

# Traces of Terror

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## PART ONE

*“Computers aren’t smarter than man—never have been. But, as an instrument in the hands of evil . . . well they’re pretty cool.”*

– Scott Nason

## Chapter One

### INDICATIONS

- 1 -

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

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

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

"Where the hell am I?"

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

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

Being immersed in the inability to think or remember anything was unnerving enough, but worse than that was the terrible feeling of disconnected emptiness. Jack was filled with a barren, dry emptiness. He felt hollow like a huge drum. His own heartbeat echoed inside his ribcage with its lonesome thud-thud, seemingly only there to remind him of how empty and lost he really was. Reminding him of how alone he was and that there was nothing else out there.

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

But it was there. And deep inside of his stomach there was a tiny glowing ember of dread. A smoldering piece of caged fear that burned deep within the clutches of the emptiness. Cut off from all other reality, radiating its ominous heat out through the darkness, this menacing dread was growing and it felt as though it was closing in on all

sides of him. As if there were something evil hanging in the air and lurking just around the corner—or right behind him. As if a horrible something was getting ready to happen...or maybe it already had happened. Had something just happened?

He tried desperately to remember something...anything besides his damn name.

*Jack Johnson, Jack Johnson...and you are...?*

He couldn't figure out where he was or how he'd gotten there, but the fog seemed to be clearing and, little by little from within the darkest corners of his mind, Jack Johnson was becoming aware of his surroundings.

Next to his right leg he could see a digital clock sitting on a small end table next to a garage-sale looking lamp with a dingy, off-white, tattered shade. From the burning bulb within, an amber halo lit the splotchy, pale-green wall above the lamp and as Jack followed the light up, he could see an oil painting of an old man and a small boy. They were holding fishing poles and the boy was carrying a small tackle box and looking up at the old man.

Still messaging his temples, Jack studied the picture. The old guy reminded him of the man that used to sell him and brother Popsicles down at Thompson's Market. On Sunday afternoons, they'd collect their allowance and walk down to the corner together. The nice old man behind the counter would ask what flavor and then he'd chop the Popsicle in half with a huge knife so they could split one. The man in the picture was friendly and warm like that and Jack could tell that he cared very deeply for the little boy. And he could see that the little boy was very happy.

“Happy boy,” Jack whispered at the picture as he turned to face the painting directly.

“I’m sorry I can’t remember your name.”

*I can’t remember your name? What a strange thought.* Jack turned to one side, eyes still transfixed on those of the child’s. “Do I know you, little fella?”

With no answer from the picture, Jack coughed and spit some more sour tasting saliva onto the floor before dropping his head into his palms again. A wave of sadness swept over him like a cold dark shadow and the smoldering ember began to burn. Slowly at first, and then faster as the flames began licking at the inside of his rib cage. This dark feeling that was both inside of him and all around him was now growing. Jack clutched his chest and tried to breathe. He could feel his heart pounding inside of his chest. With eyes closed, Jack forced himself to take a long slow breath.

Then he sat straight up and shuddered as if he’d just received an electric shock. Frozen like a statue, he realized that he was *not alone*. He wasn’t exactly sure how he knew, but he could feel it. There was someone lying on the bed behind him. There was no sound, no movement—he just knew that someone was there. Things were becoming clearer. The room was coming into focus and Jack knew without looking, that there was someone on the bed behind him. Without turning around and without a sound, he could feel that *she* was there.

“Oh God,” Jack mumbled.

Not ready, or perhaps not willing to verify this *feeling of a female presence*, Jack returned his head to his hands and waited, almost impatiently, for the nauseous feeling to

return in the hopes that it would offer a needed distraction from this new and unwanted realization. But for now, the nausea was held at bay and Jack was left wondering who this *someone* was.

“Please let me wake up. Please!” Jack was rolling his head in little circles against the heels of his hands. His neck hurt. His head hurt. Hell, his whole body hurt.

*Tell me this is a dream and then let me wake up, that’s all I ask.*

Jack looked up and surveyed the room, half expecting it to have changed into his own bedroom. Everything was blurry and looked like he was seeing it through the bottom of a Coke bottle, but as far as he could tell, he was in a motel room. The washed out green paint covering the walls felt cool and reminded him of the deep lake water in the spring. And there was an odd, pungent odor in the air like the smell of turpentine and overly bleached linens.

On a dresser at the end of the bed a television flashed images of a man in a cowboy hat waving his arms in front of a row of shiny cars, but there was no sound. As the flickering lights from the screen danced across the crumpled sheets at the foot of the bed, Jack could just make out the outline of a pair of feet under the yellowing sheets. So, once again, he forced himself not to look. Forced himself to do anything but look and he turned away. He didn’t want to look. He didn’t want to know and by not finding out, he was somehow insulating himself from the dread that was somehow buried there.

There was a drawer hanging loosely out the dresser, tilting to one side. *Broken maybe?* Jack shook his head twice and tried to clear his vision. He hoped that this was some kind

of awful dream, but his biggest fear was that it was not.

*Look behind you*, the voice beckoned from within the deepest corners of Jack's own thoughts. *Don't you want to know what's behind you? Know who's behind you?*

No. He just wasn't ready to see what was on the bed behind him—yet. So he ignored the voice and continued trying to focus his vision on the precariously hung drawer.

*You can usually tell when you're dreaming*. Jack squinted through the shadows, trying to see the objects in the room more clearly.

*Look behind you.*

*Dreams have an unreal feel to them*. In an alcove off to one side, he could just make out the outline of a discolored white Formica countertop with a sink in the middle of it.

“But this doesn't feel like a dream,” Jack said aloud as everything suddenly popped into focus.

“Whooo.” Jack rubbed his eyes and pressed his them closed a couple of times, making sure that the clarity in his vision remained. This was a motel room. He could see the television and the dresser clearly now and over by the sink, he could see a door with a toilet just beyond.

*Look behind you, Jack, you know you want to.*

*I have to piss*. The thought was more of an attempt to keep from thinking about who was behind him than it was of any earthshaking revelation about having to go to the bathroom.

“That's it...I'm at home in bed and if I don't wake up and get up right now and take a

leak...I'm just going to piss all over myself. Won't that be the shits?"

Jack sighed and rolled his eyes at his childish attempt to explain away the situation. Even if he really couldn't wait to pee, the fact still remained that he was in a motel room and there was somebody behind him on the bed. He didn't know who she was or how she'd gotten there. But this was not a dream. It was more like a nightmare.

The fog from just a few minutes ago had lifted and, although dimly lit, the whole room was now in focus and visible. And now Jack could hear the television. He could hear the whir and rattle of the fan running in the under-window heater unit. He heard the sound of water dripping in the sink and the muffled sound of a television, or maybe a radio, coming from the room next door. He could hear broken pieces of conversation from behind the paper-thin walls too. Something almost like an argument, but he couldn't make out anything more than half broken sentences. From behind a closed curtain, he heard the sounds of car horns and of the traffic out on the street. All of this where there had been only silence just a second ago.

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

Beneath his feet, Jack could now see the matted, mauve colored carpet. He could clearly discern the lingering scent of perfume and the sour smell of day old sweat. The strange combination of the two smells brought an almost imperceptible smile to the corner of his mouth. And there was another more disturbing scent; a tantalizing and

arousing smell that seemed just out of his reach.

*I don't think I'm a drug addict or an alcoholic, am I?*

But that would help explain this whole thing if he was. The awful sense of disorientation and that almost painful nausea he'd felt earlier. The blurred vision and the temporary amnesia. Weren't those all part of the aftermath of massive chemical abuse?

"That must've been one hell of a party." Jack rubbed the back of his neck and looked around the room again, being careful not to turn too far behind him. Actually, he had absolutely no memory of any party, but that had to be it. It must've been some kind of drunken binge. What other explanation could there be?

*Look behind you, Jack. You know she's right behind you. Don't you want to see her? Don't you want to touch her—again?*

What was he so afraid of? Some woman who's name he couldn't remember? Was she that ugly? So repulsive that his subconscious felt compelled to protect him from the very sight of her?

*Look, Jack. Look and see.*

Because as hard as he tried to wish it to be, this was certainly not a dream. This was as severe and as harsh as reality could get and Jack knew it. Jack knew that there was a woman lying on the bed behind him. And Jack knew that, for some reason, he *didn't* want to know that. He didn't want to think about who she was or in what hell-hole-in-the-wall dive he'd picked her up. He just couldn't bear to turn around and look at her.

Because when he allowed his thoughts to drift there, even for a second, the burning

intensified. The ember of dread began to sparkle and to speak to him from deep within. It licked at the inside of his ribcage and crawled up the sides of his throat.

But it seemed that if he wanted to...he could remember. In a way it seemed like it was okay to remember. Almost as if something was urging him to remember. All he had to do was reach down deep enough and take it. If he could do that, he could find all the answers he wanted. But he couldn't do that. He wasn't ready to do that. He was too afraid to walk down that road—yet. He just wanted to forget whatever it was that he couldn't remember. What he wanted more than anything else was to just forget everything and not to be there anymore.

So he just sat. Sat and tried to feel nothing. Nothing but that damnable burning in his gut. That feeling of uncontrollable dread. The fear that had become part of his stomach lining and was threatening to expel itself violently at any moment. Jack tried to swallow the burning lump in his throat and then blew hot air out through his mouth.

*Look behind you. Don't be afraid. Go ahead and take look.*

Jack studied the room, trying to find something to help him remember. Some artifact that would jog it all loose for him. That one item that people with amnesia or head trauma need to bring everything rushing back to them. The room was now crystal clear, well lit and in focus. Jack listened to the sound of the traffic outside and stared at the heavy, dark curtains drawn over the window. Along the bottom edge, sunlight formed a luminous, yellow-white strip along the frayed edge.

*Daytime...*

His eyes widened and glazed over, taking in nothing and yet seeing everything. His mind was hung in that hazy time between aware and unaware. In no hurry to—or maybe afraid to—make his way through this boggling scene he remained there, wide-eyed and thoughtless for several uncounted minutes. Momentarily enjoying the serenity that comes from being lost inside of a completely thoughtless daydream.

“What time is it?” Jack asked the curtains as if half expecting them to answer. He turned and grabbed the clock on the bedside table: *09:33 am*.

*It's morning?* Still dazed, Jack turned and allowed his eyes to drift back up to the oil painting on the wall. Up to the happy boy and the kind and gentle old man. Looking at the picture made him feel good. It helped hold down the burning inside and take his mind off of—.

*But what morning?* Jack's gaze was fixed on the happy child. *I hope I'm not supposed to be at work right now.* Jack poured over the face of the painted child. The happy child. The child frozen in time forever.

“No one will ever be able to hurt you little fella...”

The faint, repetitive, sound of dripping water drew Jack's attention from the picture. Now, as he looked more closely at the sink, he could see an almost empty bottle of Jim Beam laying on its side and several plastic motel glasses scattered around. One of them half filled with watered down bourbon. Across its top, a red smear graced its rim and the site of it made Jack's heart beat faster. The room was getting brighter and clearer with each passing second and the persistent smell of the flowery perfume intensified. As Jack

pulled it in through his nose, it felt familiar. It felt good and it felt exciting.

The rhythmic dripping sound was coming from a soaked hand towel draped over the front of the sink. Blip, blip, blib, came its melodic song as it fed a growing puddle of water on the tile floor beneath.

Over the sink a half visible handprint, fluid and graceful in its arc, was smeared through heavy condensation on the mirror. It was familiar and echoed of some lost memory. As if it was calling to him. Begging him to remember.

Coming from the open bathroom door, steam drifted gently through the air. Bitter smelling steam. Steam mixed with something else...with smoke! Smoke was circling in the air next to his head and Jack snapped back and forth, searching for the source until he found a lit cigarette in an ashtray on the end table. Right next to him. It was burned almost to the filter and the ash hung neatly undisturbed from the end.

*How could I have missed that?* Jack reached for the butt, knocked off the ash and then drew on it hard, filling his lungs with bitter tasting smoke. He coughed as he blew out the smoke and with shaky fingers, mashed it in with a pile of crumpled up filters already in the ashtray. Jack studied the nightstand. For some reason he hadn't noticed before, but now he could see a crumpled pack of Camel Lights, a man's Swiss Army watch and a couple of ugly, green, snap-on earrings. They were the kind his mom used to wear.

*I don't smoke Camel Lights.*

Or was it that he didn't smoke at all? He couldn't remember. He had felt like he needed a drag when he'd picked up the cigarette, but now...well, it tasted nasty and

foreign to him.

*Don't be afraid, Jack? Turn around and have a look. It's okay.*

Jack turned his gaze to the floor as a scattered montage of clothing caught his attention. A pair of blue jeans, a sweat stained T-shirt and a pair of Fruit of the Loom underwear.

*Yes, they're yours, Jack.*

Jack kept looking at the floor. He was almost forced to look at the floor. As if an invisible hand was holding his head down and making him look at it.

*What's on the floor?*

Peeking out from under the jeans was a crisp, white, cotton sundress delicately laced with tiny blue and gray flowers. Next to the dress, a black bra and a tiny pair of light blue panties lay as if they'd dropped purposely on a course to the bed.

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

Jack smiled. He had liked the light blue panties and again, found himself admiring the sweet flowery smell that seemed to be getting stronger. In fact, it was exhilarating.

Her panties. Her. The one on the bed behind him. There wasn't the tiniest bit of doubt now. Again, without knowing why, Jack fought the urge to turn and look. Before he'd seen the clothes on the floor, he was able to at least pretend that she wasn't there. Pretend that he was alone in the room. But now it was impossible to deny. And now he knew who she was too. It was coming back to him. He didn't like it, but everything was coming back to him.

And then it was there. Like an old friend standing on the doorstep; that welcome jolt of adrenaline. That chemical rush that your body instinctively gives you when it's time to act. When it's time to act decisively and quickly. Jack knew that he needed to run, to get dressed and run as far away from this place as he could. Just go and don't look back.

But as sure as he knew that there was a woman on the bed behind him, he knew that running was not only unnecessary, it was impossible. There was nothing to run from, and no place to run to. The futility in trying to escape was alarmingly familiar and Jack had the unnerving feeling that this was not the first time that he'd been caught in this predicament. He'd done this before. More than once. In fact, he'd done this many times before.

*Yes, that's right, Jack. You remember. Good. Now turn around.*

Jack leaned forward and put his head on his knees. He hugged his thighs and rocked back and forth. The bed creaked gently underneath him as if playing an introduction to the realizations that were now pouring in. Now Jack wished he could forget what he had previously tried so hard to remember. He wished he could forget and never remember anything ever again.

He knew exactly where he was and he knew why he was there. And now, he also knew why he'd been so afraid. It was as if his brain had suddenly shifted gears and sped forward to where all the answers were. White-hot panic blinded him and his heart pumped with fury. His sanity was slipping, he felt the cogs in his mind catch and bind and then grind to a screeching halt. The blackest fear he'd ever known engulfed him and

he was sure that he was losing his mind.

With his cheek cradled against his knee, Jack clamped his eyes shut and hugged his legs as tight as he could...until his foot felt something. Something warm and sticky.

*Look at the floor, Jack.*

*No. Fuck you, no!*

*It's okay...really. Everything's going to be alright. Look at the goddamn floor!*

Out some kind of undefined primal need, Jack cracked open one eye, slowly—painfully, and looked down at his feet. Looked down at what he already knew was there but didn't want to see. It was blood. It was lots of blood. It was a pool of blood the size of a big garbage bag and Jack's bare foot was sitting right in the middle of it.

“Ohhh, shit! Fuck me!”

He'd known that it was there. Known all along that it was there. It's the thing he'd been so afraid to remember. It was the reason he was trying so hard not to remember. Now his heart was pounding so furiously that he could taste each thunderous repetition in the back of his throat. Pain shot through the sides of his head and the room began to spin. Jack shuddered violently and then, to his horror and against his wishes, his eyes began to follow the glistening trail of red liquid to the base of the bed. It was as if he needed to follow it. As if every cell in his body was shouting out 'Look jack, look at all that blood!'

A strip of cold flesh shot from his lower back to the base of his skull. He was shaking now but he couldn't stop looking at it. His eye's moved inexorably on their own, following the river of blood up the soaked sheet and onto the side of the bed. Large

crimson drops were still dripping onto the carpet and Jack felt something stir in his groin.

*Jack, it's okay. You can turn around and look now.*

With one explosive, muscular contraction, Jack shot to his feet and spun around on his bloody foot. As his eyes hit the shape on the bed, vomit filled the back of his throat and he was forced to clamp his eyes shut. With one arm wrapped around his belly, Jack swallowed hard and sucked a sharp breath into his lungs, trying desperately to calm his churning insides. The burning ember was now a raging inferno, out of control and lapping at every inside corner of his being. Sweat burst into his eyes and Jack's knees buckled as he stood there with the vision of the mangled body burned into his brain.

With his hand cupped tightly over his mouth, he continued to draw wind between his fingers. But he couldn't keep his eyes closed and he stood, helplessly staring at the mangled corpse that lay draped in the sheets, unable to look away. It was limp, torn and lifeless. It was her. Eyes glassy and staring straight at him. It was her...

"Nooooo!"

Jack reached out trying to keep his balance and knocked over the lamp as he backed away from the bed. The room was spinning hard and Jack swung his arms around, knocking into the painting on the wall. The glass cracked as the picture slid down the wall and bounced once, lodging itself into the bloody pool on the floor.

Jack forced himself to look down at the picture. He tried to keep looking at it. Tried to think about the man and the happy boy, but there was not more *happy*. And just like before, his eyes returned to the horrific scene on the bed. This time the woman's cold

lifeless eyes caught him and turned him inside out. This time he couldn't stop the convulsions and Jack leaned forward, spraying the entire contents of his stomach out from behind his cupped hand—sour green vomit splattering across the wall and the end table. Emotion and confusion overwhelmed him as the walls of his vision once again darkened.

*What the holy hell is going on here? I didn't do this!*

Jack knew that he wasn't capable of such an atrocity, of killing and mutilating another human being...but at the same time, he was sure that he had done this. As sure as he was standing there, naked with puke and blood on his hands, he had murdered her. Brutally tortured, cut her up, and murdered her. That he was sure of.

*I didn't do this.* It was impossible. How could he have done this?

But it didn't really matter how...Jack knew what he'd done. Like he knew that the sun shines and that water is wet, Jack knew that he had killed her. There was no *how and why* right now. The simple fact that it had been done and that *he* had done it seemed satisfying enough at the moment.

*Satisfying? What the fuck?*

Jack wiped the bile from his face and continued his mindless stare at the lump of torn flesh on the bed. He was incapable of taking his eyes from her.

*Am I some kind of schizophrenic madman? A psychopathic killer? How could this be satisfying?*

But that's exactly what it was. Without a doubt, it was definitely one of the most

twisted emotions that he'd ever experienced.

"Satisfying," Jack whispered quietly in disbelief and again became aware of the sensation in his crotch. A throbbing, pounding need. A blinding desire with a mind of its own.

Jack turned his back to the bed and leaned forward. With both hands on his knees, he kept held his eyes shut and tried to breathe. There didn't seem to be enough air in the room to completely fill his lungs. He was panting, but not from sickness or revulsion. Jack had become exhilarated to the point of weakness. And he liked the feeling. He liked it a lot and to Jack's horror, he was smiling. And worse than that, he had a rock hard erection.

"God help me!" Jack stood and shouted at the ceiling before ramming his fist into the soft sheet rock of the wall. He opened his eyes and stumbled toward the sink, doing everything that he could to keep his eyes away from the bed.

Jack turned the handle and stuck his hands under the cold water. It felt clean and cool. As he rubbed his fingers together dried blood melted into burgundy swirls, mixing with the wet vomit as it disappeared down the drain. Jack splashed the cool water onto his face and into his mouth.

His mind was racing out of control. Fear—exhilaration—excitement—anguish. Which was it? He tried in vain to force the image of the mutilated woman from his mind, but it was burned there in indelible detail. He could even see her with his eyes closed. Now the fear was gone and it had been replaced by a strange calmness. Jack was no longer afraid.

He raised his head slowly from the sink and looked at himself in the mirror. It was not his face, but it was not altogether unfamiliar either. It was a face that was searching for something. Hardened in a way and looking older than it probably really was.

Forty...forty-five. Maybe. He *knew* that he was looking at his own reflection, but it felt like he was seeing someone else. Felt like he was looking at a stranger. Searching the strangely common face for some connection, he looked deep into the dark green eyes of this familiar stranger, wishing to find the tiniest glimmer of humanness. But it wasn't there. Behind those eyes—his eyes—he could find only deep, cold emptiness.

Jack studied the lines at the corners of his face and traced his jaw line with the tip of his finger. It was a bony jaw covered with pale, pock marked skin. The day's worth of beard helping to hide the unevenness of his complexion. His nose, centered perfectly on his face, was thin and triangular.

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

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

*Must've been a rough night.*

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

rhythmic bursts.

“What’s happening to me?” he screamed at the stranger in the mirror. “What the goddamn hell is happening to me??” The fear was returning.

An image of a woman struggling for her life flashed in front of him. Jack stood, riveted by the sensation of the memory. He could see her scratching at his chest, swinging and clawing. Another flash—a blinding, white light...and again, the woman. Jack felt the muscles in his abdomen pull tight right below his belly button. His eyes rolled back into his head while the images continued.

Breathing frantically, Jack tried staring straight into the light over the mirror. Tried blinding himself to stop the vision. But it only seemed to make them clearer—sharper and more real.

He could see her trying in vain to get away and then he hit her, hard, in the face with a closed fist. There was no way to escape the pictures flashing in his head. If he would’ve gouged his own eyes out he could not have stopped them now.

She was still looking at him. He was on top of her, straddling her chest and pinning her to the bed. She was so helpless, so fragile. So...in need. Staring straight into him with wide, pleading eyes, whimpering like a mortally wounded animal about to die. Jack clamped his eyes shut but it was no use—the burning white light reflected from the inside out.

Jack leaned against the mirror sobbing. He opened his eyes in desperation and waited for her to reappear. Instead, his reflection in the mirror was the only thing he saw. The

stranger's face was there and the girl was gone. Head still on the mirror, Jack breathed slowly as the memory of the woman begging for her life faded. But there was something attached to that fading memory and it was becoming clearer. Jack liked it. Jack liked it a lot. He wanted it to go on. He wanted to do it again. He had enjoyed the things he had done to this girl and now, Jack found that he was fondling himself.

As the events from the prior evening replayed in his head his emotions were conflicting but at the time he was killing this girl, Jack remembered being filled with a deep sense of contentment—of satisfaction.

*Satisfaction? What the hell?*

A wave of nausea and disgust swept over him, sending his mind into that dizzy, unreal realm again. The room became fluid. It was squishy and ran as if he were looking at it through Kayro syrup. Suddenly, he was covered in cold, sour sweat and his lungs seemed to be cramping and seizing up. Jack leaned over the sink and heaved again but nothing really came up.

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

And then he was in the shower.

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

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

Although he was still a little afraid, there was an odd parity now. He couldn't completely comprehend it, but it made perfect sense. He felt no remorse. At least for the moment, the horror of what he had done was masked. He understood its magnitude and yet, he was unmoved by it. As if his emotions were controlled elsewhere. Jack smiled a wry little smile and moved his head around under the stream of hot water and masturbated. The shower made him feel better and before getting out, Jack masturbated again, this time thinking about the fun that he'd had with the girl the night before.

Still drying his hair with a hand towel, Jack grabbed his clothes from the floor and then just stood for moment, looking. On the bed in front of him, lay the tangled mess of sheets and flesh. What had started out as bright happy shades against a white back drop was now darker, thicker. Almost stiff looking. The beauty in this moment was already

fading. Jack dressed himself in front of the mirror, combed his hair with his fingers and began to whistle softly, ‘You Light up My Life.’

While rubbing a hole in the condensation on the mirror he noticed it. Why hadn’t he seen it before? There was writing on the mirror, right above the sink. In bright red letters, diagonally across the mirror it read:

*“let me help you”*

When did I write that?

*I didn’t write that?*

Turning his attention to the countertop, he began searching for what he knew was there. He pushed the glasses aside and moved the dripping hand towel, carefully looking under it. Back and forth, scanning the surface of the counter.

*It’s got to be here.*

And it was. Jack picked up the tube of lipstick and uncapped it carefully in front of his face. Watching the glistening tip in the mirror, he twisted it slowly and watched the bright red shaft rise from within the gold sparkling sheath. Jack’s wide eyed stare fixated on the object and a tiny little smile crept into the corner of his mouth. He watched as the light caught the end of it—gleaming and shining as he rolled it back and forth between his fingers. Again, Jack rubbed his pelvis against the edge of the counter as he moved the lipstick up and down—in and out. Totally transfixed by its beauty. By its simplicity of form and its remarkable ability to catch and reflect light.

Jack rubbed himself harder against the counter and continued to roll the lipstick,

slowly up and down. This was the most wonderful thing that he'd ever seen. Bright, bright red. Smooth and so shiny. Glistening and sparkling. Perfect in its form and fluid motion.

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

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

"Time to go," he said as he turned from the sink and caught the empty stare of the girl on the bed.

"I'm sorry, lady luck."

Jack grabbed his ski jacket from the arm-chair as he walked toward the door. Now he was running on 100% instinct. He felt like he knew exactly what he was doing, and still he had no idea what he was doing. Kind of like watching a movie and being in it all at the same time. He reached for the doorknob and looked back at the room one more time.

*That's odd.* The room was brighter now, lit up like a goddamn Broadway stage show. *Wasn't it darker earlier?* Now it was so brightly lit that he had to squint just to see an outline of the room. The walls were bright white and shimmering with sparkling beads of light. They looked like they were melting. It was too damn bright. *Why?*

Jack's heart bounced off the inside of his ribcage when he saw the curtains. They were

wide open and sunlight was streaming into the small room like the shower of water from a fire hose. And to Jack's horror, through the window was a clear view of the parking lot and the street beyond. Which meant that from the parking lot, there was a clear view of this room. A clear view of the bloody, hacked up body!

"Crap!"

Jack reacted with an explosion of energy. He ripped the door open and shot into the hallway without even checking to see if anybody was out there. He wasn't thinking about getting caught or about the horror of what he'd done. He wasn't thinking about anything. He was just acting. All he knew was that he had to get away. Far away...and then everything would be better. Everything would be okay if he could just get away from this place.

He ran down the hallway and plowed into the first door with an exit sign over it. Out into the daylight, the bright sunshine blinded him and the cold fall air bit at his ears. Jack turned up the collar on his jacket and, holding his hand up to block the sun's rays, he made his way through the parked cars toward the street. Faster, faster. There were too many people now. And too much light. Too bright. He couldn't find his way. He bumped into a young couple, holding hands.

"Hey...watch it asshole!"

Jack raised his eyes to the city skyline, puffy white clouds spun around him like a chaotic carousel. Jack squinted and stumbled and bumped into somebody else. So dizzy...so bright. The buildings were everywhere...and growing. Rising up around him

like huge carnivorous dinosaurs. Closing in on him. Jack felt small. He couldn't breathe. He heard voices...all around him...and in the distance...indistinguishable from the roar of the passing traffic. Cars whizzed by on the street next to him. Approaching like rockets and then blurring in slow motion as they passed. The faces behind the windows glaring in silent accusation. The empty faces. Cold and expressionless. Staring as if they knew. Accusing him.

Flash. The bright light blurred his sight.

*Please don't hurt me...*

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

Flash—again with the blinding light.

*Please...oh God, no...*

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

“Stop it!!!!” Jack screamed in horror, clutching his head tightly with both hands as people began to stop and stare.

Like snow in a glass globe, the leaves swirled in the wake of the passing cars and rose from the curb in little dancing spirals. A crowd of people gathered around as Jack clung to the light pole, kneeling and squinting up at them.

“Is he okay?” asked the man wearing a tattered jean jacket.

“I don't know he just fell down...” the voices trailed off and then everything went

white. And silent.

- 2 -

Randy's eyes flinched as he looked over each screen carefully. The only light in the tiny dark room was the royal blue haze radiating from the bank of computer screens.

There were a dozen or so, neatly lined up across the counter in front of him.

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

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

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

In the background, the air was filled with hums and beeps and an occasional clicking sound. The research control room looked like something out of a NASA promotional film. And he chuckled to himself every time he realized that, as a kid, he would have thought this was "a Really cool and most excellent job . . . man."

When he stood to stretch, he leaned on the flat surface in front of him, deliberately cracking his knuckles with his weight. The clipboard that hung from the console by a ratty piece of string, mocked him with meaningless tabulations of the last six hours. It

eluded his grasp as he reached for it, swinging itself to and fro at the end of its rope.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Entry level means shit job . . . this isn't like a janitor or something like that is it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“As interesting as fish tits, Pops.” Randy said taking one final look across the line of monitors before stretching from the swivel chair and moving toward his coat that was hung on the wall. He grabbed it and pulled it on with sluggish effort. He took one step

toward the open door, then turned to face Pops. As a greenish spray of light erupted from one of the computer screens, Randy could see Pops' face clearly.

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

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

"You don't seem too excited about this one, kid." Pops asked enthusiastically.

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm tired . . . going home." Randy turned toward the still open door and then back at

Pops one more time.

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

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

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

“See ya in the morning Pops.”

- 3 -

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

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

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

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

the pit of his stomach and his skin was clammy - almost to the point of being sweaty.

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

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

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

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

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

"Where am I?" the words felt thick and airy as they passed over his lips. Because he had expected her to be there, he felt comfortable asking the question – even though he

couldn't really see her.

"Don't try to talk right now. Would you like some more water?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even as he spoke, he was having trouble remaining coherent enough to carry on a conversation. He was just too weak and he was drifting again. Falling into the white wash and the haze. He could still hear the angel talking, but her words were thick and muffled and hung from her lips like syrup.

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

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

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

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

“Jack . . .”

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

Jack could feel himself sliding again. The angel’s thick slurred speech was now unintelligible and Jack found himself retreating into the comfort of the darkness. Occasionally making out a word or a phrase. And trying desperately to talk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then Jack could feel himself slipping back to wherever it was that he had just come from. Only this time he embraced it. Jack wanted to go home. He wanted to sleep

for a week and just be left alone. There was now comfort in the darkness. It became his new friend and Jack released himself to its solace.

- 4 -

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

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

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

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

"That's just sick Pops."

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

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

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

He knew the answer though. He had found THE house and he was saving, hoarding,

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

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

"Yea, I'm fine Pops. Just a little tired, that's all."

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

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

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

"Look, I've only got three more weeks and then . . ."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pops bent forward, still hacking, and held up his index finger signaling Randy to wait just one minute for him to answer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- 5 -

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

Todd’s refrained perspective on this was refreshing for a change. Usually it was Jack that held tight to the reins of a new project. Jack was always the cautious one while Todd

consistently threw caution to the wind. But today, the tables had turned.

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

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

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

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

“But it’s just a game, not brainwashing,” Jack’s tone was a calm and even.” When it’s over . . . it’s over and everyone goes home to momma – case closed.” His steps slowed as he passed a sporting goods store with a depth finder in the window.

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

At another window, Todd turned and shoved his hands in his pockets then admired an outrageously loud red tie hanging on a bright green mannequin. Then, without turning to

face Jack, he spoke directly at the plate glass window.

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

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

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

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

Todd’s reply sounded almost apologetic. Jack maintained a two step lead just so Todd couldn’t see the puzzled look on his face. Todd was going somewhere with this and Jack couldn’t figure out where. As Jack replayed the conversation in his head, he could see now that he’d been dominating it far too easily. Todd must’ve had an ace that he hadn’t played yet - and that thought made Jack nervous.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The warm sun covered their faces as the two made their way up the sidewalk to the

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

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

As they topped the last step to the restaurant, the sound of a street musician strumming a classical guitar floated up between the towering buildings. Jack loved the street performers. They brought beauty to a not so beautiful city. This place where people put on costumes and masqueraded as someone they were not was filled with ugliness and neglect. The music helped Jack feel just a little bit more at home in a place he was not so comfortable in. Todd hated street performers.

"I wish they would outlaw pan handling," Todd grumbled.

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

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

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

Inside, Jack was seated directly across from his older brother, at a corner table in this,

their favorite restaurant. This had become their place. A place where they discussed the Company's most important projects and reminded themselves of each other's importance. They chose this place because it was the epitome of civility. Classical music whispered its melody and the flame at the tip of each candle seemed to dance in harmony with it.

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

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

Jack and Todd weren't rich and pompous . . . just rich. They were co-owners of an enormously successful, privately held firm called VTech Systems. VTech specialized in the development and manufacture of super high tech video games - along with a dozen or so other businesses. Electronics research, psycho-acoustics, even some hush-hush work for the defense department.

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

But comfort wasn't what they were looking for right now. And Jack and Todd had become good friends with Ed Holmes, the young entrepreneur that had hocked his house

to buy the failing restaurant only two years earlier. Now he appeared in nationwide articles and respected publications on everything from the best wine to new trends in dining.

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

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

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

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

The ends, always disobedient, flipped upwards toward the sky.

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

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

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

He was taller than Jack by almost two inches but they both had their dad's broad shoulders. He had a lean, muscular physique and carried himself almost arrogantly. He was the dashing older brother.

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

Standing a little under six feet tall, he was thicker and more muscled than his older brother. Jack never went to a gym and was unimpressed with muscle definition. He was more of the outdoorsman type. His hands were rough and burly from working on his land

and chopping his own fire wood. He had collected every stone for the massive fireplace in his house and the circumference of his forearms spoke of that effort.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell me about Bigger, Better, Faster, More." Jack reluctantly returned to the conversation started on the street.

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

Jack's expression indicated the need for clarification.

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

"Stop it!" Jack stared at his brother in complete astonishment. Jack was off balance

and now Todd was in the drivers seat. So he seized the opportunity and drilled forward.

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

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

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

Todd looked straight into Jack’s eyes with a cold calculating stare that made Jack shiver on the inside. Jack looked up briefly then pretended to read the menu.

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

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

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

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

“I’m serious, Jack. I don’t think you understand what we’re dealing with here. About

the problems associated with certain compulsive obsessive personalities.”

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

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

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

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

“No,” Jack said softly - now less interested in the argument than simply the process of baiting his big brother,” I believe it wouldn’t affect my most *basic convictions*.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“If you trust shit.” Todd blurted out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Todd continued to scowl in the other direction. Showing no signs that he was listening

to his little brother's prodding. He didn't need Jack to remind him of how or why they started this company.

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

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

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

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

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

Jack seemed to stay so far ahead of the curve, that they could sell their technology to other companies even after they had basically used it up. After they had moved on to the

next level. They began concentrating on more and more research and development. They landed a couple of military contracts. They worked with just about every major computer company and in the end, they had more outstanding patents than Thomas Alva Edison.

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

"Do you remember?" Jack repeated the question.

"Of course do." Todd sighed heavily

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

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

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

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

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

"Alright," Todd said rubbing his chin with his index finger. "I'll believe you . . ."

Jack really didn't like the way that sentence just kind of hung in the air like that.

Something else was coming. Todd had that damn look in his eyes again and Jack felt a little funny.

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

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

“What exactly do you mean by that?”

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

Jack was painfully confused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ever since they had become financially successful, money had lost its meaning – well,

at least for betting purposes. So Todd started this dollar bet thing. It seemed to accentuate the principal of what they were arguing about. Like it had *more* impact because there was no great sum of money involved. Only the principal.

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

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

It had an uncomfortably child-like resonance. Reminiscent of playing in the woods when they were kids.

"Oh, yea?"

"Yea."

"Oh, yea?"

"Yea."

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

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

"Waiter, we'd like to order now." Todd slapped the menu down on the table and

grinned incessantly at his brother.

Jack wasn't hungry any more.

- 6 -

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

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

Jack wrapped his arms tightly across his chest for warmth and looked down at his feet. He remembered a ski jacket with the collar wrapped tightly around his ears. He wished he had that jacket with him now. He tried hard, but couldn't remember where he had left it. At the moment all he had on were blue-jeans and a white T-shirt. The flesh on his bare arms prickled in the cold air and he rubbed his hands over them vigorously to warm himself.

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

Besides a welt under his left eye, he found nothing that could explain the substantial amount of wet blood on his shirt. It covered a V-shaped area from right under his chin, to

the bottom of the shirt. Jack felt his lips with his fingers and ran his tongue over his teeth and gums, looking for any cuts or broken skin. Nothing.

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

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

"What the hell?"

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

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

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

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

When he made it to the door, Jack sprung to his feet and hit the release plunger repeatedly and with both hands. It didn't move. Frantically, he pounded on it, ripping a chunk of fingernail from his index finger. He doubled his fists and pounded on the door, screaming at the top of his lungs.

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

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

Jack continued pounding for almost a full minute before the cold and the fear weakened him to the point of exhaustion. Then he fell to his knees, still facing the door

and sobbing like a child. His fierce pounding, now just a pitiful thumping.

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

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

With more desperation than concentration, Jack got down on his hands and knees and began to move toward the far wall. Surely there had to be another way out. Away from the bloody corpse. As far as he could possibly get.

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

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

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

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

He cupped his hand tightly over his mouth, fighting against the growing rumbling in his gut. Jack heaved twice as his stomach wrenched itself into a tight little ball. The back of his throat filled with biting hot bile and he sucked as much air as he possibly could in through his nose. Jack leaned his head back against the cool metal wall and fought hard against the all encompassing dizziness. Eyes closed, still breathing deeply, Jack could feel his heart rate slow.

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

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

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

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

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

"Good," Jack said, rubbing himself harder than before.

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

Jack screamed, curled into a ball and covered his head with both of his arms.

Whimpering, he scrambled blindly to the corner of the room and fell into it as if it were some kind of divine sanctuary. He covered his face and ground his forehead against the cold metal as tears ran down his cheeks.

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

Flash. Flash!

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

Flash.

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

Flash.

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

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

Flash.

FLASH!

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

Flash. Flash!

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

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

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

**‘let me help you’**

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

## Chapter Two

### IMPLICATIONS

- 1 -

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

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

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

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

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

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

Detective Blakely looked around the office again. Perched on the edge of the big, comfortable arm chair, he leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. He laced his fingers together and sat rubbing his thumbs back and forth, waiting for her to finish.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Detective looked thoroughly unimpressed.

"I've been involved in clinical criminal psychology for the last nine years. I've earned

dual Masters in Police Science and Criminology as well as a full doctorate in Criminal Psychology.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Now,” she chirped, “Captain Edwards assured me of your complete cooperation in

this matter, Detective. I'm fairly certain that we don't need to call him. Don't you agree?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Betsy pulled a thin file folder from her desk drawer as the two uniformed officers placed the heavily shackled man in one of the chairs in front of her. He sat with both feet flat on the floor and his knees about a foot apart.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're the psychiatrist aren't you?" The man's eyes sparkled momentarily as he leaned forward in the chair.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Betsy had been asked to consult on the case six months earlier, after the eighth

murder. Eventually, it was Betsy's in depth description of what motivated Leonard that led to his capture. And that was certainly what he must've meant by *the* psychiatrist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're the reason they caught me, aren't you?" The sound of genuine intrigue in his

voice continued to please as well as concern Betsy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leonard smiled thoughtfully and, although she didn’t know why, suddenly Betsy was

overwhelmed with an exhilarating feeling of conquest. As if she were on the edge of new discoveries about the human psyche and our deepest motivations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We now have the ability to record the minute electrical activity that makes up our

conscious and subconscious thought patterns.” Betsy paused to study Leonard’s reaction, but he maintained his air of guarded interest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During that time, Dr. Archer had been allowed to collect the sample data from Leonard as he lay in the guarded hospital room. He had been unconscious and there was no opportunity to interact with him. The whole thing would have been more effective in

the sleep lab – the little room down the hall that Betsy used to monitor and record people with sleep disorders – but, this was all she had to work with so she had jumped at the chance. Today’s comparison was going to be invaluable in furthering the understanding of Leonard’s motivations . . . as long as he could be persuaded to cooperate.

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

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

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

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

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

“Because there will be a disc with your name on it, Leonard.” Betsy glanced only briefly at him, but she knew what he was thinking before she saw his face.

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

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

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

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

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

Out of cute dialogue, Betsy found herself holding her breath and staring helplessly. Again, she caught herself losing on the battle of wills and tried desperately to maintain a strict poker face. In reality, she was portraying a much stronger position than she felt like

she was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leonard opened his eyes slowly and looked up at the women standing in front of him. His eyes crossed slowly across Betsy’s chest before reaching her face. “Like the old up/down, black/white, in/out exercise, huh doc?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Betsy adjusted the brightness and intensity on these two screens then turned her

attention to the amber monitor. The top line, that of the control group was nearly still.

While in contrast, the bottom line - Leonard's current activity - was moving slightly with occasional spikes poking up through the top line. Betsy felt another surge of excitement rush across her and she could feel her heart begin to beat harder.

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes Doctor Archer?”

“I want you to close your eyes.”

Leonard complied happily and without hesitation.

“And try to relax.”

Leonard smiled and leaned back in the chair.

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

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

Do you understand, Leonard?”

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

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

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

“Here’s the first situation, Leonard: Picture yourself on a perfectly white sandy beach,” Betsy turned to glance quickly at the monitors then returned to her script.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No Doctor Archer, nothing else.”

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

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

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

“But I can’t really make it out.”

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

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

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

“No, Just the birds. Nothing else.”

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

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

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

“Good, Leonard. GOOD. What else?”

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

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

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

Three more spikes . . . and a fourth. Leonard’s closed eyes squinted together tightly

and he leaned forward as if stretching to see the invisible birds.

“They’re . . . diving into the water. Like little Kamikaze pilots.”

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

“Go on Leonard . . . the birds are diving?”

“Yes, Dr. Archer,” Leonard’s expression grew sullen,” it looks like they’re pecking at something.”

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

“Yes, they’re pecking and swooping, swooping and pecking.”

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

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

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

Still closed, Leonard blinked his eyes then began squinting, harder and harder. Now

with an almost pained look on his face, Leonard leaned forward in the chair and started to rock back and forth slowly.

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

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

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

“Is it a fish, Leonard?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Betsy felt goose flesh start to ripple across the base of her neck. “What makes you think there’s blood in the water, Leonard?”

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

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

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

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

"Why, Leonard?" she insisted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then, she realized that her pencil was lying on the desk and that she hadn’t taken

any notes for, what seemed like, several minutes. She quickly grabbed the pencil and pretended to make a notation in the file.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And I know it’s your fucking eyeball ‘cause the upper half of your severed carcass is

laying here on the beach with me.” Leonard was shouting and laughing now. And spit was spattering from his lips onto her desk. He leaned forward in the chair again, this time raising slightly off of it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And when I’m done with this little fantasy,” Leonard’s voice had returned to that

surreal ultra-calm of the earlier conversation,” I’m going to help you, Dr. Archer . . . for real.”

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

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

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

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

- 2 -

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

The guy in bed number four was having some kind of reaction - or something. He was babbling incoherently and, although he was securely restrained and obviously unconscious, it appeared that he was trying to get out of bed.

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

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

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

"Come on, come on, come on."

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

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

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

"Shift change in ten minutes . . . Pops, where the hell are you? This one is not the one for us to fuck up on!!!"

Again, the screams echoed from the small television speaker and the man shook

violently back and forth.

