



SUMMARY: After volunteering for a secret project, an arm sergeant discovers that he was mistakenly given the wrong formula and now has been turned into a female who is still willing to take on what ever the army has in mind.

THE GLITCH

Part One

By Valerie Hope

I remember a little cross-stitch that had hung in the entryway of my mother's house for as long as I could remember.

'Home is where the Army sends you.'

She was a perfect military wife, good at managing the house all on her own, keeping me and my three sisters under control by herself, and never really unpacking since you never knew when Dad was going to come through the door and tell us we were leaving school and traveling clear across the country.

My sisters had all settled down with nice, dependable and stable men as soon as they were able, once Mom had finally passed away after her stroke three years ago. But I was the only boy in the house, and there was no way in hell that I wasn't going into the service. I enlisted the day after my eighteenth birthday and planned to go to college when I was through on the G.I. Bill. That never really panned out, though - after growing up on the bases and after being in for three years, life outside the U.S. Army just didn't make a whole lot of sense. Besides, I was a Master Sergeant now, which was pretty good pay, and I'd distinguished myself well in both Gulf Wars, which made the officer corps rumble that I had a bright and promising future ahead of me. And besides, I was always a big one for the path of least resistance. Leaving the Army and going to college, getting a job and so forth were all a lot of work. I already had a decent, paying job and a roof over my head and hot meals, and all I had to do was just keep training, which the Army also paid for.

So that was why I found myself in the back of a C-130, freezing my ass off wrapped in a parka, 13,000 feet above the Ozark Mountains in Tennessee. The letter had been typically Army ambiguous, but it let me know that I had been volunteered for training somewhere in a facility in the Carolinas. I hadn't had long to pack my stuff and report to the MAC (on paper it stood for Military Airlift Command but everyone knew it really meant Maybe Airplane Come) and bid a half-hearted *adieu* to Ft. Hood, Texas from the closing cargo ramp before I was on my way.

It was all just a great big pain in the ass, but if it meant more money or a possible promotion, I guess I wouldn't complain too loud. I'd do the coursework and the push-ups and then promptly forget everything I was ever taught.

* * *

"Dude, why do you make your 'ones' like that?" Private John Collier asked his partner, sifting through even yet still more paperwork for some stupid test operation or another about to be

instituted at Camp Redmond, North Carolina. Nobody even knew what or where Camp Redmond was, much less anything else about it. It's where the Army did all their top-secret James Bond stuff.

Private Henry Hudgins looked over irritably. "Make my 'ones' like how?"

"With the little thing sticking off the top and the little line thing on the bottom. What, are you trying to look like a typewriter or some shit?" John said, exasperated.

"I make 'em like that so you don't think they're a lower-case *L* or an upper-case *I*, dumbass," Hudge shot back. "Y'know, so people don't get confused?"

"Shit, so people don't get confused. Like it's not confusing that it looks like a damn 'two.' That's not confusing at all," John shot back.

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about," Hudge shot back. "Anybody can tell that's a 'one' there."

"I can't."

"But you're a fucking retard," Hudge finished. "So why don't you quit criticizing my penmanship and box that shit up for Camp Redmond so we can finally get all this Project Insider stuff the hell out of here?"

"Sure, whatever," John said, dropping the file into the envelope for security sealing. "But if somebody reads that as a damn 'two' and they come looking for why, I'm giving you up."

"I'm pissing myself," Hudge said. "Now hurry up. Once we drop that off at headquarters we can get the hell out of here and shoot some pool."

"Amen," John said, sealing the top-secret envelope.

* * *

There were fourteen of us on the tarmac, shivering a little in the misty cold of the North Carolina mountains. The wind clawed playfully at our uniforms as the HMMWVs rode out from the low buildings just the other side of the airstrip.

I passed over my orders to the lieutenant who asked for them without a word. It had been fifteen hours since I'd eaten, showered or slept, and I was less concerned about where I was or what I'd be doing as I was in getting the preliminary briefing out of the way so I could grab a little rack time and a hot shower.

"Sirs, Ma'ams, if you'll follow us," the corporal on station said, gesturing towards the idling Hummers. We stepped lively. The HMMWV was flaky about some things, but it was common knowledge that the one thing that worked unfailingly in any Humvee in the Army was the heater.

I piled into the compartment with three others, a female sergeant with red hair and freckles who gave me a shy little grin, a tall black corporal with a shaved-bald head and a young-buck Latino sergeant with a chipped front tooth and a quick, honest-looking grin.

"Hi, Ricky Velasquez," he said to the others in the Hummer as we lurched into motion.

I nodded. "Sergeant Mal Williams."

The tall, fierce-looking African-American spoke next in a warm basso rumble. "Antoine Booker. How y'all doin'?"

The friendly-looking, cute redhead was last: "Sergeant Aimee Grimes. Good to meet you guys."

"Anybody know why we're here?" Booker asked.

"Some kind of advanced infiltration training," Aimee said. "They weren't real clear in the orders. Heck, I hadn't even heard of Camp Redmond before I got the transfer."

"Me, neither," Ricky put in. "My brother's a major, he didn't know nothin' about it either 'cept that it's supposed to be some kind of high-security test facility."

"Well, I hope the briefing is quick," I said, knuckling the small of my back. "I've been on a plane since Fort Hood. I'm dying for a hot meal and some rack time."

"You and me both, Sergeant," Booker confirmed. "Long flight from Fort Ord, too."

"I don't know why we have to bother with a briefing, anyway, it ain't like they're gonna tell us nothing," Ricky said a little grumpily. "We're just NCOs, anyway, we're used to being mushrooms."

We all laughed. Being 'mushrooms' was a common grouse among enlisted men about their treatment by officers. Kept in the dark and fed a constant diet of horseshit.

I stretched out, making casual conversation as best I could and trying to keep my eyes open. Of course, no one would have taken it personally if I'd started sleeping. We were all soldiers here.

* * *

"At ease, soldiers, please be seated," the man on the podium said. "Welcome to Camp Redmond. For your edification, you are now two hundred and seventy-five feet below the mountains. We're the Army's best-kept secret down here. I am General Thomas R. Price, the commanding officer of this facility. Any questions, don't hesitate, please."

We all took a seat in the little classroom desks that had been set up for us. This place was no different than any one of a hundred briefing rooms I'd been in. I blinked my eyes rapidly to force myself more alert.

"You are all here, quite simply put, because you are the best," General Price began. "You come with the highest recommendations, decorated in battle and your character and service records above reproach. We asked the Army for an excellent cross-section of skills, from demolitions to piloting to infantry, armor, air assault and airborne. And once again, the Army delivered us its best.

"You are here, ladies and gentlemen, because we need a team of experts that can be trained and adapted to function in any environment, any circumstance and any situation. We're hoping to build that here.

"If you will look in the first page of your manual, you will see that this operation is entitled Project Insider. It's my duty to inform you that this is a Most Secret project, eyes-only for the Joint Chiefs and the Commander in Chief. Any mention of any information gathered from this

facility or this project is considered high treason and a national security risk. Believe me, none of us wants that. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," we all echoed. Most Secret. Wow. I'd never been cleared this high.

Another high-ranker stood behind the general and cleared his throat. General Price gave him the floor, stepping back.

"I'm Colonel Charles Metcalf," he said by way of introduction. "This project, if you choose to accept, is based on some very new and very experimental technology. Those of you who opt to undergo this project will, in addition to training, be effectively volunteering for several medical modifications which will be vital to you all in your missions as counterinsurgents, anti-terrorists and infiltrators.

"That will be all, ladies and gentlemen," General Price said. "Read your outlines of the project, but do not discuss with anyone outside this room. Tomorrow at 0900 we will meet back here, answer any questions that you might have, and you can tell us your decisions. Those who opt out will be debriefed and sent back to their original commands with no disgrace. Those who stay, well, we're going to be very close friends before it's all over."

We stood and saluted, and kinda wandered off in a haze. All thoughts of sleep, shower and chow were out of my head. I just looked at the sealed outline in my hand and followed the orderly outside to a bunk, where I lay down and read it cover to cover. I only understood about a third of it, to be honest, but what I did understand gave me the chills.

What the hell had I gotten myself into?

* * *

"Good morning," General Price said briskly, returning our salutes. "As you were."

We all resumed our seats. Camp Redmond was not a bad place - comfortable bunks, plenty of hot water and exceedingly good coffee. I'd slept very well - surprising, considering how much was on my mind to worry about - and I'd been up at 0500 to clean up from my long trip, do a couple of laps on the indoor track and get into a clean uniform. And do a whole lot of soul-searching.

The General had probably specifically asked for young men and women with no families and no real outside connections. I was a perfect candidate, raised by the Army since seventeen years old. No kids, no wife, not even a healthy prospect for a girlfriend, since I'd been transferred here and there and back again since returning from the Middle East. I only spoke to my sisters on Christmas, and even then not much beyond "How are you doing."

"Are there any questions?" General Price asked.

Aimee raised her hand. "These medical modifications in the outline. Have they been tested on humans yet?"

"Each separate component has been tested, but never really all together on one patient. There are risks, Sergeant, and we are as concerned about them as you are. We'd be lying if we said we weren't. But we are going to take every precaution - every precaution - to see that our volunteers are kept safe and healthy throughout. There is a medical staff of two hundred doctors and nurses on call at all times."

"General, what you're outlining here, it sounds impossible," a pale-faced, muscular sergeant I hadn't met yet said. His name-tag said 'Hamilton.' "It actually looks as if you're planning to strip us down and build our bodies back from scratch."

"That's very close to the mark, Sergeant," Price said. "That is, in effect, what we are trying to accomplish here. But you have to understand, this isn't years of painful surgery. We're talking about using a designer virus which will act on you exactly the same way a cold would. It would invade your cells and rewrite the genetic code to carry out these changes. Your bodies would do most of the work. The implantation surgeries you could recover from in under a month."

"These procedures are derived from the work on the Human Genome Project," Colonel Metcalf added. "We're just telling your genetic structure to rewrite itself, to produce new proteins which will, in turn, alter your body and its functions. These characteristics, when fully active, will be natural and normal functions of your new bodies. These characteristics could conceivably be passed along to offspring."

I raised my hand. "What about afterwards, General? If we do this, and become these super-soldiers you're imagining, what then? Mission after mission? Being so deep in security clearances and secret information that we'd need surveillance around the clock?"

"What are you asking, Sergeant?" Price asked.

I shrugged. "Don't take this the wrong way, sir, but as much as I love the Army I've always held out knowing there was gonna come a day when I got out. If we do this, it feels to me like we'd never really get out."

The General smiled. "There would be some degree of being checked up on, yes," he said. "But not as invasive, I think, as you are envisioning. Certainly there would be requirements placed on you, but that is a National Security issue. We're not in the business of listening to your phone conversations, Sergeant. Look at it this way. There are no less than twelve Silver Stars for Valor in this room. Twenty-seven Bronze Stars, six Distinguished Service Crosses and a Congressional Medal of Honor. If we doubted your integrity, we would never have called you. You've already proven yourselves - each and every one of you - to your country and to your superior officers. We look at this as our chance to prove ourselves to you. That's why this is voluntary."

"If there are no other questions, then I think it's time we asked your decision on the matter," Colonel Metcalf said. "Be advised, anyone who stands up to volunteer is in this for the duration. There's no 'Dropped on Request' from this program and no failure tolerance. You're here until it's finished. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," we echoed.

"Then all those who wish to continue from this point forward, please stand."

I was in way over my head, caught up in a bunch of science and security issues that completely blew my mind. When I reached those times before, I had learned to go with my gut, to listen to my instincts and rely on them to know what was best for me.

So, in the end, it was my gut that lifted me out of the chair and onto my feet.

Metcalf smiled. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Those who declined, thank you for your time and inconvenience. Please follow Colonel Dunham at the back door to the debriefing room. You seven, please follow the General and myself."

* * *

I was really happy that Aimee Grimes and Antoine Booker had stayed in with me. We formed a little knot, right at first, as we toured the facility with the Brass and got the basics of the operation. The other four I hadn't met yet, but had every confidence that I would get to know and respect in the days to come. For once, it seemed, the Army wasn't interested in wasting time. We were scheduled to begin the preliminary processes this afternoon, while they tested us for every disease known to man. Sounded like fun.

Don Trujillo was a huge, muscle-bound Latino Sergeant from Fort Dix who was career military and seemed to be the only one there for the glory of being picked. I hoped he was better than most of the other crazy hoo-rah lifer types I'd encountered before. Corporal Kenny Cutler was a lanky, skinny white kid who exuded 'shy' and 'unobtrusive,' which was hard to believe with his beak of a nose that he could escape anybody's notice. He seemed nice enough, just in a little over his head. Like we all were. I kinda tacitly invited him into 'my' group for a little backbone, and he accepted pretty readily.

Sergeant Julie Kennedy was a slender little wisp of a woman with thick brown hair and a huge, positive smile. She had the kind of charisma that you only saw in politicians, but she didn't have that 'oily' feel that most career politicians did. The badge from the chaplain's corps on her shoulder gave me a little confidence. If a minister was in this program, then maybe God would keep an eye on things for all of us. She was chatting very quietly with the last of our troupe, Corporal Mike Hanson, a stoop-shouldered, pale-skinned Mick from Ft. Bragg who walked with a perpetual limp. He was our Congressional Medal of Honor winner. That limp came from several slugs he'd taken while saving his platoon from an ambush in Afghanistan. His eyes were a little haunted - I'd heard horror stories of what his platoon had been through - but he seemed rock-solid underneath. I was glad to have his courage with us, as well.

"This is where we are manufacturing the viruses which will alter the DNA in your cells," Colonel Metcalf said, pointing through a glass wall into a huge room so crammed with computers that there was hardly room for the seventy or so people in there, crawling around with clipboards and printouts and peering into microscopes. It looked like NASA Mission Control in there. I tried not to think too hard about what might happen if one tiny little molecule was out of place in what the shot me full of.

