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Little Black Box

Cleveland wasn't always a beautiful place. The construction of several new buildings fell upon the lakeside city in more recent times, enhancing the barren skyline of mediocrity. A mixture of old and new gives forth to a unique character that is the heart of the old town. Old in origin, but renewed with the style and contrast of any other modern metropolis. At night, this is even more evident, as the lights from the tallest structures cast colorful hues of white, gold and blue in definitive patterns marking the thoughtfulness and creativity of their designers. From Lake Erie, the reflections off the placid water create a surrealistic effect reminiscent of an abstract watercolor painting with an unnatural spattering of light and shadows.

Just east of the heart of Cleveland lies a complex maze of buildings that constitute Lake Erie Medical Center—an unparalleled conglomeration of hospital buildings, research centers and educational facilities spanning several city blocks. Similar to the city in which it resides, the Center has a mixture of old and new structures with a magnificent monolith of architectural achievement placed directly in the center of it all.

Yet, for all of its grandness and diversity, up until recently the Center had one major Achilles' heel: a disparaging lack of emergency services. With the onset of industrial improvements, economic growth and increasing population, there

was an urgent need for improved emergency medical care. Thus came forth a newly fashioned emergency center—the final crowning achievement for this multifaceted medical complex.

In stark contrast to its beneficial functions, the exterior of the emergency building was somewhat unspectacular. Several brick laden pillars stood beneath each side of the structure as if they had been cut from a cardboard stencil and the windows were merely square cavities devoid of any style. The lack of lines and aesthetic adornments were painfully obvious and functionality over form must have been the architect's overall mindset whilst creating the final blueprints.

On this particular night, the sky was visibly torn by a jagged grayness that quickly engulfed the remains of the star-laden backdrop. A single raindrop toppled to the ground, signaling the advent of further bombardment and soon after others followed. One by one they left their marks upon the ground until the frequency of the drops saturated the entire area.

In the distance the alternating tones of an ambulance could be heard. Several silhouettes flashed by the windows of the emergency entrance. The tones grew louder as the vehicle approached and the pulsating crimson light became visible from the west. Reaching the entrance to the parking area, the ambulance driver disengaged the sirens. The rain was now coming down in sheets and sounded like a timpani pounding frantically upon the roof of the ambulance.

Two figures emerged from the emergency entrance covered with bright yellow raincoats. The doors from the ambulance swung open and a tall athletic man quickly stepped out. The two coated figures stood apart waiting to receive the dying patient as another paramedic emerged

from the ambulance cradling an intravenous packet in one hand while holding several layers of blood-saturated gauze on the patient's chest. The man on the gurney had sustained a gunshot wound. As the second paramedic stepped out of the ambulance, the gurney cleared the vehicle floor and a set of retractable wheels eased down and locked into place.

Rushing through the hallway, the paramedics and the two emergency staff conferred about the particulars of the injury. The first staff member, an aspiring young intern named Jerrod Brighton, was diligently monitoring the patient's heart rate. Brighton was a tall, lanky man with short curly blond hair and a boyish face.

"His vitals are borderline," Brighton remarked.

"We almost lost him on the way in," retorted one of the paramedics. "Had to defibrillate him twice."

The second staff member, a middle-aged nurse named Gayle Hardcourt, responded sarcastically. "Another drug deal gone wrong?"

The two paramedics eyed one another, slightly hastening their pace. In contrast, seeming to anticipate the inappropriate comment, Brighton continued to monitor the patient's vital signs.

With twenty-five years of unyielding service, Hardcourt had seen it all. Thus, the platform for a very cynical attitude had developed. It was even more blatantly apparent toward individuals with dark skin.

Physically, she was very lovely, but time had taken its toll on her hands and face. Her eyes were unusually gray, almond shaped and slightly sunken. Her lips were full, but with several wrinkles developing above her mouth. Tightly wrapped into a neat pile, her hair was unnaturally blonde with hints of darker roots. As for the rest of her body, it was

curvy and well maintained. Hence, she still possessed the ability to turn a head from time to time.

They reached the emergency room and made a hard right. The emergency medical team was already standing by. The room was approximately twenty-feet square with a large linen-dressed table standing in the center. A myriad of electronic devices and monitors encompassed the area and several shelves, laden with medical paraphernalia, lined the walls. It was a typical emergency room, with one exception. A man stood quietly in the far corner holding a small black device. His attention was focused not on the emergency at hand, but instead on the device. Yet, no one seemed to notice or even care about his presence.

The patient was wheeled next to the examination table and with the assistance of all was lifted from one platform to the other. With their work complete, Hardcourt abruptly directed the two paramedics out of the room. Brighton carefully removed the dressings on the patient's chest to reveal a gaping hole. Examining the wound he raised his eyes to the doctor.

"This doesn't look good Chris."

The doctor nodded and fired several orders at the nurses and assistants. The emergency crew responded, swarming around the table supplying the doctor with surgical instruments, dressings and verbal reports of the patient's vital signs.

"He's cyanotic. BP's dropping—88 over 53, pulse increasing to 150," uttered one of the nurses.

Over all this commotion, the man in the corner was still affixed to the small black device, tapping on it as if entering numbers into a calculator. A faint beep could be heard with each tap. Although he was dressed in the traditional medical

clothing and wore a mask, it was becoming obvious that he was not going to participate in the prevailing activities.

The condition of the patient began to deteriorate. The nurse reported the vitals signs again. “His BP’s still dropping—pulse at 165.” There was a discernible urgency in her voice this time.

“We’re losing him!” the doctor shouted. The periodic tones of the cardiograph began to increase and the doctor fired a rapid series of orders at each team member.

As the critical nature of the situation escalated, the man in the corner reacted with a rapid series of taps on the small black device. Its distinctive beeps now became one continuous tone. For the first time his presence was acknowledged as he momentarily paused to look up and found Hardcourt scornfully leering at him. He casually dismissed her disapproving stare and continued to focus on his own activities.

The cardiograph flat-lined. The emergency team scurried to prepare the victim for defibrillation. The doctor received a paddle in each hand and pressed them firmly upon the patient’s chest.

“Clear!” the doctor shouted and pressed the buttons on the paddles. The patient convulsed as his torso lifted off the table and then came back down with an audible thud. The cardiograph continued to emit a monotonous tone.

The man in the corner was now frantically tapping on the hand-held device. He was becoming visibly frustrated with it, but still made no verbal remarks. It was obvious that whatever he was attempting to do was reaching a critical point.

The defibrillator was fully charged again and the doctor yelled, “Clear!” for the second time. This time the patient convulsed a little more violently, but the monitor continued to

display a flat unaltered trace. The doctor instructed Hardcourt to administer a dose of epinephrine. Several minutes passed as the emergency team extended their attempt to resuscitate the victim. The man in the corner discontinued his activities and dropped his arms to his sides, gripping the small black device in his right hand. He sighed slightly as the emergency team continued to work desperately on the dying patient. Clearly, the man on the table was not going to survive, but the doctor was too tenacious to give up so easily.

With one last futile attempt the doctor yelled, "Clear!" The charge from the paddles surged through the patient's lifeless body and it convulsed in response, but the cardiograph continued to flat-line. A deadening silence filled the room. The only sound that could be heard was the incessant tone of the cardiograph.

The Doctor pulled down his mask and turned to a large analog clock hanging on the wall.

"Note the time of death—11:20 p.m." And with that he turned and exited the room. Shortly after, the man in the corner followed.

Doctor Christopher Merritt was an excellent surgeon with ten years of ER experience, but even he knew there were limitations in his profession. Still, he took no solace in this knowledge.

In appearance, Merritt was a tall slender man with short dusty-blond hair and cobalt blue eyes. He wore a thin well-groomed mustache with a cleanly-shaven face, and his sideburns were closely trimmed to the tops of his ears. The medical jersey he wore revealed toned muscular biceps and a well-proportioned upper torso. All in all, he was in excellent shape.

Merritt stopped at a nearby water fountain and allowed the cool clean water to run over his lips. He captured a small amount of water in his mouth, but did not swallow it. Instead, he swished it from cheek to cheek and then spit it out, attempting to rinse the putrid taste of death from his mouth.

He grasped the fountain with both hands for a moment and then slowly rose. Just then a figure appeared from behind and startled him. It was the man in the operating room. He was still cradling the small black device in his hand. The man was not a stranger to Merritt. In fact, they had been good friends for many years. The man's name was Jackson Wright.

"Sorry Chris. Didn't mean to startle you," Wright uttered kindly.

"That's alright. You know how I am after losing a patient."

"Yeah, I know it's not easy for you. I'm sorry..."

Merritt, glancing down at the small black device, interceded before Wright could complete his sentence. "Yeah—well—anyway, did you get anything?" Merritt made an inquisitive gesture.

Wright offered the device and pointed to a small glowing display, illustrating its deficiencies as he spoke. There was a noticeable irritation in his voice.

"No! I kept getting these damn phase shifts every time I took a reading. I even tried locking into the carrier several times, but it was hopeless."

Merritt had a difficult time expressing sympathy for his friend, considering what had just occurred, but he still managed to express a sincere apology for the wasted effort.

"I appreciate the support Chris. I know what I need to do now. Next time I should be able to compensate for the phase shifts. I think we're getting close!"

Merritt was agitated by the comment. He glanced away momentarily and then spoke. "Look Jack. I've been very cooperative with your little experiment, but people are starting to ask questions. I don't think we can keep this thing under wraps much longer. Bradford's getting suspicious and I've been receiving a lot of flack from Nurse Hardcourt about your presence in the ER."

"Yeah, I noticed." There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "She gave me a couple of dirty looks, but I really don't care what she thinks and neither do you. She's just an ER nurse who needs to mind her own business."

"Perhaps, but she can still make things difficult and Bradford can suspend your activities altogether. Don't forget. He was the one who gave you the green light on this project in the first place."

Wright rolled his eyes in disgust. "Bradford is a pretentious, narrow-minded egotist who thinks his research and theories are the sole foundation for modern neurology. He doesn't accept my ideas because they're too radical for his one-dimensional little brain and he feels threatened by me because my theories would completely alter the way we perceive the field of neurology. I detest the fact that I have to disguise my research just to appease him!"

Merritt motioned to Wright, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I understand Jack, but you have to realize that not everyone shares your enthusiasm."

Wright looked away as he spoke. "What about you Chris?" Wright brought his eyes back to meet Merritt's.

Merritt could feel Wright's eyes burning through the back of his skull like a pair of laser beams.

"You know damn well that I fully support what you're trying to accomplish," Merritt barked back, "but I still have a job to do here. Don't forget that! A man just died and you're acting like, oh well, better luck next time."

"Come on Chris, you know I don't look at it like that."

"Yeah, well please just try and consider the ramifications of what we're doing here and more importantly try to maintain a low profile. I think someone's reporting directly to Bradford. I don't know who, but I have my suspicions."

"A spy among us?" Wright jeered. The tension broke slightly as Merritt cracked a partial smile.

"Very funny, but seriously, you really need to watch your back from this point on."

"I will," Wright gave him a reassuring grin. "And by the way—thanks again for all your help," he said in a sincere tone.

Merritt acknowledged him with a gentle nod.

"Don't worry Chris. I'll have a little chat with Bradford in the morning to see if I can smooth things over a bit."

"Don't forget what I said," Merritt replied. Wright nodded and the two parted in opposite directions.

Back in the ER room Brighton and Hardcourt were having an intense debate. He was confused by Hardcourt's obvious condemnation of the now deceased patient and was trying to understand her dubious point of view.

"What I don't understand is why you insist on judging someone solely on the color of their skin," Brighton quipped.

"For twenty five years I have worked in this city and in that twenty five years I have watched thousands of victims pass through the doors of the ER. Nine times out of ten,

when criminal activities were involved, it was a black male. And more often than not it was drug related. So when one drug dealer murders another, I simply view it as one less burden on our society. I hardly think that qualifies me as a racist!” Hardcourt snapped, vehemently defending her position.

“Well, I haven’t been around nearly as long as you,” Brighton smirked, “but I was brought up to believe that everyone’s a unique individual and deserves a fair chance. You’re assuming this man was a drug dealer and got what was coming to him, but how can you be so sure that this was the case?”

Hardcourt smiled confidently. “Intuition kiddo. I can smell a drug dealer from a mile away and I’ll tell you right now, that guy was a bad egg.”

Just as she finished speaking, a nurse walked in with a solemn look on her face. It was a look of sympathy and regret and Hardcourt knew it.

“Well, what is it nurse?” Hardcourt prodded impatiently.

“That John Doe you just worked on?” The nurse paused momentarily for an acknowledgment. “He was an undercover detective for the Cleveland Heights Police Department. Apparently, he was attempting to make a drug buy and the deal went sour. The dealer who shot him escaped.”

Hardcourt displayed no emotion. “That’s a shame,” she remarked coldly and then gave a customary moment of silence. “Thank you for the report nurse,” she uttered forcefully and dismissed the nurse.

Brighton stood there with a look of irony on his face. Under any other circumstance he might’ve been gloating, but this was not the appropriate time. Instead, he just stared at her.

Hardcourt knew what he was thinking, but wasn’t about to indulge him. “Well, even I miss one once in a while.”

And with that she turned and exited the room. Brighton simply shook his head in disgust.

Wright had driven to a small rented house about four blocks from the hospital. The paint was cracked and chipping and several overgrown bushes obstructed the windows. As he turned into the driveway, the headlights of his vehicle only further revealed the neglect plaguing this humble abode.

Passing through the main entryway, he quickly turned and latched the locks behind him. He groped for a moment and finally flipped on a switch. The light from a solitary bulb, hanging from the ceiling, flooded the room with a warm yellow glow. Computer monitors, oscilloscopes and other electronic equipment sat upon three large foldable tables with a mass of cables dangling below. The dull hardwood floor exhibited a worn crescent-shaped area tracing the path of a single office chair. In the center of the room stood a small card table, covered with various electronic components, soldering equipment and a large magnifying lamp.

Wright tapped rapidly several times on a keypad parallel to the light switch. A flashing red light changed over to green. He removed the small black device from the inside of his coat and, pushing a few items aside, placed it on the card table. He then placed his hands upon his head, interlocked his fingers and just stood there for a moment with his eyes closed, appearing to be in some deep state of concentration.

Wright was of average height and build, but had a very masculine look. His jaw was roughly chiseled and dotted with thick brown whiskers. His eyes were dark and penetrating, but the areas below were gray and swollen. His lips were full and well defined with a pinkish hue and the surrounding skin was only slightly more tanned. His hair was dark brown

with a rough parting down the middle and traces of gray were beginning to show especially within his sideburns.

There were only two other doors in this tiny dwelling and Wright chose the one leading to the bedroom. The bed was a tousled mess with a mass of pillows at the headboard and several articles of clothing were strewn across the floor. A single dresser was the only other piece of furniture in the room. He removed his clothes and laid them upon the bed. A small bathroom door connecting to the bedroom stood in the far wall adjacent to the bedroom entrance.

He stepped into a cold brisk shower, gritting his teeth as the icy liquid struck his body. His eyes opened wide and he began vigorously scouring with a small sliver of soap. Rinsing his body of the residue, he paused momentarily, allowing the frigid water to drench his face.

Wright re-entered the main room, clothed in a pair of sweat pants and a university T-shirt. He positioned the chair in front of the card table and captured the device between his palms.

“Alright, the next time you’re going to work,” he spoke at the device as if giving it a command.

Turning the device face down, he removed four small screws. The back lifted off to reveal a complex series of small printed circuit boards mounted perpendicularly to a larger circuit board. He gently detached one of the boards and turned it over to reveal hundreds of components tightly populating an area half the size of a business card. Carefully, he transported the single board to a nearby computer. With the flick of a switch, the light overhead momentarily dimmed and every piece of equipment in the room crackled to life.

He positioned himself in front of a computer monitor and began keying a series of commands. The computer screen

flashed with each entry. He placed the small board on the bench and plugged in a makeshift interface cable. Automatically the monitor blinked, displaying several lines of text and a graphical simulation of the board.

Keying in several more commands, the small board came to life as a row of tiny lights, mounted to the board, flashed and flickered. The text on the screen began to scroll upward and several sections of the graphical image blinked. He was attempting to analyze the problems that had caused his experiment in the emergency room to fail.

The screen continued to scroll and blink until finally, all at once, it stopped. The image on the screen identified two components in red that were creating instability in his measurements. He tried modifying the program, but the two highlighted components had suffered irreparable damage.

“That’s curious,” he thought to himself.

Removing the small board from the test station, he rolled over to the center table and skillfully replaced the two damaged components. Within ten minutes, he was back at the test station. Following the same sequence of events, he ran several more diagnostics on the board. This time a curious anomaly appeared. The two components represented by the graphical display now flashed in yellow. He tapped out a few more commands and began to see a pattern. On a sheer whim he decided to touch one of the two identified components. He snapped his hand back violently, blurting out an obscenity. A small square blister began to form on the tip of his finger.

“This never happened before,” he spoke with a discernible perplexity and disengaged the interface.

The problem was becoming obvious as he scrolled through the code. Each of these small boards performed a critical function within the main device and each board was

designed to self learn. Unfortunately, this particular board was trying to exceed its own physical limits.

Wright spent the next few hours modifying and reprogramming the small board to incorporate its newly found functions. With that complete, knowing he could only test these changes with the next trial, he decided to make an attempt at sleep. He powered down the equipment as quickly as he powered it up and walked into the bedroom.

An hour passed and Wright was lying on the bed, eyes wide open, trying to forget about the events of the past day. A large digital clock rested on the dresser. It was a quarter to five. He removed one of the pillows from under his head and placed it between his knees. Struggling to find a comfortable spot he shifted the pillows several more times, beating them down with his fist. After a few minutes, he found an acceptable position. Exhaustion finally caught up and he managed to close his eyes long enough to drift off into a shallow slumber.

Another hour passed and Wright had completely altered his sleeping position. Most of the pillows were now at the foot of the bed and the covers were hanging off the side. Wright was sprawled out and mumbling softly in his sleep. Within his mind an entirely different world was unfolding.

The sky was unusually bright as the sun gleamed overhead. A gentle breeze was graciously pushing the clouds along, casting huge shadows down upon the plush green countryside. Dozens of trees marked the landscape, creating vibrant pastels of orange, yellow and red, and the birds were singing like a sweet symphony of flutes.

Wright had seen this place, but had no recollection of ever being here. He spoke of it many times with his wife,

Cassandra, promising that someday he would bring her here for a picnic. That day never came. Nevertheless, he was here now and wanted to make the best of whatever was to come.

He felt a bit strange, because Cassandra was sitting across from him. At first, her words seemed muted as she spoke and he strained to hear what she was saying. He had almost forgotten how beautiful she really was as he gazed into her warm glowing eyes.

“Would you like your sandwich now?” Her words were finally discernible to him. He nodded and she handed him the sandwich.

Everything around him seemed so real. The breeze upon his face, the sound of the birds, the scent of her perfume—but he knew this could not be real.

“I’ve really missed you. There were so many things I wanted to tell you,” his voice wavered. “But I never got a chance.”

She responded with a look of confusion. Obviously, she was unaware that she had been dead for nearly four years. He tried to play off the comment.

“I mean—we just never spend quality time together anymore and I think it’s great that we can share this time together now.”

“Me too,” she replied lovingly and smiled.

Wright decided that it was best to play along with the fantasy, and continued to act as if they had never been apart. He sat quietly grinning as Cassandra talked about the most trivial things. The birds were now singing even more energetically than before and the leaves on the trees were fluttering gently in the breeze.

“Jack... Jack! Are you listening to a word I’m saying?” She waved a hand in front of his face.

“Yes. You were just talking about how beautiful the trees are this time of year and how they look like they’re on fire.”

The breeze surged slightly, causing a few leaves to fall from the trees.

“That’s right,” she uttered with a trace of suspicion in her voice. Wright was becoming visibly uncomfortable. He glanced around momentarily, noticing the slight changes.

“What’s the matter my darling?” Cassandra intervened, attempting to recapture his attention.

“Nothing—nothing at all,” Wright responded abruptly. “Please, continue.”

She began talking again, but after a few minutes, Wright could no longer hear her words. He tried reading her lips, but it was no use. She stopped again and snapped at him, but she almost looked foolish as the movements of her lips made no sound. The wind began to pick up again, tossing a few items from their picnic.

Wright was becoming angry. He motioned to his ears and shouted, “I can’t hear you!”

Suddenly, a mass of dark clouds filled the sky. The trees, which had been so colorful, were now barren and the once gentle breeze had become a strong blustery wind.

“You never listened to me Jack!” Cassandra yelled, her eyes now black and empty.

Wright turned away in horror. He couldn’t understand why things had become so dismal.

“What are you talking about?” He responded angrily.

“You know damn well what I’m talking about. Your research! It was always your research! You never had time for the things that were important, and now you want to take it back. Well, you can’t take it back. What’s done is done and

you have to let me go. Stop living in a fantasy world and just leave it alone!”

Just then, a large vortex began to form off in the distance. Her eyes returned to their previous soulful state.

“Jack, please help me,” she pleaded with Wright, extending her hand. He tried to take it, but she began to move away from him. The sky was now completely black. Trees were being violently uprooted and the ground began to twist and buckle as the vortex grew.

Wright ran desperately trying to catch Cassandra, but their distance was growing.

“Jack,” she screamed, “please don’t let it take me!”

The entire landscape was being engulfed and pulverized. Wright watched in horror as a large tree, sucked into the swirling vortex, shattered into tiny splinters.

Running with every ounce of strength left in his body, the gap between them finally began to close.

“Hang on Cass, I’m coming,” he shouted over the deafening howl of the vortex.

“Please Jack, don’t let it take me,” she screamed once again.

Closer and closer, he approached, arms extended, trying to grab on to her. With one last surge of energy he leaped into the air, coming within inches of her, but his momentum sent him crashing to the ground. Wright looked up helplessly. Cassandra shrieked one last time as she entered the vortex.

Wright awoke screaming. His body was drenched with perspiration and the pillows and covers were now lying on the floor. Wright sat up, gazed at the clock, and decided that he had enough sleep for one night.

The Genuine Article

The Ohio Center for Neurological Research and Disorders building was much more elegant than some of the neighboring structures. It rose ten stories with a series of multi-tiered columns connected in between with large sections of glass that shimmered brilliantly in the midday sun.

Wright entered the building, working his way up to the fourth floor. The elevator doors slid open to reveal a long hallway with several doors on either side. At the end of the hallway stood a single entrance. The name on the plaque read, “Everett T. Bradford, MD. Director of Neurology.” Wright casually opened the door and walked in.

