

THE ISO-STASIS EXPERIMENT



Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti

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*This book is dedicated to James, for all of your help in
the creation of Graison.*

And special thanks to . . .

My brother Ron for your opinions when I needed them on crucial parts. Rob, for explaining things that only you can. James and Damien, my advisory council, I truly hope that you realize so much of what you read on these pages, you have made realistic. Captain Curt Stemrich, United States Air Force, for helping me understand rankings. Julie, for that one morning talk where you set me straight. Steve, though the prospect of this book seemed to bore you. If I want peace with you, you must be on this page. Adam, for taking me away from it all, for inspiring me with great emotions through this whole book. And finally, to F., I'm coming home.

*Thanks,
J.*

THE ISO-STASIS EXPERIMENT

Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti

PREPARATIONS AND INTRODUCTIONS

CHAPTER ONE

Iso-Stasis Experiment Nine - Coville River, Alaska

March 3, 1971 - 4:42 a.m.

Seeing was not something Jasper Herring had to do in order to know how close he was to death. The cold air clashed with the hot breath of the silver back wolf causing a stench filled steam that laced the inside of his nostrils and lungs with each deep running breath he inspired. The predominant smell grew stronger with the panting growl that, Jasper sensed a mere few feet behind him.

His pace was inhibited. Sluggish and difficult as his pounding feet sank into the muddy river bank. Running for his life, fighting for freedom, Jasper made his mistake. He looked back.

One scream. One harrowing scream was all he released. In a snarling lunge, the wolf silenced Jasper. Searing, ripping, deep. The jaws of the beast penetrated Jasper's throat as the weight of the animal pummeled him to the ground.

"He's over here!" Sergeant Jed Lambert cried out, racing through the wooded area and emerging into the clearing just before the river's bank. He lowered his ready and extended revolver when his eyes laid upon the battle that ensued on the water's edge. A battle Jasper long since lost.

Sgt. Lambert debated on whether to at least try. But his efforts would be futile against the wolf who violently shook Jasper's lifeless body, moving it about as if it were nothing more than a rag doll. He took a step, readied to turn and head back to the compound, when Ben Owens raced from the woods.

Ben couldn't speak, he only let out a gasping shriek when he saw what was happening to Jasper, he cocked back the hammer on his own revolver and raised it in an aim.

The soft, but firm 'no' spoken by Sgt. Lambert, grabbed the attention of the wolf. Releasing Jasper's body, the wolf turned his head. The glow of his yellowing eyes met Sgt. Lambert's only briefly and he returned to his plight. Pulling, tearing, the wolf did until he reached the point of success when into his jaws lodged Jasper's head and he tore it from the body. As if



carrying a trophy, head in mouth, the wolf took off down the bank.

"Let's go." In a run back into the woods, Sgt. Lambert grabbed hold of Ben's arm and pulled the much smaller man. "We can hold up at the compound. It's safer there."

"But *its* back there."

"Three hours, Ben." Sgt. Lambert raced forward. "Wolves are out. We stand a better chance back there. We have three hours left of this experiment." He stopped running when no longer did he hear Ben's footsteps with his. He looked back. "Ben?"

Panicked, Ben looked up when the chesty growl of neither animal or human rang out. "I . . . I can't. I'm scared."

"Fine. But I'm surviving this. With or without you I am surviving this. Good luck." There wasn't time to waste, the compound wasn't that far, and Sgt. Lambert took off.

Ben stood alone, but only for a moment. With wobbling legs he sped forth to catch up to the only man with whom he felt safe. The only man other than himself that was left alive.

In the compound, Ben huddled in the corner. Knees pulled close to him, body trembling. His hands pressed tight to cover his ears, and blood flowed from the handle of the revolver that dug deep into his temple. He hid in that corner of the windowless room while Sgt. Lambert placed every piece of furniture that was in there in front of the steel door. Barricading them in, safe guarding them from what seemed to follow where they led. Calling for them in the most horrifying of screams. The cries grew louder and louder. They no longer came from outside the compound, but within.

Backing up, gun held high at the door, Sgt. Lambert readied himself.

Ben lifted his eyes. "We'll never make it."

"We'll make it!" The Sergeant heard the footsteps, heavy foots steps with rumbling, and beating as it neared the door. "Three hours, Ben. We can beat this. We can do this! Raise your weapon."

Ben, using the wall as leverage, slid himself upward to his feet. "I can't die like the others. I've only two bullets left."

"I've got five. Goddamn it we can take it down!" Sgt. Lambert spoke with determination, no fear. The bellowing cries sounded so close they could have been in the room. He watched as the steel door began to bend



with each hard hit pound it took from the other side. “Ben, stay with me. Are you with me?” Sergeant Lambert needed to feel his presence next to him. Side by side they stood a fighting chance. Side by side firing upon whatever it was that tried so desperately to make its way in. His eyes locked tight in a focus on the door that began to give away. Hearing Ben’s whimpering breathing angered him. “Ben, I need you with me on this. We have to do this together.”

“I can’t die like the others. Like . . .” Ben looked to the limbless and bloodied body shredded in the other corner of the room. “. . . like her.”

“Then damn it, give me your weapon and I’ll do this alone!”

Ben raised out his gun. As his hand extended, the noise level in the room grew. The growling, the banging, became unbearable to him. And the final blow was the cracking of the archway that fought with its last splinter of wood to protect him and the Sergeant. With a loud scream, his ears filled with the sound of anxious rushing blood. His heart beat loudly, the smell and fear of death consumed him. “I can’t die like this. Neither can you.” Without thought, without thinking, his trembling hand reached forward, and he fired a single shot.

Sergeant Lambert stood for only a second, his eyes shifted to Ben, his hands dropped his weapon and his body fell to the floor.

The crashing of the failing archway brought Ben’s view from Sergeant Lambert to the door that was seconds from holding its own. Knowing he had only one shot left, Ben lifted the revolver. No longer was he frightened. No longer did he tremble. He placed the gun to his temple and fired.



CHAPTER TWO

Iso-Stasis Experiment Twelve
Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
June 14 - Present Day

The hue of the screen cast an odd blue onto Dr. Randal Jefferson's grey hair as he peered, almost too close to the screen. The freeze frame of the woman sitting at the long interview table. Blonde, straight hair, a plain pretty, she looked at the interviewer rather than the camera that he stood behind. Dr. Jefferson pressed 'play'.

"Ms. Reynolds, what would you say was your motivation for applying to the experiment?" The interviewers voice spoke on the video tape.

"Seclusion. Challenge. Money." She answered.

"And what makes you confident you can emerge successfully from the experiment?"

"The fact that I fear nothing."

Off went the tape, and with a bite to his bottom lip, Dr. Jefferson chuckled. Perhaps the reason for watching the tape again was reiteration. A reiteration that he had not made the wrong decision by moving forward with Cal Reynolds. So unlike the other female applicants and participants of earlier experiments Cal was. Petite and frail looking, yet Dr. Jefferson sensed she somehow would defy her obvious limitations when she went through the final physical portion of her screening.

She didn't try to put on a front that she was 'the perfect candidate'. Nor, did Cal have to act the part of being cold. She was. It was evident just by looking at her. There was no life in her blue eyes. None. Dr. Jefferson attributed the loss of that to the loss of Cal's thirteen year old daughter who was tragically murdered not even a year earlier.

Decisions had to be made, and Cal was one of ten women left. Only two would be chosen to go. And Dr. Jefferson knew where favoritism laid.

Closing the thick folder that marked the application efforts of Cal Reynolds, Dr. Jefferson stood from behind his desk. He scooped up the folder and moved his shorter, stout body to his office door. He looked and acted older than his fifty-three years. Dr. Jefferson blamed that on the Iso-



Stasis experiments.

“Ms. Reynolds,” he called out as he stepped from his office in his small reception area.

Cal set down the magazine she viewed as she turned around to face him.

“All ready.” Dr. Jefferson handed the folder to her. “Health papers and such are in there. You’ll move forward to the physical testing now. This is it . . .” He took a deep breath and extended his hand. “Good luck.”

Handshake first, then Cal took the folder. “Thank you for the opportunity.” She bent down for her small knapsack that rested against a chair, lifted it and tossed it over her shoulder.

“All the way down the hall, last door on the left.”

A woman of little words, Cal nodded with a polite smile, and folder stuffed within her arm, she opened the door and walked into the hall. Dr. Jefferson really didn’t tell her, left or right out of his office, but since he used the term ‘all the way down’, Cal deducted the seemingly endless hallway to her right was the correct direction to go.

It was literally the final step of the process. How far she had come. Cal knew her chances were good at that point because during the six month screening procedure, the applicant number had gone from over seven hundred, down to less than one hundred. Cal was still in the running. She had envisioned in her mind what the other applicants were like, though she never met any of them, or at least didn’t now if she had. And she wanted to. There was nothing wrong with seeing the competition. It sort of became an obsession to look for them. Like hidden Christmas gifts, whenever she went to the institute. Staring at everyone she passed in the hallways who didn’t wear a ‘Caldwell’ name tag, wondering is he one? Is she one?

She wasn’t ‘nosey’ by nature, but the folder in her arms dealt with her. The journey to the testing area was a good walk and Cal used that to her advantage to leaf through the papers and skim them as she did. Occasionally she’d glance up in her reading and walking to see if she reached the end of the hall. She’s figured if she didn’t see it, she’d hit it if she wasn’t paying attention, and she wasn’t. Her moving came to a sudden halt when she hit, not into a wall, but rather a person. He could of been a walking, moving, slab of concrete for as solid of a connection she made into him. With the surprise of the hit, Cal’s hands released the papers and up they went, flying about the hall. “Shit.” Cal frazzled, lifted her hand and



looked down.

“Ma’am, I am very sorry.” His deep soft voice spoke. It had a resonating sound to it, almost as if he tried with diligence to speak softly but had to put out an effort. “Here, let me help you.”

“No, that’s all right.” She crouched down, catching glimpse of his blue eyes as he bent also. “It’s all my fault I wasn’t paying attention . . .” She noticed his uniform, full dress, and Army, something she knew well. “. . . Major.”

His eyes shifted to his lapel and the military give-a-way of his rank that graced it. He gave a slight smile of ‘impressed’ as he helped gather and straighten the mess. “You recognized the oakleaf?”

“I should.” She stood up, taking a breath when she noticed how much he actually towered over her. She was surprised she didn’t knock herself unconscious. “Thank you. Again, I’m sorry.”

“No problem. Have a good day.” He handed her the rest of the papers and continued walking his journey on the opposite direction in the hall.

Cal looked forward also, not looking back at him. She was standing a mere five feet from the last door on the left. There were no other doors, and she wondered as she approached, if he had just emerged from the testing area. In her mind he probably did. Because the Major she had just encountered *was* what she envisioned to be in application for the project. *He* was what they were probably looking for. His score would probably kill hers in the physical division. Trying not to let it bother her, she entered the lab. Cal knew she had one thing in her favor--determination and she needed the project more than she ever let them know.

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Dr. Jefferson was a bit shocked when Major Jacob Graison entered his office. He was quiet, man of few words, that was noted in the reports. But what took Dr. Jefferson by surprise was the way he handled himself, and his demeanor. He had prepared for his first meeting with the Major, but he wasn’t prepared for what walked in. Major Graison was a man who led and trained the Rangers. Dr. Jefferson expected someone crass, someone rough, someone that came off almost as frightening as the size he was. Even the deep scars that scattered about his face didn’t project ‘fear’. Instead, the big, brown haired, rough featured man, came off meek, almost too polite. There



had to be a mistake. The Army's recommendation coded him as deadly. Yet he gave the appearance to Dr. Jefferson that he'd reason with a person to deter them from smashing a bug.

Maj. Graison sat straight up in his chair, perfect posture, his hands semi-folded on his lap, forefingers tapping quickly to each other. He sat stone face, watching only with shifting eyes as Dr. Jefferson paced back and forth reading from the folder.

"It says here, Major . . ." Dr. Jefferson stopped pacing and lifted his eyes. "That you consider yourself a very private person. You do know son, that if you are selected to participate, information about you will be placed in a manuscript for others to view."

"I do know that sir. What I do is no secret, who I am is no secret either. I would expect for them to learn about me, as I expect to learn as much about the others as well."

"Including details of your personal life?" Dr. Jefferson asked.

"My career leaves no room for a personal life."

With the open folder, eyes still focusing on it, Dr. Jefferson moved to behind his desk and sat down. "As you know Major, this study is done to show the mental and physical effects of isolation from civilization on different types of people. If chosen you will be placed in the isolated compound with seven others, for seven months. No communication with the outside world whatsoever will be possible. You're here because we sent the Pentagon a letter stating that we wish to do the Iso-Stasis experiment again. And, as they always do, they choose forty men they feel would be best physically and mentally qualified to go. You are one of six left. Only one of you will go to represent the United States Military. You've made it quite far."

"Thank you sir."

"In fact, your psychiatric scores are the highest of all the military we've interviewed."

"I expected as much." Maj. Graison nodded. "I've taken many of those tests before and have always scored high."

"I've seen." Dr. Jefferson looked impressed. "I also have a copy of a mental evaluation done on you after you spent thirty days alone in a military experiment. Locked in a room, eight by eight by eight, for thirty days. No contact with anyone. Just the clothes on your back. They gave you a notebook and pencil to journal your experience." Dr. Jefferson continued



reading. "Your handwriting never deterred and it states you still had a strong balance when you emerged. Very impressive."

"Thank you sir. That's why I feel this project will seem like a vacation compared to those thirty days. Especially with the institute providing some entertainment stimulus . . . reading materials and so forth."

"Really son? For seven months? Is this something you would like to do?" Dr. Jefferson asked.

"It is something asked of me to do. It's my job. I've no family so I won't be missed or miss anyone. To be honest, if I'm chosen to go--I go. If not, it's no sweat off my back."

"What about the compensation?" Dr. Jefferson fiddled with the pen in his hand. "A hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money for someone in the military."

"Yes, sir, it is. I'm not going to lie to you that's a very tempting amount. However, I'm in no financial bind so the money isn't my drive." Maj. Graison still sat in the same unrelaxed position.

"What will be your drive? The will to survive?"

"The will to survive?" Maj. Graison's corner of his mouth raised, he tried to hide his smile. "Being isolated with seven people in a remote spot. A spot that provides you with some sort of entertainment, food, and the freedom to move about the compound is not surviving. It is merely biding time."

"It doesn't even sound challenging to you?"

"No sir it doesn't. Now perhaps that's not the answer you're looking for. Perhaps that's the answer that will be the deciding factor in not selecting me to go. But it's the way I feel."

"I see." Dr. Jefferson wrote down. "You have much confidence. And rightfully so." Dr. Jefferson did want to add arrogance to that statement but refrained. "As I said before, you scored highest out of all the military we interviewed and second highest of all the other applicants."

That snapped the Major even straighter in his chair. "Second highest?"

"You seem surprised?"

"Well sir . . . I am. I'd like to meet the man who scored higher than myself."

"If you're selected to go you will. However, I won't tell you who that person is, the scores are confidential. I will tell you this . . ." Dr. Jefferson smiled his old smile. It seemed that he was going to derive great pleasure



telling the Major what he was about to tell him. "It wasn't a man who scored higher than you."

"A woman?" Major Graison's left eye brow raised, he relaxed some in his chair. It was apparent that it bothered him.

"A woman." Dr. Jefferson stated. "I think I may have discovered something about you that isn't written here, Major. Hoping to not insult you, but perhaps you strike me as . . . chauvinistic?"

Cool and calm, Major Graison answered. "Pretty much, sir, yes I am." Straight forward was something else he was, and he presented that, at least Major Graison thought he did. He didn't flinch, or show dismay, even though from that moment on in the interview his mind kept on question in such shock, 'a woman?'

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Cal Reynolds pulled into the long driveway. She shut off the ignition and ejected the tape from the player in her car. She stared at the house, her body exhausted, and the ten steps to the house seemed like a mountain to climb. Rubbing her tired eyes she opened her car door and grabbed her purse. She remembered when she looked at the steps, that the house she lived in before, her house, had no steps. But that house held way too many painful memories for her. She had to let it go when Jesse passed away. She could have taken the money and went far away, in essence she did. She moved to New Eagle, that was far enough away from the suburbs of Pittsburgh, where she lived with her daughter.

Cal could have chosen to live on her own, but the offer from Joyce--her life long friend--to redo the attic and stay there was probably exactly what Cal needed. The sense of family Joyce provided to her two sons helped Cal, since she had no family of her own. And Joyce could use the money Cal gave her every month, even though she insisted that she didn't need it. A single mother struggling, perhaps that was a justification Cal used for why she hadn't left Joyce's home yet.

Walking up the driveway, Cal stopped to pick up Jason's bike which was toppled on its side. Slowly she took the steps then the walkway to the side kitchen door. When she opened it, Joyce was working with diligence in the kitchen. "Hi." Cal slumped her way in.

The knife Joyce used slammed hard and loud against the cutting board.



“You’re still pissed at me.” Cal stated, walking to the fridge to get a soda.

After another slam, Joyce turned around. “Yes, I’m still pissed at you. You went back for the final interview.”

“It’s something I want to do.”

“And it is something as your friend, I have begged you not to do. Seven months, Cal. Locked away.”

With a slight chuckle of disbelief, Cal shook her head and sat at the kitchen table.

“No, listen.” Joyce set down the knife, and walked over. So much desperation was in her voice as she joined Cal at the table. “It’s not right. If you need money, teach again. St. Joan’s will take you back.”

“I don’t need money. I have plenty left from selling the house. And I can’t teach kids again. You know that.”

Joyce leaned in some to Cal. “Maybe it’s time you should. Moving in with me and my two boys didn’t help. Teaching again might. Give you some life back.”

“You don’t understand.” Cal spoke soft. I don’t want life back. Jesse . . . she was my life. She was thirteen years old. I was a kid when I had her. Do you realize how much of my life she consumed? And she didn’t just leave.” The fingernails on Cal’s hand scraped in defeat against the surface of the table. “She was taken from me.”

Hand on Cal’s, Joyce tried to be the voice of reason. “Losing Jesse the way you did was beyond tragic. I don’t think you know how proud I am of you. You have come so far since she was killed. Don’t . . . Don’t go backwards. Doing this experiment will be just that.

“Or maybe Joyce,” Cal raised her eyes slightly. “It can be my way of finally going forward. If . . . if.” Her views sunk again. “. . . that is even possible.”

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The day of interviews was long and the last thing Dr. Jefferson wanted to do was run down the halls of the institute. After being summoned fanatically by one of the technicians in the physical testing division, Dr. Jefferson found himself in a race.

Out in the hall, right outside the testing door, David, the young tech in



a lab coat, held one hand on his hip while the other held back his bangs. He looked as frazzled as he sounded.

“What is it?” Dr. Jefferson asked with concern. “What’s wrong.” He took a second to catch his breath.

“I know . . .” David held up his hand. “Please don’t get upset. It happens. An imposter. Maybe.”

“A what!” Dr. Jefferson blasted.

“I asked politely.” David cringed.

“You know how vital this is.” Dr. Jefferson took a moment to calm himself. “Are you sure?”

“We don’t know. That’s why you’re here. See . . .” David took a breath. “He was convincing. He didn’t have his paperwork, but told us, the ‘babe’ down the hall had it. He impressively handled the weightless wheel. Of course, he crammed every television cartoon theme song from 1970 - to present into that four minutes . . .” David shrugged and opened the door. “But this, this alerted us. Three hours, sir. We can’t get him off the exercise bike.”

Dr. Jefferson stepped inside and clearly saw the view of the young man David spoke of. Eighteen years old, thin and small. His shoulder length light brown hair bounced as his head bobbed from side to side while he seemingly peddled with delight.

“He keeps doing that stupid . . .” David grabbed his temple. “. . . that stupid peddling theme song from Wizard of Oz, while screaming ‘Auntie Em, Auntie Em’ over and over.”

“Dude!” The young man called out to Dr. Jefferson. “Hey, check me out. Guy, awesome fuel conscious means of transportation. Working the muscles in my massive legs along with my imagination. Forty-six miles, guy.” He gave a ‘thumbs up’. “I’m almost to the beach. Wanna come?”

Dr. Jefferson smiled. “No-no, Rickie, you go right ahead.”

“Cool.”

David was surprised. “He’s legit?”

“Oh, yes.” Dr. Jefferson nodded. “Rickie Cettero.”

“He’s . . . he’s an applicant?” David questioned.

“Actually Rickie is the first applicant ever to become a viable participant the first moment I met him.” Ignoring David’s obvious looks of offense, Dr. Jefferson smiled at Rickie who happily peddled along.



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Major Jake Graison, hair still wet from showering, approached the Officer's club. It was still early evening and he was hopeful to find Captain Charles Burgett, and convince him to leave base to grab a bite to eat with him. The small bagel sandwiches on the short flight, weren't even enough to make a dent in his appetite.

The club was semi-full, not unusual for a Friday. Jake spotted him. Captain Burgett's tall, thin body slumping inward to the bar as he sat on the stool. He rolled between his hands a bottle of beer, pulling at the label as he did so.

Smiling as he ran his hands through his wet hair, Jake lifted his head in acknowledgment to the bartender, and slapped his friend on the back as he slid on the stool to his right. "What's going on, Chuck?" He adjusted his stool and indicated to the bartender with a point to Chuck's beer. "You know what they say about pulling off them labels? Sexual frustration."

Chuck gave a quick laugh and turned his head smiling. "Man, you should know. How many labels have you pulled off this month?"

"With my luck, a case worth." He grabbed the ice cold bottle set down in front of him and gave it a long chug.

"So Jake, how'd that interview go today?" Chuck turned his stool to face him.

"Almost as to be expected. Hey, you wanna go down into town and grab a steak?" He pointed back to the door with his thumb.

"After my beer, and why did you just switch the subject on me?" Chuck brought his beer to his lips. He pointed his long index finger at Jake. "I know you." A cocky smile crept upon Chuck's face. "They don't think you're good enough huh?" Shaking his head, he laughed. "See . . . you go in there with that Jake Graison holier than thou attitude. You've been there, done that--Mr. Mountain Dew Man. And . . ."

"Shut the fuck up. Or friend or no friend, you'll be saluting my ass every time I see you." Jake took a long drink of his beer and set it down. He laughed at his friends edging on tactics. "O.K." Jake had another drink, this time finishing the beer. He leaned with his side on the bar. "You're sort of right." He waved his hand side by side. "Get this. How many of these things have I done? A ton right? How many mental tests have I taken? Many. I have always exceeded every score they ever expected. I've always



done what they didn't . . ."

"No way, you failed a mental test?" Chuck's loud laughter caught the attention of the room. Then quickly he shut up drinking his beer.

"No! I did great. Best of all the military that applied. Check this out." A look of anger and annoyance cast over Jake. "I did only second best out of all the applicants." He waved the bartender over for another beer.

"You seem pissed."

"I am pissed. And you want to know why? And I know I'm not living it down when I tell you this, but I have to. Not only did I get beat out on the tests. But . . . I got beat out by a woman. Can you believe that shit? A woman?"

"Jake, Jake, Jake. I am disa . . . uh . . ." Chuck shut up and put his bottle down, he looked serious.

"A broad. Probably some fat chick that weighs like nine hundred pounds, belongs to the mensa society." Jake rambled, totally ignoring the motioning head and bulging eyes that Chuck gave him. "Now what the hell was she doing beating me? A woman. Can you believe that? A goddamn woman. And there isn't . . ." He felt a tap to his shoulder, he slowly turned his head.

"Major!" The uniformed woman with short blond hair and glasses glared at him. "I believe before you start rambling such chauvinistic comments, you should observe to see if there is anyone around who may take offense to what you are saying. I for one have taken offense."

Jake hesitated before saying anything to the woman who outranked him. He took a slow blink and a stone face, and truly sounded less than sincere. "I apologize Coronal Stevens, Ma'am." He turned from her again, rolled his eyes and grabbed his beer. "Let's sit at a table." He motioned his head and walked away.

Chuck followed, trying not to laugh. "Busted." He pulled out a chair and sat with Jake. "All kidding aside. You think they're gonna pick you, even though you did score second highest?"

"I don't know. But if they do choose me, you know it's gonna irk me if she is there. Which she probably will be unless she couldn't pass the physical parts."

"Ah . . . the sweet sound of competition. Too bad she won't know what she's up against."

"Nah." Jake waved his hand. "What am I gonna do. We're gonna be



stranded out there together. I can't compete with her. How? Besides, it's not right. Work together not against."

"True. But if you wanted to, it is an isolation project. Make her think she's nuts." Chuck pointed to his temple.

"No. Though that is pretty funny." Jake hesitated the bottle he brought to his lips. "*If* I did want to challenge her, I'm sure there are many other ways. I mean we'll be stranded. I do however want to see what this babe has that I don't. And . . ." Jake pointed his bottle. "I guarantee one thing. Higher score than me or not. She will break. She's a woman. Hell, the competition is over with the moment she becomes pre-menstrual."

"Now listen to you. It's no wonder I'm your only friend." Chuck placed down his empty bottle. "Let's go get that steak."

"Let's." Jake stood up, his huge body moving the chair loudly as he did. "And remember, you're my only friend by choice. I'm not a people person. Emotional attachments are not good. That's why I can do what I do."

"True." Chuck pushed in his chair and walked with Jake. "But take it from someone who has a woman. The sex is definitely a bonus. Maybe that's why you're so mean to everyone but me."

"I am not mean to everyone." Jake tilted his head as the walked by the bar and placed the empty containers there. "I'm just quiet to them."

Chuck shrugged at the honesty in that comment, as he walked with him. He knew that Jake only spoke like that when he was around him. And knowing that Jake was the selective quiet guy, Chuck also knew that Jake wouldn't select the quiet route over their dinner on this night. There were two things that topped Jake's list of things he couldn't take. One, was being overshadowed on something he knew he was a master at. And the second, having it done by a woman. Jake was the epitome of the feminist movement's nightmare.

CHAPTER TWO

I-S.E. Five Preparations - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
February 23, 1952

Dr. Chandler Hertz stood beside the eight millimeter projector. The loud motor running, the film finished, it's tail end rapping against the reel with a click. He reached his hand down and turned off the motor. "Lights please." Rubbing his eyes when the brightness of the room came in, the forty-some doctor stood at the end of the long rectangular table. He faced the eight men before him, all in suits. "The film you just saw was the original documentary from the very first Iso-Stasis experiment back in 1941. As you all know, this began during wartime to study the psychological effects should our men be taken prisoners of war. The first experiment took four men into isolation for one month. They were paid a hundred dollars. This study did not breed the results. The length of time was determined to not be long enough. So, for project two, it was increased to two months." Dr. Hertz paced from one end of the room to the other while he talked. "Still, they weren't shaken enough. It was a picnic for them and the compensation was an easy earn. Project three. The experiment took on more men and moved to four months. Now they started to see results after the third month . . . please open your folders." He waited for the synchronizing paper flipping sounds, then he continued. "Three of those men folded and were removed. Five successfully made it through, with minimal side effects. That was more on the lines of what they wanted. Now, number four, 1949. The last experiment under the guidance of my predecessor, was the one that clicked on the light, so to speak. Slated for four months also, an avalanche occurred somewhere around the fourth month and these men went undiscovered and buried behind a wall of rock for an additional three months. One man survived. Yet they were all alive when the rockslide occurred. That man, Sergeant Brindle, committed suicide three months later. Our scientists and investors into the project looked at number four as tragic, yet beneficial. That was what the Iso-stasis was meant to be about. Can man actually physically and mentally survive when faced with unprecedented odds?" Dr. Hertz stopped at the head of



the table and rested his hands upon it. “That was the question posed to me when I was brought on two years ago to begin the next project. That is why I asked all of you here. You . . .” His hand motioned about. “The investors of this, have brought a few things to my attention. A few things I have expanded on. These are stated within the sealed black envelopes all of you have before you. I’d like you all to open it now and we will review. I think this is on the lines of what all of you are thinking.” Dr. Hertz picked up his own envelope. “The Iso-Stasis experiment has come a long way since its beginning in 1941. Gentleman, with your approval, I’d like to take the experiment even further.”

CHAPTER THREE

I-S.E. Twelve - July 6, Present Day

Joyce's slow moving footsteps up the uncarpeted stairs to the attic went unnoticed. As she made the bend in the stairway she could feel the chilly air from Cal's air conditioner. The mid-afternoon weather was pleasant, Cal really didn't need to have the unit full blast. But Joyce supposed the heat would eventually get up there and settle. And if it got unbearable, then so did Cal.

Joyce didn't want to make the trip to the attic, not at all. She wished the reason for it would never had happened. Seeing the messenger at the door on a Saturday confirmed to her that what she dread. A sense of loss hit Joyce, sadness, as she carried the large manilla envelope up the stairs. "Cal?" She called out softly, her voice cracking as she did.

Cal was sort of surprised at the tone, raising only her eyes from the dresser that she polished with determination. "You sound weird." She smiled at Joyce.

Joyce cleared her throat. "A um . . . a messenger just showed up." With a lowered smile she handed the envelope to Cal. "It's from that research institute."

Cal was shocked as her hand reached for it. "No shit?" Excitedly she took it and sat on the bed ripping it open and dumping the contents out. She found the cover letter and read it. "They want me."

"And this is a good thing?"

"Yes it is." Cal lifted the quarter inch bound manuscript flipping the pages. "This is the information about all those who are going. I'm going to learn this inside and out."

"You're really going?" Joyce asked.

With an 'of course' look, Cal glanced up.

Joyce nodded her head and backed up. "Great," she spoke less than enthusiastic, "just great."

Not really paying attention to Joyce's demeanor, Cal continued to sift through her folder of just arrived materials.



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With ease Jake hurled himself over the ten foot high wall of the obstacle course. There was no hesitation in his landing, he sped forth to the end of the course and past Chuck who stood at the end with a stop watch.

Clad in a sleeveless sweatshirt that was drenched with his sweat as much as his shorts were, Jake made his way to Chuck and checked out his time.

“Damn it!” he gave a pivot and irritated stomp. “Sergeant Owens still has me by a second and a half.”

“The nerve,” Chuck said sarcastically. “But remember, Jake, Owens also has you by a good ten years. I believe he’s only twenty-six.”

“Fuck that. I don’t care.” Ready to try it again, Jake stopped when he saw a corporal approaching, or rather running their way.

So official yet amusing the corporal looked when he tried to catch his breath at the same time he saluted the two officers. He received the signature ‘at ease’ nod from Jake, then after a quick wheeze and a hand to his chest he spoke. “Major Graison, Sir. Colonel Roberts needs to see you in his office ASAP.”

Jake looked down to his watch. “Let me change and I’ll meet the Coronal in his office in fifteen.”

“Sir, Coronal Roberts needs you there stat. He said he expects you as you are.”

Jake shrugged. “All right. Let me grab my gear and I’ll head over.”

