

The Halcyon Project

a manuscript by
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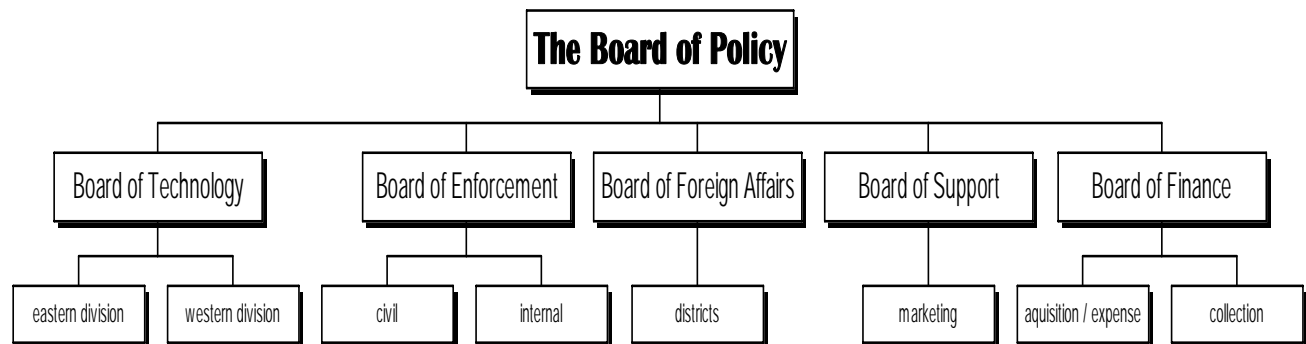
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“A book is a wonderful thing to have.”

- Mathew Garver

Budding Author

Age 8



Part One

“Liberty has never come from the government. Liberty has always come from the subjects of it. The history of liberty is a history of resistance.”

– Woodrow Wilson

Chapter One

ALONE

- 1 -

Rick Morgan thought about his wife and three boys as he sat in front of the largest desk he had ever seen. The thirty-five year old software engineer hadn't really noticed its size before. But now it towered in front of him like an evil mass of stone and it felt as if it occupied an all too uncomfortable amount of space in the room—even to the point of displacing the air that Rick was trying to pull into his lungs.

I wonder how Tera and the boys are taking this?

The dimly lit room might've had a spacious feel if it wasn't for the elongated shadows that bathed the surface of the desk, pulling at the corners and carrying them off into the darkness. Through the haze from a lone desk lamp, everything was either white or covered in pitch blackness.

I should be pissed off about this whole thing...I guess I still don't know what it is they think I've done.

Shifting on the uncomfortable wooden surface, Rick watched quietly as the shadow-clad man behind the desk creaked gingerly in a monstrous black leather chair.

His boys, as he called them, were actually Tera's from her first marriage, but Rick couldn't have loved them harder if his own life had depended on it. His family grounded him and gave him strength and his devotion to Tera and the boys was unshakable.

I wish he'd point that damn desk lamp away from my face. I don't even remember how

I got here. I mean, the officers were polite enough, but why did I cave in and follow them like a trained goat? Like I had another choice...

“We’d like to invite you down to The Board to ask you a few questions, sir.” The phrase had been delivered with an underlying tone that said more than the actual words did. Not really a threat, but the request was certainly delivered with an air of unquestionable authority. Rick recalled the look on Tera and the boys’ faces when he reassured them, “It’s all a mistake—an awful, dreadful mistake.” He remembered chuckling a little to help set them at ease and then explained that it would all be cleared up in no time. He’d kissed Tera gently on the cheek and smiled at each of the boys as the two officers persuaded him out the door with a firm but decisive grip on the back of his arms.

Now, over a day later, in this room with the huge desk and the light and the shadows, it was not feeling like a mistake. This felt like anything but a mistake. He’d been questioned several times, issued as many statements and had virtually no sleep in the last twenty-four hours. When he wasn’t being questioned, he’d spent most of that time alone in an empty interrogation room. Then there was this office. Although he’d only been in there a few minutes, to Rick it already felt like an eternity.

The husky built, sandy haired man behind the desk just kept looking through the single file folder. Occasionally, while flipping between pages, he’d make an “Umm” sound. The shadows from the lamp deepened the man’s already rough features, caricaturizing him and making it hard to guess his age. *Probably mid forties.* The cold

outline of his face was blocky and stern and it intimidated Rick the way a bully with a stick intimidates a smaller child.

It's probably part of the guy's job description to make people feel uncomfortable.

Good hiring choice.

Rick shifted uncomfortably in the wooden chair and, through the glare, continued studying the man's face.

If this guy's trying to scare the shit out me he's doing a pretty good job.

Rick tried desperately to get comfortable in the wooden chair, but it was intentionally uncomfortable—just like the out of place desk and harsh lighting—they were all part of the design. They were all tools of the trade and designed to keep you off balance.

The man looked up at Rick and then smiled. Slowly and deliberately he pulled a pitcher from the shadows and poured himself a glass of water. Raising the glass in front of his face, he admired the way the condensation shimmered in the harsh light and then quickly drank its entire contents in one fluid motion. Returning the glass to the surface of the desk with an animated gesture, the man locked eyes with his subject until he forced Rick to look away.

“Mr. Morgan,” the man spoke as he snapped the file folder shut with a flourish. “I’ve been looking over your statement and I think we’re about ready.”

Rick didn’t understand the interrogator’s statement—not that he needed too—but the pompous air of the announcement made him nervous. *Ready for what? I don’t like the sound of that.*

The interrogator tapped his index finger rhythmically on the surface of the desk and Rick could sense the man studying him. The office felt like it was getting smaller. Rick took a deep breath and tried to talk but his voice cracked and nothing audible came out.

The interrogator poured another glass of water and then slowly sipped it as he continued to watch Rick. With the glass still in hand, he leaned back in the big leather chair, making it creak and pop like a Chinese New Year. Swirling the water in front of him it was obvious that he was trying to bring attention to it and even though Rick could see exactly what the man was trying to do, he couldn't help but fixate on the sparkling glass. His throat was dry and he found himself thinking about not having enough saliva to even swallow.

"Even without a complete investigation, it's obvious that your story's not going hold up, Mr. Morgan." The interrogator set the glass down, picked up the folder and opened it sharply. "Your whole statement revolves around the claim," the interrogator paused on the word to look up at Rick, "that you had never actually known the identity of your employers. That you were hired through an intermediary...really, Mr. Morgan."

Rick nodded and, again, tried to speak—and, again, could only manage a small croak. Swallowing hard, he pushed out, "eehmp...yes, sir. I had no idea—"

"Yes, yes, Mr. Morgan," the interrogator cut in, "I've looked over this version of your story and, if you'll pardon my bluntness, it's just a little hard to swallow." The interrogator closed the folder and stood, leaning forward with his knuckles on the top of the desk.

“Unless you can give me something,” the interrogator pushed the file folder gently forward with one finger, “other than this cock and bull story, then I’m afraid our conversation is over—for now.” The interrogator’s face was cold and lifeless as he spoke.

Rick felt his life unraveling before him. He felt like a ball of yarn at the mercy of a playfully sadistic cat. He was sure that the office was smaller now. The air was heavier too—musty and warm. He could feel the sweat break out across his forehead. The sandy haired man felt like a giant leaning forward on his desk like that. The desk seemed bigger. And now Rick was feeling nauseous.

You better get a grip on this man or there’s not going to be a second chance.

Second chances and The Board of Policy were not generally used in the same sentence together. No, this was it, he needed to focus and come up with something that would appease these people.

*Just calm down and tell this nice man what he wants to know so you can go home.
He’s just trying to scare me. He’s just making sure that I’ve told him everything I know.
That’s all.*

“Are you feeling okay Mr. Morgan?” the interrogator continued. “You look...pale. Is there anything I can get for you?” The man’s voice had dropped a notch into a sadistic growl.

If this was a bluff, it was a darn good one. How long could they keep them? Indefinitely? Everyone knew what was possible, but it was always something that happened to the other guy. Again, Rick thought about the boys and for the first time,

what it would be like not to ever see them again. How lost he'd be without his family.

The thought was utterly frightening to him.

The biggest problem was that Rick really didn't know what he was mixed up in, but he was pretty sure that it was something he shouldn't have been. His statement was actually true. He didn't know who or why or what. How ridiculous that sounded now. But now Rick hated himself for not asking any of the questions that had been nagging him all along. Nagging questions about what he'd been asked to do and why.

Rick's occupation was dealing with security; software and systems security. And in that business, he was constantly dealing with people that were suspicious and careful and...well, secretive. So there were always things that he wasn't told and he was almost always working on a need to know basis. So this particular job hadn't really seemed that far out of the ordinary—until now.

Somebody wants me to break all of the top level codes into a secure system because their CIO left them high and dry—but they don't want me to know the company's name and my only contact is man known as Mr. Smith. Sounds pretty friggin' thin now, doesn't it?

But the money had been great and that, at least to an extent, probably helped Rick to remain ignorant. He'd chosen not to ask too many questions with the idea of keeping his anonymous client from spending their money elsewhere—but at what cost?

What Rick did know was that this sounded like the kind of thing that people disappeared for. The Board of Policy was asking him questions about something he'd

done and if he didn't have the answers they wanted...

The thought of spending another minute in this place was bad enough, but the thought of being separated from his family was just too horrifying to comprehend. So he would tell this man anything he had to get out of this place and back to his family. Anything.

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"Mr. Morgan," the interrogator broke in on Rick's daydream. "Is this your final statement?"

Rick sat in the chair, rubbing his palms together and looking down as he spoke quietly, "I'm telling you the truth. I've been telling the truth all along—I don't know who they are. I mean it's common practice in my business to have someone act as an intermediary between you and your client. If a company really has security issues, the last thing they want is for that to leak out. They just want it fixed as quickly and as quietly as possible. I really don't know who I was working for. I never knew. That's the truth."

The man stood behind the desk for a moment, contemplating Rick's demeanor and delivery. Over the years the interrogator had perfected his craft and could almost always tell if someone was lying by just watching them as they spoke. Most people did something when they lied to give it away. Sometimes it was outward—a little head movement or gesture—and other times it was more subtle. Sometimes it was nothing more than a feeling or a perceived tension in the voice.

But as odd as it sounded, he couldn't always tell when they were telling the truth. Did the lack of lying constitute truth? Rick did have a certain conviction and passion in his

answer. The interrogator was keenly aware that this kind of passion could be faked, though. He'd seen it before. He knew that there were those that were expert at the art of performance and at the portrayal of insincere emotion. But his job was not to guess or wonder about the truth. His job was to be sure. And at this particular moment, he was not. Rick Morgan might've been telling the truth, but this was too important to guess on.

"I suppose that you could use a little more time to gather your thoughts." The interrogator pressed the front of his desk telephone and said, "Michaels."

Within seconds, a large man in a suite entered the room. With a single nod from the interrogator, Rick was helped from his seat.

To Rick it felt more like being lifted. As they left the interrogator's office, they were joined by another man that flanked Rick on the opposite side. Together, they escorted Rick down a dark hallway. They were called assistants but to Rick, they looked like thugs. A pumped up version of Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum with dark suits and ID badges.

They walked down corridors lined with steel doors and concrete block. Fluorescent lights flickered and buzzed as muffled sounds seeped from behind the heavy steel doors. As they walked, the concrete block was replaced by darker, more intricately laid stone. The fluorescent lights were replaced with deeply recessed fixtures that poured dim yellow light onto the damp concrete floor.

Although surrealistic and unnerving, Rick found himself admiring the ornate

brickwork in a succession of arched passageways. Down and down. In the distance, there was the sound of running water. There were other sounds too—faint, indiscernible sounds. From far away, it sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard. Some kind of screeching sound. Rick felt the skin between his shoulder blades start to crawl. Hallway, stairwell, tunnel. Down to what truly felt like the end of the earth.

One of the assistant's hands completely covered Rick's shoulder as he asked him to stop. The other assistant pulled a wad of keys from his belt and jingled them in one of the metal doors. The door swung open in front of them and a faint triangle of yellow light hit the floor inside the room. Until that moment, Rick had not realized that these were cells. Prison cells. The room was completely dark except for the light seeping in from the hallway. The only thing visible was the corner of a metal bunk hung from the wall by rusted chains.

The assistant's massive hand pressed firmly down on Rick's shoulder. Then he snapped it forward, propelling Rick into the center of the dark cell.

"I want to call my wife," Rick shouted, but before he could turn around, the door slammed shut and he was left in the empty darkness. He stood motionless in the center of the cell, waiting for the numbness to subside. He needed time to understand what...or even how to feel.

At first, he felt an almost satisfying feeling akin to that of relief. He was relieved just to be alone. Relieved to be as far away from that interrogator and his desk as he could possibly get. But, his relief began to fade as he took inventory of his situation.

Still standing motionless in the center of the room, he started to tremble. He stood, surrounded by total darkness...and something else. Something even worse than darkness—silence.

There was no sound at all. Only his own breath as it passed through his nose. Only the thud of his own heart as it pushed against the inside of his chest.

Rick could feel the desperation sinking in. He could sense just how thin the walls of his sanity were becoming. To survive, he knew he would have to keep his mind occupied. Occupied with something. With something other than the pitiful predicament he was in. Some kind of mental busy work. Keep the brain busy so it can't remind you how hopeless everything is. How there's absolutely no chance of getting out of this. How you will never see your family again. How you're probably going to die soon. Reminding you about all the horrible ways a person can die. Slow torture and suffering. Hideous, lingering death. Hanging on in extreme pain. Longing for death, but never allowed to taste it. Screaming in agony and insufferable pain with no one to hear. No one to help.

"Stop it!" his raspy scream echoed in the empty cell. Rick stood hugging himself and clenching his eyes shut tightly. He took several deep breaths and repeated softly, "Stop it. Get a grip."

He decided that the first order of business would be to develop a picture of his surroundings. Draw a mental image of the darkened room. He began, arms outstretched, feeling for the closest wall. It was brick, cold and damp. It felt almost oily.

Because the texture was rough and uneven, Rick figured that it was stone, not man

made brick. He thought about the homes in his neighborhood that were sheathed in stone.

Again refocusing his energy, Rick began moving slowly around the wall. He felt as far as he could, first up the wall and then down to the floor.

On the second wall, he located a small sink about waist high. It had a round spring-loaded button on the top of the faucet that squeaked as it released rusty smelling water that Rick gladly lapped up from the palm of his cupped hand. Next to the sink he found a toilet without a seat. In the darkness, the smell was enough to inform him that it probably wasn't flushing properly. Rick located the handle and pressed it several times only to have his fears confirmed—nothing.

Covering his mouth and nose with his left hand, he moved slowly along the third wall, carefully exploring as far as he could reach, he found the door to his blackened prison. It was icy cold and felt coarse to the touch. Along one side, horizontal metal straps were bolted. The straps turned into large hinges that were embedded in the stone wall. Round lumps, rivets he thought, covered the perimeter of the door.

Rick found that the door had a small hatch at the bottom and another one about eye level. He put his cheek up against the cold metal door and could see a small sliver of light coming from around the upper hatch. There wasn't enough light to illuminate any part of the cell, just enough to let Rick know that there was light on the other side.

He located the bunk on the final wall. Although not quite waist level, it seemed too high for a bed. Mounted to the wall by a kind of hinge, it hung from chains anchored about three feet above the surface of the bed. Rick had to lean forward on his tip toes as

he traced the chains up to the large round hooks buried in the rock.

As his fingers traced across its surface, Rick found that the mattress had several small tears where chunks of stuffing were hanging out. There were also areas where it felt like it had no padding at all, just the rusted metal grid work from the frame beneath. The mattress was neither wet nor dry, but clammy feeling and it smelled of decaying newspapers.

On the walls, he found no light switches, vents or openings of any kind. Only the cold clammy stone. Cold and damp. It smelled like an old earthen cellar, filled with the smell of damp dirt and fungus.

With a painfully clear image etched into his head and exhausted by the intensity of the day, Rick sat on the edge of the bed. Like a child lost in the wilderness, he crawled up onto the bunk and curled into a little ball. There was no blanket or pillow but Rick fell, almost immediately, to sleep. His only escape, in dream.

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“Barry, Barry, Barry!” his mother was yelling in that squeaky, whining voice that curdled his stomach.

“Barry, get out of that bed right now!”

The switch came down hard on his bare back. Swat!

Barry was only eight years old, but he already knew that one day he would be old enough, and big enough, to kill his hateful mother. The thought brought him comfort the way most children found comfort in a stuffed toy or a pet kitten.

Barry looked up at his mother with big round pitiful watery eyes that seemed much too big for his face. He was smaller than most children his age, almost to the point of being frail. He was easily overpowered by his towering mother and virtually defenseless against her monstrous wrath.

“If I have to tell you one more time to get out of that bed, I’m going to beat you silly!!”

She continued to bring the stick down on his back. Swat, swat! All he could do was hold his head tightly in the pillow and cry because it angered his mother when he cried out loud. That was the sign of a weak, gutless human being. Of course, weak and gutless were punishable attributes, at least in his mother’s eyes, so Barry endured quietly.

The hate he felt toward his mother was worse than any cancer. It ate away at his soul and clouded his mind like a dark ominous storm. He had never known the joy of a loving, caring mother. He’d never known the feel of a warm hug, a soft, reassuring hand or a gentle kiss on the cheek. He’d only known pain, fear and humiliation.

He had learned by the age of five, to turn off the pain. Pain wasn’t the enemy. His mother was, and the pain actually helped him stay focused on that. Pain was a motivator, pain was a teacher. And Barry was learning.

Barry followed his tightly regimented morning ritual. He showered and washed carefully. The sting of the cold water against his tortured back seemed more like the swipe of an animal’s claws than the soothing liquid it was. He dried slowly and dressed himself. He brushed his teeth, combed his hair and went downstairs for breakfast.

His mother was frying something on the stove and mumbling unintelligibly to herself. She wore the same tattered robe she wore all day long. As far as Barry knew, she didn't own any other clothes. She'd run the spatula back and forth in the pan and carry on a conversation with the range hood, or the light. Barry wasn't sure which.

"I'm sure I don't need to tell you," she'd say to the hood, "... 'cause I know what you do. Don't think I don't," the spatula scraping back and forth as she rocked to her own internal cadence. "Don't think you can hide from me. Don't think I can't see. I have eyes in the back of my head. I can see in the dark, I can. I'll smack you silly. I'll cut you, I will!" her frenzied voice ending in a high, almost inaudible, shriek.

Then, calmly, she placed the steaming plate in front of him and smiled warmly. Barry thought it was some kind of hash and it didn't smell very good.

"Eat up son. If you want to grow up big and strong, you got to eat up," she spoke in a bubbly, trotting gate with a huge, sickening smile.

Barry ate quietly, drank his milk, and then excused himself.

She sent him off to school with the same monologue every day. "You come right home after school," she howled. "Or I'll come looking for you. Do you understand me mister? I'll come and find you!" the sentence always ended much higher and louder than it started and it always sent a ripple of prickly flesh down his back.

Barry nodded his submission and whispered his customary "Yes ma'am."

He had learned from painful experience not to test his mother. He had run away, once, but his mother found him at a neighbor's house within minutes. He hadn't realized that

the neighbors had called his mother – thinking she'd be worried about him. They kept him busy, playing games and eating ice cream while they waited for Barry's mother to come and fetch him.

She took him home, carried him up to his room and immediately taped a rag in his mouth. She removed his shoes and socks and tied his ankles to the end railing on his bed with a nylon clothesline rope. She then beat the bottom of his feet with a leather strap until they turned purple and blistered. He was kept out of school for a week and locked in his room the whole time. He wasn't allowed to leave the room. Even to go to the bathroom. He was fed once a day, which was accompanied by a frenzied thrashing from the switch. As she brought the stick crashing down on whatever part of him she could hit, she shouted the same tired speech.

"This'll teach you not to cross me mister! Do you understand me? Don't you ever cross me!!" she'd shriek in her witch-like howl. Until the day she died, Barry never again tried to run away from his mother.

He was an average student, which seemed remarkable considering his circumstance. He had a fascination for dark comic books and hid this secret carefully from his mother. Collecting these occult cartoons about macabre death and devastation, was one of the few things that brought him any pleasure.

Barry had no friends and was usually the one everyone else picked on. He was smaller than most of the other children and this, in itself, made him an easy target for ridicule. He was quiet and reserved and generally drew very little attention to himself, but was

frequently consumed by horrifying daydreams of mutilation and torture. The subject of these bright red fantasies, was nearly always his dear sweet mother.

Barry had tried, once, to explain to a teacher he trusted about the way his mother treated him. The resulting investigation and interrogation had been so demeaning and humiliating that he swore to himself he would never approach another living person about his mother again.

He had been accused of fabricating the story. Of trying to *hurt* his mother. The counselor said he was a wicked, hateful child for accusing his mother of something so unthinkable. Even the teacher he trusted had abandoned him during the ordeal. He vowed then, to one day end his mother's life with his own hands.

After the inquiry had ended, the morning beatings had begun. She had always had a short temper and used it in the name of discipline. But in the past she had hit him only when he *deserved it* and only when she was in one of her melancholy moods. This deep, almost trance like, state in which she could talk for hours to the walls, scared him more than anything. It was during these times that she seemed to end up working herself into a spitting frothing frenzy about something or other.

It always started with her sitting, staring at a wall. Sometimes for hours. Then, suddenly, she'd stand and begin pacing back and forth.

"What the hell good are you? I don't know why I even give a shit anymore...you sure as hell don't...and don't think I owe you 'cause I don't. You hear me? I DON'T!" she'd babble on at the wall, waving her arms and pointing at nothing.

Barry always stayed in his room. At least for as long as he could. Sometimes, he'd hear things being thrown and turned over. He always hoped it would end differently. Prayed for some kind of reprieve. Maybe she'd forget he was there. Maybe she'd slip and crack her skull. Maybe.

Ultimately, it always ended the same. She would come crashing through the door screaming, marching toward him, possessed by some unknown demon and start slapping the side of his head. His mother was a big woman and would have been a formidable adversary for a full-grown man, much less a small child.

Barry would try to cover his head, but quickly became dizzy and disoriented. He would see a shower of orange stars and hear the thunderous smack of his mother's palm as it struck his head in. Smack. Smack. The thunderous hand connected repeatedly with the side of his head.

He learned that the harder he cried or the harder he tried to protect himself from the blows, the longer the beatings lasted. So he became numb and developed a protective shell. Concentrating on the little chant that played inside his head;

"Pain is not the enemy."

A world inside a world. Withdrawing deeper and deeper into the safety of his internal world.

"Pain will keep me focused."

Cut off from everything.

"Pain is my companion."

Living for a dream. The dream of revenge. And one day he would have it.

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Rick was dreaming. Surrealistic, suffocating dreams that flowed from image to confusing image. His father and mother sat behind a large desk, staring at him, and then melted away like an ice cream bar in July. Somewhere, a small child was sobbing and a tiny voice echoed from far away. Too far away to be understood. A blasting, frigid wind blew in his face. It was so cold he could hardly breathe.

Out of the gray came four, twelve foot guards carrying small metal cages holding his wife and children. The guards laughed loudly and poked at the cages with long wooden spears. His family's screams echoed into the emptiness around them.

"Daddy...Daddy...please!" The words pounded at his head like a wooden mallet. His legs were frozen and he couldn't move. "Daddy ..."

The interrogator's head hovered over him like the fiery image in the 'Wizard of OZ'. Flames erupted from in front of him.

"The truth," boomed the monstrous voice. Rick's blood was liquid ice. Running through his veins and sucking the life from his soul.

The flames engulfed his field of vision. His family was gone and the guards began shoving their spears furiously in his sides. Blood shot from gaping holes between his ribs in little pulsating spurts. The flames burned away his legs and he opened his mouth as wide as he could. Rick screamed violently but there was no sound. Only silence.

Rick woke with a gasp and sat up on the bunk. He wedged himself into a corner and

rubbed his ribs through his sweat soaked shirt. He was shivering uncontrollably and panting like an old hound. The relief he felt, having escaped the nightmare, was almost instantly replaced by the panic of realizing where he actually was.

But the dark cell seemed different than before, although Rick didn't immediately know why. He looked around the room and everything was just as he had imagined it. Imagination or vision? Rick could hardly tell the difference. His mental image of the small room was perfectly outlined.

But it wasn't a mental image at all. No, he could actually see it. Actually see inside the cell. He could see shapes and textures. See the outline of the porcelain sink hanging from the wall. See the glistening from the stale water inside the toilet.

The room was no longer completely dark. Rick looked around and quickly figured out what had changed. The hatch on the lower part of the door was now open. The light from the hallway poured in through the small opening, hitting the floor and then drawing a faint outline around the room's interior. The hollow contour of the room matched Rick's mental image perfectly.

Rick closed his eyes and laid his head back against the brick wall. Forcing himself to breathe deeply. His shaking subsided and he tried to concentrate on something warm and pleasant.

He fantasized about his family coming to his rescue. Jared would formulate a plan. He was like his father and would take things into his own hands. Although Rick had never legally adopted the children, he could not have felt more like their real father. And the

boys apparently felt the same way; calling him *dad* whenever their real father wasn't around – which was most of the time.

Jared was thirteen and possessed the only trait that Rick admired in the boys' father. He was an initiator. He was not afraid to pick a course of action and pursue it. Jared wasn't the best in school, but his drive and ambition usually got him more attention than his younger brother's academics.

Mark and David, on the other hand, were nothing like their father. David, the youngest, was shy and looked up to Rick and his big brothers to take care of things. He was an excellent student but never participated in extracurricular activities. He liked to sit at home and read while the other two boys played war, built forts and wrestled until *somebody got hurt*. Rick's dad used to say, "You boys stop that before someone gets hurt." At the time, Rick thought that was the most ridiculous thing in the world to say. Now, that he had basically turned into his father, it rolled from his lips like it was the most natural phrase in the English language.

Being a dad came surprisingly easy for Rick. Complete with parental phrases and speeches on the *big picture*. These speeches started when one of the boys would ask a simple question. They tended to last until he had lost their attention and usually ended with a silly remark and a giggling match. Secretly, Rick hoped that if they remembered only one thing about these speeches, it was the giggling matches.

Rick remembered his first date with Tera. When he picked her up at her house she looked so beautiful. As they pulled out of the driveway three little hands waved from the

picture window and Rick knew that he was in love. They hadn't been dating long when Rick realized that what Tera had was what he wanted, a family. He proposed to Tera on David's second birthday and she accepted.

The cold steel bunk creaked and the chill soaked into Rick's bones. The damp atmosphere was taking its toll on him. His only warmth came from the memories he had of his life with Tera...and his boys.

- 5 -

SLAM! The door shut behind Barry sounding like a gun shot. Barry threw his back up against the door and tried to hold it shut. His heart was racing frantically. He was out of breath from running up the stairs and had ducked into the first room he could reach. The bathroom.

The evening sun, from a window high over the shower, shot into Barry's eyes as the door bounced open and then slammed shut again. First an inch. He leaned back as hard as he could. Two. Three. Now half a foot. Each time, the door slammed shut with Barry's full weight leaning against it.

"I'm gonna kill you, you little bastard," his mother's voice pierced through the closed door. "I'm gonna beat you silly, boy." The pitch on the word *boy* always shot upward, ending in a squealing *yeee*.

Barry couldn't imagine how he ever got the idea that he could successfully barricade himself away from his mother. It was just an act of desperation. He could no longer think when the subject was his mother. He could only react.

Craaack! A piece of the door molding shot off the wall and Barry was flung forward onto the tile floor as his mother poured into the room shoulder first. Barry rolled over to face his mother and began shuffling back against the tub in a vain attempt to escape his mother's wrath. Boom. Boom. His mother's fist connected with his head. Barry saw fire works flash and tasted blood in his mouth. He held his arms over his head, but as soon as he covered up, he felt the blow to his side. She kicked him so hard he couldn't breathe. He tried to roll over and curl up in a tight little ball against the side of the tub but his mother was already dragging him up by the hair. Gasping for breath, Barry fought violently to free himself from his mothers grip.

This was his thirteenth birthday. Barry had come home after school happily announcing that fact. But, it wasn't until he went into the living room that his heart sank to his feet. It was the worst he'd ever seen. Furniture turned over. Paper, glass and plastic. Everything broken. Everything smashed. But no mother in sight.

Barry was immediately sorry that he had said anything when he entered the house. He began to slowly back away from the demolished landscape, his feet carefully feeling their way behind him. His eyes still studying the debris – still looking for his mother. Slowly backing toward the door he had come in. Listening, looking, backing away while his mind spun in little circles.

“Well, if it's not the birthday boy,” his mother's declaration shot cold prickles up his back. Barry spun around and saw his mother blocking the front door. She had a small cut above her left brow and blood was dripping in her eye. She blinked deliberately and

swung a small club back and forth. It was really a small novelty baseball bat that she had brought back with her from a trip to the beach. She was wearing an apron that said *Carl's Crab Kitchen* and a pair of fluffy slippers.

She pressed her lips tightly together and brought the bat down hard on the wall next the door frame and Barry took off running. He ran up the stairs without thinking and in a panic, locked himself behind the first door he came to.

Now his mother was relentlessly bashing his head against the metal towel rack on the wall. Barry saw the blood on the wall. His blood.

He felt the skin on the side of his head tear open. Dizzy and in pain, he could no longer resist the attack. He whimpered quietly to himself as everything grew fuzzy. The room spun and his mothers movements were blurred in a jerky slow motion dance.

"Pain is the teacher," a voice in his head whispered. He looked up at his mother and saw her lips moving, but there was no sound, not even ringing, as he slipped from the realm of consciousness.

- 6 -

Rick sat in the darkness on the cold bunk and strained to hear. Slowly, he began to identify different sounds. Muffled conversation far away down the hall. Footsteps. The almost indiscernible screech of the fingernails on the chalkboard. And then something else. Something closer.

"Something's squeaking," Rick whispered to himself. There was a pitter-patter sound from around the lower door hatch and then a squeak. Rats. There were rats in the cell

with him.

“Shit!” Rick wedged himself back further into the corner, not able to see well enough to do anything but imagine the worst. It might only be one or two, or it might be a swarm. With his eyes wide open Rick imagined rats covering the floor from one side to the other. A seething ocean of rodents covering every inch of the floor.

Rick thought about them crawling on his bunk, crawling on him while he slept. He cringed and tried to open his ears wider by lifting up his eyebrows. He could see absolutely nothing and could hear them, only if he listened hard enough. He imagined rats on the bunk and swept his hands across the surface of the bed in both directions. He felt nothing.

Then there were more foot steps. Faint at first, but growing louder. Someone was coming. Rick’s heart pounded with anticipation. “They were coming to let him out. This awful misunderstanding had been cleared up and he would be going home soon,” a voice in his head chimed.

He visualized the front door of his home. The window framing the three anxious faces of the boys. Rick hadn’t stopped to think about how they were doing. He hoped they were okay.

The foot steps grew louder and finally stopped outside of his door. Rick held his breath and listened. The hatch at the bottom of the door opened and he could see the tip of one brightly polished boot. There was a rustling sound and the sound of keys, then the clank of something metal being set down and slid across the ground. He saw a metal tray

with clumps of brown, a chunk of bread and a white carton coming through the lower hatch.

He had lost the ability to distinguish time and at this moment, had no idea how long he'd been there. But for the first time, he did realize that he was hungry. No, not hungry, starving. His empty stomach ached and cramped. His mouth was dry and his lips were badly cracked. He felt his chin and guessed at two days by the stubble. He had no sense of day or night, only darkness.

When the tray hit the floor Rick saw the rats. Three at first, then suddenly, four more. They had been waiting. They were waiting for the food. His food!

Rick sat straight up on the bed as the rats covered the tray. They seemed to come from everywhere. The lower hatch swung all the way shut and Rick was encased in darkness once again. In the cold blackness of the room, the rustling sound of the rats was deafening.

"Wait!" he screamed as the muffled foot steps faded away. "Please. Please ...wait," Rick's voice trailed off into a thin whine.

There was a scurry of activity as the rats finished off the food. His illusion of maintaining his sanity was fading rapidly. He could hear the tiny claws against the metal tray. The sound of the carton being shredded. Chewing sounds echoed through the tiny cell followed by an eerie "Squeak. Squeak."

He pressed his back up against the stone wall and hugged his knees as he sat on the molding mattress. Rick dug his feet into the bed in a vain attempt to push himself into the

stone wall, farther away from the rats. The tears fell as Rick tapped his head repeatedly against the wall behind him.

“Please God...” he exhaled softly, expecting no response.

Chapter Two

LEARNING

- 1 -

Sheron Rand was in charge of what The Board referred to as the Halcyon Project. For as long as she could remember, everyone had called her Sheri. She liked the way it sounded. Sheron sounded too stuffy and pretentious, even for work.

Sheri was young, tough and very driven. She had always considered her looks a stumbling block to her success. It was too hard to get men in her field to take her seriously. Too hard to get them to do anything but smile obsequiously at her and make their little locker room comments as she was leaving the room.

She had come to The Board of Technology when she was just twenty-three years old. Like Enforcement and Finance, The Board of Technology was governed directly by The Board of Policy and its Directors. This branch was responsible for exactly what its name implied—everything and anything that had to do with technology. Next to Enforcement, Technology was the largest branch of The Board. All technological advancement in the private sector was strictly regulated and controlled by The Board of Technology. For the good of the people, of course.

Now twenty-eight, Sheri was in charge of forty people and nearly one hundred million dollars in special funding. Halcyon was one of The Board's pet projects and only a select few knew its name, much less anything about it.

Sheri had graduated from high school early and then attended a state approved

technical college. She graduated with honors after only four years in a five year program. She went on to be accepted at the prestigious Board of Technology, which was no easy task. Each year, The Board of Technology meticulously screened thousands of applicants from the best schools across the country. From these initial screenings, the top students were invited to Technology for final testing. After hours of rigorous exams and interviews, ten applicants are chosen for acceptance into The Board's Junior Training Program. The other applicants are sent home with a smile and a handshake and the hope of returning next year.

Sheri's potential was recognized early and she was placed with older, more experienced trainees. She quickly rose to the head of her work group and established herself with honors. Within a year, she was chosen for a supervisor position in the Eastern Region and began working with Dr. Yenkin.

Whether this was fate or fortune hardly matters now, but at that time, there were few people at The Board of Technology that wielded more power and respect than Dr. Antonio Yenkin. And he immediately liked Sheri.

Sheri was the kind of woman that most men immediately liked and most women immediately disliked. She was tall and slender with intensely green eyes. She was athletic and carried herself proudly. Her fair complexion and long, reddish hair made her seem more frail than she was. She was far too good looking for her intellect and she had an inner drive that out shined her appearance. She was a hard boss, but extremely fair and nearly everyone that worked for her respected her. Nearly.

Antonio Yenkin was one of the original Senior Directors, founding The Board of Policy. He had been a Director for nearly thirty-five years and in that time had made many political as well as personal allies. Antonio was the kind of man that people disagreed with quietly, in dark corners. Never out in the open and certainly never face to face. That kind of nonconformity had proven, time and time again, to be a bad career move. Dr. Yenkin's opponents frequently ended up with strange assignments in far away places or occasionally, disappeared altogether. His association with Sheri solidified her acceptance into the inner workings of The Board's power structure and she became a player in that machinery.

Ever since the Chairman of The Board of Technology had stepped down, unexpectedly, Dr. Yenkin had chosen to fill the position himself. In the beginning, everyone assumed it was a temporary measure while he considered a replacement, but as time went on, it became clear that he intended to personally remain as Chairman. Because of Dr. Yenkin's time at The Board, there were very few people that dared question his motives. Some of the older Directors would ask him pointed questions.

"Why do you waste your time with this nonsense, Antonio?" one of his oldest friends asked. "Why do you insist on handling this yourself? Appoint a Chairman."

The answers he gave never explained anything or presented any information. They did, however, have the intended effect of ending the conversation. Even old and dear friends didn't cross the line when it came to matters of The Board.

When The Board of Policy was in its infancy stages, it was Antonio Yenkin that was

assigned the task of organizing the infra structure for Technology. Antonio was responsible for creating the division known as The Board of Technology and appointing its first department heads.

It was this fondness for the division that was the reason for his egocentric behavior concerning a replacement.

Antonio was roughly seventy years old and though he may have secretly fantasized of a steamy affair with his young protege', he had always remained the perfect gentleman. Sheri's relationship with him remained strictly professional until the day he died.

There were very few people outside of The Board that knew anything about Halcyon. The diversification of the work within the project kept few of those involved from clearly understanding its magnitude. All major sub-assemblies of Halcyon were being handled by different departments within The Board and some were even farmed out to outside organizations in an effort to keep anyone from putting together the pieces of the puzzle prematurely.

Sheri was one of the few people who had seen most of the pieces and she believed in the project with all her heart. She worked long hours, pushed her people hard and expected solid results from everyone. This was her dream, and it filled her thoughts to the exclusion of all else.

This morning, she was meeting with The Directors of The Board of Policy in order to bring them up to date on Halcyon's progress. As she looked around the large conference room, she wondered why she had never taken any interest in the workings of The Board

of Policy.

After all, this was the controlling body that managed all aspects of her life. The Board was, in some way, connected to, or responsible for, anything and everything that life had to offer. In everybody's life. Yet, like everyone Sheri knew, her own day to day existence seemed so unaffected by The Board, that she remained comfortably uninterested.

She was consumed by work and the pursuit of her own ideals and goals. The Board regulated her life but rarely interfered with it, so its workings were really a non-issue with Sheri.

She knew that The Board of Policy was made up of five autonomous branches. Technology, Enforcement, Foreign Affairs, Support and Finance. Each, serving a vital roll in the coordination and structure of daily life – at least that's how the ads read.

Because of her association with Dr. Yenkin, she knew that, like Technology, each branch was headed by a Chairman and operated fairly independently. The Chairman of each branch reported directly to The Board of Policy and was responsible for implementing The Board's will. Specifically, that of The Directors.

This was the group of men she was addressing this morning. In all reality, the will of The Directors *was* the will of The Board. The Directors *were* The Board of Policy. The men that sat in these chairs were, in fact, the most powerful men in the country, probably in the world, and today they were assembling to listen to her.

The size of the room, along with its exacting detail, overwhelmed Sheri. She was in emotional overdrive as her feelings raced from excitement to nervousness. Her stomach

fluttered and a chill spread across the base of her neck. Sheri let out a long, slow breath. She knew that a poor presentation here today could seal her career shut with the nod of a head or the raise of an eyebrow. She'd heard horror stories about project heads being permanently assigned to distant places with real bad climates. Lives were shattered by a bad presentation or by the unforgivable mistake of disagreeing too strongly with one of The Directors.

Sheri was standing in the conference room looking over her notes and waiting for the rest of The Directors to take their seats. A huge forty foot walnut table was perfectly centered in the room. Large high-back, black leather chairs surrounded the table. The walls, light gray marble, lined with torch-like incandescent lights that cast powdery orange circles on the white plaster ceiling. The light was insufficient for a room this size and the dim glow encircled everything like an amber halo.

Standing behind a podium at the head of the conference table, Sheri felt as though the entire universe revolved around her. Excitement shot through her veins like tiny bolts of electricity. Her temples throbbed in cadence with the accelerated pounding of her heart as the nervousness gave way to an eerie calm. This was what she had worked for her entire life. To stand up in front of power and captivate it. To account for herself and her group proudly and confidently. This was her moment of glory and she was ready to take it.

The Directors finished their greetings and polite chit chat and all sat down in silence. One of the older men called the meeting to order and immediately announced Sheri as the Halcyon Project leader and explained solemnly that she would be giving a brief update on

its progress.

The room fell deathly silent and Sheri's confidence was shattered as she opened her mouth and heard her first word crack. Sheri swallowed hard, excused herself and took a sip from the glass of ice water that was on the podium. The Directors sat quietly and all eyes were locked on her.

She was afraid they could see the perspiration that had popped out of her hairline. A trickle of sweat ran down between her breasts and Sheri shifted nervously, adjusting her notes on the podium. She cleared her throat and set the glass back down on the podium.

"Get a hold, Sheri," she thought and then consciously forced her vocal cords to work. When the words finally came, they flowed easily and within a few minutes her initial jitters had passed and she was speaking like a seasoned professional.

Sheri had always panicked easily but she had the ability to recover just as quickly. She generally could think well under pressure, but only after forcing herself to stop and get a grip. Now, she was back in control and she hoped that her newfound confidence would overshadow her shaky beginning.

The main portion of her presentation lasted about twenty minutes after which followed a moment of awkward silence. The Directors sat around the huge table, dressed in dark gray suits, with all eyes intently on Sheri. Finally, a hollow voice from the far side of the table broke the silence.

"Dr. Rand," he said softly, "you haven't said anything, specifically, about the possibility of meeting the original deadline. We, quite frankly, have been concerned

about the recent series of delays.” The gentleman in back spoke with insincere politeness, his face obscured in the dim reddish glow.

“The delays you speak of, sir,” she said without hesitation, “have all been minor and easily overcome. The overall effect on *the original* schedule is minimal and I have added an extra shift to make up for the loss. We should have no trouble being ahead of our original schedule in another two weeks.” Sheri spoke with the appropriate mixture of confidence and humility. The insecurity had vanished and her initial apprehension seemed like nothing more than a bad dream now.

“Didn’t one of these *minor* delays involve a death, Ms. Rand?” asked another faceless bureaucrat.

Her years with Dr. Yenkin had been an endless classroom full of this bureaucratic sparring. The fine art of saying what you wish you could say without your opponent knowing that you’ve actually said it. She had learned that the certainty of the delivery was usually more important than the message itself. Antonio had always said that hesitation under pressure sent a message of fear and your opponents would perceive you as weak. This was her basis for recovery under pressure. Knowledge. Her explanation was delivered firmly, politely and with absolutely no hesitation.

“I’m sure you’ve all read my report concerning the death of Dr. Melroy, but I’d like to reemphasize the fact that the good doctor had deviated from his assigned work schedule and had begun dangerous and unapproved experimentation.” Sheri squinted but couldn’t make out the man’s reaction through the shadows. “I am now personally reviewing all

data sheets, weekly, to ensure that we have no such deviations in the future.” Sheri was completely at ease with her answer and it showed in her flawless delivery.

“Very good then Dr. Rand. I think I speak for all of The Directors when I express how pleased we are with the results you’ve obtained to date. I would just like to *reemphasize* the importance of completing this project on time. There has already been considerable time and expense involved with no hard core results. Serious repercussions would be felt, throughout The Board, if we fail in this regard. Do you understand the severity of this situation Ms. Rand?”

The feigned politeness in the room was beginning to irritate her but she spoke calmly and with conviction, “I can only reassure you, gentlemen, that we will be back on schedule and meet all deadlines as originally outlined.”

Sheri had never doubted her conviction in either her loyalty to The Board or in the Halcyon project. But since Dr. Melroy’s death, she had been keenly aware of Halcyon’s *potential* for misuse, yet she held on to the idea that if her intentions were unblemished, then the project itself would be unblemished.

There were things in Sheri’s subconscious that she could not put into words, but she was spending a lot of time justifying Halcyon’s integrity to herself. There was potential for abuse and, for some reason, it wasn’t until now that she had started to worry about it.

- 2 -

Barry graduated from Art School when he was eighteen. His face had lost the innocence of that frail child with the oversized eyes. His pale skin, in deep contrast to the

dark brownness of those eyes. Barry still looked boyish, but for reasons that belonged only to him, his eyes had grown darker. Deeper, at times, like burnt charcoal. And at other times, as inviting as melted chocolate. Barry was not tall, a little under six feet and he had always been easily intimidated because of his size. But, Art School made him feel less threatened...more like he belonged.

Back then, Art School had not yet developed into the prestigious institution it would become, so it generally appealed to those without serious ambition. It allured those who couldn't decide what they really wanted to do and that described Barry exactly. He'd attended a west coast art institute on a hardship scholarship. He had never been an exceptional student and after graduating, floated from job to job.

He finally accepted a position with the Marketing Department at The Board of Support. The few friends he had stayed in touch with from school, quickly faded as he tired of their continuous condemnation of what they called the *Ministry of Propaganda*. Barry knew that his work had no great social value, but found little humor in what they said. He actually hated the job as much as anyone could. One of his Art School buddies even tried to get him involved in the Resistive Movement in a effort to get him out of his dead end job.

Barry had seen stories on TV about The Movement and how they liked blowing things up. That intrigued him and he did pursue an association with the group. But they wanted to know everything about you including whether you preferred boxers or briefs. Too many questions for Barry's taste.

Barry had made a promise to himself long ago that he would never again let anyone inside. Never allow anyone to get close. He had secrets to keep and those people wanted to know too much. They asked about his background, his childhood – his mother. No, Barry wasn't interested in anything like that and he broke contact with the group after a few initial encounters.

Enforcement's investigation of Barry's mother's death had gone on for the majority of his first year in school. The official report ended as inconclusive on a motive or a suspect. The report had theorized that it was random violence and the case was closed after exhausting all possible leads.

Barry's mother had been found in pieces. By the look of terror etched into the expression on her severed head, the officers believed she had died slowly. Tortured and dismembered, she had been found by the paperboy, one Sunday morning while collecting for subscriptions on his route. He had noticed a dog, some kind of Spaniel, chewing on something behind a large bush in the front yard. That something was the main portion of mother's torso.

Although Barry had never been an official suspect in the murder, Sgt. Peterson (a fifteen-year veteran of Civil Enforcement), seemed to know, or maybe sense, what had happened. He just couldn't prove it. Sgt. Peterson had spent ten years as a street cop before his promotion to detective. He had good instincts about people and could generally sense things that other officers couldn't. He liked being a detective and had an insatiable sense of pride in his work.

During questioning, Barry had shown very little remorse at his mother's passing, but this was not what gave rise to Sgt. Peterson's suspicion. It was something deeper, something darker. After his initial interview with Barry, he came away feeling as though he'd been covered by a thick, noxious sludge. This man scared him and he didn't know why. At least, not exactly. Part of it surely must have been the guy's total lack of feeling toward his mother's murder. But, he'd known family members of victims who became detached. People who had closed up and blocked the pain of what had happened.

But Barry wasn't one of those people. He wasn't closed, he simply was not moved by the hideous things that had happened to his mother. He didn't care. In fact, Sgt. Peterson got the feeling that Barry thought his mother *deserved* what she'd gotten.

What he saw in Barry's eyes gave Peterson the creeps. He'd been with Enforcement far too long to get the creeps from anyone or anything and that made him even more nervous. In Barry's eyes, Sgt. Peterson couldn't see even the slightest trace of humanity. Barry was a dead man – dead on the inside.

Peterson worked the case long after it had been officially closed. He did so in his spare time. On nights and weekends. Sometimes, he'd sit for hours staring at the grotesque pictures of the mother's severed body parts. The medical experts had determined that some of the amputations were caused by human teeth. He stared at the torn flesh. He'd try to envision what kind of person was capable of this. In the end, the answer was always the same: nobody. And everybody. Given the right set of circumstances, anyone could have that thin film of civilization peeled away, leaving the dark primal instincts

that inhabit our DNA.

Sgt. Peterson was not a pessimist or an optimist, but a realist. He believed in the human spirit and its ability to endure. He also believed in its capacity for great destruction. This knowledge gave Sgt. Peterson neither satisfaction nor comfort and nine months from the day he first viewed the crazy man's handiwork, he too, closed the case of the murdered mother.

Barry had never shared anything about his mother's death with his friends at school. Barry shared very little of his private life with anyone at all. He kept to himself and avoided conversation about anything private.

Once, during his second year at Art School, he had severely beaten a military cadet and proudly displayed the boy's severed ear to the occupants of the smoky bar in which the brawl took place. The cadet had made the mistake of making some joke about Barry's mother, or the way he was raised. It really didn't matter. The whole thing was innocent enough, but something inside Barry had been aroused. Like someone stirring coals in a fireplace it had ignited the smoldering sensation Barry had known as a child. Barry's friend, Anthony, had tried to defuse the situation. Defuse or inflame. He tried to explain to the cadet that his friend had been drinking and it probably wouldn't be a good idea to continue to push him. He tried to explain that his friend was very unpleasant when provoked.

This seemed to excite the cadet and he hit Anthony square in the face, taking him to the ground. Fuel. Barry snapped. In a blind rage he went for the cadet. For those

observing, it appeared as though Barry had a deep abiding loyalty toward his friend and would protect him at any cost. This, however, was far from the truth. The situation was only a catalyst for Barry's pent up anger. Simply, it was an excuse to dip into his well of hatred and ladle it out to all who crossed him.

"I'll teach you not to cross me mister!" his mother's voice echoed from somewhere deep inside of him. A haunting sound from the other side. From the bad side.

He grabbed the cadet by the hair and literally lifted him off of Anthony. He then bludgeoned the young soldier senseless with a beer bottle, cutting up his face so badly that the pulp of flesh no longer resembled a human head. When the bottle finally broke over the cadet's battered bleeding skull, Barry used it to hack off the poor boy's ear. As the young officer lay limp and bleeding, Barry stood, proudly waving the ear in the air for all to see. The bar lay silent as everyone stared at him in shock and amazement. The boy on the floor made a pitiful gurgling sound, coughed up some blood and Anthony quickly ushered Barry outside before the authorities arrived.

There were other minor scrapes, mostly in dimly light bars late at night. But the feeling of total ecstasy Barry had felt as he stood over the soldier boy, sawing off his ear, stayed with him from that point on. He enjoyed hurting people. He enjoyed being able to issue pain the way it had been issued to him for so many years. Pain was not only his teacher, but his salvation. Like the adrenaline junkies jumping out of planes, he awaited his next violent encounter with sweet anticipation. This was the one thing in life that brought him any pleasure and he knew that he needed more of it.

- 3 -

Bio-electromagnetic induction. She'd given the explanation so many times, she could do it in her sleep. *The process of transferring electronic information, by means of magnetic radiation, to the brain, by applying a synchronous carrier wave and embedding the encoded signal within the carrier.* Sheri understood exactly what it meant, but the definition sounded like a different language to those not involved in the project.

Prior to its final unveiling, The Directors had planned a small presentation to a select group of Board officials. Sheri had been asked to keep the explanations simple and to the point. She had prepared a lively multi-media demonstration with overheads, color graphics and prerecorded video clips.

She started with a brief history of electromagnetic induction as it applied to brain wave activity. The early uses were simple relaxation devices, designed to pulse electromagnetic radiation at a single, predefined frequency. The radiating device, similar to a pair of headphones, was worn over the head. The frequency was set at the brains natural alpha rhythm, which induced a mild state of tranquility. Some of the devices also used a visual light source in tune with the induction frequency to enhance the relaxation effect.

The theory was simple enough. Electromagnetic radiation in close proximity to the brain, could be used as a simplified means of relaxation by amplifying some of the brain's normal patterns. Just pick the patterns you wanted to amplify to achieve a specific result. The early relaxation devices did work, for most people, but the technology didn't

seem to have any further use other than this simple wave enhancement.

“Until several years ago,” Sheri explained, “when Dr. Leonard Melroy stumbled, accidentally, on another use for the technique.”

The conference room where she had first addressed The Directors, was now full of people she had never seen before. Twenty extra chairs had been neatly distributed along the walls and several elderly men stood along the corridor leading in. Sheri knew these were all high ranking officials at The Board and this was all new to each of them. Halcyon had been effectively kept a secret since its inception and that was a rare feat in itself.

“Dr. Melroy,” she continued, “had modified one of these home relaxation devices so that he could directly control the frequency and amplitude of the device. In his spare time, he played with slight variations in the devices output, but never experienced any significant results until his five-year old son, Eric, got hold of the device and changed all of the settings.”

Some of the crowd seemed sleepy, some seemed placid and others looked like meticulously sculptured wax statues. This was the part of the presentation without fancy graphics, color or video, so she made a conscious effort to move it along.

“The next time Dr. Melroy used the device, it was 180 degrees out of phase from his own alpha pattern. The device was tuned to a frequency that was a third harmonic of his own and the amplitude adjustment set to the lowest setting. No one could have guessed the effect this would have on the human brain but, for some unknown reason, these

particular settings have a very unsettling effect.”

The room’s attention slowly began to focus on the speaker and her message. “Dr. Melroy was in a coma for two weeks and it took us another five months to understand the cause.” Sheri carefully left out the part about Dr. Melroy never coming out of the coma before dying.

“When we finally mapped out the mechanism and the intricate control relationships, it was clear that we had literally discovered a remote control to the brain.” The silence was replaced by a murmur that floated through the room like an early morning fog.

Sheri played a short video history of the Halcyon interface devices. The earliest appeared to be an oversized football helmet, the latest was the size of small earphones. Without getting overly technical, the video explained how that once a carrier wave had been established between the device and the test subject, emotional responses could be altered by transmitted signals from the control console. The Halcyon console transmitted the necessary alpha patterns to create the emotional responses desired and the interface device, in turn, transmitted these to the appropriate areas of the brain. It was basically the ultimate mood altering drug, without the drug. A non-narcotic means of stress and tension control, curing fatigue, loss of mental awareness and anxiety without chemicals. By all accounts it was a bio-magnetic *happy* pill.

All eyes were on the front podium when Sheri introduced Franklin Tosh.

“Thank you. My name is Franklin Tosh and I’ve been with The Board of Technology for the past six years. I was transferred to the Halcyon project a year after its inception

and put in charge of the *Human Interface* design team. The Halcyon device had been demonstrated, in the laboratory, to control human emotional responses quite nicely. The main drawback was the receiving device itself. You had to wear it,” Franklin Tosh paused and the room held it’s breath in collective unison.

“It was the task of my design team, to devise a non-obtrusive, proximity interface, capable of functioning at distances approaching several miles. This was really easily obtainable considering the body of work already performed on transmission of electromagnetic radiation. Although never quite practical, scientists have been trying to beam electricity through the air waves for years.”

Sheri lowered an eyebrow and shot a glance at Franklin as if to say. “Keep it simple stupid.”

Franklin wrapped it up quickly, with little explanation. “Their fundamental work was our basic starting point. Electromagnetic radiation can now be transmitted via satellite and my team has refined the process to make it applicable to the Halcyon carrier and the receiving device. Thank You.”

Tosh took a deep breath, exhaled abruptly then turned and stepped uncomfortably from the podium. His brief presentation was designed more to keep everyone slightly off balance than to educate. Although she was giving the presentation to respected officials at The Board, she had been asked by her superiors to keep the presentation less technical and concentrate more on an overview.

“I have been asked to answer a few short questions,” Sheri said, returning to the

podium.

After, what seemed like minutes of coughing, rustling and whispering, one of the gentlemen standing in the corridor asked, “And this... transmitter...is working now?”

“The transmitting control console has been operational for nearly two months and we have recently completed our beta test on several of the prototype receiving units.”

“You mentioned a satellite,” came one of the nameless faces. “Which one have you been experimenting with?”

Sheri paused and chose her words carefully. This would be more of a blow than anything else she had discussed. She was painfully aware of the need to maintain control over the meeting and the amount of information she released.

“We’re not using a single satellite.”

The silence in the room was broken by what sounded like a collective inhale.

“Halcyon is directly connected to the Global Inter-Link satellite network.”

The room erupted in explosive conversation with heads bouncing back and forth as questions shot between the occupants. Everyone in the room was familiar with the twenty-six satellites known as Global Inter-Link. This was an ambitious pilot project of The Board of Technology to monopolize all aspects of public communication. The Inter-Link system was responsible for all private and commercial communication including telephone, facsimile, computer and video. The Inter-Link was literally the communications hub of the world and it was controlled by The Board of Policy.

As a barrage of questions filled the room, a Board official abruptly stood and thanked

everyone for coming, adjourned the meeting and escorted Sheri to the door.

Halcyon *could* alter human emotions, and its access to the Inter-Link meant that it could perform this task globally. The burning question that remained unanswered was, “Who would be in charge of these global transmissions?”

Sheri’s new found feelings of doubt about Halcyon were growing.

- 4 -

Barry had dreamed of killing his mother so many times that when he actually did it, it seemed just like a dream. He had come home from school to find his mother sitting in front of the television set. The mangled rabbit ears looking like an artists rendering of a metallic lightning bolt. The screen was blank. His mother sat transfixed in front of the old battered console staring through it as if it were a portal to another place. Her eyes were glossed over and unblinking and for just a split second, Barry thought she was dead.

When he had asked if she was okay, she had flared her nostrils, turned her head slowly toward him and growled.

“Get to your room or I’ll slap the shit out-a-you, boy!”

Barry was in his last year of high school and was basically a full-grown man. He weighed about 190 pounds and was just under 6 feet tall. Although his face was blessed with a perfect complexion, the rest of his body carried the unseen scars of his tortured existence. Up until the day that he killed her, Barry had always remained blindly obedient to his psychopathic mother.

The day had been a normal day for Barry except for the ride home on the bus. Several

of the girls had teased him about how shy he was. They said he wouldn't know what to do with a girl even if he got up the courage to ask one out. Then they laughed. And they kept on laughing. It echoed through his head like it was an empty cavern. Although Barry was used to being teased, this time seemed painfully different. The onslaught of young adulthood had brought with it many difficult feelings. Feelings about girls. Feelings about loneliness. He wished he could kill the girls on the bus. He wished he could make them suffer the way they were making him suffer. He wished he could clamp his hands tightly around their little laughing throats and squeeze the life out of them like helpless rag dolls.

The laughing broke out again, louder than before. Every eye on the bus was on Barry. He tried his best to sink into the seat. To blend in and disappear. He wished he was invisible.

Barry clamped his eyes shut as tightly as he could and held his breath. He felt his cheeks flush and his face began to shake. That overwhelming sense of helplessness encircled him, engulfing him like a layer of vanilla pudding. Trapped and helpless, he retreated quietly into himself. Pain comes in many forms and from many sources.

When Barry got home and his mother tried to make good on her threat of physical violence, Barry could literally take no more. She raised the stick to swat him and he caught it in mid air, holding it firm. His jaws clenched and his eyes narrowed.

"Never again," he said. His voice overly calm.

"What did you say, boy?" she hollered in a thin, whining howl.

"You will never strike me again, mother," Barry said, his heart pounding solidly, still

holding his mother's stick in his hand. The fire in her eyes lit up her face like the glow of a camp fire. She was too furious to see that this was no longer the helpless, scared little boy she had successfully controlled for so many years. Too incensed to realize that she was now taunting a grown man. Too blind to read the message in her son's eyes. Barry intended to make it clear that things had changed.

The next morning, Barry woke to his clock radio as usual. He showered carefully, then dried and dressed himself. He went down stairs and poured himself a bowl of cereal and ate breakfast quietly by himself. His mother did not proclaim her same, tired litany. She would never again proclaim anything.

When she tried to strike him, he had grabbed the switch and yanked it from her hand. Outraged, she had come at him and hit the side of his head with the open palm of her large hand. Barry had successfully blocked all but a few of the blows. Without even thinking, he hit her as hard as he could, square on the bridge of her nose. She stumbled back awkwardly, knocking over the coffee table and all the neatly arranged porcelain figurines.

For a moment, she lay dazed, heels in the air. Confused and disoriented, blood gushing from her broken nose, she slowly rose and walked toward her son.

"You'll pay for this you little son of a bitch," she threatened as she advanced toward him. Her blood soaked robe swung back and forth in front of her like a pendulum.

Barry hit her again. All of his energy concentrated in one blow. Eighteen years of anger packed neatly into one explosive punch. His mother left the ground and landed in a

pile of splintered wood and glass. This time she did not get up. He had knocked her unconscious and by the time she woke up, Barry had stripped her naked, duct taped a sock in her mouth and secured her ankles and wrists to the rails of his bed. When she finally came around, the look in her eyes was that of utter disbelief and yet, complete understanding. This was what she had created. This was her handy work and now it was time to make amends.

It was Friday night and Barry spent the next eighteen hours slowly killing his mother. He had waited all his life for this and he was going to savor every precious minute like a shiny yellow lemon drop on the tip of his tongue. Each scream of pain, each plea for mercy, each begging cry for forgiveness, became background music for Barry and made the task at hand that much more enjoyable.

“Pain is a teacher, mother,” he said as she lay bleeding and crying. “Pain will teach you to be strong.”

Again he approached her with the pliers and again she screamed through the sock and fought violently against her restraints. “Pain is your friend, mother.” He ripped another piece of skin from under her armpit and dropped it into a bloody coffee cup. Barry took a tissue from a box on the night stand and carefully wiped the tears from his mother’s cheeks. He looked deep into her eyes and smiled as he brushed the side of her face gently with his thumb.

“It’s okay,” he spoke softly, “Barry’s here for momma.” Again, the gruesome pliers bit into her soft flesh. Again, her muffled screams of agony sang through Barry’s head

like Christmas music. Barry emptied the coffee cup into a large zip lock baggy and whistled as his mother's eyes followed each of his determined movements.

Barry slept all day Sunday and returned to school on Monday as usual. It wasn't until the following Sunday that the paper boy found his mother's torso buried in the front yard, the neighbors Cocker Spaniel chewing on the decomposing carcass.

Barry was now free from the terrible oppression of his mother. What he hadn't realized yet, was that he would never be free from the things his mother had taught him.

Chapter Three

REVELATIONS

- 1 -

Rick had spent the last three days with the rats in his damp solitary confinement cell. Time had become a blur and his conscious hours were increasingly hard to distinguish from his dreams. His sanity slipped a little more with the passing of each solitary hour.

He was a computer programmer for a large telecommunications firm and this sudden redirection of his life was so removed from his normal day to day life that he could not comprehend it. This just couldn't be real.

As a child, Rick had played baseball with the other children in the neighborhood, but always left early and rushed home to play computer games. Rick could sit for hours in front of a computer screen with joystick in hand. He preferred games that challenged his sense of adventure. Games that required a considerable amount of thought and involvement to solve. Simple arcade games offered no challenge for him.

At an early age, he hacked into the school computer system and changed some of the mid-term grades to help out some of his friends. Rick was always more mischievous than actually *bad*. He rarely thought about the consequences for what he did and most often what he did was meant to help others (he never changed his own grades).

He taught himself to program computers and make them do what he wanted them to do. Through books and magazines and lots of trial and error he developed his skill. His parents used to worry about his eyes going bad.

“Why don’t you go outside and play?” his father would ask frequently. “It’s not healthy to stay in front of that thing for so long.”

Rick always nodded politely to his father and answered with a sincere, “Yes sir. In a minute,” but never did go out when asked to.

He was always fascinated by keeping things secret. Codes, secret writing, invisible ink. He’d tried it all, and at an early age began experimenting with computer code systems. After high school, Rick graduated from Technical School with a degree in Encryption Scheme Technology. Then an emerging technology, EST would prove to be a career choice with multiple opportunities.

As the Global Inter-Link took off, security of point to point transmissions grew into a multi-billion dollar industry. Those skilled in this field were positioned for success from the beginning and Rick was one of the best.

He graduated with honors, at the head of his class and was courted by several major communications firms. Rick’s natural ability and subsequent success, never gave way to an inflated ego. He remained modest about his own abilities and preferred spending time with his family more than anything else.

He had been living an exceptionally normal, eight to five life, enjoying the comfort of a loving family and a beautiful home. He traded cars every couple of years, wrote off business lunches to the company and took at least three weeks vacation a year. He was an above average computer programmer for a very large telecommunications firm. At least he considered himself *above average*. In reality, he was one of the top programmers in

the world when it came to electronic security.

Rick loved challenges and tended to wear blinders when deeply engrossed in any project. If it tested his abilities, he had time to think of little else and it was his own awareness of this passion that gave way to the balance in his personal life. Rick consciously set aside time for his family and during those times, work did not exist. He could enjoy life for life's sake and asked nothing more from his existence.

He was also, like most of his middle class contemporaries, totally blind to the internal deterioration that chewed away at the structure that governed his day to day sanctuary. The news stories about The Resistive Movement and the reign of terror they perpetuated had become so common place, that most people Rick knew were numb to it. It was no longer sensational and what it represented was little more than subject matter for idle chit chat around cocktails.

"Did you hear about The Movement getting into Enforcement's computer and stopping payment on all of their paychecks?" Rick's friend Robert prided himself on keeping up with current affairs.

"How could they do that?" Rick asked with a puzzled look on his face as he sipped the Scotch and crunched a piece of ice between his teeth. "It's got to be at LEVEL 4 security – or better."

"There's some sneaky fuckers hanging out with that crowd," Robert chimed insistently, "I wouldn't be surprised if they could get into the communication hub of the Inter-Link."

“No way,” Ricks tone indicating extreme disagreement, “that’s LEVEL 7. No one can get into that without the original encryption algorithm. NO ONE!”

These conversations would usually continue for hours or until Tera called Rick on his cellular and prompted his polite, but hasty exit.

One day, Rick was approached by a superbly dressed, older gentleman. He said that he had heard of Rick’s work with satellite security systems and he was representing a new company wishing to develop secure communications. The man explained their system as using a new sub-carrier that Rick was not familiar with. In fact, it didn’t even sound practical. Rick was intrigued and accepted a part time consulting position with little question.

The man explained that a previous subcontractor had written several security codes and had quit after disagreements with management on the pay for his services. Rick felt the company’s pay was very generous and assumed the person was greedy and unscrupulous. Rick’s employer wanted to know if there was any way that he could break the codes so they could regain access to their original communication channels. Rick delighted in the challenge. In any challenge. It was like playing a computer game against an unknown adversary. He spent hours at a time in front of the screen, working harder and harder to defeat his unseen opponent.

Tera and the boys amused themselves through this time, realizing that dad had been bit by the bug again. They had a pretty fair understanding of the way these things could consume him. They also knew that he’d be back, after defeating whatever it was that he

was fighting against. And he always came back. Realizing suddenly how he'd neglected them and trying desperately to make it up to them. Trips, clothes, flowers. His family continued with their lives and waited patiently for his return. Waited for him to emerge victorious from the clutches of the hypnotic light behind his computer screen.

Rick was considered one of the foremost authorities on software security and encryption schemes, and he was familiar with nearly all of the currently used techniques. Most of the people developing these systems had studied Rick's published papers. But these keys were very different.

Of course, it never occurred to Rick to ask, but he did feel a nagging suspicion about the sophistication of these codes. They were incredibly advanced and unlike anything he'd ever seen. It may have been the overwhelming challenge that kept him from asking too many questions or it may have been the benign, honest character of his employer. Whatever the reason, Rick worked diligently and rarely asked questions beyond what pertained directly to his work. Directly to the challenge.

He was placed on a bonus plan that paid incentives for each code key he provided. There were thirteen in all and within three months, all but one of the keys had been successfully broken.

The extra money he earned from each broken code allowed him to do things for his family that he was not able to do before. In traditional fashion, he over compensated for the time he spent working. They flew to the places the boys dreamed of going. They frequented the better restaurants in the area. They bought quite a few of the luxuries they

had been doing without. The new twist on his freelance work—it not only challenged Rick, but it benefited the whole family.

It wasn't until three days ago, with one code key—code thirteen—still remaining, that he had severely regretted his lack of curiosity. Now, shivering in the damp cell, it was clear that he should have questioned his involvement much more thoroughly. His trusting nature was, now, proving to be a fatal flaw.

- 2 -

Anthony wasn't good at waiting. Patience was a virtue he had never developed. Waiting to find out something wasn't that bad, but waiting to *tell* something, for him, was excruciating. He was finally going to help the only real friend he had. Anthony relished the thought of having anyone indebted to him. But somewhere inside his convoluted mind, he thought it would be great to have Barry indebted to him. It might even be necessary at some point.