An attractive young woman sat behind a small “L” shaped desk, tapping at a computer console while talking through a headset. She paused for a moment, acknowledging Wright with a friendly smile, and then quickly ended her call.

“Good morning Jack. Dr. Bradford’s been expecting you,” she said cheerfully. Wright smiled coyly and replied, “Good morning Andrea.” Her smile grew slightly as she motioned to an opposing door. As Wright passed, the young woman sighed with enamor. She wanted to say something more, but simply lacked the courage. Instead, she momentarily fantasized about him. It was not the first time. Her eyes followed him to the door and as he disappeared into the adjoining room, thus signaled the end of the fantasy. Sighing once again, she redirected her attention back to her duties.

Bradford was sitting at a large oak desk, thumbing through several papers. He didn't bother to look up as he addressed Wright.

"Have a seat Jack," he uttered gruffly, motioning with his hand. Wright complied as Bradford continued to casually thumb through the papers. His head was cocked back as he read through a pair of thick-rimmed glasses.

Bradford was not a particularly handsome man. Two narrow slits formed his eyes and a larger slit formed his mouth. His lips were thin and colorless as well as his hair, which was more gray than blonde. His face was accentuated with a large, beak-like nose, and his ears flared out excessively from the sides of his head. Physically he was in better than average shape for a man of sixty-four, but the skin on his hands and face was sun-damaged and leathery.

Several minutes passed as Wright sat patiently, still awaiting Bradford's attention.

"This is real interesting stuff Jack," Bradford exclaimed, waving the papers in the air and then dropping them onto the desk.

"What's that?" Wright inquired cautiously, sensing deception in his voice.

"Your article on Synaptic Transference of course. It's truly inspirational. I especially enjoyed the part where you compare the human brain to a lead-acid battery."

Wright saw no point in trying to elaborate and instead, responded sarcastically. "I'm glad my research amuses you."

"Well Jack, you have to admit. Most legitimate research is published in medical journals. Unfortunately, *Popular Science* isn't one of them," Bradford jeered.

"Perhaps, but that's not what I came here to discuss. The reason why I'm here..."

Bradford interrupted. "I know why you're here. You wanted to reassure me that the experiments you've been performing are in no way related to this nonsense you've been preaching for the last two and a half years. Frankly, I hope for your sake, this is true. Because if I find out otherwise, I will do everything in my power to have you banned not only from this facility, but from the entire medical community."

"Look Bradford, that..."

"Doctor Bradford, Jack—Doctor," Bradford interjected. Wright ignored the pretentious comment and continued.

"That research has nothing to do with the Delta wave experiments. You can be assured of that. So far the information I've collected has been very conclusive. You've seen the reports. If I were hiding something, you'd know about it. Come on now. Do you seriously think that I'd take that kind of chance?"

"Like I said, I hope for your sake you're not," Bradford responded skeptically.

"I can assure you I'm not," Wright said firmly.

Bradford nodded and his tone became solemn. "You should know that your actions are being closely monitored. If I have even the slightest suspicion that you're not on the level, I'll pull the plug on this project."

Bradford sat back, clasping his hands together as if claiming some imaginary victory upon their exchange.

"I get the message," Wright responded coldly and exited the room.

Bradford picked up the receiver of his telephone and slowly dialed an extension. It rang several times and a voice finally registered on the other end.

"This is Bradford. I assume you'll be in the ER tonight?" Bradford was making more of a request than an inquiry.

The voice responded with a “Yes.”

“Make sure you pay close attention to his actions,” Bradford demanded. “If he does anything out of the ordinary, I want to know about it immediately.”

The voice responded with a brief affirmation and Bradford replaced the receiver.

Wright had found Merritt in a small lounging area within the emergency facility. They were currently discussing the dream Wright had earlier that morning.

“...it was as if everything was going great until my mind started wandering. I tried not to let it wander, but I just couldn’t seem to focus. Cass sensed this and got really upset. What’s even more strange is that I don’t think it was her anymore. Someone or something else took over.”

Merritt interrupted politely. “What do you mean by someone or something?”

“It wasn’t Cass anymore. Her eyes turned completely black and she became this cold unfeeling...” Wright paused for a moment trying to think of an appropriate word. “...demon. It was like something out of a horror movie.”

Merritt nodded, slightly intrigued by his friend’s ominous account of the dream.

“Perhaps it’s just your own inner turmoil playing out in your dreams.” Merritt made an earnest supposition.

“No Chris, I thought about that. When I was having the dream and things were going normal, my thoughts were my own and Cass acted as I would expect her to act. But when the dream became violent another presence took over. It said and did things I know Cass would never have said. In fact, it said things that even I’d never thought about.”

Merritt placed his hand on Wright's knee as he spoke. "Jack, you have been under so much pressure lately. Bradford's been breathing down your neck. The project has been nothing but a headache so far. And on top of all that, you haven't had a good night's sleep in how long? It really doesn't surprise me that you've been having these nightmares."

"I understand that," Wright said, discernibly frustrated, "but I'm telling you something's not quite right. I've had nightmares almost every day since Cass died—that's to be expected. But up until recently they were relatively normal. They didn't start getting weird until this project began. And the closer I get to success, the weirder the dreams become. It's getting to the point where I'm almost afraid to sleep."

Merritt paused, carefully considering his next words. "That's a hell of a dilemma Jack," he declared. "I know you don't want to hear this, but perhaps you should consider shelving this project. I think your sanity is slightly more important."

Wright shook his head. "No. I've come too far to quit now. I'm so close to capturing a transmission. Besides, if it doesn't happen soon I think Bradford's going to shut me down anyway."

Merritt gave a slight look of puzzlement. "I take it you already had your little conference?"

Wright nodded with an awkward grimace.

"How is our good friend Dr. Bradford?" Merritt scoffed.

"Oh, he's the same old pompous S.O.B. he's always been. He even brought up my past research. God! The gall of that man." Wright's eyes burned with rage, recalling the earlier conversation.

“Well, Bradford may be many things, but stupid isn’t one of them. You can only fool him for so long before he catches on. For both our sakes I hope you get something soon. I’ve put my neck on the line here Jack, and we’re both going down if Bradford figures it out.”

Just then Brighton entered the room. “Good morning, Chris—Jack.” He greeted them cheerfully and both men replied on a similar note.

“Did you hear about that John Doe we lost last night?” Brighton inquired delicately.

“Yeah, he turned out to be an undercover cop,” replied Merritt, a notable regret in his voice.

“You should have seen Nurse Hardcourt’s response when she found out. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone with less feelings than that woman.”

Brighton went on to depict his entire confrontation with Hardcourt. “I had her dead to rights, caught in her own racist hypocrisy, and I could’ve nailed her to the wall, but I didn’t. You know what her final response was?” Brighton paused for a dramatic climax. “Well, even I miss one once in a while,” he jeered.

Wright immediately responded with a kind word. “Well, you handled it commendably. By not saying anything you let her stew in her own contempt. You’re a bigger man for that.”

Merritt concurred with his friend by simply nodding and Brighton relished the compliment.

“Well, gentleman I have some things to take care of. I’ll see you later this afternoon.” Wright stood up and left the room.

Brighton looked to Merritt and motioned towards the door. “You know I like Jack, but he’s really running himself into the ground. I can’t believe he is doing all this simply for

the sake of some anomalous Delta wave readings.” Brighton hesitated for a moment. “Do you think there’s any credence to the rumors that he’s actually performing some kind of soul transference experiment?”

Merritt, visibly irritated, responded harshly. “Good Lord man, don’t be so naïve! You know how these rumors get started. By people who have nothing better to do than stick their noses where they don’t belong. And when they can’t dig up anything good, they fabricate something. That’s it, nothing more.”

Merritt terminated the conversation abruptly and walked out of the room. Brighton stood alone dumbfounded.

In the east wing of the emergency center was a small makeshift office where Wright often processed the data for his Delta wave studies. A single desk stood away from the door with a computer monitor and several piles of neatly stacked paperwork resting upon it. The only unusual item was a small stand-like interface sitting next to the monitor.

Wright walked in and sat down to a blank computer screen. He stared for a moment, pondering the events of the day thus far, and began to sort through one of the piles of paperwork. After flipping through several articles of paper he came upon a magazine. It was the issue of Popular Science containing his article. He contemplated discarding it, but instead opened the magazine and located his article—*SYNAPTIC TRANSFERENCE: Opening Our Mind to Other Dimensions*. He eased back in his chair and began to read.

Since the dawn of time, man has endeavored to answer the ever-elusive question: where did we come from? Men have created gods and religions

to explain the roots of our existence and shroud them in mysticism. Hence, we enter the twenty-first century clinging to unexplained beliefs all based upon one single notion—faith. We have reached the farthest depths of our solar system, via probes, and have ventured to the bottom of the ocean, but do we dare question the vein of our own existence? Jackson Wright responds with an emphatic “Yes.”

The brain is the most unexplored organ within the human anatomy. Researchers have mapped only macroscopic details of the brain and there are still many other areas that remain a complete mystery. Yet, Wright has taken a totally different approach. He is neither a neurologist nor a parapsychologist, but a research scientist who has made some astounding discoveries.

Within the thalamus and hypothalamus (the brain’s relay station between the cerebral cortex and the brain stem) lies the potential for a high frequency transmission node. Unlike our normal brain wave activity, with frequencies lower than that of standard household electrical current, this high frequency transmission is believed to run well into the terahertz range. That is 1,000 times greater than even the highest microwave and radio transmissions. So, perhaps you’re wondering, what is the purpose of this transmission? Wright believes it is the gateway to our soul. It sounds like something straight from a science-fiction novel, but Wright has verifiable proof to backup his findings. There is one catch though. As Wright explains, the carrier frequency is only

present near death, which is the reason why the transmission rate must be so high.

“There are approximately 100 billion neurons [brain cells] which can develop thousands of connections with other neurons. That constitutes a possible storage capacity of well over 100 trillion bits of information.” This is contrary to some research scientists, who have theorized that human memory might only consist of a few gigabytes of storage capacity. Wright explains, “...in order to transmit not only a person’s lifetime of experiences, but the entire neurological makeup of that person, the brain must transmit the information and structure of every single neuron.” Based on Wright’s calculations and what we already know about brain cell counts, it would take anywhere from three to five seconds to transfer the entire contents of an average human brain (currently, there is no man-made device that can receive information at even a fraction of that speed).

Assuming that Wright is correct, there still remains a much more intriguing question: where is this information being transmitted to? Wright does not have a definitive answer, but offers several theories (some explain things such as ESP, telekinesis, clairvoyance, etc...) which pose very tangible arguments. “The real thrust of my research is to...

Wright looked up to find Bradford standing in the doorway. He discreetly folded the magazine and dropped it into a wastebasket beneath his desk.

“Catching up on some paperwork,” Bradford queried.

“Actually I was just sorting through some of the old research data. I’ve already compiled most of it. I figured I had a few hours to tidy up before the next batch of readings,” Wright responded nervously.

“Well, I just wanted to let you know that I just reviewed your last Delta wave report and I have to say...” Bradford fought to impart a compliment. “You’re doing a good job.”

Wright sat there, slightly dumbfounded by Bradford’s admission. “Well, thank you Dr. Bradford.”

Bradford paused for a moment and then spoke again.

“Look Jack, I know we haven’t been seeing eye to eye, but the research you’ve done here cannot be ignored. With proper mapping of Delta wave generation during emergency situations, we will be able to better anticipate and perhaps even prevent potential brain seizures and other damaging conditions. In fact, I’ve already talked to the Board of Directors about having your research fully endorsed.”

Wright was becoming increasingly suspicious. Bradford had never been this cooperative.

“I appreciate that, but why do I get the impression there’s a catch here?” Wright offered respectfully.

Bradford wore an insidious grin. “There is no catch,” the tone of his voice increased, “I just want you to be recognized for your fine research. We’re going to move you out of this tiny little closet and put you into a great big office adjacent to mine. Additionally, I will be personally assigning two of our best young research scientists to assist you in the final stages of the project.”

“Damn him,” Wright thought to himself. The last thing he needed was this man looking over his shoulder, but instead of reacting, Wright concealed his contempt and responded graciously.

“That sounds like a very tempting offer, but I’d like a few days to think it over.”

Bradford’s demeanor quickly shifted as he retorted angrily. “Well—don’t think about it too long. I’m pulling a lot of strings here. You have a chance to redeem yourself after that ridiculous article and you’re a fool if you throw this away. Oh, and by the way, don’t think I didn’t notice what you were reading when I walked in.” He paused momentarily for a reaction. “You better wake up Jack, or before you know it you’ll be spending all your time stocking shelves at Radio Shack!”

Bradford turned and plodded down the hallway. As he approached the nurse’s station, he caught Nurse Hardcourt’s eye. She was reprimanding another nurse for neglecting her duties. Hardcourt paused for a moment and made direct eye contact with Bradford. He stammered momentarily and then turned down another corridor. Hardcourt ended her lecture abruptly and dismissed the nurse.

After a few minutes, Hardcourt walked casually down the same corridor as Bradford and entered a small supply room, locking the door behind her. Bradford was standing in the back of the room, partially obscured by a supply rack.

“Hello Evy,” she murmured softly as she approached him. “What brings you to this neck of the woods.”

Bradford was slightly distraught as he spoke. “That damn fool Wright doesn’t know who he’s dealing with. He thinks he can continue to dance around me, but I’m going to get the proof I need and then I’m going to bury him!”

“Calm down Hon, you know I hate it when you get upset,” stroking his hair as she spoke. “Wright is an insignificant bug and you shouldn’t let him get to you like this.”

“I realize that, but he’s a menace to this hospital and he needs to be shut down. Unfortunately, if I go to the Board of

Directors now and withdraw my endorsement, they're going to want to know why I gave this man so much latitude in the first place."

Hardcourt spoke compassionately. "I understand, and I'm sure that Wright will eventually stumble. And when he does, you'll be there to grind his face in the dirt." With the last sentence she gave a genuine smile. Bradford nodded in agreement.

She was now interlocking her fingers in between his, rubbing them gently. She brought her mouth to his ear and sensually whispered, "Is there anything I can do to ease your tension?"

Bradford relaxed slightly, took a deep breath and responded coldly. "Yes—just keep an eye on Wright." With that he left the room. She wanted to curse him as he retreated, but her overwhelming admiration for the man disallowed her the gratification.

A few moments passed and the door opened again. Her eyes lit up. "Perhaps he had changed his mind," she thought, but it was another nurse.

"Nurse Hardcourt, you're needed in the ER." The nurse spoke urgently. Hardcourt immediately dismissed her frustration and headed for the emergency room.

“Kiss Me Darling...”

Hardcourt entered the emergency room, quickly taking her place beside Merritt. An older man, perhaps in his early seventies, was lying on the examination table. His vital signs were currently stable even though he had just suffered a major heart attack. Merritt barked at Hardcourt for her late arrival and then fired several orders at the emergency team.

Wright was sitting in his usual corner monitoring the activities. The hand held device had two or three lights that appeared to be flashing in unison with the patient's vital signs, and a small glowing screen displayed several pieces of information about the patient's neurological condition. Wright tapped on a few buttons, clearing the current readings and displaying an entirely different set. Heart rate, respiration and brain activity were all registering through this small device. Wright tapped on a few more buttons and a single waveform with several numbers above it danced on the screen. Wright concealed a smile under his mask. Apparently, the problem that had plagued him the night before was no longer an issue. Now all he had to do was wait.

Merritt turned to one of the emergency team members. “Where's the results from the...” Before he could finish his sentence the patient went into arrest for the second time. The cardiograph began to emit a steady tone.

“Damn it,” Merritt shouted. “Get those paddles charged! He’s not going that easy!”

Wright looked down at the glowing screen and noticed a change in the waveform. A near perfect sinusoidal wave began to form and was slowly drifting across the screen. “It’s the carrier wave,” he thought, “I’m really going to get it this time.” He pressed a single button and the wave doubled in size, expanding the view. Tiny spikes began to dance up and down the slopes of the larger waveform. Wright’s eyes lit up with anticipation. He was totally oblivious to his friend’s plight as the doctor tried desperately to resuscitate the dying man.

The patient was not responding to the defibrillator. Merritt was already making preparations for an emergency procedure that would allow him to quickly enter the patient’s chest without opening his rib cage. He intended to manually massage the patient’s heart in an attempt to revive him.

The tiny spikes on the small display were now growing both in frequency and intensity. Wright responded with another tap on the keypad. The word “LOCKING” flashed on a lower section of the screen. Wright knew he was close, but contained his elation due to the dismal nature of the situation. “LOCKING” continued to flash on the screen. At any moment, Wright expected the word to change to “LOCKED.”

Merritt had made a diagonal incision, spanning from the center of the patient’s chest all the way to his side. The opening was spread apart to reveal the patient’s heart. Merritt gently caressed the heart and began to massage it. The clattering of instruments and scuffling of the emergency team came to a grinding halt. Merritt made a spiritual plea as he held the man’s life in his hand.

Wright paused to notice the anguish in his friend’s eyes. He felt a moment of sorrow for the man on the table, but his mind was reeling with the success in which he was about to partake. The word “LOCKED” finally appeared on the display. In a few moments, Wright thought to himself, all the months of research were finally going to pay off.

Suddenly, the cardiograph beeped. After another second it sounded again. Merritt rolled his eyes upward and whispered, “Thank you,” removing his hand from the man’s heart as it began to beat unassisted. The tone from the cardiograph became consistent and Merritt sighed with relief.

Wright looked stunned as the waveform on the display simply disappeared. He mumbled an obscenity under his breath, but the room was still fairly quiet. Everyone in the room turned to Wright in unison with a look of utter shock on their face. Wright, realizing what he had just done, offered a sincere apology. He stumbled as he attempted to explain that it was frustration with the device that prompted the crude remark. Most of the staff, unaware of his real intentions, simply shook it off, but Merritt was livid.

“Let’s get this man up to O.R.,” Merritt said deliberately. Wright lowered his head in shame, feeling an overwhelming sense of guilt. He watched as they carted the patient out of the room, earnestly hoping the man would survive.

Looking to Merritt, Brighton gave him an enthusiastic congratulation for his astounding medical savvy. The young intern made the admission that he had never seen this procedure performed under such critical circumstances. Merritt responded modestly and gave a nod of gratitude for the compliment.

Turning to Wright, Merritt’s demeanor was suddenly quite cheery. “Whadda you say we shoot over to the Flats for a drink a little later? I feel pretty good about this one.”

Wright, a bit dumbfounded by his friend's apparent apathy over his previous action, responded solemnly. "Yeah—okay—that sounds good."

Merritt nodded graciously and took off down the main corridor.

Dusk was beginning to capture the remains of the day, creating beautiful hues of orange and gold. A wall of towering dark clouds loomed ominously above the sunset, threatening to engulf the picturesque scene. Through a large window in the neurology building, Bradford could be seen sitting at his desk reading.

The phone on his desk rang out urgently, startling him. He picked up the receiver to hear the same voice he had spoken with earlier that day.

"Well, what is it?" Bradford barked, tossing the papers he had been reviewing down upon the desktop.

"You told me to call you if Wright did anything out of the ordinary," the voice responded nervously. "I'm not quite sure if this qualifies but..." The voice paused, fearing chastisement from Bradford. "Wright appeared to be quite upset when Dr. Merritt saved our last patient."

Bradford responded with great enthusiasm. "Excellent. Excellent! Perhaps, I won't have to do anything. It sounds to me like he's going to cut his own throat. How did Dr. Merritt respond to his actions?"

The voice relaxed a little. "Actually, Dr. Merritt wasn't really bothered by it at all. He was too elated about his success in the ER."

"Merritt must be covering for Wright. He's too much of a sentimentalist to let something like that go unnoticed," Bradford spouted forcefully.

“Perhaps you’re right,” the voice volunteered uneasily.

“I know I’m right,” Bradford retorted.

The voice hesitated momentarily and then spoke. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes,” Bradford responded devilishly. “Try to get on good terms with our Doctor. Perhaps, if you could convince him that you’re trustworthy, he’ll reveal what Wright’s really up to.”

“Do you really think that Dr. Merritt knows what’s going on?” the voice inquired.

“Absolutely!” Bradford responded harshly and replaced the receiver.

Dividing the west and east sections of Cleveland is an industrialized port, known as The Flats—an area of waterways and intersecting railroads now populated with a series of bars, night clubs and restaurants.

Wright walked into one of the restaurants that he and Merritt frequented occasionally. Several large windows stood on the far wall, giving way to a striking view of the main waterway. Two large railway bridges, resting above the narrow sections of river, were accentuated with bright glowing auras of blue and orange light. He found his friend sitting at the bar. Merritt looked somewhat somber as he held a glass in front of his face, slowly swirling the contents.

Wright approached apprehensively, not knowing how his friend was going to react.

“Hey, Chris,” he opened cordially, “How are you doing?”

Merritt ceased his activity for a moment, turned his head slowly towards Wright and then returned to his drink. His tone was sarcastic, “Well, let’s see—I’m watching my best friend flush his career down the toilet and he seems intent

upon taking me with him. Yeah, I think that pretty much sums it up.” Merritt downed the contents of his glass.

“I had a funny feeling that you weren’t going to let me slide on this one,” Wright responded, trying to lighten up the situation. Merritt ignored the attempt.

“Damn right I’m not going to let you slide. The only reason I acted so cordial earlier was because I knew we were being watched. I had to play it off. Even then I still think there are going to be some repercussions.” Merritt motioned to the bartender for another drink.

Wright requested a Vodka Tonic and sat down next to him. “Look Chris, I’m sorry about what happened, but I was so close. I actually had a signal lock.”

Merritt closed his eyes in anger. “You’ll have to forgive me for not being excited, but I happen to think that man’s life was slightly more important.”

“Believe me when I say that I’m happy you saved him. Please Chris, I only did what I did because I was frustrated with the monitor.” Wright said in defense.

“Oh, come on! You just said the monitor was working. Don’t give me that crap! You were upset because you were just about to get your readings and the guy didn’t die like you wanted him to,” Merritt barked, the alcohol now assisting his rage.

Wright sat there for a moment trying to contain his anger. He knew that Merritt was slightly intoxicated and didn’t want to escalate the argument any further.

“Look, I’d be a liar if I said that this research doesn’t mean everything to me, but I haven’t forgotten what you’re trying to accomplish. I admire you more than you know, and it’s not just because you’re a fine doctor. You care about people. You don’t just look at them like some HMO number.

That’s a quality that very few people in your profession share. Typically, they hide behind doctor-patient protocols and never consider...”

Merritt intervened abruptly. “I get the point, but that doesn’t excuse your actions in the ER.”

