

The Suicide Artist

by Karen Ingram

The first time, she drowned herself. A weighted belt pulled her to the bottom of a swimming pool. She felt a twinge of something, not quite fear, as the cool water washed up over her head. There was the strange, pregnant sound of water in her ears, the pressure of it on her skull. Then she ran out of breath and was forced to draw the deadly fluid into her lungs. Her animal instincts took over instantly. She thrashed and treaded at the water, trying to reach the surface, but the belt was too heavy. She clawed at the belt in a final desperate attempt to free herself, but she didn't have the key. The horrible taste of chlorine and white panic were her last sensations.

And then she died. And here she learned the strange and sad truth: coming back to life was more painful than dying.

The world became pain. Pain as her nervous system twitched back to life and her diaphragm began to spasm. Pain as she vomited up the last of the water from her lungs and drew her first ragged breath of air. She had expected air to taste sweet, but it burned and screamed inside of her as she coughed and shuddered until there was no strength left to fight it.

She was alive.

A mask was fitted over her face and warm, stale-tasting oxygen worked its way into her body. She became aware of voices and her vision cleared. Kelmen hovered over her, talking to the doctors in serious tones while they worked on her. He made eye contact with her and flashed a huge grin.

"We got it," he said.

She managed a weak smile and a thumbs up.

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All her life, she had dreamt about dying. Her father had chosen to put a gun in his mouth, but she decided this was not the way for her. She didn't even know the man, except for a few old photographs, some nasty words from her mother, and the sight of him in his coffin. She sometimes wondered if his reasons for leaving his family were the same as his reasons for leaving this earthly plane.

Eventually, she decided drowning appealed to her the most. It sounded quick, and she liked the idea of cleansing herself inside and out at death. It sounded soothing. Sometimes at night, when she had trouble sleeping, she would drive out to Observation Point to look out across the lake and dream about losing herself in the murky waters, trying to recall some vague memory or half-remembered dream about fishing with her father when she was very young. It was here that she first met Kelmen.

He just walked over and sat down next to her, as if she'd been waiting for him. When she turned to him in surprise, he smiled at her knowingly.

"Hello, Verity," he said in soothing tones. "My name is Kelmen, and I'm here to offer you a job. Have you ever heard of Precease, Inc.?"

Of course she had. Precease, Inc. was a huge global business that had started in her hometown just a year ago. It had started off with noble intentions, as so many bad things do. Several years ago, a device was created that enabled data to be recorded directly from the human brain. Viewers are placed in a sensory deprivation tank, and the

recording could then be played by tapping into a viewer's thalamus, giving them every sight and sensation experienced by the recorder without being muddled with their own. It was all noninvasive, quite safe, and seemed very, very real.

The creators behind this device, and behind the company they formed, had thought that if people could experience what it was like to die, so many unnecessary deaths could be averted; homicide, suicide, war, abortion, and so on. But when the first terminally ill patient signed a waiver, allowing his last precious moments alive to be forever captured on computer, a Pandora's Box was opened. The public, instead of being appalled by the experience of death, was attracted to it. Bootleg copies of the recording were sold on the black market at an alarming rate.

Precease, Inc. changed their tune quickly and quietly, deciding to capitalize on this newfound opportunity. They began to record the deaths of death row prison inmates and terminally ill patients, but the most popular one of all was their first suicide.

The man, known only to the public as Karele, signed a waiver, plugged himself into the recorder and, in front of 20 scientists, doctors, computer specialists and psychologists, he hanged himself.

Karele's recording was, Kelmen explained to Verity, a bigger success than Precease, Inc. could have ever dreamed. Sales exploded and the word "precease" imbedded itself into the global lexicon. "Death Parties" became all the rage. Karele's death whetted the public's appetite for experiencing suicide safely and they demanded more.

Precease, Inc. then had their brightest idea, yet: hire people willing to die and be revived, over and over. Experienced "diers" would be, Precease, Inc. felt, valuable commodities. Much could be learned from them scientifically, and experience would surely make them more reliable.

They soon learned the idea was more difficult to implement than they had expected. They had problems with recruitment, not because of a lack of volunteers, but because of a lack of dedication from them. Some volunteers changed their mind at the last minute, suddenly overcome with a case of stage fright or awareness of their own mortality. Others would quit after their first revival. The entire recording process, including revival, was expensive and the company could not afford to continue being slighted. They tried screening applicants more carefully and making them sign contracts requiring them to die five times, but the problems continued. A few people, unable to break their contract, simply packed their bags and disappeared. One, ironically, committed suicide at home and was discovered when he did not show up at work to die the next day. Then there were the pretenders, the people who sang praises about the company and how they'd die a hundred times for them, but as soon as their contract was up, they left.