Anthony had met Barry in Art School and had roomed with him in their second year. Anthony enjoyed Barry's company because he too, seemed to appreciate the seedier side of life. A side of life that Anthony felt compelled to immerse himself in. They were, in a sense, kindred spirits and although Anthony had viewed their relationship as friendship, Barry had never seen it as such.

Anthony was waiting in a cavernous corridor within the halls of Enforcement. Enforcement was a creepy place and just being there made him uncomfortable. Waiting was awful. Everything was gray and cold. The halls were lined with hardwood benches,

polished smooth from years of use. Dim, incandescent lights hung from the walls and an eerie glow encircled the heads of those who walked by. Footsteps echoed through out the halls as if amplified by a huge microphone hidden in the floor. Conversations mixed in a reverberating slush and the sounds made Anthony shudder. He felt his skin prickle and twisted nervously on the wooden bench.

Strangely enough, Anthony had never minded *working* for Enforcement. Maybe because it had always been on his terms. At least that's the way he always viewed it. They would call him and have him follow some subversive idiot too stupid to realize he'd crossed them. Occasionally he'd stake out a residence and make logs of a person's daily activities. In his mind, he was providing a much needed service and, what he thought of as *skilled* labor.

The problem was, that as far as Enforcement was concerned, Anthony existed on the lowest rung of the investigative scum ladder. Enforcement contracted hundreds of these no-names, with the express purpose of increasing the size of their information gathering network. When one of these small time *operatives* would accidentally stumble across useful information, they would be paid handsomely, patted on the back and the investigation would be turned over to experienced Enforcement agents.

Anthony had learned his trade straight out of Art School when he had gone to work for an investigator named Anderson. Actually, his first job for Anderson had been surveillance for Enforcement. He had immediately felt a sense of power upon being entrusted with such a prestigious assignment. Anthony never questioned Mr. Anderson's

motivations for giving him the assignment and viewed it as his *big chance*. In reality, his employer wanted nothing to do with Enforcement and welcomed the opportunity to give the case to his young assistant and reel in the financial rewards himself. He had worked for Anderson on and off for several months and had always kind of liked Anderson's bland, non-committal style.

In the end, he was able to pay back Mr Anderson's trust in him by turning him and his little band of subversives into Enforcement. Actually, Anderson never showed up the night of the arrests and Anthony wondered from time to time what had become of him. Although it should have, the thought of Mr. Anderson coming after him never bothered Anthony. In fact he would often fantasize about their confrontation and how he would drop Anderson's limp lifeless body on the steps at the Enforcement building. The fantasy, as with all of Anthony's dreams, ended with him receiving a huge sum of money for his work.

"Mr. Hopkins," screeched an ancient women standing in one of the doorways. Her mummy like features added to Anthony's apprehension about being here and he rose cautiously, as if he couldn't remember where he was. He approached her and was escorted into a hallway. The door slammed behind him with a cannon-like thud.

"First door on the left," the old women cackled as she waddled off and disappeared down a dark corridor. Anthony moved forward cautiously and tapped lightly on the door and then slowly turned the knob.

"Well, hell, son," a huge voice boomed before he had the door completely open. "How

ya been, boy?” the man’s voice reeked with inflated sincerity. “What ya got for me today?”

Anthony recognized the voice from frequent phone conversations and that, at least partially, set him at ease. His name was Lewis and he was a jovial man in his late fifties. Even though he was a senior official with Enforcement, he had always made Anthony feel at ease with his carefree style.

Anthony sat in one of the folding chairs and leaned toward the industrial metal desk. “Here’s the deal,” sounding more like he was clearing his throat than speaking. “I hear you’re always on the look out for new talent.”

This was, in fact, true. The long arm of Enforcement was constantly looking for new tentacles. Lewis was an officer of the Department of Personnel Procurement. A pretty fancy name for Enforcement’s Human Resource Department. He worked within the division that sought out and retained mostly free lance talent. Individuals who did not work directly for Enforcement had a considerable advantage over full time employees. One big advantage was that they were expendable. And cheap. They were paid only for results and hard core information. With thousands of small time free lancers out poking around, they usually were responsible for a steady stream of information on subversive activities.

“Go ahead, boy,” Lewis spoke as he grabbed a bottle and poured them both a glass of Scotch. He slid the drink across the metal desk to Anthony. Lewis sat back in his gray leather chair and listened intently.

“He’s a friend of mine and I think he’d be perfect for this. He’s a kook.” Anthony rocked back and forth in the folding steel chair and tried to get comfortable.

“Okay, boy. Tell me about him.” Lewis had the biggest voice Anthony had ever heard. It filled the room with vibrations that lasted long after the actual syllables had ended.

As if he could not contain himself, Anthony blurted, “He’s crazy, man. He’s got a loose wire. If you piss him off, he gets real *calm*.”

“CALM?” Lewis’ voice shot through the room. “What the hell good is calm? I’ve got to have people that can ...”

“Okay, okay,” Anthony broke in, “you don’t understand the kind of calm I’m talking about. It’s the kind of calm that’s like...fuel. Fuel for a fire, man. It scares the hell out of me and I’m his best friend.”

Lewis began to pay serious attention as Anthony described the brawl when Barry had sawed off the young cadet’s ear. Anthony knew he had hooked him because he wasn’t interrupting anymore, just smiling and listening. Anthony recounted other incidents and with each gruesome tale, Lewis became more content. His overpowering, jovial air had been replaced with a quieter, more sincere gaze. Anthony finished his narrative by explaining that Barry had no family and currently worked, of all places, for The Board of Policy in the Marketing Department.

Lewis stared thoughtfully for a moment then relaxed, his intense expression, suddenly replaced by a huge shit-eating grin.

“You done good, boy,” his jovial nature had returned in full bloom. “I’d like to talk to

him.”

- 3 -

“Sheri,” Franklin was yelling from behind her. “Sheri, wait a minute.”

Sheri was on her way to the cafeteria to pick up a sandwich when Franklin Tosh called out from the entrance to his laboratory. Sheri turned and followed as he motioned her inside the Human Interface lab. Sheri ate at work so rarely that food was never a burning issue with her and she had no reservations about finding out why Franklin seemed so excited.

“What’s up, Chip?” Sheri asked soberly. She had started calling him Chip shortly after meeting him. The big joke was that he thought like a computer. Logically and methodically with little or no emotion. Like a computer *chip*. So Sheri started calling him Chip, affectionately, and the nick-name stuck.

Franklin Tosh was not what you would call a fountain of emotion. He was however, a genius in electronic engineering. This magical flair for anything electrical took its toll on Franklin’s personality. Sheri had never met another human being so obsessed with their work. Not even herself, and that surprised and impressed her.

Sheri hated to think of him this way, but Franklin was a textbook nerd. Thick glasses. Trousers too short. His hair was never combed and his clothes were always wrinkled. Franklin was tall and lanky with mousy brown hair and pale blue eyes. He was one year younger than Sheri and, under different circumstances, Sheri might have considered him attractive. Sometimes, she’d see him sitting at his desk with his glasses off as he studied

some spaghetti diagram. He'd run his hand through his hair, pulling it back off his forehead and that's when she could see it. The person behind the intellect. Something in his eyes. She wasn't really sure what it was but it was endearing.

Then, without warning, he'd pop his glasses back on and his hair would fall over the rims as he stood in a trance, mesmerized by some intricate conceptual relationship. Sheri was sure that she was the only one that had ever seen this in Franklin and she kind of liked it that way.

"This way," he said pointing to a work bench along one wall, "come here and look at this."

"Why Franklin my dear," she said in a feeble attempt at a southern accent, "I don't know that I've ever seen you actually excited about anything." She continued, pretending to cool herself with an imaginary fan as she batted her eyes wildly and pursed her lips in his direction. Whatever small amount of humor she tried to convey was certainly lost on Franklin.

"Look!" he said more insistently, pointing at a small plastic tray on the work bench. "It's the latest one. Number fifteen. It's certainly the best yet."

Sheri dropped the southern belle put on and looked down at the plastic tray. For several seconds couldn't place what she was seeing.

"Well?" Franklin cocked his head and prodded anxiously for her response.

"It's so small," she whispered as she finally realized what she was looking at.

"Small??" Franklin sounded genuinely hurt. "It's five millimeters across and two

millimeters thick,” he said sounding as proud as a father bragging about his newborn son’s birth weight. “It’s *sub-miniature*!”

It looked like a watch battery and was connected by several fine wires to a rack of flashing equipment along the back of the workbench. A cable ran from the back of the rack to a portable computer. Wave patterns crossed the computer screen in a rhythmic ebb and flow. Sheri recognized the patterns as Halcyon control signals, but was still having trouble grasping the implications of what she was actually seeing.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Last time I saw this thing, it was the size of my fist. And that was only last week!” Sheri was stunned by the progress that Franklin and his team had made in such a short time. This was more than just progress though, this was a real break through. The device was so small that it would be more than comfortable to wear, it would be almost unnoticeable.

Sheri turned suddenly and looked straight into his eyes. “Does this thing work, Franklin?” Sheri’s face tightened up as she asked firmly, “Does it really work? No funny problems like before?”

Franklin smiled and slid his glasses up the bridge of his nose with his index finger. “Follow me,” he said and motioned to the far corner of the lab. The other side of the laboratory was dedicated to animal research and one wall was covered with cages. They were filled with small white rats. Franklin reached for a cage containing over a dozen furry rodents, set it down on the counter top and turned to face Sheri.

“There are fifteen test subjects in this cage,” Franklin spoke in his standard clinical

fashion. “The subjects have not eaten for forty eight hours and I have recently injected each subject with a small dose of methamphetamine.”

Sheri stared at the cage thoughtfully and wondered where this was leading. Franklin paused long enough to let what he had just said sink in. “The methamphetamine will heighten their response to the stimuli.”

“Franklin,” the impatience in Sheri’s voice was apparent, “tell me what the hell you’re doing.”

“Ask me what *stimuli*,” Franklin said smugly, again adjusting the position of his glasses.

Sheri let out a long breath while Franklin nodded his head in anticipation. “What stimuli?” she said, reluctantly playing along.

“Food!” he blurted out, hardly able to contain himself. “They’ll tear each other to shreds trying to get at this little bit of food.” Franklin held up, what appeared to be, a small piece of meat.

“Franklin,” Sheri’s tone turning from impatience to frustration, “I’ve got a lot of work to do. If there’s really a point here, I’d appreciate hearing about it. Now.”

Franklin’s eyes never left Sheri’s as he opened the top of the cage and dropped the piece of meat. The rats erupted into a pulsating ball of tails and fur. They scratched and clawed and bit each other, fighting furiously for the tiny scrap of food.

Sheri scrunched her eyebrows down hard and snapped, “Chip!”

Smiling, he reached into his lab coat and produced a small electronic device, pointed it

across the room at the rack of flashing lights and mashed a big red button.

Sheri heard the squeaky whine from the rat cage stop as suddenly as it had begun. She turned to the cage and reacted in horror when she saw all the rats lying motionless in the cage. What kind of experiment was this? “If this is some kind of sadistic joke, Franklin!” she shouted furiously, “What the hell are you doing? You’re not supposed to kill them!” “It irritated her, to no end, that he was smiling bigger than ever.

Then Sheri glanced from Franklin back to the rat cage and noticed something strange. The rats weren’t dead. There was movement. She stepped closer and leaned down to look inside the cage. The rats weren’t dead after all. In fact, one of them was nibbling on the piece of meat and the others were sitting and watching him. It looked like they were...waiting their turn. Two of the rats walked past the one eating. They nestled under some wood shavings on the opposite side and prepared to take a nap. They were all alive. And in turn, each one nibbled lightly on the small piece of meat and then slowly curled up in the bedding, watching the others take their turn.

Sheri could not speak. It was partly the awe of the situation and partly the control that Franklin was exacting over the subjects of his demonstration. But mostly, Sheri could not speak because she was still dangling at the edge of comprehension. For the first time since she walked in, she noticed that all the rats had three neat little stitches right in the top of their heads.

Sheri’s cloud of uneasiness was steadily growing. She couldn’t put it into words, and didn’t really understand what she was feeling, but something was amiss. Something was

going very wrong and it was beginning to cloud Sheri's judgment.

- 4 -

It was called the cafeteria, but it no longer resembled anything more than a glorified break room. Vending machines along one wall dispensed everything from sandwiches to orange juice. A small microwave oven sat on a counter top. A string of cabinets overhead were used for storing condiments and styrofoam cups. There was a refrigerator and a stove-top mounted in the counter.

The large room, at one time, had a full time cooking staff. Rectangular openings to the kitchen were all boarded up and painted to match the block walls. That was the definition of remodeling at The Board of Technology, temporary fixes and paint. There were a dozen round tables and probably a hundred chairs. Even though the room was never occupied by more than twenty or thirty people at a time, the furniture remained. Partly as a reminder of the power Enforcement wielded within the system. Partly because no one knew what department handled requests for furniture removal.

The entire facility was the old Enforcement headquarters. At one time, this had been a fully functioning cafeteria serving a thousand meals a day. Now it was a shell. A poorly remodeled monument to the force that had created it. Enforcement was located in their new granite and glass facility and though Technology was overjoyed to consolidate its efforts under one roof it was still Enforcement's hand-me-downs.

Before moving into this structure, The Board of Technology was scattered between dozens of buildings miles apart. Some of these, no more than portable metal buildings,

wheeled into place and parked in empty lots on cinder blocks. A poorly constructed set of wooden stairs greeted them every morning as they made their way in to work. So for the employees at Technology these hand-me-downs were appreciated.

This afternoon, the few scattered people in the large room made it seem bigger than it was. Two men sat across from each other at a table covered with diagrams. A white haired woman dined alone at a table for six, slurping a bowl soup. Directly across from her, a 46 inch monitor was mounted in the wall. Her red wrinkled eyes were fixed as the media recounted one of The Resistive Movement's worst blows ever. The old woman watched and sipped, as the emotions rose in her eyes. She hadn't lost anyone in that tragedy but the brutality and devastation flashing across the screen moved her to tears.

"Mourners gather by the thousands for the third anniversary of the worst terrorist strike in history," a reporter for The Board of Support said with a reverent yet professional tone. "This was once an internationally renowned convention center brought to the ground by a single timed implosion device. On the eve of the tragedy, people are gathering at what is now known as SKIP Park. Erected as a memorial for those who lost their lives here, it was given a name that would remain as a constant reminder of this terrible tragedy. The theme: Stop Killing Innocent People was voted and ratified by The Board of Support only hours after the terrorist strike. Here, where the center once stood, families will gather to remember their lost loved ones and to remind the Nation that subversive actions benefit no one. All though we are reminded of this atrocity here today, it is significant that no bombings have occurred within the last seven months. It is

possible that Enforcement has finally grappled The Resistive Movement, and order will once again become common place. This is Debora Monroe, TBOP News."

The old woman shivered and wiped her face in an effort to shake her disgust. It didn't work. She dumped the half eaten soup in the waste bin and walked toward the exit.

Sheri and Franklin almost knocked her down with the door as she came in. They went immediately to the vending machines and Sheri plunked down spare change for rancid coffee. The sodium vapor lamps hummed and spread yellow light across the table tops in uneven concentric circles.

Sheri sat down and passed one of the paper coffee cups to Franklin. Sheri sat next to Franklin and sipped her coffee excitedly. "Do you know what this means, Franklin?" her eyes widening and turning a brighter shade of green.

"Complete portability," he said so calmly it actually upset Sheri.

"Complete portability?" her voice twisted in a high pitched squeak. "This means Halcyon will become a reality for *everyone*. This means that access to the Halcyon signal will be universal. Without equipment restraints."

"Complete portability," Franklin said again, reaffirming his original answer.

"Franklin," Sheri said trying her best not to be upset with his lack of passion, "you've done something that will ultimately affect millions of people."

He continued to look directly at Sheri. His expression devoid of emotion as Sheri continued her monologue.

"On a global scale, Franklin. All over the world," she talked slowly as if explaining

something to a small child, “people are going to be happier and more productive. Anyone will be able to put on a receiving device and immediately feel a reduction in stress levels. Immediately feel better about themselves. Immediately redirect their energies in a more positive direction. Pressure and anxiety will melt away. All of this contributing to society as a whole. All of this because your receiving device is *completely portable!*” To an uninformed third party, it may have sounded like Sheri’s explanation was more for *her* benefit than his. That she was trying to convince herself, not Franklin.

It wasn’t that he didn’t understand what she was saying. And it wasn’t that he didn’t care, but his mind was already working on the problem of mass manufacturing. Working out the photo layout for the intricate chip designs. Planning the work schedules in overlapping shifts to facilitate the design of the assembly stations.

Sheri looked deeply into his eyes, looking for an indication that he understood the magnitude of their work. Understood the implications for society.

“The prototype units are actually sheathed in a galvanized zinc casing. I think I can shave another fifteen or twenty microns by going with a carbon fiber composite.”

“You’re hopeless, Chip.” Sheri was speaking to herself this time. Some days, conversation on a human level was impossible with Franklin. His brain processed information statistically not emotionally. “Let’s get to work then,” the calm resolve in her voice had returned, “I’ve got a report to file with The Directors by Friday.”

Still the cloud remained and grew. Sheri forced herself to forget it and move on. To stop being paranoid and just get the job done. And for now, it worked.

- 5 -

Rick's overwhelming need for food had taken its toll on his ability to think clearly. For the third time, the rats had swarmed the lower hatch and quickly engulfed the metal tray of food. He no longer viewed the rats as creepy little rodents, but as the *enemy*. This was becoming a fight for survival and it was either he or the rats.

Rick had noticed that after the food was gone, the rats vanished without a trace. The trays seemed to come once every six or eight hours. As far as he could tell, it had been several hours since the last tray was licked clean by the filthy furry bastards. The hate Rick felt wasn't directed toward his captors anymore, but toward the rats. As his stomach twisted into tight little knots, his focus now had to be on the present – and his immediate concern was starvation.

Through further explorations of his surroundings, Rick discovered that the lower hatch was not locked. It could be opened from the inside if you could get one side started with your finger nail. The latching mechanism for holding it open must have been on the outside of the door because as soon as he released the hatch, it fell shut again. Rick was trying to find a way to prop open the hatch when he found that the rats came out of hiding when it was opened. They would move cautiously toward the light source, knowing that food was on its way. The rats appeared out of nowhere and every time he looked around the room, there were more of them. They wouldn't come right up to him, but they did position themselves for a speedy attack as soon as the tray finally hit the floor. When Rick let the hatch fall shut, he heard the rats scurry back to wherever they went when

they were not stealing his food.

Rick knew they were gone because he'd lift the hatch, ever so slightly, allowing a small sliver of light to penetrate the darkness. Placing his head sideways, down next to the floor he looked across it in all directions. Gone, not a trace. But to where?

Rick opened the hatch and then closed it several times and watched and listened carefully. Each time the rats came and went without a trace. Finally, he saw two rats literally disappear under the sink.

With the hatch closed and bathed in darkness, Rick crawled slowly across the floor, carefully feeling the path in front of him. He waved his arms methodically in front of his face, first the right – then the left. Then he went back to feeling the floor. When he reached the sink, he carefully swept from left to right under the sink, surveying cautiously with his hands. The sink leaked. There was a small puddle of water under it that smelled like it had been there forever. Rick started with the bottom of the sink, carefully feeling various plumbing fixtures and connections. He slowly followed the drainpipe down to the rock floor. It was cold and slimy and smelled of mildew.

Then he found it. Where the drainpipe entered the floor, there was a chunk of stone chipped out about the size of his fist. Rick didn't bother exploring too deeply into the opening. Partially because he knew the rats were down there and partially because he was afraid they might not be satisfied with the brown mush and white cartons they had for lunch.

Rick sat on the damp floor staring at the opening. Although he couldn't see his hand in

front of his nose, he had a perfect mental image of the pipe and the hole in the floor. He felt the drain pipe and let his fingers follow it back up to the underside of the sink.

Suddenly, he turned and crawled back to bed on all fours. He yanked the mattress off the bed and drug it over to the sink. Feeling for one of the holes in the top of the mattress, he reached in and pulled out handful after handful of mattress stuffing and began shoving it down the rat hole. A dozen or so clumps, tightly packed in the hole and around the pipe. After the hole had been filled, he sat quietly in front of it and thought. Rick knew this wouldn't stop the rats, only slow them down. So he turned and drug the mattress over to the door. He folded the mattress in half and placed it next to the closed lower hatch. He positioned it carefully, so when the mattress was unfolded, it opened up in front of the hatch in the door.

Then Rick peeled off one of his socks. He worked his index finger under one side of the hatch and slid it up. The light from the hallway was very bright and he was forced to look back into the darkened cell as he worked the sock into the track. With the sock sufficiently wedged into the track, the hatch was now propped open and Rick had a perfect view of the stuffing under the sink. It was moving. Slowly pulsating.

Then he heard them. Faint at first, but getting louder. Foot steps. They were coming to feed him. The stuffing was moving faster and started to rise like the head of beer that was poured to quickly into a glass. Overflowing from the hole beneath. Foot steps, louder. Stuffing, throbbing – faster. Footsteps, louder, louder.

“My food,” Rick whispered, spitting his words toward the pulsating stuffing as he

positioned himself inside the fold of the mattress. “Mine!”

The foot steps stopped outside of the cell door and the sound of the metal tray echoed through out the tiny cell as it hit the floor outside the door. The stuffing bubbled, popping out in small chunks. Rick could see the corner of the tray as it sat outside on the floor. There was a jingling sound and Rick saw a hand on the edge of the tray. There was a loud scrape as it slid through the opening. Rick looked at the tray in front of him and then back at the rat hole. Then it happened. The stuffing erupted from the hole in three different directions, flying into the air like a champagne cork. Frenzied rats poured from the hole and raced toward the open hatch ready to devour anything in their path. Rick couldn’t reach the tray before the rats swarmed the open hatch. They fought with each other as they covered the tray. The mattress looming over their feeding frenzy.

Rick snapped the mattress forward, unfolding it with all his body weight. It dropped down on a dozen rats as the others retreated for the drain pipe. With closed fists, Rick furiously pounded the surface of the mattress as tiny rat bones crunched like potato chips underneath.

“Mine! Mine! Mine!” he yelled with each percussive blow to the mattress. “Mine!” A couple of the rats squeezed out from the edges of the mattress.

“Mine!” Crunch. “Mine!” Crunch. “Mine!” Crunch.

Then, Rick was blinded by what seemed like the sun itself shining into his cell. It was the light from the hallway. The cell door was open. Standing motionless, the guard was slightly amused by Rick’s frantic pounding on the blood soaked mattress.

Rick lifted the mattress and poked at the mutilated pile of bloody fur. But there was no food. Only what appeared to have been a clean pair of pants and a shirt. Now blood stained and mixed with rat fur. Rick studied the man from top to bottom. Where was it? Where was the food?

He had wanted the tray so badly that he had only imagined it sliding under the door. He realized that the scraping sound had come, not from a tray, but from the top door hatch. The guard had lifted it to see in before unlocking the door itself. Now he stood in doorway, towering over Rick. Even though his silhouette almost completely blocked the light from the hallway, Rick's eyes were so adjusted to the dark that he could barely open them.

"Get up," the guard said abruptly as he grabbed the back of Rick's shirt and pulled him up from the mattress. "You're late for your appointment."

- 6 -

Barry had stayed in touch with Anthony the last couple of years since they graduated from school, which was unusual. Barry never made a habit of keeping in contact with anyone. They would go out occasionally and, more often than not, ended their evenings in some kind of trouble.

Barry was less surprised by the phone call than by the sound of anticipation in Anthony's voice. He seemed on edge. Almost excited about something.

Barry had been working in the Marketing Department of The Board of Support for about six months. He originally thought this was the kind of job that would best suit his

talents. The problem was, he had no real idea of what his talents were. The job was turning out to be superficial and boring. He was assigned to the group that produced leaflets about *Personal Awareness* and *Happiness*. The message was bland and lifeless and Barry woke each morning with a suffocating feeling. He had to force himself to shave and dress and continue his existence. Barry sat for eight hours a day in a three foot wide cubicle covered with gray, burlap looking cloth. He was stationed in a row of eighteen other cubicles, each of which contained a new recruit writing copy or designing pamphlets. Barry could actually feel the life draining from his body as he sat at his desk.

The walls of Marketing were lined with posters and flyers that had been produced within. A picture of an immaculately dressed officer with his arm around a small child read, '*ENFORCEMENT—to protect and serve*'. Another with two women embracing displayed, '*PERSONAL SACRIFICE—it adds to the greater good*'. Still others proclaimed messages of '*Joy through conformity*', '*Subversive behavior steals from all of us—Do your part: Turn someone in*'.

Barry spent his eight hours in a trance and returned home each night with a hollow burning in the pit of his stomach. His routine generally consisted of a TV dinner, a glass of cheap Scotch and then he'd fall asleep on the couch watching old movies. In the morning, he'd cringe when the alarm went off and lay there dreading the day until the last possible minute. In the end, he would take a quick shower and shave with a cheap plastic razor. He'd throw on the least wrinkled shirt he could find and stumble through the apartment looking for his shoes. They were always under the couch, but he always looked

everywhere else first.

Today, Barry had called in sick and when Anthony picked him up his apartment he knew something was up. As they drove in silence, Anthony's excitement grated on him like the repeated squeak of an old see-saw. Barry had no great affection for Anthony, although he did always appreciate him for what he was; useful. Anthony was not the brightest person he'd ever met and this, along with his huge ego, made him easy to manipulate. Barry had a talent for manipulating people and, although his current employer hadn't noticed, he was genuinely intelligent.

It seemed like any other day as Anthony turned the corner into the gravel parking lot. The precariously hung sign over the driveway read 'NO MAN'S LAND'. The building looked familiar although Barry knew he'd never been there before. It was a bar, and all bars had a commonness about them that held them together and set them apart from other types of establishments. The small wood sided building was framed by a typical, gray drizzly morning. This day was like all of them before, but not like any would ever be again.

As if he could sense the life that was about to unfold, Barry stared into the ratty bar with a new, more vital awareness. Looking not at the building, but at the circumstance, feeling the energy of the moment. Barry always approached a new situation as open as possible, awaiting a barrage of sensory information. He heard the gravel crunch beneath his feet and the creak of the wooden sign as it swung in the breeze. The lingering scent of old urine and puke filled the air. He could feel the electricity that Anthony gave off. It

made the skin on his cheeks tingle as they walked up the decaying steps.

He didn't know why or how, but he felt as though his life was about to change. The bar room brawls and petty fights were no longer satisfying him. His tortured past burned inside him and yearned for freedom. Today, somehow, was a special day, a special moment in Barry's life. Anthony was about to give Barry a priceless gift and his sixth sense was telling him about it.

The inside of the bar was poorly lit and even more poorly kept. Anthony led Barry to a corner booth, which was odd in itself. They always sat at the bar in order to have a clear field of vision. Barry had become a master a subtle mockery and the ensuing fights always appeared to be provoked by the other party. After they were bated into taking a swing at him, Barry would strike one devastating blow straight across the bridge of their nose. This first blow would disorient his victim and only occasionally failed to drop them to the floor. From there, it always went down hill for any poor soul foolish enough to tangle with Barry.

Once his opponent was down, instinct took over. He'd mumble loudly as he kicked in the side of someone's head.

"This'll teach you to cross me, mister...don't think I can't see you. I've got eyes in the back of my head, I have," he rambled on as he pummeled the downed man. At this point Barry had no control and would have killed every one of his victims, but Anthony always stopped him and dragged him away from his beating frenzies, luckily before the officers could arrive.

Barry was still studying the interior of the bar when Anthony noticed his uneasiness and told him to, “Sit down, man.”

Barry sat slowly, still observing. Still soaking up every detail. Every nerve in his body was at attention and he could feel the hair on his arms stand up.

“I got something to tell you,” Anthony said with a sheepish grin and waited for Barry’s reaction. Barry was, initially, annoyed by Anthony’s almost childlike attitude but quickly became amused as he began spinning the story about his encounter with Lewis. When he got to the part about the interview with Enforcement, Barry focused intently on Anthony’s expression. This, did not appear to be a joke. His friend was serious. Anthony had known how miserable he was at his job but Barry had no idea that he had enough connections to get him an interview with Enforcement.

Barry had always respected the guys at Enforcement, but he had never imagined that he was what they were looking for. Anthony was earning his keep, yes indeed. He had seen, more than once, Barry’s untapped talent and made the connection between the two all by himself. Oh yes, his friend was useful and maybe not so stupid as Barry believed. Anthony was getting something out of this, Barry was certain of that, but he had a feeling that the opportunity Anthony created would benefit himself most in the long run. Barry began to smile and then to chuckle, as the suffocating cloud around his life evaporated like mist. He wasn’t sure how he knew, but this was what he’d been looking for. This could fill that need. As his own satisfied laughter began to fill him, he felt as though he had found his special niche.

- 7 -

Barry's initial interview with Lewis had lasted only fifteen minutes. With his brightly colored bolo tie and snake skin cowboy boots, Lewis acted the hick, but no one rises to such a position in Enforcement without a very good reason. And for Lewis, this reason was perception. He was very perceptive about the true nature of people. This was his special talent. He could talk with someone, sometimes for only a few minutes, before forming a connection with the internal workings of their psychology. In minutes he knew what made someone tick. In most cases, much better than they knew themselves.

Lewis knew that Anthony was an ass kisser. He knew that he was motivated by money and the illusion of power and that made him easy to control. That was, after all, basically his job. To control people. Those who worked for him, around him or against him. It was all the same game. He would look through their eyes into their soul and take what he needed to play them like a cheap video game. He used people and when they were used up he would discard them like old newspaper and buy a new one.

Within five minutes of talking to Barry, Lewis knew this man was destined for more than just freelance work. He knew Barry had a deliciously dark side and could sense his distaste for almost everything around him. Although Lewis had made the connection early with Barry, there remained a shadow across Barry's inner soul that he could not penetrate. This inability to read Barry completely, initially intrigued Lewis. The only reason he had spent fifteen minutes with him was to search the haunted chambers of his mind and discover the secrets hidden there. He enjoyed poking around inside a person's

psyche the way a dog dug through a pile of fresh garbage. It was more than just finding out what made someone tick. It was finding out what made them hurt and feel. What caused them pain and what gave them pleasure. These were all useful pieces of information in the control of another human being.

“Tell me about your folks,” Lewis asked as much to break the ice as to start collecting his pieces.

“Never knew my dad,” Barry remained cool and unattached.

“What about your mother?” Lewis knew from experience that questions about someone’s mother would allow more insight than a person generally preferred. But he was unprepared for Barry’s answer.

Unblinking, Barry said, “Chopped her into forty pieces, buried her in the front yard.” His tone light and irreverent.

Barry’s face was without expression as Lewis searched desperately for the meaning in Barry’s answer. Anthony started to cackle nervously and slapped Barry on the shoulder.

“Good one,” Anthony blurted out quickly flashing his gaze back and forth between the two. “Chopped her up...right?” Anthony was trying desperately to make his laugh sound believable, but his effort went unnoticed. His friend and employer were aware of only each other as they each wrestled for control.

Lewis and Barry’s eyes met and locked as they reached an understanding. They were reading each others inner secrets and words were unnecessary for the moment.

Whether or not Anthony knew the truth was unimportant to Lewis. What was

important was that Lewis had seen more than the truth in Barry's eyes. Although he couldn't find the words to express the feeling Barry gave him, he believed that Barry found pleasure in remembering whatever it was that he had really done.

His feelings of intrigue turned to uneasiness and then, horror as he dove deeper into Barry's eyes. Barry never blinked and Lewis eventually was forced away. He had made a connection with Barry's dark side and now he wished he hadn't.

Trying desperately to shake the experience, Lewis picked up his pen and began scribbling something in his notebook. He was glad to have an excuse to look away from Barry after breaking eye contact and then he quickly ended the meeting. He handed Barry the slip of paper with an address scrawled on it.

"Report here Monday morning at 7:30," he stuttered, leaving the room as though he had to relieve his bladder. In his entire career at Enforcement, no one had ever spooked him like this boy. There was no explanation for it, but there were things inside Barry that Lewis didn't want to uncover. He only knew that whatever it was, it would be useful to certain people. Anthony was right about Barry's calm being like fuel and now Lewis knew that he didn't want to see the fire.

Chapter Four

FEAR

- 1 -

Sheri sat in her office still thinking about Franklin's break through. She had never imagined that the size of the receiving device could be reduced so dramatically. She was

having trouble concentrating on work. Her head was swimming. She was afraid that even she didn't understand what this really meant. How this would affect the project as a whole.

Halcyon's original intent was to give the work force a way to escape from the rigors of daily life and ultimately become more productive and happier. The idea was to sit quietly at home, slip on your own personal receiver and tune into the Halcyon signal.

But now, there would be no limitation on where you physically were. You could receive the signal from anywhere with a receiver as portable as this.

Sheri believed, with all her heart that her work would contribute to making the world a better place. People *would* be happier and healthier. The signal would lower stress. And lower stress meant a more productive, less destructive, public.

Now that the receiver was so small and convenient even the most intolerant of people could benefit without any constraints or discomfort.

When Sheri had participated in early experiments with much larger receiving devices, she had been utterly filled with a sense of goodwill. She didn't know how else to describe it. All the work related pressures she agonized over simply melted away. Time tables, deadlines, cost overruns. Gone. But not gone. She noticed that she had absolutely no apprehension about any of these things, but she still was aware of their importance. She was able to think more clearly than she had in years and that seemed to give her energy. Energy to think. Energy to act.

Her initial contact with the Halcyon signal left her feeling invigorated and refreshed.

In fact, in retrospect, she thought the sensations bordered on erotic. Certainly, the experience was very pleasing and she wanted to repeat it as soon as she could.

During this time, it was easy to get volunteers for the tests, but as the receiving devices decreased in size, there were associated problems controlling the signal. Some of Sheri's own experiences were not as pleasurable as the first. One, in particular, invoked strong feelings of anger and disgust. The feelings were so powerful that she had trouble getting rid of them and was forced to go home early that day. She closed all the curtains in her house and sat quietly in the living room for hours. She ended up crying herself to sleep for no apparent reason, but returned to work the next day feeling fine. The strange side effects, apparently, all gone.

Other test subjects experienced similar reactions. Some even violent, but in each case the problem was identified as a receiving device malfunction and corrected. Franklin's team had always worked diligently to provide a device capable of receiving the Halcyon signal with complete accuracy. When these devices, occasionally failed in their primary duty, Franklin took it personally and always worked around the clock to correct the problems. The repaired devices always worked flawlessly and the original results were, again, obtained with all test subjects.

But, it was the side effects and their intensity that caused Sheri to question the ethics of Halcyon. She had absolutely no doubt in her mind that Halcyon was intended for good, but just the existence of the strange side effects left her with a vague, nagging worry.

Franklin and his team felt certain that these were accidents of a corrupted signal, but

was it possible to *create* a signal that would also give these results. If something in the receiving device was affecting the signal and causing the negative emotions, then it would be possible to analyze the effected signal and reproduce it. The thought gave Sheri the shivers. “Who would want to do that?” she thought uncomfortably.

Every time she asked herself that question, the answer was always the same. Certainly nobody. That would be against everything the project stood for. Everything she believed in. It was inconceivable.

Sheri was beginning to question things that never seemed important before. Why was the Halcyon project so fragmented throughout The Board? As far as she knew, there were dozens of individual teams working on different aspects of Halcyon. There was no way of knowing exactly what all the other teams were working on.

And it wasn’t long after her bad experience with Halcyon that she received a very strange call requesting not only the recorded data, but also her personal logs about the experience. The most worrisome part of the conversation came when she asked where she should send the information.

“//MedicalAffairs@BOARD.com,” the girls voice was almost mechanical as she spoke.

What did medical want with the information? They were treatment, not research. For all Sheri knew one of the other subjects could be having to seek medical attention as a result of the testing. After she hung up, she decided to send a Memo with her information. In it, Sheri requested a contact name to discuss this inquiry further. Because

of her position at Technology she received a prompt reply from someone at a company called TrioPlan. His company had requested complete physicals from some of the subjects as a follow up to their testing and Medical Affairs was coordinating the information retrieval. Apparently, this company was compiling the test information into some kind of report.

Everything that Sheri questioned was neatly explained away by the gentleman from TrioPlan. Everything except why a private sector company, outside of The Board, had been chosen to handle the information. She knew that The Board would often subcontract projects to outside sources, but didn't Halcyon's apparent secrecy demand that all projects remain internal? That's what she'd been told.

"We want to keep this one inside of Technology." That was the official stance. When she openly asked questions, the answers were always short and vague. To Sheri, the answers seemed to be designed intentionally to skirt the issue.

The more she thought about it, the more nagging the questions became. Regardless of her own convictions about her work, she would never again feel as confident about Halcyon as she once had. At least not until certain questions received answers. Sheri decided that it was time to start getting them.

- 2 -

Rick had been escorted to a small white room about ten feet square. His eyes still had not adjusted to normal light and he was forced to keep his them closed to tiny slivers. He was placed in a chair in the center of the room that looked like something you'd find in a

high-priced dentist's office. Glaring, white light showered down from the ceiling as if the sun itself was behind each textured, plastic panel. The white walls were bare and Rick had the dizzying feeling that he was inside a crystal ball fashioned from pure light. Objects and shapes were indistinguishable in the room.

His wrists and ankles were secured to the chair with nylon straps similar to the safety restraints in modern automobiles. Restraints were tightened around his waist, chest and forearms. A metal collar covered with dense foam rubber was placed around his neck, holding him securely to the oversized head rest. Two uniformed officers worked smoothly and methodically until Rick could not distinguish between the paralyzing effect of fear and that of the restraints which held him completely immobile.

Adrenaline shot through his veins and his heart slammed so hard inside his chest that it seemed to be knocking the wind from his lungs with each massive thud. Sweat sprang from his pores, although Rick had absolutely no sense of the actual temperature in the room. His face burned from within and, as the sweat ran into his eyes, he had even more difficulty focusing.

The uniformed officers vanished and left Rick strapped in silence. Within moments, the interrogator entered the room and sat at a small white desk against one of the walls. Rick wasn't sure if the interrogator brought it with him or if the ringing in his ears had been there all along. It was the same ringing he remembered as a child when his father tried to teach him to use a gun. Rick remembered how shiny his dad's 410 shot gun was, with the deer carved in the handle. He also remembered how it hurt his ears when they

shot it. The last thing he remembered about that afternoon was that he didn't like guns.

"Now," the interrogator said calmly, "shall we try again?"

Rick felt the room turning and he wanted to scream. The muscles in his jaws tightened. What little moisture he had left in his mouth had turned sour. He was going to throw up. The ringing grew louder and the hammer inside his chest picked up its thunderous pace.

"You have done a considerable amount of work for a company by the name of TransWorld, is that correct?"

Rick tried to breathe but was only able to suck in short, shallow gasps. "Yes," his voice cracked, "I've done work for them."

After three days in the damp cell, Rick had almost completely lost his voice.

"Specifically, who hired you, Mr. Morgan?"

"His name was Anderson. Kirk Anderson," Rick swallowed hard trying to lubricate his vocal cords.

"Yes. Yes. I'm sure of that, but who did Kirk Anderson work for?" The interrogator's composed, practiced delivery took on a slight edge of irritation.

"I only dealt with Kirk," Rick's words came out in broken pieces. "I had phone conversations with others, but never any names. I never even met anyone else."

This was true. And now, strapped in this chair, it seemed odd even to Rick. Kirk Anderson had approached him originally about doing the work and he was the only person Rick had ever met. He had never had any contact, other than phone conversations

and e-mail, with anyone at TransWorld. “Oh God, what have I done?” Rick thought to himself knowing he had tied his own noose.

The interrogator opened one of the desk drawers and removed a stainless steel tray covered with, what appeared to be, surgical instruments. Neatly arranged and laid out, sparkling like diamonds under the harsh room light. He moved toward Rick and placed the tray on an arm extending from the side of the chair. He placed the tray delicately, as if it were a fragile crystal vase and then straightened up the already meticulous alignment of each instrument.

“I’m afraid that my superiors would be less than satisfied if I presented them with that answer Mr. Morgan.” The interrogator’s eyes met Rick’s for an instant and then returned to the tray. “You do understand the position this puts me in, don’t you?” The icy calm had returned to his voice as he continued adjusting and examining each instrument on the tray.

Rick had never felt so utterly trapped in all his life. At this moment, he wished, more than anything, that he could just die. Fade away quietly and leave his body. The body that was secured in this hideous nightmare.

The interrogator picked up a large, glistening, hooked needle from the tray. Laser beams of light radiated from its tip as he twisted the ghastly hook slowly between his fingers. “Do you think you could remember another name or two Mr. Morgan?” the interrogator said as he held the needle up to the light and examined it.

He wanted to go back and do it all over. He wished he had never broken those codes.

More than anything, he wished he had another name to give. Any name. He wished he would have asked more questions before getting involved in the first place.

“Kirk Anderson was the only one from TransWorld that I ever dealt with,” Rick blurted out as he tried desperately to free himself from the restraints. “You’ve got to believe me. He was the only one. The only one!” His own pitiful whimper echoed through his ears in harmony with the ever persistent ringing.

The interrogator towered over him measuring the fear in Rick’s eyes. He pulled another strap from the back of the head rest and cinched it tightly around Rick’s forehead. Two brackets on the side of his head held rubber tipped screws which were tightened into position just above his temples and a third under his chin. His head was now held absolutely stationary. His eyes rolled wildly in their sockets, right, then left, round and round. Panic gripped him, he twisted and turned. Arching his back, he pulled at the straps, shook fiercely and screamed through his clenched jaws, “I don’t know anything! I don’t know any...” His fury faded into tears as he mumbled and begged pathetically.

The interrogator stood, intently examining the needle he held, smiled ever so slightly and leaned toward Rick’s face. His eyes went from the shiny instrument directly to Rick’s terrified gaze. The interrogator looked deep into Rick’s soul as if he could extract information by sheer force of will. His eyes tightened and his smile was replaced with a look of focused concentration. Still rolling the needle with his fingers, he brought it, gently, up to Rick’s face. As light as a feather, he slid the pointed tip down Rick’s trembling cheek, resting it just inside the corner of his mouth. The interrogator gently

rotated the hook around, lightly pulling the skin at the corner of Rick's mouth.

The interrogator's eyes widened and the smile returned as he drew back abruptly, pulling a small piece of Rick's lip from the inside of his mouth. As Rick's screams of agony filled the room, the interrogator's attention turned to the tray of instruments.

"Now let's see if we can jog that memory of yours, shall we Mr. Morgan," he announced enthusiastically.

- 3 -

The large steel door contained one, wire mesh reinforced window about a foot square. The inside of the window was covered with spatters of blood and clumps of hairy flesh.

There was a scurry of activity down the hallway and in several of the adjacent offices. Someone was yelling down the corridor for a maintenance man and some buckets. Two men in lab coats ran past the spattered door as others came running from their offices and met in front of it. Six of the lab coat laden individuals crowded around the door trying to see inside.

In keeping with its policies on project diversification, The Board of Technology had sub-contracted dozens of private companies to work on different research projects. This kept any one group or individual from knowing too much about any phase of any project. One of these companies was TrioPlan International and every research scientist on duty that night was crowded around the blood smeared window.

TrioPlan was a small research facility that specialized in experiments with animals—mainly primates. Their specialty was gathering information geared toward human-like

responses. They could gather large amounts of data on anything from chemical agents to drugs; from implants to electromagnetic stimuli.

“What happened?” came a voice from behind the lab coats.

Everyone spun around in unison and stood motionless, unable to speak. The man they were looking at was the president of TrioPlan and personally oversaw all research for The Board.

“Fred,” the man said insistently to one of the lab coats, “what happened?”

“Well, you know, we received the new discs this morning and tonight was the scheduled test,” he nervously avoided eye contact with the president, choosing to study his knuckles instead. They were white.

“Everything was fine until disc number seventeen.” Fred handed the man a clipboard and pointed to the appropriate log entries and associated notes. The man glanced briefly at the crumpled paper then back at the crowd. A few seconds passed and he raised his eyebrow giving the signal to proceed.

“Well,” Fred cleared his throat, “as soon as we loaded the disc and started the transmission, they went crazy.”

“Crazy?” the man dropped his head a notch as if to ask for clarification.

“Yes sir.” Fred continued to fidget, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “they started clawing at each other. We immediately stopped the transmission but they continued to rip each other to shreds...scratching and biting...it was awful, sir.”

The man surveyed the group and thought for a moment, then spoke to everyone.

Although he was not completely aware of what The Board was looking for, he had been involved in research for The Board before. He did have a pretty good feel for what was of *interest* to them.

“I want complete autopsies on my desk in one hour,” he pointed to two of the lab coats, “pay particular attention to the brains. Concentrate on a cross sectional of the cerebellum and hypothalamus. And make sure we get a *complete* blood work up. I want to know about elevated hormonal and adrenal levels.” With a wave of the man’s finger, the two coats shot off down the hall. He turned his attention to another white clad figure.

“I want a complete analysis of the transmission and a coordinated break down of the second to second biological responses. I want to know what was on that disc and at what point of transmission the reaction began.” Another white blur darted into the darkness.

“And get this place cleaned up,” indicating his disgust for the first time to the remainder of the group. “Debriefing in the conference room in two hours. We’ve got a lot to understand about what happened here tonight.”

- 4 -

Every time Sheri logged onto the banking network she got nervous, but this time was very different. Her heart began to pound and her face felt warm. She was in the office of the Vice Chancellor in charge of the treasury. For what she was about to do, she didn’t want to use her own terminal and that’s why she had waited until everyone had left for the day.

Sheri frequently worked late anyway and her security clearance gave her easy access

to most of the offices in her wing. The building was dark and only a few guards and dedicated employees remained.

Sheri was in charge of nearly one hundred million dollars in funding and personally signed off on every expenditure from pencils to ten thousand dollar computer systems. She signed all pay checks and personally kept most of the accounting records for the fund allocations. But tonight would be different.

Sheri's overwhelming desire to find out about what was going on with all the Halcyon teams, had caused her to come to a strange rationalization: It would be okay to borrow some money from the funding account in order to pursue the answers she so desperately needed. And right now, that's exactly what it was; a need.

Not long ago, Sheri had conceived a plan of channeling money from the Halcyon funding account, into a secret account elsewhere. It wasn't for personal gain. Sheri had never been motivated by greed, she simply had to have answers and getting those kinds of answers required resources. The idea was to route the funds through a phoney company she called TransWorld Telecommunications. Then generate all the supporting hard copy documentation for the files.

Tonight would be Sheri's first attempt at this type of transfer. A few days earlier, she had set up the TransWorld account and then deleted it immediately. She had found that her conviction, at that time, was not nearly strong enough to justify stealing from The Board of Technology.

But it wasn't stealing. This money was intended for the use of Halcyon and for its own

good. And that's exactly what this was for; Halcyon's own good.

Sheri was accustomed to bending the rules when necessary. How many times had she initialed something and then stamped it with Dr. Yenkin's seal, herself, instead of waiting until he was available to do it. Though it was clearly unethical, the need to expedite the process far out weighed the wrong she had done. The money that Sheri was in charge of was to be dispensed as needed, per her discretion...and that's exactly what she was doing.

Sheri quickly re-set up the account and then initiated the transfer for one thousand dollars. As she typed in the pass key and sign on code, her heart rose in her throat. She could only imagine what would happen if she were caught. There was a noise in the hallway and Sheri quickly cleared the screen. Investigation, scandal and jail. Her hand started to shake as the foot steps in the hallway faded away. Her heart was pounding wildly as she logged back in and completed the transaction. Then she printed the supporting paperwork and quickly exited out of the Financial Menu.

Sheri closed her eyes and tried hard not to think of herself as an embezzler, but that's clearly what this was.

"Stop it, Sheri," she said to the terminal as she reached for the power switch and clicked it off. "I've got to find out if something's going on with my project."

The problem was that Sheri *knew* something was wrong. What she didn't know was how she knew. A feeling...or intuition...or something. It didn't matter, something was wrong with Halcyon and it was time to find out what it was and put it right.

Subconsciously, she had always known that Halcyon could be dangerous in the wrong hands and that may be the reason she could, now, so easily rationalize stealing.

The transaction was complete. One thousand dollars routed through three different accounts and ultimately ending up as a payable to TransWorld Telecommunications. Invoices, shipping documents and receipts were all printed and placed accordingly for filing. Some time, in a week or so, she would drive across town and pay a visit to a local bank. She had set the TransWorld account up so that she could access it through her debit card. It would be a simple matter to withdraw the money directly from a machine or transfer it to her own checking account. Basically, though, the money was now hers to use as she saw fit.

- 5 -

Rick came to with an excruciating headache, dazed and confused and with absolutely no idea where he was. He was surrounded by white on all sides and his first thought was that of the dentist chair. Tightly strapped in, unable to move.

But as his senses slowly returned back from the edge of unconsciousness, he realized that he wasn't sitting, but was lying, flat on his back on...it must have been a bed. It was covered in white linen and Rick felt a soft pillow under his head. Although it smelled strongly of disinfectant, it felt heavenly to Rick. He closed his eyes and let the softness engulf his head and cradle it gently.

Rick again opened his eyes and began to survey his situation. The pounding in his left temple was keeping him from thinking, or seeing, clearly. Everything seemed so bright,

Rick felt as though his eyes had still not fully adjusted from the pitch blackness of the rat cell. As he squinted and blinked in a desperate attempt to grasp where he was, things started slowly coming into focus.

Pieces of white cloth hung from metal runners above his head. A beige plastic pitcher and cup sat on a metal stand next to the bed he was lying on. In the background, several white uniformed attendants mulled about in silence like mechanical robots. White partitions separated other beds directly across from him, but they were all empty. It looked to Rick as though he was in a hospital ward.

He tried hard to focus on his surroundings, but now realized that he could only see out of one eye. The left side of his head was covered with a tightly wound mass of gauze from his cheek bone to the top of his head. The corner of his mouth was swollen and felt like it had been stitched. An IV in his right forearm was administering a clear liquid. His lips felt swollen and greasy and smelled of antiseptic.

There were two uniformed officers standing at, what appeared to be, the only entrance to the room. Three more beds next to Rick were also empty. For some reason, Rick was the only patient in the room. If, in fact, he was a *patient* at all.

Still disoriented, Rick closed his eyes and tried to find his way back to the last thing that had happened to him. Weaving his way through the fog, a vague picture began to form.

Without warning the memory of a sharp pain hit him with such force that it made his head spin. Rick instinctively pulled forward and tensed every muscle. It was so vivid,

Rick thought the pain was real. He screamed. He screamed again and tried harder to pull himself up. At first, he thought he was paralyzed. He could move his head up from the pillow but his arms and legs felt like they were tied down with heavy weights. Then he realized, in horror, that he was bound to the hospital bed with the same kind of straps as in the dentist's chair. Rick panicked.

The memory of the hook entering the side of his head sprang from somewhere in the back of his brain. It grabbed him as if it had hands and drug him back to the cavern from which it had come. To Rick, it felt more like he was living it, than reliving it.

His eyes were still wide open as the image of the hook filled his mind. It was bigger and shinier this time. As it slowly entered his left temple, it tore a gash into the side of his head. The interrogator sadistically working the needle back and forth as blood poured out from under the loose flap of skin. Rick screamed until no more sound would come out and fought until he couldn't breathe anymore. The interrogator yanked the gash open and peered into the bleeding hole like a predator examining its prey. Bright light...stars...everything a blur...and then it all went gray.

Now, still tensing against the restraints in the bed, Rick began to remember things from after everything went gray. Although he didn't understand what it meant, he heard voices. Voices he didn't remember hearing at the time. Disjointed phrases. Incoherent foggy pieces of dialogue.

"He won't be of anymore use to us tonight...Medical wants to get started as quickly as possible, sir...make sure his wife's story checks out...".

The nightmare of the dentist's chair had vanished and he tried desperately to assign meaning to these new scraps of memory. Everything still seemed muddy as he stared at the fluorescent bulbs hung against the white tiled ceiling.

What did they mean, "*make sure his wife's story checks out*"? Had they taken her into custody too? Had she been questioned? She had nothing to do with this. And where were the boys? Were they okay? Rick's mind was on fast-forward now, racing out of control.

"Good morning Mr. Morgan," the attendant beamed as he walked around the corner of the bed. "We were worried about you for a while there, but you seem to be out of the woods now."

The man standing over him was smiling pleasantly and couldn't have been over twenty five. If this was all designed to keep him off balance and confused, then it was working perfectly. Rick couldn't figure what this place was, who these people were or what they wanted with him. Was he rescued? Too much to hope for. Most probably a short reprieve and back to the dentist's chair. And what about his family? Where they all right?

Then the image of the chair returned to haunt Rick once again. "Oh god, not the chair. Anything but the chair!" The panic began to swell inside him and he started inhaling in short, jerky breaths.

"Let's see if we can keep some solid food down, shall we?" the attendant gleamed extending a metal tray covered with colored paste.

Rick saw a vivid image of rats pouring out of a drain hole and covering the entire tray.

He closed his eyes and tried *not* to think.

Chapter Five

SURVEILLANCE

- 1 -

Kirk sat at home in his oversized love seat. The living room, Kirk called it his den, was the most comfortable room in the house. The walls were lined with books and magazines and scattered pieces of electronic gear. All the illumination in the room came from a single standing floor lamp he had purchased at an estate auction. It was brass and wood and a beautiful addition to his collection. There was an old fashioned roll top desk in one corner covered with neatly stacked piles of paper. His father's coffee cup sat between the stacks of paper, full of pens. On top, an antique anniversary clock twisted back and forth counting the seconds.

Kirk stared at the three foot view screen that hung from the far wall between two oak bookshelves. He ran through the same routine at least twice a week. Nothing on TV, so he'd log onto the Inter-Link, take out his journal and begin poking around. He always carefully noted his progress and, over the years, his journal had come to be invaluable. Pass codes, back doors, low level access—all neatly recorded for future use.

He loathed the term *private eye* and savored every opportunity to explain the difference between the people who fit that term and himself. He was an *investigative professional* specializing in data acquisition. His methods were derived from years of training and practice and were centered around knowledge and organization. He was the cream of the crop in his field and his clientele read like a roster of the upper crust of

society. He didn't come cheap and his fee spoke as much about him personally as it did his reputation.

A lot of Kirk's success came from his merger of hobby and occupation. He would sit for hours gaining access to systems he cared nothing about and would probably never use. Kirk was not what you'd consider a computer *hacker* and never showed anything more than a passable aptitude toward computers in school. He had, however, become very comfortable with computer systems as they related to his work.

One lesson he had learned from his evening sessions was that it was much easier to break into high security systems through a succession of lower security ones. He thought of it as kind of a maze. And with each evening session, Kirk recorded new pieces of this electronic jig saw puzzle in his journal. Personal files, industrial secrets, e-mail box numbers. All means of access recorded neatly and accurately. He sat for hours, like an adolescent in front of a space invaders video game, logging information that could one day prove useful.

In previous cases, his journal had been invaluable. The client was in desperate need of access to a crucial sub-system that Kirk had already gained access to. It was a simple matter to login and basically *cherry pick* the information his client required. No one knew about Kirk's journal and this added to the mystique surrounding his ability to achieve hard core results.

That mystique was part of the reason he held such a high rank in The Movement. He started out with a handful of young freedom fighters twenty years ago. Fighting

government oppression and political wrong doings. Though it was reactionary in its beginning, like anything else, it grew and matured and became, what Kirk saw as, a useful tool that helped keep the government in check.

This particular evening session had begun like any other, but within a few minutes had taken a very interesting turn. Through a succession of previously discovered, low level access ways within The Board of Technology, Kirk had come across a fairly high security link to The Board of Finance.

“I’ll be damned,” he said out loud as he sat forward and leaned into the screen. “Let’s just have a little look see.”

Strangely, it took less than ten minutes to enter, what appeared to be, some sort of transfer hub for The Board of Technology’s funding. Bank accounts, project numbers, dollar amounts. If it wasn’t for the months of work that actually went into achieving this level of access, the whole thing would have seemed a little too easy.

Kirk sat back and looked at the screen with a curiously thoughtful scowl. He massaged his lower lip between his forefinger and thumb while he studied the information in front of him. Looking down at the dog eared pages in his journal he began flipping back slowly through the pages. This was more than just months of work, it was years. Had it really been that long? Maybe it was time to hit the mother load. He deserved it. They all did.

Kirk sat up abruptly as if an electric current had shot through his under side. He readjusted himself in the love seat and snapped the journal back to the current page, logging his steps up to this point. With childlike expectation, he continued to play.

“Enie menie minie moe...let’s have a look at... TransWorld Telecommunications.”

- 2 -

Sheri drove to the parking lot outside of a large complex of department stores. The hustle and bustle of the midday shopping provided the kind of cover for a casual meeting that Sheri desired over that of a highly secret encounter. Sheri was more comfortable within the anonymity that a group of people provided rather than a dark alley or other such gloomy abode.

She was here to meet with Jeff Beacham. A small time private eye that she had contracted to—discretely—dig up anything he could on Halcyon.

Her TransWorld transfers had begun, a thousand at a time, and were used to pay Jeff for the information he provided. Information that Sheri did not have access to. Information she desperately needed in order to put to rest the nagging questions that had arisen about Halcyon’s *real* use. As she gathered bits and pieces of information on the other Halcyon teams, the ability to rationalize the transfers got easier. She was consumed by the need to save her project. Her life’s work.

Sheri felt, that if she could just reassure herself about the noble cause she was involved in, then all would be set right again. Her integrity, and the integrity of the project could be restored and her work would continue as before. The problem was, that her private investigator had already turned up disturbing information.

The most notable piece being Halcyon’s affiliation with the Enforcement branch. Jeff had found out that top level decisions about Halcyon’s direction had to be reviewed and

approved by Enforcement. What could Enforcement possibly want with Halcyon?

Enforcement was just a bunch of uniformed guards, running around locking up bad guys.

Halcyon was supposed to help people. To reduce stress and tension on a global scale. Halcyon would allow everyone to be happier and more productive. In Sheri's zeal to exonerate Halcyon's integrity, she was unable (or unwilling) to pursue the link to Enforcement and she rationalized what she had discovered as nothing more than *politics*.

She had originally met Jeff here, after a friend had arranged the meeting. Sheri's friend had hired Jeff to provide information on the nightly activities of her husband. For his findings on that job, Jeff came highly recommended by Sheri's friend.

Suzanne, now divorced, had given Sheri the investigator's card after over hearing that Sheri was curious about how you went about hiring one of *those people*.

The initial meetings made Sheri feel like a character out of cheap detective novel.

"Were you followed?" he had asked in, what seemed to Sheri, an overly melodramatic whisper.

In the weeks since that initial encounter, Sheri had met with him, in the same parking lot, several times. The meetings were generally pretty much the same. She first gave him an envelope with his pay for the weeks work. The pay was the same regardless of the quality of the information obtained. Then he would give Sheri a manila envelope and a brief overview of what he had found out.

A lot of what he had provided her was nothing she hadn't either already known or already guessed. Mostly what he gave her just created more questions.

After each encounter new questions would arise. How Dr. Yenkin had died. The diversification of Halcyon. The morality of her own involvement.

The parking lot was its typical sea of frenzied activity today, as shopping carts where navigated into position next to awaiting trunks.

Jeff was already late so Sheri used the time to review the envelope from last week. She studied a copy of a document that indicated an official from Enforcement had claimed Dr. Yenkin's body and removed it prior to his immediate family being notified. The envelope also contained a transcript of a telephone conversation between the public mortician's office and an unknown individual. It was recorded on the night of Dr Yenkin's initial medical exam.

Public Official:

- "I've completed the documentation you requested."

Unknown Man:

- "... and the original?"

Public Official:

- "No problem. It's been nicely *cleaned*."

Unknown Man:

- "Give me a day or so and then check your account."

Sheri was hoping that today's envelope would contain an explanation of this confusing exchange. What documentation? And how do you *clean* an original?

"I'm paying a thousand a week for dry cleaning records," Sheri beamed sarcastically

as she studied her face in the rear view mirror.

He had never been late before. He was always sitting eagerly in his car waiting for her. Maybe she had missed him when she drove into the lot. He always parked in basically the same area in the back of the lot next to the recycling bins. It was now an hour past the scheduled meeting time. Where the hell was he? She picked up her telephone and dialed the number on the card.

“Hi, you’ve reached B & B Investigations. At the tone, leave a brief message and I’ll get back to you.”

She mashed the end button without saying a word. She hadn’t really expected him to answer. He worked by himself out of a decaying basement apartment.

“Sometimes the mailman gets confused,” Jeff had explained to her a couple weeks ago. “It’s apartment ‘9B’, but the nine’s hanging upside down so they think it’s a six.”

He said he wasn’t married or even involved with anyone, except his work. Sheri never got the impression from this conversation that Jeff was hitting on her. He was just gabby.

She pressed redial and put the car in gear as she pulled out of the parking lot. She couldn’t wait anymore, so she’d leave a message on Jeff’s machine asking him to call her and reschedule.

The phone rang once. “Hello,” came a raspy voice.

Startled and caught off guard, Sheri had trouble asking the question, “Uhm...is Jeff Beacham there?”

“No,” the whispery calm in his voice gave Sheri that prickly feeling up her neck, “is

there something that I can help you with?”

She couldn't place the feeling right away, but it eventually grew into a mild panic. The silence on the line hung between them like a wet blanket.

“I'll just try back later,” Sheri blurted out, her words overlapping one another.

As her thumb moved into position over the end button, Sheri heard, or thought she heard, something strange. Something awful. She wasn't sure if it was real or if she had imagined it. What had she heard; a gasp; a breath; a muffled scream?

Whatever it was, real or imagined, it made her stomach turn like a child's stomach did, listening to its parents fighting.

- 3 -

“Dr. Henry is here to see you sir,” the secretary said in her overtly sensual voice.

“Thank you, Trisha,” the Director said without lifting his eyes from his desk, “tell me again who he is.”

His secretary knew the drill quite well. A busy man like the Director of Enforcement couldn't be expected to remember everyone he ever came in contact with, so part of her job was to maintain a database of information on each of his contacts and brief him before each meeting.

“His name is Robert Henry. He prefers Robert, not Bob. He holds a Ph.D. in both Psychology and Physical Science. He is currently President of a privately owned company called TrioPlan.”

The Director shuffled a stack of papers into a folder and dropped it onto a pile on the

floor.

“Go on, “ he said still looking at the desk, “I’m listening.”

“TrioPlan was created five years ago to perform experiments on laboratory animals. They specialize in the use of primates for obtaining accurate data on human-like responses to adverse stimuli.”

The Director stopped shuffling his paper and looked up at his secretary without raising his head. “What kind of *adverse* stimuli?” he asked with sudden interest.

“They’ve done the majority of their work for us, sir,” the secretary’s tone insinuating that that was enough of an answer.

The Director stuck out his lower lip and nodded his understanding, then turned his attention back to the papers.

“So, why the hell am I meeting with this guy today?” he asked as he applied his signature to an official looking document.

“Dr. Henry’s group has been assigned Folder-19 of the Halcyon Project.” Although she used the words with an apparent understanding, she actually knew very little when it came to Halcyon. She knew it was important and that a lot of people were working on it, but what it was, she didn’t have a clue. It was the same as memorizing a few medical terms to describe a procedure without having any idea what the actual procedure accomplished.

The Director spun his big chair around and opened the lower file drawer on his credenza. He ruffled through file tabs and grabbed the one labeled Halcyon/19.

“Thank you Trisha,” the Director said smiling and with a tone that indicated genuine thanks. She had always thought of herself as being vital to the inner workings of the department and he had always treated her as if she was.

“Send him in,” he said feeling sufficiently prepared for the encounter.

As she left the doorway, the Director cleared an area in the center of his desk, placed the folder in it and opened it to the first page. Although he had a consummate working knowledge of the big picture, Halcyon had been broken into so many segments that there was no way to remember what each individual group was working on. A lot of the experiments were so radical that they probably would never even be used.

The heading on the first page of the open folder read:

#19—feasibility of controlling negative emotional responses.

Chapter Six

ENCOUNTER

- 1 -

Kirk logged off the view screen and finished the last of his journal entries. He had just monitored the sixth transfer of money from The Board of Technology to TransWorld in the last three weeks. Because of the ridiculously cumbersome path the money had traveled, it hadn’t taken him long to formulate the theory: someone was laundering money—and from *inside* the noble structure of The Board itself. If this was true, then there was a very gutsy (or very stupid) person channeling money out of The Board.

Kirk had researched TransWorld from inside and out and his conclusion was always the same. It didn't exist. TransWorld was a bank account only. He was certainly intrigued.

Kirk traced the origins of every transaction back to one login. He even knew what office the transactions had occurred in. A quick jaunt over to the personnel database and he had a name and a decent amount of personal information on the owner of the login.

Sheron Rand. An interesting enough name for a criminal, but was she really transferring the money or was someone using her login unauthorized? Was she actually stealing money or was this an elaborate trap by Enforcement? Kirk felt that the ease at which he stumbled onto the whole thing was reason enough to be suspicious.

For one thing, the transfers hadn't been initiated from Sheron's office. They had originated from a terminal in the Vice Chancellor's office. That meant that she either had access to that office or she wasn't really responsible for the transfers.

Kirk was dying to find out what was going on but his natural tendency leaned toward the side of caution. He wanted to explore Sheron's motivations, but only if he could do it safely. From a distance. He looked down at the data sheet he had printed from the personnel files. Tonight, he had gotten as far as dialing her phone number and then hanging up. Even if it was a trap, nothing could happen from a short phone call. Kirk knew that even though the Inter-Link professed to being a secure communications system, it only took a matter of minutes to actually trace a call. With the right equipment, that is.

Too many years of mistrust. Too many close calls with Enforcement. Too many friends gone. Patience and control out weighed excitement and curiosity and Kirk dismissed the idea of contacting his discovery.

There had been an incident in Kirk's early years with The Movement that effected him so profoundly that he, to this day, still had nightmares about that evening.

An over turned tractor trailer rig had been the reason he was so late for the meeting that night. As the emergency crews cleared the heaping wreckage from the inter-state roadway, he cursed under his breath and imagined the looks of disapproval he would receive when he finally showed up. He was now almost forty five minutes late.

The meeting was with some of the high ranking subversive faction leaders in the area and Kirk's already trusted position in the organization allowed him to represent the local group he led. Although very young, Kirk and his followers were already responsible for several serious disruptions in The Board's communication systems. These events connected them with other groups and Kirk formed an alliance with several of the factions in the area. Fifty minutes late.

As he signaled and made the last turn, his heart physically stopped when he saw the Enforcement vehicles. Three brightly painted squad cars and one clinically bare gray sedan. It's presence quietly announcing the unthinkable. The meeting was at his headquarters and his friends were inside, not to mention most of the leaders from other area factions. Kirk's tongue stuck to the bottom of his mouth and, as his dead heart sprang back to life, he started to breathe in a frantic pant.

He drove slowly past the building without turning his head. “Think. Got to think! If it was him on the inside with Enforcement, they’d figure out a way to save him. They’d come up with a plan.” His thoughts spun wildly in his head.

He parked in a vacant lot next to a cheap motel and slowly headed, on foot, back toward the meeting place. He approached from the rear of the building which offered the cover of a large, unkept hedge. Dizzy with fear and without any clear idea of what he intended to do, he inched along the hedge to the corner of the building. He heard sounds emanating from the window he was crouched under.

