

A Jack of Hearts

by Sam Leo

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Introduction

This novel may be considered to be in the "alternative history" genre. It was started quite a while back, in 2009 or so, when the US was still reeling from the Great Recession, and it assumes that recession got very much worse, exceeding the Great Depression in severity. Then the recession faded, the economy improved, and the novel was set aside.

But another Great Recession could happen, and, depending on events, could drive the country into another Depression. The focus here is on the people whose lives have been effectively destroyed by the economic collapse. During the Great Depression, the suicide rate in the US rose from .014% in the 1920s to .017% in the 1930s, a true increase of 21%. This translates to more than 3500 suicides per year which can be attributed to the economic collapse. In the 1930s, the technology did not exist that would allow a clever entrepreneur to build a business on this. Today, it does. And also today, wherever there is a demand for a service, a business will appear to fill that demand.

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The bar was called "The Last Chance." The name always seemed appropriate to me, somehow, even before current events made it what it now is.

In the years following the Crash, The Last Chance catered to the victims of the economic crisis, those who had been laid off, the down-and-out, the desperate. The clientele ran the gamut from bag ladies and thickly-bearded men in dirty and torn jeans to laid-off executives and out-of-work Broadway actresses.

I had been spending a lot of time there. I'd been out of work for more than a year at that point; my home loan had been foreclosed and I was living in a one-room walkup in a cheap hotel, all I could afford on the meager income I was generating doing whatever work I could find whenever I could find it--and it was beginning to look like I wouldn't be able to stay there much longer, I was facing constant choices between buying food and paying the rent.

I was precisely the sort of person the Last Chance was oriented toward. There, one could, by showing proof of unemployment or simply by convincing the bartender that you were on the ropes, buy a beer or a drink for almost no money, and there were always free beer nuts--although I never could understand how Charlie, the owner, could afford them, since hundreds of pounds of

them vanished every night. The place, while large, was always crowded. But there were people to talk to, and I had learned to nurse a beer for a very long time.

I was sitting at the bar one night, doing just that, when a man in a suit came up and sat down on the stool next to me.

"Looks like that one's gone flat," he said, gesturing toward my glass. "Let me buy you a fresh one." I thanked him profusely as he ordered two from the barkeep. He introduced himself simply as "Warren" and, when he asked my name, I told him it was Jack. He then began talking to me, coaxing my story out of me and nodding sympathetically when I told him frankly I did not know what I was going to do in the days to come.

"It doesn't sound like," he said after I'd finished, "that you really have much to live for."

I stared into my beer and nodded. "I don't. I can't see things getting any better for me anytime in anything like the near future."

"Do you have anyone that's dependent on you?"

"Not at the moment. But my parents--they're struggling too. I can't go live with them, I can't help them... it's just really bad."

"What if you could help them? What if you could see to it that they suddenly received a large and unexpected sum of money?"

I stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm lucky enough to have a job," he said. "I work as a scout for a company that does business on a small island in the Caribbean. I try to find candidates for them."

"Candidates?"

He nodded. "Yes, Jack. Men and women with nothing left to lose. Men and women who would enjoy a few weeks of unbridled pleasure--sex, luxury, fine food and drink. Men and women who have needy loved ones--and who are willing to pay any price."

"I think I'm one of those," I told him. "But I doubt I can pay the price..."

"Yes, you can, Jack. The price is your life."

I stared blankly. "My life?"

"Yes. You would be asked to surrender it on a stage, before an audience, while being filmed. To be very direct, you would be asked to commit suicide."

"Suicide?"

"Yes."

"I don't get it. What's the catch? How can your company make money off that?"

Warren nodded. "A fair question. These are truly desperate times, Jack. If you have been watching the news, you know that the suicide rate is higher now than ever before. But there are still men with money, men who will pay handsome sums for the privilege of watching attractive young men and women kill themselves, either in person or on film. Wherever there is a demand, some business will rise to meet it. We are that business."

I shook a finger at him. "So let me understand," I said, "I sign up for this, I go to this island, I live in the lap of luxury for a few weeks, then I kill myself on stage. Right?"

"Correct."

"How would I be expected to kill myself?"

"You can choose. We offer almost innumerable options. From the quick and painless to the agonizing and gory. You choose, and your beneficiaries--your parents, for example--receive a sum of money proportionate to the degree of suffering you choose to endure. Even for a quick painless death, the payout is substantial. For a more drawn-out affair--or any affair which, to be very blunt about it, makes for a good show--the amount is significantly larger."

I nodded slowly. "I see."

"Would you like to know how much money we're talking about?"

I shook my head. "No." While Warren looked a little surprised, I took a deep breath and went on: "I don't need to, because I'm in, I volunteer. Where do I sign up?"

Warren smiled. "In effect," he said, "you just did." He handed me an envelope. "This," he told me, "is a pre-paid voucher for a complete physical at the Emerson Clinic on Sixteenth Street. Sometime before the weekend, get your physical and get your papers. If you cannot present a clean bill of health, we cannot accept you." He then handed me a business card. "On Sunday," he went on, "at three PM, be at this address. Bring your health certificate with you. We will proceed from there. If you have a wife or girlfriend you think might like to join you in this, please feel free to bring her--although she must have a physical as well, at your expense, and you must understand that we do not accept unattractive people."

"I don't have anyone," I said.

"Very well." He stood up and extended a hand. "I'll see you there, then," he added. "But I must go now, I have more work to do tonight."

I shook his hand, then watched him walk away. After a few moments, he sat down at a table where a young woman was sitting alone. I could not see her face, but I could see that she was petite and slender, with short-cut black hair. She was wearing a very short skirt, and the legs that skirt revealed were very nice indeed.

I kept watching. Warren bought her a drink and stayed, talking to her, for a long time. When he finally left--I could not see whether he had given her an envelope and a card or not--I made a decision. I walked over to her table.

"Mind if I sit here for a moment?" I asked.

She turned to look at me and flashed a wide smile. She was, in fact, a very pretty girl indeed--she also looked very young, very delicate. "No, please do." Then, as I sat down, she frowned. "Oh... but I may not be very good company right now... I do have something on my mind..."

"I may know what that is," I said. "Let me just be direct and ask you--did Warren offer you a one-way trip to an island? And did you accept?"

She cocked her head, and her dark eyes, already large, widened. "How did you--?"

I showed her the card. "He approached me too. I accepted."

She caught her lower lip with her teeth, a very sensual gesture. "I see. Well then, we probably should talk. Because, yes, Warren made me such an offer--go to an island and die on stage in some kind of weird sexy snuff show. And yes, I accepted as well." She extended a small and delicate hand. "I'm Julie. Julie Presser."

"Jack Packard," I said automatically. "So. You're out of work too?"

She sighed. "Out of work, homeless, and no prospects," she answered.

I was a little surprised. She looked well-dressed, clean, and well made-up, not something usually seen in the people who were living in cardboard boxes under the bridge. "Homeless? You have no place to stay?"

She nodded. "No, I don't. I do have a car. All my things are in it, and sometimes I sleep in it." She shrugged. "But for the most part, I come here and try to find a man who has a place to stay. I pay for my lodging with my mouth and pussy."

"That's not that uncommon these days," I said. "I've done the same thing with women, mostly older women. Once in a while. Not for lodging, but for food. When I can't find any other work." I stopped myself, not wanting to let her know that "once in a while" was an exaggeration.

Women, especially older and more experienced women, seemed to be attracted to me, and, since I had joined the ranks of the unemployed, I had used this as a source of income rather frequently, much more commonly than "once in a while."

She looked me up and down. "You do have the body for it," she noted. "And nice bedroom eyes, too." Then she smiled again, and her smile was literally irresistible. "You think you might want a roommate for the night? I have no money for food, but--"

"As far as I'm concerned," I answered, "you have a place to stay at least until Sunday, when we have the meeting with Warren."

She touched my hand. "Thanks," she said, still smiling. That smile quickly faded, though. "It was really funny, Warren coming up to me tonight. Funny because I really have been thinking about ending it all." She glanced at my face, then shrugged. "No reason to keep secrets," she continued. "I was thinking about trying to find a man who wanted a girl for sex and murder. I'll admit, I don't know how I'd do that. But the idea of being fucked and then, oh, I don't know, being shot or stabbed to death--that's pretty exciting."

I stared at her. "You actually find the idea of being shot or stabbed to death erotic?"

She flushed slightly. "I didn't say that, I said, 'exciting,'" she corrected. "But, actually, you're not wrong. Yes, I do. And I find the idea a whole lot more appealing than the idea of taking pills or diving off a bridge." She offered me a little smile. "Don't you?"

"I have to admit, I never thought about the idea of being shot or stabbed. I wasn't really thinking about ending it all when Warren started talking to me, it just seemed like a good plan when he laid it out--meaning I have no real idea right now about how I want to go." I looked her up and down. "But at the same time--as you said, no reason to keep secrets--I must say that I'm finding the idea of *you* being shot or stabbed to death pretty damn exciting!"

Julie laughed. "Good. I can't say yet what I'll choose--Warren said there were all sorts of possible choices. I can say it won't be bloodless."

"You're really serious about this."

"Yes. Aren't you?"

I shrugged. "As I said, I hadn't considered it before tonight. But--even so--yes. I am."

We left the bar not too long after that and went back to my pitiful one-room walkup. Minutes after we arrived, Julie excused herself to go to the bathroom, and when she came out she was totally naked. Again, I stared. She had a beautiful little body, terrific legs; her breasts were on the small side, her nipples tiny. Her pubes were clean-shaven, and her vaginal lips were smooth and tight. She posed for me for a moment, giving me that wide bright smile; she had a way of posing, her hands on her lower back and her hips and her belly thrust sharply forward, that made her look very vulnerable--and very, very appealing.

"You like?" she asked.

"I like," I said, moving toward her, "a lot." I ran my hands down her sides. She felt exquisitely soft and smooth.

She leaned her shoulders back, causing her breasts to flatten out somewhat. "Even if I have no tits? I don't, you know."

I caressed her little breasts. "Yes, you do," I corrected, feeling her nipples pop up sharply under my palms. "They're small but they fit you."

"You are a nice man, Jack," she said. She pushed closer to me and started kissing me; that went on for a while, and then she slid down my body to her knees. With obviously practiced hands she undid my pants, got my already-rising cock out, and started sucking me. As he did she gazed up at me.

"Did you spend the night with another man last night?" I asked her. With my cock deep in her mouth, she nodded. "Did you suck his cock too?" She nodded again. "Did he come in your mouth?" Yet another nod. She smiled around my cock when hearing that caused it to bounce and stiffen a little more. I pulled back, pulled her up, and moved her to the bed. She laid down, spread her legs, and smiled at me while I undressed. "Fucked him too, didn't you?" I said with a grin as I moved in between her legs.

She grabbed my cock and guided it to her sex. "Oh, yes, three times--I think it was three." I felt myself sliding into her. "I do like having sex," she told me. "A lot. Ah..." She wrapped her long legs around me.

"That's a good thing," I murmured. I began to fuck her slowly, running my hands over her belly and chest as I did. She felt incredibly smooth, soft, and fragile. I found myself imagining how she'd look, willingly allowing herself to be shot or stabbed to death, her little body squirming and bleeding. The idea had considerably more erotic power than I would have thought. I pushed really hard into her, and she moaned. Opening her eyes, she looked up at me, studying my face.

"Thinking about me being killed, aren't you?"

I touched her face. "I'm embarrassed to admit it," I said, "but yes."

"It's all right," she said with a smile. "So am I." She raised her head and kissed me again, and, for quite a while, we didn't talk any more.

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After two sex-filled days, interrupted by a trip to the clinic, we took Julie's car to the address on the cards Warren had given us. At first I wondered if we were at the right place; it was a seemingly abandoned warehouse. But, when we went inside, two large men were there to greet us--and to check us for wires, weapons, or anything else we shouldn't have. Cleared, we gave them our health certificates, after which we were admitted. We went inside, joining about a half dozen other people--exactly half men and half women, I noticed, and all of them attractive, as Warren had said and as would be expected if they were to put on a sex show for film and for a live audience--and we waited while others arrived. When the doors were finally closed, there were fifteen of us there, seven men and eight women.

Warren then appeared and began talking to us. He began by apologizing about the security measures, but noted that the police in the US would not take kindly to the sort of business he was engaged in, although on the island they were not subject to such laws.

"You must consider," he told us, "what you are doing. If you do go to island, we expect--and we have every right to expect--that you will kill yourselves, or allow yourselves to be killed, on our stage. All our candidates die in pairs, one man, one woman. We do not require it, but we strongly prefer that you have sex on that stage before you die--in public, in front of the audience and the camera. If this bothers you, I encourage you to leave, now." He paused; no one got up to leave. "Good. Now." He gestured toward a stack of envelopes lying on a table beside him. "You have a choice to make. If you are serious about this, take one of these envelopes. Each one contains an airline ticket to Miami and paid-in-advance reservations at a hotel--admittedly, a very cheap and sleazy hotel--called the Sand Dollar. You fly out tonight, your flight leaves from LaGuardia at 8:15. Put your affairs in order before you leave for the airport, you should not be expecting to come back. You only need to bring enough luggage for one night, once you get to the island everything you need will be provided for you. Go to the hotel and stay there, make sure you are in your room between midnight and six AM. During those hours, one of our agents--not me--will

come to see you, and you will receive further instructions from him." He paused again. "Finally. Again, any of you who are not sure about this, please, back out now. You will be given fifty dollars for your time and trouble in coming here. Understand?"

No one said anything--but, in the end, five of the men and four of the women took the fifty dollars and departed, leaving just two men and four women including ourselves. Warren remarked that an imbalance of genders was not good, but gave each of us an envelope anyway. Without ever speaking to each other we all left, Julie and I clutching ours. After making a few phone calls to loved ones, we went to the airport and boarded the plane, and by eleven we were in a room together at the Sand Dollar, leaving one of the reservations unused. To our surprise the envelopes also contained some cash, and we went down to the hotel bar to have a drink before our midnight "lockdown." Several of the others we'd seen at the warehouse were there as well, but we did not take the time to get to know any of them. Ten minutes before twelve, we were back in our room. There were also some forms in the envelopes, allowing us to define who our beneficiaries were, and we took the time to fill them out.

For the most part the forms were straightforward; name, address (if any), social security number, place of birth, and so on, and then a separate section where we were to give all possible contact information for our chosen beneficiaries. Julie's was her sister, Cynthia Presser; evidently neither of them had married, or at least not taken a husband's last name. I also noticed, idly, that she lived in Barrington, New Jersey, a small town close to Philadelphia that I happened to be familiar with. Mine were my parents, who lived in Detroit.

A third part of the form asked if our beneficiaries would be expecting the benefit payout. Often they were not, it noted, and if that were the case it was sometimes difficult to convince the beneficiaries that the money was legally theirs. For that reason, we were asked to write a paragraph in our own handwriting explaining why we were doing this, saying farewells--and, if possible, including some bit of information to convince the beneficiary that we were who we claimed to be--and so on, and then sign and date it. As neither my parents nor Julie's sister would be expecting the benefit, we both took the time to fill this part out carefully. I was impressed, then, with the thoroughness of the operation.

At about two AM, the expected knock on our door came. Julie opened it, and a large and powerful-looking man strode into the room. Closing the door, he immediately told us to strip naked. Assuming he wanted to be absolutely certain we weren't wearing a wire, we complied without argument, and, after looking us over, he asked for the forms, then had us sit side-by-side on the bed.

"You're not supposed to be sharing a room," he informed us, looking us over and then looking over the forms. "But it doesn't matter. Are you ready and willing to die? You both have to answer." We both said yes. "Good," he went on. "Now: you were promised two weeks of luxury, but, before we go any further, you have to be willing to take a chance that you won't have that." He took two small hard cases from his jacket pocket. Opening one, he showed us that it contained a hypodermic syringe filled with clear liquid and an alcohol pad in a sealed wrapper. "Now, no arguments, this has to be or we are done with you." He handed each of us a syringe. "Most of these are loaded with harmless saline, but there's one chance in a hundred that the one you're holding is filled with cyanide--exactly one chance in a hundred that it'll kill you, right here, right now. We know you don't want that and neither do we, if you die now we've wasted money on you--a lot of money, since your beneficiaries still get the minimum payout. But you have to be willing to take the chance."

I frowned. I did not like this, but, even so, I ripped open the packet, rubbed a spot on my arm, and stuck the needle in. Looking at Julie, I pushed the plunger. And then I prepared to wait.

I didn't have to. "You're okay," the big man said. "The cyanide hits immediately. If that had been a hot one you'd be dead or dying right now." He then turned to Julie and watched her expectantly.

She turned to me and kissed me. Then, smiling, she rubbed the alcohol pad on her hip. Watching my face, she then plunged the needle in and injected the contents.

And nothing happened. "Good, you're okay too," the big man said as she pulled the needle out. "You both pass. I do have to tell you, there'll be one more test like this, and you have to pass that one as well." He looked from one of us to the other. "Now, get some sleep. Tomorrow morning, at ten, be down front. There'll be a bus waiting with a sign saying 'Jim's Harbor Tours' and another sign saying 'Reserved seats only.' Get on it." He gave us two yellow cards. "These are your passes, show them to the driver." He then left--and we chose to have sex again before following his instructions about getting some sleep.

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We rose about eight, packed the few belongings we brought with us, then went down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. A little before ten, we went out front, found the bus, and got on it. Once all of our group was aboard--there were more of us than had been at the warehouse in New York, apparently some had come from other places--we were taken to the harbor where the large man we'd met the previous night ushered us onto a medium-sized, but very comfortable, boat, then left without boarding it himself. As we headed out to sea, it began to sink in. This was real, I'd never be coming back, and, in spite of my determination, that realization made me moody and somewhat anxious. Julie wasn't saying anything, but the somber expression on her face and the way she kept looking back at the harbor until it vanished from sight spoke volumes. A couple of our fellow passengers looked to be even more affected, they looked frankly terrified. We didn't talk to each other, everyone appeared to be lost in their own thoughts.

About two hours later, we saw an island ahead of us and the boat's captain informed us that this was our destination. The island wasn't very big; as we approached we could see only a couple of large buildings. There were, however, lovely beaches with apparent amenities. It looked like something out of a movie set.

The captain pulled the boat in to a dock, where two men, dressed in black suits and wearing dark sunglasses, were waiting for us. Telling us only to come with them, they led us to the large building we'd seen before we landed.

"You were told," one of the men said as we walked in, "that there would be one more test of your sincerity. You will take that test now. If you refuse, you will be taken back to the boat and back to Miami, where you will be given twenty dollars, released on the street, and left to your own devices. Form a line, please."

We did--Julie was right behind me--and we followed one of the men down a long hallway. As we were walking toward a door at the end of it, a gunshot suddenly rang out from behind that door, causing us all to jump. The man ignored it and continued, finally stopping at the door. One by one, we went inside. After each person entered, we waited--perhaps five or ten minutes--before the next person was ushered in.

Finally, it was my turn. Walking in, I saw a chair sitting under a bright light and another man, this one dressed in jeans and workboots, wearing a bloody apron like a butcher's. There was

blood all over the chair, all over the floor, and spattered on the wall. I noticed a camera focused on the chair. On a small table beside the chair were four identical handguns, laid out in a neat row.

"Sit," the man commanded. I sat. "Four guns," he said. "Revolvers, six shots each. One chamber in one gun has a bullet in it and all cylinders have been spun so the position is random. Choose one, pick it up, point it at your head, and pull the trigger. You have one chance in twenty-four of being shot dead. If you cannot do this, you are not suitable to be one of our candidates."

We had been warned, I reminded myself silently, and apparently everyone in our group who'd gone before me had been lucky, since there'd been no more gunshots. I sat down, chose the second gun in the line, put the muzzle just under my ear, pointing up, and pulled the trigger. There was only a click.

"You have passed," the man said. He pointed to a door. "Go out that way and wait." I obeyed and found myself in a large room with the members of our group who'd already passed through. A little anxious, I waited and watched the door, and I breathed a sigh of relief when Julie walked through and joined me. Our clothes stained with blood from the chair, we embraced.

There were no more gunshots, and finally our whole group was assembled in the outer room. Through a side door another man made an appearance. He was older, balding, his remaining hair gray.

"Let me welcome you," he said in a friendly voice, "to the Erothan Resort. My name is Saul Levenson and I am in charge of the candidate pool. You have all passed both tests, but in reality the only way you could have failed was to have refused; none of those syringes contained cyanide and none of the guns had bullets in them, the shot fired earlier and the bloodstains were merely designed to frighten you. I apologize for the charade, but we need to be as sure as we can be that all our candidates are ready and willing to accept death, that they will not hesitate or refuse when they are finally on stage." He paused and smiled. "Now. As you undoubtedly understand, the paying guests at this resort are here for the entertainment, and you are the entertainment. From the moment you leave this room onwards, you will be on display for them. Therefore, I must ask you to remove all your clothing other than your shoes and throw them into the bin over in the corner. You may keep your jewelry and wristwatches. Ladies, I see that none of you are wearing heels; so please discard your shoes as well. You will find an assortment of high-heeled shoes in that bin over there. Select your size and put them on. Men, you can keep the shoes you have, go barefoot, or take sandals from the other bin." He watched for a moment as we all, except for one of the women, began undressing. "We will require you," he continued, "to remain completely naked until you are called for the ultimate show--and, since we also require that you die in the nude, you will not wear clothes again for the rest of your life."

He paused and looked us over, focusing in particular on the girl who had not yet begun to undress. "You will find," he continued after a moment, "that there really aren't very many rules around here, we recommend many things but we insist on very little. We do, as I said, require that you remain nude at all times. There is no use in requesting an exception to this, we do not grant them. If any of you should be imagining that you are not physically attractive enough for this, let me assure you that you are. Our recruiters make offers only to attractive people, and you may recall that our agent in Miami had you to strip before offering you the injections; he would have rejected you then and there, and reported it to us, if you were not qualified in that respect. If for any other reason you do not feel you can accept this requirement, walk back the way you came, back to the boat. You will be taken back to Miami and our agreement will be considered to have been cancelled." No one moved for the exit, and the girl who'd seemed reluctant finally started talking off her clothes. "Good," Saul said. He then pointed to the assortment of small suitcases,

approximately one for each of us, sitting on the floor. "I recommend," he went on, "that you simply toss your bags in the bin with your discarded clothes. Whatever is in them, you will not need any longer. If you should wish to keep your own personal effects, such as makeup, razors, or toothbrushes, you may, but everything you need will be provided for you. Once you are ready, go through that door." He pointed. "Assistants are waiting to show you around."

Julie picked up her little overnight bag, walked to the bin, and tossed it in--the first of us to do so. I followed her lead, and in the end, only the girl who'd seemed reluctant to undress retained hers. As a group, we left through the door Saul had indicated, and we found ourselves back outside. The two assistants were waiting; one man, one woman, both smiling and both dressed in starched white shirts and shorts like cruise staff. They introduced themselves as Michelle and Travis and immediately started giving us our orientation.

They first pointed out two large, hotel-like, structures, one of them close by. That hotel, we were told, was the residence for the candidates, the place where we would live for the remainder of our lives. There was a restaurant and club there, and for us all the food and all the drinks were free. The more distant hotel was exclusively for the use of the wealthy guests who came to the island to see the shows. Every Tuesday, we were told, the names of six people, three men and three women, would be posted; these would be chosen from the pool of candidates who had been on the island for at least two weeks. From this group of six, two would be chosen at a special dinner held in the club every Saturday night. Those two would take the stage in the theater--which was in the candidates' residence hall--on Sunday at eight PM, and they would die there. All candidates were welcome to watch the death ceremonies, and attendance was very strongly encouraged, but, as seemed to be usual, not required. Life expectancy for the candidates, we were told, averaged somewhere between eight and sixteen weeks from the time they arrived, with a two-week minimum.

Another building, some distance away up a hillside and connected to the candidates' hotel by a paved road, was the location of the company's offices and what was described as "engineering." We were told that there wasn't a need for us to ever visit the offices, which were on the top floor of that building, unless there was some sort of problem. Engineering, however, was where all the devices that we could use to accomplish our deaths were stored, devices that would be moved to the amphitheater when needed. We were encouraged to go there as often as we wished whenever it was open, which was nine to six weekdays and nine to nine Saturdays--Sundays the engineers were usually occupied with setting up the evening's show. There, we were told, we could examine the standard devices at our leisure, which might help us make our decisions. If we were to need something special, something not in inventory, we were told to see a man named "David," the head engineer, to see if it was possible to prepare it.

"You should all know this right now, and keep it in mind," Travis told us. "The six chosen each Monday night and posted on Tuesday are essentially chosen at random, but if any two of you list yourselves as a couple--and if you are part of couple you should list that with us now--you will both be part of the six whenever either of you is chosen. We do not guarantee, however, and you cannot request, that you die as a couple. A male and a female are chosen from the group of six at random, and this will mean you have one chance in three of being paired with your partner. Exceptions are made to this only under unusual circumstances."

He looked us over, seemingly waiting for comments or questions. "During next few weeks," he continued when there were none, "you should get to know each other and the other candidates who are already here. Sex and death, and the associations between the two, are what this place is all about. Please feel free to have sex at any time and with anyone you choose, either

in private or in public; no area is off-limits. The main part of this hotel is exclusively yours, the paying guests are not permitted in any area of it other than the club located next to the theater. You may encounter them there, or on the beach, or anywhere else on the island. We ask that you be polite and courteous to them at all times. If you are having sex outdoors or in the common areas of the club, they may well want to watch and should in no way be discouraged from doing so. They may also ask to have sex with you, and, if you wish, this is allowed, you may even accompany them to their rooms in the guest hotel if you wish, although the guest hotel is off-limits to you in all other circumstances. You are, however, not required to have sex with any of them or with anyone else; forced sex is not permitted and will be dealt with severely if it occurs."

Again he waited for questions and again there were none. "As you have already been told," he went on, "we also strongly encourage the death-couples to have sex on stage before they die, but this is not required either. Once you have been chosen, we ask that you refrain from having sex with anyone--or masturbating--on Sunday, from dawn until the time you go on stage. This is for your benefit as well as ours, we want you to take the stage feeling a degree of sexual tension and we want the men in particular to be able to perform. We do not and will not take any steps to enforce this, though. When it is your time to be on stage, you may also invite other candidates to come up on stage and have sex with you, either before you die or while you are dying. Such invitations must be registered with Medical and engineering before the show begins, however, you cannot be spontaneous about this." He smiled. "And you should also keep in mind that it isn't desirable for a show to go on for hours, just as it isn't desirable if it's over in five minutes. You should keep this in mind when deciding how many candidates you bring on stage with you. You may not invite guests onto the stage. Everything that happens on stage is filmed and we do not want the guests being filmed."

At Julie's urging, I then approached Michelle and listed us as a couple, and she made a note of it in a book she was carrying. Naturally, that meant we were to share a room. None of the others in our group did so, and we were then taken into "our" residence hall--which could only be called opulent. There were a number of people in the lobby, and only one of them--a pretty girl-next-door type who seemed to be manning the main desk--were clothed in anything beyond shoes and jewelry. Although I knew that all these people were slated to die on the stage, none of them seemed anxious or upset, and a few looked as if they were quite happy. Some of the men walking around had erections, and I realized then that I did too. Off to our right, a muscular young man was sitting in one of the lobby chairs, and a lovely young Asian girl was on her knees in front of him, sucking his hard penis.

The girl at the desk welcomed us with a bright smile and directed us to our rooms, telling us at the same time that we should come down for a mixer to be held in the club at noon. Our room turned out to be nothing less than spectacular, very large and, as Saul had promised, equipped with whatever amenities either of us might want.

Julie sat down on the edge of the king-sized bed, her legs spread, and looked around the room. "This," she noted, "is very nice."

"It is," I agreed.

"Did you notice the people down there wandering around the lobby?"

I grinned. "The good-looking women, walking around naked? No, I paid no attention at all."

She giggled. "Right. Look, just let me just ask you, right now, although I think I know the answer--it won't bother you if I have sex with some of those other men, will it? Some of them look really hot."

"Not at all, although I would like to watch when possible."

"Of course. I assume I get to watch when you have sex with the women?"

"You can even join in if you want." She laughed again. "I do hope," I told her, "that we go together or that you go first. Don't be insulted, but I find I don't just want to watch you have sex, I want to watch your die, as well."

"Actually," she said with a smile, "I already knew that. Why would I be insulted? Like I said, it's exciting. Anyway, I hope so too. But, if I understood everything right, even if we're not paired I can invite you up to have sex with me while I'm dying, and I'll certainly do that." She then pointed a mock-stern finger at me. "You'd better do the same if your turn comes before mine."

"You can count on it." I reached for her and pulled her up off the bed. "We need to go," I told her. "It's almost noon."

She nodded, rose, and we went down to the bar. There was a pattern to life there which I noticed right away, and which was to continue in the coming days. There was almost a tangible sense of excitement in the air, essentially all the time. Like many of the men, a good part of the time I was walking around sporting a stiff erection. The women weren't exempt from this either; many of them, including Julie, had erect nipples and often left moist spots on chairs they'd been sitting on.

The bar itself was unusual, and interesting. The tables were what you'd expect in any bar, but the chairs were unique. The seats were narrow but comfortable, the backs wide. They were also equipped with levers which allowed them to be laid back like lounge chairs--as they went back a footrest popped up--or laid all the way back like a bed. We were soon to learn what these features were for--more sex took place in the bar than literally anywhere else on the island.

But at that moment our attention was focused on our fellow candidates. As we were later to learn, everyone knew when newcomers were arriving and were encouraged to attend this mixer. There were more of them than I had imagined; besides the six new arrivals, there were about two dozen other candidates on the island, every man trim and fit and every woman pretty and shapely. The eldest of them by my judgment, a very elegant-looking woman with dark auburn hair, appeared to be perhaps in her early thirties. But the vast majority appeared to be in their twenties--except for a few who looked like teenagers. Julie and I found a table and sat down, only to realize a few moments later that there were no waiters, there was a buffet line. We rose again and went to stand in the queue.

I found myself standing behind a woman who absolutely commanded my attention from the first moment. She was tall, perhaps five-eight or so, with Mediterranean olive skin and long glossy black hair. She was very athletic-looking; with long muscular legs that suggested a dancer or a swimmer. Her figure could only be called perfect; her breasts high, firm, and slightly conical. As we moved through the line, it seemed she became aware of me staring at her--in particular, at her high rounded rear end. She turned to me, showing me a lovely face, intense dark eyes, and a charming smile.

"Hello, newbie," she said in a smooth contralto voice. "I'm Joanna. And you are?"

"Jack," I answered, almost choking on the word. She glanced down at the erection I already had, and it bounced up a bit harder in response to her attention. She laughed.

"Sorry," I muttered.

"Sorry? What the hell for?" She touched my face. "You just don't know how it is around here yet, Jack," she went on. "We're all quite direct. So, let me just say, you are a good-looking man, you have a fine cock, and before long I'll have it in my mouth and in my pussy--unless you find me repulsive. So for god's sake don't be embarrassed!"

Her response stunned me; I could not figure out anything to say in response. She also found this amusing, and we went our separate ways at the end of the buffet line. Julie and I went back to our table with our food; if she had overheard my brief conversation with Joanna, she gave no sign of it.

We sat down and we ate a delightful lunch, a real luxury for both of us considering our fairly marginal previous lifestyle. No one approached us while we were eating, but, afterwards, when we were having coffee, we were almost immediately joined by a dark-skinned young man with Hispanic features. He sat down, nodded to me, then smiled at Julie.

"Well, hi there, Littlebits," he said. "You have got to be new here, or I would have noticed, a girl as cute as you does not escape my attention. I'm Ramon, by the way."

"Julie Presser," she responded, giving him her wide smile.

"Ah, you are new here," Ramon said. "Only first names here, Littlebits--or nicknames. If there's another Julie around you can use Julie P."

"I see," she said.

"Maybe. But let me explain why. You are--and I am--dead. Your last name, you left that behind in the world of the living. You may be feeling fine and breathing fine, but you are a dead girl. You volunteered to die here and, before long, you will." He smiled. "But in the meantime, you try to have as much fun as possible!"

"I plan to do just that," Julie told him. "With one exception. I plan to have fun dying, too. I really do want to put on a good show, and I think I can." She stood up and adopted the pose I'd seen her use the night I met her, her hips and belly thrust forward. "I plan to kill myself--or have myself killed--with knife or a gun, something like that. There'll be a lot of blood." She hooked a fingertip in the corner of her mouth, a sexy gesture. "Don't you think that'll be a good show?" Then she suddenly looked concerned. "They do allow that, don't they? Knives, guns? I think I like the idea of a knife better..."

Ramon laughed loudly. "Oh, yes, they sure do!" he answered. He shook his head. "And I think that'll be beautiful. I hope I get a chance to see it happen." He glanced back at me. "You mind if I touch her, man?"

"Jack," I told him. I started to tell him that was up to Julie, not me, but she'd already made her preference clear enough by moving closer to him. "And no, I don't mind at all, feel free. She is a delight to touch."

Julie smiled at me; Ramon laid his hands on her belly and started moving them upwards slowly. "Ah, god, so soft," he murmured. "A knife in this pretty little belly, god..." His hands reached her breasts. "And in these tiny little tits, christ..." He turned toward her and his cock was standing straight up.

"I want to do it that way," Julie said. Her smile faded and she pouted. "I just don't know if I can do it myself, I'm not that brave."

"You don't have to," Ramon told her. "Have you looked at the manual yet?"

"Manual?"

"It's in your room, in the drawer in the nightstand. Tells you all about what's available. They have machines that can stab you, all you have to do it throw a switch. Or you can have one of the other candidates do it to you, if you want--and if you can find someone willing." He gazed at her face for a moment. "And you have already met one man who would be willing..."

She moved a little closer to him. "You'd be willing to stab me, Ramon? Kill me? Maybe you could do it slow, use a little knife, stab me a bunch of times. I want my death to take a while."

"I'd do it with a fingernail clipper if that's what you want, Littlebits."

Julie's eyelids fluttered. She looked down at Ramon's lap, at his throbbing cock. "May I? Please?" she asked.

"Anything you want, Littlebits."

I couldn't quite believe things were moving this fast, we'd only been on the island for a couple of hours. She straddled his legs, sank down onto his lap, and guided his cock up inside herself. As she began to move on him, she looked up at me, then extended a hand to me. I took it and squeezed her fingers affectionately, smiling and nodding at her as I did. "Tell me," she said to Ramon, her voice throaty. "Tell me how you'd kill me. Would you fuck me first?"

"No," he answered. "While. Just like this, Littlebits. Imagine I've got a small knife in my hand. I'll kiss you, then plunge it up into you, into your soft belly. I'll twist it, I'll hurt you, but you won't die. I'll stick it in your belly three or four times, in this smooth back once or twice. But then, the main course; I'd squeeze, and caress, and kiss, these little breasts and the drive the knife in right through them. I'd do it over and over until you bled to death. You'd cry from the pain but I'd kiss your tears away. It would take a very long time."

Julie, who'd been moaning and bouncing on him as he spoke, suddenly gave out a strangled cry and fell forward against him, caught up in the grip of an orgasm. Her body shuddered and trembled for a long time before she became still. Finally she rose, her eyes looking swollen. "Now you," she whispered. "Give me your come, I want it..." She started moving on him again, trying to coax an orgasm out of him.

By that time, the two of them had attracted an audience. A girl sat down next to me; I looked around, half expecting it to be Joanna.

It was not. This girl was shorter, much slimmer, and looked younger. She had long silky blond hair, very pale skin, very long legs and large, brilliant blue eyes.

"Your wife?" she asked, nodding toward Julie.

"Girlfriend," I answered.

"She is hot," the blond said. "She'll be memorable on stage."

"I know that's true."

She casually reached over and stroked my painfully hard cock. "Want me to suck you off while she's getting fucked?" she asked.

My interaction with Joanna had already prepped me for this sort of thing, and this time I was not speechless. "God, that would be wonderful..."

"Thought so." She leaned over and took my cock deeply into her mouth, teasing it with her lips and tongue. "Feel free," she said, raising her head for a moment, "to come in my mouth. I like that." She then went down and started sucking me again.

I teased her nipples. I wasn't going to last long, but neither was Ramon. As it happened, we came almost at the same time, Ramon shooting his semen up inside Julie as I unloaded in the blonde's mouth. She swallowed it all, then raised her head and grinned at me.

"What an introduction," I said as the blond girl sat up straight. "Wow."

"Glad you enjoyed it--uh---"

"Jack."

"Ah, Jack." She extended a long-fingered hand. "I'm Angelina. Welcome to the party." She leaned in close to me as I took her hand, her knees pressing against my thighs.

"Angelina," Ramon said as Julie was disengaging herself, "Was one of the Six last week."

"And probably will be again this week," Angelina agreed, "although we won't know for sure until tomorrow."

"The Six?" I echoed, hearing the implicit capitalization.

Angelina gave me a soft smile and shook her head. "You aren't just new, you haven't talked to much of anyone yet," she observed, and I nodded agreement. "The group the pair who are to die Sunday night are chosen from are referred to as the 'Six.' You'll hear it all the time. If I am still part of the Six--and as I said, I expect to be--I have a chance of being chosen Saturday night. To die on the stage Sunday." She then paused. I said nothing, unsure of whether condolences or congratulations were in order.

Angelina seemed to understand. "Your proper next question," she went on with a smile, "is, 'have you chosen a method yet?'"

I nodded and smiled back. "Have you chosen a method yet?" I recited.

She nodded. "Yes. The neck slicer."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm sorry, I have no idea what that is."

"Like a slow guillotine. The arm comes down slowly, and there's a blade moving back and forth. It'll slice into my neck and keep slicing until my head is cut off." She told me this using the same tone of voice, and in the same manner, as she might have used to describe the function of a DVD player. "You're new, you haven't seen any of the shows yet, so let me paint the scene. I'll be strapped down on a table. The apparatus will be basically over my head and neck, and it'll do its thing automatically once I start it."

"Sounds like it should be a great show," I said weakly.

"I sure hope so. Anyway. The point is, I want to have someone up there fucking me while my head is being cut off." She lifted one of her long legs and draped it across my lap. "I haven't chosen anyone for that yet. But I noticed you when you came in; you are a cute guy, you'd be perfect for it. Interested?"

Again, I was speechless, I just stared at her--long enough that she eventually waved her hand in front of my face and said, "hello?"

"Are you serious?" I finally managed to get out. "You really want me up there fucking you while you're being beheaded?"

"Yes, I do. I'll have someone doing it. You're my first choice."

"Say yes, Jack," Julie prompted, and Ramon laughed.

"Uh--yes, of course," I answered without considering it further. I was goggling at her, I must have looked like an idiot.

She laughed. "Okay, good. If I do get chosen, I'll call you up. Be ready." She lifted her fine silky hair away from her rather long smooth neck. "So," she said, "I am asking opinions. Should I have my head cut off from the front, the back, or the side?"

"I don't know what the differences are."

"It's in the manual," she told me. "Cutting from the back is the quickest, you die when the blade goes through your spine. It's supposed to be spectacular, though, your body really thrashes around as the blade cuts through the spinal cord. From the front or side you bleed out. From the side the veins and arteries are cut and it goes fast. From the front the windpipe gets cut first and there's a lot of choking and all that."

I stroked her smooth thigh and tried to get myself under control. She was asking for advice and I wanted to help if I could. "What's your own preference?"

She looked distant. "Not from the side, too clean. You know, before I volunteered, before I came here, I was trying to become a singer--before the music business just rolled over and died, of course. I like being on stage, putting on a show. So I want to do that, I want to put on a good show. That's why I'm asking opinions."

I reached out and touched her throat; she tipped her head back to give me access. "It would be the hardest on you, I think," I said, "but I think you should be cut from the front. It's appropriate, you were a singer, your windpipe gets cut first."

She nodded. "So far," she admitted, "that's what everyone thinks, so that's probably what I'll choose. I'm just not quite sure. I like the idea of the wild thrashing that's supposed to happen when your spinal cord is being cut."

"Maybe you'll last long enough for the blade to get to your spine, and you'll have both," I said. I let my fingers glide down from her throat to her upper chest. Her skin was silk-smooth and extremely white. Even though she was a veteran and I a newcomer to this place, I felt a bond with her. "It seems such a shame," I couldn't help saying. "You're so young, so very pretty..."

She shrugged; a serious expression flashed across her features, but was quickly replaced with a small smile. "So are you. So is your girlfriend. All of us are young and pretty, the guests wouldn't pay to see old ugly people have sex and kill themselves." She leaned forward, pressing her chest against my hand. "And you should not start thinking like that. Yes, it's a shame for all of us. But, with things like they are, we can't expect to have much of a life--and you know that or you wouldn't be here. Look at me--at the moment I'm young, men find me attractive. For the past year, that's what I've been surviving on. I have sex with a man who disgusts me just so he'll buy me breakfast. I don't want to do that anymore. I want to have sex with men who attract me, just because they attract me--men like you, Jack. If we were in New York, could you afford to buy me breakfast?"

I sighed. "No. I can't afford to buy myself breakfast."

"And that's where we all are. There's just no point in trying to go on. Yes, things will get better sooner or later, the economy won't stay this far down forever. But, by the time it does, people like us will be old and beaten-down just from trying to survive. As far as I'm concerned, this is way better. I have been here for ten weeks, and I've lived better, I've had more fun, in that time than in all the rest of my life put together. If I am chosen Saturday night--and I hope I will be--I'll walk onto that stage proudly and have my head cut off--and it will all have been worth it."

I stroked her hair. "I agree with everything you say," I told her, "and yes, I feel the same way and that's why I'm here--that, and to get some money for my parents." She nodded at this. "I don't quite understand, though," I went on, "why you would say that you hoped to be the one chosen to die this coming Sunday. Wouldn't it be better to survive a while longer, to enjoy this place for a few more weeks? I mean, I do understand that it isn't your choice, but--"

"I understand it," Julie put in brightly. "If I could go Sunday, I would."

I looked around at her; she was sitting on Ramon's lap. "You," I said, pointing at her, "do not count. You've gone a little crazy, obsessing about getting stabbed."

"Hey, man," Ramon said. "Don't talk her out of it. She'd look fantastic with a blade sticking in her gut."

"I know she would, I want to see that myself, and I'm not trying to talk her out of it. My point is, she's focused on it to the point where that's all she wants, she--"

"No," Julie interrupted. "No, you're wrong." She leaned forward a little. "I told you, I've had enough of this world, enough of my miserable life. I want to die, I'm ready to die. Before I ever heard of this place I was thinking about trying to find a man who would kill me. Like I said, I didn't know how I was going to find a man like that out there in the real world, but if I did, I wanted to be able to take advantage of it. I wanted to be able to go somewhere with him and let him do it, let him kill me, and I didn't want to be crying and begging and all that. So I started reading about, and thinking about, a lot of different ways to die. I already knew I did not want to

die alone, I didn't want to take a dive off a bridge in the middle of the night. I wanted someone with me, someone's hands on me, as I died. I thought about being strangled, but I know I wouldn't be able to stop myself from trying to fight for air. So I focused on being shot or stabbed. If someone shoots you, he's probably going to be a little ways away from you--well, maybe not, but probably. If you're stabbed, though, that's up-close and personal. I've been thinking about it now for a while--months. Yes, I've gotten into the idea, I've actively tried to get into the idea. I want my death to be blindingly erotic, for me and for anyone watching. So I've been preparing myself. That, Jack, is not crazy."

"No," Angelina said with a soft smile, "it isn't. You have a wonderful attitude, Julie. I sort of wish I was going to be around long enough to see you on stage." She then turned back to me. "As for me," she said, "you haven't really been here long enough to understand, but I think you will before your time comes. The candidates--we get very close to each other. It's unique, there's no reason to hide anything, no one's scheming for any future because we all know we don't have one, everyone is just themselves and when people are like that they're pretty damn nice. I've heard it from long-term survivors a dozen times--if you stay too long you get too attached. When you really like someone, it isn't easy to watch that person suffer and die, even if they've volunteered for it. Here, those feelings are dangerous. We've all heard the story about Linda." Ramon nodded, his expression now very serious.

"Of course," I said, "Julie and I haven't."

"Linda was one of the longest-term survivors here. A former model, a real beauty when she arrived here. I never knew her, but the story is that she was one of the Six a dozen times over but her name was never drawn. She started falling in love with the men here, one after another, and one after another, they died on stage. She lost it. She went into a depression and couldn't snap out of it, she was eating and drinking all the time, she was getting fat and losing her good looks. Management offered to take her back to Miami, she wouldn't go. She spent hours sitting on the beach, rocking back and forth and crying. Management knew she wouldn't be able to do a death show, she was useless to them, and she was suffering horribly. Something had to be done."

"So what was done?"

"What was done was, they gave one of the candidates a gun, he went down to the beach where she was sitting, and he shot her in the head. A waste, a complete waste. Since then, anyone who loses it like that is called a 'Linda.' If someone show up whose real name is Linda, it's suggested they use a stage name, like Star or Tiffany."

"Just curious," Julie asked, "but why didn't one of the employees shoot her?"

"They can't. They can't kill us, that's murder under the laws of the Bahamas, and this island is Bahamian territory. They have a deal with the Bahamian government, and they toe the line carefully. We can kill ourselves and we can kill each other--that's murder too but when that's done things are always arranged so that the murderer dies soon after. The management, the employees, can't kill us."

"Makes sense," I noted.

"There's more than that too," Angelina continued. "The other part is payback, a sense of duty. You may not be feeling that yet, but you probably will. With the outside world as it is, this place needs to exist, people need a place that'll give them a few weeks of pleasure before they die. The owners spare nothing to give us that pleasure during the time we live here. But there's a bottom line, too. The money they make from the guests and from film sales is what pays for everything. Those guests, and those buyers, pay that money to see beautiful people die a sexy death." She smiled softly. "So I want to give them what they want, I want to go on stage and smile and be sexy

and cheerfully start the machine that'll cut my head off. And that's what I'm going to do. Above all I do not want to be a waste like Linda was."

I gazed into her brilliant blue eyes for a moment. "I do understand," I said. "Thank you for explaining that, Angelina. It casts a different light on things."

Her smile became wider. "So," she said, "how do you plan to go out, Jack?"

I squeezed her thigh and shook my head. "At the moment I have no idea."

She leaned toward me and stroked my chest with her hands. "You," she said, "should pick the arrow machine. On a random setting, with needlepoints. This chest was made for it."

"Arrow machine?"

"Yeah," Ramon put in. "You turn it on and it shoots arrows into you, one after another. You can choose broadhead points or needlepoints--the needlepoints have no blades and are no bigger around than the arrow shaft, so they do a lot less damage and you last a lot longer. Random set means the targeting device keeps moving around, so you never know where you're going to get the next one--some even miss you completely."

"That does sound good for you, Jack," Julie said, sucking on the tip of her finger coquettishly.

"I'll think about it," I said. "What about you, Ramon? Have you chose yet?"

"Yeah," he told me. "Belly crusher."

"Ramon!" Angelina cried. "You can't be serious!"

"I am, Bright Eyes. You know how much they pay for that? My wife and my kids back in L.A.--they'll get a lot of money for that."

Angelina shook her head. "That is a rough one." She turned to me. "He'll lie on a table, on his back, and put a round steel arm over his belly at his waist. Then--"

"And I'll have a girl," Ramon interrupted, "sitting on my cock. Maybe Littlebits, here."

"There's a slot in that table under the arm," Angelina went on. "When the arm is locked down and he starts the mechanism, it'll start tightening down--slowly. It'll keep going until his belly bursts open from the pressure and his guts fall out on the stage. Even then it'll keep going until the bar passes into the slot and he's cut in half." She pursed her lips. "If you want to be cut in two," she told Ramon, "you could choose one of the saw machines. It'd be a lot easier on you. And prettier, in my opinion."

"But the saw machines don't pay as much. I have four kids, Bright Eyes. They're right at the point of starving to death." He shook his own head. "I'm not part of this week's Six. I hope I'm up next week. My family can't wait forever."

"I take it the saw machines cut you in half with saws?" I asked--and almost immediately felt rather stupid, since it was pretty obvious.

"Yes," Angelina answered. "You can choose buzz-saw type rigs or flat cross-cut saws, fast cut or slow, fine teeth or coarse. You can be cut across your middle or lengthwise, up between your legs. Fine teeth cut, coarse teeth rip and tear."

"I've heard about a couple of the women," Ramon put in, "taking a circular saw up between their legs. That's sexy, man, when the saw starts cutting into their pussies. Every time, it looks like they're coming when they're being cut there."

"I think they do," Angelina agreed.

"Actually," I said, "that's close to what you've chosen. Except it's just your head being cut off."

"Yes," she replied. "And I'll be using a smooth flat blade like a razor instead of a toothed saw." She shrugged. "Just read your manual. You'll be amazed at all the methods you can choose from."

Not long after that, Ramon and Angelina drifted away from us, encouraging us to meet some of the others. We did; we stayed quite a while, and during that time Julie had sex with five different men and I coupled with two of the women. Finally, exhausted, we went back to our room, and the first thing we did when we got there was to look in the bedside table for the manual everyone had been talking about. As it turned out there were two copies, one for each of us.

I was utterly amazed. The book was more than two inches thick. As I opened it, I saw that it was divided into sections; the first was entitled "Asphyxiation" and detailed a myriad of ways a person could have himself strangled or smothered. Each method listed also carried a price, the price that would be paid to one's beneficiaries if that method of death was chosen, and a separate index listed all the methods in order of price. Quick and easy methods like single gunshot to the head, neck-break hanging, and the guillotine paid very little. The highest prices were for methods like being burned alive slowly, slow boiling in water or oil, or being torn apart by trained animals. I wondered if anyone ever chose any of those methods.

Naturally, Julie focused on the section describing the various ways one could be put to death with bladed instruments like knives and swords. After well over an hour of study, she asked my opinion of one of them. It was called the "sword drop machine."

The sword drop machine consisted of a large table above which a large heavy block was suspended. The block was set with dozens of long slender blades of varying lengths. When released, the block would slowly, but unstoppably, drop and pierce the body of the person lying on the table repeatedly, from waist to neck. The average time from the first point of a blade touching the candidate's body--the first one always went into the belly--until full penetration was reached was said to be about two minutes. No "random" option was offered for this method, the only choices were "quick" in which the second or third blade pierced the candidate's heart, "medium," in which the pattern of blades was arranged to pierce the body several times in a non-fatal manner before a coup de grace was administered by a blade into the heart, and "slow," in which no single wound was fatal; the candidate was pierced repeatedly by slender blades arranged to avoid vital areas, and death finally ensued from blood loss. This, the manual cautioned, was a rather drawn-out affair.

"I like this one," she told me. "Look, it can be set so that my legs would not be touched, so a man could stand between my legs and fuck me while the blades are going in." She shivered. "That really does appeal to me. And it pays well, too."

"You'll notice," I pointed out, "that only the 'slow' option pays really well."

"Oh, well, that's the one I'd take anyway," she said carelessly. She looked up at me, her dark eyes sparkling. "I could have several of the guys--you, certainly--come up on stage and play with me while I'm being skewered. I really like it. You think it would be sexy?"

I smiled at her enthusiasm. "Very," I said, caressing her tiny body. "Incredibly, in fact. Sharp blades touching you, pressing down on you, finally piercing you. I also think you'd take it very well."

She suddenly looked anxious. "Oh, god, I hope so," she said. "I have been trying to get into this, like I said, and I have--but I'm not stupid, I know that fantasy is one thing and reality is another. I want to smile and push up into the blades, but I can't be sure I won't go all to pieces when it happens, that I won't cry and beg for it to stop."

"In the introduction," I pointed out, "it says that having 'second thoughts' like that when you're in the middle of a machine death can be good too, good for the film and the guests. Some of them like to hear the candidates cry and scream and beg. It also won't matter. Once you turn the machine on, it won't stop. I mean, in this one, maybe you could roll out from under it before the first blade gets to you. But once that first blade goes in, you are going to go all the way whether you like it or not."

She rolled her lips in. "That's good, I suppose. I want this to be good. What Angelina told us, it was good advice." She sighed. "I just don't want to cry and beg. I want to be able to welcome the blades into me."

"I have every confidence in you," I told her.

"I wish I did," she muttered.

We made love then, and Julie slept; I spent some more time with the manual before joining her in bed. I was very torn. At that time I was thinking that I'd like a quick clean death, like an old-fashioned neck-break hanging. But--as I assumed many of the candidates were--I was put off a bit by the small sum paid to my beneficiaries for a death like that. On the other hand, I could not face the idea of having myself burned alive, so it had to be something in between. I pored over the methods, and carefully read the section entitled "freestyle."

"Freestyle" covered a number of more or less violent traditional methods of suicide, not mediated by any sort of machinery. One could shoot oneself in the head, for example, or slit one's throat, or even perform classic hara-kiri, or any other method that one could conceive that could be expected to bring certain death. A few methods, like classic hara-kiri, carried a specific price--a fairly high price, especially if the classic beheading that followed the "belly slitting" was not included--but many were listed as "discretionary." If one chose any of these, one had to undergo training conducted by the paid staff. The management, the book noted, did not want candidates to accidentally hurt someone else or simply injure themselves, which left Erothan with a serious problem.

If one chose a freestyle method, the book said, a full course of drugs and "medical processing" was strongly recommended. Having heard nothing so far about any drugs, I flipped to the pages that section of the manual referred to, and read the text there with interest.

As it turned out, a variety of drugs were available for the candidate--drugs which loosened a person's inhibitions, drugs which calmed them down, and drugs which muted--although, it was noted specifically, did not eliminate--pain. At least a part of what was referred to as "medical processing" was recommended for everyone except those undergoing the simplest and quickest deaths. The book noted that "projectile vomiting," "explosive diarrhea" or more ordinary defecation, along with spontaneous emptying of the bladder, could be expected in a variety of the more protracted and painful deaths, and, even in such a simple procedure as the automated firing squad, the candidate's bowel and bladder would probably empty itself on stage. Urination was not felt to be a problem, but vomit and feces were not considered erotic or desirable, and for that reason it was strongly recommended that all candidates have enemas before going on stage. As for the vomiting, the candidate had two choices. First, a drug which would suppress that reflex completely was available. But, the manual also noted, some candidates might consider vomiting blood desirable, which might happen if the person's stomach was pierced by a bullet, blade, or arrow. For these, stomach-pumping and the use of a drug that suppressed the feeling of hunger a totally empty stomach often provoked was recommended. For anyone undergoing a harsh protracted death a drug that would prevent early loss of consciousness was very strongly advised, as the slow mutilation of an unconscious body wasn't very interesting visually. There were a number of other

drugs and procedures available too, for those who chose certain kinds of deaths. For instance, there was a drug that caused your blood to clot more rapidly than normal, which was designed to delay things in methods where blood loss was expected to be the final cause of death. I made a mental note to mention that to Julie, as she might want to use it if her final choice was indeed the sword-drop machine on a slow setting.

With all these aids available, the freestyle methods seemed appealing to me, but the benefit paid for such things as slitting one's throat were little better than for classical hanging. Hara-kiri paid quite well but I was not at all sure I could do that, even with an assist from the drugs. It would take some more study, I told myself as I went to bed, and I fell asleep thinking about it.

-4-

The next few days slipped by much as the first day had, days filled with hedonistic pleasure and a lot of sex. In that time I met many of the other candidates and a few of the guests. Julie was one of the most sexually active women there, but she spent every night with me--except for one, when she accepted an invitation from an older man, a guest, to spend the night with him in his room at the other hotel.

One of the candidates I met who impressed me was the older woman I had noticed, who confirmed when I met her that she was indeed the "old lady" of the group at age 39. Her name was Geneviève, she had been recruited from the trainyards in New Orleans where hobos gathered, and she told me she was immensely grateful at having been allowed to join the candidate pool--since her daughter and beneficiary was, at age 20, older than some of them. She had been there, she said, for seven weeks, but she had not been chosen for the Six yet.

That she'd been accepted was no puzzle to me. She might have been considerably older than most of the candidates, but she still had a lovely face, intense dark eyes that betrayed her Creole ancestry, high firm breasts, and wonderful legs. Having given birth to a child, her belly was a little slacker than most, but it did not detract from her beauty. She also had a mature and self-confident bearing, a dignity, that many of the younger candidates lacked.

"Have you chosen a method yet?" I asked her--the usual question among candidates when they met.

"Yes, I have," she answered. "I've just recently made the decision--you're the first to hear it, actually." She smiled. "I'm going to have myself sawed in two, lengthwise. Fine-tooth saw for a nice clean cut, slow option." As she spoke she spread her legs and looked down at her smooth-shaven groin. "You think I have the undercarriage for it? My vaginal lips are a little slack..."

I ran a finger up between those vaginal lips and it came away moist. "Oh, they are nowhere near slack enough to be a problem," I told her.

"That's good to hear," she said. "After all, that's where the saw will cut in first, it'll be aimed to go right in between my lips."

I stroked her firm thighs. "Are you looking forward to it?"

"Hell no," she answered. "It's going to fucking hurt!" She laughed then, a very musical sound. "But what the hell, a little pain, I can take it." She then grinned at me seductively and took my hard cock in her hand. "If you want to," she said, "I'd like it very much if you slipped this in there."

"That'll be my pleasure, ma'am," I said. I moved closer to her and pushed my cock into her soft moistness.

"Oh, that's nice," she sighed. "I haven't been fucked all day." She pulled me down and kissed me. "Look," she said, "if you are still alive when my time comes, I'd like it if you'd do something for me."

"What's that?"

She squirmed against me with her hips; she had sexual skills many of the younger girls lacked. "When my time comes," she said, "I'll have a nice on-stage fuck with my death partner, or suck him off, whatever he wants. But then, when I'm on the table, I want another man up there with me, I want his hands on me when the saw begins cutting me. Once it gets about midway up my belly, I'll have lost enough blood that I won't be in much pain anymore. I want that man to put his penis in my mouth then, I want to be sucking him as the saw cuts up toward my heart. With any luck he can come in my mouth as I'm dying. I'm asking you to be that man. If you don't want to I'll try to find someone else, but you are my first choice."

I pushed hard into her. "I accept," I said. "I'd love to be having sex with you as you die."

She smiled at me, a free and pretty smile, one of those smiles that makes a man feel good just to be seeing it. "Thank you, Jack. That's going to make my death a great scene, I'm sure of it."

The week passed quickly, and soon enough it was dinnertime on Saturday. Angelina and the others in the current Six were seated up front, where a special table had been set up with two golden urns. Inside each of those urns, I knew, were cards bearing the names of the Six, and after dinner one would be drawn from each, and the names of the pair who would die Sunday night would be announced. Throughout dinner I watched Angelina; she ate very little, she seemed very nervous, and I did not find that hard to understand.

The moment arrived after dinner, while we were all being served coffee. Saul Levenson, dressed now in a formal suit, stepped up to the table and stood with his hands over the two urns. From somewhere unseen, a Chinese gong sounded.

"The time has come," Saul said, "to choose the pair who will be departing this life tomorrow night. This is a solemn moment, I ask you all to be silent." He slipped both his hands into the urns simultaneously and drew one card from each, neatly folded and sealed. He then laid them on the table and paused, gazing out at us, focusing on the Six sitting right in front of him. "These are the Two," he intoned. His gaze scanned the Six. "Are you all ready? Have you all selected your methods?" Each of the Six nodded and several murmured, "yes." Saul raised his hands and the gong sounded again. He then picked up the card he'd placed on his left, held it up, and opened it.

"The first member of tomorrow night's death pair is..." He paused. "Robert J." From the group of Six, a slim but muscular man with brown hair and a mustache stood up. All the candidates applauded him.

Laying that card back down, he waited until the gong sounded again, then picked up the other. "And joining him in the surrender of life will be..." Again, the pause. Then: "Angelina." I smiled; Angelina jumped up, her blond hair flying, and gave a little squeal. She and Robert J embraced, then turned to face the rest of us, and acknowledge the applause. Both were smiling and looked happy.

"Honor these two," Saul said. "Tonight is their last night on earth, the last night of their lives." We all applauded.

Later, after we'd moved to the club and had started partying and having drinks, I tried to see Angelina, but she was easily the most popular woman there that night; every man there, as aware as I was that given her predilections she would be scrupulously celibate on Sunday, was hoping to have another turn with her, and she was constantly surrounded by a knot of men. Eventually I gave up, and I looked around for Julie.

I found her sitting at a table with a man who looked to be in his forties, the fact that he was dressed marking him as a guest, not a candidate. She motioned me over and introduced me to the man, whose name was Tom Carrolton. I sat down quickly and moved in close to the table. In just a few days, I had gotten used to being naked in a group of nude people. Being naked in front of a clothed man still seemed awkward, and somehow inappropriate.

But Tom was friendly enough. Without addressing the death shows, he talked about how much he liked the resort, and how much he was going to hate going back home and "back to the grind" at the General Electric offices in Stamford, Connecticut. Julie then told me that Tom wanted to "borrow her," that she was going to accompany him up to the guest hotel and that she'd be back a little later. I made no objection, and, shortly thereafter, they left. At loose ends again, I tried to find Geneviève, but could not locate her, either. Noticing a girl I had not yet met sitting at a table alone, I boldly went over and asked her if she minded if I sat with her. She smiled warmly, told me her name was Denise, and invited me to sit.

Denise had arrived in the same group Julie and I had. I had noticed her before; during our induction, she had been the girl who'd been hesitant to strip down. Of all the girls there, Denise was perhaps the least physically "fit." Her arms and legs were smooth and graceful-looking but thin, her thighs not very much larger than her calves, and her breasts, while larger than Julie's, were still on the small side. Her waist was narrow but she had a little "potbelly" that bothered her but that I actually found cute. Her hair was long and dark brown, her eyes hazel, her face quite pretty--her lips in particular looked swollen, she had an almost permanent pout.

Denise was also very intellectual and well-spoken. She had been on track for an academic career in anthropology when the crashing economy caused the university where she'd been doing a post-doc to lay off hundreds, and she found herself among the multitudes of people who were unemployed and had no prospects.

"So," I said, making idle conversation, "how did they find you?"

"They didn't," she told me. "I found them."

I was surprised. "How? They seem very secretive about their recruiting in the US."

"Yes, they are, and for good reason." She paused and rested her elbows on the table. "After I lost my apartment," she told me, "I moved in--we all said temporarily--with my older brother Stan and his family. His wife, Monica, a very beautiful woman, had been a model in the old days, and she couldn't find work either. She went down to the modeling agencies and film-casting studios almost every day, looking for something--anything--that offered a paycheck. She and my brother had already decided that she'd even accept a porn film if she could get a part, but that field is just gorged with beautiful people now and, attractive as she was, she wasn't finding anything. I helped pay for my stay by babysitting their two-year-old son while my brother was working--he did still have a job--and while Monica was out searching."

"And?" I prompted when she paused again.

"One day, Monica told us over dinner that she'd met a strange man down at the agency. He'd been talking to all the out-of-work girls and she thought he was a recruiter for a brothel. I don't guess I have to explain what he was actually recruiting for. He made Monica the offer and he gave her a card. Naturally, he did not know, when he made the offer, that she had a young son, and that if nothing else ruled acceptance out for her. When she mentioned the payments to beneficiaries, I became interested. It would, I felt, solve my problems--permanently--and the benefit would be a great help to Stan and his family. So I asked Monica if I could have the card."

"And she gave it to you, of course. Since you're here."

"Not at first. She was shocked, and so was my brother. They couldn't believe that I might actually consider having myself killed. We argued, a lot, and it got rather heated. Monica said she'd already been told that they only wanted attractive girls--she didn't know about the men, probably still doesn't--and that I just didn't qualify." She shrugged. "I thought she might be right, but I also thought I'd never know if I didn't try."

"Both of you," I noted, "were being silly. You are more than attractive, Denise. Like Julie, a delicate beauty."

She smiled. "Thank you, Jack. Being compared to your Julie is a real compliment."

"Just what's true. Anyway, you did get the card."

"I did, and I called, and I met Ted--the recruiter--at a coffeeshop, and he did make the offer to me, and, although I wasn't aware I was being checked out when the guy came to the hotel room in Miami, apparently I met with his approval too. I was at the induction when you and Julie arrived."

"I know, I noticed you."

"You are almost too sweet," she said with another smile. "So I decided to do it. Monica and my brother cried and tried to talk me out of it, but I was determined, I was going to go through with it. Come here and be a party girl for a while, and then kill myself. The exact inverse of what I'd been all my life." She lowered her head, then looked up at me. "Can I tell you a secret, Jack?"

"Sure, please do."

"For most of the people here, I'd guess, actually committing suicide is just simply a duty, something they have to do in payment for the weeks of luxury and the benefits. Oh, they may well put on a great show, but that doesn't change the facts. I'm not like that. I have discovered that I really, seriously, want to do this, I want to go out on that stage and suffer and bleed and die. I'd do it even if the benefits weren't going to be paid."

I was a little surprised. "Why?" I asked.

"All my life," she said, "I've been a bookworm, the bright girl, the academic. Oh, I wasn't a virgin when I came here, but that part of my life was always secondary. Well, thanks to the economic Crash, I am, through no real fault of my own, a total failure as an academic. I spent all those years getting my Ph.D., and now it's useless. So now, I want to embrace my sexuality. And for me, the ultimate climax of that will be to put on a show that will arouse every man watching, a show that will arouse every man that views the film they'll make of it. That, rather than scientific papers and discoveries, will be the legacy I leave to the world." She suddenly, incongruously, started giggling like a schoolgirl. "I just haven't quite figured out how I'm going to do that yet. But I have at least two weeks, and I'm a smart girl, I'll come up with something."

I was impressed--and charmed--and I was about to ask her if she'd like to have sex with me, when suddenly, unexpectedly, Angelina showed up at the table. "I've been looking for you," she said.

"Well hello, and congratulations," I said. "You were chosen, just as you hoped you would be. I was trying to get to you earlier, but you were sort of surrounded."

"Yes, I was," she said. "Everybody wants to screw the girl who's going to have her head cut off tomorrow." She turned to Denise. "Do you mind if I borrow Jack for a little while?" She smiled, her nose crinkling prettily. "I promise not to ever do it again, after tomorrow."

Denise smiled too. "Angelina, you are our queen tonight. You can have anything you want. If you want Jack, take him. I'd do anything you asked me to do."

Angelina's eyebrows went up. "Anything?"

"Anything," Denise said with a firm nod.

"You stay here with us, then," Angelina said. She sat down and turned to me. "Jack, we've already agreed I'm going to call you up tomorrow. Are we still on for that?"

"Of course we are, Angelina."

"Good. As I told you, I want a man to be fucking me while the blade is cutting off my head, and I want that man to be you. I've decided to have it done from the front, like you suggested, so I can see your face and you can see mine."

"God..." Denise murmured.

"It'll be really good, Angelina," I said. "Really fine."

"I hope so. Anyway, I want to talk to you about something else."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I'm going to go to the clinic tomorrow for the drugs and so on. But there is one medical procedure I want to have done, and I don't want the doctors at the clinic to do it. I want you to do it, on stage."

"Me?" I protested. "I'm not a doctor, Angelina, I can't--"

"Yes, you can," she insisted. "You can come to the clinic with me tomorrow, and they can train you, in just a few minutes, how to do this. Will you do it?"

I couldn't refuse her. "Anything you want, Angelina. I'll come with you and try to learn. I can't promise I'll be able to master it, but I'll try. What exactly do you want done, anyway?"

"I want you to do a tracheotomy on me," she said. She lifted her chin and touched the base of her throat. "You cut me here, not deep, just through the windpipe. Then you stick in a little tube. The blade will cut through my windpipe above the tracheotomy; without it I won't be able to breathe after it does, and I don't want to go out that quick. I'm going to take the coagulant drugs, too, and that'll slow down the bleeding. Even after the big arteries are cut I might last a little while, maybe long enough to experience the blade cutting into my spine."

"Oh my god that's going to be so beautiful..." Denise murmured, licking her lips.

"Sure as hell is," I agreed. "I'll try, Angelina. I'll try to learn how to do it and do it on stage."

"Good," she said. She laughed. "How bad can it be? You end up slitting my throat, I could die. What a tragedy, huh?" She then slipped out of her chair and onto her knees in front of me. "Join me," she told Denise. "Let's drive him crazy."

Moments later, my rigid cock was in Angelina's mouth and I was kissing Denise while she stroked my chest. She offered me her breasts and, when I sucked her nipples, she urged me to bite them. I did, hard enough to make her flinch. After a little while Angelina let go of my cock, came up over me, and sat down in my lap, letting me slide deeply up inside her. Transferring my hands to Angelina's breasts, Denise went around behind her, got down on her knees, and began licking around our coupling, thrusting her tongue occasionally into our assholes.

She was good at it. Angelina did not last very long, and neither did I. After we'd both climaxed she rose off me, semen dripping from her cunt. "I have to go now," she said. "I have some other men I want to say good-bye to like this. I'll see you tomorrow, at the clinic, at three."

"I'll be there," I said. Angelina then walked away, and Denise remained, kneeling between my knees. "I'm sorry," I said to her. "It'll be a little while before--"

"I can wait," she said, smiling. "I can wait until next week, if necessary. Here, just let me clean you up." She took my softening cock into her mouth and carefully leaned away all the residual juices. Once I was clean, she sat back down in her chair. "Tomorrow," she observed, "is going to be fantastic."

I cocked my head and just gazed at her for a moment. "Okay," I said finally. "I'm not sure I understand. Do the recruiters have some way of finding people who find this sort of shit erotic?"

I suppose I do, but I did not even know this about myself until Julie started spinning her fantasies about being stabbed to death! I mean, I guess it was always there, but not obvious, it wasn't my favorite porn or anything like that."

Denise frowned slightly. "I doubt that. Why do you ask?"

"Well, you do, right?"

She pointed to her own chest. "Me? Oh hell no. Not at all."

"But you just said, tomorrow is going to be fantastic, and a while ago you called Angelina's plan 'beautiful'. And licked your lips as you said that!"

"Oh. I see." She smiled. "To repeat, no, I won't find it erotic. The only erotic thrill I'll get out of my own death on stage is the reactions of the men I have up there with me; I already know Julie feels differently and I hope that works out for her. No, I say 'beautiful' and 'fantastic' because it's profound. A perfectly healthy young girl, a real beauty, full of life and energy, in her prime, is going to go up there, without being forced in any way, and voluntarily allow a machine to cut off her head, to kill her. That, Jack, is profound. I look around at the men and women here, and the same words apply to all of them, absolutely all. I have no idea how many of them find this sort of thing erotic, I doubt that it's all of them. This is performance art at an extreme level. Like I said, profound."

I nodded doubtfully. "I guess I see."

Denise and I talked for a while longer. After a while Julie joined us, and finally, as the hour grew late, we headed back to our room. I did not have sex with anyone else that night, not even Julie. Like the death-partners, I wanted to be fresh on stage, and so I extended that into the next day. At three, as planned, I met Angelina at the clinic, which was in the basement of the candidates' hotel. Using her neck for demonstration, the doctor instructed me on how to perform a tracheotomy; it seemed fairly simple, and I left with at least some confidence that I would be able to do it on the stage. Angelina stayed, to receive her injections; she had planned to use the one that killed inhibitions, the blood coagulator, the relaxer, and, of course, the drug that prevented premature loss of consciousness. She had not elected to take the pain muter, she would be feeling it fully as the blade cut into her neck.

The afternoon seemed to drag terribly. Both Julie and I were nervous, and more than a little eager, having not seen one of these shows before. Finally dinnertime arrived, and then, at around seven-thirty, gongs began ringing all over the island. We all knew what that meant, and all of us--and all of the guests from the other hotel--started making our way to the theater.

I had been kept busy since my arrival there, and I had not been inside the theater before. I was more than impressed. The stage was very large, large enough to accommodate almost any sort of act. If someone wished to die by being run over by a truck, it could be done there. The stage itself was blocked by a curtain, but from the side one could still see that above it, hidden from the front by a short black curtain, were several cameras, the lenses very large, mounted on tracks and able to swivel in all directions. More cameras pointed at the stage directly, from the front and sides, and more yet from low angles. Above the curtain hung a dozen huge TV monitors, and there were more of those on the sidewalls. Things had clearly been arranged so that everyone could see everything that happened on that stage.

