



# WOMEN IN SPORTS

SWEATY, SEXY AND HOT, OH, MY!

PAT CRONIN AND VERDA FOSTER, EDITORS



***Women In Sports:  
Hot, Sweaty, And Sexy, Oh MY!***

**Edited by  
Pat Cronin & Verda Foster**

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# The Pink Pussy

by Jessie Chandler

THE SHRIEK AND intense vibration of the crotch rocket between my legs drilled deep inside me. I rode the accelerator and squeezed the brake tight, holding the bike in place as the rear wheel spun on the asphalt, churning clouds of acrid smoke that stung my eyes. My heart pounded with anticipation all the way from my head to my groin.

This was possibly the stupidest idea I'd ever had. But in order to break into the underground world occupied by the woman doing her own red-hot burnout next to me, I needed her trust and a few casual introductions.

My real name is Cailin McKenna, but in this moment I was known as Cai Kennagh. I work as an agent of the National Protection and Investigation Unit—a domestic terrorism agency. We'd gotten a credible tip that a New York gang was planning an attack on the Holland Tunnel—the tunnel under the Hudson River connecting New Jersey to Manhattan.

My job was to make a solid connection and see how far up the chain I could get. Alex Rodriguez was a ladder I was about to climb. With a little down-and-dirty luck, in more ways than one. She wasn't a banger, but was a known associate who participated in illicit motorcycle street races the gang ran.

The problem was, the longer I hung around Alex, the more I wanted to see of her. Preferably all of her, blissfully naked between my sheets. Yeah, that goddamn adage of mixing business with pleasure was probably going to take a hell of a big chunk out of my hide if I couldn't keep my mind in the game. And right now my mind wasn't on guns, wasn't on gangs. I was fired up, horny, and fucking loving it.

My rear tire screeched as I released the brake, popped a wheelie as the tire caught, and rode it for twenty feet before dropping to the ground. To a chorus of hooting from the mostly male onlookers, I shifted into neutral, rolled the bike backward to the starting line and glanced at Alex. Her face shield was still up, and her dark eyes, framed by her matte black, full-face helmet, glittered at me. The challenge I read in her was unmistakable, and so was the flash of lust that slammed straight to my clit.

Alex was sizzling hot, from pouty lips begging to be chewed on, to the tribal tattoo curling around her left shoulder and crisscrossing her bicep. I wanted to trace every inch of it with my tongue. Her luscious breasts were wrapped in a blood-red tank, and she had these endless legs that were encased in tight blue jeans, accentuating an ass I would kiss in a heartbeat. Her long black hair was tied in a ponytail that trailed down the middle of her back. My fingers itched to find out if her flesh was as smooth as it looked.

Up until now I'd only looked—a lot—but hadn't touched. Tonight, however, things were about to change. We'd been doing some hardcore flirting for the last couple of weeks, and I was done playing around. Oh, so fucking done.

The crowd was exchanging money hand over fist on the outcome of the throwdown between "The Chicks," as we'd come to be known. Earlier in the day, I'd made my own, more personal

bet with Alex. If I won, that ass I'd been drooling over was all mine. If she won, she was going to take me to some New York dive called The Pink Pussy. While the name of that establishment certainly piqued my curiosity, I was far more interested in acquainting myself, up close and personal, with a very different pink pussy. I shivered with anticipation because I was sure that in just a few minutes I'd earn the right to find out just what shade it was.

"Cai, you badass showoff," Alex called, her voice muffled but the tone unmistakably flirtatious.

My lips curled into the wickedest of grins.

The sun had been down for an hour, but temperatures still hovered near ninety. Sweat seeped from beneath my helmet and rolled down my cheek. My T-shirt stuck to my back, and I was so goddamn turned on, the vibration of the bike alone could make me come...if I let it. The sound of Alex's husky voice fired me up whenever she opened that hot mouth of hers, and the trash talking we'd exchanged most of the evening would've left me with sopping wet panties if I were wearing any under my jeans. I'd been riding that razor sharp line between propriety and uncontrollable lust for hours.

We were on a rural stretch of back road in Somewhere, New Jersey. The road cut through a forest so dense it made me feel claustrophobic. Alex's main muscle and trusted mechanic, Marco, stood fifteen feet in front of us. He raised his arms. I slapped my visor down, and that helped block some of the crowd's raucous enthusiasm. I needed to concentrate. I crouched over my bike, belly pressed against the tank, eyes glued on Marco. This was one race I wasn't going to lose.

Marco whipped his arms down. I popped the clutch. In a fraction of a second I hit the sweet spot, and then I was flying. For that moment I was one with the bike—there was nothing but speed, the wail of the wind, and the howling in my mind. It was almost better than sex.

I caught the briefest glimpse of Alex in my peripheral vision. She was right on top of me. The needle wavered at the one-ten mark, and I jammed the throttle to the stops. We screamed past the finish line a half-mile down the road, crowded on both sides by cheering bikers. I had no idea who crossed first. I slowed to turn around.

Alex didn't stop. With a glance over her shoulder at me she took off as if she'd been shot from a cannon.

I revved the engine and chased after her until she slowed and cut onto a gravel road. From there I followed her over rough terrain that was nothing more than a trail through the woods. My headlight reflected crazily off the foliage, and I nearly dropped my bike twice on curves sharper than I'd expected. Finally we emerged into a clearing. Alex rolled to a stop and killed her engine. I did the same.

My entire body vibrated with the rush of adrenaline. I was ready. Oh, so ready. I swung a leg over the seat and stalked over to Alex, who remained on her bike. I released the chinstrap, pushed the brain bucket from my head and let it drop.

Without breaking eye contact I undid Alex's helmet strap and gently tugged it off. The moonlight cast shadows across one side of her face. I put a finger under her chin and tilted her head up. It was too dark to make out the warm chocolate of her eyes, but I could feel her gaze scorching a trail over my face. I brought my other hand to her cheek and paused, giving her one last chance to call this, this—thing—between us off. Her mouth parted in a half gasp, and I was lost. Our lips met tentatively, soft and slow.

After about two heartbeats, Alex threw slow to the wind. She grabbed my shirt, pulled me toward her and shoved her tongue in my mouth. I grabbed her ponytail and yanked, mostly

because I couldn't fucking breathe. I slid my lips wetly across her cheek, onto that spot between ear and jaw. She tasted of sweat and exhaust and spearmint. Oh, my god it was in-fucking-toxicating.

I latched on, sucking hard.

Alex yowled and nearly tipped the bike.

I dug my boots into the ground and held her and the bike up.

She shoved the kickstand down, and launched herself at me. We tumbled, our fall cushioned by thick grass. Alex landed on top of me and grabbed my hands. She pinned them over my head and growled, "Finally. I finally have you exactly where I fucking well want you."

I opened my mouth to agree and she filled it again oh-sodeliciously. While she distracted my lizard brain, she released one of my wrists, unzipped my jeans, and crammed her hand down the front.

"Wait—" I yelped, but then she was kissing me senseless once more. Holy shit. That tongue of hers needed a warning label.

I bucked. I tried to flip her over. My movements only allowed her more room to work her magic in my pants. Her fingers slid over my clit, and I would have screamed if my mouth had been uncovered. I was so wet, and she kept right on going until she buried at least three fingers in me.

This time, when she came up for air, I did scream. What happened to my grand plan to get my hands in her pants? The thought was snatched away when she shifted the angle of the fingers that were pistoning me into oblivion. I was going to shatter and I hadn't even touched her yet.

I bit off another wail and tried to stop the impossible. She doubled down and I bucked out of control. Somehow she kept up, didn't miss a stroke.

The burn was building, liquid fire rolled low in my belly, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to hold it back. It spread to my lower back, down my legs, and curled my toes tight against the bottoms of my Docs. I inhaled and then I was shouting at the ink-black sky, sailing, flying so goddamn high. I blasted over the edge and lost my mind. Oh, my fucking God, yes. Brilliant white lights strobed behind my eyes and flared with an intensity I'd never before experienced. My body arched off the ground like I'd been struck with ten thousand volts. I could do nothing but bellow my orgasm to the forest gods.

Long moments later I stilled beneath Alex, who was holding onto me for dear life. She was panting as hard as I was, and she hadn't even gotten off yet.

"Holy fuck, Alex." My breath was coming easier and thought I might not pass out after all.

Alex tucked her head into my neck. She pulled her hand from my pants and wiped sticky fingers on my belly. "Little riled up, Cai?" I felt the warmth of her breath on my ear and shivered in delight again.

"I don't usually have a hair trigger. Don't know what got into me."

Alex's mouth traced an unsteady line along my lower jaw and she murmured, "I know what got into you."

I would've rolled my eyes if I had the energy. The grass beneath us smelled like sunshine, and the trees along the path stood like sentries protecting us. I investigated swaths of hot, smooth flesh that had previously been off limits. After a few minutes I ran my tongue along the shell of her ear and whispered, "I think I want to see the pink pussy now."

Alex stiffened. "You want to see The Pink Pussy? Now?"

"Yes, now."

She slumped against me and let out a resigned sigh. "Fine."

I rolled her onto her back, thumbs gliding along her cheekbones. “I think I’m going to like the pink pussy.” I kissed the tip of her nose, then moved down to leisurely explore.

She said, “It’s a fun—”

I bit a nipple through the cloth of her shirt and bra, and she shut up fast. I released her breast and grabbed the hem of her tank. Alex arched, and I ripped the shirt over her head, then executed a one-handed unhook and tossed her bra away. Then I properly introduced my mouth to her puckered, delightful nipples.

Alex moved restlessly beneath me. I added suction, eliciting a keening cry and a hand that fisted in my hair to hold me still. I nipped, she yelped, and I soothed the sting with my tongue.

She let go of my hair and slid her hands down my neck to my shoulders as I continued my investigation. I tweaked the nipple my lips weren’t wrapped around.

“If,” she panted, “you really want—oh my God—to see the—holy shit that’s good—Pink Pussy—oh, baby you have to stop—ahh!”

I hid a grin against the warm skin of her stomach and twisted her nipple again, harder.

Her body seized and she yelped. I fumbled with the button of her jeans. The zipper slid down effortlessly, as if it was waiting for this moment. I struggled to my knees and tugged the jeans, along with her boxers, over her hips to her ankles. I yanked at one of her boots till it gave and freed one leg, then settled between her raised knees and said, “Baby, it’s time to visit the pink pussy.”

Before she could answer, my tongue slid through her sopping wet folds. I zeroed in on her swollen, engorged clit. The poor girl had to be in pain, and I was in the perfect position to ease it. I didn’t even have time to work a hand under my chin and slide inside before she popped off like a bottle rocket. I held her tight as she rode her orgasm hard.

It took a few minutes for my girl to come back to herself. I listened to her heartbeat slow and her breathing even out. I tongued the warm spot under a breast and laughed.

Alex’s hand slid up to the nape of my neck. She fingered the short hairs there and said hoarsely, “What’s so funny?”

“How long before the sun comes up?”

She stretched languidly in the grass like a sleepy cat. “I don’t know. Why?”

I ran my palm over her hip and pulled her closer. “I want to see.”

“What?”

“I want to see.”

“See what? Are you always obtuse after sex?”

I sucked hard enough on the junction between neck and shoulder to mark her as mine. She rewarded me with a guttural groan that made the muscles of my pelvis clench. “I’m going to make you come until it’s light enough to see exactly what shade of pink your pussy is.”

Alex moaned as I slid down her body again. “But—”

I cut her off with a well-placed lick.

“Never mind.” Alex threaded her fingers in my hair and guided my head to her happy place. “Get busy, baby.”

Yup. She was going to have one very pleased pink pussy by sunrise.



Award-winning author Jessie Chandler lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota with her wife and two mutts, Fozzy Bear and Ollie. In the fall and winter, Jessie writes, and spends her summers selling T-shirts and other assorted trinkets to unsuspecting conference and festival goers. Learn more at [www.jessiechandler.com](http://www.jessiechandler.com).

# Love In Zero Gravity

by M.B. Panichi

MORGAN RAHN STOOD just inside the hallway to the rec center locker rooms. She leaned against the gray-painted concrete, watching the crowd gathering in the bleachers that circled the fifteen-meter square zero gravity cube that was the grav-ball court.

A growing buzz of excitement permeated the rec center as fans filled the stands. Morgan picked out her friends among the crowd at the far side of the court. Most of them wore Kelly green Devil Dawgs shirts and stood on the bench seats, taunting the Heathens' fans in the opposing bleachers. The Heathens' supporters returned the trash talk with rowdy catcalls of their own.

Morgan smiled grimly. It was going to be a hell of a game.

"There you are."

She turned to see Shaine Wendt approach from the locker room and grinned in appreciation. Shaine looked so damned sexy in her grav-ball uniform. Form-fitting shorts clung to her long legs. Her titanium lower leg prosthetic gleamed in the lighting. The loose V-neck jersey accented Shaine's broad shoulders and the green background made Shaine's eyes stand out like emeralds in contrast to her tightly cropped red hair. The jersey featured a toothy, red-eyed Doberman and the words "Devil Dawgs - we BITE!" in dripping, blood red lettering.

Shaine strode up to Morgan and wrapped her arms around her. "Filling up fast, huh?"

"Yeah. Getting amped up out there. "

"Everyone's ready. Ally wants to talk strategy before we start."

Morgan said, "Charlie Heathe's gonna be gunning for me."

Shaine looked down at her companion with a concerned frown. "You worried about it?"

Morgan shook straight dark bangs out of her eyes. "Naw. Not like I haven't bloodied him before."

Shaine kissed the top of her head. "Even so, I got your back."

An iron band of sadness tightened around Morgan's heart with the echo of those familiar words. A year ago, it would have been her best friend Digger saying them. Before he'd been killed, Digg had always been her staunch defender on the court, and like a big brother off the court. She had Shaine's protection, now, both on and off the court, and her steadfast presence had become one of the few certainties in Morgan's life.

She blew out a long breath, shaking off the maudlin thoughts and taking a few seconds to revel in the warmth and safety of her lover's strong embrace. Space—even on Moon Base—could be a cold and unforgiving place.

She straightened reluctantly. "We'd better get back to the locker room."

Shaine gave her a look but nodded and fell into step as they headed off to strategize the rec league grav-ball championship.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, the Devil Dawgs ducked through the hatch into the zero-gravity cube and propelled themselves toward the top of the court to a chorus of cheers from their fans.

Shaine and Jase flipped and twisted in the zero-g space, bouncing between the clear glass-steel walls, showing off for the crowd. Morgan followed, appreciating the sexy lines of Shaine's athletic form. She executed a lazy flip as she joined her teammates, touched the ceiling of the cube and bounced off without adding to the energy of her motion.

Ally shot past Morgan on a horizontal path barely a meter below her, kicking off the side wall to clasp hands with Luke as they used each other to flip themselves back the way they'd come.

Shaine shifted her trajectory and grasped Morgan as she passed. Shaine pulled her in for a tight one-armed hug and put up a hand to keep them from hitting the top of the cube. "You ready for this?"

The crowd erupted again as the Heathens rushed into the hatch at the bottom of the court, yelling and raising their fists toward the crowd.

Morgan's expression twisted into a determined frown as she watched their adversaries. "Fuck yeah. I'm ready," she muttered.

Shaine kissed her hard. "Show time."

THE GAME PLAYED out as a grueling, non-stop grudge match. The Heathens called their final time-out and the teams congregated on opposite ends of the court.

With a hand on Shaine's shoulder, Morgan hung in a huddle with her teammates, floating a few feet off the floor. She glanced at the scoreboard clock. Two minutes. Two lousy minutes left in the game, and the score remained tied at one. She wiped her face with the sleeve of her jersey.

Ally said, "It's their ball. We gotta get an interception or get them to foul back to us."

Luke raked his fingers through sweat-dampened hair. "They're going to use Rafe and McBride to feed the ball to Heathe for the score. We need to shut them down. We'll do a loose zone coverage. It'll give us more room to react. Ally, you and Morgan hang back and try to stay open for a goal pass."

Jase added, "Just make sure Heathe doesn't get the ball. Those other guys aren't going to take the shot because they know Heathe wants it."

Shaine arched her back in a long stretch, watching the Heathens clustered near the cube's ceiling. "They're pissed. We can use that. Keep the pressure on. The angrier they are, the more mistakes they're going to make. We just need to keep our cool."

Morgan fingered the tender bruise staining her cheekbone. "Then I can beat the shit out of Heathe?"

Shaine grinned. "We win this game and you can take him out any way you want."

"He's toast," Morgan growled.

Ally laughed. "Dawgs fuckin' bite."

The time-out ended and one of the Heathens threw the ball into play. The passing between the Heathens' players moved quickly, and the Dawgs worked to keep their adversaries from passing to their leader.

Shaine yelled, "Jase!" She pushed herself off the player she was blocking and flew toward her teammate, hands out and arms locked in front of her. As she reached Jase, he planted his feet against her palms and propelled himself away, intercepting a pass and snapping the ball down to Ally.

Ally whipped the ball across to Morgan, who caught it solidly against her stomach and let its trajectory carry her as she twisted to face the goal. Grinning, she slam-dunked the ball with twenty seconds left on the clock.

The crowd erupted.

The ref signaled a legal goal, and Morgan's teammates surrounded her, high-fiving and hugging. Morgan pulled Ally toward her. "Great pass!"

"You got the hands, girl," Luke said.

Shaine broke in and wrapped her arms around Morgan, ducking her head to steal a quick but passionate kiss that left

Morgan breathless and over-heated.

The ref blew his whistle and called for a game reset.

Twenty seconds, that's all the time they needed to kill. Still feeling Shaine's lips on hers, Morgan struggled to focus as she took her place toward the top of the cube with Jase. Ally was at center, with Luke and Shaine on defense.

Charlie Heathe glared across the court at Morgan, his face red with fury. A snarl twisted his lips. If looks could kill, she'd be dead. Morgan met his glare with one of her own.

She glanced at Shaine, whose gaze shifted sharply between her and Heathe. Morgan saw the cold assessment in Shaine's expression, her partner's special operations training bleeding through. If Heathe tried anything, Shaine would be all over him in a second.

The ball dropped. The Heathen center got to it a split second before Ally.

Charlie Heathe kicked off the wall toward the Dawgs' goal, and Morgan launched herself after him. She shouldered into his side, shoving him away just before the ball reached his outstretched fingers.

The game buzzer sounded and the crowd roared.

Morgan turned with a victorious whoop.

Without warning, Charlie Heathe rammed into her, burying his elbow into her stomach. The air whooshed out of her lungs and she flew backwards. Somehow, she had the wherewithal to pivot her body so her feet hit the wall first and absorbed the shock. She kicked off hard, intent on chasing Heathe down, but her boisterous teammates intercepted and surrounded her, pulling her into their celebrations and dissipating her anger.

The ref yelled, "Final score, Heathens one, Devils Dawgs two. Devil Dawgs take the rec league grav-ball championship for the third year in a row!"

Another cheer went up. The Dawgs' fans pounded on the clear court walls. Morgan winced as she raised her fist in salute. Whoever said grav-ball wasn't a contact sport had never played in the Moon Base rec league.

Morgan slapped Luke and Ally on the back and accepted Jase's enthusiastic squeeze. Shaine enveloped her in a hug and she returned the embrace. Shaine briefly teased Morgan's lower lip with her tongue before pulling back, but that was enough to spark Morgan's libido. She shivered

as Shaine's hot breath caressed her skin. Shaine purred in Morgan's ear, "I hear celebratory sex is a wonderful thing."

Morgan's heart hammered as her brain instantly produced erotic images of Shaine lying naked in her arms. She leaned back to meet Shaine's gaze, losing herself in her dark intensity. For the space of a heartbeat, she was only aware of the two of them and the promise of the connection to come.

The moment was shattered as their boisterous teammates started pushing them toward the exit.

Ally said, "Come on, lovebirds, it's party time!"

Morgan stumbled out of the cube's hatch. By the end of the game, true gravity was always a shock. Her legs wobbled from the sudden weight and her head pounded.

Luke bellowed at the rowdy fans, "Party at the Afterburner! See you all there!"

The Dawgs fans howled. The team yelled their thanks as they headed for the locker room and collapsed onto the benches in front of the first row of lockers.

"Man, what a game! I'm done in." Luke flopped back against the hard plastic bench.

Morgan slumped forward, elbows on her knees, and dropped her head into her hands. The aches and pains multiplied as the adrenaline faded. "Fuck. I hurt."

Shaine reached over and rubbed gentle circles on her back.

Jase lifted his jersey over his head, revealing a glaring red and purple bruise on his side. He winced and twisted to see in the mirror mounted on the wall across from the lockers.

Ally asked, "Who hit you?"

He shrugged. "Who didn't?"

"At least you didn't have Heathe's sweaty self smacking you against the wall all night," Morgan mumbled.

Ally grimaced. "Ick. I thought he was gonna kill you after that last goal."

Shaine grated, "If he'd have laid another hand on her, I'd have beaten him bloody."

Morgan grinned. Shaine was so hot when she got protective.

Ally stood. "I need a shower."

There was one set of sonic showers in the unisex locker room, as well as a few individual shower spaces for those who needed more privacy. Ally opened her locker, stripped and padded into the shower room with a small bag of toiletries.

Jase and Luke followed suit, leaving Shaine and Morgan on the bench.

Shaine continued to rub Morgan's back. "Come on, let's hit the showers. The heat will help ease the aches." Shaine stood and offered a hand. "Upsy daisy, baby."

Morgan allowed Shaine to pull her to her feet and bit back a groan.

She peeled off her sweaty clothes and assessed the damage. A red and purple bruise wrapped around the bottom of her rib cage. A smaller one stained the back of her shoulder, shading the tattoo drawn there. The bruise on her cheekbone discolored the skin under her eye.

Shaine ran her fingers gently over Morgan's bruises, leaving trails of goose bumps. She gave Morgan a cheeky grin and undressed quickly, tossing her clothes into her locker.

Morgan let her gaze roam over Shaine's body. As beat up as she felt, she could definitely find the energy to spend some time exploring Shaine's smooth skin and the muscles rippling beneath. She held out her hand and led Shaine into the showers where the others were discussing the game.

Each sonic shower had its own three-sided stall with walls that rose to about shoulder height. Sonic waves emanated from the walls while mist sprayers provided a limited amount of water.

Shaine set a bottle of body wash on a tray on the back wall while Morgan engaged the sonic shower and turned the ambient heat up as high as it would go.

“Hey, Morgan, you owe us drinks,” Luke called out.

Jase turned off his shower. “High scorer buys drinks, Morg.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll get first round.” She hung her head in front of the line of misters. The heat from the walls and the mist sluiced hotly over her body.

Shaine smoothed eucalyptus-scented body-wash across Morgan’s shoulders and up into her hairline, probing gently at tensed muscles. Morgan closed her eyes at the touch and wished they were alone. They should have grabbed one of the single showers, but she hadn’t wanted to be rude.

Shaine said to the others, “Don’t wait on us. Morgan is locking up for Mr. Lee tonight. We’ll be at the Afterburner as soon as we can.”

Ally snorted. “Yeah, we won’t be waiting on you two.”

Morgan laughed at Ally’s lecherous leer, then winced as pain lanced across her rib cage.

“I’m outta here, ladies,” Ally announced as she followed the guys out to the lockers. “Enjoy your shower!”

Morgan smirked.

“Duck your head and I’ll get your hair,” Shaine said. She squeezed a drop of body wash onto her hands and ran her fingers through Morgan’s hair, slowly massaging it into her scalp.

“God, that feels good.” Morgan leaned back into Shaine, resting against her hot skin.

“Put your head under the spray,” Shaine said.

Morgan stepped closer to the nozzles, bending so her head was in front of the one with the most output. Shaine supported her with one arm around her middle while she used her other hand to rinse Morgan’s hair.

Morgan groaned at the feeling of Shaine’s breasts and hard stomach pressed against her back, the brush of Shaine’s pubic hair against her butt. Desire heated her body and pooled between her legs. She ached to feel all of Shaine, to wrap herself in her, lose herself in the feel of Shaine inside her and around her. She swallowed hard.

Shaine finished rinsing her hair and Morgan straightened, turning into Shaine, slipping a hand around her neck and pulling her head down. She attacked Shaine’s mouth, pushed her tongue inside, delving deep, feeling a need so deep it hurt.

Shaine’s long fingers twisted into Morgan’s hair. Her lips slid down Morgan’s throat, pausing at the pulse-point at the base of her neck, nipping and sucking.

Morgan moaned. Her heart felt as though it would explode with the emotion each touch elicited. It wasn’t just the sex. Shaine reached every part of her soul, filled her, soothed her, made her whole. She yearned for the connection between them, needed to be as close to Shaine as she could possibly be.

Morgan took control of the kiss again and pushed Shaine against the side of the stall. “Need you,” she whispered against Shaine’s mouth. She slid a hand between them and found Shaine’s slick heat. Shaine sighed with pleasure as Morgan slid her fingers through her desire, exploring, dipping in and then gliding up to tease the fullness of her clit.

Shaine moaned, plunging her tongue deep into Morgan’s mouth. Morgan felt another rush of heat between her own legs. She plunged her fingers into Shaine, reveling in the tight silky softness, and began thrusting inside. Shaine’s breath came in fast gasps, her eyes shut, her head thrown back.

Morgan closed her mouth around a stiff nipple, sucking and licking. She rubbed her thumb against Shaine's clit in time to her thrusts, and from the sounds Shaine was making, knew she was close. With a deep plunge of Morgan's fingers, Shaine's body stiffened. Morgan held her breath as Shaine shuddered her release.

"Have I mentioned how much I love you?" Shaine murmured into Morgan's hair when she'd recovered enough to speak.

Morgan kissed the top of the soft breast where she rested her head. "Mmmm, probably, but I like to hear it anyway. I love you too."

She held Shaine for a few moments more before stepping away. "Let me get your hair now," she said, then added with a playful leer, "On your knees."

Shaine laughed and eased down, kneeling in front of Morgan so that her much shorter partner could reach her hair. She looked up, meeting Morgan's gray gaze with green eyes still dilated with lust. She rested her hands on Morgan's hips and leaned in to run a playful line of kisses down Morgan's abdomen. "Only for you," she mumbled into Morgan's skin. "Only for you."

Morgan ran soapy fingers through Shaine's short red hair, scratching her scalp. Shaine sighed and rested her forehead against Morgan's stomach. "That feels wonderful."

Morgan continued to massage Shaine's scalp, sliding down to her neck and shoulders and then back up. She was about to pull Shaine up to rinse her hair when Shaine started nipping at her stomach, her tongue teasing Morgan's navel and sending sharp pulses of excitement straight to her groin. Warm hands slid around to cup Morgan's ass and pull her closer as Shaine's mouth traced a line down to the puff of hair between Morgan's legs.

Morgan's breath hissed out and her hands stilled, gripping Shaine's shoulders tightly as Shaine's breath touched sensitive skin, tongue teasing slick silken folds.

Shaine kissed the insides of her thighs. Morgan raised a leg to balance against the wall to give better access. Shaine's kisses moved up until her tongue lapped at wet heat, making Morgan whimper. Morgan didn't know how long she'd be able to stand. Shaine probed deeply with her tongue, thrusting hard and fast. Morgan clung to Shaine, her breath coming in frantic gasps. Shaine wrapped one arm around Morgan's thigh, replaced her tongue with her fingers and sucked Morgan's clit into her mouth.

Morgan's brain shorted out. She squeezed her eyes shut as ecstasy rolled over her in colorful, mind-blowing waves. Her whole body convulsed and Shaine held her tightly as she nursed her through the aftershocks.

Shaine eased to her feet, bringing Morgan up with her. Morgan rested against her while she caught her breath. Shaine rubbed Morgan's back, nuzzled her hair. "That was fast enough to set a personal record. You okay, sweetheart?"

"Better than okay."

Shaine tipped Morgan's chin up and kissed her lightly.

Morgan sighed and eased reluctantly away. "We should probably finish showering so we can join the others."

Shaine nodded and reached behind Morgan for the soap. "At least let me help get you clean."

"I'll get your back," Morgan offered.

"Think you can reach?" Shaine teased with a grin.

Morgan snickered. "Think you can live without getting any more tonight?"

A few minutes later, they padded back into the now quiet locker room. Morgan dug through her bag to grab clothes, tossing a clean Dawgs jersey and a pair of black cargo pants onto the bench in front of the lockers.

Shaine donned her own clean jersey and pulled on a pair of skin-tight black pants. Morgan paused to appreciate the way the synth leather clung to her ass. “Those pants are fucking sinful,” she muttered.

“And you love every sinful inch, don’t you?”

“Of course.” Morgan laughed and finished dressing. “You want to run through and make sure everyone is gone while I lock the front doors?”

“Sure.” Shaine nodded and shouldered her gym bag. “Grab your bag and we can leave without having to double back.”

After making sure the rec center was locked up, Morgan headed back toward the grav-ball court, tapping a message to Shaine on her comp-pad as she walked.

**You done? Meet you by the cube.**

After a few seconds Shaine replied.

**See you there.**

As Morgan strode up to the bleachers, Shaine came around the far corner of the zero-g cube. She held up her comp-pad and removed a small rectangular attachment from the top. “All clear. I did a quick bio scan.”

“You got a new toy?”

Shaine nodded. “Yeah. It’s a wide spectrum mini-scanner. Gases and heat signatures. Not as thorough as a dedicated handheld, but good in a pinch.”

“You’re such a tech head.”

“Mmmm. Yeah, I am.” Shaine leaned provocatively against the clear wall of the zero-g grav-ball court and propped one booted foot behind her. “We’re totally alone in here.”

“And what,” Morgan asked, “might you be suggesting?”

“I was thinking we could christen the court.”

Morgan moved to stand between Shaine’s legs, resting her hands on Shaine’s waist. She pressed herself against Shaine’s lean form and placed a kiss on the side of Shaine’s neck.

Shaine slid her arms around Morgan and caught her lips in a playful kiss. She took Morgan’s hand. “Come on.” She pulled Morgan past the bleachers to the hatch of the grav-ball cube and kicked her boots off. “I’ve wanted to do this for a long time.”

Laughing, Morgan toed off her own boots.

Shaine opened the hatch and Morgan followed her into weightlessness. Morgan reached back and latched the hatch shut while Shaine anchored them in place, grasping the flexible hand-hold beside the door. She tugged Morgan into her arms and then kicked off the wall so they floated slowly into the center of the court.

Morgan wrapped herself around Shaine. How was it that she just couldn’t get enough of her? A look, a kiss, a suggestion, and she was ready to go again.

Shaine nuzzled Morgan’s neck. Morgan tipped her head back. She wrapped her legs around Shaine’s waist, arms around Shaine’s neck. Shaine slid her hands under Morgan’s jersey, caressing already heated skin. “Off,” Shaine murmured. “I need to feel all of you.”

Morgan couldn’t help but glance around, a tiny voice in her head unsure that they were truly the only ones in the building. Shaine caught her gaze. “It’s okay,” she whispered. “We’re alone.”



She released Morgan and in one quick move, pulled her own jersey over her head, revealing bare skin.

Morgan grabbed the front of Shaine's pants, slipping her fingers behind the fastener and unclipping it. She unzipped the tight fabric and slid her hand between leather and skin.

Shaine shook her head. "Uh uh." She trapped Morgan's hand with her own. "Shirt. Off."

Morgan grinned, withdrew her hand, and stripped off her jersey. In moments, a trail of clothes hung in the air, leaving them both naked and floating weightlessly.

Morgan took Shaine's hands, amazed for the thousandth time at the body in front of her—the slim, muscular frame, strong arms and legs, powerful shoulders. She said softly, "You're so beautiful."

"Come here, you." Shaine pulled Morgan into a tight embrace. "I love you, Morg. I always will."

"Love you too."

Morgan devoured Shaine's lips in a deep kiss. Blood pounded through her veins as Shaine's tongue dueled with hers. Morgan wrapped her legs tighter around Shaine, rubbing her aching, pulsing clit against Shaine's smooth abdomen. Waves of heat coupled with uncontrollable desire rolled through her. She dragged short fingernails down Shaine's back and Shaine groaned shamelessly.

Morgan kissed Shaine's jaw, her neck, working her way across her collarbone. She loosened her legs to slide down to access Shaine's breasts, finding a hard nipple to suck, alternately lapping with her tongue and nipping.

Shaine's gasps and shivers delighted her. She traveled lower, tasting clean skin, clinging to Shaine so she wouldn't float away.

Shaine's hands closed on Morgan's shoulders, urging her downward. Morgan licked her way down Shaine's tightly muscled abdomen until she reached her goal. She eased between Shaine's legs, blowing lightly over slick, heated flesh. Shaine's fingernails dug into her shoulders and she moaned Morgan's name.

Morgan ran her tongue along Shaine, lapping up the musky, salty taste of her, humming with pleasure as she suckled her engorged clit.

Shaine writhed in her grasp, fingers twisting into Morgan's hair. "Please. Fuck me."

Morgan grinned as she hooked an arm around Shaine's thighs. She pushed two fingers into her silky wetness, practically coming herself as Shaine moaned her pleasure. She thrust her fingers hard as she tongued Shaine's clit. Shaine pushed against her, demanding more. Tremors started as Shaine's orgasm built. Morgan sucked her clit into her mouth, then plunged her fingers deep and curled them.

Shaine gasped, her body convulsing. Morgan held tight and lightened her touch until Shaine relaxed. Then she climbed up Shaine's long body to claim her lips passionately.

When they parted, Morgan rested her head against Shaine's shoulder. Shaine kissed her hair. "You're incredible."

Morgan mumbled, "You're inspiring." She kissed the skin against her cheek. "And tasty."

Shaine laughed. "Tease."

They floated slowly into the wall. Shaine put a hand out to push them back toward the center of the court before cuddling back around Morgan. She nuzzled her neck and shoulders and slid a hand between them. Morgan sighed as Shaine's fingers explored her, slowly increasing the pressure, caressing and probing.

Morgan pressed herself into Shaine's hand, desire coursing through her body like hot lava. She was so ready, on the edge before Shaine even touched her.

Shaine played her skillfully, repeatedly bringing her almost to orgasm and then backing off until Morgan thought she'd scream. She writhed against Shaine, wordlessly begging for more, finally gasping, "Please, oh god, please."

Shaine's fingers thrust deep and hard, her thumb rubbing fast on Morgan's pulsing clit.

Morgan cried out as her orgasm exploded through her, and then again as she shook with aftershocks.

Shaine withdrew and wrapped her arms and legs around Morgan, soothing her with gentle kisses. Morgan melted into Shaine's body, reveling in the solid feel of her. She'd never tire of this feeling of sated euphoria.

They floated until the cool air made them both shiver. Shaine said softly, "I think it's time to collect our clothes and meet the others."

Morgan sighed. "Yeah." She lifted her head to look around the court, seeing their clothes floating all around them. "This could take a bit."

Shaine scrunched up her nose. "We didn't think this through very well."

"No, we really didn't."

They laughed and separated to collect their clothes, carrying everything out of the court and dumping it all in a pile on the floor in front of the hatch.

They dressed, handing each other underwear, pants, jerseys. Morgan stepped into her boots, not bothering to lace them, then searched her pockets for her comp-pad, which was blinking with messages. She glanced down and laughed. "Ally said to get our naked asses to the 'Burner before they come and find us."

Shaine threw an arm around Morgan's shoulders. "Then we'd better get going." She squeezed hard. "Come on, lover. There's another celebration waiting for us."

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# Around Every Base Until She Was Home

by Lee Lynch

JEFFERSON STOOD NAKED, feeling strong and powerful. The curtains of her dormitory window were parted slightly so that she could see the morning beyond them. The fall light was golden, the day so intensely clear that everything shone with the remnants of the night's moisture. A few cars out early Saturday could be heard below on the street. In the suburbs of New York leaves would be burning; here in the city chestnuts roasted all up and down the avenues. Was it possible winter wouldn't come this year? The city seemed to waver before her eyes, so magical, so full of promising corners and storefronts and signs she felt confused and excited at all the choices, like riches, before her.

