

## Chapter One

### INDICATIONS

- 1 -

Jack sat naked on the edge of the bed with his head cradled in his hands. Dizzy and disoriented, the dried blood flaked and smeared as he ground the palms of his hands into the sides of his head, rubbing slowly in tiny concentric circles from back to front. He couldn't think. Everything was blurry and he felt overwhelmed. A debilitating, disorienting feeling that was so powerful it made him physically ill. Saliva gathered in the front of his mouth dripped from Jack's lips as he forced air out slowly through his mouth. He wretched twice and tasted bile in the back of his throat. Jack spit out the sour mixture and swallowed hard.

And so he sat, for a time, until the queasy feeling began to subside. Until the bitter taste in his mouth softened. Sat, quietly rubbing his head with his hands until the nausea ebbed and his thoughts began to clear.

Like the morning fog hanging gently over the surface of the water, Jack's mind felt obscured and cloudy. As if he could see something right where the water and fog met, something just out of reach.

"Where the hell am I?"

Jack wiped the sour moisture from his lips and tried desperately to remember how he'd gotten there – or how long he'd been there. Everything was out of focus and he felt, somehow suspended. Stuck, in some way, between some indescribable before and after.

He knew that his name was Jack. Jack . . . Jack Johnson, but that seemed to be all that he could remember. A first name and a last name that seemed so foreign and disconnected as to not be real at all - an alias for a person with no real substance or existence. Jack had no idea what had happened in the last five minutes, much less the last five days or five years. It felt as though his life had begun with the realization that he was sitting on the side of this bed with a throbbing headache and the overwhelming feeling that he was going to puke his guts out at any minute.

The inability to think or remember anything was unnerving enough, but even worse, was the terrible feeling of disconnected emptiness. Jack was filled with a barren, dry emptiness. He felt hollow like a huge drum. His own heartbeat echoing inside his ribcage with its lonesome thud-thud, seemingly only there to remind him of how empty and lost he really was at this particular moment.

But, as Jack sat on the side of this bed rubbing his head, he realized that there *was* something else. Something small and elusive, but it was there all the same. And as his thoughts slowly began to clear, Jack started to identify the feeling inside of him. To get his arms around this – something – that seemed to lurk just out of his ability to comprehend.

But it was there. Deep inside of his stomach, there was a tiny, glowing ember of dread. A smoldering piece of caged fear that burned deep within the clutches of the emptiness. Cut off from all other reality and emanating its evil heat out through the darkness, this ominous dread, all of sudden, felt as though it was closing in all around him. As if there

were something evil hanging in the air and lurking just around the corner or right behind him. As if a horrible something was getting ready to happen . . . or already had happened.

He tried desperately to remember something . . . anything besides his damn name. He had no idea where he was or how he'd gotten there.

As the fog cleared, little by little from the corners of his mind, Jack Johnson started becoming aware of his surroundings.

He saw a small black digital clock sitting on the end table next to his leg. Next to the clock sat a yard-sale looking lamp with a dingy gold base and a tattered off-white shade. From the burning bulb within, an amber halo lit the pale green wall above the lamp and as Jack followed the light up, he could see an oil painting of an old man and a small boy. They were holding fishing poles and the boy held, what looked like, a small tackle box.

Still messaging his temples lightly with his fingertips, Jack studied the picture intently. The man was in a white button down shirt and the boy had a light jacket on. Jack's eyes locked onto those of the little child's in the painting. As he continued to study the boy's face, he could see that he was a very happy little boy.

"Happy boy," Jack whispered at the picture as he dropped his hands to his sides and turned to face the painting directly. "I can't remember your name. I'm sorry."

"What a strange thought," Jack thought to himself as he turned his head from the picture, eyes still transfixed to those of the painted child's. "How could I possibly know your name?"

Jack dropped his head into his palms again as a wave a sadness swept across him like

a cold dark shadow. But then the smoldering ember began to burn. Slowly at first, and then faster as the flames began licking at the inside of his rib cage. This dark feeling that was both, inside of him and all around him, was growing. Jack's breathing became more labored and his heart began to pound in his chest.

Cradling his head in his hands, Jack adjusted his position on the side of the bed and then forced himself to take a long, slow breath.

And then, as if he'd received an electric shock, Jack shuddered and sat straight up on the side of the bed like a statue. He had just realized that he was *not alone*. There was someone lying on the bed behind him.

Things were becoming clearer. The room was coming into focus and now, Jack knew, without looking, that there was someone behind him. Without turning around and without a sound. He just knew it. He knew *she* was there.

"Oh God," Jack mumbled.

Not wanting or needing to verify this "feeling of a female presence" by actually looking, Jack returned his head to his hands and waited, almost impatiently, for the nauseous feeling to return. But it didn't.

"Please let me wake up. Please!" Jack was still mumbling as he rolled his head in little circles against the heels of his hands. His neck hurt. His head hurt. Hell, his whole body hurt.

Jack looked up and surveyed the room. He was still having trouble focusing, but as far as he could tell, it was a motel room. There was a lingering scent in the air like fresh

paint. And the smell of overly bleached linens. The walls were a pale shade of green that felt cool and reminded him of the deep lake water in the spring.

At the foot of the bed, a television flashed images with no sound. A man in a cowboy hat was waving his arms around in front of a row of shiny cars with large, black and yellow cardboard numbers propped up on the windshields. As the flickering lights danced across the crumpled sheets at the foot of the bed, Jack could see that the TV was sitting on a kind of lazy Susan, which in turn, was sitting on top of a dark brown dresser. One of the drawers hung loosely out the front and lilted slightly to one side.

Jack shook his head twice and tried to clear his vision. Surely this was some kind of awful dream. But it sure didn't feel like a dream.

*'Look behind you.'* The voice beckoned from within Jack's deepest thoughts.

Jack ignored the voice and looked along the wall next to the television. For some reason, he was just not ready to see what was on the bed behind him, yet.

"You can usually tell when you're dreaming," Jack thought to himself as he squinted through the shadows, trying to focus on the objects on the other side of the room.

*'Look behind you.'*

"Dreams just have an unreal feel to them."

Jack could see a discolored white Formica countertop, about four feet wide with a sink right in the middle of it.

"But this doesn't feel like a dream," Jack said aloud as suddenly, everything came into focus.

Now, he could plainly make out a doorway into a bathroom, directly across from the countertop with the sink in it.

*‘Look behind you, Jack.’*

“I have to piss,” he thought, trying to continue any line of thought that kept him from thinking about what was behind him. “That’s it . . . I’m at home in bed and if I don’t get up right now and take a leak . . .”

Jack sighed heavily and rolled his eyes at his ridiculous attempt to explain away the situation. The fact was that he was in a motel room and there was somebody behind him on the bed. He had no idea who it was or how she’d gotten there. This was not a dream. This was nightmare.

The fog had lifted and the whole room was clear and visible now. As if returning from the land of the deaf, Jack could hear the television and the muffled sound of a furnace running within a wall somewhere behind him. There was water dripping in the sink and, what seemed to be the sound of a television or radio in the room next door. Jack could hear pieces of a conversation coming from behind the paper-thin wall the oil painting hung on. From outside, the sounds of car horns and traffic entered the room from behind a closed curtain.

It was if he’d been in a deep, dark cave and had suddenly been shot out into the daylight. All of Jack’s senses seemed to have been turned on at once, as if they’d been controlled by a switch.

Beneath his feet, Jack could now see the matted mauve colored shag carpet. He could

now smell the lingering scent of perfume and the sour smell of sweat. For some reason which Jack was ill equipped to explain, the combination of the two smells brought an almost imperceptible smile to the corner of Jack's mouth. And there was something else, even more disturbing than that; the smell aroused him.

Jack couldn't remember being a drug addict or an alcoholic, but that sure would help explain things if he was. The awful sense of disorientation and that almost painful nausea he'd felt earlier.

"That must've been one hell of a party."

Jack rubbed the back of his neck. Actually, he had absolutely no memory of any party, but that must have been it. Must've been some kind of drunken binge. What other explanation could there be?

*'Look behind you. Jack, you know she's right behind you.'*

What was behind him? What was he so afraid of? Some woman that he wasn't going to be able to remember?

Because as hard as it was to accept, this was certainly not a dream. This was as harsh as reality could get and Jack knew that he was in a drab motel room. Jack knew that there was a woman lying on the bed behind him. And Jack knew that, for some reason, he *didn't* want to know that. He didn't want to think about who she was or where he'd met her. He didn't even want to turn around and look at her. Because, when he allowed his thoughts to drift, momentarily there, the burning intensified. The ember of dread began to speak to him from deep within.

But yet, it almost seemed that if he had wanted to . . . he could remember. All he had to do was to reach down deep enough. If he could do that, then he could find all the answers he wanted. But Jack wasn't ready to do that. Jack couldn't do that. He was too afraid to walk down that road just yet. He just wanted to forget whatever it was that he couldn't remember. To forget everything and not be here anymore.

So for the moment, he was content to just sit. Sit and feel nothing. Nothing but that damnable burning in his gut. That feeling of almost uncontrollable dread. The fear that lined the pit of his stomach and threatened to expel itself violently at any moment. Jack tried to swallow the burning lump in his throat and then blew out air through his nose.

*'Look behind you.'*

Again studying the room to occupy his mind, Jack could just see the glistening rim of the toilet seat through the open bathroom door. Everything was crystal clear, well lit and in focus and Jack wondered about why he'd had so much trouble seeing just a few minutes earlier.

Directly in front of him was a bank of windows – heavy, dark curtains drawn, but with sunlight peaking from underneath them. Jack sat staring at the luminous yellow-white strip of light that trimmed the frayed bottom of ugly curtains. His eyes widened and glazed over, taking in nothing and yet seeing everything. His mind was hung in that hazy time between aware and unaware. In no hurry to, or afraid to, make his way through this boggling scene, he remained there, wide-eyed and thoughtless for several uncounted minutes. Momentarily enjoying the serenity that comes from being lost inside of a

completely thoughtless state.

“What time is it?” Jack asked the curtains as if half expecting them to answer.

He turned and reached for the clock on the bedside table: “09:30 am”.

“It’s morning,” Jack thought still half dazed, as his eyes drifted back up to the oil painting on the wall.

“But what morning?” Jack’s gaze was fixed on that of the happy child with the fishing pole.

“I hope I’m not supposed to be at work,” Jack mumbled softly with his eyes pouring over the face of the painted child. The *happy child*. Frozen in time forever.

“No one would ever be able to hurt you . . .”

The faint, repetitive dripping sound drew Jack’s attention from the picture. It came from the white counter with the sink in it. Jack hadn’t noticed before, but there was a nearly empty liquor bottle and several glasses by the sink. One of the glasses was half filled with, what looked like, watered down Scotch. Jack could see clearly the red smear that graced its rim and his heart began to beat faster. The room was getting brighter and clearer every minute and the lingering perfume smell intensified.

The dripping sound wasn’t coming from the faucet, but rather from a wet hand towel that was draped over the front of the counter. It lay halfway in the sink and dripped rhythmically onto the floor. Blip. Blip. Blip.

On the wall behind the sink, a half visible handprint was smeared through heavy condensation on the mirror. It was fluid and graceful and echoed of some lost memory.

Steam hung in the air, drifting gently from the open bathroom door.

And there was smoke. Circling in the air next to Jack's head. He snapped back and forth, searching for the source of the flame. It was a cigarette on the end table, right behind the clock in a glass ashtray. Right next to him all along! It had almost two inches of ash hanging neatly off the end and it was burned almost down to the filter.

"How could I have missed that?" Jack thought then reached for the mostly burned butt. He knocked off the ash, brought it to his lips and then drew on it hard, filling his lungs with bitter tasting smoke. Then, with shaky fingers he mashed it out hard in the ashtray, coughing a bit as he exhaled the smoke.

There were at least a dozen cigarette butts in the ashtray and, as far as Jack could recall, he didn't smoke that brand. Or was it that he didn't smoke at all? He wasn't sure.

So that left the woman. The other person in the room. The one that Jack didn't want to look at.

*'Why? Why so afraid, Jack? Turn around and have a look.'*

The voice echoed and was lost someplace in the back of his mind.

Jack turned from the nightstand and glanced across the carpeted floor in front of him. There was a montage of clothing scattered on the floor just in front of his feet. A pair of blue jeans, a sweat stained T-shirt and a pair of men's underwear.

"Mine?"

Jack tried to suppress the question and continued studying the floor in front of him, hoping that he'd only find two sets of clothes.

Under the jeans, he could make out a sundress laden with tiny blue and gray flowers on a crisp white cotton background. Next to that, a black bra and a pair of light blue panties.

*‘Remember the panties, Jack? The pretty blue panties?’*

He had liked the light blue panties and again, found himself admiring the sweet flowery smell that was still in the air. In fact, it was getting stronger.

“Hers.”

The thought crept out without the tiniest bit of doubt.

Again, Jack fought the urge to turn and look at the bed behind him. If there was any doubt that she was there before, it was impossible to deny it now. And now he knew who she was. It was all coming back to him now.

He felt it, like an old friend standing on the doorstep. That welcome jolt of adrenaline. That chemical rush that your body gives you when it’s time to act. Time to act quickly. He wanted to run, to get dressed and run as far away from this place as possible. Just go and never look back.

But somehow he knew that running was not only unnecessary, it was impossible. There was nothing to run from, and no place to run to. The futility in trying to escape was alarmingly familiar and Jack had the unnerving feeling that this was not the first time he had been in this situation. He’d done this before. More than once before. In fact, he’d done this many times before. He could almost remember.

Jack leaned forward and put his head on his knees. He hugged his thighs and rocked

back and forth. The bed creaked gently underneath him as if playing an introduction to the realizations that were beginning to hit him. Now Jack wished he could forget what he had previously tried so hard to remember. He wished he would never remember anything ever again.

He knew where he was and he knew what he was doing there. And now he knew why he had been so afraid. It was as if his brain had suddenly shifted gears and sped forward to where the answers were. White hot panic blinded him and his heart pumped with fury. His sanity was slipping, he felt the cogs in his mind catch and bind and then just stop working. The blackest fear he'd ever known engulfed him and he was certain that he was losing his mind.

With his cheek still cradled against his knee, Jack clamped his eyes shut tightly and hugged his legs for dear life . . . and then his foot touched something. Something warm and sticky. Slowly - painfully, Jack cracked open one eye and looked down at the floor. It was blood. It was lots of blood.

And Jack had known that it was there. Known it all along. It's what he had been afraid to remember. It's what he was trying so hard not to remember. Jack's heart was pounding so furiously that he could taste each thunderous repetition in the back of his throat.

He shuddered uncontrollably and then, against his wishes, his eyes began to follow the fresh glistening trail of red liquid to the base of the bed.

A strip of cold flesh shot from his lower back to the base of his skull. Jack tried to stop but he could not. His eyes continued on their own, following the river of blood up the

side of the bed. The sheet next to him was still wet and dripping large crimson drops onto the carpet. It was soaked. Jack felt something stir in his groin.

*‘Jack. Turn around and look.’*

He shot to his feet and turned to face the bed. Vomit filled the back of his throat as he shut his eyes, swallowed hard and sucked a sharp breath into his lungs. Wrapping one arm around his belly he held himself tightly, trying to calm his insides. The burning ember was now a raging inferno, out of control and lapping at every inside corner of his being.

