Charged with a crime he did not commit, a man is subjected to an unusual interrogation technique, by a bureaucracy that will admit to no mistakes.

Dedication

To TG captioners everywhere,

And to those gentle souls
who treat their words
with the same care
they bring to their pictures.

Respect the Reader.

Amanda Hawkins
The knock on my door was long and loud, and repeated itself after a pause of no more than three seconds. Clearly someone in dire need of a pit stop.

“Coming, already,” I yelled, drying my hands. When you’re up to your elbows in dishwater, it’s always the door or the phone.

I thought it was one of my neighbors, since strangers have to buzz in through the intercom—but it wasn’t. The stranger was tall and clean-shaven, with sharp features and an old-fashioned snap-brim hat pulled low on his forehead. He gave me the once-over. “Kit Carlson?”

I nodded. I was about to ask him how he got into the building, but thought the better of it when he flashed a badge in my face.

“Agent Thurston. We need to talk.” He barged through the doorway, followed by two short, stocky men in rain-soaked black jackets. One of them shut the door. The letters “FBI” were printed across his back.

I backpedaled into the living room. “What’s going on?”

The agent took his time answering, studying the room while one of his men darted into my bedroom. The third man stood with his back to the door. “What’s going on, Mr. Carlson… is the little trip you took last month.”

“Trip? You mean out to the West Coast?”

A grim smile. “Drop the pretense. We know where you went.”

_Pretense?_ “I was in Oakland. A buddy of mine had Giants tickets.”

“I’m sure he did.” Thurston placed himself between me and the sliding door to my balcony. “And I’m sure he’d swear on a six-foot stack of Bibles that you were right there with him.” A smirk. “What’s the going rate for perjury these days? Or did he owe you a favor?”

“I didn’t pay anything. The ticket was a present.”

“I’m sure you’d like us to believe that. We know better.”

“No you don’t. I _was_ at the game.” I shrugged helplessly. “It was the World Series opener. If you’ve got a few minutes, I could give you the blow-by-blow.”

He made a dismissive gesture. “Irrelevant. I’m sure you would’ve studied the game, it being such a key aspect of your cover story.”

“Cover story? But I didn’t—”
“Save it for the judge, Carlson,” Thurston snapped. “We know for a fact you were out of the country.” He stepped closer, his voice softening. “How did they get to you? Threats? Blackmail? Or do you just hate America?”

My jaw sagged. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve got a daughter, you scum. A little girl. When I think—” He took a deep breath through clenched teeth. “Do you even give a damn who your goddamn bombs might hurt? The innocent civilians—the children?”

I gasped. “B-b-bomb? What bomb?”

“You bastard. If it was up to me I’d shoot you right here. But that ain’t the way we roll at the Bureau.” He twisted the collar of my sweatshirt. “If you won’t talk here, you’ll talk downtown.” His head jerked. “Take him.”

I was grabbed by the arms and propelled into the night, to a street slick with fallen water and a black SUV with tinted windows. I sat in the back, an agent on either side, while Thurston rode shotgun. There was no siren, yet for the next forty-five minutes we hit every green light in sight. What are the odds?

*?

They left me in a tiny cell, not much longer than the cot that occupied half the floorspace, and only twice as wide. Sink, toilet and enough open space to set one foot in front of the other three times—that was my world. At least it was clean.

There was no window, just a couple of air ducts high on the walls—one bringing warm air into the cell, the other sucking it out—and a ten-foot ceiling that was one big fluorescent light. I had the choice of standing—facing the toilet, the sink, or the big metal door—or lying down, so I lay down. The light stayed on. All night.

Breakfast was a fruit plate shoved through a slot at the base of the door: cut-up chunks of orange, mango and pineapple. I ate, and washed, and eventually the door sighed open. Agent Thurston stepped in.

“They do a lovely brunch here, don’t they?” He nudged the empty plate with his foot. “It’s certainly fresh. I understand the grocer delivers every day.”

I sighed. “Isn’t there anything else? Eggs? French toast?”

“We say ‘Freedom toast’ around here. But no—you’ll receive a little protein from time to time. Other than that, I’m afraid it’s fruit and more fruit. You’ll lose weight, but that’s part of the plan.” He grinned. “You won’t get scurvy.”

“What about coffee?”

His expression clouded. “You can drink from the sink.” He turned on his heel and addressed the guard in the corridor. “Bring him next-door.”
Next-door was a small office, twice the size of my cell, equipped with a heavy oak desk, a padded desk chair on wheels, and an unpadded wooden chair bolted to the middle of the floor. Thurston was seated behind the desk, leaving me with the less comfortable option. No surprise there.

He propped his elbows on the desk. “Sleep well?”

“Not really.” I wriggled my butt around but the seat was flat. It wasn’t built for comfort. “It might help if the light went off now and then.”

“Sadly, we appear to have misplaced the switch. However, if your memory has improved today, I might be able to spare someone to look into it.”

“My memory?”

“Your recent trip to Pakistan.”

“Never been there.”

“Really. So you still cling to this fiction about a baseball game?”

“Why do you keep saying that? I was there. Giants, Tigers, AT&T Park—or is it a stadium? Whatever. I wish it was still Candlestick. The Giants scored one in the first, three in the third, and were up 8-1 going into the ninth.”

He shrugged. “Anyone can read a stat sheet.”

“For christ’s sake—I remember it! Sandoval hit three homers. He tied a major league record for a World Series game.”

“I know. I watched the game on TV… as did you, although probably not live.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He leaned back, steepling his fingers. “Let’s see. You met a known terrorist sympathizer at the border. You drove to Mexico City. You caught a night flight to Pakistan, changing planes in Bangkok. The game would’ve been over by then. Perhaps they taped it for you in Lahore, so you could watch it before proceeding to the al-Qaeda training camp. I doubt they’d let you see it at the camp. They’re rather prickly about anything that smacks of Western decadence.”

My eyes bugged out. “Al-Qaeda? Is that what this is about?”

He looked thoughtful. “Of course, you’d need to see it more than once to be able to talk about it as if you’d been there.”

“I was there!”

He leaned forward again. “My people are examining your apartment as we speak. They will find that game on your PVR, won’t they?”
“Well, sure. I recorded all the games.” I pushed on the seat with both hands, to lessen the pressure on my butt. Unfortunately, the chair had no armrests.

“And you watched them again recently, correct?”

“I guess so, yeah. They did win the Series.”

“In other words, you studied those games. Following your return from the terrorist training camp where you learned how to kill your fellow Americans.”

“I’m gonna say ‘no’.”

“Cut the comedy. As I said, my agents are going through your apartment with a real fine-tooth comb. They’re certain to find something that will knock a hole in your cover story.” A sly smile crept across his face. “People like you always slip up. Always. A matchbook from a Lahore nightclub. A stick of al-Qaeda bubble gum. You never know what it’ll be. I once found a map of the North-West Frontier Province, marked with the locations of terrorist safe houses and the spot where bin Laden was killed; all wrapped in plastic and stuffed down the back of a toilet. They will find something, I assure you. Think on that.”

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The light never went off in my cell. But the parade of meals continued and that became the rhythm that defined my days. Lunch was a wedge of cheese, an apple and a banana. Dinner included meat—in the form of a slice of ham or beef, or a piece of chicken—and a fruit platter with chunks of tomato, pineapple, cantaloupe and mango; not to mention strawberries, cherries, plums, pears, grapes and kiwifruit. Not all at once, mind you. The selection varied from day to day, with no discernible pattern.

A week later I was back in the small office. “You think you’re clever,” Thurston said, jabbing a finger toward me, “but you’re not.”

“Didn’t find anything, huh?”

His eyes widened. “Then you admit it! You destroyed the incriminating evidence before our arrival. Who tipped you off?”

I shook my head. “There never was any evidence.”

“I see. Well played, sir.” The agent leaned back, rolling a pen between his fingers. “You carefully avoided keeping anything that might give the game away. Very clever. You may well be the smartest—and therefore the most dangerous—would-be terrorist I’ve ever encountered.”

“This is ridiculous,” I said. “I’m not a would-be terrorist at all.”

“So you’re an actual terrorist? Is that a confession?”
“What? No! How many times do I have to tell you—I’m not a terrorist!”

He sighed. “How disappointing. That really sounded like a breakthrough.”

I spread my hands. “Look, you didn’t find what you thought you’d find, so now you know I’m innocent—right? This is all a big mistake.”

“The Bureau doesn’t make mistakes.”

“For Christ’s sake—you must’ve talked to Tony by now, right?”

“Ah, yes. Your friend in Oakland. We spoke to him. He was quite informative.”

“And he told you I was at the game?”

“He did… at first. Then we explained what was at stake, and what he had to lose by lying, and that we knew he was lying. After that, he chose to cooperate.”

I felt sweat beading on my forehead. “What did he tell you?”

“He admitted that you gave him a thousand dollars to tell people that you attended the Giants game with him. You told him some story about being sued for child support by a girl you dated but never even had sex with.”

I could barely breathe. “Tony said that?”

“He did. After some prompting, of course. He also admitted that he drove you to a bus station on the day of the Giants game, and observed you boarding a GotoBus to San Diego.”

“That’s a lie! Why would he say that?”

Thurston shrugged. “Why would you lie? We all have our reasons.”

Back in my cell, I discovered that someone had installed a flat-screen TV on the wall facing the cot. It was turned on, but the set had no OFF button or any other way of lowering the volume or changing the channel. I looked but could find no remote control. Even so, after a solid week of staring at four brick walls and an over-bright ceiling, it came as a welcome change.

The programming was simple: endless reruns of shows like Without a Trace, Criminal Minds and Numb3rs—pretty much anything that portrayed the FBI in a positive light—mixed with older series like The F.B.I., The Man From U.N.C.L.E., and even The Prisoner. I could totally relate to that one.

The theme got old after a few days and I came to treasure the odd episode of Get Smart they tossed in, like a bone to a starving dog. A dog that had eaten way too much fruit of late and was seriously thinking of biting someone.

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Thurston came straight to the point. “You’re a smart man, Carlson. Do you know what we do to terrorists in this country?”

I sat slumped in the wooden chair. With the TV blaring night and day, I hadn’t been sleeping much. “Gimme some cheese and I’ll tell you,” I muttered.

“Never mind that! If you spent less time worrying about your next meal, and more about your current situation, we’d probably have this sorted by now.” He sounded frustrated. “All right, I’ll tell you what we do to terrorists. We torture the bastards, that’s what! How do you like them apples?”

*More fruit.* I let the air sigh out of me. “Okay, I’m worried now.”

“You should be. You’re in a very sticky situation.” He leaned back. “Of course, we don’t do that sort of thing ourselves. Not anymore. However, I’m sure you’ve heard of ‘rendition’. That’s when we send criminals like yourself to some other country, like Libya, where the secret police have no qualms about doing nasty things like pulling fingernails and frying genitals.” He sighed. “At least, they used to. Recent events have altered the landscape. Too many countries are paying more attention to the rule of law these days.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Ah, yes. Very perceptive.” He tapped the side of his head. “When I spoke of ‘we’ earlier I was referring to the country at large. To those of us in law enforcement, adherence to the law is a good thing. Rendition and torture are more of a ‘CIA thing’. We here at the Bureau are more enlightened.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Not so fast, Carlson. We have our own ways of making you talk. And by the time we’re done, you might just wish we’d opted for a little torture. The grass is always greener, you know.”

“What’re you gonna do? Make me watch reruns of *Gilligan’s Island* for the next fifty years?”

“Don’t tempt me, sir. It’s within my power to do just that.” He chuckled. “But no, our methods are rather more subtle.” He leaned forward, idly tapping on the desk. “Everyone knows that terrorists are extremists; they’re motivated by political or religious viewpoints far from the norm.” He snorted. “Look who I’m talking to. In your case, that would be a very conservative version of Islam.”