Precease, Inc. came to the conclusion that they did not need volunteers; what they needed was recruitments. A team of researchers, including Kelmen, monitored Internet traffic and posts on social networks to compile a list of likely suicides near Precease, Inc. headquarters.

"You are number three on the list," Kelmen told her. "I've been following you for about two weeks, monitoring your habits and behavior to get an idea of your frame of mind. The more I observe you, the more I think you're perfect for the job."

"You've been following me?" she was too shocked to be angry.

He nodded. "When you bother to go anywhere, yeah, I follow you. The past few days, you've done little more than lie in bed and stare at your ceiling fan. But I knew you'd come back here before you did anything to yourself. That's why I chose to speak to you now."

Her face had gone numb from the cool wind coming off of the lake. She stared at her lap, where she'd tucked her hands between her legs to keep warm, and listened to Kelmen tell her about the money they would give her for each successful job. It was a lot of money. Even if the revival failed and she died, the money would be enough to pull her mother and her sister out of the crushing weight of poverty. She literally had nothing to lose.

Most recruits signed up for five deaths. Verity requested a contract for ten, and asked if she could die by drowning first as she signed her name on the dotted line. Kelmen swelled with pride. He had found their rising star. He was certain of it.

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Her second time, she slit her wrists vertically and bled out in a bathtub, feeling the hot blood mingle with the warm bath water against her skin. She learned the smell of blood, massive amounts of blood. Just out of sight, mostly watching on closed circuit camera, were the usual team of scientists and doctors to study suicide firsthand for their research. She found that she was more self-conscious about being naked in front of so many people than she was about dying. The darkness was sad and lonesome, but it was also inviting. As she lost consciousness, the EMTs and surgeons stepped in to stop the bleeding, feed new blood and drugs into her system, patch her up, and bring her back into this world.

Kelmen was waiting for her when she woke up in the hospital bed. He told her how successful her first death was selling and how this one would surely be a big seller, too. He was talking very fast and it was difficult for her to focus on his words. She still felt groggy. As he talked, she carefully worked the tape off of her skin and peeled back the bandages to examine the sutures. She would have some very large, ugly scars, she realized. She turned her arms over and examined the practice cuts she had done in the days leading up to her death. They were not deep enough to require sutures, but there were many of them. She sighed and then realized the room was quiet enough for her to hear the sigh. Kelmen had stopped talking. She looked at him and saw him studying her carefully.

"I'm sure we can fix those," he said quietly. "Make them less noticeable."

She looked at her arms again and was reminded that life was not beautiful.

"No," she replied. "I don't think that's necessary. I'll just end up getting more in the future. It's almost winter, anyway. I can wear long sleeves."

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Her third time was from anaphylactic shock. They'd discovered she was deathly allergic to bee stings and decided it would make an interesting recording.

"We're breaking new ground, here," Kelmen said excitedly. "Nobody has ever recorded this before."

It was, at first, very unpleasant and scary. Her throat itched and burned, her lips began to swell, and then she had trouble breathing. Soon, she found herself scratching at her neck, trying to loosen a too-tight collar that was not there. She didn't even notice the hives that covered her from head to foot until they told her about it later. Suddenly, it no longer felt uncomfortable. Everything just grew quieter and slowly faded to black.

They didn't make her stay overnight at the hospital, but the drugs they gave her made her very sleepy, so Kelmen offered to drive her home. Her memory blacked out at some point during the drive and she woke up an indeterminate number of hours later, not in her bed, but in Kelmen's.

"Did we have sex?" she puzzled. She lifted the covers and peered underneath, but found them both still fully dressed.

"Not yet," he said and kissed her.

He made her heart pound, her breath become hard and desperate, and her nerves tingle, alive with energy.

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Verity's deaths became Precease, Inc.'s most popular sellers, breaking records each time, and Verity became something of a celebrity. Public reaction varied greatly. Some decried Precease, Inc., labeling them as evil, moral-degrading fiends. Ironically enough, some sent death threats. Others lauded Precease, Inc. as visionaries of a new era in entertainment and hailed Verity as an artist.

