



SUMMARY: After receiving a promotion to come to a resort with all expenses paid, one man and his buddies head down only to discover that they have been chosen to test out new procedures that turn them into women.

## **BEAUTIFUL ADDICTION, PART ONE**

**By Valerie Hope**

I didn't think much about what life was 'supposed' to be like. That was for people with a lot more time on their hands than I had, I thought. Better to just keep my head down, go to work like the rest of the world, make my check and pay my bills, have a cold beer at the end of the day and don't think too much about it. I had it all sewn up. That was the secret to happiness.

It wasn't like I was anybody special, anyway - no great thinker or athlete, nothing to contribute more than my eight hours a day down at the shop and the occasional addition of my voice to the thousands of others cheering the football team. If I checked out, there might be some wet eyes around town, but they'd recover quickly. No, I was just a cog in the great machine, and not much else. A.J. Baker wasn't even a drop in the bucket, much less the ocean. I didn't even merit a girlfriend these days - nope, A.J. Baker couldn't even be a god in one person's universe.

That was why it was such a surprise to see the yellow envelope in my mailbox. Normally, I would have just round-filed it with the rest of the junk mail promising me low fixed APRs and millions of dollars in valuable prizes and huge savings at my favorite stores. But they'd found one of the shortcuts to my attention span, they put a picture of a gorgeous young broad in a tiny yellow bikini on the front. I figured that was at least worth a look, like the occasional Victoria's Secret catalog that showed up in the mailbox. Maybe even good for a little solo flying on the couch this evening, if there wasn't anything better on the TV.

Curious, I dropped my keys and wallet on the little table next to the door and put the letter on the kitchen counter as I stopped to kick off my steel-toes and open the fridge for a beer. I tossed my net baseball cap onto the cluttered kitchen table and knocked a pile of old bills onto the floor. Opening my Bud, I grabbed the mystery letter and flopped on my secondhand couch, pulling my feet on the shitty coffee table I'd found at a garage sale and upsetting a stack of empty beer bottles I hadn't gotten around to throwing away.

The letter was on similar yellow stationery and featured another well-stacked bikini babe in the margin. "YOU'VE BEEN SELECTED" headed the page in bold black letters. The letter seemed to be the standard cock-and-bull about getting a whole lot of something for a whole lot of nothing. Apparently, this letter told me that if I was willing to completely change my life, then these people were going to give me all the money I wanted to do it. I briefly entertained an idea of driving around in a brand new Porsche and wearing Italian suits, but it didn't last very long. I tossed the letter onto the table in front of me and turned on the television.

For some reason, not even Monday Night Football could keep my eyes from drifting back to the bright paper on the table. I must've picked the damn thing up a million times and re-read it, looking for the catch while secretly hoping there wasn't one.

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"Look, man, it's a scam," my buddy Lyle said the next day. Lyle was an ex-con, making a real try at going straight now that he was on the outside. He had steady work here at the carpentry shop, made decent money and finally had his own place in my building. We caught the same bus to work every morning. "Everybody in the city probably got one, man. It's a scam."

"You didn't get one, did you?" I asked him.

"No," Lyle admitted. "But that don't mean I won't. Probably tomorrow or something. Just put it out of your mind, brother man. It's only gonna fuck you up. What you got is what you got, ain't nobody gonna give you nothing for bein' a nice stand-up guy."

"I guess not," I said dejectedly. "Still, it would be nice, tho!"

"Fuck that," Lyle said, his voice getting that flat, dead quality that meant he was talking about something that reminded him of the joint. "You got what you got, and nobody's gonna give you nothing. Just forget it and you'll be a lot less fucked up about it."

"Fucked up about what?" the third member of our little 'club' said, vaulting through the rear doors of the bus just before they closed. K.C. Lester and I had gone through high school together, at least until he dropped out junior year when he got his girlfriend pregnant. She'd had an abortion, but K.C. found a decent job at the shop where we all worked now and didn't feel like going back to school. He talked about getting his G.E.D. someday, but I doubted it. He even went by K.C. because of me. With a first name like Ambrose and surrounded by "Jimmies" and "Jims" so I couldn't go by James, I shortened it to A.J. We were freshmen in high school. Keith Colin Andrew Lester thought that going by the first initials was cool as hell, so he started going by K.C.

"Check this out," I said, taking the paper away from Lyle's hand and handing it over to K.C. "What do you think?"

"Nice tits," he said, looking over the bikini babe.

"No, read it, Einstein," Lyle said, snorting his derision.

"Oh, cool. My neighbor gets shit like this all the time. It's like, they have these prizes and shit and they have this raffle for 'em, but you have to go out and look at their condos or their property or whatever. There's free food and beer and this chance for you to win a car or some shit, and all you have to do is sit through some boring-ass lectures and go look at a couple houses."

"Really?" I said.

"Yeah, it says so right here," K.C. said, pointing at the page. "Hey, this is by Holt-Pearson pharmaceuticals, it says at the bottom. You probably got entered in this contest because you let yourself get tested for that bone marrow thing."

Some old lady had been sick at my church, and everybody decided to be real nice and go get their blood tested to see if she could use their bone marrow. She died before they could find a donor.

"Hey, hey - it says you can bring guests, man! Shit - why don't we go? It's only for a weekend, what the hell else are we gonna do?" K.C. said.

"I dunno," Lyle said, scratching his goatee. "It don't sound like something I'd wanna do."

"Shit, man, what's not to like about free food, beer, and a pool? Hell, this place probably even has cable. We can sit around watching games all Sunday and then drive back in time to go to work Monday morning. What do we got to lose?"

Lyle shrugged and looked at me, as if all of a sudden it was my decision.

"C'mon, A.J., it'll be a good time. I promise," K.C. said.

"Shit, like I got anything better to do," I told him. "But you're paying for gas."

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The week progressed like the weeks usually progressed - lots of sawdust and frustration. Life at the Playscape wood shop went on without surprises. We'd constructed no less than seventeen big wooden jungle-gym/forts with slides and ladders and shit for rich little kids to play on by the time we got our take-home (at least the boss paid in cash, because of all the illegals that we had working in the shop) on Friday. We stuck around for smokes and a cold can of Coors Light in the shop for a while before we caught a bus home. K.C. was nearly jumping up and down he was so excited.

We all managed to pack for the weekend in a little bitty gym bag with room to spare. Piling into my old primer-grey Pontiac, we were off in a dense cloud of smoke and the squealing of my loose fan belt. It was a nice day for a drive. My two best buds and the open road, Stevie Ray Vaughan on the classic rock station and nothing but the wide open road ahead of us. It was almost like being a kid again - I couldn't keep back a smile as I drummed my thumbs on the steering wheel along to the music.

After about an hour, we started slowing down a little for fear we'd miss the turn. Lyle was on map detail while K.C. in the back seat (a little the worse for wear after four Bud tall boys he'd bought at the gas station) read the directions on the letter.

We pulled off the highway and headed down the poorly-maintained county road towards the resort. If they really intended to sell condos out here, they were going to have to do some serious street repairs before the commuter crowd would go for it. All the brand new Camrys and Grand Ams and Beemers in for new shocks every three months would eventually get any community group pissed off.

"Whoa," K.C. breathed. "That place is fuckin' *A huge*."

The resort was immense indeed, looking like some of the old English manor houses they'd seen on those boring-ass shows on PBS. Manicured lawns and flowerbeds graced the long cobbled entry walk on either side, and a happily bubbling fountain gaily caught the last shreds of moonlight.

A valet in a tux shirt and bowtie came out to the car, a well-groomed young man looking like just the sort the three men had given judicious beat-downs to back in school.

"Need help with your bags?" the youth asked.

"Nah," I told him, tossing him the keys. "Do me a favor. Dent the hell out of it. I need the insurance."

Lyle patted him on the shoulder in his is-this-a-threat-or-is-he-being-friendly kind of way that was always good for a laugh. "It was a joke, kid," he explained.

"Right," the kid said with a nervous smile, slipping onto the squeaky vinyl seat of my ride and pulling it around to a big indoor garage. Shouldering our little bags, we headed up the walk and were greeted by two women and a man, all dressed in green blazers with some kind of corporate logo on the breast pocket.

The man was silver-haired and tan, looking like a picture of old-guy health off the cover of *Prevention* magazine. His smile had way too much teeth in it, but his smooth baritone didn't make him sound like a condescending prick. In fact, he seemed kinda - I dunno, maybe happy to see us.

The women were older, but still good-looking and trim - smooth tanned skin marred only by just a few laugh lines and crow's-feet, hair that was still more reddish-brown than grey and dripping with about ten grand worth of diamonds between 'em. As I got closer, I could see they were identical, down to the smallest detail. The only difference was that the one on the left wore a little yellow silk flower clipped to her hair on one side.

I flashed the letter to the geezer. "A.J. Baker," I said. "It said I could bring guests, right? These are my guests. This here's K.C. Lester and Lyle Donnally."

The man's smile widened. "Ah, Mr. Baker, what a pleasure. And of course your guests are welcome. I'm Dr. William Weatherly, and these are my assistants. This - " meaning flower-hair " - is Dr. Kate McGrew and the other is her twin sister, Dr. Paula McGrew."

"How ya doin'?" I asked, extending a hand. Normally I hated doctors, but these were dropping a wad on us to stay free, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to kiss a little ass.

"Nice to meet you," Dr. Kate said. "You can always tell I'm Kate because of the flower."

"Nice," I told her. Behind me, K.C. and Lyle were making their meet-and-greets and were trying to be pleasant just like me. It was a relief - K.C. could be kind of an asshole with a couple beers in him. "Good t' meet y'all."

"You gentlemen must be tired from that long road," Dr. Weatherly said. "Let me get someone to show you to your rooms."

"Is there a bar here or something?" I asked straight out, since I planned to spend most of my time there. "I could really use a drink."

Dr. Weatherly chuckled in what sounded like genuine amusement. "Of course, Mr. Baker. There's a lounge just off the main entry hall if you prefer, or there is a fully stocked wet bar in your room as well. Please help yourself to either - you're our guests and we want you to be as comfortable as possible."

"Thanks a lot, Doc. And yeah - just call me A.J., all right? Mr. Baker is my dad."

Weatherly smiled. "Right you are, A.J. Call me Bill."

"Bill. Right," I said.

They led us up a staircase carpeted in red velvet. I'd been a carpenter long enough to know expensive woodwork when I saw it. The stairs and banister were polished cherry and the newel post was hand-carved. It would've taken journeymen like us a couple years to make it

and the wood alone was worth more than the three of us could make in a year. This place reeked of cash.

"Nice place," Lyle commented.

"Thank you," Dr. Paula said. "It's a family estate, built back before the turn of the century. The outside was brought over stone by stone from our great-grandfather's ancestral estate in Scotland."

K.C. ran a covetous hand over the polished banister. "Nice woodwork."

"You know about woodworking?" Bill asked.

"Yeah," I said. "We all work as carpenters. Journeymen - we couldn't do nothing like what you got here - but we can at least recognize good stuff when we see it."

"A discerning eye is worth a great deal, Mr. Lester," Dr. Kate said.

Bill threw open the doors on a huge suite, furnished in Danish modern and with everything we could have dreamed of - a huge tiled bar top, a sixty-inch high-definition television, comfortable couches, a view of the pool.

"Your rooms are through there. It's a suite of four, so one will be empty," Bill explained. "You're the first guests to arrive - we didn't expect people to arrive until tomorrow morning."

"We got off work a little early and decided to come straight on," Lyle explained. "I hope that's okay, Doc."

"Of course it is," Bill said. "Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'll go get some of the presentation materials together for you. Could I interest you gentlemen in a drink at the bar, perhaps?"

"Sounds good," Lyle said, and we nodded as well.

"Great. I'll see you there in half an hour." He left in a dignified hurry, a gentleman down to his toenails. Somewhere between the front door and our room, I decided that I liked this old guy.

"I expect you'll want to relax a moment," Dr. Kate said, taking her sister's arm. "We'll meet you in the bar, if there's nothing else we can help you with."

"Is it okay if we smoke in here?" K.C. asked, reading all our minds.

"Of course. Or we can have cigars sent up, if you prefer," Paula said.

We grinned. This place really was swank. "Maybe later. We'll catch y'all downstairs."

The Doctors McGrew left gracefully, pulling the door shut just before K.C. turned to us and jumped excitedly up and down.

"Can you believe this fucking place? Damn! It's better than I thought it would be!"

Lyle flopped on a leather couch and looked over the high-tech remote control next to him. "We got satellite, DVD, surround sound. shit. This set-up must cost fifteen grand!"

"It's pretty swanky," I said. "But why waste it on a buncha losers like us? They have to know we ain't buyin' nothing from them, we ain't got nothing but the clothes on our backs and enough gas money to get home on."

"Look, it ain't our fault that some computer spit out your name," K.C. said. "Look, man, don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"What about you, Lyle?" I asked. "Still think we're getting something for nothing?"

"K.C.'s right for a change," Lyle said, still fiddling with the remote. "Besides, we're here, ain't we? Let the old dude buy us a fucking drink and see where it takes us."

