

THE GIRL TEST

By Annie Warren



ILLUSTRATED BY

A 'HER TV' NOVEL

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By Annie Warren

“You've been chosen”

“Ferguson! What's the goal of our Company?”

“To produce the top products in the industry, Sir!” I had to say that! It was almost written in our contracts that we memorize that slogan. Believe it? That was a different question.

Jonathan Peters, the second, or was it third, Vice President of Production and Quality, glared at me from under bushy eyebrows. With his white moustache, he had somewhat of a Mark Twain-like image, but Twain was gaunt in comparison to the well-fed appearance that Peters exuded. That and his expensive suits screamed “I made it”. I wondered what I had been called here for. I'm a design engineer, not a foreman or anything resembling management. I was about to learn.

“Ferguson, if that *is* our goal, how then do you explain *these*?” With a sweeping hand, he gestured towards a pile of papers on his desk. When I say “sizeable”, I mean that. It stood about two feet high and was made up of various types and sizes of papers. “Not knowing what it is, Sir, I have no comment.” Even I could hear the capital “S” on “Sir”, but it wasn't quite “SIR!”.

“These are complaints. Complaints about the design of not only our sedans, but also our trucks and vans. That's a DESIGN problem, Ferguson.”

“But Sir, we have the finest design team available!” It was true; we did! I eyed the pile. “That does not look like all *that* many complaints compared to the number of vehicles we produce. Is it ...” I was cut off.

“This is just the tip of the iceberg, Ferguson! It's Wednesday and this pile represents what we have received just since Monday. The flow seems to be fairly steady. It's not a one-time push to harass us by some special interest groups; it seems to be legitimate complaints.”

“Of what are they complaining?” I asked, trying to be grammatically correct. I did not want to make *any* mistakes in front of him. He could have me fired with no recourse but to pick up my severance pay and leave. Even the union could not touch his actions. Five previous attempts at overriding his firing powers had all failed. I was not in fear of my job, but still did not know why I, of all our design people, should be here in front of him and not Clyde, our design coordinator or Marcus, our key designer. What I did not realize was that they were waiting to speak with Peters. Apparently, he wanted to fire his first salvo at me.

“They are complaining about our designs. Haven't you been listening?”

I thought I had. “What are they complaining about in our designs, Sir?”

“Simply stated, they say they are all wrong, don't fit, they can't reach important things ...all that.”

“But, Sir, we did extensive testing, measuring and dimensioning for just those things. I remember doing a lot of it myself.”

His eyes fairly leapt with fire. “Yes, it *was* your job. and, if you want to *keep* your job, you will fix these problems.”

“What new measure will we use for this new design?”

“The basis of these damned letters, Ferguson! All of these letters are from *women*! Your equations apparently were man-made in the truest sense. Obviously, men and women are different, and so they are different when it comes to cars, too. We'll have to re-measure, re-design for women. We need an engineer of your caliber and experience to know when it is right.”

“But we don't have any women engineers, Sir; never have.”

“*That* is a part of the problem. If we need to hire a woman engineer to do this, then she will be sitting at *your* desk, doing *your* job, collecting *your* pay. Do I make myself clear?”

“I... I...” For a moment, I was speechless. It was a threat to fire me and hire someone else in my place. Either I fixed things, pronto, or I'd be doing my engineering from the unemployment line. We all also knew that those who were fired never got letters of recommendation.

“I believe so, Sir, but I'm not certain...” I wanted to continue with “what the hell to do” but softened it with business-speak... “what procedures and models that will be most applicable.”

“Now, you know why you're not in management, Ferguson. Use your imagination and creativity! You were chosen because you're an excellent design engineer, or so I have been told. I will expect you to do the measuring and testing yourself, or your female replacement will do it. I'd hate to lose you, but this is business and we want only the top people with us. Do this well and stop this flood,”—again he waved at the letters—“and I'll see to it that you get a bonus. There will be no failure in this adjustment, one way or another.”

“What resources will I have to draw on?”

“Hmm, the design team leader and design coordinator will see that you have the funding for whatever adjustments and tools need to be made. You'll have a generous budget to work with. This is important, Ferguson; remember that! I have instructed my secretary to hire a consultant to assist you. She'll let you know who it is and how to contact whoever it turns out to be. You can also consult Carrie, you know.”

