Tom sat in his shared room along with the other three contestants. He looked through his bag making sure he had everything he thought he would need. He surveyed the other players in the room. Susan and John were busy keeping each other company. JoAnn was sitting on the edge of her bed waiting.

They were all waiting. The two hours had come and gone. They were supposed to be in the race at this time. Nothing had happened yet.

Tom stood up and looked out the window. They sky was blue and clear. Not a cloud in sight. He couldn't help but wonder when the race planners would change the weather against everyone else's advantage. Calling in clouds and stormy weather conditions. They could do that and more all with the flip of a button and the turn of a dial. At least that was the rumor.

Tom turned back to the group. They weren't paying attention to the weather. They were just sitting there waiting for the call to come over the loudspeaker. He walked to the front door.

“This is ridiculous.” Tom said. “They should have come for us by now.” He paced back and forth in front of the door.

Susan looked up. “What is with you guys? You're all about this damn race!” JoAnn and Tom looked over at her in disbelief. What about the prize money didn't she get?

“The way I see it? We're out of prison. We have the opportunity to enjoy life again.” John chimed in.

JoAnn looked over to Tom who shrugged. What were these two people on? Drugs? Were they high on something? No it couldn't be drugs. Such things were confiscated upon entering the facility by the judges. Maybe they just had a thing for freedom. JoAnn thought about that for a moment. Who in their right mind would consider the race to be freedom? Sure everyone in the race had volunteered and they were excited as the next person. But these two people, she thought, they weren't your normal race enthusiasts. There was something about them for sure. She'd have to watch her back around them. They could easily have a target out on her.

Tom stopped pacing. He reached for the handle of the door. Turning it slightly he found it wasn't locked. He turned it fully and opened the door. Outside a guard looked back in on them.

“Something wrong sir?”

Tom shook his head and waved. “No, nothing wrong.” He looked at the guard; the baton had been replaced with a semi-automatic rifle. At his side was a hunting blade roughly six inches in length and three inches in width. The handle was made of what appeared to be bone. Tom didn't want to find out what kind of bone that was. He shut the door.

JoAnn looked over at Tom. She wondered why she had been thrown in with this particular group of misfits. Whatever the case she was there now and couldn't go back. There was one thing she had on her mind. Win the race at all costs. She looked to Susan and John who returned the look.

“So, what were you in prison for?” She asked.

John adjusted his shirt as he stood up from the bed. “Cybernetic Cannibalism.” He carefully said the words to make sure he got them right. Looking to Susan even for approval. She nodded.

“Yeah what he said.”

JoAnn looked at them with more intent. Tilting her head she tried to grasp what it was they had done. It wasn't coming to her. “Say what now?”

“Cybernetic Cannibalism.” John explained “It's when you take parts from one cybernetic creature and use them for another one.” He waved his arms about as he spoke as if it made it all make more sense.

It didn't.

JoAnn had a blank look on her face. She looked to Tom. His face was blank as well. At least she wasn't alone in this.

“Care to say that in English?” JoAnn said.

Susan wiggled on the bed excited. “Go ahead John. Tell them what you did. Tell them.” She could hardly keep her legs from wiggling. Her hands moved about as she got more excited.

John sat back down on the bed. “We were in desperate need of money, food, shelter, and medicine.” He said. “I was approached by a friend who worked for the government. They had a bunch of robots that stopped working properly. The robots were mostly older models that were no longer manufactured. Their warranty had run out. He told me if I were to come up with a way to take parts from newer robots and place them in the older, he'd pay me a large amount of money.”

“Huge amount.” Susan said. “Way more than large, it was going to be huge!” She placed her hands out as though she were measuring a fish.

John nodded. “Right, anyway as I was working on the robots things went a little haywire and it killed a janitor on the night shift.” Pointing a finger at himself. “Totally not my fault. The police were called in and we were arrested a week later.”

Susan smiled. “Yep! True story. I was an accomplice.”

JoAnn smirked at the thought. That was something you wouldn't want to write home to mom about or put on a resume. So they were computer geeks. She could deal with computer geeks. All it would take was a swift punch to the throat to cause them to take a step back for air and a final blow across the abdomen causing their guts to spill out to the ground. Piece of cake.

Tom on the other hand was thinking more along the lines of what they had just told them. Androids. They had been playing with androids. “Any idea where the malfunctioning androids went to? After you messed with them I mean.”

John shook his head while Susan shrugged her shoulders. “No clue.” They said in unison.

Tom nodded. “I see.”

“Contestants get ready.” Dexter's voice could be heard over the PA system. “You are about to embark on the race of a lifetime.”

The door opened.

“You know the rules.” Dexter said. “You race from now till December 20th. Any team reaching the finish line before December 20th will be disqualified and shot.”

