

KATE WILHELM

Baby, You Were Great



JOHN Lewisohn thought that if one more door slammed, or one more bell rang, or one more voice asked if he was all right, his head would explode. Leaving his laboratories, he walked through the carpeted hall to the elevator that slid wide to admit him noiselessly, was lowered, gently, two floors, where there were more carpeted halls. The door he shoved open bore a neat sign, AUDITIONING STUDIO. Inside, he was waved on through the reception room by three girls who knew better than to speak to him unless he spoke first. They were surprised to see him; it was his first visit there in seven or eight months. The inner room where he stopped was darkened, at first glance appearing empty, revealing another occupant only after his eyes had time to adjust to the dim lighting.

John sat in the chair next to Herb Javits, still without speaking. Herb was wearing the helmet and gazing at a wide screen that was actually a one-way glass panel permitting him to view the audition going on in the next room. John lowered a second helmet to his head. It fit snugly and immediately made contact with the eight prepared spots on his skull. As soon as he turned it on, the helmet itself was forgotten.

A girl had entered the other room. She was breathtakingly lovely, a long-legged honey blonde with slanting green eyes and apricot skin. The room was furnished as a sitting room with two couches, some chairs, end tables and a coffee table, all tasteful and lifeless, like an ad in a furniture trade publication. The girl stopped at the doorway

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and John felt her indecision, heavily tempered with nervousness and fear. Outwardly she appeared poised and expectant, her smooth face betraying none of her emotions. She took a hesitant step toward the couch, and a wire showed trailing behind her. It was attached to her head. At the same time a second door opened. A young man ran inside, slamming the door behind him; he looked wild and frantic. The girl registered surprise, mounting nervousness; she felt behind her for the door handle, found it and tried to open the door again. It was locked. John could hear nothing that was being said in the room; he only felt the girl's reaction to the unexpected interruption. The wild-eyed man was approaching her, his hands slashing through the air, his eyes darting glances all about them constantly. Suddenly he pounced on her and pulled her to him, kissing her face and neck roughly. She seemed paralyzed with fear for several seconds, then there was something else, a bland nothing kind of feeling that accompanied boredom sometimes, or too-complete self-assurance. As the man's hands fastened on her blouse in the back and ripped it, she threw her arms about him, her face showing passion that was not felt anywhere in her mind or in her blood.

"Cut!" Herb Javits said quietly.

The man stepped back from the girl and left her without a word. She looked about blankly, her torn blouse hanging about her hips, one shoulder strap gone. She was very beautiful. The audition manager entered, followed by a dresser with a gown that he threw about her shoulders. She looked startled; waves of anger mounted to fury as she was drawn from the room, leaving it empty. The two watching men removed their helmets.

"Fourth one so far," Herb grunted. "Sixteen yesterday; twenty the day before . . . All nothing." He gave John a curious look. "What's got you stirred out of your lab?"

“Anne’s had it this time,” John said. “She’s been on the phone all night and all morning.”

“What now?”

“Those damn sharks! I told you that was too much on top of the airplane crash last week. She can’t take much more of it.”

“Hold it a minute, Johnny,” Herb said. “Let’s finish off the next three girls and then talk.” He pressed a button on the arm of his chair and the room beyond the screen took their attention again.

This time the girl was slightly less beautiful, shorter, a dimply sort of brunette with laughing blue eyes and an upturned nose. John liked her. He adjusted his helmet and felt with her.

She was excited; the audition always excited them. There was some fear and nervousness, not too much. Curious about how the audition would go, probably. The wild young man ran into the room, and her face paled. Nothing else changed. Her nervousness increased, not uncomfortably. When he grabbed her, the only emotion she registered was the nervousness.

“Cut,” Herb said.

The next girl was also brunette, with gorgeously elongated legs. She was very cool, a real professional. Her mobile face reflected the range of emotions to be expected as the scene played through again, but nothing inside her was touched. She was a million miles away from it all.

The next one caught John with a slam. She entered the room slowly, looking about with curiosity, nervous, as they all were. She was younger than the other girls, less poised. She had pale gold hair piled in an elaborate mound of waves on top of her head. Her eyes were brown, her skin nicely tanned. When the man entered, her emotion changed quickly to fear, then to terror. John didn’t know when he closed his eyes. He was the girl, filled with unspeakable

terror; his heart pounded, adrenalin pumped into his system; he wanted to scream but could not. From the dim unreachable depths of his psyche there came something else, in waves, so mixed with terror that the two merged and became one emotion that pulsed and throbbed and demanded. With a jerk he opened his eyes and stared at the window. The girl had been thrown down to one of the couches, and the man was kneeling on the floor beside her, his hands playing over her bare body, his face pressed against her skin.