I squirmed in my seat. The man was born incapable of getting to the point.

“However, there is something that you all have in common, regardless of the specific religion.” He paused. “Any guesses? Never mind. It’s hatred of women.”
I sighed. “So it’s a *Sex and the City* marathon then? Or *Charlie’s Angels* reruns? *Designing Women*? What?”

He laughed. “Perhaps ‘hatred’ is too strong. ‘Fear’ might be more accurate. In any case…” He opened a drawer and set a small cut-glass bottle on the desk. “As someone who fears women, I think you’ll agree—nothing could possibly be worse than being a woman.” He uncapped the bottle and squirted me.

In the rush of sweet moisture that followed, I recognized the scent of pink roses. A very particular scent…

“You know it, I see. It’s Laura Rosé, an Italian brand.” He replaced the cap. “Your last girlfriend’s favorite perfume, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Theresa? You talked to her?”

“Of course. We’ve spoken to your family, friends, coworkers—anyone who might be able to shed some light on what made you turn to terrorism.”

“Oh, for Christ—not this again! I am not a terrorist!”

“Yes, yes, we’ve been through all that.” A long pause. “You must be wondering though—why the perfume?”

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

“It’s simple: you might as well get used to smelling like a woman… for the simple reason that you’re going to be one. Unless you cooperate, that is.”

I had to laugh. “That’s your big threat? Talk, you filthy terrorist, or we’ll make you wear a chiffon party dress with puffy sleeves! What’s next? Sitting me in a comfy chair? Jabbing me with a soft cushion?”

Thurston shot to his feet, sending his chair spinning across the floor. “Damn your oily hide! We’ll see if you can still laugh when you’re prancing around in a two-piece cocktail ensemble with pink satin heels!”

*  
The programming changed. The parade of FBI dramas was now interspersed with infomercials on make-overs, hairstyles, fashions, and even deportment advice on acting like a lady. Boring as hell, but there was nothing else to do.

It was terrifying the way my world had diminished. Where I once had work and home; family and friends; restaurants, movies and walks by the lake, now there was only this cell, a TV over which I had no control, and occasional excursions to nearby parts of the prison complex. My world was so small, so limited, so lacking in human contact, that I actually came to enjoy Agent Thurston and his relentless determination to pry from me information that did not exist.
Less enjoyable were the twice-daily sessions of intravenous therapy, which began the day after Thurston’s latest threat to turn me into a woman. It was definitely not a good sign.

At least, I assumed they were twice a day. One fell squarely between the orange-mango-pineapple and cheese-apple-banana meals, and the other came halfway between the latter and what I thought of as dinner. I’d be taken from the cell and strapped to a gurney in the corridor, where a nurse would insert an IV needle into my arm and hang a drip bag above my head.

No one bothered to tell me what it was. That was left to Agent Thurston.

“It’s hormones, Carlson. Female hormones. That’s right—estrogen.” He loomed over me as I lay on the gurney, grinning and rubbing his hands together like a cartoon villain. “And did I happen to mention that I am the inventor of this bold new interrogation technique?”

“Congratulations. Used it often, have you?”

The grin faded. “Not as often as I’d like. This is kind of a dry run. Or a ‘proof of principle’, as my superiors call it. But rest assured; you might be the first terrorist to become a woman, but you certainly won’t be the last.”

“That’s a relief. I’d hate to be alone.”

“You won’t be, Carlson. You’ll never be alone again. I haven’t quite worked out what will happen… you know, after the change. Perhaps some sort of secretarial position… No, wait—I’ll put you to work in a brothel. That’s right, you’ll be a prostitute! Nothing but sex, all day long. With FBI agents. How’s that sound?”

I grimaced. “Seems like an awful lot of trouble to go to. All for nothing.”

“Not nothing, Carlson. Information. Are you ready to talk?”

“Sure thing. You know where to find me.”

“Tell me the name of your contact in al-Qaeda. The truth this time.”

“I already told you the truth. You didn’t want it.”

“You’re wrong about that. The truth is precisely what I want.”

The bag was half-empty by now. God only knew what it was doing to my body. “I think you want me to lie,” I said slowly, “because that’s the only way you can possibly justify treating me like this.”

Thurston pounded the gurney. “Stop twisting my words! If I wanted you to lie, I’d have said so by now. I want the truth!”

“Sure you do. The ‘truth’ where I’m a terrorist and you’re some kind of hero.”
“Yes, that truth,” he said eagerly. “Is that it? Are you confessing?”

“No, that was the lie,” I said tiredly. “The truth is, I’m just a baseball fan.”

“Have it your way, Miss Carlson. Have it your own way. I’m off to find you a sexy little nightgown, and you can damn well suck on it!”

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By the next day I was sure of it: there were fewer FBI procedurals and a lot more infomercials, although they weren’t actually selling anything. Most of the shows were instructional: the proper way to put on makeup, how to style long hair, how women speak, how ladies act and move. And my chest had become annoyingly itchy; I kept rubbing it, which felt good but offered no relief.

I was pretty sure it had something to do with the stuff they kept pouring into my veins. Thurston spilled the beans the next time he stopped by to gloat: the IV fluid was more than just estrogen, each dose also contained a few million retroviruses loaded with female DNA. In fact, the DNA belonged to my sister, requisitioned from her under the federal Patriot Act.

“The science is amazing,” he said brightly, as if he’d invented the procedure all by himself. “We replaced the virus’s original genetic code with your sister’s DNA. Once the retrovirus enters a host cell, the DNA is incorporated directly into the host’s genome.” A sly smile. “It’s permanent, you know. The process is slow, but in the end your male Y-chromosome will be completely erased. Every cell in your body will have double-X DNA. You’ll be female at the cellular level.”

I muttered something about him being insane.

“In essence,” he mused, “you’ll be genetically indistinguishable from your sister. Some might be tempted to call you her ‘clone’, although the definition doesn’t quite fit.” He leaned over me. “So, are you ready to talk about your little vacation in Central Asia?”

I shook my head. Arguing with the guy was pointless.

*

Back in the first week of my incarceration, I’d been issued a standard prison-issue jumpsuit, along with underwear and socks, all in white. Thereafter, I was given a fresh set every few days. My street clothes were never returned.

One day, the routine changed. Thurston marched into my cell, along with a pair of large guards, and dropped fresh laundry at the foot of my bed. But it was pink instead of white, and it sure as hell wasn’t a jumpsuit. “Put it on.”

I sat up, rubbing my chest and staring at the neatly-folded nightgown.
He frowned at me. “On the 24th of October, a Wednesday, you flew out of Benito Juárez International Airport, changed airplanes in Bangkok, and disembarked in Lahore, Pakistan. You’re going to tell me what you did next. Before you decline, think carefully about what we’re about to do to you.”

I was tired. This had gone far enough. “Fine. You got me. I went to Pakistan.”

He smiled. “Very good, Carlson. Now we’re getting somewhere. What happened once you got there?”

“Um… Somebody met me at the airport. I never found out his name.”

“What did he look like?”

“Uh… Short guy, dark hair, sort of a medium build—”

“That’s half the men in the country, Carlson! I want specifics!”

I struggled to imagine the scene. “He had a scar on his nose. Like it was broken.”

Thurston rolled his eyes. “Fine. Where did the man take you?”


“More specifically—somewhere near Peshawar, perhaps?”

“How’d you know? We went right through there.”

“Not a big city, is it. More of a town-sized place? Lots of mud huts?”

“Exactly. We were through in, like, five minutes.”

Thurston grimaced and turned to the guards. “He’s making it up. Do it.”

The larger of the two guards grinned at me. “Strip.”

I swallowed hard. My legs wouldn’t move.

The guards shrugged and grabbed me. Five minutes later I was alone again, only now I was naked and shivering. My linens had been swapped for silk sheets and a satin pillowcase with delicate lace trim. The nightgown was arranged neatly next to the pillow. I ignored it.

I threw myself on the bed and tried to focus on the efforts of agent Jack Malone to find somebody who had vanished without a trace, but the sheets were cold and my body heat didn’t seem to be changing that in any great hurry. Finally I stood up, rubbing my arms. It wasn’t my imagination: the room was getting cooler.

I felt the air intake. The grille was cold to the touch. So that was their game—a pretty darn effective game, I had to admit. They could afford to wait me out. I couldn’t afford to wait at all.
It wasn’t just a nightgown; there was lingerie too—for which I uttered a silent prayer of thanks, because it was too damn cold to worry about what these fabrics represented or even who might be watching and laughing their tails off.

Pantyhose first, because I was losing the feeling in my legs. As I slid into their nylon embrace, I noticed leg hairs falling to the floor, as if the fabric was slicing through them like a razor—which would be quite an invention, if true. (It wasn’t.) That was the first definite sign of what all that estrogen was doing to my body; or maybe the second, if you count that itch in my chest. I pulled the panty over my hips, flexing each leg in turn to stretch the fabric. They felt warmer already.

Then a pair of low-heel satin mules, to get my feet off the concrete floor.

Finally, the nightgown. Thank God, it was mostly cotton. It wasn’t even all that sexy, at least to me, in spite of Thurston’s threat. It was a classic Victorian-style garment with half-length cap sleeves, a round neck with gathered lace, and an embroidered bodice with lace trim. Nice, but traditional.

The hem barely covered my knees. I wrapped the loose folds around me and lay back down. Jack Malone had located his missing person. Good for him. I wished someone would put that much effort into finding me.

Then again, I’d pretty much had it up to here with the goddamn FBI.

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Thurston didn’t beat around the bush. “Are you ready to talk?”

I nodded solemnly. The wooden chair was easier to sit in, now that I was wearing heels. “I’ll tell you anything.”

“That’s better. The name of your al-Qaeda contact, please.”

I’d rehearsed this. “Abdullah ibn Silahu. I met him at college. He came to see me about a year ago and talked me into going to this camp. He texted me the details. It was him who met me at the airport in Lahore.”

“I see. And the man who drove you to Mexico City?”

“I never knew his name. It was only a few hours. We didn’t say much.”

Thurston tapped the desk with his pen, looking thoughtful, not bothering to write any of it down. “You’re a real piece of work, Carlson,” he said at length. “After all this and still you’re making up fresh lies.”

“I’m not lying,” I said quickly. “Isn’t this what you want?”

He frowned. “I want the truth.”

Not that again! “I’m trying to cooperate.”
“No, you’re stonewalling. Again.” He leaned forward, a worried look crossing his pinched features. “You do know what’s happening here, don’t you? The food, the hormones, the clothing… we’re turning you into a woman.”

“Don’t you think I know that? I’m the one growing tits!”

Thurston shook his head. “Most religious extremists would’ve given up by now. They’d be begging to cooperate. But not you.”

“I am begging!” I cried. “I’ll tell you any—”

“You seem to think that I want you to verify information I already know. Not so! I want you to tell me something I don’t know.”

I wrapped my arms around my chest, gathering in the folds of my nightgown. The office was colder than my cell. “I keep telling you, but you won’t listen,” I said softly. “I’m not a religious extremist. I’m not religious at all. I believe in some sort of God, I guess. But not any particular religion.”

He looked annoyed. “Have it your way, Miss Carlson. It’s time to up the ante. Just remember—you brought this on yourself.”

* 

There was a mirror, recently installed, over the sink. I studied my face. I’d been shaved, following my last meeting with Agent Thurston, which had scotched the sparse beard grown during weeks of captivity. That was days ago and it wasn’t growing back; not even a single hair. That was worrying.

At least it hadn’t affected the hair on my head; that was longer than ever.