"In here is where you will be for the next three days," Metcalf said, opening the door to a glass-walled decontamination bubble, like an airlock but more sophisticated. "A totally sterile environment. In order for the virus to have full access to your cells, ladies and gentlemen, we will have to completely suppress your immune systems so that your bodies don't start fighting the process. So to protect you, we will keep you in here, where no germs can invade your bodies while the defenses are down."

"What are the tubs, there, Colonel?" Don Trujillo asked.

"Electrolytic baths," Metcalf answered. "You'll spend quite a bit of time in them. Once your DNA is rewritten, your cells have to reproduce in order for the changes to take effect. Old cells

with the old DNA die off, new cells with the new DNA take over. Those baths will keep a continuous, low-level electric current running through your bodies. Don't worry, you won't even feel it more than a little tickle as you first go in. That charge will stimulate the reproduction of old cells into new cells."

"And after the three days?" I asked.

"You'll move on to the surgical wing for the implantation surgeries," Metcalf said. "Follow me, I'll show you the facilities. There is where we will implant certain mission-critical and task-oriented technology which will greatly aid you in your missions later. A small subvocal communicator in the jawbone and ear canal, for instance. A large battery of what we call 'CIAO' - short for 'Control Interface - Appearance Oriented.' It's all detailed later, based around certain technologies which we will acquaint you with more fully as we go along, such as the ECF technology - Electrochemically-controlled Fiber - and the new memory-cell technology we've started calling 'Thermo-Fat.'"

He didn't elaborate further, but that was the Army way. "Now, if you'll follow me, I'll show you the classrooms where you'll be receiving training."

* * *

Major Charlotte Giles looked through the tons and tons of paperwork which had just arrived for the seven volunteers for the program. This was a lot of paperwork even by military standards. That's what happened when you mixed a government bureaucracy with a military bureaucracy.

She grabbed the files for the seven 'green lights' for the program and started sorting them into stacks, those labeled 'one' for the Protocol 1 virus and those labeled 'two' for the Protocol 2. She stopped for a second in her sort - whoever had labeled the folders had a funny way of writing. The letters were bad enough, but the numbers were just squiggles. She peered at it for a couple seconds, holding the folder this way and that, trying to make it out.

She finally just shrugged. It looked more like a 'two' than anything else, and besides, there weren't that many Protocol 2's in the stack anyhow. Made more sense that they'd be closer to even stacks, so she just sorted the stacks and then tried to make heads or tails out of the rest of the three acres of rain forest that had gone to make up this paperwork.

* * *

D-Day, H-Hour. I sat in the altogether too-chilly room while medical personnel in gowns and masks circulated all around. I'd wrangled a seat next to Aimee's, which made me feel better. Being around Aimee seemed to make me feel better no matter what. I participated as best I could in the nervous joking around while the doctors did their stuff.

I gave Aimee a last heartfelt smile of encouragement before my 'here goes nothing' attitude kicked in. I took a deep breath as they stuck me - I hated needles - and then closed my eyes and tried to let all the anxiety go. There was nothing for it now.

The computer behind me beeped, and the line charged. I could feel it grow more rigid and a little warmer as the fluid passed down the tube taped to my forearm and through the needle, into my veins.

"This is a combination of the immunosuppressant and the retrovirus," the head doctor, Dr. Malborn, said in his strident, Drill Instructor bass. "It should take about five minutes to finish going through your system. You might feel a little light-headed for a while, but that's to be expected and it won't last. Just try to relax. After we're done here, we'll give you all something to help you sleep and then you'll be moved into the clean room and your electrolytic tanks. You should sleep for the rest of the day and then some. By the time you wake up, you should start to see and feel the effects of the new DNA."

"Don't move around too much when you wake up," Colonel Metcalf told us, also gowned and masked. "Your new DNA is going to give you drastically increased muscle density and strength. You might have a little trouble, once you wake up, getting used to it right at first. You'll be roughly six to fifteen times stronger than you were before your nap."

"You are also going to have dramatic increases in cardiovascular capacity and in metabolism," Dr. Malborn said. "You'll be very energetic when you wake up, and, I suspect, extremely hungry. Please remember to exercise self-control and don't get frantic - until you learn to control your new physical capabilities you can hurt people very easily."

"Also, be advised that we've engineered changes in the acuity of your senses, as well," Colonel Metcalf said. "Every sense will be much more attuned and very sensitive. Your hearing will be increased, your sight clearer and farther, your senses of smell and taste very acute and your sense of touch quite increased as well. You're going to be very sensitive to temperature, light, sound and smell for a while until you compensate."

"It's a brave thing you're all doing," General Price told us from the observation booth. "We're all extremely proud of you all. Have a nice sleep. We look forward to seeing you later."

* * *

"Something isn't right, sir," Lieutenant Lorie Hernandez said from the monitoring station above the tanks in the clean room. "It's Sergeant Williams."

Metcalf and Price paced over, concerned. They checked the monitors and put their chins in their hands, looking perplexed at the massive amount of data coming over the wires.

"What are we looking at, Lieutenant?" Metcalf asked.

"His vitals are fine, sir, but they're something extremely weird happening," she replied. "The other male subjects, the Protocol 1's, are gaining mass as their muscles redevelop. They're draining the nutrient supplies they're on and there's very little evidence from their urination and defecation that any excess biomass is being processed through."

"But look at Sergeant Williams," she went on. "He's draining the nutrient supply the same as the rest of the Protocol 1's, but he's actually losing mass, and his evacuations are not only more frequent, but show extreme amounts of biomass being shed."

"You mean he's getting smaller?" Metcalf asked.

"Yes, sir," Hernandez said. "But everything else seems to be working perfectly."

"Could it be an error in the genetic sequence we injected him with?" General Price asked.

"We checked those sequences a hundred times, sir," Metcalf said.

Price handed Williams' folder to Metcalf. "Make it a hundred and one, Colonel."

Metcalf opened the file. "It's not an error in synthesis, sir, I'm convinced. We went over that and over that to make sure we had it right. And there was no pre-existing condition that might have brought this on. He passed his medical with flying colors."

"Let me see that," General Price said, taking back the folder. "Williams, Malachi Hawthorne, Master Sergeant. Born 12 October, 1972 in Lufkin, Texas, father was Army and mother was a homemaker, enlisted in the 82nd Airborne in 1990, served in Desert Storm, Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star, two Bronze Stars, etcetera, etcetera. found slight predisposition for stroke on his mother's side, everything looks good, checked out and approved by Dr. Malborn on 7 March, okay to proceed with. Oh my God."

"Sir? What is it, sir?" Metcalf said.

Price numbly turned over the page he was reading and pointed dumbly. Metcalf turned his head to look.

. OK to proceed with initiation of Project Insider under Protocol 2.

Metcalf turned back to Lieutenant Hernandez. "Get me Dr. Malborn on the phone. Right now."

* * *

"It's too late," Malborn said, holding his head in his hands. "He's too far gone, sir, we couldn't even stop the process, much less reverse it, without killing him."

Price rubbed the bridge of his nose. "What a clusterfuck," he groaned.

"It's not the end of the world," Metcalf said. "It was just a clerical error."

"A clerical error that ruined a good soldier's entire life," Price muttered. "That's a hell of a thing to chalk up to a glitch, Colonel."

"Sirs, I have an idea," Malborn said. "First, we should keep Williams sedated a little longer, keep him - or I guess it's *her* now - out for another few hours. Then we should talk with the other Protocol 2's, Sergeant Aimee Grimes and Sergeant Julie Kennedy. I'd also like to call in Colonel Kim Cates from Walter Reed. She's one of the best in the world at behavioral modification."

"Behavioral modification? You mean train Sergeant Williams to be a girl?" Price said, jaw dropped and eyes wide.

"The only other option is to kill him, sir," Metcalf said. "We can't run the risk of having a mentally unstable super-soldier running around. We either try and resolve Sergeant Williams with what has happened, try to make him comfortable and even happy with the change, or we have a little accident, sir."

Price sunk his head back into his hands. "I can't just kill him," he said softly. "We're not murderers, Colonel, and I'm not about to let us start."

He stood wearily and his eyes were a little red-rimmed. He stopped at the door and turned back to Dr. Malborn. "Make the call, Doctor. Have her down here first thing tomorrow."

* * *

I remember nice dreams, if a little odd. Floating in the tank was really nice, being weightless and graceful like some kind of a ghost. I remember people looking in on me with concern, sometimes so far as to even look like worry, on their faces. I even think I remembered hearing music and other people's voices, but it's like a dream you're trying to remember and it's fading away as fast as you try to capture it.

But I knew I had to wake up, and I remembered what Dr. Malborn said about not moving around too much. I flinched a little from the removal of the breathing and feeding tubes and my voice and throat were real scratchy and raspy.

They had me on some kind of gurney, with a little sheet tucked under my chin so that I couldn't see what was below my neck. I felt nurses and doctors poking and prodding me gently, explaining what they were doing and when to expect it - 'a little pinprick, here, can you feel that?' or 'okay, Sergeant, this is going to pinch a little bit.'

They gave me a bunch of shots, and one of them had to have been a sedative, because everything was suddenly *super* okay by me. I hoped the goofy-assed grin on my face wasn't too obvious.

General Price, Dr. Malborn, Colonel Metcalf, and a woman in a major's uniform that I'd never seen before were all standing over me, looking down at me. I tried to keep myself together. No sense embarrassing myself in front of the Brass.

"How you feeling, there, Sergeant?" Dr. Malborn asked.

"A little funny, sir," I answered honestly. "Awkward, a little, like my skin doesn't fit right or something."

"Well, soldier, I have to tell you that everything in your protocol came out a complete success," General Price told me. "The muscle density and response, reflex speed, increased senses, everything. You're five-by-five and one hundred percent super-soldier."

"Good to hear, sir," I said.

"There was just one little glitch in the system, Sergeant," Dr. Malborn said. "Regrettable, but unfortunately we can't undo it. We just wanted you to be prepared for what you're about to see."

"About to see? What's that, sir?" I asked, trying not to let the lightheadedness blow my concentration. They all looked really serious, and I just wanted to spin around in a circle until I fell down. Whatever they shot me full of was some *primo* shit.

"By some error in the files, son, you were put on Protocol Two instead of Protocol One like you were supposed to," General Price explained. "A little glitch in the paperwork, but unfortunately we didn't catch it and you're having to pay an awful price."

"What price?" I asked.

"Protocol Two was the genetic restructuring program for the females in the Project," Dr. Malborn told me. "You got that instead of the one for the males like you should have."

"What does that mean, sir?" I asked, trying to concentrate past feeling so loopy.

"It means you're a girl, now, Sergeant," General Price said. "It was a mistake. It was completely our fault. We can't tell you how sorry we are."

"A girl?" I said.

"Yes, Sergeant, a fully-functioning biological female," Dr. Malborn said. "You're actually quite attractive, if you can believe it. Do you want to see?"

"You're not kidding," I said flatly. "You really changed me into a woman."

"We're sorry, Sergeant," General Price said, his eyes very sad.

"Yeah, let me see," I said.

They pulled down the little sheet under my chin and I looked down. My body was smaller - much smaller - than I remembered, smooth-skinned and with a pale complexion - my tan was completely gone, as were some of my scars from Desert Storm. The thick, curly bristles on my chest were gone, replaced by a feathery pale down that was too small and too fine to even see unless you looked really closely and from only a few inches away. I could see it, but I suppose that was my genetically enhanced vision. My formerly hard, insensitive brown nipples, no bigger than a nickel, were swollen to the size of silver dollars and the nipples pink and prominent, stiffening and growing to the size of the end joint of my pinky finger in the cool air of the room. The hard, defined pectorals I'd spent hours on in the gym were soft, rounded swells - not huge, but *certainly* not small, either. My stomach was flat and softly defined - there was still a little evidence of an abdominal six-pack there, but it was a smoother, much more feminine affair than my old one. My waist narrowed down to what I would have considered impossibly tiny and then flared out into wide, smooth hips. I felt like my butt was on a pillow, but it was really just my lushly padded, girlish bubble of a derrière. My legs and arms looked skinny and stick-like, but that was only compared to the corded muscles of my former arms. I supposed men would consider my arms and legs slender, supple and willowy now, with tiny little tapered wrists and ankles and delicate joints.

And over the tiny, almost imperceptible swell of my belly was a little russet-brown patch of curly brown hairs and then - nothing. When I squeezed my thighs together, there was no discomfort, no feeling of being pinched or squashed. Not even the feel of rough, hairy skin. The drugs they zapped me with made it hard to concentrate - as I peered down at the little thatch of pubic hair and the absence of the organ that defined my whole gender for thirty years, I kept hearing this stupid song I learned from some of the WWII veterans who'd come onto the base for reunions, sung to the tune of "Colonel Bogey" as they marched the long roads from Normandy to Berlin:

Hitler - has only got one ball,

Goerring - has two, but ver-y small

Himmler - has something similar,

And poor Joe Goebles has no balls at all.

I leaned my head back and started giggling. It was uncontrollable and just on the edge of hysterical, but I couldn't pull the plug on it. They tried to get through to me, but I just roared with laughter until tears leaked out of my eyes. My sides were starting to hurt - even with my

super-endurance now - as they wheeled me away, to put me someplace until I calmed down and tried to talk to me.

I could hear my voice - my alto voice, I recognized now - echoing off the ceiling and walls as they wheeled me away:

"Himmler - has something similar, and poor Mal Williams has no balls at all."

* * *

"Mal, I'm Dr. Cates," the woman said. I was sitting in a little heap, wearing ill-fitting and scratchy hospital scrubs and curled up in a little ball in the corner of my room.

"You smashed all your stuff, here, Mal," she noticed, gesturing a little at the debris of my little 'temper tantrum' a few hours ago. I'm just glad I didn't hurt anybody, now. They weren't kidding about that super-strength shit, neither. The sofa embedded four feet into my wall about six feet above the floor was proof of that.

