



SUMMARY: When a rich man decides that he will undergo a new treatment to enhance his looks, he does not count on someone sabotaging his transformation.

SIX MILLION DOLLAR EX-MAN

Part One

by Valerie Hope

I'D BEEN AROUND AND AROUND in my head over the whole thing. It wasn't that I didn't have the money -- I had nothing but money since my software company's IPO seven years ago, and I didn't spend my money on the flashy cars and the big houses that most other software moguls did, I had reinvested it over and over until my net worth climbed well into ten digits. It wasn't the time - I'd essentially retired years ago, sitting around just watching my money grow and still developing software in my house in my free time.

No, it was the unabashed vanity of the whole thing. I sat at my work desk in my modest house looking for the dozenth time at the glossy, sexed-up product brochure sent to me by ReNu, Inc. for their total body makeover procedure. For my whole life, the only sexy thing about me was my bank account. I was tall and gawky, with a huge Adam's apple and coke-bottle glasses, pockmarked skin from adolescent acne that I never treated and the recent developments of a pot-belly which made me look like a snake that had swallowed a potato and now a receding hairline to go with it. Pigeon-toes and knobby knees and the total and complete absence of a butt which made my pants concave.

All my life, no woman had ever given me a second look until I'd started making money, and even then only the wrong kinds of women had paid attention to me then. With everything I had, all I really wanted from the world was someone to share it with. I hated the fact that I needed to be more attractive to get that, but I suppose that was simply the way the world was. Sure, I could spend months in the gym trying to develop my body, have multiple skin treatments and implant procedures until I looked something resembling masculine and possibly even handsome once all the swelling went down. Or, I could bite the bullet and pay the staggering six million dollar price-tag and have the people at ReNu grow me a custom-made body to my own specifications.

I picked up the phone for what must have been the fiftieth time. This time I didn't lose my nerve, as I took a deep breath, swallowed, and waited until I heard someone pick up.

"ReNu, this is Alexis, how may I direct your call?" said a perky soprano.

I cleared my throat roughly. "Yes. This is Brock Stills. I was contacted by, uh --" I checked the business card in the product catalog - "Steve Hickman."

"I'll connect you," the receptionist said.

There was something pleasant playing on hold - sounded like Vivaldi - before the next voice, a pleasant baritone with just the hint of an overseas accent: "Steve Hickman, here. Hi, Brock. How are you doing?"

I tried to place him. I'm sure I'd met him at one of the huge conventions or product launches for my company, XenoSoft, but I couldn't remember exactly. But he was a salesman. Remembering shit like that was his job, not mine.

"I'm well, thanks."

"So, you finally decided to give us a call. I'm glad. What can ReNu do for you?"

"I'm interested in finding out a little bit more about the procedure."

"You bet! You can come by any time you like, I can get you time with all our scientists. When would you like to come by?"

I should've known that he would move this fast, but I had a lifetime of dealing with salesmen. You let them get up a head of steam, so you could shock them when you put your foot down and get your way. The final equation, though, was that he had something I might want. He would always be in the position of power.

"I'm slammed this week," I said, telling him that I had other things to do. Best to let him think I wasn't that interested. "Monday?"

"Monday it is. Come by whenever you like. I'll see to it you get the grand tour."

I hung up and closed the product brochure. Best not to think about it too much. Monday would come in its own time, no point in wondering about it until I got into the door. I entered the date into my PDA and went on to bigger and more important things - I fired up my Xbox 360 and plopped the controller in my lap.

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The building was pretty small, which encouraged me. High-tech was all about compactness - having godlike technology was one thing, but having godlike technology that was the size of a credit card made you impressive. Being able to clone and grow bodies in a building the size of the average public library made me raise an eyebrow in appreciation.

The reception area was luxurious without being overdone, slick and technical-looking; lots of glass and chrome. The receptionist was a masterpiece - high, pert breasts and perfectly coiffed sable hair with blonde highlights, sparking blue eyes and chalk-white teeth and all the latest designer clothes - and she greeted me warmly and had me seated with a superlative espresso by the time Steve Hickman walked in. He was the male version of the receptionist - tall and athletic, tanned and healthy-looking with a chiseled jaw, blindingly white teeth and a careless-looking tousled hairdo that must have taken hours to get it to look that artfully messy. He shook my hand with a firm grip and favored me with his 200 candlepower smile.

"Mr. Stills. I'm so glad you decided to learn a little more about ReNu," he said.

"Your promotional materials got me curious, I have to say," I said honestly. "I'd like to learn a little more about the process."

"Of course. Please come this way, I want to introduce you to Dr. Stanhope. He should be able to answer any questions you might have."

He led me back through a very slick, professional-looking corridor into a small, darkened room filled with - for me - the reassuring hum of many, many high-powered computers and the flickering lights of monitors and network link lights. I felt more at ease immediately as my eye began to rove over the setup, already trying to tweak it in my head to make it better, faster and more powerful. The room's only denizen was a small, bald-shaven man with a goatee and glasses wearing a white lab coat, khaki pants with a plaid shirt and scuffed loafers. He shook my hand energetically.

"Mr. Stills, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm very impressed with your work - we use Innovate and Accelerate on the servers here," he said, mentioning two of my high-end IT products.

"Nice to meet a fan," I said, smiling.

"Please, have a seat. Mr. Hickman tells me you're interested in learning more about the ReNu process, is that correct?"

"Very," I said, sitting in a rolling chair right next to the doctor's monitor.

"It's actually a very simple concept with an extremely technical solution," Dr. Stanhope began. "We started by creating a database - with your software, I might add - of genetic samples of people with favorable physical traits. Then we digitally recombine these DNA strands to create a new genome and then begin forced development of tissue from there. This tissue, at first, is very similar to undifferentiated stem cells when we inject it into you. The new tissues grow inside you in the same way a fetus develops, fed by your own nutrients and innervated by your own nervous system, until it replaces you from the outside in. Eventually it works its way to the skin itself, which sloughs off in about a week to a week-and-a-half to reveal the new you."

"And it works in humans?" I asked.

"100% of the time," the doctor said, virtually beaming with pride. "No tissue rejection, no adverse reactions."

"Impressive," I told him.

"We're quite proud," he said. "And we've been involved with continuous research since we first pioneered the procedure, as well. We not only can recombine DNA to construct favorable physical traits, we have also identified specific alleles in the genome which, when altered, can actually make improvements in the body."

"What kind of improvements?"

"For example, we've isolated a protein that speeds up thought. The average raise in IQ is about twenty to thirty points, give or take. We've also found a better protein for muscle tissue than the old actin and myosin strands which caused muscles to contract. When we replace the old proteins with our new ones, we've found that endurance and strength in the new body is nearly 50% higher than in a comparable body with the old proteins."

"I thought this kind of work was decades away," I said.

"We got lucky," Dr. Stanhope explained. "A lot of this research was done incompletely in the 80's and 90's for military applications. We got that early data through the Freedom of Information Act and we're only just now developing the technology to make effective use for it."

"What else have you been able to do?"

"Quite a bit, though most of it is still in the testing stages. We isolated proteins in the blood of certain communities throughout the world who are somehow born immune to many diseases and have made a body that is resistant to heart disease, cancer and autoimmune disorders. We can also set up a resistance to alcohol and drug addiction which is in early testing but looks extremely impressive."

The thought of a lifetime never having to tough out another Crohn's flare-up blossomed in my head and suddenly six million dollars didn't seem like such a steep amount any more. "That's truly impressive," I commented.

"Our replicant DNA seems to be much more resistant to degeneration over time, as well," Stanhope continued. "We've found that our DNA can copy itself many more times than biological DNA before it begins to break down. Which means that, if you eat right, you will be age-resistant to the tune of, we estimate, ten or eleven to three."

I whistled. Aging three years for every ten a normal person ages? That would mean that when I was 90, I would only look 27.

"Does it affect lifespan?" I asked.

"We simply don't know. It's such a new procedure, it will be years before we have enough data to determine that conclusively. After all, nerve cells don't regenerate, so your new body is still innervated by your old nerves. Those cells break down and die at their own rate."

"What do you see as potential risks?" I asked.

The doctor cleared his throat and slugged some tepid coffee - clearly, he didn't like talking about how his precious process might have holes in it. "Well, for one, the human genome is a huge and vastly complex equation. We're still not sure what most of the alleles on the genes do, to be perfectly honest. Our database was built comparatively: we took the DNA from twenty people with blue eyes and compared them until we identified the specific part of the strand which created the protein for blue eyes."

"So you can make encoding mistakes," I clarified.

Dr. Stanhope nodded, reluctantly. "Obviously, mistakes can be made. Translation errors."

I gestured at his computers. "How accurate is this thing?"

"Current figures have us at 99.2% accuracy. We gave one rhesus monkey a receding hairline and another one different colored eyes in early testing."

"Accidents on humans?" I pressed.

"Minor," he told me. "One patient got a lactose intolerance from the procedure that he didn't have before, and one woman got a small tail that had to be surgically removed. Someone tried to sue us for giving him an ineffective pancreas, but that was thrown out of court. Turns out he

was diabetic to start with and just hadn't told anyone because he thought it made him look weak."

I'd read about that. I was impressed with the level of the doctor's disclosure.

"But we still overhauled the process anyway," the doctor continued. "We want to be flawless by early next year."

"How many clients have you had?"

"I can't really disclose," he told me, "but we've worked on about 70 people since we opened our doors. The ones you'd expect - political figures, movie stars, pop singers... the only thing we can't do is professional athletes because of our ability to increase strength, speed and stamina. It'd be like steroid use, and it would ruin basketball for me."

I chuckled. "Still, this is staggering work," I told him.

"And it's nowhere near done," he said. "Think about the medical applications. Stem cells will lead to regrowth of tissue and organs, but here we can take care of genetic diseases. No more autism or Down's syndrome, no more sickle cell anemia or cerebral palsy. And we'll figure out how to regrow nerves soon and then we can not only reverse paralysis but also the muscle atrophy that comes along with it."

"It's a brave new world," I said.

"But I'm curious about you, Mr. Stills," he said with a lopsided grin. "What are you working on right now?"

"Not much I can really talk about, either," I confessed. "But we're working with the military to develop software to translate nerve induction into electric impulses. Fly by thought, drive by thought, that kind of thing. It's still a way off. We're also getting into the field of soporific learning."

"Soporific?"

"Sleep learning," I clarified. "We're pretty sure it will be possible, soon, to go to sleep every night for a week and at the end wake up knowing a new language or trade. The problem is we can't figure out how to teach any physical skills. My guys are working on it and say we should have something on that end pretty soon."

"We truly are changing the world, aren't we?" the doctor said.

I clinked his coffee with mine. "Here's to playing God."

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I'd left the facility with a cool six mil in an escrow account and some preliminary appointments for screening and to sit down and design my new body - the very concept of which boggled my mind in many, many ways. From there I went immediately to my office for a board meeting which I'd honestly been dreading for weeks. We'd hired a new PR firm - Wheeler & Koch - to help us improve our flagging sales in home computing applications, which had historically been our bread and butter. They were full of ideas that seemed to be taking my company in directions I wasn't entirely comfortable with. This was the meeting where I had to tell them "no." I hated doing it and I knew they were going to fight me over it.

I walked into the glass-walled boardroom and plopped down in my chair. The rest of my board-members - computer geeks all, some of whom I'd played Dungeons & Dragons with in high school - were already there, slugging coffee and talking about whatever the hell they talked about these days. I largely ignored them. I'd progressed beyond Star Trek and thinking farts were funny several years ago, and these guys - although friends and great software engineers - weren't really my crowd any more. I was much more the museum and gallery guy now, when I went out at all. At the far end of the table were Jaci Cruz and Danielle Hamilton, from the PR firm. Wheeler & Koch were no dummies - they sent the two sexiest reps they had on staff to get the big honking commission from the room full of computer geeks who would literally fall all over themselves to please them. It would have been brilliant if it hadn't been for me. I could see these were the kind of women who would only be interested in looks and so felt a somewhat reluctant aversion to them.

"What have you got?" I asked without preamble.

They were pros - they didn't even blink. The twin, veneered smiles clicked on like a switch.

"We spent the last three days trying to revamp the company's image," Jaci said with her upbeat, make-you-want-to-hit-her-with-your-car bubblehead lilt. "We're convinced you need to reposition XenoSoft in the 18-35 marketplace. It's about making your software accessible. You explained what it does to us over and over, but it never ties in to music, or movies or online gaming. That's what is going to sell your software. We have to find a way to make it sexy."

"I'm not sure our software is sexy," Brandon Drake, my VP of Development, said flatly.

Danielle spoke up. "It doesn't have to be," she said. "It just has to look that way. If you wanted to make the software itself sexy, then you hire a software developer. You want to make it look sexy, you hire us. We have several ideas. First and foremost is a spokesperson. Look at the market positioning gained by the 'I'm a Mac and I'm a PC' campaign. It's the same kind of thing. And the most viable selling point for that target demographic is sex."

"Explain how modular networking capability and virtual stream caching can ever be sexy," I said.

"When you explain to the demographic what it can do," Danielle shot back. "Modular networking means fax, email, Internet access, phone and instant messaging can all be added on to a single system with no additional hardware to buy. That means text messaging, mp3's, podcasts, portable multimedia, all the things that your target demographic is interested in. You make it faster, easier and more accessible. Virtual stream caching means faster, multiple downloads. Get your music faster. Get your podcasts faster. Then make a hip commercial with sexy dancers and sell it."

I steepled my fingers. "You're talking more money than we want to spend."

"We can work it down," Jaci replied. "One cost-effective way is to use a spokesperson."

"Spokesperson?"

"Find - or better yet, create - a sex symbol. A sexy face to put on your product. The fashion houses and cosmetic companies do it all the time."

"A supermodel is going to be less expensive than a high-end commercial?" Brandon asked.

"Not an established one, no," Jaci said. "But if you make one, it would be. Find a nobody, get her the contracts, get her out there and then have her sell your products."

"Do you have anyone in mind?" Sudeep Chandras, my VP of Marketing, spoke up.

"All you have to do is OK it," Danielle said, smiling. "We can audition models by the end of the week. We'll take care of everything."

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I sat on my back porch overlooking the river, sipping a nondescript red wine and watching the sun go down. I was scheduled for my appointment with ReNu tomorrow at 7 a.m., then the first auditions for our new spokesperson were two weeks away. I looked down at the thick folder full of data and Photoshopped pictures that ReNu had given me, laid on top of the very promising progress reports I'd received from R&D concerning our soporific learning and nerve induction control projects. Prototypes were less than a month away.

The body I'd designed was looking up at me from a glossy sheet of photo paper. It still looked like me, a little, but with a much more chiseled jaw and a full head of sandy blonde hair with just a touch of wave to it. Piercing blue eyes instead of my usual dark brown, wider shoulders and a longer neck, excellent muscle definition without being too bulky and the long-sought-after abdominal six-pack. Hairless and unblemished skin all over except for a dusty goatee and a slight patch just over my - I admit - lengthened and thickened penis. A tight, compact ass and long limbs with delicate, almost feminine, pianist's hands. An even, brilliant smile without the lifelong crooked teeth I'd been born with and my parents had never had the money to correct.

I sighed and downed my wine. I couldn't believe I was doing this. It was just so vain. So unlike me. Why was, after a lifetime of being on my own and filling my life with other things, were my looks suddenly so blasted important to me.

I looked around my empty house, devoid of anything feminine or denoting the slightest bit of companionship outside the professional realm, and I had my answer. If this was what it took to get a woman in my life for longer than about two very expensive dates, then the price-tag was a bargain.

I set my wine glass down and flipped the folder closed. I looked over the nerve induction control project folder. Very promising. My technicians had found a potential method for using the induction control in what amounted to "reverse," in conjunction with the soporific learning hardware to teach physical skills during sleep. Research showed that commitment of a fine motor skill to muscle memory took an average of five hundred repetitions. Using tiny little electrical charges sent through an array of transmitters directly to the muscles and the induction rig to "program" the neural pathways, we could artificially induce those repetitions in a remarkably compressed time-frame. My researchers were already collecting data fine motor skills to teach this way.

The soporific learning hardware was truly impressive. Our revenues could potentially climb into the billions once this was perfected. Using research from leading neurologists around the world, we isolated the specific neurotransmitters that influenced learning in two- to three-year-olds. That age range had the greatest capacity for learning in the human lifetime, and there were several small variances in neurotransmitters in the brain that might explain why. With a series of injections of these neurotransmitters into the spinal fluid and then repetitive lessons recorded at specific frequencies, our preliminary research was suggesting that very

rapid learning - three to six times faster than a normal human adult - would result. With the average human sleeping 6 hours per night, now a human could study 6 hours per night and complete a college-level course in approximately ten days with 80 to 95% retention. Truly amazing stuff, with the potential for a person to get a bachelor's degree within a year. Exciting didn't begin to cover it.

I smiled to myself. The six million I was about to spend on my new bod would be replaced in a matter of weeks once this hit the market.

The last folder was the one I dreaded -- Wheeler & Koch's prospectus for the new supermodel "face" of XenoSoft. It detailed finding a relative nobody in an open casting call - with reality-television style webcasts over the casting process and weekly eliminations, possibly, which made me cringe - and buying her the contracts with several fashion houses and national cosmetics firms to make her a high-fashion "somebody." Then in exchange for all the glamor and notoreity we provided on our dime, she smiles and nods while XenoSoft pimps her out to the 18- to 35-year-old age bracket in an attempt to find a better way to download music and put digital pictures in digital scrapbooks. As with most Wheeler & Koch joints, it was well-thought-out, cost-effective and would probably work without a hitch. I just didn't know if I wanted this to be the direction my company was going to take; from soporific learning and neuro-induction control systems to tits and ass in one stroke. Wheeler & Koch was recommending a tanned, healthy young beach bunny cut from the "Girls Gone Wild" mold, I suppose, or someone off the cover of Lowrider Magazine. I didn't know how much longer I was going to let this go on.

But it would all keep until after tomorrow. Tomorrow, I had a hot date with the new me.

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The main thing is, just relax, I kept telling myself. This is just routine for them. Still, it was a little nerve-wracking to say the least to be sitting there in a rather drafty back-closing hospital gown with an IV in my arm and no morning coffee while doctors talked rapidly around me in their own special language that the medical community made up for itself to sound important. Of the whole team, with all their impressive credentials, only one – a nurse named Suzi who got her nursing degree from a local community college – took the time to speak to me as a human being.

"The doctors are first giving you a round of antibiotics," she explained, favoring me with a dazzling smile. I suspected that she was a beneficiary of the ReNu procedure herself, she was a perfect picture of health and stunningly attractive, as were all the ReNu employees I'd encountered.

"Why antibiotics?"

"We have to shut down your immune system so that your body doesn't develop an antibody to the retrovirus. We don't want you immune to the new you," she said, grinning an adorable, nose-wrinkling grin. "But we also don't want you falling ill from whatever bugs your immune system is currently fighting."

"That's very kind of you," I commented dryly.

"We're a full-service organization." She patted my arm and gave me a blood-pressure raising smile.

“What then?”

“We're going to inject you with the retrovirus we constructed.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. Nothing to it but six rooms full of supercomputers and eight Nobel laureates.”

I grinned in spite of myself, more out of nerves than the fact that I actually found that funny. Still, I found myself grinning in spite of myself around Brandi. She was one of those kinds of girls that made you want to laugh at her jokes on the off chance she'd find you charming.

“Am I going to have any symptoms?”

“Nope. It's not that kind of virus, even though it's engineered off of the rhinovirus.”

“The common cold?”

“Pretty cool, huh?” Suzi asked.

“Pretty cool,” I agreed.

“Next thing is, we'll give you a mild sedative so that you sleep for a little while. Then we're going to float you in an electrolyte bath. That's to stimulate cell division so that your cells multiply with your new DNA structure. We're also going to start IV protein and sugar solution because your cells are going to need a lot of energy and raw material to build all the new changes.”

“And I'm going to be asleep for all of this?”

“If you want to be. If you take the sedation, you should wake up shortly before dinner with a killer appetite and a brand new bod,” Suzi told me. “You excited?”

“Little nervous,” I admitted. “Other than that, I'm good.”

“A little Valium will knock that right out,” she told me, screwing a needle-less syringe into my IV and gently depressing the plunger. I'd had Valium before, so I knew that I wouldn't feel anything at all but things would just gradually get more and more okay with me.

“I'm going to go check on your retrovirus,” she said. “It should be coming downstairs from the lab any second now. I'll taste it and make sure it's still hot.”

I grinned again and laid back, willing the Valium to take effect.

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The man in the black suit looked up briefly at the portable monitor he'd brought, the one tapped into the high-dollar video surveillance suite. No one even worrying about a custodial closet on the third floor, nestled in among a series of rooms that was largely automated. The real work had been done days ago, but the man in the black suit was nothing if not thorough. He hadn't gotten as far as he had in his cut-throat industry by not double- and triple-checking his work.

He brought up the genetic template which he'd doctored together after months of diligent hacking into ReNu's systems, putting tiny pieces of genetic information together in combination to form the perfect organism for his plans. He made sure that his was the template which was being loaded into the powerful computers downstairs, the ones which

would drive the building of the RNA strands which would go into the retrovirus to be injected into the patient he needed out of the way.

He checked the template one more time and made sure it was filed correctly:

“Stills, Brock Ronald.”

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“Something's wonky,” the lab tech commented, looking down at the biometrics and real-time blood chemistry monitoring installed in the subject. “This can't be right.”

The MD on the floor assigned to monitor the ho-hum process of retroviral transformation started up – he'd been mostly asleep by that point – and leaned over the technician's shoulder. He looked at the numbers on the monitor and shrugged.

“I don't see what's wrong,” he commented. “Basic metabolics are within normal ranges, serum protein is low – lots of biological changes going on, that's no surprise. Blood glucose low, too, from all the cellular work going on. Hematocrit and blood hormone levels are completely normal.”

“Look again,” the tech said.

“I am looking again,” the doctor said. “Perfectly normal.”

“Perfectly normal for a healthy nineteen-year-old female,” the tech said.

“Your point?” the doctor said irritably.

The technician pointed at the patient's name, date of birth, and gender on the screen.

“Oh, God,” the doctor said, picking up the phone in a hand gone suddenly numb. He punched the number blindly. “Get me Dr. Stanhope. Right now.”

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Stanhope looked down at the monitor for the millionth time. The changes were progressing normally, inexorably – just as he'd designed them to. There was no denying it, his six-million-dollar client, who, he had to admit, he liked, was cell by cell, protein by protein, turning into a nineteen-year-old female. The technicians were still trying to pull apart the genome which was right now being mapped onto Brock Stills' every cell, to predict what kind of young woman he was going to become. They were having no luck. Somehow the information had become encrypted.

Plus, they couldn't find any trace of Brock Stills' original DNA. They were right now sending agents into his house, to pull epithelial cells off of his toothbrush or hair follicles from his comb. Anything to find his original template so they could engineer another virus and put him back to normal. But by last report the agents were unable to penetrate Mr. Stills' prodigious home security system. They were calling his maid right now, waiting for someone with a key and passcode to let them in.

“I don't understand it,” Stanhope said.

Derrick Hall, the company's burly and intimidating security chief, cracked his knuckles. "It's not hard to understand," he said in his booming basso. "Basic Sherlock Holmes, Doctor. We eliminate the obvious. Whatever's left, however unlikely..."

"So tell me the obvious."

"The genetic data for your patients is very, very secure," Hall said. "It only exists in two separate places: the synthesis lab for creating the genome and the marker lab for generating new identification after the procedure is complete. That data has been changed in both places and the original data deleted. The tape backups are wiped clean."

"Impossible," Dr. Lowell, the IT director, commented, pushing up his glasses with one finger.

"Apparently not," Hall shot back.

"Then how?" Stanhope said.

"Well, I did a little digging and it turns out that all that data is managed by a data management platform called Innovate," Hall said. "A platform, I might add, that was created, tested, perfected and distributed by the company owned by Mr. Stills."

"They custom-designed our system," Lowell said. "So what?"

"So, it stands to reason. This is no accident, it's too involved. Too perfect. No one here even met Mr. Stills before three weeks ago. He wouldn't have enemies here. The place where he is most likely to have enemies who would want him out of the way would be at his company – a multi-million, if not billion, dollar enterprise. Would it be impossible for someone in Mr. Stills' company – someone very highly placed, who stands to benefit from Mr. Stills being out of the way – to have designed an undetectable way into your system which would give him access to Mr. Stills' genome and allow him to alter it?"

"How would he know Mr. Stills would come here for the procedure?" Stanhope asked.

"That's the part I have trouble with," Hall confessed. "It would have to be someone who realized that Mr. Stills wasn't happy with himself. Someone who knew him very, very well and for a very long time, I'll wager."

"It could be more subtle than that," Stanhope offered. "I doubt someone would have gone to all that trouble to bait a trap like this and not take the chance that his target wouldn't take the bait. I think Mr. Stills was somehow led here."

Hall nodded. "Then add to that list someone who Mr. Stills trusted," he added. "The first thing I want to know is who scheduled the meeting or tradeshow where we first met Mr. Stills. I want to talk to the sales rep for that meeting in thirty minutes."

Two aides, invisible against the back wall of the room, heard the task and walked hurriedly through the door to accomplish Hall's work for him.

"In the meantime, gentlemen, I suggest you figure out a way to keep Mr. Stills from owning your asses," Hall said, rising stiffly, a product of old wounds from an old war. "He's going to be a bit, shall we say, grouchy when he finds out you lost his entire identity and left him with a set of breasts and a startling lack of penis."

The room was already buzzing with ideas by the time the oak door shut gently behind Hall as he walked away.

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The sedative – I assumed that's what it was – seemed to be wearing off in increments. With a detached curiosity, I discovered first that I had been able to see the entire time, it was just that the strange arrangements of light and shadow, color and null-space that had been muzzily occupying that space in my head were actual visual images and could be processed. After that, the soft humming that had been in my brain for hours slowly resolved into the sounds of an EKG monitor, a wren singing in a tree outside a window, and what sounded like a lawnmower faintly through the wall.

Then it occurred to me that I felt differently. Very differently. I couldn't put a finger on why.

“Mr. Stills, I'm Derrick Hall. I'm ReNu's chief of security,” a tall, hard-looking man who swam disorientingly into my field of vision said gently. I felt his hand on my shoulder about two and a half seconds after I saw it touch.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Hall?” I asked from a mouth seemingly full of fur and glue. Whatever they'd given me to “calm me down” had a kick on it like a Missouri mule.

“I'm afraid it's a matter of what I can do for you, sir,” Hall replied. “I have some bad news for you.”

“The procedure worked, didn't it?” I asked, a stab of panic bouncing insistently but harmlessly off the thick, padded walls of my sedation.

“It worked, all right,” Hall admitted. “Worked spectacularly, actually. Just not in the way you or Dr. Stanhope intended.”

“I don't know what you mean,” I told him honestly.

“Someone tampered with the computers here at ReNu,” Hall explained. “Someone, we strongly suspect, involved at the highest levels of your company, XenoSoft.”

“Tampered, how?”

“They made some... alterations to your DNA retrovirus without our knowledge,” Hall said, clearing his throat awkwardly. I felt a hysterical urge to laugh. “Medically, you're fine. Perfect health, better health than you've likely even enjoyed in your life. You've got enhanced strength, flexibility, stamina, you have disease resistances left and right... you're a perfect physical specimen.”

“But?”

“Medically isn't the issue. Biologically, we have a problem.” He was obviously stalling.

“What problem?” I was getting impatient, sedation or no.

“Biologically, you're a perfectly healthy nineteen-year-old female,” he spat out, eyes lowered.

I giggled. The giggles became chuckles and then I lost it, howling with laughter. What a great joke. This Hall character, he really had me going. Somebody at XenoSoft must have put him up to this. Tears began to leak out of my eyes as I convulsed with laughter.

Slowly, the gales of hysteria resolved into a high-pitched, singsong giggle again. That's when a very stone-faced, not-laughing-at-all Hall looked me dead in the eye and held up a hand mirror.

The first thing that struck me was that I was as bald as an egg. No eyebrows, no eyelashes, no scalp hair, no body hair. I looked a bit like a plastic mannequin, if plastic could be manufactured in a flawless, creamy amber of a healthy, glowing tan above the unnameable something that denoted youth and perfect health. My skin looked soft beyond soft, the kind that begged to be caressed, that kind that one couldn't imagine ever being touched by anything rougher than the softest silk or the smoothest satin. Large, guileless brown eyes which dominated a perfect, oval face with a slender, aquiline nose with an adorable little "ski jump" at the end, full bee-stung lips in a natural, buy-me-a-pony pout. I stared at this woman – myself – in utter disbelief. The hand with its slender fingers and long nails that reached up to touch my cheek was mine; I felt it on my cheek and in my fingers, but my eyes saw the cheek and fingers of another in the mirror. My mind was in total rebellion. I started to laugh – a high, mellifluous soprano – and it quickly took on the edge of hysteria. Hall put a hand on my shoulder, and my skin – my new, beyond-sensitive skin – sent shivers of sensation up and down my spine.

"I have no idea what to say to you," Hall said.

"How?" I choked out, since hot, stinging tears were starting to take the place of the hysterical laughter, making my high-pitched little-girl voice into a symphony of hiccups and snorts and coughs.

"We're going to find out. We're already looking into it. I was hoping, if you were up to it, I could ask you some questions which might help lead me in a good direction."

"I suppose," I said, trying to regain some composure. Hall offered me a tissue which I accepted gratefully, blowing my nose in a wet honk.

He gestured me to a chair. I stumbled as I tried to walk the two steps and sit – the business of moving a woman's body was far more complicated than I'd originally given it credit for. I managed an awkward limping shuffle and plopped unceremoniously in the folding chair. The shock of the cold metal seat against the strip of bare behind peeking out from my open hospital gown galvanized me and made me gasp, which set a fresh round of tears off. Hall waited patiently for the flow to subside, offering another tissue.

"I'm sorry. I can't seem to stop crying," I said huskily.

He chuckled roughly. "I can't believe you're able to speak at all," he said. "If it was me in your situation, I'd be a complete gibbering wreck. To say I'm impressed would be putting it mildly."

I felt a warm flush across my chest and my nipples – which I didn't dare to look at, not now – stiffened against the flimsy cotton of my gown. I folded my arms across my chest. I knew he could see them, and somehow I just couldn't take that right now. I was having a hard enough time dealing with the fact that it happened in response to a compliment from a handsome man.

"So. These questions you mentioned," I said, trying to sound as brusque and businesslike as I was able to in this godawful bubblehead chirp that I still couldn't comprehend was now my voice.

He flipped open a little leatherbound notebook and snatched a gold Cross pen from his shirt pocket in one smooth motion, a fact I slowly realized was a definite throwback to his days as a detective.

“Do you have any enemies that you know of,” he said. Even his voice had changed. I could see his relief – to switch from a totally alien, foreign situation as mine to something he knew how to do, something he knew the right things to say, must have let him breathe for the first time in hours.

“No one I'd count as an enemy. Rivals, to be sure, and people who don't particularly like me, but I can't think of anyone who might wish me harm.”

“It might not be harm, specifically,” he said. “Can you think of anyone who might just want you out of the way?”

“No,” I said.

“Take me through your entire contact with ReNu, from the first meeting with their sales rep to the day you showed up for your appointment and they sedated you. I need as much detail as you can remember; anything could wind up being important.”

“I met a man named Steve Hickman at an electronics trade-show in Seattle,” I began, closing my eyes. “I can't remember the circumstances exactly, but I seem to recall it was one of the big meet-and-greets for the vendors the evening before the show opened. He walked into the group of people I was chatting with from Microsoft, old friends of mine, and introduced himself...”

* * * * *

Three hours later, I finished my recounting. My mind was working sharply despite the sedation, but my throat was dry and I found out to my chagrin that my old days of being able to chug down three or four bottles of water were over because my stomach could no longer hold that much, and that my days of drinking that much and not peeing were over as well.

Hall had done well in summoning a nurse to help my with my first experience urinating as a woman. First of all, I was in a near panic since as a female holding it in was a great deal more difficult and had an urgency to it that I'd never experienced before. Muscles down there were smaller than I was used to, for one, and there was no duct length between the two urinary sphincters to help dissipate pressure as there was when I was still equipped the other way. The nurse was patient, non-judgmental and very helpful to me, telling me that – first of all – I could no longer stand to effectively complete the process as I knew it. I'd been facing the commode wrestling with the ties of my hospital gown – unsuccessfully, since the newfound panic of trying to “tie a knot in it” with nothing to knot was starting to get to me and I was very close to doing that little dance I'd known since I was a child, regardless of gender. After that, it was a matter of learning things that I'd frankly never thought of, like wiping backwards to keep from spreading any potential infection from my newer orifices to my urethra. Hell, just having to wipe in the first place was enough to blow my fragile, well-sedated mind.

By my fifth visit to the pretty pink-tiled bathroom with the skirted and long-haired stick figure placarded on the door, I pretty much had the mechanics down pat and was well on my way to accepting the smaller bladder capacity I would be shackled with for the rest of my time as a woman. When I emerged, drying my hands – cracking and dry, my new more sensitive skin

starting to show the strain of the harsh antimicrobial soap in the clinic's bathroom – Mr. Hall had been joined by Dr. Stanhope and George Rudd, one of my top research and development people. Their eyes widened to see me.

“Good God,” George breathed. “Brock, is that really you?”

“In the flesh,” I said in my little-girl soprano. “I was an usher at your wedding, and when your daughter Ashley was born three weeks early while you were in Hong Kong on a tour of a biotech plant I was the one in the delivery room with Susan. The text message I sent you said 'thank god she has your wife's looks.' Does that convince you?”

He laughed. “Actually, Dr. Stanhope already offered all the proof I needed,” he said. “But yeah, you're Brock Stills. Nobody else would know about that message but you. ReNu, Brock? What on earth possessed you?”

“A pot belly and a receding hairline,” I shot back. “I saw a solution, so I explored it. Isn't that the way you run your department?”

“Yeah, but fuck-ups just mean scorch marks on a lab table or a dead white rat,” he countered. “Not a set of breasts and the loss of every Y chromosome in my body. I think you can say there's a significant difference here.”

“Nitpicker,” I grumped. “George, why are you here?”

“Mr. Hall called me,” he said. “There's worse news, and he thought a friend should deliver it.”

I closed my eyes. “Out with it.”

“Dr. Stanhope has done a complete system teardown,” George told me. “I sat and watched most of it. They've looked literally everywhere, Brock. Your original DNA is gone. Even the tape backups which they make every six hours are wiped clean.”

“I don't understand,” I said simply.

“It was a system command, Brock. Only people with development access could have put it there, and it's compiled into the build. Somebody at XenoSoft did this. They buried code in the data management system that would specifically hunt down and kill your DNA. Then they went and steam-cleaned your house from top to bottom. The forensic teams couldn't find a single sample in your house, your car, anything.”

“So we give me another body. Similar to my old one,” I said.

“There's the other bit of news,” Dr. Stanhope said. “We got your blood work back. Seems that your immune system has been, for want of a better word, supercharged under your new genome. The good news is that you'll probably never be sick another day in your life. The bad news is, you'll kill any retrovirus that we put into you. Mr. Stills, I don't think we're going to be able to find a way to change you back.”

I sat down hard on the chair, making it scoot a little across the floor. Dimly, my mind registered that the chair didn't creak and groan the way I was used to folding chairs doing, but that was because I was used to hearing them creak under a six-foot, two hundred and twenty-four pound body and not the five-foot-seven, one hundred and eighteen pound frame I occupied now.

"Stuck this way," I muttered.

"It seems so," Dr. Stanhope confirmed. "Mr. Stills, we'll find a way around this. We'll find a way to correct this situation. ReNu has shut down all operations and cancelled all appointments until we can get to the bottom of this. Correcting this error is now the full-time job of sixty brilliant minds."

I sighed. "It's good to know," I said. "I'd like to help, too, if I can. I can help search for who put that system command in our software."

George cleared his throat. "We have to be careful about that," he said. "It was an inside job. Somebody at XenoSoft will want this covered up."

"We have to find out who stands to benefit the most from this," Hall said.

"I can set up off-site," I said. "I can hunt from somewhere else. I'll rent an apartment near the office and tap straight in with a hard line. I'll find the sonofabitch."

Hall rubbed his temples. "You can't do that," he said.

"Why the hell not?"

"Because we lost your original DNA. We have no way to generate you any new identification, no way to show a court that you are who you used to be. Your entire DNA structure has changed."

"So I don't even exist," I said.

"Of course you do," Hall said. "Just not on paper. Which means you don't have access to any of your accounts, none of your holdings. I have someone I can contact that can generate you an identity. It won't be legal and it will not hold up under any kind of close scrutiny. But we can at least get you a birth certificate, social security number and a drivers' license. It'll be enough to get you a checking account and possibly rent you a place. I'll leave it up to Mr. Rudd to figure out how to funnel money to you. Downside is, it will take me at least a week to get this done. As I said, it's not legal. The only other option I can think of is to contact the feds, maybe work something through witness protection, but they're going to want proof of who you used to be."

"No, I don't have that kind of time," I said. "I have to find out who did this and why. Get me the illegal stuff. It'll do until we come up with something better."

"Agreed," Hall said. "Mr. Stills..."

"Better make it Ms. from now on," I sighed, brushing a fresh tear away from my eye. "I suppose I have to get used to it, at least in the short term."

He looked down in something like shame. "Ms. Stills. We still have to protect you. Whoever did this to you may still need you out of the way. We have to assume they're coming after you."

"It shouldn't be too hard to hide," I said. "After all, I don't exist."

"You're going to need a cover, is what I meant," Hall said. "Nobody springs out of nowhere. It'll raise suspicion. I want to enroll you in a community college and put some outstanding credit card debt out there in your name, anything to make it look like you didn't just pop out of nowhere."

“And he's going to need a car,” Rudd added. “Clothes. Toiletries. A computer and a cell phone, some way to contact us if he needs.”

“She needs,” I corrected, hating the sounds of it, feeling as though I was capitulating to some bizarre kind of torture.

George Rudd blew his nose. I noticed a bright tear clinging to his lashes. I'd lost sight of how much this was upsetting him, and Dr. Stanhope as well. Hall, too. They all felt as though they were letting me down, I realized, these men who were paid handsomely to fix problems having to tell me repeatedly that there was nothing they could do.

“There's a lot of things I'm going to need,” I said. “For one thing, hair. Unless we make a backstory that involves chemotherapy, I'm going to draw attention unless I have hair.”

Stanhope nodded. “I have a colleague at the university who might be able to help with that,” he told me. “Let me make a call.”

“And I'll need a car straight off,” I said. “I have some things I need to attend to.”

Hall closed his notebook. “I know just the guy.”

“And it looks as though I'm going to need about three weeks of physical therapy,” I said. “I can barely walk three steps without tripping or stumbling or falling into a wall. The weight and center of balance are not what I'm used to.”

George Rudd grinned. “I don't think you're going to need three weeks at all. My car's out front. Let's find you something to wear and I'll meet you downstairs.”



SUMMARY: When a rich man decides that he will undergo a new treatment to enhance his looks, he does not count on someone sabotaging his transformation.

SIX MILLION DOLLAR EX-MAN

PartTwo

by Valerie Hope

I FORLORLY ATTEMPTED TO ADJUST the collar of the overlarge t-shirt one of the nurses had given me out of her gym bag for my trip. It was my eighth attempt and it fared no better than the others. The collar of the white tee with the pink three-quarter-length sleeves and “Hottie” across the breasts slid up and started trying to choke me again. At least it made it uncomfortable to look down and not see my shapely, hairless legs with the dirty Keds on the dainty feet and the scandalous Daisy Duke cutoffs they'd found for me to wear.

I had a pair of gigantic bug-eye sunglasses and a beige tweed newsboy cap on and was attempting to slump down below the level of the side window of George Rudd's Mercedes so no one could see me. He was taking me to XenoSoft's Kimball Research Labs, lovingly called the “Skunk Works” for all the top-secret R&D stuff they tackled out there. Of the billions my company was ostensibly worth, more than 98% of that revenue was thought up and developed at the small warehouse on the outskirts of town. It was the place where Brandon Drake and I had developed Version 1.0 of Innovate, XenoSoft's flagship data management product, nearly fourteen years ago. We didn't have the heart to give the place up, and had moved R&D out there. It was an incongruous place to have a high-tech think tank, an old converted warehouse next to an antique flea market and a dilapidated sandwich shop. Nearly midnight, the only other building for miles with any lights on was a convenience store on the other side of the freeway. The lights at the Skunk Works were never off.

Rudd kept shooting covert looks at me out of the corner of his eye.

“What is it?” I finally asked grumpily.

“Nothing,” he said, snapping his eyes back to the road.

“George, I'm your oldest friend,” I shot back. “You keep sneaking these weird looks at me when you think I'm not looking. Don't tell me 'nothing.' What the hell is it?”

“It's just...”

“Dammit, George...”

“You're beautiful, okay?” he said. “I keep looking at you like that because you're fucking beautiful, Brock. I didn't want to say anything.”

I blushed crimson – I could feel my ears burning and and itch across my cheeks. “Forget I asked,” I said, studying the glove compartment intently. “Jesus.”

He laughed nervously. "One more reason to keep you out of sight, right?"

"Right," I said.

George lowered his window and used his prox-card to open the chain-link gate in front of the Skunk Works. The well-oiled thing slid noiselessly out of the way.

"You want to let me in on why we're here?" I asked.

"You know we got the prototype up for the nerve induction unit last week," he said. "Well, we also got a working unit going on the soporific learning system. We can use them to teach you how to walk properly, as well as giving you the basics of living and acting as a woman. When we find a way to change you back, then we can put in all the old knowledge just as easily."

"Excellent," I said. "Have either one of them been tested on humans yet?"

"Soporific learning has," George told me, guiding his car into a parking space near the door. "The teaching is done in English, after all, can't test that on a gerbil. We've had successful tests of the nerve induction rig on chimpanzees, and I don't see a reason why it won't work on you."

"So you just have Woman 101 templates laying around for this," I said.

"Of course not. I called Kevin Krishnamurthy to gather it up. He's the best, Brock."

"You say so," I said. "I'm not too sure about this."

"Okay, then, tell me what you do want to do," he said testily. "I'm on uncharted ground, here."

I rubbed my face in exasperation. "I guess I don't have much choice."

"We need to hurry," he told me. "Dr. Stanhope is working on trying to get you some hair."

I raised an eyebrow. "I was only talking about some kind of wig," I said. "I didn't know there was going to be a big production about the whole thing."

"You've got to be kidding," George said back. "He fucked up so catastrophically, he's desperate to do something to help you. I'm surprised he didn't offer his own hair. I know he wanted to."

"You're right," I said. I opened the car door. "Let's get this show on the road, George."

He opened his own door and stepped out, leading me up the short concrete steps to the security door in the back of the building. I shivered in the late-night chill – my skin was much more sensitive to cold, apparently – and waited for George to usher me in hurriedly.

We threaded through the drafty, grey hallways past several work areas and labs. The people who worked here at Skunk Works were beyond brilliant, and their workspaces showed it with original art, strange statues and posters and bizarre quotes and statements scrawled on whiteboards. I was led into the lab which housed the neuroinduction equipment. Over the door on an old fan-fold dot-matrix printer paper strip were the words "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." I tried not to take it as an omen.

George flipped on the lights in the abandoned-for-the-evening lab, the fluorescents flickering fitfully before they engaged the room in a bluish, numbing glow. He shut the door behind me and locked it. He flitted around, his six-foot-two inch frame with its middle-age spare tire

moving with surprising agility around the stacked computers and components, bringing monitors to life with a touch and filling the room with the soft hum and whirr of computers and cooling fans.

“Have a seat in the recliner there,” he said, gesturing absently to a patched La-Z-Boy in the center of the room. I slumped in it gracelessly, still at odds with the subtle art of moving a woman's body. I still even walked in the stooped-over slump of an older man, knees wide apart to accommodate a penis and scrotum that were startlingly not there anymore.

“What do I do?” I asked.

“Nothing, right now. I have to find the data that Kevin left for us. His email said he recorded the movement mechanics off of an eighteen-year-old girl at his gym. The soporific learning data is from a number of sources, all ignorant of why they gave it, according to him.”

“And Kevin? Does he know why he did it?”

“I told him it was for a comparison project, to see how accurate our data collection is. He bought it. I'll have to get you to approve the money to go ahead and see that comparison project through to keep the cover, once you're back to normal.”

“You pretty much have a blank check for now, George,” I chuckled.

He crossed the room to me and started attaching sticky, gummy electrodes to my bare legs and arms, my shoulders, my belly, my back and finally my neck and forehead. He whistled tunelessly – an old habit of his from way back, when we were together at CalTech – while he laboriously attached the wires to a prodigious interface unit on a small wheeled cart next to the recliner.

“I'm going to do both procedures at once,” he told me. “They work on completely different areas of the brain, but it's going to be a lot of information for your body. You might have a wicked headache afterwards, but it shouldn't last long.”

He handed me two little lavender pills in a paper cup. “These are sedatives. They'll put you in a kind of trance state for the soporific program. The whole thing should take about eight hours. I'm keeping everybody out of the lab until you're done. From there, we're going to take you to Dr. Stanhope for the hair and then back to my place so you can get some sleep. Derrick Hall should have some new developments to report to you by the time you come to.”

“George, I really appreciate this.”

He stopped what he was doing and smiled at me kindly. “Anything for you, buddy. You know that.”

“No, really. I appreciate the hell out of this. I'm really scared, man. I'm glad it's you.”

He had no words, so he just squeezed my hand. It meant the world to me.

He reached over and fitted a pair of virtual-reality goggles over my eyes and ears. The noise-cancelling earphones made the room go dead silent. It was an unnameable eternity of seconds before I heard George's familiar voice through the headset.

“All set?” he asked.

"I guess so," I said. Strange that when I couldn't hear the words coming from my own mouth, I still heard my voice as a scratchy tenor in my mind.

"How do you feel?"

"Kinda funky," I said. "Lightheaded."

"That's the sedatives. Just let 'em work. I'll start the program in about 10 more minutes. I can give you some music in the meantime, if you want."

"Nah, that's okay," I said back. "I'm not a fan of the R&D guys' music for the most part."

"Old fart."

"Had to happen sometime," I replied.

"Damn, this is a lot of data," George commented. "Kevin really went all out, I guess."

"Does it all look good?" I asked.

"It's a shitload of ones and zeros, Brock," he said dryly. "It looks as good as ones and zeros ever look. The file names all check out, though. Things like 'slow walk' and 'fast walk' and 'run' are here, as well as 'climb stairs' and 'descend stairs.' There's even a 'high heels' version of everything, too."

"We won't be needing those," I said. "I'm much more of the 'dress like a boy' school."

"I'll give it to you anyway," George said. "Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it. Besides, we don't know how long you're going to be stuck this way. There's no telling what kinds of skills you're going to need. This may not be the only time we do this."

"I guess you're right." It was getting a little difficult to form words from my thoughts.

"Okay, Brock, I'm starting the neuroinduction run now," he said. "It's going to tingle."

Tingle, hell. It felt like ants were crawling under my skin. I fought the urge to squirm, but my muscles were being stimulated by electrodes and I didn't have total control of myself. The slowly-working sedative was making that an okay proposition, though. Nice thing about sedatives, I was finding out after ingesting so many today. They didn't really help with my problems, but they certainly made me care about them less.

"You okay?" George asked.

"Peachy," I grumped.

"Upside is, you'll never have to pay for another drink with that pout," he said.

"Bite me," I shot back. I couldn't hear, but my speech was slurring.

"I think you're good to start the soporific learning course," he told me. "Try to keep your eyes open, Brock. Just relax and go with it."

A soft, humming kind of music filled my ears, the kind of tune that mothers hummed to newborn babies the world over. I relaxed instantly, even managing to look past the creepy-crawlie sensations under my skin. I'm not sure how I knew, but a beatific smile spread across my face.

“Lesson one,” a soft, authoritative but definitely computer-synthesized voice said in a melodious feminine contralto. “Reference to you and your possessions, skills or personality will be made by the words “she,” “her” and “hers.” These pronouns will not cause a reaction in you. You have always been referred to as “she” and “her.” It is perfectly natural and normal for you...”

* * * * *

I dimly registered being moved. Lifted by strong hands and set into the sagging seat of what could only be a wheelchair, the strange sensation of moving without moving of the wheelchair, then a car, then a wheelchair again. A change in air temperature and the dry tang of air conditioning. Dr. Stanhope's comforting voice.

“My friend at the university really came through for me,” he said. “This is a substance called Synthomer 2. Purely experimental right now.”

“What is it?” George asked above me. Try as I might, I couldn't open my eyes or make a sound. Whatever it was they'd given me was keeping me in the sub-awake state I'd been in throughout the last eight or nine hours. I'd been able to tell from my brief time outside that it was morning, and warm. But other than that I had no sense of time or place. It was disconcerting, but my altered mind only registered the discomfort in a detached, clinical way.

“It's a long-chain polymer that, to all laboratory tests, seems to be utterly unbreakable. It can only be cut with a laser at this point. The strange thing is it bonds immediately and apparently irreversibly to human tissue.”

“Wow,” George said, his curiosity for new inventions coming well to the fore in an instant.

“I'm planning on implanting it into Mr. Stills' scalp, browline, pubic bone and eyelids. The stiffer hair can be achieved by an acid bath, which we're doing now. It will take the place of the natural hair follicles that were destroyed during the transformation. Once Mr. Stills is restored, we can machine-cut the fibers to any style he might want. For now, we were thinking that his cover would be better served with long hair – no one with hair down to below her shoulderblades could ever be suspected of having been completely bald just yesterday, or a short-haired man the day before.”

“I suppose so,” I heard Derrick Hall say. “Can you do anything about the color? It's a little... extreme, I guess.”

“No,” Dr. Stanhope said. “Sadly, this polymer resists everything. Dye, paint, solvents, the works. He won't even be able to style his hair if he wants to, it will stay straight – or curly, if we acid-bathe it – no matter what he does to it.”

“I don't think hairstyling is going to be his biggest concern.”

Strange that I didn't seem to know who they were talking about. I thought they'd been talking about me, but evidently they were talking about some guy now.

“Did the sleep-learning go all right?” Stanhope asked.

“Evidently,” George replied. “We won't know until Brock wakes up. The EEG response was normal for all the research, though. I can estimate between 95 and 98 percent retention, and we can always run the course again if something important didn't stick.”

“Well, we should get started so Mr. Stills can get some real sleep,” Dr. Stanhope said. “Can we get him lifted up onto the bed, please?”

Strong hands took me under the arms and legs and I felt myself floating weightlessly before settling gently onto a soft surface. The same hands began to undress me, an unnerving feeling that I peculiarly enjoyed.

I felt a tightness around my left arm – a tourniquet, I dimly realized – and then a sharp sting in the fossa of my elbow. They’re starting an IV, I told myself in my own mind. The pain ended as suddenly as it had begun and I flinched at the pop of the latex band ringing in ears that had only heard soothing music and voices for the last however long.

“This should block the sensation,” Dr. Stanhope said, and I felt a cool flow up my arm. “The procedure is regrettably quite painful. I wouldn’t want to feel it.”

Numbness swallowed me. I drifted in and out of a fitful sleep as cold metal and pinpoint pressure assaulted my eyes, scalp, brows and finally my private parts. It seemed to take forever, but I was blissfully unaware of what forever actually meant.

“Remarkable,” Derrick Hall said, as the busy hands and the pinpoint pressure continued at my scalp. I think they were done with everything else, since they hadn’t touched my eyelids, brows or pubic area for quite some time. “It looks completely natural.”

“And indestructible?” George said, his curiosity still set on scan.

“To our best knowledge. Impervious to just about everything except extreme heat.”

“Any ideas about who might have done this?” George asked.

“A few leads,” Hall replied. “The hard part is going to be investigating this matter without tipping off whoever did it that we’re looking for him. If we spook the bad guy, he could run and we might never find him.”

“You’re sure it’s a him?”

I assume Hall nodded. “There just aren’t that many women in the company, period, and none who have that kind of access.”

“Who’s on your list?”

“Any of the vice-presidents could have done it. Two or three of the senior developers on the ReNu project. The software you run here was custom-built by a very small team of very senior people. You, of course, Mr. Rudd, and Mr. Stills were capable of doing it, but I’m confident we can rule the two of you out. It would have had to be someone who knew about ReNu’s capabilities, so I’m leaning away from the developers, who never actually visited this facility and only knew the project from the specifications. I’m going to interview the ReNu staff this afternoon, to see who might have a connection to one of the vice-presidents. If that doesn’t pan out, I’ll have to start speaking to ReNu’s former clients.”

“I can’t believe someone would do something like this to Brock,” George said. “My God, that polymer is amazing. I could never tell that wasn’t real human hair.”

"I'll pass it along to my colleague," Dr. Stanhope said.

"You're sure you don't want a little more, um, down there?" George asked. "It looks a little sparse."

"I'm assured by my nursing staff that it's the favored way to wear it these days," Dr. Stanhope said a little sheepishly.

"I'm sure it will be fine," Hall said. "Mr. Rudd, you've been with the company since the beginning. Does anyone stand to benefit from something like this happening to Mr. Stills?"

"I've tried to think through that angle," George said. "I came in a little late. Brock and Brandon Drake had already designed the original software by the time they incorporated. The company's set up pretty much to standard specifications. The prime stockholders are Brock and the vice-presidents and they pretty much own equal portions of the corporation, I think."

"So we've got nothing from that end," Hall said. I heard disappointment in his voice.

"Not necessarily," George said. "Researching the corporate structure isn't where you need to look for who's going to benefit. They incorporated purely for tax purposes, it was the last thing they did after they wrote Innovate. Where people stand to gain is the patents."

"Patents?" Hall asked. I heard the notebook flip open again.

"XenoSoft is nothing more than a collection of really, really bright software engineers," George explained. "And most of the company's products are conglomerations of really good ideas that these people had. Brock's original plan for the company was that everyone involved owned the intellectual property rights to whichever ideas they had. For example, the Innovate platform is based on technology that contains no less than eighteen patents, all held by different people. I think Brock owns nine of them."

"So you think this has something to do with one of the patents that he holds?" Hall said.

"I hold several patents myself through the company," George said. "The standard agreement is that I allow the company to license my patented work and they pay me a stipend in exchange. Usually a small royalty, but it adds up quickly when we take products to market. If something happens to me, then my patents revert to a corporate holding and they're co-owned by the primary stockholders."

"So we only have to figure out who might want Mr. Stills' patents."

"You sound relieved and you shouldn't," George warned. "Brock holds about seventy patents from his work at XenoSoft, and probably twenty more personally."

"Dear God," Hall said.

"I can help you as much as I can, but I don't really remember who wrote what software, who pioneered what technology. Like I said, I came to XenoSoft after all of this was already done. I was more concerned with my own patents and intellectual property, to be honest."

"I'd appreciate the help," Hall told him.

“Of course,” George said. “But to be honest, Mr. Hall, the one you really need helping you with that is Brock, here. By agreement, anything XenoSoft does can use patented technology whenever it wants, providing that they kick back a portion of sales to the patent holder. You're not going to find anything looking at the software that's in-house. You'd have to look at the projects in the pipeline to see any evidence of someone who might want one of Brock's patents. And the only one who can begin to see something like that is Brock.”

