

FINDING A PLACE

“For the ones who had a notion
A notion deep inside
It ain’t no sin
To be glad you’re alive”
--Bruce Springsteen, “Badlands”

--ONE—

As I started unpacking my parents’ van, I was filled with a certain amount of anxiety. Hey, who wouldn’t? It was my first day at college. Stanford University, to be precise.

I’m Brendan—Brendan Carruthers. It had been a long drive to California from Chicago, but now it was finally done. Here I was, at Stanford—the place I had wanted to be since I was a freshman in high school. Of course, for most of high school I wanted to be anywhere **other** than high school—but Stanford was the number one choice.

I had gotten my key, and my room assignment, and headed up with the first batch of my stuff. I went to my room, and found the door open.

“Hey, you Brendan? I’m Jake, Jake Atkinson.” I shook his hand. Jake was a very large human being. My parents came up behind me, and Jake introduced himself to them.

“You need some help?” he said.

“Sure. Thanks,” I said. “You’re all moved in?”

“I’ve been moved in for some time,” he laughed. “Football players had to be here a month ago.” Oh, shit, a football player. If there’s anything I hate more.....

Jake was cool, though, helping me and my parents get all my stuff in. I went downstairs and kissed my parents goodbye. They were crying. Hey, I was their only child, and here I was, going to be 2000 miles away. I didn’t cry, but I **was** going to miss them. They were great parents.

I went back up to my room, and Jake was there, reading what I assumed to be a playbook, listening to music. “Hey. Your parents get off all right?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are you from? I forgot to ask that.”

“Just outside of Chicago.”

“Shit, we’re almost neighbors,” he grinned. “I’m from Milwaukee.”

“Milwaukee. Since you play football, you must be a Packers fan.” He grinned and pointed at his desk. I hadn’t noticed it before—an autographed picture of Brett Favre, the Packers’ great quarterback.

“Are you a football fan? I take it you don’t play, not with **that** body.” It wasn’t said nastily, which surprised me. I was tall, but skinny.

“No I don’t, but, yes, I’m a fan. Da Bearrrsss, of course.”

“Of course. However, I’m not anticipating any autographed pictures of any Bears quarterbacks being your prized possession!”

“Not hardly. If I did have any, it’d be a linebacker like Urlacher. The Bears don’t do quarterbacks. So, what do you do? Football-wise, I mean.”

“I’m a linebacker,” he grinned. “I was all-state in Wisconsin last year. U of W recruited me, as did a few other Big Ten schools, but I’m sick of snow.”

“Don’t I know **that**. I got offered a full ride by both Northwestern and U of Chicago. I decided California sounded better.”

“Full ride?” he asked. “Academic?” I nodded. “Oh, goody, I get a brain as a roomie. Us dumb football players need all the help we can get,” he laughed.

“Most of the dumb football players I knew in high school needed a lot more than that,” I said.

“I have no doubt,” he laughed. “Hey, I hold my own. I don’t care how good you are at football, you don’t get into Stanford unless you can hold your own. But I wasn’t going to get any full rides academically from U of Chicago, I can guarantee you that.”

“Most football players I knew in high school couldn’t get a full ride to Kindercare.”

He cracked up laughing at that. “You’re not fond of football players, are you?” I just looked at him. “Hey, I had assholes on my high school team, too. I know what some of the smart kids went through.”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

He looked at me. “How well do you know football?”

“Well. That’s your playbook, right?” He nodded. “I could understand it without much of a problem. I just don’t have the physique to play.”

“Well, if you can understand this, you’re a better man than I,” he grinned. “There’s about a gazillion different defensive formations in this system.”

“Of course. It’s Stanford, right? The playbook was probably designed by some computer science major with too much time on his hands.”

He cracked up laughing. “So, are you a computer science major?” he grinned.

“Yup,” I laughed. “You?”

“Undeclared. I’ll probably go for history. If the football thing doesn’t work out, I’d like to be a teacher slash high school coach.”

We sat there, chatting for a while, very relaxed. I liked Jake immediately. He was cool, and didn’t seem full of himself. Very unlike football players I knew.

Hey, he got it right. I got picked on. I was a geek, and I knew it. I was valedictorian of my class. I was tall, geeky, skinny, and wore glasses up until senior year, when I finally got contacts.. And the football players led the torment.

Was college going to be different, or was Jake just an exception? A very welcome one, considering we were rooming together, mind you. That was something to find out.

--TWO--

We were three weeks into college. The first week was orientation. Boring, for the most part, as I had suspected. All kinds of blathering about ‘diversity’ and all that stuff. My high school talked about ‘diversity’ too. It meant, “All colors and races are treated with respect—but we all kick the shit out of the geek.” Then there was the ‘sexual harassment’ seminar. Back in high school, the girls considered it ‘sexual harassment’ if I said hello.

Classes, however, had started well, surprisingly enough. I was taking a variety. Stanford required general-type courses, like a humanities course and a writing course. Despite being a computer geek, I had always done well in that sort of thing—especially writing. I worked hard at that. Hey, I wanted to go into computer **research**. I wanted to help develop the next generation of computer applications. Being able to write up research findings was a plus. So, I did well in the writing courses. I was also taking calculus—and math is one of my strengths.

What surprised me were my classmates. I didn’t get scorned. I wrote a paper for the writing course that led to a lively discussion in class—and the feedback I got from my classmates was **great**. No scorn, no derision, just opinions founded on respect. It was pretty awesome.

What happened the first Monday of the third week of classes was pretty neat, too.

It was in Calculus. We were doing some problems, and I was doing fine with them. I heard a sigh to my right, and turned.

It was a blonde girl I had seen in the class. Didn't know her, but I had noticed her a bit. She was obviously having difficulty with the material.

After class, she stopped me. "Hey. You're good at this, aren't you?"

"Yeah, it's my strength."

"I thought so. Listen, I know this is presumptuous of me, but I need help. I'm a pre-med who has to take this stuff, but Calculus throws me. And I know you are getting it, and I don't know who else to ask."

"I'd be glad to." I stuck out my hand. "Brendan Carruthers."

"Sheila Mitchell," she smiled, shaking my hand. "Oh, Brendan, thank you. I'll be eternally grateful."

"No problem. When do you want to do it?"

"Are you free tonight?"

"Sure." I gave her my dorm and room number, and we made plans for her to come up about seven.

Jake had some football thing going on, so I was alone when she showed up. "Brendan, I can't thank you enough. I'm doing fine in my other classes, but this is really losing me."

"I'm glad to do it." And I was. I didn't mind helping people at all with classwork. I found it flattering.

We pulled up a chair, and I talked her through some of the stuff we had been doing. As she worked on it, I took a look at her. She was wearing a tee shirt and shorts. Her legs were long, muscular, and very tanned. Her arms looked like they had prominent muscles, too. I could tell she was broad-shouldered. Her face? I think most people would describe it as "cute". She had long, straight blonde hair, a cute turned-up nose, and freckles, visible even with her tan. What I liked were her eyes—they were deep blue and seemed to sparkle.

After a while, she seemed to be picking things up a bit better. I suggested a little break. "You want something to drink?" I asked.

"Love it. Do you have any diet coke?"

“No, but my roomie does,” I laughed. “He’s cool about stuff like that, I’ll just have to owe him one.” I grabbed one for her and took a coke for myself. “I don’t drink diet coke, I have enough problems keeping any weight on as it is.”

She giggled. “Where are you from?” she asked. “I know it’s not California, you have an accent,” she giggled.

“Chicago. And you?”

“San Diego.”

“Ah. That explains the tan.”

She giggled. “Well, that and the fact that I spend way too much time in swimming pools, many of them outdoors. I’m a competitive swimmer.”

“Oh, you swim for the team here?” I asked.

“Not this year. Next year I will be, but I’m concentrating on some international meets this year. And Nationals next spring—and, hopefully, the Olympics next summer.”

“Is that realistic? I mean, do you think you have a shot?”

“Oh, yeah. I won one gold and two silver medals at the world championships this past summer.”

“Wow. I’m impressed.” She just grinned. “I noticed you were pretty muscular.”

“Yeah. You have to be. The backstroke is my primary stroke, and that takes strength, especially in the legs. And, believe me, when I get to the Olympics, I **guarantee** there will be a couple of people in the pool with me that are on steroids. Since I have no desire to fuck up my body like that, I have to be an animal in the weight room instead.”

“Very smart,” I said. “I knew a couple of football players in high school who everyone assumed were on ‘roids. And they were bigger assholes than the other football players. Which is saying a lot.” She giggled. “I have to ask you, though—you said you were pre-med?” She nodded. “**And** high-level swimming? You must have **no** time.”

“I manage it pretty well,” she smiled. “Though I’m not out at parties four nights a week, I can tell you.”

“I can imagine,” I laughed.

“Pre-med gets harder as you go along. I’m just taking basic courses now. Which is a good thing—I’d hate to be trying to fight my way through some of the junior-level biology courses in an Olympic year. The timing worked out well.”

“Except for having to take calculus,” I grinned.

“Yeah, except for that,” she grinned back. “I’m breezing through Biology, and my humanities-type courses aren’t bad, but calc is killing me.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” I smiled. “I have to help you, so your mind is at ease, so I can watch on TV as that American flag goes up a few times next summer.”

“Good plan” she grinned.

--THREE--

I helped her out a few times in the next couple of weeks. She wasn’t dumb, not by a far long shot—she was very smart, actually. She just wasn’t intuitive about math, and the professor didn’t help. It was a good thing I was intuitive about math, or he would’ve lost **me**.

So, I was helping her. I didn’t see it as anything more than that. Though I **did** enjoy her company. We always took breaks to de-Calculus our brains, and I enjoyed chatting with her. But that was it. I was helping her study, that was all. That we got along decently just made it easier.

That’s why I was surprised when, about three weeks after I had started tutoring her, she came to where I was sitting in the dining hall and plopped down in front of me. “Hi! Want company?”

“Sure,” I said, surprised.

“You looked lonely sitting over here all by yourself,” she giggled.

“I usually eat with my roommate, but he’s in Oregon at the moment.”

“Oregon?” she asked.

“He’s a football player. Away game tomorrow.” This was on a Friday. “They go up there a day early.”

“Ah. Well, am I an acceptable substitute for your roommate?” she giggled.

“Well, you’re a hell of a lot better looking than he is,” I said, surprising myself. She just giggled again. “However, if you want to talk sports—which is what Jake talks about most of the time—be advised that, while I know a lot about football, I know little about swimming.”

“Well, what’s to know? It’s a rather uncomplicated sport,” she smiled. “You get in the pool, you swim, whoever swims fastest wins. Football’s a lot more complicated.”

“Especially here,” I grinned. “Jake’s playbook is bigger than our Calculus textbook.”

“Welcome to Stanford,” she laughed, “where they even expect the athletes to know how to think.”

As we chatted—easily, especially for **me**—I noticed something. Sheila was a very popular girl. Ten seconds didn’t go by before someone passing by us yelled out a “Hi Sheila” or a “Hey, Sheila, how’s it going?”

After a few minutes of this, I looked at her, bemused, and said, “What, do you have your own fan club or something?”

She laughed. “I just know a lot of people, that’s all.”

“You’re a social butterfly,” I grinned.

“Sort of. And you’re **not**, are you?” she asked astutely. “You should be. You’re a good person.”

“I’m rather shy, actually.”

“Not with **me**,” she smiled.

“Well, you got me where I live,” I grinned. “Flattered my brains. I’m a complete sucker for that.”

“Ah,” she laughed.

“And you’re easy to talk to, imagine my surprise. Even though you asked for my help, you talk to me like I’m a person, not a computer with legs.”

“You **are** a person. A nice one, even,” she grinned. I think I probably blushed! “However, I **was** wondering, do you have time this weekend? What with that exam coming up Monday....”

“Of course, I have time. Any time you need.”

“Tomorrow afternoon?”

“That’s fine. The game is tomorrow night. I have to watch my roomie kick Oregon’s butt.”

“That’s cool, I’m going to a party tomorrow night. 1 in the afternoon OK? I have to swim before that.”

“That’s fine,” I said.

--FOUR--

I got up the next morning, did some laundry, went to brunch. By the time I got back from brunch and retrieved my laundry, it was still only 11:30. I had an hour and a half to kill before Sheila came over to study. I ended up walking the campus—and somehow ended up at the aquatic center.

There were stands—swimming was an important sport at Stanford, our team was always nationally ranked, and the meets actually got respectable crowds. So, I parked myself a few rows up and watched. There were a number of people swimming, but I picked her out immediately.

I'd known she was a swimmer, and I knew what swimming entailed. And I'd seen her body—well, under a tee shirt and shorts, but I had an idea about her muscles. But I wasn't prepared for how she looked powering her way through the water. She was doing the backstroke, and she moved faster than I ever could've imagined. I'd seen swimming at the Olympics, of course, but seeing on TV didn't come close. Watching her backstroke through the water was like watching a motorboat—except this motorboat was powered by sheer muscle. It was riveting.

I shouldn't have come. That was my first thought. If I was intimidated by her **before** this—and I **was**—this was even more intimidating. I thought about leaving—but I was riveted. After I came to the decision that I **was** going to leave—Sheila came out of the pool for a break, and saw me.

“BRENDAN! Hi!” she yelled, and then came over to me. “What are you doing here?”

“I don't know, I was wandering the campus, killing time, and I decided I wanted to see you swim.”

“Cool!” she said. “I'm glad. What did you think?”

“I'm flabbergasted,” I said. “It's so much faster in person.”

“Everybody says that,” she giggled. “Are you going to stick around? I just need to do a few more laps in a couple minutes, then we can go study.”

“OK,” I said, trying to convince myself.

I ended up staying. Every time I thought about leaving, she paused in her laps and grinned at me. And it really **was** impressive to watch. The problem was, I had somehow avoided being my usual hopeless tongue-tied self around this girl—and I was afraid, after watching what she was capable of, I was going to revert to type.

Anyhow, I stayed, and she went out to change and I waited for her. I think the image of her powering through the water was forever imbedded on my mind. Also, I admit it, the image of her standing in front of me, wet, wearing a bathing suit!

She came out and we walked to my dorm. She was dressed more-or-less as she usually was—shorts and a blouse—but I couldn't see her that way anymore. As I had feared, the old tongue-tied Brendan was in full presence.

"You OK?" she asked me after a while.

"Fine," I said.

"Look, if you don't want to do this today..." she began.

"Of course I do," I said. "I'm fine. Really."

"No, you're not, but I'm not going to press the issue."

How did this girl get me to talk? Before I could stop myself, I told her, "Look. I told you I get shy."

"Never around me," she said.

"I've never seen you swim before," I said softly. She looked at me, but didn't say anything.

Once we got back to my room, I was better—because we were back in **my** element. But the memory lingered long after she had left.

--FIVE--

We had our first calc exam on Monday. I didn't have any problem with it. After class, Sheila walked by me and said, "I think it went well. We'll see."

Wednesday we got them back. We were sitting on opposite sides of the class, but when she got hers back, I saw her light up with a smile, then she turned around, found me, and grinned at me.

When class was over, she came running out of the lecture hall—and grabbed me in a hug! "Brendan! You're a damn miracle worker!" She held up her test—which said 91. "I can't believe I did this well!"

"I'm glad," I said—which I was, but I was also thunderstruck that she was hugging me!

"Oh, Brendan, **you** did this for me! I'm so excited! Look, how can I repay you? Anything. Anything at all."

I said it before I even thought. “Well, how about going out with me for dinner Friday?” And then immediately wanted to take the words back.

“I’d love to!” she said happily.

WHAT?

“Really?” I stuttered. “I mean, well, great!”

“I was waiting for you to ask,” she grinned. WHAT?!?!?!? “We can go wherever you want, I have a car—I know you don’t.”

“Well, I do, but it’s in Illinois,” I grinned. “That’s fine, we can decided then what we’re in the mood for.”

“Great!” she said. “I’ll see you in class Friday, we can work out the details. I have to swim Friday afternoon, but I don’t know when yet.”

“That’s fine.”

“Great! See you Friday,” she said, and she was off.

Oh my Jesus, did I just **do** that?

Oh, Christ. Now I had two days to go out of my mind.

I was sitting in my room after supper that night, pretending to do homework but really obsessing about it, when Jake stumbled in from football practice.

“Hey, Rooms, what’s up? You look preoccupied.”

“You know that girl I’ve been helping with calc?”

“Yeah, Sheila Mitchell, the swimmer,” he said, “you told me. I’ve never met her, but I know people that know her.”

“Yeah, well, we have a date Friday night,” I said.

“That’s **great!**” he said.

“Yeah, great,” I said depressedly. “Jake, I’ve only been on a couple dates in my life, and none since, oh, tenth grade—and that one was a set-up from my mother. I haven’t yet been on a date that wasn’t a disaster. And I actually asked out this beautiful, popular, **incredible** girl. I am **going** to fuck this up. I can’t **believe** I actually asked her out! What was I thinking?”

“You were thinking that you like her,” he grinned. “Bren, don’t obsess, eh?”

“What’s worse is that she’s only going out with me out of gratitude.”

“Bullshit,” he said. “Girls don’t do that, trust me. Especially girls that know you like them—and believe me, she knows you like her. Girls pick up on those things. Unless she’s cruel—and, from what I’ve heard about Sheila Mitchell, she’s a sweetheart—she’d never say yes just out of gratitude.”

“Hmm. Then why **would** she say yes?”

“Because she **likes** you, you idiot!” Jake said, but not nastily.

“Why on **earth**?”

“Bren, you’ve got some major self-image problems. I don’t know what to tell you about that. All I can tell you about Sheila is this, though—go with the flow. She **likes** you, OK? Go with it. And **relax**, for Chrissakes!”

“Easy for you to say,” I laughed.

--SIX--

Friday dawned. Much to my dismay.

She found me outside of calc. “I’m swimming until 5. Is 6 OK?” she asked.

“That’s fine,” I managed.

“Great,” she said. She gave me her dorm and room number, and said “See you at six,” and off she went.

Giving me a lovely few hours to panic. And panic I did. What with Jake playing a game tomorrow, he wasn’t around at all, so I couldn’t even get a pep talk from him. By the time five o’clock rolled around, I was contemplating throwing myself down a flight of stairs and breaking a few bones, just to get out of this. What a coward.

But I didn’t. I managed to find something half-decent to wear, and managed to walk over to her dorm without tripping and killing myself. I went in and knocked on her door.

“Hi!” she said as she answered. She was wearing a pink blouse and a gray knee-length skirt. She had even put on a bit of makeup. She looked fantastic. We left her room and got in the elevator.

“What are you in the mood for, to eat?” she asked.

“I don’t know. How about you?”

“I’ve got a mad craving for sushi,” she giggled.

“I’ve never had sushi.”

“It’s great.”

“Raw fish?” I asked, skeptically.