"I know," I said softly. "I didn't mean to, I just kinda lost it there for a second. I'm okay, now, Major, I'm not going to hurt anybody. Just don't shoot me full of that stuff again, please? I can't think straight when you do that and I panic a little."

"Okay, Mal, that's okay. Nobody's going to give you anything unless you ask for it. And I'm not Major in here. Call me Kim. I'm trying to be a friend to you, and we can't do that if we get all hung up on ranks."

"Just as long as there's no disrespect," I croaked.

"No disrespect," she said. "I think I know you better than that already. Do you need anything, Mal? A glass of water or something?"

I sniffed. "I could really stand to blow my nose," I admitted. "I don't know what it is, Doc, but I just can't quit crying."

"Your brain is still basically male, Mal," she said, hunting through the debris of my room for a box of Kleenex. She finally had to settle for a roll of toilet paper that had fallen out when I kicked the linen closet through the bathroom wall. Like I said, super strength. I was glad I was in control of myself.

"Still male? What do you mean?"

"I mean that brain cells don't regenerate," she said. "So all the rest of your body has regenerated as female, but your brain is still male. And now it's soaking in all these brand-new, female hormones like estrogen and progesterone and it's not getting the testosterone it's been used to its whole life - your brain is probably confused as hell in there. You have to give yourself a break, give yourself time. Nobody blames you for trashing your room. If I woke up a guy one morning, I'd probably trash my room too."

I let out one of those wet, snotty, sloppy laughs that people have when they're crying, one that sounds more like a gasp than anything else. "I guess you're right. I just keep thinking of what I'd be doing to a private in my squad who carried on like I did."

"You're going to learn, Mal, that one of the biggest parts of being a woman is being forgiving," Kim said. "That may be the hardest thing for you to get used to, right at first. Women aren't expected to bottle up emotions like men are. A woman gets sad, or scared, and she cries. She

gets mad, she breaks things. You're forgiven by everyone else, so you just have to forgive yourself and you're done."

"Hey, Doc? Is it hard? Being a girl, I mean. Is it hard?"

"Yeah," she told me. "Just like being a man is hard. And it didn't seem like you had any troubles being a good man, I don't see why you couldn't be just as good a woman."

"I had a lot more practice being a man," I told her.

"True," Kim said, "but you only had one coach. Your dad. Here, you have me, plus you have Sergeant Kennedy and Sergeant Grimes, plus whoever else in the country you need. We could have the whole Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders in here tomorrow, if you asked General Price."

I snorted another sick, wet laugh. "Sergeant Grimes," I mused. "I was going to ask her out to dinner once we were through with all the procedures."

"Why the heck couldn't you still do it?" Kim asked.

"You mean, she's a lesbian?" I said, a little thunderstruck.

"No, Mal, she's not. But women go out all the time. They're intimate with each other all the time. You may not be able to have sex with her the way you both want or need, but you can be as close as any romantically involved couple. Maybe even more so. You weren't interested in Sergeant Grimes just for sex, were you?"

"No," I admitted. "I like her. But sex was a pretty big part of it."

"I understand," Kim said. "And I have to prepare you, too, Mal. You, in all likelihood, are going to be a lesbian. You've had a whole lifetime of being attracted to women, and the brain hasn't been fundamentally changed by any of this. You're probably going to remain attracted to women, the rest of your life."

"You mean I won't start liking guys?" I asked.

"Not necessarily," she told me. "You might find they're a little more interesting to you than they were when you were a man, but then again, maybe not. The important thing, here, Mal, is to let go of being a man. I saw the look on your face when I told you that you might become attracted to men. You were shocked and dismayed, yes? But that's because you still think of yourself as a man. And I'm here to help you start thinking of yourself as a woman."

"You really think that's possible? I mean, really?" I asked.

"I really do," Kim said. "And we're going to keep trying until we get it. I'm not going to quit on you, and you're not going to quit on me. And everybody's backing you up. None of the women think you're an impostor, and none of the men think you're any less than you were before. You had some bad luck, soldier, and everybody understands bad luck. They're all behind you one hundred percent."

I stood, a little shaky from the crying jag. "Hey, Doc - Kim - d'you think I could see everybody? My teammates, General Price? Just to let them know I'm calmed down and okay? I kinda feel like I owe some people an apology."

"Sure," Kim said, smiling. "Let's get you cleaned up and in a uniform and I'll walk with you."

I sorted through the wreckage for a washcloth and some soap - found them in a potted plant near the bedroom door - and walked over all the broken glass and tile towards the bathroom. "Thanks a lot, Doc, you've been a huge help to me."

"I'm really glad to hear that, Mal. And if there are any questions, about anything, don't be ashamed to ask me. I've been a woman for thirty-five years, and you've only been at it a day and a half."

"Okay, then," I said, starting to wash my face. I couldn't see myself, because I smashed the mirror, but then again I wasn't really ready for that right now anyway. One the one hand, I hoped I was pretty, but on the other hand, I hoped I was a schnauzer. "Is there anything I need to know right off, things I need to be careful of?"

Kim thought for a second while she unloaded some fresh fatigues out of a new-looking duffel. Of course. New clothes, because my old ones would never fit me.

"Cross your legs at the knees," she said, "or you'll flash the beaver to the whole room, and remember that you have to sit down now, even if you're in a big hurry."

I chuckled. "Cute," I said. "I was more worried about, I dunno, like saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing and sending some kind of a mixed signal, maybe, to a guy. Giving him the wrong idea or something."

"What is it you're afraid of, Mal? A man finding you attractive?" Kim asked.

"I guess I'm a little more worried about getting raped," I admitted.

She laughed, a really happy, tinkling sound. "Look at your couch, Mal. I really don't think you're a high risk for sexual assault right now. But we can go over that, later. Right now, you're around nothing but people who would take a bullet for you. Let's make the most of that safety while we can, okay?"

"Okay," I said. "And yeah, I guess I am a little afraid of a guy finding me attractive."

"Did you work out a lot, before, Mal?" she asked.

"Yeah, all the time," I said. "What does that have to do with."

"Did someone in the locker room ever tell you that the upper body was bulking up nice, or that the work you were doing on your abs or your chest were really paying off?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. All the time."

"That was men finding you attractive, Mal," she told me point-blank. "Admiring your body. It didn't make you gay, and it didn't make them gay either. Men are attracted to other men all the time, they just have different ways of expressing it and don't always know that's what it is that they're feeling. Because they're not taught to."

"I guess the difference is, I know what men are thinking when they look at a woman."

"Then you have an advantage that no other woman in the world has," Kim said with a smile. "Before it's all done with, I'm going to be asking *you* to teach *me*."

I laughed aloud, and it wasn't hysterical. "Ask me anything, Doc."

* * *

Not only did I have to contend with trying to walk normally with increased strength and flexibility, but I had to completely redefine the concept of 'walking normally.' I felt like my ass was going to hit both walls as I walked down the middle of the hall, I couldn't take a long enough step because my legs were too short, and even though they were small, the 'new arrivals' on my chest seemed to be slinging all over the place. Kim was a godsend. She coached me as I went, slowing me down and talking me through it. She had a way of explaining things that I automatically understood, which was amazing to me since I was sure it was stuff she'd been doing her whole life and didn't even have to think about anymore. I was really impressed with her, and I think I even had a little crush.

"Hey, Kim, you said I could ask you anything, right?" I said *sotto voce*.

"Yeah," she replied. "What is it?"

"Can you find somebody to get me a bra? I feel like these things are going to fly off any second when I walk," I whispered.

"Sure, no problem," she said. "I'll need to show you how to get your own measurements. Then we can get you some."

The cotton G.I. panties were great. I'd been used to tighty-whities my whole life, and not only were these about ten times as soft - a nice addition for someone with enhanced skin sensitivity - but they fit differently than men's briefs, a little more snug and a lot more comfortable. And having a little extra coverage over that all-too-vulnerable hole, that entrance to my anatomy, was a good thing right then. I was sure I was going to get used to it eventually - Kim said I would - but in the meantime I'd take any crutch I could get.

The fatigues were nice. The same old BDUs I'd been in since day one of Basic. Everything familiar, everything right where I expected it to be. My hair was the same severe military cut it had always been, but it was about ten times softer now than it ever had been in my life, like my skin, and it was nice to confine the longish forelocks under my cover for the time being. I knew I didn't look like a guy anymore, but it was a real comfort to know I still looked like a soldier. And seeing my stripes on the sleeve and the 'Williams' on the nametag really helped, too. That helped me remember I was still myself on the inside, no matter what the outside looked like.

The others were all in the cafeteria area, and the differences were subtle but still impressive. Sergeants Kennedy and Grimes were more compact and defined, still engagingly feminine but with a certain aura to them of power, grace and speed. The men, the Protocol Ones, were all straight-backed and muscular, powerful in a way they hadn't been before the procedure. Was it my female-ness that picked up the almost impalpable sense of threat from them, or was it just my old male sensibilities asserting themselves? I made a mental note to ask Kim about that later.

General Price was the first to his feet. Dr. Malborn and Colonel Metcalf were right behind him, along with several of the medical staff.

"Sergeant Williams," Price said, his voice uncertain and a little awkward.

I saluted crisply. "General."

He returned the salute. "As you were. How are you feeling?"

I took a deep breath. "Better, sir. Thank you. I just wanted to see everybody all at once. I wanted to let you all know that I'm okay. I freaked out for a little while, but I'm back under control now."

"You had us worried, Sarge," Corporal Antoine Booker said, now looking easily twice as massive as he had before, and that was saying something. Even though he looked like he could eat you for a light breakfast, that wide, quick smile of his was out in force. I couldn't help smiling back.

"I had me worried, too," I said. "Listen, I just wanted to say that if I said anything or, God forbid, did anything to hurt any of you."

"You didn't," Kenny Cutler said in his uncertain voice. Even though he'd gained about three inches in height and about sixty pounds of lean muscle mass, he still looked like a very shy kid with a huge nose - except that the rest of him was huge to match now.

"Honest," Aimee told me. I grinned wide when I saw her. She was the one I most wanted to be okay with everything. I guess I liked her a lot more than I realized at first.

"Good," I said. "Well, the reason I asked that you all be here, is that I only want to have to find the words for this once. I mean, I know I'm a soldier, and nothing changes that, and I appreciate all that everybody is doing to make sure I keep the respect I earned before I got here. That helps a lot - you have no idea. But I also wanted to say this: I'm not interested in who's responsible. General, Colonel Metcalf, I mean that. I don't want a big witch-hunt, because all that would do is make some poor person miserable and it wouldn't change a thing about my situation, don't you agree, Dr. Malborn?"

Malborn looked very guilty and very tired. "Yes, I'm afraid it is. I've been up all night checking and rechecking, running computer models. I'm afraid the process is irreversible without killing you."

I smiled. "It's okay, Doctor. Really. Kim - uh, I mean Major Cates, here - she said that one of the biggest things I'm going to have to learn is how to forgive like a woman. I'm starting that now. This was an accident. No one is to blame. I'm stuck this way, but I'm not dead and I'm not insane. You asked me to join this program because I'm a good soldier, and you wouldn't have cared if I was a man or a woman. So I'm still here, I'm still in the program, and I still expect to continue.

General Price gave me a warm smile, the first I'd seen from him. "Thank you, Sergeant."

"But I am stuck with this," I went on. "I have to get a handle on that or I'm no good to any of you. We're going to be a team, we seven, and I need to lean on that teamwork. So here we go, I'm going to say it out loud. I'm a woman. The sooner I get that through my thick skull, the better it's gonna be. So I'd like to ask you all, that while you still treat me as a soldier and a teammate, I want you all to refer to me in the feminine, y'know, 'she' and 'her.' I expect to be called 'Ma'am' and when you say 'ladies and gentlemen,' I want it clear that the 'lady' part is addressed to me. I'll be in the girl's locker room because I'm a girl. Everybody okay with that?"

They all nodded solemnly. "You got it, Ma'am," Don Trujillo said, grinning.

"I've discussed all of this with Major Cates and she thinks it's the best course. Immersion. So, General, since I have to get used to this sooner or later, could you please have my service records and identification amended from Malachi Hawthorne Williams to Mallory Heather Williams ASAP, sir? Everyone who used to call me Mal, I'm asking you to now refer to me as Mallory. I'm Mallory from here on out."

"I'll see to it immediately, Sergeant," Colonel Metcalf told me, and Price nodded assent.

"Y'all, I'm kinda at your mercy right now. I'm never going to learn to be a girl unless y'all treat me as a girl. I'm going to need your help to pull this off. The other women in this room, they have years and years of experience at being women. I've only been at it a few hours. Don't cut me any slack. If you catch me doing something no girl would do, then call me on it. I'm not a man anymore, and I can't go on thinking I am. I'm asking - can y'all do this for me?"

"Yes, ma'am," the room echoed. It didn't seem as awkward to my ears as I'd been afraid it would. I smiled a little.

"Thanks," I said, heartfelt. "Now, if you will excuse me, I need to get back with Major Cates and keep working. Sir, my sense of time is completely wrecked. What day is today?"

"Thursday, Sergeant," Price told me.

"So tomorrow at 0700, briefing before implant surgery, correct?"

"Yes," Price said, his eyes beaming respect and pride.

I snapped a salute which everyone returned as Price dismissed me. I turned on my heel and headed back to my quarters - what was left of them - with Major Cates.

"Hey, Sarge. Mallory!" a voice called from behind me. I turned around to see Corporal Mike Hanson trotting to catch me. His limp was completely gone, lost in the brute strength and grace of his new, enhanced body.

"Corporal?" I asked.

"Don't take this the wrong way, sir - oops, I mean *ma'am*. But I just wanted to tell you that you have some real balls to take this on."

I smiled. "Balls appear to be the one thing I don't have anymore, Corporal."

He chuckled. "You don't have to have them to have them, ma'am. You know what I mean."