"Sure, why the fuck not," I said, taking my shit into the nearest bedroom.

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The lounge was all polished brass and dark woods, just like where the rich folks always drank expensive scotch right before Jerry Orbach came and arrested them on *Law & Order*. We all felt really out of place in our scruffy blue jeans and NASCAR t-shirts, but Bill and the McGrews didn't seem to give a shit. Hell, if they didn't, then we wouldn't either. Strange how I went from thinking they were just a bunch of rich bastards to wanting them not to think I was some kind of welfare case. A part of me even wished I'd brought along my one-and-only coat and tie, kept in the back of the closet in case somebody died and I had to go to a funeral.

Bill was puffing away contentedly on an expensive-looking cigar and drinking bourbon from a cut-glass highball that looked like it belonged in a showroom someplace. We all sat down and ordered cold Bud off the tap. The bartender nodded and smiled the way all bartenders do and started pulling. We hadn't even gotten situated and put our smokes and lighters on the table in front of us before we were each given a tall, frosty mug brimming with amber. We fell to like the beer drinkers we all were.

"So, I imagine you're wondering why you're here," Bill said once we'd had a long cold pull off the mugs. We all nodded, waiting for him to give Dr. Kate's long white cigarette a light from a gold-plated Zippo before he turned back to us.

"A.J., you submitted to a bone-marrow screening about a year ago, am I correct?"

"Yeah," I admitted. "Some old lady at my church got sick."

"Ah, you're a church-going man," Bill said.

"Nah, not really. I was trying to hook up with this girl on my block. I figured that was a good way to get close to her, but it didn't pan out. Besides, me and the church, we don't get along so good. I quit going."

"I see," Bill said. "But the results of your test were quite interesting."

"What, you need some of my bone marrow?" I asked in disbelief. "Not that I don't appreciate all this, Doc, but hell - if that's what you needed, all you had t' do was ask me, I'd'a given it to you no problem."

Bill laughed, holding up his hands. "No, it's not that at all," he said. "But thank you for your generous offer. No, you have an extremely rare genetic potential, something not one in two million other human beings possess. We've found only three others in the world who possess it, and two of those donors are unsuitable and the other is on active duty in the Middle

East. We invited you here to ask you if we could study it. It would be the chance of a lifetime for us."

"You mean, you want, like, some blood samples and shit?" I asked, then caught myself embarrassingly and turned to the McGrews. "Sorry. Pardon my French."

The McGrews just laughed as Bill went on. "Among other things. We're quite excited about the opportunity, but the tests would take about a week. We'd make it worth your time, A.J., I'll assure you."

"A week? I dunno if my foreman would like that. I mean, this test can't last forever, right? I'd need a job when it was over," I said.

"If it came to that, we'd help arrange a job for you," Dr. Paula told me.

"Hell, A.J., we'll talk to Mr. Reynolds for you," Lyle said. "If this is important, I mean. He'll give you a week for this. He's a prick, but he ain't that big a prick."

"Your friends would be welcome to stay with you," Bill added. "I'd be happy to make arrangements with your employer on all your behalves. You'd be our honored guests, all of you - because I cannot lie to you, A.J. Some of these procedures, well - they're more than a little painful. We'd like to extend you every courtesy if you agree. As a way of saying thank you."

I swallowed hard. I knew enough about doctors to know that they said 'mild discomfort' when they said 'screaming pain.' What must it be like if the doctor says 'screaming pain?'

"By way of compensation, we'd agree to give you an unlimited expense account, as we promised in the letter. Anything you wanted. A new car, a house - we'd arrange for it all at our own expense. It's the least we could do."

"Whaddaya say, A.J.?" K.C. said hopefully. "Sounds pretty sweet to me."

I looked at Lyle, who was the most street-savvy of us all. He shrugged, saying it was up to me.

"Anything I want, and you're paying. Just for some tests."

"Correct," Bill said.

I extended my hand across the table. "I guess you got a deal, Doc."

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I staggered into my bed much, much later. The docs had all been over the fucking moon over me saying yes to their tests and had ordered a bunch of champagne to celebrate. That shit always went straight to my head, so I don't exactly remember how I got up the stairs or got my shoes off, all I remember is waking up when it was still dark outside to go in my little private bathroom and puke my brains out. God, I hurt all over. Particularly in the back of my neck. Felt like a damn bee sting or something. Making a mental note to check it out in the morning, first thing, I lay on the lovely cool pink floor tiles and passed out dead away.

The morning sun peeking over the treetops through the bathroom window brought me groaning up out of the messy pile I'd made on the floor. My tongue tasted exactly the way my feet smelled and I was pretty sure the USC snare drum line was rehearsing on the inside of my skull. My eyes took their time focusing as I stood, steadying myself against the wall. A couple

handfuls of cold water on my face and a long piss did a little towards me regaining my status as a human being.

I staggered unsteadily out into the front, communal room. K.C. was passed out on the couch, still, while stentorian snores from another bedroom announced that Lyle was having a bit of a lie-in as well.

I fumbled around the small but well-appointed kitchen until I found coffee and started the pot. A soft knock at the door brought my attention from trying to stop the clog-dancers practicing on my temples.

The door swung away slowly on well-oiled hinges to reveal a Playboy centerfold wet-dream fantasy. Long, slender tanned legs flowed sinuously from extremely short cutoff jeans, and a lusciously muscled stomach with an eminently lickable bellybutton peeked out between the waistband of the jeans and the little red fringed halter top that did an admirably poor job of concealing a magnificent rack. I was pretty sure there was a push-up bra under there somewhere - tits didn't do that all on their own, I was pretty sure. Slender, delicate hands with long pink fingernails held a clipboard in one and twirled a strand of shiny, thick ash-blonde hair around another. She smiled at me with about a million perfectly straight white teeth behind full, pink-glossed lips, and overlarge, guileless blue eyes rimmed with the longest lashes I'd ever seen gazed at me sweetly.

"Hi, I'm Keri," she said in a cheery soprano. "Dr. Weatherly sent me over to see if you were ready for some tests."

"Are these the ones that are gonna hurt?" I asked groggily.

"I don't think so," she said with a compassionate smile. "I think that happens this afternoon. All we need today is a little blood and urine."

"No shortage of those today," I grumbled. "Do I got time for a cup of coffee?"

"Sure," Keri said. "Can I come in?"

I grunted to cover my embarrassment at leaving this gorgeous creature standing in the hallway. I stepped out of her way and she walked - it was more like slithered, her walk was so sexy - past me and into the kitchen. I lit a cigarette from K.C.'s pack of Marlboros and waited while the coffee machine worked its magic.

"I'm A.J.," I said, fumbling for some kind of non-lame icebreaker.

"I know," she said. "It's right here on your form."

"You work here?" I tried again.

"Uh-huh."

"You a nurse or something?"

"Something like that."

I finally hung my head in defeat. Besides, a girl like this probably had a rich boyfriend anyhow, wouldn't be interested in a bum like me, particularly one that smelled like the floor of a movie theater. "You don't talk much, do you?"

She chuckled. "I guess not. I try not to get too chummy with the patients, I guess."

"Lotsa patients around here?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. Dr. Weatherly's been looking for DNA matches for quite a while. We get people in and out of here all the time."

"Pretty important stuff going on here, I guess," I grumbled, pouring a cup of very strong coffee. "Way beyond me, I can tell you that."

"Yeah, it's pretty complicated stuff," Keri said. "I just do what I'm told."

"You and me both," I said, slugging coffee. "You want some of this?"

"No, thanks. I already had mine."

K.C. chose that moment to let out a boozy snort and mumble something about golf clubs as he rolled over on the couch. A very wet fart accompanied his motion. I grimaced, but to my unending relief Keri just laughed softly.

"He's a real charmer," I explained.

"You all really tied one on last night, huh?" she asked.

"So they tell me," I said. "Never have been able to handle champagne. A lot of last night is kinda blurry. I hope I didn't piss anybody off."

She smiled, a dazzling affair that raised my blood pressure about 20 points. A man could get dizzy over a smile like that. "A.J., if you are a match for what Dr. Weatherly is looking for, then you could slap his face and you couldn't piss him off. But relax. I talked to him earlier. You were all perfect gentlemen. Everybody just talked, got to know one another. You've all had pretty interesting lives, from what he told me."

"Interesting," I said. "I guess you can call it that."

She grinned again. "You all set, here?"

I set down the half-empty coffee cup. "Yeah, I guess. Listen, are these guys gonna be sitting around all day, or what?"

"Oh, no. Don't worry, you'll get to see 'em. I'll send somebody around in a minute to wake 'em up and get them cleaned up."

"Okay," I said, running my fingers through very hopeless morning-after hair. "Let's get started, I guess."

She gave me that smile again. "Follow me."

I didn't bother adding that I would do just that, into the bowels of hell. She probably heard shit like that all the damn time.

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I had to say, it was the first doctor's office I'd ever seen with an ashtray. It was like those old films I saw from in the 'Fifties where all the doctors smoked on the job, before anybody knew it

was bad for you. Which let me work off a little of my nerves - say what you would about the habit, there was something about it that settled you down.

Dr. Weatherly came in about five minutes after I got into the open-backed hospital gown, wearing latex gloves and a white coat, a stethoscope around his neck. He set a little tray down on a table and bid me good morning. He advanced on me as I ground out my cig, tying a rubber band around my bicep like a pro, tapping gently to find the vein and tapping me like a high school senior with a keg. I barely felt a thing, the guy was so good. He set about filling lots of little vials while he chatted me up.

"Little bit of a headache this morning, I expect," he said cheerfully.

"Yeah, a little," I said. "Gonna play with boys, gotta get up and work with the men."

He smiled. "Good attitude. Sounds like my father."

"My dad used to tell me that all the time, before he passed on," I said. "He was a good man, my dad. Raised us after my mom died. Did a pretty good job, too."

"He sounds like a good fella," Bill said. He jerked the needle out of my elbow crease in a smooth, nearly-painless motion and flipped the elastic band off one-handed. "That ought to be enough for now. You need some aspirin for that head. A.J.?"

"Nah," I said. "It's not so bad anymore. The coffee helped a lot."

Weatherly smiled, chuckling. "Well, I hope it's done its other job, too."

"Other job?"

He handed me a specimen cup and jerked his head in the direction of the toilet.

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I was feeling a whole lot more human - they'd even given me a second to brush my teeth, God bless 'em - by the time K.C. and Lyle came in, looking a little green but otherwise okay. They were even able to grunt out a 'good morning' that humans could even understand.

"There's breakfast if you want," Bill told us. "Although I'll understand if you pass on it. A.J., why don't you go and get cleaned up and we'll see you at eleven, okay?"

"Sure thing, doc," I said. He left the room as K.C. and Lyle sat down.

"Man, you wouldn't believe the fucking babes they sent to wake us up," Lyle said. "I'd give a nut for a night with that."

"I saw," I told him. "Was one of 'em's name Keri?"

"Nope," K.C. said. "They said they was named Toni and Lisa. Wish we'd'a gotten some warning, tho', I hated 'em seeing me looking like something you try not to step in."

"Anyway, Bill says we can hang out with you today," Lyle said. "While you're getting your tests done and everything."

"Shit, y'all don't wanna do that," I said. "Y'all can hang out by the pool, watch some TV, anything you want."

"We got shitloads of time for that," Lyle countered. "We got you to thank for the vacation, we figured we'd hang around until you were done for the day."

"That's really cool of y'all," I said. "Keri - that's the babe they sent for me this morning - she says that the really suck part of all this is after lunch, anyway."

"We'll hang out," K.C. said. "In case you wanna hold my hand or something."

"Rather hold Keri's," I said honestly. "Hey, man - why you got a band-aid on your arm?" I pointed towards the crook of his elbow. I noticed that Lyle had one too.

"Lisa and Toni took some of our blood and piss, too," K.C. explained. "Said that Doc Bill was gonna take care of our physicals this year, free of charge. Besides, Lyle has to piss every week for his parole officer anyways."

"Figured what the hell, get it out of the way instead of having to take another day off work," Lyle explained.

"Good idea," I agreed.

About that time, Dr. Kate - with a red flower in her hair today - came in wearing scrubs and a white coat like Dr. Bill's. She was smiling broadly.

"Good morning, fellas," she said cheerfully. "A.J., are you ready for the MRI?"

"Sure thing," I said, standing. She motioned and off we went.

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Something about lying completely still for twenty minutes made itches worse than they were any other time, even standing at attention in Basic training. I went to work on a mother under my left arm with one hand and behind my left ear with the other the second they rolled me out on that tray. I was thinking fondly of a cigarette while I rubbed the back of my neck, stopping suddenly when I felt an unfamiliar lump, right where the "bee sting" from this morning was.

"No, dammit," I heard muffled through the door. Lyle. "You tell me what the fuck that was, right now, lady."

I stood up and brushed past Dr. Paula, going through the thick door and into the control room. Dr. Kate was trying desperately to keep a very agitated Lyle and K.C. from pointing at the computer monitor behind her.

