

THE AMOEBA

By

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THE FALL OUT

“We must always strive for excellence in any scientific endeavor in which we approach. Answers can be found in the success as well as failures in any experiment. Our minds must continuously be one step ahead. At the end of one road, we shall think of the next. There is still so much to be learned. It is science. It is never ending.”

Dr. Randall Jefferson

Director of The Caldwell Research Institute

CHAPTER ONE

I-S.E. Twelve - Manitoba, Canada

March 4th - 4:00 p.m.

He closed his deep dark brown eyes slowly just about the same time he parted his thick lips letting out a small huff of breath. Billy Griffith leaned back, slouching some in the seat of the helicopter. He took off the baseball cap which he wore backwards and scratched his sweaty curly dark brown hair. He coughed, hoping that sick feeling that crept up on him would somehow dissipate soon, before he up heaved that take-out breakfast sandwich he didn't want to eat in the first place. "God, can you fly this thing any worse?"

Leonard Helms chewed gum, loud and chomping as he flew the helicopter. He only grinned at Billy. He could have gotten away with saying he was just learning how to fly had he not looked the part of the experienced pilot.

"It's got to be around here somewhere." Billy placed on his hat again and lifted the clipboard. An aerial map laid on top.

"Your source was wrong." Leonard told him.

"No." Billy shook his head. "Very reliable."

"Why are you chasing this anyhow? It doesn't sound like a boring story to you?"

"I'm an investigative reporter. There's nothing about this that sounds boring. Besides that, I have my reasons." Suddenly Billy's tone changed to an annoyed one. "And how in the world does it sound boring to you?"

"It was an experiment. Big deal. Who cares?" Leonard kept peering ahead as he flew. "They isolate a group of people away for months to see if they whack out."

"Yeah, but you don't think it's a bit odd that in the forty years Caldwell had been conducting The Iso-Stasis Experiments only four people of all the participants, survived? One of which shot himself in the head. Undisclosed reasons."

"He cracked up afterward." Leonard stated as if he had the answer. "Look, they lock a bunch of suicidal people up, they either kill themselves or each other. That's what happens. You said two people survived this one that just ended. You wanna know what Caldwell does to these people, call *them*."

"Oh, sure. I'll just look in the phone book and call up every John and Jane Doe there is." Billy said sarcastically checking out his map again then looking up.

"That's the names they released?"

"Hello?" Billy rolled his eyes. "You know this. You were there. Privacy reasons."

"I wasn't paying attention. I was looking at that cute blonde from the science review."

“Speaking of cute blondes.” Billy lifted the map on his clipboard and pulled out a photo from under it. “Tim snapped a picture of her walking off the plane.”

Leonard shifted his eyes between the flying and the black and white photo Billy held up. “Jane Doe? What about John?”

“Military came, surrounded him completely, and took him away. I got a picture of him from behind. Thank God he’s a giant or I wouldn’t have gotten that. The guys like six-five or something. No wonder he survived it.”

“Survived what?” Leonard asked with edge. “A mental experiment. Come on, Bill, you’re chasing nothing here. And your wasting the station’s gas.”

The clipboard toppled from Billy’s hand and he sprang forward in his seat. “Oh, shit.” He looked quickly to Leonard. “You were saying?”

Leonard looked shocked as he spotted what Billy did. It was small in their visual scope at first, but as they cleared the hillside forest, the Caldwell Experiment Complex came into their full view. Or rather, what was left of it. Wooden and metal splinters of the once structures spread about the area like matchsticks. Workers in white suits roamed about, lifting the debris, rummaging through pieces of furniture, carrying crates and even body bags to helicopters that awaited.

Billy lifted his camera. “Hold it steady.” Billy began to continuously take pictures. “Being awful quiet there, Len. Feel like recanting that crazy person story? Got any new ideas on what happened here?”

“Barring any blast of nature’s fury. I haven’t a clue.” Leonard moved the chopper closer and held it steady while Billy got what he needed.

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I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex

Dr. Randall Jefferson looked up to the helicopter that hovered awfully close. A short, stout, older man whose gray hair blew from the chopper’s blades. He wasn’t dressed like his title ‘Director of Caldwell Research’ dictated. Jeans and a tee shirt were his work attire. Donning gloves, he stood at a long table sifting through tiny pieces of the experiment’s remnants. Determining what was viable and what wasn’t.

More disgusted he grew by the minute the closer the chopper flew. They were too close for his comfort. Dr. Jefferson wasn’t worried that they could see something they shouldn’t. There really wasn’t anything recognizable left. He was more fearing of the fierce wind from the helicopter blowing away something he could very well need.

Out of place Dr. Gregory Haynes looked. Perhaps because he felt out of place, he somehow projected it. It was his second day with Caldwell, and at forty-two years old, he was the exact same age, Dr. Jefferson was when he was in Greg’s shoes. In the preparatory training position for Caldwell Director.

Overseeing the process, Greg noticed Dr. Jefferson's perturbation with the intruding helicopter. He made his way to Dr. Jefferson. "Want me to have them moved?"

"How?" Dr. Jefferson asked. "Unfortunately, about the only thing you can do right now is flip them off."

Greg snickered. He closed his mouth whenever he smiled which showed his shyness. A smaller man, greying crew cut hair. He adjusted his small wire glasses as he peered at what Dr. Jefferson worked on. "Anything I can look at yet?"

"As a matter of fact. Yes. Found a few items of interest that we will need." He handed Greg a clipboard, then lifted a small piece of tin, examined it and tossed it aside.

"From room six. Wasn't that the room where Jennifer Reilly passed on?"

"Yes. Amazing that with all the destruction, what's remained. It's in the bin."

Greg set down the clipboard and moved to the blue bin with a sheet covering it. He blinked startled when he looked in. Tossed in the bin as if categorized the same as the torn diary, computer disk and candle that were in there, was a partially decomposed arm. Severed or seemingly ripped at the elbow. The hand even sported a sapphire ring and chipped red nail polish. Greg covered the bin. "Well, uh . . ." He brought his fist to his mouth, trying to look calm as he cleared his throat. He brought his hand down and flashed a quick awkward smile to Dr. Jefferson, clearing the sickness from his throat one more time. "I see now why I left NASA for this."

CHAPTER TWO

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
March 5th - 11:51 p.m.

The growling of wolves, the painful shriek of the beast's cries could be heard through the walls of the Seal River complex. Cal Reynolds, knew she was dreaming, she kept telling herself 'it was just a dream' but she couldn't wake up.

So real it was, just like it had happened to her six weeks earlier. In the lower level watching the black in white monitor, watching Major Jake Graison, towering and strong, taunt the creature from the complex. The creature was a bur in Cal's dream. Perhaps her mind's way of making her forget. She watched the monitors. She did what she was supposed to do. Her hand trembled over the homing device button waiting for Jake to lead the creature out. All was clear. With a slam, she pressed the button. She heard the stampede of the wolves led by the homing signal. The wolves may have been a their enemy but also their saving grace against a vicious predator that would not go down. A predator that tried with fortitude to claim the three of them that remained.

Cal raced from the lower level back up to Jake and young Rickie.

Rickie.

Rickie Carlotta. Eighteen, full of life, the only person to make Cal really smile since her own daughter, Jessie, had been tragically killed a year earlier.

Never did it cross her mind when she reached the upper level that anything had gone wrong. How could it? Jake was in control. Jake had led the beast. And Cal's world sunk along with her heart when she arrived in what was the recreation room. Rickie lay on the floor, a pool of blood surrounding him. Jake, his usually stern and handsome face just looked so lost as he knelt above a disemboweled Rickie.

At that instant in her dream. The instant she lifted Rickie's' thin body to hers. Holding him in her arms. Feeling his hand touch her face. His warm blood seep against her small framed body. Cal just wanted to wake up.

Clinging Rickie tight to her. Begging Jake to help him. Feeling the life leave Rickie . . . again.

She sobbed in her dream and looked up to the ceiling. "God!" She cried out. "Take me out of this! Please take me out of this!"

She felt herself drop as if falling from a distance. And the shaking of her body caused Cal to sit up in bed and gasp for air. Her blonde hair was wet from perspiration. Her shoulders moved drastically up and down as she tried to catch her breath. The room was lit only by the moon. Trucks is the distance were the only noises.

"Cal." The deep male voice grumbled her name.

Still out of it, still feeling that dream, Cal, edgy, twitched her head to see Jake. His eyes were still closed as he lay on his side. She tried to say his name but

nothing would come out. Never could she recall her hands or body shaking so badly. Looking down to them, she saw the blood. Covering her hands, her chest, just as it did when she held Rickie. At that instant her breath went out of control and into hyperventilation. She flung the sheet from her and raced with a stumble out of bed and to the bathroom, slamming the door.

She flicked on the light and blasted the water in the sink. She washed her hands and her face waking herself up completely.

She lifted her head to look in the mirror. So pale she was. And Cal still shook. Gripping the edge of the sink, her head dropped and she let out a sob drowned out by the running water. Slowly, and emotionally, she lowered herself to the floor bringing her legs to her chest, wrapping her arms tightly around them and burying her face to her knees.

“Cal.” Jake called her name from the other side of the door. He cleared the grogginess from his throat. “Cal, you O.K.?”

Cal lifted her head, wiped her eyes, then hurried and reached up shutting off the faucet. “Um . . . yeah. I’ll be out in a second. Go back to bed.” Cal stared at the closed door. She waited with anticipation for the sound of Jake’s heavy footsteps returning to bed. And when that happened, Cal returned to her post-dream frightened huddle on the floor.

CHAPTER THREE

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

March 6th - 5:45 a.m.

Jake seemed to increase his dramatics every time he did it. For the seventh time he opened his front door wearing only boxers shorts. He was a towering man, but fit. Even in his underwear he looked intimidating. He'd huff loudly, rub his very short brown hair, and snarl his handsome, yet rugged face in disgust as he stared out into the predawn residential street of the base. Stare at that empty spot on his walk that should contain a Sunday paper. Even though he was away from civilization for seven months, his memory was sharp enough to recall he always had a paper by five in the morning. Where was it? He didn't think twice about the day before's paper. It was Jake's first morning home and he had a lot on his mind. But that was the day before and Jake now wanted his paper.

Just as he went to shut his door, something dawned on him. He stepped out onto his small porch and looked to the dark house four doors down. The home of Captain Charles Burgett, Jake's friend since he joined the Rangers. Thinking it was the same thing as what happened with the phone, Jake pulled his front door closed and walked down to Captain Burgett's home.

Jake approached the front door, knocked just once and waited. A few seconds later he knocked again. Twice to make sure Burgett heard. When no answer happened again, Jake stepped back to the walkway. Knowing that he pretty much outranked everyone that lived on that quiet street, Jake without fear, called out. "Chuck." The resonating voice that came from his huge body caused dogs to bark. Raising one eyebrow in annoyance, Jake called out again. This time louder. "Chuck!"

There was a squeak of the window, then Chuck, hair tossed about, stuck his head out whispering. "Jake?"

"Oh good you're up."

"A long with everyone in the neighborhood. What?" Chuck still kept his voice low.

Jake did not. "Chuck, did you forget to pay my paperboy?"

"What?"

"My paperboy or man, whatever." Jake's voice echoed in the street. "The guy who delivers the news? Did you forget to pay him? I wouldn't doubt it. I don't have a phone now, thank you very much. I put you in charge of paying my bills while I was gone. If you didn't use my VISA, that would have been cut off . . ."

"Jake." Chuck shut him up. "Are you that anal that you'll stand in the street in your underwear asking me about your paper?"

"I want my paper."

"Steal Corporal Jenkins. You're the Ex-O. What's he gonna say to you?"

“Good point.” Jake spun around to the house next door. He saw the paper laying on Corporal Jenkins walk and he happily marched over and took it. He smiled as he unfolded it and then saw Chuck’s porch light go on. Figuring it was his invitation, he moved to the porch.

Chuck opened his front door. “Jake, what are you doing?”

“Getting a paper.” Jake pulled on the screen door and walked in. “Is there coffee made?”

“Not yet.” Chuck shut the door. “Considering I haven’t even had time to take a leak.”

“Well, go on. I’ll start the coffee.” Jake moved across the small living room and stopped. He looked around at the papers scattered about. Beer cans on the table, a half eaten pizza that looked really old. “Chuck. Don’t you think you should clean up?”

“Yeah Jake, I’ll get right on it. Make the coffee, I’ll be right down.” Chuck, swaying his head walked to the stairs and up them. And Jake, in his journey to the kitchen, grabbed the pizza box and a few of those beer cans.

When Chuck made his way back down stairs, he could hear the gurgling of the coffee pot. He walked in the kitchen, sat at the table and waited for Jake who was already pouring the coffee.

“Thanks.” Chuck said as Jake set the cup down in front of him. “Not that I actually planned on getting up this early. Or rather being stirred from a great dream by your ass yelling outside.”

Jake sat down. “I would have picked up the phone and called. However, I don’t have a phone. Do you know how embarrassing that is Chuck? I have never been late for a bill in my life.” Jake sipped his coffee. “I should ask the experiment to issue me a letter stating that I was away for seven months. What do you think?”

Chuck hesitated in taking a drink. “You should.”

“I will.”

“God.” Chuck shook his head in disbelief. “Anyhow, I take it Cal is sleeping.”

“Yes.” Jake said as if that thought bothered him. “I tried to wake her up Chuck. And she says, Jake, go away . . . Get this Chuck, she tells me she’s tired. What do you suppose she means?”

“Um . . . I don’t know. Perhaps she’s tired.”

“Ha, ha, ha asshole. I don’t get it. I had her up and about everyday at five in the morning at the experiment and . . .”

“Jake.” Chuck interrupted. “You guys did things one way for seven months. Now you’re in the real world, you have to learn to do things different.”

“I always get up at five.”

“Yeah, but did she?” Chuck questioned. “Probably not. So let her sleep.”

"No, it's more than that. After you left last night, she got . . . she got really quiet."

"Did I say something?"

"No. I don't know what caused it." Jake said. "We talked, actually I talked after you left and then her and I, we were, you know, intimate. And she shut down after that."

"There you have it. That's your problem. You bored her in bed, Jake. I mean you just referred to having sex as . . ."

"Chuck please."

"No, Jake, listen to me." Chuck tried to explain without laughing. "What are you expecting? You, meet this woman up there at the experiment. You spend seven months with her in seclusion. Yeah, it's your element, that survival shit. But was it hers? So she adjusts to that element with you. You step from it, she feels different, you're still the same. It scared her. That's why she left you at the airport and wanted to stop seeing you. But you go after her and whisk her down here, her head's spinning. She needs more adjustment time. See, if you weren't the relationship illiterate guy you would know this."

Jake was amazed. "That was a really good explanation."

"Thanks. Just remember it takes time."

Jake looked at his watch. "Well, seeing how you know women, exactly how long do you think it will take for her to adjust? I can see it wearing on my patience."

"Jake, what is wrong with you? She's not been here twenty-four hours yet."

"I know." Jake finished his coffee and stood up. "But I want to get rolling on this relationship we started. Move on to the next phase."

"In all seriousness Jake, besides her getting used to you. And trust me you're tough to get used to. What about the other adjustment?"

Jake paused in pouring his coffee. "What other adjustment?"

"Mentally getting over the shit you two went through up there."

Jake fluttered his lips and poured his coffee. "It'll take no time. Cal's tough. You should have seen her up there. Like me, I don't think it will even phase her."

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
March 6th - 4:40 a.m. CST

Leonard's dim flash light and Billy's bright one were the only things leading the way in the dark morning as he and Billy tromped through a small wooded section. They hadn't seen any Caldwell people when they hovered again, so they landed near the river and left the chopper there

"I can not believe you have me doing this." Leonard commented.

"Doing what? I told you I would have flown here alone." Billy commented having to look up at Leonard as they walked. Not that Billy was short, he was average and thin. But Leonard was a bigger man and lean.

"Oh, sure. When did you get your license? Three months ago. I feel like a father with his teenage son every time I fly with you."

"You remind me of my stepfather. He used to grab the wheel from me constantly. Like you grab the stick." Billy fussed with the camera.

"We were sideways, Bill. And look at you with that camera. You're not getting any good shots."

"We may."

"You're not a great photographer, Bill."

"Is there possibly anything else you'd like to insult me on? Go on, get it out of the . . ." Billy stopped walking as they emerged from the woods.

"What's wrong?"

Billy sniffed. "Do you smell that?"

Leonard took a long inhale, there was a slushy sound.

Billy looked at him through the corner of his eyes. "That was really gross."

"I'm clogged up. What do you want me to do."

Smelling again then making a face, Billy continued walking. "Damp and musty."

"Death."

"No. If I meant death. I would have said death. I said damp and musty." They neared what was left of the complex. "Holy shit. Look at this place."

"What exactly are you hoping to find that the workers did not?"

"What they plan on finding today." Billy's flashlight shone about the debris. "It looks like a tornado ripped through this place."

"I'm not understanding your obsession."

"They did something to these people. I know it."

"What would be the point?"

Billy's head swayed. "I don't know that either." Billy raised the beam of the flashlight and aimed it at the small temporary silver trailer set up. "What's the chance of that being unlocked?"

"Not good." Leonard watched Billy move to it. "Bill, come on. This is a highly regarded experiment. They release their findings to not only medical journals, but the military as well. Don't you think if something was foul with this

it would have been discovered years ago?"

"How?" Billy arrived at the trailer. "How would they discover? What if their reports are doctored to fit the needs. And possibly not the total truth." Billy pulled on the door.

"What would make you believe that?" Leonard questioned.

"Because they weren't totally honest on how they got all their participants. It's an interviewing process. Only the best go? Bullshit, Len. If that's the case then why would they deliberately have a killer released from the mental institution to come here. I'll tell you why. To add drama perhaps? Make the experiment interesting. Bet me none of these participants knew they had a killer among them." Billy tugged the door again.

"How do you know they did this?"

"Trust me. I know. And me knowing this for a fact is why I'm allowed to tag this story. And follow it to the next experiment if need be."

"If you don't get us arrested first. Please quit with that door. It's locked."

Billy finally stopped pulling it. "You think we should break in?"

"I think you should do this legitimately. But since we're here. You might as well try a credit card or something because that door looks cheesy."

Billy grinned "Do you have one?"

Shaking his head, Leonard reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He took a card from it and handed it to Billy.

"Hold the light for me." Billy bent over and raised the card to the crease of the door. Just as he began to insert it, he heard a slight growl. "Man, Len, you should have eaten. Your stomach is loud."

"That wasn't my stomach Billy." Leonard looked down at Billy.

Billy slowly stood up. Another growl echoed at them.

With caution, at the same time, both men turned around holding their flashlights. The instant the beams shone outward was the instant another growl, this time fierce and loud cried at them. The ray of light hit only in a flash on the fangs and without warning the large body of a silver back wolf lunged forward at them mouth open. The jaws clenched immediately to Leonard and the weight of the wolf topped him to the ground.

Leonard painfully screamed out for help, struggling in a fight with the wolf that pinned him down. Billy looked around for something, anything to nail the wolf with. Racing to the rubble he grabbed a board. His hands shook and heart pounded as he watched the wolf snarl, its huge head rapidly moved back in forth as it tore the flesh from a now silent Leonard's chest.

As Billy went to swing at the wolf he saw the only movement of Leonard was the tossing of his limp body like a rag doll as the wolf fed upon him in an angry hunger. Billy dropped the board and backed up. The clunk of the board to the ground caused the wolf to turn its blood stained head Billy's way. Moving backwards Billy caught the glow of its eyes. Then in a running spin, Billy took off toward the wooded area, praying with every step he pounded into the ground to

reach the safety of the helicopter.

Billy didn't want to look back. He didn't want anything to slow down his determination run from the wolf he now heard chasing after him.

The woods seemed longer as his breath huffed and heart pounded in near perfect synchronization with the beast that raced behind. And then Billy saw it, the end of the woods. The blackness of the chopper that sat, door open.

"Please." Billy begged in his mind. "Please God." And with everything he had, Billy pulled from inside of him more, and charged toward the helicopter, leaping in side.

He landed inside hard, stumbling in his jump. Billy quickly rolled over and saw the charging wolf only a few feet away. His trembling hand reached blindly for the door as his eyes stayed fixed on the beast. Finally gripping the handle, Billy began to pull it and the wolf jumped forward, jaws open, slamming into the metal of the chopper door, just as the door shut.

Amidst the banging of the determined wolf, the rapidness of Billy's breathing, the thumping of his heart in his chest, Billy moved to the front of the chopper. The banging grew louder and Billy's whole body shook in fear as he sat in the pilot's seat. He looked back to the door to see the metal bending. "Shit." Billy fumbled with the controls and finally through amateur awkwardness, he started the helicopter engines.

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
March 6th - 6:05 a.m.

Cal was wanting to kill Jake for ruining her enjoyment of sleeping in on a Sunday. Her body just wouldn't do it. It wouldn't stay in bed if the sun was shining even slightly. She knew the sleep thing was going to be top priority on the list of things she was going to have to change in her after experiment life.

After getting dressed, Cal made the bed, and she had two good reasons. One it passed time until the coffee was finished and two, she didn't want to hear Jake bitch about it. Making her way back downstairs, a little more awake, the weird feeling of being in a new place set in. The small military style townhouse. So neat and clean Jake had kept it. Clinical would be the best way Cal could describe it. It even amazed her when she opened up the cupboard, how Jake had all the cups upside down and all the handles pointing right. Perfect spacing was in between each mug. She even had to snicker at the markings Jake made on the counter for each of his appliances so they too were perfectly placed.

After pouring a cup of coffee and moving the toaster over a half an inch, Cal grabbed a Ho-Ho, unwrapped it and proceeded back to the living room. Not a step into the room, not a bite into her cake and the front door open.

Jake slowed in his walk in. The paper under his arm. "Morning. You're finally awake."

Cal tried to swallow the cake and choked some. She wiped her mouth and laughed. "Jake, do you always run around outside in your underwear?"

Jake looked down. "No." He shut the door and stepped inside. "I was over Chuck's. I wanted my paper. Fuckin asshole forgot to pay my paper boy." Jake kissed Cal on the cheek. "Now there's another letter of apology I have to write. I'm ready to kill him. My credit is ruined."

"Your credit is not ruined Jake." Cal snickered. "Besides, you just got a hundred grand for completing the experiment. You don't need credit."

"That is not true. You always need credit. How do you expect . . ." Jake lifted the paper. "To buy a home."

"With cash." Cal saw he held up the real estate section. "And this can wait." She took it from him and tossed it on the coffee table. "I made coffee."

Jake's eyes went to the diagonal laying paper then to Cal. He saw her bring the Ho-Ho to her mouth. "Cal." He grabbed her wrist stopping her. "Sweetie. You shouldn't eat this junk first thing in the morning." Jake lifted the Ho-Ho from her hand.

"Hey." Cal reached for it but Jake held it high. "Ass. Give it to me."

"Later." He brought the paper wrapping still on it, back up around it and placed it on the coffee table.

"God, Jake." Cal grabbed the cake again.

"Cal." He reached for it.

"Jake." Cal smacked his hand away. "Knock it off. I'm hungry." She backed

up. "Don't." She warned.

"All right. I'll let it slide."

"Gee thanks. Now you ruined the fun of eating it." Cal tossed the ho-ho on the table, walked over, dropped down on the couch, and placed her feet on the coffee table. She began to drink her coffee.

After making the newspaper straight and re-wrapping the Ho-Ho, Jake joined her on the couch. "So."

"So."

"How did you sleep?"

"Not well."

"Why?" Jake asked. "Were you sick? You got up in the middle of the night?"

"No. I had a bad dream."

"What about?"

"About the . . ." Cal hesitated. "About the . . ."

"About?"

"About the anal way you do things around here."

"Cal. Please." Jake grabbed her hand. "What is with that word today? Besides, being organized is not being anal. So . . . you're versed in this living together thing, is this normal this short sentence conversation we're having?"

"Yes." Cal reached for the paper, grabbing a section. "Especially on Sunday's. It's very normal behavior that you just don't talk to your significant other until at least nine a.m."

"Nine a.m." Jake looked at his watch.

"Jake, I'm kidding."

"Don't do that Cal. You know I want to get this right."

"Go get a cup of coffee and we'll continue this short sentence conversation when you return."

"I can do that." He kissed her on the cheek then stood up. "Cal, I'm really glad you're here."

"Me too." Cal smiled watching him walk away then she reached for her Ho-Ho again.

"Cal?" Jake called from the kitchen. "Is there a reason that you moved this toaster a half an inch to the right?"

Cal's hand dropped the cake and with rolling eyes, she plopped backwards into the back of the couch.

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
March 6th - 10:00 a.m. CST

Stan Osowski, a younger, thin balding man had worked with Caldwell on three experiments as what they called an 'observer', and it was the first time in his twelve years with Caldwell that he ever made it to the field. Brought there because he had become so familiar with the complex from watching it on monitors, Dr. Jefferson thought he may be able to shed some light on where to dig. Stan was filled with excitement for being there and thought it an extra added bonus when he was present for the discovery of the unexpected mutilated body. He stood with Dr. Jefferson and Greg Haynes as the workers carried the black body bag to the chopper. "Hey," Stan said upbeat. "At least we know now a wolf still remains."

Dr. Jefferson looked sideways at Stan. "Thank you for that."

"You're welcome." Stand stood with the two doctors. He nodded his head in the awkward silence. "Well, I'd better be getting back." Stan pointed behind him.

Greg just smiled at him as Stan backed up and left.

Dr. Jefferson's eyes stayed focused on the chopper they loaded the body into. "Leonard Helms was his name. Central News Network confirmed he was working with an investigative reporter on a story about the experiment."

"I take it the reporter was here."

"Yes. That's how we knew to look for Leonard. This may interest you to know." Dr. Jefferson turned his head and looked at Greg. "The reporter's name is Billy Griffith."

There was a slight twitch of Greg's head as he looked confused at Dr. Jefferson. "I'm lost. Why would that interest . . ." The expression changed on Greg's face when it dawned on him why Dr. Jefferson decided to share the name information with him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

March 6th - 6:30 p.m.

"A game." Jake merely stated as he set his bottle of beer down on the round table he, Cal and Chuck sat at on his patio.

"Explain game." Chuck requested.

"Simple." Jake played with the label on his beer. "Eight participants, eight investors. All eight go in, only one comes out. The investor who has that participant . . . Wins." He looked at Cal and winked. "Unless, of course, you form one hell of a team, then you really throw them through a loop."

Cal smiled at Jake. "They didn't expect it."

"Wait." Chuck held up his hand. "Back to the game thing. So basically all these investors are doing is placing their bets? I thought this was a legit experiment."

"It is." Jake explained. "Only to make it interesting they have this side bar betting. Half the two million goes to Caldwell, the other half is the betting pool. And Caldwell throws as much as they can at you. They pit you against each other. Push the mental thing along to break you. Rely on nature's elements to play a role and then they have the catch, which history shows usually wipes everyone out."

"The monster?" Chuck said trying to get the story right.

Cal bobbed her head back and forth. "Not really. It's called a Stasis. A metamorphosis that is nearly indestructible. Jake kicked its ass though."

"So what happens in a case like with you two?" Chuck asked. "Did your investors split the pot?"

"Nope." Jake answered. "They would have, but my investor pulled from the game right before it ended. Then he *died* . . ." Jake raised an eyebrow to Cal. "Three hours later in a drive by *shooting*."

"What was that for?" Cal asked.

"What?"

"The eyebrow thing."

"Nothing." Jake grabbed his beer bottle and took a drink.

"And speaking of investors." Cal looked at Chuck. "My investors owns a resort in Vegas and . . ." She smiled at Jake. "He said as a wedding present he'd be more than happy to fly us out and give us the best room he has for a honeymoon out there."

"Whoa." Chuck smiled. "Nice guy."

"He's organized crime." Jake stated. "And that's not good news."

Cal flung her hand Jake's way. "So what if he is. I like him. He's a nice guy."

"He may very well be a nice guy." Jake reasoned. "But he's mob, Cal. You

can't plan on remaining friends with him. You should think about severing all ties."

"Why?" Cal asked.

"Why?" Jake repeated. "My position on base is why. There's not much I can do now, but once we're married it will have to stop."

Cal had a bit of a chuckle to her voice. "Once we're married it will have to stop? What are you gonna do, put your foot down?"

"Yes." Jake nodded once.

Cal looked to Chuck who had a cringing nervous smile. "Do you think being my husband gives you the authority to do that?"

"Yes." Jake nodded his head once. Again.

Cal laughed as she stood from the table. "Uh Jake? Fuck you." She turned, slid open the patio doors and went into the house.

Jake lifted his hand up. "What?" He turned to Chuck. "Was that the wrong answer?"

Chuck looked dumbfounded at him. "Um no Jake, it really wasn't."

"Thank you."

"Just a word of advice. Add a little tact to your phrasing when you inform her she has to wear a chastity belt when you aren't around."

"See." Jake grabbed his empty beer bottle as he stood up. "Why do you have to do that?"

"Do what?"

"You have to do that sarcastic shit. Why couldn't you just say I gave the wrong answer?"

"Because you should know." Chuck told him.

"Did you see me heading in the wrong direction?"

"What do you mean?" Chuck asked.

"Did you see it building to the point that she would swear at me and storm away."

"Oh yeah." Chuck laughed. "It built to that."

"Asshole!"

"What!" Chuck jumped back.

"Why didn't you stop me. Fuck." Jake tossed his hand though the air and walked to the patio doors.

"Jake?" Chuck called while trying to hide his laughter.

"What?!" Jake blasted.

"Can you bring me another beer?" Chuck lifted his beer bottle and swayed it. Jake grunted at him and went into the house.

^^^

Jake didn't have to make it too far into the house to run into Cal. She rinsed off the dinner dishes, maybe a little louder than she needed to. He watched her for

a moment before his long arm intruded her washing stream and he held his beer bottle under the water, rinsing it.

Cal shut off the water. "Saying excuse me would have worked."

"I thought of that. But . . ." Jake tossed his clean bottle in the bright orange trash bin. "Even if I said excuse me, you still would have had something to say. Probably sarcastic."

"Probably."

Jake opened the fridge and pulled out a beer. He saw Cal moving toward the patio doors. "Wait."

"What?"

"I want to talk to you. Please."

"We have company."

"It's Chuck." Jake said with sarcasm. "He doesn't count. Besides, he started this whole thing anyhow."

Cal's mouth dropped open. "How is Chuck responsible for your ignorance?"

"He knows I want to do this 'you and me' thing right. He's supposed to help me out."

"Aw Jake." Cal whined as she stopped, pulled out dining room chair and sat down. "What am I gonna do with you?"

"What do you mean? You're gonna marry me. You said you'd marry me. You didn't change your mind. Did you?"

"Jake, I didn't mean it literally. Sit down."

As Jake began to sit he saw Chuck at the patio doors pointing to his empty beer bottle. Jake held up his index finger in a 'just wait' manner. Chuck widened his eyes and pointed at the bottle again. Irritated, Jake flipped him off, shut the drapes and joined Cal. "Sorry. Now . . . you were deciding on what to do with me."

"Jake. First of all, this Aldo situation. I don't let myself like people, or even get close to them ever since Jessie was killed."

"I know that."

"I let myself get close to Rickie. And we know what happened to Rickie."

"I know that too. Cal? What does Aldo have to do with Rickie?"

Cal hesitated before answering. "Everything. He has everything to do with us being here too Jake. First he watched us, he stepped from the investors position when he became intrigued with us. He knew my closeness to Rickie. Do you realize how much trouble he went to, to acquire those tapes of the experiment so he could have Rickie segments edited for us?"

"Cal. Sweetie. I understand you were touched by that. I was too. And I plan on watching every minute. But . . . that still doesn't make up for what he is."

"He is a man with a heart. Had he not stepped in at the last minute and convinced your investor to sell his share of the game. The option to force a single winner would have continued and we would have both been killed. You know that."

Jake's head lowered. "I know that." He laid his hand on hers. "But the man had my investor shot Cal."

"That was not proven. It was a drive by shooting."

"In a very influential neighborhood. What, the lawn patrol came by and was pissed off about his grass being too high?"

Cal snickered.

"What?"

"You made a joke. That was funny."

"I was being serious."

"Of course you were. Now I'm gonna be serious for a moment. People come into our lives for a reason. And like you, I'm not good at letting them in. But once they are there, we should let them stay, because fate sent them. And they should stay until fate takes them away. Sometimes Jake, our jobs should be second to those who touch our lives."

Jake looked serious at her for a moment. He was quiet.

"Do you understand?"

"Yeah. But Cal, you do realize how easy it is for you to say that. You don't have a job."

Cal tossed her hands in the air. "Forget it. Just know, I'm not avoiding Aldo. You can if you want to be rude. But I'm not."

"All right."

"Jake? You really aren't going to reconsider?"

"Nope. Are you?"

"Nope." Cal said.

"Look, you have your reasons for wanting to be Aldo's friend. I have my reasons not to. As cold as it is, and as much as I appreciate all that he has done. He's a skeleton in my closet I don't need when I go to the pentagon."

Cal nodded slowly. "I understand that. It's a dick thing to say but . . ."

"Cal."

"All right." She swayed her head. "I'll keep him away from you."

"Thank you. And I'll try not to interfere in your Ma Barker role. Now." He laid his hand on hers. "Are we done fighting?"

"I don't think we'll ever be done fighting. And that worries me."

"We don't really fight."

"Yes we do." Cal said.

"O.K., we do. We'll get passed it." Jake soften his voice.

"Do you really believe that? Jake, we fought so much up there. We're still fighting. I think we'll always fight. Tell me we should be doing this."

"Absolutely. I love you Cal. You are the first woman I have ever loved. Gave my heart to. I'm not letting you go. And so what that we fight. When did you or I ever walk away from any challenge."

Cal tilted her head with an agreement look. "You got a point."

Jake kissed her hand. "Just bear with me, O.K.? I'm still new with this

relationship thing. I'll get it right. I promise. Hey, if I can wade through your adjustment time, you can wade through mine. Right?"

Cal pulled her hand from his. "What adjustment time of mine are you wading through?"

"Adjusting to the move here. Living with me. You know."

"No. Why do you think I have an adjustment period?"

"Chuck told me."

"Chuck's full of shit. I lived with you for seven months. Living with you isn't going to take adjustment. Living in this house will."

"We're getting another one. I got the paper today."

"That's not what I meant. I mean your marking the counter so your toaster is geometrically placed." She snickered. "And what is your obsession with this house buying?"

"I have to." Jake explained. "I get my promotion tomorrow. I officially become the Ex-O. I'm getting married. I can't live in base housing anymore. It's not right. It was O.K. when I didn't have a life. I have a life now. I have you."

Cal took in a deep breath and moved to Jake placing her arms around him. Jake closed his eyes as he held her.

"See Cal. This hug thing is really good. I like this."

Softly Cal kissed him on the lips. "Jake, you really need to lighten up in this relationship. . . .Now." Cal pulled back. "Let's go give Chuck that beer." She moved to the patio doors and pulled the drapes open. When she did, Chuck was kneeling at the glass doors, pretending he was weakly trying to get in. "Jake?" Cal's eyes went from Chuck to Jake. "Is he all right?"

"He's an asshole." Jake quickly slid open the doors taking Chuck by surprise and causing him to fall forward in the house. Jake gave a single laugh. "Beers in the fridge." He stepped over Chuck and went onto the patio.

Las Vegas, Nevada
March 6th - 7:30 p.m. PST

Aldo Connilucci sat behind his desk, sounds of gambling from the casino below seeped into his quiet office. He ran his thick fingers down the mustache that seemed to bury his top lip. A darker complicated man, not too tall, and on the pudgy side. Thick black hair not only covered his head, but any exposed part of his body.

Aldo held between his steady hands a check for five million, three hundred and thirty-three thousand dollars. He stared at it for a minute, then after laying it flat on his desk, he picked up a remote control that sat by his phone.

Slowly he turned his black leather chair and faced a lager brown cabinet. He pointed the remote at it and the doors to the cabinet opened exposing a television. Another press and the set came on. He watched the picture, black and white. Snow blew into a room through an open window. His eyes stayed fixed on the long, roundish object on the floor. It was blurry, but Aldo watched it.

A knock at his office door caused him to immediately turn off the television set.

"Come in." Aldo called out, turning his chair around.

Hayward Nelson walked in. Tall, thin, and GQ handsome. Not the expected look for an accountant and that's what he was. "I came as soon as I got your message."

"Sit down." Aldo pointed to the chair across from his desk.

"Good to have you back. You look exhausted." Hayward laid his briefcase on the floor. "And might I say congratulations."

"You may." Aldo slid the check Hayward's way and leaned back in his chair. "Go ahead and send the initial deposit to the next experiment. We'll have that off our mind at least."

"I thought we agreed to send the entire investment to . . ." Hayward's eyes moved from the check to Aldo. "Sir this is only . . ."

"I know."

"Shouldn't it have been eight million?"

"It should have been. But when that arrived by special messenger today, it also arrived with a tape."

"A tape?"

"A visual aid in their explanation of the shortage." Aldo stated.

"A third participant lived?"

"We think." Aldo nodded. "I still don't understand it fully. In fact, I'm lost." Aldo tossed up his hands. "But, if my mind is guessing right. It's not that bad of a thing. However, I'm glad I won't have to guess too long., they're supposed to call me about this tomorrow."

"I hope it's what you want to hear." Hayward grabbed the check and placed into in his briefcase. "I'll take care of the money."

“Thank you.”

“And again.” Hayward smiled as he stood up. “Congratulations Mr. Connilucci.”

Aldo nodded in appreciation watching Hayward leave. And when he was alone again, Aldo grabbed the remote control and swiveled his chair to return to watching that tape.

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
March 6th - 11:45 p.m.

The emptiness of the bed made Jake awaken. His hand moved over to the cold vacant spot next to him that an hour earlier contained Cal. He lifted up, rubbed his face and readied to call out, but stopped when he heard Cal's voice.

"No, no. Over here." She said, almost with a laugh to her.

Jake wondered who she was talking to and he slid out of bed.

"Stop that." Cal laughed.

After looking at the time, Jake proceeded from the bedroom even more curious. But as he got to the stairs he knew who Cal was talking to when he heard the second voice. A girl's voice, not too young, but definitely still a child. Jessie's voice. Cal's thirteen year old daughter.

"No, Mommy." Jessie giggled.

When Jake heard this, his heart stopped. He wondered if going any further down those steps would be an intrusion of Cal's privacy. She obviously was watching a video. He could see the blue hue of the television set creeping up the stairwell. Outdoor noises and laughter sounds grew louder the more Jake walked down those steps. With his arms folded, he stepped into the living room and his eyes went immediately to the set. He smiled.

Cal and Jessie were in what looked like a backyard. A swing set was in the background, a driveway containing a car. Even a picnic table all set up. But more so than the backdrop was the center of the video. Cal and her daughter. So much they looked alike. Both with their blonde hair, sitting at the picnic table side by side. Cal with her arm around Jessie.

"Mommy, one more time." Jessie said. "I want to show my friends."

"My eyes are killing me Jess."

"Come on."

"One more time. I can see this being shown when I'm old. Let's do it." Cal removed her arm from around Jessie and brought her hand to her eyes. At the same time, Jessie and Cal flipped up their eyelids.

Cal paused the tape when she heard Jake snicker. "I'm sorry. I woke you, didn't I?"

"Why did you shut that off?" Jake asked. "You don't want me to see it."

"No. That's not it. I'm being silly. Reminiscing. I just miss her."

"How is that silly?" Jake asked. "Can I watch with you? I would like very much to see your daughter."

Cal patted the spot next to her on the sofa. She waited for Jake to join her.

When the video played again, Jake smiled. "Can you still do that?"

"It's a family thing." Cal felt Jake grab onto her hand, slipping his fingers in between hers. She leaned her head against his arm, and then she felt his fingers tense up the second a young, dark haired man holding a guitar and sitting in the grass showed. David Martinez. Cal reached for the remote.

“Don’t.” Jake stopped her. “It’s O.K., let it go.”

Cal’s eyes shifted up to Jake, so serious and stern he looked watching David chuckling as he strummed the guitar.

“David, don’t.” Cal’s voice said.

David grinned widely and looked up at the camera. “Jess, should I?”

“Yes.” Jessie spoke from behind the camera.

In the video Cal’s hand reached down and David swiped it away. He’d strum the guitar, laugh, shake his head and play again.

David sang his own words to the Beatle’s song, *Michele*. “Caleen, was seen. Walking down the street with Mr. Green, cheating on me.”

“David.” Cal warned.

David laughed, strummed once and sang. “I love you , I love you, I love you. That’s all I want to say. You take my breath away . . .”

Jake looked suddenly at Cal when the video stopped. “What did you do that for?”

“You don’t need to see anymore.” Cal told him.

“Is Jessie in it more?”

“Yeah but . . .”

Jake took the remote and turned it on. His whole expression dropped as he watched David take off his guitar, reach up, grab hold of Cal, pull her down and kiss her. And then David pushed her down to the grass kissing her more with a happy laughter.

Cal watched Jake, his eyes fixed upon them.

“Get off my mom!” Jessie yelled. “That’s gross.”

David lifted his lips from a smiling Cal and looked at the camera. “Get used to it baby doll. I’m gonna be kissing your mother till I’m eighty years old.”

“Jake.” Cal took the remote and shut it off. “I’m sorry. That was a different life ago.”

“And it was only about a year or so ago.”

Cal lowered her head and looked at the remote.

“Cal. It’s O.K.” Jake laid his fingers on her chin and lifted her head. “I needed to see that. I did.” Jake cleared his throat. “You looked really happy then.”

“I’m happy now Jake. I love you very much.”

“I know.” Jake held her hand tighter. “And it’s O.K., I’m not letting that bother me. In fact, I’m gonna let that help me.”

“What?”

“Yes. I think maybe that’s what I need to do.”

“Play guitar?” Cal asked.

“Cal please. Do I look like a musician?”

Cal was joking. She saw Jake didn’t realize that. “Gees.” She slapped her hand on her leg. “What’s wrong with me. Of course not.”

“No, it’s the spontaneity thing. Yeah. I think, I think I’m gonna try to be more spontaneous with our romance. What do you think?”

Cal tried to stay serious but the snicker kept creeping up on her. "Sorry." She held up her hand. "But that's not you."

"Of course it is. I can do that. I can do things on a whim."

With her mouth tightly closed, Cal nodded. "I'm sure you can. Try it."

"Oh, not yet. O.K.? I have to give some thought on what I will do." Jake grabbed the remote control off of her. "As for now. Since you dragged me out of bed." Jake smiled at her. "Let's watch Jessie."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." He kissed her quick and turned on the video. "Only . . ." Jake pointed at the set. The tape sped forward. David was a fast moving blur. "We're going past this fuckin' asshole."

Cal, looking peaceful and trying to not laugh, snuggled close to Jake and they watched the video less David shots.

CHAPTER FIVE

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, Ga

March 7th - 8:00 a.m.

"Come in." Dr. Jefferson, a desk full of papers peered up when the single knock occurred at his door.

"Morning." Greg Haynes walked in. He clutched a stack of folders in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other.

"Morning Greg. Have a seat."

"Thanks." Greg pulled a chair up.

"I was reviewing your preliminary plans and notes for the next experiment."

"And?"

A slightly tilted head and a closed mouth look is how Dr. Jefferson nodded. "Ground work looks good. But you do realize that these experiments are treated like a fourth of July fireworks demonstration."

"Excuse me?"

"Each event must out do the other."

The corner of Greg's mouth raised. "And you aren't convinced that my idea for the next experiment will meet those expectations."

"Let's just say some of your new ideas are a bit different."

"I'm confident." Greg proceed to lay his folders on his lap and open them.

"They're coming across conservative."

"At first." Greg's mind was evidently elsewhere rummaging through the folder. "When you see how deep they go. You'll understand. It's a new approach. I'm striving for ninety percent of the experiment to stray from the established format. It'll add a new dimension."

"Well, it's your baby. You're the new director soon." Dr. Jefferson gathered up his notes. "I'm only going to be here for advice. Just remember we want the investors back."

"They'll come back."

"But here's some advice."

Greg smiled and gave Dr. Jefferson his attention. "What is that?"

"You may come off as, how can I put it? A softy?"

Greg slightly shook his head "Never. On the surface yes. But I assure you I'm not. Let's just say if I watch a movie about an asteroid heading to destroy earth. I may not look it, but trust me, I'm rooting for the asteroid."

With a chuckle, Dr. Jefferson held up his index finger. "Very good analogy. But somehow I get the feeling I-S-E. thirteen is not the reason you're here."

"No." Greg laid a folder on the desk. "I'm here because of our enigma in lab seventeen."

"I take it you have word?"

"Just spoke to the lab. Finally there is movement." Greg spoke with relief. "I

know you have a busy day and you were planning to leave early, but, you may want to be reachable.”

“That close?” Dr. Jefferson asked.

“That close. All the signs are there. I have a team on stand by to handle the situation. That’s just incase. Even though all testing shows normal structuring and nothing consistent to the other metamorphisms, we should still take no chances.”

“Conservative?”

Greg partially smiled. “Perhaps. Better safe than sorry.”

“All right. I’ll stay close tonight.”

“Great.” Greg closed the folder. “Helpfully with in the next twelve hours we will finally get some answers to these questions. I mean, this is the first thing thrown to me. I knew nothing about it at first. Now I’m intrigued.” Greg gathered his things and stood up.

“And probably glad to see it come to an end.”

Greg raised his eyebrow with a smile. “Yes, but . . . Who says it’s going to end?”

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
March 7th - 8:45 a.m.

In an unusual fashion occurrence for Cal, she wore a little black skirt suit and heels as she walked down the corridor of base headquarters in the direction she was pointed. Her purse, small, was tucked under her arm as she counted doors. At the end of the hall she saw the large wooden door, partly open it was, and a maintenance man stood before it. Cal watched him as he was removing the name plate that read, 'Major Jacob Graison'.

"Changing it?" Cal asked. Even though she knew it was a stupid question.

"Yes, Mam." The older worker stated. "New one will be ready shortly." He undid the final screw and took it from the door.

"What, if I can ask, are you going to do with the plate?"

"Ask the major if he wants it. And knowing the major he won't, and I'll toss it."

"Could I have it?" Cal asked sweetly. "I'm the Major's fiance, and unlike him, I'm sentimental. Can I?"

"So you're the one that the talk has buzzed about?" The worker smiled. "Sure. Here." He handed her the name plate.

Cal looked down at it as it rested in both of her hands, so proud she smiled and ran her finger over the etching of his name. "Thank you so much." Clutching it, she reached for the door, paused, placed the plate in her purse and then walked in.

Jake was standing behind a corporal looking over his shoulder to a computer when Cal walked in. Only for a second did Jake look shocked to see her, then he flashed a huge smile. "Cal." He laid his hand on the corporal's back. "Print that up. Thanks." He walked around the desk. "You're early."

"I know. I couldn't wait. Boy my stomach." Cal ran her hand over her abdomen. "It's got the flutters for you."

"Mine too."

"Really?"

"No." Jake kissed her. "I'm glad you're early. I have some things to talk about with you." He took Cal's arm and moved her closer to the desk. "Want you to meet my secretary. Corporal Lancing, this is my wife to be, Cal."

Corporal Lancing turned from the printer. He set down the papers and extended his hand to Cal. "Very pleased to meet you Mam."

"Thank you."

"Is that them?" Jake asked and the corporal handed him the papers. "Cal. Remember last night when I was talking spontaneous?"

"Uh-oh." Cal stated.

"Now I'm in an excited mood here. Do you have to do that sarcasm?"

"Sorry."

"Not a problem. Anyhow. My mind was racing with spontaneous thoughts

this morning.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Impressed?”

“Very much so.”

“Good.” Jake handed Cal the papers. “And I thought I would just start things moving. Spontaneous?”

“It depends.” Cal shifted through the papers.

“I’ve been busy since I saw you last. And for information sake the phone should be on by noon. Which reminds me.” He faced the corporal. “Lancing, did you fax that letter of apology to the phone company for me?”

“First thing after you phoned them.” The corporal answered.

“Thank you.” Jake looked at Cal again. “What do you think?”

“It’s like the world’s biggest agenda.”

“Yes.”

“For me?”

“Yes.”

Cal sifted through the four sheets of paper. “This looks like one day.”

“It is. Today’s. Shall I explain it to you?”

“Why not? Jake, you have me really busy.”

“Oh, it isn’t that bad. I just thought I would be spontaneous and get us moving on getting things rolling. See, I have you at the real estate office at ten. She has some houses to show you today. Just go on and pick one. As long as it’s big and clean it doesn’t matter.”

“Pick one?” Cal laughed. “Jake, it’s not that simple. I probably won’t find a house I like.”

“Just find one that will work and make it into what you like.”

“O.K.” Cal shrugged.

Jake looked over her shoulder pointing to the sheets. “Now after this promotion thing is over with Corporal Lancing will have all the directions to these places for you and a pass to get back on base. Don’t get lost out there, Cal, it’ll mess up the time table I set up.”

“I see you allotted me forty-two minutes for lunch.”

“You’ll like that place. I know exactly how long it takes for them to serve you.”

“Thanks.”

“And as you can see.” Jake flipped to the next page. “It may look like I have you running around for this wedding. But I promise I won’t be one of these guys who make the woman do it all. I have my appointments set up too. I’ll take care as much as I can. Probably most of the arranging. You just have to do a lot of the footwork for me. That’s not a problem is it?”

“No.” Cal shook her head still in shock.

“I don’t want to step on your toes. I know how women like weddings.”

“Jake, you can plan the whole thing if you want. In fact, I’d be interested in

seeing what a Jake style wedding is.”

Jake smiled. “Then you shall. You just have to pick out your wardrobe for that day and get your guest list to my secretary. He’s compiling mine.”

Cal looked to Corporal Lancing. “I’ll get that right out to you.”

Corporal Lancing nodded with a smile.

Jake continued to ramble. “The sooner the better sweetheart. The wedding is in a month.”

“A month?” Cal whistled. “All right.” Cal read some more. “Jake? Uh, what is this here.” She indicated. “It says at one-forty-four there’s a Jake call.”

“Yes.” Jake said with so much excitement. “I figure you’ll be in the car. I’ll call you. It’ll be one of those romantic spontaneous, middle of the day calls.”

Cal bit her bottom lip. “Will we talk dirty?”

“If you’d like. Here . . .” Jake leaned to the desk and grabbed a pencil. “Let me make a note of that there.” He scribbled on the sheet. “Lancing.” Jake laid the pencil in the holder. “Could you note that on my copy of Cal’s agenda?”

“Talking dirty?” Corporal Lancing snickered. “Sure.”

“See Cal? Spontaneous. What do you think?”

“I’m impressed, moved and speechless.” Cal folded the agenda and placed it in her purse. “And, it’s almost time.”

Jake took a deep breath and looked at his watch. “They should be here soon.”

“Let me look at you.”

“Why?”

“Jake.” Cal said his name with a tad of irritation. She stepped to him.

“Cal, you really look nice, I have to tell you.”

“So do you. So handsome.” She ran her hands down his chest smoothing out his uniform. She softened her voice inching nearly against him. “And if you’ll allow me, I’d like to just be very sentimental with you right now.”

“I’ll allow it.”

“I am so proud of you at this moment. I remember up at the experiment I promised as your friend I would be there for your next promotion. Never Jake did I doubt that I would stand here for you. But trust me, I never thought I’d feel so overwhelmed.”

“This . . .” Jake swallowed, looking in her eyes. “This is really nice.”

“Wait, it gets better.” Cal’s voice was so soft yet intense. “I’d like to tell you something, it will be the last time ever I’ll be able to address you with it, in a way I grew so accustomed to. Ready?” She watched Jake slowly nod and she neared her lips to his, almost touching. “I love you . . . Major Graison.”

“I have chills.” Jake clenched to Cal taking in a long deep breath. He paused, he looked over his shoulder to his corporal. “Lancing we need a private moment. Spin it around.” Waiting for his secretary to turn his chair, Jake returned to Cal, brought her as close as he could and he began to kiss her. Jake stopped suddenly when he heard the clearing of a throat. He stepped back, ran his hand over his top

lip and snapped to attention when he saw Colonel Roberts and a General standing in his office. "Pardon me, sir."

"Quite all right." Colonel Roberts, a man in his late forties, shook Jake's hand. "Maj. Graison you remember General Graves."

A quick snap to attention then Jake shook hands with the much older General. "General sir." He retracted his hand then placed it on Cal's arm. "Colonel, General, may I introduce you to Caleen Reynolds. My wife-to-be."

Colonel Roberts shook Cal's hand with a smile. "It is a pleasure to meet the woman who finally opened his eyes."

"Not completely." Cal smiled. "I'm trying."

Jake twitched his head Cal's way. "She ads a bit of sarcasm to everything." Jake closed his mouth tight and shook his head. "You'll get used to it."

Even General Graves chuckled. "Well, I bet you're anxious to proceed Maj. Graison. Will Ms. Reynolds be witness?"

"Yes sir." Jake tried to answer with seriousness, but he had a smile to him. "In all my career I've never had anyone present at a promotion. I am very honored that Cal is here."

Colonel Roberts looked at the proud look on Jake's face. "Maj. Graison, you and Cal go on in your office, we'll be right there."

"Yes Sir." Jake extended his hand in a leading way, allowing Cal to go before him and he followed her into his office.

General Graves look a little surprised. "Is there a problem Colonel?"

"As a mater fact. There is." Colonel Roberts said. "You and I have known Jake for many years. I've known him since he was seventeen. General, he has no family. He's been alone his whole life. When others customarily chose the person to pin on their first officer's commission. The Chaplin pinned Jake, because his only friend was out of the country. Do you get where I'm going sir?"

"I think I do." General Graves motioned his hand to the door. "Lets take care of this."

Cal's hand shook so badly as she stood on near tip toes pinning the silver oakleaf to Jake's lapel. She looked up to him. Jake stared ahead. So stern, strong. Yet his jaw twitched slightly, and in a rare moment for Jake, his eyes actually had a slight haze of sentiment to them. Cal snapped the back on to the pin. When it clicked, her body tremble, her eyes watered, and a near silent quiver of pride-filled emotion seeped from her. Cal wanted to grab him. Hold him, tell him how she felt, but she knew she couldn't. She gave a firm squeezing grip to his arm and then she stepped back.

Jake turned on his heels and snapped to attention.

General Graves held his hand out to Jake. "Congratulations . . . Lieutenant Colonel Jacob Graison."

CHAPTER SIX

Las Vegas, Nevada
March 7th - 9:30 a.m. PST

Aldo's office was at its usual Monday pace. Packed with people buzzing in and out, catching up on the work that seemed to compile over the weekend. Amidst the commotion, Aldo was on the phone. He'd laugh loudly, review a paper, hand it to someone, return to speaking, laugh again.

"Thank you for that, Cal." Aldo wiped an after laugh tear from his eye and leaned back in his chair. "It brightened my day. You do know though, if you don't want that ho-hum military life complete with a daily agenda, I got a big house out here." Aldo looked at a paper laid in front of him and shook his head.

"I appreciate the offer." Cal drove Jake's jeep as she talked on the phone.

"It's a big house. Just me and well the downfall, my rambunctious teenage daughter."

"Always remember, the teenage daughter Aldo, is your best asset."

Aldo smiled. "I am humbled. So I take it I can not propose marriage right now to you and move you into my house?"

"Thank you, but no. As a matter of fact I have to get to the bridal shop, picked out by Jake of course and then speaking of houses. I have to drag his big ass tonight, whether he likes it or not to check out a house I looked at today."

"I thought he told you just pick one."

"Aldo." Cal chuckled. "Come on, its Jake. Bet me he finds a million things wrong."

"I'll take that bet. You're on, I think the big guy is too busy and will just tell you it's fine."

"It's a bet." Cal shifted her eyes to the clock in the jeep. "And I better go."

"Cal, wait. Before you go, there is something I need to discuss with you. It's very important. It's about the . . ." Aldo stopped before he said the word 'experiment'. He looked down to a note set in front of him. A note that read, 'Dr. Gregory Haynes on line 25.'. "Cal, let me call you back."

"You're leaving me hanging Aldo."

"Sorry. But I'll get back to you on that." After hearing Cal's goodbye, Aldo snapped his finger and held up his hand to bring silence to the room. He pressed the line that blinked and immediately switched to the business man tone. "Dr. Haynes. What do you have for me?"

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
March 7th - 3:15 p.m.

From the back of the military jeep that stopped in front of his house, Jake lifted his briefcase. "Thank you Soldier." He told the corporal driving. After saluting Jake, the corporal pulled away. Jake turned toward the walk of his house and stopped when he heard the call of his name.

"Jake." Chuck called out stepping away from his car.

"Hey Chuck." Jake lifted his head.

"Wait." Chuck trotted his way. "You're home early." He made his way to Jake.

"Yeah. And don't forget Cal's serving dinner at five-forty-five. She has me looking at some house at eight. Even though I told her to just pick one. So don't be late."

"Jake. Before you go in there's something I have to do."

"What's that."

Chuck placed on a stern face, snapped to attention and saluted Jake firm. "Congratulations Lt. Col. Graison."

The corner of Jake's mouth raised and he saluted Chuck back. "Thank you."

"Goddamn am I proud of you Jake." Chuck gave a pat to Jake's arm. "I really am. Way to kiss ass all the way up the ranking ladder."

"You're an asshole." Jake shook his head and turned back to his house. "You can't stay serious for five fuckin minutes."

"Jake wait."

"What now?" Jake slowed down.

"We have two and a half hours. You're tense, you wanna go shoot some hoops before dinner."

Jake looked at his watch. "You know what? Yeah. Cal said something about baking. She does that you know." Jake nodded. "I'm gonna have baked goods."

Chuck snickered. "Well, good for you. Do you?"

"Yeah. Give me five minutes to change."

Chuck pulled at his own uniform. "Me too." He backed up. "I'll be over in five."

Jake continued up his walk and he paused when he stepped on the porch. He looked with oddness at the front window of his home. "Why are the blinds drawn?" He opened the front door and stepped into a dark house. "Cal." He called out. "Sweetie is there a reason we're in the dark. I don't draw the blinds until dusk." Jake set down his briefcase, shut the door and reached for the light switch. He flicked it on. Nothing. "Fuckin Chuck forgot to pay my electric bill too. Fuck." A striking of a match and then the orange amber color lighting of the room caught Jake's attention. He turned from the wall to see Cal standing up from lighting a candle on the coffee table.

"Your secretary said you were on your way." Cal stood wearing only one of

Jake's long white button down shirt.

"What's all this about?"

"This is about your promotion." Cal walked to him and grabbed his hands pulling him more into the living room. "You have years of celebrating to make up for."

Though Jake wanted to look at Cal, so beautiful, her hair pulled over one shoulder, his eyes kept going to the candle on his coffee table. "Cal, you really should put something under the candle. Wax is going to drip on . . ."

"Jake. Don't worry about it." Cal reached up and loosened his tie. "It will come off when it gets . . ." She pressed into him and softened her voice. "Hard."

Jake swallowed.

Cal slipped off his tie then brought her hands to his shoulders removing his jacket. She tossed it to the chair.

"So this is celebrating."

"Actually." Cal lifted his shirt from his pants, unbuckled his belt and tossed that. "This is called spontaneous seduction."

"Seduction huh?"

"Yep." Cal unbuttoned his shirt.

"Should we go upstairs?"

"Not when it's spontaneous. No." She slipped his open shirt off. He was wearing a tee shirt. "God, Jake, can you possibly have anymore clothing on."

"Sorry Cal but I wasn't expecting this . . ." He kissed her. "Spontaneous seduction." He grabbed a hold of the tee shirt and took it off. As he tossed it, he felt Cal's lips touch upon his stomach. Sensually kissing him. "Right here?"

"Oh yeah." She moved her lips slowly up his chest. "Right here."

Jake slid his hands down her back and slightly under the long shirt. He let out an ornery chuckle when he felt her bare skin. Placing his hands to her waist he, lifted Cal to his level, wrapped his arms tightly around her securing her to his chest and he began to kiss. His one hand slid further up her back and under her hair, kissing her harder. Then slowly, still holding Cal, he lowered himself to his knees.

Cal's legs straddled over Jake's as they kissed and their bodies gently moved on that floor. Feeling Cal, Jake's hands moved to the collar of the shirt. He swept her hair to the side and brought his lips to her neck, gliding them down as he opened the shirt. With an edge of roughness he pulled the shirt over her shoulders trapping her arms. His huge hands pressed to behind her shoulders, gripping her, arching her back some as he brought his lips to the center of her chest. So into it they grew until . . . Chuck walked in.

"Hey Jake . . . whoops." Chuck stopped mid-stride in the house.

"Fuck." Jake raised his head. "Don't you knock!"

"No, I never knocked." Chuck answered. "And you said to come over in five minutes."

"You still should knock." Jake looked over his shoulder. "I live with

someone now.”

“Sorry Jake, it’s just gonna take me sometime to get used to the fact that you could be getting laid in the middle of . . .”

“Chuck, please.” Jake closed his eyes. “Can you uh . . . leave.” Jake motioned his head to Cal who was on his lap. “We’re trying to do something here.”

“Oh sure. Are we still shooting hoops before dinner?”

“Chuck.” Jake called out.

“I’m leaving. Call me when you’re done.” He moved to the door. “Oh and Cal. You may want to know, I can see your left breast.”

“Chuck!” Jake’s hands shot up covering Cal’s breast. “Leave.”

Cal laughed and lowered her head.

“I’m gone. Call me.” Chuck hurried out.

“Asshole.” Jake let out a breath of annoyance.

“Don’t worry about it.” Cal kissed him.

“See. That is why we do this sort of thing upstairs.”

“No, Jake. This . . .” Cal placed her hands on his face and kissed him. She moved her body against him forcing him back and down to the floor. She lifted her head allowing her hair to dangle down at him. “This is why it’s called spontaneous.”

Jake looked up at her smile, laid his hands on her cheeks and pulled Cal to him, they kissed again and when her chest met his, he gripped her and rolled her, bringing Cal to her back and his body to hers.

Chicago, Illinois
March 7th - 3:30 p.m. CST

Billy wasn't expecting anyone at his apartment. If he had, he would have cleaned up, or certainly shaved. He definitely wasn't expecting the Executive Director of The Central News Network to show up at his home either.

"How are you Billy?" Paul Kenning, a business man in his mid forties, graying temples, asked as he stood at Billy's door. A large envelope was tucked under his arm.

"Better." Billy spoke groggy. Actually, Billy had been drinking, slow but steady since he arrived back home after Leonard's death the day before. "Come in." He opened the door wider for Paul. "I wasn't expecting anyone." Billy reached for his shirt that laid on the chair. He put it on.

"I wasn't expecting to come and see you until tomorrow. But I spoke to Leonard's wife and she said you weren't doing all that well."

"I'm doing."

"Can we sit down." Paul indicated to the sofa.

"Yeah, sure." Billy followed and sat down at the same time as Paul. "What's going on?"

"It's about this story."

"You want me to drop it." Billy folded his hands.

"Not entirely. Perhaps you're going to need to take a different approach." Paul handed Billy the envelope. "When the news of Leonard's death got out. The Science Review called. I told them you were investigating. They sent these. Thought you may need them."

Billy opened the envelope and pulled out a large pile of pictures. Clear shots, taken at the airport of Cal and Jake. "Oh wow." He said in awe. "I can see his name tag. Major Jacob Graison." He turned to another picture. One of Cal and Jake kissing at the airport gate. "They're together aren't they? I find him, I find her. Right?"

"Read the faxes that are in there."

Billy reached into the envelope. He pulled out two sheets of paper. "This letter is from Caldwell."

"Yes. When Dr. Haynes called me this morning about Leonard's death. I took the liberty of telling him that we uncovered the one participants name. Maj. Graison. And he kind of, well, chuckled."

"Why?"

"The other fax. Dr. Haynes sent it with the letter."

Billy began to read. "Shit they signed a contract of confidentiality."

"Valid for over two and a half years. They talk. They owe the institute the money back. I think the length of time is placed on there because who the hell is going to care or remember after thirty-three months."

"Damn it." Billy laid the faxes down on the table. "So basically anything I

find out, I find out on my own.”

“Exactly. And though it probably will be hogwash . . . I convinced Dr. Haynes to speak to you.”

Billy’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Yes, in exchange for not releasing details of Leonard’s death in connection with the experiment compound, he said he’ll meet with you next week.”

“That’s great.” Billy’s enthusiasm was low. “What’s he gonna tell me.”

“About the experiments and what they do.” Paul explained. “I don’t expect it will be all that interesting or news worthy. He’s going to be very PC.”

Billy ran his hand down his face. “Swell.” He let out a slow breath. “I have two participants who probably won’t speak to me at all. I have a soon-to-be director who’s going to paint a pretty scientific picture and give one hell of an explanation for what I saw up there.” Billy tossed the pictures to the table. “Shit.”

“In other words, even with what you told me you know. And what I saw. Without proof or eyewitness account, you have a flash story that won’t last in people’s minds.”

“A boring story. So I take it you want me to drop it.”

“No. Not at all. Talk to Dr. Haynes.” Paul said. “Do you know they start planning the next experiment years in advance?”

“Yes I did.”

“They start interviewing participants far in advance too. Well I’m thinking, you gather up all you can about the upcoming experiment. And by the time it rolls around, those experiment twelve participants will be free to talk.”

“Get all their information and break the story in the thick of it.”

“Well.” Paul shook his head. “That’s not where I’m thinking.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want you to talk to them, but not to break the story on experiment twelve, but to help you with the story of experiment thirteen.”

“How are they going to help with the next experiment if they know nothing about it?” Billy asked.

“They’ll be more like . . . preparing you?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m a man of my word Bill.” Paul spoke calmly in a business-like explaining manner. No emotions. Factual. “I said you could follow this story to the next experiment if need be. I keep my word. But instead of following it *to* the next experiment. How about following it *into* the next experiment.”

It took a moment, but then it dawned on Billy where Paul was going. And as he picked up the pictures again of Cal and Jake, Billy smiled to Paul. A smile of agreement to what Paul was saying.

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

March 7th - 4:30 p.m.

Coming down the steps, wearing shorts and a tee shirt, Jake moved directly to the small living room closet and pulled the basketball from it. He checked the firmness of it knowing it had been seven months since he used it. It seemed fine and he tucked it under his arm. "Hey, Cal. I'm out of here." He moved toward the kitchen. He could smell the mixture of a baking cake and dinner. "I'll be back in an hour and that'll give me time to shower before . . ." He looked at his kitchen when he arrived. A bag of flour and a bag of sugar were on the small table. The mixing bowl protruded from the sink. Splashed on the stove were a few grease dots which must have escaped from the pot. And a few jars of seasoning set on the counter right where Cal had her hands in a bowl making little balls out of some sort of tan mixture.

Cal smiled at him and placed one of those tan balls into a mushroom cap. "What's wrong?"

"Is it customary for a kitchen to look like this when a meal is being prepared?"

"This isn't the mess hall Jake. Yes. I'm cooking appetizers, dinner and desert all at the same time. I'll clean up. Go play ball." She grabbed more of the mixture.

"Cal." Jake stepped to her.

"What?"

"My ring." He grabbed her hand and looked at her diamond covered in the moist substance.

"It'll rinse off."

"Wear gloves or something. I paid a lot for that."

Cal rolled her eyes, turned on the water and rinsed off her hand. She removed the ring and placed it on the window sill.

Jake let out a slight shriek. "You took it off. I can't . . ."

"Jake." Cal reached into the mixture. "Go. And don't be late. We're meeting Mrs. Whatever, at the house at eight."

"I'm going." As Jake moved to step from the kitchen the phone rang. "A-ha. Phone service." Jake picked it up. "Maj., I mean, Lt. Col. Graison . . . Who's calling?" Jake looked at Cal. His face took on almost an angry look. "She has this substance on her hands right now, she'll have to call you back."

"Who is it?" Cal asked.

Jake hesitated. He didn't want to tell her.

"Jake?"

"It's David."

Cal smiled then erased it. She rinsed off her hands and took the phone. "Hi." She said chipper into the phone. "This is a surprise."

Jake, gripping his basketball, sat down at the table and watched her.

"Hold on David." Cal covered the mouth piece. "Jake, I thought you were

playing ball.”

“I am.” Jake put the basketball on the floor. He leaned back in the chair. “After you’re off the phone. Why is he calling here? I don’t approve.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’ll never approve of my friends?”

“Oh, I will. Whenever you create a friendship link with someone that isn’t an organized crime boss or someone you haven’t previously slept with.”

Cal’s mouth dropped open. “I can’t believe you just said that to me.” After flipping an observing Jake off, Cal braced the phone between her ear and shoulder, turned her back to Jake and talked on the phone while cooking.

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA
March 7th - 6:55 p.m.

In the large white clinical room it was a mixture of surgical team meets annihilation squad in a schizophrenic medical setting. All twenty people in the room were wearing sterilized hospital garb even face masks. Some those dressed held automatic weapons. Center of the room on a metal cart lay a long oval mound. Brownish in color, rough in texture. It seemed to shift some and every once and a while a rolling of the top would occur like a baby kicking with in its mother's womb. Monitor wires protruded from it and a steady beeping echoed in the room.

Barely any of Greg's face could be seen between his mask and head covering. He stood next to Dr. Jefferson who looked the same. "An hour now the movement is steady. Do you suppose there is trouble breaking through?"

"I don't see why there would be." Dr. Jefferson answered. "No other has had trouble."

"Yes, but we aren't sure yet if this is like the others."

There was a unison gasp when the top of the enigma raised high and fell. The breaths were released.

Greg shook his head. "This is getting unnerving."

"I have to agree. I feel like I'm at the birth of my first child again."

Greg's eyes smiled. And then another gasp occurred. An extending of the enigma followed by the groans of disappointment.

"Sir." A woman who stood near the table called out as she stepped closer to the enigma. "I heard . . . I heard a grunt."

Greg's eyes shifted to Dr. Jefferson. "That means it could actually be one of them." He waved his hand over to the armed men. They pumped the chambers of their guns. Two other surgically dressed people hurried toward the enigma, pushing a tray containing syringes. Greg, with Dr. Jefferson moved closer.

A hush took over the room and the enigma shifted violently a crackling occurred, followed by a loud grunt. Another moment of quiet, then what sounded like a deadened thumping knock. Once, then two times, then once again. Everyone looked at each other in confusion. Mumbling of voices buzzed about the room but were quickly silenced when a distant muffled voice called out. It came from the enigma.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

Greg and Dr. Jefferson hurried even closer.

"I like, hear you out there. Hello? Dudes? Like this isn't funny, it's wet and dark in here and I'm stuck."

Greg's eyes lit up. "Surgical team join me." He grabbed a tray with instruments on it and pulled it to him. "Let's cut this thing open."

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
March 7th - 8:10 p.m.

In the jeep as they pulled in front of the house was the last time Jake had told Cal 'I told you to just pick one'. Jake was filled with more comments than even Cal expected.

She thought it was going to be a good experience when they meet the real estate agent whom Cal ended up just calling Estelle. Jake smiled looking up at the home, commenting on how big and how great the yard was. The he countered that by estimating how long it would take to cut the grass. Cal knew she was in trouble when they stepped in and Jake continuously opened and closed the front door, cringing at every creaking sound it made.

Estelle kept up a happy appearance as she led them into a room by the stairs that set center. "This is a great old home." Estelle explained. "Over a hundred years old. This room here." She opened the double doors. "Could be used for a family room. It has cable. Or a party room."

Jake peered in. He didn't look pleased.

Estelle chuckled. "Doors too. My ex-husband and I would have loved to have one of these rooms to lock the kids in."

Jake turned his head to her. "That sounds rather abusive."

The joking smile wiped from Estelle's face. "Well." She cleared her throat. "Let's go upstairs." She held her hand to the stairs, and led Cal and Jake up. "As I was telling Cal this afternoon. Railings on both sides of the steps are great for safety purposes. The stairs are wide and deep." They got to the top. "Up here we have five bedrooms."

Jake looked at Cal. "Five?"

Cal nodded. "Two more in the attic. You said big."

"Five?" Jake repeated.

Estelle stopped at the first room. "Three of them have their own bathrooms, and there is a main bathroom up here. This room I love." Estelle opened the door. The walls were white with a pink balloon border. Animal figures were painted on the walls.

Jake stepped in. "It looks happy in here."

"A nursery." Estelle said. "And conveniently close to the master bedroom."

Jake placed his hands on his hips and looked around the room. Cal stood next to him. "Cal." He whispered with some disappointment. "What are we gonna do with a nursery? Come on."

"You never know Jake."

"Oh yeah I'm going to miraculously become unsterile."

Cal shook her head with a quiet smile. She grabbed Jake's hand and brought him out of the bedroom. "Wait until you see the master bedroom. What a view. And large closets."

"How many?"

“Two. Both walk-in.” By Estelle, Cal led Jake into the master bedroom. “Jake look at this window.” Cal immediately walked to the huge bay window. “Look at the view. Of course finding drapes that will fit is . . .” She turned around. Only Estelle was in the room. “Where did he go?”

Estelle pointed near the closet that was located just outside the master bedroom powder room.

Cal walked over there. Estelle followed.

Jake stood in the small hall before the bathroom shaking his head.

Cal tapped him on the back. “What’s wrong.”

“This is way too small.” Jake commented.

“The bathroom? No way.” Cal argued.

“Cal. I’m telling you. It won’t work. Watch.” Jake walked in.

“Jake. What are you doing?”

Jake walked to the commode, put down the lid and sat down. “See. My knees almost touch the sink.”

“I can not believe you are doing this.” Cal said with embarrassment.

“Cal, comfort is important. Look how close my . . .”

“Jake.” Cal called his name between clenched teeth. “Get off the toilet.” She moved her eyes to Estelle behind her.

“It’s too small.” Jake stood up.

“You’re too big.” Cal told him. “Just use the main bathroom for that.”

“Cal, please.” Jake started to walk from the bathroom and stopped when his phone rang. He looked down to where it was hooked to a holder on his belt. “Excuse me.” He moved through Cal and Estelle, lifting the phone and walking into the bedroom. He pointed to the window. “Great view.” He answered the phone. “Lt. Col Graison.” Jake peered out the window. “Who is this?” Immediately Jake spun to Cal.

Cal walked to him.

Jake’s eyes blinked several times. “Back up.” He spoke on the phone. “Who did you say this is regarding?”

Pale.

Jake’s face went immediately pale and Cal saw it.

“Jake?” She whispered. “Is everything all right?”

Jake stared at Cal and creeping up on his face was nervousness. His eyes shifted and his mouth moved slightly. Surprise had taken him but he quickly got a hold of himself. He nodded with closed eyes to Cal and returned to speaking on the phone. “When will you know more?” Jake asked firm and back into the military mode. “Fine. We’ll be there then. Thank you.” With a beep, Jake hung up the phone.

“What’s the matter?” Cal asked.

“Oh nothing.” Jake put the phone away and kissed Cal on the forehead. “That was the institute.”

“What institute?” Cal asked.

“Caldwell?”

Cal’s eye widened. “What did they want?”

“There was um . . . some papers we didn’t sign. Experiment releases or something stupid. They need us down there next week some time to finalize everything. I said we’ll be there.”

“Oh.” Cal said nonchalantly and moved away from Jake, never seeing the long deep breath he let out. “So.” She looked to Estelle. “I guess we’ll go. Thanks for taking time this evening to show him the house.”

Estelle looked a little dejected. “It’s a great house. But . . .” She shrugged. “At least now I know what to look for. We’ll find you something else. Maybe tomorrow we can . . .”

“Hold it.” Jake interrupted. “What do you mean find something else?”

Cal with a crooked smile looked at Jake. “She means find another house. You don’t like this one.”

“What are you kidding me?” Jake said. “I love it. I want to see more.” He moved to the bedroom door. “Honestly Ladies, I wish you would let me say how I feel instead of guessing. Where in the world you got the idea that I don’t like this house, is beyond me.” Jake, very poignant, walked from the bedroom.

Cal, with an ‘it figures’ look to Estelle, raised her hands and let them fall with a slap as she and Estelle followed Jake out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA
March 11th - 9:00 a.m.

Before a long observation window, Greg stood with his hands behind his back. He had a snickering smile upon his face as he stood with Stan watching inside. The vocal sounds of 'ah' in different musical notes seeped through the exterior speaker.

"How . . ." Greg cringed at a bad note. "How long has he been doing that?"

"Since seven." Stan told Greg.

"Has anyone asked him why?"

"Oh yes. Several times." Stan said.

"And what was he reasoning?"

"He um . . ." Stan hid his chuckle. "He wants to make sure he can still sing lead."

Greg's mouth opened with a silent 'oh' and he nodded. He looked back in the window and laughed.

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

March 11th - 10:15 a.m.

Cal was apprehensive about entering Jake's office. She guessed she always would be. She stepped inside into Jake's world.

Corporal Lancing sat behind his desk. He greeted her. "Soon to be Mrs. Graison, Mam, how are you?"

"Fine. Is he in?"

"Expecting you."

"What's his mood?" Cal asked.

"Normal."

"Shit. O.K." Cal moved to Jake's office door. "Should I just go right . . ."

The door opened, Jake's arm reached out and snatched Cal in. Cal shrieked and the door slammed.

"Jake." Cal pulled away. "You scared . . ." She was silenced by a kiss from Jake.

Jake stepped back with a hard smack kiss and he smiled at her. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"They took our offer. We got the house."

Cal let out another shriek and jumped up allowing Jake to grab her and hug her. "Oh, Jake. This is so great."

"That's why I needed you here." He set her down. "By the way, did you finish working out this morning?"

Cal grumbled. "Yes. Why?"

"Because you're gonna be busy the rest of the day. Do you mind?"

"Jake, you have me busy everyday. What am I doing?"

Jake walked behind his desk. "I apologize, but you're going to have disregard today's agenda."

"Oh, bummer." Cal sat in a chair before Jake's desk.

"Sorry. Anyhow." Jake handed her an envelope. "I need you to run this check to Estelle. Hand money slash down payment."

Cal opened the envelope.

"Cal, must you peek?"

"Yeah, Jake, I must." She whistled. "I could have written a check. You should have called."

"I don't want you using your money."

"Our money." Cal corrected. "Unless you have no intention of going joint once we get married."

"Hey, I'm willing to go with 'what's mine is yours, what's yours is mine' now. You're the one who won't . . ."

"Not again please." Cal placed the check in her purse. "Is this it?"

"No." Jake shook his head. "Estelle is giving you papers to bring here, I have

to fill them out and sign them. Then I need you to take them back. Actually we both have to fill them out.”

“What kind of papers?” Cal asked.

“Mortgage papers.”

“Aw Jake.” Cal whined. “Why are we getting a mortgage? Why don’t we just use all our money for the house.”

“Cal, please.” Jake looked offended. “We can not liquidate most of our cash. Besides, it is completely un-American not to have a mortgage payment.”

“All right.” Cal shrugged. “I’ll be back.”

“And no dallying.” Jake pointed. “I have us down for lunch.”

“I’m not eating at the mess with you again. People are weird with you. I feel funny.”

“No mess.” Jake told her. “We’ll leave base.”

“Excellent. It’s a date.” Cal hurried to the desk, bent over to him and kissed him. “See you soon.” Cal raced to the door trying to make an escape before another Jake instruction was thrown at her.

“Cal.”

Too late. Cal smiled and turned around. “Yes?”

“Be careful.”

With a quiet, appreciative smile, Cal nodded, and glad for no more instructions, she left.

As soon as the door shut, Jake picked up the phone and pressed intercom. “Lancing, stop Cal and tell her I said do not blow off the dress lady again today. Thanks.”

Central News Network - Chicago, Illinois
March 11th - 10:30 a.m.

The bright orange and yellow printed cartoon tie really didn't go with the other business aspects of Billy's attire. White shirt, black pants, his curly hair styled and combed neatly. But Billy didn't care. His niece had got him that tie and he promised her he'd wear it, hideous or not. A little bit more up beat, Billy walked into the newsroom. He walked by Trudy the main secretary, dropping a folder on her desk. "It's boring but it's what Kenning wanted. Can you get him on the phone and tell him Boswell Financial did indeed withdraw their bankruptcy. I'll tell him 'I told you so' myself. Thanks."

"Not a problem." Trudy, an older woman smiled and nodded then returned to her typing.

Billy continued on through the newsroom toward the cubicles. He passed by the one before his. Elizabeth Curry, sat in there, her medium length red hair tucked behind one ear as she clicked slowly on her computer. "Morning Liz."

"Morning . . ." Elizabeth looked up. "Hey Bill?"

Billy backtracked his footsteps. "What's up?"

"Did MacMillan get a hold of you?"

"No why?"

"His wife went into labor. He needs you to cover Senator Johnson's lunch this afternoon for him."

"O.K., I'll tell Kenning. Thanks." Billy moved on.

"Oh and Bill the . . ."

"Oh yes!" Billy clenched his fist with such excitement. He peeked his head into Elizabeth's cubicle. "When did it arrive?"

"About an hour ago"

"Yes." Billy excitedly raced to his desk and ran his hand over the box whose shipping label read 'Southwest High School, Seattle.' He pulled at the tape.

Elizabeth walked around to Billy's space. "I take it the Internet thing worked."

"Like a gem. I think it was like less than twenty four hours after I posted her picture, that an old high school buddy recognized her." Billy grinned and opened the box, he pulled out the first of four yearbooks. "This is a start."

"How about that Graison guy?" Elizabeth asked. "Any news on the background check."

"No." Billy flipped through the yearbook. "Talk about a highly classified individual." He looked at Elizabeth. "What is up with that? All I got is that he is stationed as Executive officer of Fort Bragg and he is now Lt. Col. Graison." Billy tossed the yearbook in the box. "I'll have to work on this on my own . . ." He stopped speaking when Elizabeth cleared her throat. Billy turned around. Paul Kenning stood there. Billy gave a quick smile of appreciation to Elizabeth as she left. "Mr. Kenning."

Paul flipped open the box. "Which story?"

"Caldwell and the experiment. Just a way to find out more about the two participant survivors." Billy shrugged as if it were nothing, when really he was loving it. "I guess I'm trying to get a grip on what kind of people they chose. Normal people I mean."

"Hoping to fit a perfect bill?"

"Hell, I mean, heck yeah." Billy smiled "I want to be exactly what they want."

"Good." Paul nodded. "Just wanted to say, you were right on Boswell. And will you cover Senator Johnson?"

"Yes." Billy took the box from his desk and laid it on the floor. "Gonna head there now."

"Thanks." Paul began to walk away, he stepped back. "Just one more thing. What day is it that you're going to Caldwell?"

"Monday." Billy answered.

"Good luck. Keep me posted on that." With a pat to Billy arm, Paul gave a boss' smile and left the cubicle.

Billy gathered up his things to leave again, as he did his eyes kept shifting down to the box on the floor. So bad he wanted to just take five minutes to review it. The year books. High school transcripts amongst other things he was curious to see was sent him. But knowing five minutes would turn into hours, Billy had to forgo his anxiousness of getting to that box and return to the work that paid for his rent.

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
March 11th - 5:30 p.m.

It was bad enough Jake had to deal with what he liked to call 'derelict enhanced' individuals, but now on top of that, he had to deal with personal calls too. Not that he minded them much, but when they could be avoided, he grew irritated. Like the woman at Bridal Boutique. Three times she called Jake to inform him that Cal failed to show up for a fitting. With it being the last straw, Jake promised if he had to drag Cal by her long hair, he would ensure she was there the next day.

More annoyance hit when Jake pulled in his driveway. He had long since accepted the reality that neighbors were a fact of life. Unless you lived secluded, you would have them. But if they had to live in such close proximity, could they not control their offspring's amusement devices. Walking up to his house, Jake paused on the walk, picked up what looked like a bad imitation of a dump truck and tossed it to the next yard.

But despite Jake's demeanor, one thing remained certain. He was happy to be home. Jake actually liked coming home, unlike before the experiment when he didn't have Cal. Now he looked forward to his weekend with her. Alone. With his briefcase in his hand, Jake opened his front door, stepping inside and stopping cold. "What the fuck happened to my house?" He spoke looking around the living room which looked like a tornado hit it. Cushions pulled some off the couch, papers spread about. "Cal." Jake set down his briefcase and took a step into his living room. A rolling sound precluded the painful crash into Jake's shin. Before he could even say 'ow' he heard the tiny little voice giggle. Staring ahead, Jake's eyes widened and he slowly looked down. Total surprise took over Jake when he peered down, hands on hips, to the bald baby. Towering like a giant over the smiling infant in the walker that was pressed to his legs. "Cal!"

Cal came from the dining room,. "Hey Jake." She kissed him. "We have company."

"I see. Who's it belong to?"

"It? Him. Lisa next door. She burned her hand and went to the infirmary. I said I'd watch him."

"Why?"

Cal laughed. "Jake, come on. You're the Ex-O. You have a certain responsibility."

"Not to be a babysitter to every bald child on base."

"One child. And look at him." Cal bent down lifting up the pudgy baby from the walker. "Wanna hold him?"

"No."

Cal propped the baby in her arms. "Cute huh?" She snickered at Jake's grumble as she ran her hand over the boy's head. "Guess what his name is?"

"I don't know." Jake still stared at the child.

"Come on, Jake, Guess."

"Um . . ." Jake shrugged his shoulders. "Bart." He began to walk passed them.

"Bart?" Cal snickered. "No. Rickie."

Jake stopped cold. He spun around.

"Yeah. Rickie." Cal smiled and placed the baby back in the walker. "As soon as Lisa told me his name, I took an immediate liking to him."

"Are you sure that's the only reason?"

Confused, Cal looked at Jake. "What do you mean?"

"I . . . I need a beer." Jake took off his uniform jacket, set it on a dining room chair and walked to the kitchen.

When Cal got there, Jake was opening a beer. "Jake?"

"Cal." Jake, serious, shut the fridge. "Babe, first you find a house with a nursery, then I come home and find you're the neighborhood nanny."

"Jake, it's one . . ."

"I thought . . . I thought you said you didn't want anymore kids after Jessie."

Cal swallowed. "Jake I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I gave that implication."

"No." Jake closed his eyes and shook his head. He kissed Cal. "I'm sorry. Maybe it's been on my mind and I'm projecting it as you."

"I don't understand." Cal said, looking back to check on baby Rickie who played with a remote control.

"Getting married. Getting a house. Living in this family neighborhood." Jake sadly shrugged. "I mean. If you wanna house. I can give you a house. A new car. It's yours. Hell, if you wanted the world, I would see how close I could get to giving it to you on a platter. But . . but this . . ." Jake pointed to baby Rickie. "If you wanted a child, I fail you. And I don't like that." He closed one eye and looked at her while taking a drink of his beer.

"Jake." Cal stepped to him. "I told you it is not important. And I meant it when I said I don't want kids. Jessie got all my maternal love, she took a big chunk of that when she was killed and Rickie . . . Rickie, he took the rest. All I want is you in my life." She touched his cheek. "Besides, kids would cramp that lifestyle you and I have and plan on having."

"You're right. And . . . and . . . fuck Cal, he's getting my remote wet." Jake marched over to baby Rickie. "Give me that." He snatched it from the baby's hand, a long line of drool trailed the remote as Jake pulled it a way. "Uh." Jake held it up in disgust.

"Jake." Cal walked over and took the remote. "Go change your clothes."

"I'm going." Jake stepped over the walker. "And look at the mess he made. One small human being should not be making this much of a . . ." Jake paused. He bent down to the floor and picked up a red and white cardboard envelope. "Cal?" He turned around and held it up.

"Whoops." Cal hurried to him and tried to take it. Jake held it from her reach.

"Are these our airline tickets to Atlanta for Monday?" Jake peeked in. "Why are the edges chewed?"

"Sorry."

"I'll put these away so they don't become anymore baby food." Jake moved to the steps.

"Let's not go." Cal said causing Jake to stop.

"We have to." Jake hesitated before walking up the steps.

"Tell them to send the papers, Jake. I don't feel like going."

"Cal, like the wedding dress lady you keep blowing off, just go and get it over with. O.K.?" Jake spoke to her and waited for a response. "O.K.?"

"O.K. but you don't want to go either."

"Why would you say that?" Jake asked.

"Your face when you took that call."

Jake took a deep breath. "It just took me by surprise."

"Are you sure that's it?" Cal asked.

"Positive. I'm going up to change. Now take care of that kid before he destroys my house any further." Jake stood on the steps and watched Cal go over to the baby. He looked at the tickets again and started up the stairs. The trip to Caldwell was now a reality and he was looking at that reality in his hands. He hated not being honest with Cal. Yet he had to do it. If Cal knew the reason Caldwell called, and it didn't pan out--there was a big chance of that--then Cal could be in for a world of hurt and let down. And since Jake vowed from the moment he met Cal to protect her, in his mind, not telling her the whole truth was protecting her.

Chicago, Illinois
March 11th - 11:40 p.m.

Billy chomped on the crust of his pizza as he flipped through another page of Cal's high school yearbook. He chuckled and swayed his head at her senior picture. "You've definitely got better with age."

Not that he thought Cal was all that bad looking, it's just he believed she was much too thin and boyish. Not much was mentioned under her name. She had good grades in high school and the teacher that he contacted at the school was able to tell Billy, Cal went on to become a teacher, despite the fact that she was pregnant when she left high school.

The pregnancy and child information baffled Billy. How could she up and go on an experiment leaving her child behind? And Billy's answer came when he traced her schooling and teaching to a small catholic school in Pennsylvania. A place she taught for years. Billy felt as if he hit the jackpot when he spoke to the gullible secretary at the school. Telling her he had gone to high school with Cal. The secretary passed the message on. And the respondent to that message, was a David Martinez. A music teacher there, Cal's freshly former and slightly bitter fiancé'. And according to David, Cal no longer lived in the state. She picked up and moved to North Carolina with some 'big' army guy. And she hadn't taught at St. Joan's in eighteen months. She quit shortly after her daughter Jessie was murdered. Murdered by Cal's ex-husband in a murder suicide.

It all made sense. Hence the experiment. Cal's escapism after her daughter's death. Caleen Lambert-Reynolds was easy to find out about. She spoke to people, never left a bad impression. People remembered her, and little 'I heard this' clues led Billy on an eight hour easy information ride that pretty much painted his picture of Cal up until her daughter died.

But Major or rather Lt. Col. Jacob Graison, was a whole other story. Even his credit history was highly classified. The most information he received was when Senator Johnson gave him a name of a friend at the Pentagon. And that lead still didn't work as well as Billy hoped. Three relatable pieces of information were all that Billy could get. One, the Lt. Colonel had been in the service nineteen years and worked his way up. Two, he was, trained and still trains the United States Army Rangers. And lastly, he has no family to contact. His entire immediate family was killed when he was a teenager.

So much in common Cal and Jake had, staunch military backgrounds, no family, and both had suffered horrendous tragedies in their lives. Billy wondered if these were keys to their being chosen to go, or better yet, their eventual success in the experiment.

Whatever the reasons, Billy would find out. He had a firm ground work started. He had years to build up, and he fully intended on doing so. Learning about Cal and Jake, who they were and what they were, would teach Billy what he needed to learn, and what he had to be, to be chosen as a participant in the next

Iso-Stasis experiment. And that's where Billy's journalistic and personal objectives had to lay.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

March 14th - 5:45 a.m.

“Again.” Jake spoke in a near order. Steam came from his mouth as he talked, the contrast of his warm breath against the chilly morning air.

With a grunt, fist closed, arms tight to her in a defensive mode, Cal pivoted her body and swung up and out her right leg.

Jake grabbed her foot. “Nope.” He set it down.

Cal caught her balance. Alike they were dressed. Gray sweat pants, white tank-style tee shirts. And even though it was cool out, they both exhibited signs of sweating.

“Again.” Jake told her.

Grunt, swing, catch.

“Cal, come on.” Jake let go of her foot. “You’re wearing down on me. You’re getting slow.”

“Fuck you.”

“Hey.”

Cal tightened her ponytail. “You’ve had me doing this for a while. We just ran three miles Jake.”

“In which you couldn’t keep up.”

“I thought it was our normal run, asshole.”

“No, no.” Jake held up his finger to her. “I told you, back to competing. Keeps things exciting between us.”

“Like the fighting doesn’t.” Cal mumbled.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.”

Jake folded his arms and looked down to Cal. “Again.”

First Cal huffed and then she kicked. Her leg caught mid-swing, again. “Jake.”

“No, Cal.” Jake held her foot. “You’re having a problem with your kicks.”

“I’m having a problem with you. You’re fast Jake. Anyone normal is not this fast.”

“And what happens if you go up against someone fast huh? You cannot assume Cal.” Jake told her as he still held on. “You should always assume your enemy is good. Never underestimate. Never. And if I was the enemy you’d be screwed right now. What would you do.”

“This.” With an angry huff and grunt, Cal, using Jake’s hold of her as leverage, lifted her body in a quick jump. Then bringing her left leg up from behind her, she flipped in a backwards spin, nailing Jake by surprise, and hard, in the jaw. Jake’s head flung to the right and he released her foot. Cal dropped catching her balance before she fell entirely to the ground. With her mouth open

and breathing heavily, Cal a little frightened, watched Jake.

Jake grabbed his jaw, his fingers touched the corner of his mouth as he slowly, tauntingly slow, lifted his head while giving a piercing stare at Cal. He pulled his fingers from his mouth and looked at the blood that was there.

Cal's eyes widened when she saw him glance from his blood toting fingertips to her with a madman stare. "Oh shit." She backed up, turned and took off running.

Jake watched Cal run-at an impressive top speed from that training area and down the hill. He ran the back of his hand across his mouth, wiped the blood on the side of his pants, and then while grabbing his jaw again, Jake smiled.

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA
March 14th - 9:15 a.m.

The institute offered to give him a haircut for the big day, but he respectfully declined, stating his 'Do' definitely needed some leverage in the length department and he'd just tuck it like a babe behind his ears.

His hair was blonde, bur nearer to brown, no style and in a growing phase he claimed began after the Sarge-guy shaved him bald. He was thin and not too tall. Not a muscle on his body, yet he flexed often. Ricardo 'Rickie' Carteri was eighteen going on twelve.

Greg grew tired of having to turn off the cartoons while speaking to Rickie who sat Indian style on his bed watching. And Greg knew at that moment if someone asked him if he would miss Rickie when Rickie left the institute. He would have to say, that after the week that seemed like a year . . . no.

Greg had a hard time believing, but he was eventually convinced. It took reviewing of Iso-Stasis Experiment twelve tapes and multitudes of conversations with Stan for Greg to realize, unlike what he thought, Rickie wasn't mentally defective after the metamorphosis.

"Rickie." Greg stated his name, grabbed the remote and shut of the television again. "Do you understand those." Greg indicated to the contract looking document just laying half opened on Rickie's lap.

"Dude, like I signed them right?"

"Yes, but I want to be sure." Greg said. "Did you read them?"

"Only the really interesting parts. Now can I like, watch the toons again."

"No, Rickie. One more time. Rickie. Rickie?" Greg drew his attention away from watching the blank screen. "Any questions?"

"When's the Cal-babe and Sarge get here?"

"I mean about the agreement?"

"What agreement?" Rickie asked.

"The papers you signed."

"Oh," Rickie lifted them, there was a small chocolate smudge on the left corner. "No questions. I like had a problem with the date, until Dr. J. said it was right. Wow, six weeks I was like missing from the planet."

Greg was giving up. "Yes, well, death will do that to you."

Rickie snickered.

"I'll make a copy of this and Nurse Leon can pack it with the clothes we got for you."

"She's a babe."

Greg hesitated. "You think? I don't find her especially attractive."

"That's because you're old."

"Thanks."

"Not a problem. So like, when is Cal-babe and Sarge picking me up?"

"They should be here in the next two hours."

“Cool.” Rickie grabbed the remote.

Greg, seeing Rickie’s attention turn back to the television, decided to leave. He paused by the door. “Rickie, one more thing. Jake and Cal don’t know completely about you. We’re informing them today that everything is fine. We didn’t want to tell them until we were positive.”

“O.K.” Rickie laughed at the television.

“Are you sure they’re gonna want you to live with them? Because we can make preparations to secure other housing for you.”

“Dude.” Rickie set down the remote. “Like they loved me. I was their adopted kid.”

“If you say so.” Greg opened the door. “We’ll send for you after they arrived. It may be a shock seeing you so don’t come off too strong at first. O.K.?”

“Me? Dude, I’m mellow. They won’t even notice me.”

Somehow Greg didn’t quite believe that, but what choice did he have. “I’ll have a copy of this for you.” Greg held up the contract and saw he received no response. He felt like he was dealing with one of his own kids when they were younger. Upon his leaving, Greg, just to be on the safe side, decided to prepare a secondary place for Rickie to be released to.

Las Vegas, Nevada
March 14th - 7:00 a.m. PST

Aldo never minded being woke up for important business. And he even realized that people on the east coast became time zone illiterate when they got exited. But it was a good call. Ivan Petropolis received a check for one third of the eight million dollar experiment pool. He was Rickie's investor. And by Caldwell releasing the check to Ivan, that told Aldo the tests were complete. Rickie was normal. Or about as normal as Rickie could get. Eating his breakfast and drinking his coffee, Aldo imagined in his mind Cal's face when she saw and touched Rickie. He was happy for her, and he couldn't wait until he knew it was safe enough to call her about it. Even though Aldo wanted to tell her about Rickie earlier, with the news that he was fine, Aldo now didn't want to ruin what could be one of the best surprises of her life.

First Class Section - Mid-flight to Atlanta, GA
March 14th - 10:20 a.m.

“What?” Jake asked clueless when Cal tossed the pamphlet at him and turned from him, facing the other way. “It’s a great idea.”

“Get your deposit back Jake or you go on that honeymoon alone.”

“Cal, look at this.” He tried to show her. “Cabins, fireplaces, wooded area, seclusion.”

“It’s a survival fitness camp, Jake. No.” Cal pushed his hand away. “We spent seven months like that. No.”

“Fine.” Jake started to put the pamphlet away when he saw the stewardess, an older woman walking down the aisle. “Wait Cal, let’s get a third party’s opinion.”

Cal saw who Jake was looking at. “If she says no, will you stop with it?”

“Yes.” Jake signaled for the stewardess. “Mam.”

“Yes sir?” She bent in toward the two seats.

“Could you solve something for us?” He handed her the pamphlet. “Take a look at this and tell me if this isn’t a great honeymoon idea.”

Slowly the stewardess opened the pamphlet. Her eyes, filled with pity, shifted to Cal. She quickly closed it. “I’d say it’s an absurd honeymoon idea.” She handed it back. “I’m sorry honey.” She laid her hand on Cal’s shoulder.

Jake’s mouth dropped open as the stewardess moved on. “She didn’t even read it.”

“Jake, you lose. She was the deciding factor.”

“Fine. No survival honeymoon.” Jake rolled up his pamphlet. “I’ll try something else.”

“Like something romantic.”

“This is romantic. I thought it would be great.”

“Jake, you would. You get sexual aroused by near death experiences.”

“Cal please. Moderately excited.”

“I stand corrected.” Cal looked over at him. “Speaking of moderately excited. How’s that jaw?”

“Great. It hurts. Good job.” Jake shifted it back and forth. He grabbed Cal’s hand and felt that it was clammy. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I don’t want to go to this.” Cal said with antsiness.

“It’ll be over soon.”

“I know. I just want to put it all behind me and move on. But we’re flying to the institute. You’re showing me pamphlets of a Iso-Stasis honeymoon. Everywhere I look there’s a reminder of it.”

“And there always will be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Me.” Jake faced her. “Where did you meet me?”

“There you have it.” Cal lifted her hand and dropped it. “The biggest painful

reminder.”

Jake said nothing for a second. He watched her serious face smile. “Oh, you’re joking. I get it. Kidding with me. Funny.” Jake forced a smile. “But could you let me know ahead of time that you’re going to joke so I don’t take you serious. I hate being ill prepared.”

“How about I give you a two minute warning?” Cal asked with sarcasm.

Jake nodded pleased. “Thanks. That’ll work.” When Cal shook her head at him, he shrugged and returned to sitting normally in his seat. He peered at the window momentarily, then unrolled that pamphlet in his hand, glancing down at it like a kid who failed to get what he wanted for Christmas.

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA
March 14th - 11:20 a.m.

"The stewardess. The pilot. The ticket taker." Cal rattled off a list as her and Jake walked down the hall in the office division of the institute. "The security guard."

"Make your point." Jake walked quickly with Cal.

"My point? Is there anyone else today you can possibly be rude to?"

"Cal, do you think I care?"

"Well don't you think that you should . . ." Cal stopped walking. "Hey." She smiled. "This is where I ran into you."

"Other end." Jake said.

"You're right."

"I know." Jake reached for the office door and stopped.

"What's wrong?"

"Look." He pointed to the name plate on the door. "Who the fuck is Dr. Gregory Haynes?"

"My best guess, the next person you insult."

Jake just glared at her, turned the knob on the door, pushed it open and allowed Cal to walk in first.

^^^

With the well presented manuscript entitled 'The Iso-Stasis Experiment: Merited' laying on his lap, Billy sat in the former office of Dr. Jefferson and across from Greg. He reviewed some of the twenty-nine page preliminary report of experiment twelve, not yet released to the institutions who awaited it. There was more silence in the office than talking. Still Billy kept the pocket tape recorder going the whole time. Greg sat behind the huge desk, fingers forming a triangle and pressed under his chin.

"So." Billy flipped a page. "A gas explosion occurred three weeks prior to the experiments end?"

"Yes."

"Taking out all but John and Jane Doe. Who remained for the rest of the experiment."

"Yes. Rules are rules."

"Rules sir?" Billy looked up. "Sounds to me like you're talking about a game."

Greg smiled slightly. "More like if they want their compensation they have to stay."

"The other participant . . ."

"As you can see in the report, three had broken mentally prior to the explosion. One was killed by a wolf attack. Wolves, as *you* know, are a big

problem in that area.”

“And you do nothing to push the mental unbalances along.”

Greg swayed his head. “Nature, seclusion, elements and such. They do it for us.”

“And what about the mental stability of the participants prior to going into the experiment. Is it true that not all of them are, how can I say, are mentally capable to begin with.”

“That’s true.” Greg, without reservation, informed Billy. “How else are we to know how the extreme circumstances effect people if there is no comparison. You need your mentally strong and weak, along with average. Plus, we won’t hide the fact that we try, like a bad recipe, to mesh the personalities that will most likely clash. Kind of jump starts things from the get-go.”

“I see.”

“It’s been done this way since Iso-Stasis two.”

Billy stopped reviewing the report. “What can you tell me about the private investors.”

“Not much. They give a tax-deductible donation. Helps them at tax time.” Greg smiled.

“Can you tell me how much they invest.”

“No.”

“Can you tell me who any of them are?”

“No.”

“Can you give me the names of John and Jane Doe?” Billy asked.

“No.”

“Anything about them? Age, background . . .”

“No.”

“Where they are now, what you feel was the key to their surviving . . .”

“No.” Greg was firm. “Mr. Griffith, anonymity is vital with everyone involved. Just as John and Jane Doe signed a confidentiality form to not speak of what happened up there. We agreed to the same. We let no one know anything about them. Including trivial things as their hair color. You have to understand. These people just want to move on.”

“I see. Now can you . . .”

“No.” Greg reached up and shut off the tape player.

Billy’s mouth dropped open. “What the . . .”

“Look.” Greg folded his hands and leaned on the desk toward Billy. “You want to know about the experiments. You want to know in-depth details, such as what goes on. You think more happens there than we are telling you.”

“Or anyone else, yes.”

“Then find out for yourself.”

“I’m trying to.”

“Find out correctly.” Greg leaned back, opened the desk drawer and handed Billy a folder. “I’m not making any promises. But I’m giving you top

consideration.”

Billy opened the folder, inside was a document at least forty pages thick. An Iso-Stasis participant Application. Billy looked up at Greg. “How did you know I was going to ask about this?”

“I didn’t. So it seems, you and I were thinking on the same lines. Fill that out. We will give you a higher consideration, but I don’t make the final decisions, understand that. Also understand this. We won’t even start screening for another six to nine months. You have a jump. And . . .” Greg began to straighten up his desk. “I have another appointment waiting. So, I’m going to have to end this.”

Billy moved slow staring at his application. He reached to the desk and grabbed his tape recorder. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Oh there’s no doubt in my mind on that.” Greg told him with an arrogant smile.

Billy stood up extending his hand to Greg. “Thank you. Not that I learned very much.”

Greg shook his hand as he stood a little. “I told you all I could. I even gave you that report early.”

Billy looked down to this things. “Thank you for that. Have a good day.”

As soon as Billy turned and moved to the door, Greg pressed the intercom. “Grace, send in my next appointment.”

Grace, sitting behind a huge mahogany desk, nodded to Jake and Cal. “You two may go in now.”

Cal set down her magazine and stood up. “Behave.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what that means. Be nice. You’re stewing over this new director.”

“Thinking, Cal. Not stewing.”

As they moved to the door, it opened. Billy walked out.

Billy automatically stopped when he saw Cal. His eyes fixed upon her as if she were a magnet drawing him in. He couldn’t believe she was standing there, so conveniently. He couldn’t figure out why, but his heart pounded. Then--not knowing how he missed him--Billy saw Jake. Billy glanced so briefly at him, then back to Cal. Cal smiled politely to Billy as she walked to the door, Jake’s hand on her back. Billy kept staring, turning like a hand on a clock as they walked passed him.

At first Jake let it go, Cal was a beautiful woman. But after just a glance it became irritating. Jake stopped in the doorway spinning around to Billy. “Is there a problem that you have to stare at her like that.” His deep voice wasn’t loud, but enough to go through Billy.

Snapped out of his infatuation stare at the female participant survivor, Billy muttered something that resembled sounds when trying to respond to Jake’s

startling question.

Jake waited.

"No." Billy shook his head.

Jake said no more. He led Cal into the office. "And you have to encourage it."

"What?" She laughed. "He was cute."

Jake poked his head back out the door looking at Billy. "Please."

"Not jealous?"

"Cal, I'll get jealous when I think you're interested in someone. And I hardly doubt you'll get interested in any man whose ass you can beat."

Cal chuckled and realized that the new director was patiently waiting for then to finish. "Sorry." She smiled to Greg.

Greg held out his hand to Cal. "Dr. Haynes. Nice to meet you." He shook Cal's hand, and after Jake had closed the door. He shook Jake's. "Lt. Col. Graison."

"Where's Jefferson?" Jake asked.

"Jake." Cal nudged him.

Greg smiled. "Dr. Jefferson is on the eighth floor. I took over as director two days ago. Please have a seat. I'm glad you could make it." He indicated with a motion of his hand to the couch. He waited for them both to sit. "Can I get you anything, Coffee, tea, water?"

Jake shook his head. "Let's just get this over with."

"Right to the chase." Greg raised his eyebrows.

"He's rude like that." Cal commented.

"Cal."

"Jake."

"O.K." Greg interrupted. He walked across the room and turned on a television monitor. "We didn't need to tell you, but we knew the personal involvement. So we felt compelled to share this information with you. Watch." Greg picked up a remote. The television come on with a blue screen then a black and white picture of a room. "Remember this?"

The monitor showed Jake, walking in, he carried a sheet covered body in his arms. Cal gasped emotionally and loudly, covering her mouth. Her heart sunk and an emotional pain shot right through her.

Jake's angry eyes shifted from Cal to the screen. "What the fuck. Turn it off."

"Watch." Greg informed as he turned up the volume.

Again Jake looked at Cal, her eyes welled with tears, her face pale. Jake in a rage sprang up. "I said turn it off!"

"Watch!"

"Turn it off now! Right now or . . ."

A hissing, whipping sound fast and high, caught Jake's attention along with another gasp from Cal. When he turned to the screen, the body was completely

covered with what looked like vines.

Greg paused the picture. "I knew you'd miss it."

Cal's hand pointed to the screen, it shook violently. "What . . . what happened to Rickie's body?"

Jake slowly backed up sitting the couch and pulling back Cal's hand. "Show it again."

"I'll do you one better. I'll show the enhanced slow motion shot." Greg ejected the tape and placed in another. It started to play, though fuzzy and a little blurred, it was interpretable and closer. "You placed Rickie's body in this room." Greg explained. "You weren't out the door five seconds when this happened." Slowly, the large blood spot ripped opened seemingly by the explosion of Rickie's abdomen flesh. Whipping from his deadly injury came vine like tentacles, at least two hundred, spraying outward and intertwining Rickie. Then fast and furiously, even in slow motion, like a volcanic eruption they shot out until his body was not only covered but covered by what looked like a shell. "He cocooned. Like our Stasis always do."

Cal was so confused. "So this means you had injected Rickie . . ."

"No." Greg interrupted with his answer. "We reviewed all the tapes over and over. The nearest we can tell, by blood samples taken and by watching, is that the stasis somehow was injured when he clawed Rickie. Therefore a transfer of blood occurred, mixing with Rickie's blood. Taking over, and like a vampire, creating yet another stasis. We've since run numerous tests on animals and amazingly we saw the same results. We were scientifically stunned."

Cal swallowed harshly. "Oh my God, Rickie became a Stasis. Was he one of the ones that came after us?"

"No." Greg explained. "It takes four to five weeks for the metamorphosis to complete, sometimes six. As I was telling Jake the other day on the phone. We didn't . . ."

"Stop." Cal held up her hand. "Repeat that."

Ignoring Jake's shifting eyes and shaking head, Greg did. "As I was telling Jake the other day on the phone . . ."

"Stop. That's what I wanted to hear." Cal turned her head and her eyes glared at Jake. "You knew?"

"Cal, look . . ."

"You . . . knew?" Cal stood up looking down to Jake.

"Can I explain?" Jake asked.

"Explain what?" Cal's voice grew louder. "You knew this happened to Rickie and you failed to tell me?"

"In my defense, I just found out four days ago."

"You dick!"

"Cal, Please." Jake twitched his head toward Greg.

"You big, arrogant, self righteous, Dick!" With her final word Cal reached down to the coffee table, picked up the box of Kleenex and hurled it at Jake

beaming him in the head.

"Enough Cal." Jake stood up and placed the Kleenex box back.

"Enough? I'll tell you when it's enough." Cal picked it back up and threw it at him again. "I cannot believe . . ." She grabbed a magazine. "You didn't tell me." She tossed it hard at Jake.

Jake's arms batted it away and he ducked away from the book she threw as well. "Stop it. Let me talk to you."

"No. I don't ever want you to talk to me again."

"Now you're over reacting." Jake tried to reason.

"Yeah I am." Cal looked around for something else to throw. She grabbed the remote that Greg still held and hailed it Jake's way.

"Cal! Knock it off!" Jake's head went to the right to avoid the video tape.

"I should have known something was up when they called. You turned white as a sheet." Cal reached for a vase but Greg stopped her.

"That's uh, a ten thousand dollar vase." He handed her another. "Try this."

Crash!

Jake closed his mouth tightly as he stood straight from avoiding the small vase thrown his way. "Thank you very much for the help!" He shouted at Greg and stormed over to Cal. "Throw one more fuckin thing at me and I'll . . ."

"You'll what Jake?"

"I'll get fuckin pissed Cal."

"Oh get pissed."

"I will!" Jake's red face lowered some to face her off. "Now calm your ass down right now and quit making a scene. You're embarrassing me."

"Fuck you, Jake."

"Oh nice, very nice. Can you possibly act any more immature. Throwing things. Yelling."

"And you're not?"

"I'm mad!" Jake blasted.

"Well so am I!"

Their extremely loud vocal match drowned out the opening of the door, but not the voice that called out. "Oh yeah. They're still fighting. Break out the popcorn. The entertainment has begun."

Silence.

Both Jake and Cal, at the same time, the same way and at the same speed, slowly turned and looked behind them. Both of their faces held the same expression. Mouth opened and shocked. Had they not begun to argue and get out of hand they would have been prepared to see Rickie walk into the room, not as the creature they thought he turned into, but as the same old Rickie they both remembered.

Jake's hand immediately sprang to Cal's back when she lost her balance.

Cal couldn't breath. She stared at Rickie who held his arms outward. "Oh my God." She raced to him. "Oh my God." She flung her arms around Rickie so

tight he gasped for air. Cal let out little shrieks of emotions. "Look at you. Oh, God, look at you." Cal, crying, kissed Rickie over and over. "Look at you."

"I can't. You're like in the way."

Jake slowly stepped to Rickie. His eyes never blinked.

Rickie caught his breath when a hyperventilating Cal released him. He looked at Jake,. "Sarge is all dressed up to see me. Dude, did you like get in trouble for missing work for so long."

"Rickie." Jake whispered his name laying his hand on Rickie's cheek and gripping it.

"Guy, you aren't gonna like lay a big wet one on me are you."

Jake laughed.

"Cal-babe." Rickie pointed to Jake. "He just . . . UH!" Rickie found himself in the midst of a huge Jake hug. Wrapped in Jake's arms, Rickie's face pressed to Jake's chest so tight he could feel the buttons on Jake's shirt indenting his forehead. His thin body flopped about in Jake's grateful embrace. "I'm dying. Help!"

In a rare occasion, Jake smiled, freeing Rickie from the life threatening hold. "I am so, so, happy to see you." Jake told him.

Cal couldn't stop touching him, but she had to ask Greg. "How . . . how did this happen. We lost him."

"I know." Greg said. "Like I told you there was a blood mixing. Rickie acquired enough to regenerate but not complete the stasis process."

Jake's head swayed. "As much as I hate to admit it. I missed you. You were the biggest pain in my ass I ever encountered, but right now, I'm enjoying every second with you."

Cal grinned at Jake. "That was sweet."

"Yeah Sarge." Rickie told him. "Thanks. We can like spend lots of time together."

"Yeah you can visit us." Jake said.

"Cool." Rickie nodded.

Still in awe, Jake looked at Greg. "Is he staying here." Jake turned back to Rickie. "Where are you staying?"

"Dude." Rickie reached out and gave a pat to Jake. "With you and Cal-babe. You guys like invited me to live with you. Remember?" Rickie scratched his head. "Or was that just that Cal-babe."

Cal grabbed on to Rickie. "It doesn't matter. You can live with us."

"Wait a second." Jake held up his hand. "I like Rickie and all but . . ."

"Sarge." Rickie stopped him. "I have no where else to go."

"How about an apartment?"

Cal backhanded Jake. "We have an extra room, Rickie. In fact we just bought a house. With lots of room."

"Cool."

Greg stepped forward into the happy reunion. "Actually, if I can say

something.” He waited until he had all of their attention. “Rickie can’t get an apartment, not just yet. He knows this.”

“Yeah.” Rickie commented. “Setting the Rickie Meister free on his own, will cause mass chaos amongst the women of the world.”

Greg smiled. “Something like that. Rickie needs monitored, watched for any changes, or occurrences that aren’t normal. We don’t foresee any,. However, we have to be on the safe side. He either has to go into special housing or to you. We’ll be happy to release him to you because, well, let’s face it, you two pretty much can handle things. Also, there are medical observation papers that need to be filled out weekly, for us. But Jake, you know what to do with them, what to look for. With your back . . .”

“Yes.” Jake cleared his throat. “Now . . . this special housing how bad is . . .”

“Jake!” Cal yelled. “He comes with us.”

“I know.” Jake held up his hand. “Just reviewing our options. All right . . .” He faced Greg. “Get me what you need to get me, because I want to go home. I got a headache.” He looked at Rickie. “And it’s gonna only get worse.”

Greg pointed to his door. “My secretary has it ready. I’ll go out and get it. Rickie, you brought your bag up right.”

Rickie gave a thumbs up.

Jake glanced oddly at Rickie. “How do you have a bag? You’ve been dead.”

“Dude, they like got me new clothes. Check me out.” Rickie turned his back to Jake. “I got the Levi butt thing happening.”

“And you also have that rebel teenage hair thing happening.” Jake told him. He reached out, gripping Rickie’s hair and tugging it causing an ‘uh’ to come from Rickie. “If you live with me, you lose it.”

“No, dude, it’s cool. Look.” Rickie reached into his back pocket and pulled out a baseball cap. He put it on backwards. “No one will know.”

Jake grumbled a little, then he saw Cal’s face. The grumpy look left him, Cal was smiling. And that made Jake happy, that and the fact she no longer was calling him a ‘dick’ and throwing objects at him.

^^^

Greg walked the three of them out into the reception area of his office. Shaking all of their hands and adjusting the Loony Tunes Knapsack Rickie had on his back. “Take care of yourself Rickie. We’ll be in touch. Lt. Col Graison.” He called to Jake as they moved closer to the door. “If you could call us frequently with updates, we’d be appreciative.”

“Not a problem.” Jake reached for the door holding the small letter size box Greg had given to him.

Greg watched as they started to leave and he shifted his eyes to his secretary, smiled snidely and went back into his office.

Jake checked out the time on his watch as he and Rickie followed behind Cal to the hall. "I should be able to get to the office and finish . . ." His eyes glanced up and he didn't speak another word when he saw Billy.

Billy was out in the hall waiting, leaning against the wall. When they emerged from Greg's office he approached Cal who was ahead of Jake and Rickie.

Jake, staying back, rolled his eyes slightly watching Billy stare only at Cal. "Oh this guys got balls."

Billy smiled. "Caleen Lambert right?" He pointed.

Cal stopped walking. "Do I know you?"

"You should. I hope." He had his hands in his pockets. "Joey Levinson. Mr. Price's English class. I sat behind you."

Rickie held up his hand. "There you have it dude. She never saw you. You sat behind her."

Billy looked only briefly at Rickie then back to Cal. "We were also in home room together for three years."

Cal's eyes widened. "Oh my God Joey."

Jake let out a huff and switched his weight on his legs. "Cal, come on. We have a plane to . . ." He grunted she snapped her head over her shoulder giving Jake a demonic stare. "Was that necessary."

"Joe Levinson?" Cal said with such shock stepping closer to Billy. "Wow look at you. You really look good."

"Yeah, well." Billy raised his eyebrows. "So do you. Real good. I mean really good. I can't. . ."

"Hey." Jake spoke up. "The looks thing is established."

Cal played off his remark. "Jake, this is Joey Levinson, we went to school together. Joey this is my fiancé, Lt. Col. Graison."

"Pleasure." Jake used the distance between them as his excuse not to shake hands with the 'stare guy'.

"Nice to meet you." Billy looked at his watch, placed his hands in his pockets again. "Wow, it was great seeing you again. I really have to go." He extended his hand and gripped onto Cal's.

Cal's smile left her, feeling their hands together. With curiosity, she made eye contact with Billy.

Billy brought his other hand over their joined hands and winked. "Take care of yourself." He flashed a wide bright grin as he moved back from Cal, letting his hands slip away. He waved and trotted off to the elevator.

Cal closed her hand.

Jake heard Rickie snickering. "What?"

Rickie inched his way to Jake and whispered. "Dude, like he palmed her."

"What?" Jake asked in a matching whisper. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I can't believe you didn't see it Sarge. He palmed her a note. Slipped it right to her under your nose."

"He did not."

"Did too."

"He did . . ." Jake watched Cal slowly move her right hand to the front pocket of her jeans. He took one long stride to her, reached out, snatched her wrist and lifted her tightly closed hand. "Open your hand." Cal didn't. "Cal, open it." Jake looked over his shoulder to Rickie. "Rickie, go chase that asshole down and stop him so I can beat the fuck out of him."

"Eye-eye Sarge." Rickie saluted and ran to the elevator.

Cal peered at Rickie who stood bouncing with excitement by the elevator. She shifted her eyes to Jake. "You're pissing me off."

"Well, you're pissing me off. Open your goddamn hand!" Jake watched Cal's fingers--red from clenching them so tightly--unroll. Laying in her hand was a yellow piece of paper folded up into a tiny square. "Fuckin asshole." Jake took the note and began to open it. "And you, Cal. Hiding the shit."

"It's a female thing, Jake. It's mysterious and never happens to me. Not like I was going to do anything. I just thought it was cool that he did that in front of you."

Jake's eyes went back and forth quickly over the paper that unfolded rather large. He looked at Rickie who was getting on the elevator. "Rickie, just hold that."

"But Sarge, he's getting away." Rickie pointed.

"Don't worry about him." Jake crumbled the note in his hand, took Cal by the arm and led her to the elevator. "He's a reporter." As Jake tossed it in the garbage, he became so engrossed in pulling Cal in the elevator, he didn't see her pick it out of the trash and shove it in her pocket.

^^^

Since it was not known what effect the being in a pressurized airplane cabin would have on Rickie, Caldwell took no chances and flew the three of them home by private jet. But all was going fine. Nothing happened to Rickie. He tried to make them think so, shaking as the plane took off, holding onto his ears and thrashing about. But Jake failed to see the humor in it and one stern slap to the back of Rickie's head not only stopped him but kept him quiet for ten minutes after his initial whine.

Cal had to laugh as she returned to the seating section. Rickie using the microphone, singing over the speaker. She made her way up the aisle to her seat. Two leather ones, wide and comfortable. Jake sat near the window, a booklet in his hand. Cal slid to her seat, sitting on her leg and facing Jake. "What are you reading?"

"Oh." Jake closed it. "Just the observation forms we have to fill out for

Rickie.” He reached down and put it away. “Easy.”

“What did Dr. Haynes mean by you knew how to fill them out?”

“My training I guess.” Jake told her and lifted the arm rest to an upright position. He laid his hand on her bent knee.

“Ranger school must teach you a lot.”

“Yeah they do.” Almost in a nervousness, Jake scratched the bridge of his nose. “Cal, they also teach basic English.”

“O.K.”

“The woman who teaches English there at the school is retiring in three months.”

“Jake . . .”

“No, Cal hear me out.” He shifted his body to face her. “I know you said you didn’t want to teach kids again after Jessie, but this is different. These aren’t children. They’re sort of men. Cal, you’re so smart. I hate to see all your education go to waste. What are you gonna do? Sit around our big house all day.” Jake brought his face closer to hers. “I spoke to the administrator . . .”

“Jake.”

“I would be so proud to tell people my wife teaches at the school.”

Cal grew silent. “Can I think about?”

“Yeah, I’d love that.” Jake kissed her quickly and moved back. “So . . . Are you still mad at me?”

“It’s funny.” Cal laid her hand on his. “I never really stay mad at you for very long. And . . . I really do understand why you didn’t tell me.”

Jake closed his eyes in gratefulness. “I am sorry though.”

“I am too, you know, for throwing things at you.” She smiled then cringed when Rickie hit a bad note. Then Cal smiled again.

“You know.” Jake’s hands gripped hers. “You look happy. Video happy.”

“What do you mean?” Cal asked.

“Remember how I said you looked so happy on that video tape? Well, you Cal, look that happy now.” He let out a deep breath. “It’s really a relief.”

“I am happy, Jake. I feel like for once fate said enough is enough. I’ve been given a second chance with someone close to me that I thought I lost. A gift. And . . .” She leaned to him and opened his jacket.

“What are you doing?”

“I know you still have it. Yes. Here it is.” She pulled out a pamphlet from his inside pocket and she gave it to Jake. “Keep the down payment on our adventurous honeymoon, Jake. Let’s do it.”

“Really?” Jake’s face lit up. “Cal, this will be so great. We’ll have so much fun.”

“I think so too. It’s just not you and I to lay around in the sun. We have to run around in the sun.”

“Thank you.” Jake kissed her and before he knew it Cal had climbed to him sitting on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her. “How teenage-like of us.” He

brought his lips close to hers. "I love you."

Just as they started to kiss, they stopped when the close sound of Rickie's laughter was heard.

Jake raised his lips from Cal to see Rickie peering over the seats in front of them. "What?"

"Sarge, it was like on my mind. Are you two still going at it. I mean, I like understood, up there in the woods, nothing to do but rock all the time. But dude, is it like all you think about, that and killing people. Or are you just really trying to make up for the years you suffered from sex drought."

Jake lifted his hand, it's largeness covered Rickie's entire face. Jake shoved him away and returned to kissing Cal.

CHAPTER NINE

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

March 14th - 7:45 p.m.

It was a carpet party and Rickie was the entertainment. Cal and Jake sat on the floor, backs against the sofa. Jake held a beer, Cal's was on the coffee table with the bowl of chips. Chuck lounged on his side, laughing and looking up to Rickie who stood center living room.

Rickie's hands moved about as he spoke in his usual dramatic fashion. "So like then bigfoot, he's coming at us. His arms are swinging. Sarge is trying his hardest to lead him out. Bigfoot's going . . ." Rickie crinkled his face and growled. "He goes after me but Sarge gets him. And the next thing I know, dude, I'm like bleeding." Rickie places his hands on his stomach and peers to Chuck. "I take my hand away thinking, minor injury and I see like my stomach. Uh!" Rickie shrieks causing everyone to jump. "I don't have to tell you, I'm scared at this moment. Sarge comes in. I drop to the floor. He panics."

"I did not." Jake argued.

Rickie flung his hand at Jake and continued. "It was like this moment to remember. Cal-babe comes up, she holds me, I feel her breast hit against my . . ."

"Rickie!" Jake yelled. "Tell your death story un-perverted please."

"Dude, her boob was right there." Rickie pointed to his cheek. "Anyway." He shrugged. "Cal's crying, her tears are like dripping in my mouth. I'm not only dying from this massive big scratch, I'm drowning in a salty ocean of Cal-babe tears. I don't feel any pain right. I'm thinking, hey it's not this bad, until . . ." Rickie pointed to Jake. "The Sarge started blubbing. Sobbing like a bambino."

"Rickie I was not." Jake insisted.

"HA!" Rickie nodded "Had to walk away, could watch the Rickie-meister pass on to the next plain. And Cal-babe, I am sorry I made an empty promise to you."

Cal swayed her head. "Rickie, that's fine."

Chuck was curious. "What promise?"

"I told the Cal-babe I would like hang with her daughter and watch out for her while we were boppin along in the never-after-world, dude."

Chuck had a slight smile. "That was really nice of you."

"Yeah." Rickie laid his hand on his own chest. "I'm just that type of guy. So like are you old folks gonna let me finish my story of death and departure or are you gonna keep interrupting me." He was answered with moans. "Cool. O.K., so I'm slipping. Voices and cries are fading and then . . . it gets black. Real black and I see this burst of light. Next thing I know, I'm behind this fat dude in a bathrobe. A long line of people are ahead of me, moving like way too slow. One by one they disappear through this door. And I stop. I stop." Rickie explained. "I can't move. Then whoa! This huge white glowing hand comes out and I hear this deep voice.

It's God. He's like . . .” Rickie does his best God imitation. “‘Ricardo, Ricardo, come to the light!’ I was like, whoa, this has to either be the biggest rip off dream of poltergeist or like, I’m dead. And so the hand reaches for me saying, ‘Ricardo, come.’ I was like, ‘Dude . . . Dude, I’m there.’ but wham! It’s black again and I can’t move. Next thing I know I’m dreaming of lesbian babes on the beach for a really long time. Until I woke up. The end.” Rickie bowed.

Chuck lifted his head to get Jake’s attention,. “Hey Jake, I really like this kid.”

Jake finished his beer. “You can have him.” He started to get up. “Cal, you need another.”

Cal lifted her bottle from the table. “Yeah, thanks.”

Rickie, looking at Chuck, pointed to Jake. “Them two are like the biggest luses I have ever seen. Smashed like the whole time up there. No wonder they lived.” Rickie laughed at Jake’s grunting at him. “Sarge, chill. But hurry back. I have a ton more dream stories to tell. I was out for a really long time.” Rickie waited then followed Jake in the kitchen.

The sound of Jake yelling at Rickie could be heard. Chuck laughed as he moved closer to Cal. “Jake’s crazy about this kid.” He whispered.

“What gave it away to you? His grunting, grumbling, yelling?”

“Nah.” Chuck shook his head. “Rickie calls him Sarge, and . . . he’s still standing.” Chuck looked up and he and Cal broke into a loud, slightly alcohol induced laughter when they heard Jake yell at Rickie to leave the toaster where it was at. “For how long though remains to be seen.”

^^^

In the silent house, Cal, slowly pushed open her bedroom door. Quietly and only an inch. She peeked in. Jake lay with only a sheet covering him, on his stomach, his arms gripping the pillow tightly. Pulling the door closed, Cal stepped back.

“Cal.” Jake called out groggy.

Cal cringed. “Yeah?” She poked her head in.

“Why are you checking to see if I’m sleeping?”

“I uh . . . I wasn’t. I was getting a ponytail holder. I know you hate when I wear ponytails.”

Jake grumbled. “Night.”

“Night.” Cal pulled the door closed and let out a long breath. She walked down the hall, stopping and laughing by Rickie’s door when she heard how loud he was snoring. She moved to the steps and as she walked down them she pulled from her back pocket the yellow note that Billy gave her. In her move downstairs she opened it and read it. A simple note saying his name was Billy and he was really a journalist. And how he meant her no harm or intrusion, he just wanted her attention and that Cal could call him day or night. No strings or interviews.

Cal had to wonder while she read the note, what he wanted if it wasn't an interview. And *that* curiosity led her back to the kitchen where her high school year book was open. She looked one more time down to the picture of the real Joey Levinson. A boy who definitely wasn't the handsome man she met at the institute. Joey was a heavy set kid, brown straight hair, thick glasses and bad skin. How bad she felt for not even knowing who Joey Levinson was until a stranger pretended to be him. Three years in the same home room and Cal never noticed him. She vowed right there to call him up one day and say hi. For no reason, but to just make up for probably being mean to someone that never deserved it.

But right at that moment, despite the late hour, she had another call to make. One she didn't want to make earlier. With no hesitation and Billy's note in her hand, she picked up the phone and dialed.

Two rings into it a groggy voice answered. Billy cleared his throat. "Hello?" "Can I speak to Billy please?"

Billy recognized the voice right away, he sprang up. "Is this you?"

"Depends on who 'you' is."

"Caleen?"

"Cal."

"Thank you for calling me. I thought for sure the big guy wouldn't let you." Billy said.

"He won't. That's why I'm calling so late." Cal pulled a chair up and sat down. "Your gall in slipping me a note in front of a man who pretty much would kill you, caught me attention."

"I didn't think of that. But I knew he wouldn't let me near you."

"He wouldn't. Billy, what is it that you want from me?"

"I need to talk to you. I know you survived the last Iso-Stasis Experiment."

"I really can't . . ."

"Please, just listen." Billy spoke with sincerity. "I know the compensation you received was large. I know if you tell me about what you experienced there you can lose that money. Trust me, it's not my intention to get you to lose that money. Cal, it's not even my intention to get you to tell me what went on up there. Not yet anyhow, I'll wait the thirty-three months."

Cal was curious. "Then what is it that you want?"

"To get to know you. Not . . . not romantically, but get to know you. What kind of person you are, what you're capable of."

"I'm lost. Why? I'm really not that interesting."

"Oh I beg to differ." Billy told her. "You were picked. And because of that, I need your help. Can I get it."

"In what way?"

"You don't have to tell me what happens. I just need you to tell me how to be, how to become what Caldwell looks for in their participants. I need a coach for getting into Iso-Stasis thirteen."

Cal went silent. "Billy . . . you don't want to do that."

“Yeah. Yeah I do. I need to. Right now, you and the big guy are the only information and training resource I got. He doesn’t seem like the helpful guy. So can you help me?”

Cal’s head dropped she listened to the soft spoken man, with so much sincerity ask her again.

“Please Cal. I really need some help. Can you?”

Not knowing if it was the right thing to do or not, Cal agreed to help him. Only a small amount of reluctance was there. And that had less to do with helping Billy than it did with Jake. Cal’s biggest concern was how would Jake handle what she agreed to. And when her mind gave her the answer, Cal slipped into a debate on whether or not she would even tell Jake.

CHAPTER TEN

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta GA

March 28th - 11:00 a.m.

Greg wanted to nearly drop over when he saw the stack of messages waiting for him after his meeting with Dr. Jefferson. So snidely Grace, his secretary handed them to him.

"My God when did I become so popular?" Greg shuffled through his messages.

"When you became director."

"You took all these, just tell me if any of them are of extreme importance because I have to head down to the labs."

"Um . . ." Grace thought. "Amelia called. She said she's canceling your date for Dr. Jefferson's step-down dinner."

"You're kidding?" Greg looked so disappointed. "I knew she would cancel. I have tried for three months to get her to agree to go out with me." He searched and found the message in the pile.

"Perhaps it's time to move on?"

"Perhaps." Greg tossed the messages on the desk. "None from any of the investors we sent the packets out to?"

"Not yet. But they only went out two days ago." Grace added. "I'd say tomorrow or the next day."

"What about Mr. Connilucci. We sent his over night."

Grace shook her head. "Sorry. Nothing."

"All right." Greg looked at his watch. "I have to head down to biology. Find me if Mr. Connilucci calls. Please." He got an agreement from Grace then he tossed his messages on her desk and left.

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
March 28th - 11:15 a.m.

Though she had spoke and corresponded with him, Cal had only saw him one time and she feared embarrassment when she entered the bar portion of the small but nicer restaurant, of not recognizing Billy. But as soon as he turned around from the bar and smiled, she knew it was him. Smiling back she approached him. "Sorry I'm late."

Billy sipped a cup of coffee and looked down to this watch. "You're O.K."

"How was your trip?"

"It was good. Wanna get a table now?"

"Yeah."

Billy lightly laid his hand on Cal's back and held his other hand out forward. She led the way to the hostess. "After you."

"How long are you in town for?" Cal asked as they followed the hostess.

"Not long. I have that interview at one. Thanks so much for meeting me."

"No problem." Cal sat at the table and took the menu.

"Hey I got you e-mail last night. That joke was funny."

"It was." Cal snickered. "My friend Joyce sent it to me. It was a little dirty, but what the hell. You didn't mind did you?"

"Who me?" Billy scoffed. "Please. Who sent who that dead person sight?"

Cal pointed at him. "I loved it."

"Thanks. Besides, we've become quite the e-mail buddies. I actually . . . I actually look forward to your letters at the end of the day."

"I look forward to yours too. Of course, you're the writer. Yours are always inventive." Cal smiled and closed her menu. "I'm getting the hero burger."

"I was looking at that. I think I will too." Billy set his menu down. "You look good. How are things going?"

Cal bobbed her head side by side. "Going. The wedding is keeping me occupied and my mind off the experiment."

"You haven't told Jake about those dreams yet have you? What did I tell you?"

Cal shrugged. "He worries so much about me as it is. I can't do that to him."

"He deserves to know . . ." Billy paused when the waitress approached. He handed her the menus. "We're both going to have the hero burger. And I'll have coffee. Cal?"

"Same."

Billy waited for the waitress to leave. "As I was saying. Tell him. Talking about it will help. You can share more with him. He knows. He was there."

Cal nodded. "I know. Then maybe I wouldn't have to call you in the middle of the night." In such disappointment in herself, Cal shook her head. "I'm supposed to be helping you. Remember?"

"Hey, I don't mind. I like helping you in return. O.K.? Besides, how often do

you dump it on me? We've only been talking for two weeks." Billy smiled. "And I signed up for that shooting course."

"Excellent. When I can explain why, you'll understand why I keep telling you to think 'mini arsenal'." Cal folded her hands on the table. "I had another dream last night."

"Watch your details when you tell me about it. You start to slip."

Cal held up her hand. "I'll watch. God, I'm just going to be an explosion of information to you when I can tell you this stuff. Anyhow . . ." Cal leaned some, looked up at the waitress when the coffees were set down and then she continued to talk. "I dreamt . . . I dreamt of your father last night."

Billy took a deep breath and leaned back in his seat. His hand played with his coffee cup. "You know, I spent my entire adult life watching him from a distance. Going to every single one of his appeal hearings, and there were many. Begging them not to let him out. Recanting what he did. How he slaughtered those people. Keeping him in that institution so my mother wouldn't face him again. And what happens? Caldwell has him released to go up there with you people. Cal, I . . ."

"Billy." Cal stopped him. "Don't. Don't apologize again. What your father was is not your fault. Them making him part of the experiment was not your doing. You had no idea until he was already gone."

"I knew what he was like Cal. And though you can't tell me yet what or if he did anything, I know." Billy dropped his voice. "I know."

"You realize, like me, your father is going to play a role in you getting picked to go." Cal raised one eyebrow.

"Big difference Cal. You're father was a hero. He almost beat the experiment. My father was a homicidal maniac sent up to probably stir up the experiment." Billy saw Cal's head tilt and her mouth open. "Don't say anything."

"I won't." She held up her hand, grabbed her coffee and sipped.

"I like seeing you in person. At least I can stop you. On the phone I have to start singing." Billy laughed. "Belinda heard me on the phone, she was over the other night."

Cal cringed. "Ouch. What did she say?"

"Same old, same old." Billy shrugged. "I told you what she's like. I swear she's the most jealous girlfriend I have ever had. I keep telling her we're friends and if she'd see the size of your fiancé . . ." Billy stopped to whistle. "She wouldn't worry. And, speaking of Jake." Billy reached into his pocket. "I printed up the email he had his secretary send me. You can have it. I saved the file."

Cal opened it and laughed. "He's so funny. Look how official he sends his threatening e-mails." Cal read it out loud, imitating Jake. "Bill, I can't stop Cal from talking to you, but I will tell you. The hundred grand comes out of your hide if I find myself writing a check to Caldwell." Cal folded the letter shaking her head. "He told me he'd kick my ass too. I told him I'm not revealing anything and you won't print it anyhow." Cal reached down and grabbed her purse. "O.K." She

pulled out a sheet of paper. "You and I decided. Slow, right?"

"Right." Billy smiled. "You got something for me. What?"

"Well, I spoke to Pete, Joyce's boyfriend. He's an attorney. He went over the confidentiality agreement with a fine tooth comb and he says there's nothing in there that prohibits me from telling the press, you, about the application process." She handed Billy a sheet of paper. "Step one. The application. Fill it out with some of these answers. Then . . . before you send it, let me see it. I'm walking with you through this process."

Billy read from the paper she handed him. He grinned at Cal. "Caleen Lambert-Reynolds, soon-to-be Graison. You are vastly becoming one of my favorite people. And . . ." His eyes shifted up and he folded the paper when the waitress set down the food. "Burgers. Experiment is aside while we eat. Tell me about this Jake-style wedding."

Cal rolled her eyes slightly with a chuckle, and as they both began to pick the same things off their burgers that they didn't want, Cal proceeded to tell Billy about the nuptials Jake had planned.

Las Vegas, Nevada
March 28th - 9:30 a.m. PST

The envelope from Caldwell was huge and its contents sprawled out all over Aldo's desk. A look of debate was upon Aldo's face as he smoked a cigarette glancing up from the papers to this accountant Hayward who sat in the office.

"Financially." Hayward said. "You can withstand the loss if that happens."

Aldo nodded.

"I mean, with the winnings, you'll still be ahead . . . financially."

"What about morally?" Aldo asked.

"I'm no priest." Hayward said. "Or anyone to preach morals to you."

"But you're a person who is here right now. Morally will I suffer a loss?" Aldo asked, wanting someone to give him an answer.

"Like with the investment." Hayward held up his hand. "It is a gamble. But . . . ultimately, it really isn't your call, is it? I mean, you can say yes, but it's a 'no go' if the Graisons, say 'no'. So realistically the outcome is out of your hands. The only choice that's on your head is the financial one. And really, you have nothing to lose."

Again, Aldo slowly nodded. His eyes moved to the telephone and to the blinking light that indicated a patient Dr. Gregory Haynes on hold. Taking one more hit of his cigarette, Aldo picked up the phone. "Dr. Haynes, thank you for waiting. I uh . . . I like what I see. Count me in on that angle for Iso-Stasis Thirteen."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

March 28th - 12:40 p.m.

Corporal Lancing stood there.

Jake, in his hover over his paper work, glanced only his eyes up to him.
“What is it?”

“Are you ready?”

“What?”

“You’re wife-to-be just called.”

Jake dropped his pen and sat back. “Don’t tell me she’s not coming to the closing.”

“That’s not what she wanted. She added to the guest list.”

“Not a problem.” Jake watched Corporal Lancing bounce from heel to toe.
“What?”

“She added that reporter Billy Grifatitowski.”

“Fuck.” Jake twitched his head. “Wait.”

“What?”

“Is that his last name?” Jake asked. “I thought it was something else.”

“That’s what she said on the phone.” Corporal Lancing shrugged.

“What was the name he sent his computerized electronic mail under?”

Corporal Lancing snickered first at Jake’s description of e-mail. “Billy ‘G’.
Sir, if I may?”

“Yes.”

“Not that you aren’t an observant man. You are. But this guy unnerves you. Just like I shut down when ever my wife mentions that soap operas guys name she likes, maybe you do the same. Like this thick fog seeps into your . . .”

“Corporal.”

“Yes.”

“I get the point. And . . .you’re probably right.”

“Thank you sir.” Corporal Lancing began to leave. “Sir, if it is any consolation. He’s bringing a female guest.”

“Why would I care? I didn’t think the man was gay.”

“I was referencing that he was bringing a date. Just incase you worried of any romantic entanglement between them.”

Jake’s mouth dropped open and his head titled in disgust. “That never even crossed my mind until you said that, thank you very much. Now I’m gonna fuckin stew Corporal.”

“Sorry sir.”

Jake grunted at him and picked up his pen again. “That’ll be all.”

“Yes, sir.” Corporal Lancing reached for the door.

“Lancing. When Rickie arrives send him right in. And don’t let him touch

my plants again. He kills them.”

“That has got to be the weirdest thing.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Jake returned to his paperwork as Corporal Lancing left.

^^^

Basic simple instructions Rickie could follow well. If he could accomplish them. And he made sure he accomplished the task of looking nice when he went to see Jake. Per Jake’s orders. But since Cal hadn’t taken him out clothes shopping yet, he lacked in the ‘nice’ attire department. So raiding Cal’s closet he found something he felt was non gender specific and snatched it up. Proudly he walked down the halls of the headquarters sporting the bright purple ‘If you want a job done right, hire a woman’ tee shirt. And he made his way into Jake’s office.

“Hey.” Rickie shut the door. “It’s you again.” He said to Corporal Lancing.

“It’s me again.” Corporal Lancing worked on the computer.

“Like why are you always here? I would think a big dude like the Sarge would have a bodacious secretary.”

“He does. Me.”

Rickie’s mouth opened and he shut it. “Dude, you are hot. Is he like, in?”

“Yes, And he’s *like* waiting for you.”

“Cool.” Rickie bobbed his head and walked across the office. He stopped and looked at the plant by the corporal’s desk. “Hey, you got a new one. Watch . . .”

“Rickie don’t . . .”

Rickie snickered when a dead spot on the leaf formed where his fingertip touched. “Cool huh?”

“Oh yeah.”

“I went to Mel’s greenhouse and started like pulling a little experimental action of my own. Dude, I don’t have the magic touch on all life forms.” Rickie scratched his head. “Bummed me out.”

“I bet.”

“Yeah. I’m a monster you know, that’s why I do that.”

“I’m sure.”

“O.K., well it was really cool having this conversation with you guy. But I have to hang with the Sarge now.” Rickie reached for the door.

“Rickie you should . . .” Corporal Lancing tossed up his hands when Rickie just walked in Jake’s office. “Knock.” Not worrying any more about it, Corporal Lancing picked off the dead leaf from the plant and went back to work.

Jake looked up when he heard the door to his office open and close.

“Hey Sarge.”

“Rickie, what the fuck are you wearing?”

“Cool huh?” Rickie pulled at the shirt. “I borrowed it off the Cal-babe. Don’t tell her. I don’t think she’ll know though. I like found it way, way, way, way, way back in her closet.”

“Yeah, I know. I put it back there for a reason.”

“Sarge, were you like wanting to wear it. I don’t think it will fit you.”

“Sit down Rickie.” Jake pointed to his chair.

“Whoa. Official army business.” Rickie sat down. “Did you know your secretary is a dude, dude?”

“Yes. Now what I . . .”

“He thinks he’s hot.”

“Rickie, I’m trying to talk to you.”

“O.K.” Rickie hunched. “Shoot. No wait! Don’t!” Rickie laughed.

“Rickie. Cal was placing away your extensive laundry of four shirts yesterday and she saw this.” Jake slid the three stapled pages to him.

“Are you like taking my stuff?”

“Yes.”

“Just asking.” Rickie looked at it. “Oh yeah. This is my employment contract.”

“Rickie. Did you read this?”

“The good parts.”

Jake reached over and snatched it from Rickie’s hand. “You signed a contract with Caldwell, stating that you would willing participate in any experiments they need you for.”

“Yeah.” Rickie smiled. “And they’ll pay me three hundred dollars a day.”

“Rickie, listen to me. For five years they can call upon you to test anything, Even poison.”

“Yeah so.”

“Yeah so? If they tell you to go to the next Iso-Stasis experiment, you have to. Legally.”

“Cool.” Rickie gave a thumbs up. “Another hundred grand.”

“No Rickie. Three hundred dollars a day. When everyone else is getting a hundred grand, you get around sixty-three thousand.” Jake grew perturbed.

“I guess cause I’m salary they have to cap it. Oh well.”

Giving up, Jake shook his head. “I’m getting an attorney to see if we can get you out of this or at least renegotiate what you agreed to.”

“Sarge, you can’t do that. It’s my job.”

“No, Rickie, working at Pizza Hut is a job. This is not. Cal has a child connection attraction to you and because of that, I’m taking it upon myself to watch out for you. They took total advantage of your naivety and I’m going to see they don’t make you adhere to this.”

“O.K.”

“You weren’t listening.”

"No dude I was." Rickie held up his hand. "I just don't know what you said."

Jake tossed the contract into his open briefcase which was on this desk. "Let me see how I can put it." He shut his briefcase. "Caldwell is screwing you." Jake stood up. "And I have to go. I have a closing to be at in twenty minutes."

"Can I go?"

"No."

Rickie stood up and followed Jake from the office. "Sarge, speaking of screwing."

Jake stopped cold and turned to face Rickie. Even Corporal Lancing stopped typing.

"Sarge can I borrow the other car? I have a date tonight."

Fear immediately struck Jake when the prospect of Rickie lunging after a fellow officer's teenage daughter, hit him. "Who . . . who . . . who . . ." Jake swallowed. "Who?"

"Es . . . Es . . . Es . . ." Rickie gulped and chuckled. "Estelle."

The briefcase dropped from Jake's hand. "Estelle our real estate agent?"

"Yeah."

"Rickie." Jake picked up his briefcase again. "She's in her late forties."

"Yeah, I know. Do you think I'll get laid?"

"Probably."

"Cool."

Jake quickly gave a silencing look to Corporal Lancing who laughed. "No Rickie it is not cool."

"It's not?"

"No."

"How come?" Rickie asked. "But before you answer that, keep in mind I'm still a teenager. And like, getting laid to us young guys is cool."

"It's cool to us old guys too but . . ."

"So no problem-o, Sarge. Thanks." Rickie moved to the door. "Come to think about it. She's like a mom-type person, she should have her own wheels. I don't need the car. She can pick me up."

"Rickie." Jake stopped him. "Really you should think about this date and the post-date physical activities you want to engage in with her."

"Huh?" Rickie was confused.

Corporal Lancing decided to help out. "Getting laid."

"Yeah, cool." Rickie smiled and started to leave again.

"Rickie." Jake tried again. "If I can? Please?"

"O.K. Is this like Dad advice time?"

Jake cringed. "You can say that." Placing himself in a mentor mode, Jake set down his briefcase, moving his hands about as he spoke. "I know right now, gratification is most on your mind. I was there, I was your age once. But, closeness is important too. Feeling for someone is important. If you want to be intimate with some one, fine, but really you should try to be intimate with

someone you truly, truly care about.”

“Like you and Cal-babe.”

“Exactly.” Jake’s hands dropped in relief. “Find someone special.”

“No way dude. I don’t wanna end up being this thirty-five year old virgin who has to go on an isolation experiment in order to get laid. See ya.”

Before words could come from Jake’s wide open mouth, Rickie was out the door.

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA
March 28th - 5:00 p.m.

There was a certain odor in the wing of the Caldwell building reserved for researching the remnants of experiment twelve. An odor that Greg swore would stick in his nose. A mixture of chemicals, death and formaldehyde was overwhelming. And Greg shuddered from the smell when he walked into the lab where the worst of the odor came from.

Stan worked hard in the lab that was dedicated to the remains of those who had died in Iso-Stasis Twelve. Remains that belonged to Caldwell, signed over by the participants when they agreed to go. Remains that would be useful in preparing for the next experiment.

Someone thought they were funny--probably Stan--by refreshing the red nail polish on Jennifer Reilly's severed arm. The brightness of the new coat of paint looked nearly fluorescent in the bluish liquid it dangled in.

"How is it going Stan?" Greg asked. "Getting prepared for the next phase."

"Yes. Trying." Stan answered.

Greg looked at they called in the lab, 'The Wall of parts.' Individual pools of preservation liquid. Each vat a different size depending on what it held. All encased behind a wall of glass for easy viewing. Some vats held arms, fingers, a foot. Only two bodies had limbs attached. Greg strolled by the two six-foot cases, Carlos Valenz was first. He dangled in the fluid, arms outward. Half his body, though gray, appeared normal, the other half showed the signs of the meal the wolves made of him. Then Greg stopped cold in front of John Montgomery's case. John's left eye hung some from the socket, but other than that, his body was unscathed with the exception of the visible means to his death. A single large fist size hole center of his neck. Flesh floated outward from the injury that one could peek through to see the other side of the wall.

"His father keeps calling." Stan interrupted Greg's stare of John.

"How often."

"Everyday. He says he'll call everyday too until he know what happened to his son."

"Did you tell him his son signed the forms?" Greg asked.

"Yes, and Dr. Jefferson said to fax him a copy. I did. He doesn't care. He's persistent."

"Isn't his father . . ." Greg pointed to John's body. "The Theodore Montgomery who owns that huge weekly news magazine?"

"Yes. That's the one. Says he's going to do a story."

"Is that so." Greg smiled with a hint of snide. "Do me a favor Stan. The next time he calls, lose your cool."

"Dr. Haynes, that might not be good, he . . ."

"Listen to me. You lose your cool. And you tell him one way or another how fed up you are with family members threatening stories. Find a way to get him to

call Billy Griffith.”

“Sir.” Stan bit his bottom lip. “Not meaning to insult you. But how bright is that? Two newsmen?”

“No, Stan. See, I got Billy Griffith off the story for nearly the next three years. Perhaps, Billy’s enthusiasm can pull Mr. Montgomery into the waiting game as well.”

“I’ll see where you’re going. I’ll handle it.”

“Good.” Greg looked at the time. “And I must go. I have Dr. Jefferson’s party to go to. Page me if you need me.”

“I will.” Stan told him. “And Dr. Haynes, sorry about your date blowing you off.”

Greg stopped cold. “Is nothing secret around this place.”