I was more concerned about the iron lung, which was my private name for what Thurston called a hyperbaric chamber. It was bed-sized cylinder of thick acrylic, mounted horizontally and capped at both ends with steel airlocks. It was used to treat people using raised oxygen pressure and to decompress divers suffering from the bends. Apparently, this one was on loan from the Coast Guard.

“You’ll continue to receive intravenous estrogen,” Thurston explained, sounding all too pleased with himself, “while breathing pure oxygen under pressure. I won’t bore you with the details, but I’m told that it should increase the uptake of female DNA into your cells and thus accelerate the feminization process.”

I could only stare at the needle in my arm, dreading what was to come. The arm was entirely hairless, of course, following a session in the shower covered in depilatory cream. Just one more indignity among many.

“You’ve been provided with a breathing mask,” Thurston said. “It supplies normal air, which is 21 percent oxygen. It’ll be turned on every now and then, and you’ll
be prompted to place the mask over your nose and mouth. I strongly advise that you do exactly that. It’s meant to prevent oxygen toxicity, which can lead to lung damage, retinal detachment and seizures. Enjoy!”

Back to the mirror over the sink. Ever since it was installed, bolted to the wall with screws I had no way of loosening, I had the distinct impression that the damn thing was talking to me. Not in a magic-mirror “you are the fairest of them all” sort of way, but in a whisper that never quite resolved itself into actual words. I wasn’t even sure that the sound was coming from the mirror, but that was the only thing that had changed.

Maybe it was my imagination. The same whisper flowed through the iron lung as well, adrift on a river of oxygen, although the hum of the air compressor made it hard to be sure. The human mind is nothing if not creative and I was pretty far gone on the road to crazy. What else could it be?

* * *

“This is your last chance, Carlson. From here on in the changes we make are the kind that are difficult, if not impossible, to reverse.”

I sat on the bolted-down chair with hands clasped in my lap, legs together, and the loose folds of my nightie tucked neatly underneath. My muscles ached, my chest was sore, and my hair sprawled over my shoulders, loose and too long unwashed. In spite of all that, I actually felt pretty good.

Thurston stared at me, fingers drumming on his desk. “Well?”

I blinked at him, unsure of what to say. Finally, hesitantly—and not for the first time—I began describing my magical (and thoroughly imaginary) experience at the al-Qaeda training camp. I talked about the weapons they’d taught me to use, the tips they’d given me on setting up an improvised explosive device, the classes in Islamic doctrine, the sleeping arrangements, the food…

“Stop, stop—not all that again.” The agent stood up and perched on the corner of the desk. “We’re past all that. To be perfectly frank, we’ve known all along where the camps are located and what goes on there. America has all the spies, informants and satellites it needs to locate the terrorists. What we do need to know is where they’re going to strike next.”

“What makes you think I know?”

“Two reasons. You were there recently, and they sent you back right away. You may think you’re an expert in firing a Kalashnikov or setting an IED, but two weeks isn’t enough for any kind of proficiency. That means you’re a messenger. So either you know the plan, or you’re in contact with someone who does.”
I found myself fighting back tears; which was strange because I hadn’t cried since I was a little kid. “But I’m not! I don’t know anything!”

He shook his head. “Still with the lies. No, Miss Carlson, you do know something and you will tell us what you know. Eventually.”

I bit my lip. “Is it too late to ask for a lawyer?”

Thurston smiled. “It was never an option.” He resumed his seat behind the desk. “By the way, when you finally do get around to naming names—and you will—don’t bother trying to throw us off the scent by using someone from your family. Or any of your friends or coworkers, either. We’ve investigated every last one of them; everyone you’ve ever known, every place you’ve lived, every job you’ve ever had, all the way back to grade school.”

_Oh, God._ “What did you tell them?”

“The truth, of course.” He _humphed_. “You remember what ‘truth’ is, don’t you? It’s that thing you’ve been dancing around ever since you got here.”

My head slumped. “They think I’m a terrorist…”

“They know you’re a terrorist, Carlson. Same as I do. There’s a difference.”

“You’ve ruined my life,” I said, barely audibly.

“Not yet. But we’re getting there.”

“You made a mistake,” I said.

“We don’t make mistakes. Are you ready to cooperate?”

I said nothing. I was imagining what would happen if he ever let me go; no home to return to, no job, shunned by friends and family alike. _No life._

“Very well. Consider yourself warned. It’s time for Phase Two.”

My jaw dropped. “You mean—all this, the clothes, estrogen, everything you’ve done to me—it was all just phase _One_?”

Thurston smiled. His eyes drifted past me. A quick nod.

A hand clamped over my mouth; a hand with a wet cloth.

A wet cloth with a sickly-sweet scent.

And darkness. ●
I awoke staring up at a pink ceiling. Well, that was certainly long overdue. Having to squint every time I lay down was driving me nuts.

In fact, they’d really spruced up the whole cell. The brickwork was gone, or covered up. The floor was hardwood and there was a carpet under the bed. There was more furniture, the bathroom was an en-suite, the space was larger…

Okay, I’m not totally clueless. It was a different room.

I propped myself up on the pillows. There were a bunch of them, and the bed was a real bed instead of a cot, and it had a canopy, and it was much softer than what I was used to. The overall effect was definitely feminine.

I get it. A feminine bedroom for a feminine guy.

The TV screen mounted on the wall facing the bed chose that moment to light up. It began playing yet another rerun: Designing Women. Of course.

I swung my legs over the edge, then stopped, instinctively clutching at the pain. For some reason, my crotch was incredibly sore. I was still wearing a nightgown so it was easy to see what was wrong. No balls.

The bastards had mutilated me.

The door clanged open and Agent Thurston walked in. “Well, well, sleeping beauty awakes. It’s about time.”

I dropped the hem of my nightie. “What did you do?”

“Pretty obvious, isn’t it?” He sat on the stool in front of the vanity, crossing his legs in the manner of males everywhere—at the ankle—as if to remind me that I no longer needed to do the same.

“But why? I told you every—”

“You told me nothing. Maybe now you’ll realize just how serious this is.”

“You’re turning me into a woman.”

“As promised, yes. And I will—if you don’t give me the name of your contact.”

“I would if I could.”

“If I believed that, you wouldn’t be here.” He stood up. “I’ll let you think about that for a day or two, but after that it’s out of my hands. And yours as well, if you know what I mean. It’s your dick on the line.”

*
A guard wearing a bellhop uniform brought breakfast: a fruit salad with bite-size pieces of orange, mango, pineapple—and a croissant. All served on a silver tray. I could hardly believe it; a pastry with butter and everything! They even included a fork for the first time, and a small napkin folded diagonally in half. It was almost enough to make me forget the ache between my legs. Almost.

I ate facing the mirror. Apparently, while I was unconscious, they’d washed and styled my hair. It fell in soft waves to my shoulders, framing my face in a manner that was unquestionably feminine. I ran my fingers along my chin and down my throat. I certainly didn’t need a shave, and rather suspected I never would. They’d even trimmed my eyebrows.

I looked a lot like my sister. She was two years older and had shorter hair, but other than that… Twins? Clones? Were we now, in essence, the same person? It didn’t bear thinking about.

I wandered over to the window. At least now I’d know whether it was day or night outside. At the moment it appeared to be a sunny afternoon, which didn’t exactly tally with my sense of the time of year. It should be winter. I was looking into a garden; a square of unruly grass surrounded by flowers, backed by shrubbery, then a hedge and beyond that a stand of willow trees. Only a tiny patch of blue sky was visible. Insects flit from flower to flower and a gentle breeze rippled through the trees. A half-seen cloud drifted overhead.

Upon closer inspection, it wasn’t a window at all. It was a high-res viewscreen, playing a summer-garden screensaver. I watched for a good ten minutes and never saw it loop. At one point a white rabbit hopped through the scene, nibbling on flowers as it went.

Into the en-suite bathroom to check out, and use, the facilities. I didn’t need a bath but I took one anyway, with my hair pinned up, just for the novelty. Afterwards, I wore a short pink robe—from the back of the door—and dried off watching an old episode of *Charlie’s Angels*. I thought my hair looked a lot like Jacklyn Smith’s gorgeously thick ‘do, with the part in the middle and no bangs, although mine wasn’t quite as long. I really admired the way she kicked ass too.

I fantasized about doing exactly that to Agent Thurston, but in my heart I knew it wasn’t gonna happen. The guy had to be six-two and outweighed me by a hundred pounds. Funny how I never noticed that before.

I opened the robe to inspect my waist. I’d lost a lot of weight and my lower ribs were showing. If I’d been exercising I’d probably have a pretty good six-pack by now. As it was my abdomen was soft, and wouldn’t look out of place in a bikini.

Which was the whole point, I figured.
I pondered my situation. I’d tried telling the truth, until the words ‘Giants’ and ‘baseball’ had lost all meaning. I’d tried confessing. What else could I do?

Then it hit me. There was one thing I’d hadn’t tried. I checked the dresser. Sure enough, it was full of underwear: brassieres and body shapers, slips and panties, stockings and ankle socks and pantyhose, all in a variety of colors. And the closet was stuffed with blouses and skirts, dresses and skirt suits. There wasn’t a pair of pants in sight, of course, but that was only to be expected.

The drawer under the vanity was well stocked with makeup, and the jewelry box contained a tasteful selection of costume pieces and a few with real value, such as the string of pearls that caught my eye.

If I were to accept the mantle of womanhood, and really run with it—in a way that no religious extremist could even imagine—then maybe I could finally convince these idiots I was no terrorist. Yeah… It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Thanks to hours of instructional programming, I knew exactly what to do. The face was easy; a bit of foundation, then finishing powder. Blush to bring out the cheeks, then blending to taper the transition from one color to the other. It felt like I’d been doing it my whole life.

I penciled around my eyes, leaving the liner thin on top and smudging the lower half with a Q-tip, which made for a softer look. Taupe eye shadow over the lid, flaring to the sides, to enlarge the eye without looking overly made-up.

I used a soft pink liner on my lips, followed by cranberry-red lipstick. “Not too bright,” I seemed to recall my mother telling me; long, long ago, when I was but a little girl. “You don’t want to look cheap.”

*Girl?* I shook my head. Where on Earth had *that* come from?

I blotted my lips, and licked them to restore the shine.

I’d never cross-dressed before, but I certainly knew how, as if my subconscious had been dreaming of this moment all its life. I returned the robe to the bathroom and baby-powdered myself all over, paying extra attention to the area between my legs. The scar was already hard to see, and the pain had faded to a dull ache. I took some comfort from the fact that Thurston must have spared no expense in finding a good cosmetic surgeon.

Back to the bureau. A pair of nude pantyhose that fit amazingly well, then a pair of control-top panties. My waist certainly didn’t need the control, but I figured my manhood might—what was left of it, anyway. The thing looked terribly shrivelled and almost bloodless. Probably had estrogen to thank for that.

I slipped on a black C-cup brassiere and, surprisingly, filled it quite nicely.
From the closet, I picked out a black cocktail dress with a scoop neckline and three-quarter sleeves, which wouldn’t look too out of place during the day but should also pass muster as evening wear. That’s assuming the light in the room ever changed; as yet, it hadn’t.

I rummaged through the lingerie to find a slip the right color and length. I wriggled it into place, then stepped into the dress, lifted it to my shoulders and did up the zipper.

Finally, a simple pair of black pumps, with square toes and three-inch heels. I fluffed my hair and inspected myself in the mirror.

Not bad at all. You’d never know it was my first time, although I had to admit that I’d had a lot of help.

I stood by the window, lost in the delicate feel of the hem of my dress touching my legs. The bunny hopped through the garden nibbling the same flowers as before. Nothing had changed out there. But I might have.