Hall sighed heavily. “Which means we have to get him access. I don't even know if I can get him in the building. I even thought about having him re-hired under an assumed identity, on the ground floor somewhere. But there's a hiring freeze.”

“I know. Brock was worried about paying the people he already had. He can't stand having to do layoffs, so he froze hiring until he knew more about which way the economy is going to swing.”

“So how the hell do we get a person who doesn't exist through the door?”

“Give me a little while,” George said. “I can figure something out.”

“Good,” Hall said. “In the meantime, we have to strictly limit who knows about this. I'd like to keep it between the people in this room if at all possible.”

“I've tried to keep it a secret, but people are going to start wondering where the hell Brock is,” George said. “He's a pretty visible boss and very well-liked by his employees.”

“We're going to have to figure something out, then. A medical emergency, something that will explain his dropping off the face of the earth,” Hall said.

“We're all done, here,” Dr. Stanhope announced, interrupting.

“Fantastic,” George said. “Beautiful work, doctor. Really remarkable.”

“Thank you,” Stanhope said. “Let's get Mr. Stills out of here and someplace where he can rest. We can discuss all of this somewhere else.”

“Agreed,” Hall said.

The strong hands resumed their posts at my armpits and behind my knees, and I knew no more.

* * * *

I woke up in a curtain of softness that was totally unfamiliar. I was in an antique bed on what looked like a hand-made quilt, wearing soft flannel pajamas and a pink camisole that weren't mine, a little heart stitched across the front around the words “fast asleep” in cursive, pink a shade darker than the shirt. The pajama bottoms matched. Thick cotton socks were on my feet.

The unfamiliar softness was my new hair. It was long, shiny and thick with kinky curls that looked wild and fly-away. The ringlets cushioned my head and half-observed my face and cascaded over both shoulders and down my back, making my head strange to move with their unfamiliar weight and bulk. I sputtered and spat to free the errant locks that had strayed into my mouth while I slept and held up a strand of the stuff to my eyes. It was a shocking platinum white with barely a hint of yellow to it, catching the light and throwing it back with golden overtones. I gasped. It was Marilyn Monroe bleach blonde, almost translucent and it shone

with an almost unnatural sheen. I touched my face with my other hand and felt high, delicately-arched eyebrows. My field of vision was ringed with long, flowing lashes which I felt brush my cheeks when I blinked – easily long enough to be mistaken for false lashes, I could tell.

I stood up and tossed my head. My wild, curly mane whipped behind me and floated gently down on the air to settle around my shoulders. A small dressing table with a mirror stood across from the bed, and I caught my reflection and stopped dead.

George had been right. I was gorgeous. A tight, athletic body without an ounce of fat to be seen, but not hard-edged like a bodybuilder. My curves were soft and feminine, wide hips and a small but pert set of breasts and prominent nipples which tented the front of my girly little camisole. The mound of platinum hair looked artfully unruly, like I'd spent hours on it to get it to look this unkempt. It framed my face and made it look small and girlish.

Something in the back of my head clicked on and I knew I needed to brush it out or it would tangle. I also knew exactly what the soft elastic band around my left wrist was for – I scooped my hair up from my temples and bound it quickly and effortlessly into the scrunchie someone had thoughtfully put around my wrist, gathering it into a loose ponytail which hung roughly to the middle of my lower back. A few errant strands drifted loose and down across my face. I tugged at them to arrange them as bangs, giving myself a sultry look. I dimly remembered the soporific learning course I'd done. Some basics of hairstyling and management must have been included in the process, since I'd never had hair longer than my earlobes in my entire life and I'd done all of this without even thinking, expertly and naturally.

I dangled my legs over the edge of the bed and was surprised to feel that they didn't quite touch the floor. The bed was tall in an antique way, but I never expected to have to drop three inches before my heels touched carpet. I looked into the bathroom to see the counter covered with plastic sacks from a local drugstore. The other door opened into a well-decorated hallway with a red runner of carpet along the polished hardwood.

I didn't walk to the end of the hallway and down the flight of stairs at the end – I glided. The natural grace and sway of my movement was effortless, and I realized I looked halfway between a catwalk strut and a sexy slink without even trying. I had the distinct impression that if I tried to “turn it on” I could probably move like oil across silk and exude enough sex appeal to set the room on fire. I made a mental note to never turn it on.

I slinked down the stairs with my new silky walk and followed the faintness of voices through a luxuriously-decorated but not too ostentatious house, past a sitting room with shelves packed with books old and new, a dining room and finally to where the subdued voices I'd been hearing were coming from, a small sitting room decorated with leather couches and armchairs, more shelves of old books and crystal lamps. Dr. Stanhope, Derrick Hall and George Rudd were there, George's wife Harmony and someone I'd never met before, a dark-haired and dark-eyed man with a slightly twitchy look about him, lean and wiry and with a long pinkish-white scar slanting across his face from right eyebrow to left cheek.

“You're awake,” George said softly, his eyes still registering shock at my appearance. I wondered idly if he'd ever get over the sight of me.

“Finally,” I said in the soprano that still sounded like a squeak to me. “Feels like I slept a month.”

“Sedatives,” George said. “Are you hungry?”

“Starved,” I replied. “What’s going on?”

The coffee table between the couches was piled to overflowing with folders and laptops glowing with eerie light of spreadsheets and databases full of cryptic-looking information.

“We’re trying to sort through all the fucking patents you and your colleagues have racked up over the years you’ve been a company,” Hall said, rubbing his eyes. “All seven hundred and twenty-six of them.”

“Where did you get all this information?” I asked.

“That would be me,” the scarred man said in a basso rumble that seemed incongruous with his lanky appearance. He stuck out a hand awkwardly. “I’m Tommy Gutierrez.”

I shook his hand.

“Tommy’s one of my go-to guys in the federal government,” Hall explained. “He helps me out with finding government information. He got all this from the patent office for us. Plus he did us another favor.”

Hall handed me a thick envelope. I opened it awkwardly – it was excessively taped shut – and pulled out a birth certificate and social security paperwork. It took me a moment to register that I was now looking at my birthdate of April 18, 1989 instead of the April 18, 1970 I was used to, and that instead of Brock Ronald Stills it was my name – Brooke Renée Stillwater – that was now typed neatly on all the forms.

“It’s not much,” Hall said. “But it should do for the time being, until we can get your original identity restored. We’re working on a drivers’ license, credit history and a high school diploma, too.”

“Why so much?” I asked. “Do I really need all of that if I’m just going to lay low?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” Dr. Stanhope said. “We really can’t trust anyone in the company with this, and we need someone on the inside, someone with access, who can start trying to look for who did this to you. George would never get the access, not to the business stuff. But you can.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, nodding. “But they aren’t going to let me in the door.”

“Oh, yes they will,” Hall said. “Because you’re going to be one of the models that is in the running to become the next XenoSoft spokesperson. You’ll get access to the facility and your passwords and access will do all the rest.”

I took an involuntary step backward. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“It’s all we can think of,” George said. “We’re pretty sure that we can get you in the running for the finalists with Wheeler & Koch. We were even discussing bringing Jaci Cruz and Danielle Hamilton into the loop by letting them know what happened to you. We can be sure they’re not in on it, it basically comes down to whether or not they can keep your secret within XenoSoft.”

“And you're certainly gorgeous enough,” Harmony Rudd said with a beaming smile. “We can easily get you everything you need to know about the modeling end of it through the learning program, you won't look or feel awkward at all.”

“That's easy for you to say,” I said. “Look, I've been a woman for under forty-eight hours and already you're lining up my first modeling gig. I haven't even had my first period yet. Oh, God. My first period.”

“They're not as bad as you think,” Harmony chuckled. “You get used to them.”

“Has it occurred that I don't want to get used to them?” I said, a little shrilly.

“Of course it has,” Hall said. “Dammit, Mr. Stills --”

“Ms. Stillwater,” Tommy Gutierrez corrected.

“My mistake,” Hall said, a little more calmly. “Ms. Stillwater, I can't sleep or eat for thinking of what's been done to you and trying to figure out a way to correct it. Simple fact: we have to find who did this to you. We can't undo it right now, but Stanhope and his people are working around the clock. Maybe if we find out who did this we can find some way of reversing it. But we can't get into your system from outside your building, you built your security too well and whoever's hiding this thing has probably added some new twists we don't know about. We need your help, and the only thing we can come up with is you being Brooke Stillwater for a while.”

“You're not the one who has to jiggle your way through the front door,” I grumbled. My little-girl voice made it sound just petulant and a little whiny. “I built the fucking place.”

“I know you did,” George said. “I was there, remember? I can't make any part of this not suck for you, buddy. If I could, I would've done it already. Don't you believe that?”

“Of course I do,” I said. Hot tears were welling in my eyes. “Goddammit...”

Harmony's soft hands took my shoulders. “Brooke, honey,” she cooed softly, “don't get mad. We're girls. We cry. It's okay.” My new name – the one I never wanted – rang hotly in my ears.

“No it's not,” I said. “I'm getting all this fucking hair full of snot.”

She chuckled richly. “Occupational hazard. You can always cut it.”

“Not without a fucking laser,” I said flatly. I was surprised at how upset I was – I never dropped the f-bomb this much, I must have been closer to the edge that I thought – it seemed natural enough to do. “Everybody in this room does their work way the fuck too well, did you know that?”

They all laughed, a little too hard. The situation's inherent tension was making them grasp any excuse to laugh it off. After a moment's indignity, I decided to join in. I had a high, lilting laugh that I hated the very sound of, but at least laughing made me feel better.

“Okay,” I said. “I'll do it. But there's no guarantee I'm going to get anywhere with it.”

“We know that,” Hall said. “We know we're grasping at straws. But unless you have a better idea, this is the best we've got.”

"I'm not done thinking," I said. "But in the meantime, you better get Kevin Krishnamurthy to work on a program to make me America's Next Top Model."

* * * *

The man in the dark room picked up the phone on the second ring. His voice was gravelly and raspy, a man clearly unused to speaking much.

"Yes."

"We've been everywhere. Stills is gone."

"He can't be," the man in the dark room said. "Nobody just disappears. So obviously, you haven't looked everywhere."

"We'll keep digging. We lost track of him the day it happened, we haven't seen him since."

"You have a photograph of the new body?" the man asked.

"It's blurry, but yes. Pulled it off of the ReNu security cameras. We're lucky to have that, that place is tighter than Fort Knox."

"I don't care about your excuses," the man in the dark room said simply.

"We need more if we're going to find Stills," the voice said just as flatly. "Ten thousand."

"It will be wired to your account in the morning," the man replied. "But I expect results. This is not an unending supply of money for you and your people. If Stills isn't found by the end of the week, you may find yourself shopping for panties the same as him."

"I don't respond well to threats."

"And I don't respond well to incompetence. Get it done."

The man in the dark room hung up the phone. It was surprising to him how easy it had become, lately, threatening people and making dark plans. From a person who never got so much as a parking ticket before he decided to move against the people who were stealing from him, he'd expected this to be harder.

He let out a breath that he didn't know he'd been holding. He picked up the phone again and dialed a number which would route his call off of six satellites and through nineteen different servers to make it almost untraceable. The voice that finally answered this second call sounded very far away, and a little bit chilling in its utter lack of emotion.

"Speak," the voice said.

"You received the package?" the man in the dark room asked.

"This afternoon. Three syringes and three bundles of compact disks, each with a dossier."

"Make certain that the dose and the program is administered to the person whose dossier they're with. These things are very specific."

"That's what you paid me to do. Am I to assume you wish me to begin?"

"Tomorrow. Once you've administered the dose, they should be unconscious. Begin the program while that happens and deliver them to me."

“They will be in your care by the end of the week. Will that be sufficient?”

“Perfectly,” the man in the dark room said. “My associates told me you were the best, I hope you deliver as promised.”

“I have never defaulted on a contract in my entire career,” the voice said. “I don't intend to start now. Just be warned, that I will expect payment in cash and negotiable bearer bonds upon delivery. Anything less will be taken personally.”

“I still prefer to wire the money to an account,” the man in the dark room said.

“I don't care what you prefer,” the voice said, taking on a dark tone. “Those are my terms.”

“They'll be met,” the man in the dark room said. “I'll expect you by the end of the week.”

“I'll contact you with details in the usual way.”

The line went dead. The man in the dark room rubbed his eyes – he hadn't been sleeping well, probably wouldn't sleep well until all this nasty business was over and done – and set about arranging to have the considerable amount of money he owed the man on the other end of the phone line taken out of his personal holdings in cash without drawing too much attention.

* * * * *

“Well, Ms. Stillwater, it seems that everything is in order. Your new checks should arrive in the mail in five to ten business days, and your ATM card about the same time. You'll need to come in once they arrive, to activate your PIN and to fill out signature cards.”

I smiled, a dazzling affair that I was slowly realizing had an alarming effect on people. “Thanks so much,” I said, trying to sound businesslike but with my squeaky soprano managing at best mildly flirtatious. The banker I was talking to – his name-badge said only 'Travis' – obviously responded to it as flirting, edging a little bit closer. This man obviously had no clue what the true meaning of the words 'not a chance in hell' actually meant. I decided to allow him his happy illusion.

“No problem at all.” He proffered a business card. “If there's anything else I can help you with, don't hesitate to let me know. I, uh... I put my personal number on the back.”

I didn't even look before stuffing it in a pocket. I turned on my heel and walked away, stopping suddenly before turning around to grab the purse I was constantly forgetting. I gave him an embarrassed grin and headed out of the bank quickly before I had to try and interact with him any more. I'd decided I really didn't like the man-woman social dynamic any better on this side of the fence than I had on the other. The feeling of men's eyes roving over me, measuring and weighing and deciding what they'd most like to do to me first was beyond disconcerting. Knowing exactly what they were thinking only made it worse.

I hitched up the too-long legs of my shapeless jeans and pushed up the arms of the baggy sweatshirt I wore to conceal my body and pushed the overlarge 'bug-eye' sunglasses onto my slender nose to hide my wide, long-lashed eyes. The blue baseball cap which restrained my out-of-control wayward blonde curls bumped against the rims as I picked up my pace.

Derrick Hall was waiting outside, leaning against the hood of his Audi sipping coffee. He offered me another tall styrofoam cup in a cardboard jacket. I smelled the scent of strong, black coffee and smiled.

"You're a saint."

"You look like hell," he told me. "Not been sleeping?"

"Not well," I told him. "Weird dreams."

"I suppose you have an excuse," he said, opening the door for me. I bridled, but decided to just let it go. Men did things like that without thinking – I know I used to. But I definitely didn't like the assumption that I wasn't capable enough to do it myself. I sat in the car, all the artificial training I'd received kicking in automatically to keep my knees together and make it a smooth movement designed to keep my crotch from showing if I was wearing a skirt. I marvelled at the ingenuity of my developers in making that technology. I did it – even down to the slow smoothing of the same nonexistent skirt behind my thighs just before my backside touched leather – as though I'd been trained in the movement my entire life. I just wish the raw data hadn't been taken from a woman who walked as though her skeleton wasn't entirely rigid. My slinky walk gathered all the wrong sort of attention, and a construction worker had told me on my morning jog that my ass looked like two wildcats fighting in a sack. It had almost been enough to make me run home and crawl straight into bed, the covers over my head.

Hall brought the powerful Audi engine to life and pulled into traffic. I'd spent a long day setting up my new identity as Brooke Stillwater at the DMV and the bank, trying to lay some of the foundation for my attempt to insert myself back into the company I'd built from the ground up as a model in our new multimedia ad campaign. I had to have come from somewhere. I just hope no one bothered to look too closely. I was mostly made up and my cover was flimsy at best.

Hall was cutting looks at me from the corner of his eye that I probably wasn't supposed to notice. I finally couldn't stand it any more and turned to him, saying, "What?"

He sighed. "You do know, don't you, that dressing like that doesn't draw less attention to you. It makes you look even more conspicuous."

"I didn't ask," I shot back.

"Look, I'm responsible for your safety, Mr. – damn – Brooke. But I can't do it all myself."

"Have you seen some of the stuff Harmony Rudd brought me to wear?" I asked, my voice climbing even higher. "There's no way."

"Girls wear that kind of thing all the time," he told me.

"I'm not a girl," I shot back.

"You are now," he countered without missing a beat. "And you're going to get figured out if you don't start acting like one. Nobody is supposed to know who you really are, remember?"

"How could I forget," I mumbled, defeated. He was right. Wearing those clothes just seemed to me like they would make me vulnerable. I was vulnerable enough in baggy clothes and trying to pretend that I wasn't actually female.

"I think the next course of training will help with that," Hall said. "I'm not sure of the particulars, but we're trying to find ways to make you more comfortable with the things that really bother you right now. We're trying, Brooke. Just bear with us."

I leaned against my arm on the window. "I know, Derrick," I told him. "I'm trying, too. My world is upside down, sometimes I forget that you're in this with me."

"Well, stop."

"I can't make any promises. After all, there's only so far I can convince myself that this is a shared affliction," I told him. "It wasn't you or Dr. Stanhope that had her first menstrual cramps this morning. Kinda hard not to feel alone when that happens."

"I have no idea what you must be going through," Hall said.

I grinned despite my grim attitude. "That's what I like about you, Hall. You say what you're thinking no matter what people might think. I'm sorry we had to meet under such circumstances, honestly. I would've liked to have had the chance to choose to be friends, you know?"

"I do," he said.

"So, this training. When is it going to be ready?" I asked.

"We should be hearing from George's people any day now," Hall told me. "Until then, we just have to get you a little more used to being a girl."

"I don't know if I'm ever going to get used to it," I replied. "It's bad enough, this fuck-me walk and hip swivel thing George programmed me with. I feel like everybody is looking at my ass."

"As I previously stated. Lots of girls walk that way."

"And as I previously stated, I still don't consider myself a girl."

Hall sighed. "Eventually, Brooke, you're going to have to admit it to yourself."

"And then the next eleven steps," I grumbled.

"You know, for a blonde, you sure seem to have a shitty attitude," Hall jibed.

"Bite me," I shot back.

"We're here," he said. "You ready?"

"No," I said simply.

"Look, I've been telling you and telling you, you have to start getting used to the idea, at least in the short run. This is part of being a girl. I can't understand what you're feeling, but I do know that this is a part of your life now, as it stands, and you can't weasel out of it. Brooke, it could be weeks or months before we find a way to reverse this."

"But it just seems so..."

"Feminine?" Hall supplied.

"I guess that's one word for it," I replied.

"Look, Dr. Stanhope offered to do this over and over," Hall said. "You're the one who insisted on a specialist. This might be in poor taste, Brooke, but you need to just man up and get this done."

I shot him the bird. He only grinned.

"You're right, you're right," I said. "Hundreds of thousands of women do this every day, after all. How bad can the gynecologist be?"

* * * *

An hour later, I wished I had never uttered those words. Apparently the pelvic examination gods were listening and decided to punish me for my hubris. Starting with having to expose a portion of my anatomy that quite frankly scared me beyond belief – I hadn't even taken a very good look at it, other than the glimpses of the little golden tuft of synthetic hair in the permanent Brazilian wax placed there by Stanhope. Then to have the table underneath me dropped away, so I was suspended by stirrups, totally exposed and vulnerable.

At least the doctor I picked was a woman, who knew to warn the speculum and other little comfort measures that might not have occurred to a male doctor. The stretching and the invasion could be coped with, but it took an effort. Thankfully, it was over quickly.

The mammogram wasn't so bad, except that the machine was poorly designed with a sharp corner that dug painfully into my short ribs – made more uncomfortable by my new, ever-so-sensitive skin – as the very cold plates compressed and mashed my smallish breasts painfully to get the cross-section.

Dr. Carswell, a short graying woman with thick glasses and a no-nonsense air about her – came back into the examination room as I was re-tying the drawstring on my sweatpants. She sat unceremoniously on her stool and gestured me to a seat across from her.

"You're a perfectly healthy young woman, Ms. Stillwater," she said. "Nothing on my exam, and nothing on the mammogram. We'll have the results of your pap smear in a day or so, but I don't expect to see anything in a woman your age. How are your menstruations?"

I was at a loss. "Okay, I guess. I mean, what you'd expect."

"Excessive bleeding or clots?"

"Not that I noticed. Cramping was about it."

"I can't think of a way to put this delicately, so I'll just spit it out," she said. "You need to put a lot more energy into keeping yourself clean. You said your period was over days ago, yet there is still blood present in the vaginal canal. Also, there's a noticeable odor developing. It's very important that you spend time and effort cleaning yourself or you'll have health problems in the future."

I think I finally breathed about a minute later. How was I going to tell this woman, who expected me to have been female my entire life, that I didn't even like to look at that part of myself, much less touch it? Desperately, I tried to think of some excuse.

"My mother was pretty religious," I said at last, hoping it didn't sound like I was making this up as I went along. "I really didn't get much about my body except that part of me was bad and I shouldn't touch it if I could help it."

"You'd be surprised how often I hear that," Dr. Carswell said. "I'm not trying to embarrass you, Ms. Stillwater, but would it be helpful if I gave you some pamphlets that might explain a little?"

I almost felt like crying from the relief. "That would be wonderful."

She smiled. "I'm sorry if this has made you feel uncomfortable."

"Thanks," I replied. "Don't worry, it's getting easier and easier. I mean, I want to know how to take care of my body. It's just difficult to ask someone at my age."

"I don't doubt it. Do you have any questions for me?"

"Not that I can think of right now," I said. "But can I call you if I do?"

"Of course," she said. "My receptionist will give you my card."

I stood, shook her hand, and went out into the little alcove behind the records room and reception to sign any necessary paperwork and schedule my next appointment to follow up once my test results were back. The receptionist was young and noticeably pregnant, a pretty girl with dancing blue eyes whose friendliness hadn't seemed forced.

"Oh, Ms. Stillwater, I have a message for you," she said, holding up a pink slip of paper.

"From who?" I asked.

"He didn't say," the receptionist replied. "You can use this phone here if you need to?"

I held up the little white Nokia that Hall had given me. "Got my own."

I dialed the number, not recognizing it but so inured to the clandestine nature of my life now that I didn't question it. The phone rang twice and was answered by a sharp beep.

"Hello?" I asked.

"Password is 'immersion.' Begin mode." A deep voice said. I never felt myself hit the floor.

To be continued...



SUMMARY: When a rich man decides that he will undergo a new treatment to enhance his looks, he does not count on someone sabotaging his transformation.

SIX MILLION DOLLAR EX-MAN

Part Three

by Valerie Hope

I NEVER EVEN WOKE UP when the paramedics arrived, and could only dimly wonder where Derrick Hall was as the white-shirted men belted me onto a stretcher and loaded me in the back of their truck. I tried to answer their questions as best I could, but I had no idea what medicines I was allergic to any more and couldn't have fabricated a medical history on the spot no matter what. Besides, it felt like my head was stuffed with cotton wool. I could think, but it was slow going. I felt like I was sedated again.

"I need somebody to call my friend," I said for what may easily have been the hundredth time, I'd lost track and couldn't concentrate. "Derrick Hall. I have his number in my phone."

The medic, a tall black man with a shaved head, looked up briefly from where he was placing an IV in my left arm. "We can take care of that once we're at the hospital, okay?"

"No, no, it's important. It's very important," I said, trying with difficulty to speak around the hissing oxygen mask they'd placed on my face.

The medic finished securing my IV – I hadn't even felt it – and took my phone off the stretcher where it had been laying next to my hand. He paged through the address book quickly and jotted a number down on his paperwork. "I'll call him just as soon as we get you to the hospital, okay? Right now I need to concentrate on taking care of you."

"I'm fine," I said. "I need you to call Derrick Hall."

"You're not fine," the medic countered quickly. "You fell out in the doctor's office. She told us you're not pregnant, so we have to figure out why you passed out, okay?"

"It was the phone message," I said, dimly remembering.

"You got bad news?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Something just... in my head. Something happened."

"Like a headache? Did you see stars of anything like that?"

"No," I said. "Just woozy."

"Dizzy? Weak? I'm going to take a 12-lead EKG – that's an electrical picture of your heart – to see if maybe something's going on there. I'm also going to checking your blood sugar off the little bit of blood that came out when we started your IV."

"Do whatever," I said.

The paramedic – his nametag said his name was Richard – held up a bristling handful of electrodes with little round disks stuck to the ends of them. “I need to lift up your shirt, is that okay?”

I nodded. Anything to get him finished with this and on the phone to Derrick. I wasn't sure why I felt so panicky about contacting him, but the urgency was increasing with each passing moment that I speak to him. Richard peeled the backing from the EKG leads quickly and stuck them to my shoulders and lower abdomen and then raised my bulky sweatshirt to expose my chest. I wasn't wearing a bra, and my nipples stiffened almost immediately in the air-conditioned back of the ambulance. He began placing the leads across my chest and under my left breast.

My breast. I stared at it as though I'd never seen it before. I could see both of my nipples pointing straight up, small as the last joints of my little fingers when I'd been a man, pinkish brown and almost perfectly cylindrical. Pretty nipples. But even though the skin of the breasts was perfectly smooth and unblemished with even a stray freckle, I could barely stand to look at them. Oddly, not because they were breasts and because they were on me. I could barely stand to look at them for an altogether different reason, a reason that had never been in my head before but now seemed completely natural, sensible and overwhelmingly urgent.

I couldn't stand to look at them because they were so fucking small.

I mean, really. How could I stand those little A-cups? I could sort of remember thinking they were absolutely huge at one point, but now... they were tiny little mosquito bites and I couldn't stand the sight of them. They repulsed me and I had to close my eyes and turn away.

“Are you okay?” Richard asked.

I was fighting tears. “Just call him.”

* * * *

“What do you mean, she's not here?” Derrick Hall nearly shouted at the charge nurse of the busy midtown emergency room. He turned to the hapless medic, Richard Stokes, standing next to him.

“You did bring her to this ER, correct?” he nearly-shouted.

“Of course I did. We put her right here in Bed 9,” he replied calmly.

“And I'm telling you, we assessed her condition, we checked her in and when we returned to this room she was nowhere to be found,” the charge nurse said.

“And no one saw her walk out?” Hall asked hotly.

The nurse gestured around her at the bedlam of the busy ER. “It's been known to happen.”

“I need to speak to everyone who's been in this part of the hospital. Now,” Hall said.

“I can't do that. I have people with patients,” the nurse said, stepping back involuntarily from the iron which suddenly appeared in Hall's voice.

“If they're not dying, then they can wait. Finding this girl is the highest priority you have as of now.”

“Are y'all talking about the blonde girl that got brought in by EMS a while ago?” one of the techs asked as he was passing by. “Somebody from the floor came by and picked her up. I think it was radiology, but I wasn't sure. I remembered because I didn't remember seeing any orders for a CT or an MRI on her chart.”

Hall looked into the room and snatched a clipboard off of the wall. “You mean this chart?”

“That's weird,” the tech commented. “They should have taken her chart with her.”

Hall turned back on the charge nurse with thunder in his eyes. “Call security right now.”

The charge nurse scurried away. Hall went to the door and flipped open his mobile phone. “This is Hall,” he said after speed-dialing. “I need all the available men you have at Mercy General right now. Stillwater's been kidnapped.”

* * * * *

“Good morning,” the chilly voice said through the speakers. I opened my eyes with an effort, revealing through the blurriness a clean white room. Several computers stood along one wall, showing software I'd never seen before. I was on an exam table of some kind, and I was still hooked to monitoring equipment which beeped softly just beyond my range of vision. Parts of my body were held awkwardly beneath sections of hard white plastic with cold metal linings.

“Where am I?”

“The room where you're going to be born, of course,” the voice said. “It's already started.”

“I don't understand,” I said shakily. My little-girl voice sounded plaintive and helpless as it echoed off of the tiled walls.

“You won't need to,” the voice said.

“This is scaring me,” I confessed. I'd never spoken truer words.

“Of course it is. But it won't for much longer.”

“I don't understand.”

“Get used to it. You'll be happier that way.”

“You're lucky we found you when we did,” the voice said. “Else you might have been stuck this way. At least now you get the chance to change it.”

“Change... me?” I asked in a small voice.

“There have to be things you want changed,” the voice prompted.

I didn't want to admit it – my brain was screaming at me Tell the truth! Tell the truth! – but something in me, some strange core of resilience, was keeping me from giving the disembodied voice the satisfaction of hearing it.

“Stop being stubborn,” the voice chided.

“It's none of your business,” I spat.

“You are my business,” the voice replied. “The entirety of you. Your every thought, your every secret desire, every little nook and cranny in your mind is completely and totally my business.”

I couldn't understand why I so fervently believed that the voice was telling me the truth. And somehow, I needed it to be telling the truth. I felt hot tears on my cheeks. "You're lying."

"You know I'm not," the voice said. "You know who I am, don't you?"

The answer popped into my mind, but I couldn't bear to say it, to hear it in my little-girl voice in my own ears. I bit my lip until it hurt.

"You do know. I can tell. Say it."

"No," I said.

"You're a willful little brat," the voice chided. "Say it."

"I won't."

"You will," the voice said. "You will, or you'll live with that flat ass and those tiny little titties for the rest of your life. You won't be able to change a thing, do you understand me?"

I cried in earnest, deep wracking sobs that made my chest heave and warm snot run over my lips. I didn't want to say it – somehow if I said it, he would win – but I couldn't bear the thought of having to live the way I was, looking the way I did. It seemed like a damnation.

"Swallow your pride," the voice said. "Tell me. Out loud. Tell me who I am."

I whimpered, feeling my resolve slipping over an edge into a deep chasm.

"Just say it," the voice said, softer now. "Just say who I am."

My voice was just above a whisper. "You're my Daddy."

The voice seemed warmer, and pleased. "Of course I am, baby. Of course I am. I'm your Daddy and you're my beautiful little baby girl. You're Daddy's girl, aren't you?"

I sniffled. Something had broken inside, I could tell. It was easier now, much easier, to say the words and easier to mean them. "I am. I'm Daddy's little girl."

"Should I indulge my little girl? Should I give her what she wants so badly, even though she's been a willful, inconsiderate, spoiled little brat?"

"I won't be a brat anymore, Daddy, I promise," I begged. I wanted to beg, I needed to beg. "I'll be a good girl, I promise." It was the first time I'd ever referred to myself as a girl. I liked it. It felt good. Calling myself a girl somehow made it real to me, and once I accepted that reality it was as if all the tension surrounding my new gender just went away.

"What do you want, then?"

"New boobs," I whispered, afraid of the words pouring out of my mouth. "Big ones, big bouncy ones. A round, soft ass. Big soft pouty lips."

"And you promise to be a good girl and do what your Daddy tells you?"

"I promise," I said.

I hissed in pain as I felt sharp, stinging stabs into my chest. I couldn't move, it hurt to breathe.

"Needles," the voice told me. "They inject a remarkable new foam I've found. It begins as a liquid gel that can be shaped, but when it dries it mimics the consistency and weight of human

adipose tissue – fat cells. But it also creates a protein when it hardens which is almost identical to human collagen and elastin, the proteins that make skin smooth and firm. So the foam makes soft fat that never, ever sags or bunches up, it's always smooth and soft and perfectly firm.”

I felt something hot surge into my chest and I yelled in pain, trying to squirm but pinned in place by the needles in me.

“It hurts?” Daddy asked.

“It hurts so bad, Daddy,” I wept.

“Do you want me to stop, baby?”

“No,” I whimpered. “Don't. Bigger. Make them bigger.”

“You're already a 34C, sweetheart,” Daddy said.

“Bigger. Bigger and rounder,” I hissed through the burning pain.

“They're 36D's now,” Daddy said. “Should I stop?”

“No,” I half-screamed in agony. “Bigger! Rounder!”

“They'll look fake if I make them rounder,” Daddy told me.

“I want them to look fake!” I shouted. “Bigger and rounder!”

“38DD's, baby,” he said. “They're huge and almost perfectly round.”

“No,” I said. “Bigger.”

“You'll have back problems,” Daddy told me.

“I don't care!”

“40F, darling,” he said. “I think it's as big as they're going to get.”

The pain subsided, but a part of me was still screaming Bigger! inside my mind. I couldn't see them, under their plastic cover, but I could feel the enormity of them, the shifting weight and mass, even the radical shift in my center of gravity, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, the ugly horrible mosquito bites were gone. Now I had a real chest, a proud and brash proclamation that I am a girl spoken to the world in words which could not be misunderstood. I found myself desperate to see them, couldn't wait to hold them in my delicate hands.

Then the hot stabs into my backside. I jumped and squealed and the hot agony flooded into my buttocks. I could feel my thighs and lower back lift off of the table a little as my ass took on a soft roundness.

“Bigger?” Daddy asked.

“Not too big,” I said. “I want a bubble butt. That wiggles when I walk.” I had no trouble with overdoing it the way I had with my titties. I didn't want a big ass – no girl did – but I wanted a round one, and nice round hips to go with it. The agony subsided, much more quickly than it had in my chest, which still throbbed with pain and heat, plus the added discomfort of some kind of pads underneath the plastic covering my chest which were shaping my breasts into the

perfect spheres as the foam dried. Identical molding pads slipped into place on my ass cheeks as the heat and pain subsided.

"You'll have to describe what you want next. With the needles in your lips, you won't be able to talk like before," Daddy said.

A plastic cover was moving into place automatically under my nose.

"Soft and pouty," I said. "Like Paris Hilton's."

"Just like hers?" Daddy asked.

"Yeah," I said. I grinned sheepishly, wondering if it was okay to talk this way in front of Daddy. "You know... cocksucking lips."

I thought I sensed amusement and the hot stabbing and flood of burning pain infused my lips, making my scream and shriek behind the muffling plastic case. I drummed my heels against the table, pulled as hard as I could against the restraints on my wrists and cried hot tears. It hurt so much I could barely stand it. I couldn't forget that it was my idea, though, and a sick part of me welcomed the pain.

Finally, it subsided. I waited in the dark for an unknown eternity, my body pinned in place by the molding pads which held my body in the shape I desired as the strange, hot foam cured and set. Finally, the hard plastic cover over my face moved away and I breathed my first breath of fresh air in what seemed like hours.

"What else?" Daddy asked in the darkness.

I babbled, my diction strange as I wasn't used to my new, puffy pouty lips. They seemed bigger, and felt much softer than before, but I couldn't see them to tell, and I couldn't move my hands to touch them. I ran my tongue over them and it felt marvelous. "I want a tattoo, Daddy, and to pierce my ears and my nose and my bellybutton and my tongue and I want..."

Daddy chuckled. "Slow down, pumpkin, slow down. One thing at a time."

"Can I pierce my ears?" I asked.

"Not now," Daddy said. "I'm not set up to do that here, I'll have to let you go out later for that."

"Well, what are you set up for?" I asked petulantly.

"Well, I could have given you longer hair, but someone beat me to it," he said. "That fiber they used is truly remarkable. I'm going to have to reverse engineer it. Same with eyelashes. Basically the only thing I'm really set up to do is to make your fingernails longer."

I bounced in happiness. "You can? Then do that," I said. I was sounding more and more like a little girl, but I didn't want to stop. It felt wonderful, perfect and natural. The part of me that had broken before seemed to be healing, but healing in such a way that what had seemed horrible to me earlier now seemed like a privilege and a treat. The pouting and begging, the whining and giggling were wonderful in the sense of power and identity they flooded me with.

"This is a ceramic polymer," Daddy explained, "used for tank and battleship armor. You'll only be able to cut or shape your nails with a grinding wheel." As he spoke, I felt cold little cups fitting over my fingertips. "How long?"

“Really long,” I said. “Like, an inch or an inch and a half.”

“You won't be able to write your name, sweetheart. Or button a shirt.”

I giggled. “I don't care,” I said. “I want them that long.”

“I'm afraid not, pumpkin,” he said. “I can't let you do that. I need you to be able to function, to write and to sign your name. I'll make them long, but not that long.”

My voice rose half an octave as I wailed. “But Dad-deeee...” I whined.

“No arguments. This isn't a discussion.” I felt some weird tugging on my fingertips as they elevated. Knowing the deed was done and I couldn't change it, I sulked. I felt my new, pillowy-soft bottom lip stick out in a determined pout.

“I was going to give you a new name, but you've apparently done that as well,” Daddy said.

“Uh-huh,” I grumped. “My name is Brooke.”

“Brooke,” Daddy said. “Pretty enough. Dangerously close to your old name, but pretty.”

“I can change it,” I said, still angry because I couldn't get my nails the length I wanted. “What did you want to name me?”

Daddy paused a moment. “I had picked out Britanee for you. With two e's. But I supposed Brooke will be fine. The paperwork is already done, and you have a drivers' license and a bank account already.”

“You can call me Britanee if you want,” I said.

“I might,” Daddy said. “I think a lot of people will call you Britanee. We'll just make it your stage name.”

“My stage name?”

“Before, when you were a boy, we went out once to a strip club. We were all trying to have a good time, but you wouldn't get into it. You ruined it for everybody and you left early. I asked you why and you said to me, 'I don't know why this is so exciting for you. All these girls are either dykes or whores or drug addicts or all three. All they care about is your money anyway. You're a damn fool if you think different.' I thought maybe you should learn a lesson, little girl, now that you're a different person. Do you know the expression, 'walk a mile in someone else's shoes?'”

“Yeah,” I said, suddenly scared.

“Well, those shoes are going to be clear platform heels, but the concept is the same. I thought you should spend a little time as one of those strippers, just so you know what it's like for them.”

“Don't, Daddy, please,” I whimpered.

“Oh, it's already done. It was buried in the programming you already got. I just have to activate it with one little word. But I'm not completely heartless. At least you're going to be a very successful stripper, sweetheart. I've already wired one hundred thousand dollars into your

new bank account, and will put fifty more in next week so you can get yourself set up. You should have no trouble making as much money as you want.”

“Daddy, why?”

“Because you stood in my way. You and the others like you. You were the easiest, you walked right into my trap. I had to have the others brought in. I can't kill you. It's not in me. Hell, I even think I gave you all a way to even be happy one day.”

“Please, Daddy. Please. I'll be a good girl, I promise.”

“You'll be an excellent girl. I'm not worried about that.”

“I'll do anything...”

The binding on my right wrist clicked open, and my hand was suddenly free. I looked down to see a slender hand tipped with long square-cut fingernails, extremely long but not as long as I'd wanted, which still caused a pang of frustration in my gut. They stuck out nearly three quarters of an inch past my fingertips and were a dull silver-grey color. I dimly felt through the flood of delight at the look of them that even though Daddy told me he'd made them shorter to give me the ability to function, I would still be hard pressed to work a zipper. Or a computer keyboard, a suspicious part of me added.

Something – a person's hands, a robot appendage, I couldn't see – pushed a clipboard in front of my face. “Sign it. Use your old name, your boy name.”

My face screwed up in distaste at having to use my old boy name, but I hastily scrawled Brock Ronald Stills across the blank at the bottom of the legal-looking form. The page flipped – I couldn't see how.

“Sign there, and initial at the bottom,” Daddy instructed. The page flipped. I signed my old, distasteful boy's name on ten pages of document, and never read a word of it as I went.

“What was that?” I asked in a small voice.

“Don't you worry your pretty little head over it,” Daddy said. “I am curious, though. Just to see if it really works the way I've been told.”

“If what works?”

“Physio-mode, subsection handwriting. Activate mode,” Daddy said.

My hand twitched involuntarily and I saw spots in front of my eyes for a moment. The page flipped again, to a blank sheet.

“Try to sign your name. The same as before, your boy name and your old signature.”

I did as I was told.

“Remarkable,” Daddy said in an awed voice.

I looked at the paper. Written on it in huge bubble-letters and curlicues was Brooke Renée Stillwater. The i was dotted with a little round heart. I gasped, horrified, and tried again. And again. And again and again. All I succeeded in doing was in the last signature putting a

winking smiley face in both of the o's in Brooke and putting two hearts after my surname in addition to the one dotting the i. No matter how hard I concentrated, how slow I went, I could not get my hand to sign my old name with my old handwriting.

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

"I've locked you up," Daddy said. "You're in a prison you can't escape from because you won't want to. It won't even occur to you that you'll need to escape. You'll be hidden in plain sight and no one will ever suspect to look for you."

"My friends will," I said.

"Oh, they'll be handled," Daddy said. "You might even get some new gal-pals out of the deal."

"Why, Daddy?"

"Because you cut me out of the loop, that's why. You stole from me and you expected me to thank you for it. But you forgot one thing. I was always the patient one. I didn't forget, you bastard, I just waited. And now I win and you lose."

"What do I lose? Tell me!"

"Actually, I think I won't," Daddy said. "I was just going to give you one more surprise. It's one I created myself. I think it's very clever, actually. I even gave it a funny name. It's a nanobot that I injected into your frontal lobe while you were unconscious. I designed it to work on your brain, the same way that the plaque formed by Alzheimer's disease works. Except instead of making you forgetful, this makes you slow. It makes it hard to concentrate and focus, makes it harder to recall information and more difficult for you to learn. In short, it makes you dumb and bubble-headed. I developed it as a weapon for the military, but it doesn't work fast enough to suit them. I call it the Biosynergic Implantable Microfilament Brain Override. The B.I.M.B.O., get it?"

"Please..."

"We're well past 'please,' pumpkin," Daddy said ominously. "Don't worry. You'll have a good life. The programming you received plus the effects of the B.I.M.B.O. will make you very happy as a dumb blonde stripper. Very happy. And besides, there are other modifications I made to your DNA, little touches that will make you extremely glad you're who you are."

"M-modifications?" I whimpered.

"Nothing too major. Fun stuff. For example, I changed some of the tissue in your body. I doubled the clitoral tissue in your clitoris, for one thing. You actually have two clits. Sex is going to be very fun for you. I also put clitoral tissue in other places. You have a clitoris below your cervix, in your anal sphincter, one in each of your lips, the tip of your tongue, the back of your throat and in both your nipples. It's going to be extremely easy for you to get off.

"And I modified the cells in your tongue to release a very potent endorphin into your central nervous system whenever they come in contact with sperm," he told me. "I doubt very seriously once your programming kicks in that you'll be able to go long without sucking a cock, but you're welcome to try and fight it if you feel you must. But after your first one, pumpkin, I guarantee you won't be able to stop."

"Please, Daddy, please don't..."

He laughed, a cold mirthless sound. "Are you kidding? Do you know how long I've been waiting for this? I once thought that I'd let your friends off easy, since I didn't know them as well. But I have to say, angel, that this has been so much fun, I'm going to really give them the works."

"My friends? What friends?"

"You don't need to know that, pumpkin. Now, please hold still for me."

Something cold touched the back of my head, where my skull met my spine. It warmed and I felt a sharp jolt. It lasted only a second, but I got a pounding headache shortly afterwards. That, too, passed in a matter of seconds.

"How do you feel?" Daddy asked.

"I'm, um... like, fine," I lied, searching desperately for words and only able to come up with the bare minimum of expression. But I wasn't alarmed, even though I dimly knew I should be. It was a little embarrassing, but I covered that well with a cute little-girl giggle.

"One last thing," Daddy said. "Full mode. Code word is 'submerge.' Activate."

My eyes rolled back, but just for a second. "Huh?" I asked.

"It's not important."

The plastic covers snapped back and I could move. My massive – my beautiful – breasts sprung free and jiggled enticingly on my small chest. I ran my fingers over them caressingly and my nipples stiffened in the chilly air.

"There are clothes in the front room," a voice other than Daddy's said, a cold inhuman computer voice. "Other things you'll need. Go and get dressed, and get out of here."

I awwwed in frustration – I really wanted to stay there and play with my titties. But I swung my legs over the edge of the table and hopped down onto the cold floor. My boobies jiggled. I sashayed out – God, I loved my sexy strut – through the door which opened automatically across the room, and out. The room outside was white tile, like the last, but one wall was covered with mirrors and strips of light bulbs, like Hollywood makeup mirrors, and there were shelves along the opposite wall full of clothes and shoes and purses. I giggled and clapped my hands, bouncing up and down in delight.

The mirror revealed a real sight. A perfect little face with big brown eyes and fuller-than-full, pouty soft lips, nested in a wild curly mane of white-gold hair wider than my shoulders. A long kissable neck and enormous, perfectly spherical breasts which stood proudly off my ribcage. A waist so narrow it barely looked natural, with a little soft abdominal six-pack. Flared hips which accentuated my long dancer's legs, and a little white-blonde strip of hair over my little pink pouty pussy.

I finger-combed my hair and vamped a little, then giggled. I was so pretty. I never wanted to stop looking. Quickly, I sat on the little padded stool in front of the mirrors and pulled the basket of cosmetics in front of me. Good stuff, I somehow just knew. Bare Minerals foundation and powder, which I brushed on like an expert in little circles with the big round brush until my already-lovely skin was burnished to a perfect matte amber. The eyes I lined with thick Chanel liquid liner, giving me a dramatic and slightly slutty look that I loved. Several coats of the only mascara I could find, in an unmarked white tube. I sort of remembered that

my eyelashes were made out of the same stuff as my hair and only certain stuff stuck to it. I could only assume, after five minutes' hard concentration that made my perfect face screw up in an adorable little moué, that Daddy must've made it special just for me. Painting my pale lashes black made my eyes look like they were framed by butterfly wings, and they tickled when they brushed my cheeks. A generous coating of pink liquid shadow on my lids and a darker pink in the crease, then a touch of glittery silver on the apex of the lids, all by Chanel again, to make my eyes pop. A touch of pink blush, Lancôme, on my high cheekbones and two thick coats of bubblegum pink Max Factor Long-lasting lipcolor on my thick Paris Hilton lips after lining them with Estée Lauder lip pencil, then a thick coat of Max Factor gloss to make them look delicious and wet. Loose Bare Minerals powder over everything to set it.

Giving my now-perfect face the once-over, I selected an O.P.I. nail color to match my lips and brushed it expertly over the dull silver-grey of my ceramic nails, giving them a shiny thick coat of bubblegum pink enamel. I put on three coats – to keep it from chipping – of color and two coats of clear gloss. It would do for now, I figured, until I could get to my manicurist to get solar nails or a French manicure. Maybe some cute airbrush designs or rhinestones. I liked when they sparkled. In the meantime, I scooped all the O.P.I., Bare Minerals, Loréal Paris, Estée Lauder, Lancôme, Clinique, Chanel and Max Factor into a cute little pink aluminum train case. I left behind the Maybelline and Cover Girl. This girl never wore the cheap shit.

Blowing on my nails to dry them quicker, I looked around the room. I was going to need a tote or something, I figured, to gather enough clothes to last me a while, but then I got a better look at the spread. There was a lot of damn Target and J.C. Penney stuff on the hangers. Oh, hell no. Not this bitch, uh-uh. I tore through the piles quickly, discarding most of it onto the floor.

I did, however, think to grab a beige Coach totebag – not exciting, but serviceable – and stuff in a pink spandex tube-dress with slashes down the sides, a hairbrush, a handful of tampons, three or four t-back thongs in bright, day-glo colors, some pink fuzzy leg warmers and a pair of 7" clear Lucite heels with a 3½" platform and pink vinyl uppers. I'd need them for work, and I would have plenty of time to flesh out my work clothes situation later. I just needed a quick outfit so I could get on the floor in time. I shoved that onto the table next to my makeup case and went back to the hunt.

I found a Victoria's Secret bra which fit me – barely – and a matching low-rise thong to go with, in a soft muted blue which went beautifully against my skin. My bouncing tits finally restrained, I could add a little more vigor to my search without getting hit in the chin. I did think to find a pair of goggles and a cheap thong bikini which looked like something from Sears but would do fine for the tanning booth. I just wanted it to leave cute tan-lines, I'd never be caught dead in it outside the tanning bed, so nobody would ever see me in something not label.

I stopped a minute to wonder why that was important, but quickly went back to my search.

It wasn't long before I found the hidden treasures, the things that made this all some kind of a game, or maybe a test, or whatever. A pair of Calvin Klein stretch low-rise jeans with leather pockets that hugged my every curve, a thick black studded Burberry belt to set it off, an adorable silk Oriental-print midriff-baring blouse with ¾ sleeves and a low neckline from Prada, a great-looking white bauble bracelet from Dolce & Gabbana and a gorgeous Swarovski crystal choker. The sheer silk blouse strained to contain my overflowing boobs and my pert ass was drawn up into a flawless apple-bottom by the tight-as-mortal-sin jeans. Something about all the designer labels made me feel better, more right somehow, and I checked myself in the mirror and approved wholeheartedly of the buxom blonde sex bomb that smiled

seductively back at me in the mirror. I slipped into a pair of Armani 4" wedges with gold uppers and a ½" platform. Daddy must have changed the bones in my ankles, too, because my sore feet were soothed instantly by stepping into the sexy platform sandals. I could barely buckle the ankle straps with my long nails, even though my training programming was helping me function with long nails.

I pushed aside the cheap discount-store purses and knock-offs until I found the only one I could in good conscience carry, a pink-and-gold Louis Vuitton hobo bag with a gold chain strap. I stuffed the matching wallet into it and slung it over my shoulder.

Alone on the shelf beside the door was a big manila envelope with my name typewritten on it. I tore it open easily with my armor-plate grade fingernails and dumped the contents on the shelf. A high-end Blackberry Pearl cellphone encrusted in pink and white rhinestones. I put it in a chic pink leather Liz Claiborne cellphone case. As soon as I'd touched it I just knew the number. My number. I set the ringtone to be Fergie's Clumsy and dropped it in my purse. I slipped a silver iPod Nano into a similar Liz Claiborne case behind it. A diamond-and-onyx Dior finger ring that went on my right index finger and a platinum and ruby Tiffany band that went on my left thumb. An employee I.D. card for the Bare Elegance nightclub, one of the swankiest titty bars on the Strip known for having the most gorgeous – and the wildest – girls in town. Only the high rollers and big spenders went there. I also had business cards for Bare Elegance with my dance name in a sterling silver case with my initials engraved on it. A Platinum Visa card, a Neiman-Marcus, a Lord & Taylor and a Nordstrom's credit card. A pink rhinestone heart keyring with no keys. I scooped in my day's makeup from the train case – in case I needed to touch-up while I was out. A pair of handcuffs, which I knew the use for automatically. A pack of Orbit gum and five Blow Pop suckers, which I knew drove the boys wild when I sucked them.

I was stuffing in the Social Security card and bank documents that I'd received earlier this week into the Vuitton wallet when I noticed the other, smaller envelope which had been underneath a stack of cheap designer knock-off purses that I'd discarded carelessly. I opened it as I had the first and drew out the contents one thing at a time.

A leather case containing three giant Montecristo Robusto cigars, the pride of Cuba and worth nearly \$100 apiece. I took one out and smelled it, the divine scent filling my nostrils. I put it back in the case, and dropped the case in my purse.

A silver filigreed cigarette lighter and a matching case full of Virginia Slims cigarettes, engraved with my initials B.R.S. on both. These I placed on the table in front of the makeup mirror, slowly realizing that the tension I'd been feeling since Daddy punished me was me craving a smoke. I even knew that I'd been smoking since high school, without being really sure how, since I'd never smoked a cigarette in my life, I somehow also knew.

I was getting confused. But it felt kind of normal. I twisted one of my curly blonde locks around a finger and giggled, and the confusion didn't seem bad to me at all.

Next was a silver powder compact. It looked perfectly ordinary, but I instinctually knew it wasn't. I popped it open and took out the puff, finding the place on the edge seam where I'd had velcro sewn in and opening the puff to reveal my stash: the better part of an 8-ball of cocaine, 10 bars of Xanax and 3 tabs of Ecstasy. There was also a prescription bottle in my own name with about 9 Vicodin left in it. Suddenly I knew that the number in my phone for Josie was my pot dealer, Inez was my coke and X dealer and Heather was the physician's

assistant who wrote me scrips in exchange for my licking her tight little pussy every week or so. As if it were the most natural thing in the world, I opened the little baggie and scooped out a fingernailful of sparkling white cocaine and placed it below my left nostril, closed my right one with a fingertip and inhaled sharply. The foul-tasting drip slid down the back of my throat and I lit a cigarette as I waited the seconds for the sweet buzz to hit me with a delicious shiver. I puffed several contented lungful of blue-white smoke, letting them out as thin wispy plumes from between my pink-lacquered lips. I sealed my party back in the powder puff and the compact went into my purse.

The last thing in the envelope was a little chrome-finish Lady Smith .38-caliber short-slide semi-automatic pistol with customized grips to fit my slender hands. I dimly remembered never having handled a firearm before, but that mattered about as much as the fact that I'd never snorted coke, either. I stripped the pistol's magazine, checked the breach, reloaded and safed the pistol before dropping it and the spare magazine in my purse and tucking the carry permit into my wallet along with the \$7500 in cash which was the envelope's last contribution.

I walked out into an overcast day, pushing a pair of wraparound Chanel sunglasses onto my nose, I was at the end of a long, trash-strewn alley. I walked out of the alley in my catwalk strut onto an unremarkable street where a cab waited.

"Where to?" the cabbie asked as I got in, his eyes running over me like a greedy caress.

"Chevy dealership," I said without hesitating, puffing my cigarette as the cab pulled away from the curb, towards town.

* * * *

The signs and parking lots of the city slipped by to either side of the taxicab as I scribbled furiously on a pink Post-It note from my wallet and a pink pen. I had so much to do, and I knew I'd never remember it all unless I wrote it down; I was such a bubblehead, I couldn't concentrate on anything for longer than about five minutes, no matter how important it was. I knew I needed a way around, first of all, else I wouldn't be able to get myself to work. I also knew I had things I wanted to get done for myself, things for my life, and then I was going to need a place to live. I was trying to put it all in order – hard, considering that I kept getting distracted by the billboards and stores we were driving past and I was high as shit. I did a couple more little bumps of coke off my fingernail in the back of the taxi, just to keep the buzz going. A part of me was still a little horrified at all the cocaine I was doing, but it felt just as natural as breathing.

After all, it had been me who'd said it. I was a stripper, and all strippers were dykes, whores and drug addicts. Well, I had the drug thing down pat, obviously, and the little twinges I was getting in my double clit when I got a look at the leggy bikini models on the Just Add Water billboard made me fairly confident that I was very much a dyke, as well. I didn't know how I felt about being a whore, but it was good money and I loved money. It kept me in cocaine and Dolce & Gabbana, so even if I didn't like fucking for money, I'd manage.

We pulled into a Chevrolet dealership and I paid the cabbie in cash. I could almost feel his eyes running over and caressing my breasts as I leaned over through his window to pass him the money. A part of me seemed to think that it should be horrified at the attention, offended somehow, but mostly I just loved it.

I gave my breasts a little squeeze-together with my biceps and the cabbie's eyes bulged.

"You like?" I purred.

He nodded dumbly.

I passed him a business card, embossed, from a silver case in my wallet. It was a silhouette of a dancing woman and the logo and address of Bare Essence – the club where I danced – and marked with the name Britanee in elegant script. I ran my fingernail along his index finger as he took it. "Come and see me, then, baby," I cooed.

He drove away in a fog, and I turned to the car lot, looking at the dull, boring sedans and mini-vans and pickups and SUVs all lined up in a long row. Between the high-pressure sales environment and my boom-boom figure, it wasn't long before an oily-smiling salesman was invading my personal space and showing me a silver Malibu that bored me shitless.

"So, what are you looking for in a car?" he asked.

