

- 1 -

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

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

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

"Where the hell am I?"

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

He knew that his name was Jack. Jack . . . Jack Johnson, but that seemed to be all that he could remember. A first name and a last name that seemed so foreign and

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

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

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

But it was there. Deep inside of his stomach, there was a tiny, glowing ember of dread. A smoldering piece of caged fear that burned deep within the clutches of the emptiness. Cut off from all other reality and emanating its evil heat out through the darkness, this ominous dread, all of sudden, felt as though it was closing in all around him. As if there were something evil hanging in the air and lurking just around the corner or right behind him. As if a horrible something was getting ready to happen . . . or already had happened.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jack dropped his head into his palms again as a wave of sadness swept across him like a cold dark shadow. But then the smoldering ember began to burn. Slowly at first, and then faster as the flames began licking at the inside of his rib cage. This dark feeling that

was both, inside of him and all around him, was growing. Jack's breathing became more labored and his heart began to pound in his chest.

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

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

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

"Oh God," Jack mumbled.

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

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

Jack looked up and surveyed the room. He was still having trouble focusing, but as far as he could tell, it was a motel room. There was a lingering scent in the air like fresh paint. And the smell of overly bleached linens. The walls were a pale shade of green that felt cool and reminded him of the deep lake water in the spring.

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

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

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

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

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

'Look behind you.'

"Dreams just have an unreal feel to them."

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

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

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

‘Look behind you, Jack.’

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

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

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

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

Beneath his feet, Jack could now see the matted mauve colored shag carpet. He could now smell the lingering scent of perfume and the sour smell of sweat. For some reason which Jack was ill equipped to explain, the combination of the two smells brought an

almost imperceptible smile to the corner of Jack's mouth. And there was something else, even more disturbing than that; the smell aroused him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But yet, it almost seemed that if he had wanted to . . . he could remember. All he had to do was to reach down deep enough. If he could do that, then he could find all the

answers he wanted. But Jack wasn't ready to do that. Jack couldn't do that. He was too afraid to walk down that road just yet. He just wanted to forget whatever it was that he couldn't remember. To forget everything and not be here anymore.

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

'Look behind you.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the wall behind the sink, a half visible handprint was smeared through heavy condensation on the mirror. It was fluid and graceful and echoed of some lost memory. Steam hung in the air, drifting gently from the open bathroom door.

And there was smoke. Circling in the air next to Jack’s head. He snapped back and

forth, searching for the source of the flame. It was a cigarette on the end table, right behind the clock in a glass ashtray. Right next to him all along! It had almost two inches of ash hanging neatly off the end and it was burned almost down to the filter.

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

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

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

‘Why? Why so afraid, Jack? Turn around and have a look.’

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

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

“Mine?”

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

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

panties.

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

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

“Hers.”

The thought crept out without the tiniest bit of doubt.

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

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

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

Jack leaned forward and put his head on his knees. He hugged his thighs and rocked back and forth. The bed creaked gently underneath him as if playing an introduction to the realizations that were beginning to hit him. Now Jack wished he could forget what he

had previously tried so hard to remember. He wished he would never remember anything ever again.

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

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

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

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

A strip of cold flesh shot from his lower back to the base of his skull. Jack tried to stop but he could not. His eyes continued on their own, following the river of blood up the side of the bed. The sheet next to him was still wet and dripping large crimson drops onto the carpet. It was soaked. Jack felt something stir in his groin.

‘Jack. Turn around and look.’

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

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

“Noooo!”

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

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

Jack forced himself to look down at the picture then uncontrollably, his eyes returned to the bloody mess on the bed. The woman’s lifeless eyes caught him and turned him inside out. This time, he couldn’t stop the convulsions in the pit of his stomach and Jack leaned forward, throwing up the entire contents of his stomach. It shot from behind his cupped hand and splattered across the wall and the end table. Emotion and confusion

overwhelmed him.

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

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

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

"Satisfying?"

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

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

Jack turned his back to the bed and leaned forward. Placing both hands on his knees, he kept his eyes closed and took several deep breaths. There was not enough air in the room to completely fill his lungs. He was panting, but not from sickness or revulsion. He had become exhilarated to the point of weakness. And he liked this feeling. To Jack's

horror, he was smiling. And worse than that, he had a rock hard erection.

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

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

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

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

More than a day's worth of stubble graced his chin and it was peppered with gray. His thick brown hair was cut short giving him a well groomed air despite his unshaven state.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

more real.

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

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

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

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

As the events of the evening replayed in his head his emotions were conflicting but at the time he was killing this girl, Jack had been filled with a deep sense of contentment.

A wave a nausea and disgust swept over him, sending his mind into that dizzy, unreal

realm again. The room became fluid. It was squishy and ran as if he were looking at it through syrup. Suddenly, he was covered in cold, sour sweat and his lungs seemed to be shrinking and ceasing up. Jack leaned over the sink and heaved uncontrollably.

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

And then he was in the shower.

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

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

Jack was still a little afraid, but there was an odd parity now. He couldn't comprehend it completely, yet it made perfect sense. He felt no remorse. At least for the moment, the

horror of what he had done was masked. He understood it's magnitude and yet, he was unmoved by it. As if his emotions were controlled by something. Jack smiled a wry little smile and moved his head around under the stream of hot water and masturbated. The shower made him feel better and before getting out, Jack masturbated again.

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

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

'let me help you'

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

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

fingers. Jack rubbed his pelvis against the edge of the counter as he moved the lipstick up and down . . . in and out. Totally transfixed by its beauty. By its simplicity of form and its remarkable ability to catch and reflect light.

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m so sorry.”

He grabbed his ski jacket from the arm-chair as he walked toward the door. Jack was running on 100% instinct now. He felt like he knew exactly what he was doing, and still he had no idea what he’d do next. Kind of like watching a movie and being in it all at the

same time. He reached for the doorknob and looked back at the room one more time.

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

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

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

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

Holding his hand up to block the sun's rays, he made his way through the parked cars toward the street. Faster, faster. There were too many people now. And too much light. Too bright. He couldn't find his way. He bumped into a young couple, holding hands.

"Hey . . . watch it buddy!"

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

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

Flash. The bright light blurred his sight.

"Please don't hurt me . . ."

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

Flash.

"Please . . . oh God, no . . ."

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

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

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

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

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