With his hand cupped tightly over his mouth, he continued to draw wind from between his fingers. He stood, helplessly staring at the mangled corpse that lay draped in the sheets, unable to turn away. Looking at it from one side to the other. From top to bottom it was limp, torn and lifeless. It was her. Eyes glassy and staring straight at him.

“Nooooo!”

Jack reached out trying to keep his balance and knocked over the lamp as he backed away from the bed.

The room was spinning hard and Jack fell, shoulder first into the wall, knocking down the oil painting of the man and boy fishing. The frame cracked as the picture slid across the floor and lodged itself into the bloody pool on the floor.

Jack forced himself to look down at the picture then uncontrollably, his eyes returned to the bloody mess on the bed. The woman’s lifeless eyes caught him and turned him inside out. This time, he couldn’t stop the convulsions in the pit of his stomach and Jack

leaned forward, throwing up the entire contents of his stomach. It shot from behind his cupped hand and splattered across the wall and the end table. Emotion and confusion overwhelmed him.

Jack had absolutely no idea how he could be capable of doing anything like this . . . but he was sure that he had. As sure as he was standing there, naked with puke and blood on his hands, he had murdered her. Brutally tortured, mutilated and murdered her. That he was sure of.

But he also knew that he couldn't have done this. It was impossible. How could he have done this? It didn't really matter how, Jack knew what he'd done. Like he knew that the sun shines and that water is wet.

There was no 'how and why' right now. The simple fact that it had been done and that *he* had done it seemed satisfying.

"Satisfying?"

Was he some kind of schizophrenic madman? Was he a psychopathic killer? How could something like this be 'satisfying'? But that was definitely one of the twisted emotions he was experiencing at this moment.

"Satisfying," Jack whispered quietly in disbelief and again became aware of the sensation in his crotch. A throbbing, pounding need. A blinding desire that he could not control.

Jack turned his back to the bed and leaned forward. Placing both hands on his knees, he kept his eyes closed and took several deep breaths. There was not enough air in the

room to completely fill his lungs. He was panting, but not from sickness or revulsion. He had become exhilarated to the point of weakness. And he liked this feeling. To Jack's horror, he was smiling. And worse than that, he had a rock hard erection.

"God help me!" Jack shouted to the ceiling and rammed his fists into the soft sheet rock of the wall in front of him. Praying for strength, he opened his eyes and stumbled toward the sink. This time, carefully keeping his eyes away from the bed.

At the sink, Jack looked into the mirror and then ran cold water over his hands. It felt clean, and cool. The dried blood melted into a burgundy swirl and mixed with the wet vomit as it disappeared down the drain. Jack splashed the cool water onto his face and into his mouth.

His mind was racing. Fear - exhilaration - excitement - anguish. Which was it? He tried in vain to force the image of the mutilated woman from his mind, but it was burned there in indelible detail. The only thing that was gone now was the fear. It had been replaced by a strange calmness. Jack was no longer afraid.

He raised his head slowly from the sink and looked at himself in the mirror. It was not his face, but it was not altogether unfamiliar either. It was a face that was lost and confused. Hardened in a way, and older, probably, than it really was. Forty . . . forty-five. Maybe. He *knew* that he was looking at his own reflection, but it felt like he was seeing someone else. A stranger. Searching the face for some connection, he looked deep into the dark green eyes of this familiar stranger, wishing to find the tiniest glimmer of humanness. But it wasn't there. He could only find deep, dark emptiness.

More than a day's worth of stubble graced his chin and it was peppered with gray. His thick brown hair was cut short giving him a well groomed air despite his unshaven state. Jack studied the lines at the corners of his eyes and traced his jaw line with the tip of his finger. It was a bony jaw, covered with pale, pock marked skin. The days worth of beard hid the unevenness of his complexion. His nose, centered perfectly on his face, was thin and triangular.

“Who are you?” Jack pulled at his chin and squinted at the foreign image in the mirror.

Jack looked down at the sink and caught himself rubbing his erection. He shook his head hard and tried to force his attention to the mirror. There was a bruise flowering on his left cheek and as he stood upright, he could see several deep scratches in his chest. There were other welts and bruises and more scratches as he continued to take inventory.

For the first time, he realized that he stung all over. He was in a great deal of pain. His testicles throbbed and pounded. The scratches in his chest burned, like lightning bolts striking in rhythmic bursts.

“What's happening to me?” he screamed at the stranger in the mirror. “What the goddamn hell his happening to me??” The fear had returned.

An image of a woman struggling for her life flickered in front of him like a flash bulb. Jack stood up straight, riveted by the sensation of the memory. He could see her scratching at his chest, swinging and clawing. Another flash - a blinding white light . . . and again, the woman. Jack felt the muscles below his belly button pull tight. Jack's eyes rolled back into his head but the images continued.

Breathing frantically, Jack tried staring straight at the light fixture over the mirror. Tried blinding himself to stop the visions. But it seemed to make them clearer. Sharper - more real.

She was trying in vain to get away, and then Jack hit her, hard, in the face. There was no way for him to escape the pictures flashing in his head. If he would have torn his eyes out with his own hands, he could not have stopped them now.

Her glistening eyes were still looking at him. He was straddling her chest, kneeling over the top of her, pinning her to the bed. She was so helpless, so fragile. So . . . in need. Staring straight into him with wide, pleading eyes, whimpering like a wounded animal. Jack closed his eyelids but the burning white light reflected from the inside out.

Jack was leaning against the mirror sobbing. He opened his eyes in desperation and horror, waiting for her to reappear, knowing that she would be there begging for her life. Instead, his reflection in the mirror was the only thing he saw. The stranger's face was there and the girl's was gone. Of all the things Jack had wished he could remember, why did it have to be this?

He leaned forward and put his forehead against the mirror, still breathing heavily. The memory of the woman begging for her life was fading. But there was something else, something attached to that fading memory and it was becoming clearer. Jack liked it. Jack liked it a lot. He wanted it to go on. He wanted to do it again. He had enjoyed the things he had done to this girl and again, Jack found the he was fondling himself.

As the events of the evening replayed in his head his emotions were conflicting but at

the time he was killing this girl, Jack had been filled with a deep sense of contentment.

A wave of nausea and disgust swept over him, sending his mind into that dizzy, unreal realm again. The room became fluid. It was squishy and ran as if he were looking at it through syrup. Suddenly, he was covered in cold, sour sweat and his lungs seemed to be shrinking and ceasing up. Jack leaned over the sink and heaved uncontrollably.

Then he stood, teetered on his heels and stumbled backwards, catching himself in the bathroom doorway, one foot on the carpet, the other on the tile. His head spun and the edge of his vision was trimmed with black. Little blips of red light danced in front of his eyes. He could feel his knees begin to buckle as the room went gray and his head met the tile floor with a soft muffled thud.

And then he was in the shower.

Jack put his right hand against the wall and held his head under the water as a cloud of steam filled the tiny bathroom. The water was hot, almost to the point of burning. It seemed to melt everything away, cleansing him inside and out. He was lost in the white mist and floating through its warm embrace.

Jack knew that he had done this hideous thing, he remembered doing it. Somewhere inside him was the answer to why, but he either wasn't willing or wasn't capable of digging down that deep. Right now was for soaking and healing. In the mist, answers seemed less important than they had when he first realized he was sitting on the bed next to a bloody dismembered corpse. In fact, he didn't need answers any more.

Jack was still a little afraid, but there was an odd parity now. He couldn't comprehend

it completely, yet it made perfect sense. He felt no remorse. At least for the moment, the horror of what he had done was masked. He understood it's magnitude and yet, he was unmoved by it. As if his emotions were controlled by something. Jack smiled a wry little smile and moved his head around under the stream of hot water and masturbated. The shower made him feel better and before getting out, Jack masturbated again.

Still drying his hair with a hand towel, Jack sorted his clothes from those of the dead woman. On the bed in front of him, lay the tangled mess of sheets and flesh. What had been bright shades against a white back drop was now darker, thicker. Almost stiff looking. The aesthetics of his work were fading. Jack dressed himself in front of the mirror, combed his hair with his fingers and began to whistle softly.

He rubbed a hole in the condensation on the mirror so he could get a better look and then he noticed it. There was writing on the mirror . . . right above the sink. How come he hadn't seen it before? In bright red letters, diagonally across the mirror it read:

**'let me help you'**

When did he write that? His eyes searched the counter top. He pushed the glasses aside and slowly moved the dripping hand towel over, carefully looking under it. Back and forth . . . scanning the surface of the counter . . . it's got to be here. And it was.

Jack picked up the tube of lipstick and uncapped it carefully in front of his face. Watching the glistening tip in the mirror, Jack twisted the case slowly and watched the bright red shaft rise from it. His eyes were glazed over and there was the tiniest little smile that began at the farthest corner of his mouth. He studied the way the light caught

the end of it - gleaming and shining as he slowly rolled it back and forth between his fingers. Jack rubbed his pelvis against the edge of the counter as he moved the lipstick up and down . . . in and out. Totally transfixed by its beauty. By its simplicity of form and its remarkable ability to catch and reflect light.

Jack rubbed himself harder against the counter and continued to roll the lipstick – slowly – up and down. This was surely the most wonderful thing that he had ever seen. Bright, bright red. Smooth and shiny. Glistening and sparkling. Perfect in its form and fluid motion.

Jack brought the tube up to his lips, following it closely with his eyes. As he rolled the red stick out of the shiny metal flake case, he touched it, ever so gently, to the tip of his tongue. Jack closed his eyes and shuddered. Again, he could smell the lingering sweetness. The scent of perfume and sweat and cheap liquor swirled through his nostrils. It was intoxicating and he felt weak.

Then suddenly, Jack closed the lipstick and shoved it into his pants pocket.

As he turned from the sink his eyes caught the empty stare of the girl on the bed, his stomach rolled once and he turned away.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, as he looked down at the empty sink. He was hurting again only this time it was inside.

“I’m so sorry.”

He grabbed his ski jacket from the arm-chair as he walked toward the door. Jack was running on 100% instinct now. He felt like he knew exactly what he was doing, and still

he had no idea what he'd do next. Kind of like watching a movie and being in it all at the same time. He reached for the doorknob and looked back at the room one more time.

That was odd. The room was brighter now, lit up like a Broadway stage show. Jack had to squint just to see an outline. The walls were bright white and shimmering with sparkling beads of light. They looked like they were melting. It was too damn bright.

Why?

Jack's heart bounced off of the inside of his rib cage when he saw the curtains. They were wide open and sunlight was streaming into the small room like the shower of water from a fire hose. But the worst part . . . through the window was a clear view of the parking lot and the street beyond. And from the parking lot, there was a clear view of this room. A clear view of the bloody, hacked up body!

Jack reacted with an explosion of energy. He ripped the door open and shot into the hallway. He wasn't thinking about getting caught or about the horror of what he'd done. He wasn't thinking about anything. He just had to get away. Far away . . . and then everything would be better. Everything would be okay if he could just get away from this place.

He ran down the hallway and plowed into the first door with an exit sign over it. Out in the daylight, the bright sunshine blinded him and the cold fall air bit at his ears. Jack turned up the collar on his Jacket.

Holding his hand up to block the sun's rays, he made his way through the parked cars toward the street. Faster, faster. There were too many people now. And too much light.

Too bright. He couldn't find his way. He bumped into a young couple, holding hands.

“Hey . . . watch it buddy!”

Jack raised his eyes to the city skyline, puffy white clouds spun around him like a carousel. Jack squinted and stumbled and bumped into somebody else. So dizzy . . . so bright.

The buildings were everywhere . . . and growing. Rising up around him like huge carnivorous dinosaurs. Closing in on him. Jack felt small. He couldn't breathe. Voices . . . all around him . . . and in the distance . . . indistinguishable from the roar of the passing traffic. Cars whizzed by on the street next to him. Approaching like rockets and then blurring in slow motion as they passed. The faces behind the windows glared in quiet accusation. The empty faces. Cold and expressionless. Staring at him as if they knew. Accusing.

Flash. The bright light blurred his sight.

*“Please don't hurt me . . .”*

Again, the vision of the woman appeared and again, he could not stop the memory. Jack spun out of control, both mentally and physically. He fell awkwardly into the street light before collapsing to his knees on the sidewalk.

Flash.

*“Please . . . oh God, no . . .”*

Jack was on top of her; smashing her in the face . . .

“Stop it!!!!” Jack screamed in horror, clutching his head tightly with both hands.

Leaves swirled in the wake of the speeding cars and rose from the curb in little dancing spirals. A crowd of people gathered around as he clung to the light pole and squinted up at them.

“Is he okay?” asked a man wearing a torn jean Jackt.

“I don’t know, he just fell down . . .,” the voices trailed off and then everything went white. And silent.

- 2 -

Randy’s eyes flinched as he studied each screen carefully. The only light in the tiny dark room was the royal blue haze radiating from the bank of computer screens. There were a dozen or so, neatly lined up across the counter in front of him.

“Sure,” Randy said, looking at the monitor to the far left, “it’s not exactly what I went to school for.”

His eyes scanned the monitors briefly and landed on a console that was scattered haplessly with lighted controls and a small panel of colored buttons. In the blue haze that filled the room, they looked like boat lights on the water at night, cutting their way through the fog. He pressed three of the buttons in sequence and brought his gaze back to one of the flickering computer screens.

“Nope, nope, nope.” Randy’s tone ascended as he teetered back in his swivel chair at the center of the U shaped console. “Not what I paid for.”

In the background, the air was filled with hums and beeps and an occasional clicking

sound. The research control room looked liked something out of a NASA promotional film. And he chuckled to himself every time he realized that, as a kid, he would have thought this was “a Really cool and most excellent job . . . man.”

When he stood to stretch, he leaned on the flat surface in front of him, deliberately cracking his knuckles with his weight. The clipboard that hung from the console by a ratty piece of string, mocked him with meaningless tabulations of the last six hours. It eluded his grasp as he reached for it, swinging itself to and froe at the end of its rope.

Randy reached with both hands and finally caught it as it spun in the air. He felt foolish. Foolish for chasing after the clipboard like Tim Conway in a Carol Burnette skit. He felt foolish for feeling the need to actually record the meaningless readings from the monitors spread across the room. And most of all he felt foolish for coming back to this place day after day after disparaging day.

His thoughts trailed off as he tapped one of the computer screens with the pencil and let the clipboard drop. It dangled back and forth on the string, turning from side to side again, still mocking him but Randy wasn't noticing it right now.

“I'm a trained mechanical engineer. This is just a temporary job . . . while I pursue a career in the field of engineering.” Randy's sarcasm filled the air like tire smoke.

Randy plopped himself back down into the swivel chair as if to punctuate his sarcastic statement with melodrama. His seat let out an elongated creak and Randy sighed in harmony with the chair. As his sigh trailed off into silence, he remembered his first day here.

“Has it been four years?” Randy’s rhetorical disbelief filled the empty room. He had just graduated from college with a BS in Mechanical Engineering not more than . . . four and a half years ago. The clarity of how quickly one can waste four years stung him like saltwater on a sunburn.

“I had to pay the rent.” He was defending himself to no one. “And that Linda woman at the agency was so excited that she’d found this position for me.”