“I know that Chris. So believe me when I say I’m very sorry for my comment and I won’t make that mistake again. I need to contain my reactions no matter what the outcome.”

Merritt nodded in agreement. “That’s right Jack. You’re not going to make that mistake again, because I’m not going to allow you back in the emergency room.”

Wright was flabbergasted. He sat for a moment trying to speak, but couldn’t assemble the words. Finally he responded. “Chris, please don’t do this to me. I’m so close to getting a valid reading.”

“You’ll just have to go with the data you’ve got,” Merritt said coldly.

“I haven’t got anything! You know that! Please reconsider your decision. If you bail out on me now, this project is over. Bradford will get what he wants and you’ll have helped him achieve it.” Wright was pleading desperately.

“Hey, don’t try to pin this on me. You’re the one who’s been pushing this project and stepping on everyone’s toes in the process. I’m sorry but I’m not going to take the fall for you.” Merritt started to get up. He wasn’t going to allow Wright to sway his decision.

Wright had a look of sheer agony on his face. “Chris, stop—just for a moment and hear me out. Please!”

Merritt hesitated and then sat back down. “What is it?”

Wright took a deep breath and began to speak. “I’ve spent three years of my life researching and engineering this project. I’ve sold my house, my car and everything Cass and I owned

to fund this project. When I presented it to the universities they laughed in my face. You were the one who convinced Bradford that my research was worth pursuing. You've gone above and beyond what anyone could ask a friend to do. I realize that. And now I ask you once again to please let me finish what I started."

Merritt couldn't ignore the plea. He sat for a moment trying to ease the lump in his throat and then formulated his thoughts.

"Okay Jack, but with a few conditions."

"Anything, name it." Wright responded anxiously.

"First of all, you need to tell Bradford you'll accept his offer, but you need another week to wrap things up in ER."

Wright flinched at the thought as Merritt continued.

"That should keep him off our backs long enough for you to get a valid reading. Second of all, I want you to start acting more respectful towards Nurse Hardcourt. She may act cold and heartless sometimes, but she's the best nurse on our staff. If you show her a little respect she'll probably back off. And finally, I want you to relax a little. You've been killing yourself over this project and I'm really worried about your health. The monitor works, right?"

Wright nodded confidently.

"Well, then all you need to do is relax and wait for your opportunity to get those readings." Merritt placed a hand on his arm and spoke genuinely. "Jack, I'm just as excited as you are about getting to the truth, but you have to remember what the ER is about. You'll get your chance. You've just got to be patient," Merritt said reassuringly.

Wright nodded in agreement and the two men proceeded to finish their drinks.

Slightly after midnight, Wright returned home. He entered the shack in his customary fashion and turned on the light to find everything in its place. There was a strong urge to examine the information he had collected in the emergency room earlier that day, but instead, he considered Merritt's request and turned in for the night.

Entering the bedroom, he noticed the pillows and sheets still lying on the floor. The disarray reminded him of his last nightmare, and he paused momentarily as the image of Cassandra flashed through his mind. Quickly shaking off the image, he replaced the sheets. After collecting all the pillows into his arms, he swayed for a moment and then collapsed onto the bed. The relief bestowed by Merritt, along with a renewed confidence in his research, provided him with the vehicle he needed for a sound restful repose. He drifted off effortlessly within minutes.

Several hours had passed and Wright was deep within his own subconsciousness. He wrestled around slightly, but seemed to be less disturbed by the dream he was having this time.

Wright stood in a window overlooking a small section of park on the east side of the hospital. There was a thick line of equally spaced trees, now absent of most of their leaves, and the ground was slowly disappearing into a flurry of white as small flakes of snow gently tousled to the ground. He turned away from the window and drew his eyes upon Cassandra lying in a hospital bed. She looked relatively peaceful with the exception of several tubes connected to her arms and a cardiograph stood beside her bed silently monitoring her heart.

"Look sweetheart it's snowing again," Wright uttered softly, hoping to capture a smile.

Cassandra was very ill, but managed to turn her head and responded in a frail, weakened voice. “I thought you hated the snow. The messes it makes with the salt and ice.”

Wright grinned and retorted. “I just never took the time to appreciate the real beauty of it. It’s a quality that I’ve been cultivating from you.”

She recognized the effort and smiled. “Jack, I’ve always known that you were a sensitive man. You try to shroud your feelings in that macho persona, but you can’t fool me.”

Wright was feeling somewhat transparent. Cassandra gave him a reassuring grin and continued.

“I know this is killing you inside. You’ve been so strong through everything—the tests, the chemo, the counseling sessions. And through all that, I don’t think I’ve seen you cry one time. Please Jack, just for once, take down the front and let it out.”

A single tear formed in the corner of her eye and finally ran down her cheek.

Wright began to speak but paused momentarily to recapture his emotions. “Cass, I’m afraid that if I start crying now that I won’t be able to stop. I want to be strong for you. I figure that if I start to break down, you will expend all your energy trying to comfort me. I want you to fight this thing and I want you to know that you can rely on me for that strength...” He couldn’t continue.

“Jack, you have been a pillar of strength for me, but now I think it’s time for you to let go. I’m dying and nothing’s going to change that now. The doctors have done everything they can and I am just so tired. Jack, I’m afraid that if you don’t let it out and I die...”

Wright intervened. “You’re not going to die. You’ve got to fight it.”

“Jack, please. I am so tired of fighting and I really want to sleep, but I need to know that you’ll be okay. I need to know that you can accept this and get on with life.”

Wright turned away as the tears welled up in his eyes. He fought the constriction in his throat as he spoke. “I’m sorry Cass, but I’m not ready to give up. I love you more than life itself and I’m not ready for you to go. I know that may sound selfish, but you’re the only thing in my life that makes it worth living. You hear what I’m saying Cassandra Penelope Wright?”

He turned back to look at her, but her eyes were closed. Wright paused momentarily with a look of confusion on his face, but soon realized what had happened.

He yelled out her name in agony. “Cassandra!”

“Oh God, please no! Please, please, please no!” He scurried about her bed trying to wake her.

One of the nurses came upon the tragic scene and grabbed Wright by the arm, trying to calm him. “Please Mr. Wright, she’s gone now. Please just calm down.”

Wright jumped back away from the nurse, crying and shouting incoherently. “Don’t tell me she’s gone! I don’t want to hear it!”

Another nurse entered the room and shortly after, Merritt followed. Quickly assessing the situation, Merritt grabbed his friend in a strong embrace. “I’m so sorry Jack. I’m so sorry.”

Wright struggled at first, but finally gave into his own sorrow and continued to sob. Merritt motioned for the nurses to leave the room and just stood there holding his friend. After a few moments, Wright finally calmed down. Merritt assisted him to a chair and Wright sat there hunched over. He mumbled pitifully, “She was right Chris.”

“About what?” Merritt inquired sensitively.

“She was trying to tell me that if I didn’t let my feelings out while she was still alive I’d regret it. And she was right. My last words to her were words of anger. I was so caught up in denying her death, that I didn’t take the time to say goodbye.”

Wright began to sob again. Merritt didn’t know how to respond and decided it was best to just listen.

“There were so many things we wanted to do, so many places we wanted to see. And now it’s too late. Cass is gone.” Wright stopped abruptly, recomposed himself and then spoke clearly. “I’ll be alright Chris. I’d just like a little time alone with her. Okay?”

Merritt nodded kindly and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Wright stood up and approached Cassandra’s lifeless body. He knelt down beside her bed, gently placing his hand upon her arm. “You’re finally at peace my love. You don’t have to worry about the pain anymore. You can finally get your sleep. And don’t worry about me. Someday we will be together again. I know in my heart that nothing can keep us apart, not even death. I will find a way and we will be together again...”

Suddenly her torso lifted violently and her face was now inches from his. Her skin was gray and putrid with thousands of tiny blood vessels visible throughout, and her eyes were completely black and lifeless. As her cold white lips opened, Wright gagged, nearly vomiting from the rancid stench.

“You stupid, stupid man,” she spouted coarsely, “You are tapping into something that man was never suppose to tap into. If you have any sense in that puny little cranium of yours, you’ll take my advice and *leave it alone.*”

The last three words rang out in his mind. Her frigid hand clasped tightly around his arm and she spoke again, but now in a sweet loving voice. "Darling, please don't let them take me. Kiss me and let me know how much you love me." Just as she said that a thick black liquid began spewing from her mouth. Wright tried to back away, but she pulled him closer with unnatural strength.

"Cassandra, please stop!" he shouted, but the hideous corpse laughed insidiously, continuing to draw him closer as he fought to break away. Merritt entered the room and Wright pleaded for him to help, but instead Merritt responded curiously as if he were oblivious to Cassandra's altered condition. "What's the matter Jack? Isn't this what you wanted? Cass is alive. Show her how much you love her. Give her a kiss!"

Wright fought violently, but it was no use. He held his mouth closed as their lips met. The corpse's tongue pressed harshly against his lips trying to pry them apart as warm viscous fluid ran down his chin. His eyes widened with horror as her tongue penetrated his lips.

Wright jumped out of his bed flailing his arms in the air. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" he screamed and finally opened his eyes. He looked around the room a little dazed by the experience and then uttered, "What the..."

Rumors of Deception

The O.R. level of the Trauma Center was dramatically different from the Emergency Department. Unlike the ER, which was often cluttered with equipment and patients, the hallways of the O.R. were generally neat and orderly. In addition, the overall pace of the doctors and nurses was somewhat more subdued, and the noise levels were considerably lower. These were the conditions that Bradford preferred over the chaotic environment that functioned two floors below.

In a large white operating room, Bradford stood amongst several other doctors and nurses, performing surgery on a young woman. A large observation window exposed the room to outside observers, and a small sign reading *Authorized Personnel Only* stood in one corner of the glass.

Bradford was in the process of removing a sea urchin-like tumor from the young woman's brain. A section of the skull plate had been removed to expose the patient's cerebrum and Bradford was simultaneously manipulating several surgical instruments, attempting to extract the tumor without damaging the surrounding brain tissue. Wright stood outside the room, peering through the observation window with a look of astonishment on his face. He was not as impressed with the procedure as he was with Bradford's unwavering ability to weave in and out of the delicate tissue without causing any discernible damage. A small video monitor, magnifying the delicate operation, sat above the operating table.

Wright periodically switched between the monitor and Bradford to get the best angle on the procedure. He gasped as Bradford finally extracted the marble size tumor from the young patient's head and placed it onto a large glass dish. Several minutes passed and Bradford signaled for another surgeon to close the woman up.

With the procedure finally complete, Bradford headed toward the exit. As he emerged he was genuinely surprised to find Wright standing before him.

"Jack, what brings you up here?" he said officiously.

Wright ignored his taunting quip and responded. "I've considered your offer and decided it would be in my best interest to take it."

Bradford was a little taken by the response and immediately suspected a deception, but decided to play along.

"Well, I'm glad that you finally came to your senses. With the Neurology Department—namely me—backing you, you will take leaps and bounds toward completing your Delta wave research. And together, my young partner, we will present your findings to the medical community. No one will be laughing at you with Doctor Everett T. Bradford standing beside you."

Wright fought to maintain his composure as Bradford spouted his nauseating discourse. The contempt and hatred he felt for this man was more intense than ever, but Wright just stood there taking every blow with unusual restraint.

"Although, there is one thing I'd like to request." Wright politely intervened.

Bradford raised a brow, speaking slow and deliberate. "Yes Jack. What is it?"

"I've had some very peculiar readings in the past few days and I'd like to process the data before transferring my

research over to the neurology building,” Wright injected cunningly.

“I see,” Bradford retorted with a look of puzzlement. “How long do you need to finish processing these data?”

“It’s hard to say, but I think it’ll take me at least a week to properly compile the results.” Wright smiled coyly.

Inside, Bradford was becoming a raging inferno. If he could have shot flames from his mouth, he probably would have incinerated the other man where he stood. He knew that Wright was just stalling for time, but he continued to maintain a cool, calm demeanor and gave a reassuring nod.

“Of course Jack, take all the time you need. No one expects you to break off midstream and interrupt the flow of your research.”

Wright smelled an even greater deception than the one he was perpetrating, but responded earnestly. “Thank you Dr. Bradford. I knew you of all people, would understand my dilemma. I’m looking forward to the move up. It will truly be an honor to work with such a great man as yourself.” Wright had to stop himself. He was becoming nauseated from his own words.

“Fine, fine. Then I’ll be seeing you soon Jack,” Bradford retorted. Wright nodded and headed down the corridor. As he disappeared around the corner, Bradford uttered viciously under his breath, “Sooner than you think.”

Wright found Merritt back in the ER, conversing with another doctor. He advanced slowly to avoid being intrusive, but the other doctor noticed him and terminated their conversation abruptly. Wright approached Merritt with a look of confusion. “Do I smell or something?” he queried.

Merritt chuckled and responded. “No, but you’ve become somewhat of an enigma around here. I overheard a couple of staffers calling you *Jack the Reaper*.”

Wright was momentarily confused by the statement, but quickly made the connection. He shook his head in disgust.

“Don’t worry. I’ve made it very clear that I won’t tolerate that kind of behavior. It’s hard to believe that trained professionals can act so immature sometimes!” Merritt reflected on his statement for a moment.

“Anyway, don’t let it bother you. Most of the staff could really care less,” Merritt said reassuringly.

Wright considered his friend’s advice for a moment and then motioned towards the ER lounge with an open hand. Merritt acknowledged his request and both men shuffled into the room.

Within the lounge, a couple of nurses were laughing near the coffee machine while waiting for their coffee. Noticing the two men, they ceased their frivolous activities, but continued to talk. Wright looked to one of the women and inquired, “Do you think I’m *Jack the Reaper*?”

He imposed the question upon her, but the woman was gracious and responded cheerfully, “No hon, we all have bad days and you were just havin’ one of them yesterday.”

Her partner affirmed her response with a simple nod. Merritt looked to Wright as if to say, “I told you so” but never actually spoke the words. Wright relaxed a bit. They watched the two nurses leave the room and then Merritt turned to Wright.

“So what’s going on?” Merritt asked, with an inquisitive gesture.

“Well, let’s see.” Wright paused for a moment as if he were actually thinking about what to say. “Cass came back from the dead and you were rooting her on.”

“Oh, this one sounds interesting, and I was even in it this time.” Merritt responded in jest.

“Just shut up and listen,” Wright snapped and continued. “I was dreaming about her again and this time it was the day she died. At first I thought I was going to be able to change the course of events, but it was more like I was outside of myself watching the situation unfold. The whole thing happened again just like it did the first time, except for one thing.”

Merritt shifted back in his chair, listening intently.

“After she died, I began telling her how sorry I was and how I wouldn’t let death come between us and that’s when she jumped at me.” There was a notable increase in Wright’s tone.

“Jumped at you? After she died?” Merritt queried.

“Yes, and that’s not the worst of it. She was prematurely decomposing and her eyes were completely black again. Then there was this ominous voice that warned me to stop running the transmission experiments, but the words that really stood out in my mind were *leave it alone*. It’s not the first time I’ve heard those words.”

He stopped for a moment, visibly shaken by his own account. Merritt gave him a consoling nod and he continued.

“What’s really disturbing is that she spoke again in her own voice, still all decomposed, and asked me for a kiss. There was this disgusting black liquid coming from her mouth. I was horrified and tried to stop her from kissing me and that’s when you came into the room.”

Merritt interceded. “And that’s when I jumped in and stopped her, right?”

“No. Actually you said something like, *Isn't this what you wanted? Cass is alive. Give her a kiss!* I remember thinking at the time that you were...” Wright finished the sentence with a series of grating remarks and obscenities.

“I suppose if I were in your shoes I might feel the same way. I'll tell you one thing. It sure changes my outlook on open casket funerals.” Merritt attempted to lighten things up.

“I appreciate the humor, but this is really starting to eat at me. I feel like my own mind's being invaded by something viciously evil. To be honest with you, it's scaring the hell out of me.”

“Well, look Jack, we're in the home stretch and soon this whole thing will be nothing more than a bad dream. If you want, I can prescribe something that might help you sleep a little more soundly.” Normally, Merritt wasn't very liberal about prescribing medications, but under the circumstances he felt it was warranted.

“Yeah, perhaps that would help,” Wright responded somberly and stood up, heading for the coffee machine. After dispensing two cups of coffee, Wright returned to the table and the two men continued to talk. They broke off momentarily as Brighton entered the room and the conversation shifted to a more general topic.

“Hey guys, don't mind me.” Brighton injected thoughtfully.

“So what did Bradford have to say about your proposal?” Merritt inquired surreptitiously, avoiding any specific references.

“He seemed very enthusiastic about collaborating with me on the Delta wave project. I really think this venture is going to open some new doors for this kind of research. In fact,

I think Bradford and I are going to get along just fine,” Wright exclaimed with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Brighton stood there with a cup of hot coffee in his hand, completely baffled by the exchange. Finally catching on, he interrupted. “Come on guys, you don’t have to play it up on my behalf. I know how you feel about Bradford. Personally, I think the guy could use a healthy enema,” he quipped, laughing at his own statement.

Merritt and Wright eyed one another and then Merritt spoke. “Look Jerrod, we appreciate your honesty, but there are just certain things we’d rather not have circulated throughout the gossip pool.”

“I understand, but at the same time I might be able to help you. Being the young naïve intern does have its advantages sometimes, and I’m not as young and naïve as you might think,” Brighton retorted keenly.

Wright, intrigued by the offer, spoke frankly. “Thank you Jerrod. We’ll keep that in mind the next time Bradford tries to execute one of his little schemes. In the meantime, just keep your eyes and ears open and let us know if you hear anything unusual, especially from Nurse Hardcourt.”

“Sure thing guys,” Brighton replied and walked off gleefully as if he had just been given some top-secret assignment.

“Do you really think that was wise Jack?” Merritt posed the question.

“Sure. If he’s on the level, maybe we’ll get some inside dirt on Bradford. Otherwise, we’ll just keep the poor kid guessing,” Wright uttered shrewdly.

The two men resumed conversation for several more minutes. Wright eventually glanced at his watch, noting that it was almost two o’clock. “Well, I’ve got some data to process

before the next shift. I'll see you in the ER." As he began to rise, Hardcourt came through the door looking as if a rabid animal had infected her. She took a couple of deep breaths and then spoke in a harsh angry tone.

"Look here Wright! I've heard some of the things you've been saying about me and I'm just not going to tolerate anymore of your crap. I have been an ER nurse for twenty-five years and you're not even a doctor. You don't belong here and if it weren't for your partner over there, you would have been expelled from this hospital a long time ago. I try so hard to maintain the respect of every nurse in this facility and I don't need some hot shot engineer making a fool of me!"

Wright interjected, "Nurse, you'll have to forgive me for my ignorance, but what the hell are you talking about?"

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. Ever since you started working here, you've been mocking me and saying things behind my back. Now I find out that you've been telling the entire ER staff that you and I—we—well you know what I'm trying to say. I shouldn't have to spell it out." Hardcourt began to blush.

Wright wore a look of sheer disgust on his face and retorted callously. "You've got to be kidding. Do you really think I'd want anyone to think that I'd have anything to do with you? No offense nurse, but you're not my type."

"Oh don't act so smug. You probably did it just to make me look bad in front of the other nurses. And you're no prize yourself," Hardcourt barked in retaliation.

"That really hurts coming from a cold-hearted, high riding, militant..." Wright finished with the worst possible expletive.

Merritt stood by watching as the two continued firing vicious insults at one another. The intensity of the argument gradually increased over several minutes as Hardcourt and

Wright began shouting at one another. Merritt finally decided to interject as several faces appeared through the small window on the entrance door.

Merritt spoke in Wright's defense first. "Nurse Hardcourt, I can assure you that Jack has no interest in either besmirching or disrespecting you. He is..."

Hardcourt cut in abruptly. "Dr. Merritt, I would expect a little more cooperation on your part. As a fellow member of our medical team it is your job to..."

"Damn it Nurse, I know what my job is. Now just shut up and listen for a moment. Jack is not only a man of integrity and professionalism, but he's a man who continues to mourn the death of his wife. He's the last man I'd suspect for starting such a ridiculous rumor. Perhaps you can tell me why you think he was the one who started it."

"Because, who else would make up a rumor like that?" she responded uneasily.

Wright reflected for a moment. The answer bothered him. He knew he hadn't started the rumor and was now trying to ascertain why someone else would. In his mind he began replaying the conversation with Bradford, focusing primarily on Bradford's overly cooperative demeanor. Just as he had stalled Bradford, he thought, perhaps Bradford was now attempting to stall him. He glanced at his watch again. It was a quarter past two. Wright was becoming suspicious and decided to speak up.

"When did you hear this rumor?"

"About twenty minutes ago. I overheard a couple of nurses talking. You can't imagine the embarrassment I felt when I heard it." Hardcourt was looking for sympathy, but the two men were apathetic to her plea.

“Something’s going on Chris,” Wright barked, “I have a bad feeling about this.” Wright pondered for a moment and then bolted out of the room.

“What’s he talking about?” Hardcourt prodded inquisitively, but Merritt just stood there eyeing her with contempt.

Wright ran down the hallway, arriving at his small makeshift office. He stood there for a moment gawking at the empty room. All of his Delta wave research, computer equipment, and even the furniture had been removed. The little black box that had been concealed in a locked desk drawer was now missing. The first thought that came to mind was that of Hardcourt. He ran back down the hallway and reentered the lounge.

“Alright Nurse, what the hell happened to my office?” he demanded.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about and I really don’t care. As far as I’m concerned you can take your research...”

Wright grabbed her by the arms and shouted in her face. “If you don’t tell me what happened to my office, I’ll...”

Hardcourt chimed in calmly. “You’ll what? Hit me? Slap me around? Don’t you dare threaten me! I’ll have you slapped with an assault charge so fast it’ll make your head spin!”

Merritt quickly stepped in between the two. “Jack, you need to calm down. Tell me what happened.”

“They cleared out my office! Everything is gone! And she had something to do with it!” Wright shouted frantically.

“Okay Jack, just calm down. I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for this and we *will* get to the bottom of it,” Merritt said in a calm rational tone.

Turning to Hardcourt, he looked her straight in the eye. “Nurse Hardcourt—Gayle, I’ve known you for quite a while.

And in all the time we've worked together we've been pretty honest with one another. So, if you have any information about who might have stolen Jack's property, I'd consider it a personal favor if you'd tell me."

Hardcourt took a deep breath and spoke in a more pleasant tone. "Honestly Doctor, I have no idea what happened to his office. I was genuinely upset because of the nasty rumor that started circulating. I merely wanted to let him know that I have feelings and didn't appreciate the humiliation."

