



Reluctant Press presents:

GROWING PEACHES

Dee Dee Perri



A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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Growing Peaches

By Dee Dee Perri

Chapter 1

"Pregnant?" I said. "I'm... pregnant?" I felt an asymmetrical smile working its way across my lips. I'd known Jimmy Franks since he and I had been undergraduates at U.C. Berkeley. He had been pre-med back then; I was still pre-everything. He went on to medical school and I eventually found my way into a Ph.D. program at Brown as a history major, American history specializing in the Civil War era. My dissertation had been on Sherman's march to the sea in eighteen-sixty-four. Truth was, I knew more about mid-nineteenth century America than most people cared to know and, well, substantially less about the twenty-first century. I was, at that moment, perfectly happy with that arrangement. "Same-old-same old," I laughed. Jimmy had always been a jokester.

But he didn't laugh. He turned his back to me and retreated to his desk. As he sat down and nudged his chair forward, his face was somber. There wasn't even a flicker of amusement in his face. His eyes bore into mine like one of those stare down contests I used to have with my older brother. I felt a buzz run up my spine. Anxiety? Probably not. Resentment, yes.

"I don't like to be jerked around," I growled. "It isn't funny, Jimmy," I added. Having been puking my guts out for the last three weeks, I knew that whatever was going on with me wasn't the flu. "If it's bad, just tell me, OK? Big C, maybe I can handle it."

My smile had vanished with the initial growl. It was time for him to grin and laugh at his little joke on me, but he didn't. He just kept staring. I was fully exasperated by now. Anger, not fear or resentment, had taken over. He'd pushed it too far, the jerk.

Jimmy tugged back his sleeve and checked his watch like somehow the current time was relevant before looking back at me. His fingers began a nervous drumming on the desk top as if stalling for time. My passions were in full flow by now. I stood up to leave,

knowing a long and, what I had thought was a good friendship had come to an abrupt and unexpected end. I could feel heat on my face. My palms were greasy with sweat and my heart fluttered wildly in my chest.

"Fuck it!" he swore. "Sit," he ordered as he checked his watch again. "Damn Feds," he growled.

"Feds?" I was completely mystified. "Feds?" I said again. My mouth was hanging open as I continued to hover over the chair I'd just vacated.

"I wasn't supposed to say anything, OK? But they were supposed to be here, what? Five- ten minutes ago?"

I sat down. I felt like Alice in Wonderland, totally lost in a world making less and less sense by the moment. "Feds," I murmured softly as I shook my head and splayed out my hands. My twisted smile had returned. All I could think was that poor Jimmy Franks had gone mad. But that was of little comfort to me at that moment. Where was the red queen running around yelling 'Off with their heads' when you really needed her?

I watched Jimmy check his watch again and then look out the window toward the parking lot before grunting. "What do you know about Betas?"

"Huh? Like Alpha, Beta, Gamma..."

He cut me off. "Very funny. Five years ago. You remember the big news, Bill? I mean how could you not?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about. Five years ago, I was working on my dissertation, OK? Five years ago I was, well, in eighteen-sixty-four and Sherman was making Georgia howl."

He looked at me startled. "Christ, I believe you Bill." He scratched his head thoughtfully. "I mean," he jerked his head, "yeah, you of all people could get lost in the wrong century." He continued to stare at me but at least his eyes were now blinking, "OK, pal, five years ago, some moron created a device that could turn perfectly normal people, men and women, into over-sexed super females..."

I felt embarrassed. "Oh you're talking about bimbos, right, Jimmy?" I laughed, "Even I remember that crap, kinda."

He looked relieved. "OK, they're called Betas now, as distinct from Alphas."

"Alphas?"

"That's us. I mean ordinary men and women are referred to as Alphas."

"Oh."

"Right. The term Beta was applied when it was decided that the bimbo was actually a new species or a sub-species and..."

"Ok, so what does that have to do with the price of corn in Ohio?" Jimmy hadn't clarified anything, much less his statement that I was pregnant.