A day to celebrate, she thought, full of her joy, her youth, her powers. She jogged down the hall to the communal bathroom. It smelled of mint toothpaste and disinfectant. The tile floor of the shower stall was cold on her bare feet, but she bore this discomfort stoically, like all others. Under a sharp hot spray she lathered and shampooed her athlete's body vigorously, roughly, from short hair to well-fleshed but neatly formed breasts, to solid muscled legs.

"Jefferson!"

Ginger's voice. Four years after they'd become lovers it still filled her with a warmth as steamy as the shower. They continued to spend hours in each other's arms imagining their lives together after graduation. Ginger planned to pursue a career in dance, Jefferson to get a Master's Degree in Physical Education.

Over and over she dwelt on how perfect Ginger was for her, how lucky she was to have found her. But then at times she'd feel frightened at how irritable she could be with Ginger, and by her own nearly compulsive flings with other women. Today she felt so good she only chuckled. Marriage would cure her of those urges, she was sure of it.

She turned the shower off. "This is going to be one damn fine day, Ginger."

She could hear Ginger's toothbrush.

"You want to climb the Empire State Building with me?"

Jefferson called out. "Or how about taking a boat trip around Manhattan?" Dry, robed, she joined Ginger at the sinks. "What a face," she told her. "I know, we'll go to the Park and I'll count your freckles."

Ginger smiled broadly at her in the mirror, blue eyes filled with light. "Again?" she teased affectionately.

"I didn't finish last time." Her spirits were so high she wanted to bounce up and down. Shoot baskets into the toilet booths. Surely her blood carbonated with excitement as it coursed through her body. It'd take a lot of wine to even her out this day. She wished she could hug Ginger hard, but they'd be drummed out of the P.E. Department in an hour if they got caught.

Ginger turned to her, brushing her shoulder-length coppery hair, a long-fingered hand curved around her brush. The touch of those hands was a gift Jefferson had found in no other woman. Ginger shook her head, eyes amused and sad. "You've forgotten mid-terms are next week."

She had. "Hell, we're seniors. Seniors don't have to study." She kept smiling, and began to clip the nails on her own solid and capable-looking hands. She didn't want Ginger to worry

about her grades, didn't want Ginger to leave her thinking she was no good, but damn, last night was to have been the final party before she buckled down. She had to get her grade point average up this semester if she wanted to graduate on time.

"We'll make it fun, Jeff. We can go study in the park. I'll help you."

"No, baby, you have your own work to do. I'll get by. I always do." She gave Ginger her most reassuring, charming smile.

Ginger, from a working class Bronx family, had come to college with hardly an ounce of self-confidence. Jefferson, who'd grown up with well-to-do parents in Westchester County, had learned to exude confidence and prosperity whether she felt it or not. And she knew her own self-possession always reassured Ginger.

Half an hour later Ginger was in Jefferson's room. Jefferson pulled her close and they held. Always, Jefferson thought, hands firmly, familiarly caressing Ginger, the touch of this woman was like winning the World Series. "You take my breath away," she told her.

Ginger moved her face for a kiss and replied, "I love you."

"Open the window," Jefferson urged, reluctantly letting her go. "Tell me you can resist a day like this."

Ginger pressed her forehead against the screen while Jefferson admired her profile. She could see Ginger take a deep breath of the air. "It's gorgeous."

"Your accent's showing," she said, moving to Ginger.

The occasional harshness that remained in Ginger's accent grated on Jefferson, who'd been raised to sound like a class, not a location, but she thought she was good at keeping the irritation from her criticism. Ginger wanted to succeed out there in the world, after all.

"Sorry," Ginger said quickly, trying again. "Gorgeous," she repeated, this time with open tones.

A warm breeze seemed to swirl into the room and wrap around them both. Jefferson had dressed in a faintly pink oxford-cloth shirt, a white v-neck sweater, sharply pressed white slacks and white moccasins. She stepped behind Ginger and pressed herself full-length to her back, reaching around to cup her breasts. "We could go out to Long Island Sound and rent a sailboat."

Ginger turned and moved her eyes down her lover's body. "You're too irresistible, that's the problem."

"Am I pressuring you, baby?" she asked. "I thought it would be something you'd like to do."

"It would, Jeff. I'm just not convinced it's a good idea this weekend."

"We won't go," she said, disappointed—crushed—but unwilling to upset Ginger.

"Oh, Jeff. Does it mean that much to you?"

Jefferson slumped, body and mind swallowed by depression. She laid her head on Ginger's shoulder. "Not if you're going to worry all day."

"You feel so small when you're sad," Ginger said, her tone remorseful, her arms comforting, her hands, those magical hands, soothing.

Jefferson snuggled against the beloved body, feeling momentarily safe and free from her own demanding will.

"I wouldn't worry all day," Ginger said.

Jefferson straightened, still holding her. "You mean you'll take a holiday with me?"

"I didn't say that," Ginger warned with a laugh. "I don't want you thinking you can wrap me around your little finger."

She began to weakly twist away from Jefferson. They fought playfully, then fell laughing onto the unmade bed.

Jefferson's good cheer returned and she knew that Ginger would spend the day with her. But was this so important? More important than grades and Ginger's peace of mind? They tussled more. How many days like this did one woman get in a lifetime, she asked herself, convinced again that it was the right thing for both of them. She felt Ginger's gentle fingers in her still-wet hair, her lips soft, nibbling, biting her own lips, tasting like mint.

"Will you play hookey with me?"

"Lock the door," came Ginger's husky answer.

"Will you?" she repeated after she'd come back. She knelt at the edge of the bed, Ginger's feet against her shoulders, and rubbed her cheeks along those soft inner thighs. "I could die happy here," she said.

"Not quite yet," Ginger whispered, rubbing back against her. "Not till you finish what you started."

Her lips pressed against Ginger's hair, still moistly hot from a shower. She parted it slowly with her tongue then asked against her, "Will you?"

"Ohh, I like that," Ginger said, pressing back. "But, Jeff, I want to graduate with a three point five..."

"I'll give you a four point oh..."

"Oh, Jefferson, oh." Ginger cleared her throat as if to gain control of herself. "I'm not majoring in sex."

"You should. You're real good, baby."

She loved Ginger's mild taste. No matter how many girls she went out with on the sly, her moral code insisted that she only go down on Ginger. If Ginger ever found out about the others, maybe it wouldn't hurt as much.

As Ginger's thighs hugged her head she pictured herself, this beautiful woman proudly on her arm, standing on the sidelines of a hockey game. Her old team would be more spirited because she, a school hero, watched. Ginger would be happy and secure, holding her hand. Always, Ginger had liked visiting with the coach and teachers, liked being her girl where that counted most...and Jefferson, all in white, a white crock of wine in her hand, would feel that mellow high only Saturday afternoons on a playing field and a few drinks could give her...

She remembered Taffy, that cute little senior from her old prep school who'd always been especially attentive. Would Taffy be around if there was a game today?

She rose, fell, with Ginger's hips, her tongue no longer roving, but strumming the slick full flesh, over and over on the same spot. She'd check the schedule and they'd drive up there.

Ginger would have a great time. She'd make sure of that.

IN THE SUBURBAN Winchester County town north of New York City where Jefferson's old team was scheduled to play that day, the golden light was softer and spread a romantic haze over the oranges, reds and yellows of the trees, over the bleached light greens of the playing field, and over the young women in short plaid skirts intent on their game. Jefferson filled her chest with balmy air which did, indeed, carry on it the scent of dozens of backyard leaf-piles gloriously, briefly, blazing. The thwack of the girls' wooden hockey sticks as they clashed defending their goals was a sound which stirred her more than prayers or anthems. This was winterless fall, this was sweet nostalgia, this was living at its best.

"Having a good time?" she asked Ginger, her heart joy-filled.

“I love sharing this part of your life.” Ginger’s face was flushed, her absorption in the game obvious.

“Want to come back to the parking lot with me?”

“Jeff, don’t you care that your team is losing?” Ginger clapped as the Bluejays made a goal, and cheered with the other bystanders. The coach, an old classmate of Jefferson’s, ran to hug the scorer.

Jefferson watched the players a few more minutes. They seemed distanced by the hazy light, as if they were floating back and forth across the field. This could all be a pleasant dream. How could she explain to Ginger that it wasn’t the winning, the losing, or even the playing? It was the feeling of well-being which was important. The ease of a day blessed by such indulgent light that she felt free of the strictures any normal day would bring. Wasn’t it like getting drunk? Life stopped being so hard.

She strode toward the parking lot in her whites. Inside the station wagon she’d borrowed from her parents were a picnic basket and supplies. Before leaving the city she and Ginger had stocked the car with rolls, cold meats, a cooler full of soda, a cheesecake and three white crocks of wine. She lowered the car’s tailgate and pulled the second bottle from its hiding place. This was not an Ivy League football game, and tailgating, especially with drinking, was not a custom. But she’d thought it would please Ginger to invite the team for a snack after the game. And the teachers were always glad for some convivial bourbon to pour into their cups of soda.

“Hi, Taffy, she said, lounging against the car with her white bottle.

The girl reached for the bottle. The team manager, she wore her short-skirted uniform like cheerleader garb. She fell, laughing, against Jefferson’s chest as she wrestled for the bottle. Jefferson felt a stab of regret at the four impassable years between them. But it didn’t matter anyway. I know right from wrong, she reminded herself. I have a will of my own. Sometimes she seemed compelled to do crazy things, but she wouldn’t let herself today. This would be a perfect day for Ginger.

“I’m eighteen, Jeffy, honest.”

“Since when? And *don’t* call me Jeffy.” It was a nickname that seemed to come naturally to the prep school crowd and she was still trying to get rid of it.

“Since last week. I started school late.”

“Looks like everything else was on time,” she commented in a wry tone, surveying the body bursting with adolescence. A few years from now the girl would still be pretty, but nothing like this—the shoulder-length bouncing hair, the breasts newly full, the face without makeup. And she spoke easily, in Jefferson’s unaccented tones. They could have been raised in the same family. Jefferson gave in, handed over the bottle.

“Thanks, sport,” Taffy said, and drank.

They sat and talked, legs dangling from the tailgate. Jefferson felt, with the cheering and wood against wood sounds farther away, as if she were even deeper into a dream. There wasn’t any harm, surely, in flirting with this kid?

“I really thought Jody would break your record this year, Jeffy.”

Jefferson tried not to show her pride that no one had scored more goals in one game than she and moved to lean her back against the inside of the wagon, aware of her pose as she raised her knees and held the white crock between them, her gold I.D. bracelet hanging loosely from one wrist, on the other an expandable watch band glinting in the sun. “You have new teachers, a new coach. It takes time.”

Taffy reached for the bottle again.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble,” Jefferson said, withholding it as Taffy’s small hands played at prying hers off. She should have bought more.

“I have gum to cover the smell,” Taffy scoffed.

She surrendered the bottle. There were plenty of liquor stores nearby. “You look too young to be drinking.”

“I started when I was fourteen.”

She clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, trying to be disapproving. “Me too,” she admitted with a smile, frankly proud of her precocity. “What else did you start at fourteen?”

Taffy threw back her head and laughed. “Don’t tell me you mean boys. I only go with them to please Mom and Dad.”

Their eyes held. It seemed to Jefferson as if the worshipful little girl in Taffy was doing battle with the seductive woman. She knew the woman had won out when she felt lured by her gaze. She tried, for a while, not to look at Taffy’s breasts, or her swinging, nearly naked legs, not to touch, with her unquiet hands, the young siren body.

Ginger joined them. It was the end of the game. All three worked to set out the food.

“Why don’t you two stay up here tonight?” Taffy suggested. “I’m going to a bar with a bunch of kids.”

“A bar, eh?” repeated Jefferson, a vision of a long night’s laughter and dancing forming in her mind. Then too, she thought, hardly conscious of the motive, she wouldn’t have to come down from her high.

Taffy’s eyes narrowed challengingly above her raised chin. “You’ve heard of the Cliffs?”

Jefferson shot a quick look at Taffy, trying to hide and at the same time reveal a knowing grin. The White Cliffs had been a gay bar when she was in school. So Taffy *was* out. Still she fought with herself against strengthening their tie, against announcing herself as available by acknowledging, out loud, that she was gay. Oh, everyone knew it, but it seemed to be one of those unwritten lesbian rules that the minute you admitted it, you might as well disrobe and hold out your arms. For herself, coming out to another woman was an intimate revelation, sometimes a sexual response.

Rather than make the hard decision, she found herself saying, “I guess it wouldn’t matter whether we went back tonight or in the morning.” Besides, she could always back out by playing dumb when they got to the Cliffs, she thought, knowing—while pretending to herself not to—that her pride would never allow that even if the bartender didn’t happen to remember her. “What do you think, Ginge?”

While Ginger hesitated, alternating slices of cheese with meat, Taffy said, “You could stay at my parents’ place. I’ll go call Mother and tell her you’ll be there for dinner. She’s been asking to meet you, Jefferson.”

She noted that Taffy hadn’t called her Jeffy in front of Ginger.

“My famous girlfriend,” laughed Ginger, looking adoringly toward Jefferson as Taffy had. She fastened the leather thong that held her hair, never taking her eyes from Jefferson and raised her eyebrows questioningly.

Jefferson stood relaxed, legs apart, arms folded. She wanted to show she cared nothing for Ginger’s decision. But she was fervently hoping to extend this glowing day. Her mouth tasted brackish with old wine and she reached for the bottle.

Ginger spoke. “All right, Taffy.” She told Jefferson, “As long as we start back to the city early.”

“Today’s shot anyway,” Jefferson replied nonchalantly, her heart alive again with excitement. “We might as well stay. Unless you’d rather go home.”

Ginger leaned toward her, resting one delicate hand lightly on her forearm. The smell of burning leaves mingled with Ginger’s scent, both smells warm and familiar in the afternoon sun. Ginger whispered, “I’m only home in your hands.”

“Thank God,” Jefferson replied, love surging in her.

Taffy leapt up and hugged Jefferson, and then, as if an afterthought, hugged Ginger too. Jefferson watched the two of them; the smaller, alluring Taffy, the back of her thighs showing as she stretched up to Ginger; the tall, almost statuesque redhead, gracefully, lightly, holding the girl. No comparison, she thought, smiling into Ginger’s eyes, full of the warmth Ginger induced in her, certain that this was the woman for her. There’s no way I’m going to lose that gem to some good-time kid who wants me for a notch in her belt.

She tipped a quick shot of bourbon into a cup of Coke; then, unthinking, she tipped it again.

THE EARLY WINTER dark came as a shock to Jefferson. She stood with Taffy on the porch while Taffy smoked a cigarette. But for the black chill through a light jacket, she felt dulled by a cocktail and wine with dinner on top of the afternoon’s drinking. Ginger was inside watching a TV ballet with Taffy’s parents. Out here high hedges obscured all but hints of neighboring lights. She felt enclosed. Her skin crawled. A blueness, the last sign of light from her perfect day, seemed to seep out of the night, into her. Would it never be time to go to the bar?

She sat heavily on a hanging wicker love seat.

“What’s the matter, Jeffy?” Taffy asked, sitting beside her. Taffy had changed to tight cuffed jeans, a white shirt open at the throat, and a madras jacket.

They swung gently.

She sighed after a while and, looking across the yard, spoke to the hedges, to the specks of light that promised a world beyond her blues. “The day’s over, that’s all. I got up and the world promised something. It staged a spectacle; the trumpets, dancing girls, glitter and song. But it was a sham. Look—the curtain’s down and it’s gone, every bit of it.” She held out her empty hands.

Taffy took one hand and laid it palm up across her own. She began to play with the fingers, to trace the lines of the palm. “No one with hands as beautiful as yours should feel bad,” Taffy said. “Look how strong, how sensitive. I’ll bet Ginger loves these hands.”

A little thrill of pleasure pierced her fog. She was still so numb she ignored the sentry voice inside her, warning, warning of the beckoning stranger Taffy. But Jefferson would do anything to lift her heavy mood.

“Every day’s like that, Taffy. You wake up full of purpose, thinking this will be the day, and it ends, and it wasn’t. Someday I’ll have been shot down so often I won’t even feel the excitement anymore.”

Taffy’s face looked like the hockey players’ had, so intent on winning that no emotion showed. Nor was there a note of concern in her voice when she asked, “The day for what?”

“Maybe if I knew, I’d find it.”

“Find what?” Taffy persisted.



“I want to say fame, fortune, success. But I know I don’t want to work that hard. The only thing I really long for is something called home. An end to the road, the quest, the tension of the search.”

“I can’t wait to get *away* from home.”

“That’s just the problem. I’m always trying to get away from what I think of as home too. Why do I feel so excited when I think I’m there, then lose interest?”

“What are you *talking* about, Jeffy? Ginger?”

Jefferson looked down at her hands, at Taffy’s small fingernails, daintily shaped and polished ever-moving across her own. How could these big hands ever make a home for Ginger when they were so restless, so uncontrolled themselves? What was wrong with her? She closed her hand on Taffy’s without considering the consequences, just to see how it felt.

“Jeffy, Jeffy,” the girl said in a low, purring voice. “I knew you wanted me.”

“But—”

Taffy pushed Jefferson back and lay half on top of her, her lips passionately assaulting Jefferson’s.

“But I don’t—” She hesitated to reject Taffy, not wanting the girl to dislike her and, as well, not wanting to act in a way that would confirm that they’d been flirting.

“Shh, Jeffy. I know.” The girl rubbed her breasts against Jefferson. “Ginger’s right inside. I don’t want to see *you* in trouble either.” Taffy moved off her and sat upright. “Wasn’t I smart? I didn’t wear any lipstick even though I longed to look great for you.”

She knew the sparkle in Taffy’s eyes. The animation bred from winning. And certainly the touch of her breasts had been exciting. “But—” she began once more when Ginger, with her graceful, spirited walk, came out onto the porch.

She stood to greet Ginger, saved from her own wavering impulses. “I need to stop at a liquor store on the way,” she said, cheered by the feeling of escape, by the rush of adrenaline Taffy’s advances and Ginger’s arrival had stirred.

She drove, and bought more wine and soon afterward filled the station wagon with half the hockey team. They flew through the clear, star-sparkling night to the bar where once again there was promise in the air thick as the cigarette smoke. Jefferson talked and laughed boisterously with everyone. She kept close to Ginger, brought her drinks, danced with her, brashly elbowed a path to the bathroom for her.

She was raucous, even overbearing, and tried to quiet herself, to assume the air of a dignified alumni. But she was rushing to get somewhere and she shouted, and drank, to drown out the space between here and there.

Then, all at once, she’d arrived. The golden day had returned. Life was hard no longer. She moved with ease, laughed low and talked quietly, with an air of amused tolerance.

Taffy came to the table, eyes glittering like the loud jukebox. “May I dance with your girlfriend?” she asked Ginger.

Jefferson saw Ginger—dear, trusting Ginger—assent.

“No,” she said herself, one hand closing around Ginger’s where it lay on the table. Her lips seemed to burn from Taffy’s earlier kiss. “I’m home.” It sounded, of course, as if she meant being close to Ginger. But really she was talking about the state just short of unconsciousness, where one movement sends the drunk toppling from her chair, from her peace, from the weight of her passions and will.

“Time to go, Jeff,” Ginger said a moment, or hours later.

She leaned heavily on Ginger as they went to the car. Someone handed them coffee.

“Can you drive?” Ginger whispered.

In answer Jefferson recklessly kissed her full on the mouth.

A chorus of wolf-calls came from the back of the wagon. Jefferson began to drive smoothly, fearlessly, a lopsided grin on her face, back to Taffy’s town.

Once she’d delivered the tired gang, she drove back to the hedge-walled house. At the sight of it her blues returned.

Taffy showed them to a room. “Sorry about the single beds,” she said.

They undressed in the dark, each collapsing into her own bed.

“I love you, Jeff,” whispered Ginger, reaching for her hand and squeezing it.

She lay, stupefied by liquor and exhaustion, feeling as if the space between their beds was a chasm. Taffy had caressed Jefferson’s hand furtively as she’d showed them her room. She’d pointedly told Jefferson, while Ginger was in the bathroom, “I could have stayed with Jody tonight.”

Now she lay on her back, wearing only her white slacks, sleep nowhere in view, and reached down to the floor for the last crock of wine. Ginger slept, as always, deeply, peacefully. The peace wine had brought—where had it gone? Where was her golden day? She couldn’t stand to lie alone, awake, empty-handed all night. Should she wake Ginger? No. She’d worn her out with her impulsive adventure and should let her rest.

She could visit Taffy, just to talk. It would fill the long hours. She reached for another drink. They said people who drank alone were alcoholics.

“*I’m only home in your hands,*” Ginger had said, trusting all that talent, all that beauty, all that ambition and grace to her.

She opened her eyes wide. Was she having nightmares? Why all these troubling thoughts? A chill crept through her like the sudden night earlier on the porch. She stared into the dark horrified at the thin line between talking to Taffy and—

Once again, she reached for the bottle, felt its round solidity in her grasping hand, drank. The wine trickled down between her breasts. She sat up, drank again. Ginger didn’t stir.

She rose, heart thudding with excitement and fear. Trembling, she pulled the white v-neck over her head, picked up the bottle, and crept out to the hall. Taffy’s door was ajar, open on yet another promise.

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Lee Lynch’s most recent books *An American Queer*, *The Raid* and *Beggar of Love* are published by Bold Strokes Books, as is her backlist. She writes the nationally syndicated column “The Amazon Trail.” She is the namesake and first recipient of the Golden Crown Literary Society Lee Lynch Classic Award for *The Swashbuckler*. In addition to many other awards, she has received the James Duggins Mid-Career Award, is a three time Lammy finalist, and has been inducted into the Saints and Sinners Literary Hall of Fame. Originally from NYC, she lives in the Pacific Northwest with her wife Elaine Mulligan Lynch.

# Hat Trick

by Pat Cronin

CARY JAMES SWIPED her forehead with a towel and downed a few gulps of Gatorade while she waited out halftime. The bitch ref should have given the yellow card to Richardson, the forward for the Louisville Reds FC. She tripped Cary seconds before Cary could score a goal. Both women ended up in a tangle of arms and legs and then Richardson slammed her foot into Cary's stomach. The fucking blind ref neglected to give Richardson a yellow card. It was bullshit. Especially when her team, the Cincinnati Ravens FC, were down by a goal. She should have gotten a free kick, which she knew she could have scored on. Their club never lost a game against Louisville and Cary didn't intend to let that happen.

"Shake it off, lass," Megan Dougall whispered in her ear. Her thick, Scottish brogue always brought a grin to Cary's face. There was something intrinsically sexy about it.

Cary kept her gaze on the empty field, certain her rampant thoughts would give her away. "That was my third yellow card, Megs. I wouldn't be so pissed off if I'd actually earned it."

"Aye, but got it ya have. So get your arse back out there and put your anger into your game. You always play best pissed off."

"I do?" Cary turned to her left and found herself nearly nose to nose with Megan. Green eyes sparkled like emeralds in the mid-afternoon sun. It was the first time Cary ever noticed the color of Megan's eyes.

"Aye. Indeed." Megan leaned close enough to Cary's ear that her breath tickled sensitive skin. "Now take that energy to the field and let's kick their arses back to Kentucky."

Cary started to reply, but the coach called them over to discuss strategy for the second half. Megan walked ahead of Cary, giving her a lovely view of her well-muscled thighs and tight ass. Keep your mind on the game, Cary chastised herself. A win would take them to the regionals. Cary shook herself, gulped down the rest of her drink and put her mind fully on the game.

Ten minutes later, Cary was on the field, running full out after Richardson. She was totally sick of seeing the number fifty-five in fiery red letters, mocking her each time she got close to her nemesis. Richardson seemed able to sense Cary and zigzag her way across midfield, deftly keeping the ball in front of her.

Megan shot in from the right, causing Richardson to dodge, sending the opposing striker into Cary's path. She sprinted ahead, cut Richardson off and passed the ball to Megan. From Megan it went to Julie, their sweeper, who kicked it to Tiff, the goalie.

Cary and Megan re-grouped and followed Tiff's directions. Once they were past midfield, Tiff kicked the ball. It arched a good twenty feet in the air as it soared to Heather, their left winger. She caught it on her head and sent it in Megan's direction. Megan dodged two Reds while Cary fought her way to an open position.

Megan kicked the ball with her left foot and it arched toward Cary. While she wasn't short by any measure, she still had to stretch her five foot seven frame to reach the pass. Her forehead

slammed into the ball at an angle and sent it toward the net. As she came down, Cary lost sight of it in a sea of Red defenders.

Next thing she knew, three of her teammates were slapping her on the back. The goal was clean and the score was now tied.

She looked for Megan, who flashed a million watt smile at her before jogging off to get into position for the next play. Cary then found Richardson and smiled at the angry look on her face. Time for paybacks.

For the next twenty minutes, the Ravens and Reds passed the ball back and forth across the field, neither team getting close to scoring. Cary was beyond frustrated, as were many of her teammates. She knew they were pretty closely matched against the Reds, but this was ridiculous. One damn goal could win it.

Number ten with the Reds now had the ball and was working her way toward the goal. She and Richardson passed the ball back and forth twice before getting close enough that Julie was able to steal it. She kicked it to Cary, who passed it to Megan as they took off again.

They ran a well-practiced drill that put Cary into position on the right side of the goal. Megan passed the ball, but it went wide and short. The Reds goalie's arms stretched out to grab it. Cary leapt forward, struck out her right leg and smacked the ball into the back of the goal, executing a well-placed volley. Adrenaline pumped through her as she ran to Megan and gave her a bear hug. Two other women from their team joined the celebration.

Megan mussed Cary's short, mousey brown hair. "That's the way, lass. Good on ya."

"Couldn't have done it without you."

"Bah. That pass was a bloody mess. You're the one that saved it."

"Maybe," Cary said, not willing to take all the credit. She never was. Even when half her team was now shouting her name.

Their games never caught a lot of attention, but today the seats were about half filled. Cary heard the fans chanting, but couldn't make out what they were saying. She turned her concentration back to the game, for once not giving a shit where Richardson was, or if she was still wearing her pissy face.

The minutes flew by again as Cary and her team either kept the ball from the Reds, or stayed close enough they had no chance of getting to the goal. Cary glanced at the clock, realizing they still had two minutes left. That didn't seem like a long time, but it was long enough for either team to score. The Reds called a time-out and Cary jogged to the sidelines and gathered with her teammates around their coach.

Coach Joan said, "Don't let your guard down for one second. You all know they can tie this thing up and fast. Cary, you keep your eye on Richardson. They're gonna try to set her up to score. Let's turn the tables and set up Cary. Tiff, you get the ball and kick it to Meg. Meg, you and Heather set up Cary on the left side. Their keeper isn't good there. Let's get a third goal to secure this win. All right?"

The team chorused, "Yes!" They all ran back to their position as play started up again. Cary practically bounced like Tigger as she waited for her chance. The Reds tried to set up Richardson again, but Tiff chest-trapped the ball. She stood, shouted some moves and lobbed a perfect cross to Megan.

Megan toyed with a Reds defender before sending a slick pass to Heather. By now Cary was set up. Heather passed her the ball. In her peripheral vision, Cary picked out Richardson bearing down on her. She had one shot at the goal. The Reds sweeper moved in to block her. Cary pulled

her right leg back, kicked the ball. It spun past the sweeper, touched the tip of the outstretched hand of the keeper and swished against the netting.

The crowd erupted in cheers as the entire Ravens' team swarmed Cary. Three to one with forty seconds remaining. No way the Reds could come back now.

They broke up the impromptu celebration to finish out the last few seconds of the game. The Ravens and Reds shook hands and the teams left the field. Cary was flying so high the only thing she could hear was the thundering of her heart.

Coach Joan was beaming when Cary got to her. "Damn nice job, Cary!" She embraced Cary tightly, then said, "Your first hat trick. Fucking awesome!"

"Hat trick?" It took a few seconds for the words to penetrate Cary's brain. "Holy shit!"

Someone clapped her on the back and Cary discovered Megan standing next to her. "What's wrong, lass? Forgot how to count? Three goals in a row. Perfect hat trick."

"Fucking A!" Cary pumped her fist in the air.

"Atta girl, lass," Megan said. She slipped her arm around Cary's shoulders and hugged her. "Let's get cleaned up. A celebration is in order."

"Hell yes," Cary said as they headed for the locker room.

HALF AN HOUR later, the women started filtering out of the locker room and into the parking lot. It was five in the evening and the team planned to gather later at a local bar for a proper celebration. Most of them divided into small groups to head off for dinner. Cary was trying to decide who she wanted to join when Megan emerged. Her reddish-orange hair hung loose around her shoulders, the curls bouncing as she walked. Too much sun turned her cheeks pink, giving her usually pale complexion a nice bit of color. She wore a loose fitting, white golf shirt and tan cargo shorts. The sway of her hips was hypnotic.

Cary licked her lips and when her eyes finally met Megan's, she saw something new there. Something she'd only hoped for before. "Hey there, lass. Fancy a bite to eat?"

Did she ever. Cary swallowed hard. "Um, something like that."

"Oh?" Megan stood in front of her, hands on her trim hips. "Tell me."

"I, uh, dammit, Megs. Every time you're around I can't talk."

Megan laughed, the sound a deep, sexy rumble that Cary felt in her chest. Megan leaned close enough to kiss her. "I like that I have that affect on you, love."

"You always have."

"Hmm. Perhaps it's time we did something about it?"

"What're you suggesting?" Cary's heart hammered in her ears. Never in her life had she been this damn nervous around a woman.

"I think you know," she purred. "I'd love to show you a new hat trick. Care to follow me home?"

Right then, Cary would follow her to the damn moon. "Sure."

Megan crooked a finger and started for her car. "Come on then."

IT WAS LESS than fifteen minutes before Cary was walking into Megan's apartment. She'd barely shut the door before Megan's lips were plastered against hers. "I've been waitin' for this all summer," Megan said between kisses.

"Mmm," Cary said, leaning back to look into Megan's expressive eyes. "Why didn't you?"

"Pardon?"

"Why didn't you kiss me before now?"

"Ah, good question." Megan took her hand and led Cary into the living room. She settled them onto the couch, but kept hold of Cary's hand. "I put everything I have into the game. Everything. I wasn't thinking there'd be time for anything else. 'Cept I couldn't keep me eyes off ya. You, lass, have distracted me for months."

"As if you aren't a distraction for me."

"And why, then, were you not tellin' me how you feel?"

Cary shrugged and turned her gaze to examine the threads in the throw rug beneath their feet. Red, yellows and greens collided to make a mesmerizing pattern of swirls, triangles and squares. If she concentrated hard enough, the colors melted together in a weird mix...

"Cary?"

Cary spoke without looking up. "I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?" Cary didn't answer right away so Megan cupped her face and gently turned her so they were facing each other. "Love? Please talk to me."

"I haven't had a relationship worth a damn. Ever. And you're my friend. Honestly, I didn't— don't want to mess that up."

"You won't. I promise."

"You don't know that, Megs."

"It takes two to mess up a relationship, lass. Ya can't be doin' that alone. Now, sure and certain I care about you. You're the best friend I've got. And I'd be wanting more if you're willing to give it a go."

Cary looked into those amazingly green eyes and found exactly what she was looking for. Caring. Passion. No hesitation.

She leaned forward and captured Megan's lips in a searing kiss. "I think I'd like to give it a go."

"Brilliant." Megan kissed her hungrily and Cary melted into her touch. She leaned back against the couch as Megan's hands tugged to free her T-shirt from her shorts.

Cary lifted her arms so Megan could remove it. "So damn hot..."

"Stop talking." Cary captured Megan's lips and nibbled at the bottom one. "Bed?"

"Yeah." Megan took her hand and practically dragged Cary down a short hallway to her room. Once there, Megan made quick work of removing her own clothes, while Cary did the same.

Cary gaped open-mouthed at the amazing site before her. Milky white skin highlighted some old and new bruises on a perfectly shaped body. Six-pack abs, luscious hips and legs that could wrap around Cary and hang on for days, taunted her from a few feet away. Her gaze wandered upward to the pert breasts with lovely, pink nipples begging to be suckled. Cary's pulse raced at the things she wanted to do with the beautiful woman in front of her.

Warm, calloused hands cupped her face and again Cary was caught by emerald eyes.

Megan kissed her long and hard, her passion as clear as Cary's. Tongues met and danced together as the women learned the feel of one another. Megan steered them to the bed and gently pushed Cary into a seated position. Megan straddled her hips and slid her tongue along Cary's

neck, making a slow trail to Cary's breasts. Once there, a very warm tongue laved her left nipple while Megan's hand kneaded the other.

Megan knelt between Cary's legs and Cary was sure she'd feel the wetness there. Just a simple touch from the woman nearly sent her over the edge. Had sex ever felt like this before? Megan's mouth was attentive, switching to Cary's other breast while her now free hand traveled the length of Cary's body.

A slow, steady touch trailed from Cary's abdomen to her thigh, sending pleasant tingles through her body. She had to lean back on her hands to keep herself upright when Megan's strong fingers stroked the coarse hair of Cary's crotch. Simultaneously, Megan bit down gently on Cary's nipple, causing her to gasp with pleasure.

"I'm...going to come...before you even touch me."

"Oh no, love. Not until I'm ready." Megan spoke around the nipple in her mouth. Her hand parted Cary's lower lips and slid across her hardened clit. "No, I want to celebrate slowly with you."

"Celebrate?" Cary's brain was too fuzzy to concentrate on talking.

"Your hat trick. Doesn't happen every day."

"Oh. It doesn't." Cary opened her eyes to look down at the mischievous grin on Megan's face. "What?"

"I'm just thinkin' about me own hat trick."

"Oh?"

"Yes," Megan drew out the word as she released Cary's nipple. "Best damn hat trick you'll ever see."

"Show me..."

Megan slipped inside Cary. Her fingers were like magic, sending Cary to a place she'd never felt possible. Her entire body burned with desire. Megan continued her motions, building up speed until Cary was sure she'd burst. Megan's thumb flicked over Cary's clit and that was it. She released a mind-blowing orgasm that had Cary screaming with pleasure.

Cary's arms weakened and she fell back onto the bed, urging Megan to keep going. She never wanted the sensation to end. She squeezed her eyes shut as her body shuddered with the last vestiges of what had to be the most amazing orgasm she'd ever felt.

Megan gently slipped her fingers from inside Cary and climbed onto the bed so she was straddling Cary. Cary opened her eyes and stared at Megan through her pleasant haze. "Wow."

"Wow? Is that a good thing?" Megan teased.

"Hell yes." Cary reached up to trace her hands along the front of Megan's body, taking in the feel of each smooth line and curve. She stared into Megan's eyes and found the most amazing thing there. Beyond the sex, beyond the passion, she saw the one thing her life had been missing. "Megs—I..."

"Shh. Don't speak now, love." Megan kissed her sweetly. She urged Cary further up the bed so they could lie side by side. "Just enjoy the moment."

Cary sighed, content to put it aside for now. "So, you said something about a hat trick?"

"Aye. So you want to see me hat trick, eh?"

"Hell yes." It was all Cary seemed able to say. There was a change in Megan's eyes and in that moment Cary realized all she wanted was Megan. And she didn't figure words were necessary at all. She pulled Megan down for a soul-searing kiss. "I want anything you want, Megs. Anything." "Buckle up, love. I think you're going to enjoy the ride."

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At the age of 5, Pat Cronin declared she wanted to be a paramedic, just like Johnny and Roy on *Emergency!* That declaration proved prophetic and after 22 years in public safety, she's now retired and working from the home she shares with her wife and kitties in The Netherlands. Pat is the author of three books and co-editor of two more anthologies. When not writing she can be found editing, typesetting, formatting e-books while watching any trivia or food related show on the BBC—unless it's April through November and then she's watching baseball. And multi-tasking. In her rare down time she enjoys traveling her adopted continent or some other geek pursuit like coin collecting or sorting baseball cards.