Stan chuckled. “No. This is the Iso-Stasis experiment. Everyone knows everything.”

“Is that so?” He questioned. “Everything?” Smiling with arrogance, Greg proceeded to leave.

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
March 28th - 8:30 p.m.

There wasn't a stick of furniture in the house, nor was their electricity. But Cal and Jake were there enjoying every new minute in their first home. The fireplace was lit, and a trail of clothes led to where Cal and Jake sat on the floor on a sleeping bag. Jake only in his boxers, Cal in his tee shirt. Open cartons of Chinese food by them, a bottle of champagne and two glasses.

"Open up." Jake held chopsticks toward Cal.

"Jake, I am not your child." She pulled her knees close to her chest.

"No. But when you stop picking apart your food like one. I'll stop trying to convince you to eat like you're one. Open up."

Cal opened her mouth a Jake placed the piece of chicken in her mouth.

"Cal. Chew. Thank you."

She smiled and wiped the sauce from her lips.

Jake lowered to her laying his lips to her with a light touch. "We are going to do good in this house."

"Yeah we are."

"Won't take much to get it in order. We pretty much can move our stuff right in. Just paint here and there." Jake looked around. "Especially that nursery." He saw Cal shaking her head. "No? We aren't painting the nursery. Why?"

"Rickie says leave it like that. He took that as his room. He likes big bird. What can I say."

"There's something wrong with him." Jake put down the carton of food and grabbed the glasses of champagne. He handed Cal hers. "Thank you for celebrating with me."

"It really was my pleasure Major . . ." Cal snickered when Jake placed his finger over her mouth. "Sorry, Lt. Col Graison.."

"Do you realize the next time you and I, well, you know in this house. We'll be married."

"I know. I can't wait until everyone stops calling me Mrs. Graison-to-be."

"And speaking of being Mrs. Graison." Jake set down his glass. "What happened to you today?"

"What do you mean?"

"The catering manager from the hotel called me this morning. He said you didn't show for your appointment to finalize the menu."

"I went." Cal said. "After the closing."

"You were supposed to be there at eleven."

"Oh." Cal sipped and set her drink down. "Billy called and was flying in. So I . . ."

"Who?"

"Billy, the reporter. So I met him for an early lunch while he was in . . . in . . . Jake?" Cal noticed the widened glare Jake had in his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"You failed to mention you had a date."

Cal laughed. "It was spur of the moment and it was lunch."

"Is there a romantic involvement I should worry about?"

Cal laughed even louder. "No. Jake, don't be silly. Actually, I have to tell you, we're becoming friends. Real friends."

Jake fluttered his lips. "Don't get caught up in that friendship Cal. He's using you."

"Oh he is not."

"Yeah he is. He wants you to think he's your friend. You finally trust him and talk and he leaks a story."

"Jake, you really have the worse judge of character. You don't trust anyone at all."

"Nope."

"Well if you talk to him you'll . . ."

"Cal." Jake interrupted. "I don't want to talk to him. That's your department. And what the hell do you two talk about if it's not about the experiment?"

Clinging to her legs, Cal peered up to Jake. "Sometimes we talk about things . . . things that I should be talking about . . . with you."

Jake's expression dropped, his lips pressed together. "Like what? What is there that you can't talk to me about, Cal?"

"Aside from my period . . ."

"Cal, please." Jake held up his hands.

Cal snickered then stopped. "My dreams."

"Now I'm upset that you didn't talk to me. I didn't think you had any hopes or aspirations you wished to pursue."

Cal's lip twitched and holding back the laughing was impossible. "No Jake. God you can be so serious and literal. No, dreams or rather . . . nightmares."

With a long breath Jake ran his forefinger and thumb down his face. "About the experiment." He watched Cal nod. "Cal, why wouldn't you talk to me?"

"I was afraid."

There was hurt in Jake's voice when he spoke. "Afraid of what? It's me, Cal. You're marrying me. I love you. Why would you be afraid to talk to me about dreams?"

"I didn't want you to think I was weak. That I didn't handle the experiment. Jake . . ." Cal laid her hand over his mouth. "You brag about me when you talk about the experiment. You brag. I didn't want to shatter your illusion of me."

Jake pulled away her hand and kissed it. "Cal. Just because you have nightmares doesn't make you weak, or show that you didn't handle it. And do you think I'd be any less proud of you if you were. Those nightmares are normal. They are your minds way of telling you to talk about it, get though it. Cal . . ." Jake lowered his face close to hers. "They are normal."

"So you have them too?"

"No." Jake shook his head and smiled when Cal tossed her hands up. "But I

did when I first started doing this type of shit. Just . . . just don't turn to someone else. Come to me. O.K.?" Jake pulled her into him. "Or else I may get jealous."

"You Jake, have no reason to ever be jealous."

"I know. But . . . Cal, just know . . . you're my entire world. All I have and want. I don't think you realize how scared I am of losing you."

"Then know this." Cal looked up to him. "I can swear on my soul I will never leave you and you will never be alone again, Lt. Col. Graison." Cal anticipated his kiss. He leaned to her, but his arm extended a bit too far. Looking at him oddly, she received her answer when his one arm tightened the embrace around her and the other hand extended a small piece of chicken.

"Now I got you. Eat."

It wasn't her laughing that failed Cal. Her attempts to shake her head, and keep her mouth tightly closed were in vain. Jake pinched her nostrils shut until Cal had no choice but to open her mouth in order to breathe. And when she did, Jake, arrogantly laughing, placed the small bit of chicken in her mouth, and sealed it with a kiss.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA

April 8th - 6:30 p.m.

Dr. Jefferson's tossing of a folder onto Greg's desk, precluded his smile and words. "Impressed."

Greg returned the smile as he sat there. "Thank you sir."

"I have to tell you. When I reviewed your ideas and cost breakdown of Iso-thirteen, I really thought, there was no way he was going to be able to pull it off." Dr. Jefferson sat down in the chair. "Where did you get the idea?"

"Well . . ." Greg rocked some in his chair. "If you think about it, many institutions ranging from the church to the US government find merit in our studies. And we pass it along to other private corporations as well to use with their research. But how many of these corporation are looking for something specific, but by law or by ethics they can not obtain results. I merely stated in a letter, that the next Iso-Stasis experiment would be open to experimental suggestions that may be helpful to them in their research. And you know, I added that, investment opportunities to help fund these private experiments, would be greatly appreciated."

"So without saying it outright, you told them, if you pay, you receive."

"Exactly. I sent this letter out five weeks ago. The response was so overwhelming I had to pick and chose which research results sought by the private sector, would and could go hand and hand with what we are trying to accomplish."

"That many?"

"Yes." Greg answered. "And there were a lot of 'We need to see what would happen ifs . . .' that were just too time consuming and really didn't fit into the Iso-thirteen agenda I had planned out."

"I reviewed some on the ones you picked. Are you going to be able to fit what you planned and these all in?" Dr. Jefferson ask.

"See, this where new ideas arrive. Previous experiments went across the board. Group oriented, all for one, one for all. Not now. More individualized circumstances will be thrown their way." Greg winked. "Which plays a role when it comes to the selection process."

"I understand a lot of them and how they can actually work for us. But one of them . . ." Dr. Jefferson reached for the folder, flipping through. He pulled out a letter. "This one here baffles me. How in the world do you plan on satisfying research needs for the Waverley Marriage and Sexuality Study Program?"

Greg just took the letter and smiled. "Trust me. I know *exactly* how I'm utilizing their needs into ours. Trust me."

Fayetteville, North Carolina

April 8th - 8:15 p.m.

It was a quaint and quiet seafood restaurant that Jake and Cal held their small personalized rehearsal dinner at.

Reserved would be the demeanor best described at the table of nine who finished up for the evening. Jake and Cal. Chuck, and Rickie with a haircut. Joyce Swindle and her boyfriend Peter. Reverend Tim. And because he had been predominant in Jake's life. Colonel Roberts and his wife Annabel.

There was something about Cal's longtime friend, Joyce, that annoyed Jake. Not that she ever said anything negative to him. She was always pleasant when she phoned the house. But she irritated Jake. A woman the same age as Cal, much taller though with large bone structures.

"A drink or two Jake with some conversation." Joyce told him as they all stood by the table waiting to go. "Why don't you join us?"

"Joyce, thank you." Jake shook his head as he held Cal's hand. "But really, I need to finish up some work because Cal and I will be gone for a week."

Cal looked up to Jake. "Just the five of us. Joyce, Pete, Chuck, you and me. Please?"

"Cal, sweetie, you go." Jake spoke softly. "Go on. Relax. Chuck? Will you bring her home?"

"You know it. I'll watch her for you Jake so she doesn't have any of those last minute flings."

Jake grumbled slightly under his breath. "Thanks."

"Dude." Rickie spoke up. "Like you should go and get trashed. Bob and Ann will drive me home. Ann said she'll babysit me."

Jake's eyebrow raised. "Mrs. Roberts, Rickie. And you're eighteen years old you don't need a babysitter."

"Then Sarge, how come you have me chilling at their house while you and the Cal-babe are dying and flying on your honeymoon?"

"Because I still want a house when we get home, Rickie."

"Oh."

Colonel Roberts stepped forward. "The boy has a point Jake, maybe you should just join Cal and your friends for a drink. You get married tomorrow. You've been planning this thing like a mission. Go out, have a good time and relax."

Jake smiled. "Thank you. But really going out isn't what I need. I need to get my work done. Get that off my mind, then go home, because I'm already too hyper about this as it is." Jake saw the sudden stares of surprise he got from everyone. "Really, I am. I'm extremely excited."

Joyce raised her eyebrows. "Oh Boy." She whispered to Cal. "If he's extremely excited, I feel really bad for you."

"He just doesn't show it." Cal whispered back then turned to Jake. "Are you

sure.”

“Positive. You go without me. Have a good time. We really shouldn’t see each other after midnight anyhow.” Jake raised his eyes over to Chuck. “Chuck just make sure she gets safe and sound into the new house.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Jake placed his arm around Cal. “Walk me out.” When she nodded, he started to walk, turning around and saying goodnight to everyone else.

There was silence as Joyce stood by Chuck waiting for Jake to leave. When he was gone, Joyce turned to Chuck. “I’ll get a hold of Aldo and tell him Jake isn’t coming after all.”

“You do that and I’ll call my friends.”

“Excellent.” Joyce smiled. “It’s a party.”

^^^

Billy’s suitcase was still on the hotel bed, unopened and he was pulling his laptop out. Preparing to settle into a writing night, he was half way through the laptop boot-up sequence when the phone rang. A weird ring. Two short rings at a time, instead of one long one. Thinking something had to be wrong at the desk, he walked over and answered the phone. Immediately he heard the loud sound of music. “Hello?”

“Billy.” Cal nearly shouted. “They told me you finally checked in.”

“Cal?” Billy sat on the bed. “What is all that noise?”

“It’s a party. Come on down.”

“Down?”

“To the lounge. Hurry up. I’ll be waiting. And bring your license, the secret service are bouncing at the door.”

Billy heard the click and looked oddly at the phone. “Secret Service?”

^^^

Chuck noticed Joyce just staring out at the dance floor when he went to the bar to get another beer. “Longing to dance?” He asked her.

“No. Watching.” She pointed to Cal who danced with David Martinez on the floor. The song was fast, rhythmic, and their entwined bodies moved more in a sexual way then danced. Swaying, hip to hip, David’s hand to Cal’s lower back. “Aren’t you suppose to be watching her for Jake?”

“I am.” Chuck took a drink of his beer. “Look Joyce, Cal’s dancing.”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it. He’d have a fit, first of all if he saw her dancing like that. Secondly, with David.”

Chuck waved his hand in a scoffing motion. “Let her go. After tomorrow she’ll be Mrs. Jacob Graison and her fun will cease.”

“He’s not that bad.” Joyce spoke smoothly.

"Please." Chuck laughed. "He's not just the stick in the mud, Joyce, he's the whole goddamn tree."

Joyce smiled, her eyes still going to Cal. "He's not that bad. Wanna know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I haven't seen my friend smile like that since before her daughter died. Someone finally gave her a reason to live again." Joyce looked at Chuck. "And for that I am very grateful to Jake."

"Whoa. He'd be really touched, in a Jake way to hear you say that. You really think he did that to her?"

"Yeah I do. I see her with him. It's Jake."

"I have to tell him you said that." Chuck chugged his beer. "Maybe then he'll like you."

Suddenly, Joyce snapped her views to Chuck. "Jake doesn't like me? He doesn't know me."

Chuck shrugged. "Go figure, it's Jake. He says you annoy him."

"That asshole."

Billy placed his wallet away after showing his drivers license to the two secret service agents working the door to the lounge. His ears had to make an immediate adjustment from the extremely loud music. The lounge was semi-crowded and Billy tried to spot Cal. He saw a long table packed with half finished drinks, and a few people. Skimming his eyes around the crowd, he spotted Cal coming off the dance floor. She saw him at the same time.

Holding one hand high in a wave, Cal raced to him. "You made it." She surprised Billy with an quick hug.

"Your party?" Billy asked.

"Yep. Jake's too. But he didn't want to come."

"Thanks for inviting me."

"Thanks for coming." Cal smiled "Where's Belinda?"

"Chicago." Billy said. "She respectfully declined the invitation."

"Her loss." Cal grabbed his hand. "Come on. Let's get you a drink."

Billy laughed as he was tugged to the bar by a partially intoxicated Cal. He stood there watching Cal as she stood on the foot rail leaning over the bar in a flirtatious manner to the bartender ordering a drink. Billy's eyes went from her hair to her shoes.

Cal looked over her shoulder and saw him staring down. "What's wrong?" She checked out her shoes, took the beers and handed one to Billy.

"Um . . . nothing. You . . ." He pointed the beer bottle at her. "Have great legs."

"Thanks." Cal smiled. "Jake made them."

Billy chucked at that remark, not understanding why Cal gave Jake credit for

her legs. He assumed he'd find out why in the course of their friendship. But at that moment, Billy discovered he was about to find out something else, the names of all of those people who gathered at the table. Once again, Cal tugged at him to pull him over. Just as he arrived at the table, Billy's eyes shifted to the dance floor. He pulled Cal back. "Cal." He whispered. "Isn't that the Vice President's wife out there?"

Cal snickered. "Yeah, she's hammered. Her and the VP are coming to the wedding. Didn't you wonder why the Secret Service supplied the bouncers?"

"Yeah." Billy spoke bewildered. "Wow. Jake must be important."

"Yes." Cal spoke peacefully with a hint of a proud grin. "Jake is very important."

^^^

The loud 'Crash' coming from the downstairs of his house, not only stirred Jake with a quick spring from his bed, but caused him to grab his revolver too. Not even bothering getting dressed, gun in hand he headed downstairs to investigate. He wasn't a quarter way down the steps when he heard the laughter. Lowering his gun, Jake shook his head. When he reached the bottom of the staircase, he saw Chuck picking up the lamp then straightening a swaying Cal. "What the fuck Chuck. It's two in the morning. You're supposed to take her to the other house." He set the gun on the table.

"I don't know where it is."

"Cal does. Cal?" Jake stepped to her. "Why didn't you just . . ."

"Jake!" Cal giggled and fell into him.

"Oh nice. Very nice. She's drunk." Jake looked at Chuck. "I thought you were watching her."

"I did." Chuck responded. "I watched her get drunk."

Jake's eyes widened when he felt Cal's hand move across his bare chest to his back and grip his rear-end. "Cal, please."

Chuck twitched his head. "Jake, she wants you."

"I can not believe you . . ." Jake removed Cal's hands. "You got her hammered."

Chuck lifted his shoulders and hands.

"Remind me never to trust you with my wife again."

"Lighten up Jake." Chuck told him.

"Yeah." Cal repeated. "Jake." Cal tipped toed to try to reach his ear, but failed. She kept trying it and losing her balance. "Let's go upstairs." She said in a loud whisper letting her hands roam freely again.

Jake glared at Chuck who was laughing. "I'm glad you find humor in this. She has a wedding to be at tomorrow and . . ." Jake let out a squeal of surprise. "Cal, please." He pulled her hand away, Chuck laughed harder. "Chuck."

"I have to go." Chuck lifted his hand in a wave. "She's all yours Jake." He

moved to the door. "See ya in the morning."

"Asshole." Jake shook his head when his door closed.

"Jake." Cal spoke in a sloppy seduction manner. "Let's go upstairs and go to bed." She winked rapidly at him.

"You wanna go upstairs?" Jake asked her pulling her back some.

"Yes."

"Oh I'll take you up to bed all right." Jake said with aggravation.

Cal's giggle turned into a scream when Jake lifted her up, hoisted her over his shoulder and carried her like a sack of potatoes up the steps.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Fayetteville, North Carolina

April 9th - 6:50 a.m.

It was so quiet in the parking lot of the hotel that the chirping sound of Cal turning on the car alarm echoed out. She tossed her keys in her purse, while a cigarette dangled from her mouth. She took one more long hit and tossed it as she rounded the building to the front entrance. She slowed down her walking when she saw Billy stand up. He tossed his own cigarette and moved to her. So different he looked than the previous times she had seen him in person. So morning like he looked. His usually neatly styled and combed hair sort off tossed into a style that consisted more of cropped curls. Round glasses graced his face and he wore a tee shirt that hung over a pair of baggy Levi jeans.

"Hey." His word dragged out as he walked grinning toward Cal in a 'nice to see you again' way. "You look good for someone who should be hung over." He hugged her when they met up.

"I wasn't that bad." Cal smiled with a chuckle as she stepped back. "Billy?"

"What's wrong?"

"You just look so . . . so different."

"Cal?" Billy tilted his head. "You called me fifteen minutes ago and woke me up."

"No, that's not what I mean." Cal looked at the hotel. "You wanna eat breakfast here, I love Hotel food."

"Sure." Billy shrugged. He turned around and walked with her to the entrance. "So what did you mean about me looking different. What? Did I gain weight?"

Cal laughed. "No. All the times I saw you before you had that fashion magazine look. But now you look . . . for lack of a better word . . . intelligent?"

Billy paused in reaching for the door. "Oh God, you think I'm a dork."

Cal laughed. "No. Well, a cute one."

Billy shook his head, opened the door and gave a gentle lead push on her back. "Get in there."

^^^

The waitress swayed her head in disbelief as she refreshed Billy and Cal's coffee. She glanced down to the two plates she was about to remove from the table. Mirror images of each other. Both plates contained the end pieces of the sausage links, broken off, and pancakes that were eaten like they contained an inedible edge. She wondered as she took the finished plates away if the man and woman belonged to some weird cult that just didn't believe in eating the outside edges of food.

"John Montgomery." Billy said the name. "You remember him?"

"Yes, he was at the experiment. He . . ."

"Cal." Billy stopped her. "No details. O.K.? Well, his father owns Newsworld Weekly Magazine."

"Yes. I know. How did you know?"

"He called me." Billy grabbed a cigarette from his pack.

"You're kidding. When?"

"Two days ago." Billy lit his cigarette. "Check this out. He says Newsworld will financially back any investigative story I work on dealing with the experiment. He wants to find out what happened to his son. And why they won't release the body."

"Simple, they won't release the body because . . ."

"Cal. Is this information cleared with Pete?"

"No."

"Don't tell me. O.K.? I'm gonna assume the experiment claims the bodies . . ." He heard Cal hum in a high pitch. "They claim the bodies for . . . hiding the truth?" He heard Cal's clue-hum lower. "Research purposes." Her hum went back up again. "That's what I thought."

"Did you tell him what you're trying to do?"

"Yes. And he said any funding I need. It's mine. He's sending a contract out."

"Billy that is so great. Look, you even got a story last night. You saw the Vice Presidents wife kissing some guy at the bar."

"I wish I had a camera." Billy grabbed his cup.

"Aldo said he can buy the security tape."

"Speaking of Aldo." Billy leaned into the table. "He looks . . . mafia."

Cal giggled. "I believe organized crime boss is a better term."

"Cal?" Bill asked with curiosity. "The man you're marrying today has ambitions of getting into the white house. Why is his wife-to-be hanging around with a mob boss?"

"Billy please, I hear about it from Jake all the time. I like Aldo and I owe him."

"Money?"

Cal laughed. "No."

"How do you know him?"

"Um . . ." Cal's voice took on a singing tone. "I can't tell you." She leaned into the table. "But, you can guess."

"If you can't tell me it has to do with the experiment." The signaling high hum sang from Cal. "It does. He works for Caldwell." A low hum, a wrong answer. "He was involved some way in the experiment." A medium hum, Billy knew he was close. "He had a kid . . ." Low hum. "Cal, I'm lost. If he isn't involved with Caldwell, what's a rich man . . ." High hum. Bingo. "He's an investor."

“Wow, how do you get your information.”

Billy laughed. “You’re bad.”

“Oh you love it.”

“Yeah.” Billy smiled. “Yeah I do.”

“Billy.” Cal went serious. She folded her hands on the table. “Aldo is an option.”

“What do you mean?”

“If we can’t get you into the experiment on your own accord.” Cal paused. “I’m gonna talk to him about pulling strings. He’s one of the big ones. O.K.?”

“Cal, you don’t have to do that.”

“Yeah, I do. But you have to do something for me in return.”

“What is that?” Billy asked.

“If I help get you into the experiment . . .”

“Cal you already are. Even if you do no more for me, you helped.”

“That’s what worries me. And that’s where my request comes in. Billy . . . You have to do everything I say. Follow every bit of advice I give to you. Read every detail I set out. Follow them to the tee. If you don’t . . . you may not come back. And I’ll never forgive myself if that happens.”

Billy swallowed the sudden nervous lump that formed in his throat. He briefly laid his hand on top of Cal’s folded hands. “Don’t worry about it. I will listen to you. And because I’ll listen. I *will* come back.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

First Presbyterian Church - Fayetteville, North Carolina
April 9th - 3:55 p.m.

Ribbons and medals graced the jacket of the full dress uniform that Jake wore. In the back room of the church, he waited with Chuck. His hair, which he let grow just a little for picture purposes was probably at its best. Jake didn't smile, he didn't move much. The organ music that played just outside the closed door did not hold the soothing effect it was supposed too. Nothing would have at that moment. Though he tried with diligence to hide it, Jake was nervous.

"Dude." Rickie popped open the door and snuck in. He was all dressed up in a suit and tie. "Whoa." He gave a thumbs up.

Jake turned around. "Rickie, you look normal."

"Thanks. And Sarge, man, you look, whoa totally awesome. I'm turned on."

"Rickie." Jake cleared his throat.

"Dude, listen . . ."

The bells of the church began to ring. Slowly and steady. Jake looked up to the ceiling, then to Chuck. He laid his hand on his own stomach and took in a deep breath. Slowly he released it through his slightly parted lips.

The door to the room opened again and Reverend Tim walked in. "Jake, it's time."

Jake spun to Chuck. "You have the rings?"

"For the tenth time. Yes." Chuck smiled. "Good luck. I'm happy for you Jake."

Jake looked at Rickie. "Rickie, I think you should go take your seat."

"I can't Sarge, I'm here to tell you something. O.K." He closed his eyes and held his hand up to the reverend who cleared his throat. "Chill Dude." He told Reverend Tim. "O.K." Rickie opened his eyes again. "Sarge, man, you look really good. Too bad, it's like gonna be wasted."

"What are you talking about?" Jake asked, not in the mood for games.

"Cal-babe. She's not waiting at the end of the aisle, flowers in hand dude, she's . . ." Tugging on the sleeve of Jake's jacket, Rickie brought him to the window. "She's there."

Jake looked out. His fingers pressed to the pane of glass. At the very end of the church's yard, Cal sat on a short small bench by the garden. Her back to the church, her head down. "What's wrong?"

"She says she's scared." Rickie whispered. "She said she can't do this."

Jake took a strong breath, biting his bottom lip. He turned from the window.

Reverend Tim moved to him. "Shall I go inform everyone there will be a delay."

"No." Jake shook his head. "Chuck, give me your flask."

"What?" Chuck asked aghast. "Jake this is a church, why would . . ."

Jake opened Chuck's jacket and pulled out the tiny flask placing it inside of his own. Then, with almost an angry storm to him, moved to the door. "Rickie go take your seat."

"O.K."

"Reverend." Jake pointed. "You and Chuck go take your places. Get everyone ready, we'll be right back." Flinging open the door with a slight bang, Jake walked out into the church. It was packed. Straightening his stand, and jacket, but not losing the determined, yet mean look to him, Jake in a heavy stride walked down the aisle of the church quickly. With a mumble of voices, everyone turned in their seats, confused as Jake moved by them and out the church.

The sun was warm on his already heated face as Jake made his way to the behind the church and all the way across the yard. He tried to be calm, despite the fact he felt as if his heart were going to explode from his chest. All he could see was Cal's back. And her veil attached to the back of her head.

Cal didn't move. Wearing her gown, her legs were parted, her elbows rested on her knees. She held the flowers in her hand, playing with the peddles.

Jake stopped when he reached her. He pulled out the flask extending it in front of her as he walked around. Just as he stood before her, lowering down to a kneel, Cal raised her eyes to the flask. His breath was lost. "My God . . . do you look beautiful."

Cal's lips quivered as she looked at Jake, so handsome before her. She ignored the flask and laid her hand on his cheek.

"What's going on Cal?" He asked with concern.

"I thought . . . I thought . . . I thought I could do it."

Jake's eyes immediately closed. "You can't."

"I tried." There was a certain whimper to Cal's voice, it mixed with fright. "I tried. I looked into that church. My heart started beating. I couldn't breath. Everything started to spin. I felt as if I was gonna pass out. I'm sorry Jake. I really thought I could do it."

"Cal, I love you."

"I know. And last night I was convinced it would be fine. That I could do this."

"You knew last night?" Jake asked.

Cal nodded.

"Cal, exactly how long did you know this could be a problem?"

Cal took a deep breath. "Since you started planning it."

Jake's eyes grew wide, his voice reflected his angering emotions. "And I'm just find out about this now?"

"I'm sorry Jake. I'm sorry. I tried to do it for you . . ."

"What about for you?"

"This whole thing just meant more to you."

"What? And you're telling me this now?"

Cal swallowed, she saw that look in Jake's eyes. "Jake. Don't get mad."

“Cal.” He stood up. “Don’t you think it would have been better to tell me, say . . . LAST WEEK!”

“Jake.”

“No Cal, what the fuck?” Jake’s hand cut through the air. “This is fucked up.” He ran his hand down his face. “For one month we’ve been planning this. One month. And you say nothing? First of all I can not believe you would lie to me like you have been. To me Cal. You knew how much I wanted to marry you.”

“I know.” Cal stood up. “Jake, listen . . .”

“No you listen. You don’t want to be married to me. Fine. Fine.” His hand swung out. “Then you file for divorce first thing Monday morning. As for now, I have a hundred and sixty-two people sitting in that church waiting and you will not embarrass me. You *will* marry me today. Like it or not.”

If Cal’s mouth could have fallen open any farther it would have hit the grass. “What?”

“You heard me. It’s a tough approach, but it needs to be taken.”

“Jake.” Cal’s voice took on a high tone. “Where . . . where in the world did you get the idea that I didn’t want to marry you.”

“Rickie told me.”

“Then he left something out. I never said I didn’t want to marry you.”

“Then what is all this about?” Jake asked.

“My fear. I have an incredible fear of being in front of people. I thought I got over it. It had been since high school. But it turned out to be the same thing. That’s why I ran out. In school, I auditioned for the play. Got the lead. Rehearsed, stepped on stage and passed right out.” She lifted her chin. “Where do you think I got the scar from?”

“I thought you locked your knees.” Jake cleared his throat.

“No!” Cal screamed. “And I felt myself passing out all over again. Jake, I just wanted to know if there was another way to do this. Like sneak in the back and have Reverend Tim marry us there.”

Jake started laughing. “You still want to marry me? And it’s only a fear problem? Cal we can handle that. Just stay focused on me, babe.” Jake grinned and kissed her quick. “Let’s go. And here I thought . . .” Jake grunted when Cal whacked him hard in the chest. “What was that for?”

“You dick!..”

“What?”

“You incredibly, huge, arrogant asshole!” She hit him with her flowers. “I cannot believe you said that to me about divorcing you. Making me marry you because the guests are there.”

“Yeah.”

“Jake!” She hit him again.

“Cal. Knock it off.”

“Oh I don’t think.”

“I *do* think. And it’s getting late, let’s go.”

"I'm not marrying you now." Cal folded her arms.

"The hell you aren't."

"The hell I am! Not until I get an apology from you."

"I'm lost." Jake tossed his hands up. "For what?"

"For being . . ." Cal hit him with the flowers, a few fell to the ground. "That . . ." Another hit. "Insensitive . . ." She hit him again, Jake backed up laughing.. "That you . . . quit laughing at me."

"You look really good." Jake snatched the flowers from her hand, grabbed hold of her wrist, and yanked her into him. "But you're too slow." He smiled at her.

Inside the groom's room in the church, Chuck stood at the window with the reverend and Rickie. He released the curtain. "O.K., they're good. Let's get this thing started."

"Jake." Cal whispered as they entered the church. "We can't do this."

"Yeah we can." He whispered back and kissed her. "You said you were afraid to walk up the aisle, right?"

BOOM!

The double doors to the inside of the church flung open with a huge bang as Jake stepped inside carrying Cal in his arms.

In the midst of surprise, the organist struggled to play the wedding march. He fumbled the notes when he tried to play quickly to catch up to a moving Jake. Joyce who was in a conversation with Annabel Roberts, flew to the front by the reverend. And Reverend Tim's mouth opened about the same time that Chuck slowly spun to see Jake carrying Cal up the aisle.

Billy closed his mouth tightly and slid down into his seat trying not to laugh.

"What the hell is this?" Aldo asked so shocked, watching Jake move right by toward the front.

Jake set Cal down. Between him and Joyce, they straightened Cal's dress. "Cal." He asked low. "You O.K.?"

Cal's mouth moved, no words came out. Jake grabbed her hand, it trembled.

In a sideways step to Jake, Chuck approached him. "Jake, I didn't know it was part of the best man's responsibility. Sorry, I didn't bring a shotgun."

"Ha, ha, ha." Jake looked over his shoulder to Chuck. "Real funny, asshole." Jake's views went to Reverend Tim. "He is. Sorry."

Joyce braced her hands on Cal's shoulder to make her stand straight. She mouthed the words, 'watch her' to Jake.

Jake agreed. "Rev. Tim, can we begin."

Reverend Tim looked to his bible and back up. "Jake." He spoke softly. "Are you sure everything is fine with this."

"Oh yeah." Jake nodded as he smiled at Cal. "We're fine. A bit of ochlophobia. But we're O.K. If we could just have the short, nodding version

please. Thanks Reverend.” Staring at Cal and not removing his focus at all., Jake laid the side of his hand gently on the bridge of her nose. “Focus. Look only at me. O.K.? Only me.” He slid his hands down to grab Cal’s and winked when Cal shivered what could have been a nod. “Go on Reverend.”

Reverend Tim cleared his throat. “The uh, short, nodding version. Caleen, do you take Jacob to be your lawfully wedded husband,? To have and to hold, for richer or poorer, in sickness in health to live in accordance to God’s will, forsaking all others, till death do you part?” There was silence. “A nod will be sufficient.”

Cal nodded.

Jake smiled. “Thanks.”

Reverend Tim turned to Jake. “Do you Jacob take Caleen to be your lawfully wedded wife? To have and to hold, for richer or poor, in sickness and in health, to live in accordance to God’s will, forsaking all others, till death do you part.”

“Oh yeah.” Jake’s hand went straight to Cal’s cheek. “I do.”

“Rings?” Reverend Tim asked of Chuck.

Chuck took a step forward and patted his jacket. “Oh, shit. I left them at home.”

Jake peered over his shoulder to Chuck with a glare.

Chuck grinned. “Kidding.” He pulled out the rings and handed then to the reverend. “Thought maybe a tension breaker was due at this moment.” He stepped back. “Sorry.”

The reverend noticed his extended hand to Jake and Cal went untouched. “Why don’t you two just put them on and I’ll say something.”

Jake grabbed both rings. “Can you do it Cal?”

Cal nodded and took Jake’s ring from his hand, she nearly dropped it her hands shook so bad. Jake held out his hand and with bad aim, the openness of the ring kept missing his finger. Reassuring her with a firm grip to her hand and eye contact, Jake led her to place on his ring. Then he took hold of Cal’s hand and slipped the ring on her finger.

Reverend Tim began to spew forth the words fast. “Love is never ending. A circle, unbroken. These rings you have exchanged are symbolic of the love you share. Through the vows you have exchanged along with the rings, you shown you commitment in marriage. Now with the power invested in me, through the church and the state of North Carolina, I pronounce you husband and wife. What God has joined together let no man put asunder . . .”

His words of finalization went through Jake. He let out what seemed like the breath he held forever.

“You may kiss . . .” Reverend Tim tossed his hands up when Jake grabbed hold of Cal and began to kiss her. “Never mind. Ladies and Gentleman, may I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Lt. Col. Jacob Graison.”

The moment the applause filled the church was the moment Jake felt Cal literally shake. He brought his lips to her ear. “It’s over now. Let’s get out of

here.”

Doing what she did the whole ceremony, Cal nodded and Jake swept her up again. Facing the congregation, Cal in his arms--her eyes closed--Jake carried her down the aisle and out of the church.

^^^

Even though Jake wasn't proficient in wedding receptions, he seemed to stay within his realm. Handling the after-dinner tradition of visiting the tables with grace. Introducing Cal to the brass that attended, like he was an old hand at it. He even got passed all those cold, evil stares Joyce kept giving him all night.

Cal was better at the reception. She didn't quite expect for it to pick up like it did, seeing how it started out very conservative. But the music blared, courtesy of Chuck switching the disk Jockey's at the last minute without Jake's knowledge. Securing the fact that they would hear, dance, oldies, and party music as opposed to *Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree*.

Colonel Roberts smiled in the odd relaxed moment he saw Jake. Standing on the side of the dance floor, holding a drink. Loosened up some, no longer wearing his jacket, and his sleeves rolled up. “Jake. Having a good time?”

“A blast.”

“Is that a sarcastic answer.” Colonel Roberts indicated to Cal who danced with Joyce on the floor.

“No, sir. I am. I like watching Cal dance. I'm considering it part of the wedding night preparations.” Jake, in a rare moment, flashed a smile to Colonel Roberts.

“Glad you're enjoying yourself.”

“Immensely. I especially enjoyed watching everyone do that Poking Dance, where they wiggled their arms and legs.”

“The Hokey Pokey.”

“That's the one.”

Colonel Roberts saw Cal coming Jake's way when the music switched to a slow song. “I'll leave you be. Here comes your wife.”

Jake grinned. “My wife.”

Cal approached Jake just as Colonel Roberts left. She grabbed his hand. “Jake, you did such a great job on this wedding. I'm proud of you.”

“Thanks Cal.”

“Dance with me.”

“I knew this was a bribe. No. I don't dance Cal.”

“Just one time tonight. Please.”

“Cal, I don't dance. Just like you don't say vows, I don't dance. Why do you think Rickie stood in for me during the bridal dance. I'm watching you though, so it counts.”

Cal swayed her head with a chuckle and a whine. As she turned from Jake, Billy was walking to her. "Hey Bill."

"Cal." Billy looked up to Jake. "Can I dance with the bride?"

"Yes." Jake took a drink.

Billy grabbed hold of Cal's hand. "Thanks, Jake." He led her out onto the dance floor. And cordially, in an old fashion mode, he cupped her hand while laying his other hand with a firmness to her back. "You look really great."

"Thanks. Jake did good on the gown, huh?"

"Surprisingly." Billy commented as they moved about slowly, their faces close.

"You having a good time?" Cal asked.

"Very good time. I really like the short nodding ceremony."

"Oh, God." Cal lowered her head in embarrassment. "A wedding to remember."

"I'd say."

"I saw you talking to the Vice President."

"Yeah. He let me do an interview. Rickie . . . get this, Rickie had him doing shots."

Cal laughed. "Is that why he was so loud?"

"Yeah. And did you hear him going on and on about the president?" Billy snickered. "At one point I quoted him as saying, 'often he finds himself wishing the president would just trip down the white house steps and get his reign over with, because he's a pain in the ass.'" Seeing that he got a good laugh out of Cal, Billy pulled her just a little bit closer and continued to dance.

"Sarge." Rickie nudged Jake who still watched Cal. "He's smoothing on your wife."

"He is not. It's called dancing."

"I see a little bit of hand-to-hand butt action going there. Don't you?" Rickie instigated.

"Rickie. Go find something else to do."

"O.K." Rickie raised his hands. "Merely making a Rickie-meister observation. I have that keen speed racer sense you know."

"Yes. Go."

"Going."

Jake returned to sipping his drink and watching Cal, until he saw Rickie, though the corner of his eye, sneaking off. "Rickie! Put back our wedding cards!" Jake set down his drink and proceeded to chase Rickie who now ran carrying the small white box.

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA

April 9th - 11:55 p.m.

Had the meeting room not had its door opened, Dr. Jefferson wouldn't have seen Greg sitting alone in there. Papers and folders stacked up and covered the table. At the point when Dr. Jefferson was walking by, he saw Greg, looking so tired, stretching back and rubbing his eyes. He knocked once on the door. "This is what I call burning the midnight oil."

Greg snapped forward in his chair. "You too, I see."

"I had an experiment I had to oversee. Government regulations. You?"

"I was waiting for the 'OK' as you can say."

"For what? Can I ask?"

"Sure." Greg waved Dr. Jefferson in. "Waiting to see that we got an answer and our offer was taken."

"On?"

"The location of Iso-Stasis Thirteen." He handed Dr. Jefferson a folder.

Dr. Jefferson sat down as he opened it. "At this cost?"

"No, lower. Carrington Island. Located a hundred and twenty-five miles Northeast of Hawaii. Fully equipped research facility, vacant now. A couple years ago a chemical gas explosion wiped out anything that breathed on that island and no one had returned."

"Until now." Dr. Jefferson said. "Is it big?"

"Small. But it has a lot we can use." Greg took a moment to yawn. "I'm encouraged about this. I wanted it, and I really didn't think Carrington would sell. He did. However, part of the sales agreement was we could not publically disclose anything that we inadvertently find remaining on that island."

"Sounds ominous." Dr. Jefferson commented.

"Par for the course with the Iso-Stasis experiment, wouldn't you say."

With so much agreement, Dr. Jefferson nodded. "So now what?"

"Now we finalize the monetary aspect of the deal. I have plans to start tearing down what we don't need and building what we do, next month."

"Looks like you are on a roll."

"Yep." Exhausted Greg spoke, but he still held a pleasing smile. "Plans are complete and set in motion. Starting first thing Monday morning, we officially move into the preliminary preparation phase of our Iso-Stasis Thirteen."

THE PROCESS

TWO YEARS LATER

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA

December 3rd - 10:00 a.m.

He was a heavy set man, short black hair that thinned a little. His voice raspy as if he smoked too much for too long. A truck driver and if his resume could say it, Lou Collins probably was a bully when a kid at school. But now, at thirty-five years old, he just looked the part.

He sat behind a table, arms folded across his stomach that protruded some in the white tee shirt he wore. He rocked back and forth in a chair that was not meant to rock. And he spoke to the camera as if it was his best friend. "Loveable." Lou said. "I'm just a big teddy bear. I think my biggest asset to the experiment would be that I can get people motivated. O.K., well, maybe not really motivated to do anything important. But if they aren't hungry I can get them to eat. Some of my favorite . . ."

Greg turned off the video. "He completed his introductory tape this morning." He spoke to Stan.

Stan lifted his head, his face dark and suntan from his time spent on the island where the experiment would be held. "How come you're not showing anymore."

"Well, basically he goes on to sing a few verses of his all time favorite Broadway hits. Not necessary. It came down to him and Skirret. We chose him, Skirret can be an option if we get a no."

Stan nodded. He had matured, given the responsibility and promotion of being Head Controller on the island during the experiment. "We're setting up things on the island for a 'yes'. You don't think we're gonna get one?"

"We'll get a maybe." Greg pulled out a chair and sat down. "We'll have to wait and see until we have the final meeting and everything is explained. I look for a phone call today. So . . . you didn't tell me. This is your third experiment with us. What do you make of the tapes instead of manuscripts to introduce the participants to each other."

"Personally?" Stan leaned back. "Others are talking that it's weak and a way to save time and money. Me, I'm looking at it from a different point of view."

"Which is?"

"I like it. It straight forward and cuts to the chase. I mean, no waiting until they all meet for someone not to like this Lou guy, right. Someone is gonna get annoyed with him and cop an attitude before they even get there. So therefore, the personality conflict begins before the experiment does.."

"Amongst other things." Greg spoke assuredly.

Stan smiled. "Well, of course. It wouldn't be the Iso-Stasis if that didn't happen."

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
December 3rd - 10:30 a.m.

“Lieutenant Coronal Graison Sir.” Corporal Grimes, Jake’s secretary entered the room.

Jake merely raised his eyes from the paper work he did at his desk. He motioned his hand for the Corporal to come in.

“Mail sir.”

“I’ll get to it. Thank you.”

“Sir. You may want to take notice of the letter on top. It’s addressed to you and Mrs. Graison. I don’t know how it got in there. But I wanted to make sure you were aware.”

“Thank you.” Jake returned to his work. “That’ll be all.” He waited for the Corporal to leave and he dropped his pencil, sliding the stack of mail to him. It caught his attention. It was odd, the envelope addressed, *Mr. and Mrs. Lieutenant Coronal Graison*, arriving in his office. But what got him was the return address on it reading, *Caldwell Research Institute*, it prompted Jake to immediately open it. He unfolded it, reading the words, not once but twice. He rubbed his hand down his face, replacing the letter back into the envelope. He let out a deep breath, and picked up the photograph on his desk. He smiled at it, his and Cal’s wedding picture. Setting down the photograph, Jake stood up. He tapped the envelope on his palm and walked from his office. “Corporal, I’m going to see my wife at the school. I’ll be back.”

^^^

“ATTENTION!” Those screaming words and the sound of Cal’s entire classroom standing up, startled her from her reading, causing her to cringe. She knew what it was. Jake.

Jake walked strongly into the room, acknowledging those who stood at attention at him. “At ease.” He moved to Cal’s desk. “Gentleman, I need a moment with my wife. Leave. Thank you.” It took approximately thirty seconds and noisily the room became empty. “Hey babe” He leaned in to kiss her.

“I hate when you do that Jake. It demeans my authority in this classroom.”

“What authority?” He kissed her. “I’m authority.”

Cal laughed at Jake as he pulled her into him. “You are so arrogant.”

“Yeah but you love me.” He began kissing her neck as she playfully tried to get away.

“Jake, we have an audience.”

Jake stopped, looked behind to see the class standing in the hall looking in. “Excuse me.” He walked over to the door. “Take a break. Leave the premises.” He slammed it shut.

“There you go, dismissing my class again.” Cal threw her hands up. “Why

are you here? You're not wanting to sneak out and have sex again are you?"

"As tempting as that sounds . . . no. I have a meeting in forty-five minutes with Colonel . . ." Jake glanced at his watch. "Well . . . yeah, we can squeeze it in. But first things first. Sit down." He waited until she sat in her chair and rolled her to face him as he squatted on the floor before her. "I was thinking." His fingers trailed her hand. "I was thinking about you and I taking a little honeymoon. Another one. Something fun, challenging, isolated. What do you say? Time away . . ."

"Jake, we don't need time away."

"Sure we do. A nice *long* honeymoon."

"What's bringing this on?" She ran her hand down his face. "You didn't do something did you?"

"Nope." He reached into his pocket and hesitantly pulled out the envelope. He handed her the letter. "Here read."

Cal looked shocked as she saw the return address. "Jake, what is this?"

"Read."

Apprehensively she pulled the letter out and read it. "*Dear Mr. And Mrs. Lieutenant Coronal Graison. Due to your history with us, it would please us immensely if you would give us your consideration in joining us once again for yet another challenging experiment. All proper channels have been taken, permission has been granted, and all preliminary interviews waived. We would like to cordially invite you, as a team, to participate in the Iso-Stasis Thirteen Experiment slated to begin on March 3rd of next year. Hope to hear from you soon, Dr. Gregory Haynes.*" Cal lowered the letter. "Jake?" She raised an eyebrow almost singing his name with just the right amount of excitement.

"Just . . . thought I'd show it to you." He bit his bottom lip, giving that arrogant Jake look. Then softly he brought his lips to hers. "So Cal, sweetheart, love of my life . . ." He saw her smile. "You game?"

~~~~~

Jake wore his uniform jacket over his open dress shirt as he walked into the kitchen of his home. He started to button his shirt and he looked to Cal who was pouring herself some juice. "You ready to do this."

"Ready." She took a drink. "I feel so out of practice though."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked, picking her up and sitting her like a child on the island kitchen counter.

"Well, school has had me bogged down the past five months. I've worked out, but other than that, I haven't done anything. You at least went on that raid last month and, were on that jungle thing in October."

"Perks of the job sweetie." Jake took a deep breath. "Tell you what. I call up Rollins. If you can clear it with the school, I'll bet he can squeeze you in for a week up at survival camp."

"You think?"

"Yeah, especially if you're going alone. What level?"

"Definitely, hard core. It's more fun. I'll try not to break anything this time."

Jake touched the tip of her nose. "I'll set it up."

"Thanks."

"But first." He reached over and grabbed the phone. He pulled up a chair placing it directly in front of where Cal's legs dangled over the edge of the counter. Staring at her with an ornery grin, Jake dialed. "Dr. Gregory Haynes please. Tell him Lt. Col. Graison." Jake's hand went to Cal's leg. "Dr. Haynes . . . Yes. My wife and I received your correspondence today . . . you can say we're mildly intrigued. The prospect isn't really striking an exciting chord in us yet."

Cal grinned with a thumbs up to Jake.

Jake winked at her. "We can do that." Jake's hand crept up her leg. "Not a problem" His eyes stayed glued to the edge of her skirt where his hand moved slowly under. "See you then." Stretching back with out losing hand to leg contact, Jake hung up the phone and stood up.

"What he say, what he say?" Cal asked with excitement.

Jake parted her legs and stepped closer to her. "We're going up first thing Monday morning for a meeting. He really wants us to go Cal."

Cal looked down at Jake's hands that manipulated her skirt. "Jake, what are doing? I have to get back to class and you have to get to work. No being late. Billy is coming . . ."

"Cal." Jake laid his hand over her mouth. "It's bad enough the man invades our computer nightly and comes to our home. Don't bring him into our intimate moment."

Cal laughed. "Intimate moment?"

"Yeah." Jake leaned to kiss her. "I have to tell you, the prospect of going on this experiment again with you, facing danger, death, the challenge. It really has me . . ." He pulled her closer. "Aroused."

"Danger does that to you. You do realize that if they asked us back, there is no way they're going to follow the same experiment format."

"I hope not. It would be too boring knowing what would happen. I think, not knowing, excites me more." He laid his lips to her neck.

"Jake stop." She felt him lead her back down to the counter.

The second Jake's body secured her down was the second loud alarm sirens blared. Jake only lifted his head to see Rickie coming into the back door.

"Sarge, like why is the alarm on in the middle of the day." Rickie, wearing his Pizza Hut Delivery Uniform, and carrying a pizza box, rushed to the keypad punching in numbers and silencing the alarm. "And like, Cal-babe prepares my meals on that counter."

"Rickie. You're supposed to be working."

"Check this out." Rickie set down the pizza box on the counter above Cal's head. "Can you like not do that in my presence. It's really creepy seeing your

pseudo parents trying to rock like kids on the kitchen counter. Pizza?" He opened the lid.

Cal nodded. "Thanks."

Jake stood up bringing Cal with him. "Rickie, you're supposed to be working."

"Check this out." He handed Cal a slice kissing her on the cheek after. "I got fired again."

"I talked to the manager last week." Jake said.

"Sarge, the dude bites." Rickie moaned as he ate the pizza. "He told me just because you're like my Dad, doesn't get me a buy. He said . . . you suck."

"He did not."

"Did too." Rickie held up his pizza in his right hand.

"I'll find you another job." Jake helped Cal off the counter.

"I really don't need another job guy." Rickie walked to the fridge and pulled out a beer. "I still have money left over from them scientists killing me last month."

"Dying for money is not a job Rickie." Jake snatched the beer from his hand. "And you know the rules of the house. No drinking in the morning."

"Sarge it's not morning to me, I haven't been to bed yet. So there you have it."

Jake walked to the fridge, opened it and put the beer back. He pulled out a carton of milk. "And here you have this. Rickie if you don't start taking care of yourself, you'll never pass the Caldwell tests to be on your own and out of the house."

Rickie grabbed the carton and moved to the table. "Dude, why would I want to leave home. I like it here. Oh wow." Rickie lifted the letter that was open on the table. "Cool."

"It's exciting isn't it." Cal approached him with a smile.

"Yeah." Rickie said. "And you know what makes it really awesome? I get this whole big house to myself for seven months." Nodding with pleasure, Rickie, pizza in mouth walked from the kitchen.

A dropped expression graced Jake's face, Cal's too as he faced her. "Remind me to speak to Haynes about that special housing they have for Rickie."

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA  
December 3<sup>rd</sup> - 12:30 p.m.

Like the pastor emeritus of a church, that's what Dr. Jefferson was at Caldwell. Advice giver father figure, part-time monitor, and of course, the only one the investors still took serious and listened to. He was informed of everything to be abreast, and called upon often. If he wasn't called upon, he went to see what was up, because since his step down as Director, Dr. Jefferson's life was pretty dull.

Dr. Jefferson stared down at the smug, pouty and closed lips of Greg, who nodded as he folded his hands.

"I see no problem." Greg said.

Dr. Jefferson singularly nodded. "You don't think you could be inviting trouble?"

"Nope. Mr. And Mrs. Graisons' participation in the experiment will, not only prove beneficial to our research and the research needs of others. But I also feel they will help provide maximum entertainment."

"You'd have to break them or come awfully close." Dr. Jefferson said. "These two beat the last experiment. How do you propose to stop them this time?"

"Conditions."

Dr. Jefferson let out a single breath that was accompanied with a short laugh as he shook his head. "They'd better be hard core conditions. These two are tough."

"Yep. And we're counting on a fight from them." Greg leaned back in his chair. "Keep in mind Dr. Jefferson this experiment will play upon something the last one couldn't."

"Which is?"

"Physically and mentally, yes, these two are tough. But there's another side to them, and no matter what, nothing can change the fact that, that side is human."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Fort Bragg, North Carolina  
December 3<sup>rd</sup> - 1:30 p.m.

Jake nodded to his secretary as he covered the mouth piece of the phone. He signed the paper handed to him then gave it back to the corporal. He removed his hand from the mouth piece. "Cal, sweetie. I'll do the best that I can do. All right?"

The corporal shuffled through the stack of papers he held.

"Jake, just don't be too late. O.K.? I'll hold dinner until you get here." Cal told him. "But I don't know how long I can hold off telling Billy. He'll be here soon."

"I know you want to wait until I'm there . . . hold on." Another piece of paper was dropped in front of Jake, he skimmed it, signed it and handed it back. "Cal, I'm trying to catch up so I don't have to come in this weekend while your computer buddy stays with us. O.K.? And . . . if the excitement gets too much for you. Go ahead tell him without me there."

"Are you sure? We are both going on the experiment, you may want to be present when we tell him about . . ."

"Cal, if you want to. You go on. I'll manage emotionally." Jake rolled his eyes. "Cal, I really have to go sweetie." Jake looked at more papers set in front of him. "I love you."

"I love you. Hurry home." Cal hung up the phone.

Jake looked at the receiver that he set down. Running his hand over his face, he peered up to the corporal. "How many times does that make?"

"I think eight in the last two hours sir. Not that I'm counting."

"And it's the same conversation." Jake grunted.

"Perhaps Mrs. Graison is just excited about something and she has to release that energy, so she calls you."

"There has to be another way."

"Well." The corporal tilted his head and saw Jake glare up. "No, I'm not meaning that. I give my wife the credit cards and tell her to go shopping. Usually I send her on a wild goose chase for something."

Jake's fingers tapped on the desk just below his paper work. His eyes lit up and he grabbed the phone, dialing it. "Cal, hey, Billy's not getting here for a few hours. There's some things I need you to get for me. Can you?" Jake looked up to the corporal with a wide grin and a thumbs up.

^^^

The urgency behind Jake's 'must have now' list baffled Cal. But he had to have his reasons or he wouldn't have asked. And Cal really didn't see a problem with it. Her dinner had been started, she had some time to kill, and she just

finished wrapping the gift for Billy.

It set on the dining room table, a letter size box, wrapped in paper that sported little yellow dinosaurs holding balloons and birthday cakes. She chuckled, placing the little card on it and then she picked up Jake's list which was jotted on the back of an old money machine receipt. It was going to be a task, finding items that ranged from golf ball shaped pens for Colonel Roberts, and a trigger finger warmer, to oddly enough, a deep sea living and survival program.

After checking the timer on the stove--all she needed to do was burn dinner--Cal grabbed her purse, shoved the list in there, and walked back out by way of the dining room through the living room. Standing in the huge entrance hall, she could hear Rickie laughing in the family room. She pushed open the already slight open double doors to see Rickie at one of the two computers they had in there. "What's funny?"

"I got a toon from this email bud of mine."

"Rickie, I'm heading out. I have to go shopping for some things for Jake. Check this out, I think Jake's finally going to try to use the computer."

"No, way." Rickie looked surprised. "Did he say that?"

"Well, he asked for me to find him an ocean survival program." Cal shrugged.

"So does that mean you're headed to the Oddball Software. I love that store."

"Going there now. Wanna go shopping with me?"

"Can you buy me something?" Rickie asked.

"Sure."

"Cool." Rickie made a few clicks on the computer and stood up. He moved to the front door with Cal. "I smell cake. Does Sarge know you're baking a cake for cyber-boy?"

"Yes, he knows." Cal opened the door and walked out. "He's coming around on Billy. Hey, he's making room in his schedule to be home this weekend. That's a start." They moved to the car. "And I think getting Jake to form a friendship with Billy is important, especially since we're all gonna be on this experiment together."

"Or maybe the toot is hoping Jake and Billy don't click in the old friendship latch process. You know, it could like make the experiment way more interesting."

Cal chuckled as they both got in the car. "That is really far fetched Rickie. Where did you dig that from."

"Just a Rickie Meister-observation."

"An off the wall Rickie-Meister observation." Cal started the car and backed up out of the driveway.

"No not really. Especially since the dudes at the toot were like super-de-dupery interested in Jake and Billy's bond. When I went there to die last month, they kept asking me about it."

Cal hit the breaks. "You're joking."

"Whoops."

"What?"

Rickie started laughing. "If I signed like a form that said I wasn't supposed to tell anyone what they asked me about, does that mean you?"

"Um . . ." Cal, her mind wandering, continued to back up. "No, Rickie, I don't count. I'm like your mom."

"Cool." Rickie bobbed his head and turned on the car radio. "Uh!" Rickie shuddered. "Sarge was like chilling and cruising to the news again. Man, how can he sing along with that?" Shaking his head, Rickie switched the station.



First Class - En-route to Fayetteville, North Carolina  
December 3<sup>rd</sup> - 3:45 p.m.

“Ladies and Gentleman.” The stewardess spoke with obvious fake pleasantries over the intercom, how could her conduct not be fake. Not only did that rambunctious little boy rampaging the aisles of first class ruin her day, but all of the other passengers as well. He once perfect hair dangled in her face. “We about to make the approach into Fayetteville Airport. At this time we would like to ask that all beverages be discarded, trays returned and seats placed in an upright position. Hope you had a pleasant flight with Trans World Airlines. We will be landing shortly.” She lowered the microphone and mumbled. “Thank God.”

The ice in Billy’s glass rattled then fell forward hitting against his lips as he brought the last of his Jack Daniels on the rocks, into his mouth. He allowed one small cube to enter his mouth. He swished it with a click as he gasped in the whisky aftertaste. The seeing the stewardess, he handed her the empty glass as he played with that one piece in his mouth. He looked down to the envelope he held in his hand, an envelope whose return address indicated it had come from Caldwell Research Institute. Billy hit the envelope off his knee, folded it in half and leaned forward sticking it in the back pocket of his pants. He adjusted his seat, sniffed, and stared out the window with a very melancholy demeanor.

Las Vegas, Nevada  
December 3<sup>rd</sup> - 1:00 p.m. PST

It didn't matter to Aldo that he was in the middle of a meeting regarding a link merger between a neighboring casino. He wanted interrupted when the call came from Dr. Haynes at Caldwell. There was something about talking to Haynes that disturbed him. Aldo was a smart man. And his knowing of people was what Aldo attributed as one of his keys to his success. Yet everyone Aldo spoke to that knew Haynes, told him the same thing, that Aldo was mistaken. What you see is what you get with Haynes. Even the unethical background check Aldo had done showed that repeatedly, Aldo's thinking and instincts were wrong. People interviewed, all spoke highly and respectfully and without negativity of Haynes. 'A good hearted man'. 'True to the core'. 'A man with integrity'. Were some of the comments Aldo received. But Aldo didn't quite buy it. A good hearted, true to the core, puritanical man with integrity working for Caldwell? That was nearly as impossible as the pope working the counter at Jay's Pornography store. The two just didn't go hand and hand. Unless Haynes was trying to change the experiment for the better. And again, another thought process Aldo didn't buy into.

To him, Dr. Gregory Haynes was attempting to win an academy award. The 'do good, I'm being honest with you, country boy' exterior was just a front for what Aldo truly believed was a brilliant manipulative man who intended to do his job well for Caldwell and the experiment. That worried Aldo. This was going to be Aldo's fourth experiment, and for the first time in his history with Caldwell, he felt--unfounded of course--that he would be going into the investment phase blind and as ignorant as any of the new investors. Aldo didn't like that. He spent too much time learning how they handled things. And that was mainly the reason he *could not* miss the call.

He hurried from the meeting, telling the owners of the other casino he had an emergency. Scooting with a rush down to his office, and catching his breath prior to answering the phone extremely calm. No 'hello or how can I help you' Aldo picked up the phone with a, "Tell me."

"They called." Greg informed. "We're meeting with them to get them to sign and tell them how things are going to go."

There it was. *How things were going to go*. Maybe Aldo read too much into that statement. Maybe he was looking for any words from Haynes that could give him a clue to what the importance of having Cal and Jake in the experiment were. "When are they coming."

"Monday morning."

"I'll be there."

"Mr. Connilucci, it is highly irregular that an investor be in the same room . . ."

"And it is highly irregular that an investor get a choice with a certain participant or in this case, participants. So under these new highly irregular Iso-

Stasis procedures, and seeing that I am the only investor who gets a choice, and who has the only team. I will Dr. Haynes, will be there. I made the investment and I need to know exactly what the hell I just got these two into. Understand?"

"Perfectly." Greg responded in an unaffected manner. "We'll see you Monday morning."

Aldo hung up the phone and regained his composure. There was a certain amount of guilt that streamed through Aldo. He always wondered had he made the right decision to invest in Cal and Jake as a team. And the more he thought about it, the more he realized how wrong it was. Unlike with any other participants, Caldwell knew Cal and Jake well. Their weaknesses, their strengths and habits. And if Haynes asked years ago about making the investment, then Haynes had years to personalize an experiment plan for Cal and Jake.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Fayetteville, North Carolina

December 3<sup>rd</sup> - 4:35 p.m.

"Cal-babe!" Rickie's voice carried into the kitchen. "We're here."

Cal immediately stopped stirring what was cooking in the pot, shut off the burner and raced to the hall. She gave a slight shriek of excitement when she saw Billy standing there and she nearly knocked him over when she hugged him. "God, it's been forever since I've seen you."

Billy grunted in the tight embrace. "Three months."

Cal stepped back. "Wow. You look great."

"Thanks."

"You all right?" Cal asked.

"Yeah." Billy grabbed his stomach. "Just shaken up by Rickie's driving, that's all."

Cal's eyes moved to Rickie.

"What?" Rickie shut the door. "I did all the posted limits."

"Cal." Billy called her attention. "He held that stupid sign with my name on it up at the airport again. When I was walking through the gate he was holding it in front of every man's face asking if they were me, like he didn't know me."

Rickie was snickering. "CB, I do that all the time, Dude."

Billy looked oddly at him. "And what is CB?"

Cal answered. "Cyber-boy. Are you sure you're all right? Your mood is not that great."

"I'm fine."

Cal took hold of Billy's hand and brought him into the living room. "Rickie, can we be alone?"

"I'm telling Sarge." Rickie declared. "Kidding. I'm gonna see if my E-babe is waiting for me."

Cal led Billy to the couch. "Sit down."

"Wow, you're in a upbeat mood."

"I am." Cal held up her hand. "Stay here." She darted off to the dining room and came back with her hands behind her back.

Billy looked up to her with a crooked smile. "What are you up to?"

"O.K., I was just thinking how kismet our whole situation is."

"What do you mean?"

"Kismet. Karma. Fate?" Cal noticed Billy still wasn't catching on. "Don't you think it's a little weird your birthday falls on the same day, I, Cal Lambert-Graison am allowed to . . ." She grinned. "Spill my guts to you. And, how many months did we have to wait?"

"Thirty-three."

"How old are you today?"

“Thirty-three.”

“Karma.” She pulled out the dinosaur wrapped gift from behind her back. “Happy Birthday, Billy.” She bent down kissed him on the cheek, then sat next to him on the couch. “Usually it’s customary to wait until after the cake. But, I couldn’t.”

“Don’t tell me you have a cake?”

“I do.”

Billy looked at the gift. “What is it?”

“A present.”

Billy chuckled. “No, I mean, what is it?”

“Let me let you in on a gift opening tip.” Cal winked. “The answer can be found when you unwrap it, otherwise telling you ruins the surprise. Go on, Billy. Open it.”

Billy hands moved to the end of the present.

“Wait. Before you do.” Cal smiled as Billy stopped. She laid her hand over his hand that was ready to rip open the box. “I’m going to cross a line here.”

Rickie’s voice carried in. “I’m telling Sarge!”

“Rickie” Cal yelled then shook her head. “A Cal line. I uh . . . usually am pretty cold. But I want to say, what started out as a phone call that would lead us to this moment, turned out to be more than I expected. I found a really good friend in you Billy. A really good friend. And I’m so grateful.” Cal removed her hand. “Go on, open it.”

Billy hesitated, then set the gift to the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“Cal, if it has anything to do with the experiment. I don’t want it now.”

“Why?” Cal’s eyes shifted from the floor to Billy.

“Because I don’t want you to think that’s what the past thirty-three months was about. O.K.?”

“Don’t be silly. I know that.” She bent down and picked the present back up and handed it to him. “You’ll hurt my feelings if you don’t take it. Please.”

Billy slowly started to tear the paper, but stopped again. “Just know something. If you decide not to tell me anything at all about the experiment, it doesn’t matter. Because I made a really good friend in you too.” He leaned to her and kissed her on the cheek.

“I heard a kiss!” Rickie yelled. “I’m telling Sarge!”

Billy swayed his head and opened the gift. There was a brown box and he lifted the lid. He smiled when he looked inside. “Oh my God.” He took out a bound manuscript and inch and a half thick. On the grey card stock cover, the title *Surviving the Iso-Stasis*. “Did you do this?”

“Yeah.” Cal let out a breath. “It’s not written well. I was going to do a story. But, I couldn’t, so it’s more like an instruction manual, taking you through steps of the experiment. Ways to beat them, see it coming.”

“Cal this is great. You had to work hard on this.”

"I've been working on it for a while now. Jake helped out a lot. He kind of thought it was fun when I would wake him up in the middle of the night for tips. He said I tested his wits." Cal chuckled. "Actually, Jake read through the entire thing to make sure it came out correctly. I may have put it together like a text book, but ninety percent of the survival tips are Jake's. Billy, if you go by them, you won't be wrong. Jake's the best at it."

Billy flipped open the cover and looked at the handwritten inscription. After reading the words, *'To one of my best friends. My thoughts and Prayers will be with you. Good luck. Love, Cal.'* Billy closed his eyes.

Cal pointed to her words. "I wrote that in there yesterday before I found out . . . before I found out that . . ." She grinned. "I can't wait for him. Before I found out Jake and I will be there with you. Billy, they invited us to participate. I'll be right along side with you. Jake and I will be right there. A team. And with all the training you have been . . ."

"Cal, stop." Billy closed the cover.

"What's wrong. I thought you'd love the idea of me being at the experiment with you."

"Oh God yes." Billy told her. "Unfortunately . . ." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out the folded Caldwell envelope. "Read."

"What is this?"

"Read it." Billy stood up and paced over to the mantel. His hand behind his neck.

Cal pulled the stationary out from the envelope. Her eyes skimmed the words with sadness. "Oh no. How could they do this?"

"They strung me along, Cal." Billy turned to her. "Strung me along for two and a half years. Kept me away from the story. Made me go through every mental and physical test they could throw at me. Pulled me right into the final interviewing process and then . . ." His hand flung out. "They rejected me."

"No." Cal stood up. "Something is not right. This isn't right."

"It's the way it is."

"It's not over yet. Not yet."

"Cal . . ."

"No Billy. Not yet." She stepped to him. "May I keep this?"

"Sure why not."

"Good. Because Jake and I are going to Caldwell on Monday. Let me see what I can do. And I want you out of this mood." She moved to him.

"I'm sorry. That came this morning and I was a little depressed."

"Don't be." Cal laid the letter on the mantel. She took on a stern yet, soft approach. "Billy Griffith, state for me the reasons you started this whole project."

Less than enthused, he did. "To see what the Iso-Stasis experiment really was. To see why they released my father and what happened to him. Help Mr. Montgomery. And of course, break one hell of a story about an institute that for decades, has been defying all regards for human life for the benefit of an

experiment.”

“Nicely put.”

“Thank you. I’ve been reciting it for years.” Billy semi-smiled.

“Good. Keep reciting it. Even if you don’t go, in three months the next experiment begins and while we’re up there, you Billy, will be telling the world what’s happening to us. Because you’ll know everything about Iso-Stasis twelve to back it up.”

“I entered this as a journalist. I have to keep that perspective. I still have that. You are absolutely right.”

“Of course I am. I’m married to Jake, it’s a habit I picked up. Never admit you’re wrong even when you are.” She stepped to him. “Everything will be fine. Please don’t get depressed. Because just like Jake and I did, you will beat them too. But in your own way.”

“Thank you.” Billy wrapped his arms around Cal.

“Uh!” Rickie exclaimed. “Full frontal touching! I’m telling Sarge!”

Stepping from their hold, Cal and Billy laughed at Rickie.

^^^

Rickie’s rambling at the dinner table about the sexcapades that entailed while Jake was at work, didn’t even phase Jake as much as the similar remainder of food left on Cal and Billy’s plate. So perturbed by what they left, Jake kept thinking ‘waste’. Did he miss something? Was he not supposed to eat the browned edge of the roast beef. Or the tips of the carrots. And as far as salad went, he thought for sure, the tomatoes, onions and peppers were certainly placed in there for consumption. Jake thought perhaps his entire life he was trained to eat wrong. After all his plate *was* the odd plate out with it actually being empty.

“Something wrong?” Cal asked as she reached down for Jake’s plate. “Jake?”

“Oh.” He shook his head. “Was I not supposed to eat the vegetables of the salad?”

Cal snickered. “Sure you were.”

“Then why in the fuck did you and Billy both leave them all in the bowl.”

Billy hid his laughter. “Jake, a little hostile about vegetables.”

“No!” Jake blasted. “Waste. Cal?”

“I don’t like them.” She answered.

Billy shrugged. “Me neither.”

Jake tossed his hands up. “Then why put them in?”

“Jake.” Cal leaned down and kissed him. “They make it look pretty.”

“Oh of course.” He shook his head watching her clear the table. “A pretty salad is more important than a wasted one.”

“Sarge.” Rickie returned from helping carry the plates in. “You’re not gonna get into that people are starving story again are you?” He sat down. “I have it on

tape if you want to save your breath. I recorded you last year.”

Jake’s mouth dropped open. “Why would you record me.”

“Because like none of my friends believed you said that.”

Jake grumbled at Rickie then faced Billy. “Bill, some time tonight I’d like for you and me to just sit down and discuss the letter you got today. Let’s put our heads together because I’m not buying them just stringing you along to keep your silence. I mean, times up right? So why turn you down? They’re too ahead of the game. Something else is up.”

“I don’t know what Jake.” Billy tossed his hands up. “But I’d love to sit down and discuss it.”

“Ah.” Rickie gave a sentimental moan. “This is really cool how there’s like no more tension between you and cyber-boy.”

“Yes Rickie.” Jake glared at him. “And you’ve tried with diligence to bring tension to this table tonight. Why is that?”

“It’s fun.”

“It didn’t work. And why do you call him cyber-boy.”

Rickie grinned. “Because last month while you off swinging off a vine being Tarzan of the Jungle, A hot extramarital cyber-sex affair occurred between him and Cal.”

Cal who was sitting down, looked at Jake’s face.

Irritated, Jake looked at Rickie. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Cyber-boy and Cal-babe hooked up nightly. Passed the time Sarge. Cats away the mouse will play. Cool! Mouse. Computer. Get it?” Rickie laughed at own his joke.

“No.” Jake said. “Cal?”

“He’s lying to get you Jake.”

“I know that. What the hell is cyber-sex?” Jake asked and shifted his eyes to Billy, Rickie and Cal who snickered. “What?”

“Jake.” Cal leaned into him. “It’s when you send a sexual message to someone and they . . .” She dropped her voice to a tiny whisper. “Masturbate while reading it.”

“Oh Cal.” Jake sat back. “Oh, that’s your business. And that does not happen.”

“Sarge, does too.” Rickie spoke up. “I had some chick give me some written oral action over the waves guy. Ten times in one night.”

“Rickie!” Jake scolded.

“Of course, it could have been more.” Rickie instigated. “If I felt like reading that letter again. I kinda got wore out.”

“Rickie!” Jake stood up. “This is not appropriate dinner table conversation. I need a beer.” He gave one more scolding look to Rickie and moved to the kitchen.

Laughing, Billy shook his head to Rickie. “I can not believe you have lived with him this long and you are not dead.”

“Can’t die dude.” Rickie tossed his hands up. “I’m a monster.”



Again Billy started to laugh, but saw the look in Cal's eyes. "Am I missing something?"

"Iso-Stasis Twelve."

Billy quickly looked back at Rickie. "Oh shit."

Rickie looked serious at Billy, growled and then laughed again.

^^^

"Cal!" Jake called with a charge from the family room.

Moans erupted in the living room from Cal, Billy and Rickie.

Cal stood up. "Pause the movie again." Waiting for the screen to freeze frame, Cal walked from the living room to the family room. Jake sat in front of the computer. "What now?"

"I'm stuck again."

"Here." Cal leaned over his shoulder and helped him out. "Jake, you've been on this for four hours. Come watch a movie with us."

"Cal, I am determined to conquer this. After all, you got me that program."

"You asked for it."

"A real survival program sweetie, not a simulation." Jake felt Cal's arm go around him. He smiled. "Of course I beat it."

"So now you're tackling the net."

"Nothing about fishing here. I'm trying to find an interesting military news site. Rickie said I could."

"All right. See this here? Just type in what you want to find and hit the 'search' button. O.K.?"

"Got it."

Cal kissed him again. "I'm going back to my movie."

"I'll be there in a minute."

"That's what you said an hour ago." Cal, shaking her head returned to the living room. "All right, Start it."

Rickie pressed the remote. The movie played.

"Cal!"

Another unison singing of moans, Rickie paused the movie.

"Yeah?" Cal yelled out.

"What is this . . . bookmark thing."

"A shortcut to my favorite places." Cal answered.

"Thanks!" Jake called out.

"God." Cal rolled her eyes. "Go on Rickie."

Just as Rickie began to start the movie, Billy stopped him. "Rickie, wait. Cal? You don't have that site I sent you book marked. Do you?"

Cal's eyes widened. "Oh . . ."

"Cal!" Jake shouted.

". . . shit." Cal cringed and slid down on the couch when she heard the

thumping of Jake's footsteps.

So frazzled and shocked Jake looked when he walked in the living room. "Cal, do you realize on that screen now are people engaged in hardcore, sexually deranged behavior?"

Rickie had the solution to the awkward pornographic discovery moment. He just started the movie again, and turned up the volume loud enough to semi-drown out Jake's moral bitching at Cal.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA  
December 6<sup>th</sup> - 8:45 a.m.

From standing side by side with Dr. Jefferson, Greg moved to behind him, watching the video tape of the retired Honorable Theodore King, or as he had been called for years by family and friends, 'Judge'. A black man, stern and strong, greying temples. He retired early, for no stated reason. Mild mannered, reasonable and calm were the mannerisms he projected on his introduction of himself video tape.

Greg noticed the look on Dr. Jefferson's face as he turned off the video tape, a look of staring, bewildered, maybe lost. Greg cleared his throat. "Words of encouragement would go well right now."

"Where are the offsets?" Dr. Jefferson stood. "I sat and watched all but Cal and Jake's video tape."

"Which they'll make today."

"Where are the offsets?"

"Sir?" Greg tilted his head.

"The weaknesses these people show, yes they are weaknesses, but there are no extremes. There has to be extremes."

"There will be." Greg stated.

"With this bunch?" Dr. Jefferson pointed to the blank screen. "I'm sorry Greg, but your selection isn't very exciting. About the only exciting prospects are what you have planned for Cal and Jake, and is that enough? If they aren't killed, the other seven people are not going to break."

"On their own, probably not. As usual, we'll help them along. But you're looking at them individually."

"Excuse me Greg, but isn't that what you said the plan was. Individualized planning."

"True." Greg nodded. "I stand corrected there. But I was careful about this selection process. Instead of one year, I took two. Chemistry is a valuable key with these people." Greg paced. "For example, let's analogize these seven people as inanimate objects. Three are lit matches, three are gas leaks, and one is a sealed off room. Singularly, if left to their own accord, they could falter or cause maybe a disruption. But put them all together at the same time, and what do you get?"

"An explosion."

Greg smiled. "Exactly."

^^^

Stepping from the cab with Cal, Jake spotted the long black limousine. "Christ, why do I get the feeling I know who this is."

The moment Jake said that, a chauffeur got out of the limo and walked around to the back door, opening it. Aldo stepped out.

Jake held out his hand. "There you have it."

Cal smiled "Aldo." She hurried to him. "This is a surprise."

Aldo gave a warm hug to Cal and extended his hand to Jake.

Coldly, Jake shook it. "Mr. Connilucci."

Aldo looked at his watch. "I know you have a meeting with Haynes. Can I get you two to come inside the car for a minute before hand please?"

Jake looked at the entrance doors to Caldwell. "Actually we . . ."

"Sure." Cal answered jumping in the limousine first.

Jake tossed his hands up and shook his head in disgust. He followed Cal in.

After Aldo had entered, the door shut behind him. "Would either of you like coffee?"

"No." Jake said. "What is this all about."

"Jake." Cal scolded.

"Cal."

"Kids." Aldo snickered. "Actually, I'm coming to the meeting too. But I wanted to speak to you both first. It's important."

Irritated and looking on edge, Jake adjusted himself in the seat. "Go on."

After first looking at Cal, Aldo began to talk. "Dr. Haynes approached me some time ago about the prospect of investing again in the experiment. But he approached me with a different angle. He asked, if you two agreed, would I be willing to invest, not two, but three million, to cover the cost of you two going in as a team. As one. I of course would have you in the game."

Cal seemed excited. "Oh Aldo, that is so great. We'll win for you." She tapped his knee. "Don't you worry, you'll get your money back."

Jake reached for the door handle. "Is that all you needed. Just to make sure you get a return on your investment."

"Jake." Aldo stated his name. "Did anyone ever tell you that you can be a real asshole."

"Yes." Jake answered. "Cal." He reached for the door again. "Ready Cal?"

"Stop." Aldo called out. "You will not leave this car until I said what I need to say before this meeting. Give me that."

"Why should I . . ."

"Jake!" Aldo scolded his name. "I have a bad feeling Jake, a really bad feeling about this experiment. They aren't going to play fair."

"They never do." Jake stated. "That's why it ends up like it does."

"Yes." Aldo nodded. "But, the experiment never bred anyone who could talk. Talk enough to cause an investigation into the experiment and eventually close it down. You two can. I believe and this is just my gut, I believe they are going to go after you full blast and with both barrels."

Cal looked at a very serious Aldo. "Do you think."

"I really do."

It took a second, but the instant Cal looked at Jake, they both grinned widely.

"Yes!" Jake spoke through his grin. "This is great. And we'd better get in there to get this started." He opened his door. "Let's get a small idea where they are headed then you and I have to sit down Cal and really work out a starting game plan."

"Jake." Cal scooted across the seat. "Do you think they're gonna hit us mentally harder or physically harder?"

"Oh Cal, I hope both."

Cal paused in getting out. She looked back to a baffled Aldo. "You coming up?"

Aldo tossed his hands in the air. "Sure, Why not."

^^^

"Before we begin . . ." Greg slid himself into a chair at the board table where Cal, Jake, and Aldo sat. "I was wondering if you wouldn't mind talking about Rickie first." He shifted his eyes to Cal and Aldo. "Do you two mind. It'll only take a minute."

Aldo and Cal shook their heads.

"Good. O.K." Greg flipped open a folder. "Jake had asked me why we don't feel he should be on his own yet, I'd like to . . ."

"Jake." Cal hit his arm.

"What? I was asking." Jake held his hand out to Greg. "Go on."

"Thank you. First, let me ask you this. Jake, how different is Rickie today then lets say when you met him three years ago?"

"Same." Jake answered.

"Exactly." Greg said. "Rickie hasn't matured, grown or changed in any maturing way physically. He's sort of in a stale mate and that concerns us. Not that it will cause him any harm, but we're trying to narrow the tests to determine if possibly, because of the mutation factor in his genes, if Rickie, will still be saying 'cool' and whipping that hair around when he's fifty."

"Impossible." Jake stated. "There's no way. He has to change eventually. I have seen many eighteen year old boys not change until they hit around twenty-four. That's they age when the average male's bone structure conforms to a more masculine shape."

"Exactly, so he can pretty much be, a slow bloomer. We're hoping. But mentally Jake, you have to admit, he has not changed. How many jobs had he gone through?"

Jake took a moment to think. "Same jobs that he went back to, or different ones? He went though six in the past month alone."

"What about relationships?" Greg asked. "Friends, girlfriends."

Cal interjected. "He has his friend Len. And he went out on that date last

month with some girl. He doesn't date much. Or get into relationships. I can't recall him getting into a long term relationship. Not one he told us about."

"Not true." Jake corrected. "Estelle."

Greg quickly checked his notes. "That would be the mature woman he was involved with for six months. Rickie stated he was in love with her Jake, and you made him break up. Or rather made it uncomfortable for him to see her."

Jake glared at Cal when she snickered. "That is entirely untrue. I took a stern father approach, but I didn't step in until she took him for every single cent of his hundred grand. Suckered him into bad real estate investments. She's serving five to ten. He failed to mention that."

Greg nodded with a slight grin. "Rickie failed to tell us that. Of course her taking his money would explain his biweekly calls for us to experiment on him for money. Which brings me to the point of this whole thing." Greg folded his hands. "Rickie has yet to be tested continuously or under certain elements. Now when you had your attorneys renegotiate his contract with us, we got to keep the two week option. Meaning we only have to give Rickie a two week notice before pulling him for an experiment. We're letting you know now, we fully intend on bringing Rickie into Iso-Stasis thirteen."

Jake immediately looked at the panic look on Cal's face. He grabbed her hand. "Remember what he is." Jake looked back at Greg. "You're not injecting him are you."

"No." Greg shook his head. "Rickie will be there not as a participant, but mainly for us. And of course to annoy the hell out of everyone." Greg smiled. "Rickie won't be taunted or teased or sought after. We'll be observing him. I expect some jealousy from the other participants because Rickie will pretty much get his way there. He'll have resources there for him, through the controllers on the island, that he can tap into. And I'm sure, knowing Rickie, he will rub that in to the others there. Any questions on Rickie?" Greg waited for an answer. "I'll leave it up to your discretion on when to tell him Jake."

Jake nodded. "I'll wait until March 2<sup>nd</sup>." He felt Cal squeeze his hand tight. "What? He'll drive me nuts for the next three months if he knows."

Greg stood up. "Now we can move on." He began to pass out contracts. "Standard participant agreement forms." He gave one to Aldo. "Aldo you can review with them." Greg handed Cal and Jake the pens "As you can see, they are the same ones you signed before. The date has been changed . . ."

"Six months." Jake looked up. "The experiment is only six months."

"That's all we'll need." Greg sat on the edge of the table. "But everything else is the same. Three things you may request a six month supply of. Should you fail to emerge from the experiment, you belong to us." That bred a smile from Greg. "Compensation when the institute deems you have completed the experiment. Uh . . ." Greg rattled and thought as Jake and Cal read. "You must remain silent for thirty-three months post the experiments end. You will rely on the resources left with you. You do not hold us responsible for any mental or

physical duress you suffer, during or after . . . you know the routine.”

Aldo laid the contract down. It was one he had seen many times before. The date and length were the only things changed. But something wasn’t right. After a few minutes time he saw Jake getting ready to sign. He grabbed his hand. “Think about this.”

“I did.” Jake responded and looked at Cal. “Ready?”

“I’m with you Lt. Col.. Graison.”

Greg watched with pleasure as both of them signed at the same time that Aldo slumped in his chair. “Good.” He walked over and took the contracts. “I’ll have my secretary copy these. Now . . .” He returned to sitting on the table’s edge. “Basically, what are the rules of the Iso-stasis? Jake?”

Jake looked up. “There are none.”

“Exactly. What we plan for you is never disclosed. All participants go in blind. That would be impossible for you two seeing how you have done this. So fair is fair, don’t you agree? And since you already know some things, might as well tell you the rest.” Greg’s whole demeanor began to change. “Things are different this time, so we’re going to do things a little different. We’re going to let you both in on the rules that pertain to you. And I will gladly rip these contracts up if you don’t agree.” Slowly he slid from the table and began to pace. “You are a team. You start as a team. You finish as a team. Should one of you die or break, the team is done. The other is air lifted out. Not only are you a team, you are a couple. You must finish as a couple. According to paragraph eighteen of the agreement, you receive your compensation when the experiment deems you have completed it. One half the money is given to you at the end, the other, one year later when you two are still married.”

Jake looked curious. “So basically, if you can’t mentally break us or kill us, you still have the stress thing that can play into our relationship.”

“Absolutely.”

Jake fluttered his lips. “Piece of cake.”

“You think?” Greg asked.

“Yes.” Jake said assuredly. “Any way you look at us, as a team, a couple, Cal and I are strong. Cal would you agree.”

“Without a doubt.” Cal agreed.

“So you see Dr. Haynes.” Jake explained. “If it is your intention for Caldwell to pull out all stops on our marriage when you see you’re failing at everything else. You’re thinking wrong. It won’t work. We’re both smarter than that.”

“Good.” Greg held up the contracts. “Then I take it you haven’t a problem with our rules and I don’t rip up the agreements?”

Jake shook his head. “We go.”

“Excellent.” Greg set the contracts down. “One more thing.” He walked slowly around Cal and Jake standing directly behind them. He leaned forward and placed his head between them, whispering with an arrogant smile. “In addition to the wonderful new things we have planned. We have added an incentive

program.” He laid his hands on each of their shoulders. “We placed a bounty on your heads. The person or persons responsible for bringing down the number one team, in any way they can, receives a fifty thousand dollar bonus at the completion of the experiment.”

Aldo slid far into his seat. “Oh shit.”

With a tap to an un-phased Jake and Cal, Greg stood straight. “I wouldn’t trust a soul up there.”

Jake merely rolled his eyes, leaning into Cal with a whisper heard only by her. “Does he think that frightens us? Fuck, makes me want to go more.” He sat up right, straightening his jacket.

Aldo slightly raised his hand. “Telling Jake this, what makes you so sure, that he’s just not going to get to the experiment, kill the other seven people and breeze through the end.”

“For the most part, Jake knows none of these people are a threat to him at first. Right Jake?” Greg looked at him. “They’re human. They’re gonna try to break the team without killing the team. Because these people are just as aware as Jake is, that you never know who you are going to need when. Rely on your resources left with you. And though Jake and Cal don’t mean to be, they are very valuable resources. And people will discover this.” Greg let out a long after speech breath. “So, that’s it. Any questions?” He received nothing but shaking heads. “All right.” Greg grabbed the contracts. “I’ll get these copied and then I need you two to do a video for me, introduce yourselves to the other participants.” He moved to the door.

“Wait.” Cal, who pretty much stayed silent most of the meeting, spoke up. She stood from her seat. “I have a question.”

Greg did that closed mouth smile. “Sure. What is it?”

Cal reached into her purse and laid an envelope on the table. “Why did you turn Billy Griffith down as a participant?”

Greg hesitated, drawing up a thinking look. “Billy Griffith. Billy Griffith. Oh yes, I remember. He didn’t meet the criteria. Funny, I didn’t realize you two knew each other.” He moved to the door.

“Liar.” Cal said with edge.

“Cal.” Jake’s eyes widened.

“He’s lying Jake.” Cal stepped to him. “Why are you lying? You knew damn well Billy and I became friends. You knew everything about it. But what baffles me is how stupid you ended up being.”

“Cal.” Jake warned.

“No.” She held her hand out. “Caldwell strung him along so he wouldn’t pursue his story. Made him think he was going to be a part of the experiment. Bide time until they could get us to sign up for the next experiment, therefore keeping us silent. Therefore Billy doesn’t go. And he doesn’t get his story. He’s out of luck. Isn’t that right Dr. Haynes?”

“Whatever you believe. Now I must copy these because I have another



appointment.”

“I thought you were a smart man.” Cal stepped even closer to him.

Greg hesitated in grabbing the door, he exhaled loudly. “I like to think I am. Yes.”

“Then tell me how a man who supposedly is that smart failed to conquer the task of basic math? You bought our silence today. Today is December sixth. My thirty three months of obligated silence to Iso-Stasis twelve ended . . . December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Guess what I’ve been doing for the past three days?” Cal raised only one eyebrow as she folded her arms.

He didn’t flinch, nor did Greg show signs of even being affected by what Cal said. “Oh well. My error.” He bounced his eyebrows high and walked from the office.

Aldo let out a slight chuckle when Greg had left. He stood up and walked to Cal. “Good job.”

Cal looked confused.

“Cal.” Jake approached her. “I wish you would have at least let me know you were going to threaten him like that.”

“What are you talking about?” Cal asked. “I didn’t threaten him.” She saw the silent stares of Jake and Aldo. “Oh shit.”

“The question is.” Aldo said as he pointed out the open door to Greg. “Did it work?”

Greg, standing across the office with his secretary, looked at the three of them and smiled.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Fayetteville, North Carolina

December 6<sup>th</sup> - 10:00 p.m.

"Enough of the Iso-Stasis." Jake, laying on top of his bed covers with Cal, took the notebook from her hand and placed it on the night stand. "Talk. Are you upset with me?"

"No." Cal looked down at her folded hands.

"I'm sorry." Jake rolled on his side to face her.

"No, don't be. It's your job."

"I swear to God, Cal, if I didn't have to go . . ."

"I know." She took a shivering breath. "Jake, will you please stop with the guilt. If I'm making you feel that way, I'm sorry. I'm not meaning to. I fully understand."

"I realize that. But know . . ." Jake touched her face. "I tried."

"What do you mean?"

"I . . . I tried to get out of it. Assigning someone else. But I couldn't get approval."

Cal's eyes lit up with a certain pleasure. "Really?"

"Yeah. I wouldn't blow this off. You think I want to leave tomorrow? No. Going to Pittsburgh with you tomorrow was something I wanted to do. Not trot off to Zaire. I feel bad because I vowed that every year I would go up there with you. Go to the mass for Jessie and the cemetery. I know this sounds silly . . ." Jake grabbed her hand. "But it's our thing we do. It's like a family thing." Jake released her hand. "Sorry. I suck at this fuckin serious talk shit."

"You did great." Cal kissed him. "I understand what you're saying."

"I feel like I'm screwing my family, you, by going." Jake saw her smile. "That was not intended to be a funny statement."

"No. Sorry. But did you ever think you'd hear yourself say that?" Cal asked him. "Since you joined the service, you have just gone where ever needed at the drop of a hat. No thinking about it. Now you think about each trip. You're getting worse Jake every time you have to go."

"I know." Jake gave an odd look. "Weird huh? Even though I still go, I still think about it. I guess having a life will do that to you. And I never really expected to have a life outside of my job."

"Well, I don't want you to worry or think about it. You have to do this. And I apologize for any guilt I laid on you. Rickie's going with me tomorrow. He'll stand in for you."

"Now there's a another prospect of family I never thought I'd encounter." Jake pointed. "Rickie. Even though the kid annoys the hell out of me, he adds like . . . this unity to our house. He give me a sense of . . . now don't laugh . . . fatherhood . . ."

Cal laughed.

"I knew you'd laugh at me."

"No, it's not you. Well, O.K., it is."

Jake rolled his eyes.

"No, Jake." Cal inched to him. "No one asked you to, but you took on a father role to Rickie. You really did. You snatched up the opportunity like it was your only chance to do it."

"Come on Cal. It is. I wish sometimes though I had gotten a hold of Rickie earlier. Just try to give him some of the things he missed in his life. Things like my father did with me. I try now, but it's really not the same. He's so goddamn hard headed and out there . . ." Jake's hand shot in the air with a smile. "I hope, and don't you ever tell him I said this, I hope it's not in vain. I hope Rickie kinda looks up to me."

"Jake please, Rickie thinks you're the coolest."

"Really?" In a rarity, Jake's face lit up.

"Uh-oh."

"What?"

"There it is again."

"What?"

"Was Colonel Roberts showing off pictures of his new grandson again today?" Cal asked him.

"Yeah, but what does that . . ."

"I knew it." Cal touched her index finger to his nose. "Every single time he does that, or someone else for that matter, you manage to make any conversation or situation into a family topic."

"I do not."

"You do too." Cal insisted. "When we went to McDonald's . . ."

"I hate that fuckin place."

"Yes Jake I am well aware. But you proceeded to engage in a conversation with that sergeant about why he purchased individualized bagged meals for his four kids."

"Cal, please. I was just trying to determine what the economic advantages were."

"You were not. You lie."

Jake gasped. "I can not believe . . ."

"You got one to go and brought it home for Rickie, because you were curious as to reaction and to what was inside." Cal poked him in the chest. "And then you Jake, proceeded to tell Rickie, when you didn't think I heard, how amazing it was how happy those meals made kids. And what did Rickie say? 'Dude, that's why like they call them, Happy Meals'."

"It made Rickie happy." Jake said.

"You get sentimental about family anymore." Cal said snidely.

"I do not."

"You do too. It's almost like you'd did the marriage thing, you got a house, and you want to have a family. But are afraid to admit it. I see you looking into Rickie's room, the nursery, all the time."

"Cal please." Jake scoffed. "I'm trying to figure out a way to convince him to get rid of that big yellow bird painting on his wall. Besides, discussing ways that you and I can start having a family is not a conversation we have."

"That's because you interrupt or change the subject when it comes up."

"I do not." Jake argued. "Anyhow, it's not an option for you."

"Bullshit." Cal came back. "I tried to have the conversation with you. I even entered a disclaimer at the beginning of it stating, 'Jake, time has healed some wounds for me. Would you like to discuss . . .'"

"Cal, I never interrupted that conversation. Not once."

"You just did."

Jake grunted. "I never meant to."

"Good. Here and now it's a hot topic. So, let's end the hypothesis of does he, does she and discuss it."

"All right."

Cal hesitated then spoke quickly. "I'm not beating around the bush on it or taking a change of you changing the subject. Jake, do you want to try to find a way to have a child?"

Jake's mouth opened and the phone rang. "I'll get it."

"No, don't let's . . ." Cal grumbled when Jake rolled her way, leaning his body on her some as he picked up the phone. "Graison." He smiled. "Oh, yeah sure Bill. We aren't busy at all. Hold on." He showed the phone to Cal. "Cyber-boy."

Cal covered the mouth piece. "Jake, we're talking here."

Jake scooted backwards off the bed. "You talk to Billy about what went down today. We'll uh, talk later." Jake pointed to the door. "I'm going down to practice on that computer thing."

Cal let out a huff and rolled her eyes as Jake hurried out. She uncovered the phone. "Hey Billy. . . . no, it's not a bad time. Jake is being Jake."

^^^

Laying on her stomach, talking to Billy, Cal felt the shaking of her foot. She looked over her shoulder to see Rickie.

"Cal-babe. The opportunity arises. The sarge did not lock the door. Plan in motion babe." Rickie tilted his head. "It's time."

Cal grinned. "Billy, I'll call you back. We're busting Jake tonight. Yeah, how about that. Of all things for him to learn, he learns how to delete where he's been . . . I'll let you know. Bye." She hung up the phone and excitedly rolled off the bed. "Are you sure?"

"Positive-a-mentally." Rickie boasted. "Been doing the Rickie-Meister

spying thing on him.”

“Let’s go.” Cal hurried to the door.

“Wait.” Rickie whispered. “Floor board.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Cal moved her leg to the right and edged her way against the wall to the stair railing.. “I see you attached the rope.” Cal looked at the rope that dangled over the railing to below.

“I take no chance tonight of those old steps busting us.”

“Excellent.” Cal climbed over the railing, grabbing on to the rope and lowering herself to the first floor. She dropped gently and without a sound to the ground. She held the end of the rope while Rickie climbed down. When he reached her, she placed her finger to his lips and whispered. “Listen.”

Jake’s voice could be heard coming from the family room. Sounding raspy. “Oh yes.”

Cal hunched her shoulders in a snicker and waved her hand to a laughing Rickie.

“Beautiful.” Jake commented. “Oh that’s nice. That is really nice. Mmm.”

A tear came from Cal’s eye in her laughing as she and Rickie crawled on the floor to the family room doors. Taking the planned route. One of them on each side. “On my call.” She whispered hardly talking.

Rickie nodded.

“Whoa.” Jake commented. “I can handle you. Oh yeah, definitely. You’re not too much for me.”

Rickie had to cover his mouth with both hands to hold in the laughing. His face was beet red.

Cal widened her eyes in a scold, then held up one finger, then two. On the third finger she held up, with a large charge, Rickie and Cal burst in the room. Cal dove for Jake and Rickie blocked the computer.

“What the fuck?” Jake had found himself rolled a good five feet from the computer and Cal on his lap.

“Dude.” Rickie held out his arms. “We hear ya down here. You think we don’t. We know that preacher creature type of talk is an act. We know dude, own up, what you’re really looking at on the computer.” With a loud ‘a-ha!’ Rickie spun to the screen.

“Assholes!” Jake complained.

“Dude,” Rickie pointed to the screen. “These are like . . . guns.”

“Yes.” Jake responded. “What the hell did you think I was looking at?”

“Naked babes, guy.”

Jake groaned with a shake of his head. “I’m not perverted like you two.” With Cal still on his lap he rolled himself back to the computer. “And for your information, these are futuristic arsenal weapon designs.”

Cal spun in a view of the screen. “Really?”

“Yes, Check it out.”

Rickie watched. Cal on Jake’s lap. The lit up look on their faces not caused

by the illuminated screen. “Uh-oh, I think it’s time for the Rickie-meister to book. Get you two looking at danger, weapons and death, and you’ll be scrolling more than that screen.” Rickie was ignored by Jake and Cal who were in awe, making comments as they each pointed at the computer. “I’m out of here. Goodnight!” Rickie yelled.

Cal raised her hand in a wave.

Rickie took one more look at them before he left. “I better put on my headphones.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Fayetteville, North Carolina

December 25<sup>th</sup> - 5:40 a.m.

The echoing 'boom' of Cal and Jake's bedroom door flinging open, caused them to jolt from the deep slumber. But the door didn't disturb them as much as Rickie.

"Dudes! Santa came!"

Jake, laying on his stomach raised his head when he heard Rickie running down the steps. So groggy, barely focusing, he looked at Cal who opened her eyes. "How old is he again?"

^^^

Rickie snickered in his Christmas cheer as he placed the crooked santa hat on Jake's head. "Cool." Rickie gave a thumbs up. "Now we're no longer grinchin' green. O.K." Rickie bobbed his head looking about all the wrapping paper he had flung about from opening his presents. "This is like the coolest Christmas. Am I spoiled or what?" Rickie smiled. "But! I am not one to just receive. I saved a little money from dying last month and I got some cool gifts for my favorite people. Let me find them."

Jake took off the hat while watching Rickie rummage through the mountain of paper. "I hope you're picking up that wrapping."

"Chill sarge, you're like breaking my searching concentration. Wa-la!" Rickie emerged from half under the tree with two presents. A long box and a smaller one. He handed them to Cal and Jake. "Merry Christmas." He leaned to Cal and kissed her on the cheek, then hurried and kissed Jake on the cheek with a laugh.

Jake grumbled and ripped open the paper on the long box. He could have been more convincing with his enthusiasm. "Oh. Look. A tie." Jake lifted the bright yellow Tasmanian Devil tie out. "Look Cal, the creature has drool dripping from his mouth. Thank you Rickie."

"No problem-o Sarge. When I saw it, I said, like, whoa, that is the Sarge. You can never have enough Taz stuff. Cal-babe open yours."

The box was small but not too small. She tore off the badly done wrap job and exposed a grey box. She flipped open the lid and smiled. "Oh, Rickie." She lifted out a watch. Thin, and slender for a woman, but obviously complete with compact features. "This is great."

Jake raised one eyebrow. "Yeah Rickie, that's a nice watch. It's looks expensive."

"Dude, it is. I paid over three hundred for it. It's so like, Cal-babe can have it on the experiment. She can be the kicking fashion survival babe." Rickie winked.

"So how come she gets a three hundred dollar watch and I get a tie?" Jake asked.

"Sarge like everyone knows you get the dad a tie and get the mom something nice. Get with the present giving program, big guy. And like, even though I'm enjoying the Jolly ole St. Nick kick. Do you guys like mind if I take all those games you guys got and try them out before the egg feast?"

It took Jake a second to decipher, but he did. "Go on."

"Thanks Sarge." Rickie dropped to the floor and shuffled through the mess.

Jake reached over the arm of the couch for his coffee taking another look at Rickie. "Cal, do you think you bought him enough?" Jake shuffled in uncomfortableness.

"Quit griping Jake. Who else do we have to spoil." Cal watched him shift again. "And what is wrong with you?" She asked with a snicker.

"You're making me wear jeans." He placed his hand between the waist and his stomach.

"Yeah, Jake. And you'll wear them all day too."

"Cal."

"Jake." Cal shook her head. "I had to call the Levi factory to get a big enough pair of jeans that would be baggy on your large ass, so wear them without complaints. And . . . you ready to make the egg feast?" Cal started to get up.

"Just a second." Jake pulled her back down. "I still have one more thing I want to give you." Jake told her.

Cal smiled. "Jake, you're like the gift giving guy at Christmas, I love it. It's the only time of year you aren't cheap." She looked to Rickie who still searched on the floor. "Right Rickie."

"Right."

Cal waved her hand at Rickie. "He's not listening. What is it."

Jake reached to the end table and grabbed the gift. It was about eight inches long and flat. Wrapped, he laid it in Cal's hand. "It may not really be a present to you. I'm kind of hoping it will end up being mine."

So odd Cal looked at him. She felt the firmness of the gift. "Feels like airline tickets." She opened the paper to expose a maroon folder. The gold lettering made her immediately look up to Jake. "Washington Reproductive Institute? Jake?"

Jake turned solemn. "The best in the country. Cal, I spoke to them a few times. The way this thing would work for people in our situation is . . . they find a donor who closely matches my genetic make up and its done through artificial insemination." He swallowed when he saw Cal's speechless look. "I was hoping that during the months we're away, you could give this some thought. If you decide no. That's O.K., If you decide 'yes', then maybe we can look into starting when we get back."

"Jake." Cal said his name softly.

"I'm sorry. I just have been . . ."

"Oh, Jake. I'd love to start a family with you."



Jake genuinely grinned. "Really?" He received a nod and Jake embraced Cal. "Thank you."

Rickie, finally finding his game, let out an 'ah' when he saw them. "So like you guys are gonna give me a brother or sister. Cool." He gave a thumbs up. "But why you guys going to some stranger to donate. You like have the living sperm factory right under your roof."

"Rickie." Jake pulled for the embrace. "Please."

"No dude check it out. I'll donate, then you know where you're getting it from."

Jake widened his eyes, "I also will know *what* I'm getting. Rickie, we kind of know what you are."

"All the more reason Sarge." Rickie explained as he stood up. "With my pow-wow make up. Guy, even if it's slight, just think, there'll be a chance Cal-babe may never lose another child. Check me out, I'm gonna hook up the new game." Rickie hurried over to the large screen television.

Jake and Cal just looked at each other.

^^^

Billy was so shocked when Jake answered the door, he literally dropped his suitcase and let out a gasping laugh. "Jake?"

Jake was smiling, the Santa hat tilted on his head, a black tee shirt and jeans. And of course from his smiling lips, dangled an unlit cigar. "Hey, Bill. Merry Christmas." Jake shook Billy's hand causing Billy to fumble with the gifts he held. Jake pulled him in and grabbed the suitcase then shut the door.

"Wow. You're in the holiday spirit."

"And you're late. But . . . I'm not saying anything. Check this out. Cal and I are having a baby."

Billy went speechless. "Cal's . . . Cal's pregnant. I didn't think . . ."

"No, not yet. In about ten months or so." Jake reached into his tee shirt pocket and handed Billy a cigar. "Here. Come on in."

Billy followed Jake into the loud living room where Chuck and Rickie intrigued themselves with a game on the floor.

"Billy, you know Chuck. Chuck!" Jake called an occupied and cheering Chuck. "Never mind him. Hey, at least now you're here, we have a forth for wrestling. This television produced game stuff is really great."

"Can I see Cal first?" Billy asked.

"Sure. She's in the kitchen."

Billy trailed behind a strangely upbeat Jake into the kitchen.

"Cal." Jake drew her attention away from the turkey. "Cyber boy is here."

Cal turned around with a smile, set down the knife and hurried over to Billy. He was able to set down the two gift boxes before his embrace. "I was worried. I

heard about the storm over Cleveland.” She told him.

“Yeah.” Billy kissed her on the cheek. “We were grounded for three hours.” Billy noticed Jake leaving. “Jake, can you wait . . . just one second.”

“Sure.” Jake came back in. “I need a beer anyhow. Bill?”

“No. I had four Jack Daniels on the plane. I thought we were crashing.” Billy waited for Jake to get his beer. “I have gifts. But I have one I want to give both of you at the same time.”

Jake, drinking his beer stepped closer to Cal.

Billy looked up with a snicker to Jake in his portrayal of a large Santa. “All right.” He took a breath. “I hope you guys like this. Cal, I think you will. I got a present before I left for the airport and I wanted to share it with you.”

Cal smiled and folded her arms. “What is it?”

“I got a call.” Billy’s eyes went from Cal to Jake. “It’s not exactly as I expected it to be. In a way, it’s kind of better. Still the end results are the same right?”

“Bill.” Jake set down his beer on the counter. “You’re fuckin killing me. What?”

Billy smiled. “Guess what?” He hesitated in a dramatic fashion. “I’m going with you guys to Iso-Stasis Thirteen.”

Atlanta, GA  
December 25<sup>th</sup> - 8:00 p.m.

Carrying his eggnog drink, Greg followed Dr. Jefferson into the study. Dr. Jefferson's house was big, and quiet, the aftermath of his family's departure was said and done with.

"Have a seat Greg." Dr. Jefferson pointed as he walked behind his desk.

"Thank you." Greg sipped his eggnog. "Excellent." He held it up.

"It's from a carton." Dr. Jefferson folded his hands. "Now tell me. What were the conditions?"

Greg took a deep breath. "I told him. Like the other people there, he would be housed and fed for the six months. We'll supply him with his three things. He must abide by resources brought and left with him. He has to abide by the experiment participant rules. He can't contact the outside world until he leaves. Only he receives no compensation like the others. He does get to leave with his story. And pictures of course. I'm allowing him to bring his journalist supplies. He signed no statement of confidentiality."

"I see." Dr. Jefferson nodded. "So you enticed the offer to cover up the fact that you were roped into bringing him along?"

"Roped sir?" Greg shook his head. "I wasn't roped. I had this planned. I needed a tenth participant in order to eligible for the Lithgow fund."

Dr. Jefferson looked curiously at Greg. "Then why didn't you make him into a participant?"

"Because I wanted him unwitting. And I wanted him so eager to go, he'd go under any circumstances. He's not costing us a cent other than food."

"It doesn't worry you about this freedom of speech you gave him."

"No sir. Not at all. All information or notes he takes, along with photos or video are ours if he fails to emerge."

"You seem . . . you seem awfully sure of yourself and this move. I'm not, it's worrisome."

Greg swayed his head to Dr. Jefferson in a 'don't be' manner. He took a sip of his eggnog. "I am very sure. William Griffith Jr. will *not* come back to civilization. Not with what I have planned."

"Like father, like son?" Dr. Jefferson asked. "You think it will be mental failure?"

"Possibly, but not probably." Greg said with confidence. "I don't see young Mr. Griffith as a bumbling, babbling, psychotic idiot. I see Mr. Griffith dead. Killed in the midst of the experiment. Killed, I'm forecasting by . . . Lt. Col. Graison."

"Cal and Billy are great friends. Jake kills Billy. Jake kills the team."

"Exactly."

Dr. Jefferson leaned back in his chair running his hand under his chin. "You must have something planned."

“Oh absolutely. I wouldn’t make that prediction if I didn’t. And I have planned for a very, very long time.”

A smile of pleasure finally graced Dr. Jefferson’s face for the first time ever over a plan Greg had for Iso-Stasis thirteen. “This could be very interesting and rewarding entertainment for the investors. This along with the bounty adds an air of mystery to the experiment. For the first time it will spark some interest from the get-go.”

“And wait until you see what I have planned for the ‘get-go’.”

In a demented sort-of-way, Dr Jefferson and Greg had a happy-thought, Iso-Stasis Experiment moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Fayetteville, North Carolina  
December 26<sup>th</sup> - 3:30 a.m.

Like seventeen year old boys at a high school football game, Jake and Chuck erupted in loud screams as they jumped up from their seats on the living room floor. Cal cringed as she carried four beer bottles and a bowl of popcorn through them. Her one eye fluttered in annoyance and she kept moving.

“Cal.” Jake called out to her, swaying a little in his stand. “We won.”

Cal winked. “Good for you.” She walked further away mumbling. “God, I could drown in a pool of immature testosterone in there.”

“Rickie!” Billy scolded.

“Dude, I didn’t mean it.” Rickie rubbed his eyes. “I can’t see anymore. And like, you’re as hammered at Sarge and Chuck. You suck man at this wrestling shit.

Was it silence that Cal finally heard as she did the dishes? After six hours of what Rickie started as, the tag-team wrestling frenzy tournament, and turned into a drinking blast of grown men playing video games with a vengeance, she did believe it had finally come to a quiet ending.

“Chuck’s crashed on the couch.” Jake stated, still wearing the santa hat as he came into the kitchen with Billy. “Rickie’s on the floor.” He picked up a bowl off the counter and carried it to Cal at the sink. “Need help.”

Cal slightly chuckled as Jake’s aim for the sink basin was off. “No I think I can manage.”

“We’ll get you tomorrow Jake.” Billy leaned into the counter as he spoke. His hair messed, eyes glossy.

“Ha!” Jake said loudly causing Cal to drop a dish. “Cal, please. Noise. Any way.” He faced Billy again. “Ha!”

“Jake!” Cal yelled. “God look at you two. You’re pathetic. I have never seen you this drunk Jake. And if you plan on having another wrestling tournament, you’d better get more booze. You went thorough almost two cases of beer and . . . and my bottle of Jack.”

“Shit.” Jake ran his hand over his head knocking the hat off. “No wonder I’m so tired.” Jake rubbed his eyes. “Cal, you mind if I go to bed?”

Cal smiled. “Not at all.”

“O.K.” Jake staggered to her and kissed her. “Love you.”

“I’ll be up soon.” She told him as she did her dishes.

“O.K., night Bill.” Jake moved to the door.

“Don’t kiss me Jake.”

“Ha!”

*Crash!* Another dish dropped from Cal’s hand. “Jake. Go to bed before you

scream one more time and I kill you.”

“I’m gone.” Jake waved and walked from the kitchen.

Billy lifted himself from his lean on the counter as he watched Cal shut off the water, grab a towel and proceed to pick up the broken pieces of plate. “Here.” Billy walked to her. “Let me help you.”

Cal laughed as she saw him grab pieces from the counter. “Oh you’re a good one to be touching sharp objects now.”

“Who me?” Billy snickered. “I’m fine.”

“Right.” Cal shook her head. “But . . . if you want to live dangerously, go on. Be my guest.” She held out her hand. “But I know a piece went into the dishwasher.”

“Don’t cut yourself.” Billy told her while gathering the small pieces on the counter and laying them on the towel.

“Me? You. I’m not the one . . . ow!”

“Did you cut yourself?”

“Considering I screamed I’d say . . .” Cal pulled her hand from the water. “Shit.” Upon it’s removal from the sink, her palm immediately seeped with blood.

“Oh shit is right.” Billy turned on the water and grabbed her hand placing it under the stream. He ripped a paper towel from the roll. “I don’t think it needs stitched.”

“If it does, I’ll get Jake to do it.”

“Not tonight I hope.” Billy commented.

“No, I want my fingers to not be joined.”

Laughing, Billy shut off the water, placed the towel in her hand and rolled her fingers over it. “There. Hold it up. Wait . . .” He led her to the island counter totally controlling her moves.

“Billy what are you doing?”

“Lean in.” He laid his hand on her back and took hold of Cal’s elbow resting it on the counter. “There. Now your hand is elevated.”

“Boy I’ll tell you what. You drunks tonight are something else.”

“I’m not drunk.” Billy leaned with his back on the counter. He stood next to Cal so he could face her.

“Really?”

“O.K. maybe just a little.” Billy winked. “But, I had a really good time tonight.”

“Good. I’m glad, and I’m glad you decided to join us for Christmas.”

“I am too. Jake was hysterical being in such a good mood. Of course he put the damper on it when he told me the experiment would target to kill me first to shut me up.”

“He’s right.” Cal’s said. “They’re gonna try something with you.”

“Yeah, but you know what? I’m ready. Because you and Jake have been very helpful. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Cal smiled. “And just so you know. I am very glad you

are going.”

“So am I.”

“I guess your Christmas is complete, huh? Getting something you really wanted and waited years for.”

Billy closed his eyes slightly and tilted his head. “I can think of something I want more, getting it would have made my Christmas complete.”

“Like what?” Cal seemed shocked.

“Like . . .” Billy had an open mouth grin. He turned his body a little more to face her. “Like . . .” He chuckled, almost with embarrassment. “O.K., you can’t make anything of it.” He closed one eye while still holding the same smiling expression. “I mean no harm. O.K.? It’s just something I’ve wanted.”

“What? Is it something deadly?”

Billy snickered. “It could kill me, yeah.”

“What is it?” Cal laughed with curiosity.

“Don’t hit me.”

Again Cal laughed at him. “Billy why would I hit you?”

Without warning, Billy slipped his hand behind Cal’s neck pulling her gently and just a little to him as he lowered his head to her. He pressed his lips against Cal’s softly. Parting her lips with his, and with a slow sweeping motion of his mouth, he kissed her, then pulled back. He bit his bottom lip. “*Now* my Christmas is complete..” He kissed a stunned Cal quickly and stepped back. “Just . . . just know that was something I had been wanting to do for really long time. Goodnight Cal.” With a subtle closed mouth smile, Billy took another step back, turned, and lifted his hand in a goodbye wave as he left the kitchen.

Slowly staring at the empty doorway, Cal brought her lips into her mouth, tasting a hint of Billy’s kiss that remained. After running her hand down to her stomach, she let out a heavy breath, blinked her eyes several times, then swayed her head in a shocking surprise. “I am definitely watching how much they drink tomorrow.” After shaking her head, Cal exhaled, shrugged herself back into clean-up composure and returned to finishing the dishes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

March 2<sup>nd</sup> - 10:55 a.m. PST

About two stories high was all the building looked. Small from the front, but a building, gray in color, that extended all the way back. Trees surrounded the structure which was located a little outside of the city on it's own property. A parking lot held only eight cars. One of which was Greg's.

Greg stepped from the double glass doors of the building, looking up to the sun and squinting. Feeling a little warmth.

"Bitter." Dr. Jefferson walked out. "Ah, better."

"Hopefully the technicians will have that air conditioning fixed before the meeting this evening." Greg motioned his hand in the way of the parking lot. "Shall we head to the restaurant to check on preparations."

"Yes." Dr. Jefferson stepped down. "That . . . that was impressive." He pointed back to the building as they closed in on the car.

"Thank you."

"I'm not understanding the approval of the costs. When you said, second site, I thought you meant an office."

Greg smiled as he opened the door for Dr. Jefferson, then walked around and got into the car himself. "Actually the cost was hardly anything. The site was pretty much equipped with mostly what we needed. We had to make some adjustments and additions. And the cost was offset by the new funding provided by the scientific study houses and businesses that are looking at us for results."

"Amazing."

"I wanted it to be a surprise for you." Greg pulled from the parking lot and passed the guard booth. "Don't lose that identification tag, they won't let you back on without going through all the clearance again."

Dr. Jefferson stopped in his reach for the tag. "I'll leave it on."

"So how were our monitors when you left?"

"Strangely excited. Lyle, Barb and Tina are working on the final phases of training the new people. But they're all settled into their quarters." Dr. Jefferson peered pout the window as they drove down a wood lined back road.

"Good. Glad to hear that. Now all you and I have to do now is check how the plans for the investors' dinner is going and wait . . ." Greg took a nervous breath. "For the holding event."

"The beginning of the moment you have waited for."

Turning off the two mile back road onto the main one, Greg gave a look of confidence laced with a hint of nervousness to Dr. Jefferson.



Beverly Wilshire Hotel - Los Angeles, CA  
March 2<sup>nd</sup> - 2:45 p.m. PST

The two small green duffel bags that Jake set to the floor in the hotel room were a hundred percent contrast to the suite that he and Cal stepped into.

"Oh wow." Cal said in awe as she stepped into what looked like a living room.

The bell man handed Jake the card keys. "The bar is fully stocked," He indicted to it. "Off to right are the two bedroom suites. Should you require anything, please do not hesitate to call."

Jake nodded in appreciation, and he tipped the bellman even though Jake carried his own bags.

"Oh Jake." Cal spun around to Jake who stood before the just closed door. "This is unbelievable."

"It is, isn't it?" Jake carried the two smaller duffels into the living area and set them down. "Jacuzzi and everything."

"Boy, Caldwell pulled out no stops here."

"Caldwell my ass. I got us here. They had us at the Marriot. Not that there's anything wrong with the Marriot, but . . ." He kissed Cal. "But it's our last night in civilization. Who knows where they're sending us tomorrow. I wanted this last night to be in style." Jake unbuttoned the jacket to his uniform. "When Rickie gets back from his sight seeing, remind me to give him guidelines so they don't kick us out of here tonight."

Just as Cal started to chuckle, there was a knock at the door. She looked to Jake. "Billy?"

"Should be." Jake walked to the door, opening it. "It is."

Billy stepped slowly inside with such an impressed look on his face. "Oh wow. Look at this place. Look what you guys got."

Jake closed the door. "Nice huh?"

"I'll say. And I only got a room at the Marriot. They must like you guys."

Cal moved to Billy. "Actually, Jake got *all* of us this suite to spend the last night in style."

"Jake." Billy smiled "That's great of you."

"Wait a second. I got the room for all . . ." Jake held his hand up and peered to Cal. "Never mind Yeah, it's for all of us. We'll send for your bag Bill. Besides, we have a lot of work to do tonight."

"Work." Billy questioned, going from looking at Cal to Jake. "It's our last night. We're gonna work."

"Absolutely. And we'll start, after I change." Jake moved to where he set the bags, picked them up and carried them with him to where the bedrooms were.

"Cal?" Billy asked. "Work?"

"Oh wait Billy." Cal explained. "He plans every single second of the day. Wait until we get to the experiment. This is just a start."

^^^

"Dudes. I'm out of here." Rickie walked into the living area that evening. He was dressed up and even smelled overbearing. "Whoa, like look at the mess." He spoke to Cal, Jake and Billy who all sat on the floor around a paper filled coffee table. Room service plates, beer and liquor bottles graced the floor them.

Holding a pen in one hand and a bound manuscript in the other, Jake oddly looked at Rickie. "Where are you going?"

"Check this out. I have a date." Rickie said so proudly. "So don't wait up." He moved to them, bent down and kissed Cal on the cheek. "Have to try to get lucky guy, six months is a long time. And the toot said that's the only thing they couldn't send to the island for me." He walked to the door. "Sarge, like I only have sixty bucks. You think that's enough for dinner. But not here."

"Yes." Jake answered as he read.

Billy was laughing at Rickie. "Where did you meet this girl."

"Woman dude." Rickie corrected. "Down in the lounge. She like came on to me. She has an animalistic name. Bambi. So like I'm out of here O.K.?" Rickie opened the door and left.

"He'll be back in ten minutes." Jake wrote down in his book.

"Why would you say that?" Cal asked.

"Cal, he only has sixty bucks. As soon as he finds out *Bambi* charges about three hundred an hour. He'll be back."

Cal's mouth dropped open. "Oh my God, Jake. Stop him. That isn't right."

"He'll be back." Jake said calmly. "Now back to these."

"Jake can I say something?" Billy interjected. "This . . . this is really anal. Making a book out of participant information. You got the tape."

"I would think since you're the least informed and also open target practice there, you'd want to learn." Jake said. "Last experiment they gave us books. It helped for the first few weeks. Cal and I closely examined them and took notes. Tonight we watch and learn who we're going to be spending all our time with. But this time we watch with a little bit of knowledge."

"You got a point. I stand corrected." Billy took a drink of his beer. "And you guys need to do that since you both got a price on your heads."

"Speaking of which." Jake pointed his pen at Billy as he spoke. "Did Cal tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Whoops." Cal hunched. "Sorry I was busy."

"Cal, please. It was important." Ignoring Cal's rolling eyes, Jake proceeded to explain. "Tomorrow morning I have to head to Andrews Air Force Base to meet a General from the pentagon to finalize their releasing me to the experiment. You, Cal and Rickie are going together. I'll meet you at the airport. Bill, whatever you do, don't let her talk to anyone. Let no one talk to her. We have to go

into this fully assuming these people want their bonus.”

“Got it. I’ll keep her clear till you get there.” Billy finished off his beer and set the empty bottle on the table.

Jake reached down and picked the bottle up. “And watch how much you drink tonight.”

Billy nodded. “I understand. You don’t want me hung over when I’m watching her tomorrow.”

“No.” Jake shook his head. “I don’t want to get up in the morning and find out in a drunken state, you kissed my wife again.”

“I apologize again for that Jake.” Billy held up his hand, swaying his head. “I won’t kiss your wife.”

“Thank you.” Jake laid his book on the table.

“When I’m drunk. I’ll wait until I’m sober.” Billy watched Jake glare up at him. “I’m kidding.”

With a grumbling, ‘hmm’, Jake pierced his eyes at Cal who laughed. “All right, let’s get back to as Billy calls, the anal participant book. Billy hit that tape again.”

Trying not to let his complaining moan seep out, Billy pressed play and they began to watch the participant tape for the nineteenth out of what would end up being over a hundred times.

PARTICIPANTS - Details received from video tape

Lawrence Kale, 43 year old male. Electronics vice-president. Currently laid off. Three years served in the Navy, discharged. States likes to be hands on, in charge type of guy. Is thin, tries to appear stronger. Height not known.

Comments:

Jake: Arrogant, believes could be a problem. Eyes shift, top lip distorts when talks too much, signs of psychiatric problems.

Cal: Agrees.

Billy: Big mouth. Seems swell.

Sgt. Melanie McMann, 29 year old female, looks physically big and strong. Quiet, yet, on edge and hostile. 9 years in US Marine Corps, Current ranking E-6. Told of no enjoyment pastimes.

Comments:

Jake: Sees woman as man hater, possibly hostile towards men due to early problems in life. Jake thinks she may also be a lesbian.

Cal: Jake is sick.

Billy: Hopes Jake is right, for visual entertaining purposes only.

Paul Hatfield, 23 year old Indian male. Car mechanic, muffler specialist. Pleasant and average guy, talks rapidly. Appears average size and demeanor, Stated too much about self.

Comments:

Jake: Normal individual, put in experiment as balance

Cal: Agrees

Billy: Didn't pay attention to guy.

Lou Collins, 35 year old male,. Truck driver. Heavy. Big. Seems likable and down to earth. Doesn't mention much about self that has anything to do which anything. Entertaining. Honest.

Comments:

Jake: Balance of experiment. Could be physical asset.

Cal: Agrees

Billy: Liked. Seemed nice.

Reed McCormick, 34 year old male. Airline pilot on leave. (Reason not stated). Physically fit. Quiet. Gave only facts. Seemed uninterested, almost nervous.

Comments:

Jake: Can't trust him. Egotistical. Prime candidate for being The Catch.

Cal: Thinks he's hot.

Billy: Agrees with Cal

Theodore 'Judge' King. 58, year old black male. Former County criminal judge. Took early retirement. Practiced private law. Was a cop while going to school. 2 sons, a wife who is deceased.

Comments:

Jake: There is a reason for placing a man who is not entirely physically fit and aged in the experiment. Has to have some mental disturbances.

Cal: Believes he is The Catch,

Billy: Seemed mean.

Jason Perry. 27 year old male. Investment broker. Openly admits he had served minimal time for bogus investment. Boasts intelligence and ability. Small man with big attitude. Told some about personal back ground.

Comments:

Jake: Another mental candidate, to even out the unbalanced individuals. Jake believes this one possibly has violent history when provoked.

Cal: Harmless.

Billy: Believes he is The Catch, because he didn't nominate anyone else.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
March 2<sup>nd</sup> - 8:30 p.m. PST

Through the long, brightly lit corridor, Gregory Haynes led Aldo and the other seven investors to a set of metal double doors. Dr. Jefferson trailed behind. All of the invertors--stomachs full from a great seafood dinner--carried information handed to them.

Greg stopped at the doors. "No more monitoring room, meeting room, offices. Convenience is the word this time. Gentlemen." He opened the doors,. "Welcome to Iso-Stasis thirteen."

"Holy shit." Aldo commented for everyone, stepping into what was an upper landing first. On that landing was a long meeting table. The railing of the landing over looked what seemed like a control center. On the wall, twenty monitors, no longer television size, but bigger filled, the enormous long wall from top to bottom. Aldo moved to the railing to peer over and get a better look. Below was a small table with two computers and two chairs. It sat closer to the monitor wall. Ten feet behind that table were eight, high back, thick leather chairs. "Haynes, so your days of NASA went into this room huh?"

"No." Greg answered with a chuckle. "This designed is based more on Hollywood's version of NASA. This way." He moved to the steps, leading the investors to below. "Please, have a set." He stood before the row of eight chairs. He waited until the investors, still looking in amazement sat down. "Thank you. Usually we would have any meetings up above, but since we don't have the monitors on duty yet, I thought sitting down here would work out." Greg paced some as he talked. "These are your observer chairs. You are welcome here at any time to come, sit, and watch. All of you, by lot, have been given your participants early. Kind of eliminates the 'I hate that he knows what I have' syndrome. Each of you were also given a detailed information package about your participant. There is data in there that the other investors haven't a clue about. Keeps it interesting." Greg said almost with a wink. "The thicker book of information are some of the experiments we wish to run and will run on the island. Companies and research groups ranging from a Sun screen manufacturer to French Military intelligence has requested results from us. Their funding has enabled this room and facility. Their funding has enabled our participants to underestimate where they are arriving. Set up a bit more cozy for them, we think that alone will throw them off and make them unprepared. Because familiarity breeds content, we still will rely on breaking our participants through mental endurance, physical endurance, and ultimately . . ." Greg hesitated, almost annoyed to say it. "Because you gentlemen enjoy it, The Catch. One of you have The Catch. A few things are different. The experiment has a study up there. Rickie. He is not a participant nor will he be. He is for us only. Don't concern yourself too much with him. However, I look for him

to annoy the hell out of your players. We also have . . . A journalist is on the island.” Greg smiled at the shocked breaths and moans he received. “Aldo, since you’re close to this. Tell why this journalist makes this experiment interesting.”

Aldo, sitting on the end, looked down the line of investors. “His name is Billy Griffith. Or rather, William Griffith junior. His father was The Catch in the last experiment. I’m not sure how much Cal has told him.”

Greg held up his finger. “Cal. While we’re there, let’s discuss her and her husband, Lt. Col. Graison. They are a team up there. They must finish as a team, both alive, both mentally in balance, and still a couple. All the other seven participants were told these conditions about Cal and Jake. All of the other seven participants were also told, if they are responsible for breaking up the team, mentally, physically or as a couple, they receive a fifty thousand dollar bonus when they make it back.”

George Nelson, an investor raised his hands. “So these seven people are going to try to kill them.”

Greg whined a little. “Not necessarily. These seven people were told about the assets that Cal and Jake can be when things get tough. They may be contemplating taking another route to breaking them up.” Greg pointed to Ron Douglass, another investor. “Yes Mr. Douglass.”

“I invested in the last experiment. Cal and Jake are one tough couple. Both loners prior to this. Both cold. They opened up to each other. I don’t see them ever breaking up as a couple. Marriage counseling is what I do for a living. I own a clinic. People that take all their lives waiting for that one. Don’t give up that one so easily.”

“True.” Greg agreed. “And as an Expert sir. Tell me what the number one reason is that marriages break up.”

“Infidelity.” Douglass stated.

Aldo laughed. “What? You think Jake is gonna cheat on Cal up there. With who, that military babe. Or even Cal. I know Cal. She’s not like that. There’s not a person up there that could pull her away from Jake.”

Greg just looked confident as he responded to Aldo. “Cal’s history of men indicates she leaned more toward the easy going, fun loving, lighthearted guys. Jake is not that. Her very good friend, Billy Griffith . . . is.”

Again, Aldo laughed. “Then I have no worries. Billy is no threat.”

With his lips closed tightly and sporting a smile, Greg picked up a remote. “I thought I’d hear that from you.” He pressed a button and all twenty monitors came on showing the same woman. “This is Elizabeth, She works closely at Central News Network with Billy. We selected a segment of what she said, you can view the rest at your convenience. Let’s just listen to what she has to say.”

The still frame started to move and Elizabeth, looking camera perfect, peered more at the interviewer. “Six years I’ve known him. And once he puts his mind to something, whether he realizes it or not, he doesn’t stop until he gets it.”

“Like going on the experiment?” The interviewer asked.

“Exactly.”

“What do you know about him and Caleen Graison.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Now that’s a friendship I did not expect to happen. They certainly became close. Billy . . . Billy talks about her all the time. Which worries me now. Especially since he is going to be at that experiment with her for six months.”

“Why does that worry you?”

“Like I said Billy, whether he knows it or not, goes after what he wants. Continuously exposed to Cal.” She lifted her shoulders in a worrisome manner. “I like Billy. He’s a great guy, but . . . He’ll either get hurt or in trouble up there. You see, Billy . . . Billy is in love with her.”

“Do you think something could transpire between the two on that island?” He asked.

“Hard to tell, it’s possible,. Especially since they kissed in December . . .”

The tape went off and Greg who was watching the screens, turned and smiled with arrogance to Aldo. “Any more comments, Mr. Connilucci.”

“I’m killing her.”

“I’ll take it as a no.” Greg said. “All right. Now before we continue with experiment game procedures, and learning about the island, we have a tour of our new facility planned. We’re hoping and confident that this will be one of the most exciting experiments yet.”

Aldo semi-shook his head and leaned to Douglass whispering. “He could look a bit more convincing, don’t you think.” He shifted up in his chair when he saw another investor raise their hand.

Greg pointed to him. “Yes Mr. Daniela.”

“One thing. I . . .” He flipped through one of the books. “I was breezing through some of what you have planned. Really, it doesn’t strike me as all that interesting. It seems . . . dull.”

Greg ignored the mumble of chuckles that was directed at him. “Let me say this. Usually this meeting, or otherwise known as Holding Event, is held when. Dr. Jefferson?”

“Two to three weeks post the experiments start.” Dr. Jefferson answered.

“That’s right. Ivan, you’re a previous investor. Tell us why that is,” Greg requested of Ivan.

Ivan looked at the other investors while he spoke. “Usually, and you new guys don’t know this. The experiment is pretty boring the first month or so. They ease the participants into a rut then hit them.” Ivan smiled.

“Not this time.” Greg said, his statement brought immediate and dead silence. He spoke calmly looking at each face as he talked. “This time, unknowingly, the experiment has already begun. And dull, you say Mr. Daniela? I’m willing to bet that by the time this experiment is almost done, you *will* be conducting all of your business from this very room. You’ll be staying, not at a hotel, but in one of our sleeping quarters. You won’t want to leave. I can



guarantee that.”

Aldo let out a breath. “Our business? Live here? Why are you so sure of yourself.”

Greg, in a charming way, faced Aldo. “I got the job of director because I know what I’m doing. My ideals are there. It wasn’t because of my good looks.” He smiled when the others did. “No, Mr. Connilucci, I promise you, this experiment will make the previous ones look like child’s play. You’ll want to come back for more. Look around you. All of you look around.” Greg’s arm went out in a waving, pointing way. “A new technological approach. A new director. A new experiment. Welcome to the new age of the Iso-Stasis.”

## THE EXPERIMENT

--The mental endurance challenges thrown your way will target, your weakness, fears and addictions. You must treat these challenges as if you were a third party watching. As if you are sitting in a movie theater watching a scary film, just tell yourself it is not real, and will be over soon.--

Excerpts from 'Surviving the Iso-Stasis'

By Jake and Cal Graison

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kapaa, Kauai - Hawaiian Islands

March 3<sup>rd</sup> - 9:20 a.m.

Thinking how cool it was because she always wanted to go to Hawaii, Cal smiled a lot as she spoke to Greg on a dock area. "So, just assure me once more that we aren't leaving Jake behind."

"I assure you." Greg told her. "We fully understood they held him longer. As a matter of fact, his plane landed in Hanamaula already. He should be here shortly and we'll begin." Greg laid a hand on her shoulder and moved on to where participants, Lawrence and Jason stood.

Cal, hearing the clicking of Billy's camera, turned to him. "Even though he's a liar, I like him."

"That's an oxymoron statement if I ever heard one." Billy held up his camera took a picture of Cal, then put the camera down. "The start of it all."

"That's not your only camera is it?" Cal asked him. "I know what happens on these experiments."

"No. I brought others. Just when they took our belongings I wanted to be able to take pictures."

"Take a picture of that ocean. It's beautiful." Cal took in a deep breath. "That is so cool we're going on an island. I'm gonna get a great tan."

Billy snickered in oddity. "What a weird thing for you to say. You're usually not that vain."

"Was that vain? Gees it was, wasn't it And . . . what in the world?"

Billy turned to see what Cal was looking and laughing at. Walking down the peer was Rickie and Lou. Abbott and Costello they looked, but dressed exactly alike. Each spotting a bright red shirt with white tropical flowers on it.

"Cal-babe." Rickie trotted up. "Like my duds?" He pulled on the shirt. "Went on a little ha-why-eye shopping spree while waiting for the big guy. And this is my new bud Lou."

"Nice to meet ya." Lou held his hand out to Cal. "So you're Rickie's mom?"

"Sort of. You can say . . ."

Billy stepped in between her and Lou, he faced Rickie. "Rickie, what did Jake tell you?" Billy raised his eyebrow.

"Dude, like that was really rude, they were meet . . . oh!" Rickie slapped himself on the forehead. "Dude Lou. You know what, rewind guy. Cal-babe is not supposed to talk to anyone cause there's like a reward for killing her."

"Oh." Long and drawn out, Lou nodded his head. "I see. O.K., we'll rewind."

"Dude, let's like go over by where everyone is and get them in the Hawaii

sailing mode. Let's sing some Brady Bunch tunes."

"Cool." Lou bobbed his head and walked with Rickie. Walking he spun to Cal. "Sorry I talked to you." He turned around, caught up to Rickie and joined him mid first verse into the song, *It's a sunshine Day*.

Cal smiled. "Last experiment, no one wanted to talk to Rickie but me and Jake. I'm glad he made a . . . ." Cal shifted around when she heard the ringing. "I hear a phone."

Billy cringed.

"Where is that . . ." Cal stepped closer to Billy and lowered down near his waist. "You brought a phone?"

"Shh." He lifted his shirt and tried to turn it off. But before he could a hand reached for the phone.

Greg Haynes picked it up and answered it. "Hello?" He spoke while looking at a wincing Billy. "Just a second." He showed Cal the phone. "For you."

Cal took it. "Who's calling me on your phone Billy?"

Billy shrugged.

Cal waited for Greg to step back and she placed the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"Cal." Aldo stated her name.

"Hey, Aldo." She looked at Billy "It's Aldo." She returned to the phone. "Are you calling to wish me good luck?"

"You can say that. Cal, I need to talk to you."

"What's up?"

"Just wanted to tell you to be careful and . . . Give you just a bit of advice. O.K.?" Aldo said. "I know you love Jake. And I know he's not the most sensitive man. I understand you need that and I fully anticipate some time in your marriage to him you'll have an affair to get that. I wouldn't blame you . . ."

"Aldo." Cal laughed his name. "What in the world?"

"Cal, look. Incase you get the urge for sensitivity. And before you find it in some Island guy, decide to pull a 'Here to Eternity' and roll about on the beach . . . don't. Save it."

"Aldo that is the funniest advice I have ever been given. Who on that island would I find . . ." Cal stopped talking when at the end of the one dock she caught glimpse of Reed lifting off his shirt as he stared into the water. He wiped his sweat with it and hung it from the back of his jeans.

"Cal? Cal?" Aldo called for her.

Billy, using his index finger, pushed on Cal's jaw to close her open mouth.

Cal's speech stammered some. "Scratch what I was going to say." She watched Reed until Billy blocked her and pointed to the limo that pulled up. "Anyhow, I'll remember that advice. But I have to go. Jake just showed up. Bye." She hung up the call and waved to Jake, who stepped from the limo wearing a tee shirt and military work pants. The dress uniform he had on a hanger was taken from him by a member of Caldwell. As she began to hand the phone to Billy, it

was intercepted.

Greg placed the phone inside his jacket pocket. "I'm going to assume Mr. Griffith, that you totally forgot that you had this phone under your shirt."

"Can you believe I did that?" Billy asked overacting. "Sorry."

Jake cringed in his walk to Cal when Rickie and Lou's singing carried over. He kissed Cal. "Sorry about being late. I see Rickie found a partner in knavery."

"Seems that way." Cal commented.

"Bill, I take it since you guys are way over here, you've been watching her."

"Like a hawk. However, Cal's been watching . . ." Billy pointed to Reed. "Him."

Jake looked. "Oh Cal, please. That is nothing, And if you're gonna stare, can you not let him know. He's arrogant enough."

"Like you know, Jake." Cal said sarcastically.

"Jake, I think he knew that's why he took off his shirt." Billy instigated.

"Probably."

Just as Cal rolled her eyes at both of them, Greg's voice carried over from a different peer. "Can I have everyone over here please. Thank you."

Cal, Jake and Billy moved behind the group of participants who approached an awaiting Greg.

"O.K. people. listen up." Greg spoke to the group where Rickie and Lou were up front. "This is where you and I part. For short time. You'll be taking this tour boat to the island. It's located about a hundred and twenty five miles from here. So you'll be on this boat for a . . ."

Unison and after a laugh, Rickie and Lou softly sang. "*A three hour tour. A three hour tour.*"

Greg cleared his throat and raised the corners of his mouth. "Correct. Three hours." He ignored the snickers of Rickie and Lou again and continued. He spoke calm and over the subtle backdrop of mood-filled humming by Rickie and Lou of the Gilligan's Island theme song. "The moment you step onto this boat is the moment your participation in the experiment begins. I will meet you on the island I am flying there with your things and having placed in your designated housing. Use this time to get to know each other, it should be a pleasant trip."

Sgt. Melanie McMann had reached her point of annoyance at the rudeness of the continuous hummers. She laid her hand on Rickie's shoulder, spinning him to face her and she stepped to him. "Can you possibly be any more rude?" She blasted him. "Why don't you just shut that young immature trap of yours so the rest of us can listen."

There was a strong triple thump on the wooden plank of the docks caused by Jake's combat boots and his three step stride. The four men who separated him and the sergeant, parted like the red sea when he made his way to her.

"Sergeant." Jake said her name strongly.

Jake's call caused Sgt. McMann to spin in a respectful attention to him. "Yes."

“Let me make something perfectly clear to you.” Jake’s voice was stern as he kept eye contact with her, one eyebrow slightly raised and leaning into her in a authoritarian way. “In my presence or out. You will not . . . not take that tone or speak to my son in that manner again. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” She replied with attitude.

Jake stood straight with a slight glare to her. “What was it that you just said. I didn’t hear you correctly.”

“I said, yes, sir, I understand Lt. Colonel Graison, Sir.”

“Good.” Jake glanced to Greg. “My apologies sir for the interruption. I needed to rectify a situation before it went any further.”

Greg nodded. “I completely understand.”

With an open mouth grin, Rickie let out a noiseless laugh as he gave a dramatic thumbs up to Jake.

Jake winked quickly to Rickie as he stepped back to Cal.

When he got next to her, Cal tugged on Jake’s tee shirt sleeve pulling him in a sideways lean to her. She tip toed up and whispered in his ear. “I am so turned on right now because of you.”

Jake grinned big time. He kissed her quickly and returned to listening to Greg.

Greg had to collect his thoughts to where he was when the long interruption occurred. He finished telling the participants about using the time on the boat wisely and as an introductory time. That was all he had left to say. Then Greg moved aside, allowing them all to board the yacht and begin the journey into the thirteenth experiment.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
March 3<sup>rd</sup> - 11:00 a.m.

Douglass spoke to Ivan and let out a loud burst of laughter as he walked behind Aldo in his chair. He gave a swift pat to Aldo's shoulder and pointed to the twenty monitors on the wall. All of them showing camera shots from the yacht. "Hey, Aldo. Looks like your two are already singled out."

From his lean on his hand, Aldo quietly and simply raised his middle finger and returned to watching Jake and Cal who stood with everyone else on the bow of the yacht. Alone they stood, with Billy not far from them taking pictures.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The yacht - Pacific Ocean  
March 3<sup>rd</sup> - 12:15 p.m.

With a slight lean over the railing Cal's eyes moved from the water where Jake had just spit, to Jake next to her. She turned to him with an open mouth look of disgust. "Jake, that was really foul."

"What?" He shook his head. "Rickie pissing over the side of the boat is all right. But I can't fuckin spit?"

"That was foul."

"Cal!" He turned around leaning on the railing. He ran the back of his hand under his nose and sniffed. "Fuckin sea air makes me stuffy."

"Stuffy?" Billy snickered as he inched his way into the conversation and closer to Cal and Jake. "Is that considered a 'tough' word Jake. Because gees, I should . . ." Billy caught the daggers thrown to him by Jake. "I should return to looking back over into the water." Just as Billy did that, he caught glimpse of the island in the distance which seemed to appear just at the ocean's edge. "Jake, Cal. Look."

Both at the same time, Jake and Cal turned to see. Spotting it, they shrugged and returned to watching the others.

Billy swayed his head. "All right. Remind me not to share anything with you again."

Cal watched as Rickie and Lou stood on the side doing something she didn't want to know about. The other men sat on the lawn chairs near the utility case and Sgt McMann paced about around them, joining in the conversation. "He just looked at me again."

"Who?" Jake asked. "And it better not be fuckin Tropicana Sun Tan man."

Cal snickered. "You gave him a Rickie name. How cute."

"No, Cal. That's who he is. Remember? We over heard him telling . . . what's that guy . . . the one who quilts with his grandmother."

"Paul."

"Yeah. We heard him telling him that."

"Oh." Cal nodded with an open mouth. "Oh, yeah. I remember now. No. Not him."

"Not him what?" Jake asked.

"He's not the one who keeps looking at me. That Larry Kale guy is."

"He's a fuckin asshole. Did you hear him saying he's going to initiate the first in a series of island hikes. So they can all get to know the island?"

"Yeah, but Jake." Cal raised her eyes to him. "We're doing that."

"Yes, but you and I won't get lost." He moved his head to the group. "They will. And how about that Judge guy agreeing and wanting to go along."

"Like he's going to be able to hike anywhere. He breaths heavy. And limps."



"What the fuck is he doing here?" Jake asked.

"He's the catch."

"No he's not." Jake shook his head. "And they're staring at us again."

"They hate us already."

"No they see dollar bills over our heads. Besides, who cares if they hate us. I'm not here to be fuckin popular. And how about her?" Jake used his head to point.

"The sergeant broad."

"Cal." Jake leaned more to her. "Do me a favor. Start a fight with her and kick her ass."

"What?"

"Yeah." Jake smiled "I'd love to see it. Get into it with her."

"Jake, she's huge. She'll kill me."

Jake fluttered his lips. "Please, she's a marine. I know how they get trained and I know how I trained you. You'll kill her."

"You think?"

"Absolutely."

Cal took a look at Sgt. McMann. "I really don't like her much. I'll think about it."

"There they go again." Jake shook his head in disgust, yelling over to the group. "What!" Another shake of his head and he looked to Cal. "Fuckin people."

He had heard the whole thing and with a slight laugh, Billy finally interjected "Uh . . . were you guys this bad on the last experiment? If you were, that pretty much explains why no one liked you there either."

Not believing Billy just said that to him, Jake swung his views Billy's way. "Bill, where did . . ." A rumbling and vibrating of the yacht silenced Jake.

Cal gripped the railing. "Jake, what was that."

Jake turned. The others in the group had stood from their chairs, the yacht continued to vibrate. "Shit."

"What?" Cal asked as Jake moved by her toward the utility box and then she saw it. Smoke, thick and black seeped up from below and from what seemed through the creases of the floor board near the stern of the boat. Smoke also was release from under the door of the room where the Captain was locked away from everyone else. "Jake." Cal rushed to him.

"Sarge!" Rickie hurried over. "Is like the boat on fire Dude."

Jake tossed lawn chairs from the way and stood before a long wooden box with two hatch doors. He grabbed the handle. "Looks that way Rickie. Locked."

In a run, Billy, taking a picture first, stood by Jake. "Jake, what do . . ."

"Bill." Jake stayed calm. "Find me an ax or something to get this open with. They keep life jackets in here." Jake pulled on the doors. "Fuck."

"Got it." Billy took off.

"Screw it Jake." Cal told him. "The island is what, ten miles away. Let's just go. Now."

"Cal. When's the last time you swam . . ." Jake struggled with the doors. "Ten miles from shore."

"I haven't." Cal coughed as the smoke seeped her way. Everyone seemed to watch and wait to see what Jake was doing.

"Lt. Colonel!" Sgt. McMann came running. "The captain is stuck in that room and there are two men below. I need your help getting to them."

"Sergeant" Jake continued to pull. "They're pretty much toast." He placed his foot on the side of the box and gripped the handle with both hands.

"I can not believe you won't help them." Sgt. McMann said in a raised voice.

"Sergeant. If you want to go. You go. But right now . . ." A grunt from Jake and then a thunderous crack as the door to the box flew open sending wood splinters. "I'm getting my wife off this boat."

Insulted and in a hero-mode, the sergeant raced toward the captains' booth.

Jake handed Cal a life jacket. "Bill!" He grabbed two more out as the others reached in. He tossed one to Billy. "Rickie." He tossed it to him. Then pointed. "Put it on and jump."

"Eye-eye Sarge. But like if I die out there. Save my body." Rickie put on the jacket. "Cause I'll be back dude."

Jake turned and saw Cal looking at the life jacket as if it was a world's mystery. He reached to help her. "Cal, just . . ."

BOOM!

^^^

A high squeal of feedback and then a hiss of static. All twenty monitors went snowy. The investors, in a rumble of concern jumped from the chairs all being vocal at the same time toward Dr. Jefferson. Who looked just as shocked.

^^^

Just like the debris, Cal, Jake and the others shot high in the air and outward from the force of the blast. All in different directions and cast into the deep ocean.

Jake, calm, kept his wits about him and his eyes open in his submergence into the water. Through the water's disturbance he peered, seeing the swimming legs of one man. Possibly Judge. He saw that Larry Kale person swimming in the distance, behind him, it looked like Paul. Jake gave it his all and pushed to the surface, inhaling as he emerged and calling out after he caught his air. "Cal!"

"Sarge!" Rickie bobbed up and down about twenty feet away.

"Rickie, do you see Cal?"

"No!"

"Cal!" Jake called out in desperation, shifting his eyes rapidly and counting as he saw the others come up. 'Seven . . . eight . . . Cal!' He treaded water as he turned among the burning particles of debris. And then he saw Billy coming up.

Loudly Billy took in air and immediately saw Jake. "Where's Cal?"

"I can't see her." Jake said almost near panic. "We have to look." Taking in a deep breath, Jake gave himself a jumpstart and dove back under the water in a search. Billy did the same.

Rickie wanted to look too. He held his breath and dove forward, but because of the life jacket he merely rolled up and bobbed back to the surface.

The rush of the ocean water pounded against her ears as Cal's one hand reached up to the wood above her head. She struggled in her swim to push that away, while freeing her shorts from the extended piece of metal she was caught up on. The wood partially surrounded her. And what once was part of the captain's room was fast becoming Cal's water coffin. She tried to stay in control, maintaining her breath which was getting harder to hold. Becoming horrified when she watched the decapitated and slightly burned head of Sgt. McMann, eyes open, slowly float downwards in front of her.

Her options were leaving her and her chest felt heavy, almost as if like the boat, it too were going to explode. Every time she let go of the wood above her to free herself, the weight of it pushed down on her.

*Shit!* Cal's mind spun as she fought with the metal that had her. *Almost got it. Almost . . .*

A hand, surprising Cal, reached down and grabbed her hand taking over to help set her free from the metal. Her eyes moved to see a swimming and a smiling Lou. Once he unhooked her, he raised one hand to the wood above her, gripped Cal by the waist and with a strong pushing swim, he carried Cal out of there and to the surface of the water.

Cal's loud, wheezing gasp for air as she surfaced, called out to Jake and Billy only ten feet away.

"Cal." Quickly, Jake swam to her and Lou.

"Jake." Cal breathed heavily. "I was stuck. He . . . he saved me." Cal looked at Lou. "Thank you."

"No problem. So, uh, Colonel. Can I talk to her now."

Jake gave an appreciative nod to Lou. "Thank you very much." He took hold of Cal and kissed her. "You all right?"

Cal nodded. "You don't have to worry about me beating up that Sergeant, she's . . ."

"Uh!" Rickie's scream echoed out. "Dudes!"

Cal and Jake pivoted his way. Rickie, floating looked terrorized as he stared at a pair of combat boots.

"Dudes! Help!" He cried out. "There's a beheaded big babe bobbin' by me. Uh!"

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
March 3<sup>rd</sup> - 12:55 p.m. PST

Rewind. Stop. Rewind. Stop. The same screen played over and over again in the twenty monitors. A rush of the participants, thick black smoke, voices . . . static.

Dr. Jefferson rubbed his temples that began to throb wishing the investors would just be quiet so he could have a moment to think.

“Dr. Jefferson.” Barb, one of the monitors spun in her chair. “Dr. Haynes in on the line.”

“Quiet!” Dr. Jefferson called out to bring silence. “Put him on the speaker phone Barb.”

The click of the phone over the speaker carried out. “Dr. Jefferson.” Greg spoke.

“Greg, what’s going on?”

“We were standing on the beach watching for them and we saw an explosion. We can see some of them now. We can’t count how many, but they’re moving slowly towards us now.”

Aldo sprang forward. “Haynes, get a chopper or something out there to lift them . . .”

Click.

Barb turned around. “We lost him.”

Dr. Jefferson held his hand in a calming manner to Aldo and the others. “I’m sure gentlemen, he already has a helicopter on its way to them.”

I-SE Thirteen - The Island

March 3<sup>rd</sup> - 12:55 p.m.

Greg lowered the antenna to his cellular phone as he smiled peering out into the ocean.

"Sir." A Caldwell worker ran to him on the beach. "The piolet said he can have the chopper ready in two minutes."

"Tell him no."

"No?"

"No." Greg reiterated. "This is a survival experiment." He motioned his head to those in the water. "Let them survive."

^^^

"Uh!" Rickie cried out. "Shark!"

His comment brought about a unison of moans and a few 'not again' to those who stayed close and moved slowly, swimming and stopping on their way to shore.

Rickie snickered as he laid, life jacket on, on top of a large wooden door. He faced Lou who held on to the edge. "Dude, you don't think we like jinxed the journey singing Gilligan, do you?"

"No way."

"Cool. I feel like a castaway now, guy. Hey, I can be like Gilligan."

"And I'm the skipper."

"Without a doubt dude." Rickie said. "Sarge can be the professor."

"I am not the professor!" Jake yelled out.

Rickie laughed. "So which babe is Cal-babe. Is she Ginger or Maryann. I say Ginger, cause Ginger was the most bodacious babe. And like I have to rank my mom up there."

"Ginger was nothing compared to Maryann." Lou argued.

"Dude, like she was the homely virgin child. What's so bodacious about her."

"Bet me Maryann could cook." Lou winked. "Any woman who can make a mean pot roast is sexy to me."

"Cool theory. But boobs are like important too. Dude . . . watch. . . . uh! Shark"

At the same time, everyone yelled "Rickie!"

Rickie laughed again. "Look at me guy." He told Lou. "Don't I remind you of the babe from the Titanic flick." Rickie fake shivered and did his imitation. "D. . . D . . . Dude."

Lou tried to be serious as he clung and imitated also. "Don't you do it Rickie, don't you say your goodbyes. You will live a ling life."

Rickie laughed loudly. "Hey guy let me cast you into the water like a

corpse.”

“Rickie!” Jake yelled. “Times up. Let Cal on that now.”

“Guy, like I’m being Rose.”

Jake helped Cal to the door. “Rickie, you’re gonna be a dead Rose if you don’t get off that door now. Besides, you have a fuckin’ life jacket.”

“Quick action guy.” Rickie slid from the door. “You guys could have had yours on too had you not been fighting.”

Jake grabbed hold of Rickie’s life jacket and moved him out of the way. “Here Cal. If you don’t get on, just hang on to it good.”

“Thanks Jake. My legs are getting tired.” She rested her cheek on her arm that hung to the door. “Don’t yell about that.”

“Wouldn’t do it.” He kissed her on the cheek. Then he whispered in her ear. “Mine are too.”

“Uh! Shark!” Rickie called out.

“I’m killing him.” Jake told Cal and turned around. “Rickie knock . . .”

Another scream entailed, only this one came from Jason Perry. Immediately Jason went under.

“Funny. Real fuckin’ funny boys. Now . . .”

With a rush sound of water, for as fast as Jason went under, that was how fast half his body shot up into the air. Blood poured from his half eaten torso and it dropped back down to the water and floated courtesy of the life jacket.

Jake watched the panic ensue in the water. “Don’t move! Nobody Move!” His eyes stayed fixed on the large fin that neared them. “Shit.” He whispered.

It was so quiet in that water. Not a sound or splash was made. All movement and talking stopped. Heavy breathing came from everyone. In a flash, the quiet was broken and shocking screams carried out when loudly the water splashed up and the rest of Jason’s body was pulled under.

“Billy.” Jake called out to him. “Help me move this door out of this blood pool. He’s feeding now.”

Billy swam as fast as his exhausted body would allow him. He joined Jake and Cal at that door and they pushed it, slowly and out of the way.

Heeding Jake’s advice that wasn’t directed toward them, the others swam from the blood that surrounded them and stayed near Cal, Jake and Billy.

Rickie with a doggy paddle flick of his hand, made his way near Jake. “Sarge, like I promise, I won’t do any more movies or tv that can get us in . . . shit.”

“What?” Jake asked and looked. The Shark, way out there, was coming back. Hoping Rickie didn’t start singing the theme from JAWS, Jake looked at Cal. “Cal, listen, I don’t want you to panic.”

“I’m not.” Cal said calmly. “I’m not even moving. I know better.”

“Cal.” Jake said. “You’re on your period.”

Cal’s hand slammed hard on the door. “Well, thank you very much for announcing that Jake. Asshole!”

"No, Cal." Jake warned. "Right now, you're shark bait."

"Oh shit."

Between watching the shark and the others steer their way clear of Cal, Jake had to think. "Billy go with the others."

"No." Billy shook his head. "Let's push her to shore."

"We'll never make it. It smells her."

Cal grunted in disgust. "Thanks Jake."

"That's not what I mean. Billy, go with the others, I got a plan."

"I don't . . ."

"Bill." Jake ordered. "Now."

Billy gave one more look at Cal, then the shark, and slowly and steadily he swam away to the others.

Jake moved closer. "I have a plan. Do what I say."

Cal felt Jake grabbing for her shorts. "Jake what are you doing?"

"I'm lowering your shorts for you." Jake glanced up, the shark circled not too far away.

"Why?"

"I need you to take out your tampon."

"What! Yeah Jake, let's ring the fuckin dinner bell."

"Cal." Jake hands maneuvered her pants down.

"Jake, my shorts."

"Cal, you will either take it out or I will. Now Cal."

Cal rolled her eyes. "This better work. Then what, Drop it?"

"Hold it."

"Hold it?"

"Hold it." Jake looked at the shark. "Hurry."

"I'm tense. It's not that easy." Cal reached under the water.

"Hurry." Jake beckoned, watching the shark.

"I swear I liked it better when I couldn't mention the word menstruation in front of you . . . out."

"Good."

"Can you pull my shorts back up?"

"Why?"

"I am not going to be less my clothes if I die. Please."

Grunting, Jake hurried and pulled them up. "Wait until I say 'now' and you drop it."

"This is sick."

"Cal." There was a raised in tone in Jake's voice.

Cal saw his eyes widen and she felt him grab her legs. "What are you doing."

"Getting you out of this. Almost time . . ."

The large fin of the shark parted the water as it made it's way with speed directly toward Cal.

“Jake?” Cal saw it. “Oh God.”

“Ready and . . . Drop It!” At the same time Jake ordered out, he hoisted Cal’s legs up. Flipping her on top of the door, Jake leaped himself backwards and out of the way a split second before the speeding and stalking shark careened with a violent jolt into the floating door. It carried, on its back, a screaming Cal at a high velocity as the door wedged against the fin of the raging beast.

Cal screamed loudly, gripping the edge of the sailing door for dear life. Her eyes never left the fin of the shark, even after it backed off, releasing the door into the shallow water. Caught in the current of a shallow wave, the still moving door kept going until, like a surfer, Cal, washed up with a vengeance on shore and directly at the feet of Greg Haynes.

Soaking wet, and breathing heavily, Cal face down, dug her hands into the sand and lifted herself up some.

“Are you all right?” Greg asked, extending his hand down to her.

Cal took it and using his leverage, she stood up, and brushed herself off. Her hair stuck to her face. “Where are my things?” She asked in a soft, raspy, yet anger filled voice. “I need a tampon.” With heavy bouncing shoulders, Cal removed the wet hair from her eyes and spun to look out into the ocean. “And then I’m coming back to kill him.”

^^^

It didn’t take that long for Cal to return to the beach. Greg didn’t suspect it would. Cal didn’t have to trot the mile to the living area, having lucked out when a female Caldwell assistant had the means to help her out.

“Better?” Greg asked her as she joined him on the beach.

“Much.” Cal still looked mad as she stood arms crossed watching Jake and the others so close to shore. The first thing to roll onto the beach was debris. Which pleased Cal. She grabbed an average length board and held it behind her back. Waiting and watching, and finally smiling when she saw Jake stand up and walk out of the water.

“Cal.” He hurried to her. “Are you all right?”

“Yep.” She nodded. “But you’re not going to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean . . .” Cal brought the board forward and swung outward nailing Jake in the side of the arm. “You big asshole! You don’t think you could have told me what you were doing!”

“When Cal!? Give me that!” Jake yelled at her, snatching up the board from her hand and tossing it angrily aside. “What the fuck! You’re alive! You aren’t shark food right now!”

“Oh yeah! But I’m really pissed at you Jake! You could have told me I was going on a ride! And what the hell made you so sure it would work!”

Jake placed his hands on his hips and ran his hand over his wet faced. His



eyes shifted to everyone that gathered around. "I . . . I . . . I didn't."

"What!" Cal shrieked. Quickly she dove for the board again, picking it up and going after Jake.

Billy, who really tried hard not to laugh, grabbed hold of Cal from behind. "Easy." He spoke to her trying to control her, as her legs kept moving in her pursuit of Jake.

Jake just nodded his head at her. "Can you make anymore of a scene Cal?"

Billy put his mouth close to Cal's ear. "Calm down. O.K." He waited for the nod and he set her to her feet. Before she could go after Jake again, Billy took the board.

Greg stepped into the confusion. "Are we done?" He didn't get an answer. "Good." Letting out a breath, he turned. "Everyone, follow me." He trotted ahead in a casual pace up the beach.

^^^

"This area here." Greg explained as he led the group from a small wooded area over a slight grade. "This used to hold two rows of town houses when the island was inhabited by another research institute. We tore all that down to make room for the compound, so you may notice the lack of grass." Greg stopped. "This is what we refer to as the compound. This is the housing section. We have you in separate buildings as you can see behind me." He pointed to the back of the small bungalow type buildings, ten of them formed a circle. "This way." Greg led them further, through two of the bungalows and into the center circle. A huge dirt area. A pit was center for a fire, logs surrounded it. "This is where you will live for the next six months. The units are nice size, one room buildings, each with a private bath. A fireplace and cooling unit. No cooking facilities. I'll take you there after this. But right now, all of your things have been placed inside. Some of your requests were rather big . . ." Greg looked at Jake. "So you'll have to make room and put them away as you see fit."

Jake saw Cal looking up to him. He shrugged. "What? I needed the beer and the arsenal."

"Then you'll bitch that the room is messy."

"No I won't."

"Yes you will. What did you do last experiment?"

"Cal."

"Jake."

Jake waved her off and moved a foot from her to Billy. He lowered his voice to him. "Billy." Jake twitched his head at the bungalows. "Ten houses built. Ten houses needed. Well eight now." Jake sniffed. "You still want to think they picked you at the last minute?"

"As I was saying . . ." Greg raised his voice to capture Jake's attention. "We placed the housing in a circle to promote closeness, and unity."

Jake's snicker rumbled from him until Cal backhanded him. "Cal, what is with the abuse today. Fuck."

Cal spun around. "You had me almost eaten by a shark Jake."

"Me? Cal, I wasn't the one on my period."

Cal gasped and turned back away from him. "I really hate you."

"Just so you know, I'm making mental notes on your behavior today."

Cal ignored his anal remark and walked quickly to catch up to Greg who had led the group toward another section of the compound. There were three building. Two were metal structures. One of them was long and plain, the other had windows. The smaller building was a log cabin type building, bigger than the bungalows.

"This is storage." Greg indicated to the first building. "And as always by lot, we picked who gets the key to this building. You can pass it along or keep it. And, Mr. Kale. You have won those honors." Greg tossed the key to Larry.

Jake hunched down to Cal. "Don't think I'm not stealing those fuckin keys off of him, first chance I get."

"I'll help." Cal whispered back to him.

As Jake laid his hand gently on her back, he felt Cal move closer to him. He smiled. "Is this our truce?"

"No, I'm cold."

Jake shook his head with a chuckle. And pulled Cal even closer.

"Utility building." Greg pointed to the next one. "Laundry room. Kitchen, dining area. The Graisons will tell you, it works out well when you come up with a clean up and cooking schedule to split between you."

"Dude." Rickie spoke up. "No they won't. Cause, like last experiment, they were on clean up all the time because no one liked them."

Greg cleared his throat. "Boy." He spoke with sarcasm. "That uh . . . surprises me. Moving on . . . the last building is the recreation room. We've stocked it with some forms of entertainment. Games, reading materials and such. We suspect a lot of your gathering time will probably be spent in the unity circle outside you bungalows. But if you get bored there, you can come here. Any questions?" Greg waited. "All right. This is where I leave you. You know the rules. No one will leave this island for any reason, for the next six months. So take care of yourselves. We have limited medical resources here and it could get tough if you get sick or hurt." Greg looked behind the pack, a younger man neared the circle. "And here's my assistant now. Leo. He will give you the bungalows while I steal Rickie." Greg approached Rickie and took him by the arm.

"Dude, where we going?" Rickie asked.

"Just want to show you where you can retrieve those privileges you get."

"Excellent. I supplied a huge list."

"That you did."

Rickie bobbed his head walking with Greg. "So like dude, do I look like the teachers pet right now?"

“Yes you do Rickie.”

“Cool.” Happily Rickie kept on moving while occasionally, just because it was stuck in his head, he hummed the theme to Hawaii Five-O.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
March 3<sup>rd</sup> - 5:00 p.m.

Even though he knew he couldn't lay down on that bed, Greg found it visually appealing. In his sleeping quarters at Caldwell, two room he had made into one, he set the dress shirt and tie he had wore on the bed. He made his way to his closet, and in his reach for a sweatshirt, there was a knock on his door. Tossing on the UCLA garment, he moved to his door and opened it. "Dr. Jefferson?"

"What are you doing in here?" Dr. Jefferson asked.

"Changing. I have some paper work to do and I wanted to get comfortable."

"I thought for sure you'd return to the control center upon your arrival."

"In time. With the accident and such, I have some paperwork to do."

"I think you should make it top priority."

"Why is that?" Greg asked.

"Because you have a control room full of investors, anxious to see you and very antsy."

So surprised Greg looked. "They're still here?"

"Oh yeah. And they aren't leaving without answers. Especially Daniela and Watson." Dr. Jefferson said.

"I see." Greg raised his eyebrows a few times. "Well then, let me go see them and talk to them." He walked from his room. "You know for a group of men who made fun of the experiment yesterday, they certainly aren't in any hurry to go home from such a dull event."

Dr. Jefferson slowed in his walk with Greg. "Did you . . . did you plan this immediate occurrence?"

Greg chuckled. "What? The explosion? The shark attack?"

"Yes. Did you plan these things to happen this early in the event?" Dr. Jefferson repeated his question.

"No." Greg shook his head. "Absolutely not. You give me far too much credit. I promised an exciting experiment. Would I go as far as to start eliminations this early into the game."

"Yes." Dr. Jefferson walked with him.

Greg just turned his head, smiled and kept on walking.

^^^

The doors to the control room were closed. Dr. Jefferson watched as Greg, reached for the doors, paused, took a deep breath, and in a slouching walk entered the room in which he was immediately bombarded with an eruption of questions.

"Gentlemen." Greg held his hand up. "Please." His voice dropped. "Please. I am still very shaken by what happened today. I don't . . . don't know what went

wrong.”

As Dr. Jefferson closed the doors, he had to ponder on what he witnessed. Greg distraught? What happened to the smiling arrogant man?

“I’ll tell you what went wrong.” Mr. Daniela spoke up. “Three hours into the game and my investment is down the tubes. I lost my participant in that accident.”

“I . . . I apologize.”

“I lost mine too.” George Watson shouted. “Two million dollars and I’m out?”

“I don’t know what to say.” Greg solemnly told them. “This was something out of our control and totally unexpected. There is nothing we can do about accidents. You have that in your Investment agreement.”

Aldo shook his head. “Never in an experiment has there been an accident like this. Nothing like this has ever happened this early in the game. Even though I still have my team, to me this doesn’t quite seem fair that these two men placed such a big investment into the experiment only to have no more interest before the first days end.”

“A gamble.” Douglass commented. “I know it’s a tough break. But they took a gamble Aldo.”

Dr. Jefferson who was quiet, finally spoke up. “Mr. Douglass is right Aldo. Just like the people who come into your casino, Mr. Watson and Mr. Daniela stepped in here fully aware.”

Mr. Daniela was listening to words he really didn’t care to hear. “So that’s it. I’m out?” Shaking his head he moved to the door.

Mr. Watson walked over and joined him. “I just wanted to experience this. I guess next time.”

“Or now.” Greg spoke up, grabbing their attention as they started to leave. “There is something you may want to think about.” He walked toward the two men. “I have an extra person on that island. Not Rickie. Now, he is not a participant. However, for a small investment, say half of what you bought into the game before, I would be willing to make Billy Griffith a participant for you. Or both of you if you wish to split. It’s up to you. Billy is up there. You can still be in the game.”

Mr. Daniela and Mr. Watson looked at each other. And at the same time, they both walked away from that door and back into the control room.

Their actions gave an answer to Greg and at that second made an unknowing Billy, officially a participant.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 3<sup>rd</sup> - 9:30 p.m.

It was runny but it was ice cream none-the-less and Rickie enjoyed every spoon full of that vanilla ice cream covered in hot fudge as he sat at the fire with the five remaining male participants.

Lou watched that spoon Rickie held, dip into the bowl, drip and go into Rickie's mouth. "That looks really good."

"Dude." Rickie slurped it up. "It is. Like, it melted on the way back but I had to eat it here so like, everyone could boil in the island heat with jealousy."

"It's not hot." Lou commented. "Actually, it's chilly."

"O.K." Rickie took another bite.

"That looks really good. Can you get ice cream at anytime?"

"Sure dude. Like *you* have three wishes. I have, they said, seventy five I came up with." Rickie hesitated in bringing the spoon to his mouth. "Want some?"

"Yes."

"Too bad." Rickie snickered. "Kidding. Tell you what. I'll get you some tomorrow."

"Really?" Lou smiled. "I'll tell *you* what. I'll make you a deal. You get me stuff like that Ice cream, I'll do something for you."

"Guy, you aren't gay are you?"

"No."

"O.K. just checking." Rickie held up his spoon. "Didn't want you to think I wanted them kind of favors. I have something else in mind that you . . ."

"What's wrong."

"Check out clarinet." Rickie pointed.

"Who?" Lou looked. "Oh Reed. What about him."

"Is it my imagination or like his nipples really shiny."

"It could be the heat from the fires."

"No guy." Rickie stood up and crept around the fire, his views kept staring at Reed's shirtless chest.

"As I was saying." Reed spoke. "Tropicana approached me with the offer and that was when I quit flying. Free tan. Free sun screen and I graced a few billboards."

Paul who was knitting, shook his head. "I can't say I ever saw you on one. But I don't look unless it's a woman."

Larry Kale who was part of the conversation had to question. "Yes but was that a smart move on your part. Flying is a career. Modeling can be lost in a heart beat. You can get old, fat, bald, or . . ."

Reed gasped. "Please. I plan on never becoming less that distinguished. If you take care of yourself, you can fight the effects . . ." Reed's eyes widened when he felt the presence close to him. He lowered his eyes to see Rickie, so close

staring at his chest. "Is there something wrong?"

"Dude, like why are your nips so shiny?" Rickie asked.

"I put a lotion on them to make them looked this way."

"Guy, they're like in an erection projection. Do you mean to have them like that?"

"Yes. It makes the chest look more massive. It impresses women."

"Cool." Rickie bobbed his head. "Have you tested it on other parts of your body to see if it works there too?"

Paul reached for the knitting needle that dropped from his hand. "Why does this interest you so much Rickie?"

"Dude, like I'm laboring in perplexity on why like Book here would apply to the stuff to his chest. Me, I would most definitely be sporting it else where."

"Why would you want to?" Larry Kale asked. "It would be embarrassing to walk around like that."

"Not for me guy. I'm a monster and parts of me are . . ." Rickie growled. "Beastly. So . . . like hanging out here. Did anyone bring stuff to make S'mores?" Rickie received no answer. "Hot dogs? Bug spray? O.K. I got the idea, since the convo is like rank. Let's sing campfire songs? Anyone? Anyone?"

Lou made raised his hand. "I'll sing with you Rickie."

"Excellent-a-Mundo. Let's start religiously with a little Rickie-Meister version of *Michael Row the Boat Ashore*."

^^^

*'My Cal road the door ashore, Rick and Lou saw. Then she hit Jake with a board, Rick and Louie, saw.'*

Rickie and Lou's singing carried into Billy's bungalow and into the bathroom where him and Cal stood in the room lit only by a dimmed red bulb. A long board lay over the sink and pans were on it. With tongs, Billy swished the photo around in the developer.

"Cal, check this out."

Cal looked into the solution. "Oh wow."

Billy turned his head to Cal who was right there. "Great shot huh? Who would have thought her head would wash up so suddenly."

"Kind of looks like she's on vacation and someone buried her in the sand."

Billy tilted his head. "Yeah, it does." He took the picture from the solution to the line that strung across the bathroom. He hung it up to dry. "But this one here is my favorite. I was really lucky the film didn't get ruined."

"It should have." Cal turned around. "Which picture are you talking about?"

"This one." Billy pointed to a picture of Cal. Her hair blew slightly, and she had a peaceful look on her face. "I took this one on the peer before we went. It was while you were watching Jake come back from bitching out Henrietta the eighth. Look at that look in your eyes Cal."

Cal moved closer. "What about it."

"See you don't see it. But that look is the look every man wants to have the woman they love give them. God, what I wouldn't give to have someone look at me like that." Billy stared at it. "Jake has to have this." Billy reached up and touched it, it was dry. He took it down.

Cal looked at all the photos that hung up. "Billy, you think you have enough of me?"

Billy smiled. "Sorry, I just kept taking them."

"God, I'm gonna start to think you're obsessed with me."

"Obsessed." Billy said soft. "Yeah, you know what. I guess I am obsessed with you Cal." He turned his head to face her. "I think I have been obsessed with you since the first moment I saw you."

Her closed mouth widened in a chuckle. "O.K., yeah, sure. Cute." She pointed back to the door. "Are we done? Jake's gonna start to miss us."

"Yeah, we're done. It's safe to open the door."

"Good let's go." Cal stopped as she turned the knob. "Billy, this picture stuff is really fun. Can I help you again."

"Without a doubt."

"Thanks." Cal opened the bathroom door and stepped into the large room. "Uh! Bright light. I'm blind."

Smiling, Billy looked at the photo he held of Cal, then after a slight hesitation, he walked from the make shift dark room.

^^^

Still sitting on his porch, Jake was grateful that the campfire songs had finally ended and Rickie moved on to telling ghost stories. At least, even if it was a little, Jake could get some enjoyment out of those. Waiting and watching for Cal to return from her film developing with Billy, Jake was surprised when another approached his small porch.

"Hey son." With that slight limp, Judge walked up to Jake. "Mind if I join you."

"No. Not at all."

"Thank you." Lifting the fronts of his pant legs some, Judge sat down on the step below Jake. "So, you aren't much of a socializer I can see."

"Not on something like this."

"I see. Trying to determine who you can trust."

"Oh I know who I can trust." Jake took a drink of his beer. "My wife. I trust Billy. And for as strange as this seems, Rickie."

"So you're not even going to try."

Jake looked at Judge. "With all due respect, sir. I got a fuckin fifty-thousand dollar incentive hanging over my head. Would you trust anyone if you were me?"

Judge laughed. "I guess not."

"So let me ask you a question. If you don't mind."



"Not at all." Judge said. "I'm an open book. Ask away."

"Why are you here? What made you go on the experiment? You never stated."

Judge took a moment before he answered. "The Theodore King that first applied to the experiment was my son. My eldest. Now, he applied 'cause he heard about the large compensation. I didn't blame him. See, he has a daughter who's ill. And he is swamped with medical bills like you would not believe. He's ha trouble getting a good job. So, I told him I would take care of his family while he was gone. But Colleen, my grand-baby, she took a turn for the worst about six months ago. She has Aplastic Anemia. Do you know what that is?"

"Yes." Jake nodded.

"Well, knowing how badly Ted needed the money. And I myself was tapped from helping, I contacted the experiment and asked if I could fill in the process because he could n't leave her. They agreed. And did a special interview process for me. And I got picked. Which was right on time, 'cause they found a bone marrow Donor. Insurance pays for that, but they wouldn't pay to bring the man over from Spain and put him up in the States. So I did. I used the money for that."

Jake hesitated in another drink. "Used? You don't get paid till the end."

"Yes, I know. I kind of took a loan out against it. Caldwell was real helpful in giving me a false agreement that failed to state that there was a chance I wouldn't get paid."

"So money was your drive."

"No." Judge swayed his head. "My family is my drive and the reason to do this." He lifted his head motioning it to Rickie. "You demonstrated great protective instincts over the boy. Let me tell you something, Lt. Col. Graison, when your children hurt, you hurt. And you wish with all that you are to be able to go though that pain for them. To take it away. I'm doing the best that I can to do that for my children now."

Hearing Judge say that, made Cal's name ricochet through Jake's mind and think of her daughter Jessie. Jake looked at Judge who sat on the step below him. A man that wrung his hands. A man who peered at Jake with wise and aged eyes.

"If I had a choice in the matter . . ." Judge chuckled. "I'd choose to hit the lottery."

That comment brought a smile to Jake's face as he took in another drink of his beer.

"But what are the chances of that, right?" Judge asked, lifting one hand then claspings his hands together again.

"About the same as someone making it all the way through the experiment." Jake saw Judge look up to him with a twitch of concern in his eyes. "I'm uh, I'm sorry." Jake closed his eyes and shook his head. "That was really uncalled for and I apologize sir."

"No, don't. Perhaps I needed to hear that. I suppose that's why I came to talk to you. You've done this before. Son, I've got six months to be on this island. I'm

smart. I know that money is not going to come easy. Especially for someone like me. I guess I'm hoping that you can at least tell me what I've got to do to make it. Because . . . I want to go back home to my family."

Jake closed his mouth tightly and lowered his head to his beer bottle as Judge stood up. "I need you to understand my position on talking to people here."

"I do. And I want you to understand mine." Judge stopped walking to talk to Jake. "Yes, that fifty extra thousand would . . ." Judge smiled and gave a humming moan. "It sure would come in handy. But I've been a man of integrity all my life. Giving up my life for the hundred grand is one thing. To take a man's life, or a woman's for money is another. I want to go home. But I want to be able to face my family. Besides, I'm getting old. Don't move right since I broke my hip. Maybe in my heyday I could have taken you out . . ." Judge smiled. "Unfortunately, I'm no longer in my heyday. Goodnight son." The judge turned and walked away. He looked back one more time at Jake when he saw Cal and Billy walking to the bungalow.

Cal slowed in her walk to the porch watching Judge leave. She grabbed Jake's hand which he lifted to her.. "Hey sweetie." She bent down and kissed him. "Come inside, Billy had something for you." Cal slipped her hand from Jake's and went in.

Billy stepped on the porch after Cal. "Hey sweetie." He leaned to Jake.

"Bill." Jake warned with a smile and a shake of his head. He stood up, finished off his beer and followed behind Billy and Cal.

Billy stood center of Jake and Cal's place. The room he stood in was like his and he guessed everyone else's. There was an open area off to the right of the door in front of the fireplace. A bed directly ahead. To the left of the one night stand, a desk. To his right, between the bathroom and closet door, was a dresser and off to the other side of the fireplace was another. He whistled. "Man, it's no wonder you two got the bigger bungalow."

Cal looked at him as if he were silly. "Billy, there's two of us."

"No, that's not why. It was to make room for the alcoholics heaven." He indicated to what made Cal and Jake's room so different. The left wall. Or at least Billy assumed it was a wall. He couldn't tell behind the cases of beer that lined up ten across and four high. He turned to Jake. "You think you have enough beer."

"I believe so." Jake answered seriously as he opened the fridge hidden between the one dresser and the 'wall-o-beer.' . "You want one?" Jake showed Billy a bottle.

"No I think I'll pass." Billy pointed to the wall. "You know Jake, you should decorate in here. Hang some pictures on your wish wall."

"Oh yeah Bill." Jake twisted off and tossed his cap. "I'll just run right down to the fuckin art store." Jake raised his eyebrow to Cal as he took a drink.

"You can start with this." Billy handed Jake the picture of Cal.

The bottle slowly came from Jake's mouth as his eyes fixed on the picture.

“Oh wow.” He said captivated.

Billy stepped closer. “Check it out. She was looking at you when I took this.”

Jake lifted his eyes to Cal, he smiled then looked back down to the picture. “Beautiful.”

Billy nodded slightly. “Yeah she is.”

“Thank you Billy. This is a great picture.” Jake walked over to Cal and kissed her.

Billy raised up his hands. “What about me Jake, I took the picture. I’m hurt.” Laughing at the irritated look he caused Jake, Billy moved to the door. “I’m turning in. Explosions, sharks, swimming ten miles, you two fighting. I’m exhausted. And . . . it’s only the beginning. Night guys.”

“Wait.” Jake called out. “Bill, shall I wake you up for a work out tomorrow morning?”

Billy laughed. He had too. “Um . . . I don’t think so. The invitation sounds really enticing. But unfortunately, I’m a city boy. I can’t compete with Mr. and Mrs Rambo. Guys I never made it completely through the ‘wimp’ level at that survival camp of yours.” He saw Jake laughing. “No, I’m serious Jake. The first time up there, ask Cal, I went home the second day because I had to go to the bathroom. No one told me there wasn’t a toilet.” He watched Jake lose his smile. “See. So I’ll just pass. Thanks anyhow.” He reached for the door again.

“Bill.” Again Jake stopped him. “Taking pictures and collecting your story is all well and fine. You have six months to do it. However, you need to regiment yourself here to make it. I have an agenda laid out for Cal and myself, you are more than welcome to join us.”

An open mouth, a silent chuckle came from Billy. “Thanks. You know what? I’ll watch you guys work out. I’m sure that’ll break a sweat. I can take a few pictures. Maybe I can do that. What time?”

“Five.” Jake answered.

“In the morning?” Billy asked. “Maybe not. Leave me a note where you’re at, I’ll find you.” With a smile, Billy lifted his hand in a wave and opened the door. “Goodnight.”

Jake’s head swayed when Billy left. “I have to work on him.” His eyes went to the picture. “I love this.”

“Whatever.” Cal shrugged watching Jake lay the picture down. She turned toward the bed and her eyes caught glimpse of it on the night stand. “Jake?” She lifted up the key ring with two keys on it. “What are these to? They aren’t our room keys.”

“Nope.” Jake drank his beer set it down and smiled. “Keys to storage.”

Cal grinned. “You got them already. You are so bad. I love it.”

“Yep. I am not trusting that asshole with the keys. Bet me he doesn’t realize they’re gone until next week.” He stepped to Cal and removed the keys from her

hand.

“So what were you doing talking to The Catch?”

“Who?”

“Judge. The Catch.”

“He is not the Catch.” Jake laid his hands on her hips. “Pretty boy is the catch.”

“Right Jake.” Cal felt herself being moved. “What are you doing?”

“Wanting to lay with you.” He undid her belt.

“You know what Billy says? Billy says the catch. was eaten by Jaws.”

“Then we’re in trouble if Billy’s right.” Jake tossed her belt, pulled Cal close and fell backwards to the bed. “Because if the shark ate The Catch, we’re gonna have to deal with one big shark.” Jake swung his legs up and adjusted his and Cal’s body on the bed. She laid on top of him.

“Did you locate the camera in our room yet?”

“Not yet.” Jake cleared his throat as he tried to speak soft. “No reason to. We can’t do anything anyhow. Mother nature has her no entry sign up.” After watching Cal close her eyes and shake her head, Jake let out a quiet chuckle, pulled Cal to his chest, kissed her gently on the head and then just held her.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
March 3<sup>rd</sup> - 10:15 p.m.

The control room grew dark, caused mainly by the fact that most of the monitors screens were dark. The participants, for the most part, were asleep early. Quiet, Greg whispered as he spoke to his two monitors on duty. Not even dressed up in business attire, Greg in sweats, was so shocked when he turned around and saw Aldo, quietly sitting in a chair watching. "Mr. Connilucci."

"Dr. Haynes." Aldo spoke, his eyes fixed.

"Waiting for the last one to go to sleep."

"Watching."

Greg turned to see one of the two monitors that showed a lit participants room. Billy's. Billy laid on his bed, his back propped on pillows. A bottle of Jack Daniels on his night stand. Billy poured a little into a glass and brought the glass to his lips as he lifted a photograph, that clearly showed was Cal. Long and hard he stared at it, set down his glass, dropped the arm that held the picture and plopped backwards into his pillows running his hand down his face.

Aldo raised a finger to the monitor. "If this young man is your ace in the hole. You're out of luck."

"Why do you say that. It's clear he's frustrated over his feelings."

"Yeah." Aldo agreed. "But I know people. And this kid, he's genuine. He's a good guy. He may be hung up on my girl, but he would never do anything about it. He's the type that would hang in the wings hoping."

"You're right." Greg said. "And would you say . . . Cal is the same way?"

"I know Cal. Even if she gets the urge, she has enough respect and love for Jake to stop it before it gets to a point that there's no turning back. So you see . . ." Aldo looked up at Greg. "Plans good. But you picked the wrong trio to put it in motion with. I'm confident you can't make them fit into your little soap opera scheme to break up my team."

"Soap opera scheme." Greg spoke as he moved by Aldo. He paused in his walking. "Mr. Connilucci. Let me just tell you. You're right. No matter what, there is nothing we can do to get Cal and Billy to that forbidden starting point. They have to do that on their own. However, we can pretty much control that they reach that finish line."

Aldo laughed loudly. "How?" So much sarcasm was in his voice. "You'd have to drug them."

Greg gave his signature smile and then walked out.

The so-sure grin dropped like a sand bag from Aldo's face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 4<sup>th</sup> - 7:15 a.m.

Cal's feet landed hard first into the soft sand, followed immediately by her rear-end as she fell backwards.

"You suck." Jake approached her. "Cal, you fell two feet shorter than where I landed on my worst attempt."

"Look at it this way Dick. You're two feet taller than me, so there."

"Oh I am not." Jake extended his hand to her. "Get up and do it again."

"You."

"I did. How many times did I fall for that, 'show me once more' thing. Let's go."

Cal tugged his hand lightly and pulled him. "Aldo said no playing 'From Here To Eternity'." She winked. "Wanna play Holden and Carr?"

"Oh yeah." Jake dropped to his knees in front of Cal, parted her legs slightly and kissing her, leaned her down, laughing, into the sand.

"Now see . . ." Billy voice precluded the click-click of his camera. "Jake." He neared them. "You failed to mention to me that this was the type of working out we'd be doing. If you had, I would have been game." Billy smiled and took another picture.

Jake brought himself up to his knees, grabbed Cal's hand and pulled her up as he stood. "Could you possibly have slept any later Bill?" Jake asked as he brushed the sand from Cal.

"Um . . . yeah." Billy said. "If Rickie and Lou weren't banging pots and pans in the unity circle alerting everyone that breakfast was done."

Jake cringed. "Please don't tell me Rickie cooked. He burnt pop tarts so bad in our toaster we had to replace it."

"Looks as if they did, Jake." Billy told him.

"Fuckin great." Jake shook his head. "It's hard enough to get Cal to eat as it is. You too for that matter."

"Hey now." Billy laughed "I'll have you know one of my three wishes was a six months supply of Ho-Ho's Jake. Which, Cal gets to have some as long as she shares her coffee. So nourishment is only an open closet away." Billy looked at them. "So are you guys done? I'll walk with you to breakfast."

"No you go on." Jake motioned his head. "We'll meet you there. Ready Cal? For room clean up."

Cal took her runners stance facing a hillside to her left. "You're on."

"Whoa." Billy stepped forward. "Uh . . . compounds over that way." He pointed to the other direction.

"Bill please." Jake told him. "We designated a longer route back. About a two mile run. Nothing much. Wanna race with us?"

"Yeah right." Bill laughed. "I'll just walk the short half mile or less back to the compound and wait."

"Suit yourself." Jake said. "Get ready Cal."

Cal was. "Twenty second head start?"

"You got it and . . . go."

Cal took off running.

Jake turned his head to Billy. "See ya."

"Jake, it's not twenty seconds."

Smiling, Jake took off running. "I lied."

^^^^

Reed set down the blow dryer on the commode and picked up a bottle of hair spray holding it to his just dried hair. He pumped it once, fixed a small section, then pumped the spray on the sides of his hair. "Oh yes." He spoke using his finger tips to smooth back the sides of his blonde hair. He then set down the bottle and picked up a hair pick. Grabbing small sections of the top of his hair, he proceeded to tease it until it stood straight up. He then sprayed it, lifted up a comb--while the hair spray was still damp--and gently styled the hair into a perfect, puffy tossed looked. He topped off his 'do' with an overcast of hold. "Perfect." He set down his hair care items and checked himself out in the mirror.

A black tape player sat on the back of the commode, Reed pressed play and grabbed a tube of lotion.

"*Good day.*" The deep male voice spoke on the player.

"Good day." Reed squeezed a small amount of pink lotion into the palm of his hand.

"*Let's build our confidence, shall we?.*" The man spoke nearly monotone.

"Let's."

"*My, you look perfect today.*"

"I look . . ." Reed poked his index finger into the lotion. "Perfect."

"*Wow, that hair. It's out of sight.*"

"My hair is the greatest." Reed proceeded to apply the lotion to his nipples.

"*People would kill for that body.*"

"I have an awesome body." Reed smiled as his nipples grew poking hard and shiny.

"*People like you.*"

"No, people love me."

"*You're special.*"

"I am special." Reed grinned at himself in the mirror, tilting his head from side to side to get a good profile view.

"*No one is better looking than you.*"

"No one . . ." Reed turned off the tape player. "Is better looking." He grabbed his button down shirt---never one that would go over his head in fear of messing up his hair--and he placed it on. He stopped one more time and looked at

himself in the mirror. "God, you are so hot." He took a shivering breath and left the bathroom.

^ ^ ^ ^

They placed a table at the front of the dining room before the cooking area, blocking it off. And Rickie and Lou had the table set up like a buffet line, with them being the greasy looking chefs.

Paul held the plate that Lou had given him. He showed it to Rickie who was serving. "Thanks."

"You're welcome guy. What would you like? Have a little bit of chocolate chip oatmeal." Rickie plopped the sticky substance on the plate. "We also have some crispy Porky Pig strips. Some scrambled chicken embryos . . ."

"Um . . ." Paul winced at the descriptions. "The oatmeal will be fine." He kept staring at his plate as he moved on.

"Come back for more, there's plenty." Rickie looked at Lou. "Dude, we're like the coolest cooking breakfast. We should start planning lunch."

"We should."

"Oh look." Rickie pointed the oatmeal covered spoon. "It's my psycho-pseudo parents."

Jake stopped cold when he saw Rickie and Lou behind the table at the end of the room wearing white dirty aprons. "Oh my God."

Billy stood from a table. "I waited on you guys. You took forever."

Cal widened her eyes, then cringed when Jake started complaining as they moved to the line.

"Tell her." Jake complained. "She's slowing up. I had to drag her that last little bit."

Billy looked at Cal with a 'sorry' look.

"And you didn't have to drag me Jake. You just charged full speed ahead." Cal pushed into him as they reached the food table. Just as she peered at the table, she smelled a sweet, almost fruity smell. She turned her head to it, and behind Billy was Reed. He wiggled his fingers in a wave to her. She waved back.

Billy told. "Jake." He grabbed Jake's attention away from the food. Billy twitched his head backwards toward Reed.

Jake huffed, pulled Cal to in front of him and proceeded to make himself and her a plate.

Jake felt as if he were back at the other experiment. He just wanted to sit with Cal and have his breakfast. He didn't mind that Billy joined sitting across, or even Rickie who sat on the other side of Cal. But did Lou--saving Cal or not--and that Reed person have to sit there as well? To Jake it was an open invitation to



everyone to have a group meal. And he huffed in irritation as Larry sat down too.

The sweet smell of Reed's hair perfume irked Jake, but not as much as the 'Pisst' sound Reed kept making. Jake looked up when he heard it for a third time. "What?" He blasted.

Reed shook his head slightly. "Not you." He pointed. "Cal. Cal."

Cal looked up and leaned in to see Reed around Jake. "Yes?"

"You really shouldn't place your hair in a band like that. It causes breakage. You have such great hair. I should know. I have studied under some of the best hair designers."

"Really?" Cal asked. "Wow, you're talented. Maybe you can do my hair while . . ."

"Hello." Jake said loudly and turned to Cal. "Face Billy." Jake then looked at Reed. "Do you see me sitting here?"

"Yes." Reed answered.

"Well think of it this way. I'm a wall. A wall that blocks you from her. Don't talk to my wife."

Cal gasped. "Jake!"

"Cal."

Billy chuckled. "This is so great." He lifted his spoon full of chocolate chip oatmeal. "You guys are entertain . . . ow!" he reached under the table and grabbed his shin that Cal kicked. "What?"

"You can be such an instigator." Cal told Billy. "First about the work out. Then Reed."

Larry leaned into the table, clearing his throat and getting Jake's attention. "Jake, I couldn't help but overheard what you said when you were in the food line. You know, if you want someone that can work out with you. I can. I know how frustrating it can be when someone can't keep up with you."

Cal's eyes widened. "Hey, I can keep up with my husband."

Larry snickered as he dug into his food. "Whatever."

"Jake." Cal nudged Jake's arm. "Say something."

"I'll work out with my wife. She keeps up rather well."

"The offer will stand." Larry said as he ate.

Cal was so offended maybe even mad, feeling almost as if another woman was hitting on Jake. "Kale-person. Why would you say that? Why would you . . . why would you even assume he'd want to work out with you?"

"Simple." Larry set down his fork and folded his hands. "There's just something a man is capable of doing better than a woman. And physically challenging exercise is one of them."

"You think?" Cal asked with edge,

"I know. I mean, let's face it. You look real cute coming in here with that ponytail, sweat dripping down you, but really Mrs. Graison, doesn't work out for you mean, spending extra long on your hair."

Cal gasped. "Fuck you for saying that."

“Cal, please.” Jake said softly. “He’s trying to get to you and you’re letting him. Let it go.”

“No I will not let it go. He’s insulting me.”

“I am not.” Larry stated. “I’m saying how I feel. If you take it as an insult. I apologize. And I have to say I’m surprised at this defensiveness. I would think if you feel I insulted you, your husband would say something to me.”

“I don’t need Jake to defend me.”

“You need him to do everything else. Train you. Talk for you. Get your food. Say who you speak to and who you don’t. I thought you were his puppet.” Larry snickered and picked up his fork. “He certainly pulls the string when it comes to dragging you along.”

Billy called Jake’s name in a whisper. “Aren’t you gonna say something to this asshole?”

“Nope.” Jake replied. “If I do, am I’m merely giving him what he wants. Let Cal handle it. She can.”

Billy nervously looked at Cal. “Cal, just ignore him. O.K.?”

“Yeah you’re right.” Cal returned to her food.

“There you go.” Larry held up his hand. “Proving my point. Yet, another man tells you what to do. For woman who’s so confident that she can keep up with a man, acts like she can keep up with a man, comes in here trying to show everyone she’s Mrs. Physical, you certainly let men control you.”

“Tell me something,” Cal looked at him. “Is there a reason you’re provoking this?”

“Nope.”

Cal rolled her eyes. “I know exactly why. You’re insulted that Jake wouldn’t work out with you. That he turned you down.”

“I’m a little shocked yes. Let’s face it. There are things I can do better than you.”

“Like what?”

“Anything physical.”

“Wanna bet? Name a challenge.”

Larry laughed. “What do you weigh. A hundred pounds? Challenge me when you grow up.”

“Dude.” Rickie set his fork down hard, “I’ve been like listening here. But insult my mom one more time and I’ll get pissed.” He saw Larry snicker at him. “Don’t make me go monster on you guy.”

“I’m sorry I insulted your mom.” So snidely Larry looked at Cal. “I apologize. I have gone overboard. Sure . . .” He sat back. “You want to challenge me. Sure why not. We’ll compete. Name it.”

“No.” Cal shook her head with confidence. “You name it. You’re so cocky and arrogant that you’re better. You name the one thing that you think for sure you can beat me in and we’ll compete.”

“All right.” Larry smiled. “Sparing.”

Amongst the eruption of moans at the table, Cal spoke up. "You're on."

Larry again, laughed at her. "All right sure little lady. No. I can't do that to you. I'm a black belt."

"So what. I'm serious. You're on. Lets do it. Cause I know I'll kick your ass."

Billy saw the seriousness on Larry's face. He saw contemplation. "Jake."

Jake pushed his chair from the table. "Excuse us." He took hold of Cal's arm. "Come here." He pulled her from the table. "Cal, what are you doing."

"Challenging him."

"To a sparring match?"

"Yeah. Why?" Cal asked. "Jake, you taught me."

"Yes, I know. And I think you can kick his ass. But Cal . . . he's a man. If he hits you, it's gonna hurt."

"You don't think I can take him hitting me?"

"No. I don't think *I* can take him hitting you."

Cal placed her hands on her hips and looked over at the smug Larry. "Come on Jake. Support me here. Let me do this. It's only sparring anyhow. No one really hits hard in sparring. Let me do this and shut him up."

"Cal . . ."

"Jake. Please. He may not do it anyhow. Sparring Jake. *You* spar with me. Come on."

After a long breath and a glance at Larry, Jake looked at Cal. "All right. But if it gets out of hand, I break it up."

"Promise me you won't do that until you know I can't handle it any longer." She didn't get an answer. "Promise me."

"O.K., I promise." He laid his hand on her back and led her to the table.

Larry watched Cal smile as she sat down. "Not allowed?"

"No, not at all." Cal said causing Billy to immediately look at Jake. "He's fine with it. But . . . I don't have to worry about it. You're so chivalrous you wouldn't fight me anyhow. Perhaps . . . a little sacred just incase I'd beat you."

Larry tossed his napkin. "You're on. Let's go." He stood up.

"Now?" Cal stood also. "All right. To the beach. Let's go."

"Jake." Billy scolded "Don't let this happen."

Jake looked at Billy as he rose from his seat. "What am I gonna do?"

"Stop it."

Jake swayed his head, almost as if at a loss, and he followed behind Cal who was eager to head out the door.

By the time Billy--who had lagged behind trying to think of something--arrived at the beach, Cal and Larry were encircled by everyone. Billy moved nearer and stood by Jake. "What's gonna happen."

"They'll spar. That's all spar. Taps. That's all."

Billy nodded, watching Cal take one type of fighter stand, and Larry remove his shirt and take another. Slowly Billy brought his hand toward his eyes.

Reed's, "ding-ding" Sound signaled the commencement of the fight.

Cal stood more stationery, pivoting her body as Larry danced around her.

"Come on, let's see what you got." Larry taunted, jabbing out to her and getting his punch blocked. "Whoa. Nice." Another attempt at a punch and another block. This time Cal followed it up with a kick and Larry snatched up her foot holding her for a second then releasing her with a toss backwards. Cal fell into the sand and Larry laughed.

Jake's arms folded tighter to his body, his heart pounded and through his clenched jaws he beckoned her name. "Cal. Come on."

Cal dusted herself off and stood taking her stand again. It was her turn to throw a punch, and Larry blocked it, tossing one of his own unsuccessfully.

It was evident that Larry was getting frustrated and wanted to end the slow moving match. Thinking he could, he started to toss his punches, one, two, three, quickly and without stopping at Cal. Her arms went up swiping his hits away just as steady as he threw them, and when he took a split second to pause, that was when Cal spun around with a kick, brushing her foot against the side of his face and taking him by surprise.

It wasn't hard kick. It wasn't intended to be. But it angered Larry out of his fighting dance. As he brought his head up, he reached forward, grabbed Cal by the shirt and punched her hard. She flew back in a spin and landed face down in the ground.

Cal shook her head and watched a bead of blood fall from her nose to the sand. Lifting herself slowly, she ran her hand under her nose.

The muscles on the side of Jake's face twitched predominantly and his arms folded so tight he could have crushed his own chest.

"Enough." Billy approached Jake. "Stop this. Stop this now."

"I can't." Jake said through clenched teeth and frustrated. "I promised my wife."

"Well I didn't." Billy stormed to the circle.

An exhale of relief came from Jake along with a smile as he watched Billy walk up to Cal and help her up.

"Cal, it's over."

Cal stood up. "What are you doing?"

"Ending this." Billy told her, lifting the edge of his tee shirt and wiping the blood from her. "I don't care if you get mad at me. I'm not letting this continue."

So arrogant Larry stood there. "See Cal. Again a man tells you what to do. The women's liberation must hate you."

Billy saw Cal lunging for him and he blocked her, then faced Larry. "It's over." It told Larry. "Knock it off."

"Let her decide. She asked for this." Larry scoffed at Billy and stepped to Cal.

Billy shoved him back. "Stay away from her." As soon as Larry regained his footing from the push, he pivoted quickly and with a short rev, elbow shot Billy hard to the side of the face, knocking him to the ground.. Perhaps it wasn't in Larry's best interest at that moment to look down at Billy, or even take that second to laugh. Maybe if he didn't he would have seen it coming. Cal, in a charging, outraged run, leaped at him, her leg straight, arms and fist close to her, and she blasted Larry in his chest, foot first with the entire weight of her body. He flew back from the force falling backwards into the sand.

Cal's leap ended as she landed in the sand just above his head. She rolled herself out of the momentum of the flying kick and dove back to Larry, grabbing him by his hair and lifting his head. Gripping hold of his arm, and using the aid of her foot under his back, she quickly rolled him onto his stomach. In a flash, her one leg straddled his back, and her other knee dug hard into his lower back arching him up as she braced his head. With a gruff whisper she spoke with her lips so close to his ear. "Don't think for one second I wasn't taught how to break your neck. Concede."

Larry didn't, he just grunted.

Cal gripped tighter, choking even him more and kneeling harder into him. "Concede."

There was another moment of silence as Larry, face purple and red, felt his air leaving him. Then with a painful grunt, he weakly called out. "I quit."

Cal dropped him and stood up and walked over to a downed Billy.

Smiling at Rickie's singing chant of 'you got beat by a girl' to Larry, Jake, in a calm excited way, clenched his fist with a 'yes', stepped over Larry and proceeded to help Cal with Billy who was out cold.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Los Angeles, CA  
March 4<sup>th</sup> - 8:25 a.m.

Ron Douglass sipped his glass of orange juice, sitting across from Aldo on the patio of the cafe. "When are you heading back? You have a business."

"I know." Aldo brought his coffee up to his lips. "Today maybe. I feel like I need answers."

"Aldo." Douglass leaned in toward the table. "The experiment just started. Nothing is going to happen. You aren't going to miss anything."

"That's easy for you to say, you live in LA. No, I would have believed that statement had the yacht not exploded."

Slowly Douglass leaned back in the chair. "You think the experiment did that."

"Most definitely."

"For what purpose?" Douglass asked. "What purpose is it going to serve to kill a participant or two that early in the game?"

"Money." Aldo said.

"How in the world is it going to get them more . . . money." Douglass' eyes raised. "Billy Griffith."

"Mighty convenient that he's on that island and now he's an unwitting participant."

"Not too mention they have plans for him." Douglass saw the look in Aldo's eye. "Is this why you're staying?"

"I'm worried. And that's why I came to see you." Aldo folded his hands. "You know marriage. Haynes said something last night. He implied . . . he implied that he was going to use a drug or something on Cal and Billy to get them to cross boundaries that they wouldn't otherwise cross."

Douglass laughed loudly. "Aldo, please. Come on, you're a smart man. The so called 'Spanish Fly' does not exist."

"What if they have something. This is a scientific research institute. Suppose they do. Suppose they have this. What if it works? Douglass, as an expert in this field, what will it do to my team?"

Douglass had to think about it. "Does Jake know of this drug or doesn't he?"

"Let's say . . . he doesn't."

"He'll get angry. Hurt. I don't see Jake . . . I don't see Jake killing Billy. It all will depend how he finds out. Does he find them?" Douglass whistled. "Does someone tell him? I think ultimately though, I'm going to go with what I said before. Jake spent his whole life never expecting to find love. Never wanting love or letting down those walls. He let down those walls with Cal. He's not going to easily put them back up. He's a man who doesn't give up the fight. I'm certain he won't give up Cal." Douglass broke into a slight chuckle. "Actually, I can see him

up there starting his own therapeutic sessions with her to work it out.”

Aldo breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you. Because if they are gonna try to make this happen, they are gong to try to do it early. Despite what Haynes says about no set rules on when he’s doing things, they have to wear them down mentally first.”

“Oh most definitely, or the physical stuff just won’t hold the impact if they aren’t drawn another way. And I think that part of the mental endurance will be tossed at them right away. If it works, if they cause a major strain early on between Cal and Jake, how good will they be for the rest of the experiment as a team.”

“Not very. And that’s what worries me. That and that so-called drug.”

“Aldo. You’re forgetting one important thing. The experiment must let you know what they plan on doing in the mental phase. Just ask Haynes if there really is a drug. He has to tell you.”

“I can do that.” Aldo ran his fingers over his mustache. “But if there is, do I want to know?”

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island  
March 4<sup>th</sup> - 8:30 a.m.

Running at a comfortable speed, Rickie stopped on the path he followed. A path that went through the trees. He looked at his extended hand, all wet and the popsicle stick he held. With a whining stomp, Rickie spun back around and ran back the way he just came from.

^ ^ ^ ^

With a black pouch, Jake stepped quickly from his bungalow, down the steps in one stride and moved in a hurry across the unity circle to Billy's bungalow. He knocked once on the door, announcing his entrance. "Billy?"

"Come in." Billy called back.

Jake slowed in his walk inside, not only when he saw Paul standing in Billy's room, but Paul shaking and holding this long stick over the flame of a candle. Paul shook it and chanted something softly. So oddly Jake's eyes shifted as he neared closer. "What's uh . . . going on."

Paul removed the little sack on the end of the stick and blew out the candle. "Here Billy, keep this with something you hold close to your heart. Tuck it away until you can no longer smell the sweet scent of it. That means the evil spirits no longer pursue you."

"Thanks." Billy smiled and took the pouch. He opened up the right hand drawer to his dresser, photos were in there. He laid the sack under a picture of Cal.

Jake cleared his throat. "So uh . . . we're doing magic are we?"

"Yes." Paul answered and collected his things. "My people believe that if someone has it against you, the evil spirits dwell upon that and feed on that, following you."

"Who has it out for him?" Jake asked.

"I overheard Lawrence stating he will get even with Billy."

Jake laughed. "For what?"

"For causing him humiliation."

Jake hid his snicker. "Um . . . did anyone inform him that he was the one that hit Billy."

"Yes." Paul said. "Unfortunately he sees Billy as the reason that Cal did what she did to him. And since, let's face it, he can not go after her . . ." Paul pointed his hand out to Jake. "He'll go after him."

"And we're doing magic to stop it?" Jake asked.

"Yes."

"O.K." Jake turned his head and opened his mouth with rolled eyes. He regained his composure and stood up. "Ready Billy?" Jake held up the pouch then set it on the night stand.

"Yes. Where's my Jack?" Billy sought out the bottle.



“Bill, come on it’s not even nine in the morning. Be a man.”

“I’d rather be a drunk, Jake.” Billy sat on the bed. “Hey, uh, Paul here gave me something for the bruising.”

Jake quickly looked at Paul. “You what?”

“Well, it’s an herb.” Paul answered. “Billy took quite a shot to the side of the face. It stops bruising and swelling. As you can see, it worked.”

Jake walked to Billy tilting his head. “Hey, it’s not purple. What do you do? Sprinkle it on?”

Paul chuckled. “No, it’s ingested. Works quickly. I would like to offer some to your wife so her eyes don’t get black.”

Jake merely glared up. “No, that’s O.K. Thanks.”

Paul with his things in his arms moved to the door. “If she changes her mind.”

“Yeah, we’ll let you know.”

Paul nodded before he left. “And Billy, take the second dose in an hour.”

Jake waited for the door to shut and he faced Billy with a quick swat to the back of his head.

“Ow. Hey, Jake. What?” Billy grabbed his bottle and took a swig.

“I cannot believe you took a medicine he gave you. What the fuck? What if it was poison.”

“Jake, come on. Why would he want to kill me? There’s no reward on my head.” Billy took another drink and Jake removed the bottle from his mouth.

“Let’s do this.” Jake lifted up the pouch and unzipped it.

“Jake, you said my face isn’t purple. Paul fixed it.”

“Unfortunately, he didn’t close the cut. I have too.”

Billy cringed and reached for his bottle, Jake smacked his hand. “Jake.”

“Bill, this will only take a second.” Jake pulled out a packaged of gauze and ripped it open, laying it paper down on the night stand. He then pulled a small bottle out of the pouch, twisted the cap and lifted out a dropper. “Tilt your head.” Laying his huge hand on Billy, Jake pushed Billy’s head to the side. He picked up the gauze keeping it under the gash, then he placed tip of the dropper near it. “It’ll hurt for a . . .”

“Ow!”

“Billy, please.” Jake scolded, catching the dripping of medication that mixed with blood as it ran down Billy’s face. Jake added another drop of the fluid, got another squeal from Billy, then placed the gauze on Billy’s face. “Hold this.”

Billy watched as Jake replaced the bottle into the pouch, pulling out afterwards another paper package. When Jake ripped open that package, he saw Jake lift from it, an already prepared suture needle complete with sutures. “Oh shit. Please tell me after you’re done with me, I’ll be able to be on television again. Is this going to hurt.”

“No. You’re numb.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” Jake brought the needle to his face.

“No I’m . . . hey.” Billy smiled. “I can’t feel my cheek.”

“See. Now can I do this? Thank you.”

“Jake, how is it that you know what to bring, what to use and how to do this?”

Jake hesitated in inserting the needle into Billy’s skin. He looked into the eyes that watched him, then Jake looked at the cut. “I just do. Field experience. Now quit moving so I can get this done.” Leaning into Billy, Jake began to stitch his cheek.

^^^

On that path, Rickie ran again. Faster this time and with a smiling look of determination. He made it just little bit further than the he had the last time before he stopped again. He looked down at his wet popsicle stick holding hand, whined loudly again. And with a stomp of his foot, he spun back around and ran back up that path.

^^^

Jake shut off the water in the bathroom, then grabbing a hand towel from the rack. He dried his hands as he walked back into Billy’s room. Billy was pouring a glass of Jack Daniels. “What did I tell you. And . . . you haven’t a clue what Indian man gave you. No drinking.” Jake took the bottle and glass. “Now. Before anymore is said. I want to thank you.”

Billy looked up at him. “For what? Getting knocked out.”

“That was pretty funny . . . I mean, you took a chivalrous shot.”

“I never saw it coming.”

“That too.” Jake folded his arms. “You know Billy, I can help you with that.”

“Thinking about it now, that may not be a bad idea.”

“Excellent.” Jake grinned. “Anyhow. Thank you for stepping in. Cal and I have this trust. I couldn’t break my promise, even though I wanted to. God, did I want to. So you did, and I am very grateful for that.”

“I’m glad you are. Right now, I’m not.” Billy stood up and walked over to his dresser. “I can’t believe Cal had to defend me like that.”

“Yeah.” A smile graced Jake’s face. “She’s fuckin awesome when she does shit like that. Man, I’ll tell ya Bill. When I see her do that, she makes me . . . makes me . . .”

Billy lifted his lowered head up in question to Jake.

Jake cleared his throat. “She uh, pushes me to the verge of finding myself in

an anatomically embarrassing situation..” He cleared his throat again, looked serious then smiled.

“Well I’m glad you were able to find sexual arousal in my pain.”

Chuckling, Jake grabbed his pouch. “I’m gonna get going, I have something really special planned for Cal and I right now.”

“Was the moment spawned by what happened today?”

“You can say that.” Jake reached for the door. “So don’t keep her too long. Send her home after you talk.”

“Jake!” Billy called out stopping him. “I can’t face Cal.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to see her.”

“Don’t even tell me you’re mad at her.” Jake questioned.

“No, embarrassed to face her. I . . . I . . . can’t. Just not now.”

Jake scoffed at him. “What is it? Your pride?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Oh you’re being fuckin stupid.” Jake tossed his arm at him. “I’ll send her in.”

“Jake no.” Billy’s eyes pleaded. “Not yet. O.K.? I feel really bad about what happened. Not yet.”

Jake took a moment to look at Billy. “All right.” He looked down at his watch. “I’ll take care of my business with her and then send her over. Get over this pride thing by then. She’s persistent.” Jake reached for the door. “And uh, Billy. The cheek scar.” Jake gave a thumbs up and opened the door.

“Oh my God.” With Jake’s comment, Billy raised his eyes to look in the mirror, touched his injury and grabbed the bottle of Jack.

“Jake.” Cal rushed him as soon as he pulled the door closed.

“Cal.”

“Is he all right?”

“Yep. Let’s go.” Jake grabbed her hand. “I have something special planned for us.” Jake winked. “You kind of put me in the mood when you kicked Larry’s ass.”

“Oh yeah?” Cal smiled holding Jake’s hand. “Gonna seduce me?”

“Cal please.” Jake briefly closed his eyes. “You know my theory on that. There’s a reason your body goes through what it does once a month. And trust me when I tell you, intimacies are just not supposed to occur during that time.” Jake pulled her hand. “Let’s go.”

“Uh-oh.” Cal resisted. “You’re not wanting something one sided are you?”

“Cal . . . please. In all our years when have I ever been like that?”

“But you said, something special and you’re in the mood.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I get it, It’s a Jake thing. Something physical. O.K. But . . .” Cal pulled

her hand from his. "I want to talk to Billy first." She spun to knock.

"Cal, he doesn't want to talk to you right now. Not yet."

Cal lowered her hand and looked at Jake. "What do you mean?"

Jake's eyes shifted. "I thought I was pretty clear."

"You're an ass. I mean why?"

Jake shrugged. "He just doesn't."

"Oh you're lying, you just want me to do whatever sick Jake thing you have planned."

"Cal."

Cal knocked on the door. "Billy? Can I come in?"

Billy hesitated before he called out. "Cal, not just now. O.K.?"

"Billy, let me in." Cal knocked again.

"See Cal." Jake reached up and pulled her back. "And you insinuated that I lied. Shame on you. Let's go."

Cal smacked Jake's hand away. "Billy." She called out again. "Open the fuckin door."

"Oh nice. Very nice." Jake commented then received a glare from Cal.

Billy called out from his bungalow. "Cal, can you just come back later. Please?"

Jake tossed his hands up. "Cal, let him go. Come back later to do your Laverne and Shirley antics with him."

With hesitation, Cal stepped from the door. "All right. And . . . Jake, which one am I? Laverne or Shirley?"

"You're tough. You're definitely Laverne." Jake walked away from Billy's place with Cal and he looked back. "And that one is definitely Shirley."

^^^

In the control center on the island, Stan peered down with authority to Rickie as if he were looking at his five year old niece. "Rickie no."

"Dude, come on."

"Rickie you can't . . ."

"Dude, check this out," Rickie said with a snicker as he held up his hand. "Check out my fingers. They're like, stuck together," Rickie laughed as he spread his fingers apart after a sticky struggle. "Cool huh. So like, can I?"

"No. You can not have another popsicle. That makes five Rickie. How many have you eaten?"

"Guy, like they keep melting."

"Eat them here."

"I can't. Come on." Rickie watched Stan shake his head. "I'll tell on you."

"Nope."

"I'll turn monster."

Stan rolled his eyes. "That doesn't frighten me Rickie. Get over it."

"One more."

"No."

"Please?" Rickie begged.

"No."

"I'll take green one this time. Dude . . . I'll let you have one of the root beer flavors. Come on, what do you say. Be a bud."

Stan huffed out. "All right. But if it melts, no more."

"Got it. I'll run real fast." Rickie smiled as he watched Stan move toward a freezer. "Aren't you like glad you're my Mr. Rourke."

"Who?" Stan handed Rickie a popsicle.

"Mr. Rourke guy. Fantasy Island. De plane boss. De Plane." Rickie laughed, Stan did not. "Guy, lighten up. I liked you better when you were like a flunky at the toot."

"I'm fun now."

"Prove it. Come and party with me an Louie-Louie tonight."

"I can't." Stan walked over to the freezer and pulled himself out a popsicle. "I have monitor duty tonight."

"Can I watch with you? I'll do commentating."

Stan thought about it. "I'll clear it with Dr. Haynes. Check back."

"O.K. thanks. And I'll steal some beer off the big guy." Rickie hurried to the door. "I'd hang a little more guy, but I have to go before the drip factor occurs. See ya." Rickie took off running.

Stan chuckled and sat down to enjoy his root beer flavored popsicle.