“You will take your gear with you. This is your only possession that you may have on your person. What you brought with you is all that you have.”

“If you kill another race member you will be disqualified and shot.”

“If you kill a guard you will also be disqualified and shot.”

“If there are no further questions, I'll start the countdown.”

Tom laughed. How could there be any questions? You play by their rules or you are murdered. It was easy enough. He already had the idea of how he would spend the prize money in his head.

JoAnn rolled her eyes at Tom as she got ready. She was determined to win the race no matter the cost. Stepping close to the door she placed her bag over her right shoulder. Looking out into the hallway she saw the guard. Perhaps she didn't need to win the race, maybe she just needed to get someone's attention. Eying the guard, JoAnn made up her mind. She had decided how things were going to go down. If innocent people got hurt in the process big deal. It's how she had to do things.

Susan and John also stood up and got ready. Susan placed her bag over both shoulders as John put his over his head letting it rest on his left shoulder and going around his body to rest on his lower back.

In his command center, Dexter looked over the monitors. Smiling as he watched all of the players get ready he reactivated the PA system.

“Here we go!”

“Ten.”

“Nine.”

“Eight.”

“Seven.”

“Six.”

“Five.”

“Four.”

“Three.”

“Two.”

“One.”

“Go!”

JoAnn ran out into the hallway and watched as the guard stepped aside. Tripping him she grabbed his knife and slit his throat. She grabbed his weapon and ran down the hallway to the nearest exit.

Sirens went off as loud as could be. They were deafening. Dexter came back on the PA “Penalty!” He said “There is a penalty. Player six has executed a guard without cause. All players stand down. Do not move.” He yelled into the mic. “I repeat stand down. If you do not follow my instructions you will be disqualified and executed.” His voice was trembling. Obviously he had never had to deal with such a situation before. It was something new, something exciting and dangerous at the same time. Dexter could only imagine what the media would say about this in tomorrow’s newspapers.

Tom, Susan, and John froze in place. Six guards ran down the hallway following JoAnn. As they came to the end of the hallway they exited the building and continued chase. They didn't have to run far, JoAnn was standing twenty feet away from the door. She was holding the knife in her hand. Blood dripped from the blade.

JoAnn smiled at the six guards as they exited the building. They had come for her and she wasn't ready to give up without a fight.

“Interesting this knife.” She said holding it in her hands. “I had one just like it once but that was years ago.” She explained. Taking out a cloth she started to clean the blood off the knife. With the gun strapped to her back, JoAnn pointed the knife at the guards.

“I was like you once.” She said. “A guard to the race. I had this very same knife actually. Well something close to it at the very least.” JoAnn made a few slicing motions in the air as she talked. “However” she turned the handle upward with the blade down. “My weapon had a certain marking on the bottom.” She looked over the knife and smiled. On the bottom of the handle was a marking. A pictograph of a lion.

“Huh, this *is* my knife.” JoAnn said. “How about that. What is going on here I wonder? I come back and my own knife is in my hands again. That can’t be a coincidence. Or can it?”

The lead guard held up his hand to his men informing them he didn't want them to make any sudden moves. They did as ordered and took a step back. He took a step towards JoAnn. “Ma'am hand over the weapon and no one gets hurt.”

JoAnn looked up from the knife and smiled. “How thoughtful, you're attempting to save me from bitterness and pain.” Flipping open the butt of the knife there was a secret compartment. She looked inside. “What do we have here?” She asked.

The lead guard looked to her then to the knife. “Ma'am, please don't touch that.”

JoAnn smiled. “Oh but I think I will.” She turned the knife, its blade pointing to the sky. Out popped a small black box. It had a switch and a light. The light was currently not shining. Flipping the switch she watched as the light came to life. Flashing a red color every two seconds. Three flashes of light, two seconds passed, two flashes of light, two more seconds passed, another three flashes of light and so on.

“Sorry about your man” JoAnn said “no actually I'm not sorry, he was working for me.” Pointing to the device in her hand she smiled. “Do you know what this does?”

The guard shook his head. “No ma'am. I've not seen such a device before.” He said taking a step back.

JoAnn smiled. “Well let me tell you a secret. It's a bomb. It's currently activated. It will blow up in twenty seconds.” She tilted the device back and forth in her hand. “If you don't go back in that building you'll die.”

The lead guard looked to his men and pointed at the door. “Go.” The five other guards ran towards the building leaving the sixth guard alone with her.

JoAnn watched as they left. Turning her attention to the last guard she gave her demands. “Give me a radio and your weapon.” She ordered. Her voice shined with authority. It was her way or the highway. JoAnn was in control of the situation and she knew it.

The guard handed over his weapon. He took his two way communications device off his belt and handed it to her. “Who are you attempting to contact ma'am?” He asked.