“Cut!” Herb said. His voice was shaken. “Hire her,” he said. The man rose, glanced at the girl, sobbing now, and then quickly bent over and kissed her cheek. Her sobs increased. Her golden hair was down, framing her face; she looked like a child. John tore off the helmet. He was perspiring.

Herb got up, turned on the lights in the room, and the window blanked out, blending with the wall. He didn’t look at John. When he wiped his face, his hand was shaking. He rammed it in his pocket.

“When did you start auditions like that?” John asked, after a few moments of silence.

“Couple of months ago. I told you about it. Hell, we had to, Johnny. That’s the six hundred nineteenth girl we’ve tried out! Six hundred nineteen! All phonies but one! Dead from the neck up. Do you have any idea how long it was taking us to find that out? Hours for each one. Now it’s a matter of minutes.”

John Lewisohn sighed. He knew. He had suggested it, actually, when he had said, “Find a basic anxiety situation for the test.” He hadn’t wanted to know what Herb had come up with.

He said, “Okay, but she’s only a kid. What about her parents, legal rights, all that?”

“We’ll fix it. Don’t worry. What about Anne?”

“She’s called me five times since yesterday. The sharks were too much. She wants to see us, both of us, this afternoon.”

“You’re kidding! I can’t leave here now!”

“Nope. Kidding I’m not. She says no plug-up if we don’t show. She’ll take pills and sleep until we get there.”

“Good Lord! She wouldn’t dare!”

“I’ve booked seats. We take off at twelve-thirty-five.” They stared at one another silently for another moment, then Herb shrugged. He was a short man, not heavy but solid. John was over six feet, muscular, with a temper that he knew he had to control. Others suspected that when he did let it go, there would be bodies lying around afterward, but he controlled it.

Once it had been a physical act, an effort of body and will to master that temper; now it was done so automatically that he couldn’t recall occasions when it even threatened to flare anymore.

“Look, Johnny, when we see Anne, let me handle it. Right? I’ll make it short.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Give her an earful. If she’s going to start pulling temperament on me, I’ll slap her down so hard she’ll bounce a week.” He grinned. “She’s had it all her way up to now. She knew there wasn’t a replacement if she got bitchy. Let her try it now. Just let her try.” Herb was pacing back and forth with quick, jerky steps.

John realized with a shock that he hated the stocky, red-faced man. The feeling was new; it was almost as if he could taste the hatred he felt, and the taste was unfamiliar and pleasant.

Herb stopped pacing and stared at him for a moment. “Why’d she call you? Why does she want you down, too? She knows you’re not mixed up with this end of it.”

“She knows I’m a full partner, anyway,” John said.

“Yeah, but that’s not it.” Herb’s face twisted in a grin. “She thinks you’re still hot for her, doesn’t she? She knows you tumbled once, in the beginning, when you were working on her, getting the gimmick working right.” The grin reflected no humor then. “Is she right, Johnny, baby? Is that it?”

“We made a deal,” John said. “You run your end, I run mine. She wants me along because she doesn’t trust you, or believe anything you tell her anymore. She wants a witness.”

“Yeah, Johnny. But you be sure you remember our agreement.” Suddenly Herb laughed. “You know what it was like, Johnny, seeing you and her? Like a flame trying to snuggle up to an icicle.”

At three-thirty they were in Anne’s suite in the Skyline Hotel in Grand Bahama. Herb had a reservation to fly back to New York on the 6 P.M. flight. Anne would not be off until four, so they made themselves comfortable in her rooms and waited. Herb turned her screen on, offered a helmet to John, who shook his head, and they both seated themselves. John watched the screen for several minutes; then he, too, put on a helmet.

Anne was looking at the waves far out at sea where they were long, green, undulating; then she brought her gaze in closer, to the blue-green and quick seas, and finally in to where they stumbled on the sandbars, breaking into foam that looked solid enough to walk on. She was peaceful, swaying with the motion of the boat, the sun hot on her back, the fishing rod heavy in her hands. It was like being an indolent animal at peace with its world, at home in the world, being one with it. After a few seconds she put down the rod and turned, looking at a tall smiling man in swimming trunks. He held out his hand and she took it. They entered the cabin of the boat where drinks were waiting. Her mood of serenity and happiness ended abruptly, to be replaced by shocked disbelief, and a start of fear.