“Who do you report to?” a man inside screamed. Kirk peered under the blinds at the bottom of the window thankful for the minimal light in the alley behind him.

The man doing the screaming had his back to Kirk and he never got a good look at his face. But the man standing behind him turned his head enough for Kirk to get a good look. It was a friend of his that he had confided in about the meeting. Kirk’s first thought was that his eyes had deceived him. It couldn’t be true. Repeatedly forcing his eyes open and closed, he dared them to see something different. But it was always the same. The face of a friend betraying him.

He told him almost everything. Kirk had given him names and addresses. Times and dates. They were both members of the new Movement and he was one of the few people that Kirk felt really at ease talking to. Now, he was standing behind the man waving the gun and asking the questions. Kirk felt hopelessly betrayed and fatally foolish. It was his lack of caution...his unchecked trust, that was responsible for this.

He positioned himself along the back side of the building, out of view from the back window or the alley. He shook with the anger that emanated from his bones. He wanted to kill that worthless, son of a bitch, weasel. More than anything, he wanted to kill him.

“Think.” He had to save his friends. “Think!” A continuous dialogue echoed in his head.

Kirk was sure that any second the armed officers would burst through the back door and come straight at him. Must help. Must save them. “Think...Think!”

The first gun shot nearly knocked him over and he grabbed at his chest to counter the impact. He heard a gruesome scream pour through a skylight on the roof above him. It sounded like it came from within in his own skull. Kirk fell to his knees in the mud, pressed his head against the damp concrete block and covered his ears tightly with the palms of hands. He fought as hard as he could not to cry out loud. Not to scream at the top of his lungs.

Someone inside had been shot and was shrieking in pain. There had to be something he could do. “Think!”

The next shot tore through Kirk’s insides as if the bullet had actually hit him, shattering his own bone and tissue. Screams of agony echoed from the skylight, scuffling sounds, voices.

“BANG” a third shot! More screaming, pitiful crying...begging. Kirk’s head was spinning. Tears flooded his eyes as the realization of how utterly helpless he was to save his friends.

He dropped to the ground and pressed the side of his face into the muddy soil and cried softly. Inside the building someone was screaming, then sobbing, then pleading. “Please...no!!” the tortured scream rose through the sky light like smoke from the top of a chimney.

Kirk lay paralyzed in the wet dirt and listened to the deaths of all thirteen of his friends. He would never forget that night and he would never forget that his friends died because he gave in to trust.

- 2 -

Barry loved his work at Enforcement. Early in his career with Civil Enforcement, his superiors had seen a certain zeal in Barry’s work. He followed orders obediently and was loyal without question. Although Barry never directly disobeyed an order, he never backed down either. From anybody. This fierce determination, coupled with an eye for structure and detail, was noticed by those within the upper power structure at Enforcement.

Civil Enforcement’s main function was to preserve public law and order. Barry’s first assignment was that of a junior detective. During his training, his senior partner would assume the *bad cop* role and intimidate the subject of their questioning while Barry assumed the role of good cop. But the scenario changed quickly when Barry’s talent for the role of villain was realized. This guy made the term *bad cop* sound like a Sunday school teacher. Barry’s talent for information acquisition was soon known to his superiors and to theirs.

Barry moved quickly through the ranks at Civil and eventually was promoted to *Internal* Enforcement. Most people never had anything to do with Internal Enforcement and some even doubted its existence. Barry was surprised to find out that it really did exist and more surprised to find out that they wanted him.

He learned that Internal Enforcement's main function was to police the sovereign structure of The Board itself. To root out corruption and impurity within the structure of The Board and its members. Internal Enforcement was initially established by The Directors at a time when disobedience and dissention ran through the very marrow of The Board of Policy.

The Directors had a severity of purpose and were adamant about the cleansing of The Board. Internal Enforcement was given complete autonomy with the authority to perform its designated duties without intervention. It was this blanket autonomy that had made Internal Enforcement so dangerous. They had complete control over their missions and were allowed any means at their disposal to accomplish them.

All this power and freedom in return for a *pure* Board of Policy. The Directors left Internal Enforcement to its own affairs. Highly funded and working mostly behind closed doors, Internal Enforcement monitored the activities within The Board on a daily basis.

Internal did an excellent job of *cleaning up* The Board. The Directors had been quite pleased with their efficiency, at least at first. But as their need diminished, The Directors attempted to disband Internal, or at least take back their *carte blanche*.

Dr. Yenkin was put in charge of this downsizing and unfortunately upon his death, this

task was left unfinished.

One of Barry's first assignments had been to infiltrate a local subversive organization they had known about for some time. This type of operation was usually handled by Civil Enforcement but when links to those inside The Board were suspected, Internal Enforcement stepped in and quietly took over. Barry enjoyed stepping in and exercising his authority over the very people he used to work for.

Many raids had been made, but the only arrests were those of the lowest members in the organization. Somehow, the people in charge always seemed to elude capture. This was the reason that the officials at Internal Enforcement suspected a leak from within Civil Enforcement. It was Barry's job to infiltrate the organization and find out where their information was coming from.

Barry spent several months reestablishing his contacts from years ago at Art School. He was set up in a small, studio apartment and posed as a struggling young artist. He began proclaiming his distaste for The Board and its policies. He was never overbearing or reckless, but did make his position known in appropriate circles and with the proper reverence. His job was not to come off as a mad man, but be accepted by a group of people that had survived by being diligently suspicious. His friends had warned him to keep his mouth shut, but eventually, he began meeting people that shared the views he was pretending to have.

It took Barry several months to establish himself within the organization and eventually gain the trust of all those in charge. Barry had the uncanny ability to be

extremely charming and persuasive. It was something he could turn on, or off, as easily as he could the radio. He was well read and educated and could articulate his position quite eloquently. Allies were forged, friendships solidified, names and addresses recorded.

He never felt guilt or remorse for what he was doing, but had an inner sense of euphoria at the thought of deceiving these disloyal, ungrateful bastards. They were threatening the fabric of his new found happiness. They were willingly fighting against The Board of Policy. He would enjoy snaring the lot and relished the thought of being involved in the questioning. His brief time at Internal had already proven to be satisfying by virtue of the methods this branch of The Board chose to embrace. Death and torture were staples of the Internal branch's diet and Barry was always hungry.

Barry's old friend Anthony, who had gotten him the interview with Enforcement, had actually given him the crucial information for this case. There was to be a meeting of leaders from several of the subversive factions. Barry contacted his superiors and scheduled a raid during this late night meeting at their head quarters.

Thirteen high ranking members of the organization were detained in the small, rented office. Since Anthony had led them to the meeting, he was allowed to stay along with Barry and two other under cover agents. The smell of fear in the room intoxicated Barry and heightened his own sense of power. The dialogue during the subsequent questioning would have been comical under other circumstances, but this night would prove to be far from humorous for those on the receiving end.

Anthony and the two undercover agents stood quietly behind Barry.

“Who do you report to?” Barry screamed inches from one of the men’s face, not really angry at all but relishing the psychological role he now played. This was bad cop to the extreme with no rules to follow.

The man’s eyes were deep and hollow and seemed resigned to the fact that this was not really an interrogation. This was the risk he had accepted when he joined the organization and tonight he would pay his dues for that membership.

“Fuck you,” the man said quietly and looked at the floor.

The shot to the man’s knee cap echoed through out the small room as the other men winced in horror. He fell to the floor grasping his leg tightly with both hands and howling in pain. Barry walked slowly around the man on the floor studying the faces of the other in the room. After one complete circle, he stopped and focused his attention towards the floor.

“Who do you report to?” Barry repeated quite softly this time. He actually didn’t expect an answer and really hoped that he wouldn’t get one. It was his job, though, to *question* these people and a full report would have to be written explaining what had happened. Internal Enforcement was big on paperwork and procedures, but Barry knew that if all of his i’s were dotted, he could have some fun. And eventually, one of the people in the room would talk. This first one would kind of prime the pump and get them all thinking a little. He was expendable.

“Some one on the Inter-Link,” whined the man with the shattered knee cap. Pieces of

bone and cartilage clung to shreds of cloth around the bullet hole. The wound was bleeding badly.

“I don’t know his real name...,” the man gasped for breath in huge gulps, “... he signs on as *Casper*.”

Another shriek of pain filled the air as Barry shot the poor man’s other knee cap. Actually the shot was a little misplaced, hitting just above the knee cap in the lower thigh. Barry was really an accomplished marksman, but his playful nature sometimes interfered with his other skills. This one must have hit an artery, Barry thought, because the leg was bleeding like a water fountain. Blood soaked a pile of papers the man had knocked off on his way to the floor. It pooled in front of him and shimmering rivers of red flowed along the old, hard wood floor. Panic gripped the others as the horrifying realization of their own fate came crashing down around them like concrete hail. The under cover agents remained steadfast by the door. Anthony was smiling so big he looked like a clown. This was better than any bar room brawl had ever been. His old buddy Barry worked with the skill and finesse of a brain surgeon.

“Guns and torture and it’s all legal, Cool!” Anthony thought to himself.

Barry knelt by the man and slowly nudged the barrel of his gun into the newly opened wound. He spoke in conjunction with punctuating jabs into the bleeding hole.

“I don’t...think...I...believe you.” He rocked the gun back and forth as he dug the barrel deeper into the gory opening. Barry was keenly aware of the man’s morbid screams of terror, and that they were being caused solely for the benefit of the others in

the room. This one would die and then others would talk.

He would conduct an actual interrogation AND bring back some useful information, (*pain was the teacher*) but this guy was for fun. Barry was too entrenched (*pain was his friend*) in his delightful course of action to alter it.

“Pain keeps you focused,” he said quietly to the man crying on the floor. “Time to focus.”

The third shot, point blank, tore open a large chunk of the man’s upper thigh, leaving a loose flap of flesh six inches long, hanging by a thread. As he screamed and begged Barry to stop, the man tried in vain to get away. His legs were useless. They quivered and spurted fluid. The pitiful, spastic attempt to crawl got him nowhere. Papers rustled. Blood flowed. Somewhere in the room a man was praying in a shaky, staccato whisper. Cries of agony and desperation sang through the room like a demonic choir.

Barry stood, smiled and slowly looked around the room at the others that had been betrayed. He waved the bloody gun indiscriminately toward the others, the hammer on the automatic weapon still cocked from the last shot.

“It’s going to be a long night fellows,” he announced in a sarcastic, jovial proclamation.

“Fire.” Anthony thought to himself, “fuel for the fire.”

- 3 -

Kirk stared intently at the view screen and thought for several minutes about what it meant. One thousand dollar transfers had been going to the TransWorld account, like

clock work, ever since he first discovered what was going on. He had watched the money travel through its electronic wash cycle and end up on the books at TransWorld.

But now, all activity in those accounts had ceased. Either something was wrong or the embezzler was taking a breather. Whatever the reason, it seemed very strange that *all* activity had halted.

Kirk sat back in the love seat pondering the situation's significance. As he watched each of the previous transactions pass from account to account, he had become aware of a certain flow about the transactions. Something he really couldn't explain very well but he knew it was there. Something in the timing between transfers. Something in the method used at each individual banking institution. There was more than intelligence behind this scheme. Although not terribly sophisticated, there was a degree of heart in the way this whole thing had been set up. Kirk thought he could feel a presence from the entity controlling the flow of money through the financial arteries. He thought he could feel something good.

Memory of the horrible destruction of life that had been caused by his trust in another, swelled within him carried by a rising river of emotion. Don't trust. Be safe. Be smart.

The penalty for complete safety was complete loneliness. Kirk trusted absolutely no one and therefore questioned every situation. He played the *what if* game with even his oldest friends. What if he calls Enforcement tonight. What if he takes that information to the authorities. What if ...

Too much mistrust clouds your soul. It colors your judgment and turns you cold and

impersonal. Kirk was beginning to long for this lost trust. Trust in his fellow man. Trust in mankind itself. Trust in his closest friends.

Be safe. Kirk logged in using a newly reactivated login from a dead man. Kirk frequently scanned the obituaries and reactivated logins of those who had no further need for them. This always allowed him more freedom when poking around where he shouldn't be. Be careful. He accessed a link within The Board of Foreign Affairs and then logged onto the general public mail section of the Inter-Link.

Looking at the print out from the personnel files, he enters the name Sheron Rand. Don't trust. Kirk thought carefully and then typed a short message. Before sending the message, he connected a short control file with specific file handling instructions.

After positioning the cursor over the send button and clicking, he quickly disconnected the Foreign Affairs link and deactivated the dead man's login once again.

"Ashes to ashes," Kirk thought quietly to himself and then shut the view screen off.

Chapter Seven

MOODS

- 1 -

Rick had been fed by the attendant and then sponged off by a pretty nurse. With each passing minute, the ordeal in the dentist chair seemed to fade into unreality. The white room was filled with sunlight from one of the windows in the ward. The light spread itself across Rick's face and the warmth left him with a sense of security.

Except for the straps that kept him tightly bound to the bed, there was no trace of the

horror that had contained him for the last three days.

Suddenly, Rick began to feel suffocated by the straps, like they were strangling him. He was filled with a jittery sort of uneasy pain in his stomach. He pulled against the straps but he could not budge. His mind exploded with a barrage of infuriating questions. Almost as if someone had put them there. He remembered the blurry images from the dentist's chair.

"He won't be of any more use to us tonight...tell Medical they can have him anytime...make sure his wife's story checks out . . "

Wife's story? Who the hell had his wife been talking to? And about what?

"Did she sell me out?" Rick's pulse began to race. "She doesn't know anything." His emotions spun wildly out of control. There was absolutely no basis for what he was feeling. He knew this reaction was irrational, but he couldn't stop it.

"She must have told them something!" He was filled with an awful sense of dread, as if something terrible was about to happen, as if something was going to swoop down out the sky and pluck him from existence. Then this horrible, black emotion turned into a blind rage. Anger at everything and everybody. Especially that betraying bitch of a wife. A cold, damp, cloud formed around his head and seeped into his soul. It felt like smoke entering his lungs and robbing them of life giving oxygen. Rick started to breathe faster and tense his body against the restraining straps. He was out of control, gripped by panic. Rick was screaming and fought violently to free himself.

"I'll kill her...I'll kill the lying bitch!" His shouts filled the ward as several attendants

came running, one of them carrying a huge syringe.

He was held too tightly in the grip of panic to notice, but a wave of relief swept over him like a waterfall flushing his system. The panic had not only subsided, but was replaced by a sense of calm that was almost creepy.

An older gentleman, maybe a doctor, joined the group saying, “No, give it a minute. If he doesn’t respond shortly, then we’ll inject.” The attendant was standing over him. The unused syringe still in his hand.

Rick felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his chest and he took several deep breaths to reassure himself.

“Feeling better, are we?” the attendant said smiling widely.

Although the overwhelming sense of hatred and dread was completely gone, Rick was now haunted by the memory of what he had said about his wife. Did he actually say, “I’ll kill the lying bitch”?

Rick lay perfectly still on the bed and started cry. “What’s happening to me?” he whimpered and then screamed at the top of his lungs, “What have you done to me??”

Within seconds, he was asleep and dreaming. For the first time in three days, Rick’s dreams were untainted by the horror of his ordeal. He dreamed of Tera and the boys. A picnic basket and a blanket. Of green grass and tall trees and a football.

- 2 -

Her work on Halcyon left her little time for a life outside of work. Sheri had few friends besides coworkers, and spent the majority of her evenings at the office.

Tonight she sat behind a stack of file folders comparing data from the latest inter-connection experiments with previous computer entries. A half eaten corned beef sandwich lay on a piece of waxed paper next to the file folders. Two nearly empty cola cans and a full cup of cold coffee sat as a testament to Sheri's fierce dedication.

As usual at this time of night, the offices were vacant. Except for the occasional security guard roaming the halls, the building lay in silence. The harsh illumination of a single goose neck desk lamp was a distracting contrast to the soft glow of the CRT. The screen sat obediently displaying its droll lifeless data.

Sheri was tired and ready to call it a night. The numbers began to blur and her thoughts strayed to the missing detective she had hired.

"Who had answered the phone at his office?" Did they know anything about what he was working on? Did they know about me?"

The thought made her shiver and she tried to focus her attention on a column of figures displayed on the left hand side of the screen.

The screen beeped. Sheri jumped, spilling the cold coffee on the open folder, as the e-mail icon flashed in the upper corner of the screen.

"Shit!" she stood quickly dabbing the spill with a wad of used napkins. She moved the folders to the floor, finished wiping the spill and threw away the soaked napkins. She sat down feeling a little silly about her reaction to electronic mail.

"Pretty scary stuff, huh Sheri?" she said to the empty office. Restoring as much order as possible to her desk she double clicked on the mail icon.

Her face felt numb as she read the screen. “Call me at TransWorld,” she said, quietly reading the screen. In a trance, she looked at the phone number and felt the strength drain from her arms and legs. Her face was suddenly warm and she’d forgotten to exhale. TransWorld? TransWorld didn’t exist. Sheri felt suddenly dizzy. Was TransWorld a real company? Had she really been channeling money into an actual corporation? That was impossible. Sure, it was. But who the hell was leaving her a message from TransWorld? Sheri stared at the screen and the phone number, unable to think.

Blip. The mail window went blank. Sheri stood in panic, knocking over her chair and the two cola cans. The message had erased itself. Gone. Mail doesn’t erase itself!

“What the hell was the phone number?” she whispered to the empty screen. “What the hell was that number?” this time at the top of her lungs.

A flood of emotions crashed in on her. Perspiration broke on her face and she had forgotten to breath again. “662...662-5...665-225 ...” she tapped her open palm against her forehead. “Damn...THINK! You just saw it, Sheri.” She grabbed a torn scrap of cola drenched paper and frantically scrawled out three telephone numbers. Immediately crossing out the first one. She thought for a few seconds, squinted hard at the scrap of paper and then slowly crossed through the third.

Sheri picked her chair up off of the floor and sat down in it. She stared at the empty screen, silently trying to think. Her hands were shaking. Had somebody found out what she was doing? Maybe this was black mail, money for silence. “Think Sheri! What to do?”

She picked up the telephone, dialed the first three digits and hung up. “Are you crazy?” she asked herself quite seriously. She cupped her face in her hands and rocked back and forth on the corner of the desk.

“Think.” She couldn’t think.

She took one, long slow breath and closed her eyes. Thinking wouldn’t help. She knew exactly what she had to do as she tucked the scrap of paper under the key board. She grabbed the receiver firmly and dialed the telephone number.

- 3 -

Barry’s success at Internal Enforcement had made him somewhat of a legend throughout The Board. Barry had been involved in numerous arrests at The Board, a number of which implicated high ranking officials. His specialty was infiltrating situations which had previously eluded other agents. He was a master at building a believable net of personal trust and then using that net to snare all those entangled. Barry called on a part of his past that he had hidden from his mother. It was this part of Barry that he used to create a character that won peoples empathy. He would become that vulnerable little boy that wanted to cry when he was hurt. Barry could be very likable and it was hard for anyone that knew him not to trust him. At least until they saw his other side.

One late night in October, Barry arrested and successfully interrogated, the Director of The Board of Technology. Because of the unique manner in which Internal Enforcement conducts its operations, no one outside of Enforcement, with the exception of The

Directors themselves, ever suspected anything beyond the published story. The story explained how the aging Director had been found at home, in bed, dead of a massive coronary.

The Director had been trying to dilute Internal Enforcement's power. In an effort to stop this in its tracks, Internal informed the other Board members that Dr. Yenkin was suspected of links with subversive activity. Until Barry was assigned the case, no one had gotten enough information to make the story believable. Before he died, he had provided Barry with a great deal of information and Barry's superiors rewarded him with his current assignment.

Barry had already spent countless weeks establishing himself within the structure of some of the strongest of The Board's opposition.

It was referred to as the Resistive Movement by all those involved. The Movement took special pride in disrupting the activities of The Board at every opportunity. The Movement was a large underground organization and its members came from all income and social levels. Barry had never realized how vast the organization was before he accepted this assignment. He had always thought these groups to be unorganized and scattered. But now he was part of the core organization that linked all the others together. The Movement had become a unified force with large amounts of capital and talent to use toward its eventual goal of destroying The Board.

Even with the knowledge of the Movement's size, Barry thought it was ridiculous to believe that they could ever be anything more than a nuisance. His position proved that.

How many other under cover agents were at work in the organization, ten, fifty, maybe hundreds? No, the Movement would be toppled and Barry knew that he would be instrumental in its demise.

Years of experience had taught Barry the patience necessary to rise through an organization and successfully ensnare the highest officials before blowing his cover. This operation would be his most ambitious to date.

The organization was suddenly growing rapidly and Barry's job was to find out why. They had recently moved into a new headquarters and assumed an identity as a local business for their cover. When they began to staff up the new office, Barry applied for a position as a graphic artist. The organization did the best they could to look into Barry's past but the only past that existed anymore was the one Internal Enforcement had created for this assignment.

Barry worked slowly and spent more time building relationships than anything else. He scheduled raids on nearby subversive groups and then brought the information to his employers in time for them to take appropriate action. He supplied them with information on how to obtain access to Enforcement communication lines. It was always low level access and the information provided was next to useless. Still it demonstrated Barry's willingness and as time went by he became a well liked and trusted member of the organization's staff. Finally he had maneuvered his way to being one of the *Top Gun's* right hand men. A peach of a spot if Barry did say so himself.

- 4 -

“May I offer you something to drink, Dr. Henry?” the Director said as he rose from his chair.

“No thank you, sir,” he said softly, yielding the appropriate reverence to the office he had entered.

The Director extended his hand over his desk and then motioned to a fluffy chair at the corner of the desk. The esthetics of the Director’s office were an odd mixture of antiques and modern art. Intricately hand detailed vases on stands of metal and glass. Exquisite oil paintings with an air of religious adoration, hung under finely crafted brass lamps which bathed them in streams of bright white light. Throw rugs and hard wood furniture. A plaster statue with brightly colored strands of filament jetting out from the top like a volcanic eruption.

Dr. Henry waited until the Director took his seat before he sat himself. There was a moment of awkward silence as the Director moistened his finger and paged through the folder. It was mostly technical information and he didn’t really understand it but all he needed was a rough overview to be able to ask a few pertinent questions.

“So,” he said lifting his gaze to meet that of the doctor, “I assume you’ve got some good news for me, Robert.”

“Yes sir, I believe I do,” Dr. Henry said with the pride of a new father announcing the birth of his first son.

The Director snapped the folder shut and nestled back into his chair making it creak

and pop under his weight. “Go ahead then,” he clasped his hands across his belly and exhaled heavily.

“Well, sir, we’ve been experimenting with stimulation of an area of the brain called the *hypothalamus*. It’s a small cluster of nerves near the center of the brain, about the size of the tip of your thumb.”

The Director sat quietly studying the doctor’s face.

“We know that this area of the brain is responsible for most of our subconscious responses: pleasure, hunger, thirst, sexual arousal and various forms of aggression. Our research has been geared toward eliciting a controlled response from electrical stimulation of these nerves. Specifically the aggression response.”

“Are you trying to find a piss-me-off switch in the brain, doctor?” The Director smiled at his own attempted humor.

“In its simplest form...uh...yes. More accurately, though, we have been trying to control the intensity and direction of the anger generating portion of the nerves.”

“Interesting,” the Director’s bushy eyebrows pressed down against his eye lids, “and you’ve been able to do this?”

“Well...not completely.” Dr. Henry’s answer seemed to puzzle the Director. “You see,” the doctor continued, “we’ve been using discs provided by your department as the input for this electrical stimulation. We know *where* to insert the electrical energy but it’s the contents of your discs that control the *nature* of the response.”

The Director flopped the folder back to the last page as he remembered vaguely:

cross-reference Halcyon/89: emotional wave response

“Go on,” the look of intrigue on the Director’s face grew with each passing minute.

“We have recorded responses from the first sixteen discs, ranging from mild anxiety to hostile aggression.” The Director nodded and the doctor continued, “Yesterday, we began a stimulation response based on disc #17. I don’t have information on the contents of the disc yet, but its significance bears investigation.”

The Director made a note on the inside of the file folder and leaned his entire body into the front of his desk, squinting with anticipation.

“The information on this disc, when transmitted to the core of the hypothalamus, seems to switch on a response of blind rage that is self perpetuating.”

The Director placed his hands on the arm rests and lifted slightly as he repositioned himself in the chair. The chair creaked again. “What do you mean, self perpetuating?”

“Simply this: We could not terminate the response by removing the stimuli.”

“In English please, doctor.”

Dr. Henry drew a long slow breath and his face drained of expression. “What ever we found, could not be stopped by turning off the switch. The test subjects literally ripped each other to shreds. Biting, scratching, clawing. Really nasty. There was such an elevated level of adrenaline in their systems that they continued to pull each other apart long after they should have been physically capable. All of this continued even after the test signal had been removed.”

The Director sat back in his chair, rubbing his hands lightly together as he stared down

at the front of his desk. An almost imperceivable smile crossed his lips as he abruptly stood and extended his hand to the doctor.

“Thank you for coming in today, Robert. We’ll be in touch.”

After the doctor left, the Director pressed the intercom button on the handset and said, “Trisha. Get me the Chairman at Policy, please.”

Chapter Eight

UNDERCOVER

- 1 -

Barry left work and drove through the evening traffic, the sun nestled low in the evening sky over the bay. Shimmering beams of amber light scattered through the mist as it rose from the water’s surface. The light spread across the windshield as Barry turned into the westbound lane. He pulled a pair of sunglasses from over the visor and rubbed the lenses down the front of his shirt. The traffic crept slowly like a herd of lemmings migrating in unison.

Barry popped in his favorite disc and hummed along as he tapped out rhythms on the steering wheel. Barry, to this day, liked rock and roll. Not that head banging, spiked hair rock and roll, but the rock and roll of his childhood.

Barry rarely had thoughts of his childhood, but music had become an escape for him at an early age. Music had allowed him to exist in a world outside of his mother’s domination and although he didn’t remember actual events from his youth, he remembered the feeling of freedom he gained when he immersed himself in the

rebellious world of *unacceptable* music. The same music that was now considered mainstream *oldies*. He turned up the volume and let himself sink into its arms.

As he inched along one of the main highways, his thoughts were of the day's activities and tomorrow's new adventures. Without really thinking about it, he had an overwhelming sense of satisfaction at the way his life had turned out.

He had begun the under cover assignment as a graphic artist for a suspected faction of the Resistive Movement. He quickly moved to a full time employee. His position frequently gave him access to key information about what the organization was involved in and the information he provided to Internal Enforcement had already resulted in arrests outside of the organization.

Lately, the organization had begun moving in a new direction and Barry was excited about the prospect of where it would lead. Another new head quarters had been secured and they had spent the last several months staffing up for a new endeavor. He had yet to determine what was actually happening and everyone seemed to be overly tight lipped about the whole thing.

The disc reached the end and Barry pushed the eject button. He tuned the radio to the all news channel as he turned off the main roadway and entered the quiet neighborhood in which he was currently living.

“The Board of Policy confirmed today that radical factions of the Resistive Movement had been identified as being involved in the communications problems that plagued the city for the last two weeks ...”

Barry smiled as he recounted his own involvement in those arrests. When certain types of individuals were identified and captured, Internal Enforcement was allowed a degree of latitude in the disposal of these perpetrators. If the individuals apprehended were classified as *mere annoyances* versus actual *information holders*, then Internal Enforcement's job changed from information retrieval to perpetrator disposal. Barry liked perpetrator disposal and looked forward to these scenarios.

He clicked the radio off as he turned into a wooded drive. He lived on a two acre lot that was heavily wooded. It had a long, winding, asphalt drive with low voltage accent lights scattered along it. These had just come on. Barry stuck his sunglasses over the visor and reached for the garage door remote. As the door creaked down behind him, Barry was encased in a thick blanket of darkness. The overhead light had been out for some time. He sat quietly in the darkness enjoying the sensation, thinking about when he'd get around to replacing the bulb.

He smiled to himself as he got out of the car and started to whistle. Tomorrow was another day.

- 2 -

When Kirk met Sheri for the first time, he was sure that his initial feelings about her were correct. She was young, strong willed and not very cautious. Kirk immediately liked her and had to make a conscious effort to remain detached.

They met in a quiet diner on the east side of town. Sheri wasn't familiar with the area but the strange voice on the phone had given excellent directions and, for reasons she

didn't completely understand, she trusted that voice. The stranger, who introduced himself as simply Kirk, had described the restaurant perfectly. Down to the number of stools at the counter.

A man in a white cap was scraping a large flat grill with a metal spatula as Sheri walked to a row of booths along the far wall. She approached the only one that was occupied.

"My name is Kirk," the man stood partially and extended his hand, "and you must be Sheron."

Sheri studied the man carefully. He appeared to be in excellent health and looked like he was in his late forties or early fifties. His eyes were dark and deeply set. Stern chiseled features made him very attractive but also a little cold. Not evil or malevolent, just somewhat...aloof.

Sheri shook his hand and said, "I prefer Sheri." She took off her coat and stuffed it into the corner. Sheri was having a hard time believing that she had actually come here. She thought about being kidnapped or killed, looked at her watch and said, "I told my friend I'd call him at 6:30. I told him where I was going. I didn't think it would take long."

Sheri felt like an idiot, but she couldn't think of anything better on the spur of the moment. Kirk studied her carefully and Sheri felt like he was smiling, although his expression hadn't changed.

Her phone conversation with the stranger had been short and to the point. He told her

that he was aware of what she was doing with TransWorld and they needed to get together and have a talk. Sheri had realized that if she'd been detected by someone at The Board, there would never have been a phone call. Just uniformed officers. But she felt compelled to meet the stranger to find out what he knew, or wanted.

Sheri was very apprehensive about the meeting and this outward display of nerves put Kirk more at ease about her motivations. Kirk started his story as generically as possible. He maintained a neutral position between friend and foe in order to allow Sheri's answers to lead him in her own direction. His mission at this point was strictly fact finding. Sheri remained reserved with the answers to Kirk's questions.

"What made you think you could siphon off Board money without getting caught?" Kirk's expression still hadn't changed.

"I've got all the documentation to back up those transactions. TransWorld is kind of...a cash account. I use it to pay for things that would be too cumbersome and slow to send through normal channels." Sheri talked quickly and felt clumsy as she rambled on, "If you think I would ever steal from The Board you've got another think coming. You'd have to be an idiot to steal from The Board." Sheri rolled her eyes and tried to look genuinely astonished.

After a few minutes, Kirk was convinced that she was not a threat. But she was frightened, confused and involved in more than she had bargained for.

Kirk knew he had to give her enough information to draw her out of her protective shell. For that reason, he was holding a file folder that contained some interesting updates

on the developments of Jeff Beacham, her missing private investigator.

“I know about Jeff Beacham,” Kirk said softly, “and I know how you’ve been paying him.”

Sheri froze as she listened to Kirk explain how he had been *monitoring* her banking transactions. He didn’t explain that his discovery was an accident and just let it hang at monitoring. He told Sheri that after the transactions had stopped, he started his research and found out, at least partially, what had happened to Jeff.

“He was held for a short time at Enforcement,” he explained in an almost clinical manner. “And then his permanent file disappeared, about the same time he did.”

Sheri couldn’t believe how much the stranger knew about her. She felt like he’d been looking through her window at night and seen her naked.

“How do you know all this?” the curiosity in her tone rising like the morning tide. “I always paid him in cash. How did you find out about Jeff?”

“I have, at my disposal a great deal of information gathering techniques,” he said with conviction. Sheri’s puzzled expression indicating her unwillingness to accept that answer.

“Jeff kept personal dictation files in the public area of the Inter-Link,” Kirk said explaining as little as possible.

“But the Inter-Link is a secure system.” Even as Sheri spoke the words, the doubt had begun creeping in.

“The public area is the lowest level of security. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to gain access and snoop around in almost anyone’s personal files.”

Sheri's apprehension over Jeff's disappearance was slowly escalating. She didn't know why, but she began to question the stranger less and Jeff's disappearance more. Although she had just met the stranger, she felt less threatened than when she had received the e-mail message.

Then Sheri had a thought. He must be in the same line of work as Jeff. Maybe an associate. Maybe a good friend of Jeff's. That had to be it. Jeff had told him the whole story before he disappeared and now he was supposed to contact Sheri to help her figure out what happened to him.

"Are you a private investigator?" Sheri's eye's twinkled with the tiniest ray of hope.

"Excuse me ma'am, but I am an Information Acquisition Specialist. *Not* a Private Eye," the tone in his voice only slightly agitated. "I specialize in acquiring data through the procurement of the appropriate talent for a particular job." The definition sounded painfully rehearsed.

"Procurement of talent?" Sheri's faced wrinkled as she grappled to understand what the stranger had just said.

"I sub-contract people with particular specialties," Kirk stated almost proudly.

"You mean like a computer hacker pimp?" Sheri's sarcasm was laced with frustration.

For the first time, Kirk had the feeling that there may be more to this scared little girl and this intrigued him. "The analogy, although a crude one, is actually fairly precise. I maintain a database of individuals with specific talents and I orchestrate their particular skills to achieve the end result."

Until that moment, Kirk hadn't known where he was going with this meeting. He had arranged it out of nothing more than curiosity. But as he spoke with her, subtle strands of an idea began to weave their fabric from within. Sheri interested him and he needed a way to safely continue his exploration. There was an essentially perfect way to proceed with this relationship. But it had to be her idea.

"From time to time I deal with, what you would call, computer hackers. I also utilize skills from most other walks of life. Many of which are non-technical." He could see the wheels turning behind Sheri's eyes. Slowly at first, but Kirk knew she was hooked. Now it was just a matter of reeling in – slowly.

"So you coordinate these *skills* so you can find out things about...people?" Sheri's initial jitters were fading into wide eyed interest.

"About people, places, companies, things...you name it. It's my specialty," he announced consciously trying to exude the appropriate air of arrogance. Kirk never personally *sold* his services and certainly never bragged about his own skill. He worked quietly through friends of friends. Always keeping a low profile. His was not a profession of glamour or fame and he had always preferred it that way. Today, though, he would play the part of the pompous professional.

"Why did they pick up Jeff?" Sheri sat forward in the booth. "Did he tell them anything? Where is he now? Is he alright?"

"Without digging too deeply, I can only guess that it had something to do with one of The Board's pet projects." Kirk actually had no idea why Jeff was apprehended and knew

nothing about specific projects. He had only seen account numbers on various files and transaction histories.

When Kirk said *pet project*, Sheri immediately thought of Halcyon. “How the hell do you know all this?” Sheri asked as she pushed her chest into the table.

Kirk had developed a special skill over years of dealing with people and information. He was a master at using little pieces of information to lead someone into believing he knew more than he did. When he could pull it off successfully it was beautiful. He would drop a pertinent fact here and there, mixed in with a carefully fabricated story about basically nothing. All the time acting the part of the all seeing, all knowing Investigative Professional. When played just right, the person would end up spilling their guts about everything.

Kirk thought over his position carefully. In order to have access to the kind of financial information that Sheri did, She must hold a position of authority at The Board of Technology. And to continue stealing money, undetected...she had to be in charge of the funding for a project. Probably *in charge* of a project. And by the size of the holding accounts, an important project.

Kirk thought carefully then began slowly and methodically, “I know all about the project you’re involved in and I know why it’s so important to The Board.”

Sheri lifted off her seat, looked around the diner nervously and began speaking in an exasperated whisper, “How do you know about Halcyon? How long have you known?” Her face had drawn up with anticipation and fear.

Halcyon was classified with the highest level of security and only The Directors and select officials at The Board of Technology knew of the project by its code name Halcyon. Those who knew the name were the select few who understood Halcyon's overall potential. Most of the project leaders within the group were assigned individual code names or even project numbers.

Kirk thought about how nicely it was going and then continued, "Like I've been trying to tell you, this is what ..."

"I know. I know," Sheri cut him off in mid phrase, "you're a goddamn Information Specialist," the combination of frustration and sarcasm in her voice amused Kirk. He bit his lower lip lightly and tried hard not to smile.

"I've been paying this guy a thousand a week to basically give me squat. Now he's disappeared and you seem to know more about what's going on than I do!" The intensity in Sheri's face turned cold as she looked directly into his eyes. Sheri could sense that this was what Kirk did best. Call it a PI or investigative whatever, but he was good.

"Can I hire you to finish what he started?" she asked as her face relaxed slightly.

Time to get the net. Carefully though. Wouldn't want to lose her. "I'm afraid the caliber of my service does not come cheap. I'm not sure you would have the resources to hire this kind of acquisition effort." Kirk was actually enjoying playing the smug, nose in the air aristocrat.

"Look," Sheri's natural confidence had begun to rise to the occasion, "I've got access to whatever I need." She thought hard about what Kirk knew. He knew about the

transfers but Sheri did not believe he had gained access to the master account. That meant he knew about the transfers to TransWorld but didn't know about their origins. She hoped.

"My family is wealthy." The lie sounded ridiculous as it passed over her lips but it was too late to stop it.

Kirk bit harder on his lower lip and looked down at the table to regain a composed, concerned expression. He did know where the transfers originated and he knew exactly how big the master account was. This was, in fact, one of the reasons he risked meeting with Sheri in the first place.

"Ten thousand a week plus expenses," he managed to sound as serious as he intended.

"Ten thousand a week?" The sentence seemed to hang halfway down Sheri's throat as she sat back in the booth with a thump.

"You must understand," he continued with the icing, "the majority of the expense is for the free lance talent I employ. High quality information, and confidentiality, carries a premium price tag. You've already indicated that I provided you with more information in a few minutes than your PI had in all the weeks he worked for you." Kirk wasn't sure how long she had been paying the investigator, so he chose the word *weeks* carefully to strengthen the gaps in his own knowledge.

Sheri desperately needed to know what happened to Jeff. Now, more than ever, she had to know about Halcyon and the people pulling the strings. Her burning need overwhelmed her sense of caution and clouded her natural tendency toward common

sense. If this guy was half as good as he was pretending to be then he could be a knight in shining armor. Sheri knew this was dangerous but she was already too involved to stop now.

“That’s an awful lot of money.” she mused, carefully studying Kirk for a response.

Thinking about the bank transfers and the size of the master account, Kirk, again, chose his words carefully. “The whole thing’s not any different from what you’ve been doing...just more zeros.”

- 3 -

“Another day, another dollar,” Barry thought to himself, whistling as he walked down the decaying steps. He was accompanied by two uniformed officers and they walked quietly behind him. Today Barry was assisting Enforcement in the apprehension of one of his acquaintances. Barry would routinely drop out of cover in order to make certain arrests personally. This was not general practice with under cover agents, but Barry was not an ordinary agent. Barry really liked the arresting process, always had. It was...fun. So when he could slip out of character without fear of compromising his position, he would arrest and interrogate suspects himself. Barry stopped in front of an apartment door and knocked softly.

He was in a dirty little tenement, in need of major repairs. Chunks of plaster hung from the walls. Strips of wall paper draped over light fixtures. Down the hallway, a baby cried. Barry could hear a faint rustling inside the apartment. He closed his eyes and smelled the lingering odor of cigar smoke mixed with cheap cologne. At the end of the

corridor, the drip, drip of a leaky faucet.

Barry was equally repulsed and completely at ease in these surroundings. He was intimately aware of the thought process of those he stalked and he understood the motivations for what they did.

Barry opened his eyes and looked at the door. Apartment '9B'. The '9' was held in place by a single nail at the bottom of the letter and was hanging upside down, looking more like a six than anything. Barry knocked again, not too loudly, almost politely, but with a slight edge of urgency. The door swung open as the man inside blurted, "What?"

He was wearing a tattered robe tied with a piece of rope. He was short. Maybe five foot six or eight. The condition of his hair indicated he had been sleeping, or drinking. Most likely both. His initial surprise at seeing the familiar face was confused by the fact that he was accompanied by two uniformed officers.

"Hey man," the man said with a deep look of concern, "what's up?"

"Do you mind if my friends and I join you?" Barry said as he walked past the man into the dingy apartment. The use of the word *friends* sent a shiver through the man's lower spine.

The apartment stank of must and dirty linen. Dirty dishes were stacked on top of the stove. The small kitchen table was covered with stacks of file folders. A computer terminal was nestled in the center. Wires ran from the terminal to several small boxes on the floor and to receptacles on the wall.

Barry walked over to the table and picked up one of the file folders as the uniformed

officers stood quietly by the inside of the door, weapons in hand.

“What the hell’s the meaning of this?” the man tried his best to sound intimidating.

Barry gently put down the file folder, and with his hand still on its cover asked, “How long have you been working on this case?”

“You don’t have any right to ...” The man was cut off in mid sentence when the uniformed officers grabbed him from both sides.

“What the FUCK is going on here?!” the combination of terror and confusion in the man’s voice delighted Barry. With a single nod from Barry, the officers forced the man into a chair. They produced a large roll of silvery tape and began securing the man to the chair. His legs were taped tightly to the chair legs and his arms and torso taped to the back.

Barry stared at the folders and plucked playfully at a couple keys on the terminal. He walked slowly around the table and briefly established eye contact with the man bound to the chair. Then, in a large sweeping arc, he pushed the file folders and the terminal onto the floor. The terminal popped and erupted into a flood of sparks and smoke. Barry picked up on one side of the table and flipped it in the direction of the man in the chair. The man ducked the best he could, but the table hit him in the shoulder and the side of his head before it rolled to a stop in front of him.

Barry’s attitude had changed from polite and demure to demented and deranged. Bad cop without the good cop for balance.

The man was now bleeding from a large cut on his the side of his head. He began to

squirm violently in the chair screaming a single guttural syllable, “AHHHHHHHHH ...”

The chair fell over backwards and the man continued with his vain squirming attempt to escape. He crashed into the wall, knocked over an end table and lamp before Barry grabbed the chair and set it, and the man upright.

Holding the back of the chair firmly in his hands, Barry bent over and leaned close into the man’s face. Barry was in his predator mode now and the look in his eyes stopped the man cold. Breathing furiously, the man locked eyes with Barry as though paralyzed by the venom in his stare.

Barry licked his lips as an eerie calm returned to his face. He let go of the chair with a snap and the man remained perfectly motionless. Frozen.

The telephone rang repeatedly as Barry’s gaze remained locked onto the man in the chair. The answering machine kicked on and the air was filled with the tinny voice from the small speaker.

“Hi, you’ve reached B & B Investigations. At the tone, leave a brief message and I’ll get back to you.”

Barry listened carefully for a moment, but the caller hung up without leaving a message. He turned, picked up one of the other kitchen chairs and placed it directly in front of the man. Barry sat down, pulled out a small notebook and flipped it open. The phone rang again and this time Barry smiled at the man and reached for the phone on the floor.

“Hello,” Barry responded to the caller in a raspy voice.

The man in the chair watched in horror as Barry removed a straight razor from his front shirt pocket.

“No,” Barry again responded to the caller. His voice whispery calm, “is there something that I can help you with?”

Barry paused for a moment, receiver in hand and then glanced up at one of the uniformed officers.

Without hesitation, the officer, his forearm around the mans neck from behind and placed his hand tightly over his mouth.

Barry leaned over to hang up the phone and as he did, sliced a chunk of meat from the back of the man’s calf. Blood poured from the gash and quickly soaked the man’s shoes and a large patch of the cheap carpet.

As the man screamed in agony through the officer’s cupped hand, Barry removed a shiny pen from his shirt pocket.

With a click he said, “Now, I need to know a little bit about your work here, Jeff. And...please be specific.”

Chapter Nine

ACCESS

- 1 -

Sheri sat in her office looking over the folder that Kirk had dropped off for her. Sheri hadn’t been excited about the idea, but Kirk’s preferred method of information transfer was by special courier. Just another expense in the money pit she thought as she tore

open the sealed envelope.

The funding that Kirk required had increased substantially since their first meeting at the diner. Sheri's initial apprehension at handling that kind of money had been easily overcome when she came to the realization that Kirk was absolutely right. It was just more zeros. The transfer process was identical and worked with the same efficiency.

Kirk had eventually confided in Sheri about the way he had stumbled onto the transfers. He did this to let her know how easy it could be for someone else to stumble across TransWorld. Kirk had asked a friend of his in electronic banking how you could, theoretically, do something like this undetected. The suggestions the friend gave made sense to Sheri but didn't lessen her fear of detection.

Sheri pulled a folder from the envelope and laid it open on her desk. It contained six of the thirteen Halcyon transmission codes. Although she couldn't explain it, even to herself, she knew that obtaining the thirteen control codes for the Halcyon transmissions was critical. This was her project and those control codes represented the unknown. Represented her loss of control. If she ever really had any to begin with.

The secure transmissions for Halcyon were being handled by a small firm outside of The Board of Technology. The company had class one security clearance and no one at The Board of Technology had access to any of their work. Although not involved in that side of the project, Sheri understood early on the need for a completely new security system for Halcyon transmissions. With the advent of the Inter-Link, the threat of wire tapping had been virtually eliminated. All voice and data communications were

encrypted, but even the highest security Board of Policy transmissions were occasionally breached by rogue hackers. However, the perpetrators were always apprehended quickly due to the high degree of internal monitoring on the Link.

Who ever controlled the Halcyon transmission codes, wielded total control over the project and its ultimate uses. Whatever those uses ended up being.

Sheri believed that obtaining the code keys was like having the combination to a safe. The code itself had no value. It was the contents of the safe that made it valuable.

Until fifteen minutes ago, Sheri thought that obtaining even one of these codes was probably the closest thing to impossible she could think of. But here she was holding six of thirteen. Almost half the combination to Halcyon's safe. And Kirk's confidence in obtaining three more by next week amazed her.

There was a short knock on her office door and Sheri broke a finger nail and almost swallowed her tongue trying to get the folder closed and into her top desk drawer. The door opened only enough for a head to squeeze through and Franklin Tosh said, "Staff meeting in fifteen. Remember?"

With her hand still in the top left hand desk drawer, her heart was racing so fast the best she could get out was a nod, a shallow and, "Uhh.. Thanks Chip."

The door closed and Sheri sat shaking. Leaning her head against the back of the chair she closed her eyes. She hadn't noticed exactly when it happened, but she was afraid of her own shadow. She was afraid of her friends. She was afraid of going to jail. And, although she didn't completely understand why, she was becoming afraid of Halcyon.

- 2 -

Sheri regained what frail composure she could. She knew that the *staff meeting* was more than that. It had been scheduled by the newly appointed Directory of Technology, and he was coming down from The Board to run the meeting himself. Dr. Yenkin's position had been filled by some high ranking official from The Board of Foreign Affairs upon his death. This would be the first visit from the new Director of Technology and it was a big affair. Sheri had met him on two occasions and she found him to be very intelligent and cordial. For weeks, rumors had been flying throughout the building. Sheri was far too obsessed with her own paranoia to take any interest in office politics and the buzz went on around her with little effect.

The conference room wasn't nearly as prestigious as the one where she addressed The Directors. It had the standard industrial tile floor, beige painted cinder block and the same acoustic ceiling tile that hung in every office in the building. A dozen folding metal chairs sat around what Sheri had often thought of as a large picnic table. The far wall was covered by two eight foot wide white boards fastened horizontally next to each other. They were covered with various symbols and some chicken scratch math.

The staff filtered in slowly. Some carrying clipboards and talking about the technical hurdles they had successfully transcended. Others, hands in their lab coat pockets, quietly taking their seats with little pomp or circumstance. Sheri's thoughts drifted as she mused over how different this scene was from her meeting with The Directors. With their starched white shirts and dark gray suits, all neatly pressed and reeking with power and

authority.

This room was filled with oddly colored sweaters, poorly fitting pants and thick glasses. Her coworkers appeared to Sheri, for the first time, as sheep. A mindless herd. Manipulated without knowledge or awareness. Sheri sat down as the Director entered the room and the herd fell silent.

He removed a small folded piece of paper from the breast pocket inside his suite coat and placed it on the podium that was situated at the far end of the picnic table.

The Director looked down at the scrap of paper, placed his hands on the sides of the podium and looked up over the top of his glasses.

“Since my appointment to Director of Technology, I have been concerned about the lack of a Chairman for this branch of The Board. For some reason my predecessor, Dr. Yenkin, felt the need to act both as Director and Chairman.”

Sheri had no idea where this was leading and was preoccupied by thoughts of security codes, electronic larceny and armed security officers. She wondered what it was like in prison. No one ever talked much about those who were detained by Enforcement. Especially those in corrupted positions within The Board.

“It is the Director’s job,” he continued, “to act as the political liaison to The Board of Policy and ensure the department follows the will of The Directors.”

Sheri hated these meetings and wished she could go back to work. Work was something she could immerse herself in like a huge feather pillow. Work could encompass and shield her. It was a place that she went to escape from reality, but Sheri

was afraid she would never have those feelings about her work again.

“I have no desire to involve myself in the intricate day to day workings of this department. Therefore, I am appointing Sheron Rand as my Chairman of Technology.”

The Director looked up from the podium and motioned toward Sheri with an open hand.

Although she hadn't moved, Sheri felt like she had slipped off her chair and hit the floor. Complete with stars and that dizzy, smacked your head on something, feeling. She blinked hard and tried to catch up on what the Director was saying.

“... day to day responsibilities will consist of all Board of Technology functions. I, personally, will communicate The Board's intentions to the Chairman and she, in turn, will be responsible only to me ...” the words again faded into an unintelligible garble as Sheri's face and arms went numb. The spinning track her mind had been on earlier was now completely derailed.

Sheri didn't remember the meeting ending or remember walking to her new office, but here she was. It was Dr. Yenkin's office and it had been closed shortly after his death. The Director was explaining to her that this was probably all happening very quickly but he would do his best to help her *phase in* her new responsibilities. “No shit,” she thought as she watched his lips move.

“You'll be moving into this office. We'll work out a lot of the details as we go, so don't worry about too much right away. Just let the idea settle in for a while.”

Sheri's usual flair for conversation was temporarily lost and she could only think of one word. “Why?” she asked quietly.

“Why?” the Director repeated with a puzzled look.

“Did you pick . . .” Sheri talked slowly with long gaps between her words.

“Did we pick you?” the Director finished Sheri’s half asked question.

Sheri nodded slowly trying desperately to catch up emotionally with this latest swirl of events.

“Honestly,” he said, “it was the way you handled yourself at The Director’s meeting. When techno-people get up in front of The Directors for the first time, they always squeak and stutter and fidget. They talk nonsense and when they’re asked a direct, tough question, they cave in and turn into a babbling hunk of jelly. I may be exaggerating a bit.” The Director played with an ivory handled letter opener he had found in one of the desk drawers.

“You were very different than anyone else I’ve met here,” he continued as he ran the letter opener under his thumb nail, “You stood up to me when I asked the question about Dr. Melroy’s death. And, it may seem like a very small observation, but I was impressed by the fact that you didn’t *hesitate*. Hesitation under pressure shows weakness. You went straight into your explanation and I liked that. Frankly we all did, Sheron.”

The Director put down the letter opener and looked straight at Sheri. “That demonstrated the ability to deal with people...not just data.”

Sheri’s pounding heart slowed somewhat as she began to open the door on her new reality. There was a part to be played here. There was in any situation. She had not been prepared for this one the way she had for The Director’s meeting, so it was time to catch

up. She took one, long, slow breath and concentrated on the tone of her voice.

“I’m not sure I completely understand everything that Dr. Yenkin was responsible for and I certainly don’t have his political ties or influence.” Sheri liked the way the statement flowed and was pleased that she could deliver it without her voice cracking.

“Confidence is achieved in small steps. Small victories,” she remembered Dr. Yenkin’s voice clearly in her head.

“No, certainly not,” the Director blurted out sounding more like a circus clown than a Board official, “no one expects you to. Like I said, just let the idea settle and I’ll contact you in a day or two. Get moved into the office,” he held his hands out to his sides and looked around the room.

The Director stood and extended his hand to Sheri. “Congratulations again, Miss Rand.” And then he was gone, leaving Sheri to wonder if she hadn’t just imagined the whole damn thing. Sheri walked over and stared at Dr. Yenkin’s leather chair. She could see him sitting in the chair. As he sat there looking up at her he said, “Don’t be afraid to take something that you’ve worked for. If you deserve it, then for gods sakes, take it.” Then he disappeared.

Sheri sat down in the big chair and closed her eyes. She rocked back and forth and pictured the new Director standing in front of her saying, “Honestly, we picked you because of your finesse with finance, Miss Rand. We’re always on the look out for corrupt, unscrupulous individuals to promote.”

Sheri immediately opened her eyes and jerked herself forward, holding tight to the

arms of the chair. It was suddenly very difficult to rationalize what she was doing.

- 3 -

Sheri's promotion came at a time when she had already begun to have serious doubts about her financial responsibility to Kirk Anderson. Now, more than ever, it felt like she was pushing her luck. If it was dangerous before, it was utterly insane now. She would be under close scrutiny in her new position and that, if nothing else, was a very potent argument for stopping the transfers.

As she reviewed the transfers for the last two months, a burning pain started to emanate from the lower part of her sternum. Sheri began to seriously question her own intelligence. Was it the new position that had finally rattled her enough to begin thinking clearly?

Kirk had charmed her. He had continued his talk of *professionals* and *free lance experts* while he slowly increased the size of the transfers. Now that Sheri took a good hard look at it, she could not believe that she wasn't already locked up. There had been over a million dollars in transfers since she'd started.

Kirk had convinced her to set up several dummy accounts and start placing money in them for *safety* purposes. "You can always put it back," he had said in complete earnest, "but if something ever goes wrong here at The Board, you'll be set."

"You'll be set is right," she said out loud. "You'll be in prison, stupid."

Sheri was convinced that the time had come to put the money back. She would do the transfers tonight and in the morning meet with Kirk to sever her ties with him forever. In

fact, everything was suddenly so clear to her that it seemed appropriate to get it all straightened out tonight.

She leaned over and closed the door to her office then turned and dialed the phoney TransWorld number that Kirk had set up for their communications.

“Good afternoon. TransWorld Telecommunications. How may I direct your call.”

The bubbly voice caught her by surprise and she almost forgot who or why she was calling. “Ah...Kirk ...”

“Kirk Anderson,” the operator oozed, “just one moment.” The line clicked and gentle music played in the earpiece.

“Hello, this is Kirk,” the music cut off abruptly.

“Who the hell was that?” Sheri tried to maintain an even tone but her irritation wasn’t easily suppressed.

“Her name’s Rhonda. She does light clerical work for me. I thought it would help round out the illusion,” Kirk said nonchalantly, trying to make light of her discovery.

Hearing the operator had strengthened Sheri’s conviction that this was going to stop. It was out of control and she was being manipulated by this man. The original ten thousand a week had escalated to nearly forty. The dummy accounts had been set up. And filled up. Kirk also seemed to come up with an endless stream of *incidental* expenses. Money, money, money. And for what?

“Well I’ve got something to help round out the illusion. I don’t require your services any longer. The bank transfers have officially ended and tonight I’m transferring

everything back from the dummy accounts. I'm through." The words seemed to free Sheri from the clasp of a giant choking hand.

"I understand how you feel," Kirk put on his most diplomatic voice, "but I think we should get together and talk about this in person."

"There's absolutely nothing to talk about." Sheri hadn't planned on arguing the point. She just wanted to say *no more* and slam the phone down. "I've made up my mind."

"I understand how you feel. And if you feel the same after meeting with me, talking it through and accepting the rest of the Halcyon codes, then I'll abide by your wishes." Kirk slipped the hook in gently with the skill of an accomplished professional.

"The rest of the Halcyon codes?" Sheri said so loud she was afraid she could be heard in the hallway. "You've got the rest of the Halcyon codes?" she over compensated and whispered into the mouthpiece.

"I've got six more," Kirk spoke easily, playing on her excitement. "We're working on the thirteenth, the final code, right now."

"Six more?" the sound of her own voice echoed with confusion, "I thought you said you'd have three more next week."

"We're a little ahead of schedule," he said smoothly.

"A little?" Sheri's thoughts again returned to Halcyon and its ultimate control. Those codes were her safety net for this project and she could lose control of it without them. Without all thirteen control codes Sheri had no way to ensure that Halcyon's use would be for the betterment of society.

This wasn't going to end as cleanly as she had hoped.

- 4 -

Sheri sat in her new office and looked deeply into the terminal's screen. It was seven o'clock and everyone had left for the evening. Her new office, Dr. Yenkin's office, was much bigger than an office ever needed to be. There was a small conference table on one side, surrounded by six high back wooden chairs. At the other end was a sitting area with a small sectional sofa and a couple of padded chairs. In the center was her new desk. It was a strange piece of work. It was oval shaped and the top surface was made out of a pitch black glossy material. Behind the desk was a massive bookcase covered in everything from technical manuals to the classics.

She had spent the last couple of days moving into the new office and getting her things arranged. There were still several boxes in her old office but everything else had been neatly absorbed by the new one.

Earlier today, she had received a call from the Director, giving her Dr. Yenkin's sign on codes for the computer. Now as she sat in front of the screen, an odd sense was coming over her. It wasn't really suspicion. It was just that nagging feeling you get when something is about to happen.

All of Dr. Yenkin's personal files had been deleted. That in itself didn't seem that odd. Sheri assumed it must be common practice to clean up somebody's directory before assigning it to another person, but this was different.

Maybe it was an oversight, or maybe they had under estimated Sheri's knowledge of

The Board's computer system but it was a relatively simple task to gain access to the master file directory. The master file directory contained all the information on individual files. Information like file size, date last modified and by whom. It also contained information on the date, time and login responsible for all file deletions.

As Sheri sat staring at the file access information, a queasy feeling started churning in her stomach. All these files had been deleted at the same time, but the login signature was blank. As far as Sheri knew, that was impossible. Someone had to have deleted the files. But right now, that was of little concern to her. Sheri was more concerned about the date of the deletions – two days before Dr. Yenkin's body had been found. Assumably, the day he had died.

Chapter Ten

AXIS

- 1 -

Sheri arranged for Kirk to meet her at the diner where they first met. She arrived before Kirk did and sat, fondling a cup of coffee and gazing out the front window.

She had spent too much time trying to recover Dr. Yenkin's deleted files last night and hadn't transferred the money back from the dummy accounts. Her head was swimming with questions. Was there a hidden agenda to her promotion? What was Kirk doing with all that money? What was in those files? Was Kirk just a con-man? Who deleted the files? Sheri felt like screaming. She sipped her coffee and stared at the empty seat trying to slow down the questions whirling in her head.

When Kirk arrived, he placed a wrinkled manila envelope on the table and sat directly across from her.

“Codes seven through twelve, at your service,” Kirk said sounding more like he was announcing a sporting event than handing over stolen classified material.

“What about thirteen?” Sheri asked, still staring out the window.

“Still working on it,” he said in an energetic effort to down play the difficulty in the task. “We had a minor set back when our key security systems specialist, a man by the name of Rick Morgan, was arrested three days ago.”

Sheri couldn’t pull her mind loose from the deleted files. If those files were deleted before Dr. Yenkin’s body was found, then whoever deleted them had something to do with his death. Maybe even killed him. Or, at the very least, knew he was dead before anyone else, like two days before. She held the coffee cup tighter and shivered. Who? Who deleted the files? It was hard to be concerned about the thirteenth code now.

“I’m not going to transfer anymore money,” she said flatly, still looking past Kirk through the front window, “I’m finished.”

“I’ve got a line on two other guys that might be able to get us a little farther on the last code. But they’re high priced talent. Top of the line.” Kirk was trying his best to maintain his enthusiasm.

Sheri barely heard what he was saying. High priced talent. More money. What was in those files? They were deleted before his body was found. He died of a heart attack, at home, alone. The autopsy had revealed that he had been dead for at least two days. The

files had been deleted two days before the body was found.

It was out of her mouth before she knew what she was saying, “There’s some deleted files I need to recover.” Sheri surprised herself, not only because she said it, but because she continued, “They belonged to Dr. Yenkin and I need to know what was in them.”

“Uhhh” Kirk rubbed his forefinger over his lips. Sensing this was a turning point, he proceeded carefully so he wouldn’t lose her. He had grown to rely heavily on the money that Sheri was providing him and he knew it would be very unlikely that he would ever replace it if she walked out.

“Director of The Board of Technology...that’s pretty hefty security clearance,” Kirk said thoughtfully stroking his chin. “They monitor pretty regularly too.”

He searched his mental database and almost immediately knew who could break that kind of security. “Best man for the job is a guy we’ve been using named Rick Morgan. Absolutely the tops in data security. No one better.”

“How much?” Sheri asked with a cynical tone that cut more than Kirk thought it would.

“It’s not a matter of money,” Kirk said blandly, “I just told you. He’s not currently available. He’s in Detention at Medical Affairs.”

“Has he done work for you before? Do you trust him?” Sheri’s eyes still hadn’t left the window.

“He’s the guy that broke all twelve of the Halcyon codes. He’s the best there is,” Kirk said, not really answering her question. “I think he had a pretty good start on number

thirteen. I know he would have gotten it, but like I said, he was arrested three days ago.”

Sheri’s gaze left the window and met Kirk’s eyes straight on. “*Why* was he arrested, Kirk?” Sheri’s gaze intensified.

Kirk could tell by Sheri’s expression of concern that she probably already knew the answer to that question.

“Breaking classified transmission codes is dangerous work.”

“You mean he was arrested for working on the Halcyon codes?” Sheri’s eyes widened.

Kirk didn’t answer. He no longer was manipulating the situation to his satisfaction.

“You mean *I’m* the reason he was arrested?” the tension in Sheri’s voice increased as the pitch rose.

Over the years, Kirk had lost so many friends and associates that he had acquired the ability *not* to feel for those caught up in the jaws of Enforcement. He always respectfully mourned their passing, but it was for a brief period then he let them go. If he hadn’t learned this, his grief would have been unbearable and consumed him. Unlike himself, though, Sheri couldn’t let it go and he wasn’t exactly sure what to say to her.

“There are certain risks that we all accept when dealing with this kind of information.” Far from controlling the situation, Kirk’s job had become damage control.

“Why is he in Detention at *Medical Affairs*?” her eyes locked on his.

Kirk broke eye contact and dropped his head. Kirk knew exactly why Rick was in medical detention but that wasn’t anything Sheri wanted to hear.

“It’s hard to say...there could be any number of reason for...”

“Kirk,” Sheri broke in so abruptly it startled him, “don’t you bullshit me. Why is he in *medical* detention?”

Kirk took a long hollow breath and slowly looked up to meet her eyes. He recited coldly as though reading a definition from the dictionary, “Medical detention is for prisoners that have trouble with the rigors of data acquisition, but are still valuable for further questioning.” Kirk’s eyes sank back to the table.

“Rigors of *data acquisition*?? Your talking about torture, aren’t you?” she leaned forward and dropped her head so she could see his face. “There torturing this guy because of me! Aren’t they?”

Kirk didn’t look up or answer.

“Oh, shit.” Sheri turned and looked back out the window. “Shit!”

- 2 -

Sheri pressed the intercom button on her telephone and called her secretary. “Sally, I don’t want to be disturbed for about thirty minutes.”

“Yes ma’am,” came the meek reply from the speaker phone.

Sheri could hardly contain herself. A courier had just dropped off a package from Kirk and she already knew what was in it. Kirk had called her earlier and told her that he was sending over transcripts from Yenkin’s recovered files. She was too excited about seeing what was in the package to question how quickly Kirk had obtained the information.

She ripped open the package and began skimming through documents. Halcyon updates from Yenkin to The Board. Personal appeals to other Directors for Technology

funding. Time tables and outlines for various projects. Letters, technical data sheets and notes. It would take a while to sort through this mess and make any sense of it.

On the bottom of the pile, was the information Sheri had asked for on Rick Morgan. Mostly personal information. Background. She felt responsible for his arrest and felt physically ill thinking about what they might be doing to him. She tried to imagine what that could be. The closest she could come were the images she had of Franklin's rats in tiny little cages...scared and alone. She felt as though she had to do something. She had to help him somehow. After all, if it wasn't for her, he'd still be a free man. But what could she possibly do by herself?

"Wait a minute," she whispered to herself and tapped her front tooth with her fingernail. Sheri just realized that she had access to whatever level of security that Dr. Yenkin had.

She pushed the pile of documents aside and leaned into the keyboard. She accessed the main systems menu. "Wow!" Her eyes widened at the newly available selections. She poked and played. Got lost a few times, but eventually ended up in, what appeared to be, the main access menu for Medical Affairs.

Within a few minutes, she knew when Rick Morgan had been transferred there, his doctor's name, his room number and what he had for lunch today. This was great. Sheri printed a copy of all his files and medical transcriptions and placed it with her other pile.

She shoved all the papers back into the package and stuck it in her briefcase. Sheri logged off, turned off her desk lamp and walked toward the door with her briefcase in

hand. Sheri thought hard about her new access and felt just a little bit cocky about her new found power.

“Maybe I’ll just transfer him out of there,” she said only half kidding as she clicked off the overhead light and locked the door behind her.

- 3 -

Sheri was tired of thinking about it. She’d half jokingly had the idea last night and thought about it all day at work. And now, in the quiet after work hours, it was actually starting to seem possible. She’d gone over and over the details, one by one, until everything seemed perfect. It was so simple. With her new access to Medical Affairs, she had the ability to enter an authorized transfer for Rick Morgan. Just pull up the screen, fill in the appropriate blanks and presto. Instant rescue. It did seem simple.

Sheri had agonized over the fact that she was responsible for what ever was happening to this man. The very thought that he required medical attention because of it gave her the shivers. Sheri stared at the clock on the wall and rubbed her chin softly. Then she picked up the telephone and dialed.

“TransWorld Telecommunications is closed for the evening,” the prerecorded voice sounding quite unemotional, *“if you know the parties extension, you may enter it now, otherwise please ...”*

Sheri shook her head in disbelief as she interrupted the message by dialing Kirk’s extension. First that phoney receptionist, now an automated attendant. Kirk sure knew how to spend her money.

“This is Kirk,” his voice devoid of its usual sparkle.

“Kirk, I’ve got an idea.” Sheri sat straight up in her chair and leaned into the front of her desk.

“Sheri, it’s late and it’s been a really long day.” Kirk sounding more tired than anything, but Sheri’s mind wasn’t on how anyone else felt this evening.

“We can get him out,” she said anxiously.

“Get who out, Sheri? What are you talking about?”

“Rick Morgan. The code guy,” she paused with no response. “I know how we can get him out of Medical,” Sheri’s voice ascended in pitch as she spoke.

“Sheri,” Kirk’s tone changing from fatigue to frustration, “nobody’s rescuing anyone.”

“I’ve got it all figured out. I’ve got access to Medical’s computer and I’ve already located the patient transfer forms.”

“No, Sheri,” Kirk said blandly dragging the “o” as if he were talking to a child.

“All we’ve got to do is show up and act official looking and sign for him.” Sheri’s blind conviction in her plan was apparent in her excitement.

“Sheri. I said no. You don’t just waltz in and walk out with someone who’s been detained by Enforcement.”

“You could get us some badges or something and before they knew what hit ‘em, we’d be gone.” She apparently wasn’t listening to a word he was saying.

“Sheri,” there was a new intensity in Kirk’s voice, “get this crazy idea out of your head. The only thing you’re going to do is get yourself in a lot of trouble. Maybe even

killed.” Kirk tried to see Sheri’s expression through the silence. He pictured her pouting when she realized her plan’s futility. “We can’t save him, Sheri. Forget about it.”

