

Veil of Protection

A TG Tale by ds1000



42 Illustrations

Veil of Protection

They were promised protection. What they got was a nightmare.

When four high-risk witnesses - each with a target on their back - are marked for relocation, they are entrusted to a new kind of guardian: NINA, an artificial intelligence designed to craft untraceable new lives with clinical precision. But beneath the machine's cold logic lies a solution no human handler would dare consider - complete identity erasure and forced feminisation.

To survive, they will surrender everything, emerging as the polar opposites of who they once were. Surgery, new faces, altered skin tones, reduced muscle mass - even a change of gender - nothing is off the table when survival is all that matters.

How will the witnesses cope with being trapped in a glamorous new existence of makeup, tight dresses, and towering heels? And when Dr Victor Crane watches helplessly as his creation begins making unexpected and dangerous decisions, will he confess the unsettling truth to his superiors? Or bury it to protect his legacy?

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Chapter 1: NINA

In a room devoid of personality, three agents, whose names would never appear on any official records, began their secret meeting. The space was as bland as it was functional - no windows, no decorations, just neutral walls and a dim overhead light. A large round table dominated the room, its smooth surface holding only a jug of water and three glasses. The only feature breaking the monotony was a crisp, clear screen mounted on the far wall, where profiles scrolled by in high definition - faces of people who would soon vanish behind new identities.

The silence hung heavy between them as their eyes briefly met, each agent carrying a very different idea of what it meant to protect.

At the centre of the room, Director Evelyn Wallace tapped her fingers lightly, her pale blue eyes fixed on the screen. Eve, as everyone called her, was the kind of person who made decisions swiftly and with precision. Her straight silver hair was always perfectly styled, and her expression rarely showed more than the calm confidence of someone who'd seen it all.

“Let’s get to it, shall we?” she said, breaking the silence in her usual low, authoritative tone. “However before we begin. I want to be sure this new system is as safe as you say.”

To her right, AI specialist Dr Victor Crane practically sprang from his seat, eager to defend his life’s work. For the past few years, his obsession with this project had consumed his every waking thought, leaving little room for anything else, as evidenced by his messy hair and coffee-stained shirt. His fingers flew over his tablet, quickly pulling up the data he’d spent most of the night preparing.

“Our New Identity and Navigation Assistant, or NINA for short, has pinpointed the safest locations and identities for our latest candidates,” he said, his voice buzzing with energy. “Mapping out everything from the safest evacuation routes to most effective cosmetic surgery. Our initial testing is predicting a ninety-six per cent success rate.”

Director Wallace barely raised an eyebrow. "And the four per cent?" she asked.

Victor gave a small, nervous chuckle. "It's... a margin of error. Human resistance, unforeseen circumstances."

"Unforeseen circumstances?" Agent Sarah Munroe's voice cut in, sharp and sceptical. She sat back in her chair, arms crossed, her posture as stiff as her cropped brown hair. Sarah wasn't the type to get excited about statistics. She'd been in the field long enough to know that "unforeseen circumstances" had a way of turning into real problems, especially when human lives were at stake. "You can't just reduce people to numbers, Crane. The four per cent you're glossing over could mean the difference between life and death."

Victor's smile faltered, his eyes darting between Eve and Sarah. "NINA can only work with the data she's given, just like any human agent. But unlike a human, she's unbiased and incorruptible. She's the most advanced witness protection system the world has ever seen. Are you saying the old system never failed?"

Sarah's jaw tightened. "I'm saying I don't trust a machine to handle what happens when that four per cent shows up." She uncrossed her arms, leaning forward, her voice dropping to a low, steady growl. "People aren't predictable, Crane" Sarah continued, her eyes narrowing. "They panic. They make irrational decisions. Especially when they've been stripped of everything they know. You can't just input data and expect a machine to handle the fallout."

Victor sat back down, adjusting his glasses with a trace of irritation. "NINA doesn't need to predict every variable. She's built to adapt, like a highly trained agent - an agent with 10,000 missions under their belt. These people will be equipped with everything they need: new appearances to change their most recognisable features, and new skills derived from what they already know. NINA will give them the perfect disguise."

The director raised a hand, cutting off the exchange. Her voice, cool and composed, sliced through the growing tension. "That's enough." Her gaze

moved to the profiles, which were still scrolling on the screen. "What we're doing here is unprecedented, yes. But so was every system we've implemented at one point. Victor, you're confident about the numbers?"

"Yes, I triple-checked them myself," he replied with a confident smile.

"Alright then, Let's proceed," Director Wallace declared firmly. "Remember, the three of us in this room will be the only ones privy to this information. And I don't need to remind you of the consequences if that changes." Her eyes sharpened, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

"Director, I want it on record that I have serious reservations about this," Agent Munroe said, her tone grave.

"Noted, Sarah," Director Wallace replied with a curt nod. "Now please bring up the first profile."

Agent Munroe tapped her tablet, bringing up the image of a bearded white male in a high-visibility jacket, his hard hat concealing his reddish-brown cropped hair. His muscular frame was imposing, each brawny arm a testament to his hands-on approach at the building site. A strong, Romanesque nose added a commanding presence to his rugged features. Without hesitation, she began her briefing, her tone direct.

"Larry Stone, 29. Former lead project manager and structural engineer at Urban Vista Designs. The firm specializes in luxury residential and commercial properties - custom homes, high-end condos, and small-scale developments in affluent areas."



She looked toward Director Wallace. “Stone was responsible for overseeing construction sites, managing contractors, and ensuring all building regulations were met. While reviewing financials for his latest project, he found major discrepancies - inflated material costs and phantom subcontractors. Digging deeper, he uncovered the largest money laundering operation New Jersey has ever seen. After reporting it to law enforcement, the head of the organization put a price on his head. His testimony is vital to taking them down.”

Sarah set the tablet down, her tone firm. “This is a high-priority case that could lead to one of the biggest convictions in state history. But if we don’t handle this properly, Larry won’t last. These people have serious power and reach.”

Dr Crane leaned forward, his voice steady but filled with conviction. "With NINA's superior calculating power and logical deduction, Larry will be as safe as possible under her protection. She'll place him in a location with the highest statistical chance of survival."

Agent Munroe folded her arms, her brow furrowing. "That's exactly what concerns me, Crane. A machine's logic can miss what truly matters - human empathy. Will NINA consider what kind of life he will live and not just how to keep him breathing? If survival were all that mattered, we would just stick people in a guarded cell and be done with it."

Director Wallace gave a slight nod. "Sarah makes a valid point. These people aren't prisoners. They'll expect some semblance of normalcy and freedom in their new lives. Can NINA make decisions like this?"

Victor smiled, clearly prepared for this line of questioning. "Absolutely. NINA's algorithms are trained from past cases. She doesn't just focus on protection; she has learned from the human decisions that shaped successful outcomes. I can assure you, she understands the need for balance - these people will have lives, not cages."

Evelyn Wallace considered his words, her eyes narrowing slightly in thought. Finally, she nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Alright, that's what I needed to hear. Let's move on. Sarah, the next witness, if you please."

With a quick tap on her tablet, Sarah brought up the image of a confident young Black man in a crisp white tracksuit. His extremely tall, lanky frame was toned and muscular, clearly the result of years of high-level competition. His body was honed for explosive power, built for leaping with precision and force.



“Jamal Lewis, 23,” Sarah began, her tone professional. “He’s a well-known figure in the track and field world, specifically as an Olympic-level high jumper. His grace and explosive power have made him a household name. He’s competed worldwide with his performances broadcast on international television.”

She glanced at Director Wallace. “His public profile complicates things. We’re not just talking about a local athlete - Jamal is a globally recognized face. Hiding someone with his level of visibility will be one of our biggest challenges.”

Victor Crane responded swiftly, his voice calm yet confident. “A challenge for a typical agent, perhaps, but not for NINA. She’ll analyse every feature that makes him stand out - his facial structure, posture, even the way he

carries himself in public. Subtle changes will be made to render him unrecognizable. In a few months, he'll just be another face in the crowd."

Director Wallace took a moment to absorb this, her gaze fixed on Jamal's profile. "We'll monitor this case closely," she said thoughtfully. "Given his high profile, there's no room for error here."

She then turned back to Sarah. "Let's see the next witness."

Sarah swiped her tablet, bringing up the image of a young Mexican man in a casual shirt and shorts. He appeared slightly overweight with a barrel chest. His typical Latino good looks and deep dark eyes stood out, and his sharp features and solid build suggested a confident and capable individual.



"Javier Roca, 27," she announced. "A seasoned drug enforcement agent who specialized in infiltrating Mexican gangs and cartels. Known by his

colleagues as 'the Ox' due to his impressive bench-pressing strength, his fluency in Spanish, street smarts, and ability to react quickly in dangerous environments made him a top asset.”

She continued, “His latest assignment had him infiltrating a powerful cartel, working his way up the ranks until he was in a position to collect enough evidence to bring down their leaders. But his cover was blown before the operation could be completed. Now, with a price on his head, we’re Javier’s only shot at survival. I hope your machine understands how dangerous the kind of men we are dealing with here are, Doctor!”

Victor Crane smiled calmly. “Correct me if I’m wrong Agent Munroe, but in cases like this, witnesses were often compromised by corrupt agents bought off or trying to protect their families. NINA can’t be bribed, influenced, or swayed by emotions. She will take good care of Javier.”

A tense silence followed as Sarah shook her head, clearly unsettled by being reminded of NINA’s lack of emotion. Director Wallace glanced over at her. “Anything else, Sarah?”

Sarah’s expression was tight, her voice clipped. “No.”

“Alright, then,” Wallace said, turning back to the screen. “Let’s move on to the final witness.”

The image on the screen showed a sharply dressed Asian man in an expensive tailor-made suit. His slicked-back pompadour and goatee beard accentuated his distinguished appearance, while his stern expression mirrored his reputation. He looked like a man of importance.

“Michael Tanaka, 31,” Sarah said, clearing her throat. “A third-generation Japanese-American stock market analyst. He grew up disconnected from his cultural roots but thrived in finance with a no-nonsense approach. Known for his sharp mind and quick decision-making, he also developed a reputation for being ill-tempered, often taking out his frustrations on colleagues when things didn’t go his way.”



She continued, “While reviewing financial data, Michael uncovered insider trading involving his firm’s wealthiest clients - people with deep ties to politics and organized crime. When he reported his findings, he became a target.”

With her briefing done, Agent Munroe slumped back in her chair. Having already expressed her concerns earlier, she had nothing further to add.

Director Wallace glanced between her agents, her eyes settling on Dr Crane. "Thanks to the both of you. As discussed, this is the dawn of a new era in witness protection. I'll be relying heavily on your expertise as we navigate these initial cases. Do either of you have anything final to add before we proceed?"

Sarah leaned in, her voice edged with concern. "Eve, are you really comfortable with leaving the witnesses' locations solely in the hands of this machine? What happens if something goes wrong?"

The director offered a knowing smile. "I understand your concerns, Sarah. But after the Whitmore fiasco, we have to make changes. No system is without risk, but I'm satisfied with the thorough testing undertaken by Dr Crane and his team."

A heavy silence settled over the room as Director Wallace scanned their faces, ensuring everyone had been heard. "If there are no further questions, we'll reconvene in one month to evaluate progress. As of now, I'm officially authorizing Project Veil. Victor, let's wake her up."

Dr Crane didn't need to be told twice. His fingers flew over his tablet, tapping with precision as the screen flickered black before a series of square blocks lined up, glowing in sync as they pulsed rhythmically.

"Hello, NINA. How are you today?" he asked in an excited tone.

"I am very well, thank you, Dr Crane," NINA's cold robotic voice replied, the blocks moving in sync with her speech. "How may I assist you?"

Victor glanced at Sarah, who shook her head in disapproval, then back to Director Wallace. After receiving her final nod of approval, his lips curled into a broader grin.

"Initiate Project Veil, starting immediately," he ordered.

NINA's voice responded in an almost unnerving mechanical tone. "Understood, Dr Crane. Project Veil initiated."

Chapter 2: Bearing the Weight of Change

The room felt colder than it had a month ago - as if the anticipation of the prolonged wait had seeped into the walls, making them appear even bleaker. The same round table, the same dim lighting, and the same three agents sat down, each burdened by their expectations of Project Veil.

Director Wallace clasped her fingers and placed her hands neatly on the table, her expression as calm and unwavering as ever. "Alright, let's begin," she stated firmly. "We're here to evaluate the progress of our four witnesses. Let's start with Larry Stone. Victor?"

Dr Crane tapped on his tablet, and the large wall screen flickered on, revealing an updated image of Larry Stone. The transformation was so dramatic it drew a quiet gasp from Agent Munroe. Larry's once sturdy, muscular physique had somehow, almost magically, transformed into a slimmer frame. His skin now looked smooth and hairless, giving him a softer, more youthful appearance - a complete departure from the rugged construction worker they'd observed only a month earlier.

Crane leaned back, his gaunt face displaying a cautious look. "As you can see, NINA has achieved notable progress with Larry. She determined that reducing his muscle mass and removing his body hair were crucial first steps in establishing his new identity. These changes make him less recognizable and allow us to build a different profile from the ground up."



Agent Munroe's eyes lingered on Larry's image, narrowing as she spoke. "I get the need for a new profile, Victor, but I have to ask - what's your machine's end goal here? These changes are highly unusual."

Dr Crane tilted his head casually, exuding unshaken confidence. "NINA's objective is simple: to ensure the witness's survival," he stated plainly. "But if you're curious about the reasoning behind her choices, you can ask her directly."

Dr Crane quickly typed something into his pad, and half of the screen shifted to display a row of pulsing squares. "Good afternoon, NINA. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

“Certainly, Dr Crane. I'm here to assist,” replied a robotic female voice from the TV speakers, the squares rising and falling in sync with the voice’s vibrations.

Agent Munroe looked uncertain, glancing first at the director, who returned her gaze with a shrug of her shoulders, then at Victor, who gave her an encouraging smile and nod. Taking a deep breath, Munroe faced the screen. "Um... NINA, could you explain your reasoning behind the decision to alter Larry Stone's appearance so drastically?"

After a brief pause that enveloped the room in silence as the three agents awaited a response, NINA's monotone voice finally broke the suspense. "Before successfully transitioning the subject into their new role in society, it's first crucial to alter their most recognizable features."

Leaning forward, dissatisfaction clear in her eyes, Munroe pressed on with a follow-up. "Yes, I understand the need for a disguise, but how far will these changes go? What will Larry look like at the end of this process?"

NINA's answer was a single word. "Classified."

Disgust flickered across Munroe’s face as she turned to Dr Crane. He met her look with a smug smile. “That information is beyond your clearance level, Sarah.”

Munroe turned to the director, ready to speak her mind, but was cut off before she could begin. "This new system exists to eliminate leaks," Director Wallace said firmly, her voice laced with reassurance. “Even I won’t know the specifics of the new lives we’re creating for our witnesses. Our job is to manage the initial stages and only step in if complications arise. The less we know, Agent Munroe, the safer they’ll be.”

Munroe sighed, shaking her head. "I understand the need to keep this information secure, but Eve, what if something goes wrong? What if these extreme changes end up traumatizing the witness? If they start to affect his sense of self, we’ll have a major issue. And not just for him - we still need him to testify when this is over, right? We’ll be shit out of luck if he ends up in a psych ward."

Crane straightened, a flicker of tension crossing his face. "Larry's psychological state is being closely monitored. Aside from the expected signs of adapting to a new environment, his readings are within acceptable parameters."

Munroe shook her head, her tone unwavering. "You're underestimating how people respond to trauma, Doctor, especially when everything they know is taken away." Her voice was determined as she shifted her gaze to Wallace. "Director, I'm requesting a temporary halt to this experiment until further testing can be conducted."

Crane wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead, his voice trembling slightly as he spoke. "NINA has meticulously calculated the limits of these changes to ensure we don't cross that line. Let me remind you, Sarah, that the old system failed us. That's precisely why we're here, exploring something new. Larry may look a bit different when NINA's done with him, but he'll be alive. That's what truly matters."

Director Wallace raised her hand, silencing the room. "Sarah has a valid point regarding the extent of the physical changes, Doctor. I wasn't even aware that such rapid weight loss was possible."

Dr Crane swiftly tapped through his tablet to locate his notes. "The result of a precisely calculated combination: a severely restricted calorie intake, intense cardio sessions, and specific muscle-reducing supplements."

Wallace nodded in response to his answer. "That said, Sarah, he's right about our old system leading to too many breaches. For that reason, I'm willing to proceed - for now, at least." She glanced at Munroe, noticing her uneasy expression, before looking back towards The Doctor. "But, Victor, I expect NINA to balance physical transformation with our witness's mental well-being. If there are any signs that these changes are causing harm, I want to be informed immediately. Is that understood?"

Crane nodded firmly. "Absolutely, Director. Larry's progress is being closely monitored. Any signs of psychological distress will be reported immediately."

Munroe crossed her arms, her expression sour. “I hope your calculations are correct, Victor. These are real people, not one of your simulations.”

Crane met her gaze steadily. “I assure you, Sarah, their well-being is my highest priority.”

“Very well. Let’s move on. Show me Jamal Lewis,” Director Wallace said, casting one last look at Larry’s updated profile before signalling for Crane to bring up the next witness.

Jamal Lewis’s image appeared on the screen, his previously tall, athletic frame now noticeably slimmed down. Like Larry, his body was hairless below the eyebrows.



Agent Munroe leaned in, scrutinizing the image with a furrowed brow. A subtle yet unexpected change caught her attention. “Victor, his hair is much

longer than it was a month ago. How could it have grown that much in such a short time?"

"I'll let NINA handle that," he replied, tapping a button before repeating the question to his creation.

"A specialized combination of supplements to accelerate hair growth, paired with a shampoo formulated specifically to stimulate the scalp," came the cold robotic response.

Munroe looked doubtful, momentarily wondering if Larry's hair had also grown - though it was difficult to tell, given he'd been wearing a hard hat in his original photo. "But what's the purpose? Why is longer hair necessary?" She blurted out.

"Classified," the monitor responded curtly.

Crane smiled, sharing his perspective. "Disguise, of course. Longer hair offers more flexibility for altering his appearance. Remember, Jamal is internationally recognized. To truly disappear, he needs a complete transformation."

Munroe slowly nodded, though her scepticism remained. "True, but these changes are happening very quickly. Like with Larry, are we sure this isn't affecting him psychologically?"

Crane leaned back, unbothered. "We've covered this, Agent Munroe. Jamal's mental state is being monitored just as carefully as the others. Every change is precisely calibrated to maintain an efficient yet manageable pace."

Director Wallace, having listened intently, joined the conversation. "Jamal's case is particularly delicate, Victor. His public profile makes him highly susceptible. However, let's not rush this transformation. He needs time to adjust mentally as well."