JoAnn slung the extra gun over her shoulder and looked to the radio. “An old friend.” She activated the radio.

“Dexter” JoAnn said into the device. “I know you're there. I heard your voice this morning as you were announcing the rules to the game.”

There was silence.

JoAnn placed her hand on her hip. “I don't have time for this Dex.” She aimed a gun at the guard in front of her. “If you don't respond, I will execute him.”

In his office Dexter sat stunned. He thought he had recognized the face of the woman speaking to him but hadn't been certain. Now he was. The voice brought back memories long past.

Dexter activated his microphone. “JoAnn?” He said.

JoAnn's voice came through loud and clear. “Yes Dex, nice to hear you again.” She said making false small talk. “I see you're now in charge of this place. Kudos to you.”

Dexter shook his head, it couldn't be. He zoomed in on her face. She looked right into the camera and smiled.

“It's me Dex. It's me.”

Dexter shot back a blank stare of both disbelief and shock. He hadn't seen JoAnn in years. The last official report on her whereabouts were that she had been killed in a hunting accident.

“What do you want?” Dexter asked.

Back outside, JoAnn cocked the gun in her hand. She continued to smile. “You Dex, just you.” She said. “You owe me big time old man. Big time.”

“What?” Dexter asked over the line. “What do I owe you?”

JoAnn frowned. “Oh come on Dex. You know the race was rigged two years ago. You let my husband die. He was going to win that year and you let him die.”

“No,” Dexter said “I didn't do such a thing.”

JoAnn shook her head. “Don't lie Dex! You know the race is rigged! There's a method to their madness. They don't want anyone ever to survive. It's all done for the sake of entertainment.” She said. “I don't have time for games like this. If you don't call off today's race, innocent people will die.”

The guard looked to JoAnn and swallowed hard. He watched as she played with the gun and watched as she tossed the device with the blinking light up in the air and then catching it.

“I can't call off the race.” Dexter said, “You know that's impossible JoAnn!”

JoAnn fired her gun. The guard fell to the ground with a bullet in his head.

“I'm sorry Dex, you took too long.” JoAnn said as she lowered the gun. “Now call off the race.” She said. “If you don't call off the race I will do something that you will regret.”

Dexter refused. “You're bluffing!” He said. “You've already killed two guards. You're going to prison young lady!”

JoAnn shrugged. “Big deal. Send me to prison. From what I hear I'll just be able to enter the race at another date. After everyone's had a chance to cool off from *this* incident of course.” She paused looking at the device. “Ten seconds to make up your mind.”

Dexter, unwilling to move, looked at the video monitor and stared JoAnn down. She wasn’t about to win this confrontation if he had anything to do with it.

“Tell me Dex.” JoAnn said. “What's in it for you? What are you getting out of this whole job?”

“I don't know what you mean.” Dexter replied. “I'm doing the job I was given by the government.”

JoAnn rolled her eyes “Right, and I'm the queen. No really. What made you take this job?”

Dexter hesitated “I don't have to answer this line of questioning young lady. Turn that device off now, we'll chat in my office!”

JoAnn shook her head. “No old man. You don't get things your way. I make the rules here.” She brought up the device. “Five seconds.”

Dexter held his ground. “JoAnn, you will not win. You will not succeed in this plot to take over the race!”

“Who said I was taking over?” JoAnn said. “I plan to stop it once and for all.”

The device beeped. “Time's up!”

Explosions could be seen and heard throughout the complex. Dexter watched in horror as one by one his video feeds went blank. Citizens, guards, janitors, maids, everyone else who was working in or around contestant quarters had died in an explosion. Throwing the microphone across the room, Dexter screamed. “JoAnn!”

JoAnn's voice came over the PA system. “Now it's just you and me old man. You and me.” she taunted him. “Ready for a game of cat and mouse?”

Dexter changed communications channels and attempted to contact any guard within range. The lines remained silent. There was no one left to come to his aid. They were all dead.

JoAnn dropped the machine guns and spoke one last time into the radio. “Told you old man. I told you. You would regret it.” She said, “Now we're on my turf.”

JoAnn dropped the radio and ran deep into the forest.

Dexter sat at his useless console with his head in his hands. What would the media do to him? Worse yet what would the government do to him? He was a dead man. In the history of the race no one had ever done what JoAnn had just done.

She committed mass murder.

JoAnn was now a threat. A big threat.

Standing up, Dexter walked out the door and down the hallway. As he passed by windows he could see the rest of the residential part of the complex. Fires and smoke everywhere.

Dexter had to eliminate the threat known as JoAnn. There was no way around it.

It was either her or him. There would have to be a victor in this year’s race. No more mister nice guy. She had made it personal. She had targeted him directly.

There was no going back.