She giggled. “Not all sushi has raw fish—but the stuff that does, most of it is actually pretty good. The way they prepare it, it doesn’t taste raw, if you know what I mean.”

“OK, I’m game,” I said.

“My roommate told me about a good place. And it’s only a few blocks off campus, so we can walk. And it’s a full-bore Japanese restaurant, so if you can’t stomach the sushi, you can get teriyaki or tempura or something.”

“OK,” I said, and we started walking.

We walked a little bit, and she said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” I answered.

“Do you regret asking me out? It almost seemed to me like it was an impulse you wanted to take back.”

“Uhh…” what was I supposed to say to **that**?

“If you don’t want to take me out, it’s OK, we can turn back,” she said with a sad little smile.

“It’s not that,” I said. “I **do** want to take you out. It’s hard to talk about, OK? But it’s not you, and I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want to.”

She grinned at me. “You didn’t expect me to say yes.”

“No, I didn’t,” I admitted. “You shocked the daylights out of me.”

“Why? Why is it so shocking that I’d say yes?” I didn’t say anything. “Brendan,” she continued with a smile, “when I asked you how I could repay you for helping me with calculus, that was a **hint**. I **wanted** you to ask me out. If you didn’t, I was going to do it myself,” she giggled.

I stopped walking. “WHAT?” I said.

“Brendan, again, why is this so shocking?”

I took a breath, and told her. “This is my first date in three years, and it’s the first time I’ve asked anyone out and gotten a ‘yes’ in close to four. The one three years ago was a blind date arranged by my mother. My list of rejections is probably longer than your list of swimming trophies. Girls do **not** go out with me.” Then I blurted out the rest. “And the reason I wanted to take it back when I asked you out is that I’m so inexperienced that I’m terrified I’m going to fuck it up. I haven’t been on a date in my life that went well, OK?” I couldn’t look at her when I said the rest. “I asked you out sincerely. I wanted to go out with you. I just can’t help but think that you’d have been better off going out tonight with just about any other guy on campus.”

“I’m out with who I want to be out with,” she said definitively. “We **really** need to work on your confidence. However, that’s a project for another day.” She grinned. “Today, we’ll just get you to like sushi. Come on!” And she grabbed my hand.

As we walked down the street—with her still holding my hand!—she said, “Look. I’m glad you told me that you haven’t dated in a while. I knew you weren’t Mister Experience, but I didn’t know it was that bad. But it’s OK, you know. I **want** to be here with you. I said yes because I **wanted** to go out with you. Just remember that, OK?”

“OK,” I said.

We got to the restaurant, and I decided to let her order. “We can just get a selection. I like all types of sushi, so we can have them bring a pile on over and see what you like,” she grinned. She started me off with some of the easier ones, which had **cooked** stuff like crab and shrimp in it. “That green stuff? That’s wasabi, Japanese horseradish,” she told me. “Be careful with that, it packs a kick.”

I tried it, and, actually, put some more on. “Actually, I like that wasabi stuff. It’s not any hotter to me than regular horseradish. And my mother’s Polish, so I know from horseradish,” I grinned.

The first few things she introduced me to, the milder ones, I liked. “I can’t believe you’ve never had sushi,” she said.

“Well, I’m from Chicago. If the plate doesn’t contain a big hunk of something that used to be part of a farm animal, it’s not a real meal,” I grinned. “I actually like this, though.”

“Good,” she grinned. “Try this one.”

I looked at the one she was pointing at. “Now, **that** appears to be an uncooked fish on that one,” I said.

“Yeah. Tuna. That’s my favorite. You’ll love it,” she said. I gave her a face—but I tried it.

“OK, I admit it. I liked that one,” I grinned.

“Told you! Don’t worry, I stayed away from some of the more extreme ones like uncooked eel.” I grimaced. “But that one, and this one over here—that’s salmon—are good.”

As we ate our selections, she said to me, “Tell me about your family.”

“Well, we live in Highland Park, which is north of Chicago on the lake. Nice suburban-type place, at least at first glance. I, personally, wouldn’t mind if I never set foot in the place ever again. Anyhow, I **do** love my parents. Dad’s an architect. Mom’s a schoolteacher.”

“Brothers or sisters?” she asked.

“Nope. I understand that I was something of a surprise—they thought Dad was infertile, and were going to try to get some treatment, when I unexpectedly started growing.” She giggled. “They were never able to have another kid, though, and they figured since they had me they wouldn’t push their luck. You?”

“I’m from La Jolla, which is north of San Diego, right on the Pacific. Also suburban—well, on the ritzy side of suburban. Dad is some sort of corporate bigwig. Mom is a nurse. I have a younger sister, Jenny, she’s 15.”

“So you learned to swim in the Pacific?” I asked.

“Pretty much at first,” she grinned. “Pools are more efficient, though, so I was in those before long.”

We chatted easily—**very** easily, for **me**—throughout the rest of the meal. I paid the bill, and we left.

“Did you want to do something else?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she grinned. “What’s playing at the movie theatre?”

“Let’s go find out,” I grinned back. We started walking to the theatre, and she took my hand again.

It was pathetic, really, how much of a thrill I got from that. I was 18 years old, and I got a thrill out of a girl holding my hand. I tried to just enjoy it, and forget how pathetic I was. Anyway, we found a romantic comedy we both wanted to see, so I paid for our tickets, we got some popcorn, and went in.

It was a good movie, and we both enjoyed it, laughing as we munched on the popcorn. After the popcorn had been exhausted, we put the tub on the floor—and she leaned closer to me and wrapped her arm around mine. It took me a minute to notice—it **was** a good

movie—and not noticing right away made the little thrill I got when I **did** realize a little less pathetic.

Anyhow, we got out of the movie and walked hand-in-hand to her dorm, laughing and discussing the funnier points of the film. I took the elevator up to her room with her.

“I’d invite you in, but my roomie is temperamental about her beauty sleep,” Sheila giggled.

“That’s fine. I’m going to get woken up about 8 tomorrow morning, anyhow. Jake’s got a game, and he’s not quiet in the morning,” I laughed.

“Good. Brendan, I had a great time. I **told** you this date wouldn’t be a disaster.” She smiled at me. “I’d like to do it again.”

“I’d like that, too. I had a great time myself.”

“Good.” She looked at me, and then leaned over and kissed me! It wasn’t a five-minute-long heartstopper or anything like that, but it was sweet and warm and nice. **Very** nice. I was shocked at first, but then returned the kiss.

“Goodnight,” she said, breaking the kiss, blushing, as she opened the door to her room.

“Goodnight,” I said, and watched her go in. Then I floated back to my dorm!

--SEVEN--

As I had anticipated, the roomie woke me up around 8:30 with all his banging and cursing.

“You know,” I said sleepily, “with you around, who needs an alarm clock?”

“Sorry, Rooms,” Jake laughed. “I know I’m a pain in the ass in the morning. Used to drive my little brother nuts back when we shared a room.”

“That’s OK. I don’t want to sleep all day anyhow.”

“How’d the date go?” he asked.

“Really well, actually.”

“Told ya!”

“Yes, you did,” I grinned. “We went for sushi. I’d never had it. I liked it.”

“Give me a bratwurst any day.”

“Yep, you’re from Milwaukee, all right,” I laughed. “Then we went to the movies.”

“So, did Mr. Inexperienced kiss her goodnight?” he laughed.

“Didn’t have a chance. She kissed **me** before I even finished agonizing about whether or not to try,” I grinned.

“Good for her!”

Just then there was a knock on the door. “Must be someone from the team,” Jake said, and went to answer the door.

“Nope, **you’re** not on the football team,” I heard him laugh.

I heard a familiar giggle from the other side of the door. “Hi, I was looking for Brendan.”

“You must be Sheila,” Jake said.

“And you must be Jake.”

“In the flesh. Come on in,” and he opened the door.

“Jesus, Rooms, I’m not **dressed!**” I said from—thankfully—under the covers.

“Is that my hello?” Sheila giggled.

“Hello. Do you mind if I get dressed?” I smirked.

“You really **do** embarrass easily,” she laughed. “Are you **completely** naked?” she said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Well, boxer shorts.”

“Then, who cares?” she grinned. “You’ve seen **me** in a swimsuit. Anyway, do you have any plans today?”

“Well, this afternoon, I was going over to the stadium to see Rooms over there decapitate UCLA’s quarterback.”

“Jake Atkinson, number 58, at your service. Quarterback demolition a specialty.”

Sheila giggled. “That sounds like fun. Would you mind company?”

“Not at all,” I said, flabbergasted.

“Good. First, the reason I’m here so **early** is I was looking for someone to eat with.”

“OK. That sounds good,” I said. “I was thinking about brunch myself.”

“And his usual eating partner has to go eat at the training table,” Jake grinned.

“Good, then that’s settled,” Sheila said.

“Great. Uh, but, would you **please** mind going out of the room so I can get dressed?”

“Damn. I wanted to see,” she giggled. “OK, fine, I’ll step out for a minute. Hurry up!”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said as she slipped out the door.

I got out of bed and found some clothes. Jake came over to me and said, softly, “Man, Brendan, this girl **really** likes you! And she’s cute as all hell.”

“That, Rooms, is scarier than UCLA’s offensive line.”

“I’m not scared of UCLA’s offensive line,” he said. “I can handle ‘em. And you know what, Bren? You can handle **this**. She’s making it **easy** for you. Most girls play the game. She’s not—probably because she’s figured out you don’t know the rules. Go out for a date, and then show up at the guy’s door at 9 the next morning? This does **not** happen! She’s making it easy. I’ll bet you wouldn’t have called her today, left to your own devices. You probably would’ve stared at the phone all day, wanting to call, but not do it.”

“You know me too well,” I laughed.

“And I’m sure she knew the same thing.”

“You’re right, she **is** making it easy.”

“She is. Go with it, you understand me?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You decent?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Good.” He stepped out of the door. “He’s all yours,” he grinned to Sheila.

“Hit ‘em hard, Rooms,” I called after him.

“Always do.” With that, he headed down the hall.

She came back in, smiling. I took a good look at her. It was still warm in Palo Alto—in fact, we were in a spell of a few days in the mid-eighties. Not what I was used to in mid-October in Chicago, that’s for sure! And she was dressed for the weather. Shorts. A blue spaghetti-strap belly shirt. Sandals. She even had her toenails painted bright red. It was very sexy—the sexiest I had ever seen her dress, not counting the swimsuit of course. I wondered if it was deliberate. Jesus, **that** was a frightening thought!

“Are you all set, Mr. Shy?” she smirked. I just nodded. “Good. Then let’s go! I’m starving.” She grinned and grabbed my wrist, giving it a little playful tug. I panicked and tried to pull my wrist out of her hand. She noticed the panic—and then she noticed my wrist.

Fuck. My deep dark secret.

“What’s this?” she said, turning my wrist over to look.

“Accident,” I lied lamely.

“Brendan, my mother’s an emergency room nurse, and I’m pre-med.. I know a few things. You don’t get scars like this on your wrist from an accident. They’re too straight and even.” I didn’t say anything. “When?” she asked.

“A couple of summers ago,” I admitted. “About three weeks before junior year began.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I don’t like to talk about it,” I said.

She looked at me, confused, then sat down on my bed. “Bren, come here and sit,” she said. I did. “Look, I just don’t get it. Why? Why would you do something like that? Someone who has so much going for them? Jesus, you’re the smartest person I know!”

“Yep,” I agreed bitterly. “You want another word for ‘smartest person you know’? I have one for you. That word is **freak**. I’m a goddamn fucking freak, and that’s how I’ve been treated most of my life. Faced with the reality of going back to the torture chamber called high school, I snapped.”

“Was it that bad?”

“Let’s see,” I said, “there was the broken wrist in ninth grade. The concussion from having my head slammed into a brick wall in tenth grade. We’ll just gloss over the **minor** bumps and bruises. And I haven’t even got into the **verbal** abuse. And let’s just say that the first person I’ve **ever** considered a real friend is Jake, and I met him all of a month and a half ago. Look, first of all, I wrecked the curve in every class I was in, for twelve years of school. Plus I’m skinny and weak—after watching you swim, I have no doubt **you** could kick my ass. Add to the fact that I’m socially inept—well, I spent twelve years

with a target on my back. I do not fit into the world I live in—so I made an attempt to leave it.”

“What happened?”

“My mother came home unexpectedly. She thinks she had a vague premonition. **That** part I **do** regret, because my parents were **never** the problem and I put them through hell.”

“I knew you had a bad time in high school, but I didn’t know it was **this** bad.” She took a breath. “You regret failing, don’t you?”

“I did then, for a long time. Of course, word got around, and I was treated like **more** of a freak. Funnily enough, I was picked on less. People steered clear of me, because then I was ‘the crazy person’ in addition to the rest of my defects. Being invisible isn’t fun, but it’s better than being beaten.”

“Well, I need to say something. Two things, actually.” She took a breath again. “I am **so** happy that you failed, I can’t tell you.” I looked up at that one, startled. “Second of all—look, I’m not going to argue with what you were feeling. Only you live in your head. However, I need to tell you something. You’re **not** socially inept. You may have been then—or you may have been when you were younger, those things tend to linger when you go through school with a lot of the same people for years.” I nodded. “But you’re **not** now. You need to know that.”

“Well, **you** see it. I don’t know if anyone else does.”

“I get the feeling that Jake does,” she smiled.

“You’re right. He does,” I admitted. “You guys make it easy. Both of you. I don’t know how much of it is me.”

“More than you think,” she said. “Hey, let’s go eat, all right?”

“Yeah,” I smiled.

“I’m glad you told me,” she said.

“You didn’t give me much of a choice,” I grinned.

“I’m very good at that,” she grinned back. We headed off to the dining hall. We had a nice chat—thankfully, the topic of my suicide attempt was dropped—and then she told me, as we finished eating, “Hey, I have to swim. I still want to go to the game with you, but I need to get an hour in. Come with?”

“Sure, I don’t mind watching you,” I said.

“Actually, it’s free swim time right now. You have a swimsuit?”

“**Me?** Swim with **you**? I’d be too embarrassed.”

“Hey, I wasn’t too embarrassed to do calculus with you, was I?”

“Hmm. Good point. OK, my swimsuit’s in my room.”

“That’s the spirit.” We went and got my swimsuit, and went to the aquatic center. We changed, and I met her on the pool deck.

“And you didn’t want me to see you in boxer shorts,” she smirked at me in just my swimsuit. I blushed from head to toe.

We found side-by-side lanes, and jumped in. I started swimming, just a basic freestyle stroke. She hung back for a minute, and then started backstroking. It was a 25-meter pool. I was 10 meters down before she even started. She caught me at 20 meters. Whoooooosh! I was not even halfway back before she passed me doing her second lap. I thought she was fast watching her from the stands. Right next to her? It was like walking alongside a freight train.

After a few more laps—it was my third, and about her fifth or sixth—she waited for me at the end of the pool.

“Now you’re going to tell me you’re just getting warmed up, right?” I said.

“Of course,” she grinned. “Don’t forget for a second that I’m a world-class competitive swimmer, OK?”

“I’m not. It’s fine. But, boy, being this close...I feel like I keep getting caught in the wake of a speedboat.”

She giggled. “You know what? You’re a good swimmer—for an amateur. Nothing to be ashamed of.” She looked at me. “It’s a pity you’re too old to take it up seriously. You have the body for it.”

“Excuse me?” I laughed. “You have more muscles in your big toe than I have on my entire body.”

“Well, if you were doing it competitively, you’d weight train, silly,” she laughed. “Anyhow, though, I’m a backstroker. What you have the body for is the butterfly. Even when butterflyers put on muscle, they’re all long and lean.”

“Butterfly?”

“I’ll teach you,” she grinned. “Even for recreational swimming, for someone with your bodytype, you’ll find it’s more efficient.” She taught me the basics of the butterfly, and

had me work on it some while she went back to her power backstroking. She was right, though, I **did** find it easier. And I told her so.

“You picked that up quicker than I picked up calculus,” she giggled.

“I’ll have to get used to it, though—it’s a shoulder movement I’m not used to. They’re a bit sore.”

“Yeah, that’s the hardest part learning the butterfly.”

“Do you swim the butterfly?” I asked her.

“Occasionally. I don’t swim it in major competition, though at the college level you swim a lot of different strokes, so I may end up doing it here next year. However, I **do** swim the individual medley in competition, and that’s all four strokes in succession.”

We swam a bit longer, then got out and went to change. She met me outside the locker rooms.

“Almost game time,” I said.

“Let’s go.”

We made our way to the stadium. We went in and found the student seating. Sheila looked around, and then we heard, “Hey, Sheila!”

Sheila waved, and said, “Come on!” to me, and we made our way in the direction of the shout. We went into the seating, and found two seats next to two girls, a tall brunette and a petite redhead.

“This is my roommate Andrea,” she said, pointing to the redhead. “And this is our floormate Eileen. Guys, this is Brendan.” I shook their hands, and we sat.

Uh-oh. Her alone—well, I was beginning to deal with that. Being around **other** people was still an anxiety attack causer.

“Is this the guy you went out with last night? The one who’s helping you with calculus?” Andrea asked.

“This would be he, yes,” she giggled.

“You like **football**?” the other one, Eileen, asked in a disbelieving tone of voice. It sounded like scorn to me—but Sheila squeezed my hand.

“To watch, yes,” I replied. “I certainly don’t **play**, not with **this** physique, but I’ve always been a fan.” Andrea giggled. Sheila squeezed my hand again. “See number 58 for us?” I asked. They both nodded. “That’s Jake Atkinson, my roommate.”

“Jake Atkinson’s your roommate?” Andrea asked. I nodded. “Oh, he’s such a hunk!” she proclaimed.

“Get in line,” I laughed. “When Sheila came and knocked on my door this morning, my first thought was that there’s a girl at our door—and it’s not for **him**? I almost fainted. I keep telling him I’m going to make him up a spreadsheet to help him keep track.” All three girls giggled at that. “Hey, Jake’s a football player, he’s a hell of a nice guy—and I’ve heard that ‘he’s a hunk!’ thing more than once. Guess what that adds up to? Chick magnet.”

“And you just sit on the side and collect his leftovers,” Andrea teased.

“NO WAY!” Sheila interrupted. “I met **Brendan** first. I didn’t meet Jake until this morning, actually. I’m no leftover.”

“No, you’re not,” I laughed. Andrea just looked at Sheila. “Anyhow, Andrea, since you’re Sheila’s roommate and all—you can be **my** leftover, and I’ll just toss you on over Jake’s way.”

“YOU’RE ON!” she enthused, to laughter from all of us. Sheila squeezed my hand, and whispered in my ear, “I **told** you you weren’t socially inept!”

Anyhow, we watched the game, we won. Jake had a great game—including two sacks, one of which I predicted before the play just from the formation, which **really** impressed the three girls. Sheila and I got up at the end of the game, and she said goodbye to her friends, and walked out of the stadium with me.

“It’s almost supper time,” she said. “You want to get supper and then find something to do tonight?”