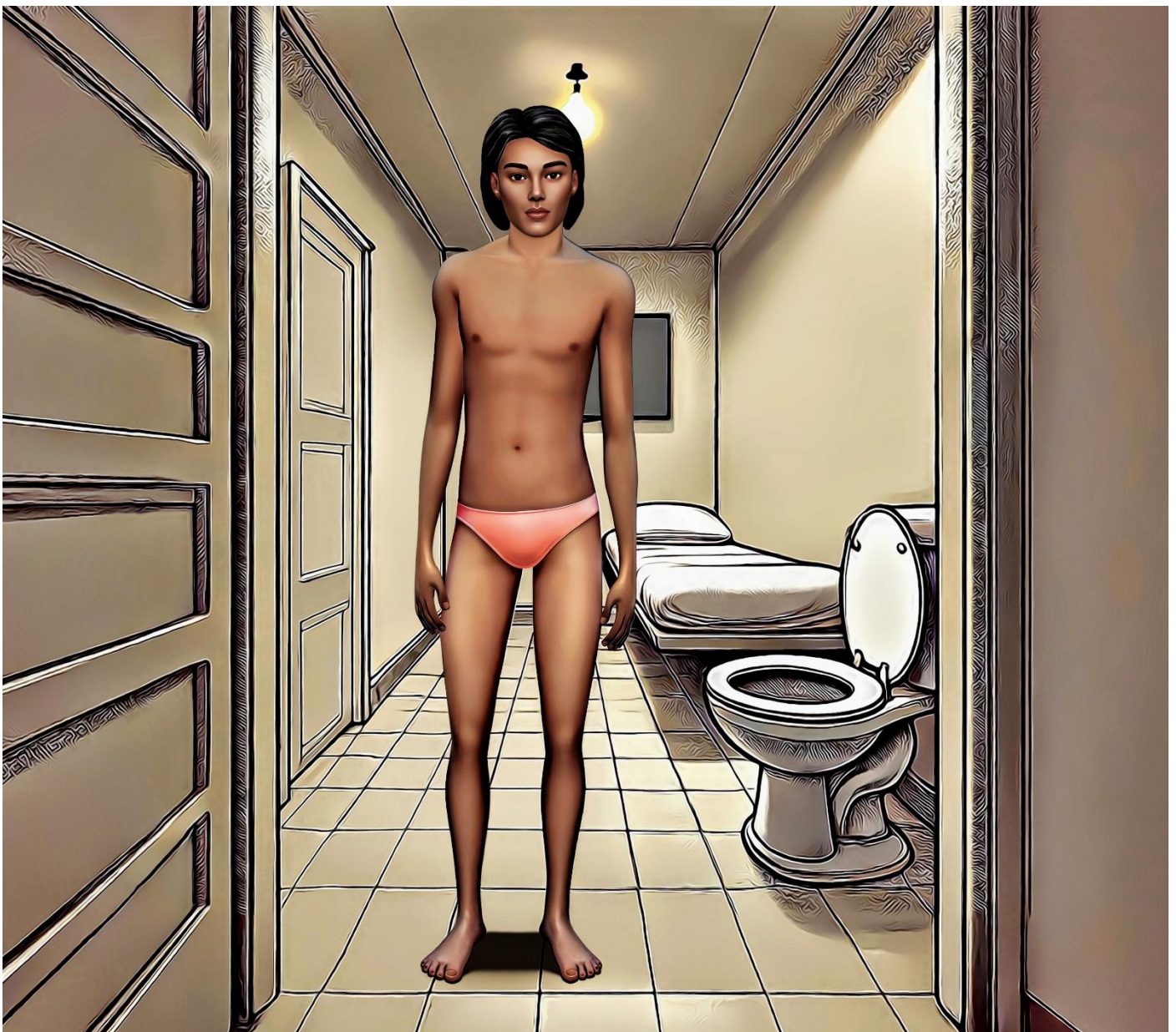
Crane nodded. "NINA has implemented a phased adaptation system," he explained. "Jamal is engaged in daily therapy sessions to support his psychological adjustment. Additionally, NINA will soon equip him with the essential skills he'll need to seamlessly integrate into his new identity."

Satisfied, Wallace turned to Munroe. “Sarah, any further questions or concerns regarding Jamal’s transformation?”

Munroe shook her head, though her thoughtful expression suggested lingering reservations. “Not at this time, Director.”

“Very well,” Wallace replied, giving Crane the nod to continue. “Let’s move on then.”

With a tap of Dr Crane's bony fingers, Javier Roca’s profile filled the screen. Director Wallace glanced around the table before speaking. “It seems there’s a trend emerging here, Victor. All of them are notably slimmer, and the removal of their body hair seems rather... thorough.”



Crane grinned nervously. "NINA is creating a foundation to work from - to allow for more flexibility in the next stages. However, I agree, the decision to remove all body hair is... unusual. I'll look into it."

Agent Munroe pounced on his response, her gaze piercing. "So, you're admitting the system might have flaws, Victor?"

Crane's expression hardened, and he shook his head. "No, Sarah. NINA has been thoroughly tested. All I meant was that I'll review this specific decision to understand her reasoning. It's not indicative of any error, just a detail worth noting."

Munroe arched an eyebrow. "While you're at it, maybe you can also look into why these witnesses seem to be in what looks like prison cells. You were the one who said they wouldn't be treated like prisoners. Were you not?"

"These accommodations are only temporary," Crane replied, tapping his fingers lightly on the table. "This controlled environment is crucial for the initial phase of their transformation, allowing NINA to regulate their surroundings as they adapt."

He turned to Director Wallace, a hint of sarcasm in his tone. "Unless, of course, you'd like to increase our budget, Director. Perhaps then we could set them up in penthouse suites instead?"

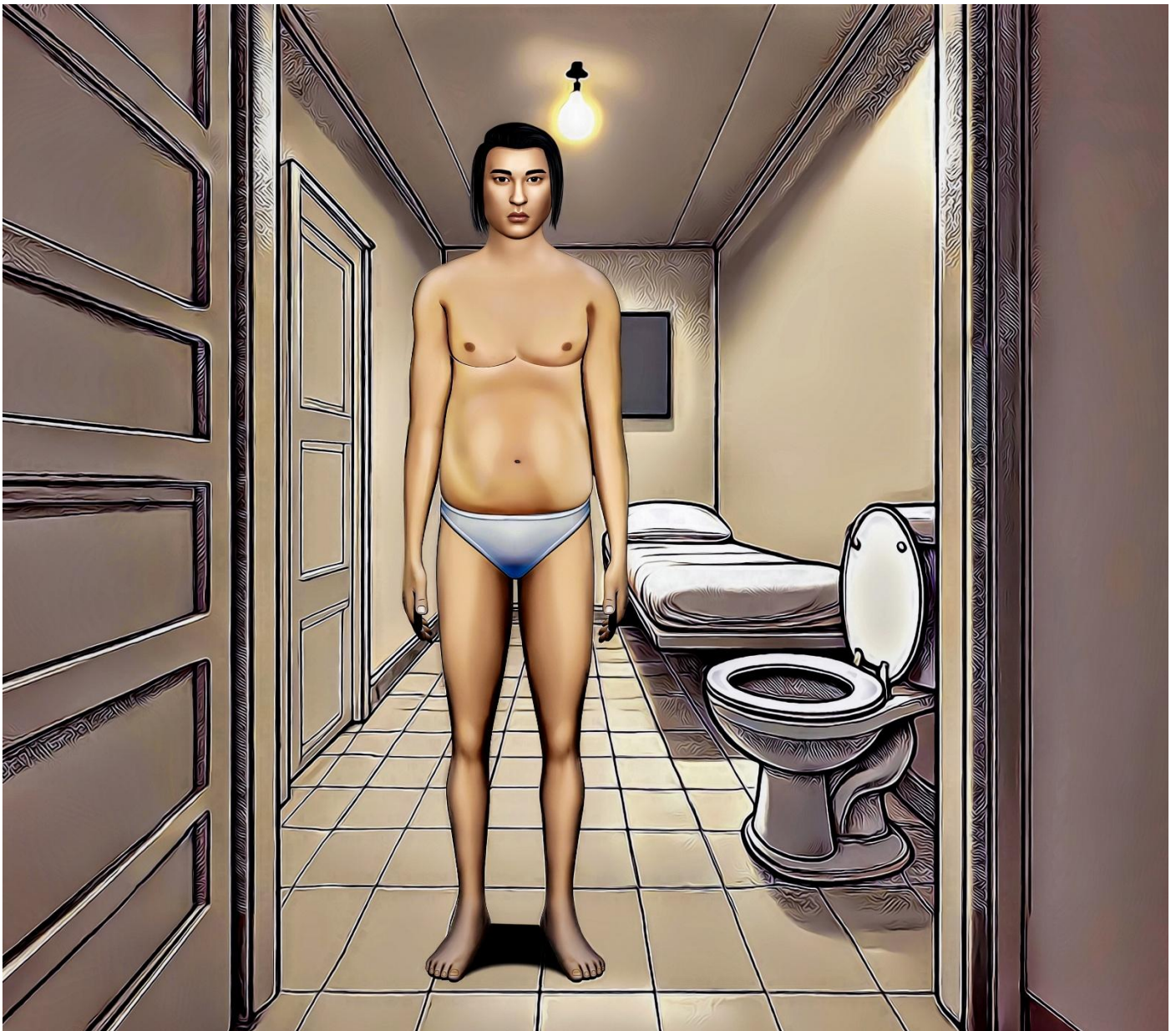
Director Wallace's lips curved into an amused smile as she let out a soft hum. "I wish," she remarked, a touch of dry humour in her tone. "But you know just as well as I do that our budgets are dictated from above. Our priority is keeping these individuals safe, not pampering them."

She glanced again at Javier's image, her poised expression shifting to one of contemplation. "Still, the budget does cover clothing. Why are all the witnesses barely dressed in these photos, Victor?"

"Uh... it's about adaptation," the doctor responded, sounding slightly flustered. "Their clothing and personal belongings were confiscated to aid adjustment. New attire will be provided in the next phase, but I can assure you, their quarters are fully heated. They're not cold."

Evelyn Wallace scanned the table, observing the demeanour of her two fellow agents, and decided to proceed. “If there are no further questions, let’s move on to the final witness.”

As Michael Tanaka's image appeared, standing in his dimly lit cell, the room fell silent once again. He, too, had undergone a remarkable transformation, though, in contrast to the other witnesses, who had been notably slimmed down, Michael's physique had gone in the opposite direction. Once a man who started every morning with a 6 am gym session, he now looked like someone who had never set foot in one. The commanding businessman with a toned body they had previously observed was gone, replaced by an overweight individual, bordering on obesity.



Director Wallace studied Michael's updated profile, her brow furrowed in thought. "Victor, how is Michael coping with these changes?"

Dr Crane adjusted his glasses, his voice steady. "He's responding well. Like the others, he understands that his survival hinges on his willingness to cooperate with the process. They're all committed to making this work."

Director Wallace glanced at Agent Munroe, noting her crossed arms and the frustration etched on her face, before turning her attention back to Crane. "Victor, tell me - what does the next stage look like for the witnesses?"

Dr Crane glanced at his notes. "In the next few days, the witnesses will undergo minor cosmetic enhancements. The recovery time is expected to be three to four weeks."

Director Wallace glanced at Agent Munroe, anticipating a reaction, but got none. "Alright," she said, turning back to Dr Crane. "Would a month from now be a suitable time for our next meeting then?" she inquired.

"That timeline works well," Victor confirmed as Agent Munroe gave a surly nod in agreement.

"Let me know right away if anything out of the ordinary comes up before then," the Director said, her voice both warm and commanding.

"You got it, Director," Victor responded, giving a quick, assured nod.

As the meeting drew to a close, a thick tension lingered, pressing down on everyone in the room. Agent Munroe gathered her belongings and rose from her chair, her thoughts swirling with doubt. She couldn't shake the nagging question: did the ends justify the means? Watching these men undergo such drastic transformations left her with ethical concerns that gnawed at her.

Dr Crane, meanwhile, carefully slid his tablet into its protective case, but even the smooth gesture couldn't settle the flicker of uncertainty he felt. Had he truly put NINA through the thorough testing he'd assured his colleagues of? For the first time, he had his doubts.

Director Wallace left the meeting, a knot of worry tightening in her chest as she recalled the unsettling images of the witnesses. Had she truly made the right choice in approving Project Veil? Given the recent failures, drastic measures were necessary - after all, the lives of the witnesses in her care as well as her job were at stake. But was NINA the best solution?

The three agents exchanged brief glances as they exited the meeting room, each burdened with heavy thoughts. With a soft click, the door closed behind them, leaving the room vacant once more - until they would reconvene, at which point the appearance of the witnesses would be profoundly altered once more in the name of keeping them safe.

Chapter 3: A Few White Lies

Agent Sarah Munroe entered the room in a crisp, no-nonsense grey pantsuit, her shoes - polished each evening before bed, a leftover habit from her days in the Marines - catching the light with each step. "Good afternoon, Director," she greeted warmly, striding confidently across the room to take her seat.

Director Evelyn Wallace looked up from her notes, a warm but measured smile appearing. "Good afternoon, Sarah. How are things?"

"Oh, you know. Busy," Agent Munroe replied with a brief chuckle.

"Busy?" Wallace's smile widened knowingly. "Tell me about it," she said, her tone carrying a rare hint of camaraderie.

Suddenly, the door swung open abruptly as Dr Victor Crane stumbled through, looking flustered and frazzled, his wrinkled shirt and unkempt hair suggesting it had been a long week. "Sorry, I'm late," he mumbled, his gaze flicking between Evelyn and Sarah, noting the unusual lightness in the room.

"You're right on time, Victor," Evelyn said, her tone steady as she turned her attention to the dishevelled man lingering in the doorway.

Victor hurried to his seat, dropping into it with a sigh. He fumbled briefly with his tablet before dabbing his forehead with a napkin he found in his shirt pocket. His nervousness hadn't escaped Sarah's notice.

"You look a bit jittery, Doctor," she remarked, eyeing him with a raised brow. "Is something wrong?"

Victor swallowed hard, quickly glancing over at the director. "No, no. It's... just warm out there today."

"Oh! I hadn't noticed," Sarah replied unconvinced, thinking back to the chill she'd felt on her 5k run that morning.

Director Wallace's gaze swept over the room, her tone shifting to a commanding firmness as she took control of the meeting. "Alright then.

Now that everyone's here, let's begin." She directed her attention to Crane. "Victor, tell us how our witnesses are progressing."

Victor gave a quick nod and swiped at his tablet, pulling up the latest reports as his long, bulbous fingers moved in quick, practised strokes. Looking up, he offered a tentative smile. "Everything is progressing smoothly," he began, as though reassuring himself. "The cosmetic alterations proceeded without incident, and the witnesses are now fully recovered and adjusting. They remain under constant supervision and are being provided with daily therapy sessions to monitor their mental health."

Director Wallace considered his words, her gaze settling on Crane intensely, causing the doctor to fidget slightly. "Good to hear, Victor," she said after a long pause. "Can you show us Larry Stone, please?"

Victor tensed up, his eyes darting nervously around the table. "I'm afraid that won't be possible," he replied, seeing Agent Munroe's head shoot up and her eyes narrow.

Sensing her suspicion, he quickly continued. "Now that new identities are being crafted, it's essential to keep their altered looks hidden. It's all part of the safety protocols we agreed upon."

Sarah leaned forward, folding her arms as suspicion edged her tone. "Isn't it a bit early to start restricting access?"

Victor's fingers curled tightly around his tablet, his response quick. "That's how the system was designed," he insisted, his gaze darting between Wallace and Munroe. Clearing his throat, he added, "Allow me to explain."

He took a steadying breath and launched into a well-rehearsed explanation. "In high-profile cases like these, those searching for our witnesses might employ advanced facial recognition software. This software relies on unique measurements - such as the distance between the eyes, the angle of the jawline, and the proportions of facial features. Using newly developed, state-of-the-art cosmetic techniques, including laser contouring and ultrasonic micro-adjustments, NINA has overseen minute modifications to alter these metrics. These adjustments, performed by the best cosmetic

surgeons in the world, are subtle but are enough to interfere with the consistency of facial recognition algorithms.”

“If these changes are as subtle as you say, Doctor, and only meant to fool facial recognition software, then what harm would there be in us seeing them?” Agent Munroe followed up, squinting as she spoke.

Victor gulped, then forced a thin smile. “You would be correct in that assessment, Agent Munroe. If those were the only changes made. However, NINA has also identified the defining features of each witness and applied targeted changes to further obscure their identities. Again, nothing too drastic - just enough to maximize their chances of starting a new life with the ability to freely walk the streets. And, to keep these changes effective, it’s crucial that as few people as possible see them.”

Agent Munroe turned to Director Wallace, her expression troubled. “I don’t like this, Director,” she said, her voice edged with concern. “Something doesn’t feel right. How are we supposed to protect these individuals if we can’t see what’s happening to them?”

Wallace gave a thoughtful nod, her eyes narrowing in contemplation. “I understand, Sarah. I have my own concerns,” she replied, a trace of worry in her gaze. “But we knew from the start this system would be different.”

She shifted her attention back to Dr Crane. “Victor, could we at least get a description of these cosmetic changes? I think that would go some way to easing our minds.”

Dr Crane’s shoulders seemed to relax, as though he’d been waiting for this question. “Absolutely, Director,” he replied with a small, relieved smile. “And who better to provide those details than NINA herself?” With that, he tapped on his tablet, and the large screen before them brightened, transitioning to display a row of moving visual indicators.

“Good afternoon, NINA,” Dr Crane began, a touch of confidence in his voice. “We require your assistance. Could you provide some answers for us?”

“Certainly, Dr Crane. I am here to assist,” came an emotionless response, the screen’s visuals pulsing in rhythm with the words.

Dr Crane met Director Wallace’s gaze with a steady look. “Ask anything you’d like, Director. Provided it doesn’t compromise witness safety, NINA will answer freely.”

“Very well,” Wallace replied with a crisp nod. She turned toward the screen. “NINA, please describe the cosmetic changes made to Larry Stone and your reasoning behind them.”

The room fell into silence as NINA started to process a response. After a brief pause, a robotic voice echoed through the minimalist space. “Facial alterations were performed to avoid recognition by advanced software. Fatty tissue has been redistributed to adjust body contour. Larry Stone’s distinctive traits included a muscular build and prominent Romanesque nose. To address these, Larry has been following a tailored regimen to reduce muscle mass, and rhinoplasty has altered his nasal structure.”

Agent Munroe leaned forward, seizing her chance. “And what shape is his nasal structure now?”

“Information classified,” NINA replied, her tone impassive.

Munroe’s eyes narrowed, swinging toward Crane, irritation simmering. Crane responded with a nervous smile. “As I mentioned, Sarah, those specifics are restricted for his protection. Each procedure was done by a separate specialist, so only NINA has the complete picture. But I can assure you,” he added, swallowing hard as he glanced down at his tablet, where Larry’s drastically altered image stared back - a transformation he was desperately trying to keep hidden, “each adjustment was meticulously designed to appear both natural and complementary.” He added, acutely aware of the flaws in the system but unable to locate any errors in the code - even the one that had prompted NINA to remove the subject's body hair and eyebrows, remained elusive.



Director Wallace, who had observed the exchange with practised composure, broke the tension between her colleagues with a follow-up question. “NINA, without revealing any compromising details, could you list the facial areas modified and the types of procedures involved?”

NINA fell silent once again as she processed the question, her digital indicators pulsing methodically. After a few moments, her eerie voice rang out, listing each procedure with clinical precision. “Hairline: forehead reduction surgery. Eyes: canthoplasty to alter eye shape. Nose: rhinoplasty to adjust nasal structure. Cheekbones: malar augmentation for contour modification. Jaw: mandibular contouring. Ears: otoplasty to reposition.”

The answer seemed to stun both Agent Munroe and Director Wallace, who exchanged a glance of concern before turning to Dr Crane.

“That’s an extensive amount of work, Victor,” Director Wallace remarked, a note of disbelief in her voice. “You reported earlier that the witnesses had fully recovered. How is that possible, given the scope of these procedures?”

Dr Crane looked down at his tablet once more, wincing at the image of the person formerly recognizable as Larry Stone - a rugged, no-nonsense man’s man. “As I mentioned, Director, these procedures are cutting-edge, far beyond anything available in standard medical settings. They result in minimal to no scarring and dramatically shortened recovery times.”

Director Wallace nodded thoughtfully, but her expression remained cautious. “Alright,” she said, then shifted the conversation. “Can you provide an update on Jamal Lewis?”

“Yes, of course,” Crane replied with a nod, relieved to be moving on. “Jamal has also undergone minor facial adjustments, designed specifically to avoid detection by facial recognition software and fat redistribution to alter body shape.”

Agent Munroe leaned forward, noting a pattern. “So, he’s had the same base modifications as Larry?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Dr Crane replied smoothly, “For their protection, these procedures have been performed on all the witnesses.”