Wright wasn't convinced of her story and responded abrasively. "Yeah right, give me a break lady."

Merritt placed both hands up as if to signal a cease-fire and spoke judiciously. "Now hold on a minute. I think you've both been played here. Didn't you say that Bradford was surprisingly cooperative when you requested the additional week's research?" Merritt looked to Wright.

Wright responded with a single nod and Merritt continued.

"And you," he motioned to Hardcourt, "don't know who actually started the rumor, right?"

This time Hardcourt nodded as Merritt continued to construct his hypothesis.

"Well then, I think it's quite obvious what's happened here. We know that Bradford had something to do with this, but you can't go marching up to his office making accusations. Obviously, someone was following your movements Jack, and I believe the rumor was created as a diversion while that *someone* was clearing out your office. Whoever started the rumor took a calculated risk, hoping Nurse Hardcourt would respond the way she did."

Hardcourt looked shocked. "Are you saying that Dr. Bradford was the one who created this whole mess?"

Wright was still not convinced of Hardcourt's innocence and retorted sarcastically. "Oh gee—I suppose you knew nothing about this nurse."

Hardcourt turned to Wright and made an earnest statement. "I really don't know anything about this. You know that I've been fighting to get you out of the ER, but I've always gone through official channels. I would never resort to stealing or have any part in such a plan. And I will be the first to apologize for accusing you of starting the rumor."

Wright was momentarily stunned. Nurse Hardcourt was too shrewd a woman to apologize just to maintain a front. In fact, this was the first time he had heard her utter the words. He thought for a moment and spoke cautiously. "Okay, so maybe you didn't know anything about this, but I still don't trust you."

"Nevertheless, I intend to have a little chat with Dr. Bradford. Nobody comes into my ER and stirs up vicious rumors about me," Hardcourt exclaimed angrily and left the room.

Merritt turned to Wright and spoke candidly. "Well Jack, I think you need to pay Dr. Bradford a visit. Perhaps he'll be able to shed some light on the situation. But whatever you do, don't just outright accuse the man. You do that and I guarantee this project will be over."

Weasels Abound

The sun was all but obscured by a mass of dark clouds hovering overhead. The glass-laden sides of the Neurology building stood in grayness like an empty void of solitude and tiny streaks of water painted the lifeless windows as a light drizzle began.

Inside, Wright paced from one corner of the elevator to the next. An eternity seemed to be passing as the lift slowly ascended and he watched the floor numbers change with agonizing anticipation. Two—he took a deep breath, carefully considering his next words for Bradford. Three—he clasped his hands together tightly, causing blood to rush through his fingers in an attempt to contain his anger. Four—he stood anxiously waiting for the elevator doors to open. They finally slide apart and Wright bolted out of the compartment. He rushed down the hallway and paused for a moment as he reached the door to Bradford’s office. Taking a deep, controlled breath, he entered.

The receptionist greeted him with unusual enthusiasm. “Hey Jack, it’s great to see you again!”

“Hi Andrea. I hate to be rude, but I need to see Bradford immediately!”

“I’m sorry Jack, but Dr. Bradford’s not in his office right now,” she said innocently.

“What do mean he’s not in his office? Where the hell is he?”

“I—I don’t know. He left about ten minutes ago and didn’t say where he was going,” she answered in a rather meek tone.

Wright lowered his tone in response and gave her a consoling smile. “Look. I’m sorry for snapping at you, but I’ve got a major problem right now and I need to speak with him.”

Andrea regained her composure and made an earnest attempt to calm him. “Jack—I don’t know why you’re upset, but I’d really like to help.”

Wright pondered for a few moments, finally accepting her offer. “Alright,” he said nodding. “Do you know what happened to my office in the ER today?”

Andrea seemed perplexed by the question, and responded apprehensively. “Dr. Bradford said that he spoke with you this morning. At your request, he had everything transferred over not more than an hour ago.”

“Where, might I ask, did he have it transferred to?” He pressed further.

Andrea smiled, as would a child who knew the answer to a difficult question. “Your new office of course! I helped to arrange it. I was so excited when I heard that you’d...” She stopped and corrected herself. “I mean your research would be conducted up here.”

“I see,” Wright uttered deliberately. “You wouldn’t mind showing me to my new office? Would you?”

“Not at all. It’s right across the hall. Just give me a minute,” she said cheerfully, tapping several buttons on her telephone.

Andrea led the way to a well-proportioned office adjacent to Bradford’s. The smell of fresh paint still lingered in the air and the plush carpet bore signs of a recent cleaning. Several new pieces of furniture had been introduced and Wright’s old

tattered desk had been replaced with a larger, more ornate one. Aside from this, everything else looked the same. The papers were neatly stacked as they had been before and all the other items were in their respective places. Nevertheless, Wright's immediate concern was focused on the little black box.

"Andrea, what happened to the contents of my old desk?" he inquired anxiously.

"Don't worry," she said with a reassuring smile. "We transferred everything from your old desk into your new desk. You have my personal assurance that it's all there."

Wright walked over to the desk and began sifting through the drawers. Andrea just stood there watching him with an impassioned yearning. She had had very few opportunities to really interact with this mysterious figure, and was hoping that this would be her chance to open up to him.

Andrea was an attractive young woman with few eccentricities. She wore little makeup, and rightfully so. Her fair complexion was smooth and young, and her dark green eyes gleamed with the optimism of a naïve young woman. Her small, feminine mouth was outlined by naturally blushed lips and her nose was slender. The hairstyle she wore was short and conservative and complemented her straight brown hair. And the short suit skirt and white blouse she wore only slightly obscured her firm, youthful body.

Andrea stood at the entrance in somewhat of a pose with one hand perched against the doorway and the other hand straddling her side. She continued to watch as Wright meticulously examined the contents of every drawer. She shifted her expression several times, hoping to capture his attention with a warm sensual smile.

After several frantic minutes he raised his eyes to her and spoke in a calm tone. “Well, it looks like everything’s in its place—with one exception.” He paused for a reaction.

She wore a look of genuine concern. “What is it Jack?”

“Something’s missing. Something that has a dramatic impact on my research. In fact, without that something I can’t complete my—research.” Wright gasped for breath as he choked on his own words.

“I don’t understand. Nothing was removed. Are you sure it was in your desk?”

“Yes!” he responded emphatically.

Andrea was momentarily speechless. “I—I don’t know what to say,” she stammered.

Wright seemed uninterested in her response as he began to formulate his next statement. “Now that I think about it. It was in a locked drawer. And I’m the only one with a key. Maybe you’d like to explain to me how you got it open.” His suspicions were growing.

Andrea was visibly upset. It was becoming apparent that she was not part of Bradford’s insidious scheme. She took a breath and responded. “You’ve got to believe me when I tell you I really don’t know what’s going on. I was given a job to do and I thought I was doing the right thing. All I can tell you is that if something’s missing, it was missing before it came up here.” She paused to catch a quick breath. “And none of the drawers were locked. I know that for a fact.”

Wright was suspicious of her motives, but decided to extend her some trust. He moved towards her and placed his hand gently on her shoulder.

“Look Andrea. You have to understand my paranoia here. I’ve been going toe to toe with Bradford for months now and

at this point he may have just won. I respect the fact that he's your boss, but in all honesty the man's a total creep."

Andrea looked Wright square in the eyes and spoke solemnly. "Jack—I'm not totally oblivious to what's been going on. I know that Dr. Bradford's been opposed to your research from day one. I also know that he's had someone spying on you. I only wish I could tell you who."

"That's all right. I kind of suspected as much."

Andrea sighed. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before, but I didn't want to get involved. I figured that it was none of my business. I had no idea Dr. Bradford was going to take it this far."

"I appreciate your honesty Andrea. Anything else you'd like to share?"

She thought for a moment and responded. "Well, I can tell you that Dr. Bradford and Nurse Hardcourt have been meeting for, shall we say, unofficial business. Maybe she can shed some light on the situation. I'm sure she would be more than willing to cooperate in exchange for your silence."

Wright raised a brow in interest. "Good point, but I don't think she knows anything about the theft. Although, it does explain why she was so upset when she heard that Bradford was involved with the rumor."

Andrea wore a look of confusion. "What rumor?"

"I'll tell you later. Right now we need to find the missing monitor. It's about eight inches long and black with a numerical keypad and display," he explained, measuring with his hands.

"I bet Dr. Bradford had one of his wormy little assistants steal it. Lord knows he wouldn't have done it himself," she said sarcastically.

Wright's eyes lit up. The realization struck him like a bolt of lightning. "Wait a minute. That's it! Bradford's assistants. He mentioned something about them in an earlier conversation. Any idea who he might've been talking about?"

"If I were to guess I'd say one of them has to be Chad Collins. He's probably Dr. Bradford's most loyal minion. He's also a brown-nosing little weasel. I can't think of anyone else who'd be involved, but I think I know where Chad might be."

"Well then perhaps we should pay him a visit," Wright said, extending his arm towards the door.

She acknowledged him with a sharp nod and exclaimed, "Follow me!"

Bradford had met with Hardcourt in their usual hiding place. At her request the two converged and were currently discussing the situation that had spawned the notorious rumor.

"Everett—I really wish you'd give me a straight answer about this whole Wright situation. I think that my loyalty and intimacy with you entitles me to an honest answer!"

"Just calm down Gayle," he said, with a condescending smile. "We all have to play our part in order to maintain the prestige and respectability of this institution. Sometimes we must sacrifice our own interests. Our first and foremost responsibility is to the clinic and the patients that depend on our professionalism. Isn't that what you've always said?"

"Cut the crap Evy," she snapped harshly. "That line of B.S. may work on your impressionable young interns, but you're not squirming your way out of this one. You better give me a straight answer or so help me I'll beat it out of you."

Bradford, amused by her threat, continued to divert her efforts. "I'm tempted by your offer," he quipped and began

searching through one of the supply racks. He located a length of rubber tubing and offered it to her. “Here. You can tie me up and lash me with this. Perhaps we can even take turns,” he said with a perverse smile.

Hardcourt was becoming enraged and snapped at Bradford again. “I’m going to ask you one last time. Did you have anything to do with that rumor?”

Bradford was no longer amused. He barked back angrily. “Of course I did you stupid twit! I needed a diversion to allow my men time to clear out his office. And you played it so well my dear. He’s probably still roaming around trying to figure out what happened. And soon I’ll know what it is that he’s really been working on. Nobody pulls the wool over my eyes and gets away with it.”

Hardcourt sneered at him as she spoke. “Evy—I never thought I’d say this to you, but you’re nothing but an self-centered, egotistical bastard. I used to look up to you and respect you, but now I just pity you. Your pathetic attempts to squelch Wright have all but failed and now you resort to theft? Even I didn’t think you’d stoop so low. I honestly think you’re jealous of Wright because he has something you don’t.”

Bradford blurted out a few forced laughs. “And what could that possibly be?” His face contorted grotesquely.

“Honesty,” she said and began counting off with her fingers. “Integrity, compassion, vision...”

Bradford broke in harshly, “Shut up! Just shut the hell up! What do you know you insignificant whore. If it weren’t for me you would’ve lost your job a long time ago. Don’t think that I’ve forgotten about that patient you killed. I think you need to consider...”

“At this point, I really don’t care what you think anymore. Yet again you illustrate how pathetic you really are. That man

died because I allowed my personal prejudices to interfere with my job, and that's a mistake I'll have to live with for the rest of my life. I told you about that incident because I thought you were my friend—my confidant. But now I know what you really are. You're just a tired jealous little old man with a major inferiority complex," she exclaimed in a cruel callous tone. With that, Hardcourt turned abruptly and walked towards the exit. Bradford stood there dumbfounded. He tried to respond, but ultimately remained speechless.

Wright and Andrea arrived at the door to the Neuroelectrical Instrumentation Lab located on the second floor of the Neurology building. A low whirring sound could be heard on the other side of the door. Wright clasped the knob tightly, took a deep breath and entered.

Inside, two men dressed in long white coats were sitting around a large countertop with several electronic instruments within their reach. At first the object they were working on was obscured by one of the men, but as Wright approached he gawked in horror. The small black device was now in several pieces. The back cover had been removed and several boards were strewn about the tabletop surface. One of the men was attempting some type of measurement with a computerized device. On the device, several waveforms flickered and the pitch of the whirring sound changed with each new measurement.

"What the hell do you think you're doing," Wright barked angrily.

"Excuse me, but do you belong here?" one of the men queried sarcastically.

Andrea chimed in quickly, trying to calm Wright. “Please Jack. Try and relax. I’m sure these men are just following orders.”

“Maybe so, but that’s my property and they have no right to it. Besides, I doubt they know what they’re doing anyway,” Wright retorted derisively.

“Let me guess. You must be Jackson Wright. Ah yes, Dr. Bradford’s told me so much about you.” The man addressing Wright was indeed Chad Collins—a weasel of a man with red hair, hazel eyes and a pair of thick rimmed spectacles that only further detracted from his meager appearance. “He also told me that you’d be working with us. Let me be the first to say that it will be an honor...”

Wright cut in abruptly. “Excuse me? Working with you? I don’t care what Dr. Bradford said. This is my project and I never agreed to share my research with anyone. Especially with some lab assistants!”

Collins responded calmly. “There’s no need for insults. I’m just following Dr. Bradford’s orders. Seeing that this project is now under the jurisdiction of the Neurology Department, I think you need to reevaluate your position.”

Andrea quickly intervened. “Excuse us for a moment,” she said and motioned Wright off to the side. “Listen Jack. I think you need to cooperate a little. Fighting’s not going to get you anywhere. You seem to forget that Collins is loyal to Dr. Bradford. Since you can’t reason with him, you’re going to have to outsmart him.”

Wright nodded apprehensively and walked over to Collins again. “Perhaps I am being a little uncooperative, but you have to understand that I’ve spent over two years developing this technology. It’s not easy for me to just hand it over.”

“Of course I understand. We’re not trying to steal your research. We’re just trying to get up to speed with what you’ve already accomplished. That’s all.”

“What a rotten liar,” Wright thought to himself.

Collins retrieved a notepad and spoke again. “Look. We’ll be happy to give back the monitor, but I’d really appreciate it if you could answer some questions first.”

Wright was taken aback by the absurd request, but was resigned to indulge the overzealous assistant. “Alright then. What would you like to know?”

Collins glanced at his notepad. “Okay. I noticed that you’re using a high gain telescopic induction coil to pick up the bioelectrical signals. Why not use transdermal pads? I mean this a unique approach, but aren’t you worried about RF noise and signal degradation?”

Wright smiled and responded coyly. “Well, it’s very simple. I’m measuring over thirty different signals. In an emergency situation it would be too intrusive and time consuming to try and attach all the appropriate contact pads. Additionally, some of the measurements I’m taking can’t be made through transdermal connections. This is the only way to accurately measure everything. And that board you removed?” Wright pointed to one of the gutted boards lying on the table. “That board enhances the signal input with dynamic noise suppression.”

Collins, realizing that he was clearly out of his league, hesitated with the next question. “Okay—okay. On the main board you have a series of microprocessors working in a multiplexing array. Why was this necessary? We’re only talking about low frequency real-time measurements. What’s with the high powered processing?” This time he felt more confident that he had Wright cornered.

Again Wright smiled. “I’ll admit, it seems like overkill, but when you’re trying to sample, process, cross-reference and store thousands of pieces of data all in a matter of milliseconds, you need a fast processor. You see, the device not only measures, but also interprets the information and literally anticipates biological changes before they happen, thus optimizing the quality of the measurements.”

Collins stared blankly for a moment. He was completely dumbfounded. Wright had finally broken through the calm, cool demeanor. Unable to outwit Wright, he decided to resort to petty accusations. “You’re hiding something!”

Wright was becoming impatient again. “I think I’ve answered enough questions. I’m tired of playing games and I suggest that you give me the monitor back now!”

Collins ignored his request and continued to recite his adolescent drivel. “If you’re not going to cooperate then I have no choice but to hold it for further testing. If you’ve got a problem with that, you can take it up with Dr. Bradford!”

Just as he completed his sentence, Bradford entered the room. He had a ridiculous grin on his face. “Hello everyone. Jack—I see you’ve met my assistants—or should I say, your assistants now.”

At first glance Wright wanted to unleash his fury upon the man, but quickly realized that any actions against Bradford would jeopardize his chances of completing his research. Wisely, he pushed the past events out of his mind, took a deep breath and responded sagaciously. “Yes. I was just educating them on the finer nuances of my work. They have a lot to learn.” Wright glanced over to Collins who was now leering at him.

“Excellent. I’m glad to see that you’re getting along,” Bradford said as he too found Collins.

Collins interjected politely. “Dr. Bradford—I was just explaining to our colleague here, that we need a little more time for our initial evaluation. He wanted to remove the device before we had a chance to finish.”

Wright could feel his heart sinking deeper into his chest. He needed to get the monitor back. Yet, it was Bradford’s next statement that nearly dropped him to his knees.

“Chad, just give the man back his device. You’re working under his authority now and there will be plenty of time for studying it later. I’m sure that Jack has a lot of work to do.” Bradford was literally scolding Collins like an insolent schoolboy. “I’m sorry Jack. These young lads can be a little too enthusiastic sometimes. I’m sure you understand.”

Wright was astonished by the exchange, and just stood there in silence. Andrea eventually nudged him, prompting him to walk over to the tabletop where the device lay. He sighed at the current state of the monitor, but made quick work of reassembling it. After installing all the loose boards he finally replaced the back cover.

Wright turned to Bradford and spoke solemnly. “As you said, I have a lot of work to do.” He was still stunned by Bradford’s actions as he exited the room. Andrea followed close behind, but was stopped by Bradford.

“Andrea—don’t you think you better return to the office now?” Bradford made more of a request than an inquiry.

“Yes. That’s where I was headed,” she responded meekly.

Upon her exit, Bradford turned to Collins with a seething expression on his face. “So help me God, you better tell me that you got the information I requested,” he shouted in a harsh, gravely tone.

Collins stumbled on his words in response. “Well—you see—I didn’t exactly get what you requested, but I did discover

a few things that would indicate that he might be doing something more than what he's telling us." He offered the notepad as evidence.

Bradford was infuriated. "Damn it to hell! I told you I needed proof you stupid imbecile! This man has been evading me, and taunting me, and making a fool of me! I have to have conclusive evidence that the man's trying to capture a human soul! Do you understand? Can you get that through your underdeveloped cranium!?"

Collins crumbled in his wake, responding with a feeble, murmured acknowledgment. Bradford slammed the notepad into the young man's chest, nearly knocking the wind from him, and stormed out of the lab.

The Beast Within

“Dr. Merritt! Dr. Merritt!” Brighton shouted as he raced down the ER corridor. Merritt turned to find the young intern rapidly approaching. Brighton finally caught up with the other man and placed his hands upon his knees as he tried to catch a breath.

“What can I do for you Jerrod?” Merritt asked.

“I was trying to find Jack, but you’ll do,” he responded smugly. “I saw two men leaving Jack’s office earlier. At first I had no idea what was going on, but when I saw the empty office I realized what had happened. My first reaction was to find Jack, but when I noticed that one of them was carrying the monitor, I thought I better follow them instead. So I did.” Brighton smiled, pausing for a suspenseful cue.

Merritt finally spoke up. “And? Where is it now?”

“Well, the two men split up. Of course, I followed the one with the monitor. It wasn’t easy. I didn’t want him to spot me. You know?”

“I get the point Jerrod. Your enthusiasm is appreciated. So where’s the monitor now?”

“In the Neuroelectrical Instrumentation Lab over in the Neurology building,” he said ostentatiously.

“Good work Jerrod. I’ll let Jack know as soon as I see him.” Merritt acknowledged him with an approving smile and began to walk away.

Before he could take another step, the younger man intervened. “Dr. Merritt—Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes, what is it?” Merritt countered impatiently.

“Well, you know I’m behind Jack one hundred percent, but I was hoping you’d tell me what’s really going on.”

Merritt was slightly taken by the imposition and spoke cautiously. “Look, I appreciate the information that you’ve provided, but I think it would be best if you just stayed on the sidelines.”

Brighton wore a look of genuine frustration. “I don’t know why you feel it’s necessary to hide things from me. I’ve been here for almost two years now and I’ve always come to you whenever I had a problem. Doesn’t that count for something?”

Merritt considered the young man’s plea and responded kindly. “Well, let me tell you this. What Jack’s doing is going to revolutionize the field of neurology. Imagine being able to predict a heart attack or let’s say—even a stroke, simply by scanning a patient’s brain waves. If we had that kind of diagnostic capability, we’d be able to treat the problem long before it became life threatening. It all has to do with understanding how the brain interacts with the rest of the body. That’s what the Delta wave research is all about.”

Brighton chimed in politely. “I understand that, but be honest with me. Is there any truth to the rumors that Jack’s trying to tap into the human soul?”

Merritt stood silent for a moment, but finally responded. “Jerrod—people interpret things in many different ways. All I can tell you is that Jack’s a lot further along than even I know. Right now he’s already collected enough information to do exactly what we just talked about.”

“So are you saying that he’s already completed the Delta wave research?”

Merritt didn’t respond, but his expression said volumes.

“Well, personally I think it’s all very exciting and I honestly hope that Jack succeeds,” Brighton said, wearing an impish grin.

“So do I,” Merritt retorted and headed down the corridor.

Wright had found his way back into the ER and was passing the nurse’s station. He couldn’t help but notice Nurse Hardcourt’s gaze focused upon him. What disturbed him most was her expression. Normally, he would have expected a scowl or loathsome sneer, but hers was a look of kindness—perhaps even approbation.

“Jack! There you are,” Merritt exclaimed.

Wright, in somewhat of a trance, was startled momentarily by the otherwise innocuous greeting. “Chris—what’s going on?” he said, still slightly perplexed.

“I just talked to Jerrod. Apparently, he witnessed two men leaving your office with the monitor.”

“Really? He didn’t bother telling me,” Wright countered with discernible skepticism in his voice.

“Well, according to him, he had to make a choice—follow the monitor or find you. He chose to follow the monitor. And you’ll never guess where they took it.” Merritt smiled with anticipation.

“To the Neuroelectrical Instrumentation Lab,” Wright responded nonchalantly and produced the small black box.

“What the...” Merritt stammered, baffled by Wright’s presentation of the unit.

“Things are starting to get really weird around here!”

“What do you mean?” Merritt queried reluctantly.

“Well, first of all. I went up to Bradford’s office and he wasn’t there. So I have this confrontation with his secretary, Andrea, and she literally goes out of her way to help me. The next thing I know, perhaps out of guilt, she tells me about a spy...”

“So you confirmed that Bradford’s got someone spying on you?” Merritt interjected.