“Sure,” I said—though I was getting more amazed every second. This girl had been by my side since 9 am. It was almost 5 p.m. She was showing **no** desire to leave. Amazing.

We got supper, then went back to my room to contemplate the evening. Jake came in shortly after we got there.

“Yo, Rooms, nice game,” I greeted him.

“Ain’t I the best,” he grinned, slapping me five. Then he turned and saw Sheila. “Wow, are **you** still here? Are you, like, stuck to him, or what?” he teased.

“Something like that,” she grinned. “We’re going to do something tonight, but what we’re going to do is still under discussion.”

“Good,” Jake said. “This was our fourth home game of the year. After the first three, I tried to get him to come to the post-game party. He keeps refusing, even though it’s a

good time and I've promised I'll introduce him around and make sure he has fun. So, maybe **you'll** have better luck. If I know him, you've been leading him around by his nose all day, and he's let you—so keep doing it."

"HEY!" I yelled in mock-anger while Sheila giggled. "She has **not** led me around by my nose. Going to the game was **my** idea."

"Uh-huh. Only because you suggested it first," Jake said. "Am I right?" he asked Sheila.

"Well, yeah, I was going to suggest it," she giggled.

"See? Now drag him to the party." Jake said.

"I just don't do parties," I maintained.

"Look, Brendan, you did fine at the game, even with my friends." Sheila said. "You'll do fine at the party. Jake's going to know everyone there, and I bet I'll know most people. You'll be fine." She looked at Jake. "He thinks he's socially inept."

"That's crazy!" Jake said. He turned to Sheila. "Do you know how many people I have traipsing in and out of this room? Football buddies. **Girls**. They **all** like him. Socially inept, my ass." He turned to me. "You're shy, it's true—but you're **not** inept."

"That's what **I** keep telling him," Sheila added. "Brendan, listen. Let's **try** going to the party. If it's that bad for you, we'll leave and find something else to do."

I thought about it, and finally gave in. "OK. We'll give it a try."

We went, and it started out fine. I **did** know a lot of people there, some of Jake's friends from the football team, and even some of his girlfriends. People chatted with me like I was a normal person. Knowing something about football helped with the guys from the team—I could talk football and not sound like an idiot. That had never worked in high school, but it worked here. I even thought that a couple of the girls were trying to flirt with me. Not that I was sure about that, not having much experience being flirted with—but I'd seen 'em all flirt with Jake. Not that it mattered, anyhow, what with Sheila's arm wrapped possessively around mine. And I was **not** complaining about **that**!

After a bit, Sheila walked over to a cooler, and withdrew a beer. "Want one?" she asked.

"I'm not much of a drinker."

"That's OK. Far be it for me to try to talk you into it, that'd be contributing to the delinquency of a minor," she grinned.

"I'm surprised **you** drink. Training, and all that," I told her.

“That’s why I drink very seldomly and very sparingly. I told you I don’t go to parties often. When I do go, I have a good time—but I limit myself.”

“Good philosophy.” I reached in and grabbed a beer.

I had a few, over a bit of a time period—but, as I told her, I wasn’t a drinker. Now, I **wasn’t** drunk—but I was feeling it a bit. How much became apparent when, somehow, I ended up sitting in a chair—with Sheila on my lap! I’m not even sure how that **happened**! No, I **wasn’t** drunk. I guess I was—loose, though. I was also **hard**. There was **no** doubt in my mind that she felt it underneath her ass. I probably would’ve freaked out—if I hadn’t been a wee bit tipsy.

“Hey, what’s up?” Jake said, as he approached us.

“Howdy, Rooms!” I said.

“He’s had a couple,” Sheila laughed.

“Only a couple,” I maintained.

“But you’re having a good time,” Jake said.

“Oh, I think he’s having a **very** good time,” she said—and ground her ass on my dick!

Jake just laughed. “I think you’ve had a couple yourself,” he grinned at Sheila.

“Too true,” she grinned back. “I’m as much of a lightweight as he is. Though **not** so I don’t know what I’m doing, or anything.”

“Good. Have fun. See you later.”

We stayed for a while longer, and headed out about midnight. The party was closer to my dorm than hers, so she led me into mine.

“Hey, I should be walking you to your dorm, not the other way around, you know,” I protested.

“You’re drunker than I am,” she giggled. “There’s campus police all over, and it’s only a block away, I’ll be fine.”

We walked down my hall. As was customary on a weekend night, there were a bunch of guys gathered in the hall, just chatting. They greeted me as Sheila and I walked down the hall—our arms around each other, by the way.

“Why are all your floormates staring at you?” she whispered after we got past them.

“Trying to figure out what **you** are doing with **me**, no doubt,” I whispered back.

“Oh **stop** it!” she said.

“Hey, it’s the truth.”

“Fine,” she said as we got near my door. “Let’s **really** give them something to stare at,” she grinned—and backed me up against the wall next to my door.

“Oh really,” I grinned, as I put my hands on her waist. I was **just** drunk enough to go with it.

“Really.” She threw her arms around my neck, and leaned in. We **both** leaned in. Like I said, just drunk enough. Our lips met.

When she kissed me yesterday—well, I don’t want to call it **chaste**, but it **was** fairly innocent. This one was **not**. She bore into me, and I returned it—then her lips parted and her tongue snaked its way into my mouth. Looking back on it, if had been stone sober I would’ve **frozen**, right there. I know alcohol loosens your inhibitions. Some people don’t need to have their inhibitions loosened, and probably shouldn’t drink. However, I was **so** inhibited that every little bit helped. Under the effect of a few beers, I kissed her right back—tongue and all.

We finally broke the kiss under the overwhelming desire to breathe. By that point, I realized, she was practically **pasted** to me. She separated her body from mine with a visible effort.

“Wow, can **you** kiss!” she said.

“You **are** kidding.”

“No. I know you haven’t done it much—“

“Try **ever**,” I interrupted.

“That was your first **kiss**?” she said, dumbfounded.

“Well, technically, last night was,” I grinned. “I thought you would’ve figured that out from my story this morning.”

“Yeah, I probably should have, but you—and we—I mean, **wow**!” She was **flustered**! I couldn’t believe it.

“You’re drunk,” I teased.

“No, I am **not**,” she asserted. “However, I am feeling a wee bit loose. So, I think I’d better leave now, OK? Because if I follow you into that room, something’s going to happen that we’re not ready for right now.”

WHAT? I was sober enough to pick up on **that!** “OK,” was all I said.

“See you later,” she said, and kissed me again, a quick one. Then I watched her walk down the hall, followed by the eyes of my completely stunned floormates. “Goodnight, guys,” she giggled, and disappeared around the corner.

Every eye turned back to me.

“Goodnight, guys,” I grinned, and went into my room.

--EIGHT--

I woke up this morning to the sight of my roommate sitting at his desk, grinning at me.

“I’m glad you’re awake.”

“Barely,” I muttered.

“I understand I missed a floor show last night. You and Sheila making out right in the hall.”

“Well, I don’t know if I’d call it making out,” I said.

“Don and Jimmy did,” he grinned. They were a couple of the guys on the floor.

“Yeah, well...” I trailed off.

“How many times have you ever kissed a girl?” Jake asked. He didn’t know about my suicide attempt—if he had noticed the scars, he’d never asked about them—but he knew my history.

“Well, Friday night was the first.”

“Bren, how drunk were you last night?”

“**I wasn’t**, really, Rooms. I was slightly tipsy. I was feeling good, just good enough to go with it. But I wasn’t drunk.”

“How drunk was she?”

“Less than I was,” I grinned.

Just then the phone rang. “Hello?” I said.

“Hi! You decent?” It was Sheila.

“No, I just woke up,” I laughed.

“Well, **get** decent. You have a half hour. I want my brunch partner again today.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

After I had hung up the phone, I grinned at Jake. “Sheila. She wants to eat brunch again today. She’ll be here in half an hour.” I started hunting up some clothes.

Jake looked at me with a serious face. “Bren? We need to talk.”

“Yeah?”

“Look, you’ve been mighty generous with your homework help. It’s time to return the favor. I’m going to help you with **my** area of expertise.”

“Football?” I grinned.

“No, the **other** one,” he laughed. “Women.”

“You mean the Jake Atkinson How To Go Through Women Like Water plan?” I laughed.

“No, not at all. You may not believe this, but I **have** had a couple actual relationships. And I’m open to another one. I liked having a steady girlfriend, though neither of them in the end worked out. However, I’m **picky** about steady relationships. I’m **not** as picky about having a good time. Because of this, once or twice, when I’ve missed the signals, I’ve hurt someone.”

“Bren, what Sheila is doing right now is a full-court press, OK? I know she knows you’re the way you are, but she is coming on **strong**. Friday night, all day **and** all night yesterday, and she’s on her way over again today? This is serious.”

“And what **you** have to do, roommate of mine, is decide—and in one hell of a fucking hurry—how you feel about this girl. Trust me. Forget your insecurity, forget your inexperience, forget all that bullshit. Trust what **I** am saying, because I see the signs. Sheila has got it bad, bad, bad for you. OK? And you need to decide how **you** feel. Because, if this goes on much longer, and you don’t feel the way **she** does, she’s going to get hurt badly. And I know you well enough to know that you **don’t** want that.”

“Sheila is popular. She’s accomplished. She’s pretty. And she wants **you**. And you need to decide if you can deal with that, before she gets in too deep, OK?”

“Wow,” was all I said. “Well, Rooms, I’ve got a confession to make. I’ve been nuts about her for weeks now.”

“Good,” he grinned. “But can you handle it?”

“That’s a good question.”

“I think you guys need to talk.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. Excuse me while I look in the closet under the dust bunnies.”

“For what?” he asked.

“My **nerve**.” He laughed at that one.

“You won’t need it. **SHE LIKES YOU!** Remember that. You like her. The rest is just working out the details, got me?”

“Got you.” Just then, there was a knock on the door.

We went to brunch, and Jake tagged along—at Sheila’s insistence. “Don’t you guys usually eat together if Jake’s not with the team? Then **git!** Both of you!”

We ate, had a good time, then Sheila asked me what I was doing for the afternoon.

“I need to study some,” I said, “but that won’t take all afternoon.”

“Do you mind if I join you? I’ll go and get my books.”

“OK,” I said. She headed for her dorm, and Jake and I headed for mine. “Full court press. What did I tell you?”

“It’s like she can’t bear to leave my side,” I said in complete amazement.

“Yup. Listen, I’m going to study with you guys for a while—but I need to go lift weights, watch film, do football things. I’m going to be gone for four or five hours. **Talk** to her, OK?”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Sheila came up shortly after that, and the three of us studied for a while. After some time, Jake said, “Hey, Brains. You got a few minutes to check this for me?”

“Sure,” I said. He handed over a paper.

“Writing assignment,” Jake told Sheila. “He always checks them for me. He’s an ace writer.”

“You can write, **too?**” she said. “Jesus. I thought you were just a math whiz. You trying to make me feel inferior?”

“If it really bothers you, you can take me back in the pool and try to teach me the backstroke. That’ll kill your inferiority complex in a damn hurry. And, by the way, I wasn’t that good at biology, either,” I grinned.

“Good!” she grinned.

I read Jake’s paper, which was fine—I suggested a few minor changes, which he made. Then he was off to do his football thing.

I stretched. “I think I need a break, my eyes are blurry and my muscles are knotted.”

“Me, too,” Sheila said. She got up from my bed, where she had had her stuff spread out, and walked up behind me, and started massaging my shoulders.

“That should take care of the knotted muscles,” she giggled.

I took a deep breath. “Sheila? What’s going on?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s just—well, look. We went out Friday night. You came here at 9 yesterday morning and we were together until midnight. And here you are at 9 this morning and it doesn’t look like you’re planning on leaving anytime soon.”

“Would you prefer that I go?” she asked in a small voice.

“No! Not on your life!” I blurted. “Well, er, what I mean is....”

“I liked your first answer better,” she giggled.

I smiled back at her. “No, I do **not** want you to leave. I just don’t know what’s going on.”

She sighed, and sat back down on my bed. “OK. I had a plan. Two plans, actually. I figured if I just refused to go away, one of two things would happen. You’d either figure it out, or you’d get so used to me being around that it’d become habit.” She smiled. “And I’m going to be away for close to a week. I’m leaving Wednesday and not coming back until late Monday. A swim meet, in Rio de Janeiro. So I wanted to put my plan into action now. You opened the door when you asked me out. That’s when I decided to do it.”

I was **stunned**.

She went on. “I know some of your history. You don’t know mine. First of all, that wasn’t my first kiss—but it wasn’t far off. I’m not much more experienced than you are. And I’ve never gone much farther than kissing. Yes, I’m as much of a virgin as you are.”

This time I said it. “I’m stunned.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because you’re so, I don’t know, **aggressive**. And sure of yourself.”

“I’m not really sure of myself. Aggressive? Well, yeah. That goes along with my story.” She took a deep breath. “Look, I was popular in high school. I’m outgoing. I like to think I’m friendly. I hung around with the quote-unquote cool kids. And being known as a nationally ranked swimmer didn’t hurt. So, I got asked out a lot.”

“Like I said, I’m friendly—so, unless you were really disgusting, I didn’t turn you down if you asked me out. Now, that’s for a first date—second and third dates are a different story. But very few people who asked me out for a first date got turned down, at least through my first three years of high school.”

“However, something dawned on me gradually. If you’re a popular outgoing girl, you know who asks you out on dates? Two types of guys. The first are guys like Jake. I **like** Jake. We could be good friends. But there’s no ‘click’ there—and Jake, if I have him pegged correctly, would lose interest if he wasn’t in my pants by the second date.”

“Right on the money,” I laughed.

“But he wouldn’t hold it against me if I said no. He’d just move on to the next.”

“Correct again.”

“I dated a couple Jakes in high school. We tried it, I didn’t feel anything more than friendship, they weren’t getting any, and that was that—and I ended up being good friends with a couple of them. That wasn’t the problem.”

“The problem was the **other** guys who ask out girls like me. The same type of guys that, I have no doubt, lead the torment against **you**. The asshole jocks who think they’re God’s gift and can get away with anything. This came to a head early senior year.” She took a breath. “I have strong swimmers’ legs, and I know how to aim a kick, and that is the **only** thing that kept me from being date-raped about a year ago.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“I pretty much stopped dating then. And I took stock. And I realized something—I had **never** been aggressive towards guys. I didn’t have to, right? I had guys falling in my lap, right? I didn’t need to go after **them**, they went after **me**. But, when I had that bad experience, and I stepped back, I realized something. I was getting asked out, all right—but not by the right guys. I can tell you off the top of my head four guys from high school that, if we had gone out, we would’ve had a better than decent shot to get past a second date. But they weren’t in the ‘cool kids’ clique and were afraid to ask. And I didn’t really **realize** that until it was too late. Hey, guys ask me out, right? Why would anyone be shy

to ask **me** out, I never say no—that's what I thought. But I was insulated by my crowd. It was hard for me to realize that I intimidated people. But I did."

"So, when I came here, I said to myself—college is a new chance. And I vowed that **I** was going to choose who I went out with. I wasn't going to hang around waiting. I was going to make it happen. And then I met you," she smiled at me. "You are the kind of guy I wish had asked me out back in high school—only you're even **more** so. And, to tell you the truth, if I were at all used to doing this, I would've been **more** aggressive. I wanted to ask you out the first day I met you. But I was only strong enough to give out not-so-subtle hints."

"But after we went out Friday night, and I had **such** a good time, I said to myself, don't let him get away. Do **not**. Do everything you can." She grinned at me. "So here I am."

I just looked at her, my mind in a complete haze.

"OK, will you **say** something?" she laughed.

"When my brain starts working again."

"**Your** brain is on the fritz? Now **that** is a serious problem. That could cause power outages all over Palo Alto."

"Very funny," I grinned. "All right, you want me to say something? Here it is. Why **me**?"

"You're sweet," she said. "You're funny. I like the fact that you're smart, I find that attractive. We compliment each other well. You're honest and solid and trustworthy. I like **nice** guys, Brendan. You might be the nicest I've ever met. And you're handsome. You have a good face. I love your eyes. And, OK, I'll admit—being 5'10", the fact that you're **tall** is a big plus! Oh, and one more thing—and I don't know if you'll like this one—but I find vulnerability as sexy as all get-out," she grinned.

"Oh," was all I said.

"What I don't know is, how you feel about **me**," she said quietly.

I took a deep breath. "I'm crazy about you," I managed to say. "If I'm honest with myself, I have been since that first day you came up here for help with calculus."

"OK, then, let me throw it back in your face. Why me?"

"You're sweet yourself. You're right about us complimenting each other. I like your vivaciousness, I always have been attracted to that. You're smart, honest, and trustworthy yourself. I'm not going for a second lie and pretend your looks don't play a part, either," I grinned. "Especially the first time I saw you swim."

"Good," she laughed. "You've never had a girlfriend."

“No.”

“You’ve got one now.”

“Good,” I grinned.

Unbelievable. Just fucking unbelievable.

And Jake was right. He’ll **love** that!

She grinned at me, and then turned and gathered all her books and papers off my bed. I was still sitting in my desk chair. She pushed all her stuff to the side, grinned, and then pointed at the bed next to her. I walked over, sat next to her—and she **tackled** me!

I thought the kiss last night was unbelievable. This was better. She was all over me, sprawled on top of me on my bed, our lips locked.

“Oh, am I glad that’s settled!” she said after she broke the kiss. Then she kissed me again. She kissed my mouth, and started kissing down my cheek and neck. I just squirmed, and she giggled.

“You’re easy,” she laughed. Then she kissed me again.

“Look,” she said, after she broke the kiss. “Do you know the number one rule of Stanford’s Dating Code?”

“Of course,” I grinned. “‘No Means No,’” I parroted from the indoctrination—I mean, orientation session.

“Good. Well, here’s Sheila’s number one dating rule. Silence does **not** mean no. If I want you to stop, I’ll tell you. OK?”

“OK,” I said.

“Good,” she said, and leaned back into kissing me. That was a hint, I told myself. A big huge honkin’ hint. Oy. Even with a hint like that—hell, I had never done **anything**! Part of me was paralyzed. But only part of me. The other part was screaming, “She likes you, she’s your girlfriend now, stop being such a damn wimp!”

My hand was on her waist, touching bare skin—she was wearing another belly shirt—so, as we kissed, I just moved it up, under the shirt, and slipped my hand over her bra-covered breast. Oh **man** it felt fantastic! And, apparently, not just to me—she moaned into my mouth and kissed me harder. A few minutes of this, and she shifted, reached her hands behind her back—and suddenly my hand was slipping **under** the now-unhooked bra. She wasn’t huge—I had seen her in a bathing suit, remember, and I was guessing about a B-cup. And she was muscular and broad-shouldered, so they looked smaller than

they would on a thinner girl. But, oh man, under my hand they felt like **mountains**. And, as I fondled her—still kissing—I felt her nipple erect until it was like a hard little pebble under my fingers.