I looked him dead in the eye, batting my long eyelashes a little. He was kind of cute, even though I wasn't really sure how I knew that, exactly. "What am I looking for?" I repeated.

"In a car. What are you looking for in a car?" the salesman asked again.

All the dumb blonde slipped out of my voice for a second. "Corvette. Convertible, leather interior, six-speed manual transmission, iPod hook-up, 5.2 liter V8..."

* * * * *

Two hours later, I roared out of the Chevy lot in my candy-apple red 'Vette convertible. I drove way too fast, knowing I could probably flirt my way out of whatever ticket I got. Besides, fast girls like me liked to drive fast. I couldn't wait until my vanity plates – NAW T GRL – got in. I wished I had some Mardi Gras beads to wrap around the rearview and maybe some Betty Boop floor-mats, but I could get those later. Besides, I wanted to get the beads legitimately, by flashing my perfect titties out on Bourbon Street, not buy some at the fucking Party Barn. A girl has to have her standards.

My next stop was Satori Body Art, an upscale tattoo and piercing parlor on 8th and Fountain. I went into the bathroom and dropped a couple of Vicodin because of what was coming and sat in the chair. The piercer was covered in metal studs and loops, a skinny dark-haired girl with way too much metal in her to be considered pretty any more. I signed her waivers and folded up the "How to Care for Your New Piercings" shit and stuffed it in my purse. Like I was seriously going to read that anyway. I sat for a while, chatting and smoking a cigarette with the girl – whose name was Caitlin – while I waited for my Vikes to kick in. Once I got the familiar tingling in my nose and fingertips I sat back and let Caitlin drive long sharp needles through my bellybutton and my tongue, threading little barbells through the holes to sparkle against my flawless skin. She also filled my ears, putting three through each lobe, three through the cartilage on my left ear and two through the cartilage on my right. I put a small sparkling diamond stud – the smallest they had – through the outside of my left nostril as well. I debated one through my clitoral hood, I heard they felt amazing, but I didn't want to have to explain to anyone why I had two clits. Maybe once Caitlin was a little better friend to me, someone I knew I could trust.

I was still buzzing hard from the Vicodin and the endorphin rush from the piercings when I sat down in the chair in front of Kevin, the tattoo artist. He was sleeved out and pierced all over, had that wonderful “bad boy” air about him that started making my pussy wet just talking to him. He was aloof and cool, the way bad-boys were supposed to be, but I knew I could get him hard. I picked a series of four interlocking hearts for a tramp-stamp in the small of my back and I leaned forward to let him get to work. The needle stung me deliciously, reminding me wonderfully of getting my big perfect titties and my adorable ass at Daddy's lab. As he worked me, I ground my double clit against the hard leather of the chair a little, sending delicious shuddering tingles through my body.

“You have to hold still,” Kevin warned.

“I can't,” I giggled. “It's, like, turning me on.”

His hands stopped for a minute, then resumed their work. I got to him, and I loved that feeling more than I think I'd ever loved a feeling before in my life. But a part of me was shocked to my core. Was I flirting with this guy? A sense of panic rose in me, but over it all was a calm, easy serenity, as if what I was doing was the most natural thing in the world. Dimly, through the happy haze that was now my mind, I realized it was the programming. I was programmed to flirt, to come on to guys, to think they were cute and hot and sexy. I thought I was supposed to be a lesbian, I complained to no one in particular, but the programming overrode me yet again, as it had done when I rebelled against snorting cocaine or smoking a cigarette, masturbating against the hard leather chair, or buying the gas-guzzling emissions machine parked outside.

“You're into pain, huh?” he asked, trying to sound aloof but his voice a little tremulous with desire.

“Any girl who says she ain't is fuckin' lying, baby,” the programming made me say, adding a sexy little smile and a coy look over my shoulder at him through long lashes.

* * * * *

I walked out with Kevin's number and a promise from him to come to my club with some of his friends so I could dance for them. I doubted he'd keep that promise – men never did, I heard in my brain and I found myself believing it – but still. Flirting with him had been fun, and shocking him with my directness. But he wanted to talk, and I couldn't concentrate long enough. After a while, he wasn't nearly cute enough to keep me pretending to be interested. I just wanted him to finish my tattoo so I could go.

After that, it was a matter of setting up my stuff – I got a membership to the Mystic Tan, to Netflix and to a chiropractor and a massage therapist. I also picked, and subsequently called, a real estate agent I picked out of the Yellow Pages. I had no idea if Jennifer Hodges was any good or not. I did know she was easily the hottest agent who bothered to put her picture in her ad, and I was now apparently willing to let that be enough.

I got myself a salad at a corner sandwich shop – the tiny little plate of greens filled me up nearly to bursting and I was surprised when I pushed the plate away with food uneaten. Looking at my cellphone for the time, I estimated I had about two hours before I had to meet my agent, so I ducked into a chic little boutique a block or so away.

I'd never really shopped before, I realized beneath my programming. Before, I'd purchased, I went into stores with a very definite idea of what I wanted and needed, I went in and found it

and walked out. Now I just strolled indiscriminately between racks and mannequins, pawing through clothes with no real idea of what I had in mind. I settled on some jewelry – my mind registered that I was happy that it was Balenciaga, but I still had no idea why that should please me – and a little print dress with some matching stiletto heels. If anything should have been able to break me through my programming with sheer outrage, it should have been the \$3,000 price tag for the lot, but I slid my credit card across the counter without a second thought.

I'd eaten up two hours without thinking and was now almost late for my appointment, something that bothered me deeply as an entrepreneur but now didn't seem to bother me in the slightest. I piled my purchases into the convertible's front seat as I slid into the driver's side, brought the overpowered engine roaring to life and blasted into traffic, cutting off a mini-van in a chirp of tires and the blare of honking horns. I should have been aghast, I supposed, at the fact that I was driving 50 miles per hour in a 30-mile-per-hour zone downtown while brushing makeup onto my cheeks with a large fluffy round brush, using the rearview for a makeup mirror, while Christina Aguilera pounded out of my Bose speakers at an ear-bleeding level. I even pried out the small stainless-steel hoops I'd gotten in my lobes at the piercing place and replaced them – painfully – with some gigantic 4" Balenciaga platinum hoops that brushed my shoulders.

I even stopped – late as I was – to buy a carton of Virginia Slims to keep in the car and two Rockstar energy drinks. I paused in the parking lot of the Seven-Eleven, about ten yards from a police car, to take a long pull of the sickly-sweet energy drink and do a quick hit of coke, I supposed, as a quick “pick-me-up.” I lit another cigarette and roared back into traffic, narrowly avoiding two accidents as I went.

I finally screeched to a halt behind a silver Lexus SUV parked in front of a row of cookie-cutter townhouses for sale just outside of the downtown area, in a chic little overpriced neighborhood called the Heights. The condos were walking distance from any number of designer boutiques and little hipster-friendly coffee shops and eateries. Ordinarily I would have hated the very idea of the place, but now I was delighted.

The picture in the Yellow Pages didn't do Jennifer Hodges justice as I ran my eyes hungrily over the long toned legs, the pert butt, the slender waist and generous tits. She had a long neck and a narrow face with full lips and a little button nose, wide brown eyes and sable hair with blonde highlights. She nestled her Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses in her rabbit-soft bangs and put on a practiced smile, tugging her Chanel business suit straight and extending me a beringed hand. I noticed the three-carat engagement rock on the hand she didn't offer, and shocked myself by thinking I'm going to dance naked for your fiancé before you marry him. I shook her hand warmly, subconsciously striking a devilishly sexy pose.

“Jennifer Hodges,” she said warmly in a melodious mezzo.

“Hi,” I said. “I'm Brooke.”

“You ready to take a look around?” she asked, gesturing to the condos above us.

I took a long last drag off my cigarette and shotgunned the dregs of my Rockstar, pitching the butt under the toe of my designer shoe and the empty can in a nearby garbage can. I got a long look at Jennifer's firm little Stairmaster butt as she stopped to retrieve her briefcase from her back seat and I felt a strong urge rise in my middle.

I barely even looked at the condo she showed me. It was nice enough, in the over-done too-slick way that high-end condos were. Three bedroom, two and a half bath with a sunroom, a balcony and an exercise room. Granite countertops, tile entryway and kitchen, garden-style jacuzzi tub and a glass-door shower. She said it was going for a quarter million but she was pretty sure she could get the price down to \$225 if we moved fast.

I opened my eyes wide and pursed my lips sexily. "You'd do that for me?" I asked.

To be continued...



SUMMARY: When a rich man decides that he will undergo a new treatment to enhance his looks, he does not count on someone sabotaging his transformation.

SIX MILLION DOLLAR EX-MAN

Part Four

by Valerie Hope

THE SEXY LITTLE REAL ESTATE agent was on her phone, delighted that I was willing to put a down-payment on the luxurious but scandalously overpriced downtown condo right then and there, especially because it was the first one she showed me. But honestly, I thought as I watched her pace back and forth in the dining room talking to the owner, and the delicious little figure-eights her well-toned ass traced through the air behind her, she could have shown me a fucking cardboard box under an overpass and I would've signed anything she put in front of me. All I was interested in right now was getting her panties off. I sucked lasciviously on the pink-stained end of my Virginia Slims cigarette on the balcony, my eyes devouring her.

Effortlessly, the programming in my mind devised a plan to come onto her. I'd read her already – I could tell she was straight, of course, just from the clothes and the manner in which she conducted herself, plus the gigantic diamond engagement ring on her left hand. That was going to be my way in.

She hung up her phone and dropped it in her black leather purse – I think it was a Dior, but I couldn't tell without a closer look – and favored me with a huge smile. “How does \$230,000 sound to you?”

“I'll take it,” I said, smiling back.

She looked at me as if I'd dropped from heaven. I'm sure that as a real estate agent, she was told that no one ever came in and dropped a huge down-payment on the very first condo you showed them. I was breaking all her preconceived notions. I forced down an evil, cream-in-the-whiskers grin. I was about to break a whole lot more of them.

“Fantastic!” Jennifer exclaimed, clapping her hands. “I can get the paperwork started right away.”

I put a long-nailed hand over hers as she went back into her purse for her phone. Dimly, I noticed it was Dior. “There's time for that later,” I said, smiling. “I thought maybe we could celebrate, first.”

She blinked. “Oh. Well, okay. Sure.”

“Maybe some champagne?” I asked.

She smiled nervously. “I shouldn't. I have other clients today.”

“Oh, come on. Live a little,” I chided. “Maybe just a little one?”

She blushed a little. "Oh, I suppose one wouldn't hurt anything."

I clapped my hands and bounced a little. "That's the spirit!"

* * * * *

The little wine bar around the corner from my new upscale condo was appropriately hipster, with just the right acoustic lesbian music and lots of people on laptops and cell phones trying desperately to look important. My bank account was lighter by about eighty grand from the down-payment I'd just authorized, but I still had enough to spring for a bottle of Dom Perignon. I'd managed to get a few glasses down her, and now she was refilling her glass without prompting, pleasantly drunk by the slight slurring in her speech and the much less polished smile.

"I don't know, I don't know," she giggled, sipping champagne with a kind of sloppy look on her face. "I mean, there's not much time for dating in my life any more. I just got focused on my career. I mean, I dated all the time in college."

"I bet you did," I prompted. "You're hot."

She giggled. "You think?"

"Oh, please," I said. "You're fucking gorgeous."

She brushed her hair behind her ear. "That means a lot, coming from somebody like you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, playing coy.

"Oh, come on," she said, laughing drunkenly. "Look at you! You're like, I don't know..."

I blushed a little. "You think I'm hot?"

"You're, like, every man's fantasy," she said.

I giggled, feeling a little tipsy myself. "Yeah, well, in my business, I kind of have to be."

"Your business?"

"I'm a stripper," I told her. "I kinda, y'know, need to look like this or I don't make money."

She made a big O-mouth in surprise, and I had to fight to keep from kissing her. She just looked so sexy that way. "Oh my God, that's so cool," she told me.

"It can be. I really like it."

Jennifer snorted and covered her mouth. "I always wondered if I could do that."

"Oh, you totally could!" I said. "You're, like, twice as hot as some of the girls I've worked with. All you really need is to be cute and have a little rhythm."

"I danced in high school. Kick line," she told me.

"Oh, sweet! Me, too! And I cheered for basketball season," I said. Where had that come from? I wondered in the back of my mind. Did they give me a back-story, too, with all that programming?

"I figured you probably did," Jennifer said. "A girl like you usually winds up being a cheerleader."

"Stop," I told her, patting her forearm. Her skin was so soft. "Tell me more about college."

"You didn't go?"

"A couple semesters at state," I said. "I got kicked out." Are you kidding me? I thought in outrage. I have a Ph.D. from CalTech! Is there anything that bastard Daddy wasn't willing to take away from me?

"Kicked out?"

I blushed crimson and dropped my eyes. "I kind of, like, fucked one of my professors and got caught. The teacher got transferred and I got expelled."

"Oh, wow," she said.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shock you," I said. "It's no big deal. I got a great job, now, and I can always go back if I want. But I want to hear about you."

"Oh, I got a degree in communications," she said. "Didn't fuck any professors, unfortunately..."

We both laughed. "...but I had a boyfriend. David. We were going to get married."

"What happened?"

"Oh, he went to grad school and met somebody else. I still had a year left to go, so I kind of, like, stayed drunk. After that, I had a lot of boyfriends, if you know what I mean."

I giggled. "Yeah. I did the same thing."

"Well, I finally sobered up and tried to find a job. I worked for a PR firm for a while trying to get into TV news. The pay fucking sucked. I finally had to get my real estate license just to pay the bills."

"You still want to do the news, though, right?" I asked.

"Actually, no," she said. "I'm making killer money, I love the hours, and I really like meeting people like you, and helping them find a place."

"That's so sweet," I said. I managed a smile, but I was tired of talking around it. Something in my programming – or was it in my crotch? – that was telling me that I needed to move now. "Have you dated since, though?"

"No," she said. "No time. Besides, I had plenty to last me in college. Like I said, I had a lot of boyfriends. I kind of got a reputation, you know."

"Yeah, I know," I said, smiling. "I was campus slut too. 'Cept I kind of, like, made it a plus. You know, we have a lot in common."

"I know, right?"

"We both had a bad time in school, we both focus real hard on our careers, we both had a lot of boyfriends in college..." I said.

"A lot," Jennifer reiterated, laughing drunkenly.

“Yeah, a lot,” I said. “Girlfriends, too.”

She hiccuped. “Well...”

I feigned shock. “You mean in all that time, drunk and fucking around, you, like, never did it with a girl? Girlfriend, experimenting was what college was supposed to be all about!”

“I guess I just wasn't ever that into it. I never seemed to get the chance.”

I ran a long fingernail across the back of her hand, looking her dead in the eye. “You weren't into it because you never met the right girl, baby, and you're about to get the chance.”

She looked back at me, looking a little cornered but definitely curious and definitely turned on. Her nipples were poking through her silk blouse, even through the bra she was wearing. “I'm not gay,” she said in weak protest. “I like boys.”

“I know you're not,” I said. “Sweetie, I don't want to marry you. I just want to fuck you.”

She blinked fast. “You do?”

I took her hand. “Why don't we go back to my place, now that I finally have one? I don't have any furniture, but those granite countertops look real sturdy.”

* * * * *

She'd been so nervous. It was cute as hell, actually. I'd led her by the hands through the arched breezeway to my door, which she had needed to unlock because I didn't have a key yet. We'd made out hungrily, tongues twining around one another like angry snakes and hands roaming blindly, struggling with snaps and buttons and zippers in their quest to find soft flesh. I'd bent her over the railing between my entryway and my living room and pulled her panties around her thighs, massaging her and kissing her thighs and her perfectly toned buttocks, kissing the little tattoo of a butterfly on her right cheek and giving it a playful spank which made her jump deliciously.

A dim part of my mind, undominated by the all-pervasive programming, registered that this was my first time as a woman, but it was overridden by my desire and the natural flow of the programming I'd received, the programming that was making me who I was now. I caressed her for a long time, feeling her desire mount, loving every second of the little firecracker orgasms coming from the constant stimulation of the clits installed in my lips, tongue and nipples which were making my juices grow cold and sticky on my inner thighs.

I picked her up – a far greater task than I expected, even with her small 100-pound frame – and set her on the countertop I'd mentioned earlier. She gasped when the sensitive skin of her perfect ass contacted the cold stone. I began at her neck, tasting the combination of sharp trapped sweat, salty-sweet woman and the barest hint of apricot body wash and rosy perfume, kissing between the valley between her firm breasts, down the taut flesh of her belly and to the warm, pouting lips between her smooth thighs. I tickled her gently with my tongue, setting off more little firecrackers in my middle, and parted her lips with long-nailed fingers before adding more pressure and speed, varying in little strokes and circles, rapid and slow, listening to her little moans and squeals and yelps as I hit just the right spots, worming a slender finger inside the warm velvet of her inside, oh-so-carefully so as to not scratch her with my long, ultra-hard nail. She threaded her fingers in my soft synthetic hair and pulled me in hard – the roughness of it drove me wild – and I pressed against her, licking like a demon, worming my finger in and

out, back and forth as she squealed. My other hand found my own soft pussy, working in tight, quick circles which sent shivers of the purest pleasure I'd ever known up and down my spine.

She shivered deliciously and came, her high-pitched yelps like music to me, pulling my hair to the point of pain and grinding herself against my soft lips until she drove the blood from them. I backed off, knowing she'd be oversensitive for a little while, but with gentle teasing and pressure I brought her off three more times. I looked up along the soft, perfect expanse of the skin of her belly at her glowing face, her hair stuck in sweat-damp curls to her forehead and cheeks, looking at me wide-eyed, as if she'd never seen me before.

"Oh, my God," she breathed.

I grinned coquettishly. "You like?"

"Oh, God," she said again, nodding dumbly.

I stood up and kissed her gently. She nibbled my bottom lip a little and I mewled a little orgasm.

"Is it my turn to do you?" she asked breathlessly.

I caressed her cheek. "If you're ready. I don't mind doing you some more if you're not."

Her eyes widened a little. "Really?"

"That's how girls roll, baby," I told her.

"I may have to rethink this whole gay thing," she said.

"Don't you dare," I cautioned. "I'm not, like, trying to convert you or nothing, baby. This isn't love, it's just really – I mean really – good sex. You like boys, that's cool."

"But this has been so..."

"Hell yeah it has," I giggled. "And any time you want to do it again, baby, I'm so there. But don't, like, go totally rearranging your life or nothing just 'cause of me. Just 'cause we fuck really good together don't mean you're, like, gay and it don't mean we should be a couple neither. I'd rather be a booty call, y'know? Let's just have fun together, okay?"

She kissed me. "Okay. But it's going to be hard to just hang out, when I don't know if I can keep my fucking hands off you."

"Well, that's cool too," I said, giggling. "Now lie back."

I brought her off a few more times – we made our way from the kitchen to the deep-pile carpet in front of the gas fireplace. Finally, she was ready and kissed her way down through the deep, soft valley between my mammoth tits, stopping to pay respects to both my erect nipples, down the trembling flesh of my belly and finally down to my aching crotch.

The little clits in my tongue, nipples and lips were nothing compared to what lay in store for me the moment her tongue touched my swollen labia. I jerked and gasped. It was as if every muscle in my body was electrically tied to the double clit nestled between the pink-brown swollen lips between my thighs. Every movement of Jennifer's tongue made me twitch and stretch in a different direction, like my body wasn't entirely under my control. And through it all, a chilly trembling feeling rose in my middle, stretching out in lazy little tendrils until it

suffused every cell in my body, even the synthetic ends of my soft hair and the ceramic edges of my long fingernails. I twined my fingers through her soft hair and moaned loudly, needing more pressure.

Apparently, there was a tiny little ridge where my two clits met and overlapped a little, where the slightest pressure took my breath away and made me almost black out with waves of pure pleasure. The chilly, shivering feeling deepened, widening and stretching until I thought my skin would burst with the effort of holding it inside. Finally, with a howl approaching a scream, I sank backwards into it as it exploded out of me, making me pant and scream and thrash my head from side to side in the silky-soft curtain of my blonde curls. I felt something splatter as I twitched, my back slowly relaxing from its divine arch which had left only my buttocks and head on the floor.

Finally, the last little drops of orgasmic energy leaked out of me, leaving me spent but glowing and hungry for more. Jennifer raised her head from my lap and looked at me with wide eyes. My musk dripped from her chin and nose, coated her hair, and spread in a wide puddle on the carpet around her upper body.

“You... you squirted.”

I smiled and colored a little. “I forgot to warn you,” I said sheepishly. “I do that.”

“I didn't know girls did that,” she said.

“Every girl can,” I explained. “But only a few do it every time they cum, like me. Did it gross you out, baby?”

“No,” Jennifer said. “It surprised me more than anything. But I, um, I kind of liked it. It tastes like you smell. All warm and salty, but sweet, too. Honey sweet, not sugar.”

“You want to learn how to do it?” I asked.

“You think I can?” she asked.

“All I got to do is find your G-spot, baby,” I told her. “It may take a while, but it's really fun to look.”

“It looked intense.”

“You have no idea. You game? Then c'mere.”

She scooted around on her hip and spread her legs wide for me. I pushed in two fingers and went to work, knowing instinctually how to do it, knowing beyond doubt that I would have her squirting halfway across the room. I suppressed a smile as my tongue worked on her swollen clit. I wondered if Jennifer could recommend a good carpet cleaner.

* * * *

If I was going to keep this up, I thought as I did a little bump of coke off my fingernail, not wanting to move too much to keep from disturbing the warm weight of Jennifer's naked body entwined with mine, I better think about getting hardwood floors. Or rubber.

I'd definitely figured out how to make her squirt. Four times, to be exact, and got her so worked up that I managed to worm my whole fist inside her pussy the last time. Not that she hadn't

reciprocated. I was going to need a gallon of water to replace what I'd sprayed all over her face and tits. Well, maybe not a gallon. I'd had a lot of fun licking most of it off of her.

The moonlight through my bay window was making Jennifer glow silver, and I could have stayed there looking at her for hours, but something inside me was twitchy, making me need to get out. I needed to go to work, to get out in the world and get myself seen. The laziness I was used to after sex, from my days as a man, was long gone. I was energized. I wanted to laugh and dance with the sheer joy of being alive, and a woman.

I kissed Jennifer's cheek and neck and she moaned adorably, nuzzling against me.

"Wake up, sleepy," I whispered. "I've got to go to work."

Her voice was so cute and muzzy when she woke. "D'you have to?"

I kissed her some more. "Tell you what," I said. "You stay here. Order Chinese or something, there's money in my purse. I'll be home about four in the morning and we can cuddle up together, okay?"

"Cuddle, hell. I want to fuck you some more," she said, smiling with her eyes closed.

"Or we can do that," I giggled, tickling her on the side of the neck. "But I need to shower real quick and go, baby, I got to make my money, y'know?"

"I'll go see if I can find us something to sleep on besides the floor," Jennifer told me.

"Don't sound like you plan on sleeping a lot," I told her.

"Eventually, we'll have to," she said.

"Not me," I said. "I got to get up early tomorrow to like, buy furniture and shit."

"I'll go with you," she said. "I'll cancel my ten o'clock, they're not going to buy anyway."

"That sounds like fun. You like like about a, what, size four? I can find you something to wear tomorrow so you don't have to wear your dirty suit from yesterday."

"You are so sweet," she told me. "I just can't get over it."

"It's nice to have somebody to be sweet to," I said, sitting up. "I got to run, baby."

She grinned. "I like it when you call me baby."

"Then I'll see you when I get home, baby," I said, kissing her. "Have a good nap, baby." Another kiss. "Then I'm going to lick every square inch of your body, baby."

"If you don't stop you're never getting to work," Jennifer said.

I spanked her playfully. "Then see you later," I said, standing and walking to the shower, pausing just long enough to give her a sexy look over my shoulder. "Baby."

* * * * *

Well, I certainly moved fast, I decided as I pulled into the parking lot of the swank topless nightclub. Limousines and high-dollar cars were pulling into the parking lot as I roared my 'Vette around back to the staff lot. I clocked in with the card I'd found in my purse, and the code registered. I danced under the name Britanee and I had an employee account for drinks,

but I didn't know anyone in the backstage area and I didn't have a locker. I took one of the unoccupied ones at the end of the row and stowed my stuff. I pulled my makeup and my dancewear out and walked into the overlit dressing room. Beautiful, statuesque women pranced to and fro, all in various states of undress from lingerie and eveningwear all the way to full nudity. Many had their hair in curlers and were crouched in front of mirrors ringed by incandescent lights putting on makeup.

A tall, leggy brunette with an elaborate tattoo around one shoulder turned as I walked in. She looked an awful lot like Dita Von Teese, if she'd just woken up and her hair wasn't done and her makeup quite so flawless.

"Hi," she said warmly. "Are you new?"

"New back," I explained. "I danced here a while back, but took some time off. I'm Britanee."

She took my hand. "Veronica," she said. She pointed to a petite redhead with bombshell curves and two nearly-identical tall honey blondes. "That's Sydney, Klymaxx and Fantasy."

"Hi," I said.

"Been dancing long?" Klymaxx asked me.

"Couple years. I tried to go to college, but it didn't work out."

"You get knocked up?" Sydney asked, smacking her gum loudly. "That's what happened to me."

"No," I said. "Fucked a professor and got kicked out."

"Right on," Fantasy said.

"He have a big dick?" Veronica asked.

"She did when she strapped it on," I grinned.

"Right the fuck on, girl!" Fantasy reiterated, high-fiving me.

"Anything I need to know?" I asked, gesturing to the club and the thumping music.

"Not really," Veronica said. "Bouncers are pretty cool, the managers are pretty much all dicks, there are dead spots for the security cameras in the girls' bathroom stalls and in the shower back there."

"Who's queen bee?" I asked.

"Old school is a girl named Corinne. Been here fifteen years. New guard is a rude little bitch named Destinee, everybody pretty much hates her here but she's gonna kiss your ass 'cause you're new," Klymaxx told me.

"Cool," I said. I blotted my hot pink glossy lips and checked my makeup one last time in the mirror, adding another coat of my special mascara just to make my long lashes that much more dramatic. I put on the slashed dress and towering platform heels, fluffed my hair with my fingers and vamped, blowing myself a tiny kiss. I looked phenomenal. I was going to make a fortune tonight.

“Damn, girl, you look good,” Fantasy told me. I smiled at her – another dyke in the club, and a seriously hot one to boot.

I grinned ear-to-ear, fastening a rhinestone choker around my neck. “I know, right?”

* * * * *

I blew a sexy kiss and opened my mouth like I was panting with desire, shaking my wild curls in a curtain behind me as I shook my divine titties and held out a side of my t-back to receive the dollar that the fat businessman with the cheeseball moustache and the flop-sweat under his arms was tipping me at the stage. It was when I kissed his cheek and pressed his greasy face between my enormous breasts that it actually hit me, right between the eyes: I loved my fucking job.

“And that's it for the night, gentlemen,” the emcee said over the microphone as I blew a kiss over my shoulder heading off the stage. My programming had been amazing – I was able to do floor work and incredible gymnastic routines on the pole, all in towering skyscraper platform heels, and I had the training to do a table dance that left my customers absolutely shuddering.

Klymaxx – who'd told me over a few lines of coke in the girls' bathroom, out of sight of the security cameras, that her real name was Kelli – was waiting for me when I came down the little steep flight of steps into the dressing room. She'd changed clothes, from her slinky tight evening dress into a pair of low-rise Calvin Klein jeans and a midriff-baring halter top, and was sitting at the dressing table smoking a cigarette and counting her night's take. I slipped into a robe and sat next to her, slipping one of her Marlboro Lights from her pack and lighting it with a book of matches with the club's logo on it. I pulled out the substantial wad of twenty-dollar bills from my tiny little evening clutch purse and extricated the generous ruffle of ones and fives from the waistband of my t-back thong.

“You were fucking great out there, girl,” Kelli/Klymaxx told me, rubbing my forearm. “Looks like you had a killer night, too.”

I grinned. “It was all right,” I demurred. I started counting out my take, taking the folds out of the bills and stacking them neatly next to my purse. Next out of my purse were all the phone numbers I'd gotten. I'd marked the cute ones and the high payers with a little smudge of lipstick. I'd put them in my phone later.

Fantasy, whose real name was Tiffany, came back to where we were sitting, wearing a tight Lycra top with “Naughty” in rhinestones across her bulging rack and a pair of sweats with “Juicy” across her bouncy bubble butt. She sat down next to me and gave my leg a squeeze.

“What's up, girl? You did all right out there.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think I'm gonna, like, head home.”

“Oh, hell, no,” Fantasy/Tiffany said. “You have to come out with us.”

“I can't tonight,” I said, rolling up the \$820 in twenties and c-notes and tucking it back in my bag. Good night for lap dances. I started with the ones and fives I'd gotten from my stage work. “I've got a serious hottie waiting for me back at my place.”

“Oooh, nice,” Kelli said. “He or she?”

“She,” I said. “Her name's Jennifer. I just met her this afternoon.”

“But we have to go party soon,” Tiffany said. “You’re way the fuck too cool to just go home every night, no matter how cute your girlfriend is.”

“I dunno, she’s pretty fucking cute,” I said, smiling. “But yeah, seriously. We’ll party. I promise.”

“Tomorrow night?” Tiffany asked. “Pretty please?”

I giggled. “How can I say no to that face?”

“I do it all the time,” Kelli said. Tiffany flipped her a long French-manicured bird and we all laughed.

“Y’all can come back to my new place,” I said. “I have to break it in, after all.”

* * * * *

Jennifer was asleep when I got there, but she’d bought a sleeping bag and a bottle of wine. She had a fire going and the light across her skin was gorgeous. I slid in next to her, kissing her smooth shoulder, and she moaned adorably and nestled tight against me.

“Did you have a good night?” she asked fuzzily.

I kissed her some more. “I had a fucking great night,” I said. “What did you do?”

“Not much. I showered, then I went to the store and came back here. I fell asleep about eleven, I think,” she said. “I bought you a Loofa.”

I giggled. “Excellent,” I said. “You rock.”

“I did some thinking, too,” she said. “About you.”

“Little ol’ me?” I said flirtatiously. “What did you think about?”

“That thing you do with your tongue, mostly,” she giggled, squeezing my hand against her warm breast. I felt her nipples stiffen against my palm. “But, no. I thought about how much I like you.”

I kissed her, but I felt a wave of apprehension. I didn’t want to talk about this. “I like you, too.” I started caressing her breast softly, hoping to distract her.

She rolled over to face me. “You don’t like talking much, do you?”

I sighed. “I dunno, I just feel like you’re about to start in about a relationship or something,” I told her. “That kinda stuff makes me really nervous, y’know?”

“What makes you nervous about it?”

“I’m not a big relationship kinda girl,” I told her. Most of this was my programming – before, I would’ve jumped at the opportunity to be in a relationship with a woman like her. Hell, I would’ve jumped at the chance to be in any relationship. But now, the very thought of commitment made me cringe inside.

“I get it, you’re a party girl,” Jennifer said to me. “I could probably never keep up with you. But that doesn’t change the fact that I really like you, Brooke. I mean, beyond the fucking – which

is incredible, don't get me wrong – but I really want to be your friend, too. Like, hang out. I think you're amazing.”

I sat up, pulling my knees up against my massive chest and hugging them. “I like you, too, Jennifer,” I said. “Really. I wanna be friends, too, and I love fucking you. But...”

“But what?”

“God, this makes me sound awful,” I said. “But I don't want to fuck just you, okay?”

She laughed. “I wasn't talking about being exclusive, baby,” she told me. “I like boys, remember? I just want us to be more than just booty calls.”

“How much more?” I asked. “That's what makes me nervous.”

She sighed in frustration. “I don't know,” she said. “That's what I was thinking about all night. Sometimes I even thought about you, in this big nice place, and thought about what living here with you would be like.”

“Moving in together? Jesus, Jennifer, we just met.”

“I just thought about it,” she protested. “But the idea doesn't suck, y'know? I like you that much.”

I rubbed my eyes. “This is a lot,” I said.

“I just wanted to talk about where we could go with this,” she told me. “Just see if there was anything we could both agree on.”

“Why can't we just have fun?” I complained. “What's wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Jennifer said. She sniffled. The frustration was making her start to cry. I got it. It was doing the same thing to me. “I just ruined it, didn't I?”

I sighed. “Well, I don't feel much like fucking any more,” I told her. “Look, baby, I do like you. I think you're great. You're funny and sweet and you're hot as hell. You're awesome in bed. There's nothing about you that's not to like. But fucking look at my life, baby. I'm a stripper, my friends are strippers. We party all night, we get fucked up, we sleep around. Do you seriously want to be a part of all that?”

“So what? I get my tits done and start snorting coke and you'll like me more?” she asked.

The thought of her high and horny with a huge bouncing rack appeared in my mind and I felt my pussy get wet, but I couldn't let that distract me, no matter how much I wanted it to.

She must have read it on my face. “Oh my God, you would,” she said. “You'd be into this if I was more like you, wouldn't you?”

“Don't be like that,” I pleaded. “Do I think you'd look hot with big tits? Yes. It turns me on, I like big tits on women. So fucking what? It doesn't change anything. Besides, if you were more like that then we wouldn't even be having this fucking conversation.”

“So you think I'd cramp your style,” Jennifer said.

“No, baby. I think I'd cramp yours,” I said. “I mean, you sat here waiting for me tonight, and it was sweet and romantic, but do you really want to do this every night? Shit, tomorrow night

after work there's gonna be like, six girls coming back with me to party. Do you really want that if you have to show a house at seven o'clock the next day?"

"Brooke, all I know is that waiting for you to call me to come over and be together isn't going to be enough for me," she said simply. "I want us to be more than that. I don't know what that means, but I was hoping you could help me find that out."

I pulled a cigarette out of my silver case and lit it. The fact that Jennifer had bought me a little plastic ashtray wherever she'd gotten the sleeping bag was not lost on me. She was a really sweet girl, and I knew I'd be lucky to have her. "So, what, then. You're talking about us being girlfriends?"

"I dunno," she said petulantly. "Maybe."

I puffed hard on my smoke for a while. "So, like dating."

"Why not? Would that be so bad?" she said. "We could at least try it."

"I just wish I knew what was so bad about what we're doing now," I complained. "I like what we have right now."

"God, you sound just like a man," she told me.

I jumped a little. I opened my mouth, trying to tell her everything. About being Brock Stills, about Derrick Hall and about Daddy. But no sounds came out. My programming forbade it utterly and my voice died in my throat.

"I guess I hit a nerve," she said. "Look, you're the one that seduced me. You got me drunk and brought me back here. Was I just a quick fuck when you did all that?"

I looked at the ceiling in desperation. "You were so sweet and you looked so good in your business suit, I just couldn't help it. That happens to me."

"And I like that! I love it that you thought I was so attractive that you just had to have me. I want you to feel that way about me all the time," she said. "Dammit, I want to make you feel that way."

"But I feel that way about a lot of people," I told her.

"And I'm okay with that," she said. "But I want the chance to keep you feeling that way about me. Can't I just have that chance? Can't I be the first to try?"

"I don't want you to try at all," I tried to explain. "I want it to just happen."

She sniffled again. "Just give me a chance, okay?" she pleaded.

I sighed. "Okay. We'll try it your way," I told her. "But I can't make any promises."

She took the cigarette from my fingers with two of hers and took a drag before passing it back. "That's all I want is a shot, Brooke," she said. "I'm sorry. I'm really no good at this."

"Yeah, me neither."

"You probably think I'm one of those crazy clingy bitches now, huh?"

I shrugged. "I really don't know what I think," I said honestly.

“I promise you're not going to be sorry you tried,” she said. “Now, we have to get an early start if we're going to shop for furniture tomorrow.”

My eyes got big. “You still want to go?”

“Of course I do,” she said. “It's gonna be fun. And I still want to make you call me baby tonight, if you still want me to.”

I looked at her appraisingly through my thick lashes. “I guess I do.”

She took the my cigarette again and took a drag before grinding it out in the ashtray, slithering into my lap and kissing me tenderly. “You like the sleeping bag?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It's nice.”

“It's waterproof,” she said, her hand sliding down towards my crotch as she kissed me deeply.

“You thought of everything,” I whispered in her ear.

* * * * *

We woke up about eight – it took four lines of coke to get me woken up, even after the cup of really strong hipster coffee Jennifer brought up from the coffee shop downstairs. I took a quick shower and pulled on my outfit from yesterday. Jennifer was in the empty bedroom, buttoning the slik blouse from her business suit.

“I thought you were going to get me something to wear,” she said, sticking out her bottom lip in a sweet little pout.

“I'm sorry, baby, I flaked on it,” I said. “But I need something too. I'll hook you up first thing before we go to the showroom, okay?”

“I was just teasing,” she told me.

“I am a flake, you know,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “You're a stripper and all strippers are flaky. You told me yesterday.”

I giggled. “You ready?”

She tugged her skirt straight. “Yeah,” she said. “Let's go.”

We walked out to my car, parked on the street. I zoomed downtown to the upscale boutiques and found a spot in a paid lot. We walked through the morning pedestrian press to a place called Chloë and strutted inside, pawing through the racks. Again, I didn't even look at the totals as I piled up purchases and passed over my credit card. We worked our way down the high-end shopping district street, from shop to shop, until our hands were loaded with bags marked with the logos of each of the stores we'd visited. We had to stop twice to return to my car and load the trunk. I dimly estimated that I'd just spent somewhere on the order of fifteen grand on clothes and jewelry, but looking at Jennifer in the little pink Versace dress with the matching purse I'd bought her at the first boutique and the way her pert little ass swiveled as she walked and set the flouncy skirt swaying made it all worth it. I was in a sensational pink pastel Michael Kors sundress which hugged my bombshell curves deliciously as I moved.

“You certainly don't get hung up about money,” Jennifer said as we loaded my car.

"It's only money, baby," I said. "I dance, I make more. Besides, I like looking good, and I don't care about wearing anything that's not label."

Jennifer held up a Vogue she'd picked up at a newsstand on the street. "I have to do a lot more research. I don't really know designers."

"Don't worry, I'll teach you," I told her. "It's almost lunchtime. Wanna grab a bite before we buy furniture?"

"I'm starved," she said. "I'll treat, okay?"

"You don't have to," I said.

She laughed. "You just spent, like, five grand on clothes for me. I want to. Where do you want to eat?"

"There was a cute little café on 7th street, over by that lingerie store."

"Oh, the one that's making you all the custom bras?"

"Yeah. It looked pretty nice, wanna go there?" I asked.

"Sure."

I lit another cigarette as we strolled. Jennifer pulled up alongside me, and now that we were unencumbered by shopping bags, she took my hand in hers. I felt a little uncomfortable right at first, but as I got used to it, it felt kind of nice. I twined my fingers through hers and smiled.

"What?" she asked, looking at my happy grin.

"Nothing," I said. "Just enjoying myself."

She grinned back. "Me, too."

We had a lovely lunch – a chicken Caesar for her and a half-turkey sandwich and a cup of tortilla soup for me, and neither of us were able to finish it – and chatted about clothes. I wanted to just sit there, smoking my cigarette and looking at her smiling face, but I kept getting distracted by a dark-haired bartender with big brown eyes and a sexy stubbly little beard who was giving me long looks. I felt my programming take over and I smiled at him as Jennifer was digging in her purse. He smiled back.

"Where do you want to go next?" Jennifer asked me.

"We better start looking at furniture," I said. "I still have to go to the gym before I get ready for work tonight." The bartender was staring at me hungrily and I couldn't stop returning his looks. Something in my programming was making me respond, but there was something else – something more than my programming – driving me as well. It was terrifying me but thrilling me all at the same time.

I took Jennifer's hand and gave it a tight squeeze. "Tell you what, baby, why don't you head back to the condo and take those measurements we talked about. I'll go tanning and meet you there and we'll head out."

"Don't you want to stay together?" she asked, sounding a little hurt.

I sighed. This was why I didn't want a relationship. But I promised her I'd give it a try.

"Of course I do," I said, forcefully tearing my eyes away from the bartender. His smoky stares were making me so wet I could barely stand it. My double clit was getting painfully aroused. "Of course I do. Dammit, I'm no good at this."

"No good at what?" Jennifer asked.

"I want to get you a surprise," I said. "Something sexy. I'm trying to get rid of you for a little while so I can, like, go pick it up. I was trying to be all smooth about it."

She smiled, her nose wrinkling up adorably. "I love it that you can't lie."

If you only knew, I thought. "So, what do you say? Can you get lost for a little while?"

She grinned. "Since you asked so nicely," she told me, kissing my hand. "Meet you back at your place in, what, an hour?"

"That's plenty of time," I said, smiling.

She stood up and tossed some cash on the table. "I'll see you there," she said, smoothing her skirt. "Can I take your car? I'll hang up all the new clothes."

I passed her the keys. She winked at me and left with a wiggle in her walk just for me. I appreciated it, in a detached way, but as soon as she'd left the little bistro I was up, slinking my sexiest walk towards the bartender, who was slicing limes.

"Hi," I purred, setting my half-empty wine glass on the bar. "I'm Brooke."

"Steven," he said, trying to play it cool and aloof as he refilled my glass. I didn't have time for his games.

"So, Steven, do you have a break coming up?"

"Lunch rush is over," he said, one eyebrow raised sexily. "I guess I can take a break. Why?"

"You got a storeroom in this place?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said.

"Take me there," I told him.

He gestured me around the bar and I followed him. He unlocked a door marked "Employees Only" and looked around the place carefully for a manager before hustling me in. He joined me in the dark, chilly storeroom and shut the door behind us.

"Lock it," I told him. He flipped the deadbolt and I was on him before he could turn all the way back towards me. I crushed my soft lips against his, loving the roughness of his lips and his stubble. My hands pushed down his jacket and kneaded the firm pectorals underneath his shirt.

"You're aggressive," he breathed.

"I know what I want," I said back, fumbling with his belt. His hands found my tits and squeezed roughly. Jennifer was better, but I liked how he mistreated them. I wasn't the slightest bit interested in gentle right now. I had no idea what was motivating me, but I couldn't have stopped myself on a bet. It was like my desire had completely taken over my mind. I could barely talk, and my breath was coming in short pants.

“And what do you want?” he asked, trying to sound seductive.

“Shut up,” I told him, reaching through his open fly. I found the warm flesh of his dick with my fingers and pulled it out. He would never have a career in porno, I decided, but it would do. I didn't care, I just needed it. He pushed down my sundress to expose my tits and was kissing them sloppily as I sank down to my knees.

I've never looked at a dick from this angle, I thought as I stared at his half-erect cock. It was purple and covered in thick veins, it smelled sharp and musky and the smooth head was only just peeking from the thick, dimpled foreskin. I shook my hair out of my face – it was sticking to my lip gloss – and took it in my hand, squeezing it near the base. He leaned against the wall with a dull thump as my other hand massaged his taut belly.

This is so weird, I thought. I don't want to do this. But if I don't I think I'll go crazy.

I was desperate to stop, but there was no way in hell I was going to. Almost like slow-motion, I felt my mouth open and my long pierced tongue extend. The head hit my tongue, warm and salty, and my eyes rolled back in my head. A powerful, drunken sense of completeness washed over me as I pushed my head forward, feeling his length slide down my tongue and into my throat. The head, fully erect now and throbbing with his pulse, pushed against the ring of clitoral tissue that Daddy had installed in my throat and I felt my panties soak through. It felt every bit as good as the clits between my legs – this wouldn't be one of the little baby firecracker orgasms from the lip and tongue clits, or the bigger ones from my nipples.

I fought for breath through my nose, as I began to pump my face up and down on his cock. I fucked him with my face, squealing and grunting and making slurping and squelching noises.

“Oh, God,” Steve groaned. “Holy shit.”

I didn't respond, using my mouth as a pussy and stroking his cock with my hand at the same time. He groaned extravagantly. I was wild inside, completely insensible of my dignity or pride, just a huge boiling cauldron of want. I pumped him with my mouth, squealing from the little explosive orgasms from the clits in my tongue and lips, trying to will his orgasm.

“Slow down, baby,” he cautioned. “Don't go so fast, I'm gonna...”

I popped him wetly out of my mouth, panting and fighting for breath. I'd drooled all over my chin and it was dripping onto my tits, hanging from my lips in a little swaying tendril. “Do it,” I growled at him. “Cum for me, baby. I want it.”

I stuffed him back into my mouth and went back to work. His breath was coming in little gasps and he started to tense up. I gagged in my desire to drive him deep down my throat, but I didn't stop. Faster and faster, wet grunts escaping my in rhythm to my thrusts.

I forced my throat open, like a yawn, and opened my mouth as wide as I would go, swiveling my head back and forth as I forced my head down on his cock, forcing harder and harder until I felt the warm damp weight of his balls rest against my chin. My free hand found my crotch under my dress, stroking myself roughly through the sodden silk of my panties. Steve cried out with pleasure and I orgasmed, twin from the stimulation of the clits in my throat and underneath my fingers, unable to scream from the hard invader in my throat. I pumped him wildly as I came and came, like it would never end. My orgasm soaked my panties and I felt my juices running around my fingers to drip on the floor between my Jimmy Choo platform heels.

Steve cried out again and I popped him out of my mouth, jacking him off as he coated my tongue in hot, salty jets which splashed across my chin and cheeks. My tongue tingled as he soaked it and thrilling hot tingles shot through my body, making my eyes shut in utter rapture. No drug I'd ever taken could match the feeling I was having, and I let my pleasure into the world in a long, breathy moan.

Daddy was right. This was going to be an addiction and a half.

To be continued...



SUMMARY: When a rich man decides that he will undergo a new treatment to enhance his looks, he does not count on someone sabotaging his transformation.

THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR EX-MAN

Part Five

by Valerie Hope

I BORROWED A PLASTIC BAG from one of the storeroom shelves and slipped my soaked panties into it before stuffing them into my purse. There was a hand-washing station next to the door and I ran some water on a paper napkin to dab the drool off of my tits. I scraped a few errant streams of still-warm cum from my cheeks and painted them across my tongue, savoring the sweet high that came over me as the semen touched it.

I finished cleaning up quickly, needing to finish the errands I'd given to Jennifer as a lie so I could face-fuck this bartender, processing the guilt I was feeling. I pulled my dress up and pulled a compact out of my purse to check my face. My eyeliner and mascara had run down my cheeks from the tears I'd produced from gagging on his cock, and my lipstick was completely wrecked. I dug out my cosmetics and moved closer to the room's single light.

"So," Steve said at last, buckling his belt, "you wanna get a drink later?"

My speech was a little slurred from the cum-high I was riding. "No, thanks," I told him. "I've got a ton of shit I need to do today."

"How about tonight?" he pressed.

I put my compact down. "Don't ruin this, honey," I told him. "I'm hot, you're hot, we felt it and we had a thing. It was fun. Now it's over. Let's don't make it something it's not, okay?"

"I don't get it," Steve said as I went back to dabbing the run makeup off my cheeks. "This was all your idea. You came onto me."

"Actually, it was you who came onto me," I corrected.

"Whatever," he said, obviously too egotistical to tolerate an interruption. I was really starting to hate this guy. "But you're the one who started this, and now you're just gonna take off?"

I finished brushing on my lipstick and blew myself a little kiss. "Yeah, that's the idea."

"But..."

I laid a finger across his lips. "Look," I said sternly. "You would have done the exact same thing to me if you could. You woulda fucked me and then never called me back, you're that kinda guy. I can tell. I did it to you before you could do it to me, so just deal with it, okay?"

"Bitch," he said.

“Damn right,” I said. “I got what I wanted, you got what you wanted and now you can brag to all your little friends about the blowjob you got in the storeroom from the pornstar blonde. Why are you so fucked up about it? Just 'cause you didn't get to be the one in control? Poor baby.”

“Maybe you should go,” he said, looking away.

I kissed his cheek. “Thought you'd never ask.”

* * * *

I had to rush to get to my tanning salon for a quick Mystic spray tan and then to a little lingerie store for a close-fitting merry widow with matching stockings and garter. My indiscretion was covered nicely, and I caught a cab for the short ride back to my condo. The crazy walking-on-air high from swallowing Steve's cum was still hanging on behind my eyes and in the tips of my fingers, assuaging any guilt about ditching her with a bald-faced lie so I could go suck some stranger's cock. I supposed we would have to talk about this, eventually, but right now I really didn't feel like explaining. Something in my programming made it all stick in my throat, anyway – I wanted to tell Jennifer what had happened to me, to tell her what I'd been before Daddy got a hold of me, and now he made me suck cock and do all these things I didn't really want to do. But the programming made me lie, cheat, sneak around, anything to keep from having to confront someone in a way that might lead to a confession.

I finger-combed my hair in the back of the cab, trying to make myself look a little less like I'd just been face-fucked in a bar storeroom. I felt surprisingly little guilt, but I suspected that was my programming at work as well. I felt – I guess entitled was the best word for it, like that near-violent sexual encounter was something I deserved. I liked Jennifer, to be certain, but I had the unshakeable feeling that if she had a problem with what I did then it was her issue, not mine. I had been honest with her about my proclivities.

What I couldn't figure out, however, was why I felt so unsettled inside. The cum-high was a wonderful glow, a sense of euphoria and well-being that I liked to the point where I doubted I could live long without it. It had made everything all right inside, made me at peace with my own ravenous sexual self and the portrait of glamor and beauty that I'd become. But as the high was wearing off, I felt myself becoming more and more distracted, more and more anxious. Like there was something I needed to be doing that I was ignoring.

But I couldn't for the life of me remember what it was.

* * * *

“Dammit, she has to be somewhere,” Hall said, thumping his fist on the desk hard.

“The trail is cold,” Frank Gutierrez, a squat and wide Latino with a scarred face who served as one of Derrick Hall's best manhunters. Frank could find anybody, anywhere, if he had enough time and money. Money, Hall had. Time was another matter. His voice was thick and hard to understand, which meant that you had to listen very closely to him. Hall suspected he liked it that way.

“I know it is,” Hall said. “But we have to find this girl.”

“Girls get lost all the time, jefe,” Gutierrez said. “What's so special about this one?”

"First of all, she can't really take care of herself, and I'm pretty sure there's somebody after her," Hall explained, raking his fingers through his hair. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept. "And the bad situation she's in is more than a little bit my fault."

"Oh," Gutierrez said, nodding. That's what Hall liked about Frank. He didn't ask too many questions, just what he needed to get the job done. "Look, Derrick, this girl is gonna have to show up on the grid eventually. We just have to be patient and wait."

"Tick tock, Frank," Hall said.

Gutierrez was about to open his mouth to counsel even more patience when his phone rang in his pocket. He flipped the Razr open one-handed and pressed it to his ear to click against his heavy-gauge earring. "Gutierrez, go," he barked.

A short pause. "Got it. Thanks."

He flipped the phone closed. "Just got a hit on a credit card in the name Brooke Stillwater. Big purchase, too, at a furniture store. There's been a lot of activity on the card, but this was over fifteen grand in one pop. My contact at the credit card company flagged it and gave me a call."

"The card I got for Brooke only had a \$750 limit," Hall said. "How the hell could she swing that?"

"Look, there's a couple of ways it could go. Either she applied for a new card and got a sick limit or she got her identity stolen and somebody else did it. One way or the other, it's the best lead we got. I'm gonna go check it out."

Hall came around the desk quickly, grabbing his jacket. "I'm going with you," he said.

They trotted to the parking lot and piled into Frank's weatherbeaten blue GTO. The old muscle-car didn't look like much on the outside, which was carefully calculated. The high-performance engine growled to life when the key was turned and roared powerfully as he slipped it into gear and pulled into traffic. Gutierrez was weaving through traffic like a madman, sensing his employer's anxiety, but Hall was lost in thought, staring out the window at the traffic whipping by.

"Hey, boss, you still with me?" Frank finally asked, pulling onto the freeway in a roar of engine.

Hall blinked. "Yeah, just thinking."

"Do it out loud," Frank bade. "Maybe I can help."

"It just occurred to me that finding Brooke may not be the hard part," Hall mused. "It's still a matter of who did this to her. And that's what's got me fucking stumped, partner."

"I only know the bare bones," Frank said. "But the way I see it, you got to know what's going on at that company. Somebody stands to make a shitpot full of money from all this. Find them and you got your bad guy."

Hall smiled. Frank always had a great way of seeing through complicated matters to the meat of the situation, and he wasn't even aware of the gender change. As it stood, Hall had been up all night poring over lists of in-house projects at XenoSoft and lists of patent-holders. All of the patents were for things that Hall could barely even comprehend, much less figure out a use

for. It was like having a constant migraine headache. Something in his investigative mind told him there had to be a better way to figure out who was behind this.

His mind kept flitting back to the concept of motive. If it was just to get Brooke out of the way, then murder was actually the better solution. Simpler, far less involved, and probably cheaper. No, there was a definite element of revenge at play here. It wasn't just someone who wanted Brooke's patents, it was someone who wanted the patents and wanted to get even. Someone who felt as though Brooke had stolen an idea, perhaps? Someone who felt wronged that the royalties for whatever magic these nerds cooked up on their laptops was going to Brooke and not him or her? That made more sense.

Problem was, XenoSoft was inbred. No one person held all the patents for any one particular piece of technology. The hodgepodge of who owned the rights to what piece of code that was nested in seventy other pieces of code that made some groundbreaking feat of computer magic happen was beyond byzantine, and something only the XenoSoft higher-ups could navigate successfully.

An idea struck him and he flipped open his cellphone, dialing one of the independent contractors he had working round-the-clock on this case, all on ReNu's dime.

"Mike, this is Derrick," he said as soon as he heard the voice on the other end of the connection. "Listen, you have a copy of the list of patent holders for all XenoSoft technology, right?"

"Yeah," the bored-sounding baritone responded around a yawn. "You sent it to me this morning."

"Go on the national database and see if any of those names have come up missing, too," Derrick said. "It's possible that our perp wants more than one person out of the way for their patents."

"I'll check. There's a backlog, it might take a couple hours," Mike explained.

"Expedite it where you can. Get back to me as soon as you know something."

Gutierrez raised a questioning eyebrow.

"A hunch," Hall said by way of explanation.

* * * * *

I was having a ball, gesturing around grandly with a cigarette smoldering between my long-nailed fingers as the workmen delivered my furniture and carted it into my condo. I had dressed the part perfectly – a tight-fitting Bebe midriff tee that showed off my cute little diamond-and-ruby heart dangle navel ring, a skin-tight pair of low-rise Cole Haan denim Daisy Duke shorts with a wide woven Gucci belt and an adorable pair of white Nanette Lepore platform gladiator sandals – and the workmen were eyeing me out of the corners of their eyes and making great gestures of admiration whenever I bent over. I'd tried to talk Jennifer into doing the same, but she'd demurred, just wearing a University of Arizona sweatshirt with the neck cut out, Flashdance style, and a nice tight pair of Calvin Klein jeans with studs up the seams that did remarkable things to her ass. As much as I was enjoying the attention of the guys, I couldn't wait for them to clear out so I could get to work getting her out of those jeans. I

only wished girl cum made me feel as good inside as boy cum did. But then, I might never leave the house if that was the case.

