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Dirty Little Cowards: William Sanders

The client said, "Should I go on down there and, uh, get undressed?"

"You might want to wait," Allison told him. "They're not quite ready yet."

"All right," the client said. "Whatever you say."

"It's just that, you might have noticed, it's pretty cool in here," Allison said. "Have to keep it that way. The equipment, you know."

"Yes." The client nodded. "It *is* a little chilly."

Actually there was a visible sheen of sweat on his face, but that almost certainly had nothing to do with the temperature.

"They'll let us know when it's time," Allison assured him. "Won't be long now."

At the other end of the main control console, the man named Burns silently damned Allison for a mealy-mouthed fool. It wasn't going to hurt this overprivileged jackoff to stand around the tank room naked and shivering for a few extra minutes. Now he'd be hanging out in here, asking questions and generally being a pain in the ass, for that much longer. Trust Allison, though, to suck up to the clients.

"I have to admit I'm a little nervous," the client admitted in a voice that suggested in fact he was a lot nervous. He rubbed his hands together and then shoved them deep into the pockets of his expensive-looking gray suit.

He was a medium-sized man, a little on the short side; Burns, remembering the TV and netzine shots of a decade or so ago, had thought he'd be bigger. But then the pictures hadn't been very clear, or given much time, the news people no doubt figuring that the public wasn't interested in yet another incomprehensible financial scandal. Considering how he'd gotten away with it, they must have been right.

He looked no older than thirty-five or forty, though Burns knew he had to be well past that bracket. His thick dark wavy hair showed no gray, and his wide evenly tanned face was without lines or wrinkles. That didn't mean anything, though. Nowadays people wore the faces and bodies they could afford.

And it went without saying that this one could afford plenty; otherwise he wouldn't be here. There were very few people in the country who could pay for a private timetable, even the ordinary passive-and legal-variety. As for the kind of specialized service Mr. Tedesco offered his clients . . .

The door from the hallway slid open and a stocky dark-faced man, dressed in white coveralls, stepped into the control room. "Devereaux," Allison greeted him. "I believe you've met—"

"Yeah." Devereaux nodded perfunctorily in the client's direction without really looking at him. "They in yet?" he asked Burns.

Burns shook his head. "Should be any minute."

Almost immediately the speaker on the wall said, "Control, this is Projection. We have a tap."

"Ah," Allison said. "Here we go."

He touched a couple of keys. One of the two big viewscreens mounted above the console came to blurry black-and-gray life,

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