She broke the kiss—though made sure not to break contact with my hand—and gasped, “Oh God. Oh, that feels so good!” She looked up at me. “I need to tell you something. The furthest I’ve ever gone before today was having a guy’s hand there **over** my shirt. So everything from this point on is new for **both** of us. OK?”

I understood. She was saying, don’t be scared. Or that she was scared, too. One or the other. Either way, the message was the same. “OK,” I replied.

She grinned—and reached for the hem of her shirt, and peeled it over her head. Then she dropped the already undone bra from around her shoulders. And she sat there, naked from the waist up, grinning at me.

“Easier access,” she said.

Her breasts, as I’ve said, weren’t overwhelmingly large—but they were round and firm and just awesome. Her nipples were pink and proudly erect. And the **rest** of her? I guess I never knew it before—but I guess I have a thing for jocks. I’d seen her in a swimsuit, and of course I’d seen her arms—which weren’t overwrought but were finely sculpted—but seeing it all **together** like this took my breath away. I had no doubt, now, that what I said before was true—she **could** kick my ass from Palo Alto to Chicago. And **easily**. But what a way to go!

“Something wrong?” she asked, as I just stared at her.

“Absolutely nothing at all,” I said. “You’re beautiful.” She just giggled, and I leaned back into her and kissed her again, putting my hands back on her breasts. She sighed into my mouth. Her reactions emboldened me, so, after a bit, I said, “I want to kiss you.”

“You are, silly,” she giggled.

“Not on the lips,” I said, and started kissing down her neck. Her eyes opened wide in realization, and she shivered as I kissed my way down her neck, and then headed right for her nipple.

“Oh GOD,” she gasped, as I ran my tongue over her nipple. It was fantastic. I did it for a few minutes and she was gasping and squirming the whole time. The position I ended up in, suckling on her boob, I had my hand on her thigh, right at the end of the skirt she was wearing. It seemed to me that she was trying to shift herself, so that my hand would move. But I wasn’t sure—so I tentatively moved my hand up her thigh, under her skirt, just an inch or two.

She spread her legs. “Yes, oh God, yes, Brendan,” she gasped. “Please. Touch me there.”

WOW. I really couldn't believe this was happening. To **me**? **This** fast? I did as she asked, though—was there any question? First outside her panties—which were **very** wet—and then I slipped my hands into the waistband and tugged. She quickly lifted her hips to help me get them off.

I reached my hand between her legs, still suckling on her nipple. Look, I had an idea about the female anatomy—but biology, as I said, was never my strong suit. And females in general **certainly** weren't my strong suit. So, as I reached down between her legs, I disengaged from her boob and said, "Remember. I'm clueless. You have to tell me what feels good."

"OK," she giggled. I reached down and found her opening. I ran my finger around the edge of it, and she moaned. Then I ran my finger up her pussy lips, up from her opening, and she gasped. I did this a few more times, just experimentally. Boy was she wet.

Now, I knew what I was going to look for, but wasn't sure where it was. But Sheila helped me out. The next time I brought my finger up her lips, she gasped "Go a little higher." I did, and found a little nub. I ran my finger over it.

"YES!" she yelled. "That's it, right there, Brendan, oh God right there...."

I worked my hand up and down, flicking the little nub on every upstroke. Every time I did, she shrieked and her legs spasmed. I was still suckling at her breast. After a while, she said, "Faster, Brendan, please, do my clit faster, Oh god..." So I did. I zeroed in and frigged her clit. She started panting and heaving, and then she **howled**, her pelvis coming off the bed, her legs spasming. She grabbed my hand and smashed it into her as she spasmed. Then, regaining her breath, she pulled my hand away from her pussy.

I crawled up next to her, as she calmed down. Then, her eyes fluttered open, she smiled at me and said "WOW!"

"Did you, you know..." I started tentatively.

"Have an orgasm?" She giggled. "Fuck yes! Did I **ever**! And it beat the **hell** out of any I've ever given myself, I'll tell you that."

I laughed. "You know—how did we **ever** get this far this fast?"

"Uhm, well," she said, blushing, "I got carried away. I admit it. But I'm glad I did. Look, I wanted what just happened, but I'm **not** ready to go all the way."

"That's fine, neither am I," I agreed.

"You see? Most guys would be trying to stick it in right now. I knew I could trust you. This is far as I want to go right now. OK?"

“Of course,” I said, though, I must admit, I was a wee bit disappointed. After doing her, I was as horny as I’d ever been in my life, and **very** hard. . I guess I’d have to take care of that myself.

She must have seen something in my eyes, though, because she said, “Oh, no, **that’s** not what I meant! I’m not going to leave you hanging, sweetie,” she grinned at me. She practically ripped my shirt off. And then went for the button on my jeans. And had my jeans and boxers off and my dick out in a **damn** hurry. “And you didn’t want me to see you in boxers,” she giggled. She reached down and took my dick in her hand. She wrapped her hand around it, and started moving her hand up and down.

“I’ve never seen one before. It’s bigger than I’d imagined,” she giggled.

“From what I’ve heard, I’m just average,” I said.

“Still looks big to **me**!” she laughed. “Look, same thing you said to me. I’m clueless. Tell me what feels good.”

“That feels good. You could grip a little harder, but not **too** hard.” She increased her grip just a bit—to where it was perfect—and started a good rhythm. I’d never had any other hand on my dick besides mine—and having **hers** on it was just a completely different experience. Her hand was soft and warm. It was fantastic. After a bit, I managed to say, “A little faster.” She picked up the pace. She was lying next to me but her head was on my shoulder, watching herself jerk me off. After a couple minutes, I yelled “OH GOD!” and came like I’d never cum in my life.

She milked the last of it, then let go. My jism pooled on my stomach. She dipped a finger in it, giggled, and said, “Wow, there’s so **much**!”

“Oh Jesus,” I groaned.

“I’d ask you if **you** came, but that’s obvious,” she laughed.

“Oh, man,” I said. “You were right. Doing myself was **never** like that.”

“Good,” she grinned. Then she got up—still naked—and got the Kleenex from my dresser. She took some and cleaned me up. After she was done, she climbed on top of me and kissed me. “Oh, that was fun!” she enthused.

“I’ll say,” I agreed.

“Wow, though, guys are **messy**!”

“And girls aren’t?” I laughed. “At least what I did was easily cleaned up. Look over to where you were lying when I did you,” I said, pointing beside me. “A nice little present for me to sleep in.” The wet spot on my sheets was plainly apparent.

“Oh, shit!” she laughed.

“It’s OK, I don’t mind,” I grinned.

“And you used to be shy,” she grinned back. We cuddled for a bit, still naked, and then she said, “Are you OK?”

“Yes. I’m just stunned. A lot has happened in a very short time period.”

“Well, yeah. You know, I didn’t intend on going this far,” she admitted. “Putting your hand on my boobs, yes, I knew I was going to let you do that. Going up my skirt? That just happened.”

“Oh. Well, are **you** OK?”

“Oh, hell yes,” she proclaimed. “I don’t regret it. It was wonderful. **You’re** wonderful. But it was very far very fast for me, too.”

“I know,” I said.

“It’s strange. I’m careful about stuff like that—like I said, that’s by far the farthest I’ve ever gone. But I find that I really trust you, so I’m OK with it. Better than OK. **Really** better than OK,” she grinned.

“Uh-huh,” I laughed. “We’d better get dressed before Jake gets back.”

“Good plan,” she smiled. We got dressed and tried to study some more. I’ll admit, it wasn’t all that successful. She kept interrupting me with kisses. Not that I **minded** all that much.

Jake came back after a while and we all went to supper. Afterwards, Sheila came back to our room and said, “Look, I need to go back to my room and **really** study, OK?”

“I know what you mean,” I laughed.

“Save me either tomorrow or Tuesday night, OK? Since I’m leaving for Rio Wednesday morning.”

“Tuesday,” I said.

“Great. See you in Calculus tomorrow,” she said, and kissed me goodbye. “Night, Jake,” she said, and she was gone.

“So,” Jake said after she had gone. “Spill the beans. What happened?”

“What makes you think anything happened?” I said.

“Well, I thought you were going to talk to her.”

“I did.” I was enjoying stringing this out.

“So, how’d the talk go?”

“Good.”

Poor Jake was really getting exasperated by now. “So what **happened**?” he asked again.

I grinned. “OK. What happened is I seem to have acquired a girlfriend. Happy now?”

“Great!” he said.

“And then we didn’t get a whole hell of a lot of studying done,” I grinned.

“Wait a minute. You **didn’t**.”

“Oh, no, not **that**. She’s a virgin herself, and we’re not ready for that yet. We did a few other things, though.”

“Good for you. I’m happy, really, Bren. You deserve it. And she’s a real sweetheart.”

“That she is,” I smiled.

--NINE--

Sheila and I went out Tuesday night, then went back to my room and fooled around again. Then she was off for Rio. I asked her if it was going to be on TV. “Yeah, on one of the ESPN’s, but I don’t know when. It might even be on after I get back,” she giggled. “They don’t show minor swim meets live.”

Anyhow, she left. It was kind of disconcerting, only because things were so new. All of a sudden, I have my first girlfriend—and then, all of a sudden, she’s gone for a week.

The football team didn’t have a game that weekend—but they had a party Saturday night. Jake convinced me to go. Even without Sheila, I still had a good time. Not **as** good a time, of course, but a good time nevertheless.

What was amazing was that I got hit on! Leslie MacWhorter, a friend of Jake’s. We were chatting, sitting next to each other on a couch, when I realized she was moving closer and closer. Then she was practically plastered against me! “Brendan, you’re such a sweetie,” she purred. “We should go out sometime. Or maybe we should just fool around.” And she moved in like she was going to kiss me!

No, I didn’t lose my mind. “Sorry, Leslie,” I said, stopping her, “You’re very nice, but I have a girlfriend.”

“You do?” she said. “Then why isn’t she **here**?”

“Because she’s in Brazil,” I laughed. “She’s a competitive swimmer, and she’s in Rio for a swim meet this weekend.”

“Oh.” Then she grinned. “Well, what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

“Sorry,” I grinned back. She smiled and shrugged, and that was the end of it. I was **still** stunned. I told Jake about it after we got back to the room, and he smiled and said, “See? Socially inept, my ass.”

“You get used to being treated like a social leper, and you figure it’s you,” I said.

“I’ve seen your wrists,” he said quietly. I just looked at him. “I figured it must have been pretty bad.” I just nodded. “Things are different here. **You’re** different. Well, I don’t know what you were like in high school, but you’re not a social leper, not here.”

“I’m starting to figure that out. Sheila was one thing. Maybe I figured that was a fluke, that we just connected in some strange way. But Leslie coming on to me like that was extremely flattering.”

“Yeah, but I’m glad the flattery didn’t go to your head.” I just looked at him. “You were flattered, but you turned her down anyway.”

“Well, yeah,” I grinned.

Jake just laughed. “You’ve got it as bad as Sheila does.”

“You hadn’t figured **that** out yet?” I laughed.

Sunday we just hung out. Ate, did some studying, watched football. The Packers beat the Bears—which meant I had to do Jake’s laundry this week. Never bet on football. Especially when the Bears are involved. Anyhow, after an early supper, we were watching the ESPN Sunday Night game—which starts at 5:30 on the West Coast. We were watching, and it was a blowout by halftime.

“This sucks,” Jake said. “What else is on?” He flicked up to the next channel—which was ESPN2—and I saw a swimming pool.

“Wait, wait, what’s this?” I said. Then the graphic flashed—Grand Prix swimming from Rio de Janeiro. “Do you mind?” I asked Jake.

“Course not,” he grinned.

“Oh, I just thought of something.” I reached for the phone and dialed. “Hello?” I heard from the other end.

“Hey, Mom, what’s up?”

“Brendan! How are you?”

“Great. Is Dad there?” Mom said he was. “I need you guys to do something. Are you watching anything on TV?”

“Well, it’s on, but we’re not all that interested in it.”

“Good,” I said. “Turn on ESPN2.”

“It’s Brendan,” I heard her say, obviously talking to Dad. “He told me to turn this on. Swimming?” she said to me.

“There’s something that’s going to be on here in the next few minutes that I want you to see. So, how is everything?”

“Good, but we miss you, honey. How are you?”

“Couldn’t be better.”

“I’m very glad to hear that,” she said. We chatted for a while, me with one eye on the TV, when they announced the women’s 100 meter backstroke.

“OK, Mom, now the TV—this is what I wanted you to see.” They suddenly showed Sheila, standing on the pool deck, adjusting her swim cap. “That’s Sheila Mitchell, that’s who I wanted you to see. She’s the second-ranked women’s backstroke in the world.”

“Very nice,” Mom said, obviously confused. “Are you getting into swimming now?”

“Well, only because I’m dating a swimmer. I thought you might like to see what my girlfriend looks like,” I grinned. Oh, I had set Mom up good!

“GIRLFRIEND?” she shrieked. “David, that young lady on the screen, that’s your son’s girlfriend,” she told Dad.

“Wow. I’m impressed,” I heard Dad say.

“As am I,” Mom laughed. “Brendan, she’s lovely.”

“That she is. And wait until you see her swim.” We watched as she entered the pool, set herself, and took off at the gun. She won, and easily.

“Wow, she’s **good**, isn’t she?” Mom said.

“Three medals at the World Championships last year, that’s how good.”

“Oh, they’re interviewing her,” Mom said. We watched as they asked her about swimming and the race and her plans for the Olympics. She was her usual vivacious self.

Then, she said, “Can I say something?” The interviewer nodded, and she looked into the camera and said, “Hi, Brendan! I miss you, sweetie. See you soon.” And then she blew a kiss at the camera!

“Oh, how sweet,” Jake said.

“Was that Jake? Tell him I agree. Very sweet,” Mom said.

“She’s a sweetie,” I said.

“Brendan, you sound **so** happy,” Mom said. “I can’t tell you how happy that makes **me**.”

“I **am** happy.”

“Good.”

“This thing with Sheila is new, but I really like her. And she really likes **me**, surprise surprise.”

“Not a surprise to your mother,” Mom said. “Then again, I’m biased,” she laughed. I chatted for a while with Mom—and Dad, who got on the phone for a bit—then I hung up.

“Excellent. Well played,” Jake said. “Your mom must’ve freaked.”

“Yup,” I grinned.

I went to classes Monday. Sheila didn’t come back from Rio until late, and we both had Tuesday classes, so it wasn’t until 2 in the afternoon on Tuesday that I heard the knock on my door. I opened it, there she was, and I was getting kissed in an instant.

“Well, hello,” I smiled after she broke the kiss.

“Hello to you,” she grinned.

“I saw you,” I told her as she stepped into the room. “It was on Sunday night, and it’s a good thing Jake got tired of the football game and decided to go channel-flipping.”

“I’m glad,” she grinned. “Did they play my little interview?” We sat next to each other on my bed.

“Yes, they did. That was very sweet. Even Jake said so,” I grinned. She just laughed.

“Anyhow, I hope you don’t mind, but I called home and had my parents turn it on. I set Mom up good.” I told her what I had done.

“Oh, that’s perfect,” she grinned. “What did your Mom say?”

“Brendan, she’s lovely!” I said in a fair imitation of Mom’s soprano. Sheila laughed. “Dad agreed, but I think he was more impressed with your swimming.”

“That’s the fastest 100 back I’ve ever swum,” she told me. “The 200 is usually my better race. I think I’ve got inspiration,” she grinned, tickling me. “I’m glad you called your parents, that was very thoughtful,” she said. “I’m glad they got to see me.” Her voice dropped a bit. “Given what you’ve told me, they must worry about you.”

“Yeah, they do. Less so even before they found out I had a girlfriend, because they’ve talked to Jake on the phone and realize what a good friend he is. But, yeah, they’re thrilled.”

“Good,” she said. “Mom met me in Rio. Either Mom or Dad try to make it to all my meets. For big ones, it’s both of them, and Jenny—but for stuff like this, at least one of them tries to make it. So, I told her all about you.”

“What did she say?”

Sheila giggled. “She’s amazed, **and** thrilled, that I actually made it past a first date with someone.”

“Did we? I don’t know, what’s a date?”

“Well, Friday night counts. The football game counts,” she ticked off her fingers. “The party counts. I don’t know if brunch on Sunday counts because Jake was there. Studying together is a gray area. Tuesday night counts.”

“We stayed here Tuesday night.”

“You had your hand down my pants, that counts,” she laughed. “Mom would be **amazed** that **that** happened. She knows my history, or complete lack thereof. But I didn’t feel comfortable about telling her **that** yet.”

“I think I’m happy about that,” I laughed.

--TEN--

The rest of October and into November went swimmingly. Sheila had another meet—all the way in the Ukraine—at the beginning of November, but we still managed to spend a lot of time together. The football team was undefeated. I found I had a widening circle of friends. Sheila and I got known around school as a “couple” and nobody batted an eye—not even **her** friends. Andrea—Sheila’s roommate--and I hit it off as well as Sheila and Jake had. It was quite amazing.

In the middle of November, we were in my room, studying, when Sheila said, “Bren, are you going home for Thanksgiving?”

“Nope. Too far and not enough time to drive, too expensive to fly. I won’t be going home until Christmas.”

“That’s what I thought. Look, I talked to my Mom today, and we agree. I’d love to have you come home to San Diego with me for Thanksgiving, and Mom and Dad would love to have you.”

“Woah,” I laughed. “Meet the parents time. We’re getting serious now.”

“Well, yes, I want them to meet you,” she laughed, “but I also hate the thought of you spending Thanksgiving in a stupid dorm.”

“Great. I’d love to come.”

“Good. Then I can parade you around to all my old friends, too,” she giggled. I stiffened, and—since she had wrapped her arm around mine—she felt it. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lied.

“Brendan, don’t give me that shit. **Talk** to me.”

“Well,” I said, “didn’t you say you hung around with the popular clique?”

“Ah, so that’s it,” she said. “Don’t worry. I’m introducing you as my boyfriend, and you’ll do fine. And my friends will be on their best behavior. I can kick all **their** asses, too,” she grinned.

I cracked up laughing. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“Yup,” she agreed happily. “This will be fine, I promise.” She took a breath. “Bren? I love you, you know.”

It felt like all the air had been sucked out of my lungs. I got dizzy. I couldn’t see anything except her eyes.

Somehow I managed to say it. “I love you, too.” Because I did. She beamed at me, and all I could feel was pure, unadulterated **joy**.

Usually she was the one to initiate physical stuff. She usually kissed me first, stuff like that. Not this time. I took her in my arms, rocked her back onto my bed, and kissed her brains out. While frantically ripping off her clothes. She moaned and squirmed beneath me as I fondled her breasts. Then, as usual, I suckled on them. Then I moved away. There was something I wanted to try.