She's now writing under her "real" name of Patty Schramm. [www.patcroninauthor.com](http://www.patcroninauthor.com) or [www.pattyschramm.com](http://www.pattyschramm.com)



# The Game Plan

by Erica Lawson

“I’M LOOKING FOR Cassie Wedlow. Are you Cassie?”

Cassie looked up from her work but continued to knead the back of the athlete lying on her massage table.

“Hey, are you Cassie?”

“This is the men’s locker room. You shouldn’t be in here!”

“Are you Cassie?”

“Yes, I am, but I’m busy.”

“My coach, Jack Anders, told me to come and see you.”

Cassie knew Jack quite well. He coached the women’s hockey team out on the far field. She stopped for a moment and looked at the woman standing in the doorway. “What do you want?”

“I think I strained something.”

“As you can see, I’m tied up with another client.”

“It’s okay, Cassie. I think you’ve done enough.”

“Shut up, Rory. I’ll tell you when I’m finished.” Rory buried his head in the padded leather and kept his mouth shut. “I’d suggest you go home and put some ice on it and see your doctor in the morning. If it’s bothering you go to the hospital and get it checked out.”

“But I’ll be waiting for hours. Can’t you just look—”

“I’ve still got twenty minutes with Rory here.”

“I don’t mind waiting.”

“And this is the men’s locker room. No women allowed.”

“Do you really want me to point out that you’re a woman?”

“I have special dispensation.”

“Please.” Cassie stopped. The one word held so much. The woman was begging for help, how could she say no? Cassie sighed. “All right. In twenty minutes.”

TWENTY MINUTES LATER Cassie slipped her key into the lock of the door of the women’s locker room. With some luck, maybe her patient had decided not to wait after all. “You can get up on the table...” She trailed off when she saw the woman standing in the doorway, her robe hanging open invitingly. She searched for words but couldn’t find them. Her brain then tracked the path her eyes were traveling, watching a single drop of water slide down her neck and over her chest to rest precariously from one nipple. It hung there for a moment or two before dropping unheeded to the floor, followed closely by her robe.

Cassie didn’t realize that she’d held her breath as the droplet remained suspended for that infinite second, but she felt the pain in her chest as she expelled the air. “It’s very dangerous to

parade yourself around like that around here. What if it was someone else, or especially a man, stepped through that door.” She tried to sound professional but she felt anything but.

“Then they’d get the surprise of their life. Relax. There’s no one around. The chances were good it was you.” She glanced down at the key in Cassie’s hand. “The door was locked and you had a key.”

Cassie shook her head. She couldn’t believe the audacity of the woman.

“As for the robe, I thought it seemed pointless since I’d be removing it anyway.” She hobbled over to the bench and gently perched on the edge of it.

“Lie down and let’s see the damage.” Cassie really didn’t want to do this, even though it was her duty to do so. She would have happily handed the job over to someone else, except that there was no one else. She was it.

“You can call me Jo,” the woman said as she slowly lowered herself until she was lying flat on her back. Pain etched her features as she brought her legs up to the bench.

Cassie stood over her and couldn’t stop looking. Jo’s body was that of an athlete. There was not a spare pound of fat on her that she could see. Cassie tried not to stare but she couldn’t help it. Even lying down Jo’s breasts were shapely and taut. Had she had surgery? Cassie took a closer look but couldn’t see the telltale line of a surgical implant. Nope, Jo had all the assets God gave her...and they were adorned with nipple and navel rings. The metal glinted at her devilishly under the fluorescent lighting, enticing her to look again.

Cassie’s hand shook when she reached for the sheet to drape over Jo’s torso. It was a shame to cover up such perfection, but if she didn’t she’d never be able to accomplish what she was paid to do. “Where does it hurt?” She heard the wavering in her voice.

“Right here.” Jo’s hand descended to her groin.

Cassie mentally rolled her eyes. Why did it have to be where she least wanted the injury to be? “What happened?” She placed her hands on Jo’s leg, starting at the knee. The skin was soft and warm to her touch and she knew she was in trouble.

“I over-extended on a run and I think I pulled a muscle. Jack said you could fix it.”

Cassie looked into Jo’s eyes and saw many things. First and foremost there was pain and concern, but there was something else there. Something that Cassie wasn’t sure she wanted to know. She cursorily glanced over Jo’s covered body. Jo was a predator. The rings weren’t for any practical purpose except for show. No wonder the woman had no qualms about parading around in the nude. She was used to it.

So why was Jo here? Cassie gently pressed into the flesh of Jo’s thigh and felt a slight swelling. She hadn’t lied about that, but Jo seemed almost unconcerned about the injury.

“You should see your doctor about this.”

“Can’t you do something about it?”

Cassie looked up and saw amusement on Jo’s face. “What do you want? I don’t have time for games.”

“Jack said you were the best, so here I am.”

“I only work on those who need my help.”

Jo sat up using her abdominal muscles and Cassie’s eyes widened as Jo’s six-pack tensed. “Are you saying I don’t need your help?”

“Are you playing any more today?”

“No.”

“Then your doctor can handle this. Go home and rest, Jo.”

“You’re scared of me.” Jo’s voice held a tinge of delight.

“It’s not a matter of fear. You barged into the men’s locker room demanding my attention. Time and rest will solve your problem. Now you refuse to leave. What am I supposed to make of that?”

“Can you at least give me a back massage? I’ll make it worth your while.”

Cassie made a point of looking at her watch. “I don’t have time right now.”

“Make time...please.” There was that word again. Jo rolled over onto her stomach and the sheet fell away. Cassie was sure she did it on purpose. “I really do need your help.”

Cassie sighed. “Don’t think you’ve won.” She stepped up to the table and reached for the massage oil. The sooner she gave her massage the sooner she would leave. But the moment she touched Jo she knew that wasn’t true. Beads of sweat accumulated on Jo’s skin and mixed with the oil on her hands to make Cassie’s grip slippery. It turned out to be a more sensual massage than she intended. Jo sighed.

Cassie continued to knead Jo’s back, easing away the tense muscles underneath. Despite knowing Jo’s intentions, she needed a massage. Cassie lost herself in her work and let her mind wander to more carnal thoughts. What would it be like with her? She could tell Jo was an experienced woman. Maybe she was heterosexual. No. Jo was teasing her, she was sure of that. But why did Jo think she was gay? Cassie was professional with all her clients, otherwise she’d leave herself open to litigation. Jo sighed again, but this time it drifted to a moan. Cassie returned to her thoughts and to the massage.

“Please, don’t stop,” Jo whispered.

Somewhere in the middle of her daydream Jo had rolled over and Cassie’s hand had begun massaging her breast. “Oh, I am so sorry!” She backed away quickly, embarrassed beyond belief. Jo smiled at her. “You don’t hear me complaining.”

“No, that was very unprofessional. I should have—”

“You should have kept going,” Jo said. “I haven’t had a good massage like that in quite a while.”

Cassie turned away and starting packing her bag. “I apologize. I’ve got to go.” She didn’t hear Jo move.

“Do you have to?” Jo whispered in her ear. Cassie’s hand hovered over the bottle of oil but she was unable to pick it up. Jo’s breath on her neck sent a shiver through her.

Cassie turned. “You did this on purpose! Are you trying to ruin my reputation?”

“Of course not.”

“If you are, I’ll sue!” Cassie was blabbering now. Jo was too close for comfort and she wanted to get out of there before something happened.

Jo grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her in, planting her lips on Cassie’s mouth before she could talk again. The lips were incredibly warm. When the kiss finally broke, Cassie pulled back. Jo smiled at her sweetly. Cassie knew she had a gob-smacked expression on her face.

“Why did you do that?”

“It was the only way to shut you up.”

“Why?”

“Because you wanted it.”

“I think you’ve got it wrong—” Jo kissed her again, this time with more fervor. Jo wanted an answer and Cassie couldn’t stop herself from responding. Jo swooped in quickly when the opportunity presented itself, her tongue easily slipping past Cassie’s lips. Jo’s strong arms encircled her, her hands sliding slowly up her jacket.

Cassie felt the coldness of Jo's nipple rings through her T-shirt. Oh God...What was she thinking? She tried to pull back but Jo held her firmly. The tongue in her mouth swirled and teased, finally finding her own tongue and beginning the delicate dance she knew would end only one way.

Cassie jerked her head away, "How did you know?"

Jo laughed easily. "I had three options. I chose the last one."

"And the first two?"

"As soon as I saw you I knew you weren't a nun or dead."

Cassie chuckled and lowered her head to Jo's neck. "No, how did you know?"

"Working around all those naked men and not even a suggestion of impropriety?"

Cassie lifted her head then her eyebrow. "Hey! Just because I'm a jock doesn't mean I don't have an education!" Jo stared into her eyes for a long moment. "So, how were all those hunky jocks under your fingers? Didn't live up to your expectations?"

"I'm not the sort of girl who massages and tells."

"Then you'll remember me."

"This is highly unprofessional."

"If that's going to be a problem then I fire you as my masseuse." Jo grabbed Cassie's hand and placed it on her breast. "Now, stop complaining."

Cassie looked at her hand then at Jo. "Why me?"

"Can't you just accept the moment? Is it important?"

"Yes." Cassie hoped that it wasn't a matter of a one-night stand with Jo, even though it was a possibility.

"We've met before."

Cassie's brow creased. "We have? When?"

"A couple of years ago at a hockey match. Do you remember attending to a player down with a broken ankle?"

"That was you?" Jo stopped for a moment. "Sorry, I didn't mean...I only saw your leg. People were gathered around you and I didn't see your face. They rushed you off so quickly that I barely had time to look." Cassie's hand involuntarily squeezed Jo's breast, drawing a harsh gasp. "Sorry."

Jo's hands rose and pushed aside Cassie's work coat, allowing it to slip off her shoulders and fall to the floor. "Is this a good idea?" Cassie asked.

"Most definitely." Jo's fingers nimbly undid the buttons of her shirt and in a matter of seconds the flaps fell open to reveal her white lace bra. "I knew it," Jo whispered.

"Knew what?" Cassie looked down at her chest as Jo's fingers lightly brushed her skin.

"I knew you'd talk too much." Jo kissed her again. The gentle entreaty of the first kiss was gone, as was the curiosity of the second. This was raw hunger. Jo pulled Cassie against her and wasn't going to wait.

Cassie pulled back. "And if I say 'no?'"

"Are you?"

Was she? Did she want to stop this? Jo watched her intently for an answer. "No."

Jo smiled. "Is that a 'no, I'm not saying no', or a 'no, I'm saying don't do it?'"

"It's a...," Cassie took a deep breath, "'no, I'm not saying no.'"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." But she wondered what exactly she had given permission for. "What do you have in mind?"

“Where’s the fun if I tell you?” Jo stepped toward her quickly and swooped down on her lips. Her fingers had already found the button on her pants, quickly followed by the zipper.

Cassie felt the coolness of the room as her pants slid down her legs. A moment later her shirt was swept off her shoulders to join her pants on the floor. A second after that, her bra and panties disappeared.

“You move quickly.”

“I don’t want you to change your mind.” Jo pulled Cassie against her and rubbed her nipple rings across her skin. Jo lifted her and kicked away the discarded clothes. Now naked, Cassie found herself on her back on the massage table. Jo hovered over her smiling impishly.

“The door—”

“You locked it on your way in.”

“You’ve thought of everything.”

“You have no idea.”

Cassie was about to ask what she meant when she felt a wet tongue at her nipple. Before she had a chance to answer the tongue was replaced by teeth biting down on her soft flesh. “Ow! What was that for?”

Jo didn’t answer. Her lips moved downward, tasting and kissing all the skin she could find.

Cassie felt a slight breeze across her nether lips a moment before her lips were parted. The breeze continued to flow over her exposed skin and she felt the tingle down to her toes. A warm tongue touched her and slid easily over her velvet skin. It drew wet circles around her clitoris, occasionally darting in and flicking it quickly. The uneven beat of the assault kept her on the edge because she didn’t know when to expect the next stroke.

She heard a chuckle and looked up crankily. This seemed to please Jo more and she laughed a little louder. Just when Cassie was about to stop everything Jo lowered her lips and drew the small bud in. Her tongue laved the exposed skin, flicking it constantly, which set off a chain reaction of twitchy nerve endings across Cassie’s body.

Jo drew the clitoris in past her lips and used great suction to hold it still. She gently nipped down on the tender flesh and Cassie squirmed. Jo dropped it quickly when Cassie bumped her nose with her hipbone. “So much for that idea.”

Jo’s tongue flattened out and wandered over Cassie’s skin, anointing each new piece of territory reverently. Fingers replaced Jo’s tongue and they quickly found Cassie’s inner warmth. They slid easily in and out, lazily stoking the fires within. Jo’s lips latched onto one of Cassie’s nipples and stayed there while her fingers caressed her.

“You know how to show a girl a good time,” Cassie said breathlessly. In fact, to Cassie it was better than good. It was the best.

Jo let the nipple pop from her mouth before she asked, “Is it enough?”

“There’s more?” Cassie’s hips began to move against the fingers bringing her so much pleasure.

“If you want it.”

Did she? Jo had teased her to the next level and now she was left wanting more. “Hell, yeah.” Suddenly Jo was gone. “Where did you go? Don’t leave me like this!”

“Shhhh, I’m still here.”

Cassie’s gaze found Jo hunkered down over her sports bag. “What are you doing?”

“Just adding a little spice,” Jo said as she extracted something from her bag.

“Where in hell did you get that?”

“The usual place you get something like this.”

Jo fitted the strap on with ease. Too easily from Cassie's point of view. Jo seemed at home in the contraption and Cassie felt a little inadequate. Jo returned to her and pulled her up to perch on the edge of the massage table. Cassie felt the pull as Jo reached for her, closing the gap between them in a second. Cassie's ass was barely on the table and was held in place by Jo's strong grasp.

Their lips met and the passion built. Cassie felt the phallus insinuate itself between her legs. Jo didn't go any further but let the cock rest in her folds. She gently rocked against it to feel the rubber edge its way slowly along her skin.

"Do you feel that?" Jo whispered harshly into Cassie's ear. "Do you want me inside you?"

Cassie couldn't seem to get a word out so she nodded instead. Her excitement made the rubber run smoothly between her legs with each pass.

"How do you want it, Cassie? Slow and relentless, or hard and fast?" Jo's whispered entreaty made Cassie shiver. "Does the thought excite you?" Cassie nodded again. "I can see it does. In fact, I think you want it bad. You want me to fuck you."

Sweat broke out on Cassie's brow. Jo was talking dirty and feeding her libido. She was discovering her deepest, darkest fantasies.

Jo continued the words. Lewd, lascivious remarks that made Cassie squirm. Finally the phallus rested against Cassie's opening and Jo pushed gently. It slid in easily with her body's lubrication. When Cassie relaxed Jo's hips moved back. Jo waited a heartbeat then pushed the cock slowly into Cassie's warm haven once more and rested a moment inside her.

Cassie didn't know what to say. It seemed Jo had thought of everything. The cock slowly pulled out and she missed it already. She didn't have to wait long for her wish to be fulfilled as it re-entered her. Jo's face filled her vision and she pulled her close for a kiss. The change of angle dipped the phallus head against her back wall. She hadn't expected a reaction and a moan escaped her lips.

"Oh yeah, keep doing that."

Jo's lips parted and her hips moved, answering Cassie's call. "You're so beautiful," she whispered.

"Please, Jo, not now."

"Yes, now." Jo lifted herself off Cassie and moved away.

"Oh God, Jo. What are you doing?" Cassie's arms flailed about. She heard the sound of a chair being dragged. "You're stopping now?"

"Oh no, my dear Cassie, but I think you need to see what I see." Jo crossed to her and extended her hand. Cassie struggled to sit up and chuckled at the sight of Jo and her strap on. "Just for that..." Jo left the sentence hanging. She grabbed Cassie and pulled her over to the chair. She sat down and brought Cassie down on her lap, leisurely lowering Cassie onto her cock, until they both faced the mirror. "Now look."

Cassie could barely focus on what Jo was saying, let alone look into the mirror in front of them. There they both sat, Cassie impaled on Jo's cock. Jo's hands encircled her, one holding her firmly around her waist while the other slid down her body, through her hair to tease the pink bud.

"Look at you," Jo whispered in her ear. "See how excited you are." When Cassie tried to close her legs, Jo persisted. "Oh no no no. This is beautiful." Jo shifted her hips slightly then moved Cassie's legs to the outside of her own, opening her up even more. Jo tickled her clitoris with a finger and Cassie jumped. "Oh, yes."

Cassie looked at the two of them in the mirror. She didn't know how she felt about such an open display of sex. She had enjoyed her lovemaking in privacy. No watchers and no opinions. But Jo was showing her something she wasn't sure she could keep her eyes on. She knew she was on the wrong side of a hundred and twenty pounds. Not by a lot, but the wrong side nonetheless, and the sight of her own body filled her with sadness. "Get that thought out of your head. You're a beautiful woman, Cassie. Can't you see it? I can. Do you want to see what I see?" Cassie shook her head. "Come on, Cassie. She's there if you just look." Jo's fingers tickled her and her body jumped again. "There she is. She's that sexual creature looking back at you."

Cassie looked briefly. Jo's fingers separated and captured her clitoris between them. Cassie watched as Jo brought her fingers together, teasing the hidden pearl out into the light. Jo's other hand slipped down to her crotch and a finger brushed lightly across her sensitive skin. Cassie leaned back.

"Look in her eyes, Cassie," Jo whispered. She flicked her tongue at Cassie's ear while her fingers continued to stroke the bare flesh. Jo tilted Cassie back and the cock hit her front wall. Cassie rocked against her to stimulate the spot she ached for.

"There." Jo murmured. "There she is! She's the most spellbinding creature I've ever seen."

Cassie heard the wonder in Jo's voice and forced herself to look closer. There was a fire in her eyes. An almost untamed inferno about to consume her. Jo's fingers continued to move and her remaining hand moved up to cup her breast.

Cassie felt the flames licking her and she prepared to leap into the firestorm of her own consummation. She'd been unaware that her hips were now moving in unison with Jo's rocking body. Cassie could no longer focus on the frenetic bodies in the mirror and closed her eyes. Her senses narrowed down to one point and embraced the explosion of her orgasm.

Cassie barely kept a lid on her noise as her body tensed. She so wanted to shout her joy to the world but she knew they were in a public place. However she allowed a tiny whimper to escape her lips in defiance. She opened her eyes and looked into the mirror. The woman quivering in Jo's arms was someone she'd never seen before. Wild. Untamed. Satisfied.

"What did I tell you?" Jo whispered again. "Isn't she something?"

Cassie's heart rate was high as she gasped for breath. "If you say so." She had seen something there, but she thought Jo exaggerated it. She heard Jo sigh deeply. "As long as you're happy."

"You're a hard woman to please." Jo flicked a finger and Cassie wriggled in her lap.

"Tickles." Cassie tried to sit up. "You get an A-plus for this effort." She looked at Jo. "How's the leg?"

"Nothing to worry about."

"How about a massage?" Cassie lifted herself gently off Jo's lap, taking her time to ease the cock out of her.

"Later."

Cassie stood on shaky legs as she dressed. By the time she finished collecting all her belongings, Jo had already dressed and was heading for the door.

"Jo?"

Jo stopped and looked over her shoulder at her.

"When you get home, don't forget to feed the cat."

"I thought that was your job."

"You wore me out."

Jo pulled on the handle and opened the door.

“Oh, and hon? When I get home you’ll get one hell of a massage.”

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# Senior Games

by **Tonie Chacon**

THE WOMEN STOOD in a circle. Most of them had old gloves, soft with age, that they already wore on their hands, or they cradled them against their sides like babies. One woman rubbed her fist into the pocket as if trying to soften up the leather. Sahara caught the woman's eyes, smiled, and gave a quick nod. She worked her fist into her own glove, still stiff with new leather despite the oil she'd worked into it the night before.

"Welcome, all of you."

Sahara put her attention to Mic, the coach.

"Thank you for coming to our tryouts for the WOFL, the over fifty league for women. This year we're sponsored by the OFL so I trust you all are over that young age, though I can see that some of you might be a bit older. It doesn't matter. All I care about is your ability on the field. No matter your age, if you have the right attitude, you'll make it on the team. We have seventeen slots on our roster this year, with two alternates. You'll have to commit to these next three and a half months to your team and comrades alike. If you're up for the challenge and want to make your city proud, go line up at the position you'd like to play. If there are no volunteers for unclaimed positions, it will still be my decision where everyone will play in the end. Do your best and please, play nice with each other. We have a few established couples like Patty and Felicia here so, yes, that means we do have some lesbians on this team. You'll figure it out. If that bothers you, this team is not a good fit for you." Mic paused to see if anyone moved to leave. No one did. "All right then. I have one more thing that I want to say. Please, please, no dating if you're teammates. Too much drama breaks a team in half. Be adults and give the team the three months I'm asking of you. You are now one team. Work together, work hard. We all know how to do that. All right. Huddle up. Come on in." Mic raised her arms, then put her arm out with her palm up. Another woman grabbed it and another slapped hers on top until the pile was high with clasped hands. A big resounding "Gladiators" rang out and the women dispersed to various positions on the field.

"Whoops," Mic called out. "Come back here and put a nametag on. Write a big name so everyone can read it. We don't have the best eyesight these days, now do we? I'll start." She wrote Mic really big on the nametag, going outside the lines. "I go by Mic. If there's a nickname you'd rather be called, now's the time to get everyone used to it." She started handing out the nametags and black markers. Soon everyone had their name on the front of their T-shirts. "Okay, head on back out there. Let's get some practice in. We've got a lot of work to do before we become champions."

Sahara looked around at the women, searching for the cute girl who'd been playing with her mitt earlier. There she was. Her name was Rachel. Sahara fell in behind another girl at second base and watched Rachel trot out to left field, before turning her attention to Mic.

"All right," Mic called out. "A little infield. Take turns. I'll be yelling out game situations for you to play the ball on. I know you've all played before so I don't think I need to explain myself

again. If you don't get the situation correct, we'll go through it and point out the correct play involved. Okay, let's get going."

Mic picked a purple aluminum short-sized bat and a yellow softball. She tossed the ball into the air and yelled out, "Second base!" The ball soared in the air into center field. The center fielder easily caught it and threw it to the woman in front of Sahara. It was Sahara's turn next, if her base was called. She got herself into her ready position like she was taught when she was seventeen, arms extended downward, scraping the ground with her mitt, and crouching down, knees bent, butt out. Her knees cried out and cracking noises echoed in her ears. She sucked in her breath, stood up, and shook out her legs, then repeated the position. She had to be ready to jump into action and cover her base or get the cutoff throw.

"Home," Mic called. The ball soared over the shortstop's head into deep left field. Rachel ran back and grabbed the ball on a bounce. Sahara ran toward her and held up her hands indicating the second cutoff throw. The ball came in fast. She caught it, flipped it out of her mitt into her right hand, and threw it with all her might into the catcher's mitt. A nice pop sounded as the catcher caught the ball. Sahara looked back at Rachel, gave her a goofy grin with a thumbs up from her right hand then turned to run back to the line of other women.

"Good job out there," Mic said. "Nice cutoff."

Sahara smiled at the compliment, as pleased as if she really were seventeen. She took her place back in line with the two others who were waiting for their chance to shine at second base. She smiled at them as she stood behind the last woman.

"Hi. I'm Sahara."

"I'm Felicia and this is Patty."

"Oh. You're the—"

"Lesbians. Mic outs us like that every year. It's easier on us if the new people know up front. You from here?"

"Born and bred as they say."

"Sahara?"

"Like the desert. My parents like to travel."

"It's beautiful. It sounds so exotic," Patty said. "You have a nice arm. Have you been playing all your life?"

"Gosh, no. I played when I was young but I took a wrong turn in my twenties and got married and had two kids before I realized I was gay. We're divorced now, and the kids are all grown up. I needed to see if I could pick up where I left off. The softball league seemed like the best place to see if I still had it. I don't want to have to explain myself to anyone. I've always been an athlete in one way or another. I swam to keep in shape and to have some me time. I hope I haven't ruined my ability to play after all. Um, it's your turn." Sahara pointed to Felicia.

"Oops, sorry." Felicia got ready for the ball to be hit.

An hour later Mic said, "Gather round. My arms are about noodles. You all did great. Practice will be next Thursday at six o'clock, same place. I'll need you all to write your name, addresses, and phone number on this roster sheet. I'll have positions for you all by next week. Thanks for coming out and being a Gladiator."

They stood in a circle, stacked their hands again, and cheered, "Gladiators!"

Sahara gathered up her belongings, took off her cleats and stuffed everything into her ball bag. She was still sitting on the bleachers when Rachel set her bag a little way down the bleacher. Rachel smiled at Sahara when she looked up. Sahara thought she was really cute with

her brown hair and dark eyes that seemed to stare into Sahara's soul every time she caught her gaze.

"Hi," Sahara said. "You did great out there. Been an outfielder long?"

"Most of my life," Rachel replied. "You have a good arm."

Sahara smiled. So Rachel was watching her practice too. "You're not bad yourself," she said. "You're very athletic. You'll get a starting spot for sure."

"Tell me how to say your name."

"Sahara, like the desert."

"It's really beautiful." Rachel gathered her belongings. "Nice to meet you and all. See you next week." She turned to head for the parking lot.

"Wait up. I'll walk you to your car," Sahara said.

Rachel smiled. "So chivalrous of you. Thank you."

"No problem. I'm parked there too." Sahara laughed at herself, again. They walked through the grass of the outfield toward their cars.

Rachel stopped at a dark blue Audi. "Here's mine."

"Nice car. I like the color. Well, nice meeting you." Sahara stuck out her hand to shake.

Rachel put her hand into Sahara's and grasped it with a firm grip.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, too. See you next week. Unless..."

"Unless what?" Sahara asked, feeling a little hope.

"Oh, nothing. See you next week." Rachel got into her car and drove off as Sahara watched.

Sahara got into her own car, put on the seatbelt and drove home. The team had a lot of nice women on it. She actually told someone she was gay. Out loud, even. It was easy telling Patty and Felicia, since she knew they were gay too. She had no idea if Rachel was gay. She was so out of practice she didn't even begin to know where to start. She had a whole week to dream about her attraction to Rachel, or her infatuation, or whatever it was. She'd let the thought sit in the top of her brain for a while until she saw her again. Next week could not come soon enough.

THE NEXT THURSDAY night, Sahara got to the field early so she could warm up before they all got down to practice. She wondered where she would play and if she would start or not. She wasn't sure why these things were important to her, but they were. She bent to touch her toes, stretched a little, and smiled as she broke into a jog around the track. Her body responded to the rhythm of her feet pounding the track. Her breathing got to a regular beat and she started to sing in her head some notes that sounded good together, having a similar rhythm. Not bad for a woman almost sixty. Her muscles responded and her legs felt strong.

When she was half way around the track, cars began arriving in the parking lot. Women gathered their gear and walked to the field. Sahara squinted to see if any of the new arrivals were Rachel. She kept up her pace until she finished her lap and jogged over to the growing group of women that did turn out to include Rachel. She sat down on the grass nearby and started stretching. Sahara caught Rachel's eye as she sat down. She smiled a hello and twitched her right eyebrow.

"Best thing to do before practice is to stretch," Mic said. "Good example over there, Sahara. Way to go. Now, all of you stretch out your legs and then start throwing to each other. Make two lines and one of you grab a ball. Let's do this."

Practice started right after they warmed up. Sahara went to grab a ball and looked over to Rachel. "Throw with me?" The invitation hung in the air.

"Um, sure." Rachel got up and went across the field opposite Sahara. They threw the ball back and forth. The other women lined themselves up in two lines and started throwing with each other also. Sahara's mitt popped as she caught the stinging throw of Rachel's toss.

"Ow. That was hard. Next time I hope I catch it in the pocket. You're bruising my hand. No wonder you're an outfielder. Quite the arm you've got." Sahara took off her mitt and rubbed her left palm, a bit in awe of Rachel's power.

Mic motioned to gather everyone together and she held a piece of paper. "All right. Settle down." She waited until everyone was silent. Sahara still rubbed her palm. "I hold in my hand the roster of the 2016 Gladiators. I'll explain my reasoning behind the choices I made, but as of right now, I stand by them. All right, this is how I've placed the infield. MaryAnn, you'll be our starting pitcher. Your favorite catcher, Susan, is yours on the field too. I want you two to tandem out with Geri and Sage. Starting at first base is Beth, followed by Sahara at second, Kim at third and Patty, I want you to play short for me. I like your quickness and we need your fast arm. I know you were waffling between second and short but we've found a terrific second baseman in Sahara." Sahara glowed from the compliment. She was simmering inside from being named a starter. She hoped Rachel made the team. She held her breath as Mic went on. "All right, for the outfield I've placed Rachel, you'll be in left, Jessie will be center and Felicia, you'll be in right. Alternates will be Karen, Sarah, Rosie and Mae. Any one of you could get hurt, God forbid, and the rest of you would need to juggle positions in case of an emergency. What do you say? Gather in now."

The team put their hands, once again, on top of one another's for the cheer. Sahara made sure her hand landed on top of Rachel's. She could touch her and held tight as the rest of the hands landed on her own. Up they raised their hands as one, coming down with a hearty, "Gladiators." Sahara smiled to herself when the cheer ended. It was her own little thrill, being able to touch Rachel in front of the team and get away with it. Sahara was sure that Rachel didn't know that she was developing a major crush on her.

Practice got underway. The infield threw around, as the outfield did. They were soon interrupted by Mic.

"All right now. Let's get started. I need Karen, Sarah, and Rosie to line up at home plate. You three are my runners. When I hit the ball, you run to first like you would in a game situation. Okay, get ready someone." Sarah stepped on home plate. Mic tossed the ball in the air. She took a full swing and "ping" sounded from the bat as the ball rose in the air toward right field. Sahara ran out for a relay to second. She shot her arms into the air giving a target for Felicia to aim at. Felicia caught the ball on one bounce and threw the ball into Patty at second, bypassing Sahara all together. Sarah ran to first and stopped after she rounded the bag. She returned to it for the next situational hit. This time Karen stepped on home plate, took a ready running position, and took off with another, "ping" as the ball flew this time into short left field. Patty, Kim and Rachel all ran toward the ball. Rachel called the others off with an, "I got it." She took the ball in one bounce, fired it into Sahara, and Sahara pivoted on the base with her left foot and threw the ball hard to Beth. The ball hit Beth's mitt with a resounding, "smack" as Karen's foot touched first base.

"Nice double play out there," Mic called out. "Good communication out in the field on that last one too, Rachel. Good job, all of you." Karen and the others jogged back to start all over

again. It was over an hour later when Sahara finally heard Mic yell, “Take a break. My arms need it.”

Sahara jogged over to get a drink of water. She sat down and as she finished her second cup, Rachel sat down close enough for their thighs to touch. It sent a rush of blood to her head, and down below where she hadn’t felt anything for so long. She smiled as she glanced over at Rachel.

“How you doing?” Sahara asked. “This has been a fun practice. I like the game situations for us to see what each player adds to the mix of our team. You have many dimensions to your game. I meant that as a compliment.” Sahara felt embarrassed by what she’d blurted out. She caught Rachel’s eye and smiled. Rachel smiled back.

“I know what you mean. I’ve been watching you too. You play like you’ve played your whole life,” Rachel replied.

“Not hardly. But I did coach little league for a spell. Only difference now is that I get to play instead of my boys.”

Their talk was interrupted by Mic. “Next week I’ve invited another team to come scrimmage with us before the league starts. An exhibition game if you’d like to invite anyone to watch. It will be a good time for some fine-tuning on the coaches part, too. Have yourselves a good week. Go on home now. See you all next week.”

The women still on the bleachers looked around, and Patty said, “I don’t think we’re ready for live competition yet. Don’t know about you all, but I’m still rusty.”

Sahara heard the others grumbling around her but she kept her mouth closed, deciding not to engage. Sahara started toward her car and felt a presence behind her. She looked over her right shoulder and smiled as she saw Rachel coming up behind her.

“Hey there,” Sahara said. “Good practice today. I’m going to hurt tomorrow, though. How about you? Did you recoup from last week for our beating today?”

“I had a harder time getting out of bed the next day but by the afternoon, I was feeling fine. A little stiff in places but overall, I’m good. Thank the Lord I have a hot tub. It helps.”

Sahara smiled at the thought of her and Rachel in the hot tub together. Who knew what could happen? “Well, um, goodnight.” Sahara got into her car and stuck it into gear and again watched Rachel in the rear view mirror. She could have used a hot tub for her sore legs and arms. Not to mention her core muscles from doing pivot throws all afternoon. And why did she have to show off by doing all that jogging? She’d pay for that too. Oh well, she could soak in her own tub. It was big enough.

AFTER PRACTICE WAS over, a few weeks later, an invitation finally came from Rachel. Sahara, Patty and Felicia were invited over to Rachel’s place for dinner and a hot tub. They were fed spaghetti and meatballs and they changed into swimsuits to go into the hot tub. Rachel’s suit had little flamingo’s on it. Sahara tried not to stare at her body but was unsuccessful. They settled into the hot water and the air was filled with oohs and ah’s from their pleasure as the water enveloped their extremities. Sahara took notice of the moonlit night, bursting through the leaves of the trees in Rachel’s back yard. Her foot found something solid as she stretched out.

“Oops. Sorry, whoever that was. I didn’t mean to kick you,” Sahara blurted out.

“It only grazed me,” Rachel said. “Did you hurt your foot?”

“Good thing it wasn’t me. I’d kick you back,” Patty said, laughing as she squirted water at Sahara.

Sahara had been hanging with Felicia, Patty and Rachel all summer and it felt like a foursome at times. It had been a long time since she had been friends with women who weren’t co-workers or her husband’s friend’s wives. Sahara reveled in the glow of friendship she’d missed these last years. She remembered back to her college days when she was footloose and very fancy free. That all changed after she met Greg in her biology class and she’d been with him ever since. That is, until the divorce. Since she joined this team, it had brought her back to her love for the game, and opened her up again to women who were so different than most of her friends. It was like she was a reinvented version of herself, only better.

Sahara looked over at her friends and smiled. Her gaze stopped on Rachel as her eyes searched hers. She smiled shyly at her, trying not to expose her growing feelings toward her, but to let her know that she liked her.

“How did Mic’s dating rule come about?” Rachel asked as she stared into Sahara’s eyes mischievously.

Sahara tried not to jolt as she heard the lingering question.

“Oh, that was a ways back,” Patty said. “Who was it, Felicia?”

“Her name was Naomi,” Felicia answered.

“Mic fell hard for her.”

“Mic?” Sahara questioned.

“Yes. Didn’t she ask how the dating rule began?” Felicia asked.

“Yes, but I never figured that it was Mic, herself, involved. Tell me more, please.” Sahara was eager to hear the gossip.

“Well, this woman joined the team a couple of years ago.”

Patty said, “And she was definitely a looker.” Felicia reached out and jabbed Patty in the arm. “Ow. I can look. I can’t touch, remember?” Patty rubbed the spot that Felicia poked.

“As I was saying,” Felicia continued, “the tension in the air that season, you could cut with a knife. It really was all Mic’s fault. I guess a bit of blame should go to crazy Naomi. Anyway, um, when they first started dating it was all sun and roses but the tide changed and Naomi started to demand things and withhold others as punishment for not getting her way.”

“What she means is that Naomi wouldn’t have sex with Mic unless Mic did everything she wanted, and that meant with the team too.” Patty’s face was all scrunched up as she shook her head.

“Yeah. You see, in order for us to win that season, she technically shouldn’t have been on the team at all. Naomi wasn’t very good. She couldn’t bat worth beans and her fielding ability was crap. But I guess they matched in bed and sometimes that’s all that matters. So she played and Mic got laid. We lost badly and, thankfully, they broke up and Naomi didn’t show up for the next season of the WOFL. Lucky us.” Patty laughed and splashed water at Felicia but some splashed on Sahara.