~~~~~

Sitting on the bed, Cal watched Jake, so excited pull a medium size black bag out of the closet. "Jake."

"O.K." Jake closed the closet. He walked over to the desk, grabbed a chair and slid it over near the bed laying the black bag on it. "Remember this bag?"

"Yeah. You called it your surprise goodie bag and wouldn't let me see what was inside."

"You didn't peek did you?"

"No." Cal shook her head.

"Good." Jake unzipped the bag. "I was going to save this for later. But . . . I can't. After today you deserve to have this now."

"Is it a present for me?"

"Yep."

Cal shuffled in excitement. "And I get it now?"

"Yep." Jake reached his hand into the bag. "I'll give it to you. But we'll probably not move into that phase until a little later. You might as well see it. It's part of your Stasis training."

The excited look dropped from Cal's face. "Stasis training."

"Oh yeah Cal. As soon as I heard we were coming back, I started to come up with a Stasis training regiment. We might as well take out the son of bitch early since we know how. And I designed something. Had two made, one for me and one for you. It'll make our battle easy. Here you go., Happy experiment." With a kiss to her cheek, and a look of pride, Jake pulled the item from the bag and laid it in Cal's hand.

Less than enthusiastic Cal looked at it. A knife, but odd looking. It had a long silver handle. Maybe eight inches long, three across. A rim at the top where the blade was and it wasn't much of a blade that protruded. The sharp object was no wider than a pocket knife. Narrow, pointed and short. "Jake, good job."

"You look confused."

"Hon." Cal tried to seem impressed. "Are you sure this is going to take down a seven foot indestructible beast. Maybe they got your measurements wrong."

"Huh?" Jake looked oddly at her. "Oh. Cal. You're being facetious. Watch." Into the bag he reached again taking out a Styrofoam head with a face drawn on.

"Cute." Cal pointed.

The head had a neck and part shoulders attached, Jake held it to her. "Now, how do you kill a Stasis?"

"Get close enough to it to sever the brain stem." Cal answered.

"Exactly. Watch." Jake grabbed her weapon and placed it in the back of the neck of the Styrofoam demonstrator.

Cal hummed. "O.K."

"Ye of little faith." Jake grinned, shifted his thumb to the end of the handle and with a clicking sound, the Styrofoam head popped high in the air when from the handle of the little knife came a thick blade. "Ha! A Jake guillotine."

Cal shrieked with excitement. "Jake, that is the coolest thing."

"It is." He retracted the blade with a button on the side of the handle. "The smaller object secures the stem and then the blade cuts right through."

"Oh wow." Cal took the knife back, stood up and extended it out. "Ha!" She clicked out the large blade, laughed, retracted it, swung about the knife like a sword and ejected the blade again. "This is so great."

Jake looked proudly and pleased as if watching a child with a toy. "I knew you'd like it. I thought we could make our own dummy stasis and train."

"I'd love it." As Cal turned around to face Jake she saw him looking elsewhere. "What's wrong?"

"Speaking of a Stasis. Rickie." Jake pointed toward the window and moved to the door. "He blew me off today."

"Blew you off for . . ." Before Cal knew it, Jake was out the door. "What?" She retracted the large blade again, laid the object on the bed and followed Jake out.

"Rickie." Jake stormed to him.

"Sarge, not now look." Rickie held up the popsicle that still had about an

inch worth of enjoyment on it. "I have to get this to my body guard." Rickie kept moving toward Lou's bungalow.

"You blew me off this morning Rickie. You know you aren't supposed to."

"Sarge, like I ran ten times back and forth to the Control center, that equals twenty miles guy."

"How fast?" Jake asked as Rickie went to the porch.

"Top speed last time."

"All right. But you aren't off the hook. Give your . . . wait a second. Bodyguard?"

"Yeah." Rickie knocked on Lou's door and Lou answered. "Here you go guy. Lime." He gave Lou what was left of the popsicle.

"Thanks." Lou smiled and took it.

"Rickie . . ."

"Jake." Cal ran up to the porch.

"Cal." Jake held his hand out to her. "Rickie why do you need body guard."

"Cause like Sarge, it's cool. Lou-ster do your bodyguard look."

Lou crossed his arms over his stomach and glared. Rickie shrieked and jumped behind Jake.

Jake let out a breath of annoyance at Rickie's laughing. "Rickie. Go wash your hands and get ready. Give me twenty minutes of your precious time."

"Eye-eye. Sarge." Rickie stepped into Lou's bungalow.

Jake turned around on the porch to Cal. "You know what Cal? You should . . ."

"What are you up to?" Cal asked as Jake walked off the porch by her.

"Just something Rickie and I have to do."

"Jake, I'm a little jealous. Last experiment, you didn't leave my side." Cal hurried to catch up to him. "And why are we heading to Billy's. He hates me right now."

"He doesn't hate you and I'd still prefer you not to be alone. But I have to do this with Rickie. So stay with Billy until I get back."

"You're pawning me off." Cal complained.

Jake stopped walking. "Are you . . . are you whining?"

"No."

"You are. And it's extremely unbecoming and not you. Knock it off. You're bitching that I'm leaving you alone. I recall last experiment you bitched that I wouldn't leave you alone. At least this experiment you have others to watch out for you besides me." Jake stepped on Billy's porch. "And I'm using one of those options now."

"He won't let me in."

"Sure he will."

"No he won't."

"Watch." Jake knocked on the door.

"Yeah?" Billy spoke funny, almost like he had toothpaste in his mouth. He

re-wrapped the cloth that held the powder herbal that Paul had given him for his bruising and swelling. He had just added that pinch under his tongue to let it dissolve slowly as Paul had suggested.

"Billy." Jake called out. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah, just a . . ." Billy picked up his glass of Jack and took a drink to rinse that herbal down. He cringed. "Minute." He walked to the door.

Jake looked at Cal when he heard the door unlock. "There you have it."

Cal smiled, tip toed up and kissed Jake on the cheek. "Thanks." She turned the knob of Billy's door and walked in. Billy was standing at his dresser. Quietly she shut the door and stepped down the single step into the room. "Hey."

Gripping the edge of the dresser, Billy in shock, looked up. "Cal?" He grunted and turned away. "I'm killing Jake."

"And I'm hurt." She walked up to behind him. "And why are you drinking this early in the morning. You'll be hung over by lunch." She moved the bottle and glass out of the way. "Billy? Are you in pain?"

He gave a soft chuckle. "You could say that."

"Are you mad at me or something?"

"No. At myself. I feel . . . I feel like such a loser right now." He lifted his head slightly when he heard Cal laugh. "That makes you laugh?"

"No." Behind him she stood reaching around and laying her hand on top of his. "What's wrong huh?"

Billy shook his head.

"Why don't you want to see me?" Cal asked softly. "Billy, thank you for what you did for me today."

Billy shifted his eyes to her hand. He separated his fingers slowly allowing room for her fingers to slip in between his. He took a shivering breath, moving his index finger enough to lift up and brush against hers.

Cal rested her chin on his shoulder speaking near his ear. "Thanks for coming to my rescue . . . my . . . hero . . . my . . ." She snickered. "Knight in shining armor."

"Cal." Billy swayed his head and moved to his left then stepped back. "It's not funny. O.K.? I feel really bad."

"Why?"

"I'm embarrassed. How you gonna look at me now."

"This is a macho thing." Cal pointed as she stepped to him. "Get over it. God Billy even Macho Jake doesn't get embarrassed when I step in."

"Has Jake ever been knocked out?"

"Well . . . no." She saw Billy's head drop to the side. "Billy, we're friends. Don't be like this." Close to him she drew. "Do you think maybe because you're drinking it's making things worse. You tend to exaggerate everything when you drink."

Billy nodded in agreement. "You're probably right."

“And . . . Jake has faith in you. He’s running around doing something secret with Rickie and he made you in charge of me. Of course, he doesn’t realize how much you’ve been drinking.”

“I’m O.K. I’m not drunk.”

“Good then. Give me a hug and you and I will go outside, hang out on the porch and make fun of the remaining participants.”

With a slight laugh Billy stepped to Cal and she placed her arms around his neck. He hesitated. His embrace not as tight as it could have been. He thought Cal noticed because when she stepped back, she had a curious look on her face. “What?” He asked.

“I just . . . I just realized how different that hug was.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh don’t be. It’s not your fault. It’s me. I realized how . . . and please don’t tell Jake I said this. Please.”

The corner of Billy’s mouth raised. “What are you talking about?”

“The hug. Jake is so . . . so big, that we don’t hug normally. It’s like the first time in really long time I didn’t have to sit, or lay down to feel that closeness. It was neat.”

Billy smiled. “Well then anytime you need to get that fix just . . .” Billy’s words were stopped when Cal embraced him again. He felt her chest press against him. Her face so near to his. A shock went through him and his hands warmly gripped to her back, pulling her closer, sliding up to hold her. He wanted to hold her like that and not let go, but a part of Billy was so afraid she would feel how fast his heart was beating. His nose brushed against the softness of her hair and his eyes closed tightly. And just as Billy’s hand moved up her back under her hair, and his mouth parted with a ‘wanting’ close to her cheek, he caught himself. Caught himself slipping uncontrollably into a moment that really wasn’t. Billy pulled back running his fingers through his hair. He smiled at her awkwardly.

Cal returned the smile and spoke in a clueless, upbeat way. “That was nice.”

“Any . . .” Billy watched her move to the door. “Did I just scare you away.”

Cal turned to face him. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re just leaving.”

“No I’m not. I just told you, ‘let me go make you some coffee, I’ll be back and we’ll sit on your porch.’”

Billy blinked several times. “W . . . when did you tell me that?”

Cal let out a huff. “God you can be like Jake. When we hugged. I’ll be right back.” She walked out.

“When we hugged?” Billy scratched his head and moved his eyes to the Jack Daniels. “Man, I’m done drinking for today.”

^^^

Reed reached down and removed a small strand of hair from Cal’s face as he

stood before her and Billy, one leg on a step, leaning in while conversing. "So that's when I was nominated."

Cal slightly shook her head. "Wow. And when did your article get published."

"About four years ago, I'm surprise you didn't read it."

"Yeah." Cal sipped her coffee. "If you have it I'd like to read it. I never read a Pulitzer prize winning article by someone I knew."

"I have it with me. I'll find it." Reed said with a smile and a toss of his hair. "And are you sure I can't give you some of that make up for the black eyes. It works wonderfully to cover up. I use it for my blemishes."

"Positive." Cal looked cross at Billy who snickered. "Jake hates when I wear too much make up. Besides, trust me, these black eyes are a turn on to Jake."

"How weird." Reed commented. "Well if you need it. I have it. And, I would like you to think about something. I paint. And you have great bone structure. I would love for you to pose for me."

Before Cal said anything, Billy did. "You paint too. An airline pilot, model, writer, painter? Kind of a lot to be good at."

"Billy." Cal gasped out. "Please, people can be multi talented."

"O.K." Billy glanced at Reed. "How athletic are you?"

"Very. Why?"

"See how fast you can run, because I just heard her husband yelling at Rickie." Even before Billy finished his sentence, Reed was gone.

"That wasn't nice." Cal told him. "And you insulted him."

"Cal, he's lying."

"Why. Because he is very talented. Billy, people can be that way. David Martinez was that way. He taught. He wrote, played guitar, sang, wrote songs, acted in a theater group, fixed . . ."

"Cal." Billy stopped her. "Name one more David praise and I tell Jake you're glorifying him."

"Tattle tale."

"Yeah." Billy drank his coffee, nudged Cal with his shoulder and chuckled. He took another sip, feeling himself sobering up. And he was grateful for that. The last thing he needed was for Jake to return and find him inebriated. Of course Billy was still confused on the oddness of his inebriation. He had never felt so euphoric. He merely chalked it up to his being knocked unconscious and he realized how bad of an idea it was after all, to drink when he probably had a concussion.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

March 4th 8:00 p.m.

Watching the tape for the tenth time of Billy holding Cal made Aldo's mind slip back into a time in his life that he had nearly forgotten about. Newly married, he treated his wife--so he thought--like gold. Showering her with whatever she needed. Buying her the first house she ever lived in. But Aldo, in the midst of becoming successful, failed in one aspect of his marriage. He failed to be there. Perhaps that was why when he found out his wife had an affair with a small time casino manager, Aldo wasn't surprised. Angered, yes. Hurt, extremely. But he loved his wife, as he knows Jake loves Cal. And through working it out and learning, Aldo stayed married. Of course, he couldn't see Jake handling Billy like Aldo handled that casino manager. Jake for sure wouldn't have Billy witness his own castration moments before being shot in the head. A smile glossed over Aldo's face thinking of that manager, and how that manager always wanted to be involved with Casinos. And he would be forever, laying in multi pieces under the now MGM grand.

"Aldo." Greg caught his attention.

"Oh I'm sorry."

"Quite all right." Greg shut off the tape. "Let me explain how it works.":

Aldo slumped. He didn't really want to hear it.

Greg paced. "The Adrenal Cortex secretes the hormone that stimulates sexual arousal. Though we can not do anything to begin that secretion, we can however aid in the amount of secretion once it starts. Understand?"

"Yes. Like a roller coaster, they need to push the cart up the hill, but once it reaches it . . ."

"They are out of control and they fly to the bottom. Yes." Greg nodded. "We were given the initial drug by a fertility and sexuality study group who couldn't get approval to test it here in the states. So after a few adjustments of our own on, we've joined research forces with that institute and are handling the testing of it." Greg clapped his hands.

"It works?"

"I believe it does, yes."

"Was Billy given that drug. He had a look in his eye."

Greg tossed his hands in the air as he walked over and sat next to Aldo. He leaned toward him in a secretive sneaky way talking in a whisper. "It's hard to say Aldo. See . . .we don't control when or how they get it."

Aldo quickly turned his head to Greg, looking at his eyes that barely blinked. "What do you mean? Aren't you gonna slip it in the booze, or whatever? You control the experiment."

"Not in this case. In this case, those five other participants are not only aware of the drug, but they have their own supply of it. So . . ." Greg shrugged. "When and how they do it will remain to be seen. But never the less, it will be

interesting.” He smiled with a look of control at a silent Aldo as he stood up and walked from the room.

MENTAL SUBSTANCE

It is a game. It is only a game. And you must play it like any other. You must play it to emerge the winner at all cost.

Excerpts from 'Surviving the Stasis'

By Jake and Cal Graison

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 12th - 6:15 a.m.

In the hollowness of the wooded area, Cal's voice echoed in the cavern. "I fell like I'm in that movie Dirty Dancing. Look how good I'm getting at this."

"Standing still you're the champ. Try moving." Jake told her.

Cal looked down to the long fallen tree that her and Jake stood upon. It connected one side of the small mountain to the other, laying over a deep cavern. A cavern filled with extending blooming trees and multi level plateaus of land leading below like nature's staircase. However, the closest plateau of land was a hundred foot drop. "No. Maybe tomorrow."

"That's what you said yesterday and the day before."

"You do it then." Cal told him.

"I do Cal. How do you think I got over here." Jake stood across from her. "Come on, you can do this."

"No I can't."

"Cal, you're pissing me off."

"Jake, you're pissing *me* off." Cal's footing trembled some. "When you told me you were bringing me up here to see a great view, you said nothing about this."

"It's a great view."

"It's a deadly view, Jake, Asshole."

"Cal. You're being a baby. There's nothing to be afraid of. Watch." Jake leaned forward, bending down and placing his hands on the tree. He then lifted himself into a handstand walking toward Cal until he stood up right again.

"Should you have been doing that?" Cal asked.

"Cal, please." Jake scoffed. "And try it that way. You can do a hand stand. It's easier."

"No thank you. I'd rather walk."

"Then do it." Jake backed up holding out his hand. He stood center tree. "Walk to me."

"No."

"I knew it. I knew you couldn't do this. Fuck it. Let's just go back over to the other side and gasp at the fuckin view again."

Cal's mouth dropped open. "I hate you. I'll do this, watch." She shook as she moved her right foot up some.

"Good. Another step."

"Oh shit." Cal moved her left.

"Just don't look down, you'll be all . . ." Jake saw her looking down. "Cal! Don't . . ." His vocal blast at her, startled Cal making her jolt. She shrieked, shook, then toppled, arms extended, over the side of the tree.

All the way in her fall Cal screamed "Asshole!" until the line Jake had secured around her waist and to the tree, snapped her to a stop.

Jake looked into the cavern at Cal. "I told you not to look down."

Cal glare up at him as she dangled. "You screamed at me on purpose."

"No, I didn't." Jake placed his hand on his hips. "But you should always be prepared for any sudden surprise."

"O.K.!" Cal yelled up. "Lesson Learned. You proved your point!" She shook her head with a mumble. "Dick."

"What was that?" Jake squatted on the log. "I don't think I heard that last comment sweetheart."

Cal said nothing, she just swung.

"Cal? Cal? What did you say?"

"I called you a Dick! Not get me up!"

"No, I'd rather let you . . ."

"Jake No." She looked up at him.

". . . down."

"Please, not a . . ." With a sudden release of the line's tension, Cal dropped the remaining ten feet to the first plateau. Even though she was semi ready for the fall, Cal plopped to the grass filled soft area, screaming a grunt of frustration and banging her fist on the ground. She shrieked again when the rest of the line fell down with a whipping sound, hitting her on the head. She stood up so angry, untangling herself out of the line and looking up at Jake.

"I'll be right down." Jake called down with a grin.

Cal watched him walk with ease across the tree. After flipping him off, she tossed down the line harshly, then moved to the plateau's edge peering over to the next level and to the cavern below. She looked above her to the tree, then back down. With hands on her hips and a pissed off expression, Cal nodded her head with arrogance. "Oh his big ass is going over *this* today."

^^^

Reed dreaded it when the soap ran into his eyes. That burning feeling not to mention the red eye look that always entailed. He debated as he reached for a towel if he should expose his other eye to the soap just to ensure an even look. Blindly tossing the towel over the shower door, Reed, with his eyes closed, turned and shut off the water. He reached for the towel, drying his face first. As he went to wrap the towel around, he noticed that the water hadn't drained right. Looking down to see if it was clogged, Reed screamed in horror when he saw stuffing up the drain, globs of blonde hair.

Hand shaking, he reached for his head running his hand across to top. Breathing in relief when he felt hair, then screaming once again when he felt that hair stay with his hand as he brought it down.

He jumped from the shower, raced to the mirror, ran his hand across the fog

and toppled nearly in a faint when only sections, small sporadic sections of his head contained hair.

^ ^ ^ ^

The heavy rain seemed to become a daily ritual on the island. Morning and evening, it would shower, then just as fast as the rains fell, it would stop and the sun would come out. Rickie never minded. Of course it became a bit bothersome to him if it happened to be raining when it came time to bang the breakfast pots.

But Rickie trudged out, pots in hand, for the bountiful feast he and Lou fixed, to the unity circle where he did his wake up call. Just as he was about to clank the skillet and pot together, something else called out stirring the slumber state of the compound.

Reed.

With the towel half on him, hands waving high in the air, Reed flew from his bungalow screaming at the top of his lungs.

Rickie looked at him and then Rickie . . . laughed. "Dude." Rickie pointed. "Is that like a new look for you."

Reed kept screaming, running around the campfire spot.

Shrugging Rickie darted out before him stopping him. "Flute, man, you have to like quiet down. Banging pots are one thing, screaming is another."

Reed took a calming breath, looked at Rickie and screamed again.

Rickie screamed back and laughed. "Sorry. Like what is your problem."

"My . . . my . . . my . . . hair."

Rickie gave a thumbs up. "Kudos on the brave move guy. Is it like a new fashion thing?"

Reed became even more hysterical. "I don't know what happened. It all just fell . . ." Reed reached to his head. More hair came out. In horror he looked at his palm. "What am I gonna do. Look what happens?"

"Guy, a little tip. Like if it falls out when you touch it. And you don't want it to fall out. Simple. Don't touch it." Rickie saw he wasn't getting through. "O.K., I'm like magic. I work for the toot. I can fix that you know."

"You can?"

"Sure guy. Go back to you place. I'll hook you up and make you look normal."

"Thank you Rickie." Reed laid his hands on Rickie's arms. "Thank you."

After snickering one more time as Reed, half naked ran into his bungalow, Rickie headed over to Jake's place to steal his clippers.

^ ^ ^ ^

After changing out of their soaking wet clothes, Cal and Jake walked from their bungalow to see Billy stand from his seat on his porch.

Jake leaned down to Cal whispering as Billy neared them. "Do you suppose he really likes us or is this an act."

"Leave him alone. No picking on him today." Cal smiled. "Morning Billy. Waiting for us."

"Yeah." Billy answered. "I was getting hungry."

"Bill." Jake said as they moved to the other buildings. "You could have gone to breakfast."

"Yeah Jake and deal with that asshole Larry Kale alone. No. Thanks."

"So I take it the little magic amulet is not working?" Jake asked sarcastically.

"Jake." Cal gritted teeth to him.

"Cal."

Billy swayed his head as they moved to the dining area. "Rickie said he made pancakes today."

They stepped onto the porch and Jake pushed the door open. Billy walked in first, Cal walked in with Jake.

Jake looked to Lou at the food line. "I have to say, that Lou guy can cook. He's teaching Rickie well. Let's just hope no one tells them they don't have to cook and clean up." He glared at Cal.

"What?" She responded. "I merely said last night it was getting out of hand how everyone take advantage of . . ."

"Excuse me." Larry Kale, with attitude, walked between Cal and Jake, bumping harshly into Billy nearly knocking him over as he walked to get his food.

Billy turned around. "See. Everyday. No wonder I get headaches."

"No." Jake pointed at him. "You get headaches because you drink all the time."

"Oh I do not." Billy hesitated before going to get his food.

"Bill." Jake grabbed his arm tugging him. "Every day I feel like the parent bringing his kid to kindergarten with you. Just blow him off and get your food. If he sees he no longer is getting to you, he'll stop."

Billy rolled his eyes slightly. "You know Jake, that is so easy for you to say. You're six foot five."

"And your point?"

Shaking his head, Billy walked slowly to the food line. He smiled when Cal stepped in front of him separating him and Larry. He got his food, letting his mind wonder where Rickie was instead of whatever Larry kept saying to him. But he knew his morning routine of catching hell from Larry was not going to end when he sat with Cal and Jake at the table. Larry joined, stealing the seat next to Billy before Jake could.

Cal laid her hand on Billy's for a second, tapping it. "So. You gonna do some photos of the island today like you said you want . . ." She felt Billy nudge into her, she looked around him to see Larry. "What an asshole. Jake . . ." Cal whispered "Jake, kill him."

Jake, sitting across from Cal and Billy, shook his head. "What's the point.

That's what I keep telling Billy."

Billy felt another hit of Larry's elbow. Getting annoyed Billy turned harshly to him. "Do you mind stopping that."

"Sorry." Larry lifted his arms. "Just not enough room.

"Then move down."

"I'd rather stay." Larry cut his pancakes moving his elbow out and whacking into Billy.

"You know what? I'm really getting sick of this." Billy told him.

"Good. Then end it. Me and you. You know what I want."

"I am not going to fight you." Billy said. "Fighting is pointless."

"When you're afraid." Larry instigated.

"If you're trying to bait me, don't. And grow up." Billy grabbed his fork. "This isn't grade school."

Cal leaned into Billy. "Way to tell him."

"You know." Larry grabbed Billy's arm, bringing down his hand just as Billy was going to eat. "I will get you to settle this with me."

"There's no way." Billy pulled his hand away.

"You don't think?" Larry asked. "You don't think I can get you pissed enough?"

"I wouldn't give you the satisfaction . . ." Under his breath he mumbled as he tried to eat. "Asshole." Before Billy could take another bite, a slam of a hand came down on the edge of his plate causing it to topple onto Billy's lap. Billy's jaws twitched as he watched Larry stand up and walk away.

Cal felt really bad. So silent she watched Billy sit there. She reached down and picked up the plate that had fallen onto Billy. "Jake can't you do something?"

"Like what?"

Billy tried to reach down, but Cal's hands were there. He watched and swallowed as she spoke to Jake, her hands picking at his lap and lifting the food.

"Shoot him or something." Cal told Jake.

"Shoot him?" Jake snickered.

Billy grabbed hold of Cal's hand. "Cal. I . . . I can do this thanks." He took over picking up the pieces.

Cal grabbed her napkin and dipped it in her glass of water. "Well if you can't shoot him Jake. Beat him up." Cal proceeded to wipe off Billy's shirt.

"I can't just step into Billy's battles for him it will . . ." Jake saw her wiping Billy off like a child. "What the fuck are you doing?" Jake snapped. "Quit that. You're embarrassing him more." Jake reached across the table grabbing the napkin off of her. "And you." He pointed to Billy. "You let her."

"Sorry." Billy said.

"And stop being such a push over." Jake ordered. "Just take a firm stand with that asshole and tell him to knock it the fuck off."

"I thought you said to ignore him." Billy asked.

"That was before."

“Well I can’t tell him that. I can’t fight him.” Billy said. “He’ll kill me.”

“Yeah.” Jake replied. “He would.”

Cal gasped. “Way to build his confidence Jake.”

“What? You want me to lie to the guy. Fuck Cal, at least I’m not wiping him off.”

“You can do something.” Cal argued.

“Like what? If I step in, which I’d love to do, it’s gonna make matters worse for him.”

“Then teach Billy how to beat him.”

“Cal.” Jake folded his hands. “This isn’t the fuckin Karate Kid here babe, I can’t teach him how to kick ass in an hour and a half.”

“Excuse me.” Billy spoke up and pushed his plate forward. “Don’t argue over this. I think what you said the first time Jake is right. I’ll ignore him. He’ll eventually get over his immature antics and drop it. Until then, I can take a few pushes and name calling. I put up with that all my life.” Billy stood up and grabbed his plate. “Trust me, there isn’t anything he can do to get to me. Excuse me, I’m getting more breakfast.”

Cal moaned an ‘ah’ when Billy walked away. “I feel so bad.”

“I do too.” Jake said.

Judge, who was just going to sit at another table, stopped at theirs and spoke in a low voice as he watched Billy. “I have an idea for you two, if you care to hear.”

“Yes.” Cal said.

“No.” Jake interjected.

“Yes.” Cal insisted with a kick under the table to Jake.

“Cal!” Jake blasted. “Knock off the physical abuse.”

“Oh you have room to talk, you dropped me off a cliff today.”

“You pushed me down a fuckin cavern.”

Judge winced. “Can I share it before the young man returns?”

Jake lifted up his hand. “Be my guest.”

Judge, with his plate, sat down with a painful grunt. He adjusted himself too sit better. The weather pained his hip. “Now the way I see it. You’d like to help you’re friend. Only, ya’ can’t. Jake, you need to end this, but Larry won’t end it with you. Unless he starts with you.”

“Which he won’t.” Jake commented.

“Not unless you make him.” Judge smiled. “He’s not a smart man. You unknowingly make him.”

Billy knew Cal and Jake had to be talking about him as he returned with his plate. They could have been less obvious and not looked at him so much as they spoke with Judge. They probably were talking about how pitiful he looked with that syrup spilled all down him. Awkwardly--and knowing he stopped a

conversation because the table went silent--Billy sat down. Just as he picked up his fork, Rickie came flying in.

"Dudes. O.K." Rickie held up his hand. "Don't say anything. Like, whistle or something and pretend all is fine in experiment land."

Oddly Jake looked at him. "Rickie what the . . . the . . . oh Fuck." Jake quickly turned away when Reed walked into the room.

Cal nearly choked.

Billy hid his snicker.

Rickie bounced from heel to toe and smiled at Reed. "Dude, like go get some nourishment." He gave a thumbs up to Reed. "Looking good guy."

Reed nodded and waved as he walked passed the table. Everyone smiled politely at him. Reed fed from the smiles and they gave him confidence. He walked straighter to the breakfast line, confident that--just like Rickie assured him--no one noticed he looked different. But they did. Not only did Rickie proceed to shave Reed's head bald, but just to help out his ego, Rickie, using some of Reed's performer make up, drew a little hair on top of the shiny dome as well.

^^^

"Give me some time." Billy said to Cal and Jake as they began to separate in the unity circle. "I want to change. Get un-sticky and grab my gear. We can decide then, where we go."

"Take your time." Jake told him, leading Cal to their bungalow. He lowered closer to Cal. "You and I have to discuss this plan."

Billy swayed his head. He found humor in the fact that Jake didn't realize that no matter how quiet he tried to be, how low he tried to whisper, Jake still was audible. Kind of chuckling at that, Billy opened the door to his bungalow and stepped inside. That chuckle smile left him and his facial expression dropped. Billy didn't recognize his bungalow. His mattress on the floor, his things sprawled out everywhere. At that second he was grateful to Jake for insisting he always lock away his equipment, because if he hadn't, he was certain that would have been destroyed as well. Not a drawer was shut. Clothing, papers were tossed about. Billy slowly moved further in his room, pausing center and bringing himself to squat near the floor. His heart sunk. When he said at the breakfast table that there was nothing Larry could do to bother him, he was wrong. Because Larry or whoever destroyed his room certainly found their nitch in getting Billy. They had ripped apart every single picture he had of Cal.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
March 12th - 9:30 a.m.

"O.K. Stan, talk to me." Greg leaned over the speaker phone in the control room.

"Well, Speed and 'X' were nearly spotted by Larry when he barged back from breakfast."

Greg cringed at the nicknames Stan had given two of the controllers on the island. "But they weren't?"

"No. Everything is in order. Provocation plan is under way. No one is the wiser."

"Excellent."

"Oh and Dr. 'G'."

Another cringe by Greg. He just wanted to asked Stan if he had been spending just a little too much time with Rickie. "Um, yes Stanley."

Stan chuckled. "Cute, you sound like my Dad. Anyhow, George here just slipped me a note. He overheard that they were going into that region. So . . . should we now."

"Did they eat?" Greg asked.

"Some did." Stan answered.

"Round up eight and release them, that should stir some excitement. Get back to me. We'll be watching." Greg disconnected the call. He gave a pat to Barb's back, a red haired woman who had been in the experiment for many years. And he turned around to see Ron Douglass entering the room. "Morning." Greg said as he walked toward him on the way to the door.

Douglass who carried a paper cup of coffee hesitated in his walk to his seat, having just overheard part of what Greg said. "Why do I get the feeling that my visit today may be worth while."

"It just may be." Greg smiled.

"Tell me, does it have to do with my participant?" Douglass asked.

"Nah." Greg swayed his head in certainty. "Lou is fine. Sit down, have a seat. Enjoy your morning. I'll be back."

Douglass's eyes followed Greg as he left, then with his coffee he sat down. "Oh boy." He looked up at the screen then reached into his suit pocket and pulled out his cell phone. As he promised, he was going to call Aldo when something was going to happen. And knowing the institutes determination with Cal and Jake, chances were good that whatever was going down, had to do with them.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 12th - 10:00 a.m.

"Take the rope." Jake instructed as he lay on his side on the bed reading.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us. It's your spot," Cal said standing by the door with Billy.

"Positive." Jake flipped a page. "Take the rope. It rained. That hillside can get dangerous coming down."

"Jake, please." Cal argued.

"Cal." He looked up at her. "Never mind. Bill. Take the rope. It's by the door."

Billy looked at the pile of bunched ropes. "Which one?"

"Anyone, just be careful when you hold it that you . . ." Jake's hand slammed to the bed when he watched the rope unroll. "That you don't do that. Hold it by the loop. Grab another."

Cal reached down, lifted a bunched rope and tossed it on her shoulder. "Anything else Jake."

"Yeah." Jake said. "Stay off the tree. When the ground is this wet, it's not stable."

Cal rolled her eyes. "Sure Jake, what? I'm gonna show off my acrobatics to Billy? Right." She grabbed the door. "Let's go Billy. And Jake are you sure you don't want to . . ."

"Positive." Jake said. "I have to do something with Rickie, if he doesn't blow me off."

Billy had to laugh. "Jake, do you realize for as much as Rickie blows you off, you should never be sexually frustrated the rest of your life."

Jake glared up. "Bill. Was that a necessary sexual reference?"

Billy, badly wiped the smile from his face. "Um . . . no. Let's go." He motioned his head to Cal and they left.

Jake returned to looking at the book, thought about Billy's comment and laughed.

^^^

"Oh, this is ridiculous." Billy huffed and commented as he and Cal climbed the steep hill through the woods. "You and Jake do this everyday?" He grabbed a tree to get his footing.

"Everyday."

"I think we should hook the rope up now Cal. I'm sliding."

"Oh it's fine. Besides, you are gonna thank me when we get to the top and you see the view. It's a great view."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yep. You can get a good shot of the little volcano."

Billy stopped cold. "There's a volcano on this island?"

"You're kidding?" Cal looked back. "You didn't know. Can't you smell the sulphur sometimes?"

"Is that what that smell is. Oh my God. Bet me it erupts."

Cal shrugged. "Surviving the experiment. Would be neat though." She started walking.

"You and Jake would love it, wouldn't you?"

"It would definitely be a new . . ." Cal crinkled her face when she heard a snort. "Did you just make that sound?"

"No. What sound?" Billy's eyes widened when he heard it.

Cal slowly turned around and smiled. "Ah, look Billy. It's a pig."

"A pig?" Billy looked over his shoulder. About twenty-five feet down the hill it stood. "Oh shit."

"What?"

"Cal move."

"What for. It's a pig."

"Cal." Billy backed it. "It's a wild bore." he moved into her.

"Oh shit.."

With a loud squeal and heavy huffing, the wild bore began to charge their way.

Cal let out a shriek that hid a bit of a laugh as she started to run up the hill, sliding some as she did and gripping the mud to get her footing. "Oh this is way too funny."

"I'm glad you think so. Hurry." Billy ran as fast as he could.

"What's it gonna do Billy, eat us?" Cal laughed.

"Yes."

"It has to catch us first." She picked up her speed.

They no longer heard the grunting and huffing of the bore as they reached the top of the hill. Billy out of breath, grabbed his knees. Bending over.

"Safe." Cal took in the air stretching out her arms. "Isn't it great up here. You should take a picture."

"Cal." Billy slowly lifted his eyes.

"Huh?" Cal turned to face him and saw the black bore.

"What now?" Billy asked backing up.

Cal looked behind her. "The tree."

"Jake said not to go on that tree."

"What choice do we have Billy. Besides, we have a rope." Cal inched her way back.

Billy saw them nearing the edge. He looked over. "Oh my God. I can't do this."

"Yes you can. Give me your hand." Cal grabbed his hand.

"I thought you were terrible at this tree thing."

"I am." Cal stepped on the fallen tree.

"Oh shit." Billy joined her on it.

"Again, what choice do we have." Nervously, Cal and Billy inched their way over the tree.

"How far do you think we'll have to go."

Cal looked at the pig. "Not far. What are the chances he'll come after us?"

"Good." Billy watched the pig move onto the tree. "Very good." Billy looked down to the cavern. "We're dying."

Cal in a near crawl, crossed her foot behind the other. Her hand reached for Billy's shirt as if his off-balanced body would give her balance. Her fingers barely touched his tee shirt when she started to sway. "Oh shit." Her arms waved out trying to get her footing again.

"Oh shit what?" Billy looked over to a swaying Cal. His hand reached out to help her and as he grabbed hold, Cal tipped over the side of the tree. The weight of her going one way made Billy's mud covered boot slide. With his hand gripping tightly to hers, he slipped off the tree hitting against the bark with a hard smack to his chest, and grabbing himself, still holding Cal, a split second before they both fell to their deaths into the cavern below.

Cal almost panicked, but just for a second. She let out an emotional gasp dangling by Billy's hold. She looked up to see him hugging the tree, holding onto her, and watching the bore. "Don't let go."

"I'm trying." Billy's face was red.

"One sec . . ." Cal swung some trying to reach the tree with her other hand.

"Cal don't swing."

"I have to . . ."

"Cal don't swing, I can't . . ." Billy shrieked as he slipped from his hug of the tree, losing Cal's hand as she swung up with her other, gripping to suspend herself. And at that moment in time. Both of them hung, hands above their heads gripping to that tree.

Cal smiled. "Hey, at least we're safe from that pig."

"Yeah but what do we do now?"

"Climb down."

"How do you intend on tying that rope around the tree?"

"It locks. A Jake design."

Billy raised his eyes. He could hear the snorting and feel the vibrating of the branch. "O.K. lock, how do you intend on doing that. We're dangling here Cal."

"How strong are you?"

"I'm Super Man. Shit Cal, I'm weak."

"Nah. Give me a minute." Grunting as she did, Cal, hand over hand, moved closer to Billy.

"What are you doing?"

"You have to hold me."

"Oh God."

"Shh." She snickered, swung out her legs and wrapped them around Billy's waist.

"Cal."

"I'll try to support myself as much as possible. Just hold on tight for a sec . . ." Cal locked her legs tight around him, holding on to the tree with one hand and removing the other. She slanted her shoulder to allow the rope to fall to her hand. "Got it. Now just bare with me."

Billy watched her reach up, her legs squeezing tighter around him with every move up she made to get the rope over the tree. His eyes moved from her arms, to his hands, to his waist. Looking at where and how tight there bodies were locked. He swallowed. "Oh god, now is not the time to be having this thought."

"What?" Cal spoke muffled, one end of the long rope in her mouth.

"Nothing."

"Got it." Cal slipped the one end through the other that contained what looked like a belt loop. She gave a tug, pulling the rope and locking it against the branch. "There." Her one hand held on to the branch again to give some relief to her weight that Billy supported. "Now let me get this end . . ." As she brought the rope near Billy's waist, her eyes widened. "Billy?"

"Sorry."

Cal laughed. "Oh that is really bad timing."

"Sorry."

"Wait until I tell Jake."

"Don't you dare!" Billy struggled to hold on as Cal maneuvered the rope around him. "Cal I can't hold . . ow."

"What?"

"Ow." He nearly shrieked.

"Am I hurting . . ."

"Ow! I'm pig food. He's biting my fingers."

"Oh fuck." Cal said with a chuckle, pulling back from Billy.

"I'm gonna fall . . . ow."

"Grip the rope, you're good."

"I'm glad you're finding humor in this." Billy let one hand go, grabbing the rope, then when he was secure, he gripped his other hand to it.

"This whole thing . . ." Cal hoisted herself up. " . . . is pretty . . ." Her legs reached up and hugged the tree. "Funny." Cal lifted her body up, letting her chest hug against the under part of the tree. Her eyes stayed fix on the bore who spotted her wiggling foot. "Come on." She beckoned.

"Who are you talking to. I thought we were climbing down? Cal?"

"Come on." Cal pulled her self tighter and just as the bore opened its mouth to grab for Cal's boot she loosened her leg from the tree, bringing it out slightly and nailing the bore in the side of the face. With a loud squeal the bore flew off of

the tree. Cal let out a an echoing 'Ha!' watching the bore, smack into trees, bounce on the plateau and finally roll lifeless and land in the cavern below. "Now who said pigs can't fly?"

"Can we climb down now?" Billy asked, holding on to the rope.

"No need to now. We'll just . . ." The tree shifted.

"Cal." Billy's eyes grew wide. "Did you feel that?"

"Um."

The tree jolted again.

"Cal."

Cal looked to see the end of the tree slipping and sinking into the hillside's mud. "Climb down Billy! Climb down now!"

Billy, trying not to rope burn his hand, lowered himself, watching as he did.

Cal in a fast belly crawl scooted herself across the tree, first gripping the rope with her feet, then sliding her feet down until she grabbed hold with her hands. There was a loud slushy sound and the tree, with a creak, moved violently.

Billy in a nervousness, held on to the rope with one hand while untying it from his waist. He looked up to Cal not five feet above him. "Cal, there's still ten feet left to go."

"Jump."

"Jump?" Billy undid the knot.

"Oh God Billy." Cal felt the tree move again. "Jump!"

Billy did and the tree creaked loudly, letting loose on the muddy hillside as Cal slid, rope burn and all, down that rope and letting go. She landed in the thick mud next to a laying Billy and looked up to the tree that fell their way. In a huddle together they scooted in, as the whistling limb sailed down. Before careening to the cavern, one end of the tree hit with a huge vibrating thump against their little landing causing the weakened plateau that they thought was their safety, to crumble into a muddy slide, sending Cal and Billy, feet first, on a fast slop filled roller coaster ride all the way down the bottom.

The weight of Billy brought him to the bottom first and rolling into a shallow pool of water. Moments later, Cal, with a velocity, rolled right into him knocking him back with a splash.

"Whew!" Cal lifted to her knees shaking her head. "All you all right?"

Billy couldn't speak. His mouth moved and his body shook. "I'm . . . I'm . . ."

"Dizzy?"

"Yeah."

"Are you hurt?" Cal asked.

"No."

"Well." She looked up. "At least we don't have to worry about climbing back down now, do we?"

"Are you . . . are you normal?" Billy asked her.

Cal laughed, tried to stand up and her boot found a hidden hole slipping deep

into a mud pocket and causing Cal to trip backwards.

"See, that's what you get." Billy pointed at her, raising up to sit. He breathed heavily looking down at a 'thick in mud' Cal. On her rear, legs bent up. Her blonde hair so soaked it was flat against her face. His views shifted to her knee, then his hand moved over it as he smiled. "But I have to tell you." He flicked mud at her face. "You really look great covered in mud."

"Gee thanks." She laughed and grabbed a handful of mud tossing it at him.

Billy ducked with a laugh, then reached his hand out. "Here. Let's head back."

"Thanks." Cal gripped his slippery hand and used it as leverage as she clung to the front of his shirt.

Billy pulled her up and tried to get his footing. As she was brought to a kneel, Billy slipped, falling towards Cal and arching her backwards. His hand reached down to the ground, stopping himself before he knocked her completely over. "Sorry. Not much of a hero. Huh?" As he lifted straight, Cal, still holding on to his shirt, came with him, causing them to meet, chest to chest. Billy paused in moving when he noticed Cal's stare on him. Immediately and nervously, he locked into that. With a shiver, trying to escape a moment he really didn't want to, he reached up, smearing away some of the muddy hair from her face. He swallowed harshly and his chest rose in a deep breath. "You . . . you . . . really do look cute in . . ." Billy closed his eyes and lowered his head to Cal. "Mud." With only a slight hesitation he touched his lips to hers. The moment that their joined lips met and parted was the moment they sprang away. What sounded like a group of pigs squealing loudly at them and in an attack mode, scared them into separation.

Cal wiped the mud from her eyes and looked around. Seven wild bores surrounded them. "Do you think we're in their mud?"

"I think we're on their dinner plate." Grabbing Cal's hand. Billy, in a tripping stand, hoisted her up. And with the cry out of the pack of bores, Billy and Cal took off running, screaming all of the way as the seven hungry animals pursued them with speed and determination.

^^^

Jake was slipping into the rare occurrence of a mid morning nap as the boredom of his book consumed him. His bobbing head, propped on his hand, sprang up when he thought he heard a scream. Listening and hearing no more, Jake, chalking it up to one of those almost-dream sounds that awaken you, shuddered his head to wake himself, and he tried to read the book again.

Cal leaped, like a hurdler over a tree stump. "Billy." She said as she charged in a run. "It's my intention to lose these things. That's why we're . . ." Another

jump. "Running around these fuckin woods. Now, quit screaming."

Billy looked behind him to the pig pack that followed. "*You* quit screaming."

"I'm allowed. I'm a woman."

"I'm telling Jake you said that."

"Oh!" Cal spoke with excitement. "Good idea! Let's go tell Jake. This way."

She careened to her left and onto the path not far ahead. And of course, the pigs, loud and persistent, followed.

Down the path Cal and Billy charged. Behind them, the wobbling, fast moving creatures caused a dust storm in their stampeded chase. Billy let out a female type squeak as a bore leaped at him and nipped at his rear just as they rounded the bend near the bungalows. Cal who ran side-by-side with him, spun and kicked out her foot to the ensuing pig. He snorted in pain, flew back and hit into the other six who just jumped over him and kept on coming.

Reed standing on his porch, saw the running two who were vocally screaming and laughing. "Hey, guys, what's going on?"

Cal pointed at him as she raced with Billy across the unity circle toward her bungalow. "Reed! Get inside!"

"What for?" Reed asked then his eyes widened when he saw the pack enter the camp.

In a hurry and nearly flying Cal, burst open the door to the bungalow and slammed it shut with her weight once Billy was in side.

Jake lifted his head, looked, returned to the book briefly, then sprang up. "What the hell happened to you two?"

"Hi Jake." Cal smiled nervously. "Hon. Can you uh . . . get me the revolver."

"The revolver?" Jake questioned as he walked around the bed. "What do you . . ." A bang against the door shut him up. "Is something following you Cal?"

"Yes." Cal bounced as she held the door.

"Cal?" Jake tilted his head as he moved to her. "What's behind that door?"

Cal flashed a smile, looked at Billy then Jake. "Pigs."

"Pigs?" Jake questioned with wide eyed look, "Pigs? Pigs are chasing you."

"Bores." Billy corrected. "Mean ones too."

"Christ and you led them here?" Jake shook his head in disgust moving to the bed. After opening the night stand and grabbing the revolver, placing that in the back waist of his pants, he reached underneath pulling out his arsenal bag. Just as unzipped it and pulled out two shotguns, he heard the loud painful scream of Reed.

"Aw!" Cal whined loudly. "I told him to get inside."

Jake pumped the chamber on the shotgun and tossed the other to Cal. "Ready?"

"Yes." Cal pumped her chamber as well. "Close or far?"

"I'm faster, you're accurate." Jake aimed his weapon low. "I'll take close." His finger was ready. "Billy, when I say . . . you open that door fast."

Billy scooted up to the door, staying clear of Cal and Jake's aiming way. He grabbed the handle and prepared.

"Ready and . . ." Jake ordered. "Now!"

Billy flung open the door. It happened so fast, he was grateful he couldn't see. A short squeal, a heavy shot and a pump of the shot gun. Another shot by Jake followed not two seconds later. Billy watched them both step out on the porch, and just for safety sake, he stayed inside behind the slightly closed door.

"Cal, to the left. I'll get the ones that are eating."

Jake stepped off the porch and Cal shifted her views, aimed, shot, pumped and shot again. Two bores flew back.

Jake neared a screaming Reeds porch. His arms flung out as he fought off the two bores that nipped and picked at him. Tossing the shotgun over his shoulder, Jake pulled the semi-automatic revolver from the back of his pants, clicked back the hammer, stepped closer and fired only twice. Both of which hit the bores, killing them instantly through head shots.

Reed lay crying on the porch, trembling. Jake scooted the carcasses of the bores aside and moved to Reed.

"Jake!" Cal ran forward though the other participants who emerged when they knew it was safe. "Is he O.K.?"

Jake shrugged. "Hey, You O.K.?" He asked and only received a whimper. "Christ. Hey." Jake bent down closer.

Cal joined him on the porch, Judge and Paul not far behind her. "Jake, is he all right."

Jake visually examined him. "I see lots of blood. No reason for the crying like this. A leg nibble, arm bite. Nothing major. Reed, come on get . . . oh, O.K., I see now."

"What?" Cal asked.

Jake stood up with a slight cringe and a sniff. "They got his ear."

^^^

Billy could barely move from the mud that dried on his clothes nearly as hard as concrete. But he wanted to get the pictures he developed of Cal out of the bathroom so the dampness from the shower didn't ruin them. One batch was already ripped up, he didn't want the second batch from those negatives to get ruined as well. He paused to look at a picture of Cal and then set it down on the sink with the others. He closed his eyes thinking about their eventful afternoon, the fall, the mud. And not only could Billy still feel the pain where that pig nipped his fingers and rear, he could still feel something else as well. Cal's lips on his. And that wasn't good. Billy didn't know why he let himself go like that, and he knew he had to get it together. Because like him and Cal on that muddy hillside, his feelings were starting to careen out of control.

^^^

Lou stood, arms crossed in his body guard mode looking down to a whimpering, bald and bandaged Reed lying in the bed in his bungalow. Raising one eyebrow, Lou looked at Judge who sat bedside, then at Paul who was over at the dresser with what looked like a mini pot over a flame. Then to Rickie. "He . . . he doesn't look good." Lou commented.

Judge peered up. "I don't think he's dying."

"No, that's not what I mean." Lou said. "He doesn't look good. Bald, earless . . ."

Rickie laughed loudly then quickly shut up when Paul carrying a smoking wand walked over to the bed. Rickie stepped out of Paul's way moving closer to Lou.

Paul shook the smoking wand over Reed, doing a mumbling chant. And for every word he spoke, Rickie tried is best to imitated. Then Paul stopped. "Do you mind?"

"Dude, you look at me weird." Rickie pointed. "You don't like me guy, huh?"

"That's because only I see you." Paul's eyes glared at him.

Rickie snickered. "Dude, that is like so wrong. Lou sees me. Don't you guy."

"Yeah." Lou nodded.

"No." Paul spoke soft yet firm. "I see Rickie."

Rickie snickered placing his hands together and formed a circle and peering through. "Romper-stomper-bomper-boo. Tell me, tell me, who are you. I see Lou, and Judge, and . . ."

"You are an abomination." Paul stated.

"Yeah." Rickie nodded. "Cool huh." He growled. "I'm a monster."

Lou swayed his head. "That is amazing."

"What guy? That I'm a monster?"

"No, that you know Romper Room." Lou was so amazed. "You're so young."

"Dude, like my uncle was one of the writers of that show. I got me the hand me down moon shoes while all my little buds were still like morphin on the power rangers." Rickie gave a thumbs up.

Paul slowly stared up. "I really need silence."

"Why?" Rickie asked.

"So this can work." Paul let the smoke linger over Reed.

"Like on his ear?"

"Yes."

"Dude, Sarge like sewed up what he could, See . . ." Rickie reached down to the bandage only to have his hand removed.

Paul looked at him. "While this man is weak, do not touch him. We don't want what is in you to pass along to him."

Rickie tightened his lips and looked up at Lou then to Paul. "Just so we're clear. Will it get you mad if I touch him again?"

"Yes." Paul answered calmly.

"O.K." Rickie bounced some, reached out his hands, laid them on Reed, saw the glare Paul gave him and then sped from the room with Lou.

^^^

Facing the shower's hot water stream, first Cal ran her hand over her wet hair, then flicked the extra water from her face. She snickered when Jake touched up behind her as he closely examined the nails on her hand. "They're clean Jake."

"Checking."

"Really, I'm not a child. I could have done this myself."

"Cal." Jake rubbed over her fingernails. "You were covered from head to toe in mud. You had mud, and I don't want to know how, in crevasses of your body you shouldn't have."

Cal laughed. "Again, cleaning myself is a task I could have handled."

"Well." Jake moved even closer. "I do have an ulterior motive."

"Really?"

"Yep." Jake softened his voice and he grabbed her wrists. He raised her arms, placing one of her hands flush against the wall and the other flush against the shower door. He reached around the front of her for the soap in the dish, soaping up his hands.

"I uh . . . I might like this ulterior motive." Cal moaned a chuckle as she felt both of his hands lay on her stomach.

"I should hope so. It's um, all part of the cleansing process." His voice was raspy as he tried to keep it soft. His one hand glided up her slowly, his fingertips barely touching as they traced the contour of her breasts. "Cleanliness is next to godliness."

"What . . . uh . . . what does religion have to do with this moment."

Jake nibbled at her ear. He smiled as he felt her head press back into his chest when his other hand moved down. "Let's just say I long to hear you say . . ."

"Oh God." Cal closed her eyes.

"That's the phrase." Jake brought his lips to her ear again. "Do you know how much I love you?"

Cal's head swayed feeling his touch, feeling his lips glide softly down her neck.

"And . . ." Jake spoke through his kisses. "How great you looked in mud."

Cal's eyes widened, immediately the vision of her kissing Billy flashed into her mind. "Jake." Her head sprang up. "Stop."

"What's wrong?"

She turned to face him, clearing the water from her face.

"What's wrong?" Jake asked, watching Cal breath a little heavy, her mouth

twitching while she held a lost expression. "Cal?"

"I have to . . . I have to tell you something."

"You wanna talk now? Right now?"

Cal nodded nervously.

"Oh I don't think." Laying both of his hands on her face, Jake stepped into Cal, backing her up as he kissed her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Las Vegas, Nevada
March 12th - 3:30 p.m.

“Daddy.” Such a childish whine came from Aldo’s spoiled nineteen year old daughter Alison. “Please.” She stomped in her walk, flinging her dark hair as Aldo sat at his desk with Ivan an investor in the experiment.

“Alison hold up.” Aldo held up his hand, reviewing the manuscript before him, it was flipped open to a page while he held a red pen. “We’re missing something.”

Ivan looked over his own manuscript. “Aldo, all these damn new companies that Caldwell has. How in God’s name are they gonna satisfy them all with results.”

“Look at it this way.” Aldo explained even though he was slightly annoyed at his daughter standing behind him, playing with his chair. “Nine days into the experiment and how many of these places have they touched upon? We knew they are hitting the fertility and sexuality study place.” He paused when his daughter giggled in his ear. “The sun tan place with that new sun screen. Which I promised my housekeeper I would get her some. How many hours are these people in the sun and the ones that use it haven’t darkened. Impressive. Also, the Wild animal foundation, Quigley Homoeopathy Pharmaceutical is an ongoing. If we could just figure out which one they used on your man Reed to make him bald . . . Alison please quit laughing.”

She giggled. “He’s bald? They made a man bald?”

Ivan swayed his head. “I just think they did it to him to cause him mental stress.”

“Yes.” Aldo said. “Obviously, but they are gonna satisfy the new funding as much as they can in the process. That’s why I think one of these is the one, Only which one is . . .” Aldo swiped his daughter’s pointing finger away from the page. “Alison, please. Go away and I’ll buy you two extra pairs of shoes.”

“But Daddy, I was helping you.”

“Pointing that fingernail with green polish isn’t helping, it’s irritating.”

“I was showing you which one made the man bald.”

Ivan looked up from his list. “Show me Alison.”

Alison gave a snide look to her father and walked around to Ivan. She indicated on the long sheet of names. “Here. Fidel La’soon. He’s the hair guy and he has that long line of hair care products.”

Aldo nodded impressed. “So you’re saying that one of his shampoos was tested on this man and perhaps it didn’t work?”

With a quirky look Alison shook her head to Aldo. “No Daddy, in New York he has that hair removal clinic that all the big stars go to. Electrolysis. Remember I asked for you to send me there so I could go last summer without shaving my

legs? And Fidel's motto there is, that he is continuously working on new ways for quick and painless hair removal."

"Alison." Aldo was amazed. "That was brilliant coming from you."

Alison twirled her hair. "Thank you Daddy. Can we go now?"

Ivan shut his manuscript. "You go on Aldo, I'm in town for that convention for three more days. We'll speak then."

"Thanks, Ivan. Alison can you . . ."

"I'll call for the car." Alison flew out of her father's office.

Shaking his head, Aldo stood up at the same time as Ivan. "Not bad, we've nailed five of these new places so far."

"Yes but five out of how many?" Ivan asked. "Will you let the others know?"

"Without a doubt. You know . . ." Aldo walked behind his desk. "This is really the first time that the investors ever pulled thought and theories together."

"The five new guys are pretty good." Ivan moved to the door. "No assholes this time."

"I agree." Aldo walked with him. "And with this comprehensive list to satisfy that Caldwell has. We need to pull together. Because let's face it, though they say they do, Caldwell doesn't tell us everything."

"No. They don't." Ivan paused at the door. "But I have to tell you Aldo. This list Caldwell has, makes me think that this is going to be either one of the most confusing experiments or one of the most fun."

"Fun? Let's hope." Aldo opened the door. "After all, meaning no disrespect, but we did get a good chuckle out of Reed today."

With an agreeing nod and a laugh, Ivan left the office with Aldo.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 12th - 7:20 p.m.

With a loud karate style scream Rickie leaped off Jake and Cal's porch and trotted to the unity circle. He wiped his hands on the back of his pants and headed to Lou who sat by the fire eating.

"You're hurting my feelings Rickie." Lou told him. "You're not eating."

"Dude." Rickie pointed back to Jake's porch. "I have to do the fam thing and chow on the porch like in an episode of Ozzie and Harriet. The Sarge, like is making me. He just yelled at me about quality time."

"But that's cool."

"Yeah it is." Rickie straddled the log. "Guy, you ought to check out the table Sarge stole from the recreation room. It's like all set like we eat at home."

"I'm jealous." Lou ate some of his food.

"Too bad guy. I feel for you."

Lou set down his plate. "And if you guys are eating soon., I'd better go make a turn of it."

"Cool." Rickie folded his hands, looked around to see who else he could bother and scooted over to where Reed sat with Paul. "Hey."

Paul looked up. "Rickie. I was going to come and talk to you."

"Why? What I do?"

"Nothing." Paul handed Reed a plate of food, "I wanted to apologize for my behavior with you."

"Dude, like don't worry. I truly believe that one should not hold a grudge."

"Good for you."

"Yeah." Rickie stared at Reed. "Flute, man, you're looking good. Not quiet so Vincent Price-like guy. How you feeling."

"Cold. But better." Reed answered taking small bites of his food.

"Dude, let me poke up the fire, it's getting small anyhow."

"Thanks Rickie." Reed told him.

"That's very nice of you Rickie." Paul commented.

"I'm the man." Rickie stood up and grabbed the large stick by the fire. "Just got to turn this log here and it should restart the . . ."

Crack. Pop. Sizzle. Scream.

Reed with a shriek flew backwards off the log he sat on, holding his face, when a hot cinder shot out from the fire smacking with a force into Reed's cheek.

Rickie slowly laid down the stick, glanced to Paul who used his napkin to pat out the burning bandages on Reed, and Rickie, softly whistling placed his hands in his pockets and walked over to where Judge and Larry sat. Larry immediately got up and left. After flipping him off, Rickie sat down. "Hey Wopner."

Judge slightly smiled at Rickie. He ran his fork playfully through his food.

"Whoa, are you like in emotional quicksand or what? Man. It's only like nine days. You shouldn't be like this unless, you know, you're Reed."

"I'm just thinking of my family. Worrying about my granddaughter."

"Bummer." Rickie reached out and picked up a stick. As he extended it toward the fire, Judge stopped him. "So like I bet you just need to know how she's doing huh?"

"Yes. My prayers are there, I'm there in spirit. Unfortunately if I want to pay for those medical bills I have to be here with no communication. No way to find out what's going on."

"Guy, like, I'm the family man now. Don't tell anyone but I may be helping to have a brother or sister." Rickie winked. "You may be in non-communicato with the civilized world. But I'm not. I can call for you."

"You can make a phone call?"

"Sure guy. I'm not a pawn. Guy like I called the weather ten times yesterday. Only like . . ." Rickie scratched his head. "It didn't do any good cause the only weather number I knew was from back home. It rained yesterday in North Carolina." Rickie nodded. "High of sixty, humidity was at eighty percent."

"Interesting."

"I was thinking of pursuing a career as a weather man. Billy like works for the big place. He can get me a job."

"I'd watch it."

"Cool." Rickie nodded. "So like you want to give me your number and I'll call and check on the fam for you."

"Will I get in trouble?" Judge asked.

"Guy, rules say. You must rely on the resources available. I . . ." Rickie laid his hand on his own chest. "Am a resource."

Judge closed his eyes. "Thank you. Just knowing will help me get through this a little better. Thank you Rickie." He reached up laying a firm hand on Rickie's shoulder. "You're a good kid."

"For a monster."

"Um . . ." Judge removed his hand. "Yes."

^^^

There was a certain amount of grueling pleasure to Lou's voice as he spoke. Talking slow, standing before his homemade barbeque pit compete with rotisserie. He looked to Cal who held the plate along with a look of disgust and to Jake who looked pleased. Lou holding a huge butcher knife poked the two prong fork into the backside of the slow spinning and cooked bore. "There." He sliced a hunk. "Now there's a good piece of pork for you." He laid it on the plate Cal held. "The butt is always juiciest. Saved it for you guys because we wouldn't be having

this feast without you.”

Jake looked at Cal. “Could he be anymore right Pied Piper?”

Cal’s mouth opened wider and with more nauseousness the more Lou stacked the pile of Pig buttocks onto the plate. She swallowed and handed the dish to Jake. “Hold this.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m going to see what’s taking Billy so long?” She backed up.

“Tell him to hurry up. I’m hungry.” Jake watched Cal move toward Billy’s bungalow and he looked at Lou who sliced. “This was an excellent idea Lou.”

“Nothing like a Pig roast.” Lou set down the knife. “And oh, yeah, hey . . .” He snapped his fingers. “Like you asked. I kept my eyes peered.”

“And?” Jake asked.

“This is the one that ate Reed’s ear.”

Jake smiled and snuck a piece of pork from the plate, looked at Reed’s bungalow and shoved the pork in his mouth.

“Billy?” Cal knocked on the door. “Can I come in.”

“Yeah.” He answered from inside.

“Hey.” Cal opened the door, stepped inside and shut it. “Are you avoiding me?”

“No.” Billy stood by the dresser. “I was writing all day. And I wanted to get my drink in before dinner so I didn’t hear Jake lecture. Want one?” He held up the bottle of Jack.

“Yeah. Thanks.” Cal folded her arms walking to him as he poured. “Quite the day huh?”

“Yes.” Billy handed her the glass and lifted his. “Here’s to a moment to remember.”

Cal clicked her glass against his and brought it to her lips. She pulled it away. “Where’s your Ho-ho’s?”

“In the closet. Want one?”

“Yes. Please.”

Billy downed his shots worth of bourbon and set down his glass. He moved to his closet. “Why do you want one? Aren’t we having dinner.”

“And wait until you see, we’re having . . .” Cal noticed Billy limping. She snickered. “Pig butt.”

“Isn’t that ironic.” He opened the closet and reached to the top shelf, grabbing the box of ho-ho’s. He limped back.

“Billy? Are you all right?”

“Just a little sore.” He winked and set down the box. “If you want to say this day nipped me in the butt, you wouldn’t be exaggerating.”

“That’s what I thought was wrong. Did he get you good.”

Billy shrugged and reached for the bottle.

Cal downed her drink and put the glass on the dresser. "Let me see."

"What?" Billy gasped, almost laughing.

"Let me see. It might be bad."

"Cal . . ."

"Billy. Come on. I won't molest you." She held up her hand. "I promise. Let me look at it."

Billy glanced at her as he leaned into the dresser. He poured a small amount of Jack Daniels into the glass. "If I show you, you can't laugh."

"Billy, it's me."

"That's why I'm saying that."

"Yeah I know. I'll laugh. But, let me see."

Billy drank his drink. Unbutton and unzipped his Levis and lowered them down to his thighs.

"Nice." Cal pointed at his American flag boxer shorts.

"Glad you approve."

Cal moved to behind him. "Up or down?"

Billy rolled his eyes and still facing the dresser, he grabbed the left side to his boxers, pulling them down.

"Look how cute you're little butt is." Cal snickered. "Oh shit." She peered closer when she saw the bite mark. About the size of silver dollar it was, distorted but round, skin punctured and the area around it starting to bruise. "Oh Billy. Did you see this?"

"Cal. How? Is it bad?"

"It doesn't add to your sex appeal, I can tell you." Still staring at his injury, she reached for her glass, which Billy filled a little for her. She brought it around, sipped it and set the glass down. "Jake should see this."

"Why?"

"Because he knows about this injury stuff."

"Did you ever wonder why that is?" Billy asked. "Why does Jake know so much about treating injuries. And what to do."

"No. He's smart."

"You think maybe he's not telling you something about himself. I mean, don't you think it's a little odd that he . . ."

"Billy. Please." Cal gave an odd look, swaying her head in disbelief to Billy. "They learn this stuff in Ranger school." She moved to the door "I'll get him."

"Cal. No."

"Billy, he needs to see."

"Cal, don't . . ." Billy cringed when she heard Cal yell out for Jake and for him to bring his pouch. "Oh my God."

Jake whistled as he looked at Billy's injured rear half exposed. "Fuck, Billy."

“Cal.” Billy looked at her. “Give me my bottle.”

Jake’s fingers touched around the injury. “You don’t need to drink anymore. Is this tender.”

Cal laughed. “Look Billy he’s feeling your butt.”

“Oh my God. Cal. My bottle.” Billy reached as Cal pulled it away. There wasn’t much else he could do, he did have his pants down.

“Did you clean this?” Jake asked.

“Yes.” Billy rolled his eyes.

“I’m seeing a little infection starting.” He heard Billy whine. “There’s some puss . . .” Jake raised his eyes to Cal who snickered while she sipped from a glass. “Give me that. You two are gonna be experiment alcoholics.” He set the glass away, then reached for the pouch. He opened it and pulled out a small vial and syringe. “I have a rabies antitoxin I want to give you. Last experiment taught me to bring plenty.” He set those on the dresser, then pulled out two foil packets laying them down too. “Here’s some ointment. Antibiotic. Put it on three times a day. Just because I’m giving you the vaccine doesn’t mean it will clear the infection. Applying it is a must. So call Cal or myself if you can’t reach the area.”

Billy whined again watching Jake fill the syringe. “Oh God, can this be anymore embarrassing?”

“Sure it can.” Jake said. “If you turn around and surprise me like you did to Cal hanging on that tree today.”

Billy’s eyes widened and looked to Cal who burst into laughter. “Cal, I’m killing you.”

“I’m sorry.” She held up her hand. “It was funny.”

Jake injected Billy causing him to squeak in a slight scream. He tossed the syringe. “Now. For lack of a better word, that vaccine might make you . . .” Jake shifted his eyes to Cal and held back any laughter. He cleared his throat. “Stiff.”

Billy closed his eyes as he pulled up his pants. He debated on just hiding out the rest of the night in his humiliation. But being a glutton, and listening to Cal and Jake, he joined them for their family porch dinner. He didn’t know what made him think that dinner would be any less tormenting than the rest of his day. Aside from the fact he couldn’t sit right, he had to deal with Rickie doing the same thing all through dinner. Sitting across from him, holding up his fork to Billy and drastically taking a bite of his meat before laughing and saying, ‘Dude, did that bring back painful memories?’

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
March 12th - 8:15 p.m.

Holding a steaming cup of coffee, which he needed to stay awake after the long flight, Dr. Jefferson stood on the meeting level of the control room. He peered below, unnoticed, watching the two Caldwell monitors take notes on what they witnessed on screen. Watching Greg, sitting off to the side on the phone, obviously with Stan. Greg watched a tape on a side screen, shutting it off and rewinding it some. His voice carried up, and Dr. Jefferson, because he was just that type of guy . . . eavesdropped.

"I know Stan. I know." Greg told him. "Just a little longer. We can go with just touching upon the plans but no more. If we don't proceed to break our main team, there's no game, no competition. And we need the others to help . . . right." Greg nodded. "Exactly. If they're boggled with what we're doing to them, Cal and Jake and that fifty thousand no longer are important. Just hang in there, I promise we'll roll soon." Greg hung up the phone, tapping his fingers on the receiver. He stretched out, spinning his chair slowly as he did. When he brought his head forward and opened his eyes, he saw Dr. Jefferson walking down to the observing level. "You arrived."

"Could say that. I'm here." Dr. Jefferson, coffee in hand, sat down in Aldo's observing chair. "Problems with the controllers."

"Restlessness." Greg answered. "They want to move on but . . ."

"But you don't want to because of the Cal and Jake thing."

"Yep. Let's face it. These investors want a chance. The last thing they want is to see Cal and Jake as shoe-in winners. They aren't going to come back if we don't throw everything we can at the favorites."

"We never did before." Dr. Jefferson commented. "It was by lot."

"But tell me this." Greg leaned forward folding his hands "I read your notes from the last experiment. You had Jake and Cal pegged to be enemies."

"True."

"What would you have done say, had you had the keen foresight to see those two forming such an allegiance that together they became unstoppable."

"I would have found it interesting and exciting, along with challenging. I probably would have intentionally targeted them more to chip away at the odds in their favor."

"Exactly." Greg moved back in his chair, rocking some. "And that's what I'm doing now. It just takes time. A little bit. I don't see it taking much longer. Stan is just concerned that his people up there are getting restless."

"Sort of not wanting the control team to become subjects of an isolation experiment as well?" Dr. Jefferson asked with a chuckle.

"Nicely put. And you know as well as I do, history of the experiment shows, the controllers are constantly busy. Now they're idle."

"Plus there are more of them." Dr. Jefferson added.

“Eventually they’ll each have their part to play.”

“So . . . any luck yet with passing the drug along?” Dr. Jefferson asked. “I saw you watching a tape of Cal and Billy.”

“I’m certain the drug has been passed.”

“The Jack Daniels?”

“Nah, I think it’s those herbals Paul gives Billy.”

Dr. Jefferson shook his head. “But Cal doesn’t take them. No, if anyone knows, they know both of these two drink. I’ll say it’s in that bottle. Have you watched the tapes.”

Greg chuckled. “Yes. And we have four people in and out of Billy’s room so much in the dark, it’s hard to see what they’re doing.”

A snicker escaped Dr. Jefferson. “Obviously these four people, know what this drug does, and they know if the results are there, and Jake finds out. It could mean a lot to them.”

“Fifty extra thousand . . .” Greg paused. “If of course they make it.”

“Of course. Seems they’re all thinking on the same lines. Not so much to kill them, just break them up.”

“Same difference as far as financial outcome goes.” Greg commented.

“Let me ask you this. You know the drug better than myself. I mean, you had our bio reconstruct it. What would happen say, if all four of these people, thinking on the same lines, thought like me, and all four, without the other’s knowledge, kept spiking the same bottles of Jack with the drug.”

“To give you a factual answer would be impossible. We have no scientific indication at all on this drug,. It’s new to us and this is the first test. But . . .” Greg held up a finger with a smile. “Theoretically. What would happen if they got overdosed on this thing?” Greg winked. “More than just a ride between the sheets. I can tell you that.”

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 12th - 11:33 p.m.

In his walk from getting a beer out of his small fridge, Jake paused to look, then step over Billy who slept on the floor in front of the fireplace. "Should we wake him up anytime soon?" Jake asked as he untwisted his cap and tossed it in the waste basket.

"No." Cal answered as she sat at the table Jake stole. A table they moved inside. "Let him go."

Jake walked to the table where the Scrabble board was, looking at Lou first who stood behind Rickie in a bodyguard mode, then Jake sat down. "Rickie, take your turn."

"Chill Sarge. I'm Einsteining it here." Rickie reached for a tile and Lou cleared his throat.

"Rickie!" Jake blasted. "Come on."

"You asked for it." Rickie grabbed his tiles. "Building off your 'S' to make the mega score here Sarge. . . 'S' . . . 'C' . . . 'U' . . ."

Jake, leaning one elbow on the table removed his beer from his mouth noisily when he saw Rickie's word. "Scuzbod? Rickie what the fuck is that."

"A word guy."

Cal snickered. "Good, And it's a double score using that ten point . . ."

"Cal." Jake yelled. "It's not a word. Rickie take it off."

"No Sarge, it's a word. See, I'll dictionary it for you."

"Don't."

"Sarge. Scuzbod means. Like, O.K., say I see this gremlin looking babe waddling down the street. I would say 'UH! Man, she has a Scuzbod.'" Rickie nodded and saw Jake's glare.

"Jake." Cal laid her hand on his. "It's a game."

"Yes Cal I am well aware. And both of you cheat. Rickie I will tell you once more. Take it off."

"Dude." Rickie said cocky. "Are you challenging me? Don't challenge me, cause when I prove you wrong it'll cost you fifty points. Which you can't afford."

"I challenge you." Jake told him.

"O.K. guy." Rickie picked up the dictionary already set on the table. "Now let's see, 'S'. Um . . . Yep, Here it is. Scuzbod. A dirty, no shaped, hideous figure on any gender. There." Rickie shut the dictionary. "Cal babe, fifty points."

"Give me that." Jake snatched the dictionary from Rickie and in the same movement, he looked at Cal. "Don't give him points!" he opened it up, flipping through. "It isn't in here."

"Made you look." Rickie pointed with a laugh.

Reaching out with the dictionary Jake smacked Rickie on the back of the head with it. "Take off your fuckin tiles. Now."

"O.K., O.K." Rickie reached up the board, slowly picking up his tiles. As

soon as he grabbed them all in his hand, a huge thunderous crack of lighting vibrated through the room causing Rickie to scream, jolt up, release his tiles out like pebbles and bang into the table disrupting the board.

“Rickie!” Jake blasted. “Fuck.”

“Dude.” Rickie grabbed his chest. “It’s like not rain time. I wasn’t expecting that. Sorry.” Rickie reached out to fix the board, stopped and looked over his shoulder to a sleeping Billy. “But like I have one question. God’s fist just smacked our house, I screamed like a babe, Sarge yelled at me, and the Billy meister hasn’t moved. Like, is he dead.”

Grabbing his beer, Jake stood up, walked over and towered over Billy. “Bill.” He called down. “Billy.” No answer and Jake extended his foot nudging Billy with his boot. It took three nudges to just get a simple and slight moan. “Christ, remind me never to leave you in his protection at night Cal.” Shaking his head and a little bit more annoyed at the company he was continuously forced to be around, Jake returned to the table and to the game of scrabble where all of the words on the board were now misspelled.

^^^

The flickering of the lights in Judge’s room, made him want the candle he kept handy by his dresser. Just incase the lights went out, which they did sometimes with all the heavy storms they had. Judge set down the book he read, swinging his legs to the floor and limping over to his dresser. He lifted it and the pack of matches, carrying them back to place on his night stand. Two steps into the return to his bed, lightening flashed along with his lamp and Judge jumped back when he saw a figure looking in the window behind his bed. He blinked his eyes, took a step.

Flash!

Judge dropped everything when the face could be seen. A man, and definitely not one of the participants. Trembling, Judge backed up and the thunder roared again. Only this time when the spark of lightening lit the window, no one was there. Breathing heavily, Judge raced forward to the window where the rain now beat against with a vengeance. He stepped so close to it that his breath fogged up the pane. And peering out into the wooded area behind his house, an area lit by the continuous flickering light of electricity bolts, Judge saw nothing but trees and the silliness of his overactive imagination.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 22nd - 9:15 a.m.

It was a wall of rope carefully knitted and tied together to look like a quilt of small open squares. Six feet wide and twenty feet high and secured tightly between two trees and spiked into the ground. Cal, legs straight and stiff, lifted herself in a climb up that wall using only her hands. And she didn't make it far.

Jake stood behind her. "Come on Hon, you're stronger than that."

"I can't . . ." Cal grunted. "Do this." It took everything she had to extend her hand to the next level up. Her face was red and sweaty. "Jake." She grunted.

"Don't use your legs," he held his hands ready. "Come on. One more."

With a painful struggling groan, Cal reached and lost it. She slipped, catching herself and slid some more. Jake grabbed hold of her before she hit hard to the ground. "Sorry." She said with so much disappointment.

"That's O.K., it's new." He kissed her on the cheek. "You'll get it. We have to work on your upper body strength more."

Leaning in toward the rope, Cal lifted her head when she heard the annoying, sarcastic laugh. She looked over her shoulder to see Larry Kale. "Does he have to come up here and watch."

"You know he followed Billy up here." Jake told her in a whisper. "Ignore him."

Billy who was seated far away, getting his workout by watching them, walked to Cal and Jake. "What's next?" He tried, like Jake wanted Cal to do, to ignore Larry.

"Stasis training." Jake answered.

Larry, hating the fact that he went unnoticed, stepped forward. "It was really pitiful watching you do that."

Jake turned slowly around to him. "If it's so easy. You do it."

"Jake." Cal beckoned in a low voice. "The last thing I want to see is him actually do it."

"Cal." Jake shook his head. "Go on Lar. Do it." Jake stepped out of his way and motioned his hand to the wall of rope.

Arrogantly, Larry wiped his hands on the sides of his jeans and stepped to the wall. "Watch little girl." He said to Cal. "This is how it's done."

Jake crossed his arms, watching Larry, without using his legs, climb up the wall. "Impressive." Jake told him.

Cal shook her head in disgust and started to walk away with Billy. "Come on Jake."

Jake watched Larry make it up ten feet, fifteen." Very impressive." Jake started to follow Cal, paused, bent down and lifted the securing spike of the rope. He laughed and continued walking when the wall of rope rolled, causing Larry to

lose his footing and fall with a hard smack to the ground.

Billy could see it all from the tree top seat Jake helped him get. He had rules to follow though, he was only allowed to take pictures and keep his mouth shut. No calling out to help Cal or doing that female-style shriek he did that annoyed Jake. So Billy quietly sat there, watching and wondering if when Jake and Cal were all done, would someone help him down?

With feet moving slow and almost sideways Cal made her way through the wooded area. She tried not to make a sound keeping her eyes peered ahead for whenever Jake would surprise her and jump out.

Jake did. Cal shrieked, causing Billy to shriek, causing Jake to yell as Cal ran to make her escape.

"Billy what did I . . . " Jake saw Cal booking. "Cal! Stop!"

Cal slid to a stop.

"What the fuck Cal." Jake marched to her. "What are you doing. This is Stasis training."

"Yes." Cal caught her breath and turned to face him.

"O.K., I'm the Stasis." Jake told her. "So what are you doing."

"Running."

"Running? Why?"

"Because, Jake if I'm unarmed, no gun, there's no way I can beat the Stasis."

"You have your knife." Jake pointed to the stick that they were pretending was their weapon.

Cal laughed. "I'm little Jake. What am I supposed to do, say, 'excuse me Mr. Stasis, could you bend down so I can reach your brain stem?"

Irritated Jake looked up to the tree at a laughing Billy. He glared back to Cal. "No, you aren't supposed to ask him to bend down, *You* Cal, are supposed to take him down."

"Right Jake. You can take him down."

"What about if something happens to me?"

"Then I'm out of here, game over." Cal stated. "I'll hide out until the helicopter arrives."

"You think?" Jake asked. "If you think they're coming to save your skinny ass if I die, you're thinking wrong. You have to take him down. Running from him isn't going to eliminate him. And eliminating the Stasis is the only way to beat the game."

Billy yelled down from the tree. "Sort of like achieving and beating the top level of a video game?"

"Yeah. Fuckin Mortal Caldwell Combat. Now are you ready Cal?"

Reluctantly Cal answered. "Yes. Come and get me again."

"Good girl." Jake smiled and trotted off ahead of her.

Cal started to walk and she heard Billy's 'PST' from above. She looked up and saw Billy pointing. She smiled gave a thumbs up, and quietly walked backwards sneaking deep into the woods.

After timing it. Jake walked out into the path. No Cal. He tossed his hands up. "Cal! Did you run a . . ."

Whap!

Jake's knees buckled when, like a batter, Cal jumped out of the trees behind him, swinging out and down a limb to a tree, careening the branch directly into the back of Jake's knees. Seeing he only wobbled, Cal swung out again, nailing him once more. And this time while Cal laughed in victory, Jake crashed, knees first to the ground.

She had him. Cal was cocky. Lifting the pretend knife from the waist of her pants, she leaped onto Jake's back, raising it up as she grabbed onto his head. Before she could touch the stick to the skin on the back of his neck, Jake flipped her over.

Cal hit back first, but not hard to the ground. No sooner did dust of dirt fly up from her land, that Jake grabbed her wrist, brought her arm to her chest pinning her down, and in his towering kneel over her, brought his hand to her throat and his face close to hers. "Too slow. You lose. You're dead." He kissed her quickly and stood up and still holding Cal's wrist, he brought her with him. "But great try." Jake grinned at her.

Cal brushed herself off. "Thanks. Again?"

"Yeah." With a smack to her backside, Jake ran off.

Billy up in the tree, witnessing it all, just shook his head with a one word thought of the very physical spousal team. "Sick."

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
March 22nd - 11:30 a.m.

Solemn was how Greg looked as he sat at his desk. Almost as if he were listening to a lecture handed to him by his father. And in a sense he was.

So concerned Dr. Jefferson spoke to him. "Listen to me. It was a good try. A very good try. But you are wasting way too much time on this. The little things here and there that you're throwing at the other participants has to increase."

"I know."

"It is a six month experiment Greg. You have to start pushing all of these people now if you want to wear them down enough for when we the catch becomes the Stasis. Because let's face it, the elements on the island are not enough to wear them down like any other place.."

Greg stared ahead, "I know."

"You're still in a safety time frame here. But in another week and a half, you will have hit one month. Our investors are gonna wanna start to see something happen here."

"And they will. I really wanted to break the Graison team first."

"Then maybe . . ." Dr. Jefferson tossed up his hands. "Maybe it's time we stopped leaving it in the hands of the participants and we stepped in some and pushed it along."

"Let me give it some on thought how scientifically we can do it."

"Perhaps now is the time we remove the science aspect of it and play on the human side." Dr. Jefferson saw the lost look on Greg's face. "The human side is a powerful tool. Or did you miss that?"

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island
March 22nd - 3:45 p.m.

Rickie wasn't in his usual demeanor when he strolled back into the bungalow area of the compound. He stopped mid unity circle and looked for the longest time at Judge's bungalow. Sighing heavily, he walked to his right and up to Cal and Jake's porch.

"Ow Cal." Jake pulled back his finger as he and Cal sat in the floor. "You pricked me with your needle."

"Sorry." Cal was sewing what seemed the thumb on the hand of a larger than life dummy while Jake worked on the side of the arm.

"Who the hell taught you how to sew?" Jake sucked the blood from his finger and continued to sew again.

"You."

"Funny. Very funny. Just watch that needle." Jake looked up to the single knock on the door. "Yeah. Come in." He pulled on the thread and lifted his head to see Rickie step in. "Rickie."

Rickie shut the door slowly. "Hey Jake."

Jake, quickly looked up with total seriousness, first to Cal then back to Rickie "What's wrong?"

"How do you know."

"You're a book Rickie. Three things." Jake explained. "One you aren't smiling. Two you failed to make that immediate sexual comment about our dummy. And three, the biggie. You just called me Jake. Now what's wrong?"

"Can I . . . can you and I talk. I like really need some Dad advice."

Cal's eyes glanced up to Jake so she could see it. She didn't want to miss it. That look of 'touched' that hit Jake only once in a blue moon. She smiled slightly and continued to sew.

"Sure Rickie." Jake set down his needle and stood up. "What's up." He pulled out a chair at the table for Rickie to sit.

"Thanks guy." Rickie slid into the chair.

"First." Jake joined him at the table. "Before we talk. This isn't about Stan scaring you again with Wes Craven stories, is it?"

"No." Rickie shook his head. "I told him I'm not buying his 'People Under the Carrington Stairs' story anymore. It's about . . ." Rickie folded his hands staring at them. "You know how like I've been calling the States for a med update of Judges granddaughter."

"Yes." Jake nodded.

"Well, I called today see. And . . . and . . ." Rickie let out the heaviest of breaths. "Sarge, she . . . she died last night. His little baby granddaughter died."

Through his nostrils Jake took a breath. It was long and loud as his views

shifted to Cal. He could feel his own heart pound in a sort of sadness for the little girl he didn't even know.

Rickie was confused. "Sarge, like, what do I do. Do I tell him?"

Cal jumped up from the floor. "No."

"Cal." Jake looked at her.

"No Jake." Cal stepped to the table. "You don't tell him Rickie. It will destroy him mentally and he'll never make it. The odds are against him as it is. Chances are he won't make it anyhow, so give him all the chances he can have. He doesn't need this on his mind."

"Cal, you're wrong." Jake told her. "He has to know. This is his family. How many times have you and I talked about hiding the truth. It comes back to haunt you."

"Then let it come back to haunt him when he makes it home." Cal stated. "He won't make it if he finds out. And then what? His son not only loses a daughter but his father as well? No Jake. Rickie, don't tell him."

Rickie's eyes were sad as he looked at Jake. "Sarge, what do I do?"

"Rickie." Jake laid his hand on Rickie's. "I can only tell you that I would want to know. That's me. But what ever choice you make will not be wrong because if it wasn't for you calling, he wouldn't know anything anyhow. Take a little more time to think about it. O.K.? Take a walk. If he sees you before you decide on what to do, tell him you didn't reach the states yet. But think about it a little more."

Rickie nodded. "You know what? I will. I grab Lou-ster and him and I will walk Flute."

"Good idea." Jake told him. "You do that. And you're welcome to help Cal and I if that will clear your mind."

"Nah." Rickie shook his head. "I'm not into that kinky sexual perversion stuff like you guys."

Cal smiled as she watched Jake gave that 'I knew that was coming' look. And Rickie's comment confirmed more than the fact he annoyed Jake with it. It confirmed that Rickie felt a little bit better.

^^^

Billy chuckled in the red lit bathroom, lifting photos from the developing solution and hanging them on the line to dry. He picked one that he was for sure giving to Cal. The one with a fallen Larry caught up in the dangling wall of rope. Finishing up the last of the photos, Billy took one more look at the long line of his day's work and opened the door to his bathroom. Checking out the time, and seeing he had a couple hours of writing he could get in before dinner, Billy grabbed his laptop, a Ho-Ho from his dresser and headed out to find a spot on the beach to work.

^^^

"There you go guy." Rickie tugged slightly on Reed's arm as he and Lou brought him toward the walking path in the woods. "Watch your step. You don't wanna twist you ankle like you did in the shower today."

"Take a breath of this air." Lou instructed Reed who no longer wore his bandage over his missing ear. "You barely get out. And you should. You are looking sharp."

"We wanted to get you out today. Take you on an adventure. Since we all need to clear our minds." Rickie reached into his pocket pulling out a small can of spray paint. "And I have our handy-dandy road map tree marking. Today we establish the Blue belt." Rickie snickered.

"Isn't this nice?" Lou asked Reed and received a nod. "You're not made at me are you?"

Reed shook his head.

"Good." Lou said in relief. "Cause I am really sorry about that egg shell getting into the omelette this morning. How's that tongue."

"Eh ah eye. Eh opt ur-ing a ow-or a oh."

Lou's face turned red and he nodded. "Oh good."

Rickie snickered. "At least you can talk now guy. Hey, we'll mark this tree."

With Reed center, Lou on one side, Rickie on the other, Rickie shook the can and raised it to the tree.

"Dude, how about I mark this one with a big 'R' for the Reed-ster?"

Reed smiled with a lethargic looking open mouth. "At ew e ice. Ank ew."

"No problem-o guy. I'll just . . ." Rickie's index finger pressed on the button. But perhaps Rickie should have checked the direction. With a spray of paint Reed screamed when it all came his way.

"Uh!" Reed grabbed his eyes.

"Guy!" Rickie reached up. "Don't like rub it in, you'll go . . ."

"Uh!" Reed screamed. "Uh an E. Uh an E!"

"Shit." Lou commented. "You blinded him now."

"Guy I didn't mean . . ." A growling snort shut Rickie up and he and Lou swayed their heads to see the wild bore huffing and staring at them.

"Eyes?" Reed questioned painfully. "Eyes? Uts o-in aw eyes?"

Rickie screamed. "Pig!"

"Run to Jake!" Lou screamed as well, and on his 'get safe' snap idea, Rickie and Lou took off running.

They didn't hear the bore chasing them and about twenty feet into their run they stopped cold when they heard Reed screaming.

"Shit." Lou looked back.

"We have to help him guy." Rickie said.

"Loser helps him, winner gets Jake."

"Deal." Rickie quickly looked at another painful Reed scream. "Odd or even."

“Even. Ready. One, two, three.” Both men shook their fist and flung out fingers.

Rickie jumped up, “Oh yeah, see ya!” he took a deep breath and at top speed flew toward the camp. “Sarge!”

Hesitantly and not as fast as he could, Lou picked up a stick and walked to Reed.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
March 22nd - 4:15 p.m.

The ideas written on slips of paper, post-its and gum wrappers ranged from placing Billy and Cal in another life threatening situation, to having Ollie at the control center on the island forge her handwriting in a note to Billy. All of the ideas, given to Greg from every employee, technical or not, were appreciated. He asked them what would bring two people emotionally close enough to be intimate and he got answers. Unfortunately, none of them were feasible.

He looked up from his shuffling of ideas when he heard the knock on his office door. Barb stood there. "Yes Barb?"

"I have your solution."

"Come in."

With confidence, Barb walked into the room. She took the seat across from Greg when he pointed to the chair.

"Talk to me."

"Well, I have been married several times. Such as yourself." She didn't notice Greg rolling his eyes. "And I know from experience, nothing gets two people into the throws of passion then a good old fashion, knock down, blow out emotional battle." She smiled.

"Nice. Good." Greg leaned back. "But Billy and Cal get along. They never fight. How do we get them to that point. Won't work."

"Yeah it will. One discovers the other one lied. I reviewed a tape from this afternoon. Jake was telling Cal that the truth always comes back to haunt you."

"O.K." Greg waited patiently. "And your point."

"My point is. We weren't thinking. We missed it. We all know of a truth that was hidden that can easily come back and . . . haunt them."

For the first time in the conversation Greg began to pay attention, and unlike Reed, he was all ears.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island
March 22nd - 7:50 p.m.

Not that Billy hated pork, but with the bore occurrences happening frequently. And Jake playing Rambo Hunter, the dining experience of eating pig was becoming a tedious one. But since Billy didn't have to cook, he kept his complaints to himself. Parting in the unity circle from Jake and Cal, Billy went to his bungalow. He wanted to get that picture of Larry for Cal before he went back over to play cards.

