

Chapter One

ALONE

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Rick hadn't noticed how big the desk was when he'd first entered the room. Towering in front of him like an evil mass of stone, the desk occupied an uncomfortable amount of space in the room that seemed to displace air that was needed for breathing. The room itself, because of its sheer size should've had a spacious feel. It was dimly lit and filled with elongated shadows. Through the haze from the lone desk lamp, everything looked gray and was covered in shades of pitch black. Rick sat in front of the desk in an uncomfortable wooden chair, while the shadow clad man behind the desk creaked gingerly in a monstrous black leather one.

During the awkward silence that blanketed the room, Rick Morgan, a thirty-five year old software engineer, thought about his wife and three boys. The boys that were actually his wife Tera's from her first marriage, but Rick couldn't have loved them harder if his own life had depended on it. His family grounded him and gave him strength and his devotion to Tera and the boys was unshakable.

But now, in the glare of the desk lamp, Rick was having trouble remembering how he'd even gotten there in the first place. Oh, he remembered the officers and their polite request.

"We'd like to invite you down to The Board to ask you a few questions, sir."

And he remembered the look on Tera and the boys' faces when he reassured them that it was all a mistake—an awful, dreadful mistake that would be cleared up in no time. He'd kissed Tera gently on the cheek and smiled, in turn, at each of the boys as the two men urged him out the door with a firm but decisive grip on the back of his arms.

Now, in this room with the desk and the light and the shadows, it was not feeling like a mistake. This was feeling like anything but a mistake. Rick had been questioned by four different people in the last twenty-four hours. He'd made statement after statement and spent most of that time alone in an empty interrogation room. Now, he'd been in this office for, what seemed like an eternity, without the man uttering more than a few words.

The husky built, sandy haired man just kept looking through the single file folder that was open on the center of his desk. Occasionally he'd make an 'Umm' sound while flipping between pages. The shadows from the lamp chiseled and deepened the man's already rough looking features. The aberrant lighting made it hard for Rick to guess the guy's age, but he figured he must've been in his mid forties. The cold outline of his face was blocky and stern and it gave Rick the willies. In fact, Rick figured that it was probably part of the guy's job description to make people feel uncomfortable.

"This was a professional interrogator it was his job is to make people nervous and keep them off balance," Rick thought as he shifted uncomfortably in the wooden chair and continued to study the man's face. And as far as Rick was concerned, he was doing a pretty good job of it right now. Rick cleared his throat and tried desperately to get comfortable in the wooden chair, but it felt like it was made out of the same hardened

material as the surface of the massive desk.

The man looked up at Rick and then smiled, ever so slightly. Then he slowly and deliberately poured himself a glass of water from a pitcher that had been hiding just out of sight in the darkness. He raised the glass in front of his face, admiring the way the condensation shimmered in the harsh glare from the lamp and then quickly drank its entire contents in one fluid motion. Returning the glass to the surface of the desk with an overly animated gesture, the man locked eyes with Rick until he forced him to look away in discomfort.

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

Rick didn’t understand the interrogator’s statement, but the pompous air of the announcement made him nervous. “Ready for what?” Rick thought.

The interrogator tapped his index finger rhythmically on the surface of the desk and studied Rick’s face carefully. All of sudden the office seemed much smaller. Rick took a deep breath and tried to talk but his voice cracked and nothing audible came out.

The interrogator poured another glass of water from the pitcher and then slowly took a sip as he continued to study Rick’s face. Still holding the glass in his hand, the interrogator leaned back in the big leather chair, making it creak and pop like a Chinese New Year. Then he swirled the glass of water in front of him. It was obvious that he was trying to bring attention to it. And even though Rick could see exactly what the man was trying to do, he couldn’t help but fixate his gaze on the sparkling glass and think about

just how dry his throat really was. He found himself thinking about how his tongue was trying to stick to the roof of his mouth and how he didn't seem to have enough saliva to swallow.

"Even before we complete our investigation, it's obvious to me that your story's not going hold up." The interrogator leaned forward and picked up the file folder, then opened it sharply. "Your whole statement revolves around the claim," the interrogator looked up at Rick then returned his attention to the open folder, "that you had no idea about who your employers actually were or what their motives where."

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

"Yes, yes, Mr. Morgan," the interrogator cut in abruptly, "I've heard this version of your story and, if you'll pardon my candor, It's just a little hard for me to swallow." The interrogator snapped the folder shut and stood, leaning forward with his open hands flat on the top of the desk.