I used Jake as a sounding-board. He was discreet—at least about what **we** discussed—knowledgeable, and didn't laugh at me asking questions he probably could've answered when he was thirteen. And one piece of advice had come up in conversation the other day. "You've never gone down on her?" he had asked. "You should. Girls love that. Tongues are better than fingers—I've never met a girl that'd disagree."

So, I was fondling her pussy with my hand, but I disengaged my mouth from her breast. I quietly slipped down her body—her eyes were closed, and she was panting under my hand—and moved into position. Then I took my hand away, and ran my tongue right up the length of her pussy, flicking her clit.

She **yelped**. And sat up straight, eyes wide open in stunned disbelief.

"Brendan? **What** are—OOOOOH! What are you doing----AYIIIIIIIIII! Oh GOOOODDDDD!!!" And she flopped back onto the bed.

I stopped. "What does it look like I'm doing?" I chuckled.

"Oh God whatever it is DON'T STOP!!!" I didn't. It took a very short time before she came like a freight train. And it was the **loudest** I'd ever heard her.

As she came down, I climbed up next to her. "Oooooohhhhhh," she groaned, then looked at me. "Oh God, Brendan, where did you pick **that** one up?"

"I don't know."

"Brendan," she said, looking at me. Damn, she **always** knew when I was evading a question.

"OK. Jake told me that it drives girls wild."

"Oh, God, Jake was **right**," she moaned. "I've never felt **anything** like that." She looked at me. "But wasn't it, I don't know, gross?"

"Not at all," I grinned.

"I would've never even **thought** to ask you to do that, because I thought you'd find it gross. Wow. I still can't believe how hard I came!"

"I think you broke my nose," I laughed.

"I wouldn't be surprised!" She started taking my clothes off. "Your turn." I helped her, and I was stripped in no time. She wrapped her hand around my dick and started wanking it—then started to scoot down.

"You don't have to, you know," I said. "There's no payback required around here."

“I know. I want to. I’ve wanted to for a while, but I keep chickening out. But if **you** can do it...” And with that she wrapped her lips around the head of my dick.

Oh, God, it was fantastic. She slid up and down my dick with her mouth. Hey, I was turned on doing **her** in the first place, this **wasn’t** going to take long. A couple of minutes, and I was close. “Honey, almost there,” I grunted in warning. I expected her to pull off—what with the ‘gross’ comment about what I had done—but she didn’t. “WATCH OUT!” I yelped, and she still didn’t pull off. The first three squirts went right down her gullet. Then she **did** pull off—and the rest hit her in the face and neck.

“Wow,” I said after I had caught my breath. “Now, **that** wasn’t ‘gross’?”

“No,” she giggled. “I actually liked it. There was just too **much**!” She got up, grabbed some Kleenex, wiped off her face and neck, and then came back and snuggled up to me in the bed.

“Brendan?”

“Hmm?”

“I was wondering...I mean, you haven’t even brought **up** the subject of, you know, going all the way. And I was wondering why.”

“Because that ball is in **your** court.”

“OK,” she said. “I’m ready but I’m not ready.”

“That’s fine.”

She looked at me. “It’s **going** to happen. I promise. You **will** be my first. And soon. I just need to get completely ready. I’m working on it.”

“As I said, it’s up to you.”

“Where did you come from?” she beamed at me.

“Chicago,” I grinned.

“Oh, you!” she spat. “OK, but you don’t even bring it up, I guess that’s what confuses me. I guess I was wondering if you even, you know, wanted to.”

“Excuse me?” I laughed. “I want you so bad it shows up in my dreams every night.” She looked at me. “Now, I’m not for an instant going to pretend that I’m not also **terrified** by the prospect. I am. But, believe me, it’s not a question of not wanting you.”

“Good,” she sighed.

“Look, you trust me,” I said. She nodded. “And you’ve had big problems trusting guys in the past.” She looked at me in astonishment. “What, you think I hadn’t figured that out? Anyhow, if I try to coerce you into this, even a little bit, I’ll lose your trust—whether you realize it or not. And your trust in me is so valuable I can’t tell you. So, yes, I want you. Absolutely. But the ball’s still in your court.”

“OK,” she smiled. “You knew about my trust issues?”

“I figured it out,” I said. “I read between the lines. I have a funny feeling that near-date-rape was just the tip of the iceberg.”

“It was,” she replied. “Nothing that major, but enough. You know. But, yeah, I didn’t trust guys, not until you. You’ve trusted **me** right from the start. That’s helped, a lot.”

“Just as your confidence in me has helped my self-confidence.”

“Yeah,” she smiled.

“I love you.”

“Love you, too,” she sighed. “You’re the first person I’ve ever exchanged those words with, you know.”

“Ditto.”

--ELEVEN--

The Tuesday before Thanksgiving, we packed our bags, got in her car, and headed for San Diego. We left just before noon, and it was about a ten-hour drive. We drove part of the way on the coast road, since Sheila said “Oh, you have to see it!” She was right, it was beautiful.

We actually didn’t get in to her house until 11 p.m. Everybody was up, waiting for us. Sheila’s Mom came running out of the house as we pulled up. Sheila got out of the driver’s seat—we had switched off the driving, but she drove to her house since **she** knew where it was—and her Mom gave her a big hug.

“Welcome home, sweetie,” Mrs. Mitchell said.

“Glad to be home.” Sheila stepped out of the hug. “Mom, this is Brendan.”

“Finally I get to meet you!” Mrs. Mitchell gushed, and wrapped me in a hug.

“Good to meet you, too,” I managed to get out. Sheila just grinned.

“Hey, honey, get the bags?” she said.

“Get the bags. **She’s** the one that packed a gazillion suitcases, she has more muscles than I do, and it’s ‘honey, get the bags’,” I smirked. Her mother cracked up.

“Oh, OK, I’ll help,” Sheila said, popping open the trunk. “Weenie.”

“Jock.” She stuck her tongue out at me. “Uh-huh,” I grinned. “Here, just grab some of these small ones, I don’t have enough hands. I’ll take all the heavy ones. Wouldn’t want you to rupture any swimming muscles or anything.”

“Got **that** right.”

“What **did** you put in these things, rocks?” I asked as I hefted the bags. She just laughed. “We should’ve brought Jake.”

“Jake is Brendan’s roommate,” Sheila told her Mom, who had been watching all this. “He’s a football player.”

“And very handy to have around for lifting heavy things,” I grinned. “All right, I’ve got them,” I said. Sheila and her mother led the way into the house. We got in, and I put the bags down. Her father was there.

“Dad, Brendan. Brendan, this is my father.”

“Good to meet you,” he said, holding out his hand. I shook it, and returned the greeting.

“And **that** is my sister Jenny,” Sheila grinned.

“Hi,” she said to me. “You’re a miracle, you know.”

“How so?” I asked.

“You lasted more than two dates,” she said with an impish grin.. “Most guys join Sheila’s Trail of Broken Hearts **long** before this.” Yup, she was Sheila’s sister, all right.

“Oh, you just be quiet,” Sheila said.

“Do I lie?” Jenny said. “Anyway,” she walked up to me, “nice to meet you. Now I have a face to put to Sheila’s incessant ‘Brendan’ blather when we talk on the phone.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” I laughed.

“Bren, there are days when you should be very glad you don’t have any siblings,” Sheila laughed.

“Oh, you love me and you know it,” Jenny said. “Well, I’m going to bed. I just stayed up for the grand unveiling,” she giggled. “See you all tomorrow.” She headed upstairs.

“She’s **such** a pest,” Sheila said. I started laughing. “What’s so funny?”

“All I could think was, yup, you two are definitely sisters,” I laughed.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right,” Sheila giggled.

“Come on, let’s show Brendan to his room,” her Mom said. I would be sleeping in the guest room. Decorum, and all that. I didn’t mind.

They got me set up, and Sheila showed me where her room was. It was too late to sneak in one of the rooms and fool around a bit, so she just came in and kissed me goodnight. In the skimpiest nightie I’d ever seen in my life! And she knew it. And she thinks her **sister** is a pest?

“You’d better wear that some night when I can do something about it,” I told her.

“I promise,” she grinned. “I just wanted to get you going a bit. Don’t worry, Mom and Dad will give us some time alone this weekend—they’re not stupid.”

“OK.” We kissed, and she headed off to her room. I fell asleep immediately.

I woke up the next morning to the smell of bacon cooking, and the sounds of talking. I could tell that Sheila, her Mom, and her sister were in the kitchen. There must have been an air vent or something from the kitchen to the room I was in, because I could hear every word.

“So. Brendan,” Jenny was saying. “He’s not your typical guy.”

“That, little sister, is why he’s lasted longer than two dates,” Sheila giggled.

“I guess I’m just surprised,” Jenny said. “He seems like, I don’t know, kind of a geek.”

“He **is** a geek,” Sheila laughed. “You know how we first met? I asked him for help with Calculus.” Jenny cracked up laughing.

“You just never dated anyone like him before,” Jenny said.

“First of all, I dated way, way too many assholes. It just took me too long to figure that out. Second of all, I dated who **asked**. Guys like Brendan never asked me out. And **him** I manipulated into doing it.”

“You’re kidding,” her Mom said.

“Nope. Brendan’s painfully shy. Well, **was**. He’s getting better. He had a very bad high school experience all-around, and it made him feel like he was socially hopeless. He’s **not**, but that’s the way he felt. But I knew I wanted to go out with him right from the first, so I used my feminine wiles.”

Jenny cracked up at that. “So, tell me, big Sis. Have you guys slept together?”

“Oh **Jesus**,” Sheila moaned. “You ask me this in front of **Mom**?”

“Since when have you ever been shy about telling me anything?” her Mom laughed.

“Oh, all right. No, but soon. **Very** soon.” Sheila said.

“So you haven’t had sex yet?” Jenny said.

“Oh, we’ve had sex, we just haven’t gone all the way,” Sheila laughed.

“Oh,” Jenny said, understanding.

I figured this was my cue, before Sheila gave Jenny a play-by-play! So, I rustled up some clothes, got dressed, went to the bathroom, then headed downstairs.

“Hey, sweetie,” Sheila said as I emerged into the kitchen. She walked over to me and gave me a kiss.

“Good morning, Brendan,” her mother said. “Do you drink coffee?”

“By the vat,” I laughed.

“It’s right over there,” she pointed, laughing. “Help yourself. Breakfast will be ready soon. We didn’t wake you up with all the clanging and banging down here, did we?”

“Yes, but I’m used to that,” I laughed. “My roommate is a tornado in the morning.”

We ate, chatting about not much. After we were done, Jenny said, “Hey, Sheila, would you mind braiding my hair? It hasn’t been braided properly since you left.”

“Sure,” Sheila said. “Do you mind?” she asked me.

“Of course not.”

“Good. I’ll take her upstairs. This won’t take long,” Sheila said.

“That’s fine,” I smiled at her. She kissed me on the way by. They headed upstairs, and I was finishing my coffee.

“Brendan? I need to thank you,” Mrs. Mitchell said.

“You’re welcome. For what?”

She laughed. “For making Sheila the happiest I’ve **ever** seen her. I know she’s usually pretty happy, but this is different. I can see it in her eyes.”

“Oh, that. Well, that goes both ways, you know,” I replied.

“I know,” she smiled. “I gather you had a longer way to go. Sheila’s told me that your high school years were less than pleasant.”

“There’s an understatement,” I agreed.

“I take it things are better.”

“Night and day. Like I said, Sheila’s a big part of it. But, even before I met Sheila, things were starting to be different. Stanford’s a wonderful place.”

“For people like you, I can see that. Sheila tells me you’re staggeringly gifted academically.”

“Sheila talks too much,” I laughed.

“Well, you know, you’re her first real boyfriend.” She smiled. “I grilled her mercilessly.”

“Uh-huh,” I laughed. “You know that meet she swam in Rio last month?” She nodded.

“Well, my roomie and I just stumbled on it on TV, so I called my Mom when it was on. When they showed her standing on the pool deck waiting to swim, I said to Mom, look at the TV and meet your son’s new girlfriend.”

“Oh, that’s a good one.”

“So she’s seen Sheila, but not met her yet.”

“You’re from Chicago, right?”

“Yeah. That’s the one thing that throws me. The weather. It’s Thanksgiving and it’s 80 degrees here. Does **not** compute.” She laughed, and just then Sheila came back downstairs.

“She grilling you?” Sheila laughed.

“Not **too** much,” I answered.

Just then the doorbell rang, and Sheila went to answer it. I heard happy squealing. She walked back into the kitchen with two other girls in tow.

“Well, hello, girls!” Mrs. Mitchell said.

“Hi, Mrs. Mitchell,” they said. Then looked at me.

“Bren, this is Mindy and Sara, my two best friends. Guys, this is Brendan, my boyfriend.”

“BOYFRIEND?” Mindy said. “You got past two dates with someone?”

I just cracked up laughing. “This seems to be a recurring theme,” I said.

“You just shut up,” she grinned at me.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get you to Chicago sometime. Then you’ll be hearing disbelief.”

“That you got past two dates with her?” Mindy laughed.

“No, that I got her to go out with me in the **first** place,” I chuckled.

“Bren didn’t have much luck with girls in high school,” Sheila said. “He was just waiting for me, you see. Though he didn’t know it at the time,” she giggled.

We went into the living room and chatted for a while. And, no, I didn’t retreat into my shell—and Sara and Mindy didn’t treat me like something they scraped off their shoe, either.

“Hey, I’m hot. Let’s go swimming,” Sheila said. “We have a pool out back,” she told me.

“Lucky I packed my swimsuit,” I grinned. “Swimming. Outdoors. In November. Toto, we’re definitely not in Chicago anymore.”

“Best part about San Diego,” Sara said.

We all got changed and met by the pool. Sheila dove right in.

“I **hate** swimming with her,” I told Sara. “I feel like I’m standing still.”

“I know what you mean,” she laughed.

“Oh, shut up and get in here, you wimps,” Sheila yelled. “This is recreational, not training, so I won’t try to blow all you slowpokes away.”

“Thank you **so** much,” I laughed.

We were in, just swimming and chatting, when Sheila started power-backstroking.

“There she goes again. Showing off,” Mindy said as she swam away from us.

“Oh, that’s OK,” I said. “The pool’s not too large, she has to come back this way sooner or later, and I know where all her ticklish spots are.”

Mindy broke up laughing, and yelled, “Hey, Sheila. He’s great. You can keep him.”

“Thanks for the vote,” Sheila laughed. I just blushed!

The rest of the weekend was fine. I met more of her friends, and they all accepted me as her boyfriend. Her family did the same. It was great.

--TWELVE--

It was a couple weeks after Thanksgiving. It was a Saturday, and Jake was out. Football season was over—except for the Rose Bowl, which Stanford was going to be playing in—so he had taken off for the day. Him and a couple buddies went to Frisco.

Sheila and I were curled up on the bed, not doing much of anything. “You know, there’s only two weeks left in class,” she said. “Then we’re going to be apart for a month. I don’t mind telling you, it’s going to be torture.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” I grinned. “Actually, I talked to Mom about it last night. Is there any way you could come out to Chicago for part of the break? My parents are dying to meet you, anyhow.”

“Oh, that’s a **good** idea!” she grinned. “There’s one hitch. I need to train heavily throughout break. Nationals are in April, so this is heavy-training time. That’s why I was in the pool all morning. I’d need to find a place to swim in Chicago. This shouldn’t be difficult—I’m a member of the National team, I get some courtesy—but I don’t know where any pools in Chicago are.”

“I can help you with that. I graduated with a girl named Lisa Waslewski. We weren’t friends, but she wasn’t an asshole. Anyhow, her father....”

“Is Michael Waslewski, international-level swimming official?” She grinned.

“Good guess.”

“Well, I know Mr. Waslewski, and I knew he was from the Midwest somewhere, and that’s not a common name. Oh, that’d be **great**. He’ll know who I am. If we can work this out, I’d really like to come out.”

“We can work it out.”

“Great. After Christmas, though.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured. Sometime between Christmas and New Years, and then you can leave when you get sick of me,” I laughed.

“I might never leave then,” she grinned. “Anyhow, that’s settled. I just have to clear it with my folks, but that won’t be a problem. Anyhow, enough talking,” she grinned, and leaned in to kiss me.

It started the way it always did. We made out, both our shirts came off, I fondled her breasts—but when I reached for the button on her jeans, she stopped me. “No. I want to do you first today.”

“Why?”

“Just do,” she grinned.

“Well, you could still take your pants off,” I said.

“Not yet,” she smirked, and went for mine. They were off in a second, and her mouth was on me in a second more. I came in a damn hurry. She swallowed it all.

“Now you get some time to recover, because I’m going to want him again later,” she giggled after I had caught my breath. “Now. Stand up, turn around, and close your eyes.”

“Huh?”

“You are getting an early Christmas present. Do what I said.”

I did, bemused. “Oh, I get it. You’ve got some really yowza lingerie on, don’t you?”

“Not quite,” she giggled. “OK, turn around.” I did. Her pants were on the floor—but she now had the blankets covering her from the waist down!

“Tease,” I said.

“No, it’s just that your Christmas present is in two parts. This is the first part,” she said, and handed me two round plastic objects. I opened them.

“They look like empty pill boxes,” I said, bemused.

“That’s exactly what they are. Empty **birth control** pill boxes. That’s the first month, and that’s the second month. I finished the second month about five days ago.” Her voice dropped. “Two months is how long you have to take them at first before you’re safe.”

Light dawned. I looked at her, she smiled, and took the blanket off of her. She was completely naked—except for one thing. A red ribbon, wrapped around her hips, and tied in a big red bow **right** in front of her pussy.

“Merry Christmas,” she whispered.

I walked back over to the bed and wrapped her in my arms. She was shaking. I was too, I think.

“Are you sure? You’re shaking.” I asked.

“I’m shaking because I’m apprehensive, yes, but I’m sure. Brendan, I got that prescription the Monday after our first weekend together.” I looked at her in shock. “I’ve been planning this since then. I figured two months was a good waiting period anyhow, just to make sure. But I had planned right then that I’d do the two months on the pill, and then give myself to you. I didn’t want my first time to be with any yucky condom, anyhow, and I know you’re clean.” She looked at me. “You are also shaking.”

“I’m worried about hurting you.”

“You probably won’t. Medically, I’m not a virgin. I don’t have a hymen. Before I got serious about swimming, I was a diver, too. One good splat when I was ten and away it went. And, believe me, it hurt like hell, so I got all that pain over with,” she grinned. “Just,” she gulped, “work me up and go slow, OK?”

“Of course.” I slipped my hand down between her legs, underneath the ribbon. My other hand went to her breast. My lips went on hers. A few minutes of that, and she was quite wet.

“Brendan,” she gasped, “I’m ready. Make love to me.”

I was ready, too. Despite the blowjob I had just had, I had been rock hard since I saw that bow. I was still worried, though. I wanted this to be good—for her, especially. I knew what a gift she was giving me.