He walked inside, eyeballing the newer bottle of Jack he was proud of himself that he hadn't touched in days. And after debating to sneak a drink before a night of poker, Billy walked into the bathroom turning on the light. His hand paused on the switch when he looked at the hanging photographs.

Where were the pictures of Cal and Jake working out. The volcano? Rickie posing. None of the shots he took during the day were hanging there. Instead, pictures that horrified him were. His eyes glued on them as his head shook in disbelief. Not only were they pictures hanging on that line, but they were an obvious sequence of events. A wooded area near a stream. A photo of his father. Then his father dragging a tied up Cal by her hair. His father, holding Cal's head as he submerged her in the water. And the worst, Cal laying on the water's edge, muddy, eyes open.

With anger and hurt, Billy ripped them down from the line and gathered them up. So in shock he was that his hands literally trembled as he held them. Staring down, Billy blindly walked with them from the bathroom and weakly sat on the bed. And he realized as he looked at them they weren't just photos. The were painful pictures of the truth that took three years to develop for him.

^^^

The roll of thunder and crack of lightening caused Cal to look toward the window behind her bed. "God, it's raining again."

"Maybe that's what's taking Billy so long." Jake commented as he lit a fire. "He doesn't want to get wet."

"You pick on him too . . ." Cal held her hand out when she heard the knock. "See, he's not afraid of the rain."

"Come in!" Jake yelled and struck a match as he squatted by the fireplace.

With a squeak the door opened and slowly a soaking wet Billy walked in.

Cal smiled at him. "What did you do, stand out there. You're drenched."

Jake poked the small flame he had going. "This should be good in about . . ." He slowed his words as he watched a silent Billy moved to Cal.

"Billy?" Cal folded her arms. "What is it?"

With his eyes fixed on Cal, Billy reached into his shirt pulling out the pile of pictures and tossing them to the table. "Someone wanted me to know something. I wish to God it was you a long time ago."

Cal's eyes filled with horror when she saw the pictures. Answerless she quickly looked at Jake.

Jake stood up. A shift of his focus occurred when he saw what the pictures were of. He ran his hand down his face.

Billy's mouth opened. "I . . . I thought this was a stupid mind game. You know . . ." He gave an emotional chuckle. "Maybe they doctored these. But uh, I can see . . . I can see that's not the case." he took in the awkward silence. And when Cal looked away, he reached out and lifted her chin to make her look at him. "I have been your friend for three years Cal. I deserved to know this." He let go of her chin, turned and moved to the door.

"Billy." Cal rushed to him.

Billy felt her grab onto his arm. He pulled gently away, opened the door and left, slamming it closed as he did.

Cal fell into the door, hitting her hand against it. Then slowly she turned around and leaned on the door. She watched Jake staring down to the table of pictures. "Jake."

Jake's hand shuffled over the photos. His eyes lifted to Cal, seeing the slight glossy look she had, the sad quiver.

"Say it. You can say you told me so."

Jake shook his head. "I'm not gonna do that Cal."

"But you told me I should have told . . ."

"Cal." Jake interrupted her. "Choices were made. O.K.? But I do think that maybe you should go talk to him."

Cal looked over her shoulder to the door. "What do I say?"

"The truth. Tell him it all. Tell him why. But . . ." Jake took a step to her softening his voice. "Tell him everything. Everything Cal."

Cal swallowed. "I can't tell him that his . . ."

Jake laid his finger on her lips. "Everything." He removed his finger and kissed her.

"Are you coming?"

"No. You have to do this." He opened the door. "I'll wait for you."

Scared, Cal nodded nervously, peered out into the rainy evening and stepped onto the porch. The sound of the door closing behind her made her nerves jump. She started to chicken out, and as she turned to go back in, she saw through the corner of her eye, Billy walking toward the woods. Taking a deep breath and knowing what she had to do, Cal in a run, chased after him.

"Billy!" Cal called out, running after him and following him to the path. "Billy stop." Even through the thickened trees, the rain beat so hard on Cal's face, she could barely see. "Wait." She caught him, and grabbed his arm.

"Cal." Billy turned around. "Go back inside."

"Come with me." She tugged on his hand. "Come inside with me and let's talk."

"There's nothing to talk about." The water dripped down Billy's curls running into his face. He swiped his hand harshly over his eyes.

"You're wrong."

"I'm wrong?" Billy tilted his head. "No Cal, you were wrong."

"For not telling, you, yes I know."

"What was it? I thought we were friends. Obviously you didn't trust me enough to tell me what I should have known!" Billy turned and started to walk.

"Trust has nothing to do with it."

Billy stopped cold. "Bull shit! Trust has everything to do with."

"No!" Cal's hand flew out. "It wasn't that I didn't trust you enough to tell you, it's because I cared too much about you to tell you."

"Then that was all the more reason." Billy charged to her.

"Why? So you could beat yourself up over it. God Billy!" Her head flung back. "Don't you think you did that enough with just the thought of your father being up there? What purpose would it have served you knowing?"

"Because had I known that my father, a part of me, my own flesh and blood tried to kill you, it would have stopped me from getting so wrapped up in you."

Cal sniffled, shivered and wiped the water from her face as she folded her arms. "That's so stupid Billy. Your father trying to kill me would have stopped you from becoming my friend?"

"No, Cal." Billy leaned with passion to her as he spoke. "It would have stopped me from falling in love with you. I wouldn't have let myself do it."

"Billy . . ."

"No." Billy closed his eyes painfully. He swayed his head and softened his voice, almost burying it in the falling rain. "We clicked." Billy clenched his fist. "God did we click. And even . . . even Jake, huge Jake, didn't scare away what I felt growing every single day and every time I saw you. Because a part of me, a little part of me believed, hoped, that some day, if I just waited . . . I would get that chance with you." His emotions escaped him and he laughed slightly. "And I knew there was a possibility that I would live my life not having you. I could deal with that. But I can't deal with the fact, that even without Jake in your life, you wouldn't have a thing to do with me because deep in you . . ." Billy touched his index finger to her chest. "Deep in your heart, you have to have some sort of contempt for who I am, who I came from."

"No." Cal grabbed his hand before he could pull it away. "That is not true Billy. I let you into my life knowing fully who you were. Who your father was. I trusted you with my secrets. I care for you because of you. You are not your father and I know that. And that's why I chose not to tell you." She stepped closer to him so as not to have to speak loud. "Billy." Her voice quivered. "You came to me to find about the experiment. I told you about the experiment. Everything you

needed to know. And the more I got to know you, the more I knew how much knowing the whole truth would destroy you. You spent your entire adult life in some sort of mission to protect others from your father. And I knew you would somehow blame yourself if you knew. I couldn't do that to you. I care way too much about you. I just . . . I just didn't want to see you hurt." Cal's head dropped . "I'm sorry I hurt you anyway."

Billy could see even though the rain the tear that rolled down Cal's face. His hand slid against the dampness of her cheek using his thumb to raise her head. Billy stepped to her, his eyes locking into hers. "Let's go inside. We can finish talking there. O.K.?" Still holding her cheek, Billy felt Cal nod slowly. Laying his other hand on her shoulder, he turned her around, and together, slowly, they walked back to his bungalow.

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Cal finished what was in her glass as she sat with Billy by the fireplace. She cleared her throat. "Another please."

"I'm with you." Billy laying on his side before her, poured some Jack Daniels into her glass and filled his empty one as well.

"I can't warm up." Cal wearing Billy's clothes, brought her legs close to her chest.

Billy rolled some on his back and reached to the ledge by the fireplace. Cal's clothes lay there. He touched them. "These are gonna take forever to dry, we were pretty drenched."

"Yep."

"So." Billy sipped his drink. "My father was the Stasis?"

Cal choked as she swallowed her bourbon. How calmly he said the words. She looked at him, downed her drink and held out her glass. "Another and yes, he was."

"Did you ever worry about me?" Billy poured her some more. "Did you ever worry that I was like my father?"

"No. Never. I knew there was something, you know . . ." Cal shrugged then sipped. "Special about you." she looked down to him as he leaned up to drink from his glass. "And uh . . ." She rubbed her eyes.

"What? Did you drink too much too fast?" Billy snickered, finished his drink with a gasp and set the glass down.

"Who me? Please. I can drink half a bottle without feeling anything."

"True. So what's wrong? You feeling sick?" Billy asked

"No." Cal shook her head. "You look really cute when your hair is messed up like that."

Billy burst into laughter. "And you aren't drunk?"

"No." Cal set down her glass. "But I better be going. Can I get my clothes tomorrow?"



"Sure. Not like I won't see you." Billy stood up and extended his hand down to Cal. "I'll help you."

"Thanks." Cal took his hand and advantage of the leverage he gave her. "I'm glad we got this talk out of the way. I feel better now. And again, I'm sorry."

Billy looked down to the hand he still held. "Cal, just tell me you don't feel awkward around me now."

"Why would I feel awkward around you?"

"Well . . ." In a nervousness Billy scratched the bridge of his nose. "I uh . . . I did sort of blurt out feelings I really, really wanted to keep hidden from you."

Cal smiled stepping closer to him giving him a deep stare. "I'm flattered."

"And I'm . . ." Billy leaned down. " . . . glad." He flashed a brief smile, brought his lips to her cheek and lightly laid them upon her. Pulling slowly back, his eyes connected with Cal's again and he stopped moving. The silence rang around them in a second that seemed like an hour. Breathing. Staring. Quiet. And then Billy lowered his head again to her, this time in his reach to meet her lips, Cal's met his.

A quivering nervousness was in the first light touching of their mouths followed by a slow parting of their lips. And like a vampire with blood, they tasted the kiss that hesitantly ensued, and with a wanting of more, their mouths widened some, pressing harder and deeper against each other.

The ache of a moan escaped from Billy's chest as he grabbed onto Cal, pulling her tight against him and his hands moved with restlessness up and down her back. Her lips and every part of her mouth responded to him like he wanted. And every second that they kissed was a second of intensity that the moment increased.

Cal's fingers crept with a probing under his shirt, feeling the bareness of his back and the strong thumping of his heart beating against her own chest. Her fingers spread wide as he pressed his waist against hers and in feeling *his* excitement, a tingling engulfed her entire body. She gripped at Billy and his hands moved with a rigidity up her back and to her shoulders.

He gasped for air, pulling from the kiss but not moving his lips so far away that he couldn't feel Cal's rapid warm breaths hitting against his mouth. He couldn't move his eyes from hers, and there was an emotional desperation in his voice as he spoke to her through his heavy breaths. "I can't . . . I can't stop. I don't want to. Tell me to stop Cal." Billy closed his eyes. "Please, tell me to stop."

Cal's body tensed up in his hold. She trembled, her mouth still open. Her eyes rolled slightly feeling his body against hers, and Cal gave him his answer, running her hands to his chest, grabbing his shirt and lifting it up over his head, a split second before her lips connected to his again.

Kissing Cal, Billy's hands seemed to move with a rapidness down across the long shirt she had on, to the 'too big' shorts she wore. Under the shirt to her waist Billy touched, as he back her up in the direction of the bed. He undid the button, then zipper and as Cal bumped into the edge of the bed, her shorts fell to the floor

and Billy dropped to his knees.

His hands grazed up the outsides of her thighs lifting up the shirt with not only his hands but the top of his head as his lips searched out her chest. He widened his mouth in a hunger, bringing his lips to her breast, and Billy lifted her up laying her down on the bed.

Contact between the two of them was broken only for a moment. Long enough for Billy to step from his shorts and leaving only his boxers on, then he joined Cal on the bed. His body found a place between her parted legs, his mouth found hers again, and in a search for a feeling that seemed so close, Billy's moved with a smooth firmness against Cal as his hand pulled on the shirt she still wore.

Cal's hands reached, so out of control to Billy's thighs, widening her legs more, inviting him to press against her as she slipped her hands under the back waist of his boxer shorts pushing them off. She shook her head 'no' when she felt him pull from her mouth and his body slide down a little. Her lips searched for his when Billy left her, raising her shirt up as he kissed his way to her stomach.

His one hand reached up feeling for her breast as his other hand gripped tightly to the inside of her left thigh, pushing it out more as he bitingly inched his way down her across stomach.

Cal felt the coolness of the air hit her as she flung off the shirt. She then felt the warmth surround her as Billy's moist lips touched upon the inside of her thigh moving slowly, teasingly inward, spreading her legs wider until . . . he arrived. Cal's eyes closed tightly as if in pain. And there was an ache of need that consumed her, taking over her thoughts, her reasoning, her entire body. As if she were feeding in starvation, she couldn't pull away and the second Billy's soft touch intensified, Cal was gone. Her back arched, she gripped the sheets of the bed and from her chest, deep, yet soft, rolled the sound of her escaping pleasure.

Billy moaned too, bringing his mouth from her, sliding his lips up her stomach and his hands under her back. And before his body met hers completely, Billy stopped.

There was a long stare between them. Eyes connected, thoughts transferring, hesitation. The quest for permission that they sought from each other ended when their open mouths pressed in a passion filled kiss again. And Billy, one hand digging deeply to Cal's lower back, brought his body up, and grabbed the edge of the bed as he not only entered into Cal, but entered into a state of ecstasy that took over him like nothing he had ever felt. He could no longer kiss her, the feeling he felt in his body so overwhelming. He pulled at the bed, lifting the sheets as he clung to Cal, bringing her as tight as he could against him. Cal's fingers twined themselves in the thick locks of his hair as her lips bit into his arched neck. With each passing moment, and intense movement their joined bodies made, their skin moisten more with sweat and the room filled with not only their synchronized breathing but their unison soft moans.

Billy slid his hand up to Cal's hair as he rolled some onto his side, lifting her head and looking at her. "Kiss me. Please kiss me." He breathed outward, locking

his lips to hers, kissing her as if he were trying to pull something from within her. And Billy stayed in that kiss until his body could no longer do anything else but hold Cal as tight as he could, let out that one last gasping moan, and freeze to a dead stop.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
March 22<sup>nd</sup> - 9:30 p.m.

The flame of Barb's just lit lighter illuminated her face with an orange cast as she ignited her cigarette sitting in her monitoring seat. She let out the smoke, allowing her mouth to stay open some, her eyes still glued to the screen of Billy's room. What she thought was 'an end' actually only turned out to be a pause, and she watched as Cal and Billy, intertwined and covers pulled partly on them, began to kiss. Slowly, passionately and holding on tight.

Barb tried to be unnoticeable. Yet her body was tense. She crossed her legs tightly and shifted in her chair slowly and deeply. She reached for her water, sniffing loudly, and clearing her throat. "Well . . ." She took a long sip and clear her throat again, this time sitting back. She moved her eyes to Greg who sat in the chair next to her. "I guess we know they got a hold of the drug."

"What makes you say that?" Greg asked almost monotone, his eyes transfixed on the kissing two.

"Because from last experiment and this one. I know Cal. She won't even walk across her room in a towel without blocking out the camera. Yet . . ." Barb's hand pointed to the screen. "There they are. How long will they . . ."

"Don't know." Greg shrugged. "We're kind of looking at our case study now." He pointed to her cigarette pack. "May I?"

Barb handed him one. "I have to say. Even though it was well . . ." She cleared her throat. "I expected it to be, how can I put it . . . more hardcore, or pornographic."

Greg stood up as he lit the cigarette. "Like I have said all along. We can help magnify sexual stimulation, but we can't generate the type of feelings that start them. Point taken." He indicated to the screen. "Let's make a copy of that tape and send it down to filmography to have them make some stills for Lt. Col Graison. Just incase Cal doesn't tell him inside a week."

"I'll take . . ." Barb's heart pounded in her throat when her eyes moved to Jake in the monitor, sitting on his bed, reading something, so unsuspecting. She closed her eyes to shake the 'feel bad' that overwhelmed her at that second. Vowing the second Greg left she was blurring Jake's monitor so she didn't have to see him. "I'll take care of it."

"I'll be in my office. I have to call Aldo." Smoking the cigarette, Greg proceeded to leave.

After Greg was gone, Barb started to follow his instructions. First blacking out Jake's monitor, then with a touch of a button, she switched the live feed of Billy and Cal to a new tape recorder, and rewound the one that had captured them thus far. Hearing silence in the control room, and seeing that she was completely alone in there, Barb fed the tape through another monitor, viewing what had transpired between Billy and Cal, all over again.

^^^

Nearly dropping the receiver from his hand, Aldo hung up the phone with a heavy look upon his face. He ran his hand over the bridge of his nose, took a deep breath and folded his hands. He stole a moment to get his thoughts together and what work he would need to take with him when he left for Los Angeles as soon as his private plane was ready. Aldo wanted to go there, be there and not miss a single moment as Cal and Jake took on what would probably be their most difficult obstacle course. And despite Greg's assurance that nothing would be happening with Aldo's team for at least a week, Aldo knew better. Aldo knew Cal. And if his gut instincts were right it wouldn't take a week for Cal and Jake's troubles to start.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island  
March 22<sup>nd</sup> - 9:45 p.m.

When did it happen? When did they realize the wrong that they had done. It wasn't during the act that was upon them before they realized. An act that had taken them from any logical state. It was somewhere still lost in the moment, still feeling consumed by urge. It was somewhere in their slow, kissing, touching, after-moment-continuance, that it hit them.

BAM!

At the same time, like they had been awakened from a dream, reality rumbled toward them, roaring like a wave of the ocean, knocking them over and snapping them out of a place they should have never gone.

Reality . . . consciousness . . . guilt.

^^^

As soon as Cal saw the face of her watch, her face tensed up in pain when she realized how much time she had been in that room with Billy. By the fire, she grabbed her now dried shorts, and stepped into them. Like a trailer to a movie, visions of what happened between her and Billy flashed powerfully in her mind. Almost as if even if she wanted to forget it, her conscious kept saying . . . remember. Remember. Remember. Arms wrapped tight. Kissing. Hands and lips touching her in places that only Jake had been for years, places that only Jake was supposed to be. Pulling the belt to her shorts tight, she could hear Billy in the bathroom, and with a shivering breath, she slowly moved to there.

Billy coughed one final time as he leaned over the toilet holding on to the seat. His trembling hand hovered over his mouth as he reached and flushed the commode. He shifted over to the sink, turning on the water full blast, rinsing his mouth, then splashing his face, not noticing the water that ran down his bare chest. It was in his tight grip to the sink's edge, head hung low that he saw Cal leaning in the bathroom archway.

Cal was silent. Billy looked as bad as she felt. Raising his head with a lost look, saddened, needing so much to hear answers that weren't there.

"Cal." Billy spoke to her, water still dripping on his face. "It's not . . . don't think . . . I don't want you to think I'm sick because . . ."

"I know." Cal pulled the hand towel from the rack and handed it to him.

Billy let out a single emotional sound as he buried his face in that towel. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry Cal." He shook his head. "I never wanted it to happen under these circumstances. I never . . ."

“Stop it.” Cal reached up and grabbed his wrist bringing down the hand that held the towel. “Just stop it. I was there too. I was with you.”

“But I blame myself for this whole thing.”

“How. Tell me how.” Cal spoke with passion. “When I was right there with you. There wasn’t anything that transpired in that bed that I didn’t reciprocate or initiate just as much as you. We, Billy, we are both partners in crime here. There was no one thing led to another, plain and simple we lost it.”

“I never wanted it to be like this.” Billy reached behind him, lowered the lid to the commode and sat down. “And know I’m not feeling like this over you. If circumstances were different I would be basking in this night.” Billy clasped his hands. “I just can’t stop thinking about . . .”

“Jake.”

“Jake.”

Cal let out a heavy sigh as she slid down the archway to the floor. “Jake.”

“I like Jake Cal. I really like Jake. And even if I thought there was a chance for us, I would have never said anything to you about how I feel because of him. Know that.”

“I know that.” Cal ran her hand down her face, reached to the floor and lifted herself up slowly. “Well . . .” She looked helpless at Billy. “It’s time to face the music.”

Billy nodded and stood also. “I’ll grab a shirt.”

Cal shook her head. “No Billy.” She walked from the bathroom.

“Cal, I’m going with you.” Billy followed her grabbing his shirt off the floor. “I want to do this with you. I was wrong, I was there. I can’t let you face this alone.” He tossed on his shirt moving quickly to the door after her.

“I have to be the one to do this Billy, and I have to be alone with him.” Cal opened the door, she paused looking out into the steady falling rain, then with a deep breath she stepped on to the porch.

Billy stayed with her. “Cal.” He grabbed onto her shoulders turning her, feeling the shaking of her body. “Oh my God, your trembling. Don’t do this alone.”

“I’m scared to death Billy.” Cal looked over her shoulder at her bungalow, the light still on. “And I should be scared. I should. Because I’m just about the crush the person I love most on the face of the planet.” She laid her hand over his, squeezing it for a little support. Her breath shook as she took it in. Then Cal turned slowly around--rain pouring down hard on her--and steady, heart beating from her chest, Cal moved to her bungalow.

Her one hand grabbed the door knob as she laid her other hand flush against the door. She closed her eyes tightly as she turned the knob, dreading with everything she was that first moment that her eyes laid upon Jake. And as she opened the door and slowly walked inside what she imagined she would feel was wrong. It was a thousand times worse.

“Hey.” Jake smiled, setting down his book and standing from his lay on the

bed. "Look at you."

Cal felt as if there was an earthquake beneath her. Her whole entire body vibrated at that moment as she tried to walk. Her lips quivered, trying to speak.

Jake walked into the bathroom and came out with a towel. "You're drenched. What he do, have you out walking in the rain?" He moved to her.

"Jake." She said his name with a near whisper.

"So how did it go?"

"Jake." His name whimpered from her. "Jake . . ." If it was possible, Cal's body shook more. "Listen to me." She sniffled loudly.

"You're shaking babe. God you must be freezing. Why don't we get you out of . . ."

"Jake." Cal grabbed his hand that reached for her clothes. "Listen to me. I . . . I was with . . . ." She closed her eyes, three heavy breaths of courage were taken and exhaled. "I was with Billy." She opened her eyes, she had to see it. Seeing the pain on his face was part of her punishment.

"I know. And for a while too." Jake shook his head. "So did you guys get everything resolved. I really hope because . . ."

"Jake, no listen."

"Cal." He wiped off her face. "Sweetie we can talk after we get you dry. I don't want you getting sick on me."

She saw his smile and it was like a guilt knife burning through her. "Stop it. Please stop it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Stop being so nice to me." She raised her hands and her voice stepping back.

"Cal?"

"I don't deserve it."

He smiled in a quirky way. "What are you talking about."

"I was with Billy tonight Jake."

"Yes Cal, I am well aware. I sent you to talk to him remember?"

"Oh God." Emotionally her hand covered her mouth.

"Cal?" Jake stepped to her.

"Jake." She said his name with a sob, her shoulders bounced. "I was with Billy, Jake. *With Billy.*"

The towel dropped from his hand at the same time that his heart dropped to his stomach. Any smile, any emotions swept from his face and were replaced with a cold stare. Jake's eyes grew wide, his head lifted up. The muscles on his jaws twitched.

"Jake, I don't know what to . . ." Cal felt the brush against her shoulder and Jake's rage as he moved passed her, flung open the door and stormed out. "Jake!" Cal raced from the bungalow following him. She ran. He walked steady, eyes forward and focused on Billy's place. "Jake." She caught up to him. "Please we have to talk."



Jake pulled his arm from her hold, snapped his view only once to her, then walked again with determination to Billy's.

Cal froze for second. Fear laced the sob that sang from her as she watched Jake step on to Billy's porch.

There was no knocking, no stopping, no calling out. Jake walked right in, his stride never slowing in his entrance as he stepped down the single step into the center of the room. Billy was not there. And the moment Jake saw the bed, the unmade bed. His gut wrenched and twisted as much as the sheets were. He stared long and hard at the bed, turn to look at Cal by the door, looked back at the bed, then like on a mission, he stormed back out. Still not saying a word.

Jake's silence frightened Cal more than anything. What was he going to say. What was he going to do. She followed him in his determined walk all the way toward the other buildings.

Billy sat at the table in the recreation building. Staring at his folded hands, ignoring the comments of Rickie and Lou who tried to instigate him. Billy couldn't react, he couldn't think about anything but Cal. And he knew the inevitable had come when he heard the door to the recreation room open and he looked up to see Jake. It was happening, It was his own personal Judgment day. Slowly he stood up.

A knot thickened in Jake's stomach when he saw Billy. A twinge of disgust burned him when he had a vision of Billy being with Cal. With no words, a steady outraged stride and a small curl of his top lip, Jake stepped to Billy, fist tightly clenched and with everything he had he sailed his fist into Billy so hard that Billy literally lifted a foot from the floor, flew back with spin and landed hard with a roll to the ground.

Jake stood exactly where he had thrown his punch watching for a second, Billy laying on his stomach not moving. Taking in a long breath, Jake turned and walked to Cal grabbing hold of her arm. He saw her looking at Billy and he pulled her while he moved. "Don't even think about it." His one hand reached out opening the door, releasing Cal's arm, and with a hand to her back, led her with a hurriedness out.

Rickie knew. Watching what had transpired so fast. The look on Jake's face. The look on Cal's face. Billy's demeanor. It said it all to him and he walked over and stood above where Billy lay.

Billy could see the top of Rickie's tennis shoe as he lifted his head. Blood flowed from his mouth and cheek. He felt as if his face was ten times bigger, it pounded with so much pain. But to Billy, it wasn't enough. And he guessed it wasn't over yet. He still had one member of the family to deal with . . . Rickie. He figured that was what Rickie waited for. And Billy was O.K. with that, he was willing to take anything right now because he felt he deserved it all. Raising up some Billy was shocked. He was prepared to take what ever Rickie had to say or

do, Billy wasn't prepared to take the hand Rickie extended down to him as help.

^^^

The second shot of whiskey passed through Jake with angry ease, as he poured just one more, slammed the bottle to the dresser and downed that one as well. Wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, he looked at Cal who still hadn't moved since they returned to the room. She stood not far from the door. Her face the same, her folded arm stand was still the same. Jake walked to the fridge, opened it and grabbed a beer. "Sit down." He told her as he untwisted the cap and move toward the table. Cal didn't move. "SIT DOWN!" he blasted at Cal.

His words not only shook her entire body, but they caused Cal to fly to the table and sit down. So scared, so cold, she sat, arms tight to her, her eyes never leaving Jake. He'd pace, look at her, take a drink of his beer and pace again. "Jake." High and sad she spoke his name then sobbed. Her head dropped and she grabbed her arms tighter. "Jake, I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry. I don't know what else to say to you." Her words shook in hyperventilation as she spoke. "I don't know what happened. I didn't mean for it to happen."

"Cal." Jake silenced her with his one, firm, yet soft word. "You didn't mean it?"

"No." She shook her head drastically staring to the floor.

"Look at me Cal." He waited. "I want you to look at me the whole entire time. You will raise your fuckin head and face me. You got that?"

Cal nodded and looked up.

"Did he force you?"

"No."

"Did he coerce you in any way?"

"No." Cal answered.

"You were drinking. Were you drunk?"

"No."

"Then you knew exactly what you were doing?"

Cal didn't answer.

"Did you know exactly what you were doing?"

She held back from crying, but it escaped in her answer. "Yes."

Jake took another drink of his beer. "Then how in the hell did you not mean for it to happen."

"I didn't think Jake. I didn't think it would get to that point. I didn't think my feelings . . ."

"You have feelings for him?"

"Jake. No. Not like that." Cal stood up. "You have to . . ."

"Sit down." He waited for Cal to returned to her seat. So calm, eerily calm Jake tried to be, but what didn't show was the fact that it took every ounce of strength not to lose it. "Explain these feelings. And be honest with me. I want nothing less now."

"They aren't what you think Jake. They aren't. I swear. I knew . . . I knew I felt something for Billy." Cal slowed in her speech when she saw the twitch of Jake's facial muscles. "But Jake, it was nothing more than maybe a infatuation. Nothing I would think to do anything about."

"You thought wrong." He saw Cal's head drop. "Cal, look at me." He sat down at the table. "Now I want to know. I want to know everything that happened tonight."

"Jake . . ."

"Everything you hear me? From the second you walked out the door to after it was over with. Everything. I want no surprises."

"Why?" Cal asked with desperation.

"Why. Because I need to know what was going through your mind. Your heart. I need to know what kind of intimate act my wife performed with another man. I deserve to know this."

"But why now?"

"You think tomorrow, or the next day, or how about two weeks when it isn't as strong on my mind. You think I want to find out details then. No,. I want to know now and I want to get it over with. Talk to me."

"I don't know where to start."

Jake took a drink of his beer. "How about I start? Did you even discuss what you wanted to talk to him about?"

"Yes."

"Explain to me how a conversation about his father got you to that point."

"He . . . he was upset." Cal sniffed. "He felt bad and it was raining and we went inside." She waited for the 'go on' nod from Jake. "I was drenched and I borrowed clothes from him while mine dried. We talked, and we had some drinks. I was getting ready to leave Jake. I swear I was. And he kissed me on the cheek. Just a simple kiss on the cheek. And I found myself in this moment and the next thing I know I'm kissing him and how, I don't know, I . . . I ended up being with him."

Jake had to take a second before allowing himself to show any emotion. "It doesn't wash. He kissed you and it just seemed like a good idea to go to bed."

"No."

"How did you kiss him Cal?"

"What?"

"How did you kiss him? Did you kiss him like you kiss me? Was it more intense, more sexual, what?" He saw the lost look on Cal's face. She didn't know how to answer him. "Did it go from the kiss straight to bed. Was their foreplay?"

"Yes."

"So you had time to think about stopping it?" Jake ensued.

"Yes."

"You couldn't?"

"I was . . . I was caught up. I couldn't." She answered so nervously.

"So he kissed you. You kissed him. Was he touching you?"

"Yes."

"Where."

Cal hesitated with a swallow. "All over."

"And did you touch him . . . all over."

Cal's mouth closed tightly and she shook her head. "Not all over. I touched him, but not . . ."

"So you kissed. You touched. Was there a lot of kissing Cal?"

Cal only nodded.

"A lot of kissing. So it was more intimate than raw." Jake finished his beer, stood up and walked to his fridge to retrieve another. "Is that right?"

"Yes."

"How intimate did he kiss you Cal?" Jake asked.

"Jake please . . ."

"How?"

"Very."

"Where?"

Cal sobbed.

"Where?"

A light pause, a whimper and Cal's eyes closed tightly. "All over."

If Jake squeezed his beer bottle any tighter it would have crushed within his hands.

"Jake, I don't understand why it's important to know what happened. It happened. I don't understand."

Jake's voice raised for the first time as he leaned close to her. "Because I need to know what my wife had to get from somebody else! What I couldn't give her. And I also need to know if my wife. MY WIFE, enjoyed it."

Cal stopped shaking, her eyes widened.

"Did you Cal?" Jake waited for an answer. "Did he get you to a point that only I should get you to?"

"Jake . . ."

"Answer my question Cal."

Cal's words quivered, her heart raced. "Jake, listen I just . . ."

"Answer it!" Jake yelled then repeated his question in choppy slower words. "Did he make you come?"

Cal gasped, closed her eyes and trembled. Hearing him say that filled her with a contempt for what she had done. She couldn't answer. She started to cry.

"Cal." Jake only heard crying. "Cal." Still no answer. "Then I'm going to take this response as a yes." He received a sob from Cal and Jake turned his back to her and walked a few feet from that table. He stared at the wall bringing his beer to his mouth. Taking a drink of the coldness of it and letting his breathing and racing heart calm. For the longest time he couldn't turn around. Cal's sniffles from her tears were the only sounds in that room. When he felt he could face her

again, Jake with partially closed eyes moved back toward her. "What did I do wrong?" Jake asked of her with passion to his voice. "Where did I go wrong? Can you tell me? Please? There's no instruction booklet on how to be a good husband. I was doing the best I could. I thought I was doing good.. If I wasn't, I would have thought something inside of you would have sent a signal. I thought you would have told me what I was doing wrong." He stepped closer to her. "That's what you're supposed to do. Come to me. Tell me how to make it right." His words picked up strength. "I would have made it right. I would do anything for you because I love you that much. It's my Job Cal to make you happy. No one else's. So tell me where I went wrong?"

"You didn't." Cal could barely speak she cried so badly. "You didn't Jake. You love me more than anyone. You treat me better than anyone. You're a great husband."

"Then why . . ." With surprising outrage, Jake's arm flung forward sailing his beer bottle into the wall. The crash, flying glass and beer caused Cal to shriek and jump. "Then why did you sleep with Billy?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" Jake's face not only felt hot to him but it grew red, strained, angry. "I'm supposed to accept that? I'm supposed to just take 'I don't know' for an answer. Well 'I don't know' isn't good enough Cal! It will never be good enough!" On his final words, Jake in his rage, grabbed hold of the table flipping it in a hard throw across the room.

Cal still sitting in the chair, shook and cowered as the table ricocheted off the dresser, into the wall and rolling with a vengeance toward the night stand, blasting everything with a mighty crash.

Jake stormed to the dresser, grabbed the fallen but unbroken bottle of Jake Daniels, snatched it up into his hand and barged out of the room.

Cal's hands, shaking, reached with hurt and desperation to her legs bringing them up against her chest as she sat in that chair. She buried her head to her knees and did what she had been doing for the last hour. What she couldn't help but do. Cal cried.

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The rain had finally stopped and Jake contemplated on leaving the porch, getting away from the bungalow. He watched everyone return to their own places slowly, looking his way as they did. Even Rickie said nothing. He just raised his hand in a sad wave.

On the step Jake sat, holding the bottle in his hands. There was so much hurt in his heart and hatred that he didn't think it was possible for him to feel like that. And in his stare at the bottle, the picking of the label, Jake heard the slow shuffle of feet. He lifted on his eyes to see Billy approach him. Jake took a drink. The

liquid swished hard from his mouth as he stared cold at Billy. "Know . . . right now. You are the last person on the face of the fuckin earth that I want to see standing before me."

Billy closed his pain filled eyes. "I know."

"And do you know how much I want to just kill you right now?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you here?"

"I have something to say."

"You have nothing to say." Jake closed his eyes and lifted the bottle to his mouth again.

"Yeah I do. You . . . you welcomed me into your home, your life." Billy head dropped and he spoke his words through a tear-filled sadness. "I never meant to hurt you. I never meant to betray you like this Jake. Never. I'm sorry." Billy's eyes glossed over. "I am so sorry. If I could give my life, my soul, to take this all back, I swear to Almighty God I would. I would." Billy's words dropped to a near whisper. "Just know how sorry I am Jake. Please just know how sorry I am."

Jake didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. Through the drink he took straight from the bottle, he watched Billy turn and walk away.

^ ^ ^ ^

Cal tossed the rag she used to wipe off the walls, in the sink. She rinsed her hands off that had some dried blood where she had cut herself and went into the other room. She had put the room back together, fixing the night stand, the lamp, the table. She pushed the dresser back to the wall and moved to the door again. A door she kept open just a crack so she could continuously look out at Jake. He sat in the dark unity circle on a log, just sitting there. And Cal knew it was time, it had been hours, and she needed to go talk to him. With her head pounding from an emotional headache, Cal grabbed the folded clothes she had set out, and walked from the bungalow.

Jake's fingers had no control and the empty bottle of Jack slipped from his hand into the dirt by his boots. He lowered his face to his hands.

"Jake." Cal walked up behind him speaking soft.

Jake raised his head. So heavy his eyes were, blurry. He had drank too much and when he lifted his eyes things spun.

"Jake. I cleaned up. I'm . . . I'm going to go stay with Rickie. O.K.? I think that the last thing you need is to be around me." She received silence from him. "I want to say something that I didn't get to say inside. I can't apologize enough Jake. If you want me to say I'm sorry everyday for the rest of my life. I will. Because I am. I love . . ." Cal paused as a lump crept up into her throat and her eyes began to burn. "I love you so much. I love you."

"Love." The word rasped from his lips and Jake stood up swaying some as he did. He turned around and faced Cal. "Love really . . . really doesn't matter now does it?" He blinked several times and rubbed his eyes. "You can't stay with

Rickie. It's against the rules of this fuckin' game. I never . . . I never gave my heart to anyone." Jake's head dropped. "I gave my heart to you Cal, and you broke it." He leaned down to her with a clenched fist. "You broke it."

Cal closed her eyes. She was defenseless. She had nothing she could say.

"We'll play by the rules of the game while we're here. But after it's done, and we step away from this island, I'm stepping away from you. I can't live my life with someone I can't trust, can't look at. I don't think I'll ever be able to touch you again without feeling some sort of . . ." Jake cringed emotionally. "Some sort of disgust for you." He looked away when he heard her cry. "I never thought I'd hear myself say these words. But fuck the other half of the money, you can have it all, I just want a divorce." Jake stepped over the log he had sat on, and slowly stumbled in a walk. "I want you out of my life." In a stagger, without looking back, and leaving Cal with those hard words, the last words he would speak to her in a while, Jake walked to the bungalow.

THE NEXT PHASE BEGINS

Comprehension of what is going on around you is vital. Do not for one second forget that. If you do, you fall pawn to the experiment and that is exactly what they want.

--Excerpts from 'Surviving the Stasis'

Written by Jake and Cal Graison

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
March 28th - 8:45 a.m.

A massive bountiful breakfast buffet was set up on the long table on the meeting level in the control room. Set up for the two monitors, Caldwell workers, and anyone who wanted to indulge. All courtesy of Aldo.

"Mr. Connilucci sir." A maintenance man approached him. "I have the cable television now all hooked up to your guest room."

"Thanks Chester." Aldo smiled. "Grab some food."

"Thank you sir. I will."

Douglass who picked at a croissant, shook his head with a snicker. "Making yourself at home?"

"Trying, there's only so many movies I can watch when everyone else is sleeping on that island."

"And weren't you one of the invertors that chuckled at Haynes' suggestion that he guarantees that by mid experiment we will not leave the center."

"Yeah, that's me." Aldo lifted a sausage link. "But I pretty much should be immune from that anyhow. Christ, you know how much I was around the previous experiments. And this time, my daughter is old enough to sort of take care of herself."

"True. And from what I heard, you've pretty much had your reasons for being here."

"And Daniela. Don't forget him. He's been here daily." Aldo pointed his half eaten sausage. "Billy is his horse and this pretty much effects him too. Boy, I heard he broke a sweat when he found out Jake knew." Aldo whistled. "He thought he was out. However, Billy's still alive. Lonely, quiet, but alive."

"How about Cal and Jake."

Aldo looked at Douglass. "Lonely, quiet."

"It's kind of sad that the experiment went to these extremes. They never did that before."

"They never had a married couple to mess with before. Besides, can't put all the blame on them." Aldo dipped his sausage in ketchup. "Damn it, this isn't Heinz. Now where was I? Oh yes, you can't put all the blame on them. Billy and Cal had to start it. They had to. I watched the tape." Aldo grinned.

"So. How long did it take for Jake to find out?"

"Not long. Immediately." Aldo explained. "Surprised the shit out of Haynes. Fuckin asshole wanted to send pictures to Jake of Cal and Billy. But it backed fired. Now I wished he would send them."

Oddly, Douglass looked at him. "Why?"

"Because if Jake gets them now, he'll know the experiment took them. He'll know the experiment had something to do with it and Jake would hug and kiss

Billy before he let the experiment get one up on him.”

“They already did. The ‘no one can get me’ man. Was gotten.”

Aldo raised his eyebrows in a compliance of agreement. “But lets not forget, he doesn’t know this. I wished he’d find out and stop this.”

“Is he being mean to Cal? Down right . . . nasty?” Douglass asked with a dramatic face to match.

“Nope. Not at all. Quiet. He hasn’t spoke to her in six days.” Aldo swayed his head. “I feel like a father watching his daughter’s problems from a distance. Having the answers but unable to do anything about it.”

“And you *should* want to do something about it. You have the biggest investment in this. O.K.” Douglass let out a breath. “Update me. Caldwell’s telling me not much has happened while I was away. What’s the Aldo scoop.”

“You know the routine.” Aldo explained. “Pushing one month, so things are starting to move now. Besides the Jake, Cal and Billy thing, they started on Lou two days ago.”

“What are they doing to him.”

“Come by tonight and you’ll see.” Aldo shrugged. “Not phasing him . . . yet. They have something up their sleeve for that Larry person, what it is I don’t know. They said they have to wait. And they got something in the works on Paul as well. Again, remains to be seen, I keep getting that stock answer of ‘soon’.” Aldo reached for some more sausage. “As for Judge. Slowly increasing. And Rickie hasn’t told Judge yet that his granddaughter has died. He gave him two bogus medical updates.”

“Last but not least You have to break it to me . . . my guy.”

“Reed?” Aldo started to laugh. “Well he got the sight back in his left eye. His hair still hasn’t grown, um . . . the ear is looking good. Since losing that part of his tongue . . .” Aldo shook his head. “It’s actually funny to hear him. Rickie understands him. What else . . . um . . .”

“What else?” Douglass’ eyes widened. “Oh my God.”

“Not that bad. A pig got his . . . little . . .” Aldo had to laugh. “Piggy . But it didn’t effect his walking. Jake sewed it up for him. The burn healed and, that’s it. No wait.” Aldo saw Douglass cringe. “Rickie stole his nipple cream.”

Douglass covered his eyes. “I’m done. I’m done.”

“Nah.” Aldo patted him on the back. “Want to know something. It’s pitiful, but I think this guys gonna make it. Anyone who can have that many accidents is tough. He may beg to be shot like a dog but other than that. You have to admit. It’s been funny.”

Douglass bobbed his head as he returned to eating his croissant. “I’ve paid more for less entertaining things.”

“That’s the spirit.” Aldo gave him a pat to his back. “Let’s go watch the players.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 28th - 9:10 a.m.

He couldn't go near her, not within a hundred feet. Not yet. Out of his respect for Cal and Jake and their marriage, Billy could only stay away until he knew that it was all right again. All right to just say hello. Like he did every day, he watched her from a distance. Working out. Taking pictures, and as he did at that moment, sitting on his porch with his lap top, occasionally glancing up to Cal who just sat in the unity circle. His heart really ached for her. So sad Cal looked, lost, alone. And Billy knew exactly how she felt. He felt the same way. So badly, as he watched her, he just wanted to walk up to her, take her tight in his arms and tell her that everything would work out, it would be fine. Above it all, Cal was his friend, a friend that he took very serious and developed with over three years. And more so than anything in the world, more than being a lover, it meant everything to Billy just being Cal's friend.

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It was barely nine-thirty and Cal couldn't take the sun any longer. Even sitting in the unity circle, shade of the trees casting upon her, it was too hot. She thought about going to Rickie's place, but like his room at home, it was too messy. And even though Cal wasn't the neat freak Jake was, even Rickie's domain was too unnerving for her. Weighing her choices of staying outside, going to the dining area or rec room and running into Larry or just going into her bungalow. Cal decided to go back to her place. She dreaded going into her bungalow at that moment because she knew Jake was in there. It wasn't Jake she dreaded it was the silence. No words. Not a good morning, goodnight, or hello had been spoken to her since he told her he wanted her out of his life. He wasn't mean, nor did Jake in anyway look at her in that way. Brief eye contact with Cal and a nod was what he did. Acknowledging her presence as if passing a mere acquaintance. And Cal stopped speaking to him three days earlier when she realized a vocal response to anything she said was just not going to happen.

Still she hoped. Every single time she knew she was going to see him, she hoped. Hoped *that* moment was the one he finally said hi. And like all the other moments she had seen Jake over that past six days, when she walked in the bungalow, there was nothing different.

She slowed in her walk in after closing the door, looking at Jake who stood by the bed with his open small arsenal bag. Jake looked up then back to what he was doing. He retrieved what he needed from the bag, and did what he always did, left the room.

A part of Cal felt it wasn't anger that caused Jake's behavior. She knew Jake

better than anyone. Jake let go of his anger fast. To Cal it was also more than just his hurt. Jake, for the first time in over three years, had absolutely nothing to say to her. And when Jake had nothing to say, Jake didn't talk. A part of Cal was seeing a different man than she had grown accustomed to. The man that used to be the loner. Never speaking unless spoken to. But a part of her was seeing the same man. The man who once he made up his mind, he didn't change it. And it was evident that Jake had made up his mind, not to have anything to do with Cal ever again.

^ ^ ^ ^

His name was Reggie, but to all those who lived, worked, and dwelled in the Caldwell Controllers building, Dr. Reginald Hawthorn was called . . . Ollie. A heavy set man, but firm. He hardly smiled and was a little older than ever one else. Glasses and pompous. But those weren't the reasons they called him Ollie. It was more of a silly reason. He worked side by side with thin Stan. Second in command on the island under Stan, a man who looked more like a research assistant rather than the man who finally earned his scientific doctrine one year earlier.

Sitting and preparing syringes in one of the lower labs, Ollie heard the familiar sound he had grown used to. The sounds that happened everyday at that time. A slight Stan shriek followed by the pounding of running footsteps on wooded stairs. And the grand finale, a heavy breath, a slam of the door and a few sequential pounds that faded.

Ollie looked up. "Hungry again?"

Stan wiped his forehead as he leaned against the door. "You can say that. Hey, Ollie, how about calling Haynes for . . ."

"Nope."

"Come on."

"Nope. I have injection therapy to prepare."

"It'll take a second." Stan tried to persuade. "I am so tired of hearing 'not yet' from him. Please, we have to know when this will stop."

Ollie laid down the syringe. "I'll make this one phone call for you. However, you have to do the injection therapy when it becomes addicting for the Catch."

"I have no problem with that." Stan said. "However, you're the medical doctor. What if there's a medical emergency and he dies."

"Stan. At that stage . . . He'll come back."

"Ha, ha, ha. You're the funny guy." Stan shook his head and flipped off Ollie. "Forget it. I'll call the guy myself."

"Scared?" Ollie asked as Stan moved to the door. "Scared of The Catch?"

"Hell yeah." Stan replied. "I saw what The Catch did to the controllers at the last experiment. *You* did not. So . . . I'd rather call Greg, It's less deadly. See ya'."

Ollie picked up the syringe and stared at it. He realized at that moment he

was missing a vital piece of information that he should have had prior to taking on the new research position. The information regarding what happened to the last controllers. Because someone conveniently left that out.

^ ^ ^ ^

Rickie's lips formed a circle as if by doing that, he could do it for Reed. He sat on Reed's porch watching him with a beckoning look. "Come on guy, you can do it. You can . . ." Rickie gave a thumbs up to Reed who sucked from a straw, despite the fact that half the liquid that went into his mouth flowed right back out the corners of his lips. "Dude, you're getting it."

"Uh tie. Uh ill et it oon."

"Yes you will. Real soon." Rickie saw from his peripheral vision, Billy, like he always did, hesitantly heading their way. "Hey look guy. Look who's coming to chitter."

Reed looked. He cringed. "Uh oh ike im. Ohm eh-er."

"Dude be nice. He's not a home wrecker guy. If you act all mean I won't interpret the Reed lingo."

"Ah eye. Uh ill E ice."

"Cool." Rickie smiled when Billy walked up. "Hey guy, bored."

"Nah." Billy shook his head and sat on the porch. "Needed company. And why is Reed giving me those dirty looks again."

"Guy!" Rickie warned. "What I tell you. Next time the bacon-to-be's lock onto your scent, I'm not getting Jake or Cal."

"Ah eye." Reed shook his head.

"Cool." Rickie told Reed. "And like, why don't you go and rub some of that sun screen on your head. Your dome is Crispin."

Reed reached his fingers up to his bald head and touched. "Ow. Eye ill E ack."

Billy snickered as Reed stood up and went inside. "Rickie, really. You don't need to get defensive on my part, I . . I don't deserve it."

"Dude, even though you did my mom while she's with my dad, I still like you. And The Rickie-Meister is in deep mental brain process over this whole thing. And I'm gonna be as persistent as Shaggy in Scooby-Doo."

"There's no mystery here Rickie. We all know what happened." Billy lowered his head almost in shame.

"Yeah, but guy it doesn't make sense. It's like when you open up a can of Dinosaurs and meatballs. And you're chompin', chompin and like WHOA! Hey there's Waldo. And like you pull a Waldo macaroni from the sauce. Same family of lunch products, wrong can. So it's like, you know Waldo isn't supposed to be there, but he's there. And right now I'm still wondering if that clever little ugly dude in the red and white shirt snuck right in there on his own because he wanted a little prehistoric action . . ." Rickie winked. "Or if like someone was trying to

pull the wool over all the pasta lover's eyes and put him there. Of course that's rather mean huh?"

Billy thought Rickie was making sense at first. "What are you talking about."

"Putting Waldo in the dinosaur pasta. Like, what about the guy searching for Waldo. And you know what?" Rickie snapped his finger "It's like no wonder I couldn't find him that one time. I looked and looked. Sarge was like, 'Rickie, you ate the goddamn Waldo, now knock it off' but I was like, no way. Some one took him. Wait . . ." Rickie scratched his head. "I really got off the subject, didn't I?"

"Kind of." Billy looked up to Reed's door. "Rickie, before your lingual-less buddy comes out. I wanted to know how Cal is."

"Doing. Still not talking to her?" Rickie asked.

"Not yet. I . . . I can't." Billy looked sad. "I wish with my heart I could just let her know I'm here as a friend. Or that I'm just thinking about her. I know she's going through a rough time because of me and I'm just really worried. Could you, I know this is asking a lot, could you just tell her that."

"What?"

"What I just told you."

"Dude, that's like way too much. I always mess up when someone give me way too much to say. Tell her yourself."

Billy chuckled. "Right. I can't talk to her."

"So come up with a way to tell her. You're a writer guy. You're suppose to think of stuff."

"Well this writer is blocked on this. Got any ideas on how . . ." Billy saw Reed coming out. "We'll finish later."

Rickie winked at Billy and shook his head holding up a 'just wait' finger. He turned to a happier looking Reed. "Guy, I see some shimmering happening on the dome. Applied that sun . . . UH! Pig!" Rickie pointed outward causing Reed to jump up, shriek loudly and run back into his bungalow. Rickie laughed for a second, then stopped. "Gone. O.K., where were we?"

Billy closed his eyes not wanting to laugh, he swayed his head with a smile and buried his face in his hands.

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Judge thought he was immune to it walking outdoors in the path. But he wasn't. Besides being rough and holding a hint of ignorance to the tone, the male voice was familiar as it called out from the trees to him.

"Lookin' foe me Judge?" The man asked. "I no longer where you be sending me. Ain't that right?"

Judge closed his eyes, telling himself over and over, 'there was no way'.

"I closer than you thank."

Slowly Judge turned around and started walking. The voice, the ruffling

leaves. It had to be his imagination. It had to be.

"Oh, you better be scared. You jus' better be. What was it that you said? 'Fear not of thy maker for he shall judge thee more than we. And it is society's gain that your soul meet your maker early for your transfer to damnation?' Yeah Judge, I remember those words. Do you."

The voice seemed to follow Judge, staying close no matter how quickly he moved. Louder and louder the voice grew causing Judge's heart to pound, his head to spin and his limping walk to weaken as he picked up his pace.

"It's not time yet. But when it is, I be sending you there ahead for my directions." The male voice started laughing and soon it multiplied, one voice, two, three then four.

Judge huffed and ran, finding himself frantic and off the path. He looked back to the laughter and the chanting hooting voices calling his name over and over. Male voices meshed together, echoing with a painful and deafening reverberation in his ears. And in his desperation run, his leg that did not move well, got caught up on a branch that he tried to step over and Judge fell face first to the ground, smashing his glasses into his face. The voice and laughter stopped. Silence. Feeling the blood flowing from the corner of his eye, Judge let out a single, frightened exhale, and shaking, just laid there scared to death to move.

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"Sarge!" Rickie called out across the dining room with excitement, darting from where he and Lou helped Reed to sit, across the room to Jake.

"Hey Rickie." Jake gave a quick smile.

"Sarge, like guess what? Me and the Lou-ster didn't cook tonight. Cal did."

"Oh yeah?" Jake said with little enthusiasm.

"Yeah, and it made me think of home. And I was wondering, if tonight we can . . ."

"No." Jake shook his head.

"How do you know what I'm gonna say?"

"I know and . . . not tonight Rickie."

"I can set three places off to the side or back at the bungalow?" Rickie tilted his head with an innocent, questioning look.

"Really, not tonight." Jake laid his hand on Rickie's shoulder. "However. I would like very much if you joined me for dinner. It would be nice, you've been busy the past couple days." Jake saw Rickie snickering. "What?"

"Nothin." Rickie held up his hand, turned his head and snorted. "Just feel Hallmarked that's all."

"What the hell are you talking about."

"Dude, you touched me wanting to dine with the Rickie-Meister. O.K., let

me go feed my pet, I mean, my pal.” Rickie laughed. “And you thought Reed was the Catch.”

“He still could be, just suffering a . . .” Jake looked over Rickie’s head, and he raised one eyebrow. “Suffering a slow . . . painful death.”

“Cool. O.K., like, Let me go and get him a plate. I have to crush his stuff cause he doesn’t have a whole tongue thanks to Lou.”

“Let him get his own plate.” Jake told him.

“Dude, I have to show some compassion, he hurt his hand today when he fell running in his bungalow. So like, are we gonna eat in here or head back to the pad?”

“Um . . .” Jake looked around. Two people weren’t there. Cal and Judge. “Here.”

“Excellent-a-Mundo. You grab some Cal grub.” Rickie snickered. “Look at me using big tough military words. And I’ll meet you back at the table.”

Jake only nodded heading off to the food table and to the familiar smell and sight of Cal’s cooking. He grabbed a plate dishing up some. There were four dining tables in the room. Two of which were empty. Jake moved to one of those tables hoping that the only person that would sit with him would be Rickie.

Cal had taken advantage of the fact that she saw Jake leave the bungalow. She wanted to change her clothes, get a little food, and sit down and try to eat. Crossing the short wooded area to the other two buildings, Cal caught up to a slow moving Judge. “Evening.” She spoke to him.

“Cal.”

She thought there was something funny about his walk, but when she saw his face, Cal had to stop him. She reached out and grabbed his arm. “What happened? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I was walking and I tripped.” Judge touched the corner of his eye. “Broke my other pair of glasses though. Not real happy about that.”

“How bad is the cut?” Cal asked.

“I’m fine.” Judge laid his hand on hers. “I’m just fine.” He moved away from Cal, almost dazed. The way he moved reminded her of the lost people in the movie *The Poseidon Adventure*. Wandering confused in just any direction.

Billy sat alone, like Jake at another table. He didn’t want to be alone, but he felt it was best. At least where he sat, he was near some of the others, he could listen to the conversation and see Cal whenever she came in.

As Larry Kale made it back to his table again, he caught Billy’s glare on the door. Snidely he nudged Billy as he made it back to his seat. “Are you waiting for some one?” Larry asked arrogantly as Billy try to ignore him. “If I was her husband I would have killed you. I wish he’d do us all that favor.” Larry smirked



and sat in his seat. He saw Rickie staring at him. "Is there a problem Rickie."

"Dude, man. Like I don't know if anyone has ever told you this but . . . you suck." Rickie sighed and faced Reed handing him his fork. "There you go guy. Rickie-Meister style Reed food."

"Ank ew." Reed scooped some former carrots on his fork.

"Look there's the Cal-babe. I have a mission." Rickie stood up. "Bone appetite guy." The swift pat on the back Rickie gave Reed caused an immediate coughing, gagging sound to come from Reed. "Flute, you O.K.?"

Reed gagged again, pulling out the fork from his mouth. A fork that seemed to go all the way to the back of his throat. He placed his hands on his own neck and tried to swallow.

"Sorry." Rickie snickered. "Cal-babe." He hurried over to her. "Hey like I have to tell you something."

"Sure Rickie what's . . . ." Cal's eyes shifted to Jake. "Why is he eating in here tonight?"

"Don't know. Maybe it's to pretend he doesn't want to see you."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. I've been like the off-the-subject guy today." Rickie scratched his head. "I wanted to catch you first. I don't want you to think I'm playing favorites O.K.? I'm not. But . . . I'm chowing with the sarge at his table."

Cal smile peacefully. "Rickie I don't mind. I wanted to sit alone."

"O.K., but one other thing."

"What's that?" Cal asked.

"Are you gonna eat tonight? You haven't been eating."

Cal sadly looked over to Jake who didn't raise his head. "I'll try."

"And one more thing before I disappear to the other side with the Sarge. After din-din you wanna go for a little not-romantic stroll in the beach. Maybe spend some bond time together, collect some shells and hope to find washed up body parts."

"I'd like that."

"Excellent. Shake on it." Rickie held out his hand.

"Rickie I don't need to shake on it." Cal chuckled.

"Cal-babe. We must seal the deal." Rickie grabbed her hand. "Shake."

So familiar it was, but it had been years. The transferring of a slip of paper into her hand. She raised her eyes to Rickie. "What . . ."

"Gotta go." Rickie closed her hand, and moved to the food line grabbing a plate, filling it, and rushing over to Jake.

Cal didn't take long to move to a table and sit by herself. Of course she didn't take much food either. A potato, a small piece of that meat she tried to make taste better and a slice of bread. Sitting down, clenching the little school-style carton of milk, she could feel the note Rickie had slipped her. What did he want to tell her? She glanced over to Rickie who seemed engrossed in rambling on

about something to Jake. And oddly enough, Jake seemed to enjoy Rickie's rambling. Placing down the milk, Cal dropped the note to the table. Folded so tiny, it was like De Je vue. Her one hand held her fork, scraping across the tiny amount of food she had, while the other played with the note, debating on reading it right there.

Deciding that Rickie had a reason to slip it to her, without lifting it, Cal, almost in a time-passing thing, maneuvered her fingers to unfold the paper. Her eyes blinked several times on the printing, though she could not make out the words yet. Putting down her fork and moving her plate slightly, Cal smoothed out the letter.

*'Cal, Just wanted to tell you I'm thinking of you. And I miss you so much. Billy.'*

She hoped it was silent, the small leak of sadness that escaped her as both her hands clasped the note as if for dear life. She brought her hands near to her face, lowering her head to them and the edge of the note, buried in her palms, touched lightly against her forehead. So hard she tried to stay in control. But as soon as she raised her eyes to Jake, who never looked at her, then to Billy who watched her, a tear streamed down Cal's face, and she stood in a rush from the table, note in hand, and ran out.

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"Cal-babe." Rickie spoke softly, holding Cal's hand as they walked slowly on the beach. The warm water rushed to them as they moved down shore, Lou in Body guard mode behind them. "He didn't mean to make you cry."

"I know."

"And Billy didn't write the note to start trouble. Honest, He just meant . . ."

"I know exactly what Billy meant." Cal spoke saddened. "I knew where Billy's heart is."

"So then if you know why. Why did you cry?" Rickie asked.

Cal stopped walking. "I miss him too. He was my friend, Rickie. A part of my daily life for three years. And we fucked up. How I don't know, but we did. And all I want is to have that friend back."

"Then maybe he's who you need to talk to right now." Rickie suggested.

Cal laughed emotionally. "Right now? No. No. I'm sure you know by talking to Jake, now is not good."

"Sarge and I really don't talk about it." Rickie said. "He doesn't and I don't try. I figured, you know, he's in that working through it phase and when he starts talking to you again he'll . . ."

"Rickie, Jake isn't going to talk to me again." Cal explained. "Ever."

"Babe, like I know right now it doesn't seem like he is. But he's being quiet to work this out."

"No." Cal shook her head, "He's being quiet to shut me out. He's practicing

living without me. To him, in his mind, I am not here.”

Rickie had to laugh at that. “Cal-babe, that’s like so ridiculous. The Sarge loves you.”

“The Sarge . . .” Cal took a heavy sigh. It would be the first time she spoke those words out loud. “The Sarge wants a divorce. He told me. As soon as we’re off the Island he wants me out of his life.” She saw the surprised look on Rickie’s face. “You didn’t know that did you?”

Rickie shook his head. “No I didn’t. I’m sorry.” He started walking with Cal again. “Oh.” He spoke the word long deep and drawn out. “I am so bummed. And is that . . .” Rickie released Cal’s hand and ran ahead of her bending down to the water. “Nah.”

Cal smiled, she needed Rickie to do that. “What?”

Rickie tossed a small stick back into the ocean. “I thought it was a finger. The toot never recovered that sergeant broad’s left hand.” He moved back to Cal. “Cal-babe. I like have a serious question to ask you.”

“Sure Rickie, what?”

“Like if you and Sarge are splitting up. Who gets custody of me?”

With a laugh, Cal tightly embraced Rickie, then continued in their walk.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
March 28<sup>th</sup> - 8:10 p.m.

A long, loud, deep burp carried up to the meeting level of the control room, bringing immediate silence to the talking four, Greg, Aldo, Douglass and Daniela.

Buy only for a second.

With his feet, like the others, propped up on the railing, Aldo hesitated in biting his deep dish pizza. "Barb, you pig."

Barb snickered an embarrassing laugh. "Sorry. Pizza and sodas get me."

Aldo laughed and chomped his pizza. "Now Haynes, before you continue, let me say . . ." Aldo motioned his hand out to Greg's attire, jeans, tennis shoes, sweatshirt. "This is the Haynes I like to see. Just sitting back and relaxing. Dr. Jefferson never dined and drank with me."

"Well." Greg shrugged and rolled his beer bottle between his hands. "Jefferson has a family. Me, I live here, what else do I got to do. Besides . . ." He smiled and took a drink. "You're an interesting bunch. O.K., as I was saying, and I'll get into more at the meeting next week, Cal and Jake were pretty much the starter gun to the mental phase. We threw some tiny stuff the other's way. Hints. But not much. And of course there's always someone every experiment who seems to slip through the cracks and for the longest time is not touched."

Douglass and Aldo looked at each other and said it at the same time. "Jake."

"So now we're heading into the thick of it?" Douglass asked.

"Yes." Greg nodded. "Pretty much so, yes."

Daniela, a young man who inherited his fortune, raised his hand like a school boy. "I'm a little lost. This is my first experiment. I know you eventually end the mental phase. But how long does it last?"

"Depends." Greg said. "We take it as far as we can and it's up to the effected participants to roll with it. Aldo and Douglass were at the last experiment. They can tell you."

Douglass looked over Greg's propped legs to Daniela. "Last experiment we had some real weak ones. First guy broke one month, the last to break was about seven weeks. But the experiment before . . . what would you say Aldo, how long did it take?"

Aldo took a moment to think. "I recall them not doing anything at all for the first month. Remember we bitched, because things were so boring. But when they eventually hit them, God, I think it was well into the later part of the third month. Wasn't it?"

Douglass nodded. "Yeah I think so. They were heading into the element stages. Which on this one, this Island is a weather circus. That alone would drive me insane."

Greg smiled. "Yeah, but that does sort of work in our favor. Doesn't it?"

Daniela had another question. "Did you ever have a participant, that was not in the least phased by the mental stuff at all."

"Never?" Greg saw Douglass and Aldo shake their heads. "They would know. But I think this experiment is the first one where we have someone who . . . let me show you." Greg put down his feet and leaned over the railing. "Barb. Can you cue up LC-327, exhibit four? Let me know when you got it. Thanks." Greg sat back. "Now Lou Collins is shocking me. He was raised in a boys home after his mother was murdered. The boys home . . ." Greg closed his mouth and shrugged. "Peanuts. But his mother was a different story. Medical records, police reports, and interviews with neighbors let us know his tragedy. Without divulging information that Lou's investor may want to keep to himself. Let me just say, there wasn't a form of abuse this woman didn't put Lou through his whole entire life."

"Dr. Haynes?" Barb yelled up. "It's ready."

"Play it," Greg instructed. "Now watch."

"*Louis. Louis, you fat piece of shit. What did you do?*" The nasty older woman's voice rang over the tape while Lou was in his room rummaging through his drawers.

"Now where in the hell did I put that?" Lou scratched his head lifting up his socks.

"*How many times did I tell you that you are worthless. Worthless. Your father was worthless. I hope God takes you from me because I can't take you in my life you pathetic imbecile*"

"Oh, here." Lou smiled, grabbed a disposable camera shut his drawer, and while looking at the yellow boxed object he walked out.

The tape stopped.

Greg pointed to the screen. "We blasted that tape."

Aldo twitched his head. "Does he do that good of a job ignoring it?"

"Ignoring it?" Greg snickered. "We believe he spent so many years blocking out his mother, he never heard it." Greg took a drink of his beer. "God I wish I could've had that ability with my fourth wife. We would have still been married. She was really cute."

While the other's laughed at the comment, Aldo didn't. He was still stuck on the fact that four women actually married a not-too-attractive Dr. Haynes. After getting over his initial shock of that, Aldo finally--like a dumb blonde--found himself laughing at a joke that had long been over with it.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island  
March 28<sup>th</sup> - 9:30 p.m.

The stick that Cal poked into the fire held her irritation. She slammed it hard trying not to show what she was feeling. The sparks from the crackling fire flew up some and she raised her eyes over the flames to Larry who sat across from her. How she wished at that moment he was burning in the flames like he appeared to be.

"Yeah, my wife cheated on me." Larry said in a near intoxication state.

Cal guessed at that moment the tell tale signs were there and that was how everyone knew. Jake's punching of Billy. Not only Billy and Cal not speaking, but the 'super couple' as they were called not long before, were no longer being that team and together twenty-four hours a day. Cal just kept smoking her cigarette and poking the fire, sitting with her elbows resting on her bent knees.

"Cheated on me with some guy from work." Larry kept talking. "When I found out. Pop. I punched her right in her face."

Cal glared up. "Good for you, you asshole." She shook her head, flicking her cigarette into the fire, trying to ignore his comments. Not a few seconds later she felt the weight on the log shift. She didn't look until she heard the softer voice of Paul.

"I believe enough time has passed." Paul told her in a whisper.

Cal shifted her head. "Excuse me?"

"Time is needed. For refection. Resolution. Penance. I feel very bad for you."

"Are you being sarcastic?" Cal asked him.

"No, genuine. I feel bad for what you're go through."

"Then don't. Not to sound like a bitch., I appreciate your concerned. But I made my own bed . . . so to speak."

"Yes, but sometimes situations that we bring upon ourselves are complicated by forces we can not control. I believe when bad encircles us, it invites the bad spirits in as well, they in turn engulf us, protecting that bad and keeping us in it."

Cal hid her rolling eyes.

"If you are willing to end this anger and bad between you and your husband. I believe I can help you."

Cal snickered. "I don't you think you can."

"No I can't. I can help *you* Cal. You are the one who must get rid of the demons that engulf you. I can help you do that. But I can only do that if you yourself are ready to get rid of them. If you have no remorse it will not work."

"Oh I have remorse all right." Cal's head swayed.

"Then shall we?" Paul asked her with a smile.

"Sure." Cal returned a smile, a fake one.

"I'll be right back, then we will go." Paul touched her back as he stood up and walked around the fire to his bungalow.

Rickie was close enough to hear. He inched his way down the log to Lou. "O.K., where ever they go, we go. Got that?"

Lou nodded. "I'm with ya."

Both, without Cal's knowledge, eyed her like a hawk from that second.

^ ^ ^ ^

Not only did Paul look like he carried a tan leather purse as he walked to Cal, but a rolled blanket as well. Rickie stood on Lou's porch with Reed, watching Cal stand up.

Lou came out. He pushed out the chamber of a revolver he held, checked for bullets, spun it and stuck in the back waist of his pants. "Ready."

"Cool. We'll stay behind, watching." Rickie told him.

"Eyes." Reed whined. "Uh on a O EW."

"Dude, you can't go." Rickie told him. "Cause you only talk two ways, loud and bad and they'll know they're being tailed. So like hang with Billy guy." Rickie patted Reed on the back. He stayed on the porch, acting all casual while keeping his eyes glued to Cal who stood up and started to walk with Paul from camp. A few seconds later, Rickie and Lou stepped off the porch to follow.

No sooner had Cal and Paul hit the path, Rickie and Lou heard the 'bang' of a flung open door, and the thumping of Jake's boots as he stormed out of the bungalow, off his porch and straight toward the path.

Rickie ran to him. "Sarge like what are you doing?"

Jake's eyes never left the path. "What do you think I'm doing."

"Sarge, like we're handling it." Rickie laid his hands on Jake. "Stay back. We got it." Rickie backed up with Lou. "You forfeited guy. You forfeited."

Jake watched Rickie and Lou hurry toward the path. He shook his head bewildered. "I forfeited. Forfeited what?"

^ ^ ^ ^

It took just a little while for Cal and Paul to reach the small hillside, clear from the woods and path. Following a trail that Paul explained to Cal that he had made.

"What is this place?" Cal asked looking down to the small spot that housed a burned out campfire.

"My place." Paul set down his things, and laid some twigs in the fire circle. "I come here to speak to the Gods." Paul took a moment to light the fire. It ignited quickly, but not in a roaring way. He stood up and grabbed the blanket roll, flapping it out. "Please sit."

"Is this something that you've done all your life?" Cal asked as she lowered

to the blanket.

"Yes."

"You must be pretty proud of your heritage."

"I am very proud of what my father taught me." Paul sat across from her by the fire.

"So is there a reason you come way up here?"

"Let's just say I don't want my magic to get mixed up with the magic that I believe the institute can perform." Paul winked and opened up his brown bag. "First, before we begin, we need to clear our minds. You Cal, need an open free mind."

Peeking up on the hillside behind a small bush were Rickie and Lou. They laid on their stomachs, speaking in whispering voices, watching.

"Dude. He like brought a blanket."

"That dog."

"You don't think like he thinks my mom has an easy reputation, do you?"

Lou shrugged. "I don't know. What he's doing now?"

Rickie's eyes widened as he watched Paul pull out a long pipe lighting it. Paul took a hit and passed it to Cal.

"Uh." Rickie whispered a scream. "He's getting my mom stoned. Dude, if he like tries anything funny, I'm gonna have to go monster on him."

"You do that and then I'll shoot him in the head."

"Cool."

Cal coughed loud smacking her chest that burned. She passed the pipe back to Paul. "That's hash."

Paul smiled. "It is an herb we need right now to open our minds and relax."

"I got high one time in my life."

"It's not getting high." Paul held in the smoke and gave the pipe to Cal. "Trust me, when we are done, you will not feel high as you put it. You will feel perfectly normal." Six more times the pipe was passed then Paul extinguished it setting it aside. "Stare into the fire Cal. Stare into the fire as if it is your soul."

Cal did, she watched the small flames flickering, bouncing. Orange and red.

Paul reached into his leather pouch pulling out a small sack. "We are going to open a door to the other side. Do not be frightened of anything you hear or see. Just know Cal, once we shut the door, all the bad sprits that engulf you now will be gone and you will have good start to come your way."

Cal nodded staring mesmerized into the fire.

Paul tossed a handful of something that seemed like dust onto the flames. He chanted in his native language then tossed some more. On the second throw the orange flames turned completely white. Cal's eyes widened yet she still didn't



move.

Mumbling the chant, Paul tossed once more into the white fire and the second he did, surrounding Cal and Paul--also Rickie and Lou below--were moans, loud, painful agonizing. It sounded as if they were encircled by the souls of the damned. Many voices, calling out her name and words that couldn't be understood. Paul chanted louder and from the white flames shot a mist of smoke, thin and streaming. It spun around Cal, over and over picking up velocity, and growing wider as it did. The cries that echoed grew louder and scream filled, and from the mist came hands, reaching to Cal. Multitudes of disfigured arms extending her way screaming out.

Cal didn't budge though her heart pounded within her chest. She kept staring into the fire trying not look at the long fingers that whipped in front of her. Grabbed for her. Cal didn't flinch. And at the point that the voices seemed their loudest, the mist thinned out, turning once again into a line of smoke. It reversed it's swirl, miniaturizing the hands within it, and it shot towards the fire. The white flames sucking it in, hands, and voices. Then just as the last of the smoke entranced its way into the flames, the tail end stopped and formed a little hand, normal and fragile it looked. The calls of the damned ceased and in the silence, the fingers wiggled in a wave to Cal, and a young voice giggled happily. As the last of that hand disappeared into the fire, a girl's voice spoke out. "Bye Mommy."

Quiet.

Below them on the hillside, Rickie and Lou, eyes wide and shocked, watched a tranced Cal. They couldn't move.

"Dude." Rickie nudged Lou. "Imagine how cool that would have been if we were smoking on that pipe too."

Lou, still so speechless, could only nod his agreement to Rickie's sentiment.

^^^

Jake was laying on a sleeping bag on the floor, a book in his hands when he heard the bungalow door open. He didn't have to look up, only raise his eyes to make sure it was Cal.

Cal walked in slow. Very slow. Her eyes wider than Jake had ever seen them. With just a slight quick shift, she looked down to Jake. "Hey." She spoke and looked forward again. Moving at a turtle's pace, and keeping her focus ahead, Cal closed the door, stepped down into the room, stepped over Jake's leg and moved straight to the bed. When she got there, her hand touched on it, and in a sideways, nearly face forward fall, she plopped down to the bed and passed out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 29<sup>th</sup> - 8:45 a.m.

“Stoned?” In his own bungalow, Jake stood hands on hips peering down to Rickie.

“That’s what I said, now can we . . .”

“Stoned. Cal was stoned?”

“Yes. Now can you . . .”

“Cal doesn’t do illegal drugs.”

“She did last night Sarge, and some weird poltergeist shit happened. Anyhow.” Rickie nearly shouted. “I need to know . . .”

“Stoned.” Jake was in such disbelief.

“Sarge, if you like keep saying that I’ll talk to you all day. Now can you try this?” Rickie held up a tube to Jake. “See,” Rickie lifted his own shirt. “Look how cool my nipples look.”

“Rickie, why would I want to try this.”

“Cause I’m serious and you like have the only ape like chest on the island.”

“Hair or no hair, it will work.” Jake pushed the tube away.

“Come on sarge, how often do I ask you for things?”

“Everyday.”

“Yeah, so like this is a daily request.” Rickie took on a pleading look. “Please. It doesn’t hurt. Please.”

“Will you leave me alone.”

“Yeah.”

Jake snatched the tube. “How much.”

“Just a little dab will do ya.” Rickie told him.

Jake squeezed a tiny dab in his hand and despite Rickie’s snickering, lifted his shirt and applied the lotion to one of his nipples. “There. Satisfied.”

“Cool. It worked. Don’t it feel tingly?”

Jake bobbed his head. “Not bad.”

“Like sarge you have to do the other. You’re lopsided.”

With a grunt, Jake did. “I don’t know why I’m doing this fuckin shit. There.” He released his tee shirt.

“It don’t look as good on a man with ape hair as it does like a bald chested man.”

“That’s good to know Rickie.” Jake tossed the tube on the night stand.

“Sarge, like I’m glad I have this momentary lapse in time happening with you.”

“I’m afraid to ask. But why?”

“O.K. you can tell me I’m over stepping my Rickie-Meister boundaries. But I was strolling with the Cal-babe yesterday and we were talking about the

situation.”

“You’re over stepping the boundaries. Off limit conversation.”

“O.K.” Rickie shrugged. “Anyhow. Sarge, she is like really bummed out.”

“Rickie.”

“Really, really bummed out.”

“Rickie.” There was warning to Jake’s voice.

“Really, really, really . . .”

“Rickie!” Jake yelled. “Enough.”

“And so is Billy for that matter.”

Jake glared. “Do you think I fuckin care how Billy feels.”

“No.” Rickie said nonchalantly. “Just adding a little decorative scenario set up.”

“What?” Jake began to get annoyed. “I don’t have time for this. I want to shoot before it gets too hot.”

“Anyhow.” Rickie followed him around the room. “We were walking and Cal got me upset. I’m bummed too. She like kept talking and talking about moving back to Pittsburgh.”

Jake stopped. “For what?”

“To live.”

“Why would she do that. She has a big house in North Carolina.”

“Sarge.” Rickie snickered. “Possibly to hook back up with the David guy . . .”

“Rickie.” Jake grabbed the arsenal bag.

“She’s a babe Sarge, she’s got to move on with her life. You know. I don’t see it taking her too long to . . .”

“Rickie . . .”

“ . . . hook up with a sensitive guy that won’t rush her. Not saying that you rushed her into marrying you, which I believe you did.”

“I did not.”

“Did too. But I’m getting off the subject again. Dude, I have been doing that.” Rickie gasped at himself. “So she’ll probably go to Pittsburgh straight from the experiment, Nah, she’ll get her computer stuff and her clothes cause she loves that stuff. Then she’ll move to . . .”

“RICKIE!”

“Uh!” Rickie screamed and stepped back. “Sarge, you scared me.”

“Good. Now getting back to the original question. Why is Cal talking about moving to Pittsburgh. Does she not like North Carolina?”

“Hello. Like, your divorcing her. Duh.” Rickie shook his head.

“Divorcing . . . where would she . . . shit.” Jake’s hand dropped the arsenal bag and without saying anymore, walked straight from the bungalow.

^^^

Though she still had five more feet to go to make it completely to the top of the wall of rope, Cal stopped she couldn't go any further. Her fingers ached and her rigid legs cramped. She wanted so much to just cheat and slide down to the ground but she didn't. Cringing and grunting she used her upper body strength to bring herself down to the next level. No sooner did her hand reach and Cal began to fall did she feel the huge hands grip firmly on her hips.

Jake grabbed onto her, setting her down onto the ground.

With such surprise Cal turned to face him. She swallowed. "Jake."

Jake held up a finger and looked past her in silence. He held one hand on his hip and he swayed his head downward to look at her. "Problems don't effect my life often. When they do, I handle them . . . my way. When our situation occurred last week I . . . I told you that night I wanted a divorce."

Cal closed her eyes and her head dropped.

"Cal look at me." Jake waited for her eyes to open and look. "I was drunk, very drunk and I broke a very important rule of mine. Never say anything in anger you can't take back." Jake paused to think and he took a deep breath. "I'm gonna try to take it back." Jake took stern approach keeping all emotions from his voice. "Divorce . . . divorce is not an option with us. Nor is wanting you out of my life. I may be quiet, but it's my way of working through it. I never walked away from anything that meant something." Jake laid his hand on Cal's cheek. "I'm certainly not walking away from you."

A gasp of emotion escaped Cal when she felt his touch, her hand sprang up holding his hand tight to her face as she closed her eyes basking in the feel of him.

Jake lifted his head looking outward as he took a step into her. "We'll get through this." Spreading his fingers to her neck, Jake pulled Cal to him and he gently laid his lips on her forehead. He closed his eyes leaving his lips on her for the longest time before letting go, and stepping back. "We'll get though this." With out looking at Cal again, Jake quietly and slowly starting walking away. His one hand stayed on her until it slid from her face as he moved on.

Cal's eyes closed and her shoulders slumped. So emotionally exasperated she was, that the second Jake could no longer be seen, Cal let out a long breath of relief and gratefulness.

^^^

That night on Paul's little hillside, Cal sat with Paul. A small but normal campfire separated them as they sat on small blankets. "But today Paul." Cal shifted her eyes to him. "He talked to me." She took a long hit off the pipe, held it in and passed it to Paul. She coughed as she let out the smoke. "He didn't say anything the rest of the day . . . but . . ." She received the pipe back. "He still talked to me."

"I'm glad. What did I tell you about exorcizing those bad spirits."

Cal handed Paul the pipe and spoke through, smoke holding breath. "You

were right.”

“Tomorrow will be better. I feel it.” Paul held the pipe to Cal.

“Thank you for everything Paul. Exorcizing the bad ghosts . . .” Cal took a puff of the pipe. “Letting me do this mind clearing ritual with you.” she blew out and handed it back to Paul. “And share in this really neat fire.” With a look of awe, Cal stared into the orange flames.

^ ^ ^ ^

Not much really ever annoyed Rickie. But the ‘clomp-clomp-clomp-clomp’ sound Jake made with his heel on the step drove Rickie nuts. Rickie watched Jake as he sat next to him on the porch. Jake stared out into the path. His hands folded, eyes peered, and leg bouncing rapidly up and down.

“Sarge.”

“What?”

“Quit that dude.” Rickie laid his hand on Jake’s knee. “What? Do you have something important to tell Cal?”

“No, I really have nothing to say. I just don’t want her out there.”

“Well chill. My guy’s watching her. She’s fine. She’s just doing a little mid clearing exercise.”

“Why does she need to do that.”

“Sarge like were have you been. No, I know. In Sarge land. You beat her Sarge.”

“I did no such thing Rickie.” Jake was offended. “I would never lay a hand on my wife.”

Rickie snickered. “No guy, that’s not what I meant. I mean, Cal’s been really bad. I’ve never seen her so down. I think maybe . . .” Rickie bobbed his head back and forth. “I think maybe it’s time you had like a little conversation to set you guess back on the path of righteous marriage. You told her today you aren’t divorcing her.”

“Yeah, but Rickie. Not yet. I’m not ready yet.”

“Guy, you should like spend tonight getting ready then.”

“Do you even comprehend what happened?” Jake asked Rickie. “My wife,. Cal. She was with someone else.”

“Yeah, that sucks, But . . .”

Jake tossed his hands up. “Thanks for the compassion.”

“No guy, I’m not saying you’re wrong for getting mad. You aren’t. You have every right to be, But you can put this like behind you because you’re the tough guy. And It still doesn’t make sense to me, like you have to see how sorry she is. She didn’t even have to tell you.” Rickie saw Jake’s glare. “She didn’t. And Sarge I have to say . . .” Rickie’s head dramatically dropped “I am so disappointed in you.”

“This ought to be good. For what?”

“You always struck me as the type that wouldn’t let the experiment get to you no matter what?”

“I am that type.”

“Guy I have news for you.” Rickie said. “We’re on the experiment Bud, and like for two people who are supposed to be mentally strong, tough. You and Cal babe are really losing it.”

The expression on Jake’s face dropped when he really heard what Rickie said. Just as he was about to respond, he stood up when he saw Cal walking very slow across the unity circle, Paul going another way. Cal kept her stare on the bungalow, inching her way home with a blank stare. She stepped on the step, looked fast at Jake then moved to the door. “Night.” She walked inside.

Jake who had turned to watch her, was confused and when he turned to look at Rickie he saw Lou.

Lou pointed to the bungalow, snickered and held his two fingers close to his mouth as if imitating someone getting high.

Jake’s jaws twitched. “No way. Cal does not do illegal drugs.” With a heavy stomp-stomp. Jake opened the bungalow door. “Cal.” He stopped cold, when just like the night before, in the same position, Cal was passed out on the bed.

CHAPTER FORTY

I-S.E. Thirteen - The island

March 30<sup>th</sup> - 5:00 a.m.

The sound of running water and Jake's brushing of his teeth were like an alarm clock to Cal. She'd lay there on her side, pretending to be asleep, not moving, listening to him finish up, the last sound of the coffee pot growing louder. She knew what was coming, a routine that happened more so lately. She'd hear his boots against the floor, listen to him pour his coffee, then feel the blast of morning air hit her as he left to go work out. And Cal listened to the routine just as predicted in her head. The clunk-clunk of his boots moving to the pot. Liquid pouring against the ceramic mug. The gasp of his first coffee drink and then the clunk-clunk again. Only this time there was no blast of cooler air. There was the feel of a hand on her hip, the smell of mint toothpaste and the sensation of Jake's breath near her ear.

"Cal." He whispered. "Cal, would you like to go out with me this morning?"

Cal's eyes widened and she grinned. And so unlike herself, she shocked even Jake by flinging off the covers and jumping from bed. "Yes." She spoke with excitement pulling her hair from her eyes. "I would love to. Thank you. Thanks Jake." She raced to the bathroom sliding to a stop at the door. "I'll be ready in a second." She started to shut the door. "Don't leave without me."

"I won't."

"Thanks." Cal shut the door and reopened it again. "Don't go. I won't be long. Wait for me."

"Cal. I will. Don't worry." Jake smiled when the door shut. And even though for some odd reason he didn't think she needed it, Jake poured Cal a cup of coffee anyway.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
March 30<sup>th</sup> - 6:10 a.m.

Greg truly hated being woke up before it was time. But there were two things that aided his aggravation as he stormed his way down to the control room. One, being told on the in-house line that there was something he should know and it should be told in person. And two, knowing full well that Doctor-I get up at the crack of dawn because I go to bed at eight-Jefferson, arrived and was sitting right there. To Greg having Dr. Jefferson around when things went bad was like making a forewarned mistake right in front of your parents. You get that snide 'I told you so' look without any words.

Groggy, messy and needing his caffeine, Greg stormed into the control room. "This better be good and Barb why are you on duty, where's Lyle?"

"He went out last night and I had nothing better to do." Barb stated as she sat next to Dr. Jefferson.

Dr. Jefferson looked up to the un-business like Greg. "Morning."

"Morning." Greg grumbled. "Barb, what's going on."

Before Barb answered she leaned and whispered to Dr. Jefferson, "Bet me he didn't have his coffee yet. Oh boy." She raised her eyes to Greg. "O.K., here it is. Jake and Cal made up."

"They what?" Greg's voice raised some.

"They made up." Barb reiterated. "This morning he woke her up, poured her coffee and bubbly Cal walked out of the room *with* Jake."

"There is no way." Greg argued. "I was up till two in the morning. They didn't speak. She was high and passed out. What in the world are you talking about, made up. When would it have all gone down? It couldn't have."

"It did," Barb stated.

"Shit!" Greg's hand tossed out. "This can't happen yet, not for at least two or three weeks."

Dr. Jefferson looked up. "Why two or three weeks."

Greg shook his head. "Figuratively speaking. Shit." He tossed his head in anger. "How did it happen?" He began to rant. Fast and furiously. "This isn't supposed to happen." He pointed out the screen. "No indication. No talking. No nothing. The man's wife cheated on him for Christ's sake. One week. One week is all it's been and he's talking to her? Nobody forgives a cheating spouse in one week? No body. What the fuck *is* Jake, a goddamn saint or something. What the hell is wrong with him?"

Dr. Jefferson hid his smooth smile. He quiet enjoyed seeing the mild mannered Greg--for lack of a better term in his mind---lose it. "Greg." Dr. Jefferson spoke passive. "I know you have secondary plans, possibly third."

"I do. But that is not the point. Next week we have an investors meeting. In two weeks I fully plan on blasting open the mental phase *while* moving on. Plans are already in motion. And those plans definitely don't include those two *making*



up.”

“Greg.” Dr. Jefferson, calmly tried again. “Some times things just don’t go as we plan on these experiments. We figure them out, or at least we think we do, down to the most minuscule detail But people surprise us. And when things don’t work out, we should calmly admit defeat.”

“Admit defeat?” Greg raised his eyebrows. “Oh I don’t think so.” he reached for the phone, first tapping Barb on the shoulder. “Cue up the tape from this morning. I want to watch it myself.” Greg dialed the phone with disturbed look on his face. “Stan?” Greg’s eyes moved to the monitor screen. “Remember what we discussed about ‘what ifs’ when it came to Cal and Jake. Yes, exactly. Well, I need you to move on it right now. Seize the opportunity because we have one. Thanks.” Greg hung up the phone.

Dr. Jefferson, watching Greg, folded his hands. “You do realize any pushing of this infidelity issue will surely indicate our involvement to some point.”

Greg lifted his hand. “Doesn’t matter. Because Jake and Cal, they’re only human. And we’re gonna hit them, hit them and hit them again.” Greg moved to the tape that played. “I want this team . . . broke.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 30<sup>th</sup> - 7:30 a.m.

The workout was a quiet one. Not too many words were spoken at all. If they were it was about what they were doing. But that was fine to Cal. She was with Jake, and it was a start. Sweaty, and wanting to get cleaned up, she walked with him, a two foot distance apart, through the unity circle.

"Nice job with the wall today." Jake told her as they neared the porch.

"Thanks."

"Um . . . showers. You first or me?"

Cal stopped walking. "Why don't you go first. I think I'll hit the dining room for breakfast."

Jake paused in his reach for their door. "You don't want to have breakfast with me?"

Cal smiled and moved to the bungalow. "I'd love to have breakfast with you. Thanks."

Returning the smile, Jake opened the door. Cal stepped inside first and then he followed. "Cal. I'll jump in real fast."

"O.K." Cal moved to her dresser.

"Then we can . . ." Jake stopped cold before the bed.

"What was that?" Cal turned to face him and saw him staring down. "Jake?" She stepped to him. "What's the . . ." Immediately Cal's stomach churned. Spread across the bed were multitudes of photographs, all of her and Billy making love.

Jake looked from the pictures to Cal. His face expressionless. He ran his hand down his face and turned to the bed again. As soon as his hand hit his chin he heard the slamming of the door. He spun to see Cal gone. "Cal." He charged to the door, flung it open and ran out. He looked to the left and to the right. He didn't see her. Knowing the only way she could disappear that fast was to run behind the bungalow, Jake went that way. Still no Cal. Before going after her, Jake went back to the bungalow.

Cal's breaths were heavy, loud and filled with the sounds of emotions, most of which were anger. She stopped running when she hit the beach, pacing in outraged circles, kicking the sand with her feet as she kept her hands on her hips. She closed her eyes tightly, threw back her head and grunted out a scream of what she felt. It some how was buried in the crashing waves.

But his voice was not. Larry Kale. "I take you two found the pictures." He yelled out.

Cal immediately spun around to see him walking to her on the beach. "What?" She huffed out.

"How do you think they got in your room. Quite the . . . " He snickered. "Spread. Caldwell I guess dropped them off for me. You know, I especially like the one . . ." Larry moved closer to her. "That's why I left it on top. I especially like the one where his head is buried between your legs."

On his final words, Cal in a fit of rage, charged forward leaping her small body at him.

Rounding the bend over the grade, Jake immediately saw them. Larry and Cal. Entangled in a brawl that consisted of fists tossing, legs kicking and both of them being thrown and leaping back up at each other. Jake, holding the stack of photographs in his hand raced down to the beach as fast as he could. "Knock it off!" He dropped the pictures as he made his way to them just as Larry dove for Cal. They landed in a roll with Larry on top. Jake biting his bottom lip, face angry, barged to them, gripped hold of Larry and tossed him back far and high as if he were nothing. Cal jumped up and started after Larry, Jake grabbed hold of Cal from behind, wrapping his arms around her and holding her raging body back. "I said knock it off!" With one arm securing a feisty Cal, Jake aimed a point at Larry who stumbled to get up. "And You! If I *ever* see you touch my wife again, whether she can kick your ass or not, I will lay you out. You got that? And you won't get up!" Jake dragged Cal as he walked backwards. She fought him. "Cal!" He pulled her harder and further back, "Calm down!"

Cal, with all of her emotions released from Jake's hold, grunting out in a high sound as she pulled from him covering her face and keeping her back to him.

"We need to talk. Look at me." Jake seeing the laying pictures, snatched them up then walked up behind her.

"Jake, I can't . . ."

"Look at me Cal."

"I can't!" She screamed, her arms shooting up as her head shook. "I can't face you!"

Jake moved to her. "Then face this." He shoved the pictures around in front of her. She pushed them away. "Cal."

"No."

"Cal! Look . . ." He saw her head turned from them and from around her back he braced her chin, forcing her head up and in the direction where his other hand held the photos.

Her eyes were tightly closed as her body shook.

Jake walked around to in front of her. "No surprises Cal. No surprises!" His voice was emotionally. "*That* is why I asked you to tell me everything. These pictures are exactly why I wanted to know everything. No surprises to me!" Jake's face was red as he spoke and it grew more red when Cal kept turning her head. "You can't face me. That's all well and fine. You will when you get passed this. So pull your ass together, get your shit straight and face this!" he ordered as he

shoved the pictures in her arms. "Because I have! And if I can, so can you." Without saying another word, watching Cal grip onto the wrinkled pictures, Jake walked away.

^ ^ ^ ^

All Rickie wanted was a Pop Tart. One of those strawberry ones with the pink icing and crunchy square sprinkles on top. And he really wanted one too. Unlike most trips he made to the control center just to bother them. After buzzing himself in the front secured gate. He did what he usually did, headed to Stan's lab. But there was no Stan. He asked everyone he saw, and he got the same response, that Stan was working on something in the lower lab. No one but Stan or Ollie had access to the goodie room. So Rickie, really wanting that Pop Tart headed to the lower labs. He hated going down there because that meant he had to pass the Wes Craven door. But Rickie, telling himself, 'dude, it's only a movie,' moved by that metal door fast, and raced down the corridor.

He thought he heard that noise about half way down and it caused Rickie to stop and snicker. Moaning. Pleasure moans seeping into the hall made Rickie wonder if someone was getting a little bit of lab counter action. Knowing if he wanted to bust some one with a loud 'Ha!' in the middle of doing the deed, he had to sneak. And Rickie did, the rest of the way down the hall, zooming in on the moans.

"O.K. stop." Stans voice said.

Busted! Rickie thought and raised his arms like a criminal, turning around and not seeing Stan. "Huh?" He scratched his head.

"Back it up." Stan said again.

Rickie took step backwards.

"That's good right there. Play it." Stan instructed.

Rickie was so confused until he heard the moans again and then he realized what Stan was doing. Stan was digging on a porno flick. Sneaking ahead to the door the sounds came from Rickie, froze when he peeked in. Stan and Ollie sat at a table a television before them And on that screen were Cal and Billy. Just as Rickie was about to rush in there and blast them, possibly going Monster, he didn't. And when he realized what they were doing, he moved out of sight.

"Time." Stan grabbed the clipboard.

"Total first drink to finish, one hour forty nine minutes." Ollie said.

"First drink to kiss."

"Seventeen minutes."

"Second?" Stan asked recording what Ollie told him.

"Twelve."

"And we have ten minutes after third drink. How long again from first drink to . . . where was it that we said it hit?"

"Um . . ." Ollie reached for the tape player rewinding the tape. He viewed

Cal lifting off Billy's shirt. "Right here. This is where I say, check out the looks in their eyes. They're gone."

Stan grinned. "Bingo. Fifteen minutes exactly post first drink. Right in the time frame expected." He set down the clipboard. "We'll tell Haynes, it definitely was in the Jack. It timed too perfect to be anything else."

"Wanna take a break before we analyze what caused the turning point of the drug."

"Yeah." Stan stretched. "This is getting on my nerves."

Clenching his fist like a little excited kid, before they took their break from the room, Rickie was racing down the hall.

^^^

Billy grinned, arms folded standing with Lou in the dining room. He stared down to little sheets of paper Lou showed him. "And you drew these?" He asked Lou.

"Political cartoons. What do you think?"

"Really good."

"You think when we get back you can show my work to some of those higher ups where you work?" Lou asked.

"I don't see why not. I mean . . ." Billy slowed speaking when he saw Larry walk in the room. Larry stared at Billy. "I mean, they're good. I wouldn't show them if . . ." He noticed Larry, determined walking closer. "I wouldn't show them if they weren't." Billy's fingers released the picture and looked up to Larry who was right there. The second he looked up, Billy was greeted with a right fist slamming hard into the side of his face.

Lou stepped back when he watched Larry dive on a downed Billy. He scratched his head wondering who Billy could have possibly slept with that effected Larry. Holding off to see what happened before he stepped in, Lou moved out of the way when Billy, slid back first, all the way down a table clearing it, rolling off the end and onto the floor. Billy had to catch his thoughts, shake his head from the surprise. When he saw Larry coming again, Billy gathered his strength, lifted up and rammed head first into Larry's gut sending him back and crashing into a wall. Holding onto Billy as he held onto him, Larry spun to his right, lifted up his knee with a force and nailed Billy in jaw. Billy's head and body flung up and back, he slammed into the wall. And in his bouncing step forward, fist tightly clenched, Billy swung out with all he had, catching a piece of Larry's cheek.

Cal didn't want to do it but she had to. She had to let Billy know the forces against them. Clenching the pictures and knowing Billy was in the dining room,

she heard the crashing of glass as she opened the door. "Oh my God." Cal rushed in seeing Billy on top of Larry on a table. Both men then rolled onto the floor in their fight. Cal in her run over, ran the long way. Through the one kitchen door, to the stove, grabbing a frying pan and out the other door thinking the whole entire time how 'now' was not the time she needed to speak to Billy. She raced over to the two men, waiting for the opportunity and when she saw it, totally pissed off, she hauled back the pan and careened it down with a force stopping the fight when she smashed Larry in the head.

When the bong of the pan sounded out. Larry lifted his head seemingly un-phased. Then his eyes rolled, his head bobbed and he rolled from Billy onto the floor.

Billy surprised, looked up at Cal. "Cal, what are you doing?" He stood up from the floor.

"I hate him." She glared down to Larry who was being closely examined by a snickering Lou. "And now I hate him even more. He gave these to Jake." She handed Billy the photographs and walked away.

A lump formed in Billy's throat when his eyes peered down to the pictures. "Oh God." He spoke softly.

"Hmm." He heard Lou's voice. "Not bad."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 30<sup>th</sup> - 8:15 a.m.

Like a banshee Rickie screamed as he made his way down the path toward the Bungalows. He would have ran there sooner, but in his excitement he forgot his Pop Tart. So after running back to the Control center, Rickie put his excitement on pause, ate the pop tart and then continued on again.

“Saaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrrge!” Rickie called out long and loud. “Saaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrrge!” He hit the unity circle, stopped cold, snapped his finger, spun and ran to Billy’s bungalow. He knocked once and blasted in.

Billy shocked, jumped up from his lay on his bed. “Rickie. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Rickie tried to act calm. “Hey uh . . .” Rickie’s eyes shifted to the bottle of Jack Daniels. “How long has that been there.”

“A week or so.” Billy answered. “I haven’t drank much since it got me in trouble.”

Rickie snickered “Thanks.” He snatched up the bottle and bolted to the door.

“Rickie what are you doing.” Billy chased him.

“I’ll be back. Thanks.” Holding the bottle of Jack, Rickie ran outside leaped off the porch and screamed again. “Saaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrrge!”

Jake emerged from the bathroom to hear Rickie’s screaming outside. “What the fuck is he screaming about?” And just as he asked himself that question, his door flung open.

“Saaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrrge!” Rickie shrieked out shutting the door.

“Rickie!” Jake screamed. “Knock it off.”

“Sarge, if you ever loved me, you’re gonna love me now.”

“I doubt it.” Jake marched to him. “And why are you drinking in the morning.” Jake snatched up the bottle of Jack and set it on the counter. “And speaking of drinking. Have you seen Cal?”

“No. I was at the toot.”

“I have to find her.” Jake moved to the door.

“Yeah you do, Sarge listen to me.”

“Not now Rickie. I have to talk to her.” Jake reached for the knob.

“Sarge it’s important. Listen.”

“Rickie . . .”

“Sarge they drugged them.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jake spun from the door.

Rickie caught his breath. “The toot. It’s all making sense to me now.” Rickie smacked himself in the forehead. “Ow. Anyway. Like listen.”

Jake tossed his hands up. “Go on. Tell me what you’re talking about. Make it

fast because I have to find Cal.” Jake folded his arms.

“It didn’t make sense. No way. Cal loves you. And like her and Billy have been bonding for three years. I certainly think if they were gonna do a little rocking it would have been before, Not now.”

Jake’s facial muscles clenched. “This better have a point.”

“Oh it does. So like, she confessed right away. She feels bad. Billy feels bad. Neither of them know what the hell happened . . .”

“Rickie.”

“Sarge listen.” Rickie held up his hand. “Neither knows how they got to that point that they were, well, you know. And . . . what was the biggest thing we forgot about?”

“What?”

“This is the experiment. What’s the rules of the game dude?”

“There are none.”

“Nope.” Rickie shook his head. “There are some when it comes to you and Cal-babe. In order to finish the experiment successfully you have to either both be alive and?”

“Still a couple.” Jake answered, growing more annoyed.

“Guy. You still don’t see? If they can’t kill you they can surely break you up. And what’s the best way to do that? Toss a little old fashion, extra marital activity at ya’. And you fell for it. You fell for it.” Rickie pointed. “They controlled it guy. I overheard the whole thing.” Rickie walked over to the dresser. “Who drinks this?” He held up the bottle of Jack.

“Cal and Billy.”

“And the toot knows this. So . . . what better place to put a drug then in something the toot knows they are gonna drink.”

“Drugged.” Jake almost laughed. “They weren’t drugged Rickie.”

“Sarge. They were.” Rickie grew serious. “I heard them breaking down the time table of the drug. How long it took to work and everything.”

Jake snatched up the bottle and stared at it. He then looked to Rickie. “Tell me everything you heard.”



Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
March 30<sup>th</sup> - 10:30

“Classic bully syndrome.” Greg commented as he peered over Lyle’s shoulder to the monitor of Larry and Billy fighting. “He’s got it going with Cal, Jake steps in. Larry needs to show he’s tough and he goes after the weaker one. Jot that down.”

“On it.” Lyle answered.

“And keep an eye on him, I have a feeling he’ll be provoking someone else before to . . .”

“Dr. Haynes.” Annabelle a monitor called his attention. “Something is happening in the Graison Bungalow.”

Holding on to the back of Lyle’s chair, Greg raised his eyes. “What is he up to?” He watched as Jake’s face grew closer to the camera and then the screen went black. A few seconds later, through the speaker that picked up the microphone in his room, Greg and the monitors heard music.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island  
March 30<sup>th</sup> - 10:55 a.m.

The brown colored liquor poured into the small glass on the table in Jake and Cal's room.

"Jake." Cal's eyes looked to the glass. "It's morning."

"Pretend it isn't." Jake set the bottle down.

"Why?"

"Cause we're gonna talk like we used to in the evening after dinner." Jake pointed to the glass. "Drink."

Cal picked it up. "Aren't you having one."

"Um . . . not right now. Drink."

Slowly Cal sipped. "What are we talking about? The pictures?"

"No. We, Cal, are gonna talk about anything that has nothing to do with our situation." As soon as Jake saw her set the glass down, he picked up the bottle and put some more in. "Let's talk about . . ." Jake shrugged. "I don't know. That stupid fuckin garden you want to make."

"The garden?"

"In our backyard. Drink."

"Why are you wanting me drunk? Is there something you want me to tell you?" Cal asked.

"Drunk?" Jake shook his head. "No. I promise no more than three drinks and that won't phase you. Drink." He pointed. "I need you uh . . . relaxed."

"I can't relax." Cal played with her glass.

"Down it." Jake told her.

"Jake. I don't want to . . ."

"Down it!"

Cal lifted the glass downed the Jack and set it down. "What's going on."

Jake looked at his watch. "I told you I need you relaxed." Jake filled her glass again.

Cal's eyes widened. "Are you wanting me to down this one too?" She asked sarcastically.

"If you don't mind."

"You're right. Maybe I do need to relax." She grabbed the glass, brought it to her lips and tossed her head back when she consumed what was in there. She gasped and set down the glass.

"Good girl." Jake poured some more. "You can sip this one if you want."

"Thanks." Cal reached for the glass.

"The garden."

"What about it."

"Build it."

"No. You don't want one. We'll put up the small basketball court for you

and Chuck.” Cal brought the drink to her mouth.

“I think you should have the garden.”

“No.” Cal sadly looked at the glass she had just drank from.

“Cal. I’ll have it built.” Jake suggested.

“Jake don’t do anything for me. O.K.? Really.”

“Why?” He asked.

“I don’t want you to.” Cal sipped. “I really don’t want you to. I make you give me what I want all the time. When we get back, that will change. You get what you want.”

Jake laughed. “Right. Drink.”

Cal drank. “Whatever.”

“This is pitiful. Look at you. What the fuck is up with this down attitude.”

“I think you know.”

“Get over it.”

“Yeah right Jake.” Cal slammed her glass. “How? You tell me how? I lost you.”

“Cal, we aren’t talking about us so . . .”

“I want to talk about us.”

“Cal. We are talking about the garden.”

“See.” Cal pointed. “You don’t even want to discuss us. I lost you Jake. I live my life for you. You are my life.” Cal’s head dropped. “And it’s over.”

“I’m here.”

“Physically. But you’ll never be any other way to me again. Or at least the same.” She brought her hand to her face and wiped a tear that ran down her cheek. She stood up. “Talking to me. Touching me. Speaking with care. I miss that.”

“And I miss the Cal who didn’t cry at the drop of a pin.”

Cal spun to him. “I can’t help it.” Harshly she wiped away another tear. “I hurt you Jake.” she stepped to him. “And I never meant to do . . .”

“Cal I would prefer we steer clear of any subject that deals with us.”

“You said yesterday we’ll get through this. How can we get through this if we talk only about the garden?”

“We’ll talk about us a later time. Right now. We can’t get into anything emotional.” Jake’s head flung back in defeat when Cal moved to him and dropped down to the floor. She buried the top of her head against his chest. “Cal.”

“I’m sorry Jake. I am so sorry. I swear to God I will never do it again. I’ll never hurt you like that.” Her hands grabbed his arms. “If you can just tell me you know I’m sorry. Just tell me you know.”

“Cal.” Jake lifted her head. “Stop crying.” He instructed. “Come here.” Jake took a deep breath lifting Cal up some. “Sit down.” He spoke softly pulling Cal onto his lap. He swung her legs over his and wrapped his arms around her. When his face met hers, he felt against his ear her emotional breath, “Hey.” He spoke near whisper. Holding her tight, feeling her arms tight around him. “I love you.” He moved his lips and kissed her on the cheek. “I love you very much. You know

that?" he kissed her again, feeling her nod. Jake closed his eyes and enjoyed Cal in his arms. His hand gripped tightly to her head, his fingers moving a little through her hair. "And we're . . ." Jake stopped to catch the rush of emotions that crept up on him. He kissed her cheek again. "You and I, we're gonna be O.K. We're gonna be just fine."

Cal pulled back and looked at him. "Thank you." she slowly brought her lips to his.

Jake was a second into the kiss when he realized he jumped the gun. "Cal." He pulled her away. "Listen we have to wait at . . ." His words were stopped when Cal pressed her lips again to his. "Cal." He tried to speak through the kiss. "Cal, listen . . ."

Wider and harder her mouth pressed against his. Kissing him. Searching his mouth with hers. Cal's hands clung to his face, as she stood up and adjusted her self to straddle his lap. "Jake." She moaned his name. "Kiss me."

"Cal I . . ." Jake grunted and his eyes widened when she moved tighter against him. "Cal." With force, Jake pulled her mouth from his. "Hold it." He switched his views to look at his watch and Jake smiled. "O.K., we can . . ." Another kiss silenced him and Jake stopped fighting. In his giving in, he returned the kisses with the intensity Cal delivered them. Then holding her, never breaking the kiss, Jake stood up, and reached to the table for the Jack Daniels. As he bent over to set the bottle gently to the floor out of harms way, he also brought Cal to the table, laying her down and himself on top of her.

^^^

In shape and fit, Jake was trained to withstand any physical element thrown his way. But even years of practice didn't gear him up for what he embarked on. His body, strong and lean was ill prepared. "Cal." He weakly moaned her name, slowly removing the sheet, then unable to bring his wobbling body to stand, Jake toppled with a roll out of bed onto the floor bringing the sheet with him. His eyes rolled as he laid on his back.

"Jake." Cal giggled his name. "Come on."

"Oh my God." He barely opened his eyes when he felt her grab his arm. "Cal."

"Jake." She laid on her stomach hanging off the bed gripping for his arm. Her hands inched up his forearm as she tugged him.

"I can't . . ." Jake tried to lift up but he plopped back down. "Move."

"Come on." Cal reached again for him.

Groaning, and using Cal's strength for leverage, Jake brought himself to a sitting position and then to a kneel. After receiving a quick kiss from Cal before she scooted back, Jake in a slow crawling movement, climbed back in bed, but not before grabbing that tube of nipple cream that had been sitting on his night stand and bringing that with him.

^ ^ ^ ^

Because it was 'the husband' thing to do, Jake placed the special bottle of Jack Daniels in his duffel bag, tucking it away so as not to forget it when they left. He walked over to the bed and finished making it. His eyes caught glimpse of the nipple cream and Jake smiled. He had to tell Rickie that his curiosity on whether the cream worked to stimulate other parts of the anatomy was satisfied. He looked down at his watch and to the bathroom. "Cal." He knocked on the door. "You all right in there." He yelled so as to be heard over the running shower water.

"Yes." There was a whimper to her answer.

Jake looked annoyed. "Is she crying again?" He opened the door. "Cal." He could have been more compassionate. "Are you crying again?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I can't help it."

"What do you mean you can't help it. Are you sad?"

"No." Cal cried out.

"Did I hurt you." Jake dropped his voice to a mumble. "I don't see how."

"No."

"Cal. Trust me. We're made up now honey. O.K.? It's over."

"I know." Cal sobbed.

"Then why are you crying?" Jake leaned against the wall.

"I can't . . . I can't stop. The tears keep coming."

"What started it?"

"I was just thinking how happy I was." Her words drawn out.

Jake rolled his eyes. "Well, be Cal. Don't be happy or sad."

"O.K."

"Stop crying."

"O.K."

"God." Jake shook his head. "Must be a side effect." He paused to think out loud. "Yeah, it magnifies one thing, it probably magnifies the other."

"What?" Cal called out.

"Nothing. Hey Cal?"

"Yes?"

Jake opened the shower door and peeked in. "Do you wanna take a walk with me."

"O.K." Cal lifted her head from rinsing her hair.

"I wanna talk to you about something and move my legs some. You killed me."

Cal burst into tears. "I'm sorry."

"Cal please. Just stop crying." Jake held his temple in annoyance and closed the shower door. "Goddamn it." He walked from the bathroom. He had to calm

himself, getting upset at Cal would only make her worse. And he didn't want to deal with that. As with any really good thing, there was a drawback. And if the crying was indeed a side effect of the drug, it definitely was a drawback. And Jake decided, though he still needed that walk, he wasn't going to tell her on the walk, as planned, about the drug. Not yet. He'd save telling her for later when his tear tolerance level was up and she'd be less likely to have a happy outburst moment.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
March 30<sup>th</sup> - 6:45 p.m.

Still munching on the fried chicken leg from dinner, Greg walked down the steps to the monitor's table. He stared up at the screen. "Nothing yet?"

"Nope." Barb pointed to the black screen of Jake and Cal's room. "Still black and we're still hearing Reo Speedwagon."

"What the hell are they doing. Let me know when you figure it out." Greg, chicken in hand, backed up, took a bite and left.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

March 30<sup>th</sup> - 7:00 p.m.

Cutting his fork into the last of what was called 'Uncle Lou's marinated bore' Jake looked up to Cal as they sat at the table in their bungalow. "How's the headache."

"Better. But still there." Cal rubbed her temples.

"Did you have a good nap?" Jake asked as he ate his meat.

"Yeah, I just passed right out. I've been doing that lately."

"Drugs will do that to you."

Cal looked up to him with a snicker. "What?"

"Last two nights. You've been using illegal drugs and they've made you pass out." Jake reached for his beer.

"No I haven't."

"Cal you have."

"Jake, when?"

"Doing that pass the peace pipe ritual." Jake set down his bottle.

"O.K., so. I'm not doing drugs."

Jake shook his head. "Babe, you're getting stoned. And I want it to stop. No more."

"O.K." Cal shrugged. "Whatever you want." She sat back in the chair.

Jake stopped in his reach for his fork. "No argument? I'm telling you I want it to stop and there's no argument?"

"No. You're right. Jake?" Cal's finger run across the rim of the plate. "Are we going to talk about us at all?"

"Not tonight." Jake took the last bite of his food. "Tonight, I just want to enjoy making up with you." He grabbed for his beer again.

"I would think that you would be upset about the pictures."

"I don't want to talk about the pictures."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Jake took a long drink. "Listen. Just know that, and don't get me wrong, seeing them, it bothered me. I'm still a man Cal. O.K.? But know they were the whole reason I drilled you about what happened. There was nothing there that surprised me. I told you that."

Cal raised her eyebrows with a slumped demeanor while playing with her napkin. "I'm just glad you didn't look at them." She didn't hear Jake say anything. She raised her eyes. "Jake? You didn't look at them did you."

"Well . . ." Jake took a drink. "Yeah."

"All?"

"Well . . ." Another drink. "Yeah."

"Oh my God." Cal covered her face.

"Cal." Jake pulled her hand down. "Right now, honestly, I couldn't even tell you what I saw."



"Are you sure you aren't mad? You're still being, I don't know, distant like."

"I am?" Jake shook his head. "Sorry. I guess my mind is still stuck on this afternoon." He twitched his head in a fine remembrance while bringing the bottle to his lips.

"Jake, I have to tell you." Cal leaned into the table. "This afternoon. I don't know what got over me. We have a really good sex life you and I, but today, you were . . . you were unbelievable."

Jake grinned while the bottle was still at his lips. "Oh yeah?" He took a drink and set the bottle down.

"Yes." Cal nodded.

Jake chuckled as he stood up. "Just call me . . ." He winked. "The champ." He got a laugh from Cal and he bent down to her kissing her. "I love you." He kissed her again. "And, let me take our plates down tot he dining hall and I'll be back."

"I'll help you." Cal reached for the plates.

"No." Jake stopped her. "Stay here. I'll be back. There's something I have to take care of." He quickly cleared the table. "I won't be long."

After watching Jake leave, Cal stood. Even though she had her fill of drinking in the morning, she went to the fridge and got a beer.

^^^

It was downright hysterical to Billy as he walked through the unity circle. So much so that he laughed. It could have been viewed as rude to do so, but Billy couldn't help it. After all, it was totally innocent on Rickie's part. Just having fun. Rickie and Reed sitting on Reed's porch singing the song by the Carpenters, '*Sing, Sing, a Song.*'. And they did.

Rickie sang loudly. "*Don't worry that it's not good enough, for anyone else to here dude.* You're part guy . . ."

And Reed sang. "*Us in, ing a ong.*"

"Keep going." Rickie bounced, the small tape player adding the back drop music.

"*Wa-wa-wa-wa-wa. Wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa. . .*"

Billy shook his head, lifting his hand in a wave to them.

"Dude." Rickie stood up. "Hey wait." He jumped off the porch.

Billy stopped walking. "I don't want to sing, thanks Rickie."

Rickie snorted a laugh. "No Guy. Did you talk to the Cal-babe yet?"

"No. Why?" Billy asked.

"Oh I know she's wanting to tell you something. She didn't tell you?"

Billy's eyes moved to Cal's bungalow. "No. She has something to tell me."

"Oh yeah. Guy and it's good. You should go talk to her."

"Rickie. Is uh, Jake there?" Billy asked.

"No. He's down at the eating hole, it's cookie baking night. Lou's like Chef

Brocket. I'm going down there now. Want some cookies."

"Yeah." Billy moved toward Cal's bungalow. "Yeah I do. I'm gonna go see what Cal wanted first."

"O.K." Rickie waved.

Billy, taking advantage that Jake was baking cookies with Lou, needed to speak to Cal. He had an opportunity., And after hearing she wanted to finally talk to him, Billy wanted to take that opportunity. His heart literally picked up a beating pace as he neared the bungalow, thumping near his throat when he knocked on the door and Cal yelled out 'come in.'

Taking a breath, Billy opened the door. "Cal?" He stepped inside.

"Billy." Her eyes widened and shifted. "What . . . what are you doing here?"

"Rickie said you had to talk to me."

"He what?" Cal held back her hair nervous. "Rickie's lying."

"You don't want to see me?" Billy asked and the smile dropped from his face. "I'm sorry. I am. I thought, it had been a while and you just wanted to talk."

"Billy." Cal moved to him. "I'd love to talk to you. I would. But not yet Not now and certainly not here. Jake will be back any second." Cal spoke with pleading to her voice.

"No Cal. Jake's baking cookies."

"Jake's baking cookies?"

"Yeah." Billy smiled. "So can I just talk to you for a second. Just a second. Please?"

Cal looked at him in debate.

Jake trotted, a chocolate chip cookie in his mouth, near the unity circle. He saw Rickie headed his way. "Rickie."

"Sarge. Hey. I haven't seen you. So like, did it work?"

"What?" Jake asked.

"The drug."

Jake grinned.

"Sarge, you dog."

"No, no." Jake held up his hand. "My intention was not for that. I followed the instructions of what you heard and well . . ." Jake twitched his head. "Well." He smiled again. "There was something in that Jack. Trust me, I know Cal."

"So like what was her reaction"

"I didn't tell her yet. One of the side effects is that she cries." Jake cringed. "I wanna tell her now. But I need to find Billy. Do you know where he is?"

"You wanna tell them together?"

"Yes." Jake nodded.

"Cool, you have your opportunity. I thought she knew. I thought for sure she'd want to tell him. But now dude you get a double whammy and get to see both of their expressions. Can I watch."

"No, just tell me where he is." Jake said.  
Rickie pointed at his bungalow.

Billy let out a slow breath of relief through his slightly parted lips as he moved to Cal. "I just need to hear your voice."

"Billy." Cal closed her eyes.

"No." Billy shook his head. "Don't take that wrong. Do you realize I spoke to you everyday for three years. Everyday." Billy watched her nod. "You're my friend. I need that friend in you more than I need anything. Cal, I miss talking to you so much. Just . . . talking." Billy stepped to her. "Sharing stories, laughing, talking about our lives. I miss that. I miss my best friend. I miss . . ." Standing right before her, Billy reached out and laid his fingertips on her cheek. ". . .you."

With a click-click the door opened, and in walked Jake. He stopped cold at the same time that Cal and Billy in a guilt jump, separated.

Billy's heart pounded in nervousness and he knew his eyes surely showed it. It was bad enough that he got busted talking to Cal, but did he have to be touching her when Jake walked in.

Cal stepped to Jake as he closed to the door. "Jake listen . . ."

"Cal." Jake held up his hand.

"Jake." Billy tried. "I just came to talk to her Rickie said . . ."

"Rickie said for him to come over." Cal continued it for him. "So he did and . . ."

"And . . . and . . ." Billy inched his way to the door. "I'll leave."

Jake stepped in front of him. "Sit down." He motioned his head to the table.  
"Cal you too."

"Oh God." Cal rushed to Jake. "Please. It was a big misunderstanding. He wasn't supposed to be here."

"Jake I'm sorry I was here."

"Sit down." Jake calmly said again.

With hands raised in surrender, Billy swayed his head. "Don't take it out on her Jake. I came in here."

"No, Billy." Cal argued. "I told you that you can stay and talk. It's not all your fault."

"Cal." Billy faced her. "Don't. O.K., Why would you want Jake mad at you for something that's my fault."

"I could have said for you to get out when you came . . ."

"Hey!" Jake shouted his loudest. "Sit down!" Jake's hand came pummeling down, pointing to the table. And Cal and Billy in a scurry flew over and sat down. "Now." Jake saw their mouths opened. "Don't." He shut them up. "Cal. Why are you acting so guilty right now."

"I am Jake. I am." Her head dropped. "I'm just trying to make things right with you and I let him in the room to talk. I'm trying and I screwed up."

"No you didn't." Jake told her. "And I know you're trying. So knock it off."

"O.K." Cal nervously shook her head.

Jake took a breath and looked at Billy. "I was looking for you."

"I was only here a minute Jake. I swear." Billy defended.

Jake cringed. "I know. There's something, there is something I have to tell you both. Something you need to know. Now before I begin, Billy, this is the first I have spoken to you at all."

"And I appreciate this Jake. I really do." Billy nervously said.

"Yeah." Jake winced. "All right. First . . ." Jake stepped to him. "Let's get one thing straight and out in the open. I hate, *hate* the fuckin fact that you slept with my wife." Jake glared at him.

"Oh God." Billy swallowed. "Jake, listen . . ."

"Shut up. I hate it. It burns me inside and out to know you shared things with her and did things with her that only I have the right to do. And pardon the terminology, but you ate from my field pal, and that will always, always be in the back of my mind. But . . ." Jake moved away from Billy. "The back of my mind. Not forefront. It can't be forefront. For more reasons than you are aware of right now. See . . ." Jake brought his hand to his eyes. "I liked you. I liked you a lot Billy. I trusted you with my wife. I saw you as no threat, because even though I knew you had feeling for her, I knew what kind of man you were. And it really didn't dawn on me until a surfer birdie spoke in my ear. Why on the island, on the experiment all of the sudden did you cross a line you would have never thought of crossing." Jake spun his views to Cal. "And you too. I trusted you Cal. And I'm sure both of you were baffled as well."

Cal nodded rapidly. "Yes, I didn't . . ."

"Cal." Jake tried to stop her.

Billy tried to interject. "Jake, look, I want you to . . ."

"Both of you!" Jake raised his voice. "Let me finish. All right? Fuck." He walked to the closet. "Both of you deserve this."

Turning to each other as they sat at that table, both of Billy and Cal's eyes filled with horror.

"Cal?" Billy spoke her name with concern. "Is he . . . is he killing us?"

"I think so." Cal's eyes shifted to the closet. "I knew his whole attitude changed too fast."

"He can get away with it too? Can't he?"

"No rules." Cal swallowed then sighed in relief when Jake walked out of the closet not with a gun, but a bottle of Jack Daniels.

Jake set the bottle on the table.

Cal looked up to him. "I don't want a drink, thanks."

"You will not drink from this bottle again." Jake told her. "Until we're home and you have one of those Cal, 'I'm not in the mood headaches.'"

Cal looked so confused. "What are you talking about?"

Jake's hand laid on top of the bottle as he shifted his eyes back and forth to

Billy and Cal. "The only way Cal and I would be considered successful participants of this experiment was to finish, both of us alive, and still a couple. There were three ways to break our team. If one of us mentally break . . . which would never happen. If one of us dies . . . which would never happen. Or we break up . . . which would never happen, unless." Jake looked at Cal. "One of us cheats. You."

"I'm sorry."

Jake closed one eye. "Listen. O.K., so that's the plan. They can't kill us, they can't break us, so they go after us as a couple. Break us up early on. We don't fight as a team, we aren't strong as a team . . . Cal dies."

"Hey." Cal's eyes widened. "What about you?"

"Cal please. Anyhow. So how do they do that? The one thing that breaks up marriages. Again, infidelity. Get one of us to cheat. It's obvious who that would be. Not me. With only one other broad scheduled to be on the island, who was a . . . a dog, the only way I can physically cheat on her here is if I'm gay and that ain't gonna happen. So they go after Cal. She already started the ball rolling for them with her delusional housewife infatuation with some television reporter who happens to be one of her best friends. But how do they get a woman, who probably has delusional housewife fantasies about being with another man, to cheat on a husband she truly loves."

"I do Jake. I do. I mean not fantasies, love you."

"So how do they get her to cheat?" Jake held up his finger. "It isn't by counting on the reporter slash best friend to be a heroic Casanova, let's face it, she's already married to that. They get her to cheat by . . ." Jake's finger tapped the cap of the bottle, "Drugging her and him."

Billy's eyes went from the bottle to Jake. "What are you saying?"

Jake grunted long and loud. "Fuck, weren't you paying attention? I just fuckin said it. You guys were drugged."

"No." Billy shook his head. "Still, drug or no drug. I should have had control. I'm so sorry Jake."

"As much as I hate to say this . . ." Jake took a second to swallow. "There was no way, under the influence of this drug, that you could have control. And with both of you under it, it pains me to think of how out of control that got. And trust me. I know what it does to one person. My back is killing me."

Cal's eyes widened. "Is that why you had me drink the Jack this afternoon. You drugged me."

A little frightened of Cal realizing he did that, Jake reluctantly answered. "Yes."

"I was drugged?" Seriousness was on Cal's face then a smile. "I was drugged!" Cal shrieked and jumped up grabbing and hugging Jake.

Billy slumped down in the chair, a heaviness was lifted off his shoulders. Though they still did Jake wrong, they didn't hurt him intentionally and that meant a lot to Billy. He reached up grabbing the bottle. "Drugged." He spoke in

relief.

"Jake." Cal pulled from her embrace of him. "You are so brilliant. You figured it out all by yourself and narrowed it down to the Jack?"

"Not really." Jake said. "Rickie overheard them at the toot, I mean institute. I was merely confirming it."

"They set this up." Cal swayed her head. "That would be why Larry left those pictures in here."

"Larry did that?" Jake asked. "Oh, he's paying. He's paying big time."

The happiness left Cal's face. "Jake, we were drugged. O.K., but . . . that still doesn't lessen what we did. What we did was wrong. What we did to you was a sin. Don't dismiss the act. I could use this as a way out, but I won't. We . . ." Cal sat back down. "We had to start it. And we did that on our own. And even if we weren't drugged and nothing sexual happened. Starting it was wrong. Wrong."

"I know." Jake lowered to a kneel before her. "And what caused it to start is part of what you and I, Cal, will work on. O.K.? And I'm not dismissing it. But I'm not going to lie. Knowing the drug had a lot, a lot to do with what transpired, makes me feel a hell of a lot better." He grabbed her hand and kissed it.

Billy watched them for a second and stood up. "Thanks Jake. Thanks for letting me know. Just know, I never meant any of it. I never meant to hurt you. I look up to you and if I admired you before, I . . . I admire you more now." Billy walked to the door. "It takes a big man to be the way you're being. And I'm not just talking in size." Billy winked and grabbed for the door.

"Wait." Jake stood up. "There's one more thing." He waited for Billy to turn around. "The experiment wanted to break up me and Cal. Cause dissension in the three of us. If there's one thing I hate, it's I hate to lose. Letting them get the best of me is letting them win. I refuse to let them win. And even if I wanted to keep you away from Cal forever, even if I wanted to break your neck right now . . ." Jake failed to see the sudden fear on Billy's face. "I wouldn't do that. Because that's what the experiment wants to happen. And the last thing I want is to give them what they want."

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
March 30<sup>th</sup> - 8:30 p.m.

The music that played into the microphone finally stopped and a long sigh of relief was let out by the two monitors, Greg, and Aldo who were in the control room. They kept their eyes peered to the screen that was still black.

Though they tired of Reo Speedwagon, those in the control room didn't know what was worse. Old eighties music or Rickie trying to be a D.J., speaking muffling close to the microphone in a smooth soft way.

"Dudes." He said. "Like, welcome back to the world of the Graisons. We hope you enjoyed this commercial break. And like, now, we'd like to take you back into the world of the wedded bliss." The snickering of Rickie was heard and then after a shuffling noise Rickie's eyeball peered close into the camera. "Dude, Haynes, man you're looking rank." Rickie laughed again and stepped back jumping off the chair he stood on. "O.K. Where were we?" He ran to the table.

"Your turn." Jake said as he sat at the table with Cal and Billy, a game board in front of them. He kissed Cal and grabbed his beer. "Bill, you ready for another one."

"No I'm fine Jake." Billy stared at his tile holder. "Rickie go on."

"Dudes." Rickie spoke with excitement to the three. "I got like, the perfect word. Check me out." Rickie began to lay down his tiles. "Building off your 'S'. S--U--C--K--E--R."

Greg's jaw moved slowly as he peered with angry irritation at the laughing Scrabble playing annoying four. But Aldo, Aldo took the opportunity while watching, to lean back in that comfortable leather chair . . . and smile.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

April 7<sup>th</sup> - 6:45 a.m.

“Almost done babe.” Jake encouraged as he and Cal stood in a small clearing in the woods. “Give it a little more.”

Cal charged forward, kicking hard into the Stasis size dummy Jake held.

“Good, again. Try a little higher.” Jake held the dummy tight.

Cal backed up and caught her breath.

“Cal, you should quit smoking. You’d do better.”

“Maybe.” Cal leaned into her knee in a runners stance.

“Maybe? What, no ‘fuck you’.”

“Why would I say that?”

“You always do.”

“Nah.” She shook her head. “Ready.”

“Yeah. Did you think of one yet?”

“No.” Cal took off running plowing into the Stasis dummy and sending it back a foot.

“Good. Once more. And why not.”

“Why not what.” Cal walked back the ten feet.

“Why didn’t you think of something. There has to be something I do in our marriage that needs worked on.”

“No.” Cal got ready to run again.

“Cal, come on, I’m not perfect.”

“Pretty much so.” Cal smiled at Jake and prepared. “Ready?”

“No.” Jake said. “I told *you* something. This is a daily thing. You have to tell me something.”

“There’s nothing to tell. You don’t need to change. I do.”

Jake grumbled and rolled his eyes. “We’ll talk about it later. Let’s finish up. Do a slide in, sweeping out his legs.”

Cal widened her eyes stepping back further. “All right.” She looked and took a few more steps back. “You gonna let him go this time.”

“Yes.” Jake answered.

With everything she had, Cal raced forward like a baseball player charging to second base. And in one swift movement, Cal leaped forward feet first, slid in the dirt with a huge dust cloud, caught the legs of the dummy and swept it to the ground. The moment the dummy fell to the ground was the moment its heavy weight caused Cal--entangled within it--to flip over from her back to her stomach. She started to get up and fell back down.

“Whoa.” Jake rushed down to her. “You O.K.?”

Cal shook her head staring blankly out. “Yeah.” She blinked.

Jake reached his hand down to Cal, hoisting her up. As his huge hands



brushed her off he noticed her balance was off. Slowly he raised his eyes to her. "You sure you didn't hurt yourself."

"Yeah." Cal took a second then helped him brush off the dirt. "I just got dizzy from being turned so fast."

"You didn't eat. An empty stomach will cause that."

"You're right." Cal commented and then snapped herself back together. "Race back?"

Jake stared at her for a moment. No." He grabbed her hand. "Let's uh . . . walk."

^ ^ ^ ^

Before a wide metal door, Stan stood with Ollie and Rickie and of course, A clipboard. "Rickie." Stan told him. "You have to. It's part of your job guy. That's why you're getting paid three hundred dollars a day."

"No way dude. You're teasing me." Rickie argued.

"No we are not." Stan showed him the clipboard. "See for yourself. Ten seconds. First step."

Rickie turned back and looked at the door. "Dude I can't."

"Then you don't get paid for today." Stan stated. "Right Ollie."

"Right Stan." Ollie added.

Stan held up the stop watch. "Ten seconds. Three hundred dollars."

"O.K." Rickie reached for the door. "But, like you start timing me the second I go through this., Don't wait."

"You got it." Stan held his thumb on the watch. "Ready? And . . . Go,"

Rickie flung open the door and stepped down the first step. The slam of the metal door behind him made him jump. "Two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . ."

*Creak*

"Six . . . seven . . ."

A slight, very soft moan was heard.

Rickie's eyes widened. "Eight nine ten. Guys!" He turned and banged on the door. "Guys!" Rickie heard another creak and another moan, "Guys!" The door opened and Rickie flew through, slamming it shut with his body. "I hate you guys." Pouting, Rickie folded his arms and walked by Stan and Ollie who laughed at him. He turned half way down the hall and sang his words out to them. "And you're in trouble." Rickie spun his body and stormed off. "Cause like, I'm telling my Dad."

^ ^ ^ ^

His growing coal black hair was still wet from his shower when Paul put it in a ponytail. He smeared the fog from the mirror as he checked his reflection then stepped from his bathroom. He could feel his stomach churning in hunger and

wondered if he missed the clang of the pot signaling that breakfast was ready. Wanting to just head down to eat, but knowing what he had to do, Paul grabbed a pack of matches from his dresser and pulled one from the pack. As the sulphur tip struck and ignited, mixed with the 'hiss' of the lighting match he heard something else. Groans.

Painful they were, but soft. Coming from within his room where the shades were drawn and only a candle was lit. Confusion on why he heard them ended when he heard something else. Lou's voice. Tiny, little and miniaturized.

"Help me. Please help me."

With his face glowing from the candle he picked up, Paul turned and the candle dropped to the floor when center of his room, no bigger than a foot tall he saw a vision. Blueish in color, ghostly. Arms reaching out, bodies of the damned going after and trying to get a crying Lou. The vision was a calling, and after stamping out the small fire that had started, Paul left the room to begin on his new mission.

^^^

Joking around and in an upbeat mood, Jake lifted Cal in a swinging hug over a small puddle as they walked to the dining room. He set her down and kissed her. "Tell me."

"Jake, there's nothing to tell. Really." Cal told him.

"I'm finding that hard to believe. If Chuck was here I'm sure he'd rattle off a list. There has to be something."

Cal paused. "All right. You get up too early. There. How's that?"

"Cal, sweetie. I have to get up that early. I'm in the service."

"Well then." Cal tossed her hands up. "That's all I can think of."

"What about on the weekends when I don't work. What if I sleep till . . ."

Jake shrugged. "Six?"

"If you want."

"Cal, are you paying attention? I only said six, that's not . . ."

"Sarge!" Rickie's calling voice careened his way.

Jake turned to see Rickie running to him. "What's wrong?"

"Sarge, they did it to me again." Rickie caught his breath. "They . . ." he paused when Judge walked by with a 'morning.' Rickie waited until it was clear and he dropped his voice to a whisper. "They Wes Cravened me again."

Cal hid her snicker and pointed to the dining building. "Jake, talk him calm again. I'm uh, gonna get some coffee."

"Cal I . . ." Jake flung his hand in frustration as he watched her walk in the building. He looked back to Rickie. "Make it good Rickie." Jake warned then proceeded to listen to Rickie, dramatically ramble.

Cal felt like she walked into some bad summer camp movie when she saw Lou, cigarette dangling in his mouth, carrying a pot to the table. She waved to him, going to the coffee pot and getting a cup of coffee. Her eyes glanced by Judge who patiently waited by the table for Lou to set the food down, then Cal, mug in hand found a spot at the table.

At first as Cal brought her lips to her mug, she thought it was Judge, or Lou when she felt the weight near her. Then through the aroma of the coffee she smelt the bad after shave and she knew exactly who it was. So close, hip touching her hip. "Do you mind?" She merely shifted her eyes to Larry who sat backwards on the bench seat next to her, back against the table, elbows back.

"Not at all." Larry said, leaning into her coffee. Placing his face to hers. When Cal went to swat him away, he quickly grabbed her wrist and slammed it to the table. "Don't."

Cal's jaws clenched thinking of how she would find an original way to nail him. "I'm warning you."

"Don't warn me." He told her gruffly. "I've noticed the happy reunion. The three of you back together. Every night. Probably having some sort of kinky trio thing happening." Larry clenched her wrist. "Not that it bothers me. In fact I find it intriguing because you're really cute."

"Fuck off."

Larry snickered. "Attitude. I was curious Cal. I saw how happy Jake is. I wonder if he would be so happy to find out that your little one night stand with Billy goes deeper."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Larry released her wrist. "How happy would Jake be if he found out about you and Billy kissing, mud covered, right before being chased by pigs. Or . . . that intimate embrace you took from Billy because Jake is too big to hold you like that." Larry smiled. "I kept a few of those pictures Caldwell gave me. And you know what?" Larry spun and stood up leaning over Cal's shoulder. Cal stared coldly forward. "I'm tired of jerking off to them. You don't want Jake to know. Be at my room tonight." Touching her shoulder, Larry turned around only to see Judge standing there. "What old man?"

Judge ignored him and sat down next to a blank staring Cal. He looked over his shoulder to see Larry sit somewhere else. "Cal." He whispered. "You tell Jake. You tell your husband right now what that man said to you. You hear me?"

Cal shook her head. "I can't tell . . ." She stopped talking when she heard laughter. She looked back and saw Jake, Rickie and Billy walking in. "I can't." She swallowed then sipped her coffee waiting for the inevitable. The smiling trio to arrive at the table.

"Dudes, it's not funny." Rickie sat down. "Cal-babe you O.K.?"

"Yeah." Cal looked up then down when Jake set food in front of her. "Jake

I'm not . . ."

"Eat." Jake ordered, grabbed her hand and placed a fork in it.

Billy joined the table. "Cal, you O.K.?" He slid to a seat. "You look upset."

"No I'm . . ." Cal tried to answer.

"Cal-babe." Rickie interrupted. "If you want a little humor today, come on my fishing expedition with me and Reed. Wait . . ." Rickie laughed. "Me and Reed will hit the reef to see if we can possiblee, catch us all some big fish-ees."

In the silence Jake glared at Rickie. "What the fuck was that about?"

"Just a little midmorning Rickie -Meister Shakespearean moment Sarge. That's all. So do you want to go fishing cal?" Rickie asked her.

"No, Rickie I . . ."

"She should stay inside." Jake interjected. "It's gonna get hot and you did get dizzy this . . ."

"I'm fine." Cal spoke. "I flipped . . ."

"You got dizzy?" Billy asked. "Are you sick."

"Fuck!" Cal slammed her hand down to the table and stood up. "I'm fine! All right!" She stepped over the bench, and without saying anything else stormed away from the table.

Everyone looked at the door and to Jake.

He peered up from his breakfast. "It's a female thing."

Just when a long drawn out 'oh' came from everyone the door to the dining room opened again and Cal popped her head in. "I heard that Jake. Thank you very much." The door slammed.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
April 7<sup>th</sup> - 8:30 a.m.

Barb dropped the notes onto Greg's desk just as she went to sit before him. "He got her again today. Yesterday, and the day before, he was subtle. Today. He was direct."

Greg flipped through the notes then leaned back. "And when did this second incident occur today?"

"Two minutes ago, that's why I scribbled it in." Barb said. "I'll have a typed report ready."

Greg closed his eyes and shook his head. "No rush yet. Just hold off until you do the final report for Rayon Clinical." He handed her the reports back the brought his hands together in a fold under his chin.

"How did you peg him for the candidate for this research?" Barb asked.

"Honestly?" Greg shrugged. "I didn't until four days ago. I had Paul pegged, but, hating to admit it, I was wrong. He seems to uh . . . clear his mind way too often." Greg raised the corners of his mouth quickly in a flash smile.

"He's out there." Barb commented.

"Yes, he is. I like it."

Barb gathered up her notes. "I'll keep you abreast of everything,."

"Please do." He saw Barb stand up and he leaned into his desk. "Oh Barb? Do me a favor?"

"Yes?"

"Have Control switch his vitamins again please. Increase the dosage of Potassium Nitrate."

"Increase it?" Barb snickered. "Sir, the dosage we started four days ago is working fine."

"His frustrational and hostility levels are growing." Greg explained. "Increase it."

"But don't you think it may have something to do *with* the fact that we've added the potassium Nitrate to his vitamins? I mean the man can't get an erection now. He was so mad the second time his attempt at masturbation failed."

Greg lifted his hands and then spoke calmly in an explaining manner. "It may have a little. Just a little. But this goes beyond his erections and you know it." Again Greg leaned back. "Increase it now. Play it safe. Yes Cal can kick his ass but I won't take a chance on her. The last thing I want is Cal getting raped."

"I understand." Barb waked to the door. "Consider it increased."

"Thank you." Greg said, sitting in a thinking mode after Barb had left. He rubbed his finger under his chin staring forward. "Yep. It's the last thing I want."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island  
April 7<sup>th</sup> - 8:33 a.m.

Cal stepped from the bathroom only wearing a towel. She combed through her wet hair walking to her dresser to grab her coffee. She felt a lot better, physically and mentally after showering,. Letting the water beat upon her for a while soothed any jumpy nerves she had. Until . . . she saw them setting on her dresser, In plain view and intended for her to see. Three photographs, all black and white The first one was of her and Billy in bed, the other two are one Jake didn't see. Cal hadn't until that second. Her and Billy kneeling, muddy, kissing. Her and Billy. His eyes closed, both of them holding on in what looked like more than a friendly embrace. Her stomach churned and cringed, especially when she saw the little note attached to the one picture. A note that simply read 'Tonight'.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

April 7<sup>th</sup> - 3:55 p.m.

The tip of the boot snuck up on Judge as he knelt down to his small garden digging up his radishes. A work boot, black, mud covered. On his hands in knees in his little garden area not too far from the back of the bungalow, Judge peered up. Up the legs that wore grey pants all the way to the black man--arms folded--who smiled flashing the silver front tooth.

Judge crawled back. "Oh my God."

"Looking foe me Judge."