He either had an encyclopedic memory or had done his homework to include my wife, Carrie, in this. I didn't know what *she* could tell me or do for me, but I wondered if I could get a bit of nepotistic funding swung her way if she did. I was still in a tizzy as to what to do and how to do it. At least I'd have the top part of my team to help me out... assuming *they* knew what to do.

“Thank you, Sir, I'll get on it right away.”

“See that you do! The preliminary design of next year's model is off the boards, in mock-up, and we'll will need your input quickly. So, get in there and find out what is wrong and set it straight!”

“Yes Sir!”

“That's all.” With that, he sat back down at his desk, ignoring my presence, and started working with some papers. I withdrew, somewhat in haste, backwards, almost like withdrawing from the presence of a king or queen. In our company he was not the CEO, but he *did* come close to being a monarch!

As I left his office and went past his secretary, I was about to ask her about the consultant, but saw Clyde and Marcus waiting. I “Hi”'d them and left. Only then did I notice that I was sweating from the ordeal with the VP. At this point, I had only a semi-idea of what he wanted. Apparently, women had been complaining about our design and he wanted *me* to fix it. Well, why not? I knew I was good at design and I knew that Marcus and Clyde agreed. I knew I *could* do it, but the eternal question starred me in the face... “How?”

“You fit the bill”

After lunch, I was sitting at an unresponsive computer screen that did not want to do what I wanted it to do when Marcus came into my cubicle and put his hand on my shoulder. His touch brought me out of my reverie, bringing me back to earth.

“I see that you're Peter's new pet designer.” I turned and looked at him, seeing his broad grin; nevertheless, I had to respond, “Not me, Marcus, unless you mean a pet to lead on a leash. I think it's more like dirty work than a reward, if you ask me.”

“Yeah, that's probably closer to it. Peters said that you fit the bill for what was needed and would be ‘fit into the part’. I don't think I envy you this one, Dana, but I'll help you any way I can.”

He wasn't exactly a “company man”, certainly not like Clyde. He was always helpful, though, just not an off-the-job type friend.

“Thanks, Marcus. I somehow have the feeling that this ‘fit’ is going to involve plugging my square peg into some round hole and making it fit, no matter what. Peters had that determined look that always makes me nervous. I've felt like that from the first day I spoke with him back when I was hired. I suppose this will take time away from my regular design work, too. What a bummer!”

“Well, special assignments are always distracting. Clyde stayed longer than I did, probably to get the final directives. We'll have to wait and see what he comes down with.”

“Yeah.” I turned back to my screen. “Moses coming down from Mount Peters.”

“Well, good luck, anyway. Let me know if you need any help.”

“Thanks, Marcus. I’m sure I’ll see you later when Clyde passes on the commandments.”

He gave me a toothy grin. “Might not be *that* bad. We’ll see, I guess. Does *look* important, though. See you later. I have a golden calf to make...”

At that, he left and I laughed to myself. *Sure* he did. For an almost-company man, he still had a nice side. I’d have to wait for Clyde since Marcus apparently knew less than I did. Strange, that.

When Clyde finally came by, he didn’t say anything but sort of stood off, eyeing me up and down. Then he moved off without a word. It was *most* peculiar and made me wonder and worry a bit. What the hell was going on?

That afternoon, Marcus and I went out to the laboratory work rooms where we looked over some of the current mockups. I looked at the parts I had designed, now with a different bent. I had looked at previous designs every day as I drove the new models to and from work. Now, with this new and as-yet unknown assignment, I wondered just what Peters wanted out of me. As I sat there behind the wheel, wondering what I was supposed to do, Marcus leaned in the window.

“Uh, Dana, one of the things mentioned was long fingernails. Yours are, uh, long, but not as long as a lot of women. Let’s see if we can extend them a bit with some paper clips and see how *that* works.” Obviously having prepared, he reached in a handful of paperclips.

So, I put paperclips on my fingernails, feeling the fool. It turned out to be a failure anyway; they just fell off when the going became critical. So, after playing around a while, we went back to our respective offices having gained, for practical purposes, nothing.

That night, I told Carrie of the new assignment as we prepared dinner. I had started it since I got home first. We worked together on it, as we did on so many things. She was my helpmate and I was hers. That was one of the reasons I loved her so much. But this time, she was as puzzled as I was. Over dinner, we discussed it further.

“I wonder what they meant by telling you that you would have to re-measure and re-design. How did they pick *you*?”