“What the hell . . . ?” John muttered, adjusting the audio. You seldom needed audio when Anne was on.

“. . . Captain Brothers had to let them go. After all, they’ve done nothing yet—” the man was saying soberly.

“But why do you think they’ll try to rob me?”

“Who else is here with a million dollars’ worth of jewels?”

John turned it off and said, “You’re a fool! You can’t get away with something like that!”

Herb stood up and crossed to the window wall that was open to the stretch of glistening blue ocean beyond the brilliant white beaches. “You know what every woman wants? To own something worth stealing.” He chuckled, a sound without mirth. “Among other things, that is. They want to be roughed up once or twice, and forced to kneel. . . . Our new psychologist is pretty good, you know? Hasn’t steered us wrong yet. Anne might kick some, but it’ll go over great.”

“She won’t stand for an actual robbery.” Louder, emphatically, he added, “I won’t stand for that.”

“We can dub it,” Herb said. “That’s all we need, Johnny, plant the idea, and then dub the rest.”

John stared at his back. He wanted to believe that. He needed to believe it. His voice was calm when he said, “It didn’t start like this, Herb. What happened?”

Herb turned then. His face was dark against the glare of light behind him. “Okay, Johnny, it didn’t start like this. Things accelerate, that’s all. You thought of a gimmick, and the way we planned it, it sounded great, but it didn’t last. We gave them the feeling of gambling, or learning to ski, of automobile racing, everything we could dream up, and it wasn’t enough. How many times can you take the first ski jump of your life? After a while you want new thrills,

you know? For you it's been great, hasn't it? You bought yourself a shiny new lab and closed the door. You bought yourself time and equipment and when things didn't go right, you could toss it out and start over, and nobody gave a damn. Think of what it's been like for me, kid! I gotta keep coming up with something new, something that'll give Anne a jolt and through her all those nice little people who aren't even alive unless they're plugged in. You think it's been easy? Anne was a green kid. For her everything was new and exciting, but it isn't like that now, boy. You better believe it is *not* like that now. You know what she told me last month? She's sick and tired of men. Our little hot-box Annie! Tired of men!"

John crossed to him and pulled him around toward the light. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why, Johnny? What would you have done that I didn't do? *I* looked harder for the right guy. What would you do for a new thrill for her? I worked for them, kid. Right from the start you said for me to leave you alone. Okay. I left you alone. You ever read any of the memos I sent? You initialed them, kiddo. Everything that's been done, we both signed. Don't give me any of that why didn't I tell you stuff. It won't work!" His face was ugly red and a vein bulged in his neck. John wondered if he had high blood pressure, if he would die of a stroke during one of his flash rages.

John left him at the window. He had read the memos. Herb was right; all he had wanted was to be left alone. It had been his idea; after twelve years of work in a laboratory on prototypes he had shown his—gimmick—to Herb Javits. Herb had been one of the biggest producers on television then; now he was the biggest producer in the world.

The gimmick was simple enough. A person fitted with electrodes in his brain could transmit his emotions, which in turn could be

broadcast and picked up by the helmets to be felt by the audience. No words or thoughts went out, only basic emotions—fear, love, anger, hatred . . . That, tied in with a camera showing what the person saw, with a voice dubbed in, and you were the person having the experience, with one important difference—you could turn it off if it got to be too much. The “actor” couldn’t. A simple gimmick. You didn’t really need the camera and the sound track; many users never turned them on at all, but let their own imaginations fill in the emotional broadcast.

The helmets were not sold, only leased or rented after a short, easy fitting session. A year’s lease cost fifty dollars, and there were over thirty-seven million subscribers. Herb had created his own network when the demand for more hours squeezed him out of regular television. From a one-hour weekly show, it had gone to one hour nightly, and now it was on the air eight hours a day live, with another eight hours of taped programming.

What had started out as *A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ANNE BEAUMONT* was now a life in the life of Anne Beaumont, and the audience was insatiable.

Anne came in then, surrounded by the throng of hangers-on that mobbed her daily—hairdressers, masseurs, fitters, script men . . . She looked tired. She waved the crowd out when she saw John and Herb were there. “Hello, John,” she said, “Herb.”

“Anne, baby, you’re looking great!” Herb said. He took her in his arms and kissed her solidly. She stood still, her hands at her sides.