I dodged around my gorgeous Richard Judd end-tables and plopped down on the white leather Aldo Ciabatti sofa I'd just bought. It squeaked and sighed under my weight and I tapped my ash into a crystal ashtray by Galotti & Radice. There was literally nothing in my house that cost less than \$300. Before, I'd been the model of frugality, even driving a beat-up '92 Honda Civic with over 400,000 miles on it when I was a multi-millionaire. Now, all the designer labels and the exorbitant price-tags just made me giddy and happy.

"This is all beautiful," Jennifer told me, looking around.

"I'm really happy with it," I replied. "And I'm really glad you came with me to pick it out. Now, whenever I see anything in my house I'll think of you."

She smiled and blushed. It was a wonderful effect on her already pretty face. Oh, she was getting so fucked tonight.

"The plasma-screen and the home theater people will be here in the morning. After that, all I really need is some stuff for the walls and I think it'll finally be home," I said. "Hey, listen, I want to ask you something and I don't want you to freak out, okay?"

"Shoot," she said, sitting next to me.

"I know we just met and everything," I said, "but I kinda want to cut you a key to this place. Y'know, like, so you can come and go as you please. It's not, like, a commitment or anything, I just like having you around. Would you be okay with that?"

She bit her bottom lip in thought. "If you were a guy, I'd be freaking out," she said. "But somehow, when you ask, I just thought 'that sounds great.' I don't know what that means."

"It means you like me," I said, poking her gently in the side to tickle her. She squirmed.

"Of course I like you, silly," she said, poking me back. "I really like you."

"So, then, we're cool. You can have a key to my place and you can come over whenever you feel like it. Just as long as you feel like it a lot."

She grinned at me. "I'm going to get you some plants for in here," she said. "This place is too white, and with all this sunlight you need some green in here."

"I'd just kill them," I said.

"Oh, like you're going to do anything domestic in here," Jennifer chided. "Look, you just spent more money in, like, six hours than I do in months. I'm sure you're gonna get a maid and then she can water the plants."

"Oh, shit, yeah! I forgot all about a maid. I think I want a French maid, in her cute little outfit with the lace apron, named Babette. She could prance around in high heels and fishnet stockings with a feather duster and bend over a lot to pick things up off the floor."

Jennifer giggled – I loved her giggle, I was going to have to pick it up and start doing it myself – and pushed me playfully. "This place would be a pigsty in days. She'd never have any time to clean it up from you molesting her every five minutes."

“So, then, maybe I'll need two maids,” I said.

Jennifer laid back, putting her feet across my lap. I started massaging them absentmindedly, smoking my cigarette as the last workmen took their last gaping stares at my tits as she moaned in pleasure. After the door had closed, she sat up.

“So, I peeked in the bag and saw what you got me,” she told me.

“Bitch! That was supposed to be a surprise!” I complained.

She shifted the neck of her sweatshirt out of the way to show a red satin strap. “I couldn't resist it, I just had to slip it on,” she said. My eyes narrowed with desire – if I'd known she was in the red satin push-up bra and thong and the little rhinestone belly chain, the red thigh-high stockings with the garter belt and the little satin bows under her outfit, then the workmen would have had an incredible show to watch, because I would've fucked her right then and there.

“Well, slip everything that's not it off,” I told her, purring a little in my throat.

“Wow,” she said. “You really do want me, don't you?”

“Every second I'm with you, baby,” I replied. “Why are you keeping me waiting?”

“Because I thought a lot about what you said to me last night. About all that relationship stuff,” she said. I felt myself getting tense, and she must have sensed it because she raised a placating hand. “No, no, don't get all defensive. I just wanted to tell you that I think I get where you're coming from. This is happening really fast, and you have a certain lifestyle and so do I and you're worried that it's not gonna fit together. I get that now.”

“You do?”

“Now that I've had a little time to think it over, yeah,” she told me. “I mean, first you were all like, 'let's keep it light and fun and no more than that' and now you're cutting me a key to your place. You can change your mind, and so can I.”

“Okay, so what does that mean, then?” I asked.

“It means that when you said you have this stripper lifestyle that you really love and you don't think I'd be able to fit into it, you're right. I totally wouldn't. Which means that I need to change a little, too, so I can get used to it – the all-night parties and shit like that. So, basically, I'm going to take a little time – like three weeks or so – and change a little. I was thinking I'd go to Vegas or something. And when I get back, I think you're gonna be really surprised at all the changes.”

“You're going away?” I asked.

“Yeah. I'm leaving in a week,” she said. “I'll be back soon, and you're the first one I'm gonna call.”

“But I'll miss you,” I whined in a little-girl voice.

“Aww,” she said, caressing my cheek. “I'll miss you, too, baby. But I think it's gonna be good for us, too. I think you're really gonna like it.”

"Well, then, I have to spend a lot of time with you before you leave, so you don't forget me while you're partying in Vegas," I said.

"No chance of that," she said.

"You are so sweet!" I exclaimed. "I can't believe you'd do that for me."

"Like I said, I really like you," she explained.

"I'm really glad we hooked up," I told her honestly. "Really glad. I wanna do something for you. I'll tell you what. When all my girls from the club come over tonight I'm gonna introduce you as my girlfriend. Would you like me to do that?"

She smiled. "But we've only had sex once," Jennifer said. "That's still a one-night stand. We have to have sex at least twice before we're technically girlfriends."

I pushed her back onto the couch and squeezed her tits lovingly. "So let's get going on that."

* * * *

Hall stuck a finger in the ear that wasn't on the phone and raised his voice over the sound of the diesel engines idling at the loading dock of the furniture store. "Say that again?"

Mike, the head of Hall's electronic bloodhounds back at the ReNu security office, raised his voice as well. "I got the results back of that cross-check," he said again. "Your hunch was good, boss. Three other patent-holders off that list have gone missing. Henry Selig has been missing for two days, Ken Blauer for one and now John Hideki has been missing for about twelve or thirteen hours. All XenoSoft patent-holders. I'm sending you an updated database of just the patents that the four missing people held and the projects using those technologies. It should be on your PDA... now."

"Thanks, Mike. Keep your eyes open for more missing persons reports," Hall told him.

"Already have automated alerts in place for the local, state and federal databases. You want me to put you in touch with the feds about this?"

"Not right now. I'm still trying to keep this out of the spotlight. We'll hold that in reserve."

"Got it." The line went dead.

Gutierrez stepped out of the furniture store and lit a cigarette, reaching in the pocket of his leather jacket to hold up a white slip of paper.

"Manager says that a boom-chaka-laka blonde with curly hair came in here about four hours ago with another woman and bought fifteen grand worth of European designer furniture," he said.

"Doesn't sound like our girl, but it's a possibility. Any security cameras?"

Gutierrez shook his head.

"Blonde curly hair is a match," Hall mused, "but our girl wouldn't be dropping fifteen large on furniture and I don't think anybody would describe her as 'boom-chaka-laka.' Anything else?"

"She had all the furniture delivered same-day to this address. Tracks back to some brand new condos in the midtown district," Gutierrez said. "I ran the address. Papers were only filed on

this address yesterday. Owner paid down in cash, mortgage is under the name Brooke Stillwater.”

“That's gotta be her, then, no matter how he described her. How far?” Hall asked.

“In this traffic,” Gutierrez replied, “about an hour, and that's if we're lucky. Just our luck to find this address at straight up five o'clock on a Friday.”

“We better get started,” Gutierrez said, spinning his keys around one finger as he tossed his cigarette, quick-stepping towards his car. Hall was right behind him.

* * * *

Hall was busy on the phone as Gutierrez dealt with traffic. He finally got off the freeway – which was at a standstill – and pulled onto Main towards downtown. He pulled up to a light and stopped at the red, gunning his engine and tapping his fingers impatiently on the wheel as he waited for it to change.

His eyes were drawn to the left, towards the turn lane. A candy-apple red Corvette was idling at the light next to him, its V8 engine purring in tune to his GTO's basso rumble. But it wasn't the car that drew his attention so fully. A centerfold-model blonde with a wild mane of platinum curls and the biggest tits he'd seen in recent memory shoved into a red polka-dot halter top was sucking on a skinny white cigarette and putting on lipstick in her rearview mirror. She had black wraparounds which she pulled down her long, slim nose with a manicured hand to look at him appraisingly. She smiled a chalk-white smile and blew him a little kiss before she gunned it and turned left, away from him. He watched her go wistfully, lost in a very pleasant fantasy involving her and a hot tub, so wrapped up in the portrait of her naked that it took the irritated honking of the car behind him to snap him out of it to notice the light had turned green.

Gutierrez looked left one last time, hoping to catch one last glimpse of the wild blonde curls. Seeing nothing, he accelerated down the street towards his destination.

* * * *

“I'm sorry, but Brooke's already gone to work,” the curvy brunette told Gutierrez, still keeping the door between herself and him. “She won't be back until late. Who did you say you were again?”

“An old friend. Frank Gutierrez. It's really important that I talk to her,” he said.

“Where do you know her from?” the brunette asked, her eyes narrowing. She had Frank pegged as a bad guy, and she wasn't volunteering much in the way of information.

“Her old job at XenoSoft,” Gutierrez said.

“She never worked at a software company,” the brunette shot back. “At least not that she ever told me. Listen, mister, you better go. Now, or I'm gonna call the cops.”

He put his hands up in supplication. “Okay, I'm going. Listen, can I give you my business card to give to her? It's really important. I just need her to contact me, I won't come back by.”

“Slide it under the door,” she said, clicking the heavy door shut.

Gutierrez did as she bid and blew out a long breath. Hazards of cultivating the 'hard' look was that you looked a little thuggy and made legit people nervous. It was a chance he had to take in his line of work. But still, he at least had proof now that Brooke lived here, she had a roommate and a job. Gutierrez sincerely doubted that he would get a phone call, but it wouldn't matter. He had a place to put surveillance, and Brooke had to show up sooner or later.

Hall was still waiting in the car as Gutierrez slid behind the wheel.

"Any luck?" he asked.

"Gone to work, but it's definitely her place," Gutierrez replied. He pointed to a parking structure directly across the street. "I'm going to stake out right over there. She'll be back eventually."

"Work? Where?" Hall asked. "How could she get a job so fast, without ID?"

"Got me, jefe. She used to be a computer whiz. Maybe she cooked something up on her own."

Hall rubbed his forehead, gesturing at the screen on the laptop in front of him. "I just don't get it. The identity we cooked up for her is Brooke Stillwater, but none of the signatures match. This handwriting looks like the bubblehead cheerleaders who signed my yearbook when I was fourteen. The 'i' in Stillwater is dotted with a little heart, for Chrissakes. And look at these charges. Brock Stills was one of the tightest bastards with a dollar I ever met. He was worth billions and lived like a goddamn pauper. Eighty-five hundred for an Azumi bedstead? Seventeen hundred for a pair of Giuseppe Zanotti boots? A forty-eight hundred dollar hi-def plasma screen and all three seasons of 'The Girls Next Door' on DVD? The complete 'Sex and the City' and seven – no, eight – stripper workout DVDs? This can't be her. Has to be a stolen identity."

"Either way, we get our best lead. If this girl stole a credit card, then she's got to know where she stole it from. But I don't know, boss. Something about this smells funky."

"What is it?" Hall asked, closing his laptop and plunging the car into a murky twilight as the light died.

"This doesn't sound like identity theft to me," Gutierrez explained, cracking his knuckles. "That deals with assumed names. The girl who answered the door, she knew immediately who Brooke Stillwater was. Didn't bat an eye. Identity thieves, they usually have so many assumed names that they have to keep notes to keep track."

"That doesn't mean much," Hall said, tapping his bottom lip with a forefinger.

"It's not just that. This place is high-profile, bought through a realtor instead of dealing directly through the bank. Identity thieves avoid middlemen, it's one more check of bona fides they have to go through, one more chance to get caught. It's a bunch of little shit, boss, but put it all together and it makes this whole thing kinda messed up."

"We just have to wait it out," Hall said. "Any idea what time she gets home from wherever the hell she works?"

Gutierrez shrugged. "We should probably hit a drive-thru."

* * * * *

I checked my face one more time and finger-fluffed by wild blonde mane. I turned to the man in the bathroom stall behind me, still fastening his trousers. I gave him a sweet smile, savoring the cum-high coursing through my veins, feeling wonderfully relaxed and alive inside as tendrils of pure ecstasy wound around my arms and legs, making me tingle.

“Worth it?” I purred to him.

He extracted a thick wad of cash out of his pocket and slid it across the marble countertop to me. “Every penny,” he said. “Damn, girl. I didn’t think the girls here gave head for cash.”

I placed a finger across his soft lips. “Let’s just keep it to ourselves, okay, baby? That’s not the kind of rumor you want getting around, y’know?”

“I get it,” he said. “I might give your name to a couple of my friends, though, okay?”

“Sure, they can come in, buy some dances, have a good time, just like anybody else,” I told him firmly.

“But – waitaminnit – I thought you were a hooker,” he stuttered.

“I like call girl better,” I told him. “And I really like it, too, which is why I don’t want it getting around. Look, sweetie, you sat and talked, you bought dances, you got me drinks, you’re cool. That’s why I didn’t go all apeshit when you asked if we could go back in the bathroom, okay? But if word gets around that I’m the girl that sucks cock for money in the club, I’m gonna get busted, or lose my job, or both.”

“Oh,” he said. “I get it. I just meant – I mean, my friends are cool and everything.”

“I’m sure they are, baby,” I said. “But I can’t take the chance. Come back and see me, okay?” I kissed his cheek quickly, pressing my divine tits against him hard, and skittered away on my eight-inch heels with the three-inch platform before anyone noticed a stripper in a floor-length, white-sequined sheath dress with a slit up the side running out of the men’s room.

I did make a quick pitstop in the stripper’s private bathroom to do a couple quick bumps of coke out of the eight-ball I’d just bought from Kelli and to repair my ruined lipstick. It took about five minutes to make me look normal again instead of a girl who’d just frantically sucked a guy’s cock until she gagged. I rolled the three hundred dollars he’d given me for the blowjob – when, strangely enough, I was jonesing so bad for the cum-high that I probably would’ve paid him – into my take for the night. The club was starting to wind down a little, and only the die-hards were left. The guy I’d just blown – Mike? Marty? I couldn’t remember – was the last of the real high-rollers left at the end of the night.

Kelli and Tiffany – Klymaxx and Fantasy – came back in the bathroom as I was clicking my compact shut. Kelli looked adorable in a little filmy pink baby-doll nightie with big red hearts all over it and her hair in pigtails and a big red Blow Pop in her mouth, and it was all I could do not to jump Tiffany who was in a man’s pinstriped suit with a snowy-white dress shirt and skinny tie and her soft honey-gold hair pushed up into a fedora.

“Whassup, bitch?” Kelli giggle-snorted at me, with the too-easy laugh and the overdone quality that told me she was very drunk. “We partying tonight?”

“Yeah, my place,” I told her. I was a little tipsy myself, I noticed, hearing myself slur my s’es a little and that my face was numb. The four shots of Patrón tequila and the two glasses of white wine I’d had were having a joyful dance in my bloodstream with the high-quality Bolivian

cocaine I'd just snorted and the tingling warmth of the cum-high. I was in ecstasy and I felt great. I never wanted the night to end. "Who all's coming, d'you know?"

"Me and Tiffany are in," she said. "Sydney and Holly – you know the little Hispanic girl, right? – are coming too, and so is Veronica and her boyfriend. He's cool as shit. And I was gonna call my friend John, too, if it's all right."

"Hells yeah," I told her.

"I'm just about out of here," I said. "I made all I'm gonna make tonight, I think, and I'm kinda over this place right now. I think I'm gonna split."

"How do we get to your place?" Tiffany asked.

"I'll text you with directions, baby," I said. "See y'all there?"

"You know it," Kelli said.

I slid out of my heels – strange, how much smaller I felt in relation to the world around me when I wasn't on my platforms – and kicked them into my locker. I slid into my blue strappy Elie Tahari slingback wedges and let the lycra evening dress slither down my body. I loved the feel of the cool air against my bare skin, making me gasp and shiver a little. They kept the club extremely chilly to keep our nipples hard, but I actually kind of liked it. I shimmied into my too-tight blue suede Kenneth Cole mini-skirt and pulled a cute little BCBGMaxAzria cropped blue cashmere sweater over my head, fluffing out my hair once I pulled it from the snug collar. I nestled my diamond solitaire heart – Jennifer had picked it out for me from Paris Hilton Style – to the center of my spectacular chest. I didn't even bother with the white lacy panties I'd worn in, just stuffed them in my Fendi purse along with my makeup, cigarettes, coke and the money from the night. I slung my Bebe dance bag over my shoulder and shook my head so my gigantic Maddy Emerson platinum hoop earrings didn't catch in the straps.

I sidled up to Tommy, one of the managers, and pressed my tits against his arm. He was a tall, lanky guy and a total sleaze, but he was also the easiest to manipulate because he was so desperate to fuck a stripper.

"Hey honey," I purred in his ear, gently rubbing his shoulder. "I'm all done for the night. Can I go home?"

He gasped a little and shifted his weight to accommodate his hardening dick in his pleated slacks. "We don't close for another hour, baby," he told me, his breath catching in his throat a little.

I made my eyes way too wide. "Please? Pretty please?" I said in a little-girl voice.

He smiled and took my ID card from my fingers. "Just this once," he said, sliding it through the badge-in-badger-out scanner near the door. "Just for you."

I kissed his cheek and ground my crotch against his hip a little, playing him, purring, "you're a rock star" in his ear before spinning coquettishly and flouncing away, giving him a perfect view of my ass. I wound through the waitstaff – clustered around the back bar, no real drinks moving now at the end of the night and last call just minutes away – and into the office to pay my taxes. Sandra, the house mom, took the government's cut of the cash I declared and

printed my receipt for me, which I tucked into my purse without looking at it. I walked by Brian's office – the general manager – and saw the door was open and his computer was on.

I barely even registered that I wasn't moving any more. I was transfixed by the computer for some reason, looking at it as though I should know something about it. It felt a little like a friend, as strange as that sounded. There was a fog in my head which was much more than just the drugs and booze as I stepped towards the open door.

Without even really wanting to, I sat down at the desk and opened the web browser, my long nails clicking strangely against the keys and the mouse button. In a kind of dream, I navigated to the XenoSoft site and typed in a long, indistinct URL full of alphanumeric codes. A single page came up, calling for a login and a password, which I input as 'bstills1' and a gibberish password that no one could possibly guess by accident.

What the fuck? I asked myself as I navigated through the thick maze of files and folders on the site. I only use my computer to shop at Nordstrom's and Bloomie's. How am I even doing this?

But my fingers worked as if they knew what they were doing. I'd sent a four-page document to the printer and was about to log off when the browser locked up, a window popping up with "Access Terminated" in red letters.

My phone rang, and I snapped out of my reverie, looking curiously at the computer as though I'd never seen that before. I dug distractedly in my purse for my ringing phone, wondering where in the hell that burst of computer-savvy whatever-it-was had come from. I found the phone and pressed it to my ear, saying, "Hello?"

"Naughty, naughty," a low, breathy voice said.

"Daddy?" I asked.

"You should know better than to poke around in things that are no longer your business, Brooke," Daddy said ominously. "I'm going to have to punish you."

"Please, don't," I whined. "I'll be good, I promise."

"No, you have to learn, Brooke, to stay out of things that don't concern you. Now I'm going to have to turn the B.I.M.B.O. up."

"Turn it up?" I asked plaintively.

"When I put it in, it was set only at Level 2. Now, I'm afraid I have to bump it up to Level 5. There are only ten levels, poppet, so be careful what you do from now on."

"Please, Daddy, I promise I'll be a good girl from now on..."

My head throbbed once, hard, and the room spun a little. My phone slid from nerveless fingers to land at my feet. I knew I had been thinking about something and talking about something, but for the life of me I couldn't remember what. I bent down and picked up my phone.

"Um, hello? Anybody there?" I asked. I wrinkled up my nose at it. "Must've been, like, a wrong number or some shit."

I absentmindedly stuffed the printed pages I had in my hand into my purse over my phone and dug for my cigarettes. Couldn't hang around here, anyway. I was cut loose and I had a party to prepare. And Idol was waiting for me on the TiVo.

I had the doorman walk me to my car in the staff lot and unlocked it. There was a box in the front seat, which I opened quickly, slicing the tape with my long nails. Inside was a shoebox full of old snapshots, some unlabeled videotapes, about a dozen framed pictures and some old high school yearbooks. All the pictures were of me, somehow, with people I didn't know.

People I knew I'd never seen before, but when I looked at them I automatically – magically – knew their names, where we'd met and where we were in the picture. I looked hard at a framed picture of three total strangers and myself in cheerleading uniforms, and wasn't sure how I could be so sure that it was Hillary Crenshaw, Stephanie Duke and Jodi Silverberg at nationals in Ft. Lauderdale, and they'd been my best friends at Madison High. We'd done everything together – first period, first dates, first cigarette, first blowjob and first lay all within months of one another. I even knew that Jodi's pussy was the first I ever ate out, remembering little details like how she tasted and the noises she made, even though I knew, deep down, that I'd never seen that girl before in my life.

There was a note taped to the inside of the box. Sweetie, thought you'd want a little history in your life. Love, Daddy. I tucked everything back in the box and brought the engine to roaring life. I still had to hit the liquor store before I went home.

* * * * *

“Gin,” Gutierrez said, laying down his cards. He looked blearily at his watch. “Jesus, where can this girl work that keeps her out 'til four a.m. on a fucking Wednesday?”

Hall was writing down the score on the tally sheet, an empty, grease-stained bag from Burger King that had been their heartburn-worthy dinner. He was into Gutierrez for about two hundred bucks, but he hadn't really been paying close attention to the game. “Graveyard shift somewhere, I guess, or maybe at a bar someplace. I'm surprised she's working at all – that's a little public, given her situation.”

“Hold up, hold up,” Gutierrez said, grabbing Derrick's arm. “I think we got something.”

A string of cars, led by a red drop-top Corvette, pulled into the sunken parking garage under the brand-new upscale condos. A Lexus SUV, a Mercedes and a Beamer coupe pulled in behind her. Hall could hear the pop-dance music beat thumping from across the street.

“Was that her? Could you see?” Hall whispered.

“Didn't get a good look,” Gutierrez said, pulling a .40 caliber Sig Sauer from a shoulder holster and checking the magazine before replacing it. “But I'm going down. It's the first movement we've had in hours. C'mon.”

They piled out of the GTO and trotted down an enclosed stairwell – the whole development had to be new, this stairwell smelled remarkably urine-free – to the street and crossed. There was no traffic whatsoever, even the local stoplights were only flashing yellow at this point. Hall had just made it to the corner, his own short-slide .38 ibouncing against his ribcage in its shoulder holster, when he heard the giggling.

A string of tall, gorgeous women were walking up the stairs towards the front entrance of the condo they'd been watching, smoking cigarettes and talking too loudly in the way that drunks had all to themselves. One, a long-legged honey blonde, was carrying a box of clinking liquor bottles, and a curvy redhead behind her was swigging ambitiously from an open bottle of expensive champagne. Two overwhelmed, horny-looking guys were in tow, but they were far from the center of attention. The coterie got to the door and began hopping up and down in impatience.

"C'mon, Brooke, hurry up!" the honey blonde called loudly. "It's cold out here!"

Up the stairs came the biggest pair of bouncing tits that Hall had seen in a while. They jiggled deliciously as she took the steps, wearing a skin-tight and barely-there designer ensemble that had to have cost a fortune. She was puffing on a cigarette and wiping the last telltale traces of cocaine from under her slender nose.

"Fuck you, I'm coming, bitch!" she called back in a melodious soprano that Hall had heard before. He pried his eyes away from the giant jiggling rack to get a look at the perfectly made-up face and the wild, barely-controlled mane of platinum blonde hair. She stuck her long, skinny cigarette between pouty, collagen-enhanced lips and dug in her purse for a ring of keys.

"C'mon in and, like, meet Jennifer," she said, opening the door. "And don't bogart all the fucking champagne, either, slut!" She took a long hit off the bottle from the redhead before closing the door behind her.

"Holy shit, that was a lot of tail," Gutierrez breathed. "I think I saw the bleach blonde this afternoon. Damn, that girl looks good."

"She better not look too good," Hall said. "Because that's our girl."

Gutierrez blinked. "You shitting me?"

"No, I wish I was," Hall replied. "Somehow between the time I lost her and now, she's had a boob job and work done on her face and somehow got enough money together for the surgery, a high-end car, a shitload of designer clothes and an overpriced midtown condo."

"And designer furniture and a plasma screen," Gutierrez added.

"That's impossible," Hall said. "I only lost her six days ago. No way could she have recuperated from surgery and had time to do all that, and get a job. It just can't happen."

"Well, then it can't be your girl," Gutierrez reasoned.

"No, that was her," Hall said.

"Which is it, jefe? She can't be your girl and not be your girl," Gutierrez stated, still on edge. "If it's her, then we go in and get her. If it's not, we look someplace else. Call it."

"We go in," Hall said.

Gutierrez drew his pistol, but Hall stopped him with a hand on his wrist. "Tomorrow," he said calmly. "Let's go grab some coffee. There's some things you need to know."

* * * * *

Frank Gutierrez gaped at Hall, his coffee cup forgotten in his hand, under the flickering fluorescent lights of the all-night diner. Looking from right to left, checking the deserted diner once again to see if he could be overheard, Hall gathered up the photos and evidence he'd set out on the table for Gutierrez' perusal.

"You're not making this up," Gutierrez mumbled at length.

"I couldn't if I tried, Frank, I'm not that imaginative."

"You're actually telling me, that hot-ass blonde that gives me half a boner just walking by..."

"...was actually a middle-aged man a week ago," Hall finished. "Look, Frank, I don't have to tell you, this information doesn't leave this diner."

"They'd put my ass away if I told anybody," Gutierrez said. "I just can't believe it, y'know?"

"Neither can I. But somebody took her, Frank, right out from under my nose, and now I find her and she's all tits and ass, makeup and designer clothes. I'm telling you, that girl didn't want anything other than sneakers and baggy sweats when I found her, now she's showing more skin than she's covering. Brock Stills didn't drink anything stronger than coffee, now this girl's smoking and drinking and snorting blow. I need to know who got her, and I need to know what the fuck he did to her to make her like this."

Gutierrez blew out a breath he'd been holding. "Okay, okay. I'm in. Whaddaya want to do?"

"I've got to get to her, alone," Hall said. "We can't even be sure that the roommate isn't a watchdog, or one of those lingerie models she brought back with her. I've got to find a way to talk to her, just her and me."

"That's easy enough to arrange," Gutierrez commented. "In the meantime, we need to find out more about this girl. I'm going to toss her car, take a look in her mailbox. Find out where she's been the last couple days."

"Should we bring her in?" Hall asked.

"I think if whoever it is that took her is still watching, we need to try and leave her where she is. If this guy's powerful enough to disappear three other dudes around the world and transmogrify your girl into a walking wet dream, then we don't want to fuck with him 'till we know a whole lot more."

"Agreed," Hall said. "So, you poke around her place and her car, see what you can find out. I'm going to head back to the office, keep trying to figure out who might've taken her."

Gutierrez clinked down his coffee cup and tossed a few bucks onto the formica table. "On it."

* * * * *

The party was thumping. We turned on the music once we got home, and I introduced everybody to my girlfriend, just like I'd promised. Jennifer blushed a pretty little pink when I did and snuggled closer to me, which I totally loved. We had a few drinks and I tapped out my coke on a mirror on my scandalously expensive Catalan Italia teak coffee table and let everybody have at it. Kelli didn't last long before she passed out on my couch in her boy-toy John's lap – I was a little disappointed, because I'd briefly entertained the idea of sucking his dick in my bathroom – and Veronica and her boyfriend Kyle only stayed for a little while before they took off. Both of them claimed needing to get up early, but from the way they'd been

looking at each other I doubted they were sleeping. So it was just me, Jennifer, Tiffany, Holly and Sydney, sipping Crown Royal & Coke in between cigarettes and little bumps of cocaine. Holly and Sydney took their leave just before dawn, and soon it was just Tiffany, Jennifer and me.

Jennifer lounged against me, stretching and making my nipples hard just from the smell of her. "I'm really glad you brought everybody over," she told me.

"Yeah, me too," I giggled. I was giggling a lot lately, after Daddy had punished me. I twisted a curl of my blonde hair around one finger. "My bitches are, like, cool as nuts, right?"

"Yeah, they are," Jennifer said. She looked at her watch. "Oh my God, it's seven a.m.! I can't believe how quick that went by."

Tiffany stretched, her delicious titties jiggling under her Juicy Couture hoodie. "I probably better go," she said. "Let y'all clean up and get some rest."

"Oh, Tiffany, you should stay over," Jennifer said. "I would worry about you if you drove."

"Girl, I'm so coked up I ain't sleeping for, like, hours yet," she said. "I'll be fine."

"Oh, come on," I said, puffing on my cigarette. "You can totally stay."

"No, I better not," she said.

"Why not?" Jennifer asked.

She grinned shyly, but the booze and the coke had relieved her of her very limited inhibitions long ago. "Cause I want to nail your girlfriend, and if I stay I'm totally gonna make a pass at her."

I giggled again as Jennifer said, "Wow. You sure are direct."

"Sorry if I freaked you out, girl," Tiffany said. "But your girl is fucking hot."

"I guess I'm just not used to hearing people talk like that," Jennifer said.

"Keep hanging out with strippers, baby, you won't even, like, notice it anymore," I said.

"Hells yeah," Tiffany agreed.

Jennifer turned to face me. "Is the feeling mutual?" she asked me.

I looked at her frankly. "Do I want to do Tiffany? Oh, fuck yeah. And then I want to watch you fuck her, and then her to watch you fuck me, and then a bigass, like, daisy chain on the bedroom floor. She's hot as shit and I would totally hit that. But not if you don't want me to, baby."

Jennifer bit her lip and looked at me very quizzically. She seemed to see something inside me that she needed to see, because she blinked and sat back suddenly. Leaning forward, she picked up a champagne glass and took a deep swig, then before I knew what was going on she leaned forward again and tooted up a long line of coke – I didn't even know she did coke – through the rolled-up C-note we'd left there. She fished a cigarette out of my pack and lit it, sitting back and still staring at me. She fought back a cough – she didn't smoke, either.

"What the fuck, baby?" I asked, shocked.

"I'm having to try a lot of new things, Brooke," she said. "I'm just trying to learn."

"Snorting coke is learning?" I asked. "You don't need to be doing that shit, baby."

"Don't preach," she told me, poking me in the leg with her toe. "Now, are you going to fuck Tiffany and let me watch, or not?"

I looked over to Tiffany in complete astonishment, but the honey-blonde was already unzipping her top. I slid to the floor and crawled to her on my hands and knees, licking my lips. Behind me, I heard Jennifer moan softly as the cocaine high hit her.

A part of me was screaming at myself. I couldn't do this. I couldn't sit by and let my girlfriend, who didn't have so much as a parking ticket, turn into a coke addict. I couldn't let her start smoking. It wasn't right. She wasn't me.

But all those thoughts fled from my brain as I started kissing the inside of Tiffany's thigh.

* * * * *

Frank Gutierrez bypassed the car alarm and the keyless entry as if it didn't exist, scanning through its frequencies with a homemade transmitter until it popped the locks. He piled into the car, a mini-Maglite in his teeth, going through the car quickly but thoroughly. Several empty packs of cigarettes and empty Starbucks cups, nothing there. A glove compartment with a .38 caliber Lady Smith and a double handful of tampons. An ashtray full of change – she tossed her butts overboard, Gutierrez supposed – and several empty CD jewel cases in the console. An insurance card and a registration for Brooke Renée Stillwater. A prox-card for the parking garage, and a half-empty book of matches.

"Bare Essentials," he said sotto voce as he read the lettering on the matchbook. Looking around, he noticed that there were several more books of matches from the same place. Also, there was a crumpled note on white paper in the front floorboard with a piece of tape at the top, addressed to her from someone called only "Daddy." The top of the tape had brown fibers stuck to it – it had been taped to a cardboard box.

Gutierrez slipped a GPS tracker about the size of a fifty-cent piece under the steering column and turned on the motion sensor. I would click on whenever the car moved, and send a page to his and Hall's PDAs as it tracked her. The battery would only last a few days, but hopefully they will have made contact by then.

He pocketed the matchbook and the note and disappeared into the night.

To Be Continued...



SUMMARY: When a rich man decides that he will undergo a new treatment to enhance his looks, he does not count on someone sabotaging his transformation.

SIX MILLION DOLLAR EX-MAN

Part Six

by Valerie Hope

“A STRIP CLUB. SHE'S DANCING at a strip club,” Hall said in disbelief. “This can't be possible. Brock Stills had probably never even been in a strip club, and the original Brooke could barely stand to look at her own breasts in a mirror without getting sick to her stomach.”

“I can only tell you what I found, boss,” Gutierrez said.

“And who the fuck is this 'Daddy' character?” Hall continued, as if he hadn't heard. “Brock Stills' father died in 1989. We listed Brooke as 'Both Parents Deceased.' The only person who could conceivably claim to be a father to her is Dr. Stanhope, and he's with us.”

“And we don't know what was in the box, neither,” Gutierrez supplied. “Look, I got an ID on her live-in girlfriend. It's her realtor, Jennifer Hodges. She doesn't have a jacket, and no connection that I can see to XenoSoft or ReNu. I don't think she's a plant. I'm going to call her just after noon, ask about some property across town. That should buy you a few hours to talk with your girl.”

Hall sighed. “Good,” he said. “In the meantime, we have more leads to run down. It turns out that the other patent holders who disappeared – Selig, Blauer and Hideki – they all disappeared after they arrived at the airport here, not in the cities where they're from.”

“So we have more missing persons who could be anybody, even another gender,” Gutierrez said.

“They shouldn't be too hard to find,” Hall said. “Look for people like Brooke, who just popped up out of nowhere. New applications for Social Security numbers, birth certificates, drivers' licenses. I have a friend at the IRS who can check for past filings. Mike will have a list for you by the end of the day, he's running the computer search.”

“Cool,” Gutierrez said. “Look, boss, I'm going home for a change and a shower. You should, too. Those crazy bitches partied past dawn. They're bound to be racked out right now. I have some of my people watching the house, they're not going nowhere without us knowing about it.”

“I'll sleep when she's here,” Hall said firmly. “Not a minute sooner.”

Frank Gutierrez thought a moment, considering an argument, but thought the better of it. He'd seen people like Hall before, people who were only holding it together through sheer force of will. It was better to let those people have their own way. They lost it when things got out of their control.

“Suit yourself, jefe,” he said. “I’m on my cell.”

Gutierrez left the parking lot of ReNu and pulled onto Camden Avenue, a major thoroughfare right through the heart of the warehouse district. Taking a look at the large spaces he was driving past, a strong idea blasted through the haze of exhaustion in his mind. He flipped open his phone and dialed with a thumb as he drove.

“Hall,” the voice answered.

“It’s me,” Gutierrez said. “Listen, I had a thought. We’re missing something. Think about it – whoever did this had access to the equipment to give your girl big tits and fix her up, right? And these other missing persons, how’s he gonna hide them if he doesn’t bring ‘em to ReNu? Boss, he has to have a physical place to do all this. He’s got have a name on a deed or a lease someplace. If we can find out where all this happened, we can probably find out who did it.”

“I knew I liked you for a reason,” Hall said. “I’m going to put some men on it right away.”

“Talk to Stanhope, see where somebody could get access to the kind of hardware they’d need to run a ReNu-style operation. I think somebody might have cloned their procedure somewhere. It explains how your girl Brooke got those giant cans without any swelling or surgical dressings.”

“How do you know she doesn’t have surgical dressings?” Hall asked.

“I don’t think bandages and stitches are real money-makers in a strip club.”

“You’re brilliant,” Hall said. “I’ll put a task force on it right after I finish making out the check for the rather immense bonus I’m going to pay you.”

“All part of the service, jefe,” Gutierrez smiled.

* * * * *

I gently extricated myself from the soft tangle of limbs in my bed, the lingering thrills of last night’s marathon three-way sex still curling like hot, slithering smoke through my middle. Tiffany was a rough, aggressive lover – I had a delicious soreness in my middle from her not-so-tender ministrations – and she’d taken me over and over with fingers and tongue, delighted with the fact that I squirted when I came. She’d done the same for Jennifer, but my little girlfriend seemed to gravitate more towards me, towards the more sensitive of the pair. Still, they’d conspired, it seemed, to make the night all about me, which I really didn’t have a problem with. The silk sheets were still damp from all my orgasms – I’d lost count how many – and the room smelled strongly of a very turned-on me.

Jennifer moaned and nestled her face into the covers where I’d been. I looked at her fondly, at the sunlight streaming through the window blind to fall in amber stripes across her face. As much as I hated to admit it, the feeling that coursed through me at the sight of her was feeling more and more like my definition of love. But then again, if she was willing to let me fuck on the side, then my biggest fear of being in love was already defused.

Tiffany’s hair was tangled and snarled around her head, making her look still as wild as she’d been last night. Her eyes opened as I stood.

“How the fuck are you awake, girl?” she whispered.

"I just am, baby," I said, kneeling beside the bed to kiss her. Her tongue parted my lips forcefully and her hand wrapped firmly around the back of my head, pulling me deeper.

"Last night was, like, fucking awesome," I told her. "Oh my God."

"I know, right?"

"Hey, I'm getting in the shower. Go back to sleep, okay?" I said, brushing her soft hair with my fingers. "You can stay however long you want."

"Thanks," she said muzzily. "You going to work tonight?"

"Probably," I said. "Jenny's leaving town in a week, though, so I might just, like, hang out here with her for awhile. I dunno, I'll figure it out."

"She's really fucking cool," Tiffany told me.

"Yeah," I agreed. "So are you, by the way."

"Bitch gonna make me blush," Tiffany said, giggling a little.

"No, seriously," I stressed. "I'm so totally into you."

"Is Jenny gonna be okay with that?" Tiffany asked.

"I think so. We're probably gonna have to, like, discuss it 'n' stuff. But I want to, y'know? I really like you and I fucking love the way you fuck."

"I like the way you fuck, too," she said.

"I'm going online today and buy us all some toys," I said. "I totally have to get you, like, a strap-on so you can nail the shit out of me."

"I'd rather just get us a guy in here for that," she said.

I snorted. "Oh, fuck that. Motherfucker would blow his load in, like, two minutes and we'd have to take care of each other the rest of the night. You know how guys are."

"Yeah, right," she agreed.

I kissed her again. "Thanks a lot, sweetie. I had fun."

She moaned incoherently as she slipped back into sleep.

* * * *

So that's how I wound up on my balcony, wrapped in a dark green Michael Stars cover-up meant for the beach but that worked just as good as a bathrobe. My tangled hair was held away from my face by a wide black elastic band, and I had my gigantic hoop earrings – fast becoming my trademark, like the hottie in Heroes – back in. I was sipping some really good imported Jamaican coffee and puffing contentedly on a Honduran cigar, my legs drawn up to my perfect tits. The cast-iron Biarritz outdoor set I'd bought was perfect, the yellow-and-white umbrella casting just the right shade over the round, glass-topped table. The cigar and the coffee tasted wonderful and the absolutely amazing feeling of being young, healthy, in love and well-fucked was combining in my body to make me smile uncontrollably, overwhelmed with the feeling that life was really good. Below me, the cars whizzed by, full of stressed-out people on their ways to stressed-out jobs. I liked how I was above all that. Something tickled in the

back of my mind, but it was lost in the happy fog of distraction and ditziness that Daddy had put there. He'd done it as a punishment, but I liked it. I was tempted to fuck up again so he'd make me even dumber.

I thumbed through one of the high-school yearbooks Daddy'd sent to me. I was obviously popular, from all the things people had written in it. I found my picture – one of those hokey store-bought ones, with the funky feather boa thing across my cleavage – and looked at all the things listed under my name. Varsity cheerleader, dance squad, gymnastics team, homecoming queen, prom princess, decorating committee, dance committee, student body secretary. All the popular things. I was briefly shocked by the lack of computer club, young entrepreneur's club, math club and Academic Decathlon – something told me I'd worked very hard at those – but it was swallowed up in the happy fog again. No, I totally remembered all those things, cheering at football and basketball games, and all the computer and math shit seemed like a fast-fading dream I'd had several nights ago. I took another pull off my cigar and put it out of my mind.

Not wanting to wake Tiffany or Jennifer, I finished my cigar wordlessly and went back inside. Stripping off my cover-up, I sat down nude on my BowFlex machine – trying unsuccessfully to forget how I'd dangled from it last night while Jennifer licked my pussy and Tiffany fed me her breasts one at a time – and put in as quiet a 20-minute workout as I could. After that, I towelled off and hopped into my marble walk-in shower. I put the cover-up back on and flopped on my couch, loading a glass pipe with weed from my humidor and pinch-hitting a few times as I watched E! News and Rock of Love. I was just starting to think about having a little lunch when Jennifer's phone rang. Dimly, from the other room, I heard her answer it.

She padded into the living room naked, her feet thumping softly against the hardwood.

“Hey,” I whispered, feeling my face light up at the sight of her.

“Hey yourself,” she whispered back. “How are you doing?”

“Good. You?”

She kissed me. “Massive headache,” she said. “Sore all over. But really, really happy. I've never had a night like last night before. It was intense.”

“That's one word for it. Did you, y'know, like it 'n' stuff?” I asked.

She grinned and caressed my face softly. I glowed in response. “Gimme a few days to process all that information,” she told me. “I think I did, but I'm still a little overwhelmed.”

“You remember that old Prince song, 'Pussy Control?’” I asked her. “Girl, that's so what you need. You so need to go on Pussy Control. You don't need to, like, process or some shit – you either liked it or you didn't, y'know? The details will, like, work out by themselves 'n' stuff.”

She thought for a little bit, her eyes faraway. “Y'think that's really what I need?”

“So much,” I replied.

“Then yeah. I liked it. I kinda felt like my life had turned into internet porn, but I liked it.”

“I thought you did. Most people don't cum like you did if they're not, like, having a good time.”

She giggled adorably. “I love the way you break things down like that. You see the stuff that I overlook, all the simple stuff that I just flat miss.”

“Hey, I'm good like that,” I said, squeezing her boobs through her knee-length Dallas Cowboys jersey playfully. She gasped and squealed, squirming against me in a way that made me start thinking about getting naked all over again. I started caressing her a little more firmly.

“Oh, baby, no,” she pleaded. “I can't. Please. I have to show an apartment across town in an hour and a half, and I have to shower and get dressed.”

I pouted hard. “Oh, I guess I can wait,” I grumped.

“You are” - she kissed me - “without a doubt” - another kiss - “the horniest girl” - and another - “I have ever met” - another - “in my life. Y'know that?”

“I'm just stoked I'm the best at something,” I said.

She laughed. “You're the best at a lot of things,” she said, squeezing my tits. “I gotta go.”

“Baby?” I asked as she went into the bathroom and began digging for aspirin in the cabinet.

“Hm?”

“Is it okay with you if I fuck Tiffany again while you're gone?” I said in a little-girl 'pretty-please' whine that would melt the average male. I wasn't sure what effect it would have on her.

She poked her head around the door and looked at me appraisingly. “I guess so,” she said after a long pause. “Just don't go falling for her. Nobody's gonna make you forget that you belong to me.”

“I like that. Y'know, like, belonging to you, I mean,” I told her honestly.

“Good,” she said. “'Cause I mean to keep it that way.”

* * * *

I didn't want Jennifer to go, but she had to work – even though I probably could've supported her if I went a week or so without buying anything with a designer label, but I knew deep down that was never gonna happen – so I ate a container of yogurt and drank some white wine for lunch, bent over in my Daisy Dukes to get things off the floor so that the guys installing the rest of my home services – including my high-speed internet and 7.1 surround sound system – spent a lot of time almost tripping and dropping things. Strange that I could go in my closet and remember every single designer of every single piece of clothing in there without a second's recollection, but for the life of me I couldn't remember who made my television, my computer or my sound system. I seemed to remember, dimly, that things like that were the most important thing in the world to me, once. Hell, I didn't even have a PlayStation any more, and I honestly didn't give a shit; in fact, I honestly wondered how in the fuck I had ever cared about shit like that. I could live a long and extremely happy life not knowing how much RAM my computer had or how many mega-whatevers were in this thing or that thing. All I knew was that my TiVo worked and I wasn't going to miss any more Project Runway, that I had a hell-hot blonde asleep in my bed that I was about to go wake up with my tongue and the sure and certain knowledge that any one of the little nerds who'd come over to hook up my electronics could be mine without any trouble on my part at all. Never mind that I couldn't seem to go very long without snorting a line or popping a pill, much less puffing on a cigarette or having a

drink. Never mind that I couldn't go ten minutes without thinking about sucking dick and eating cum so I could have that amazing high again. Never mind that I couldn't concentrate or think, and that the idea that I "didn't have a thought in my pretty little head" excited me, turned me on and made me strangely happy.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing.

I just couldn't for the life of me figure out what the hell it was.

And besides, I'd just gotten the new Michael Kors catalog in the mail. I had better things to do.

* * * *

"I think we got something," Eddie Kealor said out loud the second that Derrick Hall walked into the room. "Dr. Stanhope gave us that list of manufacturers for the lab equipment they use to sequence the RNA for their process. There's only three places in the world that make 'em. We crosschecked the list and found a whole shitpot of machinery got purchased three months ago by a holding company which is funded by XenoSoft."

"Shit, Eddie, I could've told you XenoSoft money bought that stuff without all the digging," Hall groaned, massaging the bridge of his nose.

"But get this. The holding company gets the money funneled into it directly from the managing directors. Nobody but them could have authorized that much cash," Eddie said. "So our list is now down to six people."

Hall took the proffered piece of printer paper like he was being offered the Holy Grail.

"Time to make some very rich nerds sweat," he said grimly.

* * * *

I wish I knew what was bothering me. Nothing seemed to help. Tiffany had left for the day after some spirited fucking and Jennifer was still gone to her meeting. There was nothing in my fridge but three things of yogurt, two bottles of champagne, one of white wine and a can of whipped cream and some strawberries which were staring to get a little green and furry. I'd surfed the channels three times, bought a really spectacular Miu Miu purse and a Di Modolo bracelet online, jacked off three times and gone to the corner convenience store and sucked off the guy delivering the beer in their freezer in full view of the security camera. And still, I felt unsettled and weird inside, plagued by strange thoughts and memories that just didn't fit me any more. I was sure some of it was because I was lonesome – this was the first time in days that I hadn't had people around me. Maybe I needed to go shoot pool or something at a bar, just to be around people. But there was more to it than that, I knew. I kept having these thoughts and memories of things that just didn't belong. I didn't like remembering that I went to college and graduated cum laude, or that I owned a software company and that something was terribly, terribly wrong with my life. I didn't like that nagging thought that the Kenneth Cole dress I was wearing cost too much for what it was made out of, or that the 8-cylinder roaring engine in my sexy 'Vette was irresponsible to be driving in this day and age. Those weren't the kind of thoughts I was supposed to be having! That wasn't me, but nothing I did seemed to shut that up. It made me want to cry, or to hit something, or to fuck somebody I didn't like really really hard until they passed out. Mostly the last one. Finally, after having paced around my condo for the sixteenth time and changed clothes again, I decided it was an emergency. I

dug out the little pink Blackberry Pearl from my Dooney & Bourke limited edition Hayden Panettiere bag and scrolled down through the long list of phone numbers in the address book.

It seemed to take forever to connect once I'd pushed "Send." Something in my mind told me because the call was being routed all over the globe, so it couldn't be traced. I shouted for that thing in my mind to shut up and leave me alone, like I'd been doing all day. It didn't listen.

Finally, I heard a garbled and flat "Hello?" on the other end.

"Daddy? Is that you? It's Brooke, Daddy," I near-sobbed.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm miserable, Daddy. I keep remembering things I'm not supposed to remember and thinking about stuff that I don't like to think about. I can't make it stop. I, like, smoked a half an ounce of pot and took four Valium and it still won't stop."

"I'm very sorry to hear that, Brooke," Daddy said. "But you shouldn't have contacted me. It's dangerous for you to contact me. I'm very busy."

"Please, Daddy, can't you do what you did before? Make me dumber, I mean? Please, I need it. Anything to make this voice shut up. I promise I won't ever call again."

"You're serious?" Daddy sounded surprised.

"Please, Daddy, I'll do anything you want. Just make me dumber."

"Is that all you want?"

I giggled. "Not unless you can make my tits bigger, or my nails longer, or help me find a way to straighten my hair so I can do more than just the one look."

"You know I can do all of those things," Daddy said.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "But they're not why I called."

"You're serious about this," he said again. "You realize I can't take it back once it's done."

"I don't care. Last time you said you turned it up to Level 5. Please turn it up to 10. All the way."

"Do you know what that will do to you?"

"If it shuts the voice up, I don't care, Daddy. I like being dumb. It's peaceful. And it makes it way easier for me to have fun, and I don't have to think about things like that voice tries to get me to."

There was a long pause. "I suppose I can," he said. "I can't do it now. I have to go to my workshop to do it."

"Please go, Daddy. Please."

"You have to wait an hour. I have things I need to finish here before I go."

"Just one hour?" I asked, tears leaking from my eyes.

"Just one. You can wait that long."

"If I have to."

"In the meantime, get out of the house. Go do something. It will make the time pass more quickly," he told me.

"Okay," I said, sniffing. "If you think that's best."

"I do," Daddy said. "Now I have to go, pumpkin. It's only an hour."

"Thank you, Daddy. I love you."

There was a long, strange pause. I think I shocked him. "I love you too, sweetheart. Now go. I'll phone you later."

"Okay. Bye."

As soon as the phone went dead I was sliding on my Gucci slingbacks and grabbing my purse. If Daddy said to get out of the house, then I was going to do exactly what he told me. I wasn't going to risk misbehaving in case it made him change his mind. I shut the door behind me and walked as quickly as I could out the front breezeway and onto the street – it was marginally slow going because I wasn't wearing a bra and the Girls were jiggling for all they were worth. I knew if I trotted or ran they'd be smacking me in the chin.

I pulled my Gucci sunglasses down my nose and scanned the street. What could I do to occupy myself for an hour? I'd been through all the shops on the street, I wasn't hungry or thirsty so the cafés and bars were out, I was still a little cum-high from the guy in the convenience store this morning. I didn't have any errands, I was flush with coke, grass and X and I really didn't feel like going for a drive right now. Wasn't interested in the bookstore – I had this month's Elle, Vogue, Allure and Glamour – and could care less about the mobile phone place. I already had a membership to the tanning salon and I'd laid out yesterday. I checked my Bulgari watch. Only five minutes had passed. I sighed and pouted – things just weren't going my way. The only place I hadn't checked out since I'd moved in was the gym on the corner, named Fizikle. I shrugged. I mean, I had a Bowflex and an elliptical trainer in the house, I liked working out naked anyway, but I suppose I needed the membership, just so I could go be seen in all the really cute Bebe sportswear I'd bought. Lighting a cigarette, I set off at a brisk walk towards the gym, smiling over my shoulder at a cute blond guy in a Mercedes who whistled at me as he drove past.

It was a longer walk than it looked, and the humid day had me glistening with sweat by the time I reached the corner. I was lucky to be one of those girls who could sweat sexy, though. I was turning even more heads than usual with the little curls slicked to my forehead and the sparkles of sunlight on my shoulders, arms, and the tops of my perfect breasts.

The gym was typical – it smelled like sweat and machine oil, was full of grunts and groans and bad, predictable "Jock Jam" techno music, and the muscle-kissers dominated. I didn't mind so much. I considered it a target-rich environment for later, lots of muscle-bound guys who loved themselves more than enough to treat themselves to a no-strings blowjob in the sauna room, and lots of really well-assembled girls who acted straight but would be lesbian explosions if they were hit on in just the right way.

The guy behind the counter was very frat-boy, with the artfully tousled hair and the hard muscled body under the loose-fitting workout gear. He gave me the once-over-lightly as I

leaned on the corner of the reception desk, my Maddy Emerson bracelets clinking and clattering loudly.

“Can I help you?” he said huskily. He was so into me. If he wasn't careful, undressing me with his eyes like that, he was going to pup-tent his workout shorts.

“Yeah,” I perked. “I wanna sign up to work out here.”

My eyes were drawn to the glass-walled workout room. A group of middle-aged, profusely sweating women were being led in a high-speed aerobics routine by a walking wet dream. She was about six feet tall, with white-blonde hair like mine that hung straight down her back in a shiny, slick ponytail. Loose, sweat-damp bangs framed a face that was equally angular and soft, with a pointed chin, strong cheekbones, huge ice-blue eyes framed by long eyelashes, a slender nose and the puffiest, poutiest, most kissable lips I'd ever seen. Her body was hard as a rock, clad as it was in a Lycra jog-bra and tight-fitting yoga pants, both in hot pink with a Nike swoosh. Every muscle was subtly defined – she wasn't a bodybuilder, not grotesque like that, but she was in the best shape of anyone I'd ever seen and there wasn't an ounce of fat on her anywhere. Her ass was somehow solid muscle and a jiggling soft bubble at the same time. I felt an overwhelming desire to squeeze it in my long-nailed fingers. She wore big silver hoops and a wireless headset and transmitter and she barked commands to her class in a heavily-accented alto which was husky and breathless like she was having sex. She was smiling, obviously in her element, as she led the class into a series of long side lunges, her short-nailed French manicured fingers stretching for the walls from her fingerless workout gloves.

The guy behind the counter – the nameplate said his name was Matt – caught me looking. “That's Kerstin Ragnussen. She's our aerobics instructor,” he said. “She teaches three classes a day, if you're interested.”

“Oh, I'm, like, very interested,” I said. “What do I need to do?”

He plopped a form on the top of the counter and pulled a pen from a cup behind the partition. “Just fill this out for me, and then I need to run your credit card and then take your picture for your ID. It's pretty simple. Do you want the year membership or the month-to-month?”

“The month-to-month,” I said. I was going to be coming here a lot if Kerstin was here all the time. I grabbed the pen and started filling out the application. It took a long time, because of my long nails which I still hoped Daddy would make longer still and because my handwriting seemed to consist of huge bubbles strung together. Without looking up – writing took concentration for me, because I was lately having problems with spelling – I slid my Amex Black card across the counter to him and went back to my clerical task, casting glances out of the side of my eye to the statuesque Kerstin, moving like a panther in a cage as she helped her class warm down. My mouth watered at the thought of her and I could feel little droplets of my excitement starting to collect on my inner thighs. I tried to write faster. Her class was breaking up. I didn't want to be stuck filling out paperwork or talking to Matt when I could be over there meeting her.

“All done?” Matt asked cheerfully.

“Just about,” I said.

He looked over the paperwork, an excuse to press himself against me. I didn't mind it – he was cute, and had a nice body – but my head was completely full of Kerstin right now.

“It looks done enough to me,” he said, taking it away. He handed me back my credit card with a receipt attached. “You're set for a membership at \$65.00 a month, Miss Stillwater.”

I squeezed his forearm absentmindedly, wanting him to know the door was still open even though I couldn't tear my eyes away from Kerstin, toweling sweat off her forehead and taking animatedly with one of her students, slugging water from a plastic bottle as she spoke. Every second I watched her made me want to nibble on her bottom lip just a little bit more.