Judge spun clockwise after he had backed up. He stumbled to his feet and swayed when he saw another man, not as big as the first, but a black man--thin. Trembling and wanting out of the situation, and telling himself he was imagining it, Judge turned again. Behind him a third man, long blond hair, greasy. The man was tall and brawny. Another spin, another man. Short brown hair, thin. All four were at a distance and moving closer. Judge's heart palpitated as he kept turning and turning to find a way out. Closer and closer the four men drew. The trees around him spun out of focus and blood rushed to Judge's ears. His stuttering mouth moved but no scream emerged like he wanted it to. And before Judge could take a step to run, he dropped to the ground when he passed out.

~~~~~

"So there I was." Billy rambled as he and Cal strolled through the woods. "Eight years old. Eight Cal. And I had to own up to the principal that I was indeed getting my first crotch shot by looking up the teacher's . . . Cal?"

"Huh?" Cal looked at him.

"You weren't listening."

"Yeah I was."

"Really, what did I say?"

"Um . . . sorry." Cal shrugged.

"Gees. You ask me if I ever did anything that I didn't want to do but was afraid not to and then you don't listen to me tell my story of peeping up my teachers dress."

Cal started to laugh. "You peeped up your teachers dress?"

"Yes. But somehow it was funnier when I told it in full force." Billy stopped her. "Are you O.K.?"

"Yes." Cal nodded. "I have something on my mind."

"Talk to me."

"I can't."

"Why? Does it have to do with me?"

Cal hesitated. "No. No not at all. I just have something stupid on my mind. Don't worry about it."

"I do." Billy told her. "You can't . . ."

"What's wrong?"

"Judge." Releasing the hands Billy laid on her shoulders he ran passed her down the small grade to Judge who laid there. He bent down to him. "Judge?"

Judge moaned and grabbed his head. When he opened his eyes he semi shrieked, and jolted in a frightened manner.

Cal made it down the hill. "Judge, what happened."

Judge looked around. To his left, to his right and behind him. "Heat . . . heat must have got me." He wiped his brow. "I passed out."

"Here." Billy grabbed his arm. "Let us help you to your bungalow where it's cool."

"Thank you." Judge stumbled in his stand. "Thank you." He felt Cal secure his other arm, and with their help Judge walked back to this bungalow. But not without looking around the whole entire walk back.

^^^

There was a certain whimpering painful cry that came from Reed that really annoyed the hell out of Jake. Cal and Billy stood by the door, hiding any laughter that generated more at Jake then at Reed.

"Dude." Rickie tried to soothe Reed. "Like you're gonna be fine huh." Rickie lifted the sheet covering the super swollen foot of Reed. "Sarge?"

Jake raised his eye brows. "He'll be sick but . . ." He paused when there was another whine. "Christ you got bit by a jelly fish. You'll be fine. I don't think we have to amputate."

Another whine occurred and Rickie had to turn around from the bed because he didn't want his lack of compassion to show through.

Jake rubbed his own forehead in frustration. "Cal could you go get a bucket of ice for his foot?"

"Sure Jake." Cal responded. "I'll be right back." She walked out.

Jake felt the heat from Reed's red leg. "He's fevered. We really should get this guy in a cool bath. Bill, you want to help?"

"No."

"Billy."

"All right. I'll help you." Billy was reluctant.

"Not me." Jake told him. "Rickie. Cal wants me to check on Judge. Why I have to play fuckin doctor in this place is beyond me." Jake walked to the door. "It's a fuckin endurance experiment. People should to learn to endure for crying out loud."

Billy's eyes widened and he bounced from heel to toe, placing his hands in his pockets. "O.K. well," He shrugged moving to the bed. "Shall we Rickie."

“Bath him?” Rickie’s eye widened. “No way dude.”

“But Jake said . . .”

“You know what?” Rickie inched his way to Billy. “Let’s just like splash him with water and make him look wet,. No one will know.”

“Oh Rickie I don’t . . .” Billy paused when Reed moaned. He looked at Reed, bald, earless, tongueless and now sporting a huge foot. “O.K., let’s do that.”

^^^

Cal thought she was alone in the kitchen, she found out quickly that she wasn’t. Reaching under the sink for a bucket, she felt the body move up behind her.

“Did you get my message?” Larry asked her.

Cal spun around. She just stared at him. “Why are you so sure that I’m not gonna lay you out right now?”

“I think that you want to. I don’t think you will. I’ll go to Jake.”

“Go to Jake.” Cal started to spin, but Larry grabbed her arm spinning her back around.

“I don’t think you quite understand. See . . .” He stepped to her. “I know things. I know thing because I am one of the fortunate in this experiment to be informed. Yeah, your happy go lucky husband may be bopping along thinking that the institute drugged his wife. His wife wouldn’t have cheated on him on her own. So forgiving. So fast. But the fact remains. That isn’t true is it?”

“You know nothing.”

“I know enough about that drug,. And I have the proof to back it up. Nice little information package concerning the cause and effects.” Larry smiled at her snidely. “See, what Jake doesn’t know is the kiss, the hug, they were all preludes to something that would have happened anyhow. Drug or no drug. And for all he knows, probably will happen again.”

Cal stared down to Larry’s fingers that gripped her arm. “Get you hand off of me now.”

Larry removed his hand. “Tell me something Cal. How’s Jake going to react about the little mud wrestling moment. Or how will your husband react to the fact that the drug may have made you horny. But it didn’t get you there. And it wouldn’t have happened with anyone. You Cal started that whole night. You kissed him first. Billy asked you to stop. He told you to tell him to stop. And you didn’t. You seduced him. And the best part is . . .” Larry dropped his voice to a whisper. “The drug at that point didn’t even have enough time to kick in yet. You went over the edge all on your own.” Larry stepped even closer. “How would Jake like to know that? He wouldn’t. You can stop him from ever knowing. My lips will remained sealed.” Larry’s hand slid in between Cal’s legs and rigidly up. “Perhaps somewhere else.”

Cal kept eye contact with him. Cold and hard despite the fact that his hand

groped her. "You're pathetic."

"And your stuck between a rock and a hard place." Larry brought his lips to her ear. "Tonight." Parting his lips, he extended his tongue, running it up her cheek. He backed away with a smile.

Cal didn't flinch, blink or move until he had left that kitchen. And then she spun to the sink, bent over the basin and threw up.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

April 7th - 8:00 p.m.

Paul looked very serious at Lou as they stood outside the dining building. "So. What do you say?"

Lou folded his arms. "Is this offer valid only today or can I take you up on it at anytime."

"The offer is valid always. However, these demons are after you. Twice today I had a vision. Let me Lou. Exorcize them."

"Can I smoke the pipe?" Lou asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes."

"Cool. Let's go." Up for just about anything that would take his mind to really neat places, Lou followed Paul from the building.

^^^

Like a little kid searching for his puppy, that was how Rickie sounded calling out. "Lou! Lou!" So lost. So desperate. His voice echoed as he called out the name long. "LOOOOOOOUUUUU!"

Billy was on a roll typing up his day's events, but he had to stop. At first it was funny, but Rickie's calling out over and over for at least fifteen minutes became a bit bothersome. He stopped with his work on the laptop, walked to his bungalow door and opened it. There was Rickie walking slowly around the unity circle, hands cupped over his mouth.

"Lou!" Rickie cried out.

"Rickie." Billy stepped off his porch. "Stop that. I would think if Lou is lost you have certainly searched all that you could in the unity circle."

"Dude." Rickie's head dropped. "I am like . . . so . . . bummed. I can't find my body guard anywhere."

"Where have you looked?" Billy asked.

"Here."

"He's not here Rickie." Billy told him.

"But guy. Where can he be?" With a snicker first, Rickie started to sing. "*Oh where, oh where has my body guard gone. Oh where or where can he be?*"

Billy closed one eye in a wincing manner. "Cute. Would you like me to help you look for him?"

"Guy, could you. Like I would be indebted. Really." Rickie dropped his voice to whisper. "I would have checked around the island. But like . . ." Rickie shuddered. "It's dark and scary."

"O.K., not like I'm all that brave myself. But let me get my revolver and we'll go look."

“Cool. Billy, you’re the man.”

“Yeah.” Billy nodded once, rolled his eyes and walked to his bungalow. As soon as he stepped on his porch he stopped and spun back to the unity circle when Rickie was calling out again.

^^^

There had always been things in Cal’s life that caused her stomach to gnaw and nausea to instantly hit her. Cold pizza, cat puke, and maggots at the bottom of a garbage can were some of them. But nothing ever in her life hit her like the sound of Larry’s voice when she knocked on his door and he snidely called for her to come inside.

Slowly and with only a creak she opened that door, slipping nervously into the dark room. When she shut the door, he stepped from the bathroom, not wearing a shirt.

Larry looked arrogant. ‘I knew it’ sprayed across his face. “You showed.”

“Yes.” Cal answered.

“I guess you listened to what I said.” He moved toward her.

“Oh I listened. And you need to know, I hated hurting my husband and I wanted to put it behind me.”

“This is a step.”

“Yes it is.” Cal nodded. “I love him. And you know so much.” She watched Larry get closer. “But there’s something you don’t seem to know.”

“What is that?” He asked.

“I tell my husband . . . everything.” On her last word, Cal reached back for the door and opened it. There stood Jake.

Larry couldn’t react fast enough. Jake charged through that door, Cal shutting it behind him, and moved with a vengeance straight to Larry. Jake’s humongous hand reached out in a ‘snatch’ gripping Larry by the throat, and lifting him from the floor. With a sneer of hatred and all his strength, Jake smashed Larry center face with one hard blow, holding Larry so he wouldn’t fly back. Blood shot out from Larry’s busted nose. With a running force, Jake then hurled Larry across the room. After smashing into the lamp, Larry careened back first into the wall, sliding down and dropping to the floor. Jake lunged at Larry lifting him up, securing his arm behind his back, and ramming him face first into the wall.

Larry grunted loudly in pain as Jake pinned him against the wall, feet dangling, face pressing so hard the rough wall seared into his cheek.

“There’s nothing more I want to do than kill you right now. I can.” Jake blasted in a low, frightening, gravel voice. “This is the Iso-Stasis Experiment. There are no rules. I can snap your neck and no one would care or miss you. But I won’t. You have five months left. I want every bit of torture intended for you, to be thrown at you. But make no bones about it. You will *not* walk off this island. I will stake my life on it.” Jake pulled him back cracking him again into the wall.

“You touched my wife.” Another pull back, another grunt as Jake smashed him again. “You shoved your hand between her legs.” Another smash. “You blackmailed her for sex.” Again and hard, Jake rammed him. “Death right now is an easy way out for you. You sick fuckin piece of shit.” Jake’s held him against that wall with such strength he could have crushed Larry. “Let me leave you with this. If by some slim fuckin chance your pathetic ass is alive on September third waiting for that chopper at to arrive at eight a.m. . . . I’ll put a fuckin bullet in your head at seven fifty-five. Pray they get you first.” After one more slam, Jake dropped a shaking Larry to the floor, turned, face emotionless, walked to Cal, took her hand and walked her out.

^ ^ ^ ^

“Shh.” Rickie rushed his hand out, covering Billy’s mouth as they tromped in the woods.

“What?” Billy asked. “I didn’t say anything?”

“Dude, you breathed heavy.”

Billy tossed his hand in the air. “Forgive me. Now . . . what did you hear.”

Rickie pointed. “Lou.”

Lou’s voice, close but still in the distance, carried down. “Uh . . . Paul. Are you listening? O.K., now. I liked the pipe. I liked the company and I liked the mind clearing thing. But just about this point I’m gonna have to say enough is enough and get pissed off.”

Paul didn’t seem to listen. He just continued to gather logs and branches stacking them at Lou’s feet where he had Lou tied to a large post.

^ ^ ^ ^

Cal’s shorts and underwear, intertwined, flew high in the air and landed in the sand impressively close to where Jake had tossed the rest of her clothes. Not long after, his sweat shorts followed.

Softly Jake moaned, adjusting the ‘too small’ blanket to at least cover his backside and most of Cal’s legs as he lay on top of Cal. He stopped the seduction when Cal giggled.

“What?” He asked. “What’s so funny?”

“This is so unlike you.” Cal told him.

“Please. I’m being romantic. Since I have to come up with my own list of things I need improvement on . . .”

“Jake.”

“No, Cal. You won’t tell me. I have to figure it out for myself. And through deducting, I came up with spontaneous seduction.” He kissed her again. “So . . . A small fire. Poor man’s champagne.” Jake’s hand reached up, lifted and set down a beer. “Cal and Jake . . .” He smiled and kissed her through the smile. “Sexual

protection.” His eyes glanced up to the M-16. “And here we are.”

“Here we are. And it’s still so unlike you. You enjoy privacy for your . . .” She snickered. “Intimacies.”

“Cal, please. Are you making fun of me.”

“Yes.”

Jake grunted. “This is as private as we can get. Far away, with my beautiful wife.” Jake laid his lips to Cal’s. “Who’s gonna see us.” Just as Jake locked himself and his body in the moment with Cal, kissing her and clinging to her, he sprung his head up when he heard the thump-thump-thump of feet on the sand.

“Sarge!” Rickie called out awfully close.

“No.” Jake closed his eyes then felt the tap on his shoulder. “Fuck.”

“Hey Sarge. Hey Cal-babe.” Rickie bent down. “You guys busy?”

“Rickie I believe so yes.” Jake said so annoyed swaying his head to Rickie and seeing Billy there too, only Billy had his back turned.

“Could you like put it on pause. We need your help.” Rickie rambled unable in the darkness to see Jake’s irritation. “Cause like my body guard is trapped in a bizarre Bewitched nightmare and is about to be burned at the stake.”

Wide eyed and nude, Jake’s head swayed up to Rickie with a stunned, open mouth expression. Because up to that point in his life Jake thought he had heard it all and he just heard a new one.

MIND, BODY, AND SOUL . . . OBSTACLES

--Not only will the challenges that nature's fury has to offer be thrown at you, but other obstacles as well. Be prepared. Just as in any monsoon, tornado or hurricane. If there is calm there is inevitably a storm brewing.--

Excerpts from 'Surviving the Iso-Stasis'

By Jake and Cal Graison

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

April 10th - 8:45 a.m.

“And fortunately for Lou . . .” Greg spoke before the table full of investors. “He escaped with only minor feet and ankle burns. He’ll be walking again in a few days. Now if we’ll turn to page forty-nine.” Greg waited for the simultaneous sound of flipping pages. “As you can see the mental phase is giving thriving results. The easing-in instead of the bam-bam-bam method used in previous experiments, is proving beneficial. We have Larry, who hasn’t spoken to anyone in since Jake not only beat him, but scared the hell out of him. Our panel of psychologist don’t . . .” Greg shook his head dramatically. “They don’t expect this quiet, frightened behavior to last. We’re keeping an eye out for Cal. We believe she will be his target.”

Aldo, whose fingers played with the edge of his booklet, looked up and grumbled.

“Judge King.” Greg continued. “We’ve increased the reality of the mental pressure, thus causing him to question his sanity every single time. We’re still keeping our fingers crossed that Rickie will tell him soon about the tragedy with his granddaughter, We know that will push him. Paul . . .” Greg stopped to laugh. “Paul is now convinced that it is his calling to exorcize every demon on that island before they overcome them. We have not only great plans for Paul, but rather entertaining ones when he sees the proof of his failure in his calling.” Greg noticed Ivan raising his hand,. “Yes Ivan.”

“I have Paul. Why is he still walking freely if he tried to kill Lou.”

“He didn’t try to kill Lou.” Greg explained. “Merely burn the demons from him. Jake and the others enjoyed the moment. They saw no reason to harm him. O.K., next page.” Again, the flipping of pages put Greg in a pause mode. “With the mental phase in full swing and thriving, we will now move on to the element phase with only one failure in the mental endurance . . . Lou.”

With a ‘Nah-uh-uh’ Aldo shook his head. “Cal, Jake and Billy. You failed there.”

Greg arrogantly flashed that closed mouth smile at Aldo. “My dear Mr. Connilucci. We did not fail there. Quite the contrary. The fun with those three. Has just begun.” He smiled again. “Wait.”

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island
April 10th - 9:00 a.m.

Laying on her stomach on her bed, Cal stared at her left hand. It rested on top of the other, cupped some and just under her nose. She looked at the shiny new diamond band that now graced her ring finger. It fit perfectly with her engagement ring and wedding band, completing the expensive trio. But instead of smiling at the ring Jake had given her the day before on their anniversary, Cal wiped the tear drop that fell upon it.

“Cal-babe.” The door opened with Rickie’s call in.

Cal rolled onto her back and sat up. “Did you do it?”

“Yes.” Rickie shut the door and walked in. “I got the Sarge occupied. Now what’s wrong?”

Slowly Cal stood up from the bed and walked to him. “Oh Rickie.”: She dropped her head to him. “I think I’m in trouble.”

^^^

Stan angrily slammed his clipboard on the counter, spinning to Rickie, while holding back his lab coat. “I can not believe you are putting me in this position.”

“Dude.” Rickie stepped to Stan, leaving Cal behind. “BE a pal. Guy. Come on.” Rickie whispered. “It’s like my mom. . . .” Rickie looked back at Cal then to Stan. “Help.”

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
April 10th - 9:40 a.m.

Aldo knew something was up. Being pulled from the meeting during the break. Pulled alone into Greg's office. He sat there watching a calm Greg stand behind the desk. Dr. Jefferson seated in the office as well.

"You needed to hear this first." Greg spoke soft then tossed a folder in front of Aldo. "Ovastim is the name the drug was given at first. It has no name since we have taken over it. It was given to us by a sexuality and fertility research clinic. We of course . . ." Greg held out his hands. "We made some adjustments."

Aldo opened the folder. His dark eyes glanced up at Greg.

"But . . ." Greg held up his finger. "Any adjustments we made did not deter from the original intention of the drug. And you can see the original intentions."

"Christ." Aldo's eyes partially closed.

"A problem most couples suffering from infertility have, is that trying to conceive can become regimented, boring. It becomes such a task that the couples no longer follow the demanding procedures they should. Therefore, failure is almost always imminent. Ovastim was designed for couples in this predicament. Created to not only stimulate the ovum for egg production and release, it was designed to stimulate sexual hormones in the adrenal cortex as well. Hence, a more enjoyable, less tedious conception."

"Son of a bitch." Aldo looked up at Greg.

Greg smiled. "Or daughter."

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

April 10th - 10:22 a.m.

With Rickie's compassionate hand laying on her back, Cal sat on the stool peering up to Stan.

Stan's hip leaned against the counter, his finger tapped on a closed folder. "Off the Caldwell record. We have the means to take care of this for you."

Heavily, Cal's shoulders slumped and she dropped her head, burying her face in her hands.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

April 10th - 11:30 a.m.

Cal wasn't as nervous as she thought she would be. Perhaps the long walk back from the control center, one she took slow helped. Going through in her mind, all that she had to say to Jake in that walk home. There was an eeriness Cal felt. A chill that seeped through her as she opened the door to her bungalow. And though she was indeed nervous, she knew what she had to do. No time for tears. No time for fear. She had to just do it.

Jake was putting away laundry when he looked up to Cal who walked in. "Rickie finally bring you back huh?"

Cal partially smiled. "Yep. Thanks for doing the laundry."

"No problem." He shut the drawer with his knee. "What's wrong?"

"That obvious?"

"I know you."

Cal chuckled. "That you do. Jake . . ." She stepped to him speaking softly. "We need . . . we need to talk hon."

"Oh boy." Jake stood straight. "What happened?"

"Can we sit. Please?" Cal motioned to the bed.

"Oh boy." Jake backed up and sat down. He let out a breath, a long one looking to Cal.

"You're my very best friend. I love you. And I'm coming to you as my best friend and my husband." Cal's tense hand reached out to Jake's, she ran it over his, up and down, then pulled it back. "Before I say anything, I want you to know, I am sure."

"What are you talking about?"

"No questions if I'm sure. Because I am. O.K.?"

"O.K." Jake nodded. "What are you sure about?"

Cal hesitated, looking at him in the eyes and drawing within her the courage she needed. "I am sure that . . . that I'm not done hurting you yet. Because I'm sure . . . I'm sure . . ." She closed her eyes. "Jake." She breathed out his name. "Jake, I'm pregnant."

Blasted like he had been hit with a wall of bricks internally was how Jake felt. Her words ricocheted through his ears to his heart then his gut. A huff, small but pain filled came from him and Jake slowly stood up. "You're pr . . . pr . . . Cal?"

"Yes."

Jake swallowed. His breath shivered slowly as he walked to his dresser, back to Cal, hands gripping the edges . . . head down.

"Jake."

"I didn't . . ." His head swayed to her and he spoke softly. "I didn't think you

could hit me any harder.”

Cal’s eyes instinctively closed. “I’m sorry. I am very, very sorry. There’s nothing more I can say to you. I can’t even put into words what is going through my mind.” Cal looked at him, then ran her hand down his arm. “I’m just . . . sorry.” She turned and walked to the door.

“Cal.” Jake called out to her. “Where are you going?”

“Jake, I think right now, both of us have to let this sink in. We have to think. Right now I need to go off and be alone to do that.” Cal gave him a saddened look, opened the door and walked out.

Jake stood upright running his hand slowly across his face. He moved his eyes to the door, then painfully he closed them again.

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For as much as Jake stayed inside that bungalow, that was how much Cal wasn’t there. The entire day, she failed to step a foot back inside. Jake respected what she wanted, time to think, because he too needed the same. He surprised himself by not having that overwhelming sensation to get drunk. In fact Jake had one beer after evening had set in, one beer he nursed while waiting for Cal to return from her time with--as Jake learned through Lou--Rickie.

His hand could have been setting on a live wire for as much as that shock of hearing the door open went through him. Jake set down his beer bottle and stood up when Cal walked in. “Where have you been?”

“With Rickie.” Cal shut the door.

“I know that, but where?” Jake asked.

“For the last couple hours. Peeing a lot.”

“What?” Jake twitched his head confused.

“They have those packaged pregnancy tests at the control center. Rickie, Rickie didn’t trust the blood test they ran so we did about twelve pregnancy tests.” Cal walked further into the room. “And please don’t ask the results.”

“I won’t.” Jake moved back to the table. “Did you eat at all?”

“Yes.” Cal smiled a little at him. “Thanks for asking me.”

“Cal.” Jake grabbed for her hand. “I think you and I need to talk about this sweetie.”

“Jake . . . right now I have this huge headache and I’m so tired.” She slipped her hand from his. “We’ll talk tomorrow. O.K.?”

“I’d rather not. I’d rather talk . . .”

“Jake.” Cal held up her hand. “Listen. I love you. I love you very much and you Jake, take first priority in my life. I want to stay married.”

“Without a doubt.” Jake told her.

“And I don’t want you to feel like you have to face my mistake everyday for the rest of your life.”

“I don’t want to feel that way either.”

“Good.” Cal quickly reached out and touched his hand. “Then we’ll finish this tomorrow.”

“Cal . . .”

Cal stepped to him, silenced him with a quick kiss. “Goodnight.”

Jake’s head lowered. “Night Cal.” He watched through the tops of his eyes, as Cal, almost emotionless, laid, without getting undressed, on top of the bed, on her side and semi-curved in a ball. Before Jake returned to sitting at the table, thinking and nursing his beer, he walked to Cal, kissed her and just so she knew, he told her he loved her.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
April 10<sup>th</sup> - 11:55 p.m.

It wasn't the Beverly Wilshire, nor was it even the Holiday Inn for that matter. It was a wing of a building where dormitory style quarters were. A bed, dresser, night stand, desk and bathroom were all that were in those plain small rooms so similar to what the participants lived in during the experiments. Yet there they were, not only the workers of Caldwell but eight of the richest men in the world . . . all living there.

For as arrogant, and 'know it all' Aldo believed Gregory Haynes to be. He had to give it to Haynes on the new move and better-than-ever open door policy. Aldo liked the prospect of having a place to sleep for a few hours while visiting,. And, bonus, he had a desk. Bringing a television, computer and having cable run pretty much made that little room, all that Aldo needed. Food, well, if he didn't use the kitchen or commissary they had at the center, Aldo ordered out and had it delivered. He couldn't recall in his experience as an investor, Caldwell ever offering the investors to stay under the institutes roof. Giving them the instant, easier access to watch their horses or players any time day or night. Nor could Aldo ever recall the investors getting to know each other like they were this experiment. Spending time together under one roof, showing concern for the others investment, sharing family stories and photographs. Unlike previous experiments, the investors were getting to know each other just as well as their counterpart investments were on that island.

Aldo didn't feel much like talking on this night. Even though he knew some of the investors had a game going of property poker. Aldo just wanted to get back to his computer and electronically converse with that woman in Oregon whom he told he was a maintenance man. But first he needed a cup of coffee. He could have made one, he had a pot in his room. But his legs needed stretched and he only wanted one cup. So the vending machine would suffice in it's bad coffee glory. Even though Caldwell bragged it was state of the art Columbian blend, Aldo knew his coffee.

So with future thoughts racing through his mind, worries for Cal, Aldo headed to the vending room. The halls were quiet and his thoughts magnified. He could still see the words, typos and all on his last email from the Oregon woman. Telling her he had a friend in trouble, a married friend. And the Oregon woman simply telling him, then he has to help. And Aldo would. When Cal returned from the experiment, if Jake turned his back against her, Aldo would surely have to contemplate having Jake shot. Well, at least fantasize about it.

He could hear voices as he walked to the vending area. Odd to hear at the time of night it was. Especially since the vending area was located in the office section of the building. Aldo wouldn't have paid much attention to the voices had he not heard the mention of Cal's name. Then Aldo slowed down.

"We can clear out the last of the two rooms, connect them, make one large

room. Like we did with yours.” The unknown male voice spoke.

“I’ll put an order in for carpeting.” Greg said. “Plan on painting as well, possibly some wall paper. Women like that sort of thing,. And we’ll have to order a special bed. Something orthopedic for her back. Pregnancy is uncomfortable enough without having the ho-hum beds we have to sleep on.”

Aldo had to do it. He stepped right in. “Haynes.”

“Evening Aldo.” Greg smiled then returned to the maintenance man. “Thanks George, that will be all.”

“Haynes.” Aldo walked in as the maintenance man left. “Are you bringing Cal here?”

“We’re just making preparations just in case.”

“You’re pulling my investment without my knowledge.”

“No.” Greg shook his head. “Mrs. Graison will still be in the game. She’ll have to finish it out here, watching her husband finish it there. It is in our best interest to pull her should things get too rough for her to handle.”

“There was never any talk of pulling a pregnant woman from an experiment. And there is a woman that gets pregnant every single one.”

“True. But this is the first married couple. Jake surely would have his difficulties with his mind on Cal when she’s elsewhere, That is . . .” Greg gathered up papers. “If he still wants her. She is pregnant to Billy. I would think Aldo, with Cal not only being your investment, but your friend as well, that you wouldn’t mind in the least her being pulled into a safer environment if need be, in her delicate condition.”

Aldo had to snicker. “I highly doubt, pregnant or not, Cal will ever be delicate. And no, I wouldn’t mind. But she would. She won’t leave Jake. She won’t.”

“She doesn’t have a choice. We can conduct a completely different mental endurance experiment right here under this roof with her.”

“Plus hit Jake hard.”

“In deed.” Greg commented. “But like I said, it remains to be seen. We have to see how rough it gets. I don’t want it too rough on her.”

“Oh like you care.” Aldo waved him off.

“I do. I hold compassion for the unborn. Perhaps that is why a pregnant woman was never pulled from the experiment before. Because no one held compassion for the unborn.”

Aldo sneered at him seeing through that phoney, caring decameter. “She won’t go. She joined this experiment, she’ll finish.”

“Doesn’t matter. She’s with child. It’s our call.”

“It’s her baby.”

“It’s our pregnancy.” Greg opened his top desk drawer, pulled out a contract looking document and tossed it across the desk to Aldo. “Or shall I add, toddler too. Read the standard participant contract. Read what the Graisons signed. Second page, paragraph twenty-two ‘B’.”



Aldo lifted the contract, turning to the second page. "Christ, Haynes, they signed this because to them it wouldn't happen in a million years."

"But it did." Greg took the contract back. "And according to the paragraph that reads, *In regards to the best interest of mother and child, Caldwell institute retains the right to closely monitor, test, and evaluate the pregnancy of any child conceived during the experiment . . . in any medically safe way Caldwell sees fit. And as well as having the right to be present at the birth, Caldwell also retains the right to monitor, test and evaluate the child for up to two years post experiment . . . in any medically safe way Caldwell sees fit.*" Greg set down the contract. "According to that Aldo. They don't have a choice."

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

April 11<sup>th</sup> - 7:40 a.m.

*"Cal-babe please."* Sitting on his bed, knees to his chest, Rickie heard his voice in his mind pleading to Cal. So down she was.

*"Rickie, you are not changing my mind."*

*"But the Sarge . . ."*

*"The Sarge Rickie is number one to me. He said it himself. He doesn't want to feel like he has to face my mistake everyday for the rest of his life. And Rickie, he doesn't have to. Jake of all people doesn't deserve this."*

*"Then I'm going with you Cal."*

*"I have to go alone. I have to."*

Rickie could still hear the sadness in her voice even though she was long gone. Still feel it hitting him, like her words did. Feeling about as distraught as he could, Rickie in debate, stood up from his bed, and as he did, though the window, he saw Jake walking toward the unity circle.

Alone Jake returned from working out. Marching his way back to his bungalow, planning on taking a shower and waking Cal to go get breakfast, if she wasn't already awake. He didn't want to work out alone. He would have preferred to have Cal with him. But she was sleeping and Jake really didn't have a clue on what kind of workout she could do. He had never worked out with a pregnant person.

He turned the knob to his door, calling out to her. "Cal." He could see standing in the open doorway, the bed made. "Cal." He didn't get an answer and Jake felt the emptiness of the room. Scratching his head, and stepping inside, Jake felt an annoying pain in his back. It stumbled him a step or two forward, but it didn't stumble him as much as it surprised him. Spinning around, Jake felt the pain hit his gut, and he went back another step. "Rickie. What the fuck!" Jake blasted. "And I am not in the mood to fool around."

"I'm not fooling around Sarge." Rickie had a 'Rickie' amount of anger to his voice as he raised his fist. "I'm beating you up."

"You're what?"

"Put 'em up Sarge."

"Rickie, what . . ." As Jake saw Rickie swing at him, he stepped back placing his large hand on top of Rickie's head. Stable, he kept Rickie at an arms length. And despite the distance between him and Jake, Rickie tried with diligence to charge at Jake. His feet moved fast, but he gained no ground and his arms swung frantically, hitting nothing but air. "Rickie!" Jake yelled. "What the fuck are you trying to do."

"I told you, Beat you up."

“Why?” Jake asked, still holding Rickie back with ease.

“Because!” Rickie screamed, stopped swinging and so unlike himself, red faced, stepped back with a hostile point. “You’re an asshole!”

“Yes, I know. So why are you beating me up for that now?”

“Because right now, you’re an even bigger asshole than I ever thought you could be.” Rickie was so emotional. “I have lost all respect for you. All. I will never look at you the same way again. Ever! In my book you’re about as low as they come.”

Was this Rickie? Jake had to wonder. Where were the ‘dudes’ the ‘likes’ the snickers. “Rickie.” Jake had to take a second. The vengeance filled words of Rickie went through him with hurt, taking Jake aback. “Rickie.” Jake spoke stunned and so soft. “Can you tell me what I did that has caused you to feel this strongly against me . . . Please.”

Rickie moved back, running his hand through his hair. He had a hard time even looking at Jake. “You’re this big tough guy. Cold, ya’ know. And that ‘s O.K., cause you’ve lived your life alone. It never bothered me when you were mean. Because all that, was always was just the way you had to be. But when it came to the Cal-babe, you Sarge, you ruled. I was like, man, this is what it’s about. The Sarge and Cal-babe. I thought . . .” Rickie closed his eye trying to stay in control, yet his emotions hit him again when he spun and faced Jake. “I thought you loved her. I thought you loved her more than life itself.”

“My God Rickie . . . I do.”

“The how could you do it? Knowing how much she loved Jessie. Knowing what it did to lose her kid. How can you make her give up another.”

So confused Jake looked at Rickie. “What are you talking about.”

“See? You don’t even consider it. The baby Sarge. You don’t want to look at Cal’s so she’s doing it.”

“Doing what?”

“Letting the institute give her an abortion.”

Jake’s eyes widened and he immediately barged to the door. “Oh my God.” He flung it open and spun in the open doorway to face Rickie. “I swear on my life I didn’t tell her to do this. Oh my God.”

“Sarge?” Rickie stepped to him.

“Rickie!” Jake yelled and it seemed to come from his heart. “Get me in there. Get me in there now. I . . .” Jake flew off the porch. “I have to stop her.”

Billy, in his own world was nearly knocked down by Jake in the middle of the Unity circle. “Jake, whoa. What’s wrong.”

So dazed, but determined Jake looked. “I have to stop Cal.”

“Stop Cal? Stop her from doing what. Is she in trouble.”

Jake turned to look at Billy. “She’s aborting the baby.”

Billy was lost. “What baby.”

“Your baby.” Jake spun and started to run. “Billy, if you want to . . .” When

Jake looked back, Billy was passed out on the ground. Shrugging, Jake picked up his speed and hit the path, with Rickie keeping up and not far behind him.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

April 11<sup>th</sup> - 7:50 a.m.

Greg rushed as if a world emergency were occurring. Flying down the corridors of the center all the way to the control room, flinging open the door. "Tell me." He jumped down the steps to the table. "Tell me this isn't true. You heard wrong."

"Haynes." Aldo stood up. "Do something."

Greg's eyes went to the tape that played. A tape of Jake and Rickie. The word 'abortion' rang out. Greg slammed his hand on the table. "Barb, get Stan on the phone. Stop this thing."

"I've been trying." She looked back at Greg. "Busy."

"Son of a bitch." Greg's head twitched in anger. "Stan is fired. He is fired when he gets back. What the hell is he up to." Running his hand over the top of his head, Greg, fist first, leaned on the monitor's counter. "Come on Jake. Come on."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

April 11<sup>th</sup> - 7:55 a.m.

Stan flicked the bubbles from a prepared syringe he held in front of Cal. "This will relax you. It may just put you to sleep. That's O.K., when you wake up. It will be over with."

"You guys know what you're doing right?" Cal asked so nervously laying on the table, a sheet covering her. "I don't mean to question you, but I don't want to die from this."

Stan gave a reassuring smile. "Me,. No. But Ollie does. He knows what he's doing. IT is very sterile, clean and clinical. You'll be safe. I would like to ask you to come back to follow up though. If that's all right."

Cal's hand reached out to stop Stan from giving her the injection. "Why are you doing this. The controllers aren't supposed to even talk to us, let alone help us."

"Honestly?" Stan asked.

"Yes."

"Cal, I watched you guys the whole last experiment. You can say you guys were like buddies of mine. But more so than anything else, you can say I maintain my belief that it is the woman's decision to have a child. Not some experiment's. Relax." Stan grabbed hold of Cal's arm holding the needle close.

"Thank you I . . ."

"Cal!" Jake's screaming voice in the distance was heard. "Cal! Don't you do this!"

Cal blinked several times. "Jake?"

"Rickie hurry with that." Jake bounced back and forth in a ready to charge mode, in front of the gate to the control center. "Cal!" He called out. "Don't you do this!" he cried as loud as he could then he heard the buzz of the security system on the gate.

Rickie pushed the gate open. "This way Sarge."

Jake ran behind, screaming the entire way, hoping through the brick walls, that Cal could hear him.

"Jake." Cal slid wearing a robe from the table, listening to Jake's steady call grow closer.

"Cal! Don't do this. Cal . . ."

She closed her eyes when she heard the storming of his footsteps down the corridor.

"Cal." Jake in his run by the room, skid to a stop, backed up and burst in. Rickie raced in behind him. "Cal."

Cal's eyes shifted to the red faced duo. "Jake, Rickie what . . ."

"Tell me." Jake, breathing heavy, approached her. He looked at Stan. "Tell me it didn't happen."

Stan shook his head. "We hadn't begun."

A loud breath came from Jake and he laid his hand on Cal's shoulder "Get dressed."

"Jake, look, I not going any. . ."

"Get dressed." Jake added more depth to his voice.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm . . ."

"Fuck it." Jake stepped to Cal swept her up into his arms, and spun to the door. "Rickie, grab her clothes." Jake carrying Cal walked out.

"Sarge, I'll be there in a jiff." Smiling, Rickie looked at Stan. "Dude, like, can I have a Pop Tart before I book?"

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

April 11<sup>th</sup> - 8:05 a.m.

Phone in hand, Greg slammed his office door. Though his voice portrayed an angry calm, his face depicted a man ready to explode. "What the hell was going through your mind?"

"I'm sorry." Stan said.

"What? You didn't think I would find out?"

"Actually." Stan explained. "I was going to talk to her to have her make it look like a miscarriage."

It could have been considered a squeal, some would take it as a squeak of disbelief. That little sound that escapes just before the word, did in Greg's case. "What? Fake a miscarriage. W . . . why?"

"I didn't think it was right."

"And who in God's name gave you the authority to determine what is right and what is not right in this experiment?"

"Um, begging your pardon sir. But you. I read my contract." Stan said. "It states that on the Island I can deem any preplanned experiment unnecessary if I see just cause."

"And where is your 'just' cause Stan?"

That moment was the one Stan lost all answers. "Personal conviction?"

"Personal conviction doesn't cut it. This is a legitimate scientific experiment and you nearly blew a portion of it due to personal conviction. You are so lucky Jake did his Jake thing. Lucky." Greg paced as he spoke, running his hand over and over his face in frustration. "Now we'll forget this incident and don't try anything like that again. You hear me."

"I hear you." Stan replied. "But before we hang up, I would like to go on record and say something."

Greg rolled his eyes, tossed his hand in the air and made a face of disbelief to no one in the office. "Go on."

"I would just like to say. Odds are stacked against the participants as it is in every experiment. We didn't need to get her pregnant."

Greg's mouth dropped open in a slight gasp. "We didn't get her pregnant Stan, the fuckin paperboy did.." With a slam, Greg hung up the phone, ran his hand hard across his face, and took a moment to remember what a cool-calm expression was, before he walked back out his office.



I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

April 11<sup>th</sup> - 8:20 a.m.

The door to Cal and Jake's bungalow burst open slightly, startling Rickie and Billy as they stood on the porch. They spun to see Jake, with only his head protruding from the partial openness.

"Both of you. Don't." Jake ordered with such a mean to him. "And listen to me carefully. Don't fuckin' knock on this door. Don't try to come in. Don't even make a fuckin sound that I can possibly hear in here. Until you two see me emerge from this bungalow on my own, fear death if I get disturbed because of anything you do! You got that?"

Somewhat frightened, Billy and Rickie, both standing hands in pockets, nodded. The door slammed.

Rickie bouncing from heel to toe, whistled lightly and shifted his eyes to Billy. "Dude. Like did you ever think, that *one* little part of your anatomy could cause so much trouble?"

^^^

At the foot of the bed Cal stood, biting her bottom lip and jumping when Jake slammed the door.

"Ten hours." Jake walked to her. "Ten fuckin hours Cal I sat in this room yesterday. Thinking. Sitting and . . ."

"Jake . . ."

A held up hand silenced her. Jake tilted his head. Closed his eyes and cleared his throat. "I'll try this again. Ten hours Cal. Ten fuckin hours I sat in this room yesterday. Thinking. Sitting and thinking because you said that's what we needed to do. I did it. Ten hours Cal." His voice raised. "Ten hours while you were out be bopping along with Rickie, pissing in a cup. I sat here." Jake paused. "Ten hours. Now . . ." he held up his hand. "Just so we're clear on what kind of mood I am in right now. How many hours did I sit here . . . thinking?"

"Ten."

"Exactly." Jake walked to the small table and pulled out a chair. "That's a lot of thinking babe. Sit your ass down. This is gonna take a while."

Cal, keeping her eyes on Jake, moved to the chair and sat down.

"Now when a situation . . ." Jake's one eyebrow raised when he watched Cal grab a cigarette. "What the fuck are you doing?" He walked to her snatched the cigarette from her mouth and grabbed the pack. "This is done with." He crushed the pack and tossed it in the trash. "As a matter if fact . . ." Jake marched to the closet.

"Jake."

"Sit down Cal." Jake flung open the closet, walked in and came back out with two boxes of cigarette cartons. "This is done too."

"Jake don't throw out my cigarettes. Jake!" She watched him open the door, hoist the boxes out and shut the door just about the same time Rickie screamed 'ow'.

Jake marched back up to the table. "Where was I? Yes. Now. When a situation occurs and it requires a lot of thought. Guess what I do Cal?"

"You think?"

"Exactly. For how long?"

"Ten hours."

"Fuckin never do I sit and think for ten hours." Jake blasted in a low voice. "But I did on this one. And here I was thinking my heart out. Going through this situation in my mind, believing that you and I would talk about what you and I thought about. And what happens? I'll tell you. You go off on your own. Fuck hearing what I thought about, and you decide to abort this baby."

"Yes, but Jake, don't you believe it is the woman's right to choose?"

"No."

"Just asking." Cal held up her hands.

"Why Cal, why would you even think about doing that?"

"Because it was for the best."

"The best for who? For me? How do you know? Did you bother asking me? Did you bother hearing what I had to say? Did you give me a chance? No."

"Jake." Cal stopped him before he went on anymore. "Just listen to me. O.K.? You of all people don't deserve the hurt. I didn't want you to have to face my mistake everyday of your life. To look at a baby and every time you do so, you get sick or you see what I did wrong . . ."

"Cal."

"What?"

"I'm about to say something to you I have never said before. And I am going to apologize in advance for getting out of line. O.K.?"

"O.K." Cal nodded.

"Fuck you." Jake told her. "Give me more credit than that. You failed to give me any credit at all. My God Cal, I'm smarter than that. You've really insulted me. Do you actually believe that I would blame a child. An innocent in this whole fucked up situation. That child did nothing wrong. This baby did not ask to be conceived. And I would never look at this baby with blame, contempt, or reminders of things I am putting behind me. You got that?"

"Yes."

"I am your husband!" Jake's face grew red. "I told you I would stand beside you. I would not turn my back on you and I'm not about to now. I know you. I love you. And I would never in a million years ask you to give up something that was a part of you for me. And if you would have just given me ten fuckin seconds of your time last night you would have known this for certain. Let me tell you something Cal. You pissed me off with this little stunt today. Pissed me off. Do you know that?"

"Yes." Cal answered meek.

"Good. And you know what? I'm still pissed off. Ten hours Cal,. Ten hours I . . ."

"Jake, Please do I have to hear that again?"

"Yes! Yes you do. Because you need to know that during those ten hours my thoughts went from 'my God my wife is pregnant to another man' to 'I'll bet I have no trouble getting this kid into West Point.'. That is where my thoughts went. But you never gave me the chance to tell you that."

Cal stood up slowly. "Jake. I don't expect you to accept this baby. I don't. So please don't force yourself into doing that. O.K.? I didn't want the abortion. I didn't and I'm glad I didn't have it. But I can talk to Billy. After the baby is born I can give him custody of . . ."

"Cal!" Jake blasted.

"What." Cal said with a jolt.

"Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"No." Jake shook his head dramatically. "If I don't want the abortion, why would I want you to give this baby up to Billy."

"Because it's best for our marriage."

"Cal." Jake faced her with a near stomp. "Think back. O.K.? Christmas. We made a decision that we felt would be the best thing for our relationship, For our marriage. What was that?"

"We decided to have a baby."

"Exactly." Jake placed his hand on his hips. "Well it may not have happened like we planned. But guess what Cal? We're having that baby."

Cal's head lowered and her hands grabbed onto Jake's. "I'm sorry it happened this way Jake. I am sorry."

"Don't be." Jake ran his hand down her face. "Cal, come on. You have got to understand, the circumstance in which this child was conceived do not please me in the least. Not at all. But, sometimes in the darkness of our mistakes, a little light shall fall." Jake winked softly at her. "I wanted to have a family with you Cal. We're gonna start that family. We have the chance. Just . . . just when it's time to have the second one, can we keep Billy out of it?"

Cal knew Jake really didn't expect an answer to that final question. Or at least she didn't think he did. Even if he wanted one, Cal couldn't give it. All she could do at that second was wrap her arms around Jake, bury herself close to him, and just hold on.

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With a soft, silent exhale, Cal stepped onto the porch. And Jake poked his head out. "Next." He pointed to Billy, wiggled his finger for Billy to come in, then opened the door wide. Billy glanced at Cal in fear as he walked inside the

bungalow. After the door had shut, Cal peered to Rickie then to the spilled box containing her cigarettes. "O.K. Jake's busy. Help me get these put somewhere."

Billy sat at the table watching Jake, silent, turn a chair around and straddle it sitting backwards as he faced Billy.

In that silence, Billy softly spoke up. "Jake. Let me say something. O.K.?"

Jake nodded. "Go ahead."

"I want you to know I plan on doing what I have to do. O.K.? I will take full financial responsibility for this baby. I will help with this baby. I'll take the baby if that's what you want. I'm not going to walk away. I'll be responsible."

"I . . ." Jake took a second to stare down at his own hand. "I don't want you to Bill."

"Jake?"

"I'm not asking you to put out one cent for this baby, or a second of your time. I hate how this baby came about. Hate it. But I don't hate the baby. Let's face it, you aren't exactly the fifty-thousand dollar sperm donor we were looking into getting, but you gave us the end result we wanted. I want . . . I want this baby to be raised by Cal and me. I want this baby to be a Graison. And I want this baby to call me Dad."

Billy leaned back slowly in his chair. "Can I be honest with you."

"Please."

"Jake I spent my life without a father. My entire perspective of the man that created me was one of a lunatic. I guess I silently vowed to do right by my own child if I ever had that chance. Now I know I wronged you. I know I stepped over boundaries and I m lucky to be alive. But Jake, I don't think I can walk away from this baby."

"You know Billy. I realize sometimes I can be a dick. But I wish to God you and Cal would give me more credit. I'm not asking you to walk away from this baby. I wouldn't do that. I'm not even telling you that this baby being a Graison, and this baby calling me Dad is the way it will be. I'm hoping, hoping that you will understand that Cal and I are married. And *let* it be that way."

"So you're saying you aren't ordering me to walk away, you want me to quietly do it on my own."

Jake's head went to the left then the right. He looked up and down and under the table then tugged on his ear. "Where did you hear that from because you certainly did not hear that cross my lips, now did you."

"No." Billy answered with a snicker.

"No." Jake folded his hands. "Now I will be insulted if you think I need your help to financially provide for this baby. I may hit you up come college years because I plan on getting this kid into West point."

"West Point?" Billy asked in shocked. "Jake the kid isn't even born yet."

"You have to plan ahead. Anyway . . . You can be a part of this kid's life

Bill. It would be wrong of me to shut you out. You can see the baby when you come in on those surprise weekend visits that you pull. You can see him when you want. You can even take him for visits with you, I don't care. Be close to him. But all I ask is that we wait until he is old enough to understand before we tell him the truth about his parentage."

"I can see the baby and be close to it? Develop some sort of Godfather type relationship."

"Yes."

"I appreciate this Jake. I do. And I can respect what you want."

"Thank you." Jake nodded. "But you do know we can sit here and hypothesize all we want., Fact still remains there's probably a ninety percent chance you'll die anyhow on the island."

"Thanks." Billy's eyes widened. "You're killing me aren't you?"

"No." Jake shook his head with a smile then turned serious. "At least I don't think."

"That's not funny."

Jake smiled.

^^^

"Next." Jake pointed to Rickie as Billy stepped outside. "You two go take a walk or something. You don't need to hear what will emerge from this room."

"Sarge." Rickie hesitated.

"In!" Jake pointed back with his thumb and saw Rickie didn't move. "Now!"

Like a little kid, Rickie inched his way in, looking back at Cal the whole time and letting out a peeping 'help' as he walked in the bungalow.

With memory remnants of his school day childhood along with the past three years racing through his mind, Rickie held up his hand stopping Jake just as he saw Jake's mouth open. "Sarge, just so like I'm mentally prepared for this. Are you gonna blast me like the time I wrecked your jeep?"

"Rickie . . ."

"Or like the time I blew up the microwave?"

"Rickie . . ."

"Oh wait. No. Don't like tell me you are gonna kill me like the time I got fired from McDonald's for doing the manager's wife."

"Rickie!" Jake crushed him vocally. "Silence."

"O.K., O.K., just getting ready. Go on. Give it to me." Rickie slowly sat down and took a breath.

"Five foot six! That is your height. I am six foot five. Yet you blast in my room, you try to tackle me, and you challenge me to a fight! You took a swing, no several at me. Then! Then you proceed . . ." Jake stormed to him. "Then you proceed to verbally rip out my heart! What the fuck where you thinking?"

"Sarge . . ."

"I'll tell you what you were thinking." Jake stood straight and instantly calm. "You were thinking about Cal. And I love you for that . . . thank you."

"Whoa." Rickie said heavy and deep. "Sarge, like. I am touched. Oh Sarge." Happily Rickie sprang from his seat wrapping his arms around Jake's waist and hugging him. "I knew you liked me Dude, but now I know . . ."

"Rickie." Jake grunted.

"Now I know you love me. Wait until I tell everyone."

"Rickie. Yeah." Jake pulled off Rickie's arms and rubbed his head like a dog.

"But . . ." Rickie held up his finger. "You got to admit. You were a little frightened of the Rickie-meister, weren't you." Rickie didn't give Jake a chance to say anything. "Coming at ya full force."

"Rickie . . ."

"Afraid that perhaps I may have to unleash the dreaded and feared Rickie monster on ya." Rickie tilted his head with a drastic curious look. "Huh."

With a closed mouth, Jake bobbed his head, then snickered slightly and growled.

^^^

"I'm glad you and Jake talked." Cal said to Billy as they walked slowly through the woods.

"Yeah, me too. I was really happy we could work it out. I have to tell you Cal, I was a bit, well, scared."

"So was I. He's handling it so well. I'm so proud of Jake."

"You know what?" Billy stopped walking. "Me too. And we'll do this thing, the three of us right. Whatever is best for the baby."

"I know."

"And speaking of the baby." Billy pointed to the cigarette in Cal's hand. "Smoking."

"I'll quit. It'll take time."

"What about Jake? He's gonna smell it on you."

Cal waved him off. "I'll just blame it on you."

"Thanks." Billy saw Cal starting to walk again. He reached out and grabbed her arm. "Cal, listen. I am really glad you and I can be like this again. And I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but I just want you to know, that if you ever just need me, know I'm always a heartbeat away. Because I love you."

Cal smiled softly at him stepping to him and putting her arms around him. "Thank you for that." She whispered then kissed him on the cheek. "And we really should be getting back to . . ." Cal spun when she heard the crunching of fast moving footsteps. "Do you hear that?"

"Yeah, I wonder what . . . watch out." Billy snatching up Cal, stepped back

pulling her out of the way from a fast running Lou.

"Cal!" Lou called out as he ran. "At this moment I would really appreciate you getting Jake!" Lou's voice faded as he kept on running.

Cal looked oddly at Billy. "Bore?" Her curiosity was settled before Billy could answer. Billy pulled her out of the way again when through the trees came Paul. On the same route and in a determined pursuit of Lou. Straight ahead fast Paul ran, eyes peered in a hunter mode. War paint and all. Tomahawk raised high, loin cloth flapping in his stride.

Billy let out a breath with wide eyes. "O.K."

Cal watched the two running figures disappear into the depths of the trees in a totally different direction then camp. "Oh brother." She turned back to Billy. "All right. Now what were we talking about?"

"Heading back."

"That's right." Cal smiled and side by side with Billy headed back toward the bungalows.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The island
April 28th - 5:55 a.m.

With his arms crossed, Jake leaned on the wall just outside the bathroom door. "Cal." He reached backwards giving a single knock. "Can we try to hurry up this throwing up thing please."

Cal glared her eyes at the closed door, she shot the middle finger then went to the sink.

Jake listened to the sound of the running water. "Now see Cal, you've been experiencing this sick thing for close to a week now. I would think you would be getting used to it. Buck up."

After brushing her teeth Cal, again, looked at the door. "Buck up? Did you just say . . ." She opened the door. "Buck up?"

Jake looked over his shoulder with a grin, lifting his hand and giving Cal a cracker.

Cal snatched it from his hand and bit it. "I hate you."

"Cal please."

"Something is not right Jake." Cal opened the door. "I am so sick this time. Really sick."

"Cal." Jake stopped her before she walked out. "When you were pregnant with Jessie." He spoke pacifyingly to her. "You were a young girl. You're body is just not going to handle it as well when you're old so . . .uh!" Jake grunted and all the air escaped him when he took a surprising shot to the gut by Cal who stormed off afterwards. Jake twitched his head. "Not bad." He pulled the door closed and followed.

^^^

Ollie and three other controllers stood by the metal Wes Craven door at the end of the corridor. Ollie extended his hand to Stan for him to pick last from the straws that protruded from his tightly closed fist.

Sweating, Stan drew and closed his eyes tightly when the straw was only an inch long. "Wish me luck."

Ollie with a smile gave Stan a pat to the arm. "Our thoughts are with you."

"Gee thanks." Stan reached for the door. "Perhaps right now our thoughts should be with Cliff." Taking a deep breath and turning on his flashlight, Stan emerged through the metal door and closed it. He couldn't hear anything on the dark side he stood on. Not a peep, dead quiet. And that frightened Stan more.

With his flashlight shining out, Stan began to slowly take the steps. "Cliff." He whispered out walking down a couple more steps. "Cliff, is everything all . . ." Stan's foot hit something oval on the wooden step and with a thump-crash-bang,

he fell forward and tumbled all the way down to the bottom. The flashlight flew from his hand and went out, but Stan could still see it. Feeling an ache in his knee and wanting to get the hell up and out, he reached for the flashlight, allowing his fingers to turn it back on.

Extending his hand further to grab hold of the flashlight he saw what the sideways beam of light hit. An eye. In horror Stan gripped the flashlight and despite how bad his leg was hurt, he jumped up. It was then he noticed how damp his clothes felt. Running his hand down the front of his shirt he felt the oozing slimy feel and he looked down to his hand to see it covered in semi-clotted blood. He spun around shining the light on the floor, seeing the pool of blood that he stood center of. And it wasn't Stan's blood. It belonged to the missing controller, Cliff. And Stan knew it was Cliff because pieces of Cliff's torn apart body were scattered about in no particular order on the floor.

Knowing that the combination of blood, body parts and a dark basement were not good, Stan raced to the steps. It was as he ran up them that he saw what he had tripped on in the first place. Cliff's head. And with one more silent scream so as not to alert what was in that basement, Stan flew up the steps, and banged on that door until it opened.

^^^

Upon entering the dining area with Jake, Cal slowed down. She looked at Judge sitting at a table all by himself. Head slumped, picking at his Cheerio's. "Jake, he's getting worse."

Jake looked over. "Well, he probably misses his family right now. Billy's been doing that too. Judge will get over it or he'll break."

"Can you be anymore callous."

"Probably. Now go sit with Billy and Rickie, I'll get you some food."

"I'm not hungry, I'll just have coffee." Cal said as she walked to the table.

Jake merely laughed. "Right." He walked to the food line. Where Lou, the self proclaimed chef of the Island, stood. "Did you do it?" Jake asked him.

"Yep." Lou reached behind him for a plate that was covered,. "No salt. No seasoning. Plain scrambled eggs."

"Thanks, I . . ." Jake turned his head to the banging of the dining room door as it flung open. "Christ not again." He rolled his eyes as Paul raced in, wearing his loin cloth, hit center room and leaped on a table. "Lou."

"Yeah."

"Duck."

Lou and Jake both did and just as they began to dive down, a high whistle sound brought the zooming arrow that landed in the wall directly behind the height of where Lou's head would of been.

Jake stood up, set down the plate, reached out and pulled the arrow from the wall. He marched to Paul. "What the fuck did I tell you about shooting these

things in here.”

“Sorry.” Paul took it back.

“You want to hunt him. Hunt him outdoors where I am not. Got that?”

“Yes.” Paul nodded.

Jake walked back over, grabbed the plate, got one for himself and took it over to the table where Cal sat with Billy and Rickie. “Fuckin lunatic people.” He set the plate down in front of Cal. “Eat.”

“I’m not hungry thanks.” Cal pushed the plate ahead of her.

“Eat.” Jake pushed the plate back. “Don’t make me feed you again.”

“Sarge.” Rickie called him.

“What?”

“If like the Cal-babe doesn’t want to consume food. You shouldn’t like, make her. She’ll just puke it back up.”

“She’s pregnant. She needs to eat.” Jake saw the plate inching from Cal, he pushed it back.

“But like . . .” Rickie held up his finger. “If her body is rejecting it. That should tell you something.”

“She’s a pregnant woman Rickie.” Jake snapped. “They do that sort of thing. Besides, what do you know.”

“What do *you* know.” Rickie came back.

Billy held up his hand. “Excuse me. But I know.”

Jake spun his views to him. “And how do you know?”

“I know.” Billy nodded. “I have three sisters. So I know.”

“You think?” Jake asked.

“I know.” Billy nodded.

“Sarge. He knows.” Rickie pointed. “He has like three sisters.”

“He does not know.” Jake argued.

“Sarge, he knows.”

“I know.” Billy said with certainty.

“See.” Rickie said. “Billy, you know, so you answer the question. Should Cal-babe eat if she’s not hungry?”

“Yes.” Billy answered.

Jake impressed, held his hand indicating to Billy. “He knows.”

Rickie fluttered his lips. “He’s just afraid of you Sarge. He does not know.”

“Hey.” Billy spoke with resentment. “I know.”

Cal’s hand slammed on the table. “What do any of you know!” she yelled. “And Jake I am not . . .” The open shape her mouth made in her yelling was an open invitation for Jake. He shoved a mouthful of eggs in her mouth.

“Eat.” Jake returned to his breakfast.

Cal grunted, spitting her eggs from her mouth like a two year old.

“Oh nice, very nice. Look at you.” Jake grabbed a napkin wiping her mouth.

“Jake!” Cal yelled at him. “I am not a child and I am not hungry. God, I hate you some . . .” Cal’s head tilted, her demeanor changed and her eyes shifted

elsewhere. "And does he look hot in a loin cloth or what?"

"Cal." Jake scolded. "Keep your eyes on your food."

"I can't help it." Cal looked at Paul. "I saw him running around like that, but I swear I never noticed . . ."

"Cal." Jake warned.

"His body." Cal continued. "I wonder if his rear is as firm as it looks peeking out the flaps like it does."

Jake tossed his hand in the air. "I'm clueless on that one Cal. Why don't you just go and ask him." Shaking his head he saw Cal standing up. "Cal!"

Rickie watched Jake's expression. Wide eyes, his views on Cal as he grunted. Rickie snickered. "Sarge, like guy, you can't get mad. You told her to do it."

Billy agreed. "You did Jake. And she does everything you tell her."

Jake still grumbling, Shifted in his seat and started on his breakfast. He looked up when Cal returned. "And?"

"Firm."

"I needed to know that." Jake lifted his fork to his mouth, rolled his eyes and grunted when Cal sat down with a loud 'whew', a big smile, and a new found appetite for that food she fought Jake about eating.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
April 28th - 12:00 p.m.

Greg rubbed his eyes holding the phone away from his mouth so Stan didn't hear his yawn. After his tiredness, not boredom was done showing its signs, Greg brought the phone back down. "Use the gas Stan. Yeah, that should throw you a remission and hold it off until we hit that mark. Yep, let me know." Greg hung up the phone and looked to Dr. Jefferson who sat across from him.

"Not even two months into the experiment and three lives gone?" Dr. Jefferson shook his head. "Will there be anyone left for that last crucial month."

"Oh yeah." Greg smiled. "It's my hopes that we don't lose a life for at least another month. It'll keep the investors happy."

"I agree. But if you don't want to lose another life. What are you going to do about Paul exorcizing Lou?"

"He's fine." Greg nodded. "We'll go ahead and stop the hallucination about demonic Lou."

"That won't stop him now. You do realize he is too far gone."

"Yep. But I don't think he'll actually get Lou."

"Lou is impressively holding up to that second ranking of his."

"I'll say." Greg commented. "He's becoming quite averse in avoiding the antics if Paul. But enough about him . . ." Greg turned a sheet of paper over. "We're going to go ahead and use the gas up at the control center. It's the only way right now."

"I thought that was a last resort."

"We need it though."

"What about Judge?" Dr. Jefferson asked.

"Move ahead with that. Partially."

"Not fully?"

"Not yet." Greg shook his head. "We're about as full as I will allow. A day or too we'll unleash."

"Good. It's been pretty drab since the Cal and Jake thing has been resolved. Anymore with that right now?"

"Not for now. It's time to move on to bigger and better things." Greg said. "I would look for that other issue to arise in about six weeks."

"About the same time as the remission ends?" Dr. Jefferson raised one eyebrow.

"Precisely."

"How clever."

"Hey." Greg rocked in his chair. "That's me."

"Before or after?"

"After. I think during . . ." Greg winked. "I think that during it, will ring a bell. But after . . . we hit the Cal and Jake gong."

"How are you going to do it?" Dr. Jefferson inquired.

"I'm thinking Jake will do it on his own. But if not, that's why we pay controllers."

"Thus starting a secondary Jake mental endurance phase."

"Thus starting one, yes." Greg nodded. "The affair, the baby, this next thing, and if that doesn't work, we can pull Cal for the hell of it." Greg winked and smiled. "Trust me, we'll break that big son of a bitch yet."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

April 28th - 1:15 p.m.

Billy bit his nails as he watched Cal pacing slowly reading from the few sheets of paper that emerged from that portable printer he brought. Cal's eyes stayed fixed as she read, not watching where she was going. Causing Jake to grumble in irritation when he had to move out of her way as he worked on a Stasis dummy on the floor.

"So." Billy, hands in pockets walked up behind her. "What do you think."

"I'm not done reading yet."

"So far?"

"I'm not done reading yet."

"Yeah, but you've read enough to gather up an opinion."

"Billy." Cal continued to read. "I'm not one reading yet."

"But . . ."

"Bill!" Jake yelled. "She's not done fuckin reading yet. Christ." He stood up. "And why aren't you done reading yet? You've had those three sheets for how long Cal. You aren't grading them, you're reading them."

Cal lowered the paper. "If you two don't mind. I am taking it all in."

Billy stepped to Cal. "These three pages of the chapter are very important. They deal with us."

"Give me those." Jake snatched the papers from her hand. "Why are you writing about the affair Billy."

"It's not about the . . . uh incident Jake." Billy corrected. "It's about the mind games and drugs and such."

Jake handed the paper back to Cal. "Here. And finish reading so you can give the man an opinion."

"Cal?" Billy asked. "I know you have one."

"Well, this is a rough draft right?" Cal asked.

"What's wrong." Billy panicked. "You hate it."

"I don't hate it."

"Yes you do. You hate it. Tell me I can take it."

"First of all, your writing . . ."

"Wait." Billy held up his hand. "I hope you aren't going to criticize the writing style."

"No and why would you get defensive about that?" Cal asked surprised.

"It's just that coming from the woman who wrote 'Surviving the Stasis' I just don't think . . ."

"Whoa!" Cal folded her arms. "What is wrong with the way I wrote that manuscript for you. I'm a teacher."

"Exactly."

"Explain." Cal raised one eyebrow

"Well, it's just that it reads . . ." Billy thought for a moment. "It's just that

your writing reads . . .”

Jake interjected. “Like stereo instructions.”

“Thank you Jake.” Billy smiled.

Cal gasped. “I can not believe you both just insulted my writing like that and Billy, this . . . this . . . this . . . sucks.” She shoved it to him.

“It does not.” Billy argued. “You’re just saying that because I was blunt.”

“I’m being blunt.” Cal said. “Can’t you take it.”

“I can take it when you’re being blunt. But I think you’re being spiteful.”

Cal’s mouth opened. “I am never spiteful. Tell him Jake.”

“No.” Billy shook his head. “*You tell her* Jake. She’s being spiteful.”

“You’re just being immature because you can not take constructive criticism.”

Billy laughed in ridicule. “You are not handing out constructive criticism Cal. I merely asked you to read it and give me your opinion.”

“Which I did.”

“You did not Cal. You ripped it apart.”

“Ripped it apart?” Cal asked with laughter. “No ripping it apart would be . . .”

“Don’t.” Billy stepped back, lightly smacking her hand that reached for the paper. “I won’t ask you to read my stuff anymore.”

“I don’t want to read your stuff if you’re going to be a child about it.”

“A child. I am not being a child. Am I being a child Jake.” Billy asked Jake who diligently tried to stay busy.

“Jake tell him he’s being a child.”

Jake shifted his eyes to the both of them. “I can’t fuckin take it.”

“Sarge!” Rickie burst in the room.

“Saved.” Jake pointed to Rickie. “My favorite person. Tell me you need me.”

Rickie smiled. “I do guy, like we have a problem. Reed-ster and I. He needs you.”

“I’m there.” Jake said. “Lead the way Rickie.” And with that Jake followed Rickie out.

Cal looked odd at the door when Jake left. “Did he just walk out.”

“Appears so.” Billy said. “And you hurt my feeling Cal. Hating my work . . .” Billy straightened the wrinkled papers. “Wanting to rip it up.”

“I did not hate your work Billy. I was going to tell you that your writing has really improved. And what do you do?”

“Jump down your throat.” Billy lowered his head with a slight smile. “Sorry for doing that and fighting with you.”

“Sorry for saying it sucked.”

“So you didn’t think it did?” Billy questioned.

“Sucked? No. I loved it. Print me up some more.”

“O.K.” Billy grinned racing to his set up laptop and printer.

"You do that. I'm in the mood for radishes, so I'm heading over to Judges garden to steal some. Be right back."

"O.K." Billy spoke as he prepared to print the pages. He paused when he heard the door close. He looked at the shut door in wonder. "Radishes?"

^^^

"All right, Rickie." Jake followed Rickie into Reed's room. "What's the problem."

"Sarge I think it's bad." Rickie scratched his head. "Well for us."

"What?" Jake asked.

"Flute." Rickie said. "Tell the Sarge."

Nervously, Reed stepped close. "Ice."

"You want ice?" Jake asked. "You called me over for . . ."

Reed shook his head. "Uh ink uh ought ice. Ice. Ed Ice."

Still Jake was confused. "Rickie, what the fuck?"

"Sarge, this is a problem of the most severity for some of us. Tell him again, Flute."

"Ice. Ice." Reed reiterated. "Uh ought Ice. Ed Ice."

Jake tossed his hands up.

"Sarge." Rickie finally decided to interpret. "Reed here thinks he has head lice. What do we do guy. I'm itching and I think he does have them."

Jake's mouth closed tightly. He looked at Rickie and to the bald headed Reed. Then Jake, without saying anything walked out.

^^^

Cal could hear him in her mind. Judge. Hear him complaining again about what ever 'critter' was eating at his garden. Cal could have confessed that not only did she steal his radishes twice the past week, but two cucumbers and a pepper as well but she didn't.

Slipping between Judge's and Lou's bungalow, Cal moved toward the back where the garden was. It was as she moved up the tiny grade that she heard Judge.

Soft, sad and whimpering. "No. No. Not again. No please. Go away."

Feeling really bad and feeling like she was aiding and abetting Caldwell, Cal drew up her nerve, figuring she would confess seeing how Judge discovered her picking at his hard work. When she found him she raced to him. Laying on his side, partially curl up, Judge grabbed to the ground with his fist.

"Judge." Cal hurried, bending down to him. "It's all right. I'm sorry."

"No." He nearly sobbed. "No." His shoulders and head bobbed as his fingers dug at the dirt.

"O.K." Cal laid her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. But had I known you

would have gotten this way over a few . . .”

“Cal.” Judge looked up to her speaking in a whispering confused manner. “Dear Jesus Cal.” Judge paused to close his eyes, shaking his head then sadly looking back at her. “They’re here.” His voice dropped even softer as he spoke with fear. “They’re here.”

^^^

“Seven men. Twelve children and twenty-two women.” Judge sat at the table in Jake and Cal’s bungalow. His hands nervously played with a cup of coffee. “That is the four-state total of lives they took. The men . . . that they killed. Four were police officers that pulled them over. Three were happen-uponers.” Judge paused when Cal refreshed his coffee.

After Cal poured some more in her own cup, she replaced the pot. Just as she went to grab her mug, Jake took it. “Jake.”

“Cal.” He carried the mug away. “Too much caffeine is not good for the baby.” He saw her reach. “No.” He shook his head. “Go on Judge.”

Judge smiled slightly at Cal’s tsk of displeasure at Jake and then he continued on. “They were caught in my jurisdiction after a twelve month killing spree. Caught in the act of tearing a three year old child limb from limb. The child was asleep upstairs,. Napping. These four men had been in the house doing their thing when they child awoke. The child’s scream alerted a neighbor who called for help. The neighbor had rushed over and he too was found dead at the scene.” Judge swayed his head. “They got their money to travel from what they stole. They would ride through neighborhoods. Probably like the type you live in.” He told Cal and Jake. “Watch. Watch for a woman who perhaps got her kids off to school in the morning and then went back in the house. Housewives is what they hit. Every single one of them. Early morning hits. All killings done before ten in the morning. And then they’d slip from the neighborhood and out of town. Never seen. Until the day they were caught. Cold. Callous. Heartless. Sick bastards. Abominations of life. These four men. They . . . they have no soul. I am convinced they have no soul. To let you know what they are. And I apologize if I offend you Cal.”

Cal swayed her head. “I don’t get offended. Please go on.”

“No soul.” Judges voice dropped. He peered to Cal, then to Jake and Billy who stood there also. “They would go into the house, just barge in. Bound the woman. Beat her. Sodomize her. Kill her through mutilations, And then they would . . . they would ejaculate over her remains.” He took a deep breath. “And when they appeared before my court, the blood of the innocents still fresh on their hands, they showed not one bit of remorse. Not one. And when found guilty. I sentenced them to death. All four of them to death.”

There was silence, and then Jake spoke up first. “And these four men are who you saw.”

"Yes." Judge nodded sadly. "I thought, I thought it was my imagination at first. I thought it. But they got closer to day. Closer then they ever did." Judge grabbed Cal's hand speaking with desperation. "And they're here. They're here."

Cal calmly looked at Judge. "Holograms."

"What?" Judge was baffled.

"Holograms." Cal explained. "They did it to me last experiment. The sight. The sounds. So real. They have the technology to create a vision so real you believe it is real. Holograms Judge. Trust me. The next time they appear. You stand up tall. Tell yourself it isn't real and reach out. Your hand will go right through what you see. Holograms."

"But . . . But I saw them. I really saw them."

"And I saw my daughter that was killed. She burned before my eyes last experiment. But it wasn't real. And neither are these four men. They are sentenced to die. They are locked away in an institution somewhere."

The one word. Institution. Rang not only through Billy's ears but Billy's heart as well. Sudden fear caused a slight tremble in his body. And with a cracking voice he looked to Jake. "Jake." He called him. Then motioned his head to Jake, walking around to the center room.

Jake followed, moving from the conversation that entailed between Judge and Cal. "What's up?" He whispered to Billy.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know." Jake looked over to the table.

"Jake, you and I both know an institution isn't going to stop Caldwell. They got my father out, didn't they?"

"You have a point. We'll maybe pull a search tomorrow."

"Good. Because Jake, If these guys are on this island, you heard what Judge says they do." Billy stepped closer to Jake. "And I'm scared. Not for me. Not for Judge and not for any one else. But . . ."

With real concern, Jake looked over to his wife. "For Cal."

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

April 28th - 8:45 p.m.

In the control room, Greg sat in one chair, Dr Jefferson in the other. Swirling a little back and forth, Greg stared at the blinking mute light on the speaker phone. He raised his eyes to Dr. Jefferson. "It has to be done."

Dr. Jefferson reached out his hand to stop Greg. "It is too early."

"It could be too late." Greg corrected. "Any later, any longer we wait with these four men, is another step closer we take to losing control over them. They already are out of control. At this point in the process . . ."

"Which you stopped. Correct?"

"Which we stopped. But come on, Dr Jefferson, Does it matter?"

"Probably not."

"O.K., well, then here's the situation." Greg folded his hands. "In order of importance, our control center staff and Rickie come first. Followed by Cal, followed by the rest of the participants. They are becoming a threat to our controllers. They must be released."

"Do these four men know, 'terrorize only'."

"Yes." Greg nodded "They know if they want freedom on the island they can not harm a soul. They also are aware of the tracking they have implanted in them. They know we can locate them and kill them."

"O.K., but . . . do they care?" Dr. Jefferson watched Greg in hesitation, stare long and hard at the speaker phone before finally picking it back up.

I-S.E. - The Island
April 28th - 10:40 p.m.

"Night boys." Judge limped slowly past Reed, Rickie and Lou who sat on Reed's porch all scratching their heads. Slowly and tired, Judge moved back to his bungalow. Feeling much better having spent the evening with people. And feeling much better having been reassured that what he witnessed, felt and saw, were only part of the experiment sent his way to break him.

Preparing to just hit the sack and forgo any reading, Judge stepped into his bungalow, shut the door and turned the latch. The second he turned around, the light that he left on went out. Four flashlights then lit.

One. It shined upward under the face of a smiling Luther. The biggest of the men, black and strong, he stepped from the bathroom.

Two. From the closet stepped Axe.

Three. From behind the door, with only his face lit was Wilson.

Four. Stepping to him from the corner of the room was Rapper.

"Hello Judge." Luther moved closer. "We been waiting foe you."

"No." Judge took a deep breath. "No. You are not real. You are not real."

The four men started to laugh. They closed in on Judge,

"Not real. Not real." Judge's hand reached out, trembling, "Not real . . ." He took a step to Luther. "Not . . ." His hand touched out to the figure and touched upon . . . flesh.

^^^

"Cal!" Jake blasted her with irritation. "Quit scratching your head."

"I can't help it." Cal scratched. "I just feel it moving from one side to the other. I feel it Jake."

"You feel nothing." Jake took a drink of his beer as he sat at the table with Billy and Cal. "Go ahead Bill. Now how long did your one sister have morning sickness?"

"My oldest sister was sick . . ." Billy scratched his head. "For about the first . . ." Another scratch. "Three . . ."

"Bill! Quit scratching."

"I can't help it." Billy scratched so frantically his hair moved.

"God, Jake." Cal spoke and shuddered. "I know I have them. Check me." She stood up bending toward him.

"Cal. Sit down. You don't have lice." Jake said strongly.

"I know I do." Cal scratched. "I got them from Reed."

"You did not get them . . . Bill!" Jake slammed his hand. "Quit scratching."

"Jake." Billy even scratched his eyebrows. "Can you check my . . ."

"No." Jake looked at him then Cal. "No. No. No. Do you two even understand the how ludicrous you sound. You can not catch lice from a fuckin

bald man. He has no lice because he has no hair! Now if you two don't stop fuckin driving me nuts with the scratching. I'm gonna hold both of you down, shave your hair and douse your heads with gasoline. Then! Then! You will see if you had them at all you certainly won't when I am done. Under . . ." Jake's words were cut short by Judges screaming,. It came from the unity circle. "As I was saying." Jake continued. "Wait. Where are you two . . ." Annoyed Jake stood up when Cal and Billy ran out the door. "Fuckin people in this place."

Judge seemed to ignore everyone that approached him and he just moved straight to Jake. "They're here."

"What are you talking about."

Judge peered up to Jake. "I reached out. I touched them. They aren't no hologram Jake. They are on this Island. And they ran back into them woods."

Jake's head sprang up and with seriousness he peered to the woods where Judge pointed.

"Lou, You loaded up?" Jake moved with authority across the unity circle. Two shot guns in hand. Cal to his right, Lou to his left.

Lou checked his chamber. "Yep and I have more."

"Good." Jake said. "Listen up!" He waved his hand in. "Lou, you take the area behind and down to the beach. Tonto." Jake looked at a bow and arrow armed Paul. "You hit the path area." Jake handed a shot gun to Billy who had caught up to him. "Bill, you and Rickie guard our camp and our things. Cal and I will take the area behind the bungalows and scour in toward the other buildings. Cal you ready?"

"Yep." Cal gripped her own shot gun.

Jake walked backwards with Cal, still barking out orders. "If anyone runs into trouble, get help. Otherwise if you have a clear shot. Take it." He took hold of Cal's arm and turned forward.

"Jake." Billy called out stopping him. "Wait."

"What?" Jake stopped. "I have to get going. If they're around, they're still close."

"I know." Billy said nervously. "But do you have to take Cal. Out there? With them? Jake, come on. She's pregnant."

Cal's mouth opened in shock. "Billy, first off, let me just . . ." Her words went muffled when Jake's hand covered her mouth.

Jake looked down to Billy and removed his hand from Cal. "You don't want her to go? O.K. Fine."

"Jake!" Cal gasped. "How can . . ."

Jake's hand shot over her mouth again. "She can stay here. Or she can go with me. Your call Billy. Where is she safer. With you or me?"

Billy stepped back. "Good luck."

Cal smiled and with excitement that matched Jake's, she moved quickly,

flashlights and weapons in hand to the woods.

^ ^ ^ ^

Jake and Cal were the last to return to the camp just after sunup. Tried, and moving slower they hit the unity circle were nearly everyone, with matching exhaustion, waited around the unlit campfire circle.

Lou stood up. "I turned up nothing. I couldn't see a thing."

"Us either." Jake said and his eyes moved to the blood stain and bandage on Lou's leg. "What happened."

Lou pointed to Paul. "Coming back he hit me with an arrow."

Paul held up his hand. "I was the first to return. I thought he was perhaps one of them."

"Yeah right." Lou snapped. "Keep it up and I'm gonna pull a role reversal and chase your skinny ass down. Trust me I'll take great pleasure in scalping you."

Jake huffed. That's all he had to do. It brought immediate tension and silence. "We can search again later. Right now, we need rest." He took hold of Cal's arm. "Especially my wife."

Billy stepped into the conversation. "But what do we do Jake. What if they return?"

"I was thinking about setting some traps. Post a guard. I don't know. Bill, this may all be for nothing. They may not be here."

"Then again. They may." Billy widened his eyes. "While we sleep. What do we do. Do one of us stay on guard."

"Yes." Jake looked around the group. "Whoever got the most rest will take it."

Billy tossed his hands up. "I don't know who that would be. We all waited up for you guys."

"All?" Jake shook his head. "I don't think."

With a 'Boom' the door to the bungalow burst open and Jake nearly tripped in his barging stride in. Shaking the black tee shirt caught on his boot, Jake, disgusted, looked around and marched right up to Rickie's bed, where, like a baby, he was curled up and sound asleep. "Rickie!" Jake screamed his name nudging him less-than-gently with the butt of the rifle. "Up!"

"Sarge." Rickie snuggled with his pillow. "Like, I'm dreaming of some hot Hawaiian babe. Later guy." Rickie's eye widened when he heard the pumping of a shotgun chamber.

"Now Rickie." Jake waited for Rickie to sit straight up. "You're on guard duty." He tossed the shotgun to Rickie. "Get up. Get dressed and get out there." Jake marched to the door, stopped and turned around. "Now!"

“O.K., O.K..” Rickie slowly swung his legs over the bed. “But like if I see them, what do I do?”

Jake paused before stepping outside. “You can call for help. You can shoot them or . . . just go a little Rickie-Monster crazy on them.”

“Cool.” Rickie bobbed his head in pleasure staring at the shotgun. And when he knew Jake was gone, Rickie got out of bed, stopping before his dresser mirror. Then just to amuse himself and start his day off right, Rickie took a minute to do a few ‘Rambo with a morning erection’ poses, before he got dressed and played security guard.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 3rd - 12:33 p.m.

A little bit of the picture from the lit screen and a little bit of Cal reflected off of Billy's glasses as they stood bending some peering at the small monitor, watching a tape.

"Stop." Cal told him. "Back it up." She peered closer. "Stop . . . play."

"What do you see?" Billy leaned close, his face nearly touching next to hers.

"Back it up again." Cal touched the screen. "Right . . . there."

"What?"

"Did you see. There was figure in the woods."

"Where?" Billy backed up the tape.

"There." Cal pointed.

"There's nothing there."

Cal ran her hands through her hair. "I saw movement."

"How can you see anything Cal?" Billy stopped the tape. "I was focusing on the volcano. And why weren't you watching that?" Billy pressed eject.

"What's it gonna do Billy?" Cal asked. "Dance?"

"Erupt."

"Yeah right."

"I'm telling you. Why else does Jake want to keep you out of the area. He said the sulphur smell has increased. And Cal . . ." Billy held up his finger, Cal swiped it away. "That is consistent with eruptions. So explain that."

"I can explain Jake. He's being very anal with me. Strict. Regimented. demanding . . ." She noticed Billy just staring at her. "What?"

"When . . . when isn't Jake, strict, regimented, and demanding with you. He's only worse now." Billy began to put the miniature tape away.

"So what are you going to do with all these pictures and tapes you have neatly tucked away in the indestructible Billy box?"

"Fire box. And I'm safe keeping them. My story. And I take no chances. I'm even tossing my disks in here. Especially after hearing about last experiment. This box will leave the island. I may not go with it but . . ."

"Billy." Cal said his name with sadness. "Don't even let me hear you say that. O.K."

"O.K. Besides this is my big break right? A book deal. Weekly segment in Mr. Montgomery's news mag and a special spot on Day and Time. All hooked up."

"Yep. You'll be the big celebrity. No more waiting for you to call me and say, 'Cal, I'm on Thursday. Late news. Don't pay attention to the story I'm doing. It's about a cat . . .'" Cal started to laugh.

"Cal, I called you every single time I was on the air. I know you said you didn't. But did you ever miss one?"

"Are you kidding. No way. I never missed a single story of yours. And just so you know . . . neither did Jake. If he was home, and you were on at three in the morning we got up."

"I really appreciate the support."

"I know you do." Cal told him. "I know that writing and journalism is what you want to do, and you've been doing it. But I also know . . ." Cal winked. "You have this picture of yourself being that big guy, who beaks that big story. The Walter Cronkite of his time."

"Silly huh?" Billy got ready to close the tape case.

"No. Not at all. You'll do it to. This may not be the Clinton Affair, but it certainly is entertaining and investigative. And . . ." Cal stopped him. "Is this Rickie's interview?" Cal pointed to the little tape obviously marked 'Rickie'.

"Yes." Billy answered. "The first one. I probably won't use it because he is really out there."

Cal snickered. "Can I see it?"

"Sure." Billy grabbed the tape. "I have to get set up for Jake. He was bitching as it was about doing an interview. And if I'm not ready. You know Jake."

"He'll bitch some more." Cal watched Billy place in the tape. She then watched him grab the remote pointing it at the player not three inches away. "Why do you do that? Why do you use the remote?"

"I'm a guy." Billy pressed play. The screen was blue and then the screen shot was not one of color but of black and white. And the picture wasn't Rickie it was Billy and Cal in bed. "Oh my God."

"Um . . ." Cal tapped her finger on her lips. "This isn't Rickie."

"No." Billy stopped the tape and ejected it. "Not at all." He looked at the label. "Shit. What happened to my Rickie interview."

"What did I tell you about not locking up your stuff when you're in this room."

"I won't do that again. I can tell you. This box gets locked even if I'm sitting in that stupid Unity circle." Billy placed the tape in a case and put it in the box. He began to close the lid.

"Why did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"I saw that."

"Saw what?"

"You kept the tape."

"The uh tape . . ." Billy shut the lid. "You know what Cal. I need the tape. I didn't bring that many."

"So you're saying . . . you'll erase it later?" Cal asked.

"Oh sure."

"Liar."

"What?" Billy asked. "Now would I keep that without erasing it?"

"Yes." Cal nodded.

"For what purpose?"

"Let's hope it's certainly not to Jerk-off."

From Billy's open gasping mouth came the cringing sound of Jake's voice.

"Cal please." Jake walked in Billy's bungalow. "Now is that appropriate discussion to be having with Billy."

"Yes Jake it is." Cal told him. "Because Billy has . . ."

"A headache." Billy interrupted.

"A headache?" Jake questioned. "Well take a fuckin aspirin Bill. That's the usual route taken."

"I'll uh . . ." Billy ran his fingers through his hair. "I'll do that." He clenched his teeth and whispered to Cal. "I'll erase it."

"Erase what?" Jake asked.

Cal answered. "A bad interview he did with me Jake. I want him to do it again. My hair was bad."

Jake spun his views to Cal. "Bad hair? When did you become so vain?"

"And speaking of vain . . ." Billy spoke up. "Can you tell her that volcano is going to erupt?"

Jake's mouth opened with a curl to his top lip. "What the fuck does that have to do with vanity?"

"Nothing." Billy shook his head. "But can you tell her. She doesn't believe me."

"Cal." Jake spoke calm. "The volcano is going to erupt."

"Will the eruption kill us?" Cal asked.

"Probably not. No." Jake shook his head. "It may trigger some small quakes and a tidal wave or two but other than that, worse, comes to worse, we grab some stuff and move to higher ground."

"Oh, O.K." Cal nodded. "Sounds fun."

"It should be." Jake commented.

"Sick." Billy spoke up. "And I'll set this up for your interview Jake."

"You aren't set up." Jake began to bitch. "Fuck. You make me hold off on my Rickie training and you aren't even ready. How long will it take? I'm busy."

Billy hesitated in his getting a new tape. "Doing what?"

Cal decided to answer that question. "Billy. He has an agenda."

Jake held his hand out to Cal. "See. She knows. Busy."

"And a little tired." Cal grabbed Jake's hand. "Do you mind if I just go lay down for a little before lunch?"

Jake looked with concern at her. "What's wrong? Did you work too hard this morning. You have to let me know if I'm . . ."

"Jake." Cal kissed his hand. "I'm just tired. That's all. Give me a half hour?"

Jake looked at his watch. "How about an hour instead? If you're saying you're tired then your body must be feeling it." He leaned down to her and kissed her. "Rest."

"I will." Cal moved to the door. "And good luck with the interview." She snickered at Jake's groan and she walked out.

Stepping off the porch she felt that twinge of nausea hit her. That sick feeling she got as her stomach neared emptiness. And seeing how she didn't want to wake up to a full blown regurgitation episode, Cal decided to get a snack, a fresh one, before laying down. And instead of going to her right to her own bungalow she walked straight and on a direct course to raid Judge's garden.

She saw Judge en route. And Cal didn't know whether it was guilt or fear of being busted, but she asked for permission to grab something from the garden he worked so hard on. Judge didn't mind, he told her help herself and informed her that there were some green tomatoes there if she wanted to pick them so Lou could fry them up--as promised--for her.

Feeling so southern thinking of her fried green tomatoes, Cal headed back to the garden, part of her wishing Judge would have grown some lettuce because there was nothing Cal would like more than a salad.

Working for her food didn't bother her. She actually enjoyed digging up the radishes. Sort of like hitting the duck pond at kiddie land,. Never knowing what you get until you turn it over, or in the case of Judge's radishes, pull them out.

Wanting to get the hardest pick done with, Cal knelt on the ground looking at the green leaves to the radish plants. She removed some dirt with her fingernails, nails that had grown too much for her liking, and she pulled out the first plant. Perfect size. Reaching for the second plant, she saw the black soft leather tennis shoes. Cal cringed, dusted off her hands and took herself out of the vulnerable kneeling position. She stood up raising her views to Larry. "Is there something you want?" She snapped at him.

"I hate your husband." He told her.

Cal laughed. "Well probably so do about five thousand other men back at Fort Bragg so step in line."

Larry sneered at her moving back as he spoke. So much hostility. So much anger. "You know payback is a real bitch Cal. A real bitch. Pay back time for you."

A snicker escaped her. "What the hell is . . ."

A hand. A huge hand came from behind her covering her mouth so tight she could barely breath. It shut her up at the same time another arm braced around her front in a grip, and her legs, were grabbed and she was lifted from the ground.

Cal shifted her body in a struggle, but the two people held her tight. A man held on to her legs. He smiled a gross smile at her, his hair long and greasy dangling in a swing as he carried her. And the other man who had her, all she could see was the dark skin of the hand that covered her mouth and the arm that wrapped around her shoulders. Jolting to free herself, Cal brought up her hands to try to free her mouth when both her arms were grabbed. Stretched out far and held tight, Cal was then carried through the woods like some sort of animal moving towards its sacrificial altar.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

May 3rd - 12:45 p.m.

Lyle's fingers, clicked once on a keyboard as he looked up. The electronic map of the island, blue, green and yellow in color, showed a wide shot view, then it zoomed in on an area. They watched a set of lights move. "Heading out of the camp area again." Lyle looked over his shoulder to tell Greg who leaned in between him and Barb.

"How long were they there?" Greg asked.

Barb answered. "Ten minutes maybe."

"Near Larry's again?" Greg questioned further.

"In the vicinity." Lyle answered. "But then . . ." He pointed to the monitor of Larry's room. "There he is."

"We ought to put a fuckin tracking device in his arm. What is he up to? He is up to something." Greg swayed his head in disgust then stopped cold. His eyes raised slowly and wide to the wall of monitors. "Where's Cal?"

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 3rd - 12:50 p.m.

It was bad enough that Cal got sick so easy, but now she had to use everything she had inside of her not to throw up. Fight off the gagging that came from the dirty cloth shoved in her mouth and bound there with another cloth. She used her hatred, her disgust. Watching the four men, not far from her, create a bloody mess of themselves as they each had sliced open their upper left arms.

Her fingers fidgeted with the rope that tied Cal, arms behind her to a tree. Cal kept her eyes peeled to Luther. The obvious leader. He bandaged himself and stood up at the same time as the others. He kept his eyes on her and she kept hers on him, trying to use her peripheral vision to keep the others in her focus.

He was so disgusting to her, not just in appearance but his whole attitude. What she wanted to do was just throw up all over his pathetic ass the second he removed the gag.

Luther smiled, he had a silver tooth, the only one in his smile that hadn't rotted away. He closed his fist and stepped to Cal. "Lights out baby doll." He swung back careening his fist into the side of Cal's face.

Cal's head flung to the right and she lifted it, glaring at him.

Luther was a bit shocked at first and then he laughed it off. "Didn't give her all I got. But the bitch can still take a punch. Did you hear me bitch." He asked Cal. "I said lights out." He clenched his huge fist tighter, taunting Cal with it as he pulled it back in her view. Glare and all on his face, biting his bottom lip, Luther brought his fist toward Cal. Just as he tossed it, Cal dropped to the ground, causing Luther's powerful fist to smash into tree's bark.

Hands free from the rope she undid, Cal pulled the gag from her mouth, locked both hands together and in her jumping to her feet, she brought her hands up into Luther's gut causing his body to bend down. Still joined, she lifted her hands high, cracked them down onto his back, then grabbed hold of Luther's collar. With both hands, a grunt, and everything she had, she jolted Luther and smashed him head first into the tree. "Meet the star pupil of Graison 101 . . . you asshole." With her last words Cal delivered her final blow, bringing up her bent leg hard and blasting Luther, center chest with her knee. He rolled over and fell to the ground.

In a ready mode, arms out and waiting Cal turned to see the other three charging her way. Axe, the greasy long hair man swung his arms out like an ape. Cal dodged his swing, ducked and sailed her fist into his gut. Standing up, with a clock turn spin of her body, Cal kicked out, nailing Rapper in the side of the face. The momentum of her kick carried into Wilson, the thinnest and smallest of them, she hit him as well. Coming out of her kick, Cal was greeted with a fist, fast and hard into her cheek. He took her by surprise and back. She stumbled a step or two, caught her balance and charged forward into Axe. The one who had hit her. She tossed two fast jabs, both to his face. Neither phased him much., The punch to his

stomach caused a slight grunt, but the knee shot to his groin caused him to whimper.

If Jake taught her anything it was if she ever found herself in a bad situation, do what she could to get out of it and run like hell. And that's what Cal wanted to do. Two steps in her bolting run, her long hair was grasped and yanked so fiercely that Cal literally flew backwards, her feet sweeping up from under her and she landed hard to the ground on her back. She bounced with a grunt, shifted her eyes, saw the legs of Rapper. She quickly brought up her one leg, hooked it on his, scissor locked it with her other leg and brought Rapper to the ground. Joined nearly in what wrestlers would call a 'figure four' Cal, turned her body, flipping Rapper and bringing herself to her hands in knees. The moment she raised her views, was the moment she was kicked in the side of the head.

Cal rolled, opened her eyes, saw another careening boot, and as she grabbed hold of that to stop the blow, she felt the painful seer of a foot into her rib cage. All air escaped her, Cal's neck arched. And before she could catch her breath, get herself together, she was out numbered. On the ground, trying to get up while shielding herself, Cal became like a forest fire. Something they just wanted to stomp out.

No matter how many times she tried to get up, she was kicked back down. Her hands searched out the ground, trying to get leverage, and a heel came down hard, digging into her fingers, spinning with a crushing vengeance. And Cal, not loud, screamed.

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Moseying along in a walk across the unity circle, Rickie froze. The smile dropped from his face and his head jolted around. "Cal?" Though the painful scream he heard didn't sound like it came from her bungalow, Rickie to be, sure raced there. He barged in. "Cal-babe!" She wasn't there., Pulling the door closed as he flew out, he ran as fast as he could to Billy's.

No knocking, Rickie raced in. "Billy where's Cal and . . ." He saw Jake stand up. "Sarge. Cal. I heard her scream."

Jake flew to the door and out. "She's at the bungalow."

"No Sarge I checked." Rickie, with Billy behind him ran out.

Jake stopped in his walk out. "She's supposed to be . . ."

"There." Rickie's head jolted up. "There it is again."

Jake looked around. "I didn't hear it. Can you tell where it was coming from? Try Rickie."

Rickie closed his eyes, listening, really listening. "I hear her grunting . . . up there." He pointed to behind Judge's bungalow,

"Let's go," Jake grabbed hold of Rickie's arm and in the same stride pointed to Billy. "Go to my room and grab two M-16's. Hurry." Jake, letting Rickie lead the way, took off running while Billy ran to Jake's bungalow.

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Amongst the laughter, pain filled legs, burning scrapes, arms aching and hands cramping. Cal drew everything she had inside of her, and tried once more to get up. Her lifting body from the ground was an open invitation. And a foot came up, slamming her center chest. A long wheeze shot from Cal and she flipped on to her back. Everything around her began to go blurry. Her spine arched high as only a rasping sound escaped her. She couldn't breath. The crushing pain that filled her chest made Cal fear she had gone into cardiac arrest. Her hands went numb, and shook. And with rolling eyes, one more reach out, Cal's body went limp, flopping back to the ground and slightly to her side.

The four men laughed tauntingly as they closed in to Cal. Each of them taking turns to nudge her with their foot, seeming to derive a sick pleasure from how she failed to respond, grunt or moan. And then the four of them, tips if their boots nearly touching Cal's body in the circle around her, summed up an eerie deranged silence. A silence that was only broken by the simple sound of zippers. Towering over Cal's motionless body, in some sort of psychopathic necrophilia sexual arousal, the four of them each undid the fronts of their pants and began to perform a tribal ritual they had done so many times before.

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Panicked and out of breath was how Rickie looked when he stopped cold about three yards from Judge's garden. "I don't hear anything Sarge. I don't hear anything." He sounded so desperate.

Jake's eyes shifted to a distraught looking Billy who handed him an M-16. He saw Lou there too. "What?"

"I'm here to help."

Jake nodded and stepped to Rickie. "O.K. get it together. Calm down You hear me. Calm down." Jake adjusting his M-16 laid his hand on Rickie's shoulder. "Find her scent. Can you find her scent Rickie?" He saw Rickie shake his head. "Rickie, I need you to try. Try."

Rickie stepped back and turned facing the woods. His face crinkled almost like a sniffing dog, shifting his head from left to right, taking a step, then stopping. He bent down to the ground and pulled a handful of grass bringing them to his nose. He dropped them moved more to his right, bent down again and ripped up grass. After smelling it and standing up, Rickie pointed and begin to run in the direction he aimed. "This way."

Jake spun to Billy and Lou in his backwards run. "Let's go." He turned back around and ran to catch up to a fast moving Rickie.

"Cal-babe!" Rickie called out. "Cal!" Rickie bent down catching his breath. His eyes looked to the small hill before him. "She's close Sarge, She's really

close.”

Jake took short breaths, trying to stay calm. Trying to stay in control. Trying to think. He peered like a hawk around the wooded area that surrounded him. “Over that hill Rickie?”

“Maybe. But she’s really . . .” Rickie stopped talking when a crunching sound was heard.

The sound grew louder, picking up intensity and drawing closer to them. All of them were shocked in horror when they saw the reason for the noise. Cal’s body rolled with speed down the hillside at them.

Billy’s emotions escaped him verbally as he ran directly behind Jake to Cal. “Oh my God.”

Jake dove forward onto the hill stopping Cal from falling any further. On his knees he dropped and Cal literally rolled over into the palm of his hands. It was Jake’s sound of pain. A moan that flowed from his throat as he stared down to his wife. Her face and body beaten. Hair and clothes dirty, bloody and surely showing remnants of other things she had endured. A gnawing ache twisted in Jake’s gut and he bit his bottom lip, trying to stay in control though his eyes shifted about Cal in a sense of loss. His huge hand gripped around her neck and he closed his eyes in gratefulness when he felt a pulse. “Cal.” her name seemed to whimper out from him. So in shock, sick and more so heartbroken.

Billy’s shoulders bounced as his hand reached down to her leg. “God Jake. What did they do to her?” He lifted his head. “What did they . . .” Billy’s eyes widened. “Jake.”

Jake heard the change in Billy’s voice. He opened his eyes, raised his head and saw him. A man, Axe, long hair, half way up the hill, thinking he could hide in the brush. Standing watching, as if seeing Cal laying there was some sort of sick after pleasure. A glare like no other took over Jake and he released Cal, reaching for his M-16. Bringing himself up as he swung his weapon around, Jake only pumped the chamber but never got to shoot. It happened so fast.

From the corner of Jake’s eye, he saw what made him stop. A blur, fast moving, flashed by Jake hitting him with the breeze of it’s force. And a flutter hit Jake’s eyes when he saw Rickie--moving as fast as any bullet Jake could fire--literally shoot himself toward the man in the trees. A beastly growl, deep and gurgling reverberated from Rickie the second he leaped up, sailing his thin body in an animalistic attack lunge to Axe. Rickie landed on him rolling to the ground with a man twice his size. Yet Axe, stood not a single chance. From the spot where they landed, mid hillside, only painful screams mixed with the sounds of snarling. And all that could be seen was the spraying of blood and flesh that shot up and rained out from the ground like a volcano of death had erupted there.

Lou couldn’t move, his eyes transfixed up on that hillside to Rickie. “Talk about a temper. Oh my God.”

Jake, running his hand over Cal’s head, stood straight up. “Billy, you and Lou get her back. The rest of them are around here.”



"Jake don't leave her." Billy told him watching Jake walk up the hill. "Jake, I don't know what to do for her."

Jake kept walking.

There was nothing left of Axe when Jake made it to Rickie. Nothing together that was. Pieces of his mutilated body scattered in a close circle. Rickie, eyes a different shade of green, center of the mess, catching his breath. Rickie's hands, his weapons, were covered with Axes blood.

"Grab his scent." Jake told Rickie. "It'll linger with the others. They're still here. I feel it. I . . ."

"Jake!" Billy called, holding Cal whom he had lifted into his arms. "Hurry. Please."

Jake turned around and looked down the hill. He saw the look on Billy's face and he raced down to Billy. "What is it."

Billy's answer wasn't verbal. It was the mere shifting of his eyes down to his arm that braced under Cal's legs. An arm now covered with fresh flowing blood.

"Oh God." Jake reached out for Cal, taking her from Billy's arms. His eyes closed as he pulled her close to his chest, pressing his face to hers.

Lou took the M-16 off of Billy. "Jake, take care of her. I'll go search with Rickie."

There wasn't any question what Jake had to do. Even though his gut wanted to tear the others apart like Rickie did to Axe, Jake's place was with Cal. And holding her in his big arms, Jake carried Cal back home.

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A pile of Cal's hair laid on the bathroom floor. So bloodied, tangled, knotted that Jake had no choice but to cut it. Even though Cal would never say anything to him. He took great care and cutting it carefully, bringing up the long length to just below her shoulder.

Jake sat on the bathroom floor, arms submerged in the tub he had just filled with fresh water. He wrung out a wash cloth and lifted it. "Cal."

Cal had passed out again, her cheek resting on her bent up knees.

"Sweetie." Jake lifted her chin. "Let me finish you up." Softly and gently he ran the cloth across her lips to clear the blood that dried around her top lip where he had done what he would consider, his best and tiniest stitches.

"I'm sorry." Cal spoke groggy.

"Don't be. Almost done and we'll get you into bed."

"My face feels huge."

"Your face is beautiful." Jake leaned into her and kissed her softly.

Cal closed her eyes, she could barely keep them open and her head fell forward into Jake. "All this for a radish."

Jake smiled, dropped the washcloth and wrapped his arms around her. And as he held her, even though Jake was so glad she was all right, every part of him

burned in anger and in hurt for what Cal had gone through.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
May 3rd - 2:45 p.m.

Greg eyes just stayed on Cal's monitor, the bathroom door closed, Billy pulling down the bed. Over an hour and a half Jake had been in the bathroom with Cal. Rickie and Lou having just returned, waited in the room for Cal and Jake's emergence with as much anticipation as Greg did.

"Nothing?" Dr. Jefferson's voice interrupted Greg's stare.

"Nothing." Greg shook his head.

"Aldo's on his way."

"I figured as much." Greg returned to watching.

"So what do we do now. We lost the tracking."

"Mark my words." Greg watched the bathroom door open and Jake carry Cal out. "We're not going to have to do anything. Jake will do it all."

I-S.E. - Thirteen - The Island
May 3rd - 2:47 p.m.

The air in the room was a somber one. Cal wearing only a Jake tee shirt lay propped up on pillows in bed as Billy sadly adjusted the covers over her. Lou and Rickie stood by the fireplace as Jake, back turned to everyone, leaned toward the wall, one arm above his head, in a frightening silence.

Billy's eyes lifted from the covers to it. Rickie and Lou looked. Jake's one long breath out, as he ran his hand over the back of his head, caught their attention. He slowly turned around. "Can I . . . can I be alone with my wife please. I need a minute." Jake looked in pain as he made his request.

Lou opened the door, and walked out. Rickie looked back at Cal wanting to say something, but didn't. And Billy, after giving a reassuring squeeze to Cal's hand, abided by Jake's request and he left as well.

In the empty room, Jake went into the closet. He came back out with a bottle of Jack, grabbing a glass in his stride to the bed. He sat down next to Cal, opened the bottle, poured about two shots worth and handed her the glass as he set the bottle down. "Drink it."

The moment Cal's shaking hands brought the glass to her lips and she smelled the alcohol, Cal began to cry.

Jake saw her losing the glass and he took it from her. "Cal." he set the glass down and pulled her into him.

From his chest, muffled and tear filled, Cal spoke as she shook her head. "I know it wasn't supposed to happen. But I still didn't want to lose this baby. I didn't want that Jake."

Jake's eyes closed, he pressed his lips to her and held her tighter. "Neither did I Cal. Know that. Please know that."

Cal only nodded.

"Can you please drink the Jack?" Jake requested softly. "Please?"

Cal pulled back and took the glass Jake handed to her. She took a drink, gave it back and laid down. A painful wince took over her face as she rolled into a ball bringing her legs close to her.

"Cal." Jake laid his hand on her hip bringing his lips close to her ear. He whispered in emotional words. "Listen to me. O.K.? I know you're in pain. I know this. I feel it. God do I feel it. I love you very much. But . . . I'm torn here sweetie. I'm torn. I want to go out there, find them and tear them apart for what they did to you and our baby. But I don't want to leave you like this." Jake's eyes shifted down to his hand when Cal laid hers on top of his, locking her fingers into his hand. "I don't want to walk away when you need me. For the first time in my entire life I don't know what to do." There was an abundance of sadness and confusion in Jake's words. "Tell me Cal. Please. You tell me what to do."

^^^

Wearing dark green military camouflage pants and a dark green tee shirt, Jake strapped himself with the ammunition he needed. He had a revolver in the belt around his waist. To his leg, strapped there a hunting knife. Jake looked to Rickie who was closing up a small sack. "Rickie, you went through those M.R.E.'s right. I don't want bogged down. We only need basics."

"Yeah Sarge. Took out only what you told me." Rickie handed Lou, who was dressed in dark clothing, the sack. "Thanks for offering to go with my Dad, guy."

"I want to." Lou tossed the sack over his shoulder. "Besides, we know Cal's safe with you. Little man, you were kidding when you said you go monster."

"Guy, like what have I been telling you."

Jake picked up the M-16 that laid on the dresser. "Lou, I'll meet you out side." He walked to the bed where Cal was sleeping. The empty glass on the night stand set next to the bottle of Jack. Jake bent over to Cal, running his hand down her face. "I'll be back. Maybe a couple of days, but I'll be back. I love you very much." Jake kissed her, then kissed her again leaving his lips on her for a little bit. He stood up, tossed the strap of the M-16 over his head, threw the weapon around to his back and walked to the door. "Rickie, sit with her. Bill." Jake twitched his head to the door. "Come out with me for a second."

Billy who had been sitting next to Calk's bed, stood up and walked outside. He pulled the door closed as he stood on the porch. The second he did, Jake started giving instructions.

"Watch the bleeding. Monitor it." Jake told Billy. "Keep giving her Jack every hour, the alcohol will help with the cramping. Let no one in to see her. Make sure she eats. It's vital."

Billy nodded. "I can do that. But Jake, these guys are dangerous. Are you sure you should take a chance like this?"

"Bill." Jake silenced him. "I have to do this. O.K.? You saw what they did to her. You saw the . . ." Jake cringed. "*Sick* things they did to her. I can't let them get away with hurting her and the baby. I can't. I don't want to. But my gut is ripped apart. And I fully intend on hunting them down like the animals they are. I'll find them. I will. And then they will feel every single thing they did to her."

"Just be careful. Losing the baby is bad enough for Cal. Losing you . . . she couldn't handle that Jake. I know her."

"Yeah she could." Jake winked. "Cal's tough. But . . ." Jake looked to the door then back to Billy. "There is still a chance, even though a really, really small one, there's still a chance I won't come back. If something happens to me, I need you to do something for me."

"What's that."

"Cal . . . Cal is tough yeah, but I worry about her. I don't want her alone. I want someone to watch out for her. Someone that can take care of her as good as I can. Someone I know will care for her. Because Cal needs that in her life. So

could you . . . could you just tell my friend Chuck that Cal is his responsibility.”

Billy’s eyes widened, he stuttered some. “Um . . . sure. I’ll tell Chuck.”

“Billy?”

“Yeah?”

“If I don’t come back.,You better make sure she get’s off this island okay, then . . . make sure she stays okay.” Jake stepped backwards. “If you don’t. I’ll come back and haunt you.” He stepped off the porch. “But the point is moot. I’ll be back. Even if it’s just to stop you from moving in on my wife.” Jake smiled. “I’ll be back. Besides, once I find them, this shouldn’t be too difficult. Because these fuckin assholes haven’t a clue what I do for a living. Watch her Bill.” Jake turned and walked off.

Billy stepped to the edge of the porch. “Be careful Jake.”

Jake only lifted his hand as he caught up to Lou. And Billy stood, arms folded leaning against the post of the porch watching Jake, determined and strong, disappear into the woods.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
May 3rd - 4:00 p.m.

“Kill them.” Cal’s weakened words spoken to Jake as she lay in bed, played over the speaker in the control room for Aldo.

He clenched his fist tightly and smiled at Barb. “Almost like a Rambo meets Rocky II moment huh?”

“Kind of.” Barb agreed.

Aldo felt the hand lay to his back. He looked up to see Greg walking by.

Greg looked up to see Cal sitting up in Bed, Billy beside her. “Just wanted to let you know Aldo, I moved out the equipment to check on her. Our controllers should have it shortly.”

“What equipment?” Aldo asked.

“Well for starters the portable Ultra sound machine along with medications that are not up there.”

“Ultra sound?” Aldo had wonder to his voice. “She miscarried.”

“I know.” Greg’s head dropped. “But there are complications that occur with miscarriage. For example if she doesn’t dilate enough to expel. She could get very ill, possibly die. I’m send Ollie down to perform the test and render treatment there after.”

Aldo was confused. “Rule thirty-nine Dr. Haynes. Rely on the resources left to you. Why are you stepping in on this?”

“Compassion.”

“Try again.”

Greg shrugged. “I don’t know what else to tell you. This was not supposed to happen. It was not.”

“Not? You gave my girl a fertility drug and she did a loaded newsman. What did you expect?”

“Not the pregnancy. We did strive for that. All part of the plan. The miscarriage was not on the agenda. And seeing how the pregnancy was . . . well a bit of our doing. We just want to make sure our doing, which isn’t consistent with normal Iso-Stasis guidelines, doesn’t kill her.”

“I bet one big reason is money.”

“How do you mean.”

“This so called clinic that provided you with the drug to research, they funded you. If something goes wrong, or something doesn’t take, they need full results. You don’t want to risk losing the funding, paying it back, or future investments. The results have to be reported to the fertility and sexuality clinic. Don’t they?” Aldo probed.

“Yes.”

“So you’re basically following through the research.” Aldo grumbled. “You also probably have a full agenda planned for Cal and Jake and you just want to make sure she’s well enough to handle it.”

Greg folded his arms and peered over his shoulder at Aldo. "That too."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 3rd - 4:00 p.m.

“Jake.”

Jake looked up from where he squatted when he heard Lou’s call of his name. He saw Lou trotting to him. “Anything.”

“No. Even that Stan guy came out to the gate. He said they haven’t a clue where they went off to because they lost the tracking implantation.”

Jake’s fingers, covered in blood lifted a tiny black square. “Well I think we found them.” Jake tossed it, stood up and shook his head. “Now where the hell are their owners.”

“It’s a big Island. Any idea where we start.”

Jake placed his hands on his hips. “My guess. They aren’t too far. And they aren’t going to travel too far from any resources. They’re confident but bet me they’re lazy. They aren’t going to want to rely on the island’s resources until they have taken ours. They’re close. And we’ll find them.” Adjusting his weapon Jake looked at the ground and to the direction where a few blood smeared footprints were. Without saying anything more. Jake followed in that direction.

^^^

The sounds of Cal’s dry heaving went through Billy in a near gut wrenching way. He stood behind her, holding onto her as Cal leaned over the commode. Giving her the strength she needed to stand because her bruised legs were so weak. One hand braced her back and Billy’s eyes closed. Cal’s red face, and violent shaking were more than just her attempt to bring forth from her stomach something was not there, they were just more things added to the suffering Cal was already going through.

“I’m so sick.” Cal’s words were breathy as she tried to stand up, but didn’t make it. She lunged herself back over the toilet, releasing the noises of her pointless efforts.

“It’s O.K. Cal.” Billy spoke with compassion. “It’ll stop. I promise it will stop.” Still holding Cal he reached over to the sink, turning on the faucet and letting the cool water run onto the cloth that lay in there. He reached in, squeezed the cloth and brought it to Cal’s face as she stood straight. “Wanna try to get back to bed?”

Cal nodded.

“Let me carry you.” Billy didn’t get an argument from Cal who was usually so strong. She just about flopped into his arms when he lifted her. Her head falling to his shoulder. Billy laid her down, bringing the covers over Cal who had fallen asleep before he made it the short distance to the bed. He knew the episode would repeat again when he woke her, per Jake’s instructions, just to get a reaction from her.

Billy was at a loss. He just didn't know what to do. Running his fingers gently over her face to remove her hair, his eyes saw the huge bruise on her arm. It was deep in color like the one on the side of Cal's head by her temple. The head injury that Jake had forewarned Billy would cause what he had just witnessed. Cal would get ill, violently ill. Her head would probably pound worse than any headache she ever experienced, And Jake even told Billy not to get too concerned if Cal became lethargic.

But even though Jake carefully explained to Billy all that Cal would endure, it didn't help. Being told ahead of time didn't ease the pain that Billy felt when he witnessed Cal going through it. Billy had no medical knowledge. All he could do was follow Jake's instructions and give Cal the best compassionate care he could.

He sat down by her bedside again, staring at Cal. Praying that she would get through this. Holding her hand, wiping her off and wanting nothing more than just to hold her. And though Billy was so scared to be alone with her. So scared he would do something wrong. He was grateful that he was entrusted to do so. Because it gave Billy a chance to silently and alone, deal with something else that ate away at him. Hurt him. Besides the torture and pain inflicted on the woman he loved, his best friend, Billy had to deal with the grief over losing the baby. And despite the bad circumstances of the baby's conception, it was a baby, like Cal and Jake, that he truly with all his heart, wanted to have.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 4th - 6:10 a.m.

Lou watched as Jake squatted by what looked like a burned out campfire in the very early morning. Tiny pieces of paper scattered about. A napkin. A sardine can. "So uh Jake, I guess there goes your theory that they're staying close to the bungalows."

"We're really not that far." Jake rested his elbows on his knees staring around. "But how long can their supplies hold up. They killed for money. They aren't going to kill their dinner. Trust me."

"So they'll use up what they have and come after us."

"If they have anything, they'll never use up what they have. I won't allow them that time."

"Jake, if you're so sure . . ." Lou saw Jake glare at him. "Not that I'm questioning your means mind you. But if you're so sure they'll come back to camp. Why don't you wait for them there?"

"They're animals. I wanna take them out. I don't want them anywhere near my wife." Just as Jake stood, he stopped. Stepping over the burned out fire Jake reached down to the ground to a dried bloody cloth.

"What is it?" Lou asked.

"One of their bandages." Jake examined it.

"Jake should you be touching that?"

Jake brought the cloth to his nose and sniffed. Lou cringed with a sideways toss of his head. "Gangrene." Jake tossed the bandage. "At least one of them will be slowing up soon. They'll have to stop sooner or later." Jake began to just walk. "Let's go."

Lou followed. He looked back at the bandage Jake had thrown. "You know, that was really gross."

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
May 4th - 7:00 a.m.

"I take it you put everything in order?" Greg asked as he spoke to the speaker phone while slicing his french toast.

"Yeah." Stan answered. "I spent all night learning that stupid machine."

"How difficult can it be Stan. You're a scientist." Greg reached across his small table in his office for the syrup.

"Not too. But I still haven't a clue what I'm looking at. I did some wonderful shots of Ollie's pancreas. Did you get them?"

"Over dinner yes." Greg took a bite of his food. "What about the medication and instructions."

"We sent it down with Rickie." Stan told him. "Hopefully it helped. We'll be checking on her here real soon."

"We?" Greg questioned.

"Ollie and I. Porter will be left in charge. Not much should happen while we're gone."

"Make sure you charge the fences." Greg instructed while reaching for his coffee. "With those four animals running about we can't take a chance with you guys."

"Three." Stan corrected.

"Three?"

"Rickie went, well monster on one."

Greg smiled. "Excellent. O.K., let me know when your examination results about Cal are complete. Don't send me anything half ass. O.K.? And um, then get started on that other project I sent you up."

"And what was up with that?" Stan asked with attitude

"Part of the next phase." Greg said.

"Did we need them?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?"

"Don't you think . . ." Stan snickered in disbelief. "We have enough."

"No." Greg said short. "Start the procedures."

"Can I ask a question without you pressing that little hang up button on me?"

Greg rolled his eyes. He knew it was going to be good. "Go on. But no guarantees."

"Where . . . where do you get these people from?" Stan asked.

"Ads in the paper. It is amazing what people will do, what products or pharmaceuticals they will test for money. Been happening with many companies for years."

"Won't they be missed?"

"Nah." Greg shook his head while eating. "They're homeless."

A gasp, Stan's gasp rang over the speaker phone. "Isn't that a little inhumane. You are very inhumane."

"Stan."

"Yeah."

Greg set down his fork and folded his hands. "How long have you worked for Caldwell?"

"Eleven years."

"Wanna see twelve?" With a point of his finger and a press of a button the clicking sound signified Greg's disconnecting of the call and he returned to enjoying his breakfast.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 4th - 8:20 a.m.

It was quiet, no noise. Nor did there sound like there was any movement in the shower. Perhaps it hadn't been as long as Billy thought, but it was long enough that he became paranoid. "Cal?" He called out to her as he stood with his back facing the shower doors. "You all right?"

"Yeah." She answered softly "Almost done. Do you have my robe there."

"Yes." Billy looked at the white robe hanging on the bathroom door. He heard the squeak of the water shutting off, and he grabbed the towel. Still gentleman-like he opened the shower door without looking and handed her the towel.

"Thank you." There was a pause and then Cal spoke again. "I can't bend over to put the towel on my head. I'm too dizzy still."

"I'll help you. Come on out." Billy grabbed her robe and held it open at the shower door for when Cal slid it open. She slipped into it, bringing it closed and tying it. Billy took hold of her arm and helped her step from the tub.

"Thanks. I'm sorry."

"This is not a problem Cal. Quit apologizing." He grabbed the towel placing it over her head and he began to gently blot her hair dry.

"Not much left huh?" Cal asked with some sadness.

"What are you talking about?"

"My hair."

"I like it shorter. It's kind of . . ." Billy leaned his head over her shoulder adding a feminine lisp to his voice. "Sassy."

Cal smiled. "I love when you act that way for me." She turned around and faced him. "It makes me laugh."

"Your laughter almost got us busted when you helped me do that investigative piece."

"I couldn't help it. I did play a great boyfriend to you though."

"To me . . ." Billy reached for the door. "You were still too pretty to pull it off."

Cal swayed her head moving slowly. "I should have looked like I do now."

"What? Are you kidding." Billy opened the door helping her out. "You're still too pretty to pull it off. Bruises or no bruises."

Just as Cal was about to say something, she stopped walking when she was surprised to see Rickie standing there.

"Cal-babe. You're looking good this morning." Rickie kissed her on the cheek. "And does like the Sarge know you guys are showering together."

"No." Cal tightened her robe. "But I'm sure you'll tell him." She shifted her eyes to see Stan and Ollie in the room. "Rickie?"

"Oh yeah. You got company." Rickie pointed to them. "They're like here to check you out."

Ollie stepped forward. "How are you feeling Cal?"

"Sore." Cal sat on the bed. "Sick to my stomach."

"That's the concussion. And that concussion probably explains why you told Rickie you don't remember too much."

"I don't. Bits and pieces. Is that normal?"

"Very. And so is the nausea. Have you eaten anything today?" Ollie asked.

"No. Not yet." Cal shook her head.

Ollie looked to Billy. "Why don't you go and get her something. Stan and I would like to check out Cal."

Billy glanced at Cal. "Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine." Cal nodded then peered up to Ollie. "But really. You don't have to check me out."

"It's your choice." Ollie said. "But . . . Rickie explained to us that you've had some complications with the pregnancy. It's best we make sure there are no problems that could arise. That as you know, can easily happen when you're body spontaneously aborts."

Cal's head dropped about the same time Billy's heart sunk when he heard those words. Their generated feelings swarmed around the room causing an immediate sadness.

Ollie closed his mouth tight, turning his head to Stan and nodding it. Stan carried a small machine, that looked as if it was a struggle for him to lift. He placed it on the night stand.

"Dude." Rickie reached out pulling a staring Billy. "Let's uh, let's let them do their thing."

Billy slowly nodded his head, gave a sad smile to Cal, lifted his hand in a wave and walked out hearing as he did Ollie explaining to Cal about the ultra sound.

"Guy, like you want to wait here and I'll go fix Cal babe something, or do you want to come?" Rickie asked as they stood on the porch.

Billy heard what Rickie said, but being so deep in thought, there was a delay before the words registered. "Um . . . huh . . ." Billy squinted at Rickie. "I'm sorry." He shook his head. "Would you mind running to get her something."

"No, not at all." Rickie stepped off the porch. "BE right back."

"Something easy. Tea and toast."

"Got it."

Billy thought he heard Rickie call him an asshole as he lowered down in his daze to sit. But since he couldn't figure out why Rickie would do that, Billy again, chalked it up to his half listening, until he saw Larry approaching.

"How's Cal?" Larry asked.

Billy raised his head. "Why do you care?"

"I'm deeply concerned." Larry looked nervous. Edgy.

"Talk a walk." Billy said as he folded his hands. "You haven't even a right to be here."

“Look.” Larry took on an edge. “I don’t know what she said to you, but I had nothing to do with this. Nothing.” His hand cut through the air as he spoke.

Billy curled his lip. “I think we know that asshole. I’m saying that you’ve caused enough problems for her and she doesn’t need to even know you’re out here.”

“Yeah.” Larry backed up. “Um . . . you’re right. You’re right. I’ll go.” He turned to walk away, took one more look at Cal’s bungalow then continued to walk.

Billy never claimed to be a rocket scientist and he knew at that moment he didn’t have to be one either to know that something more was up with Larry other than the ‘deep concern’ he claimed to have. And Billy knew if his own mind wasn’t so slow and fogged with what was going on, he probably would have furthered that feeling he picked up from Larry. And he would. But at that moment, all Billy could do and all he wanted to do, was think about Cal and what was going on in the bungalow.

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“Still on the right track?” Lou yelled in question to Jake.

“Yeah. I’m starting to believe they’re hiding out. Or searching for a good place to hide out.”

“I would. Especially after what happened. Judge said they patterned their attacks a few days apart.” Lou gave a slight shudder then jolt as he pulled up his zipper. He bent down, grabbing his rifle and small sack and lifted them. Seeing Jake off about ten yards to the right, Lou raised his head in a call to him. “Find something?”

Jake tossed the long stick he had been poking at the ground. He looked back at Lou. “Yep, they were here. One of them was. Momentarily.”

“Oh yeah? You’re the man Jake. You know this for sure?” Lou tossed his things over his shoulder.

“Yep.” Jake flashed a quick smile. “Let’s head down toward the canyon again.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Fresh water. They may try to find some. And that’s about the only place close.” Jake began walking.

“Sounds good to me.” Lou trotted to catch him. “So what did you find that let you know . . .” Lou’s pace slowed down as he looked at what Jake was poking a stick at. “God, Jake that’s gross. You peered at that for that long. First the puss, then the phlegm on the tree, now this.” Lou started walking again. “Is it all body excretions in general or do you enjoy all disgusting things. Jake wait up.” Lou hurried. “Just tell me one thing.” His voice echoed down the hillside. “You didn’t touch that too, did you?”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

I-S.E. - Thirteen - The Island

May 4th - 8:30 p.m.

Billy somehow regretted two things as he set bedside next to Cal. Using the words, 'feel free' and giving Cal a red pen. He vowed as he looked at all the red circles and marks that it he wouldn't get upset. He couldn't have possibly made that many errors, it had to be Cal's head injury causing her to see wrong.

"Billy?" Cal called him softy noticing his wide eyed glare on his paper. "Something wrong?"

"Um . . . no. What did you think?"

"I love it. I love your writing."

Billy tilted his head still staring at the paper mumbling. "Certainly looks it."

"What was that?"

"Nothing I . . ." Billy lowered the papers when he heard the thump and felt the vibration on the soles of his feet. He looked to the floor. "Rickie."

"Guy." Rickie pointed then walked around to Cal's bed. He laid across the foot of it. "So like is there not going to be any interesting conversation tonight?"

"I would think you'd find this interesting." Billy said. "This has to do with the first . . ." He cringed at the loud thump. "Experiment."

Rickie walked around Cal's bed and laid back down across the foot again. "Cal-babe. Good thing we're sure Sarge is coming back after rangerizing then dudes. Cause like I'd hate to see you end up with this guy." Rickie shuddered.

Billy was not amused. "What is so wrong with . . ." Billy's eyes closed tightly in a wince at the even louder bang. "Me?"

"Dude." Rickie chuckled out the word. "I think you know."

"Dude." Billy tried. "No, I don't."

"See, right there." Rickie walked around Cal's bed again and laid down, again, at the foot of the bed. "For example. The word dude. Some people aren't meant to say it. You for one, Sarge is another. It's sounds unnatural, you know? But like, the Sarge he leads an exciting life. You guy . . ." Rickie slid some off the bed, dangling his head to the floor and did what he had repeatedly done for the past half hour. He brought his legs up over his head and flipped with a 'Bang' to the floor. "You guy are like, Darren Stevens. I can like see you thinking a big exciting night is sitting in front of the TV watching Seinfeld Episodes." Rickie made his way around Cal's bed laying down again.

"That is really not fair." Billy argued. "I lead an exciting life. I'm a reporter."

Rickie laughed. "Guy like, was it real exciting and life threatening when you did that pumpkin patch story last year. No." Rickie flipped again, stood up from the floor and walked around the bed.

"I don't pick my stories Rickie. I'm here right. And I did some of those

survival camps.”

“Failed them.” Rickie said.

“I still did them. And besides.” Billy explained. “Jake has his replacement all picked out for Cal.”

Cal who was silent reading and relaxing, lifted her head. “Jake picked a replacement for himself. Incase of what?”

“Incase well, incase . . .” Billy shrugged. “You know, he doesn’t make it.”

Cal rolled her eyes and fluttered her lips. “Yeah right. But who did he pick?”

“Chuck.” Billy answered.

“Chuck?” Cal weakly laughed.

“Chuck?” Rickie laughed. “Cool choice. Cal-babe if you think the Sarge gets you rockin a lot, wait until Chuck gets hold of you.”

“Rickie.” Billy gasped.

“Rickie.” Cal shook her head at Rickie who began to flip again.

“Rickie!” Billy snapped at the thump.

“What!” Rickie stood up. “Scared my roll wrong guy.”

“Did you exercise at all today?” Billy asked him.

“No, like the Sarge isn’t here to run me like a dog.” Rickie moved to lay down.

“Stop.” Billy stood up laying down his pen and standing. “Go run a mile or something or I’ll tell Jake you blew off what he wanted to do.”

“Guy.” Rickie pointed to the door. “Like it’s dark out. If I go, can I have a gun?”

Billy’s head flung back in laughter. “You of all people don’t need a gun Rickie.”

“Cal-babe?” Rickie looked at her with pleading eyes.

Cal’s eyes stayed on the paper she started to read again. “Take the one in my second drawer.”

“Thanks.” Rickie hurried over opened the drawer and pulled out the revolver. “I’ll run it off.” He walked to the door. “Oh!” His excitement call out caused Cal to look up and Billy to pause in his sitting. “I’ll go get Paul. I’ll see if he’s up to playing a little cowboys in Indians. What do you think?” Rickie slanted his stand and limped to the door. His words had a drawn out effect. “If you’re looking for me partner-dude. I’ll be out, like fetchin up some Indians.” Rickie lifted his hand and tipped his head as if he tipped a hat he wasn’t wearing. He turned, opened the door and limped out.

Billy sat down pointing, looking so baffled. “He really doesn’t interact with normal people too often, does he?”

“He’s always around me and Jake.” Cal responded.

“Point proven.”

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
May 4th - 10:15 p.m.

Greg considered himself a nice guy, even though others did not. And he even debated on not being the nice guy as he went to the empty commissary to get a cup of mud coffee. But knowing he had a reputation to live up to, at least in his mind he did, the nice guy route was the one he took.

Aldo sat in the commissary, playing with the paper cup of coffee, turning it more than sipping it.

"Thought you'd want to see this." Greg extended stapled papers over Aldo's shoulder.

"What is it?" Aldo asked as he took them.

"Results of Cal's examination." Greg walked around him and sat down.

"I'm not a doctor. I don't know what I'm looking at."

"You'll know this." Greg pointed. "Page two. Second line."

Aldo flipped the page. His hand slowly dropped as his eyes widened. Speechless he just looked up at Greg.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island
May 4th - 11:15 p.m.

An hour or so rest was all Jake was allowing himself and Lou to take. Just an hour. And then they would scout for the glow of a campfire. Hopefully their guiding light to the three prisoners who remained. Jake must have been more tired than he thought. No sooner did he lean back against that tree that he fell asleep. Deep asleep, slipping immediately into a dreaming phase.

So real that dream seemed. The sound of doctors being paged over the intercom. The feel of those flowers in his hand as he moved quickly and with a happy feeling down the corridors filled with nurses. Feeling that glow when he turned into the last room and seeing Cal sitting up in bed. A blue blanket in her arms.

“Jake.” She smiled his name. “Look.”

Jake’s heart beat with enthusiasm setting the flowers on the bed, kissing Cal, and peering at the baby she held in her arms. “Oh Cal.”

Cal extended to the baby to him. “Hold him Jake.”

So tiny and fragile that baby felt as Jake lifted him, pulling him immediately close to his chest. The pouty face, the closed eyes. “Cal, he’s ours?” And just as Jake, still in awe, lowered his eyes to the baby again, the emptiness hit his arms. “No.” Jake looked around. “Where did he go? Cal!” The room grew black. “Cal!”

“Cal.” Her name escaped him as he brought himself awake. Jake’s heart raced and he ran his hand across his face. The animal noise around him brought him back to reality and out of the dream. But the feeling of loss was still with him. How could it not be? Because like in that dream, Jake had something he wanted snatched from his grip, without warning, and unlike anything before, there was nothing he could have done to stop it.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 5th - 7:45 a.m.

There was a hint of a well-smile on Cal's face that Billy enjoyed seeing. The swelling had gone down and besides the bruising, Cal was looking better and moving. She breathed without wheezing as she moved, sniffing some from the damp air left over from the torrential downpour they had an hour earlier. But they were outside walking--slowly--to the dining building. And Cal looked as if she were enjoying every moment of it.

Billy gripped her hand, staying close to her, shoulders touching. A unacknowledged sense of support. "Wait until you see how hard Rickie worked this morning to make you breakfast."

"Rickie has learned a lot off of Lou. Hasn't he?" Cal's words were still not as strong as she usually spoke them.

"Yeah he has. I don't get as frightened at the prospect of eating his food."

"He told me he has aspirations of going to culinary school when we get done with the experiment." Cal said as she neared the building.

Billy laughed. "Oh I can see that. Chefs are temperamental as it is. I can see Rickie if someone hates what he made."

Cal looked oddly at him. "What do you mean. Rickie doesn't have a temper."

"Cal, he goes monster."

Cal laughed and grabbed her side that was still sore. "Billy. He's joking about that." She shook her head and walked through the door Billy opened. "And you believed him. I thought you were college educated."

Billy hesitated before saying anything further. "You're right." He followed her in. "How gullible of me." He placed his hand on her back. "Here sit down."

Cal stepped over with a painful grunt and sat on the bench. The spot at the table was already set for her. "I see Reed is assisting."

"Unfortunately." Billy leaned over her shoulder. "Stay her. I'll get your breakfast. Rickie broke out the last of the sausage from the freezer since he knows you like it."

"Thanks." Cal folded her hands, shifting in toward the table. She saw Judge wave as he walked in, stopping before going to the line and walking to Cal.

"Morning. You're looking better." Judge said.

"I'm feeling better today, thanks Judge."

"You know. You may not feel much like hearing this. But I picked some nice green tomatoes. Was gonna try to fry them up for you today. What do you think?"

"I think that would be nice." Cal smiled. "Thank you."

"Good." Judge nodded. "I'll do that." he gave a pat to her shoulder and

moved on.

Before Cal knew it, a plate was set before her and a cup of coffee. "Wow." She sniffed in the aroma. "Rickie did work hard."

"Eat." Billy told her. "Oh, ketchup. I'll get it."

Only nodding, Cal was still amazed at how well Rickie did. As she reached for her utensils, fingers not even touching the fork or knife, she felt the nudge into her back. Though stuffed up from the damp whether she could still smell Larry. She tried to ignore him but he sat down next to her.

"Nothing keeps you down does it?" He asked angrily. "What does it take."

Cal patiently waited for him to get to his point and get out. She wasn't in the mod for confrontation or feeling up to it.

"I heard Cal. I heard they jerked off all over . . ."

Bam!

Larry's face careened down to the table with a crash so fast, Cal's plate rattled and blood shoot out from the sides of Larry's face as if a melon was smashed before her. She jolted, then sprang up as fast as she could when she saw Billy directly behind Larry, more angry then she ever witnessed him.

Billy's hand was red from the tight grip he had to Larry's head, pinning him to the table. And with one quick motion, Billy clenched Larry's hair, whipped back his head. And in a swoop down to the table, Billy grabbed the knife and placed the sharp edge directly to Larry's arched throat speaking gruffly to him. "Guess who's out of the experiment?"

"Billy!" Cal screamed lunging forward and grabbing Billy's hand just as the knife seared into the skin drawing blood. "No." She stopped him from slicing any further. "He's not worth it Billy, please. He is not worth this on your conscience."

"Cal." Billy said her name painfully.

"No." Cal held his wrist tighter, burying her forehead to the back of his shoulder blade. "He'll get his. Trust me. He's not worth you doing this. Not you Billy. This isn't you."

Billy's hand trembled as it instinctively pressed the knife harder against Larry. And hearing Cal whisper one more 'please' to him, Billy dropped the knife. Cal's fingers immediately slipped in between his. And he released Larry harshly, turning around.

Cal pulled him gently away from the table. "Let's go. We'll eat at the room."

Billy closed his eyes. His body shook. "Cal, I'm sorry."

"No. Shh." She reached up and touched his face. "Thank you for defending me. He really will get what's coming to him and it will all be worth it." Cal's eyes shifted to Rickie who was closing in. "Rickie will you bring some food up to my room. The three of us will eat there."

"Sure Cal-babe." Rickie nodded stepped back, gave a thumbs up to Billy and walked away.

Cal held Billy's hand. "Let's go."

Before moving, Billy brought Cal into him, hugged her briefly, then keeping

his arm around her, more so for his own support, he walked from the dining area with her.

Rickie, before getting some breakfast for the three of them, wandered over to the table where Larry lay face down moaning. "Dude." Rickie snickered. "Did you like know you're bloods like all over the table?" Snatching up the ketchup bottle that laid on it's side, Rickie laughed once more and moved on.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
May 5th - 9:15 a.m.

“Can someone tell me why this fuckin asshole isn’t dead yet?” Aldo’s hand extended in a point as he sat in his leather seat in the control room. Papers spread across his lap, his own work he brought with him. “I hate that Larry Kale.” He shook his head after viewing a bloody Larry go into his bungalow.

Lyle spun around in his chair. “I thought Billy had him.”

“Yeah well, I’m personally thinking of buying out his investor.” Aldo shifted through his work.

“Why’s that?” Lyle asked laughing. “I thought you said you hated him.”

“I do. But anyone that lucky to escape all that he has escaped, just may survive this experiment. And if that’s the case, I want him.”

“To secure a win?”

“Hell no.” Aldo swayed his head. “To secure his accidental death when he arrives back.”

Lyle laughed some more. “Actually, I’m hoping Cal remembers him having something to do with what happened to her. We don’t know for sure. But my gut tells me he does.”

“Mine too.”

“But even aside from that.” Lyle swirled his chair. “With all the asshole has done, I am a bit surprised Cal just didn’t let Billy end it.”

“Nah.” Aldo made a scoffing face. “I know my girl. Trust me.” Aldo looked up to Cal’s monitor and smiled with a wink. “I believe she’s just waiting for the right moment.”

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 5th - 12:30 p.m.

"East." Jake stated as they trudged.

"Why east again?" Lou asked. "And why do I smell sulphur?"

"East because I say and sulphur because the volcano is near by."

"That's not good." Lou stated. "So we're on the other side of the island again?"

"You're not paying attention."

"I am. But we keep moving."

"We keep moving because they keep moving. We're bound to catch them when they rest up again. This island isn't all that big."

"Tell that to my legs." Lou looked down to his muddy shoes. "And now walking is harder since we're trudging in sludge."

"With all this. We'll have to be careful when we get to that next cavern." Jake stated.

"How do you know we're hitting another cavern?"

"Listen to the sound of your voice."

Lou sang out a note and shrugged. "Still sounds bad." He snickered. "Hey Jake. Just about when do you get to the point when you give up your search?"

"Never."

"Never?"

"Never." Jake reiterated. "Once, I guess about seven years ago there was this militant gorilla leader who was wiping out villages. Single execution style, women, children and such. I was sent into the jungle to find him. It took seventeen days but I tracked him down."

"And?" Lou asked.

"Killed him."

"I see." Lou widened his eyes. "Seventeen days?"

"Yep."

"Hey, uh Jake. I heard it took some marine only sixteen days to track down a militant gorilla . . ." Lou saw the glare he got. "Kidding. And . . . oh wow. Hey you're right." Lou saw what seemed like a break in the world. He stepped to the edge with Jake. "This is a new one."

"Yeah it is. Excellent huh?"

"How exactly are we getting across?" Lou questioned.

Jake pointed down.

Lou peered over. "Climbing."

"Nah. Carefully. It isn't that far and it really isn't that steep. Just watch your footing because the mud can make it slick and you'll . . ."

Lou's shriek out echoed and faded as the ground below him gave out and he tumbled, picking up mud, like a stone gathering moss, down the cavern hillside.

". . . fall." Jake tossed his hands in the air seeing Lou land on the bottom.

And Jake carefully, began to go down the hillside himself.

Lou grumbled as he swiped the mud from his face, lifting himself to his hands and knees. "Great,. Just great. Now I'm dirty. Not only do I have to piss in the woods, eat constipating food but now I'm . . . Oh wow." Lou rubbed his eyes again and separated the bush he knelt before. "Oh wow. Jake." He called out to him. "Jake."

Jake's large boots made a thunderous muddy splash as he made it to the bottom. "What's up."

"Look." Lou pointed.

Jake peered through the parted bush. He smiled. Beyond the bush was a small clearing set center of a wooded area. Three tents were set up, A burned out campfire in the middle. "Listen." Jake held up his finger.

Lou's ears zoomed in to the coughing. "Gangrene man?"

Jake nodded and looked again. "I don't see the others." Jake leaned into the bush. "But get your weapon ready. Just incase."

"Are you going in there?"

Again, Jake smiled.

Wilson coughed violently, fevered and a bit delirious. His chest rumbled with a thickness and his arm was swollen twice its size. He laid on the ground inside the tent wanting so bad for a blanket or a drink. In the middle of a coughing spell he heard the flap to his tent open. "Luther?" He called out.

"Guess again."

Wilson raised his head to look and in the middle of his gasp of surprise, a handful of mud was shoved in his mouth and Jake gripped on to his hair yanking the man from the tent. Wilson couldn't scream. He couldn't inhale. The mud seeping to his throat made him choke as he was drug painfully by his hair across the ground by a walking Jake.

Out of the camp area Jake pulled him, through the bush and passed Lou. When back into the muddy cavern bottom, Jake, with ease, tossed Wilson out. He landed face first in the mud. Jake stormed to the man who barely lifted himself up. His huge hand plowed down to the back of Wilson's head shoving his face back in the thin mud puddle. Jake waited, lifted him, let Wilson spit out the mud, and gasp for air, then Jake submerged him again. After a moment and feeling Wilson begin to shake, Jake lifted Wilson by his hair bringing him to his knees. Behind him, Jake dropped to his knees over Wilson's feet.

"Breathe." Jake ordered to him.

Wilson coughed, mud shot from his mouth,

"Take in a breath of air."

Wilson gasped and coughed. His hands reached up to his head to Jake's hand.

"Now. Beg for your pitiful life." Jake whispered harshly in his ear. "Beg."

“Please.” Wilson began to cry. “Please don’t kill me. Please I . . .” A gurgle and a painful moan erupted from Wilson along with a wet tearing sound as Jake’s hunting knife emerged into Wilson’s gut. After waiting, holding the knife in one spot, Jake, with all his emotions slowly and deeply, brought the knife up, ripping from Wilson’s stomach to his throat. Gutted, insides dangling out, Wilson dropped face first into the mud puddle when Jake released him with the retraction of the knife.

After wiping the blade clean in the back of Wilson’s pants, Jake stood up, put the knife back in his leg strap and faced Lou. “One easily down.”

“What now?” Lou asked.

Jake placed his hands on his hips and looked up and around. “Higher ground. We have to find a place where we can watch for the others to return. I have a plan.”

“What about him.”

Jake walked over to Wilson. “Take an end, He comes with us.”

Totally baffled on why he had to touch something disgusting, Lou didn’t argue. He would do what Jake wanted and needed him to do, no matter how bloody or revolting. That was why he was there with Jake. And after all, Jake was doing his job and who was Lou to question the details of a job Jake had held for so many years.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 5th - 8:10 p.m.

Paul's hand slipped from Cal's as he stepped away from the log she sat down upon. "Thank you for joining me."

"Oh sure." Cal shifted her eyes to Billy who sat next to her in the unity circle. Rickie and Judge were there too as they gathered around a campfire Paul had built.

Paul walked over to his spot. "Cal needs to contact her husband. She needs to spiritually let Jake know how well she is doing. She also needs to see that Jake is fine. In order to do that. We must clear our minds." Paul lifted the long pipe.

"Oh yeah." Rickie commented loudly. "We're chillin on serenity."

Cal watched Paul light it. "Can I clear my mind without that. Jake says they are illegal drugs." She nudged Billy when he snickered at her.

Paul lit the pipe. "You can try. But these are not illegal drugs. How can anything Mother Nature provides for us be illegal. They come from the land. The land is ours." Paul took a hit from the pipe. "We must clear our minds."

^^^

They were buried on a small ledge on the hillside, not far above the camp where the prisoners had their stuff. Yet the other two had not returned. Jake was certain that they wouldn't see him, nor did he care if they did. He was waiting eyes peeled to the dark campsite below. A small fire lit for his food was before his feet while Lou rested.

Jake's face glowed with not only the orange light of the flame but also the hatred for the men he tracked. Men his gut told him would be around soon. Men Jake knew would be no more by sun up.

Did his eyes play tricks on him? Were the flames blearing at the corner of his eye for too long. Jake's head raised when he saw the color of the fire turn white.. The stick he held in his hand dropped when he heard the soft echoing calling of his name.

"Jake." Cal called him.

Through the white smoke, Jake saw a blue hue appear, in it, Cal's face. "Cal."

"Jake. I see you. Jake . . . I love you and I'm doing better. I need you to know that."

"Cal?" Jake's heart dropped. Did something happen to Cal? Had she left this world for another and was reaching out one final time to him. A sense of fear struck him. Until he saw . . .

"Dude." Rickie called out slow and ghostly his face popping into the blue

hue in front of Cal. "Hey like Sarge, can you see me guy? I see you. Dude this is sooooo cool."

Jake's jaw clenched. "Rickie. Cal. Goddamn it are you smoking those illegal drugs again."

^^^^

"I think you've done enough for tonight." Billy commented pulling down the covers for Cal. "Jake will have a fit if he finds out I let you do so much today."

"Jake will be fine." Cal sat on the bed. "But can you believe what happened. I reach out. I go to some spiritual plane to speak to my husband and . . . and he bitches at me for five minutes."

Billy chuckled. "It was amusing."

"I guess." Cal shrugged. "Billy, you don't have to stay in here tonight. You can sleep in your own bed if you want."

"I'd rather stay here. Don't you want me to stay?"

"That's not it. I feel bad you sleeping on the floor."

Billy waved his hand. "Me? I sleep like a rock. Jake wants me here with you. Why, I don't know. If I were in his shoes I wouldn't."

"Why do you say that?" Cal asked.

"Cal." Billy tilted his head. "Come on. We had that incident."

"Why do you do that?" Cal stood up walking to Billy as he started to set up his laptop.

"Do what?"

"Call it the incident."

"Cal . . ."

"No." She shook her head. "You act like you bumped into me on the street. More than that happened Billy. We certainly had that little 'whoops Jake I'm pregnant' episode as proof."

Billy turned from his lap top, ran his fingers through his hair and took a breath. "I really don't like talking about this."

"We should. It happened."

"I know." Billy shook his head. "I guess. I guess because it's painful for me."

Cal was taken aback by his response. "I'm sorry. I . . ."

"No." Billy held up his hand. "Not that way. It hurts because of how I feel. And you know how I feel about you. There it was, a moment I thought about for three years. Holding you, touching you, kissing you. Making . . ." Billy swallowed. "Making love to you. And I feel like I forced you against your will."

"What?" Cal gasped in shock.

"Cal, come on. You were drugged."

"So were you."

"But . . . but I still remember how I felt." Billy said. "I remember loving the

fact that I was touching you. Feeling it in my heart. And the whole time even though I couldn't stop myself, I still knew what was going on. And Cal . . ." Billy took a step to her with a raised eyebrow. "I loved it."

"You don't think I knew what was going on?"

"You did?"

"Yes." Cal nodded. "Absolutely." She folded her arms. "I remember not being able to stop too. A part of me telling myself to stop. But a larger part of me ignoring it. That drug may have made us, well, insatiable. But that drug didn't start it. I did."

Billy raised his head.

"I kissed you before it took effect. I knew when I kissed you that it was wrong. Dead wrong. And Billy I could have stopped it. I didn't. Because I didn't want to just kiss you at that moment. I had been wanting to kiss you for the longest time."

"Cal. Look a kiss is one thing, what happened is another."

"Yeah, I know. And you kind of insult me Billy."

"What do you mean?" Billy asked.

"It's bad enough I cheated on my husband. But it wasn't nothing to me. It wasn't. And that's what makes my guilt so bad." Cal clenched her fist. "If it was nothing. I think I'd be able to get over it. But I can't blame it on the drug. Not all of it. So don't think for a second I didn't feel what you felt. I did. Feeling it . . . feeling it in my heart too. And then dealing with that."

"I'm still dealing with that." Billy spoke softly.

"I am too." Cal's voice dropped. "The drug was no excuse for that night. Like I have always said, it pushed us over the edge. It didn't take us there. We did. Our feelings did. *Our* feelings Billy. Not just yours. And now see, it's worse, because it has forced me to face feelings as a married woman I should not be having." Cal ran her hand over her head. "And Jake and I are working through . . ."

"Whoa." Billy stopped her. "Jake and you?"

"Yes. I tell him everything. Jake is aware that I have feelings for you."

"Oh my God." Billy was near panic.

Cal smiled. "No. How else am I supposed to work passed this. These mini private marriage counseling things Jake has us doing, deals with that."

"Then why does he let us be alone? Why does he trust us together?"

"Because Jake has this theory that we're just too good of friends. And somehow, somewhere we kind of let those friendship feelings get confused." Cal smiled. "He's very smart Billy. He knows he'll drive himself insane if he worries too much about it. He knows that if it happened again, he couldn't stop it. And he says we need each other too much as friends, that if he keeps us apart, he'll be forcing us to want it more."

"He's right." Billy said with a humbled look. "When we didn't talk for that week. It wasn't Cal the . . ." He snickered. "The fantasy girl I needed. It was Cal

my friend.”

“Same here.”

“You as my friend takes top priority. I need you.” Billy spoke with soft passion. “I don’t want to lose that or give that up. And I’ll do whatever it takes to keep that in my life. But . . .” Slowly his eyes closed. “But it’s hard sometimes. I wasn’t . . .” Billy squinted then opened his eyes fully. “I wasn’t supposed to fall in love with you. But I did.”

“And do you think I was supposed to get feelings for you? No. Jake is my husband. I live my life for him. I love him. Love him completely. But it’s confusing, because a part of me . . .” Cal’s head twitched slightly. “A part of me feels for you.”

“So tell me Cal. I’m willing to do anything. Tell me what I do. We do.”

“I think we’ll move passed this, I do. Keeping our priorities straight. My marriage. Our friendship. And keeping these in mind will see us though what has happened and what developed. And put closure to what you like to call the incident.” Cal reached up and lifted Billy’s head that dropped. “We never spoke of what happened. Talking about it right now is what we needed to do. It was a start because we never put closure to that night. We need closure to that night to move on.”

“I feel a lot better.”

“I do too.” Cal said with a small smile.

“Would it be crossing the line to ask you for hug. I just need that from you right now. Maybe to me that is my sense of closure. You know, to touch you just once without guilt. Silly huh?” Billy glanced at her with one eye shut.

“No not at all.” Cal stepped to him. “It’s not as silly as what I feel I need for closure.”

“And what is that.”

“This.” Cal moved in and up to Billy, slipping her hand behind his neck, bringing him down to her and softly laying her lips to his.

Billy felt her lips stay to his, linger there in a slight part that made him shiver. His hands moved so slow, almost hesitantly to her back, laying them flat there and pulling Cal into him. When her chest met his, Billy exhaled through that kiss, wrapping his arms tight around her, bringing her as close as he could, holding her as their joined lips moved tender and slow. The kiss ended as passive as it began. A slight reluctant separation, a hovering of mouths with warm breaths, then one last emotional embrace.

They pulled from each other, arms slowly letting go. Hands sliding to join, then give that final squeeze. Perhaps to both of them, that moment was a test. A test of their strength and weakness. A reassurance that their one night wasn’t *all* their fault. That they could remain in control, pull away and stop. And in a sense, adding some to the resolution that was so desperately needed.

“I suppose . . .” with an embarrassed smile Billy looked at Cal through the tops of his eyes. “I suppose I’m going to have to fear for my life again?” Billy

wincing running his hand over his head.

“No.” Cal swayed her head. “Not this time.”

“But you tell Jake . . .”

“I tell Jake everything yes. But this time . . . this time I think I’m going to keep this special moment just for me.” She winked. “Good night Billy.”

“Night Cal.” Billy’s eyes closed a little as he smiled peacefully, watching her climb into bed. Then Billy, turned moved to the desk and sat before his lap top. He took a moment, just a moment, to gather his thoughts and his feelings, then Billy, booted up his computer and planned on throwing himself into his work.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 5th - 9:55 p.m.

Luther laughed loudly then spit causing a sizzle in the small campfire he had just built. He plopped down to the ground, enjoying the flames and heat of the fire and what look like a rabbit on a stick. "Wilson!"

"He's still in his tent." Rapper said.

"Go check on his lazy ass and tell him if he wants to eat, he better get out here."

"Got it." Rapper was about to sit down, but had to stop. He staggered in a tired walk over to the closed tent. "Wilson." He called out. "Wilson." Rapper dropped to his knees. "Hey Luther he ain't responding."

"Go in there and shake him."

"Wilson." Rapper parted the tent and crawled half way in. He poked his head over the sleeping bag where he believed Wilson to be asleep. "Hey are you . . ." A choking grunt came from Rapper in his kneel over that sleeping bag, then the blood poured from his neck where it had just been sliced.

Jake quickly rolled out of the way from the rain of blood. Watched Rapper grab onto his throat, then fall lifeless to the sleeping bag, feet extended from the tent. Jake in a squat walked out.

He could see Luther, back to him, sitting at the fire, poking a stick tauntingly at the already dead rabbit. Putting the knife away Jake walked up behind him.

Luther saw the shadow approaching. "Can't get him up. Huh?" The shadow grew larger and larger. Luther dropped the stick, pulled himself up some and turned around.

Wham! Jake's monstrously thrown fist slammed into Luther sending him back and spinning face first into the fire.

Luther screamed and Jake lunged forward, snatching him by the shirt and pulling him from the flames. Jake tossed the big man off to the side and Luther began to shake. His face, hands, and chest burned. And he released painful cries from feeling the effects of his burned but not charred flesh.

Strongly Jake walked to him. He could have easily stepped over a trembling Luther but he didn't. Jake stepped onto the shin of Luther as if he were a step ladder, then with his entire weight placed on his other leg, Jake stomped onto Luther's foot, turning it with a loud crack. The cry from Luther echoed over and over again through the trees. And Jake, on a mission and no emotions on his face, bent down, picked a bellowing Luther up by his broken leg and pulled him across the campsite.

He wept like a baby, Luther did, body convulsing in agony. He could have

easily fallen to the ground, but he didn't. Being tied to that tree hindered that. He stood upright. And the leather band tied to his head, secured the fact that he had no choice but to see Jake standing ten feet in front of him.

Jake pulled out his revolver and checked his clip. He extended it toward Luther in an aim, holding it steady and keeping his glare on the man tied to a tree. "It's lights out for you baby doll. Remember those words?"

Luther tried to shake his head. His eyes bulged seeing even in the darkness the barrel of that gun.

"And like my wife. You're going to feel it all." Jake fired his shot but before he did, he dropped his aim, searing the bullet into Luther's knee. Jake waited until the first scream was over then he fired a second shot hitting Luther in the other thigh. A hesitation. A shot. A scream as the bullet penetrated Luther's groin. Another pause and then a shot hit into Luther's large gut with a thump. Blood poured as if Luther's body was a vase filled with holes. And Jake stepped closer. He lifted his aim directly between Luther's eyes. "I could end this for you now. But I don't think so. I'd rather watch you suffer." Then Jake took two steps back, fired mid chest of Luther. With the blood flowing, screams carrying out, Jake eyes never leaving Luther, lowered to the ground. He sat there, legs bent up some, eyes forward, and Jake enjoyed every second that he watched Luther slowly and agonizingly . . . die.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
May 6th - 3:00 a.m.

Beep-beep. Beep-beep.

Lyle's head, laying over the back of his chair, lifted forward. With his eyes still closed, he used the back of his hand to wipe the small amount of drool from the corner of his mouth and he reached over to shut off the alarm clock that he thought was beside him. His hand dropped upon a round object, but not the alarm clock. His hand fell onto Barb's breast as she sat in the chair next to him in the control room.

Smack!

"UH!" Lyle felt the sting to his hand and opened his eyes. "Sorry." He rubbed his eyes. "I heard my alarm."

"You heard an alarm all right." Barb, sipping her coffee pointed to the monitor of the dark unity circle. The infrared lighting was on. "Look."

Sniffing and groggy, Lyle tried to focus. He did and he smiled. "Jake."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 6th 3:03 a.m.

It was long, but a good writing night for Billy. Sitting, one leg up in the desk chair. Fingers clicking, face glowing from the computer screen, the only light in the room.

" . . . in a first real comparison. Things are much more clearer and I feel better about it myself. Though what I felt emotionally was still the same. Full, overwhelming. Other aspects were not. When I touched tonight, I felt tonight. There was no seeking more. It was right there. Tonight the differences were clearly there. I had denied for so long the effects of the drug, and now I know, looking back, what some of them were: The numbness of skin that I somehow chalked up to the excitement of the moment. The lack of feel in the fingertips which caused me then to grip more in order to have that skin sensation against mine. Feeling as if in a dream state. Foggy. I remember the warmth, magnified beyond belief, sweeping through me, addicting. However in my recollection now, there was one thing that should have tipped me off then. What was I thinking? Did I actually believe that I could exceed the human boundaries and limits that nature sets forth? I must have. For I totally missed and never questioned the fact that both my emotional and physical states of arousal remained long after, not only the average man, but the youngest and fittest of men, would have folded in defeat. Now, with my conscience somewhat a bit more . . ."

Billy, startled, stopped typing when he heard the click-click, of the door. His fingers lifted and his head turned to see Jake poke his head in. Before the Jake's name could escape from Billy's open mouth. Jake, held up a silencing finger and waved Billy out to the porch.

Billy stood from his chair, hit 'save' for his document and slipped out the ajar door. Running his fingers through his hair he stepped on the porch.

"How is she?" Jake asked him as soon as Billy walked out.

"She's doing good. Jake it's . . ." Billy's smile turned to a cringe. "Oh Jake." He covered his mouth and nose with his hand and stepped back. "Man." Billy tried desperately not to breathe in.

"Funny." Jake ran his hand across his own face covered with mud and blood.

"I take it all went well?" Billy spoke through his hand.

"They won't be a bother anymore." Jake spoke with certainty. "Listen, don't tell Cal I'm back yet."

Billy keeping his head turned and down, only moved his eyes to Jake. "I have news for you, the second you step into that room, sleeping or not Cal is going to know." Billy coughed the sickness from his throat.

"I want to surprise her . . ."

"You'll be a surprise all . . ." Billy gagged again. "Right."

"Ha, ha, ha." Jake stepped back off the porch. "I'm using your shower and I'll be back. O.K.?"

“You’re what?” Billy whispered loudly. “Jake. Don’t touch my towels.”

Jake lifted his hand in a wave as he moved across the unity circle.

“Jake.” Billy whispered out again, then walked off the porch to him, but not too close. He waited for Jake to turn around.

“Yeah?” Jake asked.

“It’s great . . . it’s *really* great that your back.”

Jake smiled. “Thanks.” And smelly, tired and wanting to get cleaned up, Jake headed to Billy’s bungalow.

^ ^ ^ ^

Besides feeling a million times cleaner after his half hour shower, and besides the exhaustion, a sense of familiarity hit Jake the moment he walked inside the dark quiet bungalow. It wasn’t the room that was familiar, but Cal. The feel of her filled the room. And like every person has their own scent, Jake missing her so much, was immediately pummeled by the scent of Cal, he breathed it in deeply with a smile and walked softly to the bed.

She lay on her side, gripping the pillow like Linus and his security bank. The sheet covered most of her. Her bruised, yet always perfect leg, protruded out and Jake instinctively touched it. While bringing his knee to the bed his hand ran softly up her thigh, barely grazing the skin. And when his hand reached her hip, as slowly and gently as he could, Jake slipped into bed. He brought the sheet over with a slight flap to cover them both. Trying with diligence not to shake the bed or disturb her, he inched his way to Cal, all the way until her back pressed against his body. Sliding his hand from her hip across her stomach, Jake kissed Cal softly, whispered the words, ‘I love you’ and so comfortable, Jake shut his eyes and passed right out.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island
May 6th - 6:00 a.m.

Rough, big, and sporting the wedding band that had to be custom made for him. Cal recognized the hand well as she opened her eyes to see it draped over her hip. Immediately she was filled with excitement, pulling on the heavy arm, feeling it, then spinning to her back to see Jake, looking so peaceful, almost child-like as he slept.

“Jake.” She whispered his name with enthusiasm, laying her hand on his cheek. She brought her lips up to his softly closed mouth. “Jake.”

Jake nuzzled his head slightly, kissing Cal without opening his eyes. Then without saying anything, only giving a slight moan, he brought her back closer to him and continued to sleep.

^^^

“Dead!” Jake blasted to Rickie while pointing to the door. “Now out!”

“But like Sarge, you have to tell me how.” Rickie pleaded. “Billy said you smelled real bad.”

“Out. They’re dead. That’s all you need to know. Out.” Jake opened the door for him. “And you too.” He told Billy. “You spent enough time alone with my wife. Which by the way, you need to work on some fuckin inner strength pal.”

Billy turned white as a sheet. “What . . . what do you mean Jake.”

“Hmm.” Jake grumbled. “Out.”

Not really wanting to get further into Jake’s comment, Billy hurried and left. Rickie slowly moved out behind him and Jake closed the door.

“Cal.” He stepped down into the room as she sat at the table. Jake spoke strongly. “First off. I missed you. I worried about you and I love you dearly. But . . . you pissed me off. You are really pushing my limitations as an understand man when you hit on other men and use illegal drugs in my absence.”

“Jake.” Cal slowly closed her eyes and stood up. “I’m sorry.”

Jake grumbled. “I doubt that. I tell you what it is. I just give you way too much attention and affection. You can’t handle it and go into withdrawal when I’m not around. I hate to think of what you were like when I was away for nine weeks last tour.”

Cal smiled and stepped into Jake. “Thank you.”

“For what?” He wrapped his arms around her.

“Just thank you.”

Jake lowered his head to her and kissed her. “Now, change of tone. Let’s sit down.” He grabbed her hand and led her to the table again. “Sit down.” When Cal did he knelt before her. His hands clasped hers. “You looking like this right now .

..” Jake exhaled. “Makes me feel really good. I am so glad you’re better. So glad. My heart was broke Cal. I couldn’t think at first. Then as I walked around out there, all I did was think. And I need to tell you something.” He lowered his lips to her hand. “I realized how badly I wanted to have a baby. Our family. And Cal, as soon as we get back, the second we get back, I want to start trying.”

“Jake . . .”

“No listen to me OK?” Jake stood up. “What I’m going to say is very difficult.”

“Jake . . .”

“Cal, please.” Jake held up his hand. “For a month we got used to having a baby. I’ll understand if you don’t want to try again. I will. Do you?”

“Do I what? Want to have a baby with you?”

“Yes.”

“Of course I do. Jake I . . .”

“Cal, listened. Not that I mind putting out fifty thousand dollars. I don’t. But you still, you still don’t know what you’re getting. Do you know what I mean?”

“No.” Cal shook her head. “You’re rambling. And that is unusual.” She stood up. “But I need . . .”

“I won’t ramble. Now I don’t want you to get the wrong idea here. No, Wait. I’ll explain it so you don’t get the wrong idea. Clinically and medically speaking, I think, I think we should talk to Billy about possibly supplying what we need to father the baby.”

Cal began to laugh.

Jake swayed his head. “I didn’t intend for that to be funny.”

“It’s not. But can you tell me. Why Billy?”

“He’s your well, friend. And . . . we know him. And I just got used to the fact that he was the supplier. Fifty thousand dollars or not, a part of me will still wonder, you know.”

“Yes I do. And I’m glad you don’t mind Billy being the, as you put it, supplier.”

“Why? Were you thinking of it?” Jake asked.

“No.” Cal moved close to him. “Jake there’s something you need to know.”

“What’s that.”

“Sweetie . . .” Cal rested her hand on his cheek. “I’m still pregnant.”

Jake’s heart dropped and his mouth opened. “What . . . you’re . . . I thought . . . Cal?”

Cal nodded with a smile. “They did an ultra sound. They tested me and I did miscarry. But . . .” She stopped him before he could say another word. “I miscarried . . . one of the babies. The second embryo is still attached and doing fine.”

“Oh my God.” Jake said with such a gasp.

“That was my reaction too. I thought I lost it. I thought it was over. Who would have thought we were given a second chance, Jake. We were given a back

up plan. And isn't that so like the Graisons. Always with a back up plan."

"Cal." Jake spoke her name in awe. But still within the lines of Jake's inability to show his enthusiasm. "I am so happy."

"Really?"

"Oh God yes. Cal . . ." Jake searched for words. He didn't know what to say. His eyes locked on to hers and he lowered down to his knees. His hands, fingers spread, laid--like a kid in discovery--on her stomach. Then moving them to her hips, Jake pressed his lips to her and pulled Cal to him and held her.

^ ^ ^ ^

Standing center of the bungalow room, Cal looked up to the open ceiling hatch.

"Watch out." Jake called down.

"Can I come up?"

"No." With Jake's answer down came a rope ladder. "Long enough?"

"Yes. Please can I come up?"

"No climbing." Jake ordered.

Cal watched the ladder pull up then Jake's feet as they emerged from the ceiling and Jake jumped down. "When?"

"Couple days." Jake dropped to the floor. "O.K. watch." Jake walked to the bed and lifted the M-16. "You're tall enough to do this.. One good jump . . . which you won't do now . . . and you should be able to catch the stand of the gun on the rope ladder bringing it down."

"Why are we going over this?"

"Humor me." Jake told her. "If I'm outside, and you need out. This is your route. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Good. You know what's going to be next don't you. They're really gonna start to throw the physical stuff at us. And with you in your condition . . . no Cal, no rolling those eyes, with you in your condition, we have to make everything a little easier." Jake reached up to the rope that dangled, pulled on it and shut the hatch. He untied that rope. "Now, let's start working on those batman hooks for our ropes. I want to put, not only ladders in Billy and Rickie's rooms, but I want them to have a climbing rope as well."

"Sounds time consuming."

"It is." Jake tossed the rope he held onto the bed "Of course Rickie doesn't need an escape route. As you know now, he'll can monster his way out of anything."

Cal giggled. "Not you too Jake. Are you buying that Rickie going monster story. Jake."

"Cal?" Jake turned slowly and looked at her. "No one broke it to you?"

"Broke what?"

Jake bit his bottom lip.

^ ^ ^ ^

Cal's mouth was wide open in shock as she sat on the floor with Jake and Rickie. "No. You're joking right?"

Jake shook his head. "No, I'm not."

"Rickie?" She looked at him. "You really go monster?"

"Not very often Cal-babe." Rickie assured her. "Only when the need exceeds."

Jake rolled his eyes. "It's under control."

"Jake." Cal gasped. "I bet you were shocked when you saw this."

Rickie laughed. "Cal-babe like the Sarge knew for years."

Cal's eyes grew wide as she glared at Jake. "You knew?"

"Cal, in my defense . . ."

"You knew for . . . for years and you didn't tell me Rickie was a Stasis?"

"Cal please." Jake held up his hand. "Rickie is not a Stasis. Maybe wolfman Rickie, but not a stasis. Instead of the moon, it's his emotions that transform him. Why tell you. We had it under control."

"You should have told me! This poor boy." Cal pulled Rickie into her. "This poor boy probably needed to let this secret loose and you wouldn't let him."

"There was no need to." Jake grunted as he watched Rickie, head to Cal's chest, smiling. "And get off." He pulled Rickie away. "That's incestuous. Anyhow, this is why I work him out. Run out his energy so his emotions really don't get the best of him. Cal. You should see how far this kid can jump." Jake nodded impressed. "He is like the ultimate soldier and . . . he can't die. Well, unless we sever his brainstem."

"Ouch." Rickie grabbed the back of his neck. "Like dude, don't even say that."

"So the institute told you?" Cal asked.

"Yes." Jake answered. "They discovered by accident that Rickie turned monster when the president interrupted his soap opera on a Friday afternoon. Since then, they felt exerting him would help. And I have exerted Rickie. The other day was the only other time he really turned."

"Not true." Rickie held up his finger. "I turned another time."

"When?" Jake asked, then his eyes widened. "Oh."

"When?" Cal repeated.

"Cal." Jake interrupted. "The story does not need to be told."

"When?" Cal looked at Rickie.

Jake saw Rickie getting ready to explain. "Rickie, it is not appropriate discussion to be having with Cal."

"When?" Cal asked again.

"Rickie." Jake warned.

Rickie snickered. "Sarge, she's like drilling me here, I have to." Rickie faced Cal. "Cal-babe, it was like so funny. I turned monster the first time I had sex after like coming back to life. I was with Estelle . . ."

Jake cringed. "Rickie. No details."

But Rickie continued on. "We were like rockin, you know and like all of the sudden . . ."

"Rickie." Jake snapped. "Enough. Cal I heard this story. You don't need to hear details."

"Yeah I do." Cal laughed. "Go on."

"Cool." Rickie bobbed his head. "So there we were, doin the deed." Rickie held out his hands and shifted his body.

"Rickie!" Jake yelled. "Do we need visuals?"

"Like, yeah." Rickie said. "Have to get the feel of the story. So in the middle Cal-babe, all of the sudden, this growl comes from me. I look down to my hands strategically placed on her butt." Rickie snickered at Jake's audible wince. "And my fingers are longer. Like really long. Then Estelle, right, she's start's screaming . . ." Rickie femaled his voice. "Oh, Oh, Oh Rickie, you animal give it to me." Rickie held up his hand. "And I'm thinking, whoa,. Like I'm the king, I was making her sound like you Cal-babe when you and the Sarge go at it. So I'm growling and going , she's screaming and I'm thinking. You know, if my hands are bigger maybe . . ."

"Rickie!" Jake yelled.

"And . . ." Rickie winked. "Ha, ha, ha. I *was* the man. And I was like Herman on Lilly. I was the monster."

Cal shifted her eyes to Jake who covered his face. "Then what happened?"

"I killed her." Rickie stated calmly. There was silence when he saw Cal's mouth drop open.

"Well." Cal cleared her throat. "You couldn't help it, could you. I wondered what happened to her. Oh well."

"Cal." Jake snapped at her. "He's lying to you. He didn't kill her."

"Oh." Cal shrugged. "It made sense though."

Rickie started to laugh. "Really though. When the act ended so did the monster being inside the Rickie-Meister. I came home and told the Sarge all about it. He like didn't want to hear it then either."

"Do you blame me Rickie?" Jake said with edge. "The visual of you having intercourse is bad enough. But you having relations with a fifty-year old heavy set flabby woman was a revolting image I didn't wish to have before bed. And Cal, why do you have that look on your face?"

It was if she were in thought. And Cal was. Her head tilted with a far off look. "Rickie?" She spoke slowly. "If you go monster while having sex, what about . . ."

"Cal please" Jake stopped her.

"What about when you . . ."

“Cal.” Jake gave his usual siren yell.

“Well?” Cal looked at Rickie despite Jake’s whine.

Rickie growled.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
May 6th - 7:30 p.m.

Like an excited child, Greg nearly skipped down the steps of the control room and stood behind Barb. "This is sooner than we expected. Connect me."

Barb pressed the intercom button on the speaker phone and leaned back. "Stan?"

"Hey Barb?" Stan called out. "Is he there?"

"I'm here." Greg answered. "Did you locate them already?"

"Yes." Stan said. "Porter and Joseph went out. Well, rather they lucked out. We found the bodies. One in a tent, one to the side of their set up camp, and one . . ." Stan cleared his throat. "Get this. Tied to a tree."

"And?" Greg asked.

"And it appears Jacob Graison repeats his mistakes with his revenge kills." There was a long dramatic silence. "Like with Griff, on all three of them, Jake killed them, but he didn't sever the brain stem."

Greg clenched an excited fist, tapping it on the table. "Excellent." He smiled. "Excellent."

THE GAME

Unlike with the mental challenges, every physical challenge is real. The unimaginable will be thrown your way. And it won't stop. Once you have hit that phase of the experiment, know that it will not end until you, walk off that island. But you must fight or walking off that island will never happen for you.

--Excerpt from 'Surviving the Stasis'

--By Jake and Cal Graison

CHAPTER SIXTY

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
May 20th - 3:00 a.m.

It was set up as if for a scene where they held the meeting room. Perhaps to add the illusion that it wasn't the wee hours of the morning. A black curtain was drawn completely around the meeting level of the control room, blocking the eight investors from seeing below. Lights were added to that level. Coffee urns set up, and danish. A perky Greg, a solemn Dr. Jefferson, and seven agitated investors were all around the table.

There wasn't the feel that there usually was at any of the other investors meetings. Possibly the fact that the meeting was held so early in the morning had something to do with it. But Greg was ready and up for it.

Slumped over the open updated folders the seven investors sat. Thinking more of sleep than an experiment update. Ignoring their coffees because it was just too early to consume the beverage.

"Here we are nearly three months into the experiment." Greg spoke. "Just about at the half way point. Though we lost two lives right away, we haven't lost any since. We gained a new participant. Had some mental endurance going on. We have one near breaking. Kale. And one over the edge. Paul. But . . . seeing how Paul is still functional, he remains in the game."

Aldo shook his head, sipped his coffee that had grown cold. "Haynes, for a half an hour we have been listening to you rehash the participant mental status. Statistics for outside funding research. Do you have something to do today?"

"No." Greg answered with a quirky smile. "Why would you ask that?"

"Well seeing that you tell us the meeting was last night and rescheduled for this hour of the morning. I just figured it's the only time you could have done it. You do realize Jefferson could have filled in."

"I realize that." Greg said with sarcasm. "However. I have my reasons for bringing you all here at this hour. Trust me. See . . ." Greg began to pace. "We are almost half way through. No more lives lost. No participants out do to mental capacity. So we feel it is time to move on, possibly push it, and add a little excitement. Would you all agree with that?"

A group full of agreeing moans filled that level.

"Good." Greg smiled. "I thought so. And we are going to push it. Add excitement. We here at Caldwell thought you would like to be witness to the event that does it. That is why we called this meeting so early." Greg picked up a remote control. "You see, this morning we are not only going to be challenging the participant status, but we are also going to be challenging your status as investors as well. By dawn today, one of you *will* be out." With a press of a button, the lights went out and the black curtain surrounding the meeting level drew open. All of the monitors on the wall were lit. "Gentlemen lets's watch our screens." Greg

saw those whose backs faced the screens, turn their chairs around. “And let the game begin.”

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 20th - 3:05 a.m.

Jake's knee hit with a bang to the floor first before the rest of his big body pummeled down as well. His head immediately sprang up and he whined subtly looking at Cal. He shook his head like a dog to clear some, but not all of the grogginess. He hated that bed. Jake was good at many things, but his inability to adapt to a bed too short and too small for him, began to irritate Cal. And it seemed the more her hormones increased in the pregnancy, so did her agitation with Jake. He couldn't help it. But he didn't want to hear her bitch. It was the same thing every time he went to get out of that bed from a deep sleep. Swinging his legs over and hitting the floor before he expected to, caused his legs to buckle and Jake to drop. Usually the bang woke up Cal. But not his time. Jake was quick. He caught himself.

Tossing the covers back on the bed that dropped with him, Jake picked himself up from the floor, adjusted his boxers shorts and stammered to the bathroom. He shut the door some and turned on the light in one motion. Rubbing his eyes from the burning brightness, Jake moved to the toilet and reached for the seat. Halfway in the middle of lifting it up, Jake heard a long drawn out moan. Deep. Echoing. He lifted the seat, leaned his body to the door, and peeked out to a still sleeping Cal. Shaking his head, Jake returned to his male stand before the iron horse.

Still somewhere between an awake state and sleep state, Jake swayed as he fiddled with the opening to his boxers, exhaled and began to go. It wasn't two seconds into his going that a sudden bang on the small glass bathroom window next to him, startled Jake and nearly made him become the fireman he didn't want to be. Regaining control of his aim, Jake looked over his left shoulder to the window. And while still holding steady, without a flinch, Jake's eyebrow raised high when he saw a person outside that window. Undeterminable gender, the person, held its hands firm to the glass. It pressed its ghostly white face with rotting skin so hard against the window pane that the glass surface seemed to separate the unhealed gashes on their cheek. Hands hitting slowly, very slowly against the glass. Moaning with an open mouth showing broken teeth. And the mouth moved in a gnaw seemingly trying to bite their way in.

Jake blinked, finished going, fixed his boxers and flushed the toilet. After lowering the seat and shrugging, he moved to the sink. "I haven't fuckin watched that movie in so long. Why the fuck am I dreaming of this."

Drying his hands, Jake shut off the light and staggered his way back to bed. "Cal." He put his knee on the bed first then plopped down. "Cal."

"All right. I'm up."

"No. No." Jake scooted into bed. "I have to tell you about this dream I'm having now."

Cal rolled from her side to her back. "Jake, you can't be having a dream.

You're awake."

"Well, I didn't see what I saw."

"And what was that?"

"A zombie."

"Aw Jake." Cal pulled the covers over her shoulder. "I hated that movie. Why would you tell me about that."

"I thought you'd . . ." Jake's head swayed to the door when he heard the bang. "Did I dream that?"

Cal sat up. "No."

There was another bang. And another and then . . .

"Sarge! Sarge." Rickie turned the locked handle. "Dude, let us in! Uh! It's like night of the living dead out here."

"Fuckin Rickie." Jake flung the covers off of him. "I wish he'd hold off on his practical jokes until a decent hour."

"Sarge." Rickie shrieked. "Sarge!"

"Are!" Reed called out.

"Colonel!" Lou called out too.

"What the fuck?" Jake got out of bed and turned on the light. "They're all in on this?"

"Ignore them Jake, they'll go away, And turn out the light."

Jake stopped turned to the bed and the banging continued. "Assholes." He stormed to the door, unlocked it and flung it open. "If you three don't . . ."

With loud unison screaming, Rickie, Lou, and Reed barreled into Jake's room, slamming the door closed with all three of their bodies.

"Sarge." Rickie spoke out of breath. "Get your gun. Get something. Help. I'm scared Sarge." Rickie ran to the bed. "Cal-babe."

"Rickie!" Jake ran his hand down his own face. "Get out of bed with her."

"Jake." Cal gasped at him. "He's shaking."

"He's fucked up. Rickie, out of my bed!"

Cal felt Rickie slide from the bed. "Rickie hand me my shorts."

Jake looked at the three, of them all wide eyed. "Now . . . Cal?" He saw Cal slipping on her shorts. "Get back into bed"

"We have company in our room."

"We have morons in our room Cal. Now are you three high?" Jake blared.

"No." Rickie answered.

"Drunk?"

Rickie shook his head. "No. Sarge."

"Then why are you in my room."

"Sarge like, it's like night of the living dead out there. They're like moseying into the circle guy. Shoot them. You have to shoot them before they eat us."

"Rickie." Jake said with annoyance. "I know this is a joke of yours."

"No." Rickie whipped his head back and forth. "See for yourself guy. If it's a joke, it's not me playing it. We're being invaded by the walking dead."

"The walking dead?" Jake had a chuckle to his voice as he moved to the door wondering who actually was playing the joke. "There are no walking . . ." Jake opened the door. A man stood there, head slumped, standing as if strings held him up. White, decaying. With a deep moan he swung his arm out at Jake. Jake shut the door. "Dead."

"See!" Rickie screamed and huddled with Lou and Reed. All three of them began to ramble. Fast, furiously and frightened.

Cal stood up from bed. "Jake. What's going on?"

"All right." Jake held up his hand and cringed. "Knock it off!" He blasted the scared three. "Now! I am going to show you that there are no walking dead. This is part of a Caldwell mental endurance that you three!" Jake pointed at them. "Are falling for." He reached for the door again despite the begging screams of 'no' from Rickie, Lou and Reed. "Shut up!" Jake opened the door. The zombie like man still stood there, again he moaned and swung out to Jake. But Jake grabbed hold of his arm and yanked on him. "Come on in." With a leading toss backwards, Jake moved the man in the room. Before Jake could shut the door, he peered into the unity circle to see about fifteen of them wandering around aimless. And from the path more, very slowly trickled in. With a disbelieving shake of his head, Jake shut the door. He turned around, the zombie man stood center room slowly swinging out his arms. Rickie, Lou and Reed hid behind Cal. "What the hell. Be men for Christ's sake." Jake stepped forward.

Cal held her nose. "Jake he smells."

"Cal, please." Jake held up his hand. "I have to prove a point. An Actor." Jake indicated to the man. "He is an actor." Jake walked around to face off the man. "Tell them."

The zombie like man, snarled with a snap of his teeth toward Jake.

Jake snickered. "Nice. Very nice. O.K. I get it." Jake clapped. "Good job. You can't tell them." Jake looked again at Rickie, Lou and Reed. "Gentleman. This man is not dead." Jake poked the man. "He has flesh. "He is an actor, sent here to frighten you. I would think Caldwell could come up with something better than stealing the plot from a bad 'B' movie. But . . ." Jake lifted his arms "They did . . . Reed." Jake pointed to him. "Come here."

Reed shook his head slipping more behind Cal.

"Reed!" Jake yelled. "Come here!"

Timid Reed stepped moving only inches to Jake. Jake snatched him up and Reed screamed.

"Look." Jake told him. "Look at him. Does he look dead."

"Es." Reed answered.

"No." Jake argued. "See for yourself. Show them, earless and tongueless, you're the strong one so you three can take your new buddy and get the hell out of my room." Jake watched Reed apprehensively extend his hand, and Jake turned to Rickie. "See. Now if Reed can . . ."

Reed's blood curdling scream was soon joined by Rickie's Lou's and now

Cal's as blood shot forward from Reed's hand that was chomped within the mouth of the zombie like man.

"Oh shit." Jake spun, pulled on Reed's arm, freeing him up less four fingers. "Cal, put a tourniquet on him!" Jake ordered, moving a bleeding Reed her way as he reached out and punched the man in the side of the head. Like a domino, the man fell sideways. Jake hurried to him, dragged him to the door, opened it and flung him out. The force that Jake tossed him caused the man's body to roll off the porch and knock into several other creatures that were moving toward the steps. Jake slammed the door and rushed back inside.

Lou held a towel to Reed's hand while Cal tied a belt over it.

"Jake?" Cal called to him with question.

Jake said nothing, he opened the desk drawer, grabbed an armful of papers, took them to the fireplace and tossed them in. Lifting the matches from the ledge. Jake ignited the papers. "Bring him here. Now!" Jake grabbed the poker and placed it in the flames. "Hurry!"

Cal and Lou had to nearly drag Reed over. He screamed and cried.

"Lou." Jake held the poker still in the fire. "Hold him. Cal grab his arm."

Lou secured his entire weight around a struggling Reed, While Cal braced his arm under hers and brought it to Jake.

Jake raised his eyes to Reed. "Sorry." With his left hand, Jake clenched on to Reed's wrist yanking him forward. The towel dropped, blood shot out and Jake, with his right hand swung forward the red hot poker. With a sizzle he placed it and held it to the first finger, then the second. On the third finger, Reed screamed so badly in pain he passed right out. Jake dropped the poker and stood up. He listened and heard the increasing sound of moans outside. "O.K." Jake scratched his head in thought, looked in disgust to the bloody mess on the floor and moved by Lou who held on to Reed. "From what I saw, there's about twenty, twenty-five of these things out there. These little shacks are not safe. We'll get Reed down to the dining building, it's all metal. Lou you arm up to guard down there. That will be our secondary shelter. This shouldn't be a problem though. Cal you with me for taking them out?"

Cal smiled. "You bet."

"Let's arm up. Rickie . . ." Jake closed his eyes and winced. "Rickie, goddamn it quit hiding under that bed!"

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
May 20th - 3:30 a.m.

The tiredness, the grogginess and early morning irritability had been replaced. The investors moved down into the control room. Chattering and laughing away, drinking their coffee passing the danish and donuts about, but always, always watching the monitor screens on the wall.

Behind them, Greg stood pleased.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 20th - 3:40 a.m.

Armed with rope, shotguns, handguns, a strapped M-16 to their backs and enough ammo, both Jake and Cal stood first before the door. Lou armed also, had Reed draped over his shoulder, and Rickie, hesitant was there as well.

Jake pulled his gun forward and reached for the door. "Lou, we'll clear a path. You bolt off for the dining area. There really isn't that many." Jake opened the door. The moans pummeled them.

"Oh my God." Cal raised her weapon. "What did you just say Jake."

Lou peeked over Jake's shoulder. The unity circle was mobbed with them and the opening door sound was like their dinner bell. So many of them turned and headed to Cal and Jake's porch.

Cal stepped out with Jake and raised her weapon. She shuddered. Then she saw Jake peer at her. "Sorry. I had to get that out of the way."

"Can we proceed. We have to clear a path."

"Jake. Wait." Cal grabbed his shotgun. "We can't just shoot them. We have to shoot them in the head."

"What?" Jake questioned seeing them move closer. "Cal we . . ."

"Jake I saw the movie. They won't die. You have to shoot them in the head. We have to do all head shots."

"We do not."

"Do too."

"Cal. We do not."

"Jake., I'm telling you."

"And Cal. I'm telling you." He raised his weapon and pumped the chamber. "We do not have to shoot . . ." Jake blasted forth with the shotgun, one of them flew back and dropped dead. "See."

"O.K., O.K., I just thought." Cal started to shoot. Taking them out as they moved to the porch.

"Here's your path." Jake stepped down as he called to Lou. He could see Paul on the roof of his own porch shooting arrows at the ten or so that reached up trying to grab him. "Tonto's occupied. Hit it Lou."

Lou slipped behind Cal and Jake, off the porch completely, gave a shove to one of those things that neared him and bolted.

"Rickie." Jake called and fired. "Feel like being a hero."

"No." Rickie answered.

"Tough." Jake fired, dropping them like Cal. "Fuck, where are these things cal coming from." He could see more pouring in from the path.

Cal shot while speaking. "There has to be at least sixty now,."

"At least." Jake responded and motioned his head to Judge's bungalow. About eight encircled his bungalow. "Rickie. Go get judge."

"No." Rickie argued.

“Rickie? Go get him. He’s can’t get away from these thongs if they get in there, they’ll kill him.”

“They’ll kill me Sarge.”

“You’re faster than them. Just bolt over there and get him down to the dining building.”

“Will you guys like cover me?” Rickie asked.

“Yeah sure.” Jake fired.

“O.K.” Rickie took a deep breath and sprinted from that porch to Judges, screaming all the way.

It was like a video game, steady they came, steady was the firing and steady they fell.

Jake grinned. “Is this a fuckin blast or what?”

“I can’t believe they threw this at us.” Cal pumped the chamber. “I have to reload.” She stepped back further on the porch. “But it is fun.” She reached for more shells and as she did she saw it. About fifteen pounding and tearing at Billy’s bungalow. “Oh my God. Jake.”

“What?”

“Billy.”

Jake lowered his weapon to look to his left. “Shit.”

“You know the way he is.”

“Yeah I do.” He heard Cal reloading and felt her move by him. Jake snatched her arm and pulled her back. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Getting him.”

“Right. Stay here. As a matter of fact . . .” Jake stepped off the porch, was bumped by one of them, spun his shotgun nailing him in the side of the face, then fired, blasting it back. “Get to the roof Cal and we’ll take them out from above.”

Cal nodded staying put as a cover for Jake and also for Rickie who was leading Judge from his bungalow.

Running, spinning, firing, Jake made it across the circle to the left and to Billy’s door. He cleared the porch, tossing some of them off, and shooting them. He knocked. “Bill.” No answer and Jake tried the knob. Locked. “Billy!” He yelled. “Fuckin door.” Stepping back, Jake barged to the door, shoulder first, cracking it open. He tried to shut it but it swing back open. “Shit. Bill!” Jake called out to Billy who was sleeping on the bed. He raced to the desk. Grabbed the chair and secured it under the knob of the door. Jake stepped down into the room and turned on the lights. “Billy get up. Bill. Get up.” He moved to the bed nudging him. “Billy get up!” Jake shook a sound asleep Billy. “Bill get . . .” Jake’s head jolted to the right when he heard the crash of glass. He moved to the bathroom door, kicked it open and saw three of those things reaching and trying to get in through the small window. Jake lifted his shotgun, and fired three shots.

Billy laying on his stomach, slowly lifted his head with a ‘huh’. He rubbed

his eyes. "Jake? What's going on?"

"Rise and shine lover boy." Jake tossed Billy a pair of pants. "We're under attack and you can be breakfast if you don't move your ass out of this weakened domain."

"What . . ." Billy grabbed his pants. "What are you talking about?"

"Would you care to move a little faster Billy." Jake ordered as walked center room, lifted his shotgun and poked to the ceiling, opening the hatch. "Let's go." He pulled down the ladder.

"Jake why are we . . ." Billy spun to the sound of a crack. The chair that held the door crushed when the door flew open bringing in a stream of eight or nine walking zombie-like people. Billy let out that peep of a female shriek and reached for the rope, hesitating.

"What?" Jake asked him. "Hurry." He fired at one of them,

Billy's eyes shifted. He saw his two fireboxes, closed and secure on the floor. "Just checking." He flew up the rope.

"Fuckin journalist." After firing once more Jake began his ascent up the roped ladder.

At least fifteen had surrounded the bungalow, pounding, but Cal made it like a football player through them, and using her rope, climbed up the side to the roof. Tossing her weapon behind her, she lifted the hatch, attached her roped and climbed down half way before dropping to the floor inside. She lifted up slowly to see Larry cowering in a corner.

"Cal." He stood up. "What are you . . ."

"I'm here to help you Larry." She smiled.

"Oh God. Thank God. They're everywhere."

"I know." Cal spoke with compassion. "It's terrible. Ready?"

"Yes." Larry moved to the rope and saw her going to the front door. "What are you doing? They're right out there."

Cal could hear them banging on the door. "I know." She lifted her revolver from her waist and shifted back the chamber. "But it's the only way . . ." Cal turned the door knob and pulled the door open. "For you to die the way you're supposed to." Holding out her revolver Cal stepped to him, fired two sequential shots hitting Larry in his knees. She ran passed him as he screamed and dropped to the floor and she grabbed onto the rope. Sticking the revolver back in her waist, Cal smiled and hoisted herself up.

"Cal." Larry tried to get up, his eyes filling with horror as they began to surround him. "Cal don't . . ." Gut wrenching and agonizing, Larry screamed out long and hard.

Making it to the roof, Cal looked down to see the things swarming in the bungalow below her. Larry could no longer be heard or seen. Only shooting blood gave her the security that all was going well. She lifted up the rope, and slammed

the hatch.

On Billy's roof, Billy tugged on a shooting Jake's arm. "Jake."

"What?"

"Look." Billy pointed to the roof of the bungalow next to his.

"Aw." Jake said with disgust, lowering his weapon and storming to the edge.

"Cal! What the fuck are you doing over there."

"I'm sorry Jake." Cal tugged on her ear and fired below. "I can't hear you."

"I said. What the . . ." Jake stopped. Jake looked and then Jake grinned when he saw the line of those things, each of them carrying various body parts ranging from limbs to intestines, chomping on them, as they walked from Larry Kale's bungalow. Jake handed the shotgun to Billy.

"What?" Billy looked at it surprised.

"Time to defend yourself." Jake with a wide eyed happy look kept his stare on Cal. He back up all the way to the other side of Billy's roof, took a second, then moved forth with a charging run across that roof. He could hear Billy call out his name as he leaped one leg out over the distance of the two bungalows, Landing on Larry's roof with a drop and a roll.

"Jake." Cal rushed to him as he stood up. "What are you doing."

"Cal." He grabbed hold of her face and kissed her. "Excellent job babe. Excellent." He kissed her again. Only he pulled her into him, widening his mouth hard and wide against hers in a deep sexual way.

Cal pulled away with a giggle.

Hard and with a smack, Jake kissed her one more time and reached for his M-16. "Let's lay them out and get this over with."

"You got it." Cal pulled for her M-16 and she moved with him and positioned herself with a one leg kneel next to Jake on the roof. "Hey Jake?" Cal winked. "Sex before we clean up this mess?"

Before firing out, Jake looked at her with a smile. "You know it." He lifted his weapon and hesitated again. "Cal."

"Huh?" Cal stopped also.

"Wanna compete for who's on top?"

"There's no competition there." Cal grinned. "Prepare to work your ass off Lt. Col. Graison."

With a loud 'HA!' Jake lifted his weapon, and at the same time, Both he and Cal both began to fire into what looked like a blanket of walking dead below them.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

Caldwell Research Center - Los, Angeles, CA
May 20th - 4:35 a.m.

Larry Kale's investor slowly left the control room. There was silence and a somber feel in there. But once he was out the door, the enthusiastic talking continued.

All the investors did the same thing. Eyes stayed peered to the monitors. Watching the participants with the exception of Cal and Jake, gathered in the dining building. Seeing the massive amount of dead in the unity circle. And waiting for an explanation for what they had just seen.

But they wouldn't get one. Not yet. Greg had his plan to inform them eventually, but like one of the participants, maybe two, he wanted try to surprise the investors with the discovery of the truth, before folding and telling them everything.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 20th - 4:50 a.m.

Jake pulled the covers up on the bed, not really making it, but covering the disturbed sheets. "Cal, come on."

Cal came from the bathroom pulling her belt. "Sorry."

"You ready?" Jake grabbed the weapons and handed her one. He leaned to her and kissed her. "Thank you for tonight." He kissed her again. "And I want you to know I'll enjoy every time we're together until we can't be anymore."

Cal looked curiously at him with a chuckle, taking her weapon. "What do you mean? Are you leaving me?"

"God, no." Jake shook his head. "I mean, I'll enjoy making, you know, love to you until we can't anymore."

"You mean when we're really old?"

"No I mean in a month or so, maybe more, depends on you."

Cal laughed and stopped walking to the door with him. "Why would we not make love after a month or so?"

"You'll be showing." Jake opened the door. "Come on. Let's go." He waved to her, pausing to look out at the dead sprawled about. Acting as if it was a 'nothing' scene, Jake moved on.

"Jake it's possible to make love when you show. You just find different ways the bigger you get."

"Cal." Jake spun to her. "Hun, please. No." He shook his head.

"Jake." She gasped. "You make it sound like a revolting suggestion."

"Cal, please. Making love to you is never revolting." He kissed her. "But, you know, you'll have that roundness to your stomach." Jake shook his head.

"Yeah, so?"

"So." Jake started walking, reaching back and pulling her along. They tromped over the bodies. "The rotundness is the baby. Visualize it. It's like I'm violating you."

Again Cal gasped. "Violating me. Jake, come on."

"O.K., invading the baby's space."

"Jake, the only way *you'll* invade the baby's space is if you *reach* the baby's space. And trust me, *you* won't come close to there."

Jake stopped. He spun to her. "Was that an insult on my anatomy?"

"No."

"Yes it was. Why would you insult my anatomy?"

"Jake." Cal said his name with a bitter giggle. "I making a point. Not insulting you. You're being silly. Either that or your trying to cover up for the fact that you just find it a turn off to make love to me big and pregnant."

"Why would I be turned off by you. Pregnant or not." He continued to move across the unity circle. "I think *you're* the one covering up that you insulted me merely because I was making sure there wasn't any perversion involved in being

with someone pregnant.”

“You’re a dick.”

“What!” Jake tossed his hand in the air walking backwards. “Why are you calling me names. Where is this coming from? We’re talking and you’re being so damn female blowing it out of proportion.”

“So now I’m female.”

“Uh Cal? Yeah.” Jake nodded and tuned back around. “You have been female since I . . .” Jake stopped cold. “Since I . . .” His eyes transfixed on the ground to the body that lay alone off to the side. A younger man.

“Jake?” Cal caught up to him. “We’re arguing babe. Why did you stop?”

“Um . . .” Jake ran his hand down his face still staring at the body and more so the eyes. The yellow eyes he didn’t notice during the whole episode.

“Jake?”

“Met you.” Jake whispered.

“What?” Cal snickered.

“Oh my God.” Jake closed his eyes.

“Jake what’s wrong?” Cal moved to beside him, seeing what he kept staring at. “Do you know him?”

Jake’s lips were slightly parted like he wanted to say something but couldn’t. He spun to face Cal, so confused, and a lost look on his face. His eyes shifted in a bounce from the ground to Cal, casing her face. “Cal.”

Was Jake frightened? To Cal he looked spooked. “Jake, what is it?”

Jake moistened his lips, turned his head, looked at the body and back to Cal.

“Jake?”

Jake blinked. “Nothing.” He laid his hand on her back and moved her along. “I’m sorry. Just hit me wrong.”

“You?” Cal asked with shocked. “Wow, Jake maybe becoming a father is making you sensitive.”

“Yeah.” Jake seemed to push her in a lead toward the grade that led to the dining building. And before descending over it, Jake looked back one more time to the bodies.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

May 20th - 4:55 a.m.

“So was it him?” Aldo asked Greg at the meeting. “Was Larry the Stasis?”

Greg looked at Aldo then the rest of the investors. He hesitated, smiled. They smiled. Then Greg turned serious. “No.”

A large eruption of moans began.

Greg grew confused by this. “What? Why does that make you unhappy?”

“Could you imagine,” Douglass spoke up. “If Larry was the Stasis and these things ate him. They would get that stuff in them and not only do we have walking dead, we a walking dead stasis.”

Aldo peered up to Greg. “Would that happen?”

“What?” Greg asked. “Would they turn Stasis if Larry was the Stasis? Theoretically I’d have to say yes. But . . . unfortunately we never fed a Stasis to anything live. That may be an interesting point of research.”

Daniela, Reed’s investor, joined in the conversation. “I’m new to this. When do we see the catch?”

“It’s half way through the experiment Haynes.” Aldo said. “Shouldn’t the catch be dead.”

“No.” Douglass intervened. “Think Aldo. The Catch is saved for the crucial last three or four weeks. You know when they are all wore down. It take four to six weeks to complete the metamorphoses. So I wouldn’t look for the Catch to die for at least another month.”

Greg, wondering why he was there at all if everyone had the answers, injected into the conversation. “Douglass is right. Another month or so and you’ll find out who The Catch is when he dies.”

“I still think it would have been a ball if Larry was the Catch.” Aldo commented as he rocked in his chair. “I loved those walking Dead. Good job. We’ll see them again, won’t we?”

“No.” Greg shook his head. “That little event, of seeing them that is, is over with. We move on.”

“It’s too slow.” Aldo stated. “Things are moving too slow.”

“I agree.” Douglass added. “We want some action.”

Daniela got his two cents worth in. “I thought for sure I’d see some real mental duress. See these people fall apart then hit them physical. Other than the guy Jake calls Tonto, there really isn’t anyone on the edge.”

“Yeah.” Lancing, Judge’s investor, spoke up. “My guy wilted for a spell, but he snapped back. Tension. Will we at least be seeing tension?”

Greg opened his mouth, but couldn’t talk. The questions kept coming at him.

“Tension is good.” Aldo said. “I love when they are at each other’s throats. Ready to kill each other. Stressed out, that is a big part of the experiment. Right Haynes?”

Greg opened his mouth again still, not a chance.

“You guys who weren’t here before . . .” Douglass’ hand waved in dramatic fashion. “I have to tell you. There is nothing like when they are stressed. Tense. Ready to kill each other and BAM. Here comes something to add more stress. They can’t handle it.”

Aldo’s hand slammed to the table. “That is what is missing you know. At least when Jefferson ran this thing, he gave us some good old fashion tension. When’s the next thing going to happen,. I’m getting a little impatient here Haynes. The zombies were good but . . .”

Greg lost it. “Hey!” He silenced them with is one word, loud yell. “First off, I am *not* Dr. Jefferson. Secondly, those people were not dead. So quit annoying me by saying there were. Do you honestly believe we could have placed eighty-two dead bodies on the island and regenerated them? No. Use some common sense.”

Dr. Jefferson, quite and watching, smiled slightly at Greg’s lack of cool.

“Now.” Greg continued. “You want to know what’s going to happen next, I’ll tell you what is going to happen next.” He stormed across the control room. “Let me get the folders that we were going to hold off giving to you. And I’ll give them to you now. Then, then maybe you can all stop this whining. I hope you’re all happy. You’re ruining your surprise.” Greg marched to the door. “Like a room full of goddamn spoiled rotten kids.”

Slam!

Aldo jumped a bit in his chair at the loud closing of the door. He turned to look in the silence of the control room. “Now let me get this straight.” His finger extended then pulled back. “We give him millions of dollars and . . . he yells at *us*?”

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 20th - 4:56 a.m.

Waiting is what the others did in the dining building. They waited for Cal and Jake's return, and the second they stepped into the building, everyone, but Reed that is, stood up.

"O.K." Jake held up his hand. "We have a lot of bodies out there to clean up. We will exercise precaution in handling them. There's a clearing not too far from here. We'll carry them and burn them. Judge. I need you to go to that clearing and make sure we have the room. The last thing we want is for the fire to get out of control."

Judge agreed and stood up. "You're talking about the clearing beyond this building?"

"Yes." Jake nodded. "Can you go there now."

"I'll get right on it." he limped slowly tot he door.

"Rickie you go help Judge." Jake turned to the others. "Paul, Lou and Billy. You guys will work with me to move bodies. Cal, you stay with Reed."

"Jake I want to help." Cal told him.

"Right." Jake scoffed. "You will not touch a dead body. Especially those dead bodies. You got that? Help . . . help . . . him." Jake twitched his head to a whimpering Reed.

"Sarge." Rickie spoke up. "Like is it safe leaving Cal-babe with flute here."

"Why wouldn't it be safe leaving Cal with Reed." Jake asked with edge. "I highly doubt he's going to harm her." Jake shook his head. "O.K., let's get started before the heat sets in."

"Sarge." Rickie called out. "But like what if Reed dies."

"He's not gonna die."

"But what if he does?" Rickie hounded.

"Then he does Rickie." Jake moved to the door.

"But Sarge . . ."

"What now Rickie?" Jake snapped.

"If he dies and comes back he'll be one of them."

"No. He won't."

"But Sarge, like I saw that movie. They rise back up and . . ."

"Rickie!" Jake yelled. "He will not become one of them. All right? He won't. So drop it and let's get going." Jake had a sense of mean to his voice Rickie had never heard.

"O.K." Rickie held up his hands. "Chill Sarge, just asking."

Cal looked at Jake. What had happened to his mood? She had to wonder if she had set him off. "Jake." She caught up to him and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Listen I uh . . . I'm sorry I insulted your anatomy."

"What?" Jake looked down to her. "What are you talking about?"

"Your mood. You got in a bad mood because I . . ."

“Cal. No.” Jake stopped her from saying anything further. “Trust me. No.” He walked away and opened the door. Jake stopped and looked back. “Some time today people.” He stormed out.

Lou let out a long whistle. “O.K.” He moved to the door. “I think I’ll just not wait any longer.” Swaying his head Lou walked out.

Cal stood by the door. Paul walked by her then Billy.

Billy stopped before her. “Just tell me one thing. With Jake in that mood, and me having to go out there and help him. It’s not me right? I didn’t do anything right?”

“No.” Cal told him.

“Good.” Billy let out a breath and left.

“At least I don’t think.” Cal said softly after Billy was gone. Then she shrugged, turned around and went to help Rickie with Reed.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
May 20th - 5:25 a.m.

The folders landed with a loud paper 'whap' as Greg walked around the table with investors, slamming folders down hard in front of them. "You want excitement?" He slammed another folder. "You want tension." Another slam of a folder. "You want answers?" Greg tossed down the last one. "Dr. Jefferson has spoiled all of you. You want to know. Open the damn folders."

"Haynes." Aldo snapped. "This is verbal abuse."

"Tough." Greg marched to him. "Tough. You, like these participants agreed to sit back, take it all in. You guys pissed me off so sit back . . ." He leaned closer to Aldo. "And take it all in." He moved to the railing of the level.

Aldo leaned over to Douglass whispering. "He drives that black convertible right?"

Douglass snickered.

"Barb!" Greg yelled down to her. "Cue it up on the three large screens." Greg turned around to see the investors talking. "Gentlemen! Hello! You want to know. Look up." He pointed to the monitors. Each of them showed a cocoon type structure. "Luther. Rapper. Wilson. Checkout your monitors. Stasis one, two and three." He stormed harshly to the door. "It was supposed to be an added little surprise for you all." Greg opened the door. "And I hope your happy."

Aldo's eyes shifted from the door Greg walked out, to the screen then to Douglass. He nodded impressed. "Extremely."

Dr. Jefferson watched what was going on and hurried out the door after Greg. "Greg." He called to him. "Wait up."

Greg, looking peaceful turned around. "Yes?"

"Was that . . . was that necessary?" Dr. Jefferson pointed back into the control room.

"Yes."

"You were going to tell them today anyhow."

"I know. But what did they ask for? Stress. Tension. Excitement." Greg winked and patted Dr. Jefferson on the shoulder. "All part of the plan my good predecessor. All part of the plan."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 20th - 1:00 p.m.

And the bodies burned.

Dirty, tired and sweaty, everyone else had headed back to the bungalows once the flames really started to ignite. Billy would have liked to, but he didn't have much of a bungalow left. He was grateful that every thing he had, equipment, pictures and notes were tucked away for the night in their fireboxes.

He had taken his last picture and Billy stepped back from the terrible smelling and hot bon fire. He thought he was alone in that clearing, but when he turned to go back, he saw Jake. Perched on a fallen tree, Jake had his arms rested against his knees, his head slightly lowered as he watched the fire roar. So deep in thought, Jake looked. The world seemed to be on his shoulders. Something was wrong.

After taking a picture of him, a little frightened, Billy approached Jake. "May I?" Billy indicated to the empty spot next to Jake.

Jake scooted over.

"So." Billy sat down. "Are you going to watch until it goes out."

"I'm gonna uh . . . keep the fire going until there is nothing left." Jake's voice dropped low. "Nothing left."

"Jake? Are you all right?"

Jake swayed his head Billy's way.

"I mean if you need to talk about . . ." Billy saw Jake just stare at him. "I know I'm not your favorite person in the world Jake. I know this. But know I care about you and this isn't you." Billy didn't get a response. "And I probably just sounded like a hypocrite huh?" Billy started to get up.

"Billy." Jake spoke up. "The best thing . . ." Jake stopped to look at his own folded hands. "The best thing my wife did was tell me of her mistake with you. Tell me about it right away."

Billy didn't know where Jake was going with what he said, but Billy figured, if Jake was bringing up the 'incident' it was best for Billy to sit down and listen.

"No matter what you do in your life, things, they have a way of coming back to haunt you." Jake's voice seemed hypnotic with the crackling fire. "Time has no boundaries against that. Had Cal not told me of what happened. I would have found out on my own, right. She's pregnant. And that would have made it worse. Finding out that she didn't tell me something. So she stopped it from haunting her. Do you understand what I'm saying."

"Um . . . yeah." Billy clasped his hands. "But Jake, forgive me, but can I ask why you're bringing this up?"

"This." Jake motioned his head to the mound of burning bodies.

Billy looked. "O.K. What do they have to do with what happened between me and Cal."

"Nothing."

Billy's eyes shifted quickly. "Jake, are you all right."

"Nope." Jake folded his hands tighter. "You know Billy, when I first saw Cal. Something clicked in me. And the moment she decked John." Jake's head twitched to the right. "I went over the edge. I think, no, I know, I fell instantly in love with her."

"Witnessing physical violence will do that." Billy watched Jake look at him seriously. "Sorry."

"I knew inside that she would become a part of my life. And she did. Cal became my entire world. I love her. I love her so much."

Billy remained silent. He didn't know what to say. A part of him was afraid of where the conversation was going.

"I knew coming into this experiment, when I signed that contract, that since they couldn't physically take us out of the experiment, they were going to go after us as a couple. And . . ." Jake unfolded his hand. "They did. But even coming in here with that knowledge. I thought . . . there isn't anything in this world that would make me leave my wife. There isn't anything that can happen that I can't get passed. They won't beat us, they won't break us."

"And you were right."

Jake looked at Billy. "So I thought. I think . . . I think if breaking up my marriage to my wife is what Caldwell wanted. Then Caldwell just might get what they want."

"Jake." Billy held a slight snicker in his voice. "You can't leave Cal. You can't do that to . . ."

"No." Jake shook his head. "I said there was nothing that can make me leave her. I didn't say there was nothing that wouldn't make Cal leave me."

"There isn't."

"There is." Jake stood up. "I'm uh . . . I'm getting some more wood. Could you go back and sit with Cal. I'm going to be a while."

"Jake, why don't I send her here."

"No." Jake shook his head. "Stay with her. I'll be back."

"O.K. Look . . ." Billy followed Jake. "You are the most private person I know. You never, ever open up, Certainly not like this. So something has really got you Jake. Talk to me."

"No." Jake shook his head. "I really appreciate your concern. But I'll work it out."

Billy nodded and placed his hands in his pockets. "Work it out. All right. I understand. But, if you need to unload, you've got the perfect person to do that to. You've got Cal."

Jake raised his mouth slightly in a peaceful smile. "Yeah." Jake walked off.

Billy ran his hand over his sweaty face watching Jake disappear into the woods.