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

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

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

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

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

The man in bed number four seized and the bed rolled across the testing area. With out his permission Randy's hand shot forward and pressed the big white button labeled

‘TALK-BACK’.

“Are you all right?”

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

“Fuck me,” Randy mumbled as he watched the screen.

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

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

“What kind of sick shit is going on here?”

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

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

“Stop. Just stop for a minute and think.” Randy was talking to himself but he heard his voice coming back at him from the speakers attached to the monitor. He leaned back and looked at the man in the bed. He had stopped moving and was now lying perfectly still. This was a good sign.

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

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

“Where the hell was the NURSE?”

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

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

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

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

- 3 -

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

Jack was standing in the shadow of a huge oak tree. Its trunk was twice the size of the trash barrel next to it. The branches above swayed and creaked as the leaves swung haplessly back and forth.

In the distance an outdoor theater loomed, empty and dark. A cobble stone walk way

wound through the trees and past the amphitheater, disappearing over the horizon. The moonlight draped monstrous blankets of black shadows beneath the trees and beyond.

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

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

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

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

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

The wind blustered through the trees and they swayed together in a graceful, genuflect before coming to rest again in silence. Jack stepped back into the shadows behind the oak tree and listened as the sound of the footsteps surrounded him. That sound swelled and whirled around his ears like a swarm of bees on a warm October afternoon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why am I doing this?" Jack wondered to himself. But the feeling of sheer exhilaration was becoming overpowering. It was clouding his thoughts. All he could

think about was the girl. The pretty girl.

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

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

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

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

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

Jack watched the girl turn the corner ahead of him and a twinge of panic gripped at his stomach. It twisted his insides in a knot and he trotted forward, leaning into the night.

He peaked cautiously around the corner. He could see no one. Where had she gone? She was just here. She couldn't have gotten far. Find her. Find the pretty girl. Jack was

dazed with a heady sort of fear. He was afraid that the girl had gotten away. And he was also afraid that she hadn't.

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

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

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

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

"Only me . . . and the pretty girl," Jack whispered to himself as he stepped from the sidewalk onto the grass in front of the girl's window.

He slipped into the shadows along the side of the building, out of direct view from the street. For the first time, Jack realized that he had a hard on. This anxious feeling of

anticipation was some how sexual in nature. And instead of being repulsed by this idea, like he should have been, it just made him more excited being aware of it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He slipped through the window on his belly, putting his hands down on the floor in front of him. Swinging his knees around to one side he landed, quietly kneeling in front of the open window. Careful not to make any sudden moves, he turned his head to scan the street. It was deserted. He stood and carefully slid the window shut, closed the

curtains and turned back toward the room. Rolling laughter erupted from the television and Jack was thankful for the noise.

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

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

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

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

He could still hear her singing from the bathroom. Jack kept watch on the door as he pulled open the second drawer and there, found what he was looking for; a serrated carving knife. Must've been a foot long. He pulled it slowly from the drawer, careful not to rattle the other utensils.

The pounding between his legs had given him a headache. He couldn't remember ever

being this horny in his entire life. His mind was swimming.

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

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

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

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

What was he doing here. This entire scene was bizarre and frightening. It absolutely could not be happening. He was not a predator. He could never harm another human. He

abhorred the thoughts that were running through his head. He wanted to get away. He wanted it to stop. And he knew what he had to do.

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

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

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

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

Then he turned back toward the TV and reached over and turned the volume up. It wasn't bothersome now like it had been before. As a matter of fact, it was nice to hear

people laughing. Jack smiled and laughed out loud as he pulled open the top dresser drawer and started rummaging around impatiently. Underwear, socks, jewelry. He pulled the drawer completely out and dropped it to the floor. Then the next. It wasn't here.

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

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

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

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

For several intoxicating seconds, he stood and admired her. Admired the way her hair fell across the side of her creamy white face. Again he closed his eyes and shuddered as the clean soapy smell from her skin mixed with the lingering steam in the air. Jack could hardly get enough air into his lungs with the short little gasps he was taking and he was

getting dizzy.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and forced himself to breathe deeply several times. Jack had never in his life felt so primal, so out of control and so alive and invigorated. He was hot all over and sweat from his forehead poured over his eyebrows and stung his eyes. His heart was slamming methodically against the inside of his chest and he felt like his throbbing cock was about to tear through the front of his jeans on its own.

Still clasping the lipstick in his hand, Jack turned and smeared it intently on the steam covered mirror. Then he carefully twisted it back into its protective case and dropped it into the sink. He turned toward the pretty girl, leaned over and grabbed her by the hair. He pulled her through the door and into the bedroom. Dragging her over to the bed seemed to help bring her to. She was now holding tightly to the top of her head and she'd begun squirming and kicking. He picked her up and threw her onto the creaking mattress.

It felt good to be in control. To feel how helpless and frail she was in his powerful grasp. Like a rag doll. Jack knew he had to work quickly now.

As he dropped her, she reached out in desperation and scratched his cheek. Again, Jack slapped her hard with a full back swing. Fresh blood splattered across the white wall behind the headboard. She lay there, dazed, her eyes glazed over, still unable to catch a full breath. Jack turned and reached for the knife from on top of the TV.

He liked the way the handle fit his hand. He liked the way it shined in the blue light of the Television. He liked . . . nothing, nothing. Nothing about this entire nightmare. This wasn't happening. He had to get out. He would suffocate if he couldn't get out.

Jack tried desperately to drop the knife but his hand would not cooperate. He leaned forward and blew air sharply out of his mouth in quick staccato bursts. He felt like he was going to throw up now. His mind was swimming and Jack began to cry.

“Please, somebody help me!” he begged with that voice in the back of his head. He felt faint for just a moment longer and then his mind cleared and he was back in the real world.

Jack’s expression changed from desperate despair to eerie calm as he stood by the bed and brought the hand with the knife up to his cheek. He felt the open scratch with the back of his fingers. He rubbed the fresh blood across his cheek and into his mouth where he licked it off the back of his fingers and smiled. Jack liked the taste of fresh blood. So warm and smooth.

He knew that she was still too dazed to call out but he had to act quickly or that would all change. And that would not be acceptable so he walked over to the dresser and pulled a pair of pantyhose from the pile of clothes on the floor. Climbing onto the bed, he straddled the girl to hold her down. She started to shake and pound on his chest so he flipped her over like a rag doll, face down, onto the bed.

Jack smiled as he did it, again feeling that overwhelming sense of power and control. She was so weak that it made him crazy with delight.

Working quickly, he grabbed her by the hair and lifted her head back off the pillow. Then he wrapped the pantyhose, several times, around her head to gag her. Once secured tightly behind her head, with clumps of bloody hair pinched in the knot, Jack flipped her

back over and proceeded to tie her wrists to the headboard with another piece of lingerie.

His weight, now fully across her chest, was nearly suffocating her.

Through out the ordeal, the girl kicked and squirmed violently. She was a petite, little thing and Jack had well over a hundred pounds on her. In short order, she had exhausted herself to the point that she could do little more than whimper and cry through the wad of nylon.

Oh, there was the occasional spastic jerk as Jack grabbed her ankles and tied them to the end of the bed. Now and again the girl pulled back as hard as she could and screamed - if you could call it a scream - through the blood soaked hunk of pantyhose. She'd shake her head wildly back and forth, kicking at Jack's head or chest or whatever she could connect with. But any attempt she made was quickly rendered absolutely futile.

Jack felt like he had no control over his own body. He couldn't stop what he was doing no more than he could consciously stop his heart from beating. But he didn't want to either. And the funny thing was that he could remember wanting to. He remembered wanting to stop just a few minutes ago.

"What a ridiculous notion," Jack thought out loud.

As he stood at the end of the bed admiring the girl, he had no doubt that this was happening. And there was no doubt how it would end either. With a ripped up corpse and running and blacking out and then it happening all over again. Like a damn rat on a treadmill.

"Damn it!" Jack clutched the knife tightly in his hand and paced nervously back and

forth at the foot of the bed. Again Jack tried to drop the knife and again his hand rejected his simple request.

He stopped and stared at the girl. Studied the fear in her huge eyes. He could taste her helplessness. Smell her fear. He wanted so badly to cut her . . . just a little. To watch her face as she became aware of the outcome. Aware of how awful death could be. How utterly, utterly painful it could be.

“Aaaaaaah!!” Jack squinted hard and pounded the handle of the knife into his forehead.

He returned to pacing. Short quick steps then a turn. Back and forth like a caged lion. All the time pounding his head with the wooden handle. Mumbling to himself. Groaning. Every once in a while he would turn his head straight up to the ceiling and growl ferociously.

Then he stopped. The girl lay petrified, tears pouring from her puffy red eyes. Jack turned to face her and smiled. His eyes had turned to a deep empty color – almost black. His face was nearly expressionless as the tiniest bit of a smile crept into the corner of his mouth. He took a step forward and leaned into the end of the bed, right between her legs.

“You sure are pretty,” the words rolled out with a slight twang at the end.

The girl’s eyes widened and she started to shake her head back and forth slowly as if she didn’t understand. That excited Jack and drove him to continue. Yet, every fiber of his being knew that this was wrong.

“WRONG?” Jack asked out loud. “This is unthinkable!” he said looking straight into

the girls eyes as he crawled up onto the bed and began to slide the blade of the knife gently up the inside of her pale thigh. First one side then the other. Being careful not to cut her. At least not just yet.

Muffled bursts of sound tried to escape from behind the soggy gag, but there was not enough force to propel them over the applause and laughter coming from the television.

Jack crawled forward onto the girl and positioned his face directly over hers. Now tears had sprung into his eyes. They dripped rhythmically onto her cheeks, and slid down the side of her face. He was close enough to feel the breath from her nostrils on his cheeks. He could feel the heat from her body rising around him. Jack pressed his hips down against hers and kept looking directly into her eyes.

“I don’t know how to stop this . . .” Jack’s lower lip trembled as he arched his back to push his pelvis repeatedly down against the girl.

Then Jack hopped to his feet and went back into the kitchen area. He held his eyes clamped as tightly together as he could. He walked back and forth in short little steps with his arms wrapped around his chest.

He knew that he could stop this. He knew that he was the only one that could. Knew that he had to stop this. If he could just focus. Just concentrate.

“Ahhhh,” Jack stopped, curled forward and blew air out through his nose.

Jack’s heart was pounding so fast that he thought it was going to explode. He had stopped crying, but now was trembling badly. His face was now completely covered in a viscous layer of clammy sweat. His sexual need was dizzying and confusing. He needed

so badly. Like a heroin addict in the dark clutches of withdrawal. It clawed at the inside of his being and screamed to be let free.

Jack stood straight up and walked over to the bed. He tapped his chin with the knife as he examined the pretty girl. The helpless, sweet smelling, pretty girl.

Then he flung his leg up and over, once again straddling her across the chest. Jack looked directly into her eyes. She was so afraid and so fragile. What a prize.

“Are you okay?” he asked her, not expecting an answer.

“Are you all right?” a tinny metallic sounding voice emanated from inside his head.

Jack looked around the room as if searching for a fly in the air.

“There seems to be an echo in here,” Jack smiled and chuckled speaking directly at the petrified young woman.

Then he nestled down a little tighter across her midsection and began running his thumb along the serrations in the knife. Right up in front of her. It was more for theatrics than to actually test for sharpness. And Jack could tell that it was a good show because the girl’s head drew back hard into the pillow and her eyes widened to the point of nearly breaking.

“Can you hear me?” It sounded like the TV . . . or an AM radio.

Again, Jack scanned the room, thoroughly confused. But the voice wasn’t coming from inside the room, it was coming from inside of his skull. Like his conscious was trying to have a conversation with him.

“I’m going to get some help, but I need you to listen to me,” the elusive voice

continued.

Now, Jack was getting irritated. He was to the point of resolve with the situation and he knew exactly what he had to do with the girl. He just wanted to get on with it.

“It’s Randy . . . please snap out of it, Jack.” The scrawny little voice seemed to be pleading with him. Which of course just pissed him off to no end.

If the voice was inside of his head – and obviously that was the case – then he’d just make it go away. That’s all. Jack shook his head back and forth a couple of times and clamped his eyes together tightly. He focused on what he had to do and how he was going to do it.

Still sitting squarely across her mid section, Jack opened his eyes slowly and smiled at the girl. A huge ominous smile that sent the girl back into a kicking screaming fit.

“Shhhhhh,” Jack reassured gently then touched the side of her face with his finger tips. “Let me help you.” The words were so soft and creamy leaving his mouth that Jack didn’t recognize himself talking.

He admired her firm young breasts. Her tight skin and flat stomach. He immersed himself in thoughts of the girl, completely forgetting the silly voice.

“I’m here to help you,” the voice returned abruptly. “I’m going to try to get you out . . .”

“You ever hear voices inside your head?” Jack asked the girl.

Her eyes were locked onto Jack in shear horror. She could no longer fight. She was exhausted to the point of passing out. But she clung to the last tiny wisps of

consciousness as if they were the most precious thing on earth.

Jack brought the point of the knife up to her cheek, and nicked her a little right below her left eye. She pulled her head back into the pillow as a small bubble of blood formed on her face. Her strength was now completely gone and she lay helpless at the hands of her captor.

“Snap out of it,” the voice insisted. “This isn’t you.”

Jack dropped his head and sighed heavily. Then he took a deep breath and snapped his head upward toward the ceiling.

“I know it’s not me, you fuck!” Jack snarled at the light fixture over his head. “What the hell do you think I’m going to do about it?”

He shrugged his shoulders and curled his face up into a look of complete exasperation. He was not interested in having a conversation right now. Jack returned his attention to the woman between his legs and quickly nicked her under the other eye.

“It’s Randy, Jack . . . Randy Akerman . . .”

This time, the voice startled Jack. It was no longer thin and metallic. It was full and resonant and was coming from the outside of his head. From somewhere inside the room.

“. . . I’m trying to get some help.”

Jack snapped his head to the side and saw a figure standing in the bathroom doorway. Light streaming in from behind, the man’s face obscured in the shadows.

“You’ve got to come with me. I’m here to bring you out.”

Jack clutched tighter on the handle of the serrated knife and held it up to the side of

the girl's throat in defiance. He could feel his erection rubbing against her. She smelled good. He wanted to be alone with the pretty girl. More than anything else in the whole world, he wanted the pretty girl. He'd prefer to do it slowly and savor the moment, but if this pesky voice kept bothering him, then he'd just end it – quickly.

“Don't do it, Jack.” The figure walked forward into the room. “You need to put the knife down and come with me.”

Still holding the knife firm to the girl's throat, Jack watched the dark figure walk toward him. Watched as he moved into the light so Jack could see his face.

“The simulation has taken on a life of its own.” The figure was standing in the middle of the, now, intensely lit room. “We've turned it off and you're free-wheeling now, Jack. Ad-libbing.”

Jack recognized the face. He knew this person. But from where? What was this face? Jack pressed the knife tighter against her throat. A thin trickle of blood was forming where the blade connected with her skin. He had to do her. He wanted to do her right now. He had waited so long. Jack's hand was trembling and tears had begun to well in his eyes.

“Put the knife down,” Jack thought to himself. This time it wasn't the voice, but his own conscious taking hold. “You don't want to do this . . .”

“GET OUT OF HERE!” Jack screamed, partly at himself and partly at the stranger standing beside him. “I'M REALLY, REALLY BUSY!”

“You're at VTech, Jack . . . in the lab, running a simulation.” The stranger held out his

hand to Jack. "Don't you remember?"

Jack's head was pounding like someone was beating on the back of his eyeballs. His palms were so sweaty he thought he was going to drop the knife. The trembling in his hands had crept up the sides of his arms and nestled into his chest. He couldn't get enough air into his lungs and the room was now spinning slowly.

The stranger was saying something, but Jack couldn't understand it over the ringing in his ears. Sweat sprang from his forehead and ran into his eyes, mixing with the pooled up tears. His vision blurred and the girl seemed to be slipping away.

In one final surge of rage and defiance, Jack thrust the knife downward with all his strength. There was a brief vision of warm, red liquid oozing from the wound. Of the body twitching and gurgling underneath him as its life ran out onto his hands. But it was only a fleeting image and it faded quickly as Jack fell forward into the darkness.

- 4 -

Home was Betsy's favorite place to work. Maybe because she felt safe there. Something about being at home made her feel like she was protected. Like there was a thick wall between her and them.

Because the people she studied were society's worst and her office was where she met them face to face. Where she met them and talked with them. Figured out what made them tick. But it provided her with no protection. In her mahogany and leather world they were very real. They were alive in her office.

But at home on her couch, surrounded by her things, she was in a place they would

never invade. When she brought them here it was on her terms. She would engage them for as long as she wished and by closing her laptop, they were dismissed. Gone. At home, she was in control of the affect they had on her life.

They couldn't get out unless she opened their file and let them out. They were statistics when she brought them to her house and nothing more. Puzzles to be pondered, not people. Just paper. Although most had visited her office, none of them had ever set foot in her house. Nor would they.

Even if she was just reviewing a file, in her office the monsters would become real. It was there that she had talked to them. And she knew, beyond a doubt, that they existed . . . in her office.

Even alone, if she sat long enough at work, reading over transcripts, she could feel their eyes on her. As if thinking about them could make them materialize. And so, like a child in the dark, she would look up at the chair across from the desk and listen to her heart pounding in her chest.

Then, looking down on the empty chair, she'd be relieved that the creature had not crawled from the pages in front of her and made itself comfortable in the fine leather chair only four feet away.

That kind of foolishness made it hard to concentrate on the details of a case. And try as she might, Betsy could not sit in the same room that these men had been in without feeling as if they were there with her. It was hard to stay focused when the hair on her arms was standing up from the chill in the room.

But she was glad that the horrific acts she read about daily still affected her this way. It was comforting to know that, after all these years, she had not become accustomed to the destruction and gore her work exposed her to. Had not become too desensitized.

The fact remained that she felt more productive working on a case at home. In profiling the personality of a killer, time was of the essence. Her job was to anticipate the actions of society's most twisted, before they could mark their next victim. It seemed like this crazy world was turning out two or three new mega-psychos each year. And the more horrific the crime, the more celebrated they were in the media.

You would think the heralds of the first amendment would have the brains to figure out that media attention was exactly what these deranged psychopaths craved more than anything. Well, you would think. The true sadness of it was that the media did know, they just didn't care. What they did care about were ratings . . . ratings at any cost.

So, as Betsy sat on the floor and studied the photos in her portfolios, she wondered why anyone would want to subject themselves to this. Why people craved the macabre with such a fever. Seemingly drawn to it like a moth to a flame. She was forced to look at it, as part of her work, but she hardly viewed it as entertainment.

Betsy spread the pictures carefully in front of her and looked at each one as she straightened it on the table in front of her. She was looking at the details of three recent murders. Three murders, that on the surface, had something in common. That's why the authorities had asked for Betsy's opinion. These three killings had appeared to have been committed by the same person.

Betsy moved the pictures slowly around, studying each one over and over. Her first reaction had been that this was a copycat. But there was something funny about the pictures. Most copycats usually just pick one or two favorite rituals.

Copycat killers have a code. It's almost like they're paying homage. They follow someone else's pattern as closely as they can, but their best source of information is almost always the media. So knowing exactly what's been publicized about a certain slaying would tend to give these guys away every time.

To expand on another man's work was almost blasphemous, so they'd always copy a killing as close as they could. If the press made a boo-boo and said that John Doe had been found with his shoes removed, then the copycat would remove his victim's shoes . . . even if it wasn't really true. That was the kind of information that gave Betsy an edge.

She maintained an accurate collection of all the articles she could find about a case. She'd video tape the news and even go talk to the reporters to find out what they thought they knew. She was meticulous and very very careful about keeping confidential police information separated from media and here-say stuff.

Again Betsy moved the pictures slowly around in front of her. As if the act of touching and repositioning them could, in itself, give her the answers. Something in these cases was too similar. Too close to the others. Betsy was sure that all three killings were done by the same man. But who was he?

And what else was so strange about these crime scenes? What was the pattern that was bothering her? Nagging at her incessantly?

The patterns of the past belie the quilt of the future.

“Who are you?” Betsy lined up all the pictures end to end on the coffee table.

*Each of us takes the scraps of our childhood and makes a life from them. Some patch together dreams as best they can. While others take shattered pieces and force them into a living nightmare.*

Sometimes even at home, after she’d shut the file folders and unplugged the laptop, she could still feel their presence. The monsters in the distance. They clung to her as if they didn’t want to leave.

Why was she having so much trouble with this one? Something in the pictures had been tugging at her. As she looked over the details of each case file, Betsy found herself pouring over the crime scene pictures. They exposed the most gruesome details of each incident. And here, the killer was exposed. Subtly and uncontrollably displaying their most secret inner feelings.

But for some reason Betsy felt that they were incomplete. What was missing? She read and she studied, then studied and read. Images ran together after a while and her mind and her eyes became tired. Part of the puzzle was here and she knew it. She just couldn’t find it.

A warm cup of tea beckoned her to the kitchen and she stretched as she walked through the doorway. What she wanted was a nap, but it would have to wait. The puzzle was almost solved. It was just out of reach. She wouldn’t give up now.

Walking back to the living room with cup in hand, her mind caught on something.

Like a slot machine catches and hangs just before the bell rings and someone yells

Jackpot!

It was the evidence listing. There was one for each crime scene. Betsy pulled them out from under the pictures and laid them next to each other in plain view. She looked over them carefully. Each one indicating that the victim had a purse.

Betsy looked over each list . . . once . . . twice . . . and on the third time through, she raised her head and looked confused. It was missing.

They hadn't followed procedure. In one of the cases, that could have been believable. Someone forgot or lost it. But in all three cases . . . cases so closely alike. Betsy had found a piece of the puzzle, but she wasn't really sure if it would help her get back on track.

Frantically she dialed the phone. She was invigorated. This part of her job thrilled her. Finding the answers to impossible questions was her forte.

"Detective Blakely, please." Betsy was put on hold as the girl at the switchboard processed her request. The pit of her stomach churned with anticipation as she waited for someone to pick up the phone.

"Detective Blakely." his gruff, overly manly inflection grated on Betsy's nerves.

"Detective . . . it's Betsy Archer." There was nothing but silence from the Detective.

"Look, I've been going over these three killings and I don't seem to have a complete listing of the crime scene evidence."

"Uhm," came the grunt from the Detective and Betsy didn't know if it was a statement

or a question.

“There’s no listing for the contents of the purses,” Betsy’s voice was taking on a smug air. “Is there anything else that’s been inadvertently left out?”

The long silence from the other end of the line crushed her. And suddenly the anticipation that churned in her stomach turned into something else. It turned into panic. And she felt stupid for not seeing it before. Now she knew why there had been no list of contents and with his silence, the Detective had ignited her worst fears.

“It’s the lipstick,” Betsy started to ask a question and then didn’t. Again, there was nothing but empty silence from the phone line.

“You bastard!! You didn’t want me to know that the lipstick was missing . . . from all three!”

Betsy and the Detective were the only ones that knew about the lipstick. It was a fact that had never been released to the news. Leonard always took the lipstick from his victims. It must’ve been some kind of memento or something.

“It’s Leonard isn’t it? He’s out. You BASTARD!”

Betsy clutched her chest as she relived the horrifying memory her last conversation with Leonard. The one where he had bashed his head into her desk and said that he would be coming back. Betsy shuddered and breathed heavily.

“I’m a prime target and you didn’t tell me he was out? Damn you! I should have your ass for this Blakely.” Betsy was covered with a wash of emotions ranging from furious to utter panic.

The Detective just let her go, she was right, he was a bastard. Leonard had escaped and it was his fault. He blamed himself for having only one guard on him in the hospital and he blamed himself for not trying harder to get the doctor to understand how dangerous he was.

But he didn't have enough physical evidence to prove with any certainty that these new victims were Leonard's. He had tried desperately to tell himself that he had nothing to back his suspicions. He wanted to believe that it wasn't him . . . even though, in his heart, he couldn't.

Dr. Archer was right, this had to be Leonard. The contents of the women's purses had deliberately been left out in case of a leak to the press. Anything that could link these cases to the demon the press called the 'Lipstick Killer' was deliberately kept in sealed files. But Betsy had found the link. She was good. And now she was mad. Blakely deserved anything she dished out.

"I'm sorry, I was going to call and tell you. I'm sorry." His excuse was pitiful and Betsy didn't want to hear anymore.

"You have an obligation to EVERYONE on this case to keep them informed of ALL new developments, Detective, Do you not?" Betsy's words were clipped and decisive.

"Yes ma'am, I do."

"And isn't it also your responsibility to access the risks to those involved?" Betsy was nailing him to the wall.

"That's correct, yes ma'am." The Detective felt like a child. But he knew he had

earned the chastising he was getting.

“Then what the hell were you thinking? You should have called me.” Betsy’s voice cracked with emotion as she fought back the tears.

“Look, Dr. Archer . . .” Blakely spoke in a soft, apologetic voice. He knew he should have called her first thing. He just didn’t want to believe this was Leonard. At least not until he had to.

“I didn’t think it could be him. I mean, how could he have gone to work so quickly after he’d escaped? And part of me didn’t want it to be him.” His voice trailed off in a self reprimanding way.

“I . . . I just need to know these things, Robert. You should tell me if I’m in danger.” Her voice sounded as tired and resigned as it did fearful.

“You’re not in danger.” Blakely tried hard to sound like he believed what he was telling her.

“How so? Do you have him back in custody?” She wanted more than anything for his answer to be yes.

“No, but look out your living room window.”

Betsy went to her window, pulled the drapes aside and saw a very large man sitting in a very small car.

“The green Ford belongs to us.”

She felt relieved. Not safe but relieved.

“Thank you.” She wasn’t really sure why she was thanking him, it just came out.

“We’re going to need your help, Dr. Archer.” He paused for a moment trying to decide if he should continue. “Besides, you’re the best looking shrink I know.” the Detective poked fun in an effort to get himself out of the doghouse.

“Thank you, Robert.” The crooked, half smile his last comment brought was a welcome break in the tension. “I think you’re cute too.” Her playful sarcasm rang ostensibly through the phone line.

“Of course you do.” He was back to his normal, antagonistic self. “I’ll make a copy of what’s missing in your files but you’ll have to come and sign them out yourself. No runner. Front Desk will ID you. The Press has been unbelievable on this one.”

“Okay. Thanks. And, Detective,” Betsy was still afraid but she no longer felt alone. “Thank you for the security. This one really scares me.”

“I know.” Detective Blakely’s reverence for this situation was unmistakable.

“It should,” he thought to himself as he remembered something his grandpa used to say. “No matter what the position of the body, sometimes the soul is on its knees.”

Right now his soul was on its knees praying for a miracle, praying that he’d be able to find Leonard quick.

## Part Two

*“A man’s soul is the embodiment of all he is and does.”*

- Anonymous

## Chapter Three

### COMPLICATIONS

- 1 -

At guard station number three, Patrick Hancock sat with his feet up on the console, directly across from Wendy Stewart, the night nurse. Wendy was sitting on the counter across from Patrick, with her legs tightly crossed in front of her. Her already short skirt hiking up her thighs to the point of almost revealing underwear.

Patrick had huge shoulders and bigger biceps. His blue policeman looking uniform stretching to accommodate him. He was oblivious to the pandemonium going on behind him on the tiny security monitor. And directly behind Wendy, high on the wall, the flashing call light was begging silently for attention. But Patrick's attention was focused a little lower. And it wasn't until he leaned forward to gently touch her silky smooth kneecap that she saw the monitor behind him.

"Shit!" Wendy almost spit on him as she stumbled to her feet.

Patrick's legs dropped to the floor and then he saw the flashing call light - right before he turned to see the scurry of activity on the monitors below.

The door to the VTech research lab control room flew open and in came the nurse, followed directly by Patrick, the night watchman.

"What are you doing?" she shouted at Randy. "You're not supposed to be fooling with that!" The conviction in her voice jaded only slightly by her own suspicious actions.

Randy was sitting in front of the interface console with his finger on the talk-back

button, leaning into the microphone mounted on the end of the gooseneck. He stared up at them with that deer in the head lights look plastered all over his face.

Patrick stood motionless behind Wendy, waiting to take a cue from whatever she did next. But all she did was freeze solid when her eyes met the screen with the serrated knife . . . and the girl on the bed . . .

“What the holy fu . . .”

Then Pops and Todd shot into the room, shoving the two wax statues out of their way. Everyone stood frozen, alternately staring at Randy and then the computer monitor. Todd looked at Randy and then at Pops in shock.

He couldn’t comprehend what he was seeing. Jack in the laboratory . . . connected to the console . . . simulation program running . . .

“Shit!” Todd pulled his fingers harshly through his hair. He had a quick flash of a conversation at Eddy’s. He could see Jack convulsing in the other room and he could see the horror on the monitor.

Pops, Randy and the guard all froze, watching Todd as he continued to talk to himself. “It’s the damn dollar bet . . . damn you Jack . . . Damn You!”

“Shut it off,” Todd barked into the room at no one in particular. Todd’s eyes fixed momentarily on the monitor then down at Randy.

“I said turn the Goddamn thing off! Now!”

“It is off,” came Randy’s thin reply. “It’s been off for a couple of minutes now.”

Randy just stared into the air over Todd’s head.

“Get him away from there,” Todd ordered, motioning the guard toward Randy.

The automated emergency protocol system had calmly performed its duty and contacted everyone. And now, on the monitor screen overhead, the Emergency Medical Team hovered around bed number four like a frenzied pack of wild dogs. Equipment was unboxed, bags ripped open, needles tapped, medication administered and vital signs shouted out in rhythmic cadence.

“Blood pressures dropping . . . he’s going into defrib . . . clear . . .” The team worked in perfectly rehearsed harmony.

“Please step away from the console, sir,” Patrick insisted and then walked over and physically pulled Randy to his feet.

As the shiny metal paddles came in contact with Jack’s chest for a second time, one of the EMTs again shouted, “CLEAR!”

Jack’s body jumped on the bed and tiny beams of light danced to life on the display next to the bed.

“We’ve got a pattern . . . let’s immobilize for transport.”

Todd watched the screen in horror as the team worked on his brother. Jack was slid from the bed to a large board. Tubes in his nose, needles in both arms and his head strapped tightly down.

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Couldn’t believe that Jack was that stupid. He actually ran the experiment on himself.

“Damn it, Jack!” Todd snapped at the screen and then returned to pacing around in

little circles. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Todd stopped and, again, stared at the image, still frozen in time on the interface console. A cold feeling filled his stomach.

“Shut that thing off, Pops. And I want him held for questioning,” Todd instructed the guard, while pointing at Randy.

Outside the building, Todd watched as the team loaded his unconscious baby brother into the ambulance. Todd climbed in behind him and sat on the floor next to the Gurney.

There were three other people in the ambulance with him and there was still a lot of activity. Todd had a terrible feeling of emptiness. He felt helpless. Helpless to fully understand his brother’s condition and helpless to comprehend what was going on around him.

Needles were inserted . . . drugs administered . . . and in the carefully choreographed ritual, Todd could see the concern in their faces. He didn’t need a bunch of electronic equipment to tell him that his brother was in real trouble. It was written all over their faces – “This guy’s not going to make it . . . we’re just wasting our time going through the motions . . .”

- 2 -

If the nurses had anything important to do, you’d never know it by looking at them. All six of them were parked behind the large semi-circular counter, seemingly oblivious to the row of monitors in front of them. They were quietly talking and giggling. Every once in a while, a patient’s voice would crackle on one of the intercom speakers and one

of them would wonder off casually.

You would expect the ICU unit of a hospital this size to be a little more harried. People running here and there, strained expressions on their faces. At the very least a sense of urgency to their demeanor. But the cold fluorescent lighting was the only thing that made the place seem less casual.

The overall sense was one of day-to-day nonchalance. Of normality to the point of being mundane. Todd figured that it must have been an off shoot of dealing with death every day. At least that's how he'd deal with it. It probably was the healthiest thing to do to keep from going bonkers. But under this circumstance, not knowing what was going on with his little brother, it was irritating as hell.

The over-stuffed and overly cozy dark green furniture seemed out of place. Especially against the brilliantly white paint on the walls of the waiting area. The entire place had a kind of artificial coziness about it.

The simple fact that you could sit comfortably for hours here made Todd wish he was someplace else. He kept trying to tell himself that the staff's lack of urgency should soothe him, not make him worry all the more. But it wasn't working.

The one thing that Todd had clear in his mind was that his baby brother was the most important thing in his life. If he lost him now he would have nothing. The money, the company, the prestige would all be meaningless. Jack was the only family he had.

Todd was having a resurgence of that protectiveness over his brother - like when they were kids and he was physically the 'big' brother. He felt almost maternal. Because since

they were kids, Todd hadn't worried much about Jack. He didn't need to. Jack was smarter. Jack had his feet on the ground and always gave stability to Todd. He was always the one asking the 'what if' questions. Unlike Todd who'd just jump in, balls to the wall, and deal with the consequences later.

That's why this whole episode didn't make sense. Why had Jack done this stupid ridiculous thing? To prove a point? To show Todd that he could be crazy too? Todd's head was swimming.

He'd always been faster, harder and louder and nothing could slow him down. And Jack had provided the counter-point with his even keeled approach to life. They seemed to compliment each other perfectly.

So how could he have let this happen? It was Todd who took stupid risks, not Jack. This didn't make any sense. Not a bit.

"It should be me in there . . . not Jack," Todd thought solemnly to himself. "Jack knows he can't handle anything like this."

He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and then walked slowly around the couch. He stopped at a framed aerial view of the hospital and stared through it for a while.

"He's gonna be alright, son." Pops spoke gently as he patted Todd's shoulder in a uncomfortable sort of cadence. His voice was filled with gravel and spit.

Pops had been standing in the corner wedged against a bluish white dividing wall watching Todd pace. Although he was uncomfortable with the gesture, he felt like he had needed to say something to Todd.

Pops wanted out of this place. It gave him the creeps. But worse than being stuck there all night, would be having to see Todd's face if they told him that his brother was dead. Pops didn't seem to have a problem with thinking the worst.

But he couldn't stop thinking that the place smelled like death. Not a clean natural death either. But that antiseptic, cover it up with a sheet kind of death. Man he wanted out of that waiting room, but he couldn't just leave Todd there by himself, especially since he might be his boss come morning. Better to get some extra points now.

"I hope so Pops . . . I hope so too," Todd said coldly, wagging his head and sounding about half pissed off.

"No sense in us gettin' all worked up about it 'till we got something concrete to go on." Pops continued his attempt at reassuring Todd.

Todd knew that it was good advice, but it sounded so insensitive to him right now that it made him shudder a little.

"I'm just worried that he hasn't come to yet." That wavering sound hung at the back of Todd's throat and hearing it made them both feel weak. Todd fought back the tears that he could feel beginning to swell at the corners of his eyes.

Not at all equipped for this emotional kind of banter, Pops dropped his head and walked haphazardly over to one of the stuffed chairs and dropped himself into it. He shifted his weight gingerly to one side and then tucked his hands into his armpits.

"Damn, how much longer?" Pops wondered, trying to look anywhere but at Todd. His eyes became glassy and wide and the images that danced in front of him were from last

night, in the lab.

Images of the paramedics scurrying around Jack in a blur. The yelling and the phone calls and the accusations. As the sounds faded, Pops worried about the inevitable questions that would have to be answered. Especially if Jack didn't make it. Then there'd have to be blame placed and an example set. Even if he did make it . . . at the very least there would certainly be some kind of investigation. Pops shifted nervously in the chair and turned away from Todd.

They both waited and waited lost in thought. Todd was tempted to hassle one of the nurses again in hopes of getting a different answer.

"He's stable but still unconscious . . ." the words kept echoing through his head. Wasn't 'stable' the word they used to soften the blow right before someone took an 'unexpected turn for the worse'?

But, he just didn't have enough energy left to push it. Waiting had worn him down and he didn't have much left after that ambulance ride. It had been brutal, both physically and emotionally. Jack had had a seizure that required Todd and one of the paramedics to hold him while the other EMT administered a sedative.

The memory of that ride brought Todd into another frantically pacing circle. His explosion of movement rattled Pops, but the nurses, still chatting softly, were unaffected by the sudden movement. In fact, they acted as if there was no one out there at all.

For the rest of the evening, Todd paced slowly in tight little circles with his hands in his pockets, fists clenched and palms sweaty.

- 3 -

Todd looked rough. He had gray half moon circles under his eyes and the beginnings of a dark burly beard.

It was around noon, but he really had no perception of time right now. He had nodded in and out of sleep all night long, while sitting in the recliner next to Jack's bed. Somewhere around midnight, the nurses had informed him that Jack's condition had improved to a point where he could now have visitors. He was still unconscious though and they had absolutely no idea when – or if – he'd be coming out of it.

Todd leaned forward in the chair and scooted a little closer to the bed. Jack had several IV tubes in his arm, an oxygen hose in his nose and a couple of metal circles taped to his chest with wires coming out of them.

Todd picked up Jack's limp lifeless hand and cradled it gently in his own. Todd studied Jack's face. He looked so peaceful. Like he was just sleeping. Of course, Todd really didn't understand what a coma was other than some kind of a deep sleep.

"What the hell were you thinking of?" Todd spoke in a raspy voice as he continued to rub Jack's hand.

The only response to the question came from the rhythmic pulse of the heart monitor as the line spiked in cadence with a soft beeping sound.

"I mean, hell . . . this isn't like you. You're the sane one. I'm the crazy idiot. Not you!" Todd continued stroking the back of Jack's hand. "And I wouldn't of even thought about a stunt like this! You stupid bastard."

Beep . . . beep . . . the monitor continued its monophonic ritual.

Todd looked out the window, not really seeing anything. His eyes fixed at a distant point on the horizon.

“It was that asinine bet. It’s all my fault. All you wanted to do was prove me wrong.”

Beep . . . beep . . .

Todd wished with all his heart that he could take back that stupid dollar bet. But it was too late now. The damage was done and Todd felt as though his insides were trying to rip out through his rib cage. If Jack died, Todd knew that the blood would be on his hands.

“Jesus Christ, Jack. I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to you.” Todd leaned forward and rolled his cheek on the back of Jack’s hand. A lone tear rolled delicately from the side of his face.

Todd’s eyes were blood shot and his 5 o’clock shadow looked more like a 9 o’clock black out. He sat back up slowly as the nurse entered the room. This was a new one that Todd hadn’t seen yet.

“Good morning,” the skinny fuzzy headed brunette chirped irritatingly as she fondled one of the tubes coming from the IV bottle. “Any change?”

“No,” Todd said dryly, his eyes glued to Jack’s face.

The nurse looked quickly at the heart monitor and then headed for the door. “Just hit the call button if you need anything, sweetie.” And then she was gone as quickly as she had appeared.

“Thanks,” Todd voice dripped with sarcastic sincerity. “How ‘bout a ham sandwich

and a blow job?"

Todd breathed deeply and started to get cold.

Beep . . . beep . . . beep . . .

"You better fucking snap out of this, Jack. I mean it!"

Todd's eyes began to water and then another small tear streamed down his left cheek.

There was just no way he could loose his baby brother. It could not happen. That was too great a loss to comprehend. Too great to understand.

"Remember the river?" Still holding his hand, Todd leaned closer to his brother. "God, you must have been about eight or so. I guess that means I was twelve."

Todd wiped his cheek with his left hand but continued to hold Jack's with his right.

"Let's see . . . there was Ernie Pitts and Bobby Duvane. You remember, the one that used to always dare everyone to drink their own piss?" Todd smiled and looked up into the air over Jack's head.

"And what was that little queer's name? Roger . . . Roger Watts or Whatman or some shit like that." Todd nodded and looked back down at Jack.

"We always let him come along for comic relief - buck tooth four eyed son-of-a-bitch."

Todd squeezed Jack's hand hoping for some response. Anything. A nudge, a little squeeze . . . maybe a slight blink of an eye. But the only reply was that incessant beeping.

"So, anyway," Todd continued his story, clutching onto his brother's hand for dear life. "Ernie tells Bobby that some kid at school was bragging about going down the rapids

on an inner-tube. Course you know me. I couldn't leave that one alone. So I told Ernie that the kid was a pussy and I dared anyone with the guts to come with me."

Beep . . . beep . . .

Todd studied his brother's face for movement. Any movement. A twitch . . . a flinch . . . anything.

"So Bobby jumped right in and said that he could do anything that I could do. Ernie was scared shitless as always, but we kind of bullied him into it. And that girly boy Roger went off about how he was going home to tell his momma or some shit like that. And then you started in on me."

Todd looked over at the line on the monitor and then back at his little brother's face. Beep . . . beep . . .

"You said that you could do anything that I could do. I explained about how even the most experienced kayakers had been pulled out of those rapids over the years, but you wouldn't listen to shit."

Beep . . . beep . . . beep . . .

"I'm as big as you are,' you said in that whinny little voice that used to drive me up a tree. I explained about the under currents and how that even the best swimmers couldn't get out once they were sucked in. About how awful it was to suffocate to death under water. But you were absolutely belligerent."

Beep . . . beep . . . beep . . .

"Finally, I had to threaten to beat the shit out of you if you didn't just sit there and

watch us big kids. You pouted and fussed and then plopped down by one of those big hickory trees at the bottom of the rapids. Remember, the one with that ratty old rope hanging from one of the branches?”

Beep . . . beep . . . beep . . .

“Anyway, me and Ernie and Bobby crawled up on Miser’s Point and jumped in like the fucking idiots we really were. Ernie was the first one to tip out and we laughed like fools watching him bob up and down like an apple in a bucket. He was coughing and spitting and crying like a little girl. Then out went Bobby, but he caught a branch and pulled himself over to shore before the worst of it.”

Beep . . . beep . . . beep . . .

“By then, Ernie had washed up on a pile of rocks and was making his way to the side. I was the only one that hit Deadman’s Curve and when I did, all hell broke loose. When I hit the bottom of the first drop, I must’ve been thrown twenty feet in the air . . . and when I came down, I hit something hard. I landed so hard, I forgot what religion I was. I guess Ernie was still on the shore spitting water out, but Bobby was jumping up and down and running along side me - ‘Somebody help! He’s drowning! HELP!!’”

“Everything was kind of fuzzy after that, but I remember that I couldn’t catch my breath . . . I couldn’t figure out which direction was up . . . hell, I was swallowing so much water, I guess I was panicking.”

“And all I could think about was the falls coming up. That was really the dangerous part . . . not the rapids, but the damn hundred foot waterfall at the end. That’s what made

it so exciting and so intriguing for all us thrill seeker types. And all I could think about . .

. was that I was dead. I couldn't catch my breath. I couldn't get my bearing. I was dead.

Todd paused for a minute just holding Jack's hand and staring down at the bed.

"Then I was floating on my back, being drug to the shore. I could feel someone's arm around my neck but it wasn't until I was pulled up into the rocky sand that I rolled over and saw you standing over me soaking wet, panting like a damn rabid dog."

Beep . . . beep . . .

Todd squeezed Jack's hand a little tighter and started to cry softly. With his voice trembling and his bottom lip curled up tight, Todd continued.

"I guess I just always thought I should be the one taking care of you. You know, that big brother thing."

Todd reached over and rubbed the side of Jack's face with the back of his fingers.