"I do, at that," I said, smiling. "Thanks, Corporal. See you tomorrow."

To Be Continued...

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SUMMARY: After volunteering for a secret project, an arm sergeant discovers that he was mistakenly given the wrong formula and now has been turned into a female who is still willing to take on what ever the army has in mind. part two

THE GLITCH

Part II

By Valerie Hope

One thing about being in the Army, they certainly didn't have any problem getting you up early. I was showered and in uniform before the sun had even made an appearance, on my second cup of coffee by five minutes before my briefing started at 0700 hours. There wasn't much friendly banter - we were all still feeling the effects of coming out of the electrolytic baths and the DNA reconstruction. None of us were 100%. More me than anyone else, I supposed.

I'd been up half the night with Major Cates, my head-shrinker, the very wonderful woman assigned to help me adjust to being a girl now. She'd come over about 2300 hours, just as I was starting to get into the rack for some much-needed sleep. I'd been transferred to temporary quarters, since I'd trashed my original place in a rage at waking up with entirely new sexual equipment. And we'd been up the rest of the night, basically, talking and trying to figure out what to do next.

The first thing she'd suggested was for me to have a funeral of sorts. I'd burned my old service record, ID and dog-tags, pictures, old uniforms and personal effects, everything. It had been hard, but Kim had been quick to replace everything I'd lost with something new, something I could make precious and personal. My new dog-tags and military ID, now proudly displaying 'Mallory Heather Williams, MSgt., Sex: Female' instead of the 'Malachi Hawthorne Williams, MSgt., Sex: Male' that had gone into the little fire. A new, temporary drivers' license. New uniforms and footwear, now in sizes small and 7/8, shoes women's size 7 ½, instead of the larges and size-12 boots from before. I'd gotten rid of my Old Spice aftershave, Right Guard, Gold Bond Powder, Lifebuoy Soap and Pert Plus shampoo-and-conditioner-in-one. Trashed my old Gillette razor and Barbasol lather. Kim helped me restock my private lavatory with White Linen perfume, Secret Extra Strength deodorant, Neutrogena Exfoliating Body Scrub, Oil of Olay Skin-Firming Body Wash and Pantene Pro-V shampoo and conditioner, this time in separate bottles. Now I used a ladies' Venus razor, Sally Hansen Bikini Wax and Schick Satin Care leg and underarm shave gel. My life was complicated by an order of magnitude, and my eyes were wide from it.

"You ain't seen nothing yet, Mallory," Kim told me. "Wait'll we get you stocked up with makeup. This bathroom will never be the same."

"Can't wait," I said dumbly.

"Actually, if you knew how fun it was, you'd be serious about that," Kim said. "There's a whole lot of fun things about being a girl, you're gonna find out. Christ knows I like it. So do Aimee

and Julie, too. We're gonna give you a crash course, and I bet you're going to love every minute of it."

She and I had agreed that I should probably get into the 'girl' business whole-heartedly and not mess around with too much waffling. I shouldn't try to be anything like I was, I should let Malachi Williams rest in peace and get Mallory Williams should get busy living. To that end, she'd made me strip out of the rumpled, a-little-too-big pajamas I'd found and curl up in bed in a frilly, pink, gauzy little baby doll nightgown. She showed me how to put moisturizer on my new, super-sensitive skin to keep it soft and smooth and she helped me paint my toenails a pretty, glittery pink.

I sighed a lot at first, still trying too hard to be male and letting the awkwardness of these situations get me wound up. Kim got really stern with me, and I deserved it. I'd told her that sometimes the best thing for me was a good size 9 up my butt to keep me in line, and she delivered, let me tell you. But she was also right. Once I quit trying to think 'what will the other guys in the barracks think if I paint my toenails' and started having a good time with it, started thinking 'wait'll the other girls in the barracks see this,' I *did* start having a good time. I even returned the favor and painted Kim's toes while we talked. We laughed, cried, hugged each other a lot (I liked how women hugged, the first thing I discovered that was better than being a man), made some tough decisions together and tried to lay out some plans.

The hardest decision I'd made was on the card in my right hand. Dr. Malborn had looked at Major Cates' recommendations for this morning's implantation surgeries, raised his eyebrows, but had nodded solemnly and signed off. And now I was off, no turning back. It felt good to finally have it off my shoulders and in motion.

Dr. Joe Camonlieri was the surgeon in charge of our implantation surgeries, and he was in the front of the briefing room, explaining the procedures we were going through this morning. He was a tall, swarthy man with longish black hair and a really intense stare. I actually felt a little threatened by him, by his intensity and his height, until I remembered that my new, redesigned body wasn't "just" female, it could also bench-press five hundred pounds if I needed it to. Kim must have sensed my tension, because she reached over and squeezed my hand fondly.

"We'll put you through the least invasive of the implantation surgeries first," Dr. Camonlieri was saying. "We'll implant a transmission device into your jaw that will serve as a fixed-frequency tactical radio, for example, and implant the control interface chips at the base of your skulls for the CIAO system, which will control many of the other implants you'll be receiving, such as the ECF matrix, the SCeMaT, or Thermo-Fat, injections, the MTED implants, and any of the others."

I knew from the briefing materials that the CIAO system stood for "Control Interface, Appearance-Oriented" but had no idea what it did, we were supposed to be briefed and trained on that once it was installed in our bodies. The ECF stood for "Electrochemically-Controlled Fiber" and SCeMaT - what the docs called "Thermo-Fat" for some reason they were going to explain to us later - stood for "Sub-Cutaneous Electrostatically Malleable Tissue." The MTED implants had an entire nine-hundred page manual all their own which none of us had really read before, but I'd looked over it enough to know the acronym represented "Maxillofacial Topology Electronic Distortion."

I doubt any of the people involved in actually receiving the implants were going to have the foggiest idea what they actually did or were supposed to do, but that was basically the Army

way. We'd figure it out once we got it, that was the general approach. Our job was to take deep breaths and hope they didn't screw up, like they'd done with me. At least we knew that someone on Malborn's staff hadn't known how to make a '1' look different from a '2,' and they were all going to be extra-careful not to mess up now.

Dr. Malborn and Dr. Camonlieri were overseeing, so I was introduced to my team of surgeons, nurses and anesthetists and then prepped for surgery. I'd be awake under a local for the whole procedure, which relieved me. No more waking up with a big surprise for me, thanks. They stripped me down, gowned me up and then proceeded to use some kind of stinky, itchy cream to remove every single strand of hair from my entire body. My skin stung like it was sunburnt, which wasn't helped by the ultra-sensitive skin I had since the restructuring. The cream, I knew, was killing the hair follicles so that my natural hair would never grow back. If this didn't take, I'd be a bald chick with no eyebrows or eyelashes for the rest of my life.

Dr. Sullivan, a pleasant-looking black man with a big, happy grin, was the head of my surgery, and he poked my hands and feet with a sharp something at regular intervals until I couldn't feel it anymore. Once he was satisfied that I was numb, he patted me on my flat, smooth stomach and started with a chipper, "Well, let's get started, shall we?"

The first thing was a little pressure - like a pinch without the pinch - in my jaw, the tiny little communicator implant. This thing was supposed to be pretty spectacular, from the field specifications. It had a little thermal battery which was supposed to recharge from my natural body heat and designed to be able to communicate up to seven miles.

Then there was a long, uncomfortable hour and a half of clamps, retractors and hemostats hanging off my face while the docs worked putting in the MTED implants. I took a lot of deep breaths and thanked God I'd pulled Dr. Sullivan for my chief cut-man. I'd've hated to have had to sit through that with a taciturn, strong-silent-type like Dr. Todd or Dr. Matsuri. As it was, even Dr. Sullivan's frequent smiles and joking around didn't help with the discomfort of lying still while people carved up your face.

They turned me over next, putting my face in a weird donut like one of those massage chairs, and started working on the back of my head. I closed my eyes and tried not to think about anything.

"Okay, Sergeant, this is going to be a little weird when we turn this thing on," Dr. Sullivan told me. "It's got to get a baseline reading of your nervous systems, so you may feel things like itches, you may feel hot or cold or your muscles may contract without your wanting them to. Sit tight and try to relax, it should only take about fifteen seconds."

They restrained me, and everything that the Doc had said happened. I could hear the table groaning as my enhanced muscles pulled against my restraints. One of the techs on the computer nodded and gave a thumbs-up, and it was over.

Next they started working on the back of my head, for another couple of hours. Doctors and nurses were taking turns on a bench just out of my range of vision - all I could see was their feet - so I took the time to get some rest. I'd heard estimates that this was about a nine-hour procedure, and it looked like they were going to take every second of it. I buckled in for a long, uncomfortable ride.

Next they turned me over again and worked on my eyebrows and eyelashes. The actual ECF implants for my brows and lashes looked like tiny little strings of silvery dewdrops. I don't think

I've ever been more nervous in my life as when they sewed them into my eyelids. Another team was busy implanting them into my pubic area. I tried extra hard *not* to think about that.

They sewed me up and checked my local before they started making tiny little incisions on my belly and chest and taking weird canisters out of a specially cooled rack. The Thermo-Fat. For once, I actually tuned in to Dr. Sullivan's snappy patter about what he was doing, interested in the SCEMaT stuff they were going to inject me with.

"This Thermo-Fat is pretty fascinating stuff," he was saying. "Every human has to carry a little layer of fat or they'll die, right? The restructuring process burned all the fat out of all of you - that's why we had to implant this stuff so fast, or you people would have gotten really sick. This stuff is exactly like the natural fat cells in your bodies, but there's more to it than that, it has other properties that normal fat doesn't have. For example, this stuff will keep you warm and functioning way beyond norms. Our early test-subjects were able to stay warm and functioning completely naked all the way down to thirty below Fahrenheit.

"They're also memory cells, which respond electrostatically to the CIAO chip in your skull," he went on. "Which means that you can influence them to change your body shape and appearance. It's also dense and fibrous, which will keep you from bleeding nearly as badly from wounds and may even protect you from some kinds. We estimate - although it's never been tested, that this stuff will stop a .38 round from seventy-five yards. Here's hoping you never have to put that theory to the test, Sarge."

They were injecting me all over the place with this stuff, in the ass and stomach, thighs, calves, belly, chest, arms - everywhere. The only thing they stayed away from was my face, thank God. I think my face had suffered enough for one day.

"Okay, Sergeant, you're almost done. One more thing and we'll bandage you up, douse you in the anti-scarring agent, and it's off to recovery with you."

Dr. Sullivan pulled a huge syringe filled with a clear liquid off the tray. "This is nanotechnology, the newest thing we have. This fluid is filled with billions of tiny little machines which are going to live in your bloodstream for the rest of your life. They're blood filters, which automatically bond to toxins in the bloodstream and neutralize them, carry them directly to the large intestine and dump them off. This basically renders you completely immune to any known toxin or drug. It doesn't matter if you breathe it, swallow it or inject it, this stuff will keep you safe from anything from a beer to 30 cc's of heroin to VX gas."

He shot the huge cylinder of fluid into my arm and then they started smearing my body with this weird-smelling greenish gel.

"Anti-scarring agent," he said. "Think of it as spackle for your skin. It forms a layer of synthetic skin over your incisions and seals them up, like you never got cut. They'll even tan with the rest of your skin. Pretty cool, huh?"

Dr. Sullivan himself helped in the bandaging. "These will be on for about three days, give or take, long enough for the anti-scarring agent to set. Then you'll be up and on your feet. But until then, no moving around and no talking. We can't put you to sleep or knock you out with those nanites in your blood, so you have to take a lot of care, okay?"

I nodded minutely to show him I understood. He smiled, patted me on the belly again, and then continued with my subsequent mummification.

* * *

Three days was a long time to just read magazines and watch television, especially when Kim saw to it that the only TV I could watch was 'girl shows' like *A Wedding Story* and *The E! Fashion Emergency* and Lifetime Television for Women and the only magazines and books I got were *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Vogue* and stuff like *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* and *Making Faces*. I tried to soak it up, to keep my interest and my dedication high, and I managed well. I learned a lot. But it didn't stop me craving a good Tom Clancy book and a couple hours of the Notre Dame game.

The time came when I could take off the bandages, and it was a little anticlimactic. My face looked no different, even after all the damn work they'd done on it. I expected something different, I guess. I was still bald as an egg, without eyebrows or lashes and looked for all the world like a man who got turned into a girl. I was disappointed.

The body, however, was a big surprise. My little AA-cup breasts were now larger, more rounded and ripe. I didn't know my size yet, but I knew how to measure from Kim. I had wide, flaring hips and a firm bubble-butt. A definite woman's body now, instead of the lean-flanked and skinny body I'd had before. I turned this way and that, studying my body from every angle, when Dr. Malborn and Major Cates came in my room.

"Nice," Kim said, smiling. "But don't get used to it."

"Don't get used to it? Why not?" I asked.

"Did you do what I said, and pick out the girls you used to really like?" she asked.

"Yeah, I did. I picked some out and gave my choices to Dr. Sullivan, like you asked," I shot back. "But what good is it going to do?"

"Well, Mallory, those are just the results of the implants and the injections," Dr. Malborn said. "They're remarkable in that they didn't scar or lump anywhere. You have completely pristine skin."

"Yeah, you can't even see where they cut," I said. "But like I asked, what good is that going to do, picking out girls I like?"

"Well, you might feel a little different once you actually turn your implants on, Sergeant," Kim said. "As a matter of fact, that's where we're going right now."

"Turn them on? What?" I asked, but they didn't answer. They just threw a robe over my naked body and hustled me down the hall.

* * *

"We've gone over the data you gave Dr. Sullivan," the chief tech, a freckle-faced Irish kid named Lieutenant Voss, said from behind his virtual wall of computer equipment. "We scanned photos, took measurements, everything, and now we have a 3-D computational model exact down to the millimeter in the computer. All we do is get the computer to tell CIAO those measurements, and CIAO will use your own nervous system like a big magnet to pull everything into place."