The seating was arranged in tiers. The first four rows were reserved for the candidates, and there was a clear path from that area to small staircases on either side of the stage. Behind the fourth row was an unbroken wall, and there were a dozen rows of seating behind that; this was the guest area.

By the time Julie and I arrived, about half the candidates and a fair number of guests had arrived. As we walked in, Tom stood up in the guest section and waved at us. Julie waved back, then went over to talk to him at the wall.

After a moment she came back to me. "He asked me if I would come and sit in the guest section and suck his dick while Angelina is having herself killed," she told me. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Since I'm going to be on stage screwing Angelina, I can hardly object, Julie."

"Okay. See you afterwards, then." She left, went outside, and re-entered through the guest doorway. I walked down to the front row, saw Geneviève sitting alone, and sat down beside her. She smiled and crossed her legs.

"Pretty soon it'll be your turn," I said to her, stroking her bare thigh affectionately. "Your time to go up there and get sliced in two by a saw, and I'll be right there with you when that happens. I'm looking forward to that day." I gestured toward the stage. "I'm a part of this one, too," I told her.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "You may not know it, Jack, but you are already very popular around here. It won't surprise me if literally every girl who dies here as long as you're alive asks you up on the stage. You are, after all, the sexiest man here."

I stared at her. "I never thought of myself that way."

"Start," another voice said. I looked up to see Denise sitting down on the other side of me. "I'm assuming it's okay if I sit here," she said, "since I saw Julie up in the guest section."

"It is definitely okay. You think I'm sexy too?"

"Outrageously. Not only do you have those fantastic bedroom eyes, you are a perfect combination of big strong tough hero-type, bad-boy villain, and lost little boy. No woman can resist it."

"I certainly can't," Geneviève said with a laugh. "Angelina couldn't either, she's been raving about him ever since he arrived."

"We shouldn't be telling him this, Geneviève," Denise said. "You're a little older and I'm probably the least attractive woman in the candidate pool. He's going to start going after the hotter girls and ignoring us."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I put one arm around each of them. "Ladies," I said, "I love you both, there is no chance of that whatever."

At that point the gong rang, and the curtains on the stage slowly parted, revealing Saul Levenson. He made some fairly bland opening comments, then lifted his arms theatrically. "Today," he went on, "the two people who will give up their lives for your entertainment are... Robert L and Angelina!" As he spoke, they came into view from stage-left, walking arm-in-arm and looking relaxed, but serious. More curtains behind the main one swirled, and two pieces of machinery were revealed. The one on the right had a blade that looked like a straight razor suspended above a table; that, I knew, was Angelina's. The one on the left consisted of an open vertical framework with manacles that were obviously intended to hold one's arms and legs. Behind it was some sort of large circular device which could not really be seen very well. Between them was a large mattress on a low frame.

Saul left the stage, and the couple of the day stepped forward. They bowed slightly and again gave the Roman salute, "we who are about to die salute you!" in perfect unison. Robert was already almost violently erect.

Then Angelina spoke alone. "We will begin right away," she said. Her voice could be heard clearly over the house speakers, apparently thanks to hidden microphones. "No speeches, no farewells. We will die in sequence, not simultaneously, so that you may watch each in detail."

"And I will go first," Robert said. "For my exit, I have chosen the drill."

"And I," Angelina added, "have chosen the neck-slicer."

"But first..." Robert said. He turned to Angelina and put his arms around her. She pressed her body up against his, and they kissed, long and passionately. They then moved to the bed center-stage, and over the next few minutes had sex in about every way imaginable. The cameras, obviously operated by experts, caught it all. At different times, you could see close-ups of Robert's fairly large cock sliding in and out of Angelina's cunt, that cock in her mouth, his tongue lashing her clitoris--and at the same time, on another screen, was a full-body view. The microphones picked up everything they said to each other, every grunt, every moan. Twice Angelina could be heard cautioning Robert not to come yet, that he'd spoil the plan.

After a while, they uncoupled and rose from the bed. Hand-in-hand again, they walked to the machine Robert had referred to as "the drill." Again, he and Angelina embraced and kissed. He then turned his back to the frame and stood against it. Bending down, he snapped the manacles over his ankles. He then picked up a little wired remote-control device, held it in his right hand, raised his arms, and carefully placed each wrist against one of the upper manacles, which snapped shut in response to the pressure.

"It's time," he said, smiling at Angelina.

"Yes," she agreed, "it is."

He pushed a button on the remote, then opened his hand and dropped it. Behind him, the circular machinery sprang to life, rotating and moving slowly forward. It looked like a giant auger bit.

Angelina kissed him again, her hands playing over his body, then knelt before him and began sucking his cock again. The drill moved on, and, while she was still sucking him, it obviously touched his back.

Instantly, a fine spray of blood streaked the stage on both sides of him. His eyes flew wide open and he went stiff; Angelina caressed his legs soothingly and kept sucking him, somewhat more vigorously now. The drill kept moving.

Saul stepped out on the stage again, well to the left. "One would think," he said, "that death from the drill would be quick, since it will cut through our candidate's spine and aorta very soon. It can be, but our candidate has not chosen that. The edges of the cutting head are continually being fed with a sealant, and this will close off the aorta and prevent his premature death from exsanguination. However, his spine will be severed very soon, and when that happens he will lose all feeling below his waist. If he wishes to have a final orgasm, he had better have it soon!"

Angelina was by then working almost frantically to draw an orgasm out of him. On one of the screens a rear view of the apparatus could be seen; the drill was cutting a smooth hole in the man's back, eight inches or so in diameter. The sealant was obviously doing its job; there was still a fine spray of blood, but, considering the huge hole being cut in the man's body, there wasn't really very much at all.

Just seconds later, Angelina was successful; Robert sprayed his semen into her mouth. She opened her mouth wide to show it lying on her tongue, then swallowed it. After that she rose, stood in front of him, caressed his face.

He screamed. A loud, mournful scream of despair and agony. The drill kept moving, cutting deeper and deeper into his back. He screamed again and began gibbering, calling for his

mother, saying something about "the beans" and "the sausage" and then complaining in a very rational voice that he could no longer feel his legs. In the rear view, his severed spine could now be seen. Angelina sobbed and pressed her body against his, trying desperately to comfort him. He looked at her, told her that he loved her, and told her he wanted to be dead, right then.

That did not happen. The drill cut on, now deeply into his entrails. Intestines wound around the bit and were tossed out onto the stage. The sealant prevented him from dying from blood loss, and, even though his aorta had been cut, he lived on. He screamed again, he cried, he moaned, he beat his head against the frame as if trying to kill himself with blunt-force trauma. Nothing helped, the drill kept right on cutting through his body.

"Oh, god, he is really suffering," Geneviève said. "This one is bad, so bad..."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I don't like this one."

"Without the sealant," Denise pointed out, "he'd already be dead. That might have been a mistake on his part." I glanced at her. She seemed to be accepting what was happening on stage with much more equanimity than Geneviève, which struck me as odd, given that this was her first show and the older woman had undoubtedly seen several already.

"I haven't studied this one," I said, "but I'd guess that using the sealant adds one hell of a lot of money to the benefit paid. This man has balls. Let's honor him for them."

"You're right, of course," Geneviève said. "I sure as hell want to be honored for the saw, and for choosing the slow saw, even if I end up like him when I'm in the middle of it."

Up on the stage, Angelina was crying and pushing on Robert's midsection to hurry the process along. He had by then effectively lost his mind completely, he kept calling her "Mommie" and begging her to "make it stop."

Then, quite suddenly, he seemed to become rational again. "Angelina," he said, his voice clear and steady. "I'm--I'm there. I'm dying now. There's no pain. None. Oh, sweetheart, oh, I'm sorry, I lost it... thank you for being here... you are an angel, you..." He blinked several times, then smiled freely. "It gets good, baby. When you're on the edge, it's good. Rem... reme... member..."

The point of the auger then appeared, having burst through his belly. Blood burst from his mouth. His body started jerking spastically. The drill moved on, having opened a grotesque hole right through his middle, like something from a cartoon. He sprayed blood-stained urine on the floor--and on Angelina's legs. Then he went limp. Unnecessarily, Saul Levinson, from somewhere off-stage, pronounced him dead.

Angelina looked out at the candidates, then directly at me. Her eyes were swollen and tear-stained. "Oh, Jack, come up here now, please, I need you..."

I jumped up from my seat and almost ran up the stair. Angelina, sobbing, fell into my arms. "Oh, Jack," she moaned. "It was horrible, he suffered so much... I liked him, Jack, he was such a nice guy, oh Jack, oh god..."

I held her and stroked her hair gently. "Shh, it's all right," I said. "It's all over, he's beyond any pain now, beyond any troubles, any worries. And I'm sure his beneficiaries will be well taken care of--that's why he chose that method, you know that as well as I do."

She raised her head and looked up at me. "I can't..."

"You have to, Angelina. You know that."

"But... I look awful, I..."

"You look like you've been crying. That is appealing too, especially in this context." She still looked hesitant. "The shows, the films, they're based on couples. I don't know what the producers might do if you refused now. Robert's life might have been wasted."

She bit her lip and squeezed her eyes closed for a moment. "Yes," she said finally. "Yes, you're right, Jack. I have to do this, I have to kill myself." She opened her eyes and shook her body. "Let's go," she said. "You have a medical procedure to perform before I start."

I smiled, took her hand, and led her to the table where the neck-slicer awaited her. A small medical case was lying on it, waiting. Moving slowly, allowing me to direct her, Angelina first touched the table, feeling its soft padded surface, then sat down on it and laid back. I was surprised to see, then, that the surface had an indentation which fitted her body perfectly, so that she just slipped into it when she laid down. Later, I was to learn that for table deaths and some others, a 3D scan of the candidate's backside--or whichever side they intended to lie on--was taken in Medical on Sunday morning. The tabletop pad was then made to fit precisely, meaning the person's body and the machinery could be perfectly aligned. For a moment she stared up at the waiting blade. Her face wooden, she spread her hair out behind her and tipped her chin up, exposing her throat.

I opened the little medical kit; inside was a scalpel with a triangular blade in sterile packaging, an alcohol pad, and a little steel tube. There was no point in using the alcohol pad, I told myself; she would be dead long before any infection could trouble her.

I ran my hand up between her breasts to the base of her throat. Her body was rigid. "Try to relax, Angelina, and don't move. Think only about what's happening right now. We have to do this right, there are no second chances."

She visibly relaxed and gave me a tiny smile. "You are right, of course, Jack. Go ahead, do the procedure." I smiled too and, as I had been taught, held her smooth white throat firmly but not tightly. I then put the tip of the scalpel against it, just below her larynx, and drew it across carefully, cutting in until I felt the blade scrape against her windpipe and cutting across about half an inch. She frowned; a trickle of blood ran down she side of her neck.

"Doing okay?" I asked.

"Fine," she answered. "Go ahead."

I nodded, and I put the sharp point of the scalpel in the center of the horizontal cut I'd just made. "Now," I said, and I punched the blade firmly in, cutting through the surface of her windpipe. It made a crunching sound as it went in. She frowned again and one of her legs jerked; otherwise she did not react. As a little more of her blood flowed out, I cut downwards just a little, then pulled the blade out and laid the scalpel aside. Taking the steel tube from the case, I placed the tip of it in the center of the little cross I'd cut in her throat. I then pushed down hard on it, forcing it in, and again her leg jerked.

"Done," I said. "Let's test it."

"Yes," she agreed. Her voice was very peculiar, weak and whistling. She closed her mouth tightly and held her nose. Air whistled in and out of the little tube. "It seems to work fine," she wheezed after a moment. "I can breathe okay through it."

"Then we're ready," I said.

"Yes. Step back a little now, Jack. I have to do this myself." She turned her head and picked up a wired remote almost identical to the one Robert had used. The table, I noticed then, had a slot in it behind her neck and directly under the blade, which was mounted between two vertical arms that were in turn attached somewhere under the table. There were manacles, the same type that were mounted on the apparatus Robert had used, mounted on the table top. In her case, the manacles for her wrists had to be mounted low, otherwise the descending blade carrier would strike her arms. Turning her head to watch, she placed her wrist in the left one, and it instantly snapped closed. Still holding the remote, she did the same with her right wrist. Once her arms were locked

in place, her arms were left spread to the sides, each hand palm-up and about at waist-level--a position suggesting open invitation.

"Your ankles?" I prompted softly.

"I hadn't planned to restrain them," she replied. "I want to be able to move my legs." She then stared up at the blade for a moment, took a deep breath, and threw a little switch on the remote. Immediately the blade dropped down swiftly to a position about a foot above her throat. It stopped there, and the blade began moving. I had expected it to move fast, like a saw, but it did not. It moved back and forth in steps, about two inches of travel, with a little ticking sound. As it started moving on down slowly, Angelina let go of the remote and it fell to the floor.

"It's done," Saul Levenson said from further down the stage. "The blade cannot be stopped now. Beautiful Angelina, her head will now be severed from her body." He went on to explain to the onlookers the purpose of the tracheotomy, that it would keep her alive quite a bit longer. "Let us have silence now," he concluded, "and appreciate this lovely young woman's sacrifice."

I moved back in close to her. She glanced at me; I spent a couple of seconds taking in the whole amazing scene, then looked more closely at the slowly-descending blade. It was about eighteen inches long, very thin in cross-section and less than an inch high. As I studied it, I realized that I had been mistaken about the way it was working. It was not moving back and forth at all, it was a band, coiled up in a cylinder on one end of the mount and being pulled, in those two-inch steps, into another on the other side. That way, I realized, it would not be dulled at all as it cut into Angelina's neck, not even when it cut through the bones.

I walked around the table, leaned over Angelina's head, and--being careful to ensure that my own head was not in line with the descending blade--kissed her. She kissed me back, almost desperately. Her expression was perfect; resignation, more than a little fear, and rising excitement. I walked around the other side, leaned over her chest, and began sucking her nipples. I was sure that the more I could arouse her, the easier it would be for her to accept her death. After spending some time on her nipples I moved down her body, kissing and caressing her, thrusting my tongue into her deep navel, massaging her thighs. I then positioned myself between her legs, slipped a finger up inside her, and began licking her clit. She started to squirm a little on the table, moving her legs back and forth.

Then I heard her make a little noise, and I stood up to see that the blade was within an inch of her throat. I quickly came back around to stand near her head. She looked much more excited by then, and much more fearful, too. She could no longer see the blade with her head down, and she clearly was afraid to move it. She gazed at my eyes as the blade continued to move closer and closer to her neck, continually making that "tick-tick" sound as it moved stepwise. I caressed her face as we both waited for the ultimate moment.

Somehow, it came as a surprise when the blade actually grazed across her throat, releasing a tiny little trickle of blood, not even as much as the tracheotomy had. Angelina's brilliant eyes flew wide open; the blade made the "tick" sound again and moved down another couple of millimeters and there was, immediately, more blood. The apparatus ticked again, like some kind of diabolical clock, and cut a little deeper. It seemed to me it had slowed down now that it had actually contacted her throat.

Face-to-face with the reality of her choice, Angelina looked like she was close to panic. She whispered my name and I said something meaningless, something intended to be soothing, as the blade sank a little deeper into her throat. Her beautiful legs were moving actively, her fists clenching and unclenching, her belly heaving as her breathing grew heavy and ragged. A crunching sound, almost exactly the same sound I'd heard when I punched the scalpel in through her

windpipe, told me the blade was now cutting through it. I kept stroking her face; the blade kept cutting deeper and deeper into her throat, the crunching sound adding to the relentless "tick... tick..." as her windpipe was severed.

Then the crunching stopped--and the bleeding increased noticeably, the blood pooling on the table at the sides of her neck and running down through the slot to drip on the floor. She was now breathing through the steel tube, I could hear it whistling. Feeling it was time--I didn't know how long it would take before the blade reached the major blood vessels in her neck--I walked around the table and mounted it. Angelina retained enough control to open her legs welcomingly, and I slid my almost painfully hard cock inside her. She was extremely wet and it slipped in very easily. I tried to control myself--I was so intensely excited I knew I could easily go off far too soon. Angelina did not help me with that, she lifted her legs, rubbed them against my body, then crossed her ankles behind me, pulling me harder into her.

The thin blade had by then almost disappeared into her throat. She frowned and her head lifted a little, causing the blade to bite in deeper. She then made a swallowing motion, and a gout of blood erupted around the blade. Her esophagus, I assumed, had just been cut. The blade moved on, now completely inside her neck, the clean incision it had made visible above it.

I leaned forward and gazed into her eyes. "It looks fantastic," I whispered. "You look fantastic." She mouthed some words--since her windpipe had been cut she could no longer speak--and looked like she was trying to give me a little smile, but she did not manage it.

The blade moved on, steadily ticking, steadily cutting more and more deeply. I kept trying to pace myself, pushing far into her and then holding still repeatedly. Her stomach spasmed under me, and another large gout of blood, apparently vomited up, rose up around the blade. There was now a lot of blood on the table and a lot of blood on the floor, and Angelina's face, already pale, was growing even whiter.

The blade had reached a point where it appeared to be almost halfway through her neck when the bleeding suddenly increased dramatically. She grimaced and moved her head, cutting herself more in the process. Her eyes were brighter blue than ever before, and there was a look of desperation in them.

"It's almost over, Angelina," I said softly. I started moving on her more actively. "You've been incredible..."

A moment later, dramatic jets of blood shot out of her neck, first on the left and then on the right. It splashed on the floor several feet away. She pushed her head hard back on the table and for a moment I could see the open tubes of her severed windpipe and esophagus. The bleeding then slowed down considerably, but still remained severe, a steady red flow.

"The carotid arteries in Angelina's neck have now been severed," Saul intoned. "Even though she has taken the blood coagulants, her brain is no longer being supplied with blood and oxygen. She has just a very few minutes left to live."

As he spoke, the blade suddenly sped up considerably: "tickticktickticktick..." Wanting to come inside her before she died, I sped up too. She clutched at me with her legs--and then tried to raise her head. I heard the blade grind against her spine, cutting bone, but she kept trying to push her head up anyway, although in reality she could hardly move it at all. We stared fixedly into each other's eyes.

Then I heard the sound of the blade cutting her bones change in some way. When it did, her body began to thrash wildly under me, showing far more strength than I had thought she had left. Her legs worked at my sides; but, most amazingly, the walls of her vagina began to squirm and ripple, almost as if they were trying to suck my cock in. Already close to the edge, that

squirming drove me over, and my climax crashed over me. Angelina probably saw the intensity of that orgasm in my eyes and finally she was able to smile, just a little. Her own eyes were glazing, the pupils were forcing the bright blue down to a narrow halo. Without even thinking about it, I reached over the blade and wound my fingers into her hair. Just a few seconds later, the blade sliced through the skin at the back of her neck and her head came free in my hand.

Although my cock was softening, I was still inside her at that point. Her body began to twitch under me, all coordination gone, and her vagina had gone completely slack. I felt warm wetness on my groin and thighs as her bladder released its contents. Two thick streams of blood ran from the stump of her neck. My chest against hers, I actually felt her heart stop beating. I looked at her face; her eyes were still open and she looked calm, if nothing else.

After a moment, I managed to pull myself out of her and get off the table. I held up her severed head, showing it to the audience, I listened to their applause. Then I just stood there, even though I heard Saul saying the show was officially over. After a few minutes Geneviève and Denise came up to rescue me. Denise took Angelina's head from me and put it with her body, and the two of them led me off the stage and to one of the ubiquitous shower stalls, where they washed her blood off me.

"May I assume," Denise asked, "that that was a pretty intense sexual experience for you?"

"It was the most intense of my life, by a big margin," I answered. I then glanced at the two of them. "Oh, I don't mean..."

"Don't worry about it," Geneviève said. "That's not the same as everyday sex with us. When I'm in the great beyond, though, I don't want to hear you telling anyone that the blowjob I'm planning on giving you while I'm being sawed in two was just okay!" I was still too dazed to even laugh, I could only nod.

After the shower, Geneviève, Denise and I went to the bar, where each of us threw back a couple of stiff drinks, and where we were, after a short while, joined by Julie. Naturally, we asked her opinion about what she'd witnessed. Our own consensus was that Angelina's death had been as beautiful as Robert's had been horrible.

"I didn't witness much," she pouted. She worked her jaw around with her hand. "I went into the guest section because Tom wanted me to blow him while Angelina's head was being cut off. But he started playing with me right away and he got overexcited, I guess. Anyway, what happened was, I was down on my knees in front of him with his dick in my mouth when poor Robert was getting drilled. I could hear it but I couldn't see it. Tom lost control and came while that was happening. By the time I got up Robert was about dead, hanging there with a big hole in his middle."

"You saw Angelina's death, then?" I asked.

"No!" she answered, shaking her head. "I wanted to but I didn't get to. After Tom came, I got up and sat down beside him, ready to watch the show. But the man sitting up behind me leaned forward, reached over, and started playing with my tits, and the guy sitting next to me on the other side started fingering my clit. Pretty soon I was on my knees on my seat, sucking the guy behind me while the one sitting next to me stuck his dick in me from behind. Then the guy next to him wanted to be sucked off. I was kept busy."

"You could have told them to stop," Geneviève pointed out. "We're not required to have sex with the guests."

"Oh, I know," Julie said breezily. "But they are the guests, they are the ones paying the bills, in the end. I don't feel like I should be saying no to them if they want to fuck me. Angelina had it right, this place should exist, it should go on existing after we're gone. You take Tom; he

paid big bucks to come here and stay two weeks, and what he wants is to see pretty girls getting killed. In those two weeks he'll only get to see that twice, Angelina and whoever gets chosen next Sunday, and then he's gone. The rest of the time--twelve days out of the fourteen he's here--it's just a nice Caribbean vacation for him. If I can make it nicer for him, by giving him a blowjob or letting him fuck me when he wants to--and talking to him, he loves hearing me talk about having myself done in with knives--he's more likely to come back and he's more likely to recommend the place to his rich buddies. It's the least I can do."

"That," Denise observed, "is a good argument. I haven't been solicited by any of the guests as of yet, but if it happens I'll remember what you said and I won't refuse them."

"And you have really made me feel bad," Geneviève added. "One of the guests has been approaching me, repeatedly, asking me to come spend a night with him at the guest hotel. I've been refusing. If he asks again, I won't." She laughed. "It'll also give me a chance to get some opinions about my own exit plan, the lengthwise saw. See how some of those men like that idea."

"Not necessary," Julie said firmly. "Fuck them, yes, and chatter on endlessly about how you plan to do yourself in. But asking them what they think of that, that's just rhetorical. A buzz saw coming up between your legs, cutting you in two, starting with your pussy? I can fucking flat out guarantee they will all love that. They'll love to hear you talk about it, too."

Geneviève shook her head. "The old veteran," she murmured, "gets advice from the young newcomer. Shouldn't it be the other way around? But I'm sure you're right, Julie. Thanks for putting things in a better perspective."

"You're more than welcome," Julie said with a grin. "But I have some questions too. You might not be the person to ask, but as you say, you've been here a while."

"Ask away."

"When I found out about this," Julie began, "I kind of assumed all of these would be super erotic snuff shows--or at least somebody's idea of super erotic. Angelina's death is the sort of thing I expected. Your buzz saw is, too. Robert's death, though, and the others I've heard about that pay a lot, aren't, they're just gross. What's up with that?"

Geneviève smiled. "Well, being the old grizzled veteran I am, I can answer that. I can because a long time ago I had a chat with Saul and I asked him the same question. He told me that when Erothan first started up, all the deaths were what you called 'super erotic snuff shows.' The saws were the most extreme thing available. Simple hangings, knifings, and shootings were the usual. But they talked to the guests, did some market research, and discovered they were missing out on a big part of their potential market."

"I don't understand."

"Well, as Saul explained it, all they were getting here were those guys who wanted to see the snuff shows. There were a lot more who might come if there was a possibility of seeing the grosser stuff. The first one was a guy who had himself bashed in the head with a hammer until his skull split open and his brains fell out on the stage."

"Ick."

"Yes, for you and me, ick. But it turns out there are a lot of people out there who want to be able to witness exactly that sort of thing. They're not interested in a simple hanging. They want blood and gore. You might wonder who they are, and I can tell you: they're the people who go to auto races hoping to see a crash. Here, they can see it live and up-close."

"Ah. I'm beginning to get it."

"Yes. So they expanded the offering. Something for everyone." She smiled. "I'd guess your Tom was one of those. Didn't you just say he came while Robert was being drilled?"

Julie made a face. "Yeah. He did. Ew."

Geneviève's smile broadened. "Ew maybe. But that's what they pay to see. And if they don't pay, we don't get paid."

"Ain't capitalism wonderful?" Denise commented.

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Over the next few days, I spent a lot of time with those three women, and I found the differences between their outlooks interesting. Julie, in spite of what sometimes seemed like flighty behavior, was more intelligent and more disciplined than I'd originally given her credit for. She had carefully constructed a romantic fantasy about being stabbed to death, and I did not have the slightest doubt she'd play it through to the end. But her awareness that the reality probably would not match the fantasy she'd built sometimes broke through--although she quickly stuffed it down again when it did. She was, she told me, before more and more focused on the sword-drop machine--although she and Ramon had discussed, quite seriously, the possibility of having him murder her if she was chosen before he was. That did not seem likely, though, since Ramon had been on the island for several weeks already, and everyone knew the Tuesday selections were weighted toward the longer-term residents. She and Ramon had come up with a nice scene, though, one in which she would be on her knees astride him, his cock up inside her. In their plan I would stand behind her, restraining her arms and kissing her, while he repeatedly plunged a small knife into her belly and breasts. I had agreed to this--assuming circumstances allowed it to happen.

Geneviève, even though she had chosen a spectacular and potentially agonizing way to die, was simply focused on getting through it and getting the benefit money for her daughter. She assured me that if a simple quick hanging paid as much, she'd choose that. She confessed that she had periodic fits of blind terror at the idea of doing what she planned to do, but she was not wavering in her determination.

Denise was more enigmatic. She was clearly trying to push herself into a role as a sex kitten, and in many ways she was succeeding nicely in that; she was an exciting sex partner, completely uninhibited and always coming up with something new. She lacked confidence, though. She obsessed constantly about her thin thighs, about her little potbelly, about her small breasts. She had not yet chosen a method of death, saying that she wanted to consider a wide variety of options; she was by nature studious and the manual was surely something that could be studied at length. It seemed to me she felt she had something to prove with that death scene, although I wasn't sure what that might be--and I wasn't sure she was, either.

I liked Denise, though, and I found myself sort of looking after her a little, knowing that the "party girl" role was less natural to her than to Julie or even Geneviève. On Monday evening, at the club, I was just getting to know one of the other girls--an athletically-built brunette named Paula, who had been on the island for quite a while--when a man who looked to be perhaps in his fifties approached us. Not only his age but the fact that he was dressed in shorts and a Hawaiian shirt marked him as a guest. His hair was gray but full, and he looked like the sort of man who played tennis on the weekends--in reasonably good shape.

"Excuse me," he said apologetically. "May I talk to you for just a moment? Privately?"

"Certainly, Sir," I said deferentially. "Paula, will you excuse me for a moment?" She smiled and nodded; I got up and walked with the man, who introduced himself as Jim Palore, to the bar. "What can I do for you?"

He made a helpless gesture. "I don't know how to approach them," he said. "Don't know what to say to them, don't know who might be... uhm... available and who might not."

I cocked my head. "You mean the women?"

"Yes." He rolled his eyes. "They're driving me crazy! They're all so beautiful, and naked all the time--and they're all here to be killed, they've all volunteered to be put to death! That's just so... so... powerful..."

"Are you saying you'd like to have sex with one of them?" I asked.

He grinned. "If I don't," he answered, "I do believe I am going to die myself, just from the tension." He frowned. "I want one I can talk to some, too, though... about how she feels about all this, and so on..."

"I understand. Is there anyone you'd particularly prefer?"

"No, my god, any of them, they're all fucking fantastic."

"In that case, wait right here for just a moment." I left him and walked across the room to a table where Denise sat sipping a drink with a couple of the other girls. "Come with me," I asked her.

"Okay," she said, getting up. "What's going on?"

"You'll see." I led her back to the bar where Jim was waiting. "This is Jim Palore, one of the guests," I told Denise. "Jim, Denise--you may not know, candidates never use last names." I turned back to her. "Mr. Palore," I said, "has been wanting to meet one of the girls. He wants to hear how they feel about the fact that they're going to die on stage soon, and he wants to have sex with a candidate. Can you help him?"

Her eyebrows went up a millimeter. Then she turned to Jim. "Of course," she said, offering him her hand and a bright smile. "Will I do? We can talk as much as you want, and have sex in any way you wish."

"My god," Jim breathed. "You're so pretty, you look so delicate... god, yes!" He turned back to me. "Thank you, uh..."

"Jack," I said. "If you need anything else, just let me know, I'll help if I can." Denise scooted closer to him and asked him to tell her how he would like to see her die. Smiling, I turned away and went back to the table where Paula was still waiting for me. From where I was sitting I could see Denise and Jim talking animatedly, and I saw her take his hands and put them on her legs. After a while, though, they left.

I didn't see Denise again that night. The next day was Tuesday, the day the names of the current Six were posted. As I was told was usually the case, four of them were the same as the four who had not been chosen the previous week. Along with those was a girl named Brittney, a blond who looked like a schoolgirl and who I knew slightly, and Ramon. Seeing the names of people I already knew appear on that list felt a little strange--and, Julie told me, felt even stranger to her, since she and Ramon were by that point regular sex partners. She confessed to hoping Ramon would not be chosen, since that would eliminate any possibility of her having him stab her to death. She went off to find him, and I wandered into the bar, where I found Denise.

When she saw me, she jumped up, came to me, and gave me a kiss, almost causing me to spill the coffee I was carrying. "I just wanted to thank you," she said, "for what you did last night."

I grinned as we sat down at one of the tables. "From that, I can assume things turned out well. I wouldn't have thought it would have been that good, Jim didn't seem that impressive."

She giggled; she seemed to be very happy. "He wasn't. He certainly wasn't you, Jack. But that wasn't all that happened, either."

"Oh? You want to tell me about it?"

"I do," she said, nodding. "We stayed here for a little while, talking--mostly talking about how I might have myself killed, and how I felt about being killed on stage in the near future. I offered to have sex with him right here in the bar, the way we do, but he didn't want to do that, he wanted to take me back to the guest hotel. I accepted, of course, I went with him. We went to his room, I sucked his cock, and he came in my mouth. He seemed to enjoy it tremendously, but that was more or less it for a while for him. So he took me down to the bar in the guest hotel and introduced me to his friends there."

"I think I can assume," I said, "that you ended up having sex with someone besides Jim."

She laughed. "Well. It was different, Jack. Here, all the candidates are nude all the time. There, I was the only girl among a bunch of men, naked except for my heels while they were all dressed. I was, very definitely, the center of attention."

"And you liked that."

"Oh, yes, Jack, I did like that. They all wanted to talk about my death scene, and I took advantage of the opportunity to find out what they would like to see. As a result, I have made certain decisions about that."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I was considering all possible options. But those men, the guests, I asked them what they would like to see happen to me if it were up to them to decide. Every one of them commented on how 'delicate' I looked and said they would like to see my body cut, or see blades or something similar piercing me. Jack, they could not talk about this enough! I encouraged them to show me, by touching me, where and how they would like to see my body pierced or cut. They touched me about everywhere, but the focus was clearly on my breasts, my abdomen, and my groin. They kept talking about how exciting it would be to see steel parting my skin and my blood flowing. They were especially fond of the idea of seeing this little potbelly of mine cut or pierced." She smiled. "And so, I can limit my focus. I have by no means made a final decision as of yet, but I have narrowed my focus to cutting and piercing instruments."

"For what it's worth to you," I said, "I agree with them." I lightly caressed her breast. "You have a lot of the same qualities as Julie--that delicacy, vulnerability--and she has already decided on a death by blades. It is, I think, what's right for girls like you two." I reached down and touched her belly. "And I agree with them about this, too. It just begs to be cut."

She shivered. "That makes the focus stronger."

"Can I assume all this touching and talk led to something else?"

She laughed. "Oh, yes. Never before in my life have I had as much sex in so short a time as I did last night. I think I lost count, but at least five men deposited their semen inside me and at least three, besides Jim, came in my mouth. I was definitely walking a little bowlegged when I came back down here!"

I took her hand, pulled her out of her chair and onto my lap, and hugged her. "I am delighted," I said, "that you had such a good time."

"Thanks to you." She reached down and grabbed my already-hard cock. "My vagina is still a bit sore," she said apologetically. "It got used a lot last night. But I would love to have you come in my mouth."

"That sounds nice to me," I told her, and she slipped off my lap on onto her knees.

On Thursday, Julie and I went up to the engineering complex on the hillside. It was far larger than I had thought; apparently part of it was built into the hill. We passed through two huge doors at the end of the paved road, where several large trucks sat parked. Behind them was an assortment of pieces of equipment like forklifts. I assumed all this was used to move the equipment to and from the theater.

Passing through the loading area, we were confronted by several hallways, each with a sign over it. We started with one of the closest ones, which was labeled "Quick and Traditional." Just inside the doorway, on one side, was a standard gallows. Two ropes, one tied in the traditional hangman's knot and the other in a slip-knot, dangled from the arm, and one could choose an ordinary drop-hanging with a trap door, a platform that moved down away from one's feet, or a lift hanging, where the body was pulled up by the rope. On the other side was a model of the French Revolution guillotine. A plaque nearby noted that this model had speed settings: fast, medium, and slow, where fast was normal.

On down was a machine mounted with four rifles--the firing squad machine. Across from it was an electric chair. Here the plaque was rather detailed. The chair could be set to be a "zapper" or a "cooker." A "zapper" used high voltage--adjustable, of course--which would kill by shock, either a single massive one or a series of them, which would kill eventually. As a "cooker" it would use a lower voltage but high current, burning the occupant--either quickly or slowly. The chairs formerly used in US executions, the plaque said, were "fast cookers." An additional section took note of the fact that the current did not have to be delivered through the usual wrist, ankle, and head electrodes. As an example, a number of sharp spikes, six inches long and a quarter of an inch thick with connectors at the ends, hung from a post. These, it noted, could be inserted into breasts, genitals, or any other body parts and the electricity delivered that way. A typical usage, it said, was for a woman to have these spikes inserted in her nipples and pubic area.

"They are definitely imaginative," Julie noted, fingering one of the spikes.

"But you don't want an electrocution, do you?" I asked.

"No. Let's see if we can find the hall of poking and piercing."

"Good plan."

The next hall contained asphyxiation devices, various machines designed to strangle, smother or drown their victims. The most interesting of these was the "constrictor," which wound a cable around a person's chest and tightened every time the person exhaled, until he or she could no longer breathe--the same method, it noted, a living python or boa uses. We passed from there to the "projectiles" hall--which contained a large number of devices designed to fire guns, shoot arrows, throw spears, or hurl cutting blades at the victim. As more than one of the women--including Angelina--had suggested that the arrow machine might be a good choice for me, we went to look at it in detail.

It turned out that "it" was "them," there were a number of them. All were variants on a theme, though; they simply shot arrows into the victim, using a standard compound-bow affair, a hydraulic string-puller, and an auto-reloader. Everything imaginable was adjustable. Examples of arrows fitted with fierce-looking hunting points--"broadheads"--and the "needlepoints" Angelina and Ramon had recommended for me, were available for inspection. The plaque noted that a broadhead on a high-impact setting and aimed at the center of the chest was almost instantly fatal. If one chose the needlepoints and instructed the machine to shoot at "non-fatal zones," on the other

hand, one could expect to take somewhere between twenty and thirty arrows before finally expiring from blood loss and shock.

"Angelina was right, that really would be good for you, Jack," Julie said. "Twenty or thirty arrows! It'd be great to see all those arrows sticking in your chest and belly, that would make a super show."

"May be a bit extreme for me," I replied.

She frowned. "You're all for Geneviève having a buzz saw cut into her cunt," she pointed out. "That's pretty damn extreme!"

"I've never said that!"

She almost snorted. "No. You just get this glint in your eye, and your cock pops right up, when she talks about it. The message can't be missed."

I shrugged. "It's her decision in the end. Besides, she'd decided on that before I ever even met her."

"I think," Julie went on, "that if I get chosen before you do, I'll just take a single fast stab to the heart. What do you think about that?"

What I thought was that that would be a waste, but I knew she wanted to hear me protest, to encourage her to choose a slower and more painful death. I wasn't about to fall into that trap. "That," I said, "would be up to you. Just as it's up to Geneviève whether she chooses the saw or not."

"You wouldn't try to talk me out of it?"

"No."

"Liar."

"Try me."

"No. Let's go find the knife machines."

So we went off to find the knife machines. Before we did, however, we ran into the display of the saws, and, naturally, we lingered there for a little while. There were quite a few of these; overhead rotary saws, overhead cross-cut saws that could be set at almost any angle, and, of course, classic "buzz saws," slotted tables where a rotating blade emerged from slots that ran either vertically or horizontally. Numerous blade options were on exhibit for each one, varying from extremely heavy teeth more than an inch tall to very fine blades. There were also Plexiglas-enclosed displays that one could turn on and set the speed, demonstrating the difference between fast, medium, and slow.

Naturally, the ones that commanded our attention were the vertically slotted table, the fine-tooth rotary blades, and the rotary speed checker set on slow--the elements we knew Geneviève planned to use. Julie caressed the table, then spontaneously jumped up on it, lying down on her back, spreading her legs, and scooting down until the motionless blade touched her vaginal lips.

"That feels... weird," she commented. "But... interesting." She looked up at me. "Should my legs be open or closed?"

"Open, definitely."

"Knees up or down?"

"Down."

With her legs down and spread, she pushed herself against the saw blade a little. "You like?"

I nodded. "I do. But I like your ideas about knives, too."

"Yeah. Can't do it twice, I guess." She giggled. "Turn on the demo, Jack. Let's see what the slow speed looks like." I did, I set the control to slow and flipped the switch. The saw began

spinning at a lazy rate, far slower than one would use in cutting wood, and it moved slowly along its track, right to left. I was able to visualize how it would look cutting into Geneviève's soft smooth groin. It would take several seconds to cut in a full inch. The image was very arousing and my cock started rising in response.

"See? I knew it," Julie said. "Look at you. The idea of Geneviève's cunt being cut with that saw--or mine, for that matter--is turning you on."

"Guilty," I admitted. "But it's supposed to, isn't it?"

She pouted for a moment. "I guess."

I stepped up closer to her and laid my hand on her belly. "The idea of a knife going in here turns me on too," I told her. "I'll admit that. Again, isn't it supposed to?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure it is, it just bothers me that you don't seem to be very interested in working out your own method, about making sure it's going to be good. I think you're looking for an easy way out."

"No, I--"

"Doesn't matter. Since you're hard, bring your cock over here and let me suck on it for a minute or two while I'm laying here." I obeyed; she caressed my cock with her lips and tongue gently, slowly, for several minutes, her eyes closed. Just when I began to get close, though--I believe she sensed it--she pulled her head back, sat up, and jumped down from the table.

"C'mon," she said. "I really want to find the knives."

We did find them, in the next hallway. As we walked in, I was completely amazed by the number and variety of the machines--and the weapons on display. Primarily, though, as we discovered, they fell into four categories: machines that threw knives and other pointed objects at you, machines that stabbed blades into you and then pulled them out, machines that impaled you on a blade or blades, and machines that used a blade to cut the body open. There were numerous displays of the types of weapons these could be loaded with, varying from slender little four-inch blades to fencing foils, Japanese katanas, and broadswords.

"What do you like, Jack?" Julie asked me as she lightly touched the blades on display. "I know I don't want knives thrown at me, if I wanted that I'd choose the arrows. But the other three--they all have their... appeal..."

I put an arm around her shoulders. "For you," I said, "I think either the stabbers or the impalers. If you decided you wanted to be cut open, I think one of the saws would be a better choice."

"Mm, yes. I agree with you."

"And between those," I went on, "I think I prefer the impalers."

"Yes..." she whispered. "Blades going into me, slowly, steadily, and staying there. I like that, I like that a lot." She located the "sword-drop" machine and walked over to it, and for several minutes stood with her hands on her hips, studying it.

It was a fairly elaborate device. It consisted of a series of adjustable clamps which held "swords"--actually just naked blades of varying lengths--which could be arrayed in almost any way. The blades could be targeted to vital areas, or not. They could be large and heavy, or slender and fine. In all cases, the principle was the same; the weighted top was allowed to descend and the blades pierced the body, one after another. As was generally the case, the weighted head could be programmed to drop quickly, at medium speed, or slowly. The unit also allowed for the possibility of the blades being twisted after they'd penetrated the body. It could also be set to avoid certain areas at certain times. Specifically there was an option to have a blade pierce the victim's groin area and then pull out and move clear; it was not necessary to say what this option might be for.

"I really do like it," Julie said, kneeling on the table, caressing the head, and stroking the slim blades the demo was fitted with. "Slow speed, slender blades, avoiding vital areas. Going into me slowly, gradually, really hurting me."

"You want that much pain?" I asked.

"I think I do. I can take it." She stretched herself out on the table and looked up at the blades. "I know I can. Doesn't matter, that's what'll make it a really good show." I couldn't tell if she was trying to convince me or herself.

"Then this looks like a good choice. I think it would be incredibly erotic to see you put to death by this machine."

"Me too. Unless I can get on stage with Ramon or somebody else willing to do me by hand, I'm going to that say that this is my choice. Unless I find something better."

I laughed. "What a firm decision!"

She glared at me. "Better than you," she shot back.

I stepped up to the table, pushed her knees apart, and slid my cock inside her. She pushed back against me hard, her hips writhing. I began visualizing doing just this as the blades were slipping into her, stealing away her life. I didn't last long.

As we left the hall of knives we were planning to go back to the hotel, but another hallway, one marked "extreme," caught our attention. We went in. Here they stored the equipment for the methods that paid the very highest prices; huge pots and ovens a person could be cooked alive in, stakes with powerful ventilators that could be used for live burnings, either fast or slow. The "belly crusher" Ramon planned on using was here; Julie spent a good bit of time, her expression very serious, examining it. So was the drill that Robert had used. Other devices included a machine that inserted fireworks into a person's vagina or anus and then set them off, and a "vivisector," which used surgical scalpels on mechanical arms to open up a person's body and remove organs one by one. The "grinder" was a large cylindrical chamber in which, according to the plaque, a victim was dangled by their wrists and was slowly lowered into spinning blades, which eventually ground the entire body into hamburger; naturally, it could be set for fast, medium, or slow action. A "whole-body crusher" used a hydraulic piston to squeeze a person's body into a small chunk of broken bone and compressed flesh. "Dissolvers" could be used to lower a person's body into acid or boiling water or oil. A device with four winches could be used for drawing and quartering.

"Considering using one of these, guys?" a voice asked from behind us. We turned; a middle-aged man with a friendly face and a short beard, dressed in work clothes, was standing there, his hands in his pockets. "I'm David Lindermann, the head engineer," he told us before either of us spoke. "Most of these devices are my idea." He laughed. "Diabolical, aren't they?"

We introduced ourselves. "No, we're just looking," I said. "Julie, here, plans to use one of the impalers, probably the sword-drop. People keep telling me I should go for arrows."

"Good choices for both of you," David agreed.

"Tell me, has anyone ever chosen to be burnt at the stake? Or cooked alive, or dissolved?"

He gave us a mock-sad look. "No, a number of my toys are untested. The drill was used for the first time last Sunday. I guess you saw that."

"We did," I replied. "It was, frankly, a horror. As you probably know."

"No, I don't attend the executions," he said carelessly. "Gives me nightmares."

Julie gave him a look of disbelief. "You build these things and they give you nightmares?"

He nodded. "Yes." He then shrugged. "I was out of work, I am absolutely sure you know all about that. I got a very lucrative offer to come here and build machines people could use to

execute themselves. Can you blame me for taking it? Even if I don't much like the idea of building machines that people can use to execute themselves?"

"No, I guess not."

"There you are." He gazed for a moment at the stake. "I am proud of that one," he told us, gesturing toward it. "It'll burn a person alive just like the witches were burned in the Middle Ages. That's not hard. But I've got it rigged so that it can be used indoors and you'll never catch a whiff of burning flesh. It isn't a pleasant smell."

"Has anybody ever burnt themselves at the stake?" Julie asked, wide-eyed.

"No, not yet."

"Then how can you be sure?"

He gave her a level look. "It has been tested," he acknowledged, "to that degree. Not on a live person, no. But we have brought corpses in here after the shows and burnt them, using that apparatus. I can assure you it works fine."

"Damn," Julie murmured. "That seems... disrespectful..."

"Well, we do have to do something with the bodies, right?" David pointed out. "Should we send them back with the benefit money? That wouldn't be nice for the beneficiaries and US law enforcement would probably start trying to interfere with our operation. We have to dispose of them." He moved down the hall a short distance. "Come with me, let me show you something," he said.

We followed him, and he led us through another set of large doors into an outdoor area. The walkway led between a series of grottos; from the first, a huge tiger glared up at us with baleful yellow eyes.

"Let me guess," I said as I peered at a pack of six Rottweilers in the next one. "This is where you keep animals in case someone chooses the 'torn apart by beasts' option."

"Right you are. Did you know that the Romans considered a death by wild beasts the worst of all, worse even than being burned at the stake or crucified?" He pointed out a huge sharp-horned bull he said was named "King Minos" and a pair of thoroughbred stallions named "Slammer" and "Last Hope." From a grotto across the way, a chimpanzee screeched at us.

"That's Mr. Pibb," he said.

"He's big," Julie noted. "I thought chimps were little and cute. How dangerous can he be, really?"

David laughed. "Mr. Pibb," he said, "can and will tear off one of your arms and beat you to death with it. He's really violent. You want a quick death from an animal, choose Mr. Pibb. You see that he's wearing a collar?"

"Yes."

"It's a shock controller. In the theater, Mr. Pibb certainly would not stop with the intended victim if we didn't have a way of controlling him."

"Oh." She then turned to the horses. "What about them? I love horses, actually..."

"Well, they are both specially trained. Slammer is a kicker; on one signal he'll turn his rear to you and back-kick you, shattering ribs, rupturing internal organs, and so on. On another, he'll rear up and slash down with his front hooves. If he hits your head you're gone. He's trained to try to miss it, though. "

"What about the other one?"

"Last Hope is just for the ladies. He's trained to mount a woman. He has a very large penis even for a horse, and he'll try to push the whole thing in. When he gets it in he starts thrusting really hard with his hips. Tears a woman apart internally."

"I guess the tiger would be the best choice," I muttered.

David roared with laughter. "Kublai? Best choice only if you really, seriously, want to suffer. You take the dogs, they'll tear you to pieces. King Minos will gore you. You'll be dead pretty soon either way. Kublai won't bother to kill you. He'll just hold you down and start eating you. When you die is your business, he doesn't care."

"Damn." I walked on down a little ways and looked into a pond containing what appeared to be several hundred fishes, each about eight inches long with silvery backs and red bellies.

"Piranha," David commented. "Any questions?"

"No."

"We'd love to have some sharks but the big maneaters don't live well in tanks."

"Too bad. Has anyone chosen an animal death yet?"

"Just one, early on. A woman chose Last Hope. I hear it was messy."

"I'll bet."

"But," he said, "we were talking about our corpse disposal problem. That's why I brought you here." He led us back to the tiger's grotto. "We cremate some. But a lot of them end up here." He pointed to a chunk of bloody flesh with bones jutting out of it that was lying near the back of the grotto.

"Don't tell me that's--"

"That's a rack of ribs," he said, "from the young lady who died in the theater Sunday. Kublai, the dogs, and the piranha are fed exclusively on human flesh. Mr. Pibb gets some too."

"Angelina..." I murmured. Julie's face looked a little white.

"As I said, we have to dispose of the corpses. And this way, we do not need to buy any food for the tiger, the fishes, or the dogs."

"I think I want to go back to the hotel now for a while," Julie said.

"Me too." I agreed.

"Well, have a good day," David said cheerfully. "If you need any special equipment when your time comes, be sure and come see me!"

We agreed to do that, and we left. I do not know why the sight of Angelina's half-eaten ribs disturbed me so much. After all, I myself had held up her severed head.

I only know that it did.

-7-

The days continued to pass. I met most if not all of the other candidates and had sex with a number of the girls in the candidate pool, but most often with Julie, Geneviève, and Denise. Along with Ramon, the five of us formed a sort of a little clique, and we spent a good deal of non-sexual time together as well.

If any time, on the island, could be called non-sexual time. By far the most common topic of conversation was the death scenes; the ones that had already occurred, what people were planning for themselves, what choice someone else they knew had already made, and these conversations were very commonly erotic enough to shift the moment to a sexual one.

Within our little group, Julie, Denise, and I had not fully decided on our exits as yet. We spent a good deal of time trying to convince Ramon that the "belly crusher" was too extreme, and not pretty, but he was focused on the benefit and could not be dissuaded. The other major topic of conversation was Geneviève's plan to be sawed in two lengthwise.

Not that either Ramon or I were trying to talk her out of it--and neither were the other two women, everyone felt that the moment when the saw struck her groin and began to cut into it would be highly erotic.

But Denise, in particular, was concerned that, in the end, Geneviève's death would be pretty quick. She pointed out that the saw would, not long after entering Geneviève's body, strike the junction of the iliac arteries and the aorta, and when that happened, death would ensue very quickly.

"Well, I guess that would be okay," Geneviève said when Denise pointed out the problem. "Less pain for me, same benefit for my daughter."

"But that would mean," Julie put in, "that you would not have an opportunity to suck Jack's cock while the saw is cutting you. We want to see that happen, and I can guarantee you the guests want to see that happen. That'll be hot."

"I do want that too," Geneviève admitted. "So what's the solution?"

"The sealant," Denise said firmly. "The sealant Robert used. If you use that you might even last until the saw gets to your heart."

"That," Geneviève said with a frown, "made things pretty damn awful for Robert. You want me to go through that?"

"Oh, no, no, not at all," Denise protested. "Robert was having a huge hunk of his torso sheared away. You're going to have a nice clean cut, right up the middle of you. The sealant stopped the bleeding for him, but it can't for you, you'll still lose a lot of blood."

"I don't understand the difference."

"Robert's aorta," Denise explained, "was cut in two, straight across, by the drill bit. Think about a garden hose. You cut it in half with shears, you have a neat open end you can just put a cap on, and that's what the sealant glue did. In your case, the garden hose--your aorta--is going to be split lengthwise, the saw should go right up the middle of it. It can't just be capped, so you'll still lose a lot of blood. But the sealant would slow things way down."

"How do you know all this?" Julie asked.

"The manual," Denise answered. "It's all in there, they address exactly this issue in the section on saws. It says specifically that the sealant will slow things down, but that most people will bleed to death anyhow while the saw blade is still cutting their belly."

"I didn't see that," Geneviève said.

"In the fine print, in the footnotes."

"Ah."

Geneviève pushed her chair back a little, spread her arms and looked down at her bare torso. "It's decided then, I'll use the sealant," she said. "I do think it would make for a better scene if I survive at least until it gets to my navel."

"The best part's going to be right at the start, though, when it cuts into your pussy," Ramon said, laying his hand on her thigh. "That'll be hot, Pretty Mama. Making me hot just thinking about it. You mind if I stick something a little less sharp in there right now?"

Geneviève spread her legs. "You are always welcome there, Ramon," she said with a warm smile. "It's funny, I am scared to die and terrified of the pain, but even so, thinking about a buzz saw cutting into me there gets me all wet."

"I thought that was just me getting you wet, Pretty Mama," Ramon teased as he slipped his cock inside her. She was indeed, we all noticed, extremely wet; his erection went in with an audible squishing sound.

"I do believe," Julie observed, "that she's more into this than she says."

"Or than she knows," Denise noted.

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After what seemed to be a long time, we came around to another Saturday night and with it, the announcement of the pair who would die on Sunday. Julie gave voice to a spontaneous "no!" when Ramon was chosen as the male participant, but quickly recovered and applauded for him. Joanna, the athletic brunette with the magnificent breasts who had been a part of the previous week's Six and who had been one of the first candidates I'd met, had been selected to be his partner.

This time I was not asked to come on stage as a sort of a "second," but, perhaps naturally, Julie was, and so was Geneviève. Ramon continued to be unmovable in his intention to undergo the "belly crusher." Joanna, in discussions during the mixer that followed the announcement, told us that she was going to draw on the skills that she had and do a "death dance." As this was not something that was in the manual, several of the other candidates pressed her for details but she steadfastly refused, saying she wanted it to be a surprise.

It was very late before I got a chance to talk to Joanna myself. She opened the conversation by apologizing, by saying she'd already had too much sex that evening and just couldn't take any more. I told her it didn't matter, I just wanted to make a connection with her and that evening was probably our last chance.

"The bond among us gets very strong, doesn't it, Jack?"

I sat back in my chair and looked her over. "Yes, it does," I agreed. "I just wish I'd gotten a chance to get to know you better."

She nodded. "That would have been nice. By the way, I haven't told you--your performance with Angelina last week was magnificent. I can still see you, standing there holding her head. It was a great touch."

"Thank you." There was a moment of silence.

"Well?" she prompted. "Aren't you going to ask me to tell you how I'm going to have myself done in tomorrow?"

"No," I answered with a smile. "I heard what you told the others. I can wait, I can be surprised. I'm sure it'll be good."

"Damn well better be," she said. "You only get one shot, after all."

"Do tell me this, Joanna. Just between us--are you looking forward to tomorrow? Or would you rather someone else had been chosen?"

Her expression became serious. "I am not," she replied after a brief pause, "eager to die. I've been having a wonderful time here, and I'd just as soon that go on for a while longer. But the bill has come due, and I do have to pay it." She leaned forward. "I was a showgirl," she told me, "in Vegas, before the Crash, before so many of the casinos and shows closed down. I'm used to going out on a stage and putting on a show. I haven't done that for a while--other than working in strip clubs, I've certainly done my share of that, too--and that part I want to do, that part I am looking forward to. I've chosen the manner of my death more in terms of what would be a good show than in terms of the benefit paid or how easy it would be on me." Apparently unconsciously, she ran both hands down over her torso, starting at her breasts and ending with her thighs. "And what I've decided on is not going to be easy on me. I plan to take as much of the pain muter as I can and still be able to perform, and that means I expect to experience a lot of pain. I am trying to focus on my show. My biggest worry is that I won't be able to do it right, that I'll get overcome by the pain or lose so much blood I'll be too weak to go on."

I grinned. "And right there, you've told me something about your method. They don't all involve blood, by any means."

"No, I guess they don't." She put her hand on her belly. "But everybody says I have these nice firm muscles, and that they... uh..." She stopped and smiled. "You," she said, "are leading me into telling you the whole thing."

"Not so. I'm just listening."

"Well, I've said all I'm going to say." She then laughed. "Okay, okay, I will tell you this: I had a plan A and I had a plan B, and which one got selected depended on who my death partner turned out to be. Since it's Ramon, I'm going with plan A. And I have sworn him to secrecy already, so don't bother trying to weasel it out of him."

"I wouldn't think of it." I grinned again. "What was plan B?"

She touched her lips with a fingertip. "You're going to get too much out of me if I tell you that."

"Not so. If there was a plan A and a plan B, they can't be the same."

"Hm. Well... okay. I was going to use the arrow machine. Shooting darts, with needlepoints. You know what they are?"

I nodded. "Little short arrows, just four inches long or so."

"Exactly one inch between the head and the feathers. They usually go in right to the feathers and then stop. You have the head and just an inch of shaft inside you. My plan was to dance while the machine was shooting me, as long as I could."

"With needlepoints," I said, "you might have to take one hell of a lot of them for it to be fatal."

She nodded. "I know. I was figuring I could probably take at least a dozen in my chest and belly before I went down. Then I'd key the machine and it would switch to broadheads and take me on out."

I touched her hand. "Sounds very nice," I told her. "I'm not sure plan A can be better. Maybe Ramon will have an accident before tomorrow and you'll have to go back to B. Oops."

She laughed. "Plan A is better, take my word for it. You'll like it, Jack."

It was very late by then, and I returned to our table to find Julie and Denise sitting on either side of Ramon; Geneviève wasn't there and no one seemed to know exactly where she was--perhaps she'd already gone back to her room for the night.

"Jack?" Julie asked me. "You wouldn't mind if I stayed with Ramon tonight, would you? In his room? It's his last night and I don't want him to be alone."

"You don't have to do that, Littlebits," he said good-naturedly. "I'm okay."

"I know you are," she told him. "I still don't want you to be alone. Not tonight." I of course said it was fine, Ramon surely wasn't inclined to refuse her, and before much longer they departed for his room. Denise and I did not stay very long after that.

On Sunday, the show opened with Ramon immediately calling Julie and Geneviève up on the stage; I remained in the audience with Denise. Joanna announced that this show, like the one the previous week, would be sequential, not simultaneous, and that she would go first. She then struck a pose and music began playing, some jazzy big-band piece I did not recognize. As she started to dance, Ramon stood at one side of the stage, flanked by Julie and Geneviève. The women leaned on his shoulders and reached down to toy with his cock, which quickly started to grow erect. There was a chair behind him and a little table nearby with a box on top of it. We could not see the contents.

Joanna was showing herself to be an exquisitely skilled dancer, her performance was almost spellbinding. She had the ability to make difficult moves look easy. Her lovely body moved fluidly, always perfectly in time with the rhythm, and she had a free and open smile on her face the whole time. There were a few props on the stage; a pole, a small table, a chair, and at various points in her dance she used them all.

The song ended, and another, also a big-band number but slower and more sensual, began. As this one started, Ramon left his place at stage-left and came over to stand behind her. She stood still, writhing slowly in time with the music, her arms high over her head. Ramon moved up to hold her from behind, pressing his hard cock against her back and running his hands up her sides to her breasts. She continued her dance, her arms and legs moving continuously, rhythmically, and very sensually. After a few seconds, Ramon extended his left hand commandingly toward Julie and Geneviève, and Julie responded by reaching into the box and taking out a slender little dagger. She crossed the stage, handed it to Ramon, then moved back to her place. Over Joanna's head, Ramon passed the knife from his left hand to his right, moving his left hand to her breast.

It was expected but still somehow a surprise when he plunged the dagger into Joanna's tight muscular belly, just to the right of her navel. Her reaction, however, was much more muted than expected; she arched her head up and back slightly and her hands continued to twine above her head. Other than to continue to sway to the music as it had before, her body hardly moved. She extended her left leg a little and tapped firmly with her heel. When she did, Ramon pulled the knife almost out, then slammed it home again. A little blood trickled down her side, then down her thigh. She tapped her heel again, Ramon again pulled the blade back only to thrust it deep once more. The close-up monitor showed that her facial expression had changed very little, if at all.

Ramon then let go of the knife, leaving it standing in her body. She danced away from him, seemingly not slowed at all, even though the knife could be seen moving as her muscles worked. Moving to the small table she'd used before as a prop, she laid back on it, her head hanging, one leg up and bent at the knee and the other extended. The imbedded knife stood straight up. With her arms, she made a "come here" gesture toward Ramon. He came to her, slipped his erection into her waiting mouth, then forced it on down into her throat, ending with her face pressed against his groin. He allowed her to massage it with her lips, tongue, and throat for a few moments, then made the commanding gesture toward the two other women again.

It was Geneviève who responded this time, bringing him another, identical, dagger. While Joanna sucked him, he grazed the tip over her torso, pausing to prick each of her nipples lightly. It came to rest on her abdomen, this time to the left of her navel. He then pulled his hips back, freeing his cock from her mouth, and plunged the blade down and in.

Joanna's only reaction to it was a theatrical one, one of her arms going up rigidly and her fist clenching. Ramon's cock remained very close to her lips; at a sharp percussive beat in the music, she licked the underside of it quickly. When she did, Ramon pulled the knife almost out and drove it deep again, just as before. Blood welled up and spilled over her side, dripping on the floor. In time with the music, she licked Ramon's cock again and, also in rhythm, he repeated the motion, driving the knife in hard and deep.

She then rose from the table and resumed her solo dance--now with two knives standing rigidly in her belly. They continued to move as she worked her muscles, and ever-increasing trickles of red ran down her abdomen and legs. She moved to the edge of the stage, pirouetted, and gestured toward the knives. Ramon waited behind her, holding another knife that Julie had brought in response to another of his gestures. Turning, Joanna danced back to him, posed alongside him,

and, putting her hands in her hair, thrust her hip toward him like a belly dancer. He smiled at her, then plunged the dagger in low, just above her pubic bone.

This time her eyes widened and she let out a sharp but very brief cry, and she backed away from Ramon, preventing him from repeating the in-out motion of the previous piercings. She started to move her hands toward it, but apparently caught herself and, as a well-seasoned professional does, made the motion a part of her dance. She moved back toward the edge of the stage and by the time she got there, she had herself completely under control again--although not without giving the audience a glimpse of her chewing her lip. Once she got to the edge, she was able to smile darkly and thrust her belly out, showing off the three deeply-planted knives. A thin stream of blood ran from the center one, trickling down through her genital slit and dripping on the floor.

Meanwhile, behind her, Ramon had seated himself in the chair. Turning, Joanna danced over to him, and this time she straddled his legs and sank down on his cock, facing the audience. Julie handed him a knife from the box; he propped it upright on her left breast, then drove it firmly down and in, keeping the blade inside her breast, not piercing her chest wall. Joanna bit her lip but kept squirming on his lap. Geneviève gave him another knife and he pierced her other breast in the same way. He then hugged her, pushing on the knives standing in her belly, and she groaned loudly at this. Even so, she rose and danced off.

"This is damn good," I whispered to Denise.

"Absolutely," she agreed. "Her stamina and her discipline is incredible. Those knives may be small, but she's doing a lot of damage working them around inside herself." She pointed. "You see the blood running down the inside of her legs? It's coming from her vagina. I think that center knife is standing in her uterus."

"I think you're right. I doubt she can keep going very much longer."

She wasn't done, though, although, as she began leaving little pools of blood on the stage and bloody footprints wherever she stepped, she was dancing with noticeably less energy. After a few moments she returned to Ramon and sank down on his cock again, again facing away from him, facing the audience. As she squirmed on him, Ramon extended both his hands, and this time both Julie and Geneviève laid small daggers in his hands. Reaching around her body, he located the points of the knives just below the tips of her nipples and pressed in a little.

Joanna pressed her hips down hard on Ramon's cock, extended her arms, and raised her head. "Do it," she said softly, and when she did, Ramon forced both of the knives in simultaneously, piercing both her breasts deeply. While she trembled and pushed back against him, he drove them in even further, down into her lungs. Once they were fully buried, he let go of them.

Joanna straightened up. She choked, but managed to control herself; she could be seen swallowing vigorously. A little unsteadily, she rose to her feet and started toward the edge of the stage as if she were planning to try to continue her dance. She didn't get more than about ten feet before she exploded in violent coughing, spraying blood across the stage. She sank to her knees and continued to cough up blood.

"She's done," Denise commented. "Both lungs pierced, she's drowning in her own blood. Those knives are small, though, so it'll take a while."

On stage, Joanna tried to get up but could not. Still coughing, her chest heaving as she fought for breath, she went down on her side and then over on her back. By that time, Ramon, Geneviève, and Julie had all come to stand beside her.

"Can't go on," she rasped. "Can't breathe." She put her hands behind her head. "Kill me, Ramon."

Ramon held out his hand, and Geneviève pulled a different knife from the box, one that matched the previous ones but was considerably larger. Taking the knife, he knelt beside Joanna. Geneviève moved to her head and, kneeling as well, held it gently; Julie also went down to her knees and laid her hands on Joanna's thighs, just above her knees.

Once they were in position, Ramon, using his left hand, pulled one of the small daggers out of her belly. Fresh blood welled out. Joanna, fighting for breath, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth, did not even seem to notice. Ramon pulled out another, and another, and continued until he'd removed all of them. Blood trickled out of the small wounds and onto the floor around her.

Then, with a theatrical gesture, he placed the point of the larger knife on her abdomen just above her navel, keeping it upright. She did not move, and he pushed it down firmly, sliding about half the length of the blade into her body. "Mmph!" she grunted loudly, but she made no other response, and Ramon, after a brief pause, pushed the remainder of the blade on in, in one smooth motion. Again, she grunted and this time her body arched a little. His manner formal, Ramon again paused, then twisted the knife sharply inside her, evoking a much louder grunt and a brief squirming from her. Blood surged up and out, flowing down over her side and onto the stage.

Ramon drew the knife slowly out of her. She didn't react at all. Geneviève stroked her hair and Julie massaged her thighs as Ramon set the point down on her belly a couple of inches higher. He paused for effect, then repeated his previous action, shoving half the blade in, pausing, then burying it. Again, he waited a moment before twisting it. Joanna's grunts were becoming louder each time; and now her body was trembling. She turned her head to the side and a much thicker stream of blood ran from her mouth, down over her cheek, and into her hair. Geneviève stroked her cheek and the side of her neck.

Ramon then plunged the knife into her lower abdomen twice, once on the right and once on the left. Each time he used the same pattern; stand the knife in place, push half the blade in, pause, push the remainder in, pause, and finally twist. Joanna was losing a lot of blood. Her legs bounced on the floor, and Julie tried--with only partial success--to control them.

But she was very strong, and she lived on. Ramon laid his hand on her right breast, then kneaded around just under it--I didn't know what he was doing, but Denise explained that he was finding the spaces between her ribs. Ramon stood the knife on her chest, under her right breast, and strongly plunged half the blade in.

"Ah! God, ah, mmm...!" Joanna cried. Ramon shoved the knife on in, burying the blade. "Oh..." she murmured. "Oh, oh, I feel..." He twisted the blade and she arched her head back hard against Geneviève's hands, giving voice to a drawn out "Aaaa...!" When he pulled the knife free, blood frothy with air surged out. Ramon felt around her other breast, located his spot, and then, in the same manner, drove the knife into her.

"Ah!" she cried again. "Oh, god kill me, kill me, make me die, I want to die, Ramon..." He pushed the blade in deep and she made a harsh sound like "Uk! Uk!" as he did.

"You are dying, Joanna," Ramon said softly as he twisted the knife, provoking a brief mournful cry from her. "Let it go, let it go, accept your death..."

She blinked several times, then looked up at him as he pulled the knife out of her chest. "I am, Ramon," she answered. Her voice was very weak and she gurgled as she spoke. "Do it again..." He nodded and propped the blade upright on her solar plexus. With a firm hand, he slipped half the blade into her there. She flexed her legs violently, almost throwing Julie off of her, and again threw her head back. "Ack!" she cried as he slid it on in deep. "Oooo.... ah, Ramon... ah, ah, god,

I'm... oh... wait... I feel... Ramon, I feel... oh, wow..." She blinked several times and licked her lips, staring into space as if looking at something beyond Ramon's shoulder.

Her body spasmed, suddenly, violently. Then she became still, random shudders making her arms and legs move a little. In the monitor that showed a close-up of her lovely face, I saw her pupils expanding, as Angelina's pupils had expanded before.

I knew it, and I think everyone else did too, but Saul confirmed it for us. "Joanna," he said, "is dead. A spectacular death, one that will live on in our memories."

It was Ramon's turn then. Moving away from Joanna's now-motionless corpse, he took Julie and Geneviève by the hand and led them over to the "belly crusher." Wasting no time, he climbed onto the table, positioned himself so that the cylindrical arm was positioned right over his navel. After picking up the remote control, he pulled the arm down until it snapped into place. Julie then climbed up on the apparatus, straddled his hips, and lowered herself onto his cock.

"Great, Littlebits," he said. He then looked at Geneviève. "Come and kiss me, Pretty Mama." She did, and while they were kissing, he started the device and dropped the remote. He had not used the manacles, his arms were free.

The arm began tightening down, slowly but inexorably. Julie, her eyes swollen and tear-stained, was giving him everything she had to give. The bar moved on, pressing deep into his abdomen, causing the skin around it to become pale and strained. Geneviève kissed his nipples, her own eyes soft, her manner loving. He caressed her hair; he had to be in pain, but he was being utterly stoic about it. Julie kept working hard, trying to draw an orgasm out of him.

Then, suddenly, his eyes flew wide open. "Can't... breathe..." he choked.

"You're almost there, Ramon," Geneviève said, an undertone of urgency in her voice. "Almost there..."

"No... can't breathe... Mama... I wanted to burst... damn..."

His body started bouncing. Clearly he was fighting for air, but he couldn't get any. He began making harsh sounds: "huk! huk!" as he fought for air. His face was literally turning blue.

"Come for me, Ramon," Julie begged. "Come for me, oh please..."

"Hang on, you're almost here," Geneviève told him as she caressed his sweating face.

"Not... gonna... get there, Mama," he said, his voice terribly strained. "Love you... you too Littlebits..."

Julie started to cry. "We love you too, Ramon," she cried. "Oh, Ramon..."

He could only make a choking sound. His chest was not moving. The machine, evidently programmed to stop on the death of the victim, shut itself off.

"No," Julie wept. "No, you can't, you didn't come... Ramon..."

An attendant came out then, and checked on Ramon. "He is dead," the man announced, and Julie answered this with a loud sob. Geneviève turned her face away. The curtains slid closed, and Saul came out to announce that the show was over. As it did, Denise and I, ignoring protocol, rushed up onto the stage and went behind the curtain.

Geneviève seemed upset but okay. Julie, on the other hand, had completely lost it. She was struggling with the attendants who were there to remove the equipment and the corpses. "Don't you dare feed him to the dogs!" she yelled at them. "Don't you dare!"

I took her by the shoulders and turned her around. Still crying, she pounded on my chest with both small fists. "He didn't come, he didn't come..." she cried.

"Maybe not," I said soothingly. "But Julie, it wasn't a horror like Robert's death. It might have messed up a little, but it wasn't a horror."

Denise massaged her back, Geneviève stroked her hair, and finally we got her moving, off the stage and out of the theater. Not really wanting to interact with the other candidates at that moment, we took her to the hotel lobby. She cried for a while, but finally started to get herself under control.

"Oh," she said, wiping her eyes. "Oh, I can't do that, I've got to do better than that, I'm going to end up being a Linda."

"No, you're not," Geneviève assured her. "We won't let you."

"I just feel like I failed him so badly," she sniffed. "I couldn't get him off. I tried..."

"I know," Geneviève said. "It wasn't your fault. He was expecting to be squeezed until his belly burst open, and, though I'm sure he would have suffered a lot more if that had happened, he probably would have been able to get off. I don't know why he wasn't able to breathe, but it took him by surprise, it distracted him."

"He certainly would have suffered much more if it had gone the way he'd planned it," Denise observed. "Look at it this way--he picked the belly-crusher, one of the higher-paying methods, and in the end he suffocated--which pays a lot less. His wife and kids back in Los Angeles still get the higher benefit. That's what mattered most to him."

"I guess," Julie agreed. She looked around at all of us and gave us a wan smile. "I'll be okay," she said. "I just wish I could be the one to go out this next Sunday. I'm ready for it, I've been thinking about it since before I ever even knew this place existed, and I really am looking forward to it. It'll be easier for me than watching people I care about die." She sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes. "And knowing me, the longer I stay here the more friends I'll make. Stupid."

"Hardly," Geneviève said, taking one of her hands. "It makes you caring, you just said so yourself. When we start to feel there's something wrong with that, the world really has fallen apart." She squeezed Julie's fingers. "And we would all like it to be us next Sunday, for the reasons you just mentioned." Denise nodded her agreement, and so did I.

Even though I wasn't really sure that that was true for me.

It was Monday night before Julie was controlled enough to discuss Joanna's death, which Denise, Geneviève, and I all felt had been a very fine one.

"Yes, it was," Julie grumbled, "It was pretty. And do you know what? I'm really jealous. Sorry, I can't help it. Ramon was the only man here who had agreed to murder me. Instead, he murders Joanna. And now he's dead. I've missed my chance." She looked away. "I wanted to be her, Jack," she went on. "I couldn't have danced with knives sticking in me like she did, I just am not that strong. But the way Ramon finished her off--oh, I wanted that to be me, I really did..." She gave me a plaintive look. "Why won't you agree to murder me, Jack?"

"I like you too much," I answered.

"Bullshit. You get all hot and bothered at the idea of me being skewered by that sword-drop machine."

"Yes, I do. But I don't have to do it. You start it, and the machine takes it from there. Me, facing the idea of sticking that first blade in you--I don't think I could."

"Even if you know I want it? More than anything else in the whole wide world?"