"What the fuck are you doing, man?" I asked loudly.

"We wasn't supposed to see," K.C. said, walking towards me. "She thought we was too dumb to notice, I guess. A.J., man, there's something in your neck, dude. Right in the back. It's square, with these little legs on it like a centipede or some shit."

Lyle turned to look at me. "Bitch won't say what the fuck it is. Pretended like she didn't know what we was talking about."

"Seriously? Did y'all put something in my neck?" I asked.

K.C. walked behind me and clapped his hands loudly. "I fuckin' knew it. You got a scar back there, same as me and Lyle."

"Waitaminnit," I said. "Y'all have shit in your necks, too?"

"That's what I'm gonna make this bitch tell us," Lyle growled, turning back to Dr. Kate with eyes full of menace.

They weren't so full of menace when she racked the slide on her Glock and pointed it dead between Lyle's eyes.

"It didn't have to be this way," she said evenly, even pleasantly. "I'm sorry it came to this. Paula, dear, go and get Dr. Weatherly."

"Does he have something to do with this?" I asked angrily, picking at the sore spot on the back of my neck.

"Something to do with it?" Kate said, laughing. "My dear, he's the one who implanted them. Last night when you were all falling down drunk."

"To hell with getting our stuff," K.C. said heatedly. "I say get the keys and we're getting the fuck out of this place right now."

"Damn right," Lyle added.

"I can't allow that to happen," Bill Weatherly's smooth salesman baritone said from the doorway to the hall. Dr. Paula crowded in behind him, also holding a cocked pistol.

"What the fuck?" I asked, disbelieving.

"You have to understand how rare you are," Weatherly said.

"Go, A.J.," Lyle said. "He ain't gonna shoot you. He needs your DNA or something, remember? Go get the car and go call the fucking cops on this sonofabitch."

"I don't think I can let you do that, A.J.," Weatherly explained. "I was hoping to avoid doing this, gentlemen - honestly I was - but you leave me no choice."

"No choice but what?" K.C. demanded.

Weatherly raised his wristwatch to his mouth and said "Anataeus. Hostile subject. Subdue."

"Confrimed," said a disembodied voice from the air around them.

I tensed, ready to jump Kate McGrew and punch the bitch's mouth until she dropped the gun. I hoped Lyle was right, that she didn't intend to put a bullet in me. It was a gamble, but damned if she was gonna get away with holding a gun on my friends.

I sprang.

I tried to spring.

Nothing happened.

I just stood there, with my hands by my sides.

Dr. Weatherly paced easily past Lyle, who was standing straight with his arms by his sides like I was. I wondered if he'd gotten K.C., too, but I couldn't make myself turn my head to check. He clasped his hands behind his back and regarded me with a look of genuine remorse.

"I'm truly sorry it came to this, A.J., I really am. I like you, and your friends. But I can't let you ruin this. I - we - had hoped that you'd go along with this voluntarily. But whether you agree or not, we can't let you stop the project."

I couldn't move my mouth, so I could only whisper through gritted teeth. "Why?"

"We'll explain it later," Weatherly said. "Right now, we have a schedule to keep. Paula, are the implants ready?"

"Twenty minutes ago," Paula answered.

"Fine," Weatherly replied. "They shouldn't be any more trouble - you can put those beastly things away now, ladies. Prep them for surgery - all of them. I'll meet you in room one in thirty minutes, after I scrub."

"Fine, doctor," Kate said. "Gentlemen, please follow me."

I wanted to growl, to spit in her damn face. But I couldn't. All I could do was walk, meekly, my hands by my sides, following Kate out the door past Bill and Paula and across the hall into a pre-op. I sat on the gurney, slipped out of my robe and laid down like it was what I'd intended to do all along.

"What the hell have you done to us?" K.C. demanded, his own teeth gritted.

"The chips we implanted in your spinal columns, gentlemen, are tied in to the house computer. Only Dr. Weatherly and Paula, and our assistants have the access codes. Anataeus will be your twenty-four and seven watchdog, gentlemen. He'll keep you out of trouble while we finish our work."

"I'll fucking beat this, lady," I swore. "And then I'm coming after you."

She only smiled and took a safety razor from a tray. "Let's get you men prepped for surgery, shall we?"

\* \* \*

It wouldn't have been so bad if we hadn't been awake for the whole thing. This Anataeus thingamajig was keeping our mouths shut and the tubes down our throats were keeping us from doing much talking, but that seemed to be okay with Dr. Weatherly. He got downright chatty as he worked.

"I'm sorry that the implants are going to be a rush job for K.C. and Lyle," he explained. "We honestly took their blood and urine for a physical, not for any other purpose. We had to hustle to get these cooked up for you."

He stripped the cloth off a tray, revealing three rows of little capsules, about the size of a coat button. The first row of four was black and looked like plastic. The second was five lumps of shimmering emerald green, looking like some kind of freaky mouthwash in a glossy capsule, about the size of a cough lozenge. The third row held six hard white plastic cylinders which looked for all the world like mini-marshmallows.

"Now don't worry, gentlemen, this won't hurt at all," he said. He took a silver pen-looking thing in his gloved right hand and shoved some kind of magnifier with a light over his eyes. He walked beside my head and I heard a hum and a flash of heat. After a second, he took one of the black plastic shirt buttons - I could see that they had little wires hanging out the bottom of

it - in a pair of tweezers and went back to work. My legs started jerking involuntarily. Another button and my arms jerked, a third button and my chest and back spasmed uncontrollably. The last one was bigger - like a coat button, and it had six wires hanging out of it. He used a longer pair of forceps and some kind of "Star Wars" looking thing and worked for a long time on the side of my head. All the time, he was calling shit out like an episode of M\*A\*S\*H - "tweezers," "suction," "clamp," "retractor," all sorts of shit like that. Paula handed him stuff off the tray and towed the sweat off him. Wish the bitch had towed some of it off of me - I was the one this whack-job was sticking shit in his brain!

"There," he said at last. "All done. There won't even be a scar. At least, not once your hair grows back in."

He had to go and remind me that the crazy Kate bitch had shaved us all bald as eggs.

Next he fitted one of the green throat lozenges into some kind of a gun thing. "The next are time-release drugs," he explained as he checked some doodads on the side of the gun. "We're going to inject them into your bodies, instead of surgically implanting them. That way there will be no scarring to speak of and it will be a lot less painful for you all."

He pressed the gun into my forehead and opened fire. There was a hiss and a cold feeling on my hairline, then nothing. The next two went just below my nipples. I didn't have to be able to look down to see that the next two went into my balls. I tried not to think about that too hard, but I could see K.C.'s panicked eyes look away pointedly.

"There, now that's out of the way. Not so bad, now, was it?"

I tried to tell him what I thought of him, but I couldn't. I settled for staring daggers at him, but he was too intent on his work to notice.

"Now, the last of it. They look like marshmallows, don't they?" he said, picking up the silver pen again and fitting one of the marshmallows into a weird glove with a what looked like a silver snake on it, ending in a three-pronged claw contraption where the marshmallow went. He poked around in my bellybutton and shoved around. I could actually feel the mechanical snake gizmo creeping around under my skin. It made me want to freak out, but I could only lay there stock still. Weatherly kept looking above my head, I guess watching the snake on a computer monitor like the ones over K.C. and Lyle. In and out, in and out, until all four marshmallows were planted. Two in my chest it felt like - I'd have to feel to be sure, but I was pretty sure that was where they had ended up - and two in my hips, around back close to my ass.

"Fascinating little things, our little marshmallows," Weatherly said. "Memory foam. They're completely inert foam encased in a capsule that keeps them squeezed. All we have to do is inject you with the solvent to dissolve that casing, and the foam will resume its original shape in moments, grafting onto the fat layer underneath your skin and mimicking normal, healthy tissue. It's quite amazing - Kate McGrew developed it and we've had amazing results. I think you're going to be very pleased with the results."

I hissed. It was all I could do. I just hoped he understood that it meant he was supposed to go fuck himself with something sharp and rusty.

"Now, then, just two more little things, here," he said, taking up a syringe in his hand. Shit, I hated needles, particularly when they were in this crackpot's hands. But at least he gave me

the shots through the I.V. I don't know that I could have handled having to lie there still while he shoved the damn thing into my ass or something.

"Just a little immunosuppressant, here - just enough to make your white blood cells and lymphatic system go nighty-night for a little while. Don't worry, A.J., it's temporary and we'll keep you in antiseptic conditions until we're sure it's worn off." He pressed the plunger. Paula, just out of my field of vision, handed him another one full of something that looked for all the world like the champagne we drank last night.

"Now, this is a little something special I cooked up myself, just this morning," he explained. "I hope you like it. There's nothing else like it in the world."

He pressed the plunger. I closed my eyes. Whatever he wanted to do to me, he'd already done. Now it was just a waiting game.

"No need in you being around for me working on your friends," he said, jerking a thumb at K.C. and Lyle, looking freaked and angry in the eyes behind him. "So I'll let you sleep this off. You're going to be a little bit sore when you wake up, but it will pass soon. Keri, Toni and Lisa will be around if you need something for the pain."

He spoke into his Rolex again. "Anataeus. Subject One. Sleep."

"Confirmed," the bodiless voice from everywhere said again.

And everything went black.

\* \* \*

I just lay there, staring up at the ceiling. It took a minute or two for everything to come back to me. I was a little sore, and kinda itchy, but I couldn't remember much. I think I was supposed to be mad about something, but I couldn't remember.

I slid my feet over the side of the soft bed I was in and was a little surprised - I don't know why I was surprised, I guess, but I was - that my feet didn't quite touch the floor. My toes dangled about four inches from the deep-pile carpet. I looked down at them curiously. Something wasn't right. I couldn't tell what, but something wasn't right.

"Hi, A.J.," a cheerful voice said from the doorway. I looked up, wordlessly, trying to remember the name of the peppy little blonde that was standing in the doorway. "Did you have a nice nap?"

A.J. Yeah. That was me. And she was. Kelli? Kandi? Something cute like that.

"Yeah," I said. "Nice."

"Good," she said happily. "Listen, Toni and Lisa have K.C. and Lyle out in the front room. We were going to hang out for a little while, you interested?"

Lyle? K.C.? Who the hell were they?

"Sure," I said. I teetered uncertainly across the carpet, using my hands to help myself against the wall, out of the bedroom and into the front room. Two of the other cute girls - a short, curvy brunette with sparkling blue eyes and a heart-shaped face and a taller, willowy blonde with brown eyes like deep pools and the cutest "Jennifer Aniston" haircut - were there with two really goofy-looking people. They were spindly and skinny - I could count their ribs and the

bumps of their vertebrae up their backs - and were bald as cue balls, both their heads and their bodies. They all wore some strange-looking shorts that looked a lot like diapers. I couldn't help but laugh at them, they looked so silly.

I stopped giggling at them when I passed the mirror on the wall. I was just like them. Bald and spindly looking and wearing a diaper, too. I couldn't stand it, it was so ugly. It made me want to scream, it made me want to vomit. I covered my eyes with my hands and tried not to cry. I felt Keri's - her name was Keri - hands take my bony shoulders firmly and turn me away from the mirror. She whispered to me sweetly and settled me down, leading me over to the others and sitting me down, stroking my skinny forearms.

"I couldn't help it, I'm sorry," I said, whimpering. "I was just so ugly."

I felt one of the other diaper-wearers - K.C.! One of my oldest friends! I was starting to remember! - put his hand on my knee and give it a little squeeze. "It's okay," he said. "The same thing happened to us. Me and Lyle both. But Toni and Lisa were just telling us that they can help us."

"Will they help me, too?" I asked, despairing.

"Of course we will," the brunette - Toni - said with a sweet smile. "And Keri will, too. We'll get you feeling good about yourselves in no time."

"Dr. Weatherly sent some things that could help," Keri said, picking up a silver briefcase that had been sitting alongside one of the couches. She set it in her lap and popped the latches. She took out three small plastic bottles that were filled with a light blue liquid and led us all into one of the bathrooms.

"Rub it all over," she told me, handing me a bottle. "Then get in the shower and rinse it off. It'll make a big difference."

The liquid was chilly and smelled a little funny, but I didn't waste time smearing it over my arms, chest and legs. K.C. helped me cover my back. It made my skin tingle. Something in the back of my brain kept telling me to stop, to fight what was happening, but the image in the bathroom mirror kept driving me forward. I couldn't let myself be that ugly, not when there was help available. Once I used Keri and the others to help me get to where I could look at myself in the mirror again without wanting to scream, then I could escape and get some payback on Weatherly and the twins. But there was no point in not taking advantage while I could.

I stepped under the warm water and rubbed myself with a washcloth. When I stepped out, still dripping, I didn't have a single hair showing anywhere on my exposed skin. I ran my hands over my chest and down my hips, trying to get used to smoothness and softness where before there had been a thick, bushy coating of wiry black hair.

"This feels funny," I said.

