

RAINE MONDAY

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH BEFORE
YOU STOP BEING YOU?

CHANGES
IN
PARADISE

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stop being you?

Raine Monday

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CHANGES IN PARADISE

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CHAPTER ONE

The Warehouse was in one of the districts of New Phoenix that hadn't been touched by reconstruction or seen any inflatable concrete. The Scourge had passed, wreaking havoc and the area was twisted metal, tumbled block, with steel columns and pillars where the old city had stood. The warehouse had been relatively untouched, with scorch marks cast into the steel shell front, but appeared as structurally sound as the day it was built.

The line stretched to infinity or appeared to. Young people stood in the Desert night, laughing and talking, playing and gyrating. They had light sticks, snakes, Smartablets and other unidentified light sources. They smoked and vaped, drank, ate, and danced. They were all young, all out, all waiting expectantly.

I stood with my hands in my pockets. I didn't vape, or smoke — well, trying to quit. I didn't eat or drink. Didn't laugh or dance. I sighed. And waited. The line moved imperceptibly, and a cheer rose as everyone stepped forward.

November in New Phoenix is a perfect time of year to be outside. It had just enough of a chill to wear a long sleeve shirt but not enough to wear a sweater. In my old age that meant something, I guess.

The warehouse featured peeling paint a broken fence, and flickering overhead lights as the line progressed underneath the steel overhand. The kids didn't care.

I scanned faces, glancing up at my internal hud every so often to compare face types. I didn't see Daphne Kincaid anywhere.

"Paradise, what the fuck are you doing here?" The gate guardian said.

I glanced over. A large man stood there, rounded, balding, with a face that looked like it had been made of putty. "Benny Goodman!" I said. "How have you been?"

"Good, good. Again, what the fuck are you doing here, Paradise?"

"I got a case, of course."

"Anyone, I might know?"

I held up a picture of a young girl, dark of skin, dark of hair, dark of eye, thin, pretty, young of age.

"Pretty," he said. "There's a lot of pretty going around."

"So you haven't seen her?"

"Not that I remember."

"Well, if you do, I'll be inside."

"She lost? Kidnapped?"

"Let's just say "situation unknown."

"Ahh," Benny said. "One of those."

"Yep."

"Well, this really ain't your scene, Paradise. I think the median age is about 23."

"With me, it goes up to 24," I chuckled.

"Yeah. Look, don't cause any trouble okay? I like this gig; it helps pay the bills, ya know?"

I nodded. "No trouble, no worries, Benny. I'll behave myself."

"I know you Paradise; trouble has a way of finding you."

I raised my eyebrows at this. "Hey, I resemble that remark!"

He let me through the roped off area. "You resemble a lot of shit, Paradise, just don't resemble trouble. I ain't spending

my weekend filling out data entry cuz of you, ever again. If I even smell trouble, I'm yanking ya out, get me?"

"Easy Benny, I'm just looking for the girl."

"That's what you said last time, right before things went sideways."

I grinned. "That was fun; you have to admit. I don't think the Ross twins will ever cause a commotion like that again."

Benny grinned, opening the rope to let me in.



Daphne Kincaid was in her 20's after dropping out of college. She was small, around 5'2" chocolate skin, molecular-processed blond hair, fake eyelashes, and long nails. In the pic I had of her, she wore glittery makeup and a tight black dress with mesh stockings and old fashioned garters. The way she looked at the camera made things happen down south that shouldn't happen, and I had to keep reminding myself 'Self. This is someone's daughter. Not just anyone, your *Client's* daughter." And I started counting in binary to make my ardor slacken.

Inside was much like the outside only instead of a line of kids stretching to infinity, now there was an ocean of them gyrating, smoking, laughing, talking, dancing, and cavorting in all sorts of sinuous and thrusting ways. I felt pretty removed from them, outside their sphere as an "oldster" and envied their lack of fear for experiencing life to its fullest. Maybe if I'd visited a rave or two when I'd been in my twenties, I wouldn't be the jaded, cynical detective that I was and much more of a hipster.

The thought of being a hipster made me want to punch myself in the face, so I stopped envying them and started getting down to business.

On stage three youths began some caterwauling the young ones probably called music. I winced in pain and tried not to

hunt for the nearest exit. You're on a mission, Paradise, not a music critic.

"HAI," A girl said from nearby, thrusting some drink in my mitt.

"Uh, Hai," I replied back. When in Rome.

"I'm CandyCake. What's your name?"

I thought for a moment but decided trying to evade would just get me in trouble. These kids would see through anything quick, and I might as well go home. "John Paradise," I said, handing her my digicard.

She glanced down at it, then giggled. "Why are you here, John Paradise?"

At that moment the band on stage changed and another group came up to a raucous cheer going up in the crowd. I said, "I'm looking for someone!" Into her ear, and she giggled.

"You FOUND someone!" She screamed back in my ear and started to gyrate around me.

"No! I mean--" But the band had started up, and I was being pulled in the direction of the rest of the crowd.

The group on stage were cross-dressers, or well, hell, who knew what their original gender was.

In the crowd, I saw males, females, shemales, he-girls, and every iteration in between. These kids didn't identify with one gender per say; they were *gender fluid* as if associating with one or the other would mark them somehow.

The music was guttural and low, loud, almost making me ill with the physicality of it. The girl gyrated around me, tipping the cup to my mouth, forcing me to drink.

Hey, I'm a guy. Guy's like that kinda stuff. I scanned the crowd, glancing at the picture on my smartphone, trying to identify Daphne and gyrated. On the 40-year-old me I don't think it could be called gyrating, probably more like LURCHING, or SPASMING, but in my mind, I was gyrating with the best of them.

"Do you know this girl?" I said, showing CandyCake Daphne's picture.

She glanced at it and smiled. “Do you know how many people I know? She could look like anyone now.”

I nodded, again trying to observe the crowd around me.

She pressed in close, somehow scissoring her legs between and around mine at the same time while continuing to gyrate.

“What’s her name?”

“Daphne Kincaid.” My head started to spin, and I felt like I could float off the floor and up into the air, with the lights, the LIGHTS filling me like the music.

“I don’t know that name, but I can ask around.” She grinned up at me.

“Thanks, I’d really appreciate it.”

She briefly pulled a device out from somewhere, pressed a few buttons, then put it away.

“I suppose that’s better than actually using your voice to ask.” I chuckled.

“I just asked over seven-hundred people. If she’s at this party, we’ll know in a few minutes.”

I nodded and smiled, continuing to give into the music, and the floating. I could feel her, twining around me, feel her body close, pressed to me. I inhaled her aroma--perfume, and something else, the odor of her body, sweat, and more. She brought a friend in, and she--they--whatever gyrated in concert around me. Someone brought out a light strand, multiple strands and the room went dark, all the while the music was pounding through me, and I entered another state of being.

At first, the lyrics were just sounds, but the more I felt them, felt their bodies twining around me, the more the music entered into me, and I could hear the words of the song, make out phrases, lyrics--

Transgenderosity...you can't take any more from meee....

Transgenderosity...you can't give any more to meeee...

Over and over, repeated, different octaves intertwined with the beat and the melody.

“That’s it,” she said smiling at me. “Now you’re getting into the flow.”

I wasn’t sure what flow she was talking about, but I was definitely starting to feel something. A lassitude came over me; my mind started to float up over the crowd, seeming to take in everything and everyone all at the same time. I was horny, and started grinding up against the young Miss CandyCake and somewhere in the midst of all the music, sensation, and whatever it was I’d imbibed I lost myself.

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CHAPTER TWO

I awoke with a Hangover. Capital Hang. Head pounding, mouth of sand, eyes making way too much noise, nose unable to breathe hangover.

Yes, NOSE...when did THAT happen? I tried to remember the night before and drew mostly a blank.

After coughing out the day's lung, I sat on the edge of the bed and lit a E-boro. I sighed thinking about the meeting in an hour with a client.

His daughter was missing. Daphne. The previous night's events started filtering through.

I rose and jumped in the shower, turning it on molten. For some reason, this is the only thing that can take the edge off a hangover for me and believe me, I've tried them all: hair of the dog, aspirin, home remedies, water... The shower spray hit me and took the pain away sluicing down the drain. I stood under the shower until it ran cold, then toweled off and dressed.

Mr. Kincaid would be over at 9, and I wanted to look the part of an official detective, so I put on a gray shirt, dark blue blazer with matching slacks, kicked the mud off my loafers, and went to the mirror to tie the red tie with navy piping I had selected.

I stared at myself in the mirror--and my mouth slowly opened in horror.

“Holy shit,” I said in a voice that was death over gravel.

I have a face only a fist could love, but today something had changed dramatically. Most everything was normal, shaggy wet brown hair that was beginning to need a trim, dogshit bloodshot eyes, bags that could hide Hoffa's luggage and a nose as crooked as a politicians soul. My lips, normally, were thin as an old whore's panties, but today--TODAY--those whore panties were painted *carnation red* with what looked like gold metallic flakes embedded within. Expertly lined, moist, full, and looked like they should be adorning the shaft of a workingman's phallus. They weren't cocksucker lips, more like *cockLOVER'S* lips and I immediately grabbed the dirty dishtowel hanging beside my sink and attempted to wipe the color from my face.

It did not wipe off. I only succeeded in *ENHANCING* them even further, making them swollen from the effort of trying to wipe them off.

“Fuck,” I said, watching that purty mouth. Damn, just looking at them was giving me a raging erection that tented my somewhat pressed slacks behind their belt.

I licked them again, trying to *bite* the color off, but it appeared to be sealed on, almost plastic covered and I realized it had to be the work of a molecularist. Somehow I had been suckered last night at the rave, dance, whatever the fuck and someone had gone to town to make me look like a cock loving suckerfish.

Glancing down at my watch, I realized I didn't have a lot of time to try to cover up the offending pucker. I whipped out my smartphone, googled on the nearest molecularist then *ran* out the door.

The molecularist had dark skin, blunt cut metallic blue hair, steel blue lips, blue eyeshadow, blue fingernails, and yes, a slinky metallic blue short dress.

“Oh. My. GAWD!” The girl said as I sat down in the chair.

"I know. Make it go away."

"How did you get that in the FIRST place?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Just take it away please."

She blinked, staring at my mouth. "Honey, I don't know how to say this, but all I can do is cover that shit UP. The change in the SIZE of your lips is a Gen job. You gonna have to have a lot more work than I can provide to bring you back to normal. Have you checked your matrix lately?"

I shivered at that. "No, I haven't been to a routerport in awhile."

"Here, I can do it for you." She took out a small pen-like device and pressed it into the side of my neck. Then she turned and pulled up a plasti-screen, and my mug was projected on its surface, sans cocksucking lips.

"Thank the Lord," I said softly. At least I knew if worse came to worse, I could just step into a router and come out the other side healthy, hale, and my lips thin and color free.

She shook her head. "Don't thank him YET, honey, this could change from now until you gets to a routerport. They may not have uploaded any changes yet, is all.

"So I should hurry and do a short transmit, you think? So I can rectify myself?"

She shrugged. "Well, the problem is, if it's like I think and they just haven't uploaded yet, it could mean that the next time you step through, you end up with that kisser again. Better to let me cover this for now and you can take a look at any changes to your matrix when you have more time.

I nodded, "Alright--" I looked at her badge. "Aniti. Just do what you can for now."

She took out a needle gun and went to work. "Oh, I will honey. I'll have this covered for you in no time, but that don't fix the problem."

I would have nodded, but she had already begun working on my offending kisser.

As she worked, I thought back to the previous night. When could it have happened?

“You live around here, sweetheart?” she said, running the molecule gun over my lips. It tingled a little, but that was all.

“Uh huh,” I said in response.

“I ain’t never seen you in this joint before. Where you been hiding?”

I shrugged a bit, not wanting to talk and interrupt her work.

She smiled at me, and the gun continued to buzz it’s tingling buzzing.

“There you go, honey,” Aniti said, standing back up. She had donned eyeglasses at some point, electric blue of course. She swung a cam around and pulled up the plasti-screen so I could see my lips close up.

She had spread coloring on it, covering the red glitter plastic coating that had previously showed. It looked natural, the same color as my skin, but my lips were still *wrong* somehow, too full, too fat. They still looked like they belonged on the cheerleader who was shank swallowing the quarterback, but at least I could show my face in public. All in all, it gave me a faintly androgynous look that wasn’t all bad, but just wasn’t *me*.

“Thank you,” I said, standing up. “How much do I owe you?”

“I already pulled it from your account, honey, don’tcha remember? I had you sign my tablet while we were working. It’s almost 9...

I blinked. “Really?” I glanced at the plasti-screen and noticed the time in the corner. I barely had 5 minutes to get back to my office and meet with Kincaid.

“You come in again and see me, now, if anything changes. Okay, Darlin’?”

I nodded. “Thank you again, Aniti.”

She smiled a cobalt grin. “No problem at all, honey. You take care now.”

I jumped in my truck and drove back to my office.

My head was still swimming with the events from the night before, that feeling of lightness making the driving tougher than usual. I needed something caffeine and quick.

As I drove, I considered the upcoming meeting. What did I have to report? I hadn't seen Daphne at the rave and honestly, I hadn't looked too hard after meeting CandyCake and her friends. I still couldn't remember what had happened but I needed more than that, or my client would take his business elsewhere.

Kincaid waited at my office, looking somewhat annoyed at my tardiness. My client had a face like a bulldog chewing on a wasp and the matching deep voice. Late 60s, African American, salt, and pepper hair. He had very little money — I'd known him from my ELEMENTARY school, and I just couldn't let him go without helping him. My last case had provided a healthy income, and my rent was paid for both the office and my apartment, so I had a little time to burn.

"Sorry, had a personal emergency this morning I needed to attend to."

Kincaid shrugged as he stepped into my office and sat in the visitors' chair.

"You want some coffee or water?" I said, throwing my keys on the desk and hanging up my coat.

"Beer, if you got it," Kincaid said.

I tried not to let my eyebrows go up as I reached into my tiny refrigerator and gave him a stretch-bottle of Coors. I took a globe of water and sat in my chair.

He took a long pull from his brew. "Make any progress?"

"No, not much," I said. "I went to an event last night that I had heard she might be attending but didn't see her."

He nodded his head and grunted. "So what's the next step?"

"Have you had any luck tracking down numbers or contact info on any of her friends?"

His face contorted up a bit. "I don't have access to her smartphone account if that's what you're asking. I tried looking through the stuff she left at my house, but there was nothing there." He finished his beer and set it on the desk. "Any luck at her apartment?"

“That would be my next stop,” I said. “I had high hopes of the event last night, but I’ll go by her apartment today and check things out.”

He nodded. “Well, be quick about it. I need her found, and fast.”

I frowned at that. “Why do you need her found, Mr. Kincaid?”

He sighed. “Her Mother. She doesn’t have much time. All she been asking for is Daphne.”

“How much time?” I left the last part unsaid.

He shook his head. “Could be any day now. The cancer eat her away like a rat eatin’ a piece of meat. I can’t understand how we can live in a society where people can do things like THAT” he pointed at my lips “But can’t do nothin’ about my wife’s Cancer.”

I felt myself blush as he pointed out my enlarged pucker. “Yeah, I had a--”

“I don’t give a ratfuck what you had!” He sighed and gave his head a hard shake. “Sorry, my nerves are fried like an egg on a sidewalk.”

“Has anyone made contact? Since her disappearance?”

“No,” he said, pulling out his phone. “And I been makin’ sure to have this piece of shit smartphone charged and ready at all times. This just isn’t like her to disappear like this, not when her Mom been so sick. You got to find her, Mr. Paradise!”

I nodded. “I’m doing my best, sir.”

“Do better!” he slammed his hand down on the desk. “I hope I don’t see no more of that—” he pointed at my kisser. “Neither!” What the fuck am I paying you for?”

I sighed and nodded, avoiding eye contact. He stood up, walking for the door. “You find my daughter, now!”

“I’ll do my best, sir,” I replied.

He walked out the door, slamming it behind him.

I stared at the door after he left. So much for camouflage. I got up and walked to the small mirror in the bathroom.

My lips were coated in what looked like a flesh-toned lipstick. How the hell had this happened? I couldn't remember anything past that girl, CandyCake, dancing, and her friend. I remembered the drink--

It must have been the drink; it's the only thing I could connect. I must have been knocked out while they did whatever it was to me. I shivered at the thought of an unlicensed genomic playing with the coding of my body or a molecularist spinning molecules upon the surface of my skin. I'd never been one for "high fashion" and hated all the society types that were constantly modifying their bodies, changing, rearranging. It gave me a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I walked outside into the bright sunlight and put my sunglasses on. My headache was back, with a vengeance, so I popped a couple pain relievers and jumped into my truck.

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CHAPTER THREE

Daphne lived in the Far East Valley, what used to be called Apache Junction was now a crazy mish mash of plasteel buildings, prefab complexes, industrial sites that had sprung up during the reconstruction, and run-down relocation modules that had seen better decades.

Everything had a spray-painted feel, from local artists, who painted murals over every square inch of vacant space. Rainbow and meadow scenes gave way to garish gothic cathedrals cloaked with vampires, which gave way to maze-like murals of intricate pipelines. Quite a few of the murals had a gospel aspect, and I suspected the local constabulary had hired some of the spray painting Picassos to increase the coverage of The Word.

Her apartment was in one of the prefab complexes, stucco on what appeared to be Styrofoam that peeked out of nearly every joint. Large gaping holes in walls could be seen where people had apparently stuck an arm or leg through the wall...probably after tripping on the boxcrete cement walkways.

I found the right apartment, and opened the door using the key Cyrus Kincaid had given me.

I walked into a very neat and clean apartment. I smelled the faint odor of disinfectant, and the floor shone. I paused briefly at the doorway, and leaned down to look across the floor and see if there was a layer of dust — but there wasn't. The air did smell a bit stale as if the climate control system had not been activated for a period of time.

Daphne's living room had an organic couch that had been grown up from the floor, one orgachair, and the walls had several interactive pictures that changed scened randomly set to flowers, and water. One bedroom with an orgabed, neatly made, one bathroom, kitchen with fixed appliances, all neat, no dust that I could see.

Her room was basic, with a bulletin screen that held various pics and profiles from different socmed sites. They seemed very generic though as if some interior decorator had been given the project of "Create a one-bedroom environment for a 20-year-old." No dirty clothes, no makeup on the sink, no makeup, clinical, or feminine products in the bathroom. No nylons hanging from the shower, no hairbrushes with matted hair, no lipstick stains on the few cups in the kitchen. I knew Daphne wore lipstick, yet after searching her apartment, I could not find any evidence of cosmetics. I supposed her cosmetics could be of molecularist origin, but that was expensive — not something a 20-year-old waitress would normally be able to afford.

Her refrigerator contained several bulbs of water and fruit juice. I grabbed a juice since I hadn't had breakfast and pulled the tab, drinking the contents in one gulp and throwing the deflated bulb into the recycler — which was also completely empty.

Shaking my head, I sighed and went through her desk. Basic tablet with no applied images, musicDot...I pressed my finger onto the musicdot and stared at it, then pressed it into the back of her tablet and hit the play indicator.

Music came out of the walls, happy and pop-filled. I sighed and continued walking through the apartment, look-

ing through drawers, opening cupboards, searching closets, pulling back the orgabed mattress, looking for anything, anywhere that could be considered a “Clue.”

I found very little. Which was a clue in itself, if you think about it. Aha! I thought smarmily. This isn't Daphne's apartment. Well, unless Daphne's personality had been developed through watching some sites and channels. This home had zero personality attached to it.

The music changed...something familiar with guttural grunting and loud guitars. Why would Cyrus Kincaid lie to me? Or perhaps he wasn't lying; perhaps Daphne had lied to her Dad, telling her she lived here when she really lived somewhere completely different? Or was Kincaid lying to me for some reason?

I sighed, deciding I wouldn't find anything further in the apartment, and went back to the living room. My stomach churned a bit, and I wondered about the juicebulb. I belched and realized I had a strong need to use the restroom. I quickly darted back down the hall and relieved myself in Daphne's facilities. I started to sweat a bit as I left the restroom, my stomach in nearly full revolt. I pressed the stop key on the tablet to kill the music and glanced up into the mirror above the desk...

And noticed the lips were back. This time they were joined by extremely long eyelashes that fluttered every time I blinked. They looked so incongruous on my square-jawed, broken-nosed face.

“Fuck a DUCK,” I said, looking at my ridiculous face. I pulled on the eyelashes and only succeeded in making my eyes water a bit from the pain. I pulled open a couple of drawers and found a pair of electrosnips. I passed the wand through the long lashes, and they fell onto the pristinely clean floor.

For a moment my eyelashes on my left eye were back to normal, but then I saw them spring back to their ridiculous

length again. My lips were bright metallic red, looking swollen and glistening in the overhead light.

I left Daphne's "Apartment," locking the door behind me. A woman rode down the elevator with me, glancing sidelong at my face as she rode, shaking her head imperceptibly.

"Nice weather we're having, isn't it?" I said.

She rolled her eyes at me and remained silent as the elevator plunged to the first floor.

"Have a nice day!" I said with fake enthusiasm as she exited the elevator and stomped off toward the exit.

It was a Thursday, near noon, and luckily the routerport was not busy. Needless to say, though, that I drew quite a few looks.

As I waited in line, one little creature being held by his mom stared at me from the woman's shoulder. I had a sudden urge, and so made some kissy faces in his direction and fluttered my extreme lashes. He buried his head in her shoulder.

At the counter, I asked for a ticket to the hub transport, which was literally the next destination from New-Phoenix.

"Um," the girl at the counter said, purposely trying to avoid my eyes as she looked at her plasti-screen. "Twenty-Five credits."

I nodded and allowed my phone to scan her terminal, transferring the credits.

"Have a good day...*sir*," she said, with a little too much emphasis.

"Thank you, honey," I said, getting into character a little and chuckling as I moved to the encapsulation line. Nothing to see here, just a wannabe GenMorph wanting to hop to the next stop.

I shook my head as I waited, conscious of every eye blink and the weight of those ridiculous lashes. I hoped that no further changes would strike me while I waited in line. I'd been embarrassed enough.

Luckily, fifteen minutes later and I was at the encapsulation bay. I entered one of the small pods and waited for the technician.

“Hello sir, and welcome to New Phoenix Routerport. I need to ask if you’ve...” the technician said, then noticed my new condition.

“Ummm.” He looked down at his invisible Heads up Display. “Have you had any Genomic additions since your last transmission?”

I nodded. “Yes, but I do NOT want them recorded on my matrix. The reason I’m taking this trip is to be restored.”

He nodded. “I see, sir. Did you lose a bet?”

“Something like that.”

He chuckled and made some notations on his pad. “Well, I won’t ask the situation, sir. You just lay back, and we’ll take care of this issue as soon as possible. I assume you’ll be staying in the pod for the return trip?”

“Yes.”

He smiled. “Then I wish you safe travels, today.”

“Thanks,” I said. And the technician lowered the encapsulation screen.

It always unsettled me to think of my body being digitized, uploaded into the planetary routers, my soulthrum encapsulated and transmitted alongside the digital representation of my body, then reassembled by a large 3D human printer and the thrum placed back in my body through the enormous harmonizer surrounding the pod. I knew it was an extremely safe way to travel, but I always worried that I’d be reassembled with my arm sticking out of my back or something.

I awoke to the hermetic unsealing of the pod. My eyes fluttered open, and I immediately put my palm to them to see if I could feel the length and determined whatever the changes that had been wrought on me were gone.

I breathed a deep sigh of relief as I was escorted out of the capsule and later, the routerport. Sans cocksucker lips and flutterby eyelashes.

Shaking my head against the bright sunlight, I found my hovertruck and brought it to life.

I needed to talk to someone, someone who understood genetic and molecular manipulation. I needed to talk to them, and fast.

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CHAPTER FOUR

I drove through the streets of New Phoenix and found my way to Carlos Badilla's establishment. He was someone of an outlaw genomic, flying under the radar of Intelligence and had managed to thwart all investigations into his experiments by using his handicap as a hole card.

The office was small, in an upscale part of Scottsdale. I entered and spoke to the vapid receptionist asking if Carlos was in.

"Dr. Badilla is *always* in, Senior," she said.

"Well, I'd like to speak to him."

She tut-tutted and looked at her screen. "I'm sorry, Senior, but Dr. Badilla has no time available today."

I leaned over the counter. "Just tell him that John Paradise is standing out in his lobby, willya? Tell him he owes me one, and I've come to collect."

She sighed and blew air out her mouth, causing the bangs of her hairdo to move. "Please have a seat in the waiting room, Senior, and I will let him know."

I nodded and turned to sit down.

The other people in the waiting room were a mixed bag of people in various states of transition. There was one man who had his arm in a sling, and I could see a new hand growing

inside the bandage. A young lady had deep red eyes and a purple mouth, tugging on ears the size of an elephant. One youth of indeterminate gender crossed his legs, and I could see his legs had been modified to that of a female, but his arms were hairy, long and muscular. I shook my head and sat down.

Moments later, Carlos entered the waiting room and bade me past the door. I followed him down a narrow hallway with three or four open doors, with more people waiting on tables.

"John!" Carlos said jovially. "What brings you in, today? It's so good to see you, my friend."

I smiled and shook his hand. "I've got some kind of...condition, that I need your help with."

"Of course! Of Course!" he said, ushering me into an empty room. "I was so happy to hear you wanted to call in that favor I owed you; I can't tell you how long I've waited to repay you that kindness."

I smiled. "How is Maggie, by the way?"

John beamed at me. "She is excellent! We've managed to forestall the deterioration of her mind through the use of some new technology that has come in. She remembers me, her children, facts of her life...it's been wonderful."

I smiled. "I'm happy I was able to help."

He planted a large hand on my shoulder. "You didn't just help; you saved her life, John. It is a debt I can never repay. If you hadn't been able to find her, who knows what might have happened to my grandmother, eh? She might have walked into a bullet train, fell from a staircase, anything!"

I smiled again and nodded.

"So," he said sitting down in a massive swivel chair. "What can I do for you this day?"

I sighed and raised my eyebrows. "Well, I've had something happen to me over the past 24 hours that has disturbed me."

He frowned, taking out a tablet and stylus. "Tell me."

I nodded and launched into the story, telling him about the rave, the lips, the eyelashes, all of it.

John tapped his tablet with the stylus as I finished. "So you say it is a gradual change?"

I nodded. "Yes, and it seems...I don't know, weird to me somehow."

"To me too," he said softly, "to me too." He stood. "Well, take off your shirt, and let me take some blood. We will see what might be happening inside that temple you call a body."

I chuckled and unbuttoned my shirt. He pulled a small hypo and pressed it to the skin of my neck, my chest, my side, and my arm. Then he took up his tablet and read the results. He frowned.

"What does it say?"

"How much Genetic work have you had, John?"

"Very little. I had some basic preventative against disease back when I was on the force, but that was all. Nothing cosmetic."

He nodded, brow furrowing. "Well, you have nanites in your blood. A large volume of nanites."

I felt my stomach fall into my shoes. "What? How is that possible?"

He stood and walked back over to me, studying my body. "Well, there's many possibilities, but it doesn't appear they are currently enacting any programmatic changes. You see, with a typical Genetic Manipulation, we need a printer to be associated with the nanos in your body. The printer reads the information from the gen file and sends commands to all the little bugs in your blood. Without the printer, there is really no origination command, you see? Right now, you have a lot of inert nanos that require some trigger or catalyst to activate and make any changes."

I frowned, running my hand over my head. "A Catalyst? But changes did happen! My eyelashes were over an inch long when I walked out of her apartment!"

"I'm sure they did, I'm sure they did," John said. He stared at his tablet for a long time, then shook his head. "Unfortunately, we can't ascertain what the 'catalyst' might be. Usually, it is

one of our revolving RF tubes, as you've seen in a normal Genomic office, like that—" he pointed at a gen chair with its reclining seat and what looked like a long neon light attached to a frame that I knew circled the patient.

"However, a catalyst truly could be anything. It's extremely dangerous to activate nanos anywhere outside of a Gen station since we carefully monitor all vital signs, and can make instant adjustments as changes are activated. However, there are certain conditions where I've seen nanos activated in other fashions, for example, a combat mission where a soldier's nanos are inert and triggered to be healing once an injury occurs through the use of a handheld device hovered over the injury site. And there's theatric types of nanos that molecularists utilize that might trigger when certain light sequences are flashed, or if a certain sound is produced. It's important to remember, however, the catalyst can be anything; literally. You could have one catalyst that occurs when a certain body temperature is achieved, or if you become sexually aroused. You could have another catalyst that triggers when something is ingested, or if you fell into a body of water. It is *extremely* dangerous and could lead to unintended side effects, hence why the government has strict regulation on un-supervised catabolic ignition, but it *does* occur, and I suspect that is what has happened to you."

I nodded, rubbing my chin. "So can you take them out?"

"I'm sorry?" he said, glancing up from the tablet.

"Take them out," I said. "Get these bugs out of my system. How long would it take to do that?"

He shook his head. "Unfortunately, that is not an option. The concentration you have within you is far too high for them to be removed at this point. And since they are inert, your body does not even recognize them."

I shook my head. "What do you mean?"

"Well, if they were activated, your body would immediately sense the invasion and send white blood cells to the area to wage combat. However, since these are inert, un-activated,

they just float in your blood undergoing mitosis - creating more and more nanos with each passing second until they achieve the desired pre-programmed concentration, or they are directed to be flushed from your system.”

“Wait,” I said pausing to think about that and holding up a hand. “You’re saying that you can’t *remove* these damn things and they’re going to continue to change me?”

“Well, yes and no,” Carlos said. “They will only change you if activated. If you can stay away from whatever is acting as a catalyst, eventually they will...die for want of a better word, and be flushed.”

“Why didn’t I reset when I jumped into a router? I thought that reset your body back to the last time my matrix was recorded.”

Carlos nodded. “Exactly, it resets your body back to the last recording. Since the nanos are blood born, the routers don’t recognize it as anything except blood. It would take an *exceedingly* long time to record every cell in your body and reconstitute it exactly cell by cell. The router printers are similar to my printers. However, they categorize each element of your body very quickly. Blood, bone, cartilage, eyeballs, etc., and reproduce them in the printers. It is the elements of your body, not your exact cell by cell body makeup. That’s why I was unable to use a router to reset my Nana’s Alzheimer’s. If we could, many many diseases would be solved by jumping into a router and being reconstituted.”

I nodded and sighed. “So you’re saying there’s nothing that can be done.”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “I’m sorry, my friend, I wish I had better news. If there were anything I could do, I would, and you know that.”

I nodded. “Well, thanks for trying anyway.”

He smiled. “Anytime, mi amigo. Was there anything else I could help you with today?”

I rose, shaking my head. “No, I guess I have to get to the bottom of this. It seems like it’s connected to a case I’m

currently working on, so perhaps if I solve one, I can solve the other.”

He smiled escorting me out. “Good luck, John. Let me know if there is ever anything more I can do to help.”

I nodded and left.



I took lunch with Sarah Chico’s Mexican Food Restaurant. It was on Central Avenue, between Jefferson and Washington. It mainly catered to the work crowd, men from the surrounding plasteel skyscrapers coming in for a quick bite to eat before going back to their grindstones.

I loved the atmosphere with small wooden tables, Mexican made, thick and heavy chairs, with soft mariachi music playing in the background. They used real heavy glasses with indigo on the bottom and little bubbles cast into the glass giving it an air of authenticity although I would bet the glasses were made in Asiatic somewhere.

Sarah sat at our usual table and was drinking a Corona from a glass with a lemon wedge floating in it and my mouth almost immediately began to water.

I gave her a kiss on the cheek and sat down. “Hi honey,” I said.

She smiled at me. “You’re late.”

“I know.” I sighed taking a bite of chips and salsa. “It’s been a...crazy day.”

“Tell me about it,” she said, smiling that small smile of hers.

So I unloaded everything that had happened that day and the previous night. She listened quietly without judging, nodding at a few places and frowning when I told her about drinking something at the Rave.

“You actually *drank* something provided to you at the party?”

I nodded, shrugging. “I was thirsty.”

"You were *stupid* is what you were. You know better than that, John. It's obviously when you ingested the nanos."

"Yeah," I sighed. "Carlos says I can't do anything about them now though. They're inert as long as they haven't been activated."

She got a look on her face; brows narrowed as she stopped eating. "You realize we can't have sex now, right?"

I blinked. "Wait, what?"

"I'm not risking my body to whatever you have infecting yours. You may be a stupid idiot, but that shouldn't extend to me."

The way she said it, so matter-of-fact made me feel angry for some reason. I clenched my jaw and swallowed my pride. Anger or not, she was right. I nodded.

"And no kissing on the mouth. Not until we have identified exactly what kind of nanotechnology you have swimming around in your veins and if it could extend infection or not."

I sighed. "That's probably a good idea too, though I doubt it would extend."

"Better safe than sorry, John," she said.

Our food arrived, yet somehow I had lost my appetite. I hated putting Sarah in danger, and though I seriously doubted these nanos would infect her, she was right on the money regarding the safeguards. Most nanos wouldn't transfer hosts, but there were plenty of stories to the contrary in the news.

"So what is your next step?" Sarah said, taking a bite of her burrito. She always ate with gusto, much faster than I ever did.

"I figure I'll track down Benny Goodman." I took a couple of bites of my taco...apparently my appetite was being inspired again.

"The clarinet player?"

I shook my head. "The ex-cop. He was the bouncer outside the rave last night. He works out of the Maryvale precinct."

"What do you think he can help you with?"

I shrugged. "The whereabouts of Ms. Kincaid, what I ingested last night, who was behind the rave in the first

place...those things are expensive even when having them from a warehouse and something about the band felt...staged somehow, I sense a PR department behind all this.”

Sarah nodded cleaning her plate. Her lunch, again, had almost magically disappeared.

“Well, I’m glad you’re going to the police about this all. Unlicensed Genomic activity is nothing to be flippant about.”

I winced a little at that. “Well, I said I wanted to *talk* to Benny, not necessarily file a police report about this.”

She set her fork down silently, and I knew I was in a lot of danger. “Say what, now?”

“Well, I don’t exactly want to turn this over to them, just yet. There’s something wrong here, and I need to figure out what it is. Daphne’s life may be in danger, and if I blithely hand this over to New Phoenix PD, things could go shit in a handbasket pretty damn fast.”

“And you think this a wise course of action? Given what has been happening to you at random times throughout the day and evening? Given the fact you were given inert nano molecules that are even now condensing within your body, bonding with it, and increasing in concentration?” she was on a roll, and I could see lightning flash in her eyes. “Not to mention the fact that somehow hundreds of young people in this city are *also* exposed and could be infecting the entire general populace with God knows what?”

Sarah was a paralegal and had been working with lawyers way too long. “Yes,” I said.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. I recognized the anger technique, close your eyes, count to ten, remember that you love me. Then her eyes opened, and she whispered in an intent voice. “If you think for one *minute* I agree with this course of action; you are very wrong, John. I can’t believe you’d risk your health like this, much less the health of all those youths! You are being stupid, John, turn it over to the police and let them handle this. Illegal Genomics is a federal offense, John, and these people need to be *stopped!*”

I sighed. "I'll talk to Benny and make the call after I talk to him. You have a mistaken impression that they would be able to do anything better than I can do, Sarah. Just because I'm not working in an official capacity does not rule out my skillset, or what I might be able to accomplish outside of the bureaucratic channels. I can dig a lot deeper, in a lot more places without raising an alarm and figure out what is *really* going on before I raise the red flag, okay?"

She sighed. "This just isn't fair. You lay all this shit out on me, so you can work through it, I give you a recommended course of action, *THE* recommended course of action, and now you're going to completely ignore it and do what you want anyway? Why the hell did you tell me about it in the first place?"

I crossed my arms. "Because I wanted your input."

"Well, I gave you my input, and you're still going to go off half-cocked." She said, then she looked down. "And I mean that *literally* in this case. What the fuck am I going to do if you're turned into a woman, John?"

"I'll just pop over to a router port again and get things righted."

"You just don't understand, any of this. You are in dangerous waters, and you're making a huge mistake not going to the authorities about this immediately!"

"I'm sorry you feel that way," I said.

She threw up her hands standing. "I'm done discussing this. I have to get back to work."

I nodded, standing with her. "Can I come over later?"

She gave me an icy glare. "I'm not sure, John."

"Okay, Sarah, I understand."

She shook her head, fury and anger and frustration brimming in her eyes. "No, I don't think you do. I don't think you understand at all." And then she walked away, her high heeled shoes clacking on the saltillo tile.

I watched her go, then paid the bill, leaving a generous tip. I thought about what she said, but Sarah frequently wanted me

to take the “safe” road, to involve the authorities. She rarely believed I could accomplish what I’d set out to accomplish. I thought back on my case log and could point to several cases where I had been in real, physical, danger and Sarah had recommended I go to the authorities and I hadn’t...and...well, truth to tell, usually I scraped through somehow, but it could have been better if I *had* gone to the authorities. Fact was, I just didn’t like going to them. I liked flying by the seat of my pants, liked struggling through a case, I enjoyed picking at a problem and see what rose to the top. I liked interviewing people, asking difficult questions, sometimes intentionally stirring the pot just to see what would shake out.

Detectives who played the safe card rarely ascended to any level of comfort. In truth, they were home more often, could have kids and a pension plan...but hell, who needed a pension when I could live by the skin of my teeth? I would get a pension plan when I could afford one, and insurance, and all the other things true business owners invested in. Right now what I needed to do was solve this case so I could move on to the next one, one that was a bit more lucrative. Sarah never complained about the money when it was good.

I drove out to Maryvale, just west of the heart of new Phoenix. This neighborhood had also been completely renovated with the slums and tenements replaced by gleaming towers of chrome, glass, and steel. I found the police station and asked for Benny Goodman.

As I waited, I fervently hoped for some hint at what might be going on.

I really liked sex with Sara, dammit.

5

CHAPTER FIVE

Fifteen minutes later, Benny came to the glass and buzzed me into the back area of the station. We walked back to his office.

“Jesus Christ, it’s like a Starbucks in here,” I said as he led me to a paneled room with lots of positive space, windows, and modern furnishings.

“I can actually *give* you a Starbuck’s coffee, Paradise.” Benny indicated a gleaming chrome coffee maker in the right-hand corner. “You want a half cafe whatever the fuck?”

“Just coffee would be fine, thanks.”

He made some adjustments to the apparatus and handed me a steaming covered cup.

“So what can I do you for, Paradise? I’m busy bustin’ criminals if you can’t see that.”

“Yeah, in between golf games?”

“Hey, my handicap is the best it’s ever been!”

I shook my head as he sat down behind his desk. He was a large man, and the chair creaked under his bulk. He sipped coffee as well, making a face.

“What can you tell me about the Rave last night?”

He squinted at me a little. “What you wanna know?”

“Well, who was running it?”

He sighed. “CREAM.”

“What?” I said. “Oh, no thanks, I’m good.”

He shook his head and pulled up a tablet, then threw it on a display to the side of us. “CREAM, the Coalition for the Realistic Expression of Art and Music. They the ones that ran the shindig you was at last night. It wasn’t your scene, Paradise; I keep telling you that.”

I nodded. “I think I know what you’re talking about.”

“CREAM has been putting on these events for the last month or so. This is the second one I’ve contracted for.”

I nodded making notes on my tablet with my stylus. “You notice anything unusual about it?”

He stood up and walked to the window wall, staring out at the skyline of New Phoenix. “No, not anything out of the ordinary. Why you ask?”

I sighed. “Well, I’m looking for a kid that was supposed to be at the event last night, but I didn’t see her.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you told me. I did a little digging into that, and I have no record of her on the sign in last night.”

I nodded. “Do you happen to have a list you can share with me?”

He grinned. “You know better than that, Paradise, if I shared that info what kinda name would I have for myself in this fuckin’ town? I was independent last night, and I *need* these gigs, you know what I mean? People hear I share that kinda data and I won’t be able to whistle Dixie.”

I nodded sipping some coffee. It was excellent, having just a little hint of something familiar but I couldn’t identify. “What can you tell me about CREAM?”

He shrugged. “It’s a pretty closed mouthed organization. They ran that big protest last year out in the Grand Canyon, remember?”

I frowned thinking back, but Benny had flicked the event up on the screen. Someone, many someones’s, had hiked into the Grand Canyon and done up many of the canyon walls with murals depicting the abuse of Native Americans by Anglos. It

has been in all the news, and I vaguely remembered reading about it.

“So CREAM was the one responsible? I thought it was some Native American Rights group.”

“Nope. That was the strange thing. Native Americans have, for the most part, accepted the loss of the Grand Canyon ages ago. It isn’t even a topic of discussion. They have more important things to worry about like the loss of water, mining, loss of business, social issues...hell. They were pretty angry that someone used their history in such an inflammatory manner.”

I shook my head. “They ever catch the individuals responsible?”

Benny grinned. “Nope. We had a couple leads, but they led no where. Case was closed a few months ago after the canyon walls had been restored.”

“But you are convinced CREAM was behind it.”

He nodded and flicked another image up on the screen. It showed the CREAM webspace with a timeline. The Canyon Exhibition displayed in red. “They took credit for it.”

“Charges were never processed?”

He snorted. “That’s the thing. The murals were all done with sand and water. Sandpaintings. They must have used some apparatus to lay it all out, especially in the short amount of time they appeared, but there were no outside elements involved. It’s why it was so easy to clean up. Hell, they picked up the trash in the Canyon while they were down there and rehabbed some of the local flora.”

“And you’ve never been able to question anyone?”

He shrugged his shoulder. “All we know is, they have a headquarters in Chicago. There’s a building there, and we’ve spoken with different people who work there, but we’ve never been able to speak to the Chairman. You see, Paradise...” he leaned forward holding his big hands out in front of him. “They never actually break any *laws*. They’ve had several exhibitions like the one in the Canyon — sides of buildings, sculptures in parks, mass dance and song demonstra-

tions...but they always get permits, they always clean up after themselves...there's Nothing indictable."