*  

“Ma’am.” The steward that served lunch expressed no surprise at my appearance. But he did touch the brim of his cap in what I took to be a gesture of respect.

I smiled—sweetly, as a woman would—and thanked him. He paused only for a moment before quietly closing the door.

In addition to the usual midday fruit, the plate held an assortment of French and English imported cheeses (instead of just cheddar): a small wheel of Brie, a wedge of Camembert, and slices of Cheshire and Red Leicester.

Agent Thurston arrived soon thereafter. I stood, arms dangling self-consciously at my sides. I knew they must have been watching me, while I dressed. That was one thing. Being dressed from head to toe as a woman—a lovely one at that—and in full view of another man, that’s a whole different bag of bunnies.
“You’re ahead of the game,” he said, appraising my figure. “We weren’t planning on forcing you into a dress until next week.”

“I’m a woman now,” I said, meeting his gaze. “No point denying it.”

“You’ll get there soon enough.” He rocked back on his heels. “Unless of course you tell me the target of your next attack.”

“I’ve told you before, sir, I am not a terrorist.” My hands went to my hips. “You seem to think this is some sort of punishment. It isn’t.”

That seemed to surprise him. “It isn’t?”

“Of course not. Women are just as good as men—if not better in many respects. Don’t you think your attitude is just a bit sexist? Well, let me tell you, the loss of a bit of meat between my legs does not make me any less of a person!”

“I see. Then you won’t mind losing a bit more ‘meat’.”

I swallowed hard, but pressed on. “My mother and my sister are two of the best people you could hope to meet, Mister Thurston. If what you’ve done to me has made me more like them, then I can only welcome it. To do otherwise…”

I took a deep breath and moved to the window, where the garden was swaying. I wanted to believe that, somewhere, this place was part of the real world. “It would be an insult,” I said at last. “Not just to the women in my family… To all women.”

I faced him. “I won’t do that. So turn me into a woman, if you must. Just don’t expect me to bitch about it.”

To my own surprise, the man was backing up. Then he called for the guards. The ‘steward’ and another man charged into the room, flanking the agent. Thurston lifted a trembling finger towards me. “There’s only one reason I can imagine, why you’d be willing to debase yourself like that. You’re not just some low-level messenger boy, are you? You’re part of the attack team!”

My shoulders sagged. I was foolish to think he’d change his mind.

Thurston rediscovered his courage and put the toe to the stuffed bunny beside my bed. “The way I see it, the whole attack must depend on you getting out of here. Why else would you pretend to actually like wearing high heels and a dress, and styling your hair, and making yourself look pretty? Nothing else makes sense.”

When they were gone I collapsed onto the bed. The TV was halfway through an episode of *Sex and the City*. I watched Charlotte give the boot to some guy at the door to her apartment. My hair looked a lot like hers as well. It seemed only a matter of time before the rest of me followed suit.

*
The FBI procedurals were a thing of the past. Thurston seemed to have given up on the idea of convincing me that he and his men were the good guys. In my new quarters it was female-oriented programming all the way—like *Cagney & Lacey*, *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*, and a multitude of chatty talk shows. Plus more of the instructional programs that were obviously intended to instill in me the knowledge I’d missed out on by being born the wrong gender.

The sleeping arrangements had definitely improved. The window had gauzy curtains, the bed had a canopy, and when I closed my eyes for any length of time both the overhead light and the volume muted by at least ten percent. That might not sound like much, but to a starving man even a cookie is a full meal deal.

The day after my misguided attempt to embrace womanhood, I awoke with a sore throat. Bandages covered half my face and my neck was wrapped as well. I was still in my housecoat, feeling for damage, when the porter delivered a meal that looked suspiciously like dinner, in that it included meat. I tried to point it out, in a raspy voice, but the man just shrugged.

I was expecting Thurston and he didn’t disappoint. The man was nothing if not predictable. “Your confusion is understandable,” he said. “You were placed under sedation for the operation.”

I checked my crotch, but found no further changes.

Thurston looked amused. “A nose job, or rhinoplasty, for a dainty little schnoz. Cheekbone implants, for nice high cheeks.” He counted the procedures on his fingers. “Minor adjustments to enhance facial symmetry. And two surgeries on your larynx; a chondroplasty to remove the Adam’s apple, and a laryngoplasty to raise the pitch of your voice. All quite common in feminization surgery.”

He stopped me from speaking. “You might want to not do that for awhile. Wait ‘til the swelling goes down. You wouldn’t want to ruin that lovely voice.”

I settled for glaring at him.

“Obviously, the name ‘Adam’s apple’ comes from the Garden of Eden story. But did you know that the Bible doesn’t actually say what the forbidden fruit is? That it’s an apple is just an assumption.” He grinned. “At any rate, you don’t have one anymore. Feel like confessing yet?”

I shook my head. I doubt he’d be satisfied with an admission of cheating on a tenth-grade geography test, but that’s all I had to offer.

* Daily sessions in the hyperbaric chamber resumed, again with an intravenous drip into my arm; a potent brew of estrogen and whatever else might be on tap.
Also back in vogue was the ghostly whisper that wasn’t really subliminal, since I could hear it. The sound followed me around like a puppy, from bed to bathroom to iron lung, and hid under the bed while I slept. I knew they were trying to reprogram my subconscious with womanly thoughts—whatever those might be—but I didn’t believe in that sort of thing. *Boys and their toys.*

The bandages came off a few days later. The oxygen therapy supposedly sped up healing, along with that DNA uptake crap, and indeed the scars were already hard to see. Although I suspected that the skill of the plastic surgeon had more to do with it than dubious medical claims.

I was undeniably more feminine. My throat was delicate, with a new emphasis on the sinews tapering toward the base. The changes were a lot more obvious when I made up my face. It was astonishing how easily foundation and blush brought a rosy prominence to my cheeks. I turned from side to side and the symmetry was undeniable. Even beautiful. The FBI had done the impossible.

Why use makeup at all? Simple: I was stuck with it. If I stopped now, I’d just confirm Thurston’s opinion that I was faking it. I had to keep wearing dresses, or a nice skirt-blouse combo, and styling my hair, wearing jewelry and making-up every morning, or he’d assume my innate hatred of women was resurfacing.

So I was stuck. Only it didn’t seem all that bad. Human beings are nothing if not adaptable, so for me it became normal to pick out fresh lingerie every day, and brush my hair a hundred times on each side to make it shiny and bouncy, and slip into a cute skirt and whatever went with it, and accessorize my look with a chain, earrings and sometimes a pretty scarf. Thankfully, they’d pierced my ears during the previous operation, so I was no longer restricted to clip-ons.
Another day, another groggy awakening. This time it was my chest swathed in bandages, below my breasts and above my midriff. And my ribs were sore. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out what they’d done. It was hard to be sure through all that padding, and I was loathe to press too hard, but I guessed that that I was missing a pair of ribs. I didn’t have to ask why.

They let me stay in bed for the better part of two days—with only painful trips to the bathroom to break up the monotony. Time enough for the incisions on either side to heal and my major organs to play musical chairs with my skeleton.

Finally, although it still hurt to move, I managed to get dressed—whereupon it was back to the iron lung for more oxygen and yet more estrogen. I could only imagine how many barrels of the stuff they’d dumped into me by now. How could there possibly be room for any more? But the effect it was having on my body was obvious. My chest was swollen, long hair hung past my shoulders, my skin had softened, and shaving was a thing of the past. For my face, that is; shaving my legs had become a weekly ritual.

Thurston was waiting in his office; my first visit since the move. It hadn’t changed much, with one notable exception: the wooden chair was gone, replaced by a dark red boudoir chair with spindly legs, wrap-around backrest, and crushed-velvet upholstery. I figured it must be some sort of message.

“A girl could get used to this,” I said, relaxing into the velvet.

I hadn’t had many opportunities to speak since my throat surgery. It was amazing to hear the smooth female contralto now emerging from my lips. I could so easily imagine my sister saying these words, maybe even my mother.

“Let’s take it from the top, shall we?” Thurston cleared his throat. “On the day of the Giants game, the one you allegedly attended, you took a bus south. At the border you were met by persons unknown, and driven to the airport near Mexico City. By the way, we have located that vehicle. It’s been traced to a gang that deals in narcotics. So we’ll be adding that to your list of crimes.”

I smiled agreeably. The guy was actually rather manly when he stuck to police work and avoided the gloating. Assuming one could get past the kind of stupidity he was spouting now, for about the millionth time—which I definitely could not. But I could see how other women might.

“You flew to Thailand, changed planes, and disembarked in Lahore. You were driven from there to Peshawar, and then on to the al-Qaeda training camp.”

I tugged at the hem of my skirt, making sure it covered my knees.
Thurston looked annoyed. “I know what they taught you. I’m sure you spent many pleasant evenings around the fire, sharing mugs of hot cocoa with your terrorist buddies and boasting about how much you hate America. I don’t care about that. Just tell me your next target.”

I made a face and shrugged. “What can I say?”

“What can—you can tell me the truth, dammit!” He leaned forward. “What are you planning to blow up?”

I crossed my arms. “What’s the point? You never believe anything I say.”

“Try me, Carlson. Just this once, try me.”

That’s when I noticed the paperweight sitting on his desk, off to the side. It was a cube of clear Lucite, roughly two inches wide. It appeared to contain a pair of small rocks, mounted on a stick. No, not rocks…

“What the hell is that?” I cried, pointing. But I already knew.

“I wondered when you’d notice.” He grinned and picked up the object. “Like it? I had them cleaned and stuffed right after the operation. Preserved in acrylic glass like this, they’ll pretty much last forever.”

I felt sick. “You are one sick son of a bitch.”

“I call it ‘Testicles on Ice’. Check out the label.” He held it out for me to see. “The printing’s small, but it says, ‘Manhood, by Kit Carlson’.” He set it down.

I staggered to my feet. This was too much.

“Of course,” he mused, “we can’t very well call you that anymore, can we? It’s a man’s name and you don’t fit the profile. How about ‘Kitten’?”

*Kitten Carlson.* The bastard must’ve been talking to my sister; that was her pet name for me when we were kids. No one else knew.

“You’ve got one week,” Thurston said, tapping the paperweight. “Not from today, from the date of your last operation. It’s a Thursday.”

“What’s so special about Thursday?” I backed towards the door.

He shrugged. “The surgeon’s a busy man. You take what you can get.”

*So this is how it ends.* My anger grew. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to rip his balls off and turn them into a souvenir. But he was a strong, well-built man, and as for me… I wasn’t. Never was, in fact. I couldn’t hurt him. But maybe I could get him in trouble. So I paused at the door, threw a glance over my shoulder, and spoke the first words that entered my head. “Sears Tower.”
With no connection to the outside world, I missed what happened next.

With the ‘terrorist’ safely immersed in Blossom reruns and a That Girl marathon, the rest of the world witnessed the evacuation of the Willis Tower (formerly the Sears Tower) in Chicago, all one hundred and eight storeys of it. The intensive search that followed failed to turn up the slightest evidence of anything explosive. The cost, in both FBI manpower and lost business, was huge, running far into the tens of millions. To all of which I was quietly oblivious.

To celebrate the removal of my stitches, I took a bubble bath. With my hair pinned up, I relaxed in warm water up to my chest and covered the bits that stuck out with a wet washcloth. According to my meal count, six days had passed, which meant that tomorrow was D-Day. As in delete, demolish and dismember.

Idly, I traced the unseen curves of my body. From heavy hips to plump breasts and the waspish waist between—to say nothing of the female head floating atop the bubbles—there was little to remind anyone of the man I’d been. They’d already turned me into a shemale, so would taking that final step into womanhood really make much of a difference?

In practice, perhaps not. But on a personal level, it probably would.