"You had sexual intercourse with a Beta approximately two months ago."

"Like hell," I laughed. "You think I wouldn't remember a thing like that, Jimmy? It's me, Wild Bill Walker? Remember Berkeley?" I rolled my eyes. I never had much success as

a man-about-town, a lover. I was *so* awkward with women. "I was a virgin when I married Tina last year, for Pete's sake, Jimmy." I wrinkled my nose, "Besides, what does that have to do with anything? Pregnant? Guys don't get pregnant, right Mr. Doctor Know-It-All?"

"Are you going to stick with that story, Bill?" He cocked his head, "The Feds will eat you up."

A burning sensation shot up, then back down my spine. "Christ!" I swore. "Jesus H.," I added. "It was Chicago. Two months ago. I was at a convention and..."

"You had sex with a remarkable woman, right?"

"Now that's an understatement. Remarkable, Jimmy? I thought I'd died and gone to heaven." I shook my hand as if I'd burned it. "Hot! But give me a break, it was just once, Jimmy, just once. She went up to my room with me and I was saying to myself..." I was really blushing now as the memory flooded back. "You know me, Jimmy; I've never, ever been what you could call lucky." I swallowed and enjoyed the heat of the memory. It had been 'sex' as I had imagined it would be. I was still deep in thought when Jimmy continued.

"Betas get pregnant but they don't carry the fetus to term."

"Huh?"

"The fertilized egg of a Beta has a tail, like some monster sperm."

I started to interrupt him but he pushed on. He was looking out the window and his voice was hurried like we were running out of time.

"During sexual congress, the egg has been shown to be capable of traveling up the male's urethra and implanting itself in the prostate. It's all but certain that she was already pregnant when she chose you if indeed you only had that one sexual encounter. It takes a couple of days for the fertilized egg to develop its tail. It was a sucker's play, my friend. She needed someone to dump her offspring on and you were there with your tongue hanging out, right? Christ, Bill, haven't you noticed all those government ads on television touting the dangers of unprotected sex?" He glared at me. "A fucking rubber and you wouldn't be here right now with a bun in the oven."

"Shit," I said in a whisper. "Getting a man pregnant should be against the law. How's a guy to know?"

"It is, actually, against the law that is. Five years ago, when it was first discovered that Betas could impregnate a non-consenting male, they began to round up all the Betas. People were scared, some very important people were scared." He stopped and looked back out the window.

"If they have all been arrested, whatever..."

"That's why they want to talk to you, Bill. They want to find her before she strikes again."

"Oh."



They both had on tan Brooks Brothers suits, heavy duty cop shoes and neither man had a neck to speak of. I felt like I had been transported into a nineteen-thirty's gangster movie. I half-expected one of them to say "Da boss wants to see ya." But no such luck. They flipped open their wallets, showing some kind of identification, to Jimmy, not me. Then they proceeded to cuff my hands behind my back. I felt like a slab of meat and they were the butchers. I could be a smartass sometimes but I was thoroughly intimidated at this moment. Ordinary cops would read you your rights then and there but not these guys. They were Homeland Security thugs; in their code, you were guilty until proven innocent. They were still working from the mandate given them after 9/11. As you know, terrorists have no rights.

Like most people, I'd never given much thought to the fact that the infamous 'bimbos' had just vanished a few years ago. One moment they were all over the place, especially on TV, hanging on the arm of some big shot, all wiggly and deliciously sexy and then the next moment- gone. Gone where? Into camps like the Nazis ran? Sweet Jesus, what a thought. And if they, meaning the Homeboy thugs, could make tens, maybe hundreds of thousands, of human beings disappear, why not me? I was ready to sing whatever song they wanted to hear, trust me.

It doesn't work that way. They didn't want to hear my confession in the car as we traveled downtown, nor when we arrived in the basement of the Federal building; maybe it was above their pay grade. They shoved me into a cubical and left me there for something like twenty-four hours. Softening up? Heck, I started out like a marshmallow to begin with.