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

Rick felt his life unraveling before him. Felt like a ball of precious yarn at the mercy of a playfully sadistic cat. He was sure that the office was much smaller now than when he'd entered. The air was heavier too—musty and warm. He could feel the sweat uncontrollably seeping from his pores. The sandy haired interrogator seemed bigger. The

desk seemed bigger. And now Rick was feeling nauseous.

If he failed to get a grip on this thing, there would be no second chance. Second chances and The Board of Policy were not generally used in the same sentence. No, this was it.

“Get a hold of yourself, Rick,” he thought hard to himself.

“Are you feeling okay Mr. Morgan?” the interrogator continued. “You look...pale. Is there anything I can get for you?” he said, sounding more like a maitre d’ at an expensive restaurant than an officer of The Board Of Policy.

Rick thought about the boys and for the first time, what it would be like not to ever see them again. How empty his existence would be without his family. How complete he was when he was with them and how utterly frightening the thought of losing them was.

Without knowing the exact details, Rick did know that he was mixed up in something he shouldn’t have been. The problem was that his statement was actually true. He didn’t know who or why or what. But now Rick hated himself for not asking any of the questions that had been nagging him all along. Nagging questions about what he’d been asked to do and why.

But Rick’s occupation was dealing with security. Software and systems security. And in that business, he was constantly dealing with people that were suspicious and careful and...well, secretive. To that end, there were always things that he wasn’t told. He was almost always working on a need to know basis. So this particular job hadn’t really seemed that out of the ordinary. And with the money as good as it had been, Rick had

probably chose to remain ignorant. Had chose not to ask too many questions—but at what cost?

Rick literally could not imagine life without Tera and the boys. The thought was too overwhelmingly horrifying to comprehend so he would tell this man anything and everything he could to get out of this place and back to his family. Anything.

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“Mr. Morgan,” the interrogator broke in on Rick’s daydream. “This is your last chance. Is this your final statement...or is there something else you’d like to tell me?”

Rick sat in the chair, not exactly sure where he had just drifted back from but he wished that he could go back. He rubbed his sweaty palms together and looked down at his hands as he spoke quietly, “I’m telling you the truth. I’ve been telling the truth all along—I don’t know who they are. I mean, it’s common practice in my business to have someone act as an intermediary between you and your client. Companies with security problems usually want them identified and fixed as quietly and anonymously as possible. I’m telling you I don’t know who hired me. I never knew.”

The man stood behind the desk for a moment, quietly contemplating Rick’s demeanor delivery. It was funny, but over the years the interrogator had perfected his craft to the point where he could generally tell if someone was lying. As odd as it sounded though, he couldn’t always tell when they were telling the truth. Rick did have a certain conviction and passion in his answer. The interrogator was keenly aware that this kind of passion

could be faked. He knew that there were those individuals that were expert at the art of performance and at the portrayal of insincere emotion. But his job was not to guess or wonder about the truth. His job was to be sure.

“I suppose,” the man across the desk continued, “that you could use a little more time to gather your thoughts.”

The interrogator pressed the front of his desk telephone and leaned slightly into it as he spoke, “Michaels.”

Within a fraction of a second, a large man entered the room. With a single nod from the interrogator, Rick was *helped* from his seat. To Rick it felt more like being lifted.

On leaving the interrogator’s office, the tall husky man was joined by another, roughly the same size and Rick was escorted down a dark hallway by the two assistants. They were called assistants but to Rick, they looked like thugs. A pumped up version of Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum with dark suites and ID badges.

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

Although surrealistic and unnerving, Rick found himself admiring the ornate brickwork in a succession of arched passageways. Down and down. In the distance, there was the sound of running water. There were other sounds too—faint, indiscernible

sounds. From far away, it sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard. Some kind of screeching sound. Rick felt the skin between his shoulder blades start to crawl. Hallway, stairwell, tunnel. Down to what truly felt like the end of the earth.

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

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

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

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

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

darkness—silence.

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

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

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

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

Because the texture was rough and uneven, Rick figured that it was stone, not man made brick. He thought about the homes in his neighborhood that were sheathed in stone.

Again refocusing his energy, Rick began moving slowly around the wall. He felt as far

as he could, first up the wall and then down to the floor.

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

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

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

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

As his fingers traced across its surface, Rick found that the mattress had several small

tears where chunks of stuffing were hanging out. There were also areas where it felt like it had no padding at all, just the rusted metal grid work from the frame beneath. The mattress was neither wet nor dry, but clammy feeling and it smelled of decaying newspapers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Barry looked up at his mother with big round pitiful watery eyes that seemed much too

big for his face. He was smaller than most children his age, almost to the point of being frail. He was easily overpowered by his towering mother and virtually defenseless against her monstrous wrath.