As she wiped her hand over her face to remove the last of the drips of water, Sahara glanced over to Rachel and gave her a sickly smile. She tried to say with her eyes that she guessed this would have to wait. Rachel smiled back and closed her eyes as she rested her head back. She then sat up and moved over until their knees were touching. She leaned her head back and said, “Oh, this is a much better spot,” indicating her place in the hot tub but her knee never left Sahara’s as she spoke. Sahara followed Rachel’s lead and leaned back to let the water flow over

her upper body as the heat from her leg grew to her crotch. She didn't dare move. She didn't want to move. This was heaven. Her thoughts were interrupted by Felicia.

"Time to go. This one has to work in the morning." Felicia said, gesturing at Patty.

The evening ended way too soon for Sahara's taste, but she'd ridden with Patty and Felicia so she had to leave when they did.

"Thanks for a wonderful evening. Good food, good friends." Sahara hugged Rachel a little longer than she should. "Um, goodbye. See you next week at practice. This was fun." Sahara's remarks were followed by a chorus of goodbyes from the others as the three of them walked back to the car.

THE GLADIATORS WERE in first place, ready to go to Regionals. If they won, they could compete in the Senior Olympics. They had to travel to the west side of the state. Sahara drove the foursome in her car.

Rachel sat up front with Sahara while Felicia and Patty took the backseat. They stopped for coffee and scones along the way and were munching away and telling stories of their coming out with one another. Patty and Felicia had been a couple for the last thirty-four years. They met in their twenties and never looked back. They finally got married in 2008 when it became legal, which only lasted for six months before the state took away their status and stopped issuing marriage licenses. They were grandfathered in when their state took up the vote for marriage for all.

"Grandmothered, you mean," Felicia said with a laugh. "What about you, Rachel?"

"Well, I didn't have a clue about my sexuality until my late forties. I'm what they call a late bloomer. I did, though, make up for my mistakes by going a little wild when I discovered how fun it was being like the new girl in town. I received a lot of attention when I finally came out." Rachel dipped her head and her cheeks burned red as she stole a glance at Sahara. Sahara smiled, reached over and put her hand over Rachel's. She gave a little squeeze and put her hand back on the wheel.

"What about you, Sahara, queen of the desert?" Patty laughed as the others groaned.

"I, um, denied my feelings, married a man and have two wonderful children, both of whom are grown now. I'm divorced. Some of my best times were back when I use to play ball with a team in college. So I thought I'd try to play again. Here I am."

Sahara reached over and changed the radio channel to a country station, since she knew that was what they played here going across the middle of the state. She needed to distract the others from asking anymore embarrassing questions. She turned up the volume and started singing along as they others slowly joined in. The four of them had decent voices; Rachel and Patty enough to carry the melodies and let Felicia and Sahara take the harmonies. Sahara noticed that Rachel had a sweet high voice. It matched her personality. That was something Sahara had noticed these past weeks. Her attraction to Rachel turned from her looks and shape to her thoughts and personality.

They arrived at the park to find out they had to play a night game. Since they were all over fifty, why in the hell did they have play at night? Sahara had a few choice things to say but she decided to be quiet and do the job they came to do. Win Regionals. The four of them waited in line at the bathrooms to change into their purple and white uniforms with huge G's on their front and Gladiators on the backs.

They looked good on some of the players but not all. Patty swam in her top so she rolled the sleeves above the elbows. With her impish face and slightly turned up nose, she looked a lot like Popeye. Now all she needed were some anchors tattooed on her forearms.

They waited until all were done and walked over to the field and into the visitor's dugout. The position and batting lineups were stuck to the fence by the front of the cage. Sahara glanced at it, assuring herself it was the regular lineup.

"Huddle up, ladies," Mic called out. "Okay. I want to thank each and every one of you for coming together this season and making it a great one at that. Let's go out there and show these turkeys what we're made of. Don't think too hard out there. Autopilot is your friend. We've practiced for this moment and now it's ours to claim. We're the champions here. We just need a win to prove it and take our place at the Senior Olympics. Let's go with a," Mic stuck her hand out into the middle as each player laid hers on top for solidarity and yelled, "Gladiators."

The starters lined up to bat first, since they were the visitors. For eight-and-a-half innings the outfield played as they had all season, fielding balls like they were a living organism and not allowing a single run. The only problem was, the other team was pretty good too. At the bottom of the ninth, the score was tied 0-0.

The Gladiators were outfield. The opposing team sent two batters up, and the Gladiators got them out. It looked like the game might be heading into extra innings.

This is it, Sahara thought, as the third batter entered the box. Win and go on, or lose and go home. The batter was a leftie and the outfield shifted slightly that way. Sahara took another step toward first without leaving too much of an opening up the middle, or so she thought. The woman hit the ball straight up the middle and took a bounce off the pitcher's glove so the ball soared over Patty's head slightly past her outstretched glove. Patty threw herself into the air in a desperate attempt to secure the ball in her glove, but she missed. The ball kept the upward motion toward the left field fence. Sahara ran toward them, threw her arms in the air indicating the second cutoff, and watched Rachel sprint to catch the ball. It hit the top of the fence and bounced back ten feet beyond Rachel to the right. Sahara ran out even farther into left-center part of the field, flapping her arms wildly so Rachel or Patty could spot her and throw her the ball. The runner was rounding third when the ball came flying into her mitt.

Sahara caught it, pivoted on her left foot and threw the ball as hard as she could at home base. The ball made a perfect arch to Susan, their catcher. Somehow it lost momentum and bounced before the plate and hit the edge to bounce uncontrollably out of Susan's reach. The runner jumped on home plate making a statement when her whole team came rushing out to surround her with cheers that they were moving on.

The Gladiators had lost. It was a thought that hadn't crossed Sahara's mind. Boy was she naïve. She watched as her team came back to the dugout. They sat on the bench, quiet for a change, all deep in thought with a few swear words thrown in.

"Shit," Mic said. "I'm sorry, gals. I didn't prepare you for this. I prepared you to be winners. I'm sorry. Hell of a way to lose though. A lone home run in the bottom of the ninth. Well, this is something you can go home now and tell your grandkids. No Senior Olympics for us. You all played a great game. We had a fabulous season and I hope to see you all next year. Remember, we're not getting any younger so go find some younger ladies who want to play because I know we're going to be losing someone. Every year we lose people to hip replacements, knee and shoulder fixes too. Or to something with the same effect."

Sahara rolled her shoulders and she tried to ignore the hitching pain that radiated through her throwing arm. She thought about Mic's statement and what it meant to her situation with Rachel.



She'd been thinking that at least she'd get to see Rachel again next season, but what if she couldn't? They were all getting older. Any one of them could find themselves unable to play a few months down the road. Sahara knew she wanted to keep hanging out with Rachel, but they needed to talk.

"Thank you all for everything," Mic said. "Have a great rest of the summer and hopefully, we'll see you all back next year." Mic then went around and hugged everyone goodbye. When she got to Rachel, Sahara watched them as they exchanged hugs and words. Was Rachel telling her she wouldn't be back next year?

Sahara turned toward Patty and Felicia, and Rachel joined them. Sahara said, "Well, my friends. We didn't win the game but I think we did in life. You're my friends now and I'm not going to lose any of you." Her thoughts turned again to Rachel and all they'd done this summer. She didn't want to lose that. Patty and Felicia had been great friends, too, and they were always up for a fun time. She didn't intend to lose them either. They all started walking back to the car when Sahara came to a decision.

"Hey, Felicia. Catch." She tossed her the keys. "Go on ahead. We'll meet you at the car."

She grabbed Rachel's forearm. "Hey. Wait up. I want to ask you something before we go back to the car." She stopped, took her hands and faced her. She sucked in a deep breath. She let it out with a huff. This was the moment of truth for Sahara. She had to ask, no, she needed to ask. She gathered her courage and took another deep breath. She let it out slowly as she asked Rachel, "Now that the season is officially over, will you go out with me? Like a date? Starting maybe, um, now? I don't mean to be abrupt but I can't lose you now just because the summer is over and we lost Regionals."

Rachel looked startled but then a huge grin appeared on her beautiful face. She nodded a couple of times and looked straight into Sahara's eyes. "I've been waiting all summer for you to ask me out. I thought you were abiding by coach's rule. That doesn't matter now so, yes. Now is the perfect time. No more sanctions from Mic telling us not to date anyone from the team. I think we've completed our promises of the no drama bit. Let's go home and start dating." Rachel dropped Sahara's hands and pulled her into a hug. As Rachel's arms started to fall from Sahara's back, Sahara glanced around to see if they were on anyone's radar. Detecting no one, she tightened her grip. "Nope. You're not leaving just yet. I need to do this first." Sahara leaned in and captured Rachel's lips with her own. As their lips touched, Sahara felt the air shift slightly. She started to deepen the kiss, pulling Rachel even closer until she remembered they were in the middle of the parking lot. It was a sweet meeting, with a low hum of what could be. They matched.

"Wow," Rachel said, touching her lips. "That was more spectacular than I've imagined it would be. I'm ready to start that thing called dating now." Rachel grinned really big before she let Sahara go, turned and ran toward the car.

Sahara watched her and thought, nice butt. She grinned and wiggled her right eyebrow. We may have lost the game, but she got the girl. Not bad. It was going to be a fun ride home. Wait until they told the others.

Tonie Chacon has been writing her entire life. She wrote her first song when she was two, "I Want Mommy," and amazed her five-year-old sister. When she was fourteen, she co-wrote a song at Girl Scout camp that is still sung around campfires to this day. In 2001 she won a bronze medal at the World Championships for Performing Arts for her song, "Mystic," and she has published two albums with original music.

Her writing took a turn when she accepted a challenge to write a story about lesbians on the Titanic. A year later, *Struck! A Titanic Love Story*, was complete, and a novelist was born.

Tonie is a retired postal worker. She is married to author Kate McLachlan. They live in the Pacific Northwest with their menagerie of pets. Email: [toniechacon@yahoo.com](mailto:toniechacon@yahoo.com) Web site: [www.toniechacon.homestead.com](http://www.toniechacon.homestead.com)

# Love Takes New Heights

by Sharon G. Clark

KENDALL CONNELLY STUFFED the last of the clothes she'd take to the climbing competition into her backpack. Exhausted and more concerned about leaving Alice than normal, she mentally performed the "it's all for Alice" mantra to convince herself going to the Rocking the Rockies climbing competition had to be done. The prize money would go a long way to helping with her niece's medications and hospital bills.

"You're gonna call me tonight, right Kennie?" Alice asked, riding into the room on Kendall's friend Rai's back; a handsome, slender, and tall Asian woman. With her pale skin, dark shadows around her eyes, and thin body Alice more resembled a character from a Tim Burton movie rather than an eight-year-old girl. Her bald head was covered by a Doctor Who ball cap, bill turned to the back. What amazed Kendall most was no matter how Alice felt during the stages of her illness, a smile beamed from her face, mischief sparkled from her eyes.

"Aunt Kennie, brat," Rai reminded. Kendall knew she was blessed to have a friend like Rai Wakahisa, who opened her apartment and heart to assist Kendall when her sister, Elise, died, leaving Alice in her care.

Alice pouted. "You say Kennie, how come I can't?"

"She's my friend, not my relative, that's why. She's your aunt and deserves the respect."

Rolling her eyes, Alice conceded the point. "Oh, all right. Call, Aunt Kennie?"

"Of course I will, honey." Kendall ruffled Rai's hair as she spoke to Alice. "Call me, too, if Rai drives you crazy. I'll be back by Sunday night." Rai would keep her apprised of any issue that might arise regarding Alice. Although Rai denied any burden, Kendall felt guilt that the single woman spent time looking after her and Alice when she should be dating, living life as most women of twenty-six would do.

Rai feigned a groan as she deposited Alice on the couch. "Pick a show that won't make me puke, brat. I'm gonna see Aunt Kendall to the door." Alice nodded, and Rai picked up Kendall's backpack.

"I can get that," Kendall said, following Rai to the door.

"You need to conserve your strength." The apartment was on the first floor, the parking area in front of the building. Rai stepped out onto the sidewalk before turning to her with a frown. "Please let me call ahead and get you a room, Kennie. It's not right for you to sleep in your car."

Kendall shook her head adamantly. "You do too much already, Rai." She stabbed a finger toward their door. "Even now you're giving up another weekend for us."

"I wouldn't do it if I didn't want to," Rai said, her tone tinged with hurt and a bit defensive. This was a topic they returned to frequently. She and Rai had been friends for years, living through meager financial times and failed relationships, on both sides, together. They'd considered dating each other, but couldn't get further than awkward kisses and groping, eventually deciding not to ruin a perfect friendship for what could be an intense coupling for one

evening. Rai gave her a quick kiss on her forehead, and said, “So, drive safely and let us know when you get there.”

With a nod, Kendall said, “I will. Thanks again.”

The drive from Aurora to Colorado Springs took about the average seventy minutes for a day of good weather, usual traffic flow, and no accidents. She’d printed directions off the Internet and found the hotel in record time. Kendall drove around the parking lot to get an idea of the less populated areas and backed her car in an open spot in front of a concrete wall under a streetlight in the back of the building. She didn’t want to draw too much attention to herself but wasn’t fool enough to consider sleeping in her car in the total darkness. Her VW Bug in a good location, Kendall reached behind her and pulled her backpack onto the passenger seat. She’d need to present her paperwork for the competition’s check-in.

Stepping out of the car, Kendall intended to arrange her gear in the back for nighttime but paused at the sound of voices. She stood with her right arm resting on the car roof, her left on the frame of the open drivers’ door, and watched four women walking through the parking lot. Three of the women walked in a row, two animatedly speaking to the beautiful blonde in the center. The fourth woman, her short, platinum, blonde hair spiked in a playful style walked behind them, her expression clearly indicating her amusement of the situation ahead. As they drew closer to Kendall, the blonde woman mouthed a hello and gave her a wide smile followed by a wink. The action surprised Kendall, as did the accompanying increase in her pulse, which prompted a responding smile.

As the group moved on, Kendall shook her head, chastising herself for her impulsive reaction to the pretty blonde. Before the loss of Elise and Alice’s illness, Kendall might’ve spoken to her, started a conversation. Those days wouldn’t come again until Alice went into remission. Well, maybe not then, either, Kendall acknowledged. Alice would always have to come first. She owed it to Elise.

Kendall leaned in the car and arranged the back seat. She’d do her best to place well in this competition and earn a little money to help supplement her paycheck—take off some of the pressure of Rai’s financial contribution. The exercise and some distance to recharge her internal batteries couldn’t be bad for her either.

PAIGE HAD SETTLED into her hotel room and now hovered around the lobby waiting for Carol Ann—habitually late—to show so they could check out and get a feel for the equipment used in this competition before the meet-and-greet scheduled for later that evening. She’d attempted to compensate for Carol Ann’s tardiness in the past, but her cousin had caught on and made Paige wait longer. Paige was about to investigate the set-up on her own when she noticed the adorable brunette from the Bug walking up to the sign-in table.

Carly staffed the table, a former contender, and former champion who was out of this race due to an injury forcing her to retire. Carly hadn’t been at the competition check-in desk earlier and as a stickler for rules could force Paige to lose an acquaintance before she’d formally made one. Paige moved in that direction.

“We need a room number for our records, in case we need to contact you,” Carly said.

The woman paled considerably, alerting Paige that her observation earlier was correct. The woman was living out of the Bug. “Can’t I just get the information to you later?” the woman asked.

Carly shrugged. “Rules are rules, Ms. Connelly.”

With a dejected slump of shoulders, the woman readjusted the backpack on her shoulder and turned toward the lobby doors. Paige had to do something. She couldn’t let this one go—not yet. Something about her piqued Paige’s interest. Could be a serial killer, her internal voice said. Could be Ms. Right, she replied. Rushing forward and draping an arm around the woman, she said, “Sorry I’m late. Lost track of time.” The woman stared at her in confusion and Paige felt the rush of heat at their contact, and a jolt when piercing green eyes focused on her own. Paige blinked, wondering what she was getting herself into with this compelling stranger.

She turned them back to the table and removed her draped arm, their physical contact too unsettling. “Hey, Carly.” Paige pulled out the extra key card—the one she normally gave Carol Ann in case of emergencies—and handed it to the woman as she spoke. “Little buddy here’s in room four-zero-six with me.”

Sucking in a sharp breath, the woman said, “Kendall. The name is Kendall, not little buddy. Why do you insist on calling me that?” She looked grateful and cautious of Paige. As Paige ran her gaze over Kendall, she noted the tension in her body, the tiredness in her eyes, and realized Kendall had seen some hard times, was still under stress. Paige felt concerned that Kendall might not be in the proper mindset or physical condition to handle the rigors of this competition. Kendall needed some tender loving care. Paige wanted to be the woman to provide it.

Kendall’s response wasn’t expected, but since a scene didn’t follow her announcement, Paige realized she needed to play along until Kendall was signed in. “Because I can,” she replied playfully, rolling her eyes.

“Hey, Paige,” Carly said. “Maybe I can take you to dinner? I’m looking forward to watching you this weekend.” Paige tried not to notice, or react, to the remark. She liked Carly as a friend, but Carly wanted more than friendship. Paige thought she understood but wondered if Carly believed her chances improved now that she wasn’t a fellow competitor. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed this is the match where you beat your cousin.”

“Careful, now,” Paige said, wagging a finger in Carly’s direction. “We wouldn’t want Carol Ann to suspect we aren’t her biggest fans.”

Carly gave a wry smile.

Paige said, “So, is ‘little buddy’ all checked in? Can I take her up to our room now?” The visual of Kendall in her hotel room, sharing her bed, popped unbidden into her brain. She remembered the hotel hadn’t a king bed available and put her in a room with double queens. Paige had to curb the impulse to pout at the mental reminder. Carly handed Kendall a packet and nodded to Paige. “Great. See you later.” Grasping Kendall’s upper arm, Paige hurried them toward the elevators.

Once in the room, Paige pointed to the far bed. “The bed by the window will be yours. Always feel better by the exit. And the bathroom,” she finished, not sure why she felt the need to divulge that tidbit.

“You don’t have to continue the charade,” Kendall said, her voice quiet. She hadn’t moved away from the door. “I’ll remember the room number in case Carly, or anyone else, asks questions. Thank you for helping me check in.”

“There’s no reason to leave, Kendall. Far as I know, I don’t snore, and the bed’s empty and paid for already.” Paige saw the expression on Kendall’s face. This woman had pride getting in her way and saw this act of kindness as a handout or pity party. But sleeping in the hotel had to be a better prospect than the back seat of a Bug. “Honestly, I live alone, work odd hours as a nurse, and even if you don’t want to talk, I appreciate having someone else around.” Again she

wondered why she revealed so much to this attractive stranger. Paige wasn't usually so chatty about personal matters. "I'm not too crazy and will try to keep the annoying you stuff to a minimum. Not that you have reason to believe me, Kendall, but I'd really like the company of another human for the next couple days, even if it's just to hear you breathing." She crossed her arms over her chest. "But it doesn't mean I plan to go easy on you during the competition, either."

Kendall gave her a smile. "No way I'd expect that. But, Paige—"

"Great, you're doing me a favor, little buddy," Paige said. "Take a load off, you can unpack later. We've a couple hours before the initial meeting. I'm getting room service so I can deal with the other competitors on a full stomach. Any requests or food you can't or won't eat?"

"You're doing too much. I can't take advantage," Kendall said. "I'm not really hungry anyway. I should go."

When Kendall spun around and started for the door, Paige reached for her. "Kendall, wait, please." Kendall stood stiffly but didn't leave. "There's no taking advantage when something is freely offered. Please, I could use a friend."

Staring at the door, Kendall asked, "What about the other three women? Aren't they friends?"

"Yuck, not hardly," Paige said snorting. "The blonde is my cousin, and the other two girls her adoring fans."

"Fans? Competitive climbing has groupies?"

Paige shook her head. "It wouldn't surprise me but no, not for this. Carol Ann is a mystery writer of some repute, and these competitions give her fans an opportunity to get close to her." There was a knock and Kendall startled. "That's probably her right now." As Paige reached for the doorknob, Kendall retreated to the window, dropping her backpack on the bed.

"Where were you?" Carol Ann asked brushing passed Paige and stopping only when she caught sight of Kendall. "You're the lady with the old Bug." Kendall nodded, her eyelids narrowed in suspicion. "Carol Ann Whitmore," she said, hand extended. "I'm observant and you're adorable enough to observe."

"Um, thanks," Kendall said, shaking her hand. "Kendall Connelly."

Paige felt a pang of anger toward Carol Ann and her flirtation with Kendall by using honest compliments. She didn't know anything about Kendall and Carol Ann was a great catch, but Paige wanted to be the one to learn these things about the quiet woman. "Kendall was checking in and the desk couldn't find her reservation, so I've offered her the use of this room. She's here to climb."

"Great, I've someone else's butt to beat for a change." Carol Ann stepped to the small table and plopped into the nearby chair. "Where's the food? I'm starving. She pointed to Kendall and gave a teasing smile. "Kendall could use food, too. Don't know how good she is, but let's feed her even though we should slow her down for tomorrow. I'm too used to winning to give up my title yet."

"WELCOME. MY NAME is Rebecca Thurston. Thank you for joining us in the Rocking the Rockies, women's competition indoor climbing," Rebecca said into the microphone. "It's so wonderful to see a blend of familiar and new faces out there. Before you and your guests begin the socializing portion of our event tonight, I wanted to give a rundown of what you can expect

tomorrow.” The room was large and open. On the far wall to the left of the stage were tables laden with various foods, fresh fruit, lean proteins, and vegetables for the climbers and food for the others too. Moreover, lots of bottled water for hydration.

Paige suspected Kendall would return to the room—or her car—as soon as the opening introduction was finished, so she linked Kendall’s arm with her own to prevent her from leaving. Carol Ann might’ve also suspected the same, as she, too, seldom strayed far from their side.

“Tonight is for relaxing. Tomorrow the rigors of a very long day begin,” Rebecca said, then waited for the responding groaning and mumbling to subside. “We have two stages of events planned. The number to concentrate on is four. We have four problems—or courses—for those of you who are new to climbing, set up for the bouldering climbs, starting at oh-seven-hundred hours. You’ll have four minutes to see and perform the problem. Once we have gone through all participants, we’ll move on to the next problem. This is not an isolation course. Your competitors will be watching. In the morning, you’ll draw numbers for your placement in the event. My company, Unique Heights Indoor Climbing, sponsors this event. The fourth through sixth placements will receive five-hundred dollars, third place one thousand, second place two thousand, and first place ten thousand dollars and a contract as our advertising model.” Cheers went up, and the applause was near deafening.

Squeezing Kendall’s arm, Paige asked, “How good are you at this event?” From the muscles under her fingers, she suspected the extent of Kendall’s upper body strength. Not having seen the rest of Kendall—yet—her lower body could be just as developed. Paige’s own body warmed as she imagined Kendall naked, in all her toned glory. “I mean, I haven’t seen you compete before.”

Kendall shrugged. “Probably okay. I’m glad for this event. I don’t have to rely on spotters or belayers.”

Paige frowned. The answer was matter-of-fact, but she sensed the aloneness in Kendall at the reply.

She’d never moved fast in a relationship. Her job as a pediatric nurse precluded a normal work schedule corresponding with schedules of most her dates. For some people that might be doable but Paige quickly realized most women didn’t appreciate her long shifts, which could change at a moment’s notice. She couldn’t provide the undivided attention most required as the children under her care were never far from her thoughts. But there was something about Kendall that had her wanting to throw caution to the wind, and stake what? A claim? She didn’t know if that were part of her Neanderthal thinking but wanted to know more about Kendall, felt happier and joyful in her company. Whatever was going on with Kendall apparently made her unwilling to share her personal burdens with anyone.

Paige said, “I don’t want to draw the first position either, even if it means getting the climbs over right off.”

“Just as long as I place in the top six,” Kendall mumbled. Paige wondered again about Kendall’s motivation for participating in the competition. She wished Kendall trusted her enough to share it. Without entirely understanding why, Paige knew she’d move heaven and earth to help Kendall in any manner she needed.

KENDALL’S CELL PHONE rang as soon as they closed the door to their room. The display alerted her it was Alice. Flipping the phone open, Kendall said, “Hey, honey, how’re you doing?” From the corner of her eye, she noticed Paige trying to leave, and put her hand over

Paige's on the door handle. Kendall shook her head, hoping Paige would understand she didn't need to leave. "You being good for Rai?"

As she listened to Alice recount her day, Kendall watched Paige grab her nightclothes and disappear into the bathroom. She smiled at Paige's thoughtfulness to give her privacy although Kendall realized she didn't mind her overhearing the conversation, which surprised her. Kendall had only shared her circumstances with her supervisor at work, and, of course, with Rai. It wasn't like Paige would hold it against her, would she? And they'd never see each other after this weekend. Oddly, the last thought filled her with sadness. "Get some rest, sweetheart. Love you, too. Put Rai on for a minute." A moment of silence as Alice relinquished the phone, and for Kendall to notice the shower had been off for a while. Paige had yet to leave the bathroom.

"Everything okay with you?" Rai asked with concern in her tone.

"Yes, actually, one of the women has offered me the extra bed in her room. No one will steal me in the night. I won't be in an episode of crime television, either."

"Really? Did you thank her properly?" Rai asked.

Unexpectedly, Kendall had a visual of kissing Paige's full lips. She was glad Paige remained behind the closed door so she wouldn't have to explain the full body blush. Kendall lowered her voice. "Paige is probably straight, Rai."

"You're adorable. You could convert her." Rai's gentle laughter followed and Kendall realized how lucky she was to have her for a friend. "Probably? No gaydar going off near Paige." Rai said the name reverently.

"I'm surrounded by athletic women. You know that makes my gaydar fuzzy." Kendall glanced toward the bathroom again. "Even if she were, I don't have time to indulge in even a one-night stand. It wouldn't be fair to anyone, let alone Paige."

Rai was uncharacteristically quiet before she said, "I'll let you get some rest. Do me a favor? Don't close doors that should remain open?" Before she could question Rai further, their call disconnected.

Kendall didn't want to engage in more than the pleasant comradery she had with Paige but admitted she enjoyed their amiable rapport. Even now, Paige probably waited until she ended her call. "You can come out now," Kendall said. "It's safe."

Dressed in her jammies, Paige left the bathroom and flopped onto her bed. "I didn't want to invade your privacy."

"I appreciate the consideration, but it wasn't necessary," Kendall said, surprised she truly meant it. Paige could have overheard any part of her call. When she glanced at Paige, her expression reflected curiosity, her teeth worrying her bottom lip. "Ask," Kendall said. "I know you want to."

"Yeah, but you deserve privacy. I don't want you to feel obligated because you're here."

"I don't mind," Kendall said, again surprised by her response.

"Your husband and daughter were checking that you're okay?"

The question brought a smile to Kendall. "No, Rai, spelled R-a-i and means trust, which I do, is my roommate and best friend. Alice is my niece." Kendall suspected she'd appeased Paige's curiosity, but felt she owed Paige more. "My sister was killed in a car accident about a year ago. Alice has been with me ever since. With her hospital bills, I couldn't care for her on my own. Rai took us into her apartment and has cared for the both of us since."

"Rai must care for you very much," Paige said.

"She's been great. I owe her a lot." Kendall shifted to rest on her pillows and give her attention to Paige. "What about you? A significant other in your life?"



Paige smiled suspiciously. “Significant other? Most people assume male and ask boyfriend or husband.” She smirked. “Like I did with you.”

Kendall waggled her eyebrows. “I’m quite progressive in my thinking. Besides, you’re entitled to your life, whether with a boyfriend or a girlfriend. I like to believe there’s romance for all, genders notwithstanding. Relationships should be about feelings and compatibility. Happiness and love should be the issue.”

“Even in today’s social climate, some wouldn’t be as understanding.”

“Does that mean—”

Paige nodded. “Yes, the elusive happiness for me is sought with a woman. If the knowledge makes you uncomfortable, I can get you your own room.”

“Doesn’t bother me, Paige.”

She gave a heavy sigh and flashed a wry smile at Kendall. “I can’t keep girlfriends because of my schedule. They don’t like competing with work.”

“What do you do?”

“Pediatric nurse in an oncology ward. My kids come first, consume my time if my last girlfriend is believed.”

Kendall felt another weight lifted. Paige would understand her all-consuming devotion to Alice, and she wanted to share that with someone other than Rai. “My eight-year-old niece has Ewings Sarcoma. She’s in her second month of treatments.”

Frowning, Paige said, “Most cases are found in children ten and older. Has she begun chemotherapy?”

Kendall nodded. “So you’re here for the prize money, not the joy of climbing.”

“I enjoy the climbing too, but yes, any prize money I can win will tide us over until I can start another job. It’s not a guarantee my extraordinary skills will allow me to place in the top six, but it’s worth a shot.”

“And why you planned on sleeping in your car.”

Kendall sat up. “I’ll find a way to reimburse you for this, for everything—”

“The hell you will,” Paige said. “You’re here to save me from boredom and provide me company, remember? If you weren’t sharing my room, I’d be listening to Carol Ann, sitting where you are, explaining the plot of her next mystery, or listening to mind-numbing tales of her vapid hangers-on.”

Kendall grew panicked when she saw the look in Paige’s eyes, then angry when Paige said, “If there’s anything I can do for you, Kendall—”

“We don’t need charity, Paige,” Kendall said with more anger than she intended. “Maybe we should get some sleep. We’ve a busy day tomorrow.” Kendall rose to grab a T-shirt from her bag.

“I wasn’t thinking charity, Kendall. I’m offering my time, knowledge as a pediatric nurse, and another human to lean on when things get dicey because they most certainly will.” Paige slipped under the covers and turned away from Kendall. “Isolate yourself if it makes you feel better. No sweat off my brow, Lone Ranger.”

Kendall heard the hurt in Paige’s tone and felt horrible for causing it. It’ll be best in the long run, Kendall told herself. She didn’t need someone else complicating her life with emotions. Her life was complicated enough already. Saddened by Paige’s cold-shoulder, Kendall got ready for bed.

THE NEXT MORNING, after an early breakfast, Kendall and Carol Ann placed the trays in the hallway as Paige locked the door. They were ready for a full day of competition, dressed in their gear and climbing shoes, bags slung over their shoulders loaded with towels, other exercise essentials, and chalk.

Paige had been polite to her and Carol Ann, but not her usual communicative self. Kendall knew she was the reason. Well, Kendall reminded herself, she wasn't here for friendships—she abused the one she had already.

They reached the large open, high-ceilinged room, split into an area in the back for the viewers, with chairs laid out in several rows and most already claimed. At the far end were four tarp-covered structures, each reaching a height of no less than twenty-five feet, and between eight and ten feet wide.

This is where the actual competition would take place. In front of the structures was a table with a timing box in the center, and cloth-covered basket next to it, and three people, two men and one woman, were seated with one chair empty. The competitors gathered there, and Kendall followed Paige and Carol Ann in that direction.

Rebecca Thurston stood with a clipboard in hand, her hip leaning against the table, glancing at her watch. “We’ve got about ten more minutes, ladies, and then we’ll begin.” When the allotted time had passed and the remainder of the competitor’s arrived, Rebecca moved away from the table and stood before the first tarped structure. “Okay, folks, we’ve a long day ahead, so settle down and let’s get started. Because today’s competition is to find a representative for Unique Heights, we’ll do things a bit differently from some competitions you may have previously participated in. As a reminder, there are four problems. Once the first is unveiled, you’ll take your turn by the number you draw. Then we move on to the next problem. With the completion of the third problem, the judges will average your scores. Only the top ten will move on to the final problem. Are there any questions?”

A couple women asked for clarification on the scoring, which were relatively standard: scored on whether or not they complete the climb, how high they reached, with falls or attempts counting against them. “All right, if there’re no more questions, form a line and draw a number from the basket, and then tell the judges your number for the record.”

Carol Ann stood between Paige and Kendall, in line for numbers. Kendall said, “Rebecca wasn’t kidding about the number four, was she? Four climbs, four judges, four minutes to solve the problem. After this, I may ignore the number four indefinitely.”

“Probably a good thing you surpassed book four years ago,” Paige said.

“How many have you written?” Kendall asked, curious. She’d wanted to go to college to be a writer, but life shut that road down for her. Someday, she’d like to try again. “Are they all mysteries?”

“My ninth is in edit as I stand here. Five are mysteries,” Carol Ann shrugged with a cringe, “but four are children’s books.”

Kendall laughed; relieved to see Paige did too. “Guess you’d better hurry with another one.”

The participants totaled thirty-eight. Kendall was glad to have drawn sixteen, putting her close to the middle, and giving her an opportunity to gauge the nuances of the courses when revealed. She felt better with not having to sleep in the backseat of her VW. A part of her felt guilty for accepting such favors from a total stranger though she had to admit enjoying the time

spent with Paige so far. Although Kendall found Carol Ann a bit high maintenance—with her entourage and all—she too was nothing but wonderful and friendly toward Kendall.

Sometimes—another tug of guilt—Kendall wished circumstances allowed her to enjoy a more carefree lifestyle, especially since meeting Paige. But she wouldn't change a single microsecond of raising Alice. Not that Kendall would have managed as well as she had without Rai. Squeezing her eyes shut, Kendall thanked whatever powers were looking out for her.

THE TIME RANG to announce the end of the third round for participant eleven. There had been advantages with placement, and the ability to watch the other contestants take each climb. Under standard circumstances, a climber would see the problem and visualize the climb before making the attempt. With the current playing field, seeing moves played and identifying the holds to prove more difficult gave preceding climbers the opportunity to prepare mentally. The ability to view what worked, and what didn't, for each climb was beneficial.

“How you holding up?” Paige asked. Her voice low and breath warm against Kendall's ear. A shiver of excitement ran through her body. She and Carol Ann hadn't strayed too far from her side, yet Kendall missed the teasing camaraderie they'd shared before her outburst last evening.

“Pretty good,” Kendall said, hoping Paige couldn't tell how her closeness affected her. Though she still regretted her words, Kendall accepted the current situation was for the best. “How 'bout you?”

“Excited about how well you're doing. You'll place in the top ten, I'm sure of it.”

“You can't know that,” Kendall said. She shook her head.

“Of course, I can.” Paige playfully shoved into her shoulder. “I like having you around, little buddy, so you can't fail me now.”

Kendall felt her face heat, not sure whether Paige teased or flirted—grateful Paige seemed to want to forget last night, even for a little while. She hoped Paige wasn't making fun of her. Either way, she couldn't believe the pleasant jolt accelerating her heartbeat, helping her ignore the annoying “little buddy” tag Paige insisted on using. Being the cause of the silent moments between them, Kendall realized how much she enjoyed her interactions with Paige. Even in the same building, Kendall missed Paige when she wasn't near by.

Paige gave Kendall a quick shoulder hug. “Need to use the ladies room. Lost track of my cousin, too.” She gave Kendall a wink. “Be back in a jiffy.”

The competition gave Kendall an exciting challenge, mentally and physically. Listening to a few of the other women had confirmed this was just a sport to most of them, and they'd done these competitions regularly. No one had voiced reasons as substantial as hers for the money the top prize would bring, not that Kendall had overheard that many conversations. The adrenaline from her first two climbs had Kendall near giddy. She hoped Alice's health would improve enough that someday she'd get a chance to watch Kendall compete. Having her own cheering section couldn't hurt either, Kendall thought.

“Hey, we need your help and can't find Paige,” one of Carol Ann's giggling entourage said in her ear when she rushed to Kendall's side. “Carol Ann fell in one of the hallways, but she doesn't want the medic to pull her from the climbs.”

“What happened?” Kendall asked, even as the young woman yanked on her arm, tugging her toward the lobby.

“Don't know. You can ask her when we get there.”