I always thought that my wife Tina was tough. She was nothing compared to the woman who ran the interrogation. She was unnecessarily rude and mean. She had a mustache. I'd gone over my story eighty to a hundred times before she flew into a rage, grabbed me by the hair and yelled in my face, "Bimbo bitch lover!"

The woman was deeply paranoid, that was clear. Maybe it was the hormones. I'd never been pregnant before but in the next instant, I broke down and began to cry. I can't tell you the last time I'd cried. Maybe it was in pre-school. My dad didn't tolerate crybabies and my older brother would have kicked my ass if I'd as much as shown a tear. But I was crying now. I think 'wailing' would be the more descriptive term. It was a pathetic, wounded animal shriek that I hadn't even suspected could come from inside me. It rose to a breathtaking crescendo. My visual world became a blurred, incomprehensible smear as snot leaked out of my nose and hung expectantly on my upper lip. I was completely and totally lost in self-pity and fear. It was only when I was cried out, fully exhausted and emotionally empty, that I realized she and the others were gone. I was alone again.



A full day and a half later, I was in another cubical but this one was above ground. The cuffs were gone, a good sign, and my clothes had been returned. They'd kept me naked

and cuffed down in the basement for the last three days. I could almost taste the end of my imprisonment. The door opened and there stood a lawyer. I just knew that he was a lawyer, it's a sixth sense I have. The cheesy smile without making proper eye contact must be a talent they teach in law school. I immediately checked the back pocket of my slacks. My wallet hadn't been returned to me yet. My hand fluttered back from its futile journey to fall to the table top and rejoin its mate.

"Mr. Walker?" He said. "Mr. William Joseph Walker?" He was looking over my head as if someone were standing behind me.

"You were expecting someone else?" I said, a crooked smile working its way across my lips. I never thought I'd feel relief at the sight of a lawyer but there it was. "That's *Doctor* Walker, or if you prefer, Professor Walker. You could call me Professor Doctor Walker but that's more of a German thing." I laughed at my joke. "And you are?"

He didn't respond immediately. He still hadn't made eye contact with me, which was curious to say the least and a bit alarming. I was more than slightly insecure. Suffering the undivided attention of the Homeboys for a few days can do that to you. He flopped down his heavy briefcase on the small table between us with a loud thud. My hands had to dive away for their own safety. The man was rude, even for a lawyer. He was still looking over my head when he sat down and finally answered me. "I'm only a messenger."

My heart sank. A little voice inside me said, 'Da boss musta sent him.' He wasn't here to represent me, that was now obvious.

He extracted a thick stack of documents, squared them up by tapping them on the table top, then shoved them toward me. "Sign," he ordered.

"Huh?" I picked up the stack of papers. At the bottom of the first page, marked by a yellow highlighter, was a space for my signature. I flipped through the stack of documents; at the bottom of most pages were similar areas marked in yellow. I looked up at him but he was still woodenly staring at nothing. I started reading the first document; it could have been in Greek as it described the first party of the second, blah, blah, blah and blah.

His hand slashed down and smashed the thick set of documents I had been holding back to the table top. For the first time we made eye contact; it wasn't a pretty sight. Dis-taste bordering on livid disgust was there in his eyes for me to see. "Billy Joe," he said with a sneer crowding his lips to one side. Nobody *ever* called me Billy Joe. And he hadn't said Billy Joe but more like Billy-Joe, one word, like I was some kind of illiterate hillbilly.

I opened my mouth to protest but he didn't give me the chance. With his eyes once again fixated on the far wall, he continued. "Moron, what part of my instructions confused your pea brain? Sign these fucking forms!"

Moron? Pea brain? Those were fighting words that triggered a rage that even the last few days of maltreatment could not quite suppress. I jerked up out of my chair and blocked his view of the far wall. I opened my mouth but I was still looking for the right words when he stood as well.

