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AIRMAN MENDEZ VS THE BUREAUCRACY - A CASE OF UFO "ESPIONAGE"

What would you do if one day you were suddenly and unwillingly hurled into a situation where you were pitted against your employer and your government all at once? You were as loyal and patriotic as you could be, you did your job well, your future looked bright in your career. Then, in one unforeseen moment, your world is turned upside-down, all due to your curiosity with the UFO phenomenon. Former U.S. Air Force Airman Simone Mendez knows about this all too well. She was there.

Simone was a Wing/Base Telecommunications Specialist with the 2069th Communications Squadron (AFCC) at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, a short distance from Las Vegas. Her work involved high-security telecommunications, sending and receiving messages on semi-automatic, on-line and off-line AUTODIN equipment. She had a "Top Secret" clearance. Previously she had been stationed at Lackland AFB and Sheppard AFB in Texas from February - July 1981. She had been stationed at Nellis since August 19, 1981.

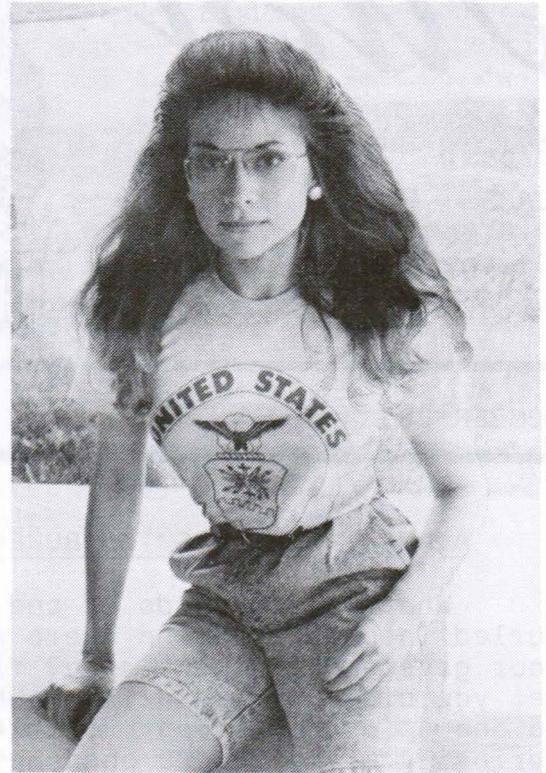
On a personal level, Simone had a strong interest in art and had drawn presentation portraits of some of her commanding officers. This had later earned her a full background spread in the Tinker AFB, Oklahoma newspaper in 1987. And she had a life-long, serious interest in UFOs, though as she is quick to explain this had nothing to do with her enlistment in the Air Force. "Talk of space travel was always appealing to me," she explained, "and the Air Force was a good way for me to get out and see the world, as well as using the opportunity to learn technical skills that we will all need for the future."

Simone's UFO interest stemmed from several experiences in which she had viewed unusual objects in the sky. Prior to her involvement in the Air Force, she had had two especially curious sightings between 1978 and 1980. One was of a straight-line formation of orange-colored shapes which travelled at the speed of a low-flying aircraft (see page three, fig.1), and the other was of a "V" formation of objects which upon first viewing seemed to fly backwards; i.e. the open end forward. The formation then reversed itself and flew pointed end forward as it approached and passed the zenith (see page three, fig.2). To her, the regularity of the "V" seemed to rule out birds as an explanation. One is reminded of the 1951 photo of the famous "Lubbock Lights" when viewing the sketch, though it is readily apparent that the formation in figure 2 is more even in appearance.

Having sometimes spoken of her interest in UFOs to her co-workers, Simone had unwittingly set the stage for an experience in 1981 that would



SIMONE MENDEZ - 1982



SIMONE MENDEZ - 1991

change her life. One of them, Airman Green (pseudonym to avoid violation of the Privacy Act - ed.), became "Act One" of this drama.

One morning in October 1981, on a very welcome day off, Simone was showering in her off-base apartment when she heard a persistent pounding on her front door. Quickly dressing, she answered and saw that it was Airman Green, anxious to talk with her. He had a nervous aspect to his demeanor as if he had done something wrong. Green had just ended his third shift duty at the message center where Simone worked. He said he wanted to show her something very important. He took a folded paper from his pocket and handed it to her. At first Simone didn't realize the significance of what she was reading since it was in message format and very blandly worded. Anyone familiar with government memos can appreciate how understated they can often be.