The knob between my legs was all I had left; nothing else remained of the old Kit Carlson. But with male hormones no longer on tap, and drowning in a high tide of estrogen, it had become a ghost of its former self. A cheap knock-off.

A souvenir. I was pretty sure Thurston would’ve enjoyed the analogy.

For old times sake, I gave the thing a rub. Nothing happened.

No surprise there. Insofar as performing as a male, I’d been fixed like the family dog. All three of Charlie’s Angels could go down on me at the same time, with Raquel Welch lending a hand, and they’d all come up empty-handed.

I was done. There was nothing left. Let it go.

* 

When next I awoke would not be the following morning, or even in the same city, and my world would be transformed.

Beyond recognition. ●
The room had changed. I barely had to open my eyes to figure that one out. The bed was a double, the furniture was modern, the carpet was wall-to-wall, and the bathroom had moved—and been enlarged to boot.

Well, duh. It was a different room. I’m not stupid, just groggy.

I sat up. My pelvis felt like Satan himself had stuck me with a hot pitchfork, and I had no difficulty figuring out what that meant. I took a deep breath. Yup, female.

The wall to my left was cloaked, floor to ceiling, in thick curtains. The old room had a bureau there, as well as the virtual garden, but now a set of drawers in high-gloss black sat opposite the bed. Mounted on the wall above it was an extra-large plasma television screen, currently turned off.

That fact alone threatened to blow my mind.

I slid out of bed, trying not to twist my hips. I had to know.

I grabbed the curtain and yanked it aside. My eyes slammed shut. The light wasn’t really blinding; it was just so big. The real world, that is, in all its glory.

I was back. No more being sealed-off from the great outdoors.

I wanted to cry. It was so beautiful. An aching immensity of blue sky, dusted with puffy white clouds that resembled cows and pigs and sheep. In the distance, an endless expanse of water in shades of indigo. And underfoot, threatening to draw me into its gaping maw, a sprawling cityscape; a twenty-first century metropolis.

I was embedded in glass, caught between earth and sky.

I fell to my knees. There was no sill; the window reached from ceiling to floor. Hesitantly, I touched the glass, which was thick and warm.

What a city! I’d never seen an urban landscape so vast, extending from one side to the other as far as I could see. I half expected to see Superman flit by on his way to the Daily Planet, or Spider-Man locked in battle with Sandman. Or in the canyons below, the Dark Knight on patrol in a jet-propelled Batmobile.

In that moment, anything seemed possible.

As for me… I was a woman. If you’d told me that a few months ago, I’d have filed it in the same category as superheroes, world-wide floods, and the likelihood of spending spring break on Mars. Yet here I am.

I slid the curtain back into place and stumbled back to bed.

*
I awoke to a small miracle: a poached egg on the nightstand, with a croissant and a small salad. And orange juice. I experienced something approaching joy.

“Breakfast in bed. Humph.” A woman’s voice. “It certainly wasn’t my idea, I can assure you.” I looked up. She was wearing a conservative black skirt and a smart blazer, with her hair tied back in a neat ponytail, and just enough makeup for a clean look. Yeah, I notice things like that now.

She introduced herself as Agent Denisova. “Agent Thurston is rather busy at the moment, seeing to the security of this building. I am your new handler.”

I put the empty plate aside. “Where are we?”

“The Willis Tower, of course.” Denisova wandered to the window and flicked the curtain aside. A brilliant, three-foot slice of the outside world streamed into the room. “You might recall it as the Sears Tower.”

_**Sears Tower.**_ Memory came trickling back.

“It’s been thoroughly searched,” she said, pacing about the bed. “Top to bottom. There’s nothing here. No bombs. No chemicals. No infectious agents.” She stopped. “We let the tenants return, but no one enters the building without being searched. No vehicle enters the area without being searched.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. “That’s a lot of trouble…”

She leaned on the bed. “Yes, Ms. Carlson, it _is_ a lot of trouble. Which you caused. Still, we did ask you for the target of your next attack, and you obliged. Thank you for that. Now… would you care to share the rest of the plan?”

I hesitated. “Um… I’m not actually… a real terrorist.”

“Not a real terrorist.” The agent stared down at me, arms crossed. “So you’re a fake terrorist? And the tipoff was just a big joke?”

“Sort of. Mister Thurston kind of… castrated me. And I just wanted to get him back somehow. Maybe get him in trouble.”

“I see.” She snorted derisively. “Well, mission accomplished— _if_ it were true. But I don’t believe a word of it and neither will anyone else.”

My shoulders sagged.

“In case you’re wondering why you’re here…” She glanced out the window. “If your friends in al-Qaeda do decide to attack, you’ll take it in the teeth along with the rest of us.” She turned away. “That may not matter much to _them_, but it does give you the opportunity to confess and save your worthless hide.”

She paused at the door. “I’ll be back soon. Get dressed.”
I was in pain but I did my best. My pelvis was solidly bandaged and it really did feel like something solid was sticking into me; a plug of some sort, as if they were afraid that whatever was inside might fall out.

Pantyhose were out of the question, so I opted for plain panties and a pair of nude stay-up stockings. A half-slip to smooth out the bumps, then a knee-length black skirt not unlike the one worn by Denisova herself. Imitation isn’t just for flattery; it’s practically mandatory when your life might depend on getting along with someone. I didn’t have a blazer like hers, so I settled for the blouse that came with the skirt, over my favorite bra and a silk camisole. A thin belt drew in the waist and demonstrated the effect of my lost ribs. I ran a brush through my hair and added minimal makeup. Black pumps with a low heel, and I was ready.

The corridor outside my room was a better fit for an upscale hotel than a detention area. Thick carpet muffled our footfalls. There were glass doors at the end of the hall but we weren’t going that far.

Agent Thurston was waiting; seated, as usual, behind an empty desk, save for a manila envelope and his favorite paperweight, which I tried to ignore. We women saw ourselves to a pair of straight-back chairs—padded, thankfully—facing the desk. The curtains were open. The view was eye-watering.

“I trust your accomodations are satisfactory?” He paused. “We took over a vacant suite here, for the duration. Fortunately, the CEO’s office had its own washroom, so it was simple to re-purpose.”

The duration of what? “I don’t mean to sound naïve,” I ventured, “but aren’t we done here? I mean, I’m a woman now. What’s left to do?”

He frowned. “It was never about turning you into a woman, Carlson. The whole point of this technique is to make you a better person—someone who’s willing to help us stop terrorism and save lives.”

“I told you before,” Denisova said, “we should’ve had him tortured.”

“Now, now. Not in front of the P-U-R-P.” He tilted his chair back, elbows on the armrests, fingers steepled. “Although it’s true. We could certainly have done that, back in the beginning. Turned you over to the CIA, that is. They would’ve farmed you out to some third-world country with no qualms about torture—Columbia, perhaps—or even arranged to do it themselves.”

“Just out of curiosity, does the CIA, or anybody else, know I’m here?”

“Of course not,” Denisova snapped. “You’re our dirty little secret.”

I shook my head. “I’m surprised they let you people evacuate a whole skyscraper. For no good reason.”
Thurston looked miffed. “I don’t know what you’re insinuating, but the FBI certainly has the authority to make those kinds of decisions, without having to explain ourselves to some petty functionary. Decisions like this, for instance.” He opened the manila envelope and handed me the contents.

Documents. A birth certificate, in the name of one ‘Kitten Carlson’. Grade school records from the school I’d attended. A BA in English Lit from Carnegie Mellon. And right on top of the pile, a driver’s license—and my new face.

So that was why the bugger had taken my picture the previous week. FBI yearbook, my ass!

I was relieved to note that Kitten Carlson’s new passport, at least, did not include trips to Mexico and Pakistan. “No reason it should,” Thurston muttered.

“You were travelling under a different name,” Denisova pointed out.

“My whole life is a different name,” I said ruefully. “Is this legal?”

“Of course. The name change has been registered with the courts. All appropriate institutions have been notified. An announcement will appear in tomorrow’s issue of the Harrisburg Patriot-News, and in the next CMU alumni newsletter.” She threw a glance my way. “We’re also having your high school yearbooks reprinted to include your new name and an age-reduced photograph. The present owners will be instructed to exchange them for the revised edition. Your friends and family have received—or soon will—legal notifications that in all future public forums they are to refer to you as always having been female.”

Thurston tapped the desk meaningfully. “Kit Carlson no longer exists.”

“I’m starting to wish you had tortured me.”

“That’s easy to say now,” Denisova said tartly.

“More to the point,” Thurston added, “torture doesn’t work. Consider the the ‘ticking bomb’ scenario, which is often used to justify treating detainees badly.”

“Here we go,” Denisova said with a sigh.
“This scenario assumes that you have a deadline, after which lives will be lost, and only by torturing a suspect can we extract the information needed to defuse the bomb. The suspect might try to hold out, but that would only encourage us to escalate the torture. But what if he lies? You could stop and send someone out to verify the information, but that takes time. So what do you do? If you wait, the suspect will keep trotting out one lie after another, until the deadline passes.” He raised an eyebrow. “You can’t afford to wait, so you have to keep hurting the man, regardless of what he says. But that simply removes any incentive he might have had to cooperate! Why bother, if the torture never stops?”

He seemed to expect an answer, but I just shrugged.

“Not to mention the fact that pain simply raises the stakes. If he didn’t hate you before, he certainly will afterward. That’s why my technique is superior.” A smug look crept across his face. “The suspect isn’t hurt at all. Case in point—you.”

Me? “You cut off my dick!”

He grinned. “But it didn’t hurt, now did it?”

“It hurts right now!”

“Really?” He found a bottle of Tylenol in his desk, extracted two pills and poured me a glass of water. “What I was getting at is that we didn’t strap you down and do it while you watched. We’re not the bad guys here. What you experienced was a genuine medical procedure, with anesthetic and everything.”

“How civilized of you.” I took the pills.

He looked flustered. “The point being, it is not torture.”

“I’m sure there’s nothing in the Geneva Conventions about turning men into women, but that’s beside the point.” I shifted in my seat, wincing as the stent moved. “The point is, you made a mistake. I’m not a terrorist.”

“We don’t make mistakes,” Thurston snapped. “But I must admit, you’ve held out for much longer than we anticipated. And I think I know why.”

“I really doubt it.”

“As I said before, the crux of my technique is to turn you into a different person—a better person. And we haven’t done that yet.”

“What do you call these?” I patted the underside of my breasts.

“Superficial. All of it. The problem is, on the inside you’re still the same hardcore America-hating terrorist that I arrested last year.” He stood up and faced the window. “But that will change. Take her back.”
Housekeeping had opened the curtains, made my bed and placed fresh white lilies in a vase atop the bureau. I tossed my new life history into a drawer.

“Don’t get the wrong idea about those documents,” Denisova said. “It doesn’t mean you’re getting out of here anytime soon.”

“I figured as much.” I went to stand by the window. “Nice view, though.”

“You should know that the windows are bulletproof. The best on the market. The army calls it ‘transparent armor’. It wouldn’t break if you went nine innings on it using the bed for a bat.” She pursed her lips. “Looks to me like you’d have trouble swinging a pillow, much less the whole bed. Unless you turned into the She-Hulk or something.” A coy smile.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Terrorists have been known to bump themselves off, so we made sure you didn’t have that option.” She brushed imaginary fluff off my shoulder. “We don’t want to lose our ‘insurance policy’, piss-poor as it is.”

“I’m not that kind of guy… or girl.”

“We know exactly what kind of ‘guy’ you were. As for the kind of girl you’ll be… that’s a work in progress.” She headed for the door. “By the way, there’s a present for you in the drawer by the bed. Enjoy.”