“I have no doubt that someone’s spying on me, but she didn’t know who it was. *How convenient*, I thought. Next, she tells me that Bradford and Hardcourt are romantically involved. That didn’t surprise me.” Wright rolled his eyes.

“That surprises me,” Merritt retorted. “I can’t imagine what Gayle would see in that overblown windbag.”

“Nevertheless, everything Andrea’s told me so far has been true. She was the one who knew exactly where to find the monitor. Oh, and that’s another thing. You know the two morons who took the monitor? They had it completely disassembled. I managed to reassemble it, but apparently they damaged one of the co-processors. I’ll have to take it home to fix it.” Wright looked at the monitor, shaking his head in disgust. “I actually got into it with this one guy, whose ego rivals even Bradford’s. The worst part though, was when Bradford walked into the room. I thought I’d never get the monitor back. Boy was I wrong. Bradford told the assistant in no uncertain terms to just hand it over. I was literally stunned. Here I thought I’d be facing a major confrontation, but the man just smiles and acts as if everything’s peachy. Oh, and did I mention that Andrea was in the middle of all this. I’m not sure what to make of her. Either she really wants to help or she’s just playing the part to win my trust.”

“Jack—not everyone’s out to get you,” Merritt said with a reassuring smile.

“I realize that, but after everything that’s happened, I’d rather be a little overcautious than not cautious enough,” Wright replied and then continued. “Anyway—to top it all off, I’m walking by the Nurse’s station just a few minutes ago and noticed Nurse Hardcourt. Normally I can expect the customary dirty look, but this time she was actually smiling at me. Explain that one.”

Merritt considered the question carefully for a moment and finally responded. “I think there are a lot of underlying issues that neither one of us really know about, but if I had to guess, I’d say that Dr. Bradford probably burned his bridges with Nurse Hardcourt today. I also think that he’s made certain concessions with the Medical Board and can’t back out now. So in that regard you may have the upper hand.”

“Well, at this point I’m just hoping to get another chance at a reading before Bradford can make his next move. If you’re right, he may be panicking and I’d rather not find out what he’s willing to try next.”

“Yeah, I hear you,” Merritt concurred. “Oh, by the way. Seeing as you’re not going to be doing any readings tonight, I thought maybe we could get together with my father this evening. He just flew in from California on business and I’m sure he’d like to see you.”

Wright spoke reluctantly. “I don’t know. I really need to fix the monitor first. Replacing the co-processor is going to take me at least two hours.”

“Jack—it’s a little after four. Go home, fix the monitor, and meet us in the Flats at nine. That gives you plenty of time. And I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer,” Merritt said, smiling confidently. Wright hesitated for a moment, but eventually conceded to his friend’s request with a simple nod.

It was an unusually clear night as several bright stars glimmered through the azure dusk. Wright entered their usual haunt, working his way through the crowd. After scanning the interior of the restaurant he stepped outside. There was a small covered bar as well as several tables scattered about the wooden deck overlooking the river. Merritt and his father were taking advantage of the cool night air as they indulged in a glass of wine. The flame from a single candle flickered brightly in the center of the table.

Merritt's father, John, was a distinguished old man with kind eyes and an honest face. His hair was still full, but the gray had almost entirely enveloped the few remaining patches of brownish blonde. His build was not dissimilar to that of his son's with the exception of his waist which extended out slightly beyond his belt line.

"Jack—it's great to see you again," John said resoundingly and stood up to receive the man.

"It's good to see you too, Dr. Merritt," Wright responded, countering with a solid handshake.

"Please Jack, call me John," the older man retorted.

Wright nodded and took his seat between the two men. As the waitress approached, he fumbled for a menu.

"Are you ready to order now?" the waitress queried. John looked over to Wright, who was leafing through the menu. After a moment, Wright finally looked up and nodded.

"Yes, I'll have the Lobster Tail, a baked potato with plenty of butter and sour cream, and a side order of steamed clams—extra butter and Tabasco sauce," John exclaimed, concluding his order with a smile.

Merritt gave his father a disapproving stare and placed his order. Wright noticed the exchange, but chose not to interject. The waitress finally took Wright's order and rushed off.

“So Jack, Chris tells me you’ve made some significant progress in your research,” John said inquisitively.

“Indeed, but it’s been very difficult keeping the proverbial hands out of the cookie jar—if you know what I mean,” Wright quipped sarcastically. John acknowledged him with a sharp nod and Wright continued. “In all honesty, I can’t wait to finish this project. It’s been a major headache. I’m sure Chris has told you.”

“Well Jack, nothing that’s worthwhile in life comes easy. Just remember. It’s not the research that makes a man great. It takes a great man to make the research great. Consider how many times researchers went off half cocked, trying to sell their ideas and theories only to discover their research had already been disputed.” John paused momentarily for a dramatic climax. “I’m still not sure how many eggs I can eat in one week,” he cracked keenly and everyone chuckled in response.

“That’s why Bradford detests you so much,” Merritt interjected, his tone somewhat more serious. “He stands on the shoulders of great men, taking credit for their work as if it were his own. Don’t get me wrong. The man is a magnificent neurosurgeon, perhaps one of the best in the world. But he lacks one crucial talent—creativity—one of the key ingredients for a truly successful researcher.”

Jack smiled and replied. “Well, it’s been a long hard road, but I’m very close. So I’m not about to give up now.”

Just as he said that, a loud horn sounded off in the distance. One of the large railway bridges resting over the river began to rise. Gradually, it ascended until finally it reached the top of the girded structure. Only moments after, a large ship passed slowly beneath, clearing the bridge by just a few feet.

John was mildly impressed. “To be honest, I didn’t think that ship was going to clear the bridge.”

“Believe it or not, the bottom of that ship’s only a few feet from river floor,” Wright retorted keenly.

John took the opportunity to impart some wisdom upon the two younger men. “That brings up a great point. Just imagine what would’ve happened if the bridge operator and the ship’s pilot had failed to communicate. Certainly, disaster would’ve ensued.”

Wright and Merritt glanced at one another with a look of confusion. John motioned toward the retreating ship and continued.

“No, I’m not going senile. I’m just trying to make a correlation between that situation and yours. Chris was telling me that this project has put a real strain on your friendship.” Wright and Merritt nodded simultaneously.

“It’s so important to remember what friendship’s all about. Without friends you can’t communicate your ideas, your feelings, your experiences, among other things. You may not even realize it, but many of what you consider to be your best qualities are usually developed from the friends you respect and admire the most. And let’s face it. Women are wonderful, lovely creatures that enhance and enrich our lives, but there are just some things you can’t share with them. The problem is, more often than not, you meet that special someone and wind up alienating yourself from the rest of the world—sometimes even your family.” John momentarily glanced at Merritt and then repositioned himself in his chair. His tone was suddenly very solemn.

“I don’t mean to be long winded, so I’ll get to the point. Stark observation hasn’t always been my strong suit, but it’s quite obvious to me that you rely on one another more than

you'd probably like to admit." John paused for a moment and then looked towards Merritt again. "When Erica left you, you were absolutely devastated. And when all your yuppie friends shunned you as a divorcee, who was the one friend who came to you in time of need?"

Merritt wore a look of compunction as he motioned towards Wright. John nodded and then drew his attention upon the man in question.

"And Jack, I know you don't like to talk about it, but who was the one person that kept you going when you lost Cassandra?"

This time Wright drew his eyes upon Merritt and nodded remorsefully.

"I guess what I'm really trying to say is that you've always been there for one another. Don't let that change now. Don't ever let the communication break down." John concluded his speech by smiling kindly upon both men.

The waitress had returned with a second waitress, each toting a large tray of food. After distributing the entrees accordingly, they left the three men to enjoy their feast.

John immediately delved into a bowl of steaming hot clams, slathering each one with an excess of butter and Tabasco before placing them into his mouth. For the second time Merritt gave his father a disapproving stare. This time Wright was slightly bothered and imposed upon Merritt.

"Is there a problem Chris?" he inquired in a disconcerted tone.

Merritt glanced at his father again and then turned to Wright. "No, I'm just worried about his eating habits. He's disregarded my advice, as well as the advice of his own physician. He's already been warned about his blood pressure and cholesterol level, yet he still eats like a twenty year old."

John quickly swallowed a portion of food and then cleared his throat. “Look here Chris! I’ve been a doctor longer than you’ve been alive. I don’t need a second opinion about my own health. I’ve lived my life to the fullest and I don’t intend to stop now. When my time’s up, I’ll relish in that knowledge.”

Wright, sensing the tension, attempted to lighten up the situation. “Now that’s a man who knows how to live.”

“Damn it Jack, don’t encourage him! That’s the foolish justification of a stubborn old man,” Merritt retorted angrily.

John recognized his son’s anguish and responded with kind words. “Chris, I appreciate your concern, but at this point, I’ve accepted the fact that I won’t be around much longer. And I’m okay with that. I miss your mother and I’d like to join her soon.”

Merritt placed his hand over his eyes, shielding them from view. Wright responded by placing a hand on Merritt’s shoulder in an attempt to console him.

“Chris? Are you alright?” Wright spoke softly. “Is this about your mom?”

Merritt looked up. His eyes were slightly red and swollen. He glanced over at his father. John was wearing a look of sorrow. “Yes. I’ve always had a hard time dealing with her death. And right now the last thing I want to do is bury my father!”

“Chris—everyone dies eventually. That doesn’t mean that you lose them forever. It’s all about what you keep up here.” John tapped on his temple. “The memories, the experiences—that’s all I have left of your mother.”

“You just don’t understand. You weren’t there when she died,” Merritt responded as his eyes began to well up with tears. The candle in the center of the table continued

to burn brightly as Merritt began to recollect the day of his mother's death.

Young Merritt sat in a chair at the foot of his mother's hospital bed. The room was huge and intimidating to his six-year-old eyes, and his sleeping mother seemed to be a million miles away from him. He sat there quietly, as his father conferred with another doctor, all the while wanting so badly to participate in the conversation. But he knew better than to interrupt. The two men paused for a moment and the boy took his cue to finally speak up.

"Daddy—is mommy ever gonna get better?" Young Merritt inquired. The distress was apparent in his voice.

Merritt's father exchanged a few more words with the other doctor and then dismissed him. Walking over to the young boy, he knelt down. "Son, you know how I told you that my job is to keep people from going to Heaven before they're supposed to. Well, sometimes we can't stop people from going to Heaven." Merritt's father had to pause momentarily as the emotion rushed up through his throat and began to press on the backs of his eyeballs. "What I'm trying to say is that soon it'll be your mommy's time to go to Heaven."

"But I don't want her to go. If she leaves I won't have a mommy. Who's gonna be my mommy?" Young Merritt began sniffing as his father tried desperately to console him.

"Christopher, I know how hard this is, but your mommy's in so much pain, and where she's going will bring her peace and happiness. Don't you want mommy to feel better?"

"Yeah. But isn't mommy happy here? How come you can't make the pain go away? You always make my pain go away," young Merritt retorted and continued to sob.

Merritt's father stammered as he tried to respond to the barrage of questions.

"Christopher darling, come here and let mommy take away those tears," Merritt's mother said, slowly opening her wearied eyelids.

Young Merritt's eyes lit up with joy. "Mommy," his tiny voice resonated as he rushed over to his mother's side. She extended an arm and young Merritt latched onto it like a lost fledgling returning to the safety of its mother crest.

"It's okay Christopher," she said in a soft tone. "I don't want you to cry anymore. There's no need for tears now. I'm here."

Producing a tissue, she leaned over slightly and blotted his eyes. Young Merritt finally fought back the tears, but continued to snuffle. His mother smiled at him lovingly. He responded with a huge grin.

"That's better," she said, taking his small hand into her own. There was a brief moment of silence as they stood there just enjoying one another. Merritt's father smiled for the first time, but said nothing, so as not to intrude upon the tender moment.

Young Merritt finally broke the silence. "Mommy? Is it true that you have to go to Heaven? Please tell me it's not true. Pleeese." His eyes began to well up with tears again.

Merritt's mother sighed and responded softly. "I'm not going to lie to you sweetheart. I have to go soon, but that doesn't mean that I won't always be right here." She placed her hand gently upon his chest as he began to sob again.

"Christopher—please don't cry. Come on now. I want you to listen to me," she said, pleading with the young boy. "I'll always be in your heart. Don't ever forget that. If you ever feel like you're missing me, all you have to do is close

your eyes and think of me, and I'll be there." Merritt's mother held his hand firmly as she spoke, rubbing his knuckles with her thumb.

"What do you mean?" he queried woefully.

"Just close your eyes and think of one of the best times we ever had together. It can be whatever you want. Like our trip to the mountains or the time we drove to Aspen or maybe even the time we went to Hawaii. Hey, you remember that little Hawaiian doll you had?"

"Yeesss," he responded in a silly voice and began to giggle.

"Remember how much you loved that doll and took it everywhere we went? You even slept with it."

Young Merritt smiled with the joy of the memory.

"See how easy it is sweetheart. Those memories never go away. And neither will I," she said, smiling back at him.

Suddenly her expression became very distraught, as if a knife had been thrust between her ribs. She looked over to Merritt's father, but did not speak. She didn't have to. He knew what she was feeling.

"Are you okay mommy?" young Merritt murmured, feeling uneasy again.

"Yes sweetheart," she labored out forcefully.

Merritt's father moved to her bedside, leaning over to talk to her. She grabbed his shoulder harshly and whispered something in his ear. At first, he shook his head, but she persisted and he finally caved into her demand.

"Alright honey, I'll see what I can do," he exclaimed and rushed out of the room.

Young Merritt, confused by the exchange, made an innocent inquiry. "Is daddy going to take your pain away?"

“He’s going to try,” she responded in a weak empty tone. “You just hold my hand and maybe the pain will go away on it’s own.”

She fought the excruciating discomfort just to wear a genuine smile for her young son. He smiled back at her, but the pain was intensifying. Her grip on his small hand was becoming tighter and the boy finally squealed.

“Ouch Mommy—you’re hurting me,” he exclaimed, but she was no longer in control. Her eyes rolled back into their sockets and her body began to convulse.

Young Merritt looked on in horror, all the while trying to release his hand from her painful grip. He tugged several times and eventually broke lose. Her arms began to flail violently as her head crashed down upon the pillow.

“Please mommy stop! Pleeease!” he cried, but she continued to convulse. Out of sheer terror, he shuffled backwards just beyond her reach, ultimately dropping to his knees. Gasping for a breath, he yelped, but nothing came out. Again, he tried to cry out and again he failed to make a sound. The young boy was breathing rapidly as tears began to pour down his cheeks. He felt totally helpless.

Suddenly, she stopped convulsing as her arms dropped to her sides. The room filled with an eerie silence and young Merritt could now hear his own heartbeat pounding upon his eardrums. After a few tense moments, he finally stood and approached the motionless body.

“Mommy?” he uttered timidly. “Mommy? Please wake up.” He shook her hand gently, but she failed to react.

“Mommy,” he shouted more forcefully, but still no response from his mother. All at once the realization had hit him—his mother was gone.

“Mommy!” he cried out pathetically and began to weep.

The center candle was nearly extinguished as it flickered precariously. Wright sat with an expressionless look on his face.

“I couldn’t save her. That’s what kept going through my mind. I felt completely helpless.” Merritt sighed momentarily and continued. “After her death, I spent many sleepless nights trying to piece together any fragment of a happy memory, but as time passed I could no longer visualize her beautiful face. That’s one of life’s greatest ironies.”

Wright nodded with conviction.

“When I got a little older I knew I wanted to be a doctor—for no other reason than to save lives. And it’s my greatest aspiration to do everything in my power to save each and every patient that comes through the ER doors. If I can spare a wife, a mother or even a child the pain that I’ve endured, it is only then that I can rest my conscience.”

John wore a look of total bewilderment. “I had no idea Chris,” he uttered remorsefully.

Few words were exchanged thereafter as the three men quietly finished their meals. The rain clouds, which had held off for most of the night, began to roll in, signaling the conclusion of a somewhat cold and somber evening.

Wright sat at the edge of his bed examining the prescription given to him by Merritt. Grasping a small paper cup, he placed a large caplet onto his tongue. With only a moment’s hesitation, the pill quickly began to dissolve. His face contorted slightly from the bitter taste and he finally washed it down with a mouthful of water. Adjusting the pillows beneath his head, Wright made a conscious plea for a restful slumber. Several minutes passed, and he was already completely motionless.

Wright's eyes opened to a blinding white light causing him to shield them at first. Lowering his arm slowly, everything seemed blurry and he strained to focus. As his eyes adjusted, several figures came into view. He began to make an assessment of his surroundings. With his eyes completely adjusted, he found himself standing in the middle of a funeral. The faces were familiar as well as the setting.

Cassandra's casket was resting above an open grave and the minister was reciting a passage in familiar fashion. "The Lord is my shepherd—I shall not want," the man uttered with great conviction. Wright stood in silence scanning the mourners. The sight of familiar faces provided some solace. He took a deep breath, nodded his head and began to focus on the words of the minister.

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul—a soul in which you have no business calling upon!"

Wright jerked his head up abruptly. He looked to the minister, but the man continued to recite the passage, and no one else had reacted to the bizarre phrase. Wright shook his head gently from side to side as if to shake off the delusion. The minister continued.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil—unless, of course, you delve into things that are better off left alone!"

Again Wright turned towards the holy purveyor and again no one else seemed phased by his taunting quip. Wright cautiously scanned the mourners again, but everyone and everything seemed normal. He decided to maintain a watchful eye on the minister.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life—and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

The word *forever* seemed to resonate unnaturally in the cold December air.

Several mourners began to weep as the minister concluded the Psalm. Wright sighed with relief. The woman next to him finally began to sob as if she had been holding back through the entire precession. He placed his hand gently upon her shoulder and turned to embrace her. As he looked into her eyes his body convulsed with terror.

“I don’t know why everyone’s making such a fuss. I feel fine. Now give me a kiss!” the woman spouted. All that remained of Wright’s deceased wife was a rotting corpse. He yelled out, but everyone was still focused on the casket as it was lowered into the opening.

“Damn it, get away from me you sick bitch!” Wright shouted, but the hideous corpse retained a powerful hold. She opened her mouth and hundreds of maggots dribbled out off the edge of her lip. In an embarrassing moment, she released one of her hands from Wright and proceeded to shove the slithering larvae back into her mouth. Wright wore a grimace of nausea as she daintily pushed the few remaining maggots between her lips with a single finger as if they were a tantalizing delicacy.

“Sorry,” she gurgled and began to chew the contents. Wright took advantage of the distraction, breaking free from her clutches. As she tried to recapture him, they both stumbled and fell onto the casket. Wright looked up and pleaded for assistance, but everyone was oblivious to his plight.

As the funeral concluded, the mourners quietly dispersed. Wright continued to struggle with the corpse as a light rain began to saturate the grave sight.

“Stop struggling my dear. Isn’t this what you wanted? To be with me forever?” she spouted in a gravely tone.

“You’re not my wife damn it! You’re not my wife!” he shouted repeatedly.

The rainfall had intensified. The ground was becoming soft and the heavy casket began to sink into the muddied earth. More and more rapidly the opening to the grave was becoming smaller. Wright finally kicked the tenacious corpse away and stood on the edge of the casket trying to pull himself out. To his misfortune the ground had become soft and he was merely pulling more mud into the grave.

The corpse leapt up at Wright again and both came crashing down onto the casket, causing it to sink even farther. He tried to get up, but she had knocked the breath from his lungs.

“Don’t fight it my love. We were meant to be together. It’s our destiny,” the corpse exclaimed, wrapping her arms tightly around his torso.

“Jack!” a voice rang out from above. “Jack—take my hand!”

Wright looked up at the narrow opening and saw Cassandra extending a hand into the grave. He wore a look of shock, which quickly melted into confusion. She looked completely normal. Her face was more beautiful than ever. He reached skyward, but she was too far away. He struggled to stand, but something was preventing his actions. It was then that he had realized if Cassandra was above, who or more specifically what was pulling at him from beneath. He hesitated to look, but finally glanced down at the gruesome figure.

The hideous corpse of Cassandra was no longer a corpse at all. The long black talons of a horrible demon were now tearing into his flesh. The face of the beast was horrific with black, penetrating eyes and mandibles like that of an insect.

In the center of the mandibles was a large opening, laced with several rows of razor sharp teeth.

Wright kicked violently, trying to break loose as the evil beast sunk its claws deeper into his flesh. The intense pain was beginning to drain his energy. He gathered every ounce of strength in his wearied body and made one last attempt to reach Cassandra. With arm extended, he kicked away from the horrid beast and finally captured the hand of his love.

The beast quickly regained its grasp and began to work its way up Wright's tattered body, tearing new flesh as it ascended.

"Pull Cassandra! For God's sake pull," Wright shouted desperately.

"I'm trying Jack," she cried, "Just don't let go!"

Suddenly, the weight of the beast was tremendous and the muscles in Wright's arm began to burn from the increased load. He looked down to find that the grave had opened up to a huge cavern. The floor of the cavern, perhaps several hundred feet below, was a glowing canvas of molten lava. Cassandra screamed at the hellish sight.

The beast had worked its way up to Wright's face, its claws now tearing into his ribs. "Where do you think you're going," it hissed grotesquely, exposing its razor sharp teeth again. The beast cocked its head back slightly as it prepared to strike.

"No!" Cassandra shrieked as the beast sunk its teeth deeply into his skull.

Wright awoke gasping for breath. He scrambled from his bed and spun around several times scanning the entire room. He finally exhaled a single sigh of relief and headed for the bathroom.

Drenching his hands under the icy water, he soaked his face several times. The chilling liquid began to penetrate his skin. He took several deep breaths and finally reached for a towel. As he blotted his face dry, he opened his eyes to a horrific sight. The reflection of the rotting corpse was now staring him directly in the face.

Wright awoke again screaming. He sprang from his bed and searched the entire house. Satisfied that he was finally awake and alone, he walked over to the nightstand beside his bed, retrieved the prescription and poured the contents into the toilet.

A Nurse's Confession

The room encompassing the Medical Board was overly expansive, creating an illusion of sparse furnishings. Hints of a modern décor appeared to center around a long cherry oak conference table, and off to the side, a miniature model of the entire medical complex stood alone on a complementary oak pedestal. Several framed photographs and conceptual drawings of the hospital stood on opposing walls, chronologically detailing its growth over the last century.

The members of the Board were primarily middle-aged men of varied nationalities, but it was one particularly ambitious woman who stood out amongst the majority. And to Bradford's dismay she was highly revered. So much so, that she had recently become the Director of the Board. Naturally, he held little favor with this woman who despised his flamboyant personality and chauvinistic repertoire. Dr. Anne Tunney was simply too shrewd to succumb to his deceitful tactics.