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

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

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

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

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

His mother was frying something on the stove and mumbling unintelligibly to herself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had learned from painful experience not to test his mother. He had run away, once, but his mother found him at a neighbor's house within minutes. He hadn't realized that the neighbors had called his mother – thinking she'd be worried about him. They kept

him busy, playing games and eating ice cream while they waited for Barry's mother to come and fetch him.

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

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

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

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

these bright red fantasies, was nearly always his dear sweet mother.

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

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

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

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

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

Barry always stayed in his room. At least for as long as he could. Sometimes, he'd

hear things being thrown and turned over. He always hoped it would end differently. Prayed for some kind of reprieve. Maybe she'd forget he was there. Maybe she'd slip and crack her skull. Maybe.

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

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

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

"Pain is not the enemy."

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

"Pain will keep me focused."

Cut off from everything.

"Pain is my companion."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rick woke with a gasp and sat up on the bunk. He wedged himself into a corner and rubbed his ribs through his sweat soaked shirt. He was shivering uncontrollably and

panting like an old hound. The relief he felt, having escaped the nightmare, was almost instantly replaced by the panic of realizing where he actually was.

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

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

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

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

He fantasized about his family coming to his rescue. Jared would formulate a plan. He was like his father and would take things into his own hands. Although Rick had never legally adopted the children, he could not have felt more like their real father. And the boys apparently felt the same way; calling him *dad* whenever their real father wasn't

around – which was most of the time.

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

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

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

Rick remembered his first date with Tera. When he picked her up at her house she looked so beautiful. As they pulled out of the driveway three little hands waved from the picture window and Rick knew that he was in love. They hadn't been dating long when

Rick realized that what Tera had was what he wanted, a family. He proposed to Tera on David's second birthday and she accepted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Something's squeaking," Rick whispered to himself. There was a pitter-patter sound

from around the lower door hatch and then a squeak. Rats. There were rats in the cell with him.

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

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

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

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

The foot steps grew louder and finally stopped outside of his door. Rick held his breath and listened. The hatch at the bottom of the door opened and he could see the tip of one brightly polished boot. There was a rustling sound and the sound of keys, then the

clank of something metal being set down and slid across the ground. He saw a metal tray with clumps of brown, a chunk of bread and a white carton coming through the lower hatch.

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

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

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

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

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

He pressed his back up against the stone wall and hugged his knees as he sat on the

molding mattress. Rick dug his feet into the bed in a vain attempt to push himself into the stone wall, farther away from the rats. The tears fell as Rick tapped his head repeatedly against the wall behind him.

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

Chapter Two

LEARNING

- 1 -

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

nearly everyone that worked for her respected her. Nearly.

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

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

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

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

When The Board of Policy was in its infancy stages, it was Antonio Yenkin that was assigned the task of organizing the infra structure for Technology. Antonio was responsible for creating the division known as The Board of Technology and appointing its first department heads.

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

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

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

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

This morning, she was meeting with The Directors of The Board of Policy in order to bring them up to date on Halcyon's progress. As she looked around the large conference

room, she wondered why she had never taken any interest in the workings of The Board of Policy.

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

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

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

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

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

The size of the room, along with its exacting detail, overwhelmed Sheri. She was in

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

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

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

The Directors finished their greetings and polite chit chat and all sat down in silence. One of the older men called the meeting to order and immediately announced Sheri as the

Halcyon Project leader and explained solemnly that she would be giving a brief update on its progress.

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

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

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

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

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

"Dr. Rand," he said softly, "you haven't said anything, specifically, about the

possibility of meeting the original deadline. We, quite frankly, have been concerned about the recent series of delays.” The gentleman in back spoke with insincere politeness, his face obscured in the dim reddish glow.

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

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

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

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

make out the man's reaction through the shadows. "I am now personally reviewing all data sheets, weekly, to ensure that we have no such deviations in the future." Sheri was completely at ease with her answer and it showed in her flawless delivery.

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

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

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

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

- 2 -

Barry graduated from Art School when he was eighteen. His face had lost the innocence of that frail child with the oversized eyes. His pale skin, in deep contrast to the dark brownness of those eyes. Barry still looked boyish, but for reasons that belonged only to him, his eyes had grown darker. Deeper, at times, like burnt charcoal. And at other times, as inviting as melted chocolate. Barry was not tall, a little under six feet and he had always been easily intimidated because of his size. But, Art School made him feel less threatened...more like he belonged.