The door closed and the television came to life, showing an old black-and-white movie, *Little Women*. As I was soon to discover, it was just the beginning of a day-long *Little Women* marathon, with versions from 1933, 1949, 1978 and 1994. And in the drawer of my bedside table? A hardback copy of the original novel.

And why *Little Women*? Because I am one.
They stopped feeding liquid estrogen directly into my bloodstream. Instead, I was given a daily dose of the hormone in the form of a pill, otherwise known as the female contraceptive. Of course, unlike most women my age, I had no worries of getting pregnant; this was just to replace an essential chemical that my body could not manufacture on its own.

In addition, twice a day, with Agent Denisova supervising, a medical technician would remove the vaginal stent between my legs and verify that the opening was clean and the sutures were holding—a process that entailed sticking an optical probe into my new vagina. The unusual aspect of this kind of surgery is that the scars are all on the inside. I’m just sayin’; I sure as hell didn’t peek.

The stent was gently replaced while I dug into the mattress and looked the other way. It didn’t actually hurt, and it was over too quickly to be stimulating, but the idea of a hard whatever being shoved into me was just too weird to accept. Not that I had any choice in the matter.

I awoke one morning with a splitting headache. Denisova arrived moments later, murmuring her sympathy—which wasn’t like her at all—and handing me a painkiller to take with my usual hormone pill; something stronger than before, which included codeine. I wasn’t thinking straight or I would have wondered at how convenient it was she happened to have it with her.

A bit later I got up to relieve myself, but barely made it to the john. It felt like someone had swapped my muscles for rubber knock-offs.

I spent most of that day in bed, and the next, listening to the TV with one ear and that incessant whispering with the other. My head ached constantly. A doctor was called in to inform me that it was probably a migraine—well, duh!—brought on by the hormonal changes I was going through.

I didn’t argue. The codeine made me a bit too happy for that.

Thankfully, the day arrived to bid farewell to the stent. Another doctor proclaimed that my vagina was fully healed, in no danger of collapse, and ready for action. Whatever the hell that meant. At least the headaches had stopped.

Denisova started me on a regime of morning and evening calisthenics; quite basic at first, but ramping up as quickly as I was able to. And she introduced me to Total Immersion Television, or TITV.

“Lie down,” she said. “You have to be completely relaxed for this.”

I put on the goggles she gave me, which were wired to a socket in the wall. Surprisingly, given all they’d done to me, the relaxing part was easy.
“They’re for dual-screen virtual reality. The computer projects the same scene into each eye, with a slight offset to fool your brain into thinking it’s in three-D.”

I flipped my hair clear of the strap. “I thought you said it was TV.”

“It is… sort of. We’ve adapted several television shows for the Total Immersion system and we’re working on more. If you have any requests, among the shows you’ve seen here, just let me know.”

“Great, more reruns. With female leads, I bet.”

“You got that right.” Earplugs dangled off the goggles and these she pushed into my ears. After that I could barely hear her.

“What do I have to do?” I shouted.

“Nothing. Just play along. You don’t actually have much choice. I’m told that it feels more like a lucid dream than anything else.” Then she lifted my head, picked at the base of my skull—and shoved a steel finger inside.

What the hell? There was a loud click and I went limp.

* I stare into a mirror. I see a woman’s face surrounded by a wavy mass of long brunette hair. My lips part in surprise. I am this woman.

I hear a voice: “Once upon a time there were three beautiful girls who went to the police academy, and they were each assigned very hazardous duties. But I took them away from all that and now they work for me. My name is Charlie.”

I remember now. My name is Kelly Garrett. I’m an Angel.

I turn from the mirror and say, “What’ve you got for us, Charlie?”

That same voice, from an intercom on the desk: “It’s a missing girl, I’m afraid. The young lady vanished from a cruise ship more than a month ago and her family would like to know what happened.”

“I don’t blame them,” Sabrina says. “Passenger or crew?”

“She was an activity coordinator. A real people person.”

“Could it be suicide?”

“Not the type. Now listen up. Your job is to check the ship over, talk to the people who knew her, and trace her movements. The ship sails at noon tomorrow. Sabrina and Kris will board as themselves. Kelly, you and Bosley are going in undercover, as passengers. Man and wife.”

I smile at Bosley. “Fess up, Bos. Was this your idea?”

He lifts his hands. “Not guilty, Kel. Just following orders.”

The intercom chuckles. “Good luck, Angels.”
I'm in a cabin on the ship. I'm wearing a strapless red dress that covers my knees but exposes most of my chest. I lift my hair to settle a necklace of pearls and emeralds about my throat. I am truly beautiful.

Bosley comes up behind me, resting his hands on my shoulders. “You are the woman that other women aspire to be,” he whispers.

I tilt my head, eyeing him in the mirror. “C’mon, Bos, we’ve got a job to do.” But his touch excites me. I sling a red cape over my shoulder.

We go to dinner. Sabrina and Kris are dining at the captain’s table. We pretend not to know them.

Bosley seats me at a table for two. “We’re being watched,” he says. Later, we dance.

The music is slow. He holds me close. “Don’t fight it,” he murmurs into my ear. “Make them believe you’re my wife.”

Later, we stand at the railing. The sea is calm, with barely a breeze to tug on my hair. The sky is full of stars.

He touches my throat. “I’ve always admired you, Kel.”

I smile. “You’re a good man, Bos.”

He pulls me closer. “Warm enough?”

“With you, I am,” I say softly.

His lips touch my forehead, the way a man shows his affection for the woman he loves. Without a second thought, my face rises. Our lips meet.

Sabrina and Kris approach. “We broke the case,” Sabrina says.

Kris says, “We found a video of our victim being pushed over the side. The evidence was there all along.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, “you’ve mistaken me for someone else. I’m here with my husband.” Bosley adjusts my cape. We walk away.

In our cabin, Bosley pulls me to him. His kiss is hard and passionate. My arms clutch at his back. My lips part; his tongue slips inside. My breasts crush into his chest. His hand entwines my hair.

I couldn’t get away if I tried. But of course, I don’t.

He unzips me. My dress falls. “I’ve heard you described as the world’s most beautiful woman,” he says. “They don’t know the half of it.”

I remove his jacket. “As my husband, you should know that already.”

“Yes, of course. What was I thinking?” He drops his pants.

I yank his shirt open and run my hands over his bare chest. I feel a kind of hunger, for what I not know. He lifts me to the bed and climbs in next to me. I feel the yearning in his crotch. Then I know.

We kiss. We embrace. He touches me in my womanly places. He stiffens and so do I. All over. Something’s wrong.
It feels like when the doctor inserts a vaginal stent inside you, and you just want to claw through the mattress because it feels so strange.

I lie still as he mounts me. This is a very unusual dream...

We’re back in the office. Charlie says, “Great job, Angels. The man who did the deed was arrested trying to hop a freighter to Indonesia.”

I’m confused. Has Bosley been arrested? He’s the man who did...

But no, he’s here.

“By the way,” the intercom says, “it was Bosley’s idea to go undercover with Kelly. If I’d known what he was up to, I’d never have agreed.”

The three of us face Bosley, hands on our hips. He grins.

FADE OUT

* 

I woke up when Agent Denisova removed the plug from the back of my head. She handed me a glass of water and took the goggles, coiling the wire and tucking it into my bedside table. The plug looked like an Ethernet jack, but with a sharp bend in the wire—like an extension cord for an outlet behind a bookcase. I probed the back of my skull but found only skin. And a lot of hair.

I gulped at the water. “What was all that? I don’t remember Bosley ever having sex with one of the Angels.”

She shrugged. “We took a few liberties. It was loosely based on a real episode, but of course we had to restrict the viewpoint to just one person.”

“That doesn’t explain the bedroom scene.”

“You’ll have to ask Agent Thurston about that. He adapted the script.”

“Of course he did.” I rolled over and probed the back of my head. “The bastard’s still coming up with new ways to turn me into a woman.”

“And doing a bang-up job, as far as I can see.” She handed me a moist towelette.

“By the way, I wouldn’t poke around back there if I were you. The port is covered by a flap of skin, but if that gets damaged then water could get inside.”

“What happens then? I short-circuit myself?” I swung my legs to the floor. “Just tell me this: what did you people do in there?” I pointed at my head.

“Oh, that? Just a bit of brain surgery. Electrodes implanted at certain locations. It’s amazing what they can do working through a small hole—keyhole surgery, they call it. They used the same hole for the interface jack. Very tidy.”

I stared at my reflection. “It’s not enough he has to chop off my nuts, shoot me full of estrogen, and prune my skeleton—now he wants to re-wire my brain as well?”
“Clearly, the person you were wasn’t willing to play ball.” She moved to the door. “We hope to have better luck with your replacement.”

“But I’m not a terrorist,” I said miserably.

Denisova just laughed. “Get some rest, Kitten. We’ll go again tomorrow.”

* New York City. Home to one million exciting, eligible, single men... and four cold and slightly cranky single women.

I’m one of them. My name is Charlotte.

I’m at home but I’m getting ready to go out.

I touch perfume to my throat, behind each ear, on my wrists. Long hair slides off my shoulder, dangling as I bend to apply scent to my ankles. Just in case a man throws himself at my feet. It could happen.

I meet Carrie at SushiSamba. “You look like you could use a drink,” she says. “When was the last time you had sex?”

“It’s been awhile.” I order a Cosmopolitan.

“Awhile is too long, which is bad in this context.”

Samantha and Miranda arrive.

Samantha places an oblong box on the table. “A not-so-little something to make you feel better,” she tells me.

“It better be Louboutin,” I say. “I’ve got Manolos coming out my ears.”

“Nope. It’s for ‘Becca.”

“Who?”

She winks. “You know. Rebecca... of Sunnybrook Farm fame.”

“We heard she’s been a little depressed lately,” Miranda says.

“Oh,” I say, as the truth sinks in. They mean my—

Carrie opens the lid. “Ah, we meet again. My old friend, the Rabbit. Just the thing for a dildo emergency.”

“It’s not an emergency,” I say. “I’m fine.”

“The Rabbit Habit isn’t just for emergencies,” Samantha says.

All three women laugh. “I’d rather wait for someone who can give me a Valentine’s Day card,” I say.

Carrie sets the box in front of me. “Could be a long wait, Charlotte.”

“A dildo a day keeps the losers at bay,” Miranda chants.

I pick up the box. The thing looks huge.

“That’s my girl,” Carrie says, tipping her glass my way. “Try it before 10:00am and you’ll be your perky self all day long.”
I’m in my bedroom. Why am I here?
I slip out of my shoes. I think maybe I’ve been waiting too long for the perfect guy to come along; my ‘knight in shining armor’.
Why wait for a man when a rabbit will do? A Roger Rabbit.
My breath quickens. In spite of what I told my friends, I’m eager to try.
I drop panties and lie on the bed.
Huh. There’s a mirror on the ceiling.
I hike my dress and reach for the box.
A date with a dildo. Who’d’a thunk?
It has batteries. God bless Samantha.
Alrighty. Flick the switch. Oooh.
I feel it in my fingers. A rabbit that hums. Doesn’t even need lube.
Here we go… Rebecca, meet Roger.
Carrie calls these things ‘consoladors’.
Into your burrow, Mister Rabbit.
And out a bit… and back in. Fabulous… better than a Jimmy Choo.
Oooh… no, don’t… don’t stop.
I watch the woman on the ceiling writhe, one hand between her legs, the other clutching her mouth. Her hair sprawls across the bedspread.
She’s lovely. Her make-up is exquisite.
She’s the kind of woman other women aspire to be.
I’m that kind of woman too.
She’s me. I’m the beautiful woman. That’s my hair sprawling across the bedspread. That’s my make-up, my hand between my legs.
Oooh, God. It’s better than sex. No fuss, no mess, no finishing early and rolling over to fall asleep—and I’m not halfway done!
Does this thing go any faster? Ooooooh—
FADE OUT

* I clawed myself upright as Denisova put the goggles away. I rubbed my face. At first I could barely speak. Then, “Why do I let you do this to me?”

