey blonde I'd dyed my hair, grown long and silken under the cap Dr. Hadley had placed on me. It brushed the tops of my shoulders and I couldn't seem to stop running my fingers through it, or playing with the studs in my freshly-pierced ears or the rhinestone dumbbell above my belly button.

"Listen, Timothy, I brought this for you. I didn't know whether or not you'd want to go this far, but I prepared it anyway." She passed me a file folder. I opened it and read the legal document inside, pausing momentarily to wave my hands frantically in front of my eyes to keep the tears forming there from ruining my mascara. Grabbing a pen from her, I signed the Petition for Change of Name without thought and passed it back. Dr. Kane was crying from happiness as she left.

* * *

First they showed us our old pictures and then our new reflections in the mirror. I was the last in, and I still couldn't believe that every one of them had made the same decision as I had. The leggy brunette with the button nose and thick sable curls wearing the sausage-sheath red spangled dress and platform heels, diamonds glittering against her amber skin at throat, ears,

wrists and manicured fingers could never have been Ronnie Ellis Crabtree. Renée Elizabeth Crabtree suited the world better, and I knew deep down that she would be a wonderful mystery author. I couldn't wait to read the first manuscript that she'd promised to send me first.

And the overweight, sweating lump of maladjustment with the unruly mop of ginger hair and the crooked yellow teeth that had been Jefferson Nicholas Hart had faded away, shrinking and flourishing into the tall redhead with the cascade of tight curls and the porcelain skin, the glittering smile and sparkling green eyes of Jennifer Nicole Hart. The black single-strap evening dress slit nearly to the thigh showed a length of luscious toned leg embraced by smoky silk and black stiletto heels, the tight bodice displayed the tops of her perfectly proportioned 36D breasts. Bright tears streamed down her perfect cover-girl face and she smiled at me unashamedly, she who'd once been a man who could barely make eye contact. I knew the days of playing online games as a woman were over. Dr. Kane had let me know that she was due to audition for the newest lady wrestler in the AWF in only a few weeks.

Jack Becker Wright's mousy figure of a man with the coke-bottle glasses was now a petite, golden skinned beauty with a long aquiline nose and piercing blue eyes, her short dark hair shining with auburn highlights and her high, Sophia Loren cheekbones bright with tears. She might have gone a little heavy on the breast augmentation, but it gave her a tight bombshell body that a free-spirited, vivacious young woman like Jaclyn Rebecca Wright deserved. She covered her mouth with steepled fingers tipped with square-cut French tips as I walked in, and I hoped the Army would let her keep those nails when she joined Officer Candidate School in six weeks. No longer would she simply watch her heroines from the sci-fi shows from afar. She would become them.

And then it was down to me. I stared at the old me, the chubby balding man with the basset-hound face and the sad blue eyes with the pouches beneath, the perpetual slouch and the defeated look to him. And next to him, in the mirror, was the five-nine blonde beauty with the ironing-board stomach and the C-cup breasts, the perfect unblemished amber tan and the long cascade of honey-blonde curls, the bright smile and full glossy lips, the long "ski jump" nose and the wide, innocent looking blue eyes beneath high, arched brows. The fantastic, look-at-it-twice butt and the long legs, the long kissable swan's neck surrounded by a seven-row diamond choker, the muscular legs in their dark silk casings over their platform heels, the second-skin black strapless evening dress with rhinestones across the slim waistline - it all went to show just how dead that tired man who was busily not aging well in the picture beside the mirror. I fanned my tearing eyes with long-nailed fingers.

I rubbed my thighs together secretly beneath my dress, just getting used to the feeling of having nothing there. Dr. Christopher's "pelvic recontouring" had included the removal of my penis and testicles and the installation of a gorgeous, thick-lipped vagina with a wreath of downy blonde pubic hair meticulously trimmed into a slender delta centered under the pale skin of my tan-line. I'd not known what to say. It was almost as if they'd known all along that this was going to happen.

So what if they did? I didn't care. Something like that was something that Timothy Michael Pierce would worry about.

Tiffany Michelle Pierce didn't intend to lose any sleep over it. She had a pageant to win and a modeling contract to fulfill. Because Tiffany Michelle Pierce had dreams of her own now, and nothing was going to stand in her way.