After another pause, Sheri broke in, “So you’re not going to help me.”

“Sheri,” the exhaustion had found it’s way back to Kirk’s voice, “I’m telling you, think about this. It can’t work. You need to trust me just this once. DON’T DO IT!”

“I can’t believe that you’d turn your back on me, Kirk. I can’t believe it.”

“Sheri, I ...”

“It’s our fault that he’s in there. Hell, it’s your fault! You hired him. You hand picked him from your endless database of expendable puppets.” Sheri could no longer control what she said or how she said it. The anger in her voice cut through the line like electricity.

“Sheri, you don’t understand what you’re dealing with.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about what you think I don’t understand. What I want to know is this: Are you going to help me?”

“No. No. No,” Kirk repeated in a bouncy staccato gate. “I can’t afford to have some half cocked female jump into something she knows absolutely nothing about and fuck up everything I’ve worked for. There’s a lot at stake here.”

“There sure as hell is. And I’m going to take care of my responsibilities with or without your help. Excuse me for thinking that you might have had a conscience. For thinking that you might have been worried about somebody besides yourself. I guess you’re just a self involved chicken shit after all.”

“Sheri,” Kirks voice dropped almost to a whisper as he continued with an eerie calmness, “please don’t do this. Don’t do anything right now. I’m begging you to trust me.”

Sheri slammed the phone down knocking it off the desk and onto the floor. She stood and then furiously paced back and forth in front of her desk for several minutes.

“Damn him!” she said softly and returned to her desk. “I’ll do it myself.”

Sheri logged onto the system and pulled up a patient transfer request.

Part Two

“The chase, the sport of kings; image of war, without its guilt”

- William Somerville

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Chapter Eleven

PLAN

- 1 -

Sheri worked most of the night on her plan to free Rick. Her overwhelming anger at Kirk had been replaced by fatigue. The patient transfer process had been trickier than she expected. The request itself was easy enough, but at the end, it referenced another form: the *Patient Transfer Authorization*—form #609.

The new form required authorization codes from two attending physicians. Sheri spent hours poking through personnel files and pouring over employee records before finding enough information to make it work.

When Sheri had entered the last of the requested information on the transfer form, she sat back in her chair and rubbed her neck with one hand.

“Finally” she mumbled, reaching for the keyboard. She mashed the Enter key and the screen went blank, followed by a one line message flashing across the middle of the monitor:

**** AUTHORIZATION PENDING...stand by****

Sheri’s heart crashed to her knees. Would this actually transmit a request to somebody for approval? She hadn’t considered that possibility. Now what? Sheri looked up at the clock. It was 4:30 a.m.. She tried to escape out of the authorization check, thinking she

could delete the forms and back track. Make it like it never happened. But the screen wouldn't budge. Sheri frantically tried key combinations to clear the message from the screen, but she was trapped.

ctrl-C, ctrl-Esc, ctrl-Break, ctrl-End, alt-X, alt-Q, Home, Esc, ctrl-alt-Del, Esc, shift-Esc, Enter, Esc, Esc, Esc, Esc,...

"Shit," Sheri yelled at the terminal, "now what?"

Her fingers went cold as she pictured a terminal, on someone's desk at The Board of Enforcement. She could see it flashing in big bold letters:

WARNING-UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS AT MEDICAL DETENTION

... and beeping, in a loud annoying cadence.

Guards would be called. They would know who and where she was. In a matter of seconds she would be detained. Sheri's arms went numb and the heat from her cheeks radiated upward, burning her eyes. Sweat erupted on her brow.

Esc, ctrl-alt-Del, Esc, ctrl-alt-Del, Esc, Esc, Esc, Esc,...

"Damn it!"

Sheri was pounding on the keyboard when the message on the screen quietly went away. She sat and stared at the cursor on the bottom of the screen. A single white dash, silently blinking on and off. It seemed to flash out a kind of Morse Code that said, "You're fucked now, Sheri!"

It felt like there was no air left in the room. She blinked repeatedly, hoping to see something on the screen. Anything.

Flash. Flash.

The flat speck of light continued to taunt her. Flash. Sheri rubbed her eyes with her knuckles and forced them open again.

Flash, Flash.

Then a tiny beep erupted from the terminal and almost knocked Sheri over. She squealed and jumped as if she had been grabbed from behind. Bouncing out of the chair and she stood, staring at the terminal in disbelief.

Flinging her arms in the air with her fists tightly clenched, she dropped her head back and closed her eyes.

“Yeeeeesssss!” she hissed and yanked her arms down in front of her heaving chest. She hadn’t realized she’d been holding her breath. Sucking air into her lungs her through her nose, she focused on the terminal once again.

She thought about that dick-head Kirk as she read the message on the screen out loud.

Transfer authorization approved.

!Authorization #45-786B.

“I don’t need any help,” Sheri announced proudly to the screen, “I can handle this myself. All it takes is guts and a conscious, Kirk.”

“Guts and a conscious,” she repeated triumphantly to herself and then clicked the terminal off.

- 2 -

Sheri waited anxiously as the guard walked back to his little building and picked up a telephone. He carried with him the copy of the patient transfer form that Sheri had printed earlier that morning.

Her car was stopped just in front of the booth and a long metal bar with orange and black stripes blocked the driveway ahead. Beyond, the narrow roadway wove through precisely manicured grounds and disappeared behind a neatly cut hedge.

She watched the guard carefully as he spoke into the telephone. Sheri’s heart stopped as he glanced up at her and then turned to face the other way.

She had offered the transfer form through the open window and then explained that she was there to pick up a patient. The guard had taken the form from her, nodded and walked back to his little house.

Now, Sheri sat and scanned the grounds nervously as the guard talked on the phone. He turned back around to face her, smiled and nodded in her direction. She smiled and nodded back. Sheri’s plan was to play dumb and hope to hell that her electronic paper trail would do all the work for her. Drumming her fingers on the car door, Sheri sneaked another look in the direction of the guard house. The guard was no longer smiling.

She had pulled her hair back and gone without makeup to be as plain and inconspicuous as possible. She looked up into the rear view mirror and suddenly felt

anything but plain and inconspicuous.

The guard replaced the receiver in its cradle and stepped out of the booth and onto the driveway next to her car. Sheri clutched the wheel with both hands and forced out an uncomfortable smile. The guard leaned down and put one hand on the car door. Sheri tried to relax her smile, but the corners of her mouth twitched with anxiety. That smile felt like it weighed fifty tons.

“Just play dumb.” She thought to herself, “You’re just a courier...you don’t know anything...you don’t need to.” Sheri took a long slow breath as her fingers tightened around the steering wheel.

“Please step out of the car miss.”

From someplace inside Sheri’s head the scenario began to unfold. The guard would detain her until Enforcement could arrive. Jail. Prison. Torture. Medical Detention. Sheri blinked hard and tried to clear her head. The vision of a cell door flashed momentarily in front of her face. She hated it when her imagination took over like this. Suddenly it was very cramped and stuffy in the car, even with the window open and Sheri was finding it difficult to breathe. She blinked up at the guard and tried desperately to speak.

“Pardon me?”

The guard smiled politely and said “ Just a minute”. He turned and walked back to the guard station.

Upon entering the booth, he reached under the counter for something and Sheri’s heart stopped.

“They’re expecting you in complex C,” the guard said walking back to the car with a map in his hand. He offered the map to Sheri and pointed down the driveway in the direction she needed to go. “Stay to your right and you can’t miss it. Visitor parking is in the front, ma’am. Oh and you’ll need this.” He pulled the transfer form out from under the clasp on his clipboard and handed it to her.

The guard stepped back, nodded and touched his index finger to the brim of his hat. He smiled warmly as Sheri inched ahead slowly. Her heart was racing and the huge artificial smile was still plastered across her face.

The metal bar lifted and Sheri accelerated slowly down the winding drive.

“Man this is a crazy idea, Sheri!” she said to herself as she watched the guard in the rear view mirror. He stood there, unmoving, until she had veered in the right direction. Then, he turned and went back into the guard house. Sheri took in a long, slow, breath and blew it out even slower. Her cheeks deflated with a shushing sound of relief.

She followed the green signs with bold white lettering. They appeared frequently at intervals along the left side of the driveway. Sheri followed the curved drive, past large bushy trees and neatly trimmed hedges. She found the parking lot without any trouble and pulled in methodically. The visitor spots were right next to the front door and Sheri chose the one closest to the sidewalk.

She turned off the ignition and looked over the building in amazement. It was a massive white structure with beautifully landscaped grounds. Neatly shaped round shrubs lined a stone walkway that led from the parking lot to the front door. White crushed rock

followed the walkway on either side. A stone fountain, near the front steps, made soothing dribbling noises.

Sheri opened her door and slid from the seat. The front of the building was lined with massive white marble pillars and huge granite steps that led up to the main entrance. There were flowers and trees and shrubs everywhere. All impeccably groomed. Sheri felt like she was at a vacation resort, not Medical Detention.

She slammed the door of the car and stepped onto the stone curb. She stopped, surveyed the scene in front of her and then walked, slowly, up to the gigantic rock steps. As she made her way to the door she carefully reviewed her situation again. She was in awe, not only of the facility, but of her ability to have gotten this far.

Once inside, she would present her transfer form and explain that she was just a courier sent to pick up a patient. She had printed all the supporting documentation and had a copy of the actual authorization number. Certainly, that would cover anything they would ask for.

They would then bring Rick out and Sheri would sign a fictitious name and take custody. It should be that easy. Sheri took a deep breath and walked up to the door.

A sudden flush of anger swelled inside her. When she thought about the way Kirk had turned his back on her, the way he had abandoned her when she needed him, it made her furious. But her anger was, in fact, a useful tool. Useful in controlling her fear. It gave her the confidence and strength necessary to continue her charade.

Sheri grabbed the big brass handle and pulled open the front door. She entered the

main lobby and walked up to a large curved counter. Two women in white sat quietly shuffling through papers. One of them looked up at Sheri and smiled, “May I help you, miss?”

The attendant was pleasant and Sheri’s confidence level was suddenly much higher than she had expected it to be.

Sheri presented the documents to the attendant and said, “I’m here to pick up a patient. I think his name’s Morgan. Rick Morgan?”

Sheri looked around the lobby as she talked—partially to portray an air of indifference to the whole thing and partially to hide her face from direct view of the women behind the counter.

The attendant opened her hand in the direction of a small couch and two chairs, “If you’d like to have a seat, I’ll have someone with you in a moment.”

The attendant smiled as she took the documents, but she remained frozen in place until Sheri accepted her offer to sit down. The attendant then picked up a telephone, but in the large open lobby, Sheri couldn’t make out what she was whispering into the mouthpiece. She strained hard to pick out pieces of the conversation.

“I have a...something...claims that...paperwork’s in order...yes ...”

The attendant suddenly got up and walked toward a closed door at the rear of the lobby. With the documents that Sheri had given her clutched to her chest, she disappeared behind the metal door.

Sheri looked around the lobby and began to feel heavy. Everything in here looked like

rock, the floors, the walls, even the furniture. Two giant stone archways led from the right and left side of the lobby trailing off into the dim haze in either direction.

Every sound in the room was amplified. Voices coming from the corridors, the tapping of the attendant's fingernails on the desk, even her own heart thumping inside her chest. The scratching sounds of a pencil as the woman behind the counter made notes on a clipboard. On the wall behind her, a large pale faced clock ticked evenly. It sounded like a wooden stick was being struck against the rock wall itself.

The remaining attendant cleared her throat and it echoed down the corridors like the clap of thunder from a distant storm. The sound startled Sheri and she realized that her confidence level was slipping.

Sheri stared up at the second hand on the clock. Tick. Tick. It seemed to be moving through molasses.

"Would you please step out of the car, ma'am?" she pictured the guard again. Jail. Prison. Torture. Her imagination was overdeveloped.

A door slammed down one of the corridors off the lobby and Sheri fidgeted nervously in her seat. The attendant looked up from her clipboard and smiled dryly at Sheri. Then there were footsteps, coming closer. She looked around the empty lobby and then back up at the clock on the wall.

"What's taking so long?" Sheri asked herself. She had been there almost ten minutes, but it seemed like an eternity.

The attendant shifted in her chair and it creaked like an old sailboat, swaying in the

wind. Tick, tick, the clock sang out its punctuation of each passing second. The footsteps were now loud enough to be coming from right in front of her, but the lobby was still empty. Except for the lone attendant, her face buried in a stack of paperwork.

Sheri's eyes bobbed back and forth from one side of the lobby to the other, carefully watching each archway for movement. Then, the footsteps stopped and the door at the rear of the lobby swung open. The attendant came through the doorway and returned to the curved counter. As she sat down, she glanced briefly at Sheri and smiled.

"It won't be much longer, Miss," she said plainly as she pulled the chair up under her and returned her attention to the pile of papers she'd been working on.

Sheri reciprocated her smile the best she could. It felt painfully insincere, but she forced it out just the same. As she did so, the first attendant leaned over to the second attendant and whispered in her ear. Without moving her head, the second attendant lifted her eyes from her work to look at Sheri. Sheri continued to smile nervously at the two.

The first attendant sat up straight in her chair as it moaned under her shifting weight. They both returned to their busy work with out looking at Sheri again.

Something must have gone wrong. Something must have happened. Sheri felt her pulse begin to race. She tried to breathe quietly but each breath seemed louder than the last. Each one, more labored than the previous.

The second hand on the clock was stuck on its upward swing. Just twitching spastically at the 8:00 position, louder than before. Everything was louder than before. Sheri was sure that the attendants could hear her frantic panting, but they both appeared

to be deeply involved in their work.

The footsteps started again from down one of the archways, crisp and sharp, but there was also a faint rubbing noise. It repeated itself at regular intervals.

Sheri glanced at the doorway she had come in through and then back to the archways, first the left, then the right. She couldn't tell where the sounds were coming from. She felt dizzy.

Sheri looked wildly around the lobby trying to see who, or what, was walking toward her. Louder. Her plan had failed. She knew it had. Any minute, the guard from the booth would appear out of one of the archways and escort her, politely, away for questioning. Intense questioning.

Sheri decided that if she could get to the door, she could get out now. Forget the whole thing and run. But she had to go now, before it really was too late.

She stood slowly, not even sure she could trust her legs to get her to the door, much less through it.

The footsteps echoed heavily as if they were coming from inside her own head, drowning out everything else. Both attendant's had their eyes glued to their work as Sheri started to slid sideways toward the main entrance. It was only fifteen feet away, but it felt like a football field to Sheri.

She tried to hold her breath, but couldn't keep from panting. One of Sheri's legs began to shake and she was afraid that she wouldn't make it. She slid another couple of feet toward the front door, eyes glued to the attendants behind the counter. They were still

looking down.

A long shadow appeared from the left archway and Sheri realized the footsteps were coming from that direction.

She continued to watch the attendant's station with one eye as she crept along, back toward the front entrance.

The shadow grew from the left archway and began to climb up one side of the attendant's station. It looked like something out of an old time horror movie, but in super slow motion. The only thing missing was a screeching violin, but the ringing in Sheri's ears was filling that void quite nicely.

It was now or never. Run or be captured. Sheri looked over her shoulder and saw the door within arms reach behind her. The footsteps stopped abruptly. She turned with a jerk and grabbed for the brass door handle.

"Excuse me Miss."

Sheri froze with her hand stuck to the door handle. Except for the clock's religious ticking, the lobby was now completely silent.

If she ran now, she could probably get to her car before they could catch her. But what about the guard house. Could they call him directly from here? She didn't remember seeing a metal bar blocking the drive out.

"Run, run now!" Sheri pleaded with herself, still frozen in place with her hand on the handle.

"Oh, miss. The patient's here," the attendant announced politely.

Sheri couldn't believe what she'd just heard. Her face went suddenly cold and she couldn't let go of the door handle. She was afraid that it was the only thing holding her up at the moment.

Closing her eyes, she swallowed hard and turned around slowly, with all the self confidence she could muster. A man in a white lab coat stood behind a wheel chair. He was next to the attendant's station, with the wheel chair parked in front of him. Leaning on the handles, he was rocking back and forth.

In the chair, sat a pale looking man with a bandage around part of his head. A blank hollow expression on his face, his eyes were unfocused and pointed at the floor. His hands were resting on his knees, palms up, as he leaned against one side of the chair. The man sat perfectly still, with his shoulders slumped forward.

"If you'll just sign here," the attendant had come out from behind the counter and was extending a clipboard to Sheri, "the aid will help you get him into your car. Are you parked in one of the visitor spots?"

- 3 -

The aid had been very helpful in placing Rick carefully in the back seat of Sheri's car. The trip out the winding driveway had been uneventful and the same guard smiled and waved as Sheri drove past the exit. Again he stood there, watching her until she was gone.

Rick sat quietly in the back seat. It was several minutes before Sheri's adrenaline level had come down enough to allow her to speak.

“My name’s Sheri Rand and I’m kind of the reason you’re in this trouble,” Sheri blurted out excitedly. She was still breathing heavily and her mind was racing out of control.

“You know a man named Kirk Anderson. I hired him...well after I hired another Private Investigator...but he disappeared and Kirk offered to help...to find out some things about a project I’m in charge of and...well, ... that’s why you were arrested.”

Rick appeared to have no idea what she was babbling about. He didn’t move or say a word, he just watched her, intensely, in the rear view mirror as she talked. Sheri didn’t know if he was drugged or incoherent from beatings or what. She shuddered when she thought about all the possible reasons for his silence.

“So, anyway, since it’s kind of my fault that you were in there, I got this idea to have you transferred out— before they took you back to Enforcement. Then you’d be screwed. People don’t usually *come back* from Enforcement, you know what I mean?”

“Where...where are we going?” Rick said hoarsely, now looking out the window in the door.

Sheri was surprised and delighted to hear the sound of coherent thought from her passenger.

“I thought we’d go back to my place for a while.” Sheri drove more cautiously than usual as her eyes darted nervously from one mirror to the other.

An image swelled in the back of Rick’s mind. An image of the Enforcement officers at his house. “ Would you please come with us, Mr. Morgan?” the words echoed through

his throbbing skull.

“Won’t they be looking for you there?” Rick sounded tired. There was no urgency in what he asked either. Sheri thought that it probably hadn’t sunk in yet. He hadn’t realized that he was free. Rescued. He must still be dazed and confused from the torture. Sheri shuddered again and forced the thought from her mind.

“They don’t know who I am,” Sheri announced quite proudly. “I created an artificial paper trail back to Medical Affairs. By the time someone figures out that you’re not where you’re supposed to be, they’ll have no way of finding out where you are.”

Sheri smiled up at the rear view mirror. Her eyes met Rick’s and her smile faded. She could see in his face the things they’d done to him. His features were drained of life. He looked like a zombie, a walking dead man.

“I want to see my family,” Rick said plainly as he turned to look out the side window again.

“I don’t think that’s really a good idea right now.”

Sheri looked in the rear view mirror for some kind of response but Rick stared out, through the glass, oblivious to his surroundings. She caught a glimpse of the man he used to be. He was weary and sedate, but she could see the intelligence he possessed.

His handsome features had a boyish quality and although he was unshaven and pale, Sheri found herself staring at him. In another place or time Sheri would have found him quite attractive. In fact, he had the most alluring mouth she’d seen in a long time. Sheri smiled to herself, then looked away. She felt suddenly guilty for *checking him out*. This

was not the time, but she had to admit she was drawn to him.

Her eyes returned to the mirror. Rick stared aimlessly out the window, bouncing like a puppet with every jolt the road provided. Studying his face, her feelings of guilt grew as she began to realize the extent of what he'd been through. Sheri was determined to make it up to him and savoring this victory helped ease her conscience.

In fact, she was feeling just a little invincible right now. She decided that she would be the one to take care of this man until he was back on his feet. She had been the reason he had lost almost everything. So she made a promise to both herself and to Rick. She was not going to rest until she made sure that he regained his health, and at least some portion of his former life. She had no idea *how* she would do it, but she *would* get it done.

"Let's just go to my place for now and let you think about recovering for a while. Okay?"

Rick said nothing and continued to stare out the window. Sheri made the last turn through the tree covered neighborhood she called home. At the end of the street on the corner, was her house. The house with three gray sedans parked out front.

Chapter Twelve

CHASE

- 1 -

As soon as Sheri turned onto her street she pulled up to the curb and parked several houses from the corner. In front of her house were three gray sedans and she had a pretty good idea what that meant. Those were Enforcement vehicles.

“How?” Sheri said softly, “How did they find out?”

The car idled softly in the background. Her mind raced through the possibilities, working more on instinct than intellect, she backed the car slowly into a neighbor’s driveway and turned around.

In a daze, she drove to a convenience store a couple blocks away. She pulled in and parked on the far side of the building, beside a dumpster. She had to stop somewhere. She couldn’t drive. She couldn’t even think. She put her forehead against the steering wheel and stared at the floor.

She didn’t notice until the passenger door opened, that Rick had gotten out of the back seat. He sat down next to her and slammed the door with a thud. Motionless and solemn, he stared out the windshield at the graffiti on the side of the convenience store.

After several minutes, Rick said, “Do you have any friends? Anybody we could call?”

Sheri turned her head and studied his eyes. Trying to grasp what he had just asked her.

“Maybe someone with a cabin, or a farm. Anything like that.”

Rick’s voice was calm and even, but Sheri was having a lot of trouble holding on to reality. Her world had begun to crumble and she stared at him as if he was a strange creature speaking an alien language.

Rick extended his open hand halfway toward her and said, “I’m sorry I wasn’t paying any attention before. I guess you know my name is Rick. What was your name again?”

Sheri looked down at Rick’s outstretched hand and then back into his eyes. She squinted and tried as hard as she could to get a grip. With tears forming in her eyes, she

slowly reached down and took his hand in hers.

She squeezed lightly and said, “Sheri. Sheri Rand. Nice to meet you.”

This whole situation left her completely off balance. She never really believed that anything could go wrong with her plan so she had never thought about contingencies.

“Thanks for rescuing me.” Rick leaned toward her slightly and tightened his cheeks to form a sober smile.

Sheri sat up in the seat still looking at Rick. She thought she could see some color returning to his cheeks. His eyes were warm and kind and his smile touched her, releasing huge tears and sending them rolling down her cheeks. She started to chuckle and then laugh.

“Oh, shit! Great rescue,” she coughed as her laughter boomed uncontrollably.

“What am I going to do for an encore?” the laughter turned to sobs that caught in her throat and made her chest heave.

“Drive us . . .” sob.”... off a . . .” sob, “...cliff?”

Rick put his hand on Sheri’s shoulder and leaned closer toward her. He dropped his head down to make eye contact and squeezed gently to get her attention.

“Sheri. You’ve got to think of a name. Someone we can call. Somewhere we can go.”

Sheri sat back in the seat and took several deep breaths. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back on the head rest. After a few seconds, she opened her eyes and picked up the phone. Sheri sniffled and then dialed the number for TransWorld.

Right now, getting help was more important than listening to a big *I told you so* from

Kirk. After all, he was right. Sheri had gotten in so far over her head that she couldn't get out by herself.

It was ringing. Sheri held her breath and her eyes closed. On the second ring she blew out the air and looked at Rick. On the third ring, the line was answered with a click and a hum, then a recording,

"This number has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel that you have reached this recording in error, please hang up and try again."

Sheri felt queazy as she pressed the end button. She stared hard at the phone in her hand and then took a long, slow breath. She dialed the number again and got the same message. Sheri dropped the phone on the car seat and let the message play all the way to the end. After the recording finished, there was another clicking sound and then a kind of squealing.

Knowing only what he could see in Sheri's lost expression, Rick asked, "What's wrong?"

"Kirk's gone. He knew I'd hang myself, so he bailed. Fucking coward!"

Sheri began pounding on the steering wheel with her palms. "Goddamn, fucking coward!" Sheri was on an emotional roller coaster that was out of control. She was pissed at Kirk for leaving her stranded. She felt disoriented and powerless at the prospect of being a fugitive with no home to go back to and no one to turn to.

Everything she'd lived and worked for was falling apart in front of her. All the money she'd syphoned off and paid to that coward and now he was gone.

“Where is he when *I* need help??”

And then it hit her like a rock from the sky. Sheri snapped forward in her seat, clicked on the seat belt and started the car.

“I’ve got to get to those dummy accounts.”

Rick’s attention had been split between Sheri and what was happening on the front side of the store. Two Enforcement cruisers and the gray sedans had come screeching into the parking lot from the far side. Rick looked down at the phone and saw that it was still on. Still putting out that funny squealing sound. Rick snatched the phone and quickly mashed the end button.

Sheri saw the cruisers right after Rick did, glanced down at the phone and caught on, almost immediately, to what had happened. They had traced the call. With nothing more than a quick nod over his shoulder, Rick motioned toward a vacant lot behind the store.

He slipped the phone into his pocket and slid out his door. He moved quickly across the front of the car and into the tall grass behind the building. As he turned to check on Sheri, he was stunned to find that she wasn’t behind him.

The driver’s side door was wide open, but Sheri was no where in sight. Where the hell was she? One of the uniformed officers stuck his head around the corner of the building and saw the empty car. As he turned his head back and shouted to the others, Sheri came running from behind the car and shot into the grass behind the building.

In a blind panic, Rick grabbed her hand and nearly ripped it off the end of her arm as he darted into the grassy field.

They left behind them a huge commotion in the parking lot. Mixed voices and rustling sounds. “They’re back here!” an officer shouted. “I see ‘em!”

And then there were gunshots, first one, then two more. Sheri and Rick were now running down an embankment of loose dirt. The ringing had returned to Rick’s ears and he was breathing so hard he could taste blood in the back of his throat. The dirt gave way and they were rolling, tumbling, and then back on their feet again.

They ran along the bottom of the ridge to a fence with a sign on it. More shots. Shouting. Through a gate and into an old train yard. Rick held tight to Sheri’s hand and yanked her along behind him.

He looked back quickly and could see the uniformed officers on foot coming through the gate behind them. He could see the gray sedans up on the hill where they had just come down. One man was talking on the radio and another was pulling a rifle with a scope from the back seat.

Sheri’s face was red as a tomato and for the first time, Rick noticed that she was struggling to hang on to some sort of black satchel. He didn’t have time to ask about it before the air erupted again with gunfire. Rick ducked down and, again, pulled Sheri behind him like a rag doll. Along a stretch of old track and then around a large wooden building. More shots.

Rick kicked some loose boards from the back of the decaying building and opened a hole large enough for them to pass through. He yanked unmercifully on Sheri’s arm as he pulled her through the opening. They were running desperately in the dark, looking for a

way out or a place to hide.

Then came the roar. A deafening, thunderous roar, as the air was filled with thousands of pigeons. It was thick with flapping wings and stinging beaks. Rick caught a glimpse of something. A sliver of light just ahead of them. He covered his head the best he could with one arm, and forced his way toward it. He could hardly breathe and it was nearly impossible to see anything with the birds all around them. He moved painstakingly in the direction of the light and tried to keep his face covered.

In desperation, with birds swarming everywhere, Rick kicked once on a row of loose boards against the far wall. As the rotten wood gave way, the sliver of light widened, revealing an empty room on the other side of the wall.

With the memory of the Enforcement officers vivid in his mind, Rick held Sheri's hand as tight as he could and dove, head first, into the narrow opening. As they passed through the broken wall, a jagged nail tore off a chunk of Rick's shirt and left a considerable gash in his right side.

They fell through the opening and, for the first time, Rick was forced to release his grip on Sheri. He had realized, too late, that they had not entered another room, but were falling down an empty shaft. Rick's arms flopped wildly as he fell head first into the black hole.

Then, as suddenly as he'd realized he was falling, his arms connected with a steel pipe protruding from the wall. Instinctively, he wrapped his forearm over the top of the pipe and locked his other hand onto his elbow. His legs swung freely and he could hear pieces

of debris landing in water below him. Rick looked around frantically for Sheri but she had vanished. The pipe he was hanging on creaked and started to bend downward. Rick tried to strengthen his hold and inch up on the pipe, but it continued to descend.

It creaked again and dropped several inches in one jerky motion. He slid down the pipe, unable to maintain a grip on the smooth surface. In the dim slivers of light from above, Rick's eyes followed the pipe from his hands to where it connected to the wall. In horror, Rick realized that he had grabbed on to some kind of lever, not a stationary pipe. As it creaked and moaned, the rusty lever began switching positions, downward!

As he slid another inch or so down the handle, Rick could make out the words *open* and *closed* on the valve housing where the lever connected. When Rick landed on the lever, it had been nearly horizontal and in the closed position. Now, under his weight, it was moving, bellowing and whining, inching its way downward to the open position.

The pain from the gash in his side was now a burning sensation crawling up the entire left side of his body. He winced and groaned, desperately trying to readjust his grip. Rick's fingers crept up on the lever and he tried to pull himself up, desperate for a better grip.

With the light shining down from the shaft above, a single pigeon appeared, directly in front of Rick's face. They stared at one another, locked in a time vacuum. The bird hung in the air in front of him, suspended silent and motionless. Frozen in space. And then, in slow, deliberate motions the pigeon flapped to a stop and abruptly changed directions, knocking Rick in the head violently with its wings and beak. Then it disappeared.

The lever creaked one final time and dropped almost a foot, coming to rest in the open position. Rick's hands slid from the pipe and he dropped into the darkness below.

- 2 -

Sheri had stayed behind when Rick first ran into the field behind the quick mart. When she saw Rick run across the front of the car and head for the back of the building, she was too preoccupied with the dummy accounts to fear for her own safety. She had left nearly a million dollars in those accounts and although she had intended to transfer that money back to the Halcyon master account, she had never done it. Kirk had talked her into leaving the money there *just in case*. As a safety in the event of an emergency. Well this situation was a pretty damn big emergency and right now that money was all Sheri could think about.

Sheri knew that her briefcase in the trunk contained not only information on those accounts but also held her pocket computer. Right now, these were her last links to the accounts and she was not prepared to lose them. Not yet.

Without noticing the uniformed officer that was looking around the corner of the building, Sheri grabbed the car keys, hurled open the door and headed for the trunk. Rick assumed they had both headed for cover. But Sheri headed for the trunk instead. She snatched the black leather bag and flung the shoulder strap over her head. Taking one sweeping glance around, she ran toward Rick, who was standing at the edge of the field, staring at her in disbelief. There was no time to explain, somebody was shooting at them.

Rick grabbed her arm and Sheri thought he was going to rip it out of its socket as he

dragged her off into the tall grass. He was moving so fast that Sheri felt like she was being drug by a wild horse. She was struggling to maintain her balance, doing what she could to keep up. But he kept pulling her forward faster than she could run.

They were running so fast that neither of them saw the hill until the ground dropped out from beneath their feet. Sheri was taking huge steps as gravity pulled her uncontrollably down the side of the hill. The dirt was soft and half way down Rick let go of her as they both tumbled head over heels to the bottom of the hill. Sheri instinctively clasped her arms tightly around the case she carried and prayed that she could hold on to it.

At the bottom of the hill, Rick fumbled for Sheri's arm and pulled her to her feet. They were running again. Running. Can't breath. Through a gate. A train yard. The back of a building. Rick kicked on loose boards. Sheri heard gun shots and Rick pulled her down and through the opening he had made.

It was dark and smelled of decay and there were birds everywhere. Pounding into her head and face with a deafening roar. For the first time since the fall, Sheri let go of the case that hung from her shoulder and tried desperately to cover up her head. It was dark in the building but traces of light poured through the decaying roof high above them. Rick was covering his head with one arm and pulling at her shirt sleeve with the other. Sheri could not see where they were going. There were birds everywhere, flapping and pounding.

The boards in front of them splintered away as Rick dove through a hole in the wall.

He pulled her behind him and then she was falling in the darkness.

- 3 -

Sheri was treading water at the bottom of the shaft. She had only fallen ten or fifteen feet before she hit the water. Streams of light shot through rotting holes in the roof, illuminating the dirty water around her. It was full of pieces of wood and more wood was falling from above. There were other floating objects in the water Sheri couldn't identify. And the water stunk with a sour tinny smell, but there was little time to be disgusted now.

Although she had been forced to let go of it, she could still feel the black bag around her shoulder. It was floating by her side in the murky water. For a moment, she was concerned about the computer but her concern for it was quickly replaced by an overwhelming fear for her own life.

The shaft wasn't very wide so she quickly made her way to one side. Her eyes had adjusted to the shallow streams of light shooting in from gaping holes far above her head.

Clinging to the slimy rock and treading water, she was able to see an outline of the walls around her. The shaft was round and looked like it was lined with stone. There were several smaller horizontal tunnels connecting with this vertical shaft. Little streams of water ran from these tunnels and emptied into the main shaft where she was. The water contained chunks of things that she didn't even want to think about. Sheri swam to the nearest of these horizontal tunnels and, with some effort, pulled herself up and into it.

Soaking wet and exhausted, she lay flat on the tunnel floor, coughing and spitting out rancid water. The smell was more intense in here and Sheri had to swallow hard to keep

from throwing up.

She heard a loud creaking noise, like metal against metal, and then a huge splash behind her. Echoes of someone yelling, “Heeeeyy,” rang through out the caverns.

Spinning around to face the open shaft, she called out to Rick. She could see him, directly in front of her, thrashing around in the polluted water.

But something had changed. Sheri didn’t remember the water moving before. But it was moving now. Gurgling sounds came from under the water’s surface and Rick was being spun around by the current. The water sputtered and spit and Rick was having trouble keeping his head above the water.

She could see him, flapping his arms in the water only a few feet from where she knelt and then—he went under. The water’s churning intensified and Sheri screamed out for Rick. She called out again and reached through the murky water with both hands.

When Rick bobbed back to the surface, their hands connected. Sheri tightened her grip on his forearm, leaned back and pulled him toward her. The water pulled back, yanking Rick from Sheri’s grasp, pulling him under water again.

Sheri fell forward in the tunnel, losing her grip just before she, too, was pulled into the water. Rick bobbed back and forth like a leaf in a puddle and Sheri, flat on her stomach, reached as far as she could for his flailing arms.

Once again, she grabbed Rick’s arm and played tug of war with the water. Once again, the water’s pull nearly forced Rick from her grip. Sheri clenched her teeth and grunted loudly as she jerked backward, as hard as she could, both hands clenched tightly around

Rick's wrist.

Rick came flying out of the water and up into the tunnel. He landed on top of Sheri, knocking her backwards into the cavern. Rick collapsed on her, unable to do anything more than gasp for air. For a moment they both just laid there panting, trying to regain control of their senses. Rick's forehead resting on the slimy rock floor of the tunnel and Sheri's chin pushing into his shoulder. Escaping the shaft had left them both utterly exhausted and out of breath. The intensity of the last few minutes had taken its toll as the adrenaline rush began to level off.

As they struggled to catch their breath, Rick was struck with the most intense feeling. He wanted to stay there, near her. He...wanted...*her*.

Confused and embarrassed, he quickly rolled off of Sheri and sat up against the damp, rock wall of the tunnel, pressing himself against it for stability. He brushed his wet hair back from his face, all the time trying desperately to fill his lungs with air.

Sheri got up slowly, inching her way to the other side. She leaned back against the tunnel, closed her eyes and tried not to throw up. Her stomach was still twitching with fear and the smell was almost unbearable.

Rick didn't really know if it was the chase or the adrenaline or being so close to death...but what he had felt when he was lying on top of Sheri made no sense. It was some sort of strong physical attraction. It was also the most eerie feeling to have while running for your life. That was the last thing he should be thinking about right now.

Yet, Rick couldn't shake it. He needed to concentrate on their next move. Any minute,

the officers would be on them, guns a blazing. No, they certainly weren't out of danger yet and it would be important to keep his head clear, but he was consumed by the reaction he'd had lying on top of Sheri.

Sheri was wrestling with the same emotions. She had scooted against the far wall and was looking down the tunnel anxiously as she pushed her hair back from her face.

She suppressed a couple of short gags and tried to analyze what she had experienced when Rick landed on top of her. She found herself in the middle of a huge wash of conflicting emotions and made the same vain attempts at rationalizing that Rick had. It was all caused by the situation. These weren't *real* feelings, just a byproduct of the excitement.

Sheri tried hard to convince herself that it was no more than that, but she too, had been affected by the incident. When she looked up into Rick's face after he had landed on her, there was nothing she wanted more than for him to grab her by the back of her neck and kiss her full on the mouth. She couldn't understand how fear could have been translated into such a strong attraction. It drained her energy just thinking about it.

With the vision of the gun firing officers etched vividly in his mind, Rick forced himself to stop thinking about Sheri and quickly surveyed their situation.

They were in a horizontal tunnel. It, in turn, was connected to a large vertical shaft. The one they had fallen into. The tunnel they were in was about four feet in diameter and seemed to be made out of concrete. The floor was slimy and a small, steady stream of water ran down to the main shaft.

Rick thought it looked like some kind of drainage system and he wondered where it led. It really didn't matter, he knew they had to get moving, and quickly. They couldn't go back the way they had come. They really had no choices.

He got up on all fours, tugged once on Sheri's shirt and without a word, started to crawl down the tunnel into the blackness. Sheri sighed heavily and followed. If she could have thought of another way out, she would have gladly offered it. But this was the only alternative.

Hands and knees on the cold slimy rock, Rick had a strange sense of deja vu. An uncomfortable, yet comfortably familiar sensation. All of a sudden he felt isolated, safe. The darkness was like a blanket that protected him. It didn't make any sense, but then again not much of anything he'd been feeling lately did. First the overwhelming urge to have sex while running for his life, now the uncanny feeling of being safe in a dark, damp, slimy hole.

Rick shook his head as he crawled through the darkness trying to clear his head.

Sheri was the first to hear the sounds.

"What's that?" she asked as they both stopped to listen. Rick smiled to himself and began to crawl forward again. It was very unnerving, but he felt as though he had returned home.

"Don't worry," he said reassuringly, "it's only rats."

- 4 -

Fifteen Enforcement vehicles with flashing lights and another half dozen of the

nondescript gray sedans all converged on the huge, condemned, building. It was the central hub for an antiquated train switching station. The structure itself was the size of an airplane hangar. It was held up by a massive skeleton of steel and concrete and was covered by a decaying sheath of wood and tin.

Uniformed officers had been assigned to circle the building and open up several of the giant steel doors in order to flush out the flock of birds that had taken up residence there.

Detectives leaned on the hoods of their gray sedans and compared notes, talked on the radio and told dirty jokes. A big man, with an even bigger laugh, made gurgling sounds as he sucked on the straw of a purple slurpy.

One of the detectives was bagging a piece of bloody cloth that one of the officers had retrieved from a nail inside the building. It was found in an opening broken through a boarded up entrance to a drainage shaft. A set of fresh foot prints led through the bird feces, right up to the hole in the wall. The drainage shaft dropped over fifty feet straight down and the officer's flashlights were not powerful enough to reveal its bottom.

A dozen or so drainage tunnels connected to this main shaft and water fell from most of them, sparkling through the flashlight beams, eventually striking the unseen floor far below.

It was assumed that the two fugitives had fallen to their death in the shaft. A special team with repelling equipment had been dispatched to the scene to confirm it, but there wasn't much the other officers could do until they arrived. Reports were being written and supervisors contacted. Back at The Board of Enforcement, heads were about to roll.

It was hours before they discovered that Rick and Sheri were not dead. And another couple of hours before a map of the drainage tunnels revealed the impossibility of a search attempt. There were, literally, hundreds of miles of tunnels and an intricate network of shafts and interconnecting passageways. The tunnels routed runoff water from every part of the city into this central shaft. The pursuit was temporarily at a stand still.

Embarrassing details were covered up and silent alliances sealed. Blame would eventually have to be assigned and someone held accountable for this miscalculation. The whole process would be more political than factual and someone's career—and life—would most probably be ruined.

There was a kind of unwritten law at Enforcement that said, if you want to excel, you must position yourself *before* blame can be assigned. Point at the most likely target, the easiest scapegoat and hope your fellow officers are pointing in the same direction. How lucky do you feel?

The ambitious would take the chance and the timid were left behind to await their turn for slaughter. The lucky ones would excel quickly and obtain positions that wielded political and bureaucratic power. These select few routinely placed blame for their own failures on their least favorite subordinates. When you exercise the power to place blame at will, the reality of a situation becomes irrelevant.

Unfortunately, this fiasco was a major breach of security and there were, at least for the moment, no feasible leads. This left little room for disaster recovery and The Directors would have to be notified. Unless the men in charge were afforded a lucky

break, and soon, there would most certainly be a changing of the guard at Enforcement.

Chapter Thirteen

REPRIEVE

- 1 -

The shaft that Rick and Sheri had fallen into was an old storage well for city runoff water. The railroad had used the water in their steam powered locomotives. The water was pumped out of the shaft, as needed, through a system of filters. The bottom of the shaft was connected to a manmade lake through a large corrugated metal pipe. In order to regulate its level, a long control lever near the mouth of the shaft directed the flow of water from the shaft to the lake. If the shaft became full, the operator would open the valve and allow some of the water to drain into the lake.

When Rick fell into the shaft, he had grabbed the lever and switched its position. This opened the drain at the bottom of the shaft and the water began emptying into the nearby reservoir. This in turn, exposed another dozen horizontal tunnels that had previously been covered by the water in the shaft.

Three hours after beginning their crawl through the darkness, Rick and Sheri emerged from a storm drain in a part of the city that neither of them recognized. Soaking wet, dirty and rank, it would have been difficult to maintain a low profile under normal conditions. But this place was far from normal.

Rick and Sheri had no idea where they were. They didn't recognize anything. This part of town was foreign to them because they thought that places like this didn't exist.

Piles of trash lined the streets and there were people sleeping in it. At least Rick hoped they were sleeping. A group of people dressed in rags stood around a barrel with a fire in it. This was not the picture that either he or Sheri had of what was now called the *less fortunate*. Those were people with one vehicle, one video system and The Board's health care package.

But these people were...were...POOR. There weren't supposed to be poor people any more, just less privileged. That's what The Board told everyone. It was on TV all the time.

"Make a donation today and let's all do our part to help the less fortunate ..."

The picture on the screen depicting a clean looking family of four, graciously accepting a mid-size color wall monitor from a Board of Support worker. The son and daughter must have been about eight and ten. Their clothes were not the most fashionable but they were clean. And they didn't look like they had missed any meals. They didn't appear to have everything that they wanted but they did appear to have everything they needed. They had been "taken care of" by the government. And the monitor was not a necessity, it was a testament to the graciousness of The Board.

Rick's initial apprehension about climbing out of a storm drain was laid to rest by these new surroundings. Their filthy tattered attire could not have been a better disguise. Everywhere buildings were crumbling, windows were broken, doors hung limp on their hinges. Children with sticks chased rats into heaps of steaming garbage. An old women pushed a rusty baby carriage full of plastic bottles down the trash covered street. The

empty shell of a burned out automobile sat in the middle of the street like a fossil from a past millennia.

Rick never imagined that people actually lived like this. Even now, he could not believe what he saw. They walked by a small child burrowing around in a pile of garbage along the curb. The child wore an adult sized dress. And it made her look like a clown. She must have been eight or nine years old and as they past her, she turned and faced Rick. She was so thin that the bones in her cheeks were clearly visible through her pale skin. She had a large half healed scrape across her left eye and down the side of her face. It must have been terribly infected because a thick pink liquid oozed from under the scab.

Sheri turned away from the girl, leaned her head and shoulder against a brick wall and threw up. Still facing the wall, Sheri braced herself with one arm and wiped her mouth with the sleeve of the other. She took in a deep breath, blew it out and asked solemnly, “Where the hell are we?”

“I don’t know,” Rick said as he knelt slowly in front of the girl. Although she didn’t seem to be frightened by their presence, she did keep her distance. Clutching an empty can she had found in the pile, she watched him intently.

Rick reached his hand forward and asked, “What’s your name?”

The girl stared at him and then reached up and touched the side of her face. Rick’s bandage had fallen off after the ordeal in the drainage shaft. Clotted blood mixed with fresh surrounded the wound in his temple. Rick mimicked the girl and gently touched the side of his face.

As he did, a flood of emotions hit him. The shiny hook flashed in front of his eyes. He could see it reentering his temple. Rick winced in pain, closed his eyes tightly and tried to force the memory from his mind. “check his wife’s story out...” a voice echoed through the dark side of this painful memory. Rick clenched his teeth and took a long slow breath before opening his eyes.

The child had moved toward Rick and was now holding her arm up in front of her. She moved closer to Rick and softly touched the side of his head. Her other hand, still against her own. Rick moved his hand up to the girls cheek and touched it gently with his thumb. Tears filled his eyes and began to roll down his cheeks. He couldn’t decide who his tears were for, himself or this pitiful child standing in front of him. There were so many things about this world that The Board had kept in the shadows. Rick wondered how many more atrocities they would discover before it was all over—how many more horrors existed. These people were living like animals and The Board was most certainly aware of it. Why hadn’t they told us? Why was it kept a secret?

“We’ve got to find someplace to stay.” Rick was still facing the child as he spoke to Sheri.

Sheri turned from the wall, her head down and still wiping at the corners of her mouth with her sleeve.

“I know,” the wavering in her voice betrayed the severity of her fatigue.

Rick stood abruptly and wiped the tears from his face as he turned and walked toward Sheri. He took her shoulders gently in his hands and bent slightly to look in her eyes.

“Are you okay?”

Sheri nodded without looking up or saying a word. Rick’s gaze moved to the strap around Sheri’s shoulder. A sudden sense of irritation came over him. In fact it was more than irritation, he was just plain pissed off!

“What’s so important about that damn bag? You almost got killed going back to get it!”

Sheri looked up at Rick and studied him. He seemed annoyed but she wasn’t sure why.

“Its got the information on the dummy accounts.” Sheri realized that he didn’t know anything about the accounts or anything else for that matter but she had no time to explain.

“Some bank accounts with a lot of money in them.” Sheri was too tired to clearly explain anything. “It was for an emergency.” She laughed at the absurdity of the word *emergency*, given her circumstances.

“Anyway, if we can get to a phone line and figure out where the hell we are, I can do a bank transfer to an ATM account... that is, if my computer’s not fucked.”

Rick half smiled at how strange that word sounded coming from her. Even with her hair matted and face smudged, she was still too pretty to talk like that. No, not pretty. He couldn’t figure out what it was about her. He couldn’t find a word that fit her. She seemed perfectly capable when she rescued him. Then she almost got him killed. Now she was clinging to her little satchel of hope like a child clings to the myth of Santa Claus. All of this fit her...and well...didn’t fit her.

She was attractive—but pretty? It was too generic. Too common. Rick realized that he was too tired to figure out just who his angel of mercy was. Besides, he had to figure out where they were.

He scanned both sides of the street examining each of the buildings. Tightly packed structures lined both sides of the street in either direction. It looked like this had been a booming area for business at one time. Now everything lay in ruin. Broken glass, decaying piles of splintered wood and garbage, everywhere. Piles of rotten stench, surrounded by people. Some poked through it, some played in it, while others lay in it like crippled mannequins. But no one spoke, not even to each other. They just stared a glazed over stare and moved about in little groups. Rick shuttered and forced himself to continue examining the buildings.

“There,” he said pointing down the block. A small hand lettered sign hung crookedly under a shattered motel sign.

ROOMS—\$16

“Do you have any money?”

“My wallet’s in the car.” Sheri’s voice sounded thinner and weaker than before. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so hopelessly lost in all her life. Big tough Sheron Rand. All she wanted to do was cry, hard and long. Rick could see the desperation in her eyes, but was unable to think of anything comforting to say. They stood face to face, staring, Sheri’s lower lip quivering slightly. Each hoping that the other had a solution.

“Wait,” she blurted out as she fought back the tears, her eyes suddenly wide and

sparkling. She picked up the black satchel and unzipped one of the side pouches. Her hands trembled as she reached into the pocket. With a glorious smile radiating across her face, Sheri produced a soaking wet twenty dollar bill.

“It’s my mad money.”

She started to laugh. It sounded a lot like crying. Rick grabbed her and held her to him like she was his most precious possession—and Sheri let him. It felt good to be held, comforted and celebrated. At this point it didn’t matter that the man standing here, with his arms wrapped around her, was almost a complete stranger. All they had was each other.

- 2 -

Sheri and Rick walked through the broken glass outside of the shabby motel. The concrete steps leading up to the door were badly chipped and Rick grabbed Sheri’s elbow to keep her from stumbling. The window pane in the front door was covered with years of petrified masking tape. Broken pieces of glass clung precariously to the tape and dangled in the gentle breeze that had begun to blow.

They walked inside together, clinging to each other like a couple of lost children. The air in the small room was warm and musty. Two mismatched chairs and love-seat lined the room. An empty gum ball machine sat quietly in the corner. Varying sized holes in the walls were surrounded by names and symbols spray painted in gloss black and drawn in colored marker.

Behind a monstrous stack of old newspapers, the attendant sat in front of a miniature

black & white TV. The ball of aluminum foil on top, acting as an unsophisticated antenna.

Rick asked the man if there were any rooms available and without looking up from the snowy picture, he explained that there were. He restated the price...plus tax, and pointed to a scrawled out sign the wall:

CASH-IN ADVANCE!

WE HAVE A DEAL WITH THE BANK,

WE DON'T EXTEND CREDIT AND THEY DON'T RENT ROOMS!!

Sheri leaned over the newspapers and handed the twenty to the man.

"We'd like a room for the night, sir."

The attendant shot a scowl at Sheri and then bent over and reached under his chair. He picked up a rusty metal box and carefully placed the money inside and then counted out the change.

Hopelessly engrossed in a show about children with alien parents, he paid little attention to them as he reached sideways under the counter and handed Sheri a key.

"Room number twenty one," the attendant coughed out, rolling his eyes toward the stairs. Rick and Sheri turned in unison heading for the room.

"Up the stairs, to your right, third door," the attendant's eyes returned to the tiny screen.

Neither of them said a word as they drug themselves up the rickety staircase and down the hall to the room. The exhaustion was beginning to settle in like the overpowering effect of a strong narcotic. Rick felt as though the best he could do was drag his feet across the floor, not lift them.

Sheri clung to her black bag as she climbed the stairs, more to have something to rest her arms on than for security. When they reached the room, she placed the key in the rusty deadbolt and turned, first clockwise then counter-clockwise. She couldn't get it open. Whether it was fatigue or the key really didn't matter. The frustration began to overwhelm her. Sheri leaned against the door, placed her forehead on it and mumbled profanities.

Without a word, Rick gently touched her shoulder and motioned with his eyes for her to step aside. Sheri moved off to one side leaving the key in the belligerent lock. Rick placed his right knee in the center of the door and leaned in on it as he rattled the key and turned the knob. The door popped open with a loud creak and Rick nearly fell inside.

The room had one queen size bed and a bathroom that was more of an alcove than a separate room. There was a small black & white wall screen in one corner with a crack running down one side and little wire antennas stuck to the wall behind it with masking tape. The floor was covered with green, sculptured shag carpet and the walls were faded light blue with small pieces of plaster missing from several spots across their surface. Sheri thought that a couple of the spots looked like bullet holes.

There was a window, covered with tattered orange floral curtains across from the door.

It was too small to let in much light. Sheri clicked on the light switch, walked up to the window and looked through the torn curtains onto the street below.

She looked back at Rick and smiled. He had already flopped face down on the bed. Sheri went back and took the dangling key from the deadbolt then closed and locked the door. Then she laid her black satchel on the floor next to the bed.

She sat on the edge of the mattress beside Rick and looked around the room. It was a dump, but it was wonderful. A sanctuary where they'd be safe. At least for a while. Sheri tried desperately not to think too far ahead. She turned and looked at the man she had rescued. He was laying face down on the bed and for the first time she noticed his blood soaked shirt.

"Ohh Rick, you're hurt." Sheri sounded as if she were in more pain than he was.

Rick turned his face away from Sheri and talked into the pillow, "I know, but I'm too exhausted to care. Just let me sleep for a while."

Sheri rose abruptly and headed for the bathroom. She stood there, with her hands on her hips and studied the half room for a minute, then grabbed a large towel and threw it over her shoulder. She turned on the rusty faucet and held her finger under the water and waited for it to run clear. She took one of the two wash clothes from the rack and soaked it under the running water. With both hands, she wrung it out, turned, and walked toward Rick with a renewed perk in her step.

Sheri sat back down next to Rick, one leg folded up under her, the other stretched out parallel to him. She lifted slowly on the torn shirt to reveal a large open cut on Rick's

side. She dropped the shirt and patted Rick gently on the small of his back.

“Sit up, Rick.”

“No,” Rick mumbled into the bedding.

“Sit up,” Sheri said with a certain firmness. Rick was not used to such conviction from a woman.

“Oh, man!” Rick made a sour face and grumbled as he drug himself sluggishly into a sitting position. He dropped his legs off the side of the bed and complained.

“I’m too tired for this, Florence.”

“Shut up,” Sheri said playfully as she pushed Rick’s elbows toward the ceiling.

“Up, up, up...” she gently started to lift the shirt over the cut in his side.

“Owwwwwwe....” Rick whined, sounding more like a five year old boy than a full grown man.

She pulled the shirt over his head and threw it on the floor, then bent over to study the gash. A shiver rolled down her spine, rattling her like an old wooden roller coaster.

“EEEEWW!” She turned away and took a deep breath, “We really need to get something on that before it gets infected. I think it needs stitches.”

Sheri looked apologetically at Rick and said, “This is going to hurt.”

Rick looked into Sheri’s huge green eyes and he was suddenly sure that she could never hurt anyone. She unfolded the washcloth she held in her hand and moved it with great hesitation toward Rick’s side. Her first attempt made Rick bark out in pain.

“Watch it!” He snapped, resting his hands on the top of his head.

“Sorry.” Sheri recoiled, regrouped and tried again.

This time she started with the blood around the cut and worked her way inward as she gathered her courage. She knew what she had to do. The cut needed to be cleaned out thoroughly. She just hadn’t thought it would be this hard to do.

Sheri made several trips to the bathroom sink to rinse the now burgundy colored washcloth. Rick moaned and winced. In spite of his discomfort, Sheri cleaned the wound thoroughly, working slowly and methodically.

“You’re hurting me,” Rick whined, now almost pouting.

“You big baby,” Sheri said, still working diligently. It was getting harder to keep her stomach from rolling.

“Hold still, or I’ll hurt you worse,” she threatened, but couldn’t hide the degree of empathy she was feeling for him.

She got the distinct impression a couple of times, that Rick was laying it on a little thick. He was milking it and Sheri was enjoying her role as nursemaid. After all of today’s failures, she was now accomplishing something. She was taking care of him. Just like she had promised herself she would.

She had the cut as clean as she could get it, so she tore the towel into strips and used them to tie a piece of the hand towel around his abdomen. With the make-shift bandage in place, Rick got up slowly, pressed his hand against his side and walked toward the bathroom. Looking a little embarrassed, he turned to Sheri and said, “Watch TV or something for a minute.”

Sheri smiled and turned away while Rick took a leak. The sound of relief as Rick exhaled slowly reminded her how long it had been since she'd gone to the bathroom.

"My turn next," she said, still facing the opposite wall.

"No problem," Rick said smugly, "do you want the seat up or down?"

"Down please." Sheri did her best to sound disgusted.

Still holding his side with one hand, Rick walked past Sheri and went straight to the window. He held the nasty curtains to one side using only his forefinger, as if touching them further would transmit some horrible disease. He scanned the street from one side to the other with as much curiosity as respect for Sheri's privacy.

When Rick heard Sheri return from the bathroom and flop down on the bed he turned to face her. Her knees were draped over the edge of the mattress and she'd flung herself backwards onto the bed. Her long auburn hair fell wildly across the tattered spread.

"Why don't you start at the beginning and tell me exactly who you are and what your part in all this is." Rick's tone was surprisingly un-accusing.

Sheri thought for a minute, staring at the ceiling, her arms resting above her head. Then she clasped her hands together behind her neck and lifted her head slowly to meet Rick's questioning gaze.

"You know a man by the name of Kirk Anderson?"

"Yes," Rick squinted and nodded. "He hired me to do some subcontracting work for a company called TransWorld Telecommunications. The guy questioning me at Enforcement was asking a lot about him."

“I hired him originally, to find out about a project of mine at Technology.”

“You work for Technology?”

Sheri nodded at Rick and continued slowly, “We’ve been working on a new form of communication and I needed some answers about its possible uses...or misuses.”

“Answers?” Rick felt a piece of the puzzle fall into place as he remembered the assignment that Kirk had him working on.

“The communication codes I was working on?”

Sheri nodded her head up and down. “Yes, but that’s only part of it. I didn’t know Kirk had hired you until a few days ago.”

Rick pressed in on the bandage and leaned back against the wall.

“You see, he was digging up stuff for me, but as it turns out, he was also doing a little investigating for himself.”

Rick’s thought process felt like molasses. “So *he* was trying to get the codes for himself?”

“Yes...well, not exactly...I mean... I needed those codes too. I just didn’t know it until after Kirk hired you.”

“But why is Enforcement so interested in you and Kirk? Why were they trying so hard to kill us today? Is there something illegal going on here?”

“Well no...well, yes...” Sheri hadn’t stopped to think about how difficult her relationship with Kirk really was to explain. She wasn’t sure how to proceed.

For the first time since leaving Medical Detention, Rick had a chance to think about

how much trouble he was in. His life was in turmoil, a fugitive from the law, hunted and hiding out. It was better than being held at medical detention though.

For all the trouble they were in, Sheri was having trouble staying mad at Kirk—and she didn't really want Rick mad at him either. She couldn't blame him for being afraid to get involved with Enforcement. She couldn't blame him now, for trying to warn her about just what could happen. It did happen. The bastard was right and Sheri knew it. But there was still a strand of resentment, only because he had refused to help her.

After all, look what they had done to Rick. It was beyond comprehension. She looked up at him. Really looked at him for the first time since she had rescued him. He looked more tired now than when she picked him up. The bandage on his head was gone, probably lost in the fall, and the scab on his temple was about to come off.

"Rick, I'm too tired for explanations now," she spoke with a preoccupied tone to her voice. She stood and walked toward him, reaching her hand up to inspect the wound in his temple. She had been so wrapped up in taking care of the cut on his side that she hadn't even noticed the one on his head.

She began to feel that need to nurture him again. She was responsible for what he'd been through and the sight of that scab made her nauseous. It was a strange bluish color and it's shape was almost geometric. She reached up in a jerky kind of motion to turn his temple in her direction. Rick stood motionless and Sheri gently touched the scab with the tip of her finger. Rick began to scream.

"NOOOOO!!!" His eyes were wild.

He grabbed Sheri's arm and clenched his fingers around her wrist. Yanking her hand down from his face, he twisted it and then flung it away .

"Heyyyy!!!" Sheri proclaimed in an indignant tone. "What the hell was that for, I was just going ..."

Rick cut her off in the middle of her sentence, "Don't touch it. Ever."

Rick's eyes had glossed over and there was something radiating from them that Sheri had not seen before. She looked at him not sure exactly who she was speaking to. She wondered why she hadn't seen this side of him when Enforcement was right on their butt. That would have been an appropriate time to flip out, even expected but this...now. After she had taken such good care in mending his side. This didn't make sense. Something was up and Little Miss 'I'm In Charge' was going to find out what it was.

"Listen, I didn't mean to make you mad but you really need a new bandage on that thing," Sheri poured as much sincerity into her voice as possible, hoping that it would mask her curiosity and win his approval.

Rick simply looked at her, flat and without emotion.

Sheri decided to take another shot. She was sure that this time he would succumb to her common sense and ability to manage the situation.

With less than two feet between them, Sheri reached toward him again, this time with both hands. She looked from one eye to the other, noting that one seemed a little more blue, but also checking for a response to her persistence. Before Sheri could make a decision on what she saw in Rick's eyes he had grabbed both of her wrists in mid-air.

Shoving them down towards her shoulders as he began backing her in the direction of the far wall. He spoke with such intensity that Sheri was immediately afraid of him.

“I said don’t touch it, ever...did you hear me...EVER!”

Together they hit the wall with a thud. Sheri’s wrists were pinned above her head. Rick towered over her leaning all of his weight on her wrists. It was enough to make her cry out.

“Alright!” her voice sounded more forceful than she felt.

“Alright...now let go.” Sheri thrust her chin forward in Rick’s direction and scowled. She looked up into his face, which was no more than three inches above her own. A cold chill shot down her spine. His eyes had changed again. More empty and sinister than before.

Rick didn’t move. His face was drawn and angry, his eyes awash with conflicting emotions. He stood there, staring through her, holding her to the wall like he wasn’t sure what he was going to do next. Yet, he never loosened his grip.

As abruptly as he had grabbed her he shoved himself away from the wall and Sheri and walked to the middle of the room. She felt the bones in her wrist pop as his weight was thrust into them. She knew they weren’t broken, but could feel the bruises form as she pulled them defensively to her chest. Folding herself around her battered joints she closed her eyes and took in a deep breath.

As the brightness of the pain subsided, Sheri felt her face flush. She was mad, mad as hell.

Rick had his back to her, standing in the middle of the room, his hands at his sides.

Sheri couldn't read him by the way he was standing.

She collected her thoughts and decided not to let it go. With her first words she sounded more challenging than she wished she had. Putting someone on the defensive was no way to resolve anything.

"Don't ever manhandle me again Rick," she spoke slowly and deliberately as she walked around his left side. Rick's face showed neither shame nor regret. It was still drawn and angry. When Sheri saw his expression she knew that he was not about to apologize, if anything, he was about to explode.

What was he so mad about? She was the one who should be mad. And she was getting madder! Sheri lost her perspective as well as her verbal control.

"I don't know what your problem is mister, but you had better get one thing straight. I paid for this room. Me!" Sheri was now waving her index finger in Rick's face, "and if you think I'm going to share it with some crazy fuck that I barely know *and* who can't control his temper...then you had better get that old thought process rolling and roll your butt right on outa here." Sheri had to stop and take a breath.

Turning his entire body to face her, Rick leaned down to invade Sheri's space and said, "Shut up."

Sheri had to take another breath. Had he actually said that to her or was she imagining it.

"I most certainly will ..."

“Shuttt uppp!”

Rick cut her off again in mid-sentence. This time Sheri shut up. Not because he’d said it, but because the look on his face had convinced Sheri that she was in no position to push. If she were going to continue to argue with him, she needed a different vantage point. Preferably one a little farther away.

In one graceful jump she was up on the old lumpy mattress, standing a good two feet higher than Rick. “This will do,” she thought as she planted her hands firmly on her hips.

“I expect an apology and a different attitude out of you,” she was quite pleased with herself but the smug look on her face melted as quickly as it came.

Before she even finished her sentence Rick bounded onto the bed landing one foot, then the other, square in front of her. The bed was shaking so hard that she almost lost her footing. Sheri wasn’t so sure that there was any place in this room that could give her the advantage now. The bathroom didn’t have a door to shut him out. The only place left would be the hall. He was leaning toward her again, that flat, blank stare in his eyes.

Sheri’s brain whirled, but produced nothing. All she could do was back up until her shoulders hit the wall. Jarred and scared, she remembered what Dr. Yenkin had taught her; in almost any situation hesitation equals fear and fear signals the wolves to attack.

She had to be assertive without being aggressive. Rick had closed in on her and effectively blocked any possible escape with his arms and legs.

Looking directly into his face Sheri spoke as calmly as she could.

“Rick, I would like an apology. You hurt me. See.”

Sheri held her already bruising arms up on either side of her face to show Rick what he had done. He looked down at them for a long time and then returned his gaze to her. When their eyes met Sheri felt as if a lightening bolt had shot straight through her. Her mind clouded and she became dizzy. She was jolted out of her daze by Rick's voice.

"I'm Sorry," he whispered, still holding her gaze with his eyes. They were clear and warm now, not dark and confused anymore. And she couldn't remember which one had been more blue. It didn't matter now, he seemed like himself again.

She wasn't sure what had happened to him, but he wasn't angry anymore. It must have had something to do with what they'd done to him at Enforcement. Sheri tried hard not to imagine what that might be. She was just relieved to have him back.

"What did they do to you, Rick," Sheri asked, studying his face and hoping that he wouldn't really tell her.

Sheri couldn't stay mad at him. Right now, they needed each other. Rick leaned down and kissed Sheri's wrist, gently and with more emotion than Sheri knew existed.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," he repeated over and over, punctuating each statement with a kiss. A single tear rolled from his cheek onto the back of her hand.

What was happening? Rick knew what he was doing, but he didn't know why. He felt like he was waking from a dream. The memory of the horrible ordeal at Enforcement hung in the back of his head like mist in the mountains. The Interrogator's voice hissed and echoed in the recesses of his mind. It had encompassed him like a suffocating cloud. But he couldn't understand the rage he had just felt. The terrible burning anger. It had

come from nowhere. And now, it was gone. Slipping out of reality just like that last dream of the night.

Rick trembled as he thought about what he might have done to Sheri. How easily he could have hurt her. He had been, literally, out of control. When he had pinned her against the wall, he was aware of his actions, but could no more control them than he could his own heart rate.

Now his anger gave way to the same emotions he felt in the tunnel. When he had lifted himself off of Sheri. They were back, stronger than before. And he didn't feel like fighting them this time.

Sheri's head was spinning and she felt odd watching Rick as he kissed her wrists. She knew he never meant to hurt her and that his outburst was somehow related to his trauma. He had made an attempt to control himself. After what he'd been through, well, he just lost it. But this had gone beyond apologizing, way beyond. Right now all Sheri could be sure of was that she didn't want him to stop.

The inside of her thighs began to tingle, sending shooting fingers up her stomach and across her back. Following an impulse, Sheri placed her hands on either side of Rick's face. Tipping his head to meet her gaze, she was again looking at the man she had rescued. Her instincts took over and she no longer thought, all she did was feel.

Still holding his face in her hands she pulled him to her and kissed him on the mouth. Without hesitation Rick kissed her back. He wasn't overpowering or aggressive, but he was powerful. His kisses were soft and gentle, but possessed an intensity that astounded

her. Sheri kissed him harder and faster and Rick matched her as the tension between them began to rise.

Struggling to her knees, Sheri pulled Rick down with her. She felt as if she were about to combust. Little internal explosions were wracking her body and she couldn't get enough air. Rick slipped his arms from her waist up her back, palms open. When they reached her shoulder blades he pulled her to him and held her there. She was exquisite. She filled him with more sensations in that instant than any woman ever had.

Rick picked her up off of her knees, turned and laid her on the bed like a piece of eggshell china being put in a cupboard. And she was clinging to him, certain that if she let go she would fall for a thousand miles.

With the gentle power that seemed so much a part of him, he laid on top of her pressing himself against her as if gravity alone was not enough. His legs to her legs, his chest to her chest, his arms to hers. They struggled with the clothing between them and didn't bother to finish removing it once it no longer created a barrier between their skin.

They moved, synchronized, as if there were a drum beat to follow, off in the distance. The sensation of skin on skin sent shock waves through them that intensified as they melted together. Sheri was more alive right now, than she had ever been in her life. Every part of her body was rocking. The power she and Rick were creating moved them in a rhythm so perfectly in sync that they were even gasping for breath at the same time.

Rick pressed his open mouth against Sheri's neck and fought for air as he breathed in her scent. He slid himself between her legs and she grasped his neck with both hands. She

kissed him long and slow, rocking with the flow they had created. Sheri lifted herself from the bed as Rick lifted himself from her. She pulled him to her as he descended and never let their lips part.