“Thank you Sir.” The Corporal stepped back, gave a firm salute and trudged quickly away.

Not really knowing what Coronal Roberts wanted, nor caring, Jake knew where he had to go. He retrieved his things and headed to base.

The Corporal opened the Coronal’s office door for Major Graison. “Coronal Roberts. Major Graison as you requested Sir.”

Coronal Roberts peered up from his desk. “Thank you, Corporal. That’ll be all.”

Jake stepped into the room, saluting as he did. “You wanted to see me, Sir.”

“At ease.” Coronal Roberts motioned with his hand. “Shut the door, Major.”



“Yes, sir.” Jake leaned back pushing it closed.

“This is between you and me, Jake, man to man. Have a seat.” Coronal Roberts pointed to the chair across.

“What’s going on?” Jake asked as he sat down.

“Son, I pull up to my house this morning after a great round of golf. Shot an eighty-four, pretty good game. I’m not even at my front door when a messenger arrives with this.” Coronal Roberts pulled out the envelope. “It was addressed to me as your C.O., it’s your orders, son, you’ve been selected to partake in that research project.” He handed the envelope to Jake. “All of your arrangements are in there. But this is not why I wanted you to close that door. I want to talk to you about this. I would like you to consider changing your mind.”

“I don’t understand, Sir.” Jake tapped the folder across his leg.

“Jake, I remember when you joined this man’s army. Skinny kid, acne all over your face. Remember that?”

Jake cleared his throat. “The enlistment has always been fresh. Thank you very much for reminding me of my acne problem.”

Colonel Roberts chuckled. “Getting back to what I was saying. You’ve made us proud a hundred times over. Something smells foul about this. Now, against my superiors wishes I’ve tried with diligence to see what I could find out. The Pentagon has sealed its copies and everything is classified about this. I don’t trust it, Jake. Not for one minute.”

“It’s an experiment, sir, like every other one I’ve partaken in.”

“Yes, I understand that. But goddamn it I can walk in and find out any of those results. I can’t find squat out about this one. That bothers me. Sending my finest into a situation that I’m not clear on, bothers me.”

“I can’t back out, Sir. I’ve agreed to go if selected.”

Coronal Roberts leaned back in his chair. “I can’t change your mind?”

“Short of ordering me not to go . . . no.”

“I can’t do that.” Shaking his head Coronal Roberts leaned forward. “Just make me a promise. If there is trouble, you will do everything in your power to get in touch with us here. Got that?”

“I got that.” Jake gave an odd look to the Coronal. “I understand and appreciate your concern. But it’s a mental endurance experiment, that’s all. The only thing that could happen to me is that I’ll break. And I guarantee you Sir, I will not break.”



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“Can you give that back to me?” Cal reached out her hand, fingers wiggling to Joyce’s boyfriend Pete. He sat legs crossed on the couch. In his hand he peered at the manuscript that contained the information about the participants. “Come on Pete, you’re bending the cover.”

“Oh big deal, Cally. It needs to be bent.” Pete looked up at her through the tops of his bi-focal glasses. “Bent from being read.” He returned to the pages.

Cal stared at him arms crossed. Pete looked so much like the attorney he was. Sitting there smug, white shirt, open tie, brown pants. His pot belly hanging over the belt that seemed to be pulled one notch too much.

Pete picked up his rock glass, took a small sip of his bourbon--his beverage of choice--and straightened his sitting position on the couch. “Cally, I promised Joyce I would review this . . . participant information mumbo jumbo shit.”

“I am an adult woman capable of making my own choices.”

“Are you?” Pete stood up from the couch. “I mean are you actually in the right frame of mind to be deciding on whether or not . . .”

“Don’t!” Cal held up her hand. “Don’t even give me shit about my right frame of mind. I passed all of their psychological tests.”

“To *their* specifications.” Pete nodded.

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?” Cal’s voice raised in anger, she then turned her stares to Joyce. “And you . . . you stand there huddling in the corner, did you tell him to get on me like this?”

Joyce shook her head. “No. I told him to look at the stuff. Whether you like him or not, he’s rational, listen to what he’s saying.”

Cal shook her head. “There’s nothing either of you are going to say that’s gonna be a news flash to me. No one will change my mind.”

Holding the manuscript outward, Pete moved to her. “Have you read this. Really read this?”

“Yes and I intended on reading it more.”

“And you don’t see it?” Ignoring Cal’s huffs of irritation, Peter pointed to the manuscript as he spoke. “You question my judging you. You say you passed their tests. O.K., what was the standards set in the determination factor of pass or fail? Did they mention that?”

“My God, Pete.” Cal faced him. “This is not some shoddy operation.



It pays well. It's been done before."

"Listen to me. I know I've joked with you, but I am being very serious right now. Look at these people. A woman who is in such high debt that she faces prison charges for bouncing checks. A self proclaimed journalist, straight from Harvard, he's a sniveling twenty-three year old. You have a Brooklyn musician without a highschool diploma, he works menial jobs. A Roman Catholic Priest who was almost excommunicated because three years ago he was caught in a homosexual affair with a waiter . . ."

"Where are you going with this?" Cal interrupted.

"I'm not done." Pete followed her with the manuscript. "A retired firefighter. Retired? He's only forty-two years old. An eighteen year old boy. What are his mental qualifications? He states right here the highest paying job he's had was a McDonald's fry boy. The worst is a trained killer. A killer."

"Who? That Major? He's a Ranger." Cal spoke sarcastically.

"He's a trained killer and he trains people to kill." Pete closed the book and slapped it on his hand. "Now . . ." He took a deep breath. "They gave you all the psychiatric tests. Do you really truly think that you all scored impeccably high? That all of you are on the same level? This woman with the debt? You think she's the same as you?"

"Nope. Do you actually think I believed that they were going to have us all equals?"

"Yes I did. How else do they expect you all to make it? This is proof Cally, proof." He held it up to her. "They're up to something. Now you and I don't see eye to eye. If you want to go it's fine with me, but it's not fine with Joyce. She loves you. She's worried. Can't you see that they are going to pit all of you against each other up there? That's how they are going to get their results."

Cal gave a sarcastic laugh as she snatched back her manuscript. "Do you think I'm that stupid? It's a hundred grand. Of course there's going to be weak people. People that break first, people they don't have to pay. I'm not them. I'm strong enough to pull through this. I need this. And if they make me work for my hundred grand. So be it. What do I have to lose?" She headed towards the steps.

Joyce reached out her hand stopping her. "What about your life?"

Closing her eyes, Cal tilted her head slowly. "I lost my life seven months ago. I'm on borrowed time." She pulled her hand away and walked

up the stairs.

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Jake took a slow bite of an apple as he laid, back propped up, feet extended on his bed. His manuscript on his lap, a red marker in his hand. “Two women.” Jake spoke to himself out loud. “I know you are one of them. Are you the indebted sales clerk? The one with no education and a self proclaimed fashion addict.” Jake laughed, shook his head. “Nah, Jennifer you aren’t her. It must be . . .” He flipped the page. “Caleen Reynolds. A.K.A., Caleen Lambert. Yep . . . That’s you. School teacher, science none the less. Military upbringing. Continuing education in psychology . . . which you stopped.” Jake lifted the page closer to his view. “Oh shit.” He saw the reason for her discontinued attempts at furthering her education. He saw her tragedy. “This is why you dropped of the earth.” With his red marker he circled her name. “So you’re the one who topped me.” He laid down the marker. “Well, since there’s no picture, this background should make you easy to spot. Enough of you.” Jake flipped to the next page. “Carlos Valenz, ha. A musician?” Slowly swaying his head, he took another bite of his apple and continued learning about the others.

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Rickie Cettero worked really hard to clean that spot on the floor of his living room. Clearing away empty bags of chips, soda cans, socks and whatever else he and his roommate Todd accumulated in between their monthly cleaning. He pushed the items aside and placed them in a really neat pile. The spot was ready, where was Todd?

“Dude.” Rickie called out from his floor seat peering up to the television that sported a huge hand swipe on the screen through the dust. “Come on. You bailed out, guy. I worked hard, Cleaned up for this momentous final round.”

“Dude, like, I’m pinged out on Pong.” Todd propped his feet on the coffee table. He flipped through the bound manuscript that Rickie had received.

“How can you be like, pinged out on Pong?” Rickie asked. “It’s like the root of all video games.”



"It's boring. Makes me think of my parents. And dude, when I put Pong and my parents together I get pity. Pity for the parents. Guy, like that doesn't even wash right."

"Valid point but . . ." Rickie turned around. "You must respect them for enduring this game. It's the ultimate challenge." Rickie held out his hand in a point to the television. "Dude, this is bi-video. Bi meaning two. Two colors. Black. White. Two shapes. A line. Dot. Guy, think of the genius behind this game. No weapons to turn to. No awesome graphic people. All you can do is hit the dot with the line. Over and over. Faster and faster. Why do you think Stephen King is so brilliant, guy. He was stuck playing Pong. No game companies fed images in that dudes mind. He had to come up with them all on his own. Bet me he thought of Carrie while playing Pong."

"Whoa." Todd wisped out slow and deep. "That is really Rickie thinking."

"And you're the smart one guy. Look at you being all intellectual by reading." Rickie set down the controller and stood up. "What *are* you reading?"

"It's your vacation guide." Todd held up the manuscript. "The letter said you should read it to find out who you're gonna be camping with."

"Dude, I have like, seven months to learn them. Personally I think they wasted their time on the books. I mean, who's gonna really read them?"

"True." Todd agreed.

"Plus . . ." Rickie snorted a laugh. "Can you believe they're paying me to go on some mountain retreat experiment. Just in time too dude, I lost my job at Burger Boy."

"You didn't need that job. You had better qualifications."

"I did." Rickie nodded. "So like, hold off the landlord for seven months on my half of the rent. OK?"

Todd shrugged, then his eyes grew wide. "Oh." He growled out. "Dude. You like have a monster up there with you."

"No way?" Rickie asked with excitement.

Calming, Todd held out his hand. "Before you get yourself all worked up, I was referring to a Dude. Six foot six. Imagine . . . Hulk Hogan."

"Whoa. How much does he weigh?"

"Doesn't say," Todd answered. "But, bet he weighs a lot. He has to



guy, he fights bears for a living. He's a forest Ranger."

"No way. No wonder they picked him."

"He works in the Army's Forest Ranger section." Todd scratched his head. "I like, didn't know the Army ran the forest rangers."

"Think about it. National forest. National Interest?"

"Valid Rickie-Miester point. You are gonna rule up there. You are so much smarter than these people."

"True and I kick ass at Pong. Shall we?" Rickie pointed to the television.

"All right. I'm ready." Todd stood up.

"Dude, one more thing. Any babes going up there?"

Todd looked. "Guy. Two. So like, if you want to get laid, you better get a jump on it, like right away."

"Oh, you know it. And . . . that info, the two babe info. That was the vital info guy." Rickie winked. "So toss the vacation guide and let's Pong."

In total agreement and out of his pitying parents phase, Todd like requested, tossed Rickie's manuscript onto the table with everything already there. He watched it knock over a can of soda. Todd was preparing to leap and rescue that manuscript from getting wet. But he didn't. Rickie wasn't going to be reading it anyway.

CHAPTER FOUR

I-S.E. Twelve - Winnipeg, Canada
August 2 - 1:06 P.M.

Stepping into the small special room at the airport, Cal was immediately noticed by the six others there. Dr. Jefferson greeted her with a firm handshake and telling her as soon as Major Graison's flight landed they would board the private jet that would take them to the isolated compound.

Cal didn't say much, she didn't need to. Any questions she had, would probably be answered at the orientation that she hoped would be given to them at the compound. As for that moment, waiting on the Major, Cal looked about the faces of the six in the room. She tried to place the names, guessing them with those who waited.

Jennifer was easy, she was the only other female. Carlos, the guitar player, was easy too, his acoustic guitar perched right next to him, not to mention his appearance that matched his name. Rickie, the eighteen year old was a give away. His long hair pulled in a pony tail, his body bouncing in laughter as he listened to a cackling and chatty Jennifer. John Montgomery, the Harvard grad, sat with his lap top, he clicked away. The only two that gave Cal a hard time was Father Daniel and William Griffith, or Griff as it was stated in the notes. They were both about the same age. And since the priest was not wearing a collar, Cal could not distinguish between the two forty-something men.

She stepped forth into the room, holding onto her small carry on. They were allotted three items. They could choose which three the institute would provide, or bring it. It didn't matter. And it annoyed Cal when she saw the laptop and the guitar. Those type of items never dawned on her. Her train of thought was more on the seven month supply of bourbon, coffee and cigarettes.

Cal slipped off to the side and took a seat behind the two forty-something men. Figuring if anything else during the wait, she'd eavesdrop on their conversation and try to figure out who was who before they divulged that information out.



Jake did not go unnoticed when he walked into the private room. His entrance immediately prompted Dr. Jefferson to gather everyone's attention and inform them they would be boarding soon, and lunch would be served on the flight. Jake hoped it wasn't bagel sandwiches.

Maybe it was a bit neurotic of him, but Jake had to know. Was she there? He walked up to Dr. Jefferson and pulled him less than obviously off to the side. "Is she here?" He asked the doctor.

"Who?"

"The woman that scored higher than me?"

Dr. Jefferson smiled at him. "Oh yes, she's here. I can't divulge which woman she is, that's for you to determine. This is going to be a goal for you, isn't it, Major? Proving that you are mentally stronger than her?"

Jake knew he was right, but didn't need to tell him that. "Nope. Don't need to prove that. Excuse me." He moved from him and looked at the two women. It was easy enough to spot Calleen Reynolds. The sales clerk Jennifer, matched her background as well as Calleen matched hers. Jennifer, sitting alone, her small thin frame crouched up in the chair, and she was pretty. Actually, Jake thought she was very pretty. And then there was Calleen. Talking away to the skinny kid who looked stoned. She messed with her auburn hair and fiddled with her glasses. The pink shade of lipstick told him she wasn't the self proclaimed fashion addict. And there was a sense of relief for Jake when he noticed her heavy set stature. At least she didn't beat him in the physical scores. *What does this woman have?* Jake wondered as he watched her. He had to find out. In his plotted mind he figured he'd seat himself next to her on the flight. Then again, maybe he wouldn't have to. When Dr. Jefferson announced they would board, Jake watched Calleen approach him. She had a smug smile on her. She probably knew already she killed him on the psych evaluations.

"Hello?" She tilted her head and extended her hand.

"Ma'am." Jake shook it.

"I take it you are Major Graison?" She asked.

Jake looked past her to the others that began to slip to the door to board. "You may call me Jake. Seven months is a long time to call me Major."

"Thank you . . . Jake." She tucked her auburn hair. "I'm Jennifer Reilly.



You can call me Jenny.”

Jennifer?! Jake’s eyes widened when he realized his mistake, and he realized the real Caleen was boarding. *Shit! Someone’s going to snatch the seat next to her.* “Excuse me.” Pissed at himself for making an error, hurriedly he fled past her like she was the plague.

Jake spotted her as soon as he boarded the large aircraft. She sat toward the back, next to the window, staring out. Different from what he expected, he knew he had to at least meet her, and possibly in his own way--just to see--he’d test her.

Cal’s body bounced when she felt the weight of someone plop down in the empty seat next to her. She turned her head sharply to him, giving a weird look. “In case you didn’t notice, there are fifty other seats on the plane,” she spoke jokingly.

“So.” Jake reached above his head and fiddled with the light and fan to see if they worked. “I *was*, you know, just going to say hello, meet, then leave.”

“We’ve met before.”

“We have?” He fiddled some more, blowing the air her way, proceeding in his private Jake test of her nerves.

“Yes.” She reached up and gently moved his hand from his new found toy. “Final interviews. You bumped into me.” She removed his hand again. “For a Ranger I thought you’d be more observant. You know, pay attention?” She spoke with sarcasm.

“I do.” His hand raised again. “When there’s someone that *captures* my attention.”

Cal stayed in control despite his rude remark. “You’ve said your hello. You can leave like you said.”

“Nah.” Jake tapped his hands on the side arms of the seat. “I like it here.”

“You’re joking right? There are fifty other seats available.”

“I like this one.” He reclined comfortable in the seat.

“You’re going to sit here this entire flight? I really wanted to sit alone.”

“No problem.” Jake stood up and stepped in the aisle and waited.

“What are you doing?” Cal noticed he wasn’t moving.

“I’m letting you out.”

“I’m not moving, I was here first.”

“Well then, you have company.” He plopped hard again in the seat.



Cal grunted loudly and stared out of the window.

Speaking in a whisper, Jake leaned to her. "What is your problem?"

"What is *my* problem?" Cal answered in an angry whisper. "There's a whole plane. You're sitting here. I was here first. You're sucking up all my air space, you and your big body."

"My big body?" Jake comforted himself even more in the seat. "If you feel claustrophobic, then move. If you're not going to move then be quiet so I can get some rest."

Cal wanted to scream, but didn't. Her soft high pitch snarl said it all.

With his eyes closed, Jake smiled. "Problem?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh nothing." He opened one eye and looked at the woman who obviously was losing her cool. "You know, if you can't make it an entire flight without losing it, how are you going to make it seven months?"

Cal opened her mouth to blast him, but stopped. "Did I . . . do something to you?"

"How could you do anything to me? I don't even know you."

"Then in that case . . ." With a fake smile and pleasantries, she extended her hand. "Cal Reynolds. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise." Jake shook her hand. "Major Graison."

"And I believe your first name is . . ."

"*Major* Graison." Jake nodded closed mouthed and reclined his seat back again.

CHAPTER FIVE

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
August 2 - 3:42 P.M.

Dr. Jefferson led the group on their initial tour. They all looked exhausted, and he wanted to finish up so he could head back in the helicopter that awaited him. It had to be tiring for the group, all except for Major Graison. Dr. Jefferson looked for signs of physical exasperation on him, and there were none. A flight from their homes, another flight, then a helicopter ride to the complex hidden deep within the Canadian wilderness. He had just finished showing them the other building, a large storage building, which was kept locked. He brought them to the main building. "This is where you'll be spending most of your time. The complex was built last year for this experiment so it is very new." All of them holding their belongings walked past him into the large open room. "This is the gathering room. A break from the usual scenery of your private quarters. I will almost guarantee this is where you'll end up spending most of your time. That and . . ." Dr. Jefferson pointed to one of the two interior doors. "Through that door and down the hall is the dining area." Dr. Jefferson moved the group across the large room. Tables set up in each corner. Bookshelves filled, chairs, two sofas. "Here in this corner we have a box of board games, should you feel the urge to get competitive." He looked to Jake.

Like a schoolgirl, Jennifer raised her hand. "Is the key we were given to our rooms?"

"Yes," Dr. Jefferson answered. "The other door leads to the eight private rooms. There is one bathroom between every two rooms. It sets between the rooms with adjoining doors. So for privacy lock the other side. We've already chosen who has which room. The three items, if you requested them are in your rooms already. I suggest now you put your personal items away, and possibly meet back here to get acquainted. Because this is where I leave you." Turning, and starting to walk away, Dr. Jefferson stopped with a snap to his finger. "Almost forgot." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a set of keys and tossed them to an unsuspecting Cal. "Everything you need to survive for seven months is in the locked



storage building. By lottery we picked a person in charge of the keys to that building. That's you, Cal." Quickly Dr. Jefferson looked. He knew it was coming and he wasn't disappointed. He hid his smile when he watched Jake grumble and shake his head. After the enjoyable moment, Dr. Jefferson spoke as he moved to the main door. "Cal, you can hold on to that key, or pass it along. Your choice." At the door he stopped. "Good luck to all of you. See you in seven months." On his final wishes, Dr. Jefferson walked out.

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Cal didn't expect much more than she saw when she opened the door to her very plain room. She laid her duffel bag on the double bed which sat next to the door that she closed and locked. A desk, a chair, a night stand and a dresser, that was all, leaving ample room for movement. The bathroom door was open, Cal knew that would change. At the foot of her bed were two boxes, her requests she supposed, and she was right. The one box, still sealed was marked cigarettes. The other, flaps opened, contained JACK DANIELS, seven large cans of coffee, two mugs, a small coffee maker and supplies to lighten and sweeten it. That made Cal smile. "Hooked up." She spoke to herself.

Though she wasn't much of a team player, she knew at least the first day, she would be cordial. They agreed to meet back in the gathering room, and Cal only had fifteen minutes to put her stuff away. She'd put the 'vitals' away first, the rest could wait. She had seven months.

Vital. And that classified the first thing she pulled out of her duffel bag. Photographs of Jesse. She set them on her desk. Though they said they provided them with enough bathroom and female supplies, Cal brought some along, just in case. Taking her supplies, she walked into the bathroom and set the little bag on the back of the toilet. The bathroom was clean, and large enough. No tub, only a shower. She turned to the sink cabinet to put her things away, as she began to bend down she heard the click of the other bathroom door. She saw the man from the waist down and knew immediately who it was. "Oh, no." She stood up.

He held his own things in his hand and his stride slowed when he saw her. "So you're my latrine buddy."

"Yes, I am, Major Graison." She grabbed her tooth paste and



toothbrush and reached for the medicine cabinet.

"Look." He stepped closer to her. "About the plane. You can call me . . ." The mirror opened, nearly slamming him in his face. " . . . what you just did." He shut it on her.

"I'm, not done yet." She opened up the mirror adding a few more things. "I'll stay on the left side."

"Why don't you just take the top shelf and I'll take the bottom." He reached from behind her and placed in his things.

"Whatever makes your life easier--Major." She shut the mirror and grabbed her other things that set on the toilet.

"That's the spirit." He watched her place away her belongings.

"What are you doing?" She noticed him just towering over her as she squatted on the floor to the cabinet under the sink.

"Could you hurry along, I have to use the bathroom."

"Well you're gonna have to wait. I'm almost done."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd finish up after *I'm* done."

Trying to pay him no mind, Cal continued in what she was doing. And she did it slow. "Wait."

"Look if you don't leave now, I'm just gonna go. I have no modesty."

"If you're gonna try to throw me into some sort of appalling frenzy--don't bother. Go right ahead and go." She heard him unzip his pants as he stood before the toilet.

"You sure?" He smiled arrogantly at her.

"You know what, Major." Cal brushed her hands together, shut the cabinet, and stood up. "I'll let you have your privacy. I wouldn't want to embarrass you." She winked holding up two fingers an inch apart. "I know what they say about you big guys." She brushed by him out of the bathroom, closing the door to her side behind her.

^^^

Eight chairs were set in a circle when Jake walked in the room with the others who all seemed to finish putting away their things at the same time. To Jake, everyone but his nemesis, seemed to be settling in their chairs appearing to veer off for vacation. Why was that? Did they not take it seriously? Though he himself was having fun at Cal's expense, the



seriousness of the experiment was forefront in his mind. Jake took his seat, the only seat available, and that was next to Rickie.

Rickie's biting of his nails made Jake shift his eyes in annoyance at him as they waited for whatever reason for someone to start. Jake just wanted to grab the skinny kid, make him sit up straight instead of slumping forward.

"Dude?" Rickie called to him

Dude? Did he just call me dude? Jake sharply turned his head to him.

"Are you like really gonna like dress that way the whole time we're here?" Rickie asked serious, not joking around.

Jake didn't answer him. He just stared at him wondering, what the hell the kid was thinking.

"Cause like, you're gonna really stick out."

Jake's eyebrow raised as he kept staring to the boy who started to smile.

"Dude, wait. I know. I know why you're dressed like this. I got it. Hold." Rickie paused to think.

The twitching of Jake's upper lip upon his stone face. His eyes shot daggers at young Rickie.

Rickie snapped his finger in front of Jake's face. "Wait . . . You're in the Army or something."

Cool gone. "What the fuck is wrong with you?!" Jake's deep voice plastered and frightened the young man. "Sit your ass straight up in that chair, look forward and don't speak to me unless you have something intelligent to say. Got that?!"

Rickie verbally didn't respond. He snapped in an upright position and looked ahead.

After a short whistle, Jennifer clapped her hands together once and spoke with annoying chipperness. "O.K.!"

Jake winced, very visually.

Jennifer, wide smiled, kept talking. "I think, we should take this moment." Her hands moved about as she spoke. "To really get to know each other personally. You know, tell a little something about ourselves. After all, the world could end while we're here and we may have to repopulate the planet." She crossed her legs as she glanced at Jake. "What do you think, Major?"

Jake snickered. "I think that man would become extinct if you're waiting for me to help you out."



“Dude.” Rickie’s shoulders bounced in laughter. “Are you gay?”

Jake, looking cross, turned quickly to him. “Now what the hell did I just tell you about saying something intelligent. That wasn’t intelligent. Sit back!”

Holding up a finger, Jennifer smiled. “No-no, boys. This is talk time. O.K. . . .” She exhaled what she thought was a tension release breath for all. “I know I’ve spoken to all of you except Caleen.”

Cal, who sat sideways in her armed chair looked up from her notebook and smiled. She continued to move her pencil about the paper, not writing, drawing.

“O.K., Caleen’s not in the mood for talking.” Jennifer still sounded chipper. “How about we go to . . .” Her finger twirled around in a circle. “John.” She pointed. “Talk first.”

“I’m a writer.” John shifted his average size body in his seat to be more comfortable. He sniffled quite a bit while he talked, crinkling his nose as he did. “I’m here to get the story of a lifetime. I also feel that the four years I just put in at Harvard, and the tedious work I did there, has helped to prepare me for this. Now . . . I’m an honest person, and . . . and . . . why are you rolling your eyes at me, Major.”

After snapping view to Cal when he swore he heard her mumble, ‘because he’s an asshole,’ Jake with arrogance, looked at John. “Ivy league doesn’t prepare you for mental endurance. Life’s experience does. You’re twenty-three years old. How much of life’s experience has been thrown your way?”

“Enough to know it will be a pleasure writing in detail, how you mentally fall apart.” John’s hard expression didn’t change despite the fact that Jake laughed loudly.

Trying to break the tension, Jennifer interjected her upbeat self and tapped John on the knee. “Shrug it off , John. We all have to deal with him.”

Cal had just about all she could she sat within the group long enough. She saw that the people she had to spend the next seven months of her life with weren’t exactly the type of people she would enjoy being with. Rolling her body forward, she closed her notebook and set her feet on the ground.

“Caleen?” Jennifer questioned as Cal started to leave. “Where are you going? We’re just getting to know each other.”

Cal gave a half smile. “I have seven months to get to know all of you.



And please, take no offense to this but . . . I'm not here to make new friends . . ." She lifted her shoulders almost embarrassingly. " . . . so I'm heading back to my room. Good night."

John Montgomery, not one to remain silent, didn't. "I think you of all people shouldn't walk out that door. You literally hold the key to our survival. We should get to know you, trust you. How do we know we can do that?"

Cal raised her hands with a shrug. "You have seven months."

"The bitchy attitude is bullshit." John snapped.

Jennifer, really trying to be the peacemaker, was frazzled. Less than an hour and already there were disagreements. Not at all like she envisioned in her mental picture of how it was going to be. She felt it. The tension. "John, Caleen, this is way too early for this. We're all the same in a way right? I mean obviously none of us has any spouses or children to think about so we . . ."

Cal interrupted her. "I have a daughter."

"Oh, Caleen." Jennifer's smile fell from her face. "I didn't mean it like that, I really didn't." Jennifer turned to her right to John when she heard his huff

"She has a daughter and she's up here for seven months?" John sneered at Cal. "Unreal. We let the person who up and leaves their kid, have control over our food. Says a lot for character." His lips smirked and he wrote in his notebook. "Remind me not to vote for you for mother of the year."

Cal stormed to him, passing Jake who sprung to his feet. Just as John looked up at her, Cal pulled back, clenched her fist and nailed him hard in the jaw. Taken by surprise by her action and strength, John lost his balance, and his chair flew back, crashing to the floor. Cal shook her hand and walked angrily from the room.

Rubbing his jaw, John began to lift himself off of the floor. He saw before him the uniform pants. "What? Like none of you thought that?"

Harsh, Jake tossed down his manuscript and it smacked John in the chest. "Here, asshole. Because you probably didn't get one, take mine. Learn your story before you write it."

John lifted himself to his elbow's support, tossing back the book and smacking Jake in the leg. "I did."

"Bull shit! Because if you did, you wouldn't have fuckin' said what you



did.” Jake bent down, grabbed his book and began to walk away. He stopped just before leaving the room. “You’re just lucky *I* wasn’t the one who nailed you. You wouldn’t be getting up right now.” Surprising those in the room over his personal rage with John’s statement, Jake left.

^^^

Cal thought she heard the knock on her door as she stood at the bathroom sink. She turned off the cold water which she held her hand under, to listen. There *was* a knock, and a voice calling in.

“Ms. Reynolds?” Another knock.

Cal shook her head and spoke out loud to herself, when she recognized who it was. “Great, another male with attitude. I’m not dealing with this shit.” She stuck her head out of the bathroom into her room, yelling coldly. “Leave me alone please! I’m not in the mood for you.” Still clenching her hand, she returned to the sink, turning the cold water on full blast and emerging her right hand into the stream.

“Ms. Reynolds?” Jake walked through his side bathroom door.

Jumping a little from his entrance in, Cal turned to him with a snap. “Hey! What the hell?”

The expression on his face was not the usual one. Instead of smug, Jake looked solace. Grabbing a hand towel off of the rack, he moved to the sink, keeping his eyes in contact with Cal’s as he reached for her hand. “I’d like to see your hand Ma’am.” He held firm, lifting it from the water and resting it in the towel to examine it. “Doesn’t seem to be broken.” He spoke softly. “Small gash.” He lifted the edge of the towel, dabbed the blood and pressed on the wound to check for depth. “You should put some ice on this, Ms. Reynolds.”

“Ms. Reynolds? Ma’am? What’s with the sudden niceties?” Cal asked with skepticism.

“Well . . .” Jake moved his view from her hand, as his eyes met hers, he raised his eyebrows. “It dawned on me that you’re actually the type of person I could get along with.”

It really wasn’t that funny of a remark, but Cal laughed as if it was. Then just as fast, she turned smug and took her hand from his. “Thanks, but no thanks. I don’t want the honors.” She left the bathroom and went to her room.



Jake followed her. "Look, Ms. Reynolds . . ."

"Hey!" Cal hollered at him. "This is my room. I did not give you permission to enter here. If you want in, you will have to knock on my door, not the bathroom. Got that Major Graison?"

"Yes." Despite what she said, he stayed. "I know we may have gotten off on the wrong foot."

"We? We? No Major Graison, you." She pointed at him with her uninjured hand. "I did absolutely nothing to you."

"Will you quit being so female and stop bitching for one second please! I'm trying to make amends. Why are you being like this now?"

Shocked that he'd even ask that, Cal stepped back. "Because you're an asshole."

"I know I'm an asshole. I'm trying to . . ."

"Out."