"I'd give anything if we'd never made that stupid bet. I'd give *anything* to just have you back now." Todd clamped his eyes closed tightly as the tears began to flow freely.

"I want your boat," came a raspy voice from the bed.

Todd snapped to attention, eyes widened and mouth open.

"Jack!" Todd's eyes bounced nervously from one side of Jack's face to the other, then back again. "Are you alright? Are you alive?"

"Thirty-four foot, V-8 inboard, high ratio prop . . . yea, I want the boat." Jack's voice was weak and airy.

Todd hugged his baby brother and cried like a little girl.

## Chapter Four

### ANTICIPATION

- 1 -

Jack dried his hair as he walked from the shower to the sink. He held one end of the towel and rubbed the top of his head and the back of his neck. He stood there in front of the sink for several minutes, staring at himself in the mirror. He was glad to be home, but he was having trouble sorting out the cascade of turbulent emotions that were surging through him.

It felt like a raging river rolling across the inside of his rib cage. He was anxious and afraid and very, very lonely. He couldn't recognize the blue eyed person in the mirror. There was no doubt that it was his reflection but Jack felt as if he didn't know the man in the mirror.

He couldn't get rid of the image he'd seen in the mirror in that distant motel room. Of the stranger with deep green eyes and that skinny pale little face. The face of the man in those horrid memories.

Jack had thrown caution to the wind for the first time in his life and now he wasn't really sure what he had done or what had motivated him to do it. It was that damn Todd and those ridiculous dollar bets. How he was always so smug and always so right. Jack had just wanted to teach him a lesson. Just for once, prove him wrong.

He remembered exactly how he felt that day – after their meeting at the restaurant. Remembered how he'd gone directly to the lab and started making preparations. In

retrospect, it was the craziest thing that he'd ever done, but at the time Jack had rationalized that he was being careful and covering all the bases.

He'd met with Randy Akerman, the lab guy, and talked at great length about 'The Project'. And then he had asked him to keep a special eye on him. Make sure he didn't have any problems. But Randy was the only one knew anything about what Jack was doing . . . except for Pops.

And Jack hadn't told Randy anything about the disc he was asking him to use. You see, Jack had gotten it from Pops because he was the guy that got the more fringe area kind of stuff. Come to think of it, Pops was probably the reason that Todd had been so nervous about the 'direction' of the simulations to begin with.

Anyway, Jack had asked Pops to get him some of the worst shit he could find. Oddly enough, never thinking too seriously about what that really meant. A rape. Maybe somebody beating someone up. Jack could not understand how anyone could strap on an EBAR and do that, but then again that's why they kept Pops hanging around. He seemed to have a knack for traveling in 'those' circles.

Jack had been involved in some of the earlier testing. He'd experienced a recording of a roller coaster ride and one of a skydiver. But he hadn't taken a couple of things into account. One, was the fact that the recording he was about to experience was not from a 'normal' person. This was, by far, the most intensely powerful emotions ever captured on disc – not to mention the fact that Pops had obtained them illegally on the black market.

And the second, was Todd's involvement in the project. He hadn't been satisfied with

the intensity of the experience so he was continually asking for improvements on the recording and playback methods. And to his delight, the research team had come up with several nifty enhancements. Enhancements that could increase the experience far beyond that of the original recording. Sort of like what a graphic equalizer does for a musical recording - it allows you to tailor the music to your taste. And this process was tailored to Todd's taste. Todd's manic, in your face, never enough taste.

Jack thought about Todd bringing him home from the hospital yesterday afternoon.

"Are you sure you're okay to stay here alone?" Todd had quizzed obsequiously.

Jack reassured his big brother, they exchanged pleasantries and then Jack slept for nearly eighteen hours.

But he still felt exhausted and drained. He'd been tortured with haunting images. Worse than dreams - more realistic and grotesque than he could comprehend. Scattered images of screaming women, pools of blood and dismembered corpses.

For a while he was walking on a small path in the State forest that bordered his property.

He was following a young women and he could smell her perfume. Methodically he tracked her – carefully remaining in the shadows. And then it was like a strobe light - flashing horrible pictures of death everywhere. There was screaming and excitement and the taste of sheer unadulterated terror. Jack woke, aching all over and feeling like he hadn't slept at all.

The doctor at the hospital had wanted Jack to stay another night for observation, but

Jack insisted on being released immediately that day. All he could think about was returning to his life. He wanted to get *his* life back. He wanted to put all of this just as far behind him as he possibly could.

But, now, standing in front of the mirror looking at himself, he wondered if he ever could. As hard as he tried to ignore it, he just didn't *feel* the same. He'd been weary and depressed before. But now he felt something else. Jack was angry . . . and he couldn't figure out why.

When he divorced Kathryn, he thought he would never be truly happy again. But this wasn't the same. This was more than depressed. This was hollow and edgy to his very core. And it wasn't just a void, it was a black scary cavern, big enough and dark enough to hide things in. Bad things. He wanted to just go back to two days ago. Before the bet with Todd.

"But I can't!" Jack barked at the dark complexioned, blue eyed man across the sink from him and then flung the towel into the hamper.

If he could just get back to some sort of normal routine, maybe . . . just maybe things would return to normal. It's understandable that things felt a little weird right now, but if he could get back in the swing of things, this horrifying experience would eventually be behind him. He had already planned on returning to work tomorrow, against Todd's orders. And right now, that seemed like the best thing for him. Work would help him take his mind off of this. Whatever 'this' was.

Jack opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out a can of shaving gel. He sprayed a

blob onto his fingers and then, starting just below his left ear, smeared the slimy blue cream down his face. As he worked the lather across his chin, he continued staring at the stranger in the mirror. Face, hair, chin - it definitely was his face.

But the expression plastered across it was confusing. It was distant and in some way, chilling. His eyes looked darker than he remembered. Like they belonged to someone else. They seemed to hold a hidden story behind them. They were a doorway to another spirit.

Jack picked up the razor and ran it across his cheek, then swished it back and forth in the warm water in the sink.

The ordeal was over, it was time to move on. The nightmare he had been trapped in for the last 48 hours, was just that; a nightmare. It wasn't real . . . and it was definitely over. Now all he had to do was get on with his life. Get back to the way it was before he'd made this stupid bet with Todd.

Jack had bet on the stability and resilience of his own moral convictions and he was proud to say that he'd proven Todd wrong. A few mental images, no matter how gruesome, couldn't change a person's basic morality. Todd was absolutely wrong. Jack had proven it. Now it was over.

But, Jack didn't feel like it was over. He felt like it was just the beginning. He'd been forced to touch emotions that he'd never seen before. That he didn't even know existed. To feel the mix of pleasure and sheer exhilaration from someone else's sadistic cruelty. He had participated in acting out the hideous rituals of a sick, demented mind. Reliving

them through this perverse perspective where the distinction between right and wrong was non-existent.

Jack had been to a place where he experienced the joy of killing. He had looked into his victims eyes and had seen their horror. It was intense and overpowering. He could smell it, lingering in the air like cheap cologne. He'd tasted the terror in their hearts and reveled in it. He had found joy, not only in their destruction but also in the long and winding path to it.

A dribble of blood spattered the side of the cream colored granite sink.

"Damn it," Jack growled at his reflection.

Wiping his neck with one finger, he realized he'd shaved off the tip of his Adams apple.

"I haven't changed." Jack proclaimed defiantly at the reflection in the mirror. "I haven't."

He stood and stared at the tiny, crimson drop on the end of his finger. Mesmerized by images that had begun to float through his mind he felt as if he were being swept away by flood waters. Swirling and churning inside his head.

Flash.

Twisted, mangled bodies strewn across indoor/outdoor carpeting.

Leaning on the sink, Jack dropped his head and blinked hard.

Flash. Flash.

A gray, lifeless corps lay posed in a field of wild flowers. Jack could see a single daisy

placed delicately in the woman's hair.

"Shit!"

The water in the sink was still running and Jack had just realized that he had a hard on. He turned the water as hot as it would go and shoved both hands under the faucet. Jack ground his teeth, closed his eyes tightly and forced himself to hold his hands in the water as long as it took.

The images were gone and his wrists were on fire. Jack turned the water to cold and let it run over his scalded flesh. He dried his hands then used the towel to apply pressure to the cut on his neck. When it had almost stopped bleeding, he wiped the remainder of the shaving cream from his face and stuck a piece of Kleenex on his neck. Jack was feeling more desolate than ever.

"Fuck you experiment . . . and fuck you Todd!" Jack threw the hand towel at the shower curtain, ripping it from three of the hanging rings. This cold empty feeling was really pissing him off. "I don't deserve this shit!"

In the kitchen, he poured himself a cup of coffee. Duke, his six year old Golden Retriever, lay sprawled across the air vent on the cool tile floor.

"Routine, routine, routine," Jack repeated to himself several times. "All I've got to do is get back into a normal routine." The dog looked up at him and tilted his head to one side.

Jack turned from the counter, cradling the warm cup in both hands, and gazed over the cabin's interior. There were very few walls in the 3,500 square foot log home. The

kitchen opened directly into an informal dinning area - Jack used it for an office rather than for eating - and then into the spacious sunken living room.

Off the dinning room to the left, a hallway led to the bathroom and two bedrooms. The utility room at the end of the hallway doubled as a laundry room and a mud room because of it's entrance into the two car garage, a split level below the main floor.

Jack walked around Duke, through the dinning room and down the three steps into the massive living room. This was his sanctuary. It was as big as the rest of the house combined. Nearly fifty feet across and almost two stories high, it had floor to ceiling windows in a semi-circular arch from one side of the room to the other. This wall of glass interrupted only by a huge stone fireplace right in the middle and two sliding glass doors at either side.

The doors opened onto a wooden deck that spanned the length of the house across the front. The living room was sparsely populated with oversized comfortable furniture. The hardwood floors covered sporadically with throw rugs. A large solid oak coffee table sat in front of a fluffy couch covered with pillows.

The room had an openness that blended, almost seamlessly, into the open expanse of the piney woods. Duke walked over nonchalantly and curled up in front of the fireplace.

The view across the hillside was incredible. The cabin was nestled on the side of a hill in a thick bed of huge pine trees. A hundred yards below, down a winding, pine needle path, was the lake and the small dock. This time of year, the lake was just barely visible through the tree tops. On a clear day, about mid-afternoon, you could catch the sparkle of

the sun gleaming off its glass smooth surface.

Jack loved the water and, despite what he could afford, he was quite content with nothing more than an aluminum bass boat and a small outboard. To Jack, a good days fishing was a dandy sunburn, a little beer buzz and no fish to clean. Heaven to him was just being out on the water - alone.

The closest neighbors were a mile on either side . . . as the crow flies. Jack's own gravel driveway wound a half mile through the trees, along the side of the hill, to eventually spill out on State Highway 31. In this county, the term 'State Highway' meant that it was a black top road.

But, twenty minutes on the bumpy, pitted Highway 31 would get Jack to the Interstate, which was only twenty minutes from downtown. And that meant that his paradise was only forty minutes (sixty during rush hour) from VTech's worldwide headquarters.

Unlike Todd, who had to have a Penthouse apartment right in the thick of the city. Who was only happy in the midst of constant electricity, constant change and constant stimulation. Jack was a private person and could never live the way his brother did.

Sitting at home like this, sipping the jet black coffee and seeing the pine trees swaying gently in the wind, Jack almost felt human again. The sun had just begun clipping over the top of the trees and was now pouring through the glass wall, spilling over into almost every corner of the living room. He almost felt normal. Almost. But, he was sweating and his hands were cold. His stomach was sour and a lingering migraine was tapping incessantly behind his left eyebrow.

The TV was mumbling quietly in the background behind him. Jack rarely watched television but since he'd come home from the hospital, he'd just left it on for company. It was saying something about an accident.

"The driver of the vehicle, a sixteen year old senior at Washington High, was apparently drinking heavily stated Police officers on the scene . . ."

Jack glanced over his shoulder to see a picture of the mangled car wrapped around a tree. He wondered why you never heard stories about the tens of thousands of people that drive from home to work and back again safely everyday. About the thousands of commercial flights that took off and landed perfectly. About the nearly two billion people that didn't get murdered each and every day. That continue to live their lives happily and without incident. Why did all news *have* to be bad?

"You people really piss me off," Jack grumbled, still looking at the TV.

And then the hair on the back of Jack's neck stood straight up as the crumpled car faded into a blood red sheet covering the remains of a young women.

*"The so called 'Lipstick Killer' has apparently struck again, this time on a small walking trail off of East Highway 31 . . ."*

Jack grabbed the remote control and turned the volume up as he stood and walked slowly toward the gruesome image on the screen.

*"Officials estimate the time of death at approximately 2 AM last night. Forensic evidence indicates that the grisly murder had actually taken place farther up the trail, and that the body was dumped at the bottom of the trail sometime prior to dawn this*

morning . . .”

Jack walked right up to the television, dropped the remote control and then put his open palms on the front of the screen as he stared at the horrific scene.

Flash.

“Please . . . no . . .”

He could see the face of a woman crying. The woman in his dream.

Flash.

She was pretty . . . very pretty and he was on top of her. There was a disjointed image of a hand and a hunting knife. Blood. The smell of death.

“It was a dream!” Jack blinked hard and tried to force the images from his head by concentrating on the TV.

Part of an arm and half of a foot were sticking out from under the sheet. But their relative position to each other indicated that one of them was not connected to where it should be. Jack’s eyes glazed over as his body went cold and he began to breathe faster. He ran his hands slowly across the pictures on the screen.

*“The woman, believed to be in her late twenties, was found early this morning by two hikers. The signature handwriting in lipstick across the woman’s dismembered torso, indicating the return of the ‘Lipstick’ serial killer. Sheriff Frank Thompson expressed his concerns about the possibility of a ‘copy-cat’ killer and stressed that evidence supporting the return of the ‘Lipstick Killer’ was merely circumstantial . . .”*

Jack hit the power button on the bottom of the television and watched the picture flash

into a single white dot in the center of the screen before fading into blackness. He sat down on the floor directly in front of the set and held his trembling hands in front of his face. Duke trotted over to Jack and stood for a moment, then lay down next to him, placing his chin on Jack's knee.

Jack had turned the television off because he was repulsed by the sudden feeling of excitement. Looking at the blood soaked sheet he found himself wondering how long it had taken her to die. How long she had suffered and how painful her death had been. He thought about how she must have smelled right before she died. The smell of fear. The sweet smell of pain and horror. He could see the terror in her eyes. He could sense her utter helplessness and the power he had over her.

"I had?!" The question startled Duke.

Jack stood up suddenly and began walking in a small circle in front of the television. Duke just put his head on the floor and watched his master pace.

"I didn't kill her," Jack said looking first at the TV and then down at the dog. "I haven't killed anyone."

*Then why did you get excited seeing it on the news?*

"I didn't get excited! It's a terrible, disgusting tragedy."

*You deny that you enjoyed thinking about how she died? Thinking about the pain she went through?*

"Yes . . . no . . . I mean I don't fucking know!" Jack walked over to the window and leaned into the glass. He closed his eyes and pushed his forehead onto the cool hard

surface. Rolling his head from side to side, trying to empty his mind. Trying to think about nothing. Cool, the cool, cold window. Pine trees, lake, wind, water . . .

*Did you notice you had blood under your fingernails?*

“I cut myself shaving,” Jack barked without opening his eyes.

*It's dried blood.*

Jack looked at his fingernails in panic. Thick flakes of dried blood hung from almost every nail. A cold chill shot from the base of his skull clear down to his knees and Jack gasp for breath.

He bounced off the window and headed for the sliding glass door. Jack slung the door open and was still gasping for breath when the frigid fall air hit him in the face. Leaning on the railing with his elbows, Jack looked down at the trees dancing in the wind, the quiet blue water just beyond. Duke stood in the open doorway, his tale wagging vigorously.

*Where were you last night?*

“Asleep . . . for eighteen fucking hours - ASLEEP!”

*Asleep? Do you feel rested? Or just can't remember where you were? Blacked out maybe?*

Still leaning forward, Jack turned his head and looked, upside down, at the dog.

“I'm not crazy and I'm not a killer.” Jack spoke directly to Duke. “I was here all night . . . asleep . . . you know that.” He wasn't quite sure who he was trying to convince.

Jack turned around, went over and kneeled in front of Duke. He had that trusting dog

look on his face that said ‘I know you’re not a killer, dad.’

Scratching his ears he said,” I don’t know why I’m telling you this ‘cause you don’t know what the hell I’m talking about, do you?”

Jack hugged the dog and then wrestled him to the floor. The two of them rolled around for a few minutes and then later, they both took a nap in front of the fireplace.

- 2 -

It had been over a week since the ordeal in the lab. Despite what the doctors had said. Despite what his brother and friends had said, Jack had gone back to work after only two days off. There was just no way that he could stay home anymore. He was driving himself - and Duke - crazy.

He knew that keeping busy was his only chance of getting back to some sense of normality. Of getting his real life back. And he needed something to take his mind off the dreams. Whether he was napping in front of the fireplace or nodding off on the deck, he felt powerless to stop the horror that infected his sleep. The brutal flashes of death. Of cutting and screaming and helplessness.

And, like the first night, Jack would sleep for long periods of time . . . twelve . . . fourteen hours sometimes. And always wake feeling like he hadn’t slept at all. Physically and emotional exhausted. It was killing him.

At work, the people were supportive and kind. “Good to see you”, “Nice to have you back boss”, that kind of thing.

But the routine at work had not provided Jack with what he was searching for. If

anything, he seemed to be growing edgier with each passing day. Each night the dreams got worse and each day Jack's sense of emptiness intensified.

Today, he sat quietly in his office with the door cracked slightly. He didn't really want to be alone and he really didn't want people around either. It was kind of hard to explain. He had that empty feeling in the bottom of his stomach. The feeling that he had hoped could be filled by common everyday experiences . . . but wasn't.

He'd been irritable since he'd come back and it bothered him that he'd made a habit of snapping at people for no particular reason.

Yesterday, the head of marketing had made the mistake of asking Jack's opinion on a flyer his department was working on for the EBAR. Jack hit the roof and threw a fit. The poor guy stumbled off shell shocked, not knowing what he'd done wrong.

Todd had witnessed several of these 'episodes' and expressed his concerns about Jack's behavior. But Jack had dismissed it as petty meddling - and then told his brother to 'go fuck himself!'.

Jack looked around his office and sighed. Of all the beautiful things he'd surrounded himself with to bring him pleasure. He was afraid that nothing would ever do so again. He felt lonely. Empty.

But worse than that, was the festering notion that his brother might be right. That damn dollar bet was still haunting him. Still rearing its ugly little head.

"Goddamn him," Jack winced as he admitted it to himself, "he's always right."

As hard as it was to say it, Jack was afraid that Todd had been right all along. Afraid

that images that strong could do irreparable damage. Because Jack had seen that, given the right set of circumstances, we all had the ability to become animals. And that bothered him to no end. He'd spent a lot of time since leaving the hospital, thinking about what he'd done. Or almost done, or been involved in. It was still all so disorienting.

He was having the worst time separating his feelings from the other ones. It was important that he make that distinction. Very clearly make the distinction. Because if he could do that, he felt like he could clear the way for the healing. Just being able to say 'this is me' and 'this – this nasty ugly part – that's not me'. That's what Jack so desperately needed. And the dreams weren't helping matters any.

Had he actually gotten excited over the idea of killing someone? Absolutely not! The idea repulsed him to the point of becoming ill. But it was so real. So exhilarating. So primal. It was tearing him up inside.

He had to know exactly where his own convictions were so he could separate the ones that had been artificially induced. He had to know where he stopped and the other began. The need to do this had become so strong that it consumed him. He could think of little else. It was his only way to be free from the nightmares. Whatever it took, it had to be done.

And left without a clear way of doing this Jack's mind grasped at a straw. He had the idea that if he knew more about the guy the memories came from . . . if he could meet him . . . or maybe just read a bio or something. That would be enough to define it. To put a face on the ugliness. To be able to say once and for all that this belongs to you . . . not

me. And then purge it for good. Forever.

So as far as Jack could see, there was really only one way to do that. He had to find out exactly who was on that disc. He had to meet the sick little fuck and give him his baggage back.

“Sally,” Jack pressed the intercom button on the telephone.

“Yes, Mr. Johnson?” came the thin electronic reply.

“Would you please get a hold of Pops and have him come see me right away?”

“Yes sir. Right away.”

“Thanks.” Jack said dryly as his finger slid off the button.

Pops was hired by Todd several years ago. Although Jack wasn’t completely naive about what Pops did, he didn’t completely understand it either. He knew that Pops was responsible for getting a hold of things that were . . . oh, say . . . to delicate to be found on the open market.

A lot of the company’s research lately centered around the interfacing and recording of electrical brainwave activity. In fact, they had actually developed a process for recording these signals so accurately, that the original emotion, feeling and in some cases, memory of the test subject could be preserved intact. VTech was already selling a version of this device under the name EBAR – It was an acronym for Electrical Brainwave Activity Recorder. Because of its cost, its biggest use to date was in the psychiatric and medical fields.

A couple thousand of the EBAR units had already been sold so it really didn’t take a

big mental jump to think about the kinds of things that were being recorded out there.

Who knows what Pops had gotten his hands on.

The experiment that Jack had been involved in really utilized the inverse of this process, though. Once the signals had been committed to disc using the EBAR, the trick was to play them back through a host brain. The research team had found early on that recording the signals was the easy part. This playback part was a little more difficult. The process they developed involved a special chemical sedative, a small medical staff and a half million dollars worth of digital equipment. The eventual hope was to have a stripped down home version, but that was still a long way off.

Although Jack had originally conceived the idea, it really had worked much better than he could've ever imagined. When you were on the receiving end of the playback, you would experience what the person on the recording end did. It was hard to explain. It wasn't like a dream . . . really . . . and it wasn't quite like being there. Not exactly.

But you felt it. You could feel the adrenaline surge through your veins as the roller coaster topped the hill. You could feel the anticipation and fear as it eased slowly over the top and then dropped out from under you. It was your feeling. It was your sensation – through and through.

But today, the burning question for Jack was the memories themselves. Where did they come from? Who's were they really? Jack had to know that. If he could just see who they belonged to. Connect them with a real, breathing human being. Then he could exonerate himself. Draw that line between him and . . . it.

“Knock, knock,” Pops tapped lightly on the door as he said the words. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Come on in,” Jack said warmly, leaning over his desk and extending his hand. Jack motioned to one of the two chairs in front of his desk and then returned to his seat.

Pops sat down and studied the office with glee. This was the first time he’d been in Jack’s office. He’d generally dealt with Todd.

“You got a lot of nice stuff in here Mr. Johnson, sir.”

“Please call me Jack. And I’m sorry, but I have no idea what to call you except . . . Pops.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Johnson . . . I mean Jack. Buster’s my real name but Pops is all I’ve ever gone by. Even when I was a kid.” Pops shifted to one side in the chair and then continued telling his story.

“See, my hair turned gray when I was ten. Some kind of freak genetic thing or somethin’ like that. Wasn’t scared or nothin’. Just turned gray.”

Jack forced out an uncomfortable smile and then jumped in before the old geezer had a chance to ramble on anymore.

“I’m not going to beat around the bush, Pops. I’ve got a favor to ask of you. I need to find out where those recordings came from.” Jack paused briefly to see the man’s reaction and then continued softly, “Who they belonged to. It’s important.”

Pops’ eyes narrowed slightly as he watched Jack speak.

“You’re talkin’ about the stuff in the lab, right? The stuff that you . . . ah . . . I mean . .

.”

Jack nodded in agreement, acknowledging Pops discomfort.

Then the old man’s expression took on an air of seriousness and he started scratching his cheek. “Look, Jack, your brother knew exactly what I was when he hired me. Hell, that’s why he hired me. I get things. I get things that other people can’t. It’s what I’m good at. Let’s call it my gift.”

Jack watched his face carefully, wondering where he was leading with this agonizing apology.

“But, to be good at it, you have to respect the - how can I say this? - the privacy of your sources.”

Jack watched the old fart, quietly wondering why he couldn’t just answer the damn question.

“I don’t think it’s any secret that some of what I do is illegal.” Pops opened his hands up in front of him. “But I’m paid to get things that other people can’t and that’s exactly what I do. I mean, Todd knew that when he hired me.”

Although it should’ve been, Jack realized for the first time that this ‘illegal’ activity was no surprise to him. He had just conveniently overlooked it in the past. Too excited about what he was trying to accomplish to worry about the means, he had let Todd quietly manage this aspect of the business. But Pops was certainly right - that was the only reason that he worked there.

The kind of brain activity that they were studying was not available at your corner

drug store. Yet they had a steady stream of these ‘black market memories’ as Pops referred to them.

“Look,” Pops continued empathetically, “I understand that you’ve had a rough time of it.”

Jack’s jaw tightened.

“My heart goes out to ya, really it does. Hell, I was there when you come out of it. I saw what you went through.” Pops began to shake his head slowly. “But I can’t tell ya where it came from.”

Jack breathed quietly through his nose, trying to hold the rage down that was welling inside of him. This guy was really irritating him and Jack wanted nothing more than to come across the desk and beat the information out of him. Just pound his face into a bloody pulp and then . . . but that probably wouldn’t be very productive.

“You misunderstand me, Pops,” Jack forced himself to continue with calm even tone. “I don’t need to know where they came from.”

*You ignorant fuck!*

“Just who’s activity it is.” The intensity in Jack’s voice rose sharply on the word ‘who’s’ and it startled Pops.

“I need to find out who the subject is.” Although he was trying hard, Jack’s voice was no longer calm and even. Even though he was still speaking softly, his back teeth were grinding together and there was a gritty edginess that made Pops squirm. Jack’s eyes had darkened and Pops could see a ring of tiny sweat beads arching ominously over Jack’s

eyebrows.

Pops thought carefully for a moment. Jack was scaring him now and he was having trouble figuring out if he had any ulterior motives. After all, it was an occupational hazard – being so paranoid. He still had lingering fears of an investigation from that awful lab incident. Of somebody ‘going down’ for that one. Pops sighed heavily and scrunched his lips together.

Then, deep in Jack’s eyes, Pops found his answer . . . and it sent a chill of prickly flesh from his face to his gut. Pops was afraid of what Jack would do if he didn’t tell him. Afraid the evil resolve lurking behind those deep blue eyes. Pops knew enough about people to read this one for what it was and he didn’t want to play with it. Not a bit.

“The disc had a lot number on it.” Pops began thinking out loud. “I can probably trace it from that. But it’d be hard to promise anything.”

“Thank you.” Jack’s voice had returned to a breathy calm.

Too calm to suite Pops and after several seconds of uncomfortable silence, he stood, smiled wryly and happily left the office.

Jack pressed the intercom button on the phone, “Sally, I don’t want to be disturbed for the rest of the day . . .”

- 3 -

“How ya doing little brother?” Todd snapped open the door to the office unannounced.

Jack picked his head up off the desk and looked up at Todd. “I’m alright.”

“Yea, you don’t look alright.” Todd flopped down into the chair directly in front of

Jack.

Todd was having a hard time dealing with Jack's problem. In a way, he felt kind of responsible for it. So he kept trying to cheer him up or get him out to do things. He'd tried all the subtle nurturing approaches he could think of to get through to Jack but nothing seemed to be getting through. All the tip toeing around just seemed to piss him off that much more.

So today Todd decided to just be direct. Get it out in the open and talk about it. What the hell. But it didn't quite come off as smooth as he wanted it to. In fact, after his lips started moving, it just sort of went bad.

"Look, I know you're kind of freaked out about this whole thing, but I'm just dying to know . . . what was it like? Killing somebody I mean. Did you really get to do it?"

'I can't believe I said that,' Todd thought, chastising himself.

Jack was having trouble believing the look in Todd's eyes. He really wanted to know.

"You're a sick fuck, big brother."

Todd was sure that he'd feel better if he'd just talk about it, but he really didn't know how to get it started.

"Come on, Jack, cut loose. What was it like?"

'What an idiot,' Todd thought as Jack stood and turned to face out the window.

"It was awful, Todd. It was the worst fucking experience of my life and you want to know what it was like?!" Jack snapped at his brother.

"Hey, cool your jets. I'm just curious, that's all."

‘Open up to me Jack,’ Todd thought, but couldn’t say.

Jack turned from the window to face Todd. “If you’re so fucking curious, let’s go down to the lab right now and I’ll hook your ass up and we’ll play the disc for you. How’s that sound?” Jack’s voice echoed through the office. Then he turned back to his empty stare out the window.

“Not me,” Todd proclaimed, waving his hands out in front of him. “I’m not getting hooked up to that mind-fuck thing.”

‘Oh, shit.’ Again, Todd scolded himself for his inability to communicate right then.

“Then drop it,” Jack said quietly.

“You know, I really have been hoping it would work itself out. I mean, you know I’ve been worried about you since you left the hospital.” Todd looked down at his feet and kicked the floor.

“But, you’re not the same . . . kind of distant . . . and you get pissed off really easy.”

“What do you expect?” Jack continued staring out the window at nothing.

Todd stood and walked around the backside of the desk by his brother. He took a deep breath and swallowed hard. “Look, I think it might not be a bad idea if you . . . saw somebody.”

Jack turned and looked at Todd questioningly. “*Saw* somebody?”

Todd looked down at the desk and played with a small porcelain Japanese warrior.

“You know, somebody that could help you . . . talk through this thing.”

To both their surprise, Jack spun around, grabbed Todd by the throat and slammed

him against the wall. The porcelain statue hit the ground and shattered.

If this were anyone else, Todd's first reaction would have been to go on the offensive. To attack. But this was so out of character for his brother that he couldn't speak. Besides the fact that his brother's powerful grip on his throat had cut off his air supply.

Jack leaned into Todd, placing his nose directly in front of his brother's. Still clamped tightly on his throat, he spoke in punctuated spurts, spraying saliva onto Todd's bluing face.

"I don't want to talk to somebody . . . Todd . . . and so help me, if you don't drop it . . ." Jack's eyes burned with glazed over rage as he stared right through Todd.

Jack pushed him harder into the wall and released his throat with a flourish. "So fuck off!"

Then he turned to look out the window as if nothing at all had happened. Todd stood, gasping for air, mesmerized by what had just happened. He took several deep breaths and rubbed his throat with his hand.

What had just happened? He hadn't recognized the man that was standing there holding his throat. He was a stranger. For a split second, he really didn't know if the guy was going to let him go. The look in his eyes had said 'no'.

Todd backed slowly away from Jack. As he rounded the desk, he reached into his pocket and then spoke slowly in a raspy voice, "I'm gonna leave this on your desk, pal. They all come highly recommended."

Todd laid down a crumpled piece of paper as he crossed around to the safety of the

front side of the desk. Then, when he was standing comfortably in the doorway he turned back toward Jack.

“And I highly recommend that you pick one and make an appointment soon little brother!”

Todd turned and left the office, still rubbing his throat. Jack turned away from the window and dropped almost lifeless into his chair.

“Sally, don’t let anyone in here the rest of the afternoon.” Jack spoke directly to the telephone as if it were a real person. The phrase had become a familiar one as of late.

“Yes sir, Mr. Johnson.”

Jack stared aimlessly at the crumpled piece of paper in front of him. Did he just grab his brother by the throat and threaten him?

Jack read through the list of six doctors, amazed at how normal there names sounded - not at all like you’d expect; Sigmund Freud or some shit. Then he wadded up the list and dropped it into the garbage can under his desk.

- 4 -

Leonard clicked off the television and flopped back down into his recliner. The in depth report he had just finished watching was replaying itself in his head. Jan Michaelson, channel five’s newest addition to the reporting roster, had gone on and on about the so called ‘Lipstick Killer’ and his rein of terror. Leonard liked the sound of that title.

The “Lipstick Killer,” he announced in a deep, mocking newscaster voice. Leonard

closed his eyes and let his head fall back onto the worn head rest of his favorite chair.

The “Lipstick Killer,” he chuckled to himself. How melodramatic.

“Good afternoon Senator, have you met the ‘Lipstick Killer’?”

He really liked the way the media played these things up. And he thought they did a good job, for the most part. Leonard couldn’t understand why the press always got such a bad rap. The story had been pretty accurate overall. Right down to the ‘daring escape that happened just two days earlier’.

Some of the recreations were hard to follow though. They did that blurry slow-motion thing. You know, a close up of a knife in mid air, momentarily frozen in time. Then bammo, it disappeared off the screen in a downward, stabbing motion. The entire scene was well executed, but the Leonard actor was all wrong. He was a nerdy type. Not at all the kind of actor that Leonard would have chosen to play himself. But then, how could they know? How could they really know anything personal about him at all? They just knew about him through his work.

Leonard thought they’d done a good job with the actual police evidence, but the scenes where the Leonard actor was at home, planning his next murder, were utterly ridiculous. Just absolutely insane. They were way off on that one.

Leonard had laughed out loud a couple of times during the broadcast. Especially when they interviewed that behavioral expert. His name was Merl something and he began by reciting his credentials, as if anyone cared about his qualifications. Then he explained what Leonard had been thinking during the murders and how his childhood must’ve been

traumatic.

“Poor little Leonard,” he pressed out of his lips in a bouncy pouty voice. Then he looked squarely at the dead television set and snapped sharply,” What the fuck would you know, Merl?”

It was hilarious. Leonard was amazed at how anyone could conjure up the image of someone’s childhood from a couple of dead bodies and a few scraps of forensic evidence.

Then, to Leonard’s glee, they had showed a couple of the more gruesome police photographs. He liked the way the media seemed to get more daring every year. A little more blood and guts . . . a little more naughty language, it really helped to drive the story home.

Leonard felt that this public forum really added a degree of credibility to his work. As if the media was celebrating with him in some way. Oh, and the fact that it helped their ratings really made it a win-win situation for both of them.

Leonard liked knowing that people wanted to see. That they were as drawn to it as he was. It added to his feeling of kinship with his fellow man and gave him hope. He enjoyed the thought of all those people comfortably nestled in their living rooms, anxiously waiting with morbid anticipation for the next picture to pop onto the screen.

And Leonard did so enjoy hearing his name on TV. It made him feel good inside, kind of prideful. He was sure that this was what it must’ve felt like to be a movie star or a professional wrestler.

But to Leonard, the really funny thing was how the media liked to portray him as some

kind of genius. A genius for eluding capture for so long, and then for escaping again so quickly afterwards. He appreciated their admiration but it wasn't true, of course.

He had enormous respect for the people that had devoted their lives to law enforcement. And he would never make the mistake of thinking that any of them were stupid. Leonard never underestimated his adversaries. But, for the most part, they were . . . well, complacent.

You see, the system was tilted so far in Leonard's favor, that most of them had given up a long time ago. Even if they didn't speak of it, somewhere inside they had lost their faith in the system. Their hands were tied, and they knew it. The judicial system was designed to kick them in the stomach and then yank 'em in circles until they couldn't see straight. Continuances, the rights of the accused, high paid lawyers, legal loop holes . . . it was really a buyers market.

Although the status of law enforcement in general was in Leonard's favor, there was just a little problem. Every once and while, Leonard ran across someone who didn't understand that they were whipped before they started. The hard nosed, never-say-die kind. Detective Blakely was one of those people. For some reason, the system hadn't drug him down yet.

He was tenacious and kept banging away at things long after others had dropped them cold. In fact, he had been the one that apprehended Leonard . . . both times. He was a bulldog and that was a problem that loomed over Leonard's head. A problem that Leonard would have to do something about. And it would have to be very soon if he was

to avoid any further mishaps.

But for now, the memory of his shining moment on the small screen was filling him with warmth and delight. Leonard sat comfortably in his favorite chair and surveyed the semi-furnished apartment. It was cheap and it provided him with a very low profile.

On the outside, each building looked the same as the next. The front door might be on the opposite side or railing and shutters added for accent. It didn't matter, they still looked the same. Even the different colors of paint didn't seem enough to distinguish one from another. For Leonard, this was a good thing. Anonymity was essential to his work.

His furnishings were simple plastic lawn furniture. Portable yet accommodating. Mobility was essential too. He didn't entertain much so his needs were few.

His one luxury was his second hand recliner. He loved that chair. It brought him comfort and peace and, at times, he could sit there for hours on end doing nothing at all.

In the kitchen, a small Formica counter traced with dingy metal edging, marked the boundary to the living room. The kitchen was rarely used for he had no dishes or utensils. Too hard to pack, too costly to replace. Leonard was a no nonsense kind of guy.

Besides, most mornings he left before dawn and didn't return until long after suppertime, as a rule. He did keep a few snack foods around and he always had a bottle of peppermint schnapps in the freezer for that special sip after work.

The kitchen served mainly as a hallway to the bedroom which was barely more than a closet itself. It was too small for anything larger than a single bed and a yard sale dresser.

His minimal requirements allowed him the space he needed to work. Though the room

was small and dark, Leonard called it the ‘Sanctuary’. He felt at home in there.

Comfortable and warm. And since his escape two days ago, he’d spent almost all of his time in there working. Getting it ready.

And now, one of the things that preoccupied Leonard was his capture. You see, Leonard realized that although Detective Blakey was the bulldog, he wasn’t the brains. The good Detective wasn’t smart enough to catch a cold for heaven’s sake. Leonard had been taunting him with a string of ridiculous clues for a long time. Fingernails and hair from bums, cigarette butts from the street, match books from fine hotels with room numbers written inside.

Leonard could just picture the look on Detective Blakely’s face when the autopsy report read ‘dog semen’.

“What kind of a sick fuck puts dog semen in a dead woman??” Leonard pictured the enraged Detective barking at the poor grunt that had handed him the report.

“How do you know she was dead at the time, DEEETECHTIIIVE?” Leonard laughed out loud.” Oh man, I kill myself.”

Leonard wagged his head back and forth on the recliner, and laughed at the poor, disillusioned Detective he had pictured in his head. Then he stood and walked through the kitchen, still chuckling to himself. He stopped to wipe a spot from the bottom of the sink with a napkin. Leonard was a fanatic about cleanliness. He considered it essential to maintaining harmony with one’s surroundings.

That was one of things he hadn’t gotten such a kick out of on the newscast, though.

The Leonard actor had been sitting at home amongst piles of newspapers and dirty dishes. He was hunched over a table that was covered with empty food wrappers, picking at the leftovers like a mutt digging in the garbage. It was both appalling and funny.

“They really don’t have a clue, do they?” Leonard forced himself think of this as a good thing. But it was hard for him to think about all the viewers out there who now thought of him as a pig.

“I’m not a pig,” he announced as he continued to scrub the spot with tiny little circular motion.

Leonard’s apartment, although cheap and dingy, was immaculately clean. Trash was disposed of immediately. Tub surfaces and tile were wiped down after every use. Dirty clothes were promptly washed, ironed, folded and returned to their place, where they belonged. Leonard knew that when one became careless in their surroundings, one was apt to become careless in their work.

“Nice,” Leonard cooed as he admired the bright shining stainless steel. Then he dropped the napkin into the paper sack he used for a trash bag. “Very, very nice,” he continued to chant as he walked toward the bedroom . . . to the Sanctuary.

The walls were painted a pathetic pale blue, but you couldn’t see much of it under the poster-board. From the top of the window clear to the floor and all the way around the bedroom. Nothing but large white sheets of poster-board thumb tacked to the walls.

Leonard had lined the entire room with the poster-board. Then, he had covered it with a collage of pictures, newspaper clippings and assorted artifacts. Hundreds of them of all

around the room. Clumped together meticulously into little groups. Big ones and little ones. Full color and black and white. Pictures from newspapers and pictures from his own Polaroid. Pictures of all the women he'd helped in his career.

And tacked into the poster-board along side the pictures were necklaces, rings, bracelets . . . any small memento that Leonard thought he needed to keep a particular piece of his work fresh in his mind. It was beautiful.

And the pictures were always in pairs. One from before and one from after their release. Because without fail, his girls were always in pain before, so terrified and bewildered. Leonard just couldn't believe that people lived like that.

And afterwards, they were always so peaceful, so serene. It pleased him the way they turned out. His girls seemed so much more at ease after he had helped them. It soothed him to see the difference between the first and second pictures.

Upon entering his Sanctuary, Leonard always stood in the center of the room for several minutes and admired his work. Slowly he'd spin on his heels, taking in the whole room in one dizzying twirl. It was intoxicating.

They looked like little angels. Leonard had always taken great care in preparing them for their pictures. For some, he would spread their hair like a halo and lay their hands gently across their soft white stomachs. For one of them, he had tucked a daisy into her flowing locks. They were all just a little different. A unique piece of work.

But he had had his failures too. The one's that had sustained too much damage to be pleasing. The ones that had required just a little bit too much help. These were

disappointing to Leonard, but he maintained photos of these too. He realized the importance of striving for excellence in his work. However illusive it could seem at times.

As his spin slowed to a stop, he began moving toward the poster-board. His eyes focused on the image of a bloody mangled mess wrapped in a sheet and lying on a bed. One of his failures. Leonard shook his head slowly back and forth as he touched the photo with the tip of index finger.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly while running his finger across the picture. “I wanted so much more for you.”

And then he let out a little laugh as he remembered that ridiculous oil painting hanging over the bed. He had had so much trouble concentrating with that there. He was trying to work and he kept feeling like the old guy and the kid where watching him.

“Why don’t you just go . . . catch some fish.” Leonard had barked at the picture, not really knowing why it was bothering him so much.

He’d finally had to reach up and knock the damn thing on to the floor, but by then it was too late. The damage was done. He’d been too distracted and unfocused. He remembered needing a long hot shower to help him forget that fiasco. The end result being another photo for the ‘failure’ board.

He had his favorites too. He remembered the one with the bright red tears. Actually it was just a little bubble of blood from where he had cut her below the eyes, but Leonard preferred to think of them as tears. It was more majestic.

But, in the end, it was all his work and as he stood back and surveyed the other pictures lining the walls of his Sanctuary, he was proud of them. It didn't matter how many times he looked at the pictures or read the articles. He never got tired of it.

Even of the ones he kept just for comic relief. Several of the journalists that had covered his work were pitifully unskilled at their craft. It wasn't so much the article's content that made it funny, the facts were mostly correct. It was usually bad grammar or an unclear meaning that made it humorous. Those particular articles were in a section by themselves and had no pictures accompanying them. The outcasts.

Other articles were informational. They were a formal account of his work. Leonard looked on them as a performer would a review from a critic the morning after a performance. He maintained articles about, not only what he had done, but he also had a section of the board devoted to all of the 'copy-cat' killers as well. When you were as famous as Leonard was, there were bound to be those who were envious and wanted to get in on the action. Leonard didn't mind. In fact, it was really very flattering.

Leonard needed the articles to help him stay focused. They were reminders. Reminders not to get complacent like others had. Like he had. He'd already been arrested twice and that was twice too many. That bothered him. Even though it had been relatively easy to escape on both occasions, there was certainly no guarantee it would be that easy again.

But when he stopped and thought about it, he was amazed at how easy it had been. It had been far too easy. All he had to do was kill that doctor, switch clothes with him and

walk right out the door. Head down, he had strolled out smack dab in front of the guard.

Even the hospital staff was oblivious.

Well, there was a little more to it than that, but Leonard tried not to get cocky about the whole thing. He did have to do a little acting and get the doctor to undo his restraints. And he did luck out getting someone so young. He looked like a twelve year old kid for God's sakes. An older guy probably wouldn't have been so gullible.