"I'm having a little trouble understanding why you want us to reverse our decision now. Just a week ago you were singing his praises. And now you're trying to tell us that he's redirecting funds for a phantom project?" Tunney probed impatiently.

"I know it's hard to believe," Bradford responded with a sinister smirk, "but the fact of the matter is—Mr. Wright's

been performing unauthorized experiments right under our noses. We have a moral obligation to shut him down.”

“It took six months of deliberation to endorse this project. We’re not going to drop it simply because of some personal conflict!”

Bradford seemed perplexed. “You’ll have to forgive me Madam Director, but this has nothing to do with a personal conflict. I’m merely looking out for the reputation of this institution. Frankly, I’m insulted by your implication that...”

Tunney interjected abruptly. “Dr. Bradford—there are no implications here. But it has been brought to our attention that you’ve been making things very difficult for the man.”

“He told you that?” Bradford queried with a hint of sarcasm.

“No. Actually we’ve heard it from several sources who will remain anonymous,” Tunney countered shrewdly. “In fact, we find it very disconcerting that a senior member of our staff has carried on in such an unprofessional manner. After this matter’s been resolved, we *will* be conducting a thorough investigation of your administrative practices.”

Bradford was steaming, but quickly recomposed as he responded. “I understand, but I think you need to hear the basis of my accusations before you pass judgment on my actions. I have irrefutable proof that this man has knowingly deceived this institution, and this Board would be foolish not to attend to this issue promptly.”

Another Board member chimed in rather angrily. “Dr. Bradford—I suggest you watch how you address this Board. You’re already skating on thin ice!”

Tunney raised a hand in truce. “We will decide whether or not to take action on this matter. So far, all we’ve heard

from you is unsubstantiated rumors and hearsay. Where's this proof that you've been boasting about."

Everyone's attention was now sternly focused on the man. Bradford calmly produced a manila folder and began distributing the contents to the Board members.

Merritt was sprawled out on a fitness machine, extending and retracting his arms as beads of sweat began to form on his brows—all the while, listening intently to Wright's most recent account of his horrific nightmare.

"...and I looked up to find Cassandra standing above the grave. It's the first time my suspicions had been confirmed."

Merritt paused, lowering the weight bar. The weights made a metallic clank as they came to rest. "What do you mean?" he queried breathlessly.

"Whatever it was that appeared as Cassandra, wasn't her at all. When I looked down to see what it really was, I was horrified." Wright's eyes widened with terror, recollecting the nightmarish image.

Merritt sat motionless in suspense.

"It seemed that my worst fears and phobias had conglomerated into the most horrific beast that I could ever imagine. Something that was part arachnid, part reptile and God knows what else. All I know is that it scared the hell out of me."

"Well Jack, I'm sorry the prescription didn't help. That's strange because..." Before Merritt could complete his sentence, Hardcourt walked into the room.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I was hoping to speak with Jack in private," she said with apprehension.

Wright and Merritt glanced at one another curiously. After a moment, Merritt finally shrugged. Taking that as a cue, Wright stood and exited the room with Hardcourt.

“Jack—is it alright if I call you Jack?” Hardcourt asked. Her tone was somewhat submissive.

Wright glanced down momentarily, confused by her kind demeanor. “Yeah—I guess,” he finally responded.

She took a deep breath and spoke. “I realize this is kind of awkward, but I wanted to apologize for making things so uncomfortable between us.”

Wright was leery of her intentions, but remained silent as she continued.

“Believe me when I say that I can relate to the pain of losing a loved one. I’ve had...”

Wright immediately raised a hand in objection. “Nurse, you’ll have to forgive me, but this topic is not open for discussion—especially with you!”

Hardcourt was not discouraged and pressed on. “Jack—please let me talk. It’s important that you understand where I’m coming from. I’m not the horrible person that everyone makes me out to be.”

Wright said nothing, but gave a nod of affirmation.

“Thank you,” she said graciously and continued. “You see—I wasn’t always this cynical. When I started out as a nurse, I had all the dreams and aspirations of a starry-eyed young woman. That was until one cold December evening.” She paused momentarily to reflect. “I had just finished my Christmas shopping with my daughter Jenny and we were on our way home. As I crossed the intersection of Main and Fourth, I heard this loud bang. The next thing I know, my car’s spinning out of control. When the car finally came to rest, I placed my hand over my face and noticed that I was bleeding. It hadn’t even occurred to me that we’d just been hit by another car. The next thought that went through my mind was that of Jenny. I looked over to see if she was okay.

To my horror the entire passenger's side had been completely caved in. At first, it looked as if Jenny had survived. She smiled at me as if to let me know that she was alright, but then she closed her eyes and never opened them again." Hardcourt's eyes began to well up with tears. For the first time Wright felt genuine sympathy for the woman and placed his hand on her shoulder.

Hardcourt quickly regained her composure and continued. "Anyway, the man who hit us jumped out of his car. As he approached, I thought he might be coming over to help, but he simply ignored us as he ran by. It couldn't have been more than a few moments before the police arrived. It turns out that we'd been the victims of a high-speed pursuit. The man was a notorious drug dealer."

Wright politely interrupted. "I'll hazard to guess that the individual in question was black."

"Yes," she responded somberly and resumed her story. "But that's not the end of it. He was eventually arrested and the DA began pursuing charges of vehicular homicide. Unfortunately, before they could make the charges stick, the man somehow made bail. To no one's surprise he fled the state. As a result, I then had only one mission in life—to find the man who murdered my daughter."

The memories and images of the event began to race through Wright's mind. "Wait a minute. I remember this story. You mean to tell me that was you?"

"Yes, but obviously I was under my married name at the time," she responded rather coldly.

Wright seemed stunned as he spoke. "I would've never have guessed you'd been married—let alone had a child." He paused for a moment, pondering his next question. "So what happened to your husband?"

Her eyes grew cold and resentful as she responded. “Well, as you can imagine, I spent every waking moment trying to locate this murderous bastard. Interviews, phone calls, follow-ups on any potential leads. It didn’t leave much time for my husband. He just wanted to forget about the whole mess and move on. I mean, I could understand if it had been years or even months, but we’re talking only a few weeks. Maybe that was his way of dealing with the pain, but it created a huge rift between us. We never recovered.”

Wright began to feel a genuine sense of remorse for the things he had said to this clearly tortured woman. The story had nearly brought him to tears. Yet, in the back of his mind, something wasn’t quite right. He thought carefully before he spoke.

“I must admit, that’s one of the most tragic stories I’ve ever heard, and I can honestly sympathize with your loss. To watch the dearest, most precious person in your life fade before your very eyes?” Wright’s voice wavered momentarily. “There *is* nothing more devastating. But tell me this. Do you really think that gives you the right to be a racist. And surely it can’t excuse your malicious behavior. You think *you* have a right to be angry at the world? At least you knew who was responsible for your daughter’s death. You had something tangible to hate—someone to despise. And if memory serves, they ultimately caught him. Right?”

Hardcourt was a little shaken by his reaction, but graced him with a single nod.

“And wasn’t he punished for his crimes?”

“Yes, he was eventually implicated in several murders. He was executed about six years ago,” she said coldly.

“So you had closure,” Wright exclaimed, clasping his hands together. “Well, I never had closure. My wife was

taken from me for no good reason and I have no one to blame for it. I'm supposed to accept it as the will of God. Well, I don't accept it! Yet you don't see me taking it out on everyone around me. Don't get me wrong. I appreciate your candidness, but you're going to have to do better than that if you want to earn my respect." Wright ended the conversation abruptly and returned to the weight room.

"So what did our good nurse have to say," Merritt queried facetiously.

Wright shook his head in sorrow. "It's no laughing matter Chris. On the one hand, the woman gave me every reason to forgive her for all the trouble she's caused. But on the other hand, I'll never understand why some people want to punish the world for their anguish. I just hope she got the message."

Merritt felt a tinge of shame for his earlier quip as he responded. "I take it that she told you about her daughter."

"Yeah. You knew about it?"

"Of course. That's why I've always tried to give her the benefit of the doubt. And let me tell you this. She hasn't shared that story with too many people. Frankly, I'm surprised she shared it with you."

Just as he said that, another interruption broke into their conversation. "Doctor—I'm sorry to bother you, but we've got an emergency and your presence is required," the nurse said urgently.

Both men reacted to the request and headed for the emergency room. When they arrived, Merritt nearly fell to his knees. His father was lying on the examination table.

Bittersweet Success

Merritt staggered for a moment but eventually motioned towards the entrance. One of the nurses met him at the door.

“Dr. Merritt, you know you can’t come in here. Hospital regulations strictly prohibit family...”

Merritt quickly interceded. “Nurse, I know the regulations, but I have to see him! You have to let me in there!”

“Doctor please. I know you’re upset, but we have things well under control. Dr. Belcher has already stabilized his condition and is now preparing for emergency surgery.”

Merritt’s face contorted with anguish, but he knew that she was right. He finally resigned himself to the fact that he would merely be an observer. After pondering on that thought for a few moments he then turned to Wright.

“Jack—I think you should get in there,” Merritt snapped. The uneasiness was apparent in his tone.

Wright turned to his friend with a confused expression and responded. “But that’s your father in there. I—I just don’t think I could do this.” Wright hesitated for a moment, trying desperately to find an excuse to deny his friend’s request. “Besides, he’s not going to die!”

Merritt took a deep breath. “Look. The last thing I’d want is to lose him. But just ask yourself this question. If he knew this was his time, don’t you think *he’d* want you in there?”

Wright suddenly felt a sickening pang in the pit of his stomach. Of all the times he had entered this room, he never

considered the morbid nature of his actions. For the first time he felt an overwhelming sense of guilt.

Merritt fought with his own conscience as he spoke. “This may be your last chance! You’ve got to take the opportunity now while you still can!” He paused as the emotions began to creep into his throat. “Jack, remember what he said about friendship? I’m with you on this. No matter what the outcome, I won’t hold it against you. If my father’s going to die on that table, nothing you do will change that!”

Wright sighed, but finally conceded to his friend’s request. As he entered the room, one of the nurses provided him with the appropriate medical apparel. He took a position away from the action and produced the small black box once again.

John laid motionless on the examination table as the emergency team scurried around him. Merritt looked on helplessly. The attending physician, Dr. Harold Belcher, conveyed an air of confidence as he calmly orchestrated the actions of the entire medical team. Nevertheless, completely aware of the urgent nature of the situation, he moved with great haste as he attempted to save his patient.

Wright was already prepared to take his measurements as he stood there waiting. He still felt the sickening unease brought on by the revelation of his own morbid actions. “How could I have been so cold,” he thought to himself.

Belcher avoided raising his voice as the situation escalated. His tone was calm and steady as he continued to dictate his orders to the medical team. Wright took notice of this style, which was a stark contrast to Merritt’s more colorful, debonair approach. Yet, it was merely etiquette.

The team responded in unison, like a finely tuned orchestra, reacting to every motion from their esteemed

conductor. Similarly, the cardiograph reacted to each labored pulse from John's damaged heart and the now familiar tone set a defining tempo for the action. The medical team fought to keep it at bay.

"His BP's still rising," shouted one of the nurses. "170 over 95!"

"Come on people, let's get him stabilized," Belcher exclaimed with commanding authority.

Unfortunately, John's brain was systematically being deprived of life sustaining oxygen and the damage was already taking its toll on his higher brain functions. Nevertheless, the medical team fought relentlessly to save him.

Wright's remorse turned to anguish as the now familiar waveform began to dance on the small glowing display. He tapped on the keypad, foolishly hoping that the device was malfunctioning. It was not. The reading was becoming more and more prominent as John slipped deeper into the ultimate abyss.

Without warning, the cardiograph began to flat-line. The tone in Belcher's voice fluctuated a little, but he still managed to maintain composure. "Let's defibrillate now," he bellowed and took the paddles from the nurse. "Clear," he shouted and everyone stood back as he hit John with the charge. John's torso jerked and lifted off the table slightly. Merritt sighed and placed his hand across his forehead as he mumbled a prayer.

The waveform was beginning to grow in intensity and the now familiar spikes began to form along the larger wave. "LOCKING" was flashing at the bottom of the screen. Wright glanced over towards Merritt as if to encourage him, but his expression said otherwise. In any other circumstance, he might have been anticipating the celebration of months of

unremitting hard labor, but the potential for a bittersweet success merely left a bad taste in his mouth.

Belcher finally displayed some concern as a single bead of sweat ran down his forehead. He fought desperately to save his patient, but his efforts were becoming futile. The cardiograph had been flat-lining for several minutes.

Suddenly, the cardiograph sounded, and almost as quickly as it had come, the tone resolved into a steady interval of short familiar beeps once again. An almost unanimous sigh of relief filled the room.

Merritt's eyes widened as he looked towards Belcher with overwhelming appreciation. Belcher nodded nonchalantly in response. As John's vital signs began to normalize his eyes slowly opened. With a renewed sense of relief, Merritt smiled cautiously and took a deep relaxing breath.

Wright, on the other hand, was perplexed as he continued to monitor the device. The word "LOCKING" was still blinking steadily on the screen and he tapped the keypad several times in an attempt to clear it. But again the reading was valid. Wright glanced towards Merritt once again with a foreboding expression of sorrow in his eyes. Merritt's smile quickly faded into confusion, discerning his friend's obvious distress.

In an almost bizarre manner, John turned his head toward Wright. His face contorted with an expression of utter horror and fear, and then he sunk into unconsciousness once again. The cardiograph squealed horribly as the incessant tone returned. Nearly everyone in the room froze momentarily, shocked at what they had just witnessed.

Hesitantly, Wright drew his eyes down toward the monitor. To his utter dismay the word "LOCKED" was already fixated in the lower corner, and with only a momentary

hesitation, a string of numbers began flooding across the small glowing display. As they reached the bottom, the numbers began scrolling upward, disappearing as a new set appeared below. Closing his eyes, Wright turned his head away, feeling a sense of shame for his untimely success.

Belcher demanded the paddles once again. “Clear,” he exclaimed and hit the man with the charge. “Come on old fellow don’t give up on me now.” Belcher fired off a few more orders as he continued defibrillation, but the cardiograph was unwavering.

Wright was mortified as the monitor continued to flash its barrage of numbers. “Why did it have to be John?” he thought to himself. The irony of the situation was eerily disconcerting. Then the words, “*leave it alone*” echoed in his mind. Was his own subconscious simply playing tricks on him, or was there truly something more evil involved? He was contemplating these questions when suddenly, the numbers ceased. The words, “TRANSMISSION COMPLETE,” were now slowly blinking across the center of the screen. He glanced up at Merritt once again. Merritt’s face was expressionless as he focused on his father’s lifeless body and Belcher’s continued futile attempt. Finally drawing his eyes upon Wright, Merritt desperately searched for even the slightest glimmer of hope, but Wright had none to give.

Belcher was resigned to the fact that he could not save his patient. Calling the time of death, he turned towards the exit and approached Merritt.

“Doctor, I’m—sorry,” Belcher said somberly. He paused for a moment considering his next words, but ill equipped to relay any sincere emotion, he simply nodded and walked away.

One by one the other members of the medical team emerged, giving a customary nod of sympathy or apologetic gesture as they passed. Externally, Merritt remained completely stoic, but internally a surge of painful emotions was beginning to well up.

As the final member passed, Merritt reluctantly entered the room containing his father's lifeless body. Wright was still standing in the corner, wishing desperately that he could have been transparent at that particular moment. But Merritt failed to even acknowledge him. Instead, he approached his father and stopped at the head of the examination table.

He stood there for several seconds speechless and motionless. Wright knew the pain he was feeling, and for that reason remained silent. Merritt eventually collected his thoughts and spoke. "Well dad, I guess you finally got your wish. You can be with mom now." Fighting off the constriction in his throat he spoke once again. "I just wish I could've said goodbye."

His emotions had finally betrayed him as he began to weep bitterly. At that moment Wright took his cue and approached his grief-stricken friend. Merritt did not dissuade him as Wright placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"Oh Chris—I'm so sorry. Believe me. I know what you're going through right now." There was heartfelt sincerity in his tone.

Ironically, Wright was holding back his own tears as the empathy for his friend along with the personal reminder of Cassandra's death was beginning to trouble him. But more concerned with the tragedy at hand, he simply suppressed the ill feelings and continued. "We'll get through this. I'm here for you just like you were there for me. Forget about the damn research."

For a moment Merritt looked as if he were going to embrace his friend, but instead he grabbed him by the shirt in a rather violent manner.

"The hell you are," he barked. "You've dragged me into this project and, so help me God, you're going to see this thing through. That man," Merritt waved a hand towards his father's body, "just lost his life. And you recorded it! Don't give me this crap! I know damn well you wouldn't throw this away now. If you want to help me get *through* this, you'll finish what you started!"

Merritt was nearly breathless as he channeled every last ounce of strength he had to convey his discontent. Releasing his friend, he slumped a little and bowed his head in sorrow. Wright stood there slightly dumbfounded.

"Look Jack—I'm sorry about that, but this is a huge blow right now and totally unexpected. I have to make funeral arrangements, flight reservations, phone calls. And after all that I have to fly back to California with my father's body." Merritt paused for a moment as he choked on his own words. The thought of placing his father in a cargo hold was horrifying. Mentally shaking off the image, he spoke much more deliberately. "So, you're on your own now. There're no more chances to be had. I just hope you got something."

Merritt looked exasperated as another horrid realization came to mind. "God—how am I going to break this to my sister? She's not going to take this very well. You know she wasn't there when my mother died. So this is gonna just devastate her. Damn it, how the hell am I going to break it to her? I've got so much to do now and I don't even know where to start..."

Wright had never seen his friend so disoriented before. On the contrary, Merritt always seemed to maintain a calm

demeanor in crisis situations, but this had simply hit too close to home. “Just when you think you’ve been stretched to the breaking point, something else pops up and kicks you in the teeth!”

“Chris, you’re talking about your father here. I know how upset you are right now, but...”

Merritt looked almost crazed as he responded. “Don’t try to pacify me! I tried to warn him, but did he listen? Of course not, he was too damn stubborn!” In an almost bizarre fashion, he turned towards his father’s body and began barking at the corpse. “You self-centered bastard, all you could think about is you! Did you ever consider that *I* needed you? I wasn’t prepared for this!” The anger and sorrow had brought him to tears again. “I tried to tell you,” he uttered breathlessly. “I tried to tell you...”

Wright grabbed him by the shoulders, pulling him away from the body. “Chris, please. You’ve got to stop. I can’t stand seeing you like this, and it’s not helping.” After resisting for a moment, Merritt finally backed away.

Eventually catching his breath, he spoke once again. His tone was now very somber. “I need to be alone. Can you give me some time please?” Without seeking affirmation from Wright, he turned back towards his father’s lifeless body.

“Alright, I’ll be in the lounge if you need me,” Wright retorted. He paused for an acknowledgment, but Merritt failed to respond. Ultimately, he nodded quietly and departed.

Entering the lounge, Wright retrieved a cup of coffee and sat down. Although he knew the room was empty, he still managed to give it a once over. Confident that he was alone, he began thinking aloud. “What the hell is going on,” he murmured. The stress and anxiety of the past week’s events were taking their toll. He still felt a tinge of nausea

from the ER, and felt almost powerless to comfort his friend. He began pondering more deeply. “Maybe, Chris was right. Maybe I have been stepping on everyone’s toes—including his. At what cost am I willing to succeed? Does it include hurting others? And have I already crossed that line?” Wright took a deep breath and leaned back, reflecting on these thoughts.

After several minutes, Merritt finally entered the lounge. Wright stood up, but Merritt motioned silently with his hands for him to remain seated. As Merritt took his own seat, Wright leaned forward and spoke. “I’ve been doing some serious thinking and I’ve come to the conclusion that I’ve been a real jerk.”

Merritt’s failure to reply somewhat confirmed Wright’s contrite admission.

“Well, I’m really sorry Chris. And I’m even more sorry about what happened in the ER. I’ve been pushing and pushing this project and neglected to see what I’ve been doing to you.”

“It’s alright. I think I can cut you a little slack. I know you’re not responsible for my father’s death.” Merritt sighed at the thought for a moment and continued. “Needless to say, you still have my support and, if my father was still here, I’m sure you’d have his support too.”

“Well, I really appreciate the vote of confidence. We’ve come this far and the personal costs have been severe, but I know your father would’ve wanted to see this thing through as well.”

Wright paused. He was hesitant to pursue the subject any further, seriously considering the current emotional state of his friend. Yet, Merritt seemed to read into his thoughts and spoke candidly.

“Jack, I know you’re bursting at the seams to talk about this thing. And to be honest, I’d like to know that my father’s death wasn’t totally in vain.”

Responding with a single nod, Wright produced the monitor. “I definitely got something.” He paused for moment, giving Merritt time to absorb the full impact of the statement. After several seconds he finally continued. “Truthfully, I was feeling horrible about the fact that it was your father lying on that examination table and there were several times when I considered walking out. But I realize now that there’s got to be some sort of rhyme or reason to all this chaos. Let’s face it. Nothing about this project has been routine. The nightmares, the technical problems and now the personal loss. We’re getting close to uncovering something very powerful, and in some respects, perhaps very evil. Yet, I really don’t think this would’ve dissuaded your father. Do you?” Wright continued his dissertation without acknowledgement. “In fact, I think that’s what he was trying to tell us last night. Needless to say, there’s one thing I am sure of. Your father wouldn’t have had it any other way. And now there’s a good chance that his death will be the turning point of this entire investigation. In which case, his death was definitely not in vain.”

Contemplating his friend’s words, Merritt took a deep breath and finally spoke. “Jack you have a point. And I know that my father would be very honored.” He paused for a moment to recompose himself. “You know—I do believe that everything happens for a reason. And ultimately, things have unfolded the way they have because that’s the way they were meant to be in the first place. I guess I just needed to be reminded of what I already knew so well.”

Raising a hand to his forehead, Merritt closed his eyes as he rubbed his forehead. He held this position for several seconds and finally, reopening his eyes, he spoke again. "Look, I'll be alright. I think I just need a little time. You my friend, on the other the hand, have no time to waste. As we speak, I'm sure Bradford's scheming new ways to try and thwart this project."

Inside the conference room, Bradford sat rather impatiently as the Medical Board continued to examine the documents he had distributed. Finally dropping the folder on the table, Dr. Tunney removed a pair of reading spectacles and addressed the man at the opposing end.

"Dr. Bradford, these are very serious accusations. And I'm still curious about the circumstances in which you obtained this information. This medical facility is based upon a strict code of ethics, and I believe that you have circumvented them for your own personal agenda."