~~~~~

Rickie was wide eyed watching Paul standing at the foot of Reed's bed. "So like, dude, you think this was really him?"

"Yes." Paul nodded. "And once again, I want to apologize for the disturbance last night." He shifted his eyes to Judge then Cal. "It was all my doing."

Cal shook her head. "It was Caldwell's doing."

"Cal-babe." Rickie held up his hand and started to walk around the bed, a moan from Reed stopped him. "Sorry, guy." He lifted Reed's newly injured hand and placed it further on the bed so no one else could bump into it. "Cal-babe. Like I know the toot can do a lot but, bring back the dead. No way. Tonto did it."

"I did." Paul nodded.

"There is no way you did that." Cal argued. "They weren't dead. Caldwell probably just went to every single mental hospital in the country and drug up all the psychopathic killers, that's all. Don't be silly."

"Cal-babe, you heard his story. Like he over charged that dude for a muffler job and the guy threatened he get back at him, big time. And what happened, the dude, after threatening our dear Indian, pulled out onto the street, WHAM. The man is dead."

"That's what happened." Paul stated. "And he waited. Waited for his chance."

"May I?" Judge raised his hand. "I kind of have my own theory on what happened." He saw everyone was all ears, except for Reed. "I believe that these people lived on this island and when Caldwell purchased it, they locked them away deep in the basement. Like . . ."

"Oh!" Rickie smacked himself in the forehead. "Ouch. Oh! Like the people under the stairs. Honorable dude, you may be so right. It might not be the muffler guy after all. If that's the case, Tonto, you are off the guilt hook."

Cal continued to laugh. If they wanted to believe revengeful walking dead or people under the stairs were coming after them, she might as well let them.

Two knocks were at Reed's door, and Billy, hair wet, poked his head in. "Cal."

"Hey." She looked up and smiled. "We were discussing Zombie theories. Come in."

"Can I steal you instead?" Billy asked.

"Sure." Cal walked to the door and out ignoring Rickie's juvenile, 'oh's and I'm telling Sarge' comments. She pulled Reed's door closed. "What's up? Where's Jake?"

"Burning bodies."

"Still? I saw the smoke I thought you guys were done."

"We are." Billy took hold of Cal's arm. "But, you and I have to talk."

"About?"

“Jake.”

Cal hesitated, then slowly, and with concern, walked and listened to Billy.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
May 20<sup>th</sup> - 5:00 p.m.

Aldo was stone face as he finished reading the five page report that Greg had handed to him.

Greg stood up from behind his desk. "Because they are your horses. I wanted to let you know this."

"And you think this is going to make a difference?" Aldo asked.

"Difference? No, impact. Another blow." Greg heard Aldo flutter his lips. "You don't think?"

"No not at all." Aldo shook his head and pushed the report forward.

"Maybe you should read it again."

"Why would I need to?"

"Because." Greg moved to the door. "You are much too confident. Much."

"I can't help it. I am." When Aldo heard the door close and Greg leave, he let out a long breath, slid down in his chair and ran his hand across his face.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

May 20<sup>th</sup> - 8:15 p.m.

"Here you go guy." Rickie led Reed out to sit on the porch. "Take in a little of the cool, fresh, Zombie free air. Want your tea?"

"O ank ew." Reed shook his head.

Rickie sat down. "Yep. Look, we can watch Paul and Lou talk. Maybe zoom in with that one special ear of yours. How's the hand."

"I ant eel I ingers."

Rickie swayed his head to Reed then burst out laughing. "Uh, good one. Dude, whoa you're funny."

Reed, in good spirits bounced in happy laughter.

^^^

With arms folded in his body guard mode, Lou looked down to Paul who sat across the fire. "So what exactly is it that you're saying? And speak English this time."

"Sorry." Paul cleared his throat. "I was merely saying that maybe we should put the demons behind us."

"Behind us? Meaning get over it?"

"Yes." Paul nodded.

"No more chasing me and trying to exorcize me?"

"No."

"Hmm." Lou rubbed his chin. "You want me to trust you?"

"Yes. I don't want you to have to run from me anymore." Paul stated.

"Really?" Lou asked.

"No. I'm lying." With quick action, Paul reached behind the log, grabbed for a spear, stood up and lunged it at Lou.

Lou ducked.

Reed screamed.

Lou stood up straight and turned slowly around to look. He saw Rickie pulling the spear out of Reed's arm that was now stuck to the outside wall of the bungalow. "Asshole." Lou faced Paul. "Like the man hasn't been through enough. Shit."

Paul bit his bottom lip. "Sorry."

Lou grunted, waved off Paul and hurried to help Rickie with an hysterical and bleeding Reed.

^^^

Cal had paced around the bungalow, and when the smell of soap and steam reached her nose, she knew it was time. She turned around as Jake walked from

the bathroom. "Feeling better."

"Yeah." He moved to the bed.

"Jake. We need to talk you and I."

"Cal, I'm really wiped out."

"I know. But we still need to talk." She motioned her hand to the table. "To steal a phase, sit."

Jake pulled back from getting on the bed, he walked over to the table and sat down.

Cal sat at the table across from him. "O.K., now. I know you. I know you so well Jake." She saw Jake look away. "And . . . I know you never talk to anyone about anything. Never. And I believe, and this is based on my knowledge of you Jake, I believe when you went to Billy, you went to him to pave a road. A road you are afraid to take for some reason. So you went to him knowing full well he would run to me. Smart. Because he did."

Jake just looked at her.

"Good. Now having that established." Cal reached over and grabbed his hand. "I would like to establish something else. Jacob Andrew Graison, there is nothing. Nothing you hear me, nothing that would ever make me stop loving you or make me leave you. I promised you one night about three years ago, I swore on my soul I would never leave you and I meant it. Nothing can change that."

Very seriously Jake looked at her. "Even if you found out I have been lying to you all these years."

Cal kept her eyes on him, never blinking, never flinching. "Nothing." She felt his hand slip from hers. "Talk to me."

After a long silence, Jake stood up. "This whole zombie thing tonight. This whole episode. It wasn't aimed toward Paul. It wasn't a physical test of the participants. It was my test. It was intended for me."

"Why do you say that?"

"O.K., well some people are musically incline. Some . . . artistically. Me? I always was scientifically inclined."

"That's not surprising."

"Yeah. So . . . when the Army discovered this about me, they played on it. Took me from the field and I went to school."

"For?" Cal asked.

"Biology."

"For how long? Was it a course, what?"

"The entire time I trained as a ranger, I went to school. Eight years."

"Jake, then that means you have your . . ."

"Doctrine. Yes." Jake nodded. "It was not what I wanted to do. Being in some lab was not where I wanted to be. The knowledge I gained, medically, helped in my career as a ranger. In my survival, and my teaching others to survive."

"Jake." Cal said his name with a smile. "So you didn't tell me about your

education. That's all right. You probably were worried that I would bitch at you for not using it when . . ."

"No. That's not it. Because of my ability I was on this team. This team that met every so often and we, as a team, developed this chemical. A gas, that hits the brain." Jake pointed to his temple. "Destroying all aspects of it with the exception of motor skills. So basically you're like a . . ."

"Zombie."

"Exactly." Jake sat back down at the table. "It didn't hit me until I saw the eyes. The yellow eyes. That was a tell tale sign of our chemical. The chemical caused bleeding behind the eyes and when the bleeding stopped, the blood stayed, causing the yellowing effect. That is what told me, what happened out there this morning was from something I did. I created."

"They got a hold of it. How?" Cal asked.

"I don't know" Jake tossed his hands up. "I thought when I left the team, when the project was finished, they destroyed the weapon. I was wrong."

"O.K., they got a hold of it. They exposed people and made you remember creating it, so . . ."

"No Cal, they made me remember something else. They made me remember why I dropped off the team. Why the research for the chemical was stopped. Because of what happened." Jake paused to think. "Ten years ago, we were after the head of a cartel in a third world country. We knew where he was. We knew we had to get him. Sneak in, take him and his men out. I . . . I Cal, came up with the brilliant fuckin idea to test the gas on this persons camp. After all I was leading the raid, it was partly my chemical, approval was given like that." Jake snapped. "So my men and me, armed with gas masks and tiny little beads, seized this camp. The only problem was, I knew how long the gas stayed in the air, fifteen minutes, right? What I didn't count on was for the winds to pick it up and carry it into the village not three miles away. It wasn't supposed to happen. The entire village, men, women, and children were hit. Children Cal. And this chemical doesn't kill you. You don't die from it. The only way out of the misery you feel is to be killed. And we created such a mess there, that we had to clean it up. Each hut, home, building we went through, and killed every single person effected. Men, women, and . . . children. Children Cal. And I truly believed that it was some sort of punishment that I was unable to have kids. So I convinced myself I never wanted them. Until you. Until now. And look. You find out tonight that I haven't been honest with you for four years. That I did something so inhuman it sickening. I tried to put it behind me. I swear. I was so sorry for what had happened. But that doesn't cut it. It happened. And it changed my life forever."

Cal waded through a long silence. A dreaded one. "What do you expect me to do now, Jake?"

"I don't know." Jake swayed his head.

"Do you expect me to yell. To scream that you didn't tell me this?" Cal leaned into the table. "Do you expect me to tell you that you make me sick. That I



hate you now for what happened. Well if that's what you expect. I am sorry to disappoint you Lt. Col. Graison. But you just aren't gonna get that from me."

"Cal?" Jake lifted his head.

"Does this shock you?" Cal asked him. "Does it shock you that I don't bat an eye about it. Jake please. You made a mistake. You moved on. Why punish you for it now when you have been punishing yourself for years. And besides, I'm supposed to not be understanding to the husband who forgave my affair? Understand problems that I have? Wants to share in the child I'm carrying? I'll tell you, if Caldwell thought this was gonna put damper in our marriage . . ." Cal fluttered her lips. "God were they stupid."

"Cal." Jake stood up and moved to her. "I'm so sorry I didn't tell you any of this before. I just didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to remember. And if I told you about the science aspect of my life, I'd have to tell you about what happened to end that aspect of my life." Jake grabbed her hands and pulled her up. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. And don't thank me." Cal hugged him. "I was really expecting something much more worse."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Cal stepped back with a smile. "You know what I thought?" She started to laugh. "I thought . . ." She grabbed her chest and her words "I thought you were going to tell me that you have been working for Caldwell the whole entire time."

Jake was quiet. "Cal." He spoke her name solemnly. "I have been."

"What?" Cal lost her smile. "What do you mean?"

"I've been working for Caldwell since the first experiment. Who do you think invented the stasis?"

Cal's mouth moved slowly before she said anything. "You?"

Jake lowered his eyes, then lifted them. "No." He stepped to her and cracked a smile. "And guess what I just did? I just spontaneously fibbed to you. I'm kidding about Caldwell."

"Oh." Cal gasped out with a smile. "Jake." She smiled impressed. "Jake that was really good. Good job. You got me."

"Yeah, that was good." Jake nodded with excitement. "And Cal. It just came to me. I mean you said that about Caldwell and a bulb went off in my head. I thought, why don't I take this opportunity to get Cal and lighten the mood. I did it. Didn't I?"

"Yes you did." Cal reached up and tapped him on the cheek. "Oh Jake, maybe you're finally lightening up."

There was a moment of silence then at the same time, Cal and Jake both shook their heads with a 'Nah.'

^^^

Bang!

“God Jake!”

Jake looked up from the floor. “I can’t help it Cal, the bed is too fuckin short.”

“You’ve been here long enough to adjust.” Cal fluffed her pillow. “Adjust damn it.”

“All right.”

“God.” Cal said again, annoyed.

“All right!”

“What are you doing anyhow?”

“I forgot to do something.” Jake, still on the floor, crawled for Cal’s shoe. Holding it, he climbed back in bed, and covered up. Sitting up, ignoring Cal’s irritated glances at him, Jake tossed the shoe across the room, knocked the shirt off the camera, then Jake laid down, snuggled next to Cal and kissed her. “Night.”

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

May 21<sup>st</sup> - 1:22 a.m.

After watching the flash, so briefly of Jake, happily climbing under the covers with his wife, Dr. Jefferson spun his chair slightly to Greg. Greg kept staring up at the monitor, tapping his hand on a folder.

"So." Dr. Jefferson said.

"So."

"It backfired."

"I wouldn't say backfired." Greg laid his hand flat on the folder and turned his head to Dr. Jefferson. "It just didn't work."

"Did you think it would?"

"Yes, so did you."

"No." Dr. Jefferson shook his head. "I said maybe. Yes, I recall saying maybe."

"Well even at maybe, you were wrong. I was wrong. It was a god bit of his history though. Dark, demented." Greg shrugged. "Oh well."

"What now?" Dr. Jefferson asked. "I know you have other things planned for the target couple. What's next?"

"Nothing."

"You have nothing planned."

"No I have things planned. I'm doing nothing." Greg ran his hand across his own head. "I'm done."

"I thought you didn't admit defeat."

"I am in this case. Why bother. I have other fish to fry. I have bigger plans to conquer. They still may die. Or at least one of them,"

"They could."

"So I have that. But . . ." Greg tossed his hand up. "As far as breaking them up as a couple, I'm not even going to waste my breath anymore. If they can survive infidelity, an illegitimate child, and a hidden sordid past, I think these two can survive anything. So . . . defeat admitted." Greg slumped.

"Good. Glad to hear you say that."

"Why? Does it show my human qualities?"

"I'm just glad that you're moving on. I was bored. And in answer to your question. No."

"No?"

"No. How can you're admitting defeat show your human qualities?" Dr. Jefferson looked at Greg. "When I'm pretty much getting convinced that you have no human qualities at all."

For a second, only a second, Greg peered with deep seriousness to Dr. Jefferson, then after that he looked straight a head with a smile upon his face.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

June 4<sup>th</sup> - 9:30 a.m.

Billy felt disgusting. He didn't want to be wearing a tee shirt. He'd rather be going without one with as hot as it was so early in the day. But he supposed he developed an immunity to the sun screen. It seemed every time Billy went out and put it on, he got burned.

It was probably the longest walk of his life, but he had to get to the spot where he got the great view of the volcano on the other side of the island. The one where the smoke seeped out every once and a while. The one Jake assured him, if it erupted, they would be fine. Of course Billy had to wonder what Jake knew of volcanoes. But seeing it was more than he knew, he took Jake's word on it.

Billy heard the rustle drawing near to him as he walked in those deep woods. He thought at first it was Reed, who was out walking alone for the first time in a while. Developing the attitude that if he was alone, and he had a mishap, then he had no one else to blame but himself. How right, Billy thought Reed to be. The again, Rickie had been extra careful with him, and Reed hadn't had an accident in nearly two weeks. That alone could have explained the bravery that Reed had in trudging out alone.

But the closer the rustling drew, the more he realized it wasn't Reed. It moved too fast. Nor could it have been Judge who had recently thrown himself into paleontology. Judge limped. The rustling moved at a steady quick pace.

Through reasonable deduction and having no one left, Billy chalked up the incoming noise to one of two people. And he pegged one of them when Lou came whizzing by him.

Lou spun. "Bill. You did not see me. O.K."

"O.K." Billy raised his camera, took a picture when Lou ran off to the left.

The high pitch war call alerted Billy at the same time he heard more rustling.

Paul, war paint, loin cloth and spear, stopped running when he saw Billy. "Clever Bamboozle. Have you seen Large Curse?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Which way did Large Curse run off to?" Paul asked.

"He went uh . . . that way." Billy pointed to the right, the totally opposite direction that Lou ran.

"Thank you Clever Bamboozle. May the good spirits be with you."

"And may the force . . ." Billy watched Paul run in the way he pointed. ". . . be with you." Billy chuckled, snapped a picture of Paul, catching the flapping of the loin cloth and getting Cal a really good butt shot.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
June 4<sup>th</sup> - 9:35 a.m.

Amongst the bitches and the gripes, Aldo and Douglass still put it off. But they got to it in the control room. Standing before a card table with money and a large board on it. Trying to wade through it while Greg discussed with Barb her inability to track who was getting sun burn and who was not. Aldo and Douglass did their job. Being the judges in the 'no winner' sidebar betting.

Douglass laughed listening to Aldo.

"Bald. Ear eaten by a bore. Lost left eye to hot cinder. Twisted Ankle. Bore ate little toe. Thought he had head lice but only had psoriasis. Got bit by a Jelly fish. Zombie ate his fingers and now the newest Reed incident . . . speared by a wild Indian with a really firm butt."

Douglass chuckled some more. Sounds like your reading the top ten list."

"And can you actually believe the poll has started for the next Reed accident."

"Oh, yeah. I'm in it." Douglass let out that after laugh breath. "He's the best damn participant I have ever have."

"Yes he is. So let's finish this up. No one had speared. So we'll go with the next closest. What do we have?"

"Two people said he'd get hit by an arrow."

"Any on the arm?" Aldo asked.

"Chest and leg."

"Give it to the chest." Aldo wrote down.

"That would be Tony in Maintenance. Next. First to loot the dead man's room."

"No one had him." Aldo said. "No one even pegged him to go in there first."

"Ok, so we go first degree to Jake." Douglass' hand ran across the board. "Two people picked Cal."

"Items." Aldo asked.

"Tough one. Electric razor and Back massager."

"Hmm. Tough one is right." Aldo thought. "Well, let's reason it out. Since no one enjoys shaving and since the massager could be enjoyable. And Jake stole the 'Best of Journey' Collection for enjoyment. Give it to whoever picked Cal and the massager."

"Tony from Mechanics."

Aldo slammed his pen. "Again? Does this man have nothing to fix or what?"

Before Douglas could add his own gripe, Greg approached and interrupted. "How's it going? Did I win anything?"

"Nope." Aldo shook his head. "We're just about done here. We have to tally up the attempts on Lou's life poll and we should be finished."

"I think I'm the closest in that one." Greg said. "Of course I never would . . ."

Something unexpected interrupted Greg's speech.

A hiss. Long loud and near static sounding. A painful scream cut short. Gurgles and another hiss.

Greg spun to Barb. "What the hell was that." He raced back over to her.

"I don't know." Barb said, tossing her hands up.

"Our stasis?"

Barb looked at the monitor. "Still in the cocoon."

Aldo rushed over. "What was it?"

Greg shook his head. "I don't know." His eyes quickly skimmed the monitor. "Who the hell was it. And where is everyone?"

"Out and about." Barb replied.

"O.K." Greg ordered. "Stop all live feed go to un-monitored recording, rewind what we got and play it back for me."

"Got it." Barb began to follow instructions.

Greg kept his eyes on the screen, holding tight to the back of Barbs chair.

"One minute rewind." Barb called out. "Here it is."

Silence. Hiss. Scream. Gurgle. Hiss.

Greg slammed his hand. "What the hell? Again."

Aldo noticed the wide eyed look in Greg's eyes. "Haynes, what is it."

The sequence of the painful silenced scream played again.

"Where . . ." Greg looked in wonder "Where? Again."

"Haynes." Aldo called his attention again. "What is it?"

"Something . . ." Greg paused on the scream. "Something just happened that I didn't plan. But what?" Greg looked down at Barb. "Again."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

June 4<sup>th</sup> - 9:45 a.m.

Rickie's arms flapped about and his legs kicked as he sailed, nearly flying over the beach and into the ocean with a splash, a good twenty yards from shore.

"Now see." Jake held out his hand. "If I could do that. I would do it with grace."

"You would." Cal commented. "But Rickie's not you. He has to do everything with, well his own style." Cal folded her arms. "We almost done with him? I'm tired of watching him jump Jake."

"Yeah. I'll call him . . . what's wrong." He looked at Cal holding her ear.

"I have this weird tickling. Buzzing. It so . . ."

A low hum rumble occurred followed by a vibration. Jake grabbed hold of Cal's arm as the ground in which they stood on began to shake nearly knocking them over. It lasted for about thirty seconds. When it was over Jake looked behind them and to the right.

"Volcano?" Cal asked.

"Nah. But it's gonna happen soon."

"I just hope you're right Jake. I hope it's more visual than deadly."

"It'll be fun. Now let's get Rickie out of the water." Jake turned calling out as he did. "Rickie come on . . ." Jake stopped cold as he looked out into the ocean. "Oh shit. Rickie! Hurry!"

"Oh my God Jake." Cal backed up, seeing a wall of water seemingly chasing in toward them. "Rickie!"

"Dudes!" Rickie called out as he swam his hardest looking behind him with each moving stroke. "Dudes! Surf's up!"

"Cal."

"Yeah."

"Run." Jake grabbed Cal's hand, hoping with his help they could run further in shore and beat the wave that charged in their way. They thought wrong. Over his shoulder and in his ears Jake knew it had arrived. With fast moving legs, he released Cal's hand, reached out his arm, grabbed hold of her by the waist and whipped her into him. Jake wrapped his arms tightly around her bringing Cal to his chest as the giant wave not only crashed into the beach but thunderously in Cal and Jake. It smacked into them with such a force it lifted them up into its watery hand and carried them top speed further and further inland. And as the wave smacked with it's final fury somewhere just into the edge of the trees, it threw forward Cal and Jake as it pulled back causing the ground to vibrate again.

They rolled, still wrapped together through the muddy land as if the momentum of the wave still carried them. And when they stopped moving, mud covered, wet and breathing heavily, Cal and Jake laughed.

Jake reached his hand up to Cal's face wiping away the mud, looking at her as she lay on top of him. "Fun huh?"

“Yeah.” Cal smiled.

Jake kissed her. “You O.K.?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Jake, I’m fine.”

“So am I.” Rickie whined out. “Like if anyone cares.” Not two feet from them, like Rambo, Rickie lifted from the mud. “Washed in from the ocean like that army broad’s head. But like, no one cares.” Rickie rubbed the mud from his eyes. “Thank you.”

They couldn’t help it. They tried not to laugh, but they did as they watched Rickie, so child like stomp off in a hissy fit back towards the bungalows.



Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

June 4<sup>th</sup> - 10:10 a.m.

"Again." Greg ordered, still standing in the same place as he had been for over a half an hour. Only this time more people had joined him, all eyes trying to find where it came from. He listened to the scream, short and painful. "All right. Take out all building and structure monitors."

Barb did and she played it back again.

"It's outside. All right." Greg said. "Let's do process of elimination. Take out one at a time. One monitor at a time and play back."

"Here's less the beach monitors." Barb pressed the tape, the scream entailed. "Not on the beach. Less section forty off the bungalows." Another play of the tape, another scream. "Less section twenty, near the center . . ." Barb played the tape, the scream happened again. "Now . . .": Barbs's fingers clicked. "Less area seventeen near the cavern." She pressed play. Nothing.

"It's there." Greg clenched his fist in excitement. "All right shut down everything but seventeen. Can you run it through to the big screen."

"Yes." Barb leaned to Lyle and together they worked, it took a minute or so. "Ready."

"Everyone watch seventeen. Play it." Greg watched. He heard the scream but saw nothing. "The microphone picked something up there. Zoom in."

Acting like it was a waste and probably just Paul chasing Lou, or Reed getting hurt, Barb zoomed in. "All right."

The scream. Then Aldo called out. "There!."

"What?" Greg spun to him.

"You have to watch and you can't blink." Aldo explained. "Watch it."

Barb played it again.

"Did you see it?" Aldo asked.

"No." Greg shook his head.

Aldo moved closer to Barb. "How slow can you play back this tape?"

"Slow I guess." Barb shrugged, looked to Lyle and rolled her eyes. "Shall I?"

"Yes." Greg nodded. "Do it." He folded his arms and promised himself, burning eyes or not, he would not blink. And he watched. The sound of everything was so deep it was monstrous. But with the deep hissing sound then came something else, a total blackness of the screen. It was during the blink of blackness the scream called out. And then the screen showed the woods, just before the gurgle. But this time they monitored closely and it was like everyone in the room saw the same thing at the same time. Those who were seated stood up. The room went silent.

"Oh my God." Barb pointed. "Is that a . . ."

"I believe so." Greg answered.

"Christ." Aldo gasped. "What in the hell?"

"I don't know." Greg shook his head. "But we have to find out." He spun and began to walk from the room. "Lyle get me exact coordinates of that spot. Pull a live feed again and see." He moved to the door.

"Greg." Dr. Jefferson called out. "Where are you going?"

Greg stopped before going out. He pointed to the screen. "There's only one way to find out if *that* is what we think it is." He opened the door. "I have to call Stan. Get them out there."

After his dramatic exit, all eyes, confused and horrified, turned back to look at the screen.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

June 4<sup>th</sup> - 11:15 a.m.

"All and all." Jake lathered up his face as he stood before the sink in a towel, getting ready to shave. "I think it's much easier."

"How do you figure?" Cal asked laying on the bed in her robe, hair wet, watching Jake shave. "I totally disagree. Nothing happened up to this point in the first experiment."

"Bull shit Cal." Jake argued and pulled out his razor. "Stop and think about it. Let's see uh . . . you were strangled, fell in a ditch and, let's not forget you died. I shot Griff. And let's not forget about what happened to Rickie." Jake looked at her with a 'so there' look.

"That's nothing. The three things that happened to me were really not the experiments fault now were they."

"In a sense."

"I really disagree Jake." Cal sat up and reached for the night stand. She opened up a drawer and pulled out a notebook. "Let's compare."

"Let's."

"First experiment up to this point. They mentally went after four of us. Me with Jessie. Fr. Dan with his past. Griff with *his* past. Jennifer with that . . ." Cal giggled. "Transmitter in her ear to make her think she heard voices."

Jake laughed. "Now that was funny."

"Yeah. But aside from what happened to me and Rickie, and personally I went through a lot. Nothing else happened that the experiment caused or the elements for that matter. Let's look at this one."

"Let's."

Cal looked up from her notebook and she laid back down. "Just to rattle. The yacht. The shark. Mentally abusing poor Reed." She waited until Jake stopped laughing. "Yeah, that one will go down as a memorable moment for us. They've been doing something to Paul, because the once mild manner mechanic is now a full fledged Indian, loin cloth and all." Cal smiled. "The drug. The incident. And the four prisoners they had released. They got me. You got them. And Rickie got one. The wild bore attacks. The Jake zombies."

Jake looked quickly at her.

"Sorry. I couldn't resist."

"All right. You're right. More has happened. It just doesn't seem like it though." Jake pulled on his cheek and ran the razor down. "Does it?"

"Yes, sort of. But you now what's really exciting Jake."

"What's that?"

"Nothing really big happened. I mean big until halfway mark last experiment. Then not only were we hit with the elements, we had the wolves and the Stasis. So, what's today?" She raised her eyebrow.

Jake grinned. "Halfway mark."

“Exactly. So, if they follow a pattern, things should start to cook. Elements . . .”

“Tidal waves, the volcano that’s gonna blow.” Jake nodded and rinsed his razor. “Let’s not forget the stasis.”

“I wonder what else they’ll get us with. Has to be an animal of some sort on the island.” Cal tapped her fingers on the bed in thought. “I hope it’s something good because we really came prepared and the Stasis is just going to be boring.”

“I agree. I was thinking on the lines of maybe Cheetahs or lions. You know, like they hit us with the wolves, they’ll hit us with a tropical killer.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah.”

Cal smiled. “Jake take off that towel.”

“What?” Jake laughed the word.

“You have a really great body. Let me watch you shave nude.”

“Cal, what the fuck. I’m not your personal pin up boy.”

“Yeah you are. Jake? I took the liberty of covering the camera.”

“Cal.” Jake looked to see her laying on her side winking. “Are all pregnant women as sexually focused as you?”

“I believe so. I think it’s the hormones.”

“Well get them under control Cal. You’re with child.”

Cal laughed and plopped on to her back. “So what?” she tossed her hands up.

“I for one will not be part of making our child neurotic.”

“Jake, he won’t be able to help it with you raising him. And how will having sex make this child neurotic?”

“He’ll know.” Jake nodded. “He’ll sense it. And what kind of complex is that child going to have growing up and knowing that he made his mother into a nymphomaniac.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yes.”

Cal had to laugh again. “You know what I think Jake.”

“What do you think?” Jake rinsed his face.

“I think it’s not the child that will have the complex. I think it’s you. You were Mr. high and Mighty raised a proper Catholic all your life. And you have the Virgin Mary complex.”

“I have the what?” Jake stood in the bathroom door.

“The Virgin Mary complex. Beat into your head by the nuns about the Virgin Mary. And because of that you feel that all pregnant women are a symbol of purity and should be treated in a pristine manner, not to be touched for fear of shattering that image.” Cal held in her laugh, trying to be so serious as she watched a dumbfounded Jake. “Yep. And I think in some warped way you snapped back to those Catholic school days and when you see pregnant, you associate that with the Virgin Mary.”

“Oh Cal.”

"No. Don't Oh Cal me. I have news for you Jake. I am far from the Virgin Mary. And don't kid yourself into thinking she was all that virginy either." Cal nodded. "Bet me Joseph did her when she was carrying Jesus. They just lied and said they didn't for storyline purposes anyhow. You know, make them look good."

"Oh . . . my . . . God."

"What?"

"I can not believe you just rambled something so blaspheme like that."

Cal snickered "Truth hurts."

"You think that's why I don't touch you?"

"Yeah."

Jake neared her. "Let me let you in on a secret little lady." He sat on the bed by her feet. "The reason I am so apprehensive about touching you has nothing to do with my mental complex. It has to do with my egotistical complex. As hard as it is for you to believe Cal. I am just a man. And if I don't train you now, and ration you, at the rate you're going, there may be nothing left of me when things get really . . . for lack of a better word . . . tight."

Cal propped herself up on her elbows with a quirky smile. "I can not believe what I'm hearing. My God, I'm crushed. *You*, not a man? Jake you shattered my image of you. Or, are you as you called it the other day, spontaneously exaggerating for humorous purposes?"

"Yep."

"Jake I'm impressed."

"Now. If I thought it . . . would I . . ." Jake grabbed her ankle and pushed gently on it causing her leg to bend and her robe to part slightly exposing her knee. "Would I admit it."

"Never."

"Never." Jake shook his head. "And if I had that Blasphemous Virgin Mary complex as you called it, would I be thinking about doing . . . this?" Jake brought his lips to her knee and slid them slightly to her inner thigh.

"I don't believe you would. No." Cal said softly.

"Should I be thinking of doing . . ." He slid his lips lower. "This."

"Absolutely." Cal plopped back down on the bed feeling Jake's lips tease and softly kiss her leg. He moved them slowly up her thigh in a gentle biting kiss. Lowering his head more, opening her robe further, then stopping too soon and too far from where he should have.

A knock at the door, brought about a pause in Jake's seduction. "Fuck." Jake's head sprang up. "Cal is this not an isolation experiment?"

"Yes."

"Why are we never isolated?"

"Ignore them."

Jake huffed, tried to regain his Jake-style romantic composure and he lowered his lips again.

More knocking occurred, this time harder, this time four or five steady knocks.

“Jake.”

“No.” Jake stood up. “I’ll get rid of them.” He moved toward the door and turned back to Cal. “And mark this down in that little notebook. At a time in our lives and place when we should be totally indulging in arousing and sexually fulfilling behavior, we get nothing but interrupted. I swear to God we’ve made love five times these past three months without interruptions.” Jake cringed when the knocking continued.

“Jake.”

“What.”

“Get the door.” Cal closed her robe.

“I am. I . . .”

“Jake.” Stan’s voice called out. “I know you guys are in there. Please. Open up.”

Jake paused in his reaching for the knob. With a slightly open mouth and a little confusion, he peered over his shoulder to Cal who sat up quickly on the bed. “Is that?”

Cal nodded.

Jake opened the door. “Well if it isn’t Laurel and Hardy. Isn’t this against the rules?”

As soon as the door opened wide enough, Stan seized his opportunity and he and Ollie rushed in the room. Stan shut the door. “We don’t want anyone to see us.”

“O.K.” Jake put his hands on his hips. “What’s up?”

Stan looked to Ollie then to Jake. “Do you mind getting dressed and coming with us? There’s a problem.”

Jake looked confused. “What do you mean problem?”

“It’s hard to explain. Could you just come with us?” Stan asked.

There was hesitation and Jake looked to Cal as if for an answer, even though he really wasn’t. “All right. Give me a second to change.”

With a sigh of relief, Stan glanced to Ollie.

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They had taken a Caldwell jeep just to the edge of the woods and walked from there. Stan and Ollie led the way, Cal stayed close to Jake as they walked through the wooded area Cal and Jake knew well.

When they saw the first dead bird, they didn’t think much about it. Nor did they even glance twice at the second one. But an eerie feeling swept over Jake and Cal when the further into the woods they walked the more dead birds they saw. Laying there, looking odd, almost as if encased in their own vomit. Many of them like they just fell from the sky.

Stan heard the sniff come from Jake. "Wait. It gets worse."

Jake kept a stone face even as he watched Stan and Ollie place on face masks. They handed one to Cal. She took it. They handed one to Jake. He shook his head to it.

A small, very small hill with a fallen tree is what they stepped over. And the second their feet hit the down-side of the hill, a flock of birds flew upward, loud and flapping. So many they were like a black cloud.

Cal shielded her head as they seemed to squawk and dive at her as they flew away. The curtain of fine feathered friends opened and expose another blackness. A tarp laying on the ground.

Stan approached it. "Shoo." He kicked forth to the three or four birds that pecked at the tarp. Many holes were in the tarp from the determination of the birds. "Ready." Stan spoke through his mask to Jake who stood at the end of the tarp.

Jake nodded. Stan lifted the tarp. The sight, the smell immediately caused Jake to blink once, clench his facial muscle, huff out a short grunt of nausea and clear his throat. But he kept his eyes on it. The sight that Stan and Ollie had led him through the woods to see.

Regurgitated meat was the first descriptive thought that came to Jake's mind. A long pile of a thick, pink, red and white, mush of a substance. Sticky Runny. Flies buzzed about it and the flap of the tarp was the dinner bell calling for the birds who flocked to return. At first it was undeterminable what it was. Then just before Stan re-covered it to keep the birds off, Jake saw the tell tale signs, buried within the mess, that gave away what lay there. Had it not been for the remainder of what looked like a little finger, a small portion of the intestines, a bit of an ear and eye, Jake would have never known it to be a person. Before he could say anything he spun around to the sound of Cal throwing up. He rushed over to her while she stood by a tree. "Cal?"

Cal held her hand up as she bent over.

"Babe, you O.K.?" Jake laid his hand on her back.

Cal stood up and wipe the back of her hand over her mouth holding it there. She coughed, getting that sickness from her. "God Jake."

Jake looked back to Stan and Ollie. "Was that one of us?"

"Yes." Ollie stepped forward.

"Who?" Jake asked, holding onto Cal's arm.

Nervous, Stan moved to him. "We hate to be so secretive Jake, but if you give us ten minutes, that's all. We need you to come with us again." Stan moved forward passed Jake and Ollie followed.

Jake, leading Cal, turned to the tarp again, completely covered with birds, and he followed Stan and Ollie through the woods.

^^^

At the control center, in a room that resembled a miniature Research center monitoring room, Stan brought Cal and Jake. He pulled out a chair for Jake at the long table before the screens. "Have a seat."

Reluctantly Jake did.

Stan handed Jake a headset. "Put this on." He then moved to the computer, clicking some. "This will work a lot like you see interviews on Television. We have a satellite." Stan raised his hand and pointed to a blank monitor one row above Jake's head. "Look up here."

Jake placed the headset on and watched.



Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
June 4<sup>th</sup> - 12:05 p.m.

On the large monitor in the control room, Jake appeared. Greg leaning toward the phone, spoke. "Jake. Thank you for joining us."

"You mean playing along." Jake said stern peering into the monitor and seeing Greg.

"What do you mean?" Greg asked.

"I mean. Is this a new thing? Some dramatic ploy to let us know the way your experiment killed one of the participants?"

"Jake, we had nothing to do with this one."

"Bull shit." Jake rocked a little in his chair, so much mean to him. "You brought me and Cal to see the body. Messengers of death. Warning maybe that we don't know everything that you guys are going to do. The experienced players to spread the word. Cause panic."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yes."

"You're wrong."

"I doubt it." Jake said with cockiness.

"Experienced players?" Greg shrugged some with a closed mouth. "Yeah, sure, we came to you for that. I'll admit it. But I came to you Jake because of your knowledge and personal experience." Greg paced a little but never far from the camera's eye. "Jake, like you I am a man who hates to fail. I hate it. I will do everything in my power to ensure I do not. And also like you, I lay everything out. Each minuscule detail of the plan. It burns me when things go astray or not as I want. I want full control. At all times. What's around the next corner will not be a guessing game for me. I hated the game concentration. Get my drift."

"Yes."

"Good." Greg said. "From day one of the experiment to day 183, I have every thing planned out. Each chapter of this experiment. Each reaction. If this happens, do this. That's the way I operate. I have no base uncovered. Or at least I thought. Jake . . . I laid out my chapters, something inserted a new one."

"So you're talking about this death." Jake scoffed a little facially.

"Yes. This death, what happened is not part of my plan. And that bothers me in more ways than one. That is where your knowledge comes in."

"My knowledge?" Jake questioned.

"Scientific knowledge."

Jake tossed his hands up. "There it is. I suppose you expect me to believe that it's coincidental, that you need my expert scientific knowledge and experience two weeks after you used my necro-encephalopathy gas bringing my past forefront?"

"Yes."

"Fine. I'll play along." Jake leaned forward. "I'm game. Shoot."

Greg closed his eyes, he looked around the silent control room then back to Jake. "This Jake. Is not game. This incident that occurred is not good. Something got one of you. What it is we don't know. That bothers me. We want you to work with Stan and Ollie to figure out what it is."

"Why?" Jake asked. "So you can throw me through a loop. I don't get thrown through a loop too easily. You should know that."

"Neither do I Jake. And I am thrown through a loop and worried right now." Greg said with edge annoyed with Jake's attitude. "I told you I like being in control. I must be in control through this experiment and every aspect of it, for it to be a viable scientific experiment. And right now, with this death, this can very easily careen from my control."

"How do you mean?" Jake asked.

"Things can now happen. Things we don't plan on. Whatever did that today is out there. I haven't any idea what it is. We spotted the remains in the monitor. It took forty minutes to find it. Did you see the dead birds Jake, they died from eating the remains. Animals, many, have picked at the remains, ingested it. Carried off some remains for others to dine on. That aspect alone, theoretically, may have taken it out of our control too much already. This participant was not supposed to die up there. Trust me."

"Who was it?" Jake asked.

"I can't tell you that. You'll find out on your own and soon enough. But who it was isn't as important as what it was." Greg leaned close to the table. "Jake, whatever killed that participant up there today . . . killed our Stasis."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

June 4<sup>th</sup> - 12:30 p.m.

Jake used his deepest and strongest voice, calling out as he and Cal emerged from the path into the bungalow area. "All right!" he shouted loudly. "Everyone out! If you are in this camp come out now! I need everyone in the unity circle now!" Jake stood center camp next to a worried Cal.

"Sarge." Rickie ran up over the grade from the dining building. "You like interrupted the meditation you make me do."

"Rickie." Jake breathed out his name in relief.

"Guy you look glad to see me." Rickie approached him.

Jake laid a hand on Rickie's shoulder "I am."

"Cal! Jake!" Billy called out as he stepped off his porch. "What's going on."

Emotional and grateful was the sound that filled the soft gasping shriek that escaped Cal. She rushed to Billy, wrapping her arms around him tight and holding him. "Thank God. Oh Thank God."

Billy smiled, held her in return, saw Jake looking, then immediately released her. He cleared his throat. "What's wrong?"

Cal laid her palm on his cheek then grabbed his hand leading him to where Jake and Rickie stood. "Jake. It's not Billy."

"As much as this pains me to say," Jake stated. "I'm glad." He gave a swat to Billy's arm and saw the confused look. "Bill have a seat." Jake pointed to the logs that encircled the fire pit. "Rickie you too." Jake looked around. "Is no one else here?"

"Sarge. Like I think everyone is here."

"Then why aren't they coming out?" Jake asked.

"They don't like you?" Rickie guessed.

With a grunt, Jake placed his hands on his hips. "I am not fuckin around people! I need you out here right Now! Busy or not!" Jake shifted his eyes quickly around the circle of the bungalows, waiting, like it was a game, beckoning in his mind for them to hurry. The suspense was killing him.

The click-click of a bungalow door opening, not only brought out a participant, but a gloating, 'ha-ha I told you so' as well from Cal. Reed stepped out.

Cal laughed and nudged Jake as she jumped a little in excitement. "You were wrong. You were so wrong in your catch guess."

Jake grumbled at her, waved a reluctant Reed into the circle and turned his head to the right when he heard another squeak of a door. The heavy thump told Jake who it was before he saw him. Lou wet and in a towel walked out.

Cal kind of winced while whispering to Jake. "Now he's someone that should not walk around like that."

"Cal please. Lou come down, Grace us with your presence." Jake looked around again. "We're missing two." Jake let out a breath. "Judge! Tonto! If one of

you are here, or both. Come out!"

The suspense was over. The identity of who the was the catch was revealed when the last bungalow door opened and he emerged. With a limp he stepped off his porch in toward the circle. Judge.

"I'm sorry Jake. I didn't hear you calling. I was listening to Rickie's headphones."

With an 'aw!' Cal tossed her hand in a bodily dramatic whine. "Damn it, no more loin cloth."

Jake swayed his head her way.

"I know. I know." She held up her hands. "Cal, please." She moved next to Billy and sat down. "The ground is yours Jake."

Jake stepped center the unity circle. "I apologize for calling you all away from what you were doing. But we had to gather everyone so we would know. A little bit ago, unidentifiable remains to a body were found. We had to see who it was. We had to see who was missing."

Rickie looked around. "Who?"

Jake lifted his hands and dropped them with a huff. "Paul, Rickie. He's dead."

With an excited 'Yes!' Lou sprang up. When he did, his towel dropped off, and Cal shrieked in a school-girl laughter.

Jake quickly at the same time as Billy, reached over and covered her eyes. "Lou." Jake twitched his head to the towel on the ground.

Lou picked it up. "Sorry." He wrapped it around his nude body. "Just happy. Not that he's dead. And I didn't kill him. I'm just glad there's no more running around."

"I'm sure." Jake commented.

Reed whimpered. "All is ed. Eye ant a-eve all is ed."

"Yeah." Jake said. "Anyhow. In playing with the experiments game, they say it isn't, I say it is. I have to talk to you. Billy, Cal, and Rickie know what I am going to talk about. You three do not. In every experiment there is a catch. A person who volunteers to take injections that activate once they die. Using the DNA, it metamorphosized them into some sort of indestructible beast. Huge, mean, deadly. That is the catch. The thing that tries to wipe us all out before the experiments end. I am telling you this because we need to work together. We need to be aware. On one hand I think this is just a turn of a page in Greg Haynes experiment plan book. On the other, I do not. Because they gave me open access to the control center with this one. Something killed Paul out there today in a way I have never seen. There as nothing left. Bits and pieces of remains that were smashed together like a pink pudding." Jake paused when everyone whined. Everyone but Cal that was, she gave him a thumbs up. Jake winked at her. "Pretty good description huh? See, the Catch didn't kill Paul. Paul was the catch. Injected with the DNA altering therapy. And now we not only have to face what ever did that to Paul and possible ingested him. But we may have to face other things as

well, because not only birds but other animals decided to have lunch on him.”

“So.” Lou spoke up. “What your saying is we pretty much can have some fucked up wildlife running around here.”

“Exactly.”

Lou looked at Reed. “Don’t worry, we’ll watch out for you.”

Reed frowned.

Jake continued. “So what the institute wants from us, is to not only keep our eyes open to what did this, but for other kills as well. And, as Lou put it, fucked up wild life.”

“Why?” Billy asked. “Why do they want your help and now ours?”

“Because . . .” Jake explained. “As they put it, this was not part of the game plan. Anything part of the game plan is in their control. Meaning, if it gets too much or too far ahead of them, still within their control they can stop it. Guess what?”

Billy guessed. “They don’t what this is, so the can’t stop it?”

“Exactly.”

“Oh boy.” Billy breathed out. “Was it that bad? Was Paul that bad?”

“Bill.” Jake stomped with his word. “I called him fuckin pudding.”

“Oh.” Billy then drew up a thinking smile. “Then is it possible to get a picture.”

Jake didn’t answer him. “Having said all I need to say. Just watch out. And . . .” He reached down and grabbed Cal’s hand. “I have unfinished business with my wife. See you at lunch.” Tugging on Cal gently, Jake lifted her to her feet and led her to his bungalow.

“Lunch?” Billy looked around the somber faces. “He referenced a mutilated dead body to food and he can think about lunch?”

“Dude.” Rickie snapped his finger. “Cool idea. Hey Lou, do we have anything like down there to make pudding?”

“I believe we do.”

“Cool.” Rickie stood up. “You get un-obscene and I’ll meet you down at the kitchen guy.”

“Excellent.”

Billy still sitting there watched Lou and Rickie excitedly go off in different direction. Then he saw Judge, swaying his head in a sad mode, stand also and walk off to his bungalow. Seeing it was time to head back and in out of the sun, Billy started to get up himself. He paused when he noticed Reed still sitting there. “Your head will burn if you stay out here too long.”

Reed just shrugged.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ill-E. Wit my wa. I oh I um ex.”

It took Billy a second to decipher the Reed lingo. And when he realized that Reed had insinuated that he would fall victim to whatever was out there, Billy laid a reassuring hand on Reed’s back. “You’re probably right.” He gave a single pat

to Reed and walked off. "See ya."

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

June 4<sup>th</sup> - 7:20 p.m.

The pencil tossed outward from Greg's hand as he stopped watching the still pictures of Paul flashing about the monitor. "Well." Greg rubbed his eyes. "I'd say its safe to say his brain stem was severed. Wouldn't you Dr. Jefferson?"

"Pretty much so yes." Dr. Jefferson answered.

Aldo, who had been watching, spoke up. "He looks as if he was thrown up."

"He does. Doesn't he." Greg agreed. "In fact, stomach acid in his remains is something we're testing for now."

"But . . . but . . ." Aldo pointed. "In order for something to partially digest him, and gack him back out. How big would it have to be?"

"Big." Dr. Jefferson said. "Big enough, that we should have spotted it on the satellite photos."

"And we didn't." Greg added. "Which baffles me even more. Because if we aren't dealing with something that's big enough to be picked up, then what the hell are we dealing with?"

No one had an answer.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

June 4<sup>th</sup> - 7:55 p.m.

After twenty minutes of wincing and trying to convince an always lethargic Reed that he wouldn't be eaten entirely by giant Pigs, Jake made his way back from the dining building to his bungalow for the second time. Not that he minded. Cal needed the calories and since she was eating real food, a treat was all right. So carrying the Rickie and Lou, pink pudding creation, Jake moved on to his porch. He stopped when reaching for the door handle, he heard Cal's ornery giggle seeping out.

"Billy this is so great." She giggled again.

"I knew you'd love it."

"Lately, I don't know what it is, I just enjoy viewing a firm butt. Thank you for sharing with me."

Jake's eyes widened, and hoping that those pregnancy hormones didn't kick into high gear while he was out of the room, Jake walked inside. Billy sat at the table and Cal flipped over on the bed, pulling her hands out from under the pillow and looking really guilty. "Cal?"

"Hey Jake." Cal smiled. "You got me more pudding?"

"Yes." He stepped to her. Through the corner of his eyes he saw Billy snickering. "What are you hiding."

"Nothing." Cal answered short.

"Cal."

"Nothing."

"Cal!" Jake snapped.

"Oh all right." She got off the bed and reached for her pudding, Jake pulled them away.

"Give it up first."

"You drive a hard bargain." She reached under the pillow and pulled out photographs. She exchanged them with Jake for the pudding. Setting one of the bowls on the night stand.

"Oh Cal." Jake said.

"Huh?" Cal stirred her pudding. "Isn't this really neat? They made pink pudding."

"Where did you get these."

Cal pointed to Billy.

Billy stood up. "Guilty. I didn't think you'd mind Jake. I figured since she wouldn't get to see the loin cloth flapping, that she would like to have those last final moments to treasure."

Jake grunted and tossed the pictures on the bed. "Under normal circumstances I wouldn't mind Mr. Bamboozle. However, at this point in her growing hormonal stage, she doesn't need them."

Cal snickered. "You called him bamboozle. I'll miss that."



"And the loin cloth." Billy added.

"That too." Cal smiled.

"Cal please. Billy?" Jake looked at him.

"Yeah?"

"Out."

"I'm gone." Billy stood up and started to leave, he stopped when he saw Cal's pudding. "Oh Jake, can I ask for your expert, honest, Jake the Great opinion."

Jake rolled his eyes. "What?"

"Do you *really* believe something unknown killed Paul today."

"Absolutely not. I think they killed him, set it up just to fuck with us. This is the Iso-Stasis, they fuck with people. Trust me. And . . . I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Paul wasn't the stasis at all. That maybe Lou, judge or . . ." He glared at Cal. "REED is the stasis."

Cal scoffed at Jake.

Billy looked a little surprised. "Really? You think?"

"Trust me I am not ruling it out."

"Excellent. I'll quote you on that." Billy walked to the door. "Night."

"Night." Cal raised her spoon.

"Night." Jake said and watched the door shut. "Quote me on it. Fuckin journalist." He walked to the fridge and pulled out a beer. He glanced at Cal who scraped the bowl. "I did bring you two."

"Yeah I know." She placed the spoon in her mouth, set the bowl down and grabbed the other. "Thanks."

"Could you possibly enjoy that pudding anymore?" Jake asked sarcastically as he took a drink of his beer.

"Well actually . . ." Cal got a twinkle in her eye.

"Cal. Stop. All right. Fuck." Jake plopped down on the bed.

"Jake I'm kidding."

"Good. Because it's getting frightening."

Cal tsked. "Do you really dread the thought of being with me more?"

"Absolutely." Jake grinned and brought the bottle to his mouth. "Not."

"Thanks."

"Until you get round."

Cal gasped, rolled her eyes, called him a 'dick' in her mind, then returned to enjoying her Paul pink pudding.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

June 11<sup>th</sup> - 9:15 a.m.

"Sorry." Greg walked into his office, papers in hand. Dr. Jefferson sat there waiting, along with Douglass, Reed's investor. "The copy machine was jammed. I know Mr. Douglass you are a busy man. Sorry if this has held you up."

"Not a problem." Douglass took the papers Greg handed him. "I'm the one intruding on your meeting. I appreciate you letting me sit in. Aldo seems to trust what I say. So no hold up is a hold up."

"I'm surprise Aldo isn't here. He said he was coming back." Greg gave papers to Dr. Jefferson.

Dr. Jefferson took them. "Aldo had business merger he couldn't leave. He's hoping next week or at the very least, a few days." Dr. Jefferson noticed some of his copies were smeared. He held one up with a chuckle. "Sometimes life's simplest things can become our biggest headaches. Can't they?" Dr. Jefferson gave a smile.

"I wish the island was one of those problems."

"Things have been quiet. Stasis awakening is nearing." Dr. Jefferson commented.

"If what is out there doesn't get them first." Greg sat down and raised his eyebrows. "Look. Four mutilations were found this past week. All unidentifiable animal remains. All looking the way Paul did."

Douglass flipped through his notes. "You still haven't found out what is doing the mutilations?"

"No." Greg answered. "No stomach acid found at all. Animal saliva was found in the remains, different types. We are chalking that up to what fed on the remains. There was not one unknown substance in there. However our Lt. Col Graison did find a trace of protoplasm in the remains."

Douglass shook his head confused. "What's that."

"Cell structuring." Greg explained. "However what Jake found was not consistent with the human biological make up." He shrugged. "But it can mean something. It can not. Undeterminable. Jake just noted that he found it."

"Here's something you may not have thought about." Dr. Jefferson pointed out. "The areas where the bodies were found."

"We searched the regions." Greg said. "We couldn't spot anything that looked like it was doing the killings."

"No." Dr. Jefferson shook his head. "I'm not talking about what did this. I'm talking about the region where the bodies were found. Look. All of them were found near the large eastern cavern. In that wooded area there. That area is located nearer to the far side of the island rather than were the control center and the compound is."

“So.” Greg tossed his hands up.

“So look at what’s going on in that region.” Dr. Jefferson stated.

Douglass tilted his head in wonder. “Haynes volcano. It’s active. You think it’s the sulphur it seeks?”

“I think it’s the heat.” Dr. Jefferson stated. “The further away from that volcano you get the cooler it is. That side of the island is hot. Especially with that volcano ready to blow. We placed the compound where it is for that reason. Heat, safe from actual eruption. I’m just saying what ever it is, maybe it likes the heat.”

“Maybe.” Greg released the notes from his hand and sat back in his chair. “Or just maybe it hasn’t discovered yet what’s beyond that region. And if that’s the case. We’re in trouble. Because what happens when it does?” After drawing up the concerned looks he sought, Greg, leaned forward to his desk, grabbed his notes and continued in the meeting.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

June 20<sup>th</sup> - 10:42 a.m.

She crunched her granola loudly then Cal spoke with her mouth full. "Pig."

"Nah." Billy shook his head. "Too big."

"How can you tell?" Cal asked.

"Another Dingo." Lou commented. "That's what I think it is."

"Ay-E es an-him-ian." Reed suggested.

Judge swayed his head in disagreement. "No, it's not any bird. Again. Too big."

"Dudes." Rickie snapped. "Maybe it's an elk."

All heads turned to him.

"Rickie." Billy snapped. "We're on a tropical island."

"Still guy. It's the experiment." Rickie shrugged.

Cal took another bite of her granola. She adjusted her M-16 better behind her back and squatted down to the meshed, bloody mess on the ground. "Jake will know when he gets here. But I think Lou's right. Look, a tooth." Just as she reached for it, Billy pulled her away.

"Cal. Don't touch that."

"Sorry."

"And how can you eat?" He asked her.

"I have to eat. I'm hungry." Cal told him. "You know, I start my fourth month in two days. Boy aren't I lucky knowing the exact date of my conception."

"And in knowing the exact date of conception. How can you say your starting your fourth month." Billy questioned. "You'll only be three full months pregnant."

"Yep." Cal chomped. "There are no half months in pregnancy Billy. You have to say the end of the three full months is the start of the fourth month. Or else, going by your theory, I would deliver a baby at eight and a half months. Which means, when will I be nine months pregnant." She finished off her granola. "Actually, I would already be considered in my fourth month if I used the period method." She heard the whines from all the men. "What? You can stare at a mutilated animal and I can't mention period." She smiled. "Period. Menstruation. The curse. Hey . . ." She pointed to Lou. "That was your nick name."

"No." Lou corrected. "Large Curse."

"That's right."

"Sarge is here." Rickie pointed. "I hope they gave him the jeep. I don't feel like carrying this one back."

Jake trotted up through the woods to the clearing. "Sorry. Fuckin Stan argued with me. He wouldn't give up the jeep. But I got it."

Cal was curious. "I wonder why. They wanted these things, you know. You

would think they would be more cooperative. Of course, everyone has to admit. Even though it's disgusting. It does pass the time. Especially during these past two weeks. Boring."

Billy rolled his eyes. "Yeah but for how long Cal? Yesterday how many of those broken bits of cocoon did we find."

Cal shrugged. "Reed knows. He's keeping count."

"Eh-eh-een."

Cal held her hand out. "Seventeen. But don't worry." She tapped her waist. "Stasis animals or not. I have the Stasis guillotine."

Jake shifted his eyes oddly at Cal as he bent down to examine the remains. "Has she been this talkative since I left."

Everybody moaned a 'yes'.

"God Cal. When do you talk this much ever?" Jake looked at the remains. "Dingo."

"Yes!" Lou clenched his fist.

"O.K." Jake stood up. "I have the shovels back in the jeep with the truck. We'll shovel this . . ." Jake sniffed. "Fuck. Does anyone smell that?"

Lou hunched in a blush. "Sorry. I had those beans last night."

Jake grunted and rolled his eyes. "I don't think that's . . ."

A loud, eerie bird squawk rang out in the woods, a loud rustling of leaves and cracking of branches followed.

Cal shifted her eyes. "Why doesn't that sound good?"

Jake extended a protective arm out in front of Cal, backing her up. "I don't know Cal. But it doesn't."

Billy's shocking gasp was heard. It shivered and his mouth dropped open. He trembled so badly he couldn't speak. "Oh . . . Oh . . . sh . . . shit."

"What?" Jake looked at him, then turned his head to where Billy pointed.

A long shrill bird scream precluded the deformed large open beak that was about the size of a compact car. The beak opened wide, exposing the forked tongue and it squealed again. It's blast of hot smelly breath hit smacked into the participants Causing Jake and Cal to turn their heads and Billy, Rickie and the others all to scream.

If it was a bird that emerged through the trees, it certainly lost something. Large, featherless, scaley. Tumorous looking bumps sprawled out across it's purplish body. It's eyes protruded wide, bulging from it peanut shaped head. It flapped out it's scaly wings as it took another step to them. Its foot smashing into the dingo remains.

Everyone groaned in disgust as the remains splashed out at them.

Judge gasped out when he saw the bird. "Dear Jesus."

Reed whined, backing up. "Um ed."

Lou's eyes widened. "Now *that* is a big bird."

"No one move." Cal ordered when she saw everyone get ready to run.

"Cal." Jake stopped her. "We should run."

"No Jake." She argued. "Dinosaurs can't see you if you stay still. Birds are ancestors of the dinosaur family."

"Where in the fuck did you hear that." Jake asked with edge, staring at the bird who cased them.

"Sarge, she's right." Rickie commented. "I saw that too in Jurassic Park."

"Jurassic Park? Rickie this isn't a fuckin . . ."

"Jake." Billy interrupted. "Actually, that is a viable theory that they used in that book."

Jake moaned. "I still say, on my count we run."

The bird squalled loudly again and took another step, this time toward Reed.

Cal breathed out in relief. "Thank God, he sees Reed."

"Cal." Jake shook his head disapprovingly.

The bird opened it's mouth widely and cried out with such a force, if Reed would have had any hair it would have blown. Reed shrieked, and the bird closed it's beak, pulled back it's head and shot forth a peck at Reed nailing him in the head and sending him flying back. Reed landed on his back.

"Jake." Cal nudged him. "The birds occupied. I say we run."

"Sarge like, I vote we let Reed be seed."

"No." Jake reached for his revolver. "I vote we just take it out." He lifted it from it's holster, clicked back the chamber and when he did, the featherless beast, turned it's head away from Reed, snared its eyes at Jake and with a loud squawk charged forth with a vengeance at them.

Everyone ran. Except for Reed that is.

As Jake stopped running to fire upon the grotesque bird, the amphibian lifted up in the air with a wide spread of it wings, shot through the woods, extended down it's clawed feet and swept up a running Billy by the shoulders.

With Billy's scream so came Cal's, she ran forth leaping up and in hoping to pull Billy down, she grabbed hold of his ankles only to be lifted up also into the air.

"Fuck!" Jake screamed. "Cal let go before he gets too . . Fuck! High." Jake put his revolver away watching the bird turn and lift higher. "Fuck."

"Sarge. He's heading over to the cavern." Rickie pointed. "How you gonna get over there guy?"

"You have to go first Rickie. Go monster if you have to. But get over that cavern. I'll take the jeep." Jake started to ruin. "I'll take the road to the beach and come up the other way. "Hurry!" Jake sped off.

"Eye-eye Sarge." Rickie took off running. He jumped over a passed out, but not dead Reed and ran with a high speed through those woods.

"Oh God, we're dead. We're dead. We're dead. We're dead." Bill looked down to see the ground getting further and further away.

"I told you we shouldn't have ran." Cal yelled up. "Everyone ran. He

attacked.”

“Now is not the time to be bitching Cal we . . . oh shit.” Billy saw the deep cavern just under his feet. Swallowing, and hating to do it, reached up his hands and with a body shudder, and a loud verbal dramatic cringe, Billy grabbed hold of the slimy feeling bird legs just incase it decided to drop them. “Please, God. Please” he closed his eyes. “Our Father who art in heaven . . .” He heard Cal snickering. “What?”

“Nothing, go on, keep praying.”

“Oh God she’s enjoying this.” Billy closed his eyes again and prayed in a quiet mumble to himself as he and Cal soared with that bird over the cavern.

Rickie in his run, saw the cavern just ahead. “O.K. I can do this. I jumped further than this on the beach. And . . . if I miss. As long as my head doesn’t fall off. I’ll be back.” He stopped, backed up, kept his focus straight ahead and started to run. Only when he ran, he sang his inspiration music. The theme to ‘Greatest American Hero’. *“Look at what’s happened to me. I can’t believe it myself. Suddenly I’m up on top of the world. Could have been somebody else. . .”* Rickie screamed the last word as he leaped--legs out kicking in the air--fast and furiously over the cavern. “. . .Whoa. *Believe it or not I’m walking on air.* I am so cool.” He screamed again as he lunged his body forward aiming for the other side. He landed hard and with a violent roll. When he stopped moving. Rickie, stood up, and like a cat who ran into the wall, shook it off. He raised his arms high in the air like a Rocky-victory-mode and then after sniffing out a scent to follow, Rickie charged ahead into the woods.

Jake, while driving kept his eyes on the soaring bird that toted his wife and Billy. He took the route down to the beach, driving as fast as he could. Then Jake sped onto the old overgrown road that he hoped would not only bring him to the other side of the cavern, but to the woods where he watched the bird lower down.

Cal saw the ground moving into her focus at a raid speed. Waiting until she knew it was safe, she released Billy’s ankles, dropping to the ground and curling her body into a ball so as to roll out of it safely. A few seconds later, with a grunt, Billy dropped clumsily a couple of feet above her head.

The bird flew off.

In what looked like a recently made clearing, Cal stood up first, slowly, bringing her M-16 around to in front of her. She reached her hand down to Billy. “You O.K.?”

Billy stood up. “Yeah. What about you?”

“I’m fine.” Cal stared out. She had only taken a slight breath in when she cringed. “Man.”

“What is that smell.”

“Everything.”

“Where are we?”

Cal just looked at Billy. “I’m supposed to know this?”

“Sorry.” Billy took in the broken trees that looked like matchsticks. The muddy ground they stood upon. The bird droppings that splattered about making it look as if someone recently painted the landscape.

Turning her body clockwise, Cal looked around. She saw a small amount of black smoke seeping up into the sky beyond the trees. “All right. Volcano. There.” Cal pointed. “So we go this way.” She went to turn around and stopped. “Maybe not.”

“Shit.”

Out from the trees in every angle, they came. Birds. Many of them. And all of them looking as big and as ugly as the one that brought them there. They weren’t loud in their noises but they still were vocal, sounding like a magnified soundtrack to the Alfred Hitchcock Movie THE BIRDS.

Encircling entirely and they drew closer.

“Cal.” Billy moved closer to her. “About this point in time I think Jake should have created a bigger guillotine.”

Cal just pumped the chamber to her M-16. “When I shoot them down we run. Got it?”

“Yeah.” Billy nodded. He looked at the birds that moved in. “Talk about being in a bad episode of *Land of the Lost*.”

Cal chuckled at his remark. “Ready?”

“Yep.”

Holding up the weapon without much of an aim. Cal open fired, spraying out the bullets into the birds that blocked their way. “Run!” She order to Billy, charging forth and firing as she did. The bullets seared into two of the birds, blood shot out and the birds ripped apart. But her firing was an attack signal to the birds that circled them. They went after Cal and Billy. Squawking out in an evil way, diving their beaks down at them, trying to get them.

Cal and Billy, running nearly together, dodged the forth coming beaks. Beaks that slammed into the ground in their misses, rumbling the ground and sending up clouds of dust as if they were tiny meteors smashing into the earth.

“The dense woods!” Cal called out veering off to her right and between two birds that leaped out.

Billy ran close, leaping over the broken splintered tree that Cal had just jumped over.

Cal stopped, “Keep going.” She held up her weapon, backing up slowly into the thick woods and firing at the bird who poked it’s head into the trees. She aimed at its eye, shooting directly at it, exploding it and causing the bird to fall over. She spun back around and ran to catch up to Billy.



Rickie heard the gunfire and shifted his direction.

Jake stopped the jeep cold, letting his ears zoom into the shots he just heard. Turning the wheel of the jeep, Jake left the road. Hoping that the jeep would handle what it was built to handle, Jake drove with haste into the woods, ducking his head at the tree branches that smacked down at him like hands.

Billy sped right by Cal, and after dismissing the possibility that he picked up super human speed, he realized that she had stopped. "Cal. Come on."

"No." She caught her breath, grabbing on to her knees. "We're O.K." She took deep breaths in, releasing them out slowly.

"Cal?" Billy walked up to her. "Are you sure . . ."

"I'm fine." She stood up. "They can't see us or get into these trees." Cal looked up. "Which is good. Now let's just hope we ran in a semi right direction." She started looking.

"What are you looking for?"

"The smoke form the volcano. We just need to go away from it and it should get us to the cavern."

"Then what?"

"It's probably a three mile walk down to the beach, or at the very least, a mile or so until the cavern is safe enough for us to climb down." She spotted the smoke, it seemed thicker than a few minutes earlier. "Oh Boy."

"What?"

"Nothing." She grabbed Billy's hand. "This way." She turned them and began to walk.

"Cal." Billy stopped. "Do you feel that. My feet tickle."

Cal stopped moving too. Just as she started to feel what Billy meant, she heard the loud noise. It sounded like a tractor trailer truck rolling their way. "Shit."

"What?"

Boom! At almost an ear shattering decimal level the loud explosion rang out through the woods causing the ground to immediately shake so violently that Cal and Billy were rocked off their stand. In their attempts to regain their stand through the vibrating ground, Cal and Billy kept on falling right back down. Rolling, standing, falling, rolling. Until everything went silent again.

Cal a little dizzy from the nature's roller coaster ride, stood up.

"Oh God, did it erupt?" Billy asked panicked.

Cal quickly looked around. "No. Well. Sort of."

"No? Well? Sort of?" Billy's voice took on a high pitch tone. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Billy." Cal snapped at him. "Do I look like a fuckin geologist. No. I think it just spit out ash. I'm not sure. No. Just ash." She spotted the volcano. "We're good. Let's go."

"This is great." Billy ran his hand through his sweaty hair as they started to

walk. And he began to ramble in a bitch mode. "This is just great. Grabbed by a bird. Flow hundreds of feet above the ground. Dropped not only on the other side of the island, but dropped in the middle of the nesting place for giant mutant birds, an earth quake, a volcano that's ready to erupt. Is there anything else that can possibly happen to us?"

Snort.

They both stopped and turned their heads slowly. Through the woods, with a dingo in it's mouth they saw, about the size of a large truck, a wild bore. Mutated as well as the birds were.

"You . . ." Cal swallowed and whispered. "Were saying?"

"Oh God. And those things move fast."

"Probably not since it's mutated."

"Wanna chance it?" Billy asked.

"No. But he doesn't see us. Let's just back up and . . ."

"Cal-Babe!" Rickie called out.

Cal cringed. Billy cringed. The bore snorted loudly and looked up,.

Rickie stopped running when he reached them. "There you are . . . are . . . uh! Pig!"

With a violent twitch of his head, the bore flung the half eaten dingo off to the side, snorted loudly again, spotted Cal, Billy and Rickie and moved heavily toward them.

They took off running, and luckily for them, since mutated, the bore didn't move quite as fast,.

Jake followed the screams and he screeched the jeep to a stop, and stood up holding his M-16 in an aim when he saw Cal, Billy and Rickie charging through the woods with the world's largest bore following after them. "Fuck."

"Jake!" All three of them screamed running as fast as they could to the jeep.

Jake fired out passed them hitting into the bore, stumbling it down but not killing it. It seemed as if the bullets merely bruised its leather like skin. Jake stood stunned as they jumped in.

"Drive! Just drive!" Cal ordered.

Jake sat back down, saw the bore get up, tossed the jeep in gear, backed up, screeched the jeep around and drove. The bore followed and picked up speed once they got out of the thick woods.

Billy and Rickie held on and sat in the back of the jeep watching the charging bore come their way.

"Sarge! Drive faster!" Rickie ordered.

Billy looked over his shoulder at Jake. "What were you saying about Jurassic Park. Uh!" Billy screamed and ducked when the gunfire rang out above his head as Cal stood up backwards in her seat and fired at the bore.

"Sit down!" Jake yanked Cal back into her seat. "I don't need you bouncing out."

“Jake . . .”

“Sit!” Jake peered into the rearview mirror to the bore, then straight ahead. Cal huffed, folded her arms, looked pissed, then lifted her head up. “Oh my God.”

“Cal . . .”

“Jake the . . .”

“I know.” Jake hit the gas harder.

“You’re speeding up? Jake the . . .”

“I know!” Jake yelled at her.

Billy saw it. Rickie saw it just about the same time that Cal gripped the jeep’s door. The wide open area before them. The cavern.

“Jake!” Cal screamed.

Jake shifted gears and hit the gas. Closer and closer the cavern drew. Billy and Rickie screamed long and loud in terror totally forgetting about the closing in bore. And just as it looked as if they were about to pull a failed Evil Knevil stunt. Jake slammed the breaks to the jeep, spinning the jeep to a sideways stop just at the edge of the cliff.

“Duck!” Jake yelled.

Everyone did and the bore, in an attack mode, and unable to stop the momentum of it’s run, leaped outward at them, over the jeep and into the deep cavern, squealing all the way down to the bottom and landing with a loud ‘Crack.’

Cal jumped up peering over the jeep. “Oh shit Jake.”

“Sarge.” Rickie called out excitedly. “You’re the man.”

“Jake.” Billy spoke in awe. “You are.”

Jake breathed heavily, calming his racing heart. He turned his head sideways to Cal with an ornery grin and kissed her. “Feel like uh . . .” He caught his breath, smiled and kissed her again. “Hitting those hormones of yours?”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

June 20<sup>th</sup> - 12:05 p.m.

In the dining building around one table, the participants stood watching Jake. They were joined by Richard, an thin studious looking black man who worked for the institute.

Jake's hand smoothed across one of the pieces of paper. "All right as we can see from the faxes of Satellite photos. This is where they are nesting. This is the spot Cal and Billy were dropped off. They estimated about fifty or so of the birds and we don't know if there are anymore bores. So assuming there are . . ." Jake pulled out another sheet of paper. "Here." He pointed. Then he returned to the nesting photo. "Here. And . . ." He grabbed another photo. "Here. Are the regions we'll set the timed explosives that the institute gave us. Richard will be joining us for observation purposes. But what I want to do is, sneak into the nesting area through the dense woods here. Cal said they can't get in. And we'll open fire upon them, taking out as many as we can first. Then we book out to a safe area, let the timed explosives to their thing and head back in to finish them off." Jake gathered up the papers. "We'll hit the control center first. Right Richard."

"Yes." Richard replied. "Caldwell will supply the fire power to do this."

"Conveniently being helpful." Jake shoved the pictures in his back pocket. "Judge you're in charge of Reed. Rickie, Lou, Richard, let's go." Jake kissed Cal, and laid his hand on her cheek. "I'll see you in a little bit. I love you." He kissed her again and with Rickie, Lou and Richard, they headed to the doors.

Cal laughed, picked her M-16 up from the table and followed them out. "Jake, wait."

"Cal. I got to go."

"Jake?" Cal moved closer to him. "I'm going right?"

"No."

Cal laughed again. "O.K., enough is enough." She saw Jake moving and she trotted to catch him. "Jake."

"Cal." He spun to her. "Stay here."

"Jake. What the hell." She began to get upset. "We're a team. Not only husband and wife, but a team. United we stand, divided we fall. Ring a bell?"

"Yes. But not his time. You stay here." Jake walked on.

"Bullshit!" Cal called out. "I'm going." Jake didn't stop. "Jake. I'm going. Jake . . ."

"No!" Jake blasted her as he spun to face her. "You will stay right here! You hear me!"

"Fuck you!" She charged passed him to the jeep.

Jake grabbed her arm pulling her back. "Cal. Not this time! Stay here."

"You can't . . ." She pulled her arm away from him. "You can't tell me what

to do.”

“The hell I can’t. In this case I will.” Jake’s tone was strong.

“You have no right to hold me back from going.”

Jake’s face was red. “I have every right!”

“It’s my life!”

“Wrong!” Jake vocally slammed out. “Wrong! It’s not your life anymore Cal! It’s not just your life at all. You have a child, *my* child involved. And when it comes to your health and that baby’s, I have to get my priorities straight. I have. And now so do you! Get your priorities straight Cal.” He turned and started to walk away.

Cal pulled him back. “What the hell is that supposed to mean. Where do you get off. I have to go and do this. Fighting these things are a priority. So my priorities are straight.”

“Are they? Huh! I don’t think so.” Jake spoke angrily. “Not when you want to put yourself in such a risk. How can they be? Think of this baby Cal. Not yourself. So what if you want to go. So what. It’s not about you anymore. You have seen enough excitement for today. Our child has been through enough. And if I have to tie you up and lock you in a closet I will! But you will not, I repeat not go with us. Clear?”

Cal just stared at him, she felt how hot her face was. “Clear asshole.”

Jake said nothing further. The clenching of his jaw and stern look said enough of how he felt. He stepped back, rigidly spun in a turn and jumped into the awaiting jeep.

Like a lost child, arm dangling holding her weapon, Cal stood there as the jeep drove away. She felt the hand lay upon her back and she lifted her lowered head to see Billy.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to go.” He told her.

Cal just nodded. “He’s never left me out. Ever.”

“Cal. I . . .” Billy closed his eyes then looked out to the disappearing jeep. “Never mind.”

“No go on. Say what you were going to say.”

“No.”

“Say it.” Cal ordered.

“Maybe . . . maybe Jake didn’t quite put it to you the way he should have, but, you have you think about the words he said. Look into the meaning of them instead of the deliverance of them. O.K.?” Billy moved away further, a slight fear of a Cal-blasting hit him.

Cal blinked slowly and her mouth took on sort of a pout. It quivered some and silently, looking a bit humbled, she slowly walked away.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

June 20<sup>th</sup> - 1:15 p.m.

"They're off." Greg set down the phone in the control room and turned to Aldo who sat next to Barb.

Aldo looked at photographs. "When did these things hatch?"

"We think yesterday. We're guessing because they were animals and not humans that is why they're hatching earlier than anticipated."

"How big?" Aldo asked.

"The birds. Thermal-graphics is estimating them to be about ten feet high, twelve to fifteen feet long."

Aldo whistled and shook his head. "I'd say your DNA mutating shit works."

"Yep." Greg peered at the photographs. "Unfortunately, this isn't what we wanted it to work on." He looked up to the screen. "And hopefully in a few hours, we can put an end to this and move on to the real portion of this experiment." He looked back down to Aldo. "Hopefully."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

June 20<sup>th</sup> - 6:30 p.m.

Cal stopped in her reaching to open Billy's bungalow door when she heard them. The sound of the sequential explosions in the distance not only filled her with a sad disappointment, but also with a jealous rage. And that carried into the bungalow with her. "That dick." She slammed Billy's door.

"Cal?"

She spun, holding a small tube and stepped into Billy's room. "Take off your shirt."

"Cal maybe . . ."

"Take off your shirt!"

"All right!" Billy grabbed for his tee shirt. "But could you please lose the edge before touching my sunburn."

"I'll be gentle." She harshly grabbed the desk chair sliding it out. "Sit."

"Maybe this really isn't a . . ."

"Sit!"

Billy sat.

"God Billy." Cal stood behind the chair looking at his arms and back. "Can you be anymore burned?"

"See. This is why I'm pushing the issue of you losing the edge."

Cal twitched her head. "You poor thing."

"Tell me about it. I keep using sun screen and I keep getting burned."

"Quit using the sun screen."

"Wouldn't that defeat the purpose?" Billy asked.

"No it they're giving you an accelerator instead of protection."

"I didn't think of that."

"See." Cal opened the tube. "This will help. Jake swears by it when he's in the jungle."

"Jake should know."

"Yeah. The dick."

Billy heard her squeeze out some lotion. "Cal, please. No anger at this moment."

"No anger." Cal laid the tube on the desk, then rubbed her hands together slightly still leaving a thick coating on them. She brought her hands to Billy's shoulders and he jumped. "Sorry."

"No. It's cold."

"It'll help."

"Feels like it." He felt Cal gently smooth the lotion over his shoulders. Her hands, so soft, moved to his back. He hated when she stopped for more lotion.

"How is this?"

"Great. It feels really good." Billy closed his eyes, "Really good." He tuned in on every soft sweep of her hand against his shoulders and back, feeling her

fingers trail over his shoulder blades to his chest in the application of the lotion.

"I know what else can make you feel better." Cal said softly as her hands slowed down but still moved.

"Oh yeah, what's that?" Billy asked.

With more lotion, Cal's slick hands, moved to Billy's chest, slowly smoothing the lotion across him in circular sweeps. "This." She pressed firm in her massage but not too firm. "Better."

"Cal . . ."

"Billy." She whispered his name, bringing her lips closer to his ear.

Billy could feel her chest press to his back and sunburn or not, that was all he felt, until her hands glided to his stomach and then lower, undoing the button of his pants. Billy swallowed, slid down in the chair, arched his back some and sucked in his stomach as an invitation for her hand that seemed to slip to the rim of his jeans. And through the openness between his jeans and skin, Cal's lotion covered hand slid in. Cool, yet firm she touched him, sending a warmth though Billy with each slippery glide. Her hand pulled from him and back to his stomach then Cal walked around the chair to face him, straddling her legs across his lap. Billy's hands moved to the back of her thighs, gripping her, then sliding his hands to the top of her legs as her lips met his. His hands roamed Cal, one hand feeling her chest, the other exploring every aspect of her lower body. And his hands probed more as he felt her moist lips widen and part against his, then slide to his neck. Billy breathed heavier and deeper with each bite Cal placed to his neck. His heart beat faster as Cal's widened kissing mouth, moved downward across his chest to his stomach and she knelt before him.

"Billy." She whispered his name, undoing his pants fully and kissing him softly just at the top of the opening. "You must really like this."

"Oh yeah . . ." Billy gasped out. Then Billy snapped to and out of his fantasy. "I'm mean. Um . . . yeah." He cleared his throat. "It feels good."

Cal snickered. "It must." She twitched her head down.

Billy lowered his views. "Shit." He quickly grabbed for his tee shirt on the desk and laid in across his lap. "I am so . . . so sorry."

"For what? You're a guy. Those things happen. Besides, at least *you're* enjoying my company." She giggled.

"Oh my God." Billy covered his face.

"Billy. Please." Cal replaced the cap to the lotion. She looked toward the door when she heard gunfire. "Listen to them." She spoke and moved toward the door. "I can't believe I'm not out there." She opened the door.

"It's for the best." Billy tossed on his tee shirt and stood up leaving it hang out.

"Yeah but still. I can't believe . . ." Cal stopped talking and laughed when she turned around and saw the awkward 'busted' look on Billy's face as he pulled his hand from his pants.

Billy turned beat red. "Sorry. Adjusting."



"You really get those things at inappropriate times, don't you? I distinctively remember hanging from the tree."

"Cal." Billy blushed. "Then again, you should have seen me in high school."

Cal returned to staring out the open door. Listening to the gunfire. "Of course, one of your inappropriate times is the reason I'm standing here instead of out the having fun."

"Fun?" Billy walked up to beside her.

"Yeah." Cal grunted. "You know. Jake could go out to a bar, flirt with a woman. Get drunk, stay out all night and stumble in. I don't think that would phase me. But . . . but, go out on a wild mutant animal shooting spree all day without me, and man do I get pissed."

"I'm sorry."

"I want to be there Billy." The gunfire slowed down, trailing off. "See they're done." She flung her hand out immediately sounding angry again. "Can you believe he left me here? That dick."

Billy didn't know what to say, he was speechless. But he did know one thing. For as much as he was hung up on Cal, for as much as he wanted so many times just to trade places with Jake, for sure, it was not one of those times.

^^^

Jake didn't expect it when he walked in his bungalow tired, sweaty and dirty, but he got it. Not a verbal hello, but a hard smack to his chest when Cal wailed a hardback book at him. "Cal. What the . . ." Smack. He was hit again, this time with a shoe. Jake shut the door batting away the flying objects that sailed his way. "Knock it off!"

"You dick."

"Calm down."

"No."

Jake bit his bottom lip and pointed at Cal when he saw her raise her hand holding a beer bottle. "Don't even fuckin think about it. Put it down." He marched to her. "Put it down!" He grabbed it from her hand. "And grow up."

"Fuck you."

"Yeah, yeah." Jake walked to his dresser opening a drawer. "Do I get an 'are you Ok?' No. Do I get asked how everything went? No. I get fuckin hit with any moveable object my wife can find the second I walk into the room." He pulled out a pair of boxer shorts. "Thank you very much Cal."

"You left without me!"

"You're pregnant."

"You could have had more tact!"

"And you could have had more goddamn sense."

Cal gasped out. "You . . ."

"Dick. I know."

"You know Jake." She followed him into the bathroom. "You think you saved me and my baby harm by stopping us. Well let me tell you something Mr. Know-it-all." She poked him in the back as he bent over the tub to turn on the water. "You made matters worse."

"How do you figure." Jake tested the water.

"I was stressed Jake. Totally stressed out. Do you think that's good for the baby? No. I shook. I trembled. I cried. I was so distraught at the tone you used on me that . . ."

"Oh Bullshit Cal." Jake spun to her. He took off his shirt and flung it. "My yelling at you did not stress you out and you know it."

"Look at me now."

"The only reason you're like you are now is because you are acting like a spoiled little brat who didn't get their way and you sat here and stewed all day about it." Jake dropped his pants kicking them out. "Stewed."

"I did not."

"You did too." Jake pulled on the plunger to start the shower. "And I don't want to hear about it." Jake stepped inside the shower. "I'm tired. I'm dirty and the last thing I need right now is to hear you bitch." He slammed the shower door.

"I have every right to bitch Jake. I am your wife."

"Exactly." Jake opened the door and peeked out. "And when have you ever, in our whole entire relationship bitched at me like this."

"Never."

"Exactly." Jake shut the door again. "So don't start now. I don't deal with it well." He heard her gasping. "And quit with the breathing loud thing. It's so female of you."

"God you can act so macho sometimes it drives me nuts. I really hate you Jake."

"There it is. I was waiting for it. Never fails. The stock Cal phrase. You know, I was out there working hard. For you. Protecting you. Can you not say anything nice."

At first Cal squeaked in her anger. "No."

"Figures." Jake soaped up as he spoke. "Not even thank you."

"No."

"Did you even do anything at all these passed eight hours besides bitch and get more mad. Did you do anything productive with your time Cal?"

She stopped herself from gasping again, and Cal smiled. She opened the shower door and peeked in. "As a matter of fact, I did."

"Good."

"I put lotion on Billy's sunburn and . . . I gave him an erection. So there." Raising her eyebrows in a gloating manner, Cal took in--with enjoyment--the instant shocked expression on Jake's face. Calmly she shut the shower door, stepped back, hesitated then flushed the toilet causing Jake to shriek when the water went cold. And feeling one hundred percent better, like everything was

finally out of her system and over with, Cal happily left the bathroom.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

June 20<sup>th</sup> - 9:33 p.m.

“Fifty-four birds, seven bores and one dingo.” Greg rattled off results to Dr. Jefferson. “That is what they estimate they took out.”

“All byproducts of our stasis?” Dr. Jefferson asked.

“Yep. Amazing huh?”

“You are documenting this. Correct?”

“Absolutely.” Greg said with certainty. “Not only did this animal episode turn out to be participant straining, another indeterminable win in the Reed accident poll, but . . .” He smiled. “It turned out to be some very valuable Stasis information we lacked in our Stasis research.”

“Another means of altering the gene sequence.”

“Yes. Exactly.” Greg sat down behind his desk. “Not only through injection, and slight blood transfusion, but now we have ingesting as well.”

Dr. Jefferson reached for the stack of research on Greg’s desk, he started to review it. “So do you think we’re done with the Stasis Animals?”

“Who knows. Possibly not. But . . .” Greg shrugged. “This one little episode is now history, that’s all that matters. It’s documented, it holds merit. And now . . . it’s time to move on.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
July 3<sup>rd</sup> - 11:00 a.m.

"Welcome back Gentleman." Greg spoke to the five investors that sat around the table. "We've got two months left of the experiment and we're expecting things to start to heat up. Many of you, have been here quite a bit. And we appreciate you're enthusiasm. Again, I'd like to ask you to fill out the personal opinion survey forms I have in front of you. It's important. Your opinion as investors is vital to a new future funding grant we may receive. I know it's tedious, but I promise you, you'll have only one more to do and that is after the experiment is over with.."

Aldo looked at the survey. "I have a question Haynes. Not regarding the stupid survey. But, why haven't the prisoners hatched?"

"They have." Greg answered. "Unfortunately, they haven't made it to the other end of the island. They have been feeding where they are. We believe they'll make it."

Douglass raised his hand. "Are you hoping that they take a while, due to the fact you lost the Catch."

Greg bobbed his head side to side. "Some what. But losing Paul is not a worry. As you and Aldo are aware. If our prisoners do not take us to the end of the experiment and force a winner, anyone of the remaining investors can pull his option, forcing us to produce a winner or no winners if that ends up being the case." Seeing that he had their attention, Greg continued. "We're still seeing some Stasis animal attacks here and there. Surprisingly none of our participants have been killed by them. Reed surprises me." Greg chuckled. "That broken wrist is healing nicely. Anyhow, we have the animal attacks. The prisoner stasis, we have steady and continuous kills in region seventeen and beyond by that unknown factor which still hasn't been determined. And we still are awaiting the eruption of our volcano. Unfortunately, that is something we can't control. So you see we have a lot of things that can take us with excitement to the experiments end, hopefully without having to pull the options."

Daniela was reviewing his notes. "Why has my participant Billy, dropped in the psychological ratings? I'm confused."

"It's right there." Greg pointed. "Not always, but sometimes he gets withdrawn. Quiet. We're watching him for mental breakage. I don't think he's there yet, but if he gets under anymore stress, he may break before the end. Then again, it could also be just homesickness. Billy is or was very family oriented. Judge as well. He too is being quiet, withdrawn, more so than Billy. As a matter of fact, we're thinking of having Ollie tell hm that his granddaughter died a few months back."

Andrew Lancing, Judge's investors, verbally displayed his displeasure.

"That doesn't seem fair."

"We can play our mental option at anytime." Greg explained. "Rules are rules."

"Would you agree Haynes?" Aldo called his attention. "This group is holding on well."

"I wasn't at the last experiment." Greg said. "But from what I read. Yes. And that's good. I think it will add to the heightened tension at the end. Unlike last experiment, which was over when Aldo?"

"Three weeks before deadline." Aldo answered.

"Exactly." Greg nodded. "Hopefully we can keep most of you hear for the final meeting, which occurs a week before the experiments end, unlike last time, when Aldo was the only one there. I heard it was kind of boring."

Aldo snickered.

Greg smiled. "All right. Before we continue on, I would like all of you to fill out the survey, take a few minutes, get some coffee and then we'll continue." Hearing the groans as they flipped open the surveys, Greg backed up to the corner of the meeting level where Dr. Jefferson watched.

"How do you think you'll do this time?" Dr. Jefferson asked.

"Well considering last survey I scored and average rating of four. I think possibly a seven, maybe an eight this time around." Greg watched them.

"I am shocked. No hoping for a ten?"

"Nah." Greg shook his head. "No hoping." He grinned. "I'm expecting that to be my score in the end."

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 7<sup>th</sup> - 2:15 p.m.

Jake, on top of Billy's bungalow roof with Cal and Billy, peered across to the next bungalow where Rickie, Lou and Judge were. Jake signaled to Rickie and Rickie nodded back. He looked over to Cal who was readying her M-16. "Cal, watch your aim."

"Jake, please." Cal scoffed.

Jake shook his head and caught Lou's attention. "Watch your aim." He whispered loudly.

Lou gave a thumbs up.

"Jake?" Billy softly called out to him. "What do you need me to do?"

"Watch Cal doesn't do anything stupid. Watch her. That's your job." Jake started to look over the roof again, but stopped and turned back to Billy. "Oh and Bamboozle. It's not an arousal task I gave you so don't let me find out you made it one." Jake shifted his eyes down to the lower part of Billy's anatomy the returned to peering over the roof.

Billy shielded his face.

Jake waited then saw, Reed, so nervously walking into the unity circle. "Come on Reed." Jake beckoned nearly unheard. "Do your thing."

With his hands behind his back, Reed stood there. "Ear eh-ee, eh-ee, eh-ee. Um aw ow. Ear eh-ee, eh-ee, eh-ee."

On Reed's final call, a loud thundering wet snort blasted forth and the ground vibrated with the heavy stomps. Through the two bungalows came the head of the large mutated Bore. He spotted Reed and moved in a sway to the circle.

"Now!" Jake charged out. Grabbed onto a rope and at the same time, he and Rickie leaped forth down at the bore, carrying with them what looked like a homemade net. The too-small net dropped over the bore's head holding it down. The bore went nuts thrashing its body. It took all Jake and Rickie could to hold the head still. "Cal! Lou! Now!"

Gun fire, not rapid, but steady rang out. Carefully aimed shots coming from both roofs of the bungalows seared into the leather skin of the bore causing it to squeal. But it still fought hard. Rickie flew up with every twitch of the wild bore's head. Even Jake's feet lifted off the ground.

"Give it more!" Jake ordered out.

Cal had to take a second to replace the clip. She returned to her firing mode over the roof's edge. She aimed at the rear, trying just to slow it down enough for Jake to do his thing.

Gunshots continued. Three four, Five at a time. With a clank of the dropped empty chamber and a click of a new one, Lou, reloaded and shot at the bolting

animal.

Reed screamed loudly.

“Sorry.” Lou shouted down watching Reed grab his leg and hop around. Lou shrugged and continued to fire.

“I think that was me!” Cal yelled to Lou in her firing.

“No it was me.” Lou shot out.

“Are you sure?” Cal asked.

“Positive.”

“O.K. didn’t want you to take the . . .” She fired a rapid sequence of shots. “Blame.”

“Thanks!”

“You’re welcome.”

And in the midst of their fire power chattering, the Bore suddenly began to weaken. Not flinging Jake and Rickie as much. And with a few more shots and a few more squeals the bore dropped down to the ground.

Jake dropped his end of the net, ran and jumped on the back of the downed bore positioning himself like a bull rider just behind his neck. Pulling out his small Stasis knife that looked too small to do anything, Jake lifted it high, jammed it in the back of the bore’s neck. The bore screamed out and Jake, released the guillotine blade into him. Knowing it wasn’t enough, Jake repeated his actions, over and over, steady and with determination until he created a near perforation edge in the bores head. Finally the tension of the gashes Jake made gave way and the head of the bore dropped forward, severing from the body.

“Yes!” Jake returned his blade to his waist and slid from the bore. He saw Lou, Cal and the others fast approaching. “And no Lou!” Jake pointed. “You can not cook this bore.” Jake grinned and looked back at the animal.

“Sarge!” Rickie called out, there was some excitement to his voice. “Sarge! It’s snowing!”

Confused everyone looked up to the white thick drops that feel upon them.

Jake turned his head to see Rickie, arms out and moving about in a circle happy dance singing. “Rickie!”

“Look Sarge!” Rickie held his head to the sky where the white stuff fell fast. He opened his mouth. “I’m catching it.”

“Rickie put your goddamn tongue back in your mouth and don’t eat that. It’s fuckin volcanic ash you asshole.” Jake yelled at him.

“Oh.” Rickie spit out. “No wonder it wasn’t cold.” Rickie shrugged, stuck his arms back out., opened his mouth and peered up at the sky, laughing. “It’s snowing.”

Jake gave up. He didn’t find Rickie as humorous as Cal did. “Cal.”

“Sorry.” Cal stopped laughing and held out her hand. “How long will this fall.”

“Hours, days. Who knows.” Jake said. “It could happen until the volcano finally blows.”



“It looks like snow.” Cal blew it off her hand.

“So I’ve heard..” Jake left Cal in her staring in awe at the falling ash. He had other things to do, like get everyone together and drag the monstrous bore out of camp before it started to smell any worse. So after securing Judge to handle a shot Reed, Jake moved onward in his task. He wouldn’t let himself mind the cleaning up phase at all. Promising himself that he would not bitch about cleaning up the mess, when he had so much fun creating it.

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
July 9<sup>th</sup> - 11:50 p.m.

Did Greg know? Aldo wondered. Did he realize that his voice carried in the empty midnight hour halls of the center as if over a speaker system. Aldo did. Perhaps that was why he sat in the vending area, sipping his vending machine coffee and shuddering in the bitterness. Aldo listened, maybe he shouldn't have. But he did. It was informative entertainment.

"Gray." Greg stated. "Pretty much a nuclear winter until the air flow picks up and moves that ash cloud along."

"It didn't stop bellowing out yet." Dr. Jefferson added. "I wouldn't look for them to escape this cold spell until the volcano stops spitting out ash. And speaking of cold spells. Did you give any thought to what I told you about whatever was doing the killings."

"I have since this cold spell hit the island. Two whole days, not a body spotted. I'm beginning to think your heat theory is right."

"I am also." Dr. Jefferson added. "So, it looks like tomorrow should be an interesting day."

"Should be. I don't know how much longer the three Stasis will wait it out. But they spotted the bungalows. They'll move in soon."

"Stalking them perhaps?" Dr. Jefferson asked.

"It wouldn't be a Stasis if it didn't."

Aldo left his coffee on the table unfinished. Not like he would miss it. And he hurried, quietly and grateful he was wearing slippers down the corridors and back toward his room. If the next day was going to bring stasis excitement. Aldo had some phone calls to make. Especially since Gregory Haynes was failing to release that information, Aldo felt compelled, and his duty, to inform the other investors.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 10<sup>th</sup> - 10:40 a.m.

Jake felt like he had just hit the warm bed, settled into the hypnotic effect of the crackling fire and started to doze. He needed to get a couple hours sleep. Seeing how he no longer used his nights for slumber, Jake tried to take advantage of his days for resting. Splitting the roof watch with Lou. One taking the night, one taking the day. Night time was especially important because the last thing Jake wanted was for one of those huge animals to pounce into camp while they all were tucked away unprepared. Jake was rarely unprepared. But he was when he heard the zipper fly up loudly by his ear. Laying on his side he opened his eyes. "Cal?"

"Hey." She kissed him on the cheek. "I'm slipping out."

"What time is it?"

"Quarter till eleven."

Jake sat up, rubbed his eyes and looked at Cal. "I've been sleeping nearly three hours?"

"Sweetie you passed right out." She kissed him again. "You're beat."

"Where are you going Cal?"

"Out." She pointed to the door wearing hiking boots, tan pants and a black leather jacket. She picked up an M-16 and tossed it over her shoulder. "Go back to sleep for a while. We're shoveling out."

"Shoveling out?" Jake was groggy.

"Yeah it stopped ashing."

"Cal, it'll rain in a day or two, that'll wash it away."

"Yeah I know." She shrugged. "But we're bored. Go back to sleep."

"Get me in an hour?"

"Yeah." She moved to the door when she saw Jake lay back down. The cold air that was so inconsistent with a tropical island's weather pelted her when she stepped outside. How eerie and gloomy everything looked. So gray. She stepped off her porch into the ash that lay as thick as two feet of snow. She saw Lou, gun in one hand, food in the other, walking across the unity circle. He must have taken a break from the roof to get his food. "Hey Lou." She called to him.

Lou chuckled, lifted his hand in a wave as he spoke out. "Look at you ready for winter. Is there anything you and Jake didn't prepare for?" Shaking his head he walked to his bungalow.

At that moment Cal wanted to tell him, 'yeah, a pregnancy' but she didn't. After seeing Reed and Judge getting a good laugh from Rickie who laid on the ground making Ash Angels, she walked to Billy who was staring at the ground.

"Hi." She tapped him on the shoulder.

Billy looked over his shoulder at her. "Just the girl I wanted to see."

“Uh oh.”

“Funny.”

“What’s up? Oh wait, bad question to ask you.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Look at this foot print I found.” Billy pointed to the ground. “Do you think it’s possible that bigfoot lives . . . Cal? What’s wrong?” He saw her waving her hand in front of her face.

“Whew. Warn me next time. . .” Cal’s eyes widened and her eyes shifted to the ground. “Shit.”

“Cal!” Lou called out.

Cal looked up to see Lou standing on his roof aiming toward her bungalow. As soon as Cal spun her views, pulling her M-16 in front of her she saw what she hadn’t saw in four years. A Stasis. On the roof of her bungalow. Thin gray hair covered its grotesque and distorted muscular seven foot frame. Large fangs protruded from the mouth that seemed to smile a slobbering smile at Cal before it stepped back out of her sight. “Jake!” she screamed out. “Jake get out of the bungalow! Jake.” She ran unable to see the Stasis anymore, fearing it jumped inside. “Jake!” She pumped the chamber.

Jake opened the door and came flying out. “Cal what’s wrong?”

“Jake get out of the . . .”

The familiar and shrill beastly growl rang out as its warning cry. Jake only took a step and barely looked behind him when the Stasis charged from out of their bungalow, lunging for Jake, picking him up by his throat, and tossing Jake out off the porch into the unity circle. The second Jake crashed with a lifeless roll and a bellow of ash, gunfire rang out from Cal and Lou, searing into the Stasis. But it didn’t phase him. He stepped from the porch after Jake.

Jake slowly tried to pick himself up from the ground, raising his head and catching the view of the stasis at the same time he heard another one cry out. His head shifted and saw one coming over the grade. “Cal!”

Cal spun it was right behind Billy. “Billy run!”

Billy saw it, heard and smelled it and Billy charged out of the way nearly bumping into Rickie who had raced forward toward the newest Stasis. Growling at it as it growled at him.

Then Cal saw it. It moved with speed toward Jake who had just stood up. Firing out once, then giving up, Cal charged forth to the stasis, pulling her stasis knife from her belt and leaping on the back of the stasis seconds before he swept it’s clawed hand down at Jake. She held on to the beast with her legs and one arm. It shrugged its body violently strong to get her off, But like a warrior, Cal raised her arm high, plunged the knife into the neck of the Stasis. He cried out painfully tossing its arms out and arching its back. Then Cal release the guillotine blade sending the head of the beast flying forward and causing its huge body to jolt and spin some in its last headless neurological moment, before it dropped lifeless and still to the ground.

Jake stumbled through the blood covered ash toward Cal, reaching his hand

to her face and kissing her. "Thank you."

Cal smiled and shoved him her M-16. "I'll go get another. Behind you Jake."

The moment Jake took the weapon and Cal backed up was the moment he heard yet another cry out, Spinning around and pumping the chamber, Jake fired at close range directly into the charging third stasis. It backed up from the oncoming bullets that not only hit him from the front but from the back.

Somehow knowing it was nearing defeat, the stasis cried out, swung out its arm, knocked Jake's weapon to the side, turned and took off running into the woods.

Cal leaped from the porch with her weapon seeing the one stasis fly into the trees. Hearing what sounded like two wild dogs fighting, she looked to her right to see small Rickie and a stasis in a battling roll on the ground.

She met up with Jake and charged Rickie's way. They stopped at the same time, stood side by side, raised their weapons high and waited for an opportunity. An opportunity that never came. Blasting out its beastly cry loudly, the stasis tossed Rickie, and jumped to his feet. Rickie rolled into the feet of Cal and Jake. Then the stasis, like the other, bolted, shielded its head from the gunfire and ran into the woods.

Jake stopped firing and reached down to Rickie. "You O.K.?"

"Yeah Sarge." Rickie swayed as he stood up. "Guy like I amaze myself for how strong I am."

"Me too." Jake grinned. "Rickie, feel like chasing them with me. We have a bloody trail to follow."

Sarge, like I'd love it." Rickie said with excitement.

Jake looked at Cal. "Cal you have to . . ."

"Here." She handed her weapon to Rickie and smiled at him. "Lou and I will keep guard here. Go get them."

Jake kissed her on the cheek and moved backwards. "Stay inside, stay armed and stay with Billy. Not like he'll be any help., but I don't want him dying." Jake ran to the path looking up to Lou. "Reload and stay on guard!" He ordered then charged forth into the woods with Rickie following the well patterned bloody trail.

Cal folded her arms close to her body watching Jake and Rickie disappear.

"Cal." Billy walked up behind her. "You all right?"

"Fine. You?"

"Fine. You were amazing." Billy laid his arm around her shoulder and the second he did so, Cal turned into him, leaning against him. At first Billy hesitated, then he put his arm around her. "What's wrong?"

Cal shook her head. "Nothing." She let out a deep breath of relief. "I just needed to stop for a second." She lifted her head and stepped back.

"Feeling better?"

"Yeah. Let's go inside." Cal turned her body and moved toward her bungalow, the whole time she kept looking to the woods, knowing that Jake would be fine, but unable to stop worrying so much for him.

^^^

Ollie was so perturbed in the lab as he shut off Stan's loud music. "Do you mind?" He asked with a snap.

"Yeah." Stan walked back over the player and turned it back on. He bobbed his head all the way back to the center counter.

Ollie huffed from the counter back over to the boom box. "This is so ridiculous. This either stays low or shuts off . . ." He turned it off.

Stan turned it on. "Stop it."

"Or we compromise. You hear me young man. I can not work or concentrate with this racket." Ollie noticed the struggle with Stan over the music stopped and Stan stared down to the phone. "What's wrong?"

Stan looked at the steady blinking red light. "Why isn't Curtis answering down in monitoring."

"Maybe he went to the bathroom."

"Still?"

"What do you mean still?"

"When I changed the tape fifteen minutes ago, Caldwell was calling him."

Ollie looked at the phone. "Should we pick it up?"

"No. We're busy. Maybe he has the ringer off."

"Maybe."

"Now . . . music." Stan reached for the switch.

"No." Ollie smacked his hand.

"Music."

"No."

The adult male game of hand slapping patty cake was interrupted when what sounded like a bang against the cabinet door came from in the room. Both Ollie and Stan turned at the same time to see what the noise was. And both Ollie and Stan jumped back when they saw why Curtis hadn't answered the phone. Curtis stared up at them, wide eyed, mouth open, only something was missing from Curtis. The rest of his body. Only his head lay, a blood smear by it, on the floor. Before either one of them could say anything, an arm came flying in.

Stan flew across the room. "I'll get the gun. Shut that door!"

Ollie raced as fast as he could over, his trembling hand reached to the side, gripping the door and before he could slam it shut, the snarling growl blasted him and then so did the claw of the stasis.

Straight through Ollie's large gut, the Stasis ripped, lifting a heavy Ollie up from the ground. Ollie's body jolted and shook, blood sprayed on the face of the stasis. And a loud ripping sound rang out as the stasis tossed Ollie gutting him as he did.

Stan trembled pulling in a hurry the drawer to the desk. He could barely pick up the revolver when the Stasis charged his way. He got one shot out then the

stasis swung out his arm sending Stan's gun flying. Stan moved to the right and the stasis followed. As the beastly arms reached to Stan in an attacking claw. Jake's voice rang in the room.

"Blast him Rickie!" Both Rickie and Jake opened fire on the Stasis. The force of the bullets turned the Stasis to face them and Jake and Rickie blasted it some more center chest and head. "He's going down!" Jake told Rickie, then dropped his M-16, raced forward, and using the center counter as a single step, Jake leaped up-and-out, sailing his body into the stasis. Not only did the weight of Jake's body sail the stasis back a few feet, but the stasis grabbed on to Jake and the both of them together, crashed with a mighty force out of the window directly behind them. The body of the Stasis broke Jake's fall as they landed hard to the ash filled ground two stories down. And finding himself on top of the Stasis, staring at the large teeth that spread wide in a reaching bite to him, Jake grabbed his knife, and with all his strength careened it through the front of the Stasis' throat, unlatched the guillotine and severed the stasis' head.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

July 10<sup>th</sup> - 4:00 p.m.

"This is not the Holiday Inn." Greg huffed to the maintenance man as they stood in the back of the control room. "If they want accommodations like this then they ought to stay at a fuckin hotel and not in our quarters." Greg ran his hand over his own head. "Sorry. I'm sorry. Just do what you can."

The somewhat frightened maintenance man made his quick exit.

Dr. Jefferson walked up to Greg. "It's not his fault."

"I know." Greg perturbed looked over his shoulder at the loud investors who chomped on pizza, drank beer and watched the monitors. "I just wasn't expecting this. Two more controllers dead."

"It's very hard to take. I know. I was in your shoes last experiment when we lost our entire controller staff. Plus I don't think you were expecting to lose two Stasis' in one day."

"No." Greg shook his head. "But, there's still one out there. Jake can't find him and neither can our satellites. He'll show back up."

"Do you suppose that's what their waiting for?" Dr. Jefferson twitched his head to the investors.

"I suppose. Awfully convenient how they showed up wouldn't you say?" Greg raised an eyebrow.

"I would say. All five too. And look how happy they are. I wonder why."

"I'll tell you why." Greg spoke with irritation. "Because there were two kills today and neither of them were one of *their* participants." He grunted. "I'd be a happy camper too." Tossing his hands up, Greg, placed on a fake pleased look and headed back to what he felt was the lions pit when he walked back into the air space of the investors.



I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 10<sup>th</sup> - 5:20 p.m.

There were three reasons that Jake showered and cleaned up at Rickie's bungalow. One, he knew Cal hated when he was covered in blood. Two, Cal was in the bathroom. And three, the biggest reason, Rickie's tub was so dirty what fell from's Jake's body would hardly go noticed.

Even though the small cut above his eye bled some, Jake was clean. And he headed into his bungalow, ready to see Cal, wanting to share the good news and the bad news with her and wanting pretty much to fool around. He still felt that rush for when Cal saved his life.

Figuring he couldn't offend her by smelling or looking bad, Jake reached for the bathroom door when he heard the shower running. It was locked. He tried it again just to be certain because Cal never locked the bathroom door. "Cal?" He knocked.

"Be out in a second."

"I don't want you to come out, I want to come in. The doors locked babe."

"I know."

"Why?"

"I'm taking a shower."

"And I'm missing it. Cal?" He heard the water shut off. "Fuck." He spoke quietly to himself.

"One second Jake."

Tossing his hands up, Jake backed up and sat on the bed. He stared at the shut door.

A few seconds later, the door opened, and Cal wearing a robe walked out. "Sorry."

"Why was the bathroom door locked?"

"Privacy."

"From who?"

Cal moved to her dresser laying her tee shirt and shorts on top. "I just . . . Jake?" She stepped to him. "Oh look at your eye."

"It's fine."

"Did you clean it?"

"Of course. I'm clean right." He felt Cal's hands touched his face and he closed his eyes. "You smell good."

Cal giggled. "I just showered."