"Fine," he said, shifting his view higher still. Then he changed his mind. His gaze locked on to mine with a cold vengeance, "Letting slime like you out to rub shoulder with

real, honest-to-goodness human beings goes against my grain anyway.” He jerked away and turned.

My anger burst like a balloon pricked by a pin. He had already reached the cubical door when I finally yelled, “I can go if I sign these?” My heart fell to the soles of my shoes as he opened the door but he did stop.



So much for walking out into freedom, they’d returned me to my cell. This time, my escort was a local police officer, female. The latter fact was an observation based upon the presence of breasts on the creature’s chest, for there was nothing else feminine about her person. She was thick, solid, and had a utility belt loaded with tools designed to kill or maim. I jabbered with her all the way back to my cell. It was a very one-sided conversation. It wasn’t until we reached the terminus of my trip that she looked me in the eye. There was an echo of that lawyer’s gaze there: disgust.

Several hours went by, then, my guard reappeared. Wordlessly, she handed me a thick stack of documents and left again. The documents were Xerox copies of the forms I’d signed earlier. I sat down to read what would still prove to be nearly unintelligible gobbledook.

The best I could make out indicated I’d given away any rights I might have had regarding some future legal action I might wish to initiate concerning my treatment by the members of the Department of Home Land Security. The second document was more than a bit mysterious. I’d apparently given away my rights as a ‘federal dependent’ which meant that they were not obligated to service my minimum needs. This is something native Americans had to sign fifty years ago if they wanted off the reservation. God knows I had no desire to live on a reservation. As a student of American history, my neck crawled with tiny, invisible bugs at the very idea. Thanks but no thanks.

I was just starting on the third document when I heard some clattering and banging in the hallway. The next moment, the door opened and a short, fat man appeared. He was sweating and his chubby triple-chinned face was red from the effort of carrying a folding table, two chairs and what appeared to be a notebook computer in a backpack. He stopped as the female guard entered and took the table and then the chairs from his grip. He turned toward me and smiled. “I’m Max. You must be Billy.”

I jerked my head to signal the affirmative to his question as I watched ‘Max’ mop his brow. His smile appeared to be genuine; that alone was refreshing. I guess I grinned back at Max as the table was set up and the computer was retrieved. Max sat down and began to chatter about anything and nothing as he brought his computer to life. The weather, the Dodgers, it didn’t matter much. I appreciated the friendliness that seemed to ooze naturally from the fat man. He was almost too nice. Finally, I had to ask. “You’re a psychologist, right?”

“Social worker,” he replied.

"Same difference," I added. The look on his face became pinched, suggesting that he didn't agree with me. But his good nature reworked its way to the surface almost immediately.

"You don't seem to be terribly traumatized by the prospect of giving birth, Billy," he said, looking down at his computer screen. Apparently notes had been taken during my interrogation.

"Traumatized, Max?" I laughed. "The moment I get out of here, I'm heading for an abortion clinic. Me, giving birth? That's... sick."

Max blanched. "You can't do that, Billy," he said.

"What do you mean can't?" I squeaked. "You're telling me that the Federal government..." I stammered off into confused silence. "That's... crazy," I mewed.

He cocked his head and looked at me as if for the first time, "You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

He rolled his eyes. "Markowitz again. He didn't go through any of those documents with you, did he." He looked at me to confirm his guess and I nodded no. Of course I didn't know whether or not that asshole's name was Markowitz. Max let out a long sigh. "If you lose that child, Billy..."

"That's Doctor Walker, William if you must." My faith in his basic good nature was becoming challenged.

"Sorry," he said, waving his hand as an apology. He began again, "If the pregnancy is prematurely terminated, you will lose your identity: physical, mental and, of course, sexual. As a being, you will be unrecognizable to others and, more importantly, to yourself. A living suicide." His face showed his deep concern

"Say what?"

"You will become a Beta."

"Whoa. You're saying I'll become a bimbo?"