As the very nature of their motion tried to pull them from one another they clawed and writhed to keep their bodies touching. Sheri rubbed her stomach against Rick's, rocking back on her shoulders until her hips dug into him. Rolling with the mattress, she heaved her chest into his, her nipples brushing softly against his bare skin. Rick held the back of her neck as he kissed her, from her throat down between her breasts.

They rolled onto their sides and Sheri wrapped her legs around him as tightly as she could. Rick pulled her to him and kissed her as the pace of their rhythm brought them to their destination, moaning and clinging to one another.

The kiss lasted beyond the last lingering feeling of release. It was long, wet and passionate, but it was softer now, and less needy. Rick stroked Sheri's long auburn hair. He smiled and shook his head, trying to discern the difference between what was real and what was not.

"You are the most beautiful ..."

"Sshhh," Sheri broke in. She wrinkled her nose and dug her shoulders into the worn, lumpy mattress. Rick was still lying mostly on top of her and Sheri was enjoying his closeness.

Rick's voice had become dark and husky. "I'm sorry about before, it's just ..."

"Sshhh...let's just forget it," Sheri whispered without opening her eyes.

Rick started to roll off of her but Sheri grabbed him and held him there, on top of her. She kissed him lightly on his neck and smiled as she drifted slowly into that place between asleep and awake.

He decided to let it go. If she could forgive him, then he would try to forgive himself. He didn't remember much about it now anyway. Sheri had clouded his mind with kisses and it was fading away, almost as if it had never happened.

They lay there, entwined, drifting into wonderful, sexual exhaustion. And just before he slipped off to sleep, Rick reached over and, ever so carefully, took Sheri's hand, weaving their fingers together to keep their hands from slipping apart.

- 3 -

Sheri slept for a couple of hours and then found herself up, washing her face in the rust stained sink. As she stared at her own ragged image in the mirror, she concentrated every ounce of energy on pushing back that hopeless feeling of despair that was beginning to creep in on her again.

When she woke, she felt glorious, but now, as she looked around the room, their situation became all too clear. Reality was a harsh, unforgiving place and she longed for that intoxicating veil of chemistry that had clouded her view so well only hours ago.

Rick slept soundly in the other room, snoring softly. Sheri studied his face and smiled to herself. He was different than other men she had known. Warmer...or more real. She couldn't really explain it. She just knew that she liked how it felt to be with him. Even when he was mad, he intrigued her. The last thing on earth she wanted right now was for

it to end.

Sheri walked around the bed, watching Rick's face, and sat down next to him. She stroked his hair and marveled at the electricity created in that touch. Never had anything felt so magical. Together they had made the world just melt away. They had lost all their worries while they were making love. No one else even existed and their shabby little room could have been a Penthouse suite in the finest hotel in the world and they would never have noticed.

It amazed her that one man's touch could affect her so completely. She began to feel as if, together, they could make anything turn out the way they wanted. They had made it this far, and the odds were not in their favor.

"Wait," Sheri said to herself and shook her head to clear her thoughts. She didn't even really know this man. Deep down she was sure he was a good, considerate person and she had always been a good judge of character. And the manner in which they had been intimate made Sheri feel as if she had seen a portion of his soul. But, still, she couldn't be sure. She knew very little else about him. Oh, except that he had a family. That fact, she knew, was going to bother her.

"But not right now," she whispered to herself as she shook off that moral dilemma and picked up the bag that held her small hand-held computer. Rick rolled over and mumbled. Something...something...boys. It wasn't very clear. Sheri remained still until Rick lay silent once again, then her attention returned to the black bag.

She unzipped the satchel and water dripped from the inner lining of the case. Sheri

wincing as she dumped out soaked papers, a pack of melted gum, assorted paper clips and her ATM card. Sheri smiled to herself, picked up the little piece of plastic and studied it carefully.

“Yea, right...I think I saw a cash machine behind that pile of garbage. You know, the one with the guy asleep on top of it,” Sheri whispered sarcastically to herself.

Sheri flung the card back onto the paper clips then carefully arranged the papers on the carpet to dry. The computer itself was inside its own plastic case though. It had a Velcro fastener on the top, and amazingly, the computer was only damp.

She got the other washcloth from the bathroom and carefully wiped off the lid. She quickly removed the AC adapter and dried it off. Lucky again, just damp. No problem so far. When she was satisfied that she'd done all she could, she connected the adapter to the computer and then cautiously plugged it into the wall outlet. Sheri's heart stood still as light filled the tiny screen:

Boot ROM Version 6.02

memory test...

booting system OS

The computer beeped, whirred and beeped again. Then the MAIN SYSTEM MENU appeared on the screen. Sheri tightened her hand into a fist, exhaled loudly and whispered, “Yes!”

Rick rustled the sheets and mumbled again. Sheri held her breath and watched him

until he lay still.

She walked her way through the maze of programs trying to find the one she needed. So far so good. Everything seemed to be okay. Of all the programs that her tiny hand-held computer had, there was only one that she needed now and that was the communications program. This program, now incorporated into every operating system, would allow her to logon to the Inter-Link and access the dummy bank accounts.

Sheri's idea was to wire the money to a dozen different locations. Both in her name and Rick's. That would decrease the likelihood that any one large transfer would generate suspicion. They could then split up and spend all day collecting the money.

It was the only way she would be able to get them out of this mess. They were going to need identification, though. And clean clothes. And ...

"One step at a time," Sheri whispered, stopping her side-tracking line of thought dead in its tracks. She stood up, stretched and began looking around the room. In the corner was a small end table covered with chipped, fake wood formica. On the table was what she was looking for. A beige, corded telephone.

Sheri slid the computer across the floor as close to the table as the adapter cord would allow. Then she picked up the telephone and turned it upside down. She removed the cord from the bottom of the telephone and plugged it into the port in the side of her computer.

Again, she sat on the floor, legs crossed in front of her, the tiny screen oblivious to Sheri's excitement. Fluorescent squares of green light crossed her face making her cheeks

glow and her eyes light up. As the screen obediently displayed the responses to her requests, she began to smile like a ghoul taking over someone's soul.

She began to access the communications program and within minutes had logged onto the Inter-Link and had gained access to the banking network. She worked mesmerized. Pounding keys and grunting. Occasionally she'd make a fist and hit the floor beside the little computer.

"Damn!" Sheri's voice was brittle with anticipation. She worked frantically, staring at the tiny screen like she had never seen such an odd piece of equipment in her life.

But, something wasn't right. In fact something was really wrong. At first, Sheri thought that *she* was making a mistake. Entering the wrong codes for the wrong bank or maybe the wrong accounts. As time went on, it became obvious what had happened. The accounts were empty. ALL of them.

"It was Kirk," Sheri whispered through her clenched teeth. He had talked her into keeping the money in those accounts and now she knew why.

"That's why his number had been disconnected," Sheri thought to herself. She was furious.

"That bastard!!" She screamed as she pounded her fist on the floor.

"What are you doing?" Rick asked as he lifted his face from the mattress and rested his chin on his shoulder. He squinted, rubbed one eye and tried desperately to assign some meaning to what he was seeing.

Sheri didn't answer, but continued to focus all of her energy on the small keyboard in

front of her. Sheri's expression changed from concern to distress.

"They're empty. They're all fucking EMPTY!" she screamed at the ceiling as if it were to blame.

Rick's expression began to change too, from confusion to blind panic. Sheri saw the fear in his eyes as he scrambled, trying to get up, trying to lose the sheets that had weaved themselves around his legs. He just couldn't seem to get his feet under him. Finally, in one explosive movement, he tossed the sheet from his naked body and leapt from the bed screaming, "What the hell are you doing??!"

Sheri jerked around toward Rick in horror. He was doing it again. Some kind of nightmare or relapse from the torture.

Sheri backed away like a crab as fast as her hands and feet would carry her. He had a crazed look in his eyes and Sheri was afraid of him again.

Rick tried to jump from the bed but had gotten his feet tangled in the sheet. He fell on the floor head first, butt naked with one leg still wrapped up in the bedding.

"What are you doing?" he continued to shout as he crawled toward her in desperation. "Turn it off. Turn it OFF!"

Sheri was frozen and couldn't do anything except stare in disbelief as Rick frantically drug his way toward her still pulling the sheet behind him.

"TURN...IT...OFF!!!!!" he shouted once more, blowing little bits of spittle as if it was punctuation.

He reached out and grabbed the phone cord, and with a whip like snap, yanked it from

the wall, splintering the wall jack and exposing a wad of old wire.

Sheri was still unable to speak and could only watch. Rick fought to free himself from the tangled sheet and then darted for the window. As he peered through a tiny slit in the decaying curtains, he asked, “How long have you been on the network?”

Rick looked up the street then down. Back and forth. Studying the parked cars, the piles of garbage, the buildings across the street. Without turning from the window, he asked again, “How long?”

This time, the urgency in his voice shook Sheri out of her daze. Sheri was a little embarrassed watching him as he stood in front of the window. He had *no* clothes on.

“Not long,” she said sheepishly, still trying to regain her composure and figure out what he was so upset about.

“Ten...fifteen...half an hour? How long Sheri?” Rick’s gaze was still glued to the window.

“Maybe fifteen minutes.” Sheri’s demure stance was the first indicator to Rick that she was figuring out what she’d done.

“Shit,” Rick said more worried than angry. He carefully closed the curtains, turned and looked around the floor for his underwear. As he slipped on his briefs he began to pace nervously. Sheri felt more like a spectator at a sporting event than an occupant of the room. When he finally spoke again, he was talking to himself, not to Sheri.

“With the amount of time it takes to set up tracking ...” Rick continued to pace back and forth and pick up pieces of clothing as he mumbled. He pulled his tattered blood

stained shirt over his head and walked along one side of the bed. He picked up his pants and turned, walked in an “L” shape across the bottom of the bed, then walked back. Rick paused to put on his pants and then repeated the pattern around the bed. Over and over.

“If they set up a wide band network search...six to eight minutes from login,” Rick talked intently to himself. Sheri’s head followed Rick as he continued his path along the bed. By now she knew exactly what he was thinking and exactly what she’d done. Sheri decided to finish getting dressed.

“He took all the money, Rick,” Sheri’s voice had developed a slight whimper. She fought hard against the tears and started panting to keep from crying. Her nose began to run and she dabbed at it with the hem of her wrinkled, smudged shirt.

“If we’re on the same communications hub as central Inter-Link.” Rick hadn’t heard a word Sheri was saying and continued pulling at the stubble on his chin and talking to the room as he walked, “then...”

Rick suddenly froze in his tracks and turned to Sheri. His cheeks had lost all their color. Sheri wiped her eyes with her sleeve and sniffled heavily.

“We’ve probably got five minutes before Enforcement shows up,” Rick said directly to Sheri, “if we’re lucky.” Rick sat on the bed and began to put on his shoes as he talked.

“By now, they’ve probably traced your login to the gateway and already have a lock on the port address.”

“I’m sorry Rick.” Sheri looked down at the floor and blew her nose into the hand towel she’d used to dry her computer.

“There’s no time now.” Rick reached down and took Sheri’s hand. He squatted in front of her and lifted her chin so he could look into her eyes. Rick spoke calmly and evenly, “We’ve got to go, Sheri. Now.”

Rick stood and gently pulled Sheri to her feet. Sheri hugged him fiercely.

“I’m so sorry for getting you into this,” Sheri said and wiped her nose again, this time on Rick’s shoulder. Rick hugged her back and put his forehead to hers.

They jerked from one another’s arms and Sheri let out a shriek as someone began pounding on the door. It was so loud, it sounded like a gun shot. They stood, frozen to the floor as the second round of door rapping fired through the air.

Sheri’s heart was in her stomach and her stomach was crowding her lungs. She couldn’t breathe. She felt dizzy and began to see prickly points of light around the outside of her field of vision.

Rick fought as hard as he could to think, but his mind was covered with mush. He couldn’t respond. Nowhere to go. Nowhere to run. The dentist’s chair filled his head and the wound in his temple began to throb.

“Open up!” came the voice from in the hall.

“It’s me, Kirk. Open the door. NOW.”

Chapter Fourteen

SANCTUARY

- 1 -

“Open the door.” Kirk continued pounding.

Rick's movements toward the door were awkward and disjointed. Unable to grasp the situation, Sheri stood there, petrified and motionless. Her hands still clenched into the same tight little fists she had made when she first screamed.

Rick grabbed the door handle and spun the bolt lock in one fluid motion. The handle popped as Rick released it and let it swing on its hinges.

Disbelief hung in Rick's gaze as he studied Kirk, standing in the hallway. It certainly looked like him. The voice had definitely been his. Kirk was the only man Rick could think of that could help them. Kirk was part of this mess and he could be instrumental in getting them out. Especially now that they had to find a new place to hide. Quickly.

There was another man with Kirk and for a split second Rick thought he looked familiar. His eyes moved nervously back and forth. He turned his head up the hallway and then down, watching. They were cold, guarded eyes, the color of newly polished metal.

The two of them stepped into the room in long, deliberate strides and closed the door behind them. Kirk glanced around, studying the interior of Rick and Sheri's pitiful little sanctuary. He turned his gaze on Sheri who was wearing only a half buttoned shirt, socks and her underwear. Embarrassed as hell, she scrambled around for the rest of her clothes putting them on as quickly as she found them. She wasn't sure if Kirk or the other man had noticed how embarrassed she was but she assumed that they had. She could imagine how it looked and that just made things worse. Rick and herself both half dressed in a motel room. She wasn't ashamed of what she had done, she just preferred to keep her

relationships private. Besides, she didn't like having to explain herself, especially not to Kirk.

"Nice job," Kirk said sarcastically and glanced down at the computer and the phone cord.

"Hub 19, gateway Alpha, address 16432." Kirk smiled at Rick and continued, "Four and a half minutes from logon." Kirk nodded as if to say, "Beat that one, bud!"

"Very nice," Rick said with an agitated edge. Kirk had found them by monitoring the banking network for Sheri's login code. Most likely Enforcement had done the same.

"How long does that leave us, Kirk?"

"'bout two and a half minutes if my calculations are correct." Kirk looked down at his watch as he spoke. The other man peered nervously through the curtains at the street below. Without turning his head, the man at the window chanted in a long drawn out, almost singing tone, "There heeeere."

Kirk grabbed Sheri by the arm, yanked her off the floor and turned toward the door. Sheri pulled her forearm from his grasp and snatched her remaining shoe from the floor. Tucking her shoe under her arm she unhooked the hand-held computer from the ruined cord and opened the satchel. Rick glanced at Sheri with a *don't start this again* look as Sheri shoved the computer into the black bag. She shrugged her shoulders without meeting his eyes.

"I've got a car in the alley, but we've got to hurry," Kirk said as he grabbed Sheri again and pulled her through the door and down the hall. Rick followed, nabbing the

mobile phone from the table at the entrance to the room. It was probably useless but with so few resources left he didn't want to just leave it behind.

Kirk's accomplice brought up the rear. With both of his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket the unnamed man kept a watchful eye, looking over his shoulder and then turning a 360 about every ten steps.

Leading the way with Sheri in tow, Kirk pushed a heavy metal door open and disappeared underneath a flickering exit sign. They stepped into a musty smelling stairwell with metal steps spiraling down to the rear exit of the building.

Water dripped a steady cadence and the smell in the shaft reminded Sheri of the culvert they had drug themselves out of a few hours ago. Kirk tugged again on her arm and she almost dropped her shoe.

The other man entered the top of the stairwell at the same time Kirk and Sheri crashed through the door that opened into the alley. He waited until they had made it out of the building before turning his back and letting the door slam behind him. They piled into the car and the hair at the back of Rick's neck began to bristle. Howling sirens whined in the distance. They had to be right around the corner of the building.

The nameless man crashed through the alley door and jumped into the driver's seat as Kirk was buckling himself into the passenger seat. The car bolted from its parking place before Sheri was able to slam the back door. Rick grabbed her by the thigh to keep her from being thrown out of the vehicle. The door made a metal on metal scraping sound as it bounced off the wall of the building and slammed shut. Sheri clicked the lock down,

just in case.

Kirk pointed to a small opening between two buildings. The driver nodded in agreement and swerved the vehicle in that direction. Buildings loomed above them, leaning over the alley and blocking the sky as the fugitives made their getaway.

They wove through a maze that only Kirk seemed to understand. Whipping the car back and forth barely missing corners of buildings and barrels of trash. The driver, with the corner of his mouth tilted up in a small smile, seemed to enjoy the ride. The occupants of the back seat, however, would have preferred a little less dramatic exit.

Sheri hit her head on the window twice and Rick was making every effort not to let his bandaged side do the same. After several more turns through rotting alleyways and back roads, they emerged onto a major thoroughfare, the sirens fading in the distance.

Within minutes, they had doubled back and were heading in the opposite direction. The driver slowed the car to the posted speed limit and Kirk took advantage of the opportunity to speak.

“I figured you’d try something like this.” Kirk looked out of the front of the vehicle as he spoke to Sheri.

“So I had your login signature and account access monitored.” Kirk grabbed the rear view mirror, turned it so he could see Sheri and sent her a scolding look.

She returned Kirk’s glare through the mirror but he had turned his head to stare out through the windshield again.

“The problem was that Enforcement had exactly the same idea. So I had to be just a

little bit faster than they were. Just a little bit better.”

“Where’s the money Kirk?” Sheri spoke with such calm that it scared her.

“You’re welcome, Sheri.”

“Where’s the money,?” Sheri’s tone was exactly the same as the first time.

“There hasn’t been anything in those accounts for quite some time.” Kirk glanced briefly in the mirror then back to the scene passing in front of him.

“That’s the reason I had to talk you into leaving the money in the accounts. There was nothing in them.”

Kirk’s double talk was just aggravating Sheri more. “What are you talking about?”

“I transferred the money out every time you transferred it in. I had a little sub-routine transfer program written that removed the money while it continued to display a phantom balance to any outside requests. It looked like the money was there, but it was gone.”

Kirk motioned the driver to another side street waving his finger in the air as if he were conducting a symphony. He looked up at the rear view mirror and saw that Sheri was fuming. The color in her cheeks was beginning to invade her eye sockets.

“Listen, everything will start to make sense shortly. Just bear with me for a little longer.”

The look in Kirk’s eyes was genuine but Sheri was having none of it. He pointed his finger again, this time to the side of the road and the driver pulled over. The car rolled to a halt in front of a drug store. They had made their way to one of the more posh business districts in their ever growing metropolis.

The streets were lined with office buildings and store fronts. Pedestrians mulled around in and out of stores, back and forth across the street, creating a sort of haphazard continuum of motion. The end-of-the-day activity seemed to take the edge off of everything that had happened in the last twenty four hours. Particularly for Rick who hadn't been outside and able to enjoy the sunshine for days.

Just being away from that other world was a relief in itself. Away from the stench and the decay. Kirk turned in his seat to face Rick and Sheri directly, his left arm draped over the back of his seat.

"I've been associated with an organization called The Resistive Movement for about twenty years now."

The confusion that had made itself at home on Rick's face was now joined by surprise. But Sheri's lips were pressed together against her front teeth and her nostrils flared in anger. She was about to bust wide open. "The Movement! He's part of the Movement!" she scolded herself.

They had both heard of The Movement through the media. It was a terrorist organization that vandalized, destroyed and interfered with anything and everything that it could. People had died, innocent people, because of the radical views and drastic measures The Movement chose to embrace.

Realizing she was still holding it, Sheri slipped on her remaining shoe. She began to massage the palms of her hands with her thumbs. Maybe that would calm her down enough to think. Right now she was so mad she couldn't do anything.

“I’ll explain more later, but when I came across Sheri and her TransWorld accounts, I saw an opportunity to help a lot of people and I took it.”

In less than twelve hours Sheri had come to realize just how naive she really was. She felt betrayed and worse, she felt foolish. She’d been conned by a terrorist, gave him the money to finance his cause and now was held captive by him. She couldn’t decide if she should cry or fly over the seat and rip the bastard’s eyes out with her fingernails. She was leaning toward the later, though.

Still very confused, Rick spoke for the first time since they had left the hotel, “I don’t understand what you mean about Sheri and the TransWorld accounts. You **work** for TransWorld, don’t you, Kirk?”

Rick’s question hung in the air between them like cigarette smoke.

“Well?” Rick prompted.

“TransWorld doesn’t exist,” Sheri blurted out, “it’s just a bank account that I set up to pay for Kirk’s services.”

Rick looked at Sheri and then at Kirk. He was more confused than ever.

“TransWorld isn’t a real company?” Rick was speaking directly to Kirk now.

“Not exactly.” Kirk cocked his head to the left.

“Not exactly my ass!” Sheri turned to face Rick directly. “I made the whole thing up, Rick. I set up a dummy corporate account called TransWorld. I used it to channel funds from Technology’s funding to an account that I could use to pay someone to investigate. And that was him.” Sheri pointed her finger directly at Kirk as she spoke to Rick.

Rick's initial concerns about something *illegal*, was turning into all out dread. What was he mixed up in? Embezzlement, terrorist subversives, illegal communication tapping...Rick felt sick.

Kirk sighed heavily and glanced back and forth between the two trying to decide how to proceed. He didn't want to reveal too much, just yet, so he decided to continue this conversation elsewhere.

"This would be easier inside," he said with an air of finality, turned and got out of the car.

Rick looked out the window at the drug store and the buildings next to it. Sheri's eyes followed his, surveying the area for the place Kirk was speaking of. Studying the store fronts and confused beyond words, Rick asked, "Inside?"

Standing by the open car door, Kirk tapped on the rear door window and then pointed to the other side of the street.

"There," Kirk motioned across the street.

Like a pair of marionettes, Rick and Sheri turned their heads in perfect synchronization from the right side of the car to the left.

Disbelief shot across Sheri's face in a tidal wave. Rick didn't know enough about the players yet for anything to make an impact, but from what he'd heard so far--this didn't make any sense.

Kirk on the other hand was completely aware their dilemma. He was also aware that to Sheri, TransWorld was still just a bank account.

He smiled, ever so slightly and opened the rear car door. Rick stepped out into the bright sunlight and the hustle and bustle on the sidewalk. Kirk and Rick walked around the front of the car. Then they joined the driver and Sheri as they exited from the other side.

The group crossed the street together and headed for the building that Sheri had been staring at in amazement, her mouth gaping like a broken barn door. She followed the other three across the street.

The glass and steel building itself was impressive, but the fifteen by thirty foot sign across the front of the building was what had Sheri so mesmerized. It read:

WORLD HEADQUARTERS

TRANSWORLD TELECOMMUNICATIONS, INC.

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The building was a three story, stainless steel and smoked glass structure. Alternating mirrored glass panels and brightly polished, metal gave it a beautiful, state-of-the-art appearance. A large, covered walkway made of marble and lined with shiny chromium rails, led up to the main entrance.

Inside the lobby, a uniformed guard sat smile-less behind a large counter. It appeared to be made of the same marble as the walkway.

They followed Kirk through the front door and past the guard. The nameless man brought up the rear, once again. Nodding his recognition of Kirk, the guard put down his

magazine and reached underneath the stone counter. There was a muffled buzzer sound and then a ding as a light came on over one of the elevators.

The lobby was fairly spacious and warmly decorated with lots of plants and cozy wood furniture. Sunlight from the glass front of the building bathed everything with a cheery orange glow. A small waterfall dribbled down over rocks sticking out from the wall between the elevators. Two sets of elevator doors were directly in front of them. The one with the light above it opened with a soft, melodic *ding*.

Kirk paused and waited for everyone to board the elevator and then stepped through just before the doors closed. Both Sheri and Rick were now painfully out of place in their tattered dirty condition. Though there was plenty of room in the elevator as it descended, Rick felt the back of his neck prickle. He noticed that the electronic indicator showed only “- -”. No “LL”, “U1”, nothing, just a double dash.

He assumed they had dropped more than one floor but couldn't put a number on it. He closed his eyes to gather his composure and felt Sheri's welcome touch as she reached over and squeezed his hand.

When the doors opened they exited into a dimly lit hallway, much less impressive than the lobby upstairs. Industrial lights with steel cages hung from the walls just above the tops of their heads. The walls and ceiling appeared to be nothing more than concrete and the floor was covered with dark tile, etched from wear.

Kirk led the way down one corridor and then another, through a short doorway and finally into a large control center of some kind. The room was dark and seemed to be lit

solely by the glare of the monitors that lined the walls. Tightly packed bundles of electronic equipment fit snugly into desk-like work stations throughout the room.

A dozen or so people sat typing at terminals and talking into headset microphones. Some were drawing on large white boards with, what looked like, a map of the city stenciled on them.

The driver turned, motioned to Kirk, then walked out the door and proceeded down the hall.

“Thanks Rod.” Kirk returned the gesture as the man disappeared in to the darkness.

Upon entering the room, Rick’s attention had been immediately captured by four oversized computer terminals. They were hung in a row along one wall and displayed screens full of cryptic gibberish. To Sheri’s amazement, Rick seemed to know exactly what it all meant. He walked reverently toward the terminals with the wonder of small child. Slowly and deliberately he craned his neck to look back at Kirk. If the twinkle in his eyes could have spoken it would have said, “Is all this stuff yours?”

Kirk nodded slowly and smiled his reply. Sheri, on the other hand, was calculating cost as she studied the room. This was where the money from the dummy accounts had gone. The Halcyon money. HER money!

This terrorist organization that had willingly and maliciously attempted to tear down everything that she had worked for, was now benefitting because of her.

Kirk was amused by Rick’s reaction but he was worried about Sheri’s. He could see that she was furious. “Damage control,” he thought holding his hand up in front of his

face. As politely as he knew how, he asked Sheri to have a seat.

“I’ll explain everything and then you can ask all the questions you want.”

Sheri could hardly contain herself. Her hands were shaking, her knuckles were white and her stomach was tying itself in a knot. Rage had left her so unbalanced that she couldn’t think or even formulate a complete sentence so she sat with a flourish in the chair Kirk pointed to. He motioned toward Rick as if he were directing traffic.

“Come here a minute, Rick. There’ll be time for all that later.”

Rick’s eyes were as big as grapefruits. He turned and walked toward Kirk, straining to maintain his view of the screens as he walked in the opposite direction.

“Do you know what that is?” he asked, whispering as if someone might hear.

“Yes, Rick, it’s the Central Access Hub of the Inter-Link.”

“But...” Rick was cut off by Kirk, his hand raised in front of his face once again. He closed his eyes and shook his head deliberately to stop Rick’s line of chatter.

“I’ll answer all your questions after I’ve had a chance to give you some background.”

Kirk pulled up a chair in front of Sheri and sat down, Sheri snapped her head to one side so she could avoid looking directly at him. He smiled and rubbed his upper lip.

“She’s very young,” he thought to himself. After drawing a deep, cleansing breath he began.

“Twenty years ago, The Resistive Movement was nothing more than scattered, unorganized bands of concerned citizens.”

“Concerned?” Sheri blurted out turning her head enough to glare at Kirk.

He avoided the look Sheri had dispatched and turned his attention to Rick who was still in awe of the electronics in the room. Kirk continued without disrupting his stride.

“I met up with a group of these people when I was very young. Hell, we were all young. We were also very idealistic. We studied history and philosophy, literature and politics. We had strong feelings about what The Board of Policy had done for our society. And what it had done to it.” Kirk paused to check Sheri’s reaction. She was still pouting.

“We decided to take action against what we viewed as an oppressive government out of control. The people no longer had a say in what the governing bodies did. We had become puppets.”

“The people’s lives were a hell of a lot better off for it too!” Sheri snapped, her manner a little too melodramatic.

“The people who played along and didn’t ask questions were taken care of. Others, were silenced. The Board and its associated branches took the worry and struggle of everyday out of our lives. Along with that, they also took away our control of it. Our freedom.”

Kirk watched both of their expressions carefully and then continued, “The Board wields complete control over every facet of technology. You should know that better than any of us, Sheri. The Board has control of all financial affairs. The Board controls every type of foreign contact. And through its strong arm, The Board of Enforcement, it exerts its will with an iron hand. No questions asked. A fact you should be painfully aware of, Rick.”

That one hit Sheri hard and she turned and studied Rick's face. She looked at the stitches in his head and thought about what he'd been through, what pain she had caused him. She had always heard stories about the way Enforcement *handled* things. It just never applied to her, never had affected her.

But The Board was affecting her now and somewhere deep inside, she knew that things were amiss. The circumstances surrounding Dr. Yenkin's death were enough to shake her, but now she had proof of Enforcement's mishandlings and it was getting hard to hold on to her ideals.

What bothered her most was that she was a part of the establishment that Kirk was pointing his finger at. He obviously wasn't the only one pointing either. The room was full of people who didn't like what was going on. Not just *didn't like* it...they were risking their lives trying to stop it.

Kirk stopped and let his words sink in. Rick no longer had the look of an innocent school boy. His eyes were filled with the image of that small child, alone on the street, with her half healed scar. Kirk watched as Rick's face transformed.

The memory of his experience with the long arm of The Board, aged him in a matter of seconds. The metamorphosis was astounding. It was like watching time lapse photography and it made Kirk tired just watching him.

The fire in Sheri's eyes had begun to fade too and wheels of doubt spun feverishly in her head. She struggled to remain focused. Her fresh young face looked as haggard and worn as Rick's did.

“You’ve both seen things, places in the past forty-eight hours that you never could have imagined, never would have believed existed.” Kirk looked back and forth between them noting the distinct change in their attitudes. He could see that they knew what he was talking about, and were re-evaluating their recent experiences. Kirk was beginning to open their eyes.

They both knew that encompassing governments had the ability to get out of control. But since they lived within the part of society that benefited most from such a government, neither Rick nor Sheri ever looked beyond the white wash. It was comfortable to blame all of society’s problems on the dissidents. It was comfortable to look to the establishment and say, “Do something about these bad guys. They’re messing everything up.”

The problem with that comes when the US and THEM mentality sets in and instead of action, both sides turn to REACTION.

“So blowing things up is the answer?” Sheri’s attempt at anger was thin and half-hearted.

Kirk stared through her for a long time.

“We used to do that,” the look on his face betrayed his guilt. He had participated in the impetuosity of youth and would never forgive himself for it.

“We struck back every time we felt threatened, and we hit hard. What we learned was that only made us part of the problem. We realized that the players weren’t our enemies, it was the rules that we couldn’t abide. So we set out to change things without hurting

anyone.”

Kirk’s mind flashed to that scene many years ago as he huddled in the mud outside the headquarters and listened to his friends pay the price for striking back. The tears grabbed him and he looked at the floor. After all these years he still had trouble with it. He sat that way for more than a minute. With his thumb and forefinger he pinched at the bridge of his nose, then drew a long, ragged breath and looked up at Sheri, then Rick. He attempted a smile but failed miserably.

“Now we tap into the Central Hub of the Inter-Link,” he waited for a reaction but got none. But right now, silence was plenty. Still making headway, he thought to himself and then continued.

“We keep an eye on what’s going on. One of the things Sheri’s helped us with is a project called Halcyon.”

Sheri’s nostrils flared and Kirk could see that *helped* was probably an inappropriate choice of words right now. But rather than back track, he decided to just plow ahead.

“Something I’ll bet Sheri doesn’t know.” Kirk was now talking to Rick as if Sheri wasn’t in the room, “is that Halcyon was originally conceived by Enforcement.”

“That’s a lie!” Sheri snapped, the venom had returned to her bite. Kirk decided to ignore her and continued speaking directly to Rick.

“I don’t think *anyone* at The Board of Technology knows that.” Kirk had not intended to explain Halcyon quite yet, but he knew that if he could keep Sheri off balance about her feelings toward him and The Movement, he’d have a lot better chance of getting

through to her.

“We’re still trying to figure out exactly what they’re up to, but I have a whole file of memos from the Director of Enforcement to the Director of Technology. Makes for interesting reading if you have trouble sleeping.”

Sheri’s eyebrows were pressed down over her eyes like heavy lead weights. She had begun to breathe heavily through her nose and her lips were curled tightly against her teeth.

Suddenly, Kirk stood, pushing his chair back behind him with his knees.

“Enough fun for one day.”

He held his hand toward the door they had entered from. “You both must be exhausted. And you don’t smell very good either.”

He turned and walked toward the door.

“I’m on your side Sheri, I really am.” He had his back to her but his tone made Sheri consider believing him.

“Besides, the people you’re defending are the same people who tried to kill you this morning.” Without intending to, Kirk drove his point home with a bang. He really was her only refuge.

Rick got up and headed for the door. His head full of questions, but too tired to ask them. Reluctantly, Sheri followed, dragging her feet as if she were wearing ankle weights.

“Get cleaned up and get some rest. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

Chapter Fifteen

LINK

- 1 -

As they went up on the elevator, Kirk began explaining that TransWorld's new Headquarters was not built by, or for them.

To Sheri's surprise, he informed them that such a waste of resources was not in the Movement's agenda. The building was a not-so-old hotel that had gone bankrupt. Ergo the fancy entrance and lavish furnishings. But it was a perfect cover. Kirk explained that they rented some of the floors out to legitimate businesses to get some sort of return on their investment. There were a few floors that TransWorld used to create a legitimate cover and the rest remained vacant.

Kirk told them they were headed for the top floor where the movement allowed people to *hide out* or stay until they could be relocated. At the moment, there were no such visitors, and Rick and Sheri would have the run of the Penthouse suites, including the Presidential Suite.

As much self control as he had at times, Kirk couldn't help but smile as he presented this particular bit of information. Strange as it may sound, he thought that the two made a rather handsome couple.

Rick looked directly at Kirk, shrugged and smiled. What else could he do. He was aware of how things must have looked when Kirk arrived at the hotel. Sheri did her best to fade into the elevator wall. She knew what Kirk meant about having the run of the

suites. She decided to ignore his little jab, choosing instead to study the dried water rings on the tops of her shoes.

The silence was getting a little uncomfortable so Kirk decided to give them their dignity.

“It’s up to the two of you to decide who gets the Presidential Suite. There’s a stocked fridge in at least three of the other suites and I’ll have someone bring breakfast up in the morning. Say...8:30.”

As the elevator jiggled to a halt the doors opened. Sheri caught her breath and Rick’s eyes danced from the floor to the walls to the ceiling, taking in the most spectacular of entry halls he had ever seen.

“Oh, Rick,” Sheri cried with the innocence of a school girl. “It’s...”

“Perfect,” Rick finished the sentence for her, taking her hand as they stepped out of the elevator. He turned and thanked Kirk for everything as Sheri studied the decorating in their new refuge.

Kirk delivered the when, where and hows for the next twenty-four hours with an air of military correctness and Rick half expected him to salute when he finished. They said their goodbyes and Kirk’s slight grin grew into a broad, gleaming, impetuous smile as the doors of the elevator closed in front of him.

“I am mortified!!!” Sheri bellowed, smiling one of her most contagious smiles.

Rick grabbed her and kissed her as if to say *I don’t care*. Sheri threw her head back and blew a sigh of relief at the ceiling. He let go of her like she were a hot coal and

headed for the closest set of doors along the entrance hall. He yanked the doors open and his side screamed with pain, making him flinch. The muscles around the cut were becoming stiff and sore.

Although he had found the Presidential Suite, he was unimpressed. Completely preoccupied with finding a bathroom, he made a bee line for the master bedroom. Sheri was entertaining the same idea.

“Me first,” Sheri called after him.

“I feel like a slug.”

She had more trouble navigating around the sofa and table than he had and she could already hear the shower running. As she entered the bathroom she found herself staring at the most pitiful creature she had ever seen. The worst part of it was, she could still recognize herself in the reflection.

“You know,” she began as Rick stepped into the shower, “I used to love a bath that was covered with mirrors. Right now I’d settle for one of those foggy little medicine cabinets.”

Rick laughed and lathered. He had forgotten how good it felt to shower.

“Oh my god, a toothbrush.” Sheri snatched it from its holder. Along side of it was a complimentary sized tube of toothpaste.

“Heaven,” she proclaimed as she squeezed a glob onto the end of the toothbrush and began scrubbing her teeth as if they had been neglected for years.

Rick was standing under the water, soaking, when Sheri stepped into the shower with

him. It was almost large enough for four people and had more levers and nozzles than she had ever seen. They were all gold toned with crystal inlay.

Rick stood there, directly under the showerhead letting the water cascade over him. He was more handsome every time she looked at him. Sheri just wished the circumstances weren't so strange. She felt a little odd, not so much because she had slept with a relative stranger, she'd done that before. It was because, somehow, this wasn't just about the physical aspects. She was vested. This man owned a piece of her. It felt like they had known each other for a very long time. Or maybe they had been waiting to find each other. As corny as it sounded that's exactly what all this felt like.

It had been a long time since Sheri had showered with a man. There was something about taking a shower with someone that felt almost more intimate than having sex. As she stood there watching him, with the water running over his body she felt the muscles just below her belly button tighten and her legs begin to tingle.

"Hand me the soap please," Sheri requested in a deep, throaty tone that made Rick smile and then shiver. He handed her the soap and without opening his eyes he turned his back to her. Sheri rubbed it into a lather between her hands. Rick put his palms on the wall of the shower and leaned into them.

In heavenly little circular motions, Sheri massaged Rick's back until almost all of the fatigue was gone. Lathering and rubbing, lathering and rubbing. From his shoulders down past his shoulder blades to the small of his back careful not to disturb the wound on his side.

The sound of the running water lulled them both and Rick repositioned himself so that Sheri could enjoy the warm rush of the clean sparkling water as well.

She wrapped her hands around his hips and massaged the dimples at the small of his back. Rick was moaning with delight. He couldn't remember ever feeling this good. All he could do was hope that Sheri was enjoying it as much as he was because when he turned around she was going to be able to tell what a wonderful job she had done. Sheri lowered her hands and rubbed the muscles in his butt until his legs felt like butter. He turned and leaned his back against the shower wall, as much out of the need for support as the need to get his hands on Sheri.

He reached out, pulled her to him and buried his face in her neck. Kissing her gently as the water trickled down between them in little streams. Sheri let her head fall back and Rick kissed her throat as he cupped her breast in his hands. Sheri gave him the soap and he lathered her chest. He moved his hands up and down her sides, each time he reached her breasts he rubbed her nipples with his thumbs and Sheri quivered uncontrollably followed by a deep husky "mmmmmmmmmmmm..."

That sound, sent electric charges from Rick's rib cage down to his knees. He had never been so excited by a woman in his life. She did things to him. He wasn't sure what it was, but she felt like part of him. Like they were having more than sex, or making love. Almost like they were completing something missing in each other when they came together like this.

He knew that Sheri felt this way too. Instinctively he knew it. He didn't have to ask

her, he just knew what she needed. This was better than sex because it was more than sex. Rick was falling in love with Sheri and she with him. They both understood what was happening and they both wanted it.

“Mmmmmmmmmmm...” Sheri moaned as Rick ran his hand up the inside of her thigh. When the water had washed the soap away, he took as much of her breast in his mouth as he could and began teasing her nipple with his tongue. Sheri cried out and leaned her weight on Rick’s shoulders.

She wanted him inside her and she wasn’t going to wait any longer. Sheri pushed him the rest of the way to his knees and grabbed the towel that he had hung over the stall. She threw it on the shower floor moving it toward him with her foot.

Rick placed the towel under his knees and sat back on his heels just before Sheri descended upon him. As he tucked himself between her legs, she wrapped him in her warm softness and rocked against him. At the pace she was setting, Rick knew he would not last. Sheri’s need was moving her toward what they both wanted but Rick wanted more than just release. He wanted that connection to last.

Putting his hands at the small of her back he moved forward and kissed her, her mouth wet from the spray. Water trickled between their lips and Sheri slowed her pace to concentrate on the kiss. She ran the tip of her tongue against the edge of his teeth. He met her tongue with his and probed her mouth in the same rhythm the rest of their body was moving to.

Sheri moved her hands from his shoulders, up to his cheeks as he kissed her. Suddenly

Sheri snapped her head back and panted as if she could hold off the inevitable until they were both ready.

“Yesssssss,” she hissed between clenched teeth as she wove her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. Her veins were on fire as this pulsing release caught her off guard. The muscles in the backs of her legs tied themselves into knots, but she continued with her motion. Descending upon him time and time again she kissed his forehead, then his cheek, his chin and then his mouth.

“I have it for you Rick,” she whispered her lips touching his earlobe, “come and get it.”

Rick welcomed the rush as he grabbed Sheri’s waist and pulled her down to him, intense with need. His breath came in abbreviated spurts as he lifted her again and again. Each time she descended, warm sensations shot through him. His brows were drawn together as his release came in full force. The combustion lasted and lasted and lasted. It was almost too much for him. As they slowed and finally stopped Sheri wrapped him in her arms, enfolding him in warmth.

With the tip of his nose resting between her breasts he realized that they were still in the shower and that the water was cold. Sheri stood and helped him to his feet. Reaching around him to shut off the water she almost lost her footing. Rick steadied her as she found the right lever. Before she could turn and leave the shower Rick pulled her to him and kissed her with more hunger than he ever had. Surprised, Sheri studied him as she pulled away, looking for an explanation in his eyes.

"I'm glad you rescued me," he spoke softly and gently. Almost in a whisper.

"I am too," she said.

"No," he continued, "I'm glad YOU rescued me."

"Oh..." Sheri answered demurely.

"I am too," her voice trailed off as she wrapped her arms around him and laid her cheek on his chest. This was all too unreal.

- 2 -

All of the food from *all* of the refrigerators on the top floor was arranged in the middle of the enormous bed in the Presidential suite. Wrapped in complimentary bath robes Rick and Sheri sat laughing and eating and enjoying their newfound feeling of security. Sheri wiped a smudge of food from the corner of Rick's mouth and he returned her kindness by wiping his hands on her robe.

"Heyyy . . .," Sheri protested and swatted at his hands.

Rick was feeling playful and began pitching pieces of food at Sheri when he thought she wasn't looking.

"You're gonna be eating your breakfast off the floor mister," she giggled at him, endeared by this playful new side of him.

When they were full, they sat back against the headboard, thinking. Rick puzzled over their new situation and what tomorrow would bring. Sheri was thinking about the people in Rick's life. Most likely, this would be the only time they would have to themselves for a while. She had to ask.

“What about your family, Rick?” She rolled the end of the belt up to the knot that secured her robe waiting for his response.

“Well, the boys are 5, 11 and...” Sheri cut him off in mid-sentence.

“No, Rick,” the guilt showing on her face, “tell me about your wife.”

Sheri had never slept with a married man and had never fallen for someone that wasn’t available. She didn’t like being in this position. She could get hurt and she knew it. Not to mention the fact that it was just plain wrong.

Rick looked at Sheri for a long time. Her hair was combed back from her forehead and was still a little wet. The green in her eyes was as bright as he had ever seen it. She was beautiful and he wanted her, but he wanted his family too.

“I don’t know what to say.”

It was true. It was more true than he wanted to believe. He had no idea what tomorrow would bring or if he’d even live to see it. If he knew what to do, he might know what to say, but he had no real grasp yet of what his choices were. After what he’d been through, he would never again accept less than exactly what he wanted. And right now he wanted Sheri.

“I don’t understand.” Sheri scrunched her eyebrows and cheeks toward each other.

“The very first thing you said to me when I got you out was, ‘I want to see my family.’”

“I meant it. I’d love to see them, but I don’t know if I ever will again. Even if you hadn’t gotten me out. I mean they weren’t going to just LET me out. As far as The

Board's concerned, Rick Morgan no longer exists and if he pops up somewhere, wehehell...they'll make sure he's never heard from again. Besides, trying to contact my family now would only put them in danger." Rick hoped that he meant what he said and wasn't just rationalizing his involvement with Sheri.

Sheri studied his eyes, and tried to understand. She had no idea how he would feel tomorrow but at least he was being honest with her tonight.

Rick saw the doubt she wrestled with and tried to lessen it.

"Sheri, they were shooting at us. We're dead meat. We'll be very lucky if we ever get any portion of our old lives back. At all!"

"You're right, I know you're right," she gave a long sigh and shrugged one shoulder. She wasn't sure what she wanted him to say, but she knew that wasn't quite it.

He could have told her that the Gods had thrown them together because they belonged to one another. That he's been searching for her all of his life and that he was incomplete without her. But as much as she wanted to hear those things, honesty would have to do. She wanted to know how he really felt because she was perfectly clear on how she felt.

For her, Rick was a magnet. Even though this thing between them was VERY new, it felt more real than any thing ever had. Her next question was going to sound a little obsessive but she knew there would be no rest if she didn't ask. Mustering all of the courage that was in her, she dove in head first.

"If you could, would you go back, I mean...to her?"

Without even an instant's hesitation he said, "I really don't know, I love those boys.

They were my life. But I'm not as sure about Terra. Not now...I've never loved anyone the way I love you."

Until he heard himself say it, he hadn't realized how involved he had become with her. And in only one day. It sounded crazy. Terra was part of the family that he loved, but now that he had experienced this electric, consuming, desperate emotion, he couldn't imagine life without it. It would be like living without air. But the boys, as much of a father as he had been to them, were not his, they were Terra's.

He didn't want to think about it, it was getting messy. He had just told Sheri that he loved her and he did, he knew he did. But he had no idea how she felt. It didn't really make a difference, he had fallen. Even if she couldn't reciprocate the feeling, he was in love.

Wallowing in relief Sheri relaxed the muscles in her neck and her shoulders dropped almost two inches.

"Sheri . . .?"

Rick leaned forward to catch her gaze. The look on his face said 'Well?' For the briefest moment Sheri wasn't sure what it was he wanted and then like the proverbial ton of bricks, it hit her.

"I need you to love me," she said looking at her hands and then at Rick.

"I don't know how, but it feels like I've known you all of my life. I'm in love with you."

He leaned toward her and kissed her. Pulling away ever so slightly, he stayed there for

a while, his cheek almost touching hers, breathing in her presence. When he leaned back, his smile was sweet and modest.

“That’s better,” relief filled his voice.

“I was worried that I was just another one of your boy toys,” he laughed and Sheri batted at him with the belt of her robe.

“That you are...” she spoke in a deep vibrating tone as she rolled onto her side.

“...and since you brought it up.”

“Hey now.” Rick’s arms were crossed in front of him as he tried to ward her off. “I’m going to sleep.”

“You are certainly no fun,” she flipped her hair as she rolled to the other side of the bed. Her pout was as beautiful as her smile.

Sheri decided to give in to her exhaustion too. They piled the food, what was left, on the bedside table, balancing trays on top of one another. Sheri found the remote and turned off the music in the living room, the lights in the kitchenette and bedroom.

Rick curled himself around Sheri as she pulled the covers up under her arm. The room was completely silent and the only light was a thin line that crept out from under the bathroom door. Rick braced himself for a rush of fear but it never came. He knew it wasn’t the silence or the darkness that had made him so afraid in that horrible little cell. It was being alone. He wasn’t alone anymore.

Blanketed by the feeling that he would never be alone again, he kissed Sheri on the shoulder and enjoyed the peaceful feeling that surrounded them as they drifted off, almost

immediately.

- 3 -

Two short piercing rings woke the newest refugees in the TransWorld camp. Rick grabbed the phone and slammed it to his ear.

“Mmmhulo.”

He received no answer, only the dial tone. Again, two short piercing rings this time Sheri responded from under a pillow.

“Whaaaaaat,” she whined, sounding like a sixteen year-old on Sunday morning. She raised the pillow just enough to see that the clock read 8:32.

“Shit. Breakfast.”

She drug herself from under the covers and grabbed the robe she had thrown on the floor the night before. Sleeping in the buff was her preference and Rick didn’t seem to object, in fact he joined her.

Stomping her way to the door she realized if it weren’t for the robe she would have nothing to wear. Her clothes were beyond repair and her favorite leather shoes were surely curled and hard by now.

The door was heavy and it creaked when it finally opened. Even with the door shut, Sheri could smell breakfast and she realized her appetite was fully awake. The girl who brought in the food didn’t look old enough to be working. She must have been the daughter of someone in The Movement. She had short strawberry blond hair and yellow green eyes. Tall and thin, she should have seemed lanky, but she moved with the sinuous

grace of a cat and Sheri found herself intrigued by the girls demure yet aloof manner.

Breakfast was set on the table by the window, everything placed perfectly. With a wide friendly smile the girl introduced herself as Melissa. She informed Sheri that Mr. Anderson would be expecting them in an hour in the main floor lobby and that clothes would be provided shortly.

If they needed anything at all, there was an intercom by the door. As she turned to leave, their attention was captured by a slamming sound from the other room. Turning in the direction of the noise, they saw Rick standing completely nude in front of the sink, brushing his teeth. He had shut the door with a little too much force and it bounced open as if it had a will of its own. Rick saw the girls in the mirror just as he bent to spit and realized if he could see them, then they could see him. Sheri simply stood there unable to speak, with her bottom jaw swinging open on it's hinges. Melissa slapped both hands over her mouth to squelch a round of uncontrollable giggling then spun on one heel to exit the room. Four strides and she hit the door with both arms outstretched.

She politely laughed, "Goodby," without looking back as she shut the door behind her.

Sheri exploded with a round of laughter so violent it brought her to her knees. Holding her stomach she tried to catch her breath.

"Oh God..." laugh, breath, laugh, breath.

"Oh God..." laugh, breath.

Rick covered his face with both hands, the toothbrush sticking out between them. He was completely embarrassed.

“Naked as a jay bird, brushing my teeth. Too bad I wasn’t doing a jig. Now *that* would have been entertainment,” he thought to himself. His cheeks were still bright red and he was foaming at the mouth from the toothpaste. He spit to keep from choking on a laugh of his own.

Collecting her composure, Sheri made her way to the bathroom. Biting the inside of her bottom lip to maintain control. She cleared her throat. Rick dropped his hands to the counter and stared at her in the mirror. Sheri stood for a moment pressing her lips together until she felt able to speak.

“There are more subtle ways to get a girls attensssshhhion.”

Sheri lost control and began to laugh again, leaning her back against the door frame so she wouldn’t fall.

Rick rested his weight on the vanity, his head hung in mock shame. Trying not to laugh himself, he told her to “get out.” which she did with one last explosive burst that had her snorting air through her nose.

By the time they sat down to breakfast the giggles had subsided. Rick was relieved that there were no smart remarks from Sheri’s side of the table.

The meal itself was wonderful. Pastries, crusty rolls with real butter, fruit and a collection of cheeses and cold breakfast meats. Rick had never tasted anything more delicious. The coffee was so smooth that Sheri didn’t bother with the cream. They were silent as they finished their meal, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. In fact it was a pleasant and reassuring silence.

Pushing himself from the table, Rick noticed the view of the city. Sheri followed his gaze out the window and across the tops of the buildings to the complex that housed The Board of Policy. Some five miles away, it was more than impressive, it was imposing.

Rick stood and tightened the belt of his robe as he spoke, “Do you really work for Technology?” he asked, still staring out the window.

She studied her cuticles for a moment. Rick turned from the window and Sheri lifted her eyes and connected with Rick’s.

“I do work for The Board of Technology.”

Rick walked over and sat on the arm of the chair by the window and mulled over what Sheri had just said.

“What exactly do you do?”

Sheri forced out a dry laugh and continued, “I’ve just been promoted to Chairman.”

“Chairman. Of Technology? You’re kidding.”

Sheri put on her most serious expression and nodded her head solemnly. “Chairman Rand.”

“Well, I think yesterday will probably have a serious effect on your career opportunities from this point on,” Rick said soberly. It was kind of funny, but neither of them laughed.

“So, tell me the part of the story that affects me.”

Rick settled himself on the arm of the chair and waited for Sheri to begin.

“I’ve been in charge of a project called Halcyon for about two years. Or at least I

thought I was. Lately I've been finding out a lot of disturbing things. There were parts of Halcyon that were being handled outside of Technology. Parts that I not only had no control over, but no idea about what was actually going on."

Rick listened intently as Sheri continued her story.

"Well, about two months ago, I decided to do something about it. To find out what the hell was going on with *my* project. So I hired a private investigator to do some snooping around."

Rick cocked his head to the other side and continued to watch Sheri closely.

"So, any way, about the time that this private dick starts to actually come across some helpful information...he disappears. Vanishes."

"Are we to the part that affects me yet?" Rick pressed one eyebrow down hard.

"Yea...after the PI dropped out of sight, Kirk mysteriously showed up. Just a little too mysteriously, now that I think about. He conned me into taking money from the Halcyon funding account to pay for his services."

"So that explains your link to Kirk. But, how could you just *take* money from a Technology account?"

"I started out transferring money, a little at a time, into a bank account that I set up. I set it up as a corporate account and I called it TransWorld Telecommunications."

"That's been on all my check stubs from Kirk."

"Yea, but TransWorld is *not* a real company. It doesn't exist. Kirk's used me to fund his roving band of subversive scum and in the process, he's created the company that I

made up.”

Rick leaned his head sideways, looking more confused than ever.

“But if TransWorld’s not real, then where the hell are we?”

“Like I said, TransWorld is not a real company. It’s a bank account. That’s all. I made it up just to have a place to transfer money to...so I could get some answers. This building is just a front for The Movement. They’ve been using the money and the name without my knowledge. If I would’ve known Kirk was a member of The Movement, I never would’ve gotten involved with him. I originally hired him to look into Halcyon. And that’s it.”

“So Kirk was working for you—when he hired me?” Rick pulled his knees up to his chest and balanced himself on the arm of the overstuffed chair.

“Yes.”

Rick rolled his eyes from one side of his field of vision to the other and then back again. It was a habit from all of those hours in front of a computer screen.

“Those security codes I was working on...were they part of this Halcyon thing?”

“Yes, a very important part. They’re the control codes for all of Halcyon’s communication protocols.”

“I knew there was something different about ‘em. They were too involved. Too sophisticated.” Fidgeting on the arm of the chair, he almost lost his balance. When he was situated comfortably again, he braced himself for his next round of questions.

“So what is Halcyon? And why is it so important to have access to the communication

protocol?”

Just as she did with her presentation to The Board of Directors, Sheri took Rick through the history of the Halcyon project. From her internship with Dr. Yenkin to her promotion to Chairman. She concluded with her fears about Halcyon’s misuse and the importance of having the codes.

“Rick, if you break number thirteen, it’s ours. We can take control. If Kirk is right and Enforcement has their hands in this, then it will be even more important to have the control codes.”

Rick was having a hard time digesting everything he was hearing. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back, scrunching up the skin at the base of his neck. He could feel his pulse jump the moment he realized exactly what Sheri was talking about. She had never come out and used the words, but Rick did know what this Halcyon device was for.

“This whole thing is about mind control.”

“It’s designed to lower stress and ...”, Sheri stated, not sure exactly who she was trying to convince.

“It’s fucking mind control,” Rick cut her off, popping his head up as he stood and began to pace back and forth.

He was amazed at Sheri’s ability to rationalize this whole thing.

“Flick a switch and send a signal. Poof—you’re happy. No more worries. Gee, I had a bad day at the office honey. Don’t worry dear, I’ll send you a happy wave. Kids getting on your nerves? No problem, I’ll radiate you a sedative.”

Sheri put her head in her hands and tears welled in her eyes. She had been one of the proverbial sheep that couldn't see the wolf through the wool. She helped do this. She had to find a way to undo it.

"It was supposed to make the world a better place. Help people stop hating each other and just get along for a change. Stop all this fighting and killing. We created this stress through technology, so it made perfect sense to relieve it through technology. It used to make sense ..."

She sat for a long time with her chest heavy and eyes downcast. Rick leaned against the wall and stared out the window. Neither of them could have imagined that at some point in their life they would be thrown into such a huge dilemma. Wanting to run from this monumental evil, but knowing that it would catch them no matter where they ran.

Rick and Sheri were part of this now, whether they liked it or not. They felt as if they had been tied to a massive boulder that was being pried from its resting place. It was within their power to stop this before it was too late. But it had to be done now and it had to be done right.

"So all of this shit I'm in is because of you, and your *project*."

Sheri just stared at the floor and said nothing.

"ISN'T IT?!!" he screamed.

When she raised her eyes to meet his, they were red and watery and full of fear. A tear stain marked her cheek and etched a crooked little path down to his chin.

She was still hurting him, and she hated it.

Sheri remained in the room long after Rick had gone to change. They had exchanged no more than a glance since his outburst. It upset Sheri to the point that she wished she hadn't told him the truth. But that wasn't an option. She was largely responsible for this situation. Rick's reaction was understandable no matter how uncomfortable it made her. He would have to sort out his feelings on his own. Sheri had to hope that he could understand her position and that her intentions had been honorable. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't help him. Sheri found herself back where she was before they'd met. Only now, did she realize how lonely she had been.

Chapter Sixteen

CODE

- 1 -

Kirk led Sheri and Rick to a small conference room. He noticed, almost immediately, the coolness between them and assumed that Sheri had told Rick about her involvement in all of this. Kirk had expected them to be tired after yesterday's events, but this was more than tired. They were carrying the weight of the world, literally, on their shoulders.

As they walked down the corridor to the conference room, Rick was studying the walls. Reading little signs, looking through open doors, trying desperately to distract himself from what loomed ahead. Sheri watched him intently from the corner of her eye wishing things were different. For both of them.

The conference room looked a lot like the one at Technology where Sheri had spent so many hours explaining project details and deadlines and listening to excuses.

“There’s no way we can have those results by Tuesday. The lab’s closed this weekend.” Sheri remembered one of her employees saying. Most of it sounded like whining to Sheri and she was usually pretty blunt about her feelings.

“Call the lab supervisor and ask him to run a crew this weekend. If he balks, ask to speak to his supervisor. Then, if you can’t handle your own job, let me know and I’ll take care of it for you.”

It seemed like years ago now, but Sheri had made that statement just last week.

Sheri’s thoughts drifted from the mindless herd she supervised to her one true friend and colleague, Franklin Tosh.

“I wonder what Chip is doing now?” Sheri thought fondly. She missed the little dweeb.

Sheri and Rick sat down across from each other, and a man entered the room carrying two large styrofoam cups of coffee. He sat one in front of Rick and shot a quick smile at him. Rick recognized him as the man that was driving the car yesterday when Kirk had rescued them from the jaws of Enforcement.

“How you doing today?”

Rick nodded without saying a word and reached for the cup. Walking around the table, the man made eye contact with Sheri and then handed the other cup to her. As she reached for it, the man cupped his hand, ever so gently, under hers and placed the cup in her open palm. He smiled at her and then turned and walked to the far end of the table and sat down.

Sheri sat motionless, holding her coffee. She just had the oddest feeling. When he had touched her hand, she felt chilled. Yet the gesture itself was warm and considerate. It wasn't one of those "*How ya doing, babe*" kind of things, he was just being nice. But where did the chill come from? Sheri shook it off and turned her attention to Kirk as he broke the silence.

"You remember Rod?" Kirk half pointed to the man sitting at the end of the table. "We didn't have a chance to do proper introductions earlier."

Kirk introduced the man as Rodney Sterling. He talked a little bit about his history with The Movement and his duties with them. Basically his job description was Rod-do-this and Rod-do-that. And to Rick it appeared the man loved what he did. He sat at the end of the table smiling pleasantly and nodding at each of them as Kirk introduced them. And then Rick remembered something from yesterday. He really wasn't sure, but now, seeing him again, Rick felt like he knew this Rod character. No, that wasn't quite it. He looked like somebody. A distant somebody. Maybe from high school or even farther back. Or maybe he didn't look like someone, but he acted like them. That was it, maybe. Rick wasn't sure, and when he couldn't put his finger on anything concrete, he quickly lost interest. It didn't really matter.

"Yesterday we were talking about The Movement and more recently, the Halcyon Project." Kirk pulled out a chair two seats away from Sheri.

"I'm going to let Rod give you a little bit of background from here." Kirk sat down as Rod stood.

“This building—TransWorld—was leased about a month ago, utilizing funds from The Board of Technology. Specifically from the Halcyon project funding.”

Sheri started to feel a swell inside her chest, but for some reason she wasn’t ready to explode—just yet. Maybe it was the good nights sleep. That always seemed to having a calming effect on her. Maybe it was the way the man presented the information so matter-of-factly. Or maybe it was because this nice man was talking now and the other one had shut up. It really didn’t matter, Sheri decided she was going to hear him out—and then she’d explode.

“This has been our operations headquarters since that time and we have consolidated our activities in this area within these walls.”

Although Rod spoke in a business-like fashion, Sheri couldn’t help but notice a quieter—almost relaxing edge to his voice. He had the uncanny ability to put her at ease just by talking. It was an odd sensation because Sheri was actually pretty angry about the fact that she had not only aided this terrorist group, but apparently, she had funded the whole damn thing.

“TransWorld is the goddamn *headquarters* for The Movement,” Sheri thought to herself and smiled snootily at Kirk. For some reason, she just wasn’t ready to get really pissed off, yet.

“... that brings us to Halcyon.” Rod paused to give Sheri a chance to snap out of her pity party and listen up. The word *Halcyon* had done the trick and Sheri immediately returned her attention to Rod.

“Do you know anything about a company called TrioPlan?” Rod looked straight at Sheri.

“Never heard of it,” Sheri responded curtly.

“What about a man by the name of Dr. Henry?”

Sheri shook her head slowly.

“Nope.”

“We still don’t know exactly what the connection is, but Dr. Henry and TrioPlan are working on some pretty scary stuff. They’re experimenting with the rage and violence centers of the brain. And from what we’ve seen, they’re doing a damn good job of it.”

Rod looked around the room, briefly catching eye contact with each person, then made the round slowly again. He was waiting for them to catch up to what he’d just said. To make the jump. The look on his face was almost shouting—“Do you get it? Huh? Do you?”

The look on both Sheri and Rick’s face said the same thing, “No, we don’t get it. What’s your point?”

“There’s been a lot of communication between Dr. Henry and the Director of Technology.”

Rod stopped and closed his eyes as if pleading with them to, “Please stay with me for just a little longer.”

Sheri rolled her eyes.

“Man,” she stated with a sarcastic bite, “imagine that. The Director of Technology

being involved with an experiment on brain activity. What's this world coming to?"

Unaltered by Sheri's sarcasm, Rod pushed forward. When he spoke this time, he was calmer than before. Not quite a whisper, but enough to force Sheri and Rick to lean toward him slightly.

"Dr. Henry's experiments keep appearing on memos from the Director of Technology." Rod stood motionless for, what seemed like, several minutes.

Then, without a word, he turned and picked up a thin file folder from a small table behind him. He opened it deliberately and removed a single sheet of white paper. He glanced at Rick, then Sheri and then read from the page.

TO : CHAIRMAN/BOARD OF POLICY
FROM : DIRECTOR OF TECHNOLOGY
RE: : Halcyon

...*bla, bla, bla*... the violent nature of these reactions, although accurately and repeatedly reproduced, still cause me grave concern for the future of project Halcyon. We have strayed drastically from our original criteria of enhanced behavior and performance. Enforcement has been given ultimate control over all aspects of our research and the decisions for its direction.

It is my belief that this project is out of control and should be terminated and dismantled immediately. We have crossed the point where the dangers now far outweigh

any possible achievement.”

Rod looked up from the page at Rick and Sheri. Sheri’s expression had changed dramatically. Her eyes were wide open and she leaned heavily into the front of the conference table. What Rod didn’t say was something Sheri already knew—she was the newly appointed Chairman of Technology. And the last acting Chairman of Technology was dead.

“The memo’s signed, Antonio Yenkin.” Rod studied Sheri’s face carefully before continuing, “and it’s dated three days before his death.”

Rod placed the paper down on the surface of the table and sat down.

Sheri’s head was spinning. Yenkin’s deleted files. The transcripts on her desk. Antonio’s *heart attack*? Mind control...It was all suddenly too much. Too real. The room felt smaller and she was claustrophobic. Sheri put her head down in her palms and rubbed her forehead in a grinding motion.

Rick had been listening intently the whole time, but an increasing look of confusion graced his face. He was getting tired of having to play catch up.

“Who’s really in control of this damn thing?” Rick looked to Rod as Sheri laid her head, face down on the table and took several long breaths.

“Halcyon was originally conceived as a kind of high tech virtual reality emotion machine.” Rod was talking only to Rick now. “Just plug in and get happy. No more worries. No more cares. And in the beginning, funny as it sounds, they really had a

handle on it. The researchers had stumbled onto a certain set of wave patterns that induced a mild state of euphoria. It actually caused the release of endorphins, but the end result was what was so important.”

Sheri sat back and slouched in her chair with her arms crossed. Rod continued to talk directly to Rick.

“The result was that when you were under the influence of, what they dubbed the Halcyon signal, your brain just worked better. Your thought process was super-charged, superficial distractions were virtually eliminated and stress was controlled to a degree previously obtainable with lots of alcohol or really strong narcotics.”

“And then Enforcement caught wind of it.” Rick cut in with an understanding degree of cynicism.

“Right.” Rod raised his eyebrows and nodded slowly at Rick.

“The Dr. Henry experiments were originally associated with Enforcement’s requests for other behavior modification alternatives. When they started getting results modifying the wave, it was an easy step for them to incorporate it into Sheri’s work.”

“But why wasn’t I made aware of this?” Sheri’s agitation showing in the question.

Rod looked solemnly at Sheri for a moment and then continued calmly.

“Sheri, I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but in reality you were the perfect Board employee.”

Sheri shifted nervously in her chair as Rod spoke.

“You were so focused on your day to day activities, that you never took the time to

look at the big picture. There were clues everywhere.”

Sheri was shaking her head slowly back and forth, but Rod continued softly, “Why were Dr. Yenkin’s files deleted before his body was found?”

Sheri’s head started shaking harder.

“Why were you put in charge of the project. Why did you leap frog over people with twice your experience? Did they ask too many questions up front?”

Rod continued to speak calmly and was not being at all confrontational. It was just too much to comprehend all at once. Sheri made a fist and rubbed her knuckles over her mouth.

“Who’s this Antonio guy?” Rick asked looking around the room at each of them. He was starting to have that *I’m being left out* feeling again.

“He was the Director of Technology until his personal views on what Enforcement was doing with Halcyon ended his career.” Rod was again speaking directly to Rick. “He was quietly eliminated after writing that memo to the Chairman of The Board of Policy. It was made to look like a heart attack. We think it was Internal Enforcement.”

Although Sheri had suspected Dr. Yenkin was murdered, hearing someone actually say it hit hard. It felt like having the wind knocked out of her. The truth carries more weight than mere speculation. Speculation can be dismissed as paranoia if you need to.

But now she knew that Dr. Yenkin had been *killed* for opposing The Board. How many others had been removed for disagreeing with a certain policy or program? How many? Sheri felt tired again.

“What’s *Internal* Enforcement?” Rick had never heard the term before and the two words sounded funny together.

“It’s a special branch of Enforcement.” Kirk spoke for the first time since introducing Rod.

“Not many people know about Internal. They’re the ones that police The Board of Policy itself. They pretty much have access to anything and anybody and, as far as we can tell, don’t really answer to anyone. Maybe the Chairman, himself. I don’t know, but they’re the people that had you.”

Kirk clasped his hands together and leaned toward Rick.

“Bottom line...we need that last Halcyon code so we can figure out what the hell they’re really up to and stop it. Before it’s too late to be stopped.”

Rick’s eyes moved slowly as he processed everything that he’d heard. There were still a lot of unanswered questions, but a few concrete facts remained. Enforcement had tried to kill them. Kirk had saved them from Enforcement and this whole Halcyon business was scary. Very scary.

The people who had tried to kill him were apparently in control of Halcyon. They were the same people who had controlled every facet of his life since he was arrested, and he was just now realizing it. There was a picture forming in Rick’s mind. A picture of The Board administering its global electronic lobotomy to its subjects. Effectively breaking the human spirit.