Linda had described to Randy, what sounded like, a very progressive company. Her pitch, that this company had been started fifteen years earlier by two brothers and not a corporate board, was what peaked Randy’s interest. They started out writing software for PCs, games, mostly. Eventually, the company branched out into hardware. Initially, hardware that was intended to enhance the playability of the games they sold. As they diversified, the company explored opportunities in high tech research.

“She and my stomach were the perfect team to sell me on this place too.” Randy remembered how Linda’s eyes sparkled with, almost, genuine excitement during their conversation.

“These people do business worldwide and have annual revenues in excess of eight hundred million dollars. And their worldwide corporate headquarters is right here!”

Randy ran a quick balance sheet through his head; rent, heat, lights, food . . . beer . . .

“Tell me again what the job duties are.” Indecision forced him to clear his throat. It was good timing because his coughing and clearing was loud enough to drowned out the sound of his stomach growling.

“It’s an entry level position in one of their research facilities.” She ran through the entry level part as fast as she could.

“Entry level means shit job . . . this isn’t like a janitor or something like that is it?”

“No, absolutely not,” Linda pulled both of her eyebrows down and scowled. “This is a high tech career path opportunity with one of the leaders in the electronics industry today.” Her voice trailed off into the corner of his mind.

Randy leaned back in the swivel chair and kicked the clipboard lightly with the tip of his boot.

“Four years,” he whispered to himself, staring past the swinging clipboard.

It turned out, that Linda had been right in more ways than she could have realized. Randy now made double what even an experienced mechanical engineer could. The company sponsored health and dental were exceptional and the stock, profit sharing and pension plans were all excellent. Randy had gotten used to money in the bank, food on the table and the security that making more than you *need* gives you. He had stopped looking for other work a long time ago. Stopped dreaming, in the silent resignation that a fat savings account and a Visa Platinum cultivates.

His ambition had been lulled. And he no longer cared that he had lost his edge. He was as bujwa as they come and he, at this point, could care less.

Just as Randy opened his mouth to qualify his work to himself again, the door to the small room opened and in walked the gray haired geezer, his favorite hunchback of an old man in a lab coat. Well, the ONLY hunchback of an old man in a lab coat that he

knew, anyway.

“Any brains hittin’ the wall yet, Akerman?” his scratchy voice bristled with enthusiasm.

“As interesting as fish tits, Pops.” Randy said taking one final look across the line of monitors before stretching from the swivel chair and moving toward his coat that was hung on the wall. He grabbed it and pulled it on with sluggish effort. He took one step toward the open door, then turned to face Pops. As a greenish spray of light erupted from one of the computer screens, Randy could see Pops’ face clearly.

It was round like a dinner plate, with a huge red nose. The veins showing themselves at the tip. His cheeks hung limp, draped in the loose skin of his face. Several layers lay bunched up underneath each eye.

Randy turned toward the still open door and grabbed the knob.

“You don’t seem too excited about this one, kid.” Pops asked enthusiastically.

“Should I be?” Randy paused with his hand still on the open door.

“This one is big shit here, kid.” The old guy turned, rubbing his hands together. “I wouldn’t miss this one for the world.”

Randy always thought Pops was a little off center. Funny, but off center. ‘How ya doing?’, slapping you on the back, ferocious hand shakes . . . Randy didn’t really care for any of it. But this was strange even for him.

“Pop’s, I’m hoping for the most UN-eventful test that we’ve ever had. I just want this one to be over.” Exasperation was seeping into his tone.

Pops always seemed to feel some sort of zest for his work. But, in the case of this particular test, it was more than just zest. This was something . . . odd . . . bordering on creepy. His eyes were filled with little flickering lights that seemed to illuminate his entire face. Randy assured himself it was just a reflection from the consoles in his eyes and that he, himself, was far too tired to be making intuitive assessments at this point.

“I’m tired . . . going home.” Randy turned toward the still open door and then back at Pops one more time.

“See ya in the morning kid,” the old man growled energetically as he plopped down with Latin flamboyance in front of the console.

“Number four,” he looked straight at one of the monitors. “Phase two . . . and all I need is a hot dog and some warm beer.” Pops snickered to himself with cherubic delight. He appeared not to notice Randy’s lingering presence.

Randy sighed and nodded as he turned and slowly closed the door behind him.

“See ya in the morning Pops.”

- 3 -

Jack tried to open his eyes but everything appeared to be dissolved in a wash of twirling translucent color. The world around him was faded and filled with blurred images. He tried hard, but couldn’t bring anything into focus.

Jack wondered if he was unconscious; or dreaming again . . . he could feel himself coming back from somewhere. Returning from some dark place. It was almost a painful

awakening.

Jack took a deep breath and let the air slowly leave his lungs. There was a strange smell. A clean, almost antiseptic smell. Reassuring, yet somehow frightening. Jack took another breath and it burned the inside of his nostrils.

He felt sluggish, groggy. His mouth was dry and his lips were chapped and cracked. He could taste blood in the back of his mouth and he was sore all over. A dull, throbbing kind of ache that seemed to emanate from the inside. There was a burning sensation in the pit of his stomach and his skin was clammy - almost to the point of being sweaty.

He wanted to rub his face, but he couldn't lift his arms. He was too weak. In any case, he blinked several times and squinted through the bright white light - trying to make sense of where he was.

"Would you like something to drink, Mr. Johnson?" a silky voice floated down from above.

"Yes," Jack replied in a cracked, raspy voice before realizing that he was even speaking. For some reason, Jack was not surprised to find out that he was not alone. Not in the least. In fact, he had expected her to be here. But who was she?

Jack squinted harder and tried to lift his head a little. He could just make out the gleaming silhouette of a woman standing over him as she gently touched his face. She placed a small tube into his mouth and Jack could feel the coolness of the water rush into his mouth. He savored the sensation of the liquid as it ran down the back of his throat. He couldn't remember ever tasting anything this wonderful.

Still unable to focus, Jack could tell that he was lying on his back. His head and shoulders were elevated slightly and besides the overall achiness, there was a sharp pain in his right forearm. Along with the antiseptic smell that permeated the room, he could just make out the smell of, what he thought was, fresh linen. But crisp with the biting aroma of bleach. Too much bleach.

“Where am I?” the words felt thick and airy as they passed over his lips. Because he had expected her to be there, he felt comfortable asking the question – even though he couldn’t really see her.

“Don’t try to talk right now. Would you like some more water?”

If there were such things as angels, Jack felt that he must certainly be in the presence of one since he had never before heard a woman’s voice that was so soothing and so sensuous.

“Please,” he croaked as he again lifted his head and tried to focus on his surroundings.

This time, as she brought the tube to his parched lips, Jack could see the face of the woman standing over him. She was dressed in white. Standing with the light behind her, golden tendrils fell around her face and produced an iridescent glow. She smiled sweetly and stood back, holding a clear plastic squeeze bottle in her hands. Jack leaned a little farther forward and blinked hard to clear the sludge from the back side of his eye lids. He could read the little white name tag pinned to her chest. ‘*Nancy*’ it said in thin engraved red letters.

Jack wanted to prop himself up on his elbows and look around, but he honestly

couldn't move anything but his head. Turning slightly to one side, he could see the outline of a pitcher of water, a glass and some small bottles – and behind that, some square boxes that Jack just couldn't make out.

Above his head, where two plastic bags filled with clear liquid. Tubes descended from the bags to a crisscrossed arraignment of white tape on his right forearm.

Looking up at the women, Jack tried hard to speak. “Am I . . .” but his voice cracked hard and then stopped working.

The woman leaned forward and again, cold water flowed into his mouth. And again, it quenched the dryness inside his mouth.

“Is there something wrong with me?” Jack managed to get enough air across his vocal cords to ask the question.

Seemingly ignoring the question, the women thumped one of the plastic tubes. “You seem to be doing just fine, but don't try to over do it. Can you tell me which hand I'm holding up?”

Jack really didn't understand the question. He squinted hard and tried to lift his head, but all he could see was the smooth white silhouette of the salubrious angel - gleaming beads of light streaming from her hair.

“Which hand . . . can you tell?” she repeated the question melodically.

“Your right . . . why am I here?” Jack's voice was airy but insistent.

Even as he spoke, he was having trouble remaining coherent enough to carry on a conversation. He was just too weak and he was drifting again. Falling into the white wash

and the haze. He could still hear the angel talking, but her words were thick and muffled and hung from her lips like syrup.

“ . . . it’s necessary. Can you tell me your name?” The women asked as she touched Jack’s wrist gently.

“Nancy . . . that’s your name?” Jack fought hard against the darkness, but he could feel its grasp tighten. He really needed to figure out where he was and what he was doing here.

“Yea, that’s my name. Do you know what yours is?”

Jack closed his eyes, clenched his jaw and fought as hard as he could against the haze. But he couldn’t think any more. It was just too hard. Too hard to figure out anything, so he just answered her question.

“Jack . . .”

“Good. Now we need a little . . .” her voice had slipped back into the murky depths.

Jack could feel himself sliding again. The angel’s thick slurred speech was now unintelligible and Jack found himself retreating into the comfort of the darkness.

Occasionally making out a word or a phrase. And trying desperately to talk.

“Where am I? . . .” Jack managed to eke out as his eyes rolled back into his head.

“I asked you what color this was,” Her demeanor was patronizing

‘What color is what?’ Jack thought to himself, but couldn’t answer.

“That’s right, it’s green,” she announced proudly. “. . . like you’re just fine . . .”

Jack’s head was spinning. He felt like she was having a conversation with herself. Or

maybe she was just humoring him.

But he just couldn't get a hold of reality. Whatever that was. He tried once more to pull himself out of the darkness, but its grasp was too powerful. For a brief moment, he was frightened by its grip. Maybe it was nothing more than a strange hallucination - or a weird dream caused by eating too much sugar before bedtime.

And then Jack could feel himself slipping back to wherever it was that he had just come from. Only this time he embraced it. Jack wanted to go home. He wanted to sleep for a week and just be left alone. There was now comfort in the darkness. It became his new friend and Jack released himself to its solace.

- 4 -

Randy opened the door to the small control room and stood for a minute while his eyes adjusted to the dim light. Buster Ungerman, the guy everyone called Pops, was sitting in front of the computer consoles, mesmerized.

As far as Randy knew, Buster was the man's real name, but for some reason, everyone just called him Pops, probably because he looked like a Pops. It always seemed funny to Randy to have a nickname for a real name that sounded like a nickname.

"What's shaking Pops?" the enthusiasm in his voice was nonexistent.

"Number four," the gray haired geezer whispered with that Vincent Price melodrama that gave Randy the creeps. "He's on a fuckin' roller coaster, kid." The old man giggled a sinister little laugh and then rubbed his hands together as if they were cold.

“That’s just sick Pops.”

It was hard for Randy to muster any degree of excitement for this job. Much less the volume or brand that Pops seemed to be able to.

“I just don’t get it. You should . . . well of all the tests we’ve run, this one . . . shit this isn’t the one to be playing Frankenstein with . . . aw, hell.” Randy gave up. He was the only one listening anyway.

“Why am I back here?” he whined at himself from somewhere behind his eyes.

He knew the answer though. He had found THE house and he was saving, hoarding, collecting money for a down payment before it sold. He would qualify right now, but he wanted to have a house payment that he could afford if he ever got the courage to quit this place. So he had graciously volunteered to fill in on the second shift while Pinky (it seemed like almost everyone here had a ridiculous nickname) was out on medical leave. Something about an operation on his shoulder, but he was going to be out for six weeks, and that kind of overtime just doesn’t grow on trees, so Randy had jumped at the chance. That was only three weeks ago, three weeks that now seemed like an eternity.

“You look ragged as hell, kid.” Pops stood from the swivel chair and squinted in Randy’s direction. “You okay?”

“Yea, I’m fine Pops. Just a little tired, that’s all.”

“You take care of yourself, kid. This is no time to be getting sick.”

Pops walked up to Randy and leaned toward his face. Randy could feel the old man’s hot breath across the side of his cheek as he wheezed and squinted in the younger man’s

direction.

“Kid . . .,” the man cocked his head sideways to get a better look into Randy’s eyes, “if you don’t take better care of yourself, you’re not gonna need a house.”

“Look, I’ve only got three more weeks and then . . .”

“All the overtime in the world won’t be able to buy your health back, kid.” Buster cut in, shaking his finger as if he were trying to dislodge it.

Randy put his hand gently on the man’s shoulder. It seemed like this was more than just idle meddling. The guy looked genuinely concerned about him.

“Look, Pops . . . Buster . . . I’m fine.” Randy punctuated the sentence with a slight nod.

Pops studied the young man’s face for a few more seconds, then snapped his head back, pursed his lips and nodded in agreement. His concern had faded and the old man turned to face the monitors with a graceful flourish.

“Man, kid . . . if I was your age, I’d stay here all the time,” the old man coughed out and smiled. And then came that evil looking grin that just drove Randy up the walls. He looked just like the Grinch that Stole Christmas when he figured out what he was going to do to all those people down in Whoville.

“God, this is good stuff! I’m serious kid, keep a close eye on number four.” Pops laughed so hard he started coughing, again making the phlegm in his lungs rattle.

“What is he doing in there anyway?” Randy asked the old man.

Pops bent forward, still hacking, and held up his index finger signaling Randy to wait

just one minute for him to answer.

“Why? Why would he do this? Why would HE do this?” Randy wasn’t waiting for Pops to answer, these were rhetorical questions. As a matter of fact, he really didn’t want Pops to answer at all.

He didn’t want to discuss anything serious with the old man. Pop’s opinion on why someone this important to the company felt the need to be involved at this level was not only of no interest to Randy, he felt sure that it would only help him lose respect for the old man.

By now Pops had both hands on his knees and it sounded like he was about to bring up a lung. Randy reached over and smacked him on the back. Pops hacked hard and it seemed to clear his airway.

“Thanks, boy.” He grumbled and cleared his throat. “You take care now.” He resurrected himself and turned to leave.

“I will, Pops,” Randy tried to muster just enough false sincerity to send Pops on his merry way.

“All right then.” Pops smacked Randy on the side of his arm and disappeared out the door.

In the darkness, Randy stood quietly and surveyed the screens on the wall. Beep . . . humm. . . and then on the screen with the masking tape, hand labeled ‘# 4’, Randy stared mesmerized for a long time watching the patterns draw geometric designs across the glass.

“Number four,” Randy finally said to the monitor, “you are into some heavy shit aren’t you?”

- 5 -

“Until we decide *if* we’re going ahead with this, we don’t need to speculate about the impact it *might* have.” The tone in Jack’s voice was firm and confident as he waited for his brother Todd’s reaction.

Todd’s refrained perspective on this was refreshing for a change. Usually it was Jack that held tight to the reins of a new project. Jack was always the cautious one while Todd consistently threw caution to the wind. But today, the tables had turned.

Todd and Jack were on their way to lunch and heading for another debate as they walked along the sidewalk, enjoying the crisp fall day.

“I don’t think it’s a question of if, Jack.” Todd spoke sharply as he walked beside his younger brother. “But I do have some definite concerns.”

“Oh, I admire your sense of duty, Todd.” Jack raised one eyebrow and shot a questioning look at his brother.