"You know what? Fine." He threw his hands in the air, backed up and walked through the bathroom to his room.

Blowing slowly out her mouth, Cal glanced down to her hand. She raised her head to the knock at her door. "Who now?" She walked to it and opened it.

Jake stood there one hand on hip, the other, a small tray of ice. "Ms. Reynolds, I thought perhaps you would like some ice for that hand . . ." He showed her it. "Ma'am."

Cal opened the door wider, totally confused. "What are you doing, Major Graison?"

"Trying to call a truce. Truce"

Cal motioned her hand inward. "Come in."

"Thank you." He walked past her into the bathroom, Cal could hear him clanking the ice tray, a few seconds later he came out with a towel filled with ice. "Here put this on so it doesn't swell up."

"Thanks." Cal placed it on her hand. "How did you get to the dining area so fast?"

"I got the ice from my room. I have a small fridge."

"You have a fridge?" She backed up and sat on the bed.

"May I sit down?" Jake asked.

"Yeah . . . sure."

Turning his head back to the desk, Jake reached for the chair. As he did, he paused when he saw the photos of Jesse. "Your daughter?"



Cal nodded. "Yes."

"She's beautiful . . . like her mother." He moved the chair close to the bed and sat down.

Sudden redness and blushing happened upon Cal. "Major, you're making my head spin from the sudden one eighty."

"Can we just . . . can we start over please?" He held out his hand. "My name's Jake."

"Cal." She lifted her injured hand. "Shake it gently." After the soft handshake, Cal placed the ice on the night stand. "Now will you tell me what's going on?"

"Before I do, let me just say . . . I'm . . . on the plane . . . I didn't mean . . . I'm really . . ."

"Are you trying to apologize?" Cal asked.

With a relief breath Jake's head fell forward. "Yes."

"You don't do it much, do you?"

"Never. But I am . . . you know. And I . . . I realized after that impressive show of defense." Jake cleared his throat. "I realized you and I are a lot alike. Actually, very much alike. Down to the major tragedy's in our lives."

"Tragedy?" Cal looked curious at him. "I read that manuscript thoroughly. It said nothing about a major tragedy with you."

"No it didn't." Jake lowered his head. "I didn't lose a child like you. I don't think anything could be that awful. But I lost my parents and my kid sister in a car accident when I was seventeen. I never was the same. They were all I had."

"I'm very sorry to hear that." Cal spoke softly.

Only an uncomfortable nod came from Jake before he spoke again. "So, you see. I misjudged you. I was so wrapped up in the fact that you scored higher than me on the mental evaluations, that I failed to see something very important. In situations like this, you don't opposite your assets . . . You join them."

"Great philosophy. I agree. But . . . I didn't score higher than you. You scored higher than me."

"No. I scored . . . wait, are you a competitive person Ms. Reynolds."

"Cal." She corrected the name before answering. "And yes. Very. Seems we started this experiment before we knew it, huh? I even planned on testing you."



“They got us.” Jake shook his head with a half smile. “But, it won’t happen again.” He stood up. “I think I’ve bothered you enough.” He slid the chair back perfectly where it was. “May I go through the bathroom to get to my room?”

“Be my guest.” Cal answered, standing from the bed.

Walking across the room, Jake paused when he spotted the bourbon on the floor “Seems, you and I do think alike. One of my three wishes was beer. Maybe sometime when you and I aren’t competing against each other, we can share our commodities?” He motioned his head to the booze.

“I’d like that.” Cal watched him walk into the bathroom. “Oh. Major, I mean, Jake.” She called out.

“Yeah?” He turned to face her.

“I forgot.” She walked up to him and reached to her back pocket. Realizing it was too painful to squeeze her hand in she faced her backside to him. “Could you help me? Reach in my right pocket.”

“What am I reaching for.”

“Just do it.” She felt his hand slip in and pull out the keys.

“Here.” He went to hand them to her.

“No. You keep them. You’re the only one who is capable of controlling that storage area.”

Jake dangled the keys. “You’ve got a good head on your shoulders too. I see no reason why you can’t keep these.”

“Look at me, Jake. Look at you.” She pushed his hand back that tried to give her the keys. “You know as well as I do, if someone wants those keys, they aren’t going to have a problem getting them from me. You on the other hand, would be tough to go through. Of course . . .” Cal sniffed in fake arrogance. “I could kick your ass for them.”

Jake with gratitude, clasped them in his hand. After a nod of appreciation, he chuckled.

^^^

In what Jake would describe as relaxing attire—a crisp green tee shirt and broken in camouflage pants—he stepped from his room. He stopped before Cal’s door, looked at his watch, raised his hand and stopped. What was his reason? He had one. Was it good enough. He could ask her to turn down the country music, but she played it so low he would have had to of



been listening for sounds to hear it. And Jake was. On the brink of getting ready to knock, Jake determined his reasoning wasn't valid enough to disturb Cal and he gave up. Just as he turned, her door opened. Jake stopped.

"Jake?" Cal poked her head out. "Were you just standing out here?"

"Yes." He cleared his throat and returned.

"Come in." Cal opened the door wider.

"Thanks." Jake stepped just inside her door. "I really didn't want . . ." His eyes shifted left to her night stand, next to her bed and to the empty peanut butter cup wrapper that just laid there. "Want to bother . . ." To Cal, to the night stand, to the bed whose spread was a little ruffled. " . . . to bother you. I was just curious if . . ."

Cal watched. What was he looking at? Was he hungry for a peanut butter cup. "Jake?"

"Sorry. I was curious if you wanted to . . ." Almost in a single motion, Jake stepped into the room, gave a tuck of the spread under the pillow, swiped up the wrapper, crumbled it and tossed it in the trash. He turned back to Cal. "Did you eat?"

"Are you obsessive-compulsive?"

"No." Jake shook his head.

"Why did you do that?"

"I hate a mess."

Cal laughed. "No."

"No what?"

"No, I didn't eat. I was going to head down but I didn't know if it would be too late." She shrugged.

"How can it be too late? Right?" Jake gave a motion of his head as he walked to the door. "I'm heading down if you want to join me?"

"Sure why not." Cal walked to the door, but not before reaching into the trash and removing that candy wrapper and laying it on her night stand. Just as she spotted the appalled look on Jake's face, she grinned and closed her door.

^^^

They chuckled in familiarity, Jennifer and John did, as if they had known each other for years. They both slowed down in their leaving the



dining area when they spotted Jake and Cal walking down the hall.

John shook his head disgruntled. "Look, at those two. Proves misery loves company."

Jennifer nudged him. "Oh, John, be nice." She lifted her hand high in an attention grabbing wave. "Cal! Jake!"

There was a slight roll to Jake's eyes when he heard the call and saw her hurry to them.

"Hi." She smiled. "As duly designated compound activity coordinator, I wanted you two to know we devised a cooking and cleaning schedule." She tilted her head with an exhale. "You know to make things easy. We posted the schedule." With a little smile, she crinkled her nose. "Sorry, but you two are on clean up tonight. Come on, John."

John only smirked as he walked in between the pair.

"Fuckin figures, don't it?" Jake shook his head.

"See, now, I would think you'd like clean up."

Jake stopped and seriously looked at her. "Why would you think that?"

Cal just stared. "Um, no reason." She pointed. "Diningroom."

Jake took a few steps to the doorway of the dining area but stopped, stepped back and held his arm to block Cal. He turned to her with a 'silent' signal then pointed in the diningroom.

Cal peeked. Fr. Dan and Griff were the only two in there. It was quiet, and Griff wrote on a tablet, passing it to Fr. Dan. Fr. Dan would read, nod, write and pass back.

Jake glanced briefly at Cal then back in the room. "Deaf?" He asked in a whisper.

"Looks it." Cal replied.

"I didn't know that. Did you?"

"Odd." Cal said. "It wasn't mentioned in my book."

"Mine neither. Makes you wonder what else we don't know."

From behind a voice whispered, "I'm wearing blue underwear."

It took everything Cal had not to laugh. But with a grunt, Jake spun around only to be irritated more when Rickie stood there laughing hysterically.

Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
August 2 - 11:49 P.M.

A sports bar perhaps, that was what the wall of televisions reminded Lyle of. Lyle wanted to be a fashion model, actor, something in the public eye. Anything but an experiment monitor who watched row after row of televisions that showed eight people living their daily lives. Long blond hair, often flowing, was pulled into a pony tail as Lyle hid his body beneath a lab coat. Not that he wasn't trained for the position he was. He had gone to school for clinical psychology. He did an internship for Caldwell in the animal isolation labs. Lyle had plans after graduation to pack up and head straight to Hollywood. However, when the offer from Caldwell came in. Seven months work for a pay that was just too sweet, Lyle couldn't turn them down. Hollywood would wait, so would his talents and looks for seven months.

Lyle began dreading that decision the first minute of the job. Sit there. Watch. Take notes. Talk with Stan. Stan wasn't a bad monitor partner. He would be Lyle's partner, and the only one he worked in that huge conference style room with for seven months.

Stan was funny enough, at least he seemed to be. He knew well what he was doing, and he promised Lyle that things got better as time moved on. Stan knew. It was his second Iso-Stasis experiment as a monitor, and he had monitored numerous other experiments in the nine years he had been with the institute.

Nine years and Stan was still a monitor? Lyle had to question that. And Stan was honest. Pay was great, the monitor door was revolving and monitors were hard to get, and why Stan really stayed in the division. He was demented and enjoyed it.

Lyle supposed he'd find out. Or at least he hoped.

Stan always wanted to be a scientist and even tried to look the part but didn't really pull it off. Too thin, tall, and he had a naturally sculptured handsome face that Lyle had to admit, made him a little jealous. Of course, Stan was losing his hair, in Lyle's mind that was a negative if Stan ever decided to try modeling.

They watched pretty much . . . Nothing.

"Thought I'd stop by." Dr. Jefferson announced as he walked into the



monitoring room. “Gentlemen, how’s it going?”

Stan swivelled his chair around. “Good. Bad. Not as expected.”

Lyle was curious. “Dr. Jefferson, I thought you said these people wouldn’t get along. It started out promising when Cal hit John. But nothing since. They’re getting along.”

With a schedule and an arrogant look, Dr. Jefferson shook his head. “That punch was not expected. Unusual for so early in the game. But I promise, things will stir. One of the deciding factors is the chemistry mix of the participant crew. Things will change.”

“I think you might be wrong in one case.” Stan interjected. “The big conflict, rivalry, nemesis thing you were counting on between Graison and Reynolds.” Smug, Stan shook his head. “Not gonna happen.”

“I highly doubt that.” Dr. Jefferson said snide. “My psychology experts agreed. Those two are my ace in the hole.”

“Your experts missed.” Stan picked up a remote control. “Check out monitor two.”

Dr. Jefferson watched the monitor that showed Cal’s room. His eyes widened, and tempered flared when he saw Cal and Jake, sitting on the floor, playing cards and drinking beer. “Oh.” He grunted in disgust and stepped back. “Ruin my evening.” Another grumble escaped him and he pointed. “That will change. Oh, that *will* change.” He nodded as he stepped back. “Guaranteed.” He moved to the door. “Stan, get a hold of our controllers up there.” After looking one more time in irritation at the monitor screen, Dr. Jefferson left.

Slowly turning from the door, Lyle faced Stan. “Our controllers up there? Can he do that?” Lyle asked.

Stan chuckled. “He can do anything he wants. This . . . is the Iso-Stasis Experiment.”



CHAPTER SIX

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
August 3 - 5:00 A.M.

Perhaps it was the fact that Cal had gone to bed before midnight that made her stir from her sleep. Glancing with squinting eyes to the red numbers on the alarm clock, she couldn't believe the time. And the reason for her awakening. The running water, the low banging--probably the toothbrush against the sink--the opening of the medicine cabinet. All that noise at five in the morning. What was Jake doing up this early?

Her door to the bathroom was still ajar, like she had left it the night before. But now the light from the bathroom shone through the crease adding light into her room. Flipping off the covers, Cal set her feet on the cold floor. She stood flattening her bed head hair before knocking on the partly open bathroom door. "Jake?" She whispered.

"Yeah." He opened the door wider for her. "Morning." His face was wet from washing it, the top of his hair had caught some of the water. He stood only wearing green boxers, while he wiped his face dry with a hand towel. "I'll be done in a second and it's all yours."

Cal, still groggy, was confused at how awake he was. "Why are you up at five in the morning?"

"I woke you didn't I?" Jake cringed. "I didn't mean to."

"Jake, what could you possibly have to do at five in the morning?"

"A work out. I figured it would eat up three hours of my time."

"Then that takes you to eight in the morning. What are you going to do with the rest of your day?" She asked, her eyes squinting from the brightness of the bathroom.

"I have an agenda. Got the day planned out. Knowing what you're gonna do will keep you busy. Hey . . . you are more than welcome to join me in the morning to work out."

"At five in the morning?"

"Sure. In fact, if you'd like, you're more than welcome to accompany me on my whole agenda. To keep busy."

"I appreciate that, Jake." Cal smiled then turned serious. "Find me



when your agenda reaches a decent hour. Have a good work out.” She turned and went back into her room.

“Cal.” Jake followed her. “You’re already up. Come on. Exercise won’t hurt.”

“I’d never be able to keep up with you. Besides.” She straightened her bed covers. “I’m going back to sleep.” She sat down on the edge of her bed and plopped sideways to her pillow. Her feet still dangled off the side. “Jake . . . you’re standing in my room in your underwear.”

“Oh . . .” He looked down at himself. “I am. I’ll be back.” Leaving her room through the bathroom, Jake went into his own, sought out his shorts placed them on to be polite, then went back into Cal’s room. In the few moments he was gone, she had fallen fast asleep. Debating for a second whether to wake her, Jake chose not to. Figuring she’d wake up stiff, he lifted her legs to the bed, threw her covers over her, nearly covering her head, and went to his room to finish dressing. He’d get her the next day, he thought. All he’d have to do is challenge her.

^^^

Cal had every intention of eating her breakfast alone. Even going as far as to sit at the smaller table in the far corner or the room wearing her best pre-menstrual syndrome face. Sitting with her back faced to everyone, Cal slowly unwrapped what she thought was the best breakfast choice. A granola bar. The concept behind the ‘ready-to-eat-heat-and-serve’ meals was good, but the matter lacked. Remembering the orange slushy substance labeled lasagna the night before and seeing the brownish gray strips of so-called-bacon that morning, made Cal grateful for the goody stash she brought in her duffle. Food-wise, it was going to be a long seven months.

Granola exposed and it appeared as if it wouldn’t even break. Good teeth or not, Cal wasn’t taking a chance on biting into it, so with her fingernails, she began to pick the bar apart. It didn’t crumble easily and every tiny speck of oat that she rolled in her finger made her think of those mini chocolate donuts back in her room. The only bonus about a bad granola bar was it aided in the ‘keep away’ look of disgust on her face.

Down went the bowl of cereal, then Jennifer’s happy voice snapped Cal from her granola daze.



“Menstruating?” Jennifer asked.

Up went Cal’s right eyebrow, then went her view. “Excuse me.”

“You have that . . . ‘don’t bother me I’m menstruating’ look.” Jennifer poured her milk into her bowl.

“Um, yeah.” Cal said with sarcasm flicking off an oat.

“Shame.” Jennifer shook her head with compassion. “First day?”

Staying in control and not letting out that gasp of irritation, Cal answered. “Pre.”

“Post myself.” Jennifer spoke nonchalantly. “Ended two days before we got here.”

Thinking, *‘Do I want to hear this?’* Cal picked at her breakfast.

“I joined you because I’m not in the mood to deal with men in the . . .” The heavy spoon dropped from Jennifer’s hand, splashing the milk about the table. Her mouth dropped open, and slowly, almost in amazement she spoke to Cal. “Oh . . . my . . . God.”

“What?” Cal turned and looked behind her, Jake had walked into the dining room. “Who Jake?” Cal asked. “You think he looks good *now*?”

“Yeah . . . you don’t?”

Cal shook her head. “He’s all sweaty.” She cringed with a shudder and engrossed herself in her granola.

“Yeah.” The word slipped from Jennifer’s mouth as she tried to eat her cereal. “That has got to be the best body I have ever seen in my entire life.”

“Too big for me to even consider attractive.” Cal shrugged.

“Not me.” Jennifer’s eyes lifted.

“Well, then seeing there’s only two females here . . .” Cal smiled. “Major Jake Graison is all yours. Seduce away.” Before Cal could get any response from Jennifer, surprisingly the huge hand dropped to her shoulder, and his voice, whispering startled her.

“Thank you for that, Cal.” Jake whispered into her ear.

Cal lifted her eyes enough to see Jake walk to where the food was. “Well.” She pushed the granola toward Jennifer. “You can finish this.” She stood up.

“Are you leaving?” Jennifer asked.

After a quick shift of her eyes to Jake reaching into a cupboard, Cal nodded. “Yep. See ya.” Not wanting to hear backlash from Jake about her remark to Jennifer, Cal darted out.



Jennifer knew the reason. Though she didn't hear what Jake whispered to Cal, she knew. He probably thanked her and asked if he could have breakfast alone with Jennifer. Smiling at the prospect of the handsome Major's company, Jennifer tucked her hair behind her ear and waited.

"Where did she go?" Jake asked, his bag of cereal and bag of milk perched in his bowl while he stood there. "Was she done eating?"

"Not really." Jennifer pointed to the granola.

"That's what she was eating? That's pathetic. Is she coming back?"

"No." Jennifer smiled flirtatious. "She left to give us our privacy."

"Oh, she did, did she?" Snatching up that granola bar, his cereal bowl still in hand, Jake walked from the dining area.

^^^

Cal smiled just before the final gurgle of her 'in-room' coffee pot. "Done," she said to Rickie. "Want some?" She stood up.

"No thank you." Rickie held up his index finger which sported a mini chocolate donut. As if a game he nibbled away. "Almost . . . aw!" he whined when he broke, "Babe I lost." Rickie shoved the broken bits in his mouth. "Thank you for sharing these."

"Oh, you're welcome, Rickie." Cal smiled. "I'm glad you came back to my room with me."

"Cal-Babe, when you said you were having mini donuts in your room. I was there."

A single knock accompanied by a short Jake call of 'Cal' caught their attention.

Cal looked up to the door. "Come in."

"Cal." Jake spoke as he entered. "I've been looking for you outside."

Cal shrugged. "I've been right here all along."

Jake looked down to Rickie. "What's he doing here?"

Rickie held up two fingers with chocolate donuts. "Have breakfast guy. Munching away with the Cal-Babe."

After mouthing the words 'Cal-babe' in question, Jake looked at Rickie in disgust. "How old are you."

"Eighteen and a half, guy."

"If you're eighteen why do you have chocolate all over your mouth."

Rickie snorted a laugh. "I'm eating chocolate."



"Try a napkin." Jake swung a view down to Cal. "Oh, Cal, by the way." He spoke sarcastically. "Thank you very much for decided to play match maker with me and Jennifer."

"Dude!" Rickie spoke with excitement. "We rule, do we not. Two babes and we got them."

Jake was shocked by Rickie's remark. "Ex . . . cuse me?"

"You and Jennifer. ME and Cal." Rickie bobbed his head. "Early too."

"I am not with Jennifer." Jake snapped.

"You just said."

"No I did not. I was being facetious." Jake said. "And you and Cal?"

Pleasingly, Rickie held a chocolate covered hand out to Cal. "Me and Cal. Don't think you can step on the territory I'm starting here guy."

Jake looked at Cal while speaking to Rickie. "Wouldn't dream of it. I hear I'm too big to be attractive anyhow."

"There you have it, Guy." Rickie said. "You're like, nine feet tall. I'm a lean, mean, five foot six."

"You're also almost young enough to be her son."

"If she gave birth to me like at five." Rickie smiled.

Jake rolled his eyes. "Listen to you. Young Man, may I give you some . . ." Jake stopped talking in irritation when Rickie laughed. "What . . . is so funny?"

"You called me young man." Rickie picked up another donut.

"Out." Jake ordered.

"Jake." Cal snapped.

"Dude, you're rude."

"Don't call me 'Dude'"

"Sarge, you're rude." Rickie attempted again.

"I am not a Sarge." Jake stated adamantly.

"What am I supposed to call you?" Rickie asked.

"How about Major Graison."

Rickie shook his head. "Doesn't work for you."

"Out." Jake pointed to the door.

"Chill. Chill." Rickie stood up. "Cal-babe, thank you for the treats." He moved to the door. "But I think to be even I'm gonna hit on *his* babe now." At the door, Rickie as his own last word, made a childish face to Jake and darted out.

Cal stood up. "That was really rude, Jake." She set the donuts on the



desk.

“And telling Jennifer to seduce me wasn’t?” Jake picked up the wrappers.

“It was a joke.” Cal grabbed the wrappers from Jake. “And quit picking up my room.”

“I can not believe this is what you consider a healthy breakfast. Cal, in order to . . .”

“Jake.” Cal stopped him. “What do you want.”

“We made plans last night to review manuscripts.”

“It’s eight-thirty on the morning. We have all day.”

“I have it on my agenda for now.”

“I don’t feel like doing it now.” Cal told him.

“Well, what do you have planned to do? Hang out eating junk food with Rickie?” Jake asked sarcastically.

“If I want. Why do you care?” Cal tossed her hands up.

“I made the agenda.”

“And what made you assume I would want to be part of your agenda?”

Jake stared for a second. “You know what? My error.” He moved to the door. “I won’t bother you again.” without saying anything further, Jake walked out.

^^^

A quarter of a crossword puzzle, two cigarettes, a cup of coffee and Cal finally heard a long enough span of silence in the bathroom to warrant Jake was done with his shower and dressed. To her bathroom door which was still closed, Cal walked and knocked.

“Yeah.” Jake said from the other side. “I’m almost done.”

“No. Jake . . . Can I speak to you?” There was a pause and Cal heard the door unlatch, it moved ajar. “Jake.” She opened the door. He stood at the sink shaving wearing only a towel. “I . . .” Cal caught herself casing him, and she quickly turned her back leaning against the archway. “I was wondering. Is it too late to get back on the agenda.” in her folded arms as she held the manuscript.

“Bored?” Jake asked, dipping the razor.

“No. Curious. Is it?”



“Yep.” Jake ran the razor down his face. “I’m a stickler for agenda and adhering to them.”

“I see.” Cal turned to leave but paused when he started talking.

“I’d have to make a new one. And in doing so, I’d hate to *assume* you’d want to be a part of it.”

“Jake . . .”

“Or, you know . . .” He clanked the razor off the sink. “*Assume* that you’d want to hang around with my ‘too big to be attractive’ body.”

“Jake.” Almost in a whine, Cal turned her head to him. When she did she caught it.

Through the corner of eyes that seemed to smile, Jake looked at her. “I’ll be done in a few minutes, then I’ll start that new agenda.”

^^^

At first Cal thought it was a joke. Then after reviewing what she had learned of Major Graison, she realized the word ‘joke’ pretty much wouldn’t grace his vocabulary. When Jake said he’d do a whole new agenda, Jake meant it.

It was taking too long, which concerned Cal wondering what she allowed herself in. But her options were limited. Hang out with Jake. Hang out in her room, or do like everyone else. Sit in the gathering room. Cal knew the second she went in there to wait for Jake, the gathering room was not a place she’d be frequenting.

Carlos found a spot, and he played his guitar. John and Jennifer huddled a board game. Rickie was no where to be seen, and Fr. Dan tried with diligence to converse with Griff. Cal’s aid to that helped the wait on Jake move a little faster.

“Thank you, Cal.” Fr. Dan grinned. A shy looking man, timid and thin. “I wanted to share that story with Griff.”

Cal’s arms moved to interpret what Fr. Dan had just said. She realized by the ache in her shoulders how long it had been, “You’re welcome.” She looked at Griff. “Anything you want me to interpret while I’m here?” She answered speaking and signing.

Griff smiled in returned. Greying and gruff he appeared and singed the words, ‘We’ll use the tablet for right now. Thank you.’

Cal nodded. She folded her arms to try to hide the fact that they felt a



little weary. Turning to go back, she caught another glimpse of Carlos, but it struck something her and she made her approach to him.

Carlos stopped playing.

“Why did you stop?” Cal asked.

He lifted his shoulders, then continued to play. “I think maybe it shocked me that you walked over here.” His words and voice soft.

“Yeah me too. I don’t mean to be anti-social. I just am.”

“I understand. That’s not what we’re here for.” His picking was slow.

Cal looked for a chair and grabbed one. “Mind if I listen to you?”

“Not at all.”

Cal slid the chair across from him and sat. “Do you sing too?”

“Badly.” He laughed and stopped playing.

“I’m disturbing you. I’ll leave you be.” She started to stand up.

“No, don’t. Please stay. It’s just weird. You’ve hardly spoken to anyone. Yet, here we sit. You seem . . .” He started to play again. “Different than my first encounter with you. To be honest, I really didn’t think you’d talk to any of us.”

“To be honest with you, I really had no intentions, until I saw you. I mean, really looked at you. You remind me of someone, even more so while you play your guitar.”

“Good or bad?”

“Oh, good.” Cal smiled sadly as she continued to watch him. “He was the music teacher at the school I taught at. David Martinez. He played every instrument. Gosh, I can’t believe how much you look like him.”

“Ah . . . I see by the lift of the eyebrow, you liked this David Martinez.”

“Oh, I loved David. Everybody loved David. He was your age. Thin like you, soft spoken . . .”

“You dated him.” Carlos smiled.

“Used to. Hell, he was the one that made me think about marriage again . . .” Cal sat back.

“So what happened? Why aren’t you home being Mrs. Martinez.”

Cal rubbed the chill that crept upon her arms. “My daughter was killed. And that killed everything in me. I didn’t have room for David anymore. I decided from that moment on to spend the rest of my life alone.”

The music stopped. “That’s sad.”



"It's my reality." Cal took a deep breath. "Anyway . . . can I just listen to you play? It brings back good memories. And not much does that for me."

"Sure." Carlos smiled and started again. "Hey, maybe in this seven months I'll even teach you."

"Oh, no." Cal waved her hand at him. "David tried. He taught me a few things but, I suck."

"Show me." Carlos took off his guitar. "Come on." He handed it to her.

Somehow Jake thought that Carlos would be a much better guitar player. Especially the way he hadn't put it down since they stepped off the plane. But the plunk of sour notes seemed to overcast any compliment that Jake would have given to Carlos. He could hear the bad notes as he made his way from his room to the gathering room, hoping to find Cal there., since in her impatience she left. He wanted to get started going over the manuscripts with her. He toted them neurotically secretive and hidden in a small knapsack. Rounding the bend into the gathering room, Jake saw the reason for the horrible guitar playing. It wasn't Carlos playing, it was Cal. He must have looked as shocked as he felt. Cal in the gathering room socializing was surprising enough, let alone the fact that now Carlos stood behind her, arms over hers being the patient teacher.

"Dude. You snooze you lose." Rickie stood next to him, watching what Jake watched. "I mean, in this type of situation, you've got to jump the babe train before anyone else, man."

Jake removed his eyes from Cal only for an instant. Long enough to evil-eye Rickie.

"Looks like the Latin lover snatched up the Cal-babe." Rickie snickered. "Guy, if you get lonely, I have some cool magazines in my room that could help you out."

"What the hell are you rambling on about?" Jake folded his arms and stared down at Rickie. "Do you think I'm actually listening to you."

"Well . . . yeah. You're getting mad."

"That's only because you're . . ." He saw Cal stop playing, stand up and hand the guitar over to Carlos. She spotted Jake. "Never mind."

"What's in the bag?"



Jake ignored him and walked to Cal. "Ready? I thought we'd go outside."

"Sure." Cal moved with him to the main door. "Kind of took you long for that agenda, what did you do? Have to rework the whole thing just to fit this in?"

"Nope." Jake opened the main door. "Had to rework the whole thing to fit *you* in."

^^^

Was it three or four? Cal had to wonder as she and Jake sat on that hillside not far from the complex with those manuscripts. Three or four times he flipped through. Looking at his. Looking at hers.

"Jake, come on." Cal said with so much irritation.

"One more time."

"No. Not one more time. They're the same." She reached over and closed them. "Simple information manuscripts."

"But my gut is telling me there's more to these."

"Your gut is wrong." Cal stated then lifted her head toward the complex.

"My gut is never wrong. What we need is someone else's manuscript. Of course, short of asking them, in order to get one, we would have to steal . . ." Jake saw her staring out. "What the hell are you . . . oh." He nodded when he saw Carlos standing outside. "I thought you said last night you were anti-social."

"I am. Why?" Cal replied.

"We'll you're being the social butterfly. Breakfast with Jennifer, guitar lessons with Carlos, donuts with Rickie."

"Jake." She nearly snickered his name. "You have room to talk. You said you were Mr. Isolation, yet you've been with me the entire twenty-four hours."

"Point taken. So . . ." Jake gave an 'up' motion of his head in a point to Carlos. "Don't tell me that's your type."

"Actually it is. I keep looking at him because it amazes me how much he looks like David."

"Who's David." Jake asked.

"I was engaged to him. We broke up after Jesse died."



"That's too bad." Jake said and reached to open the manuscripts. "All right, back to these."

"No." Cal laid her hand on the books. "It's a waste of time."

"And you're just lazy."

Cal laughed in disbelief. "Where are you getting that from, Major?"

"Well, I asked you to join me in a work out today. You turn me down."

"It was five in the morning." Cal defended.

"I think that was your excuse." Jake sighed out and opened the manuscript without interruption from Cal. "If you would have come with me, you'd probably be in bed right now crashed. Then again, I would have had to slack a bit for you, and that would have made me antsy."

"Excuse me?"

"So it probably was a good idea that you didn't work out with me today." He turned a page raising his eyebrow.

"Major Graison, I'll have you know that I would keep up with you better than you expect."

"I highly doubt that."

"You do, do you? And I'd bet anything that you wouldn't have to slack."

"You don't think?" Jake said arrogantly.

"I *don't* think. Maybe not the first day or two. But after that, I'd keep up with your big military ass in a heart beat. That is, within reason."

"Oh of course." He spoke non-believingly. "Within reason . . ." Jake lifted his one hand up. "Is that meaning, like no more than a quarter of a mile hike?"

"Oh . . ." Cal grunted. "You're so arrogant, you frustrate me."

"Then it's a good thing we don't work out together, you'd probably frustrate me."

"You know what I should do? I should work out with you. That would show you."

"You can't do that, Cal. I start at five in the morning." He turned a page in the manuscript.

"I can get up at five in the morning."

"Oh you can, can you? Well why don't you show me what you got."

"You're on." Cal pointed at him with a firm finger. "Tomorrow I start with you."



“Good.” Smiling within himself, Jake shifted his eyes to look at her, trying not to show his pleasure in her joining him.

Cal’s mouth dropped open. “I can’t believe I just took the bait. You baited me.”

“Yep. Now . . . the books.”