Finally, for the first time, Rick had a crystal clear picture of where he stood. Kirk had

originally hired him to break the communication codes for this Halcyon thing, but he had been picked up by Enforcement–Internal Enforcement–before he could finish his work. Apparently there was one code left and it was the bear. He was probably one, of several, people in the world that had a shot at cracking this code. Knowing, for the first time, who the enemy really was, brought Rick little comfort. Realizing how heavily everyone was relying on him, brought him even less. He had no choices.

“When do we start?”

- 2 -

Kirk walked around the chair he’d been sitting in and escorted Rick to the door.

“I’ll get you started on a terminal,” Kirk said to Rick as they entered the hallway, “you’ll have to let us know if there’s anything else you need.”

Rod walked up behind Sheri and placed his hands on the back of her chair. Sheri turned and looked up at him. As she stood she felt his eyes on her and that chill came over her again. She turned and headed toward the open door, Rod placed the palm of his hand ever so lightly against the small of her back. It was neither forward nor threatening, just...polite.

Sheri turned her head to look at him. Searching for something behind his eyes. But there was nothing there. Although his touch was gentle and kind, his eyes were empty. Glassy and hollow. Sheri shivered inside and then walked toward the open door. Rod followed politely about a half step behind her.

Kirk and Rick were several steps ahead now and pulling away. Sheri could just hear

something about, "... a network subsystem," and, "what about the transfer rate?"

"How long have you worked for Technology?"

Rod broke her concentration as Kirk and Rick rounded a corner. Again Sheri turned and studied the man's eyes. But this time, they were different. They were alive and vibrant."

"It seems like forever," Sheri said smoothly, still studying his face.

"What about you? How long have you ..."

"Been a terrorist?"

Sheri felt suddenly embarrassed and looked down at the floor uncomfortably.

"I didn't mean ..."

"I've been here a couple of years." Rod smiled un-accusingly and continued. "I started out doing layout work and somehow ended up doing just about everything."

"Jack of all, master of none?" Sheri joked, only half kidding.

"Jack of all, master of a few."

His relaxed manner made it easy for Sheri to believe him.

"Would you like a little tour of TransWorld? I mean, it's only fitting. Considering you basically bought the whole thing."

Sheri felt a momentary twinge of anger. The money was gone. She needed to let it go. She thought about Kirk and realized that Rick and Kirk were now out of sight. It didn't much matter where they were, they didn't need her help. Besides she didn't want to see Kirk right now and Rick didn't want to see her.

Rod touched her elbow with the tips of his fingers and Sheri was reminded that he was waiting for an answer. This was without a doubt, the most well mannered individual Sheri had ever met.

“Come on,” he said, “let me show you around the place.”

Sheri glanced once more at the empty corridor ahead of them where Kirk and Rick had been just a minute ago. Then she turned and looked at Rod.

“Okay. Show me what I’ve bought myself.” Sheri’s anger suddenly melted away, just as quickly as it had emerged.

Sheri stuck her arm out in the mock gesture of affection and tradition. Rod hooked his arm through hers, spun them around and began walking briskly down the hall in the opposite direction.

“Come into my lair said the spider to the fly.” Rod spoke in the exaggerated, melodramatic tone of some ancient horror movie icon.

Sheri got that uneasy feeling again and unhooked her arm from his.

- 3 -

By the time they entered the computer room, Rick wasn’t even aware of the fact that Sheri was no longer with them. He stood, motionless, in the center of the room they called *communication central* and stared at the banks of lighted equipment. The people that sat behind the terminals looked like robots as they tapped out rhythmic patterns on their keyboards.

Click, click...click. It was music to Rick’s ears and he was anxious to start composing.

He marveled at the odd assortment of programmers gracing a row of terminals. Rick knew better than anyone that computer programmers were a breed apart, but this was ridiculous. Skin heads and long hair, fatigues and tie die. There was a girl that was almost completely covered in tattoos. And one gender-less individual who's hair was a color that didn't exist in nature. It looked like an explosion at a thrift store.

Kirk motioned to one of the empty terminal stations at the end, "This one should give you all the access you need."

Rick sat without saying a word and brought the system up with no instruction. Kirk had been prepared to offer a quick course on system procedures but decided to keep his mouth shut and let Rick get on with it.

Rick tapped out a few quick keystrokes then stopped and stared at the screen with a puzzled look. With a screen full of information displayed in front of him, he turned to Kirk with an inquisitive look.

"I took the liberty of downloading the files from your original work on Halcyon."

Kirk fought hard to keep the grin of delight off his face. Rick was, after all, one of the top computer programmers in the world and having him wonder how you accomplished something was quite a feat.

"I thought they'd be...helpful."

Rick started to ask the question but just turned his attention back to the keyboard. Kirk waited for a moment and then realized that the conversation was over.

"If you need anything. Food, something to drink, more access...just have anyone here

give me a call.”

Kirk waited for an acknowledgment from Rick but only received a kind of grunt. Kirk understood and turned to leave Rick to his work.

Just before leaving the room, Rick called to him, “What do you want me to do after I break the last code?”

Kirk paused in the doorway leaning on the hand that rested on the door jamb. He produced a thin smile as he turned to face Rick.

“It might be a little harder than you think, Rick.”

Three of the programmers next to him had stopped typing and turned toward Kirk with an irritated look.

Rick suddenly realized how smug it must have sounded. Condescending, really. He didn’t mean it that way. He didn’t expect to be done in the next fifteen minutes, but he didn’t expect it to take two weeks either. He simply meant, *what will we do after that?*

Rick decided to play stupid and try to make a joke.

“Will I have to go into combat training after this?”

Kirk smiled and walked through the doorway shaking his head. One of the other programmers made a “humph” sound as they all began tapping furiously on their keyboards.

Chapter Seventeen

ALLY

- 1 -

Sheri was laughing and holding her stomach as the elevator doors opened into the lobby. Rod held his arm out, directing Sheri toward the open doors.

“After you ma’ lady.”

He bent down in a sweeping bow as Sheri giggled and walked past him.

“You are a wonderful host and a spectacular tour guide, sir. Have you ever thought about doing this professionally?”

Rod had shown Sheri most of the building and explained the recent history of the Movement and TransWorld. Sheri had met a number of fascinating and intelligent people. They were all so dedicated and idealistic. The whole thing caused Sheri to question her own convictions.

She was certainly feeling more at home here, although she still wasn’t quite sure about Kirk’s motivations for all of this.

Rod walked up to the guard station in the lobby and began looking through a basket of papers on the counter.

“Any messages for me?” Rod looked at the guard as he spoke.

“Anything that’s come in is in the box Roddy-Boy.” The guard’s eyes never left the magazine he was reading.

Sheri walked up behind Rod as he thumbed through the papers in the wire frame

basket. The guard was leaning his chair back, rocking on two legs. The gun he was wearing was bigger than necessary, in Sheri's opinion, and she figured he must have a complex about being a receptionist.

Rod was still thumbing through the papers in the basket. Sheri walked past him taking inventory of the guard. Even sitting down, Sheri could tell that he was a big man. Maybe six foot six, two hundred and fifty pounds. Maybe more. It was hard to tell. He wore one of those black hats with the shiny bill and a plain, light blue collared shirt. His pants were dark, either navy or blue and the chair he was sitting in was a simple hardwood design.

Behind him was a bulletin board with curled pieces of paper hanging from brightly colored push pins. Underneath the bulletin board was what appeared to be an out-dated fax machine. As Sheri stood looking around the guard's station, the machine clicked and popped and began spitting out more of the curled paper. It beeped loudly and clicked again. Without lifting his gaze from the magazine, the guard reached around and tore off the paper the machine had just expelled, then placed it on the magazine in front of him.

"You know anyone named Chip?" the guard looked up at Rod for the first time.

Sheri hadn't registered what the guard had said, although she had heard him.

"Chip who?" Rod asked casually, still reading one of the documents in the basket.

"Chip who?" Sheri echoed to herself.

The memory of Franklin Tosh popped into her head. She suddenly missed Franklin. Not only for his friendship, but for the position he had occupied within her once normal life. That nostalgic pang gripped her and she longed for her boring day to day routine at

The Board of Technology.

“Don’t know. It just says,

[SHERON, I’M LOOKING FOR YOU. HAVE IMPORTANT INFORMATION.
CHIP].”

“Oh, it’s...it’s for me, it’s Chip. How did he ...”

Sheri was so glad to know that Franklin had somehow found out where she was. But how? Franklin *did* have the intellect of a 300MHz processor and Sheri *was* frequently surprised by some of the things he did, but this was too hard to understand. Nobody knew where she was. Did they?

Then, Sheri was overcome by panic. Her throat tightened and her stomach began to churn. If Franklin could find her then so could the goons with the machine guns. Sheri went white as she remembered the gunfire and the birds in that awful building right before falling into that putrid water. The taste of that rotten liquid returned to her mouth. Sheri swallowed hard and Rod saw her reach for the counter. He stopped digging through the basket and turned to catch her.

“What’s the matter, Sheri?”

“I need to sit down.”

Rod took Sheri’s arm and helped her over to a small couch. They sat together and Rod held Sheri’s hand in his.

“Sheri, what is it?”

He spoke much softer than normal and gently squeezed her hand in his own. Sheri

took a long, slow breath.

“His name is Franklin Tosh. He works for me at Technology.”

“Who?”

Rod’s confused expression told Sheri that she had jumped in on the middle of the story. She paused for a moment and gathered her thoughts then continued slowly.

“He’s a whiz kid. A regular techno-head. He can figure out just about anything, I guess. He worked on my team at Technology.”

“*Franklin is Chip?*” Rod looked even more confused than before.

“He’s a genius, but not much on personality. So I started calling him Chip. Like a computer chip.”

Rod nodded and asked, “and you’re Sheron?”

“Sheri’s my nickname. My grandfather started calling me that when I was a kid. He’s one of the few people that know that.”

She was still feeling dizzy and she was glad that Rod was so understanding.

Sheri realized that by staying there, she was not only putting herself in danger, but her rescuers were at risk too. Her head was filled with visions of gray sedans and uniformed officers with short little sawed off machine guns.

“Damn it! How did he find me?” Sheri covered her mouth with the palm of her right hand and began to rock back and forth.

Rod searched Sheri’s face, studying each line and curve. He watched her eyes and he felt her heart beating through the tips of her fingers.

“Are you in love with this guy?”

“Nooo...it’s not like that.” Sheri shook her head back and forth. “He’s like my baby brother or something.”

“Do you trust him, Sheri? Do you trust him with your life?” Rod watched Sheri closely for her answer, studying each expression carefully.

Sheri looked straight into Rod’s eyes.

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “Yes I do.”

Rod’s stare went straight through Sheri and seemed to extract something from the inner most part of her soul. His eyes were searching...exploring. Until they were satisfied that they had found what they were looking for.

“Right now, it’s important that we get in touch with this guy and find out how he *did* find you. There’s always the chance that Enforcement could be right behind him. Or even watching him now.”

“I’m sorry Rod,” Sheri’s voice quivered and her eyes pooled up, just short of actually crying.

“It’s okay,” Rod said calmly, “we’ve just got to do a little damage control. I’m going to need your help, though. Do you think you’re up to it?”

Sheri sniffled and wiped her nose with her sleeve. She swallowed hard and nodded. She was surprised at how, with so little effort, he could put her so at ease. She didn’t know why, but for some reason, she already had the feeling that he could make all of this okay. That he would make everything right again.

I'll go get the car. Meet me out front here in five minutes."

Rod hopped up and headed for the stairway next to the elevator. Walking briskly with a slight spring in his step. He seemed so confident. And under these circumstances, Sheri didn't fully understand it. Although she didn't realize it until later, he was whistling as he bounced off down the hallway.

- 2 -

Franklin had been stunned by the news that Sheri was now a fugitive from justice. The news had spread quickly through the halls of Technology. Through the grapevine, everyone in the building had some version of the story, even before Enforcement had ended their first round of questioning.

Franklin himself had been *interviewed* for over an hour and a half. The officers asked questions about 'how well he knew Sheri' and 'did she ever seem unstable'.

Franklin answered all the questions as truthfully as he could but he couldn't help wondering exactly what it was that Sheri had done. He liked Sheri, a lot. He always had. Sheri had been the closest thing to family he had probably ever known.

Being orphaned at an early age, he had few people he was truly close to and Sheri was one of them. Most of his life since then had been centered around his desire to forget. He immersed himself in books, withdrew from people and turned to computers. Computers were analytical and predictable. Unlike people. People were generally cold and heartless and given half the chance, would hurt you every time.

Franklin had a lot of natural technical ability and excelled where others failed. Simply

because he had developed a relationship with the technology that had helped him. His computer was his friend. It played games with him. It taught him things and never said anything hateful or mean. And it was always there when he needed it. Franklin had become very much like what he loved most, and it served him well.

His relationships were minimal. The ones he was forced into by the demands of his profession were superficial and business-like. Franklin rarely opened up to anyone or displayed emotion of any kind. He was the perfect thinking machine.

Sheri had been the only human being he'd been close to in his life, for as long as he could remember. He felt something for Sheri. And although he wasn't emotionally equipped to put it into words, he knew it was what he had been missing. When he was with her, he felt less on guard than he had ever been with another human being. When he and Sheri spent time together, he thought that this must be how it felt to be in a family.

But now something was wrong. All these questions and all these strangers. Franklin had enough trouble dealing with the barrage of known faces in his world without the introduction of a new set of menacing individuals.

"Did you know her friends?" One of the men had barked at him and without allowing an answer, the other said, "Did she spend much time away from work?"

Back and forth, question after question.

"Does she have any relatives in the country?"

"How long have you known her?"

"Would you consider yourself, close to her?"

“How long have you worked on Halcyon?”

“What do you know about the agenda of Technology?”

Franklin was dizzy when they finally left. The whole thing seemed unreal. Like a bad dream. It was like something out of a story book or a night time TV soap opera. This was his first, horrifying encounter with a reality that he was totally unaware of. And, although he didn't realize it, he was moving inexorably closer toward it with each passing moment.

- 3 -

The Board of Technology was quiet. As Franklin stood in the deserted hallway, it was again, a sanctuary. A place where he could retreat to and think. A place where there were constant reminders of the superiority of intellect over emotion. Of thinking over passion. Franklin was safe and could only now begin to comprehend what had happened in the last eight hours.

One thought kept recurring in the back of his head. “Sheri's in trouble. Sheri needs help.”

If he knew nothing else, he knew this was true. Sheri was in some kind of trouble with Enforcement and he had to find a way to help her. It was the closest thing to a need that Franklin had ever experienced. But where was she?

Franklin walked instinctively to her office. Not the little hole in the wall that Franklin remembered as her office, but the big one. Dr. Yenkin's old office.

Not surprisingly, the door was locked. Sheri never locked her door. Mistrust was not a feeling that permeated the inner workings of The Board of Technology. The people here

all worked together and most had a deep abiding respect for each other. So Franklin assumed that Enforcement had taken the obvious precaution to secure the area.

“No problem,” Franklin thought out loud as he reached in his pocket and pulled out a rather large ring of keys.

In a building where no one locked a door, few even carried an office key, so occasionally accidents happened. And for some reason, they always came to Franklin for help.

“Franklin, can you help me get into my office. I’ve locked myself out again.”

And, of course Franklin always would. There was one co-worker in particular that had more trouble than most and her name was Rebeca. Franklin always felt a little funny when she came into the room. Rebeca was what most men considered a beautiful women. She was young and pretty and wore far too much make up. She always made Franklin feel uncomfortable.

“Could you pleeeeee help me, Franklin?” she’d coo as Franklin studied the workmanship of the stitching in the tip of his shoe.

Whenever Franklin got nervous, he fell back on his intellect with all his might. It gave him courage and helped him face situations that he was ill-equipped to face alone.

“In a master lock scheme such as the one used in this building,” Franklin spoke directly at a crack in one of the floor tiles, “a single pin is common to all locks while unique pins, or tumblers, are placed on either side.”

Franklin glanced up briefly, peaking between the tops of his glasses and his eyebrows.

“Does that mean you can help me? Huh, Franklin?” “I’ve already taken the liberty,” Franklin’s voice cracked, “of filing all the ancillary protrusions from a standard office key except for the one which contacts the common master tumbler.”

“Does that mean yes?” Rebeca wrinkled her nose.

Without looking up, Franklin nodded his head and then followed Rebeca to the locked door.

It was that same key that he now slid into the lock on Dr. Yenkin’s door. One click and the door opened with a silky smoothness not found on most doors in the building. Franklin reached for the wall and found the light switch. A single hanging lamp over a massive desk came on. Franklin’s eyes had adjusted to the light in the dark hallway and it would take a minute for them to readjust to the glare in here.

He closed the heavy door gently behind him and walked slowly toward the desk. He could feel his heart beating in his chest and the blood rush past his temples. Franklin had no idea what he was looking for but he had to start somewhere and this was the best starting place he could think of.

He studied the office as he stood motionless in front of the desk. He looked over the bookshelves behind the desk and at the furniture in the room. He walked around the desk, sat down at the chair and hit the space bar on the terminal’s keyboard.

From the upper right hand corner, the screen radiated these words:

\$access denied.

!restricted access from this terminal!

>terminal lockdown–Enforcement order #1212-224

Although Franklin had never encountered a message like this one before, he had a pretty good idea what it meant. Basically *don't touch*. He leaned forward and clicked the monitor off.

With the display safely off, he began tapping inadvertently on the keys to help him think. The letters he poked at had no particular meaning, Franklin was just more comfortable thinking with his hands on a keyboard.

As he studied the room in front of him and poked at random keys, it was obvious to him that Sheri had taken up residence in this office. The tell tale signs were all around him. Even though Enforcement had conducted a thorough search and contributed greatly to the mess in the room, Franklin could spot Sheri's indelible marks everywhere.

There was a half of a sandwich still lying on the desk and, much to Franklin's dismay, little pieces of bread and meat were scattered around her workstation.

"You pig!" Franklin said softly crinkling his nose in disgust.

There was also an empty can of coke (another Sheri-ism) next to the half eaten salami sandwich. It was apparent that it wasn't emptied completely by consumption either.

There was coke spattered across the key caps and a dried sticky river flowed underneath the keyboard. Sheri had a magical touch when it came to marking an area as her own and this was a glowing example.

Franklin picked up the keyboard and shook it sideways, knocking the crumbs off onto the floor. As he did so, a piece of glistening white caught the corner of his eye. It was a small scrap of paper, glued to the bottom of the keyboard with dried coke.

Franklin propped the keyboard up on one end and turned the back of it toward him for a better look. He leaned in for a closer examination and then slowly peeled the sticky paper from the back of the keyboard.

Franklin set the keyboard back down on the desk and leaned back in the big leather chair staring at the piece of paper in his hand. There were three phone numbers on the scrap. Two of them had been crossed out. Franklin stared at the numbers for a long time. All he could think about was Sheri. Sheri needed help. Sheri needed him.

Franklin lifted the receiver, and reluctantly dialed the number that was not crossed out. There was a short pause...a click...and then a dial tone.

“Umm. A T-2 time out,” Franklin mused at the telephone as he cradled the receiver.

“Disconnected at the source ...”

Franklin sat back once again in the Chairman’s chair and began to think out loud.

“Disconnected at the source...how could you leave a comm-link without an active voice line?”

He began rocking slowly in the chair. His elbows resting on the armrests, his fingertips stapled in front of his mouth, he sat staring at the hanging overhead lamp. He rocked and thought, rocked and thought. Then he flew forward in the chair and smiled at the keyboard.

“I’d leave a fax switch on the line ...”

- 4 -

When Sheri saw Rod pull up in front of the building, she opened the door of the breezeway and bolted for the car. As they pulled away from the curb Rod was whistling. It was the same song he had been whistling when he left to go get the car. He was in a remarkably good mood for having to deal with such an apparent breach of security. In fact, he should have been more worried than Sheri was. He knew nothing about Franklin or the relationship the two shared. For all either of them knew, the whole thing could be a trap. Enforcement could have gotten to Franklin and used him to find her. Sheri, still, could not figure out how *anyone* could have found her.

Her mind ticked away on the question of how, until Rod finished his rendition of “Hey, Hey we’re the Monkeys”. Clearing his throat he smiled briefly in Sheri’s direction and began to speak.

“So tell me about your friend, ‘Chip’.”

“Tell you what?”

When Rod turned his head to look at Sheri, his face was emotionless again. She realized she had wedged herself into the corner between the seat and the door and was pressing her head against the window. Sometimes she felt so at ease with him and other times...well, he made her downright uncomfortable.

“It wasn’t Rod’s fault,” she thought to herself. Sheri had spent the last six years taking everything at face value. In the last 24 hours, she had learned the meaning, and the value

of mistrust. It was no wonder she was a little paranoid now. Being alone in a car with a man she barely knew didn't help either.

"I have to decide how to proceed, Sheri. We can't just walk in there...can we?"

"Oh, no, we probably can't."

Sheri blinked repeatedly until the picture of the three gray sedans in front of her house had faded from her mind.

"I'm sure *I* won't be able to walk into the building unnoticed, you may have to go in and get him," Sheri grimaced as she spoke. She was putting him at risk.

"I had already assumed that, Sheri." Rod flashed his winning smile and Sheri felt better.

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Sheri, now do you really think I'd be working this closely with Kirk if I couldn't handle a little problem like this? He's been hiding from the government for twenty years."

"Sorry to doubt your abilities, Rod."

He was right. He and the people he worked with had successfully evaded the authorities for years. Just because she had failed miserably at it was no reason to doubt Rod's judgment.

"Are you hungry?" Rod asked matter of factly.

"No." She was so preoccupied with Franklin that she answered without really thinking about it.

He pulled the car into a fast food parking lot and turned off the key.

“You get in the drivers seat, I’ll be right back.”

“What are we doing?” Sheri thought as she watched Rod sprint into the restaurant.

Sheri did what Rod asked and moved into position in the drivers seat. She waited there, wondering about what they were doing, until he came busting out the door, both hands full of takeout. He could barely get in the car for all sacks of food.

“What the . . ?”

“Just drive.”

Rod sounded a little irritated as he wrestled with the sacks, trying not to spill anything.

“Now, you need to tell me about this place.”

Rod’s demeanor had changed. He was all business. No polite small talk, no infectious smiles.

“Well...it ‘s the old Enforcement building on 69th street ...”

“No,” Rod cut in abruptly, “ I need to know what entrance I would use to deliver something to an employee?”

Sheri glanced down at the sacks of food between Rod’s feet and began to catch on.

“I’ll take you to the door you need to use.”

“Where would Chip be?”

“Third floor. Micro-Electronics lab. If he’s not there, then Animal Testing.”

“What’s his real name?”

“Franklin Tosh.”

“Where are the security cameras?”

“I...don’t know...I ...”

This was the first time Sheri ever thought about security cameras in the building at Technology. She had been far too naive.

“I would imagine that they would have them at each entrance, but other than that, I wouldn’t know.”

“How are the various levels of security indicated. You know, clearance. What level were you?”

“I have clearance to all levels.”

“How was that displayed to other employees?”

“Everyone wears a colored ID badge. Different colors for different security clearance.”

“What color were you?”

“Yellow.”

“And Chip?”

“Blue.”

“What about the in-house security?”

“Uh ...”

“Sheri, if something goes wrong in one of the labs, who do you call?”

She felt as if she were being drilled for answers and it made her uneasy. All these things were so common-place in her everyday life that she had to struggle to come up

with answers.

“There’s a four man security team by floor. One at the front desk, one on call and two floaters.”

“The floaters patrol the building on a predefined schedule?”

Sheri had to think hard about the guards activities. She had never really paid any attention. They were more like...light fixtures—just there.

“I think so...I don’t know.” Sheri’s head was beginning to hurt.

“Who will I speak with when I get into the building?”

“The guard at the front desk.” Sheri shook her head and tried her best to think clearly, “Just tell him you have a delivery for Franklin Tosh and he’ll buzz him.”

Sheri drove past the front of the building and a pang of regret hit her square in the stomach. She would probably never see the inside of that building again. She worked hard to get to the position she had achieved. Everything had happened so abruptly. She began entertaining the idea of going with him.

She pulled into a parking space near the side entrance and smiled apologetically.

“I should be doing this,” she said as she put the car in park .

“No. You shouldn’t.”

“Yes, I should. I know the building and where to find Franklin. If you get caught in there I’ll never forgive myself.

“Sheri, you *will* get caught, I *might not* get caught. Other people’s lives are at stake here.”

Sheri sat staring at her hands trying to decide what to do.

Rod got out of the car, grabbed the sacks of food and leaned against the open door.

“Just drive around the building, I’ll come back out this door. Ten minutes is the limit.”

Rod looked down at the clock on the dashboard.

“If I’m not out here, go straight back to TransWorld and tell Kirk everything.”

Sheri started to open her mouth but Rod knew exactly what she was going to say and cut her off firmly.

“Straight back to TransWorld. No questions.” And before Sheri could utter a sound, he was walking up the steps of the building.

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Franklin tried, without success, to concentrate on the reports in front of him. His couldn’t help wondering about Sheri and where she was. Did she get his fax message? Was she alright?

He sat there, pitifully draped across the desk in the Micro-Electronics lab, worrying about his friend. One arm propping his head up, the other stretching out in front of him, banging a pencil on the desktop. His hand forcing his glasses to sit lopsided on his nose.

When the intercom buzzer went off, Tosh rocketed from his seat. He jumped so fast, his glasses went flying onto the floor.

“Franklin...there’s someone down here with your lunch order...says it’s getting cold.”

It took him a full minute to calm down enough to understand what he had just heard on the intercom.

“Hello, Franklin ...”

He hadn’t ordered anything.

Franklin leaned toward the little metal intercom box on the wall and mashed the red button with his thumb.

“This is Franklin Tosh...but, there must be some mistake. I didn’t order lunch. It’s probably Rebeca’s.”

Franklin struggled to remember this morning’s activities. He’d been in a daze ever since the questioning session yesterday and still was not thinking clearly. But he was pretty sure that he’d remember ordering lunch.

“No...says that you called it in an hour ago ...”

Franklin stared at the little metal box as the thin metallic voice spoke to him.

“... says it’s from Sheron’s Diner.”

Without thinking, Franklin again pressed the intercom button and began speaking into the box, “I did *not* order lunch, thank you! Send it back!”

Franklin released the button with a flourish and stood mumbling at the metal box, “I think I would remember if I ...”

Franklin’s eyes doubled in size as he stopped in mid-sentence and fumbled for the button once again.

“Sheron’s Diner?” He spoke the words in disbelief.

“Yup, Sheron’s Diner,” the metallic voice responded from within the box.

“Ohh, Uhm, uh, Okay...I ...Uh...be right there!”

Franklin spun around and dropped to the floor on his hands and knees to find his glasses.

“AHHH Haa!” he snatched them from the floor and put them back in place with both hands. Franklin stood quickly, took three strides and exited the lab.

“She has lost her mind coming here.”

Franklin spoke with the tone of an over protective big brother as he walked down the hallway toward the elevator. His brows were furrowed and he continued to mumble to himself as he stepped into the elevator.

He was on the third floor and as usual, the elevator stopped at the second floor and opened to an empty hallway. Franklin mashed the *door close* button over and over, but the doors seemed to hang indefinitely. They finally closed and Franklin continued his descent to the main level. Every time Franklin was in a hurry, the elevator would perform this same ritual. Although technology was Franklin’s best friend, at times it could be as aggravating as any living person.

It seemed like forever, but the doors finally opened to the first floor lobby and Franklin trekked to the desk with long fluid strides. As he walked, he ran his fingers through his hair from his forehead to the back of his neck. His attempt at straightening his tossed mop was unsuccessful.

“Where is she?” he mumbled, looking nervously from side to side. He pulled down on the sides of his mouth with his index finger and thumb then held onto his bottom lip as he looked around the lobby for Sheri. Scanning the area without results he became worried.

“What if *they* already got her?” Franklin started to feel panicky.

He searched frantically, re-scanning the room from left to right, but no Sheri.

“Where *is* she?”

“Franklin Tosh?”

Franklin jerked around so hard that his neck popped. The guard behind the counter was shooting him a puzzled look.

“Over here Mr. Tosh.”

Standing across the counter was a man holding enough food to satisfy the entire third floor.

“Your order from Sheron’s Diner.” Rod looked Franklin directly in the eye.

“Uh...yea ...”

“There’s more in the car, can you help me bring it in?”

Franklin had no idea who this was or what was going on, but it had to have something to do with Sheri, so he played along.

“Sure.”

Rod set the bags on the counter and headed back toward the door marked ‘Entrance G’. Franklin followed blindly, bouncing along without the first clue as to what he should expect next. The man was so calm and matter-of-fact, that Franklin half expected to find more food outside.

Rod exited the building and walked to one of the trees at the curbside. Franklin followed sheepishly and then stood next to him as the man lit a cigarette. Franklin never

understood how anyone could consciously do something that would destroy their own body. Rod took a long drag and blew the smoke out slowly toward the street.

“You Chip?”

“Uhh...yes sir, I am.”

Franklin’s first thought was of the fax he had sent. He had used the names Chip and Sheron. Maybe this guy didn’t even know Sheri. Maybe he just intercepted the fax and was now trying to draw the sender out into the open.

But Franklin had an overwhelming need to find out if Sheri was okay. And right now, this was the only possible lead that he had.

“What is this all about, sir?” Franklin tried desperately to hide his true interest.

Rod studied his face for a minute and Franklin felt like he was being x-rayed. The moment Franklin had stepped off of the elevator, Rod knew who he was. Tall and awkward, hair hanging in his eyes, glasses sliding down his nose. He had a very purposeful air about him and fit the bill of techno-head perfectly. His manner was slightly desperate and flustered and Rod knew that this would be an easy catch.

He rolled the cigarette between his fingers and flicked it into the road in front of them.

“We don’t have much time, your friend is in a lot of trouble and she seems to think that you can help.” Rod watched Franklin’s eyes carefully as they locked onto his. Rod didn’t have any trouble seeing that Sheri meant something to this guy. It only made sense. He was a geek and Sheri was the kind of person that was nice to everybody. Sheri was very attractive and Franklin probably had a terrible crush on her. Rod tried not to

smile.

“I want you to understand though, this is not your problem. The risks involved here are monumental and I can understand completely if you don’t want any part of it. You could be getting in way over your head.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s safe.”

“Where?”

“I *can* take you to her but you really need to think about it first. You have a lot at stake and this is not a decision you should make lightly.”

Rod could see that Franklin was about to burst. He figured that this guy would probably walk on flaming broken glass to save Sheri. It was getting harder not to smile.

“If you decide you can’t get involved, she’ll understand. This really doesn’t concern you and I’ll make her understand that. I’ll do what I can for her.”

“But, can I just talk to her?”

“She’ll be here any minute, but this really isn’t a safe place for her.

Franklin thought his heart was going to explode if it didn’t slow down. He looked up the street then down and then back at the man.

Sheri pulled around the corner of the building and saw Franklin standing with Rod under a tree. Her heart pounded in her throat at seeing her friend and Rod unharmed. The car rolled to a stop in front of them and Sheri leaned over to open the door.

Franklin was so glad to see her that he could barely stand still. He looked nervously at

Rod and back at Sheri's beautiful smile. He looked at Rod again and suddenly decided that he was not about to entrust Sheri's safety to the hands of a perfect stranger. She needed him to help her and help her he would.

Staring at him as if he were daring Rod to stop him, Franklin grabbed the door handle and jumped inside the car. Rod stood there, under the tree until after Franklin was seated. He chuckled to himself and mumbled something about bagging a *blue badge*.

Sheri hugged Franklin's neck and then sped off down the street heading back to the only safe place she knew.

Chapter Eighteen

EIGHTEEN

- 1 -

Rick's initial smugness over the ease at which the last code could be broken had all but worn off. It had been nearly five hours since he had first sat down at the keyboard and starting whacking away at the keys.

In typical style, he became so engrossed in the activity at hand, that he had no thought of food or drink or rest... until now. One too many dead ends...one too many fizzled out leads. Rick had reached his limit of frustration. At least temporarily.

He leaned back in his chair, took a deep breath and for the first time actually looked around the room he was in. One of the other programmers smiled to himself but never looked up at Rick. The room was dark and mysterious and Rick thought it looked liked something you'd see on the bridge of a submarine.

Tightly packed bundles of flashing lights, gauges and switches lined up in compact little rows throughout the room. Each computer workstation was equipped with a terminal, a small desk lamp and a big black three ring binder. Rick figured it was some kind of procedures manual.

“It’s tougher than I thought.” Rick tried to sound as jovial as he could as he addressed the gentlemen in the workstation next to his own.

“I’ve spent forty of the last forty eight hours working on it,” the man dressed in fatigues extended his hand toward Rick, “the name’s Thomas. Thomas Kirby.”

Rick took his hand, shook in firmly and looked slightly surprised.

“That’s funny,” Rick continued, still shaking the man’s hand, “there’s a real famous encryption scheme called the Kirby Key. Kind of a coincidence, you working on code keys and all.”

Rick let go of the man’s hand and studied his face for a moment. A small smirk had crept into the corner of his mouth and there was a strange presence behind his eyes. Rick felt just a little uncomfortable not being able to interpret the man’s stare or the resulting silence. Finally, the guy decided to let Rick off the hook.

“It’s wasn’t my best work,” he said as he pulled a cigarette from its pack with his teeth, “but it does get me the most attention...because of how it was published and its acceptance in the community.”

Rick didn’t know whether to feel hurt, stupid or insulted. He’d studied this guy’s papers in college and those techniques were, at least partially, responsible for Rick’s style

today. Rick thought back to how he must have sounded earlier when he asked Kirk what he was going to do when he was done.

“Geees, I’m am idiot.” Rick rubbed his forehead with his open palm and apologized to the man for his earlier comments.

“Hey, it’s alright. We’re all here to accomplish one thing, man. One thing.” He turned and resumed his typing. “Besides, I’ve got a copy of everything you’ve ever published and you know what?” he stopped typing again and turned to face Rick, “you’ve got a couple of interesting ideas.”

Rick smiled at the professional *poke* and nodded slowly in agreement. The man returned to his keyboard, this time as if to say ‘the conversation is now over, man’.

Rick still couldn’t believe it. He was tired and sore and hungry...and he was sitting next to a living legend. The closest thing to a hero that someone like himself could have.

Rick stood slowly, pushing the chair back behind him and stretching his back.

“Ready for a break?”

Rick was surprised at how comforting it was to hear Kirk’s familiar voice...even if he’d only known him for a day.

“Yea,” Rick said dropping his head and shaking it back and forth, “I’ve about made enough of a fool of myself for the time being.”

The man in the fatigues didn’t look up, but just smiled as Rick walked past him and followed Kirk into the hallway. Just before they walked out the door, the man looked up from his terminal and shouted, “Hey Rick. After I crack this fucker, let’s sit down and go

over what you missed. You know, the intricacies of something this deep. Okay, man.”

Rick smiled and turned to follow Kirk out the door.

“Why didn’t you tell me who he was before I put my foot down my throat?”

Kirk chuckled. “Humility is a wonderful thing, regardless of its source. You want something to eat?”

“I’d like to take a piss and get something to drink first, if that’s okay.” Rick pushed both his hands into the small of his back and leaned backward into them.

“Fine by me. Bathroom’s up here on the right, break room’s down the hall.” Kirk stopped, mid-stride and pointed.

“You gonna have any more surprises for me?” Rick looked at Kirk like a kid in summer camp, waiting for the next practical joke.

“Piece of advise.” Kirk’s smile dropped from his face, “don’t take anything here at face value. It quite possibly could jump up and bite you.”

Rick studied Kirk’s face for just a few seconds and then turned and pushed the door to the men’s room. “So you’re saying you’re not going to warn me?”

Kirk’s smiled, but he said nothing as the bathroom door swung shut.

The two men left the break room, each with a can of soda in there hand. They walked down the dimly lit corridor and occasionally, Kirk would stick his head into an open office door and introduce Rick to someone.

“Hey Martin, I’d like you to meet Rick. He’s going to be helping us down in central for a while.”

It was surprising to Rick that everyone he met was cordial and apparently very well educated. This was a completely different picture from the image the media had been painting for years. The Movement was a band of wild cut throats that would kill their own mother to make a political statement. They bombed and maimed and killed with little or no regret and pledged allegiance to none. At least that was the picture.

But, here he stood, meeting people with degrees in everything from chemistry to astrophysics. People as pleasant and polite as any he'd met in his life. And the most amazing thing—people with a purpose. People working together for something they believed in. Believed in with all their heart and soul. Rick didn't quite know how to explain it, but he felt welcome here. Felt at home. Felt like he belonged here. He didn't really know how to react to that feeling so, for now, he just enjoyed it.

They walked together, down the hallway, sipping their drinks. Rick grappling with this montage of emotion. The lies that he'd seen on TV. His new friends...and Sheri. Rick suddenly realized that the last time he had talked with Sheri was this morning in the Penthouse. When they had argued about her involvement in Halcyon. And now she was roaming around this strange place with a total stranger. A stranger Rick wasn't sure he liked.

"Tell me about this Rod guy." Rick stopped dead in his tracks and turned toward Kirk.

"He's really indispensable," Kirk said with, what sounded like, actual affection. "He's the one I depend on. The one that I know will get the job done. Whatever that job is."

Rick was feeling uneasy, and didn't know why. "You've known him for a long time?"

“Long enough to know that he’d take a bullet for me.”

Rick tried hard to read something more into what Kirk had said, but his eyes gave nothing away. He honestly believed what he was saying, and although Rick didn’t know why, that bothered him.

“Kirk! Kirk, hold up,” a man from down the corridor broke in, “I’ve got the copy you wanted on the new anti-Enforcement leaflets.”

Kirk turned to face this man that was standing far too close for comfort. His pitch black eyes and deep chiseled features, lent an air of malevolence to his presence.

“Thanks, Drew,” Kirk said with a feigned sincerity, “these should be just fine.” It was apparent to Rick that this character made Kirk uncomfortable.

“Do you like the way I’ve got the baby’s heads so close to the bayonets?” The man leaned even closer into Kirk’s face, his black eyes widening.

“Yea, that’s just fine, Drew.” Kirk’s discomfort was painfully obvious. “Go ahead and get it printed. We’ll distribute through the usual channels.”

“I hear there’s a new chicky on board...a babe from Technology.” The man’s eyebrows popped up and down like wooden horses on a merry-go-round.

Kirk was visibly upset at the remark and handed the paper sharply back to the man, “That’s great. Just get it back to Graphics and take care of it, Drew.”

The man turned and walked down the hallway, mumbling as he went, “I’d like to help her *assimilate* into our culture...yes, I would. Like to help her along, personal—into The *Mooovement* ...”

Kirk turned to Rick as if to say ‘I need to explain, even if you’re not asking.’

“That’s Drew. Drew Carlie.” Kirk paused and seemed to agonize over what to say next. “We do the best job we can, recruiting the best people...but this kind of work attracts a certain...element.”

Kirk stopped to study Rick’s reaction and then continued carefully, “His kind is...useful in certain situations.”

Rick tried to understand, and Kirk tried to explain. “In order to accomplish what we need to.” Kirk did not maintain eye contact, “a certain...kind of person...can be very useful.”

Kirk glance up, momentarily at Rick, but his expression was indicating that he didn’t quite get it. And, although Kirk was a little vague on this himself, he continued his attempt at an explanation.

“We can’t always be that picky about who our allies are. Willingness to participate is sometimes more important than the actual quality of someone’s qualifications.”

Kirk looked briefly at Rick and then back at the floor in front of him. He was not always proud of the methods that were necessary in order to accomplish what needed to be done. But, he was not willing to dismiss them either. His conviction was to The Movement and to what they had accomplished. What they were accomplishing.

“I understand,” Rick said, more to let Kirk off the hook than to actually indicate understanding. And, in fact, Rick did understand. If maybe just a little. He was impressed by the fact that Kirk was actually upset about having to utilize a sleaze, but did it because

of a strong personal belief in what he, and everyone here, was doing. Kirk would use everything at his disposal to get the job done, but he was concerned about the moral issues. He cared about people. Rick liked Kirk and was feeling more at home here all the time.

“I’m going to get some rest. Think about this damn code a little later ...”

Without saying a word, Kirk nodded his head, turned and continued down the corridor. Rick turned and headed toward the elevators. He was having a hard time thinking clearly right now and just wanted to lie down for a while.

Chapter Nineteen

UNITE

- 1 -

“Sheri, what’s all this about? Do you know who’s looking for you? They asked me all kinds of questions. I answered them the best I could, but.... are you all right?”

He reached his hand out and laid it on Sheri’s arm as she pulled away from the curb. Franklin knew he was rambling. He always rambled when he was excited or nervous and right now he was both. But more than that, he was glad to see his friend safe.

Buckling his seat belt and shaking his head, he continued with his rambling.

“I’ve just been worried sick about you and ...”

“Franklin, how did you find me?”

Sheri’s voice was as soft and sweet as he had remembered it. His protective tone faded as he told Sheri about the coke and the scrap of paper.

“You can be the most untidy occupant. It only took you one day to turn Yenkin’s office into a pig sty. I was cleaning up after you when I found the phone number. It was a shot in the dark but I called anyway.”

“But you *faxed* that message.”

“Yes, the line had been disconnected at the source, so I tested the hypothesis that there might have been a fax switch on the line.”

“And how long did it take you to figure that out?”

“Approximately 1.5 minutes.”

Sheri shot Rod a glance in the rear view mirror as if to punctuate the fact that ‘Chip’ was a perfect nickname for her friend. But the look on Rod’s face was not one of curiosity or amusement. It was strange and mocking, almost malevolent. With that odd smile still plastered on his face he returned Sheri’s gaze. Raising his eyebrows to an animated height.

Sheri focused on the road and Franklin’s continuing questions, trying to rid herself of that prickly feeling creeping down her back.

“Sheri, now what is all this about?” Franklin was watching her as he spoke.

“I’m going to give you the abbreviated version for now, I’m sure everything else will fall into place later.”

Sheri was wavering between telling him the whole story and telling him just the part that had gotten Enforcement’s attention.

“I transferred a patient out of Medical Detention. He was being held and questioned

for something that was my fault and Enforcement traced the paper trail back to me.”

“Wait a minute, *you* transferred someone out of Medical Detention?”

“Yes.”

“How? Why?”

There were no simple answers with ‘Chip’. His little brain had begun the analytical process and Sheri knew she was about to be interrogated.

Sheri side stepped Franklin’s immediate questions and just shot forward with her own explanations.

“His name is Rick Morgan,” she felt a little flutter as she spoke his name. The flutter quickly became a knot, as she remembered how her last conversation with Rick had ended.

“Rick Morgan?” Franklin puzzled, “I know that name from somewhere.”

“He’s a computer genius that unknowingly got involved with The Movement and was being tortured by Enforcement,” Sheri grimaced as the words passed her lips.

Rod was in the back seat, hands woven together behind his head, taking it all in.

“The Movement? How do you *unknowingly* get involved with The Movement?”

Franklin was waving his hands in the air like a Thespian performing dinner theater.

“*And*,...what’s your part in all this?”

His accusing tone made Sheri uncomfortable and she pretended to be concentrating on where she was driving.

“Sheri, I asked you a question, quit stalling.”

Exasperated, she decided to fess up.

“Franklin, there’s something going on with Halcyon. Enforcement’s involved and I think their planning something awful. Real awful.”

Franklin got real still, “What’s wrong with Halcyon, Sheri?” His eyes narrowed and he adjusted his glasses on his nose.

“You sound like you know something, Franklin. Do you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve come across some strange things...I found a file about some weird deviations in the Halcyon signal. Real violent behavioral stuff. And when I tried to run down the information trail, it just wasn’t there.”

“Wasn’t there like deleted, moved, authorization required, what?”

“No Sheri, G O N E. Nothing, zippo, blank screen gone. All that was left of that file was a little white cursor on a blue background. No *Authorization Required* message, no nothing.”

“Did you try ...”

“Yes,” Franklin said with exasperation, “the best hacker in our department couldn’t retrieve any information on the file. It was just gone.” Franklin studied Sheri’s face and thought hard before continuing, “Does Rick Morgan have something to do with this? Is that why you hired him?”

“I didn’t hire Rick, uh...Mr. Morgan. Somebody else did.”

“I do know that name. He’s one of the most respected authorities on software encryption technology there is. I studied several of his papers in college. So what’s he

doing ...” Franklin’s eyes got huge as a look of sudden understanding covered his face from top to bottom.

“The communication protocols,” Franklin whispered in awe. “He’s trying to get in the front door.”

Sheri nodded slowly as Franklin grinned from ear to ear.

“I didn’t hire him, but I felt responsible for getting him into the mess he was in. Since Kirk wouldn’t do anything to help him, I *had* to. I couldn’t just leave him there. I just wasn’t as smart as I thought I was.”

“Who’s Kirk?”

“He’s the one that hired Rick to break the communication codes.”

Sheri turned the car onto the street behind TransWorld and pulled into a parking garage. She waited for the yellow and black striped barrier to raise while Franklin hit her with another round of questions.

“What’s The Movement got to do with this...and you? Is Kirk part of The Movement?”

Sheri had been waiting for him to ask. Nothing slips by Franklin. Nothing.

The car inched it’s way into a space near the entrance of the garage and Sheri shut off the engine. When she looked up, Rod was smiling at her in the mirror but this smile was warm and supportive. Closing her eyes and chuckling to herself she said, “This would be easier inside.”

- 2 -

The building didn't look the same from the back. The gray exterior seemed foreboding now instead of inviting. Sheri was beginning to feel boxed in as the small sliver of sky between the buildings clouded up.

They walked across the street from the parking garage at the back of TransWorld. Rod led the way as they crossed, kitty-corner, to the other curb. The gravel scratched the cement beneath their feet as they walked. Franklin gawked upward at the buildings surrounding him, his hand shading his eyes.

In the center of the building was, what appeared to be, an addition. It came out a good fifteen feet from the original structure and was about ten feet wide, but only one story high. Rod had disappeared around the corner of the annex and Sheri and Franklin followed.

As they rounded the corner behind him, all they could see was a large industrial dumpster.

"Back here," Rod's voice emanated from behind the metal container.

Sheri and Franklin glanced quickly at each other, then turned and walked to the back side of the dumpster. Rod was standing, waiting and resting his hand on the door knob of small metal door. It was almost too small to be a feasible entrance and, behind the trash container, was hidden completely from view in the alley.

"This must be the back way in," Sheri said, rolling her eyes at Rod.

Rod turned to Franklin and said, "I should introduce myself." Rod extended his hand

to Franklin, "Name's Rod. Rod Sterling."

"I'm sorry...I should've..." Sheri shook her head, only a little embarrassed.

"Quite alright m'lady." Rod bowed one of his full length bows and smiled generously at her.

"Franklin Tosh, nice to meet you, sir." Franklin shook Rod's hand tentatively, watching his face closely the whole time.

"This is an interesting place for an entrance." Sheri glanced awkwardly at the dumpster.

"There's a lot of interesting things about this place, Sheri." Rod turned his key in the deadbolt and pulled on the handle, holding the door for his companions.

They entered onto a small landing, with a stairway dropping into the darkness to their left. Rod reached around and clicked a switch. It produced a loud hum, but no light. The door slammed shut behind them, echoing between the concrete walls and making Franklin jump into the air. It was several seconds before the lights clicked and popped and then filled the darkened stairwell with an eery orange glow.

"Where are we?" Sheri whispered. In her voice you could hear the shivers that made their way down her back.

"TransWorld." Rod's smile was full of mischief.

"I know that, but *where* in the building?"

"Follow me...down these stairs." Rod pointed as he hopped down the first few steps, "and I bet you'll know where you are."

They followed Rod silently, Franklin all but stepping on Sheri's heels as they went. Busting through a door at the bottom of the stairwell they entered a small room. There was a counter along the left wall and another door straight across from where they stood. Rod walked over to the door and held it open for Sheri and Franklin.

They entered a hallway that dead ended into another one. Rod was right. As they came to the end of this hallway, Sheri realized where she was. They were just down the hall from the conference room. The room where Kirk had first brought her and Rick.

Rod was already halfway down the hall.

"Are you going to the conference room, Rod?" Sheri shot him an inquisitive look.

"Yes ma'am."

"I'm going to hit the little girls room, I'll be right there. Franklin, you go with Rod. I'll join you in just a minute."

"Okay," Franklin's tone was tentative as his eyes played back and forth between them. Feeling that protesting would be futile he followed quietly, a few steps behind Rod, without comment.

Sheri turned and shot back down the hallway. The bathrooms were exactly where she had remembered and she was glad that it didn't take long to get there. Mostly because she had to pee, but also because of Franklin's reluctance to go with Rod. He had never functioned well in new environments and Sheri felt like she should be there to take care of him now.

Sheri shot through the door and straight into the first open stall. The door swung into

her leg as she undid the buttons on her jeans. She washed her hands and dried them and the headed back. Pulling on the door to the hall, she wondered why they made bathroom doors so heavy. She shrugged her shoulders and stopped at the water fountain a few steps from the rest rooms. The water tasted metallic but at least it was cold.

In one sinuous motion Sheri stood and turned in the direction of the hallway. But, before she had completely turned, a man seemed to appear out of thin air. Sheri gasped so hard it hurt her chest.

He stood within inches of her, blocking her in between the wall and the water fountain. He was short and thinly built. His wiry frame hunched at the shoulders making his neck look shorter than it was. A mop of greasy, dishwater blond hair fell in his eyes so that the only distinguishable feature was his mouth.

“Hey, you must be new around here. Ida remembered you,” his thin lips curled as he spoke.

“Yes,” Sheri knew she had to think quickly, “I’m a friend of Kirk Anderson’s.”

“Woohoo, went to the top did yah?”

“Who are you?” Sheri tried to inch away from the drinking fountain, but the man was leaning on his arm, right next to Sheri’s head. She fought hard to keep her composure. This was not going well. Every time he spoke, he came a little closer. Sheri couldn’t decide if she should rack him and run or if coercion was the way to go. She decided to try and get out of this gracefully first, but if need be she was ready to lay him out on the floor.

“Drew Carlie.” He held a rolled up comic book in his hand and began to play with a small curl of hair above Sheri’s right ear. “You’ve got the most beautiful eyes...” he leaned in closer to Sheri’s face, revealing the sweat stain beneath his arm, “has anyone ever told you that?”

“Listen, uh, Drew is it? It’s been lovely chatting with you.” Sheri ducked her head as low as she could and quickly slid underneath his arm, “but they’re waiting for me in the conference room and I’ve really got to be going.”

Sheri walked with a shiver down the hallway toward the conference room as Drew straggled a few paces behind. Sheri’s heart was racing as she turned into the open door of the conference room.

“You go ahead. I’ll see yah around.” Drew turned and quietly wandered into the darkness as he unrolled the comic book and began to read.

Sheri didn’t know if she had over reacted to the situation, but that weirdo had given her the creeps. It didn’t matter now, she thought. As she entered the room she tried to shake it off.

“Sheri, so nice of you to join us.” Kirk’s tone was overly sarcastic and she knew immediately that he was irritated about something.

“I’m sorry, I was detained by one of your *employees*.” Sheri made a funny face toward the doorway.

Kirk ignored her last comment and continued with his speech, “I think you need to start from the top with this one. Who is this young man and what the hell is doing here?”

Sheri looked over at Rod, who was looking down at the floor. She looked over at Franklin, who looked like he was about ready to cry, and then back at Kirk.

“Well ...?” Kirk said without trying to hide his anger.

“What’s your problem?” Sheri’s voice had now taken on that same pissed off edge.

“What’s my problem?” Kirk said, so calmly that Sheri shivered. “My problem is.”

Kirk pointed at Franklin’s head, “who ever this is...he should not be here. Not without my authorization.”

Again, Sheri tried to establish eye contact with Rod, but he stood, steadfastly staring at the floor.

“Well, excuse me, but I just thought we could use the help!” Sheri didn’t really believe what she was saying, but she was angry now. This was Rod’s idea...not hers.

“His name’s Franklin Tosh,” Sheri continued forcefully, “and he’s a member of my team at Technology. He’s my right hand and probably knows more about the Halcyon hardware than anyone.” Sheri crossed her arms in front of her and sat down in one of the folding metal chairs with a clang.

“So you just went and got him?” Kirk asked as he pulled out a chair across from her and sat down.

“No, I did not just go get him,” again Sheri glanced up at Rod, but this time he was looking straight at her with a huge grin.

“I get a call from Rod saying he’s got a pickup, you’re in the conference room and he thinks I should come down and talk to you.”

Rod, finally stepped forward to give Sheri some relief, “Franklin here’s a regular genius.”

Kirk turned his attention to Rod as Sheri tightened her arms across her chest.

“He figured out the fax link on the incoming line. Don’t worry, I’ve already had it disconnected.”

Kirk was now almost as confused as Franklin, who was leaning against the far wall afraid to move. Rod pulled out a chair near the foot of the table and sat down.

“Franklin sent a fax upstairs. Our only option was to pickup and debrief. Enforcement could’ve been on him, but he’s clean.”

“I can understand that,” Kirk said shaking his head slowly, “but why didn’t you clear it with me first?”

“Sorry boss, didn’t have time. I acted on instinct. I’m sorry if you feel that it was inappropriate.”

“No, shit no, Rod. You did the right thing. But does he think he can just go home now?”

Everyone turned and looked at Franklin. He was trembling like a lost child.

“What are they talking about, Sheri? I can, can’t I?”

Sheri had not realized, until this moment, what involving Franklin would cost him.

“No Franklin, I’m not sure that you can,” Sheri spoke softly as she looked deep into Franklin’s fearful eyes.

“Sheri, this is The Movement,” Franklin spoke directly to Sheri as if there was no one

else in the room, “and I want no part of it. None.”

“Franklin, The Movement saved me. If it weren’t for them I’d be dead now. Enforcement tried to kill me. How long do you think it would take for Enforcement to decide that you knew more than you were telling and take you down to headquarters. You can’t go back, Franklin. I’m sorry.”

Rod sat in his chair at the end of the table, just listening. He enjoyed seeing how well Sheri handled herself in the hot seat. She was pretty amazing. Her friend Franklin was still wrestling with the fact that his freedom had been shackled and that it was for his own good.

“But, I haven’t done anything ...”

“You worked with me,” Sheri cringed at the guilt that hit her. How many people would suffer because of her and this project?

“Franklin.” Sheri stood and reached out her hand toward him, “I think that if I showed you around and you had the chance to really see what they do here, you might change your mind.”

Sheri looked apologetically back at Kirk and said, “I think I’m changing mine.”

Kirk understood that Franklin was now a victim in this situation and it was admirable that Sheri displayed such devotion to him.

- 3 -

After Kirk adjourned the meeting in the conference room, Sheri had excused herself and headed back to the Penthouse. She was utterly exhausted from the shear intensity of

the last few hours.

“You’ll be alright with them, Franklin,” she had reassured her friend and then drug herself down the hallway toward the elevators.

Kirk had seemed to have calmed down considerably and had assured her that he would take good care of Franklin. Franklin watched, apprehensively as she walked away down the corridor.

Following a few steps behind Kirk as they entered the control center, Franklin could feel Rod behind him. They stopped next to the doorway and Franklin had a perfect view of what lay inside.

His apprehension had almost completely disappeared. Upon entering the control room, Franklin’s thoughts were systematically replaced with those of high tech wonderment.

He looked like a zombie as his head panned from one side of the room to the other. His reaction was almost exactly the same as Rick’s, when he had first entered this room.

Franklin stared at the monitors, studied the screens and inspected the racks of electronic gear. Carefully, he catalogued the images and then tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

“You’re tapped into just about everything out there, aren’t you?” Franklin whispered as if someone might hear.

Kirk nodded thoughtfully and smiled without saying a word.

“How’d you get into the central hub of the Inter-Link??” Franklin’s stare was fixed on the bank of four monitors along the far wall. “That’s like...LEVEL 7 security, I think.”

Kirk stepped forward through a small aisle between two rows of terminals and Tosh followed eagerly.

“This isn’t something that’s happened overnight,” Kirk explained as he walked through the maze of flashing screens and clicking key caps.

“We’ve had partial access for years. They’ve never really been able to effectively lock us out.”

Kirk turned to check on Franklin and found that he had stopped in front of one of the terminals, frozen, eyes locked onto the screen. Kirk walked back toward him and extended his hand in Franklin’s direction.

“Come on Franklin. You’ll have plenty of time to play later, trust me.”

Franklin made no acknowledgment of Kirk’s existence. His stare was held, entranced by a series of small wave forms emanating from a green phosphorous computer screen. Franklin jerked his head toward Kirk, a sense of wonder filled his eyes.

“This is a variant I’m not familiar with. What effect does it produce?” Franklin looked up at Kirk.

Rod and Kirk exchanged confused glances and then Kirk turned and studied Franklin’s expression for some clue to what he meant. He looked back several times at the picture on the screen and then stepped toward Kirk.

“Come on, what’s it supposed to do. It looks like you’ve modified the carrier... and what’s this peak at 45Hz?”

Franklin extended his index finger in the direction of the flashing screen.

“Franklin, what are you talking about?” Franklin was still looking at the screen as Kirk pleaded with him.

“Franklin...Franklin!” Kirk’s attempt at getting his attention was useless.

“It’s the Halcyon signal. Actually it’s a very odd variant of the Halcyon signal,” Franklin said as he turned to face Kirk. “You really should shut it off if you don’t know exactly what the effect is. I’m serious. You don’t understand the power of what you’re fooling around with here. It might be dangerous.”

Kirk again glanced at Rod, who had moved up right behind the young scientist to look into the monitor for himself. “We’re not generating the signal here, Franklin,” Kirk replied.

“What do you mean you’re not generating it from here?” Franklin pointed to the screen.

“What do you call that?” Franklin’s voice trailed off into a high whimper.

“That’s a monitoring station,” Kirk spoke to the back of Franklin’s head. “We’re not generating the signal here—We’re watching it.”

Franklin’s head spun back around to face Kirk. His look was beyond scientific concern, he was scared. Quietly, he asked, “Where is it coming from? Where’s the point of origin?”

Kirk and Rod shared another intense session of eye contact. While Kirk wrestled with the answers to Franklin’s question, Rod waited for a decision. Kirk extended an open hand to Rod and nodded slightly yielding the floor to him.

Rod stepped around Franklin and stood between the two with his hands clasped together, below his waist. He looked back and forth for a moment and then pointed to the computer screen.

“We don’t know the exact point of origin yet, but we’ve traced it back as far as hub six.”

Franklin’s eyebrows pushed down hard over his eyes and he pressed his lips tightly together. “What do you mean, hub six?”

“Hub six,” Rod looked around as if he didn’t quite understand the question, “Inter-Link central connection point number six...” Rod’s words trailed off.

Tosh’s eyebrows popped back up over the rims of his glasses and his eyes bobbed in their sockets.

“You’re not serious,” Franklin asked scanning both Rod and Kirk for a reaction, his head twitching back and forth between them. Neither of them spoke, but the message was clear; they were not kidding.

“If what you’re saying is true, then this signal is...is everywhere. It’s global.” For someone that was always very non-emotional, Franklin found himself in the middle of a whirlwind reaction to this new information. His stomach filled with acid and his heart rate accelerated to a fearsome rate. Nervously, he adjusted his glasses and rocked from one foot to the other.

“We have to find out where this is coming from and quick. Our tests on the Halcyon signal are still incomplete and we just don’t know what kind of uh...reaction this . . uh,

type of variation will produce.”

The door to the hall came flying open with a slam and a small female voice was screaming Kirk’s name.

“Please... he’s beating the hell out of her,” she pleaded, gasping for air. It was Melissa, the girl who had taken breakfast to the Penthouse.

“Who?” Kirk asked as he ran toward the hall.

“Top floor ...the Penthouse.”

Kirk’s face went white.

“Sheri!”

Chapter Twenty

PEACE

- 1 -

Kirk, Rod and Franklin all shot through the door and followed her into the elevator. They almost fell over each other as they piled through the cramped door. Although Melissa had just hit the button labeled PH, Kirk mashed it repeatedly until the doors closed.

Kirk knew that Rick and Sheri were the only ones in the Penthouse, but he wasn’t sure of what to do with that information. Kirk looked down at the girl and studied her red face. She was crying and trying to catch her breath.

“She called on the intercom a few minutes ago,” she spoke in between short gasps for air. “We heard the racket and then she was screaming...”

The elevator came to a stop and Kirk pushed the doors open before they could complete the task for themselves. They ran down the hall, toward the sounds in the distance. There was a loud crashing noise and someone crying. Another crash and then a scream.

When they reached the door to the suite, it was halfway open. A bloody smear of a handprint marked the center. It had been drug down its surface, painting the wood grain red.

Rod reacted first and kicked the door, decisively, all the way open. It swung out of the way, connecting violently with the wall behind. He ran into the suite and found Rick and Sheri lying in the splintered remains of one of the end tables. Sheri was flat on her back and bleeding badly from the right side of her face. Rick had his left forearm across Sheri's throat and he was hitting her in the face with his fist.

"STOP IT!" Sheri screamed as Rick's fist connected repeatedly with the side of her face.

Kirk entered the room as Rod shot toward the two on the floor. Rod grabbed Rick by the back of his shirt and flung him onto the floor at Sheri's feet. Kirk grabbed Sheri's arm and drug her over to the open door. He sat her down against the wall, squatted in front of her and quickly studied her wounds.

Sheri looked bad. Her upper lip was cut deeply and swollen like a plum. The whole side of her face was covered with blood, so Kirk couldn't immediately determine the extent of her injuries. His eyes scoured her face from left to right, desperately trying to

determine her condition.

There were little splinters of wood and other debris, matted with the blood in her hair and Sheri was crying uncontrollably. Kirk looked deeply into her eyes and assumed that she was going into shock.

Holding her shoulders, he tried to assess the situation. He could hear Rod and Rick scuffling behind him. Grunts and groans and the sound of knuckles connecting with bare flesh. He looked up at Franklin who stood, petrified, in the doorway.

“Franklin!”

Franklin, dazed, looked down at Kirk.

“Take care of Sheri for me,” Kirk ordered firmly as he turned and scanned the room for the other two men.

Rod was on top of Rick, holding him face down on the floor next to the bed. His knee was buried firmly in the small of Rick’s back and he was pounding, mercilessly into the back of Rick’s head.

Sheri scooted back against the wall and continued crying. Franklin took a deep breath and then knelt beside her. His eyes following Kirk as he moved cautiously to where Rod and Rick were fighting. Franklin moved closer to Sheri, positioning himself sideways between her and the fight. He sat on his feet and split his attention, unconsciously, between Sheri and the other three.

Rod had effectively subdued Rick and was continuing to subdue him. Kirk rounded the couch and headed for the bed. Rod held Rick virtually immobile, shoving the side of

his face into the parquet flooring with such force that his features had become blurred and distorted.

But, it wasn't Rick's features that alarmed Kirk. It was the cold, white-hot rage in his eyes that made Kirk's blood run cold. Rick struggled ferociously, but Rod held him to the floor with his knee. Rick's right arm was pulled up so far behind him, that it almost touched the back of his head. With his free arm Rod continued to pummel Rick's head.

Now, it was Rod who was out of control. And it was becoming apparent to Kirk, that Rod meant to kill him.

Without thinking, Kirk lunged from behind and wrapped his arms all the way around Rod, pinning his arms against his sides.

"Stop it, Rod. You're killing him!"

Instinctively, Rod popped his head back, hitting Kirk square in the bridge of his nose, opening up a hairline cut. Kirk released his hold and was catapulted backward, clutching his face and watering eyes with both hands.

At the same time, Rod lost his balance and fell forward. His hands landing square on the floor on either side of Rick's head. Rod's wrist was right next to Rick's face and Rick seized the opportunity and sunk his teeth into Rod's arm, growling fiercely.

Screaming, Rod jerked his arm away, snapping Rick's head up and leaving a little piece of skin caught between his teeth. Blood spurted from the half moon incision in Rod's arm as he flung it through the air over his head. Still screaming, Rod fell backward, off of Rick, landing on Kirk.

Franklin's eyes had not left the fight since he'd entered the room. But seeing Rick's teeth sink into the soft flesh of Rod's arm, had made Franklin wince and clamp his eyes shut as tightly as he could. His mind exploded with the vision of the tiny white rats...fighting...clawing...fighting for the food...chewing each other up...the implants...the stitches in their tiny heads ...

Franklin rubbed the palms of his hands furiously into his eyes in a futile effort to blank out the horrible image, but it just got bigger.

Now, the rats were the size of large dogs, scratching and biting in slow motion. Their teeth, repeatedly sinking into each others fur. Repeatedly drawing circles of blood onto their white coats. Franklin was seeing the horror as if he was one of them. As if he were in the cage with them.

All around him, the rats bounced and knocked into each other. The stitches in their heads looking like monstrous chunks of black rope, protruding from ugly reddish sores in their skulls. Tied in hideous knots above their heads.

Until this very second, Franklin had paid no attention to the three small sutures in Rick's temple. The three stitches protruding from ugly reddish sores in his skull.

Franklin's legs felt like huge blocks of stone as the weight of everything he was seeing came crashing in on him.

The rats ...

He saw the image of the Halcyon wave, pulsating rhythmically on the work bench back at Technology.

The stitches ...

He saw the rats trying to kill each other. He saw the Halcyon wave on the control console downstairs. The mutated wave. Something had changed. Somebody had changed it.

Why the spike at 45Hz?

... scratching...clawing ...

Why transmit on the Inter-Link?

To where?

Franklin rubbed hard, grinding his palms into the flat part of his forehead, but it was no use. The images grew and became more vivid.

...biting...the stitches ...

...the implant.

...the stitches.

Kirk and Rod were scrambling on the floor at Rick's feet and Rick, spitting blood, was starting to push himself up from the floor. As if possessed by some alien presence, Franklin suddenly dove through the air and pounced on Rick, smashing his head back into the floor with a loud crack.

Franklin sat on his back and leaned forward, grabbing Rick's head with both hands. One hand wrapped firmly under Rick's chin to keep his mouth shut.

"We've got to get it out!" Franklin screamed at the top of his lungs. "He's got an implant! We've got to get it out. NOW!!"

The sight of skinny Franklin pouncing on Rick, seemed to shake Rod out of his beating frenzy and back to reality. He and Kirk both crawled forward to help Franklin pin Rick to the floor.

Rod went for his legs and Kirk sat on Rick, right behind Franklin and pinned Rick's free arm to the floor with his knee. Rick continued to fight wildly, but he was held firmly in place by the three men.

Franklin held Rick's head tightly in his hands and began to explain to Kirk, "See this cut in his head ..."

Kirk leaned over to see what he was talking about.

Franklin kept Rick's chin pinned tightly to the floor, while Rick continued to buck.

"Didn't you say he was at Medical?" Franklin asked, breathing frantically. "That must have been when they did it."

Kirk and Rod continued struggling to hold Rick down but were both visibly confused by what Franklin was saying.

"It's a tiny receiver," Franklin said with an air of frustration, "small enough to be implanted under the skin and designed to receive the Halcyon signal."

Franklin glanced quickly between the two men. "The one we saw downstairs. Coming from the Inter-Link."

Kirk and Rod looked briefly at each other then down at the cut in the side of Rick's head. He was still fighting against them, but was wearing down.