I gave that some thought. There certainly was an offense here, if they were illegally imposing genomic activity on people, but for some reason, I didn't feel like I should bring that up with Benny. His eyes just didn't look right to me, and hell, he was in their employ.

"So you are employed by a group in which you have no idea who is actually in charge," I said.

"Contract work. They hire me through an agency; I work, I get paid, end of story. Easy money, legal, easy money if you get my drift, Paradise."

"Legal as long as it doesn't involve kidnapping, you mean."

"She ain't been kidnapped," Benny said, almost under his breath.

"How do you know?"

He shook his head and closed out the wall display. "She probably some scared kid that got daddy issues is all. How long you say she been gone?"

"A week...ish."

"So you don't know how long she been gone?"

"The father and daughter haven't spoken much. He checked on her more than a week ago, and it appears she hasn't been back."

"How old you say she is?"

"Twenty-three."

He nodded. "So that's why the father hasn't gone to the police I take it. She ain't a minor, no sign of foul play. I'm guessing you tried her phone and social media accounts?"

"Yep," I said. "No updates prior to a week ago. Last entry was an event about last night's rave."

Benny rubbed his chin. "Hmmm...well, if it goes on much longer, I can file a missing person's report."

"Thanks, Benny, I'll let you know."

"No problem, Paradise, we aim to serve, as you well know."

"Yeah, thanks."

“Anything else you can tell me about CREAM or this event?”

At that moment there was a soft chime from his tablet, and he glanced down at it. “One moment, Paradise, I need to take care of something.”

“Sure, take your time, I said.”

“Get yourself some more coffee; I’ll be right back.”

I grinned. “Don’t mind if I do; this is really *good*.”

He chuckled. “We sure as fuck paid enough for it.” He opened the door and left.

I went to the contraption and saw the mix he had on the screen. I pressed a green button, and another cup filled itself automatically. I walked around his office, staring out at the skyline. Some soft music came from somewhere, something familiar that I had heard before but couldn’t recall the title.

I sat and thought about Daphne Kincaid. I took out my tablet and pulled out her picture. She had such a delicate face, and I wondered what her mother had looked like. I couldn’t see Cyrus in her features at all except maybe in her chin. Mother’s looks, Father’s headstrong ways, I thought. Cyrus had been a hellraiser in his youth, belonged to a gang and even held onto some of his original tattoos. Daphne must take after her dad in that way, and I wondered again where she might be, who she might be with. If she was alone, scared, hurt...I was starting to suspect she wasn’t any of these things, but it still bothered me.

I found my head nodding slightly as I caught myself almost dozing. Where was Benny? I hadn’t slept well the night before and sitting in the chair was making me sleepy, even with the double dose of caffeine. I blinked my eyes, trying to wake up and felt the feathery touch of lashes again.

I pulled up my tablet, but could already tell the damage had been done. I now possessed inch long crimson metallic flaked nails. I awkwardly triggered the self-photo and stared at my changed face.

The long lashes were back, and the cocksucker crimson lips, in addition, my brows had thinned to gentle arches framing my eyes, and eyeliner swept away from each eye something like a cat.

“Fuck!” I said, staring at my image, my lips pursing sensually to say the obscene word. My nose had changed as well, thin, smaller, and the skin of my face had changed, much paler, almost white. Cast onto the six-foot five frame of mine it looked patently ridiculous.

I put the coffee down, nearly spilling it with my be-taloned fingers and made my way to the door. I opened it and looked both ways. No one was coming down the hallway in either direction.

I bolted out of the room, keeping my head down low, wishing I had something to hide the insane face I now possessed. I made it to the front counter and didn’t look up at the officer attending, just kept my head down and scooted out the door. No one stopped me or raised an alarm, thank God.

In the parking lot, a couple of people saw me, but I supposed they probably just thought I was some GenMorph being released for good behavior. A couple of them shook their head at me, averting their eyes and for once I was glad my face caused revulsion.

I got in my truck and glanced in the rear view mirror as I fired the engine. Again I saw that face with the lashes, the eyebrows, the lipstick. Jesus.

Throwing it into gear, I packed out of the parking lot and drove back to the routerport.



It had been less than 24 hours, and I’d been through two hops already. I hoped they didn’t refuse me — Traveling by router was great, but it caused router sickness if you did it too many times within too short a time frame. Usually, they would not

allow two same day jumps, but I prayed that because it was such a short distance, they would allow it.

Luck was not in my favor. When I purchased my ticket, the agent handed it back to me saying: "I'm sorry, um, *Miss* but you can't make more than two jumps in a single day. You'll need to wait until," she checked her screen, "ten AM tomorrow."

I sighed and thanked the agent, walking away and trying to avoid the stares cast in my direction.

Driving home, I decided I'd stop pressing my luck and just sleep the rest of the afternoon. It had been a decidedly *shitty* day, and all I wanted to do was to sleep off the last of whatever hangover I was experiencing.

I'd known Benny a long time. He was a good cop, thorough, and always appeared above the law. But the flippant way he had handled this meeting didn't feel right somehow, and his words struck me as strange, like hearing from him would be the last thing he'd do.

Well, at least I had something to go on, something more to investigate. CREAM. I tried to call Sarah, but she ignored me.

Arriving home, I studied myself in the mirror. Pale, nearly perfect complexion with a slight mole over the left side of my lips, which were large, plump, ripe for the sucking of cocks. Large, doe-like eyes with the flutterby lashes perfectly setting off dark eyeshadow and eyeliner sweeping away from my eyes into a sexy cat tail.

I took a fingernail electrosnip out of a drawer and carefully snipped off the nails...but they grew back almost immediately, even longer extending out nearly a full inch. I sighed, breathing, feeling like a Hovertruck had smashed into my body, my painted eyelids wanting to slide shut.

Walking over to the bed, I slid beneath the covers, consciousness fading almost immediately. *We aim to serve, Paradise*. I said to myself as I crawled into bed, and pulled the covers over my changed head.



I was awakened in the night by my doorbuzzer. Blearily I got to my feet, and pulled on a pair of pajama bottoms, forgetting for a moment all the changes that had been wrought in my body. I stumbled my way to the door and pressed the intercom. “Who is it?”

“My name is Shane Stamos, Mr. Paradise, and I’d like to speak with you.”

I glanced at the door control...something kept slipping into my field of vision, and I brushed it away. “It’s 2:30 in the morning!”

“I’m aware of the time, Mr. Paradise, but I think you’ll want to speak with me.”

I glanced at surveillance camera I had installed when I moved in. Two figures stood at my door, one wearing a long trenchcoat which was strange in New Phoenix, and the other was a young woman wearing a black, very short dress.”

Sighing, I opened the door, still not letting them in. “What do you want?”

The young woman’s eyes went wide at my appearance. “Ooooh!” She said in a very high-pitched, breathy voice. “She is going to be *delightful!*”

“Ahh, fuck,” I said, remembering my changed face. “I have a...glandular condition. What do you want?”

The man handed me a card. He was about 5’9 with slicked back dark hair, blue eyes, and wearing a dark overcoat, slacks, and highly polished shoes. I glanced at the card. “What do you want, Shane Stamos from...” my voice trailed off as I saw the company.

“The Coalition has sent me to speak with you about the changes happening in your life, Mr. Paradise.”

I glanced back at him and the striking young woman. “So you can reverse this?”

He smiled. "May we come in, Mr. Paradise? I fear the walls may overhear our conversation out here."

I nodded and allowed them to enter. The woman smiled widely at me as she passed, and I could tell she was wearing expensive perfume. She had very dark hair worn in a bob cut that slanted down from the back. She had patent leather pumps, what appeared to be silk stockings, and a very large, well displayed, décolletage that drew my eyes like magnets.

"Jesus, Christ!" I said, staring openly at her breasts. "You're going to have to sheath those torpedoes, or I'm going to be staring at them all night."

She giggled in response, and if anything arched her back slightly to better put them on display.

I cleared off newspapers, food wrappers, and the remains of my laundry that had taken up the couch, and indicated they could sit down. The man sat quietly, but the woman decided to remain standing, walking around my apartment and glancing at everything she could.

I sat down in the chair opposite. "This is where I'd normally offer guests something to drink or some shit, but I'm out of drinks, and clean glasses."

The man smiled. He had very white teeth. "We won't be staying long Mr. Paradise."

The girl had entered my small kitchen and inhaled deeply over the sink piled high with dirty dishes. "Ooooh, this place smells soooo....MAN. I love it!"

"Now, Syn," the man said. "You're being rude."

She turned and walked back into the living room, still looking at everything. She picked up a picture of myself and Sarah, then picked up a baseball I had in a small trophy case, smelling it, and replacing it.

"Syn and I have come to discuss the...condition you find yourself in, Mr. Paradise."

I nodded and felt something strange fall across my shoulder. I looked back to see what it was, but couldn't see anything.

"I'm all ears," I said, brushing at my shoulder, trying to rid myself of the feeling of whatever it was.

"I see your tendrils have started to come in," Syn said, in an ebullient voice. "It won't be long now!"

I frowned. "My what?"

"Syn, please." Shane brushed at some invisible lint on his slacks. "Mr. Paradise, you have unwittingly become a part of something, I'm afraid, and I don't know exactly how to start."

"Try the beginning," I said, again trying to capture whatever it was on my shoulder. I caught it...*hair*? And tried to pull it, but it only yanked a pinprick on my scalp.

"I'm afraid you won't be able to pull that out, Mr. Paradise, it isn't *hair* in any sense of the term, but synthetic Livetendrils that mimic hair, only much stronger and able to be programmed in any style desired."

"Wait. What?" I said, looking down at the thing in my hand.

Sure enough, a strand of what looked like hair was there, nearly white. It wasn't straight either, seeming to curve in a peculiar way, springy. I again tried to yank it from my head and yelped in pain.

"You'll only succeed in damaging your scalp, I'm afraid. Look, let me begin at the beginning like you said."

I nodded and sat back trying to ignore the feel of the tendril against my bare back.

"You have heard of the Coalition for the Realistic Expression of Art and Music?"

"Yeah, CREAM," I said. "You guys did the Grand Canyon thing last year."

He smiled. "Yes, that was one of our exhibitions. Very successful one too."

I shrugged and lit a cigarette.

"You see Mr. Paradise; we are in the process of performing a Grande Artistic Statement. You became a participant in the statement when you attended the rave last evening."

I nodded. "I noticed. Do you know where Daphne Kincaid is?"

A frown creased his perfect features. "I'm sorry?"

"Daphne Kincaid." I exhaled smoke from my nose and mouth. "It's why I was at your little shindig. I've been hired to find her."

Shane looked up at Syn who had just returned from my bedroom and was continuing to walk around my apartment. It made me nervous; I don't like people standing behind me.

"I'm afraid we don't know of that particular participant. If she is a participant, we can give you any records we might have...assuming you cooperate of course."

I frowned a little at that. Me and cooperate never did see eye to eye. "Cooperate how?"

"I was just getting to that. As I said, you unwittingly ingested the initiating nano machines when you attended the rave. Therefore as you experience the catalyst, your body is changing along the lines of the Grande Artistic Statement."

I sighed out some more smoke. "What?"

In answer, he nodded to Syn who handed me a paper flyer. I noticed she had long fingernails as well, black to match my crimson talons.

I scanned the page and read it aloud.

"You have been invited to attend Le Grande Artistique, presented by The Coalition for the Realistic Expression of Art and Music. Thank you for your participation. Over the next ten days, as you ingest different sets of nano machines, and experience the wonder of the Catalyst, your body will change it's constitution and makeup. At first, this change will be cosmetic only, but full body morph. The artistic representation will mean each person will undergo a random gender change. You may change age, height, weight, hair color; eye color...all are fair game under the Artistique. You will receive hundreds of thousands of credits in body morphic changes at *absolutely no charge!* The only requirement we ask is that we be able to use your visage in digital photos for our marketing campaigns in the future."

I shook my head as he continued.

“As a special bonus, we also include a free ID Matrix Base-line change to your new gender! All public records will change as a result, and it will be as if you were born of the opposite sex! This is a one-time, unique opportunity that you can’t miss. All we require is your digital encrypted signature at this webspace” and it gave an address. “And we can begin the process. Please understand that due to the nature of this Genomic Package, it creates a fundamental change and we can not honor any requests to terminate the experience early.”

I looked up at him. “You’re saying I can’t leave the...what-ever the fuck...”

“The Artistique, no.” He said. “Which brings us to our co-nundrum.”

I stared at him. “What’s that?”

He cleared his throat. “Well, as you can imagine...we of the Coalition are a bit embarrassed by the fact you were able to gain entry into the Artistique without signing the form. We’d like for you to rectify that.”

I shook my head. “Wait, you want me to give you *permission* to turn me into,” I indicated my face. “This?”

“You see, the Coalition’s rules are very strict, Mr. Paradise.”

I felt a pair of hands on my shoulder. “We can be sisters!” Syn said from behind me. “Won’t that be the *coolest* thing *ever?*”

I thrust her hands from my shoulders. “And what if I say no?”

Shane made a sound from his mouth, a clicking. “I’m afraid that isn’t an option.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Syn here, in her previous incarnation was an assassin.”

Syn piped in abruptly. “Do you know you only have *one* point of entry and egress from this apartment? One! I LOVE this place!”

I lit another cigarette, inhaled deeply and let it escape through my nostrils. “So you’re saying if I don’t sign your stu-

pid form, granting your permission to turn me into a woman you'll kill me? Sign or die?"

He shrugged. "Well, it's a bit more...*uncouth* way of saying that, but yes. We require all our participants to give full permission."

"Is that what happened to Daphne? Did she change her mind and you just *erased* her?"

Shane shook his head, and they both said at the same time. "No!" Shane collected himself. "Mr. Paradise if Ms. Kincaid is a participant, I can share her location and condition with you once you sign the form."

I glanced down at the paper in my hand. "So...let me get this straight. My choice is sign the form, I turn into a woman, and I learn where Daphne is." I took a puff on my cigarette again. "Or, I *don't* sign the form, and you turn Syn here," I looked up at her standing over my chair. "Loose on me, and I die."

Shane smiled. "Well, yes."

"I thought the Coalition didn't commit crimes," I said tapping ash into an empty waterglobe.

"We don't, Mr. Paradise, which is why we'd like you to sign the form."

"Murder doesn't count as an infraction in the law?"

He smiled. "Would you come quietly if I asked so you could be restrained for the rest of the Artistique?"

"Fuck no," I said. "I'm a loud ass bastard, in case no one told you."

"See, and that is the conundrum. If we were to kidnap you, hold you against your will until the Artistique completes, then release you, we'd be guilty of kidnapping. If we allow you to continue on your lifepath as it is now, we are guilty of inducing a genomic change against your will, and I imagine you would let the authorities know of our oversight. Killing you, yes, is the only option. We will make it fast, I can assure you, and can even manufacturer a valiant last stand if you'd so prefer."

I stubbed my cigarette out in an ashtray and reached into the secret compartment hidden in the inside of my chair.

“Then I say...” I pulled out a snub-nosed pistol. “Door Number Two. Go fuck yourselves,” and jumped up from the chair, spinning as Syn brought down a garrote that had leaped from her fingers.

“Oooh, fiddlesticks!” She said, moving out from behind my chair. I tried to hold the gun on her and Shane at the same time as I backed up against the wall.

Shane closed his eyes. “It doesn’t need to be like this, Mr. Paradise.”

“Obviously it does. I have the goods on you. It’s in my blood. All I have to do is go to the police, and they see I’ve had unauthorized genomic activity introduced into my bloodstream, I can give them that little flyer, and the Grande Artistique whatever the fuck is *over*.”

“It’s not that bad, though,” Syn said, moving to flank me, moving slowly, professionally. “Being a girl can be such fun, honey, you need to try it!”

“No thanks, and stay right the fuck where you are, Darlin’”

She froze putting both her hands up slightly. “We get to go shopping, and wear pretty clothes, and smell pretty, not like the stinky *boy* smell you smell like.”

“I want the two of you out of my apartment, now,” I said in what I hoped was my most menacing voice. I realized I must have looked pretty strange. A six foot four, muscular man with the face and eyes of a woman attempting to get my taloned fingers to hold a trigger.

Shane stood then, standing together next to Syn. He had his hands down, but Syn was holding her hands up somewhat, and I could see the garrote had disappeared somewhere. I wondered what other kind of weapon she could be carrying.

“It doesn’t have to be like this, Mr. Paradise. Afterall, you are transitioning whether you want to or not. The only thing we are asking is that you agree to the transition, and we will reward you for that agreement.”

“Yes, honey.” Syn smiled, eyes wide and earnest. “Being a girl isn’t so bad, you’ll see!”

I considered for a moment their words. They were somewhat correct. After all, half the population was female, what could it hurt to join them? And I'd always be able to go to a genomic and have it reversed, in the fact that might be the reward I ask for, to quietly have the damage reversed. No harm, no foul.

But no. Where was Daphne in all this? What had they done with her? They would get their way; the Artistique would continue unabated. It would continue unabated regardless unless I stepped in and mucked up their little party. I should have listened to Sarah, gone to the police and let them see the changes they'd made, let them identify the little bugs even now swimming merrily in my blood and exacting changes.

I hated when she was right.

Sighing I tongued the switch for my communications node and dialed emergency.

"Emergency services, this is Carl, What is the nature of your emergency?" I heard in my ear.

"I have an assassin and an accomplice that have attempted to kill me in my..." Syn's arm darted downward, and from somewhere a weapon appeared. When I saw the movement, I'd anticipated and fired, but she had dropped to the floor in the splits and fired into the area where my midsection would have been if I had still been there.

"Send help!" I said, as I too dropped to the floor and rolled, the projectiles fired from Syn's weapon whipping over my head to smack into the wall behind me.

I leaped behind the couch, firing at them both, but Shane had leaped into the air at the first sound and was running toward the door.

I fired, round after round at the two figures. Syn moved with ethereal grace, anticipating my bullet stream and avoiding each one. I usually dodged, but this was more fluid a movement, with a feline grace that was almost dance like. I changed my trajectory and scored a hit on her upper arm. The smooth

skin exploded in blood, and Syn let out an almost sexual laugh, her eyes dancing with amusement as she ran toward the door.

“You are an excellent shot! She said, pulling the door open. “I truly look forward to our next meeting!”

I fired the last of my shots, but they had darted out the door.

I knew she would expect me to pursue, and also knew she would anticipate my head height, so I pulled the door open from the side, kneeling, and darted a quick look around the corner. Two projectiles *tipped* past and buried themselves into my apartment wall exactly at my head height, but they were already on the move down the corridor. I reloaded quickly and was able to get off another couple of rounds before they made it to the stairs. I saw one impact Shane in his upper shoulder. He staggered for a moment, but Syn took him by the arm and hauled him into the stairwell.

“Bye, Sweetie!” I heard Syn call. “I’ll catch you next time!”

I shook my head and shut my door, throwing the electronic deadbolt, sealing me inside. I’d paid a lot of money to have just the single entry. It was always easier to defend one point of entry instead of worrying about having windows and other doors. Money well spent, today.

Sighing, I shook out another cigarette. My hands were shaking. It had been awhile since I’d been in any combat situation and I was having serious flashbacks to other times, other places when the outcome wasn’t so pretty.

I glanced up into the mirrored surface of the vid unit on my wall, watching the hulking man with the woman’s face shakily press a cigarette to his/her lips. Not so pretty indeed.

I took out my mobile device and with long taloned fingers clumsily typed.

“I was wrong. I’m sorry.” And sent it to Sarah.

It wouldn’t be enough, she was in a snit, but at least she would know I was coming around to her way of thinking.

Was it worth dying over? Nothing was permanent, not anymore. Yes, the process would complete, but I could always have it reversed. Why the hell was I so stubborn about this?

I sighed, double-checking the security, then headed back to the bedroom. More importantly, why were *they* so stubborn about this?

It made no sense. This Coalition, whatever, was willing to knock me off if I didn't sign an acceptance form. Why didn't they just sign it themselves? The process or whatever inside me was moving forward with or without the signature. They supposedly didn't want to break any laws, but they would murder a man to abide by a signed permission waiver?

I considered things from their point of view. Okay, so I'm being a stubborn ass and won't sign. Shane or Syn sign the form for me anyway. They turn it in. I go to the police and report them for abuse of genetics...and I have the evidence swimming in my bloodstream. Police conduct an investigation and...everything comes to a halt. I've ruined their Artistique.

I thought about the alternative. I sign the form. I go through the change that makes my body match the cocksucking lips I possess. At the finale, I am granted a boon, and I ask for a reversal. They, quietly, allow it and I keep my lips zipped.

The unknown factor was Daphne. Where did she stand in all of this? Where was she? Was she hiding out, or had they "removed" her from the equation too?

Dark thoughts flew on dark wings as I slid my body under the covers and my gun under the pillow.

6

CHAPTER SIX

My alarm sounded early the next morning, playing music from some online pop radio station. The music sounded familiar, and I found myself humming along with it as I got up and performed my morning routine. As I showered, I noticed more changes were happening to my body: my hips had widened slightly, and two little buds had sprouted on my chest. As I soaped them, the intense feeling I got from massaging them aroused me in ways I didn't want to think about. I hummed the music softly, and soaped up my face then quickly realized I would not need to shave.

Towel-dry, I noticed the lumps on my chest had expanded, along with my hips. I towel-dried my hair then peered into the mirror.

As my hair dried, I noticed individual strands had lengthened and changed color. Instead of hanging down over my shoulder though, they hovered into the air briefly then curled themselves into some formation on my head. When I pulled on the hair, it felt different, thicker, with an almost oily cover. It was nearly white, a color I assumed would be platinum.

As I watched more of my hair lengthened, and rose up into the strange configuration on my head, as if on its accord. I tried to use a comb and make them lay flat, even re-wetting

my hair but the water wicked away down the surface of the hair, and it rebounded back into its strange coif.

“Well, fuck me for a fool,” I said watching more and more strands of my hair lift up from my scalp, lengthen and change color, and settle into the new configuration.

I could *feel* the changes happening, throbbing through my body in time with the beat of the music...

“Holy fuck!” I said, dashing to my display to see the name of the song on the radio. *_Transgenderosity._* by Unk.

I clicked the station off, and the throbbing in my body calmed, the rate of changes slowing.

I knew I had found the catalyst! As I thought back to all the times my body had changed, I knew that it occurred when that fucking song had been playing. I did a little jig for joy, watching my strange changed body in the mirror with its platinum tendrils forming a strange cacophony of an incomplete hairdo on top of my head, my little breasts — because that’s what they were now — bobbling merrily. My large lunkish body attached to the woman’s face, becoming more and more like the woman.

All I had to do was *not* listen to that song, and the changes would never progress. All I had to do was wait out the change in silence, and I would never finish *The Grande Artistique* or whatever the fuck they wanted to call it. I could use the Routerport, change back, expose the heinous criminality of the criminals to the cops, and all would be right with the world.

Grinning a lipsticked grin, I threw on some clothes and went to the routerport.

This time, I apparently looked more female than previously. Almost no one gave me a second glance. I’d hidden my head and coif under a hoodie, but enough of myself bulged through that matched my face I could be taken for a heavily made up overweight woman.

I realized as I waited in line, I needed to go to Chicago to find the headquarters of the Coalition. I wasn’t exactly dressed

for the part...but then who actually would care? I also hadn't brought my weapon which I never did, but I knew I might need the return trip to once again return to my maleness.

"Destination, Miss?" the agent said as I approached the encapsulation area.

"Chicago," I said in my male voice.

She blinked and scanned my palm. "Oh, I see, *Sir*," she said.

"I lost a bet. I wish to be reset."

She smiled with a fake intensity. "Not a problem." She clicked something on her tablet. "We'll get you back the way you should be, Mr. Paradise."

"Thanks," I mumbled and stepped into the pod.

Moments later I was in Chicago and male. I sighed deeply, feeling air enter my male lungs, using my male hands to pull myself out of the encapsulation pod. I stretched, even though it had only been a few moments in the pod, I reveled in the feeling of being back in my skin. I ran my hands over my face, through my short hair, over my stubbled chin.

"Welcome Back, Mr. Paradise," A male technician said as he consulted his tablet. "It appears your refresh has been successful."

"Thank God for technology," I said with a grin.

"Indeed Sir," the tech said with a professional smile.

I clapped him on the shoulder and exited the encapsulation area, heading for the bright wonderful world of Chicago.



I knew from glancing at my internal HUD that the Coalition rented space inside one of the immense skyscrapers of downtown. With new improvements in construction technology, many of the steel and glass skyscrapers had been replaced by plasteel extravaganzas with each more astounding than the last. Chicago had played a large part in the Great Renovation

and since the fall of New York had thrived as the financial and artistic center of the Universe.

I took a taxi to the building and an elevator up to the 37 floor. It opened on a glassed area with painted holospheres hovering in the air and water features cascading down multi-colored plasteel tapestries. It was produced to give an OMG moment, but I refused to cave to the intentional artistic effect...although some of them were admittedly spectacular.

Walking up to the receptionist's cubicle, I produced a business card...printed on real paper from which trees were murdered. A girl stood in the foyer with a tablet in her hand, speaking discreetly into the middle distance, her eyes unfocused as she handled what used to be termed a "telephone call." When she was finished, she looked up at me.

"Can I help you, Sir?"

I handed her my card.

She glanced down at it. "Do you have an appointment, Mr...Gufflaw?"

I adopted a high-pitched nasally tone of voice. "I do not."

She read the writing on my card then her eyes widened. "Oh!" she said, almost with a squeak. "Of course, you *wouldn't* have an appointment, now would you?"

I giggled a bit in that high pitched tone. "Can you just show me to the offending commode? I'll be in and out in a jiffy."

She bit her perfectly lipsticked lip. "That's just the thing...I usually call the plumbing techs, and I don't remember having a problem today. Where's Jerry?"

"In training, I'm afraid. Jerry has been promoted."

She smiled. "Well, Mr. Gufflaw—"

"You can call me Enrique." I overemphasized the rolled r, gave her a wide smile.

"Well, Enrique, we didn't call you. Are you sure you are on the right floor?"

I nodded. "Coalition for the Realistic Expression of Art and Music, Suite 3749." I handed her my small tablet.

She glanced at it. “It doesn’t say who placed the call...was it a man or woman?”

I sighed. “I don’t know, dear. Dispatch would have handled the actual call.” I pitched my voice to sound impatient. “Well, I guess I can be leaving. Easy workday for me, apparently.” And I spun around with a flamboyant gesture and headed for the elevator.

She sighed, and I could see the indecision on her face. “Ooooh. Can you wait one moment while I ask if anyone called?”

I raised my eyebrows dramatically and flounced down onto a chair in the foyer.

The receptionist’s fingers sped over invisible keys as she apparently sent inquiries to all areas of the office.

I knew this was a gamble. Sometimes it worked, but many times I’d been turned away. I didn’t actually want to meet with anyone, but I did want to get the lay of the “land,” so while she texted the staff on her tablet, I noted all the camera locations, offices, and took pics of all the mastheads I could see with my internal hud. I also scanned their wireless connection, and setup a couple of very discreet “hunter-gatherer” programs from my home network to work since I was inside their net. I didn’t need long, my internal hud dinged in my ear softly, indicating they had been able to gain access. I smiled at the receptionist, waving, as she spoke to whomever.

What I wanted was their hierarchical structure. Sure, the mastheads would tell me the official, but I wanted to know who was playing behind the scenes. I ran their files, opening and closing documents. Apparently, the director of the Coalition was simply called “The Director.” No name was ever associated. Apparently, he or she hid his or her identity from the staff of the Coalition as well as the public. Dammit.

I did find a second in command, one Sandra Erickson. She was apparently in her office, and was the first person the receptionist — Marg, had called. I discreetly sent a command

to the water main in her personal restroom to on...and closed my connection. Entropy would take care of the rest.

“Mr. Gufflaw, we have no record of anyone calling your offices,” she said. “Sorry to inconvenience you.”

I smiled. “No trouble honey. You let Sandy know that any-time she needs anything just give me a call. I left my mobile number on that card I gave you.”

“We will. And again, sorry for the trouble.”

I nodded and stood up. I walked slowly out of the area, appearing to admire all the amazing works of art that adorned the walls, the water features, even taking a moment to snap a picture or two with my tablet.

I heard Marg say something from the desk, but I didn’t bother to turn around, appearing to be engrossed in a particularly large holo-nude that slowly rotated around a thrumming fountain with water colored a bright pink. I smiled in fake contentment, apparently amazed and engrossed in the scene as I heard Marg’s click clack of heels approach me.

“Mr. Gufflaw?” she said.

I gave a theatric jump as if she had just intruded on my introspective pleasure.

“Yes, Marg?” I said.

“Apparently we do have an issue. Not sure how it escaped our notice, but the unit in Ms. Erickson’s office appears to be malfunctioning.

I nodded sagely, narrowing my brows for full effect. “How long has it been giving you trouble?”

She giggled. “Well, we only just now noticed it. It’s as if it started in response to your visit somehow!”

I laughed at that. “Well, let’s go see what’s going on with that little booger, shall we honey?”

She nodded and walked back toward the offices.

I followed, wearing a pleasant expression.



After “fixing” the offending commode, I poked my head into Sandra Erickson’s office. She was a small woman with a severe bob haircut, old-fashioned “glasses” and wore a cream business suit. She stood at her desk, touching various areas of her display as she worked.

“All fixed Ms. Erickson,” I said.

“Thank you. Marg will show you out.”

I nodded, then paused as I saw out her window. “Oh, My!” I said in mock astonishment. “What a view you have!”

She smiled as I entered, apparently unable to contain my curiosity.

“If you have a view like this, The Director’s must be second only to the President of the New Republic!”

She laughed a bit. “The Director doesn’t have office space here.”

“Oh? Where does he...she?” I let my statement trail off, hoping she would finish my question with an answer.

“No one knows,” she said turning back to her display. “I’m sorry, I’m very busy. Please see yourself out.”

I nodded. “Sorry to intrude.”

“Not a problem at all.”

I smiled and waved as I exited her office.

Outside, I made my way to Pizzeria Uno, a restaurant I adored in Chicago that had withstood the collapse and reorganization. It was always a busy place, and I had to wait an hour for a table, but their pizza was always worth it. As I waited, I gathered all I knew about the case.

First: The Coalition was enacting some genomic experiment on willing participants through the introduction of nanomeres introduced into the body and triggered to activity by a specific song.

Second: Daphne Kincaid had unwittingly bumbled into the experiment...or maybe not so unwittingly? Did she know what would happen? Had she entered of her accord, or had she been coerced? I didn’t have enough facts to know. I didn’t have enough facts about Daphne. Her apartment certainly

didn't appear to be lived in by any human being of 20 years of age. Unless she was a robot.

Third: I had been exposed to it as well, by accident. Now I was being hunted by a gorgeous assassin who either wanted me dead or to agree to participate in the experiment so we could be sisters in kind.

Fourth: There was some mysterious Director behind it all. Living in the shadows, unknown to his staff, even apparently, his second in command. Or her. I truly didn't think Sandra Erickson knew who her boss was. I had parsed through her email, her files, and all mention of The Director was by title only. Her mysterious boss sent a communication each morning at precisely eight AM. The messages were short and brief, usually inquiring as to the progress of the Artistique, the position of certain board members, and other details related to the Coalition. My name had not come up in their correspondence, nor in any of Sandra Erickson's messages. I'd done a meta search on all her communications, and apparently, my anomalous experience had not risen to her level...or it was being hidden completely from their view.

Or this was all a front. A pretend Coalition as a front for something more sinister.

My pizza came, and I began to eat, savoring every bite. Their pizza had a cornbread crust that tasted like...

Syn sat down across from me, grinning. Her face alight as if she were seeing Santa Claus for the first time.

"You are one hard son of a bitch to track!" she said, reaching across the table to pick at the pizza with a fork.

"What do you want," I said, pushing back from the table. My appetite had fled.

She took a bite of Italian sausage, and closed her eyes, making a sound as if she had just orgasmed. "Mmmmm, Oh my God. I miss pizza so much."

"Look, if you're going to try to kill me, let's get it over with. But I'm not going to sit here and watch you eat my pizza."

“This doesn’t have to be so unpleasant,” she said. She put a paper down in front of me. “Just sign it.”

“You already know my answer.”

She sighed, rolling her enormous eyes. “Please? What can I do to get you to sign?”

“Nothing,” I said, standing.

“Why is it such a big deal to you? You go through with it, and you get a boon which could be “TO HAVE IT REVERSED!”

“I know, but it’s still wrong. You and your kind feel like you’re entitled to do whatever you want as long as it is within the law. You think you can break laws, or bend them and when it has an effect on people you can talk your way around it. Not this time, sweetheart.”

“I don’t want to kill you!” she said in a voice that was just a bit too loud and a couple of people cast glances in our direction.

I smiled. “You can try, but you won’t be killing me, sweetheart, not today.”

She shook her head and bit her bottom lip cutely. She sighed and rose from her chair.

“So we going to throw down here, in front of everyone?” I said.

She shrugged. “I guess. No better place like the present.”

I glanced around the room. People were starting to stare. “It doesn’t have to be like this. Just let me go. You don’t have to endorse what they do. You can get away.”

She smiled a small, sad smile. “No, I really can’t. You don’t know the whole story, Paradise.”

“Why don’t you tell me. Maybe then I’ll be convinced.”

She shook her hair at that, her midnight curls gently swaying with the motion. “I’ll make it fast, I promise.”

With a speed that belied her obvious curves, Syn blurred toward me, a knife appearing from somewhere. She held it professionally, blade back, handle forward.

I’d received hand to hand training in the Marines. I entered my combat stance, settling into my relaxation position, gaze

focusing on nothing and everything. Appearance notwithstanding, I knew Syn was a trained killer and would kill me without hesitation. I had reach on her, but she probably had unknown skills so I had to be prepared for anything and I needed to gain control of the arm that held the edged weapon. She was using the Filipino style of knife fighting, so I knew she would need to close in contact with me, so I had to stay out of the radius of her hands.

She darted in, turning and I saw it coming and evaded her contact, blocking her edged thrust. On her withdrawal, I hardened the side of my hand and faked a slap with my left so I could deliver a chop to her Carotid artery with my right, but she was ready for the move and evaded.

We circled each other, and I could see people on the periphery with their tablets out. I could imagine the scene, the beautiful 5'9 inch curvaceous brunette squaring off against the 6'4" linebacker with a face like a hatchet.

We circled some more, and again she attacked with a feint to my upper body, to close with her knife aimed squarely at my kidney. I blocked with both hands again and danced out of her range, attempting to stay light on my feet and taking in everything, using my subconscious to predict where the knife would be.

When entering hand to hand combat, all movements seem to slow down, as if I knew where she would jab first and follow through next. Syn did not have a body that was in fighting condition so I knew if I could just out last her, she would eventually present me with an opening in which I could disable or disarm her.

Again and again, we circled, her trying to close the distance, me evading and blocking. The crowd was getting into the fight a bit now, seeing me not raising an attack against her, and she with the weapon they quickly assessed the situation, and I could hear people calling for authorities.

With a lightning combination of attacks, Syn leaped into the air, spinning to aim a kick at my head. I realized those stilettos

she wore were steel-tipped and one of them sliced through the skin below my eye before I evaded.

She kicked again and again, spinning and whirling, stilettos and knife, deadly enemies as I sought my opening.

She never gave me one.

I was bleeding from nearly a dozen slices when we both paused, facing each other, panting heavily.

“I adore having a worthy opponent,” she said with a smile. I hadn’t laid a finger on her. “But why do you not attack?”

I shrugged. “Noble Kings and Princes do not raise a hand against a Lady,” I said trying to staunch the blood from a particularly deep wound at my scalp line. It was dripping down into my field of vision and would hamper me if I didn’t get it under control.

She giggled. “I am no Lady, in case you didn’t understand that, Detective.”

I nodded. “Cops will be here soon. All I have to do is outlast you.”

She smiled. “I know. I severely underestimated your skills, Paradise. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“And I could have brought a gun to this knife fight, and it would have been all over too.”

She frowned. “Oooh, I do so hate *escalation*. Why can’t you just be a good boy and sign the damned form.”

“Why can’t you be a good little girl and run along and play with your dolls.”

Sirens sounded from outside, and Syn gave me a little bow. “For now, Paradise, for now. I will play with my dolls. But soon, you will be joining their ranks, or you will die.”

I gave a little shiver at that.

Syn spun on her heel and blended back into the crowd.



I stooped, leaning against the table, and bled my own blood.

“Are you okay, Sir?” one of the waiters asked me, his eyes wide.

“Yeah, more wounded pride than anything. You see that woman?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it!” he said. “You both were...well, a bit amazing. We didn’t know if we should call the police or applaud!”

I nodded wincing as blood ran down my face. “Do you have a towel or something I can clean myself up with?”

He handed me is dirty dish towel, and I used it to sop up the blood from my arms, head, and chest. None of the cuts was life threatening, but a few would need stitches. A police officer entered, being towed by a waitress. She pointed at me.

I pulled up my detective’s license on my tablet and handed it to the officer. He glanced at it. “Was the woman you fought someone you’ve been investigating on a case?” he said trying to stifle a laugh. “I’ve seen some of the video footage...I don’t think she even broke a nail.”

“Hey!” I said, pride wounded. “She was a trained Assassin; I’ll have you know.”

“Why the hell would she choose here to start a fight with you? Why wouldn’t she wait until you were in a more private situation?”

“Ask her that. Say, do you happen to have a stitch or two on you? I have a few wounds that could use some mending.”

He pulled out a pocket first aid kit, and I took out some nano-enhanced healing strips to work on the deeper cuts on my body.

“So, you know we’re going to need you to answer some questions down at the station.” The officer said as I handed back his first aid kit.

“Yeah, I figured as much. I have some things to tell you too.”

He nodded and escorted me out into his waiting vehicle.

I stared back at Pizzeria Uno, and briefly mourned my lost pizza. I shook my head, sighing as the vehicle pulled away

from the restaurant and into the afternoon traffic of downtown Chicago.

7

CHAPTER SEVEN

My faith in police stations was restored when I arrived at the Chicago substation with the two patrol cops. I did have to ride in the back of the unit, but I wasn't handcuffed, so in my head I pictured myself riding in the back of a limousine driven by my two new best friends.

The substation was a "remodeled" pre-reconstruction artifact with grimy red brick walls, cement floors, tiny windows, and absolutely no sign of negative space.

"I feel cheated," I said as we stepped into the vestibule that featured an honest to God, old-fashioned metal detector.

"How's that?" one of the cops said. He was a Sergeant and carried the belly to match.

"No negative space. What the fuck is the world coming to when a "Remodeled" city building has no negative space feature, and the only light available comes from horrid, sterile, fluorescents!

The sergeant shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"Tough crowd," I said, passing through the metal detector and the open door into the squad-room.

"Long fucking night," the other patrol cop said and indicated a pair of chairs in front of a wooden desk that had to have been pre-reconstruction.

I nodded and straightened up a bit. No sense torturing these guys with my razor wit, it would only exacerbate and already exasperating situation.

“Coffee?” the Sergeant said.

I shrugged. “Sure.”

He nodded and left toward the unseen depths of the squad room as the other officer sat down at the desk and took out an honest-to-God notepad.

I couldn’t let that go. I raised my eyebrows. “Notepad?”

“I’m old-fashioned,” the officer said. He couldn’t have been older than thirty, so this surprised me.

The Sergeant returned and placed a Styrofoam cup of hot coffee in front of me. He pulled out a tablet and touched a couple of places on its surface.

“So tell us what happened, and what you are working on.”

I took a sip of coffee. I glanced at the two patrolmen, the younger holding a pen and paper, the older holding a modern tablet, probably recording everything audio and visual. I fought a deep-seated urge to resist and get even snarkier. Okay, I have a problem with authority. Especially when authority says things like “We need to talk down at the station” and “Coffee?” but I was going to resist the urge. I was going to tell them everything, listen to Sarah (for once) and confess all my sins. I was going to tell them about the illegal Genomic activity going on, my concerns about CREAM, the fact I had been given umpty-billion nanos that were changing me into a chick, and the size of my shoe if they so desired. Just watch me in my confessional Glory!

“I’ve been working out for six months, with no result. What do you think, should I give up the donuts?”

They both rolled their eyes and sighed a bit at that, young patrol guy clicking his pen and setting it on his desk.

“Cut the bullshit, Paradise,” the Sergeant said. “We have several witnesses and one torn up restaurant as evidence. If you don’t tell us what the fuck is going on, we’ll arrest you for making a public scene.”

“Is there a law against that?”

“There is if you don’t have a license!”

“Look, I wish I could tell you, I do. But I have nothing as of yet.”

“Can you at least tell us who you are working for?”

I thought about that one. There wasn’t a “law” against revealing who you are working for, but the “private” part of private eye meant you kept things, well, private. Plus with Kincaid’s wife on her death bed and a missing daughter, he didn’t need the aggravation. Not to mention spooking whoever might have said daughter.

“GQ Public,” I said. “This building has to go. And is this coffee? Do you know in New Phoenix they served me Starbucks?”

The Sergeant touched something on his tablet and glanced at the other officer. He nodded.

“You just earned a 24-hour hold, smart guy.”

I winced at that a bit. They could hold me for 24 hours without charges. I didn’t *want* them to hold me for 24 hours and wasn’t certain what that might do to my case, clues, leads and I wasn’t dressed for being held in a cell in any case. I sighed.

“Look, I wish I could give you more, but I just can’t.”

The Sergeant nodded, and they both looked at me silently for a bit, the younger guy flipping pages. This was a technique every cop in the country knew; perps didn’t like silence. Perps wanted to fill silence with confessional confessions, but the thing they were missing was--I wasn’t a perp. And I was on to their tricks, so I listened to the music playing softly over the radio and smiled.

“New Phoenix,” the Sergeant said. He showed his tablet to the other officer. He nodded and grinned.

“Take him to holding one,” the Sergeant said. “I need to make a call.” He walked off.