This situation didn't feel right, but Kendall couldn't pinpoint a reason for it. Reluctant, but dutifully, she followed her down an empty hall. As they neared a stairwell, Groupie One stopped and faced what appeared to be a supply closet. The two spoke in low tones for a few seconds. Before their intent became clear, Groupie One pushed Kendall from behind into the closet as Groupie Two slammed the door.

"Shit," Kendall gasped, catching her balance by grasping the lip of a sink. "What the hell are you doing?" she yelled. A small emergency light dimly illuminated the tiny room.

"We heard Paige and Carol Ann talking," Groupie Two said through the door. "They believe it's possible for you to beat Carol Ann's time."

"Yeah, and we can't have you winning. This is Carol Ann's time to shine."

"Are you friggin' kidding me," Kendall said. "What is this, Junior High?"

"Say whatever you want, bitch," Groupie One said. "By the time you get out of here, your turn will be over. You lose."

Kendall heard the receding sound of giggling as the two left. She squeezed her eyes shut. Please don't let Paige or Carol Ann be part of this, Kendall prayed. She tested the doorknob, but it didn't have a release button on this side of the handle, and was firmly locked. She pounded on the door with no result.

Kendall grasped the doorknob, attempting to twist it as she slammed into the door with her shoulder. After numerous attempts, Kendall resumed pounding on the door. "Hey! Someone let me out!"

She didn't know how much time had passed before the door finally opened to a confused woman from housekeeping. "Thank you," she murmured, rushing from the room and back toward the competition, praying she hadn't missed her turn.

When she entered, Kendall noted player fourteen on her climb. The relief filled Kendall and she drew a deep gulp of air.

"What happened?" Paige asked, materializing at her side. "You're flushed."

Kendall snarled, "Your cousin's groupies locked me in a closet so I wouldn't make their idol look bad."

Paige paled. "Damn bitches." She raked her gaze over Kendall. "Are you hurt?" Kendall didn't owe Paige anything, especially after this incident, but she heard genuine concern in Paige's voice.

"Shoulder's a little sore." She flashed Paige a smirk. "It looks easier to break down doors in the movies." Before Paige had a chance to respond, the buzzer announced the end of time for fourteen. She'd need to be close to the judge's table for her own turn.

"Can you make the climb?" Paige asked.

"Don't have a choice, Paige. Too much is at stake for me to give up because of little sore muscle."

"Geez, Kendall, be careful." Paige bit her bottom lip. "I'll try to make this right."

She didn't understand what Paige meant by the comment, and didn't have time to figure it out. Kendall needed to focus on visualizing and preparing for her climb.

She stood on the mat, focusing on the problem and her breathing, sharpening her gaze to concentrate on the first couple of holds needed to begin the best course. The timer buzzed the start of her third problem.

Her focus proved correct and she managed the lower third of the climb before the pain made itself known in her shoulder. Climbing shoes are fitted tightly for increased sensitivity, which did nothing for the pain.

Kendall focused on her upper body strength when working out, but her legs received an extensive regimen also. She positioned her body to swing to the next grip without too much straining, noting a hold that would take a bit of the pressure off her shoulder.

Kendall felt the strain in her left shoulder, and constantly had to remind herself not to hold her breath. She knew doing so would restrict her oxygen to her muscles, which would fatigue them quicker. Big, deep, continuous breaths helped the muscle relax, assuring efficient climbs. With the shoulder injury, though slight, her fingers could get fatigued and cause what climbers referred to as pump, handicapping her finger's grip.

Just as Kendall began to lose focus, she saw only two grips remained to complete this problem. No sooner had she reached the top, the buzzer announced the time ended. As she glanced down, Kendall saw three security guards taking Carol Ann's groupies from the room.

Exhaling a breath, Kendall hoped she'd done well enough to make it to the fourth and final round.

PAIGE CLOSED THE door behind her as quietly as possible when she caught sight of Kendall staring out the window, her face a vivid picture of pain. Climbing, exhausted muscles, the mental exercise of deliberating each move caused headaches, but the expressions contorting Kendall's features suggested this was more than about the contest. Was Kendall upset she'd only placed third? This was about her niece's bills and what the winnings would pay. Paige would offer her own fifth place winnings if she believed the offer wouldn't offend Kendall. Kendall didn't appear to be aware of her presence yet.

"Hey, little buddy," Paige whispered, settling her hands on Kendall's shoulders. "As a nurse, I can testify to giving incredible massages. How 'bout letting me work on that shoulder?"

Kendall turned slowly, her nod barely discernible. "Sure, I guess."

"Good. Lay down, take your shirt off, and I'll get the massage oil." Paige went to pull the plastic bottle from her bag as Kendall removed her top and placed herself in the center of the mattress. Paige felt her body warm, moistness pooling at her core at the sight of Kendall's toned torso. She shook her head. Focus on the healing, not what this woman does to your libido, Paige chastised herself. Paige crawled on top of the bed and straddled Kendall. She didn't dare look at Kendall's face, afraid her feelings and responses were written in her expression. "This might be a little cold at first."

"Do what you must," Kendall said. Paige wanted to groan at the images the statement created. "Any relief would be welcomed."

Yes, Paige told herself, concentrate on the healing. Gently at first, more to get an even application of the oil, Paige rubbed the silky flesh of Kendall's back, kneading deeper when she felt tension in the muscles. Crap, this was going to be more difficult than she thought. Paige enjoyed the feel of Kendall's back, finding maintaining the innocence to the massage difficult.

Paige was about to conclude the massage, hoping to salvage her remaining sanity, when Kendall twisted over beneath her and stared directly at Paige.

Kendall hooked her hand behind Paige's neck, drawing her down for a kiss. Her warm mouth glided over Paige's before fastening their lips together. Kendall's tongue pushed slowly into Paige's mouth. She tasted more incredible than Paige ever imagined.

“Take your clothes off,” Kendall’s voice was husky and low. Paige wasted no time complying, returning to her place atop Kendall, where she promptly claimed Paige’s mouth again.

Paige couldn’t get enough of her and apparently, Kendall felt likewise, her hands roamed everywhere, first entangling in Paige’s hair, exploring her breasts and back. With a groan, Kendall rolled them so she hovered over Paige, a wicked gleam in her bright green eyes.

“Tell me if I do anything wrong,” Kendall whispered.

“As if,” Paige breathed. “Please, don’t stop until one of us passes out.”

Snuggling closer, Kendall chuckled and pulled Paige tighter, nudging Paige’s legs apart. She kissed then gently bit Paige’s lower lip. Kendall moved down, planting kisses on her jaw, neck, and shoulder. Paige shivered when she cupped a breast, swiping her tongue lightly across a nipple until it puckered. Liquid heat spiraled downward as if her pulse had moved into her clit, which throbbed in time with Paige’s pounding heart.

Kendall tenderly held both breasts, pressed them together, laved one nipple, then the other, as if undecided which to devour first. Kendall moaned around a mouthful of breast. Desire built so swiftly inside Paige’s center it made her dizzy. Nothing, however, compared to the passion and lust that consumed her when Kendall moved lower.

She showered feathery kisses over Paige’s rib cage. Paige’s stomach fluttered. Kendall skimmed her calloused palms down Paige’s sides and her flesh exploded in goose bumps. Kendall’s mouth traveled lower and Paige wondered if she’d survive the night. Oh, Heaven, but what a way to die, she told herself.

When Kendall’s lips reached her clit, she raised her gaze to meet Paige’s. Kendall’s eyes blazed with passion and anticipation. Paige experienced utter affection at that moment. A sense of fear filled her. Paige could fall in love with this woman—maybe she had already.

Kendall spread her labia and Paige stifled a groan at the jolt that shot through her. Without touching or licking her clit, Paige already hovered near release. Kendall leaned down and inhaled, closing her eyes. “You smell so delicious.” Kendall ducked her head and ran her tongue the full length of her.

Paige hissed. “Oh, baby.”

Kendall took another swipe along Paige’s damp flesh and Paige twitched, bucking up to meet Kendall’s mouth. Kendall caught the brief look of contentment on her face before covering Paige’s womanhood with her warm, wet mouth. She hooked her arms under Paige’s thighs and attacked her bud.

Paige shouted, “Damn! Don’t stop!” She raised her hips to meet Kendall’s ravenous mouth, blissful sensations shooting deep inside her, making her squeeze her eyes shut. Paige adjusted herself and held Kendall’s head captive between her legs.

Kendall carefully drove two fingers inside and pumped so fast that Paige couldn’t hold out any longer, the escalating climax taking hold in a mind-blowing release. Paige moaned. The sound increased in volume as Kendall kept up the pace. The molten pleasure seemed to go on and on, finally ebbing.

Lungs on fire, Paige hauled in gasps of air. “Oh, God. Son of a—”

Kendall’s glazed mouth slanted in a smile, and Paige trembled again when Kendall kissed her stomach, her breasts, and her neck. She snuggled into Paige’s side, her warm breath fanning the flesh under her chin. Kendall nipped at her neck and said, “I feel better. Thanks for the massage.”

Paige barked a laugh. “Well, didn’t end the way I intended.” She felt Kendall tense. “But I’ll not complain.”

“Thank you,” Kendall whispered.

“Um, I should be thanking you.”

“No, for a little while, I had control of at least one aspect of my life.” Kendall tried to pull away, but Paige held her firm and looked down into her eyes.

“It wasn’t my intention to take advantage, Paige. I don’t usually—”

“You did nothing to warrant your unease, Kendall. I could’ve stopped you at any time.”

Paige waggled her eyebrows. “Which, after experiencing your great lovemaking, would make me a great big dope.”

“You’re not mad?” Kendall asked.

“Let me show you how mad I am,” Paige said, twisting until she covered Kendall. “I only hope I can make you feel near as exquisite as you just made me feel.”

Kendall grinned shyly. “If you think you should. I wouldn’t want you to think I’m a dope.”

Paige kissed Kendall deep and long. Rubbing a palm across Kendall’s nipple, bringing it to a hardened peak, Paige said, “I’d never think poorly of you, Kendall.” Then, Paige took her time exploring.

PAIGE ENJOYED HER job, but she wasn’t a fan of having to witness so many innocents struggling with disease. She hoped, at least, a few happy memories were her gift to patients and family. Not that she’d been too cheerful since Kendall had left the Rocking the Rockies competition without a word. She could have left a note, Paige groused. Granted, they’d only known each other for a couple of days but she wanted it to be more than a one-night stand. Kendall meant more than that to her, yet Paige would never get the chance to tell her, talk about...well, something more between them. Maybe it hadn’t been as fantastic for Kendall as it had for her.

It was less than a month ago and Kendall was never far from her thoughts. Where did you go? Damn, I miss you, Kendall.

Paige rubbed tiredly at her eyes, hoping to scour away images of Kendall, her beautiful body, and silky flesh. How Kendall felt in her arms, against her own skin, the sparks lighting the green of her eyes, and the volcanic heat of their shared kisses.

Not the time for such memories, she reminded herself angrily. A whole floor of sick children needed to see a positive attitude from their nurse. And there was Alice, waiting for her nightly reading. Tonight they’d start Curious George. Alice, who spoke of the illusive guardian named Kenny, who Paige hadn’t met, probably because of her night shift which started after usual visiting hours.

“Hey, Fred, what’s got you so glum?” Paige asked, entering the hallway from the back entrance and speaking to the man sitting behind a counter. One of her favorite security guards, Fred took his job seriously, but not so grave as to use his position to bully or posture like some of the others who thought a badge gave them special license to be a jerk. Fred’s main task was to monitor the parking areas and the entrances.

He pointed at the video camera monitor in front of him. “We may have a squatter. I remember that Bug from last night.”

At the mention of the vehicle type, Paige felt a burst of hope, but the emotion stuck in her throat. What are the chances the squatter was Kendall? More important, if so, why was she here? “What are you going to do about it?”

“If it’s the same woman,” Fred shrugged. “She looked so tired, so worn out, like she should be a resident in one of our beds. Guess I should call the Aurora Police Department, make her their problem.”

“Don’t call APD, please, not yet.” Paige moved closer to his counter. “May I see?” At his curious nod, Paige moved behind the counter and stared at the images on the various screens, until Fred took pity and pointed to the specific camera. Blood pounded in her ears as she stared at what could only be Kendall’s VW Bug—how many had squares of colored primer? “I’m going to go talk to her,” Paige said.

“That’s not wise,” Fred said, shaking his head. “She could be a junkie or something.” He started to stand. “I’ll go with you.”

“No, Fred, stay there. If it’s who I think it is, she’s safe.” Safe to everything but my heart, Paige thought. “I’ll be careful until I’m sure.” He didn’t respond immediately. “You can watch everything on the camera.”

Fred shook his head. “I dunno, Paige. Doesn’t feel right, but I’ll give you the benefit and watch from here. Anything starts to feel hinky and I’ll not let you forget it afterward.”

“Thank you, Fred.” Paige turned for the door but hesitated, and then turned back to Fred. “Um, Fred?” He raised an eyebrow. “If she’s who I think, will you overlook any PDA that may occur?” Please let her be happy to see me, Paige prayed.

Fred chuckled. “Only if it’s reciprocated. I’ll call up and let the Peds floor know you’re with a patient down here.”

“You’re the best,” Paige said over her shoulder, racing out the door in the direction of the Bug, and hopefully Kendall.

Closer to the vehicle, Paige slowed her step, uncertain of the reception she’d receive. What was Kendall’s reason for being here? Was she looking for Paige? She wanted Kendall in her life—even for a little while, if that’s all Kendall was willing to give her. When she peered in the side window, Paige saw Kendall buried beneath a couple of throw blankets. Her face exposed, Paige was able to see just how exhausted Kendall appeared. Why was she here? She remembered Kendall telling her about a niece with cancer. Had Kendall’s niece been admitted to her wing and was waiting for the night nurse’s shift? Would Kendall’s niece be one of Paige’s returning patients? Well, right this moment, Kendall was her concern. Paige rapped her knuckles on the glass.

With strained agility in the small space, Kendall sprang up and stared at her in confusion, and then opened the door and stepped out. The smells of old grease and cooked meat assaulted Paige, alerting her to the other method Kendall instituted for paying bills. “Uh...I was—” Kendall swallowed hard. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing, honey,” Paige said. It took every ounce of self-restraint not to draw Kendall into an embrace. Concentrating so hard on resisting the impulse loosened her tongue, and she heard herself say, “I’ve missed you.” Shock and disbelief clouded Kendall’s eyes. Of course, Paige thought, exhaustion might be the reason too. Oh, hell with it. Paige closed the distance between them and hauled Kendall into her arms. She expected resistance, but Kendall seemed to fold wearily into her embrace, her body molding flush with hers. Pure delight filled Paige. Reluctant to release her, Paige pulled away slightly and looked into Kendall’s tired face. Placing her palms on either side of Kendall’s face, Paige kissed her, gently at first. When



her body took over and demanded more of Kendall, she stopped and asked, “Why are you here?” She wondered how much, if anything, Kendall would share with her.

“My niece is in there, and I didn’t want to be too far away if she needed me.” Kendall shrugged. “I got off late for tonight’s visit and couldn’t spend much time with her. I was too tired to drive myself home.”

Paige gave her another hug. “Come inside with me.” She laughed then, thinking of Fred watching from his cameras. “Before we get rescued by security.” Inside, Paige flashed a smile at Fred, who responded with a quick wink. In the elevator, Paige nearly cried with joy when Kendall tentatively held her hand.

KENDALL HADN’T TOLD Paige, but she’d missed her too. In the dreariest parts of her day, thoughts of their weekend together, thoughts of making love to her, inspired her to go one more step beyond endurance. Her body’s responses to Paige in the parking lot assured Kendall she hadn’t imagined making love to her either. When the elevator doors opened, Kendall tried to pull her hand free, afraid to embarrass Paige in her place of work, but Paige held fast.

With a grin, Paige said, “I’m not letting you escape just yet. Come with me to check in, look in on a patient and we’ll go see your niece.”

She didn’t know how to respond, so she remained silent.

Paige took her through the doors of the Whitmore Wing, and to Kendall’s utter surprise, into Alice’s room. “Hey, Alice, I came to see how you’re doing?”

Alice’s expression brightened, but her eyes grew wide when she realized Kendall entered with Paige. “Kennie,” Alice exclaimed. “You came back.”

“Aunt Kennie, brat,” Rai said, rushing breathlessly into the room.

If the newest surprise wasn’t enough, pandemonium ensued with the appearance of Carol Ann. “Oh, Alice, you didn’t tell me tonight was party night.”

“What is going on?” Kendall asked. Why were Rai and Carol Ann here? “Did I miss something?” She directed her attention to Rai, since Carol Ann could be here to see Paige.

Rai moved to the side of Alice’s bed and kissed the top of her head. “Brat called me, upset after your visit.”

“Upset?” Kendall met Alice’s gaze. “Why, what’d I do, honey?”

Alice shifted toward Rai who answered. “Alice thinks you’re killing yourself with work.” Rai shook her head. “You do work harder than necessary, Kendall. I told you I’m here to help in every way. We know you do your best, but we both miss you.”

Kendall would’ve replied, but Carol Ann brushed by her with a saucy smile directed at Rai. “Hello, handsome,” Carol Ann said, hand extended toward Rai. “Carol Ann Whitmore at your service. Please, avail yourself of any service.”

Smiling, Rai shook the offered hand. “Rai Wakahisa.”

Carol Ann sidled closer. “Trust and forever young.”

“You’re familiar with the Japanese language,” Rai said. “Impressive.”

“You’ve no idea,” Carol Ann said.

Paige snorted. “Maybe you two should just get a room.”

Possessively, Carol Ann latched on to Rai’s arm. “Later, Rai willing. Actually, I’ve business to conduct with Kendall, who I’m glad I finally found. I never expected it would be here.”

“Me? Why?” Kendall couldn’t imagine what business they could have with one another.

“What kind of business?” Paige asked, her tone defensive. Was Paige trying to protect her from her cousin? Should she be worried Paige felt the need?

Carol Ann leaned into Rai as she reached over and squeezed Alice’s shoulder. “Hey there, squirt. Ready to help me convince your Aunt Kendall to make some changes?” Alice nodded. Carol Ann returned attention to Paige and Kendall. “I’m a trust fund baby who also does well dabbling in writing.”

“Hardly dabbling,” Kendall said.

“Glad you think so.” Carol Ann spoke to Kendall, but her attention was on Rai. Kendall considered separating them, fearful Carol Ann would devour her best friend. Nah, Rai was a big girl. Carol Ann continued, “At the climbing competition, you were only one point away from second place. If it hadn’t been for the interference of those girls, you may have even beat my time. With that in mind, there’s a serious chance you’d have been the face of Unique Heights. Obviously, I’m not in it for the money, my winnings have already been donated to this wing of the hospital.” Ah, the Whitmore Wing, Kendall remembered. Carol Ann switched from holding Rai’s arm, to holding her hand as she sank into the chair beside Alice’s bed. “Since the competition’s end, I’ve worked out a better agreement. Unique Heights is starting a donation fund for childhood cancer. Alice, with your approval Kendall, will be a spokesperson with me.”

“That’s wonderful, Carol Ann,” Paige said. “The children will appreciate this.”

“Because of all the additional duties I’m taking on, I’d like Kendall to accept the position of my personal assistant. I’d like to see her use our home gym, too. I’ve got to know if she’d have beaten me. There’s another competition next month. I can see that right now, you’re not in any condition to compete. We need to change that.”

“You don’t—” Kendall stopped when Carol Ann held up a hand.

“I only do things I want to do. Ask Paige if you don’t believe me.” Carol Ann glanced hungrily at Rai. “I hope you won’t disappear from my sight.” Rai shook her head, amusement glinting in her eyes. “Wonderful. Now, Paige, Rai and I will take over your reading duties with Alice. Talk to Kendall, convince her to keep in contact with us.”

Kendall didn’t know if there was something unspoken between them she’d missed, but Paige nodded and tugged Kendall’s hand and dragged her out of Alice’s room. Dazed, Kendall allowed Paige to lead her to an empty break room. “Paige?”

Paige closed the door behind them, and backed her against the near wall. “Kendall, I can’t expect you to share my feelings, but I’d appreciate it if you listen for a moment.” Kendall nodded. Share her feelings? Did she mean more than a one-night stand to Paige? “I want a relationship with you, Kendall. I know we barely know one another, but somehow you’ve taken residence in my heart. Don’t we owe it to ourselves to see if we have the forever kind?”

“I don’t want char—”

“Please, Kendall, don’t say charity. That’s not what Carol Ann and I intend.” Paige sighed heavily. “If she’s offering you a job, Carol Ann expects you to treat it like any other job—legitimately. We’ve both spent time with Alice, and we love her. Brian, Carol Ann’s little brother, died from Leukemia when he was sixteen. She’s serious about finding the cure. Please, consider giving up your jobs, and accepting her offer.” Paige dropped her gaze but didn’t move away. “Maybe you and Alice could consider moving in with me? I’d like to be there for you, not as a nurse—though there are advantages there—but as your life partner.”

“Why are—” Kendall’s words were cut off when Paige cupped the back of her neck and took her lips greedily. Every nerve in Kendall’s body was on fire. Legs limp and ready to collapse,

she returned the kiss, wrapping her arms around Paige's waist. Paige made her feel safe, feel alive. Paige was her aphrodisiac.

"Because, little buddy, I've fallen in love with you. I don't want to lose you, lose us, before we've discovered how far we can take this."

The pleading expression was nearly Kendall's undoing. Paige loved her. If she were truthful with herself, Kendall had fallen in love the instant Paige had called her "little buddy." Maybe it was time to accept help, accept that others were willing to provide support. "Okay, but you've got to promise me something."

"Anything," Paige breathed. "What?"

Kendall nodded. "Not to get upset when I out-climb Carol Ann. She's too comfy in her title."

"As long as taking her title is all you're interested in from her. She is the prettier of the two of us. You realize I only make a nurse's salary." Kendall could imagine the men and women swimming around Carol Ann for her money and her fame.

"Trust me, Paige, you're the best outcome of the new heights I've climbed since meeting you. I've got a good grip, too." Paige's brow furrowed as Kendall said, "I'm gonna hold on real tight."

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Sharon lives in beautiful Colorado. She enjoys finding new trails to hike and playing mahjong, although not simultaneously as she's awkward enough under normal circumstances; has served as a Marine, data entry, and program assistant. She is thankful for electronic readers—otherwise the amount of books she owns would be obvious.

# Tigers and Bears, Oh My!

by Mary Griggs

“LSU KICKS ASS!”

Sue stepped off the elevator and high-fived her fellow Cajun for his victory cheer. “Geaux Tigers!” she replied with a grin. The smile stayed on her face as she walked down the hallway to her office.

She loved everything about autumn from the crisp morning air to the changing leaves. She especially loved that fall brought with it football. Sue loved the game and she adored her alma mater’s football team. She lightly touched the tiger emblem on her door as she passed for good luck. Settling behind her desk, she flipped on her CPU and flicked the bobble-head tiger on her desk.

Sue wondered if there was anyone else in the office she could brag to about the win. She heard the woman in the next office put her voice mail on speakerphone and wondered how Gwen’s team had done.

Gwen was Sue’s closest rival at the firm. She had gone to UC Berkeley and was a typical California girl. Her sun streaked blonde hair hung past her shoulders and her body brimmed with the vitality of healthy living. In contrast, Sue was born and bred in southern Louisiana on the Bayou LaFourche. She was small and dark, with short, curly brown hair.

The two of them were district supervisors and they each headed up a team of insurance adjusters. Raises and bonuses were based on the number of policies written and renewed, the effectiveness of the claims process, the amount actually paid out in claims, and what the customer’s feedback was for each week. It was a numbers game and, as with everything else, Sue hated to lose.

Clicking onto the ESPN website, she checked the final score on the Cal game and saw that the Golden Bears had lost. With a glint in her eye, she headed to the next office to gloat.

Gwen looked up at the knock and grimaced. “I don’t have time for this, Sue. It’s ten minutes after nine and I’m already an hour behind.”

“Oh, I’ll be quick.” Sue settled into the visitor’s seat. “I couldn’t help but notice that your team lost this weekend. Sucks to be you, doesn’t it?”

“They’ll bounce back from the loss higher and better.”

“Yeah, they’ve had a lot of practice bouncing, haven’t they?”

“Don’t be a poor winner, Sue. Now, don’t you have some work to do?”

“Okay, okay. You’re still feeling the pain from the weekend. I understand.”

“Just temporary pain. My boys will end the season better than your guys.”

“In your dreams,” Sue replied. She returned to her office and, instead of working, she found a series of YouTube videos highlighting Louisiana’s best plays and Cal’s botched ones. She sent them electronically to Gwen. The thought of Gwen’s face when she watched them was enough to keep her giggling through lunch.

Coming back from a client meeting, Sue saw the scowl on Gwen's face and waved. "Having a good day?" she asked.

"It would be better if I wasn't being harassed."

"Now, now. Just because your team lost doesn't mean you should take it out on me."

"I have an idea. Why don't we just agree not to talk about football? I mean we're being paid to work."

Sue laughed. "Where's the fun in that?"

"You consider sending me these videos fun? It's juvenile!"

"How do you know I did it?"

"Because it's something you would do." Gwen shook her head. "I dare you to deny it."

"Dare me? Why don't you bet me?"

"What do you mean?"

"How about we put a wager on the upcoming game?"

"Only if the terms include you shutting up about the results, too."

"I'm only willing to do that for some pretty high stakes," Sue said. "Why don't we go big? We can bet on which team wins the national championship."

Gwen shook her head. "LSU is ranked number one in the nation! Berkeley is fifth. That doesn't seem like a fair contest."

"Then let's not deal with the BCS ranking. Straight up win-loss record to Thanksgiving?"

After thinking for a minute, Gwen said, "Including the weekend?"

"Isn't The Big Game against Stanford that weekend? I can see you not wanting to miss that one."

"It is but Stanford is looking good lately and nothing is a sure thing."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure about LSU."

"No, I think it's better if we end the weekend before Thanksgiving."

"Why?"

"I've thought about doing some exploring and the four day Thanksgiving weekend might be the perfect time."

"Pardon?"

"I've seen the way you look at me. You want to do more than just look, don't you?"

Sue's eyes gleamed. "I'd be dead not to have thought about it. You're hot."

"Why haven't you ever done anything about it?"

"Come on. You know."

"Say it."

"We're both Tops. We need to be in control too much. There's no way you'd submit to me and I'm certainly not going to submit to you."

"That's too bad."

"Why?"

"Because it makes me wet thinking about it."

Sue cocked her head in surprise. "Really?"

"You topping me or vice versa sounds pretty sexy," Gwen replied. She kicked off her pumps and propped her feet on the desk. She winked when she caught Sue ogling her legs.

Sue coughed and flushed. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm just thinking in terms of a great bet." Gwen toyed with her diamond necklace. "The loser becomes the other's toy for the course of the holiday."

"You're out of your mind!"

“Oh? You’re not so confident in your team after all, are you?”

“Don’t be daft. LSU is on a roll.” Sue studied her rival. The idea of having Gwen under control for a long weekend was making her damp. It was the fear of submission that worried her. Weighing the risk to reward ratio, Sue bit her lip.

Gwen shrugged. “It was just an idea. Why don’t you think it over tonight and let me know in the morning?”

Sue returned to her own office in a daze. She spent much of the rest of the day musing about the sort of things she would make Gwen do, very aware of the throbbing between her legs. Knowing that she wasn’t going to get much work done, she visited several blogs dedicated to predicting the outcome of the college football season. Before she closed her computer down for the day, she was confident enough to e-mail Gwen that she would take the bet.

Almost instantly, Gwen e-mailed back an official wager statement listing the terms. It was formally written and had a place for each signature at the bottom and a place for a witness signature. Sue swallowed, uncomfortable about bringing anyone else into their game, and even more uncomfortable as she read the terms of the wager:

**Following the games of November 17, either Sue Beard or Gwen Falk will become the property of the other for the Thanksgiving weekend. Ownership will commence at noon on Thursday, November 22nd and end at midnight on Sunday, November 25th (unless the loser willingly agrees to continue in servitude). Limits will be anything short of permanent marks, long-term injury or death.**

**Ownership will be conferred on the person whose football team (LSU or Cal-Berkeley) has a better win-loss record for all games leading up to 11/17.**

**If the teams are tied by win-loss record, the winner will be determined by goal differential. That is to say by adding all the points scored by the team subtracted by all the points scored against the team.**

Sue glanced at the LSU logo on her wall as she printed out the form. With a silent prayer, she signed it with a flourish. Inserting it into an interoffice envelope before she could change her mind. She put in Gwen’s inbox on the way out of the building for the night.

THE NEXT FEW weeks flew by. Sue was more than a little worried by the fact that Gwen’s team continued to find success on the gridiron. Cal was steamrolling the opposition and posting great numbers on the board. They were a shoo-in for a good bowl game and their BCS ranking just kept getting closer to LSU’s.

Football aside, the proprietary air that Gwen had assumed was also making her very nervous. Take that morning for instance. Sue had gotten her hair styled after work the day before. When she came into work, Gwen stopped by her office.

“Nice cut.” “Thank you.” Sue tousled her short cap of dark curls. “Glad you like it.”

“You know, soon you’ll need to be asking my permission first.”

Sue’s head snapped up. “Excuse me?”

“When you’re mine, you won’t be making any more decisions. I’ll be the one telling you when and how you cut your hair.”

Sue stared at Gwen with her mouth open. "What? You...uh...I," she sputtered. Gathering her wits together, she said, "You're pretty confident for someone whose team is doing the same as mine."

"Sure, they're currently very close on win-loss record. But you forget those 42-3 and 27-7 games that Berkeley had in the first weeks of the season and the great games they've played lately. Do the math, babe." Gwen winked at her and walked away.

Sitting at her desk, Sue feverishly compared the records of both teams. Appalled by her findings, she leaned back in her chair, her mind spinning.

It was all there in black and white. LSU was just barely ahead on wins but, because of all the games that had been decided in the last minutes for Louisiana, the goal differential was very much in Berkeley's favor. There were only two weeks left and Sue desperately needed her team to win or have high scoring games if she had any hope of winning the wager.

"Give me growls, Mike," she muttered, thinking about how tradition says that LSU will score a touchdown for every roar of the mascot before the game.

ON MONDAY, NOVEMBER 19th, Gwen strolled into Sue's office and sat down in the guest chair. She grinned at the look of trepidation on Sue's face.

"What do you want?"

"Well, we can start with a little better attitude."

Sue swallowed and mumbled, "Sorry."

"And I'd like to see what I've gotten."

Sue shot a glance toward the open door. "Here? Now? The pay up date isn't until Thursday."

"True but I never was very patient. You wouldn't want me to have to go and get our witness in here to see that you're welching."

"I'm not. I just—"

"I don't care what you're just. I want to see what I own. Stand up."

Reluctantly, Sue stood up behind her desk.

"Come over here."

Sue walked over and took a position to Gwen's side. She tried to stand without fidgeting but it was very hard to stay still under the scrutiny she was receiving. Gwen leaned back in her chair. "Spread your legs wider. They should be more than shoulder width apart." Sue shuffled her feet in opposite directions until Gwen nodded.

"Good girl."

Gwen stared at Sue for a long moment. Unable to take the scrutiny, Sue dropped her gaze to the carpet. As if that was a signal, Gwen immediately stood and walked to the door. "To help you get into the proper mind frame, I don't want you to wear any underwear from now until Sunday. Take off your current set and put them into an envelope in my mailbox downstairs."

"You can't tell me what to do until Thursday."

"If I leave your office and you aren't on the way to the ladies room to follow my instructions, I'll be heading directly to Betsy's office. She was pretty curious about what I had her sign all those weeks ago. I'm sure she'll be fascinated to read all about our deal."

Sue sighed. She followed Gwen out and they turned in opposite directions. Gwen headed upstairs to meet with the Deputy Director and Sue was off to the bathroom to take off her underwear.

She felt self-conscious as she returned to her office. She kept her head down and tried to ignore the feel of her shirt rubbing across her nipples. She reached her office and quickly closed the door behind her.

Sue looked around before she picked up an interoffice envelope and pulled the bunched up fabric from her pocket and slid them inside. She was distressed by how bulky the package looked. She tried to press it flat and knew that anyone seeing it would know it wasn't work related. There was a chance that a nosy co-worker would undo the string and look inside.

She removed the bra and panties and refolded them before trying again to fit them inside. The envelope didn't look quite so ready to burst and she quickly carried it to the downstairs mailroom. There were several people in the room so she couldn't hesitate in putting it into Gwen's slot.

Sue raced back to her office and tried to busy herself with her document review. She was so distracted that she clock-watched most of the afternoon. She only barely made her afternoon deadline and then decided to leave work early.

The next morning, Sue slunk into the building. She felt so exposed at having no underwear on that at ten o'clock, she raided the gym file cabinet for a pair of panties. She didn't have another bra in the bag, so she stayed in her office, working on her projects until lunchtime. Sue regretted not bringing a sandwich into work. She gathered her nerve and left the building for the short walk to a café. She kept her gaze on the sidewalk for much of the walk, sure that everyone passing by could see her nipples.

She ate a turkey sandwich that tasted like dust, then returned to her office. She sat down in her chair and punched in the number for voice mail. There was a single, short message from Gwen. Swallowing, Sue obeyed the order to come into her rival's office.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Close the door," Gwen responded without looking up from the file she was reading.

Sue shut the door and approached the desk. She dropped down in the chair.

"Get up. Did I give you permission to sit?"

"Um, no."

"No what?"

Sue stood before the desk and fidgeted. "Um."

"The proper address to your owner is Mistress. You are to use that anytime we're in private." Gwen paused. "Do you understand?"

Sue gritted her teeth. "Yes, Mistress."

"Good." Gwen pushed the file on her desk to the side. "I wonder if you're obeying my order to wear nothing beneath your clothes. Show me."

"Here? Now?"

"Address me properly."

"Mistress, we're at work."

"I am well aware of where we are. What you don't seem to be aware of is that I've given you an order. You're to obey without question."

"Mistress, please."

"Don't make me repeat myself. Nothing pisses me off more."

"I'm sorry, Mistress."

"Yes and soon you'll be even sorrier. I thought I told you to show me."

Sue undid the buttons of her blouse with shaking fingers, and opened it up.

"I've had mosquito bites that were bigger than your tits." Gwen laughed, cruelly.



Sue blushed furiously and pulled her shirt closed.

“Did I tell you to cover yourself?” Gwen asked. “Don’t you know you shouldn’t do anything without permission? Now, show me the rest.”

Sue unbuckled her belt and let her slacks slide to the floor. She kept her eyes on a spot on the carpet in front of her feet.

“What have we here? You disappoint me. Now, take them off.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Sue wiggled free of her panties.

“You know this process would be so much easier if you wore skirts.”

“I don’t wear dresses.”

Gwen raised an eyebrow at her. “You have again failed to address me properly, and what you used to do has no bearing on what you’ll be doing now.” She pushed back from her desk. “Come here.” When Sue reached down for her pants, Gwen said, “Leave them.”

Embarrassed to have to shuffle around the office with her pants and panties around her ankles, Sue clumsily obeyed. She felt even more naked for still wearing the open shirt and with her pants as a hobble.

Gwen twirled her finger. “Turn around and put your palms down flat on my desk.”

Obeying, Sue swallowed. Her bare ass was facing her new Mistress and she knew just how vulnerable a position that was.

“You will be punished now for not immediately obeying my order to come here, for failing to address me with the proper respect, for questioning my orders, and because I told you not to wear underwear.”

Gwen took a plastic ruler out of the desk and tapped the flat of it between Sue’s legs. She held the glistening ruler before Sue’s face. “God, you’re just dripping. Your body is completely responding to this. I don’t know how you ever thought you were cut out to be a Top.”