She was tall, very slender, with wheat-colored hair and gray eyes. Her cheekbones were wide and high, her mouth firm and almost too large. Against her deep red-gold suntan her teeth looked whiter than John remembered. Although too firm and strong ever to be thought

of as pretty, she was a very beautiful woman. After Herb released her, she turned to John, hesitated only a moment, then extended a slim, sun-browned hand. It was cool and dry in his.

“How have you been, John? It’s been a long time.”

He was very glad she didn’t kiss him, or call him darling. She smiled only slightly and gently removed her hand from his. He moved to the bar as she turned to Herb.

“I’m through, Herb.” Her voice was too quiet. She accepted a whiskey sour from John, but kept her gaze on Herb.

“What’s the matter, honey? I was just watching you, baby. You were great today, like always. You’ve still got it, kid. It’s coming through like always.”

“What about this robbery? You must be out of your mind . . .”

“Yeah, that. Listen, Anne baby, I swear to you I don’t know a thing about it. Laughton must have been giving you the straight goods on that. You know we agreed that the rest of this week you just have a good time, remember? That comes over too, baby. When you have a good time and relax, thirty-seven million people are enjoying life and relaxing. That’s good. They can’t be stimulated all the time. They like the variety.” Wordlessly John held out a glass, scotch and water. Herb took it without looking.

Anne was watching him coldly. Suddenly she laughed. It was a cynical, bitter sound. “You’re not a damn fool, Herb. Don’t try to act like one.” She sipped her drink again, staring at him over the rim of the glass. “I’m warning you, if anyone shows up here to rob me, I’m going to treat him like a real burglar. I bought a gun after today’s broadcast, and I learned how to shoot when I was ten. I still know how. I’ll kill him, Herb, whoever it is.”

“Baby,” Herb started, but she cut him short.

“And this is my last week. As of Saturday, I’m through.”

“You can’t do that, Anne,” Herb said. John watched him closely, searching for a sign of weakness; he saw nothing. Herb exuded confidence. “Look around, Anne, at this room, your clothes, everything. . . . You are the richest woman in the world, having the time of your life, able to go anywhere, do anything . . .”

“While the whole world watches—”

“So what? It doesn’t stop you, does it?” Herb started to pace, his steps jerky and quick. “You knew that when you signed the contract. You’re a rare girl, Anne, beautiful, emotional, intelligent. Think of all those women who’ve got nothing but you. If you quit them, what do they do? Die? They might, you know. For the first time in their lives they’re able to feel like they’re living. You’re giving them what no one ever did before, what was only hinted at in books and films in the old days. Suddenly they know what it feels like to face excitement, to experience love, to feel contented and peaceful. Think of them, Anne, empty, with nothing in their lives but you, what you’re able to give them. Thirty-seven million drabs, Anne, who never felt anything but boredom and frustration until you gave them life. What do they have? Work, kids, bills. You’ve given them the world, baby! Without you they wouldn’t even want to live anymore.”

She wasn’t listening. Almost dreamily she said, “I talked to my lawyers, Herb, and the contract is meaningless. You’ve already broken it over and over. I agreed to learn a lot of new things. I did. My God! I’ve climbed mountains, hunted lions, learned to ski and water-ski, but now you want me to die a little bit each week . . . That airplane crash, not bad, just enough to terrify me. Then the sharks. I really do think it was having sharks brought in when I was skiing that did it, Herb. You see, you will kill me. It will happen, and you won’t be able to top it, Herb. Not ever.”

There was a hard, waiting silence following her words. *No!* John

shouted soundlessly. He was looking at Herb. He had stopped pacing when she started to talk. Something flicked across his face—surprise, fear, something not readily identifiable. Then his face went blank and he raised his glass and finished the scotch and water, replacing the glass on the bar. When he turned again, he was smiling with disbelief.

“What’s really bugging you, Anne? There have been plants before. You knew about them. Those lions didn’t just happen by, you know. And the avalanche needed a nudge from someone. You know that. What else is bugging you?”

“I’m in love, Herb.”