"Even then." I laughed. "Partly because I know that you only want it because your life sucks, and you've convinced yourself you want it."

She pouted. "Mister psychologist."

"No. But I can see the obvious. Julie, if you get selected before me--or at the same time, we listed as a couple, we join the Six as one--I'll come up on stage with you and I'll stay with you,

make love with you, as you are being killed, however that might be. I cannot kill you myself. I like you too much. Maybe I more than like you."

She smiled and put her arms around my neck. "Well, Jack," she said, "maybe I more than like you, too."

-9-

Inevitably, Tuesday rolled around again, and with it, the selection of the Six; Ramon and Joanna had to be replaced. We assembled for the announcement, expecting that, like the previous week, the four survivors would be carried over. We were therefore a little surprised when Jenna, Brittney, and Mitch were carried over, but Ed had been inexplicably dropped. Two new men, George K and Darryl, were added.

And the new female selection was Geneviève. Afterwards, Julie, Denise, and I, knowing that as a new member of the Six she would be lionized, rushed to get to her. She was, after all, one of us, and we all wanted to spend some time with her before she began circulating among the other candidates.

"Well," she said when she sat down at a table with us. "Looks like my days are numbered now."

"Are you still planning on using the saw?" I asked her.

"Jack!" Julie protested.

"No, Julie, it's okay," Geneviève said. "And in answer to your question--yes, I am." She looked a little pale, but she smiled. "I am ready for this, guys. I've been here a lot longer than any of you--longer than Ramon had been, actually--and so it's to be expected that I'd be the next to go. If I'm the one chosen on Saturday, then we'll play it out just the way we've been talking about. Please promise you won't feel badly for me, you'll all be joining me soon enough."

"True enough," Denise said, nodding. "Since Jack brought up the saw," she continued, "let me ask you--how did you come to choose that in the first place?"

The auburn-haired woman shrugged. "As I have said several times," she began, "when I first came here I was just feeling grateful for being chosen, considering my age. When I started meeting the other candidates, as you know, one of the most common topics of conversation around here is, 'how are you going to do it?' I didn't have any idea, then. I was inclined to have myself hanged but that doesn't pay much. Sometime in those early weeks, I became close to one of the male candidates, one who'd been here quite a while already. He told me about a girl who'd had herself cut in half, across the waist, with a cross-cut saw. He said he really liked it, it had been a great show--he liked to talk about it when we were having sex. So I looked up the saws in the manual, and I was thinking then about just that, the cross-cut across my middle. I--"

She paused and looked up. A number of the other candidates had gathered around our table, listening. One of them, Mitch--also a member of the Six--grinned at her. "Private conversation?" he asked.

She smiled back. "Not at all. Stay, listen." She turned to look at us again. "As I was saying--the saw deaths all paid better than hanging or anything like that--although coarse-tooth high speed is not all that much better--and I did want to put on a good show. I stood in front of the mirror in my room, imagining a cross-cut saw cutting me in half at my waistline. I remember, I wasn't particularly attracted to the idea but I wasn't turned off by it, either. I was sort of arching my body, thinking about the saw, and I just happened to notice how I looked down below. There was such a nice neat groove between my vaginal lips; a little open because I've given birth, but not gaping

open, and not ragged. I had already read about the circular saws in the manual, and it seemed to me then that a spinning blade going right in there, right into that groove, would look really good. I still think that. So I decided on that, thinking, how bad can it be? How long can you possibly survive being sliced up between your legs?"

"Pretty rough, if you choose fine teeth, slow speed, and let one of your friends talk you into using sealant," Denise observed with a mischievous grin.

"Oh, well, I wasn't thinking that then. I was thinking in terms of a full-speed buzz saw, a quick rip right up through me. An explosion of blood, shock--and death. Not too bad."

"What changed your mind?" Julie asked.

"No one thing," she answered. "The changes were gradual. The benefit, of course, I won't deny that. But besides that, I talked about it, and almost every time I did I got an enthusiastic response until I said 'high speed' and then the reaction was always disappointment. I do not want to disappoint anyone. I shifted to medium speed, got something of the same reaction, and finally focused on slow. I hadn't thought too much about the teeth then, but I was told that using coarse teeth would make a ragged mess and using fine teeth would make a clean cut. About that time I also started thinking about giving a man a blowjob while I was being cut--after the shock sets in--and I decided I wanted that man to be you, Jack." She then turned to Denise. "And somebody else told me I probably wouldn't last long enough to do that without the sealant, so I decided to add that to the mix." She smiled. "And here I am, a plan all in place. The only part not decided is how I have sex with my partner before I start. I do want him inside me--the last man who'll be in there before that blade enters me."

"I hope," Mitch said, "that that's me. It would be great if we were picked to go this Sunday."

Geneviève reached up and took his hand. "That would be nice, Mitch."

He moved closer to her, dropped into a crouch, and put his hand between her legs. She parted her knees to give him access, and he began toying with her genitals, running a fingertip up the same "groove" she'd been talking about, just as I had done when I first met her. "You'll have to go before me, though," he said as she sighed. "Or at the same time. I have to see at least the beginning of this, the saw cutting in here."

She sighed again, reached out and wrapped her hand around his hard cock, and pulled him toward her. He rebalanced himself, moved closer yet, and slipped the head of his cock inside her.

"Oh, yes," she said with yet another sigh. He pushed in deeper. "After having this, I really will be ready for the saw, ready to be cut."

"I hope it's this Sunday."

"Me too."

Watching them, I found that, as much as I wanted to see Geneviève take the saw, I really couldn't hope she would be chosen that coming Saturday. I had not had quite enough of the woman, not yet.

The week moved on. During that time, Denise was spending a good part of her time with Jim Palore, who frequently took her up to the guest hotel. He did spend a reasonable amount of time at our hotel, though, in the bar. Denise had taken the trouble to introduce him to some of the other girls--including, of course, Julie and Geneviève--and he had taken several of them, including those two, up to the hotel for sex. According to the women he didn't take long to have an orgasm and seemed capable of only one per day, which meant he did not occupy a lot of their time.

He was, also, grateful to me for getting him started, and we had become friends. One evening we were sitting in the bar talking and the nature of his business back in the US came up.

"I'm an executive officer," he told us, "for Bank of America. In the Charlotte office." There was a moment of silence. "Did I say something wrong?" he asked, looking up from his drink.

"Don't tell me," Denise said, "that you're one of those guys who get the ten million dollar bonuses?"

He looked slightly embarrassed. "Well, uhm, actually, yes, I suppose I am." He frowned. "Why are you all looking at me like that?"

Geneviève, her expression very serious, watched his eyes. "Jim," she said quietly, "You might imagine how that makes us feel. We're here, facing the end of our life, because there is no money, there are no jobs. I myself was living in a hobo camp at the rail yard, because I had no home, no job, no resources. Do you know anything about hobos, Jim?"

"Ah... no, not much," he admitted. "They're the guys you see at intersections, right? With the signs that say 'homeless, hungry, need food, god bless?'"

"No," Geneviève told him firmly. "Those are beggars, bums, tramps. Hobos pretty much disappeared, but they came back when the economy tanked. Hobos move from town to town on freight trains and semi-trucks, looking for whatever work they can do--and yes, asking for handouts at times. But really, the point is, hobos used to have a sort of a community, and that's come back today. They look out for each other. If one man gets a job and makes some money, he buys food and brings it down to the camp and we all share it. We tried to look out for each other, as much as we could. I was an ordinary middle-class woman, long divorced. I worked as a sales manager for a chain of women's clothing stores, I made good money, I had a house, a mortgage, a car, and had enough money to help my daughter out when she was having rough times at school. Then the company I worked for went bankrupt, liquidated. I wasn't worried, I had CDs at the bank, I had some investments, I had time to find a new job. But I couldn't find anything, and the bank went under too, and I lost my savings. The value of my investments dropped to essentially zero. I lost my job, I lost my home, I lost my car, I lost all my money, I lost everything. I moved in with my daughter for a little while but she was barely able to feed herself and keep a tiny little apartment. She had to drop out of school, but she was lucky enough--and persistent enough--to find and hold some minimum-wage jobs, what she calls 'McJobs.' For her sake, I had to leave--and because she's the way she is, I had to sneak out, she does not know right now what became of me. A friend of mine, a man, was in the same shape I was, and one day I was out begging--yes, I was one of those bums and tramps, god bless--and he took me down to the railyard and introduced me to the hobos. I liked them, I like the communal way they lived, and I stayed. I went out and did odd jobs with them, whatever kind of work we could find--including, for me and the other women, some whoring when opportunity arose. I rode in the boxcars at times, too, up the river to St. Louis and Chicago in the summer and back down to New Orleans in the winter. I was sleeping in cardboard boxes and boxcars. That's where I was and what I was doing when the man recruiting for the island found me. He offered me a chance to come here, live well again for a while, and make a nice sum of money for my daughter by killing myself. You know what? I was grateful. I still am."

"I'm sorry you had such a rough time, Geneviève," Jim said. "But I don't understand--"

"You make zillions of dollars," Julie said bluntly. "We were making nothing, so much nothing we cheerfully came here to kill ourselves." She folded her arms and pouted. "You ever hear of such a thing as sharing?"

Jim stared at her. "You don't understand..."

"Oh, yes, I think we do, Jim," Denise said, showing more fire than I'd seen from her before. "The rich, Wall Streeters, real estate speculators--they brought us this world by being greedy."

We're now in the position of Roman gladiators, sitting and having a drink with Caesar before we go into the arena and kill each other to entertain him."

Under attack, he looked to me for support, but all I could do was shake my head. To have admitted he was a rich banking exec seemed to me to have been rather stupid at best. "No, you're making a mistake," he said. "Look, these circumstances are rather special. If I was sitting in a bar with the four of you in Charlotte, and you told me what desperate straits you were in, I would--"

"What?" Julie demanded. "Pay us for the blowjobs? Fifty dollars a shot?" She threw up her hands. "Hey! That would be great, man! I was giving blowjobs, I was fucking sleazebags, for a place to sleep, for a god-damn hamburger!" Geneviève and Denise nodded agreement.

John's face took on a hard set. "May I speak for a moment? Without being interrupted?"

"Knock yourself out," Denise said.

"I said you didn't understand and you don't. Yes, I make an eight-figure salary. Yes, I have a big house outside Charlotte and I have several cars. I see, every working day, the disaster that has befallen America, the empty homes, shuttered businesses, the homeless on the street. There are more than half a million people in Charlotte, and a third of them are out of work. If I took my whole salary for a year out in ten-dollar bills and shoveled it out my office window, that would be--what? Thirty dollars, fifty dollars, per person? If I had some way of giving it only to out-of-work people, they'd each get maybe a hundred. How far is that going to go?"

"Have you considered selling--" Geneviève started to say.

"I asked not to be interrupted," he said calmly, and she fell silent. "A lot of my co-workers," he went on, "are sitting on their money. Some of them are hiding it in places like Swiss banks. You can believe me or not, but I'm critical of them for doing that, because that damages the economy, it does nothing to help the country, does nothing to help people like you. Am I the great philanthropist? No. But I do spend my money. I spend a lot of it. Do you have any idea what it costs to come here for a week? Any clue?"

"No," Julie answered. "A lot, I'd guess."

"A lot, yes. Fifty thousand dollars. What does that go for? It pays for this place. It pays for your nice hotel rooms, your food, your drinks. It pays the benefits. It pays the salaries of all the people it takes to make a place like this work, pays for all the gizmos they build for you to use on stage, pays for all the drugs. You do know that, don't you? The guests and the people who buy the films, they pay for everything here. I do both. I've bought six films--one of you, Jack, with Angelina, and they aren't cheap either--and this is my third trip to the island, my second this year, and this time I'm spending eighty thousand to stay two weeks." He shook a finger at us. "Do you have a right to be angry? Yes. Just make sure you get angry at the right people. Go see Jim Tunning, who works with me at the bank and isn't spending a dime, he's putting all his money in Swiss banks so he can buy real estate and stock when we hit bottom and become obscenely rich instead of just comfortable. But you'll never see him, he doesn't come to places like this, he doesn't pay anyone anything for a blowjob, he won't even go to a movie." He looked directly at Geneviève. "As far as he's concerned, if you starve in one of those hobo jungles, if you freeze to death in a boxcar, well, too bad, doesn't affect him any." He picked up his drink and emptied it. "I'm not," he concluded, "the cause of your problems." He then rose from the table and left.

We looked at each other for a moment. "Uh-oh," Julie said. "I think we just blew it." She pursed her lips. "And damn it, I did know better than that. Wasn't I the one saying we should give the guests what they want, because they pay the bills?"

"And we both agreed with you," Denise said ruefully. "And acted accordingly. And yet we sat here and went after Jim like a pack of wolves. Not very bright of us."

"My fault," Geneviève said, looking down at her lap. "I started it."

"We sure did jump right in," Denise observed.

"Look, it's understandable," I said, speaking for the first time. "We lost Ramon Sunday. Ramon was a friend--no, more than that. A part of our group. Family."

Unexpectedly, Julie started to cry. "But we can't do that," she sobbed. "Can't lose control... can't become Lindas..."

I was really starting to get worried about her. "No, and we won't," I said firmly. "Yes, we made a mistake tonight. But we'll fix it. Next time we see Jim."

But we never did see Jim again. Denise asked one of the other guests if they'd seen him and was told that he had cut his stay short and had left. Something, the man said, had happened to upset him, but he did not know what that something was. The general feeling among the guests, the man confided, was that Jim had fallen in love with one of the candidates, and that she had refused to leave the island with him. That, the man told Denise, had happened in the past. If a guest and a candidate formed a connection, Erothan readily allowed the woman to leave--although they did ask that the guest involved pay \$500 per day for the time the candidate had spent on the island. Even if this fee was not paid, though, the woman was allowed to go--although the guest was also told never to come back. This was consistent with what we had been told about Erothan "toeing the line" with respect to the laws of the Bahamas. We were in no sense prisoners, we could change our minds and leave any time.

It did strike me as a bit peculiar, though, that, as far as I knew, no one had gotten cold feet and left. Perhaps, Geneviève suggested when I mentioned it, the two tests we had to pass--the injection we thought might be lethal, and the fake game of Russian roulette--tended to weed out those not willing to go all the way. She might have been right, I thought, but it still seemed odd to me. People do change their minds, and, living in this little paradise, it wasn't hard to forget what things had been like back in the real world. To me, it seemed that the closeness the candidates developed--the bonding Joanna had talked about--had more power. To pull out meant letting everyone down, and no one wanted to do that.

Our error was not without its repercussions, though. A few days later, we all found letters on our beds, letters which reminded us to be polite and courteous to the guests at all times, and further saying that if we did not feel we could do that we should avoid contact with them. There were no real consequences, but it was, distinctly, embarrassing.

As the week wore on, all four of us made special efforts to try to make connections with the guests. Three times I approached guests in the bar that appeared to be at loose ends, and for one of them, a middle-aged man named Charles Haldeman, the scene we'd originally played out with Jim repeated itself. I took him to Denise and she took it from there, getting and accepting an invitation to the guest hotel. Julie's friend Tom had left on Monday and she was actively looking for a replacement.

Geneviève I was a little more territorial about. Acutely aware that she might be selected to die on Sunday and having grown very fond of her, I wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. I was no less fond of Julie and Denise, who, along with myself, would become eligible for selection to the Six the following Tuesday--but they had at the very least another ten days or so to live. Almost certainly their life expectancy was more than that, since other candidates had told us that they could not remember a time when someone was picked for the Six the first week they were eligible.

The days continued to pass, and eventually, and eventually, inevitably, Saturday and time to make the selection was at hand. I waited anxiously as the names were announced--Darryl and

Brittney. I breathed a sigh of relief, Geneviève would be with us for at least one more week. The reactions of the winners this time was different than it had been in the previous two selections. As they gave the standardized salute, Darryl, a large and muscular black man, looked pleased if a little resigned. Schoolgirl Brittney seemed frankly terrified.

This time, none of our little group was involved, and when showtime came, we all sat together in the candidates' area. None of us had ever really gotten close to Darryl or Brittney--I had had sex with Brittney exactly once, Julie with Darryl also just once, and Geneviève with Darryl a few times--but none of us knew either of them terribly well and did not know the sorts of deaths they had chosen for themselves. When the curtain went up, we saw one of the automatic-gunfire machines and a simple gallows. As was the case two weeks previously, a large mattress laid on the floor between them.

Taking Brittney's hand, Darryl led her to the mattress, where they kissed for a moment before she sank to her knees and took his rather large cock into her mouth. Over the next ten minutes or so they coupled in about every way imaginable, his large and muscular dark body a sharp contrast to her white schoolgirl look. Differing from the patterns used during the previous two shows, they took it all the way, Brittney seemingly having several orgasms while he was inside her, Darryl finally unloading his semen into her mouth.

She rose off her knees and again took his hand; and he led her to the gallows. She appeared to flinch a little at the idea of stepping onto the platform, but she did it. Darryl then pulled down a slip-knot noose, and Brittney, her features expressionless, held her hair up out of the way while he snugged it down. He then told her to cross her hands behind her back. When she obeyed he snapped handcuffs around her wrists and placed the usual remote control in her right hand. Her legs remained free.

Darryl then walked to the shooting apparatus, which had uprights much like the ones Robert had fastened himself to. He did not shackle his ankles, though, just his wrists. Then, staring fixedly at the barrel of the gun mounted in the apparatus, he pushed the button on the remote and then dropped it.

Immediately the apparatus sprang to life, the section holding the gun moving up and down while an interior frame moved it from left to right. For several seconds it moved about seemingly at random, as if searching for a target.

Then, without warning, it stopped moving and fired. It wasn't terribly loud, it was clearly at least partially silenced. But it was effective; a gout of blood sprang from Darryl's abdomen. He grunted, grimaced, but then quickly became stoic again. He maintained his control better when, a few seconds later, the machine shot him again.

A few minutes later, he had been shot eight times in his abdomen and chest. Blood trickled from some of the wounds and poured from others. He was still alive, and still conscious, and was still well in control of himself for the most part--although his knees were visibly shaking.

At that point, the machine stopped moving. "We have decided," Brittney said in a clear but small voice, "that there would be a pause before the machine continues, before Darryl is killed. Right now, I want to take a moment to apologize to all of you. I would like to have been able to show you a more spectacular death, but I cannot do it, I am afraid, too afraid, of the pain. I am sorry. This is the best I can do. I do hope you enjoy my death." She then let the remote drop from her hands, evidently having pushed the actuator. The floor under her feet slowly began dropping away. She stayed with it as long as she could, stretching her legs and pointing her toes down, but at last she was left dangling by her neck.

"She had less painful choices than this," Denise observed. "This will take a while."

"She probably did not know that," Geneviève said. "Unfortunately for her. She didn't strike me as the sort who would study the manual in detail."

At that moment, however, Brittney did not look as if she was in very much pain. Her body was still, her chin down a little over the noose, and her legs, though free, were motionless. As she hung, the gun-machine came to life again and started shooting Darryl again, punching more holes in his broad chest. He lost strength in his legs and began to sag, hanging by his wrists. Blood drained from his mouth; he coughed and sprayed more on the stage.

Brittney, meanwhile, had begun to move. Her shoulders twitched, her breasts heaved. She lifted one leg, bending it at the knee--she had very fine legs and the gesture was quite pretty--then stretching it downward again. Her face had noticeably darkened; her eyes began to dart around wildly.

Across the stage, Darryl was experiencing his last moments. The automatic gun shot him several times in the lower abdomen, and, although in general he was maintaining his composure well, he grunted loudly as each of the bullets slammed into his body. I hadn't kept count, but he must have taken fifteen or twenty shots by then. The bullets, I thought, must be small-caliber--possibly just .22s, which would explain why the shots were not terribly loud.

Like everyone else in the place, I kept shifting my attention between the two of them, although I must admit I was much more focused on the dying girl. Brittney was struggling much more actively now, as she fought for air and couldn't get any. She was turning her head from side to side, her eyes tightly closed as her face took on a hue close to purple. She was pulling up her legs alternately by then, first one and then the other, sometimes in a bicycling motion. And, I knew, she had a long way to go--especially since she'd taken several deep breaths as the floor fell out from under her. It seemed to me that they had probably meant to arrange things so that their deaths would be approximately simultaneous, but, clearly, neither of them knew enough about strangulation hangings. Brittney still had a while to live.

Darryl did not. I was watching Brittney's struggles when the automatic gun stopped firing. Glancing over, I saw that he was hanging limply from his wrists, blood all over the floor in front of him and more slowly draining from his open mouth. Like the other machines, the gun device must have had a way of detecting death, since it had stopped and was settling back into its resting position.

By then, Brittany's struggles had reached the point where they could only be called violent. She lashed out with her legs repeatedly, and jerked up her arms behind her back; the damage she was doing to her own wrists could be seen in the pool of red on the trap underneath her. She twisted her head back and forth, abrading her neck on the rope and producing a little more bleeding. Her body surged and bucked, her breasts bouncing wildly. She lost control of her bladder and sprayed urine across the floor. It had by then been more than six minutes since the trap had moved out, leaving her hanging. I was sure that those six minutes had been an eternity for her. I was also aware that the poor girl was suffering, but nevertheless her performance was definitely erotic, and it had given me a strong erection. Neither Julie, nor Geneviève, nor Denise ever noticed--their eyes were fixed on the dying girl on stage.

Finally--quite suddenly--her body went limp. Her legs hung straight down, and a little more urine trickled down them. Everyone in the theater remained completely silent. Her feet twitched a few times, and a shudder ran down her body. After a few minutes had passed, Saul came out and announced that she had died, and that the show was over. The curtains closed slowly, and no one moved until they had closed completely.

"For someone who apologized to us for being too frightened to put on a good show," Denise observed as we filed out, "she sure did put on one hell of a good performance after all. In spite of herself."

"Sometimes things work out like that, I guess," Julie agreed. "It does make me sad that her beneficiary will only get the rate for a hanging, though. It just doesn't seem fair."

"I guess there's a lesson here," I said. "I just don't quite know what it is."

"The lesson," Denise said seriously, "is to know what you're getting into before you're in the middle of it."

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The following Tuesday, new faces began appearing at the hotel--a new group of candidates had arrived from Miami on Monday. I saw several of them at the lunch and mixer where the current Six were honored. Mitch, George K, Jenna, and Geneviève were all carried over, Ed rejoined the pool, and the third woman was a long-haired Asian girl with a delicate child-like face and a very slender and graceful body, whose name was Kim. After the ceremony was over, Mitch joined the four of us at our table, again expressing his hope that he and Geneviève would be the ones chosen on Saturday.

Then the conversation turned to the newcomers, the first such group to arrive since ours. Looking around the room, Mitch pointed out four of them to us, two men and two women; he searched the faces for a while, then said the third woman wasn't there.

"How'd you know there were five?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Word gets around. In this particular case Ed was outside with Diane and they saw them being shown around by the attendants--two men and three women." He turned fully back to us and folded his arms on the table. Mitch was short but solidly-built; he wore a short beard and his dark hair was fairly long. He had been working as a statistician for a computer company in the old days, and we'd all heard about how he'd gone from a six-figure salary to destitute and homeless in a matter of a few months, and about how he had been recruited at a trade show in California, where there were two or three hundred applicants for every job. "I don't know if any of you ever do head counts," he went on, "but if you do, you'll know that we're unbalanced, and that isn't changing."

"Unbalanced?" Julie inquired.

"Yeah. Your group had two more women than men. This group, one more. The one before you was balanced, but the one before that had an extra woman, too."

"So did mine," Geneviève said.

"I know. Right now, we have five extra women here."

"Ah, I see," Denise put in. "It's a problem because the shows are always one man, one woman."

"Right," Mitch said, turning to her. "Normally they just wait and hope that they'll get a group unbalanced the other way, but that isn't happening."

"Which means," Geneviève said, "we'll probably be starting specials again soon."

"That's the way I see it," Mitch agreed.

"Specials?" I asked blankly.

"Yeah," Mitch answered. "Specials are held on Wednesday nights. A couple goes on stage as always, but one of them--right now that's going to be the man--will walk off alive. They ask for volunteers for this, and choose among the volunteers."

"If that happens," Julie said, "I'll volunteer." She glanced at the other two women at the table. "I'd guess we all would."

"I can't, right now," Geneviève said. "Members of the Six can't volunteer for a special."

"And I would not," Denise said. "At least not if a request was being made right now. Next week might be different."

"Why not? Julie inquired.

"Because I'm not quite ready," she said evenly. "Oh, don't get me wrong, if I were to be selected for the Six next Tuesday and then chosen to go on Sunday, I'd be ready by then. But at the moment, I'm still considering my options."

"I thought you had focused on knives," I said.

"No, not really." She pushed back from the table a little and looked down at her nude body. "You know, Geneviève has said a number of times that she's grateful she was offered the chance to come here, that she was considered attractive enough for this group. I am too. I never considered myself an attractive girl and I was being told I wasn't good enough, I--"

"You," Mitch interrupted, "and whoever was telling you that, are nuts."

Denise smiled. "Thank you, Mitch. Enough men, candidates and guests, have told me that now that I'm beginning to believe it. But I am still grateful, and because of that, and because, as I've said, that I consider the film of my demise to be my legacy to the world, I want to do things as well as I possibly can. A number of men, guests especially, have told me they'd like to see my body, my breasts and my lower abdomen in particular, cut or pierced and bleeding. Therefore, when I do go on stage to die, my breasts and lower abdomen will be cut or pierced--maybe both--and bleeding. I want to do something sexy, I want to die a slow protracted death like Angelina and Joanna. I want the audience to know I'm in pain. On the other hand, I don't want to choose something so rough I end up like Robert, and I don't want to choose something that might go in an unexpected direction, like Ramon or Brittney."

"Knives," I pointed out, "seem to fit that bill perfectly." Mitch nodded agreement.

"So do arrows," she pointed out. "And spears, and saws, and a number of other things. I have not made my final decision yet, so I would not volunteer--at least not if the call for volunteers came today."

Mitch reached over and ran a fingertip around the rim of her navel. "Knives," he said, "or arrows, or a spear--sticking in this little belly would be seriously sexy. I'd love to see it, but I'm hoping that Geneviève and I get chosen to go this Sunday." Geneviève nodded her assent, but, while her plan was immensely exciting, I still wasn't eager to see her go--I would miss her, I knew that.

Later that afternoon, I returned to our room alone to clean up a bit, then started to walk back down to the bar. As I passed through the lobby, the desk clerk called me over.

"You see that girl over there?" she said in a low voice, pointing. I looked; a naked dark-haired girl was sitting in one of the chairs, her legs pulled up, the requisite high-heeled shoes on the floor in front of the chair. "She's new, she just arrived today. She hasn't even been to her room yet, she came in here and sat down there and hasn't moved. It might be good if you went over there and talked to her."

"Okay," I agreed. "But why me?"

The desk clerk, whose name tag identified her as "Jennifer," laughed. "Because, Jack, everyone here knows you're the irresistible guy, the one no girl can say no to." Jennifer was on the tall side, and, of course, since she was an employee she was dressed, blue shorts and a thin white blouse. She was quite pretty herself, a "girl-next-door" look, long light brown hair, hazel eyes,

large breasts that could look very large if she arched her back, which she was doing at that moment. Her expression could only be called seductive.

I grinned. "If only there weren't a rule against the employees fraternizing with the--"

"There's no such rule."

"No?"

"No." She arched even more.

I smiled more broadly and nodded. "I'll be seeing you later, Jennifer," I told her, using a tone I quite well knew was itself seductive.

"My shift ends at eight. Now go take care of that girl."

"Okay." I walked across the lobby. The girl's head was down, I couldn't see her face. "Hi," I said. "New here, aren't you?"

She looked up at me. She had a very broad, very pretty face with pouty lips and blue-green eyes that rivaled Angelina's in brilliance. Her body looked very soft. She was a little thin, but many of us, having had to struggle to get enough food before our arrival here, were slender. She held her legs tightly closed and she had one arm over her breasts.

"Please," she said in a tiny voice. "Please, please don't touch me..."

I cocked my head. "I have no intention," I said, "of doing anything to you you don't want me to do, now or later. No one else here will, either. I'd like to sit down and talk to you. Would that be okay?"

"I guess..."

I sat down. "So. You are new, right?" It was just an opener, I knew she was.

"Yes, I just arrived today." She closed her eyes tightly. "I had no idea I was going to be asked to run around naked all the time..."

"You get used to it. I'm Jack, by the way. I've only been here three weeks myself."

She pursed her lips for a moment. "My name is Emily Norman," she told me.

"No," I said with a smile. "You're just Emily. None of us use our last names anymore. We all feel we left them behind on the mainland."

"Oh," she replied. Then she turned to stare out the window. "It's a pretty place," she said.

"Yes, it is." I waited for her to continue, but she did not. "Emily, did you not know what you were getting into when you agreed to come here?" I was having a hard time seeing her pass the injection and Russian roulette tests.

"Benjamin told me that if I took his offer I was agreeing to come here and be killed, and they would pay my family a lot of money." She bit her lip. "When are they going to kill me, Jack? I thought I'd be taken out and killed as soon as we got here."

Evidently, I thought, she hadn't paid very close attention to what was being said right after her arrival. "No, it's two weeks before you even become eligible for the--"

"Two weeks!"

"Well, yes. And then you're in a sort of a lottery." It didn't seem necessary to go into detail then. "Most people live here for at least eight weeks or so."

"Oh... no... I can't do that, I just can't..."

"They don't force you to stay, Emily. You can take the next boat back."

She hung her head. "But then my family won't get any money. Will they?"

"No, I'm afraid they won't."

"Then I can't do that either."

"Emily, exactly how did you come to be here, anyway?"

She raised her head and gave me an almost heartbreakingly sad look. "I was having a bad day," she said.

"Somehow I doubt that that's the whole story."

She shook her head. "I lived in Iowa," she told me. "Outside of Sioux City. Things got really bad there, the depression and all, you know. My papa lost his job two years ago. He got other work, but it was hard work, and he just wasn't right for it. After about a year he got sick. There was no money for doctors or medicine. We tried to take him to the free clinics but I guess you know how they are. In Iowa there are so many people there and so few doctors, you can wait days. Papa didn't have days. He died."

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"After he died, mama just sort of lost the will to live, and she took to her bed. I had to drop out of school and take care of the family; I have two brothers and three sisters, and I'm the oldest. We raised a garden and we took whatever work we could get and we kept managing to make the mortgage payments--we weren't going to let them take papa's house away--but it was hard, really hard. There was never enough food and we had no electricity or anything like that, we couldn't afford it. Last winter, mama died--we had no heat in the house except for an old wood stove we found in the dump--and we were on our own. Whenever I could, I went to the soup kitchen at the Presbyterian Church to eat, so my brothers and sisters could have the food at home."

"Sounds like you've had it rough."

She nodded. "Yes. So, last week, I guess, I was at the soup kitchen and there were about thirty people in the line. Somebody knocked me out of the line and I lost my place, I had to go back to the end. By the time I got back up to the front the food was all gone. I sat down and I cried for a while." She looked like she was about to cry again. "Then this man came up to me. He said his name was Benjamin. He was dressed in a nice suit and he was maybe even a little fat. He offered to buy me dinner."

"And you accepted, naturally." I could see where this was going.

She shook her head. "No. I told him no. I said, I'm sorry, but I know what men like you want from a girl when you buy her dinner and I just can't do that."

Damn, I thought, what a babe in the woods. "Let me guess. He told you he didn't want that, he just wanted to talk."

"Yes. How'd you know?"

"Because in my case, the same man--different individual but the same man, really--bought me a beer. And talked. And here I am."

"Oh."

"He made you an offer. To come here."

She nodded. "Yes. Over dinner. He started out by asking me a question. He asked me, he said, if he was an insurance agent and he could sell me a life insurance policy that paid even if I committed suicide, would I do that? Would I buy the policy and then kill myself so my family would get the money? I had to think about that for a minute, but I thought, my family would be a lot better off, they'd have the money and they'd have one less mouth to feed. So finally I said yes, I would, and I asked him if he was an insurance man who could sell me a policy like that--although I also said I couldn't imagine any way I could get the money to buy a policy like that. He said that in a way he was, and he said the insurance policy didn't even cost anything. All I had to do, he said, was come here, to this island. Let the people here kill me and my family would get the money." She gave me a wide-eyed look. "Is that what happened to you, too?"

I nodded. "In a way. The agent who recruited me was much more honest."

"I don't understand."

"Emily, did he tell you exactly why these people would be willing to pay your family money for your death?"

"He mentioned some kind of show. I didn't ask."

"Yes, a show, that's right. Are you sure he said 'let the people here kill you?'"

"Uh... no, I'm not sure... maybe he just said, 'be killed.'" She started to make a gesture but apparently decided against it and kept her arms wrapped around herself. "But if the people here don't kill me, who will?"

"You will. The people who own this place, who work here, can't kill you and won't do it. You are expected to do it yourself, or find one of us--the other candidates who are here for the same reason you are--to do it."

"Oh," she said. "I see." She shook her head. I thought it was a little odd, a girl almost paralyzed by being naked in public was being almost casual about the idea of killing herself. "I just don't understand," she continued. "Why would anybody be willing to pay my family if I kill myself? Is it all a lie?"

"Emily," I said, "have you ever heard a term like 'snuff film?' Or to put in another way, are you aware of a connection between sex and death?"

She looked at me blankly. "No."

Where, I asked myself, had this one come from? How could anyone, in the internet age, have lived such a sheltered life? "Emily, there are people--a lot of people, actually--who find the sight of an attractive young woman--or man, depends on your preference--being killed exciting. Sexually exciting."

She frowned. "Why?"

I stared back. "Why? I don't know why. Why do I find the sight of a pretty girl's legs exciting? All I can say is I do. And actually, I don't just think it's some people. I think it's most people. It wasn't something I ever thought much about until I came here. I have a different viewpoint now."

"I still don't understand."

"Emily, when I say 'kill yourself on stage' what are you thinking about?"

"Huh?"

"If I said, how are you planning to kill yourself on stage--"

"Wait, wait. I have to do this on stage?"

"Yes, of course. How else can people watch?"

"Oh, oh, yes, you said people would want to watch."

"Yes. So, okay, if you had to do this now--right now--how would you do it?"

"How would I kill myself?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. Take pills if I had pills. Shoot myself if I had a gun. Maybe sit in a car, run the engine, and stick a hose in the window and hook it up to the tailpipe."

I nodded. "You could shoot yourself, yes." Without going into detail, I told her that there were a myriad of ways she could die and told her about the manual in her room. I explained that she would die on stage paired with a man, a "death partner." She didn't seem to like that, but didn't comment. "You should know, too," I went on, "the owners consider it highly desirable for you to have sex with your death-partner before you die."

"On stage?" she demanded incredulously. "In public?"

"Yes."

"I can't do that!"

"It isn't required," I said quickly. "But pretty much everyone does."

"Not me!" She paused and stared. "Wait. I don't have to be naked when I kill myself, do I?"

"Well, yes, that is required, actually."

"On stage?"

"Yes."

"I can't do that!" She made a little moaning sound. "I can't be naked on a stage! I thought maybe I'd be able to wear a pretty dress... maybe a ribbon in my hair... oh..."

Ramon, I thought, with his penchant for giving people nicknames, would probably have called this one "Deep Country" or something similar. I decided to change the subject. "Emily," I said, "you didn't eat lunch today, did you?"

"No."

"Then I want you to come with me, down to the bar. You can meet my friends and have dinner with us."

"I can't. I'm naked."

"So am I and so are all of them. As I said, you get used to it. Anyway, you cannot sit here huddled up in this chair for two weeks!"

"I can't have any clothes? Not even panties?"

"No. One of the few hard-and-fast rules."

She hesitated for a few minutes. "If I go to the bar naked," she asked in a tiny voice, "will I get raped?"

I laughed. "No. Absolutely not. That's another hard-and-fast rule, no rapes allowed. You need to make a decision, Emily. Either come to dinner with me--or by yourself--or get on the boat and go back to Miami, forget about all this."

She looked frustrated. "I can't go back. My family needs that money."

"Then get up and come with me. Believe me, it will not be bad."

"Okay... I guess..." She hesitated for several seconds, then started to get up.

I have never in my life seen a woman rise from a chair anywhere near as awkwardly as Emily did. She kept one arm firmly over her breasts, and, as she unfolded her legs, she put the other hand between them. Once she was on her feet, she looked like a caricature of the hyper-modest maiden from past decades.

"Emily, you can't even walk like that," I said, shaking my head. "And you certainly can't do that for two weeks. Relax."

"But..."

"Your only other choice is the boat."

She nodded, and, finally, she dropped her hands, letting them hang limply at her sides. She had rather large, well-shaped breasts, and a nice flat belly. Her groin, unlike virtually all the other women on the island, was neither trimmed nor shaven. Everywhere her skin looked exquisitely soft and smooth.

"You look very nice," I said, consciously not staring at her body. "Put your shoes on now, and let's go."

She obeyed, and we started walking toward the bar. She walked awkwardly, unsteadily; quite clearly she was not used to heels. She also kept looking around herself as she walked, as if she half expected someone to pounce on her. Of course, no one did--although several of the men

gave her admiring glances. Eventually we reached the bar, and I led her to the table where Denise, Geneviève, and Mitch--who was becoming a part of our group--were sitting.

"You've been gone a long time," Denise observed. "What's been going on?" She looked at Emily. "And who's this?"

I introduced them all to Emily and her to them, then invited her to sit down at our table. "Emily," I told them, "was recruited at a soup kitchen in Iowa. She has a very sad story, which I'll let her tell you if she wants to. But you should know this first: she is very uncomfortable being nude in public. She's okay with the idea of killing herself to benefit her family, but she's not comfortable about the idea of doing it on stage or doing it in the nude. More, she completely rejects the idea of having sex with her death-partner before she dies." I glanced at Emily. "Fair enough?" She nodded without speaking.

"Why wouldn't you want to have sex with your death-partner?" Denise inquired. "You don't even know who it might be, yet. It could be some really hot guy, like Jack here." I grinned at this, of course.

"That's something that's done in private," Emily replied, her cheeks flushing. "With a lover. Not with just anyone, and not out on a stage." She lowered her eyes. "I don't have a lover here."

Denise frowned. "Are you trying to tell us you don't plan to have sex with anyone, the entire time you're here?"

"Of course not," Emily answered.

"Damn," Mitch murmured.

"How old are you, Emily?" Geneviève, who had been silently watching Emily up until that time, asked.

"Nineteen," the girl answered.

"Nineteen. A year younger than my daughter."

Emily gave her a wide-eyed look. "No, you can't be that old!"

"Thank you. But I am." She held up a finger. "Now, I want you to listen to me. We have work to do, you and I, and we may not have a lot of time to do it--I'm on the short list for Sunday's show, I have a one in three chance of being selected for dying out there five days from now. The attitude you have right now is going to make your stay here sheer hell. More, I'd imagine you'd be likely to choose a method of death that doesn't make for a good show and doesn't pay your beneficiaries much of anything. You don't want that, do you?"

"No, ma'am," Emily said, respectful and attentive. "I'll do whatever it takes to make sure they get as much money as possible."

"I don't think so," Mitch said with a grin.

"No, I will," she insisted--obviously, I knew, not knowing what she was talking about.

"Never mind that right now," Geneviève said. "You'll have plenty of time to decide how you want to die. I want to talk about your life here right now. Emily, unless you are willing to go all the way, you should get back on the boat and return to Miami today."

"I already said that," I put in.

"If you do stay," Geneviève went on, ignoring me completely, "then you need to understand. You do not exist anymore. You have already died as far as the real world outside is concerned, you are a dead girl. Nothing in the real world, other than your commitment to your beneficiaries, has anything to do with you anymore. Starting today, right now, it's a new day for you. You should eat the foods you like, get drunk if you feel like it--"

"I don't drink," Emily put in.

"Of course you don't," Denise said, rolling her eyes.

"Wrong," Geneviève said. "You didn't. Now you do. You used to be a chaste good girl, I can see that. Concerned about your reputation. That's in the past. Your reputation is set in stone, because you're dead, and nothing that happens now counts. We all take things that way here. I used to be a respectable businesswoman. I had sex, sure, but it was always discreet, behind closed doors. Now, I'll screw any man who approaches me and isn't downright repulsive, and I'll do it right out here in the open, in front of anybody, any time. Denise there does the same thing."

"Nah," Denise said with a grin. "I'll take 'em even if they are repulsive."

Emily looked shocked. "Uh... Mrs... I don't know your last name..."

"I don't have one. I'm just Geneviève, to you and everyone else. Mrs. whoever, divorcee businesswoman, is dead. Mrs. whoever would not be looking forward to going out on a stage and having sex with at least two men and then being killed. I am, because I'm Geneviève, and Geneviève is a dead woman." She pointed again; her manner was domineering and parental, and I had not seen her like that before. "You," she told Emily, "will stay with us. You will drink with us, and if you can't let go any other way, you'll get totally shitfaced drunk with us. As I said, I may die in five days. Before I do, I want to see you sucking Jack or Mitch's cock right out here in the bar, in full light, in front of everybody--and liking it."

Emily flushed again. "I've never done that," she said in the small voice she seemed to use fairly often. "I'm not a virgin, but I've never had a man's... organ... in my mouth."

"The guys around here," Denise said, "don't have organs. They have cocks, or dicks. Sometimes it can be said that they have penises. We girls have cunts or pussies. Sometimes vaginas. No one around here has an organ."

"You are dead," Geneviève pushed on, "but still breathing. There is no reason on earth you should not enjoy the time you have remaining to the absolute fullest, without any inhibitions. Fucking and sucking men--or women, if you prefer--is fun. It feels good. Any man's cock inside you feels good. Take as many as you can. I've had just about every man here, myself, at least once."

"Same here," Denise put in. "But you have an inside track. Take Jack, he's the best lay here right now. Sorry, Mitch. No offense."

"None taken," Mitch said. "I hear the way the women talk about Jack. I wish they'd talk about me that way, but even the picky ones like Geneviève don't refuse me, and that's good enough for me."

Geneviève ignored all the side plays and kept hammering home her point to an attentive but stunned-looking Emily. "The fact is," she went on, "you are in paradise, you are sitting on a treasure trove. When I arrived, it took me a little while to realize that, and I wasted some of my time here. The men here who are candidates--the men you see wandering around naked--are gems, everything single damn one of them. I don't know exactly how the recruiters pick them out, but it's obvious they know their business."

"They sure do," Denise agreed. "If you want to find somebody repulsive you have to look to the guests. They're easy to spot, they're the uglier, fatter, older guys wearing the Bermuda shorts and Hawaiian shirts. You should fuck them too, though. But we can explain all that later, after you get into the swing of things."

"Just in the interest of fairness," I inserted, "let me point out that the recruiters do just as good a job recruiting the women." Mitch nodded vigorously. "I've hardly known any women as beautiful, sexy--and just plain sweet--and more than that, as totally uninhibited sexually as--"

"Flattery," Denise said, "will get you everywhere. But you get everywhere anyway."

"And besides that," Geneviève said, turning to me, "you're wrong."

"I am?"

"Yes. Emily here is maybe a bit of an extreme case, but in general her type is not rare. When I first arrived, I was more like Emily than like the Geneviève you've known."

"You were?"

She nodded. "I was." She gestured toward the newcomer. "Like her, I had accepted the idea of dying here, to get the benefit money for my daughter. That was my focus. Like her I balked at the idea of running around naked all the time. I do feel I had more reason than Emily does; she has a lovely body. I felt old and felt like I didn't compare well to the younger girls."

"Same here," Denise noted, and I remembered that she had been the only one hesitant to undress after passing the Russian roulette test. "I believed I was too skinny, my breasts were too small, and I have this potbelly I never have been able to get rid of. But the guys here have convinced me to like my skinny, my little breasts, and my potbelly. I thought at first that maybe they were just being nice to me--they are, as Geneviève said, all nice guys--but I found out the guests like it too and they aren't all nice guys, they paid a lot of money to be here and they want their money's worth." She looked Emily up and down. "You," she added, "have no such problems at all."

"My original plan," Geneviève continued, "was to stay more or less out of sight until it was my turn to die on stage, I really wasn't planning on having sex with anyone until I got on the stage and I wasn't too sure about that. I figured I'd eat well for a change, drink some good wine, stay in my room, lay out on the beach and swim in the ocean, and read some good books. For much of the first two weeks I did just that."

"What changed your mind?" Emily asked.

"The men," Geneviève answered. "Almost from the first day, they kept approaching me. I turned them away, I said I wasn't interested, and nobody tried to push it. Part of my reason for doing that was that I believed they were just being nice to an old lady, and I didn't need or want a mercy fuck. They didn't give up on me, though. There was one who was particularly persistent, his name was Karl, he's been dead for weeks now. He was the same age as my daughter, just twenty. As far as I was concerned, just a boy. One day he came up to me while I was down on the beach and asked me if I'd like to have him rub sunscreen on me. I decided to be direct with him, and I told him he didn't need to be concerned about me, that there were a dozen beautiful girls his age around and I understood perfectly that they'd be preferable."

"Pretty dumb of you, Geneviève," Mitch said with a grin.

"It was. He was, there was no mistaking it, genuinely surprised. We talked a while and he pointed out that he wasn't unaware of the younger girls, he had in fact had sex with quite a few of them. He told me he kept coming back to me because he liked me, plain and simple, that I was more attractive to him than most of the younger girls. I was amazed. I made a decision right then not to reject him again, and I invited him to join me in my room."

"And he did, I guess," Emily said.

"Actually, no. He said he would if I insisted, but he'd much rather make love to me right there, on the beach. I was hesitant, I had never had sex in public before, but he pointed out that everyone here has sex in public all the time, and I knew that was so, I'd seen plenty of it. So finally I agreed, and we made love on my beach blanket. He was a very good, very considerate lover, and I enjoyed myself totally. But it was what happened afterwards that turned me completely upside-down."

"What was that?"

"We sat there together on the blanket, just cuddling, and then some of the other men, other candidates, came up to us. They were congratulating Karl--I won't ever forget the exact words--on

'finally getting through to' one of the 'best ones here.' He was beaming with pride. I simply could not believe what I was hearing. I broke down, I cried. They were all very solicitous, wanting to know if I was all right. I was definitely all right, more all right than I'd been since I was laid off from work back in the real world." She paused and wiped her eyes, which had teared up a little with the memories. "After that I started having sex--in public--with a lot of the men. The very first one I did, besides Karl, was right here in this bar. He was here with me, he held my hands and kissed me while I was fucking the other man. Lovely, just lovely. I was with Karl a lot from then on, up until the time he went on stage. I was up there with him when he died, and I cried then, too. I miss him, still."

"You loved him, didn't you, Geneviève?" Denise asked.

"Yes," she answered. "I did. But I've also learned that here, you can spread your love around. I loved Ramon, too. I love Jack, and I'm quickly coming to love Mitch."

Denise threw me a glance. "I understand," she said. "I'm getting there."

Emily was, for the first time since I'd met her, beginning to break into a smile. It illuminated her face, it transformed her from pretty to gorgeous. "I think I'm beginning to understand too," she said. "But I'm not used to thinking like that. It may take me a while."

"Don't let it take too long," Geneviève warned. "The time left to you is very limited. I still regret wasting those first two weeks."

Emily nodded, then looked around. "This is a bar, isn't it?" she asked. Geneviève nodded. "What sort of drink," she went on, "would you recommend for a girl who hasn't ever had a drink before?"

Under Geneviève's continuing tutelage, Emily came along very quickly. We introduced her to a number of the other candidates, and, though she was still acting shy, she was clearly becoming used to being naked, and it no longer seemed to bother her when the men especially looked her up and down. By the end of that first evening she wasn't averting her eyes when other couples were having sex in the bar--including me and Geneviève. She was a bit drunk at that point, but when I first saw her the next day, she ran up to me and gave me a hug, pressing her nude body against mine and smiling when that caused me to get an erection. As that day wore on she began greeting men she'd previously met with hugs, and she confided to us that she did like to tease, she liked the reactions her naked hugs provoked. Wednesday night Geneviève gave her a demonstration on how to give a man a blowjob, delightfully using me as the subject. Emily watched closely and, in a new breakthrough, even allowed me to caress her wonderfully soft breasts while my cock was in Geneviève's mouth--she did pull away sharply when I reached out toward her, but then, apparently determined, she offered me her chest. Pausing in the middle of things, Geneviève explained to her that some men like to come in the woman's mouth while others prefer to shoot come on her face, and by paying attention she could figure out which was which. After I unloaded--inside her mouth, as was indeed my preference--Geneviève allowed a little to run out before swallowing it. She told Emily that most men are hypersensitive right after orgasm and so she should stop moving her head and tongue after they came, that she should just hold their cock in her mouth for a moment without moving. She also said that a lot of men like to see cum in the woman's mouth before it was swallowed, but instructed her to always swallow it. Finally, wiping a thick bead of my semen off her lips with a fingertip, she told Emily to taste it.

She looked doubtful for a moment, but she did. "Mm," she said. "Salty. Not bad. Better than..." She stopped herself there, and we never did hear what it tasted better than.

By Thursday afternoon, Emily had loosened up even more. She still wasn't willing to have sex with a man in the bar, but she had become very physical, a sharp contrast to the way she'd been

when I first met her. She frequently found a reason to touch either me or Mitch, and by then she had stopped flinching away when we moved to touch her--even when we touched her in very intimate places. We did not restrain ourselves at all around Emily, we might have had a little more sex than we usually did. She watched us, closely, but, whenever Mitch or I invited her to join in, she said she wasn't ready yet. Geneviève kept pressing her not to take too long, reminding her that her days were numbered. Even with the focus being on Emily at that time, I had by no means forgotten that Geneviève's days might well be even more numbered, and I paid more attention to her than I did to Denise and Julie.

Emily's true breakthrough came Thursday evening. Shortly after dinner, I was sitting in a chair, Julie straddled upright across my lap, my cock up inside her. Emily was sitting next to me, watching us and showing her true feelings by occasionally licking her lips. Peripherally, I saw Geneviève give Mitch a nudge. He grinned, moved over close to her, and began toying with her hair. She glanced at him, smiled, and scooted slightly closer to him--although she kept watching us. He stroked her cheek and then her neck, she moved one of her hands to his thigh; he started caressing her breasts and after a moment let his hand move down her belly toward her groin. Her hand, working along his thigh, encountered his rigid erection.

She turned to face him, her eyes rather wide. Without warning she grabbed his head and started kissing him, her manner not just passionate but almost desperate. He kissed her back, teased her nipples, and ran his hand up between her legs. In turn, she wrapped her fingers around his cock and began massaging it.

Then she broke the kiss, threw herself back in the chair, and spread her legs. "Love me," she whispered. "Love me..."

Smiling, being gentle with her, Mitch moved over her and used the levers to lay the chair back almost horizontally. When he moved in between her legs, she used her hand to guide his cock into herself. She was almost unbelievably wet, her thick pubic hair soaked with liquid, Mitch's cock shiny with it when he pulled it back. She moaned loudly and squirmed, clutching at his body with her hands. It wasn't more than five minutes before she gave a little shriek and her whole body began to tremble violently, her legs jerking. Mitch kept his cock buried deep inside her while she was having her orgasm, which seemed to go on for a long time.

"Damn," Julie said.

Once she recovered, she went back to just what she was doing before, moving her hips from side to side, caressing him with her legs so vigorously she was almost kicking him. Something like five minutes later--I would have sworn it was exactly five minutes--she erupted in orgasm again. Watching her reaction and her enraptured face pushed me over the edge and drove Mitch close. It looked as if he was trying to husband himself, but he did not succeed, and within a few seconds he was unloading his semen into her. Amazingly, this set her off again, driving her into another wild, writhing, orgasm.

Mitch, spent, pulled out of her. For a moment, Emily didn't even look conscious. Her eyelids fluttered and she suddenly sat up straight. People at nearby tables had been watching, and at that point they applauded. She looked horrified, then covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..." she said.

"Sorry?" Geneviève demanded. "For what? That's exactly what we've been encouraging you to do!"

"Oh, but I know how I am... when a man loves me... I make so much noise... I did that both times... I know, it's so... so... so not ladylike..."

"Wait a minute," Julie said. "Both times? Emily, how often have you had sex before tonight?"

"Twice," she answered.

Denise was staring openmouthed. "Twice? By the time I was nineteen I'd had sex maybe two dozen times and I felt deprived!"

Geneviève seemed to be, for once, at a loss for words. From one of the adjacent tables, Paula, the athletic brunette I'd been friends with for a while, got up and came over. She put her arm around Emily's shoulders. "Honey," she said, "no one here gives one single god damn for ladylike. The show you just gave us was fucking spectacular, we'll be talking about it for days. All I can say to you is, more, more."

"I'm embarrassed..."

"Don't be. Nothing here, nothing, is embarrassing. You and me and everyone else here is going to go out on a stage and die in front of everybody. There's no embarrassment. You turned us all on. Be proud of yourself."

"Paula," Geneviève said, "is absolutely right." Julie and Denise chimed in agreement. "You have every reason to be proud of yourself. You've come very far, very fast. You obviously have a very strong sex drive and you've kept that down far too long. Enjoy it now, it's past time. Believe me, when you start spreading yourself around a little, every man here is going to want to enjoy it." Several of the men at nearby tables yelled out "Yeah!"

Emily, blushing again, pulled herself back up to the table. "Thank you," she said to everyone in general. "I'm still embarrassed but I'll try not to be. Can I have another drink? Another one of those fuzzy navels?"

"Sure can," Julie said. "I'll get it for you." She got up and walked toward the bar. Paula took her leave after telling Emily to "hang in there." Emily sat in silence for a moment, staring at the tabletop. Then she looked up at Mitch and reached over to grab his hand.

"You were so good," she said earnestly. "So gentle with me, so considerate. So much better than anything I've ever known before." Her eyes filled up and large tears started flowing down her cheeks. "I don't know how to thank you, I don't think I could ever repay you..."

Mitch rolled his eyes and pulled her to him; she laid her head on his shoulder. "Good god and saints preserve us," he muttered, "where on earth do girls like you come from?"

"Iowa," Denise said. "Or so she says. Me, I think she's Venusian."

"Emily," Mitch was saying as he stroked her back, "you do not have to thank me and you owe me nothing. You obviously enjoyed that, and, believe it girl, so did I. Completely." She smiled and snuggled against him; Julie brought her drink, and, gradually, things at our table settled back down.

But Emily was not done with breakthroughs for the night. After about an hour had passed, she began to behave as if she was restless, and soon it was obvious enough than Geneviève asked her if something was wrong.

"No," she answered. "Nothing is wrong." She sipped her drink, then looked at Geneviève. "I was just thinking, that's all."

"About what?"

"Well, last night you were teaching me how to suck a man's... penis. Remember?"

"Hey!" Julie cried. "Where was I when Geneviève was giving blowjob lessons? I could use a few myself!"

"You don't need them," I said. "You're already a black belt."

"Oh. Well, okay, then."

"Of course I remember," Geneviève said with a laugh. "And?"

"I was thinking about it afterward, trying to remember everything you said. I think I'd like to try to do that. If nobody minds."

There was a moment of silence. "Ah... no, Emily," Geneviève said. "No one would mind, I assure you."

Emily then turned to me. "Would you mind, Jack?" she asked. "If I... I mean, if I tried it out on you?"

Julie laughed uproariously. "Take my word for it, he won't mind a bit!" she cried. "I haven't known Jack forever, but I've known him long enough to know that he does not mind getting blowjobs from pretty girls!"

"My observation as well," Denise said with a grin.

"The ladies," I said, turning my chair toward her, "are absolutely right."

"Okay, then," Emily said. "Here I go." She knelt between my knees, wrapped her hand around my rising erection and looked up at me. "Remember, I've never done this before. I might not be able to do it right."

"I'm quite sure you'll do fine," I said, tousling her hair.

"I hope so." Still looking up at me, she leaned forward and started licking around the glans of my penis, just as Geneviève had done the night before. My cock came up to full erection. Emily smiled and slipped it into her mouth.

But then, immediately, she took it out. "It has a taste," she said, looking at it. "I didn't expect that. A musky sort of a taste..."

"That," Julie told her, "is me. Remember, he had it inside me a little while ago and he hasn't had a shower since."

"Oh," Emily said. "You taste good, Julie." She then took my cock back in her mouth.

"What have you created here?" Denise asked Geneviève.

"I have no idea."

Emily, obviously, had paid close attention to Geneviève's lessons. She moved her mouth up and down on me, caressing the shaft of my cock with her tongue. Repeatedly she looked up at me with an expression that said, "Am I doing this right?" and I nodded. Her hands massaged my thighs, her fingers stronger than I thought they might have been. The only way she showed any sign of her lack of experience was that she never took it particularly deeply in, she kept it shallow.

Regardless of that, she was doing it well enough that I knew I wasn't going to last too long. After a while, I told her I was about to come. She just nodded and kept my cock inside her mouth. When I started spraying my come in there, she stopped moving--but then, as I was coming, her whole body suddenly shuddered violently. She lifted her head with wide eyes. Not forgetting anything, she showed me my semen lying on her tongue, then swallowed it down. Again, she received applause from neighboring tables.

"I had another orgasm!" she said, obviously amazed. "I did! But... I didn't have--anything inside me, I wasn't even touching myself, how could I have had another orgasm?"

"Some women," Julie said, "Some really lucky, really high-sexed women--get so turned on by giving a man a blowjob they come themselves. I don't, dammit."

Still on her knees, she looked up at me. "Was it good?" she asked.

"Very," I said, I pulled her up and kissed her. "Downright wonderful, actually."

"Oh, I'm so glad. I loved doing that, I really did!"

"You can do another one," a voice from a nearby table said, "any time you want to."

I turned; the speaker was Ed, a tall, lanky sandy-haired man, one of the current Six and the man possessed of the longest cock of any of the candidates. "Excuse me?" Emily said.

"I heard you say you'd never done that before. If you want to get in a little more practice..."

"I'm sorry, I don't know you."

"This is Ed," I told her. "One of the current Six."

"Oh," Emily said. "That means you might be chosen to be killed this Sunday, right?"

"Yes, that's right," Ed answered.

She got to her feet. "Well," she said, "we might not have another chance, so I suppose we should do it right now." She walked to his table and started to drop to her knees.

"No, wait," he said. "Not yet, not so fast." He laid his hands on her sides. "Let me get acquainted with this beautiful body first. You don't mind, do you?"

She shook her head. "No, sir. I like being touched... yes, just like that..." He stroked her legs, kissed her nipples, ran his hands all over her. "I've been told," she said as he ran his fingertips through her thick pubic hair, "that some men like to... ah... come in a woman's mouth, and some like to squirt it on her face. I was told that a girl could figure out the difference but I don't know how yet. Would you mind telling me? Either one would be fine."

"This is getting ridiculous," Denise said. "Are we sure she hasn't been working in a brothel for, oh, say, ten years? Developing all this charming innocence as a bit?"

"If you'd seen her the way she was when I first found her," I said, "you would not ask that." I shook my head. "Talk about a butterfly..."

Ed, after staring at her incredulously for a moment, told her he liked to come in the woman's mouth, and she had dropped to her knees and began sucking him. He didn't last very long either, and when he came, Emily had yet another orgasm. She got up and another man at the table invited her to go on, but she said her jaw was getting sore and she needed to stop for a while. She came back to our table.

"Oh, this is so much fun!" she exclaimed when she sat down. "You were right, Geneviève. I'm not going to waste a single day of my stay here. It was so nice of you to teach me, I don't know what I would do without you."

"You may have to, very shortly," Geneviève reminded her, her manner serious. "Remember, I am part of the Six as well. I may not live past Sunday."

Emily nodded, but Denise cut in. "Geneviève, it is time, now. You have to tell her how you're going to do it if you're chosen. It isn't fair for it to come as a shock."

"What?" Emily asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Have you looked at the manual in your room yet, Emily?" Geneviève asked.

"Yes. But there's a lot in there, I haven't seen everything yet."

"You always end up balancing," Geneviève told her, "a quick and painless death with something more--severe. Because your beneficiaries get more money if the way you go is painful, or takes a while, or whatever."

"I understand that, yes."

"In my case--there's no better way than to just say this--I have chosen one of the saw machines. I'll be cut in two, by a buzz saw. Coming up between my legs and cutting me lengthwise."

Emily's expression did not change at all. "That should be a very good show," she said.

Geneviève frowned. "Uh... do you understand, Emily? I'll be lying on a table, and a buzz saw--a fine-tooth blade, moving slowly-- will come up between my legs and cut into me there. It'll go on, cutting me in two. Until I die."

"Yes," Emily said. "I do understand, of course."

"That doesn't bother you any?" Denise demanded.

Emily turned to her. "No. I'll miss her when she's gone, I really like her, but we've all agreed to die on that stage. How we die is up to us, that's what the book says. That's her choice, why should it bother me? Besides, like I said, it'll make a good show."

"Let me ask you this, Emily," Julie said. "Maybe you haven't decided on exactly what you're going to do yet--you do have time for that--but are you leaning toward a particular method?"

"Yes," Emily replied. I noticed that Ed, among others, was unabashedly eavesdropping.

"What is it?"

"I'm thinking about having myself burned alive," she answered, her voice as calm and rational as if she had said, "I'm thinking about having steak for dinner tomorrow."

In perfect unison, Julie's and Denise's jaws dropped. "What!?" Julie cried.

Emily shrugged. "But maybe not. It does pay a lot, but I'm worried that it would be ugly, my body turning all black and falling apart and all. "Being torn apart by dogs pays just as well, so in the end, I might do that instead. I just don't know, yet. I do want it to be a good show." She flashed a brief, enigmatic smile. "And I do like dogs..."

"You do realize," Geneviève said, her voice a little shaky, "that those deaths pay a lot because they're not quick and they involve incredible pain."

"Yes," Emily answered. "So?"

"So?" Geneviève cried. "So you want to experience that?"

Emily laughed. "Oh, no, of course not. Being burned alive won't be any fun at all."

"So--so--why?"

"I came here," Emily explained, "to be killed, so that my family would be paid a lot of money. Choosing a death like fire or dogs pays the most. I'm going to die, so what difference does it make how much pain I feel while I'm being killed? Once we start, I'll be dead in a little while anyway and not feeling it anymore."

"That is not," Denise said, "a common attitude around here."

Emily turned to her. "Why not? The point is to get money for the beneficiaries, isn't it? That's why we came--it's why I came, anyway. Why not get as much as you can?"

"But--but--just two days ago you were so embarrassed to be seen naked I had to coax you out of the chair!" I protested.

"I'm not now, Jack," she pointed out. "Besides, one of those things has nothing to do with the other. Being naked in public, having sex in public, I never even considered doing those things, it was too embarrassing. There is nothing embarrassing about being killed--the only thing that was bothering me, even then, was the idea of being on the stage naked, and I'm over that now."

"Emily, the last time we talked about this you were talking about taking pills, or shooting yourself while you were wearing a nice dress! This is one hell of a big jump!"

"Well, I didn't know any better, then. I hadn't seen the manual yet, I thought there was just one price for everything. Being shot doesn't pay very much."

"And so now," I went on, "you've come so far that you're willing to go out there and quietly have yourself burned at the stake."

She frowned. "No."

"No?"

"No. If I'm understanding everything right, I'd go out there and stand at the stake and the machine would somehow fasten me to it, and then the machine would start the fire. Is that right?" We all nodded. "I'd do that quietly, yes. But then, it's supposed to be a show, isn't it? And once

that's done, I can't get loose, right? So I'll scream and beg and struggle. It won't be hard, it'll be really painful, I know that." She looked sad. "I'm just worried it won't be pretty. And I'm not sure being torn apart by dogs will be any prettier."

"Chinese rat torture," Ed offered from the next table.

"Don't suggest that to her!" Diane, a lovely redhead with high pert breasts and Ed's most common companion, cried.

He glanced at her. "Why not? She's right, being burned wouldn't be pretty. The rat torture is another matter. And she's focused on the high-priced methods, so why not?"

"Well..." Diane said doubtfully.

Emily had turned to face them. "I don't know what that is," she admitted.

"You have a cage strapped over your belly," Ed explained. "A rat gets put in the cage, and then the cage is heated up. The rat chews into and through your belly to escape the heat. You die looking just as pretty as you do right now, except for the hole in your belly. But it's a long, slow, agonizing death."

"Does it pay as well as being burned alive?"

"It pays a little better. Check your manual."

Emily nodded her head and smiled. "That's what I'll do, then," she said, clapping her hands like a little girl. "That one sounds perfect."

"Emily," Denise said, "you are a weird one. Definitely."

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By Friday afternoon, Emily was in full bloom. The word had gotten around about her--and about the choice she'd apparently made about her death--and she was, without a doubt, the center of attention. Men were approaching her constantly, and, while she did not take on all comers, by five o'clock she'd given two blowjobs and had had intercourse three times, all with different men. One of them had complained about her thick pubic hair--personally I could not understand why, I found it charmingly different from the usual trimmed or shaven pubic areas all the other women had--but she left for a while with two other women and came back clean-shaven.

But she was not done surprising us. Not by a long shot.

After dinner that evening, Emily was quiet and thoughtful, just as she'd been the night before, and she kept stealing glances at Geneviève, who could not help but notice, and who finally asked her what was on her mind.

"Well..." Emily said, drawing out the word, "you remember, last night, when I gave Jack a blowjob?" She was, definitely, becoming familiar with the common terminology by then.

"Yes," Geneviève answered.

"Well, do you remember that I said he tasted musky, and Julie said that was her, and I said she tasted good?"

"Yes."

Well..." Again, the long-drawn out word. "I was just wondering if you'd mind if I licked you some there? Between your legs?"

Geneviève just stared at her for a moment. Girl-on-girl sex among the candidates wasn't unheard of--or unseen--but it was, actually, less common than I had initially thought it might be. Julie, who had told me she had no objections to doing that sort of thing, said she felt that, with an equal number of young and perpetually horny men around, they were for the most part just kept too busy. Emily's approach, however, was unique.

"It feels so very good, I do know that..." Emily added.

"Oh, I know it does," Geneviève agreed. She put one foot up on the table and moved her other leg well out to the side. "Please, feel free."

Emily immediately dropped to her knees and began nuzzling around Geneviève's groin, licking and kissing the insides of her thighs, and then licking up between her vaginal lips with long smooth strokes. It wasn't long before Geneviève was sighing deeply. Mitch reached over to caress her breasts, and she turned to kiss him. A little audience of onlookers was gathering, as well.

After a while, Emily pulled her head back. "You taste wonderful," she said.

"She does, doesn't she?" I agreed with a broad grin.

"Mmm-hm." Using her fingers, she pulled the lips back, exposing Geneviève's vagina and clitoris. "That's where the saw will cut you first, isn't it?" she asked. "Right in there..."

"Yes," Geneviève replied.

"Ooo. That should be so exciting." She then started licking at her clitoris again, and it wasn't too long before Geneviève had a soft, but long-lasting, orgasm. Emily sat back down in her chair and smiled when the onlookers applauded.

"Just so you know," Julie said, "you are welcome to have another taste of me any time."

"Oh, I will. I'd like that," Emily enthused.

"Don't leave me out, either," Denise added.

"I wouldn't mind a bit of that myself," Paula added from the next table.

Emily just smiled and nodded, but didn't move to take any of them up on it, at least not then. "You just have to understand," she said, "doing it with Geneviève is special. Not just because I owe her so much and not just because she tastes so good, but because she's going to let the saw cut into her there."

"That excites you, doesn't it?" Denise asked.

"Yes," Emily admitted. "I'd do it that way too if it paid more."

"I don't mean to pry," Denise went on. "But let me ask you this--you said you knew how good it felt when somebody went down on you. On the other hand, you said you'd never sucked a man's cock before last night. I take it this means your boyfriend went down on you but you didn't reciprocate?"

"Reciprocate?" Emily asked blankly.

"You didn't return the favor?" Denise explained.

"Oh, oh no. I never really had a boyfriend back home, anyway. I think I told you I only had sex twice, before I came here. Once with a boy at school I liked, but his dad lost his job and they had to move away." She paused and pursed her lips for a moment. "My first time was with my uncle when I was fourteen. He... forced me." She shook herself as if shaking off an unpleasant memory. "And anyway, no, neither of them ever... uh, went down on me."

"I'm sorry to hear you were molested by your uncle," Denise said with obvious sincerity.

"It's okay, it was a long time ago. I took care of it, I made sure it never happened again."

I wasn't sure if the next question should be asked, but it was: "How'd you do that?"

The answer wasn't what I'd feared, Emily apparently wasn't a murderer. "I started keeping my dog in my bedroom at night. He would have torn Uncle Lee apart if he tried anything again, and he knew it."

"Good plan. But Emily, that doesn't answer the question--you acted as if you were very familiar with this, but?" Denise smiled then, thinking she had figured it out. "Ah. Girlfriends."

Emily gave her a wide-eyed look. "Oh, you mean--oh, no. Just now, that was the first time ever I did anything with another woman."

"Well then," Denise said, "how is it you were so familiar with that?"

Emily flushed. "I... I'd rather not say... it's embarrassing..."

For me, the light suddenly dawned, the pieces all fell into place. "Denise," I said, "don't push it."

She looked at me with consternation. "I'm just curious, Jack," she said. "And aren't you the one who keeps saying she shouldn't be embarrassed about anything?"

"This is different," I said. "Let it go."

Emily studied my face closely. "You know, don't you?"

I rolled my lips in. "I think so."

"Then everyone might as well know. You'd tell them, anyway."

"No, I wouldn't."

"But we shouldn't have secrets among us. We're all condemned, we have no time for things like that, that's what I've learned." She turned back to Denise, then took a deep breath. "No one," she said, staring down at the tabletop, "knows about this. No one here, no one back home, no one anywhere. I always thought I'd take this to my grave with me."

Denise was having second thoughts. "Emily, you don't have to, I was just--"

Emily lifted her head. "Bruno," she said. "My dog. He started sleeping with me after my uncle... forced me. He liked to lick my face and hands, he was a very affectionate dog and we were close. He started... pushing his nose up under my nightgown at nights. Licking me down there. He liked doing it, and I liked having him do it." She caught her lower lip with her teeth. "He did it a lot, and he always made me climax, he figured out how and he wanted to please me. He was with me until two years ago. He was old, he got sick, we couldn't afford the vet, and he died." She sobbed, just once, then controlled herself. "I lost my best friend that day."

Denise looked crushed, and Geneviève looked to be at a loss as well. "I think," Julie said, jumping in, "that you are exactly right, Emily. No secrets here among the condemned. So you let your dog go down on you. So what? Everybody here knows I was whoring myself for food and a place to stay before I signed up. What does it matter? Now it's all out in the open, and--"

"There's more," Emily interrupted.

Julie stopped abruptly. "More?"

"Yes." She squeezed her eyes closed for a moment. "I just said... Bruno, he was my best friend. I was working so hard, trying to keep the family going. He... went down on me, and somehow he understood it was sexual, it was not like licking my face. I knew, because his... penis used to get hard. And so I... I... what was that word you used, Denise? Reciprocate?"

Julie blinked several times. "You went down on the dog."

Emily stared at the table. "Yes."

It was bizarre as far as I was concerned. This wasn't something that had ever much interested me, and yet, visualizing this pretty young girl sucking her dog's penis was getting me hard.

"Well," Julie said rather weakly, "again, so what? Now we know it all, although you didn't have to..."

"No," Emily said, "You don't."

Julie spread her hands. "What else could there be? Unless you were... you were..." She stopped and closed her eyes for a moment. "Letting the dog fuck you. Of course. Of course you were. Geneviève said you have a very strong sex drive, it's perfectly obvious she's right. You're working all the time, no time for guys, and somehow you grew up feeling embarrassed about your

body. You said the dog was your 'best friend.' He's your protector, you rely on him. I do understand that."

Emily looked up at her tentatively. "You don't think I'm... awful?"

"No," Julie said. "Very honestly, I don't. I think you're one of us. You were living a horrible life--much more horrible after Bruno died--and you have people you care for, and you care for them deeply. You volunteered to come here and end your life to help them out. That's what we all did, and most of us--if not all of us--were doing things to survive we weren't proud of. We don't want our loved ones to have to do that, and so here we are--the condemned, as you said, and we condemned ourselves. For the best of reasons, the very best. And beyond that, most of us are focused on having erotic endings and not suffering too much, whereas you're just focused on getting the most money for your family, whatever it costs you. No, I don't think you're awful. I think you should be proud of yourself."