“Jake.” Cal stopped him. “No, you’re wrong. They can’t be important.”

“Cal, I’m telling you. They are part of a mental thing here. John’s fucked up comment to you yesterday made me start to think. If they were just information books, then why didn’t they tell us Griff was deaf. That’s pretty big.”

Cal paused for a second. “All right that’s a point. And on that, remind me to brush up on my sign language.”

Jake was surprised. “You sign.”

“Have so all my life. My mother was deaf. I was speaking sign language before I spoke words. I can remember when I was about four or five, I used to think my mother could hear, but she pretended to be deaf to block out my father’s loud yelling.” Cal smiled. “I remember that vividly about him.”

“He yelled a lot?”

“Sure. My father was a drill Sergeant. No wait . . . a Master Drill Sergeant.”

“I see.” Jake nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. “So your father was your strict military upbringing?”

“Yeah. Well. My father was military, but he died when I was very young. My stepfather is the one I’m talking about. He’s the only father I really remember. A good man. In fact he took care of Jesse, raised her so I could finish school.”

“I take it you’re still close to him. Is your mother still married to him?”

“No.” Cal crossed her arms and brought her knees up some. “My mother died when I was fourteen. My step-father raised me, I stayed with him. He was a good guy. He passed away three years ago.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Jake exhaled. “So . . . your back ground explains why you recognized me as a Major.”

Cal lifted an odd look to him “How did you know I recognized you as a Major? You said you didn’t remember meeting me. In fact. You said you only pay attention to people that capture your attention.”



"All right. I do remember meeting you. And yes you captured my attention. How could you not, you walked right into me."

"I did didn't I? So why did you lie?"

"I was being an asshole. But I guarantee I am the only asshole up here you can trust to be alone with."

"Nah." Cal shook her head. "Carlos is harmless. I could be alone with him."

"You don't know him." Jake nodded. "I'm a pretty good judge of people and I get a bad feeling from him."

"I'm a pretty good judge of people too, and I *don't* get a bad feeling about him. Besides, I sat in my room alone with you last night, and I don't know you."

Jake laughed at her remark. "Please, I'm the best one you could spend time with. My gut tells me . . ."

"Jake, I firmly believe your gut sucks. The manuscripts . . . Carlos?" Cal laughed.

"You're letting the fact that he looks just like your ex-fiancé get in the way of your clear thinking. Look at his eyes Cal. Really look at his eyes. They say a lot."

"So do hands. I'd rather ask to see his hands."

With a loud laugh Jake threw his head back. "Are you telling me beside being the great judge of character, you're a palm reader also?"

"No, I'm not a palm reader. I can tell by the lines on your hands so much about you." She reached across and grabbed his right hand, he struggled. "Let me see your palm."

"No." He tugged back, but not too hard he didn't want to pull her across him.

"Are you afraid?"

"Afraid?" Jake set his book to his side and willingly gave her his hand. "Go on."

Cal spread open his fingers, running her hand across his, flattening it. "God, your hands are huge."

"You know what they say. You can tell about a man's . . ." Jake's eyes widened in surprise. "I can't believe I said that. That was wrong. It was inappropriate."

"Please Jake. If you can walk around in your underwear in front of me, you can make crude comments. Trust me I've heard them all." She looked

at his hand then smiled at him. "O.K., what do I see. This is your character line. It's short."

"Thanks." Jake rolled his eyes and tried to pull his hand back.

"It's strong though. You can be trusted . . . But you're also selfish. In fact I'd go as far to say you're probably a selfish lover." Hoping to irk him, Cal was wrong.

"You're probably right." Jake felt her hand smooth against his. Her soft finger tips, her small hand getting lost in his. He actually could care less what she was saying about him. He was enthralled at how nice it felt, her touching him gently like that.

"I'm right? That's a hell of a thing to admit to." Cal was surprised as she examined his hands.

"I'm honest." He took a deep breath and swallowed. Watching her run her fingers oh-so-lightly across his palm. "Aren't we all selfish? I mean, when you're not with someone you care about, then you're more likely to be selfish in bed. Don't you agree?"

"Yeah I do." She nodded.

"So . . . I'm probably a selfish lover. In fact, I know I was. I've never been with anyone I cared about. I've never had time to care about anyone. But I know I wouldn't be selfish if I met that person." He felt her hand stop center of his palm, it rested there. Almost as if a reflex, his fingers closed over top of hers. His heart jumped a beat when he did that. Catching himself quickly he pulled away. "Back to the books."

"No." Cal was firm. "I'm not going to sit her and let you or me waste our time on your stupid manuscript theory."

"Stupid?" Jake was offended. "Will you admit defeat if I prove it."

"Oh, absolutely. How are you going to do that."

"Meet me back at your room in fifteen minutes." Tossing the manuscripts he already had into a sack, Jake handed it to Cal, stood up, then walked down the hill.



Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
August 3 - 2:09 P.M.

Stan and Lyle reached the double doors to the observation room. Doors that were supposed to be almost sound proof, but weren't anywhere near that, they discovered, as they reached for the handles.

Stan, arms filled with folders walked into the room first. "Barb . . . Tina." He set his folders on the table. "Your hair looks good today, Tina."

Tina knew it did, it always looked good when she wore her red hair up in a twist. But Stan's flattery tactics were getting them no where. "You guys are late." She stood up.

Stan checked out his watch. "Yes we are. Thank you for confirming that. Dr. Jefferson had us in his office. You know how he rambles. Anything happen today?"

Barb pushed in her chair as she stood and stretched. "Nothing. Boring still and it will be until phase one, I can see. Rickie told a couple good stories, but that's about it. Oh, we put a new one up on the board if you guys are interested."

"What is it?" Stan asked.

"It's for who's going to ruin the first easy to prepare meal." Barb pointed to the cork board.

Stan shook his head. "That is so weak. What a lame poll." He moved to the cork board. "Anyone take Caleen?" He saw their heads shake no. Reached in his pocket for a dollar bill, stuck it the envelope tacked next to the poll, and signed his name. "We have to remember to take this down for the holding event. Orders from Dr. Jefferson."

Walking backwards to the door with Barb, Tina lifted her hand to wave. "We're out of here."

Lyle stopped them. "Any chance we'll get a good sex scene tonight?"

Barb scoffed at his remark. "Please, this early? I worked on the last experiment, it was a month before anyone hooked up. But of course they didn't have a Jennifer."

"All right." Seemingly disappointed, Lyle sat in the chair next to Stan.

"And . . ." Barb continued as she opened the door. "Masturbation



does not count. So since you two have the earliest sex guess. Don't snatch up the money for that. Remember the rules." She left with a giggle with Tina.

With a smirk at the just closed door, Stan looked to Lyle. "I think masturbation should count. Don't you?"

"Absolutely."

"Too bad." Stan grabbed the remote control zooming in on monitor seven. "Hey-hey-hey. I don't know what's going on, but this ought to be good" He grinned. "Graison's going to Rickie's room."

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
August 3 - 2:11 P.M.

Jake was a man who had ventured out into many dangerous situations. Never did he think twice about any venture like he did as he stood before Rickie's door. Fist raised high to knock, annoyance level peaking from the too loud music that blasted into the hallway, Jake stopped. He tilted his head and stared at the door in utter perplexity.

"And I'm gonna keep on loving you . . ."

"What the fuck is he listening to that for?" Jake knocked hard believing even more, upon deciphering Rickie's choice in music, that something was just not right about him. There wasn't an answer and Jake knocked again . . . then again.

"Dude!" upbeat, loud and excited Rickie spoke when he opened the door. His eyes squinted and red.

The cloud of smoke billowed out at Jake. The tickle hit his throat and he immediately coughed. "Quit calling me Dude."

"O.K." Rickie grinned. "Sarge, why are you . . ." Rickie stepped out of the way when Jake walked in.

Twenty-four hours, Jake thought. A span of a day and Rickie's room appeared as if Rickie had been living in it for two years. Magazines, music, food sprawled out all over the room that was fogged by the cloud of smoke.

Rickie walked back in the room talking loud. "Sarge! What did you want!"

Jake's eyes peered about. The room wasn't that big but he couldn't spot it. Listening, slightly hunched, Jake followed the music until it reached it's loudest. By the bathroom door, under a barrage of Rickie's just unpacked and tossed clothes, Jake found the smaller portable stereo. He shut it off.

Rickie shrieked. "Guy, you killed my Rio Speedwagon."

Standing up straight, Jake turned. "Who?"

In an explaining carefree mood, Rickie lifted his hand. "I know they're probably after your time, but they're this really cool pop band from an era that boosted the stock value of hair spray." In homage, Rickie lowered his head slightly. "Rio Speedwagon."



“No, Rickie. R-E-O.” Jake corrected stern.

“No, Dude. Trust me. It’s no ‘Our . . . Rio’. It’s just plain Rio. I know. I got the Greatest Hits. Says right on front.”

“Yes, Rickie it does. R-E-O. The letters. You pronounce the letters. Christ.” Jake watch him pick up a joint. “Knock that off.” He took it from his hand and set it bak down. “Must you smoke so much marijuana?”

“I must. So, Dude, I mean Sarge, like why are you in my room badgering. I hope you aren’t coming after me because you did duo strike out with the babes.”

Jake’s jaw twitched but he stayed relevantly calm. “No, Rickie. I came for your manuscript.”

“My what?” Rickie asked.

“The book they gave you before you got here. The one that told about everyone up here.”

“Oh!” Rickie nodded.

“Do you have it?” Jake asked.

“Yes.”

“Can I borrow it.”

“Guy, it’s like really boring.”

“Rickie.” Jake snapped. “Can I borrow it?”

“Did you lose yours?”

“No. I just . . . I just want to borrow yours.”

“But you still have yours.” Rickie was confused. “Guy, like, why? I mean it’s sort of like going out and renting a movie the same day it’s on television.”

“Rickie!” Jake barked ad then calmed down. “Please. The book?”

“Hostile. Hostile.” Rickie at a slow pace spun around his room looking. He snapped his finger and walked over to a bag. “Over here.” He opened the bag and grabbed the manuscript tossing it to Jake.

Bent torn, and covered in a brown substance, Jake feared even turning a page. He held it firm by two fingers, nodded a thank you and left.

^^^

It was a sequence of sounds Cal heard from her room that told her one of two things was occurring. Either Jake had something important to tell her or he really had to use the bathroom. His movements were loud



which conveyed a sense of urgency. Heavy foots steps across his room, the fast unlatching of his bathroom side, the single step ‘clunk’ on the bathroom floor.

Before she could even listen to determine his reason for rush. The one knock was followed by the opening of the bathroom door.

Jake walked in holding the dirty manuscript. “Admit defeat.” He extended it to Cal. “Read Griff.”

No response was even out of Cal’s mouth he the open manuscript was laid before her eyes and the huge index finger came down and pointed to a line for her visual benefit. Slowly Cal stood. She lifted her eyes from the book to Jake. “Defeat admitted.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada

August 9 - 7:45 A.M.

Racing Jake had become pretty much a daily routine Cal thought she had bodily adjusted to. And she did it well, no matter the distance. Struggling that last bit of the up hill run, Cal regretted telling Jake the day before that there wasn't nothing he could throw her way she couldn't handle.

Legs burning, Cal made it. She caught her breath at the top of hill by a wooded area just about a half mile from the complex.

"Look at you, how pitiful. You know, if you quit smoking you wouldn't lose your breath." Jake stood hands on hips peering down to Cal.

Cal only raised her eyes. "I'm out of breath because I raced you up a hill."

"And lost." Jake removed his hand from his hip, held it out in cockiness and placed it back.

"Lost? One of your steps equals ten of mine. Of course I'm going to lose. And . . . you could be less of a dick and realize that you've been doing this shit for like twenty years and give me a head start."

"Then there would go the thrill of competition, right?"

Cal closed her eyes and shook her head. "You really irk me."

With a smug look, Jake smiled at her. "Yeah I know, but I can beat you."

"Physically, yes. But intellectually, you aren't even in the same league as me."

"You don't think?"

"Please . . . who kicked your ass in scrabble this past week--every time?" Cal didn't give Jake a chance to reply, she kept rambling. "Who wiped the floor with you in trivial pursuit? And the best--Mr. Military genius--who kicked your ass eight times in battleship? Eight times and you kept wanting to play to beat me, over and over . . ."

"Cool it!" Jake ran his hand over the top of his head. "I'll give you a head start tomorrow."



"What makes you think I'm going to race you tomorrow, let alone work out with you."

"Because you said the same thing yesterday. You're here. *And* you need to challenge me."

"I need to have my head examined for taking on everyone of your challenges too."

"You're having fun, who are you kidding?"

Cal smiled and stood up straight. "You're right. I'm having fun. However, we're gonna start getting bored with these games. So we'd better think of something else to do to occupy our evening time."

The corner of Jake's mouth raised as he stared down at her, he saw her lips moving, he really didn't hear what she was saying.

"I think I'm ready to start on that building project you mentioned last night . . . Jake?" She snapped her finger in front of him. "Hey. You want to work on that building project you mentioned."

"Um . . ." Jake stammered to get from his wayward thoughts back on to the train of conversation.

"If you don't feel like it," Cal said smug. "I can hang out with Carlos.."

"No." Jake interrupted her. "I told you about Carlos. Humor me, please."

"I've been humoring you. He's very nice to me. He asks me every night if I'd like to read with him." She saw Jake roll his eyes in sarcasm. "What?"

"Cal, you aren't that naive are you? Carlos wants a little more than reading off of you."

"I resent that. If all he wants is sex, Jennifer will be happy to oblige, she's made that abundantly clear to all the men."

"Yeah but look at Jennifer, and look at you." Jake said.

"In another month, her and I will both look like super models to you men."

"You're implying we'll get desperate. What about you? Aren't you going to want to . . . uh you know in a months time? Won't we start looking good to you too?"

"Doubtful." Cal faced him. "I'm a lesbian." She waited. Watched and when she saw the shocked expression on Jake's face, Cal laughed. "I'm joking you. All right. Now that we've gotten our morning exercise, race, argument and intellectual discussion out of the way. I'm going to eat." She



started to walk back to the hill, she felt Jake grab her arm.

"Wait." He pulled her back. "I brought you up here for a reason." Still holding her arm, he led her another ten feet into the trees. "This." He pointed to a tree with a knotted rope hanging down. "We'll climb up. I have to talk to you."

"Up there? Why not here?"

"I could talk to you here, but it's pretty great up there." He grabbed the rope. "Gees, I didn't think." Jake smacked himself in the head. "You probably can't climb a rope. It's knotted to help."

"Jake, you don't have to bait me into this. I can climb. You go first."

"All right." Jake leaped up in a jump and climbed the fifteen feet quickly. He lifted himself to the 'V' in the tree and called down. "Come on. I'll help you when you get here."

Speaking softly, Cal gripped the rope. "I have to be nuts." She began to climb, something her small body had done many times in her life. Something she actually did well.

Jake, standing, braced himself in a 'V' of the tree watching impressed as Cal climbed up to him. The rope barely moved or swayed. He squatted down when she neared him, and he reached out his hand, grabbing hers. "Good job."

"Thanks." With his help, she lifted herself up. "Since there's hardly any room, I'm taking it we're sitting." She held on to the tree and Jake. "Fearful of the ridicule. I'm afraid I'm gonna fall."

Jake shook his head. "I won't let you. I'll sit first." Pulling away from the hand she gripped, he sat down within the 'V'. His legs straddled the branch, as he leaned back in against the larger part of the tree. "Come on." He spoke assuredly to her, showing her the palm of his hand. His face sincere. "Sit with your back to me."

Nervous, and trying not to look down, Cal awkwardly maneuvered her legs over the thick branch and sat. Her hands held tight to the tree, her body leaned forward.

"No, slide back." Jake placed his hand on her hip. "Slide into me. I won't let you fall. I promise."

Cal, using her hands to push, slowly moved back. "Jake I don't . . ."

"I won't bite, closer." He helped her until she was right against him.

Feeling his chest behind her was reassuring. She leaned back, relaxing, using his chest as her back's support. Feeling Jake's hand on her hip wasn't



good enough at the height, so Cal grabbed it. sliding it against her waist and harnessing herself to him. "Don't let go." She spoke quickly. "Please."

Jake smiled. With his other hand he reached around her and lifted up her chin, and pointed. "Take a look." He pressed his head to hers, letting her feel secure enough in his holding her, that she could take in the view that was afoot of them.

"Whoa." Cal took a shivering breath. She realized at that moment how high above everything they were. Not only were they embedded in this tree, but the towering tree sat on top of a hill, over looking what Cal would describe in her mind as the most breathtaking view. The mountain range not far to the east of them. The river flowing freely. Cal could even see Rickie and Jennifer walking around the outside of the complex picking wild flowers.

"See." Jake rested his head back against the tree, he liked the fact that Cal's body followed his. "This is nice." Jake closed his eyes, getting lost in thought. "This is real nice."

"What is?" Cal asked.

"Uh . . ." Jake's eyes popped open. "The whole view thing."

"So tell me, Major Graison, why can't we talk in our rooms?"

"Because what I have to talk to you about, has to be between you and me. Got that?"

"Jake . . . who else will it be between, you seem to make sure I'm not buddy-buddy with anyone."

"I do that because I'm just watching out for you, Cal, that's all."

"And why is that?"

"Truth?" Jake felt her nod. "I knew there was something about you before I even met you."

"You thought I scored higher on the mental evaluations."

"That and . . . You and I . . . we're a lot alike, we're different than everyone here. Just like any guy I'd be with in the field, I'd trust you to watch my back. I don't say that about just anyone. So I want to watch yours."

"Just like any guy in the field huh? Would you hold him like this in a tree?"

Jake laughed and shook his head while closing his eyes. "No. That's where the female part of you comes into play. I . . ." Jake stopped himself from possibly coming off too attracted to her. "There's just something so



strong about you, and I respect that. I don't think I've ever met a female that came across so strong, yet so sad as you did."

"Female?" Cal asked. "Do you refer to ever woman you meet as female?"

"Pretty much so."

"Explains why you were never married or engaged."

"I was never married or engaged because I never had time to meet the right person." Jake reached up and played with the leaves on the tree as he talked. Picking them off, rolling them in his hand and letting the squashed remains fall. "With what I do, emotional attachments can be detrimental. Besides. I can honestly say, you're the first female . . . I mean woman . . ." He laughed. "That actually has spent more than an hour in the same room with me. I think I've spent more alone time with you in this past week than with every woman I've ever tried to be personal with, combined. You tolerate me, Cal. I think that's a hard thing to do."

"I have news for you, Jake. It is."

Jake tossed down another leaf. "I'm pretty bad, huh?"

"You're holding me up in a tree. You want me to be honest?" Cal didn't give him time to respond. "No you're not that bad at all, Major Graison."

He was about to say thank you, but stopped himself. "All right." He took a breath. "I haven't brought this up, because I didn't want to hear you make that sound."

Cal whined. "The manuscripts again?"

"That's the sound." Jake said. "And yes. I'm telling you Cal. I was right before. Why would Rickie's manuscript be exactly the same as ours up until the detail about Griff?"

"Because it's Rickie. They know he has a big mouth. They probably counted on him spreading it around that Griff was in a mental institute. They just didn't count on him not reading it. And why does their backgrounds and who they are concern you so much? It's not like you're spending anytime with them." Cal was confused. "Your survival through this should be what's important."

"That's right. So what happens if one or more of them break? We should know what they are capable of, shouldn't we? Just like Griff."

"That was a lie for Rickie. Griff's too stable."

"You would believe that. You think Carlos is safe." Jake's hand



hurriedly slid to her mouth before she could say anything. "O.K., my point in all this is . . . even if I'm wrong, which I doubt, let's get everyone's books. Let's compare. If they're different, we'll note the differences. If they're all the same, we had fun."

"Fun?" Cal asked. "How by asking them to read their manuscripts? Oh, joy, Jake, I bet you're a blast on a date."

"Ha-h-ha, funny. No. I don't want to ask for them. I want to . . . borrow, yeah. But without them knowing. Make a game. A challenge. It'll be fun, and add another thing to do. What do you say?"

Cal shrugged. "What the hell. I'm game. So why did we have to come up here to discuss this?"

"Because I wanted it to be between you and me. I don't want any of the scientists to know what we're doing. Not yet. And they will. Our rooms . . . bugged. Microphones. Cameras."

"How . . ." Cal tried to turn her head back to him but stopped, she didn't want to chance losing her balance. "Wait. They said they only observed the diningroom and gathering room."

"They lied." Jake shook his head. "I suspected as much, started really looking last night. You know the smoke detector in the corner of the room. Bingo. I lifted the cover, a camera embedded in the wall. If there's a camera, there's a bug somewhere too. I couldn't find it."

"Did you pull it out?" Cal asked.

"No, besides the fact it's in the wall. We agreed to be observed. Hey, if I'm here I might as well take the money right? I'll check your room today."

"Good." Cal was relieved. "I guess we have to watch what we say or do in our rooms then right?"

"Especially anything obscene."

"There goes inviting Carols over." Cal joked.

"Funny." Jake paused. "Now that we've talked. Want to go eat?"

"Yes. I'm starved." Cal looked down. "Let me go first all right?"

"I'll help you." Jake kept hold of her in every step she took as she lifted from the branch and grabbed for the rope. Hoping she didn't fall he watched her climb down with ease.

Cal felt the safety of the grassy ground. She shielded her eyes and looked up at Jake as he took the rope.

"Whoa babe." Rickie's voice was right behind her. "That was really cool."



“Rickie.” Cal turned around, he and Jennifer stood there. “What are you guys doing up here?”

Jennifer looked up at Jake as he climbed closer. “We saw you up there from below. Going to breakfast yet?”

“On our way.” Cal answered, then turned back, Jake dropped to right beside her.

“Dude.” Rickie smiled as he looked to Jake. “We were walking around down there and we thought we saw you in the tree. Man, I’d never think of a tree to be a make out spot. Cool thinking. Way to not be interrupted.” He lifted his hand and gave a flower to Cal. “A beautiful flower for a beautiful babe.”

“Ah.” Cal sniffed it. “Thank you, Rickie.”

“No problem, look, I gave some to Jennifer too.”

Cal knew at that point that Rickie’s compliment to her was minuscule, meaningless, and polite. “Gee. Jennifer has a bouquet.”

Jennifer held up the multitudes of flowers. “Isn’t he sweet, Cal. He thinks I’m beautiful.” She grabbed hold of Rickie’s arm. “Come on, Richard, let’s head down to breakfast.” She tilted her head back to Cal and Jake. “We’ll meet you down there.”

Cal glanced down at her single flower, then at the two who trotted down the hill. Jennifer’s bouquet bouncing peddles as she walked. Not meaning to come off a little jealous, she shook her one lonely flower, and spoke out loud to herself in a whisper. “She got a bouquet.” Cal started to walk.

“Hey.” With a smile, Jake grabbed Cal’s hand that held the single flower that was supposed to be Cal’s compliment. He lifted her hand and whispered as they moved. “Rickie just wants laid.”



Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
August 9 - 8:45 A.M.

Dr. Jefferson, wearing what seemed to be a brand new lab coat, its whiteness almost fluorescent, walked quickly around the observation room. His secretary trailed him--tablet in hand--like a puppy. He ran his finger tips across each of the furnishings as he passed them. "Get the cleaning crew up here, Carol. I want another once over before the Holding Event this afternoon."

"Yes, Doctor." She wrote down.

"And coffee fresh brewed should be ready, a fully stocked bar. And has the appropriate luncheon arrangements been made?"

"Yes. Calabria's will deliver at three."

"Excellent." Dr. Jefferson stopped, standing next to Tina. He placed his hands on his hips holding back his jacket as he stared at the screens. "Carol, note for the cleaning crew to clean every monitor. I want them to shine."

"Will do." She jotted down again.

"Tina and Barb I want this cork board hidden away some . . ." He turned his head to the 'ah's' that came from the two observing women. "What?" He asked as he saw them looking to the monitor.

Tina, smiling, pointed up. "Look. Isn't that sweet?"

Throwing his hands up in the air, Dr. Jefferson, charged to the door. "This isn't a soap opera ladies." He opened it, waited for his secretary and walked out. The holding event was starting in a few hours. Dr. Jefferson had better things to worry about than what was happening in Cal's room.



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
August 9 - 9:05 A.M.

Once again, Cal picked at her breakfast. Never being a cereal eater, she chose granola everyday, and everyday, she barely touched it. In fact, she barely touched anything placed out to eat. She pretended despite Jake's nagging, but the choices of food were limited, and she supposed she would have to eat it or wither away.

Cal was glad it was her day to cook. Though the others chose to just pick from the bin and heat and serve, Cal intended to make it a time consuming project. The shelves were stocked with miscellaneous items, and she was going to make use out of them. She wanted to eat, and wanted something she knew would be at least semi-good. Preparing a meal somewhat from scratch would ensure that.

A long hot shower was a what Cal took, longer than usual. Hoping Jake--who was waiting his turn--wouldn't complain too much when the hot water ran out on him, Cal stayed in the bathroom a little extra longer to give the water heater time to refurbish.

Hair blow dried, Cal knocked on Jake's side. "Sorry I took so long. I'm done." She heard his 'thank you' and before she heard anything else, she slipped into her room. The smell caught her attention right away. She wondered as she stepped further into her bedroom what it was. The answer came to her as she slid to a stop. Placed upon her bed was a virtual blanket of wild flowers. Her mouth dropped open. Quickly her head jolted to the bathroom and she ran to the door, knocking once. "Jake, are you decent?"

"For me, yeah. Come on in."

Cal opened the door, he was lifting his shirt over his head. "Jake. Can you come with me for a second." She wiggled her index finger to him.

"Can it wait? I want to hop in the shower."

"Just for a second." She turned from the bathroom and walked in her room. She waited until he stepped out. "Look." Cal held her hand out to the bed.

"Whoa." Jake rested his hand on top of his head. "What a mess."

"Jake." Cal turned her head to him. "Did you do this?" She asked softly.



“Um . . .” He shook his head. “No, Cal. I didn’t. Are you mad about it?”

“Not at all. Why would I be mad? I would probably say it’s one of the sweetest things anyone has ever done for me.” Cal said stepping to him. “If you didn’t do this, who did?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Jake mustered up a clueless look. “Don’t know.”

“It wasn’t you?”

“Nope. It’s a kind of mushy thing to do.” He shook his head stepping further back. “Not my style. I’m uh . . . going to take a shower now.”

“All right.” Cal smiled at him, not believing him, knowing he was copping out. “Jake?” She looked at the bed. “If Rickie gave Jennifer a bouquet just to get laid, whoever did this must be trying to secure a bed spot for the entire experiment. Don’t you think?”

“Nah.” Jake opened the bathroom door again and walked in. He slowed down before closing it, turned around and looked back out into Cal’s room. He gripped the side of the door as he peered at her. “Cal . . . perhaps whoever did this . . .” His head motioned to the bed. “Perhaps they did it, because, just because . . . they like you.” After a soft tap with his palm to the edge of the door, Jake shut it closed.



The Holding Event - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
August 9 - 2:00 P.M.

In a single file line, stopping only briefly at the door to show the guard their identification, the investors, one by one walked in. Different shapes, sizes, ages. Not all of them gave the appearance of having the money needed in order to be in attendance at the event.

He called himself Aldo, no last name's were even made known early in the experiment. Perhaps it was a matter of trust, but with in a months time, all of the investors would know each other well.

Aldo entered first, wearing his flashy work-out suit. Gold chains hanging between the openness of the zipper jacket. The chains buried themselves deep within his abundantly hairy chest. A bigger man, not so much in height, but in build, jingled as he walked over to an uptight Dr. Jefferson and shook his hand. "Here we are again. How do you think it will fare?" Aldo asked.

Dr. Jefferson looked into Aldo's dark brown eyes, the wrinkles that became predominant when he smiled. "I'm hoping for very good. We've got five new faces this year."

Aldo watched the other seven men walk in. He ran his fingers down his thick black mustache. "The new ones are always hopeful. But what is it that they say? Third times a charm? My third time." He lifted a small business card size blue envelope. It was sealed. "I made sure I picked first this year."

"Does it ever make a difference?" Dr. Jefferson smiled.

"Never." Aldo looked at the monitor wall, the screens hidden behind it. His anticipation of its opening apparent in his enthusiasm. " So . . . How's the uh . . . inside betting poll with the observers?" He leaned to Dr. Jefferson, asking in secrecy. "You know I loved partaking in that last time. Start yet?"

"First day. Speak to Barb, she has the cork board put away. They have a few different categories started. Weird ones." Dr. Jefferson nodded.

"I'll do that. I want to speak to the investors I remember from the last two, and claim my spot at the table. Are we going to start soon?"

Dr. Jefferson glanced at his watch. "Very shortly. If you look at your



information. And we've included notes from the first week. But . . . not much has happened."

"It's early." With a pat to Dr. Jefferson's back, Aldo stepped back, and moved to the other two investors.

Ivan recognized Aldo right away as he approached him and Douglass where they stood. How could he not? Ivan very vividly recalled his first impression of Aldo years before. He smelled of cigarettes and looked like a two bit thug off the street. Ivan referred to him as 'the wop' for the first three months until he realized that Aldo was the richest of the investors by making his money in casino action and undisclosed business. Of course Aldo did throw business Ivan's way. Ivan didn't mind, his three plastic surgery offices were state of the art, compliments of gifts from Aldo. So Ivan smiled when Aldo approached, that was a courtesy given.

Douglass on the other hand, standing side by side with Ivan, didn't care much for Aldo. Though he merely tolerated his dry sense of humor, Douglass did enjoy the enthusiasm Aldo put out during the experiments. It made for the dry times to seem a lot less dull.

Aldo held up his blue envelope. "Ready gentleman?"

Ivan held his up also, his too remained unopened. "Very much so. I see our newest additions look puzzled at what's in these little blue things."

"They should wait." Aldo said. "But did we?"

Douglass' envelope was semi-folded in his pocket, perhaps out of nervousness from holding it in his sweaty hand. Though it was the fourth experiment the Texas oilman had invested in, he always was nervous at the beginning. "Heck, I'm even afraid to open it when it's time."

As the three men--seeming like old highschool chums rather than the business enemies that they were--made their way to Barb, Dr. Jefferson called out for attention. The awaited moment, the anticipation of the event, the experiment, was about to begin.



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
August 9 - 2:35 P.M.

“Whoever designed these shelves . . .” Cal grunted as she spoke, climbing on to the counter top. “Didn’t take into account short people.”

“Easy.” Carlos held up his hand to her as a safe guard while he stood behind her. “You want me to look for you?”

“No, I got it.” Cal caught her balance. “I want to have everything ready for later.” She tilted her head back looking down at his. “Just make sure I don’t fall.” she looked back into the cupboard “Here there will work.” She dropped two boxes of pasta down and turned around.