So Leonard spent a few hours everyday reading and rereading the clippings. Spent time studying the photos and counting his blessings for the incompetence and lack of focus of the people that pursued him. But Leonard derived more from this room than just clarity and focus. This was where he got all of his motivation and drive. The Sanctuary invigorated him and it infused his veins with a renewed sense of purpose. Each and every day.

Leonard's attention turned to a series of articles about the one guy that would not let go. Blakely was the bulldog that had captured him twice and his picture graced more than a few of the articles. But in both cases, Blakely had help. Although he'd done all the leg work, a psychiatrist had almost magically led the tenacious Detective to Leonard.

She was mystical and had somehow made a connection with Leonard's thoughts. At first it made him feel funny, almost violated to see how closely she'd predicted his actions. But, after meeting her for the first time, he had also felt respect and admiration for such a worthy adversary. And over time this connection had begun to foster a fondness and a true affection. Her insight and intuition made her very special. Just like

Leonard knew he was special.

Leonard sat down at the desk and rubbed a short scar in his forehead. The scar that reminded him so vividly of her.

The desk was really the closet door supported by two filing cabinets, but it functioned as a desk, non the less. Directly in front him, on the wall, was his favorite montage of photographs and newspaper clippings. All of the pictures on this section of poster-board were of the same woman. Not just a woman. The lady psychiatrist. His psychiatrist. His pretty . . . oh so special, psychiatrist.

Leonard reached up to the pictures and rubbed the back of his fingers slowly across the intertwined portraits and then started licking the tip of his thumb. Wide eyed and humming softly, Leonard knew what he had to do. He could see it in her eyes as he studied the creamy whiteness of her face. As he looked deep into her soul and replayed that exquisite office visit in his head.

Leonard reached down between his legs and started to rub himself feverishly as he fantasized about their next meeting.

In a cluttered apartment on the other side of town, Detective Blakely's stomach turned as he walked in on the woman that had been tied to the bed. The small diameter nylon twine had cut into the girls wrists so deeply that a section of the rope was covered by a loose flap of bloody skin. The naked woman lay contorted, only half covered with a blood soaked sheet. Her hair strewn wildly about her head, an expression of helpless terror engraved on her face. Frozen in time like some horrific character in a wax museum.

She couldn't have been older than about twenty or so.

Blakely spoke quietly, moved slowly and asked everyone to please leave the room. Then he sat, in silence, his eyes welled up with tears, staring at the body resting on the bed.

"I'm sorry, I'm so . . . so sorry," he muttered between stifled sobs.

"I had him . . . I had him . . . you . . . you didn't . . ." Overcome by the sorrow that constricted his throat he gave in, hoping that his tears would wash away his guilt.

He was angry. So angry that his teeth hurt. So frustrated that he wished he could just explode.

"Next time," he began, sniffing and wiping his nose on his sleeve.

"Next time, I'm not taking you in for any fucking psycho-bullshit examination."

Blakely looked straight into the woman's open eyes.

"Next time you're going home in a body-bag you sick, damn, son-of-a-bitch!"

Detective Blakely wept quietly and undisturbed for a long time, turning his anger inside and saving it for another day.

- 5 -

"Excuse me sir," Sally's voice squeaked through the tiny little speaker.

"Sally," Jack sounded irritated. "I said I didn't want to be disturbed today."

"I'm sorry sir, but it's Pops. He says it's real important."

Jack picked his head up from the desk. "Send him in Sally. Thanks."

Pops shut the door behind him and sat down, pulling the chair up closer to Jack's desk.

Pops leaned forward and placed a thin manila file folder on the surface of the desk. Jack watched with anticipation as Pops began to speak.

“Well, I’ve got great news.” The old guy looked quickly around the room as if he was worried about someone watching him.

Jack paid no attention though, because he was focused on the folder in front of him.

Pops flipped it around so it was facing Jack and opened it with a great deal of pomp and circumstance. “I’ve located the clinic where the activity was captured. I’ve got a copy of their case and file numbers.”

Jack looked up at Pops nervously.

“And here’s the best part,” Pops said while pointing to one of the sheets in the folder. “I found the doctor that performed the procedure.”

Jack sat up straight in his chair and looked perplexed. “Is that it?”

“Well, it’s only been a couple of hours . . .”

“I thought I made myself clear that I was only interested in the subject. I don’t give a rats ass about the doctor or the clinic or the fucking man in the moon.”

“I’m sorry Mr. Johnson, that’s all I could get.” Pops stood and nodded in the direction of the folder, reaffirming the fact that this was it - then turned and quickly left the office.

Jack sat quietly in the office staring at the papers in the folder. Reading them over carefully. Looking for any clues. He needed to know the guys name. But there was only the doctor - the clinic - the fucking man in the fucking moon.

“Shit!”

Jack dropped his forehead onto the file folder and closed his eyes. He felt funny.

Something was nagging him but he couldn't put his finger on it. It was kind of like that déjà vu thing. Something familiar and yet . . .

Jack grabbed for the trash can under his feet and dumped it out right there. He spread out the debris, un-crumpled several pieces of paper before finding what he was looking for. He put the paper up on his desk and flattened it out with both hands. Slowly Jack's eyes traced down the list of names.

"Well I'll be go to hell," Jack whispered quietly in his big empty office.

"Sally, I want you to make an appointment for me . . . with a Dr. Archer."

## Chapter Five

### INTRODUCTIONS

- 1 -

Traffic was relatively light heading in to the city. Jack had expected it to be much worse than what he was used to. Most days he was seated comfortably behind his desk when the masses crawled into their cars and began their descent on the city.

Today he found himself in their midst, inching along the path like blood cells under a microscope. As Jack looked around at the other commuters, packaged in their cars, he felt something within stir. He began to connect with the other captives on this highway. Today he was a part of something, something bigger than himself.

Sitting in the middle of this mad house in motion, his view of the entire morning rush hour began to change. These were real people in his path, not simply obstacles. And these real people were what made his world tick. Society didn't exist without each person. He sat in awe of how delicately balanced the equation was. And he wondered how his new insight into the world around him had alluded him to this point.

Jack shook his head and blinked a few times to loosen his brains. "I must still be half sleep . . . what a heap of sentimental garbage." He mumbled to himself as he honked his horn several times and then yelled obscenities at the drivers in front of him. He reached for the CD case laying on the passenger side floorboard. He fumbled three or four times before he could get his fingers around the handle and pull it up onto the seat next to him.

And then, for just a split second, he felt as if he were going to pass out. He could see

nothing but a gray haze in front of him and he didn't know exactly where he was. All the noise around him dropped to dead silence. His thoughts were scrambled and a queasy feeling filled him to his fingertips. Maybe it was just a head rush. Or maybe his brain had shut down for the briefest moment as he waited amongst the throng of commuters.

It didn't matter really, the feeling of unbalance, if not the metallic taste in his mouth was clearing. What did matter, and seemed to linger, was the feeling that he would never look at people in the same way again. There was a sort of transition taking place inside him, as if the details of life were just becoming evident to him. He felt as if he'd been missing out on something all these years.

No longer did he see humanity as a whole object or a single entity. He saw it, now, as the sum of its parts. And that sum would only equal what the parts together could accomplish. Diminishing any individual would only diminish the sum.

A strange mix of feelings were washing over Jack in an almost nostalgic shower. It was also making him sick to his stomach. He felt profound and foolish and somehow he knew that this was a day that would change the direction of his life. But Jack didn't have the slightest idea about how that would happen.

As his destination came into view his throat began to constrict. Even his favorite jazz CD couldn't soothe him this morning. Harry Dial had always brought him, if not comfort, at least distraction. But today, Harry was failing him miserably. Jack turned off the CD player and turned into the parking garage.

He took his ticket from the automatic dispenser and the long orange and black arm

lifted, allowing him to proceed. The attendant sat smiling and chewing his gum in the little silver and glass booth. He waved at Jack, his head and hand bobbing in sync to the silent music playing in the headphones he wore. Jack returned the gesture and began searching for a place to park.

He rounded the corner on the fourth level and scanned the isle for a vacant spot. There was only one spot left on this level. Down at the end, next to a shiny red sports car. The polished rag top and extra wide wheels glowed an iridescent black, like wet pavement. The owner of this vehicle must have felt privileged. Jack could tell because the car was parked diagonally across the yellow line, taking up two parking spots and part of the ‘no parking’ area along the side. The owner had backed in ever so carefully and appeared to have placed the car in the exact spot he desired.

‘This is how we diminish the sum,’ Jack thought to himself. ‘But how do we restore the balance?’ He continued to ponder as he studied the shiny red vestige of self-indulgence.

“Ahhh yes,” he whispered as he pulled his Jeep Grand Cherokee in caty-corner beside the ill-parked vehicle.

Jack parked the Cherokee with its nose pointing in the opposite direction of the little red sports car, blocking it in. There wasn’t but about an inch and a half between the two vehicles at the closest point and less than eight inches at the farthest. Jack turned off the key, got out, and locked his door. He walked around the two cars, admiring them as if they were dance students and he, their dance instructor.

“Balance” Jack blurted confidently as he threw his hands in the air to punctuate his approbation. Jack felt as if he had righted something wrong in the world and now it wasn’t so hard to continue on with the day that lay ahead. And besides the new feeling of balance, Jack couldn’t hide the fact that he was tickled to death about giving the little bastard exactly what he deserved.

The relatively new parking garage had been built across the street from several historic stone buildings. As Jack crossed the street and found his way into the largest of these, he took in the details of his surroundings. It was an old building, probably constructed around the turn of the century. It had large archways that made Jack wonder how they managed to span such distances with just rocks. He knew a little about architecture and structures as old as this one always amazed him.

They were built better than those constructed today and without the machinery now available. As Jack gazed at the ceilings and ornate archways, he had thoughts of his fireplace back home. Jack was proud of that fireplace and he imagined that the men who created this building were equally as proud of this structure. The ceilings were almost twenty feet tall and the open area provided excellent acoustics. The echoing sound of his shoes squeaking as he walked along, brought his attention down from the lofty heights and helped him refocus his thoughts.

Confronting a crossroad in the hall, Jack looked around for a listing of occupants. He found it centered between two Monet-like works of art. From the information provided in the listing, he was able to find his way to the elevator, then down the hall to the right and

through the double doors that belonged to Dr. Betsy Archer, Ph.D.

He'd reached his destination, but just a little sooner than he was ready for. Jack filled his lungs and dropped his shoulders with exaggerated determination. With one fluid motion he opened the door and stepped into the Doctor's office.

The receptionist was an odd looking girl with pumpkin colored hair and an abundance of freckles. Her eyes were pretty and child-like and were the most unique color of greenish-yellow. As Jack began telling the girl his name, she rose from her chair and walked to the door directly in front of Jack. This door was smaller than the large entrance door and it had a name plate bearing "Dr. Archer" and her titles.

"The doctor will see you now," she said startling Jack half out of his wits. He wasn't ready for his appointment just yet. He'd expected to sit in the waiting area for at least a few minutes. In fact, he was a full ten minutes early. He'd deliberately allowed himself time to wait and gather his thoughts before all of this. And didn't doctors' offices run at least fifteen minutes late as a rule? He'd been counting on the twenty minute buffer and it left him off balance not having it.

"Ah, ahh, thank . . . ahh . . . thank you," Jack heard himself tell the receptionist as she opened the door for him. He must have looked as bewildered as he was feeling because the receptionist explained that Dr. Archer would be to his left as he entered the room. Jack felt as if she were coaxing him to go in. It might have been her tone or her intense gaze, but something snapped Jack out of his daze and he began to move forward. He scanned the room as he crept through the door, but he was retaining little of the mental

picture he was trying to form.

“Mr. Johnson?” a firm but gentle voice called from behind the desk. “I’m Dr. Archer, please make yourself comfortable. Would you like something to drink?”

“Yes I would,” Jack’s mind kicked back into gear. “A Diet Dr. Pepper would be nice.”

“We have Diet Coke and regular Dr. Pepper?” She countered.

Jack hadn’t expected an attempt to accommodate him. His request was made in hopes of buying some time. He needed a chance to run over his plan of attack again. He was fighting desperately to get hold of the situation. He needed to stay focused so he could accomplish what he had come here to do.

“Dr. Pepper will be fine.” Jack spoke softly, almost mumbling. He was preoccupied with his predicament, and with her.

This lady doctor had an interesting way about her. She was both formal and informal at the same time. Jack watched her move graceful from behind the desk and walk over to the wet bar. He watched her lean over and pull a can from underneath the counter. He watched the way the loose fitting fabric on her blouse swooshed against her white forearms. Jack noticed how she appeared to be utterly professional as she filled a glass with ice and then poured his drink into it. But, at the same time, she seemed approachable and engaging and something else, something that Jack didn’t have a word for yet.

She was attractive too and Jack hoped that wouldn’t present itself as a distraction. Having not been in a relationship for months now, he was extremely easily distracted. He knew he would need his wits about him if he were going to find the answers he so badly

needed.

Jack leaned uncomfortably on the edge of one of the chairs nearest the wet bar where Dr. Archer was preparing his beverage. He fidgeted nervously and popped his knuckles one at a time. He tried to clear his head of the garbled mess that lay in the back of his mind. Dr. Archer looked up from the glass, her smile was warm and inviting and Jack's drink was in her hand.

Betsy's curiosity had been decidedly piqued as she opened the can of Dr. Pepper with her pen. The ice popped and cracked as it's external temperature was lowered too quickly. The sounds coming from the glass seemed louder than what was normal. Come to think of it, most of her senses were on overdrive.

'What is it about this man that has set me on edge?' she demanded of herself as she placed the can on the counter and forced her warmest, most inviting smile onto her face before looking up at him.

"Mr. Johnson." Betsy extended her right hand, still holding the drink in her left. She walked towards him as he stood and prepared to greet her. He seemed a bit confused, as if he didn't know whether to take the drink first or shake her hand. Finally he extended his hand and grasped Betsy's.

Jack felt the electricity run up his arm and set his shoulder on fire. What was it about this woman that put him so on edge? He needed to concentrate on his reason for being here. The problem was that, right now he couldn't remember clearly what that reason was. It had to do with his work. And the CNN News, but his brain just wouldn't get

focused enough to formulate an entire thought.

Betsy could tell she had surprised him with the firmness of her handshake. It was obvious because he was still holding her hand in his.

“Your drink, Mr. Johnson.” Betsy’s smile had changed as she looked down at the glass she was holding. It was more sincere and a little shy.

He let loose of her hand and took the glass .

“Thank you . . . , and . . . please, it’s Jack.”

“If you prefer, Jack, and you may call me Betsy if you like.”

“Thank You,” Jack replied and took a rather large gulp of his Dr. Pepper.

“Care to sit?”

“Great, thanks.” Jack sat down in the chair he’d been leaning on.

“Well, we have proven ourselves to be polite, don’t you think?” Betsy joked, trying to defuse the tension that was building in the room. She stepped in front of Jack, around the small coffee table and then sat down in one of the chairs facing him.

“I suppose, manners serve us well when we’re nervous.” Jack’s grip on the glass was slipping so he set it on the coaster in the middle of the table that was now between them.

“Are you nervous, Jack?” Betsy asked, already knowing the answer.

“Y-uh well, yes as a matter of fact. I’ve never done this sort of thing before.”

“This sort of thing, meaning . . . ?” Betsy smiled inquisitively.

“Well, talked to a shri . . . uh, a psychiatrist.” Jack was embarrassing himself. He almost called her a Shrink, right to her face. This was not going at all like he’d planned.

“Is there something that I could do that would make you more comfortable?” Betsy’d been through this drill a million times. It was important to get them comfortable as quickly as possible. To get them to drop their defenses.

‘Here’s your opening.’ Jack thought to himself. ‘Don’t blow it, man!’ He had to find a way to rewind back to the shower this morning, when he’d so carefully mapped out this conversation in his head.

Just give the Doc enough to get her interested in the situation, but not enough for her to figure out the whole picture. Ask about her research subjects and maybe, how the files are kept. Make it look like you’re concerned about the Doctor / Patient privilege thing.

Then, Jack thought, he might be able to get the rest. It seemed easy enough. He just had to stay one step ahead of her. If he didn’t, this was going to be a complete disaster. He knew he would never find out what he needed to know if he couldn’t get this going in the right direction. Right now.

“Yea, I think I’d feel more comfortable if you could give me some sort of overview . . .” Jack trailed off, trying to buy some time.

“Overview?” Betsy puzzled at his request.

“You know . . . of this whole . . . uh . . . process. That would help me.” If Jack could just move the focus from why he was here to what and how Dr. Archer conducts business, well he might have a shot at getting some useful information.

Betsy sat, looking at her new patient with the most amused yet confused look on her face. She studied him for a long time.

Surprisingly, the longer she looked at him, the more comfortable he felt. Jack thought that the way her head was tilted - along with the expression on her face - made her seem innocent and fresh and trustworthy. It moved him. It moved him to the point that something inside him wanted to just gush. To babble away his secret with the most complete assurance that he was safe to do so. He had never felt such a great need to confide in someone in his life. He wouldn't even tell Todd the things he was being compelled to confide at this moment.

"Todd" Jack spoke his name over and over in his head and it seemed to snap him out of his dream. What was he thinking. He needed to get information from her, not give it! He wasn't here to cleanse his conscious. He was here to solve his problem. And she was going to help him, for starters with an Overview, of the whole process.

"Yah, an outline," Jack broke the silence with a reworded version of his question, "a block diagram of what's going to happen here." He was proud of himself for the way that came. It sounded cool and collected.

'Good,' Jack thought, 'Back on track . . .'

"I understand what an overview is, Jack. I just haven't ever been asked for one during a session before." Betsy continued to study her patient's face with interest. "It's an interesting question." Then she threw her hands up in front of her and let them drop onto her thighs with a smack.

"I'd like to know a little bit about the entire process before we begin. A glimpse of the 'Big Picture' would be very helpful." Again, Jack felt compelled to rework the original

question. “I feel more comfortable when I’m prepared.” To avoid eye contact with Betsy, he pretended to inspect his fingernails as he spoke.

This was going to work quite nicely. If she would give him enough information on how all this happens, then on the next visit he wouldn’t be just shooting in the dark. He would be able to ask more pointed, well thought out questions. He was starting to feel better about the direction the conversation was taking. Not looking directly at her made him feel a little less nervous, he could concentrate better. So he continued to attend to his cuticles.

“Jack, we are here to discuss anything and everything that you feel the need to. In this room you’re free to express how you feel, safely and without judgement. This is a haven to explore and understand the things that you feel. Here you can . . .”

“I understand that.” Jack interrupted her as he looked up from his hands. “But before I begin exploring, I’d just like some information on how we’re going to do that.” Jack was now in the drivers seat and he was hoping for an easier road from here on out.

“Well, I suppose that’s fair enough. If a little information will help you relax, then . . . ask away.” Betsy couldn’t remember the last time one of her patients had been this interesting. She was actually enjoying the banter a little and he certainly was easy on the eyes.

Jack had recovered from his shaky beginning. His confidence level was rising at a good pace and the answers he sought were looking more and more attainable. For a while there he thought he had gotten in way over his head, but now he felt like he would be able

to follow the game plan that he had formulated in the shower.

“How do you do it? I mean, say, handle patient records? Is there a file, you know . . . a case number or something you assign? How are the patients tracked?”

Jack could tell by the look on her face that he had jumped in way too quickly. He should have taken his time and built up to the question. Asked a few more that weren’t so ridiculously obvious.

‘Damn it.’ Jack scolded himself as he waited for her reply. He could feel his footing crumbling beneath him as he raised his eyes from his hands to look at the Doctor. He had been too impatient and impulsive and right now he wished that he had taken more time to plot the conversation out ahead of time.

This morning it had seemed so easy. Just a few well placed questions and he would be on his way. How could he have been so naive? He was stupid and careless.

Dr. Archer was looking at him in a way that he couldn’t describe, but he knew he’d made a huge mistake. Now she was questioning his motives. He didn’t want her on the defensive if he could help it. And he was almost certain that it was too late for that.

“That’s another interesting question, Jack. Are you concerned about confidentiality? Or are you a Detective?” Betsy’s half attempt at a joke hadn’t been well received. She cleared her throat and continued in a more professional tone. “I can assure you that we have excellent security with all of our patient records.”

Why was he asking about the records? She had encountered plenty of patients that were worried about confidentiality, but why would he ask about case numbers and filing?

She was still off balance and a little too preoccupied with his physical presence to formulate a any solid conclusion. Volleying his barrage of questions back into his court had been about all she could manage.

Jack was relieved, beyond belief, that she had appeared not to have figured out his agenda.

“Oh, no . . . not really concerned, just curious.” Jack hoped his attempt at sounding less intense had worked. And now it was time to redirect. He figured that he had hopelessly botched that first question so he quickly changed the subject.

“What about the types of therapy you employ? I’m certain that the old lay on the couch and purge routine is still around but, well- you’re a licensed MD aren’t you, I mean, can you prescribe *medication* for those who need it?”

“Is that why you’re here, Jack?” Betsy could feel Jack squirm. He didn’t look like an addict. In fact, Betsy judged by his appearance that he probably was some kind of health food nut. Dark skinned and built like a damn rock. Maybe he was doing it for a friend . . .

“NO, oh no,” again Jack retreated. “I’m just curious, that’s all.”

“You certainly are, Mr. Johnson. You certainly are.” Betsy thought to herself as she tried to concentrate on something other than his big blue eyes.

“Okay.” Betsy continued looking directly into Jack’s eyes. “I have some patients that require medication to help with a chemical imbalance . . . and things like that. There are options available to us. I’m not sure what would be best in your case, yet, Jack. I’d need considerably more information before I would prescribe medication for you.”

Jack needed to change the focus. He'd bumbled his second question beyond belief and he was building her suspicion again. He needed to set her at ease, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out how to do it.

It had seemed so easy when he had played it over in his head this morning. He would waltz in her office, ask a couple of straight forward questions and be on his merry way. Now he had a licensed Psychiatrist questioning his motives, if not his sanity. What a screw up!

"What other sort of options do you have for therapy?" Jack was just reacting now. Trying desperately to move the conversation . . . somewhere.

'The disc,' came the voice echoing in the back of his skull. 'Find out about the disc . . .'

"Do you use anything . . . more technical for your therapy?" Again, Jack was forced to look down at his fingers as he felt Betsy's gaze dig into him. "You know . . . I was reading in Scientific American that it's actually possible to record human brain waves now." Jack felt like he was behind the wheel of a runaway car – one that he was helpless to stop. "Do you have access to any of that sort of technology?" Not exactly the best segue but he had to keep the conversation moving. It was awkward but at least it was heading in the right direction.

Betsy had absolutely no idea why this man was asking these odd questions. It felt as if someone had run up behind her and shoved her forward knocking her off balance. She felt like she was being interrogated.

The fact was that she did have access to that sort of technology and she had done exactly what he was asking about. But why was he so interested? The technology was brand new. There was virtually no information published on it. And very few people knew about what she'd done with it.

If she weren't so distracted with this man, she would have been quicker on her feet. Sluggish thoughts swam through her head as she tried to come up with an answer for his question. She caught herself watching him talk. The way his mouth moved intrigued her and she had to struggle not to stare. Pinching the soft skin at the bend of her elbow wasn't helping her regain her focus this time either. She just kept watching his mouth move. Finally she broke through the fog and responded to his question.

"I find it strange that you would be so interested, Mr. Johnson." Betsy reverted to the formal in hopes of curbing further questions of this sort, as well as reminding herself of the reason he was there. This was professional. This was a patient.

"Well, my work is pretty technical and that sort of thing fascinates me."

"I see." She paused for a moment and was finally able to shake off the remainder of the spell that had been cast over her. "What kind of work do you do?"

"My brother and I are co-owners of a company that's involved in developing new technologies."

"So, would it be fair to say that you're trying to find some common ground between what you do and what I do?" Betsy asked the question more to set him at ease than to actually find out anything. "Employing this sort of technology, in your opinion, would

help validate what we might accomplish?” Betsy wouldn’t normally put this many words into a patient’s mouth, but it seemed that this would be the only way to find out why this man was really here.

“I suppose so.” Jack seemed almost apologetic. “Maybe that’s it.” He might be able to play on his jumpy thought process here. He was sounding convincingly like some kind of computer geek. His lack of conversational skills would sound logical if she bought into the fact that he was technologically inclined.

“Yea . . . that *is* it. Common ground.” Jack announced as he congratulated himself for saving it again.

“Well, I do have other technologies available to me, but my patient relationship prevents me from discussing it any further.” Control, finally.

Betsy had regained her edge in the conversation. In one fell swoop she had validated herself as technologically advanced and protectively professional. If he couldn’t find a way to be comfortable now . . . she might not be able to help him.

“Now, how is it that you decided on me as your doctor of choice? Were you referred?” Betsy tried to get the conversation back to something useable.

Jack did not respond.

“Let me guess, I was on the HMO list at work, right?” Betsy could already see the answer on his face. She wasn’t offended. Being on that list had brought her a lot of new business.

“Jack,” Betsy began “you still seem very uncomfortable. Would you be more at ease

with another doctor? A male doctor?”

“OH, NO . . . I mean, I’m as comfortable with you as I’m going to get with anyone in your position . . . I mean, profession.” Jack was fumbling terribly again. “Well, I mean, I think I would be this nervous with anyone, it’s not just you. No . . . I, I don’t want to see anyone else.”

“Really?” Betsy sensed an urgency in his voice that concerned her. But until she had more information, it would be a waste of time to ponder it.

“OK, did you come here because you wanted to talk to someone or because someone else thought you should get some help?” Betsy felt this direct approach was making progress in gaining his respect so she thought she’d continue it for a while longer.

Jack was surprised by how insightful her question was and he found himself answering it before he knew what he was doing.

“My brother felt that it would be a good idea, in light of the recent events at work. He thought I should talk to someone.”

‘Shut up!’ echoed the voice of reason in Jack’s head.

“Since I can’t seem to talk to him,” Jack continued anyway with a flippant, almost mocking tone. And Betsy saw the briefest glimmer of the problem his brother might be concerned about.

“Recent events?” Betsy was now coaxing him.

“We had a couple of very *minor* problems with some testing I was involved in . . . nothing major.”

‘For God’s sake, would you just shut up!’ Jack’s inner voice was screaming at the top of its lungs. But Jack couldn’t stop. The words were just running out of his mouth and he didn’t know how to stop them.

“And I’ve been a little . . . short tempered since then.” Jack sounded a little like Mr. Nicholson in ‘The Shining’ by the time he had finished the sentence.

‘Damn it Jack!’ He berated himself. ‘You’re losing it . . . again!’ Staying on track with this woman was almost impossible. Jack was furious with himself for having this much trouble anticipating the questions she would ask. He was telling more than he had intended. He was letting her steer the conversation. But it felt good. He was comfortable talking to her. Why had he come here? Was it to give information or to GET IT!!! ‘Come on, Jack!’

“You feel your brother is out of line with his suggestion?”

Jack felt that Todd was out of line in general, but he didn’t want to complicate this conversation any more than he already had. He wanted her to feel as if he were a reasonable man, not some half-cocked brainiac, so he decided to play it smart.

“No Dr. Archer, actually I think that he might be right on the mark this time.”

Betsy was stunned. The last two sentences out of this man’s mouth sounded like they were spoken by two completely different people. At last, she was making some progress at getting him to let down his defenses.

“Excuse me for just a moment,” Betsy spoke gently as she went to her desk for a pad of paper and a pencil.

Jack finished off his Dr. Pepper as he waited for her to return to her chair. He was getting to personal, he was going to have to stop and head her back the other direction. He could do this. He knew he could. Think. Think hard.

She sat down and settled back in the chair. Betsy thought the room seemed warmer on this side of the table. It was almost as if she had drawn him in as she snuggled back into the leather. Brought part of him with her as she returned from the desk.

On his side of the table, Jack could smell both the oily fragrance of the chair and the soft clean scent she was wearing. Her whole presence seemed to invite his trust.

When Jack looked up at her, he simply began talking. He couldn't stop himself. If he revealed too much, he would just deal with that later. He knew he needed to give her something or he would lose her. But he also knew that he couldn't stop even if he wanted to.

"There have been things at work that have caused a lot of tension . . . and its getting worse. I don't know why I'm so irritable. I can't help it. It's not like me to bite people's heads off and I guess that's why it's been so noticeable. I mean, Todd - we'd expect this kind of behavior out of him – but not me."

"And who is Todd?" Betsy asked as she wrote on the pad.

"He's my brother."

"The one that suggested that you come here?"

"Yea, that's the one."

"Does the tension at work involve Todd?"

“Yes . . . No . . . well kind of.” It was so easy for Jack to talk to her. She seemed to understand that what he was carrying inside of him was killing him. Scaring him and possessing him. He needed to get it out, he just wanted to be free of it. He was having a hard time caring, at this point, about why he had originally come here. He just didn’t want to feel alone with this thing anymore.

“Well, do you think it would be helpful to involve Todd in these sessions?”

“No . . . no, I don’t. He, uh, he thinks that I’m the one with the problem and he told me to go get it fixed. I suppose he’s concerned, but I wouldn’t expect any cooperation from him.”

There was something ambiguous about this case that had piqued Betsy’s curiosity. Something almost like déjà vu, except more real. And she sensed that this man had an imminent need to deal with whatever had happened to him at work.

There was also, undoubtedly, some chemistry between them, the kind of chemistry that could cause a problem. But she felt an unexplainable urgency to help him. Betsy decided to wait and see about the chemistry. After all, if she read him correctly, he wouldn’t be back for more than a few visits anyway and she wanted to do as much as she could in that short amount of time. Hopefully her curiosity would be satisfied before that last visit.

“Well then, we won’t ask your brother to join us if you don’t feel that it would be helpful.” Betsy looked up from her pad and smiled warmly. “I would like to schedule you for another appointment though, if that’s alright with you?”

“Yes, I’d like that.” Jack wanted to come back. He had more questions now than he had before the appointment. Besides, he wanted to see this doctor again.

Betsy went to her desk and pressed the intercom button.

“Yes ma’am?” the receptionist responded promptly.

“Make an appointment for Mr. Johnson for next week, please.” she continued to hold down the button. “Do you have a preference on the day or time?” Betsy asked as she looked up at Jack.

“No. I’ll arrange my schedule.” Jack was relieved that it was over. And he was relieved that he’d have another chance. It hadn’t gone as planned but it hadn’t been a total waste of time either. He felt better, anyway.

They stood there, staring at each other like two cowboys in a spaghetti western, sizing up the other gun slinger.

This patient was unlike any Betsy had ever had. He was going to keep her on her toes and for now, she welcomed the challenge. Extending her hand again to signal the end of this session, she smiled as Jack took it in his.

“Thank you, and I’m sorry if I seemed like I was interrogating you.”

“Quite alright Jack. It’s better to know than not to.”

Jack nodded at her and walked to the receptionist’s desk. Betsy watched him from the door of her office as he left the waiting room and got on the elevator. She could still feel the warmth of his hand in hers.

Strange. Very strange.

Jack couldn't tell if it was the elevator or his mood that was sinking as he waited for the flat silver doors to open. It became clear to him, when he stepped into the hall and felt just as unsettled, that it was his mood. Even the squeaking of his Bruno Magli's on the marble floor didn't distract him from his emotional decent. He felt as if he were leaving the safety of the nest and climbing out onto the shaky, perilous branch that his life had become. A fledgling without a net. Jack could not remember ever feeling this emotionally fragile, and he hated it.

What was it about Dr. Archer that compelled him to tell her so much? She didn't coax or persuade him in any way. She sat and listened. And watched him with those deep brown eyes that seemed to know everything. She just seemed to understand how hard this had been for him. Everything about her told him that in her office he would be safe. Her manner comforted him. He wanted to turn around and go back up to the waiting room. To sit and do just that, wait, until he could see her again. Her presence insulated him from the demons that were plaguing him now. More than anything he wanted someone to make those demons disappear. He wanted to return to the safety of her office so badly he was shaking. Jack stopped in the middle of the hall and clenched his fists. What was he DOING?!

'Run to mamma little boy. That's a good idea.' The voice in his head had taken on a cruel sarcastic tone.

It chastised him for losing control and pushed at him to get to his truck before he had another laps. Jack had had plenty of conversations with himself about what he should do

but none with the diversity of emotion he was feeling today. He was deeply sad and afraid and at the same time he was mad as hell. Furious was actually a better word for it. To the point of being irrational. But he hadn't told her anything that he shouldn't have and he knew that was a good thing.

"This must be what happens to women once a month." He thought to himself and made a mental note to be more sympathetic to the girls in the office the next time they decided to share an emotional upheaval with their coworkers.

The sunlight was painfully bright as Jack left the building. What he wouldn't give to have the sunglasses he left in the passenger seat. He wished desperately that there had been a bar in the building too. In the absence of both, he squinted and counted his steps to the parking garage. He was feeling a little more balanced now. Maybe it was the fresh air. He decided to take the stairs instead of the elevator in the parking garage. It was a good call because he was feeling better by the minute.

As he rounded the corner to where the Cherokee had been parked, Jack's temper flared again. His face was hot and he felt the skin stretching across his knuckles as he clenched his fists. He was really mad about this ass hole that felt so much above the rest of the garage patrons that he could justify using up two spaces. Jack wondered what he had expected to find upon his return. A note saying the owner was sorry?

He wasn't sure what he had thought but still, just looking at the vett shot his blood pressure up. This kind of selfishness feeds the evil that plagues us all. This is how Satan keeps a foothold in this world. There's a lot of this kind of wrong doing these days. Some

label it survival of the fittest. That was a good enough excuse for most. Jack shook his head and shook off his anger. But not before he had deeply scraped the entire length of the shiny red vehicle with his key.

- 2 -

Her name was Carol Ann and she was one of those woman that most people didn't pay a lot of attention to. She wasn't beautiful. She didn't stand out in a crowd. She wasn't the one in school that everyone asked to the prom. She was just Carol Ann. A petite, non-assuming girl who kept mostly to herself.

She was attractive in a plain sort of way. Wore very little make up and kept her hair short and straight. Her pale blue eyes were almost translucent against her milky white skin.

And everyone that met her fell in love with her. Maybe it was her shyness . . . her almost fragile nature. Most certainly it was because of her kindness. She loved life and everything in it. Her heart went out to those around her and she would drop whatever she was doing on a moments notice, just to help one of her friends.

Today, Carol Ann was down in the basement of her apartment building, doing a couple loads of wash. It wasn't hers and she certainly could find a better use of her time on a sunny Saturday afternoon, but the thought never crossed her mind. Mrs. Kliber, the elderly woman who lived next door to her, had asked her if she could help her. She had broken her wrist in a fall a couple weeks ago and she was having difficulty getting simple chores accomplished. Carol Ann had agreed without hesitation.

She pulled the clothes, one by one, from the top loading washer and then shook them vigorously before throwing them head long into the dryer. She stuffed the top of the machine with quarters and then sat back down across from the humming piece of machinery with her Cosmopolitan firmly in hand.

As she sat on the metal folding chair, the air seemed heavier in the small laundry room today. Oh, it was always stuffy - there were no windows in the 20' x 12' concrete room- but today it seemed . . . thick. Almost like you could taste it. The small gray room was never what you would call a hub of social activity anyway and because of the beautiful day outside, today it was deserted.

Everyone else was outside riding bikes, throwing Frisbees in the park, walking their dogs or any one of a couple dozen other things, all tremendously more exciting than laundry. But the thought never entered Carol Ann's head as she shifted uncomfortably on the metal chair.

Overhead a fluorescent lamp crackled and sputtered as it tried diligently, with only one of four bulbs left, to produce some semblance of normal brightness. Carol Ann shifted again, trying to get more light onto the pages of the magazine. Crackle - sputter - pop . . . and then the light went out.

"Shoot!" Carol Ann said as she looked disgustingly up at the useless fixture. There was still a working light on the other side of the room so she stood to move closer to it.

But before she'd taken her first step, she heard footsteps in the hall. The sound was unmistakable, but very faint. Almost like someone was tip toeing.

“Hey, don’t you know it’s so nice out to be inside today?” Carol Ann shouted as she walked toward the open door and stuck her head into the basement hallway. With the Cosmopolitan rolled tightly between her hands, she rung it nervously into a tight little tube as she looked back and forth down the empty hallway.

“Hmmp.” Carol Ann shook her head, turned and chose a seat on the side of the room with a properly functioning light fixture.

The dryer was now humming loudly, rocking methodically back and forth as it moaned out its sorrowful task. For the first time, Carol Ann wished she was outside. Outside in the sun. Outside with everyone else.

More footsteps. Leather shoes on concrete. Carol Ann snapped to her feet and went to the open door.

“Who’s their?” her words, again, echoing through the empty hallway.

“Shit,” Carol Ann let slip out under her breath and then walked nervously back to check the progress of her last load of wash.

Then there was another sound and Carol Ann dropped her magazine and spun around to face the open door. But this time what she heard wasn’t hard soled shoes on a concrete floor . . . it sounded like a whisper. And it sounded like it was real close. She sucked in large breathes of the thick stale air and tried to regain her composure.

“Very funny . . . who’s doing that? Is that you, Robby?”

Carol Ann stood motionless, studying the open door. When she found out who was playing this ridiculous little joke, somebody was going to get hurt.

“Who’s out there?” she shouted impatiently, sounding more like a scolding mother than anything else.

Then the unmistakable whispering again. Louder this time - right outside the door, “I want to help you . . .”

Carol Ann let out a tiny little yipe and watched as a deeply silhouetted figure slid quietly into the doorway. It was Leonard Moss.

Without thinking, she bolted toward him with her clenched fists in front of her. She slammed into him in the doorway and began pounding furiously on his chest. Leonard held his hands in front of him and successfully blocked the majority of her ill placed blows.

“You ass hole!” Carol announced with one final slug to Leonard’s shoulder. “If you ever do that again, I’ll kill you. You scared the shit out of me.”

“I’m sorry,” Leonard said softly, leaned down and kissed her cheek, then hugged her gently. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Well you sure as heck did,” Carol said trying to force a little more irritation out than she really was still feeling. She pushed her head away from his chest and looked him straight in the eye.

“Please don’t do that again, Leonard,” she asked in the most pitiful voice Leonard could ever recall emanating from her soft pink lips.

“I won’t. I Promise.”

Leonard pulled her head back against his chest and held her tightly, rocking gently

back and forth until the dryer buzzed.

- 3 -

“I’m glad to have you back Mr. Johnson.” Betsy smiled that warm, angelic smile of hers, knowing full well it would leave her patient off balance. Betsy was keenly aware of how irresistible she could be when she let that smile loose on a man. And since she wasn’t using it to entice him on a personal level, rather using it as a tool to leave him a little preoccupied for analytical purposes, this made the unfair advantage justifiable. This manipulation was to achieve a professional objective and therefore warranted. Besides, she felt she had lost some ground on the first visit and she needed to regain control of the relationship they were forming.

Jack could feel her eyes on him as he entered the room. ‘Ok, Jackson,’ he began the dissertation in his head. ‘Ya need to know what the source is. Ya need to know enough about this office and lab, if there is one, to understand the work schedules and security measures. You need to know what, if any, new sources are out there. And why she is gathering this kind of data and is anyone else gathering it. You also have to find out what about your story interests her the most and build on that . . . to get her talking.’ Jack had spent a lot of time getting the plan straight in his head.

“It’s good to see you too.” Jack returned the courtesy with a short glance and an uncomfortable nod.

‘Mission accomplished,’ Betsy thought to herself as she sat and offered the other chair to him. She decided to begin while she was on a roll.

“So Jack, how have you been since our last session?”

Jack had been uneasy since he entered the building less than fifteen minutes ago. He wished he could slow this whole process down, again. For some reason, he felt like this session was going to go much the same as the last. He decided that the best defenses was a good offense.

“I haven’t been sleeping well. I just don’t feel rested in the morning. Other than that I’m fine. Just . . . just fine.” Jack felt as if he were rambling and hoped he didn’t appear as nervous as he felt.

“Well, let’s start with work,” Betsy spoke, looking directly at him. “Is it still very stressful or have things leveled off any?”

“I don’t think that I ever called it ‘stressful’,” he could feel himself losing focus already. “It’s just that some of the research we have been doing requires long hours and it can be, well . . . a lot of pressure . . . at times.” Jack hated it when he sounded defensive.

“What type of research, Jack?” Betsy appeared not to notice Jack’s discomfort.

“Testing video games . . . for content and safety.” Jack knew the minute he said it that he shouldn’t have. How was he going to explain video game safety?!

“The plan Jack, stick to the PLAN.”

“Safety?” Betsy almost mumbled to herself. “What kind of safety concerns, Jack?” Her look was more than puzzled.

Jack decided not to explain.

“Oh, well, there are a lot of aspects to it that I’m sure most people don’t consider.”

Jack was unsure of how well he had steered that one. He realized that he had several agendas with this woman, all playing at once. First and foremost he NEEDED to get some information from her about the test data.

Second his ego was at stake. He was being out witted and out spared by . . . by . . . by not only a female, but a beautiful one at that. And the fact that he found the good Doctor attractive was an issue all in itself.

“What safety issues concern you the most?”

‘Shit’, Jack’s mind was reeling. All he could think of was that one word. ‘Shit. Shit, shit, SHIT!’ His brain was caught in an eternal loop. How was he going to head her off of this one? He was not going to tell her anything about the research. Or that he was the test subject, or what they were testing! Jack had to think, but the only thing he could conjure up was ‘Shit.’

“Jack?” Dr. Archer’s voice shook him from his stupor.

“Uh, well, I’m not sure that work has all that much to do with it.” ‘Good save Jackie boy,’ the voice taunted him.

Betsy just sat there, pencil in hand, with that ‘go ahead’ look on her face.

“The things at work affect my mood but, I think that it’s more of a problem with these damn dreams.” Jack felt helpless to stop what he was saying. “I have these dreams, they last all night and in the morning I feel like I just finished a marathon.”

Betsy watched him carefully, but said nothing.

“I don’t know why I can’t just go to sleep and . . .and . . . sleep. I’m really tired.”

‘What are you doing, Jack? This isn’t the plan?’

This is the sort of thing that she wants to hear. Jack rationalized furiously with himself. And I want to tell someone about the night sweats. The god awful black outs. Maybe, maybe they aren’t related and maybe she can help me with that. Maybe.

“What do the dreams remind you of Jack?”

That was, beyond a doubt, the oddest question anyone had ever asked him. ‘What do they remind him of?’ Why didn’t she ask what they were about or who was in them? Was this her covert way getting him to spill something. Some kind of psychological attack?

He wished he could confide in her, but he knew if he did there would be problems. Big problems. Jack was getting more unsure of his ability to lead her astray. If he divulged to much he would never get the information he had come for. She was beating him at this game and he had to find a way out of the hole he was digging. His hands were trembling and he knew that she saw them. He felt very much like he was on the edge of something, teetering, perilously. He was tired, and this place was a safe haven. He just wanted to curl up, with his face on the soft leather couch and sleep, for a long time.