The other patrol officer flipped his notebook closed and got up. “Right this way, Sir.”

I followed him, trying not to look too glum.



The holding room wasn't large and didn't feature the ubiquitous one-way glass. In fact, I couldn't see any evidence of cameras or any other recording devices. There was a bench, a commode, and a blanket in an area about 12 by 12. Two other men sat on the bench with blankets covering them, both appearing homeless with ravaged features and hair.

"Really?" I said to the patrol cop.

"You chose it, not me," he said. Maybe when you're ready to cooperate, the Sergeant's heart might soften up a bit."

I walked into the cell. "Move over, Skippy," I said to the large, dark-skinned man at one edge of the bench. He didn't move.

The patrol cop shut the door.

"Look," I said in a soft voice. "Bad day. Please make me make you move. Please. I could use the exercise and the outlet for all my fucking frustration."

The guy looked up at me and must have seen something in my eyes. He scooted over, making room for me at the end of the bench.

"Thank you," I said and plopped down.

"What you in fer?" the other guy said. He was small, wiry, and had the crazy-eyed look of someone who had smoked, sniffed, shot, or drank a little too much of whatever-the-fuck."

"I murdered a homeless guy, downtown," I said.

The black man chuckled.

"Fuck you, man!" the wiry guy said. "I was just making conversation."

"Make it somewhere else; I want to think."

"Don't have to cry about it." The guy had a nasally voice that grated on my nerves. I sighed and closed my eyes, leaning back

to rest my head on the red-brick wall. Music played softly in the background.

I really wasn't sure what had come over me. I had every intention of coming clean with the officers, letting them know what I was working on...but something tripped my tongue and I retreated into wise-crackery. I knew I needed to inform them at least of the unlicensed genomic work, knew I should probably be in a hospital so they could assess whatever the fuck nanos I had in my bloodstream and make sure they weren't infectious. I doubted they were, but one couldn't be too safe when it came to the little bugs.

Opening my eyes, I stared at the ceiling. We waited for awhile, in silence mostly except for the occasional fart by the large black man whose bowels were apparently rotting from the inside out.

I knew I had to tell them. It was the right thing to do. CREAM couldn't get away with this, and next time Syn might take me out with a real weapon and not something from a spy movie. I suspected their patience with me was about at an end as well, and I didn't want to end up in the morgue just yet. Plus they could go after Sarah if they wanted to get at me, and I was NOT going to let that happen.

Okay, I can do this. I calmed myself by taking a few deep breaths of fart. I stood up. "Okay," I said up into the ceiling, not knowing the locations of the cameras just yet. "I'll give you some intel."

Almost on cue, the door opened, and the Sergeant stood there with a grin on his face. "That's good, Paradise. Real good. Walk this way."

I followed him into another cubicle; this one decked out in tech apparatus. On the Smartscreen in the front, I could see me standing in front of Carlos Badilla's genomic lab.

"Want to tell me what you were doing at an unlicensed Genomic yesterday?" he said.

"A what?" I responded. Hey, snappy banter ain't my thing.

“We have a report from...” he looked down at his tablet and flicked something up onto the smartscreen. “The Coalition for the Realistic Expression of Art and Music that you visited an unlicensed Genomic yesterday and received treatment. What exactly has been done to you?”

Shit. “Look, I was there yesterday, but I didn’t receive any treatment.”

“Yeah?” The cop said, pressing something on his tablet. Music played over speakers in the room, and I closed my eyes. No! Not that song!!! *Transgenderosity* began to play.

And I began to change.

The music swept over me in a wave, and I fell into a trance-like state. All that existed was the music, the sound, the voices echoing in my head, their harshness somehow transformed into a lyrical melody:

Transgenderosity...you can't take any more from meee....

Transgenderosity...you can't give any more to meeee...

It started with a tingling in my lips, eyes, and face, and extended down to my chest arms and hands. I grew shorter. I could feel a tingling in my scalp as the tendrils flooded back, sweeping up into an artful arrangement of some sort. I looked down at my hands and saw long, blood red fingernails with golden sparkles. I looked up, and on another smartscreen they had me on camera, only I wasn’t *me* anymore. On the screen was a mannish woman with medium sized breasts, platinum hair coiffed in a retro rockabilly hairstyle, with sparkling lips, deep blue eyes, pencil thin brows, and porcelain skin.

It appeared I still had my arms and shoulders, but my legs and trunk shrank, so I now stood a good head shorter than the Sergeant.

Shaking my head, I tried to throw off the trance, my brain trying to focus through the clouds of lyrics, melody, phrasing.

“Please turn it off!” I said and held a hand to my throat. My voice sounded strange, not a woman’s voice, but not a man’s, not my voice.

He pressed a button on the tablet, and the music cut off.

“Look,” I said and cleared my throat, trying to find a timber my current state could not reach yet. “I’ll tell you everything.”

“I bet you will, sweetheart,” he said. “But first, I need to let you know that you are under arrest.” And he Mirandized me.

I sighed, staring at the strange creature in the monitor as he read me my rights. I put a hand to my hair and tried to comb my fingers through the curls, flattening them, but they bounced right back into place.

“Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?”

I nodded.

“I’m sorry, you need to speak up for the record,” He chuckled.

“Yes,” I said, my changed voice soft.

“Take him back to holding one,” he said, still chuckling.

I sighed and allowed myself to be escorted back to the holding cell.



“Now, tell us again. What happened at Pizzeria Uno?” The Sergeant, Frank Standfield, said. His partner’s name was Jeff Davis. In the hours since my arrest, I’d been Matrix scanned and been issued an orange female inmate jumper since my pants and shirt would no longer stay on my transformed body. I’d gone over the story at least three times already, but I knew the interrogation technique. Make them say it over and over again to see if there are any discrepancies.

“An individual known to me as Syn tried to assassinate me.”

“Why would she want to do that?”

“She wanted me to sign a form,” I said.

“And what was the form in relation to?”

“An Experiment run by the Coalition. They wanted to force me to participate so CREAM would be indemnified.

“And you refused to sign the form.”

“I did.”

“Whereby, she opened a can of whoop-ass on your ass.”

“She did,” I said, and drank a bit of water. I was tired, angry, frustrated. I didn’t like the feelings this new body was sending me. I wanted to hide, crawl into bed, and...well, cry. But fuck that, I could cry after I was dead.

“And who are you working for?”

“I’m just not going to tell you that.”

He nodded. “You know, we could play your favorite song again. See what shakes out. Maybe your Mr. Paradise will become an innie.”

“You could,” I said. “At this point, what difference does it make? But I still won’t tell you details about the specific case.”

He clicked something on his tablet and set it face down on the table. “Look, we have you Paradise. Even now, police units are raiding your friends’ illegal operation. It’s been shut down. Forever. Your friend is going to jail, for a very long time. Why don’t you tell us what is happening, and who you work for? You work for Badilla, right?”

I kept my mouth shut.

He sighed. “Okay, you crazy bitch, we’ll do this your way.” He got up from the table and opened the door.

Sarah walked in, her eyes staring daggers at me.

“Hello, Ms. Shin.”

“Hello,” she said, sitting in the chair next to me.

“You know Paradise, here?”

She glanced at me, shaking her head. “I do.”

“Has Mr. Paradise filled you in on the details of his case?”

I looked at Sarah. No! Don’t tell them anything!

She shrugged. “Just that it had to do with illegal genomic activity.”

Stanfield nodded. “And did he say anything about who had hired him?”

Sarah shook her head. “No, officer.”

“Do you know I could arrest you for Obstruction of Justice?”

“I don’t see how I am obstructing anything. I came here, to Chicago, as directed. I am taking time out of my very busy schedule. I have followed every instruction given. I don’t know who John was working for, and that’s the truth.”

Which was, technically, true. She knew about Daphne, but not exactly who Cyrus Kincaid was.

“What was the objective of his case?” Standfield said.

Fuck, they had her there. If she lied, they would know.

“What objective did John state?” Sarah said.

“He refused to answer.”

She sighed and looked at me for a long while. I felt miserable under that stare. She could tell them, right now, about Daphne and they would put two and two together. I still hadn’t been able to, but maybe they might get further with finding her somehow.

“I respect his right to refuse,” Sarah said, and I wanted to kiss her.

“You realize that by not disclosing this information, I could consider that Obstruction?”

“I do,” she said.

Standfield sighed. “Look, you two. I don’t want to arrest you! I want to go out and play a few rounds of V-golf on my new VR set I got yesterday.

“We don’t wish to be arrested either,” Sarah said. “And really, Paradise has not committed any crime.”

I winced at that. She didn’t know about Badilla.

“Receiving treatment from an unlicensed genomic is a felony,” Standfield said. “Carlos Badilla is an unlicensed genomic.”

Sarah stared at me for a time, and I knew I had a lot of answering to do when we were alone.

“Well, I don’t know who Mr. Badilla, or this establishment you mentioned. But if Paradise went there yesterday, I can tell you for a fact that his changes started before his visit, not after.”

Standfield frowned a bit at that. “Got any evidence of that, Paradise?”

“You can check with the routerport in New Phoenix. I had a refresh before I visited Badilla yesterday.”

He nodded and rubbed his chin. “Okay. You two sit tight.”

He left the room, leaving Sarah and me alone.

“What in the..” She started, but I held a painted nail up to her lips and shook my head glancing around.

“You are in a lot of trouble, Mister.”

“I know, but thank you.”

She breathed, and I knew she was trying to control herself. “Why can’t you tell them?”

I shook my head glancing up at the invisible cameras.

“Oh! You’re infuriating.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You will be Mister. If we ever get out of here.”

I took her hand in mind, and at first, she tried to pull away but then eased up and allowed me to hold it. She leaned her head against my shoulder. “You even smell like a woman. Jesus Christ, I think that fragrance is Oerwei.”

I put my arm around her and held the woman I loved. We were of a size now, and she leaned into me. I felt a disturbing tingling in my breast.

“We’ll make it through this,” I said.

She nodded but didn’t speak.

A short time later, Standfield entered. “Okay, Paradise your story checks out. There is no record of any genomic activity on your file, though, so you are still under arrest, but I’m releasing you on your recognizance for now. I have all your pertinent contact info, and if I reach out to you, you better RUN not walk to me. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“I don’t know what kind of shit you got yourself mixed up in, but I can tell you this: CREAM has powerful allies, Paradise. You know?”

“I guessed,” I said.

“I don’t think you understand the extent, Paradise. You are mucking about with some very powerful people. Best to wrap whatever the fuck this case is, collect your money, and disappear.”

“Thanks for the intel,” I said.

“Look, I don’t hate you, Paradise. But you’re dangerous. You are a danger to yourself, and also to this nice lady with you. These people wouldn’t hesitate to make things difficult for you both.”

“I hear you,” I said.

“Good. Now, both of you get the fuck out of my holding cell. I have real work to do.”

I chuckled. “We’ll let you get back to your VR.”

“Damn straight!” he said, escorting us out of the room.

I held Sarah’s hand as we exited the building.

Powerful people, Standfield had said. I wondered what he meant by that. It sounded like a threat.

I glanced over at Sarah walking next to me.

I didn’t want to find out.

8

CHAPTER EIGHT

We walked toward the routerport, and I realized we made quite the pair. I was still, technically, male, but from all outward appearances, we were two women strolling in the moonlit night of downtown New-Chicago.

The streets had long ago been capped with pneuma, so the sounds of the traffic speeding by were muted and low. Plasteel Skyscrapers towered above us as we walked down the heated paths of the city. Their shapes as varied as a confectionist's counter. Some twisted as if a giant and turned the plasteel while it was still hot, some bent over double, so you were essentially looking back into the windows of the building, some featured interlocking bubbles on razor thin support arms. The city had been rebuilt around the older steel buildings and gave a cacophony of new vs. old.

The routerport wasn't far, but I was exhausted, and I could tell Sarah was as well.

"So should we port back to Phoenix, then?" I said as we rounded a corner. They had given me some clothes — a pantsuit in a neutral gray that fit somewhat.

Sarah blinked over at me. "Where else would we go?"

I shrugged, an act that felt very different in my changed body. "We could get a room here. I still have some inves-

tigating to do. I looked up the band that is causing this..." I motioned with my hand down my changed body, "and they are playing at an event tomorrow night. We could hang out here in Chicago, go to the event, and return tomorrow night after?"

She frowned a bit. "And have you stay looking like that the entire time?"

"Well, it does give me a measure of anonymity. We could observe the event, dig for more clues, and no one would know a famous detective was in their midst."

She snorted at that. "A clever disguise, eh?"

"Exactly!" I said, squeezing her hand. "What do you think?"

We walked a bit further, passing beneath silent twisting behemoths, their windows darkened except for a few on each level. It seemed so sterile to be in the pedestrian pneuma, unable to breathe the outside air. Snow was falling lightly outside, and we weren't dressed for winter, so it was probably for the best.

"You wish to expose me to whatever it is that has been changing you?"

I frowned at that. "Well, the doc said it was due to drinking what I had. As long as you stay away from any food or drink at the event, I think we'll be fine."

"And you? The music that triggers this change will be playing at full volume, so I suspect you'll transform completely."

"That's why we return to Phoenix after. So I can have the reset."

She nodded and walked faster. "I don't know, John."

I kept pace with her, staying quiet. This needed to be something she decided. She was a thoughtful person, not liking to make hasty or rash decisions. I was the opposite, taking quick, decisive, action, but I'd learned this behavior did not endear me to my beloved. She weighed all the options in her head and carefully selected which course of action she wanted to take.

She stopped, abruptly. “Alright, but if we do this, I have some conditions.”

I winced a bit at that. “And those would be...”

She smiled. “We stay somewhere nice. No fifty-credit-a-night dives.”

I chuckled, the sound strange in my changed throat. “Alright, we can stay at the Omni if you’d like.”

“I’m not through yet.” Sara ticked her fingers. “We eat somewhere nice, we get the good champagne, and we both take a bubble bath in our suite. We order room service in the morning. I want a nice robe from the Omni, too.”

I nodded, feeling the curls along the back of my neck. “Alright, sweetheart, we’ll do all those things.”

“And I don’t want to hear one PEEP about how much it costs, do you hear me?”

“I hear you, Sarah,” I said in a soft voice.

“Alright, then.” She smiled and took my hand again. “Let’s go see what rooms they have available.”

I grinned and walked alongside the Love of my Life.



The Omni had morphed since the early part of the century. It now featured a floating cloud of pods connected by a central stalk. Each pod was a separate environment designed to entertain, providing “the perfect atmosphere for escape.” The desk clerk asked us which environment we’d enjoy, and I allowed Sarah to choose the “Mediterranean Coast” environment.

We took the lift to our environment and entered the pod. Soaring blue skies appeared to stretch overhead for miles, scudded with wispy clouds as UltraLights and heaters created a warm moist air that we inhaled.

Our suite was a bungalow that showed the “coast” and the waters of Lake Michigan beyond. The entire far wall was

transparent, and it felt as if we were in an outside cottage by the sea.

“I could get used to this,” I said, staring out the transparent wall at the boats dotting the waters of the lake below.

“At this price, I’m not surprised.” Sarah chuckled.

She turned to the smarscreen and pulled up the fashion pages.

“And what are you doing now?”

“We need dresses, dear, for our dinner downstairs.”

“We?”

“Mmhhh,” she murmured looking me up and down. “You are about a 14 I’d say.”

“Is that good?”

“Well, it’s a plus size, but not much of a plus size.”

I nodded, feeling a sinking in the pit of my stomach.

She ordered the dresses, and a few minutes later a quiet knock on the “hardwood” door came. I took out my pistol and held it behind my back, but it was an attendant bringing our dresses.

Our dresses. Fuck. I sighed.

“You promised. Now strip, Missy.” She held out the dress to my body to match the size.

I sighed and did as directed.

My body was still male, vaguely. I had my cock, but my balls had retracted up into my abdomen. My skin was a smooth alabaster on my face, torso, feet, neck and hands, with my legs and cock being the only holdout to tan maleness. My hair, the color of moonlight on cornsilk was pulled up into a complicated style with curves at both temples, and curly locks tumbling down over my still broad shoulders. My lips were gold flaked crimson, with long fluttery lashes, indigo shadow and rose blush on both cheeks. I looked like a woman from a men’s magazine from back in the 1940’s.

“This just isn’t fair,” she said, helping me put on the dress. She zipped up the zipper, then turned me to face the mirror. “You are a knockout. Albeit, a wide knockout with hairy

knees.” She giggled softly as she turned to put her own dress on.

“Think I should do something about that before we go out?”

She turned so I could zip up the back of her dress. “Up to you. It doesn’t bother me.”

I glanced down at my knees and was disturbed by their incongruousness. Which disturbed me greater, because I was disturbed in the first place.

“I wonder if these nanos have an effect on my mind as well,” I said, still staring at us in the mirror.

“Why?” Sarah said, putting on lipstick. “What are you feeling?”

“My legs, and how ugly they look.” I laughed. “I’ve never had that thought in my life, ever.”

She smiled. “You are still in transition is all. At least they are making you a beautiful woman. Though I would have loved you even if they made you a troll.”

I nodded, the smile faltering.

She gave me a hug, then continued to fix her hair and makeup as best as she could. I watched her, how she carefully started with eye shadow, light to dark, using different brushes and tools to apply and blend in varying shades. Then she used foundation and blending with wider brushes as she added lighter and lighter tones. After lining her eyes, she carefully dressed her lips lining carefully in different tones.

“Taking notes, sweetheart?” she said with a smile after she was done.

“You are like an artist,” I said, clearing my throat.

“Well, we don’t all have a pocket genomic creating the perfect cosmetic look like someone I know!” She laughed and clasped my upper arm in hers.

She then tended to her hair, finishing with a spritz of perfume for us both.

“Ready my dear?” I said holding out my arm.

We stood looking in the mirror. A wider retro platinum pinup in a black dress holding out her hand for a thinner, brunette lovely lady also wearing a black dress.

“Let’s go, Princess,” she said, smiling into the mirror.

And we did.



Dinner was lovely in the Mediterranean restaurant at the base of the pod. And the bubble bath after that was lovelier still. And the wide bed even lovelier. We were careful to not have any actual *penetration* because Sarah still had her doubts about the Nanos and she refused to kiss me on the mouth, but we were able to enjoy and pleasure each other nonetheless.

The next morning we sat having breakfast in bed. “So what’s next on the agenda?” Sarah said.

I sighed. “Well, the event. I know Unk will be there, and I was hoping to get there early and maybe pretend to be, I dunno, what do they call those people that follow groups?”

“Groupies?” she said, laughing a little.

“Yes, that.” I glanced over at her. “A groupie. Then we can maybe talk to the band members and see if they know that their music is being used to change people.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about that,” Sarah said. “As far as you know, you are the only one who is changing in response to this music, right?”

I nodded. “True, but it’s an awful lot of work for just one person.”

“Point,” Sarah said. “But what about Dierdre? How does this course of action help you to locate her? Would the band members even know about someone like that?”

“It seems like a stab in the dark, for sure,” I said. “But at this point, I don’t have much else to go on. My *modus operandi* up to this point has been asking a lot of questions, shake things up, stir, and see what falls out.”

“And you have changed your *modus operandi* now?”

I nodded. “You’re involved. Plus as Detective Standfield said, CREAM has powerful allies. I think a more low-key approach is needed.”

She hugged me tightly. It was strange being at the same level with her. Our hugs were different now as well, and involved body parts that enjoyed hugging much better than before.

“Jesus,” I said.

“What?”

“Everything with this body is a turn on.” I could feel my body heating up, and I knew I was flushed.

We both wore the bathrobes provided by the Omni after sharing a morning shower.

“Well, we need an outfit for the event this afternoon, correct?”

I smiled, stroking her leg with my foot. “You’re just dying to dress me up again, aren’t you.”

She sighed. “I might as well have *some* fun with you, after all.”

I nodded. “Then I place myself in your capable hands.”

“That’s not the first mistake you’ve ever made.” She grinned. “Let’s go.”

So we went.

Three hours later, I was dressed in a skin tight mauve uni-thing that hugged every part of me. It looked a bit incongruous with my legs shoulders and wide torso, but I tucked my small cock back up to present a flat front. Sarah looked gorgeous, wearing a black skin tight thing that left nothing to the imagination. She’d visited a molecularist too, and her hair was a neon mint that glowed red underneath whenever she shook it out. Her eyeshadow and lipstick matched, with swirls of flowery temp tattoos beside her eyes.

I felt strange because I knew her look should be causing an arousal inside me, yet my small cock barely twitched at her. I needed out of this situation, and fast, I could feel bits dissolving.

"I'm nervous," I said softly.

"Me too, but it's also exciting," Sara said with a grin. "Besides, no matter what happens, we get you to the router port right after, and I'll have my handsome man back."

I nodded, but couldn't shake the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"We don't have to do this, you know," Sarah said with a smile that was too much lipstick.

"No, I'm never going to know unless I chase down every lead. If the band doesn't know they are doing this to people, maybe they can refuse to play or something, I dunno."

She smiled, having just *way* too much fun with this. "It's still exciting. You've never let me be with you in an investigation before, did you know that?"

I gave that some thought. This was true. It bothered me somehow that I wanted her to go with me, almost craved her being with me through this. I almost couldn't bear the thought of trying to handle this alone, and that was *not* like me.

"Well," I said. "I am very glad you are going with me. I don't know that I could do this alone tonight for some reason."

We collected our new clothing and packed carefully into two enormous suitcases. I was ashamed at the fact I needed an actual suitcase, always having traveled light in the past. We stood at the transparent wall of the Mediterranean sunset and watched the lights come on below.

She wrapped her arms around me and gave me a lipstick kiss. "Well, we are in this together no matter the outcome."

I frowned at her. "The other day, you were not happy with me about how I was handling it. Why have you changed now?"

She leaned her head in and touched my forehead to hers. "Because you let me in, silly. This is the first time you've done that. Most of the time you just do your thing, inform me in an offhand manner of all the adventures you've had, and I just have to sit back, look pretty, and accept being your girlfriend. Now, *you're* the one looking pretty, and we are doing it together. You don't know how happy this makes me."

I nodded and frowned, still confused.

“Well, let’s get going, *girlfriend*, we have some bad guys to catch!”

I glanced at the time on the smartscreen and nodded. “Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath and following her out the door.

9

CHAPTER NINE

We approached the warehouse near the shore of Lake Michigan where the event was to be held. No Pneuma tube, we were exposed to the chilly air of Late November lakefront, and I could feel parts of my body responding to the cold.

“I don’t like what’s happening to my nipples in this cold,” I whispered to Sarah as we neared the entrance.

“Welcome to being a woman, honey,” Sarah said, with a grin in her voice.

A gaggle of girls stood at the back entrance of the warehouse; smoking, drinking, and talking in loud voices. They were all in various states of undress and were apparently heckling the guards at the door. Sarah and I strolled up casually, trying to blend in, but with my hairstyle and Sarah’s gorgeousness, we stood out a bit.

“Hai!” One of the girls said, walking up to us. She had a fur trimmed long coat, but was cutaway around her chest and legs, making me wonder what the hell good was a coat that didn’t cover all of your areas.

I smiled, trying to get into character. “Hai!”

“I love your hair!” She said, looking at me. “So retro-rockabilly.”

“Thanks!” I said, grinning.

“You two are new! Who’s your Fav?”

I glanced at Sarah with a look, what-the-hell-is-she-talking-about?

Sarah gushed. “Kerry, of course, OMG his eyes make me *melt!*”

She said OMG, and not Oh my God. I sighed. This was going to be a long night.

“IK, R?!” the girl said. “He smiles at me, and I want to bear his children.” She giggled.

“IK, R?” Sarah said, grinning and jumping up and down, holding my arm. “Who’s your fav, Jane?” She looked at me, clearly leading me into the conversation but I had no fucking clue what they were talking about.

“Well, they are all so *dreamy* I’m not sure I *have* a fav,” I said, hoping the topic would wander away from me, somehow, and hoping the earth might open and swallow me whole so I didn’t have to interact with these girls. I could feel my IQ dropping with each moment.

Sarah picked up the thread. “She’s kinda ladycraze, so I know she loves Jackeline.” Sarah giggled and gave me a push with her shoulder.

“Oooh, a girl crush!” The gal said, turning to her friends. “This one likes Jackie!”

Squealing, the other girls ran forward and began pelting me with questions. “Are you L, or just B? Do you like Olivier, he’s a little andro, ya know? IK, R! Who’s your fav!” And other inanities that I could neither follow nor attempt to question.

I just giggled and squealed and jumped up and down with Sarah, leading her a bit away from the pack.

“What the fuck are they talking about?” I whispered when we had moved far enough away.

She took out a Vape pen and inhaled something pink and fruity smelling. “The band, of course. Didn’t you do any research on who the members are?”

I frowned a bit at that. I hadn’t really; I’d just found where they were going to be and was hoping entropy would take

care of the rest. I'd glanced at their profile a bit but couldn't remember a single detail.

She shook her head, and exhaled pink smoke, holding the vape to my lips. "You're hopeless."

"IK, R?" I said in response, as we turned back to the gaggle of girls and joined their ranks.

An hour or so later, a hoverbus pulled up to the back of the warehouse, to the screams and squeals of us, the groupies. Three individuals stepped out, all wearing heavy coats, with knit caps and sunglasses hiding most of their features. All the girls started squealing and holding up their hands, so I did too, bouncing up and down and waving frantically, feeling my boobs bobble in response, my curls dancing across the nape of my neck. I was ice-cold freezing by then, and at that moment could care less about the objective, if this didn't work we'd go home, and I'd light something on fire and take maybe an hour long steamshower.

One of the band started pointing, first at me, then Sarah and one or two more of the girls.

Cries of dismay came from the group, but they still jumped up and down as a pair of security guards pulled my hand and Sarah's and we followed the band into the Warehouse.

Sara spoke into my ear. "The one who pointed was Olivier. The other guy is Kerry, and the girl is Jackeline. Do you think you can remember that? It's very important."

I nodded and tapped my head as we were ushered through the door. The band member who had pointed at us, Olivier, wrapped his arms around both of us and grinned.

"When I saw your hair, I just knew I had to have you, gorgeous. What's your name?" he said to me.

"Uhhh..." I stammered. "Jane."

"Well, Jane, you are my date for tonight." Then he turned to Sarah. "And so are you. What's your name?"

"Sherri," Sarah said giggling and blushing, and I thought, playing the part just a bit too well.

“You two are going to be my special girls this evening, alright? I’ll show you where to stand and when I come offstage, we’ll hang okay?”

The other boy, who had held his head down the whole time, glanced up at us and I gave a little gasp. His eyes were so green and soulful that my stomach gave a little tumble. “Uh, but what about Kerry?” I said, detaching myself from Olivier’s arm and walking over to him. “Who will be your girl for the evening?”

“Not you.” He said, turning away. “Stay the fuck away from me.”

“Aww,” I pouted, “but we could have so much fun.”

He glanced up at me and shook his head, walking away.

The drummer, Jackeline, a darker-skinned girl, began banging on her drums, testing the pedals and making sure the cymbals crashed.

Olivier took me into his embrace again. “Don’t worry about Kerry. He’s in love with you if I’m not mistaken. He never looks at the girls we bring through the door.”

I smiled and walked with Olivier, letting my hair swish back and forth across my back. He led us to an area to the side of the stage, where an old pre-reconstruction couch sat moldering. “You two can hang here while we perform and we’ll be back during our breaks.”

“Okay!” We both gushed at the same time, sitting carefully on the sofa.

I glanced over at Kerry who had picked up a guitar and was tuning it carefully. His eyes kept darting over to me, and I think I saw his face turn a couple of shades of red. I blew him a kiss, then grasped Sarah’s hand.

“Can we leave yet?” I said into her ear, as the band warmed up. We could hear the crowd gathering behind the curtain, and someone came over to our couch carrying drinks on a tray.

“You haven’t learned anything yet!” She said in a tight voice, still grinning like a vapid idiot.

"I know, but I can feel my IQ plummeting with each bobble of my breasteses," I said.

She laughed. "Just go with the flow, sweetheart. We'll be okay."

"I dunno." I looked up to see the band walking toward us. "I got a bad feeling about this."

"Well, well, well!" Olivier said, plopping himself down on the couch in between us. "We have a few minutes before the show. Whatever shall we do?"

Sarah immediately began nuzzling the guy under the chin, and I tried to follow suit, I did, but I didn't like what was happening. I felt out of control somehow, like something inside me was slipping.

I glanced up and found Kerry staring at us from across us in a green chair with torn upholstery. I looked over at him, gave him a little smile, as I nuzzled Olivier's chin.

"You found his weakness," Olivier said to me, bringing me in for a kiss. "He loves to feel the cuckold."

I smiled, making a show of it. "Mmmmm," I said kissing him back, then sliding my hand over his legs as Sarah did the same thing on the other side.

"Careful," Olivier said quietly, "we might *both* fall in love with you."

"Would that be such a bad thing?" Sarah said, as she turned his chin toward her and gave him a deep kiss.

Alright, fuck. *I* did not like feeling the cuckold, so I stood up, letting Olivier's apelike hand fall to the couch. I sauntered over to Kerry, and I could see him inhale sharply. He took something out of his pocket and put it between his lips, lighting it with a pocket torch.

"Hey there, beautiful eyes," I said, sitting on the side of the chair. "Can I have a puff?"

He looked at me with those smoldering orbs, then lifted the joint for me to inhale. I took some in my lungs, then leaned over and let the smoke escape back into his own mouth.

“Mmmmmmm....” I purred. “Smooth.” I put my arms around him, trying not to let the jumpsuit of whatever the fuck ride up between my legs.

He looked up at me. “Let’s go,” he said and took my hand leading me offstage somewhere.

I winced a little, not wanting to leave Sarah in the arms of Olivier the apeman, but followed along. My heels clicked on the wood of the stage as I tottered after him.

We got to a small alcove where he lifted the joint back up to my lips and let me smoke again. “You’re packing aren’t you.”

It wasn’t a question. “Ummmm, no? I’ve never touched a gun in my life.”

“Not a gun,” he said, reaching his hand to cup my tucked-back cock. “Here.” He fondled my package, and I am ashamed to say, my cock rose in response.

“You discovered my secret,” I said between breaths. When had I started to pant? And was a squirming? WTF?

“I noticed your legs too and the way your shoulders are. I can always tell a Genmorph. You’re part of the *Artistique*, right?”

I nodded quietly, wondering if he would have me tossed, and not caring.

“I figured.” He took another toke on the joint then passed it to me, and I inhaled deeply not wanting to face whatever the fuck was happening.

“Are you going to have me thrown out?”

He looked a bit startled at that. “No, why the fuck would I do that? Hell, we *wrote* Transgenerosity, and even though we’ve written and produced tons of shit, that’s the only song anyone associates with us. It’ll be our closer, by the way.”

I winced a bit at that. We had to get out of there before the ending song.

“So you don’t mind that I was a boy?”

“Fuck no,” he said and gave me a brief kiss to prove his point. “You look amazing.”

I smiled. “Thank you.”

He ran his fingers through my hairdo. "You know you'll be able to change this, right?"

"I will?" I patted the curls at the back of my head. "How?"

"Well, when you are complete, the nanos left over will create a little heads-up-display inside your head. You'll have full control over color, style, length, texture...you name it. Your face too will have a hud. It's all a part of the package."

"Wow," I said, sounding like a vapid blond but meaning it. "You know everything."

"Mmhm." He kissed me again, running his hands up and down my thighs. "God, you're beautiful. What's your name."

"Jane," I said softly, shivering at his touch. The way his eyes looked at me so intensely made me feel lightheaded. Or maybe it was whatever the fuck we were smoking.

"Jane what?"

I almost said my real last name, but stopped. "Par-ra" I said shaking my fog away. "Jane Parra."

"Well, Jane Parra, you want to know what I want to do to you after the concert tonight?"

I smiled, and leaned into him, whispering in his ear. "Tell me."

"First," he said, looking me in the eye and running his hand down my neck to my breasts. "I'm going to take off your fucking clothes..."

I listened, entranced by his eyes. "Yes?"

"Then..." he said, moving his hands to my ass. "I'm going to lift you up in my arms, right here, like this..." he hefted me, grunted a little, then set me back down. "Okay, well, after the concert I'm sure you'll be a bit more petite, but you get my drift."

I giggled. "Yes?" I was a bit breathless. "And then?"

"And then," he said, stroking the side of my neck and planting soft kisses there, one after another, trailing down. "I'm going to kiss you right here."

"Ooooh," I said, moaning softly, my damned body pressing even tighter into him. "And then?"

"Then..." he said, still kissing me and sucking on the smooth skin of my neck. "I'm going to go down here, and use my mouth on whatever is left."

I closed my eyes, inhaling, lost in the sensations my body was sending me. My breath came out in a hoarse whisper. "And then?"

"And then...." He whispered, parting my legs and clamping his hand over my arousal. "I'm going to fuck you in every hole you have in your body."

I felt something then, a wave course through me, my stomach clenching in response. It felt wonderful, his hand being the focus of it, playing me like a fine instrument. I clenched my toes against the wave flowing through me, giving a little scream as it made me shake and tremble in his strong grasp. Holy fuck did I just do what I think I did?

"Mmmmm yes. So sensual. I knew you would be," he said softly in my ear, as the shuddering eased.

He set me down and lit another joint. Someone came over. "15 minutes," they said in a quiet voice.

He put the joint between my lips and chuckled. "I haven't felt this way in a long time, Jane," he said. "I hope you are still here afterward."

"Ooooh," I said, puffing on the joint.

He stroked my hair softly, gazing into my eyes with a smile on his face. "You know, Jackeline is also part of the Artistique."

"Really?" I said, still entranced, my brain floating off into clouds of sensuality.

"Mmhmmm...you know what her name is though?"

I glanced over where Jackeline had taken the stage. She looked a bit...butch, since she was also riding the wave of the Artistique. She had dark skin, slight breasts, and her thighs had thickened in response to the impending change. She looked familiar, somehow, as if I knew a relative...

"What?" I said, staring at Jackeline.

"Daphne," he chuckled. "Isn't that a hoot? Does she look like a *Daphne* to you?"

I inhaled sharply, choking on the smoke and he laughed some more. I giggled. “No, she doesn’t.”

He gave me one more kiss, then whispered. “I gotta go, babe. But I’ll see you after the concert.”

I kissed him back. “Alright.”

And Kerry Oehlenschlager, lead singer of UNK, took the stage with Olivier Posis, and Jackeline Zide....who also went by the name Daphne Kincaid.



I teetered back to where Sarah was sitting on the couch looking a little disheveled. I sat down next to her, trying to catch my breath and clear my head.

“Jesus,” she said in my ear. “You smell like a Filet-of-Fish sandwich dressed with perfume fucked Marijuana.”

“Thanks,” I said. “You too.” I blinked my eyes, shaking my head trying to clear it a bit.

“What’s wrong?”

I pointed at the drummer. “That,” I said, clearing my voice and trying not to slush my consonants. “Is Daphne Kincaid.”

“OMG!” Sarah said, then clapped her hand to her mouth. “We need to get out of here; my IQ is slipping too!”

“I know,” I said loudly, now that the band had started playing. Everyone in the audience let out a loud cheer as they started their first number. The raucous sound coming from the guitars plus the deep gutturals shouted from Kerry’s throat. I was a bit captivated as he sang, fascinated that his throat could make that kind of sounds.

“Do you think he has to see a genomic frequently to fix his throat?” I shouted in Sarah’s ear.

“No, the more damaged they get, the better they are, apparently.”

I started bobbing to the music, standing up. “We should get out of here!”

"I know!" Sarah said, standing up with me. We couldn't peel our eyes from the stage; she was following Olivier everywhere he moved, back and forth like a caged lion. I couldn't fault her; I was doing the same with Kerry.

"Maybe we listen to just a couple songs and then leave?" I said, shouting in her ear.

She grinned. "Okay!" And we danced together, smiling and laughing as the music swept us away.



Two hours later we were still laughing and singing, jumping up and down and enjoying ourselves. Then Olivier stepped up to the microphone and said. "Well, it's been a lovely evening with you fine people. Hope to see you soon!"

The audience erupted in howls.

"What?" Olivier said, cupping his hand to his ear. "You have a particular song you'd like us to play?"

"TRANSGENDEROSITY!" The crowd roared back in response.

"Did you hear something Kerry, Jackie? I think they want us to play something!"

"TRANSGENDEROSITY!"

"We better go," I said, dragging Sarah away toward the back of the building. "This will force me to go through another change."

"Would that be so bad?" she said. "I mean, you're already more than halfway there."

"No, but I also don't want to see what happens at the end of the concert. Kerry said something about ripping my clothes off and throwing me in the mud or something."

Sarah laughed. "I don't think it was mud he was thinking about."

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s go already before it’s too...” I glanced ahead of us where someone had stepped into the backstage area.

Someone dressed in a skin tight catsuit, leaving nothing to the imagination. Blue-black curls danced merrily with her eyes, as the assassin Syn pointed at me and winked.

“Aww, fuck,” I said, looking for another exit.

“What’s wrong?” Sarah said as Transgenderosity began to play.

“Run, Sarah...” I said or tried to say, but the music invaded my skull, forcing me into a fog, the sound filling my mind as tingles filled my body.

I could feel Sarah shaking me, and could see Syn approaching us. She walked with a purpose in her step, moving quickly.

The weed, plus the sensual feelings of this body, plus the music with it’s tones that doubled, trebled, made my mind drift away, my eyes open and staring. I wanted to shout at Sarah to run, hide, get away, but nothing could stop this *floating* feeling and the wave of sensuality that coursed through my veins. I tried to pull myself away, but couldn’t. It was like my brain filled with cotton, and my whole being became a mannequin standing stiffly, changing, rearranging in time with the music. Sarah shouted something in my ear, but I didn’t hear. She pulled my hand, and at first, I was able to sorta stumble along, but then Syn was there, with a couple of large male attendants.

“Get them!” She said, pointing at us who must have been gen enhanced.

One of them threw Sarah over his shoulder. She kicked and screamed, but no one heard her over the loud music. The other one threw me over his shoulder as if I weighed no more than a bundle of rags, which I suppose I did at this point.

“I’m afraid you’re going to miss your date with your little boyfriend, Cupcake,” Syn said in a loud voice near my ear.

I wanted to struggle against my captor, free Sarah, but all I could hear was the music of change and feel the tingling of my body as it slipped through its final set of rearranging.

Syn grinned up at me as they carried us to a waiting black van. “I am *so* happy I didn’t have to kill you! You have made this so much *easier*, cupcake, I can’t *tell* you. They took something out and started putting it over our heads.

“Where are you taking us?” Sarah screamed as the hoods came down over our vision.

“Oooh, you two have an appointment with someone *very* important. You’re lucky!”

I heard Sarah scream, distantly. “Don’t do this to us, you *bitch*, if you know what’s...” but then someone struck her, and she gave a short scream of pain and fell silent.

“You two lovelies enjoy the ride. I’ll play some music for you, so you don’t miss out on anything.” Syn gave a giggle as she turned on the stereo and *Transgenderosity* played over the speaker system.

I don’t know if it was the changes, or the music, or the narcotics, but shortly after the music started I fell into oblivion.

10

CHAPTER TEN

My sense of time slipped away. I awoke in darkness, and I knew I was riding in a vehicle, that we had been taken, we, someone else was with me. Sarah! I tried to shake myself awake, but unconsciousness had other ideas, and I slipped under the waves again.

Eventually, consciousness returned, when someone splashed some water over my face. “Wakey wakey, eggs, and bakey!” I heard, and I choked on the water, coughing, and spluttering.

I was in a chair, bound at wrist and ankle. Syn stood in front of me, grinning her perfect grin and holding an empty cup of water. Sarah sat in a chair next to me, and was also bound, and also wet, and had been gagged.

“What the hell?” I said, struggling against my bonds. My voice sounded dramatically different.

“Oooh, you sound luscious,” Syn said. “Say something else.”

“Something else, you stupid bitch.”

“Ooooh, beautiful.” She said, stepping to the side. Two goons loomed near her, both very musclebound, both very bald. Both appearing to sweat though, I knew the temperature to be perfect.

I sighed. "What do you want, Syn? If you're going to kill us, do it quickly, I don't have any patience for games."

"I know!" she said, giggling. "But I do! My life has been soooo booooringgg up til now, so thank you for making it ever so much more interesting," she said.

"So what the fuck do you want, Syn." I squirmed a little in my chair, trying to loosen the bindings on my ankles and wrists, but they were stuck fast, immobile. I suspected they were an electromag cuff.

"We're going to play a game," she said, her voice bouncing in a little girl cadence. "If you answer correct, nothing happens!"

"And if I answer incorrect?" I said.

"Well, THAT is where things get interesting, so I do hope you answer incorrectly.

I sighed. "Alright, what's the first question?"

She took on a theatrically serious face. "Hmmm," she tapped a perfectly manicured nail against her delicate chin. "What to ask first."

"Get on with it, and cut the theatrics."

"Okay." She smiled, then sat across from me. "First, who have you contacted regarding this case!"

I shrugged. "No one."

She turned her head a little. "Now, I know you have been to at least two police departments. We know what you said to NPPD, but what about NC? Are you telling me you just went and donated to the officer's ball?"

I shrugged. "Other cases, other issues. I'm a busy guy, lots of evil to correct, children to save, lives to rescue. All in the life of a PI."

She smiled. "I don't think you are telling the truth."

Shrugging, I turned my head a bit.

She clapped her hands together quickly. "Yayyy! You're resisting. This is what I was hoping for." And she turned to something that was behind her, draped in fabric. She took off the cover with a whoosh, and I could see a chair similar to a dentists' with a "U" shaped apparatus surrounding it. There

was a control panel on one side, and I instantly knew what it was.

“Do you know what this is?” she said, again in a theatrically pitched whispery voice.

“A genomic’s station.”

“Exactly!” she said, in a loud exclamation.

“Let’s get on with it. There’s nothing much worse you could do to me.”

“Ooooooh, but there is.” She giggled and gave a signal to the looming goons. “But this isn’t for you, my dear Paradise.”