"Cal. You saved my life today." Jake softened his voice and laid his hands on her hips.

Cal pushed his hands away. "I just helped."

Jake replaced his hands on her hips. "Cal?" He pulled her into him, letting his head near to her chest and his mouth find the openness of the top of her robe.

"Jake stop." Cal stepped back. "I'm trying to see your eye."

“And I’m trying to be seductive here.” Jake’s huge hands gripped her hips tighter and pulled her back. “Cal, come on hon, what’s wrong? It’s been almost two weeks.” Again Jake ran his lips softly on her chest.

“Jake. No.”

“Cal, come on. You know what I get like when we have an exciting day. We’ve had a few and you’ve been denying me. I’m getting a complex.” His hands searched the front of her robe.

“Jake, my body has been tired.”

“I’ll do all the work.” Jake whispered grabbed the edges of the lower portion of her robe.

“Jake.” Cal giggled his name. “Stop.” Her hands fought to move his insistent and roaming ones.

“Cal.” He complained her name reaching in her robe.

“Jake. No.” She tried to grab his wrist and pull him out.

“Please?” Hands touched upon the bare skin of her hips.

“Jake. No.” Cal struggled.

“Cal just . . .” Jake’s hands stopped cold and his head sprang up. “Cal?”

“See!” She shouted, smacked his hands and spun around. In her race away she snatched up her clothes, ran into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Jake’s hands were still extended outward, only touching cool air where her body once was. He blinked several times. Holding them out. “Cal.” He called out her name.

“One second.” She mumbled something un-interpretable and then the door opened. Cal emerged wearing the tee shirt and shorts. “I’m hungry. Are you hungry?”

“Stop.” Jake called to her.

“Jake I’m really . . .”

“Stop!” He yelled as she reached for the door. “Get back here.”

“Jake, I’d really rather . . .”

“Cal!” Jake wiggled his finger to her. “Now please.”

Almost stomping Cal headed back to him. “What.”

“Lift that shirt.”

“No!”

“Cal, lift that shirt.”

“No!”

“Lift that fuckin shirt now Cal!”

“All right!” Cal stepped closer to him and lifted the shirt to just below her breasts. “There.”

Jake gasped and nearly fell backwards when he saw her.

“Satisfied?”

“No.” Jake saw her lower the shirt. “Lift it again.” When she did, Jake, in a slanted walk, eyes peered low, moved closer to view a small but protruding round belly. “Wh . . . wh . . . When?” his index finger poked the small stomach that

started below her belly button and rounded out like a normal pregnant woman. Jake let out a tiny peep when he felt the firmness of it. "When?"

"About two weeks ago I started to show a little, then bam. It seemed like everyday I woke up I got bigger and bigger. Can I lower my shirt now?"

"No." Jake dropped to his knees. "Two weeks now. It's not been this big for two weeks. I think I would have known."

"Not for two weeks no. For three days it's been this big and I'll tell you, it's been difficult hiding it from you. Why do you think I didn't fight with you about going today. I know I can't. I can't."

"Oh my God."

"Sorry."

Jake's hand reached out, fingers spread, and he laid his hand palm flush on her stomach. Slowly he felt it. "I can not believe you didn't share this with me." His eyes stayed glued to her stomach as he felt it.

"Do you blame me?"

"No." Jake said. "This is amazing that this has happened to your body so soon. Are we gonna feel it moving in there anytime in the near future."

"Soon enough. Actually almost any day or week now."

Jake looked up at her with a wide grin. "I love this." His hand kept feeling. "There is something actually in there."

"Yeah." Cal rolled her eyes.

"And your stomach is rock hard." Jake knocked on it. "Look how little and cute."

"Jake. Please." Cal raised her eyebrow in oddity at Jake who spoke like she had never heard him speak. She stepped away from him and lowered her shirt. "Stop."

"What's wrong?" Jake stood up.

"Nothing. I have to tell you Jake. I didn't think you'd be happy about my transforming body."

"Neither did I. But, I think seeing it has made the pregnancy real. I mean Cal, let's face it, anyone can say their pregnant and throw up all the time but this . . ." His hand reached for her stomach and Cal smacked it away. "Cal?"

"I'm glad your happy about it Jake. Because I certainly am not."

"Why? Isn't it normal?"

"No. No!" Cal tossed her hands up. "This." She poked her own belly. "Is not normal. It's big. It's bigger than it should be. And you wanna know why? We didn't lose a twin Jake,. I think we lost a triplet. Because there is more than one in here."

"Two?" Jake said in shock. "How . . . how . . ."

"Fuckin Stan." Cal threw her hand out and brought it to her eyes as she paced. "Remember . . . remember . . ."

"Cal." Jake, hiding his laugh, saw how upset she was. He lowered her hand and backed her up to sit on the bed. "Calm down."

"I can't!" Her words were so emotional she could have been crying. "How can I Jake? Huh? Remember the other day when Stan was here with the mutant bore you killed."

"Yeah."

"Well I pulled him aside. And I showed him this." She pointed to her stomach. "And I told him it had started to get big, but it seemed like I had grown overnight. And I asked him. When I lost the one baby, was there more than two, And you know what he did?"

"Answered you?"

"No! He put his hands in his pockets looked up and started to whistle. I had to yell at him. And then, and then he answered me. And his exact words were. Ready? He said, 'Uh, um . . . yeah'."

The laugh he held in finally escaped Jake as he knelt down before her. "Twins? Cal, we're just not having a baby,. Babe, we're having a family. Oh wait until we get back home and I fuckin brag about this shit. Why does this have you so upset."

"I work so hard on my body Jake. So hard for this to happen. Will you still want me Jake when I get very pregnant?"

"Cal, please." Jake rested his hands on her legs. "I'll always want you." He watched her smile. "I may not be intimate . . . kidding" He kissed her. "And don't worry about this body. This body is awesome and it will stay awesome no matter what. Of course you do know with two in there you are gonna get huge."

Cal grunted and her eyes moved up. "Thank you very much Jake."

"Cal." Jake moved into her and put his arms around her. "I love you." He kissed her cheek. "I'm happy. And . . . there is something very important I need to ask you."

"What's that?" Cal looked into Jake's staring eyes.

"Well since we have two dead Stasis today, Lou on guard and this hiding your body from me out of the way. Can we please . . . please make love?"

Even though Cal still felt large, she felt better. So with a smile, and purposely hesitating in answering Jake's question, she dropped her forehead to meet Jake's.

^^^

"Ready?" Jake asked Billy who stood in the center of their bungalow that evening.

"Jake." Cal scolded.

"Ready for what?" Billy asked, still holding his sleeping bag.

"This." Jake lifted the end of Cal's long tee shirt.

"Jake!" Cal nearly shrieked at him.

"Oh my God!" Billy gasped out dropping his sleeping bag. "When did that happen."

"Recently." Jake answered.

"Enough." Cal fought with Jake to lower her shirt.

"Bill." Jake pointed. "Guess how many are in there?"

Billy's eyes grew wide. "More than one?"

"Two."

"Shit." Billy grinned.

"Stop." Cal pulled down her shirt. "Jake aren't you supposed to be on the roof or something with Rickie."

"Yes." Jake answered, then looked back to Billy. "Amazing isn't it?"

"I can't believe she hid it. How did she find out there's more than one in there?"

"They failed to tell her and when she started to grow . . ."

"I am in this room!" Cal snapped.

"So am I." Rickie said when he opened the door.

"Rickie." Jake spun to him. "What the hell are you doing in here. You're supposed to be on your roof."

"So are you guy. But like, I'm waving and waving to your roof and no one's waving back and then like I realize. Cold and in the arctic ash blizzard, I the humble Rickie-Meister sit on my roof alone."

Jake's top lip curled. "What the hell was all that for?"

"Sarge like, I got this poet in me that like, just comes out and I can't stop it."

"Stop it and back to your roof."

"O.K., O.K.," Rickie held his hands up. "But like are you gonna blow off duty and hang out here making sure that Bambi isn't hitting on the Cal-babe while your protecting her safety."

"Rickie." Jake warned. "Out."

"I'm going. But awfully convenient him getting scared all of the sudden and having to hang out in here with Cal-babe all night long." Rickie backed up to the door. "And like, Sarge, you're letting him."

Billy watched the door shut and in defense of himself, he turned to Jake. "Jake, look, it isn't all of the sudden I'm scared. With this monster thing running around I'd really prefer to be where you are, Cal or not."

"God Billy." Jake winced. "You're a man for crying out loud. I can not believe you admit to that."

"I never claimed yo be a tough man Jake. Never."

Jake grumbled, spun his M-16 and pointed it up tapping on the hatch and opening it. "I'm going up." He kissed Cal on the cheek. "If you need me, call for me."

"I will. I'm probably just going to go to sleep. Once Billy starts tapping on that lap top it puts me out."

"Good." Jake smiled and grabbed for the rope ladder. "Night." He climbed up a few rungs and stopped. "Oh and Billy. No erections." Very seriously Jake finished climbing up.

It took Billy a few seconds after he felt the cold air from the roof disappear, and then he slid his hand down from covering his face. "Please tell me why he does that all the time." He asked Cal.

"He doesn't want you to get . . ."

"Cal."

"You asked." Cal looked down at Billy's stuff. "You have any pages for me to read?"

"Yeah I do. I printed you some up." Billy walked to his lap top case and lifted it. He hesitated before lifting the papers out. "Cal." He faced her. "Why didn't you tell me about the progression in this pregnancy."

"Billy, you should know the pregnancy would progress. I've been pregnant for four months. And wow, can you believe this experiment is almost over? Really. For as physical as it is. I think they made a mistake putting me and Jake on. We knew too much."

"Are you finished?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm not talking about the pregnancy in general. I'm talking about the fact that there are two of them in you and . . ." Billy stepped to her reaching out. "This," he indicated to her belly. "May I?"

"All right." Cal huffed.

Billy softly touched upon her stomach. "Are you feeling life yet?"

"Not yet."

"When my sister had the twins she felt life at three months."

"Good for her."

"Cal."

"Kidding. I may have felt life, but I probably passed it off as gas." She snickered.

Billy chuckled as he removed his hand. "You'll let me feel them when they kick, right?"

"Of course. Why would you even ask that?"

"Well." Billy moved back, running his hand across his hair. "I'm scared Cal. I'm scared that if I make this last month, that the moment I step off the plane, that will be the last moment I lay eyes on you and the baby or now babies."

"It won't be."

"How can you be so sure."

"I won't let it be." Cal told him. "Billy you and I are such good friends, I need that in my life. And I know how you are about family. I wouldn't do that to you. Deny you of your child. And as hard as this is for you to believe, neither would Jake. Even though he's running around being the big Dad. He knows and he also wouldn't deny you of your child."

"Thanks." Billy spoke in relief. "I guess I just needed to hear that."

"Sure." Cal reached out and touched his cheek. "Besides, Jake not letting you be a part of the baby's life isn't something you should worry at all about."

“Good.”

“Him killing you before we leave this island, now that’s a possibility.”

“Thanks.” Billy shook his head and moved back to his lap top case.

“Sure, that’s why we’re friends see. I can make you feel better.”

“Can you keep that frame of mind when you read my stuff tonight then.”

Billy handed her a stack of papers.

“What do you mean?”

“Cal, you tear my writing apart. I take it very personally, you know that and you still tear it apart.”

“I’ll take it easy on you tonight.” Cal took the papers and walked over to the bed.

“Good.”

“Oh.” She snapped. “Where’s my red pen.”

Billy cringed watching her search for it. He knew he was in for another bad reading and writing night with Cal. Her using that red pen and making his just written pages look as if they were bleeding from her ripping out his literary heart.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

July 10<sup>th</sup> - 9:35 p.m.

“Stan.” Greg closed his eyes as he rocked in the chair speaking on the phone. “Listen. Stan. Listen . . .” He rolled his eyes. “You’ll be fine. Are your perimeter fences up?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’re safe. And . . . we spotted him on the satellite a half an hour ago. He’s regenerating. So you have at least three days.”

“Oh Good.”

“Now.” Greg changed his tone to a softer one. “I understand the feel up there. I know that it’s somber, we feel it here. But, there’s something I need to discuss with you.”

“What’s that?”

“It was brought to our attention through the monitors, that Cal is aware that she is carrying more than one child.”

“Yes.” Stan said. “I told her.”

“Why?”

“Well, the woman isn’t dumb. She realized it when she started to show. And she would have realized it again, when she felt life early. I figured it was best. I acted dumb.”

“You didn’t tell her everything did you?” Greg asked.

“No.”

Greg smiled. “Good. Let’s keep it that way.”



CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 14<sup>th</sup> - 8:30 p.m.

The lights flickered, the room flashed white and the crashing roll of thunder vibrated the room. Jake looked up to the ceiling as he lay on his side on top of the bed with Cal. He could hear the rain beating with a vengeance against their bungalow roof.

"Jake. I can't believe you are going to sit up there all night."

"I have to."

"In the rain?"

"Cal. It won't be the first time. Now Shh." Jake's hand laid over her stomach. It's largeness nearly covering Cal's pregnancy. Jake's face lit up. "There it was again. That was little Jake. He's got the strong legs." Jake closed his eyes. "Where did he go. Wait. There." Jake smiled. "Now that was Sam. He's the puncher."

"Jake what are you going to do if I'm carrying girls."

"Cal please." Jake stated as if that was an insulting thought. "I am not having girls. Besides, God would not do that to a female child. Could you imagine me being the father to a teenage daughter. No."

"It would be awful."

"I couldn't take it."

"Neither could I." Cal said. "Do you realize Jessie would have been sixteen? Sixteen Jake. You would have been teaching her how to drive." Cal snickered at the look of horror on Jake. "Yeah., I could see it." Cal proceeded to imitate Jake. "Jessie, Jess, don't get . . . just . . . fuck. Pull the fuckin car over."

"Cal please. I would never presume to use that sort of language in front of a child. You know that."

"My apologies."

"Accepted. And . . . there." Jake grinned when he felt another tiny tap against his hand.

"Jake, you are really different when it comes to this pregnancy. Almost . . . weird maybe?"

"Cal." Jake scoffed.

"No. Let me ask you a question. Serious too. Are you going to use a high voice and talk baby talk, because that's where I see this heading."

"I can not believe you would even ask me a question like that. Do I look like the sort of man who would talk baby talk?"

"No." Cal answered.

"No. And there will be no baby talk to these children. Absolutely none. I hate it."

"Jake, I didn't realize you felt so strongly about . . ." Cal hid her snicker.

“Baby talk.”

“Oh Absolutely. You should to. It serves absolutely no psychological merit. Nor does it develop intelligent characteristics in a child. In fact, baby talk is the sole reason and blame that we have individuals like Rickie running about.”

“Jake.”

“What?” he lifted his head to look at her.

“Go to the roof. You’re late.”

“See. You asked me a question I gave you an answer now you want to get rid . . .”

“Jake I wasn’t serious about the baby talk question. I was kidding around.”

“Oh.” Jake paused in an awkward silence. “Well Cal, you have to let me know next time. I wouldn’t have wasted my time giving such a detailed explanation.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Thank you.”

“Now go to the roof.”

“Just one more kick.” Jake moved his hand. “Yep.” He smiled. “There it is.”

“Jake.”

“One more.”

Cal gave up. With her shirt up over the waist of her shorts, she plopped backward in defeat on the bed.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

July 14<sup>th</sup> - 8:45 p.m.

“Where?” Greg raced forward jumping down the two steps of the control room. Douglass sat with Daniela at the control table, and as Greg rushed to by he hit into Douglass’ chair, causing it to spin. But Greg didn’t care, actually he didn’t even notice. His excited focus was forward as he leaned against the monitors table right next to Lyle. “Show me.”

Lyle clicked a few times on the keyboard. “Sneaking in through the trees. Unnoticed. He can’t be seen. See? I’m using infrared.”

Greg watched the one monitor screen. He could see the Stasis shifting about slowly in the trees. “He looks like he’s in a stalking mode.”

“He certainly does.” Lyle agreed. “He knows exactly which bungalow to hit and who he is hunting.”

“And exactly who *is* he hunting?” Greg asked.

Lyle turned his swivel chair slightly, peered up at Greg and grinned. “Reed.”

A loud bang rang out when Douglass’ head hit, forehead first down to table he sat in front of.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 14<sup>th</sup> - 8:50 p.m.

If Reed could look any prouder at that moment, he would have. Standing before his bathroom mirror, a nice pair of fresh purple silk bikini undies on. Not that he had anywhere to go, but to Reed after months and months, he finally looked good. That missing ear stopped looking so red and was barely noticeable. He guessed as soon as his hair grow back he would keep it long enough to cover it. Or get plastic surgery when he got back home. And his hair was indeed growing back. Five whole sections, not very thick, sprouted from just above the forehead and they were getting long too. Long enough to style back and make it appear as if he had more. He was a fashion model. He could do that sort of thing. So with the comb in his good hand, and the hair spray in the bad hand, Reed, using those stumps of fingers he got quite used to, sprayed some extra hold on those lonely strands. He used that comb to lift them until they were just about dry. Then with a quick sweep jr combed them back, using the teasing end of the comb to lift and separate the hairs.

Reed looked good. At least he thought he did. Ready for nothing but a good book and bed, he shut off his bathroom light and walked into his bedroom. He thought about filing down the finger nails on his one hand. They were becoming unsightly and in dire need of a manicure. But he wasn't up for it. What he was up for on such a rainy and thunderous night, was a good Stephen King Novel and that sat on his night stand next to the nail file.

Reaching down for SILVER BULLET, Reed ran his only index finger across the cover. There were small beads of water. He raised his views and saw the very slight opening in the window and the rain that took advantage of that opening, blowing in as a mist and laying on the small sill. Not wanting any moisture in his room, Reed reached up for the widow.

The blast of water wind that pelted Jake in the face not only brought the cool rain but something else as well. A smell that Jake knew so well. Damp musty, and like a dog pound that was very unkempt. Quickly Jake readied his M-16, and raced across the roof to the hatch, he kicked it open with his foot yelling to below. "Buckle Down Cal and get ready. He's out here."

Cal, laying on the bed listen to the stomps of Jake's footsteps above her. They meshed with the sound of Billy falling off his chair as he wrote. After taking a second to laugh at Billy on the floor, Cal reached under the bed with a grunt and pulled out the arsenal bag. She retrieved the weapons she needed and got them ready.

After flicking the water harshly from his face, Jake held tight to his gun with one hand and a spotlight flashlight with the other. He turned the high bright beam on, flicking a signal of three flashes to Rickie across the way. Then Jake slowly skimmed the spotlight around the compound. He could smell him, and swore he heard that heavy breathing, but Jake couldn't see him. Jake's head twitched at every sound, peep, and crack of a branch. He was ready.

Reed never realized how hard it was to shut a stuck window with one hand. Especially since the one hand was not the strong one. He supposed it fast would become his more powerful hand, but at the moment Reed was trying to shut that window, it just didn't seem to have what it took. He grunted, struggled and squinched his face as if he were constipated trying to shut the window that was only open a half an inch. And with the feel of victory that hit Reed as he closed the window, grabbed his book and turned to the bed, so did something else. Two very hairy arms as they crashed through the window grabbing Reed from behind and pulling him with a rushing force backwards. Reed's back slammed hard into the wall. He could feel the stasis trying to fold him in half and pull him through that window that was too small for him. The heavy hot breath mixed with the cold air as the stasis pulled and Reed struggled. He had to get free. Just free and he could run for it. Then he spotted it, his weapon. The nail file on the night stand. Using his barefoot, Reed quickly picked the file up with his curled toes, bent his leg up, grabbed the file with his good hand and jammed it hard into the arm of the Stasis. The stasis in pain bellowed out and dropped Reed to the floor.

Jake heard the glass, but he didn't pinpoint it until he heard the Stasis scream. With a three step charge across the roof, Jake leaped down the hatch and landed with a hard thump to the floor. "Cal." He ran to the door. "Stay inside. Don't come out. He's got Reed."

Cal shifted her eyes to Billy when the door shut. Just as her top lip started to quiver in an uncontrolled snicker, the door reopened. And Jake pooped his head in.

"Cal. Don't laugh." The door slammed again.

Reed picked himself up from the floor after tripping over his shoes in a mad dash charge for safety and freedom, and ran gain. Underwear or not, he flung open the door to get away and the cry of the stasis that was right there, went through Reeds body like an electric shock. Reed couldn't move. He froze and the stasis, reached to him in a teasing way, grabbing Reed by both arms and lifting him high. With a wet tooth grin the Stasis stared it's yellow eyes into Reeds. And with one more beastly snarl he widened his mouth, snared it's jaw and lunged forth his

fangs for Reeds neck. But millimeters before the fangs plunged into the flesh, the floor boards of the porch broke with a loud crack and the stasis not only sunk down, but his hands released Reed, causing him to bang his head into the archway and drop completely backward in an unconscious state.

Stuck in a quick sand pit of wood from the knees down, the stasis tried to free himself from the planks that seared into his legs. He cried out as he flung about. His drool flinging like rain onto Reeds feet that were right before him. His long nailed claws grabbed for the porch trying to gain leverage as his footing got stuck even more in the mud that gathered under the hollow porch.

And it was the hollow porch that sounded off to the stasis that his death was near. Like the whistle of an oncoming train to someone stuck on the tracks, that's what Jake's stomping footsteps were to the stasis.

No time, no pity and definitely no remorse. Jake merely seized the opportunity of the trapped beast, lunged forward missing the swinging arms, and in one motion, injected the knife, ejected the bigger blade and the stasis went silent, it's head popping of like a champagne cork high in the air and landing with a thump directly on Reeds groin. Reed moaned and the body of the stasis fell limp and directly forward onto Reeds legs.

Jake stood still, his eyes focused on the dead stasis while he caught his bearings.

Rickie began to cheer, jumping up and down splashing. "Oh! Sarge! You're the man! Oh!" Rickie flung his hands out in the rainy air.

"Thanks." Jake chuckled, then turned when he heard the slight groaning coming from Reed. He reached down his hand for the stasis.

"Stop." Rickie shouted.

"Why?"

"Don't touch him yet."

"Why?" Jake asked again.

"Cause."

Jake rolled his eyes. "Cause?"

"Yeah." Rickie started to laugh and turned to face Cal and Jake's bungalow. "Bamboozle! Hey Bambi! Hurry out here guy. Get your camera. You have to get a picture of this. I got your first headline back in the civilized world dude!"

Jake cringed, especially when he saw Cal and Billy running out of the bungalow, soon Judge and Lou were there as well. "Can I help this man now?"

Billy chuckled. "Wait." He raised his camera and clicked a picture.

"Why are you doing this?" Jake asked perturbed.

"Sarge, like look." Rickie pointed to Reed, laying on his back in just his sexy underwear. The body of the dead stasis on top of his legs, the beastly and bloody decapitation resting on Reed's lap. "Like check it out Sarge. Headlines. Iso-Stasis Experiment Beast, gives head to enduring participant. Details at eleven."

Jake's mouth closed tight, he glared his eyes at Rickie and then to everyone else who's snickers emerged in the rain. With a slight complaining grunt, Jake

reached down to the furry body of the stasis and stopped. He stopped cold, swayed his head to Rickie and then the stone expression on Jake's face broke when he laughed.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

Caldwell Research Institute - Los Angeles, CA

July 20<sup>th</sup> - 3:45 p.m.

"Over?" Greg looked at the faces of the investors who sat around the table. "Not hardly. If another Stasis is what you want we certainly can provide that. We not only have the wolf hybrid like Rickie, but we have the cheetah, like the ones that were on the island. Thinkers. But I don't think we'll need that. First off." Greg paced. "We deliberately shorted their food supply. The only problem with that is, Jake rationed it out. And seeing how stupid Larry Kale never noticed Jake stole that key to the storage, he never got to over ride Jake's rationing. But we can solve that. We still have an Australian wildlife research facility to satisfy and they have supplied what we feel will be the next participant test."

Aldo raised his hand. "Are you gonna tell us about this one."

"Oh most definitely." Greg answered. "See . . ." He stopped talking when he heard the attention grabbing clearing of the throat from Dr. Jefferson who stood with Barb. He turned his head to the door to see he was being summoned. "Excuse me." Greg smiled quickly and walked over to Dr. Jefferson. "What's up?" He whispered.

Dr. Jefferson shifted his eyes to Barb, then to the investors. He handed Greg a folder. "Check it out. We may have bigger problems."

Feeling a bit under the microscope because he knew he was being watched by the investors, Greg, remaining cool, opened the folder. His face took on an immediate panicked look he couldn't hide as he raised his eyes from the papers he viewed. "When?"

"Just now."

"Damn it." Greg closed the folder and handed it to Dr. Jefferson. He kept his voice low. "I'll meet you in my office. You too Barb." Waiting until they were gone, Greg, running his index finger over his top lip, and one hand in his pocket, walked to the table with the five investors. "If you gentlemen can excuse me. I'll be right back. Just . . . give me a few minutes."

Aldo watched Greg moved to the door. "Problem Haynes?"

"Um . . . no. Not at all." It was nervous the smile Greg gave, quick, near sweaty, but he flashed it and left as soon as he did.

Aldo reached into his pocket and pulled out his money clip. He picked a bill and laid it on the table. "Fifty says he doesn't come back."



I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 20<sup>th</sup> - 3:55 p.m.

"Hello!" Rickie seemed so annoyed, hands on hips at that cavern. "Hello!" he called out long and loud again. "Nothing Cal-babe."

"Rickie, don't worry about it." Cal comforted him.

"Maybe it's just me. Lou-ster you try guy." Rickie suggested.

Lou placed his hands on his hips. Cleared his throat and bellowed his voice. "YO!"

"See." Rickie tossed his hands up. "It's gone. I can't believe the echo is gone."

Cal smoothed her hand on Rickie's back. "It's all right. Walk with me away from here to wait for Jake."

Sadly, so sadly,. Rickie agreed.

The sight of Stan walking down the hill confirmed to Billy that Jake didn't summon him and drag him into the woods to shoot him. He breathed a little easier walking up the large hill with Jake. Knowing now--since seeing Stan--that something was up. Jake getting him, telling Billy to bring his camera wasn't just a cover up for the accidental discharge of Jake's thirty-eight caliber weapon.

"A little further." Jake told him.

"Why are you being so secretive Jake?" Billy asked.

"Because I want you, as a journalist invoking the 'big' story, to appreciate it. You need that initial first response we all got."

"We?"

"Cal, Rickie Lou and myself."

"Good or bad?" Billy questioned.

"Depends on who you are, don't you think?"

"Can you give me a suspenseful lead into it? How did you find what you're taking me to see?"

"By accident. Rickie is tired of jumping into the ocean, especially after that last shark scare. So I thought this cavern's not too big or deep. Practice him jumping over that. So we came up."

"And that's where you found *it*?"

"Yep."

Billy started to huff in the climb. "God, the air is thin up here. Or is that me."

"It's you. But don't take too big of a . . ."

Billy let out a loud sound of disgust.

". . . breath."

"What is that smell."

"What I'm taking you to see."

“Do I want to?”

“Yep.” Jake walked with him. “See it answers questions. And there’s cal. Cal!”

Cal raised her hand in a wave and moved down to them. “Did you tell him?”

“Sort of.” Jake answered.

“No he did . . . hey.” Billy reached out to Cal. “Are these my basketball shorts?”

“Yes. I stole them. I need them and . . .” Cal answered. “Jake said it was O.K. Since you made me get big.”

Jake grinned.

Billy didn’t argue. “So . . .” He cleared his throat. “Jake, you were saying this answers questions. Which ones?” Billy moved closer to the cavern. The smell got worse. He wondered how Lou and Rickie standing there could take it.

“Well. Remember how we were wondering what happened to all the big, giant mutant animals?” Jake asked.

Billy nodded.

“There were so many of them right? Tons of birds, yet how many did we kill.” Jake continued to explain as they neared the cavern. “They were hitting us daily, maybe two a day. But then they stopped. Well, the question of where they went has just been answered, and you are going to say ‘Thank you Jake for this Photo opportunity’.” Jake smiled and held out his hand to the open cavern.

Billy lifted his camera and peered down. What looked like a river of remains lay at the bottom. Millions of flies swarmed around the blood and guts seemingly chewed up and spit out. Hundreds of large broken beaks poked up through the mess like little mountains. “Jake . . . Jake . . .” Billy’s cheeks puffed out, his shoulder lifted and he sped away a few feet where he threw up.

Jake watched him. “Or he could say that too.” He looked back over the cavern.

“Jake?” Cal caught his attention. “Why do you suppose this is the first time we found remains like this so close to camp?”

“I think whatever has been doing it’s killings has used it’s resources on the other side of the island.”

“And now it’s feeding here.” Cal huffed out with concern. “That’s not good.”

“No it’s not Cal. See, it’s appetite is getting bigger. Obviously.” Jake indicated to the remains. “An when whatever it is eats up all its wildlife resources here. We’re in trouble. Because that means . . .” Jake raised his eyebrows. “We’re next.”

“We’ll fight it right?” Cal asked. “We’ll have to come up with a line of defense.”

“Absolutely.” Jake watched through the corner of his eyes, Billy approach wiping his mouth. “We’ll work on that defense. But the only problem is, we haven’t a clue what we’re dealing with. And how do you go about defending

yourself against something that kills you like . . .” Jake’s head motioned down to the remains again, at the same time Billy retracted his steps for another round of stomach content tossing. “This.”

THE AMOEBAS

--One day, one hour, one minute, one second. The experiment is not over until Caldwell Research Institute declares the end. And that is the moment you walk away from them . . . maybe.--

Excerpts from 'Surviving the Iso-Stasis'

By Jake and Cal Graison

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 20<sup>th</sup> - 8:15 p.m.

Cal giggled like a teenager, standing in Reed's bungalow in front of his mirror. She ran her hands down her thighs and across the sleek tight bicycle rider style shorts she wore. "Reed thank you."

"Ew ook eh-el-en." he gave Cal a thumbs up.

"I'm out growing all my clothes and these not only are expandable but, they don't make me look fat huh."

"Eh-er." Reed shook his head.

"Let's go out side. Gosh my confidence is up." Cal grinned and opened the door. Wearing a long tee shirt that came nearly to the edge of her new maternity shorts, Cal made her way to the unity circle where everyone sat around the fire. "Hey Jake, Look, I have another pair of shorts. Reed gave them up to the baby cause. Now I don't have to go and steal that other pair off of Billy."

Jake looked up at her, back to the fire then back up quickly. He lifted the back of the shirt just a little. "Cal." He stated firmly. "Should you as a pregnant woman be wearing those . . . ow." Jake shrieked and grabbed his shin when Cal kicked him. "What the fuck?"

"I can't believe not only did you insult me in front of everyone but you . . . you called me fat. Asshole." Cal folded her arms and just to make her feel better about herself, went and sat next to Lou.

Reed saw red the same as Cal. And he verbally blasted Jake in his own way. "Ew . . . Ew . . ." Reed pointed in anger. "Eh-hen-it-ov hig."

"What?" Jake tossed his hands up. "Cal why is he calling me an insensitive pig and you're saying I said you were fat."

"You did." Cal soured her face as she leaned over Lou to look at Jake to her right.

"Where did you get that?" Jake was lost.

"Sarge, like you told her that." Rickie interrupted. "You said, Cal-babe you look like a horse in them . . ."

"Rickie!" Jake blasted. "Cal. If you would have given me a second you would have known I was merely implying that those shorts are well . . ." Jake shrugged. "Provocative and should a pregnant woman be wearing them."

Cal gasped out. "There you go again Jake. You and your fuckin Virgin Mary complex."

"Cal. Please." Jake cringed. "And where is this nasty behavior coming from? You are just too defensive."

Before Cal could say anything Judge, who sat alone across from them held up his hand to her. "Jake. This is your first time round with a pregnancy isn't it?"

Rickie snickered. "Dude, it's like his first time round with a woman."

"Rickie." Jake snapped.

Lou shifted his eyes and tilted his head. "Is that . . . true?"

"No!" Jake blasted.

Cal made that vocal peep of sound then drew up that drastic bitching tone. "Go ahead Jake. You go right ahead. Now you're throwing your past lovers in my face. What's next are you going to instigate me and tell *they* weren't fat?"

"What?" Jake spun his head Cal's way. "Where in the fuck are you getting that from? Did you hear that come from my mouth. No."

"I did." Rickie held up his hand. "Sarge like you just said it. You were like, Cal-babe, I used to bang some thin chicks in . . ."

"Rickie!" Jake turned red. "Why am I outnumbered here. What the hell did I do? I merely make an observation that the shorts were too tight and all of the sudden I'm not only calling my wife fat, but now I'm talking about 'doing' thin woman. For your information Cal, no woman I had ever been with was as thin as you used to be . . ." Jake cringed. "I meant, you know what I meant."

"Sarge, you like meant to not open your mouth and insert your foot."

Lou whistled. "And *that's* a pretty big foot."

"I give up." Jake tossed his hands up. "I quit. I lose. Thank God you're not saying anything Billy. At least some one is on my side."

Cal rolled her eyes. "That's because he's a coward when it comes to you."

Billy quickly turned to Cal. "What did I do? I'm just being quiet."

"Do you think I'm fat?" Cal asked. "Be honest."

"No." Billy shook his head and laughed "Cal, that is ridiculous. The only part about you that is growing is your . . ."

"Oh so now I'm growing. Thank you Billy. Thank you very much for the vote of confidence."

"Cal!" Jake yelled at her. "Why are you yelling at him now? What the hell. Does this make you feel big or . . ."

"Quit calling me fat!" Cal screamed at him.

"I'm not calling you fat!" Jake had enough. "I thought, now correct me if I'm wrong here, but I thought we left the female-style, premenstrual bitching shit behind. Don't I get a break for nine months or something."

Judge had the answer. "No. And Jake, that is what I was trying to tell you. You have to learn to be sensitive."

"I am sensitive." Jake spoke defensively.

Judge held up his hand. "Women that are pregnant tend to get a bit . . . well let me just tell you a little story. Now I distinctively remember it being my third child that my wife was carrying. Well she became a vicious woman. Not that I minded now, she was carrying my child. But, one time, I was playing cards down at the club. Blast! The door opened and in came Matilda, waddling her eight month pregnant self in. Yelled at me in front of the fellow club members, pulled me out of there by my ear and threatened to smear my re-election campaign."

Jake was baffled by this. "And during this reign of terror pregnancy, did you

at all consider perhaps locking her in the house.”

“You would say that.” Cal snapped at him.

“And I have had just about enough verbal abuse directed my way from that mouth.” Jake pointed at Cal and stood up. “Say it.”

“What?” Cal looked dumbfounded.

“Say it.” Jake held one hand on his hip while he extended the other toward Cal. “Say it.”

“I hate you.”

“Thank you. Now I can rest. Good night.” Jake turned, stepped over his log and headed to the bungalow. He slowed in his walk and turned back around to the now silent group. “Does anyone hear that?”

Every one looked up.

“There.” Jake moved his head again to the faint sound. A high pitch fluttering, as if the wings of a fast moving butterfly were amplified. “It’s sounds sort of like a whistle getting closer. Do you hear that.”

“Cricket?” Lou guessed. “Sounds like a mutant cricket.”

The sound grew closer and closer.

“Have we seen a mutant cricket?” Jake asked. “I don’t think it’s that big. Maybe we . . .”

The sound stopped. In the thick silence, a gurgle, slow and quick came from Judge. Everyone hurried and turned their attention from the sound back to the campfire, just in time to see Judge’s eyes grow wide and watch him drop face first off his log to the ground with a deadened ‘thump’.

It was quiet. Almost too quiet. The sound of the burning fire. The flickering orange hue that lit Judge’s still body.

Cal jumped up. “Jake.”

“Watch out.” Jake grabbed her arm and wouldn’t let Cal step closer.

Rickie grew antsy watching how slow Jake moved. “Sarge like hurry. Do some of that chest pounding shit. Judge had a heart attack.”

“Rickie.” Jake whispered his name. “Step back.” Jake moved closer to Judge. “Something is not right.” He looked down to the still body, mouth open. Blood trickled from the corner of Judge’s eyes like tears. “Why are his eyes bleeding? Something isn’t . . .”

Just as Jake began to squat, a slight ripping sound was heard. He turned his head to a snickering Rickie who commented that Jake’s pants were too tight. “Rickie please.” The ripping grew louder then . . . Crack! It was like Judge’s skull literally burst at the seams. Pieces of his head flew out at the same time the rest of his body sucked in as if every ounce of life, liquid and fat were sucked from him. His legs started to disintegrate from the feet up. And as Jake jumped back out of the way a loud humming, whistling sound came. It sounded like multitudes of the sound they heard earlier. “Lou! Get Cal back!”

On Jake’s words, the source of the noise was revealed when from out of Judge’s body poured what looked like a moving black blanket of small slimy

creatures. Millions of them scattered out, hissing in their movement. Scurrying about the ground.

Rickie and Reed shrieked dancing around and stepping on them. Lou swept Cal up into his arms and charged with her toward the bungalow. Billy raced behind them. And Jake, stepping on the tiny objects that flew about the ground, reached down to the camp fire, for a log. As he did, one jumped on his hand and Jake winced in the stinging pain he felt, he shoved his hand close to the fire and watched it drop off. He picked up the log, ignoring the burning to his palm and held it out to the ground. The things cleared in a circle from the fire he showed them. Then Jake tossed the log about like a torch at the ground causing the things to join back together and very loudly and quickly speed off out of the campsite and into the woods.

Just when Jake thought it was safe, just when the silence entailed again and there were no more noises heard from them, he spotted it on the ground near Judge's body. Quickly, Jake picked up Lou's tin coffee mug, dumped out its contents and tossed it over the two inch, black slug looking thing.

"Sarge." Rickie out of breath approached him, first taking in the sight of what was left of Judge's body. "What were they."

"I don't know Rickie." Jake held firm to the bottom of the tin cup. "But we'll find out." He lifted the cup slightly, saw it was still there, then hurriedly placed the cup back down.



Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

July 20<sup>th</sup> - 8:55 p.m.

Nobody moved. Not even Lancing, Judge's investor. They all just sat staring in silence at four of the monitors that played and replayed the same scene over in slow motion. The scene of Judge's death.

Lyle swayed his head. "What the hell are they?"

"I don't know." Greg stared in awe. "I can't even make out what they are."

Barb peered up to Greg who stood between her and Lyle. "Should I go wake Dr. Jefferson about this?"

"No. Let him sleep." Greg replied. "You saw how bad that stomach flu hit him after dinner. Let him go. He knows no more than us anyhow,"

"Haynes." Aldo stood from his chair and approached him. "What did that to that man?"

"I don't know." Greg answered.

"You don't know?" Aldo questioned. "Right. This is one of those wildlife research things you're trying to satisfy."

"Aldo, I assure you it is not."

"Haynes." Aldo stayed firm. "Look, enough is enough. That was horrible."

"Yes it was." Greg looked at him seriously.

"And you didn't control that?" Aldo asked.

"No."

"And you know nothing about it." Aldo pounded the question.

"I told you no. How many times do you need to hear it?" Greg asked.

"Until I'm satisfied." Aldo pointed a finger at the screens. "That was not normal. That was some scary shit. I have a hard time believing that nature just tossed something onto that island that you know nothing about."

"Believe it." Greg told him. "And believe this. I don't think nature's tossed something on that island I don't know about. I think nature tossed something on that island . . . no one knows about." Greg kept a stare on Aldo and his eyes only moved briefly when another worker walked in the room looking as if waiting for an opportunity to interrupt. Greg regained his composure in his serious stand down with Aldo. "Um . . ." He blinked and looked at the male worker. "Yes?" Greg rubbed his eyes.

The young worker looked apprehensive, a little nervous from the tension in the room. "Sorry to interrupt but . . . Mr. Connilucci? You're driver is waiting. He said to tell you they're waiting at the airport."

Aldo looked at Greg, then to the screens. He paused before saying anything, running his hand down his face and across his mustache. Then after taking one more look back at the screen, Aldo turned to the worker. "Can you do me a favor. Could you tell the driver I won't be leaving. And to notify my pilots I won't be needing their services tonight?" Aldo received an acknowledging nod from the worker and then Aldo returned slowly to his seat. "Definitely not tonight." He

leaned back, crossed his legs and just stared, like everyone else, to the wall of monitors.

I.-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 20<sup>th</sup> - 9:00 p.m.

Jake and Rickie lit the last of the little fires around his bungalow, and after walking Rickie over to get a sleeping bag for himself, Jake picked up the tin cup on the ground, used a stone to scoot the creature inside and laying the stone on top, carried the cup with him into his bungalow.

The second they walked in, Jake and Rickie were hit with questions. Jake said nothing. He walked by the trash grabbed a beer bottle, and took that and the cup to the bathroom. He rinsed out the bottle. "Cal, get me my leather gloves."

After shifting her eyes in wonder to Rickie, Lou, Reed and Billy in the room, Cal retrieved Jake's gloves and brought them to him. "Here."

Jake took only one, placed it on, and lifted the stone from the cup. The thing wiggled and moved about the bottom of the cup. Reaching in Jake pulled it out. Cal cringed verbally. Jake just glared at her, and picked up the beer bottle sliding it in.. "Are we done being so female? Good." He put the bottle on the back of the toilet, covered the top with the balanced stone, and took off the glove.

"Jake what is that?"

"I don't know. I'm going to take it to the center tomorrow. Even *I'm* not taking a chance of going back out there tonight." He led Cal from the bathroom. "Try to check it out with Stan, see what we come up with."

Cal's words were so breathy. "There were so many of them."

"Yeah, there were." Jake kissed her on the cheek. "And we haven't a clue how they got into Judge at all now do we. None of us saw anything."

Lou shook his head. "We were all too busy arguing.."

"We heard them though." Jake held up a finger. "Good thing. If we can hear them, we know they're coming. Cal, I never want you more than a few feet from shelter. You got that. Those things move fast." Jake lifted his hand. "And when one of them jumped on me. I could have swore it was trying to drill its way in." He showed Cal the small bleeding dot on his hand about the size of a dime. It wasn't deep and it looked as if just the skin was missing.

"Sarge, like, I guess we know now what killed Tonto and the animals, huh?"

"I guess we do." Jake sat down on the bed.

"Jake?" Billy spoke up. "I have a question. Caldwell called you to help figure out what did that to Paul. Do you still believe that was a set up? Do you still think Caldwell knows exactly what's going on."

"Absolutely." Jake stated. "They know what they're doing. And I'm finding out what these things are for us. Not for them. I'm convinced this is just the final phase of the experiment. The big thing that supposed to wipe us all out."

Cal swayed her head. "Jake, I have to disagree. The Stasis the institute can control. The wolves. But these things. I saw them too. Can they really control them? Caldwell would not put something in the experiment they could not control."

“True.” Jake said. “But here’s another thought.” Jake saw everyone listened. “Maybe Caldwell does know what these things are and they put them here. But maybe they just haven’t any idea the magnitude of what they’ve unleashed.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 21<sup>st</sup> - 7:30 a.m.

With a loud crash of broken glass, Jake's voice bellowed in the bathroom. "Fuck!"

Cal raced in. "What's wrong?"

"God, Cal, am I stupid."

"What?" She looked at the broken bottle in the sink. "What happened to it?"

"Gone."

"What do you mean gone? Did it get out?"

"No." Jake shook his head. "I must not have cleaned out the beer bottle enough. It must be like a slug because . . ."

"The salt dissolved it." Cal's head dropped then she smiled. "No Jake, this is a good discovery."

"Why?"

"What kind of water are we surrounded by?"

Jake's face lit up. "Salt water." He kissed Cal. "First line of defense." He moved from the bathroom. "While I'm gone, you guys gather up everything that can spray. You got that?"

"Got it." Cal moved with him to the door.

"And don't wander far at all. Stay close to shelter. When I get back, I'll go down to the ocean and fill them up."

"Jake." Cal stopped him from going out. "I don't understand why you have to go. You have nothing to test."

"But I'm hoping soon I will. I want to get things ready at the center. Cal, we can't kid our selves into thinking the aren't coming back."

"I know. Please be careful. O.K.?"

Jake laid his hand on her cheek. "I promise. I'll run for it." Jake winked and opened the door. "Listen."

Cal did. "I just hear birds."

"Yes. None of those things. And . . . as long as there are still birds . . ."

"There is still other food out there."

"Exactly." Jake told her. "I'll be back." He kissed her again and stepped off the porch. The small campfires had burned out and flies now buzzed about the remains of Judge that still laid there. After telling himself they definitely have to do something about *those*, Jake took off running.

Jake took the long way, but the safe way to the control center. Running to the beach, staying by the waters edge the whole trip, then running top speed up to

the gates and buzzing himself in.

Stan who was in the one lab with Richard and Porter, was so grateful to see Jake. He raced to him the second he entered. "Jake. What the hell happened last night."

"Maybe you can tell me." Jake told him.

"Isn't that why you're here?" Stan asked. "You have answers right?"

"No. I'm here to prepare for when I try to find them. Get things ready here." Jake looked at the disappointed faces.

"Jake we watched the tape over and over." Stan said. "We couldn't see clearly what it was. "Did you."

"Yeah I did."

"Then those are answers." Stan said with excitement. "You're already one up on us. Come on." He moved to the door.

"Where are we going?"

"Haynes is going to need to hear what you saw." He noticed Jake didn't follow. "Jake, you aren't coming?"

"Yeah, yeah I'll come." Jake reluctantly trailed behind. "But let me tell you something. I never really was much of an actor, so I don't get into this big show for the investors."

Stan stopped walking, he looked back at Jake. So baffled Stan seemed. "You still think we're controlling this?"

Jake gave his stock, one word answer as he followed Stan who began to move again. "Absolutely."

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
July 21<sup>st</sup> - 8:40 a.m.

He had waded through what he considered truly boring conversation. Waiting for Jake to appear on his speaker, Greg listened to the investors--still including Judge's--rattle on and on. It amazed him how a group of grown men could enthrall themselves in a conversation regarding the flu symptoms of Dr. Jefferson. And how that little topic moved on to the 'I remember when I had the flu two years ago . . .'. The flu stories from hell flew about the room and Greg swore if he had more hair he would have pulled it out.

Seeing Jake appear on the large screen was appreciated by Greg as much as if Jake was the Messiah himself dropping by for an experiment update. But Greg had to turn away from the screen seeing Jake in all his glory and arrogance. Knowing full well he was not in the mood for Jake antics.

Staring at Aldo and Douglass in a deep conversation regarding the revival of the Spanish flu, Greg found himself *having* to face the screen with Jake on it.

"Haynes!" Jake called out.

Silence engulfed the room and Greg turned around. "Jake, glad you could come."

"Yes I'm sure. What did you want." Jake was straight forward and to the point.

"Stan tells me you got a good look at what killed Judge."

"I did."

"And . . ."

Jake was silent.

"And?"

"And what? You want to see what I know about what you're doing?"

"Jake I assure you we are not doing anything. That's why you're here. We just want to know what we're dealing with."

Jake hesitated again, then he leaned forward folding his hands. "I don't know."

Amongst the moans in the room, Greg spoke up. "Jake, don't play games with us. Stan said you saw . . ."

"I did." Jake interrupted him. "And I'm telling you I haven't a clue what we're facing."

"Any guess? What did they look like."

"Slugs." Jake answered.

The whole room repeated in question. "Slugs?"

"Only flat." Jake described. "About two inches long. No structure. It definitely is a micro organism of some kid. They move at an incredibly high rate." Jake paused to think. "They make noise when they move. They have absolutely no structure. I got a hold of one last night. Rinsed out a beer bottle and kept it in there. It was completely dissolved by morning. I figured there still was some salt

in the bottle. And they don't like fire, but I didn't notice if they burned. But they don't like fire."

"Jake?" Greg spoke close to the microphone. "We watched and watched. We didn't see them get him. Did any of you."

"No." Jake shook his head. "We were engrossed in a conversation. We heard the noise and next thing you know, Judge is on the ground dead. I'm guessing they get in through the skin surface." Jake held up his hand, "One of them tried with me. If I could get a hold of one I would be able to know more. I know they can't get through glass or metal. I'll assume because they are an organism they can't get through anything that is not viable." He shrugged. "Again. I'm guessing."

"Have you seen anymore since last night?" Greg asked.

"They went into the woods and I haven't spotted or heard one since."

"You'll keep us posted right?"

Jake nodded.

"Thank you. And Jake, if you get any. Feel free to use what we have at the facility."

"Oh you know it."

"Thanks again." Receiving one more nod from Jake and after watching Jake take off the headset, Greg disconnected the call, and the monitor switched to a shot of outside the bungalows. Greg ran his hand over his face before turning to face the investors. A slight glaze of perspiration graced above his brow. He could see their mouths moving, the words they spoke seemed to be mumbled, meshed together, and slow. They all stared at him, and Greg knew they were asking questions, but between trying to let his mind think and sift through the guess work Jake gave, all Greg could do was mumble, 'excuse me' and slowly walk by them and out of the room.



CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

July 25<sup>th</sup> - 2:22 p.m.

"And it's been four whole days and nothing." Greg rubbed his eyes, sitting at the meeting table with Dr. Jefferson and the five investors. "I'm sure you gentlemen have more pressing things to do than hang about here."

Douglass shook his head. "I have my lap top and my office knows where to reach me."

"One of the perks to being rich." Aldo stated. "You are your own boss. I'm gonna give it another day or two."

"Me too." Daniela added then chuckled. "I think my people are glad I'm not there. I really haven't a clue what I'm talking about when it comes to my business."

Dr. Jefferson chuckled also and that bred a deep cough from him. He covered his mouth as he stood up slowly still looking as if he suffered the effects of that flue. "Excuse me." He coughed again. "Maybe what ever the problem was has died out or moved on."

"Moved on?" Aldo shuddered. "Now that's a scary thought. Can you imagine . . ."

"Yes." Greg interrupted Aldo. "Maybe you're correct Dr. Jefferson."

Aldo shifted his eyes at Greg wanting to blast him for rudely interrupting the great comment he was going to make. He watched Dr. Jefferson weakly leave and then just as Aldo opened his mouth to do so, Lyle called out loudly and in a panic from below.

"Dr. Haynes! Dr. Haynes hurry!"

Greg spun quickly in his chair jolting up and racing to the railing. "What is it?"

"We have movement." Lyle stated, his hand moving fast working on something.

"Movement?" Greg raced around the railing doing his customary leaping down the last two steps running straight to Lyle. Aldo and the others followed behind. "Movement? What do you mean movement?"

"Look. Check out the satellite photo we just picked up. Aerial view." Lyle point up as he pulled the photo to the big screen. The entire island could be seen, clouds and all that lingered over. "Northeast section. It's moving steady at an angle of seventeen degrees south."

Greg saw it, a small black spot that sometimes meshed with the trees, and sometimes came in clear. But it clearly moved. "A small cloud. Volcanic ash?"

"No." Lyle looked up at him. "I think that's our things?"

"Christ, there's enough of them to be seen now?" Greg hit the table with his fist and moved to his right with haste. "Lyle keep track of their speed and

coordinates. Save this footage. I have to get a hold of Stan, tell them to hold tight. Something, who knows what, is headed their way.” Greg picked up the phone.

“Haynes.” Aldo called to him. “What about the participants.”

Greg raised his eyes up to the satellite screen as he held the phone to his ear. “God be with them.”

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
July 25<sup>th</sup> - 2:30 p.m.

The cessation of the birds chirping, singing and squawking was not a silence to Jake, but a warning call. He carried another box of food to his bungalow. Reed carried water, and Lou medical supplies. They were stocking up and preparing for a one building stay-in for when those things returned.

Cal, Rickie and Billy worked with a glue Jake created. Sealing around with windows and any crevices, that something so slimy and slippery could glide right in through.

"How's it going?" Jake asked Cal as he stepped on the porch. He saw Reed stop. "Just take that inside."

Reed walked in and so did Lou.

Cal looked at Jake. "Good, we're almost done. Billy's on the roof now."

"Rickie?"

"Around the back."

"Jake." Lou came to the door, "You want me to go get more paper supplies from the storage. I think we're good. And we may be running out of room."

"Let me see. I'll be back Cal." Jake, carrying his box walked inside. He kept his views so on the supplies stacked in the corner, he didn't see Billy's two metal fireboxes. And Jake twitched his head and grunted when his foot kicked right into them. "I told him put his shit in the corner." Jake set his box down. "You know what? We are running out of room. We'll be too cramped if we bring anymore in. Let's just stick with what we got for now. Even if we find ourselves stuck in here the rest of the experiment, with rationing we should be . . ." Jake's eyes looked up.

"Shit." Lou heard it too.

The hissing. Whistling and fluttering sound.

Jake bolted to the door. "Cal!" He immediately reached out and snatched her in. He raced outside yelling up. "Billy! Get inside now! Rickie! In! Hurry!" Jake's jaws clenched tight and his head turned in terror when he heard the rustling of leaves mixing. And then Jake saw them. It looked like a river of tar headed their way, louder and louder from the trees. "Oh fuck." His eye grew wide. And he stepped off the porch. "Rickie!" he looked up to see if he saw Billy. He didn't.

"Sarge." Rickie flew around from the back of the bungalow. "I think they're . . ." Rickie froze.

"In." Jake ordered reaching for one of the buckets of ocean water sitting on the porch. Stepping aside for Rickie to go first. Jake barely had time to place a leading hand on Rickie's back when a long line of them, joined together, rose up two feet from the ground and nearly forming an arrow, shot at Rickie.

Rickie screamed out. They had covered him instantaneously. Jake flung the contents of the bucket on Rickie, with a sizzle sound they began to disintegrate, then Jake grabbed the other bucket, tossed its contents out onto the oncoming creatures, lifted Rickie up over his shoulder, flew into the bungalow and shut the

door.

"Lou light a fire!" Jake order stepping over Billy on the floor. He took Rickie to the bathroom. "Cal, Reed help me out with him." Jake lowered the seat to the toilet and sat a moaning Rickie down.

Cal raced in. "How is he?"

"They bit him but they didn't get him. Reed start the tub. And why is Billy on the floor in there?"

"He fell off the roof." Cal answered.

"Figures. We'll start calling him Reed two." Jake lifted Rickie's tee shirt. There were so many tiny bites on his exposed skin it looked as if he had been sunburned around his shirt. Rickie's head flopped forward. Jake lifted it up. "You'll be O.K."

"Sarge." Rickie spoke his name softly.

Jake began to take off his shoes. "Reed I need you to get him undressed and into the tub. The salt water didn't help his wounds. Cal . . ." Jake took off Rickie's other shoe. "Prepare a blanket on the floor in the corner for him."

"Jake." Cal sounded so upset. "That's terrible. Give him our bed."

"No way." Jake stood up. "Reed, take over." He walked to Cal. "If he starts getting worse. If there's anything that's hurt him badly. He's . . ." Jake looked at Rickie. "He's going to cocoon."

Cal hurriedly looked at Rickie also. "I'll prepare the floor." She raced out. "Jake."

Jake hurried and followed. "What's . . . shit." The pattering, tapping, continuously and loud, echoed in the room as the black things pelted themselves against the window. Multitudes of them like rain. And they kept on coming as if someone were just tossing them.

Cal spun center room standing next to Billy. Confused, a little frightened. The hissing was so loud. Shrill. The slimy creatures were literally screaming to them. They were obviously so surrounded it was mind shattering.

Jake raced to the little fridge and pulled out beers. He tossed one to Cal, then to Billy. "Arm yourselves. Remember how you used to shake soda bottles and spray them." Jake untwisted his cap. "That's what you may need to do. If not." He took a single drink. "Drink it." He held the extra bottle down to Lou. "How's the fire."

"Small but building." Lou poked it and started to stand from his squat. "But I don't understand why we're roasting ourselves out."

At the end of Lou's question came an answer. Dripping down, fast and furiously into the fire were the organisms.

"That's why." Jake readied his beer bottle.

They sounded like they screamed in pain when they dropped into the fire. Burning and shriveling as they did. It rained them through the chimney, some missing the fire and spilling on to the floor, only to be stopped by a prepared Cal, Jake and Lou who got them with their beers.

Jake flew to the dresser. "Toss anything into that fire Lou. Get it roaring to stop them!" Jake grabbed a coffee mug. "And I'm finding out what the hell these things are." He opened the dresser drawer, pulled out his glove, put it on and held the mug. He moved to the fire. "Get ready to spray me if they get me."

"Got it." Lou got prepared. "Cal, grab me your hair spray."

Cal didn't question she just retrieved it.

Lou waited and he watched Jake emerge the cup into the stream of things that dropped into the fireplace. Catching some in the cup and on his hand as he did. He dropped the cup covered it with his boot, held his hand for Lou to douse with beer, shook off the pain and stepped from Lou's way.

Lou held Cal's hair spray and his lighter. He bent down to the fireplace holding the small flame and making a torch by spraying it with the hair spray. He kept it steady, shooting in intervals until the fire began to pick up enough to stop them from dropping in.

Though the pelting and attacking stopped, the hissing didn't. It was steady. And even though it was the middle of the day, darkness engulfed them. Not a speck of sunlight could be seen through the window.

Billy limped over to Jake who had brought the mug over and set it on top of the small fridge. Jake covered the top of the mug with a book. "Jake, you got some?"

"About four." Jake answered.

Cal joined them. "Did it, or did it not feel like we were in a remake of the movie the Birds."

Billy let out a breath and nodded his head. "Especially when they shot down the fireplace."

"What's going on?" Lou waked over as they encircled the cup.

"Oh." Cal said nonchalantly. "We were just talking about 'The Birds'."

Jake peered up from his view of the mug. "Or rather . . ." He lifted the book slightly then placed it back down. "The Amoebas."

Caldwell Research Institute - Los Angeles, CA  
July 25<sup>th</sup> - 3:15 p.m.

Just inside the open double doors to the control room, Greg stood with a shorter older gentleman. He reviewed a chart and handed it back to the man. "Dr. Davis, Are you positive that Dr. Jefferson shouldn't be in a hospital?"

"Positive. Besides, he really wants to be around this." He answered. "So bed rest and try not disturb him for a couple days. That's all. His blood pressure is up and with all the fluids he is retaining I just worry about congestive heart failure. So a few days on the antibiotics and rest, he'll be good to go."

"Then we'll follow that advice." Greg smiled at Dr. Davis, then turned and walked back into the control room.

Aldo who was fetching a cup of coffee approached Greg. "How's Jefferson."

"Relapsed. But the doctor says a few days he'll be fine."

"I heard you say something about being in the hospital."

"That was my thought. But then again, you know Dr. Jefferson, he's been a part for this so long, he doesn't want to miss it. We just won't bother him, that's all." Greg walked down the steps with Aldo and peered up to the wall of monitors. "Unbelievable." His eyes locked into the shot of the unity circle. The things were everywhere. Moving about on the ground and bungalows. "Lyle, play me back that recording of Stan again."

"Yes sir." Lyle began to get it ready. "Here it is."

The tape of Stan's voice began to play. He didn't sound shocked, Stan sounded more enthused. *"I can remember many times in the east, driving five miles per hour in a long line of traffic on a highway. A highway that was under construction. If it was summer, I'd get worse because the smell would just kill me. Tar. But it is so vivid in my mind those workers and they way they would just use that equipment to roll that black asphalt on the road, smoothing it out. And that is the best way I can describe what I saw. Some machine just rolling out the asphalt right on by us."* The tape stopped.

Aldo snickered. "Awfully dramatic that Stan is."

"You know it. It wouldn't be our Stan. Aldo, look how amazing." Greg indicated to the screen for Aldo's benefit. "Look at the control building. Not a single one near or by there. Yet they're conjugating in that one area."

"Does that surprise you?" Aldo asked. "Look at the control building. It's huge. Concrete and there's three people in there. But look at our compound. Right now you have five and a half people in one little wooden structure. And you know what Haynes, they probably smell dinner."

Greg glanced at the screen. "You're probably right."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 25<sup>th</sup> - 7:40 p.m.

"Thick . . . black . . . lugies." Lou stated, arms folded staring out the window that now could be seen through. He peered into the dimly lit unity circle.

Jake chuckled. "What was that?"

"Look that them. Like some one coughed up a good one. Watch them drip from everything."

"And watch them fall." Jake told him.

Lou did. "They lose all shape. The become a drop."

"Then they regain it yes. Amoebas adapt and change. I'll know better when I view them under a microscope. And I can't do that until I can get out there."

"Jake, somehow I thought amoebas were well, small?"

"Unable to be seen by the naked eye."

"Then why are we seeing these?"

"What was the first kill?" Jake quizzed Lou.

"Oh." Lou nodded. "So like first mutant birds, then mutant pigs, mutant dingo and now . . . mutant Amoebas. You have got to give it to nature."

"Or science." Jake cringed when he heard a whimper come from Reed.

Lou pointed back with his thumb. "How long do you think we'll have to deal with that. We're stuck in here. I'll kill him."

"Probably until he gets used to it or the process is over."

"How long is that?" Lou asked.

"Three to seven days."

Lou peered over his shoulder at Reed. "Christ."

Jake shook his head with a slight smile, then with nothing else to do, he stared out the window with Lou watching the amoebas. Chalking it up to observing behavior patterns for scientific purposes.

Clear with a hint of pink was the color. Thick, gel like, see through. A glaze and still appearing wet. Yet it wasn't. It was dry and hard as a rock. The shell that covered Rickie. Though blurry as if viewing him through ice, Rickie could be seen. He laid on his side, eyes closed, looking peaceful and as if sleeping. His arms brought tightly to his chest, legs curled up in a fetal position. Never moving, never twitching, Rickie regenerated.

Reed let out a tiny sob. "Eye end. Eye or end."

"He'll be fine." Cal told him. "Trust me."

"An E ear E?" Reed asked.

"He'll say he did. But you can talk to him. Here." She handed him the blanket. "He doesn't need it though Reed."

"Eye Oh." Reed spoke sadly flapping out the blanket over Rickie. "E us ooks ol. Oh ol." Reed slowly brought the blanket up to over Rickie's shoulder, tucking

it in.

"He's not cold." Cal tried to explain. "But this is nice of you."

"Ank ew."

"You're welcome."

"An eye us ay ear?"

"Sure. You can sit there all night." Cal tapped Reed on the shoulder. "What a good friend you are." Rolling her eyes, Cal walked over to where Billy sat on the floor in a corner with his lap top. "He's over the fuckin edge." Cal grunted as she lowered herself to the floor.

"Who? Reed?" Billy asked.

"Yes."

"He's worried about Rickie. I mean, Rickie took care of him all the time. Be nice."

"Sure." Cal reached for the papers on the floor. "Are these mine."

"Hey." Billy lightly smacked her hand away. "Patience." He gathered the papers together.

"Billy I'm bored."

"Tough. So is everyone else. Except me. Look at Jake and Lou staring out that window. And Reed talking to a cocoon. Which by the way Cal is really freaky."

"You think?" Cal looked over her shoulder. "I guess." She shrugged. "Maybe I'm used to it. I do remember the first time I saw that though."

"First time?" Billy asked surprised. "Rickie's done this before?"

"Oh sure. The first time was when he put the knife in the toaster and electrocuted himself."

"Oh my God." Billy gasped.

"Yeah. Ruined a perfectly good toaster too. Jake was pissed. Anyhow. We were out for the evening and we found him when we got home. The only problem is. Depending on the extent of the injury depends on how fast he shells up right? Well Rickie died, so he shelled up almost immediately. We get home and find him half way across the kitchen, on his back, arms extended, hair sticking up and shelled."

"O.K."

"Billy." Cal rolled her eyes at him. "It may not look it, but right now, Rickie weighs about five hundred pounds maybe more. It was a bitch pulling him from that kitchen. Then . . . then his arms were out like this." Cal held her arms out. "We had to get Chuck to help lift and turn him to get him out. We could have left him in the dining room but we had company coming for dinner the next night. It actually was pretty funny getting him up the steps to his room. I hate when he cocoons though. No Rickie. No fun."

"True. And no one can ever accuse you of leading a boring life."

"Yeah they can. Right now. Can I have my reading material."

"Be gentle with it tonight?" Billy asked.



"I promise."

"All right." Billy handed her the papers. "Enjoy." He turned his laptop to start working again.

"Thanks." Cal started to read and she giggled.

"It's not funny." Billy looked up from his lap top.

"No." Cal waved her hand. "Not the words. The babies are shifting. It's like they're wrestling for fetal space in there."

"Can I?" Billy extended his hand.

"Sure go on." Cal continued to read.

"Cal? How do you sleep with all that going on in there?"

"This is coming from the man who slept through attack of the killer zombies." Cal held up the page. "Oh this is good."

"Really?" Billy's hand still felt her stomach.

"Yes. But where's my red pen? I want to circle my favorite part." Her eyes shifted in a search.

Billy gave up, it was more than the teacher in Cal, he was certain it was a sick addiction to that red pen. And then, spotting Jake on his way over, Billy removed his hand from Cal. Not that he was afraid of Jake seeing him touching Cal's stomach, but Billy just wasn't in the mood for another one of Jake's very serious, non-joking around, random, optical, erection checks.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 27<sup>th</sup> - 9:00 a.m.

"Jake, no. Don't do this." Cal pleaded, yet there was argument to her voice. "Just don't do this."

"I have to." Jake secured the tape around the edge of his combat boot sealing it to his leg.

"How can you be so sure they won't get you?" Cal asked him.

"I will cover every exposed area of my body. They don't go through cloth. O.K.? But I have to do this. I can't wait in here another day for these things to leave. They just aren't leaving Cal." Jake checked the tape around his wrists. "How do I look Lou?"

"Air tight." Lou examined him. "It's time for the mask."

Jake nodded and lifted the homemade ski cap that lay on the dresser next to a pair of sunglasses and a small duffle bag. He stopped before placing it over his head. "I love you." He leaned down to Cal and kissed her. "Understand what I have to do. I have to try to figure out a way to beat these things. If I sit back and do nothing. If by some chance Caldwell has nothing to do with this, then we're stuck. Because how can they figure out a way to get us off this island with these things, if they aren't here. We are."

Cal closed her eyes as she watched Jake place the hood on his head. She heard the ripping of the duct tape as Lou secured it to the turtle neck Jake wore. Then after hearing one last long rip, Cal opened her eyes to see Lou taping on the sunglasses to protect Jake's eyes. She grabbed his hand. "Good luck."

"I'll be back shortly." Jake told her then gave a reassuring squeeze to her fingers. "Don't worry. No matter what you see, I'll be fine." Jake tossed the roll of tape in the small duffle bag and zipped it up. He picked up the bag and the plastic video case that now contained his amoebas and then looking once more at Cal, he moved to the door. "Ready?" He asked Lou.

"Ready."

"As soon as I'm out make sure this door is shut."

"Got it." Lou held a spray bottle with ocean water. "Good luck Jake."

With one single nod, Jake opened the door slightly and slid out stepping onto the porch.

The moment Lou shut the door, the hissing that was subtle outside, grew louder and louder.

Cal flew over to the window. Billy and Lou followed. From there they watched Jake, move off the porch and into the unity circle. By the time he was halfway to the beach path, Jake was completely covered with the amoebas. But he kept on moving. And before he moved out of view, Jake had already visually disappeared. The Amoebas followed him, like he was the Pied Piper or a magnet

of some sort. Gathering thicker and thicker on him until he looked like a moving mound of Amoebas walking from the camp.

Once he was gone, once he could no longer be seen anymore, Cal's head drop. Billy laid his hand on her shoulder stepping into her as Cal, scared for Jake, moved back into him for silent comfort.

Jake took the long way, the beach way. Moving slowly, the weight of the amoebas dragging him down. He had to keep wiping his hand across the sunglasses so he could see. They stayed on him like glue. But Jake trudged on. He could not only feel their heaviness, but the squirming of their determined bodies. Jake hit the soft sand of the beach, feeling the weight of some of the amoebas leave him. Perhaps they sensed the salted air. But most of them stayed to him. And in his stride forward, Jake dropped the duffle bag and video case and walked straight--amoebas and all--into the ocean dissolving them all instantly the second he submerged.

He didn't spot any amoebas at all in the area of the center, nor did Jake tag any along with him. Any amoebas that tried to get Jake when he stepped from the ocean, met with their demise the second they touched upon his soaking wet clothes.

Jake buzzed himself in and walked though the gates. He approached the building carrying his things like some sort of lone survivor in a dead world. He stepped inside, set down his things, took off his hood and immediately began to undress. Putting on dry clothes to work in, leaving the wet ones there to place back on later.

Jake knew where he had to go. He had it all set up for testing a specimen when he got one. And he carried one in the case Billy was so reluctant to give up.

Somehow Jake knew Stan would be there waiting in the lab. If Caldwell was even watching they would have seen him. "Morning." Jake spoke to him laying the case on the counter.

"I can't believe you chanced this."

"I had to find out what . . ." Jake's hand tapped the case. " . . . these are."

Stan peered through the clearness of the case. "Oh my God. Is that them?"

"Yep."

"And what kind of tests are you going to run?"

"Well. First of all I know that can not get through clothing. But I want to know exactly *what* they do when they touch the skin. I need to video tape it and observe. I need to know first of all what we're dealing with then, we'll figure out how to deal with them. But there's only one problem."

"And that is?" Stan asked.

"A guinea pig. I looked for some sort of wildlife on my way here. There isn't

any. I was hoping you would have some sort of test animals here at the lab.”

Stan swayed his head. “Sorry. We don’t. What about Rickie?”

“Rickie *is* a possibility. We’ll have to wait until he regenerates. And wakes up.”

“Amputate a limb from him?” Stan asked.

“Yeah, you know he’ll cocoon and grow it back. We’ll have to do it painless though.”

“Shock him, kill him, then cut off the body part.”

“Exactly.” Jake nodded. “O.K., then I’ll just examine one of these things now and save the rest for . . .” Jake’s head turned.

“What’s wrong?”

“There it is again.” Jake listened and heard the ‘meows’ that came from in the room. Small tiny voices.

“Oh, those are Ollie’s cats. The one had kittens two weeks ago and . . . Jake!” Stan shrieked out when he saw Jake looking about the room.

“Where are they Stan?”

“Jake I . . .”

“I asked you if there are any lab animals and you said ‘no’.”

“There aren’t.” Stan defended. “Just Ollie’s cats.”

“Just Ollie’s cats?” Jake paused before he flipped out. “You’re willing to suggest my kid. Willing to let me take him apart, but you weren’t willing to give up the cats?”

“Jake . . .”

“Where are they.”

“I refuse to let you . . .”

“Where are they!” Jake yelled at him.

“All right!” Stan, nervous, rubbed his own head. “Under the far cabinet.

Jake marched right over, smiling at the growing amplification of cat meows. He squatted down, opened up the cupboard and exposed the family. Two large cats. The one, had six tiny kittens feeding from her. Jake swayed his head up to Stan. “Get the camera ready.”

Stan closed his eyes.

It looked like a fish tank, small and glass, only it had a glass lid. A camera was set up by it, ready to catch Jake’s experiment in it’s video eye. One single, lonely little amoeba stuck it’s self to the side wall.

“Jake. I protest this.”

“Tough.” Jake told him and started the camera.

It peeped more so than meowed when Jake lifted the tiny creature who sat patiently on the counter. Grey and white, its fur soft and new. The kitten was smaller than Jake’s whole hand. It’s tiny delicate shoulders pressed against its little face, and the kittens back paws rolled up around Jake’s thumb, gripping him. The young animal trembled, as if it knew what was coming. It’s dark glossy eyes

looked up to Jake and it's mouth opened, crying out it's peeping voice as if to say, 'please don't do this to me, please.'

"Jake, don't." Stan held up his hand.

"Stan knock it off!" Jake reached for the lid.

"I can't watch you do this. I can't . . ." Stan whined as Jake lowered the kitten in the tank and closed the lid. Loudly and long, Stan shuddered a moan of the creeps. The baby animal slid on the smooth glass trying to grab the footing it just learned how to use.

Jake folded his arms and watched, never taking his eyes off the tank. The kitten could no longer be heard, but Jake could see it still crying out. Looking around, trying to make helpless eyes contact with Stan whose hand covered his face. But it didn't take long. The amoeba, so small, pounced on the kitten landing on its back. The mouth of the kitten opened widely screaming out and its back legs dropped when the amoeba began to burrow itself in.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
July 27<sup>th</sup> - 2:00 p.m.

He sat alone in the control room. That's the way he wanted it. No observers, no investors or workers. Just Greg. He had just finished watching the video display of the first cat experiment. And now Greg stared at the screen, the glass tank before him. Only it was black. Filled on the inside with multitudes of amoebas.

"There is no way to count." Jake said over the speaker. "We estimate about four hundred or so."

Greg sipped his coffee trying to look emotionless. "They multiplied?"

"From within yes." Jake explained. "They can get into you two ways. One, through any body opening. Ears, nose mouth, you name it. The other is through the skin surface where they dig in. This takes, and I'm estimating on when they go in, bone and muscle density, it takes anywhere from six to ten seconds to get inside. You can stop it mid drill. Get a grip and pull it out. Saline solution, salt water won't work. It only dissolves half and the amoeba goes on and in. Once it does, it's over."

"How long does that take?" Greg asked.

"It depends on how big. But no matter the size. It doesn't take long until your dead, and then after that, not long before you're gone. They get directly into the blood stream, multiply and devour."

"And there's no way to stop them once they get inside."

"Not from what I seen. No, wait, I'm wrong. You can halt them if you catch it early enough."

Greg nodded. "Hence the legless mother cat."

"Yes. I seized the opportunity when I saw the amoeba go in the front paw. But I had to be fast. It made it nearly to the shoulder by the time I amputated. And I was ready. She could have survived but, well, you know, saving her wasn't a possibility."

"You really learned a lot today."

"Yes I did." Jake said. "And I also learned why none of us, you me, anyone, never saw it hit Judge."

"Too fast."

"No. All it took was one. Maybe it went in through his ear or mouth. But just one. What amazes me is how many derive from that one. I mean, if one amoeba turns into four hundred or so from one tiny kitten that barely fit in the palm of my ..."

"Jake." Greg winced. "Spare those details."

"Sorry." Jake cleared his throat. "I was saying. If you can get that many multiply in a small test subject. Imagine how many more one amoeba will make in the body of an average size man."

"Or worse." Greg stated with concern. "One very large stasis bore."

“Exactly. Which brings me to my next point. If we are aware of how fast they multiply and how many are produced. And we are also aware of how many these things have killed then, we have a problem. From what I’ve seen out there, we’re only skimming the surface.”

“And the big question would be . . . where the hell are the rest?”

Jake only nodded in agreement.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 27<sup>th</sup> - 7:30 p.m.

Jake had made it safely back and much easier wearing the biohazard suit that Caldwell provided. Returning for a bucket, retrieving ocean water then showering himself of with it before going inside.

They had just finished dinner and all of them sat in the floor together. And to keep Reed quiet, they sat by Rickie just so Rickie could feel apart of it. Cocoon or not.

Between Jake's legs, Cal sat as he leaned against the wall. Her back to his chest, Jake's arms around her. His hands rested on her stomach, something he did without thinking anymore. Cal touched his fingers as she spoke to him. "You learned all this today?"

"Yes." Jake answered.

"How?" Cal asked.

"We ran tests."

"So you must have had test subjects." Cal questioned. "Who."

"Well . . . 'what' would be more the word to describe the test subjects."

Cal was curious. "Guinea pigs, what were they."

"Cats." Jake stated. "Eight of them."

Billy gasped at the same time Reed did. "Jake, you killed eight cats."

"The amoebas killed eight cats. I observed."

"Were they . . . big cats?" Billy asked.

"Two were." Jake answered. "Six, you could say . . ." He held out his hand. "Fit in my palm."

"UH!" Billy winced and shuddered. "Oh shit Jake. You killed a kitten?"

"Yes."

"Oh my God. Oh my God." Billy kept rambling. "How can you be so cruel. A little innocent kitten."

"Knock it off. You weren't this bad when you watched the zombies eat Larry Kale."

"He was an asshole Jake. These were poor, helpless defenseless . . ."

"Billy!" Jake yelled his name. "What the hell else was I supposed to do. Follow Stan's suggestion and wait until Rickie woke up and amputate his arms?"

"Yes." Billy snapped out. "Rickie will come back. Those kittens won't."

Reed seemed to sway his head in disappointment. "Oh ake. At es eel-ee ick."

Jake rolled his eyes. "We learned today, didn't we?"

Billy was just appalled. "And this doesn't bother you in the least?"

Cal interjected. "It wouldn't. Jake has a reputation of killing, not just cats. Kittens."

Jake, after seeing Billy's open mouth look of disgust looked to his wife "Cal, what the hell are you talking about?"

"You know."



"No I don't."

"Yes you do. Are you going to say, today is the first time you took the life of a feline friend."

Jake paused and said nothing. He cringed at the moans from Reed and Billy. "No-no. What Cal is talking about was not on purpose. It was an accident."

Lou had to ask. "What did you do? Hit it with a car?"

"Close." Cal answered for Jake. "A very large boot."

Shuddering whines emanated from Billy and Reed.

"Oh nice Cal. Very nice." Jake was perturbed. "Make it sound like I stepped on the kitten on purpose. How the hell was I supposed to know the neighbors kittens were on our porch. It was five o'clock in the morning for Christ sake. I didn't see it."

"No you did not." Cal said. "I did. When I went out an hour later to get the paper. Just laying there, so pitiful all . . ."

"Cal." Billy halted her. "Please." He swayed his head to Lou. "And look at you."

"What?" Lou looked up. "I'm not saying anything."

"Exactly." Billy said. "You only asked how Jake killed the cat. Doesn't it bother you at all?"

"Not in the least." Lou shook his head. "In fact, I'm loving it. I hate cats."

Blunt and to the point Lou was. So matter of fact that he bred a snicker from Jake and immediate silence to a complaining Billy and Reed. Then Lou kind of regretted saying what he did, because after the quiet moment, the subject immediately changed. Which bothered him because he truly believed, at such an intense moment with the killer creatures lingering all around, a good pick-me-up, and some lighthearted conversation was needed.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
July 28<sup>th</sup> - 10:00 a.m.

For the first time, since the first day, all eight of the investors were together at Caldwell. Joined around the meeting table on the upper level. All of them wondering why they were summoned. Especially when half of them were out of the game. And they knew, soon enough, they would get their answer when Greg walked into the meeting section.

“Good morning.” Usually about the point when Greg finished his simple introductions, the questions from the ‘I’m better than you are’ investors would fly. But not this morning. They sat silence, each of them knowing something was awry. “I guess . . . I guess all of you are wondering why the full team of investors are here. Never in the history of the Iso-Stasis has the institute asked for an investor to return. I have.” Greg paused to look at each of their faces. “You have invested not only in a game but in a project that has a forty-year precedence. A reputation of being outstanding, scientifically worthy, and compelling. The last description is why you are here . . . compelling. In every single solitary instance, from experiment one to experiment twelve, the institute remained in control. There wasn’t a single occurrence that happened that we didn’t start, and didn’t have means to ending. Even last experiment when one of the investors pulled an option, we started something incredible, but . . . as Aldo knows, no matter how out of control that part of the experiment seemed. We . . . we stopped it. Our primary goals are to provide maximum entertainment to those who invest in our cause, and give maximum scientific results to extreme testing that no other institute dares to do. We are able to do this because of you, the investors. Private funding keeps us going. From you to other institutes. Now . . .” Greg let out a breath. “The reason I called you. A situation has arisen. Aldo, Daniela, Douglass and Caruso, along with Mr. Lancing, are aware of the situation. You other three are not. This situation is *not* one we started. This situation seems to be out of our control. And possibly, it could get worse. For the past twenty four hours straight, we have been compiling our data. We have gathered results of every physical and mental endurance experiment we endeavored. And after carefully sifting through this, with great thought, we have deducted, that at this point in time, far more than any previously completed Iso-Stasis, we have enough conclusive results to deem this a viable successful experiment. And knowing this, and knowing the situation out there, we here at Caldwell would like to pull an early end to Iso-Stasis thirteen. End the experiment now, submit our results to all those who need and await them, and stamp this experiment complete. According to participant agreements, if Caldwell for any reason cuts the experiment short, the remaining participants that emerge, early or not, will be compensated per their agreements as if they stayed the entire time. Which now brings me to you, the investors,” Greg paced slowly.

"We live and breath off of what you give us. Not only for the experiments, but yearly donations. Like I said before, we provide maximum entertainment, so you can enjoy the experiment, and of course, want to come back. Caldwell feels that if our stopping this experiment early in any way will affect your decision to return, then we will not stop this experiment. We will let it entail. More so to you, the four investors who are still in this race. The game part of this has a lot to do with why you are here. We will let this continue for your game or end it early and you four can split the purse. It's up to you. The decision is in your hands." Greg moved to a stand that held a television on it. "You will make the final decision. But before you do, I would like you to watch a video tape of Lt. Col Graison. He will show a demonstration to you then explain what is going on. Watch it, talk about it and let me know. Whatever you decide, we here at Caldwell will go along with." Greg turned on the television, pushed in the tape and moved away. He paused in his exit by the door when he heard the cringing, unison moans from the investors.

"Tell me he's not. No." Watson slid in his chair.

"Oh my God Jake." Daniela commented.

"No not the kitten!" Another shrieked.

"Turn down the sound I can't take it." Lancing requested.

"Uh! Ew." Aldo cringed. "Jake, no. No. Fuck . . . Aw gees."

Greg closed his mouth with a peaceful smile and walked out.

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Greg was summoned back, and he had a hard time when he returned to the meeting level, determining the feel of the room. He asked no question. He stood before the head of the table and awaited the investors to tell him.

Not surprising, Aldo was duly appointed investor's representative. He spoke up. "After careful discussion among us, and . . ." He took a moment to shudder. "Watching that vulgar video. We decided, game or not, it has gone on enough. We'll end it with ya. Settle up once they step off the plane."

Greg's hand's gripped the table and his head lowered in relief.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 28th - 1:00 p.m.

They huddled around the one window. All but Reed, he sat on the floor, reading a book to Rickie's cocoon. And smashed together Cal, Jake, Lou and Billy all stared out with the same baffled expression on their faces.

Jake shook his head. "What the hell is he doing?"

"Trying to make it to us." Cal told him.

Lou snickered as he watched the super slow moving figure get bombard with amoebas. "Bet me he falls on the ground before he makes it to the porch."

"He might." Jake nodded in agreement. "Those things get heavy."

Billy shifted his eyes to Jake. "Aren't you gonna help him?"

"No. Are you?" Jake asked.

"No." Billy shook his head. "But you're the hero."

"No." Jake held up his finger. "A definition of hero is someone who will risk their life in a dangerous situation to save another life regardless of who or what it is. Now . . . knowing that. Am I a hero?"

Billy blinked with seriousness. "Absolutely not."

"Thank you." Jake folded his arms and watched out the window.

"But you know . . ." Lou interjected. "That definition could fit me."

"It could." Billy said. "So are you going to save him?"

"No way." Lou shook his head.

"Don't have to." Cal pointed. "He made it to the porch." She walked to the door. "Everyone grab a bucket."

Jake grunted with a twitch of his head and reached for one of the buckets of sea water. "You know what pisses me off don't you? Now, we save his ass and I have to suit up and go out and restock."

"Jake." Cal reached for the door bucket in hand. She listened for the footsteps on the porch. "He's there. On three. One, two, three." She opened the door, then all four of them at the same time, like delivering a bad birthday surprise, tossed their buckets of water out and onto the suited unidentifiable Caldwell controller.

After visually checking to make sure he was free and clear, Jake allowed him inside. And they stood around him waiting in suspense for why this worker trudged all the way for the control center, through the masses of amoebas to them.

Richard undid his head gear, lifting off the hood. "That was frightening."

"Yes very." Jake hurried him along with the wave of a hand. "Now, what's up?"

"The experiment is over." Richard explained. "Well, officially after you're off the island. Caldwell is pulling it. And as soon as possible, they're lifting you out."

Cal, quiet just backed up. Shocked at the news she heard. It was the last thing she expected. She moved to the window. "They're pulling it early?" Cal

peered at the amoebas.

Jake huffed and rolled his eyes.

Richard was confused by Jake. "We're ending it Jake. Didn't you hear me?"

"O.K." Jake tossed his hands up. "For dramatic effect, I'll go along." He gasped loudly. "My God! They're pulling it? How bad is it?"

Everyone, even Reed blasted his name. "Jake!"

"What?"

Cal shook her head. "Hello. They're ending it. You mean to tell me you *still* believe it's just another phase in the experiment?"

With Jake's 'Absolutely' everyone moaned.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
July 28th - 6:15 p.m.

“How’s it going to be done?” Aldo asked Greg the second he returned to the meeting level.

Greg dropped a folder on the table as he stood at the end. “We got together a team and we have a plan. Now the participants have voted to wait until Rickie has come out of his regeneration before they get rescued. Which is good. Airlifting that cocoon not only will take an abundance of time, but it would be tough. And we’re not going to have the room. Now here’s the plan. As soon as Rickie awakes we move on it. First chance. Two . . . air and rescue fire choppers will fly from Honolulu to our island. These only seat six, keep that in mind. And we have some surplus that has to come back. So, barring any amoebas by the center, one chopper will swing by lifting one of our controllers from the roof. Once they have him, then both choppers will dump the contents of their water tanks on to the bungalow region. Those tanks will be filled with sea water and we feel that should be enough to saturate the area, dissolve what is there and give us the time to lift them. The first chopper will land, it will take with it, Rickie, Cal, Reed, and Billy. Jake and Lou will stay behind and load what bags are going back into the second chopper. They’ll get in, the second chopper then swings by and gets the two remaining controllers and our data. We have a scientist that feels that the amoebas will eventually die out when they run out of food. When that happens, we go back and get the rest of our materials. We don’t expect complications. We’ll get our people and participants off that island and away from these things before they can do anymore damage. And will put this amoeba episode behind us.” Greg paused and took a long breath. “That is of course, as long as one of those things, doesn’t get off the island with our participants.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 30th - 8:05 a.m.

Porter smiled gloatingly holding up his long straw. “Yep. Always did have the luck of the draw.”

Richard moaned and stepped back.

Stan bobbed his head side by side speaking monotone. “Yes, you are the man.”

“Stan, Rich. Come on. You’ll fly out next. I’m sure.” Porter winked and lifted his bag. “Well, wish me luck.” he grabbed for the rungs of the ladder that led to the roof and he began to climb.

Stan turned and walked down the hall with Richard. “One, just one. Let one of those things be on that roof.”

“That’s terrible man.”

“No it’s not.”

“Yeah it is.” Richard looked back to see the hatch opening. “He owes me seventy-five bucks. And I didn’t get it yet.”

^^^

A loud grunt of disgust came from Jake when his foot slammed into one of them. He looked down to Billy’s fireboxes “You and these fuckin boxes.”

“Sorry Jake.” Billy moved them closer to the door. “This is what I’m taking. I can buy new clothes. I can’t buy proof to my story.”

Shaking his head, Jake moved to Cal. He paused to lift his eyes to the helicopter noise. “Choppers Cal. Get ready.”

“Jake.” Sadly Cal zipped a small bag. “Look, let me wait and fly out with you.”

“No.”

“Jake I have a really bad feeling about this. Really bad.”

“Cal, sweetie. I can’t take a chance of you being on this island one more second than you need to be. O.K.?”

“Why?”

“Why?” Jake smiled. “I don’t want anything to happen to you. Me staying behind, something could happen. I doubt it, but it could.”

“Then for sure I won’t go. I won’t.” Cal was adamant. “If something is going to happen then it happens to the both of us.”

Jake smiled and kissed her. “It’s not just the both of us anymore. Get ready. Because as soon as that water hits and that chopper lands, you’re on it.”

Cal didn’t say anything, because she just didn’t want to go. And her gut told her it had more to do than her dedication to staying by her husband’s side.

^^^

"There." Porter pointed for the pilot.

He wore a cap, glasses. The pilot, Lloyd, had a thick southern accent. "Holy mother of Jesus. Will you look at that." He brought the microphone to his mouth. "Benson, this is fly boy do you copy?"

"Roger that fly boy."

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing down below?"

"What the hell are they."

"My guess is our target. All right, we're gonna have to double this. Let's you and I circle around, second pass we drop what we got, You do a scan of the region, and I'll drop down and pick up the first load."

"Roger that fly Boy."

^^^

The sounds of the choppers faded then drew in close again. The releasing of tons of water upon them sounded like a tidal wave headed there way. It beat upon the roof of the bungalow so fierce, Cal covered her ears and feared that at any second, the stick of a shack they were in would crumble down.

Jake watched from the window and he smiled, watching the last of the water fall. Seeing a mist rise up as the amoebas, in the tress, on the roof and everywhere, just disappeared. "It worked." Jake turned to the awaiting group.

Reed shrieked with joy, grabbing Rickie's arm. "Es oh. Es oh." He pulled at Rickie.

"Like dude. I have to get my things. I'll meet you outside."

"Oh-ay." Reed smiled and despite Jake's warning he flew outside, splashing in the large puddles. Jumping up and down and waving to the chopper above.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

July 30th - 8:10 a.m.

Surrounded by the eight investors, Lyle and Barb, Greg wore a headset, staring at the monitor screens while he communicated with the pilots. "How's it looking guys?"

Lloyd's voice came over the speaker. "Caldwell we see an all clear below. Lots of water for safety on the ground. I'm lowering for pick up."

Greg clenched his fist amongst the investors' cheers. "Let me know wh you . . ."

"Damn it." Lloyd bitched.

"What's wrong?" Greg asked.

"My second tank didn't unload. It's stuck. We're gonna have a weight limitation happening here. What ya want me to do boss? Pull up and let Benson hang down?"

"Where is he?" Greg asked

"Circling." Lloyd answered.

"No. Let's not waste time. Pick up the boy and the woman, let Benson get the rest."

"Roger that. I'm lowering."

Greg bobbed his head in anticipation.

"Haynes." Aldo moved closer to him. "Why didn't you just let the other chopper land. We could get more in there."

"Rickie and Cal are of first importance. I can't chance waiting on the other chopper."

Lloyd came over the speaker again. "I'm down, we're opening the door. Only one . . . hey! Some Bald guy missing an ear just jumped in."

"Damn it." Greg bitched. "Can you handle the weight of the boy and the woman too. They're small."

"Yeah. Shouldn't be a problem. But where are they."

"They'll be there." Greg shifted his eyes to Cal's bungalow. She was moving to the door with Jake. "Hurry up."

Lyle's voice, loud and startling was not the one they expected to ring out in the control room. "Holy shit!" He sprang up. "Where did they come from. Dr. Haynes. The aerial."

Greg's eyes moved to the aerial shot. His hand covered the mouth piece of his headset "Oh my God."

Lyle's head swayed. "There coming in from all angles. And fast too."

Aldo watched the nervousness on Greg's face. "There's tons of water down there right? They move on the ground. This shouldn't be a problem right?"

Fast and rapid Greg's eyes moved to the unity circle, the aerial view and to Cal's bungalow where Rickie was looking at music disks in debate. "Lloyd." Greg spoke in the microphone. "Abort and pull back."

"I don't have the cargo." Lloyd said.

"Abort." Greg breathed fast, his heart raced watching the aerial view and seeing the four black clouds moving closer and closer. "Shut the damn doors, abort and pullback now! Now!"

"Haynes." Aldo called with warning. "They're leaving the bungalow."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 30th - 8:11 a.m.

"Cal, they're waiting." Jake held her arm leading her. "And they shut the door look." They stepped off the porch. "Lou bring that bag and tell Rickie to hurry."

Lou walking out with Billy, stuck his head in the door. "Rickie, the cab is waiting. I'll bring our music."

"Dude, I'm there in a second."

Shrugging, Lou pulled the door closed hitting the step of the porch just after Billy stepped down. Lou stopped. "Jake! Jake!" Over the chopper blades he heard it, The hissing, whistling and rustling.

"What the fuck!" Jake held his hands up as he watched the chopper lift. "Hey!"

"Jake! Get in!" Racing forward, Lou grabbed Billy by the arm spinning him in the run. "Get back in. They're coming. Jake!"

Jake still center of the circle with Cal, and center of hovering helicopter noise shook his head to Lou holding his ear. "What?"

Lou leaped forward, swept up Cal and turned back. Figuring if Jake couldn't see him, he certainly would realize that something was wrong if he was stealing his wife,

And Jake did. At the same moment Lou grabbed Cal, Jake not only heard it but saw it. Every tree in the woods that surrounded them shook violently. And through the shaking trees Jake saw the green of the trees turn black with amoebas. "Shit." He backed up with a splash and bolted toward the bungalow for safety. But before he reached the porch, Jake saw something happened that he didn't expect. He thought he was a goner. A cloud, thick., black and huge formed when from the trees, the amoebas flew out and joined together. They rose up high. Causing night to fall over the compound. And knowing that was an opportunity to make an escape Jake leaped for the porch, but not before seeing the cloud of amoebas lunge for the moving helicopter, completely bombard it and cover every single inch of it as the chopper careened away.

Jake slammed the door with his body as he made it inside. Leaning against the door ignoring the voices of Cal, Rickie, Billy and Lou. Jake closed his eyes. He breathed heavily, his heart raced and he knew what was going to happen next. And Jake did not think wrong.

Boom! The crashing and exploding of the rescuing helicopter was so violent it shook and vibrated the bungalow causing them to not only lose their footing as if an earthquake had hit, but worse. The explosion caused the shattering of the two windows in the main room and also in the bathroom.

Crash-crash-crash. Cal held her head as she ducked the flying glass and Jake lunged forward ordering out, pulling out the first dresser drawer he passed in his run. "Lou, Rickie, grab and dump a drawer. Cover these windows! Billy, Cal,

hammer and nails in the closet. Get them now!” Jake dumped the drawer and slammed it against the window behind the bed.

Lou grabbed a drawer and ran to the front window, while Rickie brought one to the bathroom. They breathed a sigh of relief, holding the drawers to the windows, sealing off the outside world. Grateful for the smallness of the windows. They had made it, and just in a nick of time. Because it wasn’t long after Rickie banged his drawer up against the window, that the amoebas attacked loudly, in full force and with mighty vengeance down upon the bungalow.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

July 30th - 9:15 a.m.

"Lloyd, abort and pull back." Greg's voice played over the speaker.

"I don't have the cargo."

"Abort. Shut the damn doors, abort and pullback now! Now!"

"Doors closed and we are aborting the rescue."

Silence came over the airways before Lloyd in near panic called out.

"What the . . . holy mother of God."

"What's happening . . . Lyle pull them up. Let me see. Lloyd what's going on."

"Covered. I can't see."

"Can you make it to the ocean."

"I can't see. The weight is . . ."

Reed's scream carried over.

"Oh God, they're coming in the vents. Their just pouring . . ."

Lloyd's painful scream entailed followed by silence then finally . . . static.

With a painful expression Greg turned to face the eight investors who watched the botched rescue attempt over and over. Looking totally worn out, Greg began to leave the room.

"Haynes." Aldo stepped to him. "Are you sending the second chopper back."

Greg stopped walking. "No. He's in Honolulu and that's where he'll stay."

"But you can't leave them there." Aldo followed him. "You saw all those things."

"I did. And *you* saw how far they can jump up. I can not take a chance on another rescue mission. Sending a chopper over there, having them clear the way only to have more jump out of no where. They're all over that island, Aldo."

"What about a sea rescue." Aldo pursued. "Have our people suited up and head into the ocean. Pick them up there."

"Can't do it. If the amoebas don't get them, the sharks will."

"How can you be so sure about that." Aldo asked.

"Because we infested those waters. We had dumped food there for a period of time to keep those sharks there and now they're staying."

"Christ." Aldo was taken aback. "You cut off the only viable escape route."

Greg began to get upset, he stepped forward to Aldo with an angry vengeance. "You think I would have done so had I known about these amoebas? No. We tried to get them off that island. We failed."

"Try again." Aldo insisted.

"We can't."

"Fuck Haynes, those are human beings on that island. And with them, some monstrosity of nature."

"That's right." Greg tilted his head. "And I'm beginning to think the best

way to ensure that those monstrosities of nature as you called them stay on that island, is to just take no chance of picking them up when we pick up our people.”

Aldo stammered some in shock. “You’re . . . you’re just gonna leave them there?”

“Until we find an operable means of destroying those amoebas. Sorry. Our participants have to stay right where they are.” Taking a short breath, and closing his eyes briefly, Greg, turned away from Aldo and left the room before anymore could be said.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 30th - 6:00 p.m.

Day or night. If those in the bungalow didn't look at their watches they wouldn't have a clue what it was. Boarded up inside, the fresh air they only got a tease of, seemed like a moment that would have to last them a really long time.

But even pinned up in small quarters, Jake and Cal found even smaller quarters to just sit and talk. They needed time alone. Time they hadn't had in a while. Laying on the closet floor, each on their sides facing each other. They just talked.

The sound of a loud single, Rickie moan seeped through the shut door. Jake looked at the door then back to Cal. "As I was saying . . . no."

"You really don't think?" Cal asked him.

"No. Cal, please, these amoebas, yeah they're out there. But they can't get in here. Now those Stasis could."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. But this is lasting a lot longer."

"Nope. Think about it. December, January and part of February last experiment. Same amount of time."

"Not constant like this." Cal held up a hand.

"True. But are these things really constant? They're just hanging out waiting to eat. They'll move on."

"Or according to your theory, be gone by the end of this experiment."

"Exactly." Jake nodded.

"Jake? Let me ask you a question."

"Shoot."

"Do you think . . ." Cal paused when another Rickie moan flowed through. She shrugged. "Do you think I'm dead weight now?"

"Why would you even ask me that?"

"Because I'm not as agile or quick as you're used to me being."

"Cal. No way. When you're nine months pregnant you'll still be able to hold you're own better than anyone I know. Kick any beasts ass."

"You say the sweetest things." Cal smiled.

"Thanks. And you know I love a challenge. So do you. And this pregnancy during this experiment has added that extra challenge."

"It's still been a piece of cake."

"Yeah it has. Even the pregnancy, except for the complication has been easy. I just wished you got to do this at home. You know, in comfort. If you're sick, you throw up in a nice bathroom."

Cal laughed, then turned her head to the door. Rickie moaned again.

"Rickie!" Jake yelled. "What?"

"Sarge, like I am so bummed. I need some family time."

"Jake." Cal spoke softly as she sat up. "Let him in."

"Cal, it's closet. We're cramped in here as it . . ." He cringed at another

moan. "Rickie, all right. Come in."

The door opened and Rickie scooted inside. "Thanks." he sat next to Cal. "It's cool in here."

"Rickie, it's small." Jake told him.

"Sorry. But like, you guys won't come out and I'm really bummed. Like my friend is gone. I feel so bad about it."

Cal ran her hand down the back of Rickie's head. "I'm sorry Rickie. And just so you know, he never left your side the whole time you regenerated."

"Rickie." Jake drew his attention. "Sometimes we lose people in our lives. People that we care about, that are important. People that we'll really miss once they're gone and they leave this . . . this hollow feeling in you. You understand what I'm saying." He watched Rickie nod. "Good, now knowing that, keep this in mind. Reed was not one of those people."

"Jake!" Cal shrieked at him.

"Cal, what?" Jake held up his hand. "Rickie knew coming in to the experiment everyone but me and you was going to die. He should have been prepared."

"Rickie ignore him" Cal's voice was soothing. "If you want to feel bad You feel bad. If you want to talk about Reed, talk about him."

"Cal-babe, like I would like to talk about him. Can I?" Taking Cal's nod as an answer and ignoring Jake's rolling eyes, Rickie talked. "I just think it's like so unfair the way he died. I mean the dude was like The Iso-Stasis equivalent to South Park's Kenny. He like went through all this shit only to die going home. And I feel bad cause like the guy had a hard life. Kicked and scratched his way out of his Little Orphan Annie life. Abused as a teenager in a boys home. Wrongly sentenced to jail for a crime his buddy committed and later confessed to. Went into serious debt to bail out the woman he loved only to have her leave him for another woman. What else, yeah. He got his modeling break, the first one ever right, and what happens. He comes here and loses all his looks. But the dude trudged on. He kept his spirits up. I'm so bummed." Rickie's head hung low.

Jake actually felt a twinge of bad. "Rickie, I had no idea Reed had such a hard life."

"Me either." Cal said. "That really made his death even worse."

"It did, didn't it?" Rickie raised his head. "Too bad none of it was true. But you have to admit. It sounded good though."

Jake groaned. And bummed out or not, it didn't take long for Jake to eject Rickie right back out of that closet and return to having his private conversation with Cal.

Set up in the corner that used to be Rickie's cocoon spot, Billy sat with his laptop. It perched on a beer case, Billy's little desk. And with his fingers tapping,

Billy was oblivious to all that went on around him. He worked on his sanity, one of the things that kept him going. His writing. *'I keep hearing Jake's voice in my mind telling me that this is just the last phase of the experiment. And that miraculously in a months time all the amoebas will somehow disappear and we will be lifted from this island. A part of me doubts it. Sometimes I wonder if Jake sees what I see. The carpet of slimy creatures that blanket us, hover us and wait to devour us. But I suppose we are safe in here. Locked away. We have food, water and that is enough. My mind stays focused on my writing. And when I feel like being trapped in here is too much for me to handle, I remind myself of the great writers of the world who deliberately locked themselves away. And I pretend I am them. Like Hemingway, who rented an attic in Europe. Slept with prostitutes and drank so much while he wrote that he . . .'*' Billy stopped writing and scratched his head, speaking his thoughts out loud. "Wait a second. Hemingway killed himself. Bad choice Bill. Bad choice." With a press of the button, Billy held down until some of his words disappeared and he began to write again. Finding better words to put on his screen. *' . . . And I pretend I am them. Finding great solitude in seclusion. Using my mind as an adventure and taking that adventure to emerge with one of the greatest stories ever written.'* Billy stopped and smiled. "Better."

CHAPTER EIGHTY

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
July 31st - 2:25 p.m.

Greg's head swayed quickly, shifting his eyes to Aldo. "You must be mistaken."

"No Haynes, I'm not. You have to see it."

"Aldo." Greg nearly laughed at him. "There's no way."

"Damn it I'm telling you." Aldo argued.

Daniela stepped forward. "Could he be wrong?"

"No." Aldo shook his head. "I know what I watched."

"O.K." Greg held up his hand. "I am not doubting what you watched. I'm doubting what you're making out of it."

"See for yourself. I was working in my room and my eyes caught the news. This network repeats the news every hour. The story is coming up."

"All right." Greg tossed his hand up. "I'll watch it. Barb give me some volume." Greg tapped her on the shoulder and moved his eyes to the far right screen. The Central News Network was printed in the corner of the screen, and a female anchor woman dressed in red stared at the camera. Greg and the other investors, all of them, watched.

". . . with the president's arrival." She switched papers and camera angels. "Psychic Mary Helmsman is in the news again. Arrested for the fourth time this week, this time in Houston for stopping traffic, and urging people to repent, the end is near."

Greg laughed loudly. "Is that it?"

"No." Aldo pointed. "This is."

To the right of the newscaster's head a murder insignia appeared with the word gang across it. "In other news, authorities in Honolulu are investigating what they are calling a very bizarre gang type slaying. The unidentifiable remains of three victims were found near the property edge of Lexington airfield. The victims believed to be killed with some sort of acid, were found outside a vehicle registered to Sebastian Ferraro. Though Mr. Ferraro is said to be linked to organized crime it is not known at this time whether his remains were one of the three at the scene . . . The pope visited England today in a historic . . ."

Greg slowly turned around to the eight investors. "It has to be a coincidence. It has to be."

"Acid Haynes." Aldo said. "You know what those amoebas do. Honolulu. Coincidence?"

"Yes."

"No." Strong and loud, Dr. Jefferson's voice rang in the room. "It isn't and you know it."

Greg shifted his views to Dr. Jefferson. "What are you doing . . ."

"Here?" Dr. Jefferson laughed. "How long did you think you could hide this from me Haynes. Keep me medicated and locked in my room? Overwhelmed with the flu and unable to be disturbed."

"Dr. Jefferson I don't know what you're talking about." Greg defended.

"Bullshit." Dr. Jefferson in almost a taunt walked down the steps of the control room and straight to Haynes. "I thought . . . I thought at first when Paul died and the animals that somehow it couldn't be. But it was. Wasn't it?"

Greg didn't answer. He was silent, as were the eight investors.

"I kept telling myself. No. It wasn't possible. You assured me. You Dr. Haynes said no. I asked you when you purchased Carrington to let me know if you found them. I told you Carrington and I created that batch and put it to rest over thirty years ago on that island. And you said . . . no. None were found." Dr. Jefferson stepped closer. "And what else did I ask you. Remember?"

Greg swallowed. "If any arise, or were found, to let you know."

"Exactly." More mean than ever heard was in Dr. Jefferson's voice. His eyes straight on Greg, His face red. "And why was that. I'll tell you why. I'll tell all of you why. Because I knew, I knew then and I know now, they could get so far out of control, there may not be a way to stop them. Out of control Haynes. And you know damn well what the hell just happened in Honolulu. Honolulu? We're not talking about an isolation experiment anymore. We're talking about civilization. Ways to spread. Why in God's name you would hold this from me, keep me in the dark on purpose is beyond me, when I am the only person on the face of the earth with knowledge to stop these things cold."

A mumble of excited voices emerged from the investors.

Lancing's was the loudest. "Dr. Jefferson, you can stop these things."

"Yes." He stated firmly. "And we have to now. If they are loose in Honolulu, we have to get them now or there may not *ever* be a way to stop them. But before I do, you tell me right now Haynes. Right now. Did you . . . find them on the island." Dr. Jefferson faced off with Greg who didn't answer. "Did you!" He screamed in demand.

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Three . . ." Greg swallowed. "In a freezer."

"And you released them on purpose."

"We just thought . . ."

"Why!" Dr. Jefferson grabbed hold of Greg's shirt shaking him. "What the hell is the matter with you!" He shook him more. "What was going through your mind!" His hand trembled as he clenched Greg so tight and ignored the pulls of the investors. "Do you realize what you may have done. Do you even realize that right now, even with my knowledge, it may be too late. Do . . .do . . ." His words slowed and his hands released Greg. "You." He grunted loudly, hunching forward. Suddenly Dr. Jefferson's face turned beet red and he grabbed for his own chest, cringing in pain and stepping back. "God help us all." With a sway to his side he

fell into a table. The weight of his falling body, caused the table to break and the table and Dr. Jefferson crashed to the floor.

Greg broke through the investors who immediately surrounded him. He reached down to a still Dr. Jefferson feeling his neck.. “Oh my God.” He turned him on his back. “Everyone move back!” Greg screamed out as he opened Dr. Jefferson’s shirt. “Barb! Get medical in here hurry!” He leaned down to him. He listened for a breath that did not emerge. And despite the lost attempts of finding any signs of life, Greg began to try his hardest to revive and help a downed and motionless Dr. Jefferson.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

July 31st - 7:45 p.m.

They sat on the floor, the three of them, before Rickie. From left to right, smallest to biggest. With Rickie's bad sense of humor placing Cal in the middle. And Rickie sat Indian style before them. He spoke Rickie-style, but he also added a monotone effect. "It's time to play, win Rickie-Meister's money."

"No it's not." Jake yelled from the bed. "I'm trying to sleep. Remember Rickie, I don't sleep when you do."

"Yeah so." Rickie said.

"So, no playing games." Jake demanded laying on the bed.

"Is that your final order sarge?"

"Yes."

"O.K." Rickie shuffled some and faced Cal, Billy and Lou again. "It's time to play win Rickie-Meister's money." He laughed at Jake's grunt. "The rules are simple. I'm putting up my money for you to win to say I'm smarter than all of you. Or at least to say you can't figure out how my mind works. So like for every question you get right, I'll give you one hundred dollars of my Iso-Stasis pay of 64,200."

"Wait." Lou held up his hand. "Why are you only getting sixty-four thousand? I'm getting a hundred grand."

"Dude like, I work for the toot. I get three hundred a day."

"That sucks." Lou stated.

"No way guy. It's like the cool rate of pay. The only downfall is I only get that when I'm working for the toot. Otherwise I earn like, minimum wage working at Burger King."

"That sucks." Lou repeated. "Only sixty four thousand?"

"I can top that." Billy interjected. "Guess how much I make for being here?"

"How much?" Lou asked.

"Nothing. I'm not a participant."

"Now *that* sucks." Lou nodded.

"O.K." Rickie held up his hand. "Can we like play my game now?"

"No!" Jake yelled.

"Sarge like, if you wanna sleep go in the closet guy. No wait." Rickie snickered. "If you do that, then you'll have to eventually come out of the closet and like you've been avoiding that for a while."

"Rickie!" Jake yelled.

"We'll be quiet." Rickie grabbed his question notebook. "O.K., I give you hundred bucks if you answer the question figuring out how my mind works. But, like I take it back if you guess wrong. Now, since we have no handy dandy hand held objects that can interfere, I will assign each of you a sound. When you know the answer make that sound and whatever sound I hear first. I'll call on that person. Billy, you're buzz. Cal-babe, you're ding. And Lou-ster, you're Yo. Got

it. Let me hear.”

“Wait.” Billy held up his hand. “Am ding or dong.”

“Dude, you’re like buzz.”

“I’m buzz.” Cal said.

“No you’re ding. Billy’s buzz and Lou’s yo. Everyone try it.”

“Buzz.”

“Ding.”

“Dong.”

“Wrong.” Rickie shook his head. “Like, Lou, you’re yo. Get it right guy or I’ll not call on you even if you make the only sound. Do it again.”

“Buzz.”

“Ding.”

“Yo.”

“Fuck!” Jake yelled.

“Sarge, are you like wanting to play?”

“No!” Jake answered.

“Then quit rehearsing with us guy.” Rickie shook his head. “All right, first question.” He looked to his notebook. “Easy one. Name the capitol of the United states.”

“Buzz.”

“Yo.”

“Ding.”

“Fuck.”

“Billy, your answer.” Rickie pointed.

“Washington DC.”

“Wrong. Rickie mind guy, don’t forget, like would I make the tribute to Greek mythology city the capitol. Now way. Cal or Lou either of you want to try.”

“Vegas?” Cal asked.

“Nope. Lou?”

“New York.”

“Wrong.” Rickie chuckled. “Hollywood guys, they rule with movies there. Next question. How can you tell if a pair of underwear is clean or dirty.”

“Buzz.”

“Ding.”

“Yo.”

“Fuck.”

Rickie gasped. “Sarge, you aren’t playing. Billy, you again.”

“Smell them?” Billy guessed.

Rickie cringed. “Oh guy that’s like gross. Do I look like the type of dude to sniff my drawers. No. Cal-babe, Lou?”

Cal and Lou looked at each other, each of them wanting the other to make a fool out of themselves first.

“No one?” Rickie scratched off the question. “The answer to that one is.

When in doubt, toss them out . . . in the laundry. Question three. And guess what I'm not losing." Rickie snickered. "Oh, I like this one. Decipher this popular quote spoken in Reed-ESE." Rickie readied himself. "Er uh a ed-er, aw ew ed-er."

"Yo."

"Buzz."

"Ding."

Silence. And everyone turned to the bed.

Rickie shrugged. "Guess Sarge doesn't know it. Lou-ster?"

"For hot bad weather wear a sweater?"

"Close but no. Billy? Cal?"

Billy tried. "Herds are much better for true leather?"

"Nope. Cal-babe?"

"Fir up the bed or jot two letters."

"Oh! Oh! That is so close, but no. And like how come I never heard of those quotes before?" Rickie scratched his head. "Anyway, the quote was, Birds of a feather flock together. Next mind baffling question. In the scary movie Halloween. What was the name of the creepy slimy guy?"

"Buzz."

"Yo."

"Ding."

"Fuck."

"Ding Rickie Ding!" Cal waved her hand. "I know this. Please. Ding!"

"I believe I heard the ding sound first from my mom. Cal-babe." Rickie pointed to her while Billy and Lou moaned. "Go on."

"Michael Meyers." Cal proudly guessed.

"Wrong."

"Wrong?" Cal looked in wonder. "No Rickie, that's right."

Billy pointed to Cal. "She's right Rickie. It was Michael."

"Rickie." Lou added. "It was Michael, I loved that movie."

"So did I dude, but that answers wrong." He hunched when they all screamed at him.

Jake didn't hunch, he burned up. "Christ!" He shouted and sat up. "It's Rickie's mind. Come on Cal, think like him. Creepy Slimy., Rickie's not gonna think the murderer is slimy, not when he's a monster. Donald Pleasance is who Rickie will say."

"Sarge!" Rickie cheered his name. "You are absolutely correct-a-Mundo."

"See." Jake walked over and sat on the floor. "And you people are pathetic."

"Sarge, are like you going to play?" Rickie asked.

"No Rickie, I'm *like* going to win. Go on." Jake waved him on.

"O.K. You need a sound."

"I have one. 'Fuck'."

"Cool. That'll work." Rickie bobbed his head, turned a page in his notebook, and continued to pound them with time passing questions of the Win Rickie-

Meister's money game.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
July 31st - 9:00 p.m.

The eight investors had crowded in the lounge, sipping on old coffee and waiting patiently for Greg to return from Cedars of Sinai Hospital. There was no word at all in the last seven hours of the former director they had all come to know. Tension was high all over the center. The workers were all on edge. Observing monitors were arguing, and one of them even walked off their shift and out of the building. The second of six to quit.

They all stood up when Greg turned the bend into the lounge. All of them wanting to rush him and ask him question. But they knew they would get their answers. All of them hoping that the long length of time it took for Greg to return was time spent on saving Dr. Jefferson.

"I was told you'd be here." Greg stated. "I thought . . . I thought you'd be in the control room. But I'm glad you're all still around." Greg's head dropped, He kept his hands in the front pocket of his dress pants, his button down shirt out of his pants and hanging. "They brought him back and were able to get his heart beating. But . . ." Greg's voice cracked. "They couldn't keep it that way. They tried for hours, but unfortunately, Dr. Jefferson didn't make it." Greg closed his eyes. "I'm sorry. And I need to get to my office. I'll speak to you all later." Slowly he turned in the lounge and moved to the door.

"Wait." Aldo rushed to him. "Look, we all know this is a terrible thing that happened to Jefferson. We liked him. But there's another issue at hand Haynes. The amoebas. Dr. Jefferson knew how to destroy them. Do you know where his notes are."

"Yes I do" Greg answered and heard the huffing breaths of relief come from all of them. "He had them safely tucked away for no one to find. And no one ever will. Unfortunately for all of us, the secret of how to beat the amoebas . . . left this world when Dr. Jefferson did."

CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 2nd - 11:17 a.m.

The storage closet was thin and long, adjacent to the large recreation room complete with pinball machine, two tables, a juke box, a couch and other recreational relaxing things. Handy, near center of the building, that storage closet was a secondary storage place. Because of its easy access, things during the past five months were moved from the main storage area of the control building to there.

Packed it was, from floor to ceiling. Stan couldn't recall ever seeing it so jammed with stuff. He recalled other fond memories of that closet. That quaint little incident he had in there with that red head lab assistant Sherrie when they were setting up the control center. And the day they all were in the closet, tears in their eyes, watching Ollie's cat give birth to the kittens. Kittens whose lives were abruptly and violently cut short by Jake.

"Touch it." Stan told Richard. "I'm telling you it is."

"No. It just looks like it."

"Touch it." Stan nodded. "We can test it."

Richard reached out his finger tips and laid them on Stan's forehead. He pulled them away rubbing. "Moisture. You're right."

"Yep. Perspiration. Can you believe that. I broke a sweat."

"We've been working hard."

"And we aren't done yet." Stan wiped his hand over his head and cringed. "I thought sweating was a puberty thing for me. It's been years."

"It's not sweat." Richard corrected. "You are perspiring. Fine men like ourselves don't sweat."

"True. And I hope it stops."

"Possibly when we're done."

"Possibly."

"Let's go." Richard walked from the closet with Stan. "We'll get this done and then we're off to do the action hero stuff."

Stan stopped walking. "Is it really action hero stuff. Doesn't it have to be for unselfish means?"

"It does." Richard took a moment to think. "We can say it is."

"I'll go along with that."

"Let's finish up."

"Let's." Stan followed Richard down the hall.

^^^

Cal pounded twice on the door. "Jake. Please!" she called out long and

whiney.

“Cal.” He snapped back. “What do you want me do?”

“Hurry.”

“I just got in here.”

“Hurry.”

“Cal.” Jake snapped again. “I asked you before I went in here if you needed to get in here first. You said no.”

“Then the babies shifted Jake and the pressure hit.” Cal complained. “You know what I’m like.”

“Yes I do and that’s why I asked you first. Now can I help it you have to pee thirty million fuckin times a day.”

“Oh my God!” Cal gasped a yell. “I’m pregnant.”

“Well blame Billy for that one.”

“I will.”

“Thank you.”

“And hurry.”

Jake snarled loudly at her.

Lou saw Cal, arms folded walking around the bed. “Cal. Please. Don’t. O.K.?”

“Don’t what?” Cal asked him.

“Just . . . Shh. No bitching today.”

“Oh that’s easy for you to say.” Cal’s voice raised. “You were the one who whipped out his penis and pissed in a bottle when Rickie was in the bathroom for twenty minutes.”

“He did what!” Jake blasted from the bathroom.

“Whipped out his penis and took a leak Jake. You were sleeping.”

“Lou.”

“I had to go.” Lou defended.

“And so do I!” Cal yelled. “Hurry Jake.”

“All right!”

“I can’t take it.” Cal ran her fingers through her hair. “Stuck in a room. Yes. In a room with four men who *don’t* know how to use a bathroom quickly!”

“Cal-babe.” Rickie was the calm one. “Just take one of the buckets in the closet and go.”

“Then what Rickie?” Cal snapped at him. “Trot out of the closet like I’m little red fuckin riding hood with my bucket of urine.”

“Well . . . yeah.” He snickered. “That was funny.”

Cal grunted, folded her arms and continued walking to Billy. His fingers moved fast on the lap top. “You aren’t saying anything.” She told him.

“General fear of you at this moment has made me silent.”

Cal was getting ready in her ‘really having to go’ miserable phase. But she stopped when she looked down to Billy and really saw him. Hair messed up. Focus forward, face pale. “Billy?”

"You aren't gonna yell Are you. I'm sorry it's my fault you have to pee so bad."

"No." She shook her head and lowered to the floor. "Are you all right?" She asked him softly.

"Why?"

"You don't look all right."

Billy stopped typing. He looked to see Rickie and Lou then scooted closer to Cal. "No. I'm not."

"What's wrong?"

"Cal. I'm stuck in this room. We've been in this room for eleven days."

"Billy, it's a mental endurance experiment."

"I'm scared right now of how much I'll be able to endure." Billy scratched the top of his head frantically. "I'm afraid not much more."

"Me either."

"Really."

"Yeah." She tilted her head back and screamed her loudest. "If someone doesn't hurry up in that bathroom!"

"Oh for sure I'm not coming out." Jake blasted back. "Hold it."

Cal grumbled and looked at Billy who swayed his head with a chuckle. "You'll be fine." She laid her hand on his knee. "Trust me. And I won't let this experiment drive you nuts."

"Promise me that." Billy requested with passion. "Promise me."

Cal leaned her face closer to his. "I promise you. Besides, why would I let the experiment take that pleasure away from me." She smiled when Billy did and turned her head to the sound of the bathroom door open. "And right now, you've just be saved a round of Cal torture. Boost me up."

Shuffling his hand under her backside, Billy gave a Cal a push helping her spring to her feet. Feeling a little better, not much, Billy returned to where he was before. In front of his lap top in what he started to call, his Hemingway Corner.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
August 2nd - 1:10 p.m.

The noise level was 'New York stock exchange' loud, on the meeting level of the control room. They had divided up the table, each using a section to do their own thing. Though a lot of the times the investors worked from the Caldwell quarters, all them at that moment were in the control room, not wanting to take a chance on missing the cabin fever antics of the five trapped in the bungalow.

All but two investors had a laptop. Ivan didn't need one, he used the phone to reschedule his plastic surgery patients or refer them to another doctor. Caruso, ran his business but he didn't need a computer, he was the vocal master, only paged or called when needed. Daniela didn't need a computer either but he had one there, using idle time to master his skills in the newest version of *Doom*. Of course his video game obsession secured his title 'the kid' of the investors.

Greg cleared his throat three times before he got the attention of the investors. There was silence and a final gunshot from Daniela's game. "Thank you." Greg smiled when they all looked at him. "There's someone I need for you to meet. You'll be getting quite used to him hanging about. He's going to be helping us. Through my connection at NASA we found him and got him to agree to this. He was the top graduate of his class at MIT in biology and, he's our hope." Greg reached behind him and open the door. "Dr. Colin Whitney."

He looked like a grown up version of the kid in school everyone made fun of. The smart kid who was never rich and never dressed well because his family couldn't afford it. Though he dressed better, clearly you could see the past written all over Colin Whitney's appearance. Not too thin nor tall, average in build. He wore tan dress pants and a button down shirt with a blue tie. The pocket protector he wore had NASA written in the left hand corner. Most likely a souvenir he was so proud of. He tried to better his looks, you could see the attempt by the way he tried to part his very short cropped dark hair. With a good face on him, Aldo would describe Colin as the type of man that if he just had a crash fashion course he probably could get any broad he wanted.

Colin carried a thick abundance of charts, papers stuck out the sides of folders. He smiled a nervous smile as he approached the investors. "Quite . . . quite the introduction. Nice to meet you gentlemen." A twinge of English accent graced his voice. Just a twinge.

After tapping his bottom lip and peering at the investors through the top of his eyes, Greg pointed to Colin. "Dr. Whitney has been working for Her Majesty's Army for three years now. We were lucky to steal him away."

Colin set down everything he held in his arms on the table. "This is what Dr. Haynes gave me when I arrived this morning. As you can see, it's a lot. And I've not the time yet to go through every single sheet. But I will, hopefully by this days end, I will know some more about our amoeba situation. I've viewed some video documentation that Dr. Haynes has shown me. And I must tell you, if I were to

rate the situation, I would have to level it serious to grave.” He heard the moans, soft but there. “That’s not to say rectification can not be achieved. Never give up hope. As far as the Honolulu incidents. Right now I am awaiting word from the County coroner as to whether or not he has found protoplasm in the remains of those victims.” With his middle finger he pushed up his glasses. “My first move though is one that I feel should have been done earlier. But after being told the circumstances of your experiment, I understood why not. It’s not a scientific move, as I’ve said, I’ve not yet read all of the material. The Amoebas have gathered in one area of the island. The amoebas that have surfaced that is. And like glue they are sticking there. Where? The hut region. And that is because we have five people grouped in one small area.”

Aldo let out a loud , ‘a-ha!’ holding his fist high. “And I’m no goddamn scientist. I told you that Haynes. They smell them.”

Greg just raised his eyebrows.

Colin continued. “This gentleman is semi correct. Not that the amoebas smell them, they sense them. We want to throw them off a bit. Right now as we speak, the two remaining controllers are fetching those participants and helping them move to the main building.” Colin felt as if he were in a room full of first graders. Seeing all the investors quickly turn their chairs to check out the monitor screens. Watching Cal, Jake and the others packing things up. “Our controller have brought them suits to protect them through the walk to the main building. It is our hope. It is our hope . . . gentlemen could you please return to your seats.” He waited until they did. “Thank you. It is our hope to divert the scent, therefore causing the amoebas to not gather so strongly in one area. Hopefully making a future rescue attempt possible. Tomorrow we will begin a testing of height and distance. Try to determine how far up and out our amoebas can jump. Fingers are crossed that this is successful. We’ll need this data for rescuing plans. And finally, the second reason we are moving the participants. Whether or not the Honolulu deaths prove to be our amoebas, we have to now consider their destruction. Letting them die out is not an option. They’ll multiply with everything they consume on that island, Trees, vegetation, wildlife. They do not consume the bills of amphibians. Though unlikely, we must consider it a possibility that one may attach itself to a bird and fly off to a neighboring island or boat. Our first line of defense is our participants on that island. They are there. And we would not be favoring ourselves should we render them mentally incapacitated by locking them in a room and well, driving them nuts.”

Ivan raised his hand. “You mentioned earlier something about, the amoebas that have surfaced. Do you think they’re hiding?”

“Hiding?” Colin shook his head. “No. Nesting. Like the cockroach, they are somewhere we can not see.”

Watson was the next person to raise his hand. “But don’t they need to eat to multiply?”

“They’re asexual they need no mates to multiply, nor do they need consume

to multiply. My guess is that these are mutations of ingesting your stasis as Dr. Haynes told me. Like the stasis regenerates, the amoebas do also. Only like the earth worm, they can divide and become two. And what has made matters worse, if my theory is correct, the mutated amoebas mutated more when they consumed the stasis animals.”

Aldo took his turn in questioning. “So in order to destroy them all, you have to not only kill the ones we see, but the ones we don’t’. Draw *them* out correct?”

“Correct.”

“You’ll have to get the nest too, right?” Aldo asked.

“Correct.”

“How?” Another Aldo question came at Colin.

“We’re currently working on ideas.”

Aldo let out a long breath. “One more question.” He gave a cold stare to Douglass who huffed in wanting to ask *his* question. “Shut up.” Aldo snapped at him then pleasantly looked back to Colin. “So let me get this right. The game plan right now is not only to get our people off the island, but to use our people *first* to help you beat the amoebas.”

“Correct.” Colin nodded.

Aldo’s hand quickly covered Douglass mouth. “So what happens if we do this and succeed, but find out that the amoebas indeed have broken the perimeter and are lose somewhere else.”

Such a dramatic pause Colin took in responding to Aldo, looking over his shoulder to the wall of monitors. “If that happens, and our amoebas show up in civilization, then take good look at those screens gentleman. Because you could very well be looking at the next inhabitants of our planet earth.”

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 2nd - 2:45 p.m.

"I have an announcement." Cal shouted out walking into the recreation room, the home for all of them now. "There is a ladies room next door. I better not find a single one of you in there." She nodded and walked over to Jake who had set their stuff up in the farthest corner. "Home?"

"I guess for the next month it is." Jake stood up straight. "It's better than being in that bungalow with everyone." He looked around the large room. Like a military barracks, everyone had taken a space, but there still was plenty. The furnishings and games were moved to their own corner where Rickie was already taking advantage of that.

"We're still gonna have to sneak off somewhere to be . . . intimate." Cal said.

"At least we can now." Jake kissed her. "Now, I have a favor."

"What's that."

"As much as this pains me to ask you, while I'm working with Stan on those amoebas we got, I want you to distract Billy."

Cal looked curiously at him. "You don't want him to know you're working on amoebas?"

"Cal." Jake closed his eyes. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that. No. I want you to get him away from that laptop."

"Why?" Cal looked at Billy who was setting up. "He's working on his novel. Jake, this is gonna be his big break."

"Oh yeah, it's gonna be his big break all right. Get him off that lap top and doing something else. Got that?"

"I'm not understanding."

"All right. Let me explain. In the bungalow. It was fine. I thought . . . well I thought it was his way to shut us out. But he's getting right back into it in this large room. Rickie and Lou are occupying themselves."

"So is Billy."

"Cal." Jake laid his hands on her shoulder. "The first sign of mental strain is obsessive behavior. I've witnessed it in the field. Some men would clean their weapons obsessively to the point if you disturbed them they'd freak. Billy is getting so obsessive about escaping into his writing world, I'm afraid to read what he's written in fear of seeing nothing but, 'all work and no play makes Billy a dull boy'."

Cal laughed.

"Cal, it's not funny. We're stuck in here. That's your friend. I'll be occupied, you occupy yourself with him. Got that?"

"Yes."

"Good. Everyday, break his monotony."

"Got it."

“I’ll be one floor above you.” Jake kissed her on the cheek. “Go now.” He pointed to Billy then backed up. “And no erections.”

With a sneaky ornery grin, Cal slowly raised a thumbs up to Jake. Jake shook his head with a chuckle and walked out.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

August 2nd - 8:40 p.m.

Every one of the investors called them the 'poor persons party ware', except for Aldo, he called those short, clear plastic drink cups economically brilliant because they save on money you would have otherwise had to dish out for someone to wash glasses.

But all of them sipped from them, drinking fine bourbon in Aldo's room. Cramped in there like the participants were in the bungalows. Secretly, they gathered, holding a meeting of their own. Not that they had to hide, but it made it more exciting.

"All right what's left?" Aldo asked, taking a sip as he lay on his side on the bed.

"Switzerland and the island off St. Thomas." Daniela looked at the papers.

"I still say the house in Switzerland." Aldo stated.

Watson shook his head. "It's secluded in the mountains yes, but it's still a lot closer to civilization than that island."

"But it's cold." Aldo held up his finger. "What did Whitney say? The lower the temperature, the slower they get. They can be frozen. I say Switzerland." He waited, no one agreed. "Gentlemen we have to be all for or none of this or nothing. We can't go separate ways. We have to work together. Look where our participants are now? An island. And what's happening there. Huh?" He watched them all nod. "So will it be Switzerland?"

Mumbling their responses everyone agreed.

"Good." Aldo sat up. "Lancing, since that is your home, you hire a staff to make preparations there. We'll all have to do our parts to stock that place. And we'll all have our pilots on standby to move our families out on a moments notice."

"Shouldn't we do this now?" Daniela asked.

"No." Aldo shook his head. "Let's wait and see what happens. We need time to get things ready there anyhow. When we move our families we don't want them to panic and we don't want to do it if things start to go crazy. We have front row seats here. We'll be able to judge."

Lancing sat on the edge of the bed. "Shouldn't we be going with them."

"You can go if you want." Aldo said. "I'm not. I don't want to be sitting cozy wondering what the hell is going on. Hearing the media sugar coat it. No, I want to know exactly what is happening every second. And the only way to do that is to stay here until we no longer can."

"Then I'm staying too." Douglass stated. "As long as I know my family is safe."

"Me too." Ivan stated. "I'll stay with you. Sweat it out too. Hey, this is our third experiment right?"

Aldo looked up to Daniela. "You?"

Daniela tossed his hands up. "What the hell. Since I think your daughter is cute and want to be in your good graces should this world end, I'm in."

After grunting at him, Aldo looked at the others. "You guys?"

It took a moment, but Lancing, Watson, Caruso, and George agreed.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 2nd - 9:30 p.m.

Music played, echoing in the hollow large room. Some cross over country song filling the air along with Rickie cheers.

“Yes!” Rickie jumped up. “Tic Tac toe, three in a row.”

Lou swayed his head. “Unbelievable.”

“Clear the board guy.”

Lou set down his homemade bean bags, socks stuffed with rice and walked over to the Coke Machine. He grabbed the cans from the floor, opened the door to the vending machine and restocked them in. All the lights on the soda choice buttons lit back up. He shut the door and walked back over to Rickie. “Five games straight. That was amazing.”

“Dude, I rule.”

“But every one you toss you hit.”

“What can I say guy. The power of the beast.” Rickie growled. “You go first.”

“Thanks.” Stepping up to the line of tape on the floor, Lou gripped his bean bag, and tossed it with all his might. It slammed into a button, and with a click, a can of soda rolled to the tray.

“Good hit. Diet Coke too. Center button guy.” Rickie took his place on the line, going through his mind the strategy needed to stop Lou from getting three buttons in a row. Focusing, Rickie tossed his bag aiming for the Mountain Dew.

“Check.” Jake stated sitting at the table across from Stan.

“You suck.” Stan griped.

“How the hell can I suck when I’m beating your ass.”

Stan fiddled with a chess piece and he raised his eyes to look at Cal and Billy. They danced in a corner by the juke box. To a faster slow song they swayed to the beat of the music, laughing. He watched Billy twirl Cal in a country-style dance, pulling her into him, then stepping away and swaying again. “Doesn’t that bother you?”

Jake looked over his shoulder at them. “No.”

“It would bother me if Cal was my wife.”

“Take your turn.”

“Jake, they slept to . . .”

“Stan!” Jake yelled. “Take your turn. It doesn’t bother me. What the hell are they gonna do, start making out. I’m right here. Besides, Cal loves to dance. I don’t dance, so that is something I will humbly concede to Billy.”

“They say dancing is a very intimate form of . . .”

“Stan.”

“What?”

“Take your fuckin turn.”

Cal giggled. “I can’t help it. You know what Jake said. Cold is best.”

“But your fingers are like ice. Here.” Billy cupped his entire hand over hers. “You’ll need gloves soon.”

“That’ll help my hands. What about my poor nose.”

Billy brought his hand from her back to the tip of Cal’s nose. “I’m gonna start calling you Rover.”

“Thanks for dancing with me.”

“Thanks for today.” Billy told her. “I needed it.”

“I did too. I worry about you Billy.”

“Cal you don’t have to.” Billy spoke soft. “I’ll be fine.”

“I know. But I’m just going to ensure you are.”

Billy pulled Cal a little closer in their dance. “And I’ll be happy to let you . . .” Billy grinned wide.

Cal chuckled stepping back some. “Did you feel that?”

“Oh my God. Yeah.” Billy’s hand released her and moved to her stomach. “I thought it was my imagination.”

“No. That was a big kick.” Cal release a hiccup sounding giggle when the babies kicked again. “Oh shit.”

“This is really . . .” Billy felt a hand touch his chest and move him back. He looked up. “Jake?”

Jake separated them some, shifted his eyes down, pulled his routine erection check and smiled. “Continue.” He turned and walked away.

At first they both stared expressionless at Jake as he returned to his Chess game. Then Cal and Billy, laughed again and as Jake ordered, continued in their dancing.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
August 2nd - 10:10 p.m.

Aldo knew Greg and Colin looked like they were busy sitting at the far end of the monitor's observing table, papers spread before them. But Aldo was a bit bored and being nosey was always something he enjoyed. So after looking up to the monitors--the ones that used to show the bungalows now showing the control center--Aldo approached the pair. "Looks like they're relaxing."

Colin looked up to see everyone in the recreation room. "Cold but relaxing."

"Doesn't do much for your mental endurance huh Haynes?" Aldo gave an annoying swat to Greg's back.

"Not much." Greg kept looking at his work. "But to accomplish what we need to do, getting them relaxed and mind cleared is what we need. Especially now."

"Why's that?" Aldo asked.

"Take a look at the infrared aerial." Greg pointed to the screen. "So those dark purple spots. Those are amoeba patches. Yesterday there were only four."

Aldo looked up. The little island looked like a piece of land with the measles. The four spots had multiplied to twenty.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
August 8th - 8:33 a.m.

"Play it again." Colin politely requested of Lyle. "Slow. Slow. Good speed." He wrote down on a clipboard as he watched on the screen a huge cloud of amoebas form up and completely cover a goat that was lowered down as bait. "Excellent."

"Can I ask a question." Aldo tapped him on the shoulder. "What's the safe height and distance."

"No matter how many form together, they can not go any higher than two hundred feet out or up."

"O.K. So how do we get these people two hundred feet in the air."

Greg interjected. "Actually Aldo, we're working with your sea rescue idea. We have a safe altitude to drop poison down into the ocean to rid it off those sharks. It'll take time but hopefully the water will be safe enough to get those people in the ocean, bring them out two hundred or so feet and pick them up."

"Then you'll destroy the amoebas?" Aldo asked.

"Yes." Greg nodded.

"How?"

Colin smiled at him. "We're working on it."

"Christ." Aldo had a snicker to his voice. "That's an answer you give quite a bit. If you work this hard I want you working somewhere for me."

"Dr. Haynes." Barb called his attention.

"Yes Barb?" Greg had a pleasant smile. "What's up."

"Look." Barb pointed to the screen designated to monitor the news.

A farm house was on the screen, under it the word 'Honolulu', and the male Newscaster with Central News Network peered at the camera. "The word, serial is now being attached to the acid-style slayings now said to have claimed it's tenth through fifteenth victims. The bodies of a family of six were found this morning dead in their home west of Honolulu. With this being the fourth finding this week authorities are now following a murderous trail that seems to be leading straight to the Koolau Range . . ."

When the newscaster switched stories, Greg hit the volume button. "Mountains."

Colin looked at Greg. "Caves."

"Nesting." Greg raised his eyebrows.

"We have to stop them." Colin peered at the news. "Before we have another Carrington on our hands."

Aldo stepped between the two of them. "You really believe they're in Honolulu now? Christ. What are you gonna do."

Greg took a breath, slowly releasing it through the hand that ran down his

face, “Maybe now it’s time to pull a Cal.” He saw the confused looks on those who listened to him. “Time to face the music and confess.”

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 8th - 9:15 a.m.

Jake's eyes rose to the ceiling from his watching an amoeba when he heard the rattling of glasses. He waded through the trembling ground then blew on his cold hands and returned to work. "That thing is gonna blow again."

"Probably." Stan set a clipboard down in front of Jake. "But we're safe."

"Hell maybe we'll get lucky and burn out half the amoebas." Richard commented.

Jake cringed when he heard the shrieks coming from down the hall, followed by the laughter. "Or maybe we'll just burn out the energy of one Iso-stasis beastly boy."

"No dudes wait." Rickie ran after Cal, Billy and Lou. "You have to like do this."

"I hate zombies Rickie." Cal stated. "No."

"They're like dead Cal-babe." Rickie pulled her arm. "Come on. I've never known you to be . . . afraid."

"Well I'm with child. I'm afraid for my child."

"Me too." Billy added.

"Me too." Lou said.

"Aw." Rickie whined. "Please. I've been practicing."

Cal hesitated, looked at Lou and Billy then reluctantly followed Rickie. "All right. But if they're still there. I'm killing you."

"Cal-babe., we'll just feed them to the amoebas." Rickie led them down the long corridor. "Like pretend it's Halloween and you're at your favorite haunted house." Rickie reached for the doors. "Ready?"

They all nodded.

Rickie softened his voice to a story telling one. "Not long ago, they lived here. Chomping on the flesh of a dude called Cliff. They got the taste of blood and wanted more. What began as a Wes Craven tale grew into an Iso-Stasis nightmare. Prepare to visit. The Rickie-Meister world of people under the stairs." Rickie opened the door. "Go on. It's dark. But be afraid. Be very afraid." Rickie snickered.

Cal led the way with Lou and Billy behind her. "Rickie don't shut the door, O.K.?"

"Wouldn't do it Cal-babe."

"That's what you said last time." Cal stepped down the step, feeling Billy and Lou both holding on to her shirt. "It's really dark. Please don't shut the . . ."

Bang.

"Door." Cal shrieked and bolted to the closed door.

Rickie, hunching his shoulders backed up laughing as they pounded and

screamed to be let out. He looked at his watch figuring he'd give them some time. After all, they did want to be entertained.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
August 8th - 10:33 a.m.

It was a round table discussion. Eight investors. Greg and Colin stood before them.

Colin tossed photographs onto the table. "The island of Oahu. Our island. We brought our island up to scale to Oahu to show you in comparison the infestation of the amoebas on both bodies of land."

Greg's finger pointed to a single small spot. "As you can see. Our satellites are picking up this one section on Oahu. Still within control."

Aldo had to question. "Whitney, are you absolutely sure, that we can't just lift our people off this island and let these things just die out."

"They don't die on their own Mr. Connilucci." Colin said you. "I assure. If that was the case, they would never have regenerated after they were pulled from the freezer and released."

Barb stepped up to the meeting level, clearing her throat with a look of shock on her face. "Dr. Haynes. You . . . you have a phone call."

"Tell them I'll call them back." Greg overlooked the photos.

"I think you should take this call. It's . . . it's the president sir."

Greg immediately sprang up. He looked at Colin then bolted by him and Barb down to the bottom floor of the control room. "Lyle, put him in the speaker phone." Greg straightened his appearance as if the president could see him. Slowly the investors and Colin trickled down to hear. "Mr. President."

"Greg. How are you?"

"I'm fine sir."

"I got your message Greg. Had it not come from you I probably would have laughed. What is this about some sort of national emergency."

"Yes sir." Greg nodded. "We believe . . . we believe right now, in Honolulu you have the start to what could end up being our gravest national emergency."

"Honolulu?" President Wilson questioned. "What's going on there that could be of nation importance."

"These killings sir."

"The acid slayings." President Wilson chuckled. "Now Greg, come on . . ."

"They're amoebas sir." Greg interrupted. "Not acid. Amoebas. They drill in through the skin, devour you from within, multiply and move on."

Silence came from the president.

"Sir are you still there."

"You're joking."

"I wished to God I was sir." Greg swayed his head.

"How can you be so sure."

"Because right now on an island where we're experimenting, we are dealing with them. Many of them. They've killed every form of animal life on that island and some of our people. We discovered them by accident."

“You said ‘dealing with them’”

“Yes.” Greg spoke. “They are out of control. Right now we’re trying to figure a way to safely get our people off that island and destroy the amoebas. That’s why we contacted you. We feel that something has to be done now to stop the same thing from happening in Hawaii.”

“How do you know Honolulu has the same problem?” President Wilson asked.

“Death. Deterioration. Reports from the coroner stating protoplasm was found in the body. Aerial photographs from our satellite showing a grouping of them west of Honolulu.”

“So they’re all in one spot?”

“Hard to say.” Greg explained. “Right now with what we see, a simple ground explosion would kill that grouping. But that’s not to say they haven’t attached themselves to a car, boat, anything.”

“If this is really happening . . .”

“Oh it is.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?”

Greg hesitated before answering the president. “First and foremost you will have to stop all incoming and outgoing traffic off that island. Air and sea. These things multiply so fast that they can spread like wild fire. You can not take a chance that they leave this island.”

“Then we burn that grouping out?”

Greg didn’t answer. “No. You’re going to have to burn the surface of that entire island.”

His laughter carried through the speaker phone. “Burn out Oahu. Yes, Greg, sure. We’ll just do that.”

Greg held his hand out to Aldo to silence him after his ‘fuckin idiot’ comment. “President Wilson. This really isn’t a joke.”

“Yes it is. Do you hear what your suggesting? Burn out the entire Island of Oahu on some sci-fi theory? If we would do that, do you have a clue how long it would take to evacuate?”

“Evacuate? No sir. No evacuation. Like I said. Nothing goes in. Nothing goes out. Burn it.”

“Are you out of your goddamn mind? What in God’s name would make you think I would even agree to destroy millions of lives, let alone entertain the notion.”

Greg closed his eyes. “We’ve already faxed data to the congressional scientific team sir. They should have them as we speak, along with photographs. Take a good look at what we are sending you.” Greg drew up a serious tone to his voice as he spoke with edge to the president. “Then after you look, you tell me if you still want to laugh. I guarantee you’ll get back to me with questions on when and how. I guarantee you will stop laughing. You’ll want to end this thing with the urgency and the suggestions that I implore you with. No one goes to Oahu. No

one gets off. Destroy it. Because if one of those amoebas gets to the mainland. It's the end of the world as we know it."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 8th - 12:02 p.m.

'All work and no play makes Billy a very dull boy' was typed over and over on the three sheets of paper Jake read from.

"See Jake." Cal folded her arms. "I had to share my concern. You were right. Billy is becoming Jack from *The Shining*."

"Nice Cal. Very nice." He handed them back to her. "Are you done playing games?"

Cal snickered. "Just thought I'd lighten your day."

"Lighten my day? You don't think I'm having a fuckin blast now. I'm stuck in a lab with Stan the rambling man, Richard the paranoid man, I have to deal with mutant fuckin slugs, you and the gang running around screaming, and now you make fun of an observation I very seriously made."

"Sorry. I was joking. Lighten up."

Jake raised his eyebrow. "Lighten up? Cal, I am not in the mood for practical jokes right now babe. O.K.? With Rickie running around scaring everyone, and Stan instigating me every chance he gets. I've had it up to here. I just want to finish up and get some sleep, which I haven't gotten in two days. And I swear if I get bothered one more time for something really fuckin stupid, I'm going to march out of this lab and fuckin scream."

"Jake." Stan called to him.

Jake held out his hand. "Here it is. Yes Stan."

Stan held the phone to him. "The President would like to speak to you about the amoebas."

Jake kissed Cal on her cheek. "Excuse me." He walked by her, out of the lab, down the hall and then Jake screamed loudly.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
August 8th - 8:45 p.m.

"It's frightening." President Wilson's solemn voice reverberated over the speaker in the control room that contained only Greg and Colin.

"Yes it is." Greg stated.

"Well . . ." The President exhaled loudly over the phone. "My panel has reviewed your findings. We're going to go along with your suggestion. We're going to destroy them."

Greg looked at Colin with relief.

"I'll seek congressional approval." The president said. "Which I shouldn't have trouble getting. We'll set off several ground missiles and a small nuclear detonation in Oahu. Then we'll hit that island of yours."

Colin lost his look of 'pleased'. "You can't do that Mr. President

"We have to destroy them."

"But blowing up the surface of our island will only pause the situation, it won't stop it. It'll start all over again. The island is infested and it's infested from underneath."

"Can we draw them out?" The president asked. "Perhaps drop bait."

Greg chuckled. "Bait them? No sir. Begging your pardon, but you could drop the whole entire Cleveland fuckin zoo on that island and they all won't come out. They are in the ground. Deep and nesting. We have to destroy them from underneath."

"How is that done?" President Wilson inquired.

"We're uh . . ." Colin cleared his throat. "Working on that."

"Working?" President Wilson took on edge. "You stressed time is of importance. We have no time. Do you know for sure they are underneath?"

"Pretty sure." Colin answered. "Thermal graphic indicates . . ."

"Pretty sure?" President Wilson asked with sarcasm. "Son, we can't go on pretty sure with a situation like this. Unless you show me that these things are under the island, that nuking that island won't stop them, then we go as planned. Hawaii first, then your island."

Aldo shook his head in disgust, he knew for sure why he didn't vote for Wilson last election. Quietly he slipped from the control room where he wasn't supposed to be. Cringing at the creaking door, he stepped out into the hall and closed it. The other investors stood there.

"Well?" Douglass asked.

"It's time to move our families out." Aldo looked at them. "Wilson goes to Congress tomorrow. When it gets out to them, it won't be long before it gets out all over. And I don't want our families around when the mass hysteria begins. Lets get a move on it now." Leading the way, Aldo walked the group of investors down the hall.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 10th - 1:00 p.m.

The ground shook for thirty seconds, and they all held on until the tremor had ended. Their views then returned to the screen in the monitoring room.

"We're gonna die." Richard screamed loudly. "It's the end of the world. We're all gonna die!"

Jake, annoyed spun his head to him. "We're not gonna fuckin die. And it isn't the end of the world. Now will you shut the fuck up so we can hear this." Just as Jake turned again the ground shook. "Fuck." he raised his hand up. "Will that thing just blew its wad and get it over with. Christ."

Protesters with signs, angry and shouting were the background for the tall thin male reporter standing in the rain, on the streets of Washington DC. He held a microphone. "No nukes, save our land and baby killers are just some of the things being shouted at the capitol today as protestors gather in desperation for their voices to be heard. Trying to stop the unthinkable. The destruction of Oahu in the Hawaiian islands. Though it is some comfort to know that scientists around the world are working on a solution to stop the micro organism virus that has swept across Oahu claiming now close to seventeen hundred lives, it is frightening to think that such desperate measures may have to be taken. As Congressmen Walters told me, 'Just like America awoke this morning to the Hawaiiin Island quarantine, this may be the only way the American people, the people of the world, will be able to go to bed tomorrow night, knowing that it is over'. From Washington, Brett Stone. Central News Network."

"Hey." Billy smiled and pointed to the screen. "I know him. Wow. He's doing good." he tilted his head. "Cal, do you think he's better than me?"

"No way." Cal waved her hand at Billy. "Jake, what do you think?"

"I think the institute is really going to a lot of trouble to make this real."

Cal emerged from the group who moaned at Jake again. She walked up behind him. "Jake? This is the news."

"Yeah." Jake started to walk from the room.

"You still aren't buying it?"

"No."

"Really? Because Jake, I'm a little scared. They're talking about blowing us up too."

"Cal." Jake stopped walking. "We're not blowing up. Bet me something happens and we don't get hit. Don't worry about it." He kissed her. "It's not good for the babies."

"If you say so."

"I say so." Jake grabbed her hand and started to walk. Cal took his hand and words in comfort. She was trusting Jake, like she had always done, to not be

wrong. And this was one of the times, she prayed he really wasn't.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA

August 10th - 2:10 p.m.

"Find the central nesting location." Colin explained to Greg. "Set a small nuclear device. The underground volcanic caverns will carry the blast and destroy anything that moves under there."

Greg shook his head. "The president still isn't buying it. He wants proof that they're nesting there, not that we can destroy the nest. Which we're still not sure we can do."

"Sure we can." Colin was confident. "I just told you how."

Greg tossed his hand in the air, turned and pointed to the monitor. "Look at our island Colin. Now it may not look that big, but it is. You want to find the central nesting point. Bury a nuke. Lay surface fire to destroy the ones on the ground then detonate the bomb to get the ones underneath. When even if we find the central nesting point, even if we figure a way to drop it in the ground, how the hell are we gonna get close enough to do that? We can't just put the amoebas on pause, we can't just tell them freeze while we . . ." Greg's serious face flashed a smile. "Or . . ." He snapped his finger. "Maybe we can."

Colin stood up. "Freeze them?"

"Yes."

"The amoebas."

"Not just the amoebas." Greg peered to the screen. "The whole entire island." Greg began a dash across the control room.

"Where are you going?" Colin called out.

"I'm getting on the phone. I have to get together a top cryogenics team to figure out how we can freeze this body of land."

Aldo whistled low, turning to Douglass. "I enjoy his enthusiasm but I think the guy is off his rocker."

Greg paused by the door. "Colin, start working on a rescue plan. Especially if we freeze this island."

"Dr. Haynes." Colin stopped him vocally. "We have to work on our proof first."

Greg cringed. "Oh yeah. Proof. We'll work on that too." He reached for the door but stopped when a loud explosion blared out nearly cracking the speakers in the room. Greg tossed his hands up. "Now the volcano starts to erupt."

"Dear God!" Aldo stood slowly watching the monitor that showed the volcano.

Lyle's voice quivered as he called out. "Uh Dr. Haynes . . . uh . . . come here."

Greg spun from the door, "What is it. I don't need to see the volcano erupt it's not important now."

Colin smiled as Greg stepped closer. "I beg to differ, take a look."

Aldo pointed to the screen. "Is that black lava?"

With a loud ‘yes’ and a little jump, Greg turned and shook his head to Aldo. “Black lava? No. Central nesting place and proof to save our island? Yes. Those Aldo, are amoebas.”

Aldo’s eyes widened as he watched them spew forth with a mighty blow from the volcano, thick and in the air, black, shooting high running down the sides of it, flowing like the lava that was supposed to be there. Quickly he shifted his eyes to Douglass. “Do you think this bodes well for our people?”

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 10th - 2:15 p.m.

Another 'Boom!' rocked the control building. As everyone stopped what they were doing in the recreation room.

"Oh God, they're nuking us.!" Richard screamed. "I have to get out of here."