She wasn't sure how she felt about all the attention, but she certainly understood it. Death was a very powerful, mysterious, and frightening thing, and she was helping redefine the way everyone perceived it. Here was death, raw and unedited, for all to touch and taste without personal risk. Natural thrill-seekers flocked to it, as one would expect. Why jump off a plane with a parachute when you could feel the real adrenaline rush of imminent death? But it also recruited millions of people who had never before taken any sort of risks in life. It soon became difficult to find anyone on the street who had not experienced a recording out of curiosity at least once, and the common question on everybody's lips was, "Have you ever been preceased?"

Life for Verity, in many respects, did not change. There were differences, of course. For the first time in her life, she had money. She had millions of fans that adored her and wanted to know everything about her. She declined all interviews, much to the annoyance of Precease, Inc., but her privacy seemed to bolster her career, rather than harm it. She was as enigmatic as death, itself.

Verity also had the rejuvenated love of her mother and sister, and the simple joy of providing for them. They had been almost as numb and beaten by life as she had been, but the simple act of not having to want for anything changed them, gave their lives hope and happiness. She was happy for them. She wished she could be happy, too.

She had Kelmen, who helped her to pack her things and move into his place shortly after her fourth death. Kelmen was always there for her when she woke up from a revival. He was always there for her when they got home, to touch her, and kiss her, and remind her that she was alive. But it all rang hollow, as if it were happening to someone else. She wondered, at times, if death had changed her, but she knew deep down inside nothing had changed. She liked all of these new things in her life, but life continued to

mean nothing.

Life had always had no meaning to her, which was why she had become fixated on the end. After dying so many times, death had also become meaningless. There was simply nothing left with real meaning. She tried to explain this to Kelmen without success. Even other recruits at Precease, Inc. did not understand. Many of the new recruits in Kelmen's program credited the company with giving their lives real meaning for the first time. Precease, Inc. had given them a sense of purpose. They, and Kelmen, were completely, fully, and blindly devoted to Precease, Inc. It made her sad, and she wasn't quite sure why.

The changes in her body also made her sad, distantly. She was becoming a human patchwork quilt—a collage of mortality. The sutures in her arms were removed and the scars were fresh, red, and itchy. Her seventh death had been exposure in the snowy and isolated woods. The doctors had injected her with an experimental drug that would, in theory, prevent frostbite and preserve her tissues. For the most part, it had worked, but she had still lost some sensation in her fingers and toes, and the skin took on a slightly grayish pallor. Kelmen insisted it would get better in time, although she didn't think he had any basis for this assumption.

"And even if it doesn't, you'll always be beautiful," he said, kissing her.

"I don't feel very beautiful," she said. "I feel useless. I don't feel like I'm doing any good at all."

"Are you kidding? You're the most devoted employee we have," he laughed. "I wish I had half of your dedication. I love my job, and I love the company, but I just can't bring myself to do the things that you do. I'm . . . I'm afraid of dying," he admitted. "I don't even watch recordings. I . . . can't imagine doing that. It's too much. It makes me feel sort of inadequate, at times. We could all take a page from your book. The company would be that much better if we did."

"I don't do it for the company," she told him. "I do it because I want to die."

"Oh, you do not," he scoffed. "Not really."

She didn't respond. She resumed writing her notes. She was working on a memoir about her experiences with the help of a ghostwriter, not because she wanted to, but because Precease, Inc. had insisted. She'd spoken to the ghostwriter a few times. He seemed nice. He wanted the title to be either "A Thousand Deaths to Live" or "Living a Thousand Ways to Die." She thought both titles were a little too flamboyant, but he said it had a nice ring to it. Precease, Inc. agreed, and so did Kelmen.

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Her tenth death was murder. They hired a convicted killer on death row who took great pleasure in strangling young women, and he soaked up this final opportunity for all it was worth. Precease, Inc. had a set built at the prison, part of a house. The murderer was to simulate breaking into the house and attack Verity in her sleep.

It took a while for her to fall asleep, as she did not know what to expect. Precease, Inc. had purposely been as vague as possible to make her fear that much more real.

It worked. He slapped her around violently, ripped off her clothing, and bit her on her back and buttocks. He did not rape her, as per his contract, but she did not know about this clause and fully expected him to. Verity cried and begged for him to stop. She

begged for her life. He strangled her into silence. She later learned that, in exchange for his services, his own death sentence was commuted to life. He didn't want to die.