It had become clear to Jack that he was not going to get anywhere near the subject matter he wanted to talk about. At least not today. He was the mouse in this cat and mouse game since the moment he walked in the door. It was time to give in and try again another day. As he raised his eyes and focused on the woman sitting in front of him he forgot everything.

Dr. Archer was sitting patiently, awaiting his answer. Jack thought she was absolutely

the most striking woman he had ever seen. Her eyes were big and dark and her skin was pale and smooth and inviting. He wanted to kiss her. And for the briefest moment he wasn't sure if he could keep himself from it. Now he really had to go.

"Well, I'm not sure what you mean by what do they remind me of, but I will tell you that they don't make any sense." Jack bolted out of his chair as if it were a catapult. "And I am afraid that I have to meet this cutting short, Dr Archer."

Jack scrunched his eyes shut in embarrassment and didn't even bother correcting himself.

Betsy smiled as Jack shoved his hands in the pockets of his kaki pants. She refrained from asking him anything further. He rocked on his heels and raised his eyebrows and shoulders in unison. This wasn't the first time Jack had made an idiot of himself and it turned out to be to his advantage. This time though, it felt like a blessing and not just a lucky break.

She thought it was a cute gesture and if this time turned out to be the last time she would see him, this was a memory she was glad to have.

Betsy remained seated and extended her hand in fair well. Jack shook it firmly and looked once again into her dark, round eyes. When she smiled they sparkled and he knew he would be back for at least one more session before he gave up on his mission. Jack felt the edge of his uneasiness were smoother. He would be back, and next time he wouldn't be so guarded. There was no need to be.

"Thank you." Jack nodded as he spoke. "I'll see myself out."

Betsy turned in her seat and watched him walk out of her office. When he stopped at the front desk, she was puzzled but only for a moment. As the receptionist handed him a card, Betsy felt her face flush. She was more than glad he had made another appointment, and not just for his sake, but for hers as well.

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Jack was feeling . . . edgy. He didn't know how else to explain it. Just kind of edgy. Not angry, not upset, not anxious. He walked into the kitchen and poured himself another cup of coffee. He stared at it for a minute then slowly dumped it down the sink.

"Yea, that's just what I need. More caffeine."

Jack walked into the living room and grabbed his work boots from the side of the couch. He shoved his foot in and wrapped the laces around twice before tying them tightly.

Across from where he sat, the television - it looked like CNN - was saying something about another 'Lipstick' murder. Jack snatched the remote control and flicked it in the direction of the TV set.

It was all these damn dreams. They'd started the first night home after leaving the hospital and now he couldn't close his eyes without witnessing some macabre ritual. Without feeling like he was participating in . . . and even enjoying . . .

"Who gives a fuck who died . . . or who got killed!" Jack threw the remote control violently at the TV and stormed out of the house.

Outside, Jack pulled his keys from his pocket and opened the wooden shed at the end of the driveway. Inside, he carefully looked over the selection of tools, then pulled out a small flat bladed shovel and a rake. There were several timbre trimmed plant arrangements around his front yard that were in need of attention.

The sun felt good on the back of his neck and, even though it was cool outside, he could feel sweat dripping between his shoulder blades. As he pulled weeds, turned soil and pulled up clumps of crab grass, Jack tried to evaluate who he was.

“What do you mean who I am? I know exactly who I am!” Jack snapped at a row of tired looking Irises.

Jack knelt in the dirt and used the rake to trim around the meager flowers. His stomach was sour and he didn’t know why. Well, he was trying desperately to tell himself that he didn’t know why. Problem was, that he couldn’t get rid of one recurring thought - *‘I’m not a killer. I’m not! That was somebody else!’*

Jack’s ears were throbbing and his head felt alarmingly warm. The sour feeling in his stomach was starting to make him nauseous and he was feeling a little dizzy.

“Damn it,” Jack snapped for no particular reason as he pressed the bottom of his work boot onto the top side of the shovel blade. He reached down and turned several chunks of dirt over then, suddenly dropped to his knees breathing heavily.

Jack blew air out forcefully, trying to push back the sick feeling as little sparkles of light fired around the outside of his vision. And then there was a flash of light as Jack’s head struck the ground in front of him.

It was dark everywhere. Darker than pitch black. Jack could feel something underneath him. He was kneeling on . . . a person.

Jack looked down between his legs and now there was light - just a little bit - streaking across the woman's face. She was crying softly and saying something, but Jack, either couldn't understand her or didn't care.

In one hand, he was holding a knife. A good size locking-blade pocket knife. Sharpened to a razors edge. In the other hand, a tube of lipstick.

Jack was shaking as he carefully touched the woman's cheek with the tip of the knife. Ever so gently. Soft creamy white skin . . . so helpless . . . so afraid. So beautiful. So in need.

Her lips moved but nothing came out except for a pitiful gurgling sound.

"Shhhh," Jack reassured quietly as he touched the knife to her lips.

Jack breathed deeply, shaking with exhilaration and excitement. He could sense everything. Feel everything. And then he cut her...

Jack's eyes snapped open and he was lying on his couch, covered with a sour clammy sweat gasping for air. He was shaking and breathing hard. It was dark outside and he had a splitting headache. He pressed his eyes shut hard and ground the palms of his hands into his forehead, as if he could work the pain out like a muscle cramp.

Jack couldn't remember getting to the couch. In fact, he couldn't remember what he was doing before . . . before what?

"How long have I been here?" Jack whispered to himself.

Jack grabbed the top of the couch and drug himself to an upright, sitting position. He cradled his head in his hands and tried, in vain, to remember something. Anything. But it was no use.

Then Jack's heart stopped as he noticed the blood on his jeans. Slowly, he ran his quivering forefinger across the sticky fabric and then brought the tip of his finger up in front of his eyes.

Jack jerked himself to his feet and began frantically patting himself down. Desperately trying to find a cut or scratch or something. But he was breathing so hard, that by the time he found the torn knee in his jeans he had nearly passed out again.

Falling back into the couch, Jack began to cry. To cry and babble to himself.

"I'm not . . . not fucking crazy! I'm not!"

Jack rocked back and forth, hugging himself tightly until he fell asleep.

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Leonard was absolutely fascinated by copy-cats. At least that's what the news was calling them: copy-cat killers. But to Leonard, they were . . . almost followers. Not that he had any need or desire to ever promote that sort of thing, but it was kind of exciting. Very flattering.

And now, with his arm wrapped tightly around Carol Ann's shoulder, they sat together and watched the end of the evening news. They were actually waiting for 'Mash' to come on and had clicked on the television a little early just to be safe. They both loved Alan Alda.

On the set in front of them was the image of a bloody sheet - a slender frail arm was exposed from the elbow up.

"I can't believe there's really people in the world like that, Leonard." Carol Ann nuzzled up under Leonard's arm. "It's just so awful."

Leonard squeezed her tightly and then patted her shoulder reassuringly. "It's kind of funny if you think about it."

Carol Ann looked up at him questioningly out of the corner of her eye.

"Oh, not funny - ha, ha - just funny ironic." Leonard's tone was soft and soothing. Carol Ann cuddled up a little closer and pulled her legs up onto the couch.

"People spend their whole lives looking," Leonard hit the volume down button on the remote twice.

"What do you mean Leonard?" Carol Ann was now curled up like a cat next him.

Leonard took one big breath and looked almost perplexed as he thought about what he was trying to say. "Looking for peace. Looking for love. Looking for help . . ."

"I don't know what you're trying to say Leonard, but it would take a monster to do something like that . . . that's what I'm saying."

On the screen in front of them, a Detective Blakely was saying something about motives and MOs. Carol Ann tried not to pay much attention. Leonard picked up the remote and mashed the mute button. He was enjoying, as he always did, the way the media pretended to understand his work, but he couldn't risk his name being mentioned.

"See, that's just what I'm talking about. There's people that spend their whole lives

complaining about their meager little existence. People that are so miserable. People that long for peace and happiness, but never even get close.”

“Leonard,” Carol Ann sat up and looked straight at him, “are you saying these people are *better off* dead?”

There was a look of genuine revulsion on her face and for a second, Leonard found it hard to keep his cool. This was going to be harder than he had thought.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying, Carol Ann, but that’s really not the point either.” Leonard had turned slightly in the direction of the TV. The beginning credits were rolling, and the helicopter door flew open as it landed on the big red cross.

“It has to do more with freedom and choices.”

Carol Ann looked confused.

“All freedom comes with a price,” Leonard’s voice was silky smooth and even. “And people are generally not willing to pay the price for that true freedom.”

Carol Ann was genuinely confused. This wasn’t the first time she’d been lost in one of Leonard’s philosophical discussions, but this was certainly one of the strangest. She had come to, not only expect, but to actually feel comfortable with Leonard’s little quirkiness. She thought it was kind of cute.

“If you want the choice to be yours, then you have to accept the responsibility.” A sparkle of passion punctuated Leonard’s words. “Accept the accountability for your actions and the life you lead. Accept the fact that if you can’t do this, then someone else will be forced to do it for you. And then the responsibility for the results will lie with the

other person.”

Carol Ann was mesmerized by the energy in Leonard’s voice. She still couldn’t figure out what he was talking about, but the degree to which he believed in it was what entranced her.

“And when that happens, you’re bound by those other decisions.” Leonard paused to study Carol Ann’s eyes before continuing.

“Freedom. Choice. Responsibility. It’s a three headed snake that’ll get you every time. Just when you got two of ‘em under control, the third one reaches up and bites you on the ass.”

Carol Ann, only slightly perplexed, laid her head down on the back of the couch.

“It just scares me, Leonard,” she said, not in response to what he had said, but to continue the conversation that she had started.

Leonard turned back toward the TV and mashed the mute button again. He leaned back into the couch and put his arm back around Carol Ann.

“I know it does, honey. I know it does.”

And together, they sat quietly and watched Hawkeye Pierce make jokes while wearing an apron covered with blood.

- 6 -

Jack stood in the doorway of Dr. Archer’s office and watched her sitting at her desk. She seemed mesmerized by something in the file she was reading. For the first time Jack felt at ease in her office. His shoulders weren’t tense, his stomach wasn’t churning. He

was glad to be here, even if he didn't get the answers he needed today. He was certain, that given enough time, the information he was after would come to light. In the mean time, he might just find some other answers. Besides she wasn't hard to look at and he was always more relaxed when he left here.

"Jack Johnson is here." The intercom was muffled but it still made her jump.

"Thank You." Betsy replied as she closed the folder and looked up to see Jack standing in the doorway. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you there. Please come in."

She smiled that smile, again. But this time it was unknowingly. She was genuinely glad to see him. The indigo blue shirt he was wearing made his eyes as brilliant as the September sky. He was a welcome departure from the grisly work she had been immersed in the entire morning.

Jack walked over to and sat down in what he now considered his chair. Dr. Archer straightened her desk and with pad and pen in hand, made her way to her chair as well. The skirt she was wearing hit her just above the knee. It was barely pink and full and swished as she walked. Her hose were sheer, the color of seashells and the high heels she wore were perfect with the skirt. The jacket was fitted and beautifully tailored with the most delicate embroidery Jack had ever seen.

The last two times Jack had been here, her wardrobe had not brought attention to her figure. The clothes she wore were earth tones and comfortable though still stylish and professional. But Jack had not taken notice of her the way he was taking notice right now. This suit did more than do her justice. She was stunning.

Betsy sat down and smiled at him again. She could not contain how good it felt to see him. Although, to her, he still seemed as nervous as he had the last time he was in her office. Making a mental note to try and soothe his nerves, she began the session.

“It’s good to see you again, Jack. I’m glad you decided to come back. After your abrupt departure last time, I thought that I wouldn’t see you again.” Her effort was genuine and not too personal.

“You knew I would be back.” Jack smiled as he spoke but was surprised at what had just come out of his mouth.

It was the first time Betsy had seen him smile, really smile, and she was lost in his shining eyes. He was more than handsome when he smiled. He was exquisite.

They sat and stared at one another for a while. It seemed that they were coming to some sort of understanding. Something passed between them and they both knew what it was. Words were unnecessary and probably would have spoiled the message that had been conveyed and confirmed. A calm settled over both of them and they sat back in their chairs as if it were a sign of welcoming this new relationship they had come upon.

“Maybe I did,” Betsy conceded.

“Where did we leave off?” Jack asked deciding to move on to the reason he had come.

“I believe you were telling me about the dreams.”

Jack drew a heavy breath and began explaining how he couldn’t really explain them. They were awesome and fearful, oppressive and haunting but he couldn’t remember a single thing about them. Other than how he felt when he woke.

“How do you know you’re having a dream?” Betsy’s words hung in the air above them.

How did he know he had had a dream if he didn’t remember anything about what he had dreamt?

“I just know, that’s all.”

“Is it like a series of disjointed, choppy images?”

“Not exactly . . . all I can remember is ugliness. I just know that I’ve experienced something - done something - but I can’t remember anything about it.”

“That sounds more like a black out than a dream, Jack.” Betsy jotted something on the tablet.

“But I wake up, in bed or on the couch and I *know* that I’ve had . . . one of these things. I had one two days ago. I remember waking up on the couch and being, just wiped out.”

Betsy made another couple of notes on her pad and then returned her attention to Jack.

“It felt as though I’d gone somewhere - did something. I was exhausted.”

“And you can’t remember anything else.” Betsy tried not to reveal too much concern with her tone.

But she could see the distress that had crept onto Jack’s face and it made her wish she could change the subject. But he wasn’t here for comfort. He was here for help. And this was leading to the problem.

“Jack, we need to find out what’s behind these . . . episodes.” Betsy wasn’t writing

anymore. She was looking straight at him and now he was trying to avoid her.

Jack looked down at his hands. "I know we do." Then he looked up at Betsy. "I just don't know how."

Betsy studied Jack's face. She could see fear and she could see tension. His eyes danced nervously and he was rubbing his hands together. She knew that they would have to explore these dreams – no matter how painful they may be.

"Jack." Betsy tried to soothe him with just a smile. "Would you be willing to lie down and see if we could evoke one of these "dream states"?"

Jack snapped forward in the chair, "I don't want to have one of those dreams ever again!" He was wringing his hands like a wash cloth.

Betsy felt an urge to put her arms around him and smooth away the tension with her hands. Instead, she decided to place her hand on his leg. Jack responded by standing up and turning around. He stood there pulling at the back of his neck and she watched as the muscles in his arm flexed.

As Jack slowly turned around, Betsy stood to face him. He looked at her directly and knew that she'd understand.

"I'll have to come back," he said extending his hand and trying to smile.

Betsy nodded without a word - her attempt at a smile was successful.

Again she watched him walk from her office, but this time, he knew she was watching and it was a comfort to him.

He was gone again and Betsy wondered what she could do to keep from thinking of

him for the rest of the day.

The phone brought her the distraction she was looking for.

Betsy picked it up on the third ring.

“Detective Blakely for you Dr. Archer.”

“Thank you, put him through.” Betsy took a cleansing breath before speaking.

“Detective, how have you been?” She wrestled with her dislike for the arrogance of this man, but manners prevented her from saying anything.

“I’m returning your call, what did you need?” The Detective couldn’t hide the fact that he knew exactly what she wanted.

“I’ve been waiting for a status report . . . on Leonard.” Betsy’s tone was almost reprimanding.

“The authorities in Austin think that they have him. The description sounds right but there’s so much bullshit ya gotta go through before you can confirm anything. I mean, that’s why I haven’t called.”

“Well, thanks for keeping me posted.” Again, Betsy sounded as if she was chastising a naughty two-year old. “Can I count on you keeping me informed on any new developments?”

There was nothing but hiss from the other end of the phone.

“Detective?”

“Uh, ya . . . well, see there’s kinda been a new ‘development’.”

Betsy didn’t like the sound of that. Not at all.

“What do you mean, Blake?”

The Detective took a long hard breath and then said it the only way that he could. “We found another one.”

And now it was Betsy’s turn for uncomfortable silence.

“It fits the MO and the locale. It was Friday night. Well, early Saturday morning.”

Betsy was in shock. All she could see was Leonard’s face as it flung up from the surface of her desk. Blood flying though the air and that terrible look in his eyes. That deep evil burning.

“The only thing that’s different is that the victim looks . . .” The Detective didn’t want to tell Betsy this part. In fact he had had every intention of *not* telling her. But here he was, babbling away like some little school kid. He was still feeling guilty about the scolding she’d given him and maybe he thought that he could make it up to her by coming clean now. Whatever the reason, he just couldn’t stop himself.

“. . . well she’s the same height and build . . . I mean, her hair color and the way it’s cut . . . well shit, the girl looks just like you.”

“Damn it, Blake,” the emotion cracked in the back of Betsy’s throat. “Didn’t I tell you? I told you. He’s coming after me. Shit. Blake, shit. You should have called me. Shit.”

Betsy’s firm reprimanding tone had turned into a shaky cracking whisper.

“Hey, hey now . . . I know, I shoulda called . . . but it could be a coincidence. We just don’t have any physical evidence that links this to Leonard. It’s probably him in Austin.

This is just a copycat.”

The Detective felt like an idiot now. See, this is exactly why he hadn’t called her. Now he had to try and make her feel better.

“The murder was only two days ago. Austin’s guy was picked up about noon on Saturday. We can check the flight schedules – no prob.”

‘But, he’d have to be a magician to pull that off,’ Blakely thought to himself as he waited for some kind of response from Betsy.

“You’re right,” Betsy sounded exhausted. “Please call me when you know something. Please.”

“I will, I will.”

Betsy put the phone down and pressed the intercom. “I need thirty Katrina, do I have it?” she asked the receptionist.

“Yes ma’am, you have forty five.”

“Great, thanks.”

Betsy leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. If Leonard were here, she was in danger. She knew that he was coming back. Knew that it hadn’t been just an idol threat.

She would need all her faculties. This man was dangerous . . . and smart. And he wanted Betsy dead.

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“Tell me about what happened at our last appointment,” Betsy asked pointedly, referring to Jack’s hasty exit.

Jack had barely been in her office for two minutes before she posed the question. And it wasn't that it made him terribly defensive, but he was visibly . . . tense about it.

It had been a very abrupt departure. He had walked in, sat down, stood up and walked out. That wasn't the first time she had had a client bolt when she asked the wrong - or the right - question. In her profession, you got used to it. But they had connected in a very comfortable way and she desperately wanted to find that connection again today.

"I'm not sure what you mean . . .," Jack shifted nervously in his chair. He was sure, he knew exactly what she meant. He just wanted some time.

Betsy studied his face for a minute. He looked tired. More than tired, exhausted. Somehow drained from deep within.

"You're not sleeping very well, are you Jack?"

"I guess that depends on what you mean by 'very well'."

Betsy gave him a look that bordered on stern, while she maintained that 'I'm really trying to help' aura.

"Actually, no I'm not. Not at all." Jack knew that he had no good reason to be evasive and he also knew that she was aware of what he was doing.

Again Betsy pushed the open issue, "Why did you run out of our last appointment?"

Jack needed help. He knew it, now. When he had started this whole doctor thing, he had intended to pump her for information and that would be that. All he wanted to do was to find out who's memories they'd gotten and move on.

But things had deteriorated since then. The blackouts had gotten worse. The helpless

sense that he was no longer in control of his own life had become almost unbearable. He was spending less and less time at work and when he was there, he'd snap at almost anyone. This was a turning point for Jack.

Jack leaned forward in the chair and looked straight into Betsy's eyes, straight into Betsy's soul. He was convinced that what he saw was good. Convinced that it was honest and sincere. And that he would have to be too, if he was going to come clean. He had to be completely sure that this course was the best thing to do.

"Last time we talked about the dreams."

Betsy watched carefully, but only nodded her insistence that he continue.

"There's more to it than just dreams . . ."

This time, Betsy's puzzled expression was the only encouragement that Jack needed to go on.

"I have had a lot of nasty dreams lately. Brutal, violent kind of stuff. But that's not the big problem." Jack paused and took a shallow breath. "You were right last time . . . I've been having black outs."

Now that he had begun to open up, Betsy only needed a quick look to nudge him on.

"I'm losing big chunks of time - where I can't remember anything. Absolutely nothing." Jack ground the palms of his hands together tightly and then watched Betsy carefully for a reaction. And if there was one, he couldn't see it. She remained composed and direct.

Betsy looked down at Jack's hands then back into his eyes. "You're afraid of these

black outs, Jack. Why?”

Jack’s eyebrows snapped up and his nostrils flared slightly, “Damn right I’m afraid. I’m scared shitless!”

The intensity of Jack’s reaction to this question caught Betsy off guard. She watched him carefully, occasionally taking notes on her pad.

“Losing chunks of time would be enough to scare anyone, Jack. But there’s more to it than that. Isn’t there? What’s so frightening about the black outs?”

Jack sat perfectly still. The look of intensity on his face was starting to make Betsy’s stomach tighten up. His eyes narrowed and the muscles in his jaw rippled back and forth. Betsy could, not only feel his fear, but sense it looming around him like an early morning fog settling over a dingy marsh.

“I’m afraid of what I can’t remember. Of what happens when I’m . . . out.” Jack’s voice was now calm and even.

“That’s understandable. But is there a reason to think that you’d do something wrong . . . or bad, when you black out?”

“No, of course not,” Jack spit out almost involuntarily. “I mean . . . maybe . . . I don’t know. I just don’t know.” The irritation in his voice was rising.

Betsy knew that he was holding something back. Not telling the whole truth. This was, for the first time, a glimpse of why Jack had come to see her. Whether he was aware of it or in denial, he was finally talking about what he needed her help with.

“Why do you call them black outs, Jack? Why not passing out or falling asleep?”

Jack didn't need any clarification on what Betsy was asking him. He knew exactly what she meant and he responded thoughtfully to the query.

"There's movement," Jack sucked in a quick breath through his nose before continuing. "I'm not in the same place when I wake up."

"Like sleep walking?" Betsy probed matter of factly.

"Not really. I wake up feeling like I've . . . done something. I mean physically done something. My arms will be sore or I'll have a fresh cut or bruise. It's creepier than that, though."

Betsy nodded slightly and smiled that 'Go on' smile that she had.

"I actually *feel* like I've done something. Like there's an ugly memory just out of reach, but I can't quite get to it. Can't quite touch it. I feel guilty afterwards." Jack seemed perplexed as he searched for the words to describe exactly what he was feeling.

While Jack struggled, Betsy looked deep into his eyes, beyond the striking blue and the clean white. Betsy was trying to see into Jack's soul. She needed verification of her suspicions before pushing ahead. And after only a few seconds, she knew that she was right.

"There's still more, Jack. You're keeping something from me. Not telling me the whole truth."

Now Jack started to fidget and squirm like a ten-year old kid getting nabbed for stealing bubble gum. Before Jack could open his mouth, Betsy continued.

"There's something more about the cause of the black outs and why you're so afraid

of them. Isn't there, Jack?" Betsy tilted her head slightly to the left and squinted at him.

After taking an enormous breath, Jack proceeded to tell Betsy *everything*. He started with the bet with Todd and worked right up to the experiment and his stay in the hospital room. Along the way, he explained the technology that the company had developed and how they had improved on the equipment she had been using.

Jack talked, uninterrupted, for almost twenty minutes. He ended the recap with an in depth discussion on his deepest fears about the black outs. And the real reason he was so deathly afraid of them.

"I don't know how much of him is me or how much of me is me anymore." Jack's voice was trembling.

Betsy sat, motionless with her mouth slightly agape, not realizing that the pencil had dropped from her hand onto the floor.

"All I really know is that I've got to find out who he is. For some reason, I know that I have to face him. I'm absolutely convinced that it's the only way I can separate myself from him. The only way I'll be able to purge it once and for all."

Jack's eyes watered up and his hands were shaking. Then in silence he sat, trembling, waiting for Betsy to speak.

After what seemed like several minutes, Betsy composed herself enough to speak.

"Well . . . that's quite a story." Betsy couldn't decide if it was harder to talk or to breathe.

Jack, very carefully maintained eye contact, thinking that if he looked away, even for

an instant, he would be pronounced hopelessly psychotic and locked away for ever. This was the moment of truth. Had he misjudged her? Would she be able to help him or would this be a polite ‘Excuse me for a moment, won’t you.?’

“I don’t really understand the part about the playback. I mean, how is such a thing possible?”

A wave of relief swept through Jack like a warm, sweet breeze. He leaned forward in his chair and used his hands extensively as he explained the delicate workings of a virtual simulation.

“We’ve had the ability to record the simple electrical activity in the brain for a long time.”

Betsy nodded, still having trouble breathing.

“But, it’s only been lately that the technology has existed to capture the intricacies of all the brain’s neural activity. To capture the essence of feeling . . . emotion . . . and memory.” It was easier for Jack to explain how it worked than it was to explain how it felt.

Instead of getting easier, it was getting harder to breath. Betsy felt like there was a big leather belt wrapped around her chest and it was slowly constricting. The air in the room seemed thick and hard to swallow.

“What was missing was a way to play it back. For a subject to relive those emotions and experiences. That’s what we developed. A way to couple these signals back into the brain. It gave us the ability to take the experiences of others and play then back through

anyone else. The result was like a dream . . . a dream with senses and emotion. A dream with the full impact of all the original feelings.”

Jack instinctively paused to give Betsy a chance to catch up. She looked like she hadn’t slept in a month.

“Anyway, when you’re experiencing skydiving or racing a car at a hundred and fifty miles an hour or . . . having sex with a super model . . . that’s fun. Those things are all exhilarating and there’s not a lot of deep emotional involvement.”

“And that’s where the bet came in?”

Even though it sounded like a zombie was speaking, Jack knew that Betsy got it. And, for the second time in the last few minutes, he felt a wave of relief flush over him.

“Yes,” Jack spoke soberly, “Todd believed that those playbacks where as close to reality as . . . reality. He was convinced that those experiences could change you. Could change your morality and affect your system of beliefs.”

“And you thought that your beliefs were above reproach?”

Jack started to answer, but before he could get a word out, Betsy stood up behind her desk and ground her knuckles into its surface.

“You though that your own morality was stronger than anything you could stick into it?”

Jack nodded and was again cut off before he could speak.

“You arrogant, self centered, macho son-of-a-bitch!” Betsy was now pacing back and forth behind her desk, intermittently waving an accusing forefinger at Jack. She was

appalled, and frightened. Both for and of him.

“You really don’t know what you’ve been messing around with, do you? And I’d like to meet this big bother of yours and give him a piece of my mind too.”

Betsy plopped down in her chair with a swoosh. The combination of the thick air and the sudden tantrum had drained her.

“So why did you come here?” Suddenly Betsy felt used. She wasn’t sure when she asked the question, but as the words left her mouth, it hit her.

“You were using me to get that name! You son-of-a . . .”

“At first that was true,” Jack interrupted sharply. “But I was trying to lie to myself. Trying to tell myself that everything was okay. Everything’s not okay. Everything’s way far from okay.”

And then it happened. Jack had fought hard to keep it from happening and up until the actual moment that it happened, he thought he’d been successful. But he couldn’t hold it back anymore.

He was hysterical. In an instant he had begun babbling. That ‘I can’t catch my breath’ kind of crying that was generally reserved for small children and pregnant women.

“I don’t know what to do anymore,” Jack forced out between sobs. “Every time I turn on the news, there’s another one. Another one of those damn killings. Every time I black out!”

Jack held his head in his hands and rocked gently back and forth. “It’s not me . . . it can’t be me . . . it can’t . . .,” Jack’s voice trailed off into a muffled whimper.

Betsy had had such a forceful reaction to the whole story that she really hadn't stopped long enough to understand what Jack was really afraid of. And now, for the first time, she had gotten it.

Betsy looked thoughtfully at Jack for almost a minute then asked softly, "Jack, when was your last black out?"

Jack looked up and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. He sucked in a rhythmic breath and said, "Last night."

"When, Jack?" Betsy's eyes lit with a new intensity, "When last night?"

Jack breathed in loudly before wiping his nose again and continuing, "I don't know . . . a little before eight . . ."

"For how long? How long were you out?"

"Maybe midnight . . . a little after I guess . . ."

Betsy set her hand gently on the file folder that lay on her desk. The file folder that Detective Blakely had sent over just this morning. The file that contained all the gory details about the nineteenth 'Lipstick' killing. Or the alleged 'Lipstick' killing. The police were still calling it a copycat killer and refused to confirm or deny Leonard Moss as a suspect.

As the ringing started in her ears, Betsy fumbled with the folder to get it open. She flipped nervously to the coroner's report and scanned quickly down the document until she find what she was looking for.

. . . time of death: 9:00pm - 12:00am.



## PART THREE

*“Sunshine on my shoulders makes me smile.”*

- John Denver

## Chapter Six

### CLARIFICATIONS

- 1 -

Betsy had just finished dictating the report on her last patient of the day. But, even when she worked on other cases, her thoughts kept drifting back to last week – to her session with Jack. Her brain seemed to be working on a puzzle again. And Jack seemed to be a big part of that puzzle. The clues hadn't fallen together just yet but she felt certain that they would.

Betsy's train of thought was jolted by her secretary's voice chiming in on the intercom.

"Sorry Bets, I know you're on your way home, but it's Mr. Johnson on two. You want me to blow him off?"

"No . . . no, I'll take it." Betsy cut her off before she could finish talking.

"Dr. Archer . . . ?"

"What's the matter Jack? You sound upset?"

"That's one way of putting it." Jack's voice was shaky and hoarse. "I'm way past upset. I don't know what to do . . . I'm afraid . . . I'm just . . . I can't sleep."

Betsy could feel his distress through the phone line and it worried her.

"What is it, Jack? The dreams?"

"I can't go to sleep. I can't believe I did it, but I can't talk myself out of it either. I know that's not me . . . I just know it . . ." Jack was babbling and becoming incoherent.

“Slow down, Jack. I don’t understand what you’re talking about.” Betsy tried to remain calm, but a sickening feeling was rising in her abdomen.

“ . . . but, I . . . it’s on the news . . . every time I black out . . . oh God, Dr. Archer, I can’t do this anymore . . .,” Jack’s words trailed off into a rhythmic sob.

“Jack, calm down. I don’t understand what you’re talking about. I want to help you, but . . .”

“I’ve been up for thirty-six hours.” Jack sniffled and took a deep sputtering breath. “I’ve got to get some sleep - I can’t think straight anymore. But I’m afraid. Afraid it’s going to happen again. I don’t know what to do.” Jack tried, but couldn’t keep from crying.

“Come down to the office.” It was out of Betsy’s mouth before she knew what she was saying. “We’ve got a sleep lab down the hall where we do research.”

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Betsy tried hard to stop, but the words just kept coming out of her mouth.

“You can sleep in the lab, Jack. You’ll be safe there.”

“You don’t understand,” Jack snapped at her. “It might really be me. I could be killing these women and not even realize it.” The strain in Jack’s voice was now at a crescendo. He was almost yelling at her through the gasps of air and the bouncing sobs.

Betsy was now facing what had been gnawing at the back of her mind all morning. She wanted to believe that Jack would be fine, that his ‘belief system’ was intact. And she wanted to believe that his exposure to these images would only make you have

nightmares. But if he really was having clinical black outs, this situation could become very scary.

“The door’s lockable,” she spoke softly, trying hard to calm Jack down and not to think about what she was actually committing to. “And you won’t be able to hurt anyone while your in there.”

Betsy couldn’t believe what she was saying. The words just slid off of her tongue like they’d been sitting there waiting. Like someone else was talking and she was just listening.

Betsy clenched the phone and continued, “You’ve got to get some sleep, Jack. Before we can do anything else . . . you’re not thinking clearly right now. You need sleep.”

‘What are you saying?’ Betsy berated herself again. ‘You don’t know that this guy’s not a flying psychopath. God Betsy, what the hell are you thinking?’

Except for the labored breathing, Jack had stopped crying and the near silence hung between them like a thick cloud. Betsy’s thoughts were racing now. Torn, someplace between wishing he’d say ‘Yes’ and wanting him to say ‘No’.

Betsy realized how irrational this was. How very little she knew about him. This guy actually could be the copycat killer. Betsy thought about the timing of Jack’s black out and how it coincided almost exactly to the time of death on number nineteen. Now, apparently he’d blacked out during the most recent – and Leonard was still not in custody.

Betsy pictured Jack, sitting at home with a collection of articles about Leonard Moss

tacked to the walls in his bedroom. Reading over the gruesome details of each murder - over and over again. Savoring the beauty and intricately copying every detail . . . no matter how small. Painstakingly matching the scenes and the locations. Positioning the bodies and . . .

“I don’t know, Dr. Archer,” the hesitation in Jack’s voice was heavy. Betsy held her breath as he continued, “I just don’t know what happens when I black out. That’s the worst part . . . not being able to remember anything.”

“I’m telling you, there’s nothing you can do locked inside the lab but sleep and clear your head.” Again the words left Betsy’s mouth before she had a chance to censor them.

‘He’s leaving you a way out, stupid. just say no!’

“It’s got a solid metal door with a deadbolt.”

‘Just . . . say . . . no!’

“I can monitor you from the console and make sure you’re okay. We can even make a video tape of it so you can see that all you’re doing is sleeping. If anything happens, I can call for help.”

‘you’re hopeless . . .’

“I don’t know . . .” Jack wrestled with the idea, but the thought of sleeping without fear was too overpowering to refuse. “You promise me you’ll keep the door locked . . . no matter what?”

“Cross my heart. Look, are you okay to drive? Can I send you a cab?”

“Yea . . . not really . . . I mean I’ll get a cab.” Jack’s voice sounded almost natural

again. Almost calm.

Betsy hung up the phone, stood and walked slowly around her desk.

“The lab’s designed to be secure - to keep an eye on people with severe sleep disorders.” Betsy mumbled and walked around the back side of her desk and then, slowly made the loop again.

“Not that Jack’s crazy . . . no, I don’t mean that. I just mean that if anything was to happen . . .” Betsy continued to pace slowly around the desk and talk quietly to herself until she was interrupted by the intercom on her desk phone.

“I’m headed out Bets. You need anything before I go?”

“No, I’m fine, Katrina. I’m going to stay here a while and try to get some work done.”

“I’ll lock the door on my way out.”

“See, ya tomorrow.”

The intercom clicked and sputtered and then the room was silent. Betsy sat in her chair and tried to convince herself that the sour feeling in the pit of her stomach was from the ham in the club sandwich she had at lunch.

“I don’t even like ham.” Betsy blew out her cheeks and rubbed her belly with the heel of her palm.

Oddly enough, after Katrina left, Betsy was actually able to get involved in something else – at least enough to be startled when the door to the outer lobby opened abruptly.

“Damn.” Betsy said as she looked at the clock on the wall. It had been two hours since their telephone conversation. She took a deep breath to compose herself before Jack

walked in to her office.

Jack pushed the partially cracked door slowly as he spoke, “Dr. Archer?”

“Yea, Jack,” Betsy forced herself to sound as though she had been expecting him.

“Come on in.”

He was wearing blue jeans and a navy blue polo shirt. On his face, Betsy could see the fatigue that was weighing him down. He looked worse than terrible.

“God, you look awful, Jack.” Betsy stood and moved around her desk to meet him in the doorway.

“Thanks,” there was just the tiniest sarcastic edge to his voice.

Without so much as a thought, she touched his cheek gently with the back of her fingers. “You feel warm. Sit down.”

She took his elbow and helped him to the closest chair, then knelt in front of him. Jack’s head hung from his neck and his shoulders slumped forward. Betsy brushed his hair from the front of his forehead and smiled.

“I don’t know what to do right now, Doc. I don’t know what to think or what . . .”

“You’ve got to sleep now,” Betsy interrupted. “First things first. You’re absolutely exhausted.”

All Jack could do was nod his head and sigh. His mind was a jumble of thoughts and emotions and there was no way he was going to have any earth shattering insights right now.

Jack raised his head to meet Betsy’s eyes. She was wonderful. Jack could smell the

perfume on her hand as it swept briefly across his forehead.

“You promised me.” Jack looked sternly at Betsy. “You absolutely have to keep me locked in somewhere.”

Betsy smiled again and nodded her head slowly. “Yes, Jack. I’ll keep the door locked. Don’t worry.”

Jack studied her face for a few seconds, trying to see if there was any deceit in her expression. But there was none. There was nothing but honest care and concern. And Jack was too tired to think. The thought of sleeping without the fear was almost too good to be true. For the first time in almost three days, Jack was actually getting sleepy sitting in the chair. He felt as though he could just dose off right here. Sleep . . . sound, comforting sleep.

Jack stood up suddenly. “Show me to my room, the one that locks.”

Betsy stood and then nodded. “Okay, Jack. It’s this way.”

Jack followed Betsy through the reception area and down a short hallway to the right. At the end, she unlocked the door and clicked on the light inside.

They were standing in a small room with a folding table along one wall covered with a hap-hazard looking array of TV monitors, wires, computers and a multi-line phone. The walls were plain white and the floor was covered with industrial grade, light gray carpet. Behind the table were two rolling office chairs and beside them sat a large recliner with a crumpled white pillow across the back. Next to the table was a big dark green metal door with a small window in the center of it.

Betsy walked over to the table and hit the big red switch on top of an electrical strip. The screens came to life and the air was filled with the sound of beeps, buzzes and whirring fans. Two small black and white monitors displayed left and right overhead views of a neatly made bed, apparently in the room beyond the metal door. The room was sparsely furnished. Besides the metal frame bed, the only furniture visible on the little screens was a small table and a straight back chair.

Betsy turned to Jack with a look that asked, 'Are you ready?'.

This place reminded Jack of the lab at VTech. Almost to the point of scaring him. But he was just too tired. Too exhausted to even be afraid anymore. Jack took a deep breath and nodded once at Betsy.

"Beddy-Bye," Jack said as he turned toward the metal door. Jack stopped for a moment and placed the palm of his hand on the ominous green barrier. Jack turned and smiled at Betsy, then opened the door and walked into the room.

Betsy followed and explained that they had hospital garb pajamas - if he wanted to use them. There was a toilet in the alcove, out of sight of the two cameras.

Jack looked up at one camera then the other as Betsy finished showing him where the bathroom was and what button to press if he needed anything.

"I'll be right on the other side of that door." Betsy turned on her heel and walked toward Jack. Jack was staring at the bed. He turned when he felt Betsy standing behind him, expecting a response. As his eyes met hers, Jack thought he could see something . . . feel something . . .

It was probably only seconds, but it felt like an eternity to Jack. He couldn't pull himself away from her gaze. He was paralyzed, and repelled.

'Who are you?' Betsy's voice of reason whispered in her ear and she quickly looked down at the floor to break off the uncomfortable 'thing' that was happening between them.

"I'll be in the other room if you need anything," Betsy repeated, still looking at the floor.

Jack started to ask the question, but then figured out the answer before he had the chance.

"The recliner," Jack said half, asking and half stating.

"Won't be the first time," Betsy chimed.

Jack was far too tired to worry about how uncomfortable the recliner might or might not be . . . he just wanted to go to sleep for about a week.

"Okay . . . thank you, Dr. Archer."

Betsy turned and went for the door before that 'thing', could start again. Before closing the door, she turned looked back at Jack. "Why don't you call me Betsy?" The invitation was delicate and sincere.

Jack smiled and nodded. "Thank you Dr. Betsy."

Then the door was closed and he heard the solid clank of the metal deadbolt as it slid into the doorframe, locking him in the observation room.

Jack looked up at the cameras. Not looking at the cameras, though. He was looking at

Betsy - and from the other room, she was looking at him.

About 11:00 PM, Betsy woke up and went over to monitors to check on Jack. The almost green light from the monochrome monitors was the only illumination in the room and its eerie glow made everything seem smaller.

Jack was lying on his side, face nuzzled into the pillow. All the exhaustion and agony was gone. Now, in his face there was only serenity.

Betsy stood there and studied him. With her eyes glued to the screen, she reached for the rolling chair beside her, pulled it over and sat down. Eyes locked on this peaceful scene, Betsy reached for the camera zoom control that was on the table to her right.

Carefully, she moved the camera down and then zoomed in on Jack's face until it filled the entire screen. She just sat there and watched him sleep, watched him breathe. He looked so peaceful.

‘ . . . sitting at home with all his Leonard paraphernalia . . . ’

Although he was tanned and leathery and hardened from the weather, Betsy could see a softness in his face. A kindness.

‘ . . . cutting out newspaper articles and pictures, and carefully hanging them all over the walls . . . ’

He looked like a sleeping child, innocent and pure. Betsy stood and walked over to the door and looked through the window.

‘ . . . meticulously arranging the gruesome pictures in chronological order . . . ’

A crack of light from the night light in the alcove graced Jack's cheek. He looked

utterly handsome and hopelessly harmless.

‘ . . . studying the pictures, memorizing every detail, going over each murder again and again . . . ’

For reasons Betsy really didn’t understand, she just wanted to hold him. To hold his head tight against her chest and make everything better for him. This was not a maternal feeling at all. It was nurturing, but it originated from that space between her hip bones and blossomed somewhere between her breasts.

‘ . . . then stalking his victims . . . ’

Betsy’s fingers came to rest on the deadbolt. She was deliberately ignoring the quiet banter that was at work in her head. She had heard every cynical word, but she was choosing not to acknowledge it.

‘ . . . following them in the shadows until they were alone . . . ’

And, as if her arm and hand were working on their own, the deadbolt was unlatched. Jack made a smacking sound and readjusted on the pillow.

‘ . . . and then, when there’s not another soul insight, springing out of the shadows . . . ’

Again, Betsy’s belligerent hand decided on its own direction. It was reaching for the doorknob and all Betsy could do was look at it and then back at Jack - peaceful, quiet Jack.

‘ . . . and hacking your victim into tiny little pieces with a huge glistening knife, hack, hack, rising, wet with blood through the air, over and over . . . ’

And then the door was wide open and Betsy was walking, like a zombie, toward Jack.

She could hear him breathing deep in the back of his throat. Almost snoring, but not quite. And she could hear herself breathing. Quick shallow breathes, matching the rhythmic pounding in her chest. Jack twitched and rolled back and forth once.

‘ . . . blood splattering onto your face as you relish in the terror of your victim’s helpless muffled cries for mercy . . . ’

Betsy sat gently on the edge of the bed next to Jack. Again, she brushed the hair from his forehead, but this time she allowed her fingers to linger. To trace the soft waves that ran through his thick golden-brown hair. She let her hand rest there, on the top of his head.

Jack’s eyes snapped open and Betsy froze with a swallow stuck halfway down her throat. At the same moment, the phone in the other room rang. Betsy eyes were locked onto Jack’s as her entire body went numb. In one continuous fluid motion, Jack sat straight up and then grabbed her by the wrists. His face had changed. It was darker and there was a frigid emptiness deep in his eyes. Cold clear down to his soul.

Betsy was frozen in place, as the phone rang for the third time. Jack was breathing quick and hard. Taking air in huge gulps – holding her wrists tighter and tighter.

On ring number five, he released her arm and sat back against the metal frame of the bed. Confused and dazed. Not sure where he was or what he was doing.

Betsy instinctively stood and walked quickly to the other room and grabbed the phone. Still shaking from what had just happened, she tried to force herself to sound calm as she answered it.

“Sorry to call so late, but there was no answer at your house,” the Detective’s tone was curt and to the point.” So I figured you’d be working late.”

With her heart still pounding and her adrenaline charged system racing, the statement just seemed to hit her wrong.