I undid the ribbon, then I crawled between her legs. She spread them as far as they could go. I lined up my dick with her pussy, and rubbed. Then I started slowly pushing. The head popped in with very little resistance.

“OH GOD!” she yelled. “Oh, Bren, keep going.” I did, slowly, with her gasping and moaning the whole time. Suddenly, my pelvis bumped against hers. She felt it, too. “Oh God you’re in all the way!” she gasped.

“Any pain?”

“None at all,” she beamed. “It feels **great**. A little strange, mind you, but great.”

“I’m glad you gave me that blowjob or I’d be going already,” I laughed.

“That was the plan,” she beamed. “Advice from Andrea. Get him off once before you do it. Hey, you have Jake, I have Andrea.”

“Good enough for me,” I grinned.

“Brendan, fuck me now, please.” I did, slowly at first. She was moaning and yelping underneath me. I couldn’t believe I was actually **doing** this! It was fantastic.

I started to go a little faster, and she egged me on, yelling, “YES! YES! OH GOD YES!” I moved steadily in and out of her. She kept screaming. “Oh God **so** close!” she yelled, so I picked up the pace again, knowing it wouldn’t take me long. “BRENDAN!” she screamed, and I felt her stiffen underneath me. I needed a little bit longer—which extended hers, as she made little mewling sounds—but not too much longer. I came into her.

I tried to roll off of her, so I wouldn’t crush her. She was having none of that. She had her arms wrapped around my neck and her legs still wrapped around my hips. She hugged me into her while she tried to gasp her breath. “Oh man oh man,” she moaned. “That was incredible.”

“It sure was,” I agreed. “Thank you.”

“Thank **you**,” she said. “I was waiting for you, you know. I didn’t know it until a few months ago, but I’ve been waiting for you for a long time. And it was worth the wait.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right. Though I’m not sure I was waiting for you, because I didn’t think you **existed**.”

“In the flesh,” she giggled.

“All of it,” I laughed. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

After cuddling, and getting dressed, we were thinking about supper. But I had an idea. “Honey? I want a memento,” I said.

“What, my panties?” she giggled. “You can’t have those. They’re my Stanford Panties.”

“Actually, if I’m going to have anything like that, I’ll take the **bow**,” I laughed. She handed it over. “But that’s not what I was thinking. I have no pictures of you.” I grabbed my digital camera. “I can do it on this, and take the memory card down to a developing place, and get a few different sizes.”

“OK, but me, too. I have no pictures of you, either.”

“Fine.” I took a few of her, and she took some of me. I’d bring them down tomorrow to get pictures made.

We headed for supper. We got our food, and Andrea and Eileen, her roommate and floormate, called us over.

“I’m feeling very giddy. Permission requested to blow their minds,” she whispered to me in a giggle.

“Go for it,” I grinned. We sat down, exchanged greetings and small talk, then Andrea gave Sheila an opening.

“So, what were you up to today?” Andrea asked.

“Oh, lost my virginity,” she said matter-of-factly. “Took his while I was at it. How was **your** day?” They just stared at her, open mouthed.

“Shy, she is not,” I grinned.

“Got **that** right,” Andrea grinned back. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Sheila giggled. “Sorry, but I was dying to tell someone.”

“It must’ve been good,” Andrea teased.

“Uh-huh!” Sheila agreed. I just blushed.

We chatted a while about other things. After we finished eating, we were walking out of the dining hall. “So, there’s a good party tonight,” Andrea said. “You guys interested?”

“Sorry,” Sheila said. “His roomie’s gone until the wee hours, and the only party I’m interested in is round two. See you guys later,” she said, and steered me towards my dorm. The other two laughed as we took off.

We both fully enjoyed round two. **And** round three, a bit later. When Jake stumbled in at 12:30, Sheila was still there, but we were fully clothed.

“Hey, kids,” Jake said. He grinned at me, and then looked at Sheila. And looked at her again. “You guys did the deed, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but how did **you** know?” Sheila asked, astonished.

“I know a well-fucked look when I see it,” he laughed. “Congratulations. Just tell me you’re **done**, I need sleep!”

“We’re done,” I laughed. “Come on, I’ll walk you back and let Twinkletoes get his beauty sleep.”

Jake was out of the room for much of the next day, so we did it a couple more times. It was amazing. Five times in two days. Swimmers have amazing stamina. My particular swimmer also apparently had an amazing libido. I think I needed to swim more! Afterwards, we went and got those pictures developed. I got a nice wallet sized one to

carry around. She looked particularly beautiful in it, and the **look** she was giving the photographer—me—was **smoldering**!

The next two weeks were a blur. Finals were part of it, so there was lots of studying. There was also lots of sex. We studied together—as we had been a lot anyway—but she kept calling study breaks!

“I’m **gonna** flunk finals,” I said after one such ‘study break’.

“Oh, you couldn’t flunk if you tried, Brainiac,” she teased. “Besides which, you’ll still have a smile on your face.”

“Well, yeah,” I admitted. “I’m just finding it hard to keep up with you.”

“As long as you keep finding it **hard**, you’ll be able to keep up with me,” she giggled. “Hey, I’m just making up for lost time. Like I said, I’d been planning this for two months. Plus, we’re going to be apart for a couple weeks, so, I’m getting all I can while I can.”

“Thank you for visiting Sheila’s World,” I intoned in a mock-advertisement. “Please watch your step, and beware of the exploding libido.”

She cracked up laughing. “Like **yours** isn’t? I haven’t heard a ‘no’ yet. And you’ve called a fair amount of ‘study breaks’ yourself.”

“You caught me,” I grinned.

We had an interesting talk a couple days before we left. “You know, you’re going to be home for a couple weeks before I get there,” she said. “If you see any of your old ‘friends’ from high school, feel free to flaunt it. What do I care? Show ‘em that picture. Tell ‘em what we were doing two hours **before** the picture. Make ‘em all jealous.”

“You’re something else, you know that?”

“Hey, who was it that said that living well is the best revenge?” she laughed.

After our last final, we fucked like rabbits for the entire evening. The next day, she drove me to the airport, kissed me goodbye, and drove to San Diego as I flew to Chicago.

--THIRTEEN--

Going back to Highland Park wasn’t a big thrill, but I was really happy to see Mom when she came to pick me up.

“Dad wanted to be here, too, but he had a meeting he couldn’t get out of,” she told me in the car on the way home.

“That’s fine, I’ll see him later.”

“So, is Sheila all set to come out here?”

“Yeah, I just have to find her a place to swim. She’s coming in on the 28th.”

“Great. I’m so looking forward to meeting her. I can’t believe the change in you. I can’t wait to see the girl that brought about that change.”

“Wasn’t all her, Stanford’s a great place all around,” I said. “Though, yeah, she’s a lot of it.”

“So,” Mom said, “should I be preparing the guest room for her, or will she be sharing your room?”

I always knew the parents were cool, but **this** cool?! “Well, it’s your house,” I said.

“Brendan, you’re an adult. You have a girlfriend. She’s welcome to stay in your room, your bed is big enough.” She glanced at me while she drove. “Or was I wrong in assuming you’ve slept together?”

“No, though you would’ve been about two weeks ago,” I admitted with a grin.

“Were you her first as well?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Have you done it since the first time?”

I just laughed. “Let’s just say I’m lucky I passed finals, with all those ‘study breaks’ we kept taking.”

She laughed and said, “OK, you did it for the first time two weeks ago. You did it repeatedly since then. Now you’re separated for a couple weeks. I’ll just assume she’ll be staying in your room.” I just looked at her, and she cracked up. “Hey, I was 18 once, too, you know.”

“Mom, you’re all right.”

“And so are you,” she grinned. Then she got serious. “When I came home that day two summers ago, Brendan—well, let’s just say I didn’t think I’d ever be sitting next to you having a pleasant conversation about your sex life. I know Stanford helped. But, I’m warning you, when I meet Sheila I plan on giving her the biggest hug you’ve ever seen.”

“I’ve never apologized. I know what I did put you and Dad through hell.”

“It’s difficult to recognize someone else’s hell when you’re living in your own,” she said wisely. “Now that you’re back, you’ll probably run into some of your old ‘friends’. How are you going to handle that?”

I laughed. “Sheila advised me to throw her picture in everyone’s face and flaunt it. And when she shows up we can **really** flaunt it.”

Mom cracked up. “Oh, I am going to **really** like this girl, I can tell.”

We got home, and Dad came home shortly thereafter. We ate and hung out and chatted. They were thrilled that my life was going so well. I was glad—they really had been through hell with me.

The next day I hung out, chatted with Sheila on the phone, and, after supper, headed to Lisa Waslewski’s house. I knocked on the door, and Lisa answered.

“Brendan. Hi,” she said, obviously surprised to see me.

“Hi, Lisa,” I said pleasantly. I didn’t have anything against Lisa—as I said, she always treated me decently. “I was looking for your father. Is he in?”

“Sure,” she said, and opened the door. “What do you need Daddy for?”

“It’s swimming-related,” I laughed. She grinned, and led me into her living room. Five other people were there, friends of Lisa’s. Her best friend Chrissy wasn’t too bad, but the rest of them I didn’t like much—one of them was Craig Jannick, the asshole that had broken my wrist.

“Hey, Brendan,” Chrissy said as Lisa went to find her dad. “How’s Stanford?”

“Great. I love it out there.”

Lisa came back out, her Dad in tow. “Brendan! Good to see you,” he said, taking my hand and shaking it. Mr. Waslewski was well-known in town, and was a good guy. I always suspected he was the reason Lisa wasn’t an asshole—because she hung around with some. “Lisa says you have a swimming-related question.”

“Yes, a favor, actually,” I smiled. We sat down on a couple of chairs next to the couches where Lisa and her friends were gathered. “My girlfriend is coming here to visit, and she needs a place to swim. She’s coming out on the 28th and will be here until January 10th. And she’s training for Nationals right now and needs two or three hours a day, at least, in the pool. Since you’re an official for USA Swimming, I thought you might be able to help.”

“She’s a national-level swimmer?”

“International, actually. I’ve seen some web sites and magazines describe her as ‘USA Swimming’s Rising Star,’” I laughed. “Went to the World Championships last year. Won three medals, in fact.”

Mr. Waslewski looked at me. “Don’t you go to Stanford?” I nodded. “Rising star, three medals at Worlds, goes to Stanford—Brendan, are you going out with **Sheila Mitchell**?”

“That’s her,” I grinned.

“SHEILA MITCHELL???” Lisa exclaimed from the couch. “You’re **kidding**.”

“You know her?” I asked.

“Not well, but I know who she is, and I’ve been with Daddy to enough swimming meets.” She looked at her friends. “Sheila Mitchell walks down the hall, and twenty guys follow.”

“Not anymore,” I grinned.

“She’s **that** gorgeous?” Craig asked. “And she’s going out with **him**?”

Yes she is. Nyaah, nyaah, nyahh. I was tempted to actually say it, but I didn’t.

“It’s not all looks. Sheila’s pretty, don’t get me wrong. But a lot of it is personality.” Lisa said.

“Well, you can’t judge the personality until she gets here,” I said, “but you can judge the looks now.” I took out my wallet, and withdrew the picture. I passed it to them.

“Anyhow, Brendan,” Mr. Waslewski said, “for Sheila Mitchell, I’ll find something. No question. She’s a member of the US National team. I’ll set something up for her and get back to you before she gets into town.”

“Great, Mr. Waslewski. Thanks. She’ll be thrilled.”

He said goodbye, and left the room.

They were still passing the picture around. Craig looked like he ate something sour—ha ha ha. Chrissy had it, and handed it to me.

“I don’t know, Brendan,” she smirked. “Did you see that **look** on her face? It looks like she was coming on to the photographer.”

“Of course she was. **I** took that picture,” I grinned. “And I took it two hours after we had made love for the first time, that’s why I got that look.”

Every eye looked at me in complete astonishment. Lisa said, “I don’t believe you. Sheila Mitchell, I know, is rather notorious for ‘saving herself’.”

“Right. And when she met me, she figured out who she was saving herself for,” I grinned. I tucked the picture back in my wallet, and my wallet back in my pants. “I’ll see you guys around,” I said, and headed out the door, leaving a group of very stunned people in my wake.

I admit it. It felt **damn** good. I owed Sheila one hell of a thank-you when she got here!

Christmas was fine, Sheila and I spoke on the phone. On the 28th, she came in. I picked her up at the airport. She ran down the passageway from the plane and wrapped me in a hug and a huge heart-stopping kiss. I noticed a lot of people looking at us. I noticed most of them smiling.

“Oh, I missed you,” I said.

“Not as much as I missed you,” she grinned. We went to get her bags, then got into my car.

“I’ve got a swim schedule for you,” I said. “Mr. Waslewski had to do it at a couple different pools, but both are close enough.”

“Great,” she said. “I’ve been swimming lights-out lately, and I want to keep it up.” She grinned at me. “Oh, man, I missed you.” She grinned wider. “I missed **that**, too. I don’t suppose we can give your parents a night out as a late Christmas present, huh?”

“We don’t have to,” I grinned. “That’s my little surprise. I have a queen-sized bed, and the OK from my parents to have you in it. No guest rooms for you.”

“OH GOODY!” she yelped. “Wow, your parents are cool.”

“Yes, they are,” I agreed. “And **you** have a one-track mind.”

“Right now? After two weeks apart? You bet your ass. I am a walking pile of horniness. I thought it was bad when we were just messing around. That wasn’t nothing!”

I laughed. “It’s a good thing that we waited two months—and you told me you loved me during those two months—or I’d think you only wanted me for one thing.”

“Oh, yeah? Tell me you haven’t been thinking of fucking my brains out for two weeks.”

“Guilty,” I laughed.

“I thought so. But, yeah, I know what you mean. Look, I wouldn’t be this—eager—if I didn’t love you. It’s not **all** hormones.”

“I know,” I smiled. ‘

We made it to my house, and my Mom came running out. As promised, she wrapped Sheila in a bear hug. “Oh, Sheila, it is **so** good to finally meet you!” she said. Sheila just grinned and blushed.

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Mrs. Carruthers,” she said.

“Come in,” she said, and lead Sheila towards the door.

“Stuck with the bags again,” I muttered to myself. I went back and got them, and trudged towards the house. I dragged the bags into the living room, where I found Mom and Sheila chatting like old friends. “Why do **I** always get stuck with the bags? Who’s the world class athlete around here, anyway?” I mock-grumbled.

“But you’re such a manly man,” Sheila giggled, grabbing my nonexistent bicep.

“Mock me, eh?” I said to her. “You’ll get yours.”

“Oh, yeah, what are you going to do to me?” she said, grinning at me as we stood in the middle of my living room, my mother laughing in the background.

“This!” I said, and reached up, put my hands on her waist right above her hips—and tickled her.

“NO! STOP!” she screamed between fits of laughter. “BRENDAN! NO!”

“I know all her ticklish spots,” I grinned at Mom. Then I did it again.

“NO! YIKES! EEEEEEE!” I stopped, and she tried to glare at me, panting. The glare didn’t work too well, not with that grin on her face.

Not to mention the fire in her eyes.

Getting tickled turned her on.

“BRENDAN! UNCLE! UNCLE!” she screamed as I did it again. I stopped, and she grinned at me, breathing heavy and flushed all over. “Maybe you should, uh, stop tickling me and show me where to put all my stuff, huh?”

“Sure.” I grabbed the big bags, and she grabbed the smaller ones, and we headed upstairs. “We might be a while, because I have to help her, you know, put her stuff away,” I told Mom.

“Uh-huh,” she grinned.

We got up to the bedroom, and I put the bags down. Sheila followed, said “Nice room,” closed the door, and tackled me on the bed.

“You beast,” she said as she clawed at my shirt. “You **know** what tickling does to me. And I was horny already. Fuck me or I kill you.”

“Now, how can I refuse an offer like that?” I laughed.

--FOURTEEN--

(note: the current world record in the women’s 200 meter backstroke is 2:06.62, set by the great Hungarian backstroker Krisztina Egerszegi. So, there’s a wee bit of realism in this chapter.)

We came back downstairs about an hour later and Mom was still there, watching some TV show.

“Did you get all her stuff put away?” Mom asked, grinning.

“Sure,” I said. The suitcases were still on my floor, unopened.

“Right,” Mom said. “What am I, stupid?”

Poor Sheila blushed. “Well, uh...” she stammered.

“Relax,” Mom said. “If I had cared, I would’ve put you in the guest room.”

Shortly after that, Dad came home, and got to meet Sheila. Mom got supper on, and we all went in to the dining room to eat.

“Hey, is there a mall around here?” Sheila asked as we ate. “I need to go shopping, maybe tomorrow.”

“Sure,” I said. “We can do that.”

“I need a new coat,” she grinned. “The heaviest one I’ve got isn’t heavy enough for **this** weather.”

Dad started singing a parody version of an old Frank Sinatra song: “Chicago, Chicago, it’s twenty below. Chicago, Chicago, the wind and the snow.”

Sheila cracked up, looked at me, and said, “Now I know where you get your quirky sense of humor.”

“Quirky?”

“Quirky. Hey, it’s better than geeky. You geek,” she grinned.

“Jock.”

“Brainiac.”

“Musclehead.”

My parents were cracking up.

“Musclehead’s my favorite term of endearment,” Sheila told them with a grin. “He’s a born romantic, isn’t he?”

“You want romance? Come sit on my lap and I’ll nibble on your earlobe.”

“Swoon!” she said. My parents were still cracking up. “You just be nice to me or I won’t take you to the Olympics.”

“You have to **make** the Olympics first, Miss Overconfident.”

“Oh, I’m going to,” she declared. “It didn’t count, because it wasn’t in a meet—but at training this week I went under the World Record in the 200 back three times.”

“Great!” I said.

“Hey, I’m going to have competition in the 100 back at Nationals, and I’m going to have a **lot** of competition in the 200 individual medley. But the 200 back? That’s **mine**.”

“Good.” Then I realized what she had said earlier. “What’s this about taking me to the Olympics?”

“Oh, yeah, that,” she giggled. “Seriously, I talked to my parents about it. It’s all set. If I make the team—which I will—you’re there. We’ll get you a plane ticket, tickets to all the swimming, and tickets for both of us to some of the second-week events after swimming ends. You’ll be there.”

I was stunned. “That is very generous,” Mom said.

“Hey,” she said. “I’m going to need him there. Look, school gets out in May. The Olympics are in July. I’m going to be in training camp a lot of that time, plus, Brendan will be here. That’s two months we’re not going to see each other.” She grinned. “If you’re trying to win an Olympic medal, lonely and horny is no way to do it.”

Mom cracked up laughing. “So, that OK with you?” Sheila asked me. “You watch me win a couple medals, then we can watch some other stuff, and we can paint Paris red. Sound good?”

“Sounds fantastic. Of course I want to be there.”

She beamed at me. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

I noticed Mom looking back and forth between us. “Mom?” I asked.