My stomach took a tumble. “No, you wouldn’t.”

“Oh, I would! How utterly convenient it was for you to bring us the instrument of your leverage!”

The goons stepped down from the little dais and began unstrapping Sarah who yelled against her gag. She kicked and managed to catch one of the goons in the left temple, but it only annoyed him, so he cuffed her hard across the mouth.

“FUCK!” I said. “You’re crazy! Leave her alone! I’m the one you want to tango with, not Sarah!”

Syn ignored me, and opened a set of restraints at wrist and arm for Sarah, then secured her into the genomic station.

“Don’t!” I said. “Please don’t do anything to her!”

She smiled, her teeth bright white against the ruby of her lipstick. “I will give you one more chance. Who did you talk to, and what did you tell them?”

I sighed. There was no way out of this. I didn’t know what horrors she could inflict on Sarah, and Syn had a demented mind. I knew nothing was actually “permanent” in this society, so anything done to her could be undone, but I imagined they could make it extremely uncomfortable, even painful for her.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Syn said, turning the device on so it could run through its POST. “You think, in our world of genetic manipulation of today, nothing is actually “permanent,” right?” she used air quotes to emphasize her point.

I didn’t respond, only gritted my teeth.

“Well, before you respond, may I direct your attention to Door Number Two!” and she lifted the fabric from another piece of apparatus.

An innocuous seeming SmartScreen was underneath, similar in most aspects to the one in the hotel this morning, yet with a metal frame.

“Do you know what this is?” she said, making a flamboyant gesture with her hands. “A smartscreen” I said.

“Not just any smartscreen, but an ID Matrix smartscreen.” She giggled.

I felt a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach. With that, she could change our Matrix ID, our original information. We would literally be recognized by every genomic and router as whatever she decided to program into it. I happened to know a couple of folks that could “undo” whatever manipulations she could make to our matrix, but best not to let her know that.

“I know what you’re thinkingggggg.” She said in a singsong voice.

“What’s that,” I said, dourly.

“You think that you, like me, have access to all sorts of types of people in all worlds of civilization. A phone call or two, and you could contact someone to change your, or Sarah’s, Matrix back to what it had been. However, I have found an ingenious solution to that!”

“What’s that?” I said.

“Well, I can’t reveal everything. But let’s just say it might be a little tougher to undo whatever changes I decide to inflict on the two of you.”

“How would you manage that?” I said, trying to keep the tremble out of my voice. I wasn’t that successful.

“Oooh, you’re scared, aren’t you? I think things are starting to sink in.” She smiled and walked over to me, then twisted my nipple, hard. I yelled loudly, but what I heard come out of my mouth was a scream.

“Yesssss.” She moaned and twisted my other nipple. I tried not to scream this time, but it bubbled out of my mouth anyway. “Ooooooh, you scream so goood,” she said in a low voice.

Panting, I looked up at her through tears. “I’ll tell you,” I said.

“I’m listening,” she smiled.

I panted a bit more, watching Sarah struggle on the table.

“I talked to New Chicago PD. They arrested me for having illegal genomic alterations done to myself. Sarah told them that the genomic activity occurred before I visited Carlos Badilla, and they released me on my recognizance.”

“What else?” she said.

“Nothing else, that’s it, I swear.”

She raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow at me. “What about dear Daphne Kincaid? What did you tell them about her?”

“Nothing,” I said. “They wanted to know why I was poking around at CREAM, but I said nothing about Daphne.”

She tapped her chin briefly. “So you expect me to believe you were in police custody for over 6 hours and you didn’t tell them about who you were working for, and anything about your current case? And they just “let” you go on your recognizance?”

I nodded. “Yes, I swear.”

She walked thoughtfully around to Sarah and removed her gag. She came up spitting into Syn’s looming face.

Syn giggled as she washed the spittle off her perfect features. “So dramatic. Did you hear what John said?”

“YES!” You stupid bitch, I heard him!”

“And do you have anything to add?”

“Let us go!” she screamed. “There’s no reason for you to hold us here against our will!”

“Hmmm,” Syn said moving over to the control panel. “What do you think, boys?”

The two goons remained silent, just glowered a bit more at Sarah and me.

"I know, that's what I think too," Syn said, and pressed a button.

The machine sprang to life with a needle plunging into the side of Sarah's neck.

"I told you everything!" I said. "Stop the process; there's no reason to do whatever it is you're about to do!"

She smiled at me and pressed another button. The immense overhead light flicked to life and began to rotate around Sarah.

"Oh, but there is," she said softly, moving over to me and kneeling down beside me, watching the apparatus begin.

I thrashed my head, trying to head butt her, but she stayed out of range. "What? Why?" I yelled.

"She called me a bitch." Syn smiled, staring into my eyes. "And no one calls me that. By the way, I've not given her any anesthesia. She is going to feel every change she's going through."

"Stop! What do you want from me, I'll do anything! I'll sign your damned form, just stop the machine!"

She smiled and patted my head. "I know, Cupcake, I know. We'll get to signatures here in a moment. But first, she called me a bitch, and now she must pay..." her voice dropped off.

Sarah started to scream.

"By being one."



The following three hours were easily the hardest in my entire life. Sarah screamed herself hoarse, and her body changed. First, she shed mass through her arms and legs disintegrating themselves from her body, dissolving away, consumed by ravenous nanites.

Her torso lay on the table, armless legless, and then things began to shift. Her hair completely fell out, and the top of her skull tented out, forcing it into a completely different shape, making a cone then the wide part of the cone shifting,

with her eyes retracting into her head and migrating up into new positions where the back of her skull had formed twin pockets.

Her facial features sagged as jaw and cheekbones were absorbed then migrated upwards along the cone, her mouth widening as her skin darkened. Soon her face had completely merged with the cone which blunted, then split into a snout.

Her new appendages appeared next, printed from the raw material of her old body, attached at different points than previous. Her hips had twisted downward as her pelvis disintegrated, with her knees formed downward.

I vomited several times, but Syn appeared not to notice, engrossed in the transformation of the love of my life.

A tail extended from her posterior, as her vagina and anus pulled up into their new positions. I heard the snapping and popping of her spine as her bones fused together, sealing her into quadrupedal position.

Her voicebox returned, and instead of screaming, I could hear whimpering, crying as each change settled. Soon, her changes slowed, and the twisted form of Sara lay panting on its side, her eyes darting left and right.

“That’s about all I can catabolize right now,” Syn said, getting up and going to the dais. “Her fur and nails will grow in over the next few hours.” She stretched a bit, her breasts prominently displayed. “Now to part two, of our little show.”

She pulled up the smartscreen, and I saw Sarah’s information presented alongside her picture both as she was when her current matrix was last recorded.

Syn pulled up a second screen, throwing it up alongside the first, only with blanks in all the areas where Sarah’s information had been.

“You see, this has to be done quickly. I figured out that the database refreshes itself each 10 to the minus 12 times. Which is a pico second, one trillionth of a second? What I do is create Sarah’s new matrix completely, then upload it into the database within that timeframe.”

She typed in the information into Sarah's chart. "Let's start with species," she smiles. "Canis lupus familiaris." The letters appeared as she spoke.

"Breed. German Shepherd."

The letters appeared again.

"Birth date:" and she continued to enter the information, pulling a picture from a file within the computing platform. She took a blood sample from Sarah, who yelped awake, then returned to the workstation and placed the sample onto a covered device.

I watched as the genome appeared in the provided box, recording Sarah's genetic information completely.

"Name," She said, then giggled and typed. "Molly."

"Now then," Syn said, watching the screen as she manipulated the IO device. "To substitute one for the other."

She pressed a button, and instantly the shepherd information overwrote Sarah's.

"Now," Syn said theatrically. "The reason you will have so much of an issue reverting this..."

She opened another window. "You see, pets are in a completely different database than humans." She dragged and dropped the Molly Matrix ID into the pet database.

"Confirmed." The workstation said quietly.

Syn giggled. "I know I made that look easy, but it really isn't. There is zero transfer from human to pet and from pet to human for just this specific reason. You don't know the lengths I've gone to secure this window, a window of a picosecond, to transfer one to the other. There's another secret I won't share with you about the transition, but safe to say, it is five 9s of impossible to achieve the transfer from human to pet, and it's nine nines to move from pet to human databases. I couldn't do it now, even if I wanted to." She giggled.

She went to Sarah and unlocked her bindings.

"She's a full canine now, and will even breed true," Syn said in a delighted voice. "It's going to take her some time to get used to her new body, but I've given her an internal HUD to

help her to learn. It's a wonderful little device; it'll train all her limbs quickly and efficiently. We've put quite a bit of R&D into it, but it comes down to this. The more she acts like a dog, the more it builds neural pathways inside her little doggy brain. If she acts like a human, it will cause brief pain inside her head. When she acts like a dog, it will release dopamine in the pleasure centers of her brain. There's a few other surprises it will do too..." Syn laughed softly.

"Such as," I said, feeling an oily twisting in my stomach.

"Well, such as speech. Her ears will hear, exceptionally well, but any speech she hears will be distorted. She'll probably be able to figure out what you are saying, but the words will be meaningless, except for a few. Good Dog, Bad Dog, those kinds of things. If you refer to her by her old name, or in any human fashion at all, the HUD will filter it out as meaningless noise." "Great," I said.

"And the signals to her brain will be different as well," Syn said. "Such as her sense of taste. She no longer has taste buds, but her strong sense of smell will make up for it somewhat. Dogs have zero facial recognition skills too, so her olfactory senses will build new neural pathways based on odor."

I nodded.

The truly ingenious thing about it, the quicker she learns how to "be" a dog, the less she will have to rely on the HUD as new neural pathways are created. After the pathways are created, and she uses her own neural pathways, the nanos go to work on her old homo sapien pathways, destroying them. She will use her new canine neural pathways to operate her body. Her neural plasticity will follow canine paths then, not human. At that time, the distortion effect will also go away, but we've found that transformees who go back to being human after the HUD dissolves and canine plasticity in place are unable to return to humanity. Oh, sure, they look human, but without the neural pathways she once had, she won't be able to "remember" how to speak, walk, eat, or perform any human functions anymore, like breathing. Since autonomic functions

in such different regions of the doggy brain from the human brain, they quickly die.

“You’re despicable,” I said.

“I know, right?” She giggled. “Take the bitch down to the kennel,” Syn said softly. One of the goons lifted her in his arms. I saw her struggle, briefly, then fall back asleep.

“Now to you, Cupcake.” She said after Sarah had been taken from the room.

I swallowed. “What are you going to do to me?”

She tittered. “Nothing so dramatic, I assure you. Put her in the chair.” She said, and one of the goons complied by releasing my bonds and gripping my wrists.

I struggled but to no avail. My body just didn’t have the same influence it had before or the strength.

They clamped me down in place, and Syn stood above me.

“You said you would sign the form now, yes?”

I nodded. The fight had left me. After what they’d done to Sarah, I didn’t want to see what other horrors they could inflict.

She smiled. “I’m soooo, glad you’ve made the right decision. You know we will be working together? I think it’ll be so nice to have someone by my side I can completely trust.”

I felt the needle slide into my neck. “So what will you do to me? Make a matched set?”

She shook midnight curls. “No! I wouldn’t undo the perfection that has been wrought upon you these past few days. No, I won’t dehumanize you, Cupcake, but I will take steps to make you a bit more...compliant.”

I frowned a bit at that. “A genomic has no power over the mind, I thought.”

She giggled. “You win the prize, Cupcake! You’re very correct; I can’t force your mind to do anything. However, I can do what’s already been happening to you. You are flooded with estrogen, and with precious little testosterone and androgen, yes? You’ve felt the effects, like earlier when you were with that little piece of scrumptiousness in the band?”

I winced at that. “Yes, I remember.”

“Good, because that’s what I’m going to do. Change the...balance a bit of your body. We’ll remove the last of the nasty testosterone, make it, so you produce estrogen on a magnificent scale. I’m also going to increase things like Dopamine and oxytocin, and make it, so your pheromone levels are off the scale! We’ll give you a nice complex MHC level, so anyone noticing you will nearly cum in their pants, and if a person of the opposite sex touches you in any way, those Dopamine levels are going to go off the scale for you.”

She pressed a button, and the apparatus came to life and slowly began circling me.

“Unfortunately, there are some side effects, however.” She giggled.

I could feel tingling inside me, coming from nearly all areas of my body. “Which are?” I said, noticing that my voice had changed again, ascending in pitch.

“Well, those dopamine levels are going to make it, so you are feeling pleasure at nearly any stimulation. The high estrogen and low androgen and testosterone are going to raise your voice delightfully, probably higher than mine, and will make you so sensitive you will quickly be craving the touch of someone, anyone.”

“So you’re turning me into a nymphomaniac,” I said gasping as things in my body changed. Sound took on a different quality.

“Yes, and so much more.” Syn giggled. She spoke some more, but I was awash with so many feelings and sounds that I could hardly pay attention. Then the machine stopped.

“Modification complete.” It said.

“Mmmmmm, Cupcake, you are amazing,” Syn said, releasing my bindings.

She helped me to sit up, and I put a hand to my head, trying to remember what I needed to do to her. Was I going to hit her earlier? I frowned in confusion.

She placed the SmartScreen in front of me, and my image leaped into view. I glanced up at Syn. "Is that me?" I coughed, putting a delicate hand to my throat, trying to talk in my lower tone. "Me?" It did nothing to change the high pitched voice I had.

"MMm yes," Syn said.

I stared at myself. I was a caricature of femininity. Large breasts, platinum blonde hair, still in that rockabilly style I'd had earlier. My legs and torso had thinned dramatically while my hips and ass had filled out to match the large bust. I was shorter, standing a head lower than Syn, now, even perched on the stilettos I'd worn to the concert.

"Change me back," I said, in the little girl voice.

"Oh no, sweetheart. You are tooo scrumptious for words!"

She turned took out a hypno and pressed it to my neck. "Ow!" I said as it bit into me.

Placing the hypno into the apparatus, she pulled up my Matrix. I could see my old face there, ugly with the misshapen nose, short hair, thick neck. She pressed the button near the hypno, and my genetic material matrix sped through a number of changes. Then she substituted my current picture for the older one.

"Name," hmmm.

"My name is John."

"Not anymore, Cupcake." She giggled, and said "Cupcake."

The word John had disappeared from my matrix, and Cupcake was now in its place. She deleted my last name.

Modifying the rest of the fields, she quickly made the adaptations to my matrix. "And save." She grinned at me.

"Modifications accepted." The smartscreen said.

"Now, to introduce a bit more difficulty..."

She pressed another button and the screen cascaded. I saw things like my relationships screen pop up, change, then my past residences, past employers, all of them flickered by. My social media pages all fell away, and new ones appeared as if by magic, with history, pictures, an entire lifetime.

Just not my lifetime.

“Now, it shows you were born Kim Pierce, but you changed your name to Cupcake back in high school.”

I knew I should be alarmed at all this, and be thinking of people who would be able to help me change it back, but my brain just didn’t want to function.

She took out a tablet and set it on the table.

“I need you to sign this, Cupcake,” she said softly. “Sign your name as John Paradise.”

I used the tip of my index fingernail and did as instructed. “And click accept.” I pressed the green button next to my name.

“There,” she said, gathering me into her arms. I moaned a bit as I felt my breasts pressed up against her. “Let’s get you setup in your living situation, shall we? Then we can bring Molly in to see you.”

I nodded, still trembling a bit from the hug. “Molly?”

She giggled. “Sarah, remember Cupcake?”

“Oh!” I said. “Yes, Sarah. I want to see her now!”

Syn smiled and took my hand, leading me down the corridor.

11

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The apartment was wide and spacious with a huge Master Bed, bathroom, living area. It was outfitted in various shades of pink.

Syn handed me a card. "This is the key, cupcake. Let me warn you, that you must be inside your room by six o'clock every evening, or you will be punished. Do you understand?"

I nodded taking the key in my small hand.

"Good. And if you press this button here..." she pressed it, and a panel in the wall opened, and I could see something lying inside. "You can be with Molly. Isn't that nice?"

"That's Moll...I mean, Sarah?" I said.

"Yes, She's sleeping right now, but she'll wake up soon, and you can play with her."

"Alright," I said in my high soft voice.

"I'll be along in the morning to collect you," Syn said. "We have an important event tomorrow!"

"What event?" I said.

"The grand finale of *The Artistique*. Won't that be wonderful?"

I smiled, thinking about it for a moment, then looked back at the sleeping dog.

"You know who will be there?"

“Who?” I said, glancing back at Syn.

“Kerry. You remember Kerry, yes?”

I immediately saw green eyes in my memory, smoldering, as he took a puff on his joint. “Yes, I remember him.” I giggled as I remembered how he touched me down there, and what he wanted to do to me. “He must have been disappointed when I wasn’t there after the concert today,” I said.

“He was!” Syn said. “He missed you so so much, Cupcake. But he’ll be there tomorrow, and will be so happy to see you!”

I giggled and smiled.

“Now, you get some rest, we have a big day tomorrow!”

“Alright,” I said as Syn walked out the door.

I knelt and went to the kennel.

The dog lay on her side, hairless, panting. Her eyes were closed. I knelt and touched her side, feeling the stubble of her impending coat.

I petted her softly, my small hands brushing her stubbled skin. Her eyes opened, and I noticed they had changed too. No longer were they the color of sky, but brown all the way around, with no white showing through except at the very edges. I stroked her around her eye, and down her hairless ear.

“It’s okay; I’m here,” I said, petting her. She gave a small whimper in response. “I know, but I’m here now.”

I realized it was true. Yes, I’d been changed, and flooded with all kinds of girlmones, but I was still me, still John Paradise. Still the kick ass, take names, dick of the world.

Okay, maybe not dick...but I was still me, deep down. Changed, struck low, but I still had my brain if I could keep my head straight. I’d get through this. We’d get through this, somehow.

I sat in the kennel with Sarah and lay her head on my lap.

Together we dozed then slept.

Sometime during the middle of the night, she woke me up. Whimpering, she attempted to get up, but couldn’t coordinate herself.

Her fur had grown in, quite a bit, a rich dark tan. “What’s wrong, honey?”

She whimpered again, trying to get up, but her legs wobbled.

“Oh!” I said. “I bet you have to use the restroom.”

She gave a soft bark. “Okay, ummm...” I said, glancing around. I found a mat hanging near the kennel entry. I set it down. “I think this is a doggy mat. You can use this.”

She tried to walk over to it but was unable to...I lifted her up, but she was very heavy for my little arms. “Oooh! I don’t know how we are going to do this!”

I got her to stand, and she managed to walk, carefully, over to the mat. Almost immediately she loosed her bowels and bladder, then walked carefully back, standing in the kennel.

I pressed the button on the side, and the offal was sucked in somewhere. “There!” I said, patting her. “Do you feel better?”

She cocked her head at me and gave a soft bark.

Her fur had grown in overnight, and she was, for all intents and purposes, a German Shepherd. “Do you think you can walk? I want to try to get out of here, but didn’t want to leave you.”

She walked forward a few feet, placing each leg down carefully one after the other, but unable to make much progress.

I sighed. “Honey, Syn told me you had an internal HUD that could help you.”

She turned her head sideways at me, her canine eyes darting back and forth.

I pointed to my head, then her head...then up to the smartscreen. “In your head,” I said pointing between her ears.

She turned her head the other way; then something must have clicked because she gave an excited bark, and was able to walk normally.

Like a dog would.

“Good girl,” I said patting her head. She turned it sideways again, confused.

“Good dog,” I said. And she gave an excited bark.

I knelt and gave her a hug, wrapping my arms around her. She sat then, on her haunches. Learning quickly, I thought. Sarah always was so smart.

I took the card from the table. "Let's see if we can get out of here," I said. She cranked her head, but I patted my hand on my leg, and she followed. "Good dog," I said, and we left the apartment.

The door opened onto a hallway. There were other doors, but I didn't see other people. I walked quickly down the hallway, then out into a foyer that featured a large waterfall and a grassy area under a transparent dome. The night sky of Chicago stretched overhead as I quickly followed the pathway to the next building. I was surprised to see that my card opened that area as well.

Sarah followed, actually running at one point, then falling back into a walk. I realized she must be cycling through the settings on the HUD: Walking, running, trotting, etc. Because her movements were abrupt, mechanical.

We came to a front entrance, and I could see the pneuma tube of a Chicago street beyond. "What the hell," I said, and attempted to open the door.

It was locked of course. Sarah sat beside me, then whimpered as I tried to open the door with my card. "Locked," I said, but Sarah canted her head, and whimpered again.

"It's locked, honey. We can't get out."

She used her paw and scratched at the door.

"No, it's locked sweetheart."

She growled then and turned around. She went back a few paces, then began running and just before the door she leaped.

Crashing and crying, she landed in a heap.

"It's no use, Sarah, you won't be able to break through that."

She stood up again, walking back a little farther, then triggering the run. She again crashed into the door, making it shudder, but not breaking the glass.

She whimpered and cried, holding one of her paws gingerly.

I grasped it, and she gave a little squeal, but momentarily she was able to walk on it again.

“If only I had my gun,” I said looking at the door. But it was in my “purse” that had been taken when we’d been captured.

“Let’s see if there’s anything we can use in any of these rooms,” I said, walking along the hallway. My card opened some of the doors, and others were unlocked. Each one had a different purpose, conference rooms, offices, meeting areas. I was unable to gain access into any of the lab areas or other doors without any indication of purpose.

We walked for the better part of an hour, before returning to our apartment.

She gave a whimper or two. “I know honey,” I said. “I’m frustrated too.”

I knelt down, cupping her dog face in my hands. Her fur was much longer now, stretching past her chest and covering every inch of her body. I stared into her brown eyes, and she stared back at me.

“Can you understand anything I am saying to you?”

Her head canted a little to the side as if she were trying to decipher my words with no luck.

“Sarah?” I said her name. “Can you hear me?”

Her eyes darted back and forth a bit, with her eyebrows.

The fur around her muzzle and the top of her back was black, the rest being different shades of tan and brown. I really wished I could see something of my old Sarah in those eyes, but I didn’t, they were dog eyes set in a dog face with a dog body.

“Molly?” I said into her face.

She gave a short “woof.”

“Okay we have to figure out a way around the HUD,” I said, thinking.

Canted head.

“Good dog?”

Sarah’s tail began wagging, and I wondered if that was the HUD or an automatic response.

“Bad dog?”

Her tail stopped wagging, tucking under her hindquarters.

In one corner of the room, several dog toys had been placed in a bin. Apparently, they wanted me to “play” with Sarah. I grabbed a ball.

She stared at it, then glanced over at me with an expression on her face that said: “really?”

“Look, I don’t know. We have to find a way to communicate, right?”

She shook her head and sighed.

I tossed the ball. She watched it go, bouncing.

“Fetch,” I said.

She looked up at me with disdain written all over her face, then began walking toward the ball. When she got there, she appeared to try to use her paws to pick it up but was unable to get any purchase. She opened her jaws, and very gingerly grabbed the ball, then walked back to me and spat it to the side.

“Okay, so you understand fetch.”

“Woof,” she said in a disdainful voice.

I giggled at that. “Okay, okay. I get it.”

I didn’t know any other commands that she might understand so I went to the smartscreen and searched on “Dog Commands,” to find some I might be able to use.

After reading for awhile, I came back to where Sarah was laying. She looked very depressed; her forelegs crossed over in front of her snout.

“I’m really sorry for this, but we have to find a way around the HUD,” I said softly. “We need to be able to work together and communicate, okay?”

She canted her head, then lowered it.

“Molly,” I said. “Yes?”

She rolled her eyes up at me. “Woof.”

“Molly, No.”

She rolled her eyes at me again.

“Woof Woof,” I said. “No.”

“Woof woof,” she replied.

“Yay!!” I clapped my hands.

“Molly, sit,” I said.

She bared her teeth at me.

“Okay, I get it, you understand.” Giggling, I tried another.

“Molly, Stay.”

She bared her teeth and nipped the skin of my wrist. “Ow!” I said. “Bad Dog!”

She growled at me, then hit me in the shin with her paw.

“At least we are communicating!” I said, but she only canted her head at that.

“Molly, Kiss,” I said firmly. It was one of the commands; I thought I’d try.

She looked up at me, and I opened her arms. She tried to pucker her lips, but then suddenly winced in pain.

“Awww, shit,” I said. Licking my arm, I said. “Molly Kiss,” softly again.

She sighed and walked up to me. Sticking out her tongue, she gently gave me a small lick.

“Good dog!” I said.

She bared her teeth at that, growling.

“I know, I know, but at least you know the word kiss,” I said.

Something seemed to snap inside her, and she gave me several sharp barks, then turned around and went to the bed. Jumping up she looked back at me and nosed the covers.

“Alright, I’m tired too,” I said walking over to my side of the bed. I pulled the covers back and let her under them, then got under them myself.

She stretched out beside me like she used to do when she was human. She yelped, suddenly standing up.

“What’s wrong?” I said

She pawed the air a bit, then buried her head under the covers, and yelped again.

The HUD wasn’t going to let her sleep under the covers, apparently.

“Molly,” I said, and patted the top of the covers. “Lie down.”

She looked at me a bit confused; then something must have clicked because she turned in a circle and lay down, her body coiled into a neat circle with her head over her hindquarters.

I patted her on the head. "Good dog, baby," I said softly, then lie back under the covers.

She whimpered softly, crying. I stroked the fur of her head gently. "I know, baby. I know. We'll get out of this somehow."

I felt tears welling up in my eyes too. I closed them, and they spilled over my smooth cheeks and into the pillow.

12

CHAPTER TWELVE

The next day, I awoke with Sarah laying next to me, still coiled in a ball. I needed to use the restroom, so I climbed off the bed and went into the bathroom.

I hadn't examined myself since the day before, and I was still wearing the skin tight outfit Sarah had purchased a lifetime ago.

Taking off my clothes, I stared into the bathroom smartscreen.

"Height, weight, and general characteristics," I said to the screen.

"With shoes: height one hundred fifty-two centimeters, 55 Kilograms."

"Convert to English."

"Height: Five feet, one inch, weight one hundred and twenty-one pounds."

"Holy shit," I said. I stepped out of the shoes, then squealed in pain as I tried to stand on my feet.

There was a small chair on one wall, and I tiptoed over to it to examine my feet.

They were dainty and small, with polish that matched my fingernails. They were aligned downward at an extreme angle.

I held my leg straight out and tried to force my toes back but pain from my Achilles shot up my leg, and I quickly abandoned the attempt. They were permanently pointed downward.

“Gonna be hard to catch bad guys like that,” I whispered in my soft voice. I tip toed back over to the mirror and stepped into the heels again. Immediately, my feet felt better.

I stared into the mirror. I was petite, with alabaster skin. My narrow shoulders set off by full breasts, and wide hips shrank to an impossibly narrow waist. My legs were feminine and smooth, my buttocks rounded. My hair had not changed -- still perfectly coiffed in a platinum rockabilly hairdo. I had crimson and gold flaked lips, pencil thin eyebrows, fluttery extreme eyelashes, and a small mole under my left nostril.

I sighed, stepping into the steam shower. I heard Sarah enter, and she nosed the door open. I allowed her to come in.

When the water hit her, she gave a little bark, and as it poured over her the smell of wet dog permeated the small enclosure.

“Pewwww,” I said giggling. “You smell like wet dog.”

She canted her head at me again as I shut off the shower, and stepped back into the bathroom.

Sarah stood for a few moments looking at me, then must have found the right internal HUD to push and shook herself violently. I squealed as water droplets cascaded around me, all smelling like wet dog.

“No!” I said. “Bad dog!” and I opened the door to let her back into the room.

Tucking her tail between her legs, she left the bathroom, and I showered off the smell of wet dog again.

Fifteen minutes later I had dressed in a pair of jeans that had been conveniently left for me and a red halter top. A pair of red heels in my size fit perfectly, and I glanced back into the mirror to see a striking retro goddess wearing rolled up jeans and halter top.

I sighed, patting my hair absently, then went out to find Sarah lying on the bed. Her fur had grown longer, and she now had claws on all four of her paws.

I sat next to her, examining her paws. They were black on the underside but rough with thick pads. She wiggled them a little, and I clutched one to me. "I will find a way out of this, I promise."

She canted her head at me again, her eyebrows darting left and right.

I pushed the fur back on her face and kissed the side of her snout. "Molly Kiss," I said softly. She gave me a couple of soft licks as I hugged her to me. She nuzzled me with her snout, and I caressed her smooth fur. "Good dog," I said softly, and she gave a short growl but then wagged her tail gently.

The door chimed, then whooshed open. Syn stood in the doorway.

"Did we have a good night?" she said, grinning widely.

"No," I said. "What is Sarah supposed to eat?"

"You mean Molly?" Syn giggled. "We are going to breakfast now. She can join us if you'd like."

"Yes, please," I said in a soft voice.

We walked through the hallways toward the cafeteria. I prepared two plates of food, one for me and one for Sarah. I sat down and was about to put Sarah's food on the floor when Syn said: "What are you doing?"

"I got Sarah some food, so I was going to give it to her."

Syn shook her head, grinning. "Dogs eat over there. And they eat dog food." She pointed at the grassy area near the waterfall.

"Then we'll eat over there," I said taking both plates over to the grassy area and sitting on the wall of the fountain.

Syn followed us. "You can try to give her the food, but remember what I said about the HUD? The moment it senses you are treating her like a human, it will force her to obey as a dog."

I ignored her and set the tray down in front of Sarah.

She opened her mouth, but then squealed. Each time she tried to approach the plate she'd yelp or squeal, just inches from the food.

Syn giggled and went over to a small dispensary near the end of the fountain. She pushed a button, a chime sounded, and a door opened.

"This is the food bitches eat," Syn said placing the dog bowl in front of Sarah.

Sarah gave a few short barks and tried to lunge at Syn, only to squeal and fall to the ground.

"Awww," Syn said in mock sympathy. "You found what happens when you try to attack me? It only gets worse, bitch" she hissed, and Sarah's head came up at the last word. Apparently, the HUD allowed her to hear that word.

Syn giggled. "BITCH BITCH BITCH!" She held her face right in front of Sarah's muzzle, but the moment Sarah bared her teeth, she squealed and yelped again, falling to the ground.

"Molly, EAT," Syn said loudly pointing to the dog bowl.

Defeated, Sarah got up and walked slowly to the food. She opened her mouth, tasting it, but appeared unable to eat it...until a few moments later when she must have found the right HUD button. She began wolfing the food down.

I shook my head, and held my food in my lap and tried to eat. My breasts got in the way, so I was forced to hold the plate up under my chin which was awkward.

We ate in silence, as the sun rose over New Chicago. I watched Sarah eat, growing more and more at ease with her body and I knew we had to get out of there before it was too late.

"So where is the event tonight?" I said after we'd finished and returned to the table. Sarah sat obediently near my chair, but then started sniffing suddenly, putting her nose down and following it around the eating area. When she encountered a scrap of food, she'd wolf it down.

"It's back in Arizona," Syn said. "You are going to be amazed."

I shrugged. “What more could happen to me? I’m already complete.”

“Well, there are a few more...additions, you will receive. You will get your HUD, of course, and a few adjustments to your body.”

I sighed, not wanting to know what that would entail.

“And after? Do I get to go home?”

“Oh, no Sweetheart. Didn’t you read the contract I had you sign last night?”

She knew I hadn’t. I’d been in such a mind fog; I was lucky to scratch out my name.

“You are returning here, of course, to be with Molly.”

“Wait...isn’t Sarah coming with us?”

Syn shook her head, grinning. “Just a little extra insurance policy.”

“Fuck,” I said softly.

“Oh, yes, honey. You’ll be breaking your cherry tonight, I’m sure, with that Kerry boy. But first, you have a very important meeting to attend.”

“You said that last night.”

“We had to prepare you for your meeting, sweetheart.

“So who is it I’m to meet with?”

“Someone you came here, specifically, to find out?” Syn’s eyes twinkled merrily.

“And whom might that be?” I said.

She gave me an enigmatic grin and shook her midnight curls.

I sighed. “What’s the point? You’ve won, Syn. I know where Daphne is, I’ve signed your damned form, you’ve successfully transformed Sarah and me beyond recognition, what more could there possibly be? How much more damage could you possibly inflict?” As I said the words, I looked over at Sarah who was still sniffing around the room and licking up scraps from the floor. Ugh, we needed to move.

She smiles. "Aww, Cupcake, we haven't even begun yet. Have you thought about the ramifications yet? Of the big reveal tonight?"

I frowned. "No?"

She stood. "Well, you have a few hours to think, Cupcake. I know your pretty little head is spinning right now with the brain chemistry cocktail I induced in you, but try to hold two thoughts together so you can consider it."

I sighed and nodded.

"You know your way back, yes? We caught your evening's antics last night on the cameras, by the way. Molly about gave herself brain damage trying to break through the glass!"

"We know our way back, yes."

"Then go prepare, Cupcake. Take a nap, bathe, get dressed. I'll pick you up in four hours. I gave you some specific clothing I want you to wear tonight."

"I'm sure there's nothing revealing about it at all," I said.

"Sarcasm does not become you, Cupcake. I have exquisite taste; I'll have you know."

I shook my head, not wanting to get into it any further. "I'll be ready."

"Good. Molly will need to be left in the kennels. They are the opposite direction of the cafeteria along the path you walked. It would be good for you to drop her off there today at some point. She will have so many...friends...to play with, and teach her how to be a real dog."

I looked up at her in horror. "No! Can't she just stay in my room?"

Syn smiled sweetly. "Honey, the quicker she gets used to being the BITCH that she is, the better!"

Molly started barking, and again tried to lunge at Syn, then yelped as the HUD kicked in.

"Stop torturing her!" I said, tears forming in my eyes. "Haven't you done enough?"

“Awww, sweetie. Just let this be a lesson to you. In our future endeavors together, remember that I always win!” She smiled, her eyes alight with an inner fire.

I nodded and slapped my thigh for Sarah to follow.

We got to the room, and I immediately went to the SmartScreen. If I had cloud access, I might be able to at least keylog the entry codes of this place, or maybe disable some of the automated systems. I used the on-screen qwerty keyboard since I didn’t want any of my voice entries logged. They were probably logging everything about me, anyway: talks with Sarah, anytime I left the room, hell probably how much urine I expelled. But one could hope, and maybe there’d be a weakness.

I worked for a couple of hours. Sarah, dutifully, lay at my feet, then jumped on the bed and did her circle thing to coil into a doggy circle. She took a nap while I worked. After not getting anywhere — they had several layers of 1024 bit encryption — I lay down next to her quietly. I could see her eyes moving under her lids as she slept, and she even began whimpering a little in her sleep. I stroked her head, and she calmed somewhat, but I wondered what was going on in that human/canine brain, knowing full well that the unconscious mind sought balance for the conscious and since she had such an imbalance between human and dog it would seek the path of least resistance.

“Stay with me,” I said. “I can’t bear to lose you.”

She opened her eyes blearily for a moment and gave me a couple of doggy lick kisses, then put her head back down and went to sleep.

I dozed a bit as well, though this new body chemistry was creating many feelings inside of me that I didn’t want to think about. Syn had mentioned Kerry being at the event tonight, and just the thought of those eyes gave me goosebumps, so I quickly turned my thoughts to the current Diamondbacks roster, player, number, position, and batting averages.

I’d made my way to the outfield when I finally dozed off.

I dreamed as I slept. Sarah and I were somewhere in the south Pacific, and her body was lithe and tan, supple in the coastal afternoon. We swam in the ocean, laughing, then had Mai Tai's by the pool. Sarah wore a sarong thing and had put a flower in her hair, and she smiled that soft secret smile of hers anytime I squeezed her hand. We went up to our room and made love, slowly, gently, Sarah riding on top of me and I felt so happy and at peace...but then the dream changed.

From one moment to the next, I realized the person on top of me wasn't Sarah at all, it had been Kerry all along, and he had worn white linen trousers by the beach, and I was the one with the flower in my hair. A German Shepherd danced with the waves. We swam and had Mai Tai's, and I taught him how to Salsa dance before making love out on a lounge by the pool.

Again the dream changed and we weren't in some Polynesian paradise but in the Omni where Sarah and I had made love long into the night in our Mediterranean bungalow, but I wasn't penetrating her, she was penetrating me, and we both came, screaming together in each other arms. But after a moment, the person holding me in their arms wasn't Sarah it was Kerry, and I startled myself awake with a jolt.

Sarah snored softly beside me, her eyelids moving in her dreams as well. I glanced at the clock and realized I'd slept a long time and needed to get bathed and dressed for the "event."

I didn't want to go, but knew I would be forced to. I wondered who this meeting was going to be with--someone I had come to Chicago to...of course. The Chairman! I shook my head, rolling my eyes as I got out of bed.

Sarah's head came up, startled, but I patted her gently. "Good Dog," I said softly, and Sarah thumped her tail. "Molly stay," I said softly, and she gave a little huff and lowered her head again.

Instead of a shower this time, I started the water running in the bathtub and added some of the bathing salts and lit a few of the candles.

Okay, in my entire life I can honestly say I have *never* used bath salts or lit a single candle. In fact, the times I've taken a bath I could probably count on one hand.

Something about it felt *right* however, and I inhaled the scent of the salts with the candles and moaned softly as the tub filled.

Taking off my halter top and jeans, I eased myself into the bathtub. Okay, baths were far better as a girl than as a boy. The other nice thing was for the first time in my memory; my feet did not reach up the other side of the tub to stick out of the water like a sunken treasure ship. I was able to completely submerge myself in the fragrant water, and the heat and aroma made me feel like I'd died and gone to heaven.

There was some lavender oil on the side of the tub, so I opened the bottle and poured some into the cap and then into the bath. Taking the bottle of shampoo, I worked it into my hair tendrils, then submerged myself again, rinsing it out.

I lay back then, enjoying the feeling of the bath for a long while. When the water grew cold, I allowed it to drain out, and I got out of the tub, finding a nice fluffy pink robe on a hook beside the door.

Inhaling deeply, I found the clothing Syn wanted me to wear to the event hanging in the small closet. It was a vintage style black pin-up mermaid long dress, with black silk stockings, strapless corset, garter belt with garters, and stiletto heels. It took me awhile to figure out the order of lingerie and to get myself into the mermaid dress, but I finally looked presentable.

Stepping into the mirror, I gasped a little at what I saw. I was a Goddess. Platinum hair artfully arranged into the retro rockabilly with tousled curls trailing down my back. Creamy smooth alabaster skin. Perfect succulent lips with their crimson color and gold metallic flake. Sweeping pencil

thin brows with extreme-length flutter eyelashes. The dress looked painted on as I moved from side to side in the mirror, the towering heels feeling perfect on my altered feet.

I sighed, it was going to be hopeless.

In that moment, I realized something. I might have lost my manhood, the love of my life might have been transformed into an animal, but I still had my brain. It wasn't right that this group should be able to do this to other people, wasn't right that even now, young people were preparing for this event without having been through any proper psychological care, preparation, or conditioning. It wasn't right that CREAM would finish this Artistique and move on to the next without any thought to the participants in this event or their after care.

I thought about Daphne/Jackeline and her transmutation. I hadn't been able to get ahold of Cyrus to let him know his daughter was safe and sound and a successful musician. Or that his daughter was about to become his son. These people needed to be stopped, somehow.

I was just the guy to do it. Smiling, I pursed my lips and kissed the mirror.

Walking back into the bedroom, Sarah's head came up. I went to her, taking her head in my lap and stroking her fur gently, murmuring in her ear. "Good dog," I said softly. "Molly kisses," I said, and this time she lapped at my cheek three or four times, her tail thumping.

"I know you can't understand me right now, but I am working as fast as I can to get us out of here," I said in a soft murmur as I stared into her eyes. "You have to stay human in there for me, Sarah, we still have an amazing future ahead of us!"

Her tail thumped, but her head cocked to one side. The tail worried me. It didn't seem like it was the act of a HUD, her motions and movements were becoming more and more natural.

"You're going to have to stay in the kennels until I get back, Molly," I said softly. When I said her name, Sarah's eyebrows moved upward, and her tail thumped.

“I love you, babe,” I said kissing the side of her snout. She licked me in response. “Good dog.”

I stood up, and she watched me. “Molly come,” I said. Sarah did as instructed, jumping down from the bed.

“Molly heel,” I said and walked forward. She gave a brief growl but followed after me. I opened the door, and we walked down the hallway opposite the cafeteria.

The Kennels were right around the corner. There was a doggy play area out front, and I could see three or four dogs of different breeds running around or lounging in the sleeping areas.

I shook my head, sighing. I didn’t want to leave her here, but I had no choice. If I was going to bring down CREAM, I couldn’t be worried about where Sarah might be at any given moment, even if Syn allowed me to bring her.

I knelt in front of Sarah. “You need to stay here, babe. I’ll be back for you.”

She tilted her head a bit. I opened the gate, but Sarah did not enter. “Molly heel,” I said, but Sarah tucked her tail between her legs and sat outside the gate, staring up at me with her Doggy eyes.

“Molly come!” I said, clapping my thighs, but again, Sarah refused to budge, giving a low growl in response.

“Here, you might need this,” A man said, handing me something. I glanced down at it. A red collar.

Fuck.

“Molly, do you want me to use this?” I said pointing to the collar.

Sarah didn’t move, she lay down beside the gate, unmoving. She put her head between her paws.

I went over to her and slid the collar around her neck. Surprisingly, she didn’t growl. “I know, Babe, it’s just a little while.”

Pulling her collar, I forced her into the Doggy play area.

“Molly, stay,” I said closing the gate.

“We’ll take good care of her, don’t you worry.” The attendant said. “Some dogs start as anti-social, but after awhile they warm up to the environment.”

“Take extra-good care of her, please,” I said.

“Don’t you worry about a thing, she’s in good hands, aren’t you, Molly?”

At her name, Sarah glanced up at the man.

“She does know some simple commands,” I said.

The man clipped a leash to the collar. “We have obedience training every day, so when you get back, she’ll know some new commands.”