Herb waved that aside impatiently. “Have you ever watched your own show, Anne?” She shook her head. “I thought not. So you wouldn’t know about the expansion that took place last month, after we planted that new transmitter in your head. Johnny boy’s been busy, Anne. You know these scientist types, never satisfied, always improving, changing. Where’s the camera, Anne? Do you ever know where it is anymore? Have you even seen a camera in the past couple of weeks, or a recorder of any sort? You have not, and you won’t again. You’re on now, honey.” His voice was quite low, amused almost. “In fact the only time you aren’t on is when you’re sleeping. I know you’re in love. I know who he is. I know how he makes you feel. I even know how much money he makes a week. I should know, Anne baby. I pay him.” He had come closer to her with each word, finishing with his face only inches from hers. He didn’t have a chance to duck the flashing slap that jerked his head around, and before either of them realized it, he had hit her back, knocking her into a chair.

The silence grew, became something ugly and heavy, as if words were being born and dying without utterance because they were

too brutal for the human spirit to bear. There was a spot of blood on Herb's mouth where Anne's diamond ring had cut him. He touched it and looked at his finger. "It's all being taped now, honey, even this," he said. He turned his back on her and went to the bar.

There was a large red print on her cheek. Her gray eyes had turned black with rage.

"Honey, relax," Herb said after a moment. "It won't make any difference to you, in what you do, or anything like that. You know we can't use most of the stuff, but it gives the editors a bigger variety to pick from. It was getting to the point where most of the interesting stuff was going on after you were off. Like buying the gun. That's great stuff there, baby. You weren't blanketing a single thing, and it'll all come through like pure gold." He finished mixing his drink, tasted it, and then swallowed half of it. "How many women have to go out and buy a gun to protect themselves? Think of them all, feeling that gun, feeling the things you felt when you picked it up, looked at it . . ."

"How long have you been tuning in all the time?" she asked. John felt a stirring along his spine, a tingle of excitement. He knew what was going out over the miniature transmitter, the rising crests of emotion she was feeling. Only a trace of them showed on her smooth face, but the raging interior torment was being recorded faithfully. Her quiet voice and quiet body were lies; the tapes never lied.

Herb felt it too. He put his glass down and went to her, kneeling by the chair, taking her hand in both of his. "Anne, please, don't be that angry with me. I was desperate for new material. When Johnny got this last wrinkle out, and we knew we could record around the clock, we had to try it, and it wouldn't have been any good if you'd known. That's no way to test anything. You knew we were planting the transmitter . . ."

“How long?”

“Not quite a month.”

“And Stuart? He’s one of your men? He is transmitting also? You hired him to . . . to make love to me? Is that right?”

Herb nodded. She pulled her hand free and averted her face. He got up then and went to the window. “But what difference does it make?” he shouted. “If I introduced the two of you at a party, you wouldn’t think anything of it. What difference if I did it this way? I knew you’d like each other. He’s bright, like you, likes the same sort of things you do. Comes from a poor family, like yours . . . Everything said you’d get along.”

“Oh, yes,” she said almost absently. “We get along.” She was feeling in her hair, her fingers searching for the scars.

“It’s all healed by now,” John said. She looked at him as if she had forgotten he was there.

“I’ll find a surgeon,” she said, standing up, her fingers white on her glass. “A brain surgeon—”

“It’s a new process,” John said slowly. “It would be dangerous to go in after them.”

She looked at him for a long time. “Dangerous?”

He nodded.

“You could take it back out.”

He remembered the beginning, how he had quieted her fear of the electrodes and the wires. Her fear was that of a child for the unknown and the unknowable. Time and again he had proved to her that she could trust him, that he wouldn’t lie to her. He hadn’t lied to her, then. There was the same trust in her eyes, the same unshakable faith. She would believe him. She would accept without question whatever he said. Herb had called him an icicle, but that was wrong. An icicle would have melted in her fires. More like a

stalactite, shaped by centuries of civilization, layer by layer he had been formed until he had forgotten how to bend, forgotten how to find release for the stirrings he felt somewhere in the hollow, rigid core of himself. She had tried and, frustrated, she had turned from him, hurt, but unable not to trust one she had loved. Now she waited. He could free her, and lose her again, this time irrevocably. Or he could hold her as long as she lived.

Her lovely gray eyes were shadowed with fear, and the trust that he had given to her. Slowly he shook his head.

“I can’t,” he said. “No one can.”

“I see,” she murmured, the black filling her eyes. “I’d die, wouldn’t I? Then you’d have a lovely sequence, wouldn’t you, Herb?” She swung around, away from John. “You’d have to fake the story line, of course, but you are so good at that. An accident, emergency brain surgery needed, everything I feel going out to the poor little drabs who never will have brain surgery done. It’s very good,” she said admiringly. Her eyes were black. “In fact, anything I do from now on, you’ll use, won’t you? If I kill you, that will simply be material for your editors to pick over. Trial, prison, very dramatic . . . On the other hand, if I kill myself . . .”