“I’m not—”

SMACK

“I didn’t give you permission to speak. I couldn’t care less what pathetic excuse you have.” She pushed her chair back. “I’m going to spank you now. You are to count, thank me properly, and ask for another. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mistress.” Sue ground her teeth. She was going to show Gwen. She would take the worst Gwen could dish out without a problem.

SMACK.

The ruler landed solidly and Sue had to fight the urge to pull her hands off the table and protect herself. “One. Thank you, Mistress, for disciplining me. May I have another?”

“Good,” Gwen said before proceeding to lay into her longtime adversary’s ass.

“Fifty. Thank you, Mistress. May...may I please have...have another.” Sue had to force the words out of her mouth. Tears were dripping freely down her cheeks and she’d cracked at least one nail in trying to keep her hands on the desk. She wanted to beg for mercy but was afraid if she said anything but what Gwen had told her to say that the punishment would be prolonged.

“Well done. I’m proud that you took your spanking well, Sue.” Gwen sat down behind her.

Sue bit her lip trying not to twitch as the seconds passed in silence.

Finally, Gwen said, “Go back in front of my desk.”

Sue rubbed her ass as she shuffled into position.

“Get your hands off my ass. Put them behind your neck.” Gwen laughed as she watched Sue dancing in place. “Cute moves. I think I’m going to have you dance for me often.”

Her ass on fire, Sue could not believe how wet she was. As she moved, her upper thighs were slick with her juices. Her painfully erect nipples were rubbing against the opened shirt and causing her arousal level to rise even further.

“It’s time to get back to work.” Gwen smirked, as Sue waited for orders before moving. “Good. You may now get dressed, without your underwear, of course and get back to work.” As a redressed Sue opened the door, Gwen raised her voice and said, “I’m sure I don’t have to remind you that you can only climax after I give you permission, right?”

Sue turned watery eyes toward her. “No, Mistress.”

“Excellent. We only have one more day until you’re mine, completely. I am so looking forward to it.” She twirled Sue’s damp panties around her index finger. “And if the reaction of your body is any indication, you are, too.”

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By day, Mary Griggs is a non-profit management consultant and a political activist. By night, she writes. Whenever she can, she takes advantage of all the amenities New Orleans has to offer, especially the food! She is the author of four novels (*Unbroken Circle*, *Crash Stop*, *In the Midst of Tribulation* and *Bitter Heart*) published by Bella Books. Her website is <http://www.marygriggs.com>

# Beer and Balls

by Nann Dunne

BLAZER SHORTSTOP MEGAN Murphy finished her warm-up stretches and walked toward the visiting team's bench. All the adult softball teams in the area, including the men's teams, played within this four-field complex; the schedule posted in the newly painted admin shack told them which field to use and whether they were home team or visitors.

Third baseman Rita Verona fell in beside Meg. The unusually warm May sun beat down on the field and baked everything not covered by grass or shelter. Meg sniffed the air. Softball fields generated a distinctive scent of dirt, leather, and people. And the clunk of bats hitting balls, the whap of balls hitting gloves, and the ding of fouls hitting the cyclone fencing of the backstop played a familiar background tune. She felt at home here.

Hot and already generating some sweat, she ran her fingers through her curly, shoulder-length, red hair and gazed with hazel eyes toward the bleacher seats that stood along the third baseline. She didn't know many people in town yet, and she didn't recognize anyone. Suddenly she sucked in a breath as she locked eyes with a woman who was about to sit in the fourth row. An electric current surged through her, and her whole body tingled. When she recovered enough to smile at her, the woman's lips twitched but she sat down and looked away. Meg kept staring until a poke in the ribs broke her concentration.

"Give it up, kid. She's a loner," Rita Verona said. Of average height and stocky, Rita wielded a strong bat and earned a rep as one of the best third basemen in the Southeast Women's Softball League. A short burst of wind loosened a few strands of dark brown hair from her ponytail and blew them about her face.

"Tall, dark, and good-looking, and she's a loner? I never noticed her before."

"That's because you're new here."

Meg had moved into the area three weeks before to start a job, and as soon as she was settled, she hunted for a team. The Blazers picked her up to replace a departing shortstop, and Rita, a veteran player, befriended her almost at once. Meg enjoyed her company, and her friendship had made Meg's acceptance by the team much quicker.

"Do you know her well?"

They stopped near the bench and sat together on the end of it. Candy boxes, chewing gum wrappers, and mangled paper cups already littered the ground in front of the bench. Throwing trash into the omnipresent cans seemed to be an alien concept to most of the teams Meg had ever played on. At the end of the game, a couple of players would be designated to pick up the junk. Meg lived just across the street and didn't have to travel to the games, so she usually volunteered for clean-up duty.

"Yeah, I know her," Rita said. "Her name's Jess Spurling. Up until two years ago, she pitched and played first base for us. Outstanding. Then she and her partner, Lou, had a nasty car accident. They got sideswiped by a tractor-trailer. Jess's partner was killed, and Jess was badly injured."

Meg's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh my God. How awful." Meg couldn't imagine how terrible it must be to lose a partner. She'd never had a long-term committed relationship.

"Yeah," Rita said. "Along with other broken bones, Jess suffered a fractured right shoulder and collarbone that ended her pitching career."

"Does she still play ball?"

Rita tucked the loose hair back into her ponytail. "Nope. A couple teams offered her a pinch-hitting position, but she turned them down, which is a shame. She was a good power hitter. I see her at most of our games. I've heard she comes to watch a lot of other games, too."

Meg set her glove beside her on the bench. The coaches were meeting with the umpire, and the game would be starting soon. Meg batted second in the lineup. She got up and chose a bat from the rack. After taking a few swings, she sat back down and drew circles in the dirt with it. "Always alone?"

"As far as I know, and she never mingles with anyone. Doesn't come to any after-game parties or anything. Losing her partner hit her hard. It's kind of sad to see her by herself all the time."

"Did her partner play ball?"

"Yeah." Rita gave her a wry grin. "Lou was our shortstop."

Meg scrunched up her face. "Bummer. Still, I'd like to get to know her better. Could you introduce us?"

"I don't think so, Meg. Sorry. But it's pretty obvious that she wants to be alone, and I have to respect that choice." Rita slapped her glove against Meg's thigh. "Looks like we're ready to play. Better get your head in the game."

Meg gave Rita a soft punch in the arm. "Don't worry, I will." But she reserved a small part of her mind to daydream about meeting Jess Spurling.

During the game, Meg often had the feeling that someone was staring at her. Each time she took a glance at the third base stands, however, Jess's gaze was locked on the pitcher. But hadn't Jess's head moved quickly away from her direction a couple of times? Meg wondered whether Jess experienced the same tingle she did.

JESS PEDALED URGENTLY toward home, almost as though someone were chasing her. She stopped the bike at the bottom of the ten steps leading up to her porch. Instead of carrying the bike up the steps as she usually did, she grabbed the handlebars and pushed the bike up with the wheels bumping against each step. But the added exertion didn't achieve the release of the sizzling energy that bubbled through her.

All during the game, her heart beat faster than usual. And that annoyed her. She went to the games to relax, to bask in some of the best memories of her life, before that life was shattered. But today, when her eyes locked with the Blazers' new shortstop, her body had a startling reaction and that relaxation had skittered away. Who the hell was that woman? What the hell happened?

Jess unlocked the door, carried the bike into the hallway, and parked it there. She continued down the hallway into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of Yuengling Light Lager from the fridge. Twisting the top off as she walked into the living room, she tossed the cap into the wastebasket and plopped onto the couch. She chugged a long drink from the bottle and set it on

the coffee table. Leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, she grasped her head in her hands.

Jess was more rattled than she cared to admit. Even with Lou, she'd never experienced that reaction, that connection, so soon. Could she ignore it? Should she ignore it? She got up, walked to the mantle, and picked up the picture of Lou that held a place of honor there. Jess ran her fingers over the features of her beloved partner. Her deceased partner. Her heart froze every time that thought passed through her mind. Granted, the pain had lessened with time, but it still occasionally squeezed her soul.

What would Lou say about Jess's reaction to the shortstop? Jess knew very well what Lou would say. She could hear Lou's exuberant voice: *Go for it, girl! Get your butt back into life, and stop feeling sorry for yourself.* Jess kept telling herself that same thing, but it wasn't all that easy. Her life with Lou had been just about perfect. Could she ever find that again? You'll never know unless you try. Jess jumped. That thought seemed to come straight from Lou's mouth.

Jess set the picture back on the mantle and sighed. Was she ready to try? Was she ready to let go of Lou? She didn't think so. She ran her hands through her short, black hair. But something happened when she and the shortstop—what was her name, Murphy?—had looked at each other. Maybe she should stay away from the Blazers' games for a while. She dropped back onto the couch. No, dammit! She wouldn't let this, this "connection" thing, keep her from going to the one place she could reminisce about her life with Lou without dissolving into tears. She would just stay away from Murphy.

THE NEXT DAY, Meg pulled into the parking lot of the company she worked for. The web design job she'd found online at Mercury Website Contractors had necessitated her move to the Greater Philadelphia area three weeks earlier. So far, she found the work challenging and intriguing. She had joined a team with two other employees: Joyce Lundquist, who wrote the content for the websites that Meg designed, and Jose Rocha, who maintained and posted information to the sites. Both were about the same age as Meg, and they all got along so well Meg felt like she'd known them for years.

Their workroom held a large worktable as well as desks, computers, and tablets for all three. When a new job needed to be set up, they sat at the worktable and planned it together. Meg pushed her tablet aside and was drawing a site layout on a pad. When she had to redo a section of the website four times, Joyce gave her a faux grumpy look. "Did you have an argument with your boyfriend last night, or something?"

Jose huffed a small laugh, and both women turned toward him. "What's that for?" Joyce asked.

He turned bright red. "Nothing. Sorry." He glanced at Meg and said again, "Sorry."

Meg wrinkled her nose at him. "I think he means it would be a girlfriend, not a boyfriend."

Joyce seemed confused for a moment, and then her face cleared. "You're gay?"

"I am. Is that a problem for you?"

"Not a bit." Joyce chuckled. "At least I know it's safe to let my boyfriend be around you."

"How about around Jose?" Meg said.

Joyce looked startled as she turned toward Jose. "Are you gay, too?"

"No!" he said. "Meg's just teasing me."

Joyce tilted her head and looked skeptical. "How did you know she's gay?"

Jose gave a big grin. “Because she paid no attention to my great looks, superb physique, and magnetic charm.”

Meg reached over and smacked his arm.

“Plus...” He rubbed his arm unconsciously. “Her eyes light up brighter than mine when a good-looking woman comes through the door.”

“Really?” Joyce sounded amused. “I didn’t notice that.”

“Guilty as charged,” Meg said. “I’m single and still searching. But listen, since we cleared the air on my gender preference, I have a question I’d like to ask. For both of you. But let’s wait until break time.” She pulled the top sheet off the drawing pad, balled it up, and tossed it into a wastebasket. “Meanwhile, let’s try to come up with something we can work with.”

BY THE TIME their break rolled around, they’d gotten a good start on planning the new site. Joyce got up first, and Meg and Jose followed her. In the break room, they each bought a snack and a drink from the machines and sat at a corner table.

“Okay,” Joyce said, “what’s this mysterious question you want to ask us?” She spread out a napkin, opened her small bag of Fritos, and dumped it onto the napkin. She always did that. Meg looked at Jose and lifted an eyebrow in question. Jose smirked and shrugged. He and Meg tore open their bags of Cheetos and ate right from the bag.

Meg waved a hand toward Joyce’s spot on the table. “Why do you do that? With the napkin, I mean.”

Joyce glanced down at the napkin and chose another Frito. “I like to see what I’m eating. I don’t want any surprises.”

Huh, Meg thought. She guessed her question might be wasted on someone as cautious as Joyce. But she’d give it a try anyway. “I wanted to ask you, both of you, if you believe in love at first sight.” Both stopped eating and stared at her.

Jose waved a Cheeto in the air. “I used to think it could happen, but every time I fell for a girl, about ten minutes after I met her, I changed my mind.” He gave a sexy grin. “But I chased after her anyway.”

Meg grimaced. “I’m serious. How about you, Joyce?”

Joyce furrowed her brow and seemed to give the question a lot of thought. “I don’t know. I doubt that would ever have happened to me. I was really attracted to Gary, but we went together for several months before I realized I was in love with him. I don’t think I’d want to make a commitment on just one look.”

“So,” Jose said, “who’s the lucky gal?”

Meg felt herself blush. “I saw her at my softball game. Our eyes locked together, and I got this really weird feeling, a kind of tingling, a connection. Like she was the one for me, you know?”

Joyce shook her head no. “Like I said, that didn’t happen to me. I can’t be much help to you. Sorry.”

“I was being serious,” Jose said, “when I answered you before. How did you feel after you met her?”

“I, uh, haven’t met her.”

“What?” Jose sounded incredulous, and even Joyce seemed surprised. “How could you not meet her?” he said. “Girl, do you need some pointers on picking someone up? You want me to talk to her?”

Meg laughed. “Thanks, but no thanks, I can pick up my own women. She left before the game was over, but I did find out her name. I’ll figure out a way to meet her.”

Break time ended, and they cleared their trash from the table. Joyce patted Meg’s shoulder as they walked back to their workroom. “Let us know how it turns out, okay? I’ll send some good vibes with you.”

“Me, too,” Jose said. “And remember,” he added with a wide grin, “I’m here if you need any advice.”

“Thanks, both of you.” Talking about love at first sight with her friends hadn’t provided any hard and fast information, but nonetheless, it fortified Meg’s confidence in the possibility. Now all she had to do was come up with a way to meet the enigmatic Jess Spurling. The idea excited her.

TWO DAYS LATER, as a spectator at a game between the Gamers and the Pickers, Meg searched the third base bleachers. Ahhh, yes, Meg’s heart fluttered as she spied Jess Spurling. Jess’s attention was fastened on the far side of the field, and she held a hand above her eyes and shaded them from the late-afternoon sun. Meg wondered why she didn’t wear sunglasses on such a bright day, but she was happy that those gorgeous eyes weren’t covered.

Balancing a cup of beer in one hand and a bunch of napkins in the other, Meg climbed to the fourth row and clambered over a couple of people to reach Jess. Just as Jess looked in her direction, Meg tripped. Jess grabbed her by the waist. The beer sloshed out of the cup and headed right toward Jess. She flinched, but her hands were occupied. The beer caught her right in the face and spewed onto her short black hair and down the front of her T-shirt.

“What the... What the hell’s going on?” Jess blinked as she steadied Meg’s body and let go of her. She stood up and their eyes met, and for a moment, they just stared at each other. Meg could have sworn Jess blushed. Then again, she might have just been angry. Now that Meg stood next to her, she saw that Jess was taller than she had realized and she had to look up at her.

“Oh my God, I’m really sorry,” Meg managed to say with a wail in her voice. She dropped the paper cup and it bounced between the seats and fell to the ground beneath the bleachers. Grasping some napkins in each hand, she made an attempt to wipe Jess’s face and chest.

Jess seized one of her wrists, took the napkins from that hand, and dabbed at her own chest. Meg made a quick swipe at Jess’s hair, and when Jess jerked away from the contact, Meg stopped her ministrations and surrendered all the napkins to her. “I’m really sorry,” she said again. She rubbed her wrist and waved her empty hands. “How could I be so clumsy?”

“It’s okay,” Jess muttered. She sat down and concentrated on her chest as she continued to sop up the liquid on her shirt.

“I’m Megan Murphy,” Meg said. “I play shortstop for the Blazers.”

“I know who you are.” Jess didn’t look up. “I’m Jess Spurling.”

“I know who you are, too. I asked Rita Verona.” Megan held her breath for a couple of seconds. Would Jess turn away from her?

She didn’t.

“I was coming over to introduce myself before this fiasco happened.” Meg reluctantly tore her gaze away from Jess’s chest. She imagined that her hands had replaced the napkins. When Jess finally looked up, and Meg adjusted to having those intense blue eyes turned on her, she gestured away from the field. “I live right across the street. Come on over, and you can get washed off.”

“I’ll dry off in the sun.”

“I can’t let you do that. You’ll reek of beer and be sticky, too.”

Jess looked hesitant, but she hadn’t said no.

“Come on. I’ll toss your clothes into the washer and dryer and have you back here in time to see the end of this game. I promise. I’ll even give you a beer to drink instead of wear.”

Jess gave a small grin. Meg’s breath caught again as she waited for Jess’s next words. She was in danger of passing out as Jess made her wait until she wrung the beer out of the napkins.

“That does make sense. I don’t care for the aroma of stale beer. On anybody.”

Meg breathed again. “Is that a yes? Let’s go then.”

Jess stood, and Meg had to force herself not to take hold of her hand.

“Follow me,” she said and blessed the powers that be when Jess followed her. She noticed with approval that Jess tossed the soiled napkins into a trash bin they passed on the way out. She felt a touch of guilt for dropping the paper cup between the bleacher planks.

“WAIT A MINUTE. I better take my bike, just in case.” Jess went back, picked up her bike from where it leaned next to the bleachers, and walked across the street with Meg. Meg had the ground-floor apartment, and they entered it. “You can put your bike right next to mine.” Meg pointed to the spot.

Jess stowed her bike inside Meg’s door, alongside the other bike. She followed Meg farther into her apartment and to the bathroom. Meg said, “There’s a robe hanging on the back of the door. Take off your top, and your bra if it’s wet, and I’ll throw them in the washer.” She looked up at Jess and smiled. “Meanwhile, I’ll grab us those beers.”

“Sounds good to me.” Jess had trouble tearing her gaze away from Meg. When the shorter woman smiled, her nose wrinkled up and her eyes shone. The dusting of freckles across her cheeks was cute. She was cute. And very friendly. Something inside of Jess felt like it was melting. It scared her. She hurried into the bathroom and shut the door.

After removing her wet clothing and laying them on top of the commode, she washed off her face and chest and rinsed out her hair. She gave her short hair a quick toweling and finger-combed the chaotic mop into submission. She fished the pale-green cotton robe from the back of the door. Holding it up, she saw it wasn’t long enough for someone of her height, but that didn’t matter. When she inserted an arm into the sleeve, however, it became obvious that the robe wasn’t wide enough for her either. She put her other arm in, pulled the robe as closed as it could get, and tied the belt. She looked in the mirror over the sink. The robe didn’t meet in the front and barely covered her nipples. She sighed. It would have to do. She kind of wished Meg was the one wearing it, with the cloth barely covering her nipples. Something flip-flopped in her lower abdomen, and the heat of a blush flooded her face. Where did that come from? She hadn’t reacted that way to another woman for a long time. Too long. She recalled her first eye contact with Meg and wondered whether Meg felt the same way she was beginning to. Flustered, she grabbed her wet shirt and bra and hurried from the bathroom.



MEG MET JESS as she emerged into the living room and handed Meg the damp clothes. Meg tossed them into the stackable washer-dryer, added detergent, and set the wash cycle for a small load. She returned to the living room with two unopened bottles of beer and stared at Jess who had remained standing. Meg's heart began thudding against her chest.

"Oh my God," she said under her breath. She set the beers on the coffee table without looking at it and walked up to Jess. Her eyes felt glued to those round, full breasts as images caromed through her mind. She could see the color of the areolas, the shape of the nipples, her hand squeezing a breast... It was too tempting. She put her hands on the sides of Jess's chest and stepped closer. The smooth skin of Jess's left breast was right in front of Meg's lips, and she kissed it. A hand grabbed the back of Meg's neck and fingers splayed up into her hair. She froze. Was Jess going to pull her away? Instead, the hand eased her head back, and Jess's lips descended to hers.

The kiss started out soft and gentle. Meg's hands slid down to Jess's waist, and she undid the belt. She pushed the robe away and lifted her hands to Jess's breasts. Jess moaned in her mouth as Meg's hands encircled the breasts and her thumbs rubbed against already hardened nipples. Meg broke off the kiss and moved her head down, toward Jess's breasts.

"Wait," Jess said in a low and sultry tone as she doffed the robe. She lifted the bottom of Meg's T-shirt, yanked it over her head, and dropped it to the floor. She put her fingers under the edge of Meg's bra, gently lifted it past Meg's breasts, and pulled it over her head, too. Meg stood still, breathing heavily, as Jess pushed her shorts and panties down to the floor. Meg stepped out of them and was startled when Jess picked her up as though she weighed nothing. Jess took her into the bedroom, brushed her lips with her own, and sat her on the bed. She bent down and removed Meg's sneakers and socks, and immediately took off her own shorts, panties, socks, and sneakers.

Meg thought her eyes would burst when she saw Jess's completely naked body. "You're gorgeous," she whispered. She scooted farther onto the bed, lay back on it, and opened her arms.

"So are you," Jess said. Her low voice turned Meg on even more, if that was possible. Jess climbed onto the bed, settled into Meg's embrace, and rolled on top of her. "Am I too heavy?" she murmured through a kiss.

"No, no, you're fine. But I can't reach your breasts very well." But oh, could she feel them pressed to hers. She wriggled against them.

"You will in a minute." Jess resumed the kiss. She kissed and licked Meg's lips until they opened and allowed her entry. The kiss deepened as both women explored and tasted the other's tongue and mouth, and their hands roved over each other's body.

After the kiss ended, Jess sat up on her knees. She straddled Meg's waist, and Meg could feel the heat and wetness that echoed the heat and wetness generated by her own body. Jess clasped Meg's breasts in her hands, leaned forward, and took her left nipple into her mouth. She flat-tongued the erect nipple until it softened, and then changed to quick flicks to nudge it back into erection. She rubbed and pulled and teased Meg's other nipple until she shifted her attention from the left breast to the right one.

Meg was delirious with joy. Jess wanted her, too! She squeezed Jess's breasts, and her thumbs softened and hardened Jess's nipples in concert with Jess's stimulation of hers. Jess's

breasts felt just as she'd imagined. Firm, soft, heavy. Speaking of heavy, the heaviness between Meg's legs cried for release. "I need you," she said in a pleading tone. "Now."

Jess lifted her head and looked at Meg with slightly out-of-focus eyes. She smiled like the Mona Lisa and stretched out over top of Meg again. She kissed Meg's eyes and cheeks and neck as her hand roved along Meg's breasts and stomach, down to her inner thigh and up to her wet curls. Meg thrust her legs apart, and Jess captured Meg's thigh between hers. She cupped Meg's wetness and explored her slick folds with her fingers.

Meg wrapped her arms around Jess's shoulders as a spasm rocked her lower body against Jess's hand. "More. More!"

Jess briefly touched Meg's clit and moved that finger slowly down the length of the opening of her vagina then back to the clit. She repeated the action and said in a slow, seductive voice, "How many fingers do you want?" As she asked the question, she bucked against Meg's thigh and painted her wetness there.

"Oh my God." Meg moaned with desire. Jess rolled partly sideways, and Meg grabbed for Jess's breasts. She kneaded them and pinched her nipples. "Two, three, ten, I don't care. Just do me!"

As her words ended, Jess slipped her finger deep into Meg. She immediately drew it out and slipped one more finger in. Again, she drew her hand out, slipped more fingers in, and pumped them. Meg wrapped her arms around Jess once more and pressed her lips against Jess's neck. In unison with the thrusts, Jess bucked against Meg's leg. Meg's muscles tightened against Jess's fingers and caused excruciatingly delicious friction. They both came almost at once. Screaming.

JESS CURLED HER fingers and pressed Meg's sweet spot again and again, enticing even more spasms of pleasure. She bucked her own body against Meg's leg until Meg's orgasm, as well as her own, had run its course. Tears gathered under her eyelids and one slithered down her cheek. She had half-expected to feel guilty after her first love-making since Lou's passing. But all she felt—beyond the wonderful release of pure sex—was gratitude. Meg wasn't any fly-by-night sex partner; Jess felt an honest connection with her. Time would tell whether this would be a permanent liaison. For the moment, she would just enjoy the ride.

MEG TOOK A deep breath. She lay flat on her back, pleasantly satisfied. She glanced at Jess and turned on her side to face her. "Are you okay?" She wiped the tear from Jess's cheek.

"I'm fine. It's just been a long time, and I wasn't sure I was ready for this. Turns out, I am." Jess gazed at her silently for a minute, then she said, "You're really attractive."

Meg blushed. "Thank you. So are you." She picked up Jess's hand and slowly rubbed her forearm. "I was attracted to you the first day our eyes met."

Jess chuckled. "So was I." Then she sounded a bit tentative. "I have a question."

"Ask me anything. If I don't want to answer, I'll tell you that."

"Was that beer splashing an accident?" Jess lifted one eyebrow.

"Um, no." Meg's blush deepened, and her words tumbled out. "I wanted to meet you, and Rita wouldn't introduce me. She said you were a loner, and if you wanted to meet me, you would

take care of it. But I wasn't sure that would ever happen, and I wanted to meet you, and I was afraid—”

Jess started laughing and put her hand over Meg's mouth. “Okay, okay, I get the message.” Her eyes twinkled as she said, “I'm glad. I couldn't seem to get my life back in gear. I hope this is a new beginning for me.”

“For us,” Meg said in a quiet voice.

“For us.” Jess moved toward her and gave Meg a sweet, undemanding kiss. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” Meg took a deep breath and sat up. “Stay here and rest. I need to put your T-shirt and bra in the dryer.” She got out of bed and turned back to give Jess a second kiss. This one wasn't so undemanding. “Hmmm,” Meg said, “we have to figure out something to do while the dryer's running.”

Jess gave a low, throaty chuckle. “I'll bet we can think of something.”

“Oh, yeah.” Meg had a spring in her step as she crossed the room, naked and loving it. She could sense Jess's gaze following her. When she returned, she saw that Jess watched her every move. She found that heated gaze exciting and arousing. She said in a hoarse whisper, “I suppose we missed the end of the game.”

Jess grabbed her hand, pulled her back onto the bed, and wrapped long arms around her. “It's more fun playing this one than watching that one,” she said. Their lips joined in another kiss.

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A professional editor for more than thirty-five years, Nann Dunne began writing fiction nineteen years ago and has five novels and a collection of short stories published. As of June 2015, she got her rights back for three novels and republished them under her own imprint, Golden Keys Publishing, while continuing to write.

Her website is <http://www.goldenkeyspublishing.com>.

Nann's nonfiction book, *Dunne With Editing: A Last Look At Your Manuscript* (a must-have book for all authors), is available at [www.nanndunnebooks.com](http://www.nanndunnebooks.com) and at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).

# All's Fair In Love and Rollerderby

by Kate McLachlan

THE WHISTLE BLEW, and forty polyurethane wheels slammed onto the Masonite floor. Thuds and cracks and cheers echoed off the warehouse walls and shot adrenaline into me. I let out a primal scream and threw myself into the pack, making myself as big as I could, but keeping all my senses on the jammers behind us. I'm a big girl. They like to keep me in the back because I'm hard to push aside. The trick was to let our jammer, Amelia Tearapart, through the pack while keeping the opposing team's jammer, Lil Lulu Slugger, behind us. I locked arms with my fellow blockers and felt both jammers pummel my back with their forearms.

Amelia Tearapart elbowed my right side, signaling her move. I pushed left against the Roller Doobie Girl blockers, and Amelia, wearing a lime green tank, black shorts, and rainbow striped socks, circled around to the right. She was the smallest girl on our team, the Spoke City Spinners, but she was as tough as they came and could practically pirouette on her skates. One of the Roller Doobie Girl blockers slammed a hip into me trying to get at Amelia, but her hit barely nudged me. It takes more than one little Doobie Girl to knock me off my game. I hugged my arms to my side, hunched my shoulders, and crashed against the Doobie Girl blocker. She stumbled, hit another of her own blockers, and they both fell over like dominoes. Amelia Tearapart leaped over their splayed bodies, ducked away from the other Doobie blockers, and cruised right through the pack to take lead jammer. That was good, but I was so busy making a path for Amelia that Lil Lulu Slugger slipped right past me and took off right behind Amelia. Damn.

Roller Derby's tricky because you have to play offense and defense at the same time. I had to keep their blockers from stopping Amelia, and I also had to try to stop their jammer, Lil Lulu Slugger, from getting through. The Doobie blockers were doing the same thing, so while I was trying to shove them out of Amelia's way, they were trying to get at her and push me away from Lil Lulu too. It was a tough job, but fortunately I didn't have to do it all by myself. There are four blockers on each team, and ours outweigh theirs by eighty pounds at least, if you put us all together.

With both jammers now rounding the track, we blockers regrouped and readied ourselves for the next pass. Amelia had the lead, but Lil Lulu was right behind her. In roller derby, the jammers are the only members of the team who skate fast. It's not a race, exactly, it's about making points. If Amelia could get past some of the Doobie blockers on her next pass, we'd get a point for each one. Of course, if Lil Lulu was able to pass our blockers, she'd get points too. Since Amelia was the lead jammer, she could call off the jam if it looked like Lil Lulu was about to score too many points, but it would be better if we could keep Lil Lulu out of the pack altogether. That way she wouldn't score any.

They were on us. The Doobie Girls made a wall and blocked Amelia. We tackled the center of their line and it gave, but not enough. Amelia tried to skirt around the end of their wall, but her skates slipped out of bounds. She was forced to back up and try again.

A bright flash flew past me on the inside of the track. Somehow Lil Lulu Slugger had slipped through a sliver of track no wider than six inches, and she was already out of my reach, her peach clad tush twitching at me with every stroke of her skates. There were a lot of hot asses on that floor, all showing off in tight shorts and skimpy skirts, but Lil Lulu's ass was in a class all its own. She wore a skirt so short it was really just a belt and panties so tight they showed the crease down the middle of her butt all the way into never never land. Just like a real peach, and man oh man did I want to take a bite of it. I was so distracted by that juicy girl it took me two full seconds to remember that I was supposed to stop her.

Shit!

Lil Lulu just scored a point on me. Even worse, because I didn't block her, she was able to score points on all the other Spoke City blockers too. Amelia slapped her hands on her hips and called off the jam, but it was too late. The Roller Doobie girls were ahead, five to nothing.

I had to pull myself together. I couldn't let the Spoke City Spinners get beat just because I was excited about a little peach pussy.

The two jammers rotated out. Jammers usually just skate every other jam. The blockers stay in longer and only rotate out when we need a break. Our first and second jammers are equally good, and Kicky Longstockings, who replaced Amelia, didn't let us down. The Doobie Girls' second jammer, Pony Boi, was young and new, and she wasn't half the challenge Lil Lulu was. We were able to keep her out of the pack for the entire jam, two full minutes, while Kicky racked up the points. By the time our first jammers came back in for the third jam, we were ahead thirteen to five.

The whistle blew for the third jam. I licked my chops at the chance to block Lil Lulu, but she must have read my mind because she zipped over to the other side of the pack where I couldn't reach her and made lead jammer before Amelia even took two steps. I took out my frustrations on the closest Doobie blocker and got whistled for an illegal block. Three minutes in and I got my first penalty. It was practically a record. I usually get a penalty in the opening thirty seconds.

I skated to the penalty box and dropped my ass onto the chair. The penalty was only for a minute, but a minute is a long time in roller derby. I leaned forward, my forearms on my thighs, and watched what I was missing.

The game looks different when you're not in it. It's a whole lot easier to see what ought to be done, for one thing. I wished I could tell our blockers what to do, but even if I could, the game changes in a split second so it wouldn't do any good. I got a better look at everyone's uniforms, too, which is half the fun of the game. The Spoke City Spinners all wear lime green tank tops, the Doobie Girls all wear peach, and everyone wears kneepads, elbow pads, and helmets. There's plenty of room for creativity outside those basics, though. I keep it simple with just my tank and black leggings. Black is slimming, they say, and I need all the help in that department I can get. Some of the other girls wore shorts, fishnet stockings, petticoats, leg warmers, and thigh high designer socks all in vibrant colors. Watching the skaters go around was like putting a giant kaleidoscope up to your eye.

And then there was Lil Lulu. I watched her circle around and head for the pack. She was as much a treat to watch from the front as she was from the back. Her tank top was snug, and she was curvalicious. Unlike the other, smaller girls, her boobs weren't all squished flat from her sports bra. She wore purple knee-highs with yellow skulls on them, and of course that itty-bitty skirt. Her thighs were bare and tempting, no fishnet stockings for her, but she wore fishnet arm warmers. That was a tease in itself, practically daring someone to trip her, since she was guaranteed to get a fishnet burn if she did.

Lil Lulu reached the pack and jimmied her way through with hardly any trouble at all, since I wasn't in there to slow her down. Amelia did her best, but she couldn't break through the Doobie Girls. Lil Lulu came around again and scored four more points before my minute was finally up and I was able to get back in the game. Lil Lulu called off the jam then, with the Doobie Girls ahead fourteen to thirteen.

It went back and forth like that for a while, with the lead changing with practically every jam. I started to figure out a pattern. When Lil Lulu was their jammer, the Doobie Girls took the lead. When she sat out, we Spinners got ahead. What I couldn't figure out was whether Lil Lulu was really that good, or whether I was just so damn distracted when she was on the floor that I wasn't worth a damn at stopping her.

Lil Lulu figured out the pattern right around the same time I did. I could tell by the way she started taking advantage of me. She smiled her gaudy orange mouth guard at me, she taunted me, she flashed her booty at me practically nonstop. I made mistakes and got frustration fouls, and she laughed every time I had to go to the penalty box.

One time the Doobie Girls had two of their blockers in the penalty box and we had all four of our blockers on the floor. Piece of cake. We linked arms and the whistle blew. Lil Lulu flung herself at us like she was playing a game of red rover with the big kids. She bounced back, and I almost laughed out loud at how easy it was. She rammed us again, and this time she reached her hand down to where she didn't belong and gave me a goose, a strong deep one. Illegal as hell, but nobody saw it. I jumped and loosened my grip on my teammate. A space opened up between us, and Lil Lulu just dived right into that little gap and was through before we knew it. I got mad, tripped one of their blockers, fell over myself and took a hit on the chin, and got another penalty to boot.

By half time we were down fifty-six to forty, and I had five penalties already. If I got seven, I'd be kicked out of the game. Coach gave us a talking to during the half-time break. I could see the Doobie Girl bench from where I sat. One of their blockers kept putting her arm around Lil Lulu's shoulder. Lil Lulu shrugged her off a couple of times and I wanted to go over there and punch that blocker in the face for pawing Lil Lulu like that. The third time the blocker did it though, Lil Lulu let the arm stay and actually looked over her shoulder at me and smiled, like she knew it was killing me to watch that. She turned back around, wriggled her butt, and snuggled up against the blocker, and I felt my blood bubble.

"Hey! Pussy Whipper, you listening?"

"I'm listening," I said. Yeah, that's right, Pussy Whipper's my name, don't wear it out. Anyway, right then I was about as pussy whipped as I could be. Lil Lulu had me feeling like I was a desperate horny teenager instead of the full-grown happily married woman that I was. If I wasn't careful, Lil Lulu was going to throw me completely off my game. As for what it did to my marriage, well, that was a whole different story.

I vowed not to let her get to me in the second half.

It started out just the way I planned. I was focused and determined. I built a shell around me, and she couldn't get through. One time I found myself alone on the right side of the track with her while all the other blockers were busy with Amelia. I locked eyes with her. She flashed her eyes at me, but I knew what she was up to. It was like I could read her mind all of the sudden. She tried to dodge around me, and I used my size to force her off the track. She had to go back and recycle in. Another time, she was the one who read my mind. She dodged like she was going to skate one way, then darted the other way around my back. I caught on in a split second, though, and grabbed hold of Amelia's arm and slung her out in front of Lil Lulu like she was a

Frisbee on wheels. A whip, they call it, and that's the real reason my name's Pussy Whipper. I'm real good at it. Next time around, I could tell Lil Lulu was just gunning for me, but I was ready. That time I didn't just push her off the track, I knocked her completely off her feet. She skidded on her belly, her skirt and skates and ass all up in the air, and she shot me a look over her shoulder that made me a promise. She was going to get me back.