Green urged her to read it again. This time Simone was astonished. It was a Top Secret message torn off the machine at the message center to the effect that the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) had detected a group of unknown objects entering the vicinity of Earth from deep space. Several of the objects were tracked entering the atmosphere and heading towards the Soviet Union, after which they hovered in an area near Moscow for more than an hour. The message appeared to be raw intelligence as the report was not complete as to what subsequently happened. The document itself was the third carbon copy of a multi-carbon form, which was somewhat lightly printed but fully readable.

Given her already-present interest in UFOs, the message was an absolute fascination to Simone. Here was virtual confirmation that not only were UFOs real but that they came from "deep space." She had been well-acquainted with the various controversies over government cover-ups of UFOs and the attempts to debunk the subject by government spokesmen. She

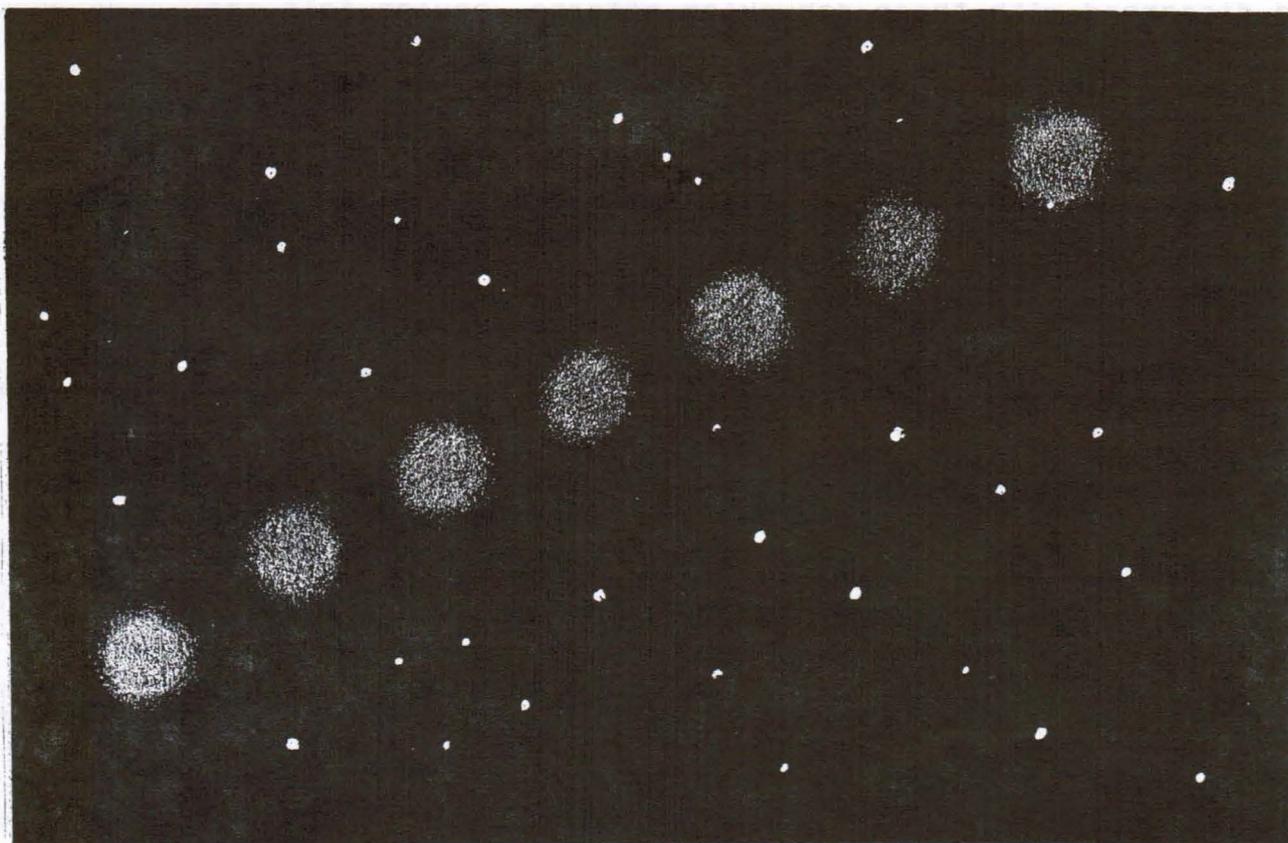


FIGURE ONE

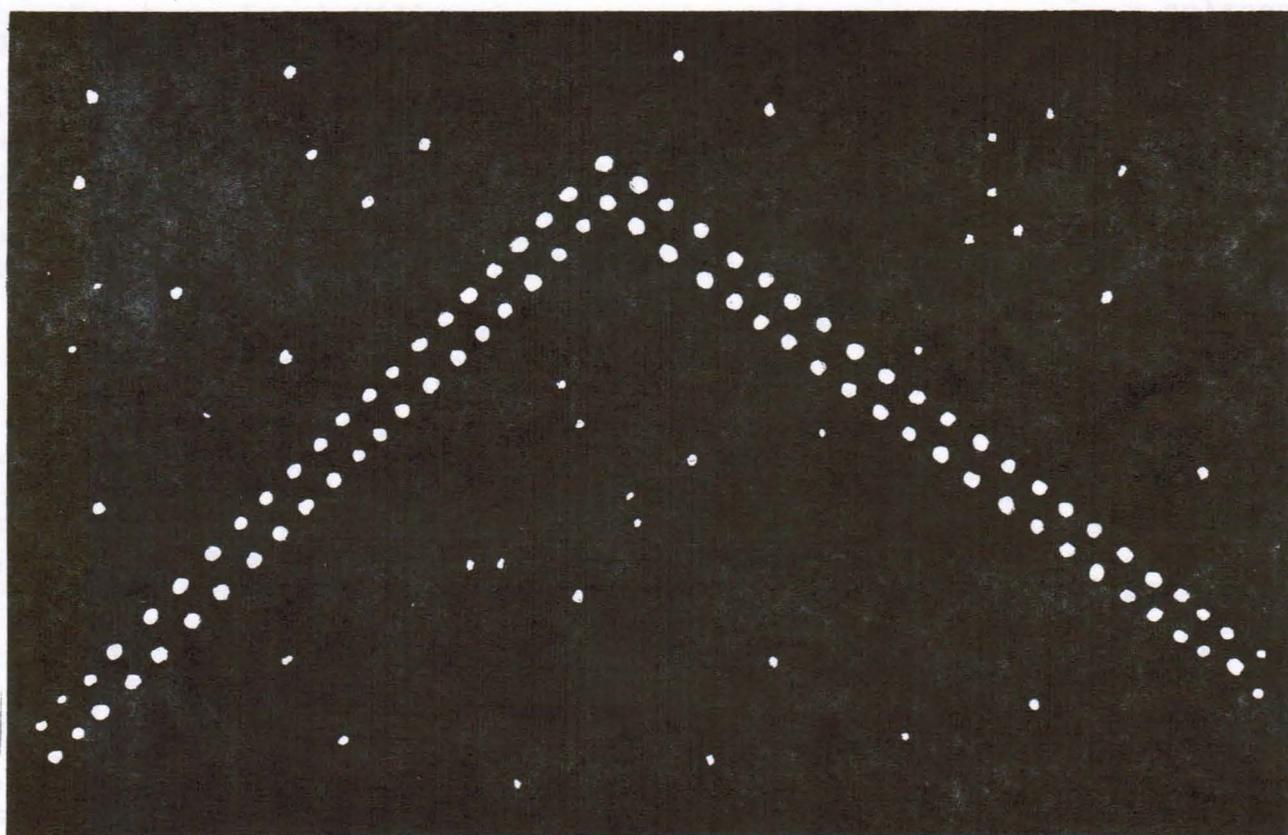


FIGURE TWO

had disagreed with these debunking efforts, having felt that a government wishing to earn the trust and respect of its citizens should not attempt to lie to or deceive them. However, she was a loyal military person as well, and, consequently, Simone was caught in a dilemma.

"I have this Air Force message in my hands which proves what I've believed about UFOs for many years, yet I can't do anything with it," she thought as she re-read it several times and reflected on warnings she had received in her training about security violations.