John felt chilled; a cold, hard weight seemed to be filling him. Herb laughed. “The story line will be something like this,” he said. “Anne has fallen in love with a stranger, deeply, sincerely in love with him. Everyone knows how deep that love is, they’ve all felt it, too, you know. She finds him raping a child, a lovely little girl in her early teens. Stuart tells her they’re through. He loves the little nymphet. In a passion she kills herself. You are broadcasting a real storm of passion, right now, aren’t you, honey? Never mind, when I run through this scene, I’ll find out.” She hurled her glass at him, ice cubes and orange slices flying across the room. Herb ducked, grinning.

“That’s awfully good, baby. Corny, but after all, they can’t get too much corn, can they? They’ll love it, after they get over the shock of losing you. And they will get over it, you know. They always do. Wonder if it’s true about what happens to someone experiencing a violent death?” Anne’s teeth bit down on her lip, and slowly she sat down again, her eyes closed tight. Herb watched her for a moment, then said, even more cheerfully, “We’ve got the kid already. If you give them a death, you’ve got to give them a new life. Finish one with a bang. Start one with a bang. We’ll name the kid Cindy, a real Cinderella story after that. They’ll love her, too.”

Anne opened her eyes, black, dulled now; she was so full of tension that John felt his own muscles contract. He wondered if he would be able to stand the tape she was transmitting. A wave of excitement swept him and he knew he would play it all, feel it all, the incredibly contained rage, fear, the horror of giving a death to them to gloat over, and finally, anguish. He would know it all. Watching Anne, he wished she would break now. She didn’t. She stood up stiffly, her back rigid, a muscle hard and ridged in her jaw. Her voice was flat when she said, “Stuart is due in half an hour. I have to dress.” She left them without looking back.

Herb winked at John and motioned toward the door. “Want to take me to the plane, kid?” In the cab he said, “Stick close to her for a couple of days, Johnny. There might be an even bigger reaction later when she really understands just how hooked she is.” He chuckled again. “By God! It’s a good thing she trusts you, Johnny boy!”

As they waited in the chrome and marble terminal for the liner to unload its passengers, John said, “Do you think she’ll be any good after this?”

“She can’t help herself. She’s too life-oriented to deliberately choose to die. She’s like a jungle inside, raw, wild, untouched by

that smooth layer of civilization she shows on the outside. It's a thin layer, kid, real thin. She'll fight to stay alive. She'll become more wary, more alert to danger, more excited and exciting . . . She'll really go to pieces when he touches her tonight. She's primed real good. Might even have to do some editing, tone it down a little." His voice was very happy. "He touches her where she lives, and she reacts. A real wild one. She's one; the new kid's one; Stuart . . . They're few and far between, Johnny. It's up to us to find them. God knows we're going to need all of them we can get." His expression became thoughtful and withdrawn. "You know, that really wasn't such a bad idea of mine about rape and the kid. Who ever dreamed we'd get that kind of a reaction from her? With the right sort of buildup . . ." He had to run to catch his plane.

John hurried back to the hotel, to be near Anne if she needed him. But he hoped she would leave him alone. His fingers shook as he turned on his screen; suddenly he had a clear memory of the child who had wept, and he hoped Stuart would hurt Anne just a little. The tremor in his fingers increased; Stuart was on from six until twelve, and he already had missed almost an hour of the show. He adjusted the helmet and sank back into a deep chair. He left the audio off, letting his own words form, letting his own thoughts fill in the spaces.

Anne was leaning toward him, sparkling champagne raised to her lips, her eyes large and soft. She was speaking, talking to him, John, calling him by name. He felt a tingle start somewhere deep inside him, and his glance was lowered to rest on her tanned hand in his, sending electricity through him. Her hand trembled when he ran his fingers up her palm, to her wrist where a blue vein throbbed. The slight throb became a pounding that grew, and when he looked again into her eyes, they were dark and very deep. They danced and he felt her body against his, yielding, pleading. The room darkened

and she was an outline against the window, her gown floating down about her. The darkness grew denser, or he closed his eyes, and this time when her body pressed against his, there was nothing between them, and the pounding was everywhere.

In the deep chair, with the helmet on his head, John's hands clenched, opened, clenched, again and again.