"But you have to admit, it's a lot more beautiful than all that nasty body hair you had," Keri said. I could only nod agreement. It was a lot more beautiful.

\* \* \*

Lyle, now as hairless as me and K.C., was out of the shower and wrapping himself in a towel when Keri brought out a little dropper bottle from the briefcase and told me to let her see my hands. I tried not to look too hard at my hand as I put it in hers, all skinny and bony and ugly

like it was. Keri only smiled in understanding and used the dropper bottle to put a drop of some kind of smelly, thick liquid on each of my fingernails.

"This is going to itch a little," she told me.

It did. It felt like ants crawling under my fingertips, really intense at first but slowly fading away. By the time it was gone completely, my nails were about an inch, maybe an inch-and-a-half long. They were even uglier than before, all jagged-edged and uneven. I glared at her accusingly.

"Don't worry, honey," she said to me sweetly. "That's only the first step. Come with me."

She led me over to a chair just outside the bathroom door. A little Korean woman in a white coat was sitting across from me, smiling.

"This is Kim," Keri told me. "She's going to make your nails nice and pretty."

"I don't care about pretty," I told her. "I want them beautiful."

"Think you can do that, Kim?" Keri asked the girl.

"Sure, no problem," Kim said cheerily, pulling on a little mask over her nose and mouth. "I know just the thing." She grabbed my right hand and poised a Dremel rotary tool over the nails and started shaping and smoothing them. Little flecks of nail and dust flew everywhere and all I could do was try not to sneeze.

"Just let Kim work," Keri said. "Relax and enjoy yourself."

"Okay," I said, still not quite trusting her. Maybe I could use the time to figure out how the hell I was going to escape. K.C. and Lyle were led out next, to other little tables with other girls waiting with Dremel tools and surgical masks. Keri, Lisa and Toni all left to talk in the other room.

"We have to get out of here," I told my friends, not caring if Kim or the others heard. They seemed really intent on what they were doing with my nails. Kim was hard at work with a buffing block on mine, now.

"I don't see how," Lyle said. "We couldn't fight our way past a bunch of Girl Scouts, and you know Weatherly ain't gonna just let us go. We have enough to put him in jail for the rest of his miserable life."

"Besides, I don't know how far we'd get," K.C. added. "We're out in the middle of nowhere. If we couldn't get to the car, we'd have to walk, and I don't think I could go more than a mile before I passed out."

"Yeah," I said. "I wish t' God I knew what the hell he shot us up with."

"I was watching pretty close when he did K.C.," Lyle said. "The sonofabitch put shit in our brains, man. Little black things, about like a coat button. Plus, he has that Annie thing, that computer that can make us paralyzed."

Kim only smiled at me - I don't know how much English she knew, actually, but I liked the way her nose wrinkled up when she grinned - and set out a couple jars of powder, one white and one pink, and a shot glass of purple liquid that smelled like paint thinner. She took a big paintbrush and dipped it in the purple stuff, then dipped it in the white powder. The liquid

made the white powder into a paste, which she started putting on my nails. It didn't seem that interesting, so I turned back to my friends.

"So what are our options, d'you think?" I asked.

"We can try to get close to Weatherly," Lyle said. "Knock him out, maybe, or take him hostage. Maybe all three of us together could do it, or maybe somebody around here has a gun or something we could use."

"I don't think even the three of us could take him together, as bony as we are," K.C. supplied. "We'd have to have a gun or a knife."

"Nothing in the kitchen," Lyle said. "I already checked."

"Damn," I muttered. "It's looking pretty grim."

"What do we do?" K.C. asked, a little wide-eyed.

"We'll figure it out," I said. "We just have to stay calm, right? We can't do anything if we're running around all freaked out."

"Right," Lyle said.

"Okay, so here's the plan. K.C., you keep an eye out for something we can use as a weapon. Lyle, you get in tight with Keri, Lisa and Toni and try to figure out where Weatherly is, maybe how we can get to him."

"What are you gonna do?" Lyle said.

"I'm gonna try to find a way to call the cops," I said. "I don't know if they'll believe a damn thing I say, but maybe they'll send somebody around to help us out."

"I just hope nobody sees us like this," Lyle said. "All skinny and bald and ugly. I don't think I could stand that, y'know?"

"Me, neither," K.C. said.

"Lisa and Keri and Toni said they're gonna help. I don't see why we can't let 'em why we're trying to get out of here, do you?"

Keri, Lisa and Toni all came in about that time, smiling like they'd shared one hell of a joke at our expense out in the hall. Kim was using the Dremel on me again, buffing away with a big cotton wheel. I looked down at what she'd done to me and jerked my hand back like it had been scalded.

"What the fuck?" I said out loud. My nails were long and thick, overlapping the ends of my fingers by at least half an inch, maybe even three-quarters. They had brilliant white tips and lustrous pink cuticles and Kim had been buffing them to a high gloss with the rotary tool.

"You don't like?" Kim asked in her highly-accented English.

"You gave me chick fingernails," I said.

"They're beautiful," Keri commented.

Something about that damned word. Beautiful. I felt something inside me soften. She was right. The soft square-cut nails, buffed to a high gleam, they made my hands look less bony

and spindly and more long and graceful. My fingers looked slender and tapered now instead of spidery like they had before. I felt the anger bleeding out of me as I looked at them, turning my fingers this way and that to regard my nails. My new nails.

My beautiful nails.

I gave my hand back to Kim, a little apologetically. "Go ahead and finish," I told her.

"You like?" she asked, smiling.

"Yeah," I said, trying hard not to sound defeated. "I like."

\* \* \*

"You're too tense," Keri said once the Koreans had packed up their stuff and left. I was storming around in a rage, gesturing wildly with my beautiful hands with the long nails glowing sharply in the light slanting through the windows. Lyle looked ready to do murder, his nails painted pink with a glitter topcoat. K.C. was just staring at his, done a really trippy electric blue with a royal blue stars and glitter.

"Too tense? What the hell did you expect?" I shot back.

"Look, A.J., just sit down. We'll get you a smoke and a beer," Lisa said. "Maybe turn on some music or something. I think everybody should just settle down."

"We're just trying to help you not feel so ugly," Keri added. "It's working, isn't it?"

"Yeah," K.C. said dreamily, staring at his fingernails in the sunlight. "I think they're beautiful."

"For a chick," Lyle said, hostility evident in his tight voice.

Lisa brought me a can of Budweiser and my smokes. I hissed sharply, turning my head and closing my eyes tight at the sight of the beer can and my beaten-up pack of Marlboros.

"What's wrong?" Lisa asked.

"Not those," I said.

"Why not?" she asked.

"They're ugly," I said. "Take them away."

"Don't you want a smoke and a beer?" Lisa pressed.

"Yeah, I do," I said harshly. "Just not those, okay?"

"Here," Lisa said gently. "Will this be any better?"

I opened my eyes slowly. Instead of the can and the wrinkled pack that had not been helped by its long stay in my breast pocket, Lisa had set a Michelob Light bottle next to a really pretty pilsner glass. The amber liquid nearly danced in the glass, with the sunlight slanting through it like that. The wrinkled pack of stubby, orange-filtered smokes had been replaced with a long, slender white box with a pretty red-and-yellow design, and "Capri 120s Luxury Lights" in really pretty lettering. My gas-station disposable lighter had been replaced with a slender little golden Colibri 'lipstick' lighter. It even had the initials "A.J.B." on it in flowing script.

Curiously, I took out one of the cigarettes. They were so skinny I thought I might break one, and as long as my hand. They were no bigger around than the cord on a computer mouse. But as it put one between my slender fingers with their long, shapely nails, it was a perfect fit. My graceful hand touched fire to the end and the blue smoke curled lazily from the end. The long, skinny cigarette in between my long fingers, the fluted pilsner glass in the other hand, my white nails contrasting against the amber fluid, it was all perfect.

It was beautiful.

"Better?" Keri asked.

"What have you done to us?" I asked.

"There's no crime in liking beautiful things, A.J.," Tony said.

"Yeah," K.C. echoed, lighting one of the long skinny cigarettes himself. "I like beautiful stuff. That's not so bad, is it?"

"It is when they do it to us," I shot back. "We don't have no choice in this."

"Of course you do," Keri said. "You want another brand of cigarette? You want shorter nails, or longer, or a different color? Just say so. You have lots of choices."

"What I want to do is get the fuck out of this looney bin," I said harshly. "I don't like what you people are doing to us and I know it's against the law."

"Look at yourselves," Keri said patiently. "You're skinny and sick, A.J. You're not in any condition to leave here until we're convinced you're all right. If we were to let you go before we thought you were better, thought you could take care of yourselves, then *that* would be against the law. Criminal negligence. Besides, if something happened to any of you, Dr. Weatherly would never forgive himself."

"So where is the good doctor?" Lyle said. "If he's so goddamn worried, why isn't he here checking up on us?"

"He's afraid you'll hold him responsible for what's happened, for your being sick. He doesn't want to upset you by visiting until he's sure you're not still angry," Toni explained.

"Fat fucking chance of that," Lyle growled.

"But he's watching, for sure," Lisa added. "He keeps a close eye on you three."

"I'll just bet he does," Lyle mumbled.

"So, are we ready to keep going?" Keri said, perking right up.

"Yeah," K.C. said. K.C. was really getting into this 'beautiful' stuff - not like it didn't appeal to me and Lyle, too, I guess, but he seemed to be a lot more excited about it than we were. "What's next?"

"How about working on your skin?" Toni said. "Smooth out some of that roughness, maybe soften you up a little bit?"

"And then maybe we can do something about those ugly bald heads," Keri said.

K.C. bounced to his feet immediately, his hands by his sides and his wrists flared out, the long skinny cigarette held between two outstretched fingers.

"Me, first," K.C. said happily.

\* \* \*

"They're still fighting it," Kate McGrew said, making some notations on a legal pad as she watched data scroll past on the screen in front of her. Her twin, Paula, set a cup of coffee next to her sister's pad before reclaiming her own seat with her own cup of coffee, studying a completely different set of data.

"Of course they are, wouldn't you?" Bill Weatherly said, making his own notes from his own data.

"The retrovirus you introduced will have done its work very soon," Paula commented. "If you think they're combative now, how do you think they'll be when they discover their new vaginas?"

"I agree," Kate added. "Look, I'm as respectful of Keri and Lisa and Toni's skills as behavioral therapists as anyone, Bill. I helped recruit them, if you'll remember. But I think in this case, their methods are taking far, far too long."

"You're overreacting," Bill cautioned. "We have time."

"They don't have the time to get them past application of violence before they use violence," Paula said. "I have serious misgivings about the therapy. Our subjects are just too unstable. I think if we only had A.J. Baker to deal with, then we could proceed as normal. But his two friends are exacerbating the situation."

"K.C. Lester seems to be adapting well," Weatherly argued.

"Beside the point," Kate countered. "You think he won't go along if the others try to revolt? And if A.J. gets hurt in any way, all of this could be for nothing."

Weatherly sighed. "I suppose you're right. What do you suggest?"

"Using Anataeus could speed this up immeasurably," Paula said. "What we're starting here as suggestions could be just as easily made into compulsions."

"And you think if they're even more unwilling than they already are, it's going to accomplish our goals more quickly?" Weatherly challenged.

"I don't think it matters, at this juncture," Kate said. "Doesn't it follow that if they perform as expected, their behavior will eventually fall into line behind it?"

"If the cerebral implants don't drive them insane," Weatherly said. "They've never been tested on unwilling subjects."

"Now you're just grasping at straws," Kate accused.

Weatherly chuckled. "You're right, you're right. I suppose there's no other way - we can't risk A.J. Notify Lisa, Toni and Keri and then do what you must."

\* \* \*

"It's risky," Lisa said to Kate McGrew when she heard what they intended. "You realize what their role models would be, of course. It would be the only source for their behavior. Porno movies and auto parts calendars."

"You don't think they'd imprint on you, Toni and Keri?" Kate asked.

"They don't trust us," Lisa said. "They'd never accept us as role models or mother figures. They'd be completely on their own."

"Do you think they could fight it?" Paula asked.

Lisa snorted a chuckle. "These aren't exactly rocket scientists, Paula. I don't think they have the intellect between them to fight conditioning on that level."

"Will they remain male on any level?" Kate asked.

Lisa tapped her bottom lip in thought. "Good question," she said at length. "But I think I have a possible solution for that. Tell Dr. Weatherly to give us three more hours. By the time I turn them over to you, there won't be any pretense to masculinity left in them."

\* \* \*

"I still say you're selling out," I told K.C. roughly. I wished he could see my face, to tell that I wasn't fucking around about this, but we were completely sealed up in these light-tank things and had been for almost half an hour. At least we could talk now, if only through the open tops, since the first ten minutes had been noisy. The tanks had been hitting them with some kind of bright red flash of light and the tanks were humming and buzzing too loud for anybody to talk. Luckily that seemed to be over and we were just standing there, now.

"Bullshit, I am not," K.C. said. "I just like beautiful things. Tell me you don't."

"Of course I do," I shot back. "But you don't have to act so fucking *happy* about it."