“Sure, Detective Blakely, I’m here. I would never dream of a getting out and engaging in a social life. In fact, I live here . . .”

“Look, I’m sorry, Dr. Archer, but I thought you’d want to know.”

Betsy breathed deeply several times and tried to stop the phone from shaking at her ear.

“I’m sorry Detective,” she said, realizing how she’d snapped. “I’d dozed off and your call woke me up. I’m a little on edge, that’s all.”

“The Austin guy . . . it’s not him. It’s not Leonard.” The words just sat in the plastic handset. Heavy and hard to hold up. “He’s still out there.” The Detective let the silence weigh itself for a few seconds before continuing. “Look, maybe I should put a couple of men on you for a while . . . just until we get him back . . .”

“I appreciate the offer Detective, but I’m fine. Really. I do appreciate the one at my house, though.” All Betsy could think of was that she *did* want the extra men. She wanted an army of them around her. But she couldn’t bring herself to grovel in front of the Detective like a damn high school cheerleader. And she tried hard to keep telling herself that she was just being silly.

“How did I know you were going to say that?” The Detective sighed heavily. “All

right then, you be careful Dr. Archer. Watch your back.”

“I’ll be fine.” Betsy repeated with a firmness intended to convince herself, not the Detective.

“Oh, and by the way, number nineteen . . .”

“Yes. I’ve got the file on my desk right now.”

“Well, the coroner’s report has been amended. Something about a mistake in some of the lab work . . . I don’t understand it all, but the end result is a change in the reported time of death.”

“What are you trying to say Detective?”

“They made a mistake. Number nineteen died around 4:00 in the afternoon. Not midnight like they said at first. Damn doctors. Well, sorry again for calling so late Doctor. Goodbye and please . . . be careful. Call me if you need anything.”

Click.

Betsy stood, motionless, and listened to the hollow dial tone ringing in her ears.

“Leonard’s still out,” she whispered to herself after cradling the phone to her chest.

“Who’s Leonard?”

Jack was standing in the doorway.

Betsy stared at Jack for a minute. Looking deeply into his eyes. Studying every feature of his face. The cold emptiness was gone now and he looked normal again. Almost boyish, Betsy thought as she watched him swish his hair from across his forehead.

Then she blurted out, “You couldn’t have done it.”

Jack just squinted and looked confused.

“Jane Doe number nineteen. Your last black out. She died too early for you to have done it, Jack.”

Jack leaned his head to one side as if the angle of his ears was keeping Betsy’s monologue from making any coherent sense.

Betsy took two steps toward him. “She didn’t die while you were blacked out. She died while you were here - in my office!”

Betsy stepped again and closed the distance between them. She grabbed Jack by the shoulders and leaned toward his face. “She was killed while you were here with me, Jack. While you were here with me.”

As the message became clear and he began to understand what Betsy was saying, Jack’s expression changed from one of total confusion to complete relief. With Betsy still hanging on to Jack’s shoulders, Jack reached up and grabbed hers.

“I was here. With you.”

“Yes, Jack. It’s not you. You didn’t do it.”

Then Betsy broke eye contact, rolled her eyes around in quick thought and abruptly turned toward the door. As she walked through it and then down the hall to her office, the confused, pajama clad Jack followed reluctantly.

In her office, she leaned over the front of her desk as Jack walked up and came to rest, leaning on the door frame. The halogen desk lamp was the only illumination in the room and it cast eerie shadows up the back walls of the office. Betsy grabbed her working

folder that was stuffed with all ‘Lipstick’ info. Then she turned and sat down in the same chair she used for their sessions together. She set the folder deliberately on her lap, placing both hand on top of it and then looked up at Jack, still standing in the doorway.

Jack looked down at her with the ‘I don’t get it’ look and Betsy responded with the ‘just sit down here in front of me’ look. Jack moved away from the doorway and sat down in front of her.

Now Betsy knew that Jack couldn’t have been involved in the killing the night before. And she was pretty sure that he wasn’t a killer at all. But she needed clarification on some things. She had to be sure about this guy. And, although she didn’t have much of a plan, she handed Jack the folder and then started to formulate one.

“I want you to look at this.”

Jack took the file folder – overflowing with articles and pictures – and then looked up at Betsy, utterly confused.

Betsy’s mind was racing now. After that scare in the other room, she hadn’t been able to slow down. She was supercharged. And now, she was absolutely positive that she could reach Jack. That she could get him to face the fear and to purge it right here and now. She just knew it.

She thought that if she could get him talking about what was in those photos. About his feelings toward those hideous acts . . . well, she could just observe him and access his reactions. It was a start anyway. At least she knew that if he seemed interested in the pictures. . . well, that would be a bad thing. On the other hand, if he were repulsed, then .

. . well, that would be a good thing. Betsy continued to ad-lib.

“Bare with me for a minute, Jack. I want you to look through these and tell me what you see. Tell me about how you feel.”

Jack flicked through the photos one at a time, every once in a while he'd grimace and make a sound in the back of his throat.

“Oh God . . . that's awful.”

“That's good, Jack. What else? What else do you feel when you look at the pictures?”

“Man . . . I just don't get it. I mean how . . .?”

And then, in a motion that scared the holy shit out of Betsy, Jack bolted to his feet and knocked the open folder onto the floor. Leonard's mug shot was on the top of the heap.

“What is it, Jack? What's the matter?”

“Th . . . that's him.” Jack was stuttering and waving his finger at the picture on the floor. “That's him . . . me . . . the face in the mirror . . .”

“Slow down, Jack. I don't understand what your saying.”

Jack was just staring and pointing. “That's the face in the mirror . . . when I was at the lab . . . that's the guy . . . the memories. I've got his memories!”

Betsy gathered the photographs together into a pile and scooped it up in her arms. She laid it down on the coffee table in front of her with Leonard's mug shot still on top. Then she looked up at Jack. He was still standing, hand outstretched, pointing at the picture on the table.

“Sit down Jack.” Betsy said softly.

Jack didn't budge.

"Jack . . . please sit down."

Jack looked at Betsy as though she had just appeared in the room for the first time.

She motioned her head toward the chair and then, slowly, Jack sat back down.

"That's him," Jack whimpered again in a small child-like voice.

Betsy's eyes were bouncing from the pictures to Jack's face and back again. She was having trouble accepting what Jack was saying.

First the scene in the lab with Jack bouncing out of bed like that, then the call from Blakely – now this. Betsy couldn't stop her head from reeling. She was swimming in a whirlwind that was out of her control. Betsy was stuck in the middle between not being able to understand and not wanting to.

It was just too much to comprehend that it had been Leonard's memories that Jack had been exposed to. Leonard's experiences he'd shared. Betsy thought back to all the office visits with Jack. Thought back to their first meeting – and then shuddered. All of sudden she felt scared and weak.

Questions danced across her mind like a shower of fireworks. How did this happen? How could Jack possibly have experienced a playback of Leonard Moss? She was the only one that . . .

Betsy's weak feeling changed to dizziness. She felt nauseous and her head was spinning. Slowly she rose from the chair, steadying herself against the cushy armrest. Now it was Betsy's turn to stare. Jack's eyes hadn't moved from the picture on the coffee

table.

Betsy looked hard at Jack. Her emotions were all knotted up. Who was this man? This person she had thought . . . felt . . . so close to? Now he was sitting there in front of her and Betsy felt prickly all over. Her heart was pounding in her throat and the dizzy feeling was getting worse. She opened her mouth and tried to talk but nothing came out. With a big breath and a deep swallow, Betsy forced out the shaky words.

“How, Jack? How could you . . .” her words trailed off as she turned and looked at the wall behind her desk. On the counter was a shelf with two CD cases stacked next to each other. Betsy looked back at Jack and then her eyes seemed to double in size.

She turned sharply and made for the wall behind her desk - to the CD cases on the counter. Betsy grabbed them and dumped them both onto her desk. Frantically she spread out the loose discs, trying desperately to read the titles printed neatly on each one. Back and forth her eyes went looking through the pile as she spread them across the desktop for what seemed like minutes.

Then, finally, she plopped down in her chair – tired and sickened - and just stared at the glistening discs in front of her.

“It’s not here. The goddamn disc is gone!” Betsy’s voice cracked as she sucked in a stuttered breath through her mouth.

Jack turned and looked up at Betsy sitting at her desk. Her face lit brightly from underneath by the single halogen lamp.

“The GODDAMN DISC IS GONE!” Betsy pounded her fists onto the surface of the

desk.

Jack squinted in her direction and took his turn at figuring out what was going on. He looked at the picture on the table and then at Betsy in front of the pile of discs on her desk. She had a horrified look on her face and tears in her eyes. Jack shook his head with an ‘I don’t understand what I’m seeing’ look. Then he looked back at Leonard’s picture and shuttered as the skin across his back turned cold.

This was almost funny. To be face to face with him after all this time. To actually meet the demon and give him a name. Leonard – Leonard Moss. He was so enthralled by his personal revelation that he was oblivious to Betsy’s. Jack reached for Leonard’s picture and held it tightly with both hands.

“Well,” Jack stated sullenly to the picture, “you’re what I came here to find out.”

Then he picked up the rest of the folder and started reading about Leonard Moss.

As Betsy sat at her desk, looking at the clutter of discs, she couldn’t help thinking about Leonard cracking his skull on her desk. And about the horrible ordeal Jack had been through . . . because of her.

- 2 -

“It was probably time to move anyway,” Leonard thought to himself as he watched the final twitches of life ooze from the woman on the bed. She really had been a fighter. A strong one for someone leading such a cold tortured existence. But, she had been too easily lured to his apartment and too easily seduced into being bound to the bed.

Leonard hated the idea of doing it right in his house – even though it wasn’t a

permanent home. Now he'd have to move again. All that packing and unpacking. But, after all, it was the reason that he lived such a sparse existence. Sort of an occupational hazard.

It had just all happened so quickly that he couldn't have stopped it. Like a damn roller coaster. She had waited on him at Shoney's and they had just hit it right off. Like two kindred spirits. After she got off work, they ended up spending the whole day together.

Although Leonard hadn't participated, he did support (and encourage) her use of some quite powerful hallucinogens. He liked the way she had just thrown caution to the wind and shot up right there in his apartment. How trusting people could be sometimes.

"What drives some people?" Leonard pondered as he gave the knife a sharp twist just to get the bitch to stop making those incessant gurgling sounds. She bounced once more . . . eyes closed slowly and then, to Leonard's surprise, popped back open again.

"You are a strong one, aren't you?"

Leonard pulled the knife from the gash in her abdomen and then thrust it back down with a twisting flourish. The young woman gasp and blew bubbles from the slit in her throat as Leonard groped the knife around inside her.

"It's better this way," he said only half reassuring and then placed his free hand gently on her forehead. "There'll be no more pain. I'll help you."

Once again, the eyes closed slowly and the bubbles ceased. Leonard closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. Feeling the warmth of her life oozing onto him was almost too exhilarating to comprehend. The smell of beauty and the smell of death. The sheer joy of

helping another human being to transcend mortal existence and achieve immortality. It was a good thing.

But the knock on the front door cut Leonard's ecstasy break short. For a moment he stood, frozen, looking over the exquisite lifeless body on the bed. Then another knock.

"Shit." Leonard whispered then grabbed a towel from the night stand. Wiping his hands, he tip toed out of the bedroom to the front door and looked out the security peep hole. After all, this was kind of a bad neighborhood.

"Shit!" Leonard whispered to himself again.

It was Carol Ann at the door.

"I know you're in there Leonard. I need to talk to you."

Leonard did a tip toe sprint into the bathroom, pulled off his shirt and quickly ran some hot water over his bloody hands. When it looked like he probably was going to get all of it off, he leaned back toward the open door and shouted, "Be right there . . . just a sec . . ."

Leonard finished drying his hands and wiping out the sink with the towel. Then he flung it into the bathtub, pulled the shower curtain shut and grabbed the robe hanging behind the door. On his way to the front door, he ripped off a paper towel and blotted down his face and forearms. Then, before opening the door, looked himself over one more time for any tell tale signs of his work.

"Carol Ann," he managed to eke out almost half surprised as he opened the door a crack.

“Don’t act so happy to see me,” she said studying the nearly closed door with suspicion.

“This really isn’t a good time Ca . . .”

“Look,” she interrupted sharply. Rather out of character for Carol Ann, it caught Leonard off guard. “I’ve just got a couple of things to talk to you about and then I’ll go.”

Leonard realized how closely he’d been guarding the door and how funny it looked. Without thinking, he over compensated and flung the door open in one fell swoop. His posture had that ‘No I haven’t been doing anything wrong’ look that a six year old kid gets when their mom walks in on them drawing on the wall with a crayon.

“Can I come in?” Carol Ann cocked her head to the side and raised her eyebrows as she asked the question.

Leonard realized that he was deliberately blocking the doorway like an overly protective nightclub bouncer. Carol Ann took half a step forward and Leonard took one big ‘I’m not guilty’ step sideways to let her pass him.

Carol Ann walked directly to the living room and sat down on a lawn chair, seemingly unconcerned about Leonard’s peculiar behavior.

“I’ve been talking with my analyst, Leonard,” Carol Ann was talking to Leonard but looking down at the carpet to avoid eye contact. “And she’s made me see some things about myself and our relationship.”

Carol Ann looked up briefly at Leonard to gauge his reaction and, for the first time, realized that he looked like he was nervous about something. His face was glistening with

perspiration and he was leaning nervously from left to right. He also kept taking quick little glances at the bedroom door which was cocked open slightly.

She'd come here to confront him about their inability to communicate effectively. To ask him to open up to him and talk to her about how he felt about her. About *her* . . . not just his word game philosophy discussions on life.

But, the funny thing was that she hadn't got to that part yet. Leonard really couldn't know why she was there and he was still nervous. Jittery about something.

Carol Ann stood slowly and took a step toward Leonard, all the while studying his appearance. He was wearing a robe, had pants on but no shirt and his hair was messed up. Carol Ann replayed the door opening scene again to reevaluate what had happened. How guarded Leonard had been. How . . . how he hadn't wanted her to come in . . .

She took another step toward him then and looked over at the bedroom door. Leonard moved slightly to his right in order to stay directly between her and the bedroom door. Carol Ann stopped and looked straight into Leonard's eyes. A bead of sweat hung from his left eyebrow and Leonard rubbed it off nervously before it could drop into his eye.

And then there was kind of a whimper from the bedroom. Carol Ann looked at the bedroom door in horror and then made a move to walk around Leonard. When he leaned around to block her, Carol Ann side stepped quickly to the other side and walked around him.

"You bastard!" she shouted as she turned to face Leonard and point at the bedroom door. "You're not alone . . . are you?" The surprise and hurt in her voice carried it

through Leonard like the serrated knife lying next to the body on the bed.

There was a look of panic in Leonard's eyes that told Carol Ann that she was right on the mark.

"You son-of-a-bitch! You stinking, rotten . . .," Carol turned as she spoke to push open the bedroom door and verify with her own eyes what she had already seen in Leonard's.

It was dark in the bedroom. The lights were out, but Carol Ann could immediately see that there was someone in Leonard's bed. As her eyes adapted to the light, she took several steps into the bedroom - not really sure what she was going to say to this slut - but she was sure going to get a piece of her.

Her eyes could make out the outline of the long flowing hair draped across the pillow. She was laying on top of the sheets and was completely naked.

Leonard had followed her and as he stepped through the doorway and into the room the light from the kitchen fell onto the bed . . . and the naked girl.

"Help me," came the muted gurgling whisper from the bloody thing on the bed.

At first, Carol Ann couldn't understand what she was seeing. It was though her eyes and her brain had absolutely no connection. At all. The images were flooding in, but there was no way of processing them. No way of understanding them. No point of reference for knowing what any of this was.

"Please . . ." the thin airy voice continued as little bubbles of saliva and blood formed and popped across the front of her neck.

"Oh for God's sake shut the fuck up!" Leonard exclaimed in an overly exasperated

voice as he walked briskly over to the bed and whacked the woman's skull several times with the closest thing he could find – the alarm clock.

Crack . . . Crack . . . Crack . . .

Carol Ann stood paralyzed in terror while the woman's feet bounced off the bed and her legs shuddered in response to each blow. It was a dream and Carol Ann didn't know if she was going to pass out or wake up. Then Leonard was taking her gently by the elbow and helping her sit down on a chair by the bed. "It's not going to work . . . you and me I mean."

Leonard opened the drawer in the night stand, pulled out a roll of duct tape and started to tape Carol Ann's hands together in front of her. She didn't fight. Didn't move at all. Just stared straight ahead at the body on the bed. Eyes welled up with tears. Heart pounding furiously. She sat as Leonard bound, first her hands, then her feet together with the tape.

"I really thought that it would . . . at first I mean . . . thought that I could have a normal relationship with a normal woman . . . but it's not going to work." Leonard tore the end of the tape with his teeth and for the first time since entering the room, Carol Ann looked at him.

"I'm sorry honey. Really I am. You were really different than the rest . . . nice."  
Leonard stuck a piece of tape across Carol Ann's mouth and pressed it down firmly.

"But, work always gets in the way," Leonard continued talking as he walked out of the bedroom. "Never a peaceful moment for Leonard," his voice now crackling with

electricity.

“I’m destined to live a different life Carol Ann,” Leonard shouted from the other room. And then he returned with the shower curtain in hand. For a moment he stood in the doorway, studying her. How he loved her.

“I really wanted it to work, honey.”

Then he walked into the bedroom, knelt down and spread the shower curtain on the floor, carefully smoothing it out. From his hands and knees, he looked up at Carol Ann, “You’ve got to believe me. I really did want this to work out.”

She was still petrified. Unable to move. Unable to understand. It was just too much information for her brain to process. Just some kind of horrible nightmare that wouldn’t quit.

Again taking her by the elbow, Leonard gently nudged Carol Ann to stand up and then to kneel down on the shower curtain. She didn’t fight – at all. And moved with a marionette like stiffness as she knelt onto the cold plastic.

“It really kind of makes me sad.” Leonard grabbed Carol Ann by the shoulders, turned her around and laid her face down.

All of a sudden, Carol Ann screamed a horrible muffled scream from behind the duct tape. She kicked hard, tried to roll over and made a violent attempt at getting up . . . but Leonard had already anticipated the move and slammed his knee into the small of her back before she was halfway turned over.

“Yea,” Leonard said reaching behind him for a pillow from the bed, “It’s too bad that

things didn't work out differently."

Carol Ann was now fighting with all her might, but it was too late. In one motion, Leonard removed his knee from her back, flipped her over and straddled her across the mid section, locking her arms in place in front of her.

Her eyes were locked onto his as she continued to bounce up and down and shake violently. Leonard grabbed a pillow from the bed and held it with both hand across the front of his chest as he waited patiently for the fight to drain out of her. He looked compassionately into Carol Ann's face and smiled.

"I don't want to hurt you, honey."

Then Leonard held the pillow tightly across her face. Again she kicked violently and he hummed softly until she lay limp underneath him.

- 3 -

Jack picked up the last piece of paper from his desk and slapped it into the waiting file folder. For the first time since coming home from the hospital, he was beginning to feel like himself again. In fact, he felt almost invigorated. Jack snatched the manila file and slid it into the hanging folder in the bottom desk drawer.

Last night's revelation about his memories and who they really belonged to had given Jack a reprieve from his pit of depression. For the first time, he was able to face the fear and doubt that had been plaguing him and deal with it. For the first time, he was able to accurately draw the line between his emotions and the ones that belonged to that hideous monster - Leonard Moss. It had a name. It was real. And it was definitely not Jack.

He'd been right all along. He was neither insane nor a murderer and that absolute realization was what he'd been needing so desperately. Jack stood and surveyed the office. He looked down at the clock on his desk - a little before noon - and entertained the notion of calling Dr. Archer. She was, after all, the reason for how excellent he felt today. And it was only getting better. Jack felt almost . . . giddy.

Whistling, he sat down and reached for the electronic Rolodex. But before he could dial the first digit, the door to the office flew open.

"I heard you were in, so I just wanted to touch base before pitching to Rane this afternoon." Todd let the door bounce against the backstop and remain half open.

"Yea," Jack watched as his brother plopped into the love seat catty-corner from his desk, "I had some things to get done and I thought I'd try to get caught up a little . . . you know, start pulling my weight around here again."

Todd picked up a copy of World Marketplace and thumbed through it without actually looking at anything. He was careful to avoid eye contact with Jack and shifted in the chair as he spoke.

"I just want you to know that you don't need to be here. Take as much time as you need." Todd's weak attempt at concern was painfully obvious to both of them.

"I appreciate the sentiment big brother, but I've never felt better." Jack stood, walked around to the front side of the desk and leaned back against it.

"In fact, it's pretty obvious now who won the bet, don't you think." Jack stood, arms crossed with a defiant look on his face. A face that Todd could easily see new life in. It

had a fresh, exuberant air that had been painfully absent these last couple of weeks.

Todd started to bow up, but caught himself in time. He was a master negotiator and the consummate poker player. He knew that this was not the time to confront his brother on this one – no matter how wrong Todd thought that Jack was. He really did look better and he was content to leave it at that.

But Jack could see through his big brother's act. He'd been dealing with him for almost forty years. To Jack, Todd's face was like a virtual telegraph station - sending out streams of information about what he was really up to. And right now, Todd was fishing. Why? Even Jack hadn't put his finger on it yet, but he was pretty sure Todd had some kind of ulterior motive.

"I want to thank you for the psychiatrist thing. She really has been a big help to me." Although absolutely true, Jack only chose the comment to help root out whatever it was that Todd was digging for.

"What about the memories? She helping you sort through that?"

"Actually, Todd, she really is." Jack widened his eyes as he wondered what the hell it was that Todd was looking for.

Sometimes Jack could feel really close to his brother. It was reassuring to have him there – even if he was just pretending to be concerned.

"It's been real important for me to put a face to the feelings." Jack continued to keep an eye on Todd.

"Hmm." Todd nodded at his baby brother with a look of hollow concern.

“Yea . . . to be able to know the difference. To know for a fact that certain things just don’t belong to me. Like I’ve said from the beginning . . . it’s not going to change who you are.”

“Man that’s great Jackson,” Todd dropped the magazine and stood abruptly. “Listen, Cynthia’s coming down for a few days, so I thought - well, since you’re okay - that I’d take a few and spend it on the lake.”

Todd looked at Jack with that ‘Is that okay?’ look.

Jack smiled wryly and nodded his head slowly. Hooked. Now reel him in, fishing trip completed. The funny part was that he wasn’t bothered in the least by his brother’s self-absorption. In fact, it was so typically Todd that it was comforting. It was reassuring to have such a constant in his life right now. And he knew that it wasn’t a lack of concern. This was just Todd’s way of saying ‘You seem fine to me’.

Without the need for words, Jack knew that his brother was worried about him. Todd just never learned how to show it. Jack knew that there wasn’t a human being on the face of this planet that would do more for him than his big brother. Just don’t expect any of that touchy feely stuff out of him and you’ll never be disappointed.

Todd made his way to the door, pointed his index finger at Jack, then winked and made a clicking sound as he turned and disappeared into the hallway. Jack returned to his seat and glanced back at the number that was still displayed on the electronic Rolodex.

Jack smiled and chuckled to himself as he replayed the conversation with Todd. Then he picked up the phone and dialed the number.

- 4 -

The corridor was empty and dark and the sound of her shoes on the tile floor reminded Betsy of her years in grad school. She was always the first one in the library and the last one to leave the sociology lab. Empty hallways were familiar to her and she had always enjoyed the peaceful quiet of the solitary walkways early in the morning.

But here, alone in the area just outside her office she felt a malevolence hanging in the air awaiting its chance to strike. This wicked fear of what may lie ahead, chilled her like a rainy December day. She ached somewhere deep inside and it pounded at her gut with a rhythm that resembled a death march. Her fear was for Jack and others like him, as well as for herself. Her carelessness would cost them, all of them. It had already cost Jack.

She walked through her door and to her desk without turning on the light. Dropping her purse on the desk and herself in the big leather chair, she blew out a burst of air. The shushing sound, as air was forced past her teeth, echoed in her large, dark office.

The day had only begun but she felt as if she had put in eight hours already. Her temperament had been both depressed and oppressed since she found that Leonard's disc had disappeared. Last night was such a double-edged sword for her. She was ecstatic that Jack found some solace in knowing he wasn't a crazed serial killer. And he seemed much more at peace when he realized that the horrible things in his head belonged to someone else.

Unfortunately these realizations were based on the *lack* of security in her office. And now, she was afraid that this lack of security would continue to cause repercussions.

What if there were other such experiments going on and they involved someone with less moral character than Jack? What if they had been given access to the Leonard Moss' data? An entire army of monsters as horrific as Leonard could be created. Betsy felt that she'd feel better if she could just throw up.

She realized that she was still sitting in the dark and reached over and turned on the desk lamp.

'Coffee would be a good idea,' she thought to herself and then walked over to the coffee maker that sat on her hospitality bar.

As the delicate aroma filled her office, she began making a list of the things she needed to accomplish today. She had an hour and a half before her first appointment. She needed a list of what had to be done to rectify this situation by the time Katrina came in.

Because by then, Betsy would be ruled by the day's schedule. She felt overwhelmed. She was scared, honestly scared, like a small child lying frozen in the dark, listening to the sounds outside her bedroom window. She studied the list hoping to force the fear from her mind.

Crack!

The sound of Leonard's head striking her desk echoed across the back of her mind.

"He's still out there," Betsy mumbled as she pulled the list closer.

The first step would be to get the cleaning crew fired. If they weren't directly responsible, they certainly were responsible for locking everything down before they left.

It was beyond her why the question hadn't come up last night, but she planned on

calling Jack and finding out who it was that had originally gotten the disc for him. Then maybe she could get some advice from Blakely on how to proceed with that. She made several more notes on her pad.

Her mind started to wander. There was, potentially, a whole new area of psychiatric care opening up here. There'd need to be research done on debriefing methods. On new techniques for helping people after experiencing these deeply disturbing playbacks. Betsy added three more items to her list.

Helping Jack through his recovery was going to be one of her highest priorities. She intended on seeing him through to the end. After all, most of his problems were a direct result of her carelessness. And besides, she had the potential for learning a great deal about the problems associated with these overlay emotions.

Betsy tested several acronyms on her tablet.

EOD                    - Emotional Overlay Disease

*OEDD        - Overlaid Emotional Distress Disorder*

*SEOS        - Superficial Emotional Overlay Syndrome*

She'd be able to publish. She'd probably be asked to do speaking engagements. There was so much to do.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and realized that she was more concerned about her career than she was about Jack. The thought disgusted her and she clutched the coffee

cup tightly in both hands. She was worried about Jack. And more than that – she was fond of him.

As warm feeling spread through her, she sipped at the contents of her cup and analyzed what it was that she had become so attached to in this man. Was it his kind, gentle nature? Or those big-ole lumberjack shoulders? The warm feeling was intensified as she finished off her first cup. Coffee and Baileys always made her feel better.

This morning, her usually soothing cup of coffee was unable to soften the fray at the end of her nerves as her thoughts returned to Leonard. She was hopelessly unable to keep him from invading her almost every thought. He would be coming, of that she was certain. But when and how? Those questions whirled through her again and again.

CRACK!

If she closed her eyes she could see him sitting in the chair across from her desk, spitting and frothing, and gurgling obscenities at her. He was haunting her.

What had he said the last time he had been in her office? “I’ll be back to *help* you with my profile.”? He would be back, but Betsy hoped it would be on her terms and not his.

And that damn Detective Blakely, getting anything helpful, in a timely fashion, from that man was almost impossible. Betsy resented being treated like a child – especially by someone as incompetent as he was. If he couldn’t keep Leonard incarcerated, how was he going to keep her safe?

She hated having to depend on other people, especially for the important things. They almost always let her down. This time her life hung in the balance and she was mortally

afraid.

Betsy had finished her coffee and walked to the sink in the hospitality bar. After setting her cup down, she leaned into the cabinet for support. She was shaking. Now was not the time. Today was an important day and she knew that she couldn't let fear disable her. Not today. She turned on the warm water and let it run over her hands in hopes of calming her nerves.

"Gooooood morning Ms. Archer!"

Betsy gasped for air, every muscle in her had drawn tight.

"I'm sorry . . ." Katrina apologized as she opened the office door the rest of the way. Now Betsy was really shaking. And she had cracked her knuckles on the bottom of the faucet when she jumped.

"Katrina . . . I want that to be the last time you enter MY office without knocking. Do we have an understanding?"

Katrina stood, mouth open as she listened to this person talk. This person that obviously wasn't Betsy Archer. Or at least not the Betsy Archer that she knew.

"Oh yes ma'am. I didn't mean to startle you." Katrina took one pensive step toward Betsy.

"Here's your schedule for today."

The poor girl couldn't even look Betsy in the eye. She laid the sheet on the desk and scuttled away as fast as her skinny legs would move. Betsy let loose a nervous giggle that contained absolutely no humor. In fact, it sounded more like mild hysteria.

Betsy returned to her desk and pressed the intercom button.

“Katrina, please get Mike Bates on the phone. I have a maintenance issue I wish to discuss with him.”

“I don’t think he handles maintenance. He’s just the administrator . . .”

“Thank you for your input,” Betsy spoke firmly and cut her off in mid sentence. “But please just get him on the phone for me.”

“Right away, ma’am.”

Betsy sat pondering how to approach this issue with Mike. She wasn’t in the mood for idle chit chat or a coy, flirtatious conversation. She would pay special attention to her tone at the beginning of the discussion in hopes that it would convey her mood.

“Mike Bates, line one.” Betsy could tell Katrina had been pleased with her own efficiency and decided to ease the tension between them.

“Thank you Katrina, that was very prompt.”

Betsy punched the speaker phone button and began her efforts at damage control.

“Mike, Betsy Archer, I have an issue I’d like to discuss with you.” She was stern and focused.

“Sounds serious.” Mike’s flippant air went unanswered. Betsy let the silence linger a moment longer than was comfortable on purpose.

“It is.” Betsy said flatly. “I’ve had a security breach in my office. I believe that the cleaning crew has confiscated files from my desk.” She said ‘files’ in a direct attempt to keep from talking about the discs. It just seemed so much easier to explain.

“Mike, I can’t abide this and I intend on contacting the authorities.”

“Whoa . . . changing cleaning crews is not a problem, even without any solid proof.

Just tell me you don’t like them and I’ll take care of it.”

“I don’t like them.”

“Fine, I’ll have a new crew in here tomorrow. Does that suite you?”

“That’s wonderful, thanks Mike.” Relief chimed in her voice. “I’ll tell Katrina that they won’t be in tonight.”

“Well, they’ll be in tonight, but they will be gone by tomorrow.” Mike sounded a little confused.

“I see no reason why we can’t do with out cleaning for one night.” Betsy’s tone was anxious and strained.

“It’s just a problem, Mike. I don’t want them on this floor. Do we understand one another?”

“Perfectly.” Mike understood that the customer was always right – even when they seemed to be a bit off kilter.

“Thank you,” she countered and then hit the button on the phone to hang up. She still needed to know exactly how the disc had gotten out of her office. And she knew only one place to start with that question. Jack.

But first she had a schedule to attend to. The rest of the morning was no good. It was already eight thirty. She had spent the last two hours in a fit of worry and the time had just slipped by. She had an eight forty five and wouldn’t be free until one this afternoon.

She vowed to call Jack then and get some questions answered.

“Katrina?”

“Yes ma’am?”

“Please put in a call to Detective Blakely requesting that he return my call, today.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“And if my first appointment is here, they may come in at any time.”

“Yes ma’am.”

The air between them was cold and business-like today. Not at all like what Katrina was used to in their low-key informal relationship. And so the morning drudged on through a haze of ridiculous appointments and muffled conversation. Betsy tried her best to appear interested in her patient’s problems but, at times, found herself staring aimlessly at the edge of her desk. She could swear that there was still a little blood stain on it.

“They’ve got something in there mouth, Dr. Archer.”

Betsy could see her patient’s lips moving but it was Leonard’s voice that she heard coming out.

“It’s an earring, Dr. Archer . . .”

At ten after one, Betsy sat in her office staring at the empty chair in front of her. She was drained. As she cleared her desk, her mind wandered it’s way around to Jack. She wondered how he was doing and if he felt okay today.

“Dr. Archer, I have Jack Johnson on line one.” Katrina chirped over the intercom.

He must’ve heard her thinking about him.

“Jack,” her voice rumbled as she spoke his name, “I was just about to call you.”

“Well since I called you, I get to go first.” Jack sounded bubbly. “I wanted to thank you for all that you’ve done for me. I feel wonderful. Thank you.”

“Thank you Jack. And I’m glad I could help, but I’m also responsible for a great deal of what has happened.” Betsy sounded tired.

Jack could sense the strain in her voice and he knew that she was feeling responsible.

“Look Doc, I asked for all of this. It’s not like you forced any of it on me. You didn’t even know the disc was gone.”

“Yes Jack, and that reminds me. I’ve got some questions about this whole disc disappearing act.”

Jack knew right away that he shouldn’t have brought up the disc. It was just that he wanted to cheer her up. Get her to lighten up a little bit, so he quickly avoided the question.

“Listen, I called you so you have to accept my thanks. If you want to tell me how sorry you are, you’ll have to call me.”

Betsy laughed. His pitiful attempt at changing the subject was refreshing. And she appreciated his humor in this situation. He was trying to thank her for making him feel better. She really thought that she should just accept it and shut up. There would be plenty of time for digging into the disc problem and she really didn’t feel up to it right

now anyway.

“You’re welcome, Jack!” Betsy chuckled again and it was filled with playful exasperation.

“That’s my, girl! Now . . . would you have dinner with me tonight?”

She was stunned at first. And she felt just the slightest bit giddy at the thought of having dinner with Jack. But the professionalism that served her so well in these situations jumped into motion and turned that giddy feeling into skepticism.

“Jack, I’m your doctor. And you know that the doctor patient . . .”

“I’m no longer a patient of yours.” Jack cut her off. “I’m cured.”

Betsy smiled to herself at the boyish charm to all this.

“Jack. It’s a little more complicated than that.”

“I’ll say. If you say ‘no’, then I won’t be back in to see you because I’ll be crushed.”

Betsy listened intently to the over rationalized argument.

“And if you say yes,” Jack continued with a flourish, “I won’t need to see you again. So what have you got to lose?”

Even though his tone was filled with playful teasing, Betsy knew that Jack was serious. He wasn’t coming back for any more sessions. He’d gotten what he had originally set out to get and in his mind, was cured. But, she knew that there was more she needed from him. She needed to know how the disc had left her office and she needed to find out what lingering effects the memories were going to have on him. Betsy couldn’t buy the Jack’s statement that he was ‘cured’.

She needed to talk to him and would love the distraction from the fear that had been creeping around in her head all day. The invitation sounded fortuitous and – against her better judgment - she decided to accept. Besides, it was just dinner.

“Yes Jack, I think dinner is an excellent idea.”

“Great. Can I pick you up about six?”

“I’ve got a lot of work to finish up. I’ll still be here.”

“Not a problem,” victory boomed in his voice. “I’ll see you there at six.”

“Thanks, I’ll meet you downstairs in the lobby.” For some reason, Betsy felt compelled to meet Jack on ‘safe’ ground. All of a sudden, the thought of them together, alone in the her office, seemed . . . weird.

“See you there.” Jack agreed without question.

She hung up the phone and contemplated the questions she should ask – and those she should not. Jack was easily set on the defensive and she had to be careful if she was going to get the information she needed. She choreographed the evening in her head and hoped that it would pan out smoothly.

Betsy had become preoccupied with the plans she was making and realized that the afternoon was slipping away. She still had a considerable amount of work to do before six. And the good Detective hadn’t called yet. That man wore on her patience. He obviously knew what her question would be and he didn’t have an answer for her right now. Only Leonard knew where he was hiding and he wasn’t giving up any secrets just yet.

The day wore on and Betsy accomplished more than she had expected. She cleaned out some old files. Threw away, what seemed like, twelve pounds of paper. Even with Leonard's shadow lurking in the corners of her office she was able to be productive. She was certain that the anticipation of dinner had tempered her uneasiness. She found herself, once again, being distracted by thoughts of this man. She wished he were here right now.

Katrina knocked on the door and waited until she was invited in to enter. She laid the days mail on Betsy's desk and walked back to the door.

"I know it is only four fifteen but if there isn't anything else, I have an errand I need to run."

Betsy felt guilty. Katrina had never before had to ask to leave early. And Betsy'd never had to ask her to work late. She had just always done whatever was necessary to take care of the office. She was a wonderful employee and a good friend and Betsy was just now realizing how she had chewed her head off earlier.

"That's fine Katrina," Betsy smiled warmly and tried to apologize with just her eyes. "You were a great help today."

Betsy wanted to say that she was sorry but before she could figure out how to get it out Katrina was walking toward the door.

"I know," she smiled sweetly then turned back to look at Betsy "I know."

The girl's thoughtfulness touched Betsy. It would have been easier for her to get pissed. To demand an apology. And Betsy almost wished that she would have. But,

instead she just nodded and left the office.

With Katrina gone and the phone set for the night service, the office was completely silent. Betsy began opening her mail and paying bills. And there were a bunch of them. Then She noticed a letter that looked a little peculiar. She wasn't sure what it was that made her feel uncomfortable, but she hesitated a long time before picking it up. The address was hand written and it had no return address. The writing was choppy and aggressive looking and it scared Betsy just to touch it.

When she opened it, she found a single piece of plain white paper inside. Neatly hand written, but her eyes moved to the signature at the bottom of the page, her heart scrambled for a better hiding place inside her chest.

It was from Leonard.

She frantically grabbed the envelope to read the postmark only to find that it had been smudged. Betsy's heart tried to ram through her rib cage. It was beating so hard it made her cough and she couldn't catch her breath.

The silence in the office was now frightening and suffocating. As she read the words he had written, the fear grew large enough to consume her. Her hands shook as she held the paper and tried to focus on it.

*Dear Ms. Archer,*

*I admire you. A lot. You have drive and tenacity – and I admire your determination*

*and your intelligence. You are really a worthy adversary. The best yet. Truly a force to be reckoned with.*

*But I have work to do and you've caused me a great deal of problems. It's time that we end this silly little cat and mouse game and get on with it. We both know how this has to end. Don't we?*

I promise that I will help you learn about yourself and I will help you move on. It's my calling and it's what I do. You know that. And I will do no less for you than I have done for so many others before you. I will set you free.

Thing is - I'm afraid the journey is going to be a painful one. With loads of agony and suffering. I can't help that – it's just the way it is.

No easy way out I'm afraid. But, you're the smart one, Ms. Archer. You already know that.

Suffering is - after all - the key to our freedom, isn't it? To your freedom?

*I look anxiously forward to our next meeting and count the minutes until we can be alone - together. Give Blakely my love (fucking idiot)*

*Leonard*

“Goddamn it!”

Betsy dropped the letter on her desk and went to the sink for a drink of water. Her hands were shaking worse than ever. The letter meant nothing. He was a lunatic, that's all. Betsy wrestled with her feeble attempt at rationalization. All he wanted to do was terrorize her with this letter. Make her second guess every move and every dark corner.

"Goddamn it!" Betsy splashed water onto her face and tried to breath.

It was almost six o'clock. She told herself curtly that she would address this matter tomorrow. Leonard was not going to manipulate her with fear. She refused to play into his sick little hands. Did he think that she would just curl up in the corner in the fetal position and start sucking her thumb.

"I'll be damned if you're going to get me to cave in, you little son-of-a-bitch!" Betsy snapped as she turned the water off and patted her face dry.

The more she thought about the letter the madder she got. But the anger couldn't get rid of the fear, just cover it up. And the two clouded emotions struggled furiously for dominance. Afraid or pissed off? She couldn't even tell anymore. Betsy was tired and angry and afraid and shaky and . . . and hungry.

Betsy looked at the clock and heard her stomach growl. Jack would be here any minute and Betsy knew that she had little to fear if she weren't alone. The lights were off and her desk was locked, now she simply had to gather her things and make her way to the elevator.

The elevator. It sounded so far away. And she didn't want to get on the elevator alone. It sounded childish but it was so confining. It seemed silly that she would be afraid of this

everyday convenience, but standing here in the dark, it made perfect sense.

Betsy gathered her things, squared her shoulders and left her office.

“Little bastard’s *not* going to manipulate me,” she reaffirmed as she closed the door behind her and made her way down the hall to the elevator.

It seemed darker in the hallway than normal. When Betsy got to the elevator, the down button was already illuminated. She looked around, quickly snapping her head from left to right.

“Not going to get me to freak out. Uh, Uhh.”

The button seemed to be taunting her. She pushed it repeatedly and made herself face the fear that was settling in the pit of her stomach. The elevator chimed its arrival and Betsy held her breath as the doors opened with a swish. Betsy let out a long breathe, paused a second and then stepped onto the elevator.

“You big baby,” she chastised herself as she hit the button for the lobby.

- 5 -

Jack turned off of the gravel road onto the blacktop of the State Highway. He whistled along with the second side of the ‘Harry Dial Live’ CD and reached down to crank the volume on several occasions.

It was really almost a miraculous turn around his life had taken. To go from the pit of the deepest despair, to this . . . what was this?

Kind of like high school infatuation. Jack was excited about going to dinner with his doctor. Now that he thought about it, it really seemed more like a ‘date’ than he’d

expected. But, that's exactly what it was. A social get together with a member of the opposite sex that he was extremely attracted to. This was not a doctor / patient meeting.

Jack swung the Cherokee wide and pulled onto the four lane headed into town. Once again he grabbed the volume knob and gave it a turn as the band counted off 'Born Under a Bad Sign' and settled into an almost hypnotic groove.

Jack ran the electric window all the way down and breathed in the air. The weather this evening was remarkable. Cool but not cold. The smell of fresh pine filled the air. Jack felt like he was sixteen again.

"Shit!" Jack's mood was temporarily interrupted as his eyes crossed the gas gauge. It was buried on empty and, now that he thought about it, it had been for a couple of days.

Jack's fleeting distraction ended abruptly as he caught the quick-mart sign coming up over the hill. The Cherokee followed his command effortlessly and almost drove itself up along side the pump, behind a rusty Toyota Corolla.

After satisfying the vehicle's somewhat gluttonous appetite for high octane fuel, Jack re-hung the nozzle and trotted inside, credit card in hand.

There were three or four people mulling around the counter in front of him and Jack grabbed a piece of beef jerky from the display on the counter. More for something to do than for any other reason. He ripped open the jerky and tore off a piece with his teeth. Jack studied the National Enquirer with amusement and interest . . . something about a deformed baby or something.

Then Jack was jolted out of his mindless daze by the guy in front of him taking a step

backward without looking. He'd apparently just caught a glimpse of the evening's headlines and was now reaching for one of the papers on the counter next to Jack. In doing so, he backed straight into Jack and hit him with his elbow as he reached for the paper. On his almost instantaneous return to the counter, the man turned slightly and mumbled, " 'scuse me."

In another instant, the man had paid his money and was out the door, leaving Jack with the most peculiar feeling.

"That was . . .," Jack searched hard for the name but couldn't pull it up. He looked so familiar. Somebody from high school, somebody from college, somebody he used to work with . . . couldn't get it. Jack squinted hard, as if that would somehow bring the illusive name screeching to the forefront of his brain.