“Beats me. I’m surprised they picked me, too. Sure, I have the expertise, but I sense there’s more to it than just measuring and designing. Marcus and I played a silly game this afternoon. We put some paperclips on my fingers to fake long nails.”

“Some fun. And?...”

I looked at Carrie’s nails. They were a good bit longer than mine and well-polished. Her position as assistant chief buyer for women’s clothes in one of the largest clothing chains in the country allowed her little luxuries like that.

“They kept falling off when it came to critical testing. I wonder what we’ll do.”

“Just grow longer nails, Dear.”

“I’m afraid this is for the next model; we can’t wait that long.”

"I'm sure they'll think of something, especially if this *is* as important as Mr. Peters seems to have indicated.

"That's what partially worries me. Either I get it and get it right, or I could be out of a job, *persona non grata*."

"Now, now, a little pressure never hurt you. It seems to spur your creativity."

"My only worry is that it may spur something else that I am not yet aware of. I really don't know their game plan yet, but that's tomorrow, let's enjoy tonight..."

With that the topic was dropped and we enjoyed each other's company.

"Industrial strength"

Next morning, shortly after I got in, Clyde, who had probably been there since before seven, came over to me, sat on the edge of my desk, and handed me an envelope.

"Good morning, Dana. How are you doing today?" "Great, Clyde, what's up?" I knew something was up as he usually didn't talk to me this early and there was, of course, the envelope.

"Yesterday, Marcus and I discussed your experimental technique. Inside this envelope are two appointments for this morning, so don't get *too* settled in. There's also a letter of explanation. The appointments are on company time, so you can log them on your time sheet under 'special assignment'. The letter puts things in black and white so that it will be clearer to you." He then stood up and smiled. "These should help greatly. See you later," and with that, he was gone.

In the letter were two appointment slips and a brief letter:

"These appointments were made to aid you in this project. The nail salon is to help alleviate the problems in basic measurements already encountered. The doctor's appointment is to help you in obtaining some insight into the feminine mindset. Remember, the alterations are to stay until the end of the project as per Mr. Peters."

Alterations? My fears from the night before came back.

Looking at the slips, I saw that I had an appointment with "Linda's Nail Boutique" at 10 and an appointment with Dr. A. J. DuBelle at 11. I just knew that was going to force me to blow off my usual lunch. Actually, looking at the first one, I had a feeling it might blow more than just lunch.

To say that I was nervous approaching the boutique would be an understatement. It was in one of the better sections of town with nice shops all around it. I didn't think it was posh, but what did *I* know of such things?

When I entered and met the receptionist, I feeling out of place in my three-piece suit. All about me flitted a number of pretty girls in satiny, pale green uniform smocks. Several women were sitting in comfortable chairs having their nails done.

"Good morning, Ma'am. I believe an appointment was made for me at ten."

She looked startled, but only momentarily; quickly she regained her composure, checked the book, then smiled.

“Ah yes, Mister Ferguson. I see your appointment right here. In fact, you have an appointment with Linda, herself. Please come this way.”

With that, she walked rather sensuously into the boutique. I followed, warmed by a blush. This was alien territory for me. In the back was an empty chair where I was seated; she disappeared momentarily behind a curtain, almost immediately reappeared and headed back to her post. From behind the curtain came a pretty, more mature, woman who introduced herself as Linda.

“So, Mister Ferguson, you are to be a designer and tester for the new models of cars coming out. That sounds like a rather challenging job. Since you are going to be putting these nails through some rigorous exercises, I've decided to give you my special attention and give you, as you might say in your line of work, ‘industrial strength’ nails. They'll be as fine as any you've ever seen, only they'll be a lot stronger and will stand up to a lot abuse without cracking, chipping or falling off. Should you prove stronger than the nails, then come back here and I'll repair the damage, free of charge.”

Almost an hour was spent by her applying to my nails some sort of goo that hardened to a bright red plastic polymer that was promised to be “as hard as nails”. She apologized for the color but told me it only came in one color. When done, however, I had nails a good bit longer than Carrie's. They were as red as hers and, I thought, as feminine as hers. There were some places where my real nails almost showed through so Linda finished by polishing them with multiple coats of an almost identical red. She ended up giving me the bottle of the nail varnish so that I could patch any scrapes I might make on my job.