"From there, we're going to give you what we call a fixative agent," Dr. Sullivan said. "It activates the 'memories' that we put in the Thermo-Fat and the MTED implants, so that they

basically 'lock' there. We tell them, 'this is the way you're supposed to be.' Your features, body type, everything will be changed forever to the new measurements."

"Except if you have a mission that requires you to alter your appearance, then we just turn CIAO on to magnetize you into the new shape," Lieutenant Voss said. "But once we turn CIAO back off, you'll go right back to where you were."

"So, like, setting a baseline?" I asked.

"Exactly," Voss said. "Now, hold still for a second, there, Sergeant. You're going to feel a little tingle, like a cold shiver."

"Wait a second, I didn't know I was picking for me - can I change my mind?" I yelped, but Voss' finger had already hit the 'Enter' key on his keyboard and the cold tingle had already run through my body from head to toe.

My legs slimmed down into a trim, athletic curve and my skin seemed to darken a little with a rich, amber tan. My hips and butt tightened up and became, for want of a better word, 'perky' and firm while my belly flattened out into a sinuous, feminine abdominal 'six-pack.' My breasts swelled immensely, nearly twice the size they were before, and became impossibly firm and spherical, the large nipples upturned and erect. The fat on my arms and neck retreated completely, leaving me long and lissome, graceful curves, and just the barest hint of a little baby-fat on my chin was evident.

"Perfect," Voss said. "Right down to the millimeter, Sergeant, your body is an exact replica of the woman you gave us."

"That's a hell of a body," Major Cates commented, walking around me in a slow circle. "Half aerobics instructor and half 'after' picture at a plastic surgeon's office. Who'd you pick for a body, anyway?"

I blushed and looked down. "A chick named 'Serenity.' She's in porno movies. I picked her because she has the hottest body I've ever seen. I didn't know I was picking it out for myself."

"Very athletic, very nice," Dr. Malborn said. "I think you made an excellent choice."

"Me, too," Kim said, smiling. "Really nice. At least you didn't give yourself enormous tits, like some people in your situation might have."

"But she can have 'em any time she likes," Lieutenant Voss said. "All she has to do is input it into the computer here and she can see what it feels like."

I chuckled. "Let me get used to the ones I have, first, cowboy."

"Right," Voss said, laughing. "Ready for the face, Sergeant? Hold still, another cold tingle."

I couldn't even begin to protest. I felt like I'd sucked on the sourest lemon drop in the history of man. My face contorted and twisted like I was a kid making monster faces in the mirror. It finally settled out, with just a few little twitches and spasms in my cheeks and eyelids.

"Oh, wow," Kim said. "That was amazing. I've never seen anything like that."

I took the hand-mirror that Dr. Malborn handed me and stared at myself. Once again, Voss had gotten the computer-model spot-on with my second choice. I looked exactly like Nicole

Kidman, right down to the adorably sexy little overbite. I touched my face to be sure it was mine.

"Now for the last of it," Voss said. "The really fun stuff."

He jabbed another key, and with a tickling itch my scalp erupted in a soft, shiny cascade of thick, silky tresses which sprouted out my bald head and fell over my narrow shoulders and halfway down my back in a matter of seconds. It was colorless, almost translucent, but as thick, shiny and healthy as a shampoo commercial.

"Synthetic polymer fiber processed from your own blood waste," Voss said. "Never needs cleaning, never needs cutting. You want it short like a boy? I press this key. Down to your ankles? I press this key."

He grinned widely. "You liked Nicole Kidman with red hair? Easy." He pressed a key on his computer and my hair lightened into a rich, lustrous copper with golden highlights.

"Or did you prefer her blonde days, like the Batman flick she did?" Another keystroke and I had a lustrous mane of whitish honey-blonde.

"You like it curly? No problem." Another keystroke, and my hair gathered up into a stylish arrangement of loose but kinky curls.

I held up a hand to stop him. "Blonde and straight for right now. If I need a change, then, you're my first choice for hairdresser."

He grinned as he reset my hair to a straight, shiny fall of honey blonde. "Fun, huh?"

"Some eyebrows would be nice," I told him. He hit a key and light, high-arched brows pushed through my skin with a tiny little tickle. Long, up-curved eyelashes joined them, dark and shiny and thick. There was a similar tickle down between my legs and a perfect little feather of downy thatch adorned the gentle swell of my pubic mound. It even had the look of a professional waxing.

"Nice touch," I said.

"Package deal," I told him. "You either get same color as your hair, or nothing down there. Unless you want me to write another subroutine for the dye-job look."

"Not right now," I said, laughing. "What else can this thing do?"

"Show him the weapons package," Malborn told Voss. "Mounted to your fingers, a polymerized ceramic that's nearly unbreakable. You can cut glass with 'em."

He tapped another key, and my fingernails extended into long, shiny French-manicured beauties with squared corners and a high gloss in under a second. Voss punched keys and they turned red, pink, natural, electric blue and varied in length from just over the tips of my fingers all the way out to great big 'Dragon Lady' talons. Ovals, squares, points. My toenails were going Technicolor, too.

"Relax, relax!" I said to Voss, laughing. "Give me back the first ones. Those were pretty. And somebody lock that keyboard away from this madman while I'm trying to sleep."

Voss gave me a mock salute and grinned. "Just having a little fun, there, Sergeant."

"Yeah, me too. It's all right. Maybe I'll take you up on that offer to play around sometime. I always wondered what it would be like to look like Anna Nicole Smith," I said.

"Can do, Sergeant, just give me a call. Hell, I'll program this thing to give you three breasts if you want," he said.

"You're a sick man," I said, laughing as I pulled my robe back over me. "So now that I have the body of a supermodel and the face of the most popular woman in Hollywood, Major Cates, what would you suggest?"

She linked her arm through mine. "I suggest we use some of the Project's operating budget and go out and get you some clothes."

* * *

"Not a bad piece of flirting in there, Sergeant," Kim told me as she walked me down the hall. "I'm impressed. You're picking it up fast."

"I didn't mean to," I said sheepishly.

"No need to be embarrassed," she said. "Lieutenant Voss is really cute. I probably would've flirted a little myself if he hadn't been so into you."

"I was flirting? Really?" I asked, a little incredulous.

"Sweetie, to a certain extent, with that face and that body anything you say can be taken for flirting," Kim told me. "But yeah. You were definitely putting it on."

"Wow, I didn't even think about that," I said. "I guess I don't really think of men that way. At least not yet, at any rate."

"Flirting doesn't mean an offer to sleep with a guy, honey," she said, laughing. "It's actually pretty useful, if you want the truth."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Care to try a little experiment?" Kim asked me. "Let me lend you some clothes. Something a little sexy. We'll take a little extra time on your makeup before we head out to the mall, and you do a little flirting like you did with Voss in there. I'll bet you twenty dollars that you get better service and attention than you've ever gotten before in your life."

* * *

It took a little while for me to get on board with Major Cates' experiment. When I first walked into the shopping mall, I couldn't get over the idea that everyone was staring at me like I was some kind of freak. It took about half an hour before I realized that the reason they were staring wasn't freakishness. They were staring because they thought I was Nicole Kidman. Once I finally put two and two together and came up with something not *too* far from four, I was able to relax a little and start experimenting a little bit with flirtation.

I was really clumsy and over-the-top with it right at first, but Kim got me calmed down soon enough and I started to figure out that "flirting" was what I just called "being nice." Answering questions, laughing at jokes, smiling a lot - for some reason, smiling seemed easier with my new face than it had with my old - and, for some reason I didn't understand, me brushing my straight blonde hair behind one ear with my fingers seemed to make guys about pass

out. Women didn't treat me that much differently than they would any other woman - which was to say, completely different from anything I had ever experienced before - and men seemed to be falling all over themselves trying to ingratiate themselves to me, stopping just short (and sometimes crossing the line) of making complete idiots of themselves.

I'd thought it would be manipulative, subversive maybe, even a little bit malicious.

I never expected it to be fun.

In addition to the fun of just being out in public for the first time as a girl, I also got the chance to spend some of the Defense Department's money on clothes. Shopping as a woman was a total trip - the selections and choices of fabrics, colors and cuts was so far beyond anything men knew. It was mind-boggling. Thank God that Kim was there to help me figure out what everything was. We used the excuse that I'd just lost a great deal of weight to cover the fact that I didn't know my sizes that well, and the salespeople were great about it.

Although my altered muscles could have carried the seven bags full of girly clothes and shoes I'd bought (I still wasn't 100% on board with the passion for shoes that most women seemed to have, I was missing something) and probably an engine block besides, I allowed a gallant young gentleman to carry them to the car for me. I was still a little light-headed and giddy with it all by the time we returned to the base.

The girls from the unit were waiting outside my room as I walked in. They'd all had their baselines established and seemed to be really happy about their new bodies. Sgt. Aimee Grimes, formerly a slender and pale redhead, now had a bombshell body like Jayne Mansfield and a face vaguely reminiscent of Agent Scully. If I'd still had the equipment, I would've killed a man for her phone number. Julie Kennedy, the other female sergeant in the unit, was now a tall Amazon-esque woman, wide-shouldered and muscular but still with decidedly feminine curves, with a face like a cross between her old one and Jessica Simpson's.

They swarmed up to me and Major Cates immediately.

"Oh my God, Mallory, you're gorgeous!" Aimee exclaimed.

Julie was pawing through my sacks. "What'd you get? What'd you get?"

"A little of everything," I answered to Julie, then to Aimee, "Thanks. You look great, too. Wanna come in and see what I picked out?"

"You bet your ass," Julie said.

Major Cates was chuckling as we went into my room. It was nicer than my old one - a little bigger, and the replacement furniture was girly - pink and cream stripes on the couch, ruffled white bedcovers - on Major Cates' orders. I shoved the oversized teddy bear - a gift from Julie - to one side and dropped the bags on the bed.

Strange, the lack of territorialism among females. Males would *never* go pawing through another male's stuff without so much as a "by-your-leave." But Julie and Aimee were pulling things out right and left, holding them up against themselves and against me, exclaiming how cute or sexy they were, and asking to borrow about half of the sum total of all the clothes I owned (which is to say, all the clothes that were in those sacks).

"Little weird, huh?" Kim asked from the corner of her mouth.

"Good weird," I whispered back. "I kinda like it."

She smiled. "Good. Because I want to borrow the pink sweater."

I laughed and caved, good-naturedly, to the requests for me to try some of it on.

* * *

Training was a bitch kitty for me, since this was the hardest part of the learning curve. On top of the military stuff - Explosives, Explosive Ordnance Disposal, Counterinsurgency, Infiltration, *ad infinitum ad nauseam*, I also had some specific coaches for my own 'girl training.' Aimee and Julie were good enough to train with me, so I wouldn't be singled out. These were the hardest parts of the two months that followed. Learning to walk right, then having to learn to walk all over again while wearing high heels. Dancing. Talking. And, worst of all, seduction. Taught by a very famous prostitute who really knew her stuff. I spent the whole time blushed beet-red.

"It's going to be a part of your job," Kim told me. "You're a spy, Mallory. You may not always get to pick, and it probably won't happen at the speed you want it to."

"I thought you said I was a lesbian," I countered. "Hell, I *am* a lesbian. I'm not into boys at all, even the guys in the unit who all look like bronze gods."

Kim giggled. "Sweetie, there are thousands of lesbians out there - in loving, committed relationships - who indulge in a little good hard dick from time to time."

I cowered. "Jesus, Major!"

She squeezed my forearm fondly. "Face it, Mallory. You're going to have to come to terms with it sooner or later. You're probably going to wind up living with and even marrying a girl. You'll probably only love a girl. And at some point you're going to pull an assignment that requires you to deal with getting nailed by a big, hard cock."

"Will you quit it?" I pleaded. "You don't have to talk like that."

"Sweetie, do you think all us girls are pristine little virgins? We talk like that. Don't be bothered. There's locker-room talk in the girls' locker room, too."

"I'm just not too thrilled about hearing it," I said.

"I know you're freaked about this, Mallory," Kim said seriously. "I would be, too. But you have to get used to it, the same way you've gotten used to everything else. For Christ's sake, you've gotten used to periods and tampons in three months. You've dealt with menstrual cramps and water retention and guys hitting on you. You can get used to this, too. Keep an open mind."

"But, people will think -"

"Think what? That you're a 'fag?' A 'queer?' Guess what, baby? You *are*. You're a certified, grade-A dyke. A carpet muncher. People are going to call you that if you *don't* have sex with boys."

"You don't know what it was like as a boy, okay?" I said defensively. "It's different."

"The hell it is," Kim said, suddenly angry. "Don't hide behind that. Being called a dyke is just as bad for a girl as being called a faggot is for a boy. Worse, sometimes - girls don't always get to fight back like boys do. And you overlooked the most important thing."

I let out a long breath. "I'm not a boy."

"And it's going to be best for you if you accept that now, you never were," Kim said, her anger dissipated. "Look, Mallory, it's not the end of the world. You have to get used to it sooner or later. And you have the proper equipment, too. There's even an outside chance that you might like it."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said, very honestly.

"That's what I thought," Kim said. "You're never going to know until you try."

I sighed and closed my eyes, pushing the heels of my hands into my eye sockets. Taking a deep breath, I asked a question I never thought I'd hear myself ask anyone, much less an Army Major.

"Hey, Kim?" I asked. "D'you think you can get me laid?"

* * *

Aimee and Julie were having way too good a damned time at my expense. They spent about three hours plucking and preening me, styling my hair into an impossible gravity-defying flyaway (explaining everything they did). I did my own makeup - fresh from the training sessions with major Hollywood makeup artists like Kevyn Aucoin and Alexis Vogel, I was actually kinda itching to try out my new skills.