Bradford was instantly on the defensive and retorted angrily. "What is it with you people? The bureaucracy in this room is thick enough to cut with a scalpel. I cannot believe what I'm hearing! There's a man down there performing unauthorized experiments right under your noses and you're more concerned about the petty details of my administrative practices? What's wrong with this picture?"

Tunney was unaffected by his outburst and spoke in a calm controlled manner. "Doctor, you can be assured that this Board is quite capable of executing decisions promptly and effectively." Leaning forward, she spoke more sternly. "But this Board also has a responsibility to examine all the facts in a matter before exercising its authority. We will be conducting a thorough investigation to determine the validity

of your accusations. For now, I would suggest that you refocus your attention on your administrative duties and leave this investigation to us.” Bradford opened his mouth preparing to speak, but Tunney quickly intervened. “Thank you doctor. That will be all.” Her final words left no room for debate. The meeting had concluded.

Visibly irritated, Bradford shuffled his paperwork haphazardly into a folder, stood up, and left the room.

Through the Eyes of a Dead Man

The sky was unusually dark, absent of even the slightest hint of moonlight. Only a few clouds looming overhead glowed with a bluish iridescence from the neighboring light of Cleveland's metropolis. Outside of Wright's rented domicile, the light from the front room was seeping out around the edges of the window coverings.

Wright was seated at his primary computer workstation, methodically keying in a sequence of commands. Each sequence created a reaction of numerous windows and popup menus randomly appearing and disappearing on the computer screen in front of him. As his entries neared completion, the activity on the screen decreased. Finally, with a single keystroke, the screen resolved into four equal quadrants. Each containing a graph-like image with numerous buttons and entry points.

Turning to his left, he reached for the small black device and attached a thick interface cable. The device reacted instantly with a series of flashing numbers scrolling across the small glowing display. Looking towards the computer monitor again, he pressed a single key. A small window with the word, "**DOWNLOADING**" and a progress bar appeared in the center of the screen. The progress bar slowly filled as the information transferred from the device to the computer's hard drive.

Wright could feel the anticipation stirring within. He had waited three years for this moment and still had no idea what to expect. “This could answer so many questions,” he thought. “Then again, it’ll probably create many more.” Whatever the case might be, he knew it was only a matter of minutes before his suppositions could finally be addressed.

His eyes lit up as the progress bar was nearly filled. Finally, the computer made an audible beep indicating a successful download of the information. Wright paused for a moment to contemplate the impact of his accomplishment. Whatever he had recorded was now sitting on his hard drive. “My God,” he uttered. “I’ve actually done it!”

Tapping away at the keyboard once again, more urgently than before, he wore an enthusiastic grin. Numerical information began to flood the quadrants on the screen. As he continued to key in the crucial data, one by one, the quadrants resolved into graphical representations. Waveforms and visual static danced within the quadrants. There were obvious, discernable patterns within the data.

“I knew it,” he shouted with excitement. “I knew it!”

As he completed yet another sequence of entries, the four quadrants began individually compiling numerical data and flashing the message, “**PROCESSING.**” Notably, the activity within the quadrants decreased significantly. At this point, he realized the shear complexity of the data he had captured.

Reclining back in his chair, he prepared himself for a long wait as he stared rather blankly at the computer screen. He couldn’t help but to momentarily fantasize about the social notoriety that would ensue from his discovery.

As the minutes passed, each quadrant exhibited only minor changes in the overall completion of the compilation process. Rationally, Wright knew, considering the magnitude

and complexity of the information he was trying to extrapolate, a few hours was very reasonable. But his impetuous nature made the wait more agonizing.

He began to reflect on the previous week's events. Only a few days earlier he had been sitting in this very room making modifications to the device—a device that could potentially unlock one of life's greatest mysteries. Wright considered this prospect very exciting indeed, but also very frightening. The repetitive nightmares had left him with an unsettling sense of foreboding.

His thoughts then turned to the men who had nearly destroyed the device in their haphazard attempt to ascertain its capabilities. "What morons," Wright mused. However, his real anger was focused on the ringleader of his most recent woes. Bradford had been a thorn in his side from the very beginning, but within the last week, his devious activities had pushed Wright to his absolute limits.

Suddenly, a muffled sound began to emanate from the computer's speakers. It was indiscernible at first, but as Wright adjusted the volume, he was astonished by what he was hearing. Only slightly above a whisper, he could hear the single syllable of his own name.

He tapped on the keyboard a few times trying to establish that what he was hearing was actually coming from the recording. The waveform dancing on the screen left little doubt. The voice was part of the transmission.

A tingling chill shot up his spine. Tapping away rapidly at the keyboard once again, he watched each graph with perplexity. Focusing on the graph in the upper right-hand corner, he noticed a very faint image materializing within the quadrant. Pressing a single key, he expanded the quadrant to fill the entire screen and magnify the image. Still unable to

ascertain what it was, he drew his face closer to the screen, hoping to find a recognizable pattern.

He was ill prepared for the claws that emerged from the monitor. Composed of a luminescent static, they stretched out fluidly from the screen. As they pulled his head closer, a face morphed from the glass and drew within inches of his own. The face was composed of static as well, but the features were unmistakable. It was the same evil form that had plagued him in his last nightmare.

“I told you to *leave it alone*,” it hissed coarsely.

Wright was terrified, and could not find the strength to break free of its grasp. As if literally smelling his fear, it laughed insidiously and then proceeded to open its mouth to an unnatural state. The inside of its mouth was also composed of luminescent static, but the razor sharp teeth were unmistakably real. Completely engulfing Wright’s head within its mouth, it took one swift bite.

Wright fell backwards in his chair, striking his head on the hardwood floor. Only slightly fazed by the blow, he jumped up and screamed, “Damn it to hell!” Highly agitated, he panned from side to side and finally focused in on the computer monitor. The four quadrants were still quietly compiling the information.

Retreating to the bedroom, he decided to take a cold shower and prepare himself for a long night. The frigid water provided the necessary shock to his system and ultimately assured him that he was completely awake.

To further prepare for the evening’s events, he brewed a fresh pot of coffee and poured a steaming hot cup into an oversized mug. By the time he had finally returned to the computer screen another fifteen minutes had passed. Although

the data were still compiling, a significant amount of progress had been made since he had first started.

Observing the clock in the lower corner of his screen, he estimated that well over an hour and a half had past. Returning his chair to an upright position, he sat down and began slowly sipping his coffee. After a few minutes, he heard a very muffled sound coming from the speakers once again. He glanced around nervously at first, but had much greater confidence that this was not a dream.

Each quadrant on the screen illustrated a specific area of the human consciousness. In the upper left-hand corner, all audio related information such as hearing and vocalization were graphically displayed. Visual information was displayed in the upper right-hand corner and tactile and pain sensations were charted in the lower left. The remaining quadrant contained information about oral and olfactory stimulation.

Wright's attention was primarily focused on the audio quadrant. The sounds he was hearing this time were much less intelligible and seemed to be overlapping. He adjusted several values on the screen in an attempt to isolate the individual sounds.

Within a few minutes, the sounds were becoming clearer. They were obviously that of human voices. Wright could identify at least two or three, but there was something rather unusual about the voices. They all seemed to have an urgent intonation to them. Further isolating the individual vocals, Wright was beginning to discern a few random words.

He strained to hear something intelligible and then it finally happened. "*Come on peop—let's—him stabil—.*" The voice was unmistakable. Dr. Belcher's garbled words rang out through the speakers. Wright was listening to the events of only a few hours past.

Piece by piece, he reconstructed the events within his mind, trying to anticipate the action. The point at which the defibrillation occurred was approaching. He could clearly hear Belcher's demand for the paddles and turned his eyes to the lower left-hand quadrant. A small graph illustrating pain receptor input was fluctuating only slightly. The word, "Clear!" rang out and within moments the waveform on the graph shot off the scale. Wright winced in response. The pain must have been staggering.

Wright bowed his head recalling the events and thinking of his friend's grief as he watched his own father die before his very eyes. The reality of what he was hearing was becoming very disturbing. To witness John's death was difficult enough, but to experience an instant replay was simply unbearable. Yet, Wright knew that he had no choice but to continue. The most crucial part of the recording was approaching.

The pain receptor graph spiked several more times until finally the sound of the cardiograph beeping could be heard through the speakers. It was at this point that Wright noticed an increase in the activity of the visual quadrant.

Slightly nervous, he leaned back, distancing himself from the computer monitor. But the image was materializing much more rapidly this time and within moments a final image fixated on the screen. Wright's jaw dropped as he looked on in horror at the image. His own figure was centered within the frame just as he had been standing in the ER with monitor in hand, but to the left of him stood the image of a horrific apparition.

Wright nearly leapt out of his chair as the computer speakers emitted a single chime. The words, "**PROCESSING COMPLETE**" flashed in the center of each quadrant. Taking a

deep breath and finally exhaling, Wright leaned over to the keyboard, cursed it and violently struck a key, clearing the entire screen.

To Hell and Back

The day was still quite young as the sun strived to reach its midday apex. A large shadow cast from the administrative building created a cool refuge for several small sparrows foraging in the damp shaded grass. Within, the Medical Board was still actively pursuing the truth in regards to Bradford's accusations from the day before. But it was not Bradford under the interrogation spotlight this time.

"Let me reiterate the question. Did you specifically hear him say he was performing these unauthorized experiments?" Tunney's demeanor was stern and direct.

The figure across the table was clearly intimidated as they fidgeted with a pen, but ultimately responded. "It was very clear to me that he was indicating the experiments being performed were beyond the original scope of the Delta wave research. Yes, that I'm sure of."

"You realize, these are very serious accusations and that this entire Board has been compromised because of Dr. Bradford's overzealous attitude. I hope you've considered the consequences if what we find does not corroborate your story." Tunney was attempting to dissolve any loyalties between the individual in front of her and Bradford. "Dr. Bradford does not have the authority that he professes, and you would be wise to distance yourself from him until these proceedings adjourn. I suggest that you keep to yourself and

perform your duties. You have been a valuable member of our staff and we would hate to see you leave involuntarily.”

Tunney’s indirect threat had the desired effect. The figure nodded solemnly, as if just being scolded, and departed the room with great haste.

Wright had been awake for well over twenty-four hours and there seemed to be no stopping him. His eagerness had turned into obsession. Still situated at his primary workstation, he was tapping away at the keyboard. As he completed a sequence of entries, the computer made several audible clicks and finally ejected a tray containing a single compact disc. Retrieving the disc, he picked up a nearby cordless phone and began to dial.

“Hello,” the voice queried on the other end.

“Hey Chris, it’s Jack,” Wright replied as he located a cardboard envelope and placed the compact disk inside. “How’s it going? And how’s your sister doing?”

“I’m doing alright, but my sister’s taking it really hard. It looks like I’ll have to take care of all the arrangements myself and, to make matters worse, my father’s body was delayed in Cleveland. But overall, the support here has been tremendous. My father had a lot of great friends.” Merritt, still shaken by the subject, abruptly diverted the conversation. “So anyway, how’s the research going?”

“Well, that was one of the reasons I called you. I really can’t go into detail right now, but I’m sending you the bulk of my research and findings on a CD. This way, in the event that something happens to me, at least I’ll know it’s in safe hands.”

Merritt chuckled nervously. “Come on Jack, you don’t really believe that Bradford would threaten your life. I mean,

yeah the guy's been a royal pain and all, but he's definitely not a killer."

"Well, I wasn't really thinking about Bradford to be honest with you, but I'm just covering all the bases. You never know when your number might be up."

Merritt was growing concerned. There was something very resolute in Wright's tone, but he just couldn't place a finger on it at the moment. "Jack—you're starting to scare me. Promise me you're not going to do anything foolish."

"Define foolish," Wright said deliberately.

"Well..." Merritt was at a lost for words. He had heard this tone in Wright's voice before, and usually it was an indication that he had set his mind to do something. It also meant that whatever Wright was planning to do, nothing that Merritt could say would dissuade his friend from executing his plan. "Just promise me you'll keep me informed. Stay in touch. Okay?"

"Sure thing Chris. Listen—I still have a lot to do here, so take care of yourself and let your sister know that I'm very sorry about your dad, and if I can make it to the funeral, I definitely will."

On the other end, Merritt replaced the receiver and pondered for a moment. He had a horrible premonition that this might be the last conversation he would ever have with his friend.

Wright, on the other hand, was now on a mission. Along with capturing the last moments of John's life, he had also captured critical frequencies and waveforms needed to establish a connection. A connection to another world—another dimension? He could only hazard a guess as to where it might lead him, but wherever it was, he sincerely hoped to find Cassandra there.

He returned to the computer station and began to reorient the equipment. Producing a set of cables with pads attached on one end, he made several connections on the back of the computer until each connection was terminated. Next, he removed the table positioned in the center of the room and replaced it with a large comfortable chair. Measuring the cables visually, he positioned the chair slightly closer to the computer and extending the cables to their full length, draped them over the back of the chair.

After thoroughly examining his setup, he was content that everything was ready to go. He took a deep breath and retreated to the bathroom for a nice hot relaxing shower.

The phone at Andrea's desk rang out. She waited for a second ring and picked up the receiver. "Dr. Bradford's office. How may I help you?"

"Andrea—hi, this is Dr. Merritt. I know you don't know me very well, but Jack Wright seemed to express some confidence in you. And right now, I don't know how to say this, but I think he might be in danger."

Andrea's tone became somewhat urgent. "What do you mean? How is he in danger?"

"It's hard to explain, but let's just call it a hunch. I know Jack pretty well and the last time I talked to him, I sensed something very ominous in his tone."

Andrea tried to maintain composure as she spoke. "So, what can I do? Please, tell me!"

"Look. I don't think he's in any immediate danger, but if you could just stop by his house, I'd be indebted to you. I hate to put you in such an awkward position, but..."

Andrea quickly intervened. "Doctor, its no problem at all. When do you think would be a good time?"

“Well, if you could just swing by after work I think that would be fine. No point in alarming anyone. As I said, it’s just a hunch, so please don’t mention that I suggested this. I don’t want him to know that I’m checking up on him. Anyway, here’s the address,” Merritt proceeded to recite the address to her.

“I understand. I’ll tell him I got his address from personnel. Maybe I could even persuade him to go to dinner.” Andrea smiled at the thought.

“Sounds good. And thank you. It’s probably nothing, but I’d feel a lot better knowing that it’s just my paranoia.”

Wright emerged from the bedroom in some fresh attire and walked over to the computer. Staring at the monitor for a moment, he finally entered a single keyword. The computer reacted instantly, displaying a window in the center of the screen. The information within the window was much more uniform than the previous windows and contained several numerical values including frequencies.

He retrieved the cables with the pads and began affixing them to his head, chest and hands. Once in place, he awkwardly moved back towards the computer and struck a key. A second window appeared with a graphical representation of the connection points on his body. The numbers in the main window began to fluctuate as electrical signals passed from his body into the computer.

Finally, Wright positioned himself in the chair and waited patiently for something to happen. He really had no idea what he was looking for, but he knew that he would recognize it when it came.

One of the numbers within the main window began to increment slowly as if pausing with each increment. The

process was arduous and several minutes had passed as Wright continued to wait for something—anything to happen. And yet, as prepared as he was, nothing could have humanly prepared him for what was about to occur.

Directly in front him, a blinding light began to radiate from what appeared to be a tear in physical space. Wright leaned back slightly in his chair as the tear continued to grow and expand. Yet, something was urging him to move towards the opening. He resisted momentarily, but it seemed as if his body had lifted up and began to float directly into it. Amazingly, he glanced back to find that his physical body was still positioned in the chair.

As he entered the opening, everything around him dissolved into pure white. Glancing back once again, he could no longer see his own body or any trace of the room. He lifted his hand to see if he had any physical presence and was relieved to find that he still had all of his extremities. “I still got ten fingers and ten toes,” he mused.

Suddenly, his hand began to melt into a grotesque mixture of red, pink and white fluid. Wright’s eyes widened with horror at the sight. The process began to work its way up his arm and he eventually screamed out. Within a split second, his hand had returned to normal. Slightly bewildered by the event, he extended and retracted his fingers several times. Satisfied that his hand was again intact, he finally dropped it to his side and out of view.

“Jack,” a voice called out softly. Wright instantly recognized the voice and responded, “Cassandra? Where are you? I can’t see you.”

“Jack, you have to go back. You don’t belong here. You have to go back,” The voice whispered.

“Cassandra! Please just let me see you,” Wright pleaded desperately.

“Jack, you don’t belong here. Go back now, while you still can.” There was a little more urgency in the voice this time.

“I don’t understand. Please show yourself. Let me know that it’s really you...”

Before he could utter another word, his surroundings became extremely dark and dismal. The screams and cries of an indeterminable number of voices crashed upon his eardrums. He tried to cover his ears, but it made no difference. The horrid wails were becoming unbearable.

As he glanced around he could see only a vast ocean of tormented and tortured souls, twisting and writhing in sheer agony. On closer inspection, he noticed a variety of macabre and gruesome acts unfolding before his very eyes. The participants didn’t seem willing as they were forced to carry out their own torturous deaths.

One man had a gun in his hand, and as he raised it to his mouth he fought desperately with his other hand to push the gun away. Wright flinched as the gun fired and the man’s head exploded in a mist of crimson. The man dropped to his knees, but within moments all the bits of flesh and bone had recomposed themselves, and the man was making yet another futile attempt to resist the inevitable bloody outcome.

Wright turned in another direction only to find a young woman standing on a ledge fighting to maintain her balance. But to his dismay, she eventually hurled herself off. She flailed her arms and legs helplessly as she fell, until finally and abruptly, she hit the ground. Wright cringed at the crushing sound and the sight of her flesh being perforated by the broken and splintered bones. Again the woman was

returned to her pre-mangled state only to repeat the same horrific act over and over again.

Yet, even more bizarre things were beginning to unfold. One man was running from what appeared to be a large video game caricature. Wright had almost laughed until the man was picked apart, limb by limb, and ultimately consumed by the pixilated beast.

He was beginning to realize that the means in which these people were dying were not necessarily how they actually died, but more likely what they had feared most in real life. Wright flinched at the thought of his own worst fears materializing as they did in his nightmares.

“My God,” he mumbled under his breath, but his statement was clearly heard. In response, the screams had increased to a deafening level. Up until that moment, Wright had essentially gone unnoticed, but now everyone’s attention was focused on him. Hundreds upon hundreds of these grotesque figures rushed in towards him and began groping and grabbing at his flesh.

“You should’ve left it alone,” echoed from every direction as he fought off the numerous prodding hands.

“Get off me! Damn you! Get off me,” he screamed, but his cries seemed to merely intensify the frenzy. He fought to stay on his feet, but even this was becoming difficult as the crowd surged around him.

Suddenly, the chaos ceased and the crowd began to divide as if to make a path for someone or something. Wright finally regained his footing and strained to make out the figure that was rapidly approaching through the crowd. As it grew closer, Wright came to the realization that the people were not voluntarily dispersing, but actually fighting to get clear of the evil. For if anyone stood in its path, they were horribly maimed.

When the beast finally emerged from the darkness, Wright was even more terrified at the hideous sight than ever before. This was not a dream. The stark reality and lethal nature of this beast was becoming more apparent as it came to bear.

Towering at over three meters, it was a massive creature with a huge crab-like head and four muscular limbs, each armed with six-inch long curved talons. Protecting its entire body was a glistening black armor plating covered with hundreds of spiked appendages—deadly enough in their own right. Its razor sharp teeth dripped with venomous saliva and its cold black eyes mirrored Wright's reflection. As it exhaled, its putrid mist brought instantaneous nausea.

Finally face to face with Wright, it spoke. "So, we meet again," it hissed. "You've been warned time and time again and now you will pay the price for your disobedience—for all eternity!" Its insidious laughter resonated like thunder.

Raising its lethal talons, the beast prepared to strike. Wright instinctively raised an arm in defense and as the talons came crashing down, his arm was swiftly detached. Wright screamed in agony and instantly dropped to his knees, clutching the bloody stump. Surely, he thought he would suffer the same fate as everyone else trapped in this hellish existence.

As the beast cocked its head back to strike, Wright closed his eyes in anticipation of the inevitable and painful death. Instead, he felt two hands fall upon his shoulders, and as he opened his eyes the beast vanished in a wisp of smoke. The surroundings had returned to the pure alabaster radiance as before and a blissful silence now filled the air.

Wright was reluctant to turn around, but cautiously peered over his shoulder to see who or what had a hold on him. He

was overwhelmed with joy as he turned to find Cassandra standing there.

Life is But a Dream

Bradford opened the door to his office and bolted through the reception area. Andrea barely had time to greet the man as he passed. Taking a seat at his desk, he shuffled through some paperwork and finally picked up the phone.

“This is Bradford. What’s the scoop?” He paused for a moment to listen. “Well—I want to be there. No arguments damn it! I insist,” he barked and slammed the receiver down. Tapping his fingers on his desk for a moment, he finally rose and headed for the door.

Andrea tried to speak, but he cut her off. “I’ll be gone for the rest of the day,” he uttered as he rushed out the door. She just shook her head, considering the rude nature of the entire exchange.

“Cassandra? Is it really you?” Wright made an earnest inquiry.

“Yes, Jack it’s me,” she uttered softly, glancing down at his gruesome injury.

Eventually realizing what she was staring at, he looked down and nearly passed out from the mangled sight. The pain had returned with throbbing intensity. Cassandra reached down and in one sweeping motion, returned his arm to its original state.

“I don’t understand,” he uttered. The confusion was apparent in his tone.

“It’s all in your mind. This,” she motioned toward the expanse, “is true reality. That corporeal body you left behind is a grossly limited vehicle for a very restricted dimensional plane.”

Wright was mildly impressed. He had never heard her talk with such technical eloquence. “Here, there are no physical limitations. You can be anyone or anything. You can go anywhere in the world—or the universe for that matter.” She paused momentarily as he tried to absorb the information. “Remember how we had always dreamed of going to Paris?” In the blink of an eye, they were standing atop the Eiffel Tower. “Quite a view don’t you think?”

Wright was literally speechless. The view was breathtaking in every direction. At one end, a large river extending from one horizon to another gleamed with a deep azure hue. Several bridges of varying characteristics passed over, connecting the opposing banks at regular intervals. Turning in the other direction, there was what appeared to be a long park extending perhaps a mile, and bordered on either side by well-manicured trees. Most of the neighboring structures were fairly weathered, but each had their own unique personality and style. Wright moved closer to the side, peering through a large wire mesh. Looking down nearly a quarter of a mile, the vehicles and people were mere specs. After a moment he leaned back, feeling a tinge of dizziness.