“Call me Brooke, okay?” I asked Matt.

“Sure, Brooke,” he said. “Now, if you can just come over here, I'll snap your picture real quick and get you a keycard and an ID, okay?”

I snapped out of my reverie. “Now? I can't, now. I need to, like, clean up a little.”

“It's just an ID, Brooke,” he said. “You don't have to look like the cover of a magazine.”

“Maybe you don't,” I told him. “But I gotta look good in my pictures. I'll do it next time I come in. I'm all, like, sweaty 'n' stuff.”

He held up his hands, eyes glued to my sweaty tits. “Okay, okay, you win.”

“I usually do,” I said. “Don't look so, like, disappointed. I'll be back soon.”

He smiled. “I'm looking forward to it.”

I checked my watch again. Dammit. Only 30 minutes. This waiting was getting more and more frustrating for me. I wanted to scream, or cry, or both. What I didn't want was to have to find something interesting to do for another half an hour while Daddy finished his stuff. Giving Matt a brilliant – and suggestive – farewell smile, I walked out of the gym and started immediately fishing in my purse for a cigarette, my sunglasses pushed up into my hair so I could see better. I found one of my long, skinny Virginia Slims and was fumbling in the purse for my lighter when I heard some strange, muffled-sounding noises coming from around the side of the gym, back towards the small staff parking lot. Curious, I let my cigarette dangle forgotten from my glossy pink lips and stepped around, my heels clacking loudly on the pavement. A short length of chain-link fence separated me from the lot, but I could just peer around the dumpster to see the source of the noises. Pants, grunts and slurps, little deep-in-the-throat mewls and squeals of pleasure. An extremely well-muscled and well-endowed black man in workout clothes – one of the personal trainers, I supposed, was leaning against the wall with his pants around his ankles, his eyes screwed shut in bliss. On her very shapely knees in front of him, bobbing her head up and down quickly enough to make her blonde ponytail whip against her back, was Kerstin, giving the man a very wet, sloppy and spirited blowjob. She was moaning for all she was worth, pausing periodically in her ministrations to give him some hard, twisting strokes with her hand or to smack the head of his prodigious cock against her outstretched tongue until streamers of spit dangled from her succulent bee-stung lips.

“Oh, damn, girl,” the man groaned as she slid him back into her waiting mouth and forced herself to take him all the way down her throat. She coughed and gagged a little but didn't let

up until her pert little nose was buried in his short, dense pubic hair and his big, swinging balls were resting against her smooth chin. She backed off and did it again.

Without even having realized it, my panties were at mid-thigh and my free hand was working my double clit in vigorous, tiny little circles as I watched her work him. I bit my lip to keep from squealing, unable to tear my eyes away from the delicious spectacle. She was magnificent. I couldn't remember ever having been so turned on in my life.

She worked him over like a porn star, switching grips and speeds and angles, until he began to signal his imminent climax with a series of grunts, each rising in pitch from the last. With a final, soul-deep groan, he grabbed the back of her head with both hands and thrust himself deep down her waiting throat, his hips jerking spasmodically. She closed her eyes and I could see her throat convulsing in time with his gasps as she sucked his sperm down her throat.

He let out a long breath and sagged against the wall, wiping sweat from his face. She leaned back on her heels, scraping a tiny little bead of semen that had fallen onto her left breast up with a finger and popping it in her mouth. She moaned deeply, sounding like a little girl, and swayed back and forth a little, like she was having difficulty keeping her balance.

Oh my God, I thought, still masturbating, she's cum-high! She's just like me!

I finished myself off quickly – a short and sweet little orgasm but very powerful, and a very timely back-up alarm from a trash truck a block over covered the gasping squeals I couldn't hold back. I backed away as quietly as I could – she was talking in her heavily accented English to the man, who was speaking in a low rumble to her. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but I really didn't care. I decided to leave them their privacy, but was doubly determined to meet and get to know this spectacular girl, the first chance that I could make.

I returned to the street, unsure but not caring if anyone had seen me jacking myself off in an alley just a moment ago. I was out of Kleenex in my purse, so I had to lick my own cum off my fingers before my copious juices started running down my arm. I was definitely going to have to clean my scandalously expensive Tacori diamond-and-platinum ring when I got home, and I might as well clean the other eight rings I wore as well. They were completely encrusted with my drying girl-goo and I really didn't want that to ruin their high-dollar sparkle. I found my gold lighter and lit my nearly-forgotten cigarette, ran my fingers through my hair to restore its bounce, and tried to think of something I could do for a little while.

Finally, it struck me. It always made me happy to buy stuff for myself, but it also made me happy to buy little presents for Jennifer. It dawned on me that I'd never been to her place before, so I didn't know of anything she really needed or really what she might even have room for. I hardly knew my girlfriend at all, come to think of it, but somehow that didn't really bother me very much. I puffed on my cigarette and pouted adorably as I tried to make up my mind what to get her. All the thinking about cleaning up my rings convinced me. My girl needed some bling. I tossed my butt and beelined for the little high-end jewelry shop across the street and a couple doors down.

I loved the way people acted in jewelry stores. All classy and over-the-top polite. Made me feel like a lady, and I liked how that felt. I didn't spend much time browsing, instead walking straight to the counter and giving the stuffy-looking salesman a dazzling smile and a very tempting view of my cleavage.

"May I help you, miss?" he asked.

"I'd like to buy a ring for a close friend," I told him, winding a tendril of my hair around one finger.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?" he asked.

"I like that one, the Tacori," I said, clicking a long nail on the glass top of the display case, indicating a very big and very expensive double band encrusted with diamonds.

He smiled. "An excellent choice, Miss...?"

"Brooke," I said, patting his soft hand. He was older than me, but I would still do him. I bet he was nasty and kinky when he got naked. Older guys usually were.

He cleared his throat, then bent and retrieved the ring from underneath the counter and put it on a black velvet pad for me to inspect. It was really pretty, but it was big and showy – the kind of jewelry I liked, but not necessarily what Jennifer liked. She tended to prefer smaller, daintier jewelry, which was cool because it was her taste, but I did have fond fantasies about her dripping with diamonds and platinum, all big and trashy and tacky like a girl in a rap video.

"That Maddy Emerson one is nice, too," I said, pointing out another. "And then, there's always that Charles Winston."

He grinned, smelling the commission. Not a single one of the rings I'd selected was priced at less than eight thousand dollars. He retrieved them all, laying them side-by-side on the velvet like three gorgeous little sisters. I wanted to inspect the stones with a loupe and was about to ask him for one when I felt a little twitch in my head, like someone thumped me.

"Can I... I mean... um.... the little glass thingy," I said. "Y'know, that one I, like, look through to see the diamonds up close?"

"A loupe? Of course, Brooke. One moment," he said.

I rubbed my temple. What was I doing again? The rings were so pretty and sparkly.

I tried to make conversation while he retrieved it. "I so don't know how you, like, work here. Y'know, with all this pretty stuff. I'd be all like, I wanna wear it."

"It can be distracting, yes," he said, trying not to notice that I was speaking differently and acting differently. I noticed it, too, but I was unable to do anything about it. And I couldn't ignore the fact that I loved how it felt. I couldn't hold a thought in my mind for longer than a few seconds. I was trying to inspect the rings but I kept losing focus and gasping over this necklace or that bracelet or whatever I saw that caught my eye. I heard myself saying "Ooh!" a lot, just under my breath.

I held the first ring up – the Tacori – and put my eye against the loupe. I knew I was looking for cut, color and clarity, but all I could see was sparkles and shiny. I giggled.

"It's so pretty," I said. I picked up the next one. "And so is this one!"

"They're all lovely pieces, Brooke," he said. "You have excellent taste."

I giggled and grabbed his arm, mashing my titties against the display case top so he could see more. "You're so sweet! Oh my God!" I gushed. "So, like, which one would you get for a girl, y'know, if you were buying her a present 'n' stuff?"

He smiled automatically. "I don't know your friend, of course, but if I were going to choose one of these three for my wife, I would choose the Maddy Emerson," he said. "It's very distinctive, the stones are top quality, and I think it suits a woman's hand very well. It's elegant."

"Hell yeah it is," I agreed. "But I totally like the Tacori too 'cause it's all, like, big and showy, y'know? People will totally notice it and be all like, where did you get that?"

"Very true."

"And then the Winston is all, like, Winston, y'know? Like, you just have to say what it is and people are all like, whoa."

"True, as well," he said. "Perhaps if you brought your friend in and let her choose for herself?"

I giggled. "Then it won't be, like, a surprise, baby," I told him, shoving his arm gently. "It has to totally be a surprise."

"Oh. Of course. I understand."

I winked at him. "Knew ya would, sweetie."

"Is there anything else I can do to help with your decision?" he asked.

I pouted hard. "I just can't make up my mind or anything," I grumped. "They're all so, like, pretty and I totally love all of 'em, y'know?"

"It can be difficult, yes," he said. He looked like he was getting impatient, and other people in the store were giving me weird looks. It felt bad for a minute before I was able to decide Fuck them! and went back to having fun.

"So, you like the Maddy Emerson?" I asked, holding it up again. I so wanted to wear it, but it was for Jennifer. She was so going to fuck me when I gave it to her.

"I do," he said.

"But... I mean, I love them all..."

The answer struck me like a bolt out of the blue. "Oh! I know!" I bounced up and down and clapped my hands. "I'll just, like, buy all three!"

The salesman nearly choked, his eyes bulging out. "All three?" he said in a strangled-sounding voice. "Seriously?"

"Like a heart attack, baby," I said, winking. "I mean, like, now that's a fuckin' surprise, right?"

"I would say so, yes," he said. He was rapidly starting to fill out paperwork, probably in case I changed my mind. "Would you like them giftwrapped, Brooke?"

I snorted. "Yah... they're, like, surprises..."

"Of course. Right away."

I busied myself looking around at the stuff – just because I was shopping for Jennifer didn't mean I couldn't pick out some stuff for myself, later – but I found a mirror on top of a display case and I had to stop and finger-fluff my bangs, reseal my sunglasses in my thick hair so that they sat just right and take about five or ten minutes to touch up my lip gloss, powder the sweat-shine off my nose and forehead and to run a quick coat of mascara on my long lashes. I took a minute to appreciate myself – I was really fucking hot – and blew myself a kiss in the mirror. It made me giggle. By that time, the salesman was back at the counter, holding a receipt book

“Now, Brooke, how will you be paying?”

I dug in my purse, chewing my bottom lip in thought. “Um... okay! Amex, please,” I said, passing him the black charge card. He took it and slid it through the scanner. The machine beeped merrily – one of my favorite sounds! - and the little digital screen lit up.

He passed me a pen attached to the digital capture device by a long cord. “If I could just see your identification, Brooke, and then get your signature here. Your total comes to sixteen thousand, four hundred and eleven dollars and thirty-eight cents.”

I dug in the purse again and passed him my drivers' license. “You can't look at the picture, okay? I look like a total retard in the picture.”

He grinned and took it, checked it against me, and passed it back. I bent low over the capture device, taking the pen in my long-nailed fingers as I started the long, slow process of writing my name. Big circles and hearts. That was way cuter than writing normal.

“Oh, shit! I messed up,” I said, noticing I'd written off the bottom of the screen. “Can I start over?”

“Of course. Just tap 'Cancel' with the pen and you can start again,” he said.

“Um... like... I don't see what you're, like, talking about.”

“Right here. Cancel,” he said, pointing.

“And I just, like, tap it 'n' stuff?”

“Exactly.”

“It's not working,” I whined.

With a grin, he took the pen from me and tapped it against the screen. I giggled again as I took the pen back, saying, “Sorry, baby. I'm, like, a real ditz when it comes to computers.”

Joyfully, I never even felt a twinge when I said it.

* * * * *

Jennifer paced back and forth in front of the nice three/two she'd just listed a week ago. She never expected the house – which wasn't in a very good neighborhood, bad schools and was way overpriced – to get a nibble so soon. She puffed nervously on her skinny little toothpick Capri cigarette, hoping she could move this property. She tossed the butt in the street and popped an Altoid when she heard the rumble of an engine pulling up the overgrown street.

She put on her best, most polished smile as she tried to force the thoughts out of her head. She couldn't go two seconds, it seemed, without having her head filled with images of Brooke, her blonde hair and perfect body, her sweet little smile and adorable giggle, her limitless energy and disarming honesty. Jennifer was full of her, full to bursting. Brooke had burst into her life like a S.W.A.T. team taking a building, giving her no chance to say no, leaving her no desire to say no. And now Jennifer was left with a head full of lingering images and a life that was not remotely familiar to the one she thought she knew. Before, she had been a realtor, a businesswoman, with her life all planned out and all her ambitions achievable. Today, she was struggling to adjust to this new woman that seemed to be living her life for her. Even though they were very wimpy ones, Jennifer was smoking cigarettes. Not just bumming them like a sorority girl at a party, but buying her own and keeping them on her. Nothing, she noted, compared to the little baggie of cocaine that she had stuffed under the pressed powder in her compact, buried deep in her purse. She'd taken a few little bumps during the day, here and there, and found that she was desperately looking forward to the time when she could have some more, to feel the way it made her feel. And the freedom of going home, being able to put it out on the coffee table and not apologize or feel nervous. But even these things were bearable if she could just find a way to come to terms with being a dyke. Not just queer, though. Queer and in love with another woman. She'd only ever dated men, only ever slept with them, only ever lusted after them. But now they seemed a strange form of second-best, not to women – Jennifer wasn't really that attracted to women in general – but to Brooke. Brooke wasn't just a woman to her. She was something more.

A beat-up looking GTO pulled to the curb as Jennifer finger-fluffed her hair and tried to focus, wrestling with her mind to keep Brooke out of it, just for long enough to show this property. Two men got out of the car, one a hard-bitten Latino with a scarred face and the other a tall, distinguished-looking man with salt-and-pepper hair who looked as if he hadn't slept in months.

She stuck out her hand. “Jennifer Hodges,” she said confidently. “You must be Mr. Hall. We spoke on the phone.”

The taller man nodded. “I'm Derrick Hall,” he said. “This is my associate, Mr. Gutierrez.”

“Hello.”

“I'm dreadfully sorry to have lured you here under false pretenses, Ms. Hodges,” Hall said briskly. “But we're not really interested in buying a house.”

Jennifer's smile dropped, but only for a second. “I'm not sure I understand.”

“You will,” Hall said. “I work for a company called ReNu. Have you heard of it?”

“No,” she answered, backing up a step and feeling around in her purse for her pepper spray.

He showed her his hands placatingly, noticing her anxiety and movements. “No need to be afraid, Ms. Hodges, I assure you. I have information for you.”

“What kind of information?”

“A few things you desperately need to know about your new friend, Brooke Stillwater.”

Jennifer let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. “Brooke? What's the matter?”

“We're hoping you can tell us,” Hall said. “Is there someplace we can go? Someplace private?”

Jennifer nodded. “There's a bar two blocks from here,” she said. “I think I'm gonna need a drink.”

The bruiser – Gutierrez – chuckled wryly. “You're probably gonna need two,” he said.



SUMMARY: When a rich man decides that he will undergo a new treatment to enhance his looks, he does not count on someone sabotaging his transformation.

SIX MILLION DOLLAR EX-MAN

Part Seven

by Valerie Hope

“YOU CAN HONESTLY SIT THERE and expect me to believe this,” Jennifer said, lighting a cigarette from the guttering candle atop the greasy table of the little corner bar they'd found.

“If you don't believe me, perhaps you can believe this,” Hall said, reaching into his briefcase. He passed her a thick manila folder. Inside were medical records and photographs, video captures taken from security cameras, all carefully detailing the transformation of a nerdy, middle-aged man with thick glasses and thinning hair into a statuesque wet-dream of a leggy blonde.

“I mean, this isn't possible. It's science fiction,” Jennifer said.

“I thought so too,” Gutierrez said, sipping his beer. His eyes never stopped scanning. “But it's real, Ms. Hodges. A hundred percent.”

“So this Stills guy – he's Brooke?”

“We think so, yes,” Hall said. “That's where we need your help.”

“Somebody grabbed him. Her. Whoever,” Gutierrez elucidated. “Kidnapped her right out from under our noses and did something to her. We're not sure what, or who did it, or why. All we know is that the girl we had at first is not the girl you're living with now. Something changed, something got done.”

“And I'm supposed to just walk up to her and ask?”

“If you think that will work, then absolutely,” Hall said. “But you know as well as I do that isn't the best approach. We want you to ask her questions. Go slowly, try to get information on what happened to her. Do strangers call the house often? Does she get strange mail?”

“You want me to spy on her.”

“That's an ugly term,” Hall said. “Don't you want to know who did this to her?”

“No,” Jennifer half-shouted. She composed herself quickly. “No, I don't. All I know is that Brooke's happy. Maybe her life before this sucked or something. I don't know. Maybe this mystery man did her a favor. You said this Brock Stills character, he volunteered for the process. Sounds like his life wasn't what he wanted it to be.”

“And you're sure that the life he has is the one he wants,” Hall said.

“I don't care,” Jennifer said. “All I know is that she's happy, and I'm happy.”

Hall rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We're not trying to destroy that. I promise. All we want to know is who kidnapped her. We have reason to believe he's done it to others. We have to stop this person before he – or she – does this to someone else. Brooke is the key to that. All we're asking is that you keep your eyes open and call us if you notice anything."

Jennifer took the proferred business card and stared at it for a long stretch. Finally, she tucked it away in her purse. "I'm going to Las Vegas in a few days," she announced. "By myself. Before that, I'll try. After that, you two are on your own. Understand?"

"Yes," Gutierrez said. "We really don't mean any harm, here, Ms. Hodges."

"I believe you," Jennifer said. "But why does it seem like every time I get a good thing going, something happens and risks fucking it all up for me?"

"We're going to try to keep that from happening," Hall assured her.

"I don't know you," Jennifer protested. "So forgive me if I don't believe a fucking word you just said. Brooke is my friend. If I get the slightest idea that you two are out to do something to her, anything, I'm calling the cops."

"We expected that," Hall said. "We understand."

Jennifer shotgunned the last of her vodka tonic. "I have to get back to work," she said. "I'll be in touch if I find anything. If you don't hear from me, that means I didn't find anything. Don't come looking for me."

"We won't," Hall said.

They stood as she left, digging in her purse for her keys after stuffing one of her skinny cigarettes in her mouth, walking as though she were about to break into a panicked run at any moment.

"Whaddaya think, Derrick?" Gutierrez asked, sipping his beer.

"Thin. Real damn thin," Hall confessed. "But she's our only in to Brooke right now."

"I still say we should talk to her direct," Gutierrez said.

"And risk losing her completely? I'm not willing to take that kind of chance. Look, we know where she is. We can keep her under surveillance, watch out for her. Maybe the bad guys will make another move. I've got people working to get her phone tapped and bug the condo. In the meantime, we have to keep digging and keep trying to find the other missing tech-geeks."

"You sure as shit don't call me for no easy cases," Gutierrez said.

"That's what you get for being so damn good," Hall said, signalling the bartender for another drink.

* * * * *

I only had a little time to run home, clean up and put my makeup on before I had to go to work. I scrawled a note to Jennifer – "Your the best babey!!!! I luv u!!! Pleeze dont open these til I get home OK?" in pink pen on pink paper – and stuck it on her pillow next to the wrapped gift boxes from the jewelry store. I couldn't wait to see her face. I couldn't wait to see her

wearing her rings and nothing else, either, or feel the cold metal and sharp stones against my double clit as she fingered me. It was going to be a great night.

I pulled my hair into two gigantic curly ponytails tied with pink bows, did my makeup all in bubblegum pink with thick black eyeliner and dumped gum and lollipops in my little miniature lunchbox purse. In my dance bag was the micro-mini plaid schoolgirl skirt, the knee socks, the platform-heeled Mary Janes, the pink push-up-bra and the little white blouse to tie in a knot under my tits and the matching pink plaid tie. The naughty schoolgirl thing got me mad bucks at the club when I danced it, and I got a bonus because it drove Tiffany wild to see me in it. Pushing on a pair of Gucci wraparound sunglasses and slipping into my wedge-heeled pink Kate Spades, I lit a Virginia Slims cigarette and headed out the door in a cloud of smoke.

My heels made a soft click-clack on the tiles of the breezeway as I made my way to the underground garage, loving the way my ass swiveled and my tits jiggled under my pink-and-gray Cole Haan tube dress with the wide pink leather Bebe belt with its enormous silver buckle. I chirped my car alarm merrily and pitched my dance bag and purse into the front seat as I slid in, knees together. I started the car with a loud roar and brought Plies & Ne-Yo's "Bust It Baby" up over the speakers loud enough to echo. I backed up in a chirp of tires, singing along happily in my little-girl soprano, and was halfway down the street before I remembered to buckle my seatbelt. I cut off three people getting on the freeway and averaged about ninety-five miles per hour over the six-mile trip to work. I supposed I should've been more worried about what a sucky driver I was, but I looked so good in my car and the music was thumping, I just couldn't bring myself to care. I was young, hot, horny and I had a lot more pressing things on my mind than some soccer mom in a minivan or some tired-assed commuter. Besides, I blew them kisses if they honked at me instead of flipping them off. That had to count for something. At least, I thought it did, and that seemed to be enough.

Screeching into the staff lot, I grabbed my stuff and sashayed into Bare Essentials, a confident strut in my walk and a wide smile on my face. I was so much happier now that Daddy had made all the disturbing thoughts in my head go away. I didn't have to think about anything more than my clothes, my makeup, my dancing, my adorable girlfriend, who I was going to fuck tonight and how I was going to get high. I picked my way through the dense pack of naked and semi-naked women, applying mascara in mirrors, hair in curlers, spraying and moussing and primping and preening. I set my makeup case on the counter and started doing the same after kissing Tiffany on the cheek and hugging my other friends.

I hit the floor right after my first round on stage, sucking on a lollipop playfully as I threaded my way through the crowded tables on my titanic heels. My skirt and t-back were a ruffle of one-dollar bills from being tipped lavishly on stage, and the blouse knotted under my huge breasts pushed them up deliciously and made them jiggle and bounce with my slightest movement. I could feel the eyes of the men in the club caressing my body hungrily – Tiffany's, too, when I caught sight of her, camped in the lap of a sixty-something big spender, one of her regulars. Giving her a seductive smile and thinking fondly of a quickie in the back of her car after work, I followed a gesture from a member of a group of three professional-looking men near the second stage. I slid silkily into his lap and started idly caressing the back of his neck.

"Hi, I'm Britanee," I announced perkily. "I, um, like, haven't seen y'all 'round here before? Where are you from 'n' stuff?"

The man whose lap I was in spoke first. "I'm Danny. This is Mike and Victor. We're from Seattle. We're just in town for a cardiology conference."

"Carda-what?" I giggled, twirling my hair around one finger. "What's that?"

"Diseases of the heart. We're doctors," he said.

"Oh, wow," I said. "That must be, like, real complicated 'n' shit."

"It can be," he said, grinning easily. He was really cute. So were his friends, but him most of all. "Can I buy you a drink, um...?"

"Britanee," I repeated. "And yeah, you totally can. Diet Red Bull and Grey Goose."

He flagged down a waitress and ordered for the table. The doctors drank Scotch and shit like that, rich guy drinks. I didn't care. I was going to make their wallets lighter.

The new Scarlett Johansson song came on the PA and I snuggled closer to Danny. "So, like, which one of y'all wants to get me naked first? I totally have to dance to this song."

Danny held up a twenty. "That would be me."

I started untying my blouse from beneath my tits. "Trust me, honey, you're gonna love this."

* * * * *

I slid back up Mike's firm body, staring at him hungrily, and kissed the tip of his chin as the song ended. I had a thick wad of cash in my little mini-lunchbox from this table – about six hundred, altogether – and it felt like I'd been dancing for days straight. Tiffany had come over in her black sequined minidress and we'd even done a few double-dances for Danny and Victor, turning each other on and getting so carried away that a manager actually had to come and talk to us for a minute to tell us to settle down. I was so wet I'd had to change t-backs in the bathroom – actually, we called it the 'powder room' because of what we snorted in there – four times. Rubbing up against the doctors' hot dicks through their slacks was making me hungrier and hungrier for the cum-high, and the seven Red Bull and vodkas I'd had weren't helping me either.

I slumped into Victor's lap and played idly with his tie while I scratched the back of his neck. "So, um... are you guys, like, coming back tomorrow night?" I asked in a little-girl whine.

"Our flight leaves tomorrow at noon," Mike said.

I pouted, sticking out my bottom lip adorably. "That sucks."

"What makes you say that?" Danny asked.

"I like you guys. You spend lots of money and you're all, like, really cute 'n' shit. I like dancing for y'all, and, like, hanging out 'n' stuff. Y'all have a really good time, y'know?"

"We enjoyed it, too," Victor said. "But all good things must come to an end."

I leaned in closer. "Or not, baby," I whispered. "Y'know, 'cause, I do, like... private shows."

His eyes widened for just a second. "How private?"

“As private as y'all want,” I said, nibbling his ear. “They're, like, a little more expensive 'n' shit, but, y'know, like, they're totally worth it. Especially if I'm, like, as into it as I am right now.”

All of them were sitting forward and listening intently. “You mean you're a...” Mike began.

I placed a long-nailed finger across his lips. “I don't, like, use that word in here, okay? But yeah. I am, but I'm, like, really exclusive 'n' shit. I don't do it with just anybody, right? It's got to be guys that're, like, polite and nice and who spend money in here 'n' stuff. I really like you guys.”

“We like you, too,” Mike said. “What do we do? I mean, I've never really done this before.”

“Well, y'all have to decide how long each of y'all is, um, gonna party with me, and then, like, who goes first 'n' shit. Then we go back to y'all's hotel, and, well... y'know.”

“I'm not sure I want anybody's sloppy seconds,” Victor said, looking at his buddies askance. “Nothing personal, guys, it's just kind of disgusting if you think about it.”

“Well, I'm not thrilled about it either,” Mike put in.

“Or me,” Danny seconded. “Besides, Britanee will be tired out by the end, too.”

“Well, one of us has to go first, and one of us has to go last,” Victor said.

“I'm not going last,” Danny protested.

“Me neither,” Mike said.

I giggled. “Um, like... if y'all are into it, I think I have an idea...”

* * * * *

It had taken me about an hour or two to get loose, even though Chris the manager had said I could leave early. I'd needed to hang out with Tiffany and gossip for a little bit and did three dances for one of my regulars, a sweet old man in a wheelchair who came in just to see me. I changed back into my Cole Haan that I'd worn in, but added a really scandalously sexy Victoria's Secret push-up bra and thong set with a matching garter and stockings, all in a very pretty lavender with black brocade. I roared into the parking lot of the nearby Embassy Suites, actually glad to be off the road – I would so get a DUI if somebody pulled me over tonight. I tossed my cigarette butt right before I entered the lobby and walked straight to the elevators without speaking to anybody. I still drew a lot of attention no matter, just because I looked so fucking hot. Maybe I needed to buy a trenchcoat or something, I thought as I pressed the button for the sixth floor.

I was in the elevator alone, so I took the opportunity to do three little bumps of coke off of my fingernail on the ride up, just to give me a little oomph for the night to come. The little shiver-thrill of the high ran up and down my body just as the doors opened. I hustled down the hall and knocked on the door of Room 614.

Danny opened the door. He was relaxed now, tie off and dress shirt unbuttoned, shoes kicked into the corner carelessly. Mike and Victor looked the same, sipping champagne.

“Hey, babies,” I cooed, coming in. Danny shut the door behind me and handed me a glass of champagne. I set my purse down next to the television and leaned sexily against the wall.

"I can't believe we're actually doing this," Victor said, looking red-faced.

"Oh, how come?" I asked him brightly. "Look, baby, you're into me and I'm into you. A girl's gotta, like, make a living 'n' stuff, but trust me – I'm totally gonna enjoy this. And it was my idea, right?"

"What do we do?" Mike asked, also sheepish.

"I usually like to, y'know, get the business shit out of the way so we can, like, just relax and party and not think about it," I said. "Y'know, like, if that's okay 'n' shit."

Danny nodded. "I agree. Three thousand, you said?"

"Uh-huh," I said. "Then I kinda want to see y'all's dicks, okay?"

"Uh... why?" Victor asked.

I giggled. "'Cause I wanna see 'em, mostly, 'n' suck on 'em a little," I chuckled, "but also 'cause, like, I need to figure out who's gonna go where, okay?"

Danny handed me a thick envelope. I kissed his cheek and slipped it into my purse, setting the champagne down. I palmed a tab of ecstasy out of my purse and slipped it onto my tongue, washing it down with the champagne, then fished in my purse again for a cigarette. I lit up and watched while the guys nervously started taking off their shirts.

"Don't be so nervous, babies," I said sweetly. "We're gonna have, like, so much fun. Just relax and, like, get into it 'n' stuff."

"Easy for you to say," Mike grumped.

I set my cigarette on the edge of the nightstand and stood up. "Okay, then, Mr. Grouchy, you're so, like, uptight 'n' shit, then let me show you how." I reached over and turned on the radio next to the bed – some 'Eighties song, I know I'd heard it in the club but I couldn't remember who sang it or what it was called – and started to dance. Slowly, I slipped the Cole Haan dress down my silky body and onto the floor, standing there in my bra, panties, garter belt, stockings and shoes. I fluffed up my hair with both hands – guys went fucking wild for that when I did it on stage – and then kept slowly undulating to the music while the guys looked on appreciatively. I took a few more drags off my cigarette and a few more sips of champagne before reaching around behind my back and popping the clasp on my bra. My giant, bouncing jugs sprang free like they had minds of their own.

"C'mon, then," I purred, blowing out a lungful of smoke. "Y'all've all been, like, dying to touch 'em all night, right? You had to be good boys in the club. I don't want you to be good boys any more."

They swarmed me, glad to finally have permission. Their hands stroked me, my back and shoulders, my tits and my stomach. I reciprocated by caressing their asses and stiffening packages, moaning and cooing to let them know that I was enjoying the attention. I poured some of my champagne on Victor's well-muscled, smooth chest and neck and busied myself licking it off while Mike squeezed my ass cheeks and Danny stroked my tits.

My voice had gone all husky and breathy with desire. "That's better," I purred.

I kept this up for a while – I didn't know how long – before I finally started working on Victor's fly, which was difficult with my long nails. Finally, his trousers fluttered down his legs to the floor

and he was standing there in boxers and socks. He had a nice, firm five or six inches throbbing under my hand. I put my cigarette in the last dregs of my champagne with a hiss and sunk to my knees, my hands stroking Mike and Danny's crotches through their trousers while I kissed and nibbled the outline of Victor's cock through his underwear.

"Y'all're keeping me, like, waiting," I said, breathless. "Hurry the fuck up, okay?"

Again, it was like my permission spurred them to action. Their pants all but disappeared and I was kneeling in a circle, throbbing dicks pointing at my face from all directions. I didn't even try to focus, I just moved from one to another with my wet and starving mouth, my hands roaming to the others as I sucked. I had several little baby orgasms from the clits in my lips and throat, soaking my panties. For a blissful eternity, I didn't even know whose dick belonged to whom. It was wonderful, just being surrounded by them. I heard grunts and moans from above me, but I didn't even register whose voice was the source. One of them came hard in my mouth and down my chin, I scooped up the delicious warm cum with my fingers and stuffed it in my waiting mouth. The cum-high hit me moments later just about the same time the X peaked in my system. It was like my skin was tingling with little electric currents shooting across me. I moaned and panted, drooled and slurped, from the two hard cocks to the limp one, sucking the last as if it were still erect and waiting for me. After a short time, my ministrations had drawn an orgasm from each of them, making me drunk and floating on the massive cum-high, and brought them all to full erection again.

I stood up, a little unsteady from the massive chemical overrun of my system. I was as high as I'd ever been and could barely focus my eyes. The men were all standing there, staring at me as if they'd never seen a horny woman before. Finally, I was able to delirious pictures of faces to the cocks I'd been worshipping earlier.

"So, like, you're narrowest, Victor," I said, speech slurred and overrelaxed. "You're the lucky bastard that gets to fuck me in the asshole. Mike, I want you down my fucking throat, baby, you taste so fucking good. Danny, you're the big boy here, I want all of that shit up my pussy."

I half-stumbled to my purse and got out a bottle of lube. Still wobblingly dancing to the music, I applied a generous dollop to my asshole and then poured a huge amount on Victor's pulsating cock. I wasn't sure how I knew what I was doing – I didn't remember ever having anal sex before, but I was doing everything like I'd done it my whole life – but I didn't care. I just wanted. More than I ever had, even with Jennifer. I hoped it was the drugs making me feel that way. I didn't like the idea of wanting anything or anyone more than I did Jennifer. But even so strong a thought couldn't stay long in my crippled brain as I pushed Victor back onto the bed. I turned around, straddling him with my feet still on the floor, Victor's legs between mine, and started to guide his slippery cock into my tight asshole.

"Does anybody have any condoms?" Mike asked.

They all looked around sheepishly. I couldn't help but giggle. "You guys are so fucking cute!" I exclaimed. "I totally can't believe you hire a call girl to come to your fucking hotel room and, like, completely forget the rubbers."

"I guess we should stop," Danny said.

"Oh, fuck that," I said as I slipped the fat head of Victor's cock into the sinfully tight ring of my ass. He gasped, and I moaned as the acutely painful stretch warred with the waves of

pleasure radiating from my ass-clit and the all-over wonderful floating feeling of the cum-high mixed with the X swirling through my blood.

“Seriously?” Danny asked.

“I don't care, baby,” I panted, slipping slowly but inexorably down the shaft of Victor's cock, feeling my asshole stretch with delicious pain that took my breath away. “I just want it.”

“I'm not sure that's such a good idea,” Mike warned.

Danny was already maneuvering himself between my spread legs, rubbing the head of his nice, seven-inch circumcised cock along my sopping wet pussy lips. “Are you seriously gonna turn this down?” he asked.

Mike looked at me, stuffed full of cock in asshole and pussy both, squealing and grunting with pain and pleasure. Victor's hands were stretched around me, pinching my nipples hard enough to make me gasp and squeezing the Girls for all he was worth. I looked at him steamily, crooking a finger to bid him closer as I used a fingertip to wipe around the circumference of my mouth as I licked my lips.

“Yeah, you're right,” he said, moving towards me. “Fuck it.”

* * * * *

My little Movado watch said six a.m. as I staggered down the hallway of the hotel. I know I looked a total wreck, but I really couldn't care less – makeup smeared, dried cum on my chin and chest, clothes rumpled, hair a mess and stuck to my face and shoulders in sweat-damp ringlets, and positively reeking of sex. I actually hurt, all over, particularly my cruelly stretched asshole. I farted softly as I walked, unable to maintain enough sphincter tone to hold it in. Luckily, very few people were even awake as I tacked down the hall, weaving right and left in my attempts to maintain balance. I had never been this cum-high before. I could barely focus my eyes.

But through it all, I was as wonderfully, totally satisfied as I could ever remember being. I felt as though I was glowing, that I was surrounded in a warm, soft cocoon of pleasure, contentment and satiation. Memories of the wild tangle of bodies and hard, pumping cocks flitted through my mind as I walked and tried to find my keys. I sagged against a column just outside the entrance, trying not to giggle as I dropped another quiet little fart and felt a warm dribble of cum leak from my gaping pussy onto my sodden stockings. I popped a cigarette into my mouth and lit it, fishing for my keys distractedly. One of the bellhops gave me a knowing look and quickly walked on. But this was no “walk of shame” for me. I was proud of what I'd done, fiercely proud, and happy. Even the bellhop's knowing that I was a whore made it somehow even better for me.

I careened through the nearly-empty parking lot and found my car. I was probably in no fit condition to drive, I knew, but it was the furthest thing from my mind right now. All I wanted was to get home to Jennifer. I'd missed her today. I couldn't wait to see her smiling face, the wonderful loving way she looked at me. She left for Las Vegas in two days. It was going to be tough without her, I knew, but as long as I could keep doing what I was doing, dancing and partying, I could make the time pass.

I fumbled my keys into the ignition, then sat back as the parking lot spun around me for a moment. Of all the drugs I did, all the abuses I subjected my beautiful, flawless body to, the

cum-high was the most potent. I could live without coke and pot if I had to. But I didn't think I could go three days without a drink of cum, warm from whatever tap struck my fancy.

I fingered the fat envelope in my purse. Added to the cash from the club, I had a little over four grand. Three more nights like tonight and I'd've paid for Jennifer's rings. However it had happened – and for the life of me I couldn't remember – I had the greatest way of making a living of anyone I'd ever heard of.

“Ma'am? Are you okay?” a voice asked, and I jumped a little, startled. One of the hotel employees had parked in the staff lot and had noticed me as he walked to work.

“Me? Oh, yeah,” I said. “Just tired, y'know? Long night.”

“You work here?” the man asked.

“Sort of,” I giggled.

“I think I'd've noticed someone like you working here,” the man said clumsily.

I grinned and giggled again. “You're sweet. No, I'm not, like, an employee or nothing, baby. I just do business here, y'know, like, sometimes.”

“What kind of business?” he asked, still trying to flirt.

“Oh, like, just what you think, baby. I'm a whore,” I told him, starting the engine to drown out his bewildered reply. He was still gaping at me, slack-jawed, as I zipped onto the main road in a squeal of abused tires.

* * * *

I crept in as quietly as I could so not to wake Jennifer. I really needed a shower before she saw me, or I would have to explain some things that I wasn't sure I wanted to explain. She was asleep at the little Gallotti & Radice writing desk I'd gotten for her, working on her laptop. Her email was open, and she'd been writing to someone named David Keller. She had the itinerary of her trip to Vegas open and she was trying to, according to her email, set up a time for them to meet.

I scratched my head. It took me a minute to figure out what was what – first of all, I hated reading and I wasn't very good at it, having to follow words with a long fingernail and read out loud under my breath, and secondly it was hard to concentrate when there were so many pretty things to look at around my condo. But it looked like Jennifer was trying to get some time with this David Keller guy on her first day in Vegas.

Oh my God, is she fucking him? I thought. Not out of jealousy – I couldn't feel that way after what I'd just done – but out of curiosity. We hadn't really talked about our pasts, Jennifer and me. Me, because I couldn't, and Jennifer because she didn't want to, I guessed. But even though I felt a little worried, I couldn't fault her if she wanted to fuck somebody while she was out of town. I know I would've done the same damn thing if it was me.

I tiptoed into the tiled bathroom and stripped off my sweaty, sticky clothes. I took a second to hand-wash the stockings – they were really nice and I didn't want to just trash them. A few minutes with the Woolite and I hung them over the towel rod. I jumped in a scalding hot shower, sagging against the wall, my balance still off from the floating cum-high feeling still overpowering me. I probably needed some sleep, but I really wanted to see Jennifer's face

when she saw her new jewelry. Just for a second, I looked around my gigantic marble walk-in shower, remembering a memory that I didn't think was mine. A smaller shower, with just a washcloth, a bottle of shampoo and a bar of Ivory soap. I blinked my eyes and shook my head roughly. There. Better. I was in my shower again, with the scented body wash, bath oils, exfoliants, depilatories, loofas and sponges and scrubbers, everything I'd bought. Everything a girl was supposed to have in her bathroom.

Now where did that, like, come from? I wondered as I lathered myself up. That was a totally weird thing for me to be, like, thinking 'n' shit. No fucking way! I lost myself in the gentle scrub of the sponge against my so, so soft skin and happy memories of being gang-fucked in a hotel room, interspersed with the new Ralph Lauren Blue Label clothes I'd seen in Elle, the way Jennifer sighed like a little baby when she slept, how cool Tiffany's nails looked last night and how sexy she looked when she put on lipstick, and wondering who got kicked off Beauty and the Geek last night.

* * * *

"I've got something," Gutierrez announced as he hung up his phone.

"Spill," Hall commanded, pouring coffee. The makeshift task force office was buzzing with activity, filled with muted phone conversations and the clicking of computer keyboards. Hall had been staring at the giant collage on the wall, photographs and reports and handwritten signs, all put up with thumbtacks and connected with colored string, trying to make some kind of a map, or timeline, or both to sort Brooke's disappearance.

"The hospital security tapes didn't show shit," Gutierrez said, rubbing his eyes. "We got Brooke being loaded into an ambulance that comes back as stolen. We lost it once it left the parking lot."

"Right," Hall said. "We know all this."

"So we figure, she got taken somewhere and somebody threw this big-tit stripper mojo on her. Has to be some kind of a facility. A fixed location. Someplace private, where nobody's gonna interrupt Dr. Frankenstein while he works on our girl."

"Right again," Hall said, a little irritably.

"Next thing we know, she pops up wearing ten grand worth of haute couture with a downtown loft and a sports car. Outta nowhere."

"Is there a point to this?" Hall growled.

"Yeah," Gutierrez said lightly, needling his boss a little. "The point, jefe, is that somewhere between Frankenstein's lab and her brand new life, our girl must've needed at least one ride."

"And?"

"So I tracked the Corvette's VIN number to a dealership on Marlon Road," Gutierrez said. "The dealer remembers her. Everybody fucking remembers her, she's kinda hard to forget, I guess. Not just 'cause of her rack, though, he remembers she paid cash and took off outta there like fuckin' Mario Andretti."

"So how did she get there?" Hall asked. "If you tell me she was dropped off and somebody saw the driver, I'm going to fucking kiss you right here in front of all these people."

“Better,” Gutierrez said, holding up the Post-It note he'd been scrawling on. “She took a cab. Just got off the phone with the cab driver, too. The physical address of the place he picked her up is in the dispatch log.”

“Frankenstein's lab?” Hall asked.

Gutierrez nodded. “It's about fifteen minutes from here, about ten from the hospital, and four blocks from where they found that ambulance abandoned.”

Hall grabbed his coat and rushed past Gutierrez, who was in hot pursuit. They were in the parking lot and opening the doors when a very tired and very winded Dr. Stanhope trotted up.

“I'm coming with you,” he said. “You'll need me to identify the equipment.”

“Could be dangerous, Doc,” Gutierrez cautioned. “Don't want you getting hurt. You're the only one who can fix our girl once we bring her in.”

“I know, but I have a very personal stake in all of this,” Stanhope countered. “I'm going.”

He shouldered past Hall into the back seat of the GTO. Gutierrez waited for the go-ahead nod from Hall – which he received – before piling in and bringing the engine to life. It was morning rush hour, so it was slow going, until they got off the main roads and into the disused industrial park containing the address. Gutierrez parked the car around the corner from the dilapidated brick warehouse and scanned the street.

“Pretty high-end security for such a shithole,” he remarked, pointing out a very expensive camera mounted on the building's corner. “Don'tcha think?”

“What's the plan?” Hall asked.

“You stay here and watch the Doc,” Gutierrez said. “I'll do a walk-around and see if there's any signs of life.” He punctuated his decision by drawing his nickel-plated .40 caliber and checking the breach. He uncocked it and placed it back in his shoulder-holster before bailing out of the car with the last admonishment, “If I'm not back in fifteen, drive the hell out of here and bring back a S.W.A.T. team. And hope he gives me some nice tits.”

Hall and Stanhope sat in the car in nervous, tense silence, Hall watching the minutes tick away with agonizing slowness on his watch. Gutierrez returned to the car at the twelve-minute mark.

“Nobody home,” he announced. “Place ain't been occupied for a couple weeks, looks like. Still locked up tight, though. I found some evidence that people have been there – empty burger wrappers and Coke cans in the trash, that kind of shit – but it's been a day or two.”

“So we go in,” Hall said.

“Not so fast, jefe. That place is sealed up like Fort Knox. For all I know it's wired to blow if we force our way in. Gonna take the King of All Nerds to pick that lock.”

Hall flipped open his phone. “Drive out of sight of those cameras. I know just the guy.”

* * * * *

“What time did you get in?” Jennifer asked muzzily as I set a cup of coffee down in front of her nose. I kissed her cheek and the back of her neck.

"Um, like, six, I think," I said.

"Did you go party with the girls?" she asked me.

"Yeah," I said, lying effortlessly. "We, um, got a little carried away 'n' shit."

She grinned sleepily. "You usually do, baby."

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. To my astonishment, she fished in her purse by her chair and came out with a pack of the super-skinny Capri cigarettes, took one out and lit it, taking a deep drag before she sipped coffee.

"So, like, when did you start doing that?" I asked, stealing one of the skinny cigarettes and lighting it myself. It wasn't as powerful as my Virginia Slims were, but it still tasted okay. Jennifer slid the stainless steel ashtray over to where we could share it.

"Oh, the other day. Don't preach to me, either. You don't have a leg to stand on."

"Like, who's preaching?" I said, mock-offended. "I was just gonna say, like, it's sexy on you. I like it. Don't get, all, like... you know."

"Defensive?" she asked, supplying the word. I wasn't sure what all it meant, but it sounded good, so I nodded and kissed her again.

"You're acting differently," she said.

"No I'm not," I shot back.

"No, really. You are. You seem... I dunno. Happier, maybe. But something else."

"You like it?" I asked.

She took a moment. "Yeah. It suits you."

"Then cool," I said. "So anyway. I got you something yesterday."

She grinned. "I noticed that. I've been dying to look all yesterday. I thought you were never going to get home from work."

"Sorry, baby. Didn't mean to take so long 'n' stuff. You ready now?"

She nodded excitedly. I grabbed the first of the gift boxes and passed it to her. She opened it and just stared at it, eyes wide, jaw open.

"It's beautiful," she finally breathed. She slipped the gorgeous Tacori diamond onto her index finger and held it up to the light to admire it.

"I know, right?" I giggled.

"How much did you spend on this, anyway?" she asked me.

"Just shut up 'n' be happy, okay?" I said, playfully shoving her.

"Oh, God, there's two more boxes," she realized suddenly. "Brooke, what did you do?"

I grinned. "I totally couldn't make up my mind on which one to get ya," I said nonchalantly. "So I just, like, got 'em all!"

I tore open one box while she opened the other. Jennifer stared wordlessly at the glittering rings on the desk, cigarette forgotten in her hand.

“Brooke, I... I can't let you do this, baby.”

“Yuh-huh,” I said. “Put 'em on.”

“No, I can't,” Jennifer protested. “It's too much.”

“No it's not,” I protested, pushing a box towards her. “It's just enough. And, like, don't go being all like 'you spent too much' and shit to me, okay? It's my money and if I wanna spend it on my girlfriend then I can do that.”

She looked at the diamonds again. “You mean it?”

“Duh,” I countered.

“They are beautiful,” she said.

“Just like you, baby,” I said, kissing her cheek. I slipped the Winston on her left forefinger while she slid the Emerson on the right ring finger. She admired them, glittering in the morning sun through my windows.

“I can't believe you did this,” she whispered.

“Get used to it, baby, that's totally what being with me is like,” I bragged. I kissed her cheek again and she grabbed my face, roughly, and pushed a kiss on me that literally curled my toes. I startled a little, pulling back right at first, but quickly closed my eyes and leaned into the lush softness of her pouty lips. Her nimble tongue darted into my mouth and out before I could nibble it playfully. We broke apart, breathless, an unknown time later.

“Wow,” I said, giggling. “Fucking take me to bed right now, bitch.”

I took her hands, but she resisted my pull towards the bedroom. “Brooke, I...”

“What is it, baby?” I asked guilelessly.

“I love you,” she blurted.

I stopped for a minute – not out of fear or confusion, the way I thought I'd feel, but because my heart was bouncing around my ribcage like a pinball.

“Wow,” I breathed. “Really?”

“Yeah, really,” she said, her eyes tearing up and glistening like the diamonds on her fingers. “I love you, Brooke. I don't know how it happened.”

My face split in a beaming smile. “Who the fuck cares how it happened?” I asked. “All that matters is that we, like, feel it 'n' junk, right?”

“Yeah, you're – waitaminnit. All that matters is that we feel it?” she asked.

“Yeah, totally.”

“So you feel it too?” Jennifer asked.

“Of course I do, baby,” I giggled. “Couldn't you tell?”

“Will you say it, then? Please?” she asked me, gripping my hands tightly.

“Say what? I love you? Sure, baby! I love you. I think I, like, always did.”

“Really?”

“Oh, hell yeah,” I said. “Since I first, like, saw you, I think. I totally love you.”

“Good,” she said, standing suddenly and pulling me to my feet with both hands. “Now we can go to bed.”

I bounced on my toes with excitement, grabbing her ass as we walked to the bedroom. She stopped abruptly, looking at me strangely.

“Y'know a second ago, when you called me a bitch?” she asked.

“I was only playing,” I said back, pouting a little. Bed now, talk later, I thought irritably.

“I know,” Jennifer said. “But it kind of turned me on a little.”

I giggled. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” she said, sounding almost relieved. “Will you call me that again while we're, y'know...”

“While we're fucking? Oh, sure!” I said happily. A thought occurred to me and I grinned ear-to-ear with excitement and pure joy. “But only if you call me a whore, okay?”

* * * *

Billy Wright was the stereotypical nerd – about 6'-4" and weighing in at about 100 pounds, most of that Adam's apple and Coke-bottle glasses. But he was one of the best systems intrusion guys in the business. Hall had recruited him after a little hack he wrote brought down two major investment banking houses in one day. When asked why he did it, his only answer was that he was bored at work. He was hard at work now, bent over an open panel of snarled wires that used to be the proximity-card sensor for the front door of the warehouse. All the security cameras on the block already hung motionless on their mounts, the result of about ten minutes' work for Billy. He'd started out trying to explain what he was doing as he did it, like he was being graded by Gutierrez and Hall, but eventually they persuaded him to stop wasting the time talking to the uneducated and just do what he did best.

“Almost there,” he said in a voice that seemed perpetually cracking, like a pubescent boy.

“No rush,” Gutierrez said, scanning the street. “Streets are clear. I don't think Dr. Frankenstein knows we're here.”

“Or he's in the process of packing his shit and heading for Ecuador,” Hall said. “No sense in trying to guess what's happening on that end. We just need to get into this damn warehouse.”

Almost as if on cue, the door beeped and the dull thunk of the deadbolts being drawn echoed on the empty street. Billy grinned widely. Hall couldn't help but return it, opening the door as Billy started recovering all the little alligator clips he'd used to hack the system from his laptop.

“There's probably internal security as well,” Wright said as they clustered together in the small anteroom of the warehouse. “Be careful. Look for a computer terminal, or a junction box.”

Gutierrez nodded, crossing his left arm holding the flashlight over his outstretched gun arm, betraying his many years as a highly decorated police officer. It was easy to forget, with Eddie's easy-going nature and laid-back style, that this was the man who singlehandedly took down three gunmen who'd taken down a city bus nearly a decade earlier. He cleared the room quickly and poked his head into the main warehouse.

"Place is full of equipment," he whispered. "There's a million junction boxes and computers in there. I'd be a week trying to figure out which one's which."

"How're the hairs on the back of your neck?" Wright asked.

"Standing straight up," Gutierrez confessed. "No way did whoever set this up leave it unprotected. That place is bound to be wired for something."

"Shit," Wright said. "I guarantee it's wired to wipe the hard drives at the minimum. We lose that data, we lose everything. You're back at Square One."

"So what do we do?" Hall asked.

"We have to convince the building's system that we're supposed to be here," Wright said. "I bypassed the outside lock, but I never fooled the computer into thinking that we were an authorized entry. I have to find a password device."

Gutierrez leaned against the wall. "It's bound to be near an entry, right? You can't put the access in the middle of the room."

"We go in that room, we could lose it all," Wright said.

Hall didn't even participate in the discussion, instead examining the walls. With a nod, he pulled a very large and wicked-looking knife from an ankle sheath and drove it hard into the wall near the corner of the doorjamb and lintel. With a little effort, he separated the drywall from the lath and pulled it away, exposing an intricate tangle of wires, conduits and boxes.

"This work?" he asked his slack-jawed associates.

Gutierrez laughed and clapped Hall on the shoulder. "Forest for the trees, right, jefe?"

"Something like that."

Wright was already hard at work separating wires and jacking in his laptop. Hall and Gutierrez stayed out of it, letting their guru work his magic, instead casing what they could see of the lab in the warehouse with flashlights from the door. With a beep from Wright's computer, all the lights in the lab came on at once with a clunk of a master switch being thrown.

"We're in," Wright announced. "All physical security's disabled, but don't try to boot a computer in there without asking me. There's bound to be data security as well. We can't lose this stuff."

The warehouse lab was a simple setup – a large control room, full of computers and monitor equipment, a glass-walled enclosure with machines and a table with restraints, and then a side room full of high-tech equipment that only Stanhope could only hope to identify. Hall and Gutierrez secured a perimeter while Stanhope and Wright sat in the control room and got down to business.

Hall satisfied himself that the building was secure, no explosives or deadly traps that he or Gutierrez could detect. The rest was up to Wright. Feeling a little more confident, he flipped open his cellphone and called in the rest of his tech team. His geeks would filter in, one at a time over the course of a few hours, so as not to arouse any suspicion from the owner of the lab. Gutierrez called in a forensics team to go over the lab for prints or DNA and brought down a covert perimeter cordon to make sure no one gets in or out without being seen. Hall never believed that they could get that lucky, that they could actually nab the guy behind the whole thing on his way to the lab to drop off a few things.

"I have no idea what half of this equipment is," Stanhope said. "Much of it looks like prototypes, possibly even developed especially for this application. I'm going to be hours sorting this through."

"Take all the time you need," Hall said. "Call me the instant you know anything."

"Of course," Stanhope said, already lost back in the monumental task.

* * * * *

I'd taken a quick nap and a shower, smoked a bowl of pot and watched Girls Next Door naked, wishing idly that I was one of Hef's girlfriends so I could wind up in a huge naked sandwich with Holly, Bridget and particularly Kendra, just managed to get some Bebe sweats on when the UPS guy showed up to deliver the new stripper pole I'd ordered to put in my spare bedroom, which would be a dance studio when I was done, and a box full of great new sex toys I'd ordered online and couldn't wait to try out on Jennifer and Tiffany. But the aerobics instructor at the gym was still on my mind from yesterday, and I stuffed some shit in a bag, did my hair in some adorable little Heidi braids behind each ear and walked the three blocks to the gym, smoking cigarettes and checking out the people on the street.

The gym was pretty empty, mostly dumpy soccer moms and other people without day jobs. I checked and found that Kerstin's class didn't start for another hour, so I booked a massage and did a few quick miles on the elliptical trainer, working up a nice, sexy glisten and making me look breathless in a tousled, just-fucked kind of way.

I kept my eyes down and my iPod cranked up high in an attempt to avoid dealing with any guys – I was horny as fuck and starting to get the itch for a cum-high, but I wanted to keep my mind on Kerstin. There was just something about her that infected my thoughts. I couldn't get her out of my head no matter what I tried. I exercised a little bit compulsively, trying to keep myself focused, and was completely sore and out-of-breath by the time Kerstin's aerobics class started. It was her intermediate level, and I was in the room with seven other women all of whom looked to be in better shape than I was.

Kerstin came in through a back entrance and got straight to work. I pushed myself as hard as I could, my sweat running down my skin in thick droplets and my breath coming in quick pants. Kerstin's eyes roamed over me as mine ran over her, until we were just dancing together somehow, all alone in the room full of people. She called out the cadence and the exercises in thickly accented English: "...ant von, ant too, ant three..." but never seemed to get out of breath or lose energy.