I looked at those ten glistening red nails. They were really pretty—or they *would* be on some woman's hand, not on mine! My initial reaction was to want to put on a pair of gloves. One thing for sure, my nails were now at least as feminine as any of the women there, if not more so. They now extended out over the tips of my fingers what seemed like three and a half miles but what was really “only” between one and two centimeters. I was only too glad to get out of that shop; outside I was assailed by occasional smiles from passers-by when they saw my nails. It did not take too many of those before I simply put my hands in my pockets and left them there. How could Clyde *do* this to me? Or, more likely, how could *Peters*?

I made it just in time for the second appointment. Again I was a bit upset when I read the name on the door, “Anne J. DuBelle, Psychiatry & Hypnotherapy”. What the heck did I need to see a *shrink* for? I'm not crazy! I began to think that either Peters or Clyde was crazy for setting this up.

But... it had been set up and I was required to carry it out. To be honest, I was curious to see what it was that she was supposed to do for me.

How many people do you see sitting in a waiting room with their hands in their pockets? Well, I gave these people an example of that. It was almost 11:30 before I got in. By then, the waiting room was all but empty. I wondered if she went home at noon or something.

When I entered her office, she arose from behind a large desk and came around it to greet me, holding out her hand. I pulled mine out and shook hers, being careful not to gouge her. I must say that she took it all in stride. If she noticed the nails, she did not say anything nor look strangely at them. I was looking for the long couch, but saw none.

She almost oozed friendliness and took me over to a set of easy chairs set by a table under the light of the window. As we talked I looked her over. She was thirtyish, quite short, five two or so, had sort of a dutch bob in her black hair and had dark eyes to match. She must have had some Arabian genes as her skin had a soft tanned look that didn't seem to come from a tan. She was wearing a pants suit that showed off a nice figure neither too large nor too small. She was an attractive woman.

Her manner and voice were equally soft and inviting. We talked a bit of my job, how I liked it and such. Then, she asked how I liked the nails. I could only tell her that I had just gotten them at the company's request and that they made me nervous. She pursued my nervousness but got no further, or so I thought.

After 15 minutes, she asked for permission to hypnotize me so that she could probe some questions and help me with my nervousness. I asked if it was necessary. She replied it was not necessary but would help me, to be sure, as well as help her, too. It would really be for my best and was, more or less, why the session had been set up.

This smacked of "prearrangement"; I felt it was best if I agreed, imagining Peters being somewhere behind it.

Well, I don't remember how she put me under but I *did* go. I remember her probing my life, my marriage, my job, well, *me*. I remember the questions and even what I answered. It turned out to be easy to answer some things that I hadn't thought of in years. There was nothing that I was ashamed of or wanted to hide. It was a very relaxed session. Concerning some of the things that I couldn't quite answer, I remembered her talking about "deeper" and I was suddenly able to remember. It was strange, but was not threatening in any way.

When I finally came out of the trance, I was rested and relaxed, feeling quite fine. I thought I had been there half an hour and was ready to go back to work. When I looked at the clock, I found that it had been two hours. I thought of the rates she charges and pondered the cost of that session. When I asked about it, she smiled and said that it was being paid by the company. That made it a little easier for me. But before I left, she gave me an appointment to return in two days at ten in the morning. I think that we were both quite hungry.

Only when I got to the cafeteria at the company did I realize that I was no longer sensitive or nervous about my long red nails. No one had said anything to me until I was in the line and one of the servers commented on the loveliness of my new nails. I sort of waived them at her, palm down, commenting on how pretty they were and that they were for a special assignment on designing new cars. She smiled and complimented me on them and didn't laugh, sneer or react badly at all. I was pleased.

I wondered where my positive attitude had come from, but I found that it carried the day. If I were to try to hide them, they'd probably have laughed, but by being open, they did not. I actually was glad of it. Trying to work at my computer, however, proved

to be a daunting experience. Thankfully, not long thereafter, Marcus came by with a list of tests that had to be done. We sat down, read through them and organized them into groups based on location in the car. By quitting time, the next day's testing was laid out.

It seemed out of place to see my long, fiery red fingernails on the steering wheel, but I was no longer sensitive about them. Then it occurred to me that the good doctor must have somehow altered my consciousness about them. I did not remember any such talk, but there must have been some. I had to smile to myself; she had pulled one on me, and a good one, too. I began to think about what I was going to tell Carrie and ran various scripts through my head as I drove home. Of course, when I saw her, I came up with yet another one.