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

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

Barry had seen stories on TV about The Movement and how they liked blowing things

up. That intrigued him and he did pursue an association with the group. But they wanted to know everything about you including whether you preferred boxers or briefs. Too many questions for Barry's taste.

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

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

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

Although Barry had never been an official suspect in the murder, Sgt. Peterson (a fifteen-year veteran of Civil Enforcement), seemed to know, or maybe sense, what had happened. He just couldn't prove it. Sgt. Peterson had spent ten years as a street cop

before his promotion to detective. He had good instincts about people and could generally sense things that other officers couldn't. He liked being a detective and had an insatiable sense of pride in his work.

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

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

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

Peterson worked the case long after it had been officially closed. He did so in his spare time. On nights and weekends. Sometimes, he'd sit for hours staring at the grotesque pictures of the mother's severed body parts. The medical experts had determined that some of the amputations were caused by human teeth. He stared at the torn flesh. He'd

try to envision what kind of person was capable of this. In the end, the answer was always the same: nobody. And everybody. Given the right set of circumstances, anyone could have that thin film of civilization peeled away, leaving the dark primal instincts that inhabit our DNA.

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

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

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

provoked.

This seemed to excite the cadet and he hit Anthony square in the face, taking him to the ground. Fuel. Barry snapped. In a blind rage he went for the cadet. For those observing, it appeared as though Barry had a deep abiding loyalty toward his friend and would protect him at any cost. This, however, was far from the truth. The situation was only a catalyst for Barry's pent up anger. Simply, it was an excuse to dip into his well of hatred and ladle it out to all who crossed him.

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

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

There were other minor scrapes, mostly in dimly light bars late at night. But the feeling of total ecstasy Barry had felt as he stood over the soldier boy, sawing off his ear, stayed with him from that point on. He enjoyed hurting people. He enjoyed being able to issue pain the way it had been issued to him for so many years. Pain was not only his

teacher, but his salvation. Like the adrenaline junkies jumping out of planes, he awaited his next violent encounter with sweet anticipation. This was the one thing in life that brought him any pleasure and he knew that he needed more of it.

- 3 -

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By all accounts it was a bio-magnetic *happy* pill.

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

“Thank you. My name is Franklin Tosh and I’ve been with The Board of Technology for the past six years. I was transferred to the Halcyon project a year after its inception and put in charge of the *Human Interface* design team. The Halcyon device had been demonstrated, in the laboratory, to control human emotional responses quite nicely. The main drawback was the receiving device itself. You had to wear it,” Franklin Tosh paused and the room held it’s breath in collective unison.

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

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

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

Tosh took a deep breath, exhaled abruptly then turned and stepped uncomfortably from the podium. His brief presentation was designed more to keep everyone slightly off

balance than to educate. Although she was giving the presentation to respected officials at The Board, she had been asked by her superiors to keep the presentation less technical and concentrate more on an overview.

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

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

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

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

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

“We’re not using a single satellite.”

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

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

The room erupted in explosive conversation with heads bouncing back and forth as questions shot between the occupants. Everyone in the room was familiar with the twenty-six satellites known as Global Inter-Link. This was an ambitious pilot project of The Board of Technology to monopolize all aspects of public communication. The Inter-

Link system was responsible for all private and commercial communication including telephone, facsimile, computer and video. The Inter-Link was literally the communications hub of the world and it was controlled by The Board of Policy.

As a barrage of questions filled the room, a Board official abruptly stood and thanked everyone for coming, adjourned the meeting and escorted Sheri to the door.

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

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

- 4 -

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

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

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

Barry was in his last year of high school and was basically a full-grown man. He

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

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

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

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

When Barry got home and his mother tried to make good on her threat of physical

violence, Barry could literally take no more. She raised the stick to swat him and he caught it in mid air, holding it firm. His jaws clenched and his eyes narrowed.

“Never again,” he said. His voice overly calm.

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

“You will never strike me again, mother,” Barry said, his heart pounding solidly, still holding his mother’s stick in his hand. The fire in her eyes lit up her face like the glow of a camp fire. She was too furious to see that this was no longer the helpless, scared little boy she had successfully controlled for so many years. Too incensed to realize that she was now taunting a grown man. Too blind to read the message in her son’s eyes. Barry intended to make it clear that things had changed.