"Exactly. Legally not even human. A perfect perversion of natural human sexuality." He became quite animated as he continued his extensive description of a Beta. His eyes brightened unnaturally even as his face took on an exaggerated paternal expression. Finally, he ended his small summary of 'bimbo-ism' with, "Billy, Billy. You have no desire to be a penis-seeking degenerate, now do you? IQ of a toaster, a sub-human animal?" He looked at me as if expecting an answer. Not getting an answer quickly enough, he answered for me. "Heavens no, you do not. And you would lose your freedom as well." He added as he raised his eyebrows to emphasize his point. "Most certainly."

"Come again?"

"All Betas are under Federal authority, protective authority."

I was sweating now. It was like trying out for membership in the Jewish faith, say, about nineteen-thirty-nine in Berlin. "Protective authority means some kind of detention center, right?"

“Correct.” He looked pained. “It’s pretty ugly, obscene in fact.” He looked around as if to determine whether or not anyone was listening. It was pure theater for we were obviously alone; the guard was in the hallway and the heavy cell door was closed.

“I can’t say it for a fact but after the courts ruled that Betas were not human, the gloves came off. Some of them were probably murdered,” he said, shaking his head and looking very sad. “More recently, the authorities have taken a more humane approach. They simply castrate the Betas, disfigure their face with tattoos, then employ the poor damaged creatures in the only function for which they are qualified.” He shuddered. “You really do not want to be a Beta, my friend.

“Slavery is outlawed in every nation in the world but a Beta isn’t human, if you understand what I’m saying. In some countries, they can be bought and sold like animals.” He looked down at his computer screen as if to confirm something. “If you didn’t realize that you are at risk of becoming a Beta,” he looked up at me to see my reaction, “then it seems perfectly likely that you have no idea of your current legal status.” I just nodded.

“Right. Damn you again, Markowitz. For starters, sex with a Beta is illegal. In fact, you are now or soon will be, a registered sex offender.”

“What? A sex offender?” Even I knew that to be a ‘registered sex offender’ required a legal judgment by a judge and a local judge at that since it wasn’t a federal matter. I’d been held by the federals and... “Max, I haven’t seen a judge or...”

“A very minor matter. The legal part, I mean. Your pregnancy is sufficient proof of sexual aberration. A judge probably looked at your medical records as soon as you passed from federal to state authority. It’s in one of the documents you signed. I’m afraid my friend you have been or will be convicted in absentia. The designation of ‘sex offender’ simply provides a means to enforce control over your person until the child is born.”

“Huh?”

“They don’t want you to become a Beta. God knows they don’t give a damn about Gammas.”

“Excuse me, Max, what’s a Gamma?”

“You are.”

“Christ! Alphas, Betas and now Gammas, the whole damn Greek Alphabet, huh? What does that mean exactly?” I said. “What’s a Gamma?”

Max shook his head. “One issue at a time, OK? As a pregnant Gamma, you are a ward of the state.”

“Ward? You mean like a prisoner.”

“You’re catching on, Billy.”

I was horror struck. “I can’t go home?”

“I didn’t say that. One can hope that you can be fully and rapidly reintegrated into your old life.”

“Reintegrated. I don’t like the sound of that. What does it mean?”

He waved off my last question after looking at his watch. "We really don't have time for that right now. How can I put it?" He twisted his face and let out a sigh, "OK. I am your case officer, Billy. Please me and everything will go swimmingly. Cross me on even the smallest item and you'll find yourself on a federal prison farm for Gammas." In contrast to his abruptly harsh language, he smiled and spayed out his hands, "Trust me, I'm on your side. And you do *not* want to revert back to federal custody- ever."

~oOo~

"It's a half-way house," Max said. "Later on, after the birth of your child, you will be able to come and go pretty much as you please but right now, its twenty-four seven for you, my friend." He pushed the gate open and waved me forward.