She spoke to Airman Green about the message for almost an hour, pondering its significance. Green wanted to take the message back to the center. Foolishly, as she is quick to admit, Simone asked Green if she could hold onto the document for awhile longer.

There was no plan to reprint, circulate or advertise the contents. It was simply an impulse to hold a bit longer that which vindicated a long-held, but to that point unproven, notion that man was not alone in the universe; that there were after all others out there not like us. "I was a naive 21-year-old, not wise to the ways of the world at that time," she later explained. "It was like having a dream come true to see this in print. I could not believe I was actually holding government proof that UFOs were genuine. I had blocked out of my mind the consequences of unauthorized possession of classified documents, it was that significant to me!" Green gave it to Simone and left.

During the time that she had the message she alluded to the existence of it in discussions with two acquaintances, who we will call George and Marsha. Both were ardent UFO fans. Simone later lamented involving them in the situation but during the excitement of knowing what she knew about the UFO incident, "I naively threw caution to the wind." Her friend Marsha was especially fanatical about her UFO beliefs, often fantasizing about what it would be like to meet aliens in various scenarios.

"We had always read everything we could about the UFO phenomenon. We were a close-knit group of friends who kept up with all the latest news and information. They didn't know all the details of what I knew, just that I knew UFOs were real," Simone said. She had exchanged letters with her friends throughout her time in the Air Force, sometimes serious, sometimes joking, and not always dealing with UFOs. It was the typical banter of people with common interests. Simone kept this correspondence on a shelf in her apartment. This would later prove to be very embarrassing to her.

The document was held for weeks, then for months. Simone became increasingly apprehensive about having it tucked away on a shelf in her apartment. She decided that she would have to take it back soon. It was now early January 1982. Just prior to her decision to return the message, she had discussed the situation with Airman Green's girlfriend, whom we will call Mary. Mary had been shown the message even before Simone and, now knowing that Simone had a copy of it, urged her to bring it back. Mary later said that she knew the message was false, thus making it all the more important to return the document and end the matter.

Mary did not tell Simone how the message could have been faked but the mere suggestion that it was so by someone close to Green was enough to convince her that she had been duped by a prankster. Simone, accompanied by Mary, brought the document back to the message center.

"How could it have been done?" she reflected upon her return to her workplace. "There are such serious consequences for faking documents at the message center that no one in their right mind would even try." Simone did recall one conversation with Green before she returned the message. She asked point blank if it was false. Green answered with

silence.

Confident that the matter seemed to be a dead issue, Simone presented the message to a co-worker. The individual, who took a quick look at the paper, felt it was not legitimate and brushed it off. Such a reaction was the final nail in the coffin for any suggestion that the story was real. It was a great disappointment for her but at least she was relieved that there would be no problems for her regarding security violations. "It was a weight off my shoulders," she said later.

Simone took back the document and prepared to leave the base with Mary. As they waited for a bus, another airman came running after them and prevented them from boarding. He explained that the document must be returned or security guards would be called to force its return.

This took Simone completely by surprise but she willingly accompanied the airman back to the center. A supervisor there asked that the document be placed in the classified waste for disposal. "Why all this fuss for a false paper? she wondered. What she wasn't prepared for was what was to come.

Several days later Simone went to the base representative for the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations, much like an internal affairs unit which police departments have. It was on a matter unrelated to the document incident, though it did relate to Airman Green. She suspected that in some way he was billing unauthorized calls on her phone. Through others she learned that Green was not the most well-liked person on the base, having at times committed petty theft and also discussing the contents of classified messages with outsiders regarding internal affairs.

Immediately after she entered the office, an FBI agent was waiting for her. Agent Miller (pseudonym) of the Las Vegas Field Office showed Simone his badge, advised her of her rights, and said that it was a good thing she came to the office because he was about to look for her. "What for?" she wondered as she stood there appalled at what was happening. He picked up a brown folder and pulled out the UFO document which she thought had been discarded days before. It then struck her! This document incident was about to explode in her lap. "A lower feeling I've never felt in my life," she recalled thinking as she imagined how the federal government was certainly going to land on her with both feet.

Simone was intensely questioned. "Who gave you the document?" "Why did you take it?" "Did you know any Soviets?" "What do you know about NORAD?"