I knew I was in for it, but she didn't get her chance to have at me during the game. I quickly picked up two fouls just playing my regular style, and I was out of the game. I couldn't even sit on the team bench, but had to go into the audience for the rest of the game. That was okay. Fans who like rough action patted me on the back and congratulated me, and besides, I like to watch.

In the end we lost by almost thirty points, and I knew exactly who to blame: Lil Lulu Slugger.

The final score is just the beginning of the end of a roller derby game. After the crowd leaves, the only people left to tear everything down is us derby girls, plus a few husbands, wives, boyfriends, and girlfriends. So after the crowd left and even though we were all sweaty and bruised and exhausted, our work wasn't finished yet. My job was to pack up the benches, but before I got started, I went to the back of the warehouse to visit the little girls' room. It was occupied and there was one person standing in line ahead of me. I took my place in line, but a minute later the door opened and Lil Lulu Slugger came out. The woman ahead of me went in, and it was just me and Lil Lulu standing in the hallway.

She looked me up and down like I was fresh meat and let her eyes linger for a moment on my skinned chin. I wiggled my chin back and forth a couple of times and said, "It's fine."

She had fishnet burns on both her forearms, and I knew it was from the time I knocked her down. I took her hand in mine and brushed the back of my fingers across one burn. She shivered, but I didn't think it was from pain.

Nothing gets my blood pumping like a rough roller derby game. I gave into temptation. I put my hands on her shoulders and turned her to face me. I slid my hands down her back past her nothing skirt, bent my knees so I could reach her bottom, and ran my fingers through her crease all the way to her never never land. I even slid a finger past the panty line and dipped into her peach pit, and all the while she just watched me and let me have my way with her. I slid my thigh between her legs and cupped her rear to pull her tight against me.

She sighed and wiggled, not like she was trying to get away, more like she liked it, but she said, "Not now. Not here."

"Tonight then," I gasped. It was killing me, but I could wait that long. "Tonight."

She leaned in, pressed the front of her peach tank against my lime green, ground her crotch a little, and blinked her glittery vamp eyes at me. "Sorry," she said, crushing my hopes. "Not tonight." She slid off my thigh, adjusted her panties, and turned to leave.

She stopped and looked back over her shoulder. I perked up, but she only said, "Did you forget the boys are having a sleepover tonight? And it's our turn to make treats for Marissa's soccer game tomorrow. Don't forget to stop at the store. We need eggs and milk and chocolate chips." She blew me a kiss and walked away.

The bathroom door opened and its occupant left. I really had to pee, but I stood a moment longer watching my wife walk down the hall, her twitchy peach ass teasing me like it had all night, letting me know there was only one pussy whipper in our family, and I wasn't it.

She got me back, all right. She got me back real good.

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Kate McLachlan lives in Eastern Washington with her wife, two dogs, and two cats. After teaching in the public schools for 14 years, Kate developed a case of temporary insanity and entered law school. All she really wanted to do was write stories but, despite the common misperception, legal briefs are not fiction, and Kate's creative urge was not satisfied by her day job. She writes now for the joy it brings her and for the joy she hopes it brings others.



# She Loves Me, She Loves Me Not

by Verda Foster

I THINK I can speak for shy people everywhere when I say that we're far too concerned about what other people think of us. We should be concerned about the opinions of others, but not to the extent that we're paralyzed with fear that we may be found to be woefully inadequate in some way.

I was always sure I was inadequate, always tried to blend into the background so no one would notice me and see how plain and dull I really was. To my eyes, I was a troll who should live under a bridge somewhere. If someone paid me a compliment, I would wonder why they would lie. I'd think to myself, don't they realize I have a mirror? Do they think I'm blind?

Of course this attitude didn't make getting to know people easy. I wasn't as concerned about how boys viewed me, but girls were a different matter. I cared very much what they thought of me. Even in grammar school I can remember my ten-year-old self following my current crush around and just gazing at her.

As time marched on, other girls slowly started to gravitate to the boys, sighing when a particularly cute one walked by, all a dither if he looked their way, or smiled at them.

Now as I said before, I was always shy, so it's no surprise in high school I was never in the "in crowd." I was a nerd. I spent most of my high school years never participating in school activities, never going to a dance or sporting event. Senior year proved to be quite different though. Half way through the first semester, an event happened that changed my whole world.

I'd always been a good student, for to do otherwise would draw negative attention to myself, and that would never do. I'll never forget the day my math teacher, Mr. Bishop, asked me to tutor a student who was failing, and had asked for help. Tory Daniels was her name. She was tall, beautiful, and very athletic. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I was flustered if she even glanced my way.

"I would hate to see her fail," Mr. Bishop said, leaning on the edge of his desk, and folding his arms. "Trouble is, there's only one of me and I just don't have the time."

I felt my heart start to race; he couldn't be serious. Me...tutoring Tory Daniels? I'd die of embarrassment if I tried to talk to her and stumbled over my words. "I've never tutored anyone before, Mr. Bishop," I replied, trying not to look too flustered.

"You're my best student, Lynn. I wouldn't ask if I didn't think you could do it, but I'll get someone else if you'd rather not give it a try."

"No!" came out of my mouth before I even had a chance to think, and Mr. Bishop smiled and patted me on the shoulder. "Good, girl." He reached behind him to pick up a pad of paper and a pencil and handed it to me. "Write down your phone number and address and I'll have her give you a call."

I took the pad and scribbled my information and handed it back quickly, before I could change my mind. The thought of tutoring Tory both terrified and excited me. I'd worshipped her from afar, but never dared to speak to her. And now she would be coming to my house!

WHEN TORY FINALLY called, I'd worked myself into such a nervous state I wasn't sure I'd be able to talk to her when Mom called me to the phone.

"It's for you," she said, "someone named Tory," and I froze, struck dumb with fear. What if I said something stupid? Suddenly this tutoring thing didn't seem like such a good idea. I broke out in a cold sweat and wiped my clammy hands on my pants. I sucked in a deep breath and took the phone. "Thanks, Mom. I watched her walk away then looked at the phone in my hand. I was dying to hear her voice, but I knew I'd make a fool of myself if I opened my mouth. You know the old saying: Open mouth, insert foot.

"Hello?" I squeaked, and cringed at the sound of my own voice.

"Hi, this is Tory," came the lilting response, and spots danced before my eyes. I was sure I was gonna pass out.

"Mr. Bishop gave me your number. He said you were going to help me get my grade in math up so I won't get kicked off the track team."

I stood there like an idiot, trying to get my heart out of my throat and back down into my chest where it belonged.

"Hello?" she said again, and I silently cursed myself for making her wait like that.

"I'd be happy to help you with your math," I finally managed to get out, "and any other subject you're having problems with."

"You're just the best," she said. I heard the smile in her voice and melted. "When can I come over?" she asked.

Any damn time you want, I thought, but responded, "When is a good time for you?"

"Would six to eight p.m. on Tuesday's and Thursdays work for you?"

"Sure, I'm easy." She laughed when I said that, and I hit myself in the forehead for saying something so dumb.

"Okay," she said. "I'll see you on Tuesday," and the line went dead.

TUTORING TORY WASN'T as hard as I thought it might be. It wasn't as if I had to think up anything clever to say. All I had to do was look at her assignments and explain how to do them, or look at something she'd gotten wrong and explain why. She was determined to stay on the team, and she worked hard. She took me up on my offer, and soon brought anything she was having trouble with over for me to help her

"You're so smart," she told me, and I basked in her praise.

I loved to look at her. Her long and lanky runner's body made my pink parts throb. She was a five foot nine pale blonde with big blue eyes to die for. She was the high school track and field star, and had her heart set on competing in the Olympics.

The two nights a week she came to my house were sheer heaven and I found myself dreading the day she wouldn't need my help any longer. She was such a demonstrative person. I got a hug from her after each session, and you can believe me when I tell you I was in need of a cold shower every time she left my house.

THE SEMESTER PROGRESSED, and I lived for Tuesday and Thursday nights. Soon that wasn't enough and I started going to all the track and field events that Tory competed in. She called me her biggest fan.

If she only knew.

Of course I knew Tory would never be interested in a nerd like me romantically, but she liked me, and was grateful for the help in keeping her grades up. For now, that was enough. I was content just to be near her and bask in the essence that was Tory Daniels.

One day when I was watching Tory at practice, I noticed a new girl come onto the track that I hadn't seen before. She was a couple of inches taller than Tory, but she slouched as if she was self-conscious of her height. She had legs that went on for days, and I wondered if my Tory might finally get some competition. I needn't have worried though. It looked like she would never find anyone capable of beating her until she went to the national competition to compete with world class runners. These small town high school girls were never going to do it.

After practice, I waited for Tory so we could walk to my house together because it was her night to study with me. When she came out of the locker room, that new girl followed close behind. I saw right away she was as smitten with Tory as I was. Every time she cast her gaze on Tory, the look of total and complete adoration was written all over her face. I wondered if I had that same silly look plastered on my face when I looked at Tory. Oh, the horror of being so transparent.

The next day I saw the tall girl as I came out of the school library. I couldn't help feeling jealous when I thought about the way she'd been looking at Tory the day before. After all, it was my job to lust after Tory, not hers. I couldn't believe the nerve of the girl when she smiled and walked right up to me.

"Hi, I'm Amy," she said, extending her hand to me. I didn't cotton to consorting with the enemy, but she seemed so friendly that I had to like her in spite of myself.

"I'm, Lynn," I said, and took her hand. "I saw you at practice yesterday." She flashed that lovely smile of hers again, and for the first time I really looked at her and noticed that she was really quite pretty. Like Tory, she was also a blonde, but her hair was darker and didn't look like it might have come out of a bottle. Tory's was so white blonde that I sometimes wondered about that. Amy had lovely green eyes and lashes so long I swear they touched her eyebrows when she blinked. Her complexion was fair, and I thought she must have to use a lot of sunscreen to keep from burning. Her hair was long and straight, and hung down to her waist, even with the ponytail she wore. I envied her that beautiful long hair. Mine was so darn curly that the only time it hung down my back was in the shower with the water hitting it. Turn off the water though, and up it went again. I hated my hair.

"I remember," she said, releasing my hand. "You're a friend of Tory's."

I smiled at that. Yes, I did consider Tory my friend, even if it was only because she needed me to help keep her competing.

Knowing that Amy had a thing for Tory too, I couldn't help gloating about my relationship with our mutual crush. "Yeah." I crossed two fingers and held them up. "Me and Tory are like this," I exaggerated.

The warning bell sounded, and I started walking toward my next class, and to my surprise, Amy fell in beside me.

“We just moved here and I don’t know many people. Maybe we could study together sometime?” she said, as we reached my turning point, and I rounded the corner. I stopped and looked back. “Sure,” I said. “Any night but Tuesday or Thursday.” I certainly couldn’t have her over when Tory was there. I didn’t need her there usurping any of my Tory worshiping time.

Amy nodded and waved, then turned the opposite direction, continuing down the hall. She really did seem nice, and for some reason, she didn’t intimidate me like most people did. Perhaps it was because I knew she had no interest in me, so there was no pressure worrying about what she thought of me. Actually, she already thought I was pretty cool because I was a friend of Tory’s. Whatever the reason, it seemed I had a new friend.

IT DIDN’T TAKE long to realize why Amy had befriended me. She was always quizzing me about Tory. What was she like? Did she have a boyfriend? There was always something else she wanted to know, and I was her source. Still, as time went on, we talked about our likes and dislikes, and found out we had a lot in common. Soon she was calling me every evening, even though we spent a good deal of the day together. She was on my doorstep bright and early every morning to walk me to school, and as incredible as it may seem, I started to get the feeling that her interest had shifted from Tory to me. This was clearly an impossibility. Tory was beautiful and outgoing. I, on the other hand, was a troll.

Senior year was drawing to an end, with Amy following me around like a lovesick puppy dog. I was running scared, but I couldn’t shake her. I didn’t really want to though, because by now she was my best friend and I loved her. But I wasn’t sure I loved her the way she wanted me to love her.

The way Amy felt about me was all just assumptions on my part. We’d never discussed our feelings for one another. Never used the ‘L’ word. I figured as long as I ignored the longing looks she gave me, it wouldn’t be true. I was certain that if I allowed us to become more than friends, she’d see me for the troll I really was and dump me. I was seventeen—and had never been on a date, never been kissed.

One evening as we were just finishing up our homework assignments, the inevitable happened. Amy finally brought up the subject and I couldn’t pretend it wasn’t happening any more.

“Lynn?”

“Hmm.”

“I love you.”

There, she’d said it. All my assumptions became a reality and I didn’t know what to say. I trusted Amy. Completely. It never occurred to me that she might have ulterior motives. She loved me and I was glad, but at the same time I was scared to death. I tried to make light of the comment and laugh it off, because suddenly my friend, who had never intimidated me, was intimidating the hell out of me.

“Of course you do, silly. I love you too.”

She reached over and covered my hand with her own and my heart stopped. “I mean, I’m in love with you.”

I pulled my hand back and got up from the table. I didn’t know what to say. Part of me was thrilled, but as I said before, part of me was scared to death. My old insecurities kicked in and I was quite certain that if I allowed our relationship to go any further than friendship, she would

see the truth and not want me anymore. I couldn't stand the thought of trying to love her and failing miserably. It never occurred to me that she might be scared too. It was all about me, and I couldn't deal with it. So I lied.

"Amy, you're my friend, and I love you, but not like that."

She easily picked up how uncomfortable I was and came to the wrong conclusion. "I'm sorry that finding out I'm a lesbian makes you uncomfortable." She gathered her books up and started for the door. "Perhaps it's best if I leave. I'm sorry."

It broke my heart to see the hurt in her eyes and I reached out and grabbed her arm to stop her. "Please," I pulled her around to face me, "can't we still be friends?"

She smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Sure, we can still be friends." She said the words, but I knew things would never be the same.

GRADUATION CAME AND went. Amy and I no longer used studying as an excuse to get together, still she was on my doorstep bright and early every morning. But I'd pulled back and she seemed to sense it.

One day when we were lying on the grass in my backyard looking up at the sky, and finding faces in the clouds, she suddenly turned over on her side and said, "I went out with a girl last night." She paused a moment as if deciding if she was going to go on. "I slept with her." She watched me intently and I knew she was waiting for my reaction.

I thought I was going to die when I heard those words. I realized that I couldn't lie to myself any longer. I was in love with her. But my fear won out and I pulled myself together and casually replied, "Good for you. Hope she was good." I could tell she was simply trying to make me jealous. To show me that if I didn't want her, she could find someone who would.

Tears came to her eyes and I wished I could take the words back. It's not as if they were unkind, but I know it sounded like I didn't care. But I did care. I cared desperately.

"You don't know what it's like to love someone like I love you, and know that you don't give a damn if I fuck some other woman's brains out or not." She stood up and started across the yard. "Just as long as it's not you, right? Damn it!" she said.

I was on my feet and running when I saw her draw her fist back, but I wasn't fast enough to get there before she hit the block wall. When I got there she was crying and holding her hand, her knuckles scraped and bleeding. I reached out and took her other hand. "Come on inside and let me clean that up."

I guess hitting the wall took all the fight out of her, because she followed me quietly inside and sat mutely while I cleaned and bandaged her hand.

"Why can't you love me?" she finally said, and I was momentarily taken aback. "Is it because I'm a woman?"

I shook my head.

"Then it's me." She closed her eyes and lowered her head.

It's hard to explain how I felt at that moment. She was in so much pain, and I had caused it. But it was more than that. For the first time in my life I believed that it was possible for someone to love me. Unconditionally love me. I didn't understand it, but I finally believed it. She really loved me.

I placed a hand on each side of her face and lifted her head so she could see my eyes and know I was serious. "I do love you. I do." Then I pulled her close and just held onto her.

“Really?” she asked, as her arms wrapped tightly around me. I thought she was going to squeeze the breath right out of me.

“Really.”

She finally loosened her grip and we separated enough so we could see each other as we talked. She leaned down for a kiss and I had to force myself not to pull away. I wanted to kiss her. I really did. But my insecurities were kicking in again and I kept thinking, what if I’m a lousy kisser? I’ll make a fool of myself and she won’t want me anymore. She must have seen my hesitation because I could see the question in her eyes as she stopped short and waited for me to make the decision.

But wanting her won out and I pulled her the rest of the way down and kissed her. Her lips were softer than I’d ever imagined. “I do love you,” I said as our lips parted. I took her hand and led her to my bedroom. “Are you sure?” she asked, as I started shedding my clothes.

“I’m sure,” I answered. “So you better hurry up and get those duds off, because I’ll be damned if I’m going to be the only one naked in this room.

She grinned and tore her clothes off, and soon we were climbing onto my bed in the clothes we were born in.

She whimpered when I cupped her breasts, and I lay down on top of her, the feel of her skin against my own so sensual I thought I might pass out. Nobody could want anything as badly as I wanted her. I kissed her again, and this time her whole body shuddered. I had never imagined that anyone could ever react like this to my touch, and I marveled at it. Why had it taken me so long to accept the love she so freely offered?

She sat up and I tumbled off her. She pushed me onto my back and her soft lips pulled my breast into her mouth. I trembled and clutched her tightly. Every tug on my nipple sent a sensation directly to my clit. I was instantly wet.

I closed my eyes as her lips and hands made love to me. Nothing had ever felt this good. My body tensed as an orgasm came too quickly, but I couldn’t stop it. I turned into Jell-O when the rush rippled through me and collapsed back onto the bed.

She held out her arms and I snuggled into her embrace. “I love you,” I said. “And I always will.”

And after thirty years, I still do.

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Verda Foster was born on a farm in the Missouri Ozarks into a family of women. Her mother was number five of five sisters and Verda is number five of six sisters. What a way to grow up, surrounded by all those extraordinary women.

She and her twin sister are the youngest of the six girls. Her father is reported to have said, “When the girls start coming in twos, it’s time to stop trying for a boy.”

Verda manages a watch repair shop, edits manuscripts for Regal Crest Enterprises, and is the author of three books on her own and three books coauthored with the wonderful BL Miller.

# Flambé

by **A.L. Duncan**

AFTER A SERIES of ineffective attempts to find assistance from several airline employees, Marjorie managed to catch a shuttle that took her far away from the airport terminal.

She checked the text message again.

## **Meet you at Hanger 17 B**

She stepped off in front of a hanger that housed a bright nautical yellow biplane that could only belong to Aunt Tilly.

Aunt Tilly was a stocky eighty-three-year-old that had weathered the ages better than dried beef. Her hair-style was the same as it was in 1954. A curly wave that would make any Hollywood movie star blush with envy. A smile that still gleamed with dimples a half a mile deep; creased now, into canyons of beautiful landscapes.

“Oh, you found me!” Aunt Tilly chimed with arms wide open.

Marjorie allowed her aunt to pull her down to her hug. “No one knew I had to take a hard right at the horned toad riding a scorpion display.”

Aunt Tilly waved her humor off with a silly grin and motioned Marjorie to follow her into an inner office. “Well, come on. We’ve got a lot to do in very little time.”

Marjorie pulled her rolling luggage up to sit in a corner of the office. “Not a problem. I know most of your story, Tilly. If you’ll give me a minute I’ll just grab a notepad and—”

“Give me your luggage,” Tilly barked.

“What?”

“Come on. Give me your luggage. And what are those bulges in your pockets?”

Marjorie complied. “Oh.” She grinned and pulled out the handful of energy drinks. “Just several shots to keep me going. It was a very early flight.”

“Put them on the desk. Now, open your luggage.”

“This isn’t necessary.”

“I’ll tell you what’s necessary and what isn’t. I had a long talk with your paper’s owner about your behavior lately. And frankly Marjorie, I just don’t understand it. You have so much going for you.”

“Tilly, I’m in perfect caliber to handle anything he asks of me.”

“Not yet. But you will be. Now, give me that luggage,” Tilly barked. Marjorie grudgingly placed her bag upon the desk. Tilly unzipped the main compartment. “We have six weeks to get you into shape, and I’ve promised Mr. Grayson you’ll be ready to return fit as a fiddle.”

Marjorie could see the old drill sergeant come out in her aunt. “Never far from the Marines, are you Tilly?”

Tilly frowned at her stash of energy drinks and tiny liquor bottles. “Good God, woman.”

“Listen, you have no idea what I had to go through to get to those. There was this cowboy, see. He needed help pulling money out of his pocket, and it wasn’t a pretty picture.”

“Honestly, Marjorie. What on earth are you doing with your hand down a man’s...” She gasped. “Are you out of your mind? Switching at a time like this?”

“What? Switching? No, no! Look, there was a woman there watching the whole thing with the most horrid application of lipstick I’d ever seen.”

Aunt Tilly grimaced. “I don’t know what you’ve been up to lately, missy. But, we’re not having any more of your frolicking about with men and floozy’s!”

Marjorie hid her face in her hand with a moan. She could feel an ache coming on.

After a moment, she asked, “Hey, just what kind of deal did you and Grayson talk about, anyway?”

Tilly dumped all the energy shots and Marjorie’s bottle of sedatives into the trash can with a series of clanking thuds. “To get you back to the Marjorie that’ll run a damn good company.”

“Come on, Tilly.”

Aunt Tilly wagged a finger at her. “Don’t you get pissy moany with me, missy. This is serious shit. You’ve gone downhill since that breakup with Charlotte.”

Marjorie laughed. “Oh. I see. This isn’t about an article on your sports career, is it?”

“Oh, yes it is. You’re going to write the best damned article that paper has ever seen. You’re also going to straighten up and fly right. Grayson doesn’t just give an entire company over to anyone.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do. But you will.”

Marjorie let the idea settle into her bones quietly with a twinge of resentment. “Am I writing yet?”

“We’re heading out. You can write later.” Aunt Tilly slapped a leather cap and goggles in Marjorie’s hands.

Marjorie followed her aunt to the large, open cockpit biplane. She smiled, humored at Tilly’s mothering, adjusting the cap and goggles on Marjorie’s head. Marjorie felt like a little kid again. An image flashed in her mind of the day when she and her brother wanted to run outside in the blizzard and was held back by their mother and Aunt Tilly fixing their layers of winter gear.

“Now, pull those goggles down over your eyes before we taxi.”

“Thank you, Tilly,” Marjorie said lovingly.

Tilly’s response was a hesitant grin. Tilly looked over Marjorie’s shoulder. “Sylvia, darling. Would you make sure our bags are stowed, please?”

“Sure, Tilly,” answered a woman’s voice.

Marjorie turned around and perused the silkened features of a well-endowed red head.

“You never told me there were beautiful women racing planes, Tilly.”

“Thank you,” said Sylvia.

“Tilly, I think I’m interviewing the wrong person. What do you say, Sylvia? Care to sit and chat with me about your cockpit?”

Tilly spoke to Marjorie. “When you know better, you’ll do better.”

“How very awkward you quoting Maya Angelou to me at a time like this.”

“Got your attention, didn’t it?” Tilly slapped Marjorie on the butt cheek. “Now, get your pretty little ass up there and leave my girls alone.”

“Girls? There’s more? Tilly, you sneaky old thing. Why keep such jewels shut up in this stuffy, dry place? Do you realize how many stories I could have without ever leaving Reno?”



Tilly assisted Marjorie's climb onto the lower wing. "I've got plenty of stories to keep you busy for a while." Tilly climbed up alongside her with more agility than a twenty-year-old and steadied Marjorie's flailing stance.

"But, I've heard your stories."

"And you're going to hear them again. Besides, I have a few new ones."

Marjorie felt like she was crawling into a very large and deep bath tub with no relief of ever getting a proper soak.

Tilly handed her a slender headset with mic. "Take your cap off and slip this on. It'll be the only way we can talk through all the noise up there."

Marjorie had one very slight moment where she dared to keep them off.

The propeller mangled the air, making conversation no less than annoying. Marjorie twisted around to eye her aunt in the back seat.

"Ain't she a beaut?" Tilly asked into her microphone. "A WACO Classic. A reproduction, but just as efficient as the original. Wait till you see her climb. Not like my father's Stearman. But, she'll do."

Marjorie was taking notes as best she could. "Are you still the chief flight instructor in Peoria?"

"And member of the Colorado chapter of the Ninety-Nines for over sixty years."

"What were you doing in Reno that I had to meet you here?"

"I came to watch Sylvia, there, qualify her P-51 Mustang. I'm not talking Ford. I'm saying she clocks in at around four hundred and sixty miles an hour."

"See there, you purposely curbed my appetite for fast women," Marjorie replied. "So, how many races have you won?"

"Over seventy. I told Grayson less, not wanting to sound like a cocky jackass. I think June made seventy-three." She was interrupted by a voice from the tower giving her clearance. "Now, I'll show you what I love doing better than baking brownies."

Taxiing soon was replaced by a speed that propelled them into the air with a powerful lift that left Marjorie's stomach on the tarmac. Cornflower skies peeled clouds to thin feathers above them. A delicate, soft glow of the waning, afternoon sun provided incredible shadows of a beautifully low flight over the Nevada terrain, dipping past cutting reds and browns in deep canyon valleys. She was surprised to hear Aunt Tilly listening to the Grateful Dead's "Ramble On Rose." But, then again, she suspected her of being the ultimate closeted hippie when she was a teenager. After all, her first Dachshund's name was Joplin.

"Do you still have that sweater Mom knitted Joplin?" Marjorie shouted over the rumbling engine.

"Oh, yes. I have it in a box now. What was your dog's name again? I forget."

"Waffle," Marjorie replied with fond memory.

"Oh, that's right."

"Damn good dog," said Marjorie. "Let me take him everywhere with not a single fuss. He loved doing everything with everyone."

"We could all learn a thing or two from a dog's love, you know."

Marjorie let that comment slide.

"Are you finding a goodly stock of journalists today, Marjorie?"

"Today's journalists pick the low hanging fruit. Easy access."

Aunt Tilly laughed. "Oh, I picked low hanging fruit once. Thought it was a man's balls, when they were a woman's boobs. I never understood modern sculpture."

“You’re special, Tilly.”

“That’s what Peoria’s mayor called me in 1949 after his daughter christened my first plane. The damn drunken bitch dented my starboard wing with her rich husband’s 1829 bottle of Veuve Clicquot. I wanted to slug her. Those bottles are ten centimeters thick. The bottle never broke after six tries. It survived a shipwreck, for God sakes, and over a hundred years of the worst storms on the Baltic. Yet, it couldn’t stand up to pure American alcoholic ingenuity.”

“She broke it?”

“No. She opened it. What a waste.”

Marjorie decided to allow the silence of the ever-changing landscape to help slow her anxiety down. Truly, such beauty could never be witnessed at thirty-thousand feet.

After a little over an hour, she spoke up. “Where exactly are we headed?”

“Seattle. Coming up in less than an hour. Are you awake, now?”

“I was awake before.”

“Good. Hang on.”

Before Marjorie could ask why, the plane rolled and dipped into a steep descent. “No, no, no. That’s okay. I don’t need to see your stunts.”

Marjorie’s hollering certainly had to have been heard for miles.

“I don’t do stunts,” Aunt Tilly retorted. “Stunts are for Hollywood. Every complex sequence is perfectly choreographed to ensure my safety and yours, dear.”

“Tilly, what have I done to encourage you to put me through this?”

“You love me don’t you? Then, trust me.”

“Oh...shit.”

A smoke trail followed the biplane.

Marjorie twisted about in fright. “Tilly, we’re on fire!”

“It’s not fire, dear. It’s smoke.”

“Then, we’re on smoke!”

“You’re not going to die. At least not today.”

“Oh, great. Now, we’re going to kill people with second hand smoke.”

“This is paraffin-based oil. It’s biodegradable. No one’s going to die. Hang onto your notes, we’re going into a Barrel Roll.”

“What’s a—”

Aunt Tilly’s announcement barely made it past Marjorie’s ears before she was hollering again. The biplane descended and rolled and tumbled before turning the plane upright. She then pulled the nose up into a vertical climb.

“Cuban Eight.” The plane continued over top and rolled into a loop, leveled off and duplicated the maneuver in the opposite direction.

Marjorie never blinked. “Oh, those damn Cuban’s,” she yelled.

“Okay. You might know this one,” Aunt Tilly jested. “It’s called the Berserk Headache, or Lump-Lump. Named after a drunk.”

Aunt Tilly brought the nose up into a vertical climb again. Marjorie’s heart swooned into a fierce lump. “Not funny, Tilly.” She gasped to what sounded like an engine dump. The plane halted and flipped nose over tail, wingtip tumbling over wingtip.

“Tilly! Tilly!” Marjorie cried. “I give up! I give up! Whatever the hell you want, I’ll do it. I promise! Jesus Christ, Tilly. Stop! I don’t want to die, Tilly!”

Aunt Tilly pulled the nose up as the plane came frighteningly close to a corn field and leveled off just in time. She reduced the speed and brought the plane in for a soft landing.

Marjorie was exhausted and sick. She tore off her goggles. “Next time I’ll make an effort to carry a weapon. So I can shoot myself. I feel a few Lump’s kicking around in me now.” Marjorie’s limbs shook as she climbed out of her seat. She planted a foot on the wing and slipped off in a fumbling screech.

“What did you think of that? Pretty grand, huh?” Aunt Tilly was soon helping her up with a slap to her back.

The motion set Marjorie bending over with a voracious vomit. A moment later Marjorie’s hand flew up to signal she was okay.

“Don’t worry. Everyone does that the first time.”

“Oh, goody. I was starting to feel so special.”

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Seattle greeted Marjorie with a much better option of groundedness. After a cup of coffee and a breakfast bagel at Louisa’s Café, Marjorie was ready to start a new day. She waited for her Aunt Tilly to leave the table before pulling out her cell phone. A quick note to Nancy at the office was all she was able to do before Tilly’s furrowed grimace met her.

Tilly pulled the phone from Marjorie’s hand. “Oh, no you don’t. No more of that today.”

“Tilly, I have to stay in contact in case—”

“I promised Mr. Grayson I’d keep you from stressing about office affairs. You must have more faith in your people, Marjorie. They were hired to do their jobs most efficiently. While you’re with me, you are not to think about anything in Denver. I’d have thought the interview I gave last night was enough to keep you quite busy for a while.”

“And it will be. There’s just so many other things to do right now.”

“Only one. Only one thing left to do.”

Marjorie grinned at Aunt Tilly’s impish smile. “Tilly, I’ve a feeling you’re up to something.”

Aunt Tilly stood and motioned Marjorie to stand. “It’s a short ride.”

“Not in your plane.”

“No. Not in the plane.”

“A direct route without pitches and yawls, I hope?”

“I prefer the more sinuous path. I return with a much larger appetite.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Aunt Tilly drove Marjorie to a park that overlooked the north shore of Lake Union. The view was an interesting lull of rolling lawns, broken up by the moldering, rusty ruins of an old Victorian complex.

“The old gas light company,” Tilly announced. “The only coal plant left standing in the United States, they say.”

“Who are they?”

“The city, I suppose, when they left it as a monument to posterity.”

“I see.” Marjorie observed the few kites fluttering in the soft breeze overtop one of the many hills, and the continual gathering of people ahead of them. “What is this, some sort of festival to honor the old dragons of Seattle’s contaminating tar?”

“This is the Cardboard Tube League event.”

“Cardboard Tube League?” Marjorie side stepped a five-year-old participant’s three foot tube as he flailed it about.

“It’s garnered worldwide attention as an official sport.”

“You’re joking. Did they run out of pillows?”

“That’s a sport in Toronto.”

“Of course. I need to get out more.”

Marjorie filed through the forty or so bodies wearing graffiti covered cardboard boxes, cardboard gladiator greaves and helmets, cardboard shields and superhero masks, all welding three foot tubes. Smaller tykes had to hold them with two hands like giant light sabers. A familiar voice drew her attention to turn about. Handing out the tubes was her ex, Charlotte O’Keefe.

“Well, look who the politicians drug in,” Charlotte greeted. “How are you, Marjorie?”

“Hi, Char.”

“Here for a story?”

“Yes. Well, not this one.”

“And why not?”

“I’m here for a real sports story.”

Marjorie glanced Aunt Tilly’s way to catch her winking at Charlotte. Marjorie’s stoic features diminished to a disgruntled sigh. “And...maybe I can slip a side column in.”

Charlotte laughed. “You’re such a snob.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You haven’t changed much. Well, I won’t say that. You have changed in one aspect.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

“Whenever you wanted to make an excuse about anything you used to blame it on politics or penguins. Whatever did you have against penguins?”

“You know there’s a woman in Australia who knits sweaters for them?”

“If you want a woman’s sport that will tantalize your toes why not check out frog jumping competitions in Mississippi?”

Marjorie flirted. “Oh, I think I’ve found something to twinkle my toes right here.” She allowed a few participants to acquire their tubes before brushing alongside Charlotte.

“Maybe you’re having an allergic reaction,” said Char. “They don’t have much grass in downtown Denver, do they?”

“It’s a feeling. Don’t you feel it?”

Char shoved a tablet in Marjorie’s hand. “Take an antacid. I’m sure it’ll go away.”

“Really, Char. How long has it been? It seems so long.”

“Oh, let’s see. I ran the senior’s Mount Marathon Women’s Race in Seward, Alaska in July, an annual celebration with several hundred badass athletes running up a mountain and back down in less than an hour. Another sport I doubt you’ve paid much attention to.”

“I can’t possibly understand why anyone would want to run up and down a mountain in less than an hour, unless one were being chased by a bear.”

“It’s a lot of fun. I give it a five moose hoof rating.”

“Beats the old pornography rating scale of X’s.”

“Before that, I was traveling in Italy. For heaven’s sake, Marjorie. It’s only been about four months.”

“Italy? With who?”

“Joann Baxter.”

“Baxter? As a friend, or—”

“None of your business.”

“Oh, come on, Char. You can do so much better than that. She’s about as rough as the potholes in Akron, Ohio. Probably run over by the same cars. Does she still smoke those awful cigars?”

“She quit. She’s taken up tai chi now. You’re just speaking out of jealousy.”

Marjorie crossed her arms. “Well, maybe I am.”

“Funny, coming from someone who doesn’t claim to feel anything. Or have you changed?”

Charlotte looked into her eyes. “No. Sorry. That was a reflection of someone else.” She directed her attention to a small boy. “Tommy. Tommy, here. Don’t go out there without your dinosaur scales.” Charlotte handed the boy his taped cardboard tail.

Marjorie barely paid attention. “I sort of wish you never left.”

“You’re not very convincing.”

“Made me lose all confidence in myself.”

“Oh, listen cupcake. That’s what breaking up is all about. Are you still with the paper? Of course, you are.”

“Things have changed.”

“So, what happened? What’s changed?”

“You might say I was forced into a tail spin.”

“Hit your bottom?”

Marjorie dropped eye contact. “Oh, something like that. My ass came up through my esophagus. Did you know Three and a Half Hour Energy shots turn into point six seconds of rocket fuel when puked? The first time in my life I was speechless.” She smiled at Charlotte’s laughter. “I guess you could call it an epiphany. Or a purging. A strategy I wouldn’t encourage as too favorable a solution to the masses.”

“I’ll make sure to take precautions.”

Marjorie’s eyes lit up as she regarded Charlotte’s face. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“Yes, I could tell by all the emails and texts you never responded to.”

“Yes. Well. About that—”

“Oh, never mind. After a while I realized you treated everyone with the same importance.”

“Char, you knew the paper was my life when you met me.”

“I stopped dreaming long ago that it could have been us all your energy went into. You’ve led a life with only one desire.”

“That’s not true.”

“You chose your job over an intimate relationship. It’s okay. I’m not saying it was a bad choice. Obviously, you’ve done quite well. I understand it’s what you wanted.”

Marjorie allowed her sulking to show. “And you’ve lived with the resentment.”

Charlotte looked down her nose at Marjorie. “You’re not that powerful. I got over it.”

The two women turned and watched a sprite ninja overtake a knight in shining cardboard.

“You’re sudden fondness and reflections would frighten me if I believed you were serious, Marjorie.”

Marjorie pulled her shoulders back. “How can you be so rude when I’m trying to make up?”