"God I hate that," Jack said straight to the guy behind the counter. "Do you know that guy?"

The look on the attendant's face was all the answer Jack needed. Without another word, he paid for the jerky and the gas and then walked slowly to the jeep.

"Man, I know that guy from somewhere . . ."

- 6 -

Leonard had finished wrapping the shower curtain around Carol Ann and then began duct taping it together. He really was quite upset about what had just happened. He actually did like Carol Ann. But, apparently she was just too nosey for her own good.

"I did try to tell her it was a bad time," Leonard said as he hoisted Carol Ann over his

shoulder and then walked to the front door.

Leonard looked out the peep hole and then thought about it for a minute. No one in sight. It probably wasn't more than twenty feet to the exit at the end of the hallway. His car was parked right by the exit and it was, after all, dark out.

"What the hell," Leonard opened the door and headed for the exit. "I'm moving anyway."

No one in the hall. Leonard moved quickly out the door. No one outside.

"Cool," Leonard cooed and stuck the key into the trunk.

Plop went the shower clad body and then the trunk was slammed shut. Leonard looked back and forth across the parked cars one more time. Not a soul.

Leonard tossed the keys to the '88 Corolla playfully in the air. Then he returned to the apartment and came out with three suitcases. One containing all of his clothes and toiletries and the other two with his collection of photos and clippings. Of all the things Leonard had left behind, the 'Sanctuary' would never be one of them. It was the only thing that really mattered to him.

He flung the three mismatched suitcases into the back seat of the Corolla and then got in and fired it up.

The first market Leonard stopped at was sold out of the evening paper and that irritated him. But, all he could do was move on to another store and hope that they had what he was looking for.

And that was the published pictorial record of the latest woman he had been lucky

enough to help. Certainly they'd had enough time to do an in depth story by now. He had checked the noon addition and it had been almost hopelessly free from anything but local government crap.

He pulled the Corolla into the parking lot of another quick-mart and left it running as he jumped out of the car. He'd been standing in line with a 2 liter bottle of Coke and a bag of Doritos looking over the minimal selection of newspapers on the rack.

As he thought to himself that this too was another dead end, he saw it. Page one cover story big as life: Lipstick Killer Slays #20.

Leonard's heart jumped and he could feel the blood actually traveling in rhythmic pulses through his veins. The pictures were blurry and hard to make out, but it brought him back to the reality of the previous evening like a rocket sled. The woman had been in particular need of his help and it was, in fact, fortunate that he had happened along when he did.

Leonard closed his eyes and breathed slowly through his nose. He could smell the warm blood oozing every drop of pain from her body. He could taste the sweat on his fingers after gently touching them to her forehead. He could hear the muffled whimpers from behind the wad of cloth in the girl's mouth.

How terrible it must be to live in so much agony. There was probably no better epitaph to hang on one's life or career than the legacy a man leaves behind by helping others.

Leonard shuddered with satisfaction and then grabbed for the newspaper. In reaching, he bumped into some big ass-hole behind him. Leonard was appalled by his type. Dark

and handsome. Fashionable Dockers. Living life with that silver spoon so far down his throat that it's a wonder he just didn't gag on it.

"scuse me," Leonard barely managed to get out . . . just to keep from making waves.

"Yea, excuse the fuck out of me you gravy-train mother fucker!" Leonard thought to himself as he clutched the paper tightly, then paid for his stuff and shot for the door in disgust.

- 7 -

The elevator doors closed, filling Betsy with an overpowering sense of claustrophobia. Four, three, two the lights flashed and then the doors opened - and there stood Jack. Her stomach felt as if the elevator was still moving, turning a little from the ride and a little from the relief of seeing his face.

Without thinking, Betsy walked directly up to Jack and hugged him. She couldn't help herself, it just happened. Jack was pleasantly surprised and hugged her back. As they pulled away from each other, their fingers caught and they stood, holding hands and staring at one another. The charge that was running between them was nearly visible.

Both Betsy and Jack seemed to be held captive by what was passing through their hands. Realizing that she had not taken a breath since she stepped off the elevator, Betsy drew air into her lungs in a sharp, almost gasp, and then quickly broke the spell by pulling her hands away.

"How you doing, Doc?" Jack's gaze made Betsy squirm.

"I finished up early and thought I'd wait for you down here, but here you are." Her

nerves had not yet calmed and it showed in her voice.

“Are you alright?”

“Yea,” she spoke plainly if not totally truthfully. “I’m fine, I just have to shift gears that’s all.”

Jack studied her face for a minute before deciding that this wasn’t the time or place to pursue it any further.

“I Understand. You want me to drive?”

His chivalry had begun to show itself, a trait Betsy found endearing and refreshing. She waited while he opened the door to the parking garage.

“If you don’t mind,” she paused to look at him a moment. “I think I would prefer that you drive.” Betsy’s better judgement was telling her that it would be much easier to terminate the evening on her terms if she drove – but she was far too rattled right now. It took all of her strength and courage just to pretend like she could carry on a conversation.

“Right this way.” He smiled, happy with her decision to bow to chauvinism.

They headed down the second isle to the left and Jack pointed his key chain in the direction of the Cherokee. It squawked twice and Jack quickly walked around to open the passenger door. After Betsy climbed in and arranged herself comfortably in the seat, Jack shut the door and walked around the back.

Trying not to be conspicuous, Betsy reached for the lock and pushed it. As Jack slid in and turned the key to fire up the V8, the radio blared at them. Betsy was visibly startled and Jack turned it off as abruptly as it had come on.

“I’m sorry, I guess I was rockin’ on the way over here.” He smiled apologetically.

“It’s alright.” Betsy assured him as she changed her position in the seat. “Was that Harry Dial?”

“Yea, it was . . . do you like the blues?”

“I have three of his CD’s. It’s really the only kind of jazz I like.”

Jack turned the volume up a little bit, backed out of the space and headed out of the garage. Harry played hard driving blues as they made their way along, enjoying a surprisingly comfortable lack of conversation.

Jack pulled up in front of the restaurant and flung the keys to a boy in a black vest. Betsy was out of the vehicle and standing on the sidewalk by the time he had gotten around to her side. He offered her his arm and Betsy smiled and took it. She could get used to men treating her this way again. Civility was it’s own reward and she wished more people recognized that. Jack seemed more like the total package with each passing minute. And that thought surprised Betsy as well as intrigued her. She was unaware that she had been evaluating him in that way.

The maitre d’ called Jack by name and the two men exchanged a rather robust hand shake. He personally sat them in a cozy, poorly lit corner booth at the back of the restaurant. Betsy tried to enjoy the atmosphere rather than be put on the defensive by it. Besides, she had heard that this restaurant had the best Mediterranean chicken dishes in town. Jack had chosen wonderfully and Betsy was feeling better than she had all day. Jack, on the other hand, had become more nervous since sliding in across from her in the

booth. He felt a little awkward and it was showing.

They ordered drinks and some stuffed mushrooms. Jack watched as Betsy scanned the menu. The candlelight flickered and danced and made her eyes appear bigger than they were. She was truly beautiful and he was glad she had accepted his invitation. It had been a long time since he felt anything in the pit of his stomach that felt this good. He was content to sit and look at her for the rest of the evening. Anything else would be icing on the cake at this point. He already felt nourished and rejuvenated just sitting here.

The only thing that was wrong was that she seemed to be preoccupied with something. Jack could tell that she was genuinely glad to be there with him. He thought about the hug earlier by the elevator. But she seemed to have something that was nagging at her. Pulling her attention away and wearing at her mood. Jack wished that there were something he could do about it.

Betsy looked up from her menu and smiled at him. He was handsome and real. Not pretty or good looking in an aesthetic sort of way, but handsome, in a male and virile sort of way. Those were the only men Betsy found attractive. As she looked at him across the flaming centerpiece, she was glad she had accepted his invitation. This evening might hold more for her than a few answers to a few questions.

“What’s the smile for?” She asked as she looked back at the menu, deliberately averting her eyes.

“I was just wondering if you could recommend a good therapist for me.”

Betsy looked confused.

“Yea, it seems that the one I was seeing has a conflict of interest.”

“Really, and how do you know that?” Betsy continued reading the menu.

“I think she’s seeing one of her patients.”

“Really?” Betsy looked up from the menu sporting a crooked grin. She was enjoying the playful rhetoric.

“Yea, I don’t know how serious it is but I think there’s definitely something between them.”

Betsy’s interest in this man was now definitely piqued. He had expressed his interest with humor and wit and he was waiting, patiently to see if his efforts had been in vain. She could almost see the anticipation on his face. Jack was enjoying this coy exchange, she could tell and she thought it would be good to help him enjoy it just a little while longer.

“How will this conflict affect you, Mr. Johnson?” She went back to reading her menu.

“Hopefully until well past midnight.”

Betsy lost control of a laugh that blurted out from deep inside her. The statement was bold and it just struck her as funny – after all, they weren’t teenagers. She regained her composure and cut her eyes in his direction with a sly, devilish look. He waited for her reply, praying he had not been too direct.

In her most professional tone she replied. “Timing is everything, it may be time for a new therapist. We’ll have to see.”

Well it wasn’t pay dirt. But it wasn’t bad, Jack thought to himself as the waiter set

their drinks in front of them. Betsy had ordered a glass of Merlot and Jack, though not much of a drinker, had decided to join her.

When the waiter had gone, Jack looked back at Betsy with the intent of continuing their conversation, but he noticed the black cloud that had plagued her since she stepped off the elevator had returned.

“Is anything wrong? You seem really preoccupied.” Jack asked with, what sounded to Betsy, like real concern.

“It’s a case that I’m working on. I find it very disturbing and I’m having trouble leaving it at the office tonight. Please forgive me . . . it’s not you. This is wonderful.” She was deliberately misleading him until she could figure out how she was going to approach this – if at all.

“I’d help if I could.” He spoke quietly and reverently. “Just let me know.”

“Jack,” Betsy paused. She needed to ask him, but she didn’t want to ruin this beautiful evening. And then, suddenly she decided that the evening was doomed if she *didn’t* get this out of the way.

“How was your company able to get Leonard’s disc?”

It was out of her mouth and on the table in front of them before either of them knew what happened. Betsy was sorry that it had come out that way, but all she could do was brace herself for his reaction.

“I don’t really know. Why?” Jack said calmly enough, apparently taking no offense to the abruptness of her question.

“Well, what if you aren’t the only company doing this. And what if my physician’s group isn’t the only place that’s recording this kind of data? The problem could become a nightmare. Have you thought about the repercussions? Because I have and frankly it scares the crap out of me.”

The tension in her voice was turned up a notch and she was almost babbling now.

“No, Betsy, to be perfectly honest, I haven’t thought about it at all.”

“It would be a great help to me to know how you got that disc.”

“I really don’t know. And that’s by design. Fences don’t usually take out ads.”

Betsy’s disappointment was brutally evident. And the look on her face forced a protective feeling over him. He wanted to fix this, not only because of what might happen, but also because he didn’t like seeing her this distressed. It chewed at his gut.

“I’ll try,” he said sheepishly. “And if I find out anything, you’ll be the first to know. But I really don’t think anyone’s going to talk. Especially to the boss.”

“I understand.” She looked at him pitifully and took a sip of the deep red wine.

Damn this was killing him. She was miserable and he couldn’t do anything about it.

“Jack?” Betsy asked in a way that was both pleading and unsure.

“What?”

“If there was something you could do to help me, would you?” Out of nowhere, Betsy had just gotten the craziest idea. It just hit her as she was thinking about the problem of emotional printing – the residual side effects of Jack’s nightmare.

“Of course! What is it?”

Betsy hesitated a moment and then sat back in the seat.

“The memories you have. They belong to a man named Leonard Moss.”

Jack nodded as if to say ‘Yea . . . and?’

“I believe that you understand Leonard better than anyone.” Betsy waited for him to acknowledge her last statement before she went on. “Maybe even better than he understands himself.”

Jack watched Betsy’s eyes as she talked. He liked the way they’d wrinkle up, ever so slightly right at the corners.

“I wrote a profile that helped the police capture him - twice. I think that he blames me for his capture.” She looked up at Jack with a determined sort of fear shining in her eyes and continued.

“Well, now he’s out - again. He’s threatened me before and now he’s written me a letter.”

Jack was starting to not like where this little story was leading.

“The last women he killed look like me. Almost exactly like me.”

Betsy took a rather large gulp from the wine glass and then blew a quick little spurt of air out her pursed lips.

“He is coming after me, Jack and I’m afraid.”

Tears pooled in her eyes but they didn’t fall. She batted at them with her lashes and waited to speak again until they had dissipated. Jack wanted to do something, but he didn’t know what. He wanted to hold her and brush the hair out of eyes and tell her that

everything was going to be okay. But she was right – he did know Leonard better than anyone else. And that thought made him shiver inside.

“You understand him, you know how he thinks. I need your help, Jack. I desperately need your help.”

Jack put his hands up on the table and took Betsy’s in his. Gently rubbing the backs of her fingers with his thumbs Jack spoke sincerely. “You know that I’d do anything for you, Doc . . . what is it?”

Betsy made no attempt to pull away this time. In fact, she found herself rubbing Jack’s fingers with her thumbs.

“I need to figure out what his next step is. With your help . . . I mean, isn’t there a chance that you could . . . figure out where he is or what he was going to do?”

Jack tensed unconsciously at her last statement and they both sat, quietly for a long time, pondering what had been said.

Suddenly Jack realized what she was asking of him. He pulled his hands from hers and sat straight up in his seat. She wanted him to experience another playback. To try and second guess this guy’s next move.

Jack’s face went white and Betsy felt like the last strings of hope were being pulled from her dead lifeless body.

“I can’t . . .” Jack was shaking his head in disbelief.

Betsy reached for his hand with a smile, but Jack pulled it away from her.

“I can’t believe you’d even ask me that.”

“Jack . . .” Betsy looked helplessly at him. Trying desperately to persuade him with her eyes. “I need you Jack . . . it’s the only way . . .”

“No,” Jack cut in and turned away from her. “I can’t do that. You should know that.”

The tears that Betsy were fighting back had begun to roll gently down her cheek. She started to mouth the word ‘but’ . . .

“Look . . .” Jack cut in. “I’ll hide in your bushes with a shotgun and blow this guy’s head off. I’ll do anything in my power to take care of you – but I won’t go under again. I can’t. I just can’t.”

Betsy’s tears were falling freely now. Everything about this god awful day was beginning to catch up with her. That stupid letter from Leonard. That stupid police Detective. Her stupid receptionist. She put her hand up to cover her face and then, started crying.

Jack could see her shaking. She was wholly, body and soul afraid and it was tearing him up inside. Quietly, Jack slid out of his side of the booth and sat down next to Betsy. Gently he place his hand on the back of her neck.

“I won’t let him hurt you. I won’t let you out of my sight. I promise I’ll keep you safe.”

Jack faced her and she looked up at him with the tears flooding down her cheeks. So scared and innocent, her eyes were as large and round as Jack had ever seen them. God she was beautiful. Jack could never let anything happen to her. An overwhelming need to protect her washed through his veins like a tidal wave.

And it brought with it all the other emotions he had tried so hard to keep in check. No one would ever harm her as long as he was alive and Jack had never felt more alive than he did right now.

With his one hand still at the base of her neck, Jack reached around and lifted her chin with his other hand. He leaned forward and kissed her. When he pulled his head back, her sobbing had stopped. For several seconds they stared, only inches apart, into each other's eyes. Then he scooped her up in his arms and kissed her again – wrapping his arms all the way around her. He needed her as close to him as he could manage. He needed her now, close to him, safe.

In the back of his mind he had expected her to resist. They had an agreement - hell, he was still her patient - but Betsy did not resist. Instead she kissed him back with equal need, meeting him and then submitting to him. Her lips were soft and full as he moved his mouth to accommodate hers. He was hungry for the taste of her. He wanted to breathe her in and fill himself with her gentle fire. She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her warm generous chest to his.

The restaurant, the other diners, even the obstacle of a table had been forgotten. She was giving herself to him and he was taking her. Jack moved his hand up her back and filled his fingers with her soft cool hair. Another surge of need blasted him from within and Jack realized that he had never been this bold or self-indulgent with a woman before. It was as if his emotions were controlling him. He was no longer in command. He was driven by his need and it scared – and delighted him.

He felt powerless in this chaotic desire. Should he stop this now? Could he if he tried? Jack pulled away from her, holding her by the shoulders to look at her and at what he was doing, here in a booth, in a restaurant.

Betsy was delirious with passion and mistook the fear in his eyes for sheer passion. She was not afraid. But there was a part of Jack that was foreign and new. He liked the feelings Betsy had stirred in him. It was a free feeling of intemperance and, although it had the slightest fringe of guilt attached, Jack wanted to embrace these new feelings. Even though they seemed more powerful than he was. He wanted the freedom he had tasted in her kiss.

Betsy looked into his eyes. She was dancing inside and she did not want the music to stop.

This time, it was Betsy that leaned forward and kissed Jack. The way her mouth moved set him ablaze. Again he captured her lips with his and was carried away by the softness he found there. Her fingers gripped his collar and she pulled him in. She pressed herself back in the booth to allow him more room to maneuver. She was his, completely. Jack had never felt so powerful or so powerless than he at this very moment.

Reaching behind her, Betsy found his hand pressing on the small of her back. It was rough and strong like a man's hands should be. His knuckles were thick and she could feel the muscles in his hand strain against her touch as she moved his hand from behind her.

Jack felt the soft, silkiness of her stockings as she placed his hand on the inside of her

thigh. They continued with their long, slow kiss as he wrapped his fingers around her leg. In his mind he could see his hand, dark and tan against the black sheer mesh of her stockings. Betsy seized Jack's elbow and squeezed it tightly then pulled his arm toward her, moving his hand up the inside of her thigh until his fingers found the lacy edge of her stockings.

He could feel both the satiny roughness of the lace and the soft smoothness of her skin. The tips of his fingers burned as they rubbed against the black stockings and Jack traced the edge of the lace with his thumb. The feel of her skin taunted Jack almost as much as the teasing way she pulled, ever so gently, at his bottom lip with her teeth. With her hands wrapped firmly around his arm, Betsy could feel the muscles tense each time Jack tightened his grip on her thigh.

She raised her hips, ever so slightly, toward him then back, in cadence with his grip. Betsy had never in her life moved this quickly with a man. But no man had ever touched her the way Jack was touching her right now. He moved his hand the rest of the way up her thigh. She trembled as if she were being shaken and pulled her mouth away from his, trying to catch her breath. Jack's thumb found the place she had been leading him to and her back arched as she pulled at his collar again, confirming that his aim had been true.

Her warmth in his hand was driving him mad with need and he moved his eyes slowly up her body until they rested on her face. Jack had never seen anything as beautiful as the woman he was holding. She was more than desirable. And she would be his, but not here.

Jack removed his hand from between her thighs and kissed her again. It was the most

gentle kiss Betsy could ever remember. She opened her eyes as he pulled his face from hers. He wanted her now but he wanted her all to himself. He wanted this to be different.

And it was more than this. No one else in the restaurant seemed to notice them. In fact, Jack was fairly certain that, to the rest of the diners, it appeared that they had simply been kissing. He kissed her neck just below her ear and whispered.

“I want you, and I want to do this right.”

Betsy closed her eyes and smiled. She could still feel his hand on her thigh. She wanted to stay in that dream place they had just come from. But they were in a public place so she sat up and brushed her hair from her face as Jack straightened his shirt and hailed the waiter.

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The air outside had helped clear their heads a little as they waited for the valet to bring Jack’s Jeep around. The pair stood in the archway smiling and staring at one another as if there were something to be lost if either one of them looked away. Jack simply could not take his eyes off this woman. She was luminescent.

For Betsy, the world seemed to be spinning around Jack’s head in a blurry collage of images. The most predominant thing in her view were his engagingly, captivatingly blue eyes. She was lost in them and didn’t care to be found.

Jack held the door for her as she slipped gracefully into the front seat of the Cherokee. He met the valet on the drivers side and handed him a twenty. But that was not why the young man was smiling. Jack knew why and he returned the grin and shook his head as

he opened his own door and got in. Betsy's hand had found Jack's thigh before he could reach for his seatbelt. Jack pulled out onto the street and drew a deep, cleansing breath. The streets downtown were almost too narrow for cars to pass and Jack barely missed the rusty little Toyota that turned, abruptly in front of him.

"My house is closer." Betsy's voice was low, almost purring.

Jack laid on the horn, then smiled once again as he switched on Lightning 101, the best jazz/alternative station in town.

"Lead and I shall follow," Jack's voice almost cracked.

The directions Betsy gave had been very clear and should have been easy to follow. But as she rubbed his thigh, he found it harder and harder to concentrate on the road. When he heard her say 'This driveway Jack, on the right.' it startled him and he realized he'd been on auto pilot for the last few minutes.

"Could you park in the garage?" Betsy asked apologetically, then crinkling her nose she explained. "Neighbors."

Jack nodded as he took her keys, got out of the car and opened the garage door. Betsy watched the muscles in his back tense as he lifted the door over his head. She liked the way he moved, he was deliberate and solid. His quiet, understated power made her feel safe. She crunched the tic tac she had slipped in her mouth as Jack climbed back into the car. He pulled his Jeep into the garage and shut off the engine.

Jack was filled with anticipation as he walked behind the SUV and closed the garage door, then made his way around to open Betsy's door. As she took his hand and stepped

down from the vehicle, Jack could feel the tension once again as it ascended to a new height. He had never felt so impulsive or free wheeling.

Slamming the door shut with one hand he reached down and scooped her up with the other. He drew her to his chest and looked up at her. She put both hands on his shoulders to steady herself then Jack let her slide down the front of him until her feet touched the ground. Then he pinned her against the car, pressing his body to hers, and kissed her again.

It seemed like an eternity since that last kiss in the restaurant. Betsy was glad Jack hadn't waited until they'd made it into the house. She draped her arms across his shoulders and played with the hair at the nape of his neck, letting him take each kiss from her instead of giving them to him.

Jack's lips found her neck and she gasped as the chills ran all the way down her and lit that aching, slow burn that she had begun to crave since leaving the restaurant. Jack played at the base of her neck with his tongue as his hand rubbed up and down that part of her thigh that connected to her hip.

Draped across the warm hood, Betsy had become ageless again. No worries about decorum, and no fear of being caught. She was free to think of nothing except what he was doing to her with his mouth and his hands.

As he began to kiss her just on the inside of her collar, Betsy unbuttoned the jacket she was wearing. It was an invitation Jack could not resist. He kissed his way down her breast just under the edge of her jacket but stopped halfway down. He drew intense little circles

on her skin with his tongue, waiting for a reaction. He was driving her insane and he knew it.

She loved the teasing but could not wait for Jack to decide to continue. She crossed her hands behind his head and pulled him down, between her breasts. Jack breathed in her scent and wrapped his arms around her lifting her as he stood. He continued tracing on her skin with his tongue. With his face buried between her breasts and her legs wrapped around his waist, he walked, unguided, to the door that led into the house.

She felt the stairs under her feet and Jack's mouth, once again, on her neck. Jack had begun rubbing up the front of her jacket with his hands, from her belt to her shoulders and back down to her belt. His hands pressed hard against her and molded to her body as they moved.

Inside the house, Jack seemed to read Betsy's thoughts. His head was full of her and this new freedom and he wrapped his right arm around her waist and pulled her to him. Her body was a perfect fit, as if her curves had melted onto him. The feel of her warm flesh pressed against him made him burn inside. He kissed her mouth with such intensity that it felt as if he were stealing the breath from her. He let her slide to the floor and Betsy reached for the light, trying not to pull her mouth from his.

After missing the switch repeatedly, she decided there was enough light streaming through the window from the street light outside. Jack reached for the zipper on her jacket as they worked their way down the dark hallway - pulling off clothing and kissing and rubbing.

Betsy's jacket was first, then Jack's shirt. His shoulders were full and round and warm and Betsy liked the way his skin tasted, the slightest bit salty. Jack had found his way under the lace of her bra to what he had been craving all night. They were large and pink and when Jack covered her nipples with his mouth Betsy fell back against the wall for support. The gentle, insistent way he pulled at them with his teeth and his tongue turned her knees to Jell-O.

If she could have pulled him any closer she would have. She wanted every part of her to be touching every part of him as he drew his tongue circles around her soft pinkness. Running his tongue back and forth on the under side of her breast, Jack felt as if he might release himself before he could get her undressed. He couldn't remember the last time he had taken a breath.

He stopped what he was doing and pulled away, trying to compose himself, but Betsy was having none of it. She grabbed the small of his back with both of her hands and pulled him to her again. Jack unzipped the skirt she was wearing and it dropped to the floor. Betsy stood, leaning against the wall in the hallway, the moonlight dancing on her pale skin made the contrast between milky flesh and black lingerie even more beautiful than any picture.

Betsy unbuttoned his jeans one button at a time, knowing full well that each one was excruciating for Jack. She could feel him pressing against the denim, trying to find his way to her. When she unbuttoned the last button she reached her hand down between his jeans and the white cotton of his underwear and rubbed him deliberately with the heel of

her hand.

Jack could wait no longer. He lifted her thigh and rested her knee against his chest. The stocking that was wrapped around her calf felt cool against the heat from his skin. Helping him out of his jeans she placed him inside her, moving her lacy underwear out of the way. Betsy dug her finger into the muscles in his chest and leaned her head back against the wall. He slipped inside her easily and they moved together as freely as if they were lying down. Jack was awash with her, her scent, her taste, her soft cooing.

She had given herself to him totally, like no other woman ever had. As he indulged himself she became more vocal. Pleading with him not to stop. The need inside him now was so powerful he wasn't sure if he could stop if he had to. But her need seemed to match his as he held her, trembling, in his hands.

Jack could feel her come before he heard the tell tale breathing that always accompanies a release of that kind. The way it rocked her entire body made him feel like he had just conquered an entire army. She was consumed by this feeling he had given her and the power with which she reacted to him brought Jack to his own burst into that feeling of nirvana.

His legs were weak and he collapsed against her, pinning her to the wall. Both their chests heaving, trying to capture the air. He found her mouth again with his, insisting on the kisses as much as their lungs were insisting on oxygen.

Betsy lifted her other leg from the floor and wrapped both of them around Jack's waist and both her arms around his neck. He pushed off of the wall, carrying her wrapped

around him. He stepped out of his jeans, underwear and shoes and left them all lying on floor of the hall. He turned and walked down the hall as she whispered directions in his ear.

He could barely see where he was going but he found his way to her room and over to the bed. It smelled like her hair and it made Jack smile as he climbed on to it still holding her in his arms. He sat on the bed with her in his lap feeling her skin with his hands. His smile lingered as she rubbed herself against him.

Jack had never had any woman make love to him like this. He wanted her to go on forever making him feel this way. Knowing him, and giving him what he wanted. And she was more than willing, she was ardent about it. It was as if she needed to please him.

“Thank you Jack.” Betsy breathed into his ear. She kissed his temple and played with his hair.

“MMMMM, glad to be of service, Doc.” he mumbled back.

“Crawl in here with me.” she spoke softly as she pulled back the comforter with one arm.

“Just a minute.” Jack reached around her as he spoke. “There, how’s that?”

He removed her bra and rubbed her sides where the elastic had been. She smiled and threw her head back.

“Much better, thank you.”

Jack’s mouth found her nipple again as he laid her back on the bed. Betsy had not expected to have a man in her house this evening. Especially not this man but as his

tongue flicked back and forth on the point of her breast she was thankful for the unexpected. He knew her body better than anyone ever had and he was not intimidated by her abandon during the throws of love making. With his own controlled abandon he made love to her again, in her bed and at his own pace. The need still as powerful, but less urgent this time. And this time he was able to wait until she was completely satiated before he allowed his own indulgence.

Jack pulled himself from her and laid down beside her. He wrapped her in his arms and pulled her close. No harm would ever come to her as long as he had breath in him. She was safe as long as she had him near.

They lay quietly for a while, Betsy draped across him, indulging in the feel of one another's skin. Jack realized Betsy had drifted off to sleep and that some how meant that he was now allowed to do the same. He drifted off with the smell of her hair filling him and warming his entire body.

Jack woke to sunlight streaming in through the open curtains. He found himself curled around Betsy, his hand tucked neatly under her side. He felt magnificent. He had never imagined that the evening could have ended so beautifully. Burying his nose in her hair, he rubbed the back of her head with it. Her hair smelled like nothing he had ever smelled before.

As his head cleared and he became more awake, he realized that he had to piss - bad. The clock beside the bed read 7:20 am. But right now the only thing that was important was finding a bathroom.

He moved slowly, unwrapping her from his side as gently as possible. He caught a glimpse of porcelain from one of the doorways off of the bedroom and headed in that direction. It was bright in the house and Jack was having trouble getting his eyes to work.

He walked down the hallway, rubbing his eyes and then entered the bathroom and shut the door. It was bright in there too, almost painfully so and it made him squint as he stood, relieving himself.

When he finished he opened the door to walk back to the bedroom. But once there, all he could do was stand in the doorway, stark naked, and stare at her. She was an angel, curled up and sleeping in the sunlight. Jack looked around at the room and admired Betsy's taste. The colors and styling - everything - reminded him of her.

And then Jack's stomach went sour as something queasy crept through his thoughts. Something ugly that had invaded him and ruined the moment forever.

Jack walked slowly back to the bathroom as the feeling welled inside of him. A wave of almost palatable sickness. A heavy dark thing that was beginning to grow inside of him. Jack pushed the door to the bathroom open and stood in the doorway puzzled.

What was it?

He studied the medicine cabinet and looked down at a towel crumpled up on the floor. His nostrils were filled with an array of wondrous smells. Jasmine and musk. The smell of clean linens and clean tile. Peach from a candle by the sink. Jack closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. Each smell had a personality and a story to tell. Each smell reminded him of something.

“Ivory,” Jack said out loud and opened his eyes.

Now, here in the daylight, Jack realized that he had been here before. It was a feeling that crept over him slowly at first and then gained momentum. As the realization accelerated, fear engulfed him and spread throughout his body like a plaque.

Jack felt sick and the room began spinning. His ears were ringing and his temples pounded as blood slammed its way through his veins. He tried to make his way back to the bedroom but he was getting dizzy. Leaning against the wall, he remembered clearly what her kitchen looked like. He could see it crystal clarity and he remembered playing with her silverware. Remembered licking it and admiring his reflection in it. But it wasn't his memory . . . it belonged to Leonard.

Panic snatched up every organ in Jack's body and twisted violently at them. Leonard had been in this house!

“Damn it.”

Jack sucked air in huge gulps and fought hard against the paralyzing fear. They had to leave. They had to leave now! Jack had to get her out of here, NOW!

He ran to the bedside and tried to wake Betsy but she wasn't cooperating.

“What?” she mumbled playfully and smiled without opening her eyes.

Jack turned and hit the lamp beside the clock with his elbow, knocking several things off the bedside table. Betsy's eyes opened sluggishly.

“Jack? What are you doing?”

“Get up!” He barked at her in a tight strained voice.

“Get up?”

“GET UP! NOW! We have to leave, Betsy . . . he’s been here, Leonard’s been in this house!”

Betsy sat bolt upright, her face more pale than ever.

“No . . . what are you saying, Jack?” Betsy was stunned. How could he have gotten into her house? But she knew by the look on Jack’s face that he knew what he was talking about and she needed to get moving. It’s just that her legs felt like sponges. She had been immobilized by shock. Jack scooped her up and held her to him.

“I won’t let anything happen to you. But you have to listen to me, Okay?”

Betsy nodded and followed his instructions as they dressed. She packed as quickly as she could and within ten minutes they were in his Jeep in the garage and were backing out of what Betsy used to feel was her safe haven from the world in which she worked. Now she had no refuge and she felt naked, vulnerable and afraid. Jack felt her recoiling as her world fell in around her. He reached over and placed his hand on her leg to reassure her.

“It’s going to be okay Betsy, you’re safe. You’re with me.”

And he drove into the night and toward his fortress on the hill outside of town.

## Chapter Seven

### LOSS

- 1 -

Neither of them said a word as Jack reached for the visor and hit the garage door remote. He had made good time from Betsy's and now, with the electric garage door whining to a close behind them, Jack felt almost safe again. Inside his house. His fortress.

The terror he had felt when he realized that he'd been in Betsy's house before, had begun to subside. He had seen inside her life through the eyes of Leonard Moss. He'd actually been in her house. He'd handled her things. He had invaded her in a way that was both unclean and very dangerous. Jack could feel the fire that ignited Leonard's sick interpretation of passion. Jack knew from his own experience that those feelings, when they were that strong and vivid, never completely left you.

The way these traces of terror clung to Jack struck him with fear. Fear that he would never be completely free of. They were both bitter and sweet and evoked an internal battle within him every time he found himself slapped with one of Leonard's morbid memories.

Though the vivid picture of walking through Betsy's home was fading. The smells and sounds and tastes of her intimate world remained. The kitchen smelled of lavender and cinnamon. Earthy and filling. Appliances clicked and creaked. And her living room smelled of lemon from the wood oil.

As the smells got stronger, Jack could taste oil from a tabletop mixed with salt from a

fingertip. The hallway smelled like raw silk and Betsy's skin. He remembered snuggling his nose into the back of her hair. Jack was horrified to realize that he couldn't separate his own memories from Leonard's. His mind whirled and skipped as it drug him, unwillingly through this sensory tour of Betsy's home.

Her bedroom smelled like her hair and it was cool and dark. But what drew him throughout this memory was the smell . . . of . . . it was so familiar . . . it reminded him of TV when he was a kid. And women. It was soap. It was Betsy's soap. Ivory.

Suddenly this memory had become unlike any other he couldn't feel anything. Jack didn't have that feeling of blackness, that morbid goop that Leonard passed for emotion anymore. Somehow something had changed. When the fear hit him, it was as if Jack's own emotional valve had gotten clogged and shut down.

The reprieve from Leonard's oppression was welcome even if Jack didn't understand how it had happened. But still, it felt strange and artificial. Like a placebo that would soon wear off. He gathered himself and tried to get back to the here and now, but he wasn't looking forward to when the valve would free up again.

"He sat on your bed," Jack said staring straight through the windshield at the cluttered workbench. He turned around, reached between the seats and grabbed the bag with Betsy's things in it. What he wasn't telling her was what Leonard had done her bed. But Betsy had seen it in his eyes anyway. She shuddered and turned to get out of the vehicle.

Jack opened his door and walked around to the back of the Jeep and examined the garage door. He reached down and slid the latch through the rail to lock the door in place,

then wiggled it two or three times to reassure himself.

Together, they walked up the stairs from the garage to the house. Duke greeted them at the door. His interest in Betsy was short lived and he retreated to his rug in front of the fireplace. They made their way to the kitchen and there they sat quietly, looking at the table top and doing everything in their power to avoid looking at each other.

“We’ve got to call the police,” Betsy said, almost without moving her mouth.

“And tell them what?” Jack looked up at Betsy, wearing a plastic smile and wagging his head as he spoke. “That I feel like I think I’ve been in your house before, though not personally, but in the mind a crazed serial killer?”

“Can’t they dust for prints or something.”

“They wouldn’t find any,” Jack returned his gaze to his hands on the top of the table. “Would they?”

“No . . . they wouldn’t.” The defeat in her voice was physically painful for Jack. But she knew, even better than he did, how cleanly Leonard practiced his profession.

The silence lingered as the two silently begged the heavens for an answer. Any answer.

‘There has to be something we can do.’ Betsy rolled the thought over and over in her head, desperately trying to conjure a brainstorm on how to catch this lunatic. It was, after all, part of her job. It was what she did really well – excelled at.

She had never been so afraid as she was right now. She was a very capable woman and yet she felt utterly helpless against this man. As she looked at Jack, standing there

pulling at his chin, lost in his own thoughts, she wondered how she had come to trust him.

She knew so little about him and what she did know linked him to Leonard. In fact he was the closest thing they had to Leonard. And yet she was trusting him with her life. Was it wishful thinking when she saw his reactions to Leonard's handy work? Or did she really see the man's heart and soul?

Jack cleared his throat and turned his attention back to Betsy. He was straddled with indecision. He had to find a way to protect her. He was in love with her. And even if she wasn't in love with him, he couldn't let that bastard hurt her. No one knew better than Jack what Leonard's intentions were. And he was petrified when he thought about what he had in mind for her.

"Well, what then? Just hide out here until he's caught?" Betsy was exasperated.

Jack shivered, turned and looked at Betsy with fear in his eyes. "I didn't just see what he saw, Betsy." Jack reached out and took her hand in his. He did this for his own sake, not just hers. The feelings began to come in a rush. He felt flooded, almost as if he were being carried away. He managed to maintain his composure as he clung tightly to Betsy's hand.

"I could *feel* what he was thinking." Jack studied her eyes carefully. "He wants you for his collection."

The silence returned, black and heavy. Jack rubbed the backs of her hands with his thumbs.

“I know what I have to do,” he said with an air of finality.

Without a word, Jack knew that Betsy understood. Jack got up and walked over to the telephone. He flipped the phone book over to the blue pages and dialed the police number and asked for homicide. Once there, he asked for anyone connected to the ‘Lipstick’ case.

Betsy sat quietly as Jack spoke behind her. “That’s right, I’ll explain it all when I get there . . . so, I’ll meet you at the lab in about an hour. No, I’ll explain everything then . . . just meet me there . . .”

Jack hung up and then made another quick call before he phoned Todd.

At the station, Detective Robert Blakely opened his desk drawer and pulled out the Smith & Wesson stub nose .38. He shook his head slowly and slid the gun into the waist holster. He had just had the strangest call.

He stared briefly at the pile of photos that lay spewn across his desk, then slowly he gathered them up and returned them to the file folder. He’d been looking at them for weeks. Trying to see something. Something he might have overlooked. Some insignificant little detail that would suddenly leap out of the picture and crack the case wide open.

“Fucking pipe dream,” he mumbled to himself as he shoved the last photo into the folder.

He wasn’t used to chasing down bullshit leads, but he hadn’t had any kind of a clear break on this case since the beginning. At this point in time, any lead - no matter how absurd, was a good lead. And after all, Leonard being on the loose was his fault.

“Besides, the guy didn’t sound like a psycho . . .” Detective Blakely put the folder in his top desk drawer as he mumbled to himself. Then, in one swooshing motion, he slid on his coat and clicked off the desk lamp.

“After all,” he continued his conversation with himself, “it’s only a fifteen minute drive over to VTech and I need to get something to eat anyway.”

Todd made record time out to Jack’s place. He could feel the tension in his brother’s voice and, after hearing what Jack had to say, he knew exactly how much his brother needed him right now. Jack opened the front door and met Todd as he walked up the cobblestone sidewalk to the front of the cabin.

“What’s up Jackson?” Todd’s flippant air was reassuring.

“I need you to keep an eye on Betsy for me,” Jack said as he walked outside, pulling the door closed behind him.

And although Todd didn’t even know who Betsy was, he leaned forward and hugged his little brother. Dimly lit by the porch light, Todd could see the anxiety in Jack’s face.

“You now I’ll do anything for you, man. What’s the deal?”

“I’m going back under,” Jack grabbed Todd’s shoulders and held him out in front of him. “I need you here to watch Betsy for me.”

“Alright, buddy . . . we’re fine. Now just slow down and tell me what the fuck it is you’re talking about. And who’s Betsy?” Todd grinned a naughty little smirk.

The two of them sat on a big rock, right outside of the front door and for nearly fifteen minutes, Jack brought Todd up to speed. He told him about his visits with Betsy

and he told him about Leonard Moss. The story was incredible and Todd just sat and listened – stunned.

It was easy for him to see what Jack was going through. And how hard this must be for him. How afraid he was of repeating that nightmare again. And whatever it took, Todd was committed to being there for his little brother.

“I understand,” Todd said firmly.

“I’m serious, Todd,” Jack looked straight into Todd’s eyes. “I love her. Don’t fuck around on this one Todd. This guy’s seriously messed up.”

Like a soldier that had just received new orders, Todd walked around Jack and into the house. Jack followed him, almost pleading as he continued to give Todd instructions.

“Todd, just keep all the doors locked and stay inside.” Todd walked into the living room and over to the gun cabinet.

From the table in the kitchen, Betsy looked over but didn’t get up. She’d heard about the infamous Todd and now here he was. She didn’t know what the hell was going on, but she knew that she didn’t like any of it.

“Betsy,” Jack spoke, splitting attention between the two. “This is my brother Todd.”

Betsy nodded and forced out a pitiful looking excuse for a smile.

Todd smiled briefly over at Betsy, but he was preoccupied with opening the cabinet and pulling out the Remington 870 12-gauge.

“Todd . . . would you just come in here and sit down?” Jack was talking to Todd but still trying to keep half an eye on Betsy.

Todd opened a box of quail shells and began stuffing them into the shotgun – seemingly oblivious to what Jack was saying.

“I just want you to stay with Betsy.” Jack motioned to the kitchen with his head. “Do you understand? Don’t leave her alone.”

As Todd stuffed the forth shell into the bottom of the shotgun he turned to face Jack with a smile. “Don’t worry about her, man.” Todd turned and snapped a quick nod in Betsy’s direction and smiled – as if to say that, that was all the introduction they needed. Then he looked back at Jack and stuck another shell into the bottom of the shotgun. “She’ll be fine. Don’t worry about a thing, Jackson.”

Methodically, Todd walked the perimeter of the living room, checking all the doors and windows. A precaution Jack had already taken. Then he continued, like an android on auto-pilot, through the rest of the house. Every door, every window, every opening - secure.

Jack walked back to the kitchen, still uneasy about leaving Betsy. “You’ll be fine here with Todd.”

“Let me come with you.”

Jack’s face tightened. “You’re safe here . . . with Todd.”

“Wouldn’t I be safe in a roomful of police back at the lab with you?” Betsy didn’t have much luck trimming the sarcasm from the question.

“No,” Jack blurted out with apparently no thought at all. “You’re staying here with Todd.”

The irrational irritation in Jack's voice troubled her, but rather than fight a winning battle for a losing position, Betsy conceded with a nod.

What Jack wasn't telling her was just how afraid he was. He couldn't even explain it to himself, but he felt that if he lost control . . . if Leonard became dominant inside of him . . . that she'd be in more danger with him.

Jack grabbed his coat from behind the door and looked over at Todd who was now in the kitchen starting a pot of coffee.

"Be careful, Todd."

Todd smiled at him as he dumped a scoop of Maxwell house into the filter. Betsy walked up to Jack and hugged him tightly.

"You be careful," she whispered in his ear and then kissed him gently on the neck.

Jack squeezed her for a minute then turned and walked out the door. Betsy moved slowly toward the door, pressed her forehead against it and turned the latch on the deadbolt behind him.

Behind her, in the kitchen, Todd whistled and then cocked the shotgun once to chamber a round.

"So tell me about yourself little lady. Jack tells me you're some kind of doctor . . ."

- 2 -

Detective Blakely was standing in the doorway of the VTech lab with a pained, confused look on his face. He took a another sip of stale black coffee from the white Styrofoam cup and then looked straight at Jack, who was standing just a few feet inside

the lab.

“You mean you’re trying to tell me that you know what this guy’s thinking?” The detective squinted hard as he forced down the cold coffee.