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

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

For a moment, she lay dazed, heels in the air. Confused and disoriented, blood gushing

from her broken nose, she slowly rose and walked toward her son.

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

Barry hit her again. All of his energy concentrated in one blow. Eighteen years of anger packed neatly into one explosive punch. His mother left the ground and landed in a pile of splintered wood and glass. This time she did not get up. He had knocked her unconscious and by the time she woke up, Barry had stripped her naked, duct taped a sock in her mouth and secured her ankles and wrists to the rails of his bed. When she finally came around, the look in her eyes was that of utter disbelief and yet, complete understanding. This was what she had created. This was her handy work and now it was time to make amends.

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

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

Again he approached her with the pliers and again she screamed through the sock and fought violently against her restraints. “Pain is your friend, mother.” He ripped another piece of skin from under her armpit and dropped it into a bloody coffee cup. Barry took a

tissue from a box on the night stand and carefully wiped the tears from his mother's cheeks. He looked deep into her eyes and smiled as he brushed the side of her face gently with his thumb.

"It's okay," he spoke softly, "Barry's here for momma." Again, the gruesome pliers bit into her soft flesh. Again, her muffled screams of agony sang through Barry's head like Christmas music. Barry emptied the coffee cup into a large zip lock baggy and whistled as his mother's eyes followed each of his determined movements.

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

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

Chapter Three

REVELATIONS

- 1 -

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

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

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

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

He taught himself to program computers and make them do what he wanted them to do. Through books and magazines and lots of trial and error he developed his skill. His

parents used to worry about his eyes going bad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

he considered himself *above average*. In reality, he was one of the top programmers in the world when it came to electronic security.

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

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

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

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

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

Inter-Link.”

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

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

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

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

Tera and the boys amused themselves through this time, realizing that dad had been bit by the bug again. They had a pretty fair understanding of the way these things could

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

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

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

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

The extra money he earned from each broken code allowed him to do things for his family that he was not able to do before. In traditional fashion, he over compensated for the time he spent working. They flew to the places the boys dreamed of going. They

frequented the better restaurants in the area. They bought quite a few of the luxuries they had been doing without. The new twist on his freelance work—it not only challenged Rick, but it benefited the whole family.

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

- 2 -

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

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

Anthony was waiting in a cavernous corridor within the halls of Enforcement.

Enforcement was a creepy place and just being there made him uncomfortable. Waiting was awful. Everything was gray and cold. The halls were lined with hardwood benches, polished smooth from years of use. Dim, incandescent lights hung from the walls and an eerie glow encircled the heads of those who walked by. Footsteps echoed through out the halls as if amplified by a huge microphone hidden in the floor. Conversations mixed in a reverberating slush and the sounds made Anthony shudder. He felt his skin prickle and twisted nervously on the wooden bench.

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

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

Anthony had learned his trade straight out of Art School when he had gone to work for an investigator named Anderson. Actually, his first job for Anderson had been

surveillance for Enforcement. He had immediately felt a sense of power upon being intrusted with such a prestigious assignment. Anthony never questioned Mr. Anderson's motivations for giving him the assignment and viewed it as his *big chance*. In reality, his employer wanted nothing to do with Enforcement and welcomed the opportunity to give the case to his young assistant and reel in the financial rewards himself. He had worked for Anderson on and off for several months and had always kind of liked Anderson's bland, non-committal style.

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

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

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

and then slowly turned the knob.

“Well, hell, son,” a huge voice boomed before he had the door completely open. “How ya been, boy?” the man’s voice reeked with inflated sincerity. “What ya got for me today?”

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

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

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

“Go ahead, boy,” Lewis spoke as he grabbed a bottle and poured them both a glass of

Scotch. He slid the drink across the metal desk to Anthony. Lewis sat back in his gray leather chair and listened intently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lewis stared thoughtfully for a moment then relaxed, his intense expression, suddenly

replaced by a huge shit-eating grin.

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

- 3 -

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

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

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

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

Sheri hated to think of him this way, but Franklin was a textbook nerd. Thick glasses. Trousers too short. His hair was never combed and his clothes were always wrinkled.

Franklin was tall and lanky with mousy brown hair and pale blue eyes. He was one year younger than Sheri and, under different circumstances, Sheri might have considered him attractive. Sometimes, she'd see him sitting at his desk with his glasses off as he studied some spaghetti diagram. He'd run his hand through his hair, pulling it back off his forehead and that's when she could see it. The person behind the intellect. Something in his eyes. She wasn't really sure what it was but it was endearing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s so small,” she whispered as she finally realized what she was looking at.