"Yeah," Lyle echoed. "You act like you're their bitch or something."

"Well then, I guess I'm a bitch," K.C. shot back. "I like beautiful stuff and I'm not too damn proud to be glad about it. I'd rather be a bitch than some hard-headed stupid fuck who has to lie about what he likes just so he can feel like he ain't beat down."

"Fuck you," I said.

"You ever think, he might be right, A.J.?" Lyle asked. "He kinda makes sense to me."

"You want to cave in to fucking Weatherly and his dyke goons, you go right ahead," I shot back hotly. "I ain't giving them nothing."

"Then they're just gonna take it from you, you stupid dick," K.C. said. "Why not get what you can out of it, since you're givin' it up no matter what?"

"Maybe K.C.'s right," Lyle said.

"What are you, some kind of peacemaker now?" I asked Lyle. "I thought you said you was tough, Lyle."

"Tough, but not dumb, A.J.," Lyle said. "Look, I feel bad. I was one of the ones talked you into coming to this damn place anyway. I don't wanna see you get all fucked up over it, not when there's an upside right there in front of us. Why you gotta be so proud?"

"I dunno," I said. "It just seems like I oughta be, that's all. Like if they can't take my pride, then they can take everything else and I'll still be on top."

"And you bein' all stick thin and bald-headed is something to be proud of?" K.C. asked.

"No more than you are," I shot back.

"And I'm the one willing to do something about it, without making fucking Weatherly shove it up my ass every single time," K.C. said.

"So what, I should just give up?" I asked hotly.

"No," K.C. said. "I ain't givin' up neither. All I'm sayin' is, don't fight it so hard when Lisa an' them try to help us out. It ain't so bad, is it?"

"Nah," I admitted.

"C'mon, A.J., he's makin' sense," Lyle urged.

"All right, all right," I said. "I'll try to be nicer to Lisa an' them. Happy now?"

"Yeah," K.C. said.

We stood in silence for a few more minutes, listening to the soft buzzing of the light-tanks, before the bulbs shut off. Tentatively, I reached up and removed the little 'tanning bed' goggle things they'd put over my eyes when they put me in. As I did, Lisa opened the front of the tank and told me to step out.

"Doesn't your skin look so much better?" Keri said sweetly. Lyle, K.C. and I looked at each other in shock. Where we'd all been kinda ruddy and uneven, now Lyle's whole body was covered in a perfectly even, pale complexion that fairly glowed with health. It was the color of heavy cream with just a few little scattered freckles on his forearms and across his upper chest. K.C. had always been lily-white with a perpetual left-arm 'trucker' tan and sunburned face and neck, but now he wore a deep, rich mocha tan marred only by two triangular patches of creamy white on both his pectorals. My own skin, which had been really uneven, covered with freckles and moles and marred by God-knows-how-many little accidents in the carpentry shop, was now rich and even and unblemished. A brush of fingertips across my bare thigh showed it to be ten times softer than it had been before. I was covered - except for pale triangles identical to K.C.'s - with a deep golden tan which nearly glowed with health.

It was hard to look away. My skin was so beautiful now.

"Now, how about doing something with those horrible bald heads," Toni said. "Dr. Weatherly sent along just the thing."

She reached into one of the metal briefcases and pulled out a weird-looking contraption like something out of *The X-Files* or something. It was a stretchy kinda cap made out of what looked like millions of little silvery beads all strung together. A long, silvery hose dangled off the back of it, supporting a big clear plastic bag full of some dark-colored paste that looked like cake frosting.

"K.C., this one is for you," Toni said, walking around behind K.C. and stretching the cap over his bald head. It fit really tight, following all the little bumps and dents in K.C.'s skull exactly. The hose dangled down the back, and Toni took a second to position the cap so that a little red bead was positioned directly in the center of K.C.'s forehead.

Lisa had one for Lyle, only this bag was filled with 'cake frosting' that was more of a coppery orange color. She fit the sparkly cap on his head while Keri fit another on me, this one with this bag's 'cake frosting' a pale, yellowish white.

"What do these things do?" K.C. asked.

"They're going to restore hair," Lisa explained. "The stuff we used to take the hair off your bodies is the same thing we used on your heads, and unfortunately that doesn't let the hair grow back. So we're going to use these things - they're called implantation headgear - to give you new hair. Better than your old hair, actually. This hair will never break, split or get frizzy, it will never fall out or turn grey, and it will always be healthy, full and shiny for the rest of your lives."

"How can it not turn grey or fall out?" I asked.

"Because it will not be grown from a follicle," Keri told me. "The caps will implant the root directly into your skull. Is everybody ready?"

"Yeah!" K.C. said happily. Lyle grunted and I nodded.

"This might sting a little," Keri said. She had a remote control unit - like one for a stereo, really small and compact - in her hand and she pressed a button.

We all flinched and yelped. Sting a little? My ass! It hurt! It was like a million tiny little needles were driven into my scalp all at the same time. My scalp itched and burned like it was covered with fire ants.

Then the hoses began to jerk and the big bags of 'cake frosting' began to change shape, like one of those Capri-Sun juice pouches when you drank through the straw.

"Holy shit," I said, watching Lyle. As I watched, coppery red hair - the same color as the shit in the bag he'd been given - began to sprout out of his scalp, through the beaded skullcap thing and start to flow down his neck, face and shoulders. And it kept on going, further and further, hanging down below his shoulderblades, thick and shiny. The front parts had shaped themselves into cute little feathery bangs which framed his now-pale face. It looked incredibly soft, and undeniably beautiful.

K.C., on the other hand, had a head that was erupting in an incredibly thick mass of dark, kinky curls that spilled from his scalp like a waterfall. I'd never seen hair that dense - it almost looked wild. It stood out from his scalp in every direction, making him actually look taller, and spilled down his back and over his shoulders, finally stopping just below his shoulderblades as well - but there had to be ten times as much hair as Lyle's, just from all those dense, incredibly thick curls.

I had problems of my own. As I was gaping at K.C. and Lyle, my vision was obscured by a thick fall of incredibly pale blonde hair - the same color as my 'cake frosting.' It was ticklishly soft and thick, falling across my face, over my shoulders and down my back in a soft, luminous cascade. It glowed bright white where the sun hit it, but had just the barest hint of gold in it as

well. I ran my fingernails through it, trying to get it out of my face, and the skullcap slipped out, clinking on the floor next to the now-empty bag and hose. I gaped in the mirror. I had long, silky hair styled from a part on the side, cascading down my shoulders and framing my face. Beach bunny hair.

"Girl's fingernails, and now girl's hair? What the fuck are you people doing to us?" I shouted.

Keri surprised me by getting a little angry in return. "Well, shit, A.J., what do you think? Maybe we gave you a girl's fingernails, and a girl's tan lines and a girl's hair - I dunno, let's think about this - because, just maybe you're a girl?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I cried.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, A.J.," she shouted back. "You're a girl! A skirt, a bitch, a cunt, a piece of ass, whatever the hell you call it."

"You're out of your fucking mind," I told her.

"Oh yeah?" Keri said, grabbing the little medical-looking 'diaper' that I'd been in all day. With a deft twist of her wrist, she pulled it loose.

I screamed.

I don't remember anything after that.

\* \* \*

"Amazing," Kate McGrew said. "Dr. Weatherly, I have to salute you on this. I didn't think the retrovirus would work so completely. But it's all perfect. The ovaries are completely functional, the uterus is as healthy and pink as a fourteen-year-old girl's. Their cell structure has been completely rewritten."

She put down the speculum she'd been using to do the pelvic exam on the sleeping K.C., gesturing to indicate all of the sleeping men on whom she'd just performed gynecological examinations and MRI's. "You say these ovaries will continue to produce viable eggs, for the rest of their lives?"

"Yes," Weatherly said. "I specifically designed their new DNA sequence to never trigger menopause. They'll remain fertile and viable for as long as they're alive, and I intend for that to be a very long time."

"You're a visionary," Kate said, squeezing his hand fondly. "A real genius."

"I owe it all to you, Katie my dear," Weatherly said magnanimously. "Your own research into prosthetics is truly remarkable. I'd never know that this hair hadn't grown out of those heads, but it's completely synthetic."

"Nearly unbreakable," she replied. "You'd have to cut it with a grinding wheel."

"Where have Keri, Toni and Lisa gotten off to?" Weatherly asked, looking at his watch. "Our patients are going to be awake soon."

"They're in Central Control," Kate replied, "working on some last minute additions to the Anataeus program that Paula designed to finish this transformation. I expect them any moment, Doctor."

"Good," Bill Weatherly said, taking her hand and leading her out of the room. "I want to get to Observation. I don't want to miss a moment of this."



SUMMARY: After receiving a promotion to come to a resort with all expenses paid, one man and his buddies head down only to discover that they have been chosen to test out new procedures that turn them into women. part two

## **BEAUTIFUL ADDICTION**

### **PART TWO**

**By Valerie Hope**

Something filtered through the haze a little. Some kind of cheesy-assed music of some kind, and people talking - a lot of people and a lot of talking, all over the top of each other, like at a party or a nightclub. I was sore all over and I didn't want to move. For some reason I felt all warm and comfortable if I just stayed still.

But the music and the noise and the people sounds drew me, wouldn't let me stay unconscious. I opened my eyes, slowly, letting the harsh light in a little at a time. There was hair in my face, long and feathery and impossibly soft, so light blonde that it was almost white. I brushed it out of my eyes and was surprised at the square cut, pretty long fingernails with the white-tipped French manicure on them.

I froze. I remembered.

*"Girl's fingernails, and now girl's hair? What the fuck are you people doing to us?" I shouted.*

*Keri surprised me by getting a little angry in return. "Well, shit, A.J., what do you think? Maybe we gave you a girl's fingernails, and a girl's tan lines and a girl's hair - I dunno, let's think about this - because, just maybe you're a girl?"*

*"What the fuck are you talking about?" I cried.*

*"You know exactly what I'm talking about, A.J.," she shouted back. "You're a girl! A skirt, a bitch, a cunt, a piece of ass, whatever the hell you call it."*

*"You're out of your fucking mind," I told her.*

*"Oh yeah?" Keri said, grabbing the little medical-looking 'diaper' that I'd been in all day. With a deft twist of her wrist, she pulled it loose.*

*I screamed.*

Frantically, I sat up against the protests of my aching muscles. I was dressed now, if oddly. I was in some kind of a body-suit, that was flexible with my movements but felt rigid and unyielding. The suit was impossibly tight in places but tented out into rigid cups around my chest and on my ass. My hair - my new, long blonde hair - was tied back in a high horse-tail, pulling my head back in an unfamiliar way and swinging back and forth strangely behind my head. My tiny, pedicured feet were strapped into some kind of platform heel, the platform under my feet at least two inches high and the slender, tapered heel was at least seven inches high. The stretchy white upper was wound around my foot and ankle so many times that I

doubted I could get them off without cutting. They were hard as hell to balance in, but I managed as I stood by using handholds - the bed rail, the dresser, the doorjamb. By taking smaller steps and rolling my hips a little bit it was a little easier for me to move.

There was a huge monitor over my bed, the source of the talking and cheesy music I'd heard when I was still half-asleep. It was one of those cheesy "Girls Gone Wild" videos I'd seen on the TV late at night, the ones with all the drunk sorority girls taking their clothes off in public and making out with other girls to get the guys off. I seemed to remember other bits of the video and other things, like a dream I'd had that was just now fading away. Really sexy stuff, too - I couldn't remember exactly what, but I know it turned me on.

But that was kind of the problem. I felt like I should have had a massive boner between my legs, throbbing in time to my heartbeat and standing out away from my body like a soldier at attention. I knew that it should be there. I could almost feel it. But the place I couldn't look at, it couldn't do that anymore. I didn't have the equipment. All I had now was the thing I didn't want to talk about.

Trying not to cry, I sat down on the edge of my bed and fumbled for a cigarette. Not my usual Marlboros - I was smoking these super-skinny, super-long 'girly' cigarettes now, Capri, because I just couldn't bear for anything else to be near me. My old smokes, they were ugly and stubby and looked awful when I held them. The new ones, at least, were slender and graceful and pretty and they looked sexy and beautiful in my long-nailed fingers. Sure, I felt like a dunce sitting there in a bodysuit with plastic boob and ass forms sticking out, wearing high-heeled platform shoes and with a long blonde ponytail swaying back and forth behind my head and trying to make a little gold 'lipstick' lighter work with fingernails like claws. But everything was nice and pretty, and for some reason I needed things nice and pretty right now. Nice and pretty was all I had. As long as I didn't have to look too close at 'that place' between my legs, I would be fine.

After a few steady puffs on my cigarette, I decided to get up and look for my buddies, K.C. and Lyle. They had to be somewhere nearby. But there wasn't a lot to hold on to out in the hall. I took a deep breath and managed a relatively speedy sashay down the hall, putting one foot in front of the other and rolling my hips like I was on a ship or something. If I kept my hands down near my waist - have I gotten skinnier? - and took smaller steps than usual, I didn't feel like I was going to sprawl face down off these huge towering heels. They weren't even as uncomfortable as I thought they'd be.