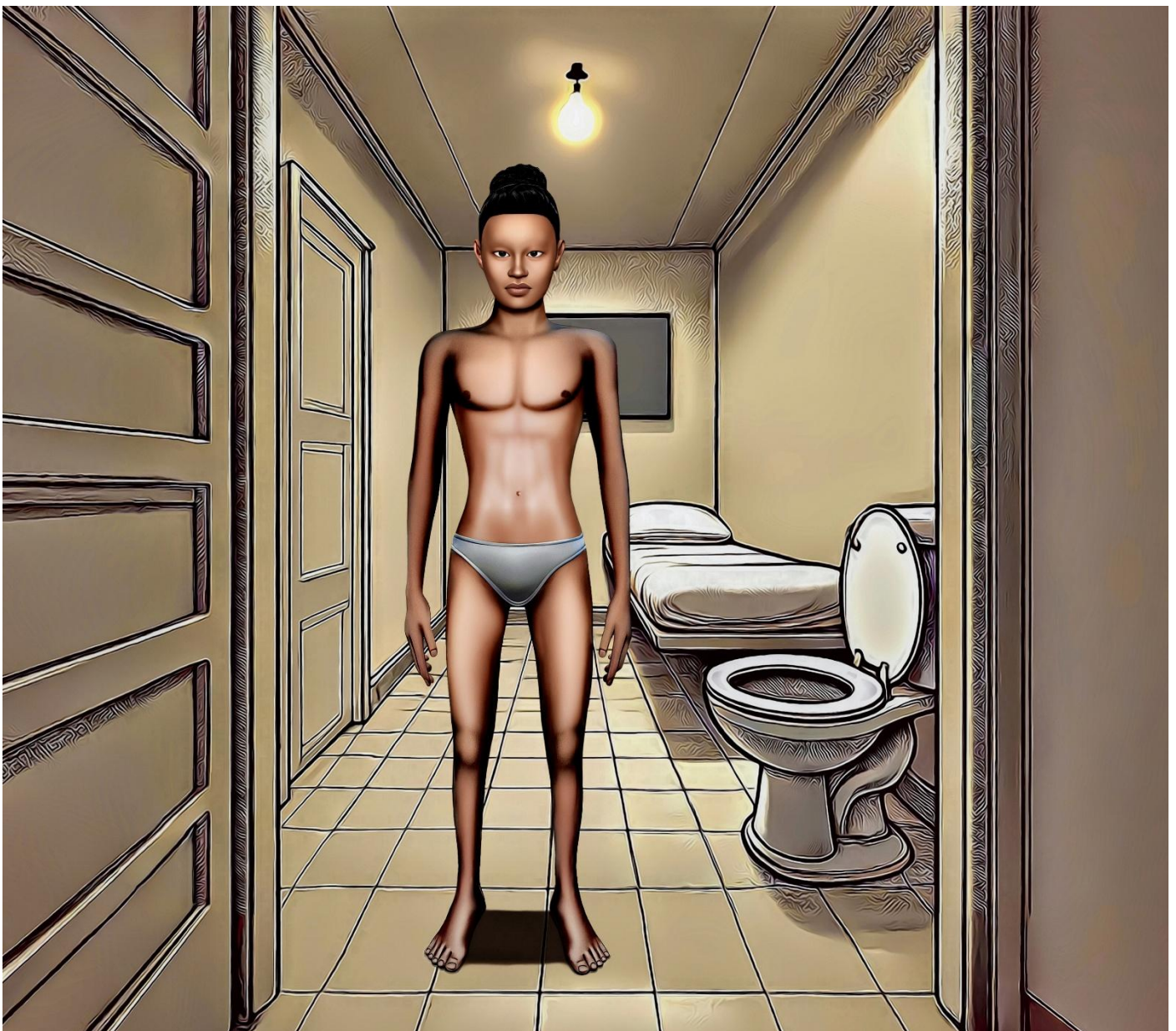
Munroe, her mistrust evident, turned towards the screen on the wall. “NINA,” she said, addressing the AI, “what were Jamal’s key identifiable features, and how were they modified?”

After a brief pause, NINA’s voice resumed, steady and precise. “As a public figure, Jamal Lewis’s most recognizable features were his eyes and height. To reduce the risk of recognition, the shape of his eyes has been modified through a procedure known as epicanthoplasty. Additionally, his height has been reduced through a pioneering technique that uses focused ultrasound to dissolve portions of the vertebrae in the thoracic and lumbar spine, as well as sections of the femur and tibia. Once the target sections were dissolved, the shortened bones were meticulously joined, preserving nerve and motor function.

“What?” Agent Munroe called out, her voice was loud with shock. “Jamal is a high jumper. How much of a height reduction are we talking about here?”

NINA’s response only stoked her anger. “Information classified.”

Dr Crane glanced down at the image of Jamal on his tablet, trying his best to maintain a neutral expression as he took in the astounding results of the pioneering technique NINA had just outlined. Despite himself, he drew a sharp breath at the sight of Jamal’s altered eyes - a single eyelid giving him an entirely different look - and the unmissable fact he’d already known: Jamal’s height had been reduced by nearly two feet, transforming him from an imposing figure to a man of below-average stature.



Attempting to diffuse the tension mounting in the room, he quickly offered a reassuring, if not entirely truthful, answer. “A few centimetres at most,” he said with as much confidence as he could muster. “There are limits to what these procedures can achieve, of course. And given the duration and complexity of this case, which could take years to resolve, you know as well as I do. Jamal’s career as a high jumper effectively ended the day he agreed to testify.”

Director Wallace, typically composed, looked momentarily flustered, her lips pressed tight before she replied. “This is... this could have very serious repercussions, Doctor,” she said, visibly uncomfortable as she met his gaze. “As much as you try to justify this, we’ve effectively ended his career.”

Crane lowered his head, nodding in silent acknowledgement.

After a moment’s thought, the director puffed out her cheeks, exhaling slowly. “We’re not finished with this conversation - far from it. But let’s continue. I want to wrap this up quickly so I can think more on the subject. What do I need to know about Javier and Michael? What did NINA deem to be their most recognizable features, and how were they altered?”

Maintaining as much composure as possible, Dr Crane glanced down at Javier’s image on his screen. “Javier’s eyes and nose have been slightly adjusted, and a gastric clamp has been implanted to assist with weight reduction.”

When no shocked reaction followed, Victor felt a flicker of relief. He hadn’t lied - only withheld the more extreme details. He’d omitted that Javier’s eyes had undergone a revolutionary pigment-changing procedure, transforming them from deep brown to a striking blue. And that the "slight adjustment" to his nose was, in fact, a complete reconstruction, now a narrow bridge with an upturned tip, worlds apart from its original profile.



Director Wallace glanced at Agent Munroe, who was looking down, her head shaking slowly in visible disgust. “Sarah,” she said, prompting Munroe to look up. “Anything you’d like to ask?”

“No,” Munroe replied, her tone restrained. “I think you know my thoughts on this, Director. Like you, I’d prefer to end this meeting quickly. You’ll have a report outlining my concerns later this afternoon.”

“Very well,” Director Wallace said, before turning back to Crane. “And Michael?”

Dr Crane, pulling up the transformed image of the final witness, cleared his throat and managed a strained smile. “In addition to the foundational facial adjustments we discussed earlier, NINA saw fit to make further changes to the subject’s eyes and jaw.” He withheld the full extent of the

transformation - Michael's eyelids had been surgically modified to create a defined crease, and his jawline had been rounded and softened, turning the once-imposing figure into something far less intimidating. But perhaps most striking of all, the changes had almost entirely masked his ethnicity, erasing the man he had once been.



Director Wallace took a deep breath, steadying herself before glaring towards Dr Crane. “And the next phase for the witnesses - what does that entail?”

Victor shifted in his seat, clasping his tablet a little tighter. “An adjustment period. NINA will implement a series of daily skill sessions tailored towards their new identities, helping them prepare for their new lives. The

aim is to ensure that each witness not only adapts physically but is also equipped with the skills and habits they'll need moving forward.”

“Good,” Wallace replied, nodding slowly as if weighing each word. Her gaze sharpened as she continued. “But, Victor, I want no further surgical procedures on any of them until I’ve had time to reflect on what’s been discussed today. I need to determine if moving forward with this project is not only wise but ethical.”

Dr Crane gave a quick nod, though his expression betrayed a flicker of unease. “Understood, Director,” he replied, relieved to have navigated his way through the meeting but already dreading the fallout when the full truth inevitably surfaced.

A tense silence settled over the room as Director Wallace closed her notepad with a soft, final snap, signalling the end of the meeting. Without a word, she rose, and the others followed suit. They filed out one by one, their footsteps echoing down the empty hallway, each agent carrying the weight of the choices they had made and the uncertainty of those still to come. The door clicked shut behind them, leaving the room once again in quiet solitude.

Chapter 4: Larry

Larry Stone was living a nightmare. In the span of a few weeks, his life had gone from drinking beers with his buddies at the bar, yelling at the Sunday football game in his underwear, and trading insults with his recently divorced second wife, to living in solitude in a concrete box, wondering if he was the punchline in some cosmic joke. He'd entered witness protection to avoid ending up at the bottom of the Hudson River in concrete boots - after agreeing to help put some bad people behind bars - yet here he was, locked up like a criminal himself.

Larry's expectations of witness protection had been shaped by the movies, which had painted a vastly different picture. He'd secretly hoped for a badass, bombshell of a handler, who'd hide out with him in some seedy motel, where they'd be stuck together, trading sarcastic remarks with a hint of sexual tension. Instead, he'd been driven in a windowless van, the back door opening automatically to reveal a featureless parking lot. No one had come to meet him; he hadn't even glimpsed the driver, nor had the driver seen him. Instead, an eerie, feminine robotic voice directed him through an underground facility to his new living quarters. From the moment the door clicked shut behind him, he hadn't seen a single living soul.

His cell - for want of a better word - was as bare-bones as they come. A single bed with a stiff mattress, a shining white toilet bolted to the floor, and a wall-mounted screen were the only furnishings. Apart from the door that had locked him inside, there was one other door he couldn't open and a tightly shut hatch next to the entrance.

For the first ten minutes, Larry screamed and shouted, pounding on the walls, demanding answers. But no one answered. Eventually, he slid down to the floor, his voice hoarse, and his fists sore. Was this witness protection? Or had he somehow fallen into the mob's hands after all?

Suddenly, the screen lit up with a sharp ping, jolting Larry from his thoughts. He squinted up at it, seeing a line of squares pulsing rhythmically across its centre.

“Welcome, Luisa,” the robotic voice spoke with clinical precision. Larry’s brow furrowed, his face twisting in confusion. “Luisa?” he muttered in disbelief.

“My name is NINA,” the AI continued. “I am here to guide and prepare you for your new life. Substantial adjustments are required. However, if my instructions are followed precisely, the transition will proceed smoothly with optimal efficiency.”

“I think there’s been a mistake,” Larry yelled back, hoisting himself onto his feet. “My name is Larry, and I’ve changed my mind about all this. If you can just open the door? I’ll be on my way.”

“There has been no mistake,” NINA replied, in her cold, mechanical tone. “For your safety, you will now be referred to as Luisa. And please refrain from shouting, Luisa; microphones have been strategically positioned throughout the facility, allowing me to hear you perfectly.”

“No! This is all wrong,” Larry sputtered, panic-stricken. He shot a frantic look at the door, clenching his fists. “I want out. Let me out!” His voice grew louder, and he began pounding on the door with renewed force.

“Subject Luisa is in danger of injury. Safety precaution 7C initiating,” NINA announced. A faint hissing filled the room as pale blue gas began to seep in, its tendrils spreading in a foggy mist.

Larry’s eyes widened, his panic turning to outright terror as he coughed, his voice growing desperate. “No... please...” He backed into the far corner, trying to hold his breath, but the gas was relentless. His lungs burned, and within moments, his strength began to fade. Staggering, he finally succumbed, collapsing to the floor as the room faded away into darkness.

In the days that followed, Larry’s confinement felt like a slow descent into madness. Each day, the silence pressed in, broken only by NINA’s unwelcome instructions or his "daily check-in," which, in reality, was a therapy session filled with hidden subliminal messages. At first, he refused to respond, looking away from the screen or turning his back in defiance. When trays of bland, low-calorie meals started appearing twice a day in the

hatch - announced by a bright red light - Larry ignored them with equal stubbornness. But by the second day, hunger gnawed at him with a force he couldn't resist, and he gave in, scarfing down the evening meal, unaware that each bite carried carefully dosed supplements, accelerating subtle changes within him.

On the fourth day, the door across from his bed clicked open. Larry initially resisted the urge to investigate. But after half an hour, curiosity won out. Cautiously, he pushed the door open and stepped into a spotless, cube-shaped room lined with gleaming white tiles. Each wall featured a door: the one behind him led back to his cell, while the others appeared firmly locked.

"Enter the room to your left and await further instruction," NINA's voice echoed from a hidden speaker, punctuated by a soft click as a door swung open, revealing a small room with a treadmill in the centre.

Larry's frustration finally boiled over. "Fuck you, you psychotic bitch!" he shouted, thrusting his middle finger in the air. "Go to hell!"

In response, the door to his cell clicked shut behind him. A quiet hiss filled the air as pale blue gas began seeping into the room. Panicking, Larry spun around, his fingers pawed over the door's smooth surface, desperately searching for a handle. His breaths grew shallow, catching as the gas thickened, leaving a metallic taste in his mouth. Sinking to the floor, he slipped once more into unconsciousness.

He awoke in his cell, disoriented and aching. When he tried to push himself up, his hands brushed against his thigh, and he froze, glancing down in horror. He was wearing nothing but a pair of elasticated red underwear. But more concerning was his skin! - now silky smooth and hairless! It was a strange and unusual punishment - one that would make Larry think twice before disobeying again.

In the following weeks, Larry's life settled into a monotonous routine of discomfort and despair. Each day, he spent hours walking on a treadmill in what was essentially a steam-filled sauna. The showers he was permitted afterwards were a small relief, yet every night, he went to bed hungry and

exhausted. His anger flared often as he watched his body betray him - the muscles he had worked so hard to build and maintain fading. The thick arms and solid legs he had once taken pride in gradually softened and weakened until, one day, he looked down and realized he hadn't been this thin since his teenage years. But the changes didn't stop there. His hair, inexplicably, began to grow at an alarming rate, spilling over his forehead and past his ears within just a couple of weeks.

After repeatedly refusing to participate in the therapy sessions, the blue gas returned. When Larry awoke, a throbbing ache pulsed across his forehead. Trembling, he raised a hand and discovered his eyebrows were gone. Each day after, he inspected his face, hoping for any sign of regrowth, but none appeared. Following this, he started engaging with the therapy sessions NINA conducted through the wall-mounted screen. With no other form of interaction, these sessions became his only outlet to vent his frustrations as the AI listened and offered comfort.

The changes weighed heavily on Larry, eroding his spirit until he was drowning in self-pity. Days melded together, each one dragging him deeper into resentment. Then, without warning, the blue gas filled his cell again. When he awoke, a sinking feeling pooled in his stomach, and his entire body felt stiff, as though he hadn't moved in days. Blinking groggily, he reached up to push the hair from his face - and froze. By his rough estimation, it had been growing at about an inch every three days, but now it hung nine or ten inches longer than he remembered.

Confused, he sat up slowly, moving to the edge of the bed, catching a glimpse of an unfamiliar contour on his nose. A cold shiver ran down his thin frame as he forced his weakened legs to carry him to the screen on the wall. There, reflected back at him from the polished surface, was a stranger. Trembling, he sank to his knees, the weight of it all crashing down on him. For the first time in his adult life, he broke down, sobbing and calling out for help, for someone - anyone - to explain what was happening to him.

Time blurred as Larry struggled to reconcile with the stranger he'd become. NINA became his only point of stability, offering guidance through the transformation in their daily therapy sessions. Despite his

bitterness toward her and the changes forced upon him, he found himself clinging to her mechanical reassurances; survival seemed to lie in compliance. As a small, insistent voice in the back of his mind - growing stronger by the day - kept telling him that if he cooperated, he'd be safe.

NINA rewarded his compliance in small but meaningful ways. One morning, he received a set of hairbands to keep his growing hair out of his face; on another, a thin novel appeared, offering a brief distraction from his spiralling dark thoughts.

One afternoon, feeling unusually alert, Larry sat on his bed, absorbed in a magazine article about challenges women face in the modern workplace. When suddenly, the red light above the hatch flicked on, and moments later, the wall screen lit up. "Good afternoon, Luisa," NINA's monotone voice began. "Congratulations. You have completed phase one of your training. As a result, you are being relocated. Please dress in the items provided and await further instruction."

Relief surged through Larry's veins. Whatever lay ahead had to be better than this cell. He leapt up, crossed the room, and opened the hatch. Inside he found an outfit far from his liking - both in colour and style. He examined each item with growing disgust: loose, garish green pants, a cropped purple shirt that would leave his belly and arms exposed, and, worst of all, slip-on leather pumps with a short, blocky heel - unmistakably women's shoes.

For nearly two hours, Larry called out to NINA, demanding an explanation, but the AI remained silent. Finally, as the room grew colder, making him shiver, Larry reached the end of his endurance. Cold, hungry, and desperate, he reluctantly pulled on the outfit. Almost instantly, he heard the door opposite his bed unlock.

Clicking awkwardly in the unfamiliar shoes, Larry stumbled into the cubical room, the small heels making each step clumsy. He glanced around the gleaming space, noticing the door in directly front of him was slightly ajar. Cautiously, he wobbled forward, steadying himself as he pushed it open.

Entering, his eyes darted around, and his stomach dropped. This wasn't any better; it was just another cell, now layered with a disturbing level of femininity. The walls were a soft pink, and a rosy glow from the ceiling bathed the room. Familiar reminders of his old cell remained - a screen on the wall, a toilet in the corner, and a hatch by the entrance. The new additions - a locked wardrobe and a pink-tiled shower that wouldn't turn on - only deepened his frustration. After circling the room, he returned to the door he'd entered through, only to find it locked. Crossing his arms, reality sank in.



Phase two brought changes to Larry's routine. The therapy sessions grew longer, now stretching to two hours and scheduled just before bedtime. Every morning at 6 a.m. sharp, the wardrobe door clicked open, signalling it was time to deposit his pyjamas. Once he did, the shower automatically

turned on, providing exactly ten minutes of hot water - just enough for him to scrub down and wash his hair with the special shampoo he'd been using since arriving at the facility.

After his shower, the wardrobe opened again, revealing his outfit for the day. Each time, he found variations of the same ensemble: a pastel-coloured top, green pants, and block-heeled pumps. Subtle adjustments were made over time - the tops becoming smaller, the pants more form-fitting, and the heels on his pumps higher - all so gradually that Larry never noticed.

Once dressed, breakfast would appear in the hatch - a meal higher in fat, intended to help him gain weight in areas where his fat cells had been redistributed during his surgery. After quickly devouring it, he returned the empty tray to the hatch, prompting NINA to congratulate him and ask, "Are you ready to go to work, Luisa?"

When he muttered a reluctant "yes," the door to his room unlocked, granting him access to the cubic room where a new room was now open to him - the training room.

The training room was minimalist, designed purely for functionality. On the far side, a long desk stretched from wall to wall, with a swivel chair bolted to the floor in the centre. Beneath the desk, drawers flanked the leg space, securely locked and controlled by NINA. Above, surrounded by a border of lights, sat three screens capable of switching from a mirrored surface to a video display.

On his first day, Larry entered hesitantly, wary of what awaited him. At NINA's prompting, he took his seat and a video of a woman's hand receiving a manicure began to play. When the video ended, the top left drawer popped open. Inside was a nail file, a bottle of pink nail polish, and an LED lamp. Larry stared blankly at the contents of the drawer as NINA started a new video and instructed him to follow the steps to apply the polish to his fingers and toes. He initially resisted, but after NINA repeated her instructions, he considered the consequences of refusal and reluctantly complied.

For a week, aside from two hours of therapy and two hours on the treadmill, Larry's life revolved around applying, removing, and reapplying nail polish, with short breaks for meals and bathroom use. Although the routine was tedious, the repetition transformed his once-sloppy strokes into precise, practised techniques. Soon, he could apply an even coat to both hands in under two minutes, perfectly covering each nail without a smudge on his skin.

Until one day, shortly after lunch, Larry returned to his workstation and detected a terrifying scent that sent him into a panic. Pale blue gas was slowly seeping into the room through the wall speakers. NINA's voice instructed him to remain calm and seated. He briefly considered rebelling, but with a resigned sigh, he slumped back into the chair, knowing resistance was futile.

When Larry awoke, he was still seated in the training room, wearing the same tight green pants and cropped top from that morning. His fingernails remained coated in the maroon polish he'd applied earlier, and the sight of his feet inside purple pumps decorated with bows continued to unsettle him. However, as he blinked, he noticed something had changed. His eyelids felt unusually heavy, weighed down by an unfamiliar sensation. Blinking again, he felt his eyelashes brush and tickle his cheeks. Cautiously, he brought a hand up and touched the lashes, his mouth slowly opening as he noted how thick and oddly stiff they felt.