"Richard!" Jake called to him as he ran out. "They aren't . . . fuck him."

"The volcano." Stan stated. "She blew."

"Jake?" Cal spoke softly. "Jake, do you hear that?"

Jake zoomed it. It sounded like rain, thick rain crashing forth above them. "What the hell?"

Horried, Billy looked. "Jake, is that Lava. Jake tell me that's not lava."

"It can't be. We're too far, the caverns would catch it." Jake raced from the room. Wincing at the screams of Richard that echoed in the hall. He darted across the hall to a room with window. "If it was we'd be . . .shit."

It rained all right, but if it was it was completely black.

"That . . ." Lou pointed. "Is not lava."

"No shit." Jake glared. "Welcome to round three of . . . shit." Jake's eyes bulged. "The amoebas." He ran from the room. "Richard!" He bolted down the hall at a speed Cal rarely saw him run. "Richard!" Jake turned the bend.

Everyone tried to keep up listening to Jake chasing a screaming Richard.

Jake spotted him at the end of the hall near the entrance. Richard was running. "Richard, Don't open that . . ."

Richard flew out, the glass door slammed behind him.

"Door." Jake's warning hand dropped and so did his head when he saw Richard step from the protective awning of the entrance way out into the rain of amoebas. No time for screaming, Richard disappeared under a black blanket. Shaking his head, and letting out a slow breath, Jake turned around to everyone that had raced forward.

"Jake?" Stan questioned. "Did Richard . . ."

"Yeah. Lets' uh . . . let's do a double check right now of all ventilation and pump the AC up full blast. Take no chances." Jake looked over to his shoulder, like piling snow, the amoebas landed. High and fast. Jake, taken aback a little by what he was witnessing, said no more and moved down the hall.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
August 10th - 3:00 p.m.

Barb's mouth dropped open, staring at the monitor screens. Her eyes kept blinking in disbelief. "Where the hell did it go?"

"There." Lyle zoomed in. "You can see a speck of a window."

"Oh my God." Barb watched the monitor that showed a shot of the outside of the two story control building. The black ground literally moves and like snow flakes trickling off, the amoebas still fell from the sky.

"We've got more time." Greg raced excitedly in, skipping down the last two steps and running to the monitoring table. "The president is fine with our nesting theory and we've bought more time to go ahead with out . . ." Greg looked up at the screen everyone watched. He saw the magnitude of the amoeba. "Whoa. Anyhow. Cryogenics team is working on it. We're underway."

"How much time did they buy us?" Colin asked.

"He didn't say. Why?"

"Take a look at thermal graphics." Colin handed Greg two photos. "It appears what blasted from our little Mt. Vesuvius may only be the beginning. We have more."

Greg's eyes lowered the pictures and peered to the darkened areas Colin had circled. More nesting areas. "I'm not worried about." Greg handed them back. "We'll get them." He cleared his throat. "Excuse me." After turning around, Greg rolled his eyes and walked back out of the room.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 10th - 9:00 p.m.

Billy had long since resolved himself that he would have to face it. And since that resolution, jealousy was a rarity. But not as he sat on the floor, playing with the words he tried to edit. He wore headphones and played them loudly, trying to block out the conversation that floated his way. And Billy wished he could keep his eyes from floating up. He tried his hardest, but he couldn't help but keep looking over to the corner where Cal and Jake were. And every time he looked, a spark of jealousy hit him. They shared an intimate moment. And it wasn't as if he never saw them kiss or hug, he had. That never bothered him. What he witnessed right then did. No touching between them, not much. Jake's hand resting on her leg, Cal on her back, him on his side. The book in Jake's hand leaned in toward Cal's stomach. And to Billy it had to be the most intimate moment he ever witnessed between them. It showed another side to Jake. And the reason, as Billy thought for his Jealousy. His staring was an intrusion, whether he was spotted or not. And Billy tried his hardest not to intrude. He poured himself into his work, and turned up the volume more on his headphones

Jake's voice was soft, almost soothing as he read. *"If I could speak in any language in heaven or earth but didn't love, then I would only be making meaningless noise, like a gong or a symbol. If I had the gift of prophecy and knew all of the mysteries of the future and knew everything about everything, but didn't love, what good would I be? If I had the gift of faith so I could speak to a mountain and make it move, without love I would be no good to anyone. If I gave everything I had to the poor, and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it, but if I didn't love, I would be of no value what so ever."* Jake closed the book. "And that's it. Get some sleep. You have to relieve me for watch early."

"Jake, I love when you read to me. You do it so well. The babies like it too." She rubbed her stomach.

"I'm glad." Jake kissed Cal, then leaned down and kissed her stomach. He looked at her with a smile. "Since you sat real nice and listen to the bible tonight. Tomorrow . . ." Jake winked. "Clive Barker."

"Oh good." Cal adjusted down. "I promise. No nightmares."

"Yeah, right." He pulled the blanket up over her. "I'll be right here."

"You always are." Cal lifted her pillow moved it to Jake's lap as he leaned against the wall and laid her head on the pillow. "Night Jake."

"Night Cal." Jake's hand rested on her face, playing a little with her hair. Lifting it, moving it, but never taking his eyes off his focus. His peripheral vision of the area surrounding him and Cal. And even though the amoebas literally fell from the sky outside of them invading the island's space, Jake was going to make sure with everything he had, nothing even remotely came inside and invaded his and Cal's space.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
August 10th - 11:45 p.m.

The thought of, 'three million dollars and I still have to pay for my coffee' kept racing through Aldo's mind as he placed his quarters in the vending machine. He pressed the 'freshly brewed' button and awaited that cringing cup of coffee. Watching it fill, he watched something else, Caruso, Lou's investor. Caruso rubbed his eyes over and over, exhaling deeply.

"Headache?" Aldo asked pulling the cup from the tray.

"No." Caruso shook his head as he sat at the table. "Stress."

"Have a drink."

"I have. Many. It isn't helping."

"Can I?"

"Um . . . no." Caruso tapped his fingers on the table. "I spoke to my wife in Switzerland. She . . . she didn't know about any of it."

"Well we sent them into seclusion before it was announced. Did you tell her?"

"No." Caruso shook his head. There was something drastic about it. "I thought it best to keep her in the dark. Besides if I told her, she would know I knew ahead of time. And if she knows that, she'll know as investors we are partly to blame."

"Oh that's bull shit." Aldo waved his hand at Caruso, then sipped his coffee with a gasping cringe.

"Is it?" Caruso looked at Aldo. "We push and push for them to provide us with entertainment. Good entertainment. Haynes tried and it went out of control. We, Aldo, us investors, could very well be responsible for helping to end this world. Believe it or not."

And Aldo chose 'not'. He passed off what Caruso said as someone who was having a long day. He himself had often rambled nonsense when he was upset. And seeing Caruso was clearly upset, Aldo left the vending lounge, shrugging of the paranoid illusions of Caruso, and sipping and cringing on his coffee the whole entire time.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island
August 12th - 8:10 a.m.

They kissed. Intensely and deep, like they hadn't done in weeks. And pretty much so Cal and Jake hadn't.. They bumped into things during their entanglement in that closet. Jake, hands gripping Cal's face, pulling her into him. Heavy breaths and moans emanated from every wide sweep of the mouths, hunger bites, and pulling of lips.

"Cal." Her name seeped from Jake's lips as his hands helped her lift her shirt. He took advantage of the kissing separation to remove his shirt as well. He pulled her back into him gasping at the feel of her skin against his. "I miss being with you like this so much."

Cal felt his lips move to her neck. "God when you're like this you turn me on."

"Everything." Jake brought his mouth close to hers and he smiled. "Turns you on." He began to kiss her again undoing the button and zipper to his pants. He brought Cal back to him, embracing her as he turned his body leaning against the storage boxes there.

Cal removed her lips from his. "And you love it."

"Oh yeah." Jake slid down some when he felt the lead. Cal's lips hit his chest and his arms extended out, gripping the sides of the boxes. He arched back his neck and rolled his eyes when he felt her sexual teasing, the gliding of her lips to his stomach, the light scratching of her fingernails against his sides as she grabbed for his pants. When he felt the cooler air hit him with the lowering of his pants, Jake flung his head forward and dropped to his knees to join Cal on the floor. So badly he wanted to hold her and make love to her. And with that desire and wanting, he brought his lips against Cal's.

"Jake!" Stan's calling of his name and pounding on the door stopped them.

Jake shifted his eyes. "Is someone dying Stan."

"No. The uh . . . the president would like to know if you can take a moment to talk to him."

Jake kissed Cal. "Tell the president." He bit his bottom lip. "Tell him my hands are into something very delicate right now." Jake and Cal kissed again.

"Jake." Stan had griping to his tone. "I can not believe you are blowing off the president like this. The world is in disarray and you're fooling around in a closet."

"Stan, this whole building will end up being in disarray if I don't take this moment with my wife. Leave."

"Fine. I'm telling."

Jake chuckled and imitated Stan. "Fine I'm telling." He moved to kiss Cal again.

“Jake, is it really a good career move for you to be blowing off the president?”

“No more worse of a move then if I speak to someone and *think* he’s the president. It’s a mental endurance thing here Cal. If it is the President. He’ll understand I’m trained not to believe it is. Now can we get back to more pressing matters at hand.”

“Absolutely.”

With an ornery, short chuckle, kissing Cal, Jake pulled her completely down to the floor.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
August 12th - 8:45 a.m.

A cultural man of many tastes, Aldo so desperately wanted an egg McMuffin at that moment as he sat in the lounge watching the news. But since all businesses were closed on this day due to the national emergency, he gathered McDonald's wouldn't open either and he dismissed his muffin for a scrambled egg on toast sandwich he made himself. The news was the only thing on, except for that kid's channel and cartoon one.

"And he sits alone." Douglass stated as he walked in the lounge.

"Yep." Aldo kept his eyes glued.

"Watching the countdown?" Douglass joined him at the table.

"I thought everyone else would be too."

"They are, sort of. They're in the control room listening to the expert talk about freezing that island. That's why I came to get you. Thought you might like to hear what he has to say."

"I will. But I want to hear what this guy has to say." Aldo pointed to the television.

"I really don't care for this news woman."

"Me either. She wears too much make up."

"Exactly."

They shared the long table in the news studio. Beth Chase on the right, an older red head woman, Dr. Carmichael on the left. So serious Beth nodded listening to his answer. "And is this virus similar to the flesh eating virus that ran rampant some years ago."

"Similar yes." Dr. Carmichael stated. "The only difference is, this is an organism, it hits you and keeps moving. There is no way, unless caught immediately that it can be stopped, nor the victim saved."

"So in your opinion, what will happen in Oahu in an hours time is validated?"

"Without a doubt."

"Tell us, Dr. Carmichael, what we can expect from this blast."

"Well Beth as you know, they are covering the ground. Short range missiles, napalm, and burning out the land first, then a small nuclear denotation will follow. We shouldn't feel anything on the east coast at all. Some on the west may have a tremor or two."

"Tidal waves, earth quakes, none of these will occur?"

"They may."

"What about radiation poisoning?"

"Well considering the strength of the nuclear weapon used, I would advice those on the West Coast to not leave their homes if entirely possible, and if they do, keep exposure to a minimum."

Beth nodded. "Should citizens on the west coast be concerned with

electromagnetic pulses.”

“No.” Dr. Carmichael shook his head. “Now neighboring islands within a hundred mile radius should be and they will be effected. To avoid damage to televisions, radios, cars, all of these things should not be running or in operation when the blast occurs. If they are, they will never work again. Also.” Dr. Carmichael cleared his throat. “The threat of electromagnetic pulses does not end when the blast does. There is still a chance that a pulse wave could hit those neighboring islands for days. So use of antennas, satellite dishes and such should closely be monitored.”

“Thank you Dr. Carmichael.” Beth gave a signature nod and faced the camera. “As we approach the top of the hour, the destruction of Oahu a heart beat a way, our prayers go out to them and their families. And America faces for the first time, not only the explosion of a nuclear weapon for destruction reasons over our soil, but the implementation of Martial law, that has officially gone into effect for the entire western Seaboard.” Beth smiled. “We’ll return in a moment.” A fanfare of dramatic trumpet music played as Beth faded out and the screen flashed to a reddened color video of a marching army brigade. And after the headline, ‘America Dying’ appeared momentarily, the station took a commercial break.

Aldo shut off the television. “I hate that woman.”

“So chipper.” Douglass shook his head. “Going to watch in the control room?”

“Yeah, bigger screens.” Aldo followed him out. “Besides, I want to listen to the cryo guy.” They turned the bend to the control room.

“Aldo, there maybe something you need to know first.”

Aldo slowed down when he opened the door and looked to his left. “What in the hell.” Greg and Colin were seated on the meeting level at the table with the cryo man. He wore a dark grey uniform, his hair a little dirty and messed up. Aldo could only see the man from the back and that made matters worse because Aldo could clearly see the golden letters that read ‘Bruno’s Heating and Air conditioning.’. Aldos shut the door, causing an ‘ow’ from Douglass when he hit him with it. “Haynes?” Aldo had question in his voice. “Is this . . .” He gasped when the guy turned around and looked. Unshaven, maybe not even twenty-two years old. “Haynes, what the fuck? Tell me this kid is not our cryogenics expert.”

“Actually.” Greg stood up. “I’d like you to meet Craig Lawson.”

Aldo reluctantly shook his hand. “Not even Bruno?” Aldo rolled his eyes.

Craig was nervous. “I work for Bruno sir.”

“Haynes.” Aldo’s voice cracked. “He’s probably a wire puller.”

“I am.” Craig stated.

Colin cringed and held his hand to Craig. He stood up. “Aldo, this man is an inventor. He contacted us when he heard on the news what we’re trying to do. Actually, Mr. Lawson, has a very brilliant idea. And technical school graduate or not, his idea just may work.”

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 12th - 9:10 a.m.

They all gathered around the television that was fed through for them. On the screen nothing much could be seen except thick black smoke and fire. A timer in the right hand corner, counted down and some annoying newscaster did terrible commentating.

"Jake." Cal looked up to him with folded arms. "How is this going to affect us?"

"Not at all."

"What about the radiation?" Cal asked.

"Cal. *If* there is a nuclear blast going off a hundred and fifty miles away, we may feel it we may not. We certainly won't be effected by radiation. Not when we're in this concrete building insulated with mutant amoebas. Don't worry about."

"I do."

"Don't."

"Sarge, like, why don't you buy this guy? It's real." Rickie questioned.

"I just don't."

Lou looked to Jake. "Jake, when will you believe it is real."

"When I step off this island and someone with some validity to them tells me. Till then I follow my gut. My gut says this is part of the Iso-stasis experiment."

"Dude, like you really think?" Rickie asked.

"Yes."

"Whoa." Rickie scratched his head. "And they're like allowed to destroy a number one tourist spot?"

"Rickie."

Cal shook her head. "You're wrong Jake. And you know for certain your gut sucks."

"Cal, please. I have great gut instincts."

"Maybe breaking a perimeter or pulling an assassination. But not here, history proves it."

"What?" Jake laughed. "What history."

"Last experiment. You said Carlos was bad."

"But I said Rickie would survive. You didn't."

"You said poor Reed was the catch. Wrong there."

"You said Judge." Jake held his hand out to her.

"Well you said Billy was going to be a psychopathic killer and try to take us all out."

Quiet Billy was shocked. "Jake, you thought I was a killer?"

"I said no such thing." Jake spoke with edge. "She's telling tales to be amusing. And she isn't." Jake lowered his face to Cal.

"I'm merely trying to show that you're gut is wrong."

"Cal?"

"Yes."

"What have I always taught you sweetie? Even when you know you're wrong?"

"Never admit it." Cal finished his sentence.

"Exactly. Now watch the show with me." Jake pulled Cal into him and glued his eyes to the counting down timer. Watching with anticipation he tried not to show. And just like his rule on never admitting you were wrong, Jake would never admit to Cal that what he was watching was real, even if he believed it was.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
August 12th - 9:30 a.m.

"The safest distance that we can get." The newsman voice spoke over a shot of Oahu, smoldering in the distance. All the investors, Greg, Colin and every worker from Caldwell gathered in that room. *"We can monitor the countdown."* The male voice spoke slow as if announcing a golf tournament. *"But it is this journalist's guess that even seeing the timer hit zero, the realization of what entailed will not hit us until we see it for our own eyes."* A silent pause. *"Still, silent. Our prayers and hearts go out to these who are alive on the island of Oahu,. For we surely feel their pain. We can see the remnants of the earlier destruction still . . ."*

It sounded like a snap of electricity, a click, and the screen went bright white, a deepened boom was heard in the distance and then silence and the screen turned to static.

Fuzzy, white, the speakers in the control room hissed with the interference of the signal. Slowly they watched the picture, squiggle some, return blurred at first, then fully. The news man face the camera at his desk holding onto his ear piece. He looked up, *"We're back and I'm told now . . . yes, we are getting a shot . . ."* The screen then showed the bellowing mushroom cloud in the distance. *"Yes there it is . . . the nuclear cloud of death. Some say we our witnessing our future right now. Some say we are witnessing our salvation. What ever one views it as, I can say we're all viewing it with a heavy heart and an abundance of sadness. This station will pause right now, for a moment of silence for our brothers and sisters who gave up their lives in a fight to save ours."*

Complete and utter silence engulfed the control room. Not a sound, not a breath could be heard.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FIVE

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 15th - 3:20 p.m.

Every other hour, Jake did it without fail. He did it for Cal, more than anyone else. Every door, window, seal, vent and opening into the building he checked. He wanted no surprises, no attacks from the amoebas that he didn't see coming. He guessed by the now deadened acoustics the building had to it, the steady hissing, and the photos that Caldwell showed them, the amoebas outside were getting worse than even he had thought they'd get.

With the experiment's end fast approaching, Jake was trying to determine what factor would play into the elimination of him, Cal and Lou, the remaining participants. There had to be something more than the amoebas. Because with the way things were, they were safe inside. But part of Jake was starting to believe there may be trouble. Even if the whole amoeba thing was a set up by Caldwell, they still would have to implement a plan to get them off the island, to free them. And that part, was the only part that Jake truly believed Caldwell had trouble with.

The amoebas had gotten out of hand, more so than they wanted them to. More so than they could control. And they communicated with Jake constantly. And even though Jake had exhausted all that he could learn from the amoebas, Caldwell still kept him abreast. His number one clue, that something had gone amiss.

Jake could hear the sound of muted gunfire, if coming from a speaker, as he rounded the turn into the monitoring lab. "Hey Stan."

"Jake."

"What's going on." Jake looked at the television. People were lighting fires in the street. Throwing things.

"Rioting is bad in San Francisco. Rumors are starting to spread that martial law may be placed in full force, all access road in and out may be shut down."

"Just like fuckin people to get themselves in an uproar before they have the facts. What are they saying is the reason for the barricade. Is it because they can't get near Oahu yet?"

"No." Stan shook his head. "They think . . . they think the amoebas may have made it to Molokai."

Jake drew up no expression on his face. He sat down, watched the television and waited with Stan for Caldwell to place one of their many calls to him.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA
August 15th - 3:30 p.m.

A blue hue took over the shot of Jake on the screen, followed by a squiggle of interference, then with a couple flicks of the screen, Jake came in clear. "Sorry. What were you saying?" Jake asked Greg who stood with Colin.

"We think we got it Jake." Greg said. "We're gonna get you guys off that island, but first we're going to freeze it."

Jake blinked rapidly four times staring at the camera next to the monitor in which he watched Greg. "Freeze the island?"

"Yes." Greg answered with a nod.

"What are you out of your fuckin mind? This is a body of land. Or did you for . . . at . . . n . . . to . . ."

"Jake, you're breaking up again." Greg said, then looked at Colin. "Thank God at least we didn't have to hear him bitch completely." He raised his eyes to the screen watching Jake come back in clear focus.

"Amoebas." Jake complained. "Anyhow. How do you plan to freeze an entire body of land."

Clearing his throat, Colin stepped forward. "We're uh . . . we're working on it."

In the background Aldo's voice emerged yelling out. "There it is again."

Greg turned, looked at Aldo and back to Jake. "We are getting the equipment and supplies together. We're expecting to do a first round test, then if that works, move into building a prototype, test some more. We're moving . . . Jake you're breaking up."

The shot of Jake came in clear a little faster. "I lost you after prototype."

"After we build the prototype, we'll test it some more. We're moving on this Jake. But we have to make sure that it'll work. We got a hold put on the annihilation of your island, but we don't know for how long. There's only one problem and it's happening now. We have to keep the lines of communication open. No matter what. We'll be going down to the wire here Jake, time is of the essence . . ." Greg's views moved to the television screen when he heard the interruption 'this is a special report'

Beth Chase appeared on screen of Central Network News. "Sheltered in, tucked away the residents of the island Molokai may be safe from radiation, but not from the virus. Officials formerly speculating, now have confirmed that the micro organism has spread, I repeat, has spread to the Molokai island . . ."

Slowly Greg raised his eyes back to Jake. "More so than ever now, time is *really* of the essence."

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SIX

Caldwell Research Institute - Los Angeles, CA
August 16th - 10:09 a.m.

"Goddamn it!" Greg's scrunched up his face and lowered his hand powerfully to press the mute button on the phone. In his anger his finger missed twice before he finally ended up hitting it. "All right." Greg ran his hand over his face, paced a few times, got himself together, peered up at his island shots and repressed the mute button. "Still there?"

"Where's you go?" The male voice on the other line asked.

"Line problems." Greg answer. "All right. Listen to me. Do what you have to do, you got that? And get me that approval today. Find out what is up the Governor's ass and pull it out if you have to , but get it for me today." Greg huffed as he disconnected the call. "Barb."

"Yes."

"Do me a favor, get on our line to the president, tell him what's going on with Nevada's Governor. See what string he can pull. Christ, he's the president. And stress to whoever you talk to, that we need to test this project and we can't if we don't have a hot, dry piece of land to do it . . ." Greg's voice dropped as he turned, like everyone else and faced the back of the room. ". . . with."

Unison, loud and drawing their way. Everyone looked baffled listening to the heavy, abundance of stomping. Like the theme music to the movie Jaws, the hitting of boots got louder and louder.

Greg placed his hands on his hips. "Does anyone know what's going on."

Even the monitor observers stood up, facing the back door. Everyone was a bit afraid when they marching stopped. The door opened. Five soldier walked in, and before the double doors closed it was apparent that many more soldiers were in the hall.

One soldier took the lead and broke forward, older distinguished. "I am looking for Dr Gregory Haynes."

"I'm Dr. Haynes. What's going on?" He approached the soldier.

"Colonel Lawrence Johnson sir." He saluted then shook Greg's hand. "By order of the president of the United States, this building has hereby been placed under the protective custody of the United States Army."

Greg spoke above the mumble of voices in the room. "Why? This is a secure building."

"Begging your pardon, sir. But the security here is not as tight as you would like it to be. And the president wants to see that nothing disturbs the work that is going on inside this structure. Especially with the threats being made against Caldwell sir. Guards will be posted around the building and property and the corridors. And for the safety of the occupants, it is advised that no one leave the premises."

“I understand. Thank you.”

Colonel Johnson nodded, stepped back, turned, signaled his four men and they walked out of the control room.

Looking at the investors and all those who stood around him, Greg, just as stunned as everyone else, stood speechless.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 16th - 6:30 p.m.

In the storage closet the all sat on the floor. Hoping in the small closed in space, together, with all six bodies, they could generate some heat. Relief from the building they kept near fifty degrees.

"Mad Max." Rickie pointed to Jake. "Like that's who I see you as."

"Please." Jake scoffed. "Me? Do I even look like the type of man, end of the world or not, who would wander around like that. Aimless and alone."

"Jake's right." Cal said. "I don't see him doing that. I see Jake, taking me and the kids, finding a secluded piece of land and staying there, living there alone the rest of our lives."

"See." Jake pointed to Cal. "People wonder why we're married. She knows me so well."

Stan agreed. "That and you both have this obsession with near death."

"Dude, like that's because it's an aphrodisiac to them, guy." Rickie snickered.

"You know." Lou spoke up. "I could be Mad Max."

"Dude!" Rickie shrieked with excitement. "Like whoa. I can see that guy. Lou Max, the man, they myth. Wandering around no man's land. Without a shirt of course."

"Of course."

"And like guy, you'll be getting all the post apocalyptic babes."

"What about me?" Billy asked. "Since you're being a fortune teller. What do you see me as in the post apocalyptic world Rickie?"

"Dead."

Everyone laughed.

Rickie's head bobbed back and forth. "No offense guy, but throw a nomad your way and you'll fold."

"You're probably right." Billy stated. "Of course, you'd have to admit. If I did survive, I may not be able to defend myself, but bet me I have one of the nicest houses in the post apocalyptic world. I can decorate."

"You *can* decorate." Cal agreed.

Jake rolled his eyes. "Oh now, that's important."

"Sarge, like can I be serious for a second?" Rickie asked.

"When are you ever serious Rickie?"

"Never. But like can I be now. I have to ask you a really serious question."

"Sure." Jake agreed. "Go on. But no trying to make a fool out of me."

"Dude, like I promise." Rickie raised his left hand. Jake grunted. "Anyway. I was buzzing in on the news this morning, which by the way Billy, your reporter buddy got like the first question at the news conference." After Billy whined, Rickie continued. "Anyhow, like the babe that wears all the make up, she was like saying that even though the president is denying it, there's like these rumors that

the reds, Russia and China are like threatening to take matters into their own hands. Would they do that. You're like the military guy, you'll know."

"If what is happening is really happening . . ." Jake cringed when everyone moaned. "Then yes. I can see that happening."

"Well what will we do?" Rickie asked.

"Depends." Jake shrugged. "Depends on what they do. And then basically, we do one better."

"Could it escalate?"

"It could." Jake answered. "Under normal circumstance, war circumstances, it would start as a ground confrontation somewhere and build from there. The only problem is, whether in peace times or not, a nuclear weapon has been used. That really opens up the playing field."

Rickie was full of questions. "So like you're saying this could actually turn into world war three?"

Jake tilted his head. "Depends again. It's hard to say. But . . . yes. It could."

"So like what would you do. Say we get off this island and war is broke out. You're like the man in North Carolina. Would you see a nuclear attack coming first?"

Jake hesitated. "Yes. I'd know before most people."

"Would you tell us?" Rickie asked.

"Yes."

"And then meet us right. You'd tell us where to go and then meet us. You wouldn't leave me and Cal-babe alone would you?"

Jake shook his head. "Seriously. If it came down to it, there comes a time when your career comes first and there are times that your career doesn't. A total nuclear holocaust is not one of those times. I probably in all honesty can say, I would go AWOL and be with my family. I would not sit in a plane watching the country's destruction knowing that my wife and family are down there. I couldn't do it."

"Oh Jake." Cal said breathy. "Look, you gave me chills." She showed him her arm. "I'm gonna cry. That was so touching."

Jake smiled. "But . . ." He held up his hand. "It's totally hypothetical. Because all of us are going to walk off this island, sit down, have a beer except for Cal that is, and laugh at the elaborate measures this experiment has gone to."

Once again, like they had done every other time Jake tossed out his disbelief, everyone moaned at him.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SEVEN

Caldwell Research Institute - Los Angeles, CA

August 17th - 3:15 a.m.

A hazy cloud of cigarette smoke lingered thick in Aldo's room. He brought his hand down blindly to the ashtray flicking the ash, missing the overflowing gold dish and spraying ashes everywhere. He had done so for a while, the gray speckles showed that. Crumbled packs of cigarette sprawled about. Aldo coughed, and kept his eyes on the television, smashing out the cigarette, picking up his pack and grabbing another one. The flame on his Zippo rose high and blocked his vision of the television for only a second as he lit the cigarette.

The metal lid to the lighter clanked loudly as Aldo closed it, then tossed it on the table. He blew out the smoke of the long hit he had taken, adding to the cloud already there. His dark eyes were even darker, and his face was pale with worry. He looked as if he hadn't slept in days, and Aldo hadn't. Hair curly instead of combed straight, a sweat suit instead of business suit. And in the quiet of the center when everyone else but those on duty slept, Aldo didn't. He couldn't. The news and all that happened in the world became an addiction and he just couldn't stop watching, wearing him down or not.

"At eleven p.m. eastern standard time yesterday, rumors were put to rest when President Wilson confirmed that both Russia and China have issued a stern warning to the United States." The Central News network Anchorwoman spoke. "Believing it to be a biological weapon gone awry, President Ishtakov urged the United States to move in what he called a malicious violation of humanity. He stated that if measures are not taken immediately to rectify the situation in the Pacific, in the best interest of humankind, he and other allies would take the necessary measures to handle it. President Wilson responded to the warning by saying, that any unauthorized move would be considered an act of war and the United States would act accordingly. Experts believe that escalation of tension between the two super powers is imminent."

Aldo shut off the television. He would leave and watch it with someone else he knew would talk to him. So, cigarette in mouth, he grabbed his pack, little bag of candy and left his room.

The halls were dimly lit, as they always were that time of night. He stopped for two cups of coffee at the vending area and proceeded to the control room. Knowing Barb was pulling a shift alone, Aldo figured she could use some company. Or at least hoped she would. The soldier posted at the door, opened it for Aldo.

"Thanks." Aldo smiled. "Lots of traffic tonight?"

He shook his head. "No. Not much."

"Raisinette?" Aldo lifted the little yellow bag gripped between the two fingers that also clenched a cup of coffee.

“No.” He smiled. “Thank you.”

Aldo slipped inside and the door closed behind him. Barb wasn’t watching the news, nor was there any noise at all in the control room except for a steady dripping. Normal for when the participants slept. And Aldo chuckled when he saw so was Barb. “Hey ya kid. Brought you some coffee. Wake up.” He stepped down the stairs and moved to where Barb, like so many times before, had her head down. “Barb.” Aldo called to her moving closer. “You have to get up. Or you’ll lose your job. Not like anyone else wants it. Barb.” Aldo reached to set down the coffees and they fell from his hand to the floor when he saw the reason for the dripping noise. The entire counter was covered with blood, it formed a puddle under Barb’s head. So much there it overflowed to the floor. “Oh My God.” Aldo touched her shoulder and Barb’s cold, lifeless body, slipped to the right and off the chair. A gouge so huge ran across her neck her head was nearly severed off. Aldo backed up and spun to get help, as he did, he stopped cold when a revolver was shoved point blank in his face.

Caruso clicked back the hammer of the gun he held. “It’s over.”

“What the hell are you talking about.”

“Look what we did. Look Aldo.”

“I see what *you* did.” Aldo argued.

“She argued with me.” Caruso had tears in his eyes. “She argued and said the world is not over. How could she say that? All those people we killed. And more. We’ve started world war three because of our greed.”

“You’re out of your goddamn mind.” Aldo tried to stay fearless. It wasn’t the first time in his life he stood facing the barrel of a revolver. And he highly doubted it would be his last.

“We’re all gonna pay Aldo. Damnation is our punishment. I don’t want to be around when the world ends. None of us deserve to be here if it doesn’t.”

“Maybe you don’t. But I do. And I will watch the world be saved.”

“No you won’t.” Caruso kept his aim on Aldo. “I won’t let you.”

“What are you gonna do? Kill me like you killed Barb? Huh?” Aldo’s face turned red. “You pathetic piece of shit. You wanna take a life. Take your own! You’re pissing me off. If you’re gonna shoot me then do it. Don’t stand here before me with a shaking gun in my face. What do you want me to do? Cower to you. Well I won’t do it. Either step aside so I can get someone or shoot the goddamn gun. But don’t waste my time!”

Bang!

~~~~~

Douglass and Ivan paused at the double control room doors to let the four men from the coroners office through. Two teams of two, each carrying a body bag.

With a sickening feeling in his gut, and still shaking from the rude pre-dawn awakening, Douglass stepped in first. He and Ivan were the last two to stumble out of bed and get down there. Greg and the others were there. Colin, a distraught Lyle. Clean up crews worked on moping up the blood that seemed to be everywhere.

Greg was even shaken, or at least looked it when he approached the pair.

“What . . . what happened?” Douglass asked.

“Caruso lost it.” Greg rubbed his own head. “From what we gathered, he came in here, killed Barb while she worked. I don’t even think she saw it coming.”

Ivan glanced down to the room. “What about Aldo?”

Greg turned his head. “Aldo surprisingly isn’t shaken. Agitated, yes. Drunk right now, oh boy.” Greg whistled. “Of course maybe now he’ll pass out and get some sleep.”

“Maybe.” Ivan peered at Aldo. “I’m still concerned for him. This was a traumatic experience.” Keeping his focus on Aldo who sat in a chair smoking a cigarette, Ivan moved with Douglass to check on the man--who though a fellow investor--had become sort of a friend.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SEVEN

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 20<sup>th</sup> - 3:00 p.m.

Rickie stopped and inhaled with a giant whiff when he stepped into the small kitchen. Pots steamed up on the stove, the aroma so good to Rickie. "Stan, Stan, the culinary man." Rickie peeked at the pots. "Look at you cooking up the ingestable pasta delight. I should be calling you chef Stan-R-Dee." Rickie chuckled and turned when Lou walked in with Billy. "Dudes. Check out Stan cooking for us all."

Stan blushed some. "I just love it. And since we're all pretty hungry all the time. My meal will be appreciated."

With Cal, Jake walked in. "I'm following the scent. And Billy where are your shoes?"

Billy looked down to his feet and wiggled his toes. "Ask you pseudo son."

"I'm asking you. That is foul." Jake told him.

"Jake." Billy defended, ignoring Cal's laughing. "You're the one who told Rickie that he could purify water if he ran it through charcoal. Well he took my charcoal inserts out of my shoes and they hurt without any insides."

Jake looked at Rickie. "You did that?"

"Sarge like, I had to experiment."

"Good thinking." Jake gave him a swat to the arm and turned his head to the stove when he heard the sizzle sound. "Stan your pots boiling over."

Another sizzle and Stan looked. "Jake no it's not. Look I have the . . ." Horror filled Stan's eyes when he reached for the burner. From the hood above the stove, slow and steady they dropped down. Amoebas. "Oh shit."

Jake spun to Cal. "Get back." As he reached to shut the vent, down they poured and shot straight out adhering to Stan as if he were their magnet. Stan began to scream turning about.

Jake flipped up the vent and in his bringing down of his arm, reached out and grabbed the fire extinguisher next to the stove. "Lou. Get the other one!" Jake blasted the white cold air on to Stan who cried in pain shocking the amoebas that laced him.

"Jake!" Cal's scream mixed with Billy's.

Jake spun to see Billy drop to the floor. Quickly he shot the extinguisher at Billy the same time Lou raced in the room. Both men, sent the mist about, freeing the amoebas that scurried around.

"Jake!" Billy screamed in agony. "Oh God Jake. There in!" He let out a shriek of pain, scrunching his face.

Jake looked down to Billy's foot. The area below his toes literally bubbled.

Cal dropped to the floor by Billy. "Jake. Help him."

Trying to block out Billy's scream for help, Jake jumped over his body and



raced from the room, he returned a second later, running by Lou with a 'get ready'. He positioned himself on one knee in front of Billy, and he lifted high . . . an ax. "Cal hold him."

"Oh God! No!" Billy cried out.

Cal braced Billy under his shoulders clinging his head close to her chest and closing her eyes.

Jake watched the amoebas move up Billy's leg expanding it as they did. His foot disintegrated, oozing its remains on the floor. "Lou. Get ready." Jake held the ax firm, hurt on his face and in his voice. "I'm sorry Bill. I'm so sorry."

"No!" Billy cried out. And with a hard 'slam' of the ax against the floor, a gut wrenching bellow from Billy, a heart wrenching sob from Cal, Billy's leg severed in a spin, blood shot out like a full force faucet and amoebas, whistling loudly, flew about.

Jake sprang up in the middle of the flying haze of fire extinguishers that Rickie and Lou sprayed out. He whipped his canvass belt off his pants and swooped it down catching Billy's leg. Jake crossed over the ends, and yanked it tight with all of his might stopping the blood from flowing.

Billy shook, arms, hands and body. He murmured sounds of pain. His head twitching from side to side. Cal still held him. Her hands covering his face, her lips to his head, and she clenched him to her and cried loudly. Sobs that were almost screams.

Jake stood from the river of blood on the floor. He ran his bloody hand across his face staring down to Billy, then up to Lou and Rickie. He closed his eyes briefly and reached down to help Stan to his feet. "You all right?"

Stan nodded. "Thank . . . Thank . . ." He closed his eyes tightly when he saw Billy on the floor. "Oh God."

"Stan what do you have here to cauterize this?" Jake asked. "We have to do this and we have to do this right now."

"We have a small laser upstairs. That will work."

"Get it." Jake told him. "And what do you have for pain."

"Some morphine. Not much."

"Get that too. All that you have. And anything, even ointment that will help with infection."

Stan nodded and backed up.

"Bandages!" Jake called out. "Hurry!" He turned to Rickie and Lou. "Blast the amoebas one more time then get them picked up and burned before they revive."

Both Lou and Rickie, looking at Billy, nodded their heads and quickly followed Jake's orders.

Jake walked over and squatted down before Cal and Billy. "Cal." He said her name strongly. "You have to calm down."

Cal was hyperventilating, holding on to Billy. "I . . . I . . . I can't. Oh God. I . . . Can't."

“Cal. Listen to me.” Jake grabbed her arm. He had never seen Cal that hysterical. He worried that she too would go into shock. “He needs you strong. Get strong. Right now. It’s only gonna get worse.”

Cal nodded.

“Babe. I’ll get someone else to hold him.”

“NO!” Cal shook her head. “No.”

“O.K.” Jake looked up when Stan ran back in the room. “We have to do this. Stan, give him one good dose. We’ll save the rest for later.”

“We had more than I thought Jake. We’ll be good for a while.”

“Hit him.” Jake ordered. “Cal.” Jake braced under Billy’s arms and lifted him into Cal and between her legs. “Use your body. O.K.?”

“O.K.” Cal closed her eyes. “Billy.” She whispered. “It’ll be O.K.”

Billy just stared out. He said nothing. His breathing was rapid and huffing.

Jake took his pulse, that too was rapid. “We can’t wait for the drug to kick in. Stan.” Jake held out his hand.

Stan laid the laser into Jake’s palm, pushing the rest of the machine closer. “All ready.”

Jake knelt before Billy’s severed leg. He was grateful that it was a clean cut under the knee. It would make his job, though heart breaking, easier to do. Jake swore at that moment he was feeling every ounce of pain Billy was and every ounce of pain he saw on Cal’s face. “Hold him Cal. Get ready.” Taking a deep breath, Jake brought the laser into Billy’s injury. And with the first touch, the first singeing sound of flesh, Billy released one more long shrill cry of pain and then his head dropped to the right and he passed out.

^^^

The storage closet was deemed the best place. Closed off, no ventilation, no cool air from the air conditioning. Private. All the boxes had been moved out and a mattress in. A single box was left for water, cloths and medication.

Jake checked the bandaging on Billy’s leg, propped it up on a pillow then covered him with the third blanket. Billy was sleeping. Jake checked his pulse, felt the temperature and feel of his skin, then stood up. He looked at Cal who leaned, back to him, face buried in her hands, against a shelf. “Cal.” Jake walked over to her. “Listen. We have no IV’s. When ever he wakes up, and I’ll tell this to everyone. We have to push the fluids. You got that?”

Cal nodded.

Hearing a soft sob come from his wife, Jake moved closer to her laying his hand on her shoulder. Cal immediately spun and fell into his chest and Jake wrapped his arms around her so tight.. “I’m going to get you a drink.”

“I don’t want a drink.”

“You need one. You need to calm down this is not good for our babies. All

right.” He felt her head nod in agreement against his chest. He moved back a little and lifted her chin. “I am so sorry for this.”

“Why would you apologize. You saved his life.”

“I feel really bad. You’re so upset Cal.”

“I can’t help it.” Cal looked at Billy. “This is the second experiment. I’ve seen a lot of horrible things. But this . . . it just hit me.”

“Billy isn’t a nameless, faceless participant. He’s your friend. Your really good friend. Of course it’s going to hurt to see this.”

Cal wiped her hand hard across her face, pushing away the tear. “I don’t want to leave him tonight Jake. I don’t want to leave his side. What if he wakes up. What if he’s in pain, scared, and just needs someone I . . .”

“Cal.” Jake laid his finger across her lips. “It’s fine. You stay with him.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind.”

“I’m sure.” Jake looked down to Billy. “Stay. In fact, I have to go do a check of the building. I’ll stop back.”

“O.K.” Cal tipped toed up and kissed Jake. She folded her arms and moved to the floor by Billy. She lowered down slowly.

“I’ll get you something to sit on.” Jake told her.

“Jake?” Cal called to him.

Jake stopped in his reaching for the door. “Yeah?”

“Jake, I am so very proud of you. So proud of how you reacted today and what you did. Just know that.”

Closing his mouth, Jake softly smiled at Cal. “Thank you for that.” He gave Cal a peaceful look, then feeling better, walked from the closet.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-EIGHT

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 21<sup>st</sup> - 7:45 a.m.

Billy's head tossed side to side avoiding the cool cloth that Cal tried to wipe him with. He moaned softly, eyes closed, his body shifting in a turn of agitation.

"Jake." Cal looked to Jake as he examined the amputation. "He's in pain."

"I know." Jake spoke softly. "But there's not much we can do. Right now I don't want to give him too much morphine. He's still in shock and the pain hasn't hit him entirely yet. I want to conserve what we have for when that happens."

"What can I do?"

"Cal, there really isn't much you can do. But . . ." Jake covered Billy's leg back up. "He's doing better than I expected. I'll be back." Slowly Jake walked from the closet, Rickie and Lou were waiting in the hall.

"Sarge like how is he?" Rickie asked.

Jake shook his head and walked to the recreation room.

"Sarge." Rickie and Lou followed "Sarge?"

"He's not good Rickie." Jake peered down to him. "Not at all. He lost a lot of blood. He's in shock, and God forbid infection starts. We're in trouble."

"Is he going to make it?" Lou asked.

Jake hesitated before he answered. "No. In my opinion, I will be surprised if Billy lives out the week." He saw the odd shifting eye looks on Lou and Rickie. "What?" Jake turned around to see Cal.

Cal slammed the cloth into his chest. "You just lied to me in there."

"No, I did not."

"You told me he was doing good."

"No Cal. I told you he was doing better than I expected and that's the truth."

"Is it?" Cal demanded.

"Yes."

"Be honest with me Jake. How bad is he."

"He could be worse."

"Jake."

"Cal." Jake softened his voice with compassion. "Billy is . . . Billy is dying." He blinked long when he heard the sadness seep from Cal. It hurt him to tell her. "I'm sorry. Without proper medical treatment, the only thing we can do is make him comfortable. And that's why I'm saving he morphine. Incase infection sets in we can pretty much push him close to overdose."

"How long will it be before we know that?"

"Soon." Jake told her. "His temperature will rise first. It may rise anyhow because of the trauma, but that is the first sign. If he makes it through the next few days without any signs of infection, we may be in the clear. I'll keep checking and cleaning it, but short of giving him antibiotics, we're at a loss. I'm sorry."

Cal swallowed harshly. "I'm not giving up hope. There's still hope, right. Tell me there's still hope."

"There's always hope."

"Thank you." Sadly Cal nodded once, bent down, picked up the rag from the floor and slowly turned and walked back to the Billy.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
August 21<sup>st</sup> - 9:10 a.m.

Amber. Glowing. Thick black smoke bellowing up. The islands of Molokai and Lanai sizzled away as the effects of the napalm reared its ugly head on the screens of the control room.

Greg swayed his head slowly. "Let's . . . let's turn this off."

Lyle did, switching to the participants and Stan at the control center. "We've still received no word on Billy from Stan."

"And we can't see how he's doing either," Greg said. "They have him in that closet."

Aldo shook his head. "What is it about that closet?"

"All right." Greg breathed out. "Let's uh, get back to what we were talking about." He waited for the seven investors to sit.

Ivan raised his hand. "Any luck on that tip on Mr. Carrington?"

"No." Greg answered. "Unfortunately, we're drawing up nothing. That tip got us a little closer. He was spotted three months ago with some blonde."

"The man is like Elvis." Aldo snickered. "How many 'Carrington spottings' have we had?"

Greg laughed. "Too many."

Douglass shook his head baffled. "You would think if the man has a possible solution and end to this like Jefferson, he would come forward."

"HA." Aldo scoffed. "Would you come forward if you started all this shit. Intentionally or not?"

"Yes." Douglass said.

"Bullshit." Aldo chuckled at him. "You would not. Neither would I."

"You're right." Douglass nodded.

"Well." Greg cleared his throat to get attention. "Since we've established that we can't count on finding Carrington, let's get to the realistic phase of what we were discussing before. We've decided on a sea rescue. It's the least disturbing should our amoebas revive from the freeze. The prototype is under construction, but scale testing that began yesterday is showing good results. Not lasting mind you. But good. And that's a start. The way we're hoping it will run is. Freeze the island. We'll give you the details on the explosives as soon as we have them. We're in a catch twenty-two because we can't figure *those* out until we know our freeze time length. We know we want to lower a boat to what we hope will be the frozen tundra of the beach. Get our people to the boat while the ground is still frozen and move them out into the ocean where our choppers will pick them up three hundred fifty feet away. Barring no more deaths we figure Jake and Lou will be able to row that boat with no problem and in no time." He saw Watson, agitated stand up. "Mr. Watson is something wrong."

"I have to get out of here."

"And go where?" Greg asked.

"I . . . I don't know. I need air, I just need air." He bolted toward the door. "I think I'm going home. Yeah."

Aldo leaned into Douglass. "Christ another one. Keep all weapons away from him."

"Mr Watson!" Greg called out. "I won't stop you from leaving, but I will remind you of what we saw earlier this morning. Or didn't you witness what was happening in down town Los Angels, rioting worse than with Rodney King."

"I feel so trapped." Watson ran his fingers through his hair. "My family is on my mind. I'm stuck here and unable to do anything."

"You're protected here and there is nothing you can do." Greg told him. "Your family is safe. And you should think about your safety as well. What good will it do them if you run out, get in your car and get killed ten minutes later."

"It . . . it won't be too good at all?" Watson had question in his voice.

Aldo whistled and twirled his finger around his own temple.

Greg ignored Aldo's rude behavior. "Mr. Watson, come back in and have a seat."

"Could I grab a croissant too?"

"Yes you may." Greg spoke to him as if dealing with a child. He took a long, unseen breath slowly through his nostrils as he watched Watson return, pausing at the danish table in debate. Greg turned his back to the investors, running his hand over his hair. He pretended to look at the monitor screens when actually he was hiding is facial expression of 'oh boy'.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 21<sup>st</sup> - 8:00 p.m.

No matter how hard they tried, or how loud they played the jukebox, Rickie, Lou and Stan could still hear Billy's screams and moans of pain. Was he really that loud? They all had to wonder, or were they tuning in subconsciously. Whatever the reason they didn't want to see it get that bad for Billy. They just wanted some relief for him.

Though Billy gave it his best, he still could not control the sounds of the pain he experienced. Jake redid the bandages checking the ho dryness of Billy's skin. Hysterics could have caused it, but Jake feared infection more.

Cal had moved to the mattress. Pillows behind her back, Billy in her arms holding him tight as he held on to her. "Jake, he needs more morphine."

"I know. I'm getting it." Jake covered Billy's leg and reached for the syringe on the floor. He moved around to the side of the mattress and injected the needle into Billy's leg. "It won't take long."

"I can't take it Jake." Billy's voice shook as he spoke "I can't. Why didn't you let them kill me? You should have let me die."

"I couldn't do that Billy. I couldn't. You think I want to see you die? No. And you have to try." Jake told him as he stood up. "I'll uh . . . I'll be in the next room if you need me."

Clenching tightly to Cal, a small sob came from Billy when he felt the kick move within her stomach and touch against his cheek. "Oh God." Billy clenched his eyes tight, his hard to control hands felt Cal's stomach. "I'm never going to see them. I'll never see the babies."

Hearing this made Jake stop with a heavy heart in his reach for the door.

Cal's fingers intertwined tightly through his hair. "Yes, Billy, yes you will."

"Promise me Cal. Promise me you'll tell them about me. Please let them know my name."

"They'll know all about you." Cal comforted him with her soft sad words. "Because you'll get to see them Billy. You *will* be a part of their lives. That I promise you."

Billy's words quivered more. The effects of the morphine trickled into him, calming him some. His one hand laid on her stomach, the other under Cal as his shaking head slowed down some against her chest. "I love you Cal. I love you so much."

Cal's stroking fingers slowed down and she looked up to see Jake turn from the door and face Billy expressionless.

"Tell me Cal. Tell me you love me." Billy's words slurred just a little, the shaking of them leaving as a grogginess hit him. "Tell me you love me . . . even . . . even just a little and I know . . . I know I can beat this. I'll try."

Cal stared at Jake, holding Billy feeling his warm body still tremble some



against her.

Jake looked away, running his hand down his face before turning back to Cal. Whispering he spoke, barely heard, moving lips telling more of what he said than sound. "It's all right Cal."

Cal brought her head lower to Billy, her lips close to him speaking softly. "Can you hear me?" She felt Billy nod. "You are one of my best friends in this whole world. I need you. You hear me. I need you. I love you Billy. And I promise you its more than a little. So now . . . you beat this."

So slightly Jake's jaws twitched as he walked to the mattress. He laid his lips for a long time on top of Cal's head. Pulling away he ran his hand down her cheek and whispered. "I'll be right out there."

Cal watched Jake leave, and she continued to give her comfort to Billy on that bed, until the trembling of his body stopped, the moaning in his voice left, and Billy, finally under the effects of the Morphine, slept.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-NINE

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
August 23<sup>rd</sup> - 10:30 a.m.

“We just . . .” Greg closed his eyes in desperation, his hand pressing on the table as he leaned over the phone. “We just need more time. We’re almost there.”

“Time is something we can ill afford Greg,” President Wilson said over the phone. “I know you’ve heard. Russian and China have issued a one week warning. One week and then they move on this thing. That’s if no more of these amoebas are discovered.”

“Did you explain. Did you send them the data.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t they understand the magnitude of this nesting place. We have to get the nest. If we don’t, we’re going to be right back to square one two months from now.” Greg tried his hardest to get through.

“I understand that. But my hands are tied here. I’m the president for crying out loud. It looks like I am twiddling my thumbs on this whole ordeal.” He paused. “How close are you.”

“Very.” Greg answered. “We’ve been running tests in small scale in Nevada with the small prototype. We feel it will work. We have preliminary plans for how we’ll go about the destruction. We’re just waiting on a date for the completion of the four Lawson Sprayers. Once we have that date, weather predictions, and estimated length of freeze time, we’ll put it in motion ASAP.”

“You have one week.” President Wilson stated strongly. “After that, it’s out of your hands.” Click.

Greg closed his eyes and slowly turned to face the investors and Colin. He spoke no words. His solemn expression of, ‘someone please give me an answer’ said it all.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 21<sup>st</sup> - 11:15 a.m.

The redness of Billy's amputation was strong on Jake's mind as he finished up making his round of checking in the control building. He wanted to see how Billy was. He had upped the dose of morphine, but hoped that didn't trigger the depression Billy just started to lose.

Knocking once on that closet door, instead of being greeted with a 'come in' Jake was greeted with a cloud of smoke that billowed out with Rickie.

"Sarge like, how's it going?"

Jake shifted his eyes to Rickie then to the cloud. "Were you . . . were you smoking illegal drugs in this room?"

"Not me guy." Rickie held up his hand then spun and pointed to Billy. "Him."

Billy was sitting up in bed, pillows behind him. Sluggishly and with a weird grin he lifted his hand to Jake. Cal snickered as she sat in the floor next to him.

"Rickie. Was my expectant wife in the room?"

Rickie scratched his head. "Depends. What was she expecting?"

"No, was she in there while he consumed them."

"Oh!" Rickie said long and drawn. "No way guy, I was like aware of the bambino situation. I booted the Cal-babe out. Check out Billy. Man, he's kicking with the combo of the morphine and the peace pipe."

"You let him smoke Opium?" Jake's eyes widened.

"Yeah, why."

"Rickie." Jake shuddered. "The mixture of the two could kill him."

"Oh yeah?" Rickie peeked in the room. "Dude, at least he won't feel it right? And like you said he's getting worse, so why let the man suffer."

Humbled. Jake was humbled. "You're right. We're gonna leave this door open. I don't need my wife and babies mellowing out as well."

"Why not."

"It's not good for them."

"But like with true Indians. Don't you think like the babes of the chiefs inhaled it."

"I'm sure they did." Jake said.

"Nothing happened to them guy."

"Oh yeah, then explain Paul." Jake walked in the room. "How ya doing Billy."

Billy smiled and spoke so slow. "Jake."

"Yes." Jake moved to the end of the mattress. "I'm going to check your leg."

"The stump." Billy gave a slow thumbs up. "You do that."

"Jake." Cal spoke his name with a smile. "Look how good his doing."

"He's stoned Cal."

"Still. Billy's doing good."

"Bob." Billy corrected.

Jake looked up as he undid the bandages. "Who's Bob?"

"Me." Billy answered. "Rickie calls me Bob. You know because he said that's what I'll do in the ocean."

"Rickie is very rude." Jake could see as he unwrapped the leg the infection had grown a little. He tried not to let it facially show. He grabbed the tube of ointment and gauze that he had always set by the mattress. "Besides, high. How are you feeling?"

"Bet me I could run." Billy said.

"Cal." Jake looked to her. "How much of that peace pipe did Rickie allow him to smoke?"

"A few puffs." Cal answered.

"Is there any left?" Jake asked knowing it would come in handy when Billy really needed it.

"Hey!" Billy raised his voice, it lowered down. "You gonna smoke the peace pipe Jake."

"Oh yeah." Jake said sarcastically as he finished applying the only means he had to fighting Billy's infection. "I'm gonna party."

Cal had to laugh. So weird Jake sounded saying that.

Billy laughed too. "I'm getting better. Huh?"

Jake took a deep breath. "Um . . . yeah." He hated to lie. But in this case he had to. If Billy didn't feel it, that was half the battle. "I'm gonna bandage you back up and then I'll let you and Cal dwell in your peace pipe world."

Billy's head moved like it weighted too much for him. He swayed it Cal's way and it dropped when he looked at her. "Cal's great."

"Yes." Jake replied while working.

"She is so great. Isn't she Jake?"

"Yes."

"Great." Billy smiled at Cal. "I love her. Did you know I love her?"

"Yes. Billy I know this. We all know this. You've said it quite a number of times these past couple of days." Jake tried to finish up.

"That's because I love her . . . A whole bunch." Billy's words were so slurry as he widened his arms.

"Great." Jake covered Billy's leg. "I'll just let you two love birds be." He smiled at Cal. "I'll check back."

"Oh. Jake." Billy tried to lift his arm, it raised an inch, he had to use the other one to bring it up. "Wait."

"Yes." Jake turned from his leaving.

"I was wondering . . ."

Jake waited. "Yes."

"I was . . . wondering."

Again Jake waded through the silence. "Yes?" He asked stronger.

"Would you." Billy pointed at him. "Would you consider giving up Cal so I

could marry her? I would really, really, really, really like that.”

“I’m sure you would.” Jake said.

“Would you consider that. Just . . .” Billy’s voice squeaked. “Just think about it. Please?”

“I’ll tell you what. Sure. Why not.” Jake looked at him. “You beat this thing. You make it to the end of this experiment.” Jake winked. “And you and I will sit down and work out those details.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Oh. That is so great. Thanks Jake. You’re great.”

“I know.” He looked at Cal who shook her head laughing. “Get better Bill. You have to get better or this deals off.”

“Got it.” Billy gave another sluggish thumbs up. “And Jake.”

Jake rolled his eyes in his leaving and turned back around. He kept his cool though. “What now? Would you like my house too Billy?”

“Yes. But!” Billy tried to lifted his finger but he gave up. “No. I want to thank you for saving my life. You’re the man, Jake.”

“Oh yeah, I’m the man.” Jake held in a snicker looking at Billy totally embarked on a journey of downers and pain killers. “You get some rest.”

“I will.” Billy started to lay down. “Oh and Jake!”

Cal watched Jake skid to a stop. In a small warning voice she called his name. “Jake.”

Jake smiled and turned around. “Yes.”

Billy lifted his blanket, peeked under, looked up at Jake and gave yet another thumbs up but with a sloppy wink. “I’m being good. No erections.”

Cal burst out laughing, and Jake’s top lip quivered. He cleared his throat and took on a serious tone. “I am very glad to hear that.” Shaking his head with a slight chuckle Jake left the closet, raising his hand in a wave and informing them like Schwartznegger, that he would be back.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
August 23<sup>rd</sup> - 1:30 p.m.

Papers were spread about the meeting table in the control room. Papers that contained weather predictions. Theories on freezing. The layout to the explosives. A phone with a direct line to the manufacturers so they wouldn't get a busy signal. Everything was there but the date that the Lawson Sprayers will be complete.

No more meetings. No more discussions. They had said all that had to be said. Greg, Colin and the investors sat around the table. Staring at the phone. Cigarette smoke lingered above them. With not much to watch on the monitor or television. They sat impatiently like expectant fathers in the waiting room of the maternity ward.

The phone rang.

Everyone sprang up as if they just jumped from their skin. Greg held up his hand and picked up the phone. "Haynes." His eyes closed and he smiled. "Yes. Thanks." Slowly he hung up the phone and stood from his seat. "Three days." he yelled over the railing to Lyle. "Lyle. Get Stan on the phone. Round up Graison we have to get this plan in motion because we're gonna need him." Getting the 'O.K.' from Lyle, Greg refaced the investors and Colin. "I'll go through what we have to go through with Graison about the rescue and the ground explosives. By the twenty-eighth we should have them off the island and the island and nesting destroyed. That's cutting it pretty close but . . ." Greg twitched his head to the right. "It's still less than a weeks time. And we'll beat the Russia deadline."

"Dr. Haynes." Lyle stepped up to the meeting level. "We've lost all communications with them."

"What?" Greg looked. Only one monitor showed a picture and that was the aerial shot. Everything else was static. "What about the phones?"

"Dead sir. Nothing. I barely got a second sentence out to Stan and everything went."

"Damn it." Greg huffed. "We need communication. Let's see if we can clear a signal."

"Sir." Lyle interrupted him. "It's the amoebas. They've finally blocked our satellite on the island."

"Can we bounce a signal from the one in the sky?" Greg asked.

"We can try."

"Get on it." Greg ordered him and turned to everyone. "Now let's just hope that Jake has implemented a back up plan to clear that satellite. Because we have to get in touch with them. We're not talking a lot of time to pull this off once we start. We won't be able to do it if our people there . . ." Greg pointed to fuzzy grey monitors. "Are in the dark about it all."

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 21<sup>st</sup> - 2:05 p.m.

"Now what exactly did they say?" Jake asked Stan as he pulled up his protective suit.

"All Lyle said was to get you. They have the rescue plans and only have . . . and that's all I got. Dead."

"So for all we know they can be pulling this off in an hour, a day, a week." Jake zipped up.

"Exactly."

"Cal check me for holes." Jake told Cal who stood with tape.

"No Cal." Lou's voice came in the room. "Check me for holes."

Cal lifted up from visually examining Jake. "Lou?" He was in a biohazard suit. All but the headgear.

"Lou." Jake stepped to him. "What the hell are you doing. I need you in the monitoring room messing with that dish while I clear it."

"Jake that's stupid." Lou told him. "Why would you do that? You're our strongest player here."

"That's right. I go out there."

"No." Lou shook his head. "If something goes wrong. We're screwed."

"Lou I have to do this." Jake argued. "Now get out of that . . ."

"No." Lou said strongly and adamantly. "I remember when . . . God this sounds so sci-fi. I remember when we went out to wipe out those mutant animals. And Cal, she wanted to go really bad. You wouldn't let her."

"That's because Cal is pregnant and she had the baby to think about."

"That's right." Lou raised an eye brow. "You told her to get her priorities straight. And I'm telling you Jake, with all do respect, to do the same. You have a wife, and two kids on the way. Who's gonna protect them and take care of them through the years if something happens out there to you?"

"I'm clearing off a satellite dish Lou. That's it."

"O.K., if that's it. What's the big deal. Let me go out there and clear it. There are so many of them out there. Let me be the one to take the chance of getting crushed by them. Not you. Jake, go to the monitoring room."

Jake looked down to Cal then back to Lou. "Fine. But I'm staying suited. If you take too long or I think there's a problem, I'm coming out."

"That's fine." Lou lifted his headgear. "But I'm sure I'll be back and be the big hero on this one." He smiled. "After all, I am Mad Max." He set the headgear over his head, his muffled voice seeped through as he connected it. "Check me for holes."

^^^

Jake, in his unzipped suit, sat down at the table before the small monitoring

wall. He checked for power to make sure everything was on. It was. He looked to his left to the window he wished he could see out of. Watch. But he couldn't. He could only hope for the best as Lou ventured out into the black world.

From the fire extinguishers that Rickie and Stan sprayed, and the air conditioning in the building, a blast of cold air shot out when one of the front double doors opened, causing the amoebas to scurry outward away from the building.

Not an amoeba was there when Lou stepped out and under the protective awning. But just a step down away, they were everywhere. A carpet, moving, thick and Lou hadn't any perception of how deep they were. He could only wait until he stepped down into them and felt how far he sank.

Lou was grateful he couldn't hear very much. He could only imagine how loud all of those things were. He had to take a second to look around, take in the awesome sight of what was before him. The sun reflected off the sliminess of the amoebas as if they were black snow. Casting sparkles of color about, like floating stars, and immediately Lou wondered if he stepped into some sort of Grim Reaper's Christmas wonderland.

Chuckling at his own thought, Lou forged ahead carrying two fire extinguishers. Even though he wore shoes he could still feel them every step he took. Under his feet. Slippery and squishy as if he were walking in a pool of worms. They adhered to him, causing pressure and heaviness on the suit but not enough to slow him too much or stop him. Lou didn't have far to go. Ten feet to the side of the building and a climb up the ladder attached to the side of the wall. That would take him to the roof and there he would blast them with the fire extinguisher and clear them from the satellite and as many as the chilled little things he could from the roof.

They slipped and dripped from the ladder like mud. Lou knew it was going to be a task climbing up there with only one hand. After blasting the ladder once with the mist, he tucked the two smaller extinguishers under his arm, and he began to climb.

They dropped on him and came at him from behind. Like waves they attacked, crashing into him with a smashing force. The climb became increasing difficult the further up he went. But there was no way to stop. No way to hold on and spray the ones that had him until he reached the roof. And finally Lou made it.

He could see as soon as he rolled onto the roof and into the thick pile why they lost communications. The amoebas had conjugated on the roof and piled high around and on the satellite so much he could barely see it.

Feeling like he was in the second grade again when Newark had the historical snow storm, Lou had to inch his way through the thickened amoebas to the large mound he believed was the satellite dish.

He began to blast them and they dropped from the dish. He called himself the exterminator, seeing the dish more and more with each spray. It was working.



He set down the fire extinguishers and took the time to lift the amoebas that had become still and hard and carry armfuls over the building and drop them. Lou could have stopped. He could have just quit when a lot of the dish and control box had been exposed, but he didn't. He didn't want to take the chance of losing communications again. Not when they were nearing the vital rescue operation.

A small section of the roof if he could, a layer of the amoebas would even help. That's all Lou wanted to clear. Freezing them was easy. And lifting them and dumping them off was a piece of cake. He used the last of the one extinguishers, but enough had not been cleared. Figuring he could jump off the roof and land safely with all them below, then run like hell for the doors, Lou began to spray about his safety extinguisher, the one he was to use for his protection only.

A hiss, a flicker and all eighth of the monitors came back on in the monitoring room. Jake found himself staring at a shot of Greg who wasn't even paying attention. "We're back." Jake grinned and Greg turned to face the camera.

"Jake." He spoke his name with relief then Greg lifted his eyes. "I see Lou is clearing the roof."

"Clearing the roof?"

"Yeah, Lyle, run him that shot."

Jake watched the feed hit the one monitor. Lou was dropping the extinguisher. "Damn it Lou get down here."

"I believe he's on his way." Greg smiled.

Lou closed one eye in a squirmishness as he stepped over the roof lowering his foot down and sliding off amoebas so he could get his footing. He knew it was going to be tricky going down, but he thought he'd give the ladder a try first before he made that leap.

If he thought going up was bad, going down was worse. Not only did they pelt at him, but this time Lou had no way to clear the ladder to hold on. And the slimness of the amoebas got under his fingers and feet causing Lou to lose his footing.

Why he didn't just let go and fall was beyond him. He had a soft blanket below him. Perhaps it was instinct, perhaps he didn't think. Feeling himself falling, he reached up with one of his arms, gripping onto a rung and swinging backward crashing into the building. It didn't pain him as much as the sound he heard when he tried to return to the ladder.

Rip.

Lou's eyes widened, he knew his suit was tore. But where? He was covered with them as it was and he didn't want to waste anytime getting back to the safety

of the building. He let go of his hold, dropping down into the depth of the amoebas. Landing feet first, Lou's knees buckled and he fell to the ground landing face first into the pile. Hurriedly he picked himself up, and in his first running step back to the building he felt them.

Closer than they were before. Creepy. Crawling, multitudes of them. Not over top of his suit, but in it. He could feel them on the legs of his jeans, covering his shins, thighs, groin and stomach. "Oh God." He raced through the thickness back to the building.

"Jake." Greg called him. "Do you see that. Something's wrong."

"I see that." Jake, in his jump from the seat, grabbed his head gear and fire extinguisher and flew from that room racing through the hall, down the stairwell and to the main floor. "Get ready to let him in!" Jake called out. "Get ready to blast!"

The figure of a covered Lou was seen nearing the building. Trudging, turning spinning as if he fought.

"Rickie open those doors! Stan get ready with me to blast them!"

Rickie kept his fire extinguisher between his legs to grab easily as he moved to the side of the door and gripped the handle.

"On my call." Jake held his extinguisher ready. And so did Stan. He waited. "Ready and . . . Now!" Jake called out. Rickie opened the door and he and Stan, full blast, released the mist from the extinguishers. Suited up fully or not, Jake, still spraying raced out, emerged through the mist, saw Lou on the top step, grabbed hold of him and led him in.

The second they got Lou inside, and the doors shut, frozen amoebas dropped from him, but Lou screamed in horror.

"Jake!" Lou's face was red, Amoebas crawled with in his head gear. "There in me. Jake! Oh God help me! Don't let me die like this! Jake!" The extending of Lou's suit. The distorting came from within it could be seen as Lou screamed in horrific pain. "Jake. Do it. Help me!"

Keeping his focus on Lou, Jake reached into his unzipped suit, pulled the revolver from the waist of his pants, extended it out in a high aim, pulled back the hammer, and after making eye contact with Lou, Jake closed his eyes and fired one shot.

Lou's dropped to the floor. The plastic shield of his head gear was shattered and red with blood. Amoebas flew out and Stan hit them with the extinguisher.

Jake saw Lou's suit stretch out and high. "We have to get him out of here. Now. Rickie get the door."

Rickie was backing up shaking his head.

"Goddamn it Rickie grab that door!" Jake yelled. "Stan you're in charge of blasting them."

Stan nodded and prepared. Rickie still focusing on a bubbling Lou, reached

for the door.

Rushing, Jake grabbed hold of Lou's arm. He could feel as soon as he gripped, nothing but amoebas were in there. There was no weight to Lou's body, and with ease Jake pulled him to the door. As soon as Rickie opened it and Stan blasted, Jake pulled him out and raced back in.

The door shut. Standing there watching the rise of the cold fog, Jake, Rickie and Stan watched Lou's body on the steps of the building. His suit growing wider, higher, stretched to the limits like an over expanded balloon. Then finally, the suit gave in. With the force of an explosion, the suit burst in every direction, sending a rain of black and red up and out. Amoebas and blood. And after the fountain mixture of the two had splashed out and landed everywhere. They could see there was nothing on that porch, not a piece of a suit, nothing, that even remotely showed a sign that Lou was ever out there.

In the silence, a Rickie sob burst through. Jake laid his arm on his back, pulling Rickie into him and he turned him away from the scene. And they walked away knowing that even though Lou was gone, what he had done would never be forgotten or buried like he now was somewhere with in the amoebas.

^^^

It was far into evening by the time Jake returned to the monitoring room with a bottle of Jack Daniels and a glass. He had the building to check. Billy, whom he kept drugged up, to deal with. Rickie who wasn't dealing with Lou's death well. Jake could have returned earlier, those were his excuses. The truth was, like everyone else, he was too down. He just wanted to take some time, get himself together, and deal with it. Then he could deal with Caldwell and everything they were going to tell him.

A pen and notebook before him, Jake poured about two inches worth of booze into his glass, sipped it, then downed it. He refilled his glass and made his connection to Greg.

"Jake." Greg spoke his name, hesitating some in speaking to him. "How uh, how's it going up there."

"It's going." Jake brought the glass to his mouth.

"We realize that perhaps you aren't in the mood right now to talk about this but. We have to."

"I know."

"You ready."

"Yes." Jake set down his glass, picked up the pen and leaned back in the chair. "Go on."

"Construction on the four Lawson Sprayers, our prototype will be complete in three days. We move into phase one on the fourth day. With me?"

Jake merely made a scoffing face.

"All right here's the way it will go. First the Lawson Sprayer. We've redone

the water tanks on fire rescue choppers. They will be attached with the Lawson sprayer. So, instead of dumping, it sprays, like a thin haze of rain. Not much, nit much will be needed. We've been testing in the desert. Now instead of water, the tanks will be filled with liquid nitrogen. The first chopper will make it's pass dumping everything it has from one tank strictly over the volcano. Then he'll circle around with the second chopper, side by side they will canvass the island releasing the liquid nitrogen down upon you. This should take approximately twenty minutes. When they are done, Chopper one will lower down to the center, the detonation devices at the same time chopper two lowers the encase nuclear device into the volcano. The lowering of these items will also be our tell tale sign if the amoebas are indeed frozen, if not, our men get it. When it is all clear, that is where you and Stan come in. You have to lay out the detonation devices. We have a link system here and a five point plan. The control center, is center. One detonation device will go there. We will send you a map of the region, and where we want the other five set up. They will be placed in five points like a star. You'll see that on the map. We have put together what we feel will be your shortest route. Set them up, get back to the center."

"Whoa." Jake held up his hand. "Get back to the center? When does the rescue take place? I want my wife off this island."

"The next day."

"Why the next day?"

"We have a problem." Greg explained. "See right now air pressure is stagnant. The hot air is moving in but not going anywhere. Basically, you don't realize it, but you're in a heat wave and it's not expected to lift. If it does. If, then the rescue will take place that day. But we don't believe. That's why we have to do things this way. We got about two and a half safe hours of freeze time Jake. That's not much. We figure it's gonna take you close to that to get those detonation devices squared away. The freezing process takes about like I said, twenty minutes. We're pushing it here. Once we get everything in place. The next day, our choppers refuel and head back out, they will ice the island back up. Lower a boat down to shore. When it is clear, then you and the others will leave the center, head down to the beach, get in the boat and row out three hundred and fifty feet where the chopper can safely pick you up, amoebas or not."

"Why don't they just pick us up on the beach."

"They can't land or get close to the ground." Greg said. "The blades will generate the warm air speeding up the reviving process. And besides, once the island is frozen, it's gonna take awhile to get you to that beach. You've got an injured man you have to carry. A very pregnant wife. It will be slick and you'll have to move slow."

Jake was writing everything down. "When do we detonate?"

"You don't. We do. Once you are off that island. The link system works like this. We send a detonation signal from the center bomb, it sends a signal out to the others,. Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom. All six go off in sequence, napalm

fries out the surface. You're in the air, out of harms way, the nuclear device is activated. Bye-bye island."

Jake dropped the pen and rubbed his eyes. "It sounds too simple."

"We've been working it out to the finest detail for a while." There was a hush of silence and closely Greg leaned his face to the camera blocking out everyone and everything in the backdrop of the control room. So close Jake could see the tickle of sweat on his brow. Serious he looked, and with so much passion Greg spoke. "But don't kid yourself Jake. Anything can go wrong. We're hoping on crossed fingers here. Balancing on an eyelash. And we've only got one chance to make this work. After that, it is so far out of our hands, you don't even know. In four days we have got to do this and do this right. And trust me when I tell you, that four days is borrowed time."

CHAPTER NINETY

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
August 27<sup>th</sup> - 9:00 a.m.

With arms folded to his body, Greg, standing next to Colin looked up to the monitor screen and gave a tightly closed proud look to him.

"Looks good." Colin commented.

"And right on schedule. Start the clock Lyle."

"You got it."

"No matter where Jake is when that timer goes off you tell him to get back in there." Greg informed. Watching Lyle nod his agreement, Greg saw something else, Colonel Johnson holding up a phone.

"Sir, The president."

Upbeat and optimistic, Greg raced to the phone. He retrieved it. "Dr. Haynes . . . yes sir. As we speak sir. Yes. Right now they're getting ready to mist the island up. We'll lower the weapons down and get things set up. Oh. Oh that is great news." Greg clenched his fist. "Thank you sir. I will." Greg hung up the phone, turned to Colin and the investors and gave a thumbs up. "We're validated. The president just informed me that Russia is gonna wait and see what we produce tomorrow before they make a decision on what they are doing at the end of the week."

Near cheers emanated in the room.

Greg spun back around to Lyle laying a hand on his shoulder. "Get Stan to hook him and Jake up. I want to do a radio check before we send them out." Greg peered up at the screens again and smiled.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 27<sup>th</sup> - 9:12 a.m.

Putting on the leather gloves, Jake's head turned to down the hall when the sound of Billy's deep gurgling cough carried up to him. He adjusted his headset. "I hear you Haynes. You're breaking up some but I hear you."

"Good." Greg said through the radio. "We have that dish turned down, we don't want it iced up too much. We'll run another check after the nitrogen is dropped."

"Got it." Jake pulled on the last glove, turned his head to another cough, then to Cal who stood with him. "You've been moving Billy right?"

"Yes."

"Prop him up more when you get back there." Jake instructed her. "His lungs are filling up now."

"I'll do that." Cal reached up and touched Jake's face. "Why aren't you wearing that suit?"

"I can't sweetie." Jake turned his head to bring his lips to her palm. "It's going to be cold. Slick. And I have to move. Besides, we'll get an all clear beforehand."

"Be careful." Cal leaned out to kiss him.

"I will. Then when I get back. We pack." Jake smiled.

"Sarge!" Rickie called up racing up the hall. "Dude! Can I please go. Please."

"Rickie no." Jake shook his head. "You stay here with Cal and help with Billy. I need you here."

"But dude, I'm like a monster. I can zip about out there."

"Yes I know." Jake told him. "But zip about in here. This is where . . ." Jake looked up to the ceiling when he heard the chopper go by. He had to wonder at first if they even sprayed anything at all. But he soon found out they did, when a loud ripping cracking occurred. The sound of the whole entire building icing up.

"Oh shit." Cal looked around. "Tell me this building isn't going to break like those flowers we used to dip in school."

Jake shook his head. "No. It won't. It may get cold for a while. Just a while. Hold it." He pressed the earpiece more into his ear, "I read you Haynes. I'm on it." Jake leaned down to Cal and kissed her softly. "They're lowering the stuff."

"Good luck." Cal winked.

"Thank you." Laying his gloved hand on her face, Jake took a step back, turned, laid his hand on Rickie's back for a moment then trotted off down the hall where Stan waited by the front doors.

Eggs shells is what it felt like to Jake as he walked out of the building

stepping on the frozen amoebas. They cracked and crunched, sounding like glass breaking with each stomping tromp Jake made over them with his boots. The air was cool, crisp and it stung a little when Jake took a breath in.

Two crates sat not far from the center, lowered by the chopper. And though the amoebas broke when Jake and Stan walked on them, it didn't stop them from having a slipperiness to them. So with caution, Jake and Stan moved, reaching the crates, opening them, and as fast as they could, they began to implement the first phase..



Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
August 27<sup>th</sup> - 11:33 a.m.

Colin carried a clipboard, a pen clenched between his teeth as he paced behind Lyle in the control room.

"The time." Aldo called out. "It seemed short."

Colin removed the pen. "It was. Lyle. What was our freeze time."

"Two hours seventeen minutes and they started to revive."

Colin noted that. "That may have been shorter than expected but we saved eight minutes spraying the island." He turned to Aldo. "They'll be fine tomorrow."

Aldo nodded in relief.

Greg saw Jake moving about on the monitor screen. "All right. We ran a test of the link when frozen. Let's give it the real test. Check it Lyle."

There were six beeps that rang out. "Linked."

"Excellent." Greg smiled. "We knew they would work in the cold. Under amoebas, well. How about our warhead."

"Working." Lyle told him.

With his hands on his hips Greg face everyone on the room. "I think as a team we deserve a round of applause. Phase one . . . successful. Now it's time to deliver that good news to the president." As those in the room clapped, Greg proudly made it to the phone and lifted it.

I-S.E. Thirteen - The Island

August 27<sup>th</sup> - 4:55 p.m.

"God, Billy." Jake bitched while he packed up the two fire cases of Billy's journalism supplies. "How much shit did you bring."

"Keep in mind Jake." Cal pointed as she stirred soup in a pot on the small burner in the rec room. "A lot of that is six months worth of writing and pictures."

"Am I supposed to fit his laptop in here?" Jake asked.

"It fits straight down on the side of one." Cal turned off the little burner. She watched Jake smile. "What is it."

Jake held up a close up of Reed smiling, post-baldness, earless, tongueless, fingerless. "This guy is going to gave us hours of story telling enjoyment."

"He was funny. Not that he meant to be. Remember how serious he was when we got here?"

"Then he fuckin cracked." Jake shoved the pictures in the case. "Just you and me again Cal. Ending the experiment."

"Billy and Rickie." Cal poured the soup.

"They weren't participants. At least they weren't supposed to be." Jake grunted with closing the firebox. "Twenty fuckin years in the service and never has anything given me so much trouble."

Cal snickered. "And speaking of Billy."

Jake grunted.

"Jake, what is up with that cough he has now? You said his lungs are filling up."

"They are. He has pneumonia. There!" Jake nodded and smiled. "This will not open again."

"He'll be O.K. until tomorrow right?" Lifting the mug she placed the soup in, Cal began to turn to leave the room.

"He should be fine. Keep him sitting up. We've slowed down on the pain killers, and they didn't help his lungs. So, this time tomorrow he'll be in medical care. He'll be fine."

"Good." Out of the recreation room Cal walked, turning into the closet. "I have your dinner."

"I'm not hungry." Billy looked up and coughed.

"Tough." Cal extended the mug down to him. "Eat or I feed you."

Billy slowly took the mug. "Did you guys get my cases together?"

Jake rolled his eyes. "Yes."

Swinging the spoon slowly in the soup, Billy gazed up to Jake. "I'm feeling really bad Jake. My chest . . ." Billy coughed and cringed. "It hurts."

Jake moved closer, reached down and slid his hand behind Billy's neck to feel his body temperature. "When did you take the aspirin last Bill?"

"About an hour ago."

"How many."

“Three.”

“Cal go get him two more.” Jake twitched his head to the door. “I have another bottle in my bag.”

“I’ll go get it.” Cal gave a quick smile and walked out.

“What’s wrong?” Billy looked up to Jake.

“Your temperature is really high.” Jake told him. “You have one hell of an infection raging through your body. It’s moved from that leg all around. I’d love to know how the hell you’re still sitting here right now, because you Billy, should be a dead man.” Jake saw Cal with a scolding look walk in the room. “What’s the glare for?”

“You are so insensitive at times.” She handed Billy the aspirin and lifted his glass of water.

Jake waved her off. “I am not. And I have to get the rest of the things together. I want to have to prepare nothing but him . . .” He pointed to Billy. “. . . come tomorrow lift up time.”

Billy took his pills and handed the water back to Cal. He looked up at her with a smile, then to Jake who was leaving. “Oh Jake.” He called out and followed it with a deep cough.

Jake waited patiently for Billy to stop rumbling his chest mucus. “What?”

“You asked how I’m still sitting here. It’s because of you.”

Jake gave a semi smile after Cal’s ‘ah’. “Thanks Billy.”

“Yeah.” Billy tried not to laugh, it made him cough worse. “After all, you *did* make that deal with me.”

Jake looked curiously at Billy, not knowing what he was talking about. He nodded as if he did and turned, leaving the room. The second he stepped out into the hall, ‘The Deal’ he made with Billy hit him. Jake stopped, looked back in the closet, and saw Billy staring at Cal with that stupid puppy dog, enamored look he always got on his face. With a raise of an eyebrow, shake of his head and a ‘Nah’, Jake chuckled it off as a bad sick-man’s joke and went back to finished the packing up.

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
August 27<sup>th</sup> - 10:43 p.m.

Elbows on knees, leaning drastically forward in a chair before a television. Aldo sat center of the other six investors who just about had as much distraught written across their faces as Aldo did. And Aldo swore with every town or city Beth Chase read off, he swore he pulled the bottom of his eye lids further down with his finger tips.

“ . . .Kearnae, Hana, Wailakul, Hilo, and finally Hawi.” Beth set the list aside. “In the past six hours official confirmation has surfaced regarding the finding of the micro organism in those cities. President Wilson stated there will be no hesitation in handling this. Some experts are questioning, when will it stop? How far will it extend? How much death and destruction will it take before they search out another way to destroy these micro organisms. And there are others who believe and support the destruction, saying that every measure should be taken, no matter how far or extreme to ensure that *we*, not these organisms, are the ones remaining when it is all said and done with.”

Aggravated, Aldo slid his hands down his face the rest of the way as he stood up. “Someone ought to tell these people. Every extreme step *is* being taken.” He shook his head slowly. “We just don’t know for certain . . . if extreme is even enough.”

CHAPTER NINETY-ONE

THE RESCUE - I-S.E. THIRTEEN

The Island/Caldwell

August 28<sup>th</sup>

*8:30 a.m.*

Jake zipped up what he knew would be the last of the bags. He had vowed the night before that he wouldn't be packing anything. Not even his toothbrush. Yet there he stood jamming a stack of papers into the only bag he and Cal would take. A small bag none the less. If it was up to Jake he would have told everyone to just buy new things. But when Cal started complaining so did everyone else.

"Sarge like I'm ready." Rickie dropped the small knapsack on the floor by Jake's bag.

Jake held his hand out to Cal. "Now see. That. That little bag right there is what I'm talking about. Not this." Jake nudged his bag with his foot.

"Jake, that's Billy's work in there. I can't leave it behind."

"Disk Cal. He has it on disk." Jake raised his eyebrows.

"Jake, we're leaving the experiment early. Do you think we'll get paid."

"Oh yeah." Jake nodded. "I already checked on that one. I'd be really fuckin pissed if I went through this whole 'the world's gonna end' charade and not get paid because they pulled us early to go along with their show." Jake closed one eye and tilted his head when Rickie and Cal both whined his name at the same time. "Stop that will you."

Cal's mouth dropped open. "My God are you miserable. You know I am not recalling you being this bad last experiment when we were getting ready to leave."

"Cal, I don't recall last experiment having to do all the shit I have to do now." Jake looked down to the stuff they had to take. "Look at this. We probably have a little fuckin dingy. Let's just hope Stan doesn't have . . ." Jake's words were interrupted when two suitcases and a smaller bag dropped to the floor. "Oh no. Only what you need. The last thing I want is my wife to sink into the ocean because you have to take your Luggage."

"Jake, I'll have you know." Stan pointed. "One of those contains disks full of data for the experiment."

"Which one?" Jake asked.

"That one." Stan pointed to the smaller blue bag.

"See the other ones?"

"Yes."

"They stay." Jake held his finger up when he saw Stan's mouth open. "No. Say nothing. Now, Cal." He turned to her. "Get those straps ready like I told you and the blanket. Stan." Jake waved to him. "Come with me, we have to find that table to rig up. Rickie . . ." Jake walked backwards. "Take the rest of the illegal drugs and get Billy as high as you can. He's not doing good. And the last thing we

need is for his mental state to effect his physical state if this rescue gets rough.”

“Got it sarge.”

“And Rickie . . .” Jake reached the door. “Keep *her* out of that closet when you’re doing it.” He received a sloppy Rickie-salute, then Jake turned and walked out. He paused in his walking with Stan by the open closet door. Billy lay half awake, covered by blankets, his face white, eyes dark, and his body shook as he seemed to continuously cough. “Bill.”

Billy slowly lifted his head and partially opened his eyes. “Jake.” he spoke weakly.

“Get ready Pal. Rickie’s gonna hook you up, get you in the mood to travel. Cal’s gonna come in here get you cleaned up and then . . .” Jake gave a thumbs up. “We’re going home.”

“Home.” Billy’s closed his eyes again, dropped his head to the right and fell back to sleep.

Jake took a second to look and he started walking with Stan again. “They know he needs medical attention as soon as we land, right?”

“Yeah they do.” Stan said. “But is Billy going to make it till we land?”

Jake really had hesitation before he answered Stan. He reached to his gut, calling upon his instincts for an answer. “I believe he will.”

“Believe or hope?”

Jake kept walking.

*10:47 a.m.*

There was a rush of excitement in the control room. Greg buzzed about. A humming of conversation filled the air instead of the dreaded news. Colin sifted through his final calculations. And Lyle worked with Kirk, the only other remaining monitor.

“They’re in the air.” Lyle announced.

“Yes.” Greg clenched his fist in a near skip across the room to the monitoring table. “Colin. ETA until we have an all clear and lift our people.

Colin flipped a sheet of paper. “Seeing that were gonna do a thicker coat of ice, twelve-forty-five. One p.m. at the latest.”

“Immediately detonating the napalm and the nuclear device . . .”

“No later than one fifteen.” Colin smiled.

“We’re rolling.” Greg twitched his head with a grin.

“Sir.” Kirk called Greg’s attention. “President Wilson is on the line.”

With all the optimism Greg was feeling he was more than happy to take the call. “Probably wants to check our progress. Put him on the speaker phone Kirk.”

Kirk pressed a button. “He’s there.”

“President Wilson.” Greg spoke with a smile.

“Greg.” President Wilson didn’t sound as upbeat.

“Sir, we are in the air and on our way to the island now. Within two and a half hours we believe this whole episode will be put behind up.”

“Greg.” President Wilson state his name firmly again. “You may want to pull back your choppers.”

“Why?” Greg asked. “We’re very optimistic about this.”

“Russia and China . . . they rescinded.”

An immediate hush took over the control room.

Greg had to take a breath, shuffling through the confusion he felt. “What do you mean rescinded.”

“In the wake of the new amoeba findings, they feel that they can not wait any longer or take anymore chances.”

Greg had a laugh to his voice. “What the hell are they gonna do. Jump the gun ahead of us. Get to that island before us?”

“They are forcing my hand as the leader of this country.” President Wilson said. “I am synchronizing my clearing of the infested areas with your annihilation of the island.”

“So what is the problem then. This is good. We hit them all at the same time.” Greg tried his hardest not to lose his hopefulness.

“The problem is . . . these new findings and how many there are. They are saying our efforts are minimal in stopping the wide spread infestations. Their satellites are focused. They are in launch mode as we speak. If they don’t see that the nesting has been successfully eliminated, then at two p.m. today your time, they will initiate what they are calling a clean sweep of the entire pacific region. Until not a single amoeba . . . nothing is left. Islands. Life. Full scale. Including the entire western United States seaboard. We are ready to defend and retaliate, but I’m sure once it starts. You know where it ends.”

Greg’s head dropped. The rustling and shuffling of everyone standing up was the only sound heard.

“Greg.” The president’s voice cracked. “This is war. And you my friend and your people are standing at ground zero. You can follow through with your plan if you want. Or . . . or you can let us handle it, abort your mission and get out of Los Angeles while you still have time to do so. It’s your call.” There was Silence while President Wilson waited for an answer. “What are you going to do?”

Slowly, but with force Greg lifted his clenched fist and brought it down to the table in such defeat. His eyes peered up to the clock that ticked down on the monitor screen. “Give me one minute to think about it. I’ll call you right back.” With a shaking finger Greg pressed the button and disconnected the call. Just as the wave of murmuring question voice swelled up, Colonel Johnson’s voice was heard above them all.

“Dr. Haynes, sir.” He stood by the partially open door. “Dr. Haynes.”

Greg looked up. “Yes Colonel.”

“The CIA just dropped off this man. They said that you’ve been searching

for him.” Colonel Johnson stepped inside. The door opened Col Johnson stepped out and in walked Ian Carrington. Short, older, grey and he looked so much like Dr. Jefferson.

“Carrington.” Greg’s eyes widened. “Oh my God.”

Aldo and the other investors looked at Carrington. Smiling with hope at him as he walked into the room The bright light at the end of the tunnel.

Stout and stern Carrington straightened his suit coat as he walked slowly down the few steps with his eyes focused on Greg. “I didn’t want to be found.”

“I know that.”

“Especially with all that is going on. *I . . .*” He shouted. “Did not want to be found! Seventeen members of my family are in Hawi right now. Waiting to die!” He stepped even closer to Greg. “Everything I built and lived for is going down because of your stupidity!” Carrington raged. “You were warned! You were told. And what did you do?!”

“I’m sorry.” Greg swayed his head. “But right now, what mistakes were made don’t need to be discussed. Now is not the time.”

“You are absolutely right.” Carrington nodded. “Now is not the time to discuss your mistakes. Now is the time to make you *pay* for what you’ve done to this world!” With a quick turn of his body, Carrington reached into his opening suit jacket, pulled out a semi-automatic revolver, lifted it in an aim at Greg and fired four shots straight into his chest. The force sent Greg back and spinning to the floor, a huge blood puddle grew under him. Lyle leaped forward as he saw Carrington’s aim shift. Reaching for the gun, Carrington fired nailing Lyle in the gut, sending him up in the air and crashing with a bang onto the monitor table.

The door to the control room burst open and in charged Col. Johnson and four soldiers. They saw Carrington holding the gun and turning his body , aiming at them.

Aldo saw it coming. “NO!” he cried out. “No don’t shoot him! He’s the only one . . .”

Four shots were fired from Col. Johnson’s extended gun. Carrington jolted from the blows, dropped his revolver and he dropped to the floor, like Greg and Lyle . . . dead.

Aldo’s face sunk within his palms. “. . . who can stop this.” he growled in anger lifting his head and glaring at Col. Johnson. “You asshole! You just shot the only fuckin person on the face of the earth that can stop this!”

Col. Johnson shook some, the news nearly bolting him over. “I . . . I didn’t know. He had a gun.”

Aldo wanted to pull out his hair. In fact he grabbed the sides of it and screamed from his gut. Looking at the bloodbath around him. Greg lying dead on the floor. Carrington. Lyle.

Col. Johnson regained his composure. “let’s get them out of here.” He motioned his head to his men and to the bodies. In synch, they bent down to the carnage and began to lift and drag them out.



The investors watched in horror.

"The clock is ticking!" Colin called out loudly. His voice bringing about a pause to all that happened in the room. He held the phone up. "The president needs an answer. Abort or continue? Whatever the decision, we need an answer now." his eyes shifted about the room.

Watson jumped up and raged to the stairs. "I'm getting out of LA." He bolted to the door.

"Wait for me." Lancing followed in a rush.

"Me too." George ran right behind him. "We'll take my car. And my plane."

Colin watched the men leave and the door slam shut. He looked at Aldo, Douglas, Ivan and Daniela. "Someone make the call."

Aldo looked at the men who stood with him, then at the screen. He huffed out a breath. "Christ." Stepping over the puddle of blood that came from Greg's body. He reached for the phone. "Give me that." He snatched it from Colin's hand. "Wilson . . . never mind who this is. Just listen, our choppers stay in the air. It's a go." Aldo hung up the phone. "Kirk, tell our pilots to hang in there. Colin monitor our stats. Daniela, you're the video game guy, work with Captain Kirk here with our detonation sequences." He faced a stunned Douglass and Ivan. "You two are our new monitors. Watch everything."

Ivan's shoulder sunk. "Wh . . . what the hell do we know about all this?"

"We know as much about this rescue as anyone." Aldo stated strongly. "We've been through this plan with them a million times." he looked around. "Where is that headset?" Aldo took it when Kirk extended it up to him. "Gentlemen, we can do this. We *will* do this." He put on the headset. "Now let's get our people off this goddamn island, blow the son of a bitch up and put an end to all this fuckin shit." Aldo stood ready, while everyone else with some hesitancy, took their position. But before they continued and Aldo prepared to be connected to Jake, . . . he lit up a cigarette.

*11:50 a.m.*

"Sarge, like you said to get him as high as I could. I did. Check out Billy-Meister. He's like, to the limits."

"Yes, Rickie. I know." Jake grunted, pulling on a strap. He looked up to the ceiling at another loud 'crack.'. "Thank God they aren't freezing again. I don't think this structure can take it anymore." Jake stood up and walked out as they stood by the entrance door. They could see the frosted amoebas outside. He wore his headset and gloves and he visually checked Billy. On a table top he laid, covered with blankets, strapped down. And to those straps that held him, four belts, close to the corners of the table. Along with baggage, each of them, Jake, Cal, Rickie and Stan would grab a belt and pull Billy.

Slow and slurred, yet with a hint of 'up' Billy's words were. "Explain . . . to me. One more time." He coughed. "How this is gonna work. Rickie, says I'm dinner and . . . um bait. Yeah that's it. For the amoebas."

Jake looked at Rickie who snickered. "It's real simple Bill. Again, for the tenth time, we're taking you out of here. More like sliding. Do you remember sled rides?"

"Yeah." Billy smiled.

"I don't." Rickie said.

"You're from California." Jake snapped.

"Jake?" Billy called him. "So are you gonna push me."

"Yeah, we're gonna give you a running start, push you and all jump on for the ride."

"Jake." Cal gave a warning tone to him. "No Billy, this is just an easy way to get you there."

"Thanks Cal." Billy looked up and smiled at her. "You're the greatest." Billy coughed and made a wincing face, smacking his lips together. "Now . . . am I supposed to get this nasty taste in my mouth?"

"Like bleach?" Jake asked him.

"Yeah!" Billy pointed.

"Yes." Jake told him. "That's the infection." Jake looked at everyone. "All right. Take your position. Grab your gear and get ready. As soon as we get the 'all clear' we move out these doors."

"Um . . . Jake." Billy called his name again. "One more thing."

Jake looked straight ahead with an annoyed face before turning around. "Bet me I know what this is." He swayed his head back to look at Billy. "Yes Billy?"

"I'm leaving the island right?"

"Yes."

"So you and I are gonna . . ." Billy winked and made a single click of his tongue. "Work out that deal Right?"

"Bill." Jake stated firm. "Ten times. Ten times in the last ten minutes you brought up that deal. Now bring it up one more fuckin time and your amputee ass will be hopping the mile and a quarter to the beach."

"I could do that if you guys don't want to carry me." Billy looked at all of them above him. "I'm up for it. I can do it." he peered at Cal. "I can."

"I know you can." Cal smiled down at him.

"Sarge, I say we let him. Wouldn't it be funny?" Rickie snickered.

"No." Jake grumbled, let out a relief breath when he head static in his earpiece. "Thank God." Suddenly Jake released the strap and spun to look at the others. His lip curled in bewilderment. "Why . . . why is Aldo talking to me?"

Cal grinned. "Oh Jake. Tell him I said hi."

"No." Jake snapped, then spoke in his microphone. "What was that Aldo? Yeah. We're on our way." Jake reached down for his strap. He in Rickie were in the front by Billy's feet. "Everyone ready. It's gonna be cold out there. But . . . it's

time.” securing the two fire boxes over his one shoulder, Jake gripped the strap and he and Rickie pushed open the double glass doors, and the five of them, Billy laying on the home made sled, very slowly and carefully made their way out.

*12:22 p.m.*

Aldo looked like ‘the man’. Or rather he felt like he was. Standing arms folded, stern look on his face, staring at the monitors, snapping out orders. Like the star of some movie in which he was leading a space command, Aldo stood there.

“Zoom in on that aerial.” Aldo instructed Kirk. “I wanna see how they’re doing on that beach.”

“This is the best we can do.” Kirk stated bringing in the shot to where on the beach, Jake and them arrived. They were in the distance.

“How are we coming with those amoebas.” Aldo asked Douglass and Ivan.

They looked at each other, then Douglass answered. “They’re um . . . still frozen?”

“Colin.” Aldo faced him. “How are we doing on time?”

“Right on schedule. In fact, let’s run a signal test.” He looked behind Aldo to Daniela. “Daniela, you’ve been waiting for this. Test the signal. Hit the button on the left not the right or you’ll blow them up.”

“Got it.” Daniela hit the button. Instead of the six beep signal connection sound, there was only a click.

Colin’s eyes widened. “What happened? Press it again.”

Daniela did. Another click. “It’s not working.”

Aldo lightly smacked him in the back. “What the fuck did you do to it. I told you not to play with it.”

“It didn’t.” Daniela defended. “Honestly.”

Kirk rolled his chair closer and watched the light as he tried to test the signal. There were a series of clicks. He looked up to Colin and Aldo. “It’s not the boxes. It’s the link. Something wrong with the central box.” He pulled the Control center up on the screen. “I’m guessing the amoebas covered it.”

“What do we do?” Aldo at Colin.

“It’ll have to be checked out. How though.”

Aldo hesitated then looked at the screen. “Graison.”

*12:24 p.m*

Bags loaded in the boat along with Stan and Billy who laid conformably. Jake and Cal prepared to get in along with Rickie.

"Sarge." Rickie said softly looking at Billy who was coughing and his eyes were closed. "He like just had the shortest high in the history of drugs. What happened."

"He's bad Rickie. He's going to need immediate medical attention when we get back." Jake held Cal's arm helping her in the boat. He noticed she stopped. "Cal, what's wrong?"

"Amoebas." Cal looked to the water's edge. "Why aren't they getting me."

"The cold slows them down. Weakens them. Get in the boat." Jake helped her in at the same time Rickie stepped in. His fingers slipped from her arm. He stepped back holding the earpiece to his ear. "What was that Aldo?" Jake spun his back to the boat. "So." he looked back at Cal. "I'm not wanting to be the hero here." He grumbled. "All right! All right. But you tell the choppers to pick them up as scheduled and get me in the water. I'm not making them wait. I'm on it." he lowered the microphone.

"Jake. Get in." Cal looked up as she sat down.

"Listen. You hold on to Billy Cal. Rickie and Stan are gonna have to row out . . ."

"Get in the boat Jake!" Cal snapped at him. "What the hell."

"Cal!" Jake moved closer. "Listen to me. There's a problem with the detonation link up and . . ."

"That is not your problem. Get in the boat."

"It is if this whole entire scenario end up being real now isn't it?" He softened his voice. "It's not that far out there. You guys row out. I'll head back to the control center. Do what they need me to do, and I'll swim for it. Pick me up in the water. But head out there now."

"Jake." Cal grabbed his hand. "I don't want you to stay behind."

"I won't be behind for long. Now get going." He kissed Cal, and before anymore could be said he gripped the edge of the boat and pushed it forward over the ice, through the slush and into the water. "Go."

Cal, Billy against her, kept watching Jake as Rickie and Stan picked up the oars and began to row.

Jake stood on the beach for a minute, he tried to make eye contact with Cal one more time before he went back to the control center. When he felt as if he did, he took a deep breath, and even though it wasn't something he wanted to do, Jake headed back to fix that box. He moved as fast as he could on the slick surface. And just about half way through the wooded area, Jake could hear the sound of the choppers returning and drawing nearer. To him it was a sign of relief. If nothing else, even if something went wrong while he was on that island, at least Cal was being lifted off.

*12:36 p.m.*

"This is fly boy." The chopper pilot spoke over the control room speaker. "Baggage in, the injured man is in and we're loading in the last three now."

"Good." Aldo said. "Now hang tight until I tell you. We have one more you're gonna have to pick up in the ocean."

"Roger that Caldwell. We'll lift up and circle around."

Aldo looked to the screen and the shot of the Control building. He could see Jake with the box. Aldo nodded in anxiousness. "Let's go Jake. You can do this."

Jake's voice came over the radio. "Found the problem Infrared signal is totally iced up. I'll clear it and it should be fine."

"Excellent." Aldo smiled and winked at Colin. "It won't be long. He got it."

"And we got something else." Kirk spoke with worry. "Look at the aerial."

Aldo lowered the microphone to the headset. "Holy shit." He like the others that remained in the control room looked to the screen. In the middle of the grey frozen island, a black spot appeared. The roundness of the small dot seemed to grow wider with each passing second.

*12:42 p.m.*

Cal was the last to get into the chopper which hovered so close to the water. She nearly rolled in her entrance inside.

"Mam." The pilot looked back. "Secure yourself. And I need someone to shut that door."

"We'll leave it open!" Cal yelled above the noise. "And I need a line to secure incase we have to just lift my husband from the water." Cal leaned into the pilot's seat.

The pilot pointed back. "There's one right behind the back seat."

"Go on and lift up." Cal told him. "I can balance."

The pilot took a quick double take at a pregnant Cal. "If you say so." And he began to lift the chopper as Cal grabbed the line.

*12:43 p.m.*

Jake set the central detonation box down. "Got it. Check your signal." He told Aldo.

There was a pause before Aldo came back on. "It works. But Jake . . . you may have another problem."

Aldo didn't have to tell Jake what it was. As soon as he said that, Jake knew what he meant. Slowly Jake rose to his feet and he realized he was no longer

standing on ice but slush. Thick watery slush. And a slight hissing, slow and low tone. The reviving amoebas could be heard.

"Shit." Jake's eyes shifted around to the slow moving of the trees.

*12:44 p.m.*

"Timing." Daniela called out. "We can time it." He looked up to the screen. "It takes three seconds for the signal to go off. When we see Jake hit that beach, we hit the detonation, he can dive under the water and avoid the fire."

Colin swayed his head. "That's got to take great timing and coordination."

"Hell, I'm the video king. I can do this."

Aldo shrugged. "What choice do we have." He spoke in the headset again. "Jake! Are you running?"

"As fast as I can."

"Move your ass faster Jake, we'll send the chopper for you in the ocean. You may see some fire works, but they'll get you."

*12:45 p.m.*

Jake's long stride and heavy running steps caused large splashes as he raced through the woods. He charged the fastest he could, wishing he could run even faster. But in his heart he knew, he could never be as fast as the amoebas that began to drip in their revival down from the trees at him. The hissing pitch grew higher and quicker. The trees rustled more. "Aldo." He called out hearing the chopper close in. "Tell them to pull back. I won't make it. They're reviving too fast. Tell them to pull back and get my wife out of here!" Jake kept running hoping against all hope he could make it to the beach.

*12:46 p.m.*

"What!" Cal blasted out.

"We have orders Ma'amm to head back."

"You will do no such thing! Turn this chopper around." Cal slammed her hand on the back of his seat.

"I can not. Those things are defrosting."

"Turn this chopper around right now!" Cal screamed, her face red.. "You will not leave my husband there!"

"I can not do that." The pilot argued.

"You will turn this chopper around . . ." Cal swiftly pulled from the back waist of her pants a revolver. She clicked the hammer and placed it to his temple. "Right now or I'll blow your fuckin brains out. And don't think I can't fly this

thing.” Holding the barrel tight to the pilot’s head she turned her views to Rickie. “Open that door and lower that line Rickie. Now!”

“Uh Caldwell.” The pilot spoke. “I got some crazy lady holding a gun to my head making me turn around . . . Roger that.”

Cal felt the helicopter tilt and head back to the island. “Yes! Can I talk to my husband through that headset.”

“I’d have to get him on that frequency.”

“Good, get him for me.” Cal snatched the headset straight from the pilot’s head.

“Ow-ow. My ears. Shit.” The pilot reached out and changed channel. “Crazy woman.”

Cal held the headset to her ear. “Jake. Jake come in.”

“Cal?” Jake called huffing as he ran.

“Jake. Jake head for the beach we’ll get you there.”

“Cal, you can’t do that. Don’t come back.” Jake’s words were breathy. “Tell that pilot to pull back. Pull back Cal. Now!”

“No.” Cal spoke strong and with deep passion over the airwaves. “I will *not* leave you. You hear me. I won’t.” Cal saw the pilot indicate with his wide eyes and pointing hand. High in the air they were. Enough to see the ripple of amoebas that moved across the island. Cal took a breath. “What’s our theme? United we stand. Divided we fall. If our backs should ever be against the wall . . .”

“We’ll be together.” Jake said softly. “But this is not one of those times.”

“Oh I beg to differ. With us Jake, it is always one of those times. But it’s gonna be tight. We’re gonna be swinging around, line hanging down. So get ready and charge as fast as that big ass can move. We got one pass by, one chance and don’t you blow it.” The helicopter tilted drastically and swung wide ready to fly fast in toward the beach and back out to the ocean. “Time to back up that mouth Lt. Col Graison.”

“I’m ready.”

“So am I.” Cal put her gun in the waist behind her pants and moved next to Rickie by the open door.

Jake could see the clearing of the trees not that far ahead of him. “Cal if something should happen. Promise me you’ll drop me.”

“Like a bad habit. But nothing is gonna happen Jake. I’ll see you in few.”

The ocean came more into his view, then Jake looked back, like a moving wall high and black the amoebas were behind him. “Cal . . .” Jake leaped over a log hitting the sand. “Know that I love you very much.”

“I love you too Jake. Very much.” Cal crouched down to the floor holding her hand on the line that flung out.

*12:48 p.m.*

“Almost . . . almost . . .” Daniela breathed out his words in nervousness,

trembling finger on the button watching a running Jake onto the beach in a mad dash from the amoebas that pursued him. "Just about . . ."

Rickie shook. Stan closed his eyes. And Cal, hair whipping from the wind, looked over her shoulder to the pilot, "When I yell we have him, you lift high, wide and fast." she saw Jake. It was going to be close, but confidence was all over Cal's face. She set down the headset and gripped the line with both hands. "Do this Jake. Do this."

The noise of the chopper was as loud as the noise the attacking amoebas made. In his bull raging run, Jake saw the chopper and the line that dangled from it. He looked back to the amoebas so close he could smell them. It was when he hit middle of that wide beach that he saw the fast moving helicopter make it's wide turn toward the ocean. Giving it everything he had, the wall of amoebas in his peripheral vision, Jake, with a grunt, a charge and a jump, leaped forth toward the line that swung right by him. His left hand gripped hold at the same time in his headset he heard the scream of the word 'now' from the control room, and Cal's distant voice yelling. 'We have him!'. And just as he brought his other hand to the rope and began to rapidly climb, a sequence of violent explosions, boom-boom-boom-boom-boom rang up in a blast from the island below.

"Faster! Higher! Hurry!" Cal screamed leaning nearly out of the chopper, watching Jake move as fast as he could. The fire and explosion that raged soon disappeared, as the amoebas that didn't get fried, made a final attempt leap as the chopper moved over the ocean. A large black floor that chased with rapidity toward Jake,. So huge, Cal couldn't see anything below the amoebas. Not even the ocean. "Jake! Move!" Her screaming words carried long.

The chopper lifted up. Jake climbed fast, but the amoebas were faster. Looking like the fingers on a cupped hand the amoebas reached for Jake. And at the same time that Rickie screamed, Jake disappeared beneath the effusion of amoebas that attacked and encompassed him.

Cal didn't hesitate nor did she flinch. Eyes locked on Jake, hands still on the line, Cal, with a swift jolt, released the life line Jake had gripped, and down, with speed, Jake dropped. Heavy and straight he passed through the remaining wall of amoebas like a cloud, dragging them with him, directly into the ocean.

A ton of noise filled the inside of the chopper that flew further and further from the burning island. Rickie cried in hysteria, staring at the water. Stan and the pilot rambled fast and insidiously. Still on the floor, Cal peered out the door, she could see the steam rising off the ocean from the multitudes of disintegrated amoebas, "Quiet." Cal spoke up. No break in the noise. "Shut up!" She screamed her loudest and grunted as she stood up. "Turn this back around and pick up my husband."

"Cal." Stan grabbed her in her move to the pilot. "You saw. They had him."



“And I dropped him!” Cal blared. “I dropped him.” She calmed herself down. “He’s fine. I’m sure of it. Now lets’ turn back around and pick him up.” She saw the pilot didn’t pay attention. Politely she tapped him on the shoulder, then moved her face close to his so he could get the jest of the seriousness on her face. “Go back and pick him up . . . now please.” Standing straight, Cal turned her body and reached behind the back seat for the second line. The instant she gripped it, the chopper swung back around. She went to the open door, bent down to the floor, secured the line and waited.

*12:51 p.m.*

“It’s awfully close Aldo.” Colin told him as he checked out the timer. “Too close. We have to detonate the nuclear weapon.”

Aldo kept his eyes on the screen. “We still have time.” His eyes shifted to the time. “Twenty-four minutes. Plenty of time.” He looked back at Colin. “What the hell dose it matter anyhow. We don’t pull this off, we’re dead anyway. So don’t worry about it., let them look for Jake.”

*12:53 p.m.*

Cal had moved to the front with the pilot. They had to close the door. The thick smoke from the island kept making its way in.

The pilot shook his head. “Even if he is out here. We’ll never see him through this. I can barely see.”

“This is where he fell. I know it. With the angle he’s here.” Cal said. “Can you hover close to the water, blow away the smoke down there and maybe we can look again though the door?”

“We can try. But keep in mind.” The pilot pointed backwards to a coughing Billy. “How much of that smoke can he take.”

Cal turned around in her seat. “He’ll be fine.” Cal got up and moved to the door. “Let me know when you’re close.”

“Got it.”

Cal felt the vibration on her feet as she stood by the door with Rickie.

“Cal-babe.” Rickie spoke so sad. “You really think Sarge made it.”

“I *know* he made it Rickie. I know it.” Cal smiled at him.

“Were down.” The pilot yelled back. “I don’t know how long I can keep her steady like this so look good and fast.”

With a nod, Cal flung open the side door. The water to the ocean three feet away. The whipping blades not only blew tiny waves in the ocean but it cleared the smoke in a circle around them. On her hands and knees Cal looked out, to her left and to her right. “Come on Jake. Come on.” There was nothing but moving ocean. “You’re out here. Where?”

"Cal-babe, maybe he swam back for the island."

"I doubt it." Cal held back her hair as she looked.

"Lady I have to lift up."

"One more second."

"I have to . . ."

"There!" Cal screamed out when out from the water shot Jake. He held his arm high in a signal to the chopper. Cal shrieked high pitched, grabbed Rickie, kissed him and pointed for the pilot. "You see him?"

"Moving that way." The pilot veered the chopper to the right.

"Jake!" Cal screamed leaning out the door, a wide grin on her face. She clenched her fist in her excitement, tossed back her head and screamed loudly. The helicopter lifted up and she lowered the line. It skimmed across the surface of the water, through the smoke in Jake's direction.

Like a whirlwind, the chopper blades moved the smoke making it harder to see below. But adding the dramatic effect for when Jake climbed up the line, emerging though the smoke and making it to the chopper.

Jake's large wet hand slammed down on the chopper floor, and his head rose into Cal's view. He smiled at her and Cal grabbed his hand pulling on him as if she actually had the strength to bring Jake into the safety of the chopper.

The moment he rolled his soaking wet body inside, Rickie slammed the door shut and the chopper lifted higher.

On his back, on the floor Jake laid and Cal leaned down to him touching her hands upon his face covered with the bloody bites of the amoebas.

"Jake." She breathed out his name as she smiled. "I knew you were all right."

"Thank you." His wet hands gripped her cheek, pushing away her hair that dangled down to him. "God, thank you so much." His chest rose and fell with the heaviness of his excitement. Hitting against Cal's chest with each one of his deep inhales. "Cal, if I live to be a hundred, I swear to God I will never stop falling in love with you over and over again."

"I'm gonna have to say the same thing Jake." With a smile, Cal let out a soft, 'whew' of enthusiasm. And laid her hand on his holding it firmer to her face. "It's been one hell of a ride this experiment, Wouldn't you say."

"One hell of a ride." Jake grinned, spreading his fingers and catching Cal's in between his. Locking his eyes to hers with a proud look. "I swear I could just stare at you forever right now."

"Stare later Jake. Kiss me now."

"Oh you got it." Pulling Cal to him at the same time he lifted his head, Jake's mouth widened before their lips even met. And after a short laugh and a smile, Jake locked his lips to Cal and deeply delivered to his wife a kiss filled with intensity brought on from not only his emotions, but from his near death experience as well.

CHAPTER NINETY-TWO

Caldwell Research Center - Los Angeles, CA  
August 28<sup>th</sup> - 1:55 p.m.

Aldo swore if his chest beat any harder he would go into cardiac arrest right there in the control room. Daniela bit his nails rocking in his chair. Douglass took a long drink straight from a bottle of bourbon. Ivan smoked a cigarette for the first time in his life. But no matter what they did individually, as a group they all watched Colin on the phone. Waiting for an answer. Would Russia and China be satisfied or in five minutes would their lives be over in flash like those in Hawaii.

Slowly Colin hung up the phone. He brought his hand to the top of his head, scratched it, exhaled and turned to face Aldo and the others. Slowly he shifted his eyes about them first, then smiled. "Satisfied."

Leaping from their seats, Aldo, Douglass, Ivan and Daniela jumped up and down, screaming in excitement like teenagers at a football game.

Colin enjoyed watching them. He gave a pat on the back to Kirk who stood up and stood side by side next to him. "We've done good. It looks as if the nesting place has been destroyed."

All of them, Aldo, Douglass, Ivan and Daniela let out long, loud breaths, grabbing their chest.

Aldo, clenched his whole body in an excitement shudder. "I knew it. I knew it. Good job everyone. Hell of a way to be a team."

Colin nodded in agreement. "It certainly is. You pulled together and ended this thing and the experiment. Now that we uh . . . are finished here. Could I get you gentlemen to follow me?" Colin extended a finger to the door.

They all shrugged, adrenaline still pumping, And in a line they followed Colin and Kirk out of the control room.

They made a right, then an immediate left to the long hall that they knew led to the gymnasium that was used for storage. Empty dark halls is what they walked through, chattering about their success and silencing when they reached the gym doors.

Colin cleared his throat standing before the double doors. He had a hint of a giggle to him. "At this point . . ." He tapped his index finger to his lip as he spoke to the remaining investors. "I'm not very good at this. So I'll give it my best shot. At this point I am to tell you how much Caldwell has appreciated what you've done. And for making the experiment a giant success, they want to thank you for participating in Iso-Stasis thirteen."

Aldo snorted out a laugh. "Participating? You mean investing."

"No." Colin shook his head and turned the door knob. He pushed open one door, Kirk pushed open the other. "We mean participating. Step inside to the other half, the half you did not see, of the Iso-stasis experiment."

It took only one step into the large gymnasium, one look around and the four

of them stopped cold.

"Oh fuck." Aldo exclaimed. "Son of a bitch." To their left was the entire set up of the Central Network News room. Beth Chase, waved high with a smile. To their right, cameras, computers lined up. Large screens, with miniatures set up.

So engrossed in what was around them they failed to hear the footsteps, heading their way. "A bit unusual." The male voice said. "But once they convinced me it would work. I was hooked."

Aldo, Douglass and Ivan knew the voice better than Daniela but the four of them knew it well and they spun to see a very healthy and alive Dr. Jefferson.

Dr. Jefferson bounced from heel to toe, hands behind back and smiling. "Hope you aren't too upset."

Aldo's mouth opened a few times before he spoke. "You . . . you died."

"Not hardly." Dr. Jefferson shook his head. "Part of the plan. The only Caldwell tragedy at the center here was Barb's." Sadly Dr. Jefferson took a breath. "We didn't expect that. But she, like you, agreed to endure the experiment. Unfortunately she knew it was a set up, you didn't. You couldn't. If you did, we wouldn't have compiled valuable psychological results."

"You said . . ." Aldo pointed. "Barb was the only one. Does that mean . . ."

"That is exactly what it means." Greg walked from behind the set of Central News Network. Lyle was behind him with Ian Carrington.

At the same time, a shriek of fright came from all four investors.

Greg laughed. "Sorry to frighten you."

"Haynes." Aldo twitched his head. "You have some explaining to do."

"Most definitely." Greg said. "And I'd love to now. We have chairs set up. Please . . ." Greg motioned his hand that way. "And then I have to be off to the hospital to check on our participants. Which by the way Aldo, you and Daniela split the pot."

Daniela leaped with a loud. "I won!"

Aldo shook his head. "Do they know it wasn't real.?"

"They should by now. Stan was telling them on the chopper."

"Son of a bitch." Aldo took a seat. "Jake didn't believe it for a second."

"No, he didn't." Greg said. "And that worried us with you Aldo. We really thought, and I lost on our own inside bet, we really thought you wouldn't buy it because Jake didn't."

"I bought it all right." Aldo watched the other four sit down.

Greg waited patiently for everyone in the gymnasium to gather around. Reporters, soldiers, Colin, Col. Johnson. His props for the second part of Iso-Stasis thirteen. "Now I'll try to explain everything. Any questions . . ." Greg smiled. "I'm sure Aldo will ask." There were chuckles. "All right." Greg lifted his leg onto a chair and leaned into it in an explaining mode. "First off, the Hawaiian islands are still intact. No amoebas there and none ever found. The special effects . . ." Greg held his hand out to four men. "Courtesy of modern movies. These wonderful special effects experts worked on the film about aliens a few years

back. Fourth of July? Was it?"

"No." The one shook his head. "Independence Day."

Greg snapped his finger. "That was it. Anyway,. Miniatures as you can see, effects. We did it all. The world hadn't a clue about this. I guess you know that by seeing our own Central Network stage. We hired the low on the totem pole reporters, set them up. They did great. And . . . where's Leo. Oh." Greg reached behind Beth and pulled forward a small man, no bigger than five feet tall, Thin, dark hair. "He's afraid you'll kill him. Leo here played the voice of our president. Wonderful Character actor who does voices for cartoons. All of our soldiers, including Col. Johnson are courtesy form the Actors Screen Guild right here in LA." Greg indicated to all the military dressed men. "And of course, if I were to give an award to best actor, I'd have to say . . ." He pointed to Colin. "Dr. Colin Whitney. Or, Steve Harris. He did great."

"What?" Aldo blasted in shock. "This man is an actor?"

"Quiet impressive." Greg nodded. "Dr. Jefferson and I did the scripting. We all learned our lines. I knew Steve in school We did dinner theater together in college. But . . ." Greg chuckled "I almost died the other night. Tell them Dr. Jefferson."

Dr. Jefferson laughed first. "I called Greg from the hotel and told him to put on the station where they showed old television programs. You know, I was enjoying an episode of Laverne and Shirley and who walked by on the screen as a waiter." Dr. Jefferson pointed to Colin.

Greg laid his hand on his own chest. "I thought we were screwed. With all the television you watch Aldo, I thought for sure, you'd flip through and see him. But . . .you were too engrossed in the news."

"Which wasn't real." Aldo nodded.

Greg set down his leg and started to pace. "Some of it was real. The amoebas were real. And I have to admit . . ." He whistled. "They got out of hand. But . . .we knew we could kill them. See when Dr. Jefferson and Dr Carrington invented the amoebas many years ago, the invented a gas that would destroy them as well. Or we would never have used them. The botched rescue attempt was real. The tank that didn't unload, we set that up so all that chopper could lift would be Cal and Rickie, letting the rest play out. And we were going to say the other chopper ran into trouble. Then as you know, Reed jumped and our amoebas unexceptedly hit. So knowing the danger in a rescue, not to mention the expense, we decided to leave Cal and Rickie on that island."

"What about the nuke?" Douglass asked. "That was real right?"

"No." Greg answered. "In fact, everyone warned me against using that idea. Right Dr. Jefferson?"

"Right." Dr. Jefferson nodded. "I thought for sure one of you would realize how far fetched it was that we were dropping a nuclear weapon into a volcano? I warned Greg, but he insisted that you would be so engrossed, you wouldn't even reason the redundancy of it."

Aldo sat back in his chair. He lit a cigarette and chuckled as he blew out the smoke. "And he was right. We were engrossed. And I have to tell you Haynes. You got me." Aldo pointed his cigarette at Greg. "I have to say, thinking about this now, I really had a good time. Scared the hell out of me. But had a good time."

"Good." Greg smiled "I'm glad. That's what we're supposed to do. Provide maximum entertainment for our investors. And you can not say you weren't entertained. And we used the clause of the contract you signed to include you in the experiment. You after all, did agree to oblige by what ever Caldwell deemed necessary for the experiment and that was you. We had an independent council of psychologists and psychiatrists observing your behavior and, Aldo . . ." Greg tilted his head. "They said you were the best under stress. You took control. You led the reigns. You finished the experiment for us. The other three that left were so upset when they found out it was a set up. All four of you did extremely well. But you Aldo, you were the man."

The whole room filled with applause.

Aldo blushed. "Hey, what can I say." He tossed his hand out. "Jake has nothing on me."

Ivan who had remained quiet in his shock, finally spoke up. "You guys certainly went to an abundance of trouble for this experiment."

Greg tossed his hands up. "I vowed to beat the last one. And I vowed to make it the best."

Aldo nodded, but let out a whistling breath. "But at quite the expense. I mean this couldn't have come cheap. You have got to be some sort of budget master Haynes.

"Budget Master?" Greg had to chuckle. "No, more like Game Master. No amount of budget mastering could have afforded all this. No, actually aside from you investors and outside institute funding. We had a little extra help. Well . . . an extra eight million dollars worth of help." He extended his arm. "Gentlemen." From behind the set of the news walked eight men.

When Aldo saw them, he, Ivan and Douglas immediately stood up.

Greg stood before the suited men. "Mr. Daniela, I don't expect for you to recognize these eight gentlemen. But I expect Aldo, Douglass and Ivan to. Do you three remember these eight men." Greg received stunned nods. "Some of these gentlemen invested in experiment eleven with you three, some in experiment twelve. Only they weren't pleased with not having a chance or being loser so . . ." Greg gave a sneaky smile. "Like you gentlemen invested in our participants. These eight gentlemen invested . . . in you."

"Son of a bitch." Aldo fell backwards into his chair. "We were pawns in our own game."

Doing like he had done so many times when he was pleased, Greg smiled. "Exactly."

Cedars Of Sinai Medical Center - Los Angeles, CA  
August 28<sup>th</sup> - 2:25 p.m.

A young corporal, in dress uniform opened the back door of a black car that stopped in front of the hospital. First his legs then the rest of Jake emerged, so official, full uniform. Jake held a huge bouquet of long stem roses, across his arm a garment bag and his hand another black bag. He looked up at the hospital then to the corporal who saluted him as he shut the door. "Half hour soldier. Just pull around. I'll be out."

"Yes, Sir."

Jake looked at his watch, then moved ahead into the hospital. He walked strong across the lobby following the direction he was given to go to the maternity floor to pick up Cal. But where on that floor, Jake didn't know.

Taking the elevator, he steeped off and approached the nurses counter. "Excuse me Ma'am."

The nurse behind the counter paused in her paper work to look up. So tall Jake seemed. "Can I uh . . . help you."

"I'm looking for my wife. She was being checked out by a doctor here. Mrs. Jacob Graison."

"Oh, yes, she is being seen by Dr. Mason." The nurse indicated. "Down this corridor, hang a right. Last room on the left."

"Thank you." Jake nodded once, arms full he proceed to follow her direction. He did pause once in his walk to get Cal. He paused to look in the nursery window at all of the babies, crying lined up in side. So loud. Red faced. Jake winced, then moved down the hall. He could hear Cal's voice carrying out, saying something about zombies, and Jake knocked once on the partially opened door and walked in.

"Jake." Cal smiled. She wore a robe, her hair wet. "Look at you." So proud she looked as she approached him. "For me?" She saw the roses.

"For you." Jake kissed her and handed them to her. He laid the rest of the stuff on the bed.

"What's that?"

"We'll get to it." Jake walked over to the doctor. "Jake Graison." He extended his hand to the Doctor.

"Dr. Mason. Caldwell had me check out your wife."

"And?" Jake asked.

"She is doing excellent. Babies are fine. The stress test turned out great. A little weight gain is needed, but otherwise, she's good to go."

"Fantastic." Jake smiled. "And we will work on the weight gain. Pretty much she'll do nothing the rest of this pregnancy."

"I would advice that." Dr. Mason said. "Multiple pregnancies can take their toll. And we don't want to chance a premature birth."

"No, we do not." Jake nodded.

“Great. I’ll let you be. And I’ll make sure that we get all the information to your doctor back home.” He moved to the door. “Good luck to you Mr. And Mrs. Graison and those babies.”

Cal lifted her hand in a wave as the doctor left. “Thanks.” She turned to Jake. “O.K. what’s in the bags?” Like an excited kid she rushed to peek. “Jake?” Cal looked at the name on the garment bag. “Jake, this is on Rodeo Drive. Did you shop for me?” Cal smiled as she undid the bag.

“A few things,” Jake sat on the bed moving the other bag her way. “All the stuff from the island is old now and, well, I told you, I wanted you to be comfortable for this pregnancy. I think Cal . . . I think I want to pamper you.” He winked.

“Pamper me? Jake, you don’t pamper me.” Cal laughed.

“I do now. At least until you birth our children.”

Cal lifted the two piece black maternity outfit. “This is nice. Did you pick it out?”

“Hell no.” He opened the other bag. “I told the woman your sizes, told her you need items for a few days, you know until we can get you home and get you more. I told her all our luggage and accessories were lost. Of course it set me back, get this . . . eight thousand dollars.”

“Oh my God.” Cal swayed her head. “But look at it all. Underwear, make up. Jake? Look at these shoes. So feminine.”

“Yes, well. She said all the clothing she picked is guaranteed to make you feel so good, you won’t feel pregnant.”

Cal ran her hand down her round stomach. “I doubt that.”

“All right here’s the deal.” Jake took the items from Cal’s hands, reached out and grabbed her hip and slid her to in front of him and between his legs. “Get dressed. I got our hotel room. I have to go do the debriefing and a transport is taking me out to Fort Irwin to do that. I should be back at the hotel by, let’s say eight?” he tilted his head. “Then. You, me and Rickie will have a late dinner. Sound good?”

“Sounds good.” Cal wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’ll get ready.”

“You get ready.” Jake’s hands slipped through the opening of her robe, gripping to Cal’s bare back and he pulled her closer to him. He kissed her. “I want to go check on Billy before I go. So pick it up.” He slid his hand down, smacked her backside and caused Cal to shriek.

She pulled away. “I’m hurrying.” She grabbed her things and moved to the bathroom stopping at the door. “Oh Jake. It’s good to be back.”

Jake couldn’t agree more. He sat on that bed waiting for Cal and he realized, just like the last experiment brought new meaning to his life, so did Iso-stasis thirteen. In definitely more ways than one and Cal’s body that seemed to grow everyday, was proof.



^^^

Greg walked from Billy's room with Dr. Jefferson and a third man. He handed the third man a stack of papers. "Make sure you file those with the home office right away."

The man nodded and in his walk, tucked them in a folder he carried.

"Greg." Dr. Jefferson pointed to the end of the hall. "Look."

Greg did. Jake and Cal were coming his way. "I almost forgot they could look normal outside of the experiment."

Jake rolled his eyes as he approached the dastardly pair by Billy's door. "Look Cal, it's the corpses."

Dr. Jefferson greeted them with a smile. "Welcome back. Cal, you look great."

"Thanks." Cal smoothed her hand down her outfit. "Jake shopped for me."

Greg reached out his hand laying it on Cal's stomach. "I hear the babies are fine. Did you um . . . get to see them?"

"The one. Then the Ultra sound machine petered out." She shrugged. "How's Billy?"

"Billy's great." Greg looked up to Jake. "Good job out there. Infection is able to be put under control and the amputation is shrinking perfectly."

"I was worried about that." Jake stated.

Dr. Jefferson nodded. "Us too. If you hadn't bandaged it properly and worked the leg like you did, Billy would not have been a viable candidate."

"Candidate? Candidate for what?" Jake asked.

Dr. Jefferson answered. "Billy's agreed whole heartedly to volunteer. He just signed the papers. We're transferring him to Atlanta day after tomorrow, to a clinic we have there. He's going to be going through a series of experimental surgeries with our bionics division."

"Now I've heard it all." Jake scoffed. "Excuse me." He walked into Billy's room. "Cal."

Cal hesitated before going in. "Will he be able to walk again?"

Greg held up crossed fingers. "We believe in time with our research, he'll be able to walk as if he never lost his leg."

Cal smiled. "Thanks." She rushed into the room. "Hey!" She called out to Billy who sat up in bed. Jake on one side Rickie on there other. "I hear you're gonna be the bionic man."

"Yeah." Jake held his hand out. "And what the fuck is up with you agreeing to volunteer for this."

Billy, still looking so pale said weakly. "They said they'll give me back my leg. Or . . . at least another one that works. I want that Jake. Wouldn't you?" He saw neither of them had an answer and as Cal drew closer, Billy reached out his hand to grab Cal's. "Guys." He shifted his eyes between Cal and Jake. "I just

wanted to let you know, I wouldn't have made it off that island alive if it wasn't for you two."

"Sarge!" Rickie shrieked out. "Oh! Dude! He made it off the island and he's gonna live. You know what that means."

"Rickie." Jake grumbled his name.

Rickie started to chant in an instigating way. "Billy and Cal, sitting in a tree. M-a-r-r-I-e-d."

"Rickie!" Jake blasted him.

Billy snickered "Jake, trust me. I won't hold you to that deal."

"Bill. Trust *me*. I wasn't going to stick with it. What do you think I'm nuts? I'm gonna give my wife up?"

"Sarge." Rickie swayed his head with a Tsk. "Going back on your word guy. It's like so Bill Clinton like. Man, you should keep your deal. I can't believe you made a death bed promise with no intention of keeping it."

"Rickie?" Jake raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah?"

"One more word out of you and you don't stay at the hotel with us tonight."

Rickie pretended to zip his mouth closed.

Jake shook his head. "I have to go. Cal, I'll send a car. They'll take you to the hotel." He leaned down and kissed her. "Bill. Get better. Rickie?"

"Yeah?"

Jake opened his mouth, shut it, shook his head and waved his hand at Rickie. "Nothing. See you guys later."

"Jake." Billy called out to him.

Jake stopped. "This is becoming a habit." He turned around. "Yes Billy?"

"Just tell me one thing. Did you bring my boxes back. I don't remember."

"We brought your boxes back." Jake said with irritation. "O.K. Now you can break your big story."

Billy leaned back in the bed and smiled. "Oh I will. I definitely will. The world has a lot to learn about Caldwell and the Iso-Stasis experiment."

"And you tell them Bill." Jake looked at him with a closed mouth and left.

Rickie looked at the peaceful expression on Billy's face as Billy stared at Cal. "So." He interrupted. "Are you gonna like break the big story guy?"

"Yes." Billy answered.

"Can I give you some food-a-Mundo for the Billy thought process?"

"Sure Rickie why not." Billy looked at him.

"Like before you break the big, Caldwell is a bad guy story. Think about this. Dude, you're like missing a leg, they're like giving you a new one." Rickie snickered "You may find yourself walking around with two right feet for the rest for your life."

Billy's mouth dropped open, he quickly looked at Cal and at the same time they both shook their heads with a 'Nah.'

"All right." Rickie tossed his hands up. "But think about how far they go."

Look at me guy.” Rickie held out his arms, smiled, the tilted his head with a snarling face. And then Rickie growled.

CHAPTER NINETY-THREE

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA

December 22<sup>nd</sup> - 9:05 a.m.

Greg rushed into his own office, casually dressed, Levis and all. He saw Dr. Jefferson sporting similar clothing behind his desk, he rummaged through the papers. "Almost done?" Greg asked. "We have to catch that flight up. You know what Dr. Morrison said. Any day."

"Yes." Dr. Jefferson lifted papers with such an awe look on his face. "This is amazing."

"Isn't it?"

"The amount of responses to next experiment's funding." He tossed a letter. "You've really done well."

"I know I did." Greg's eyes shifted to the television. "Watching Billy?"

"Um . . ." Dr. Jefferson peered up. "Yes. Actually a tape of last night's segment on the experiment. Did you catch it?"

"No, I had, get this . . . a date."

Dr. Jefferson whistled. "You should see it. Rewind it for a few seconds and catch the end."

"I will." Greg grabbed the remote. "And we can bring those papers with us."

"No need to." Dr. Jefferson lifted a check. "Let me ask you this. What in the world are you going to do with thirty-seven investors?"

Greg smiled as he pressed play. "I have plans."

"I bet you do." Dr. Jefferson dropped the check. "It's baffling how easily people can be bought." He turned the chair to see Billy on the television, a lab behind him. "Oh, this is my favorite part. Turn it up."

Greg did.

Billy moved a little across the shot holding out his hand. ". . . right here in this lab." Billy faced the camera. "Medical technologies. New drug development. Fertility manipulation. Valuable stress research that will benefit generations to come. Without Caldwell and the Iso-Stasis experiments to trial and test for a better tomorrow, in this reporters opinion, there wouldn't be a better tomorrow. Until next week. I'm William Griffith."

Greg shut off the television. "Offers for investments have increased since his series on us started."

"He certainly has been a great help." Dr. Jefferson stood up. "He was so adamant about being the journalist who would break us. How in the world did you get him to change his mind."

"Put it this way. A weekly spot of his own. A book that comes out in six months. A new leg . . ." Greg walked to the door with Dr. Jefferson. "How did you put it. It's baffling how easily people can be bought."

Fayetteville, NC  
December 22<sup>nd</sup> - 1:30 p.m.

Cal cringed then laughed at Rickie's loud bad singing.

"Cal-babe!" He yelled from the kitchen. "Can I like spike the eggnog?"

"Sure Rickie." Cal hung an ornament. "Billy can you get me the blue ones."

"Sure." Billy grabbed the box off the couch and carried them to Cal. He limped in his walk. "Here."

"Thanks." She reached in and grabbed one. "I want to get this done. Jake has Chuck and his new girlfriend coming over tonight." She extended her arm up and tip toed. "And I promised . . ." She stopped.

"What's wrong."

"Oh." Slowly she lowered her arm. She blinked harshly. "Oh wow." She grabbed her stomach.

"Cal?"

"Oh shit." Cal's eyes widened.

"Is it time?"

"Oh yeah. Rickie!" Cal yelled out.

Wearing a white egg nog mustache Rickie waltzed in the room. "Cal-babe what's wrong."

Cal turned to face him as Billy held her arm. "Get my bag upstairs and get the car." She cringed. "I'll . . . I'll call Jake. It's time."

Rickie screamed and dropped his eggnog. "Uh!" He began to race frantically around the house. "We're having the babies! Uh!"

"Rickie!" Billy screamed out. "Calm down and get the car."

"Dude." Rickie breathed heavily. "O.K. Calm. Calm."

Splash! The sound of crashing water was heard.

Rickie looked down to the large wet puddle that formed by Cal's feet and Rickie screamed again.

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Sitting behind his desk, Jake worked with a map in front of him. He looked up to the knock on his door. "Come in."

Corporal Lewis walked in. "Lt. Col. Graison Sir."

"Yes." Jake peered from his work

"Your wife just called."

"Put her on."

"She hung up."

"What?" Jake was puzzled. "I could have spoken to her."

"She didn't want to speak to you sir. She just said to tell you . . . it's time."

Jake's eyes widened and up from his desk he sprang. Never putting anything

away, never stopping he flew to of his office.

^ ^ ^ ^

“Cal. Breath.” Jake told her as he walked side by side with the fast moving Gurney. Billy was on the other side.

“No.”

“Cal breath.”

“You breath.”

“Cal!”

“All right!” She huffed her breaths, panting like a dog.

“Jake?” Billy had question in his voice.

“What?” Jake kept his eyes on Cal.

“Look.” Billy pointed.

Jake looked to the end of the hall seeing Greg standing there in surgical garb. “What the fuck. Haynes?”

“Afternoon Jake.” Greg walked up to them. He laid his hand on Cal’s stomach feeling it. “The awaited arrival.”

“Haynes.” Jake snapped. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Greg looked to the nurse. “Take Mrs. Graison in the operating room, we’re ready to prep her for a ‘C’ section. I need to speak to These two gentlemen.”

“Right away doctor.” Through the door the nurse pushed Cal.

Jake felt Cal slip from his hand. He just wanted to follow in, But Greg stopped him.

“Jake, we need to talk, then we’ll go inside.”

“Something is wrong.” Jake said. “What is it. Why are you here.”

“I’m here because you agree in the contract that we have every right to be here. Those children were conceived during our experiment.” Greg explained.

“Why . . .” Jake rubbed his own eyes. “Why do I get the feeling that this pregnancy was more than an accident..”

“Oh it wasn’t. It was planned. We would have liked for you to father the child. But . . . you couldn’t. So we had to use Billy, pull . . .” He tilted his head. “Entice the situation so we could achieve fertilization.”

“Wh . . . why?” Jake asked. “Why is Cal’s getting pregnant so important.?”

“She volunteered to be part of the experiment. To let us do what we want. We wanted to test a new DNA fetal enhancement drug. And how else were we going to do it?”

Jake’s eyes widened and he looked at Billy then back to Greg. “DNA Enhancement. No. My children are Stasis?”

“Well . . .” Greg squirmed a little. “They look normal for now. Unless they eventually sprout hair and fangs, they should be like Rickie. We’re hoping. We’ll see.” Greg moved to the double doors. “But right now, we have to remove that

cocoon.” He disappeared through the double doors.

Both of their heads swayed at the same time to each other.

“Jake Did he just say . . .”

“Cocoon?” Jake looked at the still swinging doors. “Oh my God, yes.”

^^^

After expelling all of his energy, Rickie needed some more. Figuring candy would make him pace faster until he knew, he found the only vending machine in the hospital with peanut. M&M’s. And just when his mouth started to water and he really was wanting those tasty little nubs of candy, the machine failed to spit out his purchase. No.” Rickie banged the machine. “No.”

“Hey!” Her thick rough, female voice blasted. “Don’t you beta that machine.”

Rickie saw her reflection in the machine, and slowly he turned to her. As soon as his eyes laid upon the woman who was nearly forty years old, music played in his head. Violins with a love melody. “Babe.” He whispered out. “Oh wow.”

Round she was, but not as round as she was tall. She waddled in her walk to him. Snarling her pug face, tucking her red hair. “Watch.” She had a nasty tone. “Gentle.”

“Babe, I can be . . . gentle.” Rickie was in awe. “Like what’s you name.”

Oddly she raised one eyes brow and looked down to Rickie who stared at her. She pressed the button, the M&M’s dropped and she bent down to get them. She handed them to Rickie. “Florence.”

“Florence the babe nightingale.” Rickie gripped her hand with the M&M’s. “I swear I’m in love.”

Florence Blushed and tilted her head.

^^^

“We’re in.” Greg stated and put down the scalpel. He peered over the protective sheet that blocked Cal, Jake and Billy’s view. “We’re getting them out now.”

Jake took a deep breath. “I’m sorry Cal.”

“I saw the one Jake.” Cal squeezed his hand. “The one is normal. I saw the ultra sound.”

“Out.” Greg called and carried what looked like a purple snail shell to a table. Four doctors gathered around. “Dr. Morrison.”

Dr. Morrison moved to Cal. “I’ll close her up.

Greg reached for another scalpel. The purple cocoon squiggle and moved.

"Jake you can come see this if you want. Billy too."

Jake looked down at Cal.

"Go on." She told him. "Billy you too."

"I'll uh . . ." Billy grabbed her hand. "I'll wait here."

Hesitantly, Jake moved to behind Greg. He watched him slice into the moving object. "How's it going?"

"I see the one." Greg opened the cocoon. He looked up to Jake., "Perfect, small but perfect." He extended his hands into the cocoon. "I need an incubator. My guess." Greg had a grip. "Three pounds." Slowly he lifted the baby all curled in a ball. Normal, perfect and crying. "A boy."

Jake's eyes widened. "Oh my God. Look at him. Cal!" He looked back at Cal. "A boy! What's the other one?"

Greg pulled out the second baby. "Perfect as well. Another boy." He handed the baby to a nurse that held a blanket.

"Oh yes." Jake turned back around at Cal and Billy. "Two boys. Perfect Cal. They are perfect."

"And another boy."

"Yes." Jake shouted then stunned, he faced Greg. "What?"

"Three." Greg held the third perfect baby.

Jake was speechless, only a small peep of a shriek came from him as he watched them put the three babies in the incubators.

Cal tilted her head to Billy. "Go see them." She said softly. "Go on."

"I'll wait. Jake's loving his moment. Look how happy he is Cal."

So tired Cal looked and she swayed her head to see Jake beaming in happiness at the incubator. She softly called his name. "Jake." and closed her eyes.

"Oh wow." Jake was in awe. "Cal you have to see this. Oh my God, three of them. Oh my God. Three boys. We need a . . ."

"Jake." Billy called him.

"We need another name." Jake rambled. "They all have dark hair and no fangs." Jake laughed.

"Jake." Billy called out again, this time with a crack to his voice.

"Cal," Jake turned around. "You have to see our . . ." Jake's eyes widened and he moved fast to the cart that Cal laid on. Her eyes were closed and her head was slumped. "Cal?"

Billy's voice quivered, he lifted her hand that loosely laid in his. "Oh God Jake."

"Cal." Panic hit Jake. His huge hand slipped to her neck. "Haynes! Haynes!"

Greg spun from the babies, he saw Cal. "Oh my God, she crashed. Everyone back away." he jumped on the Gurney as Morrison finished closing up. He began to do compression. "I need a cart. Epi."

A nurse flew by moving Jake out of the way.

"Start a push." Greg ordered out delivering CPR. "Defibrillator."



Billy backed away.

Jake's heart pounded as he watched them bring the defibrillator to Cal, and with a click of a shock they laid the pads to her chest. Her body flew high in the air and banged lifeless to the cart again.

Greg looked. "Nothing. Clear. Three hundred." He placed the paddle to Cal. Again high she flew with the jolt, but still nothing. "Dilanta hurry!" Greg continued CPR.

Jake couldn't back away any further to get away from the heartache he watched. What had happened. What had gone wrong. He could barely breathe. One moment filled with an abundance of happiness the next moment watching Cal refusing to come back. His eyes fixed upon them as they worked begging in his mind for Cal to revive. Praying to God with everything he had to let his wife live.

The seconds turned to minutes and like the sweep of a hand on the clock they whizzed by. Faster than Jake wanted them to. Too fast.

"Time." Greg dropped his hand.

A nurse called out. "Four-seventeen."

Jake froze. His eyes closed so tight. His ears burned, his heart raced. It had to be a dream. It wasn't happening.

"Jake." Billy spoke his name. "I'm so sorry." he moved by him slowly.

Jake kept his eyes on Cal, laying peacefully there. He could have sworn he saw her breathing, but he knew it was wishful thinking.

"Jake." Greg grabbed his arms. "We tried. We really tried."

Jake swallowed. His emotions had him so badly they formed a lump in his throat and he choked. He couldn't speak.

Alone he stood with Cal in that operating room. The bang of the door as the last person walked out shot through Jake. Every ounce of him shook and he moved slowly to the table. "Cal." He called her name softly. It broke up. "Oh God Cal." His large hand laid down on her arm. She didn't move. His fingers gripped tight to her arm and he lifted it, laying her small hand against his cheek. Pressing her palm close to him, Jake lowered his head down, and his body shook violently. For the first time in twenty years, tears fell from Jake's eyes. The first one landed upon Cal and a sob as big as Jake rang out in the hollow room.

He lost. For the first time in Jake's life he had lost. His heart broke in a million pieces right there and then. Close he brought his lips to Cal's brushing their dampness against her as he couldn't control his emotions. "Oh my God. Oh my God." His words were breathy. "What am I gonna do. Oh God, Cal, you're my life." Jake cried harder, his shoulders bounced with his every word. "You're my entire life." His forehead rest upon hers. "I love you." He whispered. "What am I gonna do . . . what am I gonna do with out you." Jake broke down again gripping her hand so tight. "Oh God." Jake sniffed in long and hard wiping his tears with the back of his hand. "I can't believe you're gone." He sniffed again. "Cal. Cal listen to me. United . . . united we stand sweetie. Divided we fall." Another tear fell hard. "But it won't be forever. Wait for me . . ." His voice dropped so low and

raspy. "Please wait for me. Please." Gently Jake laid his lips to Cal's, the moisture of his tears forming a seal as he left them on hers for that final kiss, that final taste and feel of the lips he would never touch again. "I love you with everything I am. Know that." he kissed her again. "Know that. I will be nothing without you. Nothing." Jake words trembled as he stood straight and released her hand. "Nothing." he laid both her hands on the table at hers side. He looked down to her face and ran his finger tips across the beauty of it. "Good bye Cal." Not wanting to, but knowing if he didn't, he would never leave, Jake turned from Cal. For the first time since he met her, he had to walk away from her. The hardest thing he would ever do would be to walk out the door and live his life never hearing her voice. Never seeing her face. Never touching the woman he loved with every ounce of his soul.

With a lowered head, and a saddened heart Jake slowly reached for the left double door. As his hand laid upon it, he heard it. A whipping sound, high and fast, whistling in the air. Jake closed his eyes, "Please." And then he spun. And when he did, and when his eyes fell upon Cal, Jake shrieked out so loud his huge voice echoed in every corridor of the hospital. But it wasn't a shriek of grief. It was a shriek of joy when he saw Cal, on the table, like Rickie when he first died, like the babies, totally cocooned.

CHAPTER NINETY-FOUR

THREE YEARS LATER

Fayetteville, NC

August 2<sup>nd</sup> - 9:00 a.m.

"All right." Jake barreled out. "Listen up. You three." Hands on hips his head lowered down as he towered before the three little boys in this front yard. Barely passed his knees they came. All off them mirror images of one another. Brown crew cut hair. Little levi jeans. All of them wore a white tee shirt. And all of their tee shirts were tucked in on the right, but hanging out on the left. They stood, quiet, still and not saying anything. "Look at you three, so sloppy." Jake took a moment to tuck in the shirts. "Now . . . While your mother and I are gone this week. You will listen to Uncle Billy. You got that?" he watched them nod. "No jumping off the roof with Rickie. No being bad. Trust me it won't be a pretty sight if I come home to find one of you cocooned again."

Cal laughed as she stepped from the house. "Jake, our flight!" She yelled to him and saw the blue van pull into the driveway. "Billy's here."

Jake lowered to a squat before the boys. "Jake, Sam, Nick. Give daddy a kiss goodbye." All three boys with a laughing shriek, pummeled Jake with such a force and they knocked him backwards to the grass.

Cal opened the van door for Billy. "Hey."

"Hey." He stepped out, laying his hand on her face and kissing her on the cheek. He hovered his lips with a whisper there. "I missed you." he kissed her again.

Cal giggled. "We're almost ready."

Billy checked out Jake with the boys. "Jake ritual again?"

"You know it. Routine. Since he started going on training tours again well, he feels guilty. I tried to tell him not. I mean he didn't go anywhere for the longest time. And now . . ." Cal shrugged. "With us doing these vacations."

"Vacations?" Billy laughed. "Experiments."

"Please." Cal scoffed. "Testing for Caldwell. We don't get hurt. We test. It's fun."

"You would think it." Billy laid his arm on Cal's back as he moved with her. "He looks tense."

"He is. We have Rickie and Florence's wedding creeping up." Cal and Billy both shuddered. "You know Jake's been bitching about her. And . . . he found out he has to go to Korea two weeks after we get back. For get this, six weeks." Cal saw through the corner of her eye, Billy smiling. "Stop that." She back handed him in the gut.

After grunting, Billy swiped his hand down his face wiping away the smile. "I'm sorry. Merely thinking of me helping you out with the boys again while he's

gone, that's all."

"God, you're terrible." Cal looked at her watch. "And we have to go. Jake!"

"Have fun." Billy kissed Cal on the cheek. "See you when you get back."

"Thanks. Good luck with the boys." Cal moved to the car. "Jake!"

Jake got up from the grass. "Be good for Uncle Billy." He pointed at the boys. "Love you guys." He smiled, backed up, darted forward to them, kissed all three again and raced to the car. "Bill. Watch them."

Billy waved his hand and bobbed his head. "You know it." He walked to the car to see them off. "And where are you two going this time?"

Jake shrugged as he shut the door after Cal slid in. "Like last time. we'll call when we know." He walked around to his side.

"Jake." Billy called and pointed.

Jake hesitated before stepping in. He looked to behind to see Rickie pull up right behind him. "Christ. Move that Car I have to go."

Rickie peeled his car out. Screeched it to a stop and jumped out. He raced to Jake and Cal's car as they started to back up. "Wait." Out of breath he leaned in the window. "Good luck and see you when you get back. Flo and I will help with the tots."

Jake grunted and wound up the window. He looked in the rear view mirror to see Florence, so miserable standing there. "I really should back up over her."

"Jake be nice."

Jake grumbled again and pulled from the driveway. "Oh this will be pleasant when we get back. Billy is so nonchalant. He just let's them do whatever they want. Especially with . . ." He winced when he saw Rickie dive on the ground and the boys land on top of them. "Rickie. All right. Guessing time. Which one this trip?"

"Little Jake."

Jake twitched his head. "I think you're right. What is it about that boy. He has no fear."

Cal smiled and looked at Jake. "He's just like you."

Jake grinned. "Yeah."

Caldwell Research Institute - Atlanta, GA

August 2<sup>nd</sup> - 1:00 p.m.

"I see you both are ready." Greg walked around his desk to where Cal and Jake sat before him. "Good. We think you'll like this one."

Jake had his hands folded. "Dangerous?"

"Nah." Greg shook his head. "More experimental. Testing. Fun. Cal." Greg winked. "You'll have a blast."

"But it's not dangerous?" Cal looked oddly at him. "Where are we going?"

"Someplace very vital to the next experiment we're preparing. And that's another thing we need to discuss. We need two good controllers on this experiment. And, we'd like for you two to think about going. The kids could go. In fact they'll have a great time." Greg sounded as if he were selling them a car. "And with you two controlling it, You know you'll all be safe."

"Controllers?" Jake raised an eyebrow in wonder. "For Iso-Stasis fourteen?"

"Yes." Greg nodded. "When you're testing this. Think about it."

"O.K." Jake slowly nodded his head. "But you wanna tell us where we going today."

"Sure." Greg lifted a folder and slid it to Jake. "This is a testing site directly connected to the next experiment. You can say my connections and the government are more than happy to help us out. Take a look."

Leaning to Cal, Jake opened the folder. He looked to Cal then back down to the documents that contained the heading 'NASA'. A glimmer of a smile hit Jake and Cal, and Jake lifted his eyes from the documents to Greg. "Haynes?"

"Well . . ." Greg cupped his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. "I thought it would be pretty damn interesting seeing . . . Jake in space. Don't you?"