"Very well said," Geneviève noted. "And I agree, completely." Denise, Mitch, and I chimed in with similar sentiments, and Emily started to cry. I took her in my arms and held her like she was a child.

Again, people from other tables had been listening, and several of them expressed agreement as well. "You do have to satisfy my curiosity on one thing, though," Ed said. "What kind of dog was Bruno?"

"A Doberman," Emily answered.

Denise sighed. "Damn. Now I feel deprived again."

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The next day--Saturday--I asked Geneviève to spend the afternoon at the beach with me. As had been the case the previous Saturday, I was acutely aware that today might well be the last full day of her life. I was terribly conflicted about it; we had talked a lot about the method of her execution, and I could not help but feel that it would be the most erotic I'd seen so far, and, of course, in that sense I was looking forward to it. On the other hand I felt very close to her, and I knew I was going to miss her very badly. When I held her in my arms in the warm shallow water of the ocean and told her I loved her, I was surprised myself at how intensely I meant that.

She wasn't. Gently stroking my face, she told me she felt the same and that having had a few weeks with me had been enormously rewarding for her. Again, as she had the previous Saturday, she told me--and later she told Mitch, Denise, Julie, and Emily--not to mourn for her, that she had absolutely no regrets.

"Just in case I am selected tonight," she said while we sat on a blanket on the sand, "there's a few things you should know about, Jack. A few decisions I've made. Some of them involve you, so I hope you're going to be okay with them."

"I'm sure I am," I told her.

"First," she continued, "if I am the one chosen tonight, I'm not going to come back to our group right away. You know that every male candidate wants to screw the woman who's going to die tomorrow, so I'm going to circulate and let a lot of them do just that. I'd like to ask you to keep yourself a little fresh for me. Julie, Denise, and Emily will all still be there for you Monday. Is that too selfish of me?"

"Not at all," I assured her. "And I'm sure I can speak for them by saying they won't feel it selfish either."

"Good. I'll come to you--to our group--late in the evening, when I'm starting to get tired. I want to have sex with Mitch--whether he's chosen or not--and then with you. I've changed my mind, I do not intend to fuck my death-partner on stage--I'll have sex with him if he wants, but it'll be oral sex--and once I've started my undercarriage will be the first thing cut and won't be useable for anything ever again. I've decided that I want you to be the last man to have been inside me."

"That sounds very good to me. But I'd like to modify your plan a little."

"Oh? How?"

"Instead of us just having another fuck in the bar," I said, "which is, I guess, what you were thinking--I'd like to come to your room with you and spend the night there. Julie stayed with Ramon the night before he died; I'd like to do the same with you."

She smiled. "Actually," she said, "that isn't a change of plan at all. I was going to ask you if you would do that. It's pretty normal, most of the people selected don't spend Saturday night alone."

"Oh. Well, that's settled, then."

"There is one other thing--and this will require you to make a spur-of-the-moment decision. You'll have to use your judgement on this, Jack."

"What is it?"

"I have to be shackled, wrists and ankles, when the procedure starts," she said. "I am going to take pain muters, but I still can't know I won't react badly." She paused, and, incongruously, giggled. "After all, I've never been sawed in half before! Anyway, I'm going to ask for releasable manacles. If, in your judgement, I'm under control enough after the saw has gotten well into me, I'd like you to release me, I'd like to be able to move my arms and legs."

"Might not be an easy call to make," I said. "I could make a mistake."

"You could. But I trust you. If you think there's any chance I might start flailing around or try to get up, don't release me."

"I'll do the best I can, Geneviève."

"I know you will." She gazed out at the ocean for a moment, silent and pensive.

"Do you have a feeling," I asked her, "that you are going to be chosen tonight?"

"Not really. I just know it's possible--one chance out of three, you know. And yes, I know that Denise tells us that what happened last week doesn't matter, and she's probably right, but still, I can help but feel that my chances are much better tonight and that it'll be almost a certainty next weekend if I do get through tonight."

"Would you like it to be you tonight? Are you looking forward to it?"

She turned her head toward me and smiled, but then her expression grew serious. "That should be an easy question to answer but it isn't. I'm afraid of dying and I am not into pain. Julie actively fantasizes about being knifed, and I think by the time it happens to her she will have gotten herself so far into it she really will enjoy it for its own sake. Me, if I had a choice to avoid this altogether--and a way my daughter could still get the benefit--I'd probably take that choice. You can call me a coward if you want to, but that's the way I feel about it. So in that sense I'd rather hang around another week." She looked out at the ocean again. "But that's not the whole picture. We've been talking about this endlessly, for what seems to me like a very long time. You yourself, and practically all the other men as well--and a lot of the women--think this will be a highly charged, very erotic, scene. I have come to believe that myself--well, I've become to believe it more strongly, I chose this because I thought it would be exciting. What I want to do is give myself over to the experience completely. I don't want to scream and moan. If I was sure I could do that, I'd like to lay there completely unbound and allow the saw to cut into me. In that sense, I'm actually

eager, I'd like to be chosen tonight. I want to put on that show for the people here, and I will, very soon. If not tomorrow, still soon."

"In a way," I said, "I feel a little guilty because I do find the idea so erotic. I feel like I'm pushing you toward it, and that if I didn't push, maybe you'd choose a gentler death."

"Don't," she said, touching my lips with a fingertip. "You can't control what's erotic to you. If you told me you thought it would be disgusting and ugly and you couldn't stand the idea of it, you'd be lying to me. I don't want that under any circumstances."

I pulled her closer. "And I won't do that," I said. "Under any circumstances." I kissed her and we passed from there into a long, gentle session of lovemaking.

And then, inevitably, the day ground to an end and we headed back to the hotel for dinner and for the selection. Mitch and Geneviève, both members of the Six, were upbeat throughout and no one seemed nervous or anxious. The dinner ended and Saul appeared, ready to dip his hands into the golden urns and draw out two names, and soon enough the folded papers were lying on the table. Saul announced that the male of the final pair would be Ed; I was pleased it wasn't Mitch, I liked him and felt I needed a little more time to get to know him.

I became aware that I was holding my breath as Saul unfolded the envelope. Then, when he said "Geneviève," I felt a coldness develop in my lower belly. It was here, it was real. Geneviève would die the next day with a steel saw cutting into her body, the same soft body I'd been making love to on the beach earlier that day. I tried not to let Julie, Denise, and Emily see that I was upset, and I felt I was successful with Denise and Emily--although not with Julie, who was very solicitous toward me.

As for Geneviève herself, I understood that I had quite a bit of time to deal with my conflicts before I saw her again. True to her word, she did not come to our table afterwards, but instead circulated among the other candidates, having sex with a number of the men. I saw her several times during that period, and she looked relaxed and happy. All three of "my" women offered to have sex with me, but I told them about Geneviève's request and none of them had any problem with that.

Mitch was a bit more of a problem. He joined us soon after the announcement, and he was bitterly disappointed that he had not been chosen to be Geneviève's death-partner. Not knowing if Geneviève had explained her plan to him, I told him about it--and found that he knew already, and, like me, was flattered by and intended to honor her request.

"I can't believe it," he grumbled, nursing a drink. "I have been part of the Six for four weeks now, and it's always someone else. One out of three, you'd think the odds would be in my favor." Denise apparently felt compelled to tell him that statistics didn't work like that, but it didn't seem to matter to him.

"Are you eager to go, Mitch?" Emily asked him.

He looked at her. "As a matter of fact," he answered, "yeah, I am. I've been here on the island for twelve weeks. You know we have no contact with the mainland, so I haven't heard from my son in all that time. He's just nine."

"Is he with his mother?"

Mitch shook his head. "She died a year ago. Murdered, actually. She had a bag of food she was bringing home to us. A man tried to steal it. She fought him and he shot her."

"I'm sorry," Emily breathed.

"Thanks. But it's just the way things are now, people ready to kill you over a bag of groceries. When I signed on to come here, I had to put my son in a group home. I want him to get the money and get out of there, go live with my folks in Seattle and make a life for himself."

"Why isn't he with your folks now?" I asked.

He sighed. "I had no money to get him there. We lived in Boston. It's clear across the country. Airlines, trains, buses--they all cost money."

"How are you planning to do it?" Emily asked, and I realized that we'd never discussed this topic with Mitch before.

"I haven't made a hard and fast decision," he told her. "And I won't until I'm chosen and know who my death-partner is going to be and what her plans are. As I said, I've been here twelve weeks, meaning I've seen a dozen of these shows--along with two Wednesday specials, solo women. As I see it, the focus here is entirely on the women. The guests are almost always all male, in the entire time I've been here I've seen exactly one female guest, who was here with her husband. Some of the guests are gay, but they're a minority. Tomorrow night Ed and Geneviève will die as a couple, but it's her show. For the majority of the guests and the film buyers as well, Ed's just an adjunct, a stage prop. I'll choose my method at the last minute, with an eye to complementing the woman's death. If I had been paired up with Geneviève, as I hoped I'd be, I'd have chosen a cross-cut saw. The only way I'd do something different is if my partner chose something too light, like Brittney did. Not enough money in that."

"What did Brittney do?" Emily asked.

"She hanged herself," I replied.

"Oh." She studied Mitch's face for a moment. "So if you were paired with Julie or Denise, you'd do some kind of a knife death," she noted, and Mitch nodded. She then smiled mischievously. "What if you ended up paired with me?" she asked. "Would you do the Chinese rat torture?"

Mitch laughed. "If I ended up with you, Emily," he said, "my son would love it, because he'd get a lot more money than he would if I paired with Julie or Denise." Briefly, he summarized the show Robert and Angelina had put on. "Robert didn't complement Angelina's beheading especially well with the drill device, but the contrast was good, her death was sensual, his was a horror. That works. Personally, I think the Chinese rat torture, while it's going to be hard as hell on you, is going to be sensual too. So I'd go to the extreme book and choose something horrible. Drawing and quartering, maybe."

"Eew," Julie said succinctly.

"Pays well," he noted. "But you don't have to worry, Julie. Emily just arrived this week and I'm an old-timer. The odds of me being paired up with her are something like slim to none." He then looked disappointed again. "Although, so far, I do seem to be beating the odds. Who knows?"

It was very late by the time a somewhat tired-looking Geneviève returned to our table. Despite that, her manner was upbeat and cheerful. We didn't talk too much, and she focused her attention on Mitch. Soon enough they were having sex, and he did not last too very long. Afterwards, she gave Julie, Denise, and Emily long affectionate embraces. I had already told Julie about my plan to spend that night with Geneviève, and the two of us left--leaving the others looking a little sad. The next time they saw her, I knew, she'd be on the stage.

In her room, we made love for a long time, soft and gentle, much as we had on the beach earlier that day. She slept in my arms, but, not surprisingly, she slept very fitfully; twice she suddenly sat up straight with a look of near-panic in her eyes. I was able to calm her, though, and, after the sun rose, we slept soundly for perhaps three hours.

Everyone knew that on your last day, you were supposed to report to the clinic at ten or at three, depending on how complicated your performance might be; that information was posted everywhere. Geneviève and I rose about nine, showered, and, although I was in no way required to, I accompanied her there.

I had only been to the clinic briefly before, with Angelina, to learn how to do a tracheotomy, and I had not seen much of it. Seeing more details now, I found it to be impressively well-outfitted. A receptionist greeted us, and when Geneviève told her who she was and I told her I was just along to keep Geneviève company, we were shown into a spacious office where we met with one of the engineers, whose name was Fred Smith. He asked her what her choice was, and she told him--including, of course, the details about the slow speed and the fine teeth. More details were discussed than I had known there were--for example, he asked her if she wanted a head elevator so she could see the saw cutting her, and she said she did--although it was clear she hadn't considered that. As they talked, he made copious notes.

The next step was the body scan, so that a custom table cover could be made that would fit her form exactly. The scanner looked like a plain mat, but on inspection it could be seen that the surface consisted of thousands of tiny independent sensors that would fit themselves to a person's contours. Geneviève stretched herself out on it and spread her legs slightly--and then a little more when Fred told her that she needed more for, as he put it, "good visuals." Fred told her she had a choice about whether her arms were to be up, down, or out to the sides; cautioning her that arms stretched out demanded the use of a larger table. After trying both postures, she chose to have her arms down. He then placed several different sizes of headrests before she chose one. Once she was in position, Fred pressed a button and the computer took a reading.

"Do you want to use wipers on the blade?" he asked her as she was getting to her feet.

"What do they do?" she asked.

"Circular saws spray blood," he informed her. "If you don't use wipers, a lot of it will be carried up and around and sprayed generally toward your face; a minute or so in and you'll be covered with blood. If you do use them, blood will spray onto the floor under the table, but very little will end up on the upper surface of your body."

"Wipers, definitely," she said.

"Now," he continued, his notebook in his hand, "you've chosen a slow speed. We'll drop it a bit at the moment of truth, then speed it up again, that's standard. I do need to know how much lead time you want."

"Lead time?"

"Yes. Lead time in this case will be the time from when the blade begins to spin to the time it actually strikes your body. At max slow, it moves at one-quarter of a centimeter per second, or about 10 seconds per inch. If the blade's starting position is, let's say, between your feet, your lead time as it moves toward you would be about four minutes. That's probably too long, but the choice is yours."

"That is too long," she agreed. "I really don't know--maybe thirty seconds?"

"Thirty seconds it is," he said, making a note. "That means the blade will be positioned a little less than eight centimeters from your groin at start."

"That," I commented, "may be a long thirty seconds."

"Good visual, though," Fred argued. "Time for the tension to build."

Geneviève nodded. "Yes. Leave it at thirty seconds. Oh, and there's one more thing."

"What's that?" Fred asked her.

"The manacles. I want them fixed so that Jack can open them. After the shock sets in, I want him to open them, free my arms and legs."

"Risky," Fred warned. "You could lose control..."

"Jack will make the judgement. I trust him."

Fred nodded. "Done, then, manacles with releases." He looked at me. "You'll see a little lever at the top of the manacle, push it down to release it."

At that point, our session with Fred was over; the specifications he'd noted would be taken to engineering, and by that evening the device would be built and programmed. We were then shown to another office, where we were met by an older man who introduced himself as Dr. Silverman.

"With the death you've chosen," he explained, "the initial pain is considerable, the shock effects are very high, and the blood loss, after a very short time, can be massive. I'm going to recommend, strongly, a full battery of drugs. Agreed?"

"Yes," she answered. "I also want to use the sealant on the blade."

"The sealant," he warned, "will delay your demise considerably."

"That's why I want it."

"Done, then, sealant it is. It's standard for us to clean out your colon, of course, especially in a case like this, where it's going to be cut. I strongly recommend we evacuate the contents of your stomach as well, and that you take the hunger-suppressor. The damage being done to your lower body is very likely to provoke vomiting. Unless you're interested in being able to vomit blood, we can also use the reflex inhibitor."

"No," she answered. Her voice was just a little shaky. "I don't think I need to vomit at all."

He smiled, his manner fatherly. "I know it's a bit difficult to talk about the specifics," he said. "But you have chosen a violent death. Some of the drugs we're going to give you, the relaxers and those that remove natural inhibitions, will help with that."

Silverman then took us into an examining room, where Geneviève's vitals were checked and where she was given several pills and several injections. The relaxants worked quickly and the effects were noticeable with a few minutes. She was placed on a table, anesthetic sprayed into her nose, and a thin tube run into it and down into her stomach, after which the contents were evacuated. The enema, she was told, would be done later, closer to, as they put it, "showtime," so that her colon did not have a chance to fill up again.

The next step was a private meeting with Ed, who had been going through a parallel set of procedures, to decide on the sequence of events on stage and how they would interact with each other. As a hedge against disagreements, this meeting was held in the presence of a mediator, who asked but did not demand that I not be present. I did not insist, I waited outside. The discussions took over an hour, after which Geneviève rejoined me and told me everything had been worked out. The only serious argument they'd had, she said, concerned her refusal to have intercourse with him on stage.

"But that," she said, putting her arms around my neck and kissing me, "is something I will never do again, as long as I live."

Repeatedly, over the course of the next few hours, Geneviève was subjected to a variety of medical tests to determine how well the various drugs she'd been given were working, and at times she was given another pill or shot. I asked her how she was feeling.

"A little odd," she said, "but okay. I am much more relaxed than I was last night. I'm going to be killed in a few hours, but I'm not too very worried about it anymore. Of course, I have no way of knowing how well the pain muters or coagulants are doing, but Dr. Silverman says I'm doing fine. I don't feel at all hungry even though my stomach is empty." She waved her hands. "The only thing bothering me is that I am already, and it's getting stronger, sexually excited. I really would like to make love with you, but I'm not supposed to do that, not until I get on that

stage." She grimaced. "I'm going to be more than ready by then, but I still want to leave things as they are as far as fucking is concerned."

Late in the afternoon, Geneviève was told it was time for her enema. I offered to again accompany her, but this she said she wanted to do by herself, she didn't want me watching her emptying her bowels. I did not argue; I waited for her, and she was gone for quite a while.

"That," she said when she came back, "was strange."

"Strange?"

"Yes. I expected an ordinary enema. You know what I mean, water gets squirted up your butt, you let it sit for a few minutes, then go blow it out. That is not what they did."

"What did they do?"

"They had this device that was sort of like two long tubes stuck together, one larger than the other. They slipped it up my rear; it didn't hurt, but it was a little uncomfortable." She paused and shook her head. "They just kept pushing it in and pushing it in. I don't know how far it went, it seemed to me they must have pushed twenty feet of it in there." She laid her hand on her belly above her navel. "I could feel it moving, way up here."

"I guess they went all the way up into the small intestine," I suggested.

"It felt like they were going for my throat! Anyway, then they turned it on and I could feel it pulsing inside me. Dr. Silverman explained that what it was doing was squirting solution up there through one of the tubes and sucking it--and everything else--out through the other. They slowly pulled it back out. Took quite a long time. When it was over, they pronounced me clean. I asked them why all enemas weren't done that way. They told me they couldn't do that, the procedure can cause your intestine to close up and quit working." She smiled. "In my case, of course, I am not going to live long enough to need a digestive system again."

Not long after that, Geneviève sent me away, telling me to go back to the club, rejoin the usual group, and have dinner. Remarkably--I hadn't known anything about this before--they had a few clergymen on the island--they were only there on days the shows were taking place--whose role it was to allow religious candidates to make a final peace before they went on stage. Geneviève, while she did not consider herself especially religious and had never been a church-goer, still planned to talk with one of these for a while. Given that practically all the deaths on stage--with a few exceptions, like Joanna, which was a murder--were actually suicides, I wondered if they had representatives from organizations like the Catholic Church, which considered suicide a sin.

I assumed they were there primarily because they were paid to be there, and, with the economy the way it was, nothing that paid was being turned down. I later found out that my assumption was correct, and that Geneviève, who'd been raised Catholic, had indeed been to see one of those priests.

Back at the club, I found Mitch, Julie, Denise, and Emily in our usual place, all looking a little somber.

"Is she okay?" Julie asked as I sat down.

"As okay as can be expected," I replied. "She is ready, I have no doubts about that." That didn't seem to help. "Look," I said, "this is not right. I am well aware that we're all going to miss the hell out of her, me probably more than any of you. But she said it herself--it isn't going to be long before we join her. Each one of us is going to be out on that stage soon enough, ready to accept whatever pain is involved in whatever method we choose and ready to die. We should be excited, eager to see her performance. I know it isn't easy. But above all she should not look out at

the audience and see you guys, the people she was closest to, her family here, looking the way you do right now. It won't help her get through it."

"Jack," Mitch said, "is right. I'm the old-timer, I should have been saying all this. Instead, I've been sitting here wishing it was my night instead of Ed's. He's a buddy too, that isn't fair to him."

"Actually," Julie said, "if it was my turn instead of Geneviève's..."

"Yes?" I prompted.

"I'd want the rest of you to be acting like Jack says we should act. I would not want to look out at the audience and see my friends looking sad. I chose this, no one forced me. Maybe we can't be happy, but being excited is what's right." Emily chimed in with agreement; Denise just nodded and said she'd work on it. She evidently did, because by the time we went to dinner she was acting--and, more importantly, looking--much more upbeat.

The gongs rang, as always, and as always we all went to the theater. Everything proceeded as it had proceeded before. Two machines sat on stage, on the right the saw and on the left a table device of uncertain function. The large bed stood between them, as usual. And then, Saul was introducing Ed and Geneviève as the pair who would meet their end that night. Geneviève remained silent while Ed gave a short speech, informing us that they would take turns and that Geneviève would go first. She was, I noticed, smiling, seemingly at ease, and gazing directly at us while she stood on the stage. A moment later, she summoned me to the stage, and Ed called for Diane to come up and join him. We were not seated far apart and we went up together.

"Sex first," Geneviève said when I joined her on stage. "Just follow our lead." After saying something to Diane--probably something similar--Ed took Geneviève's hand and led her to the mattress. He laid down as soon as he got there; Geneviève walked around behind him, dropped down to her hands and knees, and kissed him. She worked her way down his body until she came to his cock, and then she took it into her mouth. Diane and I stood by idly, watching, waiting for cues from the two of them.

Geneviève sucked him for a little while, then rose and motioned for Diane to come over. She did; following subtle direction from both Ed and Geneviève, she straddled his legs and sank slowly down on his long erection, taking it fully inside herself. Geneviève crouched over his face, and he began licking and tonguing her clitoris. She reached out to me and I came around to stand in front of her.

"Compromise," she said shortly. Then she slipped my rising erection into her mouth, and it quickly expanded.

Ed was trying to restrain his orgasm; periodically he laid his hands on Diane's thighs and pressed down, effectively telling her to remain still. Geneviève seemed to be focused on not pushing me too hard, but Ed, on the other hand, worked her groin with a vengeance. After a short time, Geneviève let go of my cock, pressed the side of her face into my groin, and shuddered with a long smooth orgasm.

Then she rose, rather quickly. Taking my hand, she led me to the saw machine. She stopped for a moment, inspecting the circular blade which rose a good six inches above the slot it emerged from. It was very thin, highly polished; the hooked teeth were tiny.

Geneviève touched it lightly. "Razor-sharp," she said in a louder voice, clearly intending to allow the audience to hear. "It should cut into my body very, very, easily..." She then turned to me. Her eyes were clear and very bright. "Help me up, Jack," she said.

I did, and she climbed onto the table gracefully. Ed and Diane, having risen from the mat, stood close by, hand in hand. Geneviève settled herself into the contour formed into the upper

surface of the table, the contour that exactly fitted her body, and put her head back on the headrest. Her right side faced the audience.

"Would you guide my ankles, Jack?" she asked. I nodded and did, watching the manacle snap shut across her trim ankle once her leg was in place. Once both of her legs had been manacled, the groove between her vaginal lips was perfectly aligned with the slot in the table, the slot through which the blade would move. She then picked up the remote with her left hand, placed her right wrist in its manacle, and, once it was fixed in place, did the same with her left wrist. Completely bound and helpless, she looked down at the saw, then up at me.

Then, watching my eyes, she pushed the button on the remote and let it slip from her hand. The saw came to life, the blade spinning lazily and moving forward very slowly. It was actually much quieter than I had expected, a low even humming sound.

I laid my hands on her groin and ran a finger up between her vaginal lips slowly, and she quivered in response. Knowing that she had just had an orgasm, I felt that exciting her would help make things easier--and knowing that the saw would not reach her for about thirty seconds, I kept my hand there. She was very wet and seemed to be getting wetter. Leaning over, I kissed her.

"Be careful," she said. "Don't let it cut your hand."

"I won't," I assured her. I moved my head down and sucked on her nipples, first one and then the other. I kissed her again, and she kissed me back with a savage passion. She seemed to be having a series of small orgasms as I caressed her. As we waited for the saw to strike her I stroked her groin for a few more seconds, then moved my hand away, mindful to pull it straight up. I kept kissing her for a moment, then raised my head looked down at the saw. It was at that point less than an inch away from her groin.

She looked too, then looked up at me, her expression a perfect combination of extreme excitement and intense, if controlled, fear. "I can feel the breeze from it..." she said. Her voice was steady but she was breathing very hard. "I... I want it, I want it to cut me there..."

I laid my hand against her face. "Almost there, Geneviève," I said, nodding. "Almost time."

A moment later, her body jerked. We both looked. The leading edge of the spinning blade was actually between her vaginal lips, causing them to flutter slightly but doing no damage. It seemed to have stopped there, but I also remembered Fred telling us it would slow down momentarily at "the moment of truth."

Geneviève stared at it, her eyes very wide. "I can feel it touching me," she said. "It feels smooth, warm..." The onlookers, like those of us on stage, were absolutely still and silent.

Then I saw the blade move forward, the tone dropped in pitch slightly, and suddenly the slot around it filled up with blood, blood which was immediately swept away and sprayed onto the floor. Geneviève's arms and legs jerked hard against the restraining manacles; the center of her body rose a little and she began to quiver. She threw her head back. The whites of her eyes were visible all around the irises.

"Ahhhhh...!" she cried, although the cry wasn't really very loud. "Aiiiiieee... oh, it's cutting me, it's cutting into me, right now...!" Her teeth chattered.

I grabbed her shoulder and held it tight. "Hold on, this'll be the worst of it.." I said, although I had no idea if that was really true. The saw kept moving, cutting up between her legs smoothly. Her body became even more rigid, and I saw her breasts flush pinkly. I remembered what Ramon had said and wondered if she was, in fact, having an orgasm.

She did not confirm it. After a moment she raised her head and stared at me. "Hold my thighs," she pleaded. "Hold my thighs, my hips, my body wants to squirm, don't let it, I want it to cut straight... oh. oh, god, oh...!"

I moved quickly to grab one of her thighs, and Ed, realizing I probably could not hold them both, grabbed the other. We held her legs down tightly as the blade continued to cut into her. The edge of the saw was about an inch in by then, slicing a clean slot in the smooth skin of her pubic area. Blood constantly bubbled in the spaces on either side of the blade and sprayed onto the floor, but very little was visible on her body. She alternated between raising her head to stare at the blade cutting her and tossing it from side to side.

She then amazed me by seeming to remember, in spite of what was happening to her, that she had an audience. She turned her head and looked at them, a beautiful expression of complete surrender, complete acceptance, on her face.

The saw, of course, kept moving. A moment later the tone changed again, became deeper. Geneviève gasped in a deep breath, held it for several seconds, then let out a soft, sensual, mournful cry. I wasn't sure what had changed until I became aware of pinging sounds, like light hail, and realized the sound was coming from bone fragments peppering the floor. The saw was cutting into her pubic bone.

Her thighs, though, were beginning to relax a little. Two inches of the saw was inside her body by then, cutting a perfectly straight line up the middle of her body, as if aiming for her navel. At that moment, all thoughts of how much I would miss her were gone from my mind. The erotic power of the scene was incredible, and Geneviève looked absolutely beautiful, every part of her, as she surrendered her life to the relentless spinning blade. Seconds passed, and the tone of the saw changed again. I moved one hand from her thigh and laid it on her lower belly close to the blade, feeling the vibration, feeling her skin and muscle bounce slightly as the blade cut through it.

At two and a half inches in, the tone of the saw's hum changed again and her legs went rigid again for a moment, but then quickly relaxed, much more completely than before. Possibly, I thought, the blade was now cutting into her spine. I looked up at her face; she was staring at the saw, watching it cut her. Releasing her thigh, I moved up to her head and caressed her face.

"I can't feel my legs anymore," she said, confirming what I'd thought about her spine. "I'm beginning to get numb down there... I feel lightheaded..."

"You're losing a lot of blood, Geneviève," I told her. "I know it doesn't look like that to you, but it's all over the floor under the table."

She turned her head and glanced at my cock, which was standing out rigidly from my body. "You'd better give me that soon," she said. "I don't think I can take too much more..."

I looked down at the saw. Most of the disk was still spinning between her legs, but the leading edge was close to three inches above her groin. The line was still straight, the cut still clean. I wondered if it was cutting her aorta yet. I was acutely aware that once I put my cock in her mouth, I wasn't going to last long, but judging the timing was difficult.

"I wouldn't mind it," Geneviève added, "if I died with your cock in my mouth... I'd like that..."

That decided it for me. I clambered onto the table and offered it to her, and she immediately took it in and began working her tongue around it. She couldn't do much, and I resisted the urge to move my hips, I knew I was going to come soon enough as it was. Evidently feeling much less pain now, she looked up at me with a soft loving expression as she sucked me. I moved my gaze from her face to her quivering breasts to her trembling abdomen, where yet another inch of the blade had cut its way into her; it was closer to her navel now than to her groin, having moved more than halfway. Ed was no longer holding her thigh, he was merely caressing her legs. Like me, he

was having a hard time tearing his eyes away from the powerful sight of the sharp blade slicing through her soft smooth flesh.

She seemed to me to be going into shock; in any event she seemed under control. Deciding that it was time, I reached down and pressed the releases, freeing her hands and arms. Immediately she put both hands on my body, one on my rear end and one on my thigh. Not wanting to pull out of her mouth, I asked Ed to unlock her ankles. He did, and that made the whole scene much more spectacular; she was now free, lying passively on the table and allowing the saw to cut her. It was too much for me, and, with a loud groan, I unloaded into her mouth. As always, she swallowed it. As my cock slipped from her mouth, she even managed to give me a little smile.

Then, showing an incredible degree of discipline I really hadn't known she possessed, she turned her head toward the audience, gave them a smile as well, and lifted her arms in a gesture much like a stage magician's assistant might use, gesturing with one hand toward the saw that was still cutting her.

"I can't move my legs," she said in a low voice. She sounded very weak. "I want my left leg up, bent at the knee..." I moved quickly to raise it for her. From the onlookers' point of view, her smooth inner thigh now made a background for the whirling blade, which was approaching her navel. The floor under the table was slick with blood, it splashed on my feet and legs. Bone fragments still pinged on the floor and flew about, along with an occasional bit of flesh. I felt sure the exit cut in her back was nowhere near as smooth and clean as the entry cut.

The blade bisected her navel, which filled momentarily with blood before the saw cut on through it and swept the blood away. Her arms fell back to the table, her strength gone. I lowered her leg and moved back to her face. She stared at me and blinked rapidly for a moment. Her face was very pale and I knew this was nearing an end.

"Jack..." she whispered. "Jack, it was good, wasn't it, it was good..."

"It was incredible, Geneviève," I assured her. "Far beyond what I could have imagined."

"I'm glad..." She took in a very deep breath. "Jack, I can't see... can't see your face, you're too bright... why are you so bright? I... feel... odd..." She then let out the breath and her chest became still. Her eyes looked very dark, and only then did I realize that her pupils were expanding--and I knew what that meant. She made a tiny motion as if to raise her head again, and then her right arm flipped up and back down, smacking the table. Her fingers twitched, and after that there was no further movement of her body. Her eyes remained open, staring at me, but they looked blank.

And the machinery, knowing what had just happened, spun the blade slowly down to a stop. The edge was perhaps an inch above her navel; the incision down the middle of her lower body remained perfectly straight and clean. Everything had gone exactly as she'd planned it.

But Saul Levenson was already announcing her death, and I was already feeling the loss. I just stood there, gazing down at her. After a moment I became aware of droplets of water falling on her, and realized they were my own tears.

The show was not yet over, though, and Ed, accompanied by Diane, moved toward the other table. Like the table Geneviève had used, the top was sculptured to fit his form exactly, but there was no slot, no blade, it was not a saw device. Just as she had done, however, he laid down on it, allowed Diane to guide his feet to the lower manacles, picked up the remote with one hand, then put his own wrists into the upper manacles. Leaning over the table, Diane took his cock into her mouth, her coppery hair caressing his thighs. She sucked him for a few minutes, taking his long cock down into her throat occasionally, then climbed on top of the table. Kneeling over his hips, she guided him up into herself, taking him deep. Once she was settled down onto him, he

triggered the device and flipped the remote away. The machine began to hum slightly, but for a moment, nothing happened.

Then, without warning, there was a sharp "ka-chunk!" sound, a gout of blood flew up from his body, and a thin, sharply pointed steel spike appeared from the far left side of his abdomen, clearly having pierced him through from below. As was common, he grunted loudly, his eyes flew open wide, and he stiffened from the shock of this first injury. The machine continued to hum, and after a moment there was another "ka-chunk!" and another spike appeared, this one emerging from just under his ribs, this time on his far right side. Diane, her hips squirming on him, reached down to caress his face.

"Be careful," he warned, his voice strained. "You don't know where they'll appear, don't let them hit your arms..."

"It doesn't matter to me," she almost crooned. Her green eyes seemed to flash. "Doesn't matter at all."

"Diane..." Ed started to say. But he was cut off by another spike, which shot up through his body near his armpit. He groaned loudly, his fists clenching and opening alternately. My hands still on Geneviève's cooling body, I just watched.

At a rate of about one per minute, new spikes made their appearance. Another pierced his belly near his waistline, again near the edge of his body, and yet another rose from his chest close to his left nipple, this one more centered. He coughed a fine bloody mist. Diane, keeping his cock deep inside herself, kept caressing his face. Another spike shot up, tearing through his lower abdomen fairly close to her body. She ignored that one, but then one sprang out from just under his shoulder, near his neck, and that one caught her forearm and tore a deep gash in it. Acting almost as if she was in a trance, she raised her arm and looked at the streaming blood--her own, not Ed's.

She then looked back at his face and leaned forward until the point of the spike jutting up from Ed's lower belly was in contact with her own. She continued to move forward and downward, and it indented her belly deeply.

"Diane, no... Ed mumbled.

"I want to die with you, Ed," she whispered. "I love you..." She pushed harder and the spike entered her belly suddenly, provoking a sudden thin trickle of blood. She gasped, but, with a grimace and a look of determination, she pushed on down, driving the spike more deeply into her own abdomen. Because her body was substantially narrower than his, she was coming down between the spikes, but soon her breast touched the one piercing his chest, indenting it more and more deeply as she continued to lower her body onto his.

None of us ever knew what her intentions might have been. The wound in her belly probably could have been dealt with in Medical. But at that point another spike shot up through the lower part of Ed's chest and drove deeply into Diane's, pinning them together. The device had obviously been set to do a number of these nonfatally as far as Ed was concerned, but it was in no way calibrated to the redhead's body, where it was striking her was simply chance--and this one struck some major blood vessel. She looked startled as blood poured down the shaft, pooled on Ed's chest, and ran off the side. She also seemed to lose her strength and she sank on down, the spike piercing her breast deeply. A moment later her body jerked violently as another spike shot up through Ed's abdomen and ripped into her near her solar plexus. She was bleeding profusely and squirming in pain--she did not have the benefit of having taken any of the drugs--and by then she was fully in contact with Ed's body, lying on top of him. Her legs trembled and she clawed at the table, and she gave a short loud cry as another spike slammed into her chest.

A moment later, she went limp. Ed, still alive, could do nothing except kiss her head. He did not last too much longer either; after two more spikes pierced him, his head rolled to the side and his eyes began to glaze. The machine went silent. A medical technician came out and checked Diane. Looking up at Saul, he shook his head.

"Both of them are gone," Saul intoned. "Our stage has claimed three this evening. For those candidates who may be wondering, Diane's beneficiaries will receive the same compensation as Ed's, even though her death here tonight was unplanned."

The curtain closed, but I stayed with Geneviève's corpse, I simply wasn't ready to leave yet. Julie, Denise, Emily, and Mitch all joined me there, each of them kissing her cheek or her forehead. Julie and Emily both had tear-stained faces; as ever, Denise did not seem as deeply affected, or at least did not show it. After a little while--and a little urging from the staff--we did leave, we went back to the bar where we all ordered stiff drinks. I sat silent and moody, remembering the days we'd had with her.

"You do realize," Denise said after a while, "that Geneviève's performance was easily the best one we've seen since we've been here. Considering what we're supposed to be doing here, it was magnificent. Especially at the end, when you freed her arms and legs and she made those gestures. Could not believe it."

I nodded. "It was," I agreed. "Up there on stage, the erotic power of watching the saw cut her--especially where it was cutting her--was unbelievable. It'll stay with me for a long time--well, as long a time as I have left. Next week, maybe, I can think about it and it'll arouse me. Maybe the week after. Right now all I can think about is that I can't talk to her, I can't hear that musical laugh of hers, or look into those dark eyes, and I never will again."

"Jack," Denise said, "we know you loved her. We all did. She was one of a kind." She stared at the table for a moment, then looked up at me. Still controlled, still strong, the way she always was. "She's gone, we're still here. Whatever pain she suffered up there, it's over. It isn't over for us, and it won't be for a while." She sighed. "But that's the way it always is, isn't it? The ones left behind, they're the ones who really suffer."

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Geneviève was gone but the days continued to pass, as they always do. On Tuesday, Paula replaced her in the Six, and a man named Vince, who spoke with a slight Italian accent, took Ed's place. The other four were carried over, including Mitch. On Saturday he was not chosen again; the death-pair was George K and Jenna. On Sunday George K, after a fairly extended sexual session with Jenna, faced a machine wielding machetes, which hacked him viciously across both thighs, his chest, and both sides before finally beheading him.

Jenna--one of the more robust girls in the candidate pool--was dark haired and dark eyed, and had somewhat larger breasts than was usual. She was well known for her seemingly permanent sultry look. Her performance was a little different from the usual. George K had had himself locked into one of the usual frames before signaling to the machete machine to start attacking him. Jenna, on the other hand, remained free, unshackled. She did not use a remote, she went to her machine--at that point its function was not obvious--and switched it on manually. Then she crouched in front of it.

A moment later, a door opened in the front of the thing and a short slender barrel that looked like it might fire .22s--or at most thirty caliber--emerged from it. It moved around a little and another barrel, a large heavy one that looked like the barrel of a 12 gauge shotgun, joined it.

Both were clearly on swivels that allowed them to choose angle and direction, and each had a little electronic eye mounted atop it.

Then, suddenly, taking us all by surprise, four steel shafts shot out of the contraption. Two of them pierced Jenna's abdomen below her waist, near her sides, and two went in just below her armpits. They went all the way through her, and the fact that they had heavily barbed tips became obvious. Jenna groaned as blood started flowing from all four piercings.

"Now," Jenna told her audience, "it can do whatever it wants. I can't move." She gave a strained laugh. "And I think it wants to shoot me."

The machine did not make a liar out of her. The small barrel came up under her right breast, there was a bang, and more blood began to flow. That it was small-caliber was demonstrated by the fact that the bullet did not go all the way through. It continued, firing several shots into each of her breasts; each time her body jerked and she grunted. The mechanized barrel then pressed itself into her right nipple and fired four times in quick succession. Her arms were still free and she apparently could not stop herself from grabbing the gun barrel, but she could not move it or stop it and only succeeded in burning her hands. Leaving her breasts bleeding freely, it moved to her belly and put six or seven more bullets into her, mostly around her navel, some from a few inches out, some with the muzzle pressed against her skin. She was bleeding profusely by then, having taken twenty or more bullets, but she still seemed strong, very much alive.

The barrel then dropped down and began nosing around between her legs. It was apparent that this was not unexpected for Jenna, she spread her legs to allow it to do whatever it wanted. It did not fire, it kept nosing around until it located her vagina, and once it did it began sliding inside. It was too slender to even cause discomfort, and it went on in about six or eight inches before stopping.

It still didn't fire, it began slowly sliding in and out. At the same time, the other barrel, the larger one, started to move. It drew close to her skin, then started moving up the centerline of her body. Reaching her throat, it continued up and over her chin, then moved to her lips. With a strained little smile, she opened her mouth and the barrel moved inside. Once it did, Jenna started moving her head, treating it as she always treated a man's cock in her mouth. It moved slightly, back and forth, and this continued for several minutes.

Where this was going was at this point pretty obvious. Jenna began moving her legs around the barrel inside her, then stiffened and trembled for a moment, looking as if she might have had--or faked--an orgasm. As she relaxed, the gun inside her fired.

Her eyes widened and she went stiff again. Blood started running out below the barrel. A few seconds passed, and the gun fired again, provoking more bleeding and a loud groan from Jenna. The machine paused for a few second before firing a third time. After a fourth shot a river of blood was flowing out of her vagina. At that point Jenna looked out at her audience, a tormented expression on her face,

And then the 12-gauge in her mouth fired. There was a loud bang and the whole back of Jenna's head was blown off, spattering hair, blood, and brains all over the stage behind her. Her body twitched a few times, then became still. Saul, as usual, announced that she was dead, but no one had to be told that.

"I've heard it's rare for women to use guns," Denise observed. "But I must say, this one made for a damn good show. Maybe more women will do that." She glanced at me. "Not any of us, of course."

"Of course," I agreed.

The following week, Mitch, Vince, Kim, and Paula were all carried over, with Jeff and Mimi--another slim blond--filling out the Six. On Saturday Mitch was disappointed yet again, as Vince and Kim were selected.

Paula had by that time more or less joined our little group. She was only a little older than Emily at twenty, and, while she certainly wasn't indifferent to men--she and I had been periodic sex partners for quite a while by then--she had a somewhat greater interest in Lesbian sex than most of the women on the island, and she and Emily often engaged each other, to the delight of many of the male onlookers. For some time she had resisted talking about the circumstances that had brought her to the island, but on Saturday night, more than a little intoxicated by her favorite margaritas, she started telling us the story.

"When I was eighteen," she began, "I went off to college, on an athletic scholarship, to UCLA. In high school, in Jacksonville, Florida, I'd started playing soccer, and I'd gotten good enough at it to earn that scholarship. My freshman year went well enough, but the news from home was not good. My mother had been laid off from her job long before I left, and Dad lost his as well. They were really struggling, trying to hold on to the house and keep food on the table for my two younger sisters. They weren't able to help me in much of any way, but that was okay, UCLA was paying my way, and, while I never had any extra money for anything, I still counted myself lucky. I wasn't able to afford to go back to Florida during the summer, but I did find a tips-only waitress job at a restaurant near campus, and that let me rent a room in a boarding house and keep eating. I still counted myself lucky, and I kept thinking that until I got a letter from UCLA, sent to my folks in Florida and forwarded to me in Westwood. I won't ever forget how I felt when I read it."

"What did it say?" I asked.

"Let me guess," Denise put in. "I think I know, because I got one of those myself. The college is out of money and you are gone."

Paula nodded. "It was apologetic. But it hurt, still. Cuts in the budget, things had to be eliminated. Soccer at UCLA was being cut back, all scholarships for women's soccer were being withdrawn. I'd be kept on a list if things changed and blah, blah. The bottom line was that my scholarship was gone and with it, my ability to go to school. There wasn't any way my parents could help and, as everybody knows, student loans are just about impossible to get these days."

"Post-docs," Denise said, "are the same. So what did you do?"

"At first, I just idled along, waitressing. I wasn't sure where to go or what to do. But the restaurant wasn't doing well either--practically none of them are these days--and, that December, the owner closed it--'temporarily,' he said. I was out of work and couldn't find anything else, there were a lot of out-of-school students in Westwood trying to find jobs. I left the West Coast, I caught a ride with friends as far as Atlanta and then got a ride with a truck driver--a nice guy, he didn't ask me to fuck him or anything for the ride, he said he just liked having a pretty girl for company--back to Jacksonville."

"Where things were no better," I said.

"Where things were even worse," she said with a grimace. "My parents had changed a lot since I left. They were desperate, you could see it in their eyes. My dad had managed an auto dealership--Chrysler--and it had gone bankrupt out from under him. He really didn't have much of any other skills and he was working as a bag boy at the Food Lion when I got back. Mom was making more money, but what she was doing was weird. Before she was laid off, back when I was in high school, she worked as a manager for a Gap store. Now, of all things, she was in

construction, working as a roofer! I hardly recognized her at first, she'd been a little fat before I left and now she was all lean and hard and suntanned."

"Economic hard times," Julie said, "are good for your figure."

"In her case, definitely. It wasn't enough, though. They were months behind on the mortgage, behind on the utilities, it was all caving in on them. I looked for work and found small temporary things here and there, nothing that paid much and nothing that lasted. In the spring we ran out of time. The bank foreclosed and we had to move out. We had no place to go and all the money we had went for food and gas, the homeless shelter was full to overflowing, and we ended up in a tent city--a 'Hooverville'--that had been set up in a public park in Jacksonville. There were showers there and so on, facilities, and the city just sort of pretended we weren't there."

"Which is where the recruiter from the island found you," I guessed.

"Yes, but not right away. Things got worse for us before that. Mom was working for a company that did repairs on existing homes, not a builder, but even so, business was bad and she got laid off again. She couldn't find anything else and things got even more desperate for us, we were getting to the point where we couldn't afford food. My sisters were spending half their days standing in lines at the soup kitchens." She paused and sighed. "So Mom took advantage of the fact that doing physical work had toned her up--she was 42 then, and still looked good--and she took to the streets, she started working as a hooker." She looked at Julie and Denise. "Not like you two have talked about, a casual fuck for a place to sleep. Full-blown, mini-skirt, high heels, heavy-makeup under the streetlight hooker."

"I might have done that too," Julie observed, "but girls I knew who did do it tell me there's just not a lot of business. Most guys can't afford it."

"Exactly, and that's what Mom found out. Worse, she was out there competing with 18 year olds for what business there was. She did look good, but it's tough for a 42 year old woman to compete with an 18 year old."

"Geneviève managed it very well," Denise commented, an unusual tinge of sadness in her voice.

"Geneviève was one in a million," I almost snapped. "And we can't dwell on that, that's over, that's past, that's gone." Denise nodded, and Paula went on with her story.

"So, as things got a little worse for us," Paula continued, "I told Mom I was going to join her. She tried to stop me, but I was determined, if she could do that, I could. I told her that if she didn't I'd just find another street corner somewhere else. So we started going out as a pair, and we made a bit of it, a mother-daughter pair. We had what we called our special act. I'd do a strip-tease for the john, get naked for him, kiss him, and let him play with my body, and Mom would go down on him. Usually he came in her mouth and that was the end of it. Some men would insist on fucking me, though, even though we charged more for that. When they did, Mom would put the condom on him and guide him into me."

"Strange times we live in," Denise commented.

"Tell me about it. It was almost killing Dad, his wife and daughter going out night after night, working the streets. And it wasn't working all that well anyhow, it seemed like every week there were fewer johns out there than the week before. That's when the recruiter turned up, looking for likely candidates in the tent city."

"You accepted immediately?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. I refused. He didn't take offense, he just gave me his card and went on his way. Later, I told my parents about it, a sort of a 'what's the world coming to' conversation."

"That wasn't the end of it, of course."

"No, or I wouldn't be here." She looked up at the ceiling for a moment. "Mom--Mom was ready. She would have done it in a heartbeat. She'd had enough, she'd tried so hard and every day was worse than the day before. So she insisted on going to see the recruiter. Dad yelled and screamed and it threw our whole family into a frenzy but she would not be talked out of it. My mother can be a very strong and stubborn woman."

"So how'd you end up here?" I asked.

"I'm getting to that. She went to see him--and he refused her, he said she was too old. She came back looking crushed, looking years older than she had when she left."

"So you jumped in."

"No... no, I didn't. Frankly, I was too scared. But then Mom started talking to me... she was telling me, it's better that one of us goes than the whole family... she and Dad were too old, my sisters were too young, but..."

Denise looked incredulous. "Are you trying to tell us," she asked, "that your own mother talked you into coming here? Knowing you'd be coming here to kill yourself?"

Paula hesitated for a long moment, chewing her lip. "Yes," she said finally. "That's why I don't like to talk about it. I don't want people to think my Mom's a monster, she isn't. She just couldn't see any other way out. With the benefit money, she said, they could start new--maybe set up a small business of some sort..."

"Your Dad didn't protest?" I asked. "I mean, you said he was upset at you and your mother working as hookers, and that he screamed the place down over the idea of her coming here... didn't he raise an objection about you being coerced into it?"

"I wasn't coerced, Jack," she said defensively. "I was convinced. And Dad... when he found out, Dad left us. Just walked out. I don't know where he went, I didn't see him again. Never will, I don't guess."

"Every story we hear here," Denise observed, "is worse than the last one. I mean, I understand that we're a select group, we all have hard-luck stories, we wouldn't be here if we didn't. I just don't see how they can get any worse."

"Oh, Denise," Paula said. "I wouldn't say that. I really wouldn't."

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As always, we were all in the audience for the show the next evening, to watch the last moments of Vince and Kim. Vince had chosen a method that, while it looked at first glance as if it might be one of the milder ones, it was not--he'd selected a garotte, close to the equivalent of a short-drop hanging. Kim was very secretive about her plan, when we asked her about she just laughed and told us to wait and see. Things began with Vince seating himself in a chair and putting a broad leather strap around his own neck, the ends of which were picked up by some machinery in the chair back. After that, the familiar automatic manacles snapped closed around his wrists and ankles. Kim then dropped to one knee in front of him and started playing with his cock. Once it started to rise, she slipped a cock ring down over it. At that point, Vince triggered his remote and tossed it aside, and a visible wheel behind the chair started slowly turning, snuggling the leather strap up against his throat. Once he began to struggle a little for breath, Kim took his cock into her mouth, sweeping her long black hair back so we could all see. The wheel continued to turn slowly, and Vince quite obviously found it harder and harder to breathe. It did not affect his erection, though, if anything he got harder. And he remained hard as his body began to fight against the lack

of oxygen. Some long minutes later, he came into Kim's mouth; she let some of the semen back out atop his erection so we could all see, then carefully cleaned him with her tongue. His body spasmed a few more times, then became still. Because of the cock ring, his erection remained.

As Vince was coming, Kim had triggered her own remote and then discarded it. Now, at the back of the stage, a peculiar little device made its entrance. It appeared to be a small robot on wheels, somewhat resembling R2-D2 from *Star Wars* except that it had a face, two large electronic eyes that were half shuttered near the top, and a grillwork "mouth." It rolled around seemingly at random for a few minutes, then happened to turn in the Asian girl's direction. Once it did, the eyes opened wide twice, in exaggerated fashion, and it rolled directly toward her. Shutter appeared over the edges of the eyes in the center and at the corners of the grillwork mouth, giving it a grinning mouth and frowning eyes, a diabolical look.

Kim, still on one knee in front of Vince's corpse, did not see it coming. When it was about ten feet from her, a panel at one side opened and it fired one of the little four-inch darts. The dart struck Kim in the left hip and, as expected, went in to the feathers.

Kim jumped up with a little shriek and ran away from it, her long black hair streaming. The dart had moved too quickly for me to see if it had a broadhead or needlepoint, but from her swift running I assumed needlepoint. Even so, blood was already streaming down the back of her leg. The little robot followed her but apparently lost sight of her as she went around the chair and started wandering at random again, its cartoonish face blank.

After a moment, Kim came back around the chair as well; the robot was then fairly far away. She went to Vince's corpse and straddled his legs, facing him, and settled down on his cock--still erect because of the cock-ring--taking it far inside herself. The robot chanced to turn in her direction again and went straight toward her, its mechanical face diabolical again. Again, at ten feet, it fired a dart, and this one struck her in the left side of her back, below her shoulder blade. She squealed and her body went stiff, but this time she did not jump up, she kept moving up and down on Vince's dead, but erect, cock. The robot fired again, planting another dart in her back, down lower. At that point she did get up, and again she ran around the chair, causing the robot to lose sight of her. Once it had wandered away, she came back and again took Vince's cock back inside herself, this time facing away from him.

It wasn't long before the robot happened to turn in her direction again, and as before it came back swiftly and fired a dart into her belly alongside her navel. "Yes, little toy," she said to it. "I can run no more. Shoot your little arrows into me, kill me now." It obliged her, firing a dart into her left breast, striking her nipple almost directly. It then swung around to the right and put a dart in her side near her waistline, followed by one on her left side. She was bleeding freely, blood streaming down all over Vince's legs, pooling on the floor. With obvious effort, she lifted herself off Vince's cock and raised her legs.

"Now here," she said in a weak voice. "Here." Whether keyed by her voice or by the visual she was presenting, the robot fired the next dart squarely into her vagina. She gave voice to a wavering moan as blood gushed out of her. She started to slide down, her strength apparently gone, but the robot did not stop, it fired another into her lower belly. Slowly and somehow rather gracefully she slid off Vince's thighs and crumpled on the floor. The robot moved in close and fired another dart into her side just below her ribs.

Then it stopped, shut itself down, and remained motionless. Saul announced that Kim had died and that the show was over, and people began filing out. Julie and I called it a night early that evening, and we returned to our room where I turned on the TV, something I had not done in a couple of weeks.

I probably shouldn't have done it then, either. The local satellite link offered quite a number of choices, but, other than the all-movies-all-the-time channels, there was practically nothing on other than news shows and commentaries talking about the miserable state of the world's economy. In the US, the big news was that the unemployment rate had passed sixty percent. The visuals associated with this catastrophic news were stark; soup kitchens packed with people, incredible lines in front of every place that offered any sort of public assistance. In Atlanta a small upholstery business had unwisely posted a "help wanted" sign in their window well before their opening time, and thousands of people had mobbed it. The struggle to be the first inside had turned into a riot, the police were called in and the mob then attacked the police. By the time it was over thirty people were hurt, a hundred arrested, and four were dead. The upholstery shop had been virtually destroyed and the disheveled owner told a newsman that he was planning to close it down as a result. In a number of American cities, rabble-rousers had organized assaults on neighborhoods where wealthy people, particularly banking executives, lived. In more than one such incident, banking execs were dragged from their homes and beaten by mobs that insisted that they were hoarding all the money. In one week in the US, seven such executives were lynched by the mobs, three in Dallas alone. As a result, some people were finding work--as armed bodyguards for wealthy families. As I listened to this story I could not help but remember our verbal assault on Jim Palore, which was still an embarrassment.

Around the world it was the same, practically everywhere. Food riots in London, riots by immigrants in France claiming hiring discrimination, a particularly deadly riot in Sydney when a rumor spread that the government was exporting food instead of distributing it. Wild rumors were rampant in the Islamic countries of the Middle East, rumors suggesting that the Israelis had manufactured the world crisis in order to starve Muslims to death, and mobs were in the streets of a dozen cities demanding war with Israel. Pakistan was accusing India, and India was accusing China, of interfering with their attempts to purchase food abroad, and as a result the three Asian powers were brandishing nuclear weapons at each other. Everywhere conservative thinkers insisted that only pure free-market policies could save the day, while left-wingers declared unbridled capitalism as dead and demanded that financial institutions and large industries be nationalized, and in just about every country their followers periodically fought pitched battles in the street. A large panel discussion in New York, hosted by CNN, became so heated it disintegrated into a brawl, old men in suits trying to hit other old men over the head with chairs. In spite of the best efforts of security guards the audience joined in, and by the time the dust had settled five people were injured and one had died.

In many countries, but in the US especially, enormous numbers of people were on the move. No matter how often the media reminded everyone that things were bad everywhere, people could not seem to help themselves from going elsewhere when things were bad where they were. I was reminded of Geneviève, how she'd said she was living with the hobos when she was recruited, when there was an article about people riding the rails, as they had done in the 1930s. There were plenty of cars, too, the Interstates were often clogged with them. Few people could afford to or were inclined to buy new ones, and the repo men had more business than they could handle, but there were often ways to keep the old ones running, and gasoline was not terribly expensive. For the most part the travelers did not have the money to pay for a stay at the motels that had so far avoided bankruptcy, though, and thus there were camps, sometimes very large, at Interstate interchanges. Like foxes trailing migrating lemmings, a hoard of human predators followed these aimless meanderings, and crime in these camps was rampant. Recently, the news story said, some of these camps had taken up armed defense against this sort of thing. People

perceived to be criminals--or who simply, for whatever reason, were not seen as trustworthy--were sometimes summarily shot.

"It looks like," Julie noted, watching, "that we're in just about the best place we could possibly be. In spite of what's going to happen to us some Sunday night."

"I'd say so," I agreed. "It's been a damn good six weeks, hasn't it?"

She snuggled close to me. "For the most part," she said. "For me, it's hard when someone like Geneviève, someone we're close to, goes. I really can understand where Linda was coming from, why she went to pieces. I don't want to last that long myself." She looked up at me wide-eyed. "And don't you even think about going before I do, Jack! Either we go at the same time or I go first, you hear me?"

"Yes, dear," I said with a smile. I touched her nose. "You don't think I'll be sad when you're gone, if you go before I do? You don't think I'll miss you?"

"Of course not. You have Denise and Emily. All the women around here want your dick, Jack. You'll never give me a second thought."

"Oh, right. And the men just ignore you."

"They're not you."

"And Denise and Emily, as close as I am to them, aren't you."

She snuggled closer and smiled contentedly. "I wish I had met you before, Jack. We won't have had enough time together here, whoever goes first."

I stroked her hair. "No," I agreed, "we won't. But it would have been different back in New York. You saw the news."

"Yeah. I want to die in your arms, Jack. I know, I probably have to be strapped to the machine, and I know, if we go at the same time or if I go first you'll be there with me. I'd rather have it like this, you holding me and knives going into me."

"I guess that could happen," I said, "assuming I'm still alive, of course--if you chose freestyle. But I might have to murder you, and I'm not sure I can do that. I'm sorry, I just can't say, I can't promise I wouldn't balk at the final moment."

"Ah yes, the unmentionable word around here--balk, refuse to go through with it when it's your turn. Nobody has in a long time, they say. They also say it used to happen more often early on."

"There's peer pressure now, everyone is friends with everyone and nobody wants to disappoint their friends or look bad in their eyes. It makes balking harder."

"I guess." She yawned and stretched her body against mine sensually. "I sure won't," she added as her eyes dropped closed.

I touched her cheek. "I know you won't, Julie." I watched her innocent-looking face as she fell asleep.

Then I turned back to the TV and listened to more news of disasters, tragedies, wars and rumors of war.

That next Tuesday, the notice on the bulletin board announcing the names of the current Six was accompanied by one commenting on the gender imbalance on the island and stating that the Wednesday specials, in which a solo woman would die on stage, would be held, the first one to take place in eight days, and a volunteer sign-up sheet was included, giving a deadline for signing of midnight. One of the volunteers, it noted, would be chosen that night and announced

the next day. Paula, again part of the Six, was not eligible, but Julie and Emily both signed in immediately. Denise, who kept saying that she had not yet fully decided on the mode of her exit, did as well, saying that a week would give her enough time to make a final decision. By the time they had signed up, though, six other names were already on the list, and by the end of the day it appeared that most of the women there, other than the current Six, had thrown themselves into that lottery. I was not overly worried about "my" girls, the odds were against any of them being chosen. I readily admitted that I wasn't really ready for that, not so soon after losing Geneviève.

Because of those odds, I was stunned when I saw that the selection for the special was Denise. Again, as ever, Julie seemed upset by the news while Emily, who seemed to have gotten over Geneviève's death quickly, showed little emotion. Mitch and Paula did not seem very happy about it either.

Denise herself, on the other hand, merely smiled and shrugged. "It is, after all, what I'm here for," she observed. "I do have some work to do now, though. I have to make decisions, and I want them to be informed ones." During that week, she spent considerably less time with us than before, apologizing for her absence when she did appear and telling us she'd been spending quite a bit of time in her room studying and in Medical talking to the doctors. It was strange, there wasn't quite the same urgency as there had been when I knew Geneviève had only twenty-four hours left--but on the other hand, during that whole week I was uncomfortable whenever she was out of my sight. I really had become attached to my little professor, and Geneviève's words about loving people were sharp and clear in my mind.

Saturday came before Wednesday, though, and, at last, Mitch was no longer left out, he was chosen to go on stage Sunday. Adding to his luck--as far as he was concerned--Paula was chosen to be his partner. As usual, they were the focus of everyone's attention that night, which seemed to bother Emily some, she wanted a chance to say good-bye to Mitch in a personal way--and to Paula as well, since she was as frequent a sex partner of hers as Mitch was. I wouldn't have minded doing the same with Paula myself, but she and Mitch seemed strongly paired then and as always were the centers of attention, and it did not look like there would be an opportunity.

I did not regard this as luck, at least not for our little group. I was not really as close to Mitch and Paula as I was to Geneviève, Julie, and Denise, but I was close enough--it seemed unfair that just three weeks after losing Geneviève we were going to lose Mitch, Paula, and Denise all in the space of five days.

"You should not be feeling like this, Jack," Denise, apparently understanding what I was feeling, told me on Saturday night. "As we've discussed, this is what we're here for--to do this and get the benefit paid. Objectively, the sooner the better."

"You do understand," I replied, "that I'm going to miss you."

She laughed. "Oh, Jack, I hope so!" she enthused. "If you were going first I'd miss you too, dammit. Can't help it. But look: it's been three weeks since Geneviève died, right?"

I nodded. "Three weeks tomorrow."

"Yes. Now let me ask you--when you think about her death, does it make you sad? Or does it turn you on?"

I didn't answer for a moment. "Both," I admitted finally. "I miss her too. God damn it, Denise, I loved her. And I love you, too, and that makes this shit damn hard."

She put her hand on my cheek, her eyes soft. "Jack," she said, "Loving you, and being loved by you, has been the high point of my romantic life. Just to have had that, just to have known you, and Julie, and Geneviève, and the others, makes all this completely worth it as far as I'm concerned. I want to give you the same kind of gift Geneviève gave you--an extreme, a memorable,

erotic experience. I can't even hope to do better than she did, but I can hope to do as well. Here, put your hands on me." She picked up my hands and placed one on her belly and one on her right breast. "Didn't you once tell me it would be hot to see this body--this 'delicate little body,' as you and many other men have said--pierced and cut and bleeding?"

I couldn't deny it. "Yes," I admitted. "But I've gotten more attached to you since then."

"I understand. And let me ask you, does that make the idea--in the abstract, at least--more or less erotic?"

I considered that for a moment. "More," I agreed finally. "I can't say why, but it does. In the abstract, anyway."

"I want you to focus on that. That and only that. You can be sad afterwards, but just for a little while." She touched her nose to mine. "You are going to be on that stage with me Wednesday," she went on. "And this little body is going to be pierced, cut, and bleeding all over you. You will be turned on, I won't accept anything else. Okay?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No."

There was nothing to do except surrender. "All right, Denise," I said. "I'll be turned on, I promise."

"Good." She caressed my cheek. "Now look: we'll have more time to talk about all this after tomorrow. Mitch and Paula are friends of ours too, and tomorrow is their day."

We had long known, at least in general, about Paula's plans once she was selected. Having focused quite a bit of her life on athletics, she wanted something that at least paid homage to that. Her own particular sport, soccer, did not lend itself well to such scenes--none of us could think of anything related unless she were to have herself kicked to death, which appealed to no one. Olympic events offered a wider variety of possibilities, and at some point, someone suggested--jokingly, at the time--that perhaps she could be a "javelin catcher." She had, however, taken that suggestion to heart, and had long planned to have one of Erothan's machines launch aluminum javelins at her. We were all familiar with them, we'd seen them at engineering; they were needle-pointed at one end and dull at the other, somewhat thicker in the middle than at either end, and more slender overall than standard Olympic javelins. We had talked quite a bit about whether it would look better if she tried and failed to dodge them or simply stood and took them--the consensus was the latter. Mitch, whose focus had always been on doing something to "complement" his partner's demise, had not revealed how he intended to complement Paula's death by javelin.

As expected, when they went on stage that Sunday, one of the "shooting machines"--they were all basically similar, whether they fired bullets, arrows, or anything else--was sitting at one side, waiting to be activated. The usual bed was there as well, and--no surprise to any of us--they called Emily up to join them. Showing no signs of the reluctance she had once expressed about appearing on stage in the nude or about having sex on stage, she joined them enthusiastically and made love with both of them with just as much abandon. Once that was over, Emily stepped back and stood beside an odd little cylinder about five feet tall, which I had not noticed before, while Paula and Mitch came to the front of the stage in the center.

"We know," Paula said, "what you all expected tonight, that I'd play 'javelin catcher.' She smiled. "But Mitch and I have discovered, just in the last twenty-four hours, that we have something in common, and for that reason we have changed our plans rather completely. I hope you will all enjoy what we've come up with."

Mitch turned back to Emily. "Emily, would you bring us our tools?" Emily nodded, reached into the cylinder, and drew out two fencing rapiers. Of course, they had no protective tips. Carrying one in each hand, she came to the front and handed one to each of them, after which she retreated again.

"This," Denise commented, "should be good."

"Definitely," I agreed.

Wasting no time, Paula turned to Mitch. "En garde," she said softly, raising her sword. He bowed to her slightly, then raised his own weapon. The blades clicked together.

Then they began fencing, a flurry of motion and clanging blades. I was surprised; I would have expected an athlete like Paula to have been skilled in something like this, but it turned out that Mitch was at least her equal. For a couple of minutes the match just went back and forth, each of them advancing and retreating in turn and each managing to turn the other blade away from a possible strike. Both of them had broad smiles on their faces, clearly enjoying themselves in spite of the known outcome of this.

After a short while, Mitch began to distinctly dominate the match. If Paula was, by prearrangement, letting him dominate, then they had choreographed it very well, it was not at all obvious. Consistently he was driving her back, parrying her thrusts with ease. A moment later he almost got past one of her parries and the tip of his sword pierced her left breast, leaving a small but freely bleeding wound. She gave him a nod of acknowledgement and they went back to it--but it was mere seconds before the tip of his sword, making contact but pushed by her parry, raked across her abdomen, opening a long shallow cut. Again she acknowledged it, and again they began to fence, but almost immediately he scored another glancing strike on her left side at her waistline. She parried that away, but ended up with her sword down and out of position, and Mitch took complete advantage of the moment, lunging forward and running his sword into her belly below her navel, the point exiting just over her pelvis in the back.

"Agh!" she grunted loudly. Dropping her arms, she bent over slightly and looked down at the steel blade that had transfixed her. From the front the piercing was very clean, there was no blood at all. It flowed steadily from the exit wound, though, running over her high firm buttocks and down the back of her leg. For a moment she struggled with the obvious impulse to grab at the blade.

Then she raised her head, looked at Mitch, and started pushing herself forward. The thin blade of the rapier passed smoothly on through her. Undaunted, she took a step, then another; a little smile played around her lips. Finally, the basket of the rapier was resting against her belly. Mitch leaned his head forward and they kissed for several seconds.

And while they were kissing, she brought her own sword around until the point was close to Mitch's side, then firmly ran it into his body. He made no move to stop her until she had pierced him very deeply.

Finally, Mitch broke the kiss. Pushing her back gently, he pulled his sword out of her, and as it came free she pulled hers out of his side. Blood running from their wounds, they saluted each other with the rapiers--then resumed fencing.

But Paula, having taken a more severe wound than Mitch, was slightly but noticeably slowed. It wasn't more than a few seconds before Mitch managed to knock her sword to the side and drive the point of his own into her right breast, almost squarely into her nipple. As before, he ran her through, the tip emerging below her shoulder blade. She stopped, gave a short cry, and looked down at her chest. Then, as before, she raised her head and started pushing herself forward, and again the blade passed through her as she came. This time, she raised her sword and drove it

into Mitch's belly after she'd taken only one step, and again he made no effort to stop her. They both took steps toward each other, and both swords slipped through them. When the baskets of the swords rested against their skin, they again kissed.

"You look lovely with a sword sticking in your tit, Paula," Mitch told her as they broke the kiss.

"I certainly hope so," she answered. "Let's go on."

Mitch nodded. As before, Mitch he pushed her back and pulled his sword out of her chest, stepping backwards to free his own body from hers at the same time. As the rapier came free from her breast she lost her balance and staggered slightly to the side as she tried to maintain it. Mitch gave her no chance. He stepped in behind her, put his left hand across her solar plexus, and ran his sword into her back. With a little spout of blood the tip emerged from her breast above the nipple. Mitch pushed on until the basket rested against her back. Looking stunned, Paula turned her head toward him. her sword started to drop from her hand; she tried to hold it but could not, and it clanged on the floor. Blood trickled from her mouth and streamed down her breast, the rivers merging.

"I'm yours, Mitch," she said in a strained voice. "Can't do any more..."

"I know," he replied. He kissed her head and then her ear.

She touched the steel blade emerging from her breast. "Kill me now, Mitch. You've won the match. No mercy, just slaughter me." Turning her head further, she smiled a little.

"Just what I had in mind," he said. He kissed her head again, then slowly pulled the rapier back through her and out. Her body stiffened and she came up on her toes as the blade was moving through her, but once it was out she began to sag, her knees quivering. Giving her no time to recover, Mitch plunged his blade into her back again and ran her through again, the tip emerging below her ribs this time. Paula was losing blood and weakening fast, and Mitch recognized it. He pulled his sword free again, and her knees started to buckle. Supporting her, he turned her around and ran her through once again, this time through her belly near her navel. As the rapier's basket pressed against her abdomen, she grabbed at him almost frantically, holding on tight. Blood streamed down her legs and pooled at their feet. Once they were in a firm embrace, Mitch looked down at the floor, located the remote, and activated it with his foot.

Immediately the machine sprang to life. A red finder laser shot out of a lens near the top of it and focused on Mitch's back. With a soft "phut!" it launched a javelin. It flew in an odd-looking point-down fashion, but when the slender aluminum shaft struck him it went all the way through him and all the way through Paula's body as well, emerging from her back down low. He gave a short sharp grunt and clutched her body to his; the machine fired a second round, skewering them both through again. Now Mitch's knees gave out, and they sank down to the floor, holding each other upright. The machine spat another javelin. It would not stop, we all knew, until whatever internal sensors it had told it they were both dead.

After four of the javelins had been fired, Paula, badly injured, looked to be very near death. At that point Emily, who had been simply standing and watching, suddenly came back to them.

Mitch, blood already running from his mouth, looked up at her. "No," he said. "No, Emily, go back, that thing could make a mistake!"

Instead, she dropped to one knee beside them. Stroking their hair with her hands, she kissed Paula, smearing blood on her own face and getting a weak little smile from the dying athlete in return. "If it does," she said, turning her head toward Mitch, "then I'll die here with you. My family won't get as much money as I'd hoped, but I'll have died with my friends, and that's worth a lot." She then kissed him, and continued to kiss him when the next javelin struck him. Paula's body

spasmed as it went through her, and one of her legs moved out at an awkward angle. Her head fell onto Mitch's chest, her arms hung limply, and she did not react at all to the next javelin.

Mitch did not last very much longer. After two more of the javelins, the machine turned itself off, causing us to breathe a sigh of relief, we didn't know if it would turn on Emily automatically. Saul came out and announced that both Mitch and Paula were dead, and that the show was over.

We did not have time, then, to grieve for Mitch and Paula. Emily was still on the stage, still holding Mitch's body, and we did not know, then, if she had been speared through by one of the javelins. None of the Erothan staff moved to help her, so Julie, Denise, and I all rushed onto the stage. As it turned out, the machine had been very efficient; she had not been touched, she was completely okay physically.

Her psychological well-being was another matter altogether. The coolness she'd shown when Geneviève had told her her plan, when we'd talked about other deaths, even when Geneviève died, was completely gone.

"They're dead," she said as we reached her, her voice low but calm. "I loved them, I loved them both. Now they're dead, they're gone. Geneviève is gone, and they're gone. Gone."

"That's what we're here for, Emily," I said gently.

She looked up at me with wet eyes and a trembling lip. "I know. But... they're all gone and I'm still here. It just doesn't seem..."

I pulled her up; she didn't resist me. "It's never easy," I said. "Not when it's the ones we came to care for. I know that very well." I turned her toward Denise. "We have to go on. We're going to have her company for a very short time now, just until Wednesday, just three days. We should focus on her."

"Yes," Emily agreed. She broke away from me and lunged for Denise, folding her in her arms. "Please," she murmured.

Denise patted her back. "I have to," she said. "You know that. You will when it's your turn, too."

"I know. Oh, I want it to be my turn, this is just so... hard..."

"For all of us," Denise agreed. "We just handle it in different ways." She turned Emily toward the stairs and got her moving. "Different ways, that's all."

"And some of us," a wet-eyed Julie added, "handle it much better than others."

Julie and Emily followed my suggestion, and Denise was the center of attention the rest of that evening and for the next two days--not that she didn't get quite a bit of attention from the other candidates, especially since she was going to be doing the first "special" to be held in quite a while. She was spending almost all her time with us by then, which I assumed meant she had decided on her means of exit, but we had never asked her what she was planning. Monday night, though, one of the others, a tiny but very cute brunette newcomer named Polly, did pose that question.