I felt like I wouldn't be able to stand up much longer, much less move, by the time Kerstin threw her towel around her slender shoulders and broke into a big smile, her large blue eyes still riveted on me. She smiled and chatted idly with the other students, congratulating them on

their improvement or performance one by one, patting their shoulders and hugging them as she filed them out, one at a time, until it was just us left in the room.

She eyed me openly, her eyes roaming hungrily but her curiosity winning out over desire. “Do I know you?” she asked me.

I twirled a lock of blonde hair around one manicured finger and swung my tits back and forth coquettishly. “I, like, don't know,” I said, smiling and giggling. “I feel like I do, y'know?”

“Mm-hm,” Kerstin said, sipping water. “I feel the same way.”

“I don't, like, wanna sound like a stalker 'n' junk,” I said, “but I've totally, like, been following you a little. Y'know, like, just watching you. I hope that's not, like, totally weird for you.”

She bit her bottom lip – it made me want to do it too – and considered a minute. “If it was anyone else, orre, I would be pissed off,” she said. “But because it's you. I don't know why that makes difference, but it does, yes?”

I stepped closer, rubbing my stiffening nipples lightly against her arm. “Yeah,” I said. “So, like, you wanna get out of here?”

She giggled. Adorably. “You can hardly stand,” she said, poking me. “Out of shape. And I have another class in half hour. You go rest, take shower, brude. Let me teach, then we go out, okay?”

I bounced up and down a little, petulantly. “But I don't wanna wait,” I whined, pouting. “I wanna go out with you now...”

She kissed me. Not hard, but certainly not lightly. She stared at me in disbelief as we parted. “I don't know why I did that,” she told me.

“I don't, like, care,” I said breathlessly. I took her hand. “Find somebody to cover for your class, baby. You're, like, so coming with me.”

“This is very strange,” she said.

“Just go with it, baby,” I urged her, squeezing her arm. “Don't, like, think about it too much.”

She looked around mischievously, like she was afraid she'd be caught. “I suppose...”

I took her hand and started dragging her towards the locker room. “That, like, settles it.”

“I do not even know your name,” she told me.

“It's Brooke,” I told her. “And you're Kerstin.”

“Where are we going, Brooke?” she asked me.

“Someplace fun, baby girl, that's all I care about,” I said.

“Where is that?”

“Anywhere you like,” I told her. “What do you like to do for fun?”

To be continued....



SUMMARY: When a rich man decides that he will undergo a new treatment to enhance his looks, he does not count on someone sabotaging his transformation.

SIX MILLION DOLLAR EX-MAN

Part Eight

by Valerie Hope

THE ONLY WAY I COULD tell which cock I'd drained was by the shade of lipstick smeared around the base. Kerstin had taken me back to the trainers' lounge of the gym and there had been eight very muscular twentysomethings who were relaxing and talking about their clients. Kerstin and I had come in and sipped vitamin water and made small talk for a little while while the tension mounted. Kerstin was very familiar with them – I was pretty sure she'd fucked everybody in the room – and introduced me as a friend. The guys took this as a signal and suddenly got very touchy, rubbing legs and shoulders. I was a little scared – that was a lot of guys – but I couldn't deny how much I wanted them, how hot they were and how desperate for a cum-high I was. Kerstin smiled at me and hitched her eyebrows sexily as she went down on a chiseled black man, kissing the outline of his prodigious cock through his exercise shorts. I closed my eyes and leaned back against a rock-hard set of Latino abs and spread my legs for someone else. I turned my head and opened my mouth for a rapidly stiffening cock, realizing dimly that I didn't even know names and didn't want to. I just gave in to it, stuffing cocks into whatever hole I had open, squirming across the tangle of bodies until I could get close to Kerstin.

“We have to, like, talk. Y'know, after,” I panted in her ear.

“I know,” she panted back after popping a spit-slick cock out of her sucking mouth. “Äsch ja! Äsch Gud! Spika mig hårdare!”

“What is it about you, baby?” I panted, grabbing a black cock and licking the head hungrily.

She smiled at me with her mouth full. “It feels like we are the same.” Between the accent and the huge cock in her mouth, I couldn't understand her. She had to say it three more times.

It wound up like most of these events in my life, a huge blur of sex and sweat and cocks without people attached. All I know is that I was slumped in a shower, encrusted with cum and spit and god knows what else, so cum-high I couldn't focus my eyes and could barely walk, letting the hot water sluice down my naked skin. My pussy and asshole were sore and aching in that way I loved so much.

I wrappped my still-throbbing body in a towel and staggered out of the shower to slump down on a bench next to Kerstin. She was holding her head in her hands, moaning softly.

“You okay, baby?” I slurred.

“Too high,” she said. “Dizzy.”

I reached into my locker for my purse. “C'mere,” I told her. “I got something that'll help.” I fished out my compact and tried to focus my eyes long enough to undo the Velcro seam and fish out my little baggie. I tapped out a little pile of coke onto the back of the compact and separated it into rough, skinny lines with my platinum card.

“Is that cola?” Kerstin asked.

“Does that mean coke?” I bubbled back. “Yeah. It helps with the cum-high a little, helps you, like, get your shit together. Y'know, like, if you need to drive or some shit.”

“I've never tried it,” Kerstin told me, rubbing the back of her neck.

“Really?” I asked, bumping a line quickly and tossing my head back. “I thought we were, y'know, alike 'n' shit. I just figured you'd be doing like me, y'know?”

“No,” she said. “I don't do like you. I do not drink or smoke or sniff cola like you.”

“Well, what do you do, girl?” I asked, doing the other line.

“I snaska kotte, you know – suck cock – and I work out. All the time, I work out. I eat healthy and only drink water but I exercise twelve, thirteen hours every day.”

“You must really like working out,” I commented.

She looked faraway for a moment, her sparkling sapphire eyes drifting off and becoming a little vacant. “I guess I do,” she said dreamily. “I mean, I think I like. Some. Sometimes I think I don't like it at all.”

My eyes widened. “Oh my Gawd,” I said, grabbing her arm. “I used to feel like that. Y'know, like, about my life 'n' stuff. I totally used to be like you that way.”

“You did?”

“Mm-hm,” I said. “I used to, like, think my life wasn't, y'know, like, really mine or junk.”

“You used to feel that way?” she asked. “How did you stop?”

I blushed a little. “You're gonna, like, laugh at me.”

“No, please. I promise.”

“I called my daddy,” I said.

“Your papa?”

“Mm-hm,” I said, “my daddy. I, like, can't believe I'm telling you this. I'm not supposed to, like, talk about it or anything, y'know? But I totally feel like I can tell you anything. My daddy, he helped me by putting this thing in my head. A little, like, machine or some shit, like that sits there and he can turn it up or down from his lab. I called 'n' asked him to, like, turn it up all the way.”

“You asked him to turn your BIMBO up all the way?” she asked, shocked.

“How did you know it was called that?”

She looked at me intensely, grabbing me by the upper arms. “Did you... did you used to be... someone else?” she asked.

I gasped. "I think so, yeah."

"You don't know for sure?"

"I told you, baby. Daddy, he, like, fixed me."

"I hate it," she told me. "I hate feeling like this. I try to work, to keep focused, but I keep thinking how I hate to work out."

"I knew somebody like that," I told her. "Y'know, like, from before. I think I did, anyhow. He always used to be like 'why should I work out?' 'n' stuff. He was like 'I work out my mind I don't need to work out my body.' What was his name?"

"Ken Blauer," Kerstin said.

"You knew him too?"

She looked at me with pain in her eyes. "I was him, orre."

"Oh Gawd," I said. "Maybe that's why, like, we're so into each other, y'know?"

"I do not know," she told me, slumping back and wiping a tear from her eye. "All I know, I was someone else once. Someone important, maybe. And now I can only work out and suck dick."

"Poor baby," I said, stroking her soft skin. "I'm gonna make you feel all better, baby."

"How?" she asked me.

"First, you're going to do a couple lines of coke so you can fucking walk," I told her, tapping out some more of the sparkling powder on the back of my compact. "Then, we're gonna call Daddy and fix you up like he fixed me."

"You think it will work?"

"I'm, like, living proof 'n' shit, baby."

* * * * *

"This equipment – the processes at work here – they're remarkable. Utterly revolutionary," Dr. Stanhope said, sipping coffee as he gestured at the computers and papers scattered across his desk in the task force command post Hall had set up. "Any one of these could be Nobel material."

"What are we talking about?" Gutierrez asked.

"Every last thing our mystery man has done – resculpting the bodies using an injectible foam instead of surgical implants. No scarring, no postoperative pain, no risk of rejection or infection. The learning program, the subliminal suggestions and body retraining. A lifetime's worth of mannerisms, ways of interaction, all taught in a matter of hours with remarkable retention. He's used it to subvert and in some cases recreate an entire personality. And then there's this thing."

He held up a small block of lucite. Inside it was a prototype machine, no bigger than a grain of rice, with hundreds of little tentacles running out of it, finer than human hairs.

"It's a neural interference device," Stanhope said. "Literally, a brain blocker. The little hairs attach to neurons in the forebrain and interrupt them. It slows cognitive function and speed,

decreases attention span and concentration. It slows down the brain's ability to form ideas and react to its environment.”

“Why?” Hall asked. “Why would that be useful?”

“It's the ultimate set of handcuffs, Mr. Hall. Imagine. How far could a prisoner with one of these in their brain actually get on their own? He calls it a Biosynergic Implantable Microfilament Brain Override. A 'BIMBO.' No wonder Brooke's personality has altered so radically.”

“You mean he used that thing to turn her dumb?” Gutierrez said.

“Dumb? No,” Stanhope corrected. “It can't decrease overall cognitive function, just its speed and Brooke's ability to focus on it. She's still the same genius she was, it's just that she can't concentrate. He didn't make her dumb, it's more like...”

“He made her an airhead,” Hall finished. “A bimbo, get it?”

“She would still have the same ideas as before, except that instead of having them in seconds they may take hours, now, and she wouldn't be able to focus long enough to reach the conclusion unless the circumstances were very pressing. Otherwise, she's going to think about what she's programmed to think about. According to these logs of the subliminal learning regimen, that consists of clothes, jewelry, hair, makeup and dancing.”

“Can it be reversed?” Hall asked.

“With time, I'm sure it can,” Stanhope answered. “But not in the short term. It's going to take months to reverse engineer some of this technology and find safe ways to reverse it.”

“That Bimbo thing,” Gutierrez said, pointing to the block of lucite, “it's pretty small. Does it know how to mess with people's brains on its own?”

“I don't know what you mean,” Hall said.

“I mean, does it know how to mess with people's brains automatically, or does it have to be told?”

“There is some intrinsic function written into the nanotechnology,” Stanhope said. “But it has to be triggered and adjusted externally.”

“So there's a transmitter in it?” Gutierrez said.

“A transceiver, yes,” Stanhope said.

Gutierrez clapped his hands. “Then we can find them. All of them.”

Hall smiled. “I knew I kept you around for a reason.”

Gutierrez grabbed his keys and hooked Stanhope by the elbow. “Doc, get your coat. I need you to come with me.”

“Where? Where are we going?” Stanhope stammered, grabbing his grey twill suit jacket from the back of his chair as Gutierrez tugged him physically towards the door.

“Jennifer Hodges leaves for Vegas tomorrow morning,” he said. “She needs to know what got done to Brooke. She needs to hear it from you. Maybe then she'll side with us and we can get

this motherfucker solved.” He was already pressing his cell-phone to his ear as the door shut behind him.

* * * *

I puffed idly on a cigarette and TiVo'ed through the commercials on Keeping Up With the Kardashians while I listened to Kerstin in the shower and opened the packages that had arrived by UPS while I'd been at the gym. It was my “sexy secretary” outfit – a scandalously short-skirted pinstripe business suit by Ralph Lauren with a very elegant pair of Versace eyeglasses fitted with non-prescription lenses, and a lacy red Frederick's of Hollywood boned corset to wear underneath. I was toying with the idea of trying it on – today was Sunday and I wasn't working tonight, not with half-price table dances and a perennially sucky crowd, and I wasn't sure I wanted to wait to see how I looked in it – when I heard a key in the lock.

Jennifer walked into the foyer in a cloud of cigarette smoke. She was carrying bags from some of the local boutiques. She looked tired – bags under her eyes and a little pale, nothing some of my mineral concealer, a good exfoliation and a spray tan wouldn't cure – but cute in a little BCBG Max Azria print sundress I'd picked up for her a couple days ago.

I bounced to my feet, so happy to see her my heart skipped.

“There's my baby!” I cooed, throwing my arms around her so our tits squished together and kissing her deeply and kind of roughly. She melted into me a little.

I searched her eyes. “Um, is something wrong, sweetie?” I asked.

“I just got a call from somebody I didn't want to hear from,” she said grumpily.

“Who?”

“Nobody,” she said sharply. “This guy from work. He's an asshole.”

“So, like, what did he want?”

She sighed. “He needs me to meet him,” she said. “He said it's real important, so I guess I have to, but I really don't want to deal with him right now.”

“So blow him off,” I told her, giggling happily. Nothing could keep me down when my baby was home. “Or I can go with you 'n' stuff.”

“I can't, honey,” she told me, squeezing my upper arm. “But I'll only be a minute, okay? I promise.”

“You better,” I mock-scolled. “This is our last night together.”

She turned her head in response to the water shutting off in the other room. “Company?”

I blushed a little. “It's my friend Kerstin. She's my new personal trainer. She's really cool, but I was totally gonna kick her out 'n' junk once you got home. Tonight is just, like, you 'n' me, okay?”

“Sounds great,” Jennifer said. “Hey, Brooke, are you holding? I'm out.”

I pouted adorably in consternation. “You've been, like, hitting that stuff kinda hard, baby, are you sure?” She had been going a little crazy on the coke lately. She'd dropped about ten

pounds – not that I was complaining about that, she looked incredible and was well on her way to a size four – but I didn't want her getting sick on me.

“Just to get me through meeting this guy,” she said.

“In my purse, you know where,” I told her cheerfully, accepting her reasoning. I was finding that life was a lot easier when I just let Jennifer do my thinking for me. Besides, she was way smarter than me anyway. It had been the same when I'd caught her yesterday making herself puke after lunch. I was all set to be worried and supportive, but she'd been able to make me see what a good thing it was for her after about ten minutes of talking. Hell, she made it sound so positive I was thinking about doing it myself, if I wasn't about to be spending so much more time at the gym.

Kerstin walked in, her rock-hard body wrapped in a fluffly pink towel and her hair dripping.

“Hey, Kerstin, this is my girlfriend Jennifer,” I said, smiling brightly.

“Oh God she's beautiful!” Kerstin cooed. “Just like you said, Brooke!”

I smiled wider. Her call to Daddy had been a success. I looked in her beautiful sapphire eyes and saw none of the pain that was there earlier, just a bright, smiling happiness. She kissed Jennifer's cheeks and started asking her about her workout. I bounced on my toes and clapped my hands a little. I'd made Kerstin happy. I'd done a very good thing.

* * * *

“What the fuck do you want now?” Jennifer snapped angrily as she flung her designer purse across the table and slid into the booth at the restaurant Gutierrez had chosen for the meet.

“Jennifer, this is Dr. Howard Stanhope,” he said, ignoring her brusqueness.

“Hi,” she said without missing a beat, and turned back to face Gutierrez. “So?”

Gutierrez cleared his throat. “We still don't know who did this to Brooke,” he said. “But now we know what they did. That's what the Doc, here, is for.”

“And I told you, I don't care. Brooke is happy.”

“I'm sure she is,” Dr. Stanhope said. “In fact, she's probably far happier than she should be.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“This,” he said, placing the BIMBO in its little lucite block on the table. “An identical device was implanted in Brooke's brain. It interferes with her ability to concentrate and form thoughts.”

Jennifer looked at it idly. “I don't notice anything like that about Brooke.”

“You wouldn't,” Stanhope countered. “You wouldn't have known her any other way.”

“Then how is all of this my problem?” Jennifer asked. “Look, I told you people, I'm leaving for Vegas tomorrow. I want to spend what time I've got left with Brooke, and you're standing in the way. Now, if you don't have anything new to tell me, then I'm out of here.”

“If you don't mind,” Dr. Stanhope said, placing his hand over hers, “why do you need to go to Las Vegas so urgently?”

"None of your business," she snapped.

"Brooke is our business, like it or not," Gutierrez said. "Look, Ms. Hodges, I'm here as a courtesy. The people I work for, they'd much rather I just kicked in Brooke's door and took her away in cuffs, got it? The only reason I'm even talking to you is because you take care of her, and like you said, she's happy where she is. I don't want to fuck that up for either of you. So can you just come the hell down off your high horse for two seconds and answer the doctor's questions?"

Jennifer sighed. "I have to go to Vegas to get a divorce," she muttered.

"Our records didn't show you were married," Gutierrez said, eyebrows raised.

"It was a rush thing," she said, sipping some water. "I was only twenty, still in college. It was stupid, but it was easier to just be estranged than to actually get a divorce. But since I met Brooke, I don't want anything like that hanging over us."

"I can understand that," Stanhope said. "An untrustworthy person could place a considerable emotional and financial drain on you while you're trying to focus on being happy."

She looked at him fresh, surprised at his sensitivity. "That's right."

"Your trip is booked for two weeks, though," Gutierrez said. "Not to sound suspicious, but that's an awful long time for a Vegas divorce. Even if you are planning to take in Cirque du Soleil."

"I have... other plans while I'm there."

"Ms. Hodges, please," Stanhope pleaded. "We're trying to protect Brooke."

She sighed. "It's embarrassing."

"Believe it or not, you're among friends," Gutierrez said.

"Look. Brooke is different. She makes me feel different, more than anybody else ever has. I'm not like her, though, and even though this probably sounds stupid to you, I'm afraid that not being like her is going to make me lose her someday, and I don't want that to happen."

Stanhope nodded. "Of course," he said after a brief reflection.

"Clue me in?" Gutierrez said.

"I'm going to Vegas so I can make myself more like Brooke," Jennifer said. "So we can be together. Like I said, it probably sounds stupid."

"Not at all," Stanhope said. "So, what does this transformation entail, if you don't mind my asking?"

Jennifer sighed again, obviously embarrassed. "A boob job. Lip implants. Dyeing my hair and updating my wardrobe a little. Learning..." she swallowed. "Learning to strip and dance on a pole."

Gutierrez nodded. "I get it. You think this will help you keep Brooke?"

Jennifer bristled. "I don't know. But I'm not taking the chance."

Gutierrez put up his hands. "Hold up, chica, I ain't doubting you," he said placatingly. "I'm just trying to understand, okay? We're on the same side."

"Ms. Hodges – may I call you Jennifer? - it's important for you to understand some of the changes that our perpetrator made to Brooke. Biological changes."

"Biological? Like, she's sick?"

"Not quite," Stanhope said. "We're still trying to figure out the scope of it – the technology involved is brand new to us. But as we understand it so far, the brain implant is the least of what was done to her."

"What are you saying?"

"Brooke is conditioned – some might even say brainwashed – to be what some people might call a stereotypical stripper. Promiscuous, lesbian and drug-addicted. She has no self-control where sex and drugs are concerned, it was more or less removed from her. Does Brooke do drugs, to your knowledge?"

Jennifer looked askance at Gutierrez, who made a placating gesture: I'm not a cop. After a moment's consideration, she nodded. "Coke, mostly. Smokes some pot and I've seen her drop ecstasy once or twice. She also takes a lot of Xanax and drinks constantly."

"I'm not saying I approve, but at least Brooke hasn't moved on to harder drugs. Heroin, methamphetamine. But she will come into contact with them eventually, and because of what was done to her, she will try them and she will become addicted. She is unable to say no, do you understand?"

"Even if it kills her?"

"Even if it kills her," Stanhope confirmed. "She has also been augmented, according to some of the literature we've unearthed. Certain cells on her tongue and soft palate have been altered to secrete a very powerful endorphin-like substance when contacted with enzymes present in human semen. The endorphin is very powerful, systemic and completely addictive."

"Addictive? You mean..."

"I mean exactly that," Stanhope said. "And that puts her at a very high risk for disease, as well as rape, unwanted pregnancy and other consequences. Her life could become something very unpleasant if she isn't careful, and she's programmed to not be careful."

"Yeah, I've noticed that," Jennifer said.

"So you see how crucial you are to her," Gutierrez put in. "You're the one who's going to have to keep Brooke out of the real trouble."

"Goddammit," Jennifer said, looking from Stanhope to Gutierrez and back again in a mixtutre of disbelief and shock. "You make it sound like I have to raise her like a fucking child."

Stanhope smiled a very fatherly smile. "Nothing could be further from the truth, Jennifer. Honestly. Your relationship won't change. You'll just have to be the voice of reason for some things."

"You think she's out there now? Y'know, sucking guys off and stuff like that?"

It was Gutierrez' turn to redden and stammer. "We, uh... we sorta have proof."

Jennifer held up a hand. "Don't. I don't wanna know."

"I appreciate how this must make you feel," Stanhope offered. "I can vouch for the fact that she can't help herself, Jennifer. It's not something she can control, any more than she could stop breathing or eating. It really has no bearing on how she feels about you, or you her."

"It's still a hell of a lot to take in," Jennifer commented.

"I can't imagine," Stanhope said.

"What am I supposed to do? Cancel the trip to Vegas? Quit my job, spend all my time trying to keep Brooke from getting hooked on smack or getting hepatitis?"

"No," Gutierrez said. "Look, we checked you out. You're smart. More than smart enough to figure this out. Like the Doc said, your life isn't going to change that much. You're just going to have to occasionally convince Brooke that her bad ideas are actually bad ideas and talk her out of them. I have to do that with my girlfriend all the time. The way I see it, that's part of what being in a relationship is all about. It's just that Brooke's bad ideas will tend to be really bad fucking ideas."

"I get it," Jennifer said. "Look, I'm sorry if I've been a bitch."

"Forgiven," Stanhope said.

"I don't know what to do, guys," she said. "I really don't."

"What do you think is best for Brooke? What's best for you?"

She lit a skinny cigarette. "What's best for Brooke is to do like you say. Watch over her, keep her out of trouble. And you're right, once I get over being shocked and overwhelmed like this, it's not gonna be that hard," she said. "What's best for me is to go to Vegas like I planned. Get divorced. Get over my insecurities, do what I set out to do, and above all take a little time to figure out what the fuck I'm doing."

"If you don't mind my asking," Gutierrez said, "how are you planning to pay for this big transformation you got planned? That's some pretty big bucks you're talking about."

"I know," Jennifer sighed. "It's gonna eat up most of my savings."

"What if I offered to help you?" Stanhope said. "The medical end, I mean. With the new technology and the original ReNu process, we can make any change you like. You can keep your savings and I can at least promise you won't have nearly so much postoperative pain."

"How much would it cost?" Jennifer asked, eyeing him narrowly.

"Consider it an exchange of services," Stanhope said. "Your feelings for Brooke aside, you're doing us a favor. I would consider helping you the least I could do."

"It feels like taking payment," Jennifer said. "Brooke isn't my job, Doctor."

"Of course not," Stanhope said. "And if you choose to view it that way, then I can't stop you. But I prefer to look at it as a mutual aid policy. We're all a single team, working to help

Brooke and to stop whoever did this to her. It only makes sense that we assist one another, with the single goal in mind. Your plan is to alter yourself so you can stay closer to Brooke. We can help with that. I don't see any good reason why we shouldn't."

She pursed her lips in thought. "I suppose, looking at it that way..."

"Don't alter your plans at all," Gutierrez said. "Go to Vegas. We'll meet you there and take care of everything."

"I'll think about it," Jennifer said. "I have your number. I'll let you know by this afternoon."

"Fair enough," Gutierrez said. "In the meantime, there are a couple things we could use your opinion on."

"Such as?"

"First and foremost, who's going to be looking after Brooke while you're gone," Gutierrez said. "I was wondering if you'd be willing to introduce me as an old friend or something. Just so I'd have an excuse to be closer to her."

"Won't she, like, attack you so she can get at your dick?" Jennifer asked. "That's what you said might happen."

"It's a danger," Gutierrez said. "Probably best to pretend I'm gay or something. I think we can get around it if we need to. What do you think?"

"I'd feel a lot better, knowing somebody was looking out for her," Jennifer said. "I'll do it. There's a little bistro on our street that Brooke loves. I'll make sure we eat there tonight. You can accidentally bump into us there, if you know what I mean, around eight."

"Perfect," Gutierrez said. "My first name's Eddie, by the way. Since we're 'old friends' now."

"Eddie," she repeated. "Everybody in college called me Jenny."

"I'll send you an email with a cover story," Gutierrez said. "Something simple, easy to remember, close to the truth. Just be sure and check your computer before you leave for dinner."

"There's another thing," Stanhope said. "There is an opportunity for us to get an agent into the company that Brooke used to own. We're almost certain that whoever did this to Brooke works at that company."

"An agent?" Jennifer asked.

"A company called Wheeler & Koch, a PR firm, is looking for a spokesmodel for XenoSoft. The opportunity would get someone close to the directors of the company, one of whom is our bad guy. Originally, we hoped that we might be able to talk Brooke into it, before she was caught and tampered with. Now we need someone else. We've been considering you."

"Me?" Jennifer almost choked on a drag of her cigarette. "I'm not a model."

"I wouldn't worry," Stanhope said. "The open casting doesn't end for several weeks, and after your trip to Vegas you'll definitely have the looks for it. Plus, we have technology that can teach you everything you need to know about modeling in an evening."

"I find that hard to believe," Jennifer said.

"So do I, and I've inspected the machine that does it. Leave it at this. Credere incredibile. It means 'believe the unbelievable.'"

"That's inspiring, but..." Jennifer said.

"I didn't speak Latin the day before yesterday, Jennifer," Stanhope said. "This technology, as fantastic as it sounds, works. All you have to do is look at Brooke for proof."

"This is one I have to think about, too," Jennifer said. "I don't know about the modeling thing. Believe it or not, I'd like to run that one past Brooke."

"Of course I believe it," Stanhope said. "She's your girlfriend, after all."

Jennifer smiled and blushed. "I still get goosebumps whenever anyone says that."

"She is a remarkable woman," Stanhope said.

"She's one of those magic ones," Gutierrez said. "You just can't help falling for her. I've only seen her from three blocks away through a telephoto lens, chica, and I think I'm a little bit in love. We all want to help her, and help you too. Just keep that in mind, will you?"

"I will," she said, squeezing Gutierrez' hand and then the Doctor's in turn. "Thanks. I'll call you soon, okay? I gotta go."

They stood. She hugged each one of them firmly – obviously relieved to be convinced that they were on her side – and hustled out of the restaurant in a cloud of smoke and clicking heels.

* * * * *

I was really glad when Jennifer got back. Really glad. I felt a little bad about tearing her pretty Alberta Verrati blouse, but I needed her naked so I could express how glad I was. She arched her back like a contented cat and then snuggled against me from the cozy nest of our clothes on the foyer tiles.

She caressed my face. "I love you," she whispered.

"Oh, baby," I cooed. "I love you too. A lot."

Jennifer propped herself up on one elbow so she could look down at me, running her fingers through the dense curls of my hair to make it fan out around my face. "Hey, Brooke, listen. I got something I need to talk to you about."

"What's up?"

"I, uh... I know what you've been doing. When we're not together. With boys."

I blushed. "Baby, I..."

"Don't," she said, laying a finger across my lips. "You don't have to explain. I know."

"You know?"

"That you can't help it. I know you can't really control it."

"Um, like, how do you know that?"

“Baby, I'm not stupid. You don't hide it that well. The stains on your panties, how sore you are mornings after you're out all night. Hell, your friends will talk about anything, but somehow they just miraculously don't talk about what happens after you leave work.”

“Are you mad?”

She smiled. “No, baby. I'm not mad. You wouldn't do anything to hurt me. You wouldn't do this if you could help it.”

“It's like... I dunno. It's all like, I have to 'n' stuff. Like I just, y'know, lose my head.”

“It's okay, Brooke, really,” she told me, caressing my face. “But I need you to tell me the truth.”

“It's only once in a while, baby,” she told me. “Just if the guy's really cute and only if he spends a bunch of money on me at the club. I don't do it with guys I don't like, and I always make sure I get paid afterwards. It's just business.”

Jennifer gasped a little. “You take money for it?”

I giggled. “Of course I do, sweetie! I mean, why shouldn't I 'n' stuff?”

She took a deep breath. “Do you use protection?”

“You mean, like, rubbers?” I said, giggling again. “Sometimes. I dunno. Sometimes I get so into it all I forget to check.”

“Promise me, Brooke,” she said. “Promise me you won't do it again without a condom.”

“But baby...” I whined.

“Brooke... you could get sick, sweetie. Deathly sick. There's AIDS, hepatitis, herpes... and you could make me sick, too. You have to promise me.”

“I want to, baby, like, really. Seriously, but I'm not kidding. I just get so turned on 'n' stuff. Sometimes I just don't check, y'know?”

“Can you at least promise me you'll start checking?” Jennifer asked me.

I stuck out my bottom lip in my most adorable pout. “I guess so.”

She kissed my cheek. “Thank you,” she said. “I can quit worrying. You always keep your promises.”

“Or...” I said, smiling brightly, “you can start doing it with me! You can check in case I, like, get too turned on and forget 'n' shit! That would be totally fun!”

“Whoa,” Jennifer said, holding up her hands and laughing. “Baby, that may be okay for you, but I don't think I could be a hooker.”

“It's really fun,” I teased.

She kissed me. “I'm gonna have to take your word for it,” she laughed. “Can you make me another promise?”

“What?” I asked, a little suspicious. The whole rubber thing had me a little nervous.

“That no matter who you fuck, who you do anything like that with, that you only love me.”

I kissed her. "Oh, that's an easy one."

* * * *

I was trying very hard not to cry while Jennifer packed her bags and got ready to go the next morning. We'd had a great night the night before – we spent all afternoon making love, then a cute dinner at a bistro we both loved not far from our house. We'd accidentally met an old friend of hers there and had hung out for about an hour or so, just chatting. Eddie was a really sweet guy and was really hot to hang out some more. I liked him. He offered to come and hang out while Jennifer was in Vegas, and I was seriously thinking about taking him up on it. Besides, he was kinda cute, too, and hanging out with cute guys tended to lead to other fun things.

"I'm so gonna miss you, baby," I told Jennifer.

"I know, sweetheart," she told me. "I'm going to miss you too. Really. But I really need to do this, okay? I can't tell you why just now, but I will as soon as I get back and everything's going to make sense to you. I promise."

"I know. I mean..." I sniffled. "I just hate thinking you're not gonna be here when I get home."

She stopped packing and stroked my cheek. "You are so sweet."

"I'm serious," I told her, wiping my eyes.

"If it wasn't important..." she said.

I grabbed a Kleenex out of a box next to the bed and wiped my eyes carefully, trying hard not to wreck my eyeliner. I blew my nose and said, "You're, like, gonna miss your flight."

"Don't be sad, sweetie. Please. I just know you're going to be so happy with the stuff I have to do out there. You're really going to love it."

I grinned a little. "I like surprises," I giggled.

She grinned. "There's that smile again. And besides, Brooke, you could totally have fun at an insurance convention. You're going to have a great time while I'm gone, you always do. Hey, you can always call Eddie and hang out with him. And there's Tiffany, and that girl Kerstin..."

"None of them are you," I complained, pouting.

"You're gonna make me cry," Jennifer said.

"I don't wanna do that," I said. "So, like, we should get going 'n' shit."

Jennifer zipped up the last of the matched Louis Vuitton luggage I'd gotten for her. "I think that's everything. Anything I forgot, I guess I can pick up while I'm there."

"Well, remember, you totally promised me you're gonna hit the Versace store while you're there," I told her. "I so wish I could go, y'know, just for that."

"I'll send you pictures."

"You better send me shoes," I shot back.

I walked her down to where her Lexus was parked on the street outside and helped her manhandle her very heavy luggage into the back of the SUV. She shut the hatchback firmly and turned around to look at me, her chin dimpled as she held back tears.

"I'll see you in six days," she told me. "And I'll be thinking about you the whole time. I'll call you every night, I promise, okay?"

I nodded, chin dimpling. I was so about to lose it.

"Don't be so sad, baby. I'll be home soon."

"I know," I sniffled. "But I miss you now."

"I gotta go. Not gonna say goodbye, cause we're never saying goodbye. Just kiss me."

I snaked my arms around her, flattening my tits against hers in that way we both liked, and kissed her as hard as I could, pulling at her hair and scratching her shoulder with my long sexy nails. When we parted, we were both a little breathless, but her more than me. Several passersby had stopped to ogle, two really sexy women making out on the sidewalk in broad daylight. Normally, I really liked when people watched me, but now I resented it a little. I forced myself to ignore them and kissed her again, as hard as I could. When we parted, both of us were having a little trouble keeping our balance.

"Just so you don't, like, forget me or nothin'," I explained.

"No fucking chance," she panted. Reluctantly, she checked her watch. "Baby, I gotta go."

I smoothed wrinkles in her blouse that weren't there, just for an excuse to touch her. "You don't want to miss your flight or nothin'," I said in a small voice just this side of tears.

She stroked my cheek – I melted inside – and climbed into her car. I waved, crying silently, until she rounded the corner and was out of sight. Sagging against the side of the building, I fished a cigarette out of the pack in my pocket and bothered a passing businessman for a light. I just slumped there, sucking on my smoke and pouting for all I was worth, depressed for what felt the first time in my life. I didn't feel like going out, I didn't feel like getting high, I didn't even feel like taking the businessman who'd lit my cigarette into the alleyway to suck his cock. Nothing sounded good.

The muffled sounds of "Smack That" came out of my pocket and I fished out my little pink phone. The caller ID read "Tiffany calling" and I pressed send and pushed it to my ear, clicking lightly against my big platinum hoops.

"Hey girl," I sniffled.

"Hey, you sound like ass," Tiffany said. "What's up?"

"Girlfriend just left town," I said.

"That sucks," Tiffany said. "Hey, you workin' tonight?"

"Yeah," I said weakly. I didn't feel like it, but the club usually cheered me up.

"I know what'll help," Tiffany said. "I'll pick you up for work and we'll go in together, okay?"

"How come?" I asked. "I got my car."

“No, you're comin' in with me, bitch,” Tiffany told me mock-sternly, “‘cause I'm gonna get you fucked up at work tonight.”

I giggled through my pouting. “That sounds like fun,” I told her.

* * * * *

Tiffany and Amanda struggled under my weight a little, giggling the whole way. I could only stagger along between them, an arm across each of their shoulders, and slur my way through singing “Baby Got Back” while snorting laughter at random intervals.

“Girl, you are messed up,” Amanda told me.

“And you're hot as fuck,” I told her, nuzzling her neck. “And you're comin' in for, like, a threesome with me and Tiffany.”

“I can't,” she said, fumbling my keys out of my purse. “I have to go home.”

I blew a wet raspberry. “You suck,” I told her.

“I know I do, honey,” she said patiently.

They manhandled me – which I liked a lot – through the front door and flopped me onto my Aldo Ciabatti couch in a heap. I was still wearing my dance clothes – the tailored business suit, the naughty secretary thing had gone over big tonight. I couldn't close the little leather purse I'd been carrying. Reaching into it – I'd put it in my other purse to carry – I grabbed a handful of money out, I didn't even look how much, and thrust it towards Tiffany.

“Here,” I said. “For, like, gas 'n' shit.”

“Honey, that's, like, three hundred dollars there,” Tiffany said.

“Take it!” I yelled at the me middle one of the three Tiffanys I was seeing.

She took the money and took one bill out of the big sheaf. “That's all you owe me, sweetheart,” she said. “You keep the rest, okay?”

I hugged her. “You fucking rock,” I said, rocking her back and forth.

Tiffany laughed. “Goddamn, you're wrecked,” she said against my right tit. “Listen, you gonna be okay tonight?”

I tried to figure out what she meant by that. I'd had a great night – I only thought about Jennifer every now and then, but whenever I did I just took a shot of tequila – and then danced some more. The evening was great – I knew I had fun – but it was just a little blurry. There'd been an argument with a manager, I remembered. He'd been all pissed off because I'd blown this really cute guy up in the VIP room right in front of everybody. He'd said he was going to send me home but I whined and begged. After that, though, all the guys wanted a dance from me.

“Here's a trashcan, in case you need to puke, okay?” Amanda said, setting it beside the couch.

“That's a Catalan Italia, dammit,” I slurred, pounding a fist against the couch. “I ain't puking in that! That cost, like, four hundred bucks?”

“Bitch, you need to get yourself some shit at Target,” Amanda said, pulling off my shoes.

They left me there on the couch, watching the ceiling spin, and put a roll of paper towels and a bottle of water out of my fridge next to my cell phone on the coffee table. They put my cigarettes and the fake glasses I wore with the secretary outfit next to those.

"I'll holler at you later, girl," Tiffany said, kissing my cheek.

"Y'all want to do some blow before you take off?" I mumbled against the cushion.

"No, thanks," Tiffany laughed. "Later, okay? I really gotta motor."

"Okay," I said, waving weakly. "Love you guys."

"We love you too, baby," they said, closing the door behind them.

* * * * *

I woke up in near-blackness. Stripes of light moved across one wall, headlights through blinds. My head pounded and I was dizzy and nauseous, my mouth felt full of cotton. Strange softness was everywhere – tickling my shoulders and face like millions of tiny feathers and like tight, silken pillows against my chest and backside.

I had no idea where I was. I was having a hell of a time focusing, my mind tried to worm away from the tasks I put it to, like it couldn't stay in one place for more than a few seconds. Angrily, I shook my head. The feathers assaulted my face and neck and I had to spit them out of my dry mouth. The motion made me sick and I had to sit very still for a moment.

I was face down on a couch. Irritably, I pushed myself up, fighting the vertigo and nausea that tried to keep me there. Was this some side effect of the ReNu process? I was going to have some very angry things to say to Dr. Stanhope if it was.

I reached onto the coffee table for the glasses I noticed there through my crusted eyes. My fingers clicked against the tabletop – my fingernails? - and I grabbed the glasses gingerly, since I couldn't seem to make contact with anything with my fingertips. I slid them onto my nose. My eyelashes brushed against the lenses immediately, leaving little grey-black smears across them. Irritably, I pulled them off – poking myself in the side of the face with what could only be my fingernails – and reached down to clean them with my shirttail. My hand found only a soft, slightly stretchy bit of fabric. I pushed my glasses back on and stared down in alarm. No shirttail. A pinstriped skirt. A miniskirt, it looked like.

I sat up slowly. My balance seemed all wrong, and I felt as though I was both sitting on a pillow and that my crotch was exposed in the tiny skirt. I looked around the strange apartment slowly, both to avoid the nausea and the assault of the tiny feathers again. Long, blonde curls drifted into my field of vision.

The last thing I remembered was... a hospital? Being in a hospital, then someone coming and mentioning something about someplace safe... I couldn't focus. And how did I wake up in a strange apartment full of scandalously expensive designer furniture, wearing a miniskirt?

What the hell was going on?

To Be Continued...



SUMMARY: When a rich man decides that he will undergo a new treatment to enhance his looks, he does not count on someone sabotaging his transformation.

SIX MILLION DOLLAR EX-MAN

Part Nine

by Valerie Hope

I FUMBLED AROUND A LITTLE before finding a lamp switch and clicked it on. My eyes blinked back pained tears as the light assaulted me and I held my head and groaned. A strange, high-pitched groan. When I grabbed my head in both hands to keep myself from being sick, my fingers buried themselves in rabbit-soft curls which made me draw them back in shock. I looked at my hands. Small, narrow palms with long, slender fingers, each circled with a ring dripping in diamonds – those can't be real – and tipped with an inch or inch-and-a-half long fingernail, tipped in lustrous white and studded with rhinestones in the shapes of hearts.

The reflection in the glass tabletop showed a heart-shaped face dominated by girlishly wide blue eyes framed by impossibly long lashes behind a chic pair of rimless glasses. Smeared makeup made the eyes look deep-set, but did nothing to detract from the beauty of the flawless amber complexion, the slender aquiline nose and the generous, pouting mouth with the bee-stung lips coated with glossy pink. A thick cascade of white-blonde curls poured from the head, making it look smaller, to settle around the face and narrow shoulders like a cloud. A mischievous tendril of kinky curls crept down across the face.

I put a hand to my face in shock. I felt it. My face felt my hand, but the reflection of the girl mimicked the motions exactly.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, and the silky mellifluous soprano that reached my ears made me jump a little. Overlarge, silvery hoops nestled in the blonde curls. I tugged one experimentally and received a sharp twinge in my earlobe for an answer. My ears were pierced, as well. From what I could see in the hazy reflection on the tabletop, perhaps several times.

I saw a little pink cell-phone next to a bottle of water and a pack of cigarettes on the coffee table. Fumbling, I picked it up and forced myself to calm down after dropping it twice. The long nails made it nearly impossible to do anything. It took me several minutes to dial, finally using the squared corners of my nails to press the buttons. It felt very strange to be manipulating things that I couldn't feel. My fingertips were at least three quarters of an inch away from the buttons.

The phone rang interminably. Finally, a familiar voice answered: “This is Dr. Michael Stanhope. I'm not available to take your call...”

I took as many deep breaths as I could, trying to stay calm. The deep breathing was making my absolutely titanic breasts – what possessed anyone to make them that large? I wondered – threaten to pop out of the top of the little lace merry widow I was wearing under my tailored jacket. Why on earth am I dressed like this?

The entirely-too-cheerful female voice finally finished explaining to me how to leave a voice message or a call-back number and the tone sounded. My voice sounded husky and breathless when I spoke, and I purposefully ignored how sexy that sounded.

“Dr. Stanhope, it's Brock Stills. I don't know what time it is, or what day. I'm in a strange apartment somewhere, and I'm a woman. Please call this number back. It's very urgent, and I'm very frightened right now. I won't go anywhere until I hear from you.”

I hung up and started trying to ascertain where I was. There was a very expensive-looking computer on a desk in the next room, just visible through the open door. I stood slowly and padded across the hardwood. The huge breasts – my breasts – bounced and jiggled wildly with every step until I relented and physically held them down with my long-nailed hands. I dimly registered how tight and confining my clothes were. I made a quick note to try and find something else to wear.

I booted the computer – the processor was quite pleasantly fast – and was surprised to see the desktop wallpaper was a picture of a myself, dressed in a skin-tight pink tube dress and high heels, dripping with jewelry, in a group of four other women, each as beautiful and breathtakingly sexy as I was. They all wore tight, revealing clothing except for the one standing next to me, who was in a tailored, professional-looking business suit. All were smiling and laughing. The background dimly showed a beach boardwalk crowded with weekend revelers.

There was nothing of use on the computer, just a web browser, an office suite and some underpowered antivirus software. It looked like the computer had only what the manufacturer had installed. The folders containing music and photographs were packed, however, and the web browser's bookmarks were stuffed with online stores and shopping. I ignored that and entered the URL for my personal server at XenoSoft from memory. I had to hunt and peck with the restrictive fingernails, making typing an exercise in frustration which had me growling. My head was pounding and I still felt sick. Opening the browser, I brought up WebMD and checked my symptoms. The only thing it came up with was hangover, which I ignored. I didn't drink, so that couldn't be it.

I downloaded some of my personal software – applications I'd written myself several years ago – and began searching several immense databases for news of my company. The date shocked me – it had been five weeks and change since I'd gone into ReNu for my treatment. I'd lost well over a month of memories, as well as having my body changed into that of a nymph. Once I'd set up the searches, I tried to get into XenoSoft's server, but found that my password had been changed. Alarmed, I tried another login and failed again. Someone had locked me out of my own company.

The search engines were coming up with results already. Apparently, I'd been in the news. Missing, now an ongoing court case around having me declared legally dead. My assets frozen, since news of my untimely demise would leave me intestate and all my property, including my very valuable intellectual property, would be squabbled over and eventually absorbed.

What in the hell was going on? How could this be happening? Overwhelmed, I slipped my glasses off to rub the bridge of my nose – carefully, with the claws I had, and...

What the fuck? Last I remembered, Tiffany and Amanda had, like, dumped my drunk ass on the couch and totally split out on me. I was still fucked up and stuff, but I could totally get rid

of that with a couple bumps of coke and a hot shower where I, like, played in the water a little... Oh, fuck me, what am I, like, doing in here? And why do I have these glasses in my hand? Still, I totally looked cute in 'em, so I just, like, slipped 'em back on so I could blow kisses to myself in the mirror and...

I sat in shock. Taking the glasses off made everything – not just my vision – a hazy fog. It almost felt like someone else was in control of the life. Could that be it? Could that be why I didn't remember the last month and a half of my life? I shuddered, and to my immense surprise discovered I was crying, little hiccuping sobs that made my shoulders shake and my gigantic tits jiggle. Angry, shocked, I tried to get a hold of myself, but discovered to my alarm that I couldn't stop. I have no idea how long I sat there and bawled like a baby, but there was no stopping until I cried myself out. Huge drops were leaving salty grey blotches on the lenses of my glasses, but I didn't dare take them off. I blew my nose with a Kleenex from a box in the bathroom – filled with scented this and exfoliating that, I had no idea what a tenth of that shit was actually for – and tried to compose myself. Sitting angrily back at the computer, I shoved a vase containing some kind of pink flower out of the way so violently they almost crashed to the floor.

Wait! Not the chrysanthemums, those are your favorites!

Favorites? I didn't even like flowers!

There was a knock at the door and I jumped. Could it have be Stanhope? Did he know where I was? Without thinking, I bounced and jiggled my way across the floor into the darkened foyer, holding on to my tits to keep them from breaking my jaw as I jogged. I peered through the peephole – I had to stand on tiptoe to do it – and saw only a figure silhouetted by the lights of the breezeway outside. I pulled the chain and opened the door to the grim face of a very tall, very muscular and very dangerous-looking black man in a dark suit.

“Do I know you?” I asked him.

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a silvery gun, which he shoved into my face. I backed up two steps involuntarily and he immediately followed me in. “You shouldn't have called Stanhope,” he growled. “Daddy wants you brought in.”

“Daddy? Who – what are you talking about? My father is dead!” I argued.

“And you're gonna join him if you don't hustle your ass,” he commanded. He made a sharp gesture with the gun. “Move.”

“Where are we going?” I asked him plaintively. I couldn't believe how whiney I sounded.

He raised a hand as if to slap me. He towered over me, and I braced for the impact I was sure would drive me to my knees, if not flat on my back. With my eyes squeezed shut, I heard a metallic click. It took a second to open my eyes. My would-be attacker still had his hand in the air, joined now by his other. A squat, dark-skinned Latino in a leather coat was putting my assailant's gun in his pocket with one hand while holding another flush against the first man's temple. He smiled at me but his eyes never left his prisoner.

“Thought you could use some help,” he said. “Good thing I was watching your house.”

“Do I know you?” I asked him.

"We met the other night," he said, looking a little confused.

"Look, man, I don't remember a thing about the last five weeks," I told him honestly. "I just woke up here tonight in this strange apartment and in these – I guess you can call 'em clothes – and I have no idea how I got here or what the hell happened to me. Why is my body like this? And my hair? What the hell happened to me? Where's Stanhope?"

He looked at me and his eyes betrayed that he hadn't the foggiest idea what was going on.

"Stanhope's in a van, parked outside. He about panicked when you called, but we knew your phone was probably tapped. We waited to see if whoever did this to you sent somebody, and bingo. Now we're getting somewhere, don't you think?"

Silently, he cuffed the bigger man and searched his pockets as I stood there, trying to take it all in. "Will you please tell me what the hell is going on?"

The man looked at me askance. "You're kidding, right?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Eddie. Eddie Gutierrez. I work for Derrick Hall."

"That name sounds familiar," I said, rubbing my temple. I scratched myself again and I hissed.

He looked a little shocked. "Waitaminnit," he said. "You remember Derrick Hall? And Stanhope? What the hell is going on here?"

"I don't know," I said irritably. "All I know is that I woke up here, and I have no idea how I got here, why I'm dressed like this, and for that matter, why I'm a woman with these... these... airbags on my chest, and on top of it, I feel like I'm going to yurk all over myself and my head is pounding."

He grinned lopsidedly. "Well, that's probably because you're hung over and probably nicking."

"I don't drink," I told him, "and what the hell is nicking?"

"Nicking out," he told me. "Jonesing for a cigarette."

"Jonesing for a... I don't smoke."

He chuckled. "Girl, the two packs of Virginia Slims you burnt up tonight say otherwise, and last I checked, the fifteen shots of Patrón you downed at work qualify as drinking. I have it all on tape, if you want the proof."

"Wait... at work? I'm not allowed into my work. I tried to log in just a little while ago. They're trying to declare me dead."

He colored slightly. "Not your company," he said, suddenly abashed. "Your, uh... other job."

"Other job? What other job?"

He shook his head. "No time for that now. I gotta get you back to Stanhope and Hall. We have to figure out what the hell is happening to you."

"Now you're talking," I said. I stood and hustled towards the door.

"Don't you wanna grab your purse? Maybe put on some shoes?" he asked.

“Not really,” I said, “but I guess I should.”

* * * * *

Jennifer Hodges was a lot of things, but a gambler wasn't ordinarily one of them. It wasn't that she disapproved – she tried not to disapprove of anything, keeping an open mind usually had benefits – but the fear of losing her very hard-earned money far outweighed the excitement of winning more. Still, it was that kind of evening, she thought. The talk with David went better than she'd expected. He looked older, the same as she did, and maybe a little wiser. None of the original spark that led her to marry him in the first place was left. She never saw her passionate lover across the table at the restaurant where they'd met. She only saw a tired, slightly balding and rounder man who used to inflame her with a glance or touch but now only made her feel a certain numb acceptance.

He'd smiled, and joked, the way he always had before, but it didn't have the charm it used to. He was still funny and witty, and well-read, but it didn't make him the glittering genius she used to think he was. And she'd lost the ability to inflame him, as well. She regretted that, a little, missed that she could lean forward and breathe deeply in a low-cut blouse and the next thing she'd know they'd be looking for a deserted custodial closet or back seat.

He'd signed the divorce papers with a sad, wistful smile, obviously thinking the same thing she was, wondering what could have been, missing the old fire. But he had been a gentleman to the end, even kissing her cheek fondly when they'd parted. And just like that, Jennifer was free.

Strangely, it didn't feel any different. She thought she'd have this great rush of emotion, but she dimly began to realize that there was no emotion she could feel right now that wasn't completely tied up with Brooke. That crazy blonde bitch filled her top to bottom, side to side. She'd changed everything about Jennifer in her offhand way, and Jennifer loved her for it.

She strolled through the casino with a self-assured strut that drew eyes. Ordinarily, that would have made her feel self-conscious, but she decided that, if she was going to let herself change to be more like Brooke, then she should let the changes inside happen as fast. I like it when they look, Brooke always told her, shaking her tits and ass and smiling that secret smile she had when she could feel the eyes on her. It makes me feel sexy, and feeling sexy is just for me. It kind of worked. She felt... bigger, somehow, more in control. It was fleeting, kind of like the way the cocaine made her feel. Maybe it was because she related it to the drugs, that's why she felt like it was fake. She wished she could get high the way Brooke did, just for fun. But she was feeling herself need it, need it to feel the way she wanted to feel, and it scared her. She hadn't brought any to Vegas – a combination of attempting to distance herself from her newfound addiction and the difficulty of trying to get it through an airport – but she was already thinking about how to find some here. It worried her.

A shapely woman in a business suit and thick-framed, square-rimmed glasses – Dolce & Gabbana, she noted, and smiled to herself, the constant reminder of her Brooke – was waiting by a roulette table and smiled, waving Jennifer over.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Good, I guess, Dr. Wheeler,” Jennifer replied. “A little nervous.”

“I suppose that's to be expected,” she said with a reassuring smile. “But there's nothing to worry about. Whoever developed the technology tested it exhaustively. It's quite safe.”

Jennifer sighed deeply. "Then I guess we better get started," she said.

Dr. Wheeler smiled and patted her shoulder. "The nice thing about your being my only patient is that we can get started whenever you like," she said. "Why not stay a little while? Play some slots or something. There's no rush, Jennifer."

Jennifer blew out a long sigh. "I could use a drink, actually," she said.

A waitress came by and Jennifer ordered a white wine and a few hundred in chips. She lit a cigarette and sat at the roulette table, nodding distractedly and toying with the strand of Mikimoto pearls that Brooke had lent her to go with the black Christian Loubouton dress she was wearing as Dr. Wheeler explained the rules. Hardly even paying attention to anything other than her drink and her recent spate of extreme decisions.

"Winner," the caller announced, sliding a considerably bigger stack of chips towards Jennifer. Distractedly, she pushed them onto another marked space on the green felt and turned to Dr. Wheeler, the talented doctor that Dr. Stanhope had placed in charge of Jennifer's upcoming transformation.

"Do you think I'm doing the right thing, Janet?" Jennifer asked, using the doctor's first name the way she'd been insisting since they met. "All these changes?"

She gestured to her chest with one hand. "Like 'em?" she asked. "I had the girls done six years ago. One of the best things I ever did for myself. Guys stare at them all the time, and after a while I started learning to like it. But that is not – I repeat not – why I did it."

"Why did you do it?"

"For me. For a little flat-chested girl with braces and acne who never got to feel for a moment that she was pretty, or sexy. It took me about a year to get used to the guys looking, but it took me all of five minutes to get used to filling out a bikini top."

"And you think it'll be the same for me?" Jennifer asked.

"I don't know, Jennifer," she said. "All I do know is that if you're making the transformation for the right reasons, it will turn out great."

"Winner," the caller announced.

Jennifer shoved her chips to another space, hardly even looking. "But what are the right reasons?" she asked.

"Honey, there are as many answers to that question as there are people in the world," Dr. Wheeler answered. "Only you can answer that question truthfully. But you have to do this for yourself, Jennifer. You have to. It can't be for anyone else."

"Not even someone you love?"

"Especially not for someone you love," she replied. "Then either they'll feel like they owe you something, or you'll feel like they owe you something. And there will always be the doubt, that you had to do it because they didn't love you the way you were."

Jennifer sighed. "I don't want to feel like that. I've spent too much time feeling like that."

“Then finish your wine, play some blackjack, and think about it. Everything will be ready for you if you decide to go ahead, and it's just as easy to take it all down if you decide not to.”

Jennifer smiled. “I appreciate it, doc, but I probably better keep the wine to a minimum,” she said. “Probably better keep my head clear. And I should probably avoid the blackjack, too. I'm broke enough as it is.”

Dr. Wheeler gestured to the roulette wheel, which had just stopped again on a number where a considerable amount of Jennifer's chips were standing. “I shouldn't think that would be too big a problem, Jennifer,” she said with a wry smile, “considering you just won four thousand dollars.”

* * * * *

“I don't understand,” Dr. Stanhope said. “It's a total reversal. His memory, his personality – it's all restored. And all the subliminal training he received, all the refinements, are all gone.”

“Not gone,” Dr. Alexander Kransz said, tapping his bottom lip with a pencil. He was perhaps one of the most innovative and successful neurobehavioral researchers in the world, and had come in as a personal favor to Stanhope. He radiated professionalism and control, even though his close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and the graying vanDyke beard and his considering brown eyes gave him an almost comical resemblance to Sigmund Freud.