I groaned at that. “Don’t worry; it’s very humane. We also bathe and brush them for you. When do you expect to be back?”

“Probably tomorrow at some point,” I said. “Though it may be longer.”

He smiled. “Don’t you worry about Molly while you’re gone. We’ll take great care of her.”

“Thank you,” I said and could feel tears sliding down my face.

Sarah watched me walking away. She opened her mouth then,

And howled.

When I got back, Syn was standing in front of my apartment. “Oh, Cupcake, you look gorgeous!”

Syn wore a matching mermaid dress in blood red, with red stilettos and black silk hose. She looked amazing as well, but fuckitall if I was going to tell her that. I nodded but did not smile. “Let’s get this over with so I can get back here to Sarah as soon as possible.”

Syn grinned. “Awww, was parting difficult?”

I glowered at her, but I knew with this current body my glower probably came across much different.

“Well, let’s get to our routerport, and we can make the jump to NP.”

I nodded and followed Syn back toward the main building. She took me to an area I'd never been and used her keycard to open the door.

It appeared to be a private routerport, with two pods sitting side by side. An attendant was entering data into a tablet in front of them.

We got into the pods with assistance from the attendant. Syn gave a signal, and both pod canopies closed. I glanced over at Syn who was grinning at me from ear to ear. The pods entered the transporter, and a few moments later was opening in a similarly equipped private routerport with a female attendant this time.

"Welcome to New Phoenix," the attendant said.

I did not respond, as Syn was helped out of her pod.

She crooked an arm for me. I glowered again at her. "Suit yourself, but pouting isn't going to help."

I sighed.

This compound was a bit different from the one in New Chicago. After leaving the routerport, we were outdoors. Dusk was falling over New Phoenix, and I could smell mesquite in the air. The smells of home.

"You are to be on your best behavior, Cupcake. Do you understand?"

"Or what?" I said softly.

"Or how about instead of a German Shepherd I make her a French poodle?"

I sighed, gritting my teeth.

"I'll take that as a yes," Syn said softly and led us into a small building with stucco walls.

We walked down a small hallway and into a conference room with a large SmartScreen at one end.

We both sat down in matching arm chairs in front of the SmartScreen. It was a bit surreal. We were both dressed in similar retro fashion, her dark hair to my nearly white hair. Hers was shorter, in a bob that did zero for her face in my opinion, but the rest of her body was voluptuous to an ex-

treme. I was a bit more petite, but no less voluptuous in reality, just a smaller version of Syn.

“So, what now?” I said.

“We wait, Cupcake,” she said in a whisper.

I nodded, taking a deep breath. The dress was difficult to wear. I kept feeling like different parts of my body would be falling out at any moment, but somehow everything stayed put. It was a little tricky to breathe with the corset on, but if I took shallow breaths, it made it a bit easier.

I didn't know what I was going to do. I was going to take them down, somehow. I glanced around the room looking for a weakness, a weapon, anything I might be able to lay my hands on. I knew I wasn't made for hand to hand anymore...well, if Syn could do it I could learn, I supposed.

My stomach churned butterflies into soup, then mixed them with a cement mixer. I'd never felt so small, so weak, so frail in all my life. But I had my mind, dammit, and all I needed was an opening.

The screen flickered to life. I saw the CREAM logo.

The logo changed, and a face appeared. A face I knew...

“Well, well, John. I've been waiting for your report for some time now.” The face of Cyrus Kincaid filled the screen, chuckling softly.

My mouth fell open, and the butterflies began dancing the tango.

13

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cyrus Kincaid chuckled softly. "So, John, I know you must have a lot of questions."

My mouth was still hanging agape at who I saw on the screen.

"But you...I..." stammering, I shook my head. "Why the hell would you involve me in this?"

He looked thoughtfully down. "Well, John, your involvement in the Artisique was actually an accident." He looked pointedly at Syn. "We don't tend to have accidents regularly, but they do happen."

"But, why hire me in the first place? I mean..." I sighed, trying to get ahold of myself. "I did this as a *favor* to you because you were the custodian at my old school!"

He nodded, rubbing his chin. "That's why I hired you, John, I needed someone I could trust."

I shook my head. "By *breaking* every ounce of trust I might have had in you?"

He nodded gravely. "You see, John, I knew that if I just hired you as a detective for CREAM you might not actually prove yourself for many years. This way, I've been able to see how

you handled this very dire situation firsthand. And I must say, John, you did an admiral job, just admiral!"

I closed my eyes, putting my hand to my head. "Wait, hold on. I'm getting an ice-cream headache from this flip flop."

He chuckled softly. "Syn, get John some aspirin, would you doll?"

Syn smiled and silently rose and left the room.

"I know you are worried about Sarah, John. But let me tell you, that situation is for the best."

I shook my head. "WHAT? How in all the green heavens is that for the Best?"

"She would always have been a manipulation point with you, John. Don't you see that? I mean, look at you, right now. You've agreed to a lot that you never would if she hadn't been involved. Am I right?"

"If you mean signing the form, then yes!"

"I mean exactly that, John. You allowed yourself to be manipulated into signing that form through your fear for Sarah. You never gave an ounce of consideration that maybe she gave up her very humanity just so you could have that decision. Do you see?"

Syn handed me two tablets from a cap and a clear glass of water. I considered what had happened to me, but at this point, I didn't give a rat's ass if it turned me into, well, a RATS ASS, so I swallowed the pills and sucked down the water.

"No!" I said, wiping my mouth on the back of my arm. "I don't see. Can you start from the beginning?"

Cyrus chuckled. "Okay, John. Here it is, in plain simple language. I wanted you to be part of team CREAM after that incident last year when you solved that murder, do you remember?"

"Of course, the Flores case."

"Amanda Flores, yes. That was amazing work, John. You took something that the police had as a dead file for <i>years</i> breathed new life into it, and solved the case, and you found the actual murderer, John! You saved that other

man from spending even a minute more behind bars, wrongly incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit!"

"I'm a bit familiar with the details, yes."

"So, after that case, I was reading the newspaper and I saw your name as the Hero. I need a Hero, John, so I hired you to "find my daughter." He used air quotes for emphasis.

"So you knew all along that your daughter was actually Jackeline from the band."

He chuckled. "Of *course*, I did, John, why do you think it is their song that is the centerpiece of the *Artistique*? I wanted to give her a chance to shine, give *them* a chance to shine and she had been so frustrated with her damned psychiatrist who refused to sign off on her Gender Reassignment."

I sighed, rubbing my temples. "So, she wanted to be male all along?"

"Yes, John, of course. She'd been receiving psychotherapy for *years*, John, and he denied her request, *four times!* Do you know how awful that was? How awful is it for you now, in the wrong skin? Maybe you can sympathize with her plight a little, yes?"

I glanced down at my bounteous bouncing boobies and said. "Yes, I can relate somewhat."

"So, I hired you to find her. A very simple case, John. But...well, mistakes were made."

"Mistakes like giving me the nanos in the first place so the catalyst would change me every time it came on the radio?"

He nodded solemnly. "God's honest truth, John, I thought you would see Daphne up on stage, recognize her, report it to me, and I'd hire you on the spot for the private detective position I have open with CREAM. I never thought you would become wrapped up in the *Artistique*, and I sincerely apologize."

I shut my eyes, and could feel my long lashes brushing my cheeks. "Then why," I said, trying to draw enough air into my lungs. "Why did you have your *Assassin* here, try to *kill me*?"

Cyrus looked troubled at that for a moment. He remained silent for awhile, and I thought he might actually get up and leave. But then he seemed to reach some kind of decision and said: "Because you were a loose cannon, John."

I exploded, standing up. "A loose cannon!" I shrieked, not enjoying the sound of my voice echoing off the immense screen in front of us. "A loose cannon? Why the fuck didn't you just tell me?"

"Sit down, John, and I'll explain. But I won't explain if you get hysterical."

"I..." I felt like my blood my explode right out the top of my head at that point."Oooooh!!!" I said, sitting down, panting.

Syn patted my hand gently, and I nearly punched her in the mouth.

"Have you calmed down, John?"

I took a few deep breaths. Fucking estrogen. "Yes!" I said in a tight whisper.

"You were a loose cannon. You went to the police in Phoenix, and in Chicago. You visited my headquarters there, and made quite a stir with your little trojan programs, by the way."

I gave a little snicker at that. Heheh I liked hearing my snicker, I planned to do more of that.

"You went to the police here, you involved Sarah, you visited my quarters in Chicago, and were arrested. All without that release form, John can you see how uncomfortable that made me?"

I breathed slowly. It was like everything he said lit me on fire. I wasn't used to this kind of emotion, and controlling it was taking everything I had.

"We had to answer some tough questions by both PDs. I was able to get past the NP PD because of my relationship with Bennie, but NCPD was a different story. We're being audited right now, by the City government, did you know that?"

I shook my head, not trusting my mouth to say words that made any sense.

"A very uncomfortable audit. Directly due to your intervention. So you can see, we needed to take steps. When you were found at the concert, I can't tell you how relieved we were to finally get you under our custody so we could work these things out."

"Work it out?" I said, clenching my teeth, hoping steam wasn't coming out of my ears. "You turned the love of my life into a *DOG*."

"I told you why we did that, John. It's in your own best interest, I promise you."

"Hoo boy," I said, glancing at Syn. "Do you have alcohol? I need alcohol, like, pronto."

Syn glanced up at Cyrus, who gave a wave and a nod. Syn silently left the room again.

"I know you don't believe me right now, John, but the longer she is leverage against you, the more danger you will be placed. We have many enemies, John, and we can't allow our operatives to have...*entanglements* that might compromise any mission you might be assigned."

"Could you at least kept her human?" I said, and my voice cracked on the last word. "Please? Can you please return her, at least, to being human? I might consider an arrangement if you would do that." It'd be the only way I wouldn't burn the whole thing to the ground, but I held my sexy tongue.

"No, John, no matter what kind of human we might make her, she'll always be a source of manipulation for you. Whether you work for us, or not."

"But that's what being a human is all about!" I said. "I mean, what about your wife? Does she really have cancer?"

Cyrus's face fell at that. "She did, John. And she will die from it, very soon."

"And how would *you* have felt if your predecessor had decided she was a source of manipulation for you and turned her into a *Damned dog*!!"

Cyrus looked up at me then. "You think you know? That I don't know your pain? Let me show you something, John."

The view changed. I saw the compound, then, the kennels. I even saw Sarah laying down in one of them. The view didn't remain on her, sweeping to another area where another dog...much hairier and rounder, a Chow I think, lay panting on what appeared to be a hospital bed."

I rolled my eyes. "You're shitting me. You want me to believe that's your *wife*."

"She stopped being my wife about a dozen years ago when I came into this position, John. Not she is my pet."

I wanted to vomit at that point, in fact, I gagged a little.

"And you?" I said to Syn. "Is there someone in the kennels that is someone you care about?" She shook her head, a little sadly. "Nope, Paradise. My wife Serena was used in an attempt to "Dissuade" me against certain actions I took in Botswana. She died screaming, on fire, when I didn't...accede their wishes."

I slumped in my chair, defeated.

We all sat in silence for a few moments, with our individual thoughts.

"So, after I was a loose cannon, you kidnapped me, kidnapped Sarah, changed me into a woman, and changed Sarah into a dog. And now you want me to *work* for you?"

Cyrus smiled then. "We would. I think your skills, intelligence, wisdom, fearless resolve in the face of unknown danger, and commitment to the team would be of great benefit to us."

I shook my head in disbelief, still too stunned for words. I could feel the curls dancing along my bare upper back.

"Like this," I said, holding my hands up. "A five-foot nothing weak girl?"

Syn giggled. "Being a girl is sooo much fun, though Cupcake."

"There may be some...*operations* in which we might need you to wear a male avatar, that is true. But for the most part, yes, you would remain as you are...or as you will be at the end of tonight's event."

I shook my head again, still shocked.

"Look, give it some thought. Enjoy the event tonight, I think you will be amazed. Go back to the compound and love Molly. Think about it. Then give me your answer one week from today."

"And if my answer is no, do I have to get used to birthing puppies as well? Or will you just treat me to a bullet in the brain?"

He smiled. "Nothing so dramatic. No, we won't return you to your original body, that is true, but we will allow you to leave unmolested."

"Right. Because your track record has been so good."

"Seriously, John. After tonight, no matter what you might say or do would be moot anyway. You wouldn't have any power to hurt us, so yes, you would be allowed to go on your way."

"And Sarah?"

"Molly, I'm afraid, is who she will be for the rest of her life. Whatever you decide to do or not to do, we will not be changing Molly back, and there's a very simple reason for that."

"Which is..."

"Well, by the time you make your decision, Molly will have lost her intellect due to the transition from human to canine within her brain and would die in the attempt to revert her."

"Then why not let me go now? Consider it repayment for the mistake of being forced to participate in the *Artistique* against my will."

He shook his head. "No. And I really must depart now, the event is about to start. Syn, take her to the event and keep an eye on her. We wouldn't want her to slip away and cause more trouble for us."

"Understood, boss."

"I really hope you give it some thought, John, and come work for us. I think we'd make a great team if you can let

bygones be bygones. I mean...we're doing this to change the world!"

And with that, he was gone.

I panted, spent, sitting in my chair. I glanced over at Syn who was staring glassy eyed at the screen.

"Is all that he said, true?"

She looked at me."Every word."

"I'm sorry about your wife," I said, and I surprised myself by meaning it.

She gave a little shrug."Well, that was a long time ago. Another life." I could hear a little quaver in her voice.

"Please Syn?" I got down on my knees and put my hands in her lap."Look, I'm begging you. I'll do whatever you all want. I'll be your perfect go to guy...er...gal. I'll be a part of the team, be a productive component of Team CREAM. All of it. Please change her back?"

"She called me a bitch," Syn said softly, her eyes in the middle distance.

"I swear, I'll talk to her. She'll never call you that again, I promise."

She shook her head, midnight curls dancing around her shoulders."It's not up to me, cupcake." She wouldn't look me in the eye, though, and I wondered at that.

"I know he listens to you. You all want me part of this team, and I'll do it, I swear. But I can't do it if Sarah is a canine, I just can't."

She sighed, looking up at me and I could see tears in the corners of her eyes.

"If you can't, at least help me to escape. You can do that, can't you? Another little "Accident" maybe you just leave your card on the table in my room?"

She glanced up to the ceiling and said nothing for a minute."No, cupcake, I can't. Your bitch called <i>me</i> a bitch so she will live her life out like that."

There was no venom in her words this time, however. I realized, every move Syn made was probably categorized,

recorded, scrutinized. Anyone in the group with a license to kill certainly would be."

She glanced at me then, and I could see something in her eyes.

"Alright," I said playing along. "I guess I'll think it over. It is a lovely place, at least, and I know we might be happy there."

Syn stared at me a moment then said softly. "I could.... really use...a friend, you know? That's why I got us the matching dresses. I thought it might be nice for us to be friends, or sisters under the skin. We both come from similar backgrounds, and both could be working in the upper echelon of CREAM. I just thought it would be nice for us to be friends, Cupcake."

"Cupcake," I said softly.

She grinned. "It *is* funny, you have to admit. The big tough ex-marine, ex-detective forevermore being called Cupcake? Come on, you can see the humor in it, right?"

I realized in that moment, Syn was actually being honest with me. "You realize, this is probably the *first* discussion we've had where you've actually been vulnerable with me?"

She gave me a grin. "Wrong, cupcake. I've actually been vulnerable the entire time. You are just now only recognizing it. I've been pleading for you to be with us the whole time, if you remember."

Stunned, I sat back. She was right! She had been pretty honest with me, up until the "kidnapping" incident. And for that, she'd just been doing her job.

I was seeing her in a new light, a light I didn't like. I needed to *hate* Syn, not be sympathetic to her.

"Alright, so, aren't we supposed to *be* somewhere right now, *sister*?"

She glanced over at the time on the SmartScreen. "Oh! Yes! We're going to be late!"

She got up, and I followed her, dashing out of the room and into the night of New Phoenix.

14

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The ballroom was grand. The old Hyatt Regency had been rebuilt in the center of New Phoenix to be a towering plasteel spire that dominated the skyline with sky blue and silver neolights that could be seen from Apache Junction. The old Compass restaurant that had circled the top of the old Hyatt had been reconstructed at the apex of the new Hyatt plank by plank and given a face-lift. The entire ballroom floor had a transparent aluminum skin so the dancers could see all the way to the city streets, 45 stories below.

“Good thing I don’t get vertigo,” I said as Syn and I made our entrance. For this, I allowed her to lead me, arms linked, as we were announced.

“May I present, the lovely ladies, Miss Syn, and Miss Paradise!” the announcer said, as we entered the room to the gasps of many well-dressed people. Everyone wore high-end tuxedos and floor-length gowns. We were the only two scandalously dressed in shimmering satin mermaid gowns, backless and strapless, with shimmering neolights that accented our curves.

We both strutted into the ballroom, swinging our hips, smiling and giving “the queen’s wave” as Syn called it, turning our wrists slightly to the oglers in attendance. Syn’s two bald bodyguards followed close behind us. One of the goons’ hands could wrap itself completely around my little neck now and snap, no more wiseacre ex-detectives.

“Miss Paradise?” I said, waving to all as we made our way down the entry chain.

“Don’t worry, cupcake; I’ll change your name back before the night is over. No Jane, though, just Paradise. It suits you better than Cupcake.”

“Thank you,” I said without making a snarky comment. Which was hard. Damned hard.

“We are two gorgeous broads,” I said, between clenched smiling teeth.

“That we are, Cupcake, but never forget, this gorgeous broad-handed you your ass when you were a 6’4” mountain of man-meat.”

“I don’t remember it like that,” I said softly. “Seems to me, it was a draw.”

“It wasn’t a draw if you take into consider your width and breadth at the time. And strength. And the fact you had testosterone swimming in your blood to help you be more aggressive.”

“I wasn’t a trained assassin in my past life,” I said, still clenching my teeth. God, would this entry never cease?

“I’ve seen Marines kill an armed opponent with a single hand chop, Cupcake.”

“You never let me get in close enough,” I said.

She sighed, still smiling as we took our place in the chain. “Exactly.”

“Eh, I couldn’t hurt a girl,” I said. “Then.” Placing heavy emphasis on the word.

“And now you can?”

“I *am* a girl, now. So yes. No holds barred.”

She giggled. “I look forward to it, Cupcake.”

I sighed, looking at my scrawny arms, my soft hands. And no abs. "It's going to be awhile before I am in fighting shape again."

"When you are, I'll be there." She said, smiling. As a group, the entire audience took their seats facing forward.

On the stage, a man stood behind a podium. "Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the final event of Le Grande Artistique!"

A round of applause went up from the audience, but not as much as I'd expected. That made me frown a bit; I'd thought everyone who had participated in this...

"First, on our program, is a dance routing by Theologis!" and with a flamboyant wave of his hand, the MC directed everyone's attention to the stage.

"When does UNK come on, I whispered to Syn."

She looked at me. "Last," she said with a wide smile.

"Do you think we, I mean, I, or we...oh, can I go see Kerry before he takes the stage?"

She smiled broadly. "So you can give him a good luck kiss?"

I nodded, smiling the vacant smile of the wonton cocksucker she was trying to make me.

"Alright, but I'm sending Thing One with you. No funny stuff, Cupcake, you say your peace and get back here."

"Yes, Ma'am," I said softly. She grinned at that but waved me away.

The reason I wanted to get backstage had zero to do with The Man with the Gorgeous Eyes, and everything to do with Daphne. She was the missing piece in this little drama. I wanted to get her true story before I lit the fire that made everything burn.

Thing one towered behind me as I quickly found my way to the backstage area. A chaperon tried to stop me, but with a glower from Thing One, he opened the rope and let me pass.

Goons could be handy, I see.

Once through the backstage area, we entered the green-room where the evening's performers ate complimentary

food, drank complimentary drinks, and just in general complimented each other on their compliments. I turned to the towering hulk of muscle, pitching my voice like I'd heard Syn address them. "You stand here. Wait for me. Keep your eyes on me at all time; I don't want anyone trying to take advantage of a piece of ass like mine."

He clenched his jaw, crossed his arms, nodded, and assumed a position at the door. I figured I was just giving him the orders Syn had already told him, but I didn't want him looming directly behind me.

Unk was seated in a group of chairs near the back. Olivier spotted me almost immediately, and I heard his voice cry out in happy recognition.

"Well, look who's here, Kerry!" he stood and intercepted me with those arms, bringing me in close. "Your cuckold!" He planted a deep kiss on my lips, his tongue doing far too much exploring.

I kissed him back, disentangling myself from his arms, and sitting next to Kerry and Daphne — who looked like a slender young man now. He wore a black t-shirt that emphasized his obvious upper body strength. "Oooh," I said in a soft voice, wrapping my arms around Daphne. "You are turning out well."

"Thanks," he said softly, his voice in the male register. She, or he, looked like he could be Daphne's twin brother with a strong jaw, chiseled abs, and it was very obvious he was male now.

"Hey babe," Kerry said to me, but I ignored him. If I saw those eyes, I knew this would be a missed opportunity.

I leaned into Daphne and dropped the act. "I need to speak to you in private. Your father hired me to find you, and I wanted to ask you a couple of questions. Do you mind if we go somewhere and speak?"

He looked up at me with a haunted expression. "What good would that do? Nothing can be done now."

I frowned a bit. "Please? It might be worth your while."

He shrugged and got up, his arm draped around me. "We'll be back," I said with a salacious grin, and Olivier laughed and laughed.

"That Sheila is one after me own 'eart," Olivier said in his heavy Australian accent. "You better claim what's your partner, or Dave there going to steal her from ya."

"Dave?" I said softly as we walked.

He shrugged. "Better than anything else I could come up with."

We found a quiet spot near the back, and I made a show of cupping his chin and kissing him on the mouth, lifting my leg and grinding my pelvis into his hip. Olivier laughed uproariously.

"Your father sent me to "find" you, and I ended up in this Artistique against my will," I said, not knowing where to start. "Are you okay? He said this is what you wanted?"

He glared at me. "My father..." he said in a low, dangerous tone. "Thinks he can control anyone."

I frowned, confused. "So you didn't want this gender change?"

"God no!" he whispered. "Did you see the way I used to look? Why the hell would I want to give that up?"

I shook my head, still wrapping a leg around him. "Then why are you doing it?"

"All I wanted to do was perform my music. Me and the guys came up with that song, Transgenderosity, and I played it for my dad one night just because I wanted him to be proud, you know? Next thing that happens, he's co-opted our group, made us pop stars, and that damned song is playing on every radio station in the country."

"And you didn't want that?"

"No! I wanted to come by our fans with integrity! I feel like we are a sellout now, and I can't wait for this to all be over."

"So he used this song you wrote as his..."

Dave shrugged. "His inspiration for the Artistique, yes. I think he did this, just to prove he could!"

Thunderstruck, I almost dropped the act. I could see Kerry, stalking his way over to us, and his eyes caught me off guard.

“Ahh,” I said softly. “Well, I’m going to do something about it.”

“It’s too late!” Dave said. “After tonight’s song is over, it’s all finished for this event.”

“Well, maybe I can pull the fire alarm, or get a message out to the cops...”

“All bought and paid for, baby,” Dave said. “My dad thinks of every angle. He bought the police; he’s disabled any alarms, this event will go through even if a tidal wave from the Gulf of California rose up and tried to sink the southwest! It’s why he chose Arizona for the finale in the first place.”

I felt crushed. “There has to be something we can do!”

He looked at me with cold eyes. “There’s nothing we can do. The only way to bring my dad down would be to be in his inner circle. Or if we could get through to Syn, that crazy bitch. We’d have to be on his advisory team somehow, and there’s no way he’d take advice from me!”

Kerry came up and grabbed my arm, taking it away from Dave.

“If you can do something, babe. DO IT.” He hissed. “His next event will be even worse!”

“Hey!” Kerry said, wrapping my arm around his neck. “What the fuck are you doing?”

I shook my head, then glanced down at Kerry whose smoldering green eyes stared down into my soul. “About time, darling, I was getting exhausted trying to lure you out.”

He kissed me hard on the mouth then, his hands finding my ass and I didn’t have a lot of cognition after that.



Some time later, after I'd been to the ladies' room to pull myself together, I found Thing One, and we went back to our seats in the audience.

Syn grinned widely at me. "Did you have a nice time?"

"Mmhmm," I said, but I was very distracted. Inner Circle? Wasn't that exactly where Cyrus wanted me to be? With a tumbling in my stomach, I realized I was positioned perfectly. In fact, I couldn't be better positioned if I tried.

UNK came on the stage to the mad cries of the audience and began to play. I registered it distantly, my mind flying down pathways, putting things together, crafting a plan.

I stood with the rest of the crowd, swaying in time to the beat. I felt a few tingles in my body, and something assembled itself in my mind's eye...the HUD Syn had mentioned. I would toy with that later, right now I had to focus on my next steps...

Sarah had less than a week if that. I couldn't wait for Cyrus to bring me back for the follow-up interview, I needed it to happen now. In the past, I'd used my muscles and blundering attitude to get me past most circumstance. The time for the blundering detective was over. I was a woman now, and I had to use my brain muscle, not my physical being to achieve what I wanted. I needed to become part of this "inner circle," find out what was going on for the next event and take action but from within. I would have to gain their trust so I could dismantle what they had created.

In the past when I needed something to happen, it usually involved something exploding, a diversion, followed by a car chase and me shooting it out with the bad guys. The tables had turned, however, and now I needed to be crafty, weigh options, be mentally adept. I'd never been known for my brain power, but it was a complete necessity now that I was a five foot nothing piece of arm candy.

A week. Less than a week. I needed not only to bring them down but ensure they would never build back up. They would burn for what they'd done to us, to Sarah. All of them would burn.

“Why aren’t you screaming, cupcake? Your boyfriend is on stage!”

I sighed and gave some half-hearted whoops to get into character.

After the band had stopped playing, the Emcee came back up onstage.

“Congratulations, ladies, and gentlemen, the Artistique is now complete! If you direct your attention up to my left...”

It showed an image of everyone who had participated in the event. I could barely make out my original face, followed by my name, followed by my former gender. Strangely, I looked oafish to my new self, the smile crooked, the nose broken. How had I lived like that?

I shook the thought from my head, listening.

“This is your current matrix as it exists in the governmental database. When I give the signal, everyone will count down from ten, and we’ll make the switch.”

A drumroll came from Dave in the back.

“Everybody ready?”

“YES!” Cried the audience, but again, with less enthusiasm than I’d anticipated. Syn, however, was vociferous. She put her arm around me, smiling. I would have objected, but it placed my left arm within inches of her tablet.

“TEN, NINE, EIGHT!”

I shook my head, thinking of Sarah, her face cast in my mind as she smiled, laughing the other night as we danced. I knew I couldn’t steal the tablet without being noticed, but if I found the right section...

“SEVEN, SIX, FIVE!”

I remembered the way she looked on our first date, three years prior. She’d worn jeans, cowboy boots, and a flannel shirt. I’d been in love from the moment I’d met her. Syn giggled and smiled at me, still holding me close in her right arm. Girlfriend I thought, grinning madly at her.

“FOUR, THREE, TWO!”

Syn gripped my shoulder tighter. I leaned in and whispered in her ear. "I want to see Cyrus right after this."

"Why?" she said, a little breathless.

"I've made my decision." I smiled widely, the same smile Syn used.

"ONE!" the crowd yelled, and the Emcee pushed the button.

On the screen, everyone's matrix changed, picture, gender, and specifics. Fireworks erupted into the Phoenician night, pink and blue, then blue and pink. Everyone ooo'd and aaaahhh'd. While Syn was distracted, I placed the microdot from her handheld on the mole just above my lip.

Ah, the price of beauty.

I just hoped I had it right side out, or this little ruse would produce a whole lotta subcutaneous fat from the inside of my lip and not my target.

"He can meet with us briefly, right now!" Syn said in an excited voice.

I gripped her hand. "Let's go, girlfriend!"



We went back to the same conference room where we'd been and sat down in the chairs. I held Syn's hand tightly, laughing with her as we walked. She had found champagne at some point, and we'd been drinking a wee bit.

"Come on, Cyrus!" Syn said in a loud voice, then belched. Then giggled.

I giggled. "SO ladylike," I said.

"I know, right? She drank straight from the bottle. "You and me, Paradise, we are going to be sooooo awesome!"

I grinned, holding my glass out for more. She splashed some in, and I took a noisy gulp. Which was far more theater than actual drinking.

The screen flickered on, and Cyrus faces filled the area.

“I don’t have much time, but what did you need, John?”

“Paradise,” Syn corrected.

“Oh, yes, excuse me.” Cyrus smiled, which appeared forced.

“What do you need, Paradise?”

“I’ve made up my mind,” I said smiling.

“Oh? And what is your answer?”

I smiled. “I’d like to be a part of the team.”

“Do you now,” the Director said, crossing his legs. “This is a surprise.”

“I know.” I gripped Syn’s hand tightly. “But I’ve made a friendship that will last a lifetime, and I can’t wait to start helping CREAM achieve its goals.”

Syn giggled, and her eyes shone at me.

“I see.” The Director said. “And what of Sarah?”

All I could see was her face as she kissed me on our last night together. I swallowed a little and said: “Well, I gave it some thought. I do love Sarah, don’t get me wrong, but as you’ve so carefully have demonstrated, she is a liability to me. Even were I to go back to my old life, I see this now. Better this way; I can enjoy her in her current form as my pet, and carry out my duties in the service of CREAM. Since Sarah is still with me, I have no desire to get...” entangled” with anyone else.”

“What about tall dark and soulful?” Syn said with a grin.

“Not seriously entangled with anyone else,” I said, smiling at Syn. “With the notable exception of my sister, here.”

Please forgive me, Sarah.

Cyrus nodded. “And you’d be willing to submit yourself to the will of CREAM? We have a bit of an induction program, parts of which you might not enjoy.”

“With all due respect, Sir, I was a Marine. Their induction program is the best in the world.”

He raised an eyebrow at that. “Alright, I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, Joh...I mean Paradise.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“You’re welcome,” he sighed, standing up. “Well, I must go to my next meeting, but for now I welcome you aboard, Paradise. We’ll meet tomorrow after you are inducted, and we can go over the next project and what it will entail.”

“Question, Sir?”

“I have exactly one minute, what is it?”

“CREAM has always abided the law, and the transforming of humans into animals for reasons of coercion is an infraction of the International Genomic Codes. How, exactly, has CREAM avoided detection all these years?”

He smiled. “You’d be surprised how much we can write off as fetish, Paradise. There are thousands of people who have themselves transformed every year into pets, voluntarily. We simply adhere to the same format, and voila. We’ve also, as I’m sure Syn demonstrated, obtained directory access to federal domains and databases. A pico second does not seem like a long time to you or me, but when we are talking about the writing of a database, a picosecond can seem like throwing a baseball through an open window.”

I nodded. “I thought as much, Sir.”

“Stop calling me Sir, dammit, we’ve known each other for a long time.”

“Okay, Cyrus,” I said, smiling.

He began reaching for the switch.

“Oh, and Cyrus?” I said.

“What?”

I smiled, gripping Syn’s hand tightly, entwining my fingers with hers. “I won’t let you down.”

He gave a small grin at that. “No, you won’t.” And his image flickered off the screen.

“YAYYYYY!” Syn jumped up and down, throwing her arms around me. “I’m so happy you changed your mind!”

I smiled, hugging and jumping too. “We are going to have such fun!”

She giggled, joy dancing in her eyes as we walked back toward the private routerport.

They would all burn.
Starting with this bitch on my left.

<END BOOK ONE>

15

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Syn led me to a suite on the highest floor of the Hyatt. "We have a mission tomorrow here in NP, so the boss has told us to stay here."

I nodded, feeling slightly dizzy. I hadn't had much to drink, and wondered why my head was spinning.

"What's wrong," she said.

"Just a bit dizzy. I guess I had too much to drink," I said as Syn opened the door to the suite, and we both gasped a bit.

New Phoenix stretched below us in a glittering tableau of twinkling lights. She held my hand, smiling as we stared outward at the view. It was hard to believe that only three days earlier I was staring out at a view with Sarah and holding her hand.

"Beautiful," I said softly.

Syn nodded, brushing my hair back from my neck. "You can change this all now, you know."

"Yeah?" I said.

She nodded. "You have a nice HUD that will control your cosmetics, hairstyle, lash length, skin tone and other effects.

In my mind, I saw it. "How do I..." but in a moment I saw. It came up in the right-hand corner of my left eye.

"Look at the selection you want, then blink twice to engage. Pretty simple."

I did as instructed, staring at a banged hairstyle very similar to Syn's. I blinked twice and could feel my hair tendrils rearranging. Then I pointed at a different color; blue-black. We went and stood in the doorway, and our hair matched almost perfectly.

"Can I change my height?" I said.

She giggled. "No, that would be a bit too much for entropy to handle."

"Damn, I said." Flickering through other styles and colors, I finally settled back on platinum with the rockabilly 'do I'd been wearing for days now.

Syn smiled. "I knew you would like that style, eventually."

"Yeah, it's sorta grown on me," I laughed. "Literally."

She took my hand and brought it up to her cheek. "You can't know how happy I am, Paradise."

My stomach did a lazy roll. Really? Was I really going to have to do this?

I staggered a little in my heels that wasn't altogether faked.

"You must be exhausted, cupcake. Let's lie down."

She led me to the bed where we stripped off our dresses to our lingerie, and scooted under the covers.

"I don't expect anything more from you than friendship, cupcake," she said and I could hear the smile in her voice. "I know you are still in love with Sarah."

I nodded a bit and felt tears sting my eyes. I gave an unintentional little sob.

"Shhh, I know." She stroked my arm beneath the covers.

I cried silently, not wanting to give Syn the satisfaction of comforting or torturing me in either way.

I touched the microdot on my mole once, switching off the recording. I had Cyrus's confession all on video. Probably. But I had no idea how, and when to use it. Best to at least go through a couple of days and see how I might best leverage my revenge on the entire organization.

Dave/Daphne's words haunted me. Why would Cyrus lie about all that? Well, to initiate the *Artistique* of course. But why would he put up his own daughter like that? And what else was he lying about? I decided he was a megalomaniac, his skewed artistic vision of the future was becoming a lot of peoples' nightmare.

The microdot had evidence now. If I could escape, I could take it to the police, or if I could gain access to a tablet, I could upload it directly. He admitted to top-level genomic crimes. Thing was, who would I take it to? If Dave was telling the truth, Cyrus had high-level police and government officials in his pocket. So who could I take it to that would not instantly turn me over?

I wanted to think on it some more, but sleep wrapped me in its warm embrace.

The next morning, I rose early. Syn was still sleeping next to me. I briefly considered rifling through her belongings to find her tablet, but she'd notice in an instant and I'd be back at the farm, probably birthing puppies. I got up and ran the shower super hot. Before I stepped in, I ordered us both outfits for the day: Dress suits, mine in cream and her in crimson. I figured it would play up the "girlfriend" angle and I did want her to trust me at this point.

Normally, I would have rushed into attempting to send out the info I had. The old me would have done that, for sure. I would have found whatever weapon I could and bashed pretty Miss Syn's brains in while she was sleeping. I think this was a test of some kind, however, Thing One and Thing Two were noticeably absent and were probably lurking behind a false door somewhere in the suite. The instant I failed the test it would be all over.

After my shower, I stood in front of the Smartscreen in mirror mode. I aimed my eyes at the different skin colors and enhancements, playing with the different combinations. I suppose in different circumstances it might be fun to try something new, but I stuck to the old look I'd been handed,

the crimson and gold-flaked lipstick, winged eyeliner and flutterbye lashes.

I rolled on the white silk stockings, lingerie, followed by the suit skirt, silk cami, and jacket. I selected a french twist for my hair, something new!

I stepped out into the room, and Syn gave a little gasp. "Oooh, so professional today!"

"Well, it seemed to go with the new job and all," I said. "I picked one for you too, same as mine but in crimson."

"Really?" she said, dashing into the room to see the auto-closet. She took it out and held it against her. "I love it! Thank you!"

She hugged me then, and I hugged her back. "Seemed the least I could do since you chose our dresses for last night."

She pulled away, wiping a tear. "I can't tell you..." she smiled again, and wiped another one away. "Anyway, let me get ready real quick and I'll be out in a jiffy!"

"Okay!" I said, trying to match her tone and hugging her again.

She closed the door and I sighed, rolling my eyes. This was going to be a long day. Even longer since we were here and not in NC where God knows what was happening to Sara in the kennel. Hang in there baby, I'll be there soon, I promise.

After breakfast in the hotel, we went to a meeting room where again we had a large smartscreen in front of two chairs. "Does anyone else work for CREAM other than you and me?" I said, as we sat down.

She giggled. "You are a special case, cupcake. Until you are indoctrinated we aren't taking any chances."

I nodded as the monitor flickered to life and the face of Cyrus Kincaid filled the screen. I touched the microdot on the mole of my lip to begin recording.

"I hope you two had a nice evening and a good sleep?" he said glancing at each of us.

"Yes!" Syn replied. "Paradise chose our outfits today!"

I smiled and actually felt myself blush a little.

"Well, well, Paradise. I never knew you had it in you. You look lovely."

"Thanks, Boss," I said.

"Well, I would love to get into the details of our next case, but step one is for you to go through onboarding and indoctrination. Are you prepared, Paradise?"

I shrugged. "Will it hurt?"

He grinned. "Only if you want it to."

I sighed. "So what, exactly, does it entail?"

He glanced down at a tablet he had in front of him. "Well, last night, as you might have guessed, was a bit of a test. We allowed you to share a room with Syn to see if you would take any untoward action against her. We are happy to see you have changed your ways, John... I mean, Paradise."

"I didn't see the point. I do want to earn your trust, Sir."

He nodded at that. "Today you will receive a dose of nanos that have quite a different function from the cosmetic doses you've had up to now. These are much more robust and have quite a different function."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"First, your nanos will quietly record everything you see, hear, or speak. They will automatically upload this to CREAM servers and it will be archived."

I nodded, feeling butterflies in my stomach again.

"Second, you will receive training and defensive nanos that will assist with reintegrating your current body with your fighting style. I'm sorry to say that should you find your way back to being the 6'4 male as before, you will have a very difficult time operating it. Your Nanos will only function in this particular female form unless you are deployed on a CREAM sanctioned mission."

I nodded at that too. It was getting hard to remember what it had been like when I'd been male, anyway. I was growing more and more comfortable with this body and frankly, the thought of going back to my old body gave me shivers.

"Understood," I said softly.

"Third, you will have a series of obedience nanos injected. These will make things very difficult for you if you choose to disobey any direct orders by myself or Syn, or any other CREAM functionary above your pay grade."

"I've always had a little "problem" with authority." I said softly.

"We know. And given your reluctance to participate and what is at stake for you, we felt some extra insurance was necessary."

Again, I nodded. I hated the sound of all of it, hated the thought that my thoughts, actions, behavior would all be at the behest of someone else. I would be a thing, a puppet, with very little of the "real me" left.

Or so they thought.

"Lastly, there's this," Kincaid said, holding up a vial.

"And what is that?"

He grinned. "Let's call it a failsafe. If at any time, for any reason, we feel you are acting outside the boundaries of the best interests of CREAM, we will activate these nanos."

"A doomsday?" I said in a soft voice.

"You could say that. Basically, it causes every cell of your body to interlock with adjoining cells. You are still aware, still conscious, but a statue for all intents and purposes, immobile until one of us can release you."

"Why not just kill me? I'm sure you have nanos that could just stop my heart or liquify my lungs or whatever."

"You are about to become a very valuable piece of CREAM property, Paradise. A lot of time, effort, and money has been devoted to your creation."

I sighed at that. "And Sarah?"

He shrugged. "Sarah, or Molly, as you've been instructed, will continue to be your companion. Nothing further will be done to her in any form."

"Please?" I said, giving a slight whimper. "I know what I've promised, but can't you see how much I need her to be returned? I will do anything you say, but there's no reason for her to remain an animal!"

He shook his head, standing up. "Unfortunately, no Please don't bring that subject up again, Paradise. Her fate, and yours, have been sealed." He paused a moment and said in a gruff tone. "Besides which, from the report I've been given she's almost completely utilizing her canine brain at this point anyway. Her intelligence was very high so she has adapted remarkably well. Even if I were to return her to human form immediately, she would have an excruciating recovery to say the least. Even if she could recover, there would be permanent damage."

Tears spilled over my cheeks.

"That's enough of that," Syn said softly.

I nodded and wiped my eyes.

"This won't hurt a bit, cupcake," she said, pressing the hypo too my neck. I felt a brief sting, and then some warmth as the nanos flooded into my veins.

"We can go back to NC, now," Syn said. "That cocktail is going to make you very sleepy."

"It really records everything I do or say?" I said.

She nodded. "I've had it for years. You don't notice it after awhile. It's not like there's someone behind the scenes scouring every record. But in case something happens, like the other day when you and I danced our tango, records are taken for liability and documentation. This way we are sure we haven't missed anything when you begin your missions."

"What missions?" I said, already starting to feel fatigued.

Syn smiled cryptically. "That will be explained to you tomorrow cupcake. Now, let's get back so you can play with Molly."

I nodded, wanting to see her.

We walked back to the private router port. These were all the rage now, with the Uberrich and famous. They were fairly new, and thus, a bit unregulated. It made me a bit nervous to use the private routerport instead of the public one. Router technology had tons of safeguards against arriving at your destination discombobulated from the printers. Private ports did not have near as many safeguards; the theory was that private owners would be much more careful with any transmission that might take place.

"No guardrails, I see," I said as we both entered our pods.

"No real need," Syn replied. "I mean who is really going to step into the beam mid transmission? It's just a waste of material to put up guard rails for the few of us that use these."

I nodded, filing that away for future reference.

We arrived at the CREAM facility in New Chicago. I immediately began walking toward the kennels.

"I'll leave you to your happy reunion, cupcake. I'll pick you up at 8 sharp in the morning, okay?"