The grilling lasted for some time and left her very depressed. "They thought that I was some kind of spy - me, Simone Mendez, who never had an ounce of disloyalty to America. I was proud of my country and my service to the Air Force. Yet, they thought that I was the lowest form of life, an agent for a foreign power!"

After the questioning, she was brought over to the base hospital for serious depression. They gave her a sedative and kept her there for the weekend. Rather cruelly perhaps, her interrogators advised her before they left that she would be questioned again. In the meantime an intensive background check was conducted. After she left the hospital, the FBI conducted a search of her off-base apartment and confiscated a number of personal letters and other materials relating to her friends George and Marsha and their interest in UFOs.

Simone was called in for questioning again some weeks later. This time a polygraph machine awaited her. She was taken into a room and urged

to sign a document that she acknowledged that no tape recorders or two-way mirrors were being used.

Another intensive grilling by an OSI Special Agent along with the polygraph operator began with similar questions that she had been asked previously. During the entire time she was interrogated, several hours in her estimate, the distinct impression was given that the document was real and not the fake she was initially led to believe was the case.

When wired to the machine, Simone was extremely nervous. "My personality is such that if I am put into a pressure situation like this, being threatened with spy charges, federal prison and all, my body just sort of goes into a state of panic. I uncontrollably wring my hands, shake and move about without conscious control over it," she explained. "This made my examiner very angry." In fact, Simone flunked her polygraph exam, not so much due to any idea that she was lying about being a spy as much as her body having uncontrolled shakes throughout.

As angry as her examiners were, they seemed to recognize the nature of the test failure. They ended the session by taking her to dinner, probably partly to relax her after a tense interrogation, and partly to observe her in a more sedate environment. It wasn't exactly lavish (a base restaurant) but try as she wished she couldn't eat and settled for a diet coke.

Further polygraph tests were conducted irregularly over the next few months. More failures occurred but OSI and FBI regarded the tests as inconclusive due to the state of mind of their subject. After being unable to clear her name following repeated failures on the polygraph, Simone's self-confidence had sunk to a new low, perhaps the worst time of her life. She had been repeatedly threatened with espionage charges and long-term imprisonment. Her career in telecommunications was in shambles - all because one day she looked at a UFO document which blatantly contradicted official policy on UFOs.

Just before Easter, April 22, 1982, Simone's depression about this affair overwhelmed her again. In her apartment on a Friday afternoon, she ingested five over-the-counter sleeping pills. Groggy and only half-awake, she nevertheless noticed that a friend in the area had placed the day's mail on a nearby table while she had been out. One piece was from her family. She opened it and saw that it was an Easter card from her mother and father expressing their love for her. Even in her hazy awareness the card had moved her so deeply that she realized she could not continue being in this frame of mind.

Simone managed to call one of her friends in communications on base to report her physical condition. She was rushed to a hospital and, while not in any serious danger, she still required treatment. They kept her in the hospital for a weekend and then released her, though she was ordered to stay with two other on-base families - this to prevent her from being alone while she recovered from her intense depression.

After Simone was fully healthy the interrogations resumed. This time there was a difference. While before the polygraph examinations tended to be accusatory and confrontational, now a new examiner, not nearly so hostile, conducted the tests. Initially, the tests were as inconclusive as before. On June 10, 1982, a final polygraph given to Simone was passed. This seemed to satisfy her examiner that she could not be guilty of espionage. The ordeal, which lasted six months, appeared to be finally coming to an end. The official case was closed in early July 1982.

However, the terrifying inquiry had left scars on her. She had lost her position at the message center. In fact, shortly after the inquiries



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
 HEADQUARTERS 2854TH AIR BASE GROUP (AFLC)
 TINKER AIR FORCE BASE, OKLAHOMA 73145

20 Feb 87

REPLY TO
 ATTN OF: CCQ

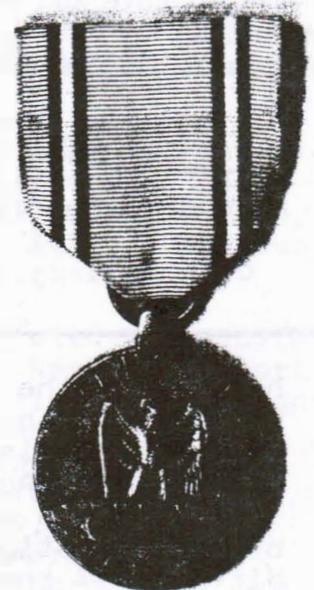
SUBJECT: Award of the Oak Leaf Cluster to the Air Force Good Conduct Medal

TO: Sgt Mendez, 2854 ABG/SVT

1. This letter is to advise you that you have been awarded number 2 Oak Leaf Cluster to the Air Force Good Conduct Medal. The effective date of that award is 11 Feb 87.
2. I add my personal congratulations and appreciation for your faithful and devoted service to the United States Air Force.