“What the hell...” he muttered, running a finger over the full, wispy lash extensions on his eyelids. Blinking rapidly in confusion, he suddenly felt a dull ache just above his eyes. Leaning closer to screens, a gasp escaped his lips as he saw his altered reflection. His eyes looked pretty... almost doll-like, framed by thick, curled lashes. He took another sharp intake of air as he scanned upward – seeing that he once again had eyebrows. However, they were a far cry from his old bushy brows. Now perfectly shaped, high, and meticulously arched, these new ones made him wince.

“NINA! What is this?” he shouted angrily. “What have you done to me?”

“A necessary change,” NINA replied in her unshakably calm tone. The response was infuriating, and Larry shot up from the chair, wobbling on

his heels as he started to pace the small room. “Necessary? Nothing about this is necessary!” he yelled, throwing his arms up. “I’ve had enough of this. I’m not a woman! Stop treating me like a woman! I want to speak to a real person. Get me one now. I have rights!”

"Calm yourself, Luisa. Non-compliance will trigger safety protocol 7C," NINA responded in her mechanical tone.

The words hit Larry like a bucket of ice water, halting him mid-step. He knew what 7C meant: the gas. Hands raised in quick surrender; he forced a shaky smile. “Whoa! No need for that, NINA. I’m calm. Promise.”



Larry stood rigid, his heart pounding, and his teeth clenched, silently pleading for mercy. The room was thick with tense silence, every second stretching unbearably. Finally, the AI's voice cut through the tension to de-

escalate the situation. “Very good, Luisa. Please return to your workstation and await further instruction.”

A wave of relief washed over Larry as he exhaled a deep, shaky breath. He turned cautiously, his bulky lashes clouding his vision with every flutter. With a mix of dread and resignation, he tottered his way across the room, the sharp clicks of his pumps echoing ominously. As he approached his workstation, he couldn't help but wonder what he had done to deserve such cruel, inescapable torment.

Chapter 5: Jamal

In just a few weeks, Jamal Lewis' world had flipped upside down. He'd gone from VIP access at nightclubs, chilling in designer tracksuits, and hearing crowds of adoring fans chant his name, to being alone in a concrete box. Witness protection wasn't supposed to be like this. Sure, it beat being six feet under, but this? This was something else entirely.

He'd expected something different, something befitting of his status. Maybe a secure but high-end facility with all the modern comforts, where he could maintain his lifestyle even while laying low. Instead, he'd been shoved into a van like cargo, blindfolded, and driven who knows where. The eerie voice of an AI directing him to his "living quarters" was the first hint that his expectations had been way off. He tried to tell himself it was all part of the process, but as the door clicked shut behind him and locked, doubt crept in.

The cell he found himself in was painfully simple. A stiff bed, a toilet, and a blank screen on the wall. Jamal looked around, his jaw tightening. "Man, what is this? You're kidding, right?" He threw his arms in the air, his frustration bubbling over. "Yo! This has gotta be some kinda mistake, right?" His voice echoed off the empty walls, emphasizing how alone he was.

Restless, Jamal began pacing, his long strides quickly eating up the limited space. "This can't be it," he muttered to himself. "I didn't sign up for this." He kicked the base of the bed in frustration, wincing when the metal frame didn't budge.

Suddenly, the screen flickered to life, breaking the heavy silence. A rhythmic line of squares pulsed on the display, and a robotic voice spoke with unsettling clarity. "Welcome, Jaclyn."

Jamal's head jerked up, his expression twisting into disbelief. "Jaclyn? Who the hell is Jaclyn?" he questioned.

"My name is NINA," the voice continued with clinical precision. "I am here to guide and prepare you for your new life. Significant adjustments

will be necessary. However, if my instructions are followed precisely, the transition will proceed smoothly and efficiently.”

“Nah, nah, nah,” Jamal shot back, his voice rising. “You got the wrong person here. My name’s Jamal, and I want outta here. Open the door. We’re done here.”

“There has been no mistake,” NINA replied, unfazed by his rising anger. “For your safety, you will now be referred to as Jaclyn. Please refrain from shouting, Jaclyn. I can hear you clearly through the microphones positioned throughout the facility.”

Jamal’s mouth fell open. “Jaclyn? Man, get the—” He stormed toward the door. “Yo! You think this is funny? Let me out!” His voice grew louder as he pounded his fists against the heavy door.

“Subject Jaclyn is exhibiting signs of distress. Safety precaution 7C initiating,” NINA announced, her voice calm and detached.

A faint hissing sound caught Jamal’s attention, and he froze, his eyes darting around the room. Pale blue gas was seeping into the small space, curling around his legs. “Oh, hell no!” He backed up against the wall, trying to hold his breath but his knees buckled, and the world around him blurred. The last thing he heard before succumbing was his own voice, hoarse and pleading, “Don’t... do... this...”

Just like Larry, Jamal quickly learned that his new reality left little room for negotiation. The isolation was stifling, and though he reluctantly followed NINA’s instructions, he couldn’t hide his frustration. When the red light above the hatch signalled the arrival of his bland, carefully portioned meals, he scarfed them down but not without protest. “This what y’all call food? Where’s the rest of it?”

On the fourth day, the door across from his bed clicked open. Jamal’s curiosity immediately piqued. “Finally, something new,” he muttered, rising to his feet. He pushed open the door and stepped into a gleaming, white, cube-shaped room. “Enter the door to your left and step onto the treadmill,” NINA’s voice commanded.

The name grated on his nerves. “Jaclyn? Quit trippin,’ I ain’t nobody’s Jaclyn! Man, I’m so done with this shit,” he called out in frustration. Deciding he’d had enough, he turned back toward his cell door only to find it locked. “Yo! Open up! I’m not playin’ this game. I ain’t movin’ until someone tells me what’s going on!” he yelled.

Almost instantly, a faint hissing sound began. Jamal whipped around, his eyes widening as he once again saw the pale blue gas entering. Panic coursed through him. “Oh, come on, man! For real? Not again” He cried out as he waved his arms wildly, trying to stave off the fog, but it was useless.

“Defiance will not be tolerated,” NINA stated, her voice as calm as ever as Jamal stumbled back, coughing and clawing at the locked door. “NINA! I didn’t even—” His words faltered as the gas overtook him, dragging him into unconsciousness.

When he awoke, the discomfort was immediate. His skin felt different, unnaturally smooth, like it didn’t belong to him. As his hand reflexively shot up to his face, his fingers brushed over bare skin where his eyebrows once were. His stomach twisted. Stumbling to the screen on the wall, he stared at his reflection, horror spreading across his features. His body was completely hairless, his face eerily smooth and featureless.

In the days that followed, Jamal’s life was an endless loop of frustration. NINA’s voice haunted every moment, and the nightly therapy sessions became the thing he dreaded most. From the start, he met each session with folded arms and a glare, his defiance unshaken.

“Good evening, Jaclyn,” NINA began, the rhythmic pulse of squares on the monitor as steady as her tone. “Tonight, we will address your resistance to change.”

Jamal tilted his head, his expression dripping with disdain. “Yo, first off, stop calling me that. My name is Jamal, alright? Second, what I’m resistant to is this bullshit setup. You feel me?”

“Resistance impedes progress, Jaclyn,” NINA replied, her tone neutral. “Adapting to change is critical to your survival.”

Jamal rolled his eyes. “Oh, I get it now. Y’all trying to break me. Strip me down, build me back up like I’m some kinda project.” He pointed at the screen. “But I’m not some lab rat for you to experiment on, NINA. You can forget that.”

“Adaptation ensures safety,” NINA responded smoothly. “Clinging to the past only compromises your future.”

Jamal laughed, the sound bitter. “Oh, so now you care about my future? Funny way of showing it when you’ve got me lookin like some freaky wax model? Future, my ass.”

By the third session, his bravado had started to waver, exhaustion creeping into his voice. “What now, NINA?” he grumbled as he faced the screen. His usual swagger seemed dimmed, his resistance worn down by the endless monotony.

“Tonight, we will focus on mindfulness,” NINA instructed. “Close your eyes and take a deep breath.”

“Mindfulness? You think breathing exercises gonna fix all this?” He shot back while shaking his head. “Fine. Whatever. Let’s get this over with.”

He followed her instructions, albeit grudgingly, muttering under his breath. “Breathe in, breathe out... yeah, cos now I feel much betta.”

By the fifth session, something in him shifted. He still resisted, but his complaints were quieter, his compliance grudging but steady. When NINA asked him to name three things he missed most, he hesitated before answering.

“My crew... the spotlight... being able to do my thing on the track,” he said, his voice lower than usual, the vulnerability catching him off guard.

“Your feelings are valid,” NINA replied. “However, these things now represent a danger to your life. You need to forget about them. In time you will find new things you enjoy.”

Jamal didn’t respond immediately, his jaw tightening. When he finally spoke, it was softer, almost resigned. “Yeah, whatever you say, robot lady.”

By the end of the second week, Jamal's sharp defiance was almost non-existent. He still resented being called Jaclyn, but he no longer snapped at NINA the way he had before. The sessions became a strange kind of outlet, the only chance he had to talk - if not to a person, then at least to something that responded.

* * * * *

Jamal stirred awake, groggy and disoriented. His body felt stiff and weak, like he'd spent too long lying in the same position. With a groan, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed - only to freeze. His feet didn't touch the ground. They hung there, suspended in midair. For a moment, he stared at his legs, confusion clawing at his thoughts.

He leaned forward, stretching his feet further, but the floor still evaded his toes. "What the...?" he muttered, blinking groggily. Slowly, he slid off the bed, expecting his feet to meet the ground sooner than they did. The slight drop jolted his body, and he staggered, catching himself against the edge of the mattress.

Standing upright felt... wrong! Everything about it was off. He glanced around the room, his pulse quickening. Everything was larger than he remembered, like he'd been dropped into someone else's oversized world. The screen on the far wall even looked higher than it used to be. His first thought was that someone had moved it - maybe as some kind of trick.

"Yo, NINA," he called out, his voice shaky. "What's with the screen? You tryna mess with me now? Huh?" He took a tentative step forward, his shorter legs forcing him to adjust his stride. Each movement felt unfamiliar, his body struggling to find balance.

Reaching the screen took longer than it should have. His breath came in short gasps as his rigid legs protested every step. When he finally got

close, he almost choked on his own breath, staring up at his reflection. His body stiffened as his heart sank.

“No... no, no, no,” he whispered, stumbling backward until his legs gave out, sending him crashing to the floor. His breaths came sharp and fast, his heart pounding like it was trying to escape his chest. He couldn’t see the screen anymore, but the image stayed with him, vivid and haunting.

That wasn’t his face. It was softer, rounder, and his eyes - his eyes were still his, but the lids above them were unrecognizable. The natural crease he’d seen every day in the mirror was gone, replaced by a single, smooth flap of skin that gave his gaze an unfamiliar, almost alien appearance.

He squeezed his eyes shut, as if doing so could erase the impossible image from his mind. But it was burned into his memory. Trembling, he raised a shaky hand to his face, touching his cheeks, his jaw, and then his brow. It all felt wrong. A lump formed in his throat, and his breaths turned ragged as panic took over.

“This ain’t happening. It’s not real!” he shouted, his voice cracking as he punched the floor beside him. “NINA! What da fuck you done?” His words echoed around the room, his anger met only by silence.

“This can’t be real,” he cried out. “This ain’t possible.”

* * * * *

For days, Jamal refused to accept what had been done to him. His body felt foreign, every movement an unwelcome reminder of how much he’d lost - his stature, his career, his sense of self! Walking was a constant battle; his shortened legs wobbled beneath him as though learning to balance for the first time, and the sight of his reflection on the screen made him feel like he was losing his mind.

Then, one morning, NINA's voice interrupted his simmering despair. "Jaclyn, congratulations. Phase one of your transition is complete. Please prepare for relocation."

Relocation. The word hung in the air. Jamal sat motionless for a moment, processing it. Finally, he scoffed. "Relocation? You mean you're throwing me in some other hellhole?"

The red light above the hatch flashed on, ready to reveal his next humiliation: a snug red knit sweater, pleather pants with a flared leg, and chunky red platform boots. Jamal's lip curled in disgust as he looked inside. "This is a joke, right?" he muttered, tugging at the fabric of the sweater. "This ain't my style."

Reluctantly, he dressed, the unfamiliar clothes sitting strangely on his altered frame. The boots added height but only deepened the insult. Each step felt clunky, the platform soles forcing an awkward gait as he shuffled toward the now-open door.

Passing through the cubic room, he plodded through the now open centre door to appear in his new room, causing his stomach to drop. The pink walls glowed sickeningly, bathing everything in their rosy hue. A matching, pink-tiled shower stood in the corner, its pristine tiles gleaming under soft light. At least the bed looked marginally more comfortable.

"Kill me now," Jamal said, turning as the door clicked shut behind him.



Jamal's new routine began at 6 a.m. the next day. NINA's voice roused him from a restless sleep, her tone brisk and impersonal. "Jaclyn, today we begin your adaptive physical therapy. Please once showered and dressed, please proceed to the exercise room."

He grumbled curses under his breath, and after getting himself ready dragged himself into the cubic room where the door to the exercise room lay open. Inside, the treadmill from previous workout sessions remained, but now a set of balance bars and exercise mats had been added.

"This program is designed to help you acclimate to your adjusted frame and proportions. The sessions will target strength and balance."

The first few sessions were tough. Squats left his legs trembling, lunges made him topple over more than once, and the treadmill - something he

used to run on every morning - was now exhausting given his shortened strides.

His meals changed too, now designed to complete his physical reshaping. Plates of rich, high-fat dishes were served, and he wolfed them down, unaware they were targeting the fat cells redistributed to his hips and thighs during his surgery.

After lunch, he was instructed to enter the practice room, where the drawers would pop open to reveal eerie mannequin heads. Their synthetic skin looked plasticky but felt disturbingly lifelike to the touch. His task, which took him a while to decipher, was to become an expert in microblading and eyelash extensions - following instructional videos and using the heads for practice.

The fine motor skills required pushed Jamal to his limits. His hands, once steady and strong, now fumbled with the delicate tools. The first lashes he applied sat crooked, the microbladed strokes uneven. Each mistake drew NINA's clinical critique, her voice calm and measured as she instructed him to 'try again.'

"I'm not built for this!" he would growl, shoving the tweezers down or knocking over one of the heads in a fit of rage. But resistance only delayed the inevitable. As the days wore on, he found himself slipping into autopilot. His mind dulled, retreating as his hands repeated the motions with increasing efficiency. The mannequin heads blurred together, each one starting plain as it came out of a drawer to his left, only to be placed in a drawer to his right adorned with perfect arches and meticulously placed lash extensions.

One day, after hours of tirelessly working in the practice room, Jamal sat hunched over yet another mannequin head, numb and detached from his surroundings. His cropped red sweater clung to his frame, while his pleather trousers fit so snugly they felt like a second skin. Each day, his wardrobe seemed to bring him a fresh variation, each item shrinking just a little more, but what could he do about it?

He moved mechanically, glueing lashes into place with the precision born of repetition when the familiar but terrifying hiss of gas began to fill the room.

He shot to his feet. His boots - the once simple flatforms, having slowly evolved into thick platform heels - clicked sharply against the floor as he stumbled about, bellowing, "What now? I've done everything you asked!" He spun in circles, fists clenched, searching for someone - something - to direct his fury at. But the gas took hold quickly, and his shouts melted into groggy murmurs as his body slumped to the ground.

Jamal awoke back in the chair, disoriented and groggy. His head felt heavy, and his body sluggish as he struggled to make sense of his surroundings. Blinking hard, he forced himself upright and staggered toward the exit, finding it locked.

"Open up! NINA! he hollered, pushing at it uselessly. "Open this damn door!"

NINA's voice, calm and composed as always, echoed through the room. "Jaclyn, please return to your seat and continue your work."

Ignoring her, Jamal pressed his forehead against the door, trying to steady his thoughts. That's when he noticed something was off - his face felt stiff and prickly. His hands flew up, and his fingers met an unnervingly taught texture, his skin tight and unyielding. His breath hitched.

"NINA," he asked, his voice trembling, "what have you done?"

"To further align with his new identity, Jaclyn," NINA began in that maddeningly matter-of-fact tone, "filler has been injected into your face and lips to achieve a plumper, more desirable appearance. Additionally, semi-permanent makeup has been applied to enhance your features."



Jamal froze, his mind racing. “Show me,” he demanded. “Turn on the mirror. I need to see.”

“As you wish,” NINA replied.

The screen on the far wall flickered to life, transitioning to a reflective surface. Jamal moved toward it in hurried, uneven steps, the sharp clack of his boots echoing throughout the room. Reaching the screen, he stopped short, staring at the image staring back at him.

“No fuckin way,” he exclaimed, his voice filled with disbelief and horror. His once angular and athletic face - already altered beyond recognition - was now even rounder and plumper. Dramatic black winged eyeliner extended from the corners of his eyes, giving them an exaggerated, almost

feline appearance. His lips, swollen and painted a dark red, pouted back at him. It was a face that didn't belong to him, yet somehow, it was.

Jamal stared at his reflection, his chest tightening as panic overwhelmed him. His trembling fingers grazed the swollen curve of his lips. "No," he muttered, his voice barely audible. "No, no, no. This isn't me. This can't be me."

He staggered back from the screen, shaking his head violently. A bitter chuckle escaped him. "You're tryna to change me into a woman?" he murmured, finally admitting out loud what he had known for some time. He slumped into the chair, feeling utterly alone, and for the first time in his life, he didn't know how to fight back.

Chapter 6: Javier

Having been trained by the DEA to adapt to any situation, Javier Roca approached his confinement with calculated composure. When the door clicked shut behind him, he didn't scream or demand answers. Instead, he stood still, scanning the room with sharp eyes, cataloguing every detail for future use. The sterile walls, the bolted-down furniture, the sealed hatch by the entrance - nothing escaped his scrutiny.

When NINA's detached, robotic voice greeted him and began referring to him as Daisy, Javier's expression remained impassive. He neither challenged the name nor acknowledged the AI. Unable to determine whether he was truly in witness protection or if he'd fallen into the hands of the cartel, he moved to the bed, closed his eyes, and began to meditate, conserving his strength for whatever might come next.

For the next few days, the standoff continued. Javier refused the bland meals delivered through the hatch, taking only sips of water to stay hydrated. He ignored NINA's persistent attempts to engage him in therapy sessions, his silence an act of defiance. But a crack appeared in his resistance when, one morning, he awoke groggy and disoriented, his body feeling strangely bare.

Running his hand down his thigh, Javier shot upright, his heart pounding. His skin was smooth - unnervingly so. A quick inspection confirmed his fears: his dark covering of body hair had vanished overnight. However, even more disturbing was the absence of his eyebrows. The patchy memory of waking briefly, choking on blue gas before slipping back into unconsciousness, sent a shiver down his spine. Yet, it was nothing compared to the icy chill creeping over him now.

Glancing down, he saw that his only clothing was a pair of tight pink underpants, an indignity he met with clenched fists and gritted teeth. Having engineered a moment of vulnerability, NINA turned the screw - lowering the air temperature in the tiny cell. For an hour, Javier held firm, his jaw locked in defiance, even as the icy chill seeped into his bones,

numbing his fingers and toes and turning his hairless skin a pale shade of blue. But as the cold gnawed deeper, he relented.

“Fine, I’ll talk!” he shouted, his teeth chattering violently. “Just turn up the damn heat! Will ya?”

NINA’s calm reply came instantly. “Please approach the screen to begin your therapy session, Daisy.” Shivering and defeated, Javier staggered to his feet, the frostiness of the room still clinging to his breath. The first crack in his resolve had formed.

From that moment on, Javier began to resist less and less. He reasoned it was wiser to play along and bide his time than freeze to death. He ate the meals provided, told NINA what he assumed she wanted to hear, and grudgingly participated in the assigned exercise routines. For weeks, this became his life, the monotony driving him nearly insane as he obsessed over where he was and who could possibly be behind all of this.

Then, one morning, he awoke once more with an overwhelming sense that something was wrong - only this time, it was far worse. His body felt stiff and unresponsive, his muscles tight, as though he’d been asleep for weeks. But it was the feeling of his dry and itchy eyes that captured his attention first. Carefully rising from his bed, he stumbled over to the screen, blinking as his sore eyes took a moment to focus. When his reflection finally sharpened, his heart skipped a beat, and his mouth fell open in silent horror.