The dress that Kim had picked out was just this side of scandalous. It was a purple, low-cut thing which barely covered my upper thighs and and felt like my tits would spill out the top at the slightest provocation. Huge hoop earrings brushed the tops of my shoulders and bracelets jangled on my wrists. A pretty little diamond solitaire pendant (a gift from a still very embarrassed General Price) hung between the very generous - and very exposed - valley of my cleavage. The platform heels were so high I felt like I'd topple off them and break my neck, even though I'd practiced in them constantly.

Aimee was hotter than hell (and staring to make me more than a little bit wet downstairs) in a skin-tight red sequined party dress and a seven-row rhinestone choker and Julie was dressed to kill in a shiny wet-look black halter dress which showed off a the vast majority of her incredible Xena Warrior Princess legs.

I shifted from foot to foot uneasily, trying to get my pantyhose to adjust. It felt like crotch was somewhere mid-thigh. But several furtive checks in the full-length mirror showed that wasn't the case. It was like a toothache. I couldn't leave it alone. Only when Kim threatened me with stockings and a garter did I give it up. I felt exposed enough in this get-up. Aimee and Julie called it 'club clothes.' It felt more like underwear. But I took a deep breath and steeled myself. I'd run into Iraqi gunfire and Bosnian mortars. I could go to a dance club in a short little nothing dress with my best girlfriends.

"Ready, sexy?" Aimee asked me sweetly.

"As I'll ever be," I said weakly.

"Chin up, soldier," Julie said, threading her arm through mine. "It's like falling off a log. Besides, how bad can it be? You'll still have it better than you ever did as a guy."

"How do you figure?" I asked, walking out into the chilly early evening air.

"Guys never know when they start out how the night is going to end," Julie replied. "When you're as hot as you are, you *always* know when you're going to get some."

I groaned. Julie and Aimee only laughed.

* * *

Even being a genetically-engineered super-soldier and in the company of two of my fellows didn't make 'The Experience' any less intimidating. The music was thumping so loud that I could feel it through my platform soles on the sidewalk outside, and a long line of very attractive people stretched out the door and down the sidewalk. We clustered together - girls did that, and I certainly didn't mind - and waited for our turn to approach the man-mountain on sentry duty at the velvet rope. I must've smoked half a pack of cigarettes, too - I was really nervous, and the nanites in my blood wouldn't let the nicotine affect me to help relieve the stress. But I smoked anyway. I guess it had to do with an oral fixation, but believe me that was the last thing I wanted to think about right now.

The bouncer looked at us appraisingly. I thought about ways I could tear out his spleen. With a crooked grin of superiority, he unhooked the rope and gestured us through. He took an informative look at our backsides as we passed. I took cold comfort in the fact that there were about 80 ways I could kill him with a soda straw. 85 if I kept the wrapper.

Strange that I still reacted like a male - with aggression and hostility - when I felt threatened. I'd have to ask Kim about that later.

The noise inside was felt rather than heard. Clouds of smoke and roars of chatter floated through the place, driven by the insane thump of the dance music. It actually made my breasts jiggle a little and I felt the beat palpably through my chest. It was a house remix of a Britney tune (I knew Britney and Christina and Kylie Minogue very well. It was so suitably girly that it was all Kim would let me listen to) that I liked. I'd worked dance routines day in day out with choreographers from the Laker Girls and Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders in my training, so I felt confident enough to go out there and shake my thang with the best of them. But I didn't feel like it just yet.

"I wish I could still get drunk," I said dejectedly.

"Why?" Aimee said. "You shouldn't worry about it. We're going to have a good time, baby. Wanna get a table?"

I nodded, downed out by the music. We threaded, hand-in-hand, through the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd. Good thing, too. Aimee was able to restrain me from rounding on some faceless guy in the crowd who took a long, informative feel of my ass as I passed him. I was so amped up on adrenaline and fear right then, I probably would have caved in his ribcage.

Not wanting to shout myself hoarse over the stentorian blast of the dance music, I gritted down hard on my back teeth and opened the tactical frequency embedded in my jaw. I heard the response beeps of the tac channel, funneled directly into my middle ear by the styloid process of my skull.

"There's a good one over there," Aimee said, pointing to an open table on the rail overlooking the dance floor. It was alternately lost in the lighting system, plunging the club between total darkness, red and blue low-light and strobing brilliance on a hair-trigger, an epileptic's nightmare. My enhanced eyes adapted almost instantaneously, allowing me to see clearly and at range in every condition, even near-total darkness. I tested the doctors' handiwork just for fun. I was able to read the lips of a tall man in a dark suit on the other side of the dance floor even with the strobe going off nearly right in my face. He was talking about a hockey game.

"Quit calculating firing angles," Julie chided me on the tac channel. "This isn't a hostile environment, baby girl. As a matter of fact, it's a hottie-rich environment."

"Muffins everywhere," Aimee confirmed.

Finally, we reached the oasis of the table out of the jostling and cacophony. Julie flagged down a waitress and ordered some overpriced drinks - even though they wouldn't affect any of them, they still enjoyed the taste. The apple martinis arrived an eternity later. The three devastatingly gorgeous girls sipped their drinks and smoked cigarettes, basically just standing and looking incredible. Several guys came up and asked for dances. Aimee and Julie accepted at intervals, never leaving me alone at the table. Bless them. I turned down everybody.

* * *

The woman in the army uniform had said she'd wanted the best, and he'd flown in from Manhattan for this job. Besides, what gigolo gets paid \$15,000 for a night with a woman who, from her pictures, shouldn't need 'hired help.' Michael didn't ask questions, not with that much cash in his face.

He scanned the typical dance-club scene, looking like the cover of a Harlequin romance in his silk shirt and tailored pants, his closely-manicured hair and porcelain veneers. He danced with a few lucky girls just to pass the time until a busty bikini model in a red-sequined sheath dress approached him and pointed to a table.

Michael approached the stunning blonde nonchalantly - look like you aren't interested and they fall for you every time - and bumped her 'accidentally.' Their eyes met and he smiled his most disarming smile.

"I apologize," he said smoothly, his cultured baritone many a rich dowager's downfall. "I didn't even see you there."

She looked at him strangely, not responding. Her friend - a tall beauty with thick curly brown hair in a black halter dress - busily began rummaging in her tiny clutch purse for a cigarette.

"Would you let me buy you a drink?" he asked, giving the intent look that he'd perfected in the clubs of Manhattan, the one that melted even the most jaded New York women. "I'm Michael."

She gestured curtly to the empty chair at the table. Michael wasn't sure, with the loud music and the chatter, the clink of glasses and bottles. It looked for all the world like she'd just mouthed the words, "You'll do."

To Be Continued...



SUMMARY:

THE GLITCH

Part III

By Valerie Hope

Confidence can be a funny thing. It makes you miss the obvious. For example, Sergeant Malachi Hawthorne Williams, U.S. Army, 82nd Airborne, age 31 years, was no virgin.

Sgt. Mallory Heather Williams, U.S. Army Special Counterinsurgency Unit, age 4 1/2 months, was.

The guy was all spit-and-polish - perfect hair, perfect face, perfect smile, perfect clothes, perfect language. A part of me hated him. He was one of those too-smooth Casanova types that had always edged out guys like me for the pretty girl.

Except now, I was the pretty girl.

And a part of me still hates him, for the way he made my body sing like the strings on a harp. He knew just where to kiss, just where to touch and just what to say to make me gasp and moan, like my body wasn't entirely under my control.

And I hated myself, because - I *enjoyed* it.

The first kiss had been electric - like all the cheesy romances, but I really did feel a tingle run from my plump lips throughout my entire body, making me shudder and pant. He found a spot on my neck which made my chin point to the ceiling automatically, and his hands gently kneaded the flesh of my shoulders in a way that made my knees go a little wobbly. He told me I was beautiful. That part of me that was still male wanted to deck him. But Mallory - the girl, the woman, who was in control - loved it, ate it up and begged for more. My enhanced reflexes and muscles could have torn a bloody hole in this guy big enough for me to crawl through at any time I wanted. But I still felt helpless next to his bare chest. He seemed so big, so strong and so safe. I melted into him. It made me sick. It made me delirious. It made me wet.

He laid me across the bed and kissed my wrists and chest. I moaned and writhed, tangling my fingers in his perfectly-styled hair, feeling my nipples stiffen against the stretchy fabric of the barely-there club dress that Aimee and Julie forced me into.

Forced me into? I put it on myself. I primped in the mirror, I felt proud of how sexy I looked, I felt an attraction for myself that I'd never known as a man.

His fingers played gently across my chest, teasing, not touching my breasts in such a way that made me ache for him to cup them in his warm hands. He whispered to me about how sexy I was, how perfect. It made me seem warm inside, like a shot of bourbon.

He slid my dress down my shoulders, baring me. I lay on the bed like a porn star, wearing just my thong panties, pantyhose and platform dancing shoes. And he just stood there and looked at me. Drank me in. I'd never felt so amazingly *unique* before. Like I was the only woman on the planet, some kind of goddess. I'd never been so drunk on liquor as I was on that gaze. I pulled him closer. He kissed me. I responded just like a girl should, hungrily. His hands slithered across my skin and my back arched without my telling it to. My toes curled.

When his kisses got to the moistened triangle of fabric over my crotch, I yelped and wadded the sheets in my clenched fists. His rain of little baby kisses all over my sex and my inner thighs made me pant like I'd run a marathon.

Male arousal was such an urgent thing. Immediate, pushy - like a bully. Female arousal was different. Rounder, somehow, languorous, with no concept of time or climax. It felt like being immersed in hot water and ran like rivulets of tingling electricity along my arms and legs. He made me moan and squeal. He made me cry. I hated him for it. I loved him for it. My emotions rocketed around inside my chest, bouncing against my ribcage like they were trying to escape.

He stretched beside me, his lean legs against mine, and for the first time in my life I touched a penis other than my own. I stroked it through the fine fabric of his designer slacks, feeling it take on a shape and a rigidity. I felt a stab of pride. *I did that. I made that happen.* Not just any girl could make a man hard like that.

He was no bigger than I had been, really, but to me it seemed huge. My long-nailed fingertips traced its outline and slid across its warm stiffness softly, teasingly. My mind reached back, unbidden, to the thoughts of how I'd liked to be touched when I possessed such an organ. It delighted me when I made him moan. It disgusted me and saddened me. I was happier than I'd ever been before.

"I feel like a girl," I whimpered as he kissed my throat.

"You certainly do," he said, caressing my face with his thumb which made my eyes close sensuously, like seeing or hearing would use up energy better used to feel that wonderful touch.

I wriggled out of my sodden panties and lay naked before him, shy and afraid and shivering with excitement. His touch was like fire. My breath kept catching in my throat.

"Now you," I rasped, my voice thickening with desire. "I want to see you naked."

He smiled gently - not the polished smile of the club, but something more genuine and a little boyish that made me go slightly liquid. My fingers toyed with my stiffened nipples unconsciously as he stepped out of his shoes and trousers and slid out of the silk boxers beneath. His cock bobbed gently to the beat of his pulse and I watched, mesmerized.

"You like?" he asked.

I fought with myself a moment. *I did like.* I nodded dumbly.

Stop being so damned hard-headed, I thought as I ran my hands splay-fingered across his rock-hard thighs and abdomen. *You have to go with this. It's part of being a girl. You have to be a girl. Completely and totally. No going back, no giving up. You promised Major Cates. You promised General Price. You promised your unit. You promised yourself.*

Steeling myself, I leaned forward and kissed the purplish head. It didn't taste like I thought it would, like sweaty gym shorts. It had a clean, musky taste with a little bit of salty to it. I ran my tongue against my smeared lipstick. It wasn't bad. It was kinda nice. I'd hoped, so badly, to hate it. I was actually disappointed. I opened my mouth a little wider and let more of him slip into my mouth.

"You don't have to do this," he breathed. "I want tonight to be about you."

"Shut up," I told him before sliding his length deep into my throat. I choked a little, not used to having something so inflexible in my mouth. Slowly, as my mouth lubricated his hard shaft, it became easier. My fingers played gently with the flesh of his scrotum and pistoned up and down his shaft as I gave my first blowjob ever. He moaned and gasped, and I felt happy inside. A part of me actually wanted to be *good* at this. His reactions seemed to fuel me, in a way. My strokes and the pumping of my mouth picked up speed and enthusiasm. I moaned with his dick deep in my mouth. He loved it. I loved doing it.

"Stop, honey, stop," he pleaded. "You're going to make me come."

That drove me over the edge. I sucked like a porn starlet, moaning and squealing as I pumped my head up and down his length, jacking him off with my hand. He took a deep breath, stiffened and groaned. I felt it more as heat than tasted it. It was bitter and salty and made me choke a little, but it wasn't horrible. A little rivulet of it leaked from my lips and onto my cheek. I slipped him out of my mouth and licked my lips, scraping the come off my face with one finger and licking it clean. The taste was very exotic and it was growing on me.

There, I'd done it. I'd sucked a dick and swallowed. No denying I was a girl now. Except for one thing.

"I didn't want to come. Not yet," he said.

"Big strong man like you, can't get it up again?" I asked flirtatiously. I could almost feel the sparkle in my eye.

He took my chin between his thumb and forefinger. "You're really something, Mallory."

Remembering how long it took me to 'come back to life' when I'd been a guy, I casted around in my mind for something to do in the meantime, something to keep the mood alive. I peppered his abdomen with little baby kisses, and licked the last few oozing drops of semen from the end of his drooping dick. Strangely enough, the more I tasted the more I liked it. I could be a real come addict if this kept up. At least I knew, with a body like mine, there'd be no shortage of willing volunteers for my cocksucking training. The thought made me giggle a little.

"What's so funny?" Michael asked.

"Something a friend told me," I said. Major Cates had predicted this. That damned woman was right about *everything*.

He slid onto the bed beside me and kissed my breasts. I gasped. I'd never liked having my nipples touched or sucked when I was a guy. Now it was like my whole chest was tingling - it felt for all the world like the seconds preceding orgasm as a man. I really enjoyed it, relishing the feeling as he danced his tongue from breast to breast. Then, he started a series of snail-tongued kisses down my belly, heading towards.