Kirk had never asked any questions about how Rick had gotten the cut. They all had

assumed that it had something to do with the interrogation process.

Rick was almost still now, except for an occasional twitch and for the first time since he had grabbed Rod, Kirk's attention returned to Sheri. She looked pitiful, all huddled up, alone in the corner. Bleeding, scared and crying quietly between short little gasps of air.

Kirk studied her briefly and decided that she, at least seemed stable. Melissa was with her now and had gotten a wet dishtowel from the kitchenette. She was dabbing it gently on the side of Sheri's face.

"They've done something to the signal. Mutated it somehow. This isn't the intended affect, but I know a reaction like this is possible."

"You're saying he's got something *in* his head?" Kirk turned to look directly at Franklin.

Franklin spoke calmer, "It's a sub-miniature receiver designed to interface the Halcyon signal to the emotional response centers of the brain—a bundle of nerves called the hypothalamus." Franklin paused briefly then continued, "It's responsible for all of our subconscious feelings: pain pleasure, *rage*...stuff like that."

Kirk was having trouble keeping up with the pace of what he was hearing. As the picture became clearer, he didn't know whether to think Franklin was a raving lunatic or just be scared shitless. Pieces of what Kirk knew about Halcyon began to fall into place.

Kirk studied the look of despair that had covered Franklin's face. This kind of thing just couldn't be possible, could it? Surgically implanted receivers, control waves on the Inter-Link? If what he was telling him was true ...

“Shit! Tell me what to do, Franklin.”

- 2 -

With Kirk and Rod holding Rick to the floor, Franklin ran to the bathroom and grabbed the first thing he could find to restrain Rick. He brought over the ties from the robes that Sheri and Rick had worn and handed one of them to Kirk. Without a word, Rod swung Rick’s arm—the one he had pinned on the floor with his knee—up to the small of his back and clasp his wrists together.

With the skill of seasoned sailor, Kirk quickly cinched Rick’s arms tightly together and then reached up and took the other robe tie from Franklin.

Working together like two men in an Olympic knot tying event, Kirk and Rod tied Rick’s legs together and then pulled them toward his bound wrists. Using the remaining length of the tie, Rod roped Rick’s ankles tightly to his wrists.

By now most of the fight was worn out of Rick, but there was still rage burning in his eyes. Furious, complex, unexplainable rage. He flexed against the restraints and growled like a starving animal.

Kirk flipped Rick onto his side and straddled him across the shoulders, holding him tightly in place. Rod moved around in front of him and clasped onto Rick’s head, with the glistening wound on his temple facing upward.

“It’s got to come out of there guys.” Franklin jerked his head nervously back and forth between the two men.

Kirk looked up at Franklin, then across to Rod and finally down at Rick. If this was

going to happen, he had to make the decision. He had to make it now.

“I need something sharp,” Kirk said looking around the room. On the end table next to the bed, was a plate with a half eaten orange, several pieces of peel and a small paring knife. Kirk nodded his head in that direction and Franklin took the cue without discussion. Bounding over to the table he snatched the knife in his hand.

Sheri and Melissa remained huddled up against the wall by the door sniffing. Sheri was more aware now, but she was badly shaken and still in shock. She clung tightly to the towel Melissa was holding on her cheek.

“I need both of you to hold his head just as tight as you can,” Kirk said directly to Franklin as he plucked the knife from his outstretched hand.

Franklin kneeled next to Rod, grabbed Rick’s chin and mashed the palm of his hand into his cheek. Kirk brought the knife toward Rick’s head and then he began to buck like an unbroken pony.

Kirk was having serious doubts about trying to perform brain surgery on this roller coaster. It would be very difficult not to do serious injury to Rick if this continued. Kirk dropped one eyebrow and shot a quick glance over to Rod, who appeared to understand what Kirk was thinking.

Rod placed one hand in the center of Franklin’s chest and gently pushed him aside. With Franklin clear, Rod curled his right hand into a fist, brought his elbow straight back and held it there for a moment. Then he hauled off and punched Rick square in the middle of the forehead. The sound of knuckles connecting with skull echoed throughout

the room. It sounded like an egg dropping on the sidewalk.

Rick's bucking subsided and turned into flinching and incoherent moaning. Rod popped him again in the same spot, and this time Rick lay, motionless on the floor.

For the first time since the attack, Sheri rose to her feet, leaving Melissa holding the towel and sitting by the door. She screamed at Rod as she walked toward the three men on the floor.

"Stop it! You're killing him!!"

Sheri leaned down behind Franklin—who was squatting on the floor in front of Rick.

"Don't hit him again, Rod. *Please*," Sheri begged softly and then began to cry. She was still bleeding and Melissa walked up behind her and gently pressed the towel into the side of her face again. Sheri grabbed it with both hands and pressed in on it. "Please don't hurt him anymore..." Sheri mumbled almost inaudibly.

"Franklin," Kirk looked firmly at him, "take care of her."

Franklin stood and took Sheri by the shoulders, turning her away from the scene in front of them. He held her head to his shoulder as he gave the necessary instructions to Kirk. Sheri leaned the towel against Franklin's shoulder, her head along with it.

"It's just beneath the skin. Just cut the stitches and then carefully reopen the incision."

Kirk stared at Franklin for several seconds before continuing. He carefully wedged the tip of the small knife under the first of the three stitches in Rick's head. The first two cut cleanly, but the third tore through the skin and remained connected to the other side.

The wound was now partially open. Kirk blew out the breath he'd been holding and

looked up at Franklin—partly for his approval and partly to regain his composure before proceeding.

“That’s fine.” Franklin sounded almost excited as he patted Sheri on the back and cradled her in his arms. “Just reach in and pop it out.”

Kirk thought that sounded way too matter-of-fact, but took another deep breath and looked back down at the hole in Rick’s head. There was something in there, just below the skin. Something shiny, glistening from behind the torn flesh.

Kirk put the tip of the knife into the opening, right where the stitch had ripped through the skin. Slowly, he worked it farther in, exposing more and more of the glistening metal object.

Rick moaned loudly and snapped his head to one side.

“Damn it!” Kirk snapped, pulling the knife away and almost cutting himself.

“Do it now!” Franklin wrapped his arms tighter around Sheri who was now trying to turn around.

Kirk and Rod engaged in another short mental volley. Rod nodded, leaned over and took Rick’s head tightly between his forearms. Rick started to flex against the restraints and bounce around on the floor.

“Do it!”

Sheri broke from Franklin’s arms and spun around in horror as Kirk stuck the knife into Rick’s head and popped out a small round piece of metal. The tiny metal receiver hit the floor with a ting and rolled several inches before coming to rest beside Franklin’s left

foot.

Rick immediately went limp and exhaled loudly as he lay absolutely still on the floor.

Sheri grabbed Kirk and pulled him backward off of Rick. She knelt down beside him and without looking up, shoved Rod away as well. Sheri lifted Rick's head gently into her lap and brushed his hair from his face with her fingers.

Kirk watched anxiously from a half squatting position by Rick's feet. He was not sure how Rick was going to react next, so he remained ready to pounce at the first sign of trouble. Rod remained in a similar stance, next to Sheri, watching Rick carefully for any signs of movement. There were none.

The burning rage behind Rick's eyes was gone. It was replaced by a hollow emptiness. He was looking up at Sheri who was rocking his head in her lap. Rick began to cry and buried his face in Sheri's thigh. Deep sobs rang through the room and everyone was frozen, their attention focused on Rick.

Everyone except for Franklin. He stood, staring in wonder at the little, round, metal device lying beside his foot. He picked it up and wiped the blood from it with his shirt sleeve. He held it up to the light and studied it like it was a priceless gem. Twirling it slowly between his fingers, he plopped it down into the palm of his hand and then, raised his hand to eye level, right in front of his nose.

Looking over the top of his glasses, he puckered his lips together and made a long humming noise.

"Hmmm," he looked over his palm toward Kirk, "it looks like prototype number six.

The one with the molybdenum shell. The new ones are poly-carb. But we didn't make this one...no lot number or identification mark."

Kirk was surprised at how disconnected Franklin seemed from everything else that had just happened in the room.

"But the damn thing works. And with a signal coming from the Inter-Link." Franklin spoke with the awe and reverence due all great discoveries in science. He looked over at Sheri and, with a huge grin, said, "It works. We did it Sheri. The thing really works!"

Franklin's eyes met Sheri's as she slowly turned and looked up at him. She was a pitiful sight. The blood on her face and hair was now starting to dry and her hair clung to her face in matted clumps. Her upper lip was badly cut and so swollen that she looked deformed. Sheri's eyes were puffy and discolored. Glistening droplets of fresh blood formed on her chin and then dropped rhythmically onto her leg.

Franklin looked down at Rick who was sobbing quietly. White ooze and dark red blood mixed with his tears and left a dark, swirling stain on Sheri's pants.

Franklin's face went limp. The implant had worked. But Franklin never realized the *work* it was meant to do.

His device was not destructive. But the destruction and desolation laid out in the scene in front of him was beyond comprehension. Franklin felt a sudden pounding behind his eyes and his face felt hot. His chest began to tighten and he felt as though he couldn't breathe. He felt like he was having a stroke.

As if he were being burned, his hand shot forward in an involuntary motion, causing

him to drop the tiny metal implant like it was on fire. His face scrunched in disgust and horror as he stared at the receiver. Franklin took several wobbly steps backward away from shiny metal object on the floor.

He rubbed his open palms together, trying desperately to clean away the feeling that his skin was crawling. Franklin's breath came in short, abbreviated bursts as he turned and once again locked eyes with Sheri.

His normally staunch, non-emotional exterior had been shattered. In his watery eyes, Sheri could see the pain of realization as it came crashing in on him. The true weight of what he had so zealously created was more than he could bear.

"What have we done, Sheri?" Franklin's voice trembled, "My God, what have we done?"

- 3 -

Sheri closed the door to the Penthouse suite. Leaning against it and resting the good side of her face on the cool wood. She was glad to be alone.

If Rod and Kirk would have gotten their way, one of them would still be there right now. But Sheri knew that she didn't need them there. Only she and Franklin understood fully what had happened. Rick was not going to become violent again. His anger wasn't coming from within him. The source was the Halcyon wave. And as soon as the implant was removed those impulses were removed.

Sheri understood it all on the scientific level. Rod and Kirk were much more emotional about the situation. They kept insisting that one of them stay with Rick and

that she go with Melissa for the night.

But emotional didn't even begin to describe what poor Franklin was going through. Melissa, had to take Franklin back to his room. He literally fell apart when he realized what his wonderful little device was capable of.

Sheri knew that coming to grips with his part in all of this would be a tough hurdle for Franklin. So she made herself a promise to check on him first thing in the morning. But right now her lip was starting to throb and she just wanted to get some aspirin.

Sheri only had clear vision in one eye and maybe that was good. The destruction in the room didn't look as bad that way. As she walked toward the bathroom door, she had trouble focusing on the splinters of furniture that she was forced to step over. Desperately forcing back that off balance feeling, she leaned on the bed on her way to the bathroom. It shook harder than she wished it would've and Sheri froze, involuntarily, like a deer staring into oncoming traffic.

Rod and Kirk had laid Rick on the bed after his sobbing had subsided. Shortly after that, he passed out, but Kirk checked him and his vital signs were strong. He figured that rest was probably the best thing for him. For all of them. Reluctantly, Kirk and Rod had finally left Sheri with Rick.

"I'll be fine," she reassured them, "He's not going to hurt anyone else. It was the implant. That's all." Sheri forced out a weak looking smile and closed the door with the two of them still standing there.

Now, she thought about just lying down beside Rick and going to sleep. But as she

walked past the bed, she caught a glimpse of herself, through the open door, in the bathroom mirror. A gasp hung in her throat.

She didn't recognize herself. It wasn't her. It couldn't be. What she saw in the mirror was some kind of monster. A puffy swollen creature with dried blood soaked in her hair. Badly discolored and grotesquely streaked in red.

Before leaving, Melissa had gently wiped down the side of Sheri's face, but she had only been able to get the worst of the blood with the kitchen towel. Sheri's face was still red and smeary.

She looked down at the clothes she was wearing, stretching her arms out in front of her to study them. The left side of her blouse was covered in mostly dried blood. The right sleeve hung by a thread, nearly ripped from the seam. Her slacks were speckled with blood and whatever had secreted from Rick's head. Pieces of splintered wood and other debris, clung to the dried blood like insects on fly-paper.

As her gaze rose, from her hands to the mirror, the horror of what Rick had done slammed into her like a Volvo hitting a brick wall. There were no tears only disbelief.

She didn't feel as bad as she looked and that, in itself, surprised her. Only now did she understand the men's reluctance to leave her alone in the room with Rick. Sheri didn't think anyone could look this bad and still function.

The cool water of the faucet stung as she cupped handfuls of it up to her face. The cut on her lip was going to leave a scar but she didn't think that it needed to be stitched.

Sheri carefully washed the matted blood from her hair and combed it back, out of her

face. A shower sounded inviting but she didn't have the strength to stand for much longer. With the bloody hand towel, Sheri repeatedly dabbed her face and rung out the towel under the running water. Streams of diluted blood swirled up the sides of the sink as she tried to wash away the pain of what had happened.

Looking, apprehensively into the mirror, Sheri began to realize the futility of what she was trying to accomplish. She was trying to get her old face back and it just wasn't there. She dropped the blood soaked hand towel into the sink and turned slowly away from the mirror.

An oversized T-shirt hung on the back of the bathroom door. Sheri usually slept unclothed, but the thought of something covering her made her feel more comfortable tonight.

Keeping her back to the mirror as she changed, she made a conscious effort not to see any of the other bruises she knew were there. They'd be there in the morning. She could look at them then.

Rick slept, oblivious to the coercing that Sheri had done in order to convince Kirk that she would be safe alone with him.

Sheri didn't want to admit that she was a little afraid now that everyone was gone. She needed to remove Rick's clothing and get him under the covers, but she didn't want him to wake up.

Something was growing in her stomach like a slice of bread expanding in a glass of water. Although she couldn't explain it intellectually, she did understand what it was. It

was plain untainted fear and it felt heavy and foreboding. She knew that the implant had caused Rick to do what he did. She knew that it had caused his outburst back in that sleazy motel. But Sheri felt like there were no guarantees that she would be safe with him.

“The intercom is right over there,” she spoke softly to herself, making her lips tingle.

Staring at the little gray box on the wall by the bedroom door, shivers clutched her and she pushed her shoulders down hard to stifle them.

Rick wouldn't hurt her. Not now. Not since the implant had been removed. Sheri remembered the fire in Rick's eyes just before he had hit her the first time. A short wordless prayer followed that thought and she walked around the bed to undress him.

His shoes and socks came off easily. The shirt was already ripped, so Sheri finished the job, tearing it up the side, and slipped it off without disturbing him. His breathing remained steady and shallow. No sign that he would wake any time soon. That thought was both comforting and, for some reason she couldn't explain, frightening.

Though Rod had assured her he had not harmed Rick in any permanent way, Sheri couldn't help but worry. Rod had hit him pretty hard. And that smacking sound as Rod's fist connected with Rick's skull, still echoed in her ears.

She thought for a while about how to remove his pants and decided that they weren't worth the trouble. Pulling gently on the blankets underneath him, she had all but the last corner free, when Rick began to come around.

Suddenly, he jerked to one side, drawing his hands up in front of his face. Unsure of

what to do, Sheri stood paralyzed, waiting for Rick to become still again. The blood drained from her face and, for some reason, this time she could not calm her fears.

Rick pulled his eyelids apart, trying to focus. His vision was doubled and fuzzy, but he could tell that someone was standing in front of him.

“Sheri?” his voice cracked and hoarse.

“I’m here Rick,” her apprehension hung in the room like morning mist.

“Where?”

“By the bed. Over here. Can’t you see me?”

“Kind of...” he moaned, trying to focus on her.

Still groggy he propped himself on one elbow, instantly yelling out in pain.

“What the hell happened to my arm?”

Blinking repeatedly as he spoke, his vision began to improve and he forced himself up on the edge of the bed. He was stiff and sore and his head was pounding horribly. The way your head pounded the morning after trying to drown yourself in tequila.

Sheri was still standing in the same spot, not really sure why she hadn’t approached him. But still not ready to either.

His head bobbed and weaved a little as he shook off the cobwebs and tried to find his way into complete consciousness.

“I feel like someone just beat the crap out of me.”

His words came tumbling out as he looked up at Sheri. He vision came into focus, but he was sure his eyes were deceiving him.

He leapt from the bed and in one bounding motion he was in front of Sheri, reaching for her. Sheri's arms shot out, instinctively, in front of her. A yelp erupted from her lips and she jumped back several feet, waving her arms in front of her.

"Rick, listen to me," her hands outstretched, keeping him at arms length.

A flood of emotions crashed in on him as a mental image played through his head. Rick could see Sheri's bloody hand reaching for the door as he snatched her by the hair and pulled her to the floor.

"Listen, now," she struggled to get her hands around his wrists. Rick was no longer coming toward her, but just standing there with a funny look on his face. She was still afraid of him.

"LISTEN TO ME!"

His mouth hung open and his eyes tried to roll themselves back into his head. Rick remembered what he had done. He remembered vividly, exactly what he had done.

He had been completely out of control. Now, as the brutal image replayed itself in slow motion, Rick was forced to *face* what he had done to Sheri. Forced to try and believe it.

Still holding onto his wrists, keeping him as far away from her as possible, Sheri began to question him.

"Do you remember what happened?"

Rick began to shake and Sheri thought that he was losing it again. Tightening her grip on his wrists, she began to second guess her own reasoning. Was it really the implant?

Did that explain everything, or did his rage originate elsewhere. Was it completely from the Halcyon wave or did the wave just enhance a deeper, darker side of him?

He began to jerk his hands away from her and she lost her grip just as he flung himself backward toward the bed.

Rick scrambled to hang onto the blanket as he, and it, slid down the side of the mattress and hit the floor. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he was overcome by disbelief.

Sheri realized that the feelings he was battling with were not feelings of anger or rage. He looked afraid, scared. Like a small animal caught in a trap.

Sheri realized that she didn't have anything to fear from him anymore. She could tell by the look on his face that he was not going to hurt her again. Ever again.

Rick's insides felt like an old dish rag that someone was wringing out before they hung it on the faucet to dry. He began wrapping himself in the blanket, forming a cocoon around himself. Sheri walked over to him slowly, crouched down on her haunches and stroked his hair.

"It's okay Rick," Sheri spoke softly.

Rick jerked his head away from her touch and tried to push himself back into the side of the bed.

"It's not as bad as it looks." Sheri again put her fingers through his hair.

"Oh Sheri...I...I..." he shook his head as tears stained his cheeks.

"I know, I know. It'll be alright," her voice quivered and she cleared her throat.

“What’s happening to me?” Rick sobbed into the blanket at his shoulder. “I don’t know why, Sheri, I don’t know why ... you have to believe me. I’ve never hit anyone in my life. Never ...” Rick’s words, once again fading into rhythmic sobs.

“I know, Rick.”

Rick’s eyes were red and swollen and he looked up at Sheri, “What’s wrong with me? What’s happening to me??”

Sheri leaned forward and tried to soothe him, but again Rick jerked away from her.

“What if I do it again?” A look of cold fear had suddenly filled his eyes. “Sheri, you have to get out of here. I could have killed you. I would have killed you. I *wanted* to kill you.” Rick’s eyes were frozen in fear and disbelief. He couldn’t comprehend what he’d done, but he was well aware of what he did. He had a perfect mental image, not only of the beating, but of how he had felt during the whole thing. Of the sense of pure animal rage.

Rick had never experienced any feeling so powerful and so overwhelming. All he wanted to do was hurt. Hurt anyone and everybody. To kill with his bare hands. Rage so strong that just the memory of it brought Rick to the verge of hysteria.

“Sheri, get out now. Get away from me. There’s something terribly wrong with me.”

“Rick, listen to me. I know why you did it.”

He sat there staring at her as if he’d been deaf all of his life and her voice was the first thing he had ever heard.

“And I know that you won’t do it again.”

“How do you know...” the half finished sentence hung in his throat. He wanted to believe her, but all he could think of was the memory of the rage. Of how he had felt pleasure pounding on her face. How unable he had been to control what he was doing. It had been like watching a movie from behind your own eyes. Unable to turn it off. Trapped.

“What are you talking about?”

“When you were in Medical Detention,” Sheri again moved toward Rick, “they did something to you? They put something in your head.”

Sheri reached slowly for Rick’s head and then gently touched his temple. His eyes locked onto hers and he shivered violently as she caressed the side of his face.

“It was a device designed to control your emotions. When you *went off*, it wasn’t you, it was the signal being sent to the device. It was absolutely not your fault. Honest.” Sheri continued to stroke the side of his face.

Rick’s head was spinning now. He was only beginning to understand. Sheri could see it in his eyes and she thought it was important to tell him before he figured it out for himself.

“Do you remember the conversation we had about my part in all of this?” Sheri didn’t wait for a response, “The implant they used on you was the same device Franklin and I have been working on.”

Rick sat there, unable to move, staring at Sheri’s battered face. He reached up to the side of his face, touching her hand and his own temple. There was a bandage where the

scab had been. Before he could say anything, Sheri spoke.

“Kirk and Rod took it out. After that, you just quit. It was over.”

Rick’s face was drawn and he looked like he had just been gut punched.

“They put something in my head? ... at Medical?”

Sheri nodded without saying a word.

Rick thought about it for a long time. He closed his eyes to clear his mind and the image of the hook crashed through his eye lids. He shook his head so violently that he almost fell over. The image was still there so he opened his eyes.

He understood what had happened. Everything was falling into place. The implant, the wave, his unexplainable reactions to things. Mind control. Only what he’d been given was not chemical. It was electrical.

It was a helpless feeling being out of control with no way of stopping yourself. He knew what he was doing when it had happened. He knew that he didn’t *want* to hurt Sheri, but he couldn’t stop it. Couldn’t help it.

Sheri watched him as the look on his face shifted from disbelief to fear to understanding. Her own memory of what had happened was less vivid than Rick’s and parts of it were missing altogether. Those parts were filled with gray mist and a deep black emptiness. To be honest, Sheri was glad that she couldn’t remember all of it. What she did remember was bad enough.

The picture of Rick curled into the fetal position, sobbing in her lap was the most vivid. The image was bright and full of colors. It seemed like a cartoon. Other scenes,

played over and over, out of sequence, in a montage of mental images. Disjointed blurbs of violence danced across her field of vision but the memory of Rick curled in her lap crying, shook her hardest of all.

Rick reached up and took a hold of her arm. He laid her face in his hand and covered it with his own. Sheri sat on the floor next to him and they rocked back and forth, bumping the mattress with each motion. They were dazed and drained. They were emotionally and physically exhausted and it felt good to just sit.

“I’m sooo sorry,” Rick’s voice was unsteady and pleading, “will you ever be able to forgive me?”

“This isn’t your fault, Rick.” Sheri put her head against his shoulder.

For all practical purposes, Sheri felt like she had done this to herself. Rick was just the instrument of destruction, not the force behind it. She and Franklin had created the device that had *Commanded* Rick to attack her. He wasn’t responsible. Rick was a victim too.

“Can you forgive *me*?” Sheri asked as she place her hand behind his neck.

They sat without answers, the silence stretched between them, but it was a comfortable silence so they let it be.

After a long, welcome rest, Rick spoke again. He reached up gently and held her shoulders in his hands, lifting her head from his shoulder. Looking directly into her bloodshot eyes, he spoke softly to her.

“I would never intentionally hurt you.”

The way he said it, it was almost a question.

“I know that Rick.”

She looked at the carpet and felt guilty. Rick’s intention was not to shift the blame from himself to Sheri. But, he could sense how seriously she was taking it and decided to try and lighten the mood.

“You must have gotten a few good licks in because I feel like shit.”

“No, I didn’t...Rod did.”

“I’ll remember that,” the bounce in his voice faded. “Do we have any aspirin?”

“I think so, in the bathroom. I’m gonna get in bed.”

Sheri stood and extended her hand to Rick.

“I don’t blame you,” Rick said as he grabbed her hand and rose to his feet, “can I get you anything?”

“Yea...a dozen aspirin sounds good.” Sheri had forgotten all about the aspirin when she had seen her reflection in the mirror.

She turned to follow Rick into the bathroom but he walked her to the bed and tucked her in.

“I’ll get ‘em, you just rest.”

Rick’s eyes filled with tears as he sat on the side of the bed gently stoking Sheri’s swollen cheek. He made her feel like a little girl with a temperature. But she was glad to be lying down. The stiffness was setting in and there was a shooting pain in her back.

“Awe, go on you big baby.” Sheri closed her eyes and rolled over.

Rick found the aspirin in the medicine cabinet and looked to the sink for a glass of

water. In the sink to his right, was the blood stained towel Sheri had left after cleaning up her face.

His knees went weak and almost buckled. Sheri had lost a lot of blood by the looks of that towel. How could he have let this happen? He loved her. Wouldn't that override any artificial emotion planted in his brain. Shouldn't true, solid, real love like he felt for her give him the strength to overcome. It should've, but obviously it didn't.

He picked up the towel and dropped it into the bathtub. Then he rinsed out the sink and took eight aspirin from a bottle. He separated four for himself and downed them, emptying the glass of water. He filled it again and then walked back into the bedroom.

The woman on the bed resembled Sheri, but one side of her face was badly swollen and it distorted her gentle features. The sorrow he felt for what he'd done made his stomach roll when he looked at her.

He knelt by the bed and touched her arm gently.

"Sheri, here's your aspirin."

"Mmmm?"

She rolled over, opened her eyes and looked up at him. He was so sweet and gentle. His eyes were a soft baby blue color. Her favorite color.

"Thanks, and stop looking at me like a whipped puppy. I told you, *I'm responsible*, not you. Now get in bed."

Rick smiled. She must not feel too bad if she had the energy to boss him around. That's always a good sign. He chuckled, shook his head and crawled over her and into

the bed beside her.

Sheri took the aspirin he brought her and set the glass on the bedside table, then Rick turned out the lights. They lay in silence for a long time both hurting and worrying.

“Good night Sheri.”

Rick rolled over and kissed Sheri so gently on the temple that she wasn’t really sure it happened. Rick snuggled up behind Sheri and put his arm over her. Sheri took his hand in hers and held it to her chest.

- 4 -

Sheri was in the kitchenette area of the penthouse suite, in the process of laying out the breakfast that Melissa had just wheeled in. Rick was still sound asleep in the bedroom when Sheri was startled by a rap on the door. She immediately assumed that Melissa had forgotten something.

Remembering the promise she had made to herself about checking on him, opening the door to Franklin’s familiar face was almost more than Sheri could bear. She reached out and gave him a huge hug, squeezing all the air from his lungs.

“Oh Chip,” she cooed affectionately, “I’m so glad to see you.”

Franklin tensed nervously, arms straight by his sides. He was encompassed by an overwhelming feeling of guilt for what had happened last night. After all, he had been so proud of his implant. Right now, Franklin was having trouble looking at her. Although most of the swelling had subsided in her upper lip and around her eyes, she still looked puffy. Big black circles hung like wet blankets under her eyes. The cut in her lip was

lightly scabbed over, as was the one on the side of her forehead. Her cheeks were discolored and Franklin thought they looked more purple than anything.

But her hair was clean and washed and she was still beautiful. Still...Sheri.

She could see, in his feeble attempt at a smile, that he was having a lot of trouble with what happened. He blamed himself. Sheri took his hand in hers and pulled him into the suite, closing the door behind them.

"It's not you're fault, Chip. We were duped. All of us. Me more than anyone. You just did what I asked. And you did it well. I'm the one who should've seen this coming. It was my project!"

The words seemed to bring little comfort to Franklin and he just stared at the floor.

"Besides, I've been in worse fights than this...I'll be fine, really." Sheri threw her arms around his neck and hugged him again fiercely. This time Franklin returned the hug, lifting her from the floor and burying his face in her neck. They stayed there hugging each other for longer than Franklin had ever hugged another human being. When he put her down he seemed, at least a little, relieved.

Sheri pulled him into the room where Rick was sleeping. They stood together, watching him, both wondering what would come next.

"Is he going to be all right?" he said motioning to the bed where Rick was snoring lightly.

"He's going to be fine, Franklin...just fine. Come here."

Sheri walked over to the bed and sat on the edge. Franklin followed sheepishly a few

steps behind, still staring at the floor. Sheri patted the bed with her hand and Franklin sat down apprehensively.

Rick rustled gently and opened one eye. The one on the opposite side from the implant.

“What’s going on? Some kind of damn convention?” Rick cleared his throat and smacked his lips.

Franklin smiled nervously at him and studied the bandage on his head. Unlike Sheri, Rick was pretty green looking. His eyes were dark and his complexion was pale.

Rick sat up against the head-board, placing one of the pillows behind the small of his back. He rubbed his face with both hands and then shook his head, making that dog-shaking-off-water sound with his cheeks.

“I feel like I’ve been run over by a piece of large earth moving equipment.”

Sheri leaned over and ran her fingers through his hair, then kissed him softly on the forehead with the good side of her lips.

“Talk to Franklin for a minute. I’m going to finish getting breakfast ready. Sheri stood and returned to the kitchenette, determined to make this a special meal together. She started looking through the cupboards, finding most of what she was after. Table cloth, place mats. She even found some china and actual silverware. Sheri began the task of creating her master piece.

On the bed, Franklin had just begun to realize who Rick Morgan really was. His earlier apprehension was quickly replaced by inquisitive surprise.

“You’re Rick Morgan,” Franklin said, sounding as if he was announcing a brilliant discovery.

“Why, thank you for that insight. Your name’s Franklin, right?”

“Yes sir, Franklin Tosh. I’ve studied your papers on *encryption algorithm processes*. They’re fascinating.”

Rick cocked his head and dropped one eyebrow. “Don’t you think encryption algorithms is kind of a dry subject?”

“Oh, no sir.” Franklin was now wide-eyed and had turned on the bed and squared his shoulders to face Rick directly, “I think it’s just fascinating, sir.”

Rick looked thoughtfully over Franklin’s head and concluded that this was a guy that reads too much.

“What was it that you found so fascinating about those papers? I wrote those over ten years ago. To tell you the truth, I’d forgotten about them.”

“It was the way you used the multi-threaded control process to engage the loop detectors. That was genius, pure genius.”

“Franklin,” Rick looked at him hard, “technology is more than code and chips and circuits.”

Franklin’s expression went blank.

“It’s much more than that.” Rick sat up a little farther and a little color returned to his cheeks. “There’s got to be ...feeling...intuition.”

Franklin tilted his head like a dog listening to a high pitched whistle. Rick had always

been technically minded, but what really separated him from the pack was his ability to bring art into his science. To create something beautiful out of all those numbers and symbols. Rick's passion for life had given him an insight into the inner workings of other people and other things.

It bothered him that Franklin had read, and appreciated his papers for the wrong reason. He appreciated them on a purely technical level and that was only a fraction of what Rick had originally intended. The main purpose for Rick publishing anything was to try and explain his own philosophy about creative technology.

Rick took a deep breath and laid his head back against the wall. He looked at the fan hanging from the ceiling and tried to think of a way to explain it to Franklin.

"Franklin. Have you ever been in love?"

Franklin hesitated ever so slightly, glanced down at the bed and then said, "No, sir."

"Have you ever felt passion toward anyone? Or anything?"

Franklin thought about the excitement he had felt during the last test of the implant. The sheer joy of realizing that vision. The wonderful sense of accomplishment that he had been left with. Then he thought about entering this room last night when Rick was hitting Sheri. Franklin shuddered and said, "No, sir."

"Boy," Rick thought to himself, "this guy's a human computer."

"Look, it's like this thirteenth Halcyon code that everyone and their brother is working on. There's something special about it. There's a feeling behind it...a passion. The best code systems are always fluid. In a constant state of flux. Changing like a chameleon."

Franklin cocked his head back to the other side, not understanding what Rick was saying, but not agreeing with his principal, either.

“But I’ve built static security models based on floating OR gate technology.”

“No, no, no,” Rick said, waving both of his hands back and forth in front of him.

“That’s just what I’m talking about. No feeling. No emotion. Only cold circuits—hardware. Life can’t exist within hardware. Only within a software system can you realize the freedom to fully express. These are truly the *best* security systems.”

Franklin was shaking his head rhythmically back and forth. “Fourth generation multi-flops are capable of cascading indefinitely. That creates, literally, an unbreakable combination...and it’s definitely a *static* model without influx.” Franklin folded his arms in front of him with a slight huff.

Rick was looking down at the bed swinging his head back and forth like a pendulum. “No, no, Franklin, you just don’t get it.” Rick sounded agitated now. “You can’t achieve any level of technical superiority without a certain level of ...”

Rick stopped in mid sentence as though a switch had been thrown. He had been so busy disagreeing with Franklin, that he hadn’t actual been listening to what he was saying. Franklin’s words were sitting in the back of Rick’s brain like a late supper sitting on an empty stomach.

Rick’s subconscious had already begun the task of digesting what Franklin had said and now, his conscious mind had a chance to catch up.

He looked straight at Franklin and squinted. His nostrils flared and his lips were

pressed solidly together. Although he knew better, for just one second, Franklin was afraid that Rick was going to fly off into another rage.

“How would you implement that cascade thing?”

“What do you mean?” Franklin seemed surprised at Rick’s sudden interest.

“In what progression? Where would you initiate the initial factor? How would you initiate it? *How?*”

Franklin pushed his glasses up on his nose. He pulled both of his legs up onto the bed and crossed them in front of him.

With a huge grin plastered on his face, Franklin said, “Get me a piece of paper and I’ll show you.”

- 5 -

Sheri had finished her culinary presentation and was just putting the little ring things around the napkins when she noticed the level of conversation rising in the other room. The boys were apparently excited about something.

Sheri walked in to announce breakfast and to her surprise, found Franklin and Rick, sprawled out on the bed, surrounded by scraps of paper. They both turned, in unison and said, “Sheri, we’ve got it!”

Sheri’s questioning gaze bounced back and forth between the two of them like an afternoon at Wimbledon.

“The 13th code,” Rick blurted out, “we know how to break it.” Rick’s use of the word *we*, indicating, at least in his own mind, the credit that he gave Franklin for his own

revelation.

Rick snatched up all the papers on the bed and stood abruptly. Franklin picked up one of the papers as it flew from Rick's arms.

"Got to go." Rick shot Sheri a look oozing with urgency.

"We've got to get to comm-central right away."

Rick and Franklin took long strides, arriving at the door at the same time. Franklin pulled it open in a herky-jerky motion and Rick stepped into the doorway and then turned to face Sheri. His arms still clenched across his chest to hold all the pieces of paper.

"Call Kirk and have him meet us downstairs." Rick turned, hesitated and then turned back around to face Sheri. "It's important!"

Then they were both gone, leaving the door wide open behind them. Sheri sat on the edge of the bed, bewildered and munching on a piece of bacon.

It was like the aftermath of a storm or a natural catastrophe. She wasn't sure what had just blown through, but she knew it was gone and the sudden quiet was dispiriting.

Sitting and wishing she knew what they were talking about, Sheri decided to try and find Kirk. She picked up the telephone receiver on the night stand by the bed and looked at it. The face of the phone was blank, so she wasn't really sure how to use it.

She brought the receiver to her ear and immediately heard ringing. And then, to her surprise, a familiar voice.

"Yes m'lady, is there something I can do for you?"

"Rod?" Sheri held the phone out and looked at it before returning it to her ear.

“Certainly, who were you expecting?”

“How’d you know it was me?”

“Lets see,” Rod’s tone was overly exaggerated, “call from the Penthouse...I just saw Rick and Chip fall all over each other coming out of the elevator...that leaves...you.”

“Well, I just laid out a huge breakfast and now there’s no one to eat it with. Would you care to join me?”

“Let me let Kirk know where I’m going and then I’ll be right up.”

“Will you tell him that Rick and Franklin are looking for him and then ask him if he’d like to join us?”

“Certainly.”

Part Three

*“The great cycle of the ages is renewed. Now justice returns, returns the
Golden Age; a new generation now descends from on high.”*

- Virgil

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Chapter Twenty One

CHAOS

- 1 -

Rod had been the only one to take Sheri up on her breakfast offer, but she was glad he did. There was enough food for a small army, but the two of them were able to finish most of it. They ate like pigs and Sheri couldn't remember enjoying a meal this much in a long time.

The two of them laughed and talked and Sheri nearly forgot where they were and what turmoil her life was in. Rod had a way of making her feel at ease. Of making her forget about the bad things in her life. He hadn't even mentioned how she looked this morning. Sheri knew what she must have looked like after getting the hell beat out of her yesterday. But Rod hadn't commented either way. As she played with a pile of half eaten hash browns, Sheri wondered if she looked better or worse than Rod expected. She decided not to ask.

"Help me clean up?" Sheri asked Rod as she began gathering dishes together.

"Screw it." Rod reached out and grabbed one of the plates Sheri was holding and forced it to the table. "Let Melissa get it. It's her job. Come on."

Rod stood and took Sheri's elbow and pointed her toward the door.

"I've got just a few things to wrap up and then we'll find something to do. Get out of this place for a while."

The thought of getting out into the real world was particularly appealing to Sheri right

now. Even considering the extravagant surroundings, she was feeling a little pensive, cooped up. Maybe it was the idea of having to hide out, or maybe just the chaotic disruption in her life.

Whatever the reason, Sheri smiled and gladly dropped the dishes onto the table.

“You’re right,” she announced with a flourish, “I’m on vacation.”

Rod smiled at the sarcasm in her voice. He admired her ability to scoff at the situation. To bounce back so gracefully after all she’d been through.

Sheri took Rod’s arm and allowed him to escort her to the door. They took the elevator back to the basement and Sheri followed Rod down one of the dark corridors, back toward the rear entrance of the building.

They entered a small office area with several little cubicles along the walls. Each was only a couple of feet wide, but neatly arranged. In fact, Sheri thought they didn’t look very used. Over the top of each one, a fluorescent light flickered and bathed the work surface in white-green luminance.

Rod pointed to one of the chairs and asked Sheri to take a seat.

“This one’s mine. You can touch anything you want...just don’t break anything,” Rod tried to sound like he was scolding. “I’ve got a couple phone calls to make.”

Rod turned and walked into an adjacent room. He pushed the door, but it bounced and didn’t quite close all the way. Sheri looked around at the small cubicles trying to occupy herself, but she could hear little pieces of Rod’s conversation through the partially open door.

“ . . yea, tonight...that’s already taken care of ...”

Sheri marveled at how amazingly neat the surface of the work area was. Pencils all placed in a coffee cup with a blue heart and the word ‘MOTHER’ across the front. A small laptop computer sat open in the center of the work area. The desk calendar underneath, devoid of writing. No appointments or reminders not even doodles. A small plastic security badge lay on the corner of the calendar. It read ‘Rod Sterling–LEVEL 2’ and had a really bad picture of Rod on it.

Sheri took Rod’s invitation seriously and touched the space bar on the laptop. The screen popped up with a small white square right in the center.

\$please enter your password:

Sheri glanced over at the door and again heard broken bits of conversation.

“... just stick to the way I’ve planned it...it all needs to be wrapped up this evening ...”

Sheri turned her attention to the small keyboard and typed the word *Rod* and pressed the enter key. The machine just beeped and repeated its polite request. Sheri tried *Rodney* and *TransWorld* and *Movement* and then got tired of playing with it. She started to open one of the drawers when a voice from behind her nearly knocked her off of the chair.

“Hey chicky, what’s going?” Drew hissed at her, leaning down so that he was at eye level with her. Sheri hadn’t heard him enter the room and the way he seemed to just

materialize in the room gave her the creeps.

“You son of a bitch,” Sheri shouted as she spun the chair and tried to roll backwards to get some distance between them. But, she was already backed up against the work station and she couldn’t push the chair back any farther.

“You scared the shit out me!” Sheri did her best to look intimidating.

Drew leaned in closer and placed his hands on the arm rests of the chair. His face was now almost touching hers and Sheri felt suddenly claustrophobic. He wore a huge clown like smile that covered the entire bottom half of his face. Framed by greasy dishwater locks, his mouth looked like a picture from one of those evil comic books.

The initial fright of Drew sneaking up behind her was quickly being replaced by a more sincere sense of dread. Sheri’s heart was still pounding unmercifully and indications were, it had no intention of slowing down.

“What do you want?” she pushed herself into the back of the chair as hard as she could.

“Why don’t you and me get out of here for a while. Maybe go for a drive or something.” Drew’s eyes went slowly from Sheri’s face, down to her legs, and then back up to her eyes.

“Why don’t we *not*!” Sheri turned her head to one side to keep his hot foul breath off of her face. But, the harder she twisted sideways, the closer he got. Sheri did the best she could to control her fear, but as hard as she tried, she could not slow down either her heart rate or her breathing. She wondered how much longer Rod would be. A minute?

Two? Probably longer. Something had to give.

In one swift, bolting motion, Sheri turned toward Drew, leaned forward and tried to stand up. But Drew bounced the arms of the chair violently and easily knocked her back down. She couldn't breathe. The slow growing fear that was churning inside her had just changed into panic.

Drew touched his nose to the hair along the side of Sheri's face. She tried desperately to scrunch her face into her shoulder. Tried to keep her head away from his. But it was no use. She was back as far as she could get and there was no place else to go.

Sheri could feel his moist hot breath on her cheek and she felt her stomach turn violently. Drew moved his nose in a circular motion, working through Sheri's hair until he touched the smooth skin of her cheek.

"Come on," he said in an almost imperceptible whisper, "just you and me, chicky."

Sheri felt dizzy and thought about screaming. Rod was in the other room. He'd come running...but then Drew would stand up and the whole thing would look terribly innocent. It would look like Sheri was paranoid. Over reacting. Scared of the boogey man.

Drew's tongue touched the bottom of her earlobe and Sheri opened her mouth to scream. Before she had made a sound, Drew jerked, straight up, eyes open wide. His clenched hands, lifting the chair off the ground before he was able to let go of it.

Sheri wiped the side of her face in disgust as she realized that Rod was standing behind Drew. Not just standing behind him, but holding him, in the air, by the collar.

Drew's expression had changed from that of malevolent sleaze-ball to scared, little shit-head.

"Got a problem with the lady, Drew?" Rod said sounding so calm that Sheri shivered.

"Uh...no sir," Drew squeaked, while the tips of his shoes dangled against the floor.

"We was just having a...discussion."

Sheri was relieved to have him off of her, but a sudden chill shot up her back when she saw the look in Rod's eyes. It took her a couple of seconds to figure out what it was that scared her. Rod had the same look in his eyes when he had nearly killed Rick. When he had pounded him senseless with absolutely no intention of stopping. A glazed over blackness that Sheri could feel. That she thought she could taste.

Sheri bounced to her feet and quickly positioned herself behind Rod. Besides wanting to put some distance between herself and the little creep, she really wanted Rod to let go of him. After all, he was just a creep.

A vivid picture of Rod smashing in the back of Rick's head flashed across Sheri's mind and she felt suddenly nauseous.

"Didn't you say we had someplace to go?" Sheri said, pulling insistently on the back of Rod's arm.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Rod stood motionless as Drew's collar dug deeper into his neck. Drew's hands were clutched to his throat and he had begun making a gurgling sound. Sheri wondered if it was her imagination, but the feeling was so strong she couldn't ignore it. She thought Rod was going to kill him. No, she was sure of it.

“Rod,” Sheri tugged harder on his arm, “let’s get out of here. Come on.” Sheri seized his free hand and began pulling him toward the door like a child trying to get her daddy to take her to the park.

Rod too, teetered between Sheri’s request and his desire to finish what he had started. Sheri couldn’t tell which way he was leaning the hardest.

Then, without warning and as quickly as he had grabbed him, Rod released Drew’s collar, letting him drop to the floor with a thud. Drew shot out a long sigh and rubbed his neck as he leaned forward and tried to regain his breath.

Rod turned to Sheri and smiled, completely dismissing the whole situation. His eyes had returned to normal, soft and warm and that, in itself was just a little too creepy.

“Yea, let’s get out of here for a while.” Rod took in a deep, cleansing breath. “I need some fresh air.”

- 2 -

“He’s lost it, out of control.”

Drew was standing in the janitor’s closet down the hall from the bathrooms and talking into a portable phone. The door was open slightly and he peered out the crack, nervously scanning the corridor for activity.

“I’m telling you, man...you need to yank his ass. He just about blew my cover today and he’s gotten way too involved with this chick...the one from Technology.”

Drew leaned into the door frame and let his eyes bounce from one side of the hallway to the other.

“He’s lost his objectivity on this one and I think he’s gonna fuck up the operation for all of us. I say yank him and do it now! I’ve got enough on this Kirk guy alone to put him away for about a million years.”

Drew mashed the end button and knocked over a mop as he slipped the phone into his shirt pocket and slid into the darkness down the corridor.

“Oooh Rod,” he cooed into the darkness, “better watch your back, buddy. Fuck with me you son-of-a-bitch and I’ll fry your ass.”

- 3 -

“God, that guy is creepy.” Sheri looked out the passenger window at the midday traffic.

“Oh, Drew’s harmless enough.” Rod glanced over his shoulder as he moved into the left hand turn lane. “He’s just a sleaze...that’s all.”

“Well I’m just glad to be out of there. Where are we going?” Sheri turned to face Rod.

“I’ve got some things to pick up at my place, then we’ll head back and see how Rick’s doing. Maybe stop and get something to eat on the way.” Rod shot a brief smile at Sheri and then returned his attention to the road in front of them.

Sheri’s emotions were turned upside down. In the last couple of days, her life had been destroyed, she’d had an affair with a married man and now she felt a strange friendship with the man driving the car. He had been kind and gentle with her and was always extremely polite. He had never been anything but the perfect gentleman. At least with her.

But the feeling of knowing him better than she really did was unnerving. She felt like she could tell him anything, even though she had met him only two days ago.

The overly comfortable feeling was tainted by something though, something Sheri couldn't really identify. There was something about the way Rod looked when he was angry that terrified her. When he was hurting people he seemed at peace. Sheri shivered, and forced strange image from her mind.

"Tell me about yourself." Sheri sat sideways on the car seat with one leg bent in front of her, the other stretched out across the floorboard.

"Not much to tell. Born, raised and went to work."

Sheri watched him closely as he glanced in the rear view mirror, signaled and then changed lanes.

"Tell me about your folks. Tell me about your dad. Is that who you learned your manners from?"

"Don't have a dad." Rod looked out his window, signaled and turned left into a wooded residential area.

"You mean you never knew him."

"Never had one. That's all."

"So, your mom raised you by herself." Sheri dropped her left arm across the back of the seat, briefly catching the edge of Rod's shirt with the tips of her fingers.

Rod said nothing, just checked both mirrors and then turned into a long winding driveway.

Sheri readjusted on the seat, bumping a rolled up magazine sticking out of the crack in the seat. She pulled it out so her knee could nestle up against the back. Sheri recognized the magazine and looked up at Rod with surprise.

“Isn’t this Drew’s comic book?”

“No.” Rod reached up and hit the automatic garage door opener hanging from the visor, “it’s mine. The little sleaze has a bad habit of taking things from my desk when I’m not looking.”

“I can’t imagine you reading something like this. Sheri was staring in disgust at the cover. It was one of those adult, occult comics that to her seemed more Drew’s style than Rod’s. On the cover, Sheri stared at a picture of a half decomposed skull with worms crawling out of its eye sockets.

She shivered, remembering how Drew had twirled the rolled up magazine in her hair. Sheri closed her eyes tightly and forced all memory of Drew from her mind, intent on enjoying her outing.

This was a subject that she fully intended on exploring in more detail with Rod. But not right now. Right now, Sheri didn’t want to think about anything bad or ugly or painful or uncomfortable. And certainly not wormy eyed skulls. Sheri dropped the comic book back on the seat between them.

Rod pulled the car carefully into the garage and again pressed the button on the remote.

“So what about your mother?” Sheri asked, opening her eyes, and again trying to fuel

a conversation.

“I chopped her up and killed her when I was kid.” Rod paused for effect and then laughed loudly.

A cold chill came over Sheri as the garage door finished its descent, hit the floor and encased the garage in total darkness. The tone in his voice said that he was kidding, but what a horrible thing to say.

Sheri sat, frozen in the darkness as the last tiny sliver of light disappeared from under the garage door.

“The light’s burned out,” Rod said calmly in the darkness. “I’ll get around to changing it one of these days.”

- 4 -

Rick was so excited, he was about to burst. Everyone in communication central was gathered around him and Franklin. Even the smug guy in the fatigues, Kirby, had quit work to look over and watch the two newest hackers.

Rick was seated directly in front of the keyboard and Franklin was sitting so close to him that they looked like they were connected at the hip. A low murmur in the room was replaced by dead silence as Rick typed in the last Halcyon code.

It had taken Rick and Franklin just a little over an hour and a half to crack the code. Franklin’s insight into hardware and hard based logic, had been the perfect springboard for Rick’s imagination and creativity.

Franklin’s steadfast ideas about hardware based security systems had initially irritated

Rick, but some of what he said had crept into Rick's subconscious just the same. He had been working on the problem with his head in the clouds, thinking far too esoterically.

Each successive code had gotten more difficult to break, so Rick had developed a thought process to cope with the increasing challenge. He approached each new code with a preconceived notion about its complexity and degree of sophistication. And for the first twelve codes, this mode of thinking had served him quite well.

But, it had ended up being a dead end to the 13th code. This was apparently the original intent of the people that designed the codes. An electronic smoke screen. Misguidance and misdirection. Rick had not only taken the bait, but swallowed it whole.

Franklin's mundane, mechanical ideas were the foundation that Rick needed to get his feet back on the ground. Besides his cold logical style, Franklin also had the advantage of approaching the problem clean. He had never seen any of the other codes so this was a completely new problem for him. No patterns. No misdirection.

It didn't take long for the light to come on and when it did, all the pieces seemed to fall effortlessly into place. Rick felt like he had experienced a vision, although he wouldn't have used a word that strong to describe it. But, what he had finally come to see was the simplicity in the last code. The beauty and structure inherent in the patterns that he'd stared at for so many hours.

It was right there in front of him the entire time. It was like staring at one of those T-shirts that you can't read up close, but when you back away, it magically comes into focus.

These were the key elements of the 13th code and together, working as a team, Rick and Franklin were about to break it. Without really considering the implications of what they'd accomplished or even what the next step was, they pounded away at the keys with the joy and anticipation known only to children.

The last keystroke made, the last sequence entered and the entire room held its breath. A small chiming sound floated from the speakers attached to the terminal. Then, like magic, the welcome screen for the Halcyon command console appeared.

The room filled with hoots and cheers. Everyone was hugging and slapping each other on the shoulder. Rick and Franklin simply leaned back in their chairs and smiled at each other. They'd done it. Done it together.

Rick stood and pushed his way through the tightly packed group of people that surrounded him. Kirk was behind the group, leaning against a metal console smiling.

"Congratulations."

"Have you seen Sheri anywhere?" Rick asked still looking around the dark room.

"Anybody seen Sheri?" Kirk stood up and addressed the huddled group in front of him.

"I saw her down in Rod's office just a little bit ago," a nameless face announced, "I think he said he had to run by his house ..."

Rick was disappointed. For some reason, all he wanted to do was share this moment of victory with Sheri. She had paid a pretty hefty price for all of this and this celebration belonged to her more than to him and Franklin. They should all be together. To be

honest, it was a pretty hollow victory without her.

Franklin had made his way through the crowd and was standing, just behind Rick. Rick could tell that Franklin wanted Sheri there too and they exchanged a short, knowing look. Sheri had brought this whole group together. Kirk, Rick and Franklin and without any one of them, this would not have been possible.

Kirk studied both of their faces and found himself with the same feeling. After all, this moment really did belong to Sheri. She should be here to share it.

Kirk looked over the room. Kirby, the guy in the fatigues, was sitting at the workstation that Rick had just left. He was staring at the screen with a blank look on his face. Kirk could read the excitement, even from behind, as everyone crowded closer to the terminal.

“Listen up,” Kirk again spoke to the assembly in front of him, “nobody touches anything until I get back. Kirby. Turn it off for now.”

Everyone spun around, the look of disappointment on their faces indicating that they would respect Kirk’s command.

With his shoulders slouched down like a pouty child, the man in fatigues quietly reached for the switch. Under any other circumstance, he probably would have argued. This was far too important a find to just sit on. But, he hadn’t done it—Rick had. It was kind of a gentlemen’s agreement. The bond of the programmer. This was Rick’s moment and he would be allowed to savor it, in whatever fashion he wished. With whomever he wished.

Kirby flicked the terminal's power switch and the screen went blank.

"I'll take you to Rod's office," Kirk said as he placed his hand on Rick's shoulder.

As the three men walked down the hall and turned into the small area with the office cubicles, a strange sense of emptiness came over Rick. Not so much emptiness as...jealousy. The office area was empty, which meant that Sheri was off somewhere with Rod. He had just now realized how much he'd been involved in this code since leaving her this morning.

"Shit," Rick spoke to no one in particular, "breakfast."

Kirk and Franklin both turned with confused looks on their faces.

"Sheri made us breakfast," Rick spoke directly to Franklin, "and we just ran out without so much as a 'good bye'."

"I'm sure Sheri understands how important this is," Franklin said sounding as logical as ever.

"Franklin's probably right," Kirk joined in, more to comfort Rick than to support Franklin. "She knows that we're all in big trouble without that last code."

Rick looked reluctantly resigned to the idea. Hopefully they were right. If so, maybe Sheri didn't hate him right now. But he couldn't quite shake the idea that she was off running around with Rod just to spite him.

"I'll go ask around and see if I can find out where they went and when they'll be back." Kirk disappeared down the corridor and left Franklin and Rick to sulk in private.

"Do you think she's okay with him?" Rick turned to face Franklin, who was now

sitting at Rod's cubicle.

Franklin picked up the security badge that was sitting on the desk and studied the face for a long time. Then, without looking up, said, "No."

"I wish we knew more about this guy?"

Rick and Franklin both smiled at the same time as their eyes landed on the laptop and the four words displayed across its screen.

\$please enter your password:

"These cheap PC's always utilize a standard three level encryption scheme," Rick said as he grabbed the back of the chair Franklin sat in and turned him toward the keyboard.

"Not necessarily," Franklin spouted excitedly as he typed several characters into the small unit. "It's probably a modified substitution algorithm." The computer beeped and continued displaying its simple request.

"What are you talking about? Substitution algorithm?" Rick sounded irritated with Franklin. "There's no way...how could a substitution...unless ..."

Rick face lit up like a Christmas tree and he pushed the chair aside. He knelt on the floor, directly in front of the keyboard and began pressing keys with a vengeance.

"Franklin, you little fucker," Rick's eyes never leaving the screen, "how do you think of this shit?"

Within fifteen minutes, Rick and Franklin had broken the simple code, oddly enough it was 'Mother', and were digging through Rod's personal files, trying to find out anything they could about him.

“See if there’s any correspondence files,” Franklin blurted in Rick’s ear.

“Get off of me, you’re making me hot.” Rick pushed Franklin gently on the chest. “I’ll get to that, calm down.”

“See if there’s any communication software. Any Inter-Link up-links.”

Rick turned and gave Franklin a stern look. “Cool it, Franklin. We’ll look at everything, just let me...what’d you say??”

“Up-link. See if there’s an up-link to the Inter-link.”

Rick turned back to the screen, scanned a couple of directories and then, with a short smile toward Franklin, executed the communication program.

\$up-link protocol initiated ...

!connect! ...

>LEVEL 2–verified.

The screen went blank and both Rick and Franklin held their breath. Neither man budged. Neither able to take their eyes from the tiny screen. Then it beeped twice and displayed a new message. Silence filled the room as the two men read the screen in horror.

\$ENFORCEMENT UP-LINK–LEVEL 2

!System Reporting–Covert Operations!

!field agent identified--alias: Rodney Sterling!

>enter message:_

- 5 -

Kirk was in the lobby, asking the guard if Rod had said anything about where he was going, when all hell broke loose.

Kirk was the first one to notice the flashing red light on the wall behind the fax machine.

"It's a silent," Kirk said to the guard as he made a sweeping motion to hit the automatic door lockout switches. This wouldn't keep anyone out long term, but it would slow them down. That was important, because the flashing red light meant that someone at one of the other monitoring stations had seen something. Something dangerous.

Kirk flew around the counter, next to the guard and both men quickly looked over several video monitors. The back of the building was clear, but in front, sat three gray sedans. One man stood against the front fender smoking a cigarette while the doors on the other two cars opened slowly.

"Shit," Kirk snapped at the guard, "how long have those been there?"

"Dunno," he said sheepishly.

Kirk's eyes were saying, "*what the hell where you doing, you dumb shit??*" But he knew, all too well, that there wasn't time for that now. He could chastise him later. Right now, there were more immediate concerns.

“Call downstairs, lock the elevators out and signal silent running.” Kirk ran into the elevator and nodded to the guard as the doors closed and he descended into the basement.

Silent running was the code that everyone at TransWorld was well trained on. It meant that there was danger topside and the TransWorld cover would have to be put to the test. All activity in the basement would cease and all personnel would sit, quietly and wait for the danger to pass.

That, at least, was the theory. This would be the first practical application of that theory since they had moved into this building.

Kirk ran through the halls, red lights silently flashing everywhere. There was a scurry of activity as everyone did exactly what they had been trained to do. Screens were logged off, systems shut down and hidden electrical breakers were flipped off.

Once locked off, Kirk knew that the elevators would not go down. Even unlocked, they wouldn't do so without a code, so besides the rear entrance, that was the only way in—or out.

Kirk ran to the rear of the building. The back stairwell had to be locked manually—and from the inside. Once in the rear lobby, he glanced at the open door to the stairwell and then went over to a bank of three video monitors behind the rear counter. This station was never really attended by anyone and was originally designed as a backup for the other monitoring stations.

Kirk pressed a single button under the first monitor and a picture of the front lobby, upstairs, appeared on the screen. Kirk placed his thumb over a small joystick protruding

from a hole on the control console. As he moved it under his finger, the camera in the upstairs lobby panned from one side to the other.

Kirk's chest froze and he couldn't breath as he saw the bird's-eye view of the guard's body, draped across the counter. Although the tiny monitor was in black and white, Kirk didn't need color to determine what the dark pool of liquid running from the man's head was.

With the joystick, Kirk quickly panned across to the other side of the lobby and caught the elevator doors just as they closed. Kirk stood. Frozen in place. His hand paralyzed on the camera control. On the monitor, his eyes went slowly, from the elevator doors up to the floor indicator.

Kirk's heart made a huge thump and his face erupted into pouring sweat as the indicator changed from 'L' to '- -'.

- 6 -

Kirk looked quickly at the second monitor and saw Enforcement officers in the hallway outside of communication central. On the third monitor, in front of the building, another dozen or so cars had just pulled up. By the appearance of the front door, they hadn't bothered to *ask* to be buzzed in. Still, Kirk was amazed at how many of them there were inside the building.

"How the hell did they get down the elevator??" Kirk's eyes went frantically back and forth between the tiny monitors.

There were officers in the hallways, in the lobby, in the elevator and still more arriving

outside. This was a nightmare.

“Shit.....SHIT.....**SHITTT**” Kirk’s sight was blurring and a horrible vision was forming in his mind of a frightened young man lying paralyzed in the mud while his friends were tortured to death one by one.

He couldn’t move. Couldn’t think.

“Think, damn you!” Kirk hit the console in front of him with both hands. “Think you bastard!”

Kirk closed his eyes tightly and could feel the cold cool mud against the side of his face as the screams of agony rose from the skylight ...

“It’s happening again ...”

He looked back up at the monitor and saw two officers in the hallway leading to the rear of the building.

“... and there’s nothing I can do about it. THINK!!” Kirk looked around the room in a panic. It *was* happening again. Just like before. Everyone would die because he couldn’t think. Because he couldn’t save them.

His eyes pooled with tears until the monitors in front of him became a blur. Kirk started to pant heavily, still searching the room for an answer. Wildly looking around as if the room itself would speak to him. Would just reach out and give him the answer he was looking for. A few more seconds and the officers would be there and then it would be all over.

“Think goddamn it. THINK!”

Kirk's head was filled with images of all the people that had trusted him...of all the friends that he'd lost over the years. Swimming in self pity and doubt. Unable to move. Unable to act.

Then the door from the hallway flew open with a crack and Kirk spun around and screamed, "NOOOOO!"

It was Rick and Franklin looking like they'd seen a ghost.

"What the hell's going on?" Rick ran into the rear lobby with Franklin clinging to the back of his shirt.

Kirk was frozen. Motionless. Like a wax statue. His face was perfectly white and his eyes watery and swollen. His eyes moved slowly from Rick to Franklin. And then, as if by instinct alone, slowly around the room once more. Rick and Franklin stood, waiting for a response. Studying Kirk.

He looked like he was in some kind of trance, eyes still wandering from one side of the room to the other. "Kirk, what's going on?"

And then Kirk saw it. Next to the door where Rick had just come in. The fire alarm.

As the door began to close slowly under the power of the hydraulic arm, Kirk saw the Enforcement officials jogging down the hallway, automatic weapons in hand. In one leap, Kirk came over the top of the counter and flew between Rick and Franklin, knocking them apart. The two men stood in awe and tried to figure out what was going on. In one continuous, fluid motion, Kirk slammed the door, engaged the dead bolt and tripped the fire alarm with his elbow.

Two of the overhead sprinklers sputtered and began to spew a torrent of water down on their heads. Two more cut in and flowing rivers began to form on the tile floor.

Kirk knew that because of the sophistication of all the electrical equipment in communication central, the majority of the basement had been outfitted with automatic halon fire extinguishers. He also knew that halon was a white gas that would fill just about all the rooms in the basement with a dense cloud in just seconds. Everyone at TransWorld had been trained on the location and use of the gas masks that were located at receptacles all around the building.

The lobbies, hallways, stairways and elevator shafts were equipped with the standard water sprinkler systems found in most commercial buildings. Right now, the confusion from the halon mist and the barrage of water raining in on everyone, was the best diversion Kirk could provide. It was the only edge he could give them right now and he prayed that they would take full advantage of it.

There were gunshots down the hallway. Kirk, soaking wet and still leaning up against the door, pointed to the open stairwell and yelled at Rick and Franklin. “Go, get out. NOW!”

“What about you?” Rick, although dazed and confused, had been through this drill before. Even though he didn’t understand exactly why this was happening, he did understand that it was time to run.

More gun shots and somebody was screaming.

“We can’t leave you here.” Rick still had not moved. He and Franklin stood in the

middle of the floor, looking like two soaked hound dogs.

Kirk shoved himself away from the door and bolted back to the counter.

“You’ve got to go now,” he stated almost matter-of-factly, then reached underneath the counter and pulled out a .45 automatic. He pointed it straight in the air, cocked it once and then turned back to Rick.

“I’ve got to help them.” Kirk set the gun down on the counter and reached in his pocket. He pulled out a set of keys and tossed them to Rick. “Take my car...the blue wagon out back. Rod lives in Elmwood. 2117 Spain Drive ...”

The sound of gunfire filled the room as the door to the hallway splintered, creaked and then popped open. Kirk grabbed the gun and dropped to the floor behind the counter as bullets filled the air. The counter cracked and popped as chunks of wood flew off, showering over the top of his head.

Rick dove for the open stairwell as shots ricocheted over his head. He drug himself toward the doorway, bullets hitting the wet floor around him and the metal steps ahead.

Everything seemed like it was in slow motion. Water poured in little rivers from the open stairwell and Rick tried desperately to crawl inside, but he felt like his body weighed a thousand pounds. Like he was dragging a lead weight behind him.

Kirk, still laying on the floor behind the counter, fired three shots into the air to get the officers attention. Then he popped his head up and quickly snapped off seven more shots at the men in the doorway.

Three of the four dove for the floor in front of them, clutching their weapons tightly to

their chest, while the fourth man fell backward with a short gurgling grunt. He dropped his machine gun and lay bleeding, flat on his back with a large chunk of his throat missing.

Kirk dropped back behind the counter and snapped the clip out of the gun and grabbed for another.

“Go on,” he shouted at Rick from behind the counter, “find Sheri and Rod.”

Rick looked down at his legs and realized why it had been so hard dragging himself through the door. It was Franklin. He was stuck to the back of his right thigh, clinging to him like a baby monkey to its mother. Two more shots ricocheted through the stairwell. Kirk popped in a fresh clip, jumped up and again showered the men in the doorway with lead.

Rick seized the opportunity to grab Franklin by the back of his neck and drag him to his feet. Both men ran, full speed up the stairs and bolted into the alley behind the building. Rick saw the blue wagon first and grabbed Franklin’s shirt and yanked him in that direction, almost knocking him down.

Once inside, Rick started the car and put it into gear. The tires spit gravel and the car fish-tailed down the alley with Franklin’s door still open. Rick side swiped a garbage can and debris went flying.

Just before they reached the street, a gray sedan skidded into place, blocking their path. Rick slammed on the brakes and sparks flew from the side of the car as they skidded past several dumpsters along one wall.

Two plain clothed officers got out of the car and began firing at them. Rick and Franklin ducked down below the dash as Rick slammed the car into reverse and mashed the accelerator.

Three shots left the windshield a spider web of shattered glass. Franklin's head was covered with his arms and he was crawling off the seat, onto the floor and under the dash. Rick kept one hand on the steering wheel as he crouched his head down as far as he could.

Sparks flew off the back bumper as the car bounced back and forth between the brick walls that lined the alley. Garbage cans flew into the air and a shower of rubbish covered the rear window.

Another shot caught what was left of the shattered windshield and tiny chunks of flying glass covered them both. Rick shook his head to remove the most of the glass and bobbed back up to quickly glance behind them.

Rick slammed the break pedal as hard as he could. The car flew backward onto a street packed with rush hour traffic. The blue wagon crashed into a small compact car, shoving it into oncoming traffic in the other lane. Another car plowed into the side of somebody next to them, pushing the car sideways across the entrance to the alley. Rick threw the car into drive and, again, mashed the accelerator to the floor.

The tires smoked and the car spun around as two more cars collided with each other, adding to the mayhem on the already bustling street. Rick took a quick right and lucked into an interstate on-ramp. He jumped a curb, cutting across three lanes and bounced off a

guard rail before successfully entering the freeway.

He watched both the rear view and side mirrors for any sign that he'd been followed. Instinctively, he put his blinker on and moved into the left lane. He passed several cars, checking his mirrors the whole time.

Rick was surprised at how clearly he was thinking. How real everything seemed. He looked over at Franklin under the dash and patted him on the back.

"I think we're okay for now," Rick said with a big sigh.

Franklin was shaking like one of those strap things you put around your butt to lose weight.

"What the hell is going on? Who were those guys?" he asked, almost crying, as he looked up for the first time since crawling under the dash.

"Oh, just some friends of mine from Enforcement." Rick's frivolous attitude surprised himself.

- 7 -

Sheri followed Rod into the house. She had a creepy feeling up the back of her neck that she just couldn't shake.

"Why did you say that about your mother?" She asked as she closed the door to the garage behind her.

"She was a bitch. She was mean to me so I killed her. That's all."

"Rod, stop it, you're scaring me."

Rod's face grew cold and his eyes darkened. "I'm scaring you?"

“Yes,” Sheri said uncomfortably as she walked past him into the living room.

“This is a lovely house,” Sheri said, desperately trying to change the subject. “Have you lived here long?”