K.C. was sleeping next door, the monitor playing some kind of porno or 'Girls Gone Wild' video over him while he slept. I noticed they'd put him in heels and a bodysuit like mine. It was weird to see my old drinking buddy from high school's face pillowed in a huge soft mass of sable brown curls on the pillow, with eyelashes brushing his cheeks they were so long and thick. I noticed bandages taped on his arm and shoulder, as well, covering where his old tattoos used to be. Maybe Dr. Weatherly or one of the McGrew bitches had taken them off. Poor Lyle - he was covered with them from prison. They probably cut off half his skin trying to get those prison 'tats' removed.

Sure enough, they had. Lyle - in the next room over - was covered in bandages on his skinny arms, neck, shoulders and I was sure down into the skin-tight bodysuit which covered him like mine did. He was looking distractedly at whatever was playing on his monitor while gathering his shiny mass of coppery red curls into a ponytail behind his head.

"Hey, Lyle," I said from the door.

"Hey, baby," he said back, then looked away strangely.

"Did you just call me 'baby?'" I asked him.

"Yeah," he shot back. "I've been talking kinda funny since I woke up. Y'know, like, not bein' able to remember words an' stuff."

"Think they, I dunno, like, did somethin' to us?" I asked.

"Holy shit, you're doin' it too," he told me. "Is K.C. awake yet?"

"Nope, still sleepin'," I said. "Think they, like, did whatever it is to him too?"

Lyle shrugged his narrow shoulders. He tried to stand, and nearly fell. I told him what I'd learned about the high heels and he took some short steps around the room, trying to get the hang of it. He stumbled and I barely caught him, the empty plastic cups of our boob forms on the bodysuits 'clicking' together loudly.

I helped him stand and gasped when I got a look at him. "Lyle, weren't your eyes brown before?" I stammered.

"Yeah," Lyle said. "OhmyGod, yours were too, and now they're blue."

"Yours are green," I said, helping him over to the mirror. "Look."

Sure enough, he was the proud possessor of a pair of utterly sparkling, emerald green eyes and I had a huge, guileless pair of sapphire-blues where before we'd both been dark brown. We touched around our eyes carefully (not wanting to poke ourselves with our long fingernails), trying to see if they'd given us lenses or something. We couldn't find anything in our eyes. Somehow Weatherly or the McGrews had given us different color eyes and hair. We'd all lost weight and height, it looked like - it was getting harder and harder for us to be identified. If we didn't get some word out to the cops soon, they wouldn't believe that we were who we said we were. Things were getting desperate.

Lyle reached down to scratch his balls - the way all men do, I guess, when they first get up - and tried not to look down when he felt - or didn't feel, really - what waited down there between his legs.

"Shit," he mumbled. "I managed to forget. Even when you came in, y'know, with your pussy out like you did."

"Shut up," I said. "Don't say that word around me."

"What, pussy?" he said back. "Like not saying it is going to make it go away?"

"Don't push me, Lyle," I warned.

"Or what? You're gonna slap me, pull my hair?" Lyle shot back. "Scratch my eyes out? That's how girls fight, after all."

"I ain't no girl," I shot.

"What the hell else can I call you, huh?" he spat. "Standing there in your high heels with your long hair and nails and your little blonde snatch?"

"Shut up!" I cried.

"Face facts, A.J.! Weatherly made us into bitches!"

"He made you into a bitch," I said. "He ain't done shit to me."

"Look at yourself!" Lyle said, turning me forcibly towards the mirror. I closed my eyes tight. I didn't want to see!

"Open your eyes, dammit!" Lyle continued, shaking me. My ponytail bounced against my back and it was hard to keep my balance on the platform heels. "Open 'em!"

I sobbed. "I don't want to."

In an instant, his rough touch on my shoulders turned into a hug, a tight hug. Long, slender fingers began smoothing my long, soft hair and I couldn't keep back the tears. I bawled into Lyle's skinny shoulder like my life depended on it.

"It happened," he whispered. "There's nothing we can do about it now."

"Why?" I asked no one in particular.

"I dunno," Lyle said. "Maybe he'll tell us. Maybe he won't. I dunno."

"I don't understand," I sniffed.

"Me neither," Lyle said gently. "But I'm all, like, so we're girls now. There's totally got to be a reason for it, y'know?"

"Totally," I agreed. "But, like, what do we do about this, y'know?"

Lyle smiled and smoothed my hair over one ear. "First, we like, go get K.C. up and then, we'll, y'know, figure out a plan and stuff."

K.C. staggered into the doorway, trying desperately to keep his balance on the high heels. His eyes were wide and wild, and a deep polished shade of brown so dark it was almost black. They'd been blue when he went to sleep.

"I have a pussy," he mumbled, looking like he was in shock. He raked his long-nailed fingers through his huge mass of tight brown curls. "Between my legs, guys, a pussy."

"We know," Lyle said. "It happened to us, too."

"I don't want a pussy," K.C. mumbled.

"Sit down, sugar," I told him gently, taking his arm. "Sit down and we'll, like, try to figure this out."

"You have a pussy, too, A.J.," he told me numbly as I led him to Lyle's bed.

I took a deep breath and tried not to freak. "I know, honey. I know."

\* \* \*

The first thing we tried was to get out of the bodysuits, but they were sealed on somehow. It wasn't as though they were really uncomfortable, anyway - sure, they were stiff in some places, and they were a little constrictive - but they were embarrassing, since they were clear and let us see our denuded bodies and all the bandages from the tattoo removals (they even

got the little one on my ass, I discovered). They left our - oh, God, I still can't believe I'm saying this - pussies exposed, which was a little frightening. But mostly we wanted them off because Weatherly put them on us. And the big empty breasts on the fronts and the rounded, girly bubbles on the asses didn't exactly make us comfortable, either.

We hardly even noticed, as we talked, that our voices were getting consistently higher. It happened too slow to see, but after an hour of chatting and smoking our long white cigarettes, even K.C.'s great big Adam's apple was all but gone and we sounded like a bunch of refugees from the Vienna Boys' Choir. Lyle's voice was the lowest of us, and he sounded like something off an 'Alvin and the Chipmunks' record. Nobody was ever going to take us seriously with voices like this, especially now that we couldn't help saying 'like' and 'y'know' and 'totally' and 'OhmyGod' all the time like some bimbo. It was humiliating, but there was the part of us that liked how our voices sounded now, just like the nails and the hair and the cigarettes. They were beautiful, and we were so ugly before. For some reason, beautiful things just seemed so much more important to me and K.C. and Lyle now. Hell, I couldn't even stand to look at myself in the mirror until they'd helped me take off all my ugly body hair and implanted my long blonde mane on my head.

I think our nipples were growing, too - it was hard to tell behind the clear plastic breast cups on our suits, but what had used to look like tiny little purple male nipples seemed a lot bigger - as big around as a silver dollar, maybe even bigger - and puffier, and their color had changed to go with our new complexions. Mine were a rosy pink, Lyle's a pale pink and K.C.'s a dark, rich brown.

Since the suits wouldn't come off and we weren't quite up to examining one another's - oh, God - pussies yet, we sat around trying to get the high heels off one another. The stretchy stuff that was holding them on our feet didn't have a closure that any of us could see, and we kept getting distracted - the super-high heels and platforms were so cute and so sexy and made our legs look so good, they were so beautiful we'd just get distracted looking at them, just like our nails and our hair. It was hard to concentrate.

We must've sat there about an hour or so, I guess, trying to concentrate on escaping, when we all found ourselves standing up even though we didn't really want to. Trying desperately to stop, we walked down out the door and down the hallway with this runway-model sashay and strut, unable to open our mouths or make a sound. We didn't stop walking until we'd all come into a room at the end of the hallway and struck some glamour-girl model poses with our hands on our hips, lined up in front of Dr. Weatherly and the McGrews. Keri, Toni and Lisa - our aides and nurses - were busy at a lab table by the wall next to the door.

Kate McGrew had a red flower - like a hibiscus, but there's no way I coulda known that, I didn't know dick about flowers - behind her ear to distinguish herself from her twin. She set down her clipboard and walked around in front of us.

"Good afternoon, ladies," she said cheerfully.

"We're not ladies," I mumbled through gritted teeth.

"Not yet," Kate said happily. "I'm happy to see that Dr. Weatherly's implants are working splendidly. They're going to help you do everything more beautifully than before - walking, standing, sitting, even talking. Did you like how easily you were able to walk and stand just a moment ago? Wasn't it beautiful?"

We were angry and sullen, but we couldn't help but nod. It was pretty beautiful.

"You young ladies have an awful lot to learn, I'm afraid, and there's not much time for it," Kate continued. "We can't have you running around the mansion like men, you see. So we're going to speed up the process of your becoming lovely young women."

"I don't think so," I told her.

"Oh, I do," Kate said. "You have to understand, my dear, that our implants are going to compel you to act as young ladies no matter what. This can either be painful and humiliating for you, or it can be a wonderful, beautiful journey. It's all a matter of attitude."

"I just want things to go back to the way they were," K.C. said tonelessly.

"Of course you do," Kate said. "But unfortunately, that simply isn't possible."

"Why?" I asked. "Why have you done this to us?"

"Ah, the million dollar question," Dr. Weatherly said. "And one worthy of an answer, I think. You see, A.J. - may I call you that, or do you prefer something more feminine?"

"A.J.'s fine," I said flatly.

"Very well," he continued. "A.J., you have a genetic treasure hidden deep in your DNA. A genetic marker which causes your cells to produce a very special protein. Not one in two million human beings has such a genetic predisposition."

"I already told you people, you could have blood or marrow or whatever you wanted," I hissed. "Why all of this? Why ruin our lives?"

"I don't think we've ruined anything, actually," Weatherly replied smoothly. "I think, with Kate's help and Keri, Lisa and Toni's coaching, your lives are going to be better than you ever hoped they would be. But that is neither here nor there. That protein that your body produces, A.J., is miraculous."

"Miraculous how?" Lyle asked.

"I owe everything to it," Weatherly said. "As do the McGrews. You see, Lyle, Kate and I have a little secret that we've been keeping for quite some time. We stood to lose it, but then we found A.J., there, and our prayers were answered."

"What secret?" K.C. asked.

"I was born in the year of our Lord 1861," Weatherly announced. "I am one hundred and forty-two years old, come September."

"Bullshit," Lyle said. "You couldn't be older than about sixty-five."

"So you say," Kate said. "I was born in March of 1909. That makes me ninety-four."

"You, too?" I asked Paula McGrew.

"No," she said. "I'm only fifteen."

"What the fuck are you people talking about?" Lyle demanded.

"That's no language for a young lady," Kate scolded.

"What we're talking about, Lyle, is that we have found a way to use this special protein, with a few chemical alterations, to restore our youth and vitality for an unspecified span of time. As long as the serum is prepared and taken once per year, it prolongs life and youth indefinitely. It makes the body fantastically resistant to disease - Kate, here, used to have acute systemic lymphoma and now there's no trace of it in her body."

"You mean you cured her cancer with this stuff?" I asked.

"Indeed," Weatherly replied. "So you see your value."

"So why haven't you announced this to the world, made a fortune?" Lyle asked.

"Because, my dear, the protein can't be synthesized by any means I know," Weatherly replied. "The protein has to be secreted by a living human host, and then chemically altered within the body."

"So you're just using me to produce your, like, serum and stuff," I said. "It still doesn't explain why you went to all this trouble."

"Because, my dear, the chemical alteration of the protein occurs in the human uterus," Weatherly explained. "I always suspected this, but until the work into DNA and genetics in the 1940s I was unable to link the serum to the genetic code. I was already well into my eighties when I discovered the genetic mark and was able to test for it in others. The genetic potential was in my DNA, you see, which only gave me a very healthy and long lifespan. I was lucky enough to find Kate later that same year."

"So how does this explain her being only fifteen?" Lyle asked, pointing at Paula.

"Because she's not my twin," Kate said. "She's my clone."

"The protein is altered due to chemical changes in a woman's body during menstruation," Weatherly explained. "Kate, unfortunately, only had a few years of fertility left when I met her. We didn't have the means to make her menstruate again, so we cloned her and used Paula's estrous cycle to prolong our youth."

"But there was a flaw," Paula said. "The process that they used to force my growth and maturity caused me to experience menopause extremely early, and without the protein in my system I aged very rapidly afterwards. Although Kate and I look alike, tests have shown that my body has aged well past Kate's age."

"So you see, A.J., that we need you to be a woman. Ideally, we would have asked you to undergo the procedure to become a woman. But it didn't take us long to discover that you wouldn't agree to that for any amount of money. We drugged your drink and implanted the Anataeus module in your neck to begin the night you got here."

"And we couldn't let your friends go, either," Kate said. "We really do apologize. We didn't plan on any of this."

"But you're not gonna let us go," I said.