When she woke up in the hospital, Kelmen told her that this recording was their biggest seller yet. He looked so happy. When they got home, he tried to kiss her and she shrank away from him.

"He didn't rape you," Kelmen said. He was not angry, just confused.

She didn't answer. She curled up on her side in bed and prodded her split lip with her tongue, tasting the rawness. She didn't speak for two days.

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When she had fully recovered from her injuries, she reported to Precease, Inc. for her usual meeting with the board of directors to determine her next fate. They suggested dehydration. She suggested decapitation.

"Uh. . . I don't think we could revive you from that," one of them said after an awkward pause. He turned to his compatriots for guidance. "Can we fix that?"

"I don't want to be revived," she said.

Kelmen leaned over and murmured to her, "Ver, you can't do this. You have an obligation to the company and to the interests of the public."

"I have fulfilled my contract," she reminded them, ignoring Kelmen. "Ten deaths. I'm no longer obligated to do anything. Will die for you once more. But this is the last time. It's time for me to go."

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In bed that night, they both stared into the darkness, unable to sleep.

"In all the times I died," she said suddenly. "Were you ever afraid for me? Were you ever afraid they wouldn't be able to bring me back?"

"No," he said. "I always believed we could do it. We are the best in the world."

She chewed on this for a moment. "They can't be perfect all the time. Everybody fails, sooner or later."

He rolled over and looked at her, studied her shadowed features, brushed her hair back from her face.

"I never understood why you feel so uncomfortable with the company," he said. "Especially considering all the sacrifices you made for them. It seems so. . . disloyal."

"Somebody has to ask questions. Otherwise, they'd be unstoppable," she said. She let the words hang between them for a while, feeling their weight.

"Will you cry for me at my funeral?" she asked finally.

"No," he said.

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She sat and waited patiently while the technicians argued. Decapitation had never been recorded before and they wanted everything to be perfect. This was, after all, Verity's swan song. They couldn't decide whether she should lie face up or face down in the guillotine. Some of them said it would be scarier to see the blade come down at her,

while others thought it would be scarier just to hear the sound of it coming. Nobody asked her for her opinion, but had they, she would have said she had no preference. She was in no hurry, and she found their heated debate morbidly amusing.

Finally, Kelmen heaved a sigh and spoke up above the other voices. “Guys, the theory is that the head remains alive for up to a minute after it’s been severed from the body. Nobody knows for sure if that’s true, of course, but I prefer to err on the side of caution and assume that it’s true. That being the case, Verity will be aware of everything that’s going on when her head falls off. I don’t want her to land on her nose, or stare at the floor of the basket. That’s not very cinematic. So, we’ll put her in face up, and after she falls, I’ll pick up the head so she can see her body. Does that sound acceptable?”

There were murmurs of agreement among the doctors, scientists, and techs in attendance. It sounded like a fine plan. Verity said nothing. She lay down with her head in place and stared up at the massive blade while they fussed with her headset and ran final tests to ensure everything was working optimally. She was not afraid. She felt nothing at all. Kelmen leaned over into her field of vision suddenly and kissed her.

“I lied,” he whispered. “I will cry.”

“Thank you,” she said.

He kissed her one last time, stood up, and ordered the recorder to be activated.

Everyone was silent and hidden away from her sight. It was just Verity and death, now. She regarded her fate curiously, studying the details of the wood grain, the bolts, and the shiny, insidious blade. They used a silent countdown at her request, so that she would not know when it was coming. The less bracing time, the better the recording, as she had learned from experience.

Precease, Inc. loathed losing someone of her caliber and experience, but they were certain this death would be the most spectacular of all.

Suddenly, there was a lurch as some unseen switch was activated, and the blade rushed down to meet her. Time did not slow down. Her life did not flash before her eyes. It all happened rather suddenly. There was the sound of it sliding down, the smooth chop as it hit bottom, and then she experienced the oddest sensation as her head—just her head—tumbled down into the wicker basket below. She bounced once and rolled slightly to the right, her cheek coming to rest against the rough, woven surface. She tried to turn her head to look up and couldn’t. She had no neck. She realized she couldn’t breathe.

Hands reached down, gently lifted her up and cradled her. Kelmen. His smile was shaking and tears filled his eyes.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, his voice cracking with emotion. “A true artist.”

He brushed her hair back from her face, his touch so familiar. Then he turned her in his arms to show her the fruits of her labor. Her masterpiece.

It was, indeed, beautiful.