“You know why. If you didn’t I’d have two large men in here to hold you down.” She opened the curtain. “And you can’t remove the plug yourself, because the computer disengages the mind from the body. Sort of like what happens naturally while you sleep.” She smiled. “Back tomorrow.”
I have the face of an Angel. I wonder at that, the sheer intensity of the beauty that stares back at me from the mirror. She’s me.

I’m out with my friends.

“So, Kel. You and Bos,” Kris says. She leans toward me.

“I gotta ask, how big is he?”

“Mind your own business,” Sabrina says. “The modern woman has better things to talk about than penis size.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“You know I’m right. One of the reasons we’re here is to bust the stereotype of the female cop. You’re not helping.”

“I don’t mind,” I say.

“I do.” Sabrina places her hands on the table. “Are you sure it’s a good idea to date someone you work with? Not to mention a friend.”

“We’re not dating,” I say. “It just sort of happened. He was pretending to be my husband, I was his wife... we got in too deep.”

“He sure as heck did,” Kris says. “But c’mon. Bosley’s been panting after you for years. You must’ve known!”

Sabrina looks angry. “Don’t tell me it was nothing but a fling. Bos isn’t that kind of guy. He’s probably in love.”

“You’ve known guys like that, right?” Kris taps the table. “Back in high school, I knew this one guy—the quiet type—who doodled my name in his exercise book for the whole year. One of his buddies showed it to me. It was a real work of art.”

I sigh. “So you did him, is that the moral of the story?”

She looks hurt. “Heck, no. I was dating the captain of the foosball team.”

“I appreciate your concern, ladies,” I say. “But Bosley’s a big boy. He’s not my type and he knows it. I mean, it’s obvious! I’m way too pretty to settle for some overweight, middle-aged guy who’s not rich.”


“If he’s that big,” Kris muses, “maybe I’ll hit that thing myself.”

FADE OUT
“Ohmygod,” I say, “it was awesome!”
“Told ya,” Samantha says smugly.
“Man’s best friend is the dog,” Carrie says to her wine glass. “Ours is the dildo.”
“To the dildo,” I say, and we drink.
“Mr. Right’s got competition,” Miranda says. “Hope he’s up for it.”
“I’m still in the market for a husband,” I say. “Roger just helps pass the time.”
Carrie eyes me. “Who the hell is Roger?”
I look down. “You know… the Rabbit.”
“Roger Rabbit,” Samantha says, smiling.
Miranda laughs. “Oh, wow, I am SO on the next train to Toontown.”
Carrie drains her glass. “Kidding aside, you know what this means, don’t you? You’re one of us now. A slightly cranky single woman in New York City.”
“Slightly LESS cranky,” I say.
FADE OUT

I began to sense a pattern in the stories I was living. Sex as a woman was part of it, to be sure. But the important thing was that I was accepted as a woman, by other women. Agent Thurston’s way, no doubt, of telling me I was one of them.

I’m not saying there was anything subtle about it.

Denisova installed a treadmill in the room and I added that to my routine. I knew I’d lost weight. I’d been a bit overweight before all this began, but with the diet I was on, the surgeries and everything else, I was probably well south of a hundred-fifty pounds. If nothing else, Agent Thurston’s method of interrogation was one hell of a weight-loss programme.

The days flew by. I was Alicia Florrick, the ‘good wife’, awaiting my husband’s release from prison. I was Sabrina, the teenage witch, hanging out with my aunts and nailing my boyfriend on the side. I was Mary Richards, a news producer for a Minneapolis TV channel, flirting with my boss and ducking into the back room for a quickie with Murray.

I was every woman in the world. Or so it seemed.
I am Andrea. I am an android. But in my dreams, I am a real woman.
The brash Kirk arrives, along with the woman beloved of my creator. I feel confused. Korby should love me, not her.
The Kirk is arrogant, full of himself. I prefer Ruk. He does everything I say and he’s huge. The perfect male.
“Remarkable, isn’t she?” Korby says of me. “Notice the lifelike pigmentation, the variation in skin tones. The flesh has genuine warmth. There’s even a pulse, the physical sensation of life.”
“How convenient,” the woman says.
“But she’s only a computer,” Korby says. “Like the one on your ship, but far more advanced. You must realize that.”

“I am a machine, but I am capable of love. I love—
The Kirk approaches. “Andrea, kiss me.”
I turn away, tending to the environmental controls with Ruk. I am a mere machine, but I am capable of love. I love—
The Kirk approaches. “Andrea, kiss me.”
I am programmed to obey. I kiss the Kirk. Then I slap him—or try to. He grabs my wrist and pulls me to him. He embraces me.
“No,” I say. “I am not programmed for you.”
“Are you confused, Andrea?”
“No.” But I am.

Ruk confronts the Kirk.
“Emotion, Ruk? You disapprove?”
“You came from the outside,” Ruk says. “You bring disorder here.”
“The danger to you is Korby.”
“I was programmed by Korby. I cannot harm him.”
“The Old Ones programmed you, too, yet you destroyed them.”
“That was the equation!” Ruk shakes the Kirk like the rag doll I was programmed to remember. “Survival must surpass programming!”
“That’s it, Ruk! Logic! You and I are cool. Your beef is with Korby!”
Ruk pushes the Kirk aside and turns on Korby. “You brought him among us. You brought the inferior ones. We had cleansed ourselves.”

“Is this your perfect world?” the Kirk says. “Aren’t you doing exactly what you hate most in human beings, killing without remorse?”

“You don’t understand,” Korby says. “Ruk was a prototype, a leftover from the old days. He was flawed. I constructed the perfect being right here—tested it, proved it. I proved it!” He turns to me. “Andrea?”

I come to him. “I am programmed to love—”

“So you were.” He touches my hair.

“I will kiss you,” I say.

We kiss. The feeling is electric. Transcendent.

“To love you. To—to kiss you.”

Again we kiss. “You are a woman,” he says.

“I am a woman. I can love.”

A strange man with pointed ears enters the room. “Captain, are you all right? Is this Doctor Korby?”

“No, it isn’t,” the Kirk says. “Doctor Korby was never here.”

* 

I awoke to the sound of Agent Denisova yelling at me. “Confess, you bastard! Who’s your contact? What’s the target? Is it this building? Well? Is it?”

I rubbed my eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m not a terrorist. I wish I could help you.”

“You’re this close to the whole ball of wax,” she said at lesser volume, holding up fingers parted by a fraction of an inch. “Womanhood. The whole enchilada. Not just boobs and a dick-hole, but sleepovers and stuffed animals and sharing your goddamn feelings with your BFF. Is that what you want?”

“What I want doesn’t seem to matter.”

“Damn straight it doesn’t.” For a moment I thought she was going to hit me, but she managed to control herself. “All right, Miss Carlson. Have it your way. But I’m telling you right now, you’re running out of last chances.”

She left. Through the open door I heard a familiar voice. “They’re talking about closing us down,” Agent Thurston said. “So finish the job. My way.”

●
Days became weeks and weeks turned into months. I saw the sun pass through the sky so many times that the days bled one into the other and time itself seemed to shift into fast-forward.

*Koyaanisqatsi*. Life out of balance. Time out of mind. And I was out of mine.

Okay, maybe it wasn’t really like that. I spent most of my time flat on my back, imprisoned in the virtual world of TITV, which I came to appreciate as an escape from the gilded cage in which I lived. During the few hours I was awake, I ran the treadmill, ate sparingly and lost more weight. I became fit as well as female.

I heard through Agent Denisova that the security cordon on the building had been lifted. All that remained of the FBI presence was right here, focused solely on me. They were determined to keep me here as an insurance policy, since it would be a political embarrassment if I were moved and an attack followed.

At some point in this time—hard to say exactly when—the stories in TITV began using my real name and my real face. I became ‘Kitten Carlson’ to the Angels, to Carrie and the gang in New York City, to the WJM-TV newsroom, to my witchy aunts and many others. Nothing subtle about *that* either.

* 

I am Kitten Carlson. I am an android. In my dreams, I am a woman.

“Remarkable, isn’t she?” Thurston says. “Her flesh is warm, her hair is soft. To every outward sign, she is a woman.”

“How convenient,” someone says. But it isn’t. I want to be real on the inside too.

The Kirk approaches. “Kiss me, Kitten.”

He pulls me to him, embracing me roughly. I allow myself to be kissed.

He grins. “Are you confused?”

“No. I am programmed for this.”

I go to Thurston. “I will kiss you.”

We kiss. The feeling transcends all that I was before.

“I turned you into a woman,” he says. “You should thank me.”

“I am a woman. Thank you.” I touch his face. “To love you. To kiss you.”

The Kirk’s communicator squawks. “Captain, are you there?”

“Kirk here. Three to beam up. Miss Carlson is going home.”

*
I took a long shower after that one. The end was encouraging, but it was beyond disturbing the way Thurston had inserted himself into the story. And actually kissing the guy was a mental image I had a tough time shaking.

I would’ve given him hell for it but he simply wasn’t around.

In fact, I never saw the man again.

“Agent Thurston has been reassigned.” Those were the words of one Franklin Delano Bossanova, seated at Thurston’s desk, who had introduced himself as the regional director of the FBI. “He asked me to say goodbye, and he expressed his best wishes for your future. I understand that he’d grown rather fond of you.”

A little too fond, if you asked me.

He pushed a small object across the desk. “I believe this belongs to you.”


Bossanova checked his cell phone. “I have another appointment, so I’ll be brief. You’ll be pleased to know that we have arrested the man who crossed the Mexican border at San Diego, was driven to the airport in Mexico City, and subsequently flew to Pakistan to attend the al-Qaeda training camp.”

Silence. “And he wasn’t you,” Denisova said from behind me.

My jaw dropped and I had trouble forming words. I finally sputtered, “So that’s it? You know I’m innocent?”

“We know you’re not a terrorist,” Bossanova said. “That’s all we care about.”

My mind spun out and slammed into a mailbox. Totaled.

I took a deep breath. They caught the guy, Thurston was gone… “He’s out there turning that guy into a woman, isn’t he?”

Silence. “I’m not at liberty to discuss FBI operations. However, it is true that his methodology didn’t receive a fair test, what with you being innocent and all. You may rest assured, however, that the man is on very thin ice indeed.”

How reassuring. “So I can go home?”

The man looked like he’d eaten a clove. “Not just yet.”

“What’s the problem? Look, I know my apartment’s gone, and probably all my clothes and stuff too. That doesn’t matter. It wouldn’t fit any—”

“We bought the apartment for you,” Denisova interrupted. “We’re in the process of having it redecorated. It’ll be waiting when you get out.”
That was surprising. “Uh, thanks…”

“The problem is,” Bossanova humphed, “we simply cannot have you running off and suing us for wrongful imprisonment or some such nonsense.”

“I’ll sign a waiver,” I said quickly. “Whatever you want.”

“I’m afraid it wouldn’t stand up in court. You could claim that you signed under duress, and that’s rather plausible given what happened to you.” He drummed his fingers on the desk. “It would mean lost prestige for the Bureau, compensation payouts, lost jobs…” He frowned. “Perhaps even my own.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” I protested. “I never even saw you before!”

“I gave the man free rein,” Bossanova said sadly. “No, it’s definitely in everyone’s best interests that you become a woman.”

“I am a woman! For God’s sake, look at me! I’m wearing a wrap-style paisley sundress by Ralph Lauren, four-inch sandals with rhinestones, and a Lise Charmel bra-and-panty set. I did my own makeup this morning, and my hair is down to my tits with a Farrah flick at the ends. What more do you want?”