Jack could hold his end of a conversation with Todd better than most. He knew well the things that would incite his brother and had learned to avoid them without knuckling under. Todd had the reputation of being both hot headed and a fierce negotiator. But to Jack, he was just his big brother, Todd.

“But it’s just a game, not brainwashing,” Jack’s tone was a calm and even.” When it’s

over . . . it's over and everyone goes home to momma – case closed.” His steps slowed as he passed a sporting goods store with a depth finder in the window.

Jack didn't go in for overkill or theatrics when trying to get someone to listen to his point of view. He had patience. He would state his case and then allow the other person time to reflect. Jack never was a salesman. That was Todd's job. Todd was always selling. Always pushing. Always winning. He was the one that drove them both. Drove their enormous success.

At another window, Todd turned and shoved his hands in his pockets then admired an outrageously loud red tie hanging on a bright green mannequin. Then, without turning to face Jack, he spoke directly at the plate glass window.

“I just think that until we know what kind of liability we're taking about . . .”

“I see,” Jack cut his brother off in mid sentence,” this discussion isn't about a sense of responsibility . . .” The expression on Jack's face was as sarcastic as his tone. “It's about covering your ass.”

Jack returned to walking, shaking his head as he made his way toward the restaurant. Todd followed, hands still buried in his pockets. He looked up at the sky and drew a deep breath.

“If the liability is going to out weigh the profit,” Todd continued, trying to catch up with his brother,” there's no sense in wasting our time.”

Todd's reply sounded almost apologetic. Jack maintained a two step lead just so Todd couldn't see the puzzled look on his face. Todd was going somewhere with this and Jack

couldn't figure out where. As Jack replayed the conversation in his head, he could see now that he'd been dominating it far too easily. Todd must've had an ace that he hadn't played yet - and that thought made Jack nervous.

"Besides, it won't stay where it is now. It's the next generation I'm worried about."  
Todd played his ace.

Jack stopped dead in his tracks but did not turn around. Todd walked up beside his younger brother and looked at the side of his face for a response.

"How come I have no idea what you're talking about," Jack squinted as he stood staring at the sidewalk," but I've got a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach?"

Todd studied the side of Jack's face for a moment and then spoke softly," We've only got a few simulations . . . and of, what I'd call, average intensity . . ."

Jack turned and looked directly into Todd's eye's. He listened with intent because he knew his big brother far too well not to recognize this . . . this preparation. Todd was prepping him for something and he knew that he was probably not going to like it when he found out what it was. So Jack held his questions and let his brother continue.

". . . we're not going to be able to hold the margins - especially when higher impact data is available."

"Higher impact data?" Jack asked, only partly confused.

"The natural progression is Bigger, Better, Faster, More." The intensity in Todd's voice was now on the rise and the statement hung between them like a hammock filled with rocks.

Jack recognized the look in Todd's eyes, but he couldn't figure out exactly where he was heading with all this. What worried him was the passion in his brother's voice. Todd was up to something and now Jack didn't want to know any more about it.

Of course that was not an option. They both knew that. This would have to be discussed, but they didn't have to do it right now. In fact, that was what lunch was for. So Jack retreated gracefully under the pretence that they had both broken their solemn oath. Their oath not to discuss business before lunch. So the two of them walked together and reflected in silence.

The warm sun covered their faces as the two made their way up the sidewalk to the restaurant. They had lunch reservations to discuss the future of their new venture. This time honored ritual was not new to them. Each time they left the office for their once-a-week lunch appointment, they would vow not to start any work (or work related) discussion until they were seated at a table. They would solemnly vow to enjoy the walk and the weather and each other's company. To discuss politics and the arts and how to properly prepare fresh lake trout . . . anything but work.

And every time the discussion would begin before either of them had taken three steps off the elevator. Sometimes it started before they had left the office, but without fail, always before that third step.

As they topped the last step to the restaurant, the sound of a street musician strumming a classical guitar floated up between the towering buildings. Jack loved the street performers. They brought beauty to a not so beautiful city. This place where people put

on costumes and masqueraded as someone they were not was filled with ugliness and neglect. The music helped Jack feel just a little bit more at home in a place he was not so comfortable in. Todd hated street performers.

“I wish they would outlaw pan handling,” Todd grumbled.

Jack dropped a twenty into the guitar case as they walked past.

“I swear, Jack . . .,” Todd was now shaking his head disgustedly.

“Just get us a table.” Jack stood with his hands folded in front of him, smiling and *not* knuckling under.

Inside, Jack was seated directly across from his older brother, at a corner table in this, their favorite restaurant. This had become their place. A place where they discussed the Company’s most important projects and reminded themselves of each other’s importance. They chose this place because it was the epitome of civility. Classical music whispered its melody and the flame at the tip of each candle seemed to dance in harmony with it.

Lead crystal and hand polished silver flanked each place setting. Gilded gold molding and carved cherry wood satiated the room. This civility was what eluded Jack and Todd in their discussions of company matters.

Being here, they were both required to keep their composure. This atmosphere had become a tool for them. Forcing its hand and having its way with their behavior. Although dining here was terribly expensive, they considered it an investment.

Jack and Todd weren’t rich and pompous . . . just rich. They were co-owners of an enormously successful, privately held firm called VTech Systems. VTech specialized in

the development and manufacture of super high tech video games - along with a dozen or so other businesses. Electronics research, psycho-acoustics, even some hush-hush work for the defense department.

They rarely displayed evidence of their wealth, but dining here, they both rationalized, was clearly necessary to the well-being of the company. In fact, they were more comfortable eating at Mack's Diner than they were at a five star establishment like Edward's.

But comfort wasn't what they were looking for right now. And Jack and Todd had become good friends with Ed Holmes, the young entrepreneur that had hocked his house to buy the failing restaurant only two years earlier. Now he appeared in nationwide articles and respected publications on everything from the best wine to new trends in dining.

Preferring to associate with people that had come up the hard way, Jack and Todd took an immediate liking to Ed. He had become successful through nothing more than hard work and sheer determination.

Jack especially enjoyed those kind of people. They had grit and substance, and they deserved their successes. Todd, on the other hand, appreciated the stamina of those who had come up the hard way, but his basic philosophy was different than Jack's.

Affluence, whether received or attained, was of no consequence. It was what you did with that affluence that counted. Ed, Edward when they were at the restaurant, had impressed Todd with his business savvy. When he spoke of market trends and financial

options, Todd listened with intent. Ed was one of the few people that Todd had any true admiration for.

Despite the few things they had in common, Jack and Todd were very different. Todd was the aggressive one. He was the salesman, the deal maker. It was Todd's intensity and drive in the business community that was responsible for the high profile of their business. He was dynamic and charismatic and seemed to fill a room by just walking into it. He was disarmingly handsome in a slippery sort of way. His hair was a sandy blond color and long enough to touch the collar of his shirt. At work, he wore it slicked back in that GQ look, but in his leisure time, it was combed back fell wistfully around his face. The ends, always disobedient, flipped upwards toward the sky.

His eyes were like a grayish green fog, shifting from dense to transparent. They were round in shape, like his brother's but had become permanently narrowed by his disbelieving nature. Todd had a 'prove it to me' attitude from the time he was born. This attitude had manifested itself in that ever present squint that added to his charm.

His chiseled, Mediterranean look, along with the dimple in his chin, proved irresistible to the ladies. He was, most always, overpowering – at work as well as in his personal life.

In business, his appetite for domination had become an asset. But even in his recreation, Todd preferred the edge. He would much rather be skydiving than golfing. Motor cross suited him more than fishing. And if he was on the water, it would be in the loudest, fastest boat money could buy.

He was taller than Jack by almost two inches but they both had their dad's broad

shoulders. He had a lean, muscular physique and carried himself almost arrogantly. He was the dashing older brother.

Jack on the other hand was quiet and polite. Non-competitive and generally unconcerned with his muscle to fat ratio. Although he was far from what would be considered fat, he was capable of caring a little extra through the middle. For thirty-eight, he figured he was in pretty good shape.

Standing a little under six feet tall, he was thicker and more muscled than his older brother. Jack never went to a gym and was unimpressed with muscle definition. He was more of the outdoorsman type. His hands were rough and burly from working on his land and chopping his own fire wood. He had collected every stone for the massive fireplace in his house and the circumference of his forearms spoke of that effort.

For Jack, being physical and getting a workout wasn't about looking good, it was about feeling good. Feeling strong, to him, was feeling like a man. Jack was powerful. And he had a presence. But it was a sturdy, constant influence, undemanding, and unlike his brother. His face was tanned from hours spent on the lake and his features were less chiseled than Todd's. He had a more rugged, weathered look about him. And the lines at the edge of his eyes made him more handsome, not less.

His hair was darker than Todd's but it bleached easily in the sun. Jack somehow managed to have highlights in his hair year round. When he smiled, his intensely sky blue eyes and his shining white teeth seemed to battle for attention. Each feature as powerfully brilliant as the other. And both were filled with an honesty and openness that made those

around him feel instantly at ease.

Jack would rather discuss than dictate. He was not the type to bark orders and for that reason, Jack filled the role of General Manager, providing the common sense approach to dealing with their almost three hundred employees. Employees that Todd was really incapable of dealing with.

But Jack was the brains behind their success. He drove the internal engine of the company. Jack had degrees in Electrical and Mechanical Engineering and a doctorate in Physics. He had taught himself Japanese and German and preferred reading to almost any other hobby - except for being on the lake. And sometimes he'd read out there.

He was fascinated by the Japanese culture and had an extensive collection of rare vases. His taste was eclectic and in his collection, every piece seemed to compliment its surroundings.

Despite the outward appearance of complimenting each other, Todd and Jack disagreed violently on things. They argued passionately over the things that Jack felt strongly about. Because unlike Todd, if Jack didn't feel strongly about it, he wouldn't argue. This was their strength. For in the end, they each provided the balance that the other needed.

And so the weekly lunch tradition had evolved as a counterpoint for their unique personalities. A civil means to sometimes uncivil ends. Yet always a tool for restoring balance. And today's lunch discussion was going to put the supreme test on that balance.

“Tell me about Bigger, Better, Faster, More.” Jack reluctantly returned to the

conversation started on the street.

“I’m just saying,” Todd spoke with a sickening cream in his voice, “that things are naturally going to gravitate toward the absurd, you know that.”

Jack’s expression indicated the need for clarification.

“I mean . . . first it’s a bike ride and then it’s a roller coaster,” Todd sat up a little straighter, “and then you jump out of a plane then you crash the plane,” Todd was leaning into the front of the table now, “then you’re tied up in back of the plane while a crazy lunatic crashes the plane but first kills everyone onboard right before your eyes . . .”

“Stop it!” Jack stared at his brother in complete astonishment. Jack was off balance and now Todd was in the drivers seat. So he seized the opportunity and drilled forward.

“. . . nothing’s ever enough. Consumers can’t stop . . . look, the public will ask for more and then won’t be able to handle it . . . that’s all I’m saying. It’ll be too much. I understand the way it works. They’ll demand a bigger thrill with each version. They always do.”

Jack was confused and trying hard not to let it show. So he thought hard and then leaned forward to look directly into Todd’s eyes when he spoke.

“I think I know what you just said, but what I can’t figure out is what it is you’re so worried about. So it’s exciting. Big deal. It’s nothing more than a really good movie. You watch it, it seems really real, you get a little head rush and then you go home. That’s it. Case closed.” Jack sat up defiantly and opened the menu.

Todd looked straight into Jack’s eyes with a cold calculating stare that made Jack

shiver on the inside. Jack looked up briefly then pretended to read the menu.

“You mean you actually believe it wouldn’t have an effect on you?” Todd was speaking a little too loudly for their surroundings. Again.

“I didn’t say it wouldn’t effect me,” Jack said calmly, still pretending to read the menu. “But I do know that it’s not going to have any lasting effect. What? You think it’s gonna be like a bad acid trip or something?”

Todd lifted his eyebrows and nodded slightly to indicate a positive response.

“Oh, come on,” Jack said looking up from the menu.

“I’m serious, Jack. I don’t think you understand what we’re dealing with here. About the problems associated with certain compulsive obsessive personalities.”

“You’re friggin’ crazy!” This time it was Jack that was a little too loud for their surroundings. Jack glanced around the room and smiled curtly.

“This could change the way you think,” Todd continued, “maybe even affect your beliefs . . . your moral outlook - hell . . . I don’t know what else! I’m really worried about the potential for loss here.”

“I don’t care what you put on the thing” Jack huffed at his big brother, “when the program’s done and the power’s cut off . . . it’s over. End of story. No lasting impact. No emotional psycho-babble brain damage. No deep scarring of the inner-psyche. Nada - zippo - zilch!”

“So you actually believe that it would have no lasting impact what so ever?”

“No,” Jack said softly - now less interested in the argument than simply the process of

baiting his big brother,” I believe it wouldn’t affect my most *basic convictions*.”

Jack was just fencing with Todd now and Todd seemed to be taking the bait.

“Oh, that’s a cute metaphysical distinction.” Todd snapped and then turned to see the waiter standing behind him. Jack smiled, still pretending he was reading the menu.

“Would you like to hear about our specials today, gentlemen?” The waiter played the ‘I didn’t hear a thing’ routine perfectly.

Todd turned back toward Jack and flicked the menu over his shoulder in a motion of dismissal. The waiter and Jack exchanged a glance that acknowledged how both of them felt; “What an ass-hole”.

Jack smiled and nodded politely to the waiter, indicating that they probably needed just a few more minutes.

“There’s nothing metaphysical about it Todd. I’m just saying that if you trust . . .”

“If you trust shit.” Todd blurted out.

Jack was so pleased with himself that he almost let loose with a big smile. Getting under Todd’s skin for a change was really a crowning achievement. Jack concentrated hard on not smiling.

“ . . . if you trust in what you believe,” Jack continued calmly,” then any outside influence is going to have such a minimal effect that you probably couldn’t measure it.”

Todd was rolling his eyes and looking around the room and Jack was wallowing in his reaction. But he couldn’t have pulled it off convincingly if he hadn’t genuinely believed in what he was saying. No amount of external stimulation could change who you were or

what you believed in. That was just a constant. An unchangeable truth.

“Ahhh!” Todd grunted in disgust and shoved the menu forward on the table. “It’s no use trying to have an intelligent conversation with you,” Todd said and turned away from his brother.

Jack looked the other way for a minute and thought about what it would take to actually get through to his brother. He could usually find a way to wear him down. It just took patience. Something Jack, unlike Todd, had plenty of.

“Todd,” Jack started slowly, “remember when we started this company?”

Todd continued to scowl in the other direction. Showing no signs that he was listening to his little brother’s prodding. He didn’t need Jack to remind him of how or why they started this company.

He was in college, struggling through his third year as a business major, when Jack called him. Jack had this great idea for a new video game.

“It’ll be more realistic than *anything* . . . real-time 3D render . . . blah, blah . . . texture map something . . .” Todd remembered how Jack had bragged energetically.

And Todd remembered being so fed up and frustrated with school that even this cockamamie scheme was a welcome diversion. He gladly quit school and went to work pushing his brother’s idea. Whatever the hell it was. He literally shoved it down throat after throat. And to his eventual surprise, his brother was right. It really was revolutionary and unlike anything anyone had ever seen.