“I was just thinking. I’ve never seen you like this. I never thought I **would** see you like this.” She looked at Sheila. “I don’t think words can express how thankful I am that you came into his life.”

Poor Sheila looked flummoxed. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Mom said. “Look, let’s all go in the living room,” she said. We did, Mom and Dad in their favorite chairs, Sheila and I together on the couch.

“Does she know?” Mom asked me.

“Yes,” I said, knowing what she was talking about. Sheila looked at me questioningly. I just pointed to my wrist. “Ah,” Sheila said.

“Do you know I’m the one that found him?” she asked Sheila.

“Yes, he told me that.”

“As you might imagine, it was devastating. However, I knew why he did it. I don’t know if I wouldn’t have done the same thing if I were going through what he was going through.”

“I never knew that,” I said.

“I said I understood, I didn’t say I approved, and I didn’t want to give you any more encouragement while you were that fragile,” she said sternly. “Anyway.” She smiled at Sheila. “Having gone through that, I hope you can understand why I get a bit emotional at seeing him this happy.”

“Yeah,” Sheila smiled, “but **I** didn’t do anything!”

“You love him,” Mom said.

“Yes,” she said, smiling at me.

“**That** is what you did,” Mom smiled.

“Oh, that was easy,” Sheila giggled.

“For you. Not for too many people in Brendan’s life,” Dad interjected.

“Well, then, they’re all idiots,” Sheila said. “Look, this is a two-way street. My high school years weren’t as horrific as Brendan’s, but the bad spots—and there were enough of them—all had to do with guys. I was done with guys, I didn’t trust them, I didn’t want to have anything to do with them. Then I met him.”

“Good,” Mom laughed. “You two, by the way, are adorable together.”

Sheila looked at me, blushing bright red, grinning. I’m pretty sure I was doing the same.

We chatted for a while, then went up to bed. We didn’t sleep—well, not right away, anyhow.

The next morning, we ate breakfast, then I drove her swimming. “You can drop me off, you know. You don’t need to waste three hours watching me swim,” she said.

“I **like** watching you swim. Besides, I brought a book.”

“OK,” she giggled.

What was funny was what happened when she got in the pool. There was obviously some training going on. Sheila went and introduced herself to the coach running the training, who had been expecting her, thanks to Mr. Waslewski. They chatted for a minute, then Sheila got in to the far lane, which had been left for her. The other lanes were filled up with the kids training there, who ranged in age from about 9 to 14 or so. They had been doing their thing, until Sheila plopped in and started her power backstroking.

I don’t think those kids got much done in the next few minutes. They were too busy staring at the far lane in complete **awe**. I know how they felt!

After a couple laps, she stopped and popped up to take a breath. That’s when one of the kids yelled, “Oh my God, that’s Sheila Mitchell!” Sheila just smiled and waved at them, and went back to backstroking.

She did this for a while—and the kids calmed down some—when, suddenly, she popped out of the pool. I heard her ask the coach, “This is regulation 50 meters?”

“Sure is,” he smiled.

“Good.” She walked over to where I was sitting. “Hey, honey, does your watch have a stopwatch?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Can you come down here? I need a time.”

“Sure,” I said, and followed her onto the pool deck, and followed her around to the far lane. “What do you want me to do?”

“I’m going up and back twice. That’s 200 meters. Give me a three-two-one-go count, and stop it when I hit the wall on the second time back here. It won’t be precise, but it’ll be close enough.”

“Got it.” She got into position, I gave her the count, and off she went. As she powered through the water, I noticed that the kids had stopped swimming and were watching her. Then I noticed that even the **coach** was watching her.

“100 or 200?” The coach asked me.

“200,” I said. Sheila did her thing, then hit the wall. I hit stop.

She popped out of the water and looked at me. “2:05.93,” I told her.

“Good,” she grinned.

The coach looked at her dumbfounded. “That’s a world record!” he said in amazement.

“Fourth one this week,” she grinned. “Now I just have to do that when it **counts!**” The coach just grinned and shook his head. And the **kids**? They were just astonished. It wasn’t every day when they were in the pool while someone was swimming a world record time in the far lane.

When she got done, she went up to thank the coach for the use of the pool. “Any time. You’re going to be here a few more times over the next couple weeks, yes?” She nodded. “Any time. The kids got a big kick out of it.”

“Yeah, but I think I disrupted them,” she laughed.

“That’s OK. They don’t get to see a world record time up close and personal every day. When they went back to swimming after watching that, they were all trying harder.”

“Cool,” she laughed. She turned to the pool and told the kids, “You guys keep swimming!” Then she went into the locker room to change. When we came out, trying to get out of the place, she was besieged by autograph requests! She smiled and signed them all.

“You handle that stuff really well,” I told her when we got in the car.

“My favorite thing in the world—outside of **you**, of course—is kid swimmers. I love ‘em. And there’s not many kids in the pool at Stanford, and the ones in my pool in San Diego are all blasé about my presence by now,” she giggled. “I love having kids watch me swim. Because when you’re 10, 11, swimming is hard work, for someone that age. They see **me** swim, and they see what all the hard work can lead to.”

“Do you know how admirable that is?” I said. She just blushed.

“Yeah, yeah,” she muttered. “Stop feeding my ego and take me to the mall, huh?”

I laughed, and did just that.

It was lunchtime, so we headed into the food court at the mall before we decided to go find her a winter coat. We walked into the food court, and she leaned into me. “Isn’t that Lisa Waslewski?” she asked.

I looked. “Yes it is.”

“And those kids she’s with, are those some of your good buddies from high school?” she said with a twinkle.

“Yup,” I chuckled. “A couple of them were my **bestest** buddies,” I said sarcastically.

“Good,” she said, and wrapped her arm right around me. She snuggled up next to me and walked right up to them. “Lisa?” she said.

Lisa turned. “Sheila! Hi! Hi, Brendan.”

“Listen, Lisa,” Sheila said, “if I don’t get a chance to see your father this week, **please** thank him for me, for arranging some pool time for me.”

“Uh, sure,” Lisa said, obviously stunned to see her there—and to see her wrapped around me!

“Good,” Sheila said. Then, to me, she said, “So, sweetie, what do you want to eat?”

“I don’t know, what’s over there?” I said, and we walked away—leaving a lot of hanging jaws in our wake!

We didn’t see them after that, but, the next day, I got a surprising phone call—from Lisa.

“Hi, Brendan. Listen, I was wondering. We’re having a get-together on the First. We’re going to have food and stuff, people are going to come over about 1 and eat, and then we’re all going to watch the Rose Bowl.” She giggled. “Most of us go to Illinois, but we have no Stanford fans in attendance. So, I was wondering if you and Sheila would like to come.”

“Ah. Because you think U of I is going to win and you need some Stanford fans to abuse?” I laughed.

“Well, no, but, yeah,” she laughed. “I just thought you’d have a better time than watching it alone.”

“Lisa, what’s your phone number?” She gave it to me. “Let me go find Sheila and I’ll call you back in five minutes.”

I found Sheila in the kitchen with my Mom, chatting and drinking tea. I told her about Lisa’s call.

“Bren, this is a set-up,” she said.

“How so?”

“They all think you’re lying about us being together. They think we’re just friends and I’m play-acting. I saw that when we ran into them at the mall. So, they figure they get us together for a number of hours, we’ll slip up, and they can then hammer you for lying about me being your girlfriend.”

“Ah,” I said. “So we should go, yes?”

“Absolutely,” she laughed. “And we can **really** have fun when Stanford wins!”

New Year’s Eve, we stayed in. Since we hadn’t been together for Christmas, we exchanged gifts on New Year’s Eve. I got her two sets of earrings. One pair had dangling hearts with a small diamond in the middle of the heart. The other ones were the Olympic rings. “Just a little good luck charm,” I grinned.

She loved them, and then gave me mine. “I hope you don’t take offense at this,” she said worriedly.

“Why would I?”

“Well, because, I thought your wardrobe needed a bit of spicing up.” I laughed, and opened the boxes. There were three complete outfits in there. Much less boring than what I usually wore.

“I love them, they’re great,” I said. “Hey, you can dress me if you want.”

“Good. How about I **undress** you first?”

--FIFTEEN--

New Year’s Day, we got up pretty early, and baked cookies. Lisa told me we didn’t have to bring anything, but we decided to make a batch of cookies and bring them over. I dressed in one of my new outfits.

“Very sharp,” Mom said. “Good eye, Sheila.” She just grinned.

Then we headed over to Lisa’s house. “Here we go, into the lion’s den,” I said.

“Are you OK with this?”

“As long as **you’re** here, yes.”

“Good. I’m usually a very nice person, you know. I haven’t fucked with anyone’s mind in a long time,” she giggled.

We got there, and Lisa answered the door. She didn’t let us in, but motioned to step outside for a minute. “Brendan, I have to warn you,” she said. “Look, I always thought you were a nice guy, and didn’t like a lot of the stuff that was done to you in school. It was my Dad’s suggestion that I invite you here today, but I thought it was a good idea.” She looked at us, pained. “But some other people here are glad you’re coming for their own devious purposes. I’m sorry.”

“They think we’re **not** going out and they’ll get proof if we’re around all day—and then torment me with it.”

“Yes. How did you **know** that?” Lisa said.

“I’m the class brain, remember?” I laughed. “No, actually, Sheila figured it out. Actually, I thought **you** were in on it. I’m glad you’re not.”

“I’m not,” Lisa said.

“So, what do you think?” Sheila said with a grin. “Do I have to fuck him right in the middle of the living room, or will a lot of heavy making out suffice?”

Lisa’s eyes got as wide as saucers, and then she burst out laughing. “Oh, isn’t **this** going to be an interesting afternoon!”

“Got **that** right,” I grinned.

“Brendan, you’ve changed. It’s good to see,” Lisa said. Then she led us into the house, right at the vultures.

“Hey, where do you want these cookies, anyhow?” Lisa took them.

Craig yelled, “Oh, mommy made cookies for Brendan to bring.”

“No, actually, **we** made them,” Sheila said. “He’s **very** handy with a spatula.” Half the room looked confused, but the other half cracked up. They’d probably seen “Stripes”!

Lisa took our coats, and then looked at us. “Look at this. We bring them over so Stanford would have a rooting section, and neither of them are wearing any Stanford stuff!” She was wearing an Illinois sweatshirt. We grabbed a seat on a loveseat at the side of the room.

“Well, Sheila just got me this outfit for Christmas. Besides which, all my Stanford stuff is warm-weather.”

“I’m wearing something that says Stanford on it,” Sheila said with a twinkle.

“I don’t see anything,” Lisa’s friend Chrissie said.

“I’d have to take my jeans off for you to see,” Sheila grinned. “My panties, which are red, say “STANFORD” in white letters right across my ass.”

“The legendary Stanford Panties,” I laughed. “We have a very good bookstore out there.”

Just then, Mr. Waslewski came in. “Sheila! Good to see you! Hello, Brendan.”

“Hi, Mr. Waslewski,” Sheila said. “Thank you very much for the help with finding me a place to swim.”

“You’re welcome. Scuttlebutt is that you’re putting down some smoking times.”

“Let’s hope it holds until Nationals,” she laughed.

“It will. Lisa, your mom told me to tell you that the food was ready, and out.”

They had put on quite a buffet spread, in the dining room. We all went and got food and took it back into the living room. As I was eating, my cel phone rang. I fished it out of my pocket, and said, “Hello?”

An off-key voice blared into my ear, “Are you ready for some FOOTBALL?”

I cracked up laughing. “What the **hell** are you doing calling me?”

“Ah, we’re still at the hotel, waiting for the bus to pick us up to take us to the stadium.” It was Jake, of course. “I had a few minutes to kill, so I figured I’d wish you a happy New Year.”

“Right back atcha.”

“Sheila there?”

“Yup.” I turned to Sheila. “It’s Jake.”

“Jake?” she said. “Calling you three hours before he has to play in the Rose Bowl? He’s insane,” she smiled.

“Yes, I am,” Jake, who obviously heard her, said into my ear. “Are you at your house?”

“Actually, no. An old classmate of mine invited us over for a Rose Bowl slash New Year’s party. But this place is lousy with Illini fans, so you’d better kick some ass, Rooms.”

“Plan on it. The bus is pulling up, I gotta go. See you back at school in a few weeks.”

“See you then. Break a leg, Rooms. Not your own, one of those guys’.”

“Got it,” he laughed, and then hung up.

“He’s nuts,” Sheila laughed after I hung up. “His roommate,” she told the rest of the room. “Who will be **playing** in this game we’re going to watch.”

“Your roommate plays football?” Craig asked me in derision.

“My roommate won the Pac-10 Defensive Freshman of the Year award. His name’s Jake Atkinson, he’s a linebacker, he wears number 58, and get used to seeing him in the Illinois backfield all day long,” I laughed.

After we ate, Sheila asked where the bathroom was. Lisa told her. When she came back, instead of sitting next to me, she sat right in my lap!

“So, how long have you guys been going out?” Chrissie asked her.

“Beginning of October,” Sheila smiled. “We first met right after classes started, we have calculus class together. I noticed that he was good at calculus. I noticed that I was **not**. So I asked him if he minded helping me. We studied together for a few weeks, and I got to know him. Because of his help, I got a 91 on the first exam. So, I batted my baby blues at him and said, ‘kind sir, whatsoever can I do to **repay** you?’ He picked up on this **blatant** hint, asked me out to dinner, and the rest is history.”

“More or less,” I laughed.

“Did I forget anything?” she asked.

“Well, yeah, the part where you wouldn’t leave,” I laughed.

“Oh, yes. After that date—which was on a Friday night—I showed up on his doorstep at 9 the next morning. We were together until midnight. Then I showed up at 9 **Sunday** morning. I wore down his resistance,” she giggled.

“Not that there was much to wear down, mind you,” I laughed.

“I just had to bash my way through that whole shyness thing,” she laughed.

“You be nice, or I’ll tickle you.”

“Don’t you dare!” she said. “That would be rude.” She turned to the rest of them. “I’m very ticklish. He knows exactly where all my ticklish spots are, and he also knows how much it turns me on. Five minutes after I walked into his house and met his mother, he started tickling me. I had to pull him upstairs to ‘help me put my stuff away’” She giggled. “Funny how all my stuff was still in my suitcases an hour later.”

Every single person in the room was staring at her. I loved it.

“At least it happened here,” she continued. “We didn’t have to deal with roommates. His parents are letting me stay in his room. It’s very handy,” she giggled.

“Well, Sheila,” Craig said, “if you’re that hot-to-trot, you should dump Brendan and come over here and be with a **real** man.”

“Hmm,” Sheila said, looking at him. “You’re nice and arrogant, aren’t you?” He just grinned evilly at her. “It’s my experience that guys who are that arrogant with girls generally have dicks that are smaller than my clit, so I think I’ll pass.”

A nice “Ooooooooooh” went around the room at that. However, I didn’t like the look on Craig’s face. “You might have opened up a can of worms,” I whispered in her ear.

“That’s one worm I can handle,” she whispered back.

About a half hour later, I said to her, “Scuse me, ma’am, but I need to get up. Nature calls.” She got off my lap, giggling, and let me up. I made my way to the bathroom.

On my way back, I heard her say, “Take your hands off me.”

I peered into the living room, and Craig was next to her on the loveseat, putting his arm around her. Uh-oh. I didn’t know what to do. Craig could kick my ass.

“Oh, come on. You must be tired of Brendan by now,” Craig was saying.

“Craig, cut it out,” Lisa interjected.

“I’d advise you to take your hands off me,” Sheila said.

“Or what? Brendan will get me? That wimp. I broke his wrist a few years ago, the little pansy. Why don’t you and I go somewhere and I can show you what a guy who can get it up can do.”

I decided to walk back in to the living room. “Hey. So what’s going on here?” I said casually.

“He thinks he’s going to show me what a real man is like,” Sheila said.

“Ah,” I said. “Need my help?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve warned him twice to get his hands off me. Think he deserves a third?”

“Nah.”

“You’re right,” she agreed, then took her arm, wound up all those magnificent swimmer’s muscles, and **hammered** her elbow right in Craig’s crotch. He **screamed**, and fell to the floor whimpering, clutching his crotch. Everyone else in the room gasped.

“Nice shot,” I said, sitting down next to her.

“Thank you. “

Just then, Mr. Waslewski ran into the room. “What’s going on?” he yelled.

“Craig thought he was going to get friendly with me, without my consent,” Sheila said calmly. “I gave him two chances to get his hands off me. When he didn’t take either of those chances, I introduced my elbow to his testicles.” She looked down at Craig, who was still whimpering and pale. “You see, I was almost raped about a year and a half ago. **That** guy got a knee. Sometimes people forget I’m a fucking world-class athlete.”

I chuckled. “I’ve seen her naked, and she’s got muscles on top of her muscles.”

“And I don’t take any shit from guys who think they can have anything they want. Anyhow, sweetie,” she said to me, “I think we should find a more congenial place to watch this game.”

“I think you’re right,” I agreed, starting to get up.

“NO! STOP!” Lisa said. “No. This isn’t right. I don’t want you two to go.” She pointed at Craig who was just starting to breathe normally and get color back in his face. “I want **him** to go.”

“Lise?” he said in disbelief.

“Get out,” she said firmly. “You crossed a line, and you deserved what she did. Now get out.”

“I concur,” Mr. Waslewski said.

Craig left, sputtering.

“I’m sorry,” Lisa said to Sheila after they left.

“Don’t be. Wasn’t your fault,” she said.

“I guess I don’t understand how you’re friends with him,” I said. “You were always nice.”

“We’ve been friends forever,” she sighed. “Our **parents** are friends. We grew up together.” She sighed again. “I guess that’s why I’ve excused a lot of the shit he’s pulled. Especially since he knows not to pull any shit with **me**.” She grinned at Sheila. “Now he knows not to pull any with **you**, either. Brendan, if I were you, I’d stay on her good side.”

She snuggled up to me. “He’s got a permanent claim on my good side,” she grinned.

“I’m still awestruck,” Carole, another one of Lisa’s friends said. “Could you teach **me** how to do that?”

“Sure,” Sheila said. “First, go lift lots of weights. Second, go lift some more weights. Third, backstroke a lot.” Everyone cracked up at this. “Fourth, go back and lift more weights. Simple, really.”

The rest of the afternoon and evening passed much better without Craig there. Especially after the game started, and Sheila decided she wanted to watch it lying on the loveseat with her head in my lap. And, during halftime, she decided she wanted to make out. With eight other people there.

“Hey, get a room!” Lisa yelled.

“After the game,” Sheila grinned.

Oh, yeah. Stanford won. And the roomie kicked some serious ass. And, after the game, back at my house, I got an up close and personal view of Sheila’s Stanford Panties. Well, for as long as they stayed on her, anyway!