“That depends. Do you still remember being male?”

I stared at him. The answer was obvious.

“That’s the problem. Ms. Denisova will see to your final conversion.”

A chill slid down my back. “What’s that supposed to mean? W—wiping my mind or something? You might as well kill me.”

“Nothing so crude as that. But I must admit, if you’d been female all along—on the inside, I mean—then we wouldn’t have this problem, would we?”

I swallowed hard. “I, uh… probably should’ve mentioned this before, but… you know, when I was growing up I always kinda figured I should’ve been a girl.”

Bossanova grinned and stood up. “A rather clumsy lie, don’t you think? But trust me, by the time we let you go, it will be true.”

* 

So it was back to my room and more TITV immersion therapy. It was worse than before, when I held some small hope that I’d be found innocent and released. But now they knew the truth, and yet were more determined than ever to push me into womanhood. Nothing I could do, nothing I could say would make any difference.

Each day, before plugging me into the TITV, Denisova administered a drug to increase my suggestibility. And as the stories became ever more personal, my old life began to feel less real than the virtual one.
I am Kitten Carlson. I meet my friends for drinks at SushiSamba. “Tell us about yourself, Kitten,” Samantha says. “What were you like as a little girl? Before your tits arrived.”

“Mine arrived in the mail,” Carrie says. “Overnight express.”

“I bet she was a princess,” Miranda says. “I don’t like tiaras,” I say. “But I was a big Princess Di fan. I wanted to be just like her and marry a prince.”

“I wanted to marry Prince,” Carrie says, “before he turned into a big wuss.”

“I was into stuffed animals,” I say. “My room was full of ‘em. My favorite was a jack rabbit named Ralphie.”

“So you were into rabbits way back then, huh?” Samantha smirks. “I guess you and the Rabbit Habit were meant to be.”

“I’m being serious,” I say.

“So am I.” She drains her glass and signals for another. “So what do good little girls up there in Connecticut do in their spare time? Knit tea coozies for the homeless?”

“Scarves, maybe. Can’t wear a tea cozy.”

“When I was a little girl,” Carrie says, “I left my favorite baby doll out in the rain for four days. Her face peeled off.”

“I wasn’t into baby dolls at all,” I say. “Kind of ironic, isn’t it?”

“When I was little,” Miranda says, “I put a rubber band around my dog Pepper’s snout. She didn’t like it.”

“I had a pet rabbit...” I say, and we all burst into laughter.

“In some ways, you’re still a little girl,” Carrie says. “You managed to hang on to the kind of dreams we all had growing up.”

“I wasn’t into rabbits back then,” Samantha says. “Although I am now.”

“I mean she’s ‘charming’,” Carrie says. “She’s the part of us that gets giddy after a good date and wonders if he could he be the one.”

“I believe in romance,” I say. “I won’t apologize for that.”

“You are a princess,” Miranda says. “The one in The Princess Bride.”

“And wuv, twu wuv, wiww fowwow you fowevah,” Samantha lisps.

“Don’t change, Kit,” Carrie says. “We wuv you just the way you are.”
The woman in the mirror finished her makeup and tossed her head to the side, sending long hair sliding over her right shoulder to half-cover her exposed breast. Lashes fluttered; bow-tie lips twitched into a small smile. She seemed to like the way she looked. So was *this* the real Kitten Carlson? Or was what’s-his-name still in there somewhere, struggling to stay relevant?

“How do you feel?” Agent Denisova and I faced each another across a small table one of the guards had set for tea. Each of us sat with one leg crossed over the other at the knee, as women are wont to do. We were wearing nearly identical black skirts that showed a lot of leg, but the rest of our outfits were quite different.

I couldn’t quite fathom why she’d chosen to wear dark stockings with that skirt. My own beige hose put my legs in a much better light. Of course, her shoes were glossy black flats; maybe that explained the color, although it did look a bit like she was wearing a black bodysuit. I’d chosen sand-color pumps and a tan blouse. I hadn’t been female as long as she, but my color sense was better; probably thanks to all those infomercials.

“Fine,” I said, gently bouncing my free leg. It reminded me of the vacancy in my crotch, as if the paperweight on my vanity wasn’t enough.

“Feel any different?” She sipped at her tea.

“Not really.” I drank from my own cup; milk, no sugar.

“Tell me about yourself. What were you like as a little boy?”

Little *boy*? That didn’t sound right. “I was always getting into my mother’s closet. Wearing her high heels, trying on bras and panties. That sort of thing.”

“She must’ve been upset. What with you being a boy and all.”

“I was pretty good at putting things back where they were supposed to be.”

“When did you figure out you were really a girl?”

“Maybe around nine, ten years old. But I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Why not? You could’ve gone on hormones during puberty and been female by the time you were eighteen. By now you could’ve been happily married and the adoptive mother of a little girl.”

“I don’t know. I wish I had.”

Denisova smiled tightly and stood up. “Nice try, Kitten. Very smooth. But it’s still a lie.” She moved to the door. “Not to worry, though. We’ll know when you’re telling the truth.”

*
I am Kitten Carson. I’m an Angel, and I’m undercover on board a cruise ship. I’m in my cabin, wearing a slip and not much else. My ‘husband’ steps behind me, resting his hands on my shoulders. “You are the woman that other women aspire to be,” he whispers.

I shiver, averting my gaze. “C’mon, Frankie, we’ve got a job to do.”

The man isn’t Bosley, it’s Bossanova. “Actually, we don’t,” he says, shrugging out of his dinner jacket. “The case is solved. The butler did it.”

I feel goose bumps race down my arms. “Then what are we doing here?”

“Guess.” He whips off his belt.

I feel confused. Something’s different. Then it hits me: there’s no script. He folds his belt in half, grins, and sets it aside. “Quite a system our young Mr. Thurston developed here, isn’t it? Did you know that two people can use it at the same time? True story.”

“I shouldn’t be here,” I say.

“Why not? I’m a man, you’re a woman, and this is virtual reality.” He steps out of his pants. “What happens in VR... It doesn’t just stay in VR. It doesn’t really happen at all.”

I retreat across the room. “I won’t do it,” I tell him. “In this world I’m one of Charlie’s Angels and I’ll kick your butt if you try!”

“I don’t think so, Kitten.” His shirt joins his jacket in the closet. “I kept enough of the scripting to fix that. You’re about to find me irresistible.”

“Oh, no—” I dart for the door but he gets there first. At his touch, I melt. He pulls me to him and kisses me. I feel dizzy. Then I kiss him back.

“That’s better,” he says. “Would you care to join me on the bed?”

I would, and I do. He’s a big man, a lot bigger than me; not so much taller as wider, but rather distinguished in a middle-aged sort of way. He’s wearing tighty-whities. I’m wearing nothing at all.

He whistles. “Damn... They sure did a number on you, didn’t they? As I understand it, this is pretty much what you look like in real life too.” His fingers trickle down my arm.

I shiver. There’s something about his touch... something I need.
He stands beside the bed. “You’re a woman,” he says simply. “You’ve had the training. You don’t need me to tell you what to do.”

It’s true. I know exactly what to do. I’m a woman now. I’m the wife.

I kneel before him, gazing upward. His briefs bulge grotesquely, but he doesn’t need them anymore. I tear at them and the fabric comes apart like tissue paper. This is a dream, after all.

I take him in my hands. I cup him and stroke him. I kiss him.

He smiles down at me. “Do it, Kitten.”

I lean forward, hands behind my back.

I open my mouth. My eyes lock with his.

He shifts forward, and slides inside.

I use my tongue.

He slips down the back of my throat.

My lips envelope him. I pull him deeper inside.

I can barely breathe, but he seems in no hurry to finish.

This is a kind of love-making. I think.

My body tingles all over.

Eventually, he grasps the back of my head and I am given little choice but to swallow all that he has to offer. Time stops; I cannot move, I cannot breathe. My mouth is wide open, come what may.

And come it does. After he’s done, I lie on the bed.

He sits next to me. “That was incredible.”

“Better than a kick in the nuts,” I say.

He laughs and we kiss. His tongue explores the area so recently vacated by his manhood. My hands probe his body. At my urging, he stiffens. Well, of course he does; this is his fantasy.

I wriggle beneath him, aligning my pelvis to his. He fingers me to the point of ecstasy, then slides himself inside. “This is better than the real thing,” he mutters to himself. “Normally I’d be done by now.”

But not here. Not in this world. He can last as long as he wants.

I lock my legs around his thighs. We move in unison, back and forth, in and out, until I lose track of the passage of time.

In fact, time does not truly exist here, just as this room does not exist. I could live entire lifetimes stuck to this bed, knowing only pleasure.

I can no longer think of myself as I once had. I have been transformed. I am no longer a man, in any sense of the word.

I am a woman.
Another long shower. That mean old Mister Bossanova had a lot to answer for, taking advantage of a helpless lady, and I would certainly have given him heck for it—except that I never saw him again either. Apparently, the FBI makes it a habit to hire men who don’t stick around to own their mistakes.

Either way, I resolved that I was done with Total Immersion TV. Denisova would have to put me in a straightjacket to get me in there again.

I pulled the curtains. The sun was high in the sky, the day glorious. I was fairly sure it was early fall and I seemed to sense a crispness to the air, even from this great height. I fixed my face, brushed my hair, and touched perfume to each ear, as well as wrists and throat. I studied my reflection, almost coyly. Small nose, pretty mouth, symmetric features. Got to admit, I make an attractive woman.

Something else was different. Hard to put my finger on, but it was there. I studied the room. No lunch had been served; no wedge of cheese, no apple and no banana on the side. Could that be it?

I dressed in a conservative bra-and-panty set, neutral stay-up stockings and a navy blue skirt suit; black pumps with rounded toes and wide heels. I’m not sure why I chose an outfit like that. Maybe it was to show whoever might be watching that I meant business; that I’d be calling the shots from now on.

I shuffled through the documents Agent Thurston had given me. Birth certificate, driver’s license, school records, the Bachelor of Arts I’d worked so hard for. That was me now; Kitten Carlson, an educated, professional woman.

Maybe it was time to embrace that.

I went to the door and knocked. No answer. And then, for the first time since all this began, I tried the knob. Amazingly, it was unlocked. I had to wonder how long it had been that way. Maybe I could’ve walked out anytime.

The corridor was empty. The office next to my room was empty. The tiny kitchen where my meals originated was empty. There was no one in any of the rooms that opened off the hallway, all the way to the entrance door. Through frosted glass I could see an unlit common area and three elevator doors.

No one there either.

I was alone.

Outside my door was an empty suitcase. On top of it sat an airline ticket for a two-hop flight to Harrisburg, a sheaf of traveller’s cheques, and an American Express Gold card, all in the name of Kitten Carlson. The implication was obvious.

I was free.
I packed the suitcase with the clothing I wanted to keep, along with my makeup, hair products and jewelry box. There was enough room for my dog-eared copy of *Little Women*, the stuffed rabbit I’d been sleeping with and the Rabbit Habit, both of whom I’d taken to calling ‘Roger’.

For a moment it was hard to leave. I’d lived there for a long time. If nothing else, I thought I might miss the view. I walked slowly to the elevator, suitcase in tow, heels silent on velvet carpet. And I thought about how difficult it was going to be to reconnect with my mother and father, my sister and my friends—all of whom had been reliably informed that I was an America-hating terrorist. Not to mention the news that I was now female, and had in fact been one all along, and anyone who suggested otherwise would have to answer to the federal government.

On the other hand, maybe fitting in would be a breeze. Thanks to the FBI and their heavy-handed approach to public relations. After all, it wasn’t like I’d ever really been a boy.

Not really.