"Every man here I've asked about this," Denise answered, "talks about how 'delicate' I look and thinks I should have my belly and breasts cut or pierced by a knife or something like that. I had long ago decided I'd do that, and that I should have them both cut and pierced and that I should die, finally, of exsanguination."

"Exsanguination?" Emily asked.

"Blood loss," Denise answered. "I've also planned," she went on, "to do one of the longer performances we've seen here. If things go the way I presume they will, I'll last for quite a while."

"Which machine?" Polly asked.

"No machine," Denise told her. "I've decided on a freehand."

Polly, Julie, and Emily stared at her for a moment. "A freehand?" Polly asked. "You mean doing it yourself?" Denise nodded. "Oh, I don't think I could do that, not with a knife! Maybe I could shoot myself, but that's about it. I just don't have the courage it would take to stick a knife in myself."

"I don't either," Julie agreed. "Kind of wish I did, but I don't trust myself that far."

"Don't you have to be trained to do a freestyle, Denise?" I asked. "At least I think that's what the manual says."

She nodded. "Yes, you do. That's one of the things I've been doing with my time since I was chosen for the special, getting the training. I have another session to go--tomorrow afternoon. But the trainers tell me I'm doing very well. They have to certify you before you can do a freestyle, but I'm confident I'll get the certification tomorrow."

"What does the training consist of?" I asked. "I mean, I read the material, I know they don't want you to end up hurting yourself and not being able to finish--I'm just not sure how they'd do that."

"What they do," she explained, "is make you hurt yourself. With no drugs, nothing. And, as soon as you do, they make you hurt yourself worse."

"How do they make you hurt yourself?" I looked her up and down; her body was unmarked.

"They have a neural stimulator," she answered. "It's sort of like a taser but it doesn't make you fall down and flop around. You just touch it to yourself, just hold it against your skin." She rolled her eyes. "Believe me, it hurts like hell! You have to hold it in place for several minutes, then turn up the intensity and do it again. If you can't do it, they won't certify you for a freestyle using blades. The good part is, they say that with a full load of drugs, the blades actually hurt less than the neural stimulator does at any setting above five." She smiled, rather darkly. "I've been able to take it up to seven so far. I'm going to try for eight tomorrow."

"So what exactly are you going to do, Denise?"

"Well, Jack," she answered with a smile, "I'm glad you asked me that. You know I'm going to want to have you up there with me--and I do want your opinions about what exactly I should do. All of you but especially you, Jack, simply because you're male." She sat up very straight in her chair and ran her hands down over her body. "Every man here that I've talked to about this says he wants to see my breasts and my belly stabbed or cut, so, obviously, I plan to stab and cut my breasts and belly. I'm going to use a small slender knife for the stabbings and make the cuts shallow so I can do it quite a few times. At the end, I want you lying flat on your back, and I'm going to kneel over you and take your cock up inside me. While we're screwing, I'm going to slit my belly open, hara-kiri style. If I survive that--and I probably will--I'll keep cutting myself and stabbing myself until I can't do it anymore. Then I'll just bleed until I die." She looked at each one of us in turn. "How does that sound?"

"It sounds like it'll be an amazing show," Julie said. "But it also sounds like you have it all planned out. What sorts of opinions do you want from us?"

"Details," Denise answered. "Where, exactly, do I stab myself? Where do I cut? In what order?"

"Ah, I understand," I said. "Stand up, Denise." Smiling, she did as I asked. I reached out and put my hands on her thighs near her knees, then ran my palms upwards. After pausing for a

moment with my hand on her rather high pubic mound, I moved it to her left a little. "I think you start here," I said, my fingertips on a spot in the center of the slight hollow just above the tendon. "Straight in, and in deep."

"That sounds good to me," Julie agreed.

"Has to be a little more to the center," Denise told us. "Otherwise I could hit the iliac or femoral artery, and if that happens there's a lot of blood really quick and I'm gone, just as quick."

"That's okay too," I said. I leaned forward and kissed her belly. "I am going to miss you, Denise," I told her. "Badly. But you look so fragile, and you feel so very soft--the whole idea of you pushing a knife into yourself, it's just overwhelming."

She ran her fingers through my hair. "Looking forward to it?"

"No," I told her bluntly. "No, I'm not."

"I am. It's what I came for."

"I know."

She sighed and shook her head. "Maybe we shouldn't discuss this," she murmured. "I just wanted to be sure I didn't do anything that would... look bad."

Julie laid her hand on Denise's arm. "I don't think you will," she offered.

"I hope you're right." She smiled. "Do you mind if I ask Jack to spend the night with me Tuesday?" Of course, she said she didn't mind--and in fact Julie and I had already discussed this, and I had been planning to suggest it myself if she didn't.

Tuesday, though, as it turned out, was different. As always the new Six were announced, and introduced in formal ceremony that afternoon. And this Tuesday, Julie and I became part of the Six for the first time. Julie was delighted, repeatedly saying she hoped she'd be chosen Saturday night; I didn't really share her sentiments. At the time, I kept telling myself that it was because I was distracted by Denise, who was scheduled to end her life on Wednesday. Because of the usual attention paid to new members of the Six--and because all the other candidates were aware that Tuesday would be Denise's last day among them--I was unable to spend the day with her as I had with Geneviève. That bothered me. I had become very fond of that bookish little girl.

We did, of course, get together late in the evening when I accompanied her to her room. For the most part, that night and the subsequent day followed the same script I'd established with Geneviève--I accompanied her to Medical, stayed with her while she went through her preparations. There was, of course, no planning session with a death-partner--I was playing that role, even though I'd be walking off the stage at the end of the performance. Unknown to me, Denise had invited two more men, a pair of relative newcomers named Tim and Jerome, to accompany her up there as well. We met with them briefly in the middle of the afternoon.

"My partner this evening," she told them bluntly, "is Jack. You two are mobile penises for me to suck, and it would be nice if you used your hands to stimulate me a little. But that's your whole role. If you don't like it, pull out now."

"I like it just fine," Tim, a large and muscular man with a cock that was actually a little small for his big body, told her.

"Same here," Jerome, an ex-marine whose head was shaven bald and a man noted among the candidate women for his staying power, agreed. "Damn, Denise, if you just wanted us to stand up there and hold your hands it would be okay. This is your show, and you're calling the shots. We're there for you, whatever you want us to do."

Denise smiled, her manner softening somewhat, and hugged them both. I did accompany her later that afternoon when she had her intestines cleaned out. As I more or less expected, she

declined to visit with any of the Erothan's staff clergy; we spent the remaining time, an hour or so, on a private balcony overlooking the ocean.

The final stage of Denise's preparation was the administration of the drugs and her session with makeup, which took place simultaneously. While a small crew of makeup girls worked her over, a white-coated man who identified himself as Dr. Studemeyer put her height, her weight, and the results of her blood tests into a computer and then gave her drugs in precise doses, several pills and even more injections. The most important for her, he said, were the "pain muters" and the "relaxants."

The pain muters were given first, by injection in Denise's hip. Saying that she was to be given a maximum load of these, Studemeyer went through a procedure of giving her an injection, waiting about ten minutes, and then testing her with one of the neural stimulators--which looked like a cattle prod. Based on her reactions to the shock, he gave her a little more--and this was repeated about five times.

"What sort of drugs," I asked, "are used in the pain muters? Most of the strong painkillers I know about also make you really drowsy."

"That's true," Studemeyer told me, "and that we don't want. Still, the main painkiller we use is an opium derivative. It's called 'dolophex,' and by itself it would have her sound asleep already." He smiled. "But we don't use it by itself. She's also getting, in the same mix, a dose of amphetamine-class drugs that counter the sedative effects of the dolophex. Not good for her heart, not in the long run, but since she'll be dead within a few hours that hardly matters, does it?" He poked her thigh with the neural simulator; she flinched, but only a little. "Another 10 mg," he said.

"I take it," I said, "that that thing really hurts." Studemeyer laughed--and poked me with it. It felt like it was red-hot, it produced an explosion of intense pain, enough that I yelled. "As you can see," he said. "And, as you can see, she's only reacting a little. Which is what we need, since she's planning to stick knives in herself."

"And cut my belly open," Denise added with a smile.

"It doesn't hurt you?" I asked her. I started to rub the spot on my thigh where I'd been poked with the thing, but the pain was already completely gone.

"No," she answered. "Well, not much, anyway. I am aware of it, and I know it's pain, but it's not bothering me." She laid her hand on her belly. "I'm sure it'll be the same when I put a knife in here. I plan to slip it in real slowly, inch by inch, and--"

"You'll find," Studemeyer told her, "that you can't do that. Not like I'm sure you're envisioning it, anyway."

"I can't?"

"No." He touched her belly as well. "Let's say you push the point of a sharp knife against yourself right here, that's what most people would do. The first thing you'll find is that human skin is very tough, it resists being penetrated, and you end up making a dent in it. You push harder, and finally the skin gives way. The muscles and organs behind it aren't nearly as tough as skin, the knife goes through them easily. The net result is that you have several inches of it in there before you can stop it. Then you can go slow, put on the show you obviously want to put on."

Denise nodded. "Okay, I understand," she said.

"But," Studemeyer went on, "there's another way."

"Oh?"

He grinned. "Yes. The knives we'll supply are double-edged. If you want to put one in your belly slowly, press the point in firmly and then begin rocking it, either up and down or side to side--"

-edge to edge, if you see what I mean. The edge will cut, and you can work it past the skin that way."

"Thanks, doctor. I'll try to do that."

"You should understand, too," he added, "that there'll be a difference when you actually push a knife into yourself. Drugs or no, your body will argue with you. The relaxants we've given you will help, but it won't be easy until you've lost a significant amount of blood."

She nodded. "I'm sure. But I am sure I can do this."

He touched her shoulder lightly. "I'm sure you can too, Denise."

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When the time came, Denise took the stage as if she was about to address a scientific assembly, managing to project a remarkable dignity in spite of her nudity. For a moment it looked like she was searching for a podium. Of course, there wasn't one, so she came to center-stage, out close to the front, and, her hands clasped behind her, gazed out at her audience. She had never looked better; the experts in Medical had put waterproof makeup on her face, enhancing her eyes and lips, and her hair had been done perfectly. Her skin, thoroughly exfoliated and treated with the lotions medical workers used, looked satiny smooth; she looked better than ever, almost supernatural. She appeared calm, but her nipples poked up sharply and her smooth-shaven vaginal lips were slightly swollen and appeared a little moist. Having followed her onstage, I stood close by her side.

"I," she said formally, "who am about to die, salute you all." The onlookers responded with applause, and she smiled at them. "I have always," she continued as the sound faded, "been someone who likes being in control at all times. I don't plan to change that now, in the final moments of my life. I have requested certification to execute a freestyle suicide, I have taken and passed the training, and have received my certification." She paused for a moment. "Tim, Jerome, would you gentlemen join us on the stage?"

They did, and while we were waiting I looked over the setup she'd requested. The usual bed was missing, its place taken by a king-sized mattress lying on the floor. There was a small table, and lying on it was a leather case, folded closed, which they had given her before we mounted the stage and which contained the knives she planned to use on herself. She had also had monitors set up at various places around the stage where she could see the images on them. As I was looking at them, she began explaining their purpose:

"The monitors," she said, "will allow me to see things as you do, so I can adjust visual angles and so on as necessary. I want you to be able to see everything that happens, as it happens, in complete detail." She then broke into a wide smile. "And finally, to all the candidates--it has been such a pleasure to know you all. You have made my life here truly wonderful. And now, I hope, I can execute a fitting climax to that." She nodded, as if to herself. "So. Let's get started. The sex comes a little later, I want to be bleeding and dying by then." Opening the leather case, she took out a knife, a rather plain double-edged blade four inches long and half an inch wide with a black handle. Looking out at her audience, she touched the point to her neck, then ran it slowly down over her body, down the center of her breast, over her nipple, down to her navel and lower.

She then stroked her thigh with it. "I'm going to put this knife in now," she told the onlookers, "in my lower abdomen, in deep. I'll do it slowly so you can all see it going in." She glanced at the two men she'd called up. "Tim, Jerome," she continued, "hold my shoulders. If my body tries to bend forward, don't let it." She looked down at herself.

The men obeyed. With her feet spread apart, and one leg cocked--she was obviously aware of her pose--she pressed the point of the knife against her lower belly, not far from the spot I'd indicated days earlier. Looking back at her audience, she started rocking it back and forth, as the doctor had instructed. A moment later a trickle of blood appeared.

She then startled us all by looking up and her audience and smiling softly. "Yes, good," she said. "The point has passed through my skin. It should go in easily now." As we had planned, I moved in close beside her and pulled the skin tight so that the penetration could be seen clearly. At that point, less than an inch of the blade was inside her. It looked very clean, the skin puckered just a little on both sides of the blade, a tiny trickle of blood beneath it. Denise nodded with satisfaction. "I do like being in control," she said softly. "Of my life, and of my death." She put her hand over the rear of the handle, and, after just a slight hesitation, began pushing it slowly on in. It slipped on into her smoothly, evenly. She did move as if to bend over, but Tim and Jerome held her shoulders firmly.

She turned her head to me, her eyes very wide. I tipped my own head forward and kissed her, and I could feel her tremble even though she kissed me back with a passion. All the while, she kept right on pushing the knife very slowly on into her belly, and I kept my hand on her belly alongside it, keeping the skin taut.

After a few seconds she broke the kiss, stopped pushing, and gazed at my eyes. A small smile played around her lips. "Think I should stop?" she asked me. "Or keep going?"

I looked down at her abdomen; two-thirds of the blade was inside her by then, and there was a fairly strong stream of blood running down her leg. "Keep going, definitely," I replied, giving her the answer I was sure she wanted to hear. "Go all the way. You should get the whole blade in there."

She gave me a stronger smile. "Yes, I guess I should," she said, nodding. As she spoke she started pushing again, forcing the blade on in. "Feels smooth and soft," she said, as much to the audience as to me. "Very sensual... I hope everyone is finding it erotic..."

"I certainly am," Tim said. To emphasize his statement he pressed his hard cock against her back.

She leaned her head back, looked up at him, and pushed the final inch of the blade on into her belly. "So am I," she told him. She let go of the knife, leaving it standing rigidly in her belly and spread her arms to the sides.

"Denise, that was beautiful," I said, stroking her hair.

She looked back at me, then down at my cock, and stroked my rigid erection with her hand. "I can see," she said, smiling again, "that you find it erotic too, Jack."

"I promised you I'd be turned on."

"I remember." She looked back down at herself. "But I need to do more," she murmured, "before we start having sex."

"Be sure you don't get too weak," I cautioned.

"I feel okay." She giggled, amazing us all again. "I feel like I have a red-hot poker sticking in my abdomen, but I feel okay." She looked back out at her audience. "I believe I should do my breast next," she commented. "You agree, Jack?" she asked, swiveling back to me.

"Yes," I answered. "I do." I cupped her left breast with my hand and teased the nipple.

"Here we go, then." She reached into the case and drew out another knife, identical to the first. Looking out at her audience again, she pressed the point into her breast an inch or so above the nipple, pointed downwards. "Hold my breast up, would you, Jack?" she asked, and I immediately complied. "Yes, like that." She nodded, as if to herself, then pushed hard, and over

an inch of the blade slid right in. She made a little choking noise and squeezed her eyes closed for a moment as fresh blood spilled out, running over her breast and over my hand. Almost immediately, though, she got herself back under control.

"Feels very different," she commented. She laughed--although it sounded a little strained. "It really fucking hurts! But it looks good, so what the hell, huh?" She pushed another inch in. "The pain," she said, "doesn't matter." She pushed again, and another inch slipped in. "Soon enough, I'll be beyond the pain." She drove another inch of the blade in, staying inside the breast itself, not piercing her chest wall.

I squeezed her breast gently. "Denise," I said, "you are incredible."

She grinned, again pushed on the knife, and it slipped deeper into her breast. There was a look of determination evident on her face as, with a series of little squeaking grunts, she pressed it on home, leaving only the handle exposed. Once it was in all the way, she looked into the box again and drew out a third knife. This one was different, it had a short, strongly hooked blade, like a carpeting knife.

"Every man that I've talked to," she told her audience, "said these breasts should be pierced or cut. This one has been pierced. Move your hand, Jack." I did, and she lifted her left breast with one hand and brought the knife up under it. Without pausing, she dug in with it, pushing the little blade up into her breast, then pulling it across to her right, slitting the underside of her breast open. The cut was close to an inch deep, and blood streamed down in a sheet of redness. Looking calm and in control--although occasionally she bit her lower lip--she continued to cut herself, bringing the blade an inch or two up the inside margin of her breast before pulling it out.

"And now it's been cut," she observed. She switched the hooked knife to her left hand, lifted her right breast, and started cutting it in the same manner. Once she'd finished her cut, she laid the hooked knife aside, picked out another short-bladed dagger, and pierced her right breast to match her left. Her whole body from mid-chest down was by then painted with red.

With three knives standing in her body and blood washing down from the cuts under her breasts, she looked out at her audience and slowly turned from side to side. She was smiling a little, she looked very calm, very much in control. "I think it's time now," she said, "to go on to the next phase. The damage I've done to my breasts isn't serious, but I am losing a lot of blood. I'm feeling just a little lightheaded." She turned to me. "Lie down, Jack," she said in a weak voice. "On your back." I did as she asked. With Jerome and Tim helping her, she straddled my hips and sank down on my cock. As she moved gently on me, she turned her head from side to side, sucking each of the other two men's cocks briefly. Finally, looking back down at her own body, she drew the knives out of her belly and breasts, each with a quick jerk that caused her to wince with the pain. A bright stream of blood ran from each wound.

She laid two of the knives aside and held the third one up. "I now plan to cut my belly open," she announced. "Which will be fatal, although hopefully not right away." She glanced at Tim and Jerome. "Make sure I stay upright," she instructed as she pressed the point into her abdomen about at the level of her navel but far over on her left side, "all the way through." They nodded; she paused just a moment, then drove the knife firmly in.

"Ah!" she cried. Her body flexed forward, but the two men held her firmly. She chewed her lower lip again, gazed down at me for a moment, and then started pulling the knife to the right, using a short in-and-out motion. Her chest heaved and she made little noises halfway between grunts and squeaks as fresh blood started pouring out.

Cool as ever, she gazed down at me. "You like this, Jack? You like seeing me slit my belly open?"

I pressed my fingertips into her belly, below the cut, letting the blood run over them "God, yes," I said. "Push the knife in a little deeper..." She cocked an eyebrow at me and pushed the knife on in, as far as it would go. "Yes," I murmured, "like that..."

"Denise, I can't hold it..." Tim said, interrupting me. "Can't hold it any longer, going to come..."

Pausing for a moment, the knife deep in her belly, she turned her head toward him. "Give it to me," she said. He pushed his cock toward her mouth, her lips parted, and he started spraying semen onto her tongue. She swallowed rapidly, but some spilled over, dripping onto her breast. She held his cock in her mouth for a few seconds, looking up at him; then let it slip free. Looking back down at her belly, she drew the knife on across, lengthening the slit by another inch or so.

By then, the blade was piercing her immediately under her navel and was about half-buried. She paused, looking down at me. Her face was tight, but she grinned darkly. "In a couple of minutes," she said, her voice sounding tight as well, "my entrails are going to fall out all over you. Is that going to gross you out, Jack?"

I ran my hands up her body, through the blood that practically covered her. My fingers encountered the cuts she'd made under her breasts and I hesitated, but she pushed her body into my hands and my fingertips slipped into those cuts. "Not in the least," I assured her. I looked down at her belly. "Go in deeper, Denise," I urged. "Go slow, I love watching you do that..." Still looking down at me, still smiling darkly, she nodded and slowly pushed the blade on in, again, as far as it would go.

"Now what?" she asked.

"Now keep going," I said. "You're only halfway. Keep going, cut yourself wide open. Cut deep."

"It hurts, Jack," she whispered, although the dark smile had not left her lips.

"You can take it, I know you can."

"Can I? Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. You have more discipline than any person I've ever known, you and I both know you can. Do it, Denise."

She cocked an eyebrow again. "For you?"

"For me."

She closed her eyes for a moment. "I love you, Jack."

"Denise, I love you too."

Her smile became soft, loving. "You cannot know," she told me, "what that means to me, or what you mean to me. I would kill myself for you just because you asked me to, even if there were no payout, even without the painkillers." Gazing down at me, she pulled the knife to the right and moved it in and out, and the slit in her belly grew longer. "I want to do this," she went on as she drew the knife hard to her right again, moving a little more quickly now. "For you, for everyone, everyone who told me they loved this little potbelly of mine." She pushed the knife back in, very deeply. "Is it sexy, Jack? Oh god, I want it to be sexy, I want it so bad..."

I just shook my head. "There's no way I can tell you how sexy it is."

"That's what I want to hear." She dragged the knife across hard, slitting open another two or three inches of her belly. Still watching my face, she pushed the knife in deep and firmly drew it across again. Blood continued to stream out, and a moment later a loop of her intestine fell out of her. She looked back at her belly and continued, lengthening the cut. The slit opened more and a mass of her entrails fell out onto my hands. She paused then, just staring at them. Blood ran from her mouth. With a firm hand, she pulled the knife on across to the right another inch or so, then

pulled it out and laid it down. "It's done," she said, picking up a loop of her intestine and toying with it. "My belly's been slit..." She seemed very calm and relaxed. Raising her head and looking out at her audience, she gestured toward her open abdomen. "It might seem strange," she said, her voice steadier than before, "but it can take quite a long time for a person to die from disembowelment. Long enough, in fact, that watching me die that way might try your patience. Thus, I will be hurrying things along a little. I want to tell you that I am feeling very little pain now. Beyond that, it doesn't seem to matter much to me anymore whether I live or die:" She looked down at me, smiled, and began squirming on me.

In turn, I started thrusting into her more energetically, and, when I did, more of her entrails fell out. Considering that she was still alive and moving, there was an amazing amount of blood all over her lap, her legs, me, and the floor. She was very pale, and her eyes looked sleepy.

She leaned down toward me. "So what should I do, Jack? What now?" Almost idly, she picked up a loop of her intestine and pulled it on out of herself.

"You know, Denise. Stab yourself again."

"You want to see me do that?"

"Yes I do."

She picked up the knife again. "I'll do it, then. Where?"

I looked at her chest. "In your breast," I said. "Straight in this time, right through the center of your nipple."

She nodded, set the point of the knife squarely on the center of her left nipple and firmly forced the blade in. She threw her head back; and blood spouted from her mouth. Her head tipped back forward slowly, and she was smiling. She moved the knife inside her chest and more blood spilled out.

"I'm just about done, Jack," she told me. "Just about gone... one more should do it." She almost casually pulled the blade back out of her breast. "You need to come... come in me while I'm dying, while I'm finishing myself off. It's my time, Jack..."

I pulled myself up to a sitting position, keeping her on my lap. "Denise, you don't have to do anymore..."

"Oh, I know that. I want to. I'm liking the feeling of the knife going in now." She kissed me, then tucked the point of the knife up under her ribs on her right side. "This will kill me," she told me. "Tell me when you're close, and I'll do it."

I pushed up inside her, hard. "God, this has been beautiful," I told her. "You wanted to leave a legacy, you could not have done better." She smiled softly, and I felt my orgasm rising. "Now..." I whispered.

She nodded, and, still smiling and watching my face, pulled the knife into herself, burying the blade completely. I started unloading my semen inside her; she jerked the knife hard to the right and rich dark red blood started pouring out of her. Leaving the knife buried inside herself, she threw her arms around my neck and brought her face close to mine. Her body quivered, then began to jerk violently. As my orgasm faded, I could see that she was no longer breathing and that her pupils had begun to expand. I could feel her vagina contracting on my softening cock. Her arms fell away from my neck. Her body continued to jerk, now without coordination.

I held her close to me as she went through her death throes. Just as I had with Geneviève, I felt her life leave her. I didn't move, I just sat there, holding her, missing her already, and remained motionless until the attendants lifted her body off me, until Julie and Emily got me to my feet and started steering me toward the showers.

I was not in a good place psychologically; I was consumed by a variety of feelings working against each other. As has been the case with Geneviève, I had found Denise's death immensely erotic, and, in spite of all the discussions, I felt guilty precisely because I had found it erotic. I felt her loss acutely; losing both her and Geneviève in such a short time seemed almost too much to bear. I wanted to cry but also did not want to, I wanted to be able to put on a brave front for Julie and Emily, both of whom were obviously upset as well--and in the end, that's what I did.

But I also felt that if Julie were to be chosen for the coming Sunday, I might lose it completely, I might well become a male Linda. I had no way of knowing, then, how much more quickly things would begin to change for me on the island.

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At least as far as appearances were concerned, Julie and Emily seemed more recovered from Denise's death the next day than I did. I was definitely out of sorts, not at all good company; the week dragged slowly for me, and I was acutely aware at all times that there was a possibility that either Julie or I might be chosen to go on stage that Sunday.

But for the moment, life went on. Polly, Jerome, and Tim all joined our depleted little group, and bald ex-marine Jerome and Emily quickly formed a sort of a couple--although Emily remained as free-spirited as ever. Almost by default, little Polly and giant Tim paired off to an extent as well.

When we were alone, though, Julie fretted. She talked incessantly about Ramon and Mitch, about how she'd been close to both of them and both of them had been willing to kill their death mates, and about how she could not find someone who would commit to doing it to her. At times she would rage on about how it was simply not fair. In spite of this, she seemed to accept, without rancor, my continued insistence that I could not trust myself to do it right, that I might end up making a complete mess of her final show. Finally, one night after she'd raged about it for a good thirty minutes and had fallen asleep weeping, I decided I had to take a more active role in this.

I had to find a man willing to kill Julie on stage. Which--since she'd already approached just about every man there with this idea--meant changing someone's mind.

I started the next day, working on ex-marine Jerome. He refused, I argued, he continued to refuse. Tim was my next target, but the result was the same. My problem was, I had virtually nothing to offer other than extolling the thrill of killing a lovely and compliant young woman with a knife--which from both had brought a response of "why don't you do it, then?" I did not have a good answer for that, other than the same truth I had told Julie at least a dozen times--that I did not feel I could trust myself to actually do it once the time came. Finally, on a night when Emily was off somewhere with Jerome, Julie was at the hotel entertaining a guest, and Tim was involved with another woman, I found myself alone with Polly, and I talked with her about Julie's desires and my self-assigned task. She was already aware of it--probably thanks to my attempts to recruit Tim.

"And you say Julie has approached every man here about this?" Polly asked me.

I nodded. "I think so. If not every one, close to every one. No one is willing to do it. And she could be chosen at any moment."

"So could you, you're part of the Six as well," she pointed out. "In which case this is not your problem anymore." She flashed her quick and very charming smile, and tossed back her long black hair. Polly was slender, with small but wonderfully soft, smoothly-rounded breasts, and was at least a couple of inches short of five feet tall. The fact that her legs were long meant her torso was truly miniature. Her eyes and ears were large for her head, her chin was somewhat pointed

and her greenish eyes were slanted, giving her a distinctly elven look. "But I agree with you, Jack," she went on. "Julie should have things the way she wants them." She rolled her eyes to the left. "You say Tim refused you?"

I nodded. "So did Jerome--and they were my best bets. They both surely got off on watching Denise stab herself."

"So did you, Jack," Polly reminded me. "And still, you can't bring yourself to give Julie what she wants." She looked pensive. "But I do understand that. I can go out on stage and die myself, but I couldn't even imagine killing anyone with my own hands."

"Have you picked a method yet, Polly?" I asked her.

She grinned conspiratorially. "I should tell you what I tell most people, that it'll be a surprise. But you're part of the Six and you'll likely be up there before I am, so I'll do it if you promise not to spread it around. You can only tell Julie."

I raised my hand solemnly. "I promise."

"Okay." She leaned across the table toward me. "I plan to have myself fucked to death."

I looked blank for an instant, but then I had a horrifying vision of tiny Polly on stage under one of the horses David had shown us. "Don't tell me--Last Hope?"

She looked blank then. "Last Hope?"

"The horse they have up at engineering. The one trained to fuck women to death."

Her eyes opened wide. "No! I didn't even know they had one, I just skimmed the section on animal deaths in the manual--except for the Chinese rat torture, since Emily plans on doing that one." She leaned a little closer to me. "They really have a horse trained to fuck a women to death?"

"Yes. A big stallion named Last Hope."

She cocked her head. "That could've been interesting--but it wouldn't work well with me, I don't think. I'm too little, he'd probably kill me almost instantly." She shook her head. "No. I've planned to have myself impaled. A steel rod, coming in through my vagina, up through my belly, and finally piercing my heart. I decided I didn't want to try for the out-the-mouth bit, since I want to be upright while this is happening and out-the-mouth means people couldn't see my face when I actually die."

I started visualizing that, too. "That," I told her, "should be impressive."

"I hope so. I've planned some more stuff, too. Some little pikes to come out and stab me in the chest, and belly, and legs before the main event. I want lots of blood and I want the audience to see me taking some pain." She shook her head. "I said, once upon a time, I couldn't imagine doing a freestyle--but that was before I watched Denise do hers. I still don't think I have the discipline to do what she did, but--hell, maybe just as a homage to her--my plan is stand free, not locked into the apparatus, when those little pikes do their thing. They'll hold me for the main event."

"You've gotten that approved?"

She nodded. "Yes. I've seen the guys in Medical already, and I've been up to see David at engineering several times, we've already worked out some of the details." She went on, explaining some of those details to me.

I shook my head. "I'm still just planning on the arrow shooter, with needlepoints, that's what all the women seem to want to see happen to me," I said. "You've planned a really elaborate show."

"My last," she said, suddenly serious. "I want it to be good."

"What were you doing out in the real world, Polly?" I asked. "You've never told me..."

"Oh, my life was pretty ordinary," she answered. "I was sort of an actress, I played some bit roles in a few movies and had parts in some TV commercials." She paused and giggled.. "Because of my size and looks, I was type-cast, I always played either a little girl or an elf or fairy. One of them you might have seen, it got a good bit of play. It was for Green Giant foods; I played one of his elves."

I snapped my fingers. "I do remember that!" I exclaimed. "You were wearing a tight green outfit, a green hat and green slippers. I remember because your costume showed just about all of your legs. I thought they were really pretty then." I paused and smiled. "And I still do."

She mock-pouted. "Just my legs? Not the rest of me?"

"Polly, you already know I think you're a knockout."

She waved a hand and laughed. "I was just teasing you, Jack. It's nice to hear, though."

"So how did you end up here? Type-cast, or no, seems like you were doing okay."

She shook her head. "I wasn't. I said I was sort of an actress--meaning, I could not get enough parts to make enough money to make ends meet. I wasn't starving, though, because my boyfriend Ted was doing okay--he had his own auto-repair business, and you know people repair their cars these days, they don't buy new ones. So we were fairly comfortable in spite of the fact that I was having trouble getting parts."

I frowned. "So what went wrong?"

She didn't speak for a moment. "These days," she went on, her eyes misting up a little, "it only takes one small thing to go wrong. It's weird, it really is. There we were, cruising along, and suddenly, we find out that one of Ted's customers has wrecked her car and died in the crash." She shrugged. "At first, it was just one of those things. We were sad to hear it, of course, but she was a customer, not a close friend or anything. Then we find out that they've determined that the reason she crashed was that her brakes failed, and the reason the brakes failed was that the caps on the hydraulic lines had been put back on, but not tightened--and all the fluid ran out, front and rear."

"Let me guess--Ted's shop worked on her brakes."

Polly nodded. "It wasn't even Ted's job. He had two mechanics he'd hired, and one of them had done the repairs on the woman's brakes. It was just an oversight, he was being rushed to get to another car and he just plain forgot to tighten the caps. But Ted was the owner, so it was Ted who got sued by the woman's husband. We paid out a huge amount of money to lawyers, but we lost anyway, and the woman's family was awarded one and a half million dollars. We couldn't pay anything close to that, we couldn't pay lawyers to appeal, things just piled on, couldn't get loans from any bank, one after another. I guess you can imagine where things went from there."

I touched her hand. "You and Ted lost everything."

She nodded again. "Business, house, car, every-damn-thing. In the span of something like six months we went from more or less middle class to out-on-the-street homeless. I have to tell you, Jack, I was wandering around in a daze, I didn't know what was happening. To make things worse, we'd been living on a shoestring when we were doing okay so we could funnel some money to my parents, his parents, my brother and his sisters, all of whom were on the edge and all of whom fell over the edge when things went bad for us. We all got together and decided to try to keep one of the houses, and so we all, all nine of us, moved into Ted's parents' house and we scraped to keep up the mortgage on it. That was working, but we were all still on the edge, struggling for everything, never having quite enough food--I'm sure you've heard this kind of story from a dozen people here."

"Hell, Polly, they've heard it from me!"

She laughed. "I'm not surprised."

"So where did the recruiters find you?"

She looked pensive for a moment. "At the office of a modeling agency. Sort of."

"Ah. I've heard that one before. Denise was recruited through a modeling agency. Well, indirectly."

Polly shrugged. "It's fertile ground for them--obvious, in fact. A place where they can find good-looking men and women who're desperate."

"I suppose. Does your boyfriend and family know you came here?"

She didn't answer immediately. Her expression, I noticed, had changed. Polly was normally a cheerful girl, outgoing and seemingly happy in spite of her circumstances. Now, suddenly, she looked sad and somehow evasive. "Yes," she answered finally. "They know. They know where I am, what I'm doing, and what's going to happen to me in the end."

"None of them raised any kind of objection?" I asked. I started to tell her about Denise, about the way her brother and sister-in-law had tried to dissuade her, but after a moment I stopped. Polly's lips were trembling, and her eyes had filled up with tears. "Polly?" I said, touching her hand again. "Is this something we shouldn't talk about?"

She shook her head. "No. We shouldn't." She raised her head, and tears streamed down both her cheeks. "But I have to... I have to talk to someone about it... I..."

I squeezed her fingers. "I'm here, Polly. Now or later. Whenever you want to talk, I'm ready to listen."

She sniffed, blinked her eyes several times to clear them, then picked up a napkin and wiped them. "Oh, I must look horrible..."

"You cannot look horrible," I assured her.

She smiled at that, tremulously. "Yes I can, and yes I do." She squeezed my fingers back. "Jack, if I told you how I came to be here, you would not believe me."

"You couldn't be more wrong. Were you here to see Paula's performance?"

She nodded. "That was the first one I saw. I never got to know her at all."

"Her family was in bad straights--maybe worse than yours, they were living in a tent city. Her own mother convinced her to come here--her own mother!--and sacrifice herself for the good of the family."

Polly stared at me for a moment, then, surprisingly, laughed. "Well, Jack," she said after a moment, "that's a weird one, I'll agree. But I think I can beat it."

"You do?"

"I'm sure of it. Do you recall, I just said the recruiters found me at the offices of a modeling agency?"

"Yes."

"But I'm an actress, not a model. I'm way too short to be a model."

I frowned. "But then--"

"I misled you, deliberately, and I shouldn't have. I'm sorry. I was recruited--if you can call it that--through a recruiter who was working a modeling agency. The thing was, I wasn't the model."

I grinned and shook my head. "That was true for Denise too, her sister-in-law was the original target of the--"

"In my case," Polly interrupted, "the target was Ted, my boyfriend."

"He was a model? I thought he was an auto mechanic."

She shrugged. "He'd done some modeling. Clothing, Sears-catalog type stuff. After the bottom fell out, he tried to get back into it. He had no luck. But he was looking, and that's where the recruiter found him. He brought the card home."

"So how did you end up--?"

"Being the sacrificial lamb? It took a few days and a lot of discussions. We all felt we were in danger of literally starving, or of falling sick and being unable to pay for medical help. It was sort of the consensus that one of us should go do this. My parents and Ted's parents were too old, but all the rest of us were possibilities. Since I wasn't getting any work acting, everyone finally sort of focused on me. It was Ted, though, who told me I should be the one."

"Your boyfriend?"

"Yeah."

"And you accepted?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. I flatly refused. But the discussions went on, and I was being made to feel as if I were some sort of criminal for letting the family down, like coming here and committing suicide was some trivial little thing."

"I don't get it. Why not Ted? He was the one who first got the offer, right?"

"Right. But Ted was still getting some car-repair work, here and there. He was bringing in some money. I hadn't brought in a dime in months." She shook her head. "I guess they just figured I was more expendable." Pausing, she wiped her eyes. "Anyway, I was feeling like I was being pushed into a corner. Finally, I said okay--but only if Ted would do it too, if he'd come here with me. Twice as much money for the family, I kept saying. I knew Ted, I was sure there was no way he'd agree to that and I'd have an out. But he surprised me--he said yes."

"Damn..."

"Yeah. So he and I went to a meeting. Afterwards, the family had a big farewell party for us. Lots of tears, all that. Then we left, we were flown to Miami, put up in a cheap hotel."

I nodded. "Same for us."

"Then the man came around with the two syringes he said might contain cyanide. I injected mine in my thigh, and, of course, nothing happened. Ted just stared at his for a few seconds, then yelled 'fuck this shit!' He threw it down, grabbed his clothes, and ran out of the room. I was just stunned--but the man from the resort acted like he'd seen it before. He told me nothing had changed for me, I was still welcome to come to the resort, and then he left." She paused, her eyes wet again. "I didn't know what to do. I got dressed and went out looking for Ted. I couldn't find him. I was up all night, looking for him. I never did find him, he might have run all the way back to Atlanta. I looked for him all night. When morning came, I still didn't know what to do, I was in a sort of daze. I just followed instructions, I got on the bus, got on the boat, picked up the gun when they told me to, pointed it at my head and pulled the trigger. I'd had no sleep and I was out of it. Irrationally, I kept expecting to see Ted any minute. Once we were shown to our rooms I fell asleep and slept for hours."

"Polly," I said, "when you woke up and came back to your senses, why didn't you just leave? You can, you know."

"Oh, I know." She wiped her eyes again and smiled. "But what the hell. I feel betrayed by everyone who said they loved me. But here, everyone is so nice... I know, I know, my family is still going to get the cash, but that's no longer what I'm doing this for. I'm doing it because if I left I'd be going back to a pure shit life with people I no longer even like, and I'm doing it for the others

here. So I will do it, Jack. I'll go on stage and have myself impaled and die, and I'll try to be smiling while I'm being killed. For you, and Julie, and Denise, and Tim, and all the others here."

"Damn..." I murmured again.

"But you know, this wasn't what we started out talking about. We were talking about your problem, and Julie's."

"Yes, we were. I'm not sure that one has a solution, though."

She gave me a conspiratorial smile; she was beginning to look like her old self again, even if she was a little red-eyed. "I do believe," she told me, "that I have a sort of an inside track with ol' Tim. He really, seriously, likes me."

I smiled back. "He does. Polly, everyone really, seriously, likes you, including me."

She leaned forward and touched my nose playfully. "That's good, because I really, seriously, like you, too, Jack. Howsomever, that is not the point right now. The point is Julie's problem, and I do believe I have a solution. Let me talk to Tim--at the right time. I do believe that when his cock is inside me, he's sorta vulnerable to my suggestions."

I laughed. I had had sex with Polly several times already, and she was a delightful partner, passionate, athletic, and inventive. "So am I, Polly," I admitted.

She gave me a seductive look. "Wanna get vulnerable to me right now?" she asked.

I pulled her toward me. "Nothing I'd like better," I told her just before I kissed her.

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Polly was as good as her word. The next day, picking a time when Julie was not around, Tim came up to me, his manner that of a small boy whose mother had assigned him an onerous task. He told me he'd agreed to Polly's demand, but wondered how things would work if he and Julie were not selected as death partners--especially since they were not likely to be, given that Tim had not yet been selected as one of the Six yet, and Julie's number could come up at any time.

"I'll be straight with you, Tim," I told him. "Even though it might change your mind. First, I've never seen this happen; the only men I've seen actively kill women out there on the stage have been Ramon and Mitch, and in both cases they killed their death partner and died themselves immediately afterwards. Erothan does not like having those technically guilty of murder hanging around. My understanding is that if you agree to do this, you'll be a part of the Six the next week and you'll automatically be selected."

"Actually," he said, "that makes it more attractive as far as I'm concerned. It means my wife and my little girl back in Nebraska will get the benefit sooner. Like Emily always says, that's what we're here for." He paused and drummed his fingers on the tabletop.

"I didn't even know you were married, Tim," I said.

He grinned. "Yeah. Six years. Linda would kill me if she had any idea what I was doing here. As it is, I'm sure she thinks I'm suffering."

I smiled too. "I suppose," I said after a moment, "we ought to let the staff know what we've planned well ahead of time."

"Probably ought to let Julie know, too. I haven't told her yet."

"Let me take care of that." I rose from the table. "Let's take a walk up to engineering. I think Saul would be the person to talk to, but I don't know where to find him and I do know where to find David." Tim agreed to this readily enough, and a short while later we were seated in David's office, discussing the plan with him.

"I remember Julie," he told us, "from when you two came up here a couple of weeks ago. Very attractive girl. She wants to be murdered, eh? Stabbed to death?"

"Yes," I answered. "She's built a huge fantasy around it, I think it helps her handle things."

"Well," David went on, "it really doesn't pose any performance problems, of course. She takes relaxants and painkillers, she'll be pretty pliant, you can do whatever you want. The legal issue is another matter." He spread his hands and smiled. "But. As you know, this is not the first time this sort of thing has come up, and we have our ways of handling it."

"Meaning, if I do kill Julie one Sunday, I go on the next," Tim said.

David nodded. "Yes. When one of the candidates kills another, we always report that to the Bahamian authorities. As you know, we have our arrangements with them. They send a couple of officers around to investigate--they never do really investigate, since we always have the films to show them, and that always closes the case. Our arrangement is such that they don't come to the island for ten days following one of our reports." He smiled again. "And of course, if we have films showing that the perpetrator is himself--or herself, that has happened as well--deceased, there is no problem and no action is taken."

"Well, that suits me fine," Tim said. "My wife and child are starving back in Omaha, the sooner they get the money, the better."

David looked Tim up and down. "You," he said, "are a very large and powerful-looking man. Julie is quite small. I would expect an exceptional performance. For that reason--assuming all goes as planned--I will personally authorize a ten percent increase in whatever payout is established for the method you choose."

Tim broke into a huge grin. "Thank you, David. I really appreciate that, that'll make a big difference back home."

"I hope so. We're all settled, then?"

"All settled," Tim replied.

We left then, and found Polly, Jerome, and Emily waiting for us back at the bar. Luckily, Julie was still involved with the guest, which gave us a chance to do some scheming about how to tell her. Tim, now evidently pleased with the role he was going to be playing, insisted that she be told while we were all present.

"She could be chosen this Saturday," Polly noted. She snuggled close to Tim. "If she is, that means you have only a week left. I'm going to miss you, Tim."

He squeezed her shoulder. "No, you won't," he told her. "You'll have Jack to look after. You know he's going to go all to pieces when Julie's gone."

"Unless," she pointed out, "he gets chosen too. He's part of the Six, remember?" She looked at me. "If he isn't," she went on, "then we'll have to look after each other for a while. A short while, nothing lasts long here." She turned back to Tim and gave him her impish grin. "But none of that means I'm not gonna miss you!"

It was close to six o'clock that evening before Julie returned from the guest hotel. She came in and walked to our table slowly, as if she was very tired. Without saying anything, she sat down and just stared down at the table.

"Julie?" I inquired tentatively. She glanced up at me, but said nothing. "What's wrong?"

"What on earth," she answered, "makes you think anything's wrong?"

"We could start," Polly interjected, "with the fact that you're anything but you're usual cheery self."

Julie turned to her. "Look," she began, "You know how the guests are, the first thing they want to talk about is how you plan to do it when your time comes. So I told the guest I'd gone up

there with--Harold--all about it, how I'd like a man to do me in but I can't find one willing to do it, so I'm probably going to end up taking the slow-drop sword machine." Her words were coming quickly, spilling out. "The idea of the sword-drop really turned him on, he came twice in a matter of maybe twenty minutes or so. Then he wanted to take me down to the bar, show me off to his friends."

"Just like Jim did with Denise," I commented.

She turned back to me. "Yes. And I was pretty much expecting it to turn out more or less the same way, that they would all want to talk to me about how I was going to be done in and that they would all want to fuck me." She shook her head. "That isn't how it went down."

Polly frowned deeply. "It isn't?"

"No. There was a man there--at the bar--who recognized me. I didn't know him from Adam. It turned out he's a very rich old fart who comes here all the time, he was here just a few weeks ago and decided to come back."

"Meaning, he had seen at least one of the shows," I noted.

"Yeah," Julie said sourly. "He'd seen one of the shows. And he remembered me from the show. You'll never guess which show he'd seen."

"I wouldn't want to try."

"Ramon and Joanna, that's which one." She shook her head vigorously. "It came damn close to being just plain embarrassing. I mention that I'd like to be killed by one of you guys, then start to try to talk about the sword-drop machine--and then this guy brings up Ramon and Joanna, and all of a sudden that's all they want to talk about. Nobody was asking me about my plans, they were asking me about Joanna reacted to being stabbed. At times, I was being just about ignored--I considered coming on back down here, but Harold wanted me to spend the night, and so I did. It was doubly bad--all the memories of Ramon and, damn it, I can't help but admit it, envy about Joanna." She paused. "Sucks," she added succinctly. More in tune with the Julie we all knew, she sprawled theatrically in her chair and put her head down on her arms on the table.

Then after a second, she sat up straight abruptly. "Isn't there anything I can do to get one of you guys to change his mind and do this for me when it's my turn to go on stage? Anything?"

Everyone at the table knew--except Julie. The plan had been for me to tell her later, but this opportunity was far too good to miss, and everyone knew that, too. Tim glanced at me and I nodded.

"Okay, Julie," he said nonchalantly. "I'll do it."

To everyone's puzzlement, she leaned forward and stared blankly down at the table. "Okay," she murmured. "I understand, it is a lot to ask, and--" Then, suddenly, her head snapped back up, her eyes wide open. "What did you just say?"

Tim grinned broadly. "I said, I'll do it."

"You... will?" She blinked several times. "You'll kill me, on stage? With a knife?"

"Yes."

She let out a shriek that attracted everyone's attention, lunged out of her chair and hurled herself on Tim, hugging him, kissing him, and thanking him almost incoherently. Polly and I just shook our heads. For me, I was just hoping that the reality of this would bear at least some resemblance to the romantic fantasy she'd been constructing.

"I hope you won't mind," she said to Polly when she calmed down some, "but I'm going to be occupying your man some over the coming days. I want to plan this down to the last detail."

"I don't mind at all," Polly said with a wave of her hand. She looked at me. "Your man can keep me occupied."

Over the next few days I did not see that much of Julie, she and Tim were spending quite a bit of time at the medical facility. I did get to know Polly much better, though, and Julie was back in my bed every night. Of course, I asked her what she and Tim were doing with their time.

She gave me a sideways glance. "Well, what would you say if I told you that Tim and I had fallen madly in love with each other and we were spending all our time fucking?"

I laughed. "I'd ask you why you weren't doing that in the bar the way we always do."

She grinned. "But what if I said it was because we were really really truly in love?"

"I'd ask you why the hell that made any difference. You know perfectly well how many women I've fallen in love with here--and just to emphasize that, Polly is the latest one. I know you loved Ramon, and Mitch. It just isn't the way things are here."

She pouted. "Can't get any jealousy out of you, huh?"

"Nope."

"Well, I suppose that's a good thing." Leaning against the dresser, she shook her head. "Just talking nonsense, Jack," she admitted. "As a matter of fact I do think I'm sorta in love with Tim, but that isn't what we've been doing. We've been studying anatomy over at Medical, practicing for my death." She ran her hands down over her body sensually. "I want to be stabbed a number of times," she went on, "and I want the blade to go in deep, every time. I'd like to have blood spurt out, at least a couple of times." She paused and giggled. "I sort of have a vision of it."

"I can see that."

"So the doctors over at Medical are teaching us. We're working out all the places Tim can stab me, push a four or five inch blade in all the way, and not kill me." She smiled. "It turns out there are dozens." She laid her hands on her belly, on opposite sides of her navel. "Mostly down here. But I want to be stabbed in the chest, too, I want to be stabbed in both breasts." She laid her hands on them as she spoke.

"Denise said you couldn't do that, you had to leave one unharmed. Or rather, at least one lung unharmed. Otherwise, you drown in blood."

"Turns out Denise was, for once, mistaken. For what I want to do, Dr. Studemeyer says they'll give me a super dose of the coagulant. That way, the blood'll be slow to leak into my lungs. He says I can be stabbed through both tits, all the way in, and go on for quite a while."

"That'll make it tough for you to get the spurts."

"No. Makes it better. That way, Tim can cut some fairly major blood vessels. I get a nice spurt and then it clots up. I should last a long time."

I took a step toward her. "Julie," I said, "are you really sure you want to do things this way?"

I expected a quick and enthusiastic "yes," but that isn't what happened. Instead, she looked down at her body for several seconds. "I like the idea of it," she said without looking up. "I think it'll be sexy. Tim's such a big guy, he's so strong. I can imagine him thrusting the blade into me, over and over, blood squirting out, me crying 'again! again!' Me finally fading, hardly reacting to the last few stabs, dying, smiling as I'm going out." She raised her head and her eyes were wet. "Can I do any less, Jack? Considering the way Geneviève and Denise died, can I do any less?" A single tear drained down her right cheek. "But I'm so scared..."

I frowned. "I don't think," I said, "I've ever heard you mention being scared since I've known you, Julie." She said nothing for a moment. "But I don't think you have to worry too much. I haven't tried the painkillers they give you yet, but Denise--"

"Jack," she said, cutting me off, "I'm not scared of the pain. I think I could take the pain even without any of the painkillers. When I get turned on, I get immune to pain. When we're screwing you could probably bite one of my nipples off and I wouldn't object." She stopped and her lips trembled visibly. "The show, being stabbed, bleeding--that's fine. But afterwards I'll be dead. Dead, Jack! What does that mean? Pearly gates? A sea of fire? Taken to meet Odin by Valkyries? Or just--not existing anymore?" She wiped her eyes. "I wish I was religious, that I had that kind of certainty. I'm not and I don't."

I moved toward her. "I don't think I can help you too much here, Julie," I admitted. "They have some preachers and so on here, for people to talk to. Maybe you should talk to one of them, maybe that'll help."

She shook her head. "It won't help." She sniffled loudly. "Jack, I have the weirdest mix of emotions going on inside me right now. The way we're planning to do it, I really truly want to do it that way. But somehow... somehow..."

"Yes?" I inquired when she fell silent.

"It makes it more real. Weird, huh? If I'd been chosen last week, I would've chosen the sword-drop machine and I'd be dead already. I knew that on Saturday, I knew I would've gone right out there and let myself be strapped down on that table and trigger those swords, and I would've been smiling and laughing about it, at least up to the moment when they started skewering me. Having Tim do it, it's... I don't know, more personal and somehow much more real. He's going to kill me out there. Kill me!"

I frowned. "Julie, maybe you should reconsider..."

She shook her head. "No. I want him to kill me. I really do." She looked down at her belly. "I want his knife in me, I do. I want him to stab me dozens of times, I want a fucking bloodbath." She chewed her lower lip. "I really need to figure out how to get by this. It's just... irrational. I want to be killed, I want to die, but I don't want to be dead. Which makes no sense."

"Maybe," I suggested, "you should stop focusing on being dead after your performance and focus on your legacy."

"Huh?"

"Don't you remember? Denise used to talk about it all the time. How her performance would be her legacy, the legacy she was denied when her academic career collapsed. It was one of the last things I said to her, I told her she'd left a wonderful legacy."

Julie laid a forefinger on her cheek and gave me a wry smile. "Yeah," she said. "I do remember. As much respect as I had for Denise, starring in a snuff film doesn't seem like much of a legacy to me. Writing a great novel or a symphony, making a big scientific discovery, that's a legacy."

"You ever say that to Denise?"

"Of course not. I didn't want to rain on her parade. That was her way of handling things, there wasn't a way I was going to try to talk her out of it."

"Agreed. Can I be blunt with you, Julie?"

"Of course you can."

"Your way has been to build a huge romantic fantasy around it. That's slipping a little. You need to get back to that or find a new way. Quickly."

She nodded. "You have any ideas about how I can do that?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I do."

"Yeah?"

I hesitated. I was, I'd admitted it long ago, in love with Julie. That I had been in love with both Geneviève and Denise, and was coming to feel that way about Emily and Polly, did not matter. I had certainly, during my stay at the resort, learned to appreciate the intense eroticism associated with a beautiful woman's voluntary death, and in that way I was eager to see Julie's demise. But on the other hand I did love her, in a way I wanted to protect her, I wanted her to survive. For a moment I considered suggesting she bail, that she take the boat back to Miami and try to put her life back together.

But I knew, as well, she'd scoff at such an idea.

"As I said," I continued after my rather long pause, "you had, at the time I met you, built a romantic fantasy about the idea of being killed by a man." I moved close to her and laid my hand on her belly. "You have been fantasizing for a while about having a man run a knife into you here. You still have that fantasy intact, you just fear the end. Am I right?"

She looked up at me with childlike eyes. "Uh-huh."

"Okay, then let me tell you this: you're going to have a bloody death. Remember, I was right there, with Angelina, with Geneviève, and with Denise, when they all died bloody deaths. And this is what I can tell you, what I know: as the end draws near, it no longer matters to you, you're okay with it." I ran my hand up her body. "We can do it the way you and Ramon planned it, way back when. I'll hold your hands behind your back and Tim'll to plunge a blade into you, over and over. It'll be intimate, personal, and incredibly erotic to anyone watching, not to mention you, me, Tim, and whoever else you might have up on that stage at that time. You're still looking forward to that, aren't you?"

Her lips trembled. "Uh-huh."

"Then that's what you should focus on. Forget about the end, it doesn't matter. When you get there it'll be okay with you, you won't mind dying." I caressed her belly lightly.

She looked down at it. Then, her head still lowered, she flicked her gaze back up to my face. "You said, 'incredibly erotic.' You mean that? Incredibly erotic for you?"

I continued to stroke her body. "Julie," I said, expressing my thoughts aloud, "first of all, you know perfectly well I love you and I don't want to lose you. But ever since you told me about your fantasies, back in New York, I've been thinking about how fantastic it would be to see a knife sinking into this wonderful little body. It seems to me that..."

She put her hands on my cheeks. Her eyes were intense. "You really want to see it? You want to see me stabbed to death?"

"Yes I do, I--"

"I'm going to be. I'm going to be stabbed a dozen times. You'll be there, with me. You'll see the blade going in, over and over. In my belly, my breasts, my sides, my back." She paused and caught her lip with her teeth. "Jack..."

"Yes?"

"Jack, can I do it for you? Can I take the knife for you, bleed for you? Jack, can I... die for you?"

I frowned slightly. "I don't think I quite understand..."

She held my face tightly. "I know, I know, it's... weird. But Jack, Jack, I love you. I'll go on stage anyway and I'll let Tim kill me, I'm not going to back out now. But if I were doing it for you... if you asked me to do it, for you... it would be... so much easier..."

I remembered what Denise had said about having been willing to die for me even without the payout, and I felt I did understand, at least to an extent. I held her shoulders and pulled her a little closer. "Julie," I said, "I want this. I want you to let Tim plunge a knife into your body, over and over. I want you to do this, for me, I want to see it, I want to see the knife piercing you, I want to see your blood flowing out. I want to watch you die."

She suddenly lunged forward and embraced me. "Oh, Jack, I will, I will, I'll die for you. Just be there with me, I want you with me, I want it to be like you said, I want you to be holding my wrists when the knife first goes in, I want you with me when I die. Will you do that for me?"

I kissed her. "Yes," I answered soothingly. "I want that too, as much as you do. We'll talk to Tim, we'll arrange it."

We kissed again, and from there we passed smoothly to lovemaking, the first time we'd had sex in private for quite a while.

From that night on, Julie was back to being her old self, she was no longer moody. At the Saturday selection neither of us was chosen, and we were naturally in the audience on Sunday to watch a young couple we knew only slightly do a simultaneous short-drop hanging. The girl, a pretty teenager named Marcy, lasted a long time at the end of the rope, but unlike Brittney--whose death by hanging now seemed to be in the distant past--it appeared as if she expected it. On Tuesday we found that we were still part of the Six--and we also noticed that Tim had been added. That same day, a fresh group of recruits came in from Florida, five women and three men--undoing the gender correction balance that has caused the Resort to start doing the Wednesday specials. As a result they continued, and, while both Emily and Polly had signed up, neither was chosen. Instead, we went to the theater on Wednesday and watched a tall black girl named Kasey have herself sliced to pieces with motorized scalpels, a performance that ended when a final scalpel stroke, delivered slowly, opened her from the base of her throat to her groin, allowing her entrails to fall out on the stage.

The following Saturday, though, the inevitable came to pass--Julie was the selection. I was of course not chosen to be her partner, who was, by requested setup, Tim. As usual, once the selections had been announced, Julie and Tim were the center of attention, while Polly, Jerome, Emily and I were left at our usual table.

"Not going to be an easy thing, come Monday morning, to be without those two permanently," Polly noted, looking more than a little glum.

"Of all the people I met when I first came, you'll be the only one left, Jack," Emily added.

I nodded. "And in a lot of ways, I wish that wasn't the way it was, I wish it was me instead of her, or at least that I'd be her partner. I know perfectly well there's never a guarantee of that, but I had always believed it would happen that way somehow."

"I know what you mean," Jerome agreed. "If Emily and I don't go together, I'll be disappointed." He grinned. "Unless I go first."

"You don't want to see me go through the Chinese rat torture?" Emily asked with a seductive smile.

Jerome squeezed her thigh. "Bluntly, and honestly--I've told you this before--no. If you were doing a slow strangulation hanging, I might want to see that. If you were having yourself garroted, I might want to see that." He shook his head. "I like you far too much to want to see you go through the rat torture, too much to be able to see that as erotic. I can't even imagine it."

Emily's smile faded. "I have to--I've told you that before, too. I came here for the money, for my family. My other choices are being burned alive, boiled in oil or water, or torn apart by animals."

"None of those are any better."

"My thinking is that those would be ugly, they wouldn't make a good show."

"From my point of view," Jerome noted, "neither will the Chinese rat torture."

"But--"

"Look, Emily," he said, his manner serious, "the plain and simple fact is, nothing involving pain and blood appeals to me at all. Just about everybody here manages to get into the eroticism of the death scenes--everyone but me. I don't like it. I can't make myself like it." He held up his hands. "You know I'm a Marine--not an ex-Marine, like everyone says, when you're a Marine you're a Marine forever. I've been trained to fight. For me, it's like this: tomorrow night we'll all go in there and sit and watch Tim kill Julie. I love Julie. I don't want to see that happen. I will, because it's expected. But--unlike some of the other guys around here--I can't do any drinking before the show. If I do, if I'm a little high, I might lose control, rush the stage, put a stop to it. I have been tempted. More than once."

"But Jerome," I said, "you were up there on stage with Denise, didn't you find that--"

He shook his head. "That was for her. Homage to her courage, her determination. You didn't even notice, Jack--nobody did--that I didn't even come during her performance. Most of the time I wasn't even erect."

I frowned. "Well, no, you're right, I didn't, I was focused on Denise--"

"As you should have been."

Emily, who had been listening closely, laid her hand on Jerome's forearm. "All right, Jerome," she said in a soft but serious voice. "Listen to me. If we are not partners on the stage, if I'm chosen and you're not, don't come. I don't want you in the audience. We all have to do what we have to do here, there's no way around that. But if it upsets you that much, don't come." He started to say something, but she silenced him by touching his lips. "And if we are partners," she went on, "then I want us to arrange things so that you go first. I already know you're going to choose guns. I can be with you, hold you, while you're being shot. You do not have to watch me."

He looked pained. "Emily, I can't do that, I can't just sit in the bar knowing you're out on that stage being killed!"

She nodded. "I can understand that. But I'm not going to give you a choice, Jerome. I want you to promise me, right now, that no matter how it goes, you will not watch me die. If you don't promise me, then I'll change my method. Maybe a long-drop hanging, maybe the guillotine, something like that, something that causes a quick death. It'll make me very unhappy and I'll feel like my life is being wasted, but, knowing how you feel about it, it'll make me more unhappy to go through something like the Chinese rat torture knowing you're watching." She stopped and stared at him fixedly. "Promise me."

Jerome was literally squirming. "Emily, I..."

"Promise me!"

He hung his head. "All right, Emily," he said finally. "Doesn't seem like I can ever refuse you much of anything anyway. If I'm still here when your turn comes, I'll sit here in the bar and get shit-faced drunk, how's that?"

She squeezed his arm. "I wish it was as simple as that," she told him. "But didn't you just get through saying that you couldn't trust yourself to drink before any of the shows, for fear you'd rush the stage and put a stop to it? If you sit here in the bar and get drunk, who's going to stop you from coming over to the theater and... and... I don't know, killing the rat?!"

He looked up at her and grinned, and a moment later the grin turned into a laugh. "Okay, you got me," he said finally. "And okay, you're right. I can't afford to get drunk. Can't get drunk

tomorrow and go save Julie. Can't save anybody." Looking glum, he shook his head. "I can't even believe we're all in this fucking ridiculous situation anyhow."

"It's a weird one," I agreed. "But I might have a suggestion."

"You always have a suggestion, Jack," Jerome said. "So?"

"Medical. Before you go out on stage, they give you all sorts of drugs, you know that. One of them is a relaxant, it helps you be calm about what's about to happen. Both of them were trying not to show it, but Geneviève and even Denise were nervous on their Sunday. They weren't after Medical got through with them. I'll bet that if we talked to Dr. Studemeyer he'd be willing to give you some of those when it's Emily's time. After all, it's in their interest too, they wouldn't want an ugly scene."

"And most especially," Emily said with a grin, "they wouldn't want to risk losing a rat!"

Jerome laughed. "Oh, no god forbid," he agreed. "Okay. If Studemeyer is willing to dope me up, I'll let him dope me up."

"We should go talk to him soon," Emily said. "Maybe Monday. I do want to keep putting my name in for the Wednesday specials, and you never know. I could get picked and go as quick as this coming Wednesday."

"I trust not," I grumbled. "Pardon me for being selfish, but I'm losing people I care about a little too quickly these days."

"It's what we're here for, Jack," Emily said earnestly. "We've had our good times, nothing can take those away now."

I gave her a sour look. "Yes, you're right, I know. I'd just prefer to have a few more of them. If possible."

Emily nodded. "If possible, Jack," she said with a soft smile. "If possible."

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Although we were late getting back to the room--quite a number of the men wanted to say goodbye to her sexually at the bar--Julie of course spent the night with me that Saturday. As has been the case previously, we made soft gentle love for a long time once we did get back. We did not sleep until very late, I spent a great deal of time just stroking and caressing her little body and her face while she chattered on about the plans that she and Tim had made and about what role she wanted me to play in the drama. Many times she asked me if the plans they'd made sounded good to me, adding that she wanted to be able to feel that she was doing this for me specifically. I assured her that what she'd planned would be intensely erotic for me, and assured her that I was accepting her performance as a special--and perfect--gift. As has happened before, we slept for a long while after sunrise, then went down to Medical to start the preparations, at three since this one presented no complications. As we walked there, Julie was visibly nervous; I was too, but I hid it well. The day went generally as it had gone with Denise, except that Julie was not so rigorously tested for her ability to control her pain, and there was of course the planning session with Tim, which, as a co-participant, I sat in on as well. Tim, I found out at this session, had chosen a particularly violent end, a chainsaw-wielding machine that would sever his arms and legs and leave him to slowly bleed to death--slowly only because he'd been given an extra-heavy dose of the coagulants. His choice, he said, was determined not only on the payout, but because he did not want his own demise to be an anticlimax to Julie's.

Soon enough--too soon for me--it was time for us to go onstage, where we were joined by Polly. Only one machine awaited us there, a stool-like structure with four arching steel arms fitted

with manacles and four automated chainsaws. Having been given heavy doses of the relaxant drugs, Tim and Julie were quite calm, Polly and I less so. The sex was first; Julie and I as one pair and Polly and Tim as the other at first, then switching partners. The girls sucked us to erections, then rode our cocks for a while. Without either Tim or I having climaxed, we then moved to phase two of the performance, and for this Polly faded into the background as Tim and I prepared to kill Julie.

Everything had been planned, precisely choreographed. Julie was standing, half-facing the expectant audience, and she had adopted that pose I'd seen what seemed like eons ago, back in New York, her belly and hips pushed forward. I moved in behind her and she arched her body further, stretching back against me. Her eyes were bright and she was smiling, the relaxants seemed to have done their job very well.

"Finally time," she said, her head pushing against my shoulder, her face close to mine.

"Finally," I agreed with a nod. I wrapped my fingers around each of her wrists and pulled her hands down behind her back. "Ready?"

"Oh, god yes. You? You want to see me die for you, Jack?"

I still had violently conflicting emotions about it, but I did not let her see that. "Yes. For me, Julie." I held her hands tightly and looked up. Tim was standing there, waiting, a slender five-inch knife in his right hand. I waited for a little to build the drama of the moment, then nodded to him.

He nodded back, took a step forward, and plunged the little knife into Julie's smooth flat belly to the right of her navel, burying the blade. She let out a little squeaking sound and her body jerked hard back against mine. Her arms strained against my hands, but I held her tight.

"Take it for me, Julie," I whispered. "Take it for me."

She pursed her lips and stopped struggling. Tim yanked the blade out; Julie squeaked again and raised one leg. Blood erupted, streaming down her belly faster than I thought it might have considering the coagulants. Tim let her bleed for a moment, then drove the blade back in, close to the same place.

Julie was staring at me. "It's happening, it's really happening, I can't believe it..."

"It is. It's beautiful, Julie."

"It is?"

"Yes." I deliberately pushed my hard cock against her back.

She looked back at Tim and tossed her head. "Again!" she cried loudly.

Tim was touching his head with his left hand. He gave Julie a sort of a crooked smile and pulled the knife out. Fresh blood appeared, but not nearly so much this time. Julie twisted in my grasp; the knife in Tim's hand flashed forward again, and this time it struck the other side of her abdomen, a little higher, and did not go in all the way. I was watching Julie, waiting for Tim to push it on in deep.

But he did not. I After a moment I looked up; Tim was holding his head with his left hand and frowning deeply. He was also wavering a little, and his erection, as rampant as mine as we started, had disappeared. "Tim?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

"I... don't know..." he muttered. "Head hurts..." He let go of the knife, leaving it standing in Julie's belly, and almost staggered back a step or two. At that point Polly reappeared, headed toward Tim at a run.

She did not get there before he fell, toppling over backwards like a felled tree and hitting the stage with a heavy thud. As Polly knelt beside him, his feet twitched several times and one hand pounded the floor a couple of times. All I could do, and all Julie could do as well, was stare.

Polly, wide-eyed, looked up at us. "I think he's dead!" she cried in a stunned voice.

At this point a clothed attendant rushed out. He did not go to Tim, but to the chainsaw machine, where he flipped open a panel at the back. "Yes," he said in a loud voice. "Tim has died." He then vanished from the stage quickly, apparently leaving the three of us to our own devices.

For a moment, we didn't do anything. Polly was the first to break out of the paralysis. "Jack," she whispered, "you know what you have to do." She was still kneeling beside Tim's still form, and her eyes were full of tears. I didn't understand and I said so. From the audience, the other candidates were yelling something, apparently at me, but I could not understand what they were saying.

"Jack, please," Julie groaned after a moment. Only then did I realize she still had the knife sticking in her belly; it wasn't in very far and it was hanging. I let go of her wrists, turned her around, put my arm around her and quickly pulled the knife out. She groaned, and new blood dripped on the floor. She leaned against me, one of her hands on my shoulder and the other stroking my face. She had a look of desperation in her eyes.

I did understand then, what Polly had been telling me, what the other candidates had been telling me. I didn't really think about it, I didn't consider any options. I just kissed Julie passionately, and while I was kissing her I drove the knife back into her, just above the point where her left thigh joined her torso.

Her body went rigid. Pulling back from the kiss, she gazed into my eyes. Her face was calm. She looked down at the knife piercing her, then back up at me. "I love you, Jack," she murmured. "Ah, god I love you... so much..."

I pulled the knife up a little, then yanked it out. I felt her body stiffen momentarily as more blood flowed out. "I love you too, Julie," I replied softly. "You can't know how much." I pressed the point of the knife against her side at her waistline.

She pushed her body toward it. "Oh, I do know," she sighed. "You love me enough to kill me, the way I want to be killed, even though you don't want to do it." She took several deep breaths. "Kill me slowly, Jack," she murmured. "Slowly, gently, lovingly." I pushed harder and so did she. Finally the point broke through, and the blade slipped softly and sensually back into her. She threw her head back and her body trembled. "Yes, like that, oh, like that..."

I forced the knife in deeper. "We're committed," I said. "I'll do this as close to what I know you want as I possibly can." I pressed the knife hard into her and squeezed her body harder against mine. Then I pulled it out, and watched her blood flow, a fast stream that quickly thinned to a trickle. "And yes, I do love you enough to kill you. I just don't like hurting you..."

"It isn't bad," she replied instantly. "The pain muters, remember? I'm loaded with them. Don't worry about it, just do it to me. You have to play both roles now..."

"I know." As I spoke I felt a hand touch my back, and turned my head to see Polly standing there, one of her hands on me and one on Julie.

"Thought you could use some support," she said. Her eyes were wet and luminous.

"You aren't wrong about that," I agreed.

"Just focus on the show, Jack," she advised. "Once we're out here on this stage, the show is everything."

Nodding, I drew the point of the knife down the center of Julie's chest, leaving a thin red line from the blood adhering to the blade. After grazing it across her trembling body for at least a minute or so, I stopped when the point was resting just under her ribs on her right, just a little off the centerline of her body. I paused for a moment and squeezed her shoulder affectionately. Then, with one swift motion, I plunged the blade in, as deeply as possible, and drew it right back out. A

spurt of bright blood shot out, hitting the floor at least three feet away. Immediately, though, the flow slowed--a tribute to the coagulants.

"Yes..." Julie sighed. "Oh, perfect..."

I gritted my teeth. My erection was literally painful. Of all the intense erotic experiences I'd had since my arrival on the island, killing my precious little Julie was turning out to be by far the most extreme. But I also did not want to do it, I did not want to be without her. I tried to resolve the conflict by telling myself that she was going to die on this stage tonight regardless of what I did, but it only helped a little. I had to go on, there was no choice.

Remembering all the talks we'd had, I turned her body slightly so that her front was fully exposed to the onlookers. Still conscious of her audience, she cocked one knee, arched her body slightly, and gave the onlookers a dark sensual smile.

"I'm ready," she said.

"I thought so." I then plunged the knife into her left breast, just above the nipple. The hard steel passed easily through the swelling of her breast and sank deep into her chest.

"Ah!" she cried. "Ahhhh...!" Her mouth was open. She choked, and blood stained her teeth.

"Oh, that's pretty," Polly breathed, obviously talking to Julie. She stroked Julie's hair.

Julie was looking at me, her body quivering a little, her eyes expectant. I pressed the blade hard into her chest and heard her gasp as I moved it around inside her. I then yanked it out violently, pulling it to the side as it came--and I was rewarded with another arching spurt of blood, the sort Julie had said so many times she wanted.

"More," she sighed after the spurt had slowed to a trickle. "More, more, I want you to kill me, I want you to watch me die, more..."

I nodded, smiled, and kissed her briefly. "Both breasts, right?" I asked her.

Her eyes widened. "Both breasts. Do it." I nodded again, then pressed the point of the knife into her right breast, squarely into her nipple, and started increasing the pressure. Her mouth went tight, but even so she pushed her body forward, as if welcoming it. I kept pushing, and at last her skin yielded and half the length of the blade sank into her chest, provoking another loud gasp from her.

"You want the rest of it?" I asked her.

Her eyes were wide. "You know I do. Give it to me, Jack, give me all of it. Give it to me slow, let me feel it."

I kissed the side of her head near her temple and then started working the knife on in slowly, rocking it from side to side as it went. Blood flowed down below it, and I could feel her body quiver and flinch as the sharp point cut deeper and deeper into her chest. She was by then breathing very hard, and blood kept dripping from her mouth. I pushed the blade on until it was completely inside her. Then, leaving it standing in her breast, I ran my hand down her body until my fingers were between her legs. She was literally dripping wet.