“How do you mean?” Hall asked, slugging coffee. The man looked awful. He probably hadn't slept in four or five days.

“The mind is infinitely complex,” Kransz said. “We haven't even scratched the surface of what it's capable of. Research has shown us that two or more separate, distinct and fully-formed personalities can exist in a single mind. Research has also shown that the brain has an amazing capability to find ways around damage.” He tapped a file folder next to him. “This case documents a man in Indiana who re-trained himself to speak and read after the part of his brain which controlled those functions was physically destroyed in an industrial injury.”

“You're saying that Brooke – Brock – I honestly don't know what to call her now – her brain has found a way to re-access the memories and personality that whoever did this to her destroyed?”

“That's exactly what I'm saying,” Kransz said. “Brock Stills' original personality was never destroyed, Dr. Stanhope. It was subsumed. Replaced. Written over. But somewhere in his brain the original copy got kept. And now it's back in control, and has found a way past the restrictions that infernal device has placed on her mental capacity.”

“But why?”

“Strangely enough, it was a fluke,” Kransz said. “Alcohol has a very drastic effect on the human brain, and Ms. Stillwater consumed a great amount that night. It deadened her higher brain functions and, somehow, the effects of that device. It allowed the original personality to assert itself for a brief time. Think of it like two pilots each wanting the controls. Brooke drank too much and passed out at the controls, so the original personality took over.”

“Will she stay that way?”

“No,” Kransz said simply. “The new personality is far too powerful and the benefits of her existence outweigh what the original ever provided. But the survival instinct is the strongest we have. The original has figured out a way to survive. The eyeglasses.”

Stanhope looked confused. “Glasses?”

“A simple act, one that Mr. Stills had experienced every morning of his life since age six. Reaching over and putting on his glasses. Mundane, but strong associations.”

“Associations with what?”

“Waking up,” Kransz said. “Seeing clearly. It all tracks. Put the glasses on in the morning when you awake, and you can see clearly for as long as you wear them. Take them off, and everything becomes blurry and indistinct again, usually right before you go to sleep. That personality has made it a trigger event, and the other personality has accepted it. However, it triggers negative associations as well as the positive. Wearing glasses make for geeks and nerds, make people less attractive, were probably a source of ridicule for him as a child. The Brooke personality has withdrawn access to the training – containing everything that makes her sexy and attractive – while the glasses are on, as well, and the Brock Stills personality has to fend for itself.”

“‘Boys don't make passes at girls who wear glasses,’ you mean,” Stanhope said. “That is fascinating.”

“And convenient,” Kransz said. “Look, Michael, I can find a way through this but it could take years of intensive therapy and study. Plus, I haven't the foggiest how to remove that damn machine in her brain without making her a quadriplegic for life. Besides, the Brooke personality loves it, depends on it to keep her separate from the original personality. But at least there's a way to control it. A way to mitigate it.”

“Wouldn't it just be best to leave them on? Leave the Brooke personality submerged?”

Kransz scratched his ear. “I don't think so,” he said. “First of all, the Brooke personality is by far the stronger, as well as the only one suited to the body it occupies. Brock Stills cannot begin to cope with life in a woman's body – you have proof of that from your time with her – much less life in that woman's body with its elevated needs and desires. Secondly, the Brooke personality provides safety. Brock Stills was attacked and hunted. Brooke Stillwater is safe. Besides, leaving the Brooke personality submerged will eventually lead to it reasserting itself, the same way the original did. If that happens, we have no way to tell what would trigger it. It would possibly be out of our control and we could lose the original entirely, as you did before.”

“I see your point,” Stanhope said.

“Plus, there's the drug addiction to consider, and the question of simple happiness,” Kransz concluded. “Which one is the happier? The more complete?”

Stanhope scratched his head. “That's for him – her – to decide. We have to confine ourselves to practical matters for now, Alex. How long is it safe to leave Brock in control?”

Kransz removed his glasses and paced a little, considering. “Let's go out on a limb and say that the Brooke personality is twice as strong and twice as needy as the original,” he said,

looking at the ceiling as he always did when he thought out loud. Stanhope remembered it well from their days as undergraduate roommates.

“Fair enough,” Stanhope agreed.

“Then it stands to reason that she should spend two hours as Brooke for every hour she spends as Brock,” Kransz said. “I wouldn’t push it, though. Brock Stills gets agitated easily, and is not equipped to live like this. He’s in acute drug withdrawal and has no idea why, for example. Think what he would be like during a menstrual period, or if he gets turned on by something.”

“I see,” Stanhope said. “Executive decision, then. No more than four hours a day as Brock, and when she takes the glasses off she should be in familiar surroundings.”

“I think we should let her work,” Kransz said. “She’s safe enough there.”

“I agree,” Hall put in. “Gutierrez can keep an eye on her like he’s been doing, and we can definitely place more guards.”

“Then I suggest you do it now,” Kransz said. “Brooke has needs that she needs to see to.”

“I’ll have my people take her back to her apartment right away,” Hall said.

“Wouldn’t Gutierrez be better?” Stanhope asked. “Brooke knows him.”

“Eddie can’t do it,” Hall said simply, giving no further explanation than, “he’s busy right now.”

* * * * *

“It’s not that I don’t believe you, Curtis,” Gutierrez said, pulling off the bloody padded gloves he’d used on the tall black man he’d detained in Brooke’s apartment. “I want to believe you. But I just don’t, that’s all.”

He started pacing in a slow circle around the bloody, beaten man – a move calculated to make the prisoner feel menaced and off-balance. He’d had good luck with it when he worked for the government agency with no name he’d signed on with just out of the military. “You know why I don’t believe you, Curtis?”

He stared straight forward, panting a little. He was hanging on by a very thin thread, and Eddie was trying very hard to let him hang on. He’d surrender a lot more information if he felt like he had a little bit of control. Let him hang on to the unimportant stuff, think he was winning, and he’d be much more free with what he considered the “little stuff.” Fact was, Gutierrez already had most of the stuff he’d be hanging on to anyway. All he needed was something mundane – a phone number, a name, a drop point.

“I don’t believe you because nobody can be as ignorant as you about a job like this,” he said. “You’re trying to make me believe that you were hired to kill someone by someone you don’t know, have never talked to and never met for a sum of money that you don’t know. You must think I’m pretty stupid.”

“If the shoe fits,” the tall man said, trying to crack a smile through bloodied, split lips.

“See? That’s clever. You’re a clever guy, Curtis. Clever guys like you don’t take jobs from people they don’t know without knowing how much they’re getting paid,” Gutierrez said

conversationally. “Now, Curtis, can we discuss this like grown-up, civilized adults, or are you gonna make this ugly again. I got all night, marine.”

He flinched. Truth was, Gutierrez had the guy's entire service record. It always worked better if you let them think they were outsmarting you.

“Fuck you,” Curtis grunted.

“See, now, that's not nice,” Eddie said. “Who hired you, Curtis?”

“I told you. I don't know.”

Eddie picked up a piece of pipe from the bloodied tray sitting next to the restrained prisoner. “Oh, Curtis, Curtis, Curtis,” he said sadly, turning the pipe over in his hands. “This is gonna be a long night.”

* * * * *

I slumped over the scattered pictures and files from the investigation at a table in a musty conference room, my head in my hands. God, I felt awful. I sipped some more Gatorade – they still insisted I was hung over, no matter how improbable – and tried not to feel my body. My body, however, had very poignant ways to remind me it was there, every time I moved. I endeavored to sit very, very still.

Three others had been taken and transformed, according to Hall. All were brilliant men, all had participated in authoring the technology that founded XenoSoft and made it successful and all owned patents which kept them very wealthy.

Ken Blauer had co-authored the streaming data management technology which went into some of our first releases. He'd taken his patent and started a company of his own, integrating the software he'd written into a method for real-time interpretation of MRI data, allowing real-time mapping of the human brain. Last I'd heard, he was a serious contender for the Nobel Prize in Medicine. I remember how Ken had railed against working out – he considered it a waste of human potential, a focus on everything that was useless and pointless. Now he was a twenty-something year old woman who could do nothing else but exercise, could talk about little else. But why change him to a Swedish national? Just to hide the identity further? That couldn't be the reason. My name was barely changed, and there was even a slight resemblance remaining between the picture of the gray-haired bespectacled Ken Blauer and the shapely, blue-eyed Kerstin Solveig Ragnussen.

Waitaminnit. Swedish. Stockholm. It was about the Nobel. It was about the patent.

We're being punished.

I could remember a time, early in the days of the company. We'd just made an important release, a big one. Everyone in the party – I couldn't remember who all was there, we were working out of spare rooms, we didn't even have an office then – wanted to go spend some of the money we'd just made. They were ragging me, I remember, for not wanting to spend any money. I wanted to save, we had no idea if our business was going to amount to anything. They decided to go to a strip club by fiat, and I remember clearly not wanting to go.

Why? I asked them flatly. Why even go to a place like that? Those girls are all drug addicts and hookers, or else they're lesbians. Besides, if I'm hungry, I don't want to pay to look at a picture of a steak.

Now, according to the bank records in front of me, I spent money like it grew on trees. Probably the money from my patents, if this guy's sick sense of humor was any indication. And I was everything I'd accused a stripper of being, according to Hall. Addicted to cocaine, a high-priced call girl and promiscuous to boot and with a live-in girlfriend.

It was someone who'd been with us from the beginning, then, since the earliest days when we were just wild ideas on paper. And it was someone who knew the patents, who owned what. And he was punishing us for our use of the patents. I slid another picture across the table, a gorgeous smiling Asian girl with a glittering smile and a drool-worthy body. She was wearing a barely-there bikini and stretched over a classic car hood in an auto-parts calendar pose. John Dansforth had used his patents to resell his technology overseas, in Japan. Now Keiko Hatamari – she went by “April” – was a Japanese expatriate. I remembered how he would blow up when we'd get pornographic email spam, going on and on about how degenerate and immoral it was to exploit women in such a way, to make them little more than decoration and diminishing them to a two-dimensional image. Now he was a bikini model who did car and boat shows and worked her off hours as a waitress at Hooters.

The same with the picture of the gorgeous statuesque blonde I slid from the pile, a glamorous head-shot of a woman with a supple-yet-hard athletic body and firm silicone breasts, smiling a mouthful of brilliant white dental veneers at the camera, her pom-poms at her hips and the skin-tight uniform of the local professional football team hugging her every delicious curve. Henry Selig had despised perpetually cheerful people, they annoyed him in every conceivable way. He would compare them – unfavorably – to yip-dogs and dismiss them, no matter how smart or insightful, simply on the basis of their upbeat personalities. He was being very profoundly punished by his status as a professional football cheerleader, expected to smile and show spirit her every waking hour. Henry had dealt a serious financial blow to the company, once, by registering a patent for his brilliant file-management application technology in the Ukraine so that no one in the United States could reverse-engineer his code. Small wonder that the bubbly, perky blonde cheerleader with the vapid toothy smile and the centerfold body was now Katja Irina Sergeinova, moved to the U.S. from the Ukraine when she was only eight years old.

I rubbed my temples, stabbing myself painfully with my manicured talons. Who could be doing this? There weren't that many of us in the beginning, and of those people, no more than a handful who could ever have masterminded a scheme like this, much less executed it. Only the best and the brightest, really, the original executive board of XenoSoft. People I thought I'd trusted.

The door to the room opened and I turned to see who it was, slinging my mammoth breasts against the back of the chair hard enough to make me wince. They continued jiggling and bouncing in the confines of the overlarge sweatshirt Stanhope had lent to me just to remind me of their presence.

Hall and Stanhope came in and sat across from me, regarding the pile of files and evidence I'd been going through. A third man came in, leaning against the wall, but he didn't sit and didn't

speak. Stanhope had introduced him earlier, naming him Dr. Kransz, but he'd given me very little additional information. I gave him a searching look.

"Anything?" Hall asked, gesturing to the files.

"Just a theory," I said. "Henry Selig, John Dansforth, Ken Blauer and I all worked on some of the original technology behind XenoSoft. We all hold valuable patents as a result of that work, and every one of our transformations seem to be aimed at punishing us, somehow, for who we were back then, or opinions we expressed, and also what we did with our patents."

I went on to explain the irony of Henry Selig becoming Katja Sergeinova, of Ken Blauer becoming Kerstin Solveig Ragnussen, of John Dansforth becoming April Hatamari and finally of myself becoming Brooke Stillwater. Hall made careful and detailed notes of every word I'd said.

"This is a whole new direction to consider," he commented as I finished.

"Does it shed any light?" I asked hopefully.

"It will," Hall said. "We just have to add this angle into the suspects we already have."

"And you're not going to tell me those suspects," I said flatly.

"Not right now," Hall said, placing one of his hands over mine and squeezing gently. I took a little comfort from it, but it made me feel unbearably feminine. "We aren't sure what the capabilities of the device in your brain are, yet. Dr. Stanhope is still studying it. We can't be sure that your attacker can't hear every word we say, for example. We have to assume, until we know differently, that anything we tell you we essentially tell him."

I sighed and extracted my hand from Hall's warm grip. He had surprisingly soft hands for a man. "I suppose that's only prudent," I said. "So what now?"

"We were thinking of taking you back to your apartment," Hall said. "Put you back where you'd been hidden in plain sight. That would arouse no suspicion."

"Back there?" I asked, eyes wide. "I'm not sure I want to go back there, particularly alone. Look, Mr. Hall, you even went so far as to show me my name on the mortgage, but I swear to you, that condo isn't mine. I don't live there."

"I know this is difficult, Brooke," Dr. Kransz spoke up from his spot near the door. "But there are some steps we can take to make it easier."

"Such as?"

"Could you remove your glasses, please?" he asked simply.

I felt a moment's panic. "I can't see without them," I said stubbornly.

"I understand that," Kransz said, and he sounded as though he actually did. "But I'm asking you to do it anyway. Is that all right with you?"

Nodding reluctantly, I took a deep, steadying breath and did as he asked.

"Oh my God, what the fuck am I wearing?" I exclaimed. "I mean, like, shit, dude!"

"Would you like to go home and change?" Stanhope asked.

I snorted. "Duh. Like, where am I 'n' stuff? Is my car here? Can one of y'all, like, give me a ride home?"

Hall stood tiredly and offered me a lopsided smile. "Sure, Brooke. I'll give you a lift."

I snatched up my little Gucci purse from the chair behind me and dug frantically in it, looking for my cigarettes. Finding them, I stuffed one in my mouth and began digging for my lighter. I swear, it was like someone else packed my purse, nothing was where it was supposed to be, and whoever did it didn't even put in lip gloss or a hairbrush. Hall saved me, flicking a disposable lighter alight in front of me. I cupped my hands around the flame and puffed away.

"Oh my Gawd, thanks," I gushed, exhaling a cloud of blue smoke. "I don't know what the fuck, but I was totally dying for a smoke 'n' stuff. Um... does anybody know how I, like, got here?"

Hall took my arm gently and led me towards the door. "I'll explain everything on the ride home."

* * * * *

Jennifer Hodges tossed her cigarette out the window of the rental car and pressed her phone to her ear. She'd been trying, with difficulty, not to be one of those clingy girls but she couldn't seem to go ten minutes without wanting to call Brooke, just to hear her voice. Brooke's phone went to voice-mail and she sighed heavily.

"Hey baby, it's just me. Missing you. Wanted to say hi, nothing serious," she said, trying to sound lighthearted. "Just wanted to tell you that I'm going to Cirque du Soleil tonight and I'll have my cell off, so don't freak out if you don't get me. I'll call you tomorrow. I love you."

She pressed end and got out of the rental, her low heels clicking loudly on the pavement just outside the climate-controlled self-storage place that Dr. Wheeler had rented to set up the equipment. Jennifer had taken the retrovirus last night, tailored to what she wanted, and she felt no different this morning. Maybe the transformation wasn't going to be as bad as she thought, if the retrovirus that was supposed to rewrite her DNA from the ground up only made her a little queasy for about ten minutes last night.

"Good morning, Jennifer," Dr. Wheeler said brightly as she entered the concrete storage locker. It was a small room, only about eight feet by ten feet, but crammed floor to ceiling with equipment. Dr. Wheeler had mentioned that she'd had to rent out the space next door just to hold all the cases for the equipment. Still, it was better than a hotel room, and considerably more anonymous.

"Hi," Jennifer said, trying not to sound too nervous. The physical changes she'd asked for didn't bother her nearly as much as this for some reason. Dr. Wheeler swore that the mental stuff was completely safe and all the changes in her mind would make perfect sense to her, as if they'd been her ideas and her life experience the whole time. It sounded a little far-fetched.

"I'm just triple-checking everything," Dr. Wheeler announced. "I finished your program late last night and I just want to make sure that everything's ready to go before we start."

"I'm not gonna be... I mean, I'm still gonna know everything I know now, right?"

Dr. Wheeler stopped what she was doing and offered a heartfelt and reassuring smile. "Of course, Jennifer. I promise, I'm not going to let anything bad happen to you. And you'll be completely in control of yourself, and still have all your mental faculties that you do

now. We're counting on you, remember? You're the one who has to look after Brooke for us. We need you every bit as sharp as you are right this second."

Jennifer let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding. "Okay," she said at length. "I guess I'm ready."

"Great," Dr. Wheeler said. "If you'll just have a seat in that chair right there, I'll be ready to get started in five minutes. Just relax, sweetheart. Everything is going to be fine. Better than fine."

"I hope so," Jennifer said, stepping gingerly over the masses of cords, wires and machines between her and the comfortable-looking chair. A set of what looked like tiny television screens were attached to a boom over the chair, where they could be lowered over Jennifer's eyes.

"It's going to feel like having very vivid dreams," Dr. Wheeler said. "But it's quite relaxing."

"I dunno," Jennifer said. "It's just all so Dr. Frankenstein to me."

"I thought so, too, right at first," Dr. Wheeler countered, the majority of her attention on a laptop computer sitting atop a large featureless machine which whirred with the sound of cooling fans. "But believe me, there's nothing to worry about. You'll be asleep for most of it."

"Okay," Jennifer said.

"I'm planning on just keeping you sedated after you're done," Dr. Wheeler said. "I'll go straight from this into making the physical changes you asked for. No point in waking you up just to make you go to sleep again."

"How long will I be out?" Jennifer asked.

"About six hours," Dr. Wheeler said. "You should be up and around and ready to hit the casino by about eight o'clock tonight. The whole process takes a remarkably short amount of time."

"You mean I'm not gonna be all messed up and sore, trying to recover?"

"Not as such," Dr. Wheeler replied. "I'm sure you'll be a little sore, and have some trouble with balance and the like, not to mention the shock of not recognizing yourself in the mirror for a little while, but it will be nothing compared to doing it the traditional way, with surgery and all the post-operative pain you'd experience."

"Okay," Jennifer said. "Then I guess we should start."

Dr. Wheeler came over with a small tackle box, which she opened to reveal a very small but very complete set of IV supplies. With a practiced hand, she started an IV in Jennifer's left arm with a minimum of pain and had her hooked up to a bag of fluid in short order. Then she drew up some medication in a syringe and tapped the bubbles out, holding the clear fluid up to the light.

"This is going to put you in a nice, restful sleep," she said. "When you wake up, you'll be a whole new woman. Literally."

She pushed the plunger and watched. Jennifer didn't try to fight it, exactly, but before long Dr. Wheeler's face became hazy and rather liquid, and then everything went dark.

Wheeler stood, knuckled her back, and set up the drugs on an automatic pump which would keep Jennifer Hodges sedated for a while. Shaking her head and chuckling – had she been this twitchy in the lead-up to the process? – she walked over a clump of telemetry leads thick as snakes and pushed a rolling processor unit out of the way to squeeze back into her control position. She took the first of the thumb-drives she'd loaded with the subliminal teaching data Jennifer – and also Dr. Stanhope, without Jennifer's foreknowledge – had requested. Loading the first series, which consisted of hair and makeup, dancing to include jazz, ballet, tap, Latin and hip-hop as well as cheer and interpretative, gymnastics, runway and photo modeling and stripper pole tricks.

She sighed and shook her head as she fit it into the slot on the side of her computer and began loading the programs. The things we do for love, she mused, pressing Enter. The computers hummed and whirled to life.

* * * * *

“Don't we have to assume they're all in danger?” Stanhope asked, looking at the files that Brooke had left. The pictures of April Hatamari, Kerstin Ragnussen and Katja Sergeinova stared up at him from the laminate tabletop. He couldn't bring himself to think of them as the men they'd been. The people in the pictures were too feminine, too womanly, to let his mind consider them as anything other than what he saw.

“That seems logical,” Eddie Gutierrez said from his place at the table, bags of ice on both his knuckles. Stanhope gave a wry twist of his mouth to Gutierrez and Hall. He had never been consulted on the use of torture, and he was incensed that he was a party to the practice. He'd insisted on treating the prisoner's wounds personally. There were many of them, placed precisely in the spots guaranteed to cause the most pain. Gutierrez was good at his job.

“We traced the accounts that Curtis Mayfair gave up,” Hall said. “They had payments wired to them from a numbered account in the Bahamas. An account fed by a dizzying amount of holding and shell corporations. We can't begin to trace anything through that mess. This guy moves money very well. Forensic accounting is giving us an estimate of a month or a month and a half.”

Stanhope sighed loudly. “Then I think it's best that we keep going the way we've been going. Trace the technology, not the money.”

“That's a dead end as well,” Hall said simply. “It's all custom stuff, Doc. There's no manufacturer or assembly line to track it to. It would take as long, if not longer, to track that as it would the financials. I think we have to start considering the possibility that the only way to get this guy is using one of these women as bait.”

“Out of the question,” Stanhope barked.

“We can keep her out of danger,” Gutierrez put in.

“That's what you said at the emergency room,” Stanhope countered. “I'm not going to put a patient of mine at risk just because you two don't want to do the leg-work of the investigation.”

“Dammit, Doc, there is no investigation!” Hall said, throwing up his hands. “I'm telling you. This guy is good. Really good. We're never gonna catch him if we keep going by the book, because this guy already knows the book. He's covered every track he's made, don't you get

that? We can't catch him unless we draw him out, and the only way to do that we can even begin to conceive involves one of these women."

"There's nothing you can say to change my mind," Dr. Stanhope said, eyes narrowing.

"Well, that's too bad, because it's not up to you," Hall said levelly, a dangerous light in his eyes. "We have to stop this guy, Doc. He can strike any one, anywhere and any time with complete impunity. Brooke and the others are just the beginning."

"What do you mean, it's not up to me?" Stanhope said.

"I'm going to ask Brooke and Jennifer," Hall said. "I'm going to abide by their decision."

* * * * *

Jennifer shivered, but not entirely from the chill in the air. She'd gotten over the strangeness of having all this information in her head, information that she'd never learned but knew as intimately as though she'd picked them up when she was a little girl. And she'd spent a wonderful, beautiful afternoon in the hotel spa, putting the finishing touches on her new body and appearance. She ran fingers capped with long – not as long as Brooke's, but still over half an inch past the ends of her fingertips – manicured nails, decorated with little rhinestone hearts and lacquered a nacreous pink, through long hair now a brilliant, shimmery vanilla blonde, straight and shiny and hanging to the small of her back. She pulled her robe a little tighter over huge breasts – a flawless set of 38DD's with the too-perfect, spherical "done" look – and a belly flatter than years of crunches and sit-ups had ever gotten it and a little rhinestone Playboy Bunny head twinkling in the new navel piercing she'd gotten last night. Artificially extended eyelashes, glued painstakingly to her real lashes and coated with thick mascara, brushed her cheeks as she blinked and impossibly soft, puffy collagen lips pursed in a sexy moué under a straightened, narrowed nose. She'd gazed for hours in the mirror, touching the face that no longer seemed entirely hers, into the sparkling sapphire blue eyes that had been a dark brown only a day before. Her new spray tan made her skin the color of amber.

"Oh, Jennifer, what the hell are you doing?" she whispered to herself under her breath, taking a long pull off the Capri cigarette smoldering between her long-nailed fingers.

"Did you say something, honey?" Clarissa, a long-legged redhead with titanic tits and a staggering amount of piercings, asked from the mirror next to her.

She grinned. Jennifer had been surprised, in the mirror earlier, just how sultry and bubbleheaded that grin looked now, with the perfect white veneered teeth sparkling between full, glossy lips. "Just talking to myself," she said, finger-fluffing her long blonde hair.

"I do that all the time," she said, leaning into the mirror to put on another coat of lipstick.

"Gentlemen, welcome to the Crazy Horse Too, the wildest night spot in Las Vegas, where the party never stops. Now, please direct your attention to the main stage and the Crazy Horse's newest blonde bombshell, please give it up for Krystal!"

Jennifer exhaled a long breath, dropped her robe to reveal the pink satin corset with black lace trim, the black stockings with pink garters and the eight-inch platform heels that made her over six feet tall. The grin flashed back automatically as she took the stage, taking the pole in one long-nailed hand and spinning effortlessly. All the eyes in the house were on her, even

those of the men getting table dances. The Crazy Horse was packed shoulder-to-shoulder, as usual according to management, and “new girl money” was there to be had.

Jennifer wasn't even having to try. The information in her head was also programmed into her muscles, and her body danced perfectly along to Beyoncé's “Naughty Girl” without needing any conscious control. Her hips undulated like her skeleton wasn't completely solid and she twirled around the pole like she weighed nothing. The sheer exhilaration of it was overwhelming. Spinning upside down, legs spread wide, at above the level of her head when standing straight, Jennifer laughed loudly, a rich throaty affair full of sexy promises.

The first of the men was at the rail, singles in their hands, waiting for her to dance her way over to them and give them a little something special, a little taste of her delightful sexuality. She slinked over to the first one, a tall black man with a sweet nervous smile.

Jennifer was surprised that she felt no fear, no nerves or embarrassment when she flipped down the cups of her corset to expose the tight, bouncing flesh of her newly-enhanced tits. The man's eyes widened and Jennifer smiled widely. She pressed his face into her breasts and shimmied back and forth, leaning back and pressing him deeply into her cleavage. She laughed again, savoring every drop of the wonderful, wonderful feeling. Brooke suddenly made so much more sense to her. If this was what she felt, all the time, no wonder she acted the way she did. Jennifer was probably going to act the same way, from now on. No drug, no sex, no nothing could ever feel as good as being on this stage, her tits out and every eye riveted to her. All the stiffening dicks in all the laps of the men staring and drooling over her.

Okay, maybe not no sex or no drugs. But it still felt pretty incredible.

She released her hold on the first man, stretching the band of her t-back wide with a manicured thumb so the dazed but happy fellow could slide a few singles under the band. She crawled – slinked, actually – to the next one in line and started the process over again. Closing her eyes and laughing happily, she accepted the one fact that was beginning to dawn on her deeply.

This was her new job, and it was never gonna get old.

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SUMMARY: When a rich man decides that he will undergo a new treatment to enhance his looks, he does not count on someone sabotaging his transformation.

SIX MILLION DOLLAR EX-MAN

Part Ten

by Valerie Hope

I POUTED FOR ALL I was worth when I opened the box from Dr. Stanhope. He was obsessed with my glasses, for some reason, it's all he ever wanted to talk about, and now this: a box full of them, about twelve pair. At least he had some taste. The frames were Versace and BCBGMaxAzria, Gucci and Armani. They'd at least look cute with some of my outfits. But damned if I was gonna wear any of them today. Not with my baby coming home.

She'd been strangely silent, just a couple texts here and there and late-night calls when I was usually either at work or out partying afterwards, where the noise and crowds tended to make conversations difficult. I hoped she wasn't having second thoughts about me. She hadn't been a dyke when we met, and sometimes girls who were new to the pussy game freaked out a little. Maybe she got herself some nice hard dick out there in Vegas. The thought made me jealous, to be sure, but also turned me on and made me a little wistful.

I dressed to kill – I wanted Jennifer's eyes to pop out when she saw me. I'd spent most of yesterday shopping with my new best friends, introduced to me by Eddie Gutierrez. There was Kerstin, of course, she and I hung out all the time, but April Hatamari and Katja Sergeinova were just as awesome. I felt so close to them, from the minute I met them. We'd hung out, laughed, partied a little and then fell to a giant four-way lez fest on my dining room floor not long after. All of them were just like me, in a way, and all of them chased the cum-high the same way I did. The four of us getting together for lunch was enough to raise the chance of any waiter in the tri-county area of getting a blowjob.

But as great as fucking April, Katja and Kerstin was, I still missed Jennifer. All the time. Every second I had to spend without her made me realize how much I loved her even more. I was fully intending to have “the talk” with her once we were alone together, about working out some kind of long-term arrangement.

I smoothed out the front of my Dior suit – it hugged my curves deliciously and made me look slutty and sophisticated all at the same time, I loved it – and tucked my new Vuitton leather bag under one arm. I fluffed out my curls and checked the makeup one last time. The text message had said to meet Jennifer at Correale's, a romantic little Italian bistro about six blocks away, and to wait outside for her. She said she had a surprise for me. I giggled. I hoped it was shoes.

I finished up with my signature giant hoop earrings and my new Tacori ring with the four-karat diamond in the platinum setting. I added a new platinum Movado watch and a gorgeous Elle

Tahari bracelet to make me sparkle and walked out to my car, my Gucci boots' spike heels clicking and clacking along the tiled breezeway.

I looked over my shoulder and saw the uninteresting gray sedan which I knew had two of Hall's men, watching my house and myself around the clock. I fought the urge to wave to them – Gutierrez had yelled at me when I'd sent them a pizza the other night, saying I'd "blown their cover." I wished I'd blown something else of theirs – the Asian guy who had my day shift was yummy. Still, it was kinda nice knowing they were there. Nobody'd bothered me since the last time, but Hall and Gutierrez still expected something. They weren't any closed to finding out who'd changed me, they said. I really didn't care. I liked the life I had, and if they never found out who Daddy was, then nothing would really change for me.

The 'Vette roared to life just as soon as I had my iPod hooked up and my cigarette lit. I peeled out of the parking lot in a squeal of tires and blasted the six blocks to Correale's. I passed my keys to the valet with a twenty-dollar bill and a glittering smile. He had a really nice dick and was really gentle. He even offered to eat my pussy before I blew him, which I thought was really sweet. Most guys just started shoving their shit down my throat before I even got all my weight on my knees. Not that I minded. I liked it when they went wild – especially knowing that I was the one that made them that way – and a good throat-fuck could really make my day. But it was nice when they were gentle, too. It didn't happen that often, I was finding.

I puffed on my cigarette lazily as I paced back and forth on the sidewalk outside, waiting for Jennifer to show up. I returned a few smiles here and there – some guys, and even a really cute skinny brunette girl full of piercings and with her hair dyed pink. Ordinarily I would've gone for it – I didn't get hit on by many girls, I seemed to intimidate the ones who weren't strippers – but there was only one pussy I was really interested in right now.

My head turned to the sounds of Jay-Z blasting over a really top-dollar sound system. A black convertible Mercedes was pulling to the curb and a stunning blonde got out, passing her keys to the same valet as she tossed the butt of a skinny girly cigarette, stained pink on the end with glossy lipstick, into the gutter to be ground out under the toe of a Jimmy Choo python-skin pump. Smoky grey stockings clung to hard, well-muscled dancers' legs and the lace tops just peeked from underneath the hem of a short black-and-white plaid schoolgirl skirt with a mouthwatering Vuitton belt I would gladly do murder for. She wore a tight white blouse – Valentino, I thought, or maybe even Chanel – which strained over a great big set of perfect tits. She wore a skinny black tie and a low-cut sweater cropped above her bellybutton and off the shoulder, emphasizing her curves even more. Dangling chandelier earrings tapped against her shoulders. Her vanilla blonde hair was pulled back in a diamond-studded hair clip and she had a pink fleece newsboy cap with a ghetto tilt. Her makeup was nighttime – a little overdone and slutty, but really attractive – and piercing blue eyes regarded me from a face that was a little too familiar once the initial attraction began to fade.

"Hey, baby," a familiar voice told me from that beautiful sexy face. "I missed you."

"Jennifer?" I said, my eyes wider than normal. "Is that..."

She raised her arms above her head, making her buttons strain over her breasts. "It's me, baby. All me. Dr. Stanhope helped me make a few improvements. What do you think?"

I couldn't talk. I could only stand there like an idiot and stare. The sharp smell of my musk reached my nose, and I knew my Victoria's Secret thong was now sodden and sticking to my

thighs. My mousy, kind of awkward girlfriend never came back from Vegas, but this sleek sophisticated blonde with the enormous rack, glamorous and polished and sophisticated and oozing sex.

"You like?" she asked, cozying up to me.

"I love," I whispered.

"Good," she said, giving me a sly wink. "'Cause I love, too."

I threaded my arm through hers and went into the restaurant.

* * * *

"I just can't get over this!" I gushed again, taking her long-nailed hands in mine across the table. She smiled at me. No amount of surgery – or whatever the Doc had done for her – could change that smile, or the way it melted me completely inside. "You look incredible, baby!"

"I know," she giggled. "Every time I pass a mirror I have to stop and make sure it's really me."

"Can I, like, ask you something?"

She lowered her eyes behind long eyelashes. "Why?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Brooke, baby... I never dreamed of a life like the one you live. I mean it, even when I was a little girl, I didn't think living the way you live was even possible. You've shown me so much, baby, and everything I've seen I've loved. I was getting jealous, if you can believe that. Jealous that you got to live the way you lived and be who you were, and I couldn't. I could stand by and watch, but it wasn't enough. I wanted to be like you so much. To look like you, and live like you... I had the opportunity, so I took it. I hope you're not mad."

"Mad?" I giggled. "Why would I be mad, baby?"

"Because I feel like I'm stealing from you, a little."

"That don't make any sense, baby," I told her. "I want you to be in my life 'n' stuff. Anything I have, like, you can have too. I want you to have it. I just wish I knew all this, y'know, I would've, like, done shit different if I knew you were getting all jealous 'n' shit."

"No, baby," she replied, holding up a hand to stop me. "I wouldn't want you any different. I wouldn't want you to change a thing."

"You are so sweet," I said, tearing up a little.

"Oh, don't cry! I want this to be a happy surprise!" she said.

"It is," I sniffled.

"You're going to ruin your makeup, baby," she said, squeezing my forearm. "Look, there's one other thing."

"What?"

"There's some extra stuff that they put in my brain," she said. "Stuff that I didn't know whether or not you wanted, so they hid it behind a password. If you – only you, too – says the password,

then it comes out. If you don't like it, you can make it go away the same way, by saying the password."

"What is it?" I asked.

"You'll have to say the password and see," she said, sliding a folded slip of pink paper across the table to me. I fumbled it open to find one word, written in pink ink and surrounded by hearts.

"Su.. super..." I stumbled, wrinkling my nose in concentration, trying to pronounce the long word.

"Superlative," Jennifer helped me.

"Oh," I said. "What's 'superlative' mean?"

Jennifer jerked a little as I said the word. Her eyes went unfocused for a moment and then came back, but they looked a little sharper, somehow, and a little more vague at the same time.

"So, like, think you can find a supply closet 'n' stuff, baby?" she said in a higher, little-girl voice that just oozed sex appeal, twirling a lock of shiny blonde hair around one finger and licking her glossy lips. "'Cuz you're about to get so fucked."

* * * * *

"So, like, I may need you to turn it off 'n' shit. Y'know, like, sometimes," Jennifer said as she fastened her bra behind her back nimbly. I was still laying back over one of the cardboard boxes in the walk-in refrigerator we'd found, my skirt pushed up over my thighs and my tits still bare. I was still trembling a little.

"Um, okay," I said. "But if this is what happens, y'know, I may never say that word again."

She giggled. It had a brainless sound to it, cheerleader-y and happy, and it suited her in a weird way that I couldn't quite pinpoint. "So, like, part of this whole thing – y'know, the tits and the bod 'n' stuff – is that I help out Dr. Stanhope with some shit."

"Yeah?" I asked, stirring myself from my post-mind-blowing-sex torpor and pulling on my panties from where they were wadded up on the floor. I ignored the smears of Jennifer's lipstick as I slithered them up my long tan legs and snugged them over my still-throbbing pussy.

"Yeah," she confirmed. "I have to, like, be a model. For the company you, like, used to work for."

"A model?" I said, brightening. "Oh, that'll be so cool!"

"Y'think?" Jennifer said, trying to fix her hair in the mirror of a little compact she'd just done two bumps of cocaine from. "'Cuz I'm, like, 'I dunno if I wanna do this' 'n' stuff."

"How come? You're totally hot enough and the money would kick."

"I know," she said, pouting. It made me want to nibble her bottom lip. "But it's not for that, y'know? It's so I can get into your company and, like, spy on people 'n' shit. Y'know, it might be, like, kinda dangerous."

"I don't want you to get hurt or nothin'," I said.

"Oh, believe me, I totally don't wanna get hurt neither," she said back. "I mean, like, fuck that. But it's kinda what I have to do to, like, pay for the new bod 'n' stuff."

"Then let me do it," I said. "I totally don't mind, and I'd rather it was, like, me in danger than you."

"That's so sweet," Jennifer purred. "But no, it's, like, gotta be me. Stanhope said so."

"He's been being a total fuckhead lately," I said. "Hall, too. I'm totally gonna bitch 'em out. They don't got no right to go around, like, fucking with people and putting them in danger like that."

"I know, right? That's what I said," Jennifer told me. "But there's not a lot I can do, y'know? I kinda owe 'em 'n' stuff."

"I guess," I said, defeated. "But I don't have to like it."

"Me neither," she said. "C'mon, find your bra, bitch. We gotta go see 'em after we eat."

"I thought you already ate," I teased.

"Can't live on pussy and coke," she said back, grinning. "But it's totally fun to try."

* * * * *

We swung by the condo real quick to change – our clothes reeked of very turned-on pussy – and then piled in Jennifer's new shiny black Mercedes SL600 to peel out across town to Stanhope's place. I laughed like a little kid, flashing my tits at truckers as we blew by and throwing my hands in the air as she gunned the engine, making her swerve into other lanes by Frenching her without any warning and then finishing the twenty-minute trip by giving her a handjob as she tried to concentrate at 85 miles per hour in the pre-rush traffic. I had never felt so happy or free. I'd loved Jennifer before – I knew that – but this new Jennifer, this exciting and sexy and carefree Jennifer, was more than I could've ever dreamed of. I couldn't wait to introduce her to Kerstin and Katja and April, and to re-introduce her Tiffany and the girls at the club. Jennifer said she wanted to start dancing there nights, and keep selling real estate during the days. I giggled at the thought of it. Jennifer was gonna sell a lot more condos now with that rack, and she was gonna make bank at the club. I tried to imagine old Jennifer as a stripper and couldn't. For new Jennifer it only made sense.

A dark cloud formed over me as she pulled the expensive roadster into a parking spot outside the warehouse where Stanhope and Hall had set up shop. The pissed-off that I'd been keeping in check, thinking about Hall and Stanhope putting my baby in danger, boiled back to the surface. I tossed my cigarette and made my way up the steps to the front door, my heels clacking as angrily as I felt.

The door opened and I stopped short. A tall woman answered the door, at least five-eleven without the heels she was wearing, which were really cute Michael Kors slingbacks. She wore a skintight pair of black leather skinny jeans and a red cropped sweater which revealed a scandalously flat belly, cut low to show the tops of two mouthwatering C-cups. A long swan's neck, encircled by a silver choker by a designer I didn't know, led to a heart-shaped face with overlarge sable eyes, framed with long smoky lashes and high cheekbones. An adorable little rosebud mouth with bee-stung lips broke into a toothy grin – her teeth were as white as chalk –

at the sight of me. Her French-manicured hands moved to touch up shining black hair which fell past her shoulders and shimmered white in the light of the sun through the blinds beside her. Her skin was a glowing mocha color with no visible blemish or imperfection, looking as soft as satin to the touch. She was one of the most breathtaking women I'd ever seen, with a poise and polish to grace the cover of any magazine, a Latina vision.

"Hi," she said. "We weren't expecting you, Brooke. Jennifer? Is that you? Oh my God, you look incredible! I absolutely love your hair!"

I stood stunned in the doorway as Dr. Stanhope joined the woman in the doorway.

"Brooke," he said warmly. "Good to see you. Come in, come in."

I made my way past the woman and into the laboratory interior, lit with its harsh fluorescent lights which still just managed to make the woman glow some more. It was rare that I met a woman who made me feel awkward and homely, but she was one of them.

"Let me introduce you," Dr. Stanhope said, putting his hand on the woman's narrow shoulder. "Brooke, Jennifer, this is Heather Tijerina. She's the new spokesmodel for the XenoSoft campaign, she'll be helping us from the inside."

"Waitaminnit... she's the new model?" Jennifer said in disbelief. "I thought... I mean, I had all that information, like, sent into my brain 'n' stuff in Vegas. I thought you wanted me to be the new model. I was all ready."

"We thought it over," Heather said in her silky contralto. "It wasn't fair to ask it of you, Jennifer. You're not trained or prepared for what we were asking you to do, so we decided to send in someone who had the necessary skills to infiltrate the company. Besides, with the changes you made, you're a little bit, um... porno for the ad campaign that Wheeler & Koch want to publish."

"So, like, y'all just happened to have, like, a ninja Green Beret spy who also is a fucking supermodel just, like, waiting to work this case 'n' shit?" Jennifer asked.

"Nothing of the sort," Stanhope replied. "Instead, we brought the mountain to Muhammad, so to speak. We did have, as you put it, a perfectly viable 'ninja Green Beret spy.' The supermodel part was also in our power as well."

"I don't get it," I said.

"Of course not," Stanhope said. "You weren't expected to. Ms. Tijerina has no resemblance whatsoever to the agent you knew. We worked very hard to keep it that way."

"I gotta say, life is a lot different than I expected," Heather said. "But I did have one thing right. My first day like this, I did stay home and play with myself all day."

"Eddie?" Jennifer said in disbelief, her eyes wide in shock. "Eddie Gutierrez?"

"In the luscious flesh," Heather said, striking a sexy runway pose with arms wide so we could take in her flawless body, her cover-girl face and smile and Pantene commercial shining hair. "Whaddaya think, chicas?"

"You're fucking beautiful," I stammered.

“You did this to him for a job?” Jennifer said, accusingly.

“Hold up,” Heather said, gesturing placatingly. “I volunteered, sweetie.”

“You wanted to be a girl?” I asked.

“Not really,” Heather – Eddie – replied. “I hadn't ever thought about it, really. What I did want was to get between you girls and whatever trouble is trying to find you. And fuck – I wasn't never much to get excited about as a man. Maybe I'll do better as a girl. Never can tell.”

“You seem awful, like, laid-back about it all,” Jennifer said.

“The brain programming helps,” Heather said. “And the Xanax I been taking with the champagne I been drinking. Funny, I never liked bubbly before. But the programming said that models live on the shit, so here I am guzzling it down. But the main thing is, I don't really care. Boy, girl, whatever, it ain't that big a deal to me. Just as long as I'm doing something important, that's all that matters.”

“That's amazing, baby,” Jennifer said, hugging her tightly. “Really amazing.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said, blushing adorably, the rich mocha of her skin darkening to a ruddy flush. “Better me than you, anyway, right? At least I got the training. Hell, I'm probably putting it to better use now than I ever have.”

“Understand, my dears,” Dr. Stanhope said cautiously, “you can't let on you know anything about this. Jennifer, you still have that audition on Saturday, you can't even acknowledge that you know Heather. The two of you have never met.”

“I get it,” she said.

“We'll keep in touch as best we can, but it will be difficult – we know that Brooke is being watched, and you probably are as well, Jennifer. But once Mr. Gu-- I mean, Ms. Tijerina. Once she has enough information, she will have to bring it to you, Brooke, to help us make sense of it.”

“I, like, don't see how much help I can be,” I told him.

“You'll be more than you know,” Heather said. “Just trust me, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, returning her infectious smile.

“So for now, just go back to your lives,” Dr. Stanhope said. “Try not to do anything out of the ordinary. You'll be hearing from us in just a few days, and hopefully we'll begin to get someplace with this investigation.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Jennifer asked, smacking her gum a little. “I mean, like, if they figure out Heather's been, like, snooping around 'n shit they might get pissed and make another try to hurt Brooke or something.”

“We thought of that,” Heather said. “Hall's doubled security on you while I'm on the inside. Expect to have a lot of company over the next week or so.”

“Maybe we should, like, have a party,” I said, giggling.

“Just as long as you stay in one place, you can do whatever you like,” Dr. Stanhope told me. “Just don't do anything out of the ordinary. Nothing different than usual can happen this weekend, or it could ruin everything, do you understand?”

“So, like, just hang around 'n' be gorgeous like always,” Jennifer said. “Got it, baby.”

“Would it, like, help if I got Katja, Kerstin and April to, like, hang out for the weekend or something?” I asked. “Might be easier if y'all only have to, like, watch one place, y'know?”

“That might save security some time and effort, but it might also look a bit suspicious.”

“Suspicious how?” I asked. “We've been, like, hanging out 'n' stuff for, like, a week, y'know, ever since Jennifer went to Vegas 'n' stuff. Why would anybody think shit if we all got together 'n' partied some more, y'know?”

“I... I suppose that makes sense,” Dr. Stanhope said.

“Oh, Doc, let the girls have some fun,” Heather said, giving his arm an affectionate squeeze. The programming they'd given her had certainly removed any inhibitions about contact with men. That squeeze... suggested. Jennifer wondered if they'd actually managed to change sexual orientation for her. Still, if there was a single shred of attraction to females left in her, then Jennifer would lay good money that Brooke would find it.

Brooke was digging in Jennifer's purse – her not feeling as though she needed to ask, that she was comfortable enough with her to just dig around in her purse like that, made Jennifer almost glow with satisfaction and contentment – for cigarettes, lighting one of her skinny Capris with the flick of a match.

Heather stared a moment, then took the matchbook from between Brooke's long-nailed fingers. “Where did you get this?” she asked, all the sexy silk gone from her voice replaced by a brisk “all-business” snap that made any doubt that this woman had once been Eddie Gutierrez disappear in a flash.

“Swiped them from April the other night, I think,” I told her. “My lighter was totally out of gas. I don't, like, remember totally. I mean, they're just, like, matches, y'know? How'm I s'posed to remember where the fuck I got them?”

“Don't get upset, please,” Dr. Stanhope said. “Heather wouldn't ask if it wasn't somehow important, I'm sure. Could you try to remember, please?”

“I am, okay?” I complained. “I have, like, five hundred fucking things of matches at home, just ask Jennifer. I just, like, pick 'em up, I totally don't look at 'em.”

“Do you remember whether or not you were wearing your glasses that night, Brooke?” Heather asked, handing the matches back.

“Um...” I scrunched up my nose, concentrating. “Um, yeah. I think so, those cute Versace ones with the red stripe on the sides that Dr. Stanhope got me. They went with that really cute Guess? outfit that I picked up last week. They totally went.”

“Thank you, Brooke,” Heather said. “I appreciate it. Do you mind if I hang on to those matches?”

“Whatever, dude,” I said, pitching them to her. “I didn't even know you smoked.”

“Honey, I'm a model,” she said. “Kinda goes with the territory. Like the champagne.”

“So, what are y'all up to today?” Jennifer asked.

“Oh, with the audition in two days, I need a portfolio,” Heather said. “So, I'm about to get my picture taken a lot of times. We have to get footage of about seventeen different magazine spreads, a couple fashion shows, some other print work like bikini shots 'n' stuff like that. It's gonna be a busy few days.”

“Oh,” I said. “You're gonna have, like, designer clothes 'n' shoes 'n' shit coming in?”

“Any minute now,” Heather said.

“So I guess I know what we're doing for the rest of the afternoon,” Jennifer said.

“Got anyplace I can freshen up?” I asked.

* * * * *

“Matches?” Dr. Stanhope asked Heather once she was in the makeup chair, her hair in overlarge curlers and an aging woman with a sure hand and a no-nonsense attitude applying various brushes across her flawless skin.

“From a sandwich shop on the corner of 16th and Camden,” Heather said back, showing him the matchbook. “Two blocks from XenoSoft, and a known haunt of one Brock Stills. I think the version of Brooke that wears glasses is conducting her own investigation into this matter.”

“You think so?”

“Positive,” Heather said, pursing her lips so that the makeup artist could define her cheekbones. She did it instinctually, without being told. The subconscious training programs that Brock had developed were truly astounding. Stanhope would have believed this woman had been doing this her whole life if he didn't have first-hand knowledge to the contrary.

“So what now?”

“We have to talk to her,” Heather said. “We have to get her alone and wearing those glasses and find out what she knows, and more important what she's looking for.”

“I'll arrange it,” Stanhope said.

* * * * *

I was pretty disappointed when the time for me to go to work finally rolled around. The portfolio shoot was incredible, stocked full of gorgeous designer clothes and fueled by cigarettes, champagne and cocaine. We'd even gotten to have a few pictures taken of us, Jennifer and me, which the photographer promised us copies of. There were a bunch I planned to frame and hang around the condo.

They'd gone all out, even shooting a couple of perfume commercials. Me and Jennifer had a ball, playing dress-up like a couple of little girls all afternoon and generally getting in the way. We would've been nuisances to the crew if we hadn't been so fucking hot.

I was working my magic on one of the stagehands, a cute blonde guy with a sleeve tattoo on his left arm. I'd seen his eyes caressing me all afternoon and he was just hunky enough to want to do him, plus the fact that I was hungry for the cum-high I hadn't had in days.

I brushed my hair behind one ear – boys couldn't seem to resist that, even though I had no idea why – and answered the question he'd just asked me. “I dunno,” I said, smiling shyly and lowering my eyes. “I mean, I gotta work, but I'm not doing nothin' afterwards or nothin'. I could, like, meet you someplace. Y'know, IHOP or somethin', for coffee?”

“Yeah, I can do that,” he said, smiling at me.

“Cool,” I said. “But y'know, I'm usually all, like, tired 'n' shit after work, y'know? Maybe we can find someplace to go hang out for a little while. Y'know, around here 'n' stuff. Know someplace around here that's, like, kinda more private. Out of the way 'n' stuff?”

“Probably,” he said, eyes widening a little.

Jennifer appeared out of nowhere, around a huge rack of designer gowns I'd been pawing through when Keith – the assistant – had started chatting me up. She gave me a long-suffering look and stepped forward to take my arm. “Dr. Stanhope is looking for us, baby.”

“Um, he can wait a while, can't he?” I said, a little flustered.

“No, he really can't,” she said, tugging my arm. “Nice to meet you.”

“Hang on a second,” Keith said in his sexy mumble. “Brooke, sweetheart, why don't we go to the back storeroom? I can swipe one of those bottles of champagne, we can have a couple drinks. Hell, your friend can even come along if she wants.”

Jennifer gave him a knowing smile. “Oh, sweetie, you haven't graduated to that level just yet. Do a little more time in the minors before you try to play in the Show, y'know? C'mon, Brooke.”

She tugged me away, and I managed to blow Keith a little kiss. “Bye!” I said, trotting to keep up with Jennifer. “See ya later, okay?”

She took me around a corner and gave me a firm look which turned me on more than a little. I found myself wanting her to shove me hard up against a wall and tear my clothes off with her teeth. I hoped this didn't mean I was gonna start pissing her off on purpose just so she grudgefucked me.

“Dammit, Brooke!” she hissed at me, trying to keep her voice down and not attract attention. “You were gonna go suck his dick, weren't ya?”

“So?” I said accusingly. “So what if I was?”

“Baby, you can't just do that any more!”

“But I need it!” I whined, stamping my foot. “You don't know how long it's been, okay?”

“What if he was, like, sick 'n' stuff, Brooke? What if he had herpes or something? I know you weren't gonna use a rubber, you don't even got any. I looked in your purse before we left this morning.”

“He didn't have herpes,” I snorted.

“How do you know, huh? Did you have his blood tested?”

“No,” I grumped.

“So you get herpes from blowing this guy you don't even know, just so you can get high, and then you bring it home and give it to me. And April, and Tiffany, and Katja and Kerstin and everybody you sleep with. All of us have herpes now and all 'cuz you can't keep from sucking any strange dick that you got, like, a passing interest in. Brooke, you can't do it!”

“So what am I s'posed to do?”

“Try a steady boyfriend,” she offered.

“Oh, whatever,” I spat.

“Well, how about you? If you're so fucking desperate to have dicks in your mouth, then maybe you need to figure out a way to do it so you don't fucking make everybody around you sick!”

“So I'm all, like, s'posed to blood test every guy I meet who I think is cute?” I shot back.

“No,” Jennifer said, her eyes twinkling in that way they did when she came up with something new and fun to try in bed together. “But you could stick to guys who already have their blood tested.”

“How the fuck am I gonna do that?” I asked.

“Lemme make a couple phone calls, baby,” she said, digging in her purse for her phone.

“But baby, I really need it,” I whined, pouting. “Bad.”

“Just a little longer, baby, just another couple days.”

“A couple days? I thought you meant, like, maybe an hour or something.”

“Just trust me,” she said, dialing her phone with a long rhinestoned thumbnail.

“Whatever,” I said, turning and stomping away. Fine. Fuck her. She didn't start dancing at my club until tomorrow night, anyway, so tonight I was gonna make me a little extra money.

* * * *

“I gotta go, I gotta go get changed and go to work,” I told Heather, who was so gorgeous in her Valentino gown with her hair done and her makeup perfect, flowers threaded in her hair and dripping in silver and emeralds. I kissed her cheek gently, so as to keep from smudging her makeup.

“It was great seeing y'all again,” Heather told us. “Look, I'll talk to you after I get the job. You know we can't see each other, but I can at least give y'all a call, y'know, see how you're doing.”

“That would be great,” Jennifer said.

“Remember,” Stanhope reiterated for the millionth time. “Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing that draws attention to yourselves.”

* * * *

His name was Daniel and he had everything I was looking for. Cute, with dimples and a shy smile, a crewcut of dark brown hair with tiny little traces of gray in it, a fat wallet full of twenties

and a washboard stomach and a swelling in his trousers when I danced for him that made my mouth water and my pussy get slick. I excused myself from him just for a second, to go in the bathroom and “powder my nose,” literally. I did three generous bumps of coke because my buzz had faded completely, I'd been sitting working the magic on Daniel so long. He'd bought at least two hundred worth of dances off of me and I'd been getting wilder and wilder with each dance, pushing to see where his limits were. So far he didn't have any. He wanted to fuck me, I could tell. Now was the time to see if he would part with a couple hundred dollars to do it. And if he didn't, I was gonna suck his dick for free. I just needed it so bad, and I was still pissed off at Jennifer for telling me I couldn't. It might as well be Daniel, because it was gonna be somebody if it wasn't him.

I sashayed back out of the bathroom – my buzz kicking back in pleasantly – and plopped in his lap to rub his chest suggestively with outspread fingers. I could feel a really nice, rock-hard body underneath the J.C. Penney off-the-rack clothes. My other hand played idly with the hair near the nape of his neck.

“So, Daniel, you wanna, like, go someplace?” I asked.

“Like where?” he asked, shouting a little over the music.

“I dunno. Anywhere you want. Just as long as we can hang out. Y'know, like... alone.”

“Are you asking me out?” he asked.

“Sorta,” I said. “'Cept I really don't wanna go out. Maybe, like, I'm asking you in 'n' shit.”

“Asking me in?”