After a year of hitting the streets and working part time selling everything else he

could, from used cars to vacuum cleaners (he did pretty well with the vacuums), Todd struck a cash deal with one of the big video giants. The up front cash and continuing royalties put Todd and Jack on a collision course with success that was unstoppable.

Todd became more aggressive than ever and Jack, bless his heart, seemed to just have one great idea after another. A new kind of interface, a new way of controlling the characters, artificial intelligence - Todd was just amazed, he'd also gained a new respect for his baby brother.

Jack seemed to stay so far ahead of the curve, that they could sell their technology to other companies even after they had basically used it up. After they had moved on to the next level. They began concentrating on more and more research and development. They landed a couple of military contracts. They worked with just about every major computer company and in the end, they had more outstanding patents than Thomas Alva Edison.

As the memories flashed through Todd's head, he sat in this retreat of civility - surrounded by candles and china and music - staring intently into his brother's eyes. Studying their movement and depth. Fighting against his own frustration.

"Do you remember?" Jack repeated the question.

"Of course do." Todd sighed heavily

"Do you remember when you thought I was wrong about the game even selling?" Jack waited for Todd to nod.

"Well, you got behind me then. You trusted my judgment. What's different now? Why can't you . . . won't you . . . believe me now?"

“I didn’t trust you then,” Todd pursed his lips and studied his brother’s face. “I just hated school . . .”

Todd sat quietly studying his little brother’s face. The guy was, after all, some kind of a genius. Maybe it was worth a listen. But, Todd knew one thing – there was going to be a winner and a loser out of this. That was for sure.

Then, Todd came back to life. And like a shark on the move, sat up and readjusted quickly in his chair.

“Alright,” Todd said rubbing his chin with his index finger.” I’ll believe you . . .”

Jack really didn’t like the way that sentence just kind of hung in the air like that. Something else was coming. Todd had that damn look in his eyes again and Jack felt a little funny.

“If you can prove it to me,” Todd’s jaw muscles clenched in defiance.

Jack’s funny feeling was turning into a sour stomach.

“What exactly do you mean by that?”

“You know, show me.” Todd pursed his lips and raised his hands on either side of his shoulders. “*Show me.*”

Jack was painfully confused.

“I thought I was controlling this conversation quite nicely,” Jack thought to himself as the sour feeling continued to grow in the bottom of his stomach. “How did it turn so quickly?”

“Show me?” Jack repeated Todd’s statement as a question.

“Yea, prove it . . . in the lab or whatever . . . prove it scientifically.”

Todd sat back in his chair and gazed around the room. Then he leaned forward, placing both forearms on the table, his hands clenched into fists. Todd had that narrow look in his eyes again as he stared into his brother’s face. That negotiator look. That predator look.

“I’ll bet you a buck you’re wrong. That you *can’t* prove it to me.”

Jack studied his brother and thought about what he was proposing. You had to be careful with Todd and his dollar bets.

Ever since they had become financially successful, money had lost its meaning – well, at least for betting purposes. So Todd started this dollar bet thing. It seemed to accentuate the principal of what they were arguing about. Like it had *more* impact because there was no great sum of money involved. Only the principal.

It was about someone being right and someone being wrong, a winner and a loser. Todd liked making sure there was always a loser. If he got the big deal, someone else had to lose it. If he went home with the most beautiful woman, someone else went home alone. It was the law of the jungle. And it was Todd’s way.

“Okay.” Jack was sucked into Todd’s game without a clear understanding of what he was actually agreeing to. For some reason, he was carried along by the momentum of the moment and his mouth was open before he realized he was speaking. “Okay, I’ll bet you a dollar I can prove it to you.”

It had an uncomfortably child-like resonance. Reminiscent of playing in the woods

when they were kids.

“Oh, yea?”

“Yea.”

“Oh, yea?”

“Yea.”

The memory echoed through the back of Jack’s mind as he tried to figure out what the hell he had just agreed to.

Todd smiled, picked up the menu and waved it in the air like he was hailing a cab.

“Waiter, we’d like to order now.” Todd slapped the menu down on the table and grinned incessantly at his brother.

Jack wasn’t hungry any more.

- 6 -

Jack opened his eyes and one word filled his mind. Cold. His face was cold and so were his feet. He had been dreaming about something warm and happy. But now, that was gone and it was just cold.

He was sitting on the floor with his head propped against the wall behind him. His warm breath turned to white mist as it left his nostrils in long curling streams.

Jack wrapped his arms tightly across his chest for warmth and looked down at his feet. He remembered a ski jacket with the collar wrapped tightly around his ears. He wished he had that jacket with him now. He tried hard, but couldn’t remember where he had left it.

At the moment all he had on were blue-jeans and a white T-shirt. The flesh on his bare arms prickled in the cold air and he rubbed his hands over them vigorously to warm himself.

Jack pulled his arms away from his body and saw, what appeared to be, fresh blood splattered down the front of his T-shirt. In horror he dabbed at the sticky fluid with his middle finger. Almost as if he couldn't decide what the substance on his shirt was. But he did know what it was and he began frantically feeling his face and neck for any signs of injury.

Besides a welt under his left eye, he found nothing that could explain the substantial amount of wet blood on his shirt. It covered a V-shaped area from right under his chin, to the bottom of the shirt. Jack felt his lips with his fingers and ran his tongue over his teeth and gums, looking for any cuts or broken skin. Nothing.

He stood gingerly, every joint complaining. He had never ached this bad from the cold. Jack wondered how long he had been asleep here. Which seemed like a queer thing to wonder since he didn't even know where here was. As he stood, his head hit something with a dull thud. Something that was hanging just above him. He stepped to one side and examined the room in front of him.

He was inside some kind of walk-in refrigerator. There were several metal shelves against the walls, lined with an odd assortment of cans and boxes. The walls were metallic and sparkled with white ice crystals. His head had hit a large piece of meat that was now dangling back and forth in front of him on a metal hook.

“What the hell?”

Behind him, rows of frozen carcasses hung quietly in the cold. The ceiling was dull metal with patches of frost painted across it like miniature glaciers. The floor was covered with a honey-combed rubber mat. In the ceiling, in the center of the room, a single incandescent bulb burned with glaring intensity. Its eerie beams of orange-ish light cast ominous shadows on the floor beneath the chunks of dangling beef.

Jack looked down one row of meat then back up another. He could see a door at the far end and right now, that meant someplace warm. So he took several steps toward the door and then fell abruptly to the floor. He fell face down, with his legs lying across the object that had tripped him.

Jack rolled over and pulled himself into a sitting position. His eyes were watering from the thump his nose had taken and several seconds had passed before he could focus on the blob in front of him. The scene he faced sent a frigid bolt through him that left his insides colder than his outsides. He sucked at the bitter air in desperation, but the wind caught in his throat and made a sinister gagging sound. He rolled to his hands and knees in a mad panic and crawled as fast as he could toward the door he had spotted on the far wall.

What Jack had just seen on the floor was the upper torso of a human body, half wrapped in white butcher’s paper. It was severed across the mid-section, the tiniest wisps of steam still rising from its warm insides.

When he made it to the door, Jack sprung to his feet and hit the release plunger

repeatedly and with both hands. It didn't move. Frantically, he pounded on it, ripping a chunk of fingernail from his index finger. He doubled his fists and pounded on the door, screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Let me out of here . . . goddamn you . . . somebody let me out of here!” His flailing outcry echoed over and over.

Jack couldn't remember how he had gotten here or why he was in this place but right now, his one all consuming thought was just to get out. His pounding was a purely reflexive action that was just as strong as when your leg jumps after striking your knee.

Jack continued pounding for almost a full minute before the cold and the fear weakened him to the point of exhaustion. Then he fell to his knees, still facing the door and sobbing like a child. His fierce pounding, now just a pitiful thumping.

The lone light bulb cast an array of dancing shadows through the darkened room. Like evil dwarfs, taunting and laughing at him. The room constricted around him and Jack heaved once as he fought the image of the severed body from his head.

Jack turned and sat on the floor, his back pressed up against the door. He was claustrophobic and having trouble breathing. He ran the back of his hand across his dripping nose and then looked desperately around the tiny room. He couldn't think. He couldn't even formulate a complete thought. He just wanted out. At all costs . . . out of this place. This dreadful awful place.

With more desperation than concentration, Jack got down on his hands and knees and began to move toward the far wall. Surely there had to be another way out. Away from

the bloody corpse. As far as he could possibly get.

He consciously kept the pile of flesh in the corner of one eye. As if to ensure that it didn't suddenly jump up and come after him. Jack was breathing almost to the point of hyper-ventilation now and was having trouble maintaining his balance – even on his hands and knees. He was dizzy and the lingering tears burned at the corners of his eyes and blurred his vision.

Jack moved cautiously along the wall. He searched his surroundings, frantically looking for some other way out. Another door . . . some kind of opening . . . anything. He had almost given up on finding it, when he saw it. A great big air vent on the wall over one of the metal shelf units.

With his eyes fixed on the vent above him, he stood, bending awkwardly to avoid the carcasses suspended above him. But, Jack's head hit one of them and the instant his hand touched the meat he knew that this was not a side of beef. Like he'd known all along that it was there. Just waiting for him to rediscover it.

Jack jumped back to the wall and gasp in horror as he looked at the dangling remains of the bottom half of the body. The dangling hips, punctured by a hook, dripped single drops of blood, adding to the sporadic pattern on the floor. Shadows waved across Jack's feet as the flesh swayed back and forth in front of him.

He cupped his hand tightly over his mouth, fighting against the growing rumbling in his gut. Jack heaved twice as his stomach wrenched itself into a tight little ball. The back of his throat filled with biting hot bile and he sucked as much air as he possibly could in

through his nose. Jack leaned his head back against the cool metal wall and fought hard against the all encompassing dizziness. Eyes closed, still breathing deeply, Jack could feel his heart rate slow.

And then, like a wave of water washing sand from his feet, it was gone. The panic . . . the fear . . . all gone. Jack opened his eyes and just stood there, looking at the lower half of this woman. He was breathing easier now and found himself wondering about how the body was hung there. It was an odd thing to ponder, but Jack couldn't clear it from his mind. It seemed . . . crooked. Like it should have been more perpendicular to the floor or something. Jack took a step closer and watched as the gentle swaying slowed and eventually stopped.

Then, to Jack's amazement, he found himself staring over at the other half of the body. The one on the floor – and wondering about why it was clear over there. It really didn't work over there. And now that the panic was gone, Jack was overwhelmed by something else. By a curious sense of disorder. He found himself disgusted and irritated by what he was seeing. Not fear, not revulsion . . . just disgusted.

“No, that's not right.” Jack snapped at the body and then walked deliberately toward it.

With absolutely no hesitation, he scooped up the torso and carried it over to the where the other half was still swinging. The blood soaked paper, now cold and sticky, matting to the hair on his arms. Then, ever so gently, he arranged it on the floor – directly beneath the swinging legs.

No longer cold, Jack was dizzy and his face felt hot. He felt tingly all over, and before he knew it, he had unzipped his pants and was rubbing his cock. Even though the legs were still hanging a little off center, the piece underneath seemed to give the whole thing a sense of balance. Now it had form and continuity.

“Good,” Jack said, rubbing himself harder than before.

As the beauty of the moment began fading, the room began turning, slowly at first then faster and faster. A familiar nausea, accompanied by a metallic taste pinched at the corners of his mouth. He was going to fall. He could feel the vertigo take over and he closed his eyes in defense. It didn’t help and he felt himself go down next to the body, his hand landing in the sticky blood on the floor.

Jack screamed, curled into a ball and covered his head with both of his arms. Whimpering, he scrambled blindly to the corner of the room and fell into it as if it were some kind of divine sanctuary. He covered his face and ground his forehead against the cold metal as tears ran down his cheeks.

“Oh God . . . what’s happening to me?”

Flash. Flash!

The woman was sitting, tied up in front of him.

Flash.

Jack ground the palms of his hands into his eye sockets, furiously trying to get rid of the pictures he was now seeing.

Flash.

She was so beautiful. So fragile and helpless. “Please . . .” she uttered in an almost indiscernible little voice. That puny little voice that both irritated and excited Jack.

Pressing his arms tightly around his head, Jack chanted rhythmically” No, no, no, no . . .” as he tried desperately to push this vision from his mind.

Flash.

FLASH!

Now he was kneeling on top of her. He could smell her. Her perfume . . . his sweat . . . and the sweet aroma of utter fear. Jack leaned forward - slowly – bent down and touched the tip of his tongue to her cheek. She was crying . . . poor fragile little thing . . .

Flash. Flash!

And she was looking up at him with big tears welling up in her eyes. And then she was gone – just as quickly as she had appeared. Jack was alone and shivering on the floor.

The incandescent bulb over head popped and flickered. There was the sound of an electric buzzing. The light flickered once more, popped, sputtered and then went out.

As the last remaining drops of light fled the room, Jack got a snapshot of the red writing on the wall directly in front of him:

**‘let me help you’**

In the darkness, Jack pressed his head into his hands and rocked back and forth on the floor. He squeezed his head between his palms and held his breath until the grotesque image of the sectioned body faded into the blackness that encompassed him.

## Chapter Two

### IMPLICATIONS

- 1 -

“Detective Blakely,” Betsy paused to choose her words carefully. “There are two things that I need to explain to you. First of all, my client needs to feel completely at ease in order for these test results to have any integrity whatsoever . . .”

The Detective looked deliberately around the office as Betsy spoke, giving the definite impression that he had little interest in what she had to say. Catching a brief glimpse of his reflection in the window, he drug his fingers through his thinning hair.

“Dad was bald at 50,” he thought to himself. “I wonder if my luck’ll hold?”

“. . . and second,” she continued with a hint of exasperation, “there’s the confidentiality of the doctor / patient relationship. Those officers are not allowed in this office *by law*.”

The Detective returned his gaze to Betsy and made an annoying sucking sound through his teeth. The muscles in his jaw worked back and forth in a cadence close to the beating of his heart.

“Now I’m sure you feel that you’ve properly accessed the safety issues,” she tried not to patronize, “but I must insist that you consider the needs and rights of my patient.”

Detective Blakely looked around the office again. Perched on the edge of the big, comfortable arm chair, he leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. He laced his

fingers together and sat rubbing his thumbs back and forth, waiting for her to finish.

Looking across the mahogany desk at Dr. Elizabeth Archer, he found that his patience was running thin.

Detective Robert Blakely figured that he had the good Doctor pretty well pegged. He was all too familiar with her type; young, obnoxious career girl with more ambition than sense. By her appearance, he knew that she had been sliding on her looks for a good long while. You know, the sorority, cheerleader type. He'd seen it plenty of times in his almost twenty years on the force.

“Listen Doctor, I’m sure you’re very good at what you do and quite capable of helping people learn to nurture their inner child - or whatever - but you don’t have any idea what your dealing with here? This guy’s a monster. He’s killed fourteen women . . . that we know of . . . Fourteen!”

Detective Blakely leaned even further forward in the chair as his tone changed from concern to down right condescending.

“Now, nurturing this guy’s inner child is not going to change a damn thing. He’s a friggin’ psycho - pardon my French - and I’m not going to leave him in here with you alone.”