“Not exactly.” Jack shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

“Well, what then? First you tell me you can, then you tell me you can’t. I’m sorry Mr. Johnson, but I just don’t buy any of this psycho-bullshit-babble.”

The Detective was starting to second guess his decision to come here. He knew when had gotten the call from this Mr. Johnson guy that it was a wild hair . . . but this . . . this was getting just a little too weird. After all, he didn’t know who Jack Johnson was and he certainly didn’t know anything about him. On the phone, he had said that he was a good friend of Dr. Archer’s and that he had some information concerning Leonard Moss. The whole thing had sounded thin, but right now, the good Detective felt like all he had to follow up on was ‘thin’.

Jack thought for a minute, rubbing his chin with his fingers. Then he turned and walked over to the console in the lab. He reached forward and hit the a button labeled ‘EJECT’ and then picked up the three inch micro-disc from its caddy.

“I’m going to explain this as simply as I can.” Jack tried hard not to sound condescending and by the look on Detective Blakely’s face, it seemed to be working.

“The brain is nothing more than a chemical computer.” Jack spun the disc nervously between his fingers. “It’s a wonderfully marvelous mechanism . . . but, for everything we know about it, we really haven’t begun to scratch the surface of what’s inside there.”

The Detective stared through Jack and then winced as he tipped the cup to his mouth for another sip of the dark sludge.

“On this disc,” Jack held it up in front of his face, still twirling it around, “is a snapshot of a human brain. A digital representation of all that he is.” Jack paused to see if he was losing the Detective, but Blakely was still looking straight at him.

“But, it’s more than just a bunch of ones and zeroes,” Jack looked right at the disc. “This disc represents the essence of the man . . . his memories and the way he thinks . . . what makes him happy and sad . . . even what he likes for breakfast. It’s a complete and accurate replica.”

Detective Blakely was interested enough in what the guy was saying, but he had absolutely no idea how this could possibly get around to information about Leonard. He leaned forward and peered into an empty wastebasket. He looked back at Jack briefly, then leaned forward and grabbed the roly chair that separated them and flopped himself down in it. There was a short pause and then the Detective nodded up at Jack as if to say “Go on, I’m still listening.”

“The thing is, that in recording this brain activity, we’re actually getting a lot of information that we can’t identify. Signals that defy classification.”

The Detective shifted in the chair, making a creaking sound.

Jack looked hard at the man, thinking carefully about what he was about to say, before he continued Jack spoke slowly and softly. “I’ve experienced this ‘unidentified’ information.” Jack let the statement hang in the air like a cloud of smoke, swirling and

lingering all around them. Then he turned and walked slowly around the room, pointing at the equipment as he continued to speak.

“We’ve been able to take this activity – this disc – and play it back through another person.”

The lab was empty tonight and Jack motioned through the window at three crisply made up beds in the other room. Blakely’s expression indicated that he needed no more explanation than that.

“Yea, someone lays in there and gets hooked up to those machines and then you play the disc in here and watch ‘em.” The Detective leaned back in the chair and glanced around the room, still without a clue about how any of this related to Leonard.

“That’s pretty close, Detective.” Jack looked at Blakely for a minute, then turned so he could see the beds behind the window. “But the playback allows that person to . . . experience . . . the thoughts of the others. To actually feel what they have felt.” The words just kind of trailed off as they left his mouth.

Jack turned completely away from Blakely as he fiddled with the buttons on the front of one of the CD towers. “To feel exactly what that other person had felt in all its original intensity.” Jack opened and closed the CD caddy several times. “To be where he’d been and do all the terrible things he’d done.” This time Jack’s voice faded out with a quiver.

Without saying anything, the Detective could sense the hesitation in Jack’s voice. He could hear it. Something bad had happened in this room. Something bad had happened to this guy. And, for the first time since arriving here at VTech, Detective Robert Blakely

was beginning to understand the connection this might have with Leonard.

Without turning around and still playing with the CD drive, Jack took a deep breath and continued. “Under sedation, the played back signal will become dominant - stronger than your own feelings.” Jack breathed out, loudly through his mouth and opened and closed the caddy again.

“Although you’re still aware of your feelings, judgement and morality,” Jack paused for, what seemed like, forever. Then he picked at one of the buttons on the machine in front of him, took a long slow breath and turned around to face the Detective. “But your feelings become secondary – they take a back seat to the feelings on the disc. And most probably, your feelings will be in conflict with the others. With the more powerful dominant feelings.”

Once again, the Detective could hear it in Jack’s voice. It was fear and it hung there between them like a huge wet blanket that neither of them could ignore.

“What’s your point, Jack?” Detective Blakely stood and dropped the empty coffee cup into a trash can. What the Detective was afraid of was that he was already getting the point, but he didn’t want to admit it yet. Even to himself.

Jack walked over to the Detective and spoke softly, with the disc still in his hand. “Once the playback becomes dominant, you’ll not only relive the past - recorded - experiences . . . you’ll actually start to think and feel like this person - in real time.” The intensity behind Jack’s eye’s was almost overpowering. His voice tightened and he started to speak faster.

“Once the dominant emotions take over, you’ll start to know what this guy thinks before he does. Start to anticipate all his moves. Understand what he wants before he does - because you’ll want it yourself. Want it more than anything and you’ll find away to get it. The same way that he’d find to get it.”

Robert Blakely looked at Jack for a long time. What had started out as a wild goose chase was now ending up like a freaky episode of the X Files. He couldn’t figure out if this guy was completely off his rocker or what. Because the alternative to him being nuts was that he might be right. That this shit really worked.

Blakely looked at Jack’s face for a long time before speaking. He’d learned to read people after his twenty years on the force. And he didn’t have much trouble reading Jack Johnson. There was something deep in his eyes and in wasn’t craziness. He could tell that Jack Johnson was not a lunatic.

In his eyes Blakely could see terror. This guy was deathly afraid of this room. The Detective didn’t understand all the tech stuff Jack had been talking about, but he did know who was on that disc. He knew because he’d been at the hospital when it had been recorded.

“This shit really works, doesn’t it?”

“Yes sir,” Jack replied solemnly, “this shit really works.”

Together, the two of them stood looking first at the disc then at each other. And although Jack had never used the word “I” when he was explaining the process, the good Detective had absolutely no delusions about who Jack was talking about. It was written

all over his face. Jack had done this before. But why? Why?

Still thinking about the tremendous fear in Jack's eyes, the Detective prodded on,  
"What are the risks for you?"

Jack looked thoughtfully over every square inch of Blakely's face. He liked this Robert Blakely guy. He was perceptive and picked up on the things you didn't say. Jack smiled and felt a little silly as the realization hit him – this guy was a cop. It was his job to figure stuff out.

Jack held the disc up right between them as he spoke. "This stuff is stronger than I am."

It felt strange to actually say it out loud. It's what he'd been trying to fight the whole time. Since the bet. Since the hospital. Trying to rationalize his way out of. Trying desperately not to admit to anyone - especially himself.

But, the cold hard truth was that he'd been on the edge of not coming back. He had crossed that thin line that separated civilization from chaos. And this time, he might not be so lucky. This time he might not be coming back.

The Detective's eyes bounced from the disc to Jack's face several times. There was something more hidden behind Jack's eyes . . . something really, really awful. Robert Blakely breathed in slowly through his nose and then looked straight at the disc and asked the question that neither of them wanted to hear out loud.

"It's Leonard, isn't it?" It came out more as a statement than a question.

Detective Blakely needed no more answer than the look on Jack's face. He had

already known the answer. A flood of questions blurted across his mind. Where had he gotten the disc? From Dr. Archer? But why? And why would you put yourself through something that hideous? Why? Why? Why?

This had been what Dr. Archer was doing with Leonard in the hospital. That ‘experiment’ or whatever it was that she was so damned interested in. But how . . . too many questions and too little time. He didn’t have the strength to ask any of them right now.

Besides, he didn’t need to understand anything more about the process or the string of events that had gotten him to this point. He knew what Jack was suggesting they do and it scared the shit out of him. If that thing really worked . . . to actually live the experience . . . to – be – Leonard Moss.

Blakely shuddered and reached out to touch Jack on the arm. He wanted to say “Don’t do this.” More than anything he wanted to talk Jack out of this crazy idea. But he’d spent too many sleepless nights with the images of the horrendous police photos. Each of them, forever etched in his mind in horrific detail. Each of them calling to him from his dreams. All those faces begging for retribution.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” was the only thing he could get to come out.

Jack forced out an insincere smile, “You got a lot of hot leads on this one, Detective?” Jack spoke with a biting insight into Blakely’s tortured existence.

Blakely’s arm dropped back to his side as he looked down at his shoes and then back up at Jack. “Then let me do it. I know more about Moss than anyone. Let me do it.”

Jack wanted to say yes. To shout it at the top of his lungs. To scream “yes – Yes – YES!” But he couldn’t. He knew that he was the one that had to go through with this.

And for all his insight, the good Detective just couldn’t know why Jack had to do this to himself. Actually no one could. Because up until just a minute ago, Jack hadn’t known. This wasn’t just about finding Leonard or saving Betsy. That was the excuse. This was really about finding himself. And this was his ticket – to either salvation – or destruction.

“I’ve run hundreds of these things, Detective,” Jack smiled warmly as he made up the excuse on the fly. “It’s not the kind of thing you can just jump right in at the deep end on.”

Blakely started to object but the look in Jack’s eyes stopped him. They were cooler now. A lighter shade of blue than before. And without understanding it, the Detective knew that he had to let Jack do this. He knew that it was somehow his fight. His demon to battle.

“It’s okay,” now it was Jack’s turn to reach out and touch the Detective on the shoulder, “I have to do this.”

Jack tried to mean that he needed to do this to save Betsy. To keep her safe from the raving lunatic. But, what he needed to admit to himself was that he had to do this. That he needed to face the monster and see if he could beat it. Otherwise he’d never know if his brother was right or not. Never know if a man stood for something or was just a product of some random electrical impulse in the back of his frontal lobe. Never be able to sleep again.

“Tell me what to do,” Blakely said with a tone of half indecision.

Jack walked back to the console and popped the disc back into the caddy then turned to Blakely. “I’m expecting somebody else - then we’ll get started.”

Todd had either seen one to many war movies when he was a kid or something. He returned to the kitchen after his third time marching around the house with the shotgun on his shoulder. Then he surveyed the living room thoughtfully.

“This is really a poor vantage point . . .” he turned and looked at Betsy to explain, “. . . because of all the glass.”

‘Oh God,’ Betsy thought painfully to herself.

“We’d be better off upstairs in a secure position.”

Her first reaction was to light into him, but she really didn’t have the energy or the inclination. Betsy grabbed her bag and drug herself behind Todd, upstairs to the master bedroom. Duke trotted behind them, bringing up the rear. Once Todd was satisfied with the security of the their new position, he told Betsy that he was going downstairs to re-check the perimeter.

“Oh, is that absolutely necessary?” Betsy grabbed the remote control on the bed and clicked on the television. She was having trouble believing that these two were really brothers. This pseudo-macho son-of-a-bitch was really getting on her nerves. Maybe Todd was adopted.

“Just hang tight, I’ll be back in a minute. Come on Duke.”

Todd disappeared out the door and Duke followed him down the hall.

*‘ . . . and in local news, the ‘Lipstick’ killer remains at large this evening with police indicating . . . ’*

Betsy clicked off the TV and curled up on the bed, hugging one of the big pillows. It smelled like Jack. She closed her eyes and replayed the previous evening in her head over and over. Was this the most wonderful man she had ever known? Sweet and kind. Caring and strong. Or was he just another dumb lumberjack?

“Be careful,” she said softly into the side of the pillow, “please be careful, Jack.”

Before leaving the house, Jack had made three phone calls. The first one was to the person in charge of the ‘Lipstick’ case – as he found out, Detective Robert Blakely. The second call was to Todd’s mobile, knowing perfectly well that that was the only way to get a hold of him. And the third, to Randy Akerman.

Randy didn’t need to ask a lot of questions and almost instinctively knew what was going on. Somehow had known, long before Jack had, that this day would be coming. The reckoning.

For Jack the mental image of Randy standing in the doorway, talking him down, had been a powerful one. Although it could’ve been anyone, it had been Randy. And Jack would not go through this again without him there.

Randy had arrived shortly after Detective Blakely and was waiting, patiently, in the hallway outside the lab when Jack and the Detective came out.

“Randy,” Jack said warmly extending his hand. “Thanks for coming.”

Randy smiled and shook his hand firmly. He glanced uncomfortably at the Detective

and then back at Jack – only a little confused. “Your welcome Mr. Johnson. I mean . . . I work here.”

Jack smiled at the absurdity of what he’d just said. He had just meant that he was glad to have him ‘here’.

“This is Detective Blakely. He’s the one working on the ‘Lipstick’ killings. You know . . . from TV?”

“Yes sir, how do you do?” Randy shook hands, tentatively with the Detective. “I’ve seen you on the news.” Then he turned back to face Jack.

“I want Randy in the lab, as close to that interface console as you can get. You know what I mean?” Jack looked first at the Detective then over at Randy.

Randy shook his head slowly, “No sir, not exactly.” Although he instinctively knew exactly what was going on, he needed to hear it out loud. He needed to hear Jack say the words.

Jack took a quick breath and then brought Randy up to speed on what they were about to do. Randy listened quietly.

Then Jack looked straight into Randy’s eyes. “I wouldn’t go through this without you here. You got me out last time and I’m counting on you now.”

Randy swallowed hard and felt his stomach sour. “But, I don’t know what I did . . . I just panicked.” Randy could feel his chest start to tighten as he thought about that last ugly incident in the lab.

“You’re the one that talked me down.” Jack reassured.

“I almost lost my job . . .”

“You’re the one that was there with me. I need you now, Randy. I need you now.”

Jack had a calm insistence in his voice that made Randy feel weak.

He looked at Jack carefully for a long time. The years spent here in this lab. . . all the boring nights . . . now this.

“I should’ve been an Engineer like the old man.” Randy said, shaking his head and looking at both men. Then, as if being coerced by some outside force, he looked deep into Jack’s eyes and spoke softly, “I’ll try not to let you down, boss.”

“Well, try your ass off!” Jack nodded abruptly and motioned to the lab. Then Randy quietly turned and left the two men standing in the hall.

“Alright, Mr. Blakely,” Jack said taking a deep breath and forcing out all the artificial pomp he could muster, “let’s get this psycho.”

It had taken almost all day to get to this point. The phone calls, the explanations, all the arrangements. Preparation for the playback was an arduous task involving several technicians and an hour or more of work. Jack had paced nervously back and forth in the hallway while the Detective just sat, almost motionless in a chair in the corner. But now it was just passed five o’clock and the halls at VTech were thinning out quickly.

Jack remembered the technician’s voice. “We’re ready, sir.” And he remembered entering the lab. He remembered that awful antiseptic smell and that cleaning fluid on his forehead. He remembered having his wrists restrained by his side . . . some kind of

injection . . . pressure along his forehead.

The staff nurse had been there, oblivious to what was really about to happen. She performed her mechanized ritual with the same robotic precision she had so many times before. Tap the IV. Adjust the trace on the scope. And then return to her station like a programmed drone.

But now Jack was standing next to a tree outside. No longer confined to the bed in the lab. And it didn't seem strange at all. It was night time and stars filled the sky. It all felt quite natural and expected. The wind brushed gently overhead through the tree tops and the air was full of the crisp clean smell of autumn.

He'd been here before. Lived this scene before. The crunching gravel in the distance. The pretty girl. The apartment. Jack's heart filled with excitement. But, this time was different because he was aware. Aware of what was happening and who he was. Unlike before, when he hadn't known. Hadn't known what he was doing. He was now aware that this wasn't him - that it was somebody else.

"Oh shit," Jack looked down and saw his feet moving, "I'm walking."

Jack's heart began to throb and that tingling feeling of excitement was starting to flow over him like a warm shower.

"Where's the pretty girl? I can't smell her?" The thought hung in the back of Jack's mind, just out of reach. The air was full of the smell of pine needles and tree bark. Of wild flowers and decaying underbrush. And he relished in how they all mixed together with the clean night air.

But knowing this wasn't him and being able to deal with the strange conflict of emotions were two different things. Jack was both excited and repulsed by what he felt. Both exhilarated and sickened.

"I am the dominant one here," Jack reminded himself forcefully.

He was convinced that if he could maintain that thought he'd be alright. Keep thinking about who was in charge. Just remember that he was in the lab and this wasn't real. Just remember that he was the only one that could save Betsy. His Betsy.

Overhead, the rustling of the trees in the wind heightened and Jack's pace picked up.

"No girl. No apartment."

The trees thickened and the air got colder. He was now walking down the side of a hill. Pine needles crunching under his feet as he slid and teetered trying to remain afoot. Jack's heart was now racing but it wasn't from over exertion. He was excited.

"I am the dominant one . . ."

Faster now, through the moonlit night and into a clearing. There, he stood for a moment and then he was jogging down a trail through the trees. The moon flashed across the treetops like a strobe light in a psychedelic disco.

*"I'll kill her, Jack . . ."* the voice echoed from nowhere and everywhere.

Jack slapped his face hard. "I am the dominant one, you fuck! I am!"

Breathing harder now, Jack stopped and looked around.

*"And you're going to help me."*

"I AM the DOMINANT one." Jack pressed his palms firmly into his temples.

Then Jack found himself squatting behind a large fur tree. Something real familiar about this place. “Have I been here before? Or was it Leonard?” Everything was getting mixed up.

On his hands and knees, Jack crawled along the side of a fallen tree. A tree that he’d seen before. A tree that he recognized.

“That I recognize?” Jack shook his head back and forth trying to think clearly.

*“Sorry, but I’m the dominant one here, Jack”* the eerily calm voice came from deep within.

Jack shuddered and sat for a minute on the damp ground.

“You can’t change who I am,” Jack spoke defiantly at the inner voice. “You can’t!”

*“But, Jack . . . I already have. You know that.”*

Jack grabbed his head and rocked back and forth on the ground.

“Ahhhgh.”

*“Can you smell her, Jack?”* The calm voice filled with electricity.

Suddenly Jack’s nostrils were filled with the mental image of Betsy. Of his sweet Betsy. Jack breathed deeply and started to shake all over. He remembered last night. He could feel her soft silky skin under him and taste her warm lips. The way her hair smelled and the smell of Ivory soap on her neck.

*“That’s good, Jack. Help me help her.”* the voice whispered softly.

Jack had a hard on and he was soaked in a thick sour sweat.

“I’m staying right here,” Jack said trembling as he stopped crawling and planted

himself in the dirt.

*“Tell me more about Betsy, Jack. About how she is in bed.”*

Jack growled and tried as hard as he could to think about fishing or hunting or playing with Duke . . . but the only image in his head was that of Betsy. Naked on the bed. Soft and tender. So helpless. So in need of help.

“Stop it!” Jack blurted out. “This is my memory! This is my land and that’s my tree! I dropped it myself last week.”

Suddenly Jack shot up and looked around in absolute horror. What had he just said? This is my tree? Jack looked all around in disbelief. Under the moonlight, everything was clearly visible now. This was the hill on the lake side of his property. *His* property. A hundred yards or so from the cabin. From his cabin.

“See,” Jack tried in vain to reassure himself, “I am in control. This is my memory.”

Then he heard the sound of footsteps in front of him and was again on the ground behind the lifeless tree. Crunch, crunch went the pine needles and Jack again shivered with excitement.

“Not excitement!” Jack snapped hard at the voice inside.

*“Yes, excitement Jack. I know you can feel it.”*

On the other side of the tree, the footsteps stopped. Jack peeked carefully over the edge to see a man from behind, holding a shotgun and sitting on a big rock.

Jack turned around and sat in the dirt. Trying to think. Trying to figure out what to do next. Then he carefully picked up a grapefruit sized rock. Jack’s eyes were almost as big

as the rock itself as he looked down at his hand. A hand he apparently had no control over.

Then, to his horror, he quietly crawled over the tree and inched his way toward the man. His whole body was out of control. Now Jack was just a spectator and he helpless to stop what he was about to do.

*“Excitement, Jack. The thrill of the hunt.”*

“Fuck you!” Jack snapped – but there was no sound. He tried in vein, but he couldn’t stop his arm from raising the rock high over his head.

Jack was rubbing himself with his other and couldn’t stop that either. Actually didn’t want to stop. Blood pounded against his temples and throbbed incessantly between his legs. Again, he could smell the lingering scent of Betsy’s perfume. Of her shampoo and soap. It burned at the inside of his nose and ignited a fire inside of him. Sweat poured from his eyebrows and ran into his eyes. He tip toed quietly up behind the man. Behind the man and his dog.

“My dog . . . Duke. Watch out!!”

The rock came crashing down onto the man’s skull before he had a chance to raise the shotgun. Teeth gnashing, Duke sprang into the air.

Detective Blakely dropped the fresh cup of coffee onto the floor as Jack sat straight up in bed. His wrists were still restrained and he was screaming wildly and shaking his head from side to side.

“He’s at my house . . . Oh my god, no . . . the bastard’s at my house . . .” Jack was

rocking forward, pulling against the creaking restraints as he howled in a mixture of half screaming and half crying.

Blakely was fighting to get the restraints undone when Randy came pouring into the room.

“I didn’t have time,” Randy blurted, half out of breath. “By the time I figured out what was going on . . .”

“You stay with him,” Blakely said and suddenly darted for the door. “I’ve got to get to a phone.”

- 3 -

Leonard had parked his Corolla deep in the woods and left it there. He had made his way through the woods and come across Todd and Duke, before making his way to the cabin.

In the trunk of the Toyota, Carol Ann came to in a panic, gasping for air. Frantically, in the darkness, she kicked at the back of the seat over and over until it finally gave way. Then she tore herself loose from the shower curtain and crawled out of the car.

With only the thought of trying to find help, she made a mad dash through the woods – so dazed and confused that she had no idea where she was or where she was going. She just ran.

And as she moved through the trees, she came across the cabin, with the sliding glass door wide open on the side. All she could think about was getting to a phone and calling for help.

She walked up to the door and almost called out. She wanted to say ‘Hello, is anybody home,’ but her throat wouldn’t work. It clamped down to the point of keeping her from breathing. But, as her head began to clear, she started second guessing herself.

How far had she run through the woods? Who’s house was this and where was Leonard? That was the question that kept her from moving any farther– where was Leonard?

So, when she heard a noise – footsteps – from inside the house, she quickly dropped back into the trees to hide. Desperately trying to formulate a plan. Any plan. But, as she looked around the darkening woods, she realized that she was in the middle of nowhere. Her only hope would be to get into that house. To a phone.

Betsy rubbed the sleep from her eyes and looked up at the clock on the wall. She must have dozed off. Now, in the eerie silence of the cabin, Betsy wondered where Todd was. As she sat up on the side of the bed, Betsy called out almost timidly. “Todd?”

Then she turned and looked toward the open bedroom door, expecting some kind of response. She stood and walked into the hallway.

“Todd, are you down there?”

“Little bastard macho son-of-a-bitch,” Betsy mumbled to herself as she walked down the stairway and into the dinning room. She looked across the kitchen then out over the living room. To the far right, a curtain swung lazily across the open sliding glass door.

“Todd? Duke?” Betsy walked toward the open door and then looked out into the evening air.

“Shit,” Betsy said as she slid the door shut. “Stud man’s out patrolling the grounds.”

Betsy slid the glass door shut and then looked across the glass wall in the living room, squinting to see anything outside through the trees. She leaned her forehead into the glass and slid sideways along it, trying desperately to catch a glimpse of Todd or the dog or whatever.

To shield her eyes from the inside light, she placed her cupped hands up along the sides of her forehead and the glass.

“Damn it!”

She could see nothing. It was getting too dark outside. Betsy leaned back from the window and shook her head nervously as she turned and walked back toward the kitchen. She figured it was probably just as safe without Todd there. Then she froze, paralyzed with fear as she looked down at her hands.

On the heel of her right palm was a bright red smear. Betsy touched it with her left hand and held her finger up in front of her face. She smeared the greasy red stuff between her finger tips and slowly turned back toward the wall of glass in the living room.

Betsy’s heart stopped in her throat and for a moment, she thought she was going to pass out.

There in front of her, stretching the length of the entire glass wall, was an arch shaped smear of lipstick from one side of the house to the other.

“He’s here . . . he’s in the house . . .”

Behind Betsy, lurking in the shadows, Leonard tip-toed down the hallway and up into

the bedroom.

Keeping one eye on the open door, Carol Ann circled carefully up the hill and around the side of the house. Halfway around the back, she came across the balcony to the bedroom. At this part of the hill it was only a few feet off the ground and, with little effort, she managed to pull herself up and over the railing. After timidly peeking through the sliding glass doors, she cautiously entered the bedroom.

Carol Ann looked around the large room. There was a double bed . . . a huge wooden dresser . . . a door, wide open to the hallway. To her left, directly across from the foot of the bed was a large mirrored closet door – half open, revealing a large array of men’s shirts. Turning her attention back to the bed, she found what she was looking for, the end table with the phone on it.

She took one deep breath and made a move toward it – but it was too late. Someone was coming up the stairs. Carol Ann’s heart pounded and she instinctively shot toward the first hiding place she saw – the closet.

Detective Blakely had a police helicopter on the way, but in the mean time, they were driving frantically to split the difference. Randy was in the front passenger seat and Jack was in the back. He was mumbling about how he’d told her ‘she’d be safe there’ and how this ‘was all his fault’ and ‘if anything ever happened to her...’

“Can’t you drive any faster?”

Blakely shot through an intersection with a red light and swerved to miss a honking pickup truck. He glanced empathetically at Jack in the rear view mirror and didn’t say a

word.

“The chopper’s going to meet us at the 31 off ramp. There’s a flat open field there we can use for an LZ.”

Jack stared out the side window and rubbed the side of his face with his open palm.

“*Blakely . . .*,” came the thin crackly voice from the radio.

“Yea, go ahead.” Blakely dropped the microphone in his lap and turned the steering wheel hard to the right to miss the rear end of a Vega hatchback.

*“Still no answer at the house. Phone company’s on it but they can’t tell if it’s a circuit problem ‘til they get a man on site.”*

“What about county?”

*“Sheriff’s on his way, but he’s coming from old 96. Probably be another 20 minutes.”*

“Fire Department? EMS?”

*“Both responding to a bad wreck out by the Ford plant.”*

“All right, thanks. Keep on it.”

*“You got it.”*

Jack felt sick and fought hard against the tears that tried to fall.

Still rubbing the lipstick between her fingers, Betsy ran upstairs in a panic. She went back to the bedroom and locked the door before thinking about the gun cabinet in the living room. But now it was too late to go back. Leonard had been in the house and was probably still there. She backed slowly away from the door, staring at it as if was some kind of wild animal about to pounce on her.

She ran over to the bed, grabbed the pillow and hugged it furiously. Then she saw the phone on the end table and lunged for it, knocking the base off onto the floor. She grabbed the cordless receiver and mashed the PHONE button repeatedly. The light on the phone was on but there was no dial tone.

“Shit.” Betsy threw the phone on the floor and grabbed the pillow tighter. Then the cool breeze hit the side of her face and Betsy let out a scream. The door to the balcony was open and the curtain was dancing inward like a sadistic ballerina.

Betsy looked frantically around the bedroom, not knowing what she was looking for. Until she saw the sliding mirrored closet door slowly move. Betsy stood to face the open door, still hugging the pillow for dear life. And before she could blink, Leonard stepped out of the darkness behind her and grabbed her around the throat.

After tying Betsy to the bed with nylon curtain cord, Leonard barricaded the massive dresser in front of the locked door. Betsy was yelling and fighting hopelessly against the rope, now secured tightly around her wrists and to the bed posts.

“Leonard, you don’t have to do this,” she babbled between gulps of air.

“Oh, I know I don’t, doctor Archer,” Leonard cooed as he finished tying her ankles to the end of the bed. “But, I want to. I want to help you.”

Leonard reached into his pocket and pulled out a large pocket knife. He opened the glistening blade slowly and locked it into place.

From within the darkness, Carol Ann could hear the screaming and she pressed her fists tightly to the side of her head. Then she heard his voice – calm and collected.

Another scream shot through the base of her skull and it made the back of her teeth hurt.

Betsy shook violently against the rope but it was no use. The thin nylon twine cut into her wrists and a trickle of blood ran down the inside of her forearm.

“So pretty.” Leonard put his face down, right next to Betsy’s and breathed deeply.

Betsy froze in a cold sweat. He stuck his tongue out and licked the side of her cheek before standing and shouting, “YOU THINK YOU’RE SO FUCKING SPECIAL, DON’T YOU?!!”

Carol Ann jumped as the shouting penetrated her haven. She closed her eyes tightly. But as she did, all she could see was the image of the woman in Leonard’s apartment. She could see Leonard bashing her skull in. Another scream and Carol Ann whimpered, but tried desperately not to cry out loud. She remembered Leonard taping her hands up and remembered being lain on the plastic shower curtain. Another blood curdling scream came from the other side of the door and Carol Ann could hear Leonard’s muffled voice.

Opening her eyes, she could see that the closet door hadn’t closed all the way – and through the tiny crack, she could see Leonard kneeling on top of the woman on the bed. His back was to Carol Ann and she could barely make out what he was saying - something about ‘helping’ her. Carol Ann couldn’t stop shaking and there was a terrible sour metal taste in the back of her throat. If Leonard heard her, it would all be over. He’d kill her like he had meant to the first time – in his apartment.

Betsy couldn’t breath. Leonard’s eyes were on fire and burned with a furious rage. He held the knife up to the light and admired it just as he heard a huge crash from

downstairs.

Leonard ran the knife gently across between Betsy's breast and popped off two buttons on her blouse.

"They'll be hear shortly, Doctor," he said mater-of-factly. "I'll have to work quickly now."

Betsy screamed.

*"We'll be there in 3 minutes,"* the chopper pilot announced over the headsets.

Detective Blakely reached over, squeezed Jack's knee and nodded as if to say 'We're going to make it, pal. Just hang on.'

Jack's heart went from a pounding torrent to a dead stop when the search light hit the roof of his house. Dancing over the tree tops and periodically lighting up the grounds around the house. There was no one in site. Jack stretched his neck to see through the window and down to the house below but it was no use from this distance.

*"I'll have to put you down at the top of the drive,"* the intercom once again chirped as the helicopter spun a 360 and shot down toward the end of the gravel driveway.

It must've taken all of ten seconds to get from their vantage point to the end of the driveway and land. To Jack, it seemed like an eternity. An eternity of not knowing . . . about Betsy . . . about Todd.

"I'll kill the bastard," Jack felt the rage swell inside him like fermented bile. Until this moment, the fear had been so overwhelming that Jack hadn't had time to notice the surge shear unstoppable anger he was feeling. The thought of personally cutting this guys head

off and holding it up for all the world to see was actually very exciting. He wanted to look into his eyes when he faced the same brutality that he'd perpetuated on so many other. To taste his fear and reveal in his ultimate destruction. He wanted to taste his blood.

Before the chopper was completely on the ground, Jack had the door flung open and was jumping out, already running. Blakely and Randy followed suit, but Jack had already disappeared into the trees, heading toward the rear of the house.

Blakely, instinctively headed straight up the driveway toward the front door and Randy followed reluctantly.

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Huddled in the darkness, Carol Ann's thoughts drifted back to Leonard's bedroom. He had killed someone right in front of her. No hesitation. No thought. Then he had tried to kill her. And now he was killing somebody else. How many more had there been before this?

As Carol Ann sat in the back of the closet, her mind raced with conflicting images. The cracking skull. The plastic shower curtain. That suffocating trunk. And as they played against the backdrop of the horrendous scene going on in the other room, a seed began to grow inside her. A feeling, unexplainable at first, but definable as it grew. A gritty earthy feeling that began to fill Carol Ann from her toes to the back of her eyeballs. It was hate. Shear utter hatred.

She hated Leonard for what he'd done and she hated him for what he was. She hated

him for tricking her and lying to her. She felt dirty all over and repulsed to the edge of sickness.

And then an eerie calm fell over Carol Ann and the shaking stopped. She looked through the crack in the closet door and watched as Leonard set the knife down on the end table. Without thinking, she opened the closet door. Quietly and smoothly. She was mesmerized by the dream-like scene in front of her. Leonard on top of the woman . . . speaking softly to her while she struggled in vain against the rope that held her down.

He had tried to kill her and had fucked it up. That's all Carol Ann could think about – was that he was just a fuck up. Little bastard fuck up. A lying, losing slime-faced fuck up. And although she didn't realize it yet, she was walking toward him. Inexorably moving – like a glacier grinding away at solid rock. Slowly, one foot in front of the other.

"You little bastard," Carol Ann mouthed the words that she was thinking to herself. Blood raced furiously across the front of her face and made her feel hot all over. A red, blistering, blinding hot feeling that infuriated every last cell in her body.

The knife was still on the end table and Carol Ann was now almost close enough to touch it. Almost close enough to grab it and shove it into the little bastard's back.

She stood, frozen in time. Seconds felt like an eternity and Carol Ann felt dizzy. Emotions and memories flooded through her like a raging torrent. The poor girl in Leonard's apartment. That awful cracking sound as the woman's skull caved in.

Crack. CRACK!

It was deafening in her ears and mixed with a ringing, throbbing sound. Her face was

on fire and the images in front of her seemed to be shifting in shape. Almost fluid – as if she was looking at them through a sheet of water.

She looked down at the knife and then up at Leonard’s back. And, almost out of her control, her hand began to move. It started to open and her arm moved upward toward the knife on the table. Carol Ann breathed quietly out of her open mouth.

Suddenly Leonard spun around and looked straight into Carol Ann’s eyes. For a brief moment he looked surprised, but then a sinister smile crept across his face.

“Carol Ann,” came the warm, almost inviting sound. “You’re just in time.”

Leonard glanced back over his shoulder at Betsy, then over at the knife on the end table. Carol Ann looked at the knife then at Leonard. For a moment, the two just stared at each other. As Leonard’s smile widened, it caused the fury to ignite inside Carol Ann.

She lunged for the knife the same time that Leonard did and the two of them fell to the floor together.

Carol Ann had the knife and she was holding it with both of her hands, shoving it towards Leonard’s face. Leonard was holding her wrists and seemed to be making headway pushing it back toward her. They rolled back and forth and Carol Ann tried, without success, to bring her knee up between Leonard’s legs.

“Crack. Crack.” Carol Ann couldn’t stop hearing the sound of the woman’s skull. She could see the look in Leonard’s eyes. The glee that he had experienced when he did it. She could still feel the stale smelling pillow cupped tightly over her face. Still feel her lungs tighten to the point of bursting.

“You little bastard.” Carol Ann barked as she weakened and the knife came closer to her face.

Randy followed Blakely to the front of the house where the Detective took a standard strategic stance to one side of the door. With the stub nose .38 up in front of his face, he turned to shatter the door casing with one solid kick. Without a word, the detective motioned to Randy to move to the other side of the open door.

With the .38 stretched out in front, Blakely swept the house from left to right before moving cautiously into the entryway. First the living room then the kitchen. As he cleared each area, he returned the .38 to its resting position next to his cheek.

Then Randy’s heart stopped as they heard the scream from upstairs. Without hesitation, the two men dashed toward the stairway and down the hallway. Another scream.

Again, on the outside of the doorway, Blakely turned to kick the door in. The casing popped and splinters flew, but the door only opened an inch or so.

From inside the bedroom, a horrendous bloodcurdling scream shot out through the crack in the door and paralyzed both the Detective and Randy. Then silence.

Randy and Blakely heaved furiously onto the door, sliding the dresser only inches with each attempt. It had balled up the carpet on the inside and wedged itself tightly between the door and the floor. Again they pushed, muscles aching, backs straining and finally the carpet tore loose and the heavy furniture slid free.

Still rolling around on the floor. Leonard held tight to Carol Ann’s wrists. The knife

was moving toward her face and the muscles in her arms burned from the inside out.

Leonard looked deep into her eyes and smiled a cruel sadistic smile. He knew that he had her. She was weak and frail and didn't have the stamina to keep this up any longer.

Leonard held firm to her arms, exerting his power over her and letting her savor the thought of her own death. Letting her think about it – just for a brief moment – before he ripped her throat open with the blade.

Carol Ann closed her eyes tightly, screamed as loud as she could and focused every ounce of her energy into her arms. Every muscle fiber tightened and surged in harmony. Every last drop of her anger was directed toward that little bastard.

Leonard's eyes widened as the knife swung forward, only inches, and tore a deep gash in his throat. There was a terrible look of disbelief plastered across Leonard's face as he continued to hold onto her wrists and fight with her. Gurgling and spitting, then finally, Leonard's eyes rolled back into his head and the two of them lay still together on the floor.

Jack entered the room, through the balcony, only seconds later, as the dresser that was blocking the door creaked and popped and slid forward several feet.

On the bed, Betsy was trying in vain to free herself from the ropes. On the floor beside her, lay Leonard's body . . . his throat cut deeply and blood still pumping in short spurts from the carotid artery. And kneeling over the body panting, with the lock blade knife still dripping with blood, was Carol Ann.

Detective Blakely froze, gun outstretched in front of him, and quickly sized up what

had happened. He moved cautiously in short steps toward Leonard, gun pointing straight at his head.

Without thinking, Jack went immediately over to Betsy and began to untie her.

“Oh, Jack,” was all she could get out before Betsy leaned her head in to Jack’s chest.

Jack hugged her as hard as he could.

Blakely poked Leonard in the ribs several times with the tip of his shoe to make sure he wasn’t going to move. He didn’t.

Randy took the knife gently from Carol Ann and then helped her out of the room and down the stairs.

Leonard stopped bleeding – finally.

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It had been almost a week since that terrible night at Jack’s house. For Jack, the nightmares were finally over. He was at peace with himself once again. He’d faced the devil and been able come back – if not completely unscathed – at least completely intact. He was whole again and he felt exonerated.

And Todd was alright. He was recovering nicely from a concussion and the seventeen stitches he’d gotten in the top of his head. Todd had been found wandering aimlessly behind the house, groggy and dripping with blood, but alive. He made all the typical Todd remarks like “if he’d had the guts to come straight at me” and “I’ve had worse”. In the end, Todd remained unshakably – Todd.

Duke had been thrown into a tree and had suffered a couple of cracked ribs and had a

few stitches of his own. The vet said that he would be fine, but Jack would have to restrict his activity for a few weeks. The doctor's orders seemed to be fine with Duke. He had yet to get too far from either the fireplace or the food bowl.

Betsy hadn't been harmed by Leonard. She'd faced him. Stared straight into the darkness of his soul and somehow cheated him out of his prize. She felt incredibly lucky and hopelessly unlucky. She knew that her healing process would take time. Knew that Leonard would continue to invade her dreams until she could learn to let go. Letting go of this nightmare was going to be hard for Betsy.

She had made the decision to move in with Jack at the cabin – just for a while. They needed each other more than ever right now and the healing would be easier this way. Jack told them at work not to look for him for at least a month. He spent his days, with Betsy, walking in the woods and fishing out on the lake. Enjoying the crisp piney air and the sun and the water.

Today, they had walked down to the water's edge and along the rocky shore. Jack skipped a couple of flat rocks across the silky smooth surface of the dark blue-green water. They talked about politics and the weather and what they were going to have for supper. They enjoyed each other's company and soaked up the sun's rays like it was an invigorating tonic.

As Jack continued to follow the shore line, Betsy started up the hill, back toward the cabin.

"Jack," Betsy called, only half turning around, "are you coming?"

“You go on, Bets . . . I’ll be up in just a minute.” Jack flung a stick into the water and watched it sink slowly.

Betsy knew that Jack’s ‘just a minute’ could mean an hour. He was like a damn little kid when it came to that lake.

“Well, I’m cold and I’m going in.” Betsy looked over her shoulder as she started up the winding trail through the woods.

Jack stood solemnly down by the lake, staring at a neighbor’s dog in the distance. Studying the big black mutt as he gingerly sniffed the rocks along the waterline. It seemed like he’d seen that dog around a lot lately. Jack stood there, motionless as the dog waddled up to him, wagging his tail wildly and then it looked up at him.

“Are you the little fucker that’s been shitting in my yard?”

The dog seemed to smile. Jack knelt down in front of the scraggly looking mutt. He remembered stepping in a big old pile of shit this morning. Right on his sidewalk. He also remembered how long it had taken him to train Duke not to shit in the yard. It was only common sense. You’ve got a hundred other acres out there for shitting.

The dog continued wagging its tale and then he put his head down and sniffed at Jack’s jeans. Jack had no patience for people that couldn’t control their own animals. Call it a pet peeve or whatever. He just couldn’t stand the thought of this little bastard running around undisciplined. It really pissed him off. After all, it didn’t take that much effort to train an animal properly. Just a little patience and a lot of follow through. And you didn’t have to train them to catch Frisbees or jump through hula-hoops – just the important

things. Like not shitting on somebody else's property.

Jack pulled the .357 from his shoulder holster. He always carried it when he was out in the woods. There was no telling what you might run across out there - snakes, bobcats, even the occasional grizzly. Besides, he had a little range set up down by the water where he'd pop off at beer cans and whatever else he could scrounge up.

Jack stood and emptied all the shells into the palm of his hand. The dog looked back up and sniffed at him. Looking down at the dog, he loaded one round into the pistol and shoved the rest into his coat pocket. Jack spun the chamber and then snapped it shut.

Jack held the gun up to the trusting animal's head. The dog stopped sniffing and stared at him with those droopy, black eyes.

"You filthy shitter."

Jack squeezed the trigger.

"Click," went the firing pin as it hit nothing but dead air.

Jack opened the pistol, gave it another spin and again, snapped it shut.

Up the hill, Betsy had stopped to catch her breath. She turned to look down the trail and could just barely see Jack through the trees. It almost looked like he was on his knees but she couldn't make it out any clearer than that. Just a colored blob through the trees. And for some reason that Betsy couldn't explain, it just creeped her out. Jack wasn't moving. Just kneeling there by the water like a statue.

She wished she could see him better, so she moved forward a couple of steps and leaned around a tulip poplar to try and get a clearer view through the trees.

It wasn't a new feeling, but since the Leonard incident, she'd been filled with a strange sense of dread. Kind of apprehensive about everything. And now, it was growing into something stronger – like impending doom. An awful cloudy feeling that engulfed her to the point of suffocation.

“Jack?” She said quietly at first then repeated it loud enough to project down the hill.  
“Jack, are you coming?”

BANG!

The gunshot had come from the spot where Jack had been kneeling and a swirl of smoke was now circling over his head. Betsy jumped out of her skin and began running frantically down the hill. Gun shots down at the lake weren't anything new. Jack target shot down there a lot. But this one scared Betsy and she didn't know why.

She jumped and ran and almost lost her balance as she jetted down the trail and into the clearing at the bottom. There, she stopped, leaned forward and put her hands on her knees to stabilize herself and catch her breath. She could see Jack several yards in front of her, facing the water.

“Jack,” she tried to speak between gasps, “JACK ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

Jack seemed peaceful as he looked out at the lake. In front of him the water swelled in large circular patterns of concentric rings out from the shore. Betsy stood motionless behind him, panting.

Jack turned to face Betsy with a smile.

“Snake,” was all he said.

THE END