When I came in, I made the mistake of trying to hide my hands, wanting to first set up the story of what happened. Hiding was the worst thing I could have done as she wanted to see what it was I was keeping from her. So, when I brought them out, she was all oohs and aahs, asking me why I had hid them, how it had happened and why. So, I went through the day from start to finish as we made and ate dinner. She had to help me do some of the things that I was used to doing, with fingernails that had been a lot shorter. I was finding that long nails were getting in my way!

It did not occur to me until mid-evening that she, too, had not had any sort of a negative reaction. What kind of a woman was she that could accept so readily a husband that had long, red, glistening, ultra-feminine nails? I didn't know then, but I was mighty happy that she *was* so agreeable. Home life was not stressed by this company action. Would there be more?

“Find Out How Our Half Lives”

The next morning at work, the testing turned out to be more trying than I had expected. I had a list of tests we had planned out on a clip-board. Damned if I wasn't having troubles even with writing! I had to learn a new way of holding the pen to make my notes and check off the items, one by one.

I thought that I'd breeze in and breeze out, but no, it was not *that* simple. With some of the complaints I did not see any difficulties. I could, for example, grasp the air conditioning lever and move it with ease. I saw no problem there; had it been changed? The glove box, however, *did* cause difficulties I would not have foreseen. It was opened by pressing a soft, rounded button. Well, if you were in the driver's seat and reached over, the long nail would hang while depressing the button but not far enough to open it. In the passenger seat it was easier to drive poke it straight on, but this meant that it was stressing the nail. Mine took it as, I could probably have opened tin cans with them. They were hard, almost inflexible talons. I didn't want to test to see what *would* break one.

I spent the morning and well into the afternoon making tests and notes. Still I did not complete the test list since I kept finding things that had not been in the original set. In essence, I sat in every seat and reached for everything I could, in sight or not. I was finding that this was most definitely not a “snap assignment”. Also, violating a rule of mine, I took some of my work home with me.

That evening, after dinner, I asked Carrie for some help with the project. She did not understand what I meant until I told her that I wanted to see her do some things in the car. Sure enough, what had been easy for me had posed a problem for her as she had approached it differently. When I asked her why, she replied simply, "That's the way I always did it; it's more natural to me."

When I showed her how I did it and the nails did not get in the way, she only laughed and said that mine was a "man's way", and that if I wanted to *truly* test these things, I'd have to learn how to do some of these things in a more feminine manner. She suggested that maybe the shrink could help me in that respect.

"Carrie, Love, do you mean that you want me to learn to do things like *women* do?"

She looked at me in a peculiar way, then glanced at my long, red nails. Finally, she smiled. "It couldn't hurt you to find out more about how our half lives. Might even do you some good!"

"Alright, if you think it will do some good, I'll see what I can do. It seems that it's going to be necessary for this job."

We spent another half-hour going through some of the "tough" problems as I learned how women did them. I wondered if I'd remember these things when I was in "test mode".

The next morning I started working on my real job, design. I took my notes and dashed off—well, as fast as those nails let me with the multiple back-space-rewrite actions required—some simple design changes that would make access to some of the knobs and switches easier with long nails, while not really changing short nail access. So far it was easy, but I had not tackled the harder ones, though I was thinking and planning what to do.

At ten I was again at the doctor's office. She smiled and we talked for a while. I mentioned what Carrie had suggested and said that I didn't know how to do it. She suggested that the easiest way was to simply watch women. I said I was *always* watching women. She laughed and said not to watch them *that way*, but to watch *what* they did and *how* they did it and learn from them. It sounded like a good idea and I told myself to do that.

Well, after our short talk she asked for permission and, when I agreed, again put me into a trance. Again I don't know how she did it. I knew I was going to have to research hypnotism and see what I could learn about the techniques.

Similar to the previous time, this trance seemed like a conversation. The only difference was that I did not volunteer information or talk without being asked. She "looked" into my childhood, bringing out things I thought I had long forgotten. I had "conveniently" forgotten that as a smaller than usual child, I had been picked on by a lot of boys and even some girls. At first, it was painful to remember these things, but she must have seen my anguish and told me how to view them. She taught me a sort of eye-in-the-sky objectivism, and how to relax and not worry about the past. And, true to her words, I did relax and saw my past actions almost like a movie in which I was the star, or main character.