Betsy studied the Detective’s face and then spoke calmly and evenly, “Detective Blakely, believe me, I do understand your reservations. But I have a job to do here and my background will show that I am capable of handling this situation.”

The Detective looked thoroughly unimpressed.

“I’ve been involved in clinical criminal psychology for the last nine years. I’ve earned dual Masters in Police Science and Criminology as well as a full doctorate in Criminal Psychology.”

The Detective tried to keep his mouth shut while he yawned deep in the back of his throat.

“I’ve spoken with, interviewed, studied and analyzed dozens of serial killers, pedophiles and violent sex offenders. I have logged hundreds of hours detailing accurate psychological profiles for every government agency from the County Police Department to the FBI.

“Excuse me Doc,” Detective Blakely interrupted, “but a long list of credentials won’t do squat for you if this crazy fuck . . . excuse me . . . psychopath . . . goes off in here. Trust me, I’ve read this guy’s profile - I know *exactly* what he’s like.”

Betsy smiled at what the Detective had just said and then continued. “You know what this guy’s really like because of the his profile?” Betsy remained calm as she reworked the Detective’s statement into a question.

“Yes, ma’am,” the Detective nodded enthusiastically.

“The profile that I wrote?” Betsy concealed her glee almost perfectly.

The Detective fought hard to keep his surprise from showing on his face. He knew this profile inside and out. He’d read it a dozen times. How could he have missed who wrote it. Why didn’t the sign on her door ring some sort of bell? How could he have over looked such a big piece of the puzzle.

“Now,” she chirped, “Captain Edwards assured me of your complete cooperation in this matter, Detective. I’m fairly certain that we don’t need to call him. Don’t you agree?”

“But . . .,” he stopped himself and tried frantically to reevaluate his weakening position.

“I do understand your concern,” Betsy interrupted sharply as she put her hand threateningly on the phone, “but I don’t think Pete is going to be very pleased if we interrupt his day for a little matter like this.” She tapped her index finger on the receiver and looked straight into the Detective’s eyes.

Before the Detective could regroup, Betsy painted in the rest of the picture for him.

“Feel free to leave your men outside the door and if I need anything, they can be in here in an instant.” Betsy let the words hang just long enough to sink in. “Now please, bring my patient in . . . *please.*”

Detective Blakely started to open his mouth and then, for some reason, just didn’t. Maybe it was the look in her eyes that said she wasn’t bluffing about calling the Captain. Maybe it was the fact that he certainly didn’t need any more trouble with the Captain. Or maybe it was just that feeling, a Detective’s intuition, that he wasn’t going to win this one.

Whatever it was, he begrudgingly stood and instructed the officers to escort the man in. He gave them instructions on where to stand, how to listen and how alert to be. He then explained that he would personally ‘Rip off the top of their heads and piss down their empty skulls’ if anything happened to the good doctor. He then apologized for his

language and moped out the door.

Betsy repressed the urge to smile and nodded politely at the Detective as he turned and left the room. She wasn't offended by his concern and actually had anticipated his resistance. She'd been dealing with this very problem for the entirety of her adult life.

Besides being a woman, Betsy was small and attractive. She had short dark hair that framed her pale face in a way that accentuated her creamy white features. Her big brown eyes gave the impression of an innocent child. She was chesty for her size - a fact that she tried to hide by wearing loose billowy blouses and minimizer bras. She preferred khaki and raw silk, in muted tones.

At five foot four, she seemed almost frail. But in reality Betsy possessed an almost overpowering will, as well as a fair amount of skill in the Martial Arts. She studied the Arts for the self discipline, but the physical aspects of the training had become a welcome bonus.

Her psychological training had provided her with the skills necessary to circumvent situations and avoid direct conflict if necessary. She preferred this approach, but was not afraid to deal with a problem head on if she had to. Her physical appearance had forced her into a position of being overly self-conscious. She knew that society viewed her, and most women, as a victim. And for the most part she'd been able to avoid situations of that nature.

Betsy pulled a thin file folder from her desk drawer as the two uniformed officers placed the heavily shackled man in one of the chairs in front of her. He sat with both feet

flat on the floor and his knees about a foot apart.

Betsy studied him as he sat in the chair, his wrists hand cuffed to a chain around his waist and his feet shackled to the bar between his ankles. His eyes were dark and sunken and his cheek bones pushed dangerously through the side of his face.

Betsy thought that he had to be considerably lighter than the hundred and sixty nine pounds indicated in his file. He was dressed in the standard, bright orange prison jumpsuit and appeared to have recently bathed and shaved.

Betsy glanced down at the file folder and then nodded her request to the officers for them to leave. One of them looked to be barely eighteen, straight out of the Police Academy no doubt. The two hesitated, looked at each other then turned slowly and left the room.

Betsy shifted her attention back to her patient, studying his eyes for several seconds. She smiled and rattled the papers in her hand. "I'm sorry about that little mix up with the officers," her voice was genuine and sincere.

"Not a problem," the man spoke in a creamy, soothing, almost melodramatic tone.

"They seem to have the idea that you have the supernatural ability to free yourself from twenty pounds of stainless steel." Betsy watched him carefully as he replied.

"It does seem to be a rather ridiculous notion."

"I agree, Leonard. I did, however, feel strongly about talking to you in private and I did have to get authorization to do that."

"You're the psychiatrist aren't you?" The man's eyes sparkled momentarily as he

leaned forward in the chair.

“I am a Doctor of psychiatry, if that’s what you mean.”

A wretched little smile began to crawl slowly across the man’s face. Slow and deliberate, like the sun creeping across the face of a sun dial. “No, not a psychiatrist . . . *the* psychiatrist.”

His expression, a mixture of intrigue and astonishment, interested Betsy. His curiosity was valuable to her no doubt, but it seemed to have an edge to it. An edge she wasn’t sure she could command. And that edge had begun to manifest itself in his smile.

The longer she studied his smile, the worse it got. What had begun as a crooked, sly little grin had become a full fledged snarl. His eyes seemed to grow, becoming rounder, almost wild. Leonard’s face had transformed from placid to . . . to . . . she tried to find a word that would sum up Leonard’s new expression. The only word that described him adequately at this moment was sinister.

Betsy pulled her eyes away from his, suppressing, with all her will, the goose flesh creeping up her arms. She focused her attention on the folder again hoping that would help her regroup. But the prickles on her shoulders and down her arm were undermining her thought process.

She read through the synopsis of the key psychological indicators that she had prepared for the FBI shortly before Leonard Moss’s capture. He had eluded capture for nearly two years and perpetrated the longest running and most brutal string of serial killings in the city’s history.

Betsy had been asked to consult on the case six months earlier, after the eighth murder. Eventually, it was Betsy's in depth description of what motivated Leonard that led to his capture. And that was certainly what he must've meant by *the* psychiatrist.

She had created a vivid verbal picture of what he lived for, and why he killed. She had spent hours and hours pouring over photographs of crime scenes and evidence. And from those, she had been able to contrive what made him happy and what pissed him off. She filtered through this mountain of evidence, studying every detail, looking for the subtle threads that wove a connection between them. And she had nailed this one on the head.

Typically, Betsy made broad generalizations about a patient's interests and activities. But this time Betsy had gone so far as to guess at a list of probable hobbies, based on the evidence that had been gathered from these crime scenes. She normally never gave specifics, but, for some reason in this case, she felt compelled.

It was this assessment of the murderer's hobbies, that Betsy was glancing over at this moment.

"He likes intricate work. Working with his hands. Most probably finely detailed work involving a small knife. Something like airplanes or model cars . . ."

Betsy lifted her eyes to look at Leonard without moving her head. He still had that queer, gleeful look on his face and she was anxious to get a dialogue going and hopefully remove it in short order.

"Are you allowed to continue with the models, Leonard?" Betsy forced herself to raise her head and look directly at him.

“You’re the reason they caught me, aren’t you?” The sound of genuine intrigue in his voice continued to please as well as concern Betsy.

“Yes, that’s true,” she answered slowly. “I’m sorry they didn’t inform you.”

“No, that’s not it at all,” Leonard shifted excitedly in his chair, “I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance Doctor Archer. Bravo on some fine police work. Those idiots at the FBI would still be dusting for prints and looking for hair follicles if it wasn’t for you. Bravo!”

Betsy watched his face carefully as she tried to steer the conversation, “So, do they . . . allow you to build your models in prison, Leonard?”

“Oh yes,” he stated enthusiastically. “They provide me with everything I need - except for the Xacto knife, but that’s understandable don’t you think?”

“Yes, I’d think, under the circumstances, that’s very reasonable, Leonard.”

Betsy was beginning to feel, not quite at ease, but certainly less guarded. This was probably, without a doubt, the most interesting case she had ever been involved in. The intricacies and detail that connected each of this man’s crimes were incredible. The care that had gone into each murder was, without question, the most remarkable she had seen.

But Betsy had a mission today. Something that she needed to accomplish and it was important that she stay focused on that goal.

“Tell me, Leonard,” Betsy asked with a hint of theatrical inflection, “how would you like to live forever? To be immortal?” The carefully thought out question was launched with a helping of tender concern.

Leonard smiled thoughtfully and, although she didn't know why, suddenly Betsy was overwhelmed with an exhilarating feeling of conquest. As if she were on the edge of new discoveries about the human psyche and our deepest motivations.

Leonard snapped his head back and the smile fell from his face. It was replaced with an expression of pouting thoughtfulness.

“That certainly is an interesting question Doctor Archer. How do you propose to accomplish such an historic feat?”

Betsy could see through his coy, playful dialogue. This question really did interest him. Possibly more so than even he could grasp. Although this was her first time to speak with Leonard face to face, she could tell that he was completely aware of the desires that lie deep within him. And those desires were the main reason he was in her office today.

Betsy stood and walked to the paneled doors behind her desk. She slid the doors back into pockets in the walls, uncovering the equipment she would need for her little experiment. Three TV monitors sat on the top of several shelves. Below them was a row intricate electronic equipment.

Colored wires from the front of over a dozen panels came together in a tightly bound bundle that culminated in a circular, mesh basket about the size of a cantaloupe. To one side, Betsy clicked on a tower computer.

Then she picked up the mesh basket, along with the bundle of wires. She turned to face Leonard and, as she spoke, used the basket to point at the monitors on the shelves behind her.

“We now have the ability to record the minute electrical activity that makes up our conscious and subconscious thought patterns.” Betsy paused to study Leonard’s reaction, but he maintained his air of guarded interest.

“Go ahead Doctor Archer. I’m certainly fascinated so far.” Leonard cocked his head slightly to one side as he listened intently.

“On these monitors,” Betsy continued to point with the basket in her hand,” varying levels of emotional activity appear as different colors and intensities. This system can track emotional responses across the entire spectrum of brain wave activity.”

Betsy studied his face for a reaction. Leonard didn’t blink, so Betsy continued, “When compared with the response from a control group . . .”

“You mean non-serial killers,” Leonard broke in without being able to help himself.

Betsy paused and thought carefully before she repeated her statement with added emphasis on the word ‘control’.

“A control group.” She didn’t mean for it to, but the tinniest bit of sarcasm had crept into her voice. And she was sure that Leonard had picked up on it.

But what Leonard had no way of knowing was that he was actually the control group.

Leonard had been unconscious for several days after his capture. There had been a violent struggle bringing him in. Both Leonard and one of the deputies had been injured. The deputy was still in the hospital.

During that time, Dr. Archer had been allowed to collect the sample data from Leonard as he lay in the guarded hospital room. He had been unconscious and there was

no opportunity to interact with him. The whole thing would have been more effective in the sleep lab – the little room down the hall that Betsy used to monitor and record people with sleep disorders – but, this was all she had to work with so she had jumped at the chance. Today’s comparison was going to be invaluable in furthering the understanding of Leonard’s motivations . . . as long as he could be persuaded to cooperate.

“The point is, Leonard,” Betsy’s professional tone had returned, “we can use this information to develop a clearer understanding of our deepest secrets. It will help us understand what we feel and why.”

Now it was Leonard’s turn to study the Doctor with interest. His eyes locked onto hers and, for a moment, Betsy felt trapped. Paralyzed by his hypnotic stare. And for just a fraction of a second, Betsy got the creepy feeling that Leonard could read her mind. Just crawl up in there and rummage around like he owned the place.

Betsy shuddered and winced ever so slightly . . . it probably was unnoticeable . . . but she was irritated with herself for the loss of control. For weakening in this battle of wills.

“And what makes you think that I have any desire to have my brain waves recorded for posterity?” Leonard’s mouth curled up into an evil little smile. Like he was playing with her now. Like he was leading the conversation where he wanted it to go.

Betsy smiled at his question as she felt her composure return. This was the question she had prepared for, the one she had so cleverly anticipated. She actually had to fight hard to keep from smiling. To keep from showing how pleased she was with herself.

“Because there will be a disc with your name on it, Leonard.” Betsy glanced only

briefly at him, but she knew what he was thinking before she saw his face.

“And it will be studied for years, long after you’re gone.”

Betsy knew that this was one of Leonard’s key drivers. Notoriety . . . fame . . . attention. The possibility of doing this forever would be too much for him to refuse. Would be intoxicating and lure him in like a moth to a porch light.

Betsy purposefully put on a touch of melodrama as she continued, “Because hundreds of professional people will know, not only your name, but your mind.” Betsy’s eyes flashed quickly across Leonard’s face. “You won’t be just another character in a medical journal . . . your thoughts catalogued inadequately and left on a page to be forgotten. These doctors will KNOW you, Leonard, they will SEE your mind!” Betsy found herself getting caught up in her own excitement.

She had bought into her little speech and she knew that he would too. He was a perfect specimen. Especially since they previously had recorded unconscious dream patterns from him. They had been able to capture two full discs of dream state brain waves. And now to collect cognizant data to compare with was more than Betsy dared to hope for. She was positively beside herself with anticipation.

Certainly he wouldn’t turn this chance down. Certainly not. This would be far too alluring for Leonard to refuse. But, wonder if he did? Suddenly Betsy turned cold at the prospect. Had she really considered everything? Really covered all the bases?

Out of cute dialogue, Betsy found herself holding her breath and staring helplessly. Again, she caught herself losing on the battle of wills and tried desperately to maintain a

strict poker face. In reality, she was portraying a much stronger position than she felt like she was.

“Okay.” Leonard barked insipidly. “Hook me up and let’s get cranking . . . all in the name of science, Doctor Archer. All in the name of science.”

Betsy started breathing with a small gasp and immediately walked around to the front of the desk and, before he could change his mind, stretched the elastic basket over Leonard’s head. She pulled his shaggy brown hair back over his ears and straightened the basket across the front of his forehead.

Leonard closed his eyes and relished in the warmth of her touch across his temples. Her skin was silky smooth and the exaggerated firmness of her touch gave him the impression of a hidden frailness.

“The way this works,” Betsy spoke with a heightened sense of urgency, “is that I’ll ask you a string of situational questions.”

Eyes still closed, Leonard took a long slow breath through his nostrils and relished in the good doctors choice of perfume. Her enthusiasm was genuinely child-like and it reminded him of some of his own lost passion.

“Then,” she stood straight up in front of him, studying the clump of wires protruding from the top of his head, “you’ll simply respond with the first thing that comes into your mind.”