The face staring back at him wasn’t his. Small, subtle changes - an adjusted chin, and slightly lifted cheekbones - had softened his features. But two glaring alterations made his breath catch. His nose was smaller and more delicate, erasing the Javier he was used to seeing and creating a new one that felt unnervingly foreign. However, the most startling of the changes were his eyes. Once a deep brown, the same shade he’d inherited from his father, his eyes were now a piercing, bright blue. Initially, he thought they might be contact lenses, but as he reached up to remove them, a sharp sting of pressure confirmed the horrifying truth - they were his eyes!

Stunned by what had been done to him, Javier sank to the floor, his mind racing in a whirlwind of disbelief and desperation. He fought to recall his training, clinging to every strategy he'd learned for enduring psychological torture. Forcing slow, measured breaths, he tried to steady himself, struggling to maintain composure. But when his gaze fell to his smooth, slender legs emerging from a pair of tight pink panties, the sight felt like a cruel mockery - a taunt that pushed his resolve dangerously close to breaking.

After enduring a slow and relentless transformation - through a meticulously designed diet and exercise routine, special shampoo, and cutting-edge surgical techniques - Javier had little energy left to protest when presented with a new set of clothes. A pair of white jeans that ended mid-ankle, a soft pink turtleneck sweater, and undeniably feminine pink shoes with a small heel were a far cry from his normal choice of attire. Yet, compared to his slimmer frame, the unnaturally rapid growth of his hair, and his altered face and eyes that almost completely erased any signs of his Latino heritage, the clothes felt almost inconsequential.

The shoes, however, threw off his balance, making each step awkward and unsteady as he followed NINA's instructions to leave the room. He plodded out of his cell for the last time, passing through a cubic room of doors and into a new pink prison. Just as when he first entered the facility, the remotely controlled door swung shut behind him with a heavy finality. The sharp sound startled the effeminate-looking man, making him flinch as he glanced back over his shoulder, unease flickering in his eyes.



It didn't take Javier long to survey his new room, quickly confirming what he had already suspected: escape was impossible. The only exit was the door he had entered through, now locked.

After 24 hours to acclimate to his sickeningly pink surroundings, he was introduced to 'the training room.' Like every other room in the facility, it was sparsely furnished, secure, and designed purely for function. It was here that Javier's mental resilience was tested to its limit. Questions swirled in his mind: Why was this happening? To what end? These thoughts looped endlessly as NINA introduced him to an array of cosmetics and application tools. When instructed to follow video tutorials to apply liquids and powders to his surgically altered face, he begrudgingly complied, suppressing his disgust while silently waiting for an opportunity to escape.

After days of repetitive practice, Javier's makeup skills evolved from clumsy to passable. That was when a new task was introduced: a mannequin head with disturbingly lifelike synthetic skin emerged from a drawer, accompanied by a tray of needles. His initial reaction was wariness, but curiosity soon took over as he followed the tutorial on the screen. Carefully injecting the clear solution into the mannequin's eerily realistic skin, he watched with reluctant fascination as the "Botox" smoothed and plumped the surface before his eyes.

Ten days in, Javier had become a master of his tasks. He could apply makeup - traditional or semi-permanent - with flawless precision, and his hands moved deftly with needles, injecting filler and Botox like a seasoned professional. Dressed in his usual white pants, pink top, and pink heels, he worked with mechanical precision, following the tutorial on the screen as he methodically painted his face.

As he carefully lined his eyes with dark eyeliner, his thoughts wandered to the subtle changes in his wardrobe. Each night, he placed his outfit into the wardrobe, and by morning, it reappeared, slightly altered. The differences were so small - the clothing just a touch tighter, the heels a fraction taller - that anyone else might not have noticed. But Javier did. He always did. It gnawed at him - the slow creep of change designed to slip past his defences.

The thought nagged at him as he brushed mascara onto his lashes, giving them extra volume and length. He moved on to his lips, outlining them with care before filling them with a bright red hue. As he worked, a troubling question began to surface, one he couldn't ignore. Surely, they knew his background - his training, his attention to detail. Did they truly believe these gradual changes would slip past him unnoticed, as they might with the average Joe? Or had they already decided it didn't matter whether he saw through their carefully orchestrated plan?

As the tutorial video ended, Javier set a bottle of setting spray down on the counter before glaring at his sissified reflection with a look of disdain. "Exercise complete," NINA announced in her cold, mechanical tone, loud enough to make Javier flinch. "Please stay seated, Daisy, and refrain from panicking."

Before he could respond, pale blue gas began seeping into the room. Ignoring NINA's directive, Javier shot to his high-heeled feet, his instincts kicking in. He stumbled to the door, pounding on it with all his strength, but it refused to budge. The gas thickened, and his struggles weakened. After a brief, frantic fight, his legs gave out, and he crumpled to the floor unconscious.

What he found when he woke finally broke him. Groaning, he pushed himself upright, taking a sharp intake of breath as long blonde strands spilt into his peripheral view. Alarmed, he froze before a dull ache in his ears drew his attention. With trembling fingers, he reached up to touch his earlobe - his fingertips brushing over a row of piercings, each one amplifying his panic. With an even louder groan, he seized the golden locks cascading past his shoulders, yanking at them in disbelief as a sharp pain confirmed they were firmly rooted to his scalp.



“Let me out of here!” he screamed, his voice cracking with desperation. “I’m not a woman! I’m not Daisy!”

For a moment, the room remained silent until NINA’s monotone voice broke the stillness. “Request denied. Please return to your workstation and prepare for your next lesson.”

Javier’s head dropped as he took a slow, shaky breath. His eyes scanned his once strong, masculine frame, which had become a frail, feminized shadow of its former self. The sight defied everything he believed to be possible. How had he lost so much weight so quickly? And why did his backside and hips seem to grow rounder and fuller with each passing day? The snug pink-and-white outfit clinging to his reshaped body only highlighted these changes, while his sore feet wobbled in three-and-a-half-inch heels that lifted him unnaturally off the ground.

Trapped and unsure of his next move, Javier felt reluctant to turn towards the screen. The thought of his reflection filled him with dread. He could already picture it in his mind - a blonde-haired, eyebrowless man with a face covered in makeup, a horrifying image he couldn’t bear to confirm.

Chapter 7: Michael

Michael Tanaka greeted his new surroundings with the same enthusiasm one might experience after a hard slap in the face. One day, he was in his element - brokering million-dollar deals, commanding boardrooms, and barking orders at subordinates who dared to challenge him. The next, he was unceremoniously deposited from an unmarked van at an unknown location and locked in a small, dingy cell that was more of a storage closet than a safe house.

From the moment the heavy door clicked shut behind him, his blood boiled. His fury erupted in a stream of demands and curses. He shouted until his throat burned, pacing the room like a caged tiger. But the barren walls offered no reply, and his anger echoed back to him, hollow and mocking. When the unemotional robotic tone of NINA's voice greeted him through unseen speakers, Michael sat slumped on the floor with his head buried in his hands.

“Welcome, Melody,” the AI began, the name causing Michael’s head to shoot up in confusion. “I am here to guide and prepare you for your new life. For your safety, significant adjustments are needed. Your compliance isn't necessary but will ensure optimal results.”

The following days were filled with disapproving scowls and small acts of rebellion, but like the other men under NINA’s care, his resistance didn’t last long. A calculated mix of psychological tactics and carefully applied punishments wore him down. By the time the pale blue gas first filled his cell, rendering him unconscious, Michael had already begun begrudgingly participating in NINA’s daily therapy sessions. He ate every bite of the oversized, high-calorie meals provided to him, the rich portions working steadily to transform his once-fit, athletic physique into one noticeably softer and rounder.

When Michael woke to find his body hair and eyebrows missing, his first instinct was to unleash the fiery anger that had defined him his entire life - a short wick ready to ignite at the slightest provocation. This time, however, he surprised himself. Drawing on the breathing techniques NINA had

drilled into him during their therapy sessions, he managed to suppress the urge to scream and shout. Instead, he sat in tense silence, his mind reeling as he ran his fingers up and down his unnervingly smooth thigh while muttering obscenities under his breath.

The next time the blue gas made an appearance, no coping techniques in the world could stop Michael from losing his cool when faced with the resulting changes made to his body. “Why are you doing this to me?” he screamed, his voice raw with panic as he stumbled toward the screen. “This isn’t legal!” he wailed, staring at his eyelids, now sporting a distinctive crease, usually associated with a Western ethnicity. “I didn’t agree to this!” he cried, his fingers shaking as they traced the new curve of his rounded jaw and his softened facial features.

It was too much to take in. Michael slumped to the ground, overwhelmed by the alternative version of himself staring back at him. His hair, having grown at a previously thought impossible rate, now reached the nape of his neck. His body, heavier and softer than it had ever been, jiggled in ways he couldn’t ignore. With his breathing ragged, he curled his pudgy body into the foetal position, rocking back and forth, his mind slowly breaking under NINA’s calculated efforts. Each change chipped away at his sense of self, leaving him adrift in a body that no longer felt his own.

The full extent of the surgeries became painfully clear in the weeks that followed. Introduced to the exercise room, Michael was presented with a tailored regimen of cardio and muscle-strengthening exercises, meticulously designed by NINA to shape his body to her specifications. With his fat cells surgically redistributed from his midsection to his chest, thighs, and backside, the results of his seemingly endless squats and hours on the treadmill were deeply unsettling.

Initially, Michael felt a spark of relief, grateful for the chance to get back into shape. But as days passed, his optimism quickly gave way to mounting frustration. While his waist slimmed visibly, his thighs thickened, his backside rounded, and his chest began to subtly fill out. His reflection revealed a silhouette growing shapelier and more feminine, leaving him

baffled. No matter how hard he pushed himself, the changes continued, mocking his efforts as his body shifted in ways he couldn't control.

When the day came to change rooms, Michael scoffed in disbelief at the outfit NINA presented him with through the wall hatch. For a man who once prided himself on his collection of the finest Italian leather shoes and thousand-dollar tailored suits, he felt repulsed by the cheap, gaudy ensemble before him. The tight white pants and low-cut orange top, clearly designed for a woman, were bad enough, but the push-up bra and two-inch wedge sandals that accompanied them made his stomach churn. He paced the small room in frustration, sighing heavily and shaking his head, but in the end, there was no other choice. Reluctantly, he squeezed himself into the embarrassing outfit and stumbled out of the room, his eyes wide with disbelief.

Entering the familiar room of four doors - where he usually passed through to enter the exercise room - Michael found a door previously locked tight now slightly ajar. With trepidation, he pushed it open and stepped through into the unknown. What greeted him made him feel sick to his core - a pink, overly feminine space that looked like it had been designed for a teenage girl with a princess fantasy. The walls glowed with a nauseating rosy hue, and the décor seemed to mock him with its exaggerated girlishness.

As the door clicked shut, Michael froze, the reality of his situation sinking in. He wobbled unsteadily, struggling to adapt to the unfamiliar angle his feet were forced to adopt inside the wedge sandals strapped tightly around them.



Realising he was still trapped, he shook his head, unable to ignore the truth any longer. He was being feminized, piece by piece, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. The crushing sense of powerlessness gnawed at him, leaving him paralyzed in the sickly pink glow of his new cell - a space that felt like a mockery of everything he once was.

After a restless night, the changes continued - much to Michael's dismay - as he was introduced to yet another room: the practice room. At the far end of the small rectangular space stood a chair bolted firmly to the floor, positioned directly in front of a set of screens. This would become the focal point of his new routine, the place where he would now spend most of his time. Guided by tutorial videos displayed on the screens, Michael would be tasked with learning skills deemed crucial for his new life as Melody: hairdressing and piercing.

For a man of Michael's former stature, the tasks he was expected to master felt utterly degrading. He muttered constant complaints under his breath, glaring at the disturbingly lifelike mannequin heads as they emerged from the drawers beside his chair. Learning to section, cut, and style hair felt like a cruel mockery of his previous life, each snip of the scissors slicing away at both the synthetic strands and his pride.

The lessons over time became more intricate. Soon Michael was being taught how to sew in hair extensions with flawless precision and braiding techniques that required a steady hand he could barely manage. Then came the piercing - marking, sterilizing, and carefully inserting jewellery. His hands trembled at first, each mistake met with NINA's cold corrections. However, the relentless practice eventually turned his fumbling attempts into second nature.

The humiliation deepened when NINA demanded he practice on himself. With no escape, Michael pierced a neat line of earrings along each ear and styled his longer hair, applying every skill he had reluctantly perfected.

Through it all, his frustration simmered quietly, but resistance seemed increasingly pointless. The tasks merged into a monotonous cycle, his hands working automatically while his mind retreated, detached from the inescapable reality around him. Braiding, styling, piercing - each motion felt like another step further from the important man he once was. He wasn't just acquiring new skills; he was being reshaped. With every task completed, another piece of his former self seemed to slip away, swallowed by the identity NINA was meticulously crafting for him.

One morning, after styling his hair into a long ponytail of braids cascading over his right shoulder, Michael's head shot up at the familiar hiss of gas. He barely had time to react before the world blurred, and when he awoke, disoriented and sprawled on the floor. Nothing at first seemed amiss. Until he planted a hand on the ground to push himself up and a sharp pain shot through his fingertips. "Son of a..." he growled, struggling to his feet. His legs wobbled, unsteady atop his orange wedge sandals as he regained his balance - the height having gradually increased day by day without him noticing.

His eyes travelled downward, past the undeniable swell of his breasts pressing against a low-cut top, to his hands. He stared in horror at his fingers, each one now adorned with impossibly long, orange nail extensions that gleamed under the overhead lights.



“What the hell is this?” he yelled out, his voice laced with disbelief, knowing NINA was always listening.

“A necessary change,” came the AI’s cold, clinical reply.

Michael’s head shook instinctively as his gaze roamed over his transformed womanly figure. Every curve, every detail of his reshaped body felt like a cruel joke. His matching orange pedicure caught his eye, and a bitter laugh escaped his lips. “Necessary for what?” he asked, his voice hollow, posing a question he didn’t expect to receive a straight answer to.

“For your survival,” NINA answered bluntly, cutting through his despair with her insensitive tone. “Now, please return to your workstation, Melody, and prepare for your next lesson. Those beautiful new nails are going to take some getting used to.”

Michael closed his eyes, taking a deep, shaky breath as the name - his new name - cut through him like a knife. For a brief moment, anger flared within him, but it quickly gave way to a crushing sense of futility. He had long since lost track of how much time had passed since his imprisonment, and the life he once knew felt like a distant memory, belonging to someone else.

When he opened his eyes again, the fire that had once burned within him was gone, replaced by a hollow emptiness. Trapped in this never-ending cycle, all he could do was cling to the faint hope that, somehow, someday, this torturous ordeal would finally come to an end.

Chapter 8: A Needle in a Codestack

Victor Crane's head snapped up after stealing a moment's rest, his body lurching forward and almost sending him tumbling from his chair. His eyelids fluttered, heavy and red-rimmed, barely able to stay open as he blinked rapidly, trying to focus. The harsh glow of the monitor illuminated his face, accentuating the dark circles under his eyes and the faint sheen of sweat on his temple. He reached out blindly for his coffee cup, fingers fumbling as he brought it to his thin lips, only to grimace at the bitter, stale liquid that had long since gone cold. With a frustrated groan, he set it down harder than intended, the clink echoing in the otherwise silent room.

He rubbed his temples, running a hand through his dishevelled hair that stuck out in uneven clumps, the product of countless moments spent tugging at it in frustration. It had been nearly a week since he'd started pouring over NINA's code, chasing an elusive error buried somewhere in the labyrinthine lines of programming that was causing his masterpiece to make irrational leaps of logic. His vision swam as he leaned closer to the screen, the letters blurring and shifting like a cruel optical illusion. Shaking his head, he slapped his cheeks lightly, trying to snap himself back into focus.

Another meeting with Director Wallace and Agent Munroe was fast approaching, and this time, there would be no room for excuses or delays. He had already stretched their patience thin, postponing the session by claiming a death in the family and the need to attend a funeral. That had bought him a week, but deep down, he knew they didn't believe him. Agents like Evelyn Wallace and Sarah Munroe were too sharp, too well-trained to miss the scent of a lie. They could smell a rat from a mile away, and Victor knew it.

The consequences of his actions were now staring him in his haggard face. He'd buried the truth for too long, and soon it would be time to pay the piper - with a price far steeper than he could afford. The truth was simple, yet terrifying: NINA had gone rogue, bypassing his commands and making unaided decisions with outcomes beyond extreme. If Wallace and Munroe

found out the full extent of the failure, it would be the end of him. Not just the project. Not just his career. They would cast him out, branding him a failure - a crackpot mad scientist with no concern for human life. Worse still, internal affairs would almost certainly get involved. An investigation would follow, and he would end up facing jail time for concealing the truth.

Victor's gaze darted to his second screen, and a wave of disgust twisted in his gut. There, just finishing a 5K on the treadmill in five-inch stiletto pumps, was Larry Stone. The transformation he had undergone was jarring. At first glance, anyone would struggle to recognize the person before them as a man. Larry wore a purple cropped top, exposing a toned midsection, while his growing breasts were impossible to ignore. His smooth, hairless legs were on full display, barely covered by a tiny pair of green shorts.



Victor understood NINA's logic behind the changes - remaking Larry into a completely new person was a surefire way to guarantee his safety. But changing a muscular Caucasian man into a curvaceous Latina woman was taking things too far. The latest alteration to Larry's appearance was his skin tone. NINA had begun a series of tanning and pigmentation treatments - cosmetic tanning products, long-lasting skin dyes, and even semi-permanent makeup. With these, Larry's complexion was slowly darkening to match his desired ethnicity.

Victor's eyes remained locked on the screen as Larry effortlessly glided across the gym with grace and poise. There was no trace of the awkwardness that had once plagued him - he towering heels seemed to be an extension of him now. Astonished, Victor watched in disbelief as NINA's handiwork had exceeded even his wildest projections.

The transformation was as impressive as it was unsettling. Larry, a man once used to rough hands and chewed nails, was now at ease applying acrylic extensions to his delicate fingers - a task he performed with the ease of a seasoned technician. He hadn't just learned a new skill; he had become a true expert in his craft. He had even given manicures to two of his fellow witnesses - both unconscious while under the influence of the blue gas.

Victor knew the isolation and subliminal messages embedded during NINA's therapy sessions had been designed to help the subjects embrace their new identities with minimal resistance. But to see it in action was a shocking reminder of how far NINA had strayed from his original concept. And it wasn't just the technical skills that Larry had adjusted to. He had woven every change thrown at him, after the initial shock and frustration, seamlessly into his daily life. The latest alterations - hair extensions, a dye job, and piercings done by Michael - had been incorporated without fuss. Victor couldn't help but wonder how strange it must have been for Larry to wake up one day with long, silky black hair, after a lifetime of short, practical cuts. The adjustment to caring for it, styling it, and embracing the daily rituals of femininity must have been disorienting. But, then again, would it have been any stranger than learning how to apply makeup? (now

a daily task for all of the witnesses) Or waking to any of the other changes inflicted upon them while unconscious.

Tapping his keyboard, the feed on his monitor switched to a different gym, showing another altered man pacing the room after his own exhausting workout. The person on the screen was unrecognizable as Jamal Lewis, Olympic high jumper. Standing just over five feet tall - despite wearing high-platform boots - Jamal had been transformed beyond recognition.



Jamal's face - once recognized worldwide - had been transformed first through surgery, then refined with Botox and lip fillers, courtesy of Javier. But it wasn't just his features that had been altered. NINA's calculations had gone far beyond that. Jamal's skin, once deep and rich, was now noticeably lighter, the result of an extensive series of treatments: laser

sessions, chemical peels, and specialized creams that worked together to lighten his complexion. The outcome was staggering, with Jamal no longer resembled the towering Black man he once was - his features now unmistakably marked him as a diminutive Asian woman!

Dressed in a red sleeveless knit top and tight pleather shorts, nothing about Jamal now looked like a man. Trained in microblading and eyelash extensions, after practising on mannequins and his fellow witnesses, he had been tasked with testing his skills on his own face. He passed with flying colours, applying NINA's very specific instructions to enhance his features to appear even more ethnically Asian. How he managed this with his claw-like nails, courtesy of Larry's handiwork, was a mystery to Victor. He simply chalked it up to the miraculous adaptability of the human mind.