I nodded. "Thank you, Syn, for giving me this second chance."

She grinned. "This will be so much fun! You'll see."

I smiled back and walked toward the kennels.

The attendant greeted me at the door with a smile. "How has she been?" I said.

"Perfect," the attendant said. "She performed flawlessly at obedience class. If you'd like to bring her, we meet each day at 7:30 am."

"I'll.... give that some thought," I said, knowing I wouldn't bring her. I did not want her acclimating any more than she already had.

"She really enjoyed the classes, for what it's worth. I do hope you bring her."

He went out into the exercise yard and I gasped a little. Sarah was dashing around the area, tail wagging, tongue lolling just like any of the other animals. Another large German shepherd chased her for a moment, then turned and Sarah chased him. The attendant clapped his hands and both dogs paused, and he pointed a finger down. Both dogs sat on their haunches obediently.

The attendant clasped a leash to Sarah's collar and led her back to me.

"Molly sit." The attendant said.

Sarah sat obediently.

"Molly, stay." The attendant said and placed her leash on the ground next to her.

Sarah, of course, did as instructed.

"Oh, and she made a new friend." The attendant said.

I frowned. "OH?"

He grinned and nodded toward the exercise area. The large German shepherd was whining near the door, tail up straight behind him staring straight at Sarah.

"That's Prince. He's grown fond of Molly, but rest assured not "too" fond if you get my drift. We don't allow the males and females to procreate."

"Good thing!" I said, my stomach tying itself in knots.

He grinned and handed me her leash. "She also knows heel."

I smiled. "I bet she does."

Sarah gave a short sigh, and I gently tugged her leash.

We got back to our suite and I unhooked Sarah's leash and leaned down to take her in my arms.

She smelled different...more doglike. I wanted to give her a bath.

"Do you want to take a bath, honey? After all that time at the kennel?"

She canted her head a bit.

"Molly bath?"

She still had her head canted, though her tail did thump a bit on the floor.

"C'mon honey, let's get you washed."

I walked into the bathroom and began filling the tub. I added some bubble bath, and inhaled the scent of the soap. I realized that women were much more attuned to their other senses. I wanted to crawl into the bathtub myself, and I laughed at that thought.

"Sarah, let's get you into the tub," I said, turning to her.

She gave a short bark and leaped up into the bathtub, causing soap and water to cascade all over us and onto the floor.

I leaned over the tub, clothes soaking, and worked the suds into her fur. She lapped a bit at the water, then shook her head.

I turned on the spigot, and she lapped at the freshwater flowing out of it. I couldn't decide if this was a doggy action or a Sarah action...she might have just been thirsty.

When was the last time Sarah ever drank out of the bath spigot, Paradise? Definitely a doggy action.

I sighed, not knowing what to do. I now knew the location of the routerport, but had none of the controlling information. I would need at least a password or access key, and they had yet to trust me with any of that. All I really needed to do was get Sarah out and into the hands of Carlos, but how?

I thought about that, biting my lip, as I scrubbed Sarah's fur. After a bit, I pulled the plug and let the water run down the drain.

"Okay, Sarah, out you go."

I patted my leg and Sarah leaped from the tub. Almost immediately she shook herself, causing me to squeal as water splattered all over me, soaking me even further. I grabbed a

big fluffy e-towel and passed it over her fur, wicking all the moisture off.

"I love you, baby," I said softly into her rear. She gave me a slurpy doggy kiss.

After toweling her dry, I went out into the room and turned on the smartscreen. I had apparently been granted more privileges; I could now watch entertainment applications and had access to the Net. I did some random searching on CREAM and watched some of the news sources.

The *Artistique* had been a grand success. Thousands of young people had participated for the chance to have their IDMatrix completely rewritten and their genetic shape randomly chosen. They gave a quick interview of UNK, with Olivier performing flawlessly in front of the camera, his white teeth and easy smile loosening the panties of all young girls everywhere. I saw Kerry in the background, glowering, and off to the side was the new Dave, who also gave a short interview. He didn't smile, however, but gave lip service to the wonder of CREAM, the *Artistique*, and how much fun he was now going to have as a dude.

I sighed. I had failed, miserably.

Sarah leaped up beside me and automatically turned around and put her head in my lap. I absently petted her head and ears, feeling the clean fur beneath my fingers.

What did I have? I had been turned into a twin of Syn with platinum retro hair. My head was swimming in a sea of estrogen, I'd lost all body mass, and with my muscles could probably not pull the top off a water globe, much less stand up in a fight with Syn.

Although...I thought about Kincaid's words. Part of the nano programming was to make me "comfortable" in combat situations with my body.

I stood up and walked a few feet forward and entered some tai-chi stances. I moved through each slowly, deliberately, feeling the blood in my veins, the air in my lungs, the earth beneath my feet. I moved from form to form, feeling each one,

first stretching my muscles, then flexing and tightening each one in turn as I progressed.

Breath came very easy. I felt lighter than air, much lighter than I had. I could feel every inch of my body, each finger and toe, from nose to heel. The moves came fluidly, each progressing to the next, and my head cleared as I breathed deep into my new lungs.

Invigorated, I flipped a yoga Application onto the smartscreen and followed along with those exercises as well, my body flexible and strong, each position perfectly balanced. I'd never been a big fan of yoga, I was more into wrestling, boxing, and martial arts, yet the yoga moves made me feel born again, as if I was walking on the planet anew, refreshed, reinvigorated. No longer was I the hulking mass of muscle, this shape and form was sleek, balanced, and even my breasts, though large, did not jiggle with fat but tightened in response to each pose.

Feeling fatigued, I crossed my legs and entered a meditative trance for a bit, clearing my mind of all extraneous thought, allowing it to flow out of my body like water through a screen. I thought of nothing, and everything. One with the chi of the world, my chi joined with the earth chi, feeling my soulthrum.

I blinked on the soul HUD, and opened my eyes. I could now see Sarah's soulthrum surrounding her body. I'd been able to do this, briefly when I had been John, but now I was able to stare at it fully. Her thrum was a deep orange, that shifted into the brown spectrum. I could see her thrum evolving, changing, as her thrum and mind adapted to her new body as well. At the edges, a somewhat neutral gray was entering, dampening her thrum as her brain learned new patterns. The gray was shaded in many different gradations and streaked in various places with white bands. In many ways the gray was far more complex than the orange, which confused me...but maybe it was related to her new condition or something. I'd have to watch it and find out.

I realized then that things were dire, but not as dire as I'd thought the night before. I was still human, at least, and could still think. Sure, my brain was swimming in estrogen and other chemicals, but I was still me under here, still John Paradise. Sarah was my priority, I had to get her out somehow, before that creeping gray could replace her orange.

I did a run down of everything I knew. I was in a compound, granted employee status, but heavily restricted by recording nanos, obedience nanos, backup nanos, and other devious devices. But no matter what they injected me with, I still had free will, could still act, make decisions. I could run, had incredible balance and agility, and I knew I would still keep my cool under fire.

I knew the location of the private routerport, and would be given insight into CREAM's next action in the morning. I hated to wait that long, but I knew if I could save a lot more people by waiting a bit it would be worth it. Syn was beginning to trust me, just a little, and I'd use that trust to my advantage. I knew asking them to let Sarah go was a waste of breath.

I had net access...but I also knew everything was being recorded including myself, sitting here, right now. They didn't need external cameras when they could just peer into...but really that was playback only. It wasn't real-time. I could affect an escape before my brain downloaded the day's events if I just knew when the download happened...

Getting up I walked to the smartscreen. There was no way I'd be able to access my old cybertools without ringing countless alarms...

I thought about it some more. The brain dump had to happen once per cycle with incremental uploads throughout each day. If I could identify when it happened...

My tablet sat on the table. Apparently, Cream wanted me to use it for a portable Smartscreen. It had a wireless ear-piece...which gave me an idea.

I took out the earpiece and studied it carefully. As I thought, it utilized different types of technology but every wireless

communication device was really just a radio, right? If I could find the right band...

I set the earpiece to wide spectrum and inserted it into my ear. I heard cacophony of white noise. I separated out the signals from the Smartscreen and Tablet, since I knew those by heart. Then I waited.

About fifteen minutes later, I heard another sound which normally would be filtered. It lasted only a few seconds, then cut off. Fifteen minutes later, the sound came again, before cutting off.

Hmmm, they would know I was monitoring the wide spectrum, but not why. I then sat on the floor with my legs crossed and my hands on my knees and closed my eyes. A girl needs a little white noise in order to meditate, dontcha' know? I sat in this pose for a very long time, calculating each interval of the sound and the duration.

Time passed slowly. I was hyperaware of my body, my breath slow and steady, my limbs relaxed. I could feel the twinges in my muscles as each one relaxed after the workout. I thought about Kerry, then quickly replaced him with Sarah, then Kerry again and I grew aroused. I didn't give into my carnality, forcing myself to calm and count each 15 minute cycle.

Sarah licked my face at one point and I almost stopped the meditation charade, but then I heard her go over to the doggy mat and relieve herself.

Near 2 AM, the tone changed, becoming much longer. I smiled.

First upload complete.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"So, Ms. Paradise, I'm sure you are anxious to find out what is in store for you," Kincaid said, the next day. We had gathered in a small conference room and this time several other people were in attendance. I wore the cream business suit and skirt combination with my hair tendrils pulled back into the french twist again. Syn was similarly dressed in her crimson suit. Three other people sat around the table. Kincaid was on a SmartCube, this time in the center of the table, with everyone seated able to see him clearly. I wondered where he might actually be.

"Yes, I'm sure." I said softly.

Kincaid chuckled."With us today are our department heads. This is Jack D'Arcy, Fran Washington and you know Sandra Ericson."

Each of the people nodded at me in turn.

"Jack is VP of Sales, Fran is our HR Director and Sandra is my right arm, leg, hand, you name it as Director of Operations."

"Nice to meet all of you," I said softly.

"Good, now, down to business. Our next project will be entitled: *Phantastique* And with a theatric wave of his hand, all the lights went out and the SmartCube went dark.

"Imagine an event in which your very essence is transfixed."

I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. A low glowing sphere illuminated on the HoloCube which became three dimensional. *"and then transformed."* on the screen an older man shifted becoming lithe and supple, young and strong.

"Imagine being immersed in an experience so real, every sense of your body becomes involved." I felt wind on my face and smelled lilacs as the screen lit up to show a field of lavender flowers with a small home in the distance. I could feel warmth on my face from somewhere as if the sun were shining behind me. Rain appeared, sudden and dramatic, and the the air became cold with the scent of damp flowers filling the room. Wind blew into my face and I felt moisture.

Rolling my eyes, I sighed.

"Now, imagine, if through the use of shamanic Ayahuasca, these senses could be manipulated into facing your greatest fear." A lion leaped out of the screen and I gave a little jump, standing automatically and entering a defensive position. I noticed Syn had done the same, a weapon appearing in her right fist. I chuckled and glanced at her. She smiled in response as we both sat down. *"Or your deepest desire."* An orgasmic female voice emanated from the screen as two curvaceous ladies cavorted around a handsome man who caressed each of them with his hands.

"Phantastique will combine all the arts: visual, sensory, auditory, tactile, and genomic, into one major extraordinary experience, unlike anything you've ever experienced." Music filled the room as the lion paced in front of us. I could smell it, feel its presence almost like a physical force. "Combined with the latest in Genomic science."

My stomach tumbled with butterflies. What the fuck was this maniac cooking up now?

"The Coalition for the Realistic Expression of Art and Music seeks the elite of humanity to experience Phantastique! A sensory artistic experience designed to entice and enhance

everything from your greatest fear to the heights of pleasure and passion. Join us!

The presentation finished and the lights came back on. All of us were panting just a bit from the extreme sensory illusion.

"Ayahuasca?" I said. "That's pretty dangerous stuff. And isn't it illegal?"

Kincaid smiled. "Not if used for spiritual purposes in the pursuit of religious ceremonial events."

"Ahh," I said.

"Indeed, Ms. Paradise."

"So you're going to get them stoned, throw them into an isolation chamber, and then what?" Sandy Ericson said.

"The participants will be flooded with Ontological Nanites."

I frowned. So did most of the other attendees. Except for Sandy. "Those are highly unpredictable and considerably dangerous."

"Okay, I'll ask it," I said. "What the hell are Ontological Nanites?"

Kincaid turned to me. "To be or Not to Be, Ms. Paradise."

I sighed.

Sandy interrupted. "They take whatever might happen to be going through your mind at the time and create changes within the body as a direct result. They are very experimental, bleeding-edge technology. We have absolutely no empirical evidence on them at all, and this could result in..."

Kincaid interrupted her. "I knew you would have an issue with the Nanites, Ms. Ericson."

"Problem?" she said, her face turning red. "Why would I have a problem? We're still assessing the possible damage from the last Genomic Event you orchestrated, and you want to push on with another project? How long do we have for this one?"

"Friday," he said with a grin.

The table erupted in gasps and moans. "Are you kidding? Why so fast?"

Kincaid sighed. "I'm afraid we have an express timeline on this due to...legal matters."

The group fell silent at that.

"I'm sure you are aware our last production is still being scrutinized for legality?"

The small group nodded and some "yes" answers murmured.

"Then you know we have been given a "by" by the International Genomic Council."

Again the group nodded heads.

"That "By" expires at midnight on Friday. I want to squeeze the last possible drop of Genomic freedom from our time. We have the nanites, I've purchased the sensory dep tanks. I've already arranged for an Amazonian shaman to be in attendance. Our attendees will be given a tea that contains both the Ontological Nanites and the Ayahuasca. They will have a four hour session in the tank in which they will be subjected to music that they have selected along with a few selections I have had prepared. The nanites will create an amazing artistic statement within the attendees, each creation will be completely unique. Can you imagine what it would be like to be given a dose of hallucinogen, then allowed to meditate deeply through an experience of light, sound, and tactile responses? I think we will witness some amazing transformations."

"People could die," Syn said quietly.

Kincaid nodded sagely. "People could die, Syn. It is true. We will have medical staff on hand to ensure no emergencies takes place. We will have instant access into the chambers and can effect full genomic repairs if necessary."

This sounded about as brilliant as an elephant in a China shop. "What do you want us to do then? It sounds like all arrangements have been made?"

"I need to identify the 10 individuals. I want them to be the elite of the elite."

"And you haven't had any takers?" Sandy Ericson said.

Kincaid's face fell a bit. "One."

"How many have you asked?"

"Two hundred."

There were murmurs at this.

"And no one else wishes to participate?" Sandy said.

"Well, they have yet to respond to us." Kincaid cleared his throat. "We've called several times and have not heard a response."

Again, I rolled my eyes. I thought about the situation, the Phantasiq or whatever craziness Kincaid wanted to enact. I thought about the type of people he wanted to recruit, the elite of the elite. I'd known people like that, officers of upper echelon during my time of service in the marines. I shook my head. Gads, the best way to get them to do something was to.

I laughed softly.

"Is there something you wish to state, Ms. Paradise?"

"I know how to get them to join."

"Please, share with the group."

"Well, just let me have 5 minutes with any of them and I can practically guarantee you'll have ten before the week is out."

Kincaid raised his eyebrows and looked at Syn. She nodded serenely.

"Alright then. You and Syn will depart this afternoon. I'd like to see how you might accomplish this."

I rolled my eyes, then nodded.

"If that will be all, we shall reconvene this Friday. I shall attend this event live, in person. I hope to see you all there, and that Ms. Paradise's idea will work."

There were various mumblings of assent around the table. I realized this was one embattled group. I had carefully recorded the entire meeting on my cam. Hopefully, soon, I'd have someone to show it to.

David Pressler was a young, up and coming GenWeb entrepreneur. He'd invented several intellectual products that had scored big and had an immense following. He was young, charismatic, outgoing, and adventurous.

Syn and I had arrived in his Mexico City hacienda less than an hour after the meeting. I had taken Sarah to the kennel again, but this time her tail had been wagging furiously as we approached. I didn't want to think about what that might indicate, so I just hoped her mind stayed human long enough for me to get through this ridiculousness.

Syn and I stood in his outdoor foyer in front of a hedgerow of lovely white and pink flowers. I touched one gently. They reminded me of home...Oleander. I smelled one. Bitter. It seemed a very appropriate aroma for me right now. I plucked the flower and put it in my hair with parts of the stem and leaves.

"Ooh, that's a beautiful look for you, cupcake." Syn said, also plucking a flower and putting it in her hair. "We can be twins!"

I sighed, closing my eyes briefly and allowing the pain and anguish to flow through me, draining out. It wasn't the time, not yet.

"Wow, they didn't tell me you'd be so beautiful," David Pressler said entering the foyer. Syn and I smiled.

"Hello, Mr. Pressler." I said holding out my hand.

He was blonde, with whitened teeth and extended incisors. He wore his hair in a curious fashion, like a lion's mane: long locks that flowed out from his head in a halo. His skin was slightly mottled with spots as he took my hand gently in his and kissed it with strangely soft lips. I felt something tickle inside me, and I inhaled. I didn't want these feelings.

He led us into the hacienda, up an elevator to the sixth floor, and into a conference room. We sat at the thick wooden table and he ordered us glasses of water that came in thick Mexican water glasses.

"So, Mr. Pressler." I said. "I show we are currently holding an application from you regarding our next CREAM event." I

held my tablet out in front of me as if regarding impressive data. I'd also put on a clear pair of spectacles to look more the part.

He shrugged, yawning. "Yeah, well. I know it's on Friday but I have a ton of shit to do this week."

"So did you intend to participate?"

He shrugged. "Like I said, I'm pretty busy. Maybe if I were to be given certain Guarantees..." he looked me up and down with a smile.

I flipped the cover on my tablet closed with a snap. "I just wanted to let you know, we made our selection and you didn't make our list. Thank you for applying however, and we will keep you in mind for the next round." I smiled, standing and holding out my hand.

"Oh!" He said, standing and taking my hand. "Well, then, this is a short meeting."

I smiled brightly. "Thank you for your interest in CREAM Mr. Pressler. We'll reach out to you again if we feel you meet our standards."

He released my hand, frowning. "You're welcome? So that's it? That was the meeting?"

"Yes." I started walking out the door. "So sorry to take up your time, but we do value the "personal touch" even on our turn-down list. Thank you again."

"No trouble at all Ms. ."

"Paradise." I said and walked out of the room.

Syn followed, a stormy look on her face. Her voice was a hiss. "What are you doing? We are supposed to recruit them, not reject them!"

I raised an eyebrow. "Keep walking."

We nearly made it to the elevator before I heard a loud voice. "Hold on!"

I laughed softly. "Bingo."

David Pressler ran out of the room toward us. "May I ask, why?"

"Why what, Mr. Pressler?"

"Why I was rejected?"

I glanced down at my tablet. "Well, I'm afraid I am not at liberty to say. As you were told, we have a high standard for who we allow into this event. It is truly for the elite of the elite. We just didn't feel your...portfolio...matched with whom we were looking for."

"Who did, then?"

The elevator door opened. I smiled and turned to leave.

"No, seriously, who made it onto the list?" He held the door to the elevator open.

I glanced down at my clipboard. "Well, I'm not supposed to share that information, Mr. Pressler." I gave him a look though, a conspiratorial one.

"I can definitely make it worth your while." He said, with a smile that I'm sure he felt was disarming.

"Oh, Mr. Pressler." I glanced down. "I might lose my job were I to reveal that to you."

He stepped into the elevator. "I'm going to follow you until you tell me."

The elevator door closed.

I smiled.

After a half-hour meeting in which I allowed David Pressler to dazzle me with his wit, charm, and salesmanship he said: "So, I can expect a re-evaluation then?"

"Given this new information, I'm sure things will work to your benefit." I said, standing up from the table.

He put his hand on my back and kissed me lightly on the lips. "Until next time, then."

I smiled softly at him. "Until we meet again."

Syn cleared her throat, grinning, and we left the room.

"You did it!" she whispered in the elevator, and I shushed her and pointed at an invisible camera in the corner.

She gripped my hand as the elevator door opened. I stepped out.

On the way out, I stopped in the Ladies' room. As I sat on the stool, I quickly peeled the recording device off the mole above my lip, and placed it in the corner of the stall's Smartab. Opening a web address, I directed it to bring up the latest fashion emag. Without removing my eyes from the screen, I brought up another tab behind the first and keyed in a series of numbers for a netaddress, and enabled the transfer. From a shell command, I sent a simple link address to Benny in New Phoenix.

"He certainly had your ticket, didn't he cupcake?" Syn said from the next stall. I jumped, startled, but stayed in control.

"I think you have it backward," I said.

"Oh, you had him figured out for sure," Syn said, opening the stall door.

"I guess I haven't earned any privacy yet," I said.

She grinned as I finished up. "I just love watching that lovely new snatch of yours in action."

I gave a small grin, finished, and pulled up my skirt and panties.

As I drew near to her she whispered in my ear. "Admit it, Cupcake. You love the thought of that very handsome, very rich man sticking his large throbbing..."

I turned my head and kissed Syn full on the lips. My tongue darted out and danced with hers, as I pressed my body up to her tightly. I felt her stiffen in response, then relax, her arms wrapping around me. We kissed for a few moments and I felt my damned heightened libido kick into full gear.

"His equipment isn't what I've been dreaming about," I said, in what I hoped sounded like a husky whisper.

"Oh, baby," she said softly. "You don't know how long I've ached for you to say that."

As we kissed, I reached my hand back and peeled the recording device off the Smartab. I entered a key combination by feel, erasing all history of the exchange. Then I closed the

encrypted session and let the screen return to the fashion mag I'd been reading.

Panting, I pulled away from her. Her face was flushed, breath coming short and quick. She stared at me with her smoky green eyes.

I stared back into her eyes with my cobalt blue. My hand gripped her ass hard and she gave a breathless squeal.

"I think someone might need a good spanking," I said in her ear.

"Oooh, yes!" she said. "I've been a bad bad girl."

"Mmmm, I know that," I said, giving her a bite on the neck. "I think it's time you and I got to know each other a little better, don't you?"

"Let's go home!" she said, nearly running out the door.

I watched her leave and glanced back as the smartab clicked shut. My "eyes" had only seen the fashion mag and the encounter with Syn. They couldn't record every input and they couldn't record my thoughts. Hopefully, Benny would get the recording and take action.

Or he could see the message from me, remember the last dickpic I'd sent him, and delete it.

Arriving back at CREAM central, we were greeted by Sandy Erickson. "I see you were successful in your endeavors, Ms. Paradise."

"The best way to get someone at that level to do something is to tell them they can't."

"A Masterstroke, Ms. Paradise. Brilliant."

I smiled. "Well, we'll see Sandy. The next one might not be so easy."

She tapped my fire-walled tablet. "I've taken the liberty to send you your next few contacts."

"Are we to leave now?" I said.

Syn smiled lasciviously." Not until tomorrow morning, Baby."

Sandy looked up abruptly. I raised perfectly sculpted eyebrows and gave a slow wink. Inside I shuddered and bit the inside of my cheek to stave off revulsion.

We walked back to Syn's suite, hand in hand. She nibbled at my neck and I had to pretend to enjoy it. Fact was, it wasn't just the fact that the bitch had transformed Sarah, I was having a very difficult time being aroused by her body. Sandy was a beautiful woman too, but in my mind, all I wanted was to maybe emulate her hair color and makeup style, not fuck her. I tried to think of the old me making love with my familiar cock and my familiar body. But it returned to Sarah in my mind, her smile, her laugh, her scent. All the times we'd kissed and caressed, made love in the middle of the night. Then to her body, changing, screaming, and the way the top of her head had pushed up to become her new dog's snout, and my ardor immediately slackened.

Something had tripped in my brain. Apparently, Syn didn't know this either, because she was looking forward to our encounter.

Her door whooshed open, and we entered. I took the opportunity to move in, being the former man that I was. I took her in my arms, and lifted her jacket off. I unbuttoned her blouse and planted my lips on hers.

Inwardly, I pictured David Pressler. Followed by Kerry, AND Olivier. My libido responded as I fantasized, clearing my mind and letting my body do the rest. If I allowed myself to think of Sarah, it returned to the horror that had happened to her so I pictured my new body making love to cacophony of the band members of UNK, David, hell even old Kincaid got some action and I was able to increase my ardor.

Syn panted as I eased her skirt down her hips, then kissed her soft inner thigh. I nipped it and heard her moan in response. In my mind it was David I was kissing and biting, my imagination running wild. Syn gave a soft moan and I moved

on to taste her labia, licking softly then plunging in deep, and back out again to tease her clitoris. I felt Syn's fingernails in my hair tendrils, holding my head to her sex, the nails deep in my tendrils...which could strangely...feel.

I gasped at the sudden feeling and looked up and into her eyes.

"Oh, I see you hadn't discovered that yet," she said in a breathless voice. "Yes, your scalp and hair tendrils are basically one giant erogenous zone."

She demonstrated, taking my tendrils in her hand and letting them slide through slowly. I moaned unintentionally at the feeling, as if I had hundreds of sexual appendages all being stroked at the same time. I realized, that was exactly what I had and it caused me to moan even more.

I returned to ministering to her sex and she ran her fingers through my tendrils. She gasped, pulling harder and harder, and I responded in kind, unintentionally, David had been replaced by Kerry. Syn orgasmed suddenly, gushing into my mouth and she gave a long scream of delight as she writhed beneath me. I was close as well, but she gave a devilish laugh and gripped me by the shoulders, and pulled my head up to kiss her mouth.

"I have another surprise for you, lover." She said between kisses.

"What's that?"

She leaned over and took something out of a small case. It looked like a disk. She reached down and put it between her legs, and I felt something inflate.

"Oh God!" she said, her voice a bit deeper. "I've always wanted to use this!"

She gripped me hard, then rolled us over, rolling on top of me. I felt the artificial phallus press between my legs and suddenly I was being penetrated and I gave a small scream as something tore away inside me.

"I broke your cherry," she said, grinding into me. I moaned in response, the feeling of penetration combined with the orgy of men in my head lifting me to new heights.

She thrust deeply into me, moaning in turn as the apparatus seamlessly integrated with her nervous system.

"Oh, God, I can feel it! Inside you!"

I could only gasp in response as we continued. She kissed me again, licking my neck, her hands in my hair tendrils and all I could think of was being in the arms of David Pressler with his cute smile and hard abdominal muscles. She massaged my breasts, then kissed and licked them and I screamed at the feeling.

She continued to writhe and penetrate me, then she pulled out and turned us over again, to pull me up into an embrace. Then she guided my head back down and I took the thing in my mouth and for all intents and purposes, it felt very real.

"Oh, God YES!" she said. "It's as if I have a real cock!"

I opened my mouth, licking and sucking, lost completely in the fantasy of my mind. I tickled the base of it and she screamed again as it plunged into and out of my mouth. She continued to stroke my hair, and I licked and sucked until she exploded in my mouth and I felt it eject a sticky salty substance and I had to swallow to prevent choking.

She lifted my chin to hers. "How does it feel to be such an amazing cocksucker, baby?"

I couldn't speak, and she kissed my mouth again, driving once again hard cock back into my vagina. I gasped again, and this time she pulled me on top of her and I rode the cock thing, lifting myself up and down it's throbbing surface.

I glanced in the mirror above her bed and could see the two women, the blonde atop the brunette, both with creamy skin, both naked, both gyrating. I opened my mouth as orgasm erupted through me causing me to clench, my toes curling as I pressed my breasts against hers tightly.

"Mmmm, there you go, lover." She said in a husky voice.

"Oh. My God." I said, still feeling the orgasm moving through me. The cock was still buried deep, and I lifted myself off and lay next to her.

"I've wanted to do that to you since we first met," Syn said softly.

"Mmmm," I moaned in response.

"Sex as a girl isn't so bad, right?"

"No, not bad at all," I said, closing my eyes and feeling the afterglow.

"I told you, you'd love being a girl." She held me in her arms then.

I allowed myself to be held. At first, I'd wanted to use this opportunity to gain her trust even more, but she'd brought me to such an extreme sexual high...I looked up into the mirror above our beds. I still didn't find HER attractive, but I certainly did enjoy the experience and wondered what it'd be like with someone with a real...

"You should probably head home now, lover." She said. "We have an early morning tomorrow."

"Yes," I said, trying to lift my head, and failing.

"Or you could stay right here."

I nodded, weakly feeling a strange lassitude sweep over me. She stroked my hair tendrils, and I fell asleep.

The next morning I awoke still in Syn's arms. She was snoring softly. I rose and padded naked over to my clothes and began to put them back on silently.

I sat at her kitchen table, fingering the flower I had taken from the hacienda the day before. I was wrung out, and not in a good way. I felt dirty, like I'd betrayed Sarah, but I needed to gain the upper hand in this relationship or I'd never get out of here. I wondered what Benny might be doing. The police could be getting ready to swarm this place any minute, or he could have deleted the message. I'd passed messages to him

like this in the past, and he had sent replies...I sure wished I could gain net access somehow.

If only I could gain access to Syn's tablet or SmartScreen. I glanced over at the darkened device on the wall. It was password protected, of course, but I might be able to open her tablet if she had been careless the last time she'd been on it.

I glanced into the bedroom and saw her sleeping soundly. She might be sleeping soundly, but Thing Two could be anywhere, lurking, a piece of furniture, a space behind the curtain. I'm sure I was being observed.

I fingered the plant, breaking the leaves apart absently, smelling the waxy aroma of the Oleander. Ugh, I'd need to wash my hands because...

I blinked. Oleander.

Standing, I walked over to her coffee maker and directed it to prepare two cups of Syn's favorite coffee.

"Morning lover," I said softly, bringing a tray and setting it down on the side of the bed. Syn looked up at me, blearily.

"What time is it?" she said in a soft voice.

"Almost eight o'clock. You must have been tired."

She stretched."Mmm, and you made coffee."

I handed her a cup and took one for myself. "What time is our next appointment?"

"Eleven," she said, sipping from her cup.

I smiled. "Perfect. I need to go shower, change clothes and see Molly."

She sipped. "Mmmm, delicious. Thank you, cupcake, for the coffee, and for last night."

Biting the inside of my cheek I leaned over and kissed her on the lips. "You're welcome."

She kissed me back. "You'll be back to pick me up?"

"Of cours,," I said, standing and walking toward the door.

She smiled and gazed after me fondly, as she sipped her coffee.

I went to the kennel first. The young man I'd met earlier was standing in the play area with dogs all around him barking and dashing to and fro. I spotted Sarah. Her tail was up as she flitted around the other German shepherd, nipping at his neck and back. Then the male would snap back and Sarah would dash off, with the male on her heels. They'd run for a bit, then Sarah would stop and the male would crash into her.

As soon as she saw me, she ran over, moving naturally, powerfully, her tongue lolling out of her mouth, her tail wagging furiously.

Like any of the other dogs.

I triggered my soulthrum hud instinctively and passed it over her. I could still see a faint orange amidst the complicated gray mixed with black swirls. As she ran up, she tumbled into my legs, and I nearly fell off my heels.

"No!" I said sharply, and Sarah's tail instantly drooped and stopped wagging.

I knelt down and gathered her in my arms. "I'm sorry, you just nearly knocked me off my feet!" I said, hugging her tightly.

She licked my face with her long doggy tongue and I had to keep moving it out of her reach.

"Molly, sit." The attendant said sharply.

Sarah obediently sat on her haunches, her tail still wagging.

"Hi," he said, smiling.

I realized I liked that smile and smiled back in response. "Hello again."

"I've taught her some new commands. Would you like to see?"

I smiled. He had neatly combed hair with very tan skin that looked completely natural. His teeth were white, but not abnormally so, and I could see his muscles under his

collared shirt. As he turned to direct Sarah, I gazed down at his backside and noticed that was taught and firm too. I felt that quivering again, and I twirled my hair absently and tried not to shift my legs too much against the moisture that was gathering between them.

"Molly, fetch!" He said and tossed a plastic bone into the play yard.

Sarah obediently ran and picked up the bone in her mouth, then trotted back to the attendant and dropped it at his feet. "Good girl!" he said, and scratched the area around her collar roughly.

"Molly stay," he said and moved away from her. Sarah sat, watching him, her doggy face following him.

"Come," he said, and Sarah stood and walked to the attendant who again petted and scratched her.

"Wow," I said, moving over to them. "You've done an incredible job!"

"She's really smart." He said, looking into my eyes.

"Mmm, I think you might be the smart one," I said, taking his arm in mine and holding it to me. What the fuck was I doing?

He smiled, a little uncomfortable, but enjoying the attention. "I'm Dale," he said.

"You can call me Paradise," I said, releasing his arm.

"You're new here," he said in a soft voice.

"Mhmm," I purred. "I need someone strong and handsome to show me around."

"Really?" he said. "Well, I mean. I could show you around the compound sometime. If you'd like."

I took his arm in mine again and leaned in close. "I'd like that a great deal."

"How about this afternoon? I'm off at 2?"

"Awww," I pouted. "I have to work all day today. How about tonight?"

"Yes!" He said a little too loud, and I giggled. "I mean, okay. Tonight would work great."

"Okay, Dale," I said, releasing his arm and gyrating my hips to grasp Sarah's collar. "Thank you for taking such good care of my dog."

He blushed deeply. "No problem, ma'am. It's our service."

I smiled and leaned in toward him. "Well, you do it very well."

He pulled a leash out of his pocket. "Here, you can lead her back inside."

He leaned down to clip the leash on Sarah's collar, and I couldn't help but run my hand over his firm tush. It was like I couldn't keep my hands off him. What the fuck?

"Thank you so much," I said, my voice like melted butter.

He turned, smiling. "You're very welcome, Ms. Paradise."

I brushed my breasts across his chest as I leaned down to take her leash. "Until tonight, Dale."

He cleared his throat and I could see his pants tenting in response. "Yes, err. Yes. You can find me at suite 1202 North."

I leaned in and kissed him warmly on the cheek. "1202. I'll remember that. See you tonight, Dale."

I literally had to tear myself away from him to lead Sarah back into the kennels.

Shaking my head, I eased the gate open to Sarah's stall and she obediently walked inside. I stroked her fur, scratching at the area around her collar. She arched her neck, apparently, it was her favorite spot. I looked at her kennel with food bowl and water dish in one corner and the sleeping pad in the other. She lowered her nose to the ground and sniffed over to the food bowl and wolfed it down voraciously. Then she lapped at the water and returned to me.

Every motion seemed natural. She moved from one to the next to the next without pause. I knew each passing day she lost more and more of herself. Considering my actions with the attendant, the same thing was happening to me.

"It won't be long now, baby," I said softly into her doggy ear.

She panted, licking my face. I thought about the oleander tea I made this morning.

“Things are finally in motion.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I returned to my suite, stripped out of my clothes, and took a very hot shower. I wanted to rid myself of Syn's stink, and the shame I'd been feeling. I tried to picture the guilt and all of it sluicing down my body and into the drain and was mildly successful.

It was important to gain her confidence. It was important to distract her from the real goal of what I'd sent to Benny. She trusted me to hand her a full cup of coffee, with its deadly payload of crushed oleander. I didn't actually know if her nanites would counteract the poison or not, but it seemed like a perfect opportunity to begin exacting my revenge. I suspected her nanites, like mine, guarded against viruses, bacteria, and the like but hoped maybe the oleander might sneak through since it was a biologic poison.

I had little hope of her actually dying from ingesting it, and as soon as she knew she was poisoned, she'd probably put two and two together with the oleander, and I would be held accountable. But I prayed for a little window of opportunity here, at least maybe enough to sneak Sarah out and into the hands of Carlos. I needed to play up the "Twin sisters"

angle, so she'd know I was madly in love with her and couldn't possibly do anything to harm her.

I sighed. It left such a vile taste in my mouth. But I needed to take advantage of this window of opportunity as much as possible. I actually had a method of disposal for her that wouldn't involve an extended fight, but I wasn't quite ready to take Syn completely out of the game yet because I hadn't yet figured out what to do with Kincaid.

The perfect opportunity would be Friday, I thought. He'd actually be onsite and vulnerable to attack. Friday, it had to be. I hoped I could forestall Syn's suspicion of me for at least that long. It was Sarah's deadline too, but if Syn were ill, perhaps I could sneak Sarah out without anyone being the wiser.

I finished with my shower and went out into the dressing area. My hips automatically started grinding the instant I saw myself. Fuck, this libido kept me almost constantly aroused. It clouded my judgment, and if I wasn't careful I'd be a complete nymphomaniac shortly.

I thought of the artificial phallus from last night and closed my eyes against the remembered feelings. I went through the starting lineup for the Arizona WildBirds to try to stave off all the sexual imagery.

I stared at myself in the mirror. We were nearly identical twins, I thought. I accessed the hair hud and played with different styles and colors. I styled it similar to Syn's with the same midnight black severe bangs, and short slanted bob. Then I dialed in the lipstick, mascara, eyeliner, and lashes to match.

Hmmm, I thought. She had larger breasts than I did, but I was nearly identical cosmetically. My nose was slightly smaller and upturned, and I was smaller in height as well, but other than that I could be a dead ringer for the woman.

I turned sideways and looked at my profile. Yes, her breasts were definitely larger. I wondered briefly if she could enlarge min...what the fuck was I thinking! Keep your eyes on the prize, John. Sarah returned to human, you returned to being

a card-carrying member of the national insemination society of the North American United Continent.

Keeping my hair in the same style as Syn, I turned the color back to platinum and chose a skin-tight blue silk dress that left nothing to the imagination. If you got 'em, flaunt 'em, I thought.

I also kept the same cosmetic combination, blew a kiss to the mirror, and teetered on my sky-high blue stiletto heels out the door, my hips swaying seductively with each step.

Syn met me with open-mouthed awe. "Cupcake!" she exclaimed. "You look...incredible!"

I smiled back and did a little pirouette. "I'm you, only blond."

"I know!" she had actual tears beading her eyes. She took me to the mirror and we stood looking at each other. She was wearing a business suit and skirt combo, but other than that we could have been sisters, albeit me being a touch younger and more petite.

"Your breasts are larger, though," I said in a gush. "And your nose is a little less turned up than mine."

"Well, and there's this," she said turning toward me and I saw something tenting her skirt. Something that looked suspiciously like...

"Oh my God!" I said. "You didn't take it off? Why-ever not?"

She smiled. "Well, let's just say it's a bit more attached to me than I originally intended. I tried to take it off, but apparently, my nanites have integrated with it so deeply that it's become something of a part of me. I could go to the gen-lab and have it excised, but I thought..."

"No!" I squealed. "No, leave it!"

"Alright," she giggled. "I thought maybe we might enjoy it later when we come back."

"Oh definitely!" I said, a bit too loud. Gads I was already aroused. I gyrated my legs together trying to not feel the

moistness between them. Sam Arbuckle, Pitcher. Joey Moore Catcher. Armondo Juarez First Base. I took a deep breath, and the arousal subsided a little.

To make things worse, Syn moved up close to me, wrapping her arms around my neck and kissing me, open-mouthed and sensual. This did not arouse me, it made me want to gag, but the feeling of the...thing between her legs did send shivers up my spine. It was sad that the thought of kissing a beautiful woman no longer held the intrinsic arousal I was used to...it was the thought of the cock. All my thoughts came back to it, and I felt like I was riding a whirlpool with everything circling around it. I suppose if the old me had been confronted with a male-appearing woman who exhibited the same behavior I might have a similar reaction. I bit back the bile in my throat and allowed myself to kiss back. I tried to put Sarah firmly in my mind, I was kissing Sarah, not Sarah's...murderer? Transformer? Fuck, I didn't know. I was kissing Sarah.

My internal dialog did not make it any better. I wanted the cock. But not the woman attached to it.

She also did not appear any worse for wear due to the poison, which saddened me.

"So shall we go?" I said, in what I hoped sounded like a breathless whisper.

"Yes. Although, let me use the ladies' room again. I'm having a bit of stomach trouble today."

I smiled. "Okay, I'll be waiting right here for you."

She smiled and darted toward the bathroom.

I smiled, looking to the counter where both of our oleander flowers stood in a vase.

Moments later she was back. "Okay, I'm ready."

As we walked to the private routerport I asked. "So who is on deck for today?"

Syn sighed, dramatically. "Benjamin Paxton."

I stopped. "Really?"

She nodded. "We've been trying to get him to participate in a CREAM event for years, but he refuses based on some stupid honor code."

I laughed. "He won't fall for the same routine I ran on David. Hell, he WROTE the routine."

Syn nodded. "If you can bag him though, Kincaid will be extremely happy though, Cupcake." She stopped a moment, holding her stomach. "Ugh."

"Your tummy hurt?" I said.

She nodded. "Anyway, he's out in the Caribbean on his yacht, so be prepared for his misogyny."

"Hmmm," I said, tapping a fingernail on my tooth slowly. We started walking again and I went over what I knew about Ben Paxton.

He'd made his fortune in real estate, in the New Republic of Texas. After the secession and all the nastiness that went with it, land in Texas became a goldmine due to eminent domain rights. Ben's family had a bit of land near Corpus Christie, and he leveraged that to buy out all of his neighbors pre-secession. After the secession, the land skyrocketed in price, and Ben walked away with a fortune.

He was a venal man, in his late sixties, severely overweight. He drank and smoked and fucked anything that moved. We'd be easy targets, and if we weren't careful we'd both end up literally fucked with nothing to show for it.

Considering my libido, I didn't care if I ended up with my panties down, but I didn't want it to be for nothing so I knew it would be important not to give away the cow for free.

"He'll want to sleep with us, won't he," Syn said, keying in the information into the router for our trip. Two routerpods materialized and the lids opened.

"Yes, I suppose he will," I said. "Look, this is going to be a tough one and I may not be able to land him. We have more on our list though, right?"

"Yes," Syn said. "But Benjamin is key. He holds the leashes to half of the elite in this hemisphere and if he comes out against us, we will have a very difficult time all around."

I nodded. "Well, he's a Texan. I served in Texas, so I know a bit of what we are walking into, but you are going to have to trust me."

She smiled. "I trust you more and more each day, cupcake."