"Twenty-four seven? And my wife? Max, when can I see her." I thought about it for a moment, "What have they told her?" Having gotten started, it was hard to cut off the flow of questions. "My job. I got responsibilities and..."

Max's hand descended upon my shoulder. "Whoa. One step at a time, my friend." He looked at his watch. "It's way too late to begin the admission assessment." He faced the clerk that came to the front counter. "Sorry Carl, you know me. We got to talking and..." He laughed, "Well, here we are, late as usual."

"Billy Jo, right?" The clerk said after looking at the names listed on his clip board. "Supposed to be here two hours ago, Max."

"Yeah, well," He turned to me and said, "Gotta go."

"Will I see you again, Max?"

"Sure. Later in the week after you get squared away. Like I said, I'm responsible for you until your bundle of joy is delivered."

I watched him leave. He had been the only bright spot in my world for the past half-week. As I turned back, the clerk was holding a bracelet out to me.

"Huh?"

"Everything's electronically coded in the facility," he said as he took my arm and slipped on the band just above my wrist. With a quick, abrupt movement, the plastic band was tightly fixed to my wrist. "There," he said, "this gizmo tells the computer who you are and that determines what doors will open and what doors will not. Understand? Anyhow it's got a G.P.S. transponder, so don't get any ideas of sneaking off. So, welcome to the nut house."

"Yeah. Great," I said, looking at the transparent band on my wrist. I felt as trapped as I did back in the federal building.

"I'll get someone to give you the grand tour and show you to your room." He stopped and looked at me, "Nobody gets a private room, so don't ask, Peaches." He turned and yelled over his shoulder, "Cindy!" Nothing happened. He yelled again and still no Cindy. "Gammas," he said in a knowing voice. "Fucking airhead pussies, everyone of them." He stopped and looked at me. "Sorry." He shrugged his shoulders.

“Look, I think Gammas are just about the sweetest people on God’s green Earth. I’m not one of those bastards who hate them just for being different. They’re just, ah, airheads sometimes, OK?” He looked at me. I must have looked unhappy or something. “Come on, Peaches let’s not start off on the wrong foot, OK?”

He left me alone to look for this Cindy person. Peaches, what was *that* all about? I was decidedly uncomfortable with the image. Airhead pussies? Fuck. Gammas were men, right? Men don’t have pussies and you don’t call them Peaches, for God’s sake. My insides quivered as a novel concern bloomed unbidden in my consciousness. How does a man give birth anyhow? For that matter, if Gammas were men... he was looking for Cindy. When was the last time I had ever met a man named Cindy? I leaned over the counter to take a peek at the list the clerk had examined when Max first brought me inside the facility. Every name on that list was a feminine version of a male name. And there, near the bottom, was mine, Billy Jo, no 'e' on the Joe and no last name either. Nobody had a last name. Now that was pretty odd.

~oOo~

“Billy Jo, right?” She-he said as she-he flipped out a hand bearing obviously false, brightly painted nails that had to be two inches long. The hand was offered palm down and she-he quickly drew it back as soon as our fingers touched. The hand fluttered back to his-her neck like a little bird before slowly dropping down, finally settling just above feminine cleavage. The vividly purple nails indented slightly the soft breast flesh just above the plunging neckline.

I was still staring at that hand and at that cleavage as Cindy turned and grabbed me by my right arm. His or her right hand wrapped itself around my hand. Cindy’s left hand gripped me just above the elbow and drew me in close enough that I could feel her breast squished against my bicep. “This way, sweetie.” The voice was an extreme falsetto now, as rich as butterscotch.

I don’t know if it was the perfume which formed a heavy cloud around this caricature of femininity, the tactile impression of that all too female breast intimately pressed against my arm or the fact that my personal space and been attacked but I locked my knees and brought us both to an awkward, stumbling halt. “If you don’t mind,” I said, pulling my arm free and stepping back.