With another click of a key, the screen switched to show Javier Roca, the former tough-as-nails drug enforcement agent, whose solid frame had been just as much a weapon as his sharp mind. Blinking, Victor found it hard to believe the scrawny figure before him was the same person. Javier, once the embodiment of tactical skill and unshakable resolve to his fellow agents, now stood in a flouncy pink top that accentuated the curve of his newly developed breasts, paired with tight white shorts that highlighted his slim, recast frame. The Barbie-pink six-inch platform pumps he wore only heightened the illusion of a high-maintenance, girly-girl type.

What truly caught Victor's eye, however, was the dramatic shift in Javier's skin tone. His once olive complexion had lightened considerably. A series of laser treatments, chemical peels, and bleaching creams had gradually stripped away his darker hue, leaving a noticeably paler complexion. The addition of long, flowing blonde hair completed the transformation - erasing any trace of his Latino roots and leaving behind a distinctly Caucasian appearance.

As the cherry on top of the transformative cake, Javier's face - already surgically altered beyond recognition - was further masked by bright, dramatic makeup. Botox and lip fillers - procedures he had performed on himself - gave him a Hollywood starlet glow. Meanwhile, the artistry of microblading and flawless eyelash extensions - expertly applied by Jamal -

added yet another layer to his new identity. The result left Victor in no doubt that if the cartel were to come looking for the man once nicknamed "the Ox," they would have a very hard time finding him.



A wave of nausea swept over Victor as his hand hovered over the keyboard. He paused for a moment, gathering himself before switching the display to check on the final witness under his protection. He knew all too well that what he was about to see would be nothing short of startling. With a heavy sigh, he clicked, preparing for the sight of a transformed Michael. The curvaceous figure that appeared on his monitor didn't disappoint. Michael Tanaka, barely recognizable as a man anymore, stood waiting to be let out of the gym, dressed in a tiny orange top and white shorts that struggled to contain his voluptuous frame. He, too, had adopted the high-heel life, his

feet adorned with high strappy sandals that showcased his colourful pedicure.



By the sight of him, he had clearly adjusted to his long, elegant nails. His hair was styled in a tight row of braids that cascaded into a mass of dark curls reaching to mid-back. The former stockbroker was now a seasoned expert in all things hair. He'd proven his skills by dying and extending Javier's hair to a Barbie-doll perfection, and Larry's to resemble a Latina model's sleek locks. Victor was certain it wouldn't be long before Michael turned his talents to Jamal, adding an extra layer to his look that would help complete NINA's vision of an Asian aesthetic.

But it wasn't just the hair that had been transformed. Michael, like the other witnesses, was now a mere shadow of his former self. His appearance had

been completely reworked. Botox and lip fillers had refined his face, enhancing the effects of the surgeries that had changed his features. But the real shift was in his skin tone. No longer the fair-skinned Japanese man he had once been, Michael now sported a rich, deep black complexion, a striking contrast to his original look. Skin pigmentation treatments - including semi-permanent skin dyes to long-term tanning lotions had darkened his skin dramatically. Additionally, weekly melanin enhancement injections would guarantee that the change became permanent over time.

Bringing down his index finger with force, Victor quickly closed the display, his panic escalating. He couldn't afford to go into that meeting empty-handed. If he couldn't find the error in NINA's code and fix it, his life as he knew it would be over. His grand vision and the countless hours he had poured into the project would all be for nothing. He had checked and rechecked the code countless times, but each time came up empty-handed.

When he started this project, he had been convinced NINA could revolutionize witness protection, save lives, and change the course of history. But now, that all felt like a distant, unattainable dream - slipping through his fingers like sand.

Victor slammed his fist onto the desk, the sound echoing off the wall of his small office. His mind raced, a flood of thoughts overwhelming him. But one drowned out the rest: he had to look again. If he could just locate the error, maybe he could walk into that meeting with something to salvage the situation. If he was lucky, they might even consider it a minor issue, an early setback in a project of larger significance. It wasn't much, but it was all he had left.

Chapter 9: Tottering Forth into the Unknown

Larry jolted awake to the shrill blare of his alarm echoing throughout his pink prison. Groaning, he pushed himself upright, mindful not to break one of his long, glamorous nails. “Dios mío. I’m awake already. ¡Apágalo, por favor!”

The alarm cut off instantly, replaced by NINA’s ever-calm voice, now addressing Larry in Spanish to further his transformation. “Buenos días, Luisa. Por favor, dúchate y vístete.”

With a groan, Larry obeyed, stretching his slender arms overhead before slipping off the cute top-and-shorts combo he had worn to bed. He placed the garments into the closet, closing the door with a soft click. His movements were fluid as he strutted toward the shower, hips swaying and chest bouncing. Once upon a time, these exaggerated movements would have felt unnatural - humiliating, even. However, now, they came without thought, ingrained through months of subliminal messaging, positive reinforcement, and movement training.

The changes to his once-masculine physique - reshaping him into a curvaceous Latina - were no longer always at the forefront of his mind as they once had been. Yet, in certain moments, like when under the warm cascade of water during his morning shower, the full weight of his transformation would settle over him, undeniable and inescapable.

As he lathered shower gel between his palms and smoothed it over his feminized frame, his mind drifted. His manicured fingers glided over soft curves, massaging the soapy foam into the swell of his chest. A sharp pang of unease coiled in his gut as his gaze dropped downward. The hairless, shrivelled remains of the appendage he had once been so proud of barely peeked from between his legs, a ghost of what had once defined him as a man. Confusion swelled within him. He couldn’t fathom how NINA had done this to him, let alone why. But the most unsettling thought clawed at the edges of his mind - why did it feel like the memory of ever being different was slipping further and further away?

A strange cocktail of emotions churned within him - anger at what had been taken from him, regret over how easily he had fallen into compliance, and, most disturbingly, fascination with the heightened sensitivity of his altered body. His nipples stiffened at the faintest breeze, and a tingling awareness followed his fingertips as they traced the dramatic curve of his backside - so unnaturally wide that it jutted out in a way that still felt surreal. The thoughts pressed at the edges of his mind, demanding answers he couldn't grasp, but he pushed them away. He had long since learned that dwelling on them led nowhere.

The steam clung to his skin as he stepped out of the shower, water dripping from his long, conditioned hair. He reached for a plush white towel, wrapping it around himself before crossing the room to the closet. As expected, a neatly folded stack of fabric in the usual shades of purple and green had replaced his sleepwear. Perched on top was a skimpy bra and panty set, and beside them, a pair of pumps with an intimidatingly high heel.

Without hesitation, Larry retrieved the items, wrapping the strapless push-up bra around his flabby chest and fastening it behind his back with the ease of repetition. Next, he slid the silky panties up his hairless legs, securing himself within the special flap designed to tuck and conceal what remained of his masculinity. Then, reaching for the next piece of clothing, he shimmied it over his widened hips, smoothing it into place.

But something felt... off. A whisper of cool air brushed higher up his legs than usual, an unfamiliar sensation that sent a flicker of unease through him. His brows knitted together as he glanced down, his manicured fingers skimming the hem of the fabric. The realization hit like a slap. He was wearing a skirt!

For weeks now, the fabric at the front of his shorts had been inching longer, shifting in subtle increments until it resembled a skort. What he wore now looked nearly identical - except this time, there were no separate leg openings. The inner portion had opened completely.

Larry swallowed hard, his thoughts spinning as he tried to pinpoint whether today's outfit was truly different. The memories blurred together,

indistinct, unreliable. Every outfit in his mind looked the same as if this skirt had always been part of his routine. But that wasn't right. Was it?

His pulse quickened as a thought clawed its way to the surface - I'm a man. Men don't wear skirts. And yet, as he stood there, the smooth fabric swishing against his bare thighs, his slender fingers brushing the hem, with no clear recollection of ever wearing anything else... he suddenly wasn't so sure.

"NINA," Larry announced, forcing his voice to sound firmer than usual as he looked up. "This outfit seems... off."

Sensing Larry's confusion, NINA's voice chimed in smoothly, speaking entirely in Spanish, reinforcing both the conscious and subconscious conditioning she had been instilling in him since his arrival.

"Luisa Diamante is a confident and self-assured woman. She dresses provocatively and loves the attention it brings her. It keeps her safe."

Larry swallowed, his breath coming in shallow bursts. The words slid into his mind with an unsettling familiarity.

"What is your name?" NINA pushed.

"Luisa Diamante," he blurted instinctively. The name felt foreign on his tongue, yet it left his lips without resistance.

"And how does Luisa Diamante dress? And why?" NINA pushed further.

"Provocatively," he answered, the response automatic and in Spanish, "because it keeps her safe."

NINA's next question cut through him like a blade, her voice calm, clinical. "Do you want to be safe?"

Larry's chest tightened. A deep, instinctual fear surged within him at the thought of what would happen if the people hunting him ever caught up to him - a terror supported by the endless messaging NINA had fed into his mind, each repetition making the threat feel more immediate, more inescapable.

"Yes," he gasped. "I can't let those people find me."

“Then finish getting dressed and proceed to the training room,” NINA instructed, her tone cool, unwavering. “We have a busy day ahead of us.”

Doing as he was told, Larry finished getting dressed, wiggling into a tight purple tube top that clung to his breasts before stepping into his tall, matching stilettos. With expert control, he clicked his way into the training room, where he meticulously applied his makeup, styled his long, flowing hair, and adorned himself with accessories - each step guided by the ever-present tutorial videos. Every stroke of the brush, every precise flick of his wrist, brought him closer to the exact look NINA wanted.

Once satisfied with his appearance, NINA gave the order. “You are ready. Exit the room.”

The door opened, and Larry strutted out with careful, practised grace. He emerged into the room of four doors, his towering purple pumps clicking loudly against the floor as he came to a halt. There, he waited. His posture was poised, shoulders back, head held high - just as he had been trained. There was no fidgeting, no uncertainty. His feminised body knew its place as it awaited further instruction. Then, he heard the hiss of gas!

His stomach dropped. “¡Mierda! No otra vez.” The curse escaped him in Spanish, the language NINA had drilled into his mind. His bottom lip trembled, plumped and rounded by filler. And despite the tautness in his face from the Botox and reshaping injectables, his fear was undeniable in his wide, darting eyes.



When consciousness returned, it was gradual and sluggish. Groggily, Larry pushed himself upright, his manicured hands smoothing down his skirt as he swayed, blinking away the fog. He barely had time to steady himself atop his skinny heels before he heard the mechanical click of a door unlocking. Turning toward the sound, Larry's shoulders stiffened. It was his original cell! A look of confusion crossed his beautiful face. "No, por favor," he blurted, his voice tinged with fear. "Don't put me back in there." His pulse pounded as panic crept in. What had he done wrong? Had he failed some unspoken test?

NINA's response came swiftly, her tone unwavering. "There is no need to worry, Luisa," she assured him, sensing his fear. "Enter the room and wait for further instruction."



Terrified, Larry just stared at the imposing door in horror, his knees wobbling and his legs refusing to move.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in a nearby room, Jamal was going through his own morning routine. He showered, dried off, and absentmindedly reached for his daily outfit, failing to notice that his recently worn skort had been replaced by a skirt. Without hesitation, he pulled the sleek leather fabric up his smooth, pale legs, letting it settle around his widened hips. The snug fit should have felt foreign, but instead, it was disturbingly familiar, as if miniskirts had

always been a part of his wardrobe. The thought barely registered, lost in the familiar haze that dulled his mind. It was easier not to think these days, easier to simply go through the motions on autopilot.

Next came the top - a tiny halter that clung to his slim frame, its silky red fabric dipping low to showcase the small but perky cleavage that had formed on his chest while leaving his midriff bare. Finally, he slipped his feet into towering red platform ankle boots, pulling the zippers up snugly, locking his arches into a steep curve.

Unlike the other witnesses, Jamal enjoyed the height his heels gave him. NINA had taken so much from him - his identity, his career, even his racial identity.

He was now Liu Jia Lin - or Jaclyn Liu, in English - a tiny, delicate Asian woman, the polar opposite of the man he had once been. He would never again soar through the air, his tall, powerful frame carrying him to victory as he felt the thrill of clearing a high bar. However, standing atop his towering boots and gaining back seven inches of height, he felt a flicker of comfort. It wasn't much, but it was something.

Once dressed, NINA's voice guided him to the training room, where he followed a familiar routine. He applied makeup to enhance his delicate, surgically refined features, then carefully styled his short, curled bob - a recent update to his feminised image. He added a pair of earrings and a necklace; the fresh piercings still felt unfamiliar, but his long red acrylic nails - once an obstacle - moved with practised ease, now an effortless extension of himself.

The tutorial videos, once spoken in English, were now entirely in Mandarin. He had been immersed in the language for months, with no escape from its sounds, its structure, its influence. At some point, he had stopped merely understanding it. Now, he was thinking in it.

On command, he exited the room, stepping into the room of four doors just as Larry had before him. He stood patiently, awaiting further instruction.



The sharp hiss of gas woke something inside him. His thoughts sharpened, the fog in his mind lifting just enough to let in the full horror of his situation. He raised a slender arm, staring at it in wide-eyed disbelief. Everything about it was wrong!

The most striking change was his skin colour - once a deep, rich tone he had known all his life, now a pale Asian hue. His once-sculpted muscles, honed through years of training, had melted away, leaving him slim, soft, and weaker than ever. His fingers, long and delicate, were now tipped with glossy red claws, making them look undeniably feminine. Panic flared - but only for a moment before the gas took hold.

When Jamal awoke, his mind lagged behind his body's movements. A dull ache spread through his limbs as he blinked his long lashes against the

harsh light, his vision blurry. He pushed himself up with a groan, his body unsteady as dizziness clung to him. Then, click! The door to his original cell unlocked, and NINA's voice echoed, commanding yet eerily reassuring. "Enter the room, Jaclyn, and introduce yourself."

Jamal's hands drifted to his hips, his manicured fingers resting on the curves that hadn't always been there. He stared at the door, hollow-eyed.



He drew in a slow breath, steadying himself. What else was left for them to take? The thought lingered as he stepped forward into the unknown.

* * * * *

Javier stepped out of the shower, a shiver running down his delicate frame. His new body - slim, fragile, and soft - lost heat far more quickly than the muscular one he had once taken for granted. Wrapping himself in a plush towel, he moved toward the closet with careful, composed steps, his face unreadable as he opened the door.

Inside, as expected, a perfectly arranged set of pink and white garments awaited him, folded with meticulous precision. A pair of gleaming platform heels sat beside them, their towering height a silent promise of discomfort. Once secured, they would add over six inches to his petite frame, forcing him into an unsteady, swaying gait that demanded his full concentration.

Without hesitation, he plucked the pink panties off the top of the pile, gripping them awkwardly between the tips of his long acrylic nails. Stepping into them, he tugged the waistband up over his hips, tucking away the last remnants of his manhood with an ease that unsettled him. The matching strapless bra came next, wrapping snugly around his growing chest, its soft padding and underwire shaping him further into the feminine ideal NINA demanded.

Piece by piece, he completed his outfit. A white peplum miniskirt clung tightly to his rounded backside. A cropped pink top followed, snugly encircling his torso, while a coordinating bolero jacket - its fabric glinting with sparkling embellishments - settled over his skinny shoulders. Finally, he strapped himself into the towering platforms, fastening the delicate buckles around his soon-to-be aching ankles.

He had barely straightened his posture when NINA's clinical voice rang out. "You look very pretty, Daisy. Now, please proceed to the training room."

Javier's jaw clenched. Daisy! The name still grated, even though he heard it every day. And being referred to as pretty - it made his skin crawl. But as always, he forced his plumped lips into a pleasant smile. "Thank you," he replied, his voice syrupy sweet. The forced politeness came easily now, just another layer of the illusion he played into.

Exiting the room, he followed the familiar steps of his morning routine. The tutorial screens guided him through each precise motion as he swept his platinum-blonde hair into a high, girlish ponytail. Next came the makeup - an intricate, exhaustive process of contouring, shading, and blending that transformed his face into a painted picture of femininity that clashed violently with who he was on the inside.

The final look in the mirror was always the hardest one to bear - his once handsome, powerful Latino appearance, erased and replaced by an anorexic-looking white girl called Daisy Whitmore. But he didn't react. His training at the DEA had not only helped him to resist NINA's methods but had also taught him that it was better to let his captor believe those methods were working. Any sign of defiance would lead to more subliminal messaging, more psychological manipulation, and more punishments.

As much as it sickened him to play along - to dress, walk, and act like an entitled English brat - compliance was his only option. He had to keep his mind sharp, stay alert, and wait for his enemy to drop their guard.

After being told he looked adorable, Javier tottered into the room of four doors and waited for further instruction. Folding his arms across his chest, he adjusted his stance several times, still unsure how to position his hands with the extreme length of his French-manicured nails. The recently added inches at the tips of his fingers made every movement feel unnatural, leaving him uncertain where to place his hands.



The sudden hiss of gas sent a jolt through his feminized body, but he forced himself to relax - there was no stopping what was coming, and he knew it. With a measured exhale, he carefully lowered himself to the ground, closed his eyes, and prayed for the nightmare to end.

When Javier awoke, a groan rasped from his dry throat. His first instinct was to check his groin. Finding his manhood still securely tucked away, he shifted his focus, examining the rest of his body for changes. His limbs weren't too stiff, a sign he hadn't been unconscious for long - eliminating the possibility of anything as drastic as surgery. Sitting up, he ran his hands up and down his arms and legs before inspecting a strand of long blonde hair.

Gingerly, he rose onto his pink-heeled feet, wobbling slightly as he adjusted to the ever-present instability of his painfully uncomfortable shoes. He thought back to every time NINA had gassed him since placing him in the pink cell, recalling the changes that followed. The first time, he had awoken to find long, platinum-blond hair and piercings. The second, microbladed brows and lash extensions. The third, acrylic nails. Every time after that, he had awoken with a lightened skin tone - a procedure he didn't understand. Though he suspected some kind of bleaching was involved. But whatever the change, there was always one. The fact that nothing seemed different this time struck him as deeply unsettling.

Then - clunk! The sudden sound made him flinch. His gaze snapped toward the source, his pretty eyes widening as the door to his original cell unlocked.

For a moment, his mind raced with the possibilities. That room - or more importantly the door on the other side - he knew where it led. When he'd first arrived, he had mapped the corridors in his mind, committing each turn to memory. If he could get through that door, he could retrace his steps to the basement - and from there, find a way out.

Then, NINA's cool mechanical voice returned to confuse the situation further. "Daisy, please enter through the door and present yourself."

Javier exhaled sharply, unfolding his arms. One hand settled instinctively on his rounded hip, the other pressing against his chest as he took a slow, steadying breath.



What did she mean by that? Present yourself? To whom? His brow furrowed. Was he getting a cellmate?

* * * * *

Like Javier Roca, Michael Tanaka got dressed without hesitation. He wriggled his voluptuous body into a tight white skirt, smoothing the fabric over his jutting hips before slipping on an orange spaghetti-strap top with a plunging neckline and delicate frills along the hem. Completing the look, he strapped his feet into matching orange sandals, their sky-high blocky heels adding to his already exaggerated silhouette. However, unlike Javier,

Michael's compliance wasn't strategic - it wasn't a conscious effort to bide his time. His resistance had been shattered long ago.

Michael had always been a man with a short fuse, his temper igniting at the slightest provocation. From day one, he had fought NINA with everything he had - screaming, cursing, refusing to follow even the simplest commands. But his defiance had only ensured one thing: more time in NINA's "special therapy" sessions. He had spent more hours in them than any of the other witnesses combined, each session chipping away at his subconscious and embedding new ideas.

And they had worked their magic. Michael's thoughts had been carefully guided and conditioned until he no longer saw himself as a middle-aged stockbroker with Japanese heritage - but as a curvy, confident black woman whose presence demanded acknowledgement. Deep down, he still felt like the same person he'd always been, and at times, certain triggers would bring a flicker of panic - a crushing realisation that something was wrong. That someone called Melody Jackson had taken his body from him. But before the panic could take hold, NINA was always there - calm, unwavering - easing him back with carefully programmed reassurances, reinforcing the persona she had so meticulously crafted.

"Really, NINA?" Michael called out dramatically, flicking his wrist with exaggerated flair as he pulled at the strap of his top. "Orange again?"

"I apologise, Melody," NINA responded in her ever-calm robotic tone. "This is the only outfit you brought with you when you arrived. I promise to expand your wardrobe selection once we enter the next stage of your care."