“Small??” Franklin sounded genuinely hurt. “It’s five millimeters across and two millimeters thick,” he said sounding as proud as a father bragging about his newborn son’s birth weight. “It’s *sub-miniature!*”

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

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

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

Franklin smiled and slid his glasses up the bridge of his nose with his index finger. “Follow me,” he said and motioned to the far corner of the lab. The other side of the laboratory was dedicated to animal research and one wall was covered with cages. They

were filled with small white rats. Franklin reached for a cage containing over a dozen furry rodents, set it down on the counter top and turned to face Sheri.

“There are fifteen test subjects in this cage,” Franklin spoke in his standard clinical fashion. “The subjects have not eaten for forty eight hours and I have recently injected each subject with a small dose of methamphetamine.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Franklin’s eyes never left Sheri’s as he opened the top of the cage and dropped the piece of meat. The rats erupted into a pulsating ball of tails and fur. They scratched and

clawed and bit each other, fighting furiously for the tiny scrap of food.

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

Smiling, he reached into his lab coat and produced a small electronic device, pointed it across the room at the rack of flashing lights and mashed a big red button.

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

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

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

top of their heads.

Sheri's cloud of uneasiness was steadily growing. She couldn't put it into words, and didn't really understand what she was feeling, but something was amiss. Something was going very wrong and it was beginning to cloud Sheri's judgment.

- 4 -

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

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

The entire facility was the old Enforcement headquarters. At one time, this had been a fully functioning cafeteria serving a thousand meals a day. Now it was a shell. A poorly remodeled monument to the force that had created it. Enforcement was located in their

new granite and glass facility and though Technology was overjoyed to consolidate its efforts under one roof it was still Enforcement's hand-me-downs.

Before moving into this structure, The Board of Technology was scattered between dozens of buildings miles apart. Some of these, no more than portable metal buildings, wheeled into place and parked in empty lots on cinder blocks. A poorly constructed set of wooden stairs greeted them every morning as they made their way in to work. So for the employees at Technology these hand-me-downs were appreciated.

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

"Mourners gather by the thousands for the third anniversary of the worst terrorist strike in history," a reporter for The Board of Support said with a reverent yet professional tone. *"This was once an internationally renowned convention center brought to the ground by a single timed implosion device. On the eve of the tragedy, people are gathering at what is now known as SKIP Park. Erected as a memorial for those who lost their lives here, it was given a name that would remain as a constant reminder of this terrible tragedy. The theme: Stop Killing Innocent People was voted and ratified by The*

Board of Support only hours after the terrorist strike. Here, where the center once stood, families will gather to remember their lost loved ones and to remind the Nation that subversive actions benefit no one. All though we are reminded of this atrocity here today, it is significant that no bombings have occurred within the last seven months. It is possible that Enforcement has finally grappled The Resistive Movement, and order will once again become common place. This is Debora Monroe, TBOP News.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Complete portability,” Franklin said again, reaffirming his original answer.

“Franklin,” Sheri said trying her best not to be upset with his lack of passion, “you’ve

done something that will ultimately affect millions of people.”

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re hopeless, Chip.” Sheri was speaking to herself this time. Some days, conversation on a human level was impossible with Franklin. His brain processed

information statistically not emotionally. “Let’s get to work then,” the calm resolve in her voice had returned, “I’ve got a report to file with The Directors by Friday.”

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

- 5 -

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

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

Through further explorations of his surroundings, Rick discovered that the lower hatch was not locked. It could be opened from the inside if you could get one side started with your finger nail. The latching mechanism for holding it open must have been on the outside of the door because as soon as he released the hatch, it fell shut again. Rick was trying to find a way to prop open the hatch when he found that the rats came out of hiding

when it was opened. They would move cautiously toward the light source, knowing that food was on its way. The rats appeared out of nowhere and every time he looked around the room, there were more of them. They wouldn't come right up to him, but they did position themselves for a speedy attack as soon as the tray finally hit the floor. When Rick let the hatch fall shut, he heard the rats scurry back to wherever they went when they were not stealing his food.

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

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

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

Then he found it. Where the drainpipe entered the floor, there was a chunk of stone

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

Rick sat on the damp floor staring at the opening. Although he couldn't see his hand in front of his nose, he had a perfect mental image of the pipe and the hole in the floor. He felt the drain pipe and let his fingers follow it back up to the underside of the sink.

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

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

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

“My food,” Rick whispered, spitting his words toward the pulsating stuffing as he positioned himself inside the fold of the mattress. “Mine!”