Leonard opened his eyes slowly and looked up at the women standing in front of him. His eyes crossed slowly across Betsy’s chest before reaching her face. “Like the old

up/down, black/white, in/out exercise, huh doc?"

"Yes . . . in its simplest form, that's relatively correct." Betsy turned and walked back around her desk to face the monitors on the shelves behind her.

"But the situations I describe will cover more emotional responses. Slightly more detail than just in/out." Betsy spoke without looking at Leonard as she clicked several switches and watched as light filled the top row of monitors.

Betsy removed a small disc from a plastic case that was hand labeled 'Moss - session #1'. Then shoved it into one of the CD drives in the computer tower.

In response to Leonard's pre-recorded brain activity, each screen now had a pulsating waveform running across its surface like a snake swimming across the surface of the water. From left to right, the three monitors displayed brightly colored waves in amber, blue and dark red.

A second disc, labeled 'Moss - session #2', was placed into a drive, directly below the first. Betsy pressed a small button beside the opening and a tiny red record light came on next to it.

On the three screens above, a second set of waves, right below the first ones, now appeared in response to Leonard's current state of activity. These new patterns were in the same brightly displayed hues as before: amber, blue and dark red.

A rhythmic pattern across the top was now dancing hypnotically on the blue screen. The red screen was nearly flat and the old and new waves were pulsating up and down slowly.

Betsy adjusted the brightness and intensity on these two screens then turned her attention to the amber monitor. The top line, that of the control group was nearly still. While in contrast, the bottom line - Leonard's current activity - was moving slightly with occasional spikes poking up through the top line. Betsy felt another surge of excitement rush across her and she could feel her heart begin to beat harder.

With the initial adjustments complete, she returned to her desk and pulled a small micro-cassette recorder from her top desk drawer. She clicked in the play and record buttons and set it, lengthwise, on the top of her desk. She glanced excitedly back at the three monitors then turned her attention to her patient.

"I can see that technology excites you Doctor." Leonard spoke with a breathy calm. "That's good. I mean, someone in your line of work that displays a deep abiding passion for their art. Quite commendable. I generally find that those who are really interested in their work do a much better job."

Betsy ignored the banter, wet the tip of her index finger on her lower lip and then flipped over one of the papers that was lying in the open file folder on her desk. She hated to admit it, even to herself, but this was genuinely about the most exciting thing she had ever done.

The Emotional Brainwave Activity Recorder (EBAR) - was a relatively new acquisition at the clinic and this would be the first time that she had used it, at least consciously, on anyone as dangerously disturbed as Leonard Moss.

"Now Leonard," Betsy breathed slowly after she spoke to help maintain her

composure.

“Yes Doctor Archer?”

“I want you to close your eyes.”

Leonard complied happily and without hesitation.

“And try to relax.”

Leonard smiled and leaned back in the chair.

“I’m going to read you a list of predefined situations and I want you to, off the top of your head, respond with the feelings that are invoked by the situation.” Betsy looked up at his face then returned to her speech.

“Don’t think too hard or long about the response, just kind of ramble on about what your feeling or thinking of as I set up the situations.” Betsy paused again to look at Leonard. He was comfortably slouched in the chair, eyes closed and head back.

Do you understand, Leonard?”

“Yes, Doctor Archer. I believe I understand perfectly.” The tone in Leonard’s voice was airy and calm. Betsy thought - or hoped - that she sensed a slight twinge of anticipation in his voice. She felt like she was just going to explode with excitement.

“Alright, here’s the first situation . . .”

Leonard dropped his head slightly and took a long, slow deep breath through his nose. His smile had faded to an almost expressionless look. Betsy perceived it as a look of complete concentration.

“Here’s the first situation, Leonard: Picture yourself on a perfectly white sandy

beach,” Betsy turned to glance quickly at the monitors then returned to her script.

“There’s no one in sight, for as far as you can see, in any direction. The sky is completely blue, without a single cloud. The water laps gently at your feet as white foam swirls in the wet sand.”

Pencil in hand, Betsy made notes on the elevated activity on the blue monitor. There was little change on either the red or the amber. This certainly was expected - no surprises here.

“It’s warm,” Leonard says in an eerily calm voice. “It’s very, very warm.”

“That’s good Leonard. That’s very good.”

Betsy knew that Leonard’s interaction was crucial to the experiment’s success. The scenes were constructed sparsely on purpose. The more she could get him to participate in the situations, the more useful the data would be.

“Do you see anything, Leonard? Anything at all?” As Betsy spoke, she continued to split her attention between Leonard and three colored monitors behind her.

“No Doctor Archer, nothing else.”

Betsy gave him a minute before probing further. It would be better if he chose a path without being lead. Without any prompting. These would be the deeper - truer feelings of his subconscious.

“Wait . . . there is something else . . .”

Betsy smiled and glanced back at the monitors then carefully documented the responses.

“But I can’t really make it out.”

“Go on, Leonard,” Betsy cooed with reserved enthusiasm, “tell me what you see Leonard.”

“Something on the horizon . . . something . . . something flying . . . birds . . . yes, Dr. Archer, I see birds.”

“Wonderful, Leonard. Wonderful. Anything else?” Betsy was writing and stealing quick glances back at the monitors in between her interaction with Leonard.

“No, Just the birds. Nothing else.”

“What do the birds look like, Leonard? Big, little? How are they flying? Fast, slow?” Betsy was careful not to lead the scenario.

Leonard flinched and the amber monitor spiked sharply then returned to its waveless inactivity.

“Circling . . .,” Leonard squinted, even with his eyes closed,” and . . . some of them are swooping down at the water.”

“Good, Leonard. GOOD. What else?”

“They’re swooping at the water. Feeding or something.”

Not wanting to miss anything, Betsy was writing and glancing back at the monitors as fast as she could. Another sharp spike on the amber. Then another. And then the red screen began to dance. This was going better than Betsy could have ever hoped for.

“What’s in the water, Leonard?” She had hoped that the scenario would take on a life of its own, but this was happening all too quickly.

Three more spikes . . . and a fourth. Leonard's closed eyes squinted together tightly and he leaned forward as if stretching to see the invisible birds.

"They're . . . diving into the water. Like little Kamikaze pilots."

"Really, Leonard? Go on." Betsy felt like she was going to burst. When she published her findings, she'd become a household word in the psychiatric field.

"Go on Leonard . . . the birds are diving?"

"Yes, Dr. Archer," Leonard's expression grew sullen, "it looks like they're pecking at something."

"Pecking?" Betsy looked quickly at the monitors then at Leonard. Another spike on the red.

"Yes, they're pecking and swooping, swooping and pecking."

Suddenly the top line on the blue monitor dropped off the screen. At the same time the red line bounced clear to the top. Betsy wrote as fast as he spoke. Her heart was pounding frantically. She looked up at the screens and back at Leonard. Another spike . . . two more. God, this was great.

"Can you see what they're doing, Leonard? Can you see what the birds are doing?" Betsy checked again to make sure the record light was still on. "What's in the water, Leonard?"

The monitors continued to spike erratically. Growing in intensity. Seemingly taking on a life of their own. A vivid graphic life with jagged chaotic energy dancing across the surface of the screens.

Still closed, Leonard blinked his eyes then began squinting, harder and harder. Now with an almost pained look on his face, Leonard leaned forward in the chair and started to rock back and forth slowly.

“What is it, Leonard? What’s in the water?”

Amber, blue, red. Bright red. Spike. Spike. Bright, bright red. Spike after monstrous spike.

“I’m not sure Dr. Archer. I’m not sure. A fish maybe.”

“Is it a fish, Leonard?”

“No . . . I don’t think it’s a fish, Dr. Archer.” Leonard sounded disappointed.

“Why not, Leonard? What do you think it is?”

“Not sure . . . but I know, now that it’s not a fish.” His inflections had become singsongy and almost taunting.

“Leonard, if they’re not diving for fish, what would the birds be feeding on?”

“Yes, Doctor Archer, I’m certain it’s not a fish.” Leonard went on, seemingly oblivious to her question.

Spike. Spike. Betsy couldn’t write fast enough. She felt like she was going to get whiplash trying to keep an eye on the monitors behind her and on Leonard too.

“And why do you think so? Why do think they’d be interested in anything other than fish?”

“There’s too much blood, Dr. Archer. Far too much blood for it to be just a fish.”

Betsy felt goose flesh start to ripple across the base of her neck. “What makes you

think there's blood in the water, Leonard?"

As Betsy turned again, to view the monitors, her heart sank in her chest. The portion of the blue screen that indicated Leonard's calming response was completely gone - only the control display was left.

The line on the amber monitor, the tension or anxiety response - had risen to fill the entire screen and its intensity was throbbing from pale banana to brilliant sunshine.

By themselves, these were disturbing displays, but what made Betsy's heart pound painfully in her chest was what she saw on the third display. On the monitor with the blood red ridge of jagged peaks. Bouncing and bobbing like gnats in the summer wind. The monitor indicating Leonard's current state of rage.

"Why do you think there's blood in the water, Leonard? Why?" Betsy's breathing was now becoming labored and her cheeks felt warm.

"Why, Leonard?" she insisted.

Then Leonard's eyes popped open like a sprung mouse trap and Betsy nearly left her chair. Realizing how important it was to stay calm, she immediately fought to regain control.

"Why, Leonard?" she asked as insistently as she could then pretended to take some notes to avoid direct eye contact.

A huge gruesome smile seized his face and Betsy felt her knees go numb. Leonard stared straight into Betsy's soul with those hideous round eyes. This time, even worse than before. Betsy could feel him inside of her. She could feel him digging around.

Turning over old rocks and looking for anything that crawled out.

“Because I can see what’s in their mouth, Dr. Archer. I can see it as clear as day.”

Leonard’s voice dripped with an oozing melodramatic sincerity that sent a cold ripple between Betsy’s shoulder blades.

“What do you see, Leonard?” Betsy’s tone had a shrillness she could not shake. She cleared her throat and continued. “Tell me what you see.”

Leonard’s eyes widened again and Betsy felt as though she could keep nothing from this man. Hide nothing. Hide her dread at this moment and all the dread that had come before it. Crawling around in the back of her mind where no one had ever been allowed before. She felt violated but she couldn’t get him out.

She turned back to the row of monitors on the wall. Turned not to see what was going on but turned to avoid contact with Leonard. Turned away in utter fear. Turned away in a weak attempt to break the hold that he had gained on her.

It didn’t seem possible, but the blood red spikes were even more frantic now - leaping and hopping the full height of the screen. Bouncing wildly back and forth and pulsating from orange to deep, dark savage red. Betsy forced her eyes down at the floor, trying desperately not to give the impression that she could no longer look at the screens.

Her whole face was burning and she couldn’t take a complete breath. Little beads of sweat collected over her eyebrows. Feeling like she had been facing away from Leonard for an eternity, Betsy forced herself to turn around and look at him. Forced herself to look calm and collected. Forced herself to stop shaking.

And then, she realized that her pencil was lying on the desk and that she hadn't taken any notes for, what seemed like, several minutes. She quickly grabbed the pencil and pretended to make a notation in the file.

Betsy kept her head down and glanced quickly up at him - trying to figure out a way to just end this whole thing - now!

“Well, Leonard, if you are not willing to participate further . . .”

His eyes were glued to her. Somehow attached directly to her . . . like they were physically a part of her.

“One of them has an earring in it's mouth.” Leonard continued solemnly. “A pearl earring, Dr. Archer.”

Betsy grabbed her earlobe frantically to verify what she already knew. How could this have gotten so far out of hand. Then she snapped her hand back down to the desk in disgust. He was playing with her now and she was falling right in. She hated herself right now, but there seemed to be painfully little that she could do about it.

“You're behaving poorly, Betsy,” she reprimanded herself. “Get a grip! You're not some little school kid who's easily scared by a bully.”

“Oooh,” Leonard cooed in sincere surprise, “one of the birds has a punctured eyeball on its beak.” Leonard's voice cracked as he leaned forward in the chair. “Your eyeball, you cunt!”

Betsy couldn't speak. She felt frozen to the chair. The pencil dropped out of her hand and she could no longer pretend.

“And I know it’s your fucking eyeball ‘cause the upper half of your severed carcass is laying here on the beach with me.” Leonard was shouting and laughing now. And spit was spattering from his lips onto her desk. He leaned forward in the chair again, this time raising slightly off of it.

“I watched the goddamn bird pluck it from your skull and then I sucked the empty eye socket clean!”

The heavily shackled Leonard Moss stood and leaned into the front of her desk. Betsy absolutely could not move. Could not speak. Could not utter one tiny little whimper.

Leonard’s eyes were on fire and his cheeks were shaking as he ranted, pounding his knees into the front of the desk and struggling against the wrist restraints.

“Officer!” Betsy tried to shout but could only manage to get air out.

In a quick swooping motion forward, Leonard’s head came down like thunder on the top of the desk. CRACK! Blood from a split across his forehead ran into his eyes and he shook his head back and forth like a dog drying off.

“Officer!!” Betsy screamed and this time managed to get out something above the level of normal conversation.

CRACK! Down came Leonard’s head again on the desk. As he drew back this time, blood splattered Betsy in the face and she jumped to her feet and backed into the equipment behind her, knocking off a dozen or so CD cases.

Leonard stood perfectly still, his face now covered in his own blood. His eyes glowing with a red haze, locked onto Betsy as the officers burst into the room.

“And when I’m done with this little fantasy,” Leonard’s voice had returned to that surreal ultra-calm of the earlier conversation,” I’m going to help you, Dr. Archer . . . for real.”

The officers flanked Leonard on both sides and held him fast, but he was no longer moving. One of them pressed the back of Leonard’s neck hard and slammed his head down into the desk and held it there firm. Together, they looked at Betsy and then down at Leonard.

Betsy remained pressed against the bookcase wiping blood from her cheek with the back of her hand. The officers yanked Leonard Moss from in front of the desk and drug him out of the room.

“You really do need my help, Dr. Archer.” Leonard shouted as he disappeared into the hallway.

Betsy stood there, for a long time, shaking and wiping at the blood on her face with a Kleenex.

- 2 -

Randy didn’t know how long he’d been asleep and he had no idea what had startled him from his slumber and brought him to his feet. Standing frozen in front of the bank of screens, Randy rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand and desperately tried to understand what he was seeing.

The guy in bed number four was having some kind of reaction - or something. He was

babbling incoherently and, although he was securely restrained and obviously unconscious, it appeared that he was trying to get out of bed.

Randy's first reaction was to hit the call button on the side of the console to alert the staff nurse, Wendy. At least that's how they'd played it out in all those drills. He wasn't even awake yet and the emergency protocol had kicked in.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. In all his years here, this really had been a boring job. He had absolutely no idea what to do next. Randy paced back and forth, biting his thumb nail and then mashed the call button three more times.

Assess the situation. That was the next step in protocol. But it was just now becoming clear to Randy that he knew so little about what they were testing with this one, that there wasn't enough information to 'Assess the situation.' At least not accurately. Randy mashed the call button again.

"Come on, come on, come on."

Randy stepped back from the console, eyes glued to the monitor as he ran his fingers through his hair. Number four looked like he was having some kind of seizure - or bad trip - or something.