"We cannot," Weatherly explained. "There's way too much riding on this. We've already altered your bodies irreparably. We've modified you, A.J., so that you will continue your menstrual cycle for the rest of your natural life, and with the protein in your system that lifetime could be quite long indeed."

"What about us?" K.C. asked.

"You'll be taken care of the same as A.J.," Kate told us. "Pampered, almost. We won't let anything happen to any of you. And K.C. and Lyle will be invited to join the protein therapy with the rest of us so that they can stay young and beautiful for as long as they want, the same as Keri and Lisa and Toni."

"We're only in our forties," Keri said brightly from behind us. "In case you were wondering. Dr. Weatherly is working with us, trying to see if he can engineer the youth protein gene into our DNA. If it works, no one will have to go through what you three have gone through, ever again."

"So all I have to do is have periods for you," I said, trying not to listen too hard to what I was saying. Periods. Jesus, I was going to have periods.

"Not all," Weatherly said. "I'd like to study you as well."

"So what's with all this bullshit that Kate is spewing, about us having to become perfect young ladies?" K.C. asked.

"Wouldn't you rather be at home in your new bodies?" Paula asked. "Comfortable?"

"That don't mean we have to act the part," K.C. shot back.

"No, I suppose it doesn't," Kate said. "But it would be easier on all of us."

"It's actually very simple, K.C.," Weatherly interrupted. "As women who act like men, you'd be able to go to the police and possibly even convince them that you'd been changed against your wills. That would cause an investigation that we don't want."

"I get it," Lyle said. "It's to keep anybody from believing we was anything 'cept girls, our whole lives and stuff. They'd just put us in the loony bin if we told anybody."

"You bastard," K.C. hissed at Weatherly.

"There's another upside," Kate said. "Our hope - and we have very good ways to make it a reality - is to make you so happy as women that you'd never think for an instant of going back to being men."

"And how the hell you gonna do that?" Lyle growled.

Kate smiled, and it chilled my blood. Behind her, Weatherly talked into his watch again.

"Anataeus. Submission protocol one, all subjects," he said.

"Acknowledged," said the disembodied voice. "Initiating."

Without meaning or wanting to, each of us gracefully tucked one foot behind the other and flowed to our knees. We spread our hips a little and rocked forward on our hands. Behind us, Toni, Lisa and Keri came up, each of them holding a syringe and wearing huge, dangling strap-on cocks that glistened with lubrication. I tried to shut my eyes to block it out - mostly because something in me was getting really turned on - but the Anataeus program wouldn't let me.

"Don't worry, baby," Keri whispered in my ear as she knelt behind me. She took a second to fit the syringe's needle into some kind of aperture near the back of my neck. I didn't feel anything go in, so it must have been some kind of IV tube in the body suit. I held really still and tried to

hold my breath, to keep myself from trembling and my pussy from throbbing. I felt my pussy lips flower open for the first time in my life, and the rush of warmth and wetness between my thighs. It was horrible. It was alien. It was intoxicating and wonderful and, above all, beautiful.

I felt the slick, warm head of the dildo against my slit. Keri gave a slight up-and-down rub that just brushed the sensitive nub of what could only be my clitoris and made me squeal and jump even with Anataeus keeping me still.

"Oh, she likes that," Keri said to the others, who smiled wickedly. Toni was sliding the fake cock up and down K.C.'s slit and Lisa was doing the same to Lyle. Their mouths were open and they were panting slightly. I'm sure I was doing the same.

"Now, listen, sweetheart," Keri cooed to me as she stroked up and down, up and down my slit and made me gasp with shocked pleasure. "When you're ready to be a girl, all you have to do is say 'give it to me,' and I will. Understand?"

"Yes," I said. I was fighting this as hard as I could. I didn't want it to feel good. I didn't want myself to want it so badly. But I did. I wanted it, and it felt so good I could hardly stand it. With a gentle pressure, Keri pushed the blunt head of the rubber cock against the puckered opening of my vagina. I felt it sink in a little bit and I bit back a moan.

"I'm about to fuck you like a girl," Keri said. "You can't lie to me, A.J. I know you want me to. You want all nine inches of this dick inside your hungry little hole. I can see it in your eyes. Should I make you beg for it?"

"No," I breathed, barely audible. "Just get it over with."

"Oh, tough little bitch, aren't you?" Keri said. "Think you can be so tough when I'm giving you all nine inches of this dick you want so bad?"

"Shut up," I told her.

"I oughta make you kiss it first," Keri taunted, keeping up the gentle pressure on the cock but not sliding it in, in deep where I wanted it - *needed* it - to be. And Anataeus kept me stock-still, unable to slide backwards and impale myself on it.

"Yeah, I like that idea. I should make you kiss this big fat cock first before I stick it up your pussy," Keri said, walking on her knees around the side of me and dangling the big, flesh-colored thing in front of me. I could smell my musky girl scent on the tip.

"Go ahead, little girl," Keri taunted. "Kiss it."

Telling myself that it was just to get it over with but knowing that it was really because I would do anything to get that veined length inside me, I gave it a quick little peck on the tip.

"That wasn't a kiss," Keri scolded. "I meant kiss it. Kiss it like you mean it."

Unsuccessfully fighting back tears, I took the cock in one hand, wrapping my slender fingers with their long, French-manicured nails around it in such a beautiful way and planted a long, sloppy wet kiss all over the head.

"Lick it. Use your tongue like the little cocksucker you are," Keri commanded.

I was incredibly far gone at this point, teased to the point of shaking. I stuck out my tongue and laved the head, kissing the length and rubbing it across my face.

"Oh, yeah," Keri said. "Now moan. Moan to tell me how much you like this."

I moaned for all I was worth, and it wasn't because Keri told me to. My pussy felt like it was dripping and my clit was sending warm, urgent waves up and down my body. I sucked the cock, pistoning my head up and down its length while I squealed in excitement. I wished so hard that I could free up my other hand from Anataeus' control so I could stroke my clit with my long-nailed fingers. It would feel so good and look so beautiful. As beautiful as I must look right now, sucking cock. In my mind, it was like I could see all the girls from the Girls Gone Wild video and all the pornos I'd ever seen, cheering me on, wanting me to have this. I popped the cock out of my mouth wetly and my voice was a husky, aroused whisper.

"Fuck me, please, Keri. I need it."

"Fuck you where?"

"In my pussy," I said, weeping, but trembling with excitement.

"Fuck you how."

"Fuck my pussy hard," I told her. "Please."

She gave me a look that looked for all the world like pity - maybe even sympathy, Weatherly had done his mojo on her and Lisa and Toni long before we showed up - and knee-walked behind me again. I felt the pressure on my hole again, teasing but not going in.

"You gonna be a girl like Weatherly tells you to?" she asked.

"Yes, please," I whispered.

"You gonna stop fighting this and start enjoying it?"

"Yes," I breathed.

"You want this cock?"

I nearly wailed. "Yes! Give me that cock!"

"I'm gonna have you in makeup and a bikini and you're not going to say a word," Keri cautioned. "If you do, you're never going to get this dick again, you understand me? You're gonna be a perfect little girl for me and do what I tell you to do, right?"

"Anything. Anything! Just give it to me!" I cried.

She thrust her hips forward and I groaned, down deep in my throat. It was a beautiful sound to go with the most beautiful feeling I'd ever known. I was so far gone, I didn't even realize I'd said 'give it to me.' Keri sawed into me, driving me half out of my head, it felt so good. And it wasn't like I was in my right mind, anyway - the whole experience, from the day we drove up to the mansion, had us all real close to the edge. I don't remember the exact minute that my mind snapped. I don't think any of us did.

Somewhere in the sea of passion and pleasure, Keri pushed the plunger on the syringe. It flooded my bloodstream with the chemical that dissolved the coating on Weatherly's little 'marshmallows' that he'd implanted in my body.

In an explosion of shock and something near pain, the coating dissolved and the foam inside expanded like a bomb. In an instant that made me yelp with panic and shocked pain, my skinny little body suddenly erupted to fill my bodysuit, my flawless soft skin mashed up against the plastic restraints as the foam started to bond with the fat under my skin and solidify. God, it hurt. God, it felt good. God, I was beautiful.

"Oooh, God!" K.C. cooed, getting fucked across from me. "Look at her! Look at her tits! She's gorgeous!"

I closed my eyes. He'd called me *her*. *She*. And it had felt right. Down deep. The 'Girls Gone Wild' and the porn stars inside my head cheered.

I was one of them now.

"I'm a girl," I whispered.

I never saw Weatherly smile. I was lost in my first orgasm.

\* \* \*

I just sat there, smoking my Capri and looking down at myself. The blonde, rabbit-soft hair was over my shoulder and spilling like a golden-white wave over my perfect spherical 36DD breast with its huge pink nipple. My legs were parted slightly, but it was because I'd forced myself not to cross them demurely at the knee. My lush, padded ass - a perfect feminine bubble below my wonderfully slender waist and flat tummy - was taking a little bit of getting used to, making sitting a little different. But I wouldn't trade it, any of it. My tits, my ass, my tummy and waist and long blonde hair, it was all so very *beautiful*. My skin glowed a soft, amber tan which fairly glowed with health. The damp, musky smell of my sex - my first sex, my cherry - still emanated from my skin.

Weatherly showed me the device. I didn't understand much of what he was telling me, but it sounded like he knew what he was talking about. It looked like three little blue plastic Cheerio's tied together with little black rubber tubes.

I twirled a lock of hair around my finger and smiled. "So, like, that goes in my pussy?"

"No, my dear," Weatherly explained. "It goes in your womb. Your uterus. It will take the transfigured protein from your enriched uterine wall and encapsulate it."

"You're, like, talking about my period, right?"

"Correct," Weatherly said. "All that it means is that in addition to your normal menstrual flow, you'll expel some neat little capsules. Almost like vitamin pills, except filled with a clear liquid. We'll show you how to recover them so none of it is lost."

"Cool," I said. "And I give those to you, right?"

"Right," Weatherly told me.

"And they keep all of us, like, young and beautiful forever, right?"

"That's the plan," Weatherly said.

I bounced a little. "Cool! I'm so in!"

"Excellent," Weatherly said. "I'll send you off with Kate in just a moment and she'll implant the device. It won't hurt and it will only take about five minutes."

"Okay," I said. "And afterwards, you're, like, gonna do our faces and stuff, right? We still totally look like guys in the face."

"Of course, dear," Weatherly said. "We'll also arrange for your new identification."

"Whatever," I said, not caring. I only wanted my beautiful face.

"And when we're done, we'll take you girls out and get you something to wear for the next few days while we work on your apartments. You and your girlfriends have a lot of shopping to do. I'll see to it that you all get credit cards."

"Now you're talking, baby," I told him, jumping up. My titties jiggled deliciously. I got up on tippy-toe and kissed his cheek. "There's only one thing in the world I like better than shopping."

"And what's that?" the distracted Dr. Weatherly asked in all honesty.

"Come up to my room later and like, find out and stuff."

\* \* \*

I was watching as Dr. Kate and Dr. Paula took the bandages off of K.C.'s face. God, she was a looker. A perfect little heart-shaped face in that sea of dense sable-brown curls, huge brown 'little-girl-lost' eyes and long, thick lashes, high 'Sophia Loren' cheekbones and pouty, bee-stung lips that were just made for cocksucking. She had those super-sexy Brooke Shields thick arched eyebrows that gave her a perpetually smoky look. They'd straightened and whitened her teeth, too, like mine and Lyle's, giving us these sexy cover-girl smiles.

She looked in the mirror and grinned, touching her face with her long-nailed fingers and examining herself from different angles. She ran through some cute little expressions, like a sultry sneer and a sexy little pout. Finally she just resorted to her open-mouthed grin, which showed off her brand-new tongue stud. We'd thought she was crazy, right at first, but then she'd demonstrated it on Lyle's and my pussies and now we were seriously thinking about getting some of our own. Not going overboard, though - we'd all gotten our ears done, but K.C. went a little wilder and got three earrings in each ear, two in her left upper ear, one in her bellybutton (which I had to admit was super cute) and one in her clitoral hood which she raved about. At least we'd talked her out of getting one in her nose until after she'd seen her new face.

Lyle's face was as beautiful as K.C.'s, narrow and a little squarish, but with huge green eyes and a perfect little cute button nose with a little spray of freckles across her nose and cheeks. She had thin, high-arched eyebrows and the longest lashes of us all. Her mouth was this adorable little 'Mary Pickford' affair with a cupid's-bow upper lip and a full bottom lip which looked so incredibly sexy wrapped around a cock. She lit a cigarette and exhaled a thick cloud of curly blue smoke above her head, then reached over and squeezed K.C.'s hand as congratulations. Her curly red pigtailed bobbed up and down.

I was just as happy with my new face. It was shaped like a narrow oval with high cheekbones and soft, feathery eyebrows that made me look for all the world like the supermodel, Nikki Taylor, even down to the cute little overbite. I'd opted for the big, thick 'Angelina Jolie' lips as well which the Doc had put into a perfect little sexy pout as their natural state. I couldn't wait to try them out on a cock.