“Here let me help you down.” Carlos reached up his hands to her waist. He grasped it, lifted her and brought her down to the floor. “Cal? Can I ask you something.”

“Sure.” Cal visually checked out the items she had.

“Why doesn’t Jake want you to be around me? He seems to want to corner the market on your attention.”

“He does?” Cal shrugged. “He didn’t say anything about not wanting me to be around you.”

“It’s easy to see. I mean, I’m not doing anything but trying to be nice. You know. But, every time I make a suggestion for you and I to do something, he’s there. He’s always there.”

Cal slowly she turned around to face Carlos who stood right by here. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t really noticing he did that.

“I’m just . . .” Carlos tossed his hand up some. “I’m just trying to get to know you.”

“We have seven months.” She smiled at him.

“But, wouldn’t it be better to start to get to know you *now*. I mean, really wouldn’t it be odd five months from now, after all this time in isolation to find out you harbor a secret passion for fuchsia.”

“Oh, my God.” Cal chuckled.

“What?”

“I do.”

“No, you don’t.” Carlos started to laugh then paused. “Really?” He asked with a tilted head and innocent look.



Cal caught herself staring at him, she shook her head. "God, you look like David. I'm sorry."

"Anything that works in my advantage. What about tonight? We can sit, talk . . ." Carlos turned his head to the loud clearing of a throat, Jake was walking in. "See what I mean?"

Jake said nothing further. He walked up to beside them, reached to the shelf for a small bag of cereal and walked over to a table. Loudly, he pulled out the chair and sat down. "Your cigarettes burning away, Cal." He reached his hand over to the ashtray on the table.

"Sorry." Stepping to it, Cal reached out, reaching the burning butt the same time as Jake. "Thank you." She put it out.

Carlos, realizing a moment with Cal was impossible, decided it best to leave. "I'm heading out. If you want to do something . . ." He looked to Jake. " . . . different for tonight. Let me know, Cal."

Cal's eyes shifted from between Carlos who awaited an answer, and Jake who raised his eyebrows, head tilted. "I can't Carlos. Thank you any how." She saw from her view, Jake smiled. "We're working on something."

"If you change your mind." Carlos stepped back. "See you at dinner." He nodded to Jake and walked out.

Jake's stare followed him out the door, and he sensed that Carlos knew it. After the room was just his and Cal's, Jake stood dumping the cereal in his mouth. "You're supposed to be humoring me about Carlos."

"I am. But what am I suppose to do? Tell the man he's banned from hanging around me because you don't trust him?"

"I'll tell him if you want."

"No don't. Why don't we just get a hold of his book and we can clear this all up."

"I get a bad feeling, Cal." Jake finished off his cereal. "I really do. Besides, we're going to have to wait on Carlos. I've slated John for the first book."

"I don't understand. If you're that suspicious of Carlos, why don't we get his first? Then we can clear this up and you won't have to worry about me hanging . . ." Her words slowed down with realization. "We'll do John first."

"Thank you. Hey, what are you doing?"

"Well, I know they have the prepared meals, but I thought I'd cook. So I'm just getting things out and ready." She turned around and leaned



against the counter. "I wanted to make something I'll eat."

"Good. I'm getting tired of seeing you pick at your food. So . . . you cook?"

"Of course I cook. I cooked all the time for me and Jesse. Actually, I cook rather well."

"I'll be the judge of that tonight."

"No, please don't. I'm limited here. Wait until we get back home and then I'll make you a dinner . . . wait, I forgot. You live in North Carolina, I live in Pennsylvania."

Jake fluttered his lips. "Twelve hour drive. No problem."

"You'd actually come up?" Cal asked.

"Are you inviting me?"

"Yes I am." She nodded.

"Then I'm there." He began to arrange all the things she had pulled out and set on the counter, by size. "Ready to head back to the room?"

"Yes." She grabbed his hand away from her stuff and they started to leave. "Did you get the things for our building project?"

"Yeah, and I wanted to ask you. Can I put them in your room? My room is neat. Yours has all those flowers everywhere."

"Not anymore, I threw them out." She noticed he stopped walking. "Jake? Is something wrong?"

"You threw them out?"

"Yeah. I mean, I didn't know who put them there. What if it was some sort of sick . . ."

"Cal, you shouldn't . . ."

"I'm joking Jake. And you can put the supplies in my room." They started to walk again.

"Speaking of supplies. I saw the oddest thing while I was out."

"What's that?" Cal asked as they headed to the hall where the sleeping rooms were.

"Loose dirt. Different color, spread all around this one area."

"So." Cal shrugged as she stopped at her door. "Loose dirt. So what?"

"Cal, seriously. It wasn't there when I was getting those, I mean, it wasn't there earlier. It's like someone was digging, but I couldn't find the hole."

"Digging." She snickered as they walked into the room. "Like our graves? How eerily 'Flowers in the Attic'."



“Go on, make jokes.” Jake shut the door. “Obviously, you aren’t remembering paragraph fifteen ‘B’ in the agreement we signed.”

“Obviously not. What’s paragraph fifteen?”

“Basically. You die here. You are theirs. Your body is Caldwell property forever.”

Cal laughed and then the smile dropped. “You’re not kidding.”

Jake raised his eyebrows.

Hurriedly, Cal opened the second drawer of her desk. “I have it . . . here” She pulled out a stapled document. “Paragraph fifteen?”

“B” Jake nodded and stepped to her.

Cal flipped through the pages, let her finger skim down the raised her eyes to Jake who stood before her. “Shit.”

“See.” He nodded arrogantly.

“God, Jake.” She closed the document. “It really makes you wonder. What the hell we got our selves into.”

The Holding Event - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
August 9 - 3:00 P.M.

“Gentlemen, welcome to the Iso-Stasis Experiment.” Dr. Jefferson tapped his index cards he intended to use as notes, against the end of the long table. Once collated, he stepped back closer to the monitor wall. “First, I need to thank you eight gentlemen. Without you, and your investment, the experiment would not be possible. Some of you have returned from previously investing. We welcome you back . . .” Dr. Jefferson nodded to Aldo, Ivan, and Douglass. “And the rest of you, welcome aboard.” He inhaled with dramatics as he paced back and forth before them. “The Iso-Stasis. Number twelve. Right participants carefully selected, tested and processed have been placed together like an intricate puzzle for your benefit and ours. They assumed that they were all chosen for their mental and physical strengths. As our veteran investors know, that is not the case. All of these people are different. Ranging from the very strong to the traumatically weak. Should they make it the entire seven months without mentally breaking they receive a sizable compensation. All of them know this. None of them know the real reason for their being there. That, being all of you.” Dr. Jefferson had their attention and he went with it. “Far from civilization. A mental endurance experiment. However, left to human nature, we would not get the results we want. So we step in. There are three simple phases to this experiment. Mental, nature’s fury, and finally, the experiment itself . . . The Catch. Each step increases the intensity of the experiments and pushes the participant mentally and physically further.” Pacing, Dr. Jefferson moved slowly around the table. “We’ve ranked the participants for you. On through eight. The lower the number, the better the chances are of their emerging. We monitor . . .” He pointed to the huge wall of monitors. “Daily. Twenty-four seven. We keep track. You are welcome anytime to view. We provide weekly reports. Everything you need to know is in the folders before you. Now . . .” Dr. Jefferson lifted a mock small blue envelope. “The reason for your being here. All of you picked one.. Inside is a name. The name is the reason for the gamble you took. *They* are your horse in this particular race. You may open your

selections.”

Aldo pulled out his small card and peered at the name. His dislike in his selection was apparent as he pounded his fist on the table in anger. “Son of a bitch. I don’t believe it.” He shook his head. “I have a woman. A fuckin’ woman. Christ, I ought to just hang up my hat. I thought this year I’d have a good chance. What is she? Number seven, or eight?”

“It depends, who do you have?”

“Caleen Reynolds.” He tossed his card down, and rubbed his head. “Two million dollars, two million and I get a woman.”

“That’s the chance you took. You gambled Aldo.”

“And I lost--again.”

“Not yet.” Dr. Jefferson smiled. “Cal, as she likes to be called, is number two.”

Aldo lifted his eyes over the hand that covered them. “Two? A woman is number two? A woman has never been number two.”

“Correct.” Dr. Jefferson placed his hand behind his back. “When you read about her you’ll know why. Very strong. Willed and physical. She’s a good one. Besides, there is something special about Cal. I think all of you will find this interesting. Please open to page four.” He heard the flipping of pages. “Though Ms. Reynolds could have made it into the experiment on her own credentials, she was a shoe in when we did a background check on her. Her maiden name is Caleen Lambert. For those of you who never did a history on the Iso-Stasis, let me enlighten you. Ms. Reynolds applied without the knowledge or even inkling that her father was part of the 1970 Iso-Stasis experiment. Sergeant Lambert was headed into the winners slot. Never once did he break. He was one of our best. He was killed by a fellow participant three hours before the end of the project. So, knowing her genes, her background and her history. Ms. Reynold holds the second slot.”

Aldo clenched his fist. “Yes. I have a chance. Who’s number one.”

“Of course you can look at the board but . . .” Dr. Jefferson peered about. “Who has Major Graison.”

Small, meek appearing, the balding man held up his card. “I do. I’m Stewart Marshall.”

“You have the favorite.” Dr. Jefferson chuckled silently at the disgruntled moans. “Carlos Valenz is number three. The rest are in various order, again, check the ranking board. Before I get into answering anymore participant questions, for the new people.” Dr. Jefferson took a breath.



“The rules. There are none. We control what happens, who it happens to, is by lot, not by choice. There will be one winner. Never has there been more than one winner, if by chance there is, the pot will be split between the names of the investors who have the names of those who walk away. Unless, of course, they pull the option. In that case, we will ensure one winner and one winner only.” Picking up the remote control. “I guess it’s time, to let all of you enjoy the event. And ee your horses.” He flicked on the monitors, each screen lit up, some empty rooms, some filled. “May I say, may the best man win?”

Aldo shook his head, distracting everyone’s attention as they tried to see who they had. “You didn’t mention what the Catch is this experiment.

“I apologize.” Dr. Jefferson stepped closer to the screens. “The Catch is the heart of the experiment. In the past, it has usually been ours. Not this time, for one of you hold The Catch.” Dr. Jefferson pointed to the screen. “One of these eight people is a homicidal maniac. We, for experiment purposes, paid for his release. This participant thrives for the kill. We won’t reveal who it is, but they are brilliant.” Dr. Jefferson smiled impressed. “Keep in mind, looks, gender and history may be deceiving.”

Aldo stepped closer to the monitor with Ivan, they both peered for their person. “A homicidal maniac? Shit, this will make for an interesting inside bet with the investors, don’t you think.”

“Oh most definitely.” Ivan gaped forward. “But which one is it?”

^^^

The slow motion video tape played in all twelve monitors. Each of the investors were shown scenes from the previous week, highlighting their ‘horse’ as they called them. They were on the last one, the best one, as Dr. Jefferson put it. Aldo stood the closest to the monitor. A short glass filled with ice, his scotch whiskey barely covering it as he brought it to his thick lips, sipped it and watched.

It played in slow motion, twice because everyone seemed to get a kick out of it. Jake standing up in defense of Cal. Cal in no need of his protection, storming over, fisted hand, slugging John Montgomery to the floor.

“Again.” Aldo called out as he watched it closely.

“No not again. It’s time to watch them now. What they are doing



now.” He turned off the VCR and let the live scenes play.

“I’ll be damned.” Aldo stared at the single monitor where Cal stood preparing her meal. “I’ll be damned. That’s my girl.” He tapped his forefinger, gold diamond band upon it, on the screen. “Cute little thing isn’t she?”

“Very much so, yes.” Dr. Jefferson and stepped closer to the table. “If I could for one last moment have everyone’s attention.” When he knew he had it he reached into his pocket. He held up a gold coin. The mental phase is to begin in one week.” He showed everyone the coin. “This is how we determine who will be pushed.. Which four it will be. Ivan, you call it.”

Ivan peered to the name ‘Rickie’ on his card. “Since my horse is seven, heads will be even.”

Dr. Jefferson tossed the coin in the air. It flipped several times landing in the palm of his hand. He slammed it on the back of his other hand, covering it. He peeked under his hand and held up the shiny gold object. “Heads it is.” Smiling he began to walk to the back of the room, he paused, clasping the coin tightly in his fisted hand. “Two, four, six or eight. This early on . . . which one will break?” Placing his hand with the coin in his pocket, Dr. Jefferson opened the doors to the full viewing area. “Let the game begin.”



MIND TRIP



CHAPTER EIGHT

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
August 18 - 12:05 A.M.

They faded into the darkness of the elevator shaft where they stood. Black baseball caps, all black clothing. Carl and Hawk, Caldwell controllers on sight, stood waiting, headphones on. They appeared as twins in every way aside from the way they dressed. Both early thirties, same the medium build, and bland buzzed brown hair.

Lowering his infrared goggles, Carl brought the microphone of his headset closer to his mouth. "Stan, come on. What's going on?" He covered the microphone and looked to Hawk. "This is ridiculous."

"I say we go for it." Hawk shrugged.

"Stan," Carl tried again. "Let's go. What's going on?"

Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
August 18 - 12:05 A.M.

From the wall of monitors, Lyle stepped back with folded arms. “Stan, tell them to go on. The barflies are pretty much hammered.”

After a nod, Stan brought the phone to his ear. “Go for it. Lyle says they’re oblivious.” Hanging up, Stan stood up and walked over to where Lyle peered at the monitor of Cal and Jake’s room. “You know, it’s bad enough that Cal and Jake spend every waking moment together. But do they have to stay up so late? They’re killing us.”

“And boring us.” Lyle said. “They could at least have sex.”

“Tell me about it.” Stan stated perturbed then his face lit up brightly and he pointed. “Oh, yeah. Here we go. Check out monitor eight.”

Through the monitor of Jennifer’s room the darkness slowly disbursed as a hint of light raised up from the floor with the elevator shaft that carried Carl and Hawk.

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
August 18 - 12:07 A.M.

His black gloved hand held the syringe and Carl tapped once on the side to remove the bubbles. Standing bedside a sleeping Jennifer, Carl motioned his head to Hawk. With a nod, Hawk took a breath and laid his hands upon her in a secure manner. Leaning down Carl placed the need to Jennifer's neck and injected.

Jennifer's eyes opened with the pinch of the injection. Just as she was about to scream, Hawk covered her mouth muffling it. Her body thrashed violently in a struggle and then she stopped.

Hawk slowly lifted his hands. "She's out. Grab her feet."

Sticking the syringe back in his pocket, Carl grabbed Jennifer's feet and he lifted at the same time as Hawk. Grunting they carried her to the awaiting elevator shaft. After hitting the 'down' button with his elbow, and giving a, 'shit is she heavy look,' Carl watched the elevator doors close.

^^^

Jake walked--not as straight as usual--through the bathroom into Cal's room. He carried in each of his hands, a bottle of beer. He strutted in, wearing his work out shorts and a tee shirt, plopping down on the floor on Cal's bedspread she had spread out. Sitting across from her, one leg bent up, he handed her a bottle. "And this is it. You're drunk and I've drank way past what my limits are." Jake, with his free hand reached down and picked up the empty bottle of JACK DANIELS. "We've drank too much tonight. That's all we did."

"I am not drunk." Cal sat up folding her legs. "Please. Besides, what else are we going to do?" She brought the bottle to her mouth.

Jake watched her, mind drifting as she wrapped her lips around the ring of the long neck. "Um . . ." He ran his hand over his face trying to wipe the thoughts away, as his hand dropped down, he saw her clock. "God is that the time? We've been drinking on this floor for over four hours."

"That's not all we've done. Of course it started out as one drink while we worked on our twig city we're building." She pointed to it. "It's coming



along. Then we got into how you failed--again--to get Fr. Dan's book. He's going to worry about you Jake, what's the excuse you used three times this week? You wanted to confess?"

"I tried. However, I'm glad we agreed to hold off on Fr. Dan, and go to Jennifer."

"Now there's someone you can distract. All you have to do is sleep with her." She snickered at his whine. "It's the only way you'll be able to do it Jake. I think you're losing your edge."

"I am not." Jake was adamant.

"Are too. When you first got here you were the big military Ranger guy. Now look at you."

"I can still go in that mode. Don't you forget it." Jake, holding his bottle, held out his index finger to her. As Cal tried to swipe his point away, he snatched up her hand with his other one, he held it. "I'm this way around you." He released her hand and took a drink.

"Why is that?"

"Because I like you." Jake leaned back resting his body half up on his elbow.

"Enough to cover my bed with flowers?"

With an open smile Jake shook his head. "Don't . . . I told you I didn't do that. Now do I look like a sensitive guy? Think about what I do for a living.

"Speaking of which." Cal set her beer down. "What is Major Graison going to do for a living after he retires?"

"I don't plan on retiring for a while. I'm in this for the long run. The whole nine yards. I'm taking it as far as I can." Jake fiddled with the bottle between his two hands.

"You mean like, General Graison?"

"Sure." He looked up at her through the tops of his eyes.

"I can see that." Cal nodded. "Definitely. I can see that."

"Yeah, me too." Jake lowered his head. "I should be promoted to Lieutenant Coronel shortly after we get back. But . . ." Jake shook his head and finished his beer. He set the bottle off to the side. "I know I'm doing this for myself right? But . . . I guess it would be nice to have someone be proud of you. Do you realize you're the first person I told about that promotion."

"Then I certainly hope I'm the first person you call when it happens.



In fact, I'll come down and share in your moment. I'll be proud of you." She reached across and laid her hand on his wrist, clutching it, looking at him.

Jake lifted himself a bit from the floor. "You really mean that?"

"Oh, absolutely. Imagine how close we are gonna be in six months." Cal gave him a reassuring look. "I consider you my friend. And take that as a compliment. I don't consider anyone a friend."

"God, that's scary." Jake rubbed his tired eyes. "I could have said the same thing. Know, I consider you a friend Cal."

"Good." Cal smiled and leaned her head back against the side of her bed. "Because everyone else hates us."

"You aren't kidding. Maybe if they liked us we could be trusted enough to go steal their books." He saw Cal laugh and nearly choke on the beer she took a drink of. "But . . . ask me if I care."

"Do you care." She set her beer back down.

"I could give a fuck. I worry about me." He laid his hand on his chest. "And I worry about you." Her placed his index finger on hers. "That's it. And I hope that's the way it is with you."

"Most definitely. We're friends right?"

"Right." Jake edged a bit closer to her. "And as your friend." He felt her bended knee against his stomach. "What is this thing on the top of your head?" He reached for her hair.

"It's a ponytail." Cal chuckled.

"I don't like it." Sticking his middle finger in the band that held it, he popped it off releasing her hair. "I like it better down." The softness of her hair fell upon the back of his hand. He extended his fingers grabbing it. Pushing it down. "Much better." His words softened as his hand released her hair and he grabbed gently to the back of her neck. Pulling her to him, he parted his lips, then hesitated moments before they touched. His eyes never left hers, he could feel her breath on his.

"What's wrong?" Cal asked softly.

Taking a deep breath, and subtly shaking his head, eyes half closed, Jake bit his bottom lip. "It's getting late. We have to be up early to work out." He scooted back. "I have to go." He stood up. "I'm getting tired, the alcohol's getting to me."

"Jake?" Cal grabbed his hand before he could get away. "Stay a little longer."



“Ah, no.” Jake shook his head still biting his lip, still holding her hand. “We’ve been drinking. I know where this is leading.”

“So what.” Cal tried to pull him back.

“No-No.” Jake pulled his hand away letting his fingers slip slowly from hers. “Right now I’m in a state I rarely drink myself into. If something is gonna happen, I want to be in control of all my faculties and you sober enough to realize exactly what you are doing.”

“I may not be as appealing to you when you’re sober.”

Jake fluttered his lips, throwing his head back. “Doubtful.” He crouched down to the floor to her in a squat. “You can never look unappealing to me.” He ran his hand down her face. “But, uh . . . I’ll tell you what.” He smacked his lips together to moisten them. “When you are completely sober, let me know when it’s all right to hit on you. Because I’d love to have that opportunity.” Jake smiled as he stood up, holding out his hand, grabbing Cal’s and pulling her to her feet. “Get some sleep.”

“I will. Goodnight, Major Graison.”

With a glossy eyed smile, Jake stepped back to the bathroom letting his hand slide from hers. “Goodnight, Ms. Reynolds.”

Cal waited until he disappeared into his side, she looked at their mess upon the floor, immediately she began to pick it up. As she did, she realized Jake was right. Her head was heavy, and mind not as clear as it should be. After all, she and Jake did kill a bottle of whiskey and numerous beers. And she’d rather not take a chance of waking up in the morning wishing she hadn’t gotten her courage, or made her mistakes from the bottom of a bottle.

Shoving everything into a corner when it could wait until the next day, Cal longed for and dreaded her bed. Her body was tired yet she knew as soon as she plopped down on it, the ceiling would start to move. Fortunately, she thought, it wouldn’t be long before she passed out.

^^^

Jesse’s blonde hair was so shiny in Cal’s dream. Cal loved to play with it, running her fingers through the undamaged softness of it. Jesse giggled as she laid on her stomach, hands propping up her chin, facing her mother who laid the same way on Jesse’s bedroom floor. “Jess, you really should wear you hair shorter.” Cal reached up and touched it. It felt so real her



hair, so life like. Cal knew in her mind it was a dream, she had them so often. She loved when they occurred. "I think it would look so cute."

"Mom no. I'd look like a boy." Jesse, playing, smacked away her mother's hand. "You look happy Mom."

Cal lowered her head, lifting only her smiling eyes. "I feel happy. Jess . . . I met this guy. He makes me forget." Cal reached her hand out to her daughter. "He really makes me forget."

"Is he cute?"

"I think so." Cal nodded. "And strong. He's so strong. Like he could take it all away. Oh, Jess, you would like him. He'd like you, too." Cal became saddened.

"What's the matter, Mommy, doesn't he like you?"

Cal felt her daughter's small hand upon her face, she titled into it, placing her hand over it. "Oh Jesse, I just miss you so much. I miss you more than . . ."

"Mommy?"

A voice? Jesse's voice? It wasn't part of Cal's dream. She twitched her head away in her dream to look, when she turned back. Jesse was gone.

"Mommy. Oh Mommy."

Cal's eyes opened, immediately focusing on the clock. Three A.M. *Am I dreaming still?* The voice still called to her. Cal, laying on her bed, still dressed from a few hours ago, still above the covers, began to lift herself. Her head was still heavy, somehow she was still feeling the effects of the booze. As her blurry vision somewhat cleared, she saw in the corner of the room something that horrified her. It filled her skin with chills, and her heart raced.

"Mommy?" Jesse stood there, almost see-through, holding out her hand, waving. She wore that blue dress Cal had bought her for the sixth grade dance.

Cal rubbed her eyes. "No, I'm still drunk. This is a dream." Her mind told herself that over and over, it was a dream. "No." Cal scooted her body to the bed, bringing her knees close. She wanted with every ounce of her being to turn away, but no matter how unreal. There before her was a vision of her daughter.

"Mommy. Why did you let him take me?" Jesse asked. "Why Mommy. Why did you let him do that to me?" The beautiful sight of Jesse turned horrific, flames burst around her, engulfing her. She screamed in agony



calling out for help to her mother. Her delicate skin melted from her before Cal's eyes.

"No." Cal covered her ears and buried her head in her knees. "This is a trick. A bad trick." Rocking back and forth, her head still spinning, the muffled sounds of her daughter's cries stopped. Cal lifted her head and looked around. The room was dark, quiet, normal. She took a deep breath, her hands shaking, and stepped from the bed. "It was a dream." A stem of fear brewed within her, making her just a little frightened to be alone. Without thinking she went to the bathroom and stopped before she went through Jake's side. "I can't wake him for a nightmare. He'll think I'm nuts." She pulled back her hand, wiping the sweatiness on her bare leg. "What was I thinking?" She walked slowly back to her room, though difficult and still bewildered from her experience, Cal laid back down, and tried to sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
August 18 - 7:20 A.M.

Cal darted quickly back into her room, she had too, she didn't want anyone to see her. She tried to fall back to sleep after her nightmare, but she only dozed, snapping herself awake for fear she would dream again. But Cal knew she had her opportunity when she heard Jennifer giggling in the hallway, and her door shut. She was taking her morning walk before breakfast. That gave Cal enough time to get Jennifer's book, read it with Jake, and put it back before she returned. It actually worked out in her favor that Jake didn't wake her for the morning work out. In fact, Jake was still sleeping, an oddity for him.

Still wearing only the tee shirt she wore to bed, the large shirt that hung to her thighs, covering her underwear, Cal leaned against her just closed room door. "Yes." She looked at the book. Her inner self really longed to peek at that book before Jake. But she knew they were a team in this, and he'd be mad enough at her for getting one step ahead of his master plan, she didn't want to chance him getting even more angry with her. Not today, not today of all days. Cal was filled with a certain feeling of sadness. She just wanted to keep busy to work through it. Jake wasn't helping. Why was he still sleeping?

^^^

The warm water beat down with a soothing rush to the center of Jake's chest. He lifted a pool of it to his face, splashing it on it, then running his wet hands through his short hair. His head lifted slightly when he heard the slow slide of the shower door open. He felt the coolness of the outside air hit against his back, and he felt her presence. He didn't have to turn around to know it was Cal. Feeling her body slowly press up against him from behind, looking down, seeing her hands, hands he knew, roam and feel and move about the soapy hair on his chest. *'This has got to be the coolest dream.'* Jake smiled, grabbing her right hand, bringing her fingers sensuously



to his lips. He had to see her, he had to turn around. Slowly he did. Wanting so much to see her body in his dream, all he saw was her face. His sopping hands grabbed her head and he pulled her close, bringing his mouth down to hers, yet Cal pulled her mouth away, placing her lips to his neck. Her mouth, and the water from the shower glided across his nape and to his chest. Feeling the skin of her body touch his, sent an overwhelming feeling of arousal through him, he wanted more. "I've never made love with anyone in a shower." He told her softly as her lips passed the center of his chest.

"Who says we're making love."

'This has got to be the coolest dream.' An exciting intensity filled him as her mouth moved slowly, lower, and lower. Jake found himself releasing her hair. His right hand reached slightly up, gripping so tightly to the top of the shower doors, he could feel the edging of it, his other palm was flush against the wall as he flung his head back.

"Jake."

Jake's eyes popped open from his deep slumber into a semi-reality. He had the most confused look on his face.

"Jake, are you all right?"

Still breathing deeply, and still feeling like a part of him was in the dream--in fact his mind and his body still felt like they were--Jake stared at Cal. *Fuck.* "Cal? What are you doing in here?" His eyes shifted downward to himself, and he pulled his sheet closer into his body.

"I'm waking you up. You look really baffled. Are you feeling O.K.?"

God, if she knew. Jake rubbed his eyes lifting his head up slightly. "What . . . why?"

"Look." She held up the book. "Jennifer's. I heard her leave her room and took the opportunity. Don't be mad. I mean, you weren't getting up. Jake, it's seven-thirty."

"Fuck." He started to spring up, then caught himself. "I haven't slept this late in years."

"We don't have much time to look at this. Move over."

"Cal, I . . ." He saw her proceed to sit on the bed, he shifted his body to give her room. He hoped it would be enough that she wouldn't touch him. "I don't think . . ." Jake lifted himself slightly, still staying on his side, still staying covered. He then noticed the somber look on her face. "Is something wrong?"



Cal shook her head. "Let's just look at this." She lifted her leg up to rest the book on.

Her thigh. Her bare thigh creeping from the bottom of her shirt stared Jake smack in the face. He scooted back a bit more, mouth hanging open. "Cal?" Bringing his hand to the edge of her shirt, he lifted it just a little. "Cal do you realize you're only wearing underwear?" He placed his hand on her leg and pushed it down.

"Don't look if it bothers you." Cal began to leaf through the pages, reading.

Jake couldn't concentrate, especially as he watched as she subconsciously moved her leg a little up, then down, then outward. He began to panic when it brushed against his thigh and moved upward as she got more comfortable. "Cal." He pulled the sheet all the way to him. "I'm naked in this bed, and I have to go to the bathroom. Can you?" He waved his hand for her to turn away.

"I thought you weren't modest?"

"I am at this moment."

"Oh, O.K." Cal got up from the bed. "Come in my room when you're ready. Do you want coffee?"

"Um . . ." Jake began to get out of bed, he had to stop, keeping covered when she turned back around. "Yeah," he nervously ran his hand across the top of his head. "Coffee would be great."

Giving him a half smile, Cal left his room.

^^^

He didn't say anything when he walked into Cal's room. He stood in the doorway looking awkward, wearing his workout shorts and a black baseball cap turned backwards on his head.

"Here." She handed him a mug of coffee. "Come on we have little time. And for your benefit. I got dressed." She lifted her shirt to show her shorts. "I know you feel uncomfortable around me."

"Cal, that is not . . ."

"Come on sit down." She moved almost saddened to the bed to sit. "I shouldn't have done that, I apologize. I wasn't thinking."

"No-No." Jake, being careful not to splash his coffee, moved to the chair and sat down. "I had just woke up. I was half out of it. Trust me, you



can lay in my bed with me half naked anytime you want.”

Cal only lifted her eyes from the book that spread across her legs that were folded Indian style. She didn’t smile. “All right, here’s Jennifer. Now John’s book said nothing about Jess . . .” She cleared her throat. “Jesse. But Jennifer’s does. What else.” Her sad eyes skimmed.

Jake inched his chair closer, and laid his hand flat on the page she was about to read. “What’s wrong? Did I do something?”

Cal released a breath as she raised her head and answered him softly. “No.”

“Then what . . .”

“Bingo.” She turned the open book to Jake. “Read.”

“Where?” Jake took it and watched her finger point. “A diagnosed schizophrenic? Holy shit.”

“Explains her mood swings. Look at the next line. It says she used to hear voices.”

“Eight of them. Multiple personalities.” Jake started to laugh. “Oh this is funny.”

“Jake, this is serious. Does it mention what her personalities were?”

“Nope.” He shook his head bringing his finger to his eye and rubbing it. “Unless one of these is a murderer, she’s pretty harmless. Easy to control. Just say something to her and pretend you didn’t.”

“Jake.” Cal snatched the book back. “Doesn’t this strike you as odd? Out of eight of us, two are mentally unstable.”

“And I’m going to say two more are. Balance of wits, Cal. Half sane, half insane. See how they balance out in the end. Comparison. There’s a control, a constant, in every experiment.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Sure, there has to be a constant.” He closed the book. “And out of the five books we’ve viewed, only yours and mine are the exact same . . . I’d even go as far as to say.” Jake raised his eyebrows. “We’re it.”

^^^

The etchings on the beads of his wooden rosary could have been worn off for as hard as Fr. Dan ran them through his fingers in prayer. How many times did he pray? How long did he kneel bedside, head down,



begging, weeping? It was a routine he had done years earlier, too many years to count. A routine of inner penance that he long since put behind him until the night before.