Without removing the knife, I pulled her toward the mat. She groaned, her steps were unsteady, and she supported the knife with her hand. I sat down cross-legged, then pulled her down into my lap. Using her other hand she guided my erection and it slipped up inside her effortlessly.

I moved gently under her and gazed at her eyes. "I'm going to kill you now, Julie," I said softly. Polly, kneeling beside us, nodded approvingly.

"I know," Julie said. Her voice was weak and bubbly. "I want you to. I want to die like this, coupled with you, oh god I want it so bad..." She caught her lower lip with her teeth, leaned back slightly, and to my surprise, ripped the knife out of her own breast. As more blood flowed out, she handed it to me. "Finish me off."

I took it from her, caressed her face gently, and pressed the point into her belly at her waistline. She smiled slightly and pressed her head against my hand, but otherwise did not react, even as I increased the pressure. Her body jerked slightly when the point broke through and the knife sank in, but that was her only immediate reaction.

"I'm not afraid now," she told me as I slowly worked the blade in deeper. "Not anymore. This is exactly what I wanted, Jack, being killed by the man I love." She started squirming on my cock, I stopped pushing on the knife, and she exploded into a shattering orgasm. At the height of it I slammed the knife home and twisted it sharply, provoking a rush of blood and a brief little cry from her. As I drew it back out, I noticed that her skin was beginning to grow cool, and I knew that she did not have much time left. She sagged forward, her movements less vigorous, and laid her head on my shoulder. I kissed her head, stroked her smooth bare back, and then plunged the knife into it, just below her shoulder blade.

Her body arched backwards; I whipped the knife out and drove it into her belly again close to her navel. She seemed to sigh, but the sighs went on, punctuated by gasps of air. I was very close to my own orgasm by then, and it seemed to drive my hand. I tore the knife out and stabbed her again, in her chest under her breast. She turned her head to face me. She was struggling to breath and her body was beginning to jerk, but her eyes looked peaceful. I twisted the knife inside her again and felt her legs tighten up; her fingers clutched at my shoulders and back. My climax started to rise; I groaned and ground the knife hard into her, moving the point around inside her. Then I was spraying my semen into her, and at that moment I wasn't at all sure exactly what I was doing with the knife, I only know it remained buried in her chest.

Her now-cold body relaxed as my orgasm rolled off, as if that was what she had been waiting for. She offered me a tiny smile. "I'm going, Jack," she whispered, her voice faint and bubbly. "Love you..." She let out a long, rattling, gurgling breath and did not draw in another. She continued to stare at my face. I watched her wide-open eyes as her pupils started to enlarge, and I knew that she was, indeed, gone. I just held her then, calling her name, not wanting to let her go, and continued until other hands pulled her limp corpse off of me.

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I don't remember much of the remainder of Sunday evening. I do know that Polly, Emily, and Jerome took me off the stage, and I remember the two women giving me a bath, washing away Julie's blood, and I remember them taking me to my room. Nothing else, not from that night. The next morning I found Polly still there with me. I felt like crying and told her so, and she urged me to let it out, but I could not.

"Did you find out," I asked her, "what happened to Tim?"

"Yes," she said, nodding. "Jerome talked to the guys from Medical. They say he had a bad reaction to the coagulants. He had a massive stroke." She shrugged, although she looked sad. "Dr. Studemeyer says it happens sometimes. Anyway, the good side, for Tim's family, is that they say they're going ahead with the payout as if he had completed the whole show." She managed a weak smile and patted my shoulder. "The good side for you--sort of, I guess--is that Medical has done an autopsy on her, and has determined that the first wound that Julie suffered would have been fatal, eventually."

I was still numb. "So?"

"So, that means that legally you are not a murderer."

"Which makes no difference to me at all, Polly, I--"

She shushed me. "No, Jack. If they'd determined you were, you'd be an automatic pick for next Sunday. As it is, nothing has changed for you."

I shook my head. "Next Sunday would be fine for me. I don't know how much more of this I can take, I really don't."

She hugged me. "I know exactly what you mean. However it happened, Tim and Julie are gone, and we're still here. For the moment, anyhow."

I touched her hair lightly. "I just wish you--and Emily--wouldn't put your names in for the Wednesday specials. I really don't think I could stand that right now."

Polly frowned. "But we already have, Jack," she said, telling me what I already knew. "We can't retract them, it wouldn't be--fair."

I hung my head. "I know. We have to die. And the sooner, the better."

"It's the way we have to look at it." She started tugging at my hand. "Come on, come on, let's go get some food in you," she said. "Try and get things back to something like normal around here." I let her pull me toward the door, although the idea of food wasn't appealing and neither was the idea of being back in the bar. "I want to get a promise from you, too, Jack."

"I doubt I can refuse you anything, Polly," I said. "Ask."

"If I'm chosen for Wednesday--or if Emily is--either of us would ask you to be on stage with us. Do it, Jack. You find these things erotic, you know that, and you--"

"That I do find them erotic," I said, cutting her off, "is a huge part of my problem. But yes, you are absolutely right, I do. I was incredibly aroused when Geneviève died, when Denise died. Even more so last night with Julie. But I don't want them dead, Polly! I don't want to be without them. I loved them, I love you, I don't want you to die!"

She stopped, turned to me, threw her arms around me and gave me a passionate kiss. "Oh god, Jack, I love you too," she sighed. Abruptly, her mood shifted to serious. "But I have to die, Jack, just as you do. The payouts don't matter as much as letting the others down. We can't do that." Then, just as suddenly, she flashed her charming smile. "But we're here for at least another week, and we should take full advantage of the time we have left. Are you hungry?"

Her high spirits were at least a little infectious. "Maybe. Sort of."

She took me down to the dining hall then, where I ate a light breakfast and winced every time someone came up to congratulate me on the way I'd finished the show with Julie, which happened a dozen times or more. I took these accolades with murmured "thank yous" even if, at that moment, I would rather have not been reminded. After we ate, Polly suggested we go down to the beach for a while, and that seemed a good idea to me. By early afternoon we were there, relaxing on one of the mats the resort provided, our bodies shining with sunscreen.

Polly was being more than affectionate. We'd always gotten along well, but she was definitely taking things to a new level. I supposed that she was to an extent trying to compensate for the loss of Tim, whether she was aware of that or not. I could not fault her for that, nor did I mind. In no sense did it erase Julie's memory, but it did at least keep me distracted.

Distracted enough that, after a while, I found myself on top of her, my cock hard and inside her, her legs wrapped around me. We didn't just have sex, we made love, slowly and gently, with many kisses and much soft caressing of each others' faces. We reached our orgasms almost simultaneously, and they were long and drawn-out. Afterwards, we lay together, still coupled, for quite a while.

At last, though, we realized that we had an audience. Two men--boys, really, I would later learn that one was eighteen and the other nineteen--were watching us from a short distance away. Both had raging erections. Sitting up, Polly gave them a bright smile and motioned them over.

"Newbies, right?" she asked as they drew close.

"New as you can get," one of them, a slender lad with a shock of unruly dark hair, said. "We just arrived today. My name's Nick Pomroy." That, of course, immediately led to the standard lecture about using no last names. The other, who was taller, more muscular, and blond, then introduced himself simply as Tommy. His hair was tousled and he had a day's worth of stubble on his cheeks and chin. Polly was looking at him with apparent interest.

"Well, I'm Polly and this is Jack," she told them. "I think you could properly call us old-timers now. You know about the Six?" Both men shook their heads, and she explained, telling them that I had been part of last week's Six and probably would be again this week when the new Six was posted Tuesday--tomorrow--morning. "I could be a part of it too, I haven't been yet but I've been here long enough."

"I guess we should apologize," Nick said, "for watching you. You are just so beautiful..."

Polly laughed. "Why thank you sir," she said. "And in fact you should not apologize. You've been told already, I'm sure, that public sex is not only permissible but encouraged here, so that the paying guests can watch. There is no reason in the world why you shouldn't. Soon enough people will be watching you."

Tommy laughed too. "I dunno, I don't know any of the women here, and--"

"Oh, you don't have to." She glanced at his rather large cock, which was standing firmly at attention and which he was obviously--and almost comically--trying to ignore, and I knew what she was planning. "Come here," she said, "and sit beside me."

He looked doubtful, but he obeyed. As soon as he sat down, Polly picked up his hand and laid it on her well-oiled breast. "You like?" she asked with an impish grin. Staring at her, he nodded. "Good," she added. She then laid down half in his lap and, watching me, slipped his cock into her mouth.

He continued to stare at her in disbelief. I scooted closer and stroked her thighs and hips gently as she sucked him. She continued to watch me and she smiled around the cock in her mouth. Tommy reached for her breast, his movement tentative. She grabbed the hand and placed it there herself, and he began playing with her nipple.

"You don't mind, man?" Nick asked, obviously astounded.

"Not a bit," I answered. "Polly's enjoying herself, and there's nothing I like better than seeing her enjoy herself." I watched her for a moment, watching Tommy's thick cock, now wet with her saliva, slip in and out of her delicate mouth, then looked back up at Nick. "I don't think," I observed, "that your friend is going to last long. Believe me, I know how good she is at this. And I'm sure that as soon as he finishes, it's your turn." Without missing a beat, Polly nodded.

I wasn't wrong. Just a minute or two later, Tommy groaned, and a second after that, semen burst from the corner of Polly's mouth. I saw her swallow quickly, then move her head to capture what had escaped.

"I don't believe this," Nick murmured.

Polly let Tommy's softening cock slip from her lips. "Believe it," she said with a smile. "This is only the beginning for you guys!" She came up on her knees, moved to Nick, and quickly took his cock in her mouth. He took a little longer, but the result was the same. "In the future," she told them as she wiped her mouth, "we can fuck, too. I'll apologize for not doing that now, but Jack and I just finished, and I wanted to... I guess, just savor the feeling for a while." The boys hastened to assure her that no apologies were necessary. We then started to head back to the bar, the boys following along behind us like puppies.

"Jack," Polly said as we walked along, "Look, I'm not trying to take Julie's place, I hope you know that, I know she's irreplaceable. But... what do you think about me moving in with you until, well, until death do us part?"

I paused to hug her. "I think that would be wonderful, Polly," I said.

Back at the bar, we found Jerome and Emily sitting at our usual table with two girls I had never seen before. They introduced them as Alice, a lovely girl with bright blond hair and a wide, innocent-looking face, and Bridget, a slender freckle-faced redhead with very white skin who wore a large red clip in her hair, also newcomers who'd just arrived that day. We invited Tommy and Nick to sit down and introduced them in turn.

Emily was being very solicitous toward me, assuring me repeatedly that what had happened on stage was exactly what Julie had always wanted, but adding that she understood well that that did not mean we all didn't miss her badly. I just nodded agreement. I found myself sinking into depression again and I decided that I just wasn't going to do that. The Six had not been announced yet, but I knew that any of the old-timers at that table could be chosen to die Sunday and I felt it likely, in spite of what Polly had said about the management deciding that I was not a murderer, that I would be. Depression, I told myself firmly, was just wasting now-precious time.

"Have you heard they're changing things?" Jerome asked me.

"No," I replied. "Changing what how?"

"The Specials," he explained. "The last group they brought was eight women and just three men." He looked at Tommy and Nick. "The balance is worse than ever, and if it keeps up they're going to run out of men for the Sunday shows. Meaning, they're upping the Special schedule." Naturally, Nick asked what the Specials were, and Emily explained.

"They'll be doing Specials now Wednesdays and Fridays," he told me. "And, starting on Friday, the wait between the choice of the girl doing the Special won't be a week anymore."

"So what's the new plan?" I asked.

"Well, Lily's on for Wednesday as we knew. Who's up for Friday will be announced on Thursday. After that, until further notice the announcements will be made on Tuesdays and Thursdays for the shows on Wednesday and Friday. One day's notice, just like the regular Sunday shows."

I frowned. "Which means..."

"Which means," Polly put in, "that assuming we aren't part of the Six this week, either Emily or I could go on Friday. We're both signed in to the pool."

I sighed. "I know that. Damn."

"Where do you sign in?" Alice asked. "I'll sign. My folks are starving, and I'd just as soon get this over with quickly."

"You can't," I told her. "You're guaranteed two weeks, and--"

"Wrong," Jerome said succinctly.

I looked back at him. "Wrong? Since when?"

"Since this morning. The two week guarantee still applies to the Six choices, but no longer applies to the Specials. Any girl can sign in for the Specials. Even ones that just got here, like these two." He shook his head and grinned ruefully. "The resort needs to get rid of some girls."

I looked over at Alice and Bridget. "Don't," I advised them. "Wait, give yourselves the two weeks at least. You can't imagine what life is like here. Paradise and hell, all jumbled up together. Eat, drink, lay on the beach, have a lot of sex. Two weeks is soon enough."

"I wasn't really planning to have a lot of indiscriminate sex," Alice said stiffly. "Even if I do have to--"

She was interrupted by Emily, who exploded into laughter. While Alice sat looking confused, Emily explained that she'd arrived with pretty much the same attitude--if not worse. "And now," she concluded, "I can proudly say that, with the exception of the three guys that arrived today, I've had sex with every man here, and with about half the women!"

"I'm two up on you," Polly noted, hooking a thumb toward Tommy and Nick. "You'd better get busy."

"None of us have any time to waste," I said. "There's a damn good chance that this time next week, two of the four of us could be dead. With the worst possible luck, it could be three."

"Best possible luck," Emily corrected.

"Whatever," I said carelessly. "The point is, you four newbies really should jump right in. No inhibitions, let yourselves go. If you want to get drunk and pass out, do it. If you want to screw, just do it, anytime, anyplace. The vast majority of the screwing around here is done right in this room where everyone can watch--and join in if they feel like it."

"I dunno," Alice said. "I mean, obviously the four of you are two couples, and--"

Polly laughed. "In the first place," she explained, "Jack and I have been a 'couple' for less than twenty-four hours, since our old partners died on the stage last night. In the second, that does not matter here to pretty much anybody, and anybody it does matter to will tell you quick enough." Again she gestured toward Tommy and Nick. "As a case in point, I just gave these two guys blowjobs less than twenty minutes ago, and my 'partner' here watched and played with my butt while I was doing it." She looked back at me. "Not that you aren't my partner, Jack. Till death do us part, right?" I nodded and she cocked her head. "I suppose that makes you my husband."

I put my arm around her. "And you're my wife," I agreed. "Which means I could ask you to forsake all others, couldn't I?"

She pursed her lips. "You could. And if you did, I would."

"Well, you know what? I'm not going to."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Pure selfishness. You heard what I told Nick out on the beach when you were going down on Tommy, didn't you?"

Her eyes sparkled. "No," she said, although her body language suggested it wasn't so. "I was busy. What'd you say?"

"He asked if I minded, and I said, Polly's enjoying herself, and there's nothing I like better than seeing her enjoy herself. I'm a totally selfish man. I'm not going to deny myself that pleasure."

She snuggled a little closer to me. "Selfish bastard, I knew it. But okay, we'll do it your way, I wouldn't want to deprive you."

"Good."

"Well," Bridget said, "I'm in." She smiled appealingly.

"I should be," Alice said, shaking her head. "You'd never guess where they recruited me from."

"A bar called the Last Chance?" I guessed.

"Modeling agency?" Polly opined.

"Soup line?" Emily asked.

"Porn movie set," Alice told us. "Where I'd been working as an actress and where I'd just been fired." Her cheeks colored slightly. "You want to know why they fired me? They fired me because I said I didn't like taking it up the ass. Not that I wouldn't do it, even, just that I didn't care

for it. The director said I had a 'bad attitude,' and they fired me on the spot. I needed that job so bad, I ran out crying." She gave us a sour look. "The recruiter offered me a shoulder to cry on and a solution. So here I am."

"You might need a little time," Jerome offered. "Just don't take too much, you don't have much. And for god's sake don't waste a minute being embarrassed about what you were doing in real life. A lot of the people who end up here were whoring themselves one way or another to make ends meet."

"Present company included," I put in.

"And some of us," Emily said, "were into things even kinkier than that." I wondered if she was going to elaborate, but she did not. "Believe me, no one here is going to bat an eye at an ex-porn actress."

"Well, that's good to know, at least," Alice said.

"So tell me," Bridget asked, leaning forward. "Since we haven't seen any of the shows yet, how do most of the--candidates?--do it? Kill themselves, I mean?"

"It's all over the map," Jerome told her. "Hanging, in one form or another, is pretty common. Stabbing and shootings are too. And there are some more extreme ones."

"Yes," I agreed. "Definitely. One of our friends had herself killed by a buzzsaw coming straight up between her legs. Another killed herself with knives freehand, hara-kiri style. In the first one I saw here, the man was drilled through from the back by a drill over a foot in diameter. And there are weirder things available for anyone who wants them." Bridget asked for more detail and Jerome, seeing that the discussion wasn't entirely a comfortable one for me, picked it up, selecting Ramon and Joanna as his example.

"That doesn't sound possible," Bridget said. "Stabbed that many times and still dancing? I don't see how that can happen..."

"Oh, it can," I assured her. "You would be--no, you will be, I'm sure enough of that--amazed by the number of times someone can be wounded with a knife--a knife pushed in really deep--and keep going." I told her about Mitch and Paula, and the way they'd effectively killed each other with rapiers. "It isn't anything like what you see in movies."

"No, it isn't." Polly agreed. "If it was, what I've planned for myself would never work, I plan on a fair number of piercings before I sign out." She tipped her head slightly. "What're you thinking about doing, Bridget? I mean, I know you just got here, but--have you thought about it yet?"

"Yes and no," the redhead answered. "What I would want to do is what everybody wants to see most, what turns people on the most."

"Well, it's a balance," Polly said. "Balancing payout with the good show. A lot of times the good show doesn't pay much. One recent death was a girl named Marcy, she hanged herself and strangled to death at the end of a rope. The paying guests loved it, and it was a very sensual performance. But a short-drop hanging doesn't pay much."

"On the other hand," I said, "Erothan can be generous." I told her about Ed and Diane, Diane's unscheduled death. "They paid her beneficiaries as if it had been planned. They didn't have to pay at all."

"Oh?" Bridget asked. "How do you know they paid?"

"Well, uhm, they said they were going to."

"Okay, they said so, but do you know it for a fact? Did you speak with her beneficiaries?"

I frowned. That was, it seemed to me, an odd question. "Well, no, I didn't, how could I? None of us have been off this island since we arrived, or had any contact of any sort with the outside world. As far as people out there are concerned, we're already dead."

"Oh, right, of course." Bridget went on, peppering us with questions, many of which we could not answer. "You can just leave," she asked finally, "at any time. Right?"

I nodded. "That's what they tell us."

"How many people just do that?"

"None."

"None?"

"None since I've been here, and people who were here before me never mentioned any."

"Nobody gets cold feet? Ever? I mean, we're talking about people killing themselves here!"

"You don't understand," I told her, shaking my head and smiling. "You can't. You will, very shortly. The management here is very clever, really. You have the two weeks before you can even become a candidate--the specials are voluntary, no one who has any doubts has to sign up. Coming from where we all came from, those two weeks are two weeks in fucking paradise. And during those weeks you'll form a bond with the others here; if you don't, you'll be the first one I know about. And once you do, you don't even think about leaving. It's like a betrayal, a betrayal of the ones you've watched die on the stage out there."

Polly laid her hand on my arm. "And especially, the ones you've been up there with when they died."

"Yes," Emily agreed. "Especially those. Most especially the ones you've come to love."

That seemed to satisfy Bridget, at least partially, and for a time she stopped dominating the conversation with her questions--although she did not stop entirely. By silent consensus the four of us took the four newcomers under our wings, showing them around and familiarizing them with the accepted norms of behavior at the resort. After dinner that evening, Emily broke the sexual ice with them by inviting Tommy to her chair and having her usual passionate sex with him. While they were engaged, Polly made her move on Nick, telling him that resistance was futile. Before she did, though, she suggested that I initiate Bridget, since Jerome was still working on a hesitant Alice.

I took her advice. Sex with Bridget was quite pleasant--even if she did continue to ask questions pretty much the entire time.

At least when her mouth was not full.

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Lazily, I rolled over on the bed and caressed Jennifer's ample breasts, and she turned her head to smile at me. This was the fourth time I'd slipped away to meet with the desk clerk. I was not talking about these trysts with the other candidates, but my lame excuses--"just going for a stroll on the beach, no, I'd rather be alone"--pretty certainly weren't fooling anyone. We had just finished a very pleasant lovemaking session, and were relaxing in the afterglow.

Sex with Jennifer was different. Unlike all the other girls I'd been intimate with since coming to the island, she was not under a death sentence, she was not expected to die on stage, and that was, to me then, a comforting thought. She would probably be here, manning her desk, for as long as I lived.

"You like my tits, don't you, Jack?" she asked me.

Teasing her nipple, I nodded. "You are larger," I said, "than any of the candidates, even the ones who do have big breasts, like Emily. It's odd, it's as if the recruiters have a bias against buxom women. And yet, they still dominate porn--at least the last porn I've seen. They seem to have a preference for medium-sized, or even small, like Julie and Denise."

"Actually," Jennifer told me, "they do. And I can explain to you why."

"Oh? How do you know?"

"Because the guy I used to date is a recruiter. The fact that I was dating him is what got me the job here." She rolled onto her side, facing me. "I've worked in hospitality since I graduated college," she went on. "When I met Jake--the recruiter--I was an assistant manager at a major hotel in Tampa. Just a few months after we'd gotten together it went under and I was out of work. Jake brought me here. The best they could offer was desk clerk, but in these times, a job here is a fucking treasure. A desk clerk job here is worth a hundred times what a manager's position is worth in the real world."

"I can see that. So why'd you stop seeing Jake?"

"I didn't. But I'm here except for a three-week vacation, and he's in Tampa and Orlando, recruiting. We don't get together often."

"Ah."

"Anyway, he used to talk a lot about the criteria they used for who to approach and try to recruit--and they want to spend their time on people who are likely to accept the offer. Hungry people are more likely to accept. Men are easier; they're taught to look for men who've lost most of their body fat but retained the muscle--like you, Jack. The women are different. They do want women who are hungry, literally hungry, not getting enough food. You can pick them out by their legs; you look for thin calves and thighs, slender but still shapely, still attractive. Denise is a perfect example. But malnutrition affects women's breasts, too."

"Oh?"

"Yes. The breast is mostly fat, and when a woman loses weight they lose at least part of that fat--all of it if the malnutrition is too bad. The skin can only retract so much as the breast gets smaller. Women whose breasts are small aren't much affected, and the medium-sized ones aren't either, the skin and ligaments can retract that much. Big-breasted women are another matter. The skin can't pull up that much, and so they get saggy and droopy, and that does not look good." She stopped and shook her head. "I've heard stories about that. The guy who came to your hotel room in Miami and offered you the fake cyanide shots, he also asked you to strip, remember?"

"Yes."

"The reason for the strip was a final check. Typically, the recruiter has only seen the candidates in clothing, and clothing can conceal things--like major scarring, or droopy breasts. If that happens, the candidate is rejected, given fifty dollars and plane fare home. It does happen, and the inspectors--that's what we call them--say it's a really tough thing to do. They always do it before the candidate takes the supposed cyanide shot." She sighed. "Anyway, that girl Emily has about the largest breasts you'll ever see here."

I grinned. "Well, you're larger, Jennifer. You could join the candidate pool."

She laughed. "I could, yes. But I'm not impoverished, Jack! I have a job, and a damn good one! I have no desire to die on that stage!" She arched an eyebrow. "Maybe you could get a job here. Helping David with his infernal machines, maybe. Or maybe just designated preferred stud for the shows."

"Thank you," I said. "But you know I can't do that, I couldn't even if they offered. It would be a betrayal of all my friends and lovers who are already dead."

"And that," she said, "is why the employees here tend to avoid liaisons like this with the candidates. Even though it isn't against the rules and some of them are more than worth it, so it does happen. The guy or girl ends up dead and the employee ends up grieving."

I touched her hand. "What about you?"

"Oh, I'm a cold and heartless bitch and I won't shed one tear when you die on stage," she said airily.

"That's actually good to hear, Jennifer. I don't want anyone grieving when I'm gone."

"Like I said, I won't shed one tear." Her expression suddenly became very serious. "I'll shed a whole damn bunch of them."

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Tuesday morning, I was hoping for a fairly quiet week. Those hopes were dashed almost immediately. The first thing we did was look at the posting for the Six, and we found that Polly had replaced Julie there, as well--which of course set me to worrying that she could be chosen for Sunday's show and I might not be, leaving me facing the loss of yet another loved one. Jerome had taken Tim's place on the list, and from my point of view that would only be somewhat less bad, as the marine--I no longer called him "ex-marine" even in my thoughts--had become a close friend.

I told myself, though, that Polly and Jerome had only one chance in six of being chosen, and I had the same one in six. Maybe, I thought, I'd be chosen and neither of them would be. In spite of the fact that it would mean my death, I found that thought appealing and somewhat comforting. I had, I felt, come far since my arrival at Erothan. I had loved Geneviève, but when she died there was something of a balance between the intense erotic impact of her death and the pain of losing her. There had been just as much erotic impact with Denise and distinctly more with Julie, but in each case the pain of the loss had increased exponentially. I had no doubt that further increases could be expected if Emily or Polly went before I did, and I definitely did not want that to happen.

That afternoon, Polly was asked by one of the paying guests to join him up at the guest hotel, and she had accepted, telling me she might well not be back until morning. Emily and Jerome were continuing to work on Alice, which left me alone with Bridget, who told me she'd like to meet Lily, the girl who would act as the special on Wednesday night. So we went to find Lily, which did not take very long.

Lily was a slender girl of medium height with intense dark eyes and long, light brown hair; the adjective most people used to describe her was "sweet." I knew her fairly well, I'd had sex with her several times, and she greeted me warmly, hugging me and pressing her smoothly rounded but only medium-sized breasts--which of course brought my conversation with Jennifer to mind--against my chest. I tried to assure her we'd spend some time together before Wednesday night.

That, apparently, wasn't good enough. "Jack," she said, "I really am glad to be able to speak to you today. I haven't selected a man to go on with me Wednesday. I know it's asking a lot considering, but..." She paused and studied my face. "Could you do it? Please?"

Mentally I sighed, but on the outside I just smiled. "Of course I can," I answered. "I'd be happy to. By the way, this is Bridget; she's just arrived and wanted to meet you."

She looked at the red-haired girl. "Me? Why?"

Bridget laughed. "Because you're on stage tomorrow!"

"Oh." Lily laughed too. "Should have known." She turned to me. "You did say she just got here."

"Yes, I did."

"So my performance will be the first one you've seen," she said to Bridget.

"Yes." The red-haired girl leaned forward, her legs slightly spread and her hands clasped between her knees. "I still can't quite believe it, I can't believe you're going to walk out on stage and kill yourself tomorrow."

Lily laughed again. "Well, I'm not, at least not in the sense that Denise did. Has anyone told you about Denise?" Bridget nodded. "I am going to go out there and start up a machine that will kill me. The recruiters use the term 'kill yourself' but that's kind of a loose meaning. Since I've been here, Denise is the only one I've seen actually, seriously, kill herself. Even the people who've hanged have had the machines do it for them, they haven't kicked out the stool or anything. And a few people, uh, they, uhm..." She looked back at me, a worried expression on her face, and caught her lower lip with her teeth.

"Not a problem, Lily," I said, patting her knee. "What she's concerned about saying is that some people, some of the women especially, have someone kill them on stage. That's happened several times." I gave Bridget a direct look, wondering how she was going to react. "Most recently, my long-term lover had me kill her on stage, and Lily was concerned about saying that."

"Oh, Jack, that is not so!" Lily cried while Bridget looked shocked. "Everyone here, absolutely everyone who's been here more than a day knows Julie was begging you to do that, and you always refused! Everybody knows, too, that Medical determined that Tim killed her, not you! You--"

"Technically." I turned to Bridget. "Tim was her death partner, and he was supposed to kill her, but he stroked out and died after stabbing her a couple of times. My choices were to let her die a long slow lingering death--I don't know if the management here would have intervened, they are very scrupulous in their rule that they themselves cannot harm any of us in any way--or finish her off. I chose to finish her off."

"Which is what she wanted you to do, Jack, and you know that."

I nodded. "Yes, I do. But I loved her and it--hurt me."

Lily's eyes were soft. "Everyone knows that, too, Jack."

Bridget watched me for a second, then rose from her chair, came to me, and hugged me. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I didn't mean to open up wounds."

"I know that. And it's okay. It's something that happens here, that's all. We all know it. I came here with Julie, and we knew the rules--she was going to die on that stage and there was only one chance in three I'd be her death partner. Now she's gone and I'm still here, although probably not for long. It's just the way things worked out."

After reassuring herself that I was okay, Bridget turned her attention back to Lily. "And you," she said. "You're going to die tomorrow. Aren't you scared?"

Lily laughed. "Of course I am. Aren't you? You're here, after all, you signed up and you knew the deal. You're sitting here in this bar naked, and that means you took the shot you were told might be cyanide and you pointed a gun you were told might be loaded at your own head and pulled the trigger. Right?"

"Yes, but--"

"So I can turn it around. Not tomorrow, but sometime in the next few weeks you'll be asked to go out on that stage and die. Aren't you scared?" She laughed then. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to give you a hard time. The answer is, as I said, yes. But I won't be tomorrow night when I go out on stage. The relaxants they give you in Medical really help. I haven't had them yet but I've seen

the effects close-up." She stretched her slim body. "I'm eager to get it over with now. I have a family, two younger sisters, in Colorado waiting for and really needing the payout."

"What're you planning to do?" Bridget asked.

Lily sighed. "Well, what I'm planning is exactly why I haven't asked Jack to accompany me. I'm going to do the slow drop swords, and as everyone here knows..."

"That's what my Julie was going to do if she couldn't find a man to kill her," I finished. "But no worries, Lily. She didn't do it, I don't have bad associations with it."

"I don't know what it is," Bridget said.

I explained what it was. "By 'slow' she doesn't mean that the blades drop slowly, although they will. She means that several of them will pierce her before she gets a fatal one."

Bridget stared. "That should be a horror," she observed. "I mean, a real horror, it--"

"No, you're wrong," I said, cutting her off. "We've had horrors out there on that stage, there's no doubt about it. But you'd think a woman having a slow buzz saw cutting up between her legs would be a horror too, and it wasn't, it was incredibly sensual. You're visualizing a screaming, struggling, and suffering victim. Because of the attitude we all have toward this, and because of the drugs, it isn't like that. The relaxants help you accept it, and the pain muters are very effective. I expect Lily's demise to be a thing of beauty."

"Oh, I certainly hope so," Lily breathed. She looked back at Bridget. "You don't understand, not yet, but you will. Your death on stage--it's how everyone will remember you, and you only get one shot to make it good. If you're like most people here, you'll spend a lot of time trying to balance out how easy it's going to be on you, how much it pays, and what kind of show it'll be. I want something people will talk about, something they'll still be talking about after all the candidates who see it are dead and gone."

"I think you may have that," I told Lily. "Look, are you spending the night with anyone tonight?"

She smiled. "I hope so," she answered. "But I have no plans yet."

"Would you like me to stay with you?"

Her smile broadened. "Yes, I would. But Polly?"

"In the first place, it isn't Polly's last night alive, and I know her well enough to know that she'd actively encourage me to stay with you. Secondly, it's moot, she's up at the guest hotel and will be there all night."

"Then I accept, Jack, and gratefully." She looked around the room; at the bar a trio of men were standing watching us. "I should go for now, though. As you said, it's my last night and I have lots of good-byes to say to lots of people." With that she rose and walked toward the bar, leaving me with Bridget and her seemingly never-ending questions. Telling her, in detail, about the way Denise and Geneviève had died did, at least, consume most of the evening. It was about two AM before I reconnected with Lily, and we adjourned to her room for some affectionate late-night lovemaking.

The next morning, I offered to accompany Lily to Medical, as I had done with Geneviève, Denise, and Julie. She, however, declined. What she was going to do was, she told me, pretty straightforward, and she said she wanted my interaction with her on stage to be more or less ad-lib. Beyond that, she said, she was a fairly strongly religious girl--her words--and she wanted to spend some of her time with the priest.

I left her at Medical and went down to the bar as usual. Polly was back, and her "date" from the guest hotel was with her, sitting at a table with Jerome, Emily, and the four newcomers. She introduced us--the man, whose name was Eric--was younger and much more athletic-looking than most of the guests. As always, I felt a bit awkward being naked around a clothed man. In the course of the conversations--which mostly centered around Lily's show that evening--he revealed that he was a junior exec at Wells-Fargo. Although I was the sole survivor of the group that had once torn into Jim Palore, that story had gotten around and the veterans were all very careful not to do that to Eric, and the newcomers followed our example. Perhaps that in itself led to some stiffness around the table, and he left shortly thereafter.

Once he was gone, Polly moved over to me and snuggled close. "It was only one night but I missed you," she said. She looked up at me with wide eyes. "I heard you spent the night with Lily, so I guess you didn't miss me very much."

"Lily is not you," I said. "Besides, I have no doubt you had fun times up at the guest hotel."

She pursed her lips and nodded. "Actually I did. Normally I don't. I go up there to let them fuck me, sure, but usually I don't get anything out of it at all. Last night was different. Eric wanted to show me off, although what made him think I was giving him special treatment, I can't imagine; normally I do just about anything the guests ask me to, you know that. Anyhow, he wanted to put on a sex show for his friends, starring him and me." She giggled. "Gave me a chance to become an actress again for a little while!"

"If you were ever a porn actress," I noted, "you haven't told me about that yet."

She looked stricken. "Will this change things between us, Jack?"

I laughed. "No."

"Oh, good," she said. "I'll confess, then. I never was a porn actress before last night. But last night, that's what I was doing. Eric reserved one of the conference rooms there and had the tables rigged as a stage. To start, he had me posed in the center of it and all his buddies seated around it. Then he climbed up there and asked me to suck his dick."

"You did, of course."

"Of course. Sucked him until he sprayed come all over my face--he pulled out right at the end like they do in porn flicks. After I cleaned up a little, he took one of the seats and sent one of his buddies up and asked me to fuck him."

"Which you did as well."

"Sure. He laid on his back and I rode him. I played it to the hilt, Jack. All the moaning, all the 'oh, my god, you're so good,' the 'oh, yes, fuck me, fuck me,' all that. They loved it and I had fun."

"How many of them did you fuck before the night was over?"

"Five. And I sucked off four more." She tipped her chin up proudly. "No man left that room unsatisfied."

"Well, shit."

"Shit?"

"Yes, shit. Hearing that sort of thing turns me on and I'd like to make love with you right now. But I can't, I'm on stage with Lily tonight and I have to save myself for her. Sucks."

She patted my arm. "My honorable Jack," she murmured. "But yes, Lily is worth it, she's such a sweet girl. I'll be here tomorrow and I'll tell you more stories about my sexual adventures. Maybe I'll have had more by then."

"Slut."

"Absolutely."

"I love sluts."

"I love you, Jack."

I kissed her then, a long, soft, loving kiss. As I did, though, I realized that if Polly was chosen Saturday and I wasn't, it might well push me over the edge. I was also aware that for me, Polly was in ways Julie reincarnate. There were certainly more than a few similarities between them, and I wondered if Polly was aware of it or if it mattered much to her. But there were also differences, and I decided not to worry about it. There really wasn't enough time, I told myself, to fret about things like that.

The day slipped by, and soon enough the candidates and the guests were gathered in the theater, waiting to watch Lily surrender her life on stage. The sword-drop machine, looking much as Julie and I had seen it in engineering what seemed like eons ago except that the blades were hidden by a black cloth shroud, was waiting. Alongside it was a four-poster bed complete with sheets and pillows and a padded chair sitting beside it. As was usual, I did not accompany her on stage, instead I was seated in the front row with Polly when Lily came out. Saul introduced her, and then she called me up. She seemed calm, even upbeat, very relaxed. I let her lead; she guided me to the chair, had me sit down, then curled herself into my lap. We kissed and I ran my hands over her smooth soft body. My erection started to rise.

"I'm going to go down on you now," she told me after a few minutes. "But warn me if you get close. I'd like you to save your orgasm for a while."

"It's your show, Lily," I said. "We'll do it your way."

She smiled, slipped off my lap, knelt between my legs and took my cock in her mouth. Looking up at me, she sucked me for several minutes, then rose and led me to the bed. Lying down, she drew me down on top of her and I slipped inside her easily. We then fucked in several different positions for a few minutes each, but mostly in the standard missionary position. Several times she cautioned me not to come, and I did not.

Finally, from a position astride me, she rose and led me to the sword-drop machine. There she turned and faced her audience. "In honor of those who have gone before me, recently," she said. "Denise, Paula, Mitch, Julie. You can see, there are no manacles on this table, I will not be bound." Then, holding the remote in her hand, she climbed onto the table and stretched herself out in the form contoured to fit her body exactly. She looked out at her audience, then at me. With a smile, she pressed the start button and tossed the remote aside.

Immediately, the machine came to life. The shroud was pulled up and away, revealing about a dozen shining steel blades, each one razor-thin and no more than three-quarters of an inch wide. It was obvious immediately that the longest ones were aimed at Lily's abdomen, her body would be pierced several times before a lethal wound was inflicted. The head bearing the blade suddenly dropped two feet, eliciting a gasp from the onlookers. But then it stopped and resumed its descend, not surprisingly, at a slow speed. A peaceful and pretty smile on her face, Lily watched it come. Taking her suggestion that we ad-lib to an extent, I stepped up beside her and started caressing her body as the swords moved on down.

"Watch your hands," she warned.

I squeezed her breast. "I will, don't worry."

"Good. Wouldn't want anyone to get hurt." She giggled.

I smiled too; her good humor, so different from the majority of these shows, was contagious. I wondered if she'd be able to maintain any of it when the blades began entering her. By that time, the longest one was just an inch or so away from her belly. Together, she and I

watched it drop on down and finally touch her skin. She quivered as the needle-sharp point pressed a valley into her abdomen, below and to the left of her navel.

"Here we go," she said. She had her head up and her expression could only be called eager. The blade kept moving. "Ah!" she cried suddenly, and at the same time a bead of blood filled the little valley in her skin. "Yes, it's in me, it's begun..." She raised her hips a little, forcing the blade on in a bit. The blade kept moving down, slowly, cutting into her belly. More blood appeared, running in a thin stream over her side.

I caressed her face gently, and she turned to look at me. "You doing okay, Lily?" I asked, feeling a little stupid as soon as I said that.

But her response surprised me. "Oh, yes, Jack," she said, grabbing my hand and holding it tightly. "I'm dying now, I'm being killed. It feels just... wonderful." She looked back down at her belly. "Look, another one's just about to go in." I did look, and she wasn't wrong; a second blade was just touching her, higher and to the right of the first. It broke through, more blood appeared, and Lily gasped. But then, almost immediately, she laid her head back, looked up at the apparatus, and smiled richly. "Oh, yes, I can feel them cutting into my entrails," she said, her voice almost dreamy. "So good..."

I wondered if she'd taken an extra-heavy dose of the pain muters. "It isn't hurting you at all, Lily?" I asked.

She turned her head, her eyes wide. "Oh yes, it hurts. Not too bad, I did take the drugs. This is pain I want to feel, Jack." A third blade was touching her by then, very low on the right side of her abdomen, and again she gasped as it punched through her skin. "I want to die." She smiled very brightly. "I'm enjoying being killed."

I leaned down and kissed her. "You," I told her, "have a wonderful attitude. I wish we all could have it."

A fourth blade entered her, near her solar plexus, and this time her body stiffened for a moment. The others had not stopped moving, and the first was now a good two inches deep. "There's nothing about it that isn't good, Jack," she told me. She paused to swallow, and I was sure she was swallowing blood. "I am putting on a good show, right? My family's going to get the money they need so badly. The feeling of the blades cutting into me, going in slow, is painful but it's also very sensual. And soon, as soon as I die, I'll get to see the face of god." She raised one leg and squeezed my hand again. "Make love to me," she said, "start before my breasts are pierced. You're safe, my groin isn't going to be pierced at all. Use my body, have your orgasm while the blades are killing me." She then gasped again as she was pierced below her ribcage. She squirmed a little, tearing her flesh on the blades and increasing the bleeding. "Oh, god, yes, yes," she sighed. "Oh, I do love this..."

I could only shake my head. The blades targeting her breasts weren't far from touching them by then. I moved in between her legs and slipped my erection inside her, finding her extraordinarily wet. As Angelina had done a million years before, she squeezed my body with her thighs. She also tried to move her hips, but the blades, now deep inside her, prevented her from doing that. As I stroked slowly in and out of her, I watched another blade pierce her near the joint of her hip on her right side.

The tips of the two blades headed for her breasts were by then just touching them, just below her nipples on each side. Still smiling, her body relaxed, she reached up and touched them with her hands. As they pressed twin valleys in her breasts, she started actively caressing them, stroking them up and down. She gasped a little when they broke through the skin, the right one a little before the left. Fresh blood trickled out.

"Oh yes, come in to me," she almost crooned, talking to the blades as if they could hear. "Steal away my blood, my breath, my life." She watched while the blades descended perhaps another inch or so, then squeezed her breasts with her hands, pushing them up on the blades, eliminating the valleys. I looked down at the forest of blades piercing her abdomen. The first few had stopped moving, apparently all the way through her. The rest kept sliding in relentlessly. The ones piercing her breasts were now well in, and I was sure they would pierce her lungs soon--and that would probably end things. I sped up, pushing deeply into her. She smiled down at me, a very peaceful look on her face, and began massaging me with her legs.

Then, suddenly, she choked. Blood welled up in her mouth and spilled over her cheek. Her expression changed as she struggled for breath she no longer could get. Her chest heaved up, impaling her breasts a little further on the blades. She began making gurgling noises, her mouth opening and closing, her body beginning to writhe against the blades. She pressed her thighs tightly against my sides and I could feel her legs quiver. Grabbing the blades piercing her breasts, she cut her hands severely on them. Her eyes were very wide and looked a little wild. Her movements became more violent, and I knew she was going through her death throes. I pushed very deeply into her and, with a groan, unloaded my semen inside her.

By the time my climax rolled away, her body had relaxed; her hands and feet twitched occasionally, her wide-open eyes stared sightlessly. "I hope you enjoyed being killed all the way to the end, Lily," I said as I pulled out of her. I moved toward the stairs as Saul announced her death. It wasn't long before I was back with my friends in the bar.

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I had liked Lily. As everyone said, she was a sweet girl. But I had never been terribly close to her, and although I would not say I was unaffected by her death, it didn't have anywhere near the direct impact on me that Julie's had had. After the show our little group remained in the bar for a while, the veterans remembering good times with Lily, the newcomers a little shocked after having seen their first show, as newcomers always were. As was now expected, Bridget had all sorts of questions; we answered them as best we could--although I did silence her for a while by having sex with her again. It was probably three AM before Polly and I took out leave of the group. I went to bed that night hoping that the next couple of days, at least until the Saturday night selection ceremony, would be more peaceful.

That was not to be. The next morning when Polly and I went down for breakfast, we found Alice and Bridget trying to comfort a white-faced, shocked-looking, Jerome. Tommy and Nick were there as well, looking uncomfortable.

I knew as soon as I saw him. I had not yet looked at the bulletin board, but I knew. "Oh, god, no, please don't tell me..." I said as soon as I saw him.

He looked up at me and nodded. "I gotta, old man. Tomorrow night, the new Friday special. First one. Emily."

I sat down heavily. "Oh, no, that is not fair, it's not," I moaned. "The first Wednesday special is Denise and the first Friday special is Emily? Just five days after Julie? How is that fair?"

Polly, still standing, massaged my shoulders. "It's just that our time's up, Jack," she said, her voice tinged with sadness. "We've been here a long time now. You and Emily especially."

"No, just me especially, goddamn it." I looked back at Jerome. "Look, I know you were trying to get her to change her plan. Any luck?"

He shook his head. "None. She's immovable. She's over at engineering right now getting the plans in place." He stared at the table. "I don't know if I can take it..."

"Yes," I said. "You can. You agreed to take the relaxants. You have to, Jerome. I know you, you cannot watch what's going to happen to her."

"What is going to happen to her?" Bridget asked.

"Chinese rat torture," I said succinctly. "Don't make me describe it, look it up in your manual."

Bridget went white-faced as well. "I already have read that one," she said. "You can't be serious!"

"We are," Jerome said. "It's one of the highest-paying methods. She's totally focused on payout."

"Damn! What's her backup?"

I frowned. "Backup?"

"Yes." She gave me a quizzical look. "Didn't you read the section in the manual?"

"Actually, no."

"Oh. Well, the rat torture is pretty much always fatal, but there's a random element the engineers can't control. If the rat misses all the major blood vessels as it digs, the victim could last hours or even days--too long for the shows--or even, although it's unlikely, survive. You pick the rat torture, you also have to pick a backup, something to finish you off."

I looked back at Jerome. "Does Emily know this?" I asked him.

"I don't think so."

I had an idea. It was crazy, it might not work, but I wanted to give it a shot. I rose from the table. "I'll be back in a while," I told the others.

"Where're you going, Jack?" Polly asked.

"Engineering. I need to find Emily and David."

It didn't take long. I found them together, as I expected, in David's office. Emily, seemingly perfectly relaxed, was sitting in the chair across from his desk, her legs crossed, one foot swinging idly. Her shoe dangled from her toe.

"Hi, Jack," she said brightly. "What're you doing up here?"

"I came to talk to you two," I said. I paused to catch my breath, having almost run up the hill to the engineering building.

"What about?" David asked.

"About Emily's backup plan. I'm embarrassed to say it, but none of us knew anything about that."

"I didn't either," Emily said, confirming Jerome's theory. "I just found out about it a few minutes ago." Her brow furrowed. "David tells me they have rats trained to dig right in, but you can't predict where they'll go."

"I know. Any decisions yet?"

"No. Actually, that was what we were talking about when you came in."

"Good. I think maybe I have a suggestion." I turned to David. "Can they tell," I asked him, "when they do a post-mortem, if the damage the rat did would have been fatal?"

He frowned. "I'm not a pathologist," he said slowly, "but--you're referring to what happened last Sunday with Julie, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can answer that. Julie's iliac artery was cut the first time she was stabbed. She was bleeding to death internally before you ever touched her. That would have taken a while anyway,

and the action of the coagulants was slowing it down, but, short of emergency surgery, the outcome was inevitable." He glanced at Emily. "But there, our pathologists were working with a series of very clean knife wounds. The damage the rat will do will not be clean, not in any sense. I'd doubt very seriously if the same sort of determination could be made."

"That's what I thought." I turned back to Emily, crouched beside her, and held her face in my hands. Even though she had become easily the most sexually active woman at the resort, she still looked like a young innocent. "Emily," I said, "I'd like to be your backup. I want to kill you."

"You understand," David warned, "that that would make you a murderer as far as the resort is concerned. You'd be an automatic choice for Sunday."

"I do know. That's what I want."

"Ah."

Emily was smiling softly. "Jack," she said, "I'd love to have you kill me."

"How were you thinking about doing this, Jack?" David asked.

I kept gazing into Emily's eyes. "Hadn't planned that far yet."

"If it were done in certain ways, there would be extra compensation for Emily's beneficiaries."

"Then let's do one of those ways," Emily said promptly. She didn't move her head or eyes as she spoke.

"You'd have to have a steady hand for these, Jack," David warned. "A steady hand and a strong stomach."

"I do. Let's talk about these ways."

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Polly was furious. Jerome wasn't very happy either, but Polly was furious. When Emily and I came back from engineering and told the others our plan, Polly just exploded.

"You son of a bitch!" she screamed at me, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. "How could you do that? You didn't say a word to me, you just went up there and set up things so that you'll die on stage on Sunday!" I reached for her but she pulled away. "No! Don't you touch me! You selfish bastard!"

"Polly, I'm sure he was just trying to--" Emily started to say.

Polly whirled on her. "No. You always think the best of everybody, Em. Jack was not trying to help you out, he was just looking out for his own interests. Just thinking of himself, the way he always does."

"I don't always think the best of everybody," Emily said innocently.

Polly put a hand on her hip and shook a finger at her. "Yes, you do. You're just--you just--you haven't had that much experience, you don't know what it's like to be betrayed by--"

"You know what it's like to be raped by your uncle?" Emily shot back.

"Girls, please," I said, wanting to stop this from winding up any more. "Both of you are at least partly right. Yes, I want to help Emily out. But also yes, I want out. I want my turn on stage. I want Emily to be the last girl I love that I have to watch die." I hung my head, perhaps being a little theatrical about it. "I feel I really am in danger of becoming a Linda," I said. I looked at Polly but she still had her back to me. "Polly, if you're chosen Saturday and I'm not, I'll come apart. I just won't be able to take it."

"It's still too soon for me to be chosen," Polly said without turning around. Her whole body looked tense. "I've only been here a little over three weeks. Others have seniority over me."

"It does not work like that and you know it. You're part of the Six, the choice is random. One chance in three."

She looked back over her shoulder. Tears streaked her cheek, shining in the light. "Don't you understand anything, Jack?" she whispered. "No, I haven't seen as many of my friends die as you have. Maybe I'm just not as strong as you, but for me, Denise, Julie, Tim, and now Emily, that's enough. I don't want to go on without you." She turned away and squared her shoulders. "In fact," she continued in a low voice, "I just won't." She then turned on her heel and ran toward the bar, startlingly graceful sprinting in high heels. With an athleticism that surprised me, she used one stool to launch herself up on top of the bar. Once there, she stood with her legs spread and raised her arms.

"Listen to me!" she cried loudly. "Everyone! I want to make an announcement!" Everyone in the bar was already watching her, and they gazed at her attentively. "My announcement is this," she said, lowering her arms. "I have decided that, if Jack is chosen on Saturday and I am not..." She paused and took in a deep breath. "Then, on Sunday afternoon, out on the grass beside the beach, away from the cameras, I will kill myself." Her voice dropped in volume. "I understand that this means that my family will not get any payout. I don't care, everyone in my family is an asshole, and besides that, my former boyfriend will probably share in it and he's the biggest asshole of all. I'll be doing this for you, my brothers and sisters here. I want everyone there. Please understand that this is not a fit of temper, not sour grapes, on my part." She frowned. "Well, maybe it is. So what? It's what I want to do and I'm going to do it."

"How're you going to do that, Polly?" a young man named Mike who'd been there about as long as she had, asked. "You won't have any--equipment."

"I'll use a knife, like Denise did. Slit my belly open."

"Without pain muters and relaxants?"

"Yes, if they won't give me any." She shook herself. "And if they take away the knives, I'll use a broken bottle, and if they take away all the bottles I'll use a sharp seashell!"

There was then a moment of rather awkward silence. It continued until I reached the bar. "Come down, Polly," I said. "Come down and let's talk this over."

She put her hands on her hips and glared down at me. It was amazing how strong she looked, almost regal--even though she was wearing nothing but high heel shoes. "I've said what I had to say," she told me haughtily. "I said it like that, to everyone, so I can't go back on it."

"If your family members are all assholes," Bridget said, "why don't you change your beneficiaries?"

Polly frowned. "Huh?"

"Change your beneficiary. Cut them out."

"Can you do that?"

"Sure. You need to go up to the office and fill out a new sheet, that's all."

"I didn't know that."

"I didn't either, as a matter of fact," I said to Bridget. "How do you know?"

She smiled. "I ask questions," she replied, toying with the clip in her hair. "Haven't you noticed?"

"Oh yes," I told her. "I have noticed." Then, to Polly: "Come on down. Let's go up to the office. We can talk on the way."

"It isn't likely," Polly said as we left the bar, "that this will make any difference at all. It's just a matter of going through the motions. There isn't going to be any payout for me. You're going

to kill Emily. That means you'll be the automatic choice Saturday. I won't be chosen to go with you. And that means I'll go out Sunday afternoon and do myself in at the beach."

"Like I said, that you won't be chosen isn't a certainty." I stopped, turned her around to face me, and held her by her shoulders. "And yes, okay, Polly, I understand, I understand all too well. I understand you've committed to this insanity. So let me commit to this: I'm not going to let you do it."

She didn't struggle, but she drew herself up straight and as tall as possible for a woman her size. "You cannot stop me."

"Oh yes, I can." I squeezed her shoulders. "Saturday night, I'll be chosen, because I'll be a murderer. If you aren't chosen, I'll do what murderers do. I'll kill you."

Her face crumpled and she started to cry, huge wracking sobs. I pulled her to me and she buried her face in my chest. "Ah, Jack, I love you..." she whispered. "Can't stay mad at you." She raised her head, wiped her eyes. "Let's go on up to the office," she said. "Just in case I do get chosen Saturday night, I want to make sure that asshole Ted doesn't get a share of the blood money. The more I think about it now, the more pissed-off I get."

An hour later, we were back at the bar. Polly, having changed her "will" so that the Atlanta homeless shelter was now the beneficiary--seemed to be more under control. That I might have to actually follow through on my promise to her and kill her I tried not to think about, even though I understood that there were, statistically, exactly two chances out of three that that would be the case.

But at that moment, there was Jerome to deal with. Emily had been trying to soothe him, but without too much success. "Jack," he said to me, "I just can't understand how you could do this." He then reiterated Polly's accusations about my selfishness. Emily tried to jump in to defend me but basically the whole scene that had played out with Polly earlier was being played again.

"All right," Emily said finally. "I've had enough. All of you, just shut up!" We all turned to look at her. This was not a side of her any of us was familiar with. "This is my life, and my death," she said strongly. "And it'll be the way I want it, not the way any of you want it. Sure, Jack's trying to cheat the lottery, stack the deck. Whether I think that's right doesn't matter. He means a lot to me and I really do want him to be the one to finish me off tomorrow. They told me I had to have a backup. I have one." She turned to Jerome. "You really want me lying there for hours after a rat has torn a big hole in me, waiting to die? I don't want that. You want that for me?"

He stared up at the ceiling. "No." He brought his head down. "But I know you. You picked something horrible because it pays a lot. Didn't you?"

"My whole reason for being here," she reminded him, "is the payout. By the end of the evening tomorrow I'll be dead and the payout will be on its way. What happened to me on stage won't matter to me then."

"You didn't answer my question."

"No, and I'm not going to, and I've sworn Jack to silence. You're not going to be there. It's bad enough you know about the rat. You don't need to know about the rest."

"But..."

"That's the way it's going to be, Jerome." She suddenly got up and sat on his lap. "This is my last full day on earth, Jerome. Let's not spend it fighting. Please?"

He sighed, long and deep. "I never have been able to refuse you much of anything, Emily." It was a statement I'd heard Jerome make before.

Afternoon gradually turned into evening, and after dinner, Emily was, as was usual for those scheduled to go on stage the next day, the center of attention. As she was going to be doing

the most extreme performance since at least Geneviève, quite a few people seemed to want to find out how she felt about it. For the most part she brushed such questions aside, citing her usual mantra that she would not be in pain for long and that she was happy that her family would soon be getting a very substantial payout.

Over time, I had begun to suspect that a lot of Emily's casualness was not real, that it was an act for the others. There were times when she'd been able to hold things together very well--she'd been very cool after Geneviève's death, after Denise's show, after Julie and Tim--but at other times she'd lost control, as she had when Mitch and Paula dueled to the death, and when she did lose it she lost it pretty completely. That final evening she was being a model of coolness, laughing and joking, willing to have sex with almost anyone anytime. But I noticed that when she thought no one was looking her face was tight and her eyes furtive. I wanted to be able to talk to her about it, try to help if I could, but she was being so avidly sought out by the others that it did not seem I'd have a chance.

At about ten that evening she returned to our usual table and sat down heavily; she had just finished something of a marathon Lesbian sex scene with three of the other women. She was relaxing, sipping one of her favored fuzzy navels, when Vern approached her.

Vern had been at the resort for about three weeks at that time, and had become well-known there. He was probably the most classically good-looking man there, having a chiseled face and a perfectly-toned body to accompany his quite large cock. When he'd first arrived, the women had been quite interested, but that had faded, and it had faded fast. Vern had gained a reputation for being arrogant, demanding, and vain, and these traits were emphasized by his boisterous frat-boy manner. In my entire stay at the resort, I believe Vern was the least-liked person there. Emily, normally ready to accept almost any sexual partner, had had sex with him only once; both Julie and Polly had pegged him quicker and neither of them ever did.

"Looking forward to tomorrow night, Emily?" Vern asked.

She gave him a cool, impersonal, smile. "It's what I'm here for," she said, repeating a line I felt I'd heard too often. "I'm ready."

He crouched beside her chair. "But you're going to have a rat chewing into your guts," he said. His erection at maximum, he poked a finger into her navel. He giggled. "Digging in right here," he went on. "Oh, that's gonna be something to see, a big old nasty rat digging in here. Sticking his head in, down in your guts, oh, man..." He pushed his finger in harder.

"Vern," Emily said levelly, "could you stop doing that?"

He did respect that, he pulled the fingertip out, but poked her belly again gently. "You know those rats shit everywhere when they get excited? I've seen it. You think he'll shit inside you when he's down in your guts tunneling around?" He laughed again. "God, that's gross!"

Emily closed her eyes for a moment. "Vern," she said quietly. "Stop, please."

"Well, hell, woman, I didn't choose it! You were the one who decided on the Chinese rat torture. Man, your death is gonna be a mess! I dunno, I'd never choose something that gross, but it sure is gonna be something to see! I gotta tell you, I--"

"Vern," Jerome said quietly. "Emily said stop."

Vern didn't even look up at him. "Aw, fuck man, it ain't a big deal, we always talk about the way people are gonna go down. I'd just like it if ol' Emily here would invite me up on stage so I could watch it up close, you know? Blood and guts flying, that ol' rat digging in and shitting everywhere, oh man, that is going to be funny as shit!"

Jerome at that point stood up. I started up too, because I knew what was coming, but I wasn't anywhere near fast enough. The former marine grabbed Vern's hair and jerked him to his

feet. Then, lightning-fast, his fist plowed into the center of the frat boy's face. The crack could be heard all over the bar, and yet again everyone turned to look. Vern went reeling backwards, crashed into a table, and went down. He raised himself on his elbows. Blood was streaming from his nose, and he spat out several teeth. The left side of his face below the eye looked oddly caved-in, and that eye did not look like it was in the socket quite right. He looked dazed, but nevertheless struggled to get up.

I was up by then. Rather than trying to restrain Jerome, which I knew he would not accept easily, I moved quickly to Vern. "Stay down," I advised. "Just stay down, don't say anything, and be happy you aren't dead. You are hurt, and bad."

"I can't see right," he mumbled, blood dribbling from his mouth as he spoke.

"I said don't talk," I hissed. "You keep on and I might lay one on you myself, and believe me, that wouldn't be as bad as having Jerome hit you again. Just lay there until the guys from Medical can get down here." I looked up. "Somebody call Medical," I said loudly. I looked over at Jerome; he was just standing there, both fists clenched, his body tense. I nodded to him, then turned back to Vern. "Now wait for Medical, for whatever they have here to use as an ambulance. Don't imagine I'm going to try to help you, you deserved what you got."

I then rose and stood beside Jerome, who was gradually relaxing. A short while later two of the attendants rushed into the bar pushing a gurney. They picked up Vern and rolled him out, pausing by the door to speak to Saul Levenson as he was coming in. After a brief exchange he nodded, and the two men rolled Vern on out.

Saul came over to our table, where by then everyone was seated again. "You mind telling me what went on here tonight?" he demanded.

"Vern was out of line," I said, eliciting nods of agreement from Emily and Polly. "He got taken down a notch."

"That man is badly injured."

Jerome shrugged. "He'll heal. Maybe he'll fit in better when he does."

"We do not condone, or permit, brawling here," Saul said sternly.

Jerome looked up at him, his hostility obviously rising again. "So what're you going to do? Send me back? Your loss."

Saul was not intimidated. "And yours as well," he noted. "But you are correct, it would be our loss too, and we only expel candidates for the most egregious offenses." He paused. "Or for repeat offenses," he added with emphasis. "At the moment, I would simply ask that you keep yourselves under control. If there is a problem, if someone is 'out of line' as you put it, let us know and it will be dealt with."

"Well, unless I miss my guess Vern won't be a problem for a while. And he's the only one who ever was."

"We will speak to him as well, once he's well enough." With that, Saul turned and left.

That was the first, and the only, time I ever saw an incident of violence off the stage the whole time I was at Erothan.

I did not stay with Emily that night, Jerome did. He also accompanied her to Medical the next day. She insisted on it, saying she wanted to make sure that he was given the relaxants as well. I hadn't been sure that Medical would cooperate with her plan, but they did. By the time we were preparing to go to the theater, Jerome had almost passed out, slurring his words and weaving whenever he tried to stand up. We left him there, his chair tipped back, staring blankly at the ceiling and not really aware of what was going on around him.

The plan was for Polly and I to be on stage with Emily, so we took our places in the front row, awaiting her call. I couldn't help but shudder when I saw the machinery that would carry out the Chinese rat torture sitting on stage, a large hooded rat running about in a small cage on top of it. The two most recent deaths, Julie's and Lily's, had been intensely erotic. I doubted that this one would be.

To begin, Emily came out, stood center stage, and gave a short rambling speech about what she was going to be doing and why she was going to do it. "To any of you who find what I'm about to do gross or repulsive," she said, "I apologize. But my mission here is to earn as much money for my family as possible, and this is what I have to do to do that. If any of you wish to leave, I'll certainly understand. I am not interested here in leaving a legacy, putting on a great show, or even fulfilling a fantasy. I just want to save my loved ones." She had gained a little weight since her arrival at the resort, and at that point she looked simply stunning, almost perfectly beautiful. Her movements were a bit slow, though, I wondered if perhaps Medical had given her more than the usual dose of the pain muters or the relaxants, considering what she was about to go through.

She then asked me and Polly to join her on stage. Once we got there, we all held each other for a moment, a three-way embrace.

"Are you sure you're both okay with this?" Emily asked us. Her eyes were half-lidded, as if she was sleepy. "It isn't going to be as ugly as being burned alive or torn apart by the dogs, but I don't think it'll be pretty."

"I'm not," Polly said bluntly. "But I'm here for you, Em. Whatever you want to do."

"Same here," I said, my hand on her back. "But you know that, Emily."

She smiled at me softly. "Yes, I do, Jack. I have so much to thank you for..."

"No, you don't."

"I feel I do." She looked over at the table. "Let's get started."

Emily's plan called for the sex to begin only after she was strapped down on the table. She walked to it without hesitation, but stumbled once on the way, catching herself on my arm. When she got there she started to try to mount it, but seemed to be having problems with that, too. I helped her, and soon enough she was stretched out on it. It took a moment, but she did manage to fit her ankles into the appropriate slots and trigger the automatic manacles. She then picked up the remote and fitted her wrists into their slots; the manacles engaged with a soft thud. As soon as all four manacles were in place--no one would imagine she could be in any sense free for her chosen method--a ceramic ring on an arm rose from the table near her waist on her left. It arched over her belly, then came down to lie against it. Her navel was precisely in the center of the ring. This was followed by a dome-shaped wire-mesh cage with a sliding door on one side and a pair of circular channels, almost closed, on top. It arched over her too, finally fitting itself against the ceramic ring. A strap came up from the other side, hooked onto it, and pulled it down firmly. Emily smiled dreamily while all this was going on.

"Are you okay?" I asked her in a low voice.

She turned her head toward me. "Uh-huh. Took lotsa relaxants, Jack. More'n I was supposed to, maybe. I stole some when the doc wasn't looking."

"Ah. That may be for the best."

"S what I figured." She squirmed a little on the table. "They work, though. I'm all ready to get fucked some and then have that ol' rat chew into me. All ready." She blinked several times. "Let's fuck some."

I nodded. At that point I wasn't very excited, but after I'd moved around between her legs and began caressing the wonderfully smooth skin of her thighs and belly, I began to rise. Polly,

meanwhile, stood by her head. The two women kissed while Polly teased Emily's nipples to firm erection. It wasn't long before I slipped my cock inside her, and at the same time Polly straddled her face, letting Emily lick and nibble at her pussy. After a while--and after Polly had had one orgasm from Emily's now-skilled tongue--we switched places, Polly crouched between her legs and my cock in her mouth.

After perhaps ten minutes, Emily called a halt to it. Polly and I stood up; Emily smiled at us, keyed the remote, and opened her hand, letting it fall to the floor. Immediately the machine came to life. It rolled over to her and a tube emerged, connecting the cage holding the rat with the cage strapped to Emily's belly. The sliding door in that cage opened, and the back wall of the holding cage moved forward, forcing the rat into the other cage, after which the sliding door slid shut and the tube withdrew. Trained or not, it just ran around at first, standing up on its hind legs, exploring its new environment.

"It tickles!" Emily cried. Just as Lily had done, she giggled--although in her case it sounded a little hysterical. I held her head and Polly caressed her legs as we waited for the next step. It wasn't long in coming; another tube, very narrow, emerged from the machine. From it oil ran into the two circular channels. Once they were full, a spark ignited and set the oil ablaze, after which the tube withdrew and the machine, to all appearances, shut itself down. A little band of bluish flame emerged from the tops of the rings.

The cage appeared to heat very quickly, although the ceramic ring protected Emily's belly from the hot metal. The rat reared up again, then squeaked and jumped as it touched the mesh. It turned around, reared again, squeaked again. Then, centering itself in the cage, it sniffed at Emily's belly. A moment later it began scratching at her navel.

"Oh, that tickles even more!" Emily said. She raised her head to look, and I supported it for her. Just a second later it bit into the flesh at the edge of her navel, its strong teeth ripping out a chunk of flesh. Blood started to flow immediately. Emily stiffened and stared as it ripped out another piece, then another. Once started it moved very quickly, tearing pieces of flesh loose with its teeth and scrabbling them away with its front paws.

I looked down at her face. Her eyes were wide open and staring, the muscles in her neck were tight, and she was chewing on her lower lip. Her arms and legs jerked periodically. The rat was methodical, tearing away skin and muscle all around her navel and kicking them away with its feet. In just seconds it had torn a ragged hole large enough to get most of its head in. Blood was flowing freely, streaming down over her side. By then her arms and legs were straining against her restraints. I began caressing her face and neck, and I could feel her body quiver and jerk. The rat began poking its head down into the hole and tearing away bits of flesh from inside her. They came flying out as it pushed its front paws inside and dug.

"My god, Emily," I said, my voice choked. "I know this has to be agony for you."

"It's my choice," she mumbled. "But yes, even with the muters the pain is... terrible. It's chewing through my entrails, ah, oh, Jack, oh, you can't imagine..."

I actually couldn't. The rat could stuff its whole head inside by then, and within a few more seconds half its body was fitting inside the gaping hole it had torn in her belly. Digging frantically, using teeth and claws, it was throwing out a shower of blood and torn pieces of flesh. Periodically it backed out, evidently to avoid drowning in her blood, which filled the hole, streamed down over her side, and spilled onto the table.

The rat pushed in further and seemed to be exploring left and right inside her, making her skin bulge as it did. Switching places with Polly, I laid my hands on her abdomen alongside the cage and pressed down a little. I could feel it quiver and surge. Her whole body was shining with

sweat. She was already getting pale; her eyes were wide now, her jaw was clenched, and the muscles in her neck stood out strongly. To me it looked like she was being pushed to--and perhaps beyond--her limit. "Say the word," I told her as Polly stroked her sweating brow, "and I'll stop this, I'll put you out of your misery."

She shook her head violently. "No. Let it happen. I'll be dead soon enough anyway."

Polly, although she continued to stroke Emily's face, had turned her face away. Emily herself watched fixedly and I did not seem to be able to look away. The rat pushed in repeatedly, now stuffing in almost its whole body, all four feet now scrabbling out chunks of muscle and stringy pieces of intestine.

"I wish it would hurry," Emily said. Her face was very white.

"I don't think it'll be much longer," I assured her, although really I had no idea. As I was speaking the rat pulled itself completely out, shook blood off its whiskers, and appeared to take a deep breath. It then dived back in, tearing at her insides furiously. All that was visible of it was the back part of the tail. I could see and feel her abdomen moving as it worked inside her. Her body jerked violently, and the rat's tail vanished. I waited--and then, to my surprise, the little animal's head, covered with blood and fluids, pushed out of her vagina. Apparently it had tunneled into her uterus and followed the canal on down. In a grotesque imitation of childbirth it forced its body on out--and to add to the weirdness, the process seemed to stimulate Emily to orgasm. She gasped and flushed the way she always did when she was coming as the rat pushed free.

The rat ran across the table and jumped to the floor. The machine that had placed it suddenly came to life again and, after a quick laser sighting, it fired a tiny dart--a tranquilizer, I assumed--into the rat's rear end. The animal collapsed, a mechanical arm came out and collected it, and within a couple of seconds it was back in the holding cage.

Emily, meanwhile, was still quite alive. Her head was turning from side to side, her body heaving, and she was breathing very hard. The cage over her belly unbuckled itself and folded back, the ceramic ring following it. She was then left lying there with a hole two inches in diameter in her belly where her navel used to be, and blood flowed steadily from her vagina.

"Hurry, Jack," Emily gritted. "I don't want to lie here like this..."

"God yes, hurry," Polly muttered.

David had presented a number of plans for Emily's backup plan for which the resort would pay extra. The highest-paying ones involved fire and skinning her alive. Although she wanted to go for one of these I flatly refused, saying at the time that I did not think myself capable of carrying them out. After considerable negotiations I had agreed on "staking" her body, driving stakes through her abdomen first, then through each breast--once the second breast stake was placed she would not be able to breathe and her death would ensue quickly. Steeling myself, I reached for the stakes and the mallet, which were lying on a small table to my right. With one stake and the mallet in hand, I turned back to her. Just as I did, she had some sort of spasm. A huge gout of blood, a river of it, suddenly burst from her vagina. Her eyes wide, she raised her head to look.

But only for a second. Almost immediately her head fell back and rolled slightly to the side. Her chest was still. I could only stare, at that moment confused.

Then Saul stepped onto the stage and announced that Emily had died and that the show was over.

"No," I said numbly. "No, wait a minute, this wasn't supposed to happen..."

Polly took my hands, removed the mallet and the stake and placed them back on the table. "It has happened," she said with an unsteady voice. "Let's go, Jack, let's go."

I stared at her. Like myself, she was spattered with the blood the rat's digging had thrown about. "No, I'm supposed to kill her..." I mumbled.

"You can't. She's already dead. Come on."

"But..."

She pulled at me hard. "Come on, Jack!"

I went, I let her lead me off the stage. We were headed for the showers when we were stopped by one of the guests, the same man who'd taken Polly up to the guest hotel for her X-rated show. Quite bluntly, he asked her if she would suck him off while still covered with Emily's blood. She looked a little exasperated but agreed, telling me it would not take long.

It did not. I just stood and watched while she knelt before him and sucked him until he came in her mouth. Normally, watching Polly give head or fuck was a turn-on for me.

Not this time.

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"This is insane," I said. It was Saturday morning and I was still lying in bed. "Just insane. We were told death from the rat torture is never quick."

"It's unpredictable," Polly said. She was sitting gazing into the vanity mirror; she turned back to me, eyeliner in her hand.

"They said that too. I haven't heard anything yet, but I think we can assume the rat compromised some major blood vessel, causing her to hemorrhage." I sat up. "You can't imagine how rotten I feel. That was Emily, a girl I loved. I've been shepherding her around since the day she arrived, I was more than close to her. She put herself through absolute hell, and now she's dead, and I can't even properly mourn her because I feel cheated. I'm an ass."

Polly smiled. "Yes," she said. "You are being a complete ass, I'll agree with that."

I grunted. "Gee, thanks."

"Just telling it like it is." She shook the eyeliner at me. "Look, all that's happened is that your effort to fuck with the system fucked up. You're still part of the Six. As you've told me so often, you have one chance in three of being chosen."

"And you do too," I pointed out. "With my luck, you'll be chosen tonight and I won't."

"I'm sure I won't be, no one is ever chosen the first time they're part of the Six. But this is not your first time. So what if you get chosen and I don't? I vowed to go out and kill myself Sunday afternoon if that happened."

"I said I wouldn't let you."

"You said you'd kill me to stop me from killing myself." She laughed. "Which is weird, but nice. The point is, what do we do now if you do get chosen? We've made vows."