Cassandra giggled at his trepidation. “You have nothing to worry about. Your perception of falling and death is nothing more than an illusion.”

“You laugh, but what about my arm? That sure seemed real.”

Cassandra smiled as she explained patiently. “Jack, this is why you don’t belong here. You’re at the mercy of your

own limited understanding. You can be hurt only because you still believe that you can be hurt.”

“Yeah, but what about all of the others who were suffering the same horrible repetitive deaths? Surely, they’re not in the same boat as me.”

Her tone became slightly more somber. “In a way they are. They’ve arrived here without the knowledge that they have passed on. So they’re at the mercy of the same beast that has been plaguing you in your dreams. He lies to them and tortures them. Tells them that if they obey him, they will eventually be released. Of course, that’s just another one of his lies. But you see, it takes more than just knowing that you’re no longer bound by human mortality. It is a profound knowledge—an understanding that you receive. But not everyone receives it. Those who’ve lived immoral, corrupt and self-serving lives fall under the jurisdiction of the beast. And it’s their own guilt and self-hatred that prevents them from breaking free of his bonds. You my darling by no means fall into this category, but you have come here prematurely and right now I’m protecting you. Though, to be honest, I don’t know how much longer I can continue to do so. Soon your mind will submit to the fear, paranoia and lies of that horrid beast and you’ll be lost to me forever. That’s why it is imperative that you return now. You have to live out your life. And when that life ends, I *will* be here waiting for you.”

Wright was intrigued by her explanation. “I understand now. I’ll go back and everything will be different. Do you realize what this means? I’ve actually discovered...”

Cassandra chimed in politely. “Jack, when you go back, this will all appear to have been a dream. Your perceptions of it will allude to that. And this is what everyone will tell

you. Even your own mind will tell you that it was simply just a dream.”

Wright was anxious to speak. “But it’s not! Is it? *This* is reality.” Wright motioned towards the Paris backdrop.

“Yes, my darling. This is reality,” she replied with a loving smile.

Crawling to a stop, Bradford eventually engaged the parking break. Directly behind, a single police vehicle came to a rest as well. Bradford sat for a moment waiting for the officers to exit their vehicle and finally opened his own door.

As they approached, one of the officers spoke. “The van should be here shortly. Do you think there’s a lot of equipment in there?”

“To be honest, I have no idea what he has in there, but it *all* belongs to the hospital.” Bradford jaunted officiously.

The officer was slightly irritated by Bradford’s over-enthusiastic attitude. “Look—our instructions are to confiscate any computer-related equipment. Anything beyond that is off limits. You’re here merely as an observer. If you get in the way, I’ll remove you myself. Are we clear?”

Bradford was astounded by the utter disrespect he had just been served, but held his tongue. He didn’t want to ruin his chances of witnessing his triumph over Wright. “Of course. We’re in complete agreement officer.”

As they approached the entrance, the two officers stood apart. The ranking officer rapped on the door and waited. After several seconds, he knocked once again, but there was no response. The two officers eyed one another.

Bradford chimed in impatiently. “Why don’t you just break it down?”

The officers glared at Bradford without replying. Knocking a final time they waited for another minute. Convinced that Wright was either ignoring them or incapable of coming to the door, they finally elected to kick it in. Bradford rolled his eyes in response.

After several violent kicks, one of the hinges became dislodged. The officer stood back a few extra inches and unleashed one last blow. The wood around the doorframe splintered as the deadbolt finally gave way. The door swung open and hung askew on the lower hinge.

Wright was positioned near the center of the room, still seated in the chair with cables attached.

“Cassandra—I just want you to know that everyday since you died, I’ve regretted not telling you how I really felt. I was so caught up in my own self-pity that I failed to realize what we’d already shared. And I was just so angry at the world that I neglected to see that I should’ve been spending our last few hours together simply loving you. That’s what made it all the more unbearable when you left. The last words you heard out of my mouth were words of anger. In some ways I was acting like a child throwing a tantrum.”

Cassandra wore a look of distress as she spoke. “Jack, please. You must stop this immediately. Do you really think that I could have ever been upset with you? I knew what you were going through. I knew the pain you were feeling. You were always good at suppressing your feelings, but this was one time when I really wanted you to let it out. You needed to let it out, and that’s what I was trying to convey that day. I wasn’t angry with you at all. I was actually very disappointed that I couldn’t stay and help to ease your pain,

but I was being called here and I really had no other choice. Nevertheless, just please understand that I loved you then. I love you now. And I will always love you.”

Wright took a deep relaxing breath. He felt as if a massive weight had just been lifted from his heart. Embracing her gently, he gazed lovingly into her eyes. She had never looked so radiant. Drawing his mouth close to hers, he attempted to kiss her, but she abruptly intervened.

“Jack! Something’s wrong. You have to go back now,” Cassandra said with great urgency.

Wright frowned slightly, but acknowledged her plea. “Alright Cass—How do I get back? The last time I looked, the way I came through wasn’t there anymore.”

“Jack. Remember. It’s all in your mind. You have to perceive the door being opened.”

Wright stood there for a moment with his eyes shut trying to open the door, but his efforts were proving futile. Closing his eyes even tighter, he thought this would enhance his concentration. It did not.

Cassandra finally intervened. “Jack, this is not a game. Someone is trying to break your physical connection. If they succeed, not only will your physical body die, but your entire existence could be lost as well.” She paused for a moment and spoke more tenderly. “Darling, you have to want to leave. I know this is difficult for you, but you have to do it.”

The concern was apparent in her tone. Wright finally settled within his mind the idea of returning, and almost instantaneously the opening appeared. To his utter dismay, Bradford was standing in front of the computer.

“Look, I’m telling you that this man’s doing something very perverse and perhaps even dangerous. If we don’t shut this thing down now, he could die. Do you want to be responsible for this man’s death?” Bradford imposed the question to the officers.

“How do you know that disconnecting this thing won’t kill him,” one of the officers retorted keenly.

“Are you questioning my professional medical expertise?” Bradford queried ostentatiously, insulted by the mere inference.

The two officers turned to one another and shrugged. “Fine, but we’re not gonna be responsible if something does go wrong. It’s in your hands now. We’ll be outside.”

Bradford turned to the computer and, locating the power button, leaned over to press it. He was startled by the hand that grabbed his arm.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing,” Wright barked as he shoved his hand away.

Quickly recomposing himself, Bradford wore an insidious grin as he spoke. “It’s over Jack. You won’t be squirming your way out of this one.”

“What are you talking about? And how the hell did you get in here?” Wright glanced over at the remains of his front door. His confusion was mounting until one of the officers finally stepped in.

“You see Jack, the Board ruled in my favor and these officers have been ordered to confiscate everything in this room. Additionally, there’s going to be a formal inquiry into your finances to see if any of the money you received for the Delta wave research was utilized for this perverse little experiment. Jack—you’re in a lot of trouble. See what happens when you mess with the wrong bull?” Bradford

was quite pleased with himself as he concluded his pedantic rhetoric.

Wright turned to the ranking officer to confirm Bradford's claim. In response, the officer produced a single document and spoke. "I'm afraid he's right. We have a warrant to search these premises and confiscate any and all computer-related materials."

Glaring back at Bradford for a moment, Wright made no verbal remark, but just nodded solemnly. Bradford was grinning from ear to ear.

"Where's that damn van at," one of the officers barked impatiently.

"They got hung up at the station," his partner replied. "They said to go ahead and start carrying things out."

"Figures," the first officer uttered sarcastically. "Alright, let's get moving."

As the two officers began disassembling the equipment, Wright stood there quietly pondering his next move. Bradford forced the issue as he turned to find the monitor resting on the table.

"Maybe we should start with this," he exclaimed tauntingly as he snatched up the device.

Wright was infuriated and attempted to retrieve it from Bradford's hands. The two men struggled for a moment and eventually fell into a tug of war. Noticing the commotion, the ranking officer spoke up. "Alright, that's enough." But the two men were equally adamant about their struggle and continued. The officer made a more forceful demand. "I said that's enough!" In response, Bradford suddenly and unexpectedly released his grip. As a result, the device went sailing into the air. Wright followed its path and watched in horror as the device ultimately struck the wall, shattering into pieces.

“Damn you,” Wright shouted in a literal rage. He made a move toward Bradford, but before he could wrap his hands around Bradford’s throat, the two officers intervened.

“Alright, one more outburst like that and we’re gonna have to cuff ya.” Turning to Bradford the officer made an equally grating assertion. “And *you* can wait outside. You’ve caused enough problems.”

Placing his hands in his pockets, Bradford replied rather humbly. “My apologies. I wasn’t trying to create any added turmoil here, but as you can see, this man is obviously unstable.”

In an almost taunting fashion, he reached over to Wright and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Jack, try not to be too upset.” With that he smiled and exited.

Confirming the address she had scribbled on a piece of paper, Andrea took a right turn and started looking for the number. As she approached Wright’s house she was shocked to see the patrol car as well as Bradford’s new Mercedes parked out front.

She hesitated to slow down, but still managed to glance over as she passed. Bradford was standing out front, and through the open door she could clearly see Wright positioned between the two officers. Utterly confused by the bizarre scene, she simply sped off.

Wright stood there with an indignant look on his face, astounded by the radical turn of events which were unfolding before his very eyes. “That son of a bitch has taken this thing too far,” he mused angrily. Yet, he felt completely helpless as he watched the two officers dismantle three years of hard work.

Suddenly, the sound of crushing metal and shattering glass broke the silence.

“What the hell was that,” the ranking officer shouted, directing his inquiry at the other officer.

“Somebody just plowed into our car!”

“Stay here and watch him. I’ll call for back up. This is getting out of hand,” the first officer barked and bolted out of the house. Turning to find Wright, the remaining officer was ill prepared for the blow that he received to the back of his neck. He fell to the floor unconscious.

Wright turned to his computer, rapidly keying in a series of commands. He knew he only had a few moments. Finally, with a single finger he struck the *Enter* key. A small window appeared with a progress bar and the word “**DELETING...**” in the heading. Locating the disc he had created earlier, he headed for the door. Just then, Bradford appeared at the entry blocking his path. Without hesitation, Wright landed a punch square in the center of Bradford’s face. The man instantly dropped to the ground. Patting him down, Wright located his keys and headed for his car.

The other officer was still preoccupied with Andrea. She had exaggerated her injuries and pleaded with him not to leave. Consequently, he failed to notice Wright sliding into Bradford’s vehicle. As the engine turned over, the officer finally looked up, but it was too late. Wright had already pulled away and was accelerating rapidly down the street. Andrea was smiling inside. “Good luck Jack,” she conveyed mentally and returned to her theatrics.

The powerful engine responded instantaneously as Wright pressed down hard on the accelerator. Looking in every direction he flew past several stop signs. It was only a matter of time before the police would catch up and begin their

pursuit. Squealing into a back alley, he started looking for a place to ditch the vehicle and continue his escape on foot. Unfortunately, he had only traveled a block when two patrol cars fishtailed behind him with sirens blaring. "Damn it," he blurted out angrily.

Blasting through the alley in excess of sixty miles per hour, dust and debris kicked up in every direction. As Wright crossed an intersection, the large sedan heaved and scraped the ground, producing a huge shower of sparks. The pursuing officers backed off slightly, fearing a collision.

Finally, turning out of the alley, Wright swiftly avoided a collision with an oncoming vehicle. Looking into his rear view mirror he could see the smoke from the other vehicle's tires still lingering in the air. The car had come to rest directly in front of one of the pursuing vehicles which, in response, swerved and launched off the curb.

The second police car was less fortunate and caught the back end of the other vehicle, sending it into a tailspin. The patrol car skidded sideways across the street, eventually plowing into a telephone pole. Wright noticed the collision and sighed.

Weaving in and out of traffic, Wright handled the lumbering giant with unusual poise. The patrol car was beginning to lose ground as the powerful Mercedes engine throttled effortlessly through its gears. Wright had managed to put a full block of distance between them and was again looking for an opportunity to ditch the vehicle.

Pulling off onto another side street, he raced down the narrow road at ninety miles per hour. "I've got to get rid of this disc," he mused anxiously. Unfortunately, the patrol car had managed to close their distance again by cutting through an adjacent side street. For the second time, Wright

gunned the powerful engine and crept away from the pursuing vehicle.

Up ahead, Wright saw a long freight train approaching. “This is my chance,” he thought. Easing off the accelerator, he began timing the distance from the train. But the driver of the patrol car was keen to his plan. In an effort to thwart Wright’s death defying feat, the officer swerved to the side, attempting to overtake the larger sedan. Wright saw this and in response, easily pulled ahead.

With only several hundred feet to go, the officer reconsidered his plan and backed off. The locomotive was fast approaching. Wright’s timing had to be precise. He finally gunned the vehicle, accelerating rapidly away from the other car. With only a few car lengths to go, Wright was confident of his escape.

Suddenly, the powerful Mercedes engine seized violently. The oil pressure gauge dropped to zero. The earlier hit to the undercarriage had cracked the engine block, causing oil to slowly spew out over several minutes. With no power the car had become an uncontrollable beast. Wright slammed both feet down upon the brake pedal, but it was no use. The car slowed only slightly as it rocketed towards the oncoming train.

The loud horn wailed as the locomotive approached. Wright gripped the wheel tightly, hoping the remaining momentum would carry him safely past the train. As the front wheels struck violently over the tracks, the heavy car lifted off the ground. Wright watched in horror as the train closed to within a few car lengths. An eternity seemed to pass, but the rear wheels finally struck the first track, shifting the momentum of the car and heaving Wright forward in his seat. The train’s powerful headlight flooded the interior of the car

with pure white. Wright sighed with relief as the rear wheels finally pounded over the second track. Yet, the large sedan was far from clear as the massive train struck the rear quarter panel and sent the car tumbling violently.

Rolling over several times, glass and debris flew in every direction. Inside, several airbags had fired, but were already deflating as the car continued to tumble. The battered vehicle finally came to rest upon its roof. Wright laid crumpled in a bloody pile, all but ejected from his restraints.

The lights from the pursuing patrol car eventually came into view and the officer hurried towards the wreck. Crouching down, he produced a flashlight and examined Wright.

“Just hang in there! Help’s on the way!” the officer shouted.

Wright looked up at the officer, but merely smiled. The same bright alabaster doorway had appeared directly in front of him, and this time Cassandra was standing there waiting.

After several minutes, the paramedics finally arrived and carefully extracted Wright’s body from the twisted mess.

“He was conscious when I got to him,” said the officer.

One of the paramedics acknowledged him as they began working on Wright. They scurried about the body for several minutes trying to revive him, but their efforts proved futile.

Wright looked back towards his mangled remains and sighed. As he stepped through the opening, Cassandra took his hand and as quickly as it had appeared, the opening vanished.

Some Things are Better Off Left Alone

Bradford was standing in the ER conversing with Brighton. He looked almost comical as he wore a large bandage over his swollen nose. Perhaps compensating for his facial apparel, he seemed overly animated as he spoke.

“You know—this could’ve all been avoided if the Medical Board hadn’t dragged their feet on the issue. I tried to tell them that Wright was a menace, but Tunney was so combative every step of the way. Yet, a two year intern walks in and they take your word as *Gospel*.”

Brighton responded rather glumly. “Well, I really didn’t expect things to turn out this way. If I had known that somebody was going to lose their life, then perhaps I would’ve reconsidered.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. Wright knew what he was doing. Besides, you were following my directions and I don’t feel any remorse for the man. He was playing with fire and he got burned. If you really think about it, what he was doing was quite sick!”

“Well, I don’t know about all that, but as you said, I was following *your* directions, so I really hope that you’re going to keep your end of the bargain and get me out of this God awful ER.” Brighton’s tone had become very solemn as he made his plea. For the first time he refused to let the other man intimidate him.

“In time my boy,” Bradford asserted in a patronizing tone. “Things have become somewhat heated around here and we need to let them cool down before I submit a transfer request to the Board.”

Brighton knew that he was getting the brush off the moment Bradford opened his mouth, but he also knew he had no recourse in the matter.

Suddenly, the ER entrance doors flung open with a flurry of commotion. A man on a gurney was soaked with blood, yet there were no obvious perforations in his clothing. Apparently, the blood was not his own.

“We’ve got a live one here,” shouted one of the paramedics. The man on the gurney was struggling, but there were several straps on his legs and across his chest and arms, restricting his overall movement.

“Can we get some help over here,” the same paramedic shouted urgently.

Brighton motioned towards the man, and right at that moment the struggling criminal freed an arm and slid it behind his back.

The paramedic shouted, “Get that arm restrained!” Brighton reacted and grabbed the man’s arm. But it was too late. Removing his arm, the man produced a gun.

“Weapon,” someone screamed and everyone scurried for cover. Brighton attempted to twist the gun from the assailant’s hand, but was momentarily stunned by the unusual crack that rang out from the barrel. “That was an odd sound,” Brighton mused, mentally relating it more so to a loud firecracker than to a gunshot.

Finally, removing the gun from the hand of the struggling criminal, Brighton sighed heavily. Yet, he was literally gasping as he tried to take another breath. Pointing at his

chest, one of the nurses screamed out. Brighton looked down to find a large crimson stain expanding through his medical jersey. He gasped for another breath and ultimately fell to his knees.

At that point, several staff members as well as the two original paramedics had finally pinned down the man on the gurney, but that didn't stop him from laughing uncontrollably. As Brighton ultimately slipped away into blackness, he heard the man utter, "Ya should'a left it alone!"

All eyes were fixed on Bradford as he walked into the Boardroom. He failed to acknowledge the contemptuous stares as he finally took a seat.

Somewhat nervous about the nature of the proceedings, he wore a conjured smile and spoke rather loudly. "Well, I'm glad to see that you finally came to your senses. I just hope that you don't blame me for the outcome. I mean, I tried to tell you early on that he was a liability. Surely, you can see that now." Bradford seemed to be fishing for some kind of vindication, but the Board members remained silent, watching the man slowly unravel himself.

After allowing him to squirm for a few more minutes, Tunney finally chimed in. "Dr. Bradford—this Board is not here to make any moral or legal judgments. I really don't know if you have any remorse for the part you've played in Jackson Wright's death. And personally, I really don't care how you feel. As for the legal ramifications, that will be up to the appropriate authorities to decide whether or not you were directly or indirectly responsible for his death. What we are here to discuss is your inappropriate actions within this institution."

Bradford cleared his throat and quickly edged in. “Look. I’ll be the first to say that, perhaps, I was a little overzealous in my approach to the situation, but I can assure you that I still handled things professionally and within the guidelines of this institution.”

“Not according to our sources,” Tunney retorted sharply.

Again, Bradford seemed very nervous as he responded. “And what unreliable sources would you be referring to? I’m sure that there’s no substance to their claims.”

Tunney smiled confidently. “On the contrary, Nurse Hardcourt has come forward and told us everything you’ve been doing for the last week. The unauthorized relocation of Wright’s office—confirmed by your own secretary. The theft of his property—namely the device that he was using for the bulk of his research, which incidentally was entirely funded by Wright. An internal audit has finally established this fact. In reality, he never touched a dime of the money that was allocated for his research. So, as you can imagine, this has left this entire institution with a horrible black eye. Our PR department is already implementing damage control. And,” Tunney’s face became completely expressionless. “You have become a major liability. Thus, it is our determination that you will take the fall for this entire fiasco. Not only have we terminated your employment from this hospital, but we’ve also advised the Medical Association of your recent activities. In response, we have been authorized to inform you that, pursuant to a full investigation, your medical license will be revoked.”

Bradford was floored. He stuttered breathlessly for a moment, but finally managed to speak. “This is outrageous! I have never seen such hypocrisy in my life! You people have no idea who you’re messing with. I can assure you, you

haven't heard the last of this. When my lawyer gets through with you, you'll wish..."

Tunney motioned to one of her associates as she harshly cut him off. "Doctor, I think you're in enough trouble as it is without making idle threats."

Within moments two burly security guards stepped in and took a secure hold on each of his arms. Again, Bradford was dumbfounded. He was finally at a loss for words and ultimately remained silent as he was escorted from the room. Tunney said nothing, but wore a smile of complete and total satisfaction.

Several days had passed and a large group of friends and relatives had gathered for Wright's funeral. Amongst the attendees were Merritt, Hardcourt and Andrea. As the minister applied the appropriate words, many of the mourners wept.

Hardcourt was less apt to express her emotions openly, but as the minister concluded, a single tear formed in the corner of her eye and eventually ran down her cheek.

Looking towards Merritt she quietly began to speak. "You know, I really wish I could have thanked him for what he said the other day. After thinking about, I realized that I've wasted so much of life being angry and bitter. And for what? The man that murdered my daughter is dead. So, I can either spend the rest of my life seething in my past or I can simply start living." Pausing for a moment, she took a deep breath and exhaled. "I choose to live."

In a rather unusual fashion, Hardcourt closed her eyes and put on a slight, but genuine smile. It had been years since she had felt such a sense of peace. Finally opening her eyes, she looked down towards the casket and mouthed the words, "Thank you."

Nodding graciously at Hardcourt, Merritt then turned his attention to Andrea and offered her a tissue. She had been crying through the entire precession. Her sheer respect and admiration for Wright had led her to risk her own life among other things.

“I truly hope he’s found happiness—but I really wish we could have had that dinner.” She was having difficulty holding back the tears as she spoke. “Why did this have to happen? What was so important, that Jack gave up his life to protect it?”

Merritt took a deep breath and responded. “To be honest, I don’t know. And No one ever will. Right before Jack left the house, he erased all the information. And the monitor itself was completely destroyed.” Looking down at the grave, Merritt shook his head. “Jack, I hope it was worth it.”

As the large mass of people began to disperse, Merritt addressed both women. “Ladies, can you give me a few minutes? I just want a moment alone to say goodbye.” Both women nodded graciously and headed towards their vehicles.

When the last of the mourners had dispersed, Merritt again looked down towards the casket and spoke. “Jack—I just want you to know that I won’t let your research die with you.” Reaching into the breast pocket of his suite coat, he revealed a small compact disk. “I know how important this was to you.”

The lid of the casket exploded into a shower of splintered wood, littering the entire grave site. Merritt fell backwards from the blast and landed on his backside. Almost simultaneously, the gruesome decomposing forms of Jack and Cassandra leapt up out of the grave, each taking a hold of one of Merritt’s ankles. As they slowly drug him into the opening, he screamed out desperately.

Merritt awoke to several pairs of eyes fixated upon him. The faint whistle of the ventilation system and the loud droning hum of the jet engines played in the background. As everyone slowly drew their eyes away, Merritt sighed heavily and thought to himself, “Well, at least they’re together.”