"Awww," I said, smiling back in mock fondness. "Love you too, sweetheart."

She blinked away a tear, and we both entered our pods.

We stepped out on a cruise ship near St. Martin. The heat was extremely, well, HOT, and the humidity caused me to almost immediately sweat. I instantly regretted wearing silk.

A woman who looked like a supermodel greeted us. Tan, huge breasted, long bouncy blond hair. She wore a bikini that I thought fit her perfectly and I wondered where she might have downloaded it from.

"Hello!" she said with a wide smile. "Welcome to The Ol' Texas Gal."

I smiled and held out a hand. "Hello. I'm Paradise, and this is Syn. We're the representatives from CREAM."

She smiled. "Yes, we've been expecting you. Won't you come this way? We have air conditioning inside."

We followed her across a deck about the size of a football field that featured a pool, a lit stairway, and wetbar. Music thumped from invisible speakers everywhere, and young beautiful people cavorted, drank, danced, and made merry all across the expanse.

The sound cut off completely once we were inside, and we were led to a large galley, where a man stood at a huge grill turning what appeared to be chicken. He wore a very tight, small, swimsuit and nothing else. He was hairy, red, round, and had graying chest, arm, back, and ear hair.

Benjamin Paxton turned and regarded us, grinning. "Well, if it ain't CREAM come beggin'. Pull up a chair, girls, and tell me what you need to tell me. I ain't participating in yer event,

but I'll give you exactly five minutes to tell me why it might be worth my while."

My mouth watered as he began slathering barbecue sauce onto the chicken.

"Is that honey Sriracha sauce?" I said, and I tried to keep the squeak out of my voice.

He gave a wide grin. "Hell yeah, it is!" He pulled a piece from the grill, and set it on a plate. "You want some?"

"God Yes!" I said, smiling. I wasn't acting, I hadn't had Honey Sriracha chicken in...well. A very long time indeed. There was a special place in El Paso that made it, and I visited the restaurant every time..."

I took a big bite and wolfed it down. "Oh My GOD," I said, looking at Syn with barbeque sauce dripping from my chin. "Sis, you have to try this!"

I held out a piece to her, and she took it gingerly and bit a tiny bite. She winced, shaking her head. "Mmmm, delicious." She said, but I could tell she hated it.

"She's a virgin," I told Benjamin, wolfing down another piece of the chicken. "I knew this amazing place in El Paso that made Siracha Chicken...what was the name..." I snapped my fingers trying to remember.

"Dukes!" Ben said. "Yep, I bought him out two years ago. Best damn chicken anywhere, I'll tell you."

"Yes!" I squealed, laughing and grabbing his arm. "Oh! That was so good. He had pulled pork, beef ribs, chicken, pork ribs, deep-fried turkey, GOD. One of The best restaurant in all Texas."

Ben grinned, and put two more pieces of heaven on my plate.

"So about this event Y'all are plannin'..." he said, trying to lead us into the conversation.

I spied something hanging on the wall in the next room. They looked like old currency, dollar bills, but I knew Benjamin wouldn't hang dollar bills on his wall unless...

"Are those Redbacks?" I said in a properly pitched voice of admiration. "Oh my God, Sis do you know..." I hopped off my stool and went clomping in my heels over to the display in the room. I could hear Benjamin following behind. I kept my eyes wide open and astonished...at least that was my intent. "Actual Texas Redbacks!" I said. "These are from, what the 1800s?"

"Eighteen thirty-nine to forty-two, to be exact." He grinned. "Ain't many pretty young thangs like you know what those even are. You a TexasGal, now?"

I sighed. "In my heart, yes. But in reality I hail from Arizona, not from the Great Republic of Texas."

He touched my nose with a twinkle in his eye. "Well, I won't hold that against ya none."

I giggled and wrapped my arms around his arm. "What else you got in this ol' barge."

"Old Barge!" he said. He gave me a sharp spanking and I squealed in response. "Come here. I got something else ta show ya."

He took us on a tour of his yacht, proudly showing off his memorabilia, all his awards and trophies, copies of manuscripts, culminating in a display that he had under glass in his captain's quarters. The display had a soft light to it, and was the obvious attraction in the room.

"Can you guess what..."

"Oh my God!" I said, and I had been saying as he led us from treasure to treasure. "Sis, do you know what this is? Is this the actual...?"

He gave a nod, beaming with pride.

"The Travis War Letter," I said, whispering with Reverence. "I thought this was at the Alamo!"

"It was, but I...well. Now it's mine."

I stared at the letter, reading the words:

Bejar, Feby. 24th. 1836

*To the People of Texas & All Americans in the World—
Fellow Citizens & compatriots—*

I am besieged, by a thousand or more of the Mexicans under Santa Anna — I have sustained a continual Bombardment & cannonade for 24 hours & have not lost a man — The enemy has demanded a surrender at discretion, otherwise, the garrison are to be put to the sword, if the fort is taken — I have answered the demand with a cannon shot, & our flag still waves proudly from the walls — I shall never surrender or retreat. Then, I call on you in the name of Liberty, of patriotism & everything dear to the American character, to come to our aid, with all dispatch — The enemy is receiving reinforcements daily & will no doubt increase to three or four thousand in four or five days. If this call is neglected, I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible & die like a soldier who never forgets what is due to his own honor & that of his country — Victory or Death.

William Barrett Travis.

Lt. Col. comdt.

I read every word, and turned to stare at Benjamin with wide eyes. "This is a truly amazing piece, Benjamin."

"Thank you," he said softly. Then he turned suddenly. "Oh Tarnation! I forgot my chicken!" And he dashed out the door.

Syn shook her head, looking at me. "You realize it's been over an hour, and he told us five minutes?"

I nodded. "Just, let me close this deal, okay?"

She grinned, nodding, but holding her stomach. "I need to find the bathroom."

"It's called a head, and it's over yonder." I pointed to a door.

"Jesus, you're even starting to TALK like him," she said. "I'll be right back."

I went back to the galley and sidled up to Benjamin, watching him cook. The chicken had blackened a bit, but he put some new cuts on and started slathering them with sauce.

"I ruined these," he said, pulling the blackened once off the grill.

"Naw, you didn't. They just a little crispy is all." I said. I picked up one of the pieces and shucked off the skin. "See? Good as new."

He smiled. "You sure know yer stuff little lady," he said softly.

"Why thank you, kind Sir." I said grinning, as I shucked more blackened skin, and handed them to him to put back on the grill. I tried not to lick my fingers, but failed.

"What was your name again?" he said, as we continued to tend the meat.

"Paradise."

He shook his head. "Paradise. I shore enjoy your company." I giggled and hugged him. "I enjoy yours too, you old Bear."

He swallowed a bit, then squeezed the bridge of his nose between his eyes.

"Smoke get to ya?" I said softly.

"Yeah."

I smiled and took his hand. "Gets ta me sometimes too."

"Ma wife, may God rest her soul." He coughed a bit, then blinked rapidly. His voice was hoarse. "She called me old Bear, too."

I wrapped my arms around his middle and gave his belly a good shaking. "Well, it's on account of all this goodness right here."

"Best watch yeself, Missy." He said, turning more meat with his tongs. "I could fall in love with a woman like you."

"Would that be such a bad thing?"

"Oh, yes." He grinned. "Yes, it would. For you, it would."

I held him tight, laying my head on his chest. He continued to cook, and we just stood there for awhile.

Syn came back in, and gave a little cough.

I grinned up at Ben, releasing him. "We done been caught," I said.

"Appears so," he laughed. "So about that event..."

I shrugged. "You already told us, "No," Ol' Bear. I believe ya. If you change yer mind, you know where to find us."

He smiled and didn't respond.

I took Syn's hand and said. "Let's go sister."

She smiled, but didn't say anything. We walked out the door.

The same gal who had met us, led us back to the private router link. Two pods appeared, and the woman keyed in the information for our return trip.

"If he changes his mind," I said, handing her a card. "Tell him to contact this address and ask for me."

She smiled. "I will."

Syn and I got into our pods, and in moments we were back in New Chicago. I smelled like barbeque smoke, and still had sauce on my hands and chin.

"Win some, lose some," Syn said, when we returned.

I stayed silent, and walked into the ladies' room near the port. As I washed, I asked her: "So what's our next destination?"

At that moment, a man entered. He handed me a tablet, with some text illuminated on it.

"My Dear Paradise,

Thank you for your visit today. Your wit and charm have truly warmed 'ol Bear's heart. I would be honored to be at your event this Friday. But if I can entreat upon you, would you be my guest? I won't make it a condition of my attendance, because I realize someone as young, beautiful, witty, and charming as yourself must have many suitors, but I would consider it an honor if you would accompany me. I await your reply."

Sincerely,

Bear

I showed the note to Syn, who shook her head in amazement. I dictated a reply, hit the send button, then Syn and I hugged each other.

"Do you ever meet anyone that doesn't fall in love with you immediately?" she said, and that struck me.

When I'd been male, I'd been a rough and tumble kind of man. I drank, smoked, caroused, and never had much of an impact on those around me. Since becoming a woman, however, I noticed I needed to use other methods to gain peoples' respect and admiration. It made me feel good in a way, even though I knew I was in the employ of a despicable company, with even more despicable people, it made me feel good to be able to have some measure of influence.

This was the inherent construct of Evil, I realized. If I used my powers in the employ of Evil, didn't that make me Evil in return?

I released Syn, and pulled out my tablet. "So who's next on the list?"

She beamed at me. "Susan Duncan," she said. And she keyed in the information into the routerport.

As the pods appeared, I touched my hair and glanced at myself in my tablet.

Who are you really, Ms. Paradise?

At the end of the day, I'd successfully recruited three more people to the event. Invitations were coming in over the net as well, now that Benjamin Paxton was coming. By the end of the day, CREAM hit our ten initial attendees, and we actually WERE refusing others.

I made Syn a nice cup of tea, sprinkled with a little Olean-der flower and handed it to her after she returned from the restroom, yet again.

"I don't understand what's happened to me," she said, sipping the tea.

I shrugged, not saying anything.

"You okay, cupcake? You should be happy!"

I nodded. "I know. I am. That's...part of the problem."

"How so?"

"Well, what we will be doing on Friday is incredibly experimental and dangerous. What if something terrible happens? It will all be on me, I recruited all of these people."

She shook her head, setting the tea down. "No, you can't think like that."

I nodded, still feeling glum.

"Look, I felt absolutely Awful about what I had to do to Sarah, you know? But it was my job. If I hadn't done that, Kincaid would have directed someone else to do it, and it might have been worse. Did you know he's got Slade and Sven's families somewhere?"

"Wait..." I said. "You mean Thing One and Thing Two?"

"Yes."

"No, I didn't know. Where are they?"

"No one knows. Including me. That's how Kincaid plays us all against each other. He uses us, each of us, in turn, to get what he wants. Leverage."

"What did he have on you?"

"Now?" she said, sipping some more tea. I would NOT feel guilty about that, dammit. "Nothing."

"So now you do this just because?"

She nodded. "Yes. At first she held my wife and daughter, but then they were...killed. So now, I just work here."

"But you could do anything!" I said. "Why this?"

"Why NOT this?" She said. "Did you know that Congress has eased up on the requirements for transgendered genomic transitions in the wake of Artistique?"

"What?" I blinked. "No."

She nodded. "It was a huge success. Yes, we ended up with a few — " she looked at me. "Wrinkles, but most of them have been mitigated and the effect is now being seen. After Phantastique, I'm betting Congress eases a lot of the restrictions from the old Genome Wars. That's the ultimate goal with this, show the world what The Realistic Expression of Art and Music can really be!"

I shook my head, staring at her. "You believe in all this."

"Yes" she smiled brightly, taking a big sip of tea. "And you will too, cupcake, soon. You're a natural at this!"

That's what I'm afraid of, I nearly said. But stayed silent.

"Baby, I don't know that I can do...tonight. Is that okay?" she held her stomach again.

"Getting bad? Maybe you should go see a doctor or something?"

She shrugged. "I went this morning after you left. They didn't find anything."

I nodded, taking a sip of my own tea.

"Did they say what might be wrong?"

She laughed. "Nerves, or perhaps a virus the nanites don't recognize. That would be strange indeed, however. It can recognize thousands of microbes."

"Well, I'm sorry you don't feel well," I said.

She nodded. "Cupcake, I need to ask you something."

I set my cup down. "Okay."

"If I trust you with the router code, will you head over to New York and pick up Mary, Participant number 8?"

"Tonight?"

"No, tomorrow is Thursday, and she will be staying here at the compound."

I nodded. "Of Course."

She sent a message to my tablet with a keycode. "You know how to operate the router?"

I nodded. "I've seen you do it enough, yes."

"Sven will join you, of course. But I trust you, cupcake, I really do."

"I know."

She took my hands in hers and stared into my eyes. "You've given me new hope for the future, cupcake. You can't know what a gift your friendship is to me."

I nodded and smiled.

"Mary will expect you tomorrow by 9 sharp. Just bring her back here, and Sandy will get her setup in a suite."

"Alright."

"I wish I could go, but this stomach thing..."

"You need to get your rest," I said.

She nodded and smiled.

I released her hands, and turned to leave.

"Goodnight, my love." She said softly.

"Night honey," I replied.

I walked out the door.

And tried not to skip on the way to the kennels.

"Victory or Death," I said softly.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

Dale was happy to see me. "I'm off in about an hour," he said. "Want to hang out in my office?"

Ugh, the date. I'd nearly forgotten about it. I wasn't really interested, well, okay, I was interested but didn't want to be. Damn, he could fill out a pair of khakis. What was I thinking?

"I'm sorry, something's come up. And I need to cancel."

He looked very disappointed. I felt bad for him so I put my arms around him, pressing my breasts to his chest and looking up into his eyes. "Forgive me?"

He nodded. "Of course."

I smiled and ran my fingers through the front of his hair. "Can I have Molly's leash? I'll be taking her tonight."

He smiled, and reached over and pulled a leash from the wall. "Here you go. You know where to find her."

I smiled and released him. "Thank you, honey. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Okay."

I walked to Sarah's stall. Hopefully, this would be her last few moments as an animal. I intended to get my ass to New Phoenix, get to Carlos, and have him fix this situation asap.

Her tail started wagging furiously as I approached, and she did little circles, her tongue lolling out. She gave a couple of soft barks. Happy Dog.

"Let's go, baby. I've got our ticket home!" I said, holding up my tablet. I clipped the leash to her collar, and opened the low gate to let her out. She tugged on the leash, hard, nearly pulling me off my feet. I yanked on her leash. "Damn, Heel Molly!" I said, sharply, and she immediately settled back at my side.

"Stay with me, baby," I said in a whisper. "We're getting out!"

I tried to walk as nonchalantly as I could through the hallways and not draw attention. I really hoped Syn was truly sleeping and this was an opportunity. If not, it'd set me back several days in the trust department but I didn't care. I needed to get Sarah out of this crazy house and back to doing what she should be doing which was loving me.

We made it to the routerport without incident. I approached the control pad with a little trepidation. I'd never actually operated a router and the thought of it scared me silly. I knew the basics of operation...you needed a pod, you needed a destination address, you needed an access code. But beyond that, all I knew was occasionally there was accidents, people stepping into the beam, disassembled, and beamed to parts unknown in conditions unknown to be reassembled as a horror with your insides on the outside and other fun facts.

I rezzed the pods. I entered our destination. Opening Sarah's pod, I said "Up Molly!" And patted the interior. Obediently, she leaped up into the encapsulation pod. I started to get into mine when someone said: "Where are you going, Ms. Paradise?"

I swallowed and turned around. Sandy Ericson stood casually, her hands behind her back. "New Phoenix," I said.

She nodded. "And why would you be going there? You've completed your assignment, we have all the participants we could ask for."

"I need Mexican Food, and there's this place off Central Avenue I'm dying to see."

She nodded moving around toward the router pod. I considered taking her out. I could do it with a quick jab of my stilettos, but I didn't want to hurt anyone I didn't have to.

"Let's have a little chat before you leave," she said softly.

"I'm not in a talking mood," I said. "I'm very hungry."

She sighed. "I know about the message to your friend in the NPPD."

I winced at that. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I also know about your attempt to poison Syn."

I winced again. "Syn's been poisoned? Oh My GOD! I need to go get a doctor right..."

"Enough, John. Step away from the routerpod and let's talk."

I sighed and stepped toward her. I envisioned the kick I would use, spinning, with the angle at her throat. The stiletto would strike right there across the carotid artery and she'd be...

"You are thinking about all the ways you could kill me. It won't work."

"Won't it?"

She shook her head, and glanced to the left. Sven materialized from thin air, holding a gun on me.

"Fucking ninja fucking tech. It just isn't fair."

"This isn't what you think."

"No? I'm sure you've notified Syn who is garnering to turn me into a russet potato or something."

Sandra laughed at that. Then she turned to Sven. "Lower your weapon. I want to speak to her."

Sven obeyed as directed.

"What do you know about Ontological Nanites, Ms. Paradise?"

I blinked. "Onto-what?"

"Ontological Nanites."

I frowned. "I remember you talking about them in the meeting. I remember that you didn't like the idea we were going to be using them.

She nodded. "Do you know the word Ontology? the science?"

I shook my head. "No."

"It's the philosophical study of the nature of being," she said. "What makes you, you, John?"

I shrugged. "A combination of things, I guess."

She nodded. "You, more than anyone should be able to grasp this. You've been through quite an evolution. Before this experience, you were male, attached to Sarah as your life partner, yes?"

I nodded.

"And now that ontology has changed. You are now female, still attached to Sarah but as your pet."

"I refuse to accept that ontology as you put it."

"Whether you accept it or not, does it make it any less true?"

"Look, I'm not getting drawn into this discussion. Do whatever the fuck it is you're going to do to me, and let's be done."

"So, let's examine Ontological Nanites," Sandy said as if I hadn't just stated anything.

I looked at her but stayed quiet.

"Ontological Nanites allow self-editing. Basically, whatever you think you might happen to be, whatever definition you declare for yourself, it is expressed through the nanites in the crafting of your physical being. If you define yourself as a male, it will strive to accomplish this within the boundaries of the conservation of mass. You can lose mass, but you can't gain it within the closed system of your body."

"Okay," I said.

"So, now take that closed system and expand it. Kincaid means to flood the suspension liquid of the isolation chambers with nanites as well, thereby creating an enclosed environmental system that can be used. In effect, the participants could gain mass albeit not mass that could actually do any-

thing. It can't create more nervous system, or extend brain capacity etc. But it could create bone, fat, plate, metal, hair, or other organic non-conductive mass."

"Alright, I see."

"Not really."

"Where are you going with this?"

"So we are talking about taking these participants, subjecting them to "art" and "music" meaning images and sound in a sensory deprived state. Then we are going to introduce ontological nanites, set them to ON and SEE WHAT HAPPENS?" her voice raised at the end. "Do you see the insanity of this?"

I thought about it for a minute. "Well, if I were a participant, I'd probably end up being changed back to a male."

She nodded and pointed at me. "Exactly! A male human, probably much like you were, although much reduced because of your current stature. You wouldn't be much different than you were when you came to see me in New Chicago and fixed my toilet."

I shrugged at that, not certain if I should be flattered or insulted.

"But think of who were are placing into the suspension tanks, John. People who have attained the greatest wealth imaginable. People who have done anything and everything they've needed to amass said wealth. People who are venal, vain, brilliant, clever, but most of all people who are KILLERS in their chose field. Do you see this?"

I thought about it. Hell, even David already made himself look like a lion. Expose him to sound, video, isolation, and these crazy nanites? He'd probably come out...

"They'll be monsters," I said softly.

"Exactly!" Sandra said.

"Okay, so it's going to be a monumental clusterfuck." I said. "What is it you want me to do about it?"

"You are going to be visiting your friend Carlos in New Phoenix, yes?"

"That was my intention, yes."

"And your friend Benny Goodman with the New Phoenix PD?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"And you were going to bring them here, to bring down CREAM?"

I nodded again. "Yes, in a nutshell."

She took out her tablet and handed it to me. An image on the screen showed Kincaid with someone. "Press Play."

I hit the play button. There was no sound, just video and it showed Kincaid shaking hands with a taller man, with silver hair and a lean physique. They appeared very friendly and Kincaid showed the man several items on his tablet. The video ended.

"You recognize the other man?"

I stared at him...and it hit me where I'd seen him before. "That's Maricopa County Sherrif Darren Eagleman."

She nodded.

"And apparently he is on friendly terms with Kincaid."

"Yes. Very friendly. Kincaid has made friends of nearly every major law enforcement officer."

I sighed. "So, you're saying I may not have the unquestioned cooperation of the New Phoenix Police Department."

She shook her head and mouthed the word. "No."

"Well, I can at least go see Carlos and have him change Sarah back."

She nodded. "Your friend has always skirted the law, never being caught. He's tread the line very very carefully."

"Yes, he has."

"And when you ask him to transform an individual whose ID matrix clearly reads PET? In violation of several major Genomic Codes? Codes that could see him de-certified, and in major criminal lawsuits, the least of which could mean a jail term of fifty years or more?"

"Well, I have evidence of CREAM's illegal activity and can prove Kincaid set us up, robbing Sarah of her humanity." I began to cry, dammit. I hated crying. Stupid estrogen.

"What evidence?" she said.

I shrugged. I wasn't going to show my hand or the mole on my face that had been recording everything.

"You're talking about the recording device you've hidden on the mark above your lip, am I right?"

I felt my stomach tumble into my toes. Tears were freely streaming down my face now. "Yes," I said.

"That tablet Kincaid held up, essentially exonerated CREAM from any unlawful doing as a result of Artistique. NPPD has dismissed any charges against us.

I nodded. "Well, it still indicts him on *Phantastique* however."

"And what crime has been committed so far with *Phantastique*?"

"Well, nothing yet."

"Nothing...yet." She reiterated.

"It also has his confession about using genomic techniques to rob Sarah of her humanity! He confessed to it!"

"It does." She said. "And that is damning testimony, to be sure. And I'm sure you informed Cyrus that he was being recorded, correct? That you were a duly sworn Eye of Private and that you were going to record his deposition?"

"No, of course not."

"And are courts in the Continental Northern United States ever allow that kind of testimony?"

I didn't respond to that.

"Were you able to record the event when Sarah was transformed?"

"No," I said.

She sighed. "Look, you might be able to get the evidence admitted since it is THE only evidence. However, that might be with a law enforcement officer who is not sympathetic to Cyrus or CREAM in general. And I just told you the likelihood of that."

"So what am I supposed to DO?" I said, sobbing now. "I can't leave Sarah like this!" I indicated Sarah who was obediently

sitting at my feet after jumping off the platform at some point. She panted, tongue lolling.

"I'd like to offer an alternative."

I sniffed and nodded.

"I can tell you this: As of this moment, Syn does not know of her poisoning. Her nanites will take care of it, but they are slow. Once they gather enough force, they will neutralize the poison in her system naturally."

I sighed.

"I did not block your transmission to Bennet Goodman. I know it was received. I've been monitoring action, and you might be happy to know his office has reached out to us and I handled the calls."

My stomach gave another tumble at that.

"I also know of your crafty little email to Benjamin Paxton. You might ALSO like to know HIS office called inquiring about you and our treatment of you. He expects you to be there Friday and won't participate in *Phantastique* without you."

"Damn, does anything get by you?" I'd sent Benjamin a reply regarding his invitation. "Without blood, without tears, there's no glory."

"You attributed it to Davey Crockett."

I nodded.

"But that quote was really by Santa Anna. You knew that. You knew he would know that and that he would know you knew that in return."

"Well, when you say it like that."

"You knew he would immediately be suspicious and at least know something was up regarding you."

I shrugged. "I hoped, yes."

"Well, he is, and he does. He's coming fully ready for conflict."

I smiled. My fierce Bear.

"So Bennet Goodman and law enforcement will be here, and your boyfriend Benjamin Paxton will also be here to win friends and influence people."

"It might be an interesting occasion," I said.

"And the participants will be turned into Monsters by their own inner vision of themselves."

I nodded, wondering where she was going with all this. "Your point is?"

"Well, I can ensure a few things. I can ensure that the wheels will come off the experiment. He has certain safeguards he wanted me to put into place, but he's only verbally asked me for them once, and I am going to deliberately forget those safeguards."

My eyebrows narrowed at that. "Why, you crafty little bitch!"

"And I'll make sure the gates are open when the police swoop in. And I'll make sure all the evidence points directly at Cyrus."

"And you want me to safeguard your ass with both Benjamin and Benny."

"Yes. And ensure my safe extrication."

"Only if you can help me get Sarah back to being human tonight."

"I can't use our equipment. Syn would know nearly instantaneously. But what I can do, is arrange to inject Sarah with some ontological nanites tonight."

"Why would you...?" but I saw it. "Oh, and since she still defines herself as human..."

"The nanites should return her humanity."

"And if they don't?"

She sighed and patted Sarah on the head. "Well, it would indicate Sarah herself no longer considers herself human. And it would be a crime to take that from her."

I looked at Sarah in the eyes. Stay with me!

I thought about all of it. She was right, on nearly every count. Carlos couldn't return her without risking his entire

business, reputation, and certification due to the ID Matrix classification. He'd do a lot for me, but that might be a break-point, and to try could sacrifice Sandra's plan.

But the ontological nanites might not work...and then where would I be?

I had to try.

"Okay, you got yourself a deal," I said.

"Perfect," Sandy said. "Bring Sarah to the lab and let's see what we can do."

I nodded and led Sarah out of the routerport.

I really hoped this would work. If it didn't...I didn't have much to live for honestly. But this place would come down.

My Bear would see to it.

We entered the lab. Darkness was just falling outside, giving the empty laboratory a sinister feel. Long shadows cast by ten egg-shaped chambers stood in a rough circle around a central command chair.

Sandy directed the lights to come on, and I could see the eggs were a dark gray, featureless shell. She sat in a chair, and two of the chambers opened.

"Two?" I said. "Why two?"

"Well, it would be nice to have two volunteers for the experiment to show Cyrus." She made some changes to the smartpanel in front of her. "It would be nice to see the impact of the entire process on you both. If Cyrus wants you to be returned to being male, so be it. You do still identify with being male, don't you?"

"Of course!" I said, a little too loud. But did I? Of course, I did. I thought of Benjamin's warm embrace, and chalked it up to female hormones. "Definitely."

"Well, then get in the pod. I'll introduce the Ayahuasca histamine as soon as the door closes."

I walked Sarah over to her pod. "Now, you go in the pod, baby and when you come out everything should be back to normal!"

Sarah's tail wagged, and she licked my face.

"Okay, get in the pod," I said, but Sarah whimpered and tried to coil herself around my legs. "No! Molly, get in the pod. This one is for you!" I tried to lift her, but only her front paws would come up. We must have looked ridiculous, the petite woman trying in vain to lift the 70-pound dog into the isolation pod. She whined and wriggled in my grasp until Sandy lifted her hind legs as I lifted her front and we finally got her into the pod.

"Hold her there, while I close the door!" she said, running back to the control panel.

Sarah sat in the suspension liquid looking at me with terrified eyes. "It'll be okay, honey, you'll be back to normal in a little while, I promise!" I said, holding her in. Her whole body quivered as she tried to jump out the wet interior, but I held her firmly by her collar. The door closed slowly, and I released her.

The pod closed completely around her, and I could hear her scratching furiously at the door, trying in vain to get out and howling.

"Let's hurry!" I said, running to my own pod, and stripping my clothes off. My heels tripped me up a bit and I stumbled. Kicking them off, I righted myself then climbed into the suspension fluid. "Ready!" I said.

"Okay, you need to breathe in the histamine slowly. You will experience visions shortly, but don't try to force anything."

I nodded, scared out of my wits as the pod door slowly closed in front of me.

"The histamine will cause you to vomit profusely. Just keep your head forward, and vomit into the suspension. The nanites will break it up and render it harmless."

"Yayy," I said softly, as the pod door shut.

Darkness engulfed me. I couldn't hear anything. The suspension liquid was cold at first but then started to warm up. I felt the chamber shift, easing me backward and onto my back. Then it filled with warm liquid and I floated above it not touching anything with body in any way.

A mist settled over my face, and I inhaled. There was a pungent aroma of leaves, decay, something fishy, and I tried not to vomit. I gagged a bit then vomited as I felt it cascading down my throat, but then it was over and I lay in the warm liquid.

I felt dizzy, and the music began. Symphonic tones, individual and soft. They sent shivers up my spine, even though I was actually warm in the liquid. The sound moved through me somehow, and then I could see light.

At first, there were colors: Red, orange, yellow and green. Each soft and warm as the music flowed all around me. I felt dizzy, floating and my mind was cast adrift.

Such a disappointment... the words of my father. I felt a burning in my throat as I wanted to cry...it had been after a baseball game and I had underperformed.

Rain began to fall, in a forest. The music swelled beneath it, and I walked naked and alone. I felt the water pour down over my head, between my breasts and sluice through my vaginal lips. I wiped the rain away seeking shelter. It was dark, and I was starting to get cold. I could see a cabin in the distance so I started walking, my feet squishing in the mud as I walked on my toes.

I could see a fire burning in the fireplace as the storm increased. Lightning flashed and thunder cracked, and I gave a little scream at each boom. I'd always hated lightning. I knocked on the door and a man answered. He mouthed something to me, but no sound came out of his lips. He opened the door though and ushered me inside.

Handing me a warm towel, he indicated I should sit by the fire. I stood, dripping, using the towel to dry my hair and body. I wrapped it around myself, covering my breasts and pelvis.

The music increased, brass soaring with long sweeping lines. The man rubbed my shoulders and I leaned back, feeling his strong hands knead the knots from my back. I could feel each of them being worked in turn, and I moaned as I relaxed under his strong grip.

Glass shattered as the string section woke up and began to increase the tempo. I looked up, startled, to see a large animal had entered into the room. It had huge slitted eyes, fangs dripping with what looked like venom, and a long sinuous body that stretched out behind it. A hood opened up and the massive cobra rose up to stare at us, his eyes level with mine.

Petrified in fright, I couldn't move. The cobra head bobbed from left to right, swaying. The man with me had no weapon. I pulled a poker from near the fire and spread my legs in a defensive stance. The music continued to pound through me, woodwinds and trumpets accenting the upper notes of the strings as the tempo increased. The snake saw my weapon and moved from side to side, its coils tensing, preparing to strike.

I couldn't let it hit the man. I needed to defend him at all costs. I'm not sure why this thought came to me, but I felt certain I needed to protect him since...since he couldn't protect himself.

The snake struck then, but I'd anticipated it. I leaped to bat it away, swinging with all the speed I could muster...

But I was too late. The fangs sank deep into the man's neck who uttered a wordless scream and collapsed. Coil upon coil wrapped around the man, constricting. The fangs bit again.

I hammered at the cobra's head, fear driving me to strike as hard as I possibly could. It landed with a sickening thud, and the music punctuated each blow. The cobra released the man, regarding me warily. It rose up, moving to one side and I moved to the opposite. Each time it darted, I darted in the opposite direction keeping a space between me and it. We danced this dance for awhile, and I could feel my body moving with it in response.

It struck at me, aiming for my neck, but I again anticipated, driving up with the poker. With a huge accent of cymbals and brass, the poker penetrated through the cobra's lower jaw, and up into the brain. It fell, dead at my feet.

Now the music evened out as I rushed to the man's side. His neck had swollen, turning purple and black. I ran as fast as I could into the bathroom, hoping against hope for something I might use to help with the bite.

There on the counter, a bottle. Antivenin. I snatched it in my hand, then dashed back out to the man who was gasping, holding his breath. I pulled out the needle from the antivenin and drove it deep into his carotid artery.

He relaxed a bit as the music slowed, becoming somber, a minor key. I could see the swelling in his neck going down. I held the man's head in my lap, stroking his forehead with my fingers. His eyes opened after what seemed like hours but must have only been a few minutes. He looked up into my eyes, and I felt pride swelling inside me. I leaned down and kissed his mouth.

We kissed passionately, to the sound of the lessening storm. We made love right next to the body of the cobra. He penetrated in missionary position, kissing my mouth, my breasts, kneading them with his strong hands. I panted, gasping as we made love, and as dawn broke with the glissando of a harp, I lay in his arms in front of the fire. He held me tight and close, and I felt at peace as the music slowly came to an end.

The world went dark again, and an opening appeared. I realized I was still in the suspension pod, but now I was upright again.

It was over.

Sandra stared at me as I exited the pod. I was shaking, still under the spell of the encounter.

"Well?" she said. "You're still female."

I glanced down, knowing it to be true. "Well, it was the scene you programmed. I was cast as the female, so I suppose I stayed that way as a result."

She chuckled. "I'm sorry to say, but no. The scene is pulled from your own fears, dreams, and fantasies. If you dreamed of being a female, that is how you see yourself now, no matter what you might say or claim otherwise. The ontological nanites never lie, they create whatever you dream for yourself."

"Maybe they didn't work because of whatever nanite cocktail Syn injected me with?"

She shook her head. "No, I was observing the whole time. You did change, briefly a few times. In fact, at one point it looked like your legs were fusing together like that of a snake...did you dream of a snake?"

"Well...yes...but I didn't dream I'd become one. I did fight a snake for awhile. It's one of my deepest fears."

She nodded as we went to Sarah's pod. I couldn't wait. "And Sarah? How did she do?"

Sandra shook her head, and my heart sank. The pod opened.

Sarah leaped out, still canine, still German Shepherd. She was trembling and wet, and she shook herself furiously and I squealed.

"Maybe they didn't work on her?" I said, my voice cracking with emotion.

"She did return, briefly, to being human. But by the end she was back to being fully canine again.

I swept my soulthrum gaze across her and was relieved to see she still had not lost the little bit of human she had earlier.

"Well, we just have to convince the authorities on Friday that she is Sarah. They have to change her back!

Sandra shook her head. "John, this means that Sarah doesn't want to be human any longer. I'm sorry.

"No, that's just not true. It's like me, she didn't have a choice!"

Sandra nodded, but I could tell she didn't believe me. I'm not sure I believed me either.

"There's got to be a way," I said softly, attaching the collar and leash back on her. "I will get you back!"

Sarah looked at me and licked my face. Her tail thumped the floor behind her.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

I'd been basically going through the motions all morning. I dressed, and everything was the same. The ontological nanites had absolutely no effect on me or Sarah. I took her back to the Kennels; her tail wagging furiously and she yipped and barked as soon as she saw Prince in the play area. I unclipped her to go play and left.

I brought Syn some un-doctored hot chocolate from the cafeteria, early. I added two sprigs of cinnamon to it and touched the door notification.

Syn opened it and looked at me, wide-eyed. "Oh! I didn't think I'd see you today."

I smiled and handed her one of the cups of hot chocolate. "I thought you could use this."

She took it, smiling. "Come in, come in!"

I entered and immediately noticed the smell of cigarettes. She'd been smoking, heavily, from the amount of ash and butts in the ashtray on her small table. She had her tablet next to a cup of coffee.

"I've been up all night, unfortunately," she said, walking to the table and sitting down. "Every time I fall asleep, I have to

run to the ladies' room so I decided to sit up and read...and smoke." She giggled. "One of my guilty habits."

I inhaled the aroma deeply and walked to the table. She had several still in a pack and I glanced at her. "May I?"

"Oh yes!" she said. "I didn't know you smoked."

"I did." I said, lighting one and inhaling deeply. "Oooh, I've missed it."

She giggled and lit up herself. "So why are you here?"

"Well, to give you your chocolate, and let you know I was a volunteer for *Phantastique* last night."

"Oh my GOD, no!" she said. "It didn't do anything?"

I held up my arms, looking down. "Nope. Apparently, you did too good a job on me."

She smiled. "I told you, you'd enjoy being a girl."

I shook my head. "I really thought I'd be able to change back. Sarah too."

Syn nearly dropped her cup. "She went through it too?"

"Yes, and you'll be happy to know that she stayed a German Shepherd."

She nodded and inhaled her cigarette. I did the same.

"I know you probably had hoped it might reverse all of this."

I shrugged. "Well, you did your job too well."

She set her cup down and stared at the table for a bit. Then she looked up at me, tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

I shook my head. "It is what it is, I suppose."

She nodded and sipped her hot chocolate. "So are you ready to go get Mary?"

"I am," I said, standing up. I'd decided on a pantsuit today, with light long slacks in dark blue and a dark blue blazer cut perfectly to emphasize my assets.

I felt, somehow, guilty for what I'd done to Syn. After the talk with Sandra, I knew Syn trusted me completely. I shook my head. I needed to keep hating her, I was NOT going to get caught up in this crazy madness any more than I needed to.

But I'd still bought the hot chocolate. And I still had quite a bit of oleander in my purse. I could have given her more of a dose, but what was the point? I'd nearly lost all hope of getting Sarah back to human. Her small remaining amount of human soulthrum grew slimmer each day. I knew within 24 hours at most, it would be completely gone and what had I done to try to get her out?

Sighing, I walked to the door. "Well, I best be on my way, so CREAM can continue to prosper. Have a good day, honey."

"I'll try," Syn said softly, still smoking. "Will I see you later?"

"Sure," I said.

She smiled up at me as I left.

At the routerport, Sven stood expectantly, silently.

"Don't you ever fucking talk?" I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Most of the time, I feel no need."

His voice was deep. His muscles were...muscle. I let my eyes roam over him and could see his "package" was muscle too.

"MMmm," I said, feeling my damned hormones taking over. "Tall, muscle, and silent. I can see why Syn hangs onto you. Where's Thing Two, by the way, I haven't seen him in weeks?"

"He...how you say." Sven paused, his giant muscled hand rubbing his muscled chin. "Under cover."

"Ahh, so he's watching us from the shadows?"

"No, he not here. He somewhere else."

I smiled and looked up at Sven, batting my long eyelashes. "And where would that be?"

Sven grinned. "Never you mind, lady. We go now."

I couldn't see a way out. I could try to out-run Sven, but if he grabbed me, it'd be all over. Assuming I escaped, what then? No reputable Genomic in the world would process Sarah back to human without good reason, and even the non-reputable

Genomics wouldn't risk whatever license or certification they had to bring her back.

I felt like I wanted to cry, like there was no way out. I'd never had self-doubt as a man, or indecisive. I blundered about, shook things up, killed people who tried to kill me, and usually came out on top in the end. This time it'd cost me one phallus, and one life partner, and I couldn't seem to get out of the funk I was in.

I sighed and keyed in the information for New York into the Routerport terminal. "You're no fun at all."

Sven grinned again. "Sven can be much fun. You wait and see."

"Yeah, yeah. Promises promises," I said, and hit the enter key.

The pods materialized, and we got in. As the lid came down, I held my breath, just like I'd always done. I wondered what would happen if you kept breathing during a jump, if your lungs would explode at the new location, or if they'd suddenly implode somehow with all the blood rushing in to fill...

I remembered the world back when we had binary computing systems. With the advent of the new prismatic machine language, computing power had taken an evolutionary step forward. Gone were the days of ones and zeroes everything now ran on good old ROYGBIV. There were still accidents and mistakes however, no system was perfect. Which was why I never could grow used to the thought of a giant digitizer mapping out my entire body, destroying every molecule, sending the digitized transmission through nano-wormholes and reassembling the whole thing on the far side with a human 3D printer.

I shook my head. I was amazed that during the ayahuasca ceremony it had been the snake and not a router accident. Routers terrified me.

We arrived in New York moments later and exited the routerport. It was raining. Sven lurked somewhere above me in the clouds.

"Look, just move your chin somewhat over me and I'll be perfectly dry," I said, as we walked in the direction of the Sears Building.

"Funny," he said, opening an umbrella and holding it over us.

"Thank you," I said.

"Funny Lady smell nice."

"Back 'atcha, there Brutus."

He grinned as we walked through the rain.

Mary Wilkins, queen of the Dance, sat screaming at minions in a Theatre on Broadway. "I said on SIX, you bitches not on FOUR!"

A troop of scantily clad women wore outfits of what appeared to be "homeless-tramp" with stringy hair, patched and torn brief clothing, and smudged skin. The sign above the opening read: *VAGRANTS, THE MUSICAL*.

I wondered in what universe scantily clad women walked the streets while singing and dancing.

"Miss Wilkins," the aid said very softly as we were led to the stage.

"What?" She screamed.

"The people from CREAM are here to escort you to the event."

"I'm not ready!" she said. "Tell them to wait!"

"You heard her," the aid said. "You can sit in the front row if you like, or anywhere in the house, just don't disturb..."

"We'll be leaving," I said, projecting my voice.

"What?" the aid said, in a soft voice. "No! She wants to attend, however she has reh..."

"Tell Ms. Wilkins we will consider her application next year. Good day!" I said, and turned and began walking out.

We actually made it all the way to the back of the house. Wilkins was in her own little world, still screaming at her homeless dancers. I shrugged and glanced at Sven.

"I think she calls your bluff," Sven said.

I laughed. "Yeah, well, what she doesn't know is, I'm not bluffing. We have plenty of applicants, and what's one less soul to CREAM in this fucked up event anyway?"

"Mr. Kincaid not be happy."

"I don't give a fuck what Cyrus says. I'm the reason he HAS a waiting list. Let's go, Sven, maybe you can ram me with that pole of Ptolemy you got hidden in those pants when we get back."

He chuckled and touched my shoulder softly. "Funny Lady."

"Fuck you," I said, and we walked out the rest of the way.

Rain sluiced down, drenching me. Sven once again opened his umbrella.

"I hate this fucking city," I said, as we walked toward the routerport. "Why the fuck can't they have hover transport like every other city on Earth?"

"I love it," Sven said, breathing deeply. "Make Sven feel alive." He collapsed the umbrella and let the rain fall on us.

I squealed and dashed away, the rain beating down on me and flooding over my face, hair, hands, and soaking me quickly to the bone.

"Open the damned umbrella, Gonads, or I'm gonna kick you so hard..."

"Enjoy the rain, Lady." He said, leaning down to stare into my face. I could see the water dripping off his chiseled chin. He put a massive hand on my shoulder. "Look up!"