The urge to purge his bladder woke him just after midnight. He recalled not hearing any sounds coming from Rickie's room, an odd occurrence for a young man who blasted music all hours of the night.

Hoping the sound of flushing didn't awaken Rickie because he wasn't in the mood to talk, Fr. Dan made it back into his room. It was when he flicked on the light to grab a snack that he saw it. A photograph. One he hadn't seen in years.

Two altar boys, no older than fourteen stood side by side with fr. Dan in that picture. All three of them smiling. And it would have been a perfect photograph had it not been for the bright red letters handwritten on the picture. Words that read, 'they trusted you.'

He could of thrown it away. But instead, Fr. Dan chose not to. Right in front of him it laid, in full view, adding to the intensity in which he said his rosary.

^^^

Taking one more look in the mirror at her face, Cal brushed her bangs from her eyes and knocked once before opening Jake's bathroom door. "Jake?" She peeked in. "I'm done with my shower, it's all yours."

"Thanks." Jake turned his eyes and smiled. He sat on his bed, a rifle in his hand, he appeared to be checking it.

Cal leaned against the archway and folded her arms. "Where did you get the rifle? Storage?"

"Nah. It's mine." Jake spoke proudly of it, lifted it, checked the scope and put it back down. "They said three things right? Besides the beer, the fridge, I wanted a small arsenal."

"I didn't think of that. So why are you checking your rifle?"

"I thought . . ." Jake stood up, laying the rifle on his bed. " . . . we, meaning you and me, might take a long walk and get some target practice in. It'll kill time."

"You go on. I'm not up for doing much."

"What about we just work on our city."

"Sounds good." Cal lowered her head and walked into the bathroom.



“Meet you in my room.”

“Cal.” Jake stepped forward, gently taking hold of her arm. “You’ve barely spoken to me. We ate breakfast, you didn’t talk. We worked out, you beat me in the climb, you didn’t gloat. I’m getting a complex here. If something is wrong, if I did something you have to tell me.”

“Jake.” Cal lifted her hand and placed it on his face, sliding it down slowly across the cheek that was in dire need of a shave. “It’s not you. I think it’s just a female thing today. You heard Jennifer. She sad the guys from the movie SPEED were in her room last night.”

“Jennifer has seven people living in her head. I’m surprised Barney the Dinosaur wasn’t there as well.”

Cal gently smiled. “Thanks.”

“What is it, Cal? Tell me.”

“Did you ever have one of those days when you are just flooded with memories. Memories that are painful and so real at the moment? I’m having one of those days.” She turned away from him. “I’ll see you at our city.” Cal moved from the bathroom into her own room, closing the door shut. She took a deep breath, she hated acting so weird. Many a days back home were spent in missing Jesse moods, just like she was in.

Cal glanced at the platform that sat in the corner of her room. The platform that her and Jake were starting their city of twigs on. It was fun, intricate, and a big time passer. Jake was so anal about it, especially how he wouldn’t let the city sit in his neat room.

Feeling a little tired, Cal moved to her bed. Just as she did, she heard it. “Mommy?”

Cal looked to the corner, Jesse was there again, wearing the blue dress. It made her heart jump, but it also made her angry. Looking up to the smoke detector where Jake found the hidden camera in her room, Cal lifted her hand, extended her middle finger, turned and walked out. Jake would have to find her. She wasn’t going to wait in her room. Not with what they were doing to her.

^^^

Carlos tightened his lips as he glanced up to the ceiling. He sat on a chair across from Cal, his guitar across his lap. “Um . . . yeah, I think I know that. Give me a minute.” He began to fiddle, playing three or four



false starts trying to jumpstart his memory on the song Cal requested.

"You're close." She smiled. "Take your time. I'm enjoying watching you play."

"So . . . can I, uh, take this as a sign, you're getting rid of the big guy?"

Cal let out a single huff of a laugh. "No. Jake's my buddy. I just needed a little bit of home right now. And you're a little bit of home to me."

"Are we possibly missing David?" Carlos asked.

"Yeah." Cal sadly nodded. "Today I am. Broke up or not, we always remained friends. And he always knew what to say . . . Or play."

"This song, right?" Carlos began to pick the strings.

"Yes." Cal wisped out in awe, closing her eyes. "That song."

Every question Jake asked of Cal concerning her demeanor was answered in the view and sounds before him. Cal sitting in front of Carlos, listening to him play and sing. There would be no interruption from Jake. Not until Cal gave indication. The song he played put a peaceful, yet sad look on Cal's face. The words, *I would give everything I own, just to have you back again. Just to touch you . . .* Told Jake exactly where Cal's mind and heart were at.

"Attention!" Rickie shouted as he snuck up behind Jake. He saluted when he saw the green pants and shirt that Jake wore.

Jake turned around. "That has got to be the lamest salute I have ever seen in my entire career." He grabbed Rickie's forearm. "Straighten this, goddamn it."

"Sarge, man, you are gonna have to teach me all this shit."

"Rickie!" Jake placed his face close to his. "I am not a Sergeant, I am a Major."

"Dude, chill. Think of it like I gave you a promotion."

Grunting loudly Jake returned to looking in the gathering room.

"Explains the pissy mood you're in, huh?" Rickie peeked around Jake's big body. "I'm in the same boat pal. Jennifer's diggin' on John now. Says she needs intellectual stimulation. You having the same prob-lem-o?"

"No I am not having the same problem." Jake snarled.

"Whoa." Rickie held up his hands. "The little green eyed monsters is creeping out . . . wait!" Rickie started to laugh. "Hey you're wearing green."

No, Jake, don't kill him. He's just a boy. Shave his head while he's sleeping, yeah,



that would do it. Jake lowered his view to get a closer one of Rickie, he sniffed him when he got near him. “Rickie, are you high?”

“Yeah.” Rickie laughed. “Why? Do you get high? Wanna join me, got some . . .”

“Do I look like the type of person who gets high?”

“Well . . .” Rickie shrugged. “You never know. I thought maybe you got that scar on your eye in a binge or something. I knew this dude who had the same one. He walked into a wall. Did you walk into a wall?”

Jake began to feel himself lose it on Rickie, he didn’t want to, he tried to remain calm. “No, Rickie, I did not walk into a wall. I got smashed in the fuckin head with a rifle.”

“Ouch.” Rickie grabbed his temple. “A rifle’s pretty big. Couldn’t you duck?”

“Duck?” Jake shook his head and when he turned back around, Cal was standing there.

“Jake, I’m sorry,” Cal said, “I should have told you I left.”

“No, that’s . . .”

Rickie laughed. “He was jealous, babe. Getting all upset because Don Juan was moving on you.”

Cal broke a smile at Rickie, she looked up to Jake. “I’m ready.”

“Let’s go.” Jake took hold of her arm.

“Hey!” Rickie called out to them. “Can I hang with you two for a while?”

Jake saw Cal getting ready to answer, he interrupted. “No!”

“Let me hang with you. It’s like all boring.” Rickie pleaded. “Come on Marine guy. I won’t say a word.”

Jake released Cal’s arm and whispered to her. “Go on ahead, I’ll be right there.”

“You won’t hurt him will you?”

“Nah.” Taking a breath Jake marched back to Rickie. “You cannot come with us.”

“But . . .”

“And if you *ever* call me a marine again. I will sneak into your room, flush your drugs, rip up your magazines and cut off every fuckin strand of your hair. You got that?”

“Yes I do.” Rickie stepped back from him. “And you know what? I don’t think I like you anymore. Wanting to mess with my do.” He protected



his ponytail. "And I'm chatting to Carlos about stealing your babe." Snickering first to irritate Jake, Rickie then ran as fast as he could into the gathering room.



Rickie was in a socializing mood, besides feeling really good at the moment, he was still shaking off a bit of the fear he acquired from irking Jake. Running into the gathering room, his squeaky high top tennis shoes coming to a stop, caused everyone to look up at him from what they were doing. "Hey." Rickie raised his hand up, snickering, while rubbing his boney bare chest with the other. He lifted his baggy Levi Jeans, which were unbuttoned, and almost falling off of his body. "What's going on?"

No one responded.

"O.K." He shrugged, stalking out the participants of the experiment like prey. One at a time, hoping to get someone to--as Rickie would put it--chill with him. *Carlos*. "Hey dude." Rickie took the seat that Cal had been sitting in a few minutes earlier. "How's the playing going? Dude." Rickie sniffed. "Guess what. I think that Cal-babe likes you."

"Rickie." Carlos stopped playing. "Why are you telling me this. If Cal's with Jake . . ."

"No, no." Rickie held up his hand. "I don't think she is. I think he's keeping her prisoner. I think like, you should go in there and rescue her from the guy." Rickie nodded. "And not to mention he's not very nice. Not at all. You know he told me that he was gonna cut off my do."

"So that's it." Carlos smirked at him. "He made you mad."

"Yeah, but. You like Cal. I think right is right and you should just tell him that you want . . ."

"Rickie." Carlos' hand slapped down on the hollow body of his guitar. "Are you that bored that you'd deliberately try to start trouble. For example, making Jake pound me?"

"Well . . . yeah. But . . ."

"Get the hell out of here."

"Gees." Rickie pulled a small note book from his back pocket. "Look it's my Blue's Clues note book." He saw Carlos didn't laugh at all at his children's program reference. "Fine." Taking the small pencil from the spiral, he flipped open the pad. "I'll just scratch your name off of my



friend-for-a-day list.”

Scouting out the few people in the room, Rickie spotted his next target. John sat with Jennifer, both of them hovering his laptop. Clearing his throat and noisily pulling up a chair, Rickie joined them. “How’s it going?”

Jennifer immediately pinched her nose and scooted back. “God Rickie, how much weed did you smoke today?”

“Not all of it. Have to make it last. Of course, when I saw it all, I was like, whoa . . .”

John’s fingers tapped loudly and with exclamation on the keyboard of his laptop. “Rickie! Go away.”

“Why?” Rickie asked. “I just want to chill with you guys.”

Jennifer rolled her eyes. “Right now, we don’t want to chill with you Rickie. You overdosed all of us at lunch.”

John, trying to concentrate on the story that he and Jennifer were collaborating on, peered his green eyes with annoyance at Rickie. “Look. When you have something with meaning you would like to share with us, please do. But for right now, in your state, I highly doubt that, so--get lost.” John turned his laptop closer to him and Jennifer.

“Fine.” Rickie, again reached in his back pocket. “I’ll just pull out the handy dandy note book and . . .” with a whip of his pen across the paper, Rickie shut the pad. “. . . scratch you two right of the Rickie list.”

Both Jennifer and John responded at the same time. “Good.”

Still not letting it get him down, Rickie went to the quiet section. Fr. Dan sat with a tablet, sending notes back and forth to Griff in a conversation. To Rickie, they looked as if they needed livened up. And perhaps in need of some assistance. “Hey, Padre.” Rickie waved then turned to Griff and mustered up his loudest voice. “Hey Griff!”

Fr. Dan plugged his ear and shook his head. “He’s not hard of hearing Rickie, he’s deaf.”

“Oh . . . should I yell louder?”

“No.” Fr. Dan replied. “Can I help you, Rickie?”

“I thought I could help you talk to Griff. I’ve learned a lot from Cal with that hand thing she does.”

Fr. Dan looked impressed. “Rickie you should have said it before. Please, that would be great.”

Rickie clasped his hands together, extended them and cracked his



knuckles as he stood in front of Griff. “Griff, I’m going to sign.” Rickie’s lips annunciated as he talked.

Griff understood him, was a bit apprehensive, but spoke through sign language to Rickie.

Rickie nodded, arms crossed leaning his weight more on one leg than the other. “Ah huh.” He closed his mouth, taking it all in. “He said that it has been lovely weather we are having here.”

“Hmm. Odd.” Fr. Dan tilted his head. “Tell him I agree and would like to finish our talk about the book of revelations.”

“O.K.” Rickie faced Griff. With a sigh he moved his hands about in no particular motion.

Fr. Dan knew immediately. Especially when the clueless glare crossed Griff and he lifted his hands in a surrender. “Rickie!” The usually soft spoken priest shouted. “I can’t believe you lied to me. That was the most insulting thing I have ever witnessed. Lying to a priest and deceiving a deaf man.”

“I’m sorry.” Rickie started to laugh. “But I just couldn’t resist. You have to admit it was pretty funny.”

“No it was not. Now please find someone else to bother.”

“What is with everyone today?” Rickie reached into his pocket. “Though I hate to do it.” Rickie scratched his pencil on the paper. “Religious man or not. Dude your off my list.” He stuck it back in his pocket and left the gathering room. They were too boring for him anyway.

^^^

Jake laid on his side, on Cal’s floor, in his large hands he finely tuned the object he worked on, and had worked on for the last hour. Often, he’d lift his eyes from it, watch Cal, all along being careful not to crush the delicate thing in his grip. Being careful not to jump start her, Jake sat up and brought his face close to her hands to watch, he was certain she was doing something wrong, and she was. “No, Cal.” He spoke softly. “You are using way too much glue on the wood. Look.” He lifted her hand. “It’s all over your fingers and it’s going to smear all . . .”

“Jake!” Cal snatched her hand up. “So what.”

“So what? Aren’t you supposed to be making a roof for the school? Where did you put the school?” Jake looked down to the platform that held



five structures.

“Right here.” She laid her index finger on it.

“That’s the school? Cal, there’s no room for a playground or . . .”

“God, Jake.” Cal began to pick the dried glue off her fingers and drop it on the floor. “Think of it as the perfect school. No playground, no recess. No recess, a teacher’s fantasy.” She saw Jake picking up the glue bits that fell to the floor. “Jake . . . quit it.” She stopped him.

“But it’s getting all messy. Doesn’t it bother you?”

“No, not really.” Cal rubbed her hands together and placed them behind her, leaning back on them, her feet extended. “You should see my room back home.”

“I’d like that.” Jake smiled.

“No way. I can see you coming in there, picking up my clothes, wiping the dust from my computer screen.”

Jake laughed and shook his head. “I’m not that bad. I just think everything should have a place.”

“You’re anal.” Cal rolled her eyes at him. “It’s no wonder you never married. Or been in a relationship.”

“For your information, the reason I never got married or have been in a relationship has nothing to do with the way I am. My lifestyle doesn’t allow time for it. And . . . *if* I do find the right woman. And *if* I do live with her, marriage or not . . .” Jake’s words were sharp especially when he watched her nod her head so nonchalantly at him. “That would mean I care enough to put up with *her* . . .” He took his index finger and poked her gently in the forehead sending her back some. “. . . little quirks.”

“Right. Sticking you in an isolated spot for seven months isn’t mental endurance for you, Jake. Making you live with someone who leaves their socks on the floor is.”

Jake took a long slow breath through his nostrils, ready to lash back out, but refraining. He returned his views to the platform. “Can we just leave my neat habits alone please?”

“Sure.” Cal added glue to the bottom of the roof, getting ready to secure it. “Are you that finicky about sex too? I bet you’re anal when you have sex--no homosexual references intended--aren’t you?”

Jake turned his head quickly to her, giving her an ‘I can’t believe you just asked me that’ look.

“What? Did I just shock you by asking you about sex? You looked



shocked. Were you that way?"

"I don't remember." He reached out grabbing her hand and stopping her. "Can we at least make this look nice by putting the roof on straight.

"Jake, why do you care? Never mind." Cal pulled her hand away and placed on the roof, smoothing the excess glue away with her finger. "Jake?" Cal grabbed a cloth from the floor and wiped off her fingers. "If we have sex, will you stop me in the middle to tell me I'm not moving right?"

"Cal!" Jake ran his hand down his face hurriedly and flustered by her. "Please."

"I'm sorry." Cal lifted her shoulders. "I won't bring it up again." Looking down to the platform, Cal smiled with pride at her newest creation. "My school looks good."

"Cramped in there, but good. And you should know schools. You think you'll ever go back to teaching?"

That question took Cal a little by surprise. She had never brought it up to him. Jake must have remembered from reading about her. "No, I gave up teaching children. I can't do it." Her face turned saddened.

"Well, you don't have to teach children to be a teacher. What about teaching adults? In fact . . . I was thinking like soldiers. We have a school on base and it employs civilians. I'm sure I could get . . ."

"Jake." Cal reached out her hand and laid it on his knee. "I'm done teaching. I'm done working with people. I appreciate the thought, I do."

Jake brought his other hand over hers, then removed it. "Let's get back to work on this."

"Do you mind if we stop for a little bit?" Cal, using her hands as leverage, lifted herself from the floor and walked to the desk. She lifted her pack of cigarettes from her desk, looked at Jesse's picture, then lit one. "I just want to be alone right now."

Seeing what she stared at, Jake knew. "No problem. Let me know when you're ready for company. I'll just go read or something."

The quietness of that particular moment lasted just that, a moment. A steady knocking began at the door.

Jake, hand out, reached for the door. As soon as he opened it, the apparent dislike was seen on his face. "Rickie? What is it?"

"I was like wondering if . . ." He peeked his head around Jake. "Hey, Cal. I was wondering if I could hang with you guys, or maybe we could all go outside or something?"



"No." Jake shut the door.

"Jake!" Cal ran to the door and opened it. "Rickie I'm sorry."

"Dude." He rubbed his forehead. "Hit me in my dome . . . Can I come in?"

Cal opened the door wider. "Come on. What's up?"

"Well." Rickie scratched his head. "No one wants anything to do with me today. Seems like they're all sick of me."

Jake's mouth dropped open. "Is it any wonder Rickie? You did nothing but tell crude oral copulation stories over lunch." He heard Cal snicker. "What's so funny?"

"Just the way you phrased that. It was so, so, polite." Cal sat on the bed. "Rickie I would go but I really feel like I want to be alone right now."

"Oh, O.K. How about you guy?" He asked Jake.

"Not me, I'm going to read." Jake replied.

"I can read. I'll read with you."

"No." Jake snapped.

Cal lifted herself from the sitting position she was in. She actually felt kind of sorry for Rickie. "You know what . . . I'll go with you, Rickie."

Rickie smiled. "Cool. Hey . . . I'll bet since you're going Carlos might want to go. Is it O.K. to ask him?"

As Cal began to nod her 'yes' answer, Jake stepped between her and Rickie. "You know, Cal. I think I *will* take a walk with Rickie after all."

"That is really nice of you, Jake." Cal sat back down on the bed. "I'll stay here then."

"But I thought you said you were going?" Jake leaned in closer to Cal. "You're not leaving me alone with this kid are you? I might kill him." Jake paused and then grinned. "Rickie, go wait out in the hall for me. I think I will occupy some of your time."

"Excellent-a-Mundo." Rickie smiled and gave a thumbs up. "I'll be right outside."

Cal watched Rickie leave then looked at the delight on Jake's face. "You're killing him."

"Nah." Jake shook his head. "Just gonna teach him a few things. Besides, you need to be alone."

"Thank you. And thank you for being concerned."

"We're partners, right?"



Cal closed her mouth tightly, rasing on the corner of it. "We're partners."

"O.K." Jake shuddered. "Here I go." He reached for the door. "Maybe I'll take him to our tree and make him climb. If nothing else, it should be pretty funny." Before he opened it, he reached over to her desk, made sure her cigarette was out, grabbed the strand of cellophane that laid there, straightened Jesse's picture and closed tightly the desk drawer. He did this all without thinking. "Want me to check back when I return?"

"That'll work." Cal plopped down on her pillow. "I might be sleeping so don't wake me. Wait for . . ." She glanced at her watch. ". . .an hour?"

"Got it." Jake opened the door. "See ya then." He stepped into the hall and took a deep breath, pausing to place himself in the right frame of mind to deal with Rickie. Jake was looking at it as a test. A test of wits and mental stamina. He had to see it like that, or else he'd never make it outside of the building with the young man that drove him insane.

CHAPTER TEN

Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
August 18 - 3:55 P.M.

Bored Stan and Lyle were. Bored and hungry, slow they swivelled their chairs back and forth dreading the fact that they just began their twelve hour shift.

“Nah.” Stan shook his head. “I hate pizza. Something else.”

“Hot dogs?” Lyle suggested.

“Gross.”

“Fried chicken.”

“Shit!” Stan stopped swivelling and in his snap forward he grabbed the remote. “Make sure this is reordering.” He ordered out as his eyes peered to the monitor of Cal’s room. “What the hell is he doing?”

They watched him walk into her room quietly. The plastic card he held in his hand, slipped into his back pocket as he tried and succeeded in closing the door without any noise. He had used the card to break in. Cal lay sleeping on her bed, totally oblivious to his presence. He wandered around her room, looking, snooping. He opened every drawer lifting her clothes. Stan and Lyle couldn’t make out what it was, but he slipped an article of her clothing into his back pocket. He carelessly shut that drawer, items still hung out. Slipping back to the door, he paused over Cal’s sleeping body. Like they were watching a Hitchcock film, Stan and Lyle held their breath as his hand reached down to her. They waited for her to open her eyes. She didn’t. He bent down, stroked her hair, finger tips barely touching. Then he ran them down her neck to the opening of her shirt, stopping for a brief moment, staring. He stood up, opened her door, and left without notice.

Stan looked at Lyle. “Jefferson has to know.”

^^^

Dr. Jefferson tsked as he finished watching the video that Stan and Lyle played. He took a moment to review the notes that Stan had made, and



disappointed, laid it on the table. "Thank you for bringing this to my immediate attention. This definitely isn't good."

Lyle was curious. "Excuse me, sir. But is this what the Iso-Stasis experiment is all about?"

"Yes, it is." Dr. Jefferson answered. "But we have investors to think of. Investors that pay yours and my salary. They wouldn't be happy. It's just too soon in the game for something to happen to her, or to anyone else for that matter."

"What should we do?" Stan asked.

After a thinking breath, Dr. Jefferson ran his hand down the bridge of his nose exhaling loudly. "Leave a note for the other shifts. Should anything like this occur again, I want our controllers up there to do something. In our best interest they have to find a way to make Graison aware. He's Cal's self appointed guardian angel . . ." Dr. Jefferson glanced to the monitor of a sleeping Cal. "Let him protect her."

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
August 18 - 4:05 P.M.

Jake had to give Rickie credit. For someone who was pretty much enjoying the effects of his stash of drugs, he kept up pretty well. Somewhere between Rickie's story about his third grade teacher and his expulsion from school in the sixth grade for peeking in the girl's locker room, Jake had enough. He found it impossible to block Rickie out any further. Jake tried, keeping his mind on Cal, his very vivid dream he had the night before. He thought of Chuck, he's one time, only friend. He did a lot of thinking that first half hour walk with Rickie. That was until he could no longer block him out. The dudes, man, and Sarges, were creeping into his thoughts. He knew the moment Chuck was using Rickie phrasing in his thoughts, he had enough of Rickie. So, Jake tried to lose him. It wasn't difficult, Rickie thought it was a game. Jake told him, 'I'll race ya', and Rickie bought it.

The zig zagging help a lot. Darting in and out of trees, almost in a circle around the complex, must have confused poor Rickie. Finally, though Jake could still hear the calling out 'Sarge!', he couldn't see the scrawny boy, and Jake knew he was free. He headed back to his room.

Jake didn't knock on Cal's bathroom door, just on the chance she was still sleeping, and she was as he stepped inside. He wondered if he should wake her, but she still had another fifteen minutes. Stepping back to leave, he noticed her room looked different. Something had changed. Glancing over to the desk, he picked up on what a part of that was. Cal had messed the desk back up. Figuring he'd show her, he fixed it again.

Jake slowed as he shut her desk drawer, it was something so trivial--messaging something back up. It was something so unlike Cal for the mood she was in. A twinge of bad feeling hit his stomach as he peered around the room, her dresser drawers were out. The thought that someone else had been in there looking around quickly left his mind. He felt stupid for thinking it. Cal was just trying to irk him. But if she was going to do that, why not just mess up his room?

Jake straightened everything back up, pushing all the drawers in place.



Re-fixing Jesse's photo, then leaving for his own room. As he closed his door, his conversation with Cal crossed his mind.

Perhaps he really was a bit anal about being neat. But neat wasn't so bad. Neither was giving everything a place. Jake glanced at his dresser to the brush next to his shaving kit. The kit set next to a picture of his family all on a dresser that held not one speck of dust.

"No." Jake turned his head looking back toward the bathroom. "I'm not that bad." Wanting to prove it to himself, Jake grabbed his brush. He slid it over four inches. "There." He stepped back, smiled and decided it was time, early or not, to wake Cal. Moving his hand out to the bathroom door, Jake stopped. "I can't do it." He flung back his head shaking it, walked to his dresser and replaced his brush to its original spot.

^^^

Conceivably Rickie didn't have to wheeze as loud as he did when he ran into the gathering room. Nor did Rickie have to linger in a drastic slant in the door way. Sweaty, but more wet from the outside faucet he doused himself under, Rickie staggered in. "Dudes!" He said with sensational exhaustion.

No one looked. Around the one table, Jennifer, John, Carlos and Fr. Dan played cards.

Thinking that they didn't hear him, Rickie called again. "Dudes!" He staggered to them loudly, making sure his heavy breathing was heard. "Dudes, the sarge made me run." Up went Rickie's arm inches from Jennifer's face. "Smell me."

"Rickie!" Jennifer snapped. "Go away. Bother someone else."

There he was in the pits of bodily weariness and no one cared. Rickie was offend. "Oh, yeah?" He said with marked immaturity. "Well, Dudes . . ." He nodded standing behind Jennifer. "She's got a queen, two kings a seven . . ."

"Rickie!" Jennifer's whole body shuddered with the ear piercing shrill scream of his name.

Drastically John's eyes fluttered as he plugged his left ear. "O.K." He widened his eyes and looked at his cards again.

^^^



Maybe Carl and Hawk shouldn't of stolen that bit of weed from Rickie. But they were bored. And perhaps they should have saved it for the evening hours when not much was done. But they didn't.

Laughing and in a teenage leaning and nudging into each other contest, they sat in the underground control area directly under the gathering room. The entire sub level of the compound, secret and hidden was a mirror image of the floor layout above. Scientific and lab equipment was strategically laid out and placed in different rooms. In front of a counter, peering up to a small line of video monitors, they were.

"Go on." Carl instigated. "Do it."

He snorted a laugh "What will Jefferson say?"

"He'll love it." Carl slurred out. "Love . . . it. Come on."

After running the back of his hand under his nose, Hawk pulled a microphone to his mouth. He lifted a hand trying to stop laughing and then he deepened his voice. "Jennifer."

Jennifer looked quickly around the table.

"Jennifer, this is God."

The cards flew from Jennifer's hands when she screamed. Only glances of oddity went her way.

"You suck." Carl nudged Hawk. "Do something more original." Just as he said that he looked up at the monitor. Rickie was trying to help Jennifer gather her cards all while she kept smacking his hands away. "Oh, Hawk, this would be perfect. Do it."

With a snide grin, Hawk brought the microphone to his mouth again.

"Jennifer." Hawk spoke to her. "Rickie is trying to kill you, Jennifer. He's after you. Get him. Get him first."

A bellowing scream that sent everyone over the wedge of announce came from Jennifer as she sprang up from her chair sending it flying back. A slight growl emerged from her as he eyes locked on to Rickie.

"Babe, you look pissed." Rickie said.



Jennifer's said nothing. Her hands slammed hard on the table and she literally lunged at Rickie.

Being the perceptive type of guy, Rickie took off running, only after he shrieked.

"See?" Jake handed Cal a cup of coffee as she sat Indian style on her bed. "I can be nice."

"Thanks, Jake." Still half asleep, Cal took the cup. Reaching for her cigarettes she turned her head toward her door. "What the hell?"

Right outside , so close, over and over, struggling, Rickie's called for help, but somehow his attempts were drowned out by tiny panting Jennifer screams.

"Great." Cal said annoyed. "Just what I need to when I wake up."

"I'll handle it." Annoyed himself, Jake flung opened Cal's door.

In the hall, not far from where Jake stood, Rickie was on the floor. Face down he was with Jennifer on his back. His head bobbed in a fierce endeavor to free himself from the wrestling choke hold she had placed on him.

"Rickie!" Jake blasted in a strong warning voice. "Knock it off!" Thinking no more about what he saw, he grunted, slammed the door closed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
August 23 - 2:45 A.M.

What was it, Cal wondered, that gave her so much difficulty in sleeping. Maybe it was the way her evening ended up that caused it. The argument between her and Jake, the one that started out small, and ended with her kicking him out of her room for being so arrogant. Jake looked ready to go when she pointed at the door. He was tired of arguing with her also. But why was the fight bothering her so much? Maybe she knew in her heart that Jake was right after all. All Cal was trying to do was to get him to listen to her on why they should proceed to get Fr. Dan's book. Skip ahead of the Jake-agenda . Whether he took it personally or not, Jake got defensive. Telling Cal she was impatient, they had six months left to go. There wasn't any loud yelling. Just two stubborn people in a heated debate on what they should do.

As she sat there, crossed arms rested against her bent up knees, forehead laying on her arms, she heard it.

"Mommy."

^^^

What Jake felt like doing was go into Cal's room, wake her up, and make her as restless as he felt. Never in his adult life did he ever have trouble sleeping. Yet there it was, pushing three in the morning and Jake was waking up every half hour it seemed. "Fuck." Jake picked up his alarm clock, looked for the thirtieth time at it and set it down in disgust as he ran his fingers through his hair. "She's probably in there sleeping like a champ." Flinging off his covers, Jake set his feet to the floor. With a grunt he rubbed his face. All he could hear in his head was Cal bitching at him. He could see himself standing in her room, most likely looking really dopey with his mouth hanging open in surprise as she called him such names as, arrogant, egotistical, woman hater, chauvinistic, and not to mention, son of a bitch. Where did it all come from? A tiny argument--not even big enough to



constitute being called small--was all it was. It didn't even warrant how it ended up.

Sitting there on his bed he ran the events through his mind. Jake couldn't believe how defensive she got, not to mention mean. Cal was never that mean, but in the past couple days, she was a bear. Jake had to admit to himself that maybe he shouldn't have asked her if the reason for her moods was a, woman-time-of-the-month-thing. That seemed to be the final determination in her becoming insulting toward him. Still, something was up with her. She wouldn't talk to him, tell him what it was, so Jake guessed--he guessed wrong. He sat there, on the side of his bed hating the way they left things. Feeling like there was something he forgot to do. Wanting to go into her room to make it right.

Jake stood up from his bed. Adjusting his boxer shorts on his chill bodied he walked to the bathroom. The brightness of the light as he turned it on, blinded him. As he stood before the commode and lifted the seat he heard its eeriness. A child's voice began to cry out, seemingly in pain, and it come from Cal's room. "What the hell?" Without hesitation he flung open Cal's door.