“Sorry,” she said but she didn’t look sorry. There was a mischievous look in her eyes. “It takes a bit of getting used to,” he added in a rich baritone. The feminine illusion vanished in an instant. A lazy smile ripened across the heavily made-up face. The lips, made to appear fuller due to the heavy application of lip gloss or whatever it was, parted, showing his teeth but it was a male smile that emerged. He fluttered his exaggerated eye lashes as a coquette might and winked.

“Pretty shocking, huh?” he said, then threw back his head and laughed. The latter sound and gesture was entirely male. He shifted again, tucking his elbows in close to his waist and letting his hands droop limply from their wrists. He cocked his head slightly as his facial expression, including his smile, became once again completely feminine.

"Dearie, they don't call this the Nut House for nothing." The voice was again feminine but not that extreme falsetto. "Dear, dear." She sighed and fluttered her eye lashes, then turned and started down the hall. Her stride was an exaggerated feminine movement more like something one might see in a nineteen fifties movie with Jane Mansfield in the starring role than what one normally experiences in real life. She stopped, one hand on an out-thrust hip and looked over her shoulder. "Billy Jo?" she cooed.

Whatever, I grumbled to myself as I hurried after this drag queen. It's a little difficult to really describe Cindy. Superficially, there was nothing male in Cindy's appearance, from her short but femininely-styled hair, the makeup, the off-the-shoulder white, nearly transparent dress, four-inch spike heels, also white, and nylons. Other than the breasts, however, she, or rather he, was entirely male.

The four-inch heels were entirely ridiculous, making her a full head taller than me. The off-the-shoulder dress exposed broad shoulders that could only belong to a man. His biceps were two-three times the size of mine and his hands and feet were, well, huge. I'm only saying this to give you a fair picture of the objective image of Cindy. The fact was, his obvious maleness seemed to dissolve right before my eyes when he 'became' Cindy. The movements, gestures, facial control, even the voice said woman. Remarkable. A human being is more than a simple sum of its parts; movement and mannerisms could, apparently, override the physical. "Cindy?"

She stopped and turned. She was female now. Of that, there was no longer any question for me. "How long have you been here?"

"Four weeks."

"That's amazing," I said. "Were you, ah-" I wasn't sure how to complete the question.

"Feminine?" she said, raising one eyebrow. "A girly-boy?"

"Yeah. I mean before you got here."

"Hardly. I have a wife and three wonderful children and I want to get back to them as soon as possible."

I looked at Cindy in puzzlement. "Then why... this?" I waved in her general direction to indicate her costume.

"I already answered you, Billy Jo. Because I want to get back to my family." She let out a long sigh. "Tomorrow during the interview, someone, probably Dr. Ash, will go over the situation for you." She looked at me. "This is a halfway house, OK? You will stay here until they say you can go. You might get out of here in a few weeks or, like poor Pauli, you could stay here full time until your baby is born."

"And that's why you're dressed like that?" My disbelief was written all over my face. "Why? My God, it's bad enough to be pregnant, Cindy. Why in the hell do we have to pass as... women."

"Come on," she said as she led me toward a couch in the receiving area. She sat down and removed her shoes. "Christ," he said in his male voice. "These were invented by someone who hated women." He rubbed his feet as he continued to talk. "Let's get one point straight. You, me, *we* are Gammas. Not men. Not women."

“Not men? Damn it, Cindy, I am a...”

“A what? Do you have any idea what a Gamma is? You were a man- once. No longer. Get that through your head. In the old days, there were men and there were women and officially, one was either one or the other.”

“And that’s no longer true?”

“Billy Jo, you are not male nor are you female. You are a Gamma. End of story. Come on, let’s finish this tour so I can go to my room and soak these poor feet.”

~oOo~

“That’s about it,” Cindy said as she led me toward the elevator. “A library filled with books on breast feeding, baby and child care. Everything you ever wanted to know about feminine hygiene...”

“I saw some novels.”

“But did you look at the titles huh? Romance novels. Just like the video collection. ‘On A Clear Day,’ ‘The ‘Sound of Music.’ All gooey and sweet, dear Billy Jo.”