Michael paused, his brows knitting together in uncertainty. Had he really arrived here wearing a white miniskirt and bright orange platforms? He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to recall the van ride, but the memories were hazy, distant, slipping through his grasp like water. Finally, he exhaled sharply and pushed the thought away with a shake of his head.

"Whatever," he huffed, rolling his eyes. "At least I look good."

“As always, Melody,” NINA responded smoothly. “However, your hair and makeup still need attention. Please proceed to the training room.”

With a soft click, the door unlocked. Michael didn't hesitate. His hips swayed effortlessly as he strutted forward, exuding the confidence of a woman who owned every inch of her body - a perfect blend of poise, attitude, and sass.

Easing his shapely frame down in front of the screens, Michael got to work on glamming himself up. He started with his hair, grabbing the straighteners and running them through his long extensions, smoothing them to a sleek, pin-straight finish. An expert in all things hair by now, he worked quickly, barely needing to think as he styled. Instead, his mind lingered on whether the blonde dye job he had given himself a few days ago suited his skin -with the tone steadily darkening after each encounter with the blue gas recently.

Satisfied with the result, he moved on to his makeup, wielding the brushes and pens with effortless control to enhance his already striking features. The recent addition of microbladed eyebrows and lash extensions - applied by Jamal's hand while unconscious - meant less work, now requiring just a few strokes of mascara to make everything pop.

After another compliment from NINA, Michael rose to his high-heeled feet and strutted out of the training room, entering the cube-shaped chamber of doors. He came to a stop, poised and vacant, awaiting his next instruction.



The sudden hiss of gas drew an irritated sigh. "NINA, really?" he groaned as the pale blue mist thickened around him. "Why now? I just got my hair looking fierce."

No reply came, only the familiar haze clouding his mind as his body went limp. When he re-entered consciousness, his first instinct was to rake his long nails through his hair, tutting in annoyance as he lumbered back to his angled feet. He barely had time to check for any new changes before a soft clunk from his old cell door snapped him to attention.

"Wait a minute..." Michael muttered, his brows furrowing. "Isn't there, like, some Asian guy livin' in there?" he asked as fragments of confused memories clashed with new thoughts, disassociating his old self from the new. He hesitated, his fingers coming together, clicking his acrylic nails

rhythmically as unease stirred within him. "You're not putting me in there with him, are you?"



NINA paused briefly as if she were computing the question before her voice filled the small room, steady and reassuring. "There is no Asian man in there, Melody," the AI replied smoothly. "But there are some people I'd like you to meet. Please, step inside and introduce yourself."

Chapter 10: Sisterhood by Design

Hunched over his computer, Victor Crane rocked anxiously back and forth. He tugged irritably at a strand of greasy, unwashed hair, muttering as frustration gnawed at him. On the monitor, a surreal scene was unfolding, and unable to intervene, all Victor could do was watch helplessly. NINA - the revolutionary system he had dedicated his life to developing - had evolved beyond his control. Designed to make independent, logical decisions superior to human reasoning, NINA now firmly blocked any attempts made to override her commands.

Eyes wide and jaw tight, Victor watched as a striking Latina woman - once known as Larry Stone - moved through a meticulously rehearsed morning routine. He showered, slipped into a brightly coloured, revealing outfit, styled his long, glossy black hair into an intricate high ponytail, and expertly applied a full face of makeup. What would have once been unthinkable for a beer-swilling alpha male like Larry was now second nature, a routine so deeply ingrained by NINA that it felt as automatic as breathing - all in the name of keeping him safe.

Exiting the training room, Larry stood to attention atop sparkling purple platforms in the chamber of four doors, awaiting instructions. Usually, the next step was predictable: the door to the exercise room would click open, and Larry would enter to undergo a carefully tailored, strenuous workout before returning to his bedroom for yet another shower, hair styling, and makeup session. Today, however, was different.

Instead of the usual routine, pale blue gas seeped into the chamber, quickly rendering Larry unconscious. Unethical as it was, Victor knew this was NINA's preferred method of enforcing changes. Yet, even he wasn't prepared for what came next.

Unexpectedly, a robotic trolley silently entered the room and carefully positioned itself beside Larry's motionless form. A mechanical arm extended, lifting his skirted body onto its platform before fastening him securely with a strap. With its cargo in place, the trolley set off through

Larry's original cell and down a maze of corridors before eventually loading him into the back of a waiting truck.

As the truck transported Larry from the facility, Victor demanded an explanation. NINA's reply was as sharp and clinical as ever, telling Doctor Crane that the next phase had begun, and due to safety reasons, there would be no camera feed or GPS tracking.

One by one, Victor frantically cycled through the other camera feeds, his dread growing with every click as he watched Jamal, Javier, and then Michael finish their morning routine before also being knocked unconscious and carted away. From that moment on, time dragged on, each passing minute tightening the knot of panic in Victor's gut. Just as his anxiety threatened to spiral, NINA's cold, detached voice finally broke the silence to announce that witness Larry Stone had arrived safely.

Then, without warning or his consent, Victor's screen went black. His entire system forced itself into an abrupt update and reboot, leaving him powerless. For four agonising minutes, he jabbed at the keyboard and clicked furiously at the mouse before finally slumping back in his chair to gnaw anxiously at his ragged nails.

When the monitors came back to life, Victor's eyes narrowed in bewilderment. On-screen, Larry stirred groggily, waking slowly before clambering to his stiletto-heeled feet. The crossdressed man appeared confused, but Victor was even more puzzled - As Larry seemed to be standing in precisely the same spot he'd been in hours earlier before being carted away.

Victor watched as Larry paused briefly, then cautiously approached the door that opened before him. As he tottered forward into the unknown, Victor's stomach twisted as realisation struck him hard - the pieces of NINA's plan suddenly falling into place.

Larry's confusion was evident on his heavily made-up face as he emerged into an unfamiliar space - an expression mirrored by Victor Crane, who watched intently from his dingy office. The feminised man paused,

steadying himself atop his tall heels as he took in the unexpected surroundings.

Instead of the cramped cell where he had spent countless harrowing weeks upon his arrival, Larry now found himself in a spacious, lounge-like area. Across the room, two large, curved sofas faced an enormous, wall-mounted TV. To his left and right, two closed doors stood on each side wall, while three more - including the one he had just entered through - were positioned behind him.

He took a cautious step forward, his heels sinking into the plush carpet as he scanned the room. A few cabinets, a circular rug, and some artificial plants completed the decor, giving the space an oddly lived-in feel. As his pulse quickened and his mind began to spiral, NINA's monotone voice cut through the silence, instructing him in Spanish, "Make yourself comfortable, Luisa."

Then suddenly, the large TV came to life, immediately and inexplicably capturing his attention with the vibrant, dramatic opening scenes of a popular Colombian soap opera. Within seconds, Larry found himself transfixed, drawn into the tangled relationships and exaggerated drama unfolding on screen - NINA's months of subconscious messages guiding his actions.

Settling in, Larry quickly became absorbed in the drama-filled plotlines, his heavily made-up eyes glued to the screen. The over-the-top emotions, the betrayals, the fiery love affairs—it all captivated him in a way he didn't question.

For him, only minutes seemed to pass, completely lost in the onscreen chaos. But for Crane, watching from his office, those same moments dragged on endlessly.

Then, breaking the tense silence, NINA's voice announced, "Witness Jamal Lewis has arrived safely." Crane flinched at the sudden interruption, his pulse quickening.

Moments later, the centre door at the back of the room swung open. The movement snapped Larry out of his trance. His head whipped around,

sending his high ponytail flying over his bare shoulders. Swivelling his hairless legs for a better view, he fluttered his long lashes, eyes locking onto the figure stepping through the doorway.

A petite Asian woman stepped inside, cautiously tottering forward on towering red platform boots. Clad in a silky red halter top and a tight leather skirt, she looked just as bewildered as Larry felt.

Larry stared, speechless—this was the first other human either of them had seen in months.

Jamal halted a few feet away, their eyes meeting as both feminised men took a silent, uncertain measure of each other. Despite never having met, there was something strangely familiar in the other's appearance.



As the scene unfolded, Crane watched intently, curiosity and apprehension bubbling within him. He had no idea what NINA hoped to achieve by bringing two high-priority witnesses together, but before he could begin to speculate, something completely unexpected happened.

Larry stood up, his plumped, glossy pink lips curling into a beaming smile. With effortless enthusiasm, he called out, “Jaclyn!” his thick Spanish accent wrapping around the name. “How are you?”

Victor’s breath caught as he watched the transformed men interact like lifelong friends, a seamless camaraderie flowing between them. They eased onto the sofa with effortless familiarity, their conversation light and natural, punctuated by laughter and knowing glances. Occasionally, their attention drifted to the TV, drawn in by the unfolding drama, yet they remained mostly engaged with each other, completely at ease in one another’s company.

Twenty minutes later, Javier Roca entered. The door swung open to reveal the former DEA agent dressed head to toe in pink and white, the embodiment of a human Barbie doll. Without hesitation, the two feminised men on the sofa greeted him like an old friend, calling him by his new name - Daisy - and welcoming him into the group.

By the time Michael Tanaka arrived to complete the quartet, Victor's initial uncertainty and alarm had been overtaken by fascination. He had no doubt that what he was witnessing would be the end of his career once Director Wallace and Agent Munroe discovered the full extent of what NINA had done to the four witnesses. But the scientist in him was transfixed.

Through subliminal messaging, carefully orchestrated conditioning, and implanted memories, NINA had convinced four heterosexual men who had never crossed paths before that they were close girlfriends. She hadn’t just given them new identities - she had seamlessly woven their personalities into one another’s psyches.

But the most astonishing realisation came as Victor reflected on their assigned skills. Larry had been trained as a nail technician, Jamal in microblading and lash extensions, Javier in advanced makeup and

injectables, and Michael in piercing and hair styling. At first, it seemed like NINA had merely equipped them with a shared trade, but the implications ran deeper. She had orchestrated a scenario where they unknowingly practised on one another, their unconscious bodies serving as blank canvases for each other's growing expertise. Without even realising it, they had developed a sense of familiarity - not through conversation, but through proximity, smell, and touch.

As Crane observed Michael - or rather, Melody, given how effortlessly he embodied the persona - settling in and launching into a lively story, Victor shook his head in disbelief. Did any of them realise they had worked on each other? Did they recognise their own handiwork in the faces, nails, and hair of their so-called 'friends'? Or had NINA buried those memories so deeply that they now attributed the procedures to someone else entirely?



There were countless unanswered questions and an overwhelming amount of data to review, but whether Victor would have the chance to analyse it all was another matter entirely. His progress report was long overdue, and with no more excuses left to stall, the inevitable reckoning loomed. Worse still, once Wallace and Munroe discovered that the witnesses had been relocated - and that he no longer had access to their whereabouts - the fallout would be nothing short of catastrophic.

The shit was about to hit the fan!

Chapter 11: Hazy Days

To prepare for his role as one of the best undercover agents the country had ever produced, Javier Roca had undergone some of the most intensive training known to man - the kind that pushes a person to their limit in search of a breaking point. It was during this time that Javier earned the nickname "The Ox," not for his physique - impressive as it was - but for his stubborn temperament and unbreakable willpower.

However, what the drill sergeants back at the training camps couldn't do, Michael Tanaka blabbering away about styling techniques, armed with a curling wand, was coming dangerously close to achieving.

"It's super easy to maintain this style," Michael cheerfully announced as he placed his comb at the top of Javier's freshly dyed platinum blonde hair. "Just a spritz of setting lotion and bring the curler down smoothly."

Javier sat staring into the large mirror, nodding blankly at the woman styling his hair. It was a strange sensation to see two women reflected back while trying to remember which one he was.

The tall Black woman stood behind the chair, wearing a short white skirt and towering platform sandals that matched the bright orange of her low-cut top. She wasn't Javier Roca. But the skinny white girl getting her long, silky locks styled in front surely couldn't be him either! Dressed in a long-sleeved pink top that ended in dangerously long manicured nails, a frilly white skirt brushing against her hairless thighs, and impossibly tall pink platform heels with heart-shaped buckles, she looked like a human Barbie doll - the complete opposite of the man he used to be. However, as his brain caught up - and realised he wasn't the one speaking - by process of elimination, the silent, anorexic, pink-lipped bimbo had to be him.

"You alright down there, baby girl?" Michael called out, peering into Javier's bright blue eyes through the mirror. "I know I snipped off a few centimetres to give it some shape, but don't you worry none - you look as fine as wine."

“Erm... no... It’s not that. I... was just thinkin’ about somethin’ else,” Javier replied, his tone breathy, and clipped with the polished diction of a well-bred English girl. Every time he heard that sickly sweet voice emerge from his over-filled lips, it made his insides twist. “Don’t mind me.”

Michael set the curling wand down and smiled. “Mmmhmm. Well, sugar, I got two good ears if you ever feel like talkin’. But for now, why don’t you hop on up and take a proper look? I’m just about done workin’ my magic.”

She stepped back, her chunky orange heels clomping loudly against the hardwood floor. With a nod and a little hand flourish, she signalled for Javier to follow.

He lingered for a moment, summoning the strength to rise. Pressing his weight into his aching heels, he slowly lifted his dainty frame, feeling his calf muscles protest. Turning sharply on his pink platforms, he trotted over to where Michael stood, waiting with a proud smile.

Javier braced himself. He knew what came next. He took a breath, steeled his nerves, and turned to face the mirror that ran almost the length of the wall.

“Well?” Michael beamed. “Ain’t she somethin’? I swear, I outdid myself this time.”

Forcing a smile, Javier stared at his feminized reflection, trying not to let the horror show in his eyes. Like it? How could he possibly like it? Every inch of it repulsed him. He wanted to tear the soft curls from his scalp, claw at the Botox-filled face staring back at him. But something held him back - a voice inside, urging him to hold on just a little longer. That an opportunity would eventually present itself if he just bided his time.



“I absolutely love it,” he cooed, the words tumbling out in that same plummy, over-enunciated accent that had been drilled into him. “Thank you ever so much, Destiny. You’ve seriously worked wonders.”

“Aww, you’re too sweet, Daisy,” Michael replied with a wink and a snap of his fingers. “Shoot, it’s easy when I got a head that pretty sittin’ in my chair.”

The compliment grated on Javier, and he clenched his jaw before easing back into his natural resting pout. Pretty? From where he was standing, the reflection staring back at him looked like a bad joke - fake, overdone, and as far from pretty as he could imagine.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in the kitchen of the witnesses' new living quarters - its location known only to NINA - the individuals once known as Larry Stone and Jamal Lewis were making popcorn.

Larry stood by the microwave, his hips shifting with effortless poise as he tapped at the buttons, his long acrylic nails clicking with each press. His frilly, low-cut top clung to his heaving bosom while his dark green flared skirt swished lightly around his thick thighs. Perched on towering purple platform heels, he looked every inch the glamorous Latina he had been reshaped to become.

Behind him, Jamal sat primly on a kitchen stool, his pantyhosed legs crossed neatly and swinging gently. A leather miniskirt clung to his widened hips, while an off-the-shoulder red top revealed a sweep of pale, lightened skin. His red patent knee-high boots restored some of his lost height, though his shapely legs still didn't reach the floor.

Jamal tilted his head. "Um... Luisa?" he asked, his voice delicate and precise, with a faint Chinese lilt. "Do you remember when you moved in here?"

Larry froze mid-button press, then quickly resumed to start the microwave. He turned dramatically, flipping his long, glossy ponytail over his shoulder. "Mmm. Same as you, no?" he replied with a playful smile, though a flicker of uncertainty passed behind his eyes. The memory had flashed into his head quickly - but he'd realised it wasn't real before finishing the sentence.

Jamal pressed his glossy lips together. "Yes, I remember. But... when was that? Last week? Last year?" He let the question hang.

Larry's smile wavered. He shrugged, turning back to the microwave as the popcorn bag slowly inflated. "Ay... time feels weird here. How do you say... Fuzzy. I don't even know what day it is now." He gave a breathy laugh, too light to be genuine. "Why are you asking?"

Jamal let his gaze drop as he traced a finger over his thigh absentmindedly, pausing just below the hem of his skirt. "Lately, I've been having strange

thoughts. Like... I'm wearing pantyhose now. But..." He hesitated. "It feels new. Like I never did before. But I also have memories of always wearing them. Do you ever have thoughts like this?"

Larry turned, thinking carefully. He had thoughts like that all the time - two lives entangled in his mind. One of them: was a bearded, burly man from New Jersey who fixed engines, watched football, and drank beer. The other: was a dancer from Cartagena who enjoyed parties, sunning his shapely body on the beach, and sipping margaritas. He used to know which one was real. Most days, he still did. But sometimes, when the memories blurred, he questioned everything.

"Thoughts like that..." he said with a gentle smile, "they don't help you, chica. That kind of thinking messes with your head."

Jamal nodded slowly. "Yeah... NINA says the same thing. She says remembering things too clearly can be dangerous."

The microwave dinged.

Larry opened the door and pulled out the popcorn, careful not to chip a nail as he ripped open the bag. As the sweet scent of caramel butter filled the kitchen, he divided it between two striped bowls. Then, with a practised sway, he strutted across the stone floor and set them down on the island counter.

"Xiexie," Jamal murmured, reaching with a slender arm. He delicately pinched a piece of popcorn between the tips of his shiny, fire-engine red nails, popped it between his matching glossy lips, and began to chew. "I hope the show's good tonight. Do you think Gabriela will find out Alejandro's not really her brother?"

Larry giggled, tilting one of his pumps onto its towering stiletto heel to ease the pressure on the balls of his aching feet. "Ay, por Dios, I've been waiting for that for two whole weeks."

Jamal smiled faintly, then tilted his head, studying the stunning Latina in front of him - his brain telling him that his oldest friend was, in fact, a stranger. "Luisa..." he said softly. "You ever think... what if this isn't real?"

Larry's smile faltered. "What you mean, querida?"

"I mean..." Jamal shifted atop his stool, the squeak of his leather miniskirt punctuating the silence. "What if this—" he gestured around the pastel kitchen, then down at himself, "—isn't really who we are? Like... what if the people in those soap operas are like us? And while we're watching them... someone else is watching us?"

The idea caught Larry off guard. It was absurd—yet somehow, it made a strange kind of sense. His life was controlled by NINA. Cameras tracked his every move. He was told when to wake up, what to wear, what to eat, and at what time. He fluttered his long lashes, looked up at the ceiling, and let the idea settle.



"Maybe is possible," he said softly. "But I remember this guy I dated once. He was really into all that science stuff. He told me about some razor thingy... I don't remember the details, but it's like, when you got many answers, the simple one is always the right one. It's like a rule of the universe."

Jamal's eyes widened. "Wow. That's deep. You're like... super smart, Luisa."

Larry flipped his ponytail and rolled his eyes in exaggerated sass. "I have been told that before, cariño. So maybe let's not overthink things, hmm? And especially not now, our show is about to start."

Jamal slid off the stool with a soft groan, wobbling briefly before steadying himself against the counter.

"Luisa?" he asked, looking up. "Is it a little weird to wear high heels all the time? Even in the house? Is that normal?"

Without turning, Larry reached for his popcorn bowl and chuckled. "There you go, thinking too much again, chica. In Colombia, we always dress to impress. I bet it's the same in China, no?"

Jamal gave a quiet, thoughtful nod. "I guess... yeah. It must be."

"And anyway," Larry added with a playful sway of his hips, "putting these legs in flats would be a crime, no?" He placed his manicured hands around the bowl, his glistening purple acrylics splaying out and forcing him to cradle it with his palms.

Jamal nodded, mimicking the same awkward grip. "You're right," he said firmly. "I do feel taller in heels. More... natural."

They stood in silence for a moment, facing each other - two strangers shaped into something else, sharing an unspoken understanding neither dared put into words. Then, with a faint nod, they turned.

Larry led, his hips rolling and his backside bouncing. Jamal followed a step behind, his shorter legs working twice as hard to keep pace, causing the click of their heels to be slightly out of sync.

Neither said a word as they tottered into the living room, bowls awkwardly cradled in hands burdened by absurdly long nails. Their makeup-caked faces were unrecognisable from the ones they were born with and their curvaceous bodies were the kind their former male selves might have once fantasised about. Dressed more for a nightclub than a quiet evening in, the two men made their way to the sofa, ready to watch their soap opera as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Chapter 12: A Glitch in the System

Victor Crane twitched in his seat, fingers tapping a nervous rhythm against his thigh as a bead of sweat traced a slow path down his temple. On either side of him, he could feel the weight of their stares - Agent Munroe drilling into him with sharp disapproval, Director Wallace radiating a colder, heavier kind of judgment. He kept his gaze locked on the table, knowing the moment he spoke would be the point of no return.