Weatherly and the McGrews had just taken the first of the 'goodies' out of my pussy and delivered injections to everybody. The McGrews were stone hotties! Both petite and curvy, with perky little B-cups and flat stomachs and waists, long black hair and huge brown eyes. Keri, Lisa and Toni looked like they were only about eighteen now, with their tight smooth skin and gravity-defying boobies. They fucked like eighteen-year-olds, too, doing the male staff of the gardener, the valet, the mechanic and the cook as well as Dr. Weatherly constantly - that is, when me, K.C. and Lyle weren't at them.

And Weatherly - wow, what a babe. Tall and broad-shouldered with this perfect little-boy grin and a longish shock of sandy blonde hair. A toned and muscular body, with little body hair and excellent muscle definition, especially on his delectable tight ass. A nice, long cock that never took too long to 'rise to the occasion' and filled up our pussies nicely. I decided that if my pussy goodies could keep him looking *that* hot for the next hundred years, then he could have as much as he fucking wanted.

"So, um, like, Doc, when do we get to move into our new apartments and stuff?" K.C. asked, still examining her beautiful face in the mirror.

"They should be ready tomorrow or the next day," Weatherly said. "Why? Are you in some sort of hurry?"

"I dunno," she said, shrugging. "I guess, I'm just all, like, sitting around the mansion looking all hot and stuff is fun and all, but it's like, I really want to get my own place and, like, get a job and stuff. Y'know, like, have a life?"

"I totally get that," Lyle concurred. "I'm all like, y'know, me too."

"Me, three," I added. "Totally. I mean, um, like, I totally know I have to keep coming by and stuff, so you can get my goodies out every month and stuff. And I totally don't want to, like, stop fucking you and the staff and stuff. But, y'know, there's like, more to life, right?"

"Totally," K.C. finished.

Weatherly smiled patiently. "Well, I'm disappointed, but I understand. And I wouldn't dream of standing in the way of that, my dears. You're young, independent ladies and you deserve to make your own ways.

"I couldn't let you go job-hunting without proper identification, however," he continued. "And Dr. Kate is working on that tirelessly. She's having all your old documentation altered to account for what she's calling 'typos.' It's easier than starting from scratch, but it still takes time."

"Just as long as we get pretty names," K.C. said.

"Totally," Lyle added. "Beautiful names."

"For beautiful girls," Weatherly concluded. "Don't worry, we wouldn't dream of anything else. But until that identification is finalized, won't you young ladies consider remaining our guests?"

"Oh, fer sure," I said happily. "It's not like we're in some big hurry."

"So, like, we're all done here, right?" K.C. asked. "I can go put on makeup, finally?"

"Yes," Dr. Weatherly said. "You're completely healed."

"Cool," Lyle said. "I feel, like, totally naked without it."

\* \* \*

"It's almost sad," Kate McGrew told her clone/sister, Paula. "Their minds were completely destroyed. There's no vestige of the original personalities, it's all formative and based on the videos we tried to condition them with."

Paula shut down the closed-circuit monitors they'd been using to observe the three young women in Weatherly's office. "It's no great loss," she concluded.

"I don't know, Paula, it might be. Lyle Donnally had a 120 IQ before. With proper education, he could have been quite promising. Now, I doubt any of those girls could focus long enough to generate even an 85 IQ under good circumstances."

"Isn't it you, Kate, that told me that the end justifies the means?" Paula asked. "We're young again. We're healthy and alive, for the first time in years. And these three girls - they're happy enough."

"But how have we helped society by created these stereotypical bimbos? Outside of shopping, makeup and clothes, their only principal interest is sex. Doesn't that set us back, as women?" Kate asked.

"That's not our concern," Paula said. "You said it yourself. It didn't matter what kind of women these men became, so long as they became women. And don't you think our work will undo any damage to the cause of women that these three nothings create?"

"I suppose," Kate sighed. "It's not like they were any great world-changers when they were men, either. I just feel a little regretful, is all."

Paula put her smooth hand - smooth and free of blemishes for the first time in years - over her sister's. "So do I, Katie. But there's nothing we can do but make the best of it. We've generated a lot of good from this. We may have given ourselves and Dr. Weatherly enough borrowed time to finally discover a way to synthesize this protein, so that no one will have to go through this process again.

"And look at what we've accomplished," Paula went on, holding up a sheaf of test results. "Katie, these women have nothing but cigarettes, cocaine and Jack Daniel's for the rest of their lives and still be healthy as mules. Resistance to disease is off the charts. Cell renewal is almost immeasurable. Metabolic rates are more in line with a cat's than a human being's. They're approaching biological perfection. They hardly age. The dopamine and serotonin levels in their brains will keep them happy and well-adjusted for the rest of their lives. A.J. will be fertile for the next three centuries. We *did* that."

Kate put on a brave but unconvinced smile as she stood. "You're right, I'm sure."

"Of course I am," Paula agreed. "Will you be all right?"

"I suppose," Kate told her sister honestly. "I just need to look past what we've done and try to see the larger tableau."

"Don't take too long," Paula said. "Remember, we have room to breathe again. We can't waste time regretting our decisions with so much work left to do."

Kate smiled. "You always know just what to say."

Paula shrugged. "One might suppose that I know how you feel."

"One might."

\* \* \*

They'd been more than thorough in erasing all evidence that Lyle Maurice Donnally, Keith Colin Andrew Lester and Ambrose James Baker had ever existed. Even their names on the lists for junk mail had been altered. Birth certificates, Social Security information, credit and driver's licenses were reissued - with the requisite primping at the DMV for the pictures, of course, like it was the cover of *Vogue* or something - and given to the girls so they could begin their new lives.

So it was with a mixture of sadness and excitement that Amber Jami Baker, Kaycee Andrea Lester and Layla Marie Donnally moved from Weatherly's mansion and into their new apartments in the city. The apartments were perfect in every detail - just the right sort of bottled water in the refrigerator and the proper stuffed animals on the dressers. The closets were stuffed with clothes that the girls had picked out from catalogs, all revealing and tight and oh-so-fashionable. Weatherly and his team had even subscribed them to just the right magazines and gotten them lifetime memberships at the absolute trendiest gym and tanning salon in the city. The girls had jumped and cheered like teenagers when Weatherly had passed them the keys to their new cars, super-sexy convertibles with lifetime warranties (none of the girls would be savvy enough, Weatherly supposed, to maintain their automobiles on their own). As Amber piled into her midnight-blue Miata, Layla into her lipstick-red Jeep Wrangler and Kaycee into her bright white Toyota MR-2 Spyder, Dr. Weatherly and the McGrews didn't worry overmuch. 'God smiles on madmen and fools,' the old saying went. They were pretty sure that covered bimbos and bubbleheads, as well - none of them had ever seen an airhead fall. Besides, with bodies like theirs, the rotten-cored society they lived in would catch them anyway. It was entirely probable they'd all end up as trophy wives to middle-aged financiers and business leaders.

And they would at least have something gainful to do in their lives. Amber, with her all-American cheerleader good looks and perky demeanor, would make an outstanding Hooters girl, where she would start in three days. No doubt she'd be gracing their calendar in a matter of months.

Kaycee, having embraced her party-hard 'bad girl' demeanor, was looking forward to her new job as an exotic dancer in one of the ritziest gentlemen's clubs in the city. With her incredible, toned body - complete with gravity-defying D-cup breasts - and her seeming inability to let a cock go by unsucked, she would probably be able to buy and sell them all in no time.

Layla's freckle-faced innocence and bright red hair made her a rarity among the healthy, tanned and blonde women who comprised the area's pro basketball cheerleading squad. Besides, she had developed a deep love of dancing anyway, more than adequate enough to help her sail past her audition (along with several thousand dollars discreetly delivered to the choreographer judging the tryouts).

They stood in front of Kate McGrew, Paula, Dr. Weatherly and Toni, Lisa and Keri like something out of a clothing catalog. Layla was dressed to thrill in a second-skin red velvet tube dress with a belt of large silver heart-shaped links, smoky grey hose and seven-inch Lucite open-toe skyscraper platforms that made her seem much taller than her 5'-4" frame really was. Her cascade of coppery-red curls was pulled back behind her lipstick-red plastic cat's-eye sunglasses and huge, shoulder-brushing hoop earrings peeked out of the mass of red curls. She'd painted her nails, lips and toes the same shade as her dress and flung the suggestion that redheads not wear red in the faces of every fashion maven who ever said it. Her perfect 34C-24-34 body was only barely shrouded by the studded black leather biker jacket she wore over the dress.

Kaycee was a skate-punk's wet dream, her wild sable curls worn down and black Wayfarers on her slender nose. A myriad of dangly rhinestone earrings tickled the tops of her shoulders from their nest in the sable jungle. She wore a black leather bustier which shoved her D-cup breasts into a tempting shelf of tanned cleavage and bared her flat-as-a-plank stomach with its cute little rhinestone Playboy bunny-head navel ring. Her low-rise 'hiphugger' jeans were barely high enough to cover the downy feather of pubic hair, fitting like they were sprayed on and decorated with silver studs down the seams. Her platform stiletto heels were black and shiny, showing off toenails painted a glittery pink the same as her lips and the nail-beds of her French manicure. She threaded a long-nailed thumb through the wide, pink glitter belt which rode low on her hips, the other taking a long Capri cigarette away from her glossy lips.

Amber was an 'Eighties revival, complete with 'big hair' with bangs moussed up several inches and the white-blonde cascade teased out to the width of her shoulders. A blue bandanna kept most of it back. She wore Wayfarer sunglasses with white plastic frames and big white hoop earrings. A skin-tight pink Lycra crop-top strained across her peerless 36DD breasts, with the words "High Maintenance Bitch" picked out in silver. She wore a white faux-leather jacket down her arms, baring her tanned shoulders and bunched sexily around her wrists and hands which wore black lace fingerless "Madonna" gloves. A mass of white plastic bracelets clattered on her wrists. Her wide, womanly hips were encased in pink 'pleather' pants with a waist as low as Kaycee's and flared, bell-bottom legs. The pink faux leather was covered in a python-skin print and her pink boots had lower Lucite platforms and heels than the other girls, not because she didn't like the higher heels but because she was 5'-9" to Kaycee's 5'-7" and Layla's 5'-4". She didn't like to tower over her girlfriends.

"Come by and visit often," Weatherly was saying a little sadly. "We'll miss you all terribly, and I want you to consider this a second home. Really."

"Oh, totally," Amber said happily. "We'll, like, come up weekends and stuff."

"Yeah," Kaycee put in. "We're totally gonna miss you too."

"We better go," Layla said. "I totally wanna see our new places, and still be out, like, by the time the clubs start happening."

"You'd best go, then," Paula said. "Enjoy your new apartments, your new clothes, everything. And if there's ever anything you need."

Amber held up her cute little pink cellphone. "You're on my speed-dial."

They turned, a catwalk pivot followed by a sexy sashay that dripped invitation. Kate stepped forward, grabbing Amber's and Layla's arms and turning them around.

"Amber, Layla, Kaycee," she said urgently, her eyes betraying emotion. "Are you happy? After everything that's happened?"

"Happy?" Kaycee said, clicking her tongue-stud against her teeth. "I never really, like, thought about it and stuff."

"Yeah, me neither," Layla echoed.

"Doc, relax," Amber told her. "We haven't even gotten a chance to figure that out, yet, y'know? Give us a month or two. If we're not, like, totally happy by then, we'll call you and work something out and stuff."

Kate searched the sapphire-blue eyes that sparkled with excitement and sex appeal, searching for something of the man who'd walked up the front steps some six weeks ago wondering what in the hell was going on. Something was in there. Something, in those eyes, something she and Paula and Weatherly hadn't managed to kill or break.

"Deal," Kate said. "But you have to tell me."

Amber smiled her vapid smile, and that unnamable something in the eyes winked out behind the brainless happiness that dominated her life. "Okay," she bubbled.

Kaycee and Layla smiled as well, walking to their cars. Amber started to follow, but stopped and turned back to Kate, her peerless face blank and thoughtful for the first time that Kate McGrew had ever seen.

"Doc Kate, I'm, um. I'm, like. you think I'm beautiful, right?" she asked.

Kate nodded, blinking back a guilty tear. "You're the most beautiful woman I know."

"I think you're beautiful too," she whispered, and it wasn't Amber's voice. It was the voice of someone else, someone she hadn't heard from in six weeks.

"Thank you," Kate whispered back, squeezing Amber's hand fondly.

"So, like, I'll see you around and stuff," Amber perked, bouncing a little in her cheerleader-on-the-sideline way. "Love ya! Ciao!"

Kate walked back to the group and waved as the three girls roared off in their new cars, towards their new lives. Paula stepped up behind her sister and put a comforting hand on Kate's shoulder.

"Feel better?" Paula asked quietly. Around them, the team was breaking up and heading back into the house to continue the work, the never-ending work.

"Much," Kate said, smiling. "After all, I'm beautiful. Did you know that?"

Paula took her hand and led her back towards the house. "I had my suspicions."