I shook my head. "They don't mean anything now," I told her. "That was based on my scamming the system. That failed."

"Yes, it did." She put her makeup away. "So let's just wait and see what happens tonight. My hope is that we'll both be chosen, or we both won't."

"To quote Denise, one chance in nine we'll both be chosen."

"I've seen worse odds. Let's go downstairs."

We did, and we found Jerome and Alice at our usual table. The chair Emily had used the previous day was achingly empty, and Jerome was the very picture of misery. "I heard," he said as we sat down with coffee. "I'm glad you didn't have to kill her, Jack."

I shrugged. "In a way, I am too. Fucked my plans, obviously."

"You can't win them all, man."

"Gets bad when you have a hard time winning any of them."

"You can say that again."

There ensued a few moments of silence, somewhat awkward, which was broken when Bridget came in. With her was one of the guests, a rather fat man dressed in shorts and the seemingly requisite Hawaiian shirt. In a way, the intrusion was a welcome one, the man, whom Bridget introduced merely as Walter, was at least a distraction.

"So," I said idly after a while, "how are things back on the mainland? It's been a while since I've watched the TV or anything."

Walter shrugged. "Same old same old," he replied. "Government is still struggling to get a handle on the economy, but it seems things just keep going from bad to worse. Unemployment is up to something like thirty-five percent. There've been a bunch of food riots, things like that." He looked around the room. "You guys have it a lot better here."

"In ways," I said. "At times."

Walter grinned; the grin somehow looked oily. "Yeah. Until you have to go on stage."

If only you knew, I thought, but outwardly I merely nodded.

"Walter," Bridget informed us, "tells me he's been here four times in the last two years. He was telling me about the way things have changed since the first time he came."

"Yeah, the stage shows weren't very interesting then," Walter said. "They were okay, I guess. Mostly guys had themselves shot. Women were either stabbed or hanged themselves. The first girl I saw die on that stage had her throat slit. That's all. Then she squirmed around until she died." He shook his head. "Things have gotten a whole lot better since then!"

I was hoping, and I was sure Jerome and Polly were hoping, that he would not mention Emily. Perhaps to prevent that, Alice took the conversation in a different direction. "So, Walter," she said, "what do you do back in the real world?" She tossed her hair and adopted what looked like a deliberately provocative pose.

She did get his attention. "Me? Oh, I don't do anything. I'm really just a playboy." He giggled. "Family money." He then became serious. "Well, that's not really true. I own a company that maintains offshore oil rigs. I don't have much to do with day-to-day operations of it." He looked away from Alice for a moment. "My parents bought it for me when I was eighteen."

"That's weird," Alice said, drawing his eyes back to her. "I would have thought most 'family money' disappeared during the depression and all."

Walter looked at her like she was from outer space. "Are you kidding?" he said. "My family is richer than ever. And once the economy pulls out of this--and it will, sooner or later--we'll be richer yet."

"How's that possible?" Alice asked, leaning forward, her blue eyes wide.

He frowned. "Well, I dunno... I mean, the position you guys are in, if I tell you, it might piss you off..."

"It won't," Alice assured him airily. "Tell us."

He grimaced and spread his hands. "Doesn't matter anyway. I have nothing to do with it. I do benefit from it, yes, and so do you, in a way, 'cause guys like me pay the bills, you know..."

"We do know," I said, almost sternly.

He looked at me and pursed his lips, on him an ugly expression. "Well," he continued, "it's complicated but it's not, it's all a big circle. You probably remember, when we first had an inkling this was coming down, way back in 2008, Lehmann Brothers went under. Now see, the company went down. The execs and so on. they didn't, they already had theirs. They weren't really hurt

anyway, they just moved to Chase or Goldman or wherever. Little investors lost their money, but the big ones had it insured by AIG or whoever. Then AIG goes down, but they're too big to go down and the government steps in and bails them out. The companies can fall like ten pins and little guys get mashed, but the big boys, they don't fall, they've got their asses covered. That puts them in a position to come in and scoop up what the little guys left laying around. So the big guys get richer. Then things get worse, the currency either starts to inflate or deflate, but it doesn't matter. Money people can take advantage either way. If it inflates, they can price their stuff ahead of the curve and make a killing. If it deflates all their costs go down and they can pick up stuff like real estate cheap. In the end stuff like that turns to gold."

"And your family..." Polly mused.

"Are those money people, those big guys, yes. Don't get me wrong, Molly--"

"Polly," she corrected.

"Polly, sorry. I know how it looks. I know how it is, too. I went to Harvard, I majored in economics and political science. There's no stopping it. It's the system; the rich are always going to come out fine and the little guys are always going to get shit dumped on their heads."

At that point I was hoping to avoid another full-blown attack on a rich guest--the second time recently there'd been a chance of that. I could see Jerome, Polly, and Alice all tensing up. "But you yourself," I interjected, "said you have nothing to do with all that."

He shrugged. "I don't." He giggled again, almost girlishly. "I'm a big disappointment to my dad. He's a J.P. Morgan type. I'm not. I'm the CEO of Gulfstream Services, yeah, but all I do is sign paper that comes across my desk. Dad doesn't trust me with any decisions. He thinks I'll screw it all up."

"What do you think?" Bridget asked.

He rolled his lips in. "He's probably right. I'm good at spending money. That's about it."

I smiled. Crisis averted, I told myself. "Guys who spend money are what we need here," I said sagely, which earned me an odd look from Polly.

But even so, the conversation switched directions, to more normal channels--what each of us planned to do when it came our time on stage. For some time we had known that Jerome planned a firing-squad scenario. I mentioned the arrow machine, and Polly drew Walter's interest with her impalement idea, although she frustrated him by refusing to be very specific. Alice mentioned that she had once acted in porno films and said that she felt that being stabbed or strangled while having sex was probably appropriate for her. Bridget offered no opinion, and I assumed that she had probably already shared that with Walter when they'd been alone together. After a while, Walter left and went back to the guest hotel, saying he'd see us again soon.

After he'd gone, Polly sat staring at Bridget. "Don't take this wrong," Polly said, "but that one was really, seriously, disgusting. I mean, I have sex with most guests if they ask, but you're a lot more dedicated than I am!"

Bridget's mouth fell open. "Oh my god, I didn't fuck him! Jesus! Are you kidding me?"

Polly frowned. "But... you were up at the guest hotel with him, weren't you?"

"Yes. He invited me. I wanted to talk, so I went."

"And he didn't...?"

Bridget laughed. "Oh, he tried. Can't expect him not to, I'm running around naked, right? But I managed to deflect him."

"How?" I asked.

"I asked him a lot of questions," she told me with an odd, enigmatic, expression.

Inevitably, Saturday night arrived again.

And there we were, after dinner, having coffee. Both Polly and I were in states close to panic in our fear that only one of us was going to be chosen, but the moment was here, it could not be avoided. As always, Saul, dressed in his formal suit, stepped up to the table and stood with his hands over the two urns, and the gong sounded. He recited his usual line about selecting the "pair who will be departing this life tomorrow night." He pulled one card from each urn and, as always, paused and gazing out at us, focusing on the Six sitting right in front of him, myself and Polly included. As always he asked us if we were ready, if we had selected our methods, as always we all nodded. As always the gong sounded again, as always he picked a card and opened it.

"The first member of tomorrow night's death pair is..." he said, "Polly." Polly and I turned to each other, a look of something like terror on her face, which I was sure was reflected in my own. We waited for the next name. One chance in three, one chance in three, I kept saying to myself. Not horrible odds, one chance in three. Waiting for Saul to announce the second name, I felt I might actually have a heart attack.

Then the gong. Then Saul's voice. "Jack."

For a moment there was absolute silence. Then Polly was up on her feet, screaming and embracing me. I was still a little out of it. "What did he say?" I asked.

"Jack!" she shrieked. "He said Jack! We're on together!"

Then we were mobbed by the other candidates.

Polly and I did not get back to our room until late that night. She'd had sex with a number of the other candidates, and I'd played with a few--just one orgasm for me, with Bridget. I wanted to save myself for Polly, once we got back to the room, but as soon as we did we almost tore into each other, our passion heightened by our relief at having been chosen to go together. I was harboring a little suspicion that perhaps the selections this time were not truly random, but no one was complaining and I surely wasn't about to.

"We have to work this out," she told me afterwards, snuggling close to me in the bed. "You are going to be locked to a frame, but I won't be. We have to figure out how to have some kind of sex out there before we start killing ourselves."

"We certainly do, I'm not going out without it." I sighed. "And it won't be easy. We can't be doing it while I'm being shot with arrows or while you're being impaled."

She stared up at the ceiling for a moment. "I think I can work it out myself," she said. "It's so funny how far we've come, how crazy this all is. I'm actually looking forward to being impaled and killed tomorrow, actually all excited about it. Insane."

"I'm not really looking forward to being shot with arrows," I said, "but I am certainly looking forward to ending this. Before I fall in love with Bridget or somebody. Like I'm in love with you."

"Yeah, that's been a real pain." She giggled.

"So how are you going to work it out?"

She toyed with my cock. "Trust me," she told me.

I smiled. "Okay."

As Polly's method was definitely complex, we went to the clinic at ten the following morning. Having been through the routines before, nothing was surprising to me, it was, by then,

just ordinary. Polly asked that one more piece of equipment be provided and, when I asked what that was, just said "trust me" again, and I merely shrugged. We had the enemas, we had our stomachs pumped, we received what seemed like an interminable series of pills, capsules, and injections. Polly was fitted into her machine, measurements were made, controls were set. The final stage, one I had not seen before, was makeup, focused much more on Polly than me. When they'd finished it did not actually look like she was wearing much of any makeup at all; she looked absolutely radiant.

After we left Medical, I slipped away to say a quick good-bye to a tearful Jennifer. By showtime, we were ready to go.

-30-

Waiting for us on the stage was one of the fairly commonplace X-shaped frames, automatic manacles at all four corners. One of the arrow-firing machines, loaded with needlepoints, stood in front of it. Just to the right of it was a much more unusual looking device. It consisted of a small base platform four feet above the stage, accessible by a stairway at the back. There was an upright steel pole on either side; each one was fitted with three black metal boxes, each about fifteen inches wide but just four or five inches tall. These were attached to the poles at three intervals. From the tops of the poles hung straps with hand grips. There were no manacles at all. There was also another item, a little platform on wheels with handgrips on the sides; I had no idea what it was for.

Holding my hand, Polly stood for a moment, gazing up at the apparatus she herself had designed. Letting me go, her fingertips trailing through my palm, she gave me a small smile and, with a firm step, walked over to it. After climbing the stairs, she took her position in the center of it, her stance fairly wide; in the overhead monitor I could see that there were slight indentations that her high-heel shoes fitted into. Standing between the uprights, she gazed out at her audience for a moment, that small smile still on her face. Meanwhile, I approached the X-frame backwards. Holding the remote control in my right hand, I fitted first each ankle and then each wrist into the manacles, and felt them snap shut on contact. I then turned my full attention to Polly. She'd been watching me, and, as soon as the last manacle snapped shut, she flipped the topmost of three switches mounted on the pole on her right. Reaching up, she grabbed one of the two hand grips with each hand.

"And so we begin," Saul intoned. "Jack has allowed himself to be fully immobilized, but you will note that Polly is not in any way bound. At the moment she is free to move off the platform any time she wishes. It will take a great deal of discipline for her to remain in place."

As he was speaking, slender steel shafts had begun emerging horizontally from each of the black boxes. The close-up monitors showed that the middle ones on each side ended in simple needle points, but the ones coming from the top boxes were fitted with short triangular blades about an inch and a half wide. They were oriented almost horizontally, but tipped just slightly to the front. The lower ones looked even more diabolical. They had heavy barbs on them, about an inch back from the point; they looked like straightened-out fishhooks. It was immediately obvious that the middle ones were headed toward Polly's waistline, the lower ones were aimed toward the center of her thighs, while the bladed upper ones targeted the sides of her chest just behind her breasts.

Turning her head from side to side, Polly watched them come. Their speed obviously calibrated, they adjusted themselves so that each one was about the same distance from her body, then moved on steadily. At the same time, panels with thin padded surfaces rose on hydraulic

shafts from the base plate between her feet, one on each side. The moved up fairly swiftly until at last they touched the insides of her thighs opposite the spot where the shaft was aimed. Effectively, they prevented her from closing her legs--although they did nothing to stop her from stepping forward or back.

And at that point, she flipped the switch off. The shafts stopped moving, remained where they were. Polly smiled richly. "We will get back to this," she told the audience, "in just a moment." She then very gracefully did step, backwards, off the platform, being careful not to touch any of the exposed points. She turned and walked toward me. "Didn't think I'd forgotten, did you, Jack?" she asked me.

I grinned too. "You said trust you. I trusted you."

"I never had a doubt." She dropped to a crouch in front of me, obvious careful about her legs being in a good visual position, and took my semi-erect cock into her mouth. She began sucking me with long smooth strokes, pausing when my rapidly-rising cock was deep in her mouth. Sometimes she looked up at my face, sometimes out at the audience; she never closed her eyes.

"I'm starting to get close," I warned her after several minutes. She nodded, released me, and quickly went to the little wheeled platform. Rolling it over to me, she placed it right in front of me, and at that point I knew what it was for.

I wasn't wrong. She stepped up on it, turned around, and guided my cock into herself from the back. Holding on to the rails, one leg very straight and the other cocked prettily--she was obviously acutely aware of, and concerned about, the visuals--she moved her hips back and forth.

"Sorry you have to do all the work," I said.

"Not a problem. Soon I get to sleep. And so do you."

"The big sleep, as they say."

"The big sleep. I am ready. I love you, Jack."

"I love you, Polly." It wasn't much longer before I came inside her. I reacted strongly, wanting the audience to know I was having an orgasm. Apparently somewhat reluctantly, she pulled off of me and turned to face her audience, her legs spread. A bead of semen formed and ran down her left leg; she ignored it.

"And now," she said, looking back at me.

"And now," I echoed. She went back to her machine, carefully avoided the points as she stepped up into it, grabbed the hand grips again, this time holding them so tightly her knuckles turned white.

And threw the switch again.

Instantly the shafts started moving again. They came closer and closer, until finally all six simultaneously touched her skin. She gasped, but did not move. To no one's surprise the shafts kept moving, indenting her skin. After another few seconds, the ones touching her chest broke through. She gasped again and quivered as thin streams of blood trickled down her sides, but still she held her position. With just the tips of the blades piercing her skin, they then stopped moving. The ones pushing against her thighs broke through next, provoking a soft little noise from Polly, but, as fine lines of blood trickled down her legs, they stopped as well. The ones pressing into her sides had formed much deeper valleys, but they kept moving--and at last, a loud groan from Polly and two new trickles of blood announced that they too had breached her skin. They kept going, however, and at that point, the other four began moving again as well.

"Oh... god..." Polly murmured as the six shafts sank on into her body. "Oh, it... ah!" She closed her eyes for a moment, her face tight, and threw her head back. The shafts, now perhaps an inch deep, kept moving. Her legs jerked periodically; all the muscles in her arms were taut. It was

obvious by then that the angle of the blades on the upper pair was set to allow them to pass between her ribs, and she was bleeding much more freely from those than from the others. As soon as the whole of the triangular blades had disappeared into the sides of her chest, the upper pair stopped moving again--apparently, to avoid puncturing her lungs at that point. The ones piercing her sides and thighs kept moving, though, and the ones in her legs were now deep enough that the fishhook-like barbs were almost buried. Trembling, Polly whipped her head from side to side as they drilled deeper and deeper into her flesh. The barbs vanished into her thighs, another inch or so of the shaft was buried, and then those shafts stopped moving. At the same time, the pads supporting her inner thighs dropped away and folded back into the base; they had become unnecessary, she could no longer move her legs without tearing the flesh on the barbed points. The ones in her sides stopped as well, their points probably an inch and a half or two inches inside her abdomen. Breathing very heavily, she squirmed against the piercings, provoking more bleeding.

Then, without warning, two hatches opened in the base and steel hooks popped out. Arching over, moving very fast compared to the shafts, they pierced the tops of both her feet deeply. She gave a loud cry as blood welled up and filled her high-heel shoes.

Biting her lip, still trembling, she finally let go of the hand grips. She ran her hands down over her body, wincing when she passed her waist and wincing again when she reached her thighs. She paused to stroke her clitoris a few times, then looked back at the audience. Her face was tight, strained, her lower lip trembled, her eyes were wet. She looked pitiful, but that merely added to her appeal.

"I cannot move at all now," she said, her voice unsteady. "Whatever is done to me, I cannot avoid it." There was applause, not loud but enthusiastic, and Polly managed a little smile. "So I'll do something else to myself, I'll go on to phase two." She flipped the center switch on the pole, then put her hands on her breasts.

Almost immediately, what looked like two new shafts poked out of the black boxes alongside her chest. They moved out rather quickly, and it soon became apparent that these were not shafts, but mechanical arms. A clamp at the end was holding a shaft perhaps ten inches long, slimmer than the ones piercing her sides and thighs but strongly barbed like the ones now imbedded in her legs. The arms moved on out, crossing in front of her chest before stopping. Bending on mechanical joints, they turned in such a way as to aim the twin barbed shafts at her breasts--and started moving toward them.

Polly, her hands now under her breasts, watched them come. They were clearly targeting her perky little nipples, and, as they drew near, she herself adjusted her breasts so that the cruelly barbed points would strike them dead-center. She looked up at the audience, then back down at her breasts as the points of the shaft came closer. In spite of her other injuries she remained focused until they did touch her, making quite sure they struck the exact centers of her nipples. Once they were firmly set she moved her hands away, letting the mechanical arms do their work. Inexorably they pushed on, folding first her nipples and then her breasts in, forming deep valleys. A few seconds later she grimaced and, first on her right and then on her left, trickles of blood from those valleys announced that they had broken through.

The arms kept right on, slowly pushing the spikes deeper and deeper into her breasts. Polly held on to the handgrips and alternated between watching them sink into her chest and looking out at the silent and attentive audience. Finally the shafts stopped moving, remained still for a second or so, then reversed direction. Polly ground her teeth. The barbs were deeply buried, and I wondered if the device was set to pull them back out, which would have torn her nipples open. They did not do that, though; once they had pulled her breasts back out into their normal shape,

the clamps at the ends of the arms opened and released the shafts, leaving them standing rigidly in her breasts. The arms then moved back and disappeared into the black boxes.

Polly brought her hands back down to her breasts and, looking down at herself, touched the shafts lightly, tracing them down to the point where they entered her nipples, then teasing the nipples themselves. She raised her head. "I guess that's enough foreplay for now," she said, her voice breathy and more strained than ever. "Time for me to get fucked." She bit her lip, then threw the lowest switch on the right upright.

Immediately, a new hatch opened in the base, precisely between Polly's feet, and a new steel shaft emerged from it. This one was much larger than any of the others, perhaps an inch and a half in diameter. It was pointed at the top, but the point did not look terribly sharp. It also looked shiny, as if it was coated with a glaze of oil, and there was a deep groove down the front side of it. Where it was headed was quite obvious, even to someone who had not heard Polly talk about her chosen method of execution.

The shaft rose fairly quickly until it was within an inch or so of Polly's groin, then slowed. As if intelligently guided--and, very probably, it was--it found its way unerringly to her vaginal area and nudged in between her smoothly-shaven labial lips. Polly stretched her neck forward to see as it slowly slid up inside her. Between her natural juices and the oil coating it, it went in quite easily. It moved on until perhaps seven or eight inches of it was inside her.

It then started moving up and down, a three or four inch stroke, pumping in and out of her vagina. Polly sighed and, in spite of her injuries, smiled a little. After a few seconds of this, the spike seemed to hesitate when it was down--and then it pushed upward a good bit further, perhaps to a depth of about ten or eleven inches. Polly's body jerked and her catlike eyes widened, but she then relaxed as it resumed the pumping motion. Just a few seconds later, though, the same thing happened, driving the spike in more than a foot deep.

"Ah!" Polly cried, her eyes very wide. "Ah, god, it's torn me inside... oh... oh..." She stared out at her audience, and, confirming her statement, blood started flowing down the groove on the front of the spike. After a moment, the sequence was repeated. As it slid further into her body, Polly gave voice to a loud and somehow very sensuous grunt and the flow of blood increased markedly as the shaft began pumping up and down again. Every time it pushed up, a surge of blood flowed down the groove. It again pushed in deeper, and Polly, her whole body quivering, stared out at her audience with open mouth and wide-open eyes. When it resumed the up-and-down motion it could be seen moving under the skin of her belly, and it was up beyond her navel by then.

With obvious effort, she composed herself. "Soon," she told the audience, "it will tear through my diaphragm and then my heart, and I will be no more. I want you all to know that being here for the past few weeks, knowing all the candidates--these have been the best days of my life. I'm happy to die for your pleasure, and I hope you find my demise exciting and memorable. I'll try to keep talking to you as long as I can." She reached for the switches again, and hit the middle one. Immediately, the spikes piercing her sides and thighs began moving again, slowly drilling more deeply into her small body. "I'm not feeling very much pain now," she told us as she watched the shafts slip deeper into her sides. After a moment, the impaling rod pushed further up into her, and she groaned loudly. "Oh, it's close, it's close now," she murmured. That was my cue. She looked at me and nodded. I nodded back--and then tried to move my thumb to trigger the arrow machine.

My thumb did not move. I tried harder, but still, it refused to move. Watching me, Polly frowned briefly, but then the impaling pike surged upward again. Again her green eyes flew wide open.

"My death is at hand," she told us. "Just seconds away." She hit the top switch and the bladed upper shafts began cutting deeper into her chest. "Good-bye, my friends. Enjoy watching me die." She then grabbed the two slender shafts piercing her nipples and began forcing them in deeper as well. She smiled sensually, and then the impaling shaft moved upwards again. "Now!" she screamed. Her body began jerking wildly as blood burst from her mouth and flooded down the impaling shaft. Her hands dropped away from her breasts and her head sank forward. All the shafts stopped moving, and Saul announced that Polly had just died.

I felt really bad. Polly had done her part wonderfully; I had let her down by not yet triggering the arrow machine, I was supposed to have four or five arrows in my chest by the time she died. I tried again to start the device, but my thumb just would not move, it seemed to be paralyzed. I could move my left thumb just fine, but my right would not budge. Time passed, excruciatingly slowly. I became aware of Saul glaring at me. I gave him a look of desperation, and demonstrated my ability to move my left thumb. He did nothing; I tried to roll the device over so I could trigger it with my still-mobile fingers, but in the process lost my grip on it and it fell to the floor.

A technician came out onto the stage then, picked up the control, and started to offer it back to my right hand. I shook my head. "No, in my left," I said. He nodded, did as I asked, then quickly moved offstage. I glanced at my now-impatient audience and started to move my left thumb toward the trigger.

And found that now, it was my right thumb that was mobile and my left would not move. By then, it was obvious even to me that this was not a physical problem. I could not do it, I could not trigger the device.

After about fifteen agonizing minutes--I was sure that the pain of the arrows would be minor compared the mental pain I was feeling then--the technician came out again, took the control from me, and locked it down. He unsnapped the manacles holding my wrists, then never looked at me again. Saul announced that the show was over, apologized to the audience for the "unforeseen events," and the staff started cleaning up the stage. The audience, guests and candidates alike, filed out. No one spoke to me, no one looked at me. Like Cain fleeing the Garden of Eden I made my way back to the bar, where I was again shunned as if I did not exist. I went back to the room Julie and I, and later Polly and I, had shared and found clothing on the bed and shoes on the floor. A note in very large print said I should proceed immediately to the dock. Feeling numb, I got dressed, left the hotel, and walked down to the docks. A staff member who looked more like a guard was waiting there. Pointing to a bench, he told me to sit. I did, and shortly a boat came in, a boat much like the one I'd arrived on. I was told to get on board; I did and the boat departed, with no one on board except me and the crew. No one spoke to me at all during the trip.

And so I ended up back in Miami, pretty much just dumped on the docks. I was in far worse shape than I'd been when the recruiter found me in New York; I owned nothing except the clothes I was wearing. I did have a wallet, containing my drivers' license and some other personal papers, but no cash and, of course, no credit cards; it had been a long time since I'd had one of those. I joined some other people at a dumpster behind a seafood restaurant scrounging for food and managed to get at least something to eat, but the overwhelming sense of guilt I had, my perception of myself as a total and utter failure, was like a foul taste in my mouth that accompanied every bite. I was at bottom; as the blues song says, "so far down it looks like up to me." I wanted to kill myself but I had no way of doing it, and wasn't sure I could do it even if I had the means.

Forced to live, I had to find a way to survive.

The next morning, after having spent a night sleeping on a pile of rope on the wharf, I started thinking a little more clearly. I did have a resource, I understood that. But in my current condition, there was no way I could exploit it. I needed a start. A shower, some halfway decent clothes. I just didn't know where I was going to get them. As I wandered aimlessly around the streets of Miami, an opportunity presented itself. As I passed by a church, I saw a rather dumpy young woman come out and collect mail from the mailbox--evidently, the church secretary. No one else was around--that particular church wasn't operating a soup kitchen or anything like that--so I went up and rang the bell. When the dumpy young woman answered the door I turned on all the charm I could manage considering my disheveled and unshaven state. The women on the island had convinced me that I was unusually attractive to the opposite sex, and that was the resource I intended to exploit. Faking an Eastern European accent, I told her I had been put ashore without even my luggage by the irrational Russian captain of a freighter, and I asked her if the church had any work needing to be done that would allow me to earn enough money to contact my relatives in Europe so I could get home. She seemed very sympathetic but said she didn't have the authority. Luckily, she said, the minister, who did, was in his office, and she went to get him.

The minister, a gray-haired and slender black man, was suspicious of me. There were, he told me sternly, thousands of people in Miami needing work, and the church's resources were severely limited. Dumpy pleaded my case even though she didn't know me at all, and in the end I got more than I had expected. The minister told me there was a lot of high-ladder work--cleaning light fixtures, changing bulbs, and so on--that the church needed to have done, that the current custodian could not physically do, and that they could not afford to hire contractors to do. If I felt I could do that, he said, he would consider letting me work there for a while--at minimum wage, of course. In addition, he said, there was a lounge room near the baptismal I could use for temporary quarters, and a shower as well. It was better than I'd hoped for. My restriction was that if I left the church after hours--6 PM--I was out for the night, out until the doors reopened at nine.

When I asked, in the most abject manner I could manage, if I could have a five-dollar advance so I could buy a toothbrush, a razor, some soap and some deodorant--I did not even have those, I said--I won him over. He gave me ten and told me to be back in less than an hour, to show the toiletries to the secretary and give her any change left over, or the deal was off. He said if I wanted to buy wine or beer the church wasn't about to pay for it.

My only response was to ask where I could find a suitable store. He told me and I was back in twenty minutes with the toiletries and a small amount of change. Not long after, showered and shaved, I was on a high A-frame ladder in the church sanctuary. Dumpy--her name was Lynne--brought me a McDonald's before she left for the day, and I remained in the church that night.

From there my situation improved rapidly. Lynne was infatuated with me almost from the first minute, although she did not appear to expect me to reciprocate; she was not an ugly girl, but she was short-legged, thick-bodied, and plagued with cellulite. Saying she did not want church visitors seeing me in dirty clothes, she bought me some new Wal-Mart clothing and took me out to dinner the second night I was there--she had keys, we could get back in anytime--then seemed stunned when I did behave affectionately toward her. We slept together in the church that evening, and she did not even notice that my Eastern European accent had disappeared. Afterwards she seemed immensely grateful, and the next day she bought me a new watch and a little suitcase to keep the clothing she'd bought me in.

I remained at the church for six weeks, and during that time I was able to save just about all the money I was paid, as Lynne seemed to want to pay for everything and I was perfectly willing to let her. I then packed my suitcase and slipped away with several hundred dollars in my pocket. My short term goal then was to get back to New York, where I knew the streets and the scene better. Unwilling to spend any of my money on train or bus fare and remembering what Geneviève had said about a resurgence of hobo culture, I found my way down to the train yards and indeed found them there, and they were more than willing to teach a newbie the tricks of the trade--especially a newbie able to afford a few groceries and some beer to be shared around.

Within a few days I was watching the sandy landscape of Florida roll by from the open door of an empty boxcar. Stopping for a while in Raleigh, North Carolina, I was able to play the same game as I'd played at the church in Miami, this time getting a part-time stint at a junkyard where the manager was a middle-aged widow desperate for attention. My next stop was Washington, and then Philadelphia, and by the time I arrived in Manhattan I was able to afford to pay rent on a tiny apartment. I started working some of the bars I knew--including the Last Chance--and my new-found confidence in my ability to charm women paid off quite well. Once in New York, even though I wasn't working any sort of actual job, I was making enough simply from the women to keep up my rent, eat reasonably well, and even buy myself a second-hand motorcycle.

But I was restless, too; I felt I had left unfinished business on the island, and the guilt, the feeling that I had betrayed all the other candidates, still gnawed at me. I think that was the reason I decided to go down to Jersey one weekend, that feeling of incompleteness. I had seen Warren twice at the Last Chance, but I avoided him and, if he saw me, he didn't approach me. In the end I decided, for reasons I cannot really explain, to follow the only concrete lead I had to anyone from there. Of all the candidates, the only one whose full name I knew was the one I'd met in New York, Julie. More, I could remember the name of her beneficiary--her sister, Cynthia Presser, who lived in Barrington.

I did not remember the address, but, using computers at the public library, I was able to get it. On a Saturday, some four months after my return from the island, I rode my motorcycle down there and located the address.

My thoughts, as I pulled up, was that Cynthia apparently hadn't done much with the benefit money. The address had led me to a seriously run-down trailer park on the East side of town, where Cynthia's home--if she still lived there--was a terribly beat-up trailer. Not even a "mobile home" but a small travel trailer on wheels with long-flat tires, the tongue resting on a cluster of crumbling concrete blocks. Parking my Harley behind a rusting Chevrolet sitting out front, I walked up and knocked on the door.

When a young woman in brief shorts, sneakers, and a tied-off shirt answered the door, though, I knew immediately that she still did. The family resemblance was very strong, strong enough to give me a jolt. The girl looked like a slightly younger version of Julie.

"Yes?" she said in a voice that, too, was much like Julie's. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Cynthia Presser," I said.

She laughed. "Cynthia? Well, that's me, although I never hear that name used anymore. I'm Cindy."

"Ah. Cindy. My name is Jack Packard." As always, it felt odd to use my last name, I really had gotten out of the habit.

She looked me up and down. "Did someone send you to see me, Jack?" she asked.

"Uhm, no. I came to see you because..." I paused. "Ms. Presser, I really don't know exactly why I came to see you, to be perfectly honest about it," I blurted. "I was a friend--a very close friend--of your sister, Julie."

Her eyes flew wide. "Julie! Where is she? I lost track of her, she fell off the face of the earth!" She grabbed my hand. "Come in, come in, you have to tell me, where is she?" Reluctantly, actually cursing myself at that moment for coming, I allowed myself to be dragged into the trailer. "Let me get us some coffee, and--"

"Ms. Presser," I said.

"Cindy," she corrected, giving me Julie's bright smile.

"Cindy. Don't get coffee yet. From the way you're talking I can only assume you don't know."

"Don't know what?"

"I am so sorry to have to be the one to tell you this. Cindy, Julie is dead. She's been dead for about five months now."

She looked stunned. After a moment her eyes filled up with tears and her lips began to quiver. "Dead?" she whispered. "How? Why is she dead?"

I had already decided to stay with the technical truth. "She killed herself, Cindy."

"Killed herself?"

"Yes."

Her eyes suddenly flashed fire. "Why? Because of you? Because you walked out on her, something like that?"

I sighed. "No. I was--with her--when she died."

The fire faded and vanished, and a moment later she started to cry. She sank into a threadbare chair and continued weeping; I knelt beside it and put my hand on her shoulder. After a while, she laid her hand on mine, and continued to cry for a while.

Finally, cried out, she raised her head and wiped her swollen eyes with her hand. "I'm sorry. This is a shock. Let me get that coffee, please." A little unsteady, she rose and went into her tiny kitchen, returning a few minutes later with two cups of coffee.

"Cindy, I must say, I am a little surprised that you heard this from me," I said after a moment. I took a sip of the coffee. "Didn't you get the benefit?"

"Benefit?" she echoed blankly.

"Yes." I did not want to go into detail, so I improvised. "Julie took out--let's say, an insurance policy. I was with her when she filled it out, that's how I knew your name and where to find you. You were named as the beneficiary. You should have heard from the company by now."

She smiled softly for a moment. "Yes, that's Julie, all right, always trying to look out for her little sister. God, I loved her." She then shook her head. "But no, I haven't heard anything from any insurance company. What company was it?"

Given that I hadn't been planning on going into detail, I hesitated. But there was no way around it; since the money hadn't arrived, it seemed logical for her to contact them. "Ah... it was called Erothan." I answered.

She frowned. "Erothan Insurance? I never heard of them."

I sighed. This was not, I could see, going to stay under control. "No. The Erothan Resort." "Resort?"

"Yes, It's in the Bahamas, on a small island by itself."

"I don't mean to sound stupid, but why exactly would a resort pay me a benefit for Julie's death?"

"Cindy," I almost begged, "don't ask these questions. Just take it at face value, they do, they owe you a substantial amount of money. You can take my word for it."

"Mr. Packard--" she began.

"Jack," I interrupted.

"Mr. Packard," she resumed, her manner cold, "you cannot expect me to do that. You come here and tell me my sister is dead, and that I'm the beneficiary of an insurance policy. Then you say, no, not insurance, the money is to come from a beach resort. Which is it? And besides that, why are you here? For a share of the money?"

I waved my hands. "No, no, I don't want a dime of it, I wouldn't take a dime of it. I guess if anything I came to see the good that had come from that money. And I find you don't have it yet."

"I never even heard anything about it."

"I know. It was a part of the forms, Julie and I talked about it as we filled them out."

"You filled one out too?"

"Well, yes, I--"

She pointed an accusing finger at me. "Mr. Packard, you came here, I did not seek you out. I really do think you owe me a full explanation of what happened to my sister!"

I sighed and stared at the floor. "Very well," I said softly. "Please, though, be quiet until I finish. This is not going to be easy." A bit haltingly, and with numerous edits, I told her what Erothan was and why benefits were being paid. She remained silent, but she looked, by turns, incredulous, sad, and angry.

"So Julie," she said when I finished, "killed herself, on stage, for the entertainment of rich perverts." I nodded, wondering as I did how she'd react if she knew the details of that scene, and feeling fortunate she hadn't asked. "And you had signed in too, to do the same thing. How is it you are still alive?"

I bit my lip. "I reneged. Balked, as they say on the island. Julie didn't."

"That, Jack," Cindy said, "makes you at least a halfway intelligent man and makes my sister an idiot."

"No, Cindy, you don't--"

"It doesn't matter." She wiped her eyes. "Nothing matters. Crazy, just crazy." She shook herself. "All right, She made me the beneficiary. It isn't insulting her memory for me to take it. Let's call them and see where the hell the money is." She went to an older and obviously well-used computer on a desk in the corner and looked up Erothan. There was an office in New York.

"No 800 number," she mused. "Gonna cost me. Okay, okay." She picked up her phone and dialed, and I just listened. After a moment she looked over at me. "They have three separate listings," she said. "Guest, Employee, and Entertainer. Julie would have been entertainer, right?"

I shook my head and grimaced. "Yes, I'm sure of it, although I never heard that term used."

She talked a bit longer, then finally hung up. "Well, how about that. No Julie Presser ever on the island, as far as they say. No Julie as an entertainer or guest ever. A Julie Barnard works there as a first-aid nurse, but they described her and she's not my sister." She jabbed a finger at me. "Now what's this really all about?"

"Something has gone wrong," I said. "Obviously. I'd say this means you're not going to get your money, and that would upset Julie greatly. That's my only interest right now, Cindy--fulfilling Julie's last wishes. If you want me to just go, say the word and I'm gone. But I think I can prove to you that what I'm telling you is true."

She crossed her legs. "How?" she demanded.

"In New York there's a bar called the Last Chance. It's where Julie and I both were recruited. The recruiter is still working that crowd, I've seen him there. If you went there and sat around looking impoverished, I'd guess he'd approach you. They're searching for good-looking men and women. You qualify."

"I won't have any trouble looking impoverished, since I pretty much am."

"You at least have a home."

"Such as it is. Wanna know how I pay for it?"

"Not really."

"I'm a whore. I do some other work too, when I can find it, but I have a set of clients. When you showed up I thought one of them sent you over. Shocked?"

I grinned. "Hardly. Since I'm one too."

Her eyebrows went up. "Yeah? Gay or straight?"

"Straight."

She looked me up and down. "Yeah, I can see it. You may be a liar but you are cute. Okay, Jack Packard. Let's go to New York, to this bar."

"You trust me?"

She shrugged. "Why not? If you wanted to attack me you've already had a perfect opportunity and you didn't. So let's do it. Is that your bike outside?"

"Yes."

"Let's take it. My car doesn't run for shit, and the bike'll use less gas."

That evening, back in New York, Cindy stayed at my place; I gave her the bed, I took the couch. The next evening I took her to the Last Chance, and she took a table while I sat at the bar. Warren didn't show up that night, or the next, but on our third night there--just when her patience was beginning to run out--he did. I more or less hid my face and watched him. He approached one other man, was evidently rebuffed, and one other woman--and then he approached Cindy. They talked for quite a while, and I saw him leave her a card. When he left, she came over to me, and at my suggestion we left the Last Chance and went to a coffeehouse down the street.

I bought the coffee. She didn't speak for a long time, she just sat staring down at the table. "Well," she said finally, "okay. You were right about Erothan. Come to our resort, live the good life for a while, have lots of sex with good-looking men, then die on stage in a snuff show. I did get the whole story. He is persuasive, he made it sound--attractive." She looked up at me. "Were you the one who had sex with Julie before she died on stage?"

"There were two of us. I was one of them," I answered. "And actually I was having sex with her when she died. Okay? Now you know."

Cindy pursed her lips. "But you didn't kill her."

I had been expecting a question of that sort and I was ready for it. Perhaps later, I told myself, I could tell her the whole truth. For now, I felt it would be best if I presented the matter as Erothan had seen it, along with my own true feelings as they had been as that scene had begun. It was perhaps lying, but I felt I could justify it. "No," I said. "As a matter of fact she wanted me to. I couldn't, and I told her so. I liked her far too much, I couldn't do it."

"How'd she die?"

I had hoped to avoid this. No such luck, all I could do was be brief--and somewhat evasive. "She was stabbed to death."

Cindy made a brief choking sound. "Why would she choose something like that?" Leaving out any mention of the fantasy structure Julie had embraced, I focused instead on the scale of

benefits, and how many of the candidates tried to choose the hardest death they felt they could take in order to increase the benefit--and that sent Cindy into another brief period of crying.

"Well," she said finally, wiping her eyes, "what now? For me, actually getting the money isn't as important as making sure Julie didn't go through that for no reason. But Erothan is denying that Julie was ever there. Where does that leave us?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Maybe get a lawyer?"

She looked pensive. "Once upon a time," she said, "before times got so very hard, I worked in a law office. These days especially, we might find a lawyer to take the case for a share of the benefit. The trouble is, we're going to need more evidence than just your word for it that Julie was there and that she died there."

"I have no idea how we'd get evidence like that."

"We could go try to beat the truth out of Warren."

"I doubt if that would work. Besides, our contact with him was brief, all here in New York. I'd doubt he'd remember names."

"Maybe someone else who didn't go through with it?"

I shook my head. "I don't know of anyone else who left. You couldn't understand, you weren't there. No one does that."

She did not ask the obvious questions, and I was grateful for that. "What about the--guests?" she inquired. "They came back. Did you know any of them?"

I stared at her for a moment, wondering why I hadn't thought of that. "As a matter of fact," I answered, "I did. For two of them, I know the names and the city they lived in. At least the city they said they lived in."

"What cities?"

"Stamford, Connecticut, and Charlotte, North Carolina."

"Connecticut is way closer. First thing in the morning?"

"Sounds good to me."

That night, Cindy and I became lovers--at her suggestion. Her body, and her style, was so similar to Julie's it was a strange experience. Although they were still fairly small, she had slightly larger breasts; that was the only real difference. I had to make a conscious effort not to call her "Julie" during our lovemaking, but I succeeded in that.

The next morning we took the bike and headed for Stamford, which was only a little more than an hour away. Once in town, we went to the public library and used one of the computers there to look up numbers for Tom Carrolton and for the General Electric offices there. It was Thursday morning, and, figuring he would probably be at work at that time, I called the GE offices. When I asked for him by name, the receptionist responded with, "Yes, sir, I'll connect you." I gave Cindy a thumbs-up.

"Tom Carrolton," he answered after a moment.

"Tom," I said, "this is Jack Packard. You knew me only as 'Jack.' At the resort."

There was a moment of silence. "Surprised to hear from you, Jack," he said carefully.

"I'm sure. Tom, I hate to ask but I need to speak to you about something important. Is there a place we could meet? This will not take long."

There was another silence. "Yes, fine. I'll be having lunch at Ricardo's on Broad Street. In about an hour. Will that work?"

"Fine," I said. "I'll meet you there." And, a little over an hour later, we sat down at his table in the restaurant.

"Julie," he said with some surprise. "I surely didn't expect to see you here. You decided not to--ah--do it as well?"

I grinned. Confirmation, right there, already. "Tom, this isn't Julie. It's Cynthia, her younger sister. There is a strong family resemblance."

"Very." He let his gaze linger on her for a few moments, then turned back to me and handed me a small leather pouch. I glanced at it; it was a money clip, and it contained a large number of hundred-dollar bills. "I do appreciate," he said, "your discretion on the phone, and the fact that you did not call me at home." He pointed to the clip. "There's five thousand in there," he said. "I trust that's sufficient to maintain that discretion?"

Although I wanted that money very badly--Cindy was staring at it almost hungrily--I laid it on the table. "Tom, to be frank, it never even occurred to me to try to blackmail you. That's not why I looked you up."

He cocked his head. "Oh? Why, then?"

"You do know about the resort's system, right? The benefits paid for the performances?" He nodded. "Well, Cindy here is Julie's beneficiary. Not only has she not received the benefit, but when we called Ero--ah--the resort, they denied that any 'Julie' had ever been there."

He frowned. "That's troubling," he said. "But there should be records. With times as they are, you shouldn't have a problem finding a good lawyer who would handle this matter for you on a contingency basis."

"Something I know something about, I used to work in a law office," Cindy said. She went on to explain her feeling that my testimony alone probably wouldn't be enough to get a lawyer interested. She pointed out that we really had no other evidence in-hand that Julie had ever gone to the resort.

Tom pursed his lips. "I see," he said, "what you want from me. Cynthia, you have to try to understand my position. Yes, I was at the resort, and yes, I knew your sister there. I did not see her--final performance--but I can confirm that she was there, and that she was among those they call on the island, 'candidates.' On the other hand, I do not want it known at the company or at home that I vacation in such places. I'm sure you can appreciate that. I could not, therefore, testify in court, or give you a signed affidavit to that effect."

Cindy nodded. "I do appreciate that," she said. "What we would ask you to do, Tom, is simply to speak to our lawyer--when we get one--and say exactly what you just said, off the record. A dozen witnesses might convince a court. The lawyer will have to find the paperwork, we just need to convince him. We would, absolutely, respect your privacy."

He seemed to consider this for a moment. "Very well," he said at last. "I will do that. Off the record."

She smiled warmly, looking more like Julie than ever. "Thank you, Tom," she said. "We'll be in touch." She got up, I followed her lead, and we started to leave.

"You forgot something," Tom said, gesturing toward the money clip.

"I told you, we weren't asking for that," I reminded him.

"I know. But you can use it. Take it."

We did.

And the next morning, at Cindy's insistence, we were off to Charlotte, to try to get at least one more confirmation. Feeling that even the bike would cost too much money in gas--we needed

to conserve the money we got from Tom--we parked the bike at her place in Barrington and went to the rail yards to catch a train for Charlotte. A discussion with some of the veteran hobos there told us which train to catch, and soon enough, we were in a boxcar on a CSX freight, headed South. The money we'd gotten from Tom was carefully concealed in various places on our persons. Hobos in general were trustworthy, but human predators were to be found there, as everywhere. Standing in the open doorway, we watched the landscapes of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia roll slowly past. The countryside was beautiful, but the parts of the cities the train rolled through often looked like war zones. In Baltimore the train seemed to be about to stop, but it appeared that a near-riot was going on there between local hobos and local police, and the engineer has second thoughts--to my relief, we rolled on. In Washington we did stop, and Cindy and I hid in a back corner of the car, hoping to avoid detection by the "bulls," as the hobos called the security guards the railroads hired. We didn't even need to hide, no guards seemed to be working that stop at that time, and while we were there, two other hobos, a middle-aged man and a pretty but very young girl, joined us in the car. We had some food with us, they had some wine, so we got together to make a nice meal as the train rolled slowly on toward Richmond.

The man introduced himself as Bill Landermann, and his young companion simply as Susie. He wanted to know where we were headed, what prospects we had when we got there--common topics of conversation, as I knew, among hobos.

"Ever hear of a place called Erothan?" I asked him.

"Oh, hell, yeah, man," he answered. "One of their agents tried to recruit Susie, here, down in New Orleans. I know all about 'em. Sick fucks."

"New Orleans?"

"Yeah, man. For me and Susie, that's home. Winter's come on, we're headin' back there, find work on the docks."

"You spent a lot of time at the yards in New Orleans?"

"Yeah, 'bout half my fuckin' life since the depression started."

"Ever run into a woman named Geneviève down there?"

He exploded into laughter. "Geneviève! Oh, man, Geneviève Delille was the queen, man! Is that who you mean? Got to be, she was the only Geneviève in the New Orleans yard! Ah, man, damn, she was a goddess, a fucking goddess." He then looked sad. "Ah, man, that's why you asked about Erothan. That's where she went. Went to kill herself, get some money for her daughter, Fulvie. Haven't seen her in a year, man. She's gotta be dead by now. Tragédie, tragédie. Shit times we live in, a woman like Geneviève Delille gotta go kill herself to provide for her daughter."

I made a note of that name--"Fulvie Delille." "I know," I agreed. "I knew her. On the island, at the Erothan resort."

"She is dead, right?"

"I'm afraid so. I was there when she died."

To my surprise, Bill--who looked like the very model of the tough hobo--began to cry. Susie tried to console him. "I knew it, I knew it, oh, tragédie, oh, Geneviève, you knew how much we all loved you..."

"Do you know her daughter, Bill?" I asked when he'd calmed down.

"Yes," he answered.

"You know how to find her?"

He frowned. "Yes. What you want with her?"

"My sister," Cindy explained, jumping in, "also died at Erothan. I was the beneficiary. I did not get any money, and Erothan is denying my sister was ever there. You just said that Fulvie

was Geneviève's beneficiary. All we want with her is to find out if she did receive the benefit from Geneviève's... ah, sacrifice."

He was silent for a few minutes. "Fulvie," he said finally, "doesn't know anything about all this. Geneviève told me, and some of the other guys, what she was up to when she left. She didn't tell Fulvie and she asked us not to tell Fulvie until the money showed up. Last time I saw Fulvie was months back. Didn't look like she had no money then. She might not know yet." He jabbed a finger at me. "You gonna tell her?"

I sighed. "Don't you think someone should? Geneviève is dead, Bill. There's nothing Fulvie can do about it now."

Bill seemed to consider this for a moment. Finally, he nodded. "Ride on with us," he said. "To New Orleans. Y'all can come back to Charlotte later. I'll take you to see Fulvie."

Cindy was agreeable to this idea, so we decided to ride on with Bill and Susie--and in the process, got to know them better. Bill did not have a hard-luck story to tell, as so many of those on the island did; by his own admission he'd been pretty much a ne'er-do-well his whole life, a high school dropout who had worked odd jobs and sometimes construction before the Crash who'd found something like a home among the hobos when they became numerous again.

Susie, who told us she was just eighteen, was another matter. "I was just your average high school kid," she told us. "Spoiled, I know that now, I didn't know it then. My parents were well-off and I was their only child. Then the Crash hit, and they both lost their jobs, they lost their savings, they lost everything. Dad broke down, went crazy. He got a gun and he killed my Mom, and he tried to kill me too--shot me in the chest. Then he killed himself. Obviously, I didn't die. I was in the hospital for maybe three weeks, and then I went home." She paused and sighed. "But I had no resources, no money, no job, nothing. The bank foreclosed, the repo men took the car and Dad's truck, and the sheriff's deputies threw me out in the street. I had no idea how to live on the streets. I went down to the French Quarter, trying to beg from the tourists. I wasn't doing well--frankly, I was starving. People were telling me I could make a few dollars whoring, because I looked young and fresh. Before I started that, though, I ran into Bill and he kind of took me under his wing, taught me how to be a hobo." She gestured with her hands. "So here I am."

"Not as bad as some I've heard," I told them.

"You were on the island?" Bill asked. "You said you were there when Geneviève died..."

I felt like hanging my head, the humiliation of what I had done was so complete. "Yes," I answered. "To both. In answer to the question you didn't ask, I... changed my mind and left. Almost no one does that."

"They let you do that?"

"Yes. They toe the line carefully with the law. No one is a prisoner and they won't hurt anyone. The candidates are required to do it themselves."

Bill looked at Susie and grinned. "Well, hell, honey, mebbe you should go for a while. Get some good food, live the life of Riley for a bit, 's what that recruiter fellow said Geneviève was going to be doing. Then change your mind and come back."

"I wouldn't recommend it," I said swiftly. "You can't understand what it's like there." I started explaining, telling them about the constant enforced nudity and the open sex. "People in the real world," I explained, "always wear masks, that's the way I see it, anyhow. There, everyone is under a death sentence and no one does. You get very close to people very fast under those conditions. By any standard I can imagine defining the phrase, I fell in love with at least five women there. Geneviève was one of them. Cindy's sister Julie was another. And they with me, too. There's no jealousy there, no possessiveness."

"You make it sound like paradise," Susie commented.

I turned to her. "It is. I said that exact thing myself, not too very long ago, there's no question about it. But it's limited. You only have a few weeks or months to enjoy it before you die on stage." I looked back at Bill. "The point is, the peer pressure to follow through, to kill yourself on stage--you can't imagine how strong that is. You really do love these people, you don't want to disappoint them."

"You did," he pointed out.

I sighed deeply. "That's right. I did. I am not proud of it. I still regret it."

"You're still alive," Cindy noted. "That counts for a lot."

"I suppose." We went on, talking about many things, while the train, with occasional uneventful stops, rolled on through Virginia and North Carolina, then over the mountains into Tennessee. In Memphis, Bill told us, we'd have to get off and catch a southbound, since the train we were on would continue on westward toward Little Rock. He knew the Memphis yard well, he said. It would just be another uneventful stop.

He could not have been more wrong.

Night had fallen, and long before the train actually reached the Memphis yard, we began hearing the noise. At first it was an unintelligible rumble in the distance, but as we came closer the sounds of shouts and screams, along with sirens, squealing tires, and an occasional gunshot became apparent.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked Bill.

"No idea, man," he said succinctly. "Whatever, it ain't good." He directed us to the back corner of the boxcar. "If it looks too bad, stay on," he instructed. "We can catch a southbound in Little Rock, just as well."

The train rolled into an industrial area of the city, an area that I would have expected to be more or less deserted at night. It was dark but not at all deserted, people could be seen running on nearby streets, whether toward something or away from something it was impossible to say. A police car, siren screaming and lights flashing, roared down one of those streets, and I was stunned to see it mow down two or three people on foot, knocking them aside like pins in a bowling alley. Someone then threw a cement block at the car, shattering the windshield. It rolled to a stop, the doors flew open, and two officers lunged out, weapons already drawn. Almost immediately a shot rang out, but it was one of the officers who fell. The other then began firing wildly in the general direction of the gunfire. In spite of that a mob of people were rushing at him as the train moved on. It rounded a bend and the scene was lost to my sight.

"It definitely looks too bad," I noted.

"Fucking well right about that," Bill agreed. "Problem is, this train stops in the yard here, it gets a new loco. Even if we stay on, we're gonna be sitting there for at least an hour or so."

"We just stay in the back corners and stay quiet," Susie said. "Whatever's going on out there, nobody should be interested in an empty boxcar."

The train was slowing down by then. Outside, on the streets, it was obvious that some kind of full-blown riot was in progress. Crowds of people surged this way and that, groups of police cars had collected at various points, the sounds of shouts, screams, gunfire, and breaking glass were all around us and distinctly intensifying as we drew closer to the trainyard. The train was then moving at perhaps ten miles an hour, but suddenly, the form of a young black woman appeared in the open door. Looking panicked, her eyes wide, she stared at us.

"Bo's?" she asked breathlessly.

Acknowledging the code--only hobos called other hobos 'bo's," something I had only recently learned--Bill nodded. "Bo's," he answered. "Get over here in the corner, quick." The black girl obeyed instantly, almost disappearing into the shadows. "What the hell," Bill asked in a low voice, "is going on out there?"

"Hell's 'bout right," the girl answered. Her eyes were still wide and were fixed on the open door. "The whole city's gone crazy."

"Why? What set it off?"

She glanced at him. "Been buildin' a couple of weeks," she said. "Started when one of the companies that trucks food and shit into the city tried to lower wages. Teamsters went out on strike. The motherfuckers that ran the truck firm hired scabs. Everybody went out on strike. The Union men started having wars with the scabs, people were getting killed. Trucking in Memphis just plain stopped. Then the stores started running out of food. Not even rich men could buy food in Memphis, people were driving to Little Rock and Nashville and Paducah and even Birmingham to get food. But the gas trucks weren't running either and pretty soon nobody had gas to go anywhere."

"Damn," Bill muttered. "That's bad..."

"No shit. City's dyin,' man. But it got really bad when some fucker started a rumor than a whole trainload of food and shit was being run up from Mobile to someplace in Canada on a CN train. People decided they were gonna stop that train and take the food. They got the whole yard blocked up, man. Cars and trucks all over the tracks, some of the tracks dug up, all kinds of things. Trains can't get through here atall."

"What about the one we're on?" Cindy asked.

The black girl shook her head. "It's goin' maybe another mile, maybe not even that far. You can bet the engineer's gonna get a message to throw her in reverse, pretty damn soon."

"I don't understand," Bill said. "If the mob wants to hijack a CN train, why are they way out here?" He gestured toward the door. "They seem to be just rioting everywhere!"

The black girl nodded. "They are. I don't know if there even was a train. But these mobs, these motherfuckers have just gone fucking nuts. Tonight it just fucking exploded. It's like the whole city's out in the street, people are killing other people for no reason. You wanna know why I was running? I was running from a man who was trying to kill me. Not a cop, not anybody I know, just a man who saw me and started shooting at me." She shook her head. "I'm just lucky that motherfucker is a piss-poor shot!"

The train lurched, then slowed down more. "What do you figure we should do, Bill?" I asked.

He was silent for a moment. "We shoulda got off in Nashville," he said. He stroked his chin. "I guess we should just stay put. If he does throw it in reverse, we'll get off wherever he does stop."

"Sounds good to me, I don't think we want to be out in that," I said, gesturing toward the door.

"Take my word for it, you don't," the black girl said.

The train continued to slow down and, after a few more minutes, stopped. Patiently, we sat and waited for the predicted reversal, but it did not happen. Time dragged on slowly. We could still hear the sounds of the rioting outside, but at least it wasn't right around the section of the train we were on.

"This ain't right," Bill said finally. "One way or another, we should be movin' here." Staying low to the floor, he moved forward to the center of the boxcar and peered out the door. He stayed there for a few minutes, then came back. "There's a mob of people around this train, up toward the

front," he said in an urgent low voice. "Around the loco. I think they might have dragged the engineer out."

"In which case we're going nowhere," Cindy observed.

"Meanin' we have to get off whether we like it or not," he told us. He turned to the black girl. "You know this town well?"

She shook her head. "No, I was 'boin' down from Chicago. All I know of Memphis is the yards and the 'bo jungles. I got lost runnin' from that crazy motherfucker with the gun, I got no idea where we are right now."

"Shit," Bill muttered. He went to the other door, looked out. "Warehouse district," he said. "Mebbe a block over. Those streets look empty, I say we try to get over there, find a place to hole up, wait for the daylight."

"We gotta risk it," the black girl said. "If they've dragged the engineer out, they'll be searching the train next." She got to her feet and moved toward the door. Susie, Cindy, and I all followed.

Trying to stay in the shadows, we got off the train one by one. No shouts from the mob, which was at least ten or twelve cars ahead of us, suggested that we'd been seen. We crossed the street that ran alongside the tracks, then moved in close to the buildings, again staying as much out of sight as possible. There was at that moment no one around, but the street and sidewalk was littered with broken glass and other debris, evidence that the rioting had been here, and recently. Half a block down, a Ford sedan lay on its side, apparently overturned by the rioters and evidently searched, as even the trunk had been pried open. There was a crowbar lying on the sidewalk nearby and I scooped it up as we went by, thinking it might well come in handy.

I almost dropped it when we crossed another street and came across three broken and bloody bodies, two black men and one white. They looked as if they had been beaten to death. Susie stopped as if paralyzed by the sight, but the rest of us got her moving again. We passed another corner, and as we did there were shouts. I looked to my left to see three men running toward us.

"Git 'em!" one of the men shrieked.

With a speed and grace that surprised me, Bill intercepted one and sent him reeling backwards with a skillfully-thrown right hand. Another seemed to be targeting Susie, but I lunged forward and cut him down with the crowbar, slamming it across his midsection. The third was going for the black girl, who was retreating, but who had her fists up and clenched, ready to fight. I didn't wait to see how well she could do that, I ran up and chopped the crowbar down across the man's shoulders, and he fell heavily.

In just instants, the fight was over. The two I'd hit with the crowbar seemed to be down for the count, but the one Bill had punched was getting back on his feet. Together, Bill and I rushed to him and grabbed him.

"Why'd you do that?" Bill demanded. "Why'd you come for us like that?"

"Don't know you," the man muttered, spitting blood. He'd lost teeth from Bill's punch.

"So?"

"So tonight in Memphis, you don't know a man, you kill him," the man spat venomously. He then looked toward Cindy. "'Sides, you got hotties with you."

"This town's gone crazy," Bill observed.

"S what I said," the black girl agreed.

"So I guess," I said, tapping the crowbar on my palm, "that since I don't know you, I should kill you. Right?"

The man looked at me fearfully. "Aw, no, man, don't do that," he begged.

"Why not? If you'd won this fight, you would have killed me and Bill and taken the women. Raped them. Right? Tell me the truth, asshole. If I think you're lying I'll split your skull." I surprised myself with how coolly I delivered the threat.

The man hung his head. "All right, yeah, right. Just make it quick, okay?"

"Wait," the black girl said, holding up a hand. She stared down at the man on the ground, her hands on her hips. "You got a car, asshole?"

"No," he answered. He gestured vaguely toward one of the men lying on the ground. "We came down here in Mike's car."

"Is there any gas in it?"

"A little. Maybe a quarter tank."

"Why'd you bring a car? Gas is hard to find in Memphis, so I hear."

The man snorted. "You can't find no gas anywhere. No food, either. We were hoping to find some food around these warehouses, steal it, carry it home in the car." He grinned, a very ugly expression. "You and your girlfriends look pretty tasty, you know that? Have some fun, then a big ol' feast..."

"You're eating people!?" Susie cried, horrified.

The man shrugged. "Not yet. It'll probably come to that. Folks already stewin' up dogs and cats."

"Jesus," Bill muttered.

"Okay, enough," the black girl said. "Look, here's what's gonna happen. You know your way around here, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. You're gonna take us south of the city to whatever train yard is close but out of the riot area. You do that, we'll let you go. Fuck with us, my bud here will split your skull with that crowbar. Got it?"

The man got to his feet. "Yeah. Deal." He went to one of the unconscious men, reached into his pocket, drew out car keys. Following him, we went a couple of blocks to a beat-up Ford station wagon; I stayed very close behind him the whole time. It was decided that Bill would drive, and that our captive would sit in the front passenger seat so I could sit behind him, where I could snap the crowbar around his neck if necessary. The car started and we were off, our captive giving Bill directions.

We were lucky; the man gave us good directions and we were not on the road long before Bill pulled the car into an area where a large number of train cars and a couple of Norfolk-Southern locomotives were assembling a train. There appeared to be a small hobo jungle here, which seemed very active as we arrived. Bill turned off the car; the black girl popped the hood and ripped out a handful of spark plug wires.

"You can fix it and go," she told our captive as she threw the wires down. "If you know how. We don't want to be followed." We then left him and went into the jungle.

"Hey, come on, you guys!" an older man yelled at us as we drew close. "Get a move on! You lookin' to hop a train outta here, right?"

"Yes, we are," Bill answered.

"Then let's get on board! This train is leaving, any minute! Headed south, away from all the craziness in Memphis!" Directed by the older man we scrambled into a slow-rolling boxcar already hitched to the train. We all collapsed in a corner.

"Name's Ben Tatum," the older man said. "They call me 'The Conductor.' Who might y'all be?" We introduced ourselves all around, and we learned for the first time that the black girl's name was Kendra Perkins; we had not taken the time for introductions before.

"You did good with that guy back there," I told Kendra. "Quick thinking, I wouldn't have thought to ask about a car." Bill nodded.

"You did good yourself, taking down that guy coming for me."

"Thanks."

"I think you killed him. Broke his neck."

I shrugged. "I think so too. Doesn't bother me any."

Kendra smiled. "Me either." We took a moment to explain to Ben what has happened out on the streets, and he just nodded and made more comments about how Memphis had gone insane overnight. I was just happy we were out on the rails, headed into Mississippi and leaving Memphis behind us.

"Where is this train headed?" Bill asked.

"I'm not sure, and I don't think the engineer is sure either," Ben answered. "Word came down to get equipment and personnel out of Memphis, this is an unscheduled run. Maybe Jackson, maybe Biloxi, maybe Baton Rouge or New Orleans." He shook his head. "We'll know when it stops. Anywhere's better than where we were."

"That's for sure."

The train rolled on; daylight came and countryside turned into an urban landscape--Jackson. We passed through a trainyard there and kept going. It was beginning to look like our impromptu train might well take us all the way to New Orleans. It was taking quite a while to get anywhere; since our train was unscheduled, it never went much over ten miles an hour or so and it kept being directed off onto sidings to wait while a regular train went by. The day passed, darkness fell, we slept and another day dawned. In ways it was a relaxing trip--there was nothing to do except watch the Mississippi countryside glide by--but our food and water was running low and the makeshift latrine we'd set up in the far corner of the boxcar was beginning to smell. I dozed in the corner, thinking about how ironic it would be if I died of thirst in a boxcar on a slow-moving train.

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But that did not happen. We got our wish when the train rolled into a busy yard where a large sign announced that we were in "New Orleans, LA" and ground to a halt. We got off, crossed a few tracks and a fence, and found ourselves in a well-populated hobo jungle.

Bill and Susie seemed to know everyone there. Cindy, Kendra, and myself were introduced to far too many people to remember almost any of the names. We were shown to some makeshift showers that had been set up, given food, and generally welcomed. Then we were off, Bill leading the way, on our way to meet Fulvie Delille. Kendra decided to tag along with us, saying she had no special plans.

Ten blocks or so later, he led us up a walkway to a small ramshackle apartment building and tapped on one of the doors. Seconds later, that door opened and a young woman stepped out. "Bill!" she shrieked, and threw herself into his arms. "You're back!" I was left standing there open-mouthed. The resemblance between Julie and Cindy was strong; Fulvie literally looked like a clone of Geneviève.

"These people," Bill told her, gesturing toward us, "have something to talk to you about, Fulvie."

She looked toward us. "Oh?"

"Yes. About your mother." I took a deep breath. This was, I was very sure, going to be a repeat of my first meeting with Cindy back in Barrington.

It wasn't, not at all. "My mother is dead," Fulvie said flatly, looking at each of us in turn. Her face was expressionless. "She died in a snuff show at a place called Erothan, in the Bahamas." She turned her attention back to Bill. "Do you know how she died, Bill?"

"No, I--"

"She was cut in half with a buzz saw. Came up between her legs. I'm told this was her choice. I was also told she was sucking some guy's dick while she was being cut--and killed."

"My god..." Bill muttered.

I was left looking at the ground, wondering what the reaction--from all of them--would be if they'd known I was that guy. "That," I said, "was what we came to tell you. Not in that much detail, I'll admit. Really, we came to see you to find out if you got the payoff for Geneviève's--sacrifice."

"Why, you want part of the money?"

"No, no." I gestured toward Cindy. "This is Cindy. Her sister died at Erothan as well. She did not get the payout and now Erothan is denying her sister was ever there. We're trying to find out if others got the payouts."

Fulvie's manner softened a little. "Hm! Okay. Come inside, please. Let's talk." We went inside, found seats in the tiny and cramped living and dining area. Fulvie produced a bottle of cheap whisky--Southern Comfort--and six glasses, and poured us all a shot. "As a matter of fact," she said, "if you'd come a couple months earlier I would not have known any of that. And no, I did not get any payoff. And, Erothan is also denying that Geneviève was ever there. No one by that name in any of their archives, they say." She sipped her whisky. "So now let me turn that question around." She looked in turn at me, Cindy, and Kendra. "Was one of you there?"

"Yes," I said tiredly. "I was." The usual question--how is you're still alive--was asked again and I answered honestly, as I always did.

"So you knew my mother."

"Yes, I did. Very well. And I will readily admit, I was in love with Geneviève. And several other women, including Cindy's sister, Julie. That might sound odd, but on that island it is not odd at all."

Fulvie nodded. "I have heard that. Paradise, until you have to die on stage."

I nodded as well. "How did you find out?" I asked.

"A woman--a writer--came down to the hobo jungle looking for me. Well, not me, Fulvie, but 'Geneviève's daughter.' She didn't even know the last name--"

"We never used last names on the island," I explained. "I did not know Geneviève's last name myself until I met Bill--pure chance. The only reason I knew Julie's last name was because I knew her in New York, we went to the island together. The other women I was closest to there--Denise, Polly, Emily--I still don't know their last names."

"Anyway," Fulvie continued, "everyone in that jungle knew Geneviève, and so the guys brought the writer to me. That's how I know what I know." She paused. "Emily--that's the one that did the Chinese rat torture, right?"

I closed my eyes for a moment. "Fulvie, I'd rather not talk about that, that was one of the worst things I've ever... but yes, that's right."

Again, Fulvie nodded. "Maybe it'll help a little if I tell you that Emily's family did get the payout. Seven hundred fifty thousand dollars. They are sitting pretty now."

Bill stared. "Seven hundred fifty K?" Everyone seemed shocked; I was not, I already knew the payout from the manual.

"Yes. Erothan is quite generous when they pay. They just don't always." She finished the whisky in her glass. "I need to take you to see the writer--her name is Thompson. She's helping me find a way to get the payout, setting up a lawyer. We'll sue if we have to." She looked at Cindy. "And you should be a part of that lawsuit, you're in exactly the same position I am. Our loved ones died to get this money for us, we fucking well should have it!"

"Damn straight!" Cindy agreed.

It was still early afternoon, and Fulvie was quite sure "Ms. Thompson" would still be in her office. After walking a few zig-zag blocks, we took a streetcar for several blocks more. A short distance down from where Fulvie told us to get off, we went into a building labeled "The Times-Picayune/The New Orleans Advocate" and took an elevator up to the third floor. There Fulvie led us to an office where the door was open and a woman with red hair was standing looking out the window.

"Ms. Thompson?" Fulvie asked. "Can you--"

The woman tossed her head theatrically and started to turn. "Damn it, Fulvie, I told you my name is--"

And as she turned, I saw who she was. "Bridget!" I cried.

The woman froze. Then, staring at me: "Jack? Jack! Oh my god Jack!" I stepped toward her but she ran to me and practically jumped up on me, embracing me tightly. "Jack, I never thought I would ever see you again!"

"I take it you two know each other?" Fulvie said dryly.

"Know each other?" Bridget said, pulling back a little. "Know each other? God damn, I had the best sex of my entire life with this man, I--" She stopped and clapped her hands over her mouth for a moment. "Oh shit, oh shit, sorry, I was back at the resort for a moment. I hope I haven't fucked anything up with a new girlfriend..."

"You haven't," Cindy said. "I did not imagine he was a virgin when I hooked up with him." She laughed. "And he is good, isn't he?"

"Bridget, I am just--I can't find the words. But how--"

"How is it I'm still alive?" She smiled. "Remember, I asked you once how many people just decided to leave Erothan and you said none?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, now you know one."

"You just--left?"

"Yes. Let me explain. I want to apologize to you for--several things, Jack. But the first is misleading you and all the other candidates while I was there. I never had any intention of going on stage. I was there undercover. I'm an investigative reporter, and I was--still am--doing a series on Erothan. When I became eligible to be a part of the Six, I left, I did not want to push things quite that far."

"The Six?" Cindy asked, and we explained.

"Was it hard to do?" I asked Bridget, although I was sure I knew the answer.

She frowned. "One of the hardest things I've ever done in my life," she said, drawing out the words. "I felt like scum, and still do sometimes, like right now. I just kept telling myself that

doing the show, getting a payout for a loved one, wasn't what I came for. I came to get a story." She shrugged. "As to the mechanics of it, it couldn't have been easier. I told Saul I had decided to leave. He made a call and said there'd be clothes in my room, and as soon as I was dressed I should go to the docks. I did, a boat was waiting. They dropped me on the pier in Miami and left. Haven't heard from them since."

"So the whole time you were there you were getting material for a story--I do remember how you were always asking questions about everything. How did you remember it all? I never saw you with a notepad or anything..."

She smiled, turned to her desk, and picked up a hairclip. "Remember this?" she asked.

"Yes... yes I do, you almost always wore it..."

"Not almost." She flipped it open, revealing a USB stick. "Always. It records everything," she explained. "At night I could empty it onto a larger unit I had in my room and it would be ready for the next day." She pursed her lips. "The hard part was going through all the material. Days, real-time." She sighed. "And all the memories... everything we ever said to each other is on there, Jack..." She looked away for a moment, then turned and picked up a paper from a nearby shelf. "This," she said, "is the result."

I looked at it. Even at a glance I could see that it painted a thorough picture of life--and death--at the resort. I thumbed through the pages, saw names. Jack. Julie. Geneviève. Denise. Emily. Polly. Jerome, Tim, Ramon, Joanna, Angelina, Paula. I remembered Denise's musings on "legacy," and my eyes misted up.

"The other thing I wanted to apologize for," Bridget went on, "is the way you were treated after you..."

"Balked?" I laughed harshly and waved a hand. "Don't apologize for that. I deserved it, I let everyone down."

"We talked about you a lot after they took you away," Bridget went on. "A lot. No one could understand it, you of all people--if you'd gone crazy, if you'd become a Linda, that we could have all understood." In response to a question from Kendra, we had to stop and explain what was meant by "a Linda." "Maybe you didn't know it," Bridget went on, "or maybe you did. All the women were upset that Sunday, and some of the men, like Jerome, that this was your last day with us--and that definitely includes me, I'd been crying about it off and on all day. Some of those women didn't even come to the show that night. Then when you balked--it was such a shock, so unexpected, part of the reason no one spoke to you was no one knew what to say. After you left, the whole atmosphere has changed, nothing was the same. So the resort brought in a doctor to talk to us about it. He told us that while none of us had ever seen a balk like yours before, they were fairly common in the early days of the resort. He told us it probably wasn't a conscious choice you made, your body just would not do it, even if conscious you wanted to do it. We could accept that, and gradually things got back to something like normal."

"That doctor is exactly right," I said. "I really wanted to do it, as Polly and I had planned--I'd start taking arrows before her impaling was over. My thumbs would not move, would not press the button," I made a snorting sound. "Doesn't make me feel a whole lot better about it, though."

"It should," Cindy put in.

"But," Bridget said. "Not why Fulvie brought you to see me." She looked around at the group. "One of you, I take it, lost a loved one on the island and did not get the benefit."

"Me," Cindy said. "My sister, Julie."

"Ah. Julie. Did not know her, sure did hear a hell of a lot about her. Now, let me guess; you didn't know anything about it--you weren't expecting a payout--and now Erothan says she was never there?"

Cindy nodded. "I had no idea until Jack came to visit me."