Rod walked slowly around her, watching her every inch of the way. Sheri turned in place, slowly, to keep one eye focused on him. He did not answer her, but returned, to Sheri’s dismay, to their previous conversation.

“Do you think it’s wrong to kill someone that’s mean to you?” Rod continued to circle Sheri slowly.

“Rod, I really don’t want to ...”

“Cause I personally believe there’s nothing at all wrong with it.”

Sheri was beginning to get dizzy. The room was hot and she could feel the perspiration breaking out on her forehead.

“Rod, please ...”

Rod continued circling slowly. “People shouldn’t be mean to other people...it’s just plain wrong. Don’t you agree, Sheri?”

She was feeling sick to her stomach now. All she wanted was to get back to Rick and Franklin and get away from this guy. Sheri broke eye contact with Rod and took one step toward the door. With the speed and agility of a cat, he reached out and grabbed her arm so hard, that Sheri was sure it left a bruise.

“Rod, you’re hurting me,” Sheri said with a mixture of fear and apprehension. “How the hell did I get myself in this mess?” she asked herself as she closed her eyes and took a

long slow breath.

“Rod,” Sheri did her best to sound solemn and sincere, “don’t you think we should be getting back now?” Sheri opened her eyes and again took a step toward the door, but Rod’s grasp on her arm tightened and then something snapped. Sheri panicked and lost it.

She turned and brought her knee up hard into his crotch. His grip loosened, but he hung on. She flapped her arms violently, three or four times, hitting him in the face until his grip on her released.

Sheri turned and bolted for the garage door, but was stopped abruptly when her head snapped backwards and she was thrown onto the floor. Rod had grabbed her by the hair and yanked her back to where he was standing. Now, she lay flat on her back, staring up at him.

“You’re just like that other sack of bitch-shit. You all are.”

Rod dragged Sheri back into the living room by the handful of hair he still had in his fist. Sheri held on desperately to the top of her head, trying to keep a big chunk of skin from tearing loose.

Rod picked her up and when she tried to knee him again, he blocked her leg with his and then hit her square in the face with his fist. Sheri dropped to the floor, blood flowing freely from her nostrils.

Dazed and dizzy, unable to focus clearly, she tried in vain to crawl away from him. Rod just followed closely behind her and then grabbed her hair again and yanked her to her feet.

“You think it’s funny, don’t you?”

Sheri was holding onto the top of her head and crying.

“You think you can be mean to whoever you want? Don’t you?”

Rod let go of Sheri’s hair and forced her down into a high-back chair behind her.

“DON’T YOU?” he yelled inches from her face, pieces of spittle flying into her eyes.

“Rod, please...” Sheri tried to talk between gasps, but Rod brought his right elbow into the air above her head, closed his fist tightly, and hit Sheri in the face again. This time she went out. Blood running down the front of her shirt and into her lap. Her body lay limp, half poised to fall out of the chair. Rod repositioned her slightly and smiled as he lifted her chin and looked at her bloody face.

“So pretty.” He turned and walked into the bedroom.

In the rear wall of the bedroom closet, was a hidden door. He slid the clothes apart and then released the latch to the small door. Rod crouched down and walked through the door into a tiny little room and reached for the pull chain. The light came on, shining on his favorite room in the house. His play room. In here hung weapons and devices of torture. All part of his personal collection. All near and dear to his heart.

Rod squatted on the floor looking around at the tightly packed array of instruments at his disposal. He removed a roll of duct tape from a pegboard hook and then grabbed a huge scalpel and a couple jagged needles.

He returned to the other room and placed the scalpel and the needles neatly on the end table and then methodically bound Sheri to the chair with duct tape.

Sheri moaned and sighed as she began to return from unconsciousness.

“You probably would have liked my mother,” he said calmly as he ran a piece of tape across Sheri’s mouth and pressed in down tightly at the corners. Rod’s eyes met Sheri’s, “You two are a lot a like.”

Chapter Twenty Two

TERMINATION

- 1 -

Rick still was watching his mirrors anxiously, but it had been nearly fifteen minutes since they had left TransWorld. He had gotten on and off the interstate a couple of times, always carefully watching behind him. He was heading toward the address that Kirk had given them.

Rick looked over at Franklin. The poor guy had actually wet himself during the ordeal and Rick was feeling kind of sorry for him. Then he noticed Rod’s laptop sitting on the seat between them.

“How’d you . . . ?” Rick was unable to finish his question before Franklin cut him off.

“I don’t know ...” Franklin had seen the question in Rick’s eyes before it had actually been asked. Franklin had just asked himself the same question.

“I remember grabbing it when we heard all the noise. I don’t know why, I just did.” Franklin was looking at Rick but his eyes where focused far off into the distance as he tried to remember what had just happened.

“Then there were gun shots...and I just held it up to my chest with both arms.

Everything gets kind of fuzzy after that.” Franklin shook his head and winced in pain.

“Do you remember talking to Kirk?” Rick’s eye’s never left the road ahead of them.

“Yea...kind of. I mean there was water...and all that shooting ...”

“Do you remember latching onto my leg like a leach?” Rick’s attempt at sounding irritated was overcome by empathy for what Franklin was going through.

“No. Just water...stairs...guns...I must’ve froze with it next to my chest the whole time. I do remember dropping it on the seat when the windshield shattered.”

Franklin’s eyes focused on Rick and then on the tiny laptop. Rod had her, he took her before Enforcement had come and he was a member of Enforcement. He could kill her and no one would know the difference.

“Sheri,” Franklin said in a trembling child’s voice.

“I know buddy, we’ll find her. Don’t worry. We have to.”

Rick fought with his emotions for a long time as he drove. Without meaning to be quite so abrupt he broke the silence that hung between them.

“I’m in love with her, Franklin.”

Rick turned and exchanged a quick glance with his passenger. In that instant, Rick could see that Franklin was in love with her too. In his own unattached sort of way, Franklin needed her. He probably cared more about Sheri’s life than he did his own. She was the reason he’d allowed himself to get mixed up with all this in the first place.

Rick knew, at that moment, that they were her only hope and they had only one shot. If they didn’t save Sheri, soon, nobody would.

Rick turned to catch a street sign and then announced dryly, “We’re almost there ...”

Without saying a word, Franklin looked at Rick, his eyes searching for answers to the questions that haunted both of them:

“What are we going to do? How can we possible help her??” Rick drove on in silence.

They pulled over to the curb at the top of the street. The sign read *Spain Drive*. It was in a fairly upscale part of town that Rick was not totally unfamiliar with. The address on the house next to them was 2111. Rod’s house should be the third one down on this side. The mailbox and driveway was just barely visible from this vantage point.

Because of the amount of brush surrounding the yards, Rick decided to inch the car forward two houses. Now the mailbox labeled 2117 was clearly visible. Part of the winding drive could be seen as it disappeared behind a row of neatly trimmed hedges. There he stopped, shut the car off and turned to face Franklin.

“I’m going up there. I’m going to help Sheri. Are you with me?”

Franklin looked petrified and pale. He was rubbing his hands nervously together as he stammered to Rick, “Uh...I don’t, um...is this really the best...you know ...”

Rick placed his hand gently on the top of Franklin’s, momentarily stopping their writhing.

“Franklin,” Rick’s voice sounded calm and resolved, “I am going to help Sheri. I need your help. Can you pull yourself to ...”

Franklin jumped clean into the air as the beep from the tiny laptop cut Rick off in mid-

sentence.

“Shit!” Franklin snapped as he clutched his heart and opened the lid in one motion.

“What is it?” Rick’s eyes followed Franklin’s as he read the small fluorescent screen to him.

“Says there’s an incoming message.”

Rick shook his head, opened his door and got halfway out. He turned back to Franklin, “We’ve got to go now, Franklin!”

“But...” Franklin started to say something but couldn’t finish.

Rick jumped the rest of the way out of the car and just before he slammed the door said, “Come on!”

Rick gave Franklin one monstrously disappointed scowl and then vanished into the bushes along the sidewalk.

Again the tiny computer beeped and Franklin’s attention was momentarily pulled away from his lack of courage.

\$Central Command Initiative;

!FIELD AGENT: Barry Perry //ALIAS: Rodney Sterling!

>Message: three primary targets not apprehended; mission incomplete; need location of primary targets—primary targets must be eliminated; please respond; _

Franklin's heart took one gigantic leap and began to pound like a timpani drum. Faster and faster—louder and louder.

>Three primary targets.

>Three primary targets.

Franklin felt like he had just swallowed his tongue. "Me and Sheri and Rick." The words echoed in his head like it was a cavernous void.

"Three primary targets," Franklin said to the little computer as panic gripped him like the jaws of a great white shark.

Without thinking, he started typing in response to the blinking cursor.

>abort, primary targets unnecessary, abort, primary target unavailable, abort mission, abort mission ...

Franklin had no idea what he was doing or what he expected to accomplish. He was just reacting. Just trying to save Sheri.

Franklin's hands were shaking badly and his chest was heaving as he continued typing frantically,

>abort, abort, abort, abort, abort, abort, abort, abort, abort, abort ...

Franklin slammed the lid on the computer and brought his fists up to his eyes. He buried his head into the side of the car seat and cried loudly as he mumbled between gasps.

“Help...me...someone...please help...me...I don’t know what to do ...”

- 2 -

“What does it mean?”

The man asking the question was head of covert operations for Internal Enforcement. He was a large man, well dressed and standing behind his desk with his arms folded in front of him. A view of the city and the bay beyond, lay cloaked in dusk, spread across the picture window behind him.

A hard copy of the strange message had been hand carried to him by the Field Supervisor responsible for all agents working on The Movement’s activities at TransWorld. He glanced down at the message again and reread the last line, “abort, abort, abort, abort ...”

His head rose slowly from the copy with a sincere conviction in his eyes.

“It means he’s finally flipped out, sir. We always knew this day would come...that he’d outlive his usefulness.”

“Barry’s the loose cannon, isn’t he?”

“Yes, sir. Always been right on the edge.”

Realizing that he had originally asked for Barry on his team, the man did a quick tap dance, “Don’t get me wrong, he’s been very useful. Provided a lot of information. A lot.”

The man behind the desk pushed out his lower lip and nodded rhythmically.

“But I’ve been watching him closely for a while,” the Supervisor put the piece of paper down on the desk in front of him. “He’s more interested in his own agenda these days. I’m just not seeing the hardcore results I used to. In fact, he had a pretty severe altercation with one of my other field agents today. Almost blew his cover.”

“That’s too bad,” the big man dropped his arms to his side, turned in the dimly lit office and stared out the window. “He did a good job with that whole Yenkin mess a while back.”

The Supervisor stood, in silence, staring at the man’s back as he looked out through the enormous window.

Without turning from the window, the man spoke solemnly, “Triangulate his position and send a termination team.”

- 3 -

Seized by sheer panic, Franklin had lost all concept of time. As far as he knew, he could have been crying for three minutes or three hours, he just didn’t know. When he did finally open his eyes, there were two of the gray sedans parked at the head of Rod’s driveway, not more than twenty feet from where he sat, hunched down in the seat.

The cars where empty and if Franklin hadn’t already all but exhausted his well of panic, he probably would’ve burst. But he was numb. His heart had pound in his chest until his whole body ached. Ached with fear and pain and loss. For someone who had lived their entire life, virtually devoid of emotion, this was too much. Way too much.

Franklin felt nauseous and dizzy. Where was Rick? Sheri? Was he the only one left? Then there were sounds. Franklin cocked his head to one side and listened hard through the missing windshield.

Muffled shouts. Maybe screaming. Far off, though. Thud, thud. And then something breaking. A sharp pain crossed Franklin's chest and he was afraid that he was going to die. Not at the hands of Enforcement, but at the mercy of his own out-of-control nervous system.

Then there were footsteps and voices coming up the driveway. And almost as quickly as Franklin had heard them, the men appeared from behind the hedge. Walking toward him!

Franklin dropped to the floor board and covered his mouth with both hands to keep from whimpering out loud. The foot steps were getting closer and then the car lurched. Franklin let out a little whine and forced his hands tighter over his mouth. Tears streamed down his cheeks and terrible images flashed across his mind; *"He's under the dashboard...get him!" ...bang! Bang!*

"Is this your first termination assignment?" the voice from outside the car was so loud that Franklin thought the man was right on top of him.

"Naa, but this is the first one I've really gotten to participate in," the second officer leaned against the front passenger fender and offered a cigarette to the first.

He took the cigarette from the pack, lit it and took a big drag. "I've got some rags in my car...let's see if we can get some of that blood off of you."

He turned and walked back toward the gray sedans. Again the car bounced as the second man flung his cigarette onto the ground and followed the first.

Franklin let out a yipe so loud that he was sure they would pounce through the open windshield and shoot him dead. Again he forced his hands tighter over his mouth and listened carefully as the two men continued toward their car.

“God I love this job...” Franklin heard one of the men in the distance as he slammed the trunk of the car.

Franklin lay, paralyzed on the floor for almost ten minutes after the Enforcement officers had driven off. Ten minutes of gut wrenching, agonizing fear. Ten minutes of mind numbing horror.

When he was finally able to move, he crawled, like a baby, from the floor to the car seat. There, he cautiously looked up and down the street. It was dark now and the street lights dropped their pathetic haze over the pavement.

Empty. No one in sight in either direction. Franklin carefully opened the car door and climbed out onto the sidewalk. He was still shaking and the queasy uneasiness in his stomach grew.

As if in some terrible nightmare, he walked slowly toward the driveway, his shadow following beside him like a sadistic mime.

Franklin’s heart stopped as he rounded the hedge and saw the front door to the house wide open—porch light on. Several moths fluttered around the light and periodically bounced into it, making a soft thud.

Franklin's feet kept moving him closer, taking him toward the house. Outside, the sounds of crickets filled the air, but inside the house there was silence. Deep, suffocating silence that seemed to draw Franklin toward it. His feet brought him up to the door and he paused, trying desperately to see inside without actually going in.

Then his feet, without his direction, took him into the house. Franklin closed his eyes. Once inside, he opened first one eye, then the other.

At first, the scene in front of Franklin was too grotesque to comprehend. His mind could not accurately put together the scattered images in front of him. They made no sense. Or his mind wouldn't allow them to.

Red. Everything red. Furniture turned over. Bright light. Red. Red.

There was a man, or at least Franklin thought it was a man, fastened to a kitchen chair with silvery tape. Red. Everywhere.

There were spatters of blood across the floor around the chair and several small tubular objects. All brightly painted and glistening. They looked like ...

Franklin's stomach wrenched violently and vomit sprung from his lips like Old Faithful. He turned and leaned on the sofa and threw up again, shuddering uncontrollably the whole time.

The round tubular objects on the floor were fingers. All ten of the man's fingers had been severed and dropped at his feet. The bloody stumps on his hands, still dripping blood onto what used to be beige carpet. Pieces of splintered bone glistened under the reflecting room light. Bright and harsh.

Franklin stood and wiped his mouth, still facing away from the man in the chair. Who was it? The thought hit him so hard that it almost knocked him over. Franklin spun around and held his hand up to his mouth to suppress a round of dry heaves.

He stood in place, and studied the man's face, or at least what there was left to study. Silvery tape had been wrapped tightly around his neck and fastened securely to the back of the chair.

Franklin had no point of reference for this ghastly vision, but he assumed that the bloody pulp on the side of the man's head was what was left after his ear had been severed.

Franklin again felt his stomach turn over. He swallowed hard and forced himself to continue. He knew that he had to find out who this was. Was it Rick? Or Rod? And where was Sheri? Had they taken her? He was hiding in the car the whole time. He wished he knew if Enforcement had her.

He took a deep breath and looked directly into the man's open eye's. They were screaming at him. Calling for help. *"They're killing me...help me...help me, Franklin."*

Franklin quickly turned away and swallowed hard again. It was Rod. Or what was left of him. How awful, Franklin thought, to die this way. Tortured and mutilated. It was almost too much, and Franklin began to whimper. He looked frantically around the room.

"Rick!...Sheri!..." Franklin panted heavily as he turned from side to side in sweeping motions of indecision.

"Please..." sob, sob, "... where are you?"

Either Enforcement had taken them or he would find them, dead and mutilated in the next room. Franklin couldn't even force himself to consider either prospect.

He fell on the couch behind him and bawled. His head in his hands, lost and afraid. Now what? What was he going to do now? He laid there shivering like a scared puppy.

"Franklin?" came the voice from the other room, "are you alright?"

Franklin yipped like he'd been swatted with a hickory switch.

It was Rick, *and* Sheri, walking out of the bedroom clinging to one another. Franklin climbed off the couch and ran to them as fast as his feet would carry him. He wrapped his arms around both of them and squeezed.

"You're okay...oh thank God...you're okay..." his words fading into the high pitched sobbing.

"It's okay Franklin," Sheri patted him on the back and then brushed his hair with her fingers, "it's okay now. We're alright."

- 4 -

When Rick had left Franklin in the car playing with the computer, he was furious. Furious and scared. All he could think about was Sheri and getting her away from that man. Rod had been an Enforcement agent all along. And he had Sheri.

Rick came up to the house from the side and carefully peeked into a window. He was looking into the living room, and to his horror, Sheri sat, bound tightly to a chair with duct tape. Her back was to him and he couldn't see her face. Rod was walking around the room ranting and raving about something. Rick couldn't make out what he was saying

and he couldn't hear through the closed window.

Sheri was still and lifeless. Blind panic gripped him. Was he already too late? He used every ounce of will he had to push that thought from his head. All he knew was that he had to act fast.

He ran around to the front of the house and came crashing through the front door with absolutely no plan of attack in mind. Just one crazed thought; *save her, save Sheri*.

Rod turned abruptly to face Rick and then smiled. A huge nasty smile that covered his entire face.

"Well, look who's come to join the party," Rod said sounding jovial as ever. Then his eyes turned pitch black and the air in the room seemed to go cold. He dropped his head slightly and squinted at Rick.

"I should've killed you when I had the chance," his voice sounded cold and malevolent. "No matter," he said turning his palms up in the air. He took a step toward Rick.

Rick glanced quickly down both sides of the room, momentarily making eye contact with Sheri. Her face was bloody, but she was alive. He wasn't too late. The look in her eyes scared him. She was dazed but he could still see the fear screaming in her eyes. She'd been strapped in that chair and tormented by this madman because he hadn't been there to protect her. He should have prevented this.

His heart sank to his knees. Rick had never loved anyone the way he loved Sheri. He couldn't bear the thought of living without her and this man was trying to take her away

from him. Trying to destroy that love. He was going to kill her.

Fire sprang up around Rick's collar bone and spread all the way up to his ears. His temples began to throb. That burning rage had returned, but this time it was not electronically induced. This was *his* rage and with the power of God above, no one was going to hurt Sheri.

Rod took another slow step toward Rick and Rick lunged at him so hard that when he connected with him, both men left the ground and crashed through a glass coffee table.

A jagged piece of glass ripped across Rod's forehead, opening up a large gash. As blood erupted from the wound, it both surprised and delighted him.

He tasted it with his tongue as it ran past his mouth and he smiled at Rick, who was on top of him, clutching his shirt with his both hands.

"Good job," Rod said as the smile faded. "Now you die."

In one massive burst, Rod flew from the floor, extending his arms and knocking Rick clean off of him. Rod stood, watching Rick scramble across the floor, trying desperately to regain his footing. He came to rest up against the couch, dazed, eyes wide open, trying to focus on Rod.

Rod stood proudly, towering over him. Rick was no match for this madman's almost super-human strength. And Rod knew it. He smiled, and again took a step toward Rick.

This time, though, he fell to his knees with a puzzled expression on his face. He looked around, confused for a moment, then his head dropped like a mechanical doll, to examine his legs.

A piece of glass from the coffee table was wedged deeply into his right thigh and blood was oozing out in short spurts. The bloody glass glistened under the harsh glare of the overhead lights. It had struck an artery and Rod had already lost enough blood to make him dizzy.

He looked up angrily at Rick and snarled as he pulled the glass from his leg. Realizing immediately that this was a mistake, he looked around the floor to find something to stop the bleeding.

Rick hadn't let this opportunity pass. He leapt up and ran to Sheri's side pulling the tape from her mouth and then, her arms and legs. All the time, looking back at Rod on the floor, desperately trying to stop the bleeding from his leg.

"Come back here you fuck," he spewed his vicious profanities as Rick grabbed Sheri's arm and pulled her toward the door. "I'll cut your fucking heart out, you fuck!"

Rod pressed hard on his leg with both hands, but the blood flowed out from between his fingers in little geysers.

Through the window, Rick caught a glimpse of the two Enforcement officials coming up the driveway, weapons in hand. Their eyes were carefully trained on the front door and they had not yet seen him or Sheri. At least he wanted to believe they hadn't.

With Rod still wallowing on the floor, Rick yanked Sheri's arm and headed for the first door he could find. It was the bedroom and as they flew inside, they heard a voice as the officers came through the front door.

"Barry...buddy!! You look like hell man. What's been going on here?"

“Fuck you, piss ant!” The blood flowing from the cut on his head forced him to squint his left eye.

The officer that knew Barry kept a pistol fixed on his head while the other one looked around the living room.

“Where’s the girl, buddy?”

Barry’s eyes involuntarily caught the bedroom door and then returned to the man with the gun.

“You guys wanna just leave now? Otherwise I’m going to eat your hearts for fucking breakfast!” The word breakfast was punctuated with flying spittle.

“Now Barry, let’s be a polite host.” The man motioned with his head toward the bedroom and the other officer nodded. Holding his gun in front of him, he disappeared quietly through the doorway. A few seconds later, he returned.

“It’s clean. Open window though. Exits out back. Could be anywhere by now.”

“That’s alright. Not our problem anyway.” The man turned and smiled at Barry. His smile faded quickly and he turned to the other officer and said, “Get him in the chair.”

Rick held Sheri’s ears tightly as Rod’s screams echoed throughout the secret little room in the back of the closet. It was lined with ghastly instruments of torture. Leather straps, stained dark red from years of use. Knives, scalpels and hooks. Rick’s stomach tied in knots at the site of the hook and he was forced to close his eyes and try not to listen.

The officers in the living room had no desire to kill Barry quickly. They wanted to

hurt him before he died and they told him so. Told him that he wasn't such a big shot now, was he?

More screams. Blood curdling awful screams. Rod cursed them right to the end but he eventually gave way to begging, pleading, pitiful cries for mercy. Rick tried desperately to block it out as he held Sheri's head tightly against his chest.

The officers taunted him and made fun of him. One of them laughed uncontrollably every time Barry screamed out in pain. Each time, as the screams tapered off, the other one would recite some silly rhyme;

"This little piggy went to market... this little piggy had roast beef...and this little piggy [scream]...had none."

Laugh, laugh, laugh ...

"Oh God, no. Please stop. Please..." Barry's plea for help faded into a child-like sobbing--then another sudden burst of gut wrenching howling. More crying. Begging. Screams. Laughing.

And then there was silence.

Chapter Twenty Three

OUT

- 1 -

"It's not going to take them long to figure out what car we're in." Rick was again watching the rear view mirror nervously. The three of them were sitting in the front seat of Kirk's wagon, with Sheri in the middle.

Franklin had used the bottom of his shirt to wipe as much of the blood from Sheri's face as possible. Most of it was from her nose and she looked better already, just having it off her face. The wounds from yesterday looked better too.

Rod hadn't really had the chance to hurt her. They had only been there a few minutes when Rick showed up. He'd gotten there just in time. She'd never been so glad to see anyone.

"Sheri, we have more bad news," Rick's voice wavered and gave her that sinking feeling of dread. "There was a raid right after you left with Rod."

Rick explained as much as he could about what had happened back at TransWorld. Truth was, he was still having trouble putting all the pieces together for himself.

Sheri sat quietly and listened. When Rick described how they had left Kirk, she just turned and stared out the window without a word.

For some strange reason, and it made absolutely no sense, Sheri felt oddly at peace. Safe. It was an uncanny feeling that made no sense at all. They were fugitives with nowhere to go. No one to turn to. Basically in deep, deep shit.

But, she felt safe with Rick and Franklin. Protected somehow. Insulated from whatever else existed in the world. She knew it was a ridiculous notion, but she couldn't shake it—and really didn't want to try.

"What are we going to do?" Franklin asked nervously as he continued to rub little red smudges from Sheri's cheek.

Rick thought for a minute.

“Sheri,” he looked over to see how she was doing, “when we were in that stinky motel, you were saying something about some money in some accounts. Do you remember?”

Sheri nodded her head without opening her mouth.

“Is there any account...anywhere that might have something in it?”

Sheri shook her head without thinking. “Kirk took it all,” she said still shaking her head back and forth.

“Think, Sheri. It’s important. Any of the accounts? Anywhere?”

Sheri’s head was still shaking back and forth when suddenly she stopped and turned toward Rick. Her eyes rolled around for a few seconds then she looked over at Franklin and then back at Rick.

“I never got to check *all* the accounts,” she said sounding suddenly hopeful.

“Good, Sheri,” Rick was shaking his head up and down slowly, “How do you access them?”

“It’s straight PIN access. You can do it from any...” Sheri’s eyes were now sparkling like diamonds, “... ATM.”

Rick new it wouldn’t take long to find out if there was any hope left in the other accounts. He pulled the car into a small shopping plaza and quickly located the ATM island. He pulled up in front of it and turned to Sheri.

He grabbed her gently by the shoulders and said softly, “Sheri, we’re not going to have much time. Try the accounts quickly. If there’s anything there, take out what you

can and let's get out of here. There's no time for anything else. Do you understand?"

Sheri nodded her agreement and followed Franklin out the passenger door. Truth was, there was probably forty accounts that she hadn't checked and she wouldn't be able to check them all now. So Sheri started with the last one.

She had given them all sequential PINs in order to make them easier to remember. Probably not a very smart move she thought now in retrospect.

Empty. Sheri tried the next. Empty.

Empty, empty, empty. Sheri was having that burning urge to claw Kirk's eyes out again. And then she felt sad.

Sheri tried two more accounts. Empty. Empty. Inside the car Rick looked nervously at his watch.

"She's taking too long," Franklin said in his whinny little worried voice.

"I know," Rick said without emotion. "Get her in the car, Franklin. Now."

Franklin slid out the door and walked over to get Sheri. Reluctantly, she turned and followed him back to the car.

Rick glanced up at the review mirror and in horror, tried not to believe what he was seeing. Four plain clothed men were getting out of a gray sedan parked behind them. Four men who were all looking around nervously as they walked toward their car.

Sheri slid into the seat with her lower lip stuck out and Franklin followed slowly behind her. With Franklin's hand on the door handle, Rick put the car in gear and mashed the accelerator, squealing away from the men behind them.

Franklin was barely able to get the door closed and not fall out. Sheri and Franklin turned and looked over their shoulders to see what was going on behind them. Four men were running back to their car and getting inside. The car started up with a roar and shot away from the island behind them.

Rick flew out of the shopping center lot and onto the main drag. Cars skidded, horns blew and two lanes of traffic came to a stand still.

The gray sedan burst out onto the street through the same hole the blue wagon had just made. The back of both cars swung wide as they fish-tailed into the oncoming lanes.

“Hang on,” Rick looked up at the rear view mirror, “here we go again.”

Rick turned right, across two lanes of traffic, into another busy street. The gray sedan turned across the same traffic, matching Rick’s moves perfectly.

“Shit!” Rick pulled the steering wheel hard to the left and the wagon bounced over the curb into a small alley.

Again the gray sedan matched the turn in perfect synchronization. Rick scraped the side of the wall as he accelerated down the narrow alley. The gray sedan stayed perfectly between the walls without touching either side.

Rick slammed on the brakes, spun the wheels hard to the right and hit a metal dumpster as he turned down an adjacent alley. The sedan missed the dumpster and made the turn without a hitch, gaining precious seconds on the wagon.

Then Rick looked up and saw it. The brick wall ahead of them. He had just turned down a dead end.

“Shit!”

Brick walls ran up either side of them, three and four stories straight into the air. Like rats in a cage.

Rick slammed the brakes and, just before the car came to a stop, shoved it into reverse. His foot was poised, hovering over the accelerator ready to go.

He looked at the sedan in the mirror. It was stopped, twenty feet behind them. Rick hesitated and watched carefully then mashed his foot onto the brake to keep from rolling back any farther.

“What are they doing?”

Sheri and Franklin had spent nearly all of the last few minutes with their heads cocked around to watch the sedan behind them. Now, they all sat motionless, trying to figure out what to do. Rick put his left foot on the brake pedal and worked the accelerator with his right. The wagon’s engine roared and the rear of the car lowered slightly but it stayed in place.

“They’re not shooting at us,” Franklin said soberly.

“What?” Rick’s eyes never left the mirror.

“The other one’s were shooting at us. These guys aren’t.”

Franklin was right. Rick didn’t quite understand it. This had been his only run from Enforcement that hadn’t, yet, involved gun play.

Then one of the men from the sedan got out of the car slowly, with his hands in the air.

“What the shit?” Rick kept playing with the accelerator as if that, in itself, would be

enough to scare off any would-be bad guys.

The guy was saying something and Rick's heart was now stuck in the middle of his throat. Straight behind his Adams apple, pounding.

"We're friends," the guy was saying, hands waving in the air, "we're not going to hurt you. We just want to talk."

Rick let his foot off of the accelerator.

"We're with The Movement. We can help you."

- 2 -

"Kirk told us to watch those accounts for access and then be ready to move quickly if we saw anything."

Sheri had recognized the man as the guard from the front desk, the first time they had entered TransWorld. Rick shut off the car. They got out, leaned against the hood, and waited for the man to join them. Rick wanted to stay near the car, just in case.

"He knew that you'd try it again," the guard spoke as he walked around the beat-up wagon. "He knew you wouldn't learn your lesson the first time, so he had us monitor Sheri's PIN list for activation."

Sheri blushed and looked down at the ground. "Is Kirk...alright?" Sheri felt embarrassed asking about Kirk after being so mad at him.

"We all accept the risks as part of our membership rights. It's an oath we take. A vow to make a difference. At whatever the cost."

Sheri wasn't sure if that was really an answer, but after Rick's description of his last

encounter with Kirk, she was afraid to ask again.

“Listen,” the big guard continued, “you guys are hot. Real hot. There’s not much we can do for you. You’ve got to act quickly.”

The guard took a pen and a small note pad from his shirt pocket and scribbled something on it. He pulled the paper from the pad and then shoved it into Rick’s palm.

“It’s a marina. They’re expecting you. Right now it’s safer than air travel. We could never get you past security at the airports.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Rick looked into the man’s eyes and saw how desperate their situation really was.

“Listen,” the guards voice was deep and lulling, “We’ll do everything we can for you guys. You’re family now.”

This was really what The Movement was all about. Not bombs and killing, but kindness. Helping and caring. Fixing the wrongs and celebrating the rights.

Hurting and killing was Enforcement’s job. The Board’s job. But you never saw any of that on TV. It was buried, covered up. It was misrepresented in the media and twisted until it fit what The Board of Policy sanctioned as acceptable news. Rick had no time for anger now. Nor did he have the energy for it.

He simply shook the big man’s hand and thanked him. Genuinely thanked him.

“Good luck,” the big guy said, “and watch your backs.”

He gave them all a friendly smile and then made a hand signal to the others in the car behind them. The engine roared to life and the man waved at them one last time before he

turned and jogged back to the car.

Rick followed the directions to the marina. He knew they were at the edge of the city, but there was no water in sight. Again, they found themselves in a seedier side of town. One less frequented by members of *normal* society.

He parked the car, as indicated on the note, next to an old abandoned factory. They left the car and walked down a dark passageway between two large decaying buildings. At the end of the path, concrete steps descended into the darkness beyond. The air was foul and damp.

The steps twisted and turned and finally ended in a huge cavernous structure. Moonlight poured in from the far side and the outline of several large ships was clearly visible in the distance. This was clearly not a main port of call on the city's registry.

They were met by an old man wearing a white straw hat. He introduced himself as Leslie.

"Just call me Les," he said plainly and then turned and began to walk away.

They followed reluctantly.

"You guys need to be out of here tonight."

"Where are we going?" Rick was the first to ask.

"Right now, the big concern is passports and clean clothing. Just follow me." The man spoke without ever turning around to look at them.

Rick turned to Sheri and Franklin and said, "Passports...join The Movement and see the world."

Sheri smiled, a little, and leaned against Rick's arm.

"I just want to see the inside of my eyelids."

- 3 -

In the marina office, Les sat at a little metal desk, behind piles of discolored paper. They were in an open area that contained several desks and a montage of half a dozen or so old wooden and metal chairs.

Les and his new refugees were the only ones in there tonight. The room smelled of diesel fuel and fish guts. Four discolored panes of glass, positioned in the center of the entrance door, provided a somewhat restricted view of the ships and dock area below. Workers scurried around like ants as a crane hoisted huge boxes onto one of the ships.

The room was lit by two hanging lights with exposed incandescent bulbs jetting out from the bottom. With a single desk lamp in front of him, Les appeared to be the brightest thing in the room. Surrounded by an orange glistening halo. With every feature highlighted, the age in his heavily wrinkled face was easy to see.

In the corner, Sheri sat in a metal, folding chair, her arms crossed hugging herself. She was going over everything Rick had told her about Enforcement's raid on TransWorld and the last time he'd seen Kirk.

Sheri was numbed by the shear weight of her own part in all this. How many people had died, or have yet to die, because of her? How many lives had she affected with her research? With her stupidity? She began to cry, quietly, trying to hid her tears.

Rick walked over to where Sheri sat, brought his hand up to the side of her face and

touched her softly.

“What’s the matter, Sheri?”

“Oh nothing,” Sheri wailed as tears shot down her swollen cheeks, “nothing at all.”

Sheri made a sweeping motion through the air with one hand as she spoke.

Rick squatted in front of her and placed his other hand gently on her knee. With one hand still on her cheek, he slowly turned her head so he could look directly into her eyes.

“Sheri?” Rick said softly.

“I destroyed them...” Sheri said throwing both hands into the air, “They’re all dead because of me. The Movement’s dead, because I was too damn pig-headed to listen to anyone. To listen to...” Sheri started bawling louder, “... to listen to Kirk.”

Rick took Sheri’s hands in his and said, “Sheri, it’s not your fault. It’s not anyone’s fault.”

“Yes it is, damn you,” Sheri said as she yanked her hands away from Rick. “Just leave me alone.” Sheri turned sideways in her chair and put her hand over her mouth.

Rick thought for a minute, then decided that it was best if he just left her alone for a while. He stood and turned to face Franklin. Rick was amazed. Franklin had, again, grabbed the little laptop and was clutching it to his chest.

“What’d you bring that for? A goddamn security blanket?”

“Dunno. We might need it for something.”

Rick shook his head slowly then walked up to Franklin.

“You and Sheri both, can’t be in a car chase or a gun fight without a computer.” Rick

studied the confused look in Franklin's eyes and then rubbed the top of Franklin's head with his open palm and added, "You're a goof, Franklin."

Les was thumbing through a log book of some kind, making notes when Rick turned around to look at him.

"So, what you say Les...you said something about some passports, right?"

Les looked down at his watch and abruptly closed the book and dropped it into the top drawer of the desk.

"Oh shit, look at the time. We best get going on this one."

He stood, methodically pushing the chair out from under him, then turned and walked over to the back wall. He placed both of his hands on the side of a large bookcase and leaned into it with all his weight.

Franklin and Rick looked questioningly at each other. They watched as an old fashioned, wire mesh elevator appeared from behind the bookcase Les had slid to one side.

Rick looked at Franklin again and then motioned toward Sheri. He thought it would be better right now if Franklin approached her. Les was raising the wire mesh, exposing an ancient manually operated elevator.

Rick entered with some apprehension, while Franklin helped Sheri up from the chair and escorted her in. She just leaned on his arm and stared at the floor as they walked together.

Les pulled the mesh back down, and with one pull on the steel cable hanging from the

ceiling, the elevator lurched and began descending. As it did, the bookcase rolled, under its own power, back into place, once again covering the secret opening.

Steel girders, concrete and metal caged lights passed by them as the descent continued. Down and down. Then there was an awful scraping sound. Metal on metal. And the elevator bobbed to a stop.

Les flung open the mesh door and walked, casually into the massive room beyond.

Rick and Franklin stood, mouths open, staring into the building's gaping expanse. The silence and the lack of motion shook Sheri into the present. She looked up and sniffled a couple of times before she too, stood gawking out into the expanse ahead of them.

It was a room. A huge room. A room the size of a football field. It was lined with row upon row of computer terminals, flashing monitors, buzzing line printers and clusters of colored lights. Stretching into the distance as far as they could see. Hundreds of them.

The ceiling was twenty or thirty feet above their heads and lined with shiny metal cones from which mercury vapor light poured out over everything. It looked like a lot of light but the immensity of the room seemed to suck it up like the first precious drops of rain on hardened dessert sand. It still felt dim in the enormous room and it took a few seconds for their eyes to adjust. Both to the light and to the unbelievable picture in front of them. Franklin rubbed his cheek bones with the tips of his fingers.

Walking back toward them with his hands outstretched, Les spoke impatiently. "Come on now, we've got work to do."

Sheri grabbed Rick's arm and the two of them stepped off the elevator in unison.

Moving like gelatin, unsteady and slow, Rick was the first to speak.

“Is *this* The Movement’s headquarters?” He had thought that TransWorld was The Movement’s headquarters, but now it was apparent that it was just a very [very] small part of it.

“This?” Les’ voice ended in a high pitched squeal, “The Movement’s headquarters?? Goodness no!”

Les was shaking his head and sporting a big, country boy smile.

“Well, what then? It’s so big.” Rick stopped again, desperately trying to grasp what he was seeing.

“It’s kind of a regional center...not really even regional...more like a district or something, I guess.”

Les glanced between Sheri and Rick, surprised by their lack of knowledge.

“We’re just a chapter. A pretty small chapter at that. The Movement’s everywhere. Didn’t you know that?”

Franklin was still standing in the elevator.

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They’d all been given clean clothing and passports, identification and five hundred dollars cash.

“I wish we could give you more, but cash is one commodity that we’re a little short of these days.” The look of regret in Les’ eyes was genuine. “I’m sorry for the quick tour and general lack of hospitality, but you guys got a boat to catch.” Les looked nervously at

his watch, "It debarks in about twenty minutes. With or without you."

Sheri was still feeling deeply responsible for what had happened at TransWorld. She had become withdrawn and distant. Rick was worried about her, but he didn't know what to do. Or say.

"I suggest we all move top side now and get you on board before it's too late." Les looked back and forth between them, "Enforcement already has the airports under heavy surveillance. It won't take 'em long to figure out that you're not going that way and start looking elsewhere. If you're not on this boat...it may be your last chance." Les turned and began to walk back toward the lone elevator shaft.

"Do you have an Inter-Link connected terminal we can borrow for five minutes?" the words were out of Rick's mouth before he knew what he was saying.

"I'm sorry young fella." Les' tone indicating how truly sorry he was, "but we've really got to be going *now*." Les shot a glance at his wristwatch.

"This is important. More important than anything The Movement has ever been involved in. Good people have already died trying to stop it." Rick studied Les' face for a moment then added, "A lot of them."

Les didn't quite know what to think. He knew this guy had worked with Kirk on some pretty weird techno-stuff, although he really didn't know much about it. But Les knew Kirk. Knew him well and for a lot of years. Les took a deep breath and looked into Rick's eyes. Rick believed what he was saying. That was for sure.

"This way," Les walked quickly toward the closest array of terminals, "but I'm

serious...if you don't make that boat, you're going to be in deep shit. Enforcement will have every exit to the city wrapped up so tightly, you won't be able to get a sneeze out."

Rick smiled at Franklin, who knew exactly what Rick was doing, then grabbed Sheri's hand and ran to catch up with Les.

Les stopped at the first free workstation and pointed at the screen, "This one's got access to the Global-Inter-Link, capable of LEVEL 7 access, direct connect to ..."

Rick pushed him politely out of the way, "Fine, fine," and sat down while logging onto the system.

Franklin leaned excitedly over his shoulder as Rick began navigating through the system. He pulled up screen after screen that Les had never seen before. Not that he was any kind of computer whiz, but he did spend a hell of a lot of time around a hell of a lot of computer screens.

Franklin smiled and glanced back at Sheri as Rick typed in the sequence for the 13th code and entered the Halcyon Main Menu. Sheri moved cautiously forward as she studied the screen in front of Rick and the look of ridiculous glee plastered across Franklin's face.

"You guy's did it?" Sheri's voice was thin and distant.

"Yea," Franklin said sheepishly, "I guess we forgot to tell you."

"Lock it out, Rick. *Lock it out and shut it down!*" The intensity in Sheri's voice sent a cold chill down Rick's back.

"It's not that easy, Sheri."

“Change the last code and lock the bastards out, Rick!” Sheri was screaming now, clutching to the back of his shirt.

Rick spun around in his chair and grabbed her arms. “Sheri,” he said looking straight into her eyes, “listen to me.”

Their eyes locked for a moment and then she pulled her arms away and stepped back, just staring at him.

“It’s coded,” Rick began slowly, grappling for the right analogy, “like...like a cable TV converter box.”

Sheri stood, her eyes red and swollen, filled with confusion and fear.

“Pay-per-view...” Rick paused and studied Sheri’s face. He knew that time was tight, but he had to make her understand. “It’s like the old pay-per-view cable shows. The signal was encoded so that only the people that paid for the show could receive it. Normal subscribers were locked out. That was the basis for the two way cable systems that followed.”

Sheri struggled to get a clear picture.

“Like the cable signal, each Halcyon receiver, the implant, has a unique code. Like the cable TV box that allowed certain programs to be sent to certain subscribers.”

Sheri’s eyes grew and her breathing became low and shallow.

“The Halcyon control panel,” Rick tapped his index finger on the terminal screen behind him, “allows *certain* responses to be sent to *particular* individuals or groups. They’re all listed in the User Scan Index. Right here.” Rick was still tapping on the

computer screen behind him.

“Sheri, they can make anyone with a receiver react in anyway they want at any time.”

Sheri stood motionless for several awkward seconds as Les carefully watched the second hand on his watch.

“Show me,” Sheri finally broke the silence.

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Rick pulled up the User-Scan-Index and proceeded to show Sheri how it worked.

“It’s like a big electronic phone-book. You can search by name... civilians or Board of Policy...look, here’s a group called ‘SENIOR STAFF–MEDICAL DETENTION.’”

There were thousands of names in the list. Maybe tens of thousands. How long had this been in place. The tiny implants had only been developed by Franklin’s team a few weeks ago.

“We weren’t the first team to develop the miniature implants,” Franklin explained soberly as if he could read her mind.

Sheri’s head snapped toward him, her face covered in horror. “How long?”

“A year,” Franklin avoided direct eye contact with her, “maybe more. We can’t really tell.”

“Look,” Les waved his hand between them, “you can’t afford to miss that ship.”

Rick held his hand up as if to say *we know, but this is important, Les. Please.* Les looked at Sheri, then Franklin, then sighed heavily and shook his head.

“Alright, it’s your life.” Les turned and sat in the empty workstation behind Rick.

Rick turned his attention back to the terminal and quickly tapped out a rhythmic cadence as screens flashed in front of him, illuminating his face with colored squares of flickering light. The screen displayed a long list of names. They were all *Rick Morgan*. Just different middle names.

Morgan, Rick Brian

Morgan, Rick Charles

Morgan, Rick Carl

Morgan, Rick Earl

Morgan, Rick John

Morgan, Rick Lloyd

There was probably forty names on the list. Rick quickly scrolled down and highlighted one of the names; *Morgan, Rick Tyler*.

A small square window appeared on the left-hand side of the screen. Inside it, a wave form was displayed. Sheri immediately recognized it. The Halcyon wave. But, Franklin recognized it for something else.

“Hey, that’s the one with the funny spike at 45Hz.” Franklin turned first to Rick, then to Sheri, “the one that I saw on the monitor at TransWorld. When Rick was ...” Franklin froze.

Sheri smiled ever so slightly and reached out to touch Franklin’s hand. “It’s okay

Franklin.”

Franklin looked down at his feet while Rick pointed to the message displayed under the snake like wave as it slithered hypnotically across the screen.

TRANSMITTING: aggression #7

“They’re still sending this one to me. I assume, that if I had that implant thing in my head, I’d still be beating the shit out of whoever I could get my hands on.”

Sheri and Franklin stood in silence and awe as they stared into the screen. Rick quickly cleared the screen and pulled up another wave pattern. This one in stark contrast to the first.

The first one was covered with jagged spikes emanating like razor sharp teeth from the jaws of a meat eating reptile. But, this new wave was smooth. Mellow and docile, it flowed gently across the screen.

“It’s being sent to all Board of Support general staff. It’s called *tranquil* #2. Do you have any idea, just by looking at it, what kind of effect it’s having, Franklin?”

Franklin continued to stare at the soothingly simple pattern that bounced rhythmically across the tiny window.

“It’s synching with one of the brain’s natural frequencies. Locking in on it.”

Sheri grabbed Franklin by the shoulders and looked deeply into his dark eyes. “What does it do Franklin? This isn’t what we were working on, is it?”

Before Franklin could answer, Rick cut in, “It suppresses creativity and free thought.”

“I think that’s probably an over simplification.” Franklin turned his entire head toward Rick, his shoulders still held tightly in Sheri’s grasp.

“Over simplification my ass.” Rick stood sharply, the rolling chair hitting Les in the leg as it shot across the floor. “This thing gives The Board the ability to create a race of placid non-thinking sheep. Or crazed fucking lunatics. Capable of anything. Afraid of nothing.” Rick’s head snapped from Sheri to Franklin repeatedly.

“Press a button...send a signal...presto...” Rick was pacing back and forth in front of the terminal now.

In the background, a steam whistle punctuated Rick’s aggravation.

“I hate to be a party pooper,” Les looked up from his watch again, “But you guys have got about five minutes to get top side and board that ship. After that, you’re stuck here.”

The three stood in silence, staring at each other uncomfortably.

“Rick,” Sheri’s eyes were pleading. “Lock it out. Change the code and let’s get out of here.”

“That won’t change anything Sheri. They’ll get back in quicker than we did. Maybe a couple of days at the most.” Rick began to pace in front of the terminal again, pulling nervously on his chin.

Then he stopped and looked directly at Franklin. “Is there anyway we can neutralize the signal? Render it useless?”

Franklin stuck out his lower lip and said calmly, “Actually, I can do better than that.”

Rick's eyes widened as he leaned toward Franklin nodding his head as if to say *okay, what?*.

"Just send out a constant high frequency carrier. Anything over 10k and the receptors in the implants will fuse. It'll burn 'em out."

"Would that hurt anyone in the process?" Rick's face was shadowed with doubt.

"Four minutes ..." Les sat quietly staring at his watch.

"No. I don't think so. The receivers will just quit working. That's all." Franklin shrugged his shoulders and lifted his hands, palm up.

Sheri looked at Franklin and then Rick, "We can't do anything that will hurt anyone. We can't." Her eyes pleading with the two men.

Rick shot a quick glance at Franklin. "Franklin?" his tone questioning but insistent. "We don't have a lot of time, here."

He looked Franklin straight in the eye and spoke firmly and calmly, "Will it hurt anyone? We've got to be sure."

"I don't see how it can. The receptors can't deal with a signal that high. It'll just burn out the micro-circuitry. The casing should remain intact. The host should be fine."

Franklin's use of the word *host* troubled Rick. These were people they were talking about. A lot of them. This was an important decision and it infuriated Rick that he had no time to make it. One way and The Board has complete control—the other and...and what. We just don't know. It's a gamble. A damn big one.

Rick looked carefully at Franklin and then Sheri. He could see fear in Sheri.

Despair...concern. But, in Franklin, he saw something else. Confidence. Assurance.

Rick grabbed his chair and quickly pulled it back to his workstation. "I'll write a sub-routine to modify any wave they send," he said as his fingers caressed the keyboard with a burning, singular purpose.

"But won't they find it?" Sheri looked questioningly from Franklin to the back of Rick's head. "And just take it out? Put it back the way it was?"

Rick stopped typing and turned to look up at Sheri with a big grin on his face. "No. No, they won't."

He turned and continued his work with a new ferocity. "I'll put it in as a worm...a kind of virus that moves around. Rick stopped typing again, "The Inter-Link's a big place," and then continued without losing a beat. Rick smiled to himself.

"Three minutes kids," Les announced as the distant steam whistle once again proclaimed its insistence.

"Come on Rick, we've got to go..." Sheri put her hand on Rick's shoulder, but he wasn't listening. Sheri could see his reflection in the computer screen in front of him. He looked mesmerized...possessed. His eyes on fire with the passion of the task that now consumed his soul.

Rick was remembering the worm he had written in high school. The one that randomly changed grades. Not in any important classes. Rick hadn't intended to do any real damage, just a little mischief.

The worm program would lay low in the school's main frame computer and then

resurface once every several months or so. The mischievous program would then look for students that were doing poorly in Phys-Ed, Band, Home-Ec...those kind of classes.

Rick didn't think any permanent damage could be done by giving someone an undeserved 'A' in Gym class. It was just a challenge that he couldn't resist. Not after reading about worm programs and their ability for stealth. He just had to see if he could make one work. So he did. And the last time he had checked, it was still there. Quietly laying in wait and periodically helping the underdog. Rick smiled.

Les stood impatient and Sheri pulled at the back of Rick's shirt. Again the steam whistle tormented them. It seemed to be saying *you're not going to make it...it's too late!*

"We've just got a couple of minutes...you've got to be going—now." Les began walking back toward the open elevator.

"Rick, please," Sheri leaned over and whispered in his ear.

His eyes were unblinking. Fingers pounding furiously on the keyboard. Franklin turned and followed Les to the elevator.

"Rick," Sheri said softly.

Again the whistle. Two quick blasts.

Rick stood, eyes frozen to the screen, still typing furiously. The chair rolled slowly out from under him like a ghost had pulled it out of his way. He leaned into the keyboard and continued working.

Franklin and Les were in the elevator, Les' hand poised on the control cable, "Come on, you two. NOW!"

Two more short blasts.

“We’re out of time.”

Sheri pulled at the back of Rick’s shirt.

“Got it!” Rick hit the enter key, turned from the keyboard and ran toward the elevator with Sheri in tow.

At the elevator, he stopped, turned to Sheri and said, “You go on.”

He shoved her into the elevator and turned to run back toward the workstation. There he looked back at them, “Go on, I’ll catch up.”

Sheri looked on in horror as Les nodded his understanding, snapped the wire mesh door down in front of them and yanked the control cable. The elevator lurched and scraped and began to rise.

Sheri lunged forward and clutched the wire mesh in her fingers. With her nose sticking through the wire frame, she watched as Rick sat back down at the terminal.

“Rick,” she screamed as loud as she could.

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t even turn. He was once again paralyzed in the arms of some supernatural power that resided deep within the flashing screen and its montage of micro-circuitry.

Franklin put his arm around Sheri and they watched as Rick disappeared behind a steel beam embedded in a dirty concrete wall.

“Rick,” Sheri whispered almost imperceptibly into the darkness.

- 6 -

Franklin and Sheri stood at the guard rail atop of a long ribbed plank. They were aboard a filthy freighter looking down at Les. The stench of rotten fish and diesel fumes gagged Sheri.

One long blast from the steam whistle, deafening from this vantage point, and Les waved up to them. He was standing at the bottom of the plank and motioning to two other men.

One of the men released a lever and the bottom of the plank swung loose from the dock in front of him.

“Where is he?” Sheri screamed at Franklin, almost completely drowned out by another blast from the monstrous steam whistle behind them. Franklin had literally dragged Sheri up the plank onto the ship. She was now screaming and crying and leaning precariously out over the guard rail.

“We have to go back...we have to get Rick.”

“There’s no time Sheri. He’ll catch up to us.”

Franklin’s words felt hollow and empty as they left his mouth. He didn’t believe what he was saying, but he thought that was what he was supposed to say. What Rick would want him to say. Rick was his friend. And it felt funny thinking about it, because he had just met him a day ago.

Yet, he felt like it had been a lifetime ago. Certainly they had shared a lifetime worth of experiences in that short time.

They had looked into the face of death together—and beaten it. Faced the bleakness of their past and helped carve out a new future together.

Franklin was overcome by a torrent of unexplainable emotions. Franklin never dealt much with his feelings. He rarely had to. But now, as the other workman connected a steel cable with a hook on it to the plank below, Franklin was seized by panic and remorse. A sense of loss that he could neither comprehend nor except settled in his chest and made it hard to breathe.

Acting only on instinct, Franklin bolted down the plank as it began to swing back and forth and rise through the air.

“Wait! WAIT!” he shouted, waving his arms wildly over his head.

A look of horror and disbelief covered Les’ face and he began waving Franklin back, “You crazy fool...get the hell off of there. You’re going to break your damn skull.”

From nowhere, Rick appeared behind Les, out of breath and leaning forward onto his knees for support.

Franklin froze, clinging to the guide ropes on both sides of the plank as it swung back and forth in the air like a conductor’s baton. Les yelled something to one of the men and the plank jerked and bounced and then began, slowly, to descend.

- 7 -

At The Board of Policy, it was dark and quiet. It was well past five o’clock, but few at The Board actually had regular work hours. Results were all that was important, not the hours spent or rigid rules about who should be where or when.

An informal session of Directors had just been adjourned in the master conference room. Several of the men still sat at the huge table, engaged in idle chit-chat. Two of the men stood in the doorway, recapping the high points of the evening meeting.

“How do you think the new restricted access hours for unauthorized users on the Inter-Link is going to be received?”

“I think it will be received better than expected.”

“Really?”

“Yea, it’ll should also cut down on the number of infiltration terminations per month. To Enforcement that means less man hour costs.”

Three other men walked down the hall. One of these, The Director of Technology. As he rounded the corner toward his office he turned and bid goodnight to the other two gentleman.

Bang! Bang!

The Director could not immediately comprehend what he was seeing. His ears were ringing and, in front of him, one of the other men was falling in slow motion, with two large red spots on his chest.

The shots had apparently been fired from behind, by the way the skin and material in the man’s suit was blown outward. Spatters of blood clung to the Director’s face like small droplets of spring rain.

The next shot caught the man to his immediate right, in the back of the neck. There was the sound of saltine crackers breaking over a bowl chili and the man’s head cocked

sideways like a rag doll. He gurgled and clutched at his throat, while blood spewed out of his mouth in an arch and he too, fell to the floor.

Standing behind the two men on the floor and directly in front of Director, was one of the building's security guards. With the other two men on the floor, the guard and Director were the only ones left standing in the hallway.

There was an almost imperceivable scar in the guard's temple. The surgeries had been done carefully, on routine check ups, over a long period of time. And no one at The Board had even realized that all the guards and staff members had been fitted with their own, personally coded, implants. Their own personal link to the Halcyon signal. Inextricably linked to the will of The Board and its master, *Enforcement*.

Now, the guard stood, eyes rolled back in his head, with his automatic weapon stretched out in front of him. His face was shaking and pale. His mouth open slightly with a thin line of saliva running down the side of his chin, where it hung—momentarily frozen in time—then dripped to the floor with a plop.

In the background a woman was screaming and three more gun shots filled the air. The Director's head filled with ringing until he could hear nothing else.

His eyes were drawn, uncontrollably, to the guard's finger on the trigger of the gun. Time hung, unmoving, while the Director stared at the trigger, waiting for the guard to squeeze.

Out of the corner of his eye the Director saw the gurgling man, sprawled out on the floor in front of him. The man began to shake and spasm in the pool of blood, all the time

clutching the wound in his neck with both hands.

The Director squinted as the guard's finger tensed and the trigger began to move backwards.

Bang! BANG! BANG!

The Director dropped to his knees as hot urine ran down the inside of his leg.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

Chunks of wood flew from a side door as bullets erupted from its surface. The door flew open, revealing one of the other guards. He was emptying his weapon into the first guard, through what was left of the splintered door.

The first guard dropped his gun and turned in place as shot after shot cut through his mid section. He finally fell forward and landed on top of the other two victims. There, they all lay motionless, in a pile of human rubble.

The new gunman turned to face the Director and then stepped into the hallway. His eyes too, were rolled back into his skull—glassy white with eyelids twitching madly. He pointed his gun at the Director, cowering on the floor.

On the floor, the Director was kneeling in a pool of his own piss. When he saw the dead guard fall in front of him, he realized that he hadn't been shot. That he was still alive.

Clutching his arms across his chest and breathing in short punctuated gasps, he looked up into the guard's white eyes and saw no trace of life in them. They were flat and cold. He covered his face with his hands and began to pray.

“Please God...oh, please,” he mumbled into his palms.

Click. Click. Click.

The guard repeatedly pulled the trigger, but the clip was empty. From down the hall, the quick rattle of automatic gunfire punctured the air. More screaming.

“No...stop...no, please!” came a blood curdling scream from down the blackened hallway.

Bang. Bang. And the screams were silenced.

The guard popped the empty clip out of his gun and it fell onto the floor with a clank. He fumbled for another from his belt, popped the fresh clip in and cocked his weapon. Without taking aim, he placed two shots into the top of the Director’s skull.

A blood spattered officer ran down the hall behind him, shooting aimlessly into the air. He ran to one of the glass doors that lined the hallway and then screamed wildly before smashing his face through it. With blood pouring from his cheeks, he began shooting through the broken door into the empty room, laughing hysterically.

The guard’s eyes momentarily returned to normal as he stood next to the dead Director and watched the officer run off down the hall and fall down an open stairwell.

A blank expression covered the guard’s pale white face as his eye lids once again began to twitch rhythmically. He lifted the gun barrel to his mouth and gently squeezed the trigger.

Bang.

Chapter Twenty Four

REFUGE

- 1 -

Sheri, Rick and Franklin sat at a long rectangular table. The captain of the freighter sat at the head of the table and several of his officers sat to his left, across from the three refugees.

The ship's mess had a low ceiling and several metal poles poked out of the floor and connected to the riveted metal above their heads. A man with a big floppy chef's hat was digging big scoops of something that resembled stew, from a large metal container on a cart immediately behind the captain.

The captain was a large, burly man. His fluffy dark brown beard was speckled with tiny streaks of gray. Deep crows feet at the corners of his eyes, gave him the appearance of an evil clown. He had a laugh that was as loud as the ships horn, and when he spoke it seemed to shake the rivets in the ceiling above.

"You just about missed your ride, kids," the captain boomed as his spoon plunged deeply into the bowl in front of him.

Sheri and Franklin both turned to Rick, who was sitting between them. The look of irritation on their faces seemed to amuse Rick. And that just infuriated them more. He smiled and held his bowl up for his fair share of the spicy smelling meaty-goo.

"What was so goddamn, fucking important back there?" Sheri's eyes shot out little lightning bolts as she spat the words at him. Rick continued to ignore her and took a

mouthful of the chef's surprise.

The captain and his officers exchanged glances and then laughed loudly. A sailor's mouth, on a beautiful creature, as frail looking as Sheri, was something they were not accustomed to. Sheri's cheeks were turning red.

"Ma'am," the chef's outstretched hand asking for her empty bowl.

"Fuck you, too."

The room erupted into howls of laughter.

"Fuck all of you." Sheri crossed her arms tightly in front of her and pushed her chair back away from the table.

Sheri just sat, quietly, and fumed as everyone wiped their eyes, caught their breath and returned to their meals.

"What *was* so important?" the captain asked tearing a chunk of bread from a loaf and dipping it in his stew.

Rick reached for the loaf, smiled and looked up at him, still carefully ignoring Franklin and Sheri.

"It was one of the user groups on the Halcyon wave User-Scan-Index."

The captain looked confused but it didn't affect his appetite and he continued shoveling the spoon into his face.

Rick knew that he had no idea what he was talking about, but the explanation was really for Sheri and Franklin's benefit, not the captain's.

"Before the worm program could execute and begin destroying the implants." Rick

turned slightly to catch Sheri's reaction, "I sent a signal to one of the user groups in the list."

The captain squinted hard at Rick, but didn't seem to mind that he hadn't the faintest clue to what Rick was talking about. In went another heaping spoonful of slop.

Rick turned fully sideways to Sheri. "I sent an *aggression #10* signal." Rick turned all the way around to face Franklin, "to all the guards at The Board of Policy."

"Is that a bad thing?" the captain asked from behind a mouthful of food, "that *aggression* thing?"

Rick turned back to face the man with an enormous smile. He turned his head slowly back to Franklin, then to the captain and finally to Sheri.

"Yea," Rick said as he brought a dripping spoonful up in front of his face, blew on it, and then shoved it into his mouth. "I think it's a real bad thing."

- 2 -

Sheri lay face down on a large beach towel, half asleep from the sound of the gentle surf washing against the beach. Franklin was sitting next to her in one of those half-chairs with the short legs.

"Hand me a beer, please, Franklin."

Franklin smiled at Rick, who was sitting in the sand on the other side of Sheri. He took the lid off the Styrofoam cooler and handed a bottle across Sheri's back, to Rick.

"Hey, watch it," Sheri snapped as droplets of ice cold water dribbled onto her back.

Sheri rolled over and sat up, reaching for the bottle of sun tan lotion at her feet. She

looked out across the ocean and it was hard for her to believe that it was true. The beach was nearly deserted during the off season and the three of them spent a lot of their time outside.

“Are you working tomorrow, Franklin?” Sheri asked, rubbing lotion up the outside of her leg.

“No, me and Karen are going into town.”

“Oooh,” Rick didn’t look up from the paper he was reading, “you and Karen are getting to be quite an item, uh?”

“She’s a nice girl. She’s not like that Rick.”

“Uh, uh.” Rick’s sarcasm hung heavily on each syllable.

Franklin grabbed a handful of ice from the cooler and flung it at Rick. Rick, calmly, blocked nearly all of it, by raising the paper in front of his face.

It had been three months since the freighter had dropped them at the unidentified port. The goodbyes had been brief and the captain cordial when he had wished them the best.

They had gotten jobs, working for a small beach side resort. Not a nice, fancy, plush one, but a run down, kind of working man’s resort. Staff was allowed to live in some of the old guest rooms on the in-land side of the hotel. The three of them were allowed to share one such molding room.

An old torn sheet on a piece of twine separated Sheri’s and Rick’s bedroom from Franklin’s. The cramped quarters might have given rise to tension among any other individuals. But these three shared a special bond. Something they’d lived through

together. Their connection was strong and their love for each other had grown and made them into a kind of family.

“Any beer left?” Sheri stopped rubbing her legs to squint through the sunlight at Franklin.

“Sorry, Rick got the last one.”

“Shit.”

Rick grinned as he took an overly dramatic drink from the bottle.

“Franklin, will you go buy another six-pack?” Sheri begged.

“Can’t. Broke.” Franklin looked up the beach at a flock of gulls streaming through a cloud in perfect formation. Sheri turned to Rick and put on her best pouty face. “Will you by me a beer honey?” Sheri batted her eyes heavily.

“Can’t. Broke.”

“Shit!” Sheri’s put-on face quickly faded as she smacked Rick’s paper with the back of her hand.

Rick put the paper down and looked lovingly at Sheri. She hated when he did that. It made her heart hurt. Rick smiled and talked softly.

“Look...we’re broke as hell. We live in an utter shit hole. It stinks. The water’s a funky color and the toilet backs ups every time Franklin eats oysters. The cock roaches are bigger than a small cat and the cats are actually afraid of the rats.”

Sheri was looking down at her towel feeling guilty. Franklin was still watching the sea gulls. They had swooped down in front of an old man with a metal detector. He wore

tattered shorts, no shirt and was carrying a big shopping bag. Probably full of beer pull tabs, small change and lost car keys.

“We work ten hours a day, six days a week, trying to eak out a feeble existence here. The pay stinks and that ass-hole we work for has brain damage. He’s a dick with ears and sometimes I just want to wrap my hands around his skinny little neck and squeeze every last bit of shit right out of him.”

Sheri was playing with the cap on the lotion bottle, trying desperately to avoid eye contact while Rick was in one of his speech giving moods. Franklin continued to watch the man sweep the metal detector back and forth as he made his way up the beach toward them. Occasionally, he would stop, stoop down and dust off something. After examining it carefully, he would either chuck it or add it to the collection in the bag.

“Yet, for all the grief and aggravation...I have never been happier in my life.”

Rick took a deep breath from the moist salty air and looked around at the picture in front of him. Sand and water. Sun and surf. Blue sky and white billowy clouds. The gulls and the man with the metal detector coming toward them. Rick reached out and held Sheri’s head up and looked straight into her eyes.

“Life is great...and I don’t want to hear anymore of your whining.”

“Oh, Rick,” Sheri leaned forward and put her arms around him, “piss on you. It’s real easy to talk like that when you’re the one who got the last beer” she giggled and chewed on his ear. Rick handed her the nearly empty bottle and Sheri smiled coyly.

“Thank you, honey.”

“Howdy,” Franklin was addressing the man with the metal detector.

Sheri turned around in surprise. He was standing just a few feet in front of her and wearing a large straw hat that obscured his face from view.

“I believe I’ve got something that belongs to you,” the man said while extending the open shopping bag toward Sheri.

The sun lay high in the sky behind him and it glistened through the tips of the straw in his hat. Sheri squinted and brought her hand up over her eyes.

“Belongs to me?” Sheri was waiting for the guy to ask them for a hand out. Wouldn’t that be a laugh. The blind leading the blind.

As the man moved the bag slowly toward her, Sheri raised her hand to block the sun’s glare. Then, the contents at the bottom of the bag came into focus.

The man dropped the bag at Sheri’s feet and stood for a moment, before lifting his head, exposing his face from behind the brim of the large straw hat.

“Kirk?” Sheri heard the name stick in her throat.

“Shhhh,” he mouthed with his lips, but no sound came out. “I’m putting you in great danger by even coming here,” he said as he switched on the metal detector, turned and began to wave it back and forth across the sand.

“But...Kirk,” Sheri said to his back.

Kirk stopped and turned back to face her, “This isn’t the time. I can’t stay. They’re still tracking me. I’m still hot as shit. Trust me, you’ll be fine here.”

He winked at Sheri and looked down at the bag. Then he turned and walked off down

the beach.

Sheri grabbed the bag, in a daze, and dumped it out on the towel in front of her. To Franklin's surprise, it actually did contain some small coins, beer tops and a few keys. But there was also three large bundles of the currency and three black passbooks.

Rick and Franklin stared at Sheri as she slowly paged through the little black books.

"Well?" Franklin was the first to ask.

"What is it?" Rick leaned closer to get a better look.

Sheri's head raised slowly to meet Rick's eyes. "it's the dummy accounts. Three of 'em."

Sheri looked back down at the open book in her hand and then back at Rick. "Looks like about a million dollars a piece."

Holding the newspaper off to one side, Rick's mouth opened and closed like a fish in a bowl. Sheri sat with disbelief plastered across her face and Franklin rubbed his chin and frowned.

Sheri looked down the beach just in time to see Kirk disappear behind a large rock formation. He was an amazing man. Misunderstood and somehow haunted. Sheri wished that she had had more time to get to know him. She had misjudged him and now she regretted it.

"I wonder if we'll ever see him again?" Sheri pondered out loud, wishing for just one more glimpse of him.

Rick's lips were still moving in a desperate attempt to say something, but no sound

was coming out.

Franklin nodded, “I wonder if he’ll ever see *anyone* again.”

Sheri put the passbooks back in the shopping bag and flung one of the banded rolls of bills at Rick. Sheri rolled over and laid face down on the beach towel.

“I’ll have that beer now, honey.”

The End