She wrapped herself around my arm as she had initially when we had first met but this time I didn’t reject her. It wasn’t that I felt any less encroached upon but rather that I could now sense the very real need she had for tactile support. Maybe her needs had touched upon mine as well. As we waited for the elevator to arrive, she laid her head on my shoulder and slipped her hand out of mine. The latter went around my waist. Standing thus felt oddly natural.

“They’re going to tell you that Gammas are sexless,” she said as she pulled away from me and entered the elevator.

“Who are they?” I retorted as I followed into the elevator.

“Dr. Ash for one. But they are wrong.” Cindy blushed and half-turned away before once again accepting my gaze. “Not like the Alphas that we were once upon a time.” She took my hands in hers and looked down at me. “Not even like the Alpha women we knew when we were men. It’s not something ‘ordinaries’ can understand.”

“Ordinaries? You mean normal people, right.”

She rolled her eyes. “An attitude like that...”

“What?”

“We are not less than them, Billy Jo, just...”

“Different.”

She smiled and dropped my hands as the elevator door opened. Not sexless but not what I had known as sex? I had no idea what she was talking about. I chased after her. “What then? Cindy what?”

“Love, real love without the ego. Without trying to win or conquer or control.” Her eyes had formed dark pools as she looked deeply into my eyes. “Dear, dear Peaches, you have come a long way in an hour.” She tweaked my cheeks and laughed. “Carl...”

“Who’s Carl?”

“The afternoon clerk, silly.” She squeezed my cheeks yet again. “Carl calls you Peaches and I think that’s a far, far better name for you, Sweet Meats.” She abruptly turned away. “That’s your room,” she said over her shoulder as she headed for the elevator. She stopped again and turned around to face me. “I might not see you tomorrow. If I know Dr. Ash, he’ll keep you busy as hell. Two months pregnant, right? Yeah, he’ll do his damnedest to get you in step, Peaches.”

I watched her until the elevator doors closed. What did she mean by ‘in step’? One thing was certain, the name Peaches wasn’t going to happen, not ever.

I turned the knob and pushed the door open. Either the door had already been unlocked or perhaps it was that device on my wrist that had unlocked it. I poked my head in, “Hello?”

“You’re my new roommate, right?” a male voice boomed. “Come on in, I’m Greg,” he said as he reached for a bathrobe to cover up his nakedness.

I saw tiny twin cones mounted upon an otherwise hairless chest that were abruptly covered as the man pulled together the robe and tied the belt. That same instant, I saw the penis that dangled between his legs as well. Greg was of rather slight build, unlike Cindy, and his physical feminization was far more compelling than that evident with Cindy the Amazon Girl. Greg’s features were relatively fine for a male and his lips full, like those of a teenage girl. For all of that, he wasn’t feminine at all. His hair was cut in a masculine manner, parted on the left and no evidence of makeup was on his person. Nor was there any hint of the feminine in his deportment as he walked toward me, his hand out. We shook hands.

“Greg?” I said in surprise. “William Walker, but my friends call me Bill.” His grip was solid, a real handshake.

He stepped back and waved his hands, “Half of this is yours, Bill.” He looked back at me. “Mind if I ask who were you talking to outside?”

“Cindy,” I said. “She showed me around. Gave me the grand tour.”

“Pretty shocking, I’ll bet,” Greg said as he walked back to his bed and sat down.

“Shocking?”

“Hell’s bells. A lumberjack in drag.”

“She’s... nice,” I said, defending my new friend.

“If you say so,” Greg replied with a half-grin on his face. “What lies did she tell you?”

“Huh?”

“She’s a fruitcake. Probably told you that you can’t get out of here until you can pass as a dame. Tell me I’m not wrong.”

I just stared at him. “You mean...”

He interrupted me. “This is a half-way house not some kind of forced feminization center.”

I felt a tremendous sense of relief. “Thank God,” I exclaimed.