--SIXTEEN--

It was unthinkable. Me, Mr. Academics, skipping college for a week. However, that’s exactly what I found myself doing. Sheila had told me about her plans to take me to the Olympics. However, she suddenly decided that she needed me there for the Olympic **trials**. In Indianapolis. In April.

When we got back to Stanford in January, our relationship deepened. I’d never had a steady girlfriend, of course, so I was winging it. The same was true for her. There was so much excitement at first, so many firsts for both of us. But when we got back to Stanford, we settled into a routine. Dad had actually warned me about that—he said that a lot of couples get all overwhelmed about the excitement of a new relationship, that they find a routine of an established relationship boring and stultifying. He said, since it was the first real relationship for both of us, that might even be more of a problem.

Luckily, it turned out to be the exact opposite. For me, and Sheila and I talked about it, and she agreed. Where our outer personalities are very different, a lot of our inner personality was much the same. One thing that we found was vitally important to both of

us was safety and security. Another thing was a deep empathy, and a desire to share our highs and lows with someone who shared that empathy. What we discovered, when we settled into a routine, was that our basic empathy was so strong and compatible with each other that it sometimes seemed like we were two people occupying the same space. When I unexpectedly blew a test—not something that happened to me often, and thus a very upsetting event—**she** broke out in tears. Luckily, the highs—and there were more of them, for both of us—were equally shared.

Jake made the comment once that it was almost like we were twins.

“Except twins don’t make mad love,” Sheila giggled. And **that** was something to behold, it turned out. As our empathy for each other deepened and grew, sex became an experience that it’s hard for me to describe. It had been great, right from the first, but it seemed to get better, especially emotionally, every time.

But that shared empathy between us had grown in every way—which is why I was sitting on a pool deck in Indianapolis instead of in a programming class in California.

I truly was glad to be there. A little amazed, but very glad. Her parents and Jenny were there with us, the first time I had seen them since Thanksgiving. Jenny greeted me with, “Hey, you’re still around! When’s the wedding?”

Yup, Sheila’s sister, all over.

Sheila complained that the schedule didn’t work to her advantage. “My sure bet, the 200 back, is the **last** race I swim. I’d like to get it out of the way so I know for **sure** I’m on the Olympic team.” The top two in each event made the team, and she told me she was sure that “the only way I don’t make top 2 in the 200 back is if I break my leg pushing off the wall on the third turn.” But, still, she would’ve liked to have been sure, early.

Her first race was the 400 Individual Medley, a race she swam for fun and for distance work and didn’t expect to make the team in. She was a contender for the 200 IM, but the 400 was a long distance for her. Before she went down to change and get ready, we sat in the stands for a bit, cuddling. I had gotten to know her coach at Stanford, Jon Peters, pretty well over the year, and he was sitting with us. I told her, “Remember. This isn’t your race. Warm up, get used to the atmosphere, relax.”

Coach Peters laughed, “Damn good advice. You sure you need me?” She grinned at him. Me, she kissed.

Then she went down to the pool and relaxed her way right into second place. Bang, first try, she’s on the team, and in her weakest event by far. I was thrilled beyond belief. She came out from under the stands, found me sitting with Coach Peters, and said to us, “Can someone explain to me how in **hell** I just made the team in the 400?”

“You’ve been improving in that event all year,” Coach Peters told her. “Of course, you’ve been improving in all your events all year.”

“Making the team in your first event took all the pressure off, didn’t it?” I said.

“It sure did,” she replied.

“I think this is going to be a fun week,” I said to Coach Peters.

“I think you’re right,” he laughed.

I was right. The next day was the 100 back. She won it. The following day she had a day off, then back in the pool for the 200 IM. She won it. The last day was the 200 back.

“In your sleep,” Coach Peters told her. “Just relax and swim your race.”

“I hope it’s not **too** easy. I swim better if I have a challenge.”

“You want a challenge?” I laughed. “Krisztina Egerszegi. **There’s** your challenge.” Sheila had taught me a few things. Krisztina Egerszegi was the current world record holder.

“Good point,” she laughed.

“Just don’t over swim it,” Coach Peters cautioned.

“I won’t,” she laughed. “I’ve set that record how many times in practice? I’m worried about tightening up, not over swimming.”

“You won’t,” I said. She didn’t. She blasted out of her opening position and sped through the water like a dolphin on amphetamines. When she finished the 200 meters and slapped the wall, I knew even before the time went up. I stood up, and screamed, and then the time went up. 2:05.33. She had beaten Krisztina Egerszegi’s record, which was more than a decade old, by more than a full second. She stood in the pool, turned, saw the time, and just went **delirious**. And I felt the waves of pure, ecstatic joy roll over me, as she looked up from the pool and laughed towards me.

After she got dressed, she met me in the stands, and threw her arms around me. “That was so cool,” I grinned at her.

“Congratulations,” Coach Peters told her. “I just hope you saved something for Paris,” he grinned.

“Oh, sure,” she said. “It’ll be easier, now, actually. Now that I’ve got it, I can admit I wanted that world record **badly**. But, since I did it **here**, in Paris I can just worry about medals.”

Word got around, and—Stanford being a swimming power and all—when we got back, Sheila was the center of attention around campus for a while.

Jake teased her about it almost as long. One day, a few weeks after we got back, we were studying, and Jake walked in and said, “Hey, Rooms. Hey, superstar.”

“Will you cut it out?” she giggled. “You can’t talk, either, Mr. MVP of the Rose Bowl. Football’s still a bigger deal here than swimming. You got followed around like a king with his loyal court for the first month of the semester.”

“That, Swimfins, is because I fully acknowledge that I **am** a superstar,” Jake grinned.

“OOOF!” I said. Sheila looked at me. “I just got hit in the head by Jake’s expanding ego!”

“Something that’s already infinite can’t expand,” Sheila giggled.

“Jocks,” I snorted. “Jock roommate, jock girlfriend. I really need to find some nerds to go hang around with.”

“Does it bother you?” Jake asked, serious all of a sudden.

“What?” I asked.

“Do you get jealous? Not of me, but of her.”

“Yeah, he does, a little,” Sheila interjected. I looked at her. “Yeah, I’ve picked up on it a little bit, though you hide it well and never say anything.” There’s that empathy thing again. “What I don’t understand, is why? I’m not jealous of your academics.”

“Well, I’m not jealous of your talents or accomplishments either. It’s what goes along with it.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Well, when I ace a final, there isn’t 15,000 people in the stands going berserk,” I smiled.

“Ah,” she said. “Is it bad?” she asked tentatively.

“Not at all,” I smiled. “Just a minor twinge.”

“Good. I confess, I worry about that,” Sheila said.

“Don’t. You know I feel it almost as much as you do when you win. The applause might not be for **me**, but I feel it, because you feel it. Plus I get fringe benefits, like trips to Paris to watch the Olympics.”

“You could’ve even come to the Rose Bowl,” Jake grinned.

“Well, that was a tough choice. The Rose Bowl with **you** or home with **her**. Yeah, I really racked my brains about that one,” I teased. “Sorry, Rooms, I don’t love you **or** football that much.”

--SEVENTEEN--

Flying back to Chicago at the end of the semester was not a lot of fun.

The good thing was, I got my old summer job back. It was a summer internship at a web design firm. I loved the work, my boss—Erica—was cool, and the pay wasn’t bad. Erica was thrilled to have me back. She was less than thrilled when I told her I’d need three weeks off in July—but was more accepting when she found out **why**.

There were two new college intern-types working there with me this year. Paula and Melanie, both had just finished their freshman years at U of Chicago. They were both cool—which was a good thing, as Erica had put us in a huge cubicle, with a workstation on a desk on each of the three walls. It was an oversized cubicle, but, with three of us in there, it was still cramped. Good thing we got along.

One thing I quickly discovered—the deep bond that Sheila and I had forged between us had a downside. Separation was **brutal**. And not just for me—she called me in tears a week and a half after I had come home. But we tried to deal with it. I knew that it was a fine line between bonded and codependent, and I think she did, too. So we just tried to deal. And I did, mostly. I think she did, too, and it was more important for her, seeing as how she was training for the **Olympics** and all.

But it crept up on me every so often. A week after she had her crying jag on the phone with me, I found myself sitting at my cubicle, just staring into space, lost. Melanie caught it.

“Bren, you OK?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine.”

“You don’t **look** OK,” she said, concerned.

“I’m OK,” I smiled at her. “I’m sorry. I just really, really miss my girlfriend.”

“That’s her, right?” Melanie asked, pointing at the picture on my desk. I nodded. “I figured. She’s very pretty. Are you guy serious?”

“You know, that’s an interesting question,” I said. “If you’re asking me if we’re exclusive, utterly and completely. If you’re asking if we’re in love, definitely. If you’re asking about future-plans serious, we haven’t actually discussed it,” I smiled. “But we’ve been apart less than three weeks and I’m going out of my tree. And not just me, she was on the phone in tears with me last week. Our bond is so deep that being apart is almost physically painful.”

“Wow,” Melanie said. “Where is she?”

“San Diego.”

“That’s where she’s from? I take it you met her at Stanford.”

“Yes and yes,” I said, “but she’d be in San Diego right now even if she didn’t live there. That’s where the US Swimming team is having their pre-Olympic training camp, and she’ll be swimming in the Olympics this year.”

“Wow, that’s impressive,” Melanie grinned. “Is she good?”

“World record holder and gold medal favorite in the 200 meter backstroke,” I said proudly. “And she’s swimming three or four other events, too.”

“That’s great,” Melanie said. “So, you’ll be spending a bunch of time glued to the TV when the Olympics are on, huh?” she grinned.

“No way. I’m going to be in Paris, watching it live.”

“That’s great!”

“Hey, Melanie? Thanks for listening. Talking about her helps. Though I’ll have to be careful and not blather on and drive you **too** nuts.”

She cracked up laughing. “That’s OK.”

It was a couple weeks later, the second week in June, a Thursday. I was sitting at my desk, late in the afternoon, when I felt a set of hands snake down my chest from behind, and a set of tits press up against my back. I turned around, and there she was.

I couldn’t even speak. I just jumped up and hugged her. And kissed her. Right in the middle of the office! Screw decorum.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked.

“We have a long weekend off from training,” she giggled. “I don’t have to be back in training until Wednesday, so I don’t have to leave here until Tuesday. When I found that out, I called my mother and said, ‘buy me a damn plane ticket to Chicago!’ Having wealthy parents comes in handy sometimes.”

“I’m so happy to see you, I can’t even tell you.”

“Ditto. Damn, I missed you.”

“How did you get **here**, to the office?”

“I took a cab from the airport to your house. Your mom told me where your work was. She just dropped me off. I figure I can go home with you. You leave in about an hour, right?”

“Yeah,” I grinned.

“Is this the famous Sheila?” Melanie interrupted.

“Yeah,” I laughed. “This is Melanie and Paula, my cubemates.”

Just then, Erica came by. “What’s all the commotion?” she asked.

“Sorry,” I said. “This is Sheila, my girlfriend. She just flew in from San Diego to surprise me.”

“Isn’t that neat,” Erica laughed. “Brendan? Get lost. And take tomorrow off, too.”

“Really?”

“Really. Get out of here.”

See, I said Erica was cool.

We went back to my house, and decided to be good. We talked with Mom—and Dad when he came home—and didn’t race for my bedroom until **after** supper!

It was after that, lying in each other’s arms, that we talked about it.

“Bren, does it scare you?”

“What?” I replied.

“How connected we are. How much being apart hurts. There are days that I feel like someone cut off my left arm.”

“Yeah. And, yes, it scares me.”

“Good. I was worried it was just me.”

“Not even close,” I grinned. “This was a good idea you had, though. I almost feel like my batteries have been recharged.”

“Yeah,” she grinned.

“How’s your training going?”

“Not bad. It’d be better if you were there, but I’m dealing with it.”

The visit did rejuvenate us, but it was still too short. The good part was, when she left, it’d only be a month before we saw one another again.

We got to Paris early, five days before the Olympics actually began, so she could spend some time in my hotel room before moving into the athlete’s village. Well, OK, we **did** get out of the hotel room a bit to explore Paris. She brought along this little phrasebook—not knowing I took French in high school. I’m not fluent, but I get by. Her parents and Jenny arrived the day before the Opening Ceremonies.

Once the Olympics finally started, whenever Sheila had things to do, I found myself spending time with Jenny. It was natural, she’d rather hang with me than her parents. We were eating lunch one day, when she sighed.

“I miss my boyfriend,” she said.

“You have a boyfriend? How long?”

“Just since April. But we’re really close.”

“That’s good,” I said. “What’s he like?”

“You,” she grinned. “He’s sweet, and nice, and very smart, and so shy **I** had to ask **him** out,” she giggled. “And every one of my friends thought I was absolutely insane for doing it. He’s not popular. But he’s **so** beautiful, inside I mean. Though he **is** cute,” she grinned. “Like I said, he’s like you. I saw you and Sheila during Thanksgiving, and then especially at the Olympic trials, and I figured she had the right idea. I had **known** Alex, of course. So, when we got back from trials, I asked him out the very next day.”

“Did he swallow his tongue?” I grinned.

“Yeah, pretty much,” she laughed.

“You’re sixteen, right?” She nodded. “Just finished sophomore year?” She nodded again. “You did a good thing asking him out, you know. If he’s anything like me, you did a **very** good thing.”

“I know,” she smiled, and grabbed my wrist, letting me know that Sheila had told her about the scars. “I don’t think it was nearly as bad for Alex, but people ignored him. Including me, to be honest. Thank you for helping me wake up. Because it wasn’t just a good thing for him. It turned out to be just about the best thing I ever did for **me**. So, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I smiled.

I was sitting with Jenny and their parents as the swimming started in earnest. The schedule was the same as trials, with the medley relay—if Sheila made it—tacked on at the end. She'd make the medley relay if she was the higher finisher of the two Americans in the 100 back.

So, the first race was the 400 IM. She told me she'd be delirious just to make the final in this, her weakest race. She made the final. Then she won the bronze medal. The expression on her face when she popped out of the pool and saw '3' next to her name was absolutely stupefied. Jenny turned to me and said, "Bronze in the 400? That sister of mine brought her A game!"

That was on Saturday. Sunday she swam the prelims (in the morning) and semifinals (in the evening) of the 100 back. Monday evening was the final. She not only won the gold medal, but grabbed another world record in the process.

Tuesday, she had the morning prelims-evening semis for the 200 IM. Tuesday afternoon? She was in my room. Said she had to "recharge her batteries." Not that I was complaining, mind you. I was just afraid I'd wear her out. Not a chance, she said to me.

Wednesday was her most hectic day. Prelims for the 200 back in the morning. The evening would have the finals of the 200 IM, and the semis of the 200 back. It's a day I'll never forget as long as I live.

First, she won her second gold, in the 200 IM, in a stunning upset. If she was stupefied by the bronze in the 400, this had her completely flabbergasted. The look of joyous disbelief she gave me as she turned after seeing her name atop the standings is etched into my brain forevermore.

After the race, there was the medal ceremony. She still had to swim the semis of the 200 back, so she came out with her USA team sweatsuit over her swimsuit. I watched, delirious with joy, as she proudly wore the gold medal and they played the National Anthem. Then she headed for the locker room, to get the sweats off and prepare for her other race. Except, she took a detour—up into the stands.

The USA swimming "contingent" had a section. Not only parents and friends of the swimmers, but other swimmers not swimming on a particular day, all sat together. So as she approached us in the stands, her teammates were all there, yelling and screaming for her—as were me, Jenny, and her parents, of course. But it was in front of all this that she did what she did.

She came up the stands, stood in front of me, reached behind her and lifted the gold medal off of her neck—and leaned over and put it on mine. She smiled, and said, "I told myself before I even got here that if I was fortunate enough to win two, the second one was yours." Then she kissed me, and disappeared out of the stands.

I was absolutely fucking stunned. I could **not** believe it. She gave me her gold medal. I was incoherent. I sat there in a stadium filled with twenty thousand people and

unashamedly bawled my eyes out. Jenny, sitting next to me, rubbed my arm, grinned, and said, “That sister of mine is a good egg, isn’t she?”

“You can say that again,” I managed to sniffle.

Jenny laughed, and said, “I don’t have any gold medals for Alex, so he’ll have to settle for my virginity. Except I gave him that a month ago.”

“Oh, Sheila and I swapped that way back in December.”

“I know. She told me. She also told me you’re a stud,” she giggled. I just blushed. “That’s probably why she gave you the gold medal!” I just blushed harder.

When she finally emerged after swimming the 200 back semi, I almost started to cry again.

“You didn’t have to do this, you know,” I said.

“I know. I wanted to. Look, do you realize how much better I’ve gotten as a swimmer since we started going out? I draw strength from you. I’m **going** to win the 200 back tomorrow, and our relay team looks really strong, so I could leave here with four gold medals. I do **not** win four gold medals without you, no possible way. Part of these are because of you. You deserve at least one of them.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. She did, though. “I have no races tomorrow morning. Take me to your room. We need to celebrate.”

She won the 200 back the next night. She and her teammates won the medley relay the following night. She was voted USA Swimmer of the Meet by her teammates. The next couple of days immediately after the swimming was over were a whirlwind of interviews. On American TV, she told the world what she’d done.

“So, what are you going to do with all those medals?” the interviewer asked.

“I don’t know,” she giggled.

“Four gold and one bronze, you’re going to need quite a display case,” the interviewer teased.

“Yeah. Well, I don’t have all of them. I only have three of the gold medals. The one for the 200 IM, I gave to my boyfriend.” She beamed like a small sun when she said it. Backstage, watching her, I beamed, too.

The rest of the Olympics were more relaxing, as we got to go out and see a lot of the other events. We also got more time alone, and more time to explore Paris. It was then, walking through Paris one gorgeous evening, that it all came to a head.

“I’ve never asked you this. Are you planning on graduate school?” she asked.

“Not right away. I’ll have the credentials and the expertise with just my bachelors to get a good job. I’ll eventually go for a masters and probably a doctorate, but part-time, after I get in the working world.”

“So, I’ll be in med school, but you’ll be working,” she said.

“Yup.”

“Good. If at least one of us is entering the workforce—well, that means we can get married right after college.”

I stopped walking. An explosion went off in my brain. She got ten feet in front of me, realized I wasn’t beside her, and stopped, turning around. She was grinning. “Something wrong?”

“Well, that sounded like a proposal,” I said.

“It was. OK with you?”

“Well, aren’t I supposed to do that?” I laughed.

“You can. When we make it official,” she grinned. She waved her bare left hand at me. “You know, when you put a bit of sparkly stuff on this finger here. Then you can do it properly.”

“Nope, you’re not shy,” I grinned.

“Never was,” she grinned back. “Look, what did I tell you on our first weekend together? There’s no way I’m letting you go. I plan to grow old with you. Is that OK?”

“OK? How about fantastic?”

“Good,” she grinned. Then, she took my hand, and we walked through Paris in the moonlight.

--THE END--