"Shit!" Randy glanced around the room, not knowing what to do or what he was looking for. He hit the call button again and again then Randy's heart stopped as the man in bed four screamed at the top of his lungs, "Ahhhhhhhhh!"

The skin prickled down the back of Randy's neck. He looked down at his watch.

"Shift change in ten minutes . . . Pops, where the hell are you? This one is not the one

for us to fuck up on!!!”

Again, the screams echoed from the small television speaker and the man shook violently back and forth.

Randy backed up until he hit the wall behind him. Still looking frantically around the room, his eyes landed on the microphone mounted to the gooseneck on the far side of the console. It was the interface console. He'd seen other technicians use this for communicating with the subjects. It was strictly forbidden except for trained personnel.

Randy knew just enough about it to be dangerous. The interface console had something to do with the mass of wires and sensors attached to the subject's head. Somehow, this particular console allowed you to interface with whatever input the subject was experiencing at the time.

But there were big problems with it. As Randy understood it, if you didn't know exactly what you were doing, you could screw things up pretty bad. The interface console allowed communication with a person that was in a hyper-state of hypnosis. You never really knew exactly how they'd react to the additional input. Say the wrong thing and you've got real problems.

The man shouted again and Randy glanced down at the silently blinking call button before he pulled the chair up and sat down nervously at the interface console. Randy looked briefly over the controls and prayed.

“I shouldn't be doing this. Where the hell is she?” Randy wanted, more than anything, not to be the one that had to make a decision right now.

The man in bed number four seized and the bed rolled across the testing area. Without his permission Randy's hand shot forward and pressed the big white button labeled 'TALK-BACK'.

"Are you all right?"

When Randy hit the button, the monitor in front of him blipped on and, for the first time, Randy could see the horror the man in the bed was facing.

"Fuck me," Randy mumbled as he watched the screen.

From this vantage point, he could see a knife extended in front of him . . . and Randy could see someone's thumb being dragged down the knife's serrated edge.

"Shit!" Randy snapped the rolling chair back and took a quick look at the man in bed number four. He was arching his back into the air and knocking over an IV stand.

"What kind of sick shit is going on here?"

Randy pulled himself back up to the interface console and began to tremble. He knew that he had to do something . . . and he had to do it right now. The man screamed again with a gurgling, drowning kind of sound and Randy's heart began slamming into his rib cage as he slapped at the button again.

"Can you hear me? I'm going to get some help, but I need you to listen to me." Randy was flying on pure adrenaline and instinct. He pressed the talk-back button again and spoke slowly as he tried to think of what to say.

"Stop. Just stop for a minute and think." Randy was talking to himself but he heard his voice coming back at him from the speakers attached to the monitor. He leaned back and

looked at the man in the bed. He had stopped moving and was now lying perfectly still.

This was a good sign.

“It’s Randy . . . please snap out of it Jack.” he spoke in stuttered bursts as he, again, mashed the forbidden button.

More than anything, Randy needed a clear head. This wasn’t just any test case. This was the boss.

“Where the hell was the NURSE?”

Randy smashed the call button on the side of the console one more time. With his eyes glued intently to the monitor, he pressed the talk-back button again and continued to speak into the microphone.

“I’m here to help you.” he said quietly, “I’m going to try to . . . get you out of there . . .”

Randy released the talk back button and looked, first up at the clock and then down at the flashing call button.

“I guess we’re alone on this one number four . . .”

- 3 -

The night was clear and the sky was littered with stars. A summer wind blew softly through the trees and the moon hung full above, casting an iridescent glow across the grass. Crickets chirped incessantly and the air was filled with the sounds of the night.

Jack was standing in the shadow of a huge oak tree. Its trunk was twice the size of the

trash barrel next to it. The branches above swayed and creaked as the leaves swung haplessly back and forth.

In the distance an outdoor theater loomed, empty and dark. A cobble stone walk way wound through the trees and past the amphitheater, disappearing over the horizon. The moonlight draped monstrous blankets of black shadows beneath the trees and beyond.

Jack breathed deeply through his nose. The air was sweet and warm. He looked up at the sky and admired the stars, flickering through the summer heat. He was in some kind of park. But why?

Jack had a funny feeling of anticipation that he just couldn't explain. Not a bad feeling, actually it was kind of a good one. Like the feeling you get before your Birthday or Christmas. A sort of tingling in the bottom of your stomach. Jack took another deep breath, looked around and felt himself smile.

"I have no idea where I am, but this is wonderful."

He was content with the way things were. Jack felt like this was a good night and a good place. That this feeling of calm was better than . . . than something else. And maybe that's all he would allow himself to think about right now.

In the distance, he could hear the faint crunch of gravel under someone's feet. The sound was getting louder. It was no longer just a crunch. It was a mashing, grinding sound and he could hear how the weight was shifted from the back of the foot to the front with each step. The sense of anticipation was welling inside.

The wind blustered through the trees and they swayed together in a graceful, genuflect

before coming to rest again in silence. Jack stepped back into the shadows behind the oak tree and listened as the sound of the footsteps surrounded him. That sound swelled and whirled around his ears like a swarm of bees on a warm October afternoon.

His breath came faster and he could feel his heart beating against the inside of his rib cage. The footsteps came closer and closer - and then a young woman appeared on the cobble stone path.

Jack's heart was racing, but he couldn't figure out why. He wasn't afraid, he was excited. Why was he so excited? Why did he feel safer in the shadows, as if they would protect him.

The wind's cadence through the tree tops was hypnotic. Whooshing and then quiet and then whooshing again. Jack was intoxicated with delight.

The girl stepped into the moonlight dead in front of him and stopped. Jack was peaking around the edge of the tree to watch her. She stood motionless for a moment, looked anxiously around and then continued walking briskly down the trail.

In that brief moment, Jack could see her perfectly. She was beautiful. Long sandy blonde hair falling over her shoulders. The wisps around her face floating on the wind. Her silhouette was thin and shapely. When she walked, she moved with the grace of a dancer.

He couldn't understand why, but he felt compelled to follow her. Jack stepped quietly from behind the tree and pursued her cautiously, making sure to keep his distance. Careful not to get too close. Careful to walk only on the grass so as not to alarm the pretty

girl.

“Why am I doing this?” Jack wondered to himself. But the feeling of sheer exhilaration was becoming overpowering. It was clouding his thoughts. All he could think about was the girl. The pretty girl.

His heart continued to pound in his chest and he struggled to keep his erratic breathing under control. If the girl heard him, she’d run away. He’d lose her. He’d lose the pretty girl.

“What an odd thought . . .,” Jack caught himself, “. . . lose the pretty girl?”

He stopped for a moment at the edge of the park and watched as the girl crossed the street. She never hesitated as she stepped onto the pavement. The street was deserted and only a few people milled about on the sidewalks under the street lights. Jack watched from the shadows at the edge of the park as the girl turned down a side street and headed up the block.

“What the hell am I doing?” Jack mumbled to himself. But as the words fell from his lips, his feet carried him into the street and down the trail toward the girl. His feet did not hear the question he had whispered, they were just following.

The night air was still warm but now it was tainted and heavy with that stale smell of humanity. Odors like refuse and diesel fumes lingered in the once sweet moist night air. This new atmosphere smelled tense and dry. It burned a little when Jack breathed it in. And it made him long for the park. But the pretty girl was no longer in the park.

Jack watched the girl turn the corner ahead of him and a twinge of panic gripped at his

stomach. It twisted his insides in a knot and he trotted forward, leaning into the night.

He peaked cautiously around the corner. He could see no one. Where had she gone? She was just here. She couldn't have gotten far. Find her. Find the pretty girl. Jack was dazed with a heady sort of fear. He was afraid that the girl had gotten away. And he was also afraid that she hadn't.

There she was - walking toward an apartment house. Jack was relieved. He could smell the lingering scent of her perfume. Breathing deeply, he closed his eyes and . . . yes, he was sure of it, he could smell the pretty girl. He paused just long enough to see her turn and cross the street to the left. Jack walked down his side of the street and stopped at the spot where she had crossed.

From this vantage point, he watched her enter the small apartment building. Jack stood there for a minute or so, not knowing what to do. He looked back and forth from street sign to stop sign. His fingers tingled as if they had gone to sleep and he shook them and curled them in and out of a loose fist. A light came on in one of the lower story windows and he could see the girl inside.

Jack glanced nervously up and down the street again. It was late and the few people he had passed on the street were now gone. He was alone with the pretty girl.

Again his heart began to race and again his feet started to walk without his request. All he could see now was the window. All the other lights in the building were out. All the other tenants asleep. Just the pretty, pretty girl was awake.

“Only me . . . and the pretty girl,” Jack whispered to himself as he stepped from the

sidewalk onto the grass in front of the girl's window.

He slipped into the shadows along the side of the building, out of direct view from the street. For the first time, Jack realized that he had a hard on. This anxious feeling of anticipation was somehow sexual in nature. And instead of being repulsed by this idea, like he should have been, it just made him more excited being aware of it.

Jack reached down and rubbed himself through his jeans as he inched closer toward the open window. White linen curtains billowed gently through the opening as the summer breeze blew across Jack's face.

He closed his eyes and inhaled. He could smell her. He could smell her from where he was and it was wonderful. Young and innocent. So vital and alive. Jack edged toward the open window, almost panting now. Rubbing himself, harder, with the heel of his hand.

Through the open window he could see her. She turned on the television and then pulled off her blouse. He could feel his heart beat as he pressed his hand, harder and harder against his jeans. As he moved to get a better view he continued rubbing.

Jack was scaring himself now. His forehead dripped with sweat. This overwhelming, maddening urge to fuck something made him delirious and afraid.

The girl went into the bathroom and closed the door only halfway.

"Oh, God help me!" Jack thought as he grabbed the outside of the window sill and pulled himself up.

He slipped through the window on his belly, putting his hands down on the floor in

front of him. Swinging his knees around to one side he landed, quietly kneeling in front of the open window. Careful not to make any sudden moves, he turned his head to scan the street. It was deserted. He stood and carefully slid the window shut, closed the curtains and turned back toward the room. Rolling laughter erupted from the television and Jack was thankful for the noise.

A small one bedroom apartment lay in front of him. The double bed protruded from the wall and the brown, molded pipe foot-board wasn't more than two feet from him. The TV sat on top of a thrift shop dresser directly across from the end of the bed. In the corner was a small sink, microwave and a toaster oven. Jack could hear the water running and someone humming to themselves from behind the half closed door.

Blood pounded in his temples and the sweat had begun to drip into his eyes. Jack slid between the bed and the dresser, carefully watching the bathroom door. The water stopped and was replaced with the sound of sloshing.

"She's in the bathtub!" Jack's mind was racing. The thought of the girl sliding into a steaming pool of water made the blood surge in his appendage. Jack rubbed at it feverishly, almost clawing himself.

He shook his head, blinked the sweat out of his eyes and walked directly to the kitchen area. Pulled open one of the three drawers and leaned forward on the counter. Silverware - not quite right.

He could still hear her singing from the bathroom. Jack kept watch on the door as he pulled open the second drawer and there, found what he was looking for; a serrated

carving knife. Must've been a foot long. He pulled it slowly from the drawer, careful not to rattle the other utensils.

The pounding between his legs had given him a headache. He couldn't remember ever being this horny in his entire life. His mind was swimming.

It sounded like the TV was getting louder, making it hard to think. As if he could make sense of anything anyway, even with a clear head.

Jack looked down at his hand and saw the knife. His knuckles were white and the end of the handle was buried in his groin. To his horror, he watched as his feet began moving again. His goddamn feet were walking - and the bathroom door was getting closer.

"I've got to get the fuck out of here right now!" Jack told himself as he began rubbing his erection with the handle of the knife. But he was still walking. Getting closer. He was almost to the door now. Jack's ears were ringing. The TV was roaring with an unintelligible pattern of sound. Sweat stung his eyes and he continued to rub his crotch. As he passed the TV, Jack laid the knife on top of it. The blade pointing at the wall between the rabbit ear antennas.

The air was getting thicker and hotter and harder to pull into his lungs. He closed his eyes and then his mouth, slowly filled his lungs and held it. As he opened his eyes he could feel the muscles in his cheeks pushing the corners of his mouth down, toward his chin. He felt determined and desperate and indescribably sexual. This feeling was beyond horny. The high he was on was hormonal at its core but it was more than the pull of the tide. This feeling was primal beyond description and Jack felt himself trying to climb out

of his own skin. He wanted to run from this feeling and he wanted to wallow in it.

What was he doing here. This entire scene was bizarre and frightening. It absolutely could not be happening. He was not a predator. He could never harm another human. He abhorred the thoughts that were running through his head. He wanted to get away. He wanted it to stop. And he knew what he had to do.

Jack's body moved with such force that it startled him. The bathroom door swung open and bounced off of the sink. The girl was naked, drying her hair with a towel. She had been looking down at the floor when she saw Jack's feet, and in a panic she flung her head up letting her hair slap against her back. It stuck there on her shoulders, forcing her head to remain in that position. She was now staring into the face of the intruder and in her eyes Jack could see fear and innocence and disbelief in its purest form.

Before the scream could leave her mouth, Jack slapped her hard with an open backhand. She fell to the hard tiled floor with a thud and Jack stood there looking down at her. The girl raised her head, blood running from the corner of her mouth and whimpered. She tried desperately to crawl away from him. Jack took one big step forward and kicked her in the ribs, like a soccer ball. She lifted off the floor and then dropped back onto the tile gasping and wheezing uncontrollably.

Jack turned and walked quietly into the other room, leaving the half conscious pretty girl lying in a heap of hair and water and blood. Standing perfectly still for almost a minute, he assessed the room in front of him. He spun on his heels and turned to face the bathroom door again.

“So far so good,” Jack thought to himself and then immediately wondered why.

Then he turned back toward the TV and reached over and turned the volume up. It wasn't bothersome now like it had been before. As a matter of fact, it was nice to hear people laughing. Jack smiled and laughed out loud as he pulled open the top dresser drawer and started rummaging around impatiently. Underwear, socks, jewelry. He pulled the drawer completely out and dropped it to the floor. Then the next. It wasn't here.

Then Jack saw it on top of the dresser, right next to the TV. A small plastic pouch. He opened the zipper at the top and dumped the contents onto the dresser. Spreading the objects across the wood surface he smiled when he found what he'd been looking for.

Holding the bright red tube of lipstick up in front of his face he cooed contentedly. Slowly he cranked it up and watched the tip of it sparkle in the light. He loved the way it glistened and shined.

A wave of contentment spread over him as he closed his eyes and shuddered ever so slightly. Jack clung tightly to the little cylinder and began rubbing his pelvis against the front of the dresser. Lightly at first then harder. Jack's breathing had escalated to panting and he suddenly turned and walked briskly back into the bathroom.

There she was, the pretty girl, still lying in a heap on the floor, trying to catch her breath. She had spit out a piece of broken tooth in a pool of bloody saliva. She was making little headway in her struggle toward consciousness so Jack knew that he had some time left.

For several intoxicating seconds, he stood and admired her. Admired the way her hair

fell across the side of her creamy white face. Again he closed his eyes and shuddered as the clean soapy smell from her skin mixed with the lingering steam in the air. Jack could hardly get enough air into his lungs with the short little gasps he was taking and he was getting dizzy.