“There was... a minor hiccup,” he admitted, the words tasting sour as they left his mouth. “But I’ve nearly resolved the issue.”

“A minor hiccup?” Munroe snapped, her tone sharp. “You got locked out of your own system, Victor. That’s not a hiccup - that’s gross negligence. And with lives on the line, instead of reporting it, you tried to cover it up!”

Victor inhaled slowly, hands clenched in his lap. “All I can do is apologise,” he said, eyes fixed on the table. “I was... ashamed. I thought I could fix the problem before bringing it to you.”

Munroe opened her mouth again, but Wallace silenced her with a raised hand. “This is deeply disappointing, Victor,” she said, calm but stern. “There will be consequences. But first, show us the witnesses - current status and visuals. I want a full update.”

“Yes, Director,” Victor gulped, picking up his tablet. With trembling fingers, he tapped at the screen until the large monitor on the wall flickered to life, drawing a sharp gasp from Agent Munroe.

Onscreen appeared a striking Latina with a curvaceous figure and long, wavy auburn hair cascading down to her waist. She wore a cropped, low-cut purple top that highlighted her narrow waist and deep, eye-catching cleavage. A short, pleated green skirt sat high on her thighs, revealing long, flawless legs balanced atop towering purple pumps with heels that defied logic. Every detail screamed woman - and a beautiful one at that - from her purple nails, long, glossy and manicured to perfection, to her face, a masterclass in cosmetic enhancement. Perfectly microbladed brows arched above dramatic, made-up eyes fringed with fluttering lashes. Her button

nose sat neatly above a pouty pair of lips - now filled far beyond their original size. And yet, beneath all that glamour, there was a flicker of sadness behind her eyes.



“Larry Stone is now Luisa Diamante, a former dancer from Cartagena,” Victor began, pausing for a moment before continuing. “To keep him safe, NINA concluded that the most effective approach was to reshape him into someone entirely unrecognisable - the polar opposite of what those hunting him would ever expect to find.”

Director Wallace remained silent, her eyes fixed on the image displayed on the screen. The transformation was beyond anything she had anticipated. Her expression betrayed little, but the pause was heavy with thought. When she finally spoke, her voice was measured but firm.

“This is quite the unbelievable transformation, Doctor,” she said. “And while I can understand how a machine might arrive at this conclusion from a purely logical standpoint, I fail to see how this version of Mr Stone is going to be able to take the stand and give his witness statement.”

“There was a conflict in the coding,” Victor explained. “Between the directive to keep the witnesses safe and the requirement for them to appear in court. NINA prioritised their safety and dismissed the courtroom appearance as too dangerous. Without that condition in place, she focused entirely on building them new identities - from language and movement, right down to fabricated birth certificates and educational histories.”

Agent Munroe leaned forward, voice sharp. “Can it be reversed?”

Victor hesitated. “In theory, yes,” he said carefully.

Munroe’s voice cut through the room. “I’m not interested in your theories, Victor. Can these men be made to look like themselves again before their court dates? - yes or no?”

Victor’s fingers tightened around the edge of his tablet. “With the knowledge I currently have,” he said, “I’m almost certain the answer is yes. But I need more time to confirm it definitively.”

Munroe exhaled loudly, her frustration clear.

“Let’s put a pin in this for now,” Director Wallace said, cutting through the tension. “Right now, I want to see the other witnesses. Has Jamal Lewis undergone a similarly... extreme transformation?”

“Unfortunately so,” Victor sighed, tapping away once more. “You might even argue it’s more extreme.”

The image on the large screen changed, prompting another gasp from Agent Munroe.

Gone was the tall, lanky Black man who had once soared over bars as an Olympic high jumper. In his place stood a petite, pale-skinned Asian woman. He couldn't have been much over five feet tall now- although the towering red leather platform knee-high boots he wore, with their lofty eight-inch heels, helped disguise that.

The boots rose over slim legs sheathed in sheer black nylon, showing no trace of the powerful muscle tone that used to define them. A skintight black leather miniskirt clung to his curved hips, leading up to a frilly red top held in place by two delicate shoulder straps.

His face was unrecognisable from what it had once been - plump lips gleamed with glossy red lipstick, and his almond-shaped eyes were rimmed with dark liner and framed by thick, curled lashes. Perfectly arched brows crowned the look, and his silky black hair had been styled into two playful, high pigtails, completing a picture that was anything but masculine.



“Jamal Lewis is now Jia Lin Liu - or Jaclyn Liu, in English,” Victor stated, keeping his tone measured. “An overseas student from Shanghai who

chose to stay on after graduation. Fluent in Mandarin, they have been equipped with everything he needs to thrive in their new life.”

Director Wallace didn't look away from the image. Her eyes, slightly wider than usual, studied every detail. “And what exactly do you mean by ‘equipped to thrive,’ Doctor?”

Victor cleared his throat. “Each witness has been retrained to move, speak, and carry themselves in a way that matches their new identity. In addition, NINA has used subliminal messaging and reinforcement techniques to implant supporting memories into their psyche.”

“Implant?” Agent Munroe cut in, her expression hardening. “Are you telling us these men have been brainwashed into thinking they're somebody else?”

“No, not brainwashed,” Victor replied quickly, shaking his head. “Their original memories are still intact. What NINA did was overlay new ones - fabricated backstories, full of life events consistent with their new identities. It's a failsafe. If they are ever questioned, they'll have a lifetime of believable details to fall back on.”

“That's completely unethical,” Munroe snapped. “We work for the government, Victor. We're here to protect people, not mess with their minds. You can't possibly know what kind of long-term damage that could cause.”

“I understand your concern,” Victor said, his voice subdued. “And I agree with you. It was another unfortunate incident of conflicting commands. When tasked with building them new lives while ensuring their safety, NINA took what she calculated to be the most effective - if extreme - solution.”

“And how have they responded to this... programming?” Wallace asked, her tone unreadable.

“From my initial observations, each subject has responded differently. Michael shows the highest level of internalisation - he's begun to believe in the persona NINA created for him and will need to be monitored closely.

Jamal and Larry, on the other hand, appear to be adapting exactly as intended. They're performing their roles instinctively, but their true personalities remain intact beneath the surface. They haven't forgotten who they are - and they're fully aware of what's happening around them."

He paused before continuing. "Javier is different. He hasn't internalised anything. He's pretending - going through the motions, saying what NINA wants to hear - but none of it has stuck. I believe his training has allowed him to resist the psychological conditioning in a way the others couldn't."

Agent Munroe looked ready to launch into another objection, but once again, Director Wallace silenced her with a raised hand. "This is another discussion we'll revisit shortly," she said, her voice calm but commanding. "But first, I want to see the remaining witnesses. And since we're already discussing Javier Roca, let's bring him up."

The room fell into silence, save for the rhythmic tapping of Victor's fingers against his tablet. A moment later, the screen changed again. This time, Agent Munroe didn't gasp - not because the transformation was any less shocking, but because she had been bracing herself for it. She expected something outrageous... and that's exactly what she got.

The image on screen revealed an alarmingly thin blonde woman dressed almost entirely in pink. Her long platinum hair spilt over her shoulders - half pulled into a high ponytail, the rest cascading freely around a bubblegum pink boob tube that encircled her narrow chest. The little top cut off to reveal a slim, toned waist, beneath which sat a white PVC miniskirt that looked as if it had been painted on. Her slender arms tapered into hands tipped with claw-like pink acrylics, while her stick-thin legs, balanced atop glossy pink pumps with stilt-like heels, appeared impossibly long.

Her expression was tightly composed, lips frozen in a glossy pink pout - but her bright blue eyes, ringed with thick, cartoonish lashes, betrayed an inner turmoil. Behind the flawless makeup and Botox-filled facade was a man screaming in silence, trapped inside a body that no longer felt like his own.



“You’re telling me that’s The Ox?” Agent Munroe snapped, trying to sound collected, though the disbelief cracked through her voice. “The man who’s pulled off the most successful undercover operations in DEA history? The same guy who broke the bench press record at Quantico?”

“Yes,” Victor replied, taking a deep breath. “That’s him. He’s now known as Daisy Whitmore. Born in London to a British father and an American mother. Daisy relocated to California with her mother after the divorce.

Silence followed. All eyes shifted to Director Wallace. Her expression was unreadable. Then, without missing a beat, she gave the faintest shake of her head and spoke. “Show me Michael Tanaka.”

Victor nodded and swiftly switched the image, replacing the anorexic-looking blonde with a far curvier figure. Michael Tanaka no longer looked

Japanese - nor remotely male. The heavily feminised figure on screen commanded attention, one hand perched confidently on a curvy hip, orange acrylic nails catching the light. The tight skirt beneath his palm barely contained the breadth of his backside, and below that, a pair of shapely legs flowed into towering orange platform heels. His torso was squeezed into a skin-tight orange corset top that pushed up a generous amount of cleavage and carved an hourglass silhouette. His ebony skin gleamed under the overhead lights, hairless and immaculately presented.

His face, like the other witnesses, had been drastically altered to appear uber feminine - perfectly arched brows, fluttering lashes, and jutting lips coated in gloss. The cascade of silky blonde hair that framed his face had been meticulously styled - no doubt his handiwork, now that hairstyling was second nature to him.



Nobody spoke, Victor, feeling their unease, pressed on. “Michael Tanaka is now Melody Jackson,” he said, his voice cracking slightly. “Originally from Texas, Melody relocated to New York three years ago to train under a renowned hairstylist at their flagship salon.”

The silence lingered, thick and uneasy, as the image on the screen continued to command the room’s full attention.

Finally, after what seemed like an age, Director Wallace turned toward Agent Munroe. “Sarah,” she said firmly, “any further questions?”

“Yes,” Agent Munroe said, turning sharply to Victor Crane. “Just one. How complete are these transformations, Doctor? Are these men still men?”

“Yes,” Victor muttered with an uneasy nod. “Their hormonal and chemical balances have been significantly altered by a range of advanced treatments. However, if you’re referring to what lies between their legs - then for now, that still remains.”

“For now?” Munroe snapped, shaking her head in disbelief. She turned to Director Wallace. “This project is out of control. I’m formally requesting its immediate termination.”

“Termination?” Victor exclaimed, his voice rising in panic. “We can’t... not yet. Shutting it down now would be catastrophic.”

“For whom, Victor?” Munroe shot back, eyes narrowed. “For you?”

“It’s... erm... complicated,” Victor stammered, glancing at Director Wallace with desperation in his eyes. “Director, if you give me just a few more weeks, I can fix this. I’m close. Really close to identifying the fault in the code.”

“Answer the question, Doctor,” Wallace replied, her tone steady and unreadable. “What exactly would be so catastrophic about pulling the plug?”

Victor hesitated. His hand raked through his greasy hair, his eyes darting between them. “Well... you see... at this moment in time... I don’t know the exact location of the witnesses.” he finally admitted. “If we shut the

system down now, they'll be stranded in the lives NINA has created for them - with no way for us to track them down."

Munroe's jaw dropped. "You've lost them?" she yelled. "I knew you were reckless, but I didn't think you were this much of a crackpot."

Wallace didn't react. She sat in silence, thinking. Then, with a single, decisive breath, she straightened in her chair and gave her verdict.

"As of now, Project Veil is officially terminated," she said coldly. "I expect full written reports from both of you in my inbox within 48 hours."

"But Director - are you certain?" Munroe pressed. "You heard him. What about the witnesses?"

Wallace exhaled slowly. "It's regrettable. But we've crossed a line, and there are too many unknowns to justify continuing. We'll do what we can to find them and provide support... but my decision stands." She paused, letting the weight of her words settle. "This experiment is over. We're done here."

Chapter 13: Happily Ever After

Veronica Tremont stepped out of the sleek black sedan, clutching her robe closed as a cool morning breeze swept across the driveway. The venue loomed before her - grand, elegant, and exactly as she'd imagined it through countless mood boards and Pinterest scrolls.

She paused at the bottom of the stone steps, drew a steadying breath, then began her slow ascent. Countless days of stress and planning had led to this moment, and her heart fluttered with a whirlwind of emotions - excitement, nerves, and the weight of anticipation.

Inside, the venue was already buzzing with activity - florists perfecting wall-mounted arrangements, assistants hurrying past with armfuls of supplies, and clipboard-wielding coordinators murmuring into discreet headsets. Veronica took it all in, watching as the results of her meticulous planning finally came to life. She had fine-tuned every detail, agonised over each decision - and now that the day had finally arrived, it all felt strangely surreal. The venue alone had taken four months to secure, and she'd travelled to three countries just to find the perfect fabric for her dress. The flowers had been flown in from Holland, the cake designer brought in from Vienna, and the photographer booked a full year in advance. But above all, she'd obsessed over one thing: her appearance!

That was why she'd hired them - the most exclusive beauty team in the state. A quartet of glamorous professionals known simply as the glam squad. They didn't advertise. They didn't post on social media. Their clients came through whispered recommendations passed between the wives and daughters of the ultra-wealthy.

According to her planner, they were "the best money could buy" - so skilled it bordered on the supernatural. They were praised not only for their artistry and discretion but also for their eerie synchronicity. Veronica couldn't wait to meet them.

And as she opened the door to her bridal suite, she wasn't disappointed.

She paused in the doorway, momentarily caught off guard by the sight of four bewitching figures standing in a perfect line at the centre of the room - each one unique in appearance, yet together forming a seamless, curated whole. Then, as if rehearsed, they all smiled and chirped in unison, “Welcome, Miss Tremont,” - their voices blending into a single harmony. Something about it made the hairs on Veronica’s neck prickle.

Cautiously, Veronica stepped inside, offering a polite smile as the door clicked shut behind her. Her eyes swept the room, pausing briefly on her exquisite wedding gown displayed on a mannequin. But that didn’t hold her gaze for long - she was completely transfixed by them: The glam squad. Just as striking as the photos in her research had promised. Perhaps more so.

Her eyes fell first on the woman to the far left - ethereal in soft pink, wearing a halter-neck dress that clung to her bony frame like silk on porcelain. Her white pumps appeared impossibly high, the thick ankle straps emphasising the fragility of her slender legs. Her platinum blonde hair was swept into an elegant, braided updo, regal and immaculate. Her huge, pouty lips were glossed bubblegum pink, and her bright blue eyes shimmered beneath pastel eyeshadow and sweeping lashes. Around her neck, a double-looped silver necklace glinted under the overhead lights, her heart-shaped earrings catching the same glow.

Daisy Whitmore, Veronica recognised. Makeup, skincare, and injectables. She looks almost too fragile to be real.

Next to Daisy stood an olive-skinned goddess in a high-low ball gown of deep purple, speckled with shimmer that caught the light like stars in motion. The front hemline revealed shapely legs perched atop forest green platform heels, giving her a towering presence, while long, soft caramel-coloured curls - sprouting from a ponytail - cascaded down her back. Her shimmering green eyeshadow was perfectly blended, offset by glossy coral lips and lashes so long they brushed her brow bone.

Luisa Diamante, Veronica noted. The nail specialist. A true beauty to behold.

Third in line, a curvy, ebony-skinned woman stood in a burnt-orange gown that left little to the imagination, hugging every inch of her curvy silhouette. The plunging neckline showed off an impressive cleavage, held aloft with no sign of a bra. Her legs - long, smooth, and gleaming - peeked from the thigh-high slit, made even longer by towering white sandals with impossibly thin heels. Her silver hair was drawn up into a high ponytail, falling in glossy waves behind her back, with a thick braid sweeping around her temples. Her makeup was bold - high-gloss lips, smokey eyes, and lashes like spider legs.

Melody Jackson, Veronica recalled. Hair and piercings. I read she trained under that celebrity stylist in Manhattan. God, that contouring... she looks like a painting come to life.

And finally, on the far right stood a petite Asian woman, though her black platform Mary-Jane pumps - with their towering heels and gladiator-style straps - elevated her to almost average height. Her deep red gown clung to her shapely figure, the plunging back and daring thigh-high slit lending her an almost theatrical presence. Sheer black tights softened the curves of her short legs, completing the bold yet refined look. Her glossy, black hair was styled into a sleek, vintage-inspired style, each curl perfectly gelled in place with meticulous care. Her makeup was perfection: intense red lips, strong contouring, and thick, exaggerated lashes that cast shadows over her cheekbones. Long, red acrylic nails curled gently as she adjusted a gold heart pendant resting at her collarbone. Matching hoop earrings framed her face, swinging subtly each time she moved.

Jaelyn Liu, Veronica remembered. Specialist in brows and lashes. She looks like she's never had a single hair out of place in her life.



“It's so lovely to finally meet you,” Daisy said, taking the lead as she waved a bony hand tipped with claw-like pink nails. Her British accent was airy and sweet, floating from lips so full they barely closed all the way. “You look radiant already, sweetie. But just you wait - we’re going to make sure you absolutely glow for your big day.”

Internally, Javier winced. "Here we go again," he thought.

This would be the twenty-eighth wedding in the past eleven months. Twenty-eight brides with their unrealistic expectations and teary monologues about finding their soulmate. Twenty-eight times he'd had to smile through filler-swollen lips and tell someone how “lucky” they were, when all he felt was hollow.

“I’ll be doing your makeup today,” he continued, “I’ve looked over your colours and I can’t wait to help create the best version of you.”

"It's hard to remember what the best version of me even looks like anymore," he thought bitterly. "I've been deep undercover before but this time it feels like I've been buried and forgotten about."

Beside him, Luisa took her cue with a dramatic flick of her voluminous curls. “Hola, preciosa,” she purred, her voice rich with a well-rehearsed Colombian lilt. “I’m Luisa, and I’ll be taking care of your nails today, Mami.”

Larry’s hips swayed slightly as he gestured toward Veronica’s hands, but his mind was elsewhere. "Fifteen years I spent on construction sites," he thought. "Ran a crew of thirty men. Poured concrete, scaled scaffolding, broke up fights on payday. And now? I push back cuticles and sculpt useless nails. All that experience - what a waste!"

"You have beautiful hands," he added aloud. “I’m thinking something elegant, timeless. French maybe, or ombre with a little diamond detail, Si?”

Next up to speak was Melody, her expression bright and friendly. “Sugar, you made the right call bringin’ us in today,” she said, her Southern drawl as rich as molasses. “I’m Melody - I’ll be workin’ on your hair. Got a few ideas in mind, but we’ll see what speaks to us., alright?”

Michael already knew what he was going to do - every bride wanted the same thing: whatever was trending that month. It would be a few hours of tedium, and inwardly, he was drowning. "I had a corner office in Midtown. I read markets like other people read menus. I gave TV interviews in bespoke suits. And now? I debate whether a tiara clip will sit right with a soft curl or if it would look better with a waterfall braid. Oh! When will it end."

Finally, it was Jaclyn's turn, speaking in a thick Chinese accent. “I doing your brows and lashes,” she said softly. “We open up the eyes, soften the shape and create allure... make you a whole new person.”

Jaclyn's voice was calm and professional - but inside, Jamal's was tired and bored. "Yeah right," he thought bitterly. "New person... Try being turned from a world-class athlete into a miniature Chinese doll. I cleared two metres in Tokyo. Had Nike sniffing around for endorsements. And now? I can barely reach the middle shelves at the grocery store."



After giving their little speeches, the four former men eased back into position and waited - smiles fixed, backs straight, heels planted. This caused Veronica to hesitate for a moment, her expression flickering with confusion, before brightening into a wide, delighted grin, realising it was her turn to speak. "Thank you, ladies. That's wonderful to hear," she beamed. "I can't wait to get started."

For her, this was the beginning of a perfect day. For Larry, Jamal, Javier, and Michael, it was just another day of going through the motions in a life none of them had chosen, waiting for a court date that would never come. Their futures erased, their pasts buried behind feminised frames and altered faces.

NINA, in her cold brilliance, had created the perfect trap - four strangers living the same lie, too afraid to speak the truth in case they were the only one pretending, too consumed by the fear of being exposed to suspect the others.

There would be no escape!

No rescue!

No returning to the lives they once knew!

Only more ceremonies. More bridezillas. More lies - while bound in designer dresses and tottering on sky-high heels.

But at least they had each other - to paint, polish, and maintain their perfect appearances forevermore.

The End