Mark Laurence

MARK LAURENCE, Capt, USAF
 Commander, Hq Sq Section



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
 HEADQUARTERS 554TH COMBAT SUPPORT GROUP (TAC)
 NELLIS AIR FORCE BASE, NV 89191

19 MAR 1984

REPLY TO
 ATTN OF: SVCC

SUBJECT: Letter of Appreciation

TO: Airman First Class Simone C. Mendez
 554 CSG/SVH

1. I am pleased to send you a copy of a letter received from the Commander, AFOSI, and a letter from the Base Commander, 554 Combat Support Group, expressing appreciation for the fine job you are doing.
2. Your demonstrated dedication is most admirable. Thanks for the teamwork you show!

Jillian D. Tate

JILLIAN D. TATE, Lt Col, USAF
 Chief, Support Services

2 Atch
 OSI ltr, 9 Mar 84
 554 CSG/CC ltr, 13 Mar 84

V. RATER'S COMMENTS

FACTS AND SPECIFIC ACHIEVEMENTS: Airman Mendez has performed all assigned duties in an excellent manner. She has put forth a great effort toward gaining full knowledge of the Telecommunications Center (TCC) procedures. She performs most assigned tasks without direct supervision. Her ability to understand and carry out instructions has been instrumental in accomplishing the assigned mission. Her expertise and attention to detail has been demonstrated in the message distribution section where accuracy is of the most importance. STRENGTHS: Airman Mendez's greatest attributes are her devotion to duty, perseverance and enthusiasm toward the mission. Her pleasant personality enables her to work in harmony with her co-workers and superiors alike. EDUCATIONAL AND TRAINING ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Airman Mendez is currently in upgrade training to the five skill level and is progressing satisfactorily. OTHER COMMENTS: Airman Mendez is always in proper uniform. Her conduct both on and off duty is exemplary. She has contributed her artistic talents in the TCC self-help beautification program. Airman Mendez is a definite asset to the organization and to the U. S. Air Force.

VI. 1ST INDORSER'S COMMENTS

 CONCUR NONCONCUR

Airman Mendez's job performance is exceptional. Her initiative and motivation are worthy of special note and set an outstanding example for other airmen to emulate. Her performance of duty has contributed directly to the high efficiency rating of the Telecommunications Center.

— The rating evaluation printed above was written by Airman Mendez' superiors on March 1, 1982, almost two months after the beginning of her investigation on espionage charges over a UFO document.

had begun, the message center was moved to temporary facilities while the original building was completely overhauled. She did not know the reason for this but wondered if it was a direct result of the UFO paper getting out. Again it is a rather odd reaction if the document were nothing more than a frivolous hoax by a bored airman. The length and intensity of the investigation was baffling to Simone as well. Six months seemed a bit much if the document was known to be a hoax early on in the investigation, as she had been clearly told by her interrogators. As harshly as she had been treated, Simone understood that the investigators were doing their job in trying to determine if there was indeed a spy ring in operation at Nellis AFB. She knew she was not but the uncertainty of what military justice had in store for her had to be extremely unsettling to her, or would have been to anyone for that matter.

Simone's career was re-directed towards clerk-type jobs which did not require security clearances. It was not what she had wanted but it was now all she had left. She did the best she could with it.

As is the case very often with stories like this, all did not end here. The incident tended to follow Simone like the "Flying Dutchman" through the remainder of her Air Force career, popping up at inopportune moments.

The question remains: Was the document real or not? Simone could not be definite after all she was through. She never saw the document after the first day of the investigation. Was there any way to find out?

A curious series of events would help Simone to answer these questions. The real world was about to open up even more for her. And there would be a dramatic discovery.

END OF PART ONE
TO BE CONTINUED!!