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

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

“Mine! Mine! Mine!” he yelled with each percussive blow to the mattress. “Mine!” A

couple of the rats squeezed out from the edges of the mattress.

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

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

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

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

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

- 6 -

Barry had stayed in touch with Anthony the last couple of years since they graduated from school, which was unusual. Barry never made a habit of keeping in contact with

anyone. They would go out occasionally and, more often than not, ended their evenings in some kind of trouble.

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

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

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

Barry spent his eight hours in a trance and returned home each night with a hollow

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

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

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

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

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

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

Once his opponent was down, instinct took over. He'd mumble loudly as he kicked in

the side of someone's head.

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

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

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

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

Barry had always respected the guys at Enforcement, but he had never imagined that he was what they were looking for. Anthony was earning his keep, yes indeed. He had seen, more than once, Barry's untapped talent and made the connection between the two all by himself. Oh yes, his friend was useful and maybe not so stupid as Barry believed.

Anthony was getting something out of this, Barry was certain of that, but he had a feeling that the opportunity Anthony created would benefit himself most in the long run. Barry began to smile and then to chuckle, as the suffocating cloud around his life evaporated like mist. He wasn't sure how he knew, but this was what he'd been looking for. This could fill that need. As his own satisfied laughter began to fill him, he felt as though he had found his special niche.

- 7 -

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

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

Within five minutes of talking to Barry, Lewis knew this man was destined for more than just freelance work. He knew Barry had a deliciously dark side and could sense his distaste for almost everything around him. Although Lewis had made the connection early with Barry, there remained a shadow across Barry's inner soul that he could not penetrate. This inability to read Barry completely, initially intrigued Lewis. The only reason he had spent fifteen minutes with him was to search the haunted chambers of his mind and discover the secrets hidden there. He enjoyed poking around inside a person's psyche the way a dog dug through a pile of fresh garbage. It was more than just finding out what made someone tick. It was finding out what made them hurt and feel. What caused them pain and what gave them pleasure. These were all useful pieces of information in the control of another human being.

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

"Never knew my dad," Barry remained cool and unattached.

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

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

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

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

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

Whether or not Anthony knew the truth was unimportant to Lewis. What was important was that Lewis had seen more than the truth in Barry’s eyes. Although he couldn’t find the words to express the feeling Barry gave him, he believed that Barry found pleasure in remembering whatever it was that he had really done.

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

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

“Report here Monday morning at 7:30,” he stuttered, leaving the room as though he had to relieve his bladder. In his entire career at Enforcement, no one had ever spooked him like this boy. There was no explanation for it, but there were things inside Barry that Lewis didn’t want to uncover. He only knew that whatever it was, it would be useful to

certain people. Anthony was right about Barry's calm being like fuel and now Lewis knew that he didn't want to see the fire.

Chapter Four

FEAR

- 1 -

Sheri sat in her office still thinking about Franklin's break through. She had never imagined that the size of the receiving device could be reduced so dramatically. She was having trouble concentrating on work. Her head was swimming. She was afraid that even she didn't understand what this really meant. How this would affect the project as a whole.

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

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

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

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

When Sheri had participated in early experiments with much larger receiving devices, she had been utterly filled with a sense of goodwill. She didn't know how else to describe

it. All the work related pressures she agonized over simply melted away. Time tables, deadlines, cost overruns. Gone. But not gone. She noticed that she had absolutely no apprehension about any of these things, but she still was aware of their importance. She was able to think more clearly than she had in years and that seemed to give her energy. Energy to think. Energy to act.

Her initial contact with the Halcyon signal left her feeling invigorated and refreshed. In fact, in retrospect, she thought the sensations bordered on erotic. Certainly, the experience was very pleasing and she wanted to repeat it as soon as she could.

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

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

problems. The repaired devices always worked flawlessly and the original results were, again, obtained with all test subjects.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What did medical want with the information? They were treatment, not research. For all Sheri knew one of the other subjects could be having to seek medical attention as a result of the testing. After she hung up, she decided to send a Memo with her information. In it, Sheri requested a contact name to discuss this inquiry further. Because of her position at Technology she received a prompt reply from someone at a company called TrioPlan. His company had requested complete physicals from some of the subjects as a follow up to their testing and Medical Affairs was coordinating the information retrieval. Apparently, this company was compiling the test information into some kind of report.

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

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

The more she thought about it, the more nagging the questions became. Regardless of her own convictions about her work, she would never again feel as confident about

Halcyon as she once had. At least not until certain questions received answers. Sheri decided that it was time to start getting them.