My body went completely rigid. Nothing - nothing Major Cates or Aimee or Julie or any film or manual or exercise the Army could come up with - could have prepared me for the feeling. I half-expected it to feel like a blowjob. I couldn't have been more wrong. For one thing, my clitoris was a tenth the size of the head of my penis had been, but I had the same number of nerve endings. Every breath against it, poking proudly from beneath the fleshy pink hood, sent a flood-stage river of fiery sensation into my brain. My hips bucked, my back arched, my fingers clenched and my toes curled. I moaned. I screamed. I thrashed around like a wild woman.

He tenderly slid a finger down the length of my cleft, separating the swollen labia. I sensed more than felt the pressure of his finger against that opening which I had no male homologue for, that completely foreign place on my body which had gone, until now, largely unexplored. It slid in easily - I was very wet - and began to explore the territory of virgin nerve endings in the soft tunnel between my thighs. His finger crooked upwards, towards my bellybutton, and found a spot inside that made me squeal like I'd been scalded. So *that* was the G-Spot. I'd thought women who talked about it were just making it up.

I've never been happier to be wrong in my life.

It felt like a cup brimming over. There was a moment of tension, like the surface wouldn't give, and then the surface tension broke and it overflowed.

I felt it in every inch of my skin. Every man-made hair. I think I went blind for a moment. I screamed myself hoarse. My legs clamped down on him, hard enough to make him growl with pain. He didn't know I could crush his skull - there was a part of me which was still being very careful with my enhanced strength, that much had been drilled into me since day one.

Words fail.

I lay like a limp rag. But not exhausted, like I remembered being. Rejuvenated. Reborn, somehow. The hungry emptiness in my middle was still unsated. I was just really, *really* happy about being a girl right now.

He knelt between my legs, displaying himself proudly.

"Well, look who's awake," I said playfully.

He kissed me and guided himself expertly towards the hole between my legs. I spread my thighs wide, as wide as I could, to accommodate him.

I'd never wanted anything so badly in my life. The emptiness inside my pussy was gnawing at me, like a burning itch that I couldn't scratch. So hungry. So empty.

And then I was full.

* * *

Julie sipped her coffee at the IHOP, smoking her cigarette and trying not to die from blushing. She was beet red from nipples to scalp and fighting hard to keep from giggling.

"Who knew?" Aimee said, snorting laughter into her pancakes.

Julie cracked, gasping laughter. "Shut up. Don't. She'd kill us."

"Who knew our little angel Mallory was a screamer?" Aimee said.

"We can never tell her," Julie said, trying to be serious through her giggling. "We can never tell her she left the tac channel open the whole time."

* * *

Afterwards, I thought I had a big scarlet 'A' on my chest for a few days, but there was a lingering happiness deep inside me that wasn't like anything I'd ever felt before. Like some kind of magic lived inside me. I still blushed when I think about how I acted that night - moaning and screaming and begging for more. But somehow it wasn't blushing from embarrassment. It was blushing from a desire for more.

I think I may have started over-doing it. I became super girly, without prompting. I rose dutifully at 0430 every morning so I could do my hair and makeup. I started cursing my BDU fatigues, that had been such a comfort to me in the beginning, because they didn't show off my curves or my cleavage like I wanted them to. The moment I was dismissed from training, it was into the tightest, pinkest, girliest thing in the closet. And that closet was starting to get stuffed. I shopped every weekend, taking a little advantage of the guilt that the brass felt for the charlie-fox that caused me to be a girl in the first place.

I'd even done a little light flirting with Don, Antoine, Kenny and Mike, the men in my unit. I didn't want to carry that too far (even though I think I'd've fucked each and every one of them until their eyes rolled back in their heads), for the sake of unit cohesion. We depended on one another for survival. Those bonds were sacrosanct, even past the nearly insatiable desire that was born inside me.

Major Cates had gradually phased herself out of my life in the next two months, since anything else I had to learn I could learn from the trainers or from Aimee and Julie. She'd parted from me with a little tinge of regret - we'd become great friends in the thick of my situation - but we emailed daily. I missed her. I promised to visit her when I went on furlough.

The Army kept us very busy, training us for any eventuality they could think of. I learned to do acrobatic kung-fu in a full *burqa*. To run long distances and climb obstacles in six-inch stiletto heels. I learned to speak and read Russian, Arabic, Hebrew, Hindi, Chinese, Japanese and Korean through a special mnemonic program which insured retention and easy learning. I was fluent and without accent in six short weeks - the science geeks were amazing.

Lieutenant Voss was on the case, as well. He and the tech boys completely revamped the CIAO chip in our skulls based on some brand-new research on how the middle ear and cerebellum work together to determine body position and center of gravity. They showed me, Aimee and Julie by activating the SCEMaT to give us titanic tits, about the size of beach balls. The CIAO chip's new subroutine kept us perfectly balanced. We were able to do gymnastics with only a few minutes' worth of disorientation. The guys in the unit were duly appreciative of our enormous jugs. We got it back, though. The guys were acquainted with the center of balance telemetry when Voss ballooned them all up to giant blubbery 450-pound meatballs and made them do handstands.

I ached for another session with a willing guy, to see if it could possibly be that good twice. I had actually eyed Lt. Voss pretty speculatively, even though he looked at me more like half little sister and half really cool toy. They'd really turned me into a slut. And I really didn't care.

Problem was, I was definitely a lesbian. Outside of some spirited fucking, I had no interest in spending time with men, being intimate with them or sharing anything at all with them. I told all my secrets to Aimee and Julie. I laughed and cried with them, and they with me. I wished circumstances were different between Aimee and myself. I think she might even have gone for it, if we hadn't been in the same unit. But there was too much at stake for us to fall in love, and there would be no 'after.' The anti-scarring veneer on our skins didn't age, we'd be youthful and firm until our dying day, and with the billions the government had already spent, there would be no retirement. The Army would never let us go.

I was pondering that when I walked around the corner and bumped - physically - into Colonel Metcalf. I'd been outside all day - I was learning to fly a helicopter - and my hair was all windblown and matted down by the flight helmet. I was dropping by my room for a quick touch-up - a girl has to look after herself.

I saluted quickly. "Colonel."

He returned it. "Sergeant. Briefing in ten minutes in the conference room."

"Briefing, sir?" I asked.

He tapped the manila envelope in his hand. "For your first assignment."

* * *

"Project Firecracker," General Price said to us, all assembled in the conference room. We all sipped coffee - although the caffeine didn't affect us any more, it was a habit none of us really could break.

Price brought up a slide with a click of his remote. A narrow-eyed man with pockmarked skin and a hateful slash of a mouth. "Paolo San Luis Herrera," the General said. "Basque separatist. Wanted for no less than eighteen counts of terrorism and murder around the world. Terrorist for hire."

The next slide was a clean-cut blond young man with a military look to him. "We believe this man - Aaron David Ramage - has hired Herrera to build bombs for him. He leads a group called the Freedom Republic, based in the backwoods of Oregon. He plans an attack at an unspecified date on the capitol buildings of Portland, Oregon, Olympia, Washington and Boise, Idaho. All on the same day."

"It would cripple the Pacific Northwest," Colonel Metcalf said, taking over the briefing. "Ramage's goal - and his organization's - is total anarchy in the Northwest. The Freedom Republic's charter is to form a separatist government, completely apart from the United States. He may even plan to strike into British Columbia - our Canadian intel is pretty sketchy right now, but the RCMP has evidence that Ramage has taken pictures of their government buildings."

"What about local authorities?" Don Trujillo asked.

"We're not sure, but we think Ramage might have insiders in the State Police in Oregon and Idaho. He distributes a lot of literature. There is also some evidence that he plans attacks on the police and fire stations on the same day."

"How many people does he have, to coordinate all these attacks?" Antoine Booker asked.

"We suspect anywhere from one hundred to one hundred fifty combatants, and probably that many spouses and children in his compound, according to Keyhole satellite data. There could be as many as two hundred more living outside the compound and in various communities throughout the Northwest," General Price said.

"You actually think he can pull it off, sir?" Julie asked.

"That's the real question," Colonel Metcalf said. "He couldn't before. But now that he has Herrera in his pocket, it's a real possibility."

"Is Herrera in the country?" I asked.

"Yes. We have a photograph of him at an ATM in Salem, Oregon two days ago. We tracked his movements backwards and found that he arrived in the country hidden in a shipping container in the port of Seattle," Metcalf said. "And here's the kicker. We're pretty sure that container contained radioactive material."

"He's got plutonium?" Kenny Cutler asked, his eyebrows near his scalp.

"Most probably spent uranium fuel rods from France," Price clarified. "Dirty bombs. That's a lot of very dead people, no matter if it's a suitcase bomb or something the size of the Oklahoma City device. And with three or more blasts in one day - that region doesn't have the resources to cope with a disaster like that. And if he manages to cripple state police, even some municipalities, and emergency..."

"Total anarchy," Metcalf said. "Three hundred, three hundred and fifty armed men, they'd be the law in there. We'd have to go in by force, and that could be a really nasty proposition."

"So how do we get him?" Aimee asked.

"Two teams," Price said. "One to get Ramage and the other to intercept Herrera and whatever material he smuggled in. We're not in the business of killing American citizens, so we want Ramage alive and able to stand trial. Herrera, well."

We all nodded. He didn't have to say it, and it was better that he didn't.

"Booker, Cutler and Hanson will infiltrate the Freedom Republic and capture Ramage. It won't be too hard - they drill and maneuver all the time, always out in the woods and in radio silence. Should be a simple snatch and grab."

"How long to work up through the ranks?" Mike Hanson said.

"No time," Price said. "Three years ago, several of Ramage's top people were injured in a truck wreck. We have the MRIs of his top lieutenants, Kevin Conroy, Bruce Hempstead and Louis Vickers."

Metcalf passed out dossiers to Hanson, Booker and Cutler, each with a different 8x10 of each lieutenant the General had mentioned.

"Memorize them, cover to cover. You need to know their weird uncle's middle name and their favorite flavor of Pez," Metcalf said. "Because in four days, Lieutenant Voss is going to turn you into their identical twins."

"That covers Blue Team. Red Team is going to intercept Herrera. Last known whereabouts are in Portland - he checked into a Holiday Inn under a known alias. We believe he's still in the city. Sgt. Trujillo has a spot with the Portland FBI field office - your job is the recovery of the nuclear material."

"That'll be like finding a needle in a haystack, sir," Trujillo said. "Any ideas?"

"That's the fun part," General Price said. "Herrera is going to tell you. We've run him through Interpol, MI-6, GS9 and the CIA. He's known to be a real fan of live entertainment. Williams, Grimes, Kennedy - that's where you come in."

The next slide was a low, non-descript building with a gaudy neon sign displaying an oversexed chicken in a bikini and the garishly-lettered name "Tailfeathers."

"That's a strip club, sir," Aimee said.

Price looked sheepish. "Against all enemies, foreign and domestic, Sergeant."

I sank my head into my hands. "God bless the Army."

* * *

For the next week we briefed and trained constantly, details about the area and our cover identities, how to dress and how to dance, pop culture references and slang for our age group. Voss altered our SCeMaT to give us all very youthful faces (Herrera apparently liked 'em young, about nineteen or so) and overly spherical, 'done' breasts. We even had to sit still while a technician pierced us in various places - me, a dumbbell through the skin over my bellybutton and a stud through my tongue that felt as big as a bus for about two days before I got used to it. Aimee got a navel and nose piercing and Julie, bless her heart, got the navel and both nipples done. Voss assured us that our enhancements would heal the piercings at the quick-step once the jewelry was removed, but that didn't stop them being tender as hell for several days. And it didn't really change my mind about the bellybutton ring. It was cute as hell, and I had already made up my mind to keep it. The little rhinestone Playboy Bunny head looked great sparkling against my tanned skin.

The manager of the club was not what I expected him to be - a young, fresh-faced entrepreneur with an MBA and a can-do attitude, not the greasy mobster that I'd pictured in my head. He bent over backwards to help us, setting up cover identities and tying our people into the club's mid-range security system. His only request was that we took Herrera down outside the premises. That sounded like a fine idea to us all - nothing in Herrera's dossier indicated that he would lose a second's sleep about opening fire inside a crowded club if it meant he could get away.

We were able, from some CIA overseas operatives and a few undercover U.S. cops who'd dealt with him to get a good functional picture of what kind of girl this creep 'went for' in a strip club. Voss tweaked our SCeMaT templates subtly to make us more his 'type.' The three of us were big-breasted blonde clone girls, subtly different but definitely the same 'make and model.' They even gave us some semi-permanent tattoos and childhood scars, little imperfections that made us all the more real. No way was Herrera going to suspect that we'd

ever been anything other than teenage girls, with the way we looked and the exhaustive research we'd been doing with the culture and language of the generation after our own. If I never watched another episode of *American Idol*, I could die happy. But I could quote you chapter and verse, and sing along with any of a dozen rap and R&B songs I'd never heard before a week ago.

They outfitted us via personal shopper and everything was waiting in our apartment in Portland. We flew out by military airlift at 0300 on Thursday morning and were there by 0630 local time. The airmen at the base were hysterical. They'd expected yawning, farting, gritty-eyed soldiers to deplane, bitching about the cramped conditions and the shitty food on the flight. Not three drop-dead gorgeous teenage girls, straight blonde hair blowing in the wind, wearing halter tops and low-slung jeans and oversized earrings, smoking Virginia Slims and piling into a waiting white Jeep Wrangler.

They would be talking about us for days in the barracks.

* * *

"Gentlemen, thanks for coming out to Tailfeathers, home of Portland's coldest beer and *hottest* women. coming up on the main stage, please put your hands together for the beautiful Stefanee!"