Bridget nodded. "That's the pattern. The lawyer we've hired says that over the past few years, no one whose beneficiaries weren't expecting a payout got one. One of the other plaintiffs in the lawsuit he's planning is the Atlanta homeless shelter--Polly's beneficiary, and yes, just like the cases of Julie and Geneviève, they say their archives don't show a record of a 'Polly' ever having been there. When the family was expecting it--like Emily's--it's been paid and paid promptly." She frowned. "It's funny, it didn't used to be like that, even when Erothan wasn't doing as well as it is now. All claims were paid. Something changed, and we don't know what."

"Denise?"

"Her brother and sister-in-law were paid. We've verified that."

"I guess they just figured that if folks weren't expecting the money they could just keep it," Bill offered.

Bridget nodded. "That's how it looks, yes. Thing is, it isn't consistent with the way Erothan has always operated. From the very beginning they have always been straight-up, very careful to toe all legal lines both in the US and in the Bahamas. Ethical lines, too, the founders wrote that into their articles of incorporation--for example, no one with a history of mental illness is accepted and neither are convicted felons--you didn't know it, Jack, and neither did I, but pretty damn complete background checks had been done on you and Julie before that man came to visit you in Miami with the syringes."

"You yourself had to take that test--the cyanide syringes--and play the Russian roulette game before you got in. You took that risk?"

She smiled. "We'd gotten a little advance information on that--from one of the very rare former employees at Erothan. I say rare because those are safe well-paying jobs, people don't quit them often. This man did because he had to go home to take care of an ailing parent. He told us the cyanide syringes and the Russian roulette were just games. We knew there was no risk."

I just grinned. "But how'd you get away with it, Bridget? I would have expected they would have found out in advance that you were an investigative reporter and rejected you."

She shook her head. "We set up things months in advance," she explained. "The newspaper fired me--on paper--and I became a regular at Harrah's Casio, supposedly losing all my money, and then began living an impoverished life. But really, I'm not sure we did get away with it, not sure they didn't know all about it before I ever arrived. When you read the articles, you'll see that I'm actually very complimentary about their operation--they may have just felt they had nothing to hide. These missing payouts are the only hole in that--a damn big hole, for sure. So far I've not mentioned that in print."

"So when would this lawsuit go to court?" Cindy asked.

Bridget shrugged. "Hard to say. Right now the lawyer is talking to the head execs of Erothan in New York. They are insisting that there's got to be some kind of mistake, that all payouts are sent out within five business days of a candidate's death." She shook her head. "I don't mean to be discouraging, Cindy, but this could be a long haul. We have a number of plaintiffs now, with the same story, but the hard evidence is just--"

"Wait a minute," I interjected. "What about the films?"

Bridget just stared at me for a moment. "The films!" she shrieked. "I never thought of that! And god damn, I should have, I wrote about them!"

"Films?" Cindy asked.

"Films were made of all the deaths," I explained, "and offered for sale. A release was part of our contract. Erothan has to have a library of them. And Jesus, the two we're talking about right here--Julie and Geneviève--two of the most spectacular ever, they must have sold dozens of copies of those!"

"Perverts," Fulvie grumped.

"Those perverts may have saved our bacon," Bridget said. She ran around behind her desk, picked up a phone, punched buttons. "Alan?" she said after a moment. "I have something, might be really a break for us." She then explained about the films, how they could be ordered or bought by the guests before they ever left the island. "He says yes," she told us when she hung up. "If we can find copies of even those two, it'll prove our case." Her hands fluttered. "I'm going to need to shoo you folks out of here right now, I have work to do," she told us. "Jack, Cindy, do you have a place to stay in New Orleans? I'm going to need to be in touch."

"No, we--" I started to say.

"They'll stay in the hobo jungle," Bill said, cutting me off. "Fulvie knows where to find me, and I'll know where to find them."

We left then, taking the streetcar back the way we came, then walking toward the rail yards. "I suppose," Kendra mused as we walked along, "that I'll take my leave of you folks when we get back to the jungle. I ain't really a part of this."

"Kendra," I said, "First of all, you saved us all with your quick thinking in Memphis, I haven't forgotten. As far as I'm concerned, the five of us make up a little team--you can make it six if you want, Fulvie. If you have people to see, a place to go, we'll miss you. But you are more than welcome to stay with us."

"And if there is a payout," Cindy added, "we'll make sure you get a part of it. You too, Bill, Susie."

"I'll share that expense," Fulvie said. "And I'm in."

I shook my head. "This is the way we were on the island," I mused. "All for everyone, no one left out. Must be contagious."

"Maybe we caught it from you," Susie suggested.

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Over the next few days, Cindy and I learned how to live in a hobo jungle. Bill, Susie, and Kendra, all very experienced, were our teachers. We went out daily looking for work and sometimes found some, such as hourly construction jobs, which meant we could bring back food and a few luxuries like beer to be shared around. The women went out separately, looking for cleaning work, filling in for an absent waitress in a surviving restaurant--and, Cindy and I were told quite directly, turning an occasional trick if the opportunity presented itself and the money was good. This of course bothered Cindy not at all, since she had already been working as a prostitute back in New Jersey. While no one wandered around in the nude--or at least not commonly, there were a few people there with some mental issues--and there was obviously no public sex, the general feel was much like the resort, everyone helping everyone, just trying to make it through to another day.

The difference was, a gallows was not waiting for us.

Fulvie came to see us often, she was a regular there in spite of having a little apartment to live in. When she was there, it was more like being on the island than ever for me; she and Cindy

bore such strong resemblances to Geneviève and Julie, and their personalities were similar as well. It was almost like having them back, and feeling that made me feel guilty. I had loved those women and they were dead; Cindy and Fulvie were different people, but they, along with the rest of our crew, had become very important to me.

There was a hurdle waiting, though, and I'd been more or less expecting it since we'd talked about the films in Bridget's office. It happened less than a week later, when Fulvie came to tell us that she'd heard from Bridget and that they'd obtained copies of eight films showing the deaths of people Erothan were now saying had never been at the resort. Among them were the films of Geneviève, Julie, and Polly. All of which, of course, featured me in a very prominent role.

So Fulvie, Cindy and I went back downtown, to a law firm, where we met Bridget and a lawyer named Alan Klein. And where, not at all surprisingly, Fulvie insisted on seeing the videos of her mother's performance on stage. Alan asked her if she was sure, she said she was, and he stuck a USB stick in a computer. We were then watching what for me were memories that were seared into my brain.

I had never seen one of the resort's films before. It was very professionally done, showing every detail; views of Geneviève's face split-screen with the saw cutting into her groin. And, of course, there I was, in living color, my cock in Geneviève's mouth. I found myself unable to imagine how Fulvie was going to react to this.

"When I was first told about this," Fulvie said when the film was over, "I built a picture of it in my mind. I couldn't help it. I saw my mother shrieking in agony, begging for release. I saw the men with her grinning, leering, laughing." She paused for a moment. "The film has erased all of those. I saw my mother performing for her audience, showing just ridiculous courage." She turned to me. "And you--I have never seen an expression like that on a man's face, ever. You seem turned-on, yes. But I can hear her voice, you're doing what she wants done, how she wants it done. And you also look like your heart is breaking, you actually look like you're in more pain than she was. And afterwards, you're crying..."

"If you see very many of these films," I said, my voice low, "you'll see me looking like that a lot." I stared up at the ceiling for a moment. "Julie. Denise. Polly. Not Emily. Emily was just pure agony."

The next thing I knew, Fulvie was out of her chair, on her knees beside me, embracing me, and crying bitterly. I could not hold back the tears either, not then.

"I'm not sure it was a good idea to show these..." Bridget commented, her voice a little shaky.

"I think it's necessary," Cindy said, her voice sounding hard. "Let's see my sister's."

The room was silent while the next video played through. Once it was over, Cindy turned to me, a very enigmatic look on her face. "You lied to me," she said, although her tone was not especially accusatory. "You told me you did not kill Julie."

"I left out," I answered, "that I had stabbed Julie, I didn't want to tell you that, no. I did not lie about killing her." Cindy started to speak, but I held up a hand to silence her. "An autopsy was done on Julie, which is unusual for those who die during the shows. The reason it was done, was, specifically, to determine if I had in fact killed her. If I had, I would have been the automatic choice for the show the next week, since by Bahamian law I'd be a murderer. The autopsy determined that stab wounds Tim had inflicted were fatal--blood-loss fatal, meaning not immediately--but meaning he had killed her, not me. Since he had already died, the police report was just a formality."

"He's telling you the truth, Cindy," Bridget put in. "I saw the reports, it's in the article."

Cindy just stared at me in silence for several long minutes, her face expressionless. "How I'm feeling right now," she said after a while, "does not make sense. I do understand this, I heard that other woman telling you you had to do it, I--"

"Polly. Her name was Polly."

Cindy waved her hands. "I would have said the same thing if I'd been there in her place! Jesus, this is weird. I have never seen a--a, a display--of passion as high as what you and Julie had in those last minutes of her life."

"I don't doubt it," I said. "I loved her. I loved Geneviève, too."

"I know you did," Fulvie put in. "I can see it, in the way you looked at her, the way you touched her hair."

Cindy sighed deeply. Her hands and her head were constantly moving. "What I want--what do I want, what should I want?" She lowered her eyes. "What I really want right this minute," she said in a muted but nevertheless slightly hysterical voice, "is to experience that myself. I want you to do that to me."

There was another moment of silence.

"He can't, Cindy," Bridget said finally. "It would be murder..."

"I know." She then burst into tears. I went to her, I pulled her up and folded her into my arms, not knowing if she'd push me away. She did not, she almost collapsed against my chest.

How lucky are you, Jack Packard? I asked myself silently. To be alive, to be here in this room in this crazy situation with two women as perceptive and rational as these two? How lucky can one man really be?

We went back to the jungle and things continued as before while we waited for the outcome of the talks between Alan Klein and the execs at Erothan. I had feared for my relationship with Cindy when she was seeing the film, but if anything we were closer than ever. About two days later she got a temp job at a law office, helping one of the lawyers file papers--something she had experience with. That, however, turned out not to be all the lawyer was interested in.

"I'd been working maybe two, three hours on the filings," she told me when she got back to the jungle. "Making good progress. Then the lawyer--Prescott was his name--came over to my desk and asked me if I'd like to make some better money. I said the fifty dollars he was planning to pay me was okay, but sure, I'd be interested in making more."

"What did he have in mind?" I asked.

"He said, 'I'll pay you \$200 to come upstairs with me, get naked for me, suck my dick, and let me come in your mouth.'"

I grinned. "And you said?"

She laughed. "I said sure, Mr. Prescott. No problem at all. Now?" She shook her head. "First trick I've turned since we got together, Jack."

"Tell me about it."

"Well, we went up in the elevator to the eleventh floor and he took me to a conference room. Once we were inside he locked the door and asked me to undress. I did--and then he spent probably a half hour or so just caressing my body, teasing my nipples, stroking my thighs, telling me I was beautiful."

"You are."

"I'll thank you as I thanked him. Anyway, he finally sat down on a couch and got out his cock, which was already really hard. I knelt in front of him and took it in my mouth. He did not last very long at all. I held still while he came in my mouth, then swallowed it down. He thanked

me and told me it had been great, and that it had been a long time for him, his wife wouldn't do blowjobs."

"Was that it?"

"No. He wanted me to stay a little while, sitting naked on the couch with him. He stroked and caressed me a lot. His erection came back, he asked me to go down on him again, and he asked if I'd stretch out on the couch this time so he could play with my tits and legs while I was sucking him--and offered another \$200. Naturally, I said sure." She paused and rolled her eyes. "And he lasted a *lot* longer this time! Not that I wasn't expecting that." She shrugged. "Then I went back to the filings, with \$400 in my pocket. At the end of the day I got another fifty, and he told me if I came back in three or four days he'd have some more work for me wink wink."

"He never asked to fuck you?"

"Never mentioned it. Just interested in the blowjobs."

"So. \$450 for the day. A good outing."

"Absolutely. And I'll go back in three days, of course."

"Of course."

"Now," she said, snuggling up to me, "we need to find a nice private place for a little while."

"Oh? Why?"

"Well, I've been naked with another man for a couple of hours and given him two blowjobs, Jack. I have not been fucked. A woman has her needs!"

We did find a private place, a beat-up little trailer where the usual resident was away for a while, out riding the rails. Since the viewing of the films, sex with Cindy had become a little strange--if in ways more exciting than ever. She always brought up stabbing Julie at some point, usually in the context of "how did it feel?"

And that brought back memories, feelings, erotic and painful at the same time. "At first," I told her, "the skin resists. The doctors mentioned that when Denise was planning her freehand. Skin is very tough, really, even soft skin like this." I always stroked her breast or belly as I said that. "So it stops it, and then it breaks free and the blade just sinks softly and smoothly on in. The feeling is incredibly sensual. Like the feeling when I start to enter you, and there's a little resistance and then it's as if you open up to me, but even stronger."

"Julie seemed to think so too," Cindy often said, her voice wistful.

"Julie," I usually reminded her, "had been worked over good by Medical. She had pain muters, relaxants, and coagulants. They have that down to a science at the resort. Out here, in the real world, what I did to her would be very very painful."

"I don't think I even care," she commonly answered. "That isn't important. It's important that I'd be gone, you'd be alone and in prison." She'd then shake her head. "That I'd fall in love with my older sister's lover, with the man who killed her--and yes, I know, you really didn't but it does still feel like that--who could have imagined?"

"No one," I would assure her--and then, after I told her I'd come to love her as well, we'd resume our lovemaking.

But things were about to change on another front, as well, and that came about two days later. Following dinner, our little group was relaxing in the communal area of the jungle when Fulvie came to see us. She seemed a little uncomfortable, not her usual self.

"Cindy, I have a favor to ask you." she opened.

Cindy smiled. "What's that, Fulvie?"

She didn't answer for a moment. Then: "I'd like to borrow Jack for a few hours."

"Borrow me?" I asked. "Anything you need, Fulvie, sure. What do you need?"

Again, Fulvie was silent for a few minutes. "I hardly knew my father," she said finally. "Mom divorced him when I was very young. He had no interest in me--one of the reasons for the breakup, I was told--and Mom never remarried. I just knew a series of 'uncles' and 'friends,' some of whom lasted quite a while, some of whom didn't. I never had a father, you see."

"I do see," Cindy acknowledged.

"Sooo... ever since we saw that film... I've been, uhm, I don't know. He was Mom's lover, the first man and the only man I ever saw her having sex with. In my sort of fucked up mind, I've been casting him in the role of 'father.'"

I actually found this flattering, and started to make a joke about taking her to a playground, but decided that wasn't a great idea.

"So you want to borrow Jack to...?" Cindy inquired.

Again Fulvie didn't answer immediately. "To take him back to my apartment and try to seduce him," she said finally, rushing the words out. "Turn him into something other than a father-figure. Clear him out of my head."

Cindy and I both laughed. "I have no objections at all. But you may get him out of your head and under your skin, Fulvie," Cindy said. "You heard what Bridget said about him."

"Well, if you plan on trying to seduce me," I added, "you will not have to try very hard, Fulvie!" I leaned forward. "I have two things," I went on. "One's a request--I'd like to have Cindy there. At least half the time I was making love with your mother, Julie was right there beside us." At this, Fulvie nodded. "The other is a condition. I will confess that I have been struggling not to call Cindy 'Julie' ever since I met her, and so far I've succeeded. I want you to promise me you will not get upset if at some point I call you Geneviève!"

She smiled. "I promise, Jack," she said softly. "You can call me Geneviève any time you wish..."

"Shall we go?" Cindy suggested.

As we left, I heard Susie ask if it was ever going to be her turn, Bill snap at her, and Kendra saying she wanted to be next in line. I walked away feeling very good indeed.

And then--realizing I was about to re-create wonderful times I had with Julie and Geneviève in the bar on the island, and that Julie and Geneviève were still dead--I felt very badly.

Even so, once we were inside Fulvie's little apartment, I did not give her any chance to try to seduce me. I just folded her in my arms and kissed her, and she returned it with passion. It wasn't long before we were fumbling to get our clothes off, something Fulvie accomplished well before I did. We resumed the kiss after the last of mine were gone, and I ran my fingers through her hair and my hands over her breasts, her hips, her thighs. After a few moments she slid down my body and took my erection into her mouth. I looked down at her and she back up at me, her eyes wide open. Her face was Geneviève's, her eyes were Geneviève's, even her technique was somehow Geneviève's. I realized then that there were minor differences between Julie and Cindy, differences I apparently unconsciously noticed and held on to. With Fulvie there was essentially nothing. Even the difference in their age counted for nothing, as Geneviève looked quite young at 39; at one point Fulvie told me they were often taken to be sisters.

Then Fulvie's eyes started to look wet, and a moment later they filled up, and then tears started streaming down her cheeks. She let out a couple of choked sobs. It broke me, and I started crying as well. I pulled her up, guided us to a chair, sat down with her, and just held her on my lap. We were both crying freely by then. My erection was gone.

"Okay, this is just fucking stupid," Cindy said, standing beside us with her hands on her hips. "Fulvie, this is not your long-lost father, this is Jack, an amazing man women dream about."

Jack, this is not Geneviève, this is Fulvie, a fucking fantastically beautiful young woman. And by the way, I'm not Julie. Get yourselves together!"

I tipped Fulvie's head up and looked at her face. "I'm sorry," I said. "She's right. It's just that your mother, she was just--magnificent. In every way. A magnificent woman."

Fulvie nodded. "I know. She was." She started stroking my chest. "I am glad," she went on, "that she had someone like you to share her last days with." She smiled a little. "Sometime," she said, "I want to hear stories. Not about the show at the end. About your days with her before that."

"I have dozens," I assured her.

"Later," Cindy said. "Not what you're here for tonight."

"No," I agreed, "it isn't." I kissed Fulvie again, and again we started getting into it. My erection came back, and Fulvie swung herself up into my lap and guided it to her very wet pussy. I slipped inside her, and finally there was a difference; Fulvie, having never given birth, was tighter than her mother.

Things were going much better then. I pulled out all the stops for Fulvie, all the little things I knew from my now extensive experience that most women liked during lovemaking. When she had an orgasm, I pressed into her hard and remained perfectly still until she finished. We changed position, me behind her and her right leg up, my cock sliding in and out, my hand caressing her breasts and my lips nuzzling her ear, and she climaxed again.

I was at my limit. "Close," I whispered in her ear. "Inside you, on your belly, on your tits, or in your mouth?"

"Inside me..." Fulvie whispered back.

"Done," I said. I stroked back once, then pushed in as deep as possible and began unloading inside her. As I was coming, Fulvie launched a third orgasm of her own. After that, we rather collapsed together.

After a moment, Fulvie looked up at Cindy. "You were right," she said. "Julie."

"I did warn you," Cindy responded with a smile. "Geneviève."

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A few more days passed for us in the jungle while we waited to hear from either Bridget or Alan about the status of a possible lawsuit. Things had changed for me. I now had two lovers, and we engaged very commonly as a threesome. My stars seemed luckier than ever. If a twin sister of Denise--or Emily, or Polly--had walked into the camp I really wouldn't have been very surprised.

Cindy went out and met with Prescott again, gave him two more blowjobs, and returned with \$450 again. Susie did even better. She'd gotten a job cleaning at an office complex--something she had done before--and had accidentally entered a room where some sort of conference was in progress, five businessmen in attendance. They'd initially seemed angry with her, they said this was a very private conference and the door was supposed to be locked. She showed them the keys she'd been given and explained that she'd been told to clean all the rooms on that floor, that no one told her about a conference. She then started to leave.

One of the men stopped her and asked her how much she was being paid to clean the floor, and she told him, minimum wage for a full day, \$58. One of the other men told her she was really cute and said they'd give her a hundred to get up on the table and dance naked for them. She immediately accepted--she said she would've done it for twenty-five, but of course she did not tell

the men that. One of the men put on some music and she got up on the table, slowly stripped off all her clothes, and danced.

"I played it like a stripper," she told us. "Going around to each of the men and shaking my boobs at them, kissing them on the head. They started throwing dollar bills on the table." She giggled. "I felt I needed a pole!" Then the men asked her if she'd have sex with them. "I did hesitate," she said. "I'm not very experienced, I've turned a few tricks, not many, and--five guys? But then they said they'd pay \$250 each and of course I said sure, I'm not going to refuse that kind of money. Next thing I knew two of them were up on the table with me and I had one cock in my cunt and another in my mouth. After those guys came I got two more. The last one I screwed on the couch."

Bill was just staring. "So you ended up with--?"

"\$1250 from the guys, a hundred for the dancing, \$29 from the dollars they threw, \$58 for the cleaning. \$1437!"

"Don't much like to see you doing that," Bill said, but he was grinning. "But hell, \$1437? We're going shopping now. The jungle needs food and supplies."

"I'm going to throw my \$450 into that, too," Cindy offered. "There'll be more where that came from, Mr. Prescott likes my blowjobs."

"Anybody would like your blowjobs," I put in.

"You can't say that! There are thousands of men in this city alone who have never had one of my blowjobs!"

"Thousands of deprived men who don't know what they're missing. Let me just say that I like your blowjobs. I'd call them fantastic."

She cocked an eyebrow at me. "Well, that's good to hear. Doesn't make your point, though."

"Well--"

"Maybe," Bill said, "I should arbitrate this."

"How, Bill?" I asked.

"Well, Cindy could give me a blowjob and I could make a judgement." He then laughed, making it obvious that he was joking.

But he did not know Cindy well enough, and what she did was exactly what I expected her to do. "That's a fine idea, Bill," she said, taking him by the hand and pulling him toward the vacant trailer. "We'll be back in a few minutes." Bill looked stunned.

And so, for that matter, did Susie, although she raised no objection. Kendra, on the other hand, looked annoyed.

"I don't get those offers," she said, a sour expression on her face. "You know what I made today? Thirty dollars, restocking grocery shelves. No one made a suggestion." She turned to Susie. "Sorry, I'm really glad you made some nice money today. Just makes me feel like I'm not pulling my weight." She shook her head. "I guess it's just because I'm black..."

"I think it is," I agreed. "And let me finish, before you take that the wrong way. It's just the way America has been, for a long time now. Women can still raise a ruckus about stuff like this. But when a man sees a white girl that looks as good as Cindy or Susie willing to work for next to nothing, he feels comfortable making those offers because he knows she needs the money really badly, especially since the crash. A black girl working for next to nothing--even a beautiful black girl like yourself, Kendra--well, it's just what we've always seen. Men aren't sure how you'd react."

She gave me a wide-eyed look. "You think I'm beautiful?" she asked me.

I tapped her nose. "Stunning."

Susie giggled. "I think we should dress her up really sexy and take her down to the French Quarter. She could call herself Lady Marmalade and go around saying, 'voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?'"

Kendra stared at her. "What?"

"It's from an old song, Bill plays old tunes for me. Lady Marmalade, by Christina Aguilera and some others. About a New Orleans streetwalker."

"I don't know what the French means."

"It means, 'do you want to go to bed with me tonight'? Straightforward. I'll get Bill to play the song for you."

"Okay." She turned back to me and started to say something else, but about that time Cindy and Bill returned.

"Okay," Bill said, his knees seemingly a little shaky. "You win that one, Jack. There's not a man alive who wouldn't like that." He quickly turned to Susie. "But that goes for you too," he told her.

I gave Cindy a long lingering kiss. "Now," I whispered to her after we broke it, "I have to go seduce Kendra."

She smiled. "I know. Past due. Any time, Jack."

In spite of the constant quest for money, life in the New Orleans hobo jungle was incredibly good for me--for all of us, really. Cindy's blowjob had broken the remaining sexual ice in our little group; I had three passionate and skilled lovers and was sure I'd add Susie in due time, especially since Bill now had both Cindy and Kendra as additional lovers himself. But things always change, and the way they were about to change could not have been predicted by any of us. That change came when Fulvie came to the jungle with a handful of papers.

"From the lawyer," she said, almost breathlessly. "The execs at Erothan want to see us; you two and me. She showed us the papers. "Plane tickets, hotel vouchers, a credit card that can be used at restaurants and for taxis and such. We leave tomorrow morning, ten AM."

"This sounds good," I said. "Maybe they're ready to pay you two, and that'll change everything for us. But why do they want to see me? They don't owe me a payout."

"No idea. But they were very specific, and there is a ticket for you."

And so the next morning the three of us left, taking a taxi to Louis Armstrong airport and flying out to La Guardia in New York. Our meeting with the Erothan execs was not until nine the next morning, so we had most of a day and a full evening to wander around Manhattan, get a good meal at a good restaurant, and generally relax.

We were not late the next morning, at nine exactly we presented ourselves to a receptionist at Erothan's rather plush headquarters. She greeted us warmly, took us to a conference room with a small table and very comfortable chairs, and brought us coffee and donuts. After about ten minutes, the door opened and three men in suits came in.

"I'm Bradford Collins," one of the men, the oldest of the three, said. "I'm the CEO, and one of the founders, of Erothan. I'm very happy to meet you." He twined his fingers, seemingly nervously. "We started Erothan shortly after the crash with what we believed, and still believe, were the best of intentions. Yes, we felt it could make money." He looked directly at me. "We also felt it would be a true humanitarian benefit to people who were out of options. The resort, as originally set up, was not a place you would recognize, Jack. It was much more Spartan and the benefits were far smaller, averaging maybe forty K per person." He waved his hands. "Even so, it became obvious, very quickly, that we had completely underestimated the attraction of the resort,

both for candidates and observers. And the film sales, we could hardly keep them in stock. The guest hotel was always full and sometimes had waiting lists extending months. So we expanded. We doubled the size of the guest hotel, then tripled it. At the same time we improved the living quarters for the candidates and increased the benefits substantially--we felt the beneficiaries should share in our profitability. As I said, we believed ourselves--and we still do, it's the principal this company was built on--to doing a public service as well as generating revenue." He looked at me again. "I assume you found the amenities provided for the candidates suitable, Mr. Packard?"

"More than suitable," I agreed. "Luxurious. Fine food, fine liquor. We never wanted for anything."

"And that's the way we want it. Ms. Presser, Ms. Delille: what has happened here--failing to get a benefit you are due--is not in any sense something we ever want to happen at Erothan. We do now know how and why it happened and I will be explaining that, but let me do this first." He turned to one of the two other men, so far silent, sitting at the table. "Ray, the envelopes," he said.

"Yes, sir," Ray responded. He rose, took two envelopes from his coat pocket, and gave them to the two women. They opened them.

"Four hundred thousand dollars?" Fulvie shrieked. "Four hundred thousand? Are you kidding me?"

Cindy, staring at her check, looked stunned. "Mine's two hundred thousand," she said in a much calmer voice.

"And for your interest, Mr. Packard, a check for four hundred thousand, in Polly's name, should arrive at the Atlanta homeless shelter today."

"That's a lot of money," Fulvie said. "A million just for these three."

"Erothan makes a lot of money," Collins said. "We are not interested in making ourselves billionaires, or I should say that isn't our primary interest. As our profits rise, so do the benefits. And conditions for the candidates."

"It fits," I said, "with the way the staff at the resort toes the legal lines. And with the ethical guidelines Bridget told us about." I frowned. "But, by the way, why aren't Bridget and Alan here? They negotiated this."

"There was no negotiation, Mr. Packard. Mr. Klein merely demonstrated to us that our archives were not accurate. We took it from there. And we will be meeting with them, separately. We want to reimburse them for any legal expenses they may have incurred, and for their time in bringing this unfortunate matter to our attention." He laid his hands on the table. "And, there are some things we wish to share with you that we do not want to share with a reporter or a lawyer. You will understand, I'm sure."

"Okay."

Collins looked at the other man at the table. "Bring in Fields and Berstrom, would you, Ben?"

"Yes, sir." Ben got up, went to one of the doors, opened it. Two men, followed by a man who was dressed in a security guard's uniform--complete with sidearm--came in. The two men stood a short distance from the table, looking down at the floor.

"The one on the right, the younger man," Collins said, "is Larry Berstrom. He was an IT specialist here at Erothan, very highly paid and valued. The other man is Arthur Fields. He was one of our executives, vice-president in charge of the benefits. He'd been with the company for more than a decade." Collins rose and began to pace. "About four years ago," he went on, "Mr. Fields had an idea. Well thought out, in a way. A number--not a large number, but not insignificant, either--of our candidates were people like your relatives, ladies. They did not notify their

beneficiaries of their intentions, or that those people should expect a benefit. Mr. Fields idea was the funds simply never be sent to them, that it could be shown as paid out to the beneficiaries when actually, it went to Mr. Fields' own bank account. How much money was diverted this way, Arthur? Remind me..."

"Twenty-seven million dollars," Fields answered in a low voice.

"Twenty-seven million dollars, yes," Collins said, nodding. "Now, you see the plan, don't you? No one would ever ask for this money, no one was expecting it, as far as any of these people knew their friends or relatives had just disappeared. And there was no way they'd ever find out, either, because none of the candidates ever came back, we were in a period where no one ever balked, as the candidates say." He looked at me again. "Then you did balk, Jack. And worse, we had been visited by an investigative reporter who left with her story. It was possible the whole scheme might unravel. Especially if you did exactly what you did do, find Ms. Presser and let her know she was due a benefit. Even if you hadn't, Ms. Thompson, as part of her story, was verifying payouts and finding discrepancies." He stopped talking and paced some more. "So, Mr. Fields engaged the services of Mr. Berstrom here, with a plan to erase the evidence that these candidates were ever at the resort. To do so, all he had to do was alter the name in the archival database. He couldn't delete it, that would unbalance the books. So he just changed it. For example, Geneviève Delille became Ginny Dell. That sort of thing. And, Mr. Berstrom, how did Mr. Fields get you to do this for him?"

"Bribed me," Berstrom answered.

"Ah. Of course. How much was the bribe?"

"Two million."

"Two million." Collins shook his head. "But the titles of the films, they were locked in, weren't they? You could not change the title of the film Geneviève-Jack-Ed-Diane, which was a very much requested video in our library, or it would become unavailable and raise an alarm."

"Yes," he admitted. "That's right."

"Did you tell Mr. Fields about this problem?"

"No. Because there wasn't anything we could do about it."

"I might have had an idea," Fields growled at him.

"So," Collins said, looking back at us. "That's why you were told what you were told originally on the phone, that we had no record of a Julie or a Geneviève, because their records were no longer under those names." He turned back to the two men. "Mr. Berstrom," he said, "you are fired. More, we will make sure you never work in IT again. We have connections. Your bank accounts have been frozen and your bank is taking steps to repossess your house and car, as you now have no source of income. Soon you will be homeless, on the street. Don't consider applying as a candidate, you are not attractive enough to qualify and soon you'll be a convicted felon as well. Please leave our building." Berstrom, looking broken, got up and left.

"Wow," I said weakly.

"You're a different matter, Art," Collins said. "You were a friend of mine, a trusted part of this team. I still can't understand how you could do this."

"Because the whole thing is stupid," the man snarled back. "You just told them, 'we' have no interest in becoming a billionaires. You might not, but I do, and it's stupid not to take money that's just lying around, no one asking for it. All you want to do, Brad, is satisfy your own perverted fantasies, everyone knows you find those shows erotic."

Collins nodded. "Yes, I do. My interest was one of the motivations for establishing this company, I won't pretend otherwise. But you stole money--not from us, but from beneficiaries like these two women, who Ms. Thompson tells me were impoverished until today."

"Oh, we were that," Cindy put in.

Collins ignored her. "And whose loved ones died to bring them out of poverty. Yes, I know, we've discussed, loss of hope is a primary motivator for many of the candidates. But people do not commit suicide by buzz saw! They take pills, jump off buildings, cut their wrists, shoot themselves."

"So? Who cares? In today's world you take the money or you end up on the street yourself." He glared up at Collins. "So now what? You fire me, take all my assets, put me out on street like you did Larry? I'll bounce back, Brad. You know that, I'll be back up before you know it!"

Collins nodded. "Probably true. You are resourceful, I do know that." He turned to the security guard. "Please," he said. The man, his face impassive, drew out his pistol and handed it to Collins.

Fields' eyes widened. "Brad, what are you--"

He did not finish. Collins put the muzzle of the gun against Fields' head and pulled the trigger. There was an enormous roar and Fields' blood and brains spattered on the wall. He collapsed in a heap.

Fulvie screamed, Cindy looked stunned. I sprang to my feet, ready to make a desperate lunge for Collins if he turned the gun toward us.

But Collins merely handed it back to the security guard, who, still impassive, holstered it. "That," Collins said as he used a handkerchief to wipe blood off his hand, "was justice. But it was also in part to balance the power equation. We are a very powerful company. You had no power. Now you do, you could report this and have us arrested, or you could blackmail us. We trust you will do neither."

I sat back down. "Mr. Collins," I asked, "why am I here?"

Collins sat down. as well "Mr. Packard, Erothan is currently in crisis, and some sort of action must be taken, and taken quickly. You might remember, just before you left, the specials had been increased because we were getting more female candidates than males."

"Yes, I do remember."

"We do not--at least not yet--understand this trend. But in recent months it has gotten much more extreme. The last three boats to the island contained only female candidates, no males at all. Now, our marketing research suggests that while much of our clientele is perfectly happy with seeing women kill themselves, or being killed by machines, or even by other women, a substantial portion is interested in the male-female interaction. The sexual mix seems very important. Thus, the film catalogued as Jack-Julie-Tim-Polly is one of our most popular."

I nodded. "Okay. I understand the crisis. What does that have to do with me?"

"We have," Collins went on, "with great effort, and great skill on the part of our negotiators, reached an agreement with the Bahamian government. This agreement allows what would otherwise be considered murders to take place on our stage under certain specified conditions, without consequence for the murderer. This may change with a future government, we cannot be sure, but the agreement we have means that no charges can be filed even if that becomes unlawful again." He smiled. "The government of the Bahamas derives a great deal of revenue from our presence there, and they do not want to lose it to, say, Aruba."

"I still don't understand how--" I stopped myself in mid-sentence. "Oh. Maybe I do."

Collins, still smiling, nodded. "We want to hire you, Mr. Packard. To come back to the island and play the role of executioner."

I laughed. "Mr. Collins, I do appreciate the offer, I really do. But that whole scene was just killing me, I--"

"Your salary would be one hundred fifty thousand dollars a year," Collins interrupted. "Much more than that, actually, since you would have no food costs, no housing or utility expenses, and free medical care whenever you're on the island."

I paused a moment. "Why me?" I asked weakly.

"Because we consider you the best man for the job," Collins answered promptly. "You did not know it--you weren't supposed to know it--but much of time you were at the resort you were being filmed, especially when you were in the bar. Our experts have studied those films extensively." He glanced at Fulvie and Cindy. "You do realize," he went on, "that you are exceptionally attractive to most women, right?"

I nodded. "Not sure I'd use the word exceptionally, but--"

"Exceptionally," Fulvie put in.

"You probably think," Collins continue, "that this is just due to the fact that you are a rather classically good-looking man, both in terms of your face and your body. You are. But that's not it."

"No?"

"No. Primarily, it's because when you're with a woman, your entire focus is on her. You pay close attention to what she's saying and you adjust yourself and your approach to what she is telling you, in all sorts of small ways, that she likes. But at the same time you come across as strong and independent, maybe somewhat self-centered, in no sense and in no way needy. You can be seen as hero or villain, and switch between the two. And when they see you break down after one of the girls you've gotten close to dies, when you turn into a lost child, you're far over the top. Not every woman sees all these facets of you. But most see some."

"Sounds about right to me," Cindy commented.

There were tears on Fulvie's cheeks. "Seeing the way he was with my mother," she said, "was all it took for me."

"I don't--"

"Jack," Cindy said in a firm voice. "Listen. If I can go out and suck men's dicks for two hundred dollars, you can do this for a hundred and fifty grand!"

"And some of the stresses you experienced when you were a candidate," Collins went on, "won't be there. You will not be interacting with the candidates as equals on a day-to-day basis as you were then. How all that will be handled has yet to be worked out. But it should prevent you from becoming emotionally intimate with a series of the women as you did previously."

I folded my arms across my chest. "I'd need assistance. A crew."

"Acceptable. How many?"

"Five."

"Acceptable."

"At seventy-five thousand each."

"A bit high. Fifty thousand."

"Seventy."

"Sixty."

"Sixty-five."

"Done."

I sighed. "I may in the end regret this," I said, "but you have a deal." I then turned quickly to Fulvie and Cindy. "Damn, I did not even ask if you wanted to be a part of this..."

Cindy laughed, Fulvie just cocked her head. "Has he gone crazy?" she asked Cindy.

"I dunno. Next he's probably going to ask us if we think Bill, Susie, and Kendra are going to want to be a part of this."

"Crazy," Fulvie intoned.

Cindy nodded. "Crazy."

EPILOGUE

It was a Thursday afternoon, late. Cindy, Fulvie, and I were out on the patio behind the cottage we shared as quarters, just a short walk from the main building, sipping drinks and watching the sun drop toward the shimmering blue Atlantic. After my previous stay at the resort it felt strange at first to be wearing clothes on the island, but I was an employee now, not a candidate. From our vantage point on the patio we could see the beach, a few men and many more women, lying in the sand or swimming in the water, all of them completely nude.

"Such beautiful women," I mused, watching them. "Recruiting sure does do a great job of finding them." I shook my head. "And my job is to kill them."

"It is," Fulvie agreed. "But keep it foremost in your mind, their reason for coming here is to be killed. Their choice, not yours."

"Society's choice," I argued. "Political choice, for allowing things to fall apart to the extent that they feel they have to do this." Then I smiled a little. "At least I have four women around me, just as beautiful as any of the candidates, who do not need or want to be killed. That's a good thing."

"A very good thing," Cindy agreed. "I remember, I once said Julie was an idiot for doing what she did. I've thought about that. If I'd been approached by one of the recruiters before I met you I might have done the same thing. I was leading a shit life, no plans and no hope." She laughed, briefly. "Would have been ironic if we had both signed up, each naming the other as beneficiary, and then ran into each other here."

"You could have had a duel with the proviso that the winner leaves and collects."

"Wouldn't have worked. We'd both try to let the other win. Probably both end up dead."

"Good thing it didn't happen, then." I glanced at my watch. "Almost time for dinner," I noted. We had our meals with the other employees, in the building that housed the offices and engineering, not with the candidates. We spent a good bit of our time there, actually, mostly with David and his staff, designing things we'd need. "And then," I continued, "off to the bar. We have a show tomorrow night, a double. I have to select two candidates."

"From among the pool of I'd say twenty that'll volunteer," Fulvie said.

"Probably so," I grunted.

Following dinner, Fulvie, Cindy, and I got into our costumes. Susie was our costume designer, and had handled the whole process, laying them out and having them made for us by engineering. All black leather; mine consisted of pants, a hood that covered the back of my head and the area around my eyes, and military-style boots. Cindy and Fulvie, who would accompany me to the bar, were dressed in very short leather skirts and halter tops with high-heeled boots that came almost to their knees. Cindy oiled my bare chest slightly to make me look a bit more muscular. Bill was now my trainer, in charge of getting me looking ripped, since I was now as much an actor as anything else. I was not there yet, but definitely getting there--and he was

probably in the best condition of his life already, thanks to going through the exercises and drills with me.

We didn't do things the way they were done in the Sunday night shows or specials, and a concept of conducting simple rather formal executions had never even been seriously considered. Instead we performed what amounted to little one-act plays; Kendra was our playwright and stage manager, and turned out to be very good at it. These were always simple enough that the candidate did not have to memorize lines, although quite a few of them did.

We tried to look intimidating as we walked into the bar, but I was well aware that this pretty much failed completely with any of the candidates other than rank newcomers, they knew us too well and knew we were not intimidating at all. A quick head count showed me that we had at the moment only five male candidates--men who were, if anything, being overworked by the crowd of eager women they found themselves among.

I went to the bar, ordered a Bourbon on the rocks. The women, knowing what was coming, started gathering around. "I have an announcement," I told them, turning to face them. "As you all probably already know, we've scheduled a show for tomorrow night. I need two female volunteers for that show, two women to volunteer to die on stage." Immediately a host of hands went up.

"Twenty-six," Fulvie noted. "I underestimated."

"You haven't heard the details yet, ladies," I said after sipping my drink. "First, any of you who've been here less than two weeks, you know the rules, you are not eligible for these shows, only for the Wednesday specials." Seven or eight hands went down. "The payout to your beneficiaries is one hundred fifty thousand." Five or six more hands went down. "As to how you will die, you will be allowed to bleed to death. You will not be asked to suffer excessive pain." A couple of hands dropped, leaving maybe ten.

"Will we be having sex with you, Jack?" one of the girls asked.

"The first choice, yes. The second, as much as possible. It may be a little soon."

"Likely, though," Cindy commented with a grin. All hands remained up.

I looked them over, taking my time--the important thing, as I well knew, was good visuals. A small girl, almost hidden by some of the taller ones but waving a hand frantically, caught my attention. "You," I said, pointing to her. "Come over here."

She did. She was only about five feet tall, with proportionately long legs, meaning her torso was very small. Still a little slender--most of the girls were too thin on arrival, since they had not been eating well in the outside world--she was nevertheless very attractive, her face elven, her startlingly bright blue eyes almost unnaturally large, her black hair cut short, her breasts and her legs essentially perfect. She reminded me of Polly.

I pushed my mask back, exposing my face. "What's your name?" I asked her.

"Sarah," she answered, giving me a full rich smile.

"Sarah, you are my first choice. Get your script and instructions from Cindy, be at Medical tomorrow at three, your prep will not take long." She clapped her hands, and Cindy took her aside. I started looking over the others.

A dark-skinned girl near the front of the group caught my attention. She was taller and more robust than Sarah but still quite slender, with very dark eyes, long black hair, and large but very firm breasts. "You," I said, nodding to her. "What's your name?"

"Juanita," she answered, a Spanish accent obvious even in the one word. Her eyes took on a pleading look. "Please, Jack, pick me, my family is starving..."

"I do not make my choices based on those considerations," I said coldly. "Even if I'd like to sometimes. How you will look while you're dying on that stage is my only criterion. But my

judgement is that you'll look very good. You are my second choice. Go to Fulvie, she'll give you your script and instructions. Be at Medical at three." I then went back to my drink. Several of the other girls approached me, wondering if I might be persuaded to stay at the bar a while and asking me to keep them in mind for the next show. I declined their invitations but told them I would keep them in mind the next time I was making selections.

But I knew I would not, I'd make the selections on the spur of the moment, just as I had that evening.

Once Sarah and Juanita had been given their scripts and instructions, the three of us left the bar and went back to our cottage. The next day, I went over to Medical at three, made sure all was going well with the preparations for the show that evening. Nothing went wrong, and at seven-thirty that evening we were backstage, waiting for the audience to file in.

We had made some changes in the way the stage was set up. More TV monitors had been set up just behind the stage curtains, to allow the performers could see what the audience was seeing. Cindy and Fulvie remained backstage during the shows. Normally the cameras and the shotgun microphones that picked up the voices of the performers were all computer-controlled, but we had had David's engineering crew install overrides, so that Cindy and Fulvie could change the choices they made if they felt it would make a better visual.

The other three members of our crew, while fully supportive of our enterprise, did not attend the shows. Bill said the whole idea bothered him, although he acknowledged the necessity, and swore he'd never see one of the shows. Susie said she just wasn't interested. Kendra said much the same, but with a hesitancy that made me feel she'd change her mind in time. It seemed to me her usually very erotic scripts belied a lack of interest.

As showtime approached, Sarah, Juanita, and I had all gotten into costumes. The girls wore short skirts and blouses--with full underwear--while I was clad in a sport shirt and slacks, in all cases the sort of ordinary clothes one might see in any city on a summer night. In my pocket was a very sharp knife with a four-inch blade--the knife I would use to kill them with.

Kendra had had a mockup of the interior of the bedroom area of a small apartment built on stage. As the play began, Sarah and I walked through the doorway.

"Sarah," I said as we came in, "There's something I have to tell you."

Already starting to turn down the bedcovers, Sarah glanced back at him and grinned. "As long as you're not planning on telling me you're married," she said, "it can wait."

"I'm not married," he answered. "But Sarah--what I have to tell you, it is important. It can't wait."

"Yes it can." She giggled. "It won't be too long before my roommate Juanita comes home, we don't have too terribly much time." She looked back at him. "I really like having sex with you, Jack. And you already know I'm not shy about asking for what I want!"

"It really can't wait, Sarah."

Moving toward the bed, she began unbuttoning her blouse. "Okay," she said. "Tell me, then." She shrugged off the blouse and laid it aside.

"Have you been reading in the news," I went on, "or hearing on TV, about this guy they're calling the Clean Cut Killer?"

She reached around behind her back, unsnapped her bra, and took it off. She looked up and to her left and nodded. "Yes," she answered. "A serial killer, right? They think so, anyway. He's killed what, two women? But exactly in the same way, so they think it's one guy."

"Two that they know about right now. He's killed more than that."

Sarah pushed her panties down and kicked off her shoes. "Lloyd, really, can't we talk about this later? Right now I really want to make love with you," she told him. She sat down on the bed and finished removing her panties, leaving herself completely naked. Then she stopped and frowned. "How do you know he's killed more than two?" she asked.

"Because," I answered, my voice level, "I am the Clean Cut Killer," Sarah."

She stared for a moment, but then laughed. "Sure you are, Jack. And I'm the Queen of England, I--"

"Sarah," I interrupted, "I'm serious. Dead serious, I'm afraid."

She stopped speaking and stared again, more intensely this time. "Jack... I mean, that's not possible, it's--"

"I'm afraid it is." I sighed theatrically. "I'm really going to miss you, Sarah. But I decided before we went out tonight that this was it."

"It?"

"The night I was going to kill you." I pushed his hand into his pants and drew out my knife, letting her--and the audience--see it. The four-inch slender steel double-edged blade gleamed in the light.

She stared at it for a moment and her frown deepened. "Jack, if this is some kind of a joke, it really isn't very funny."

"It isn't, Sarah. I'm sorry, but it isn't."

She continued to watch me, but she didn't do anything else. "Jack," she said at length, "I think we should talk about this."

I just shook my head. "There's not really very much to talk about, Sarah," I told her. "I have to do this, I just can't stand it anymore. All the time I'm with you and most of the time I'm not, all I can think about is how it'll feel when I push a knife into you, about how you'll react to that, about how you'll look when you're dying. I have to do it." I took a couple of steps toward her; per the script, she didn't move.

"No, Jack, you don't have to do it," she countered. Even though she was sitting naked and vulnerable, she did not appear to be the slightest bit tense. She crossed her legs and folded her arms across her knee. "And you don't want to. There are things that we can--"

I forced a laugh. "Oh, yes, Sarah," I countered. "You are very wrong about that. I do want to. Badly. Desperately." I sat down on the bed beside her. "So badly I cannot stop myself."

Her eyes were calm, she barely glanced at the knife in my hand. "Jack, you don't want to do this," she repeated, having apparently completely memorized her lines. "I know that there's nothing I can do to stop you--or at least I don't feel I have much of a chance of stopping you--but there are other choices."

"No. There aren't. Every time I've been out with you, every time we make love, this urge I have, the urge I've never been able to control, it builds up more. I've controlled it with you longer than I have with anyone in a very long time. I just can't do it anymore. I decided when I came to pick you up tonight, before I got here, that this would be the night." I ran my hand through my hair. "But I couldn't--I just couldn't--just do it, I had to tell you about it--"

She uncrossed her legs and turned toward me, pressing one knee against mine. "And I'm glad you did," she told me. "Whatever happens now. But I--"

"And now, you realize, there's another issue. I've told you who I am. You know what I've done."

She nodded. "'I know too much,' as they say in the movies." She paused and sighed. "I won't lie to you, Jack--not that I'd expect you to believe it anyway. If you just walked out of here

right now, I'd have to contact the police and tell them what I know. I just couldn't live with myself if I didn't. But that's not what I'm hoping for--I'm hoping you'll agree to let me help you. You have to turn yourself in, and then--"

I just shook my head. "I can't do that, Sarah. You know damn well I wouldn't be judged as 'sick.' They'd just throw me in jail and throw away the key." I became serious again. "I have to kill you, Sarah. I have to, I need to, and that's what I'm going to do."

Still following the script, she did not act as if she was even especially upset. She gazed at my face for a moment, her eyes moving from one of mine to the other. "Jack, this just doesn't seem right to me; in a way I'm still finding it hard to believe. I said I'd call the police, and I guess that's true, but I have to say I'd have a hard time trying to convince them that you're a serial killer."

I sighed. "Sarah--"

"I know, I know," she interrupted. "I accept what you say. I guess, I haven't the slightest idea what you'd be trying to do by lying about something like this, especially when you're sitting there holding that knife." She paused and studied my eyes intently for a few seconds. "But... you've always been such a gentleman--in a real sense, a gentle man--with me." She smiled and shook her head. "Maybe even sometimes a little too gentle, that was something I was going to talk to you about sometime. You're always considerate, you're just such a--a nice guy. Not what I'd expect a serial killer to be, in fact sort of the opposite of what I'd expect." She cocked her head. "Can you explain why? I mean, you say you need to kill me, here and now, tonight. You say it the same way someone might say they need food, or water, or air."

"Or sex."

"Yes, that too." She paused. "We've been having sex. It isn't--enough?"

"No. It isn't. Please don't misunderstand, Sarah. Having sex with you has been wonderful. As you say, it just isn't enough, not for me." I sighed deeply. "I wish I could explain it to you in a way that would make sense to you, but I can't."

"Can you try?"

"Sarah, I'm just forced to do this. Something inside me, it keeps chewing at me. It won't stop, I know that from experience, it won't stop until I've killed you. I honestly have put this off as long as I can, because I've enjoyed being with you so much."

She looked up at me, her gaze still steady. "If you do kill me, Jack," she said, "how will you do it?"

"What?"

"How do you plan on killing me? I mean, I understand that you use a knife, I can see that. But I'm afraid I haven't read many of the details of this killer's--I mean, your--methods. Would you cut my throat?"

"No. I never do that." I frowned. "Sarah, you really want to hear this?"

"Yes, I do."

I reached over and touched her bare belly; she didn't even flinch, she just looked down. "I like to go in here first. Straight in, and deep. Then I pull the blade partly out and put it back, at a different angle. Causes a lot of internal bleeding."

She caught her lower lip with her teeth. "Sounds very painful."

"I don't think so. Of course I never have experienced it myself, but based on the way the girls I've killed have reacted, I don't think it is painful at all. Shock, or something. And this knife, it's double-edged and very very sharp. It goes in very easily." Talking about it was exciting me, which it was supposed to do; hopefully it was having the same effect on the onlookers. I started breathing harder and my erection began to rise.

"Is that all? You just wait for the girl to die then?"

"No. After a while I take it out. Then I play it by ear. I usually do at least two or three more in the belly. If the girl is weakening a lot, I stay with her belly. If she's strong, then I do her chest." I touched her breast; she sighed, and I noticed that her nipple was very erect. "Through here, maybe. Then I go between the ribs, around your side." I touched that area too, letting my fingertips bounce over her ribs. "That usually finishes it..."

"I see." She noticed that I already had an erection, and her fingers glided over it. "Jack, do you want to...?"

"No. Not now. I do, but after I've stabbed you, while you're dying." He sighed again. "I have to do this, Sara. If for no other reason than the fact that you know about me."

Her eyes remained calm. "All I can do," she said quietly, "is ask you not to. I won't lie to you, and I won't make promises you and I both know I wouldn't be able to keep."

I put my left arm around her shoulders and toyed with her coal-black hair. She still did not try to pull away. My face was very close to hers. "I wish," I said softly, "that I had a choice. I really do, Sara." I leaned closer, and she tipped her face up; when I kissed her she closed her eyes, put her hands on my shoulders, and kissed me back, passionately. There was a certain wild excitement in that kiss, not something the script had called for.

"Get your clothes off, Jack," she said when we broke it. Her tone was urgent. "Now."

"Sarah, I told you I..."

"Jack, you're going to kill me--kill me, end my life! You're going to stab me, stick that blade into my body, cause me pain, cause me to bleed--at the bottom line, just for your erotic pleasure. You can at least give me mine."

"That's hard to argue with," I said.

I removed my clothes, put them on a nearby chair, then sat down on the bed and laid the knife down. Sarah looked at it, then stretched out, facing me, her head in his lap. "Keep talking to me, telling me about what you're going to do to me," she said. She then took my erection into her mouth.

"As I told you, I'm going to slip this knife into your soft little body, several times." I caressed her side and her breast, teasing the nipple. "Each time I take it out I'll pull it to the side, cutting the wound open a little so you'll bleed a lot. The more blood you lose, the easier this will be for you--and in fact, the more pleasurable for me, because you'll relax and start to accept it." Her eyes wide open and fixed on my face, she nodded a little as her head continued to move up and down on my cock. "I'm sure you're strong enough for a number of knifings. When I go in through your breast I'll go all the way through it, through your chest wall, into your lung. You'll cough up blood then, but it won't be too bad for you." I stroked her belly. "I can hardly wait..." She shuddered but also worked her legs back and forth. I slipped my fingers between them, found her extraordinarily wet, and commented on that so the audience could hear.

After a few minutes, per the script, she released my cock and stood up. Straddling my legs, facing me, she sank down and guided my cock, and I slipped deeply inside her. She began moving on me immediately, side-to-side, fairly fast.

"Slow down," I told her, although I could not resist stroking and squeezing her beautiful smooth thighs. "I don't want to come yet, I--"

"Come inside me," she crooned. "Come in me, then you can kill me, I--"

"No, after I come I don't want to kill, I--"

She smiled brightly. "Then we have a solution!"

I grabbed her by her waist and held her tightly. "No, we don't. I told you who I am. I have to kill you." I shook my head. "To kill you after I came--just a cold murder--that would do nothing for me. I'd be wasting you, Sarah. I can't do that."

She wilted. "Yes, of course, I know too much. Very well, Jack. I'm going to ask you again not to do this, but I guess you have to do what you have to do." She slowed her movements down as I had asked. We moved together gently for several minutes. Then I picked up the knife, making sure both she and the audience saw me do it. She stared at the knife briefly, then looked back at my face. I leaned my head forward and kissed her; she put her hands on my shoulders and kissed me back, again as passionately as ever.

And, while I was kissing her, I swiftly ran the knife into her side at her waist, hiding the whole blade inside her.

She went stiff; her fingernails raked over my shoulders, then dug in hard, and she gave voice to a choked squeal behind the kiss. Beyond that, she did nothing at all. I was using my left hand to hold her head, but she wasn't even trying to break the kiss--if anything she was kissing me harder and more passionately than before, moving her head around and thrusting her tongue into my mouth. I held the knife very still inside her and kept kissing her until her body started to relax somewhat.

I broke the kiss and she pulled her head back a little. Her eyes looked larger than ever. "Ad-lib now, right?" she whispered.

"Ad-lib," I answered. "You've done a beautiful acting job, Sarah."

In spite of the knife sticking in her side, she gave me a beautiful smile. "Kill me, Jack," she sighed. "Softly, gently, lovingly... and slowly. Make it a good show."

"I'll do my best." I pulled the knife back a couple of inches, pulling it to the left to cut the skin. Blood started to flow down her side and over her hip. She winced, frowned, and bit her lip, but she remained silent and offered no resistance at all. Holding her tightly and watching her eyes, I started sliding it slowly back in, angling the point upwards, forcing it to find a new path, feeling it cutting its way through her entrails. She was trembling, her fingers had tightened on my shoulders, her nails dug in harder, but she did not struggle or try to fight. She was frowning deeply, her mouth had dropped open and her eyes were growing even larger as I slipped the blade softly and gently back into her. I then held her for a few seconds again before I pulled the knife out of her, allowing her blood to come rushing out.

Still trembling, she just watched me, her eyes wide, waiting for my next move. After letting her bleed for a few moments, I tucked the point of the knife in alongside her navel. Feeling the pricking of the point, her eyes popped open wide. She looked down at it, then back up.

I then punched it in, just about an inch of the blade. Her body jerked, her hands clutched at my shoulders, but she neither objected nor tried to fight. Instead she just stared at me fixedly, her body quivering, as I began slowly sliding the blade back into her.

After a moment she looked down at the knife again, watched an inch or so of it slide in, then began moving her hips again on my erection, very slowly.

"Wonderful," I whispered, too soft for the mikes to pick it up.

She looked back up at me. "It hurts," she said in a low voice, but loud enough for the audience to hear. Her hips were still moving. "But it's also... somehow... sensual..." I blinked. That line was not in her script, but it was a damn good one.

"For me too, you have to know that," I ad-libbed in return. I pushed the knife on in slowly until the entire blade was inside her. I knew that, thanks to the drugs, it wasn't hurting her too badly--she was acting as if it was hurting more than it actually was. I then held her tightly and

drove the knife hard against her, getting a little more depth and feeling her blood spurt against my hand. She stopped moving and threw her head back, her mouth open. I relaxed the pressure and she lifted her head and opened her eyes again.

And she began moving her hips again. I drove the knife hard into her again, if anything harder than before. She grunted and shook her head, but when I let the pressure off she yet again began moving on me. I did it again, and again, with the same results each time.

I pulled the knife swiftly out and fresh blood spilled out freely; by that time we were both covered with it. Sarah still seemed to possess much of her strength, though. I caressed her face for a moment, then pressed the point of the knife against her abdomen again, down lower and a little more to her left.

She pushed down with her hips and cocked her head to one side. Then, to my amazement, she pushed her body forward against the knife, hard. The razor-sharp point of the blade breached her skin, and two inches of the blade sank into her before I could stop it.

But Sarah, an odd expression on her face, just kept on pushing, and the blade kept sliding on in. I could hardly believe she was doing this, but it was happening. I held the blade still and she kept pushing, slowly forcing more and more of it into herself until it was completely buried.

"This is the way I wanted it," she whispered. "A knife in me... over and over, like your Julie..." I had to close my eyes for a moment. "Do it hard again..."

I blinked a few times, composed myself, nodded, and then slammed the blade in, as I'd done before. She grunted, then slammed her hips down on my cock in response. When I released the pressure, so did she. I did it again, and again, and each time she responded in the same way--although each one was somewhat weaker than the one before. Finally I pulled the knife out, and again, new blood flowed freely.

She sagged against me. She kept her face tipped up, her eyes still on mine. Her left hand slipped off my shoulder and dropped onto her thigh. She was still moving her hips, though, but her movements were noticeably weaker. I leaned her back and raised the bloody knife, aiming it at her left breast and holding the point a little more than an inch from her bare skin.

She looked at the knife, looked at her breast, then looked back at my face. Her eyes wide and her mouth slightly open, she just watched me. "Do it, Jack," she said softly after a moment. "Do it, I want you to, I want that blade in my chest." She smiled. "So go ahead, stab me again, finish killing me..."

"You're wonderful, Sarah," I told her. I then plunged the knife into her bare breast, just above the nipple, driving it deeply into her chest. She threw her head back, her body straining against my arm, and she grunted loudly and harshly. Part of the blade remained exposed; she gasped, winced, and squirmed as I forced it on down and in, once again burying it fully. After holding it inside her for a moment, I snatched it out. A bright stream of red raced down over her chest, highlighting her nipple and the shape of her breast.

"Again," she said in a firm voice. "Again."

I placed the point of the knife squarely in the center of her nipple, watched her face for a moment, then drove it firmly in. Sarah gave a soft little cry and her body stiffened. Her face, chest, and belly flushed and her lips took on a noticeable swollen look--as if she was having an orgasm. Assuming she was, I waited until it appeared to be over. While I was waiting I glanced at the monitors, one of which showed the two of us, full-body, another showing Sarah's strained face, her brilliant blue eyes open wide, and the third showing the knife piercing her delicate nipple, blood bubbling out around the blade. Beautiful visuals.

I pulled the knife free. She sagged more against my arm, breathing hard and trembling. Her eyes dropped closed, and blood ran from her mouth. Holding my own orgasm back, I just held her for a moment, letting her bleed, knowing that she was getting weaker by the second. I studied her body; her left arm was down, limp, covering her left side almost completely. Her hips were no longer moving; I pushed in and out of her a few times, trying to keep myself up but also to delay my own immanent orgasm.

I decided to do a little improvising of my own.

"Sarah," I said, touching her face lightly, "Raise your left arm for me." She opened her eyes slowly and blinked a few times. She looked confused. "I want to put the blade in you again," I told her, "I want to put it in between your ribs, but your arm is in the way." She did not move. "Please, Sarah," I continued, wondering if maybe she was too far gone. "You're dying, it won't be long now. I don't want to force anything else on you." I sighed. "I know, it's crazy. I'm hurting you, murdering you... and you've done so much already... but... just this one last thing..."

She blinked again, then shook her head slightly. With obvious effort, she raised her left arm and laid it atop her head. At the same time she turned and leaned toward me, offering me her entire side. "Like this?" she asked, her voice weak and thready. I smiled and kissed her; to my amazement she again kissed me back, her tongue playing softly across my lips. I carefully placed the knife's point between two of her ribs, right behind her breast. Feeling the touch, she smiled. "Do it," she said yet again. "Go deep, give me all of it."

Slowly and gently, I started pushing the knife in. Her skin resisted the point only for an instant. When it gave way, three inches of the blade fell into her before I could stop it.

Her body quivered, her eyes fell closed again and her face went tight, but she didn't move and she kept her arm up. Very slowly and very deliberately, I pushed the blade on down and in, watching her face and watching the steel slip into her side at the same time. Her body trembled continuously and jerked periodically, stimulating my penis inside her; her fist was tightly clenched over her head. With her other hand, she continued to dig her nails into my shoulder. Her mouth remained open, but her eyes, fixed on mine, alternately opened wide, then dropped closed. I pushed on, forcing the knife on in until the blade was buried, until the handle rested against her side. I then pulled it out swiftly and stabbed it back in one rib higher, this time using a strong stroke that buried it completely. Sarah's body jerked, but she did not move her arm. I did it again, going one more rib higher. Blood was pouring out of her by then.

I released it, leaving it standing there, and helped her lower her arm, being careful to guide it around the imbedded knife. She leaned against me heavily, struggling to breathe; she choked, and more blood spilled from her mouth. I just held her, stroking her cheek and toying with her hair. Her body quivered and periodically jerked; she kept her eyes closed most of the time now, but occasionally she glanced up at my face. I just held her, caressing her cheek, and, my cock still inside her, waited for the final moment.

And finally, after a few minutes had passed, her body suddenly jerked violently, then relaxed completely. She let out the breath she'd just taken and did not draw another. Her head came up just for a moment, and she opened her eyes; she looked very much at peace. Her body spasmed sharply again, one of her beautiful legs coming up sharply as if posing. Unable to withstand the movement around my cock I erupted, my semen spraying inside her.

When I finished her eyes had glazed and her pupils were expanding. Perfect timing.

Even so, as I struggled to get Sarah's corpse off of me--the term "dead weight" has a meaning I was now very familiar with--I was not unaware that the show was not over. I got to my feet, pulled the knife out of Sarah's chest, and then waited for the next part of the act to begin.

It did, almost immediately. The door opened and Juanita came in. "Hi, Sarah," she called. "Sorry I'm back a little earlier than I said I'd be." She then saw Sarah's corpse on the bed and me standing there naked, still partially erect, covered with blood. Her eyes grew huge and she froze in place, as per her script. While she was frozen I crossed the room to her, put my arm around her shoulders, and quickly stabbed her three times, in and around her navel. To me, it felt very strange to stab someone through clothing.

"I'm sorry," I said, stepping back. "I had to. I can't let you live after you've seen this."

In spite of having been stabbed, Juanita was able to play her role well--as she'd assured us, beforehand, that she could. She looked down at her belly and touched herself with both hands, smearing them with blood.

"You killed her," she said, looking up at me. "Sarah, you killed her."

"Yes, I did. And now I have to kill you as well. The only thing we have to decide now is how you're going to be killed."

"How?"

"Yes, how. Do you want to try to fight me? Do you want me to just execute you, cut your throat?" I glanced at Sarah's body. "Or do you want to die as she did?"

Quite steady on her feet and seemingly totally in control, Juanita walked to the bed and stared down at Sarah's body. "You were having sex with her while you were killing her, weren't you?" she asked me.

"Yes, I was."

She looked back at me. "I don't want to be killed," she said, following the script. "I want to leave. Just let me leave, please."

I shook my head. "That's not an option, Juanita," I told her. "And anyway, look at yourself. You're badly injured already, you might not even make it downstairs."

She did look down at her abdomen, at the blood staining her skirt and dripping on the floor. "I might be able to make it to the hospital..."

"I doubt it. I imagine you have maybe fifteen-twenty minutes left before blood loss takes you down."

"If you called an ambulance..."

I laughed harshly. "Right. Paramedics up here. A dead body on the bed and me covered in blood. Who'd ask any questions?"

She wilted visibly; she too had obviously memorized at least most of her script. "All right, Jack," she said. "Go ahead, kill me. You can choose, but I think the best way for me is to die as Sarah did..."

I smiled. "Okay. Take your clothes off, please. All of them."

She was supposed to be abject per the script, but she was unable to prevent herself from flashing a quick grin. She removed her clothing piece by piece, taking her time about it, making a striptease of it even though everyone in the audience has already seen her nude. As her skirt came off it was obvious she was still bleeding rather profusely from the stab wounds around her navel, even though they weren't especially deep.

When her panties were gone, I stepped up behind her and pulled her body up against mine, running my left hand up her side until I was cupping her breast; her skin felt like fine satin. She sighed and squirmed against me a little. I pushed her hair aside and kissed her neck.

"Ready?" I asked, holding up the knife so she could see it.

"Ready," she answered.

I drove the blade back into her belly, an inch or two above her deep navel, angling it sharply downward so it wouldn't hit her aorta and end things too soon. She gave a sharp little grunt and put her hands over my hand and the knife, but did not try to interfere.

"I did this with Sarah," I told her as I pulled the blade back and slightly to the right. Then I started pushing it back in along a new path. "In and out," Blood began bubbling out alongside the blade, streaming down her belly.

She pushed her hips back against me harder as the blade slipped on in. "Dios mío, puedo sentir mi vida fluyendo fuera de mí..." she murmured. I pulled the knife out of her and immediately plunged it back in a couple of inches to the right, at the same angle. It only went in about halfway, but another push took it all the way to the hilt. I pulled it back, pushed it home again, and more blood flowed. Juanita kept her hands on mine the entire time, just resting lightly there.

"You're doing beautifully," I whispered to her.

She turned her head toward me. "Ah, I hope so... kill me, Jack, make me dead... stab your knife into me again, deep, deep..." She'd largely dropped the script--she really wasn't supposed to be this cooperative--but the scene, I felt, was good enough that it didn't matter. I pulled the knife out of her and drove it in again, this time to the left of the original wound, once again getting it in about halfway on the first stroke, then forcing it on home.

By that time, my erection was starting to recover. I again pulled the knife out. I turned her around and moved her over to the little dresser that was part of the bedroom set. "Lean back on it on your elbows," I instructed, and she did. Three heavy streams of blood were running down her belly but she did not seem to have lost a lot of her strength. I sucked each of her nipples for a moment and squeezed her extremely firm and beautifully-shaped breasts. Then I kissed her; pushing her legs apart with my knee while still kissing her, I slipped my fresh erection inside her. She kissed me back furiously. Then, after moving on her for a couple of minutes, I pulled myself half-up, pushed my cock very deep into her, and stabbed the knife into her right breast, going in straight through the center of the nipple.

She gave a little cry and threw her head back. She brought her leg up against my side, stroking my hip with her knee and thigh. Just as it had been with Sarah, the knife wasn't quite all the way in, so I pressed it on, slowly, rocking it from side to side to open the wound a little. She kept right on rubbing my hip with her knee and thigh as blood frothy with air surged out. I kept pressing for several seconds, then drew it out only to thrust it right back into her breast, a little lower. She started to fade, noticeably, and I started stabbing her repeatedly in that same breast, over and over, driving the knife deep each time. One of the piercings hit some major blood vessel and blood spouted out, two or three feet in the air. She was trembling almost violently by then, her movements becoming uncoordinated, her eyes seemingly staring into space. Knowing she was almost gone, I switched to her untouched left breast, located the knife's point in the center of that nipple, and started pushing it in. When half the blade was inside her she suddenly spasmed, then relaxed. She was not breathing. For the benefit of the audience and the film I simulated an orgasm, pushing far into her and groaning theatrically. I was not close and would not be, I knew, for a while yet.

I waited for just a moment, as if spent. Then I pulled out of her, got up, got my clothes and went out the door as the curtain fell and the show ended.

Cindy and Fulvie were waiting for me backstage. "Great show," Cindy said. "Really fantastic. This one's going to sell hundreds of copies, I'm sure."

"Yeah," I agreed as we started moving toward the large shower that was located backstage. "Those two girls were just amazing. Both of them staying right on script, almost all the way."

"You were damn good yourself, Jack," Fulvie told me. "People would think you actually got off on this sort of thing."

"Oh, how wrong they'd be," Cindy said, and they both laughed. "How'd we end up with a boyfriend who's a sadist, Fulvie?"

Fulvie shrugged. "I dunno. He does make up for it in other ways, though. Doesn't he?"

"I guess he does."

By that time we'd reached the shower stall. The girls turned on the water, pushed me inside, then took off their own clothes and joined me. As they helped me wash down, blood streamed down the drain, looking like a replay of the movie *Psycho*. But this shower had no curtain, and the resort's cleanup crews were walking past it from time to time. We ignored them.

"You didn't come that last time, did you?" Cindy asked me. "With Juanita?"

I shook my head. "No. It would have taken a long time. Me standing there fucking a corpse for fifteen minutes isn't a good visual."

She grinned. "Still wound up from it, though. Aren't you?" Only then did I notice I was still partially erect. Fulvie, grinning as well, dropped into a crouch and took my cock into her mouth, where it almost immediately came back to full erection. "I do think," Cindy went on, "that we can take care of this in less than fifteen minutes!" She then kissed me while Fulvie continued to suck me, and after a couple of minutes they switched places. When I started my orgasm, Fulvie dropped back down and the two of them shared it. After that we all dried off, got dressed, and went back to our cottage.

We were all a bit tired but not exhausted, and tomorrow, we knew, would be an easy day, we would not schedule another show for at least a week. We went out onto the patio again, again sipping drinks and gazing up at a clear starry sky.

"You know," Cindy said, "this isn't going to last forever, Fulvie. One day we'll wake up all old and wrinkly and it'll all be at an end."

"True," Fulvie agreed. "So we should do something about that."

"Like what?"

"Well, we could have Jack kill us before it happens. He could stab you to death and cut me in two with a buzz saw. He has experience."

Cindy laughed. "True." She then sipped her drink. "I dunno, my sister and your mother might be pissed about us joking about that."

"No," Fulvie said strongly. "No. I did not know Julie, her main motivation may have been loss of hope. For my mother, her main motivation was to get a better life for me. That has succeeded far beyond anything she might have expected, and even her friends Bill and Susie got a benefit. She'd be proud, and pleased."

"I think I'll just choose to believe Julie would feel the same." She pursed her lips for a moment. "But just to be safe: when the time comes we'll have Jack stab you to death and he can cut me in half with a buzz saw." They both laughed, and after a little while their idle talk faded away as they both fell asleep on the lounge chairs.

And I was left with my own thoughts. On my return I had also immediately reconnected with Jennifer, who was still there, still at her desk, and delighted to see me back, alive and now an employee. Of course I introduced her to the others, and of course she was amazed by the resemblances to Julie and Geneviève, both of whom she'd also known. And of course, with the full knowledge of the others, we resumed our previous relationship, with Jennifer taking the totally unnecessary step of cautioning me not to do what she herself had done, get involved with one of the candidates. This was a land mine I had absolutely sworn I would not step on. With four regular

lovers now--and a planned visit from Bridget, who we remained in contact with, coming up, I hardly had the time to anyway.

I looked over at Cindy and Fulvie, at their beautiful sleeping faces. In a few minutes, I told myself, I'd take them inside and put them to bed. But at that moment, my attention had been caught by a very bright star hanging somewhat low over the horizon. Star or planet, I did not know, did not know what celestial body it might be.

I stood up and held up my drink. "Are you my lucky star?" I asked. "If you are, I salute you, I drink to you." I took a large swallow. "Because you're good. Because, I, Jack Packard, am the luckiest fucking man on this god-damn planet!"