He saw it too as he stepped into Cal's room. The ghostly vision of her daughter standing amidst roaring flames, screaming, crying. "Cal!" He called out to her as she sat on her bed, covering her ears, and hiding her eyes. "Cal." He rushed over to her unable to keep his view from the image of Jesse. "Come on." Jake's face felt hot as he scanned the room looking for where they were sending it from.

"No! It'll be over soon. I can deal with this."

"I won't let you deal with this." Jake reached his arms under her rolled body that sat on the bed and carried her quickly out of the room to his own. He set her down on his bed, pointing. "Stay here." Rushing, he reached under his bed for a rifle.

"What are you doing?" She started to get up.

"Stay here!" His hand shot outward as he ran to the bathroom, closing the door and locking it so she wouldn't follow.

Jake ran in Cal's room, the vision was still there. Hoping it would stay for another moment, he stood dead center of it. His eyes peered and ears tuned in around the room, searching, stalking. He knew the voice came from high and to the right, seemingly from the vent. But where were the images coming from? The thought of Cal's dresser popped into his mind,



he fled to it in a race against the clock to beat the mind game they played before it disappeared. Grabbing her hand mirror from the dresser by the back of it, Jake returned to his spot, rifle in one hand, mirror center chest. Being careful not to touch the glass of the mirror, Jake shifted his body from left to right until he caught the beam. Almost like it absorbed into the mirror, the beam that carried the frightful sight could be seen. Jake watched. The wall paper border. The black and white one that Cal hated, held the answers. Tossing the mirror down to Cal's bed, Jake grabbed hold of the end of the bedframe and shoved it toward the corner he knew they sent the image from. Rifle still in hand, Jake jumped on her bed. His eagle eyes searching every black square in the corner. "Got you!" Jake's right eye moved closer to the small projection camera no larger than a dime. Something that wouldn't be seen normally, but the green light emanating from it made it at the moment --obvious.

Jake reached his fingers to it, it set in the wall a quarter of an inch. Lifting his rifle, butt first, in his outrage, he slammed it not once, but four times into the wall, making a hole big enough for his fingers to reach in, grab the lense and rip it from the wall.

Breathing heavily in the dark room, he jumped from the bed and turned on the light. Jesse's cries were still going on. Sliding the desk chair to the other wall, Jake stood on it, pulled off the vent covering and snatched out the two inch speaker, wires and all. The room went quiet. Slowly, he stepped off the chair and faced the smoke alarm on the opposite wall. He held up his rifle aimed to shoot at it, then stopped, bringing it down. Taking another step closer, he glared. "Nice try fuck heads. You lose on this one." Turning away, he stepped into the bathroom. He could hear Cal trying to open the door. He unlocked it.

"Jake." Cal flung it open. "What the hell were you doing?"

"Ending that." He moved past her into his room and placed his rifle under his bed.

"I could have handled it."

"What!?" Jake brought his hand to his temple, looking at her, totally confused. "Excuse me? That was handling it? Sitting there with your head and ears covered while it happened?"

"What else was I supposed to do? What choice did I have?" Cal's words were emotional.

"You could have chosen to come to me with it."



“Right Jake.” Cal smirked and walked to the bathroom. “And have you laugh at me?”

“Wait!” Jake called out, running to her, stopping her. “How long has this been going on?”

“A few days.”

“So that explains the mood. You should have told me. I could have taken care of it for you.”

“I don’t need a hero Jake. I certainly didn’t need you to be one now!” Cal’s words were angry as she turned from him.

“You want to tell me what I did to deserve that?” Jake grabbed hold of her arm.

Cal stared down at the fingers that gripped her. “I can handle things myself.” She snatched her arm back. “I don’t need to run to you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I hardly know you.”

“What?” Jake tried his hardest to stay calm. “Christ, Cal I take that as an insult. I have spent more time with you in these past three weeks than I have ever spent with anyone in my life. What you see is what you get with me. I have never been anything less with you. We’re partners in this, that’s the way it should be. I feel I know *you*.”

“Then you’re wrong.” Cal stepped back.

“Don’t.” Jake shook his head. “Don’t walk away. Come back in my room, let’s talk. I don’t understand why you are so mad at me. I’ve seen you these past couple of days, I’ve asked you what’s wrong. Cal . . .” He tried to be soothing. “Look how upset you’ve been. You aren’t yourself.” His hand reached for her face.

Cal quickly pushed it away. “They were showing me visions of my daughter burning, how else am I supposed to be?”

“Not alone. We could have dealt with this. Ended it like I just did.”

Cal tried in vain to walk away from him. “I have to go through this alone. You don’t know me, Jake. You think because we’re what you call partners in this, I’m totally honest with you? If you knew me then you would know, if it has to do with my daughter then you have no right to even talk to me about.”

“Even when it’s just a set up. Something they did to you just to eat at you?”

“Yes.” Cal folded her arms.



"Then fine." Jake, in his frustration, slammed his hand against the bathroom door. "Don't come to me. Deal with it on your own."

"Don't take that tone with me."

"Don't be like this with me."

Turning completely away from him, Cal walked into her room.

"Cal. This is really stupid. It was a sick, cruel thing to do. I'm here. We decided to stick together. Let me help." He walked to her as she started to move the bed. He grabbed to it also and pulled with her to return it to its spot.

Cal, closed mouth, lifted her head to him. "No, I can handle this. It just hit me the wrong way."

"I'd say the right way. The way they wanted it to. You're stronger than this Cal. Don't let them get to you." He leaned down to her to speak softly. "Let me help."

"Jake." Cal stepped back. Don't try to help me, please. I don't wanna start depending on you."

"Why not? I depend on you." Jake waited for a response, he didn't get one. "Cal?" Still he received nothing but her silence. "I'll leave you alone." He backed up, looked at her and turned away.

"She didn't want to go with him." Cal spoke softly.

Stopping in the doorway to the bathroom, Jake spun around. Cal sat slowly on the bed, her head down.

"She um . . ." Cal picked the bits of plaster from her wall off her bed. "She didn't want to go."

Jake didn't know what to say. Cal looked and sounded as if she was opening up to him, no one had ever done that. Jake didn't know how to react. Standing almost frozen, he watched her and listened.

"She begged me Jake, begged me to stay home. I refused." Cal's eyebrows raised. "I had plans. The details weren't put in any of the books. I guess they didn't need to be." Cal's words were low, almost inaudible. "What they showed in the room pretty much said it all. The flames, her asking me why I let him do this. Why I let her go. What you don't know Jake . . . her father . . ." Cal paused to control her emotions. "He had been going through some sort of depression over his job. Nothing, you know, I thought of. He asked if he could have her for a year. I laughed. He got mad. That weekend he snapped. He covered her with gasoline while she slept, and he . . . he." Cal exhaled.



Jake flung his head back closing his eyes. They were details he didn't know. Details that made the image that appeared in Cal's room make sense. He took a step to her.

Standing up, she tossed the plaster on to the floor and brushed her hands off. "See I live with it everyday. It was a painful reminder that I was responsible for my daughter's death."

"You weren't responsible Cal. He was."

"A part of me knows that. A part of me wants to keep blaming myself. I guess it's my punishment." She lifted her view to him. "And . . . I wanted to come to you with this, I did. That first night it happened. I felt so scared. I ran to your room. But I couldn't bring myself to go in."

"You should have." His hand slid down her face. "No one has ever came to me like that. I'm not sure I would have been real good at it, but I would have tried." He stepped even closer.

"You're doing really good now. And you didn't deserve the way I've been with you. I'm sorry. Thank you so much for taking care of what they were doing to me." Cal stared at his chest which was inches from her. "It means a lot." She followed her view from his bare chest to his eyes. "You say, Major Graison, that you aren't sensitive. Well . . . you don't give yourself enough credit." She folded her arms close to her body.

"I'm really not, Cal. Why else do you think no ones ever came to me. I'm not the type of guy who comes off comforting. To be honest with you, I may ask, but I don't know where to begin to make anyone feel better. I just . . ." He felt her press her body against his, her head rested on his chest.

"If you don't mind, could you just hold me for a second? Just a second."

Jake swallowed, he was in a position he was never asked to be in. He was needed. He brought his one hand up slowly, almost hesitantly to place it on her hair. As he laid it down, nervously on the softness of her, he pulled her closer to him. Her arms wrapped tightly around his waist. Jake paused, awkward, he brought his arm across her back. As her whole body touched to his, the nervous breath he held, released and he slipped his strong arms completely around her, laying his cheek against the top of her head. He closed his eyes. In that moment, holding her, letting her get lost within him. Jake loved it, someone finally needed his strength more than himself. He held her longer than she requested. It felt too good to let go.

"Jake?" Cal pulled away slowly. "Thank you." She stood on tip toes



and kissed him gently on the cheek, his eyes closed again as she did.

“You’re welcome.” Jake suddenly felt cold as Cal moved away, he ran his hand down his chest. “Oh shit. I’m half naked. I’ll put some clothes on.” He stepped backwards. “Let me grab a shirt, and I’ll help you clean up this mess I made in your room.” He darted out.

“Jake . . .” Cal shook her head. “The man is worried about a shirt when he’s wearing underwear with an opening in front..” She saw Jake quickly came back in, pulling over his head a sweatshirt.

“I’ll just pick up the plaster.” Jake pointed. “I don’t want you to worry about having to sleep with this mess.” He started picking up the wall from the floor.

“So do you think I’m the only one they’re messing with?”

“I doubt it. Of course, like you, who wants to tell anyone.” He carried his handful of plaster to the waste basket. “We knew they were going to pull something right?”

“Yes. All right, figuring they used my daughter against me. They go after people’s weaknesses. What do you think?”

Jake brushed off his hands. “I think you’re right. And if that’s the case, we have to figure out what people’s weaknesses are.”

“O.K., so what’s your weakness, Major Graison?”

“Right now . . . you.” Jake moved to her bed not even noticing the surprise look on Cal’s face. “And they aren’t going to get that weakness, because I’m making sure they don’t get you.”

“Why do you feel you have to protect me. I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can.” Jake grabbed her pillow, straightening the case. “But can you let me do this please. Let me protect you. For the first time in my life I watching out for something other than our government.” He placed the pillow down and reached for the covers. “And I like it. So humor me.”

“I’ll right I’ll humor you.”

“So, am I like your knew purpose in life?” Cal asked jokingly.

Jake leaned his body closer. “I didn’t look at it like that. Why? You wanna be?” He returned to her covers.

“What are you doing to my bed? I’m going to sleep. The bed doesn’t need made for that.” She took hold of his arm. “Jake, go get some sleep. I’ll be sure to let you know if they try anything else.” She placed her hand over her heart. “I promise.” She noticed Jake picking up her hand mirror from



her bed, he stared at it with curiosity. "What's wrong?"

"This mirror. It has finger prints. They're too big to be yours."

"Then they're yours." Cal took it off of him. "Don't worry about it." She tried to lead him from the bed.

"Why are you shoving me out, I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes you are, to sleep. You'll have me out of bed in a couple hours."

"You're right. I need to sleep. I won't be able to, but I'll try." Jake backed from the room and in a few short minutes returned, just as Cal was slipping into bed. He held his pillow and a blanket. "Is this a good spot?" He pointed to the floor.

"Jake, get . . ." The flap of the bottom edge of his blanket smacked Cal as he flung it out so it would lay in the floor. "You can't sleep there." Cal jumped out of bed. "You're only in the next room. We'll leave both doors open. You can't sleep on my floor."

"Why?" Jake pulled his knees up.

"Because I said so."

"Oh, yeah, good reason. You said so." He snickered. "Tough." Jake started to fluff his pillow--annoyingly.

"Jake." Cal placed one hand on her hip and flustered, ran the other across her face. "I don't need you sleeping in here, especially when you are so neurotic about being neat. I'll wake up at five in the morning and you'll be arranging all of my stuff."

"And you'll mess it right back up like you did the other day. When I straightened your desk on my way to walk with Rickie. I came back and you'd messed it up again." He pointed his index finger at her and began to lay down.

"I did no such thing. And maybe you think I did because you didn't straighten it up as well as you think you did."

"Please, I know . . ." Jake stared up at her. He knew he pushed in her drawer. He knew what her room looked like when he had left it that day. Remembering that bad feeling he had when he walked in there coupled with the large finger prints on her mirror, made Jake worry more. "I want you to check all of your stuff. I think someone's been in this room." He began to look around. "And because of that. I'll be very comfortable right here. That is until I move my bed in here. And we move your dresser . . ."

"No fuckin way. And no one has been in my room. If you're looking for a reason to sleep in here, I'm not giving you one. Out!" She reached



down and grabbed his hand. "Come on." She pulled hard.

Jake laughed at her, barely resisting and he still didn't move. "Cal . . . are you trying to move me?"

"I'm serious." She tugged harder.

"So am I." He pulled at her, bringing her down some.

"Jake." Cal, propped up on her knees beside him, looked down. "I will let you know if I need you."

"I don't believe you." Jake adjusted himself up more, bringing his body closer to hers. "You too strong willed. I think I know you . . . wait. That's right, I don't know you."

"You know me, Jake." Cal started to get up. "It's something else."

"What?"

Cal sat down on her bed and looked at the smoke alarm. "Some other time perhaps?" Her eyes shifted to the camera.

Jake saw what she meant. "What about now?" He stood up and grabbed her hand. Making her follow him to the bathroom, Jake shut both doors and turned on the water in the shower. "Spill it."

"All right." Cal bit her bottom lip. "Promise you won't get mad at me. Promise. I have a really good reason for keeping this quiet."

"If you say you have a good . . ." He watched Cal dart from the bathroom and he stood there bewildered hands in the air. "What the hell is she doing?" He waited, and in a few seconds Cal returned holding a photo album. "You're hiding the fact that you brought pictures? So did I."

"No you, asshole." She grabbed his hand pulling him down to the floor with her. Sitting close to him, legs touching, she opened the photo album across both their laps.

"Ah." Jake laughed. "Is this you?" He pointed to the first picture.

Cal smacked his hand away. "I'm not here to show you my album."

"Will you show me another time then?"

"Yes Jake. Will you show me yours."

Jake raised his eyebrow at her and he soon felt the cold smack of her hand on his leg. "You asked." He watched her fiddle with the inside cover. "What are you doing?"

"Pulling it out." She slipped her fingers between the cover and the white sheet, out of the pocket she pulled out several sheets of paper. "Here." She handed him the first one. "Read."

Jake unfolded the yellowing sheet of paper. "It's a letter from the



Caldwell institute.” He turned his head to her. “Where did you get this from? This is from an experiment over twenty years ago.”

“I know. It was in my father’s stuff.” She took the letter back. “He was in The Iso-Stasis Experiment nine. He died during the experiment.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“I know I didn’t.” She handed him another letter. “Here’s one from the institute saying that he had passed on tragically in the final three hours.”

“Oh shit.” Jake skimmed the letter.

“I was too young to remember all the details. But my stepfather remembered everything. Nine years ago he saw the ad in the paper and he showed me. I guess it was for the eleventh experiment.”

“So your stepfather knew about the project from the beginning?”

“Yes. He said my father was chosen by the military just like you. Bill, my stepfather, and my dad were good friends. He said he begged my father not to go. He said that he knew something was up. This letter . . .” Cal pulled it out. “It’s from my father’s C.O. He states that he has found out from an undisclosed source that not a single person survived the experiment. Nor have they for the prior two. All eight go in. No one comes home. Now I can’t access any information on experiments ten, and eleven. My guess same scenario.”

Jake looked shocked, his mouth hung open. “You knew all this coming in here and you still came?”

“I knew all this *before* I applied.” Cal refolded her papers and stuck them back in her hiding place. “When my stepfather showed me the ad, there was nothing I could do. But I looked in the Times every single day from there after, waiting for another ad. In January, three weeks after Jesse’s death I saw their ad again. I figured, what the hell do I have to lose. So I applied. It was something I felt compelled to do.”

“So that’s the reason behind you being here, that’s your motivation?” Jake took hold of the photo album. “You’re avenging your fathers death.”

“No.” She took the album back. “Quit being so melodramatic. I’m here to beat them. My father joined this project of his own free will, just like you and I and everyone else here. However . . .” She closed the book. “When my dad and everyone else joined they didn’t know the odds. I do. I have an advantage. No one is suppose to walk away here, Jake. The basis of their experiment isn’t to see who can walk away, it’s to see how long you last. Guess what? I’m beating them at this. That’s why I’m here.”



Jake swallowed. "You are one determined lady. You will walk away."

"No matter what they throw at me. I'll walk away with you Jake."

Smiling he turned his head. "We may be the only ones."

"And you aren't mad at me?" Cal asked, almost frightened to do so.

"No, I understand. Do you think they know who your father is?"

"Oh most definitely. I think that has a lot to do with why I was chosen. But I bet they haven't a clue that I know."

"I bet you're right." Jake stood up and shut the water off, the bathroom was eerily quiet. "Thank you for telling me."

"Like I said I was going to, but I couldn't."

"Now that we have that out of the way, how bout we skip sleeping, and just start our day?" Jake was very serious in his request.

"How about not." Tucking her photo album under her arm, Cal lifted herself from the floor and walked to her room. She stopped cold and unexpected, Jake nearly knocked her over. "Jake." She turned to face him. "I'm really all right. You're in the next room Jake. You can't get much closer than that. I promise I'll yell if I need you."

"Can you promise me you'll check your stuff first thing tomorrow to see if anything is gone."

"No I won't. Nothing's gone. You're overboard. And are we going after Fr. Dan's book?"

"In accordance with my agenda." Jake folded his arms.

"Yeah, yeah." Cal marched into her room and picked up his belongings. "Everything is according to your agenda." She shoved them to him. "If we decide to have sex to occupy our time, will that be part of the agenda too?" She turned and walked in her room.

Flustered, Jake babbled nonsense parts of words in his response to what she said. Before he could get something intelligent and or understandable out of his mouth, her light was out.

Sand Dune Casino - Las Vegas, Nevada
August 23 - 10:30 P.M.

His figure could not be seen behind the tinted mirrored glass that was the entire far wall of his huge office. Aldo looked upon his crowded casino floor he looked with pleasure, a drink in his hand.

"Mr. Connilucci sir?" A younger man knocked on the door of his office, "telephone, line three, Stan from the institute."

"Thank you." Aldo gave a nod as the man left his office. He walked with his drink and sat behind his desk. After a breath, he hit the speaker phone button. "Yeah, Stan . . ." Aldo rocked some in his thick leather chair. "What do you got for me?"

"It's over." Stan's voice came through the speaker. "Cal beat the mental phase. Graison took charge."

"Excellent." Aldo clenched his jaws with a smile and nod. "What is his interest in my girl."

"Like her. You know the routine. Experiment boy meets experiment girl. It's a little bit more this time."

"What do you mean?" Aldo asked.

"They're close. Not bed partners, but . . . from observation. Friends. I think they may be a team here. And that could get in the way of a ingle winner."

"Doesn't matter. I'll take four million just as easy as I'll take eight." Aldo lifted his glass to his mouth.

"Yeah, but uh . . . will Graison's investor same the same."

The glass stopped short of Aldo's lips as he sank, instead of into bourbon, into thought about what Stan said.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
August 25 - 7:15 P.M.

As if they were watching the Super Bowl, Lyle and Stan held their breath, clenching tightly to papers watching the monitors. When the moment arrived, they shrieked loudly.

"Yes!" Lyle shouted first. "He's there."

"Come on Johnny boy . . . he's gonna chicken."

"No way. She asked him, he didn't answer, he just walked in."

"We are going to sail this one." Stan held out his hand for a high five. "And everyone else said Cal and Jake first. Ha!"

"Wait . . . no John, don't back up." Lyle covered his eyes. "He looked at her."

"Shut out the light Jennifer, shut out the . . . yes!" Stan's hand grabbed the remote. "Infrared on."

"It's over." Lyle began to laugh. "We won." He pounded his fist on the table three times. "Wait . . . unless of course oral sex doesn't count."

"Oh, please. We won." Stan stood up and walked to the cork board and grabbed the envelope. "This was a big one, too. Including Aldo's money, there's five hundred bucks in here." He smiled at his money.

Startling both of them, making them jump, was Dr. Jefferson as he walked into the room clearing his throat. "Another poll meet it's end?"

Lyle quickly placed the money in his back pocket. "Uh . . . yeah. Monitor eight."

Dr. Jefferson looked up peering at the screen by the end of his nose. "I see." He shook his head. "Before you took that money you did make sure that oral copulation counted?"

"Doesn't matter now." Stan zoomed in on them. "It's ours. I'll just shut off the infrared to give them some privacy."

"You do that." Dr. Jefferson sat down at the table with them. "I'm here right now to see if our controllers took care of both the situations?"

"Yes." Lyle answered. "Jake is fully suspicious that someone has been going in Cal's room. And the other thing, the last one was switched this



morning. I have to tell you. It was close. Jake was right there getting Fr. Dan's book. Before his . . ." Lyle chuckled. "Agenda. Anyway . . . Fr. Dan busted him again."

"I see." Dr. Jefferson said. "And what did our Major Graison confess this time?"

"Lustful thoughts." Stan answered. "Fr. Dan scratched his head and finally told Jake to let loose, he was tired of hearing about it."

Smiling at that, Dr. Jefferson stood back up. "I'll leave you two to . . ." His head motioned to the monitors. "I was just checking if our controllers got them."

Lyle answered instead of Stan. "Yes, they switched the books just like you said."

Dr. Jefferson walked to the door. "*Now* when those two find the manuscripts they won't know anymore than they do now. Imagine them thinking they can outsmart us. Do they not realize we know everything." He opened the door and feeling upbeat Dr. Jefferson left the observation room.

Lyle lifted his shoulders and slid in the chair. "I take it he doesn't know that Cal and Jake were in the bathroom the other night having a secret meeting?"

"No, and why tell him. We don't know what they were saying, it'll only make matters worse."

"How do we know they weren't fooling around in there? Speaking of which. He's gone. You wanna put that infrared back on?"

"You got it." Stan sliding down in his chair, clicked on the infrared in Jennifer's room, and sipped on his soda as he and Lyle watched the big entertainment for the evening.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
September 3 - 7:35 A.M.

Fr. Dan's hands clenched tightly to the edges of the bathroom sink. He stared in the mirror, still fogged from his shower. With his right hand he wiped across the steam leaving a smear large enough for him to stare at his eyes. His eyes, bloodshot, sore. The dreams, every night for the past ten days he had the same dreams. Waking up with a headache that carried on until the afternoon.

Fr. Dan looked down to his hands, they trembled. *Stop this, just stop this. You are better than this, control yourself. They're only dreams.* A sickening knot formed in his stomach as he looked at his face, the scar on his left cheek. The scar that was the painful reminder.

He noticed his brow had begun to sweat. That same dream was weakening him, and he couldn't tell a soul about having them. No one. Splashing his face with cold water, he grabbed for a hand towel and brought it to his face.

"Fr. Dan!" Rickie called from his side of the bathroom. "Hey Padre."

Turning off the faucet, and hanging the towel, Fr. Dan responded in a shaking, cracking voice. "Yes, Rickie?"

"You almost done in there, man? I got a piss boner that is screaming release me."

"I apologize." He unlocked the knob and opened the door. He saw Rickie sitting on the bottom of his bed, blanket across his lap, wiggling. "All yours."

"Thanks guy." Rickie bolted for the bathroom and Fr. Dan went into his own room pulling the door closed behind him.

"Hey, Padre?" Rickie yelled loudly over his forceful release. "You going to breakfast now?"

"You go on without me, Rickie."

"Whatever. Oh, man . . . I can't stop."

A bright spot, a slight smile came to Fr. Dan as he sat on his own bed staring at his desk. He had to face his dreams, he had to face what ate him.



He had placed what it was, in a box in his dresser. He would get that box when he heard Rickie leave. No earlier, he couldn't chance Rickie walking in.



Steam came from Jake's mouth as he stood with Cal just outside the complex on their hillside. The morning temperature was a bit chilly which didn't bother Jake as much as Cal. "You ready for me, babe?" He lifted his shorts and rested outward on his left leg.

"Babe . . . please." Cal rolled her eyes and shook her head. "You won't get me."

"Cal, you haven't worked out in a couple days." Jake stood straight. "Speaking of which, how's that knee?"

"I hate you."

"Whoa why the attitude? Are we trying to get out of the chase?" He nodded at her.

"No!" She spoke with sarcasm. "You injured me on purpose. I get up in the middle of the night and you're laying on my bedroom floor--without my permission--I tripped over you."

"I didn't make you fall on purpose."

"If you were in my room on purpose then you made me fall on purpose."

Laughing loudly Jake flung his head back. "What the hell kind of lawyer-wanna-be talk is that? Get your shit together, get ready."

"Way to bark orders at me. I'm ready." Cal positioned herself.

"Now . . ." Jake pointed outward into the wooded area. "You have to go through the woods to the buildings. If you make it there before me, I do your clean up tonight. If I catch you . . ."

"I know, I know, I do your clean up tomorrow. So what do we compete for on nights we don't have clean up."

"Positions."

"Positions in what?" Cal asked.

"Never mind." Jake looked at his watch. "Ten second start. Get ready. Go." He watched her run figuring he'd give her a few more seconds, then go opposite of which way she went.

Through the woods Cal ran. Possibly not as fast as she would normally



go, but her other senses were kicking in and she really had a hard time doing more than one thing at a time. She heard her own footsteps crunch against the leaves as she ran. A certain fear was with her also, the fearing the element of surprise. Not knowing where or when Jake would leap out at her, kept her pace slower than it should have been. *Where the hell is he?* She could see the two buildings through the breaking of the trees ahead. Her footing slowed up, as she stopped, the leaves beneath her feet sprayed. She listened. Faintly she could hear the crushing of leaves. She looked behind her, to her left, turning to her right. As she faced forward, Jake jumped out blocking her way. "Shit!" She began to run again veering to her right.

Jake held out his arms running sideways, smiling.

"Don't tackle me." She knew she was had. Shrieking loudly, Jake caught her. She felt his arms go around her waist and lift her up, throwing her over his shoulder and running with her through the rest of the woods. "Jake." She hit her hands on his back. "You won. Put me down."

Jake stopped running with her, he slid her body down across his as he put her firmly on the ground. "Clean up tomorrow."

"I have to find something I'm physically better at." Cal frustrated, kicked her foot before they started walking. "I have to beat you once. Aside from the intellectual shit we play."

"I let you win at all those intellectual games we play too."

"Right . . . Jake. I could whoop your ass in Candy Land."

"Oh funny. Ha, ha, ha. Let's get something to eat. We build the skyscraper today." He saw they were almost at the main building. "Race?" He smacked her backside and took off running.

^^^

"Hey, you two." Jennifer approached Cal and Jake as they walked into the dining area. "I wanted to let you guys know I made eggs if you were interested. But you don't eat breakfast do you, Cal?" Jennifer asked. "No wonder you're so thin. But . . . did you notice." She pulled at her pant leg. "I've lost weight this first month."

"I see that, Jennifer. Gosh." Cal smiled. "By the end of the experiment think how thin you'll be."

Jennifer was glad to hear that. "I may look like you."

Jake's disagreement with her statement was obvious. He let out a loud



'ha', and folded his arms. "I highly doubt that." His comment was followed by a grunt, courtesy of Cal, who backhanded him in the gut. "Ow . . . will you stop hitting me?" Jake snapped.

"Will you stop being so rude."

"I'm not being rude, I'm being honest. You think this little-miss-nice-thing you're doing is honest?" Jake shook his head. "Who was the one bitching about her this morning."

"Oh, I just hate you." Cal stormed away from him.

"Hey!" Jake shouted to her across the dining area grasping everyone's attention. "That is twice in one day. I'm getting a complex."

Cal, flipping him off, retrieved her granola bar and sat down at a table with everyone else, figuring Jake wouldn't sit there. She was wrong.

"All right." Jake laid down a plate of eggs . "Here's the deal." He snatched the granola bar from her hand, and slid the plate of eggs to her. "I'm willing to forget this little 'I hate you' thing. *And* I will forfeit my win this morning, if you eat food."

Cal looked at the plate of eggs, she sniffed it.

"What are you, a dog? Eat." Jake handed her a fork.

"If I do, it's not because I need your forgiveness on the 'I hate you' . . ."

"Cal, I'm crushed."

"Shut up, Jake. I'm doing this so you do my clean-up." Cal plunged the fork in the eggs, lifted a fork full and brought it to her mouth. She hesitated, not eating them yet.

Jake grew frustrated he helped the fork in there. "Eat."

Cal wiped her mouth and glared at him. "I can't believe you just shoved food in my mouth." A jar of Salsa came down before Cal, she followed up the hand, it was Carlos.

"Try this on your eggs. It's excellent." Carlos set his plate down and sat on the other side of Cal. "I'll join you."

Jake shifted his eyes back and forth in disgust, breathing heavy, shaking his head.

Rickie laughed at the scenario as he ate his eggs. Jennifer, hanging on John. John trying to scoot further away. Carlos staring at Cal, and Jake being pissed off. To Rickie, it was funny. "You know, you can like swim in the sexual tension at this table, it's so thick." He snickered as his shoulders bounced up and down. "I hope you guys brought protection?" His



comment seemed to catch everyone's attention, they looked up. "Yeah, didn't think of that, did ya? I'm a condom man myself.." Rickie shoved eggs in his mouth. "We don't want a bunch of babies running around up here."

"Rickie!" Jake slammed his hand down. "Even if one of the women did get knocked-up, it takes nine months to have a baby. We won't be here that long."

"Yeah but still . . . you never know, it could happen. This is a scientific experiment.. What if they put . . . hey." Rickie's eyes looked across the room. "What's wrong with the padre?"

Everyone at the table turned to see Fr. Dan walking slowly in. His hair tossed about, shirt hanging out of his pants. Frazzled was the best way to describe him.

Rickie stood up. "I'll see what's up." He walked hands in his pockets to the priest. "Fr. Dan, you looked fried, dude."

Fr. Dan lifted his eyes. "Did you take it?" He asked Rickie softly.

"No. Take what?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"No, I . . ." Rickie nodded his head. He was guilty. He did steal Fr. Dan's cinnamon flavored dental floss. "Forgive me, father, for I have sinned."

Shocking Rickie, and all that were in the dining room, Fr. Dan, in an outrage and loud holler, scolded at Rickie. "I'm not fucking around, Rickie. I am serious."

"Whoa Padre, so I took the box. I'll give it back, no biggie."

"Did you look in it?!" He shouted.

"Well yeah, how else was I suppose to . . ."

With a loud scream, and hands extended outward, Fr. Dan lunged at Rickie knocking him to the floor with his grip tightly around Rickie's neck. He pounded Rickie's head with his every word. "You--can't--get--away--with--this!"

Cal jumped up from her seat at the same time as everyone but Jake. He still ate his cereal. "Oh my God. Jake, do something."

Jake turned his head back to Fr. Dan's pounding of Rickie, then he returned to his food. "Sit down Cal."