I sighed. “You know, baby. To fuck. I wanna fuck you, and I'm asking you if you wanna go someplace and fuck me. Does that, like, clear it up 'n' shit?”

“Wow, you're sure direct,” he told me. “Yeah, we can definitely go someplace. What do you have in mind?”

“Your place?”

“It's a mess.”

“I don't care.”

“Okay, then, my place. Anything else?”

“Um, I mean, there's the matter of the work I'm gonna miss,” I told him.

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Well, y'know, if I, like, run off and fuck you – which I wanna do, believe me – I still will lose, like, two hours of work 'n' stuff. I can make three hundred dollars easy on a night like this. I mean, I gotta pay my rent 'n' stuff, right?”

“Are you telling me you want me to pay you to have sex with me?”

“Just three hundred, baby. I mean, you'll blow that if you stay here anyhow, I've seen how you're spending money. This way, it blows you, get it?”

“I get it. You're telling me to pay you three hundred bucks to go off and have sex.”

“More or less,” I said.

“That's all I needed to know,” he said, flipping open a wallet. A skinny wallet, nowhere near as full of twenties as the one he'd been showing me all night long. All this one had in it was a picture ID and a badge.

“You're under arrest for prostitution and possession of drugs,” he told me.

“Drugs? What drugs?” I asked, eyes wide.

He pointed to my nose. “You missed some. You should take a little more time cleaning up after you get high, ma'am. Girls in your line of work, they always assume the lights are down low enough that nobody's gonna notice. Now, stand up.”

He pulled out a pair of handcuffs. It's the first time in a long while seeing them didn't turn me on. He turned me around and I felt the cold metal lock around my wrists.

“You have the right to remain silent. If you give up this right, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney...”

* * * *

“God damn it, Brooke,” Jennifer said, rubbing the bridge of her nose in frustration. “What the fuck did Dr. Stanhope say?”

I tried to rake a hand through my dense blonde curls, but my hand was shackled to the greasy table in front of me, in the precinct interrogation room. The pink sequins of my low-cut party dress, still worn from work, clashed sharply against the drab greyness of the room.

“Don't draw attention to ourselves, he told us,” she went on, puffing her cigarette madly. “So now what are we supposed to do?”

“Just fucking bail me out 'n' shit,” I told her grumpily. “I just wanna go home.”

“Brooke, you know what this means. You have a record now.”

“So what? Half the girls I know got records. It's no big deal.”

“No big deal? How do you get 'no big deal' out of a prostitution charge, Brooke? Are you out of your goddamn mind?”

“I don't get what you're so, like, pissed about,” I shot back. “It didn't happen to you, and you snort more fucking coke than I do.”

“Not in front of cops,” she said flatly. “Brooke...”

“Just get me out of here, okay?” I shot. “We can, like, argue about all this later.”

“I already posted your bail. You can go just as soon as you pick up your shit at the front.”

I jingled my shackles. “Maybe they'll, like, let us take a set of these home or somethin'!”

She couldn't quite hide her grin. “Bitch.”

* * * *

John Taylor wasn't paid to think. He was just paid to react. He'd been shadowing the blonde with the big cans for over a week, following the bitch wherever she went. Shopping, mostly, or

to the gym to meet up with that hot Swedish piece of ass that Ben Long had been following. Her girlfriend, the realtor who'd come back with the hellacious body and the long blonde hair, usually worked during the day and came home at night while Brooke went to shake her titties at the strip club where she worked. They didn't deviate from their routine much at all. Brooke went to work, then partied afterwards, then went home. Jennifer went to work during the day while Brooke shopped and just hung around with her hot friends. If she hadn't been so fucking hot, then she would've been boring as shit. But his employer had told him to contact his handler if anything out of the ordinary happened, and the bitch getting busted definitely qualified. He was hanging out in the street, outside of the downtown precinct, waiting for his handler, a hard-eyed man named Prescott. Prescott pulled up in a Lexus – lucky rich bastard – and motioned him into the front seat. He slid in without a word, ignoring the light rain that was beginning to fall.

“Did you find out what they charged her with?” Prescott asked as soon as he had the door shut.

“It took a little doing – her paperwork ain't been processed yet – but word has it she's in for possession of cocaine and being a working girl.”

“Is she still inside?”

“Yeah. Her girlfriend went in twenty minutes ago. Probably to bail her out – Stillwater was headed down to arraignment when I showed up. I'm sure bail's been set by now.”

“This could be bad,” Prescott said. “She might try to cut a deal. She has... information that we would rather keep secret. We have to keep her quiet, Taylor. Her girlfriend too. Get me?”

Taylor nodded grimly. It had been fun following her, not like his usual jobs. Bitch got naked all the time and didn't care if her windows were open or not. Only job in a while where he'd kept copies of certain surveillance photos for his personal collection. He didn't relish the idea of killing her, but a job was a job, and all jobs ended.

Prescott passed him a sealed envelope. “Passport, ticket out of the country, bank codes for your payment. The usual. As soon as it's done, get the hell out of the country.”

“I know the drill,” Taylor said. He'd killed before.

“Just make sure it doesn't get traced back to me. My boss wouldn't like that.”

“I'm sure he wouldn't. I'll call you as soon as it's done.”

Taylor got out of the car and didn't look back as the silver Lexus disappeared into the rain.

* * * * *

I piled into the Mercedes – fucking nice car, made me want to rethink my 'Vette, no matter how much I loved it – and lit a cigarette as Jennifer piled into the drivers' seat. She was still really mad at me – I could tell – but at least she wasn't bitching at me any more. I puffed on my cigarette and pouted as sexily as I could. I knew if I could just get her panties off, then Jennifer would forgive me. And I knew how much it turned her on when I pouted.

“Put your lip back in, baby,” she said flatly. “It ain't gonna work this time.”

“Are you sure about that? I'm, like, just getting' started.”

“Dammit, Brooke, I'm not in the mood.”

“You would be if you'd, like, just let me lick that spot on your neck,” I grumped.

“Not now,” she nearly growled. “I just need to be mad at you for a while, okay?”

I pouted for all I was worth. “Fine.”

Angry, I pulled my purse onto my lap and started digging in it for my phone. I could at least call Tiffany, or Kerstin or somebody and tell my side of the story. They wouldn't be mad at me for getting busted. Hell, Tiffany told me she'd gotten busted twice – once for drugs and once for drunk and disorderly at a party at her house. Besides, they all knew I was a whore on the side, and none of them had a problem with it.

My fingers brushed past a hard case as I dug for my phone in the little Fendi bag I'd been carrying. Without thinking, I pulled out the pair of Versace glasses Stanhope had given me and I'd tucked into my purse this afternoon. I felt strange, looking at them and turning them over in my long-nailed fingers. They were gorgeous – thick black frames with white trim, square-framed and very chic – and they went with my charcoal grey suit that I used for the 'sexy secretary' outfit I danced in at work. But they so didn't go with my pink sequined cocktail dress, clear acrylic platform heels and huge pink plastic bangle earrings. But I felt this overwhelming desire to put them on. As insistent as the desire to drink cum or snort coke, in its own way. Sticking my cigarette between pink-glossed lips, I opened them and slid them onto my nose.

The strange haze that usually surrounded me lifted again. I was in a car – a shockingly expensive one, a convertible with leather interior and a Mercedes-Benz logo on the airbag – driven by a very attractive blonde with huge silicone breasts and a designer outfit. I dimly recognized the rings on her hands, rings that I'd allegedly bought for her. This had to be Jennifer.

Again, as the last time I'd woken from my strange half-sleep, I had a lit cigarette in my mouth. I could taste it on my tongue. As before, the expensive designer purse in my lap contained makeup, cigarettes and cocaine. I was dressed like a common streetwalker – it was that or the cover of Elle, I was finding – and wearing platform heels which I was sure would break my neck in the fall I would take from them if I tried to walk.

I tried to steady myself with a few deep breaths, to get my bearings so I didn't flounder the ways I'd done before, waking up in a strange life the way I did. Jennifer had a half-enraged, half-sullen look on her face and it seemed as though she might have been crying earlier. Perhaps we'd been fighting or something. My own bottom lip was stuck out as though I was sulking. Yes, and argument seemed likely.

I tossed out the cigarette – as much as Stanhope and the others had insisted, I did not smoke and refused to learn how, even though the headaches and the bad moods were consistent with what I knew of nicotine withdrawal.

“We've been fighting,” I said.

“You fucking know we have,” she said sullenly, not looking over at me.

“Jennifer,” I said. She looked over, saw the glasses.

"I don't know why we were fighting. I'm sorry."

She sighed. "No, you wouldn't."

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Heading back to the condo."

I checked the high-dollar platinum Movado on my wrist. "At midnight? Don't I usually work until much later than this?"

"Yeah, normally," she said. "Not tonight."

"May I ask why not?"

"You got busted," she told me. "Possession of cocaine and prostitution. You got high and like, tried to sell your pussy at the club. To a cop this time."

"I did what?"

"You heard me," she said. "You called me to come bail you out 'n' stuff. You got a court date in, like, six weeks."

I sunk my head into delicate hands. "Oh, God."

"That's kinda what I said," Jennifer said. "We've been fighting about how it's no big deal."

"My alter ego – I still can't believe that I have one – she sounds like a real piece of work."

"What do you mean, 'piece of work?'" Jennifer said.

"Well, let's see. Irresponsible, out of control, impulsive, self-absorbed and self-indulgent, mindless of consequences, narcissist, possible borderline personality disorder..."

"Hold the fuck up," Jennifer said. "You don't know her."

"I know what she leaves behind her," I shot back.

"You're talking about somebody I love."

"Well, maybe you should be a little more choosy."

"Fuck you."

During the 'conversation' we were having, I was still trying to get my bearings, to find out where in the city we actually were. Strangely enough, even though Jennifer was doing well over eighty-five miles per hour, there was a Dodge PT Cruiser sticking to us like glue, about two car-lengths away, matching our frantic lane-changes, done without signalling.

"Well said. A very well thought-out argument, 'fuck you.' By the way, we're being followed."

"You are such a stuck-up, self-important... what did you say?"

"I said we're being followed. Grey PT Cruiser, two or three car-lengths behind us."

"Who the fuck are you, James Bond? How can you be sure?" she spat.

“Make a lane-change. A quick one, without a signal. You have a real talent for it, shouldn't be hard. Watch the car, see what he does.”

Jennifer downshifted and powered around a garbage truck on the right-hand side, punching her high-performance sports car up to about a hundred in the process. The PT Cruiser stayed right with us.

“Shit,” she said. “I think you're right.”

“Don't go home. Don't get off the freeway, stay where there's traffic,” I said, thinking quickly. When I'd first made my money, we'd had classes from the FBI about being followed and kidnapped, and the lessons apparently stuck even though I was a sex-crazed bimbo now. I dug out my phone from my scandalously expensive purse.

“What now?” Jennifer said, pulling onto the loop around the city, full of traffic and well-lit and no end to it – a perfect choice.

“I'm calling Hall. We're gonna lead this guy right to him.”



SUMMARY: When a rich man decides that he will undergo a new treatment to enhance his looks, he does not count on someone sabotaging his transformation.

SIX MILLION DOLLAR EX-MAN

Part Eleven

by Valerie Hope

“WE'RE REALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO working with you,” Jaci Cruz told Heather while Danielle Hamilton nodded her assent behind her. Heather was sitting at a luxurious mahogany conference table in the XenoSoft building, surrounded by the XenoSoft board of directors, wearing a Balenciaga business suit and Miu Miu pumps that would have bankrupted her this time last week. She offered a glittering smile – she knew, instinctually, the effect of that smile – and shook Jaci's expensively manicured outstretched hand.

“I'm looking forward to it too,” Heather purred. Even though the deck was stacked – Hall's men had planted enough phony problems on the other finalists in the model search to make Heather the hands-on favorite – she'd worked her ass off to get this contract.

She gazed around the room with glittering hazel eyes. Everybody was there except Brock Stills, the man who'd really put this company together. Susan Cho, an emaciated-looking Chinese woman with slate-grey hair and a hard face, was the Chief Technical Officer of the company, the one who oversaw all the development of all the technology XenoSoft had a hand in. She certainly had the access, but no motive that she or Hall could detect. She was one of Brock Stills' closest friends before this happened, and the strain of not knowing where Stills was definitely showed on Cho's narrow face. The Chief Financial Officer, Erich Wahrecht, was a longshot as well. He didn't have the same access as most of the geeks, and he'd never had it so good. He was just a numbers guy, anyway. He still merited a look. He managed billions of dollars on a daily basis, and wanting to dip a finger in that pot might have led him to work something on the inside. But the forensic accountants had gone over XenoSoft's books with a fine tooth comb, and as far as they could tell, Wahrecht was scrupulously honest, accounting for every penny.

Kathy Sanders, the VP of Sales, just didn't have the oomph to pull something like this off. She had no technical background and nothing to gain from attacking the patent-holders, but the one thing the tall redhead did have was contacts. She knew everybody. She might be involved, just on the basis of her network, but Heather sincerely doubted that Sanders was the mastermind. George Rudd, the head of the “Skunk Works,” had been cleared ages ago by Stills herself, but he still had the access. Heather couldn't just write him off as above suspicion de facto the way Brooke could.

Sudeep Chandras, the VP of Marketing, was another longshot, but could definitely be involved. His job was to get the maximum amount of XenoSoft's products to the maximum amount of people for the maximum amount of profit. The patent-holders must have made his

job a nightmare, and he could conceivably stand to gain from Stills' removal. It just seemed like a lot of work for someone who made their money by moving the products.

The only other person in the room with the access and the wherewithal to do what had been done to Stills, Blauer, Dansforth and Selig was Brandon Drake, the VP of Development. His job was to determine what XenoSoft was going to do next, where they were going to go from where they were. He definitely had the access, and his list of accolades as a programmer and a scientist were easily as long and impressive as Stills' or Selig's. But he was the richest man in the company easily, and Heather couldn't imagine what he would have to gain by this. The company was set up to dissolve without Stills' direct involvement, held at bay only by emails that had been forged from Stills in the beginning by the culprit and now were given out at intervals by the glasses-wearing Brooke just to keep the company charter in force. But time was running short – the annual shareholders' meeting was only a few short months away, and if Brock Stills didn't make an appearance then the company would fold. Heather had racked her brains for weeks trying to figure out who stood to gain the most if the company folded. She had nothing.

Brandon Drake leaned forward and steepled his fingers, giving Heather a dry smile in an attempt to mask his runaway attraction to her – even with the programming, Heather was having a hard time getting used to men looking at her that way, but it was happening gradually.

“We're really pleased with your selection to be the new face of XenoSoft,” he said. “Ms. Cruz and Ms. Hamilton have big plans for you. They seem to think you can get XenoSoft software into every home in the country.”

“I don't know about that,” Heather replied smoothly, “but I do know how powerful a strong advertising campaign can be. I'll get the word out, I promise you that. What the country does with that word is up to them more than it's up to me.”

“Well said,” Sudeep Chakras told her in his lushly-accented baritone. “I've been trying to convince the people in this room of that concept for years.”

“I have to confess, I'm used to shooting spreads for Vogue and Glamour. I've never posed for a Wired layout or for Scientific American. I'm breaking new ground here,” Heather said.

“You're going to do just fine,” Jaci told her. “We'll make sure of it.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Heather said. “But I do have one question. Ordinarily, I'm hired to be a pretty face or a nice body. I sell clothes, perfume, makeup... never software. I don't know anything about this, and you're asking me to be much more than a pretty face. You're hiring me to be a spokesperson for your company, and I know next to nothing about it. I have a portfolio full of pictures, but if I can't discuss your company and your software, then there's no way I can do what you're hiring me to do. You don't need the GoDaddy girl, you need somebody who can talk.”

“We already thought of that,” Danielle told me. “We're going to give you as much as you can read, Heather, about the company and all the products. We'll have you up to speed in no time.”

“That's great,” Heather said, “but once again, I'm a model. I smile and look pretty. I honestly doubt that I'm going to be able to explain what half your literature means. I was going to ask if

there were people I could talk to – y'know, programmers and developers – who could explain all your technology to me. I do a lot better if I can talk one-on-one.”

“I'm sure the line will be out the door with volunteers for that job,” Susan Cho commented wryly.

“Great,” I said, smiling brightly.

“We'll get that set up as soon as we can,” Drake told her. “I'll post a company-wide email this afternoon. As long as it doesn't interfere with any development deadlines, then I'll say that you can have as much time with the developers as you want.”

“Excellent,” Danielle said. “Heather, do you have any other questions?”

“Not right now,” she replied. “I'm really looking forward to this. It's a great opportunity.”

“We're excited as well,” Wahrecht said. For what it's costing us, we better be, he seemed to add unspokenly. Heather decided to ignore the implied derision.

She stood languidly, letting the men in the room get a final tempting glimpse of cleavage and her stellar shape, unconsciously smoothing her skirt over her hips and striking a suggestive and glamorous pose. She shook some hands and made her leave with Jaci and Danielle.

“You did really well in there,” Jaci told her. “Really well. I could tell they were impressed.”

“They're businessmen,” I said. “I just acted like they did.”

“It worked. You have a real knack for people,” Danielle commented. “Ever think of working at in public relations?”

“Maybe when I'm done modeling,” Heather said. “I can't make more money anywhere else than I am doing what I'm doing.”

“Do you have plans for lunch?” Jaci asked.

No amount of programming could make Heather stop thinking I'd like to have you for lunch, chica, running an appreciative eye over Jaci's smooth, sleek body in its expensive designer suit. But she only smiled and shook her head.

“I'm scheduled for a manicure in an hour, and a massage after that. I have to go work out today, as well, or I'm not going to be able to keep this contract for very long.”

“Don't fool yourself,” Danielle said. “You could gain ten pounds and still look beautiful.”

“I'm not going to chance that, if you don't mind,” Heather said with a silken laugh.

“A rain check?” Jaci asked.

Am I on crack or is this girl coming on to me? Heather thought, re-evaluating the Latina's body language and her insistence on getting together. She made a mental note to ask Jennifer or Brooke about it later. “Sounds great. I'll call and schedule something for this week.”

“Now that we're greenlit, we plan to start shooting the first campaign immediately,” Danielle told her. “So don't be surprised if you get a call within a week or so.”

“I'm really looking forward to it,” Heather said. “Got to dash. Homework, y'know.” She patted the thick folder of XenoSoft information they'd given her.

They embraced and kissed each others' cheeks – very chic, as was the style, but Heather had to wonder if Jaci's kiss didn't linger a little longer than was absolutely necessary – and Heather was out the door and on her way to the new Porsche Boxter they'd gotten for her, gleaming and sparkling in the visitors' lot. She had her phone to her ear, clicking against her Di Modolo earrings, before she even had the door open.

“We got them,” Hall's voice said when the connection went through. “I have them in the downtown facility. We missed you out there.”

“I'm more good where I'm at. The board gave me access.”

“Good. I think you're going to want to hear what we learned from Taylor.”

“I'll be there in twenty minutes,” Heather said.

* * * * *

Heather perched sexily on the edge of the desk, smoking a Sobrani cigarette and sipping water out of a plastic bottle. Monitors on the wall in front of her showed Taylor, sitting in a chair in an empty, windowless room in the basement. Hall paced in front of her and Jennifer puffed one of her skinny Capris in a chair by the door.

“He was a tough one to crack. A real pro,” Hall said.

“How did you get to him?”

“Old school,” Hall said. “We dug up his priors and threatened him with prosecution.”

“Nice,” Heather said.

“You're not gonna, like, prosecute this guy?” Jennifer asked.

“Oh, we'll let the D.A. have him when we're done,” Hall said. “He's going away for a very long time with the evidence we dug up on him. But it's best if we let the cops build the case. We want some distance from this.”

“So what did you get from him?” Heather asked.

“The Holy Grail. We got a physical location,” Hall said.

“We know where Daddy is?”

“Looks like it. Taylor got his orders on a cellphone that was given to him. Standard stuff, bounced off at least twelve towers, untraceable. But Taylor gave up the name of the man who gave him the phone – a low-level money launderer for the Colombians, a guy called Stanley Hoffman. Hoffman's got a record – mostly minor white-collar stuff, nothing that ever stuck to him – but his roommate is the informant the ATF used when they tried to trace the money back to the Colombians in the big investigation last fall. The informant is still in place.”

“How did you get this?” Heather asked.

“I still have some friends at ATF,” Hall said. “They used my agency a couple years ago to bust some Turkish gunrunners, they owed me a favor.”

“So you bought the informant?”

“Pennies on the dollar. Seems that this Doug Halstead doesn't like legit nine-to-five work and was looking for a little extra cash. He said that Hoffman met with his employers on or around the first of every month to get his orders.”

“That's not much,” Heather commented.

“No, but that paired with the Lo-Jack code for his Beemer, led us to an office building in an industrial park south of town. Toll booth video confirms it, and he's been there eight times this year. On or around the first of every month.”

Hall brought up a map of the city on one of the monitors and pointed.

“Son of a bitch,” Heather breathed.

“Accounting confirms it. The office space is rented by one of the holding companies we've been tracking. It's funded by XenoSoft, sure as shit.”

“Then all that's left is to wait 'till Daddy's there and bust the shit out of him.”

“It shouldn't be long. Word that Brooke, Katja, Kerstin and April have disappeared off the face of the earth should be reaching him any time now. He's gonna want firsthand intel on what happened, and we think he's gonna call in his people.”

“And if he doesn't?” Heather asked.

“Then we're no worse off than we were before Taylor got pinched.”

“I dunno, boss, it's pretty thin,” Heather said, taking a long drag off her cigarette.

“Agreed,” Hall said, “but right now it's the best we got.”

Heather turned to Jennifer. “How's Brooke?”

“Wasted,” Jennifer replied. “Once she took the glasses off, she got really pissed. As pissed off as I've ever seen her, she was all, like, stomping around and throwing shit and yelling about how she don't want no other bitch in her head telling her what to do 'n' stuff. She got hold of a fifth of vodka and fucking pounded it, baby, and she's fucking passed out downstairs.”

“I'm sorry,” Heather told her.

“She'll get over it,” Jennifer said.

“You don't sound so sure,” Heather pressed.

“Y'all made it sound all easy 'n' shit,” she went on, pausing to drag off her cigarette. “Like getting Brooke to settle down and take care of herself was just, like, gonna happen like fucking magic. That girl don't like being told what to do. She fucking freaks when you try. It's like I'm gonna totally lose her over this.”

“She loves you,” Hall said. “I don't know much about women, Jennifer, but even I can see that.”

“She's gonna be mad for a while,” Heather said. “She deserves it. She's been through a lot, and none of it was fair. You're doing the right thing, just being there for her.”

“That's what Stanhope and Kransz said, too, but I don't like her being all mad at me 'n' shit,” Jennifer complained. “Look, when I agreed to help y'all out, I didn't know that meant we were gonna be pissed off at each other all the fucking time.”

“Let Brooke work it out,” Heather said. “Just trust her.”

* * * * *

I wasn't even feeling anything, I was just tearing into her. Kerstin had bruises forming where I'd spanked her ass and I was thrusting my whole hand into her while she yelped and squealed in a combination of pain and ecstasy.

“Äsch Gud! Äsch ja, jag nöd det! Jag vilja det, jag vilja det så dåligt! Äsch ja, ge den till mig!” she screamed, panting. Oh God, yes, I need it. I want it so bad. Give it to me.

“C'mon, you little Swedish slut,” I growled in her ear. “Cum. Cum for me, you nasty bitch.”

“Knulla mig, du slyna! Du hynda, du fladdermus, knulla mig!” she panted. Fuck me, you bitch. You fucking bitch, you slut, fuck me!

“You like that, you fucking whore?” I said, biting her neck hard.

“Ja, ja, ja,” she breathed, reaching around behind her and grabbing my tits so hard it hurt. I wanted it to hurt. “Du är så het, du giftbrun. Jag älskar din fitta, din brön. Få naken för mig, slicka min klitta, du otäck cola narkomanen sur-fjas! Jag er så kåt.” You are so fucking hot, you toxic pussy. Get naked for me, lick my clit, you nasty coke addict acid-pussy! I am so crazy horny!

I had to admit, learning Swedish this way was so much more fun than language CDs. She came one last time, so hard that she clamped down on my hand and made me yelp in pain, and her juices ran down my wrist. Figuring she couldn't take much more, I slid my hand out of her cruelly stretched pussy and licked my fingers clean while she sagged against me, panting and sweaty and thoroughly satisfied.

“Oh, God, that was good to me, bruden,” she panted. I liked it when she called me baby like that and I cuddled tight to her, kissing her neck. I felt a little guilty tearing into her like that, especially because it was Jennifer I was mad at, but Jennifer wasn't around and Kerstin was willing. I just wished I felt a little better inside.

“Har'u en tagg?” Kerstin asked me, cuddling into the crook of my arm.

“Don't know that one, baby,” I purred.

“A cigarette,” she translated for me. “Do you have one? I want one.”

“Sure,” I giggled, reaching across the clothes we'd torn off one another for my purse. I gave one of the security cameras a sly wink – at least the guards got a good show today. I lit two of my Virginia Slims and passed one to her, which she puffed on gratefully.

“It's funny, I only smoke when I just fucked you,” Kerstin commented.

“I guess I'm, like, a bad influence.”

"You bring things out of me, orre," she told me, using the word for hottie. "Before I knew you, it was just my classes and working out and snaska kotte all day long." Snaska kotte mean sucking cock. That was one of the first Swedish words I learned.

"That doesn't sound so bad," I told her.

"It wasn't, but that was when I didn't know there was more," she told me. "I mean, I still go out looking for the kuksås when I can, 'cause I like the high so much." She was talking about boy cum. Another of the first words she ever taught me.

"But when I'm around you, Brooke, I keep thinking there's so much more. About how I feel."

"What do you mean, baby?" I asked, confused.

"I'm sorry, Brooke. Jag tanka... jag tanka jag älskar dig." she said in a rush.

"You think... you love me?" I asked, struggling with the translation.

"Ja," she said. "I really think I do."

I propped myself up on my elbow so I could see her face, the glowing curtain of my sweat-heavy curls shielding our faces in a warm platinum glow. "You don't really mean that," I said.

"That's the problem," she told me. "I think I really do."

"I thought you were into April 'n' stuff," I said.

"I am," Kerstin told me. "But she doesn't make me feel like you do."

"Oh, honey," I said, my eyes stinging with as-of-yet-unshed tears. "I can't. I really can't. I love Jennifer. I couldn't ever even, like, dream of being with anybody else."

Kerstin lowered her eyes. "I know. I've talked about this for days. In my mind. But I can't help how I feel, either."

"Kerstin, I think you're awesome. Anybody would be lucky to have you. But Jennifer is who I love, nobody else. I'll be your friend and I'll fuck you anytime you want, but I just can't do more than that, okay? Please? Don't make me pick?"

"It's okay," Kerstin said, kissing my shoulder. "Really, bruden, it's okay. I know what this is. I just wanted you to know how I feel, okay? It's important to me."

"You're so sweet," I told her, caressing her face. "I wish it could be different for you. I wish I could be who you need me to be."

"Just be who Jennifer needs you to be," Kerstin told me, "because that's what I love, too."

What Jennifer needs me to be.

I kissed Kerstin softly, caressing her face carefully because I had a lit cigarette between my first two fingers, and nuzzled her nose. "I have to go, sweetheart. There's something I need to do."

"Will you be back?"

"For you? Always," I said, searching through the piled clothes for my sodden panties.

* * * * *

Jennifer hadn't wasted time. I'd learned from my friend James, one of the surveillance techs who had an amazing cock and knew just how to use it, that Jennifer had left ten minutes ago with Hall and Heather for an address south of town. They'd taken some guys with guns – yuck, I hated that macho type – in a van and were moving quickly. I doubted they could move quicker than me, though, I thought as I piled into my Corvette and brought the engine roaring to life. I lit a cigarette and turned up the stereo, squealing the tires as I revved out of the parking lot and onto the road. I wished I'd had some different shoes – I was still in the lucite skyscraper platforms from work that I'd gotten arrested in, and the skin-tight pink sequined tube dress as well. I'd had time to clean up, to shave my pits and fix my makeup, at least, so I didn't look like a total mess.

All the anger and resentment I'd felt at Jennifer had melted away in an instant when Kerstin had said what she'd said. Just be who Jennifer needs you to be. I'd thought I was doing that, being myself and fucking around, doing my thing. But that wasn't what Jennifer needed, I knew that now. She'd changed everything for me, the way she looked and talked and acted, even the way she dressed and the car she drove. She needed me to help her, to guide her through this new world that she didn't know and wasn't really prepared for, and I'd been acting like a spoiled brat because I couldn't get cum-high whenever I wanted, hate-fucking another girl not because I really even wanted the sex, I just wanted to get back at her for telling me no.

I couldn't let that be the thanks Jennifer made for all of her sacrifices. She was in danger because of me – in more ways than just Daddy's goons. She could be arrested for the cocaine in her purse, drugs she'd never carried before she met me. She could catch some nasty disease that her spoiled brat girlfriend brought home because she couldn't wait two seconds to slip a rubber on a guy and she wasn't really choosy who she fucked. Hell, she was even in danger from society, a body of largely ignorant and angry people who could be really tough on dykes, no matter how hot they were.

Sure, they were young and hot and rich as shit, and they loved each other, but I knew down deep that wasn't enough. We had to be united and face the world together because neither of us could face it alone. That's why I was tearing ass across the city at ninety-five miles an hour in a cloud of cigarette smoke and blasting hip-hop. I had to find her, to tell her that I was with her – really with her – and she wasn't alone in this. I needed to say I was sorry, sorry for being such a spoiled brat. I needed to kiss her, and stroke her soft blonde hair. I needed to do a lot of things.

I checked my onboard navigation system and determined that I was getting close. If they were going there with guys with guns, then I probably shouldn't show up in a squeal of tires and Young Jeezy at a million decibels. I took my high-heeled foot off of the accelerator and turned the stereo down low, tossing my cigarette and finding an out-of-the-way place to park my distinctive car – a black convertible 'Vette with a pink pinstripe and vanity plates that said “NAW T GRL.” I didn't want to get anybobby busted. I just wanted to see my Jennifer.

I click-clacked my way around the back of the building, trying to look as inconspicuous as I could in a pink sequined dress that barely contained 40F breasts, a curtain of platinum blonde curls and eight-inch see-thru heels. It suddenly dawned on me that maybe I hadn't thought this through all the way. They were bringing guys with guns to this place. Maybe it was dangerous enough that I needed a gun, too, or maybe I should've just stayed away. My head

had been all full of Jennifer, I couldn't think of anything else. I turned around to go back to my car, either to get my gun or to get the fuck out of here.

Wait. If this place is so fucking dangerous, why are they bringing Jennifer? I thought, and smacked my gum loudly. Proud of myself for conquering my own fears, I turned back around towards the building. Four armed men had appeared outside the door and were looking at me with half-interest, half-disdain.

"Can we help you, miss?" the tallest of them asked.

Without skipping a beat, I smacked my gum loudly and twirled a lock of curly blonde around one finger, smiling and putting all my weight on one leg, letting my tits hang out teasingly and cocking one hip to show off my flawless shape.

"Um, yeah," I said brightly. "I'm, like, here to see Daddy."

* * * * *

"Stay back," Heather warned, slipping a ballistic vest over her Chanel blouse. Even in shooters' glasses, she still looked ready for a runway. Jennifer nodded, fastening the Velcro closures of her own vest and checking the magazine in her 9mm Sig Sauer. The 'extras' that Dr. Stanhope had put in her subconscious training program were going to serve her in good stead, she decided.

"What are you, um, expecting in there?" she asked, wishing that she'd thought to let Stanhope or Hall be able to deactivate the 'airhead' persona she'd installed under the password. She hoped that it didn't overwhelm her ability to help out.

"We're not even sure if this 'Daddy' character is in there," Hall said, strapping on an MP-5 submachine gun. "But I doubt he'd leave a place as important to him as this unguarded. Expect between six and ten men, well-armed and trained. There are no other businesses in this complex, so we figure he's on the first floor, maybe the first and second."

"We go room to room, rubia, and take out anybody who tries to stop us. Even if we don't get Daddy, chances are we get his identity and possibly his location. One way or the other, this ends today and you and Brooke can get back to your lives," Heather said.

That was enough for Jennifer. She slipped on her own shooters' glasses and followed the first stick, the breaching team, five exhaustively-trained men who would make entrance and take the heaviest resistance. She was going in with the second team, which included Hall and Heather.

They took the door with a battering ram and ran in behind the roar of flash-bang concussion grenades. A few staccato chatters of submachinegun fire sounded from out of the shattered door, and a crackling "Foyer clear. Second team, go go go" came over Jennifer's headset.

They moved quickly, guns pointing everywhere as they moved into the smoky foyer. Shattered glass and pottery from destroyed planters littered the floor and two of Hall's men were restraining three bloodied and wounded men in suits with flex-cuffs. Another was disabling the elevator, behind a bullet-pocked reception desk with a destroyed computer. The other pair were leaning to either side of the door to the stairs, weapons pointed upwards.

“Safe to assume they know we're here,” Hall grunted. “Try to save computers, we may need the evidence. We'll take this floor. Move!”

They flowed around the reception desk and into the office space beyond. A desk had been overturned at the far side of the room and Jennifer could spot figures moving behind it. Without thinking, she snatched one of the grenades dangling from her harness and popped the pin, letting the spoon fall free as she tossed it high, over the makeshift barricade. Her nine-mil spoke once, twice, three times to keep their heads down before a blinding flash and a deafening roar filled the small space. Three men rolled from behind the desk, grunting in pain, and one of them struggled to his knees, a pistol in his hand. Heather stitched him across the upper body with a three-round burst from an Uzi. He sagged backwards on his knees, lying still.

“Drop 'em!” Hall bellowed, leveling his own weapon.

The remaining two men sagged, then tossed their weapons far from themselves and laid down on the floor. Jennifer went over to the man who'd been shot, kicking his pistol away from an outstretched hand. He was still breathing – the rounds had taken him in the vest – but he was in considerable pain. Unmindful of his discomfort, Jennifer rolled him over with a toe and bound his hands with flex-cuffs.

The other two men in her team came around the corner of a hallway, which she knew from the building schematic they'd given her to study led to a break room, restrooms and a back entrance covered by Hall's third team.

“Seven employees locked in the break room, Mr. Hall,” one of the soldiers announced. “All unarmed. We've got them restrained, but it looks like the guards locked them in there a few minutes ago.”

Hall looked puzzled, peering at his watch. “A few minutes, are you sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We breached less than a minute ago,” he said. “How could they have known?”

“Is the first floor clear?” Heather asked.

“Yes, ma'am,” the second man said.

“Ma'am,” Heather repeated. “I'm never gonna get used to that. Keep the exits covered, secure this floor. We're going upstairs.”

“Check, ma'am,” the soldier replied, looking around the room for cover.

Jennifer, Heather and Derrick Hall moved back through the foyer to the stairs. They ascended quickly, in a tight overwatch formation, and came out in another long, unremarkable hallway. One of their men was sitting against the wall, struggling for breath.

“What happened?” Heather asked sotto voce.

“Three men in the hallway,” he panted. “I was first through, they were waiting. They retreated through the second door on the right. The rest of the team pursued.”

“You okay?” Jennifer asked him, unable to help herself, even though she was trained not to waste time on the wounded but to leave them for the medics who would come in afterwards.

He smiled at her. “Took it in the vest, one in the leg. Through and through, it's not bad. I think I got the bleeding stopped.”

“Hang in, medics will be here soon,” she told him, caressing the back of his gloved hand with her thumb as she squeezed it reassuringly. She got a shy but genuine smile in return.

“Thanks, ma'am, but this ain't my first rodeo,” he said self-deprecatingly.

“Bravo Team from Alpha Team,” the headset crackled.

“Bravo, go,” Hall responded.

“Two remaining guards barricaded in a sealed room at the back of this floor,” Alpha Leader said quickly in his clipped speech. “Exits unknown. We have the entrance secured.”

“Can you breach?”

“Possibly. Stand by.”

“Never mind,” Heather broke in. “We're on your floor, ETA your location thirty seconds. Hold your position.”

“Alpha clear, holding position,” the man responded as Jennifer, Hall and Heather made their way down the hallway towards the door that their wounded man had indicated. They moved through a well-appointed laboratory full of too-familiar equipment: subconscious training gear, retroviral growth cultures, and a bank of powerful computers for genetic and epigenetic sequencing. It was a duplicate of the ReNu lab and the one they'd discovered a week ago downtown. Just how deep do 'Daddy's' pockets go? Jennifer wondered. This guy has more toys than F.A.O. Schwarz.

They picked their way through the lab tables to where Alpha Team – now a man short – was covering a steel-core door at the back of the lab. They were using the tables for cover.

“Charlie Team from Bravo Leader,” Hall said into his headset.

“Charlie, go.”

“We have three or more Tangos pinned in a room, southeast corner, second floor. Do you see any exits?”

“Stand by. None visible, Bravo. Possibly roof access.”

“Helicopter?” Heather asked.

“Anything's possible,” Hall said. He raised his voice, shocking in the quiet of the lab. “You're trapped in there, there's no way out! Throw down your weapons and come out of there!”

“You throw down yours,” a voice answered, muffled by the door. “We're walking out of here.”

“I don't see that happening,” Hall responded.

“Throw down your weapons and back away,” the voice repeated. The door opened, just a bit, and a strong arm pushed a curvaceous woman in a pink sequined dress into view. Another hand held the muzzle of a submachinegun to her temple.

“Brooke?” Jennifer asked.

“I'm sorry,” I sniffled. “I didn't know.”

“Relax,” Hall said. “We're backing up.”

“Weapons down. Now,” the voice commanded.

The teams looked to Hall, who nodded. In a clatter of hardware, they left a pile of guns on the floor and started backing away. Two men in suits came out and gathered them up quickly, leveling MP-5s and Uzis at Alpha and Bravo Teams. Once they had the room covered, Brooke was pushed out of the room, tottering on her eight-inch heels. Behind her, leveling a gun at the base of her skull, nestled in her thick blonde curls, was Brandon Drake.

“The model,” he said, amused. “I should've known. You seemed a little too bright for a fucktoy.”

“Bright enough to slip past you,” Heather growled.

“Apparently not,” Drake replied.

“Why?” Hall asked.

He sneered. “You actually want the James Bond villain monologue?” he said, chuckling. “For the money, idiot. This bitch tried to keep it from me with her patents and maneuvering. She thought she was so fucking smart. Now she's a cocksucking imbecile for the rest of her life, and I have the money anyway. Now we know who the smart one is.”

He dug in the inside pocket of a coat for something as Hall said, “Others know we're here, Drake. You're not going to get away.”

“They know nothing. When they get here, they'll find an empty building.”

“You're that sure you can hide our bodies?” Hall asked.

“I don't have to,” he said. He raised what he'd been digging in his pocket for, some kind of respirator, and fitted it over his nose and mouth. A hiss escaped the fume hoods and ventilation ducts. As one, the teams hit the floor, trying to get underneath whatever Drake had released into the room.

“It doesn't matter,” he told them, his voice oddly muffled by the respirator. “Any dose is an effective dose. I'm not sure how long the aerosolized retrovirus' incubation period is, but it doesn't particularly matter. A day, a week... sooner or later, you'll all come looking for Daddy. You won't be able to help it.”

One of his guards turned on him, a face like thunder. “You bastard.”

He started to raise his weapon, but Drake only said, “Deactivate.”

The guard's eyes were full of terror – all of their eyes were – while he struggled to move with muscles that no longer seemed to obey his commands.

“Please,” he sneered. “Those strange dreams you've been having? You thought you were actually imaginative enough to come up with those on your own? I've been having you and your men programmed to suit me for weeks, now.”

“I'll find a way to stop you, Drake,” Hall promised, rising to his feet.

“In a month's time you'll be begging to suck my cock, you idiot,” he spat back.

Brooke turned on him, murder in her eyes. “You son of a bitch,” she hissed. “It's, like, bad enough that you did this shit to me.”

“I can do it to whomever I please, you stupid slut,” he said back. “You actually think you can stop me? I'm desperate to see you try. You can't pay for entertainment like that.”

Brooke raised her hand to slap him and he muttered the word “fugue.” Brooke slumped to the floor, moaning.

“What the fuck did you do to her?” Jennifer demanded.

“Just activated an old failsafe I installed in her so-called brain when I first started playing with her. That BIMBO I invented is an amazing thing. Even though I never designed it to, it can interfere with motor function as well as cognitive function?” he chuckled. “But, then, you'll all know that soon enough. I've made enough here for all of you to have one of your own.”

Brooke rolled on the floor, staring up at the bright light streaming through a high window in the lab. She drooled a little, trying to force herself to sit up. She could only weakly flap her arms and legs, no matter how hard she tried. Tears leaked out from behind long lashes.

Her head lolled to one side, nerveless, and she saw her purse. Looking to make sure Hall wasn't watching her – he wasn't, all his attention was on Hall – she started willing her hand to slide across the tiled floor in tiny, quiet little fits and starts, towards the alligator Gucci purse, laying open next to her.

Drake was lounging on one of the lab tables, laughing at Hall and Heather as he leveled a gun at them. “Now,” he said conversationally, “all I need you to do is tell me where Stanhope is and I can finally call an end to this miserable adventure.”

“Fuck you,” Heather growled.

“That's no language for a lady like yourself,” Drake chided. “Although you won't be a lady much longer. Maybe you should keep that language put by, for when you become a cum-addicted gutter whore in a few days.”

“I swear to Christ I'm gonna kill you,” Heather shot back.

“Not likely, my dear,” he said. “You'll most probably want to fuck me. If you're a very good girl, I might let you. Now, again. Where is Stanhope?”

Brooke's long-nailed fingers snaked into her purse and closed over the cool metal of her Armani glasses. She started sliding them back across the floor, towards her face. A soft moan almost escaped her lips – the concentration it was taking to do this without drawing attention was all she had, and she could almost feel the strange metal thing in her brain which was interfering with her body and her mind.

"You'll never find him," Hall said, coughing.

"I'm sure I will just as soon as you tell me," Drake said. "After all, it's your only chance to get the antivirus I created. Think about it, Hall – yes, I've known your name for quite some time – either give me Stanhope or become a brainless slut like Brooke for the rest of your life."

"Fuck that," one of Alpha Team said. "I'll tell you."

"Shut the fuck up, Donaldson," Alpha Leader snapped. "One word and I'll put a bullet in your brain."

"I ain't going out no whore," he shot back.

"Use your fucking brain, man!" Hall spat. "You actually think Drake is going to cure you? If you want out of this, then Stanhope is your only chance. He knows as much about this process – more – than Drake does."

"A bird in the hand," Drake teased.

"Damn right," the soldier said. "He's at the headquarters we set up on Brookdale."

"The address," Drake said.

In a blur, Heather snap-rolled to where Drake's paralyzed guard stood. Taking his hand in her long-nailed ones, she bent his wrist backwards and pumped the trigger of the gun the useless guard was holding in nerveless fingers. Two shots caught the soldier in the chest, deflected by his kevlar but knocking him backwards. The third and fourth shots took him in the temple and just below his left eye, silencing him forever.

Drake's answering shot forced Heather away from the guard – unarmed again – and covering behind a table. Heather and Hall scrambled for cover with the rest of Alpha and Bravo Teams.

"You bitch. I was going to leave the country, you know. You'd never have heard from me again. But now I have to stick around a week or so, to make a new retrovirus. Now you get to weigh three hundred pounds and have potent body odor in addition to being a cum-crazed whore."

"We'll find you, no matter where you go," Hall said.

"No, you won't," Drake replied. "You'll be lucky to find your own slum apartment when I'm through with you."

"You're not that smart," Jennifer said. "There's a flaw somewhere. We'll find it."

"Please, keep posturing," Drake said. "I find it immensely entertaining. There are no holes in my plan, bitch. I've thought of everything."

Brooke stood behind him, glasses glinting in the sunlight, and jabbed him in the back of the neck with four syringes, two in each hand, that she'd grabbed from the table. She pushed the plungers savagely and Drake screamed, dropping his pistol as he grabbed for the needles in his neck. He sank to his knees, moaning and gurgling.

"You didn't, like, think of everything, baby," she smiled at him. "You let a dumb blonde stripper beat you, after all."

* * * * *

I tucked my glasses in my purse – it was a gift from Marc Jacobs, supple grey suede – and dug for my cigarettes. I sort of missed the acuity that came from wearing them, but it gave me a headache after a while, and I couldn't keep them on for more than about three or four hours before I just had to remove them. Just long enough to manage the accounts and keep XenoSoft – my company – on track for the next few days.

It had taken the better part of a month to convince the board that I was Brock Stills. The whole thing had come to light, but just to the board members. I didn't want this splashed across the front pages. Not when we planned to roll out the technology used to make me to the public in a few weeks. Drake's place on the board had been filled by Stanhope, who was now very rich and very happy.

I clicked down the marble hallway and out the sunlit foyer of my new office building towards my car, a shiny new Maserati convertible. I'd kept my vanity plates, though. I clicked my key-fob and the alarm chirped merrily, almost sounding happy to see me.

I checked my watch – a lovely platinum Rolex, a gift from Jennifer – and picked up my pace, anxious to get to my appointment. We'd set up Keystone Industries as a management corporation for XenoSoft, something very hush-hush, since everyone decided it was best that no one know I was in charge. It would've raised far too many questions if Britanee Sparxx, winner of the Adult Video News award for Best New Female Performer, was found to be CEO of one of the largest software corporations in the world. At least Jennifer's cryptic phone calls had paid off. I got fed my weekly diet of hot-and-sticky, certified disease-free, and no one was in any danger. And it augmented my income nicely. I couldn't dance any more – I was too much of a celebrity – so I bought the club and ran it, just for the excuse to hang out with my friends. Besides, I still got crazy turned on watching Jennifer up on that stage, doing her thing on the pole. She was one of the club's top earners, always strutting around the place with a ballerina's tutu of singles and fives tucked into her scanty panties, a Capri smoking in her fingers and a brilliant smile on her face. She'd never been happier. She'd sold the real estate practice to a couple of young go-getters who were earning her crazy money on the side. Enough to support her burgeoning appetite for designer labels and the chief Colombian export. It's not like she needed the money, she just did it because she liked to make her own way. The seven billion dollar estimated worth of the bitch she slept with could've kept her in Dior and nose candy for the rest of her life. My baby just liked to work, that was all.

I parked outside the unmarked building that housed my new biotech labs and got out, smoothing my skirt over my hips and walking briskly – that way that made my titties bounce in that way that made all the armed security guards stare and whisper after I passed, giving me a glittering smile – through the security gate and into the back.

The labs were usually sealed, since there were viruses and nasty shit being worked with all the time. I wasn't interested in the work, anyway – I never was, it was all complicated and boring to me, especially without my glasses to help me concentrate – I just needed to get back to the central office in the back.

Heather Tijerina was already there, smoking a Sobrani cigarette and sipping coffee. She was wearing a purple knit dress – looked like Versace – and upwards of fifteen grand of Tacori and

Maddy Emerson ice on her fingers, wrists and ears. She blew me a smoky kiss as I walked in. I embraced her and kissed her on either cheek warmly.

“Where's Dr. Stanhope?” I asked brightly, drinking in the sight of her. She was impossibly sexy, now one of the most sought-after fashion models in the industry. Her campaign for XenoSoft had increased household consumer sales by half. We were planning a commercial later this month. She'd been leafing through the latest issue of Vogue, planning her spring wardrobe. It was, ironically, the issue with her on the cover wearing a luscious Ralph Lauren gown.

“Oh, he's back with the team,” she said, gesturing a manicured hand at the door past reception. I admired her briefly again. Her own prior exposure to the virus had protected her from whatever Drake had exposed her to – all it had done was lighten her hair a little and make her a little fuller in the chest. It also gave her a vastly increased appetite for boys, but that only served to make her happy.

“Ciao, sweetie,” I said, clicking past, giving my ass a delicious little wiggle to see if she'd notice. She did. I saw her bite her bottom lip in appreciation. I hoped we'd get the chance to get together again at some point. Heather had a serious fetish for big tits. I fit that bill admirably. I had the means at my disposal now to reduce them from their titanic 40G size, but I wouldn't dream of it. My tits were my favorite part of my body. And as much as Heather, Jennifer and Kerstin liked to play with them, I was going to keep them just like they were. If anything, I was gonna get them bigger, even though the focus groups who evaluated my pornos said I was at the high end. They'd think it was sexy if I told them it was sexy, after all.

The back room was crowded, as always, guarded by the glamazon members of Alpha and Bravo teams. They were not like the others – me, Heather or Jennifer – just merely pretty, but they made up for it by being incredibly sexy. The virus had changed them in weeks, and even though Stanhope was still hard at work on a cure, the subconscious programming had made them very comfortable with their gender and the attendant appetites that the virus had fostered in them. Additional programming had all but forced monogamy to decrease the risk of disease, so all seven women had very satisfied boyfriends. Stanhope had even managed to offset the intense cravings that came with the cum-high, and these women could easily go two weeks without drinking cum. It was too ingrained in me, April, Katja and Kerstin, unfortunately. We'd been at it too long, and we liked it way too much, for the enzyme treatment to keep dicks out of our mouths for longer than a day or two. It wasn't that bad a way to live, and it sure helped my porn career. I made an internet movie once every two or three days. The 'Web was choked with pictures and videos of me naked, slurping on a cock or three or four. I imagined all the guys world-wide jerking their cocks watching me and started soaking my panties. With an effort, I managed to break my mind away from that world-wide circle jerk and focus.

Danica Hall – a tall woman with soft skin and bee-stung lips, her platinum blonde hair pulled back into a severe bun and her tailored men's business suit hugging her every luscious curve, gave me a happy smile when she turned and saw me. Still the best security in the business, she'd come over when we'd merged ReNu with XenoSoft and had taken over security for this facility and kept guard on me, Jennifer, Heather and Stanhope.

“How are you, sweetheart?” he asked me, kissing both my cheeks as we embraced.

“I'm awesome,” I said. I couldn't help but return her happy smile. As crazy as it sounded, Danica actually seemed happier as a woman. She had a seven-figure income, a new Ferrari, a

designer wardrobe that I both helped put together and coveted down to my marrow. But she would have traded it all, even the house on St. Bart's and the 52-foot luxury yacht, for David, her boyfriend. He was executive chef at Maison Zen, the most upscale place in the city. There was an eight-week wait for a table even if you knew somebody. Luckily, since Jennifer and I had invested in the place, we got to eat there whenever we wanted. Danica had met him when she was vetting him and it was love at first sight. They planned to marry early next year in the Bahamas. I was going to be maid of honor.

"That's good to hear," she said.

"Fourth quarter earnings are, um, up six percent 'n' stuff, which means you and the Doc will, like, get all the funding you need, plus some," I said.

"That's great news," Danica said. "Stanhope will be ecstatic. He can't wait to break ground on that new epigenome mapping project."

"Like, as if I know what that even means 'n' shit," I giggled. "I'm just, like, gonna write the checks. Y'all can do, like, whatever with 'em."

"She's ready," Danica said, gesturing towards the door. I nodded and went in.

She was sitting in the middle of her pink frilly bed, playing happily with her dolls, making Barbie go to her knees and suck Ken's absent dick. She had blonde hair almost to her ankles, tied up in long pigtails above either ear. Huge, rhinestone-studded hoops adorned her ears and shimmered in the light. Anything shiny was pretty to her. Her huge, pink-glossed pouty lips were pursed in concentration as she took her dolls through the motions of sex. Titanic breasts – they made mine look like mosquito bites, easily a 48H – swung on her chest, strapped down by a pink satin custom bra just to keep them under control. She'd already herniated a disc in her back from carrying them around, but she cried uncontrollably if anyone even mentioned getting them reduced. She saw me and waved happily, her sapphire blue eyes twinkling without any vestige of intellect behind them.

"Are you ready, sweetie?" I asked happily.

"Hi, Brooke," she burbled in a voice more suited to a toddler. "Are we going to go play with boys again?"

"That's right, honey. Lots of boys, just like before. Are you ready to go?"

Brandi Drake clapped happily. The four BIMBOs – the second-generation kind that made concentration impossible – Brooke had injected her with made it impossible to mitigate the cum-hunger, or any impulse for that matter, making her good for nothing more than sex and self-gratification. She had a lucrative career in the fetish pornography market, since she had breasts that it took a handtruck to carry around and acted like a little girl wherever she went – because she had the functional mind of a four-year-old, didn't mind being tied up or spanked and could plow through a room full of cocks without losing the slightest bit of steam. It was enough to earn her keep at the lab, at any rate, and gave Stanhope a chance to study the BIMBO modules. Unfortunately, they couldn't be surgically removed without killing or paralyzing the patient, but Brooke and April and Kerstin and Katja had long since learned to live with theirs.

A part of Brooke wondered, distantly, if Brandi knew what had happened to her. A bitter, angry part of her hoped it did. But at least the porcelain face and twinkling eyes appeared happy. But it didn't take much to keep Brandi happy.

"Have you gone potty, honey?" I asked her.

"Mm-hmm," Brandi confirmed, nodding. "I wanna see the boys."

"Okay, honey, we're going. Get your purse and we can leave," I said.

She grabbed her little pink purse – Hello Kitty to my Prada – and took my hand in hers. Her nails were almost two inches long, lacquered pink and indestructible like my own. She could barely hold her crayons to color. I reached in the pocket of my suit and gave her a lollipop. She squealed and bounced up and down – almost giving herself a concussion from her immense tits – and clapped her hands, kissing my cheek sloppily as she tore off the paper and stuffed it in her mouth. Even in her innocence she made it sexy without meaning to. We'd used the training programs as best we could, but with a functional IQ in the high sixties, there was only so much we could do to mitigate her sexiness. She just oozed it, and the little-girl innocence made it irresistible.

"How many boys are there gonna be?" she asked as I paused to light my cigarette before getting into the car.

"I'm not sure, honey. Four or five."

"I want ten," she said, plopping onto my leather seat. She sang her happy little 'buckle up' song to herself as she attempted the seatbelt with her crippling long fingernails. I had to help her.

"We'll see. The director might only have, like, four or five."

Brandi pouted, her bottom lip stuck out adorably. Even I had problems not wanting to fuck this girl, even knowing who she'd been. No trace of my old friend remained in that flawless face, though.

"Maybe you can, like, play with a girl, then," I tried, anything to turn off the sullen pout. Brandi was perfectly capable of making everyone's life miserable if she didn't get her way.

"Don't wanna girl. Want ten boys," she grumped.

"How about this, then. When we're done, I'll take you out for ice cream, okay?"

She squealed and clapped her hands, kissing me again. Relieved, I put the car into gear and pulled out into traffic, towards the big house in the suburbs where we were going to shoot today's scenes.

"Um, Brooke?" Brandi asked shyly, blushing.

"Yeah, honey?"

"You take care of me, right?" she asked.

"You know I do."

"Then, um... can I call you 'Mommy?' I never had no Mommy before."

I gave her a sidelong look, searching for some trace of Brandon Drake in those guileless blue eyes, some shred of the evil bastard who'd forced me to call him Daddy and thank him for all the things he did to me against my will.

Only innocent expectation gazed back at me.

"I guess so," I said, puffing on my cigarette. Brandi took my other hand and squeezed it tight. She didn't let it go for the rest of the trip.

Fin...