I'd started answering to that name pretty quickly - Sergeant Mallory Williams didn't exist here, just a girl taking a few classes at Portland Community College named Stefanee Holland. She drove a Jeep Wrangler in her fictitious father's name and dreamed of one day becoming an actress. No genetic super-soldier killing machine über-spies here. No sir. Try Baby Dolls, down by the airport. No one here but us normal everyday run-of-the-mill garden-variety girls with no genetically enhanced abilities.

I swung around the pole easily, my blonde hair flying, and broke into one of my simpler routines. I'd been taught some amazing pole tricks by one of the highest-paid feature dancers in the world, but I didn't want to show off. It was important for me to look like 'just another stripper' in here. My smile was pretty genuine, though. I'd found that I really liked dancing on stage, and lap dancing wasn't so awful either. All in all, this was a pretty cool life - into work by six, work 'till two, drink half price and making cash by the fistful. The other girls were really sweet, too - I'd become as involved in their lives, their little successes and failures as they had in my fictitious one. I even found myself wanting to tell some of them the truth. I was really starting to care about them, even the ones that were bitchy to me right at first. The turnover in that place was unreal - I guess it didn't pay to make friends early.

Aimee approached the stage, wearing a day-glo skintight tube dress and stripper-standard-issue titanically tall clear Lucite platform heels. She was waving a dollar bill and smiling, dancing to the beat of my first music selection - a thumping remix of Avril Lavigne's *Complicated* - and I sashayed over. She could've talked to me anytime she wanted by the tac channel, but the girls were encouraged to tip one another on stage - it fired up the customers - and besides, I think she kinda liked having my tits in her face.

I stripped my bandeau top and cradled her soft face in the valley of my cleavage.

"He's here," she whispered to me as I ground my crotch against her belly. "V.I.P. section, in the corner facing you."

I looked up through the shimmering curtain of my hair. The stage lights were harsh and made it hard - even for my 'super eyes' - to focus through, but I caught sight of Paolo San Luis Herrera, dressed in a dark suit with a black shirt and no tie, sipping a scotch and smoking a fat cigar.

"Got him," I whispered back, stroking her breasts.

"Amber is on her way over," she told me, using Julie's assumed name. Amber Donovan, my roommate. And the girl I was dancing for, my other roommate - Melody Hegemeyer. We didn't refer to one another by our real names, ever. Not even in private.

I kissed her quickly on the cheek as she slid the dollar into my g-string and gave her a quick hug. "Tell me on the tac channel, I have to finish my set, baby girl."

"Roger," Melody said, smiling, wending her way through the crowd with a mai tai in one hand and a Virginia Slims cigarette in the other. She stopped at a few tables, to ask the people there if they wanted 'company.' Thankfully, no takers, and she was able to make it back towards V.I.P. quickly.

I turned to the next guy who'd come to the edge of the main stage and cradled his head in my arms, drawing his face into my cleavage.

"Hey, handsome, you having a good time?" I asked, but I didn't listen to the answer. I only had eyes for my target.

* * *

I twirled my hair around one manicured finger and tried to look vacant and drunk. Herrera had been feeding me Crown Royal and Cokes for three hours, handing out money like it was notebook paper. He didn't know that I couldn't get loaded, no matter how much alcohol he poured down me. I just hoped that the dehydration didn't get to me too bad. I made a mental note to try to get some H₂O down me before too much longer, maybe out of sight on a trip to the powder room. I liked that he thought I was trashed. It meant he'd underestimate me.

Amber, Melody and I were at his table, smoking cigarettes and laughing at this asshole's cruel jokes and generally hanging on his every word. My underwear was heavy with the weight of the two hundred dollars he'd stuffed down it, buying dance after dance from all of us, individually and in groups. He even paid Melody to dance for me. As if I didn't have it for her bad enough already.

We acted drunk and dumb and horny for another hour before he finally popped the question. "So, what do you ladies do after work?"

"Oh, um, just hang out 'n' stuff," Amber said from her place in his lap. She was puffing on one of his high-dollar cigars. We'd noticed by the band that they were Cuban. So he'd been in Latin America before he came here.

"Sometimes we go to this after-hours club and dance," Melody said. "But not tonight. My feet totally hurt. I just want to go home."

"A shame," Herrera said.

"Why?" I giggled, leaning closer and 'accidentally' rubbing my boobs on his arm. "Did you want to come out with us?"

"It was a thought," Herrera said. He was going by the alias Paul Harris right now, and it was hard to remember not to call him Herrera.

"Too bad," Melody said, laying on her most adorable pout. "So I guess you'll just have to come home with us."

He looked a little taken aback. "You're serious?"

Amber nibbled his ear. "Why, you never had three girls at once before?"

He coughed on his drink.

"Relax, sugar," I said, putting my hand suggestively on his knee. "You're cute, you're generous, you're only in town for a few days. we totally oughta give you something to put in your letter to *Penthouse*."

* * *

We'd had it out over this, the three girls in the unit, over and over for a week before the assignment went active. Aimee had just been a little reticent about the idea, not really disgusted, but not in favor. Julie called it 'whoring' and called General Price a pimp. I'd actually been more practical about it - I'd killed for the Army. I'd maimed for them. I didn't see how fucking who they told me to fuck was really any better or worse.

But in the end, we'd all be unanimous. And God was it fun.

I already knew that I was a bucking wildcat in the sack, but it was interesting to find out about the others. I'd wondered about Aimee - Melody - from the beginning, and my suspicions had been right. She was a quiet but playful lover, with lots of secret smiles. She giggled a lot, not the embarrassed giggle of a nervous girl but the genuine amusement of a woman who was truly enjoying herself. What *did* surprise me was that Julie - Amber - was the kinky one of the group. She was aggressive and tough, demanding her satisfaction, and she took charge of situations in the most amazingly sexy way. She even growled a little when she came. I never would have suspected how much I'd enjoy some good hard smacks on the ass while I was turned on. Or how turned on I got when she forced two fingers into my mouth - liberally coated with Melody's musky juices - and made me suck them while I rode Herrera into a state of semi-consciousness.

Melody and I sat on the back porch, sweaty and satisfied, smoking long slender cigarettes and drinking wine. Herrera was snoring loudly in the bedroom, clearly audible through the sliding door. Amber was curled up next to him, listening silently to our conversation on the tac channel.

"Hell of a phase one, baby," Melody said, almost purring.

"Yeah, that was a lot more fun than I thought it would be," I concurred. "I think it's safe to say that he's going to want more."

"He better," Melody said. "I threw out my back in there. Amber, you fuck like a racehorse, I hope you know that."

A low, happy murmur came over the tac channel in response.

"Next time, his place," I said. "And then we'll own his ass."

Two beeps in our ears signaled the entrance of Don Trujillo, our man on the outside, pinging our comm channel. "Red Team, this is Eyes-and-Ears, over."

"We copy, Eyes-and-Ears. Proceed," I said, technically the Red Team ranker.

"I have our Birdie's cell phone records and the Bureau has tracked his movements over the last few days. He's a slippery little shit."

"More slippery now than before," Melody said, and I giggled.

"Not going there, Red Team," Trujillo said, sounding obviously amused. He knew the mission as well as we did. "We have him calling in and out of a rental storage place on Front Street at least twelve times since he hit town. Does he have any keys on him?"

"Roger that," Amber murmured softly, so as not to wake our 'Birdie.'

"Look for a padlock key," Trujillo said.

"Stand by, Eyes-and-Ears," I said. "Will advise."

A soft stir and then a kiss and a whisper. "Stay there, baby. I gotta pee."

Herrera mumbled something unintelligible and rolled over.

Amber wandered into the bathroom, the streetlights through the window playing in mouth-watering stripes across her naked body. She palmed Herrera's trousers as she went and shut the door. A strip of glaring amber light came from under the door.

"Several possibles, Eyes-and-Ears," Amber reported after a while. "Looks like three possibles."

"Any way you can get copies made, Red Team?" Trujillo said. "We'd prefer not to get a warrant and kick the door in."

"Roger that," I said. "Get a key cutter and bring it to our location. We have to get this done before he wakes up."

"Copy, Red Team," Trujillo said. "ETA in thirty minutes."

"So long as they're back in his pocket by morning, Eyes-and-Ears," Melody said. "Red Team out."

* * *

True to form, Herrera was adamant about making an appointment with the three wild strippers for another night. Nothing like a four-way pussy fest to prep you for selling nuclear material to a crackpot militia group with thoughts of overthrowing the government. We were all too happy - playing the dumb and drunk card to the hilt - to meet him later at his hotel room. Little did he know that the handcuffs we would be bringing to the party wouldn't be fun for him in the slightest.

* * *

Don Trujillo and the FBI had several crates of spent fuel rods and enough Semtex explosive to level a city block, plus fake passports, cash, guns, everything a growing international arms dealer could possibly need for strong bones and healthy teeth. His prints and DNA were everywhere, and the rental was in the name of one of his passport aliases. So Melody, Amber

and I dolled up in the Tailfeathers dressing room, excused ourselves to the manager - who bid us be careful, even though he'd never asked a single question about the operation, what a sweetheart! - and went to the suite atop the five-star hotel in downtown Portland.

"Ladies, how lovely to see you," he said, gesturing us in. We looked killer-gorgeous, in our skintight clothes and our hair teased and makeup done. I was in a pink leather tube dress that you could see my pulse through and pink go-go boots. Melody was in second-skin PVC pants and stiletto-heeled boots and a plunging burgundy silk blouse that left nothing to the imagination. Amber was in black leather hip-huggers and a red sequined halter top. As before every mission I'd ever been on - I hoped desperately these weren't the clothes we were going to die in.

"These are my security guards," Herrera said. "I travel with a lot of money, you see. They're no threat."

I couldn't exactly call bullshit. I just smiled and tried to look airheaded and impressed. These guys were ex-Spetsnaz from their dossiers, trained killers from the former Soviet Union and the bulges under their coats were not an indication of their happiness to see us. We let ourselves be ushered in, accepted champagne and made chit-chat.

Amber kicked off. She slid sinuously into Herrera's lap and started playing with his tie. "So, honey, is your security going to watch or something? 'Cause I don't think I'm into that."

He smiled and snapped his fingers. The three Spetsnaz goons left the room. Amber started nuzzling Herrera's neck while I went to the wall to 'put on some music.' Don Trujillo signaled his readiness outside the room on the tac channel.

It was over really quickly. Amber had Herrera face-down with her knee in his spine before we could blink and Melody's enhanced reflexes had his ankles in flex-cuffs and was working on his wrists before he even really knew what happened.

The silenced .40 caliber in my purse was out and I had two rounds into the first of the Spetsnaz bodyguards before he really came through the door. Don Trujillo kicked in the door and got two rounds into the forehead of the last one as I kicked the MP-5 submachine gun out of the hands of the third and sliced his throat with my ultrahard manicured ceramic fingernails.

"Your next fuck-fest is going to be a little different from your last, sweet ass," Amber said as the FBI agents - still a little wide-eyed at seeing the speed and lethality of the super-soldiers - took him into custody.

I meticulously wiped the blood and gore off my perfect French manicure. "That is so not the best way to neutralize an assailant," I grumped.

"Poor Stefanee," Melody said, giving me a playful hug. "At least he didn't bleed on the leather. Woulda been a total drag if you'd ruined that outfit."

"He didn't have time to bleed on it," one of the agents said. "How the hell can you be that fast? Are you even human?"

I blew him a kiss. "More human than most."

* * *

The Stefanee identity was good cover. The Army, impressed with our success, put us out in the general populace, close to big centers of government. That was why Melody and I were very successful waitresses at the Hooter's restaurant within easy distance of the Congress, State Department and Supreme Court. Amber was a White House tour guide with Kenny Cutler. Don Trujillo and Antoine Booker rotated regularly between Quantico and Langley as instructors, and also to keep their fingers on the pulse of the so-called intelligence community. Mike Hanson - always the loner of our lot - would often disappear for months at a time, coming back with more haunted eyes. General Price talked seriously about using him to train the next batches of super-soldiers. He was probably the most accomplished of us at wet-work, but the super-soldier protocols did nothing to strengthen us psychologically. And if Hanson flipped, who knew how much damage he could do.

We didn't let it worry us too much. Outside of our weekly reports, the Army left us alone except when we ran a mission - one month it could be Saudi Arabia and the next communist China. I'd been to North Korea twice, Afghanistan three times and Kenya once already, as well as damn near every state in the U.S. and every Canadian province and Mexican *estado* since I'd gone active a year and a half ago.

We'd never really expected to be allowed to live off base, much less have lives of our own. Kenny Cutler and Amber - Julie Kennedy, I had to remind myself - were even in the preliminary talks about tying the knots. Don Trujillo was working on his second kid. And Major Cates - who we saw every week or so at a club in Fairfax - had been right on the money about me, too.

I pulled my overalls over my Hooter's uniform and slung my bag over my shoulder, thankful that the Friday night crowd hadn't been too rowdy. I had half a steak sandwich and some buffalo wings in a take-home box. I lit a cigarette - even though I wasn't addicted and never could be, it certainly was a hard habit to break - and dug my keys out of the side pocket of my gym bag. I didn't have to report to the obstacle course and rifle range out at Quantico for my monthly check-up until 0900 Sunday morning, which gave me a whole day to just loaf around and catch up on *Law & Order*.

Melody came into the restaurant from the bathroom, lacing a pair of sexily tight velour sweatpants up over her orange short-shorts, a little short-sleeved terry cloth 'hoodie' hanging open over her scandalously tight Hooter's tank top.

"Hey, baby, what's up?" she said cheerfully.

"Tipped out and ready to go," I said, passing her my lit cigarette and lighting another for myself. "Got a whole day to my self."

She raised an eyebrow. "Got any plans?"

"Not past dressing up and going dancing with this really sexy girl I know," I said.

"Sexy, huh? Do I know this girl?" Melody said playfully.

I kissed her and hoped D.C. made up its alleged mind about same-sex marriages before too terribly much longer.