- 2 -

Rick had been escorted to a small white room about ten feet square. His eyes still had not adjusted to normal light and he was forced to keep his them closed to tiny slivers. He was placed in a chair in the center of the room that looked like something you'd find in a high-priced dentist's office. Glaring, white light showered down from the ceiling as if the sun itself was behind each textured, plastic panel. The white walls were bare and Rick had the dizzying feeling that he was inside a crystal ball fashioned from pure light. Objects and shapes were indistinguishable in the room.

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

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

difficulty focusing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was true. And now, strapped in this chair, it seemed odd even to Rick. Kirk Anderson had approached him originally about doing the work and he was the only person Rick had ever met. He had never had any contact, other than phone conversations and e-mail, with anyone at TransWorld. “Oh God, what have I done?” Rick thought to himself knowing he had tied his own noose.

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

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

Rick had never felt so utterly trapped in all his life. At this moment, he wished, more

than anything, that he could just die. Fade away quietly and leave his body. The body that was secured in this hideous nightmare.

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

He wanted to go back and do it all over. He wished he had never broken those codes. More than anything, he wished he had another name to give. Any name. He wished he would have asked more questions before getting involved in the first place.

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

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

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

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

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

- 3 -

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

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

see inside.

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

TrioPlan was a small research facility that specialized in experiments with animals—mainly primates. Their specialty was gathering information geared toward human-like responses. They could gather large amounts of data on anything from chemical agents to drugs; from implants to electromagnetic stimuli.

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

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

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

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

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

eyebrow giving the signal to proceed.

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

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

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

The man surveyed the group and thought for a moment, then spoke to everyone. Although he was not completely aware of what The Board was looking for, he had been involved in research for The Board before. He did have a pretty good feel for what was of *interest* to them.

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

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

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

to understand about what happened here tonight.”

- 4 -

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

Sheri frequently worked late anyway and her security clearance gave her easy access to most of the offices in her wing. The building was dark and only a few guards and dedicated employees remained.

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

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

Not long ago, Sheri had conceived a plan of channeling money from the Halcyon funding account, into a secret account elsewhere. It wasn't for personal gain. Sheri had

never been motivated by greed, she simply had to have answers and getting those kinds of answers required resources. The idea was to route the funds through a phoney company she called TransWorld Telecommunications. Then generate all the supporting hard copy documentation for the files.

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

But it wasn't stealing. This money was intended for the use of Halcyon and for its own good. And that's exactly what this was for; Halcyon's own good.

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

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

wildly as she logged back in and completed the transaction. Then she printed the supporting paperwork and quickly exited out of the Financial Menu.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rick again opened his eyes and began to survey his situation. The pounding in his left temple was keeping him from thinking, or seeing, clearly. Everything seemed so bright, Rick felt as though his eyes had still not fully adjusted from the pitch blackness of the rat cell. As he squinted and blinked in a desperate attempt to grasp where he was, things started slowly coming into focus.

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

He tried hard to focus on his surroundings, but now realized that he could only see out of one eye. The left side of his head was covered with a tightly wound mass of gauze

from his cheek bone to the top of his head. The corner of his mouth was swollen and felt like it had been stitched. An IV in his right forearm was administering a clear liquid. His lips felt swollen and greasy and smelled of antiseptic.

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

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

Without warning the memory of a sharp pain hit him with such force that it made his head spin. Rick instinctively pulled forward and tensed every muscle. It was so vivid, Rick thought the pain was real. He screamed. He screamed again and tried harder to pull himself up. At first, he thought he was paralyzed. He could move his head up from the pillow but his arms and legs felt like they were tied down with heavy weights. Then he realized, in horror, that he was bound to the hospital bed with the same kind of straps as in the dentist's chair. Rick panicked.

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

His eyes were still wide open as the image of the hook filled his mind. It was bigger and shinier this time. As it slowly entered his left temple, it tore a gash into the side of his

head. The interrogator sadistically working the needle back and forth as blood poured out from under the loose flap of skin. Rick screamed until no more sound would come out and fought until he couldn't breathe anymore. The interrogator yanked the gash open and peered into the bleeding hole like a predator examining its prey. Bright light...stars...everything a blur...and then it all went gray.

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

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

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

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

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

The man standing over him was smiling pleasantly and couldn't have been over

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

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

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

Rick saw a vivid image of rats pouring out of a drain hole and covering the entire tray. He closed his eyes and tried *not* to think.