"No, I won't look up you Oxymoron!" I said, pulling away and trying to walk in the rain. One of my stilettos came off, and my foot stepped right into a puddle, soaking my foot and stocking. "Oh No!"

He put a hand on my shoulder again, stopping me. "Look up!"

"If I look up will you open the umbrella, you walking gargoyle?"

"Yes, yes." He put a finger gently under my chin and pushed my head up. "Look up."

I sighed, coughing a bit on the rain. I looked up, closing my eyes. The rain poured over my face. I was reminded of the Ayahuasca ceremony, it was the same feeling, the same rain. All we needed was a little thunder and lightning and a giant snake...

"Open eyes," he said. "Let the water cleanse."

I shook my head, then cracked my eyes open, letting the water sluice through them. The rain on my upturned face was shockingly cold but in a few moments it did feel better, as if it were healing my soul somehow, the water and rain scouring my face and soul clean.

"God works through us. His tears wash away our sins." Sven said. "Feel it baptize you, bringing you closer to our Maker in the Heavens."

I started crying then, at his words. Memories of Sarah holding me, dancing, blond hair, blue eyes laughing at me as they gave me that secret smile while eating an ice cream cone. I screamed upward into the morning rain, feeling it fall into my mouth, draining down my throat. I breathed it in, making me cough and choke, but I didn't care. My hair tendrils streamed down from my head and shoulders, my pantsuit drenched. I stood and screamed, crying and my tears mixed with the rain and was washed away.

He lifted me up in his arms then, opening the umbrella. I shivered against his chest as he carried me, and I could hear him chuckling. I shivered, clutching my arms around my neck.

"What are you laughing at, Pancho?"

He grinned. "It is a good day to be alive, Lady. It is a good day to die."

"You're nutty as a fruitcake thrown in a toaster."

He laughed and carried me, striding through the rain. I shivered, holding his neck as we made our way back to the routerport.

We entered the building and he set me down.

"Lady need dry off."

"Why is it when you are talking about God, you don't speak in an accent?"

He smiled. "Because He fills heart, speaks my tongue."

I sighed and shook my head; my long hair scattering water all over the tiled floor. "I'll only be a few minutes," I said, and walked to the Ladies' room.

Inside, I ordered a hot towel and a dry pantsuit from the smartscreen. It materialized a few moments later and I went into a stall, taking off my soaked clothing and putting them in the recycler. I stood naked and shivering and used the e-towel to dry myself and hair tendrils. Dressing quickly, I used my hair and cosmetics HUD to repair my visage then opened the stall and walked out into the main room.

"Is that your husband out there waiting?" A woman said.

"No, he's my..." I paused. What the hell was he? "Assistant."

"Mmmm, he's gorgeous." The woman said. "He can assist me with my panties right off, anytime."

"I know, right?" I said, pretending to fix my hair in the mirror.

Outside, Sven waited patiently, smiling at the people who passed by.

"Lady looks much better," he said with a huge grin.

"My name is Paradise, and I'm no Lady."

He grinned and nodded. "It is better to have your head in the clouds and know where you are.... than to breathe the clearer atmosphere below them and think that you are in Paradise."

I narrowed sculpted eyebrows at him. "You are a strange man, Sven."

He chuckled. "Henry David Thoreau."

"Henry...what the fuck?"

"Henry David Thoreau. Poet."

"You're smarter than the average Ranger, aintcha."

He grinned.

As we stood in line at the router, someone touched me on the shoulder. I turned, "no more rain, Sven, I'm..." but it wasn't Sven this time, it was the aide who had assisted us earlier.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. Miss Wilkins will join you now.
I rolled my eyes.

After showing Ms. Willkins to her suite and entrusting her to the gentle care of Sandy. I worked with Sandra on the final details of the event. We wouldn't have another opportunity to get together on all this, so we made the best use of our time as possible. Later that evening, I walked back to the kennels to retrieve Sarah. Sven followed me, grinning.

"Jesus, fuck, don't you ever stop smiling?"

"A good day to be alive, Lady."

I shook my head, rounding the corner to the kennels. Sarah and Prince ran in the yard, both of them dashing after a ball thrown by Dale who was grinning and encouraging them.

Sarah's tail wagged furiously, and she barked as Dale held the ball high, eager to play the game.

"Oh, hello there!" Dale said, walking toward me.

The two dogs tore through the yard, both eager to grab the ball. Sarah was the first to scoop it up in her mouth and she trotted toward us, ball clenched between her jaws.

"Tell her to drop it, and point at the ground," Dale said.

"Drop it," I said softly pointing, but Sarah continued to hold the ball in her mouth.

"Molly, drop it!" Dale said.

Sarah released the ball at my feet, then barked at me to throw it again. I picked it up gingerly in my fingers, trying to avoid any dog slobber, and awkwardly threw it down the yard. Both dogs ran after it, and Sarah was again the fastest leaping high in the air to catch it on the first bounce. In one fluid motion she landed, turned and trotted back to me, ball proudly in her mouth.

I picked up the ball and tried to throw it a bit harder, but my weak arm strength wouldn't allow a good throw. Prince collected the ball this time and plopped it at Dale's feet.

I watched Sarah carefully, trying to find any hint of "Sarah" the person I'd fallen in love with so long ago. All I could see was Molly the dog.

Dale clipped her leash to her collar and held it out for me to take. "Feel like getting some dinner later?" he said in a hopeful tone.

"I'm wiped," I said. "Maybe another night?"

He nodded, smiling and I left the kennels toward my suite. Sven continued following me.

"Don't you have more important business to take care of?" I said, as we reached my suite.

"Lady wanted Sven's pole, I believe."

Ah fuck, I'd forgotten about that. Couldn't I ever get a break? "Not tonight, sweetheart, I just want to go back to my suite and rest."

He nodded, still smiling. "You let Sven know if he can ever be of...service."

"I'll do that," I said, tugging Sarah's leash and opening my door.

I unclipped her lead and removed her collar. Sarah darted into the apartment, sniffing at the ground and moving from place to place. I filled her bowl with food and water, and she gobbled it up.

Changing my clothes I put on a pair of knit leggings I had delivered from the smartscreen. I also wore a white long-sleeved neo-cotton shirt that hung low across my thighs. I ordered a bowl of soup from the food screen, then folded up my legs and sat on the orga-couch and sipped it slowly, watching Sarah eat.

I shook my head. We'd come so far, lost so much. I knew tomorrow would be a bad day, bad for CREAM, and probably bad for me. It was also the one week mark since Sarah's transformation and I knew if something didn't happen, and soon, I'd lose the human in her forever. As it was, the way she acted and behaved it was as if she'd been born a dog. I was worried sick that if she were able to be returned to her body,

what damage might have been done to her intellect, her soul? Would it repair itself? Or would she forever think and act as a canine?

She finished eating, came toward me on the sofa and sat down, her muddy brown eyes tracking the movement of my hand as I ate. She moved her head toward my bowl, smelling the soup. I lowered the bowl and let her lick the remaining liquid. She quickly cleaned the entire bowl, her eyes returning to me as if asking for more.

"Sorry babe, all gone," I said.

She gave a "whuff" and put her paw on my leg. I scratched her chest and heard the thumping of her leg on the carpet. I scratched behind her ears and her tail wagged as she turned and leaned her body up against me to give more areas for me to pet and scratch. I hugged her tightly to me, and she licked my face.

"Eww, doggy germs!" I said, turning my face away as she licked.

A soft chime came from the door and I stood, extricating myself from Sarah. She gave a soft bark in response to the door as I opened it.

Benjamin Paxton stood in a suit and tie, holding flowers. I gave him a soft smile. "Well, look at this tall drink of water."

He smoothed his few hairs back over his bald pate and handed me the flowers. "Ma'am, it's mighty nice to see you."

I opened the door. "Come in handsome."

He gave me a grin and walked into my suite. Sarah immediately began sniffing him, her tail up. "Molly, this is Benjamin. Benjamin, Molly."

Ben knelt and scratched Sarah around the collar. "I love Shepherds. I had a couple as a boy."

I smiled, smelling the flowers. "Won't you have a seat?"

He continued to pet Sarah as I went to the living room smartscreen and ordered a vase. After it appeared, I filled it with water, placed the flowers in it and the vase on the table.

Can you see this? some text sprang to life within my field of vision. I gave a smile and nodded.

We will need to be very discreet. I'm told that this text will not be picked up by any recording nano devices you might have.

"So what brings you to my door, Benjamin?"

He smiled, sitting down. "I'll take a drink if you got it. Whiskey."

I poured one for both of us and returned to the sofa with our drinks in hand. He sipped his slowly, savoring the taste. I lit a cigarette and sipped the whiskey, enjoying the double burn in the back of my throat.

You were once John Paradise, the detective?

I smiled at him over the rim of my glass. *Yes.*

What has happened to Sarah James, your committed partner?

I looked down at Molly. *She has been transformed into this dog.*

He took a long sip of whiskey, closing his eyes. I couldn't tell if it was due to the liquor or in empathy for Sarah.

We suspected they were using illegal Genomic techniques for coercive efforts. I reached out to NCPD, but Kincaid has them in his pocket. Along with the local justice department, FBI, and CIA as far as I can tell. The only government agency I've been able to convince to help me was the Department of Security.

Are they here?

Yes, outside the compound

My heart skipped a couple of beats. *In other words, you are here to rescue me?*

He smiled, and I saw a blush rise from his collar. *I am. Let's say that I enjoy your current...form, far better than your previous one, but no matter. You are a human being, and so is Sarah.*

Can we leave now? The longer Sarah stays transformed, the less human she becomes in her mind.

He nodded. *There are a LOT of moving parts to this. We want to nab them tomorrow.*

My heart fell. *But that may be too late for Sarah!*

He took a drink slowly. "So how have you been?"

I smiled. "Good, good. We have our full list of participants. It will be an extraordinary event tomorrow."

"I'm sure it will. You will be there, of course?"

"I wouldn't miss it," I said. *PLEASE get Sarah out now! Even if you leave me here, I don't care, but get her out so she can be returned to being human!*

There's a problem with that.

What?

He sighed. "What do you think will be the outcome of the experiment?"

I giggled, theatrically. "I think you will be enhanced in some areas," I said, making an obvious glance at his crotch.

"What if I'm already happy with my...equipment?"

I laughed, rising, and sat next to him on the sofa. I set my hand on his thigh. "Is any man ever satisfied?"

*We have searched every possible record for Sarah James, and as far as I can tell, every document has been scrubbed. She doesn't even have an ID matrix, or social security number anymore. Her birth certificate, operator's license, lines of credit, bank accounts, online media access accounts, social account, all of them are gone. The only way *I* knew of her was one news story of you, holding her hand after rescuing some kid.*

The Bonneville case, sure.

Well, here's the funny thing. It wasn't John Paradise holding her hand, it was you, female you.

Wait, what?

Yes, and literally as I watched, the footage changed from you standing and holding Sarah's hand to you standing with Molly at your feet. By the time I finished watching the feed, your first name had been removed, and all reference to Sarah was gone. All media still pictures have been changed now that

also had Sarah's image. Basically, they've all been replaced to show you as a female with your dog companion.

How could they do that? I covered my shock by sliding my hand up along Ben's thigh.

We don't know. I was able to make contact with some of your former platoon, though, and some current friends in New Phoenix. They confirmed you had been male, and been connected to a woman named Sarah James. Every record of yours, and Sarah's has been altered however. You even have a female birth certificate under the name of Kristine Paradise.

I leaned into him, and he put an arm around me, holding me up. It was a good thing, I was seeing spots before my eyes.

*So that's what makes this extraction so difficult. Basically, they've completely scrubbed your old identity. And they've done it with a granularity I've never witnessed before. So not only would you have to *convince* people you were once male, you'd have to *really* convince them Molly was once Sarah.*

She still shows a human soulthrum though. So if we can get her out now, all someone has to do is to look at her thrum and they can see it was once human.

Soulthrum huds are not court-admissible, however. And there are many natural-born canines that show up on color spectrums.

I started to tremble.

He took me in his arms, and I buried my head on his shoulder. It felt nice to be held like everything would be...

Everything will be okay, I promise.

Sarah put her head in my lap and looked up at us inquisitively with her soulful doggy-brown eyes.

After crying for a while Benjamin brushed back my hair and looked into my eyes. *I'm sorry I can't get you out of here immediately.*

I don't give a rat's ass about me. I want Sarah out so we can change her back.

I know.

Tomorrow is going to be a world class clusterfuck too, you know that, yes?

He smiled, and kissed me softly on the mouth. I responded, my tongue dancing with his softly. He was a good kisser.

Yes.

You won't be getting in one of those tanks, then.

I have to.

No you don't! It's too dangerous!

Better be careful, Mr. Paradise. Might think you have grown to care about me.

I do care about you! Enough to know you should stay the fuck out of one of those tanks! Those ontological nanites are nothing to fuck around with!

If I don't move forward as planned, they will know something is amiss. I've referred several of their larger clients to them too, so to back out now would also cause them to back out.

I don't give a fuck about other clients, referrals, or this experiment. All I care about is you, and getting Sarah out as fast as possible. We can sort shit out later, but if you have a team standing by, let's make use of them and extract now!

Look, we are T minus 13 hours from extraction. I suggest you get some sleep, tomorrow will be a big day.

I stood up abruptly. "Well, if we don't stop now, we'll both end up somewhere we'll regret," I said with a shake in my voice that wasn't completely faked.

Benjamin smiled. "Very well. I will see you at the event tomorrow?"

"Of course," I said smiling and leading him to the door. Sarah followed behind us, tail wagging.

"Until tomorrow, then." He took my hand and kissed it.

"Goodnight," I said, and told the door to shut.

Fuming, I inhaled deeply and patted Sarah on the head. I wanted out. I couldn't stand the skin I was in, couldn't stand this situation even a little bit more. Insufferable man, teasing me with the 'rescue' only to be told 'but wait another 13 hours. ' Fuck. It just wasn't fair.

"Let's get some sleep, baby. Tomorrow is going to be a big day."

She huffed at me, and we went into the bedroom.

That night I dreamed I was back in the rainstorm again from the experiment. The man who rescued me from the rain was actually me I realized...the old me. I hadn't even known when going through the experience. I'm sure there was something Freudian about it all, but I didn't care.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Syn and I stood at the doorway as the last of the participants entered into the meeting room. All ten participants were seated in their chairs, glancing at promotional feeds on their tablets. They'd already signed the waivers and the air thrummed with excitement.

The lights came down, and I ran my fingers over my tablet to close turn off the air recyclers so the intro could commence. I felt Cyrus Kincaid brush by me, the aroma of his cologne the only indicator he was in the room. I gritted my teeth against the urge to stab him in the throat with my stilettos. This would all be over in some way, shape or form soon.

A 3d Holocube set in the front of the room glowed a deep purple as music rose from concealed speakers. The *Dies Irae* from *Symphonie Phantastique* by Hector Berlioz thundered in our ears as a ghostly monastery filled the expanding holocube with fog blending into the environmental controls of the room to bring the experience to the watchers. Other scenes followed, a peaceful meadow with a doe hiding behind a fallen log from a pack of hungry wolves, a falcon in flight over a scurrying mouse as it flees for its life, the depths of the ocean where a shark circled a school of panicked fish. Scene after scene, each disturbing and made more real by the music and

the environmental controls of the room. A humid wind blew into our faces, followed by the sound of falling water as a rain forest scene filled the cube followed by the cube flashing with colors, ending with a brilliant white light that quickly filled with black lettering. "Welcome to Phantastique!"

The lights came up to have Syn and I framing Cyrus Kincaid with our arms outstretched.

"Greetings Ladies and Gentlemen to Phantastique," he said in his deep voice as we progressed to the front of the room. Syn and I strutted with rolling hips and bobbling breasts as we followed Cyrus. I wore a crimson wiggle dress to Syn's black. Matching arm trophies.

"This will be a unique experience like nothing you've ever experienced," he said as we took the center of the stage. Syn and I stood smiling at his left and right, slightly behind him. We both monitored the room for any threats, gorgeous bodyguards in red and black.

"I'd like to introduce Syn and Paradise, my assistants for today's events."

We nodded in turn, as the crowd goggled.

The cube behind us rose above our heads and filled with a feed from the pod chamber. "As you can see, your sensory deprivation pods are ready and waiting. We have made every adjustment necessary to ensure your safety and ours for the duration of the event. You will need to surrender all modes of communication to my assistants at this time.

Syn and I smiled and strode down from the room holding a basket. Each participant placed a tablet into the basket reluctantly.

I moved from person to person, and arrived at David Pressler. "I see you have one on your hip, Mr. Pressler," he looked guilty as he removed a hidden tablet. "And I see you have a wristab." This time he rolled his eyes as he removed it.

"Now, each of you will need to don a dressing gown over your clothes to preserve them from the special fluid we have in the tank." Cyrus said, handing us each folded stacks.

I handed my five participants a purple rubberized jumpsuit and watched as they stepped into it. I helped a couple raise the suit over their shoulders and zipped up the back.

"And a hair protector." Kincaid said.

I assisted each by placing the rubberized cap over their head.

"Do I need one?" Ben said as I started to put his on.

I glanced at Kincaid who shook his head.

"No," I said smiling.

He looked at me fondly, and I felt the touch of his hand.

Be ready within 5 minutes of the tank door closing. he sent to my text hud.

Okay. , I sent.

No heroics. When the team enters, surrender any weapons you might be carrying immediately and put your hands on your head. That is the only indicator of status friendly. All other actions will result in containment or neutralization.

Syn is a very skilled assassin. We have no weapons, but are deadly with hand-to-hand.

I'm sure you are.

I smiled sweetly at him as I walked away.

"You will now be given a cup of Ayahuasca, a hallucinogen followed by an injection into your carotid artery of the ontological nanos. The Ayahuasca will cause you to vomit inside the chamber. Do not worry or try to resist, it is all a part of the process."

A shaman stepped out from beside the stage and began dancing as a fire blossomed to life from the floor. He wore dark robes and had woven a couple of feathers into his hair. His skin was leathery with age as he sang a low chant. He set a small table over the fire with a stone pot. Into the pot he added several elements: Water, leaves, berries, and other items of unknown origin. He mixed it slowly, still chanting as it began to bubble.

A stench permeated the air, and I almost gagged against it. I blinked my eyes rapidly, but did not allow the stupid smile to leave my face as we stood.

The shaman then poured a small amount into paper cups and handed them to us. I took the cups, two at a time, and distributed them to my participants. I handed Benjamin his cup last.

"Now drink the entire contents in one swallow," Kincaid said.

The participants looked at the viscous liquid in their cups nervously.

Bottoms Up. Benjamin sent. He was the first to swallow it. He made a face as the other participants followed suit.

Ugh, that was awful. I think I'm going to puke.

That's the idea.

The rest of the participants looked as if they agreed.

"Now if you will all follow me, we will seal you up in your deprivation chamber."

A door opened and Cyrus walked toward us. I turned and went to the back of the room, indicating with my arms that they should rise and follow.

As the participants entered the room, Sandy Ericson helped them into each pod and entered a few settings into the side.

Benjamin walked just in front of me. It won't be long now.

Just fucking stay human, would you?

Don't worry about me.

Sandy Ericson is supposed to ensure certain safeguards for the event. However, she told me two nights ago she was not going to set them.

We are aware of that fact.

This is going to be a clusterfuck nightmare. What if you get killed by...whatever the fuck they turn into?

That is why they are entering so quickly after the doors close. We hope to forestall the transformation.

Hope?

You know better than I nothing is 100%. We hope to contain the threats, but if not all the agents will be able to neutralize anyone who might become contentious.

I sighed as Sandra assisted Benjamin into the tank.

"Are you ready, Mr. Paxton?"

"Remember the Alamo," he said, and entered the tank.

Sandra entered some information into the side of the pod.

"Ladies and gentleman. I wish you good luck on your journey!" Cyrus dramatically pressed a button on the control panel in the front of the lab and the pod doors slowly started to close.

"Ugh, I'm going to vomit!" Mary Wilkins said, followed by severe retching as she projectile vomited onto the closing doors. I heard other participants begin to gag in response.

"Next time we need the doors to close faster," Kincaid said quietly to Sandra.

"Noted sir."

The doors finished closing, and I heard locks engage.

Kincaid watched the control screen and put it up on the holocube for us all to watch. The music began inside the pods as their image and readouts sprang to life beside each participant.

"All safety protocols have been verified?" Kincaid said. Sandra appeared not to hear him, typing furiously on a tablet.

"Sandra?" he said.

"Yes?"

"All security protocols are in place?"

She looked at him, a bit confused. "What protocols, exactly, are you speaking of?"

Kincaid's jaw clenched. "The safety overrides on the Ont-Nano's of course, what do you think I was speaking about?"

"Ummm?" She glanced down at her tablet. "Sir, you never mentioned anything about an override. You had wanted a pure experience, I believe you said."

"Of COURSE I wanted overrides!"

She glanced down at her tablet and made some quick motions as if verifying the situation. She did not speak for what seemed a long time.

"WELL?" Kincaid finally said.

"Well what, Sir?"

"Have you put the protocols in place!" His voice was taking on a ragged edge. I looked up to the participants, mainly one participant. *Stay human, you old bear.*

"What protocols, Sir?"

His eyes lit with understanding, and he sat back against the stool.

"This was intentional," he said softly.

Sandra continued touching her tablet. "Of course, Sir."

"Syn, Paradise. Seize Sandra Ericson, and lock her in the ops cubicle for now."

Syn immediately stepped toward us from across the room. I was much closer, less than an arms-length from Sandy.

Above, several alarms started bleating from the participants as heart and breath rates began to increase to dangerous levels. Someone screamed inside their tank.

Syn continued toward us. I turned to Sandy who stared at me into the eyes. I reached for her — and snatched the tablet from her hands. I stepped in front of Sandra to face Syn.

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. "And so you finally betray me." She said softly.

I shrugged, and kicked off my stilettos, shrugging each shoulder as I popped my neck and prepared for combat.

Syn ran toward me.

Our skirts were matching, and they retracted quickly into form-fitting short pants. I met Syn's rush with a jab to her larynx with the tablet. I knew she had hidden weapons, but her first rush would be by hand. She fainted, dodging out of the way and rolling to hit the back of my neck with her

clenched hand. I was ready for it, and ducked, attempting to sweep her legs but she jumped, keeping her head down and tumbling into a somersault taking out twin knives in the process which she held handle first with the blade of each knife over her wrist-bone.

She darted her hand toward my throat, and I bobbed to the side hopping backward and avoiding the cut. As her arm passed, I struck her hard across the face with my hand. She turned away from the slap, lessening the impact, but I knew I'd hit her a good one because my wrist exploded in pain.

I shook off the pain, as she barreled into me from the side. We went down in a tumble and I nearly lost the fight when she jabbed upward toward my eye. Using my legs, I attempted to jam my right heel down into her sternum, but she rolled and came back up on her feet, both knives still in her hand and grinning.

Sven entered the room then, and grabbed me from behind.

I pivoted my hip, attempting to throw him over my shoulder but he was too fucking big and I only succeeded in wrenching my wrist again painfully.

"Take Ms. Paradise, and Ms. Erickson into the Ops cubicle, and lock them in for the duration of the event." Kincaid said in his deep voice.

I struggled against Sven's grip, but he was too strong, holding me by the collar of my red jacket just off the floor.

I looked at Sandra, wondering if it had been five minutes yet. I glanced up at the display monitor to see all the participants screaming in pain, changing, things rearranging. I searched for Ben's readout and saw him, eyes closed, trembling as his jaw clenched against the grip of the visions.

"I trusted you!" Syn said, slapping me across the face. She had a huge welt on her face, and I realized we would now match.

Glaring into her eyes, I said: "Fancy a cup of tea?"

She began breathing then, harshly, doubling over and I realized maybe my heel had struck home after all.

"The oleander?" she said.

I nodded.

She began to cry then, gripping Sandra's hands behind her back and zip tying them with heavy plastic. Sven zipped my hands as well, and we were lead away.

"I trusted you." She kept saying between sobs. Over and over again.

They lead us into the ops cubicle which overlooked the lab. Sven lead me in, and Syn thrust Sandra through the doorway.

"I'm going to have such fun with you cupcake," she said, with a look of crazy in her eye.

"I'll bet."

She cackled, as Sven left the room. She slammed the door behind, and I heard the security lock engage.

"Well, that was fun," I said.

"Won't be long now," Sandra said.

"It feels like a whole fuck of a lot longer than five minutes. How long since the event began?"

"It's been nearly seven. They did say: "sometime after 5 minutes."

I tried the door to no avail. The room was clear walls, looking on the events below. It held a control smartscreen and little more. I pressed the power setting on the tablet, to no avail of course.

At least we could see what was happening below.

On the screen several of the participants were no longer human. Syn had taken over the controls and was touching various areas fervently, trying to stop the process. The glass of the ops cubicle could not block the screams of the participants.

Mary Wilkins was the farthest along. Her arms had fused to her torso, and her legs quickly becoming a tail of some sort. Next was a man named Gerold Nock who appeared to be sprouting long sharp spines all over his body, though that remained human looking. Another woman was roaring, but strangest of all was the great mane that had sprouted around

David Pressler's head. His nose was flattening and his eyes had grown into catlike slits.

I stared at Ben's pod and he'd begun to change too, his eyes narrowing and his nose flattening out into a muzzle.

An explosion rocked the building.

"Looks like the cavalry has arrived," I said. "Damn, I wish we could get out of these manacles."

"They'll have us out soon," Sandra said.

"I hope so."

I watched the lab, as Syn made some more adjustments on her control screen. Then she looked up at me, smiled, and pressed a button.

Steel doors slid into place at both the exits.

"That's going to make it a bit more difficult," I said. Ugh, I needed to get to Sarah.

One of the pods started to rock. A man who looked half boar, half-human rammed the door with his brutish head as tusks slowly grew in. The pod rocked back and forth. Below, Kincaid yelled at Syn who continued to furiously type at the control unit.

Sandra giggled.

"What?" I said.

She shook her head, giggling some more.

"Are you going to let me in on it?"

She smiled. "I knew this would be an eventuality. So I redirected the Master console to..." and she looked over at the console standing in the middle of the ops room.

"So she can't control the experiment from there?"

"Nope," Sandra said, giggling again. "It must be driving her crazy."

"I think she crossed that line 8 minutes ago," I said.

Other pods began to rock. Syn yelled back at Kincaid, still pressing furiously at the control tab. Below us, screams, roars, and other sounds could be heard, sounds that had not been created by any human throat.

I smelled the smoke before I saw it. It entered from the air circulator.

"We better get down," I said, kneeling and then lying on the floor. Smoke quickly billowed into the room, with a chemical smell. I hoped they wouldn't use nerve agents, but I wouldn't have been surprised.

Another explosion, this time directly outside of the lab. The steel door buckled inward some, but held firm.

Syn looked up at me, her face a mask of fury. Kincaid was attempting to keep the pods upright as a half a dozen or more rocked back and forth. Ben's rocked the most and his camera had apparently broken, I couldn't see any image of him at all on the screen. A moment more, and the pod exploded outward, with an enormous half-human half-bear creature roaring angrily and fell to all fours to charge at Cyrus.

The ops room leading to the hallway blew open, and several masked men entered. They darted toward us, one of them placed a mask over my head.

"Follow me to safety!"

I nodded, breathing in the blessed oxygen as my manacles were cut from my wrists. I followed the fireman out of the room as others attempted to open the ops door to the lab, placing clear putty explosive around the edges.

As I made my way into the hallway, I heard a heavy THUMP and the sounds from the lab immediately became louder.

With a roar, Benjamin the Bear thing crashed into the doorway and came toward us. The agents shot at it, and I screamed for them to stop, but the shots were thwips instead of gunfire and I realized they were tranquilizer darts and not live ammo.

Benjamin appeared unaffected and advanced on us. The agents fell back, but I moved forward, hands still manacled behind my head, the breathmask over my face. "It's me!"

The bear creature roared at me, then stood and pulled me in for a hug. I could smell the animal of him, pungent and dank mixed with the ayahuasca. What could be going through that head right now?

We followed the fireman until the first T intersection, but turned south instead of north and ran down the hallway toward the living suites, and the kennel.

Every hallway was dark and full of smoke. Emergency lights flashed, with the sound of the alarm mixing with the sounds of screaming and roaring behind me. I heard men yelling too, and realized they were now fighting the participants.

Running as fast as I could, I turned down hallways and corridors. It wouldn't do to become lost now. Ben huffed beside me, loping easily on all fours.

I passed my suite in a rush and fled down to the kennels, where I could hear dogs barking, snarling and squealing.

As I rounded the last corner, I was confronted by an enormous lion, blood dripping from his fangs.

I stopped abruptly, holding out my hands in front of me.

"Stop, David. It's me, remember?" I said, backing up and holding my hands out in front of me.

The lion snarled, tossing its head. It moved forward a step or two. Benjamin roared back, standing in front of me.

"Keep it distracted," I heard from a male voice behind me, but didn't dare turn to see who it might be.

"All will be okay, David. We can help you. I know you don't want to hurt anyone else. It's okay."

The lion lowered its head, snarling. It pawed the ground, talons extending. Ben stood on his hind legs and pawed the air.

"It's okay, David," I said in a soft voice, and I stopped retreating. "It will all be okay."

He snarled again, but stopped advancing. I moved forward a bit toward him and could hear people behind me preparing something.

"I think I can calm him," I said, stepping toward him.

"Mr. Pressler!" Kincaid's voice came from behind me. "Stop this right now, and all will be forgiven!"

The sound of his voice immediately enraged David, or the lion David had become.

"Cyrus, stop talking!" I said. "You're making him..."

At that moment, David Pressler the lion leaped forward. Benjamin met his charge and the two went down in a tangled heap of clawing, snarling fury. The lion screamed and jumped up again, but Benjamin swatted it back down and they tore at each other with tooth and claw.

"Gentlemen!" Cyrus said. "I know you still have some human intelligence. Stop this now or..."

With a wrenching lurch, David spun away from Benjamin and leaped past me and onto Cyrus Kincaid, tackling him to the ground.

"No!" I yelled, trying vainly to get the lion away from Benjamin who was tearing at him with his teeth.

The lion roared at me, blood dripping from its fangs and turned back to its kill. Benjamin barreled into me, pushing me away with his shoulders and paws.

Several firemen tried to extricate Kincaid from David's clutches, but the lion clamped his mouth on Cyrus's shoulder, rolling him over and using its back legs to disembowel Cyrus who grunted with each thrust. Several agents discharged their firearms into the animal, killing it, but not before the damage had been done.

We continued to run down the hallway to the kennels, where I saw another battle scene. Dogs barked furiously, snarling and leaping up into the air, attempting to clear the fence. Several were fighting, including, I saw with a sinking heart, Prince and Sarah. They fought desperately in one of the larger kennels, twisting body and head against each other, slashing with their teeth.

"Sarah!" I screamed, running to the kennel and opening the door. She and Prince tore at each other, but the male German shepherd was far larger than Sarah. He over-powered her, knocking her to the ground, but she leaped back, gripping his throat with her teeth and biting down hard, snarling.

I tried to pull Prince away from her, but he spun on me, his teeth seeking my flesh, and I darted back. Sarah had a grip on

Prince's throat, and he squealed, but Sarah did not release her hold. Benjamin pushed in, snarling, and clamped his muzzle down on the opposite side of Prince's neck. The dog fell on his side, Bear and dog both clamped on his throat.

A couple of moments later, I tugged on Sarah's leash and she turned on me with a snarl, but then she saw it was me and she started licking my face.

"Are you okay?" I said, looking at her body and feeling for wounds. She had several, including a deep gash in her ear which bled profusely. None of her wounds appeared life-threatening, so I tugged her away from Prince who was thrashing in his death throes. Benjamin sat up and looked at me.

"Come on!" I said urgently. "We need to get to the router-port, leave him!"

Ben seemed to understand finally and we ran down the hallway.

The battle was nearly over. I saw a snake creature, Mary, gassed by two agents, and an enormous canine which looked like a werewolf was brought down with a net.

Another creature which looked very much like a plant with only a single long stalk and the head of a flower moved forward on what appeared to be roots at the base of the stalk.

"Meep!" the creature said.

I blinked, not knowing who the creature(?) had been.

I didn't have much time, I knew my access would only last another few minutes at best, but a girl could hope.

Sarah, Ben and I ran and I hoped it wasn't too late. Stay with me baby, stay with me!

We got to the router port. I pressed the vocalization button with my nose and spoke the coordinates of New Phoenix into the receiving microphone. I requested two pods. It was tricky with my hands tied behind my back, but I was about to enter my pod when Syn stepped out of the shadows.

"I guess I knew I never could trust you," she said in a soft voice.

I sighed. We were so close! Ben snarled at Syn, lunging toward her, but quick as a snake, she cartwheeled over him and as she rose hit him on the side of his cranium with what looked like a lead sap.

I didn't know they even made those anymore. Ben went down in a heap, huffing, unconscious.

I shrugged. "You never should have hurt Sarah."

"She's not hurt. She's happy as a dog, just look at her."

I glanced down and saw Sarah was baring her fangs at Syn, growling in a low tone.

"See, she's happy to see me."

Sven stepped out behind Syn who raised a laserneedle.

"Game over, cupcake. You'll wish I'd killed you after I get done with you, believe me."

I felt my shoulders slump as Syn stepped toward me. As she neared, she paused.

"It's so wonderful that your hands are already behind your back, cupcake. This makes things so much easier. I'll have to remember this so you never have hands again."

"Please let us go," I said.

She came up behind me, grabbing my hair tendrils in her fist and forcing me to me knees.

She stood behind me, back to the beam, holding my hair tightly in her fist. "I think this time, I'll just kill you, cupcake. I don't want you coming back to hurt me again."

"You know, you will never have any friends, Syn. You're a delusional narcissistic bitch."

She giggled and I could see the bright light of crazy in her eye. "I know, right? She lowered the laserneedle at my temple."

Sara took that moment to act. With a powerful leap she snarled and pummeled into Syn. Surprised, Syn stepped back, but the large dog hurtled into her chest carrying her farther backward...

And both of them fell back into the transportation beam.

Without a capsule.

Oh my God.

"No!!! I screamed, standing and running toward the beam, but the Sven gripped my arm tight.

"Hold on," He said.

I twisted in his grasp. "No!" Sven held me tight, dragging me toward the controls on the routerpad. He touched several locations.

"They not actually GONE, they just in transfer chamber...I can get them reconstituted but it's going to be difficult to separate..."

Two figures rematerialized in the transport chamber. Sara was lying on her side, and Syn crouched on all fours. Her eyes widened in fury, and she roared, her words coming strange and distorted in her mouth.

"KILL THAT BITCH!" she said, her arm moving up and pointing at Sara. Then she collapsed onto her side.

Sara's head came up, but she appeared to stunned to move. She was yowling, but hadn't risen to her feet yet when Sven pointed his gun and shot her in the chest.

"NOOOO!" I screamed, twisting out of Sven's grasp and running to Sara. She glanced up at me, gave a couple of huffs...

Then she died.

I screamed, all my frustration boiling out of me in a rush. I got up and ran toward Syn, but Sven intercepted me.

Syn was still lying on her side, heaving, her eyes wide and terrified. She looked up at me, her mouth working but apparently unable to say any words.

"You fucking cunt!" I screamed into her face. "I'll gut you like a fish!"

Again I struggled against the twin bands of iron holding my arms but was unable to break free. I cried and screamed in anger, heartbreak and frustration.

For a moment, clarity seemed to return to Syn and she reached out and touched my face. I felt her push back my hair,

then cupped my chin and said "John..." Her head fell down again, eyes closing.

Sven hauled me to my feet, but I continued to writhe in his grasp. Two men with a rolling gurney came in and I watched them place Syn on the gurney and wheel her away. I was also taken away, but at that point, I didn't care. Sarah still lay dead at the base of the router.

CHAPTER TWENTY
ONE

Sometime later I awoke to find I was in my suite. My hands were free, bandaged about my wrists, and the other cuts and bruises I'd incurred had also been treated.

I went to the door, figuring it would be locked, but found it opened easily.

Walking down the hallway, I passed empty rooms. Broken and shattered glass was strewn everywhere and no one was in sight.

This was my chance. I went to the medical station with murder on my mind. I figured the door would be locked, but it shooshed open at my request. Stranger and stranger.

Syn lay in a bed, with a tube down her throat and an apparatus breathing for her.

Why would she need a ventilator? I saw that her arms and legs had been restrained as well. All the better to kill you with, my dear.

I stepped up to her, strategizing on nefarious schemes...air in her IV? Just shut down the ventilator? Switch off the power?

Her eyes opened, and one of her hands twitched. She looked up at me...and something kind of clicked.

I glanced down at her using my soulthrum hud. Her aura was gray streaked with orange here and there...and I knew what had happened. Somehow, Syn and Sara had exchanged places.

Her eyes fluttered open but darted around wildly.

"Sara? I said softly. "Is that you in there?"

Her eyes settled on me briefly, and I thought I saw her head nod, but she struggled against the ventilator, her hands flailing wildly about.

I heard a door open behind me, and to my shock and amazement, Carlos Badilla entered.

"Carlos!" I said. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

He grinned. "It is good to see you too, again, John Paradise. A much changed, John, but this visage is far more fetching than your last body."

I glanced down at my hospital issue Johnnie and blushed. "How the...what the hell..." I put a hand to my head and sank into a chair near the bed.

"You've caused quite a bit of chaos around here, John. When Kincaid was removed, they contacted me due to my relationship with you. When I heard what had happened to Sara I came immediately, I'm so sorry, John."

"But what has, happened. Exactly." I said.

"Just as you might have expected. Sara and Syn exchanged Soulthrum and their memories were swapped due to being processed through a printer without an encapsulation pod."

I raised my eyebrows at this intel. "Wow. So when Syn yelled to kill Sara that was really Sara?"

"Yes. When she was reconstituted, she took advantage of the situation and removed the threat of Syn. It was a master-stroke because any technician with a soulthrum hud would have recognized the issue and reverted the transfer. However, due to the confusion, Sven wasn't prepared and Sara capitalized on the moment."

"So why is she like this? If she could speak, why is she on a ventilator and all...this?"

Carlos gave me a sympathetic look. "She has been a canine for over a week John. Her soulthrum has nearly completed its transition. Right after the event, she was able to control her body just enough to utter those words, but she was completely unable to control the actions of the body past that."

I shook my head. "But she's human now, so doesn't that mean she'll relearn how to "be" human?"

Carlos shrugged. "I don't know, John. Certainly not right now. If you look at her aura you can see that she still retains some of her humanity, but she was so far along the canine scale it is barely there. We will let her rest and hope her mind will be able to adjust to the new situation."

"And if it doesn't?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, John. Right now, you need some rest yourself. You've been through a harrowing experience."

"I don't want to leave her," I said in a rush. I picked up her hand, Syn's hand, and looked into her eyes that were darting and spinning.

"I'm afraid I'm going to need to put her into a medically induced coma for awhile, John. We'll see what happens and monitor her brain activity closely. That's all I can say."

I nodded and sat down in the chair. Carlos injected something into her IV and Sara's eyes stopped spinning and darting, and her eyelids closed. The respirator took care of her breathing.

"I'll be back in the morning, John, and we'll see what's what. Get some sleep and we'll see how she is in the morning."

"Alright," I said, leaning back in the chair. I held Sara's hand and closed my eyes.

I wondered where Ben was, and if he was alright and returned to human. I wondered about all the participants and what had happened to them. Apparently, it was all over, but I was surprised to still be in the compound and not in some hospital.

Mostly I worried about Sara and the way her eyes darted backward and forth as if she couldn't control them. These thoughts tumbled through my mind as I again sank into sleep.

What seemed like moments later, a nurse came in and opened the shades to sunlight streaming in. "The doctor will be in, in a moment but I brought this so you could freshen up."

She set a small kit down and I saw a toothbrush and other assorted implements. I used the hair tendril hud to reset my hair, and put on the tshirt and jeans the woman had brought.

A few minutes later, Carlos entered.

"So?" I said, hopefully.

"I'm going to bring her out of the coma, and we'll see."

The technicians and Carlos removed the ventilator, then he went to the IV, and turned a dial. Sara's arms began fluttering again, and her feet also began thrashing. Her eyes opened and her pupils darted from left to right.

"It's okay honey, I'm here." I said holding her hand.

She calmed a bit, but I could tell she was still in distress. She kept inhaling through her nose and her eyes wouldn't focus on me.

"Sara, it's me honey."

Her eyes fixed on me. "John?" she said in a broken voice. It came out more like "Jaohhnnn."

"Yes, it's me honey. You're safe."

She relaxed a bit, but her breath came fast and she labored, breathing. She struggled against the bindings, her hands and feet twisting.

"I can't...." She said breathless, "It's wrong!"

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" I said softly.

She began gasping then, her eyes rolling up into her head. Her back arched severely.

I heard an alarm go off and Carlos moved in, brushing me aside. "Ventilator, stat." He said and they put the tube back down her throat. They also put some electrodes on her chest and everything calmed down somewhat.

Hours later, she was again asleep.

"How long will it take for her to get used to her new body?" I said to Carlos, finally.

He pursed his lips quietly, staring at the screen.

"What?" I said looking at it.

An image of Sara's brain was projected with different shadings in different regions.

"Well, it is as I feared. Canine's and humans have disparately different regions for autonomic functions. We've been able to get her stabilized, but from all the brain activity I'm seeing, she may never be able to control her limbs again."

"Won't it get better over time?"

"Time will tell, John. Time will tell." He patted me on the shoulder as we watched Sarah sleep in the body of her worst enemy.

The sun rose and cast a baleful glance across the hospital room.

"Please come back to me, baby," I said patting her hand. "Please."

The ventilator rose and fell inside her chest, and Sarah didn't answer.

<The end>

This story continues in the next book "Lost in Paradise" available soon!

ΔBOUT ΔUTHOR

Raine is a US based author who lives in the midwest with an owl and many cats.

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