“Is that what you’re doing? It might surprise you to know that I’m perfectly able to take care of myself. I’ve gotten along just fine without you.”

“Don’t anybody move. I think this woman has lost her senses. I can tell by your dispassionate, furrowed brow you didn’t find that funny.”

“You can’t attach an emotion to an object. Are you really an editor of a major newspaper? How, in God’s name, Mr. Grayson believes you a candidate for the paper’s owner is beyond me.”

“Hold it. How’d you...you knew this?” Marjorie turned around to Aunt Tilly’s unconvincing shrug. Turning back to Char, she added, “And just what else do you know about me, hmm?”

Char shied away. “Nothing.”

“I don’t believe you. And stop fiddling with your oversized straws. What are these things, anyway?”

The voice of a young teenager answered the question from behind her. “They are cylindrical, fiber-based material. I.e. tubes.”

Marjorie turned and eyed his Green Man outfit. The young man wore a very convincing hat of paper bag leaves to mask his upcycled corrugated beard.

“Cardboard tubes were recently used by bandits intent on robbing an armored truck of cash. The armed guards were persuaded to exit the truck after seeing the cardboard tube.”

“These don’t look that intimidating,”

Marjorie’s curt reply only encouraged the young man. “It was painted to resemble an M20a1B1 Super Bazooka rocket-launcher.”

“Ah. Clearly thrill-seekers vying for attention as heroes.”

“This label is usually reserved for firefighters,” he said.

“Really? So, the obvious parallel here to your story is about sexual deviants who achieve satisfaction from the act of taking their frustrations out on another human being with a blunt weapon.”

“Marjorie,” Char exclaimed.

The young man was clearly still within the pool of his scientific mind. “Actually, these actions are discouraged with a cooling off period between events, and the participant is given an oxygen bottle that also blows bubbles. You can’t get mad at bubbles.”

As Marjorie watched the young man depart, Char paced up beside her. “I don’t know what’s more awkward right now. Conceding to the fact I still find your acidity attractive, or feeling an unrealistic expectation that the only reason you are still here is that you really are serious about making up.”

Marjorie leaned against a pine trunk and grinned. “Would you like me to hug a penguin to prove my perspective has changed?”

Char made a dismissive noise with her tongue. “I’m serious.”

“Maybe I could try knitting them sweaters.”

“You can’t even make a pot holder.”

Marjorie crept closer. “The awful truth is I want us to be real with one another.”

“What’s so awful about that?” Char retorted. “I’ve always been honest with you. I think the only time you were ever honest with me was the night you admitted buffalo meat gave you gas.”

“Yes, well. It’s very unpredictable and hard to digest.”

“Too much like yourself. I see. What do you say we get down to brass tacks here, shall we?”

“Yes. Why don’t we.”

“You go back to wherever it is you came from and I’ll just pretend I had a migraine that developed a hallucination of your appearance.”

Char left Marjorie spinning about. Her head was swimming in confusion. She felt flushed. This was new. Not since she first met Charlotte had she feel this way. Aunt Tilly caught her

attention by making wide-eyed flapping signals like she was flagging down a fighter jet on a carrier.

“I suddenly feel very foolish.” Marjorie rubbed her face in her hands and growled with irritation. “What the hell am I doing here?”

Again Tilly was flagging her, insisting she follow Charlotte.

Marjorie dropped her shoulders and surrendered. She found Char picking up discarded and broken tubes and cardboard pieces. She gathered an armful of her own and approached her.

“Look, Char. I...I never realized I had a chance with you.”

Char coughed a laugh. “A chance? Oh, this is you’re hallucination. Forgive me. I’ll step out and leave you to your insanity.”

“Now, wait just a minute. I’m not the one messing around with a bunch of grown up men and women playing dungeons and dragons with paper toys. Look at them! La-la-la in their damned happy moods!”

“I’ll have you know this is a legitimate sport.”

Marjorie let out a spewing snort. “Sport? This isn’t a sport. This is no more a sport than an Easter egg hunt, for Christ sake.”

“We are an official league.”

“It’s cardboard, Charlotte!”

“Its purpose is to bring recycling awareness and fun to the human condition.”

“Funny. I call that knocking back a few brewster’s at Nellie’s on Save the Planet night. You wouldn’t believe the numbers exchanged on toilet paper.”

“Does that still go down as easily on eighty-five proof espresso the next morning?” Her reply was a dry glance away. “Oh, don’t dwell on it, Marjorie. I’ll always swear Nellie’s saw more of you than I did. Not such a bad thing, really. I found my independence again. I learned how to bake a pineapple upside down cake and read four and a half chapters of a book before you even came home from your journalistic notions. I really don’t know why it took you so long to decide why that model Avery’s ass looked better on a sports ad than a damned horse’s ass. But, then again, it is ranch country in Colorado, isn’t it?”

Marjorie smiled. “Chaps always looked better on you when naked.”

“Don’t make a fool of yourself.”

Marjorie turned an irritated glance to a man wearing a cardboard Darth Vader outfit. “Give me a ring if you want my advice about making a fool of oneself.” She turned and walked away.

Charlotte followed Marjorie. “Going so soon?”

“Pardon me, my watch shows I’ve overstayed my welcome.”

“Journalists are never welcome, unless you write with authenticity the honesty of the people.”

Marjorie turned on heel. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I can’t understand how we spent almost ten years together and yet you know so little about me. I was just getting started.”

Marjorie felt a headache coming on. “Well, don’t take it personal, remember. I’m that way with everyone.”

Charlotte ran and halted Marjorie’s departure with a hand. “Oh, no you don’t. I’m not letting you leave without a damned good excuse.”

“I have the hiccups. And I need an antacid. Is that good enough?”

Charlotte pulled a Tums out of her pocket and slapped it in Marjorie’s hand. “There.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re the worst of writer’s, you know that?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been in your little executive box for so long you’ve lost touch with humanity. The only feelings you have is the sorrow you feel when your ink runs dry. Haven’t you ever felt anything, dammit? Haven’t you ever allowed loneliness to encompass your bones so there was no escaping it? Haven’t you ever longed for someone’s kiss after a long day? Haven’t you had enough of highlighting the prejudices and angers and discontentedness of society? I’d have grown sick of it. But, not you. You live for it. You suck it up like it’s the real world. I’ve got news for you. The real world is imperfect. The real world has frailties. The real world enjoys laughter and fun and tofu!”

“You’re quite a number, yourself, Ms. O’Keefe. Miss dandelion wine and tofu turkey. Well, I’ve got news for you. The real world eats red meat, two inches thick, over licking flames and tantalizing hickory chips. The real world drinks hard ass alcohol that’ll knock your socks off and make you count crossing pedestrians in rush hour more relaxing than counting sheep. The real world plays rough-ass, bloody knees and busted lip sports that kick the ever-loving shit out of you before you come back asking for more on your dream-team fifty-four inch high definition television screen. You’re way of getting out more is dating women like Joann Baxter. Changing them like fairies adorned with chakra crystals and praying over the music of Tubular Bells like it was some religious epiphany on a black light poster.”

Charlotte hauled back and whacked Marjorie in the arm with a cardboard tube. “Don’t you make fun of Tubular Bells! That’s a genius piece of work!”

Marjorie flinched. “I’m sure you cherish the memory.”

Another whack issued across Marjorie’s arm. “I’m sure controversy is a red hot topic for you. You’re used to cockamamie stories every day. But, you have nothing real.” She whacked again. “Nothing authentic.” Another whack.

“I’m starting to get the point.”

Marjorie received another couple blows before snatching up the five-year-old’s tube.

“Hey, lady,” he hollered. “That’s mine. Get your own!”

She met his eyes. “Oh, don’t worry. You’ll get it back.” Marjorie blocked and parried Charlotte’s double handed ninja chop, and forced her back with a couple slices of her own.

“You’re so sure of yourself, aren’t you?” Charlotte said. “You’re so arrogant. Haven’t you ever made a mistake?”

The thought burned in Marjorie’s head. “I’m beginning to believe the past twenty-four hours are just that.”

“Why can’t you admit these are the most rewarding moments of your life? Get it out—liberate yourself from all that crap you’ve fed yourself, dammit!”

The five-year-old tugged on Marjorie’s pants. “Here, lady,” he said, handing her his Captain America shield. “I think you need this more than I do.”

“Thank you.” Marjorie turned to shield herself just as Charlotte’s tube busted in half.

“Oh, damn!” Charlotte cried.

“And you’re out!” shouted a man with a bull horn. He stepped up to Marjorie and lifted her arm in the air, announcing her as, “The winner. Ms. Captain America!”

Marjorie bent down and handed the boy’s weapons back. “Here you are, son. You know, you saved my life today.”

He accepted them and shrugged. “Aw, it was nothin’. Everybody deserves saving.”



She rubbed his head and smiled. "That's a very loyal and honorable thing to say. Where did you learn that?"

"From my dad. He said that after ol' Mrs. Crocker fell into her flower bed and came up with a wasp's nest in her hair. We were able to save most of the wasps from her violent attacks. Did you know if we didn't have wasps, we wouldn't have pollination and we'd be overrun with insects?"

Marjorie paused in wiping her shirt sleeve. "No. No, I didn't know that."

Charlotte walked up to her as the boy ran off. "Well, I believe I owe you an apology."

"Apology? Nonsense. This was supposed to be better than therapy, wasn't it?"

Charlotte laughed. "Was it for you? Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I deserved everything I got. It sounds like I deserve a little bit more if you want to go another round."

Charlotte wiped the sweat from her brow. "No. I think I'm good."

Marjorie grinned. "You were right, you know."

"About what?"

"What in the world did we see in each other? We have nothing in common."

"Oh, I don't know. You charmed the socks off me once."

Marjorie accepted a bottle of water from her and sat down on the lawn. "And how did I do that?"

Char sat beside her. "By being the way you are now."

"Oh? And how's that?"

"By being someone who's attentive. Someone who takes the time to listen. And care."

"Aren't you afraid it'll wear off?"

"Maybe I was being brash. I am at fault at living in the past. Living with just memories."

Marjorie bowed her head. "Look, Char..."

"Just like a schoolgirl, there I was; trying to impress you. Trying to get your attention."

"You're awfully cute when you're mad. Brings out your dimples."

"Now, don't distract me while I'm vulnerable."

Marjorie leaned in a little closer and smiled into her cinnamon eyes. "Look. I happen to have quite a bit of vacation time. What do you say we have dinner? Maybe a few?"

"Maybe if you drop your principles for a while I'll agree."

Marjorie feigned innocence. "Principles?"

"Seattle is about fun, remember?"

"Ah, yes. Fun. Isn't there somewhere else you've wanted to go? Somewhere you haven't been with ol' what's her name?"

"Are we flying?"

Marjorie pulled her gently into her arms. "Flying? No. No. Let's not fly, darling. Let's um...let's take a long drive. An RV. What do you think of that? You've always wanted to visit the Grand Canyon. We can take donkey rides and get lost in a valley with the coyotes. Then feed them burnt pancakes at breakfast while we admire the sunrise. We'd have to climb out first."

Charlotte twisted out of Marjorie's arms gently. "Then what? You go back to your paper and forget all about me again?"

"Paper? Ah. The Paper. Well, you see, I've been given a new position. I won't be running around so much anymore telling people what to do. I'll have more time."

"To do what?"

"Whatever you want to do."

Char mused something under her breath. “Truth is, I haven’t stopped thinking of you either. And my life has been horrible since I left. I’ve stayed in touch with your Aunt Tilly all this time, you know.”

“You have?”

“She’s a wonderful gal. Just swell. Are we wrong to want this?”

Marjorie drew her lips close to Char’s sweet, fragrant hair and admired how the silver sparkled in the sunlight. “Well, you know what they say about horses and wishes.”

“If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. If turnips were bayonets, I would wear one by my side.”

Marjorie embraced Charlotte’s shoulders and looked longingly into her eyes. “Ms. O’Keefe, you’re nuttier than this sporting event. And more precious than any number of gambles I’d make on any twelve papers.” She twisted around and grabbed a stray cardboard tube. Holding it up between them, she added, “Here. I’ll give you a choice. You can stab me now, or kiss me.”

Char stared deeply into Marjorie’s eyes and murmured with curled lips, “A temptation I’ve never been able to refuse.”

The kiss ignited Marjorie’s senses like they had never parted. A fire never extinguished.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were sad then? Why didn’t you leave a note?”

“I didn’t like you then.”

“Oh. Do you like me now?”

Char leaned back upon the soft emerald grasses and pulled Marjorie on top of her. “I think I need more convincing.”

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A 2015 Golden Crown Literary Finalist, and Rainbow Awards Runner Up, A.L. Duncan writes women’s literature of various genres. Her stories weave tales of myths, folklores, and spiritualities with ageless themes of personal struggles and triumphs when she’s not being distracted by a new pair of bifocals. She lives an anti-social life in Cincinnati, Ohio with her partner who enjoys the same.

# Coaching Together

by Jeanine Hoffman

“OKAY LADIES, SUICIDE drills. Line up!” Coach Martin bellowed to her team. She watched as the young women formed lines at the court’s base line and then blew her whistle. Beth Carson, her assistant coach, and friend, was on the other side of the court watching and timing the players they’d wanted to watch for slacking. There were only a couple they had questions about and they still had time to make cuts before she had to post her final roster for the year’s volleyball team.

There wasn’t much to do in the small town where she taught and coached. People came out to support the private college’s teams all year. The town really loved watching the women’s volleyball team trounce their opponents. In Katie Martin’s ten years of coaching, the team won far more than they lost.

Katie looked up from her clipboard when she heard Beth yelling at one of the girls.

“C’mon Michelle! That can’t be your best time because I’ve seen you do better. Back to the line and I want to see you sprint full out this time.”

Katie tried to hide her amusement. In their first year together as coaches, Beth reverted back to teammate status, especially with the seniors who were freshman in Beth’s senior year. It took some time for Beth to pull back to mentor instead of befriending the players. Katie enjoyed mentoring her former player as a coach and now, several years later she felt that Beth would be ready for her own program when the opportunity came along.

Katie ran her eyes over Beth again as she watched her tease and cajole the players into giving her their best efforts. Beth certainly hadn’t changed much since her years as a player. She was still trim and fit but she filled out some since her playing days. Her usual coaching attire of a team polo shirt and volleyball shorts showed off her best attributes.

Beth’s whistle brought Katie out of her head and back to practice. “Okay, ladies, hydrate and then hit the weight room. I’ll be around to check on you so no slacking off, and no trying to show off. We can’t afford injuries. Hit it.”

The younger women scattered to the bleachers for their water bottles and towels before heading over to the weight room with the usual chatter and boasting. Beth walked over to Katie after they had the gym to themselves.

“Hey, you okay? You’ve been quiet all practice.”

“Yeah, sorry. You’ve been running it well so I thought I’d step back and let you do your thing.”

“Uh huh. And the truth please? In all the time I’ve known you I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so distracted during a practice.”

Katie hung her head. She knew she couldn’t escape the questions and this wasn’t the time or place. “Tell you what, let me pick up a pizza and meet you at my place after practice. If you beat me there, just let yourself in. You still have that key, right? We can talk then and in the meantime, I’ll just let you run things.”

“Sure. Whatever you need. Katie, you’d tell me if something was wrong though, I mean, you aren’t sick or anything, right?”

Katie felt like a bigger heel after seeing the concern in Beth’s eyes. “I’m fine. I got a call earlier that got me to thinking. I promise we’ll talk about it at dinner. Now, go keep an eye on them while I get set up for a scrimmage.”

“You got it.”

Katie watched as Beth walked away. She didn’t know how she was going to handle dinner but she’d given herself a deadline now and she had to follow through.

KATIE SAT IN her car with the food and tried to screw up her courage. She wasn’t known for being a risk-taker off the court. On the court she’d always been the one to make the crazy sliding dives, spike through the double blocks of opponents, and risk injury to make the play. As a coach her strategy and willingness to change things up on the court were as well known as her insistence on her staff wearing suits to every game.

Finally, she grabbed the pizza box and her briefcase and got out of the car. It was time to face Beth and decide what she was going to tell her.

“About time you got in here. I was starting to wonder if you were sitting out there eating my food.” Beth poured a glass of the merlot she had brought and set it down for Katie. “C’mon, leave the pizza and come sit with me. Tell me what has you so tied up in knots.”

Katie sat on the couch, keeping a cushion between her and Beth. She thought about making up something about Ray’s advancing age and not wanting to lose him. Then she thought about telling her that she just didn’t want to move to Connecticut. Too much winter or something.

She couldn’t do this anymore. She had to find out, and if she was wrong then she could try for the job in Connecticut and suggest Beth as a replacement for her here. Fine, she had a game plan, now she needed to execute it.

“Okay, you, spill it. What had you so distracted that you zoned out on suicide drills?”

“Would you believe I was wondering what our next opponents knew about us?” Katie sipped from her glass. “Thanks for the wine.”

“Nice try. No redirect. You taught me about watching who puts everything into the crappy drills and who slides by. It isn’t like you to be the one sliding by.”

“I got a call today from Ray.”

“How’s he doing? Is he ever going to retire?”

“Well, that’s sort of why he called. He’s planning on stepping down at the end of the year.”

“It’s about time. How old is he? He’s been coaching since you were in diapers.”

“Funny. Not wrong but funny. He’s turning seventy and his wife wants to move to Arizona to be closer to their kids and grandkids.”

“That’s great. So, why did that have you thinking so hard in practice? Surely you can’t be thinking of hangin’ it up just yet.”

“Don’t call me Shirley.”

“Wise ass. Enough of the dramatics. What had you on edge?”

“Fine. He asked if I was interested in interviewing for his job. He needs an answer in the next week if he wants to fast track it and get me there at the end of the semester.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I didn’t yet. He was pressuring me to make the move to Division II two years ago but I wasn’t interested in the school or the program. Southern Connecticut is located in New Haven though. I’m not thrilled with the idea of living in a city again.”

“So what, they don’t have suburbs in Connecticut? What’s the real reason, Katie? What’s holding you here?”

“It just doesn’t feel like the right time.”

“The right time? For what? To move up the ladder? Or are you afraid of leaving me with the program here?”

Katie reached across the cushion and grabbed her hand. “You have to know I would trust you to run this program in a heartbeat. This isn’t just about the program. I want to know if I take the post, if it’s even offered, if you would come with me.”

Beth looked at her but her eyes gave away nothing. “As your assistant? Can you bring your own staff?”

“No. I mean yes that too, but what I meant was that I don’t want to move someplace you aren’t going to be too. I’ve been holding something back from you for a couple of years now. It’s wrong because I was your coach and then I’m technically your boss. I understand if you don’t think of me the same way, I get it. I’m older and I was a mentor figure of sorts.”

Beth put her wine glass on the coffee table and leaned over while Katie was babbling. She had to admit, nervous was a fun look on Katie but she decided to cut things off and put them both out of their misery.

“Katie, stop talking. I’ve never seen you so nervous. I’ve wanted to ask you out for years, but like you said, there was the boss thing. You know, you aren’t actually that much older than me so you having coached me doesn’t bother me and that was a long time ago now. The question is, what do you want? I’m not interested in moving and starting a relationship at the same time. Plus, if you get the job and take me with you, you’re still my boss.”

Katie deflated at first but then perked up when something Beth said hit her. “You mean it? You’re interested in me?”

“Since the first day you walked into the gym and introduced yourself. Of course, back then I never imagined that there would come a time when we’d become friends and colleagues, never mind more than that. I put it down at first as a silly crush on the new coach. When you offered me a position here I thought it would be great to work with you and learn from you. I never imagined that you would want to be my friend. I’ve been falling for you for years.”

“I never knew. Beth, why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“Same reason you didn’t, I suspect. You were my boss and I couldn’t imagine you having any interest in me. I decided a couple of years ago that I would be your friend and enjoy as much of you as I could without crossing that line and risk alienating you.”

“Aren’t we a pair?” Katie asked. “Think of all the time we’ve wasted.”

“Not wasted at all. Think about how solid a friendship we have. What could be better to build on? It’s like you say in practice. Build the fundamental skills first and add the fancy stuff once you have confidence in the basics. I’m ready to get fancy. The real questions are really if you’re ready, and what to do about the job?”

“I don’t want to start anything with you unless we both understand that I’m serious about you. That means I’m not moving anywhere that you aren’t living too. I want to try this and as much as I appreciate the chance at Division II, it isn’t the be-all-end-all. I really like the system we have here. My main concern is you working for me and being in a relationship. The challenge

is that I can't imagine you not being on the bench with me. You've brought a lot to the program and it isn't fair to the team or the school to take that away, never mind how unfair it is to you."

Beth leaned back into the couch and thought. Katie could see the crinkle in her forehead that she always got when she was tackling a problem. When her face cleared Katie knew she had a solution. Or at least a possible solution.

"So, if we both want to keep working at the same school, I can't work for you, right? At least not as your direct report. What if we ask someone else to be the one to write my reviews? I know Dan doesn't see that much of me but he can tell how things are going from meetings and reports from you, right?"

Dan was the director of athletics but what Beth was suggesting was totally out of the box for the small college. "I don't know Beth, that's kind of stretching things. Maybe we should talk to him though. If it comes down to it, maybe I can renegotiate my contract or something."

"Whatever we do, if we present a united front I'm sure we'll be okay. Other faculty members date and you're only my boss for the team stuff. I teach classes that you have no impact on, so perhaps Dan won't mind."

"Maybe. What about you? Would you actually consider a serious relationship with me? I've never really seen you in a long relationship."

"I could say the same for you, you know. I can't remember you ever even mentioning a date."

"I was in a relationship before I came here. She thought I spent too much time at work and decided to find others to play with when I was busy. I really haven't had the stomach for dating since then. Once we got to know each other as colleagues, I just wasn't interested in anyone else."

"I remember dating a few people when you knew me as a student but no one took anything seriously back then. At my last job it was pretty clear that being a lesbian wasn't something that would wash well there and I was looking to gain experience and build my resume. Once I moved back here I was so busy getting my feet wet that I didn't even think about dating until I realized how interested I was in you. But I was afraid to approach you about it."

"And now?" Katie asked.

"God, Katie, you really are dense sometimes. My heart almost fell out of my chest when I thought you were going to Connecticut. I'm serious about finding out if we can be an us. A real couple."

Katie shifted in her seat so she was closer to Beth and faced her. "So, would it be all right if I kissed you?"

"I'd say it's overdue, Katie. Long overdue."

Beth leaned in and Katie could smell her shampoo as she moved closer. As she closed her eyes and her lips found Beth's, Katie felt as if her heart would beat right out of her chest. It was a quick and rather chaste kiss, yet Katie felt its pulse through her body.

As soon as it started, it was over and Katie felt the loss immediately. She leaned in for a second kiss and this time, Beth's hands reached around and started running through her hair. Katie felt Beth's mouth open under her lips and with a groan Katie entered Beth's mouth with her tongue.

Katie realized that her own hands had wandered and slipped under the fabric of Beth's shirt. She felt as if there were miles of skin for her to explore and she started to do just that as they continued to kiss.

The feel of Beth's mouth was addictive and the kiss lasted until they were both panting for breath.

"Where do we go from here?" Beth asked. She picked up Katie's hand and laced their fingers together for the first time.

There was silence for the longest time before Katie had an answer. "My first response was, 'my bedroom,' but I don't want to jump into bed without us really talking this through. There are repercussions that could affect your whole career."

"Those are mine to deal with, Katie. You're worth the risk to me." Beth leaned in for another kiss and this time it was longer and deeper. "Your first answer would have been a good one but I know it goes against your nature. Since that's part of who I've fallen in love with, I can accept a slower path there, as long as we get there eventually."

Katie felt like her brain did a dance in her skull. "You love me? As in romantic, in love with me?"

Beth couldn't help but chuckle at the dumbfounded expression that crossed Katie's face. "Oh how I wish I could take a picture of that expression. Yes, I've known for a while now that this was more than a crush. Haven't you felt it? All the time we spend together, the meals we've prepared, eaten, and cleaned up after, time sitting on your porch sharing the evening and a bottle of wine. All so domestic and comforting, yet also enticing and exciting. If you only knew how many times I'd go home and fantasize that we were upstairs in your bed together after locking up for the night."

Katie quirked a brow at Beth's statement. "Really? Are we talking about a lot of times?"

"Over the past year or so, just about every time I left here. That's when I felt like you might really feel something for me too but I just didn't know how to bring it up and not have things be awkward at work."

"I've felt the same but I'm not ready to go forward until we talk to Dan. I'll call him tomorrow, okay? If we get Dan's okay, then nothing at work has to change. If he has an issue, then I'll find another post as close to here as I can and you can take the head spot. You're ready for it, you know."

"I don't want it, Katie. This is your team. You've molded them into a cohesive unit. I can always find a local high school and get in somewhere."

"We're getting ahead of ourselves. Let me reheat our pizza and we can talk more. Why don't you pour us more wine?"

"I will but we're not done with this. I've waited this long and can wait a bit longer but, I'm at least going to get to make out with you tonight, right?" Beth grinned at her.

"Pervert. Is that all you can think of now?" Katie teased.

"Am I alone?"

"Nope. I'll agree to it on one condition."

"Should I groan in agony now or wait to hear it?"

"I'm serious. I don't want us to get carried away until we have a plan. I was your coach when you were a student. People can bring that up and make all sorts of accusations."

"Shit. I was already old enough to drink by then. How could that matter? It isn't like we were carrying on a torrid affair when I played for you."

"You and I know that, but if anyone wants to make a big deal of it, this could give them ammunition. I just want to make sure we're both covered, but I don't want to lose the best assistant coach I've ever had either."

“I know and you’re sweet to worry but I really can’t see that happening anymore. Ten years ago, sure. I think things have grown enough and we’re in a liberal enough area that it won’t be as big a deal as you think. If my only role was coaching, sure. I’ve been an adjunct professor long enough that I really can’t see a problem. That masters I picked up when I was with the high school was a great idea. Glad I had a coach in college who suggested it.” Beth shooed her away. “Go, get the food. I’m starved.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

KATIE KNOCKED ON the open door of the athletic director’s office. It was a small school and things were pretty informal but she was still nervous. She and Dan went back quite a few years and had a great working relationship, but she’d never pushed any limits other than budgetary for her team.

“Katie, come on in. I hear you’ve got a great group again this year.”

“Yeah, I think we have a shot at going pretty far with this group. Plus, we’ve only got a few seniors so most of them should be back next year.”

“Sounds good. So, I assume this isn’t social. What can I do for you?” He waved her in and motioned to the seats in front of his desk.

Katie closed the door and took a seat.

“Uh oh. Closed door kind of meeting? Who did what and how much is it going to hurt the budget?” Dan smiled but she saw the concern in his eyes.

“Nothing about the budget, and I don’t think anyone is in trouble. Actually, that’s why I’m here. I want to prevent some trouble before anything happens.”

“Preventative measures are good. Do we have a drug or academic problem?” Dan asked. He leaned back in his seat.

“Neither. It’s too early for academic issues and thankfully nothing else is going on. This isn’t about the team, Dan. It’s about me. I got a call from a school in Connecticut. A Division II school. They mentioned an interest in having me interview for the head coaching job for next year. I wanted to come to you before I gave them an answer.”

“Are you going to do it? Interview, I mean? I’d hate to lose you, Katie. You’ve done a lot of good for the program here and the students love you.”

“That’s just it. It’s a great opportunity but my life is here, Dan. However, that could cause some problems too and I wanted to talk to you about ways to handle something that’s come up. If we can work it out, I’ll turn down the interview.”

“I’m listening.” Dan said with a bit of wariness slipping into his voice.

“Beth and I have been talking and we’re interested in dating. I know she’s my assistant and that could cause problems. I wanted to see if you had a problem with it. If so, I can leave, she can take over and I’ll look for something else.”

“Whoa, hold on a second. First you’re telling me about Connecticut then about leaving and giving your job to someone you want to date. Slow down a minute. First, Beth isn’t someone you really review. I mean sure, you talk to her about her performance but technically, I decide the budget allocations for the department, including pay scale and raises. Second, she’s already an adjunct here in a separate department. I don’t see a problem if you two date, as long as it doesn’t affect your working relationship with the team.”

“Really?”



“Katie, do you think I haven’t noticed others sniffing around our program? I know we have a great deal of local support for your team and it’s because of you and your community outreach with the local high schools. You’ve done a lot around here and I don’t care who you date as long as it isn’t a co-ed.”

“That was the other thing. This was before your time but Beth was a senior my first year here.”

“Your point?”

“What if someone brings it up? Nothing went on and as she pointed out last night, Beth was drinking age by then. It wasn’t until recently that I wanted to pursue something but I didn’t approach her.”

“Katie, I think you’re over-reaching here and trying to find problems where they don’t exist. You’re a great coach. You run a program that has increased in popularity because of you, and your classes are always full. You’ve been an exemplary coach and member of our faculty. I really don’t think anyone’s going to care, but if you need the assurance, I’ve got your back. I know you’ve got to be serious about her or you wouldn’t put either of us through this talk.”

Katie relaxed into her chair. “You might be right. I’m looking for reasons to stop before anything even started. Sorry.”

“Hey, I’m your friend too, not just your boss. Talk to me. What’s going on? Doubts about how she feels?”

“No. She made it pretty clear that she’s interested in something serious. It’s been a long time for me, Dan. I guess it’s just nerves. If you give your blessing, then I guess I have a date to arrange.” Katie stood and thanked him before heading for the door.

“Katie,” Dan called out, “if you need anything, I’m here. For the record, I think you two should have been a couple a few years ago.”

“Thanks, Dan. I’ll keep that in mind.”

EVERYTHING WAS READY when the knock sounded at the door. Katie had flowers on the table, dinner was in the oven, and the wine was open and breathing. One last look around as she headed for the door told her that she was ready.

She opened the door to find Beth standing there. “You know, you could have come inside.” She stepped back to let Beth come in before shutting the door.

“After last night it felt sort of weird to just let myself in here.” Beth shrugged in embarrassment.

“Don’t be silly. Anyway, come on back to the kitchen. I think the lasagna should be ready. You can grab the salad from the fridge.”

“Got it. Wow. The table looks great, Katie. You didn’t have to do that for me.” Beth stood still and appreciated the place settings, flowers, and the white taper candles that Katie had set out.

“Actually, we’re celebrating. It’s Friday. We don’t have a game until Tuesday, and no practices this weekend. Plus, I talked to Dan today.”

“You did? And?”

“Get the salad and I’ll rescue dinner. We can talk while we eat. I’m starving. I didn’t eat lunch today.”

“You know you shouldn’t skip it. Did you have a meeting again?”

“Nope. I was busy putting together our dinner so I could have it ready after practice.” Katie pulled the hot pan out of the oven and sprinkled some freshly chopped parsley on top from a bowl on her cutting board. “Done. Let’s eat.”

Beth led the way with the bowl of salad and tongs while Katie carried the hot pan and put it on the hot pads she had ready. Once they were served and the wine was poured, Katie lifted her glass of wine toward Beth.

“A toast. To understanding and amazing athletic directors, and women with the patience of Job.”

Their glasses met with a soft clink. After a sip, Beth placed her glass down and looked at Katie with shining eyes. “Does that mean we’re clear?”

“Yup. In fact, he seemed surprised that I was asking him and that we weren’t dating already. Apparently he knew something I didn’t.”

“So we’re really going to do this? Officially date?”

“If that’s still what you want.” Katie had trouble raising her eyes to see Beth’s.

“Of course it is. Hurry up and eat because you’re going to need all the energy you can get.”

“Pushy girlfriends can be so tedious, don’t you think?” Katie asked with a smirk.

“I wouldn’t know. Mine slinks along at the pace of a tortoise.”

“You know what they say, ‘Slow and steady wins the race.’”

“Yeah, yeah...but we aren’t track coaches. Volleyball is rather faster paced than a turtle so eat up, I think it’s time to do some drills in the bedroom. Let’s see if I still have the soft hands of a setter.”

Beth said, “Dinner? Who needs dinner?”

Katie pushed back her chair, grabbed Beth’s hand and they headed for the stairs.

Clothing was shed faster than the steps were climbed and before Katie knew it, Beth had straddled her on the steps. After a searing kiss, Beth jumped up and ran for the bedroom.

“C’mon, you can do better than that. Can’t keep up?”

Katie followed at a purposely slow pace. She entered the bedroom and saw Beth, naked and reclined on the bed. Her eyes roamed over Beth’s luscious body as she stepped closer and shed her own clothes. “I’ll show you who can and can’t keep up.” Katie lowered her head and kissed Beth deeply before moving down her body. Katie felt Beth gasp as her lip closed around first one then the other breast, kissing and licking Beth’s nipples until they couldn’t get any harder.

As Katie continued her leisurely exploration, Beth groaned. “Slow can be good too.”

Neither left the house for the rest of the weekend.

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Jeanine Hoffman was born and raised a New Englander with an eye towards the west coast. After a visit in 2014 to the Portland, OR area, Jeanine and her wife, Heather, made a choice. A new goal was set and in 2015 the fledgling family joined the wagon train and moved west. Oh, wait, a big truck came and moved the stuff while the family flew west. Yeah, that’s how it went.

The now infamous cockapoo, Mr. Bones, along with his faithful sidekick, Bailey the black terror cat (nicknamed Toothless), have acclimated nicely to the west coast vibe. Heather and

Jeanine spend their spare time checking out cool farmers markets, farm to table restaurants, food trucks, and stalking mountains to take pictures.

Currently, Jeanine writes from home but has a varied past that covers everything from being an EMT/Firefighter, to restaurant work, bouncing at a lesbian bar, and banking. Jeanine uses this vast background to pull from when she is too lazy for research. There is so much social media that Jeanine has limited herself to a minimum of mediums or there would never be another book written. Jeanine can be reached through [jeanine.hoffman@yahoo.com](mailto:jeanine.hoffman@yahoo.com) or through her Facebook listed under—yes, you guessed it—Jeanine Hoffman. (Can't be original about everything).

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Talia Stoddard is an insurance wiz who's always been smart on the job, but unlucky in love. After years of being told that she's too big, too tall, too black, too lesbian, and not a very snappy dresser, Talia has resigned herself to a life alone with only her dear gay friend Jacob for a diversion.

When Kelly and Talia's lives crash into one another, it's under the most stressful and threatening circumstances. Talia is in terrible danger, and it's up to Kelly to rescue her. In the horrendous situation they end up in, neither expects to find a friend, much less a soul mate.

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*The Gift* is the story of a woman determined to succeed against all odds, and of an unlikely romance she finds along the way.

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A chance encounter separates Roslin, daughter of the king, from her privileged world. She takes refuge in a peasant community where she finds herself drawn to the charismatic Brice, leader of the slaves' rebellion. Is Brice indeed the Chosen?

The old order is eventually overturned and the slaves win their liberty. But in the new, free world, the unveiling of a carefully kept secret has as much impact on the ex-slaves as the rebellion had on their ex-masters. And Brice and Roslin have to face their own challenges as they explore their love for each other. A gripping story of love, battle and outstanding moral courage.

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Haunted from childhood by visions of a mysterious woman she calls, Blue Eyes, artist Samantha McBride is thrilled when a friend informs her that she's seen a woman who bears the beautiful face she has immortalized on canvas and dreamed about for so long. Thrilled by the possibility that Blue Eyes might be a flesh and blood person, Samantha sets out to find her, certain the woman must be her destiny.

When Tess Richmond becomes aware that a private investigator has been hired to investigate her, she plans to teach the woman a lesson she won't soon forget, never even suspecting the terrible mistake she's about to make and the fragile heart she'll decimate in the process.

Samantha's first meeting with Tess ends in an act of heartbreaking cruelty that leaves her shattered, her faith in a beautiful destiny destroyed by Tess' misplaced revenge and hatred of the father who abandoned her. When Tess realizes her mistake, she wants to make amends, but can she ever rebuild the trust that was lost, or the love that was denied?

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