"Jake." Cal shifted her eyes to him. She watched as Carlos, Griff and John were all unsuccessful in helping. "Jake if you don't go, I will." She began to march over, and he stood up.



“Son of a bitch.” He wiped his mouth and stormed to the men who were disrupting his breakfast. He reached down, grabbed Fr. Dan by the back of his shirt and lifted him from Rickie. “Cool it.”

Fr. Dan spun around to Jake, closed fist, and nailed him in the face.

Jake’s head jolted to the left. He felt the skin upon his cheek bone spilt with the hard hit of Fr. Dan. Bringing his fingers to his face in anger, he looked at the blood on his finger tips. “Fuck.” Shaking his head he looked at Cal. “See ,Cal! Now I have to hit a priest.” With all his strength, Jake hauled off and slammed Fr. Dan sending him in a spin to the floor. He shook off his hand and returned to his breakfast. “Thank you very much, Cal, now I’m burning in hell.”

Rickie picked himself off the floor. “Whoa, talk about a breath taking experience.” He stared down to the passed out priest. “All over dental floss. Imagine if I swiped his toothpaste.”

John ruffled his hair in confusion. “What are we going to do about this. Obviously we can’t have him hanging around us until he calms down.”

Jake, who munched on his cereal, called out from his seat. “Lock him in his room. There’s padlocks in storage. I’ll go get them.”

Covering her mouth, upset, Jennifer shook her head. “No, we can’t keep him prisoner.”

Carlos looked over at Jake. “He’s right. We have to lock him up. He may get better. He may not. I’m not willing to take that chance. You saw how strong he was.”

Griff signed to Cal.

Cal returned the signing. “Griff agrees also. He wants to know who’s taking him back to the room?”

All heads turned to Jake.

Buried in a bowl of food, Jake only lifted his stare. “No.”

Cal held up her hand to everyone, she walked over to the table with Jake, stopping only to wet a cloth in the sink. She sat in the chair next to him. “Jake.” She spoke softly, lifting his chin and turning his head to her. “You’re the only one big enough to pick him up and carry him.” She dabbed lightly to his wound. “It’ll take you a minute.” She laid her other hand flat on his face. “Please.” Gently she dabbed the cloth again.

Reaching up, Jake grabbed her hand that held the rag. “Cal . . .” He stared in her eyes. “You owe me.” Pushing his chair back, Jake got up, moved to Fr. Dan, lifted him up over his shoulder and carried him out.



^^^

When Jake returned to his room from bringing the locks in from storage, he could hear the shower water just turn on. Not only did he have to deck a priest, carry him to his room, get the padlocks, he had to wait to take a shower. But it gave him opportunity. He had placed the tiny strips of paper on the bottom of Cal's drawers, all of them, something he had been doing all the time. He would use this time to see if any papers had fallen out. And if they did, he'd double check with Cal to see if she went in that drawer. Usually if there was a strip on the floor, Cal was the blame. She never saw the paper or the tiny pieces of lint he placed under her daughter's photograph and other things Cal had on her desk. Jake was bound and determined to prove someone had been in her room. His instinct told him so, he always trusted his instinct. If that was the case, and someone was in there, then Jake had to find out who.

He knocked once on the bathroom door before opening it to tell Cal he had returned. "Cal." He called in. "I'm back."

"Wait. Did you get Fr. Dan situated?"

Jake leaned with is back against the door. "Yeah, I . . ." He shouldn't have, it was wrong, but Jake's eyes immediately went to the mirror, Cal was right. He could see her foggy naked figure through the frosty glass door. He swallowed. "I um . . . yes.." He shifted his eyes away, then returned them. "What do you make of this." He hung his head down, trying to behave. "I think it's the same as with you."

"So do I." Cal shouted over the water. "But we read about him. There was nothing in any of the books. What would his weakness be?"

"The excommunication maybe. It doesn't make . . ." His eyes lifted. "Sense." He leaned against the door, gripping to the handle. "What are the odds that maybe we were . . ." He saw her lift her leg up, possibly to begin shaving it. "Wrong."

"About what?"

Jake didn't hear her, he was too far gone, lost in watching her, lost in awe as his imagination took over. Envisioning his dream, seeing himself take off his clothes, open the shower door and slip in there with her. The leg, the perfect leg, bent up, he would lift to his waist.

"Jake. About what?"



"A . . . uh . . . the books. Maybe we were wrong about the books." He ran his hand down his face. Looking to the mirror, he saw it began to steam up. Jake couldn't figure out if it was his saving grace or his punishment. "I'll uh meet you in your room. I want to talk to you about getting Carlos' book." Nervous, he quickly shut the door.

"Jake?" Cal stuck her head out of the shower, he was gone. She shrugged her shoulders and continued in her shaving.

^^^

Jake felt it the second he walked into, or rather snuck into Cal's room. He was going to get an answer. The proof was in the small slips of paper that laid on the floor around Cal's dresser and desk. The piece of lint on Jesse's picture was out in the clear open view. "Cal, couldn't have opened all these. No way."

"Jake?"

Jake jumped as he heard her voice call from the open bathroom door. He moved his stare from the desk to Cal. She was peeking her head out, only her face and bare shoulder were seen.

"I forgot to bring in my clothes. Could you?"

"Um, sure." Jake walked to the dresser. "You weren't in your drawers at all?"

"No. I just wanted to beat you to the shower. They're on my bed."

"Oh." He picked them up. Holding her clothes he awkwardly handed them out to her with his head turned.

"Thank you." Cal took them with a giggle and shut the door.

Letting out the breath he held, Jake placed his hand on top of his head. "I am not handling this very well." He spoke out loud.

"Handling what?"

God she has radar ears. "Nothing." Jake bent down picking up the little bits of paper, his evidence. He had to just figure out who and why.

"Cleaning up my room again?" Cal stepped back in, brushing her wet hair. "What did you want to discuss about Carlos's book?"

"I want to get it as soon as possible."

"No waiting? Jake I'm shocked. What's up?" She sat down on the bed.

"I was thinking, what if we're wrong about the books?" He sat down next to her on the bed. I mean Fr. Dan was set off about something. You



and I know there was nothing in any of the books, except the excommunication, that would give hint that he was off.”

“So then we might be wrong. Why go after Carlos’ book then?”

“His and Fr. Dan’s are all we have left. We saw Fr. Dan, I just want to hurry and get the book thing done with now.”

“Thank God. But . . . Carlos is fine.” Cal stood from the bed. “In fact, he’s a lot calmer than you or I.” She set the brush down on her desk and straightened Jesse’s picture. “When?”

“This afternoon. He does those goofy guitar exercises in the gathering room. You keep him there until I return for you. And you stay there with other people.”

“O.K., but what if he wants to go to his room.”

“Stop him. Think of something. Just give me time in his room.” Jake got up and moved to the bathroom.

“How long is going to take to get his book?”

“Just give me time.” Jake stepped into the bathroom knowing that the book was not the only thing he was looking for. Anything possibly missing from Cal’s room was on his agenda for the search.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
September 3 - 2:05 P.M.

Carlos stared down to the platform city that laid on Cal's room floor. He nodded his head pacifying at it. "Very nice. Thanks." He folded his arms. "I'm going back to my room now."

"No wait!" Cal stopped him, blocking him as he walked. "You can't go yet. We're talking."

"Cal, I'm a bit suspicious here." He smiled stepping toward her. "You follow me to the gathering room. I tell you I'm not playing and you don't want me to leave." He tilted his head. "What are you up to?"

"I just wanted to um . . . spend some time with you." Cal smiled.

"Where's Jake?"

Cal shook her head. "Haven't a clue. And I wanted to take advantage of the situation."

"Ah . . ." Carlos said. "So that's it. He doesn't like you around me."

"Sort of. No." Cal grew a little nervous, Carlos moved closer and closer.

"Cal. You follow me, drag me to *your* room. I'm flattered."

"As you should be. I think. Is that arrogant of me?" She giggled and tucked her hair. *Come on Jake, hurry he has that look in his eye. And I just did that universal female flirting thing without thinking.*

"Cal? Are you and Jake a couple?" He asked.

"No, we're sort of partners in this experiment."

"There's nothing romantic?"

"No. Please." Cal scoffed. "Him and I? Really, he's not my type."

"Could have fooled me." Carlos said.

"Does he leave me a choice." Cal nervously laughed.

"No." Carlos shook his head with a smile. "So . . . I'm curious, if it's not Jake, what is your type?"

A month away from home perhaps? Cal couldn't pinpoint what made her spew out the answer she did. She didn't mean to. But when she saw Carlos with that tilted innocent look on his face, all she saw was David. "You?"



Another smile crossed Carlos' face.

^^^

Carlos' book laid on the bed, Jake had found it immediately. Yet he had spent his time in a totally frustrating attempt, searching for something, anything that would give him the proof that Carlos was the one in Cal's room.

Jake had lifted every piece of furniture and checked every drawer, not once, but three times. As he made his final sweep he saw that he had been gone twenty minutes. "Shit." Figuring the hell with it, he picked up the book from the bed. "At least I have you." Flipping through the pages he looked for Carlos' section. When he got there, he turned a page, wide eyed. "Fuck." He kept turning the pages. "Nothing. Same as mine." Slamming the cover he tossed it on his bed, not even caring that it wasn't the place he found it. He left Carlos' room to find Cal.

Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
September 3 - 2:11 P.M.

Stan made the entrance he was getting quite good at. Flinging the door open with a bang and making his announcement, "Ladies, we are here."

Tina held up her hand. "Shh. This is good. Hurry, you're going to miss it."

Stan and Lyle scooted to the chairs at the table next to Tina and Barb.

Barb moved the bowl of popcorn to them. "Here's the situation. Jake told Cal--monitor two--to keep Carlos occupied while he checked his room for the book. But he told her to stay in the gathering room. Carlos didn't want to, so Cal brought him to her room."

Tina zoomed in. "Monitor ten. Jake heading into the gathering room. He's looking for Cal. Check out guys what's happening in Cal's room. She had to keep him there."

Stan grabbed a handful of popcorn. "Did he find the book?"

"Yep." Tina answered. "Saw it was nothing, tossed it down. Then he went searching for Cal."

Barb pointed. "Check out Cal. And now . . . here comes Jake."

Stan extended his reach in the bowl. "Ten bucks says he flips and beats the hell out of Carlos."

Tina stuck her hand out to him. "You're on, he's going to put up a front, and he won't tell Cal."

Lyle disagreed. "He's going to know it's a ploy. It won't bother him."

Barb had her say so also. "All of you are wrong. He's going to get pissed, not beat up Carlos, but verbally slam the hell out of Cal."

Stan stuck his ten dollars on the table. "Everyone in?" He watched the other money come down, some ones, some fives. "Get ready. Here he goes."

With bated breath they watched Jake reach for Cal's room door.



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
September 3 - 2:12 P.M.

Grabbing the door knob to Cal's room, Jake in one motion, opened it and stepped in. Stopping in a slide cold in his tracks, concern left him and anger and jealousy took over when he saw Cal. Jake's eyes closed, his heart sank, and his head dropped.

The kiss. The long kiss, immediately stopped. Jake's entrance was heard, his presence was felt.

Cal stepped back immediately, bringing the back of her fingers to her mouth.

Carlos quickly lifted his hands from Cal. "Does he always just barge in here?"

Jake was going to justify his entrance and his appearance with a comment. Instead, he stood silent, staring down at Carlos through the tops of his eyes.

Carlos backed up. There was something frightening about a big man with angry jealousy in his eyes. That was what he saw on Jake. Though he had never encountered someone in that state, he didn't want to chance it. "I'd better go." He walked to the door. "Cal . . . Jake."

Jake opened the door wider. Once he saw that Carlos was completely free from the door frame, Jake slammed it loudly.

Cal looked at Jake. He couldn't possibly be mad. She had to be imagining it. "Jake, what took you so long, I . . ."

"What the fuck was that?" Jake asked loudly, barking her back a foot.

"Excuse me?"

"That shit." Jake's hand pointed to where they were at. "When I walked in here? I thought I told you to stay put in the gathering room."

"He didn't want to stay." Cal defended herself.

"So you brought him back here?"

"Oh, you can't possibly be upset about this." Cal neared him. "You told me to keep him busy."

"I didn't tell you to sleep with the guy."

"I wasn't sleeping with him."

"Would you have?"



“That’s none of your fuckin business.” Cal scolded.

“You’re right.” Jake threw his hands up. “It isn’t any of my business. And you know what? I’m sorry I interrupted you.” He stormed to the bathroom door.

Cal quickly snatched his arm. “Jake, stop this. Just stop. Let’s not fight, please. There’s no reason to fight or be jealous.”

“I’m not jealous.” Jake argued. “Jealousy is an emotion not worth wasting your energy on.”

“Then what is it?”

Jake stopped before going into the bathroom. “I’m pissed. Pissed because I told you I don’t trust him. I told you to stay away from him.”

“I know you told me that. But you have to remember, you have no right to . . .”

“Bullshit!” Jake’s hand extended downward, then he sprang it to the side of his face. “Don’t tell me that. I have spent every single moment with you this past month. Every second. Don’t tell me I have no right. Because I every right to worry about you.” He turned back around. “I can’t talk right now.”

“Jake. You are way too upset. Stop.” She followed him in the bathroom. “Stop!”

“What?” He spun back around.

“You needed time. I got . . . I just maybe went about it the wrong way.” She saw him turn. “Wait.” She called out in desperation. “Since we are standing here yelling at each other, was it worth it? Did you get the book?”

“Yeah I got the book. It’s useless. It’s the same as ours. You were right all along. Happy?” He headed to his room.

Cal stopped his door from shutting. “Jake, fine I was right. But you can’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not mad at you, Cal. I’m mad at myself. Because this is the first time in my life I have ever felt this out of control and I can’t handle it.” He closed his door on her.

^^^

Jake was quiet, as quiet as he could be when he entered Cal’s room. He saw her sitting on the floor, fixing the platform city. He knew she had to hear him. She probably was ignoring him. And rightfully so. He had been



an asshole to her, and stewing for three hours in his room didn't help much.

Softly he walked up to her as she sat Indian style on the floor and squatted behind her. As he lowered himself, he lowered a bottle of beer to in front of her. "Truce?"

"Truce." She took it. "Thanks."

"I missed our platform city time, huh? I like your church." He stayed close behind her.

"I felt inspired after today's episode with Fr. Dan. Have you heard him all day?"

"Yes. He keeps knocking on that door, knocking." Jake shook his head. "Cal, listen."

Cal watched him slip his hand over hers, it made her smile. A smile he couldn't see.

"I'm sorry." He gripped her hand. "I'm sorry I acted like that. I was wrong. And . . . I was jealous. Very jealous." Jake slipped his fingers comfortably in between hers. "It's just when I saw you kissing him. Combined with the fact it was Carlos. It bothered me."

"I'm sorry, too, Jake. It shouldn't have happened. I'm sorry it bothered you."

"It's behind us." He removed his fingers from hers.

"Jake, it's dinner time, do you want to go with me?"

"Cal." He brought his mouth close to her ear. "Can we not go to the diningroom tonight? I don't feel like being around anyone." He spoke softly in her ear, not realizing that his warm words tingled her. "Can we just have dinner here tonight. Me and you? Alone?"

Cal rested her head back, it touched upon his chest. "Yeah we can."



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
September 3 - 9:10 P.M.

“Yes Barb . . .” Stan held the phone tightly to his ear, his head resting back as he made faces. “Yes Barb, he apologized . . . that’s what we think . . . no, no.” He stuck his tongue out and pressed his middle finger to the mouth piece. “I’ll call. We’re here to midnight. Tonight’s the night.” He handed the phone to Lyle. “You tell her.”

“Hey, Barb.” Lyle moved his mouth making a bitchy face, imitating Barb. “They had dinner, alone in her room . . . right now? Battleship.” He pulled the phone away from his ear. “No it’s not romantic, but they’ve been drinking.” Lyle smiled. “Goodbye.” He stood up and hung up the phone. “God is she such a bitch. She is so worried about this bet. If they do it tonight before midnight, she gets it. After that, the Jake and Cal poll is Aldo’s.”

“That’s the breaks.” Stan pulled out his notebook. “What’s the beer and shot count?”

“Um . . .” Lyle reviewed. “Post dinner, four beers Jake, one shot. Cal two beers, two shots. If they keep going they’ll be slamming by eleven. Barb said she’s giving us a tip.”

“We’re winners either way.” Stan said. “Then let’s root them on.”



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
September 3 - 9:15 P.M.

“Miss.” Cal smiled at Jake who sat on her floor across from her, their Battleship boards between their legs as they played their own ‘back and forth’ version. “B-14.”

“Hit.” Jake grunted and brought his bottle of beer to his lips. “J-9.”

“Miss.” Cal picked up her bottle and slowly to her lips. She saw Jake watch her. Maybe she was a bit more pronounced then she needed to be, but she had to do something. Jake certainly wasn’t going over the edge. It had been a month already and the closest thing they had to being intimate is when he chickened out of kissing her. Cal thought for sure he’d make his move after dinner. He was so quiet, staring. He had that look in his eyes. But she knew she really misinterpreted his offer to let loose, when he retrieved the Battleship and beers for the evening. “All right, Jake. C-14.”

“Ah . . . hit.” He bent and slid his leg inward towards his body brushing against Cal’s thigh as he did. “J-7.”

“Miss.”

“No. Cal, what the fuck?” Jake slammed his hand down. “I have fuckin pegs all over this place and you’re going to tell me I haven’t hit you yet?”

“Nope.” Cal closed her mouth tightly and shook her head.

“Oh bullshit. You can’t tell me this whole entire time, you’ve sunk three of my ships and I haven’t even hit one of yours. You’re cheating. Let me see your board.” Jake reached out his hand to it. “There is no way I’ve missed every single turn.”

“Sore loser.” She closed the lid of the game as he reached to it and clutched it to her chest.

“I cannot believe how immature you are that you would sink to the level of cheating in Battleship. And . . . you won’t even own up to it.”

“Fine.” She handed him the board.

Jake lifted the lid, his mouth dropped open. “This can’t be. How could I have missed every time? Cal, I apologize for calling you a cheater. I guess I am a sore loser.”

“No.” Cal scooted closer to him, grabbing the board and setting it on



the floor. "I'm a cheater. I kept moving my boats."

"Ships . . . and I knew it." He reached over and shut the lid on the game again. "Well, I just refuse to play Battleship with you. Again."

"You know, there are other things that we can do." She moved closer, letting the slight effect of alcohol give her nerve. "You do know that."

"Oh, sure." Jake swallowed as he watched her inch her face closer.

Cal stared at him. He looked scared. She moved her lips so close to his, speaking softly as she did. "Tell me what you want to do, Jake. Anything you want to do."

Jake couldn't take his eyes off of her, he knew his nervousness was showing. How could he answer that question? With a deep breath, showing her came to him as the best way. Reaching his hand up, he slipped it behind her neck. "Cal I . . ."

"Dudes!" Rickie yelled from outside of her door. "Dudes, Can I come in?"

Cal pulled back and gave a 'sorry' smile. As she stood up, she felt Jake run his hand down her arm when she walked from him.

Fuck! Jake rubbed his eyes and knew he'd have to wait--again--for Cal to make the move.

"Dudes . . . whoa it smells like a brewery in here." Rickie held his nose, like he had nerve to complain about any smell. "You guys having your own private party. I got some weed if you . . ."

"No!" Jake stood up, he just wanted Rickie out. The longer he stood there, the more what almost happened would slip from Cal's mind. "We don't do drugs. But thanks." He gave a snarling look.

"Just asking, just asking." Rickie held up his hands. "Hey, are you two like done with the Battleship yet. There are others who want to play and I'm afraid if I don't bring it back, someone else might go for my throat."

Hurriedly, Jake bent down to the floor, grabbed the boxes and handed them to Rickie. "Here. PEGs are inside. Bye." He reached for the door.

"Excellent." Rickie lifted the lid up on the one. "Whoa. Who's box was this?"

Cal smiled. "Mine."

Rickie shook his head at Jake. "Dude, you suck at this game. You didn't hit one of her boats. Man for a big military guy, Sergeant and all, you really have no strategy." He closed the lid and backed out. "Remind me not to go into war with you. I'd be dead."



His ears began to burn in annoyance. Rickie's rambling. Cal's laughing tested Jake. "Rickie!"

"I'm leaving." Rickie tried to imitate a fake intellectual voice. "Perhaps something a tad easier would be better for you. Something on the teenage level. Truth or dare?"

"Out!" Jake shut the door cutting off the laughing wave Rickie was giving Cal. He grunted loudly and leaned on the door. "I'm getting another beer. You want one?"

"Jake." Cal folded her arms. "We were . . . yes, a beer will be fine." She listened to him bitch about Rickie the whole time he was in his room.

Jake stopped in his stride in the bathroom. He stared at the beers he had in his hand. He knew he shouldn't be drinking. Jake took a deep breath before stepping into Cal's room. He wanted to hand her the beer and asked her where they let off. But what were the chances that Cal would drop down to the floor and say 'here.?' "Anyway . . ." He stepped in the room and handed Cal her beer. "Why didn't you tell Rickie you cheated."

"What? And ruin my reputation, please. I'd rather have you look bad." She took a drink. "So, where . . ."

"And how about Rickie telling me to play truth or dare? Like I couldn't kick your ass in that one."

"Excuse me?" Cal nearly choked on her drink.

"Of course I can't figure out how you would cheat in that. The trick would be to make it something that would force you to talk or lose."

"I would answer anything. You on the other hand, would not."

"Right." Jake brought his bottle to his lips. "You game?"

"Truth or dare? Jake, what the hell are you going to dare me to do? There would have to be an ending. We could dare each other all night. Something like, maybe truth or . . . shot."

"Nah." Jake folded his arms and looked up. "You drink like a fish. That would be no threat for you to answer the question."

"I'd answer them anyhow, you'd end up smashed.. What about, truth or . . ." She looked up at Jake then cased him up and down. ". . . strip."

"Strip?" Jake wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You mean like take off an article of clothing if won't answer the question?"

"Yes. Are you afraid?"

"Who me? No. It's just that I'm wearing a tee shirt, shorts and boxers. You have much more clothing on."



"Yeah but Jake, according to you, you'd answer anything. So why worry."

"O.K." He nodded. "You're on. Truth or strip." Jake, in a nervous twinge, raised his eyebrows as he took another drink of his beer. *God why am I putting myself in this position.*

"Good. Let's make this interesting though. Let's ask the question first, put each other on the spot, then we get the chance to answer or strip."

"All right. I'll do you one better." Jake pointed at her with his beer. "You have a coin We'll flip for each question. Heads is easy. Tails, anything goes."

"You're on." Cal alughed, walked to the desk, grabbed a penny and handed it to him. "And just to add pressure." She grabbed his hand and led him with her. "We'll play on the bed." She sat down, legs folded. "Of course you have no modesty. You probably won't have any problems being naked in front of me."

"If I'm naked, then I've lost the challenge." Jake sat down across from her. "I don't like to lose."

"Tell me about it. O.K." Cal straightened herself. "Because I have more articles of clothing, you go first. Ask away."

Jake smiled at her and set his beer on the floor, he flipped the coin, it landed on the bed. "Heads. All right . . .What was the rudest thing you've ever done?"

"Strip." Cal winked and removed a sock. "I have leeway." She took the coin and tossed it. "Heads again. Jake, how many relationships have you had in your adult life."

"None." He grabbed the coin.

"None? Jake, are you a virgin?"

"No, I'm not a virgin." He shook his head, took the coin and flipped it. "Tails. How many relationships have you had in *your* adult life? Full blown. Intimate."

"Three." She took the coin. "Heads. What is Major Graison's ideal woman?"

"Tall. Brunette. Dumb and . . ." Jake smiled with a wink. "And huge breasted."

Dejected Cal did a quick case of herself. "Asshole."

Jake flipped the penny. "Tails again . . . Today when you were kissing . . ."



“Strip.” Cal took off her sock.

“I didn’t even ask the question.”

“So I know where it’s going.” She tossed the coin. “Yes! Tails. How many women has Major Graison been with.”

Jake debated, he grabbed the edge of his shirt, then remembered, it was Cal. “Don’t laugh. Four.”

“Four?” Cal smiled. “And you never had a relationship, no one you really cared about?”

“There was this one girl I really liked. I never slept with her though.”

“Why not?”

“We were nine.” He took the coin, watching her laugh at him. “Easy one. If you were stranded up here alone with only Rickie, would you sleep with him?”

“He does have the condoms. Hmm. No. My turn. Heads. Do you ever want to have any kids?”

“I never thought about it. And if I did . . . I can’t.”

“What?” Cal looked shocked, almost saddened. “You can’t have kids?”

“Nope. I was on a mission and when we were in the jungle I was ambushed. When my assailant jumped me from the brush he knifed me . . . let’s just say, he missed it, but caused damage that couldn’t be prepared.”

“Jake, I’m sorry. Does it work?”

Jake was shocked by her question. “Of . . . yeah . . . I guess. I haven’t had any real practice since the incident though.”

“Well. Just because a car starts, doesn’t mean it’s going to make it up the hill.”

“Give me the coin.” He glared at her. “Time to get tough with you. Time to lose some clothes.” He nodded his head at her when he flipped tails. “While you’ve been here. Have you had any sexual thoughts about . . .”

“Strip.”

“Go ahead Cal, strip. Which is it? Your shirt or your shorts?”

Cal lifted her shirt from her shorts. Stuck her hand under it, undid her bra and pulled it out from her sleeves. She whipped it across the room. “Ha! Watch out.” She tossed the coin. “Tails. O.K., Major Graison. I read that you were isolated in a room for a month by yourself. Did you jerk-off to pass the time?”

Jake’s mouth dropped open, a stunned look that Cal had never seen,



hit him. "Strip." He took off his shirt, tossed it to the floor and tried to ignore her laughter. "My turn. Same question as last time. Have you ever had any sexual thoughts about . . ." He moved his face closer. "Me?"

"Strip." Cal stood up from the bed, undid her shorts and let them drop. Her long tee shirt covered her underwear. She grabbed the coin. Pausing to look at his bare chest that was right before her. "Were you the one who laid the flowers on my bed?"

"Strip." He stood up and dropped his shorts. "Did you enjoy kissing Carlos?"

Cal reached for her shirt and paused. "No. I thought of someone else the whole time." She saw the side of the coin her flip produced. "You're in your boxers, Jake, answer this question or lose. Were you the one who put the flowers on my bed?"

"Yes. And don't ask me why. It was a really mushy thing to do . . . my question. Who did you think about when you were kissing Carlos?"

"You." Cal placed her face closer to his. "Why haven't you hit on me yet?"

Jake's jaw twitched. He never lost eye contact with her. "You haven't asked me to. I figured if you asked . . ." He moved even closer softening his voice. " . . . you couldn't complain if it was bad."

Cal lowered her head almost embarrassed.

"Why haven't you . . ." He leaned further in, slanting her downward on the bed. " . . . asked me yet?"

"I didn't think you wanted me too. Are you still wanting me to?" She began to breath heavier in anticipation.

"Oh, yeah." He slowly, almost as if he were afraid, slid his hand up her thigh, barely touching her skin. His finger tips searching for the bottom of her shirt to creep up. His heart pounding in his throat. The tip of his nose brushed against hers as he parted his lips. "I'm sorry." Jake froze, he stared at Cal for a moment then backed up. "I'm sorry."

"Jake . . . What?" Cal lifted herself up, she was spinning from his sudden withdraw from her.

"Cal don't get me wrong. I want to." He stood from the bed. "I really, really want to. But . . . it's getting late. We may be rushing things. Let's just call it a night."

"Let's not." Cal reached her hand up to his. "Jake, what are you afraid of?" She stood up. "Why do you keep backing up?"



Jake placed his hands on his hips, shaking his head. "It's just that . . . it's just my heart is kind of involved in this one."

"I have news for you, Major Graison. So is mine."

Jake looked up from the floor he stared at.

"So, before you drive me completely insane. Before you consume my every thought with visions of us having sex in my bed, your bed, on the floor, or in the shower." She watched him smile brightly. "Will you *please* hit on me? Please. I'm standing here half naked. Now's your opportunity, Major Graison. Take your best shot." She didn't see him budge. "Or aren't you up to the challenge?"

Jake took a step forward to her, reached out and cupped her face in his hands. Without hesitation he pressed his lips hard to hers and kissed Cal with everything he was. The fingers on his large hands spread, feeling the contour of her face as he kissed her, trying to not smile as he did. He pulled slightly away, moaned soft, caught his breath, then began to kiss her again.

Cal could feel him moving her, pushing her backwards as he felt her. It was almost borderline frightening to her how intense he was being. She felt her back bump into the wall and she moved her head away. "Jake."

Jake opened his eyes. "Do you wanna stop?"

Cal looked into his eyes, then shifted downward to his body. "No." She pulled him back into her.

"Good." He placed his one hand above her head, flush on the wall as he pressed his body inward against her, hunching down to meet, waist to waist. Sliding his lips from her mouth to her neck, he brought down his hands. Grazing them across her back to her thighs, Jake lifted her up, pulling her legs around his waist and pinning her between the wall and him.

The rush of the moment, the movement, the intensity. Cal could feel him getting more and more into it, burying himself deeper and harder against her. Getting ready for the inevitable moment. Then she felt him stop again. "Jake? What is it?"

He lifted his head from her neck, carrying with him a bashful-type smile. "Cal . . ." He laid his forehead against hers and kissed softly. "It's been a long time for me." He tilted his head almost embarrassed. "Bear with me?"

"And this is coming from the self proclaimed selfish lover?"

"Not with you." He kissed her again. "But if you don't want to because of what I said . . ."



She quickly covered his mouth with her hand. “Shh. Jake . . . make love to me.”

Her words went through him, sending chills surging into him. His hands gripped tighter to her, digging into her hips as he grasped the top of her underwear.

“Jake.” Cal whispered and when he pulled back she motioned her eyes to the smoke alarm. “Maybe we should consider the bathroom instead of the bed?”

“Nah.” Jake shook his head, pressed his lips hard once again to hers, and he kept moving against her as if they weren’t even being watched.

Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
September 3 - 10:10 P.M.

“What are they saying?” Lyle asked as they watched Jake and Cal.
“Turn it up.”

“It’s as loud as it goes. Man, for two people about to do it, they are talking quite a bit.”

“You’re recording all this aren’t you? Aldo says one thousand dollars to each observer who’s on duty and captures it.”

“It’s a video moment.” Stan held the remote. “Let’s just zoom slightly . . . there. Wait . . . is it action time?”

“I think it is?”

“Yep.” Stan smiled as he watched Jake set Cal’s feet to the floor. His hands still lifted her shirt to her waist while he gripped at her.

Lyle pointed to the screen. “Is he?”

“I think he is.” They saw Jake step back and bring himself down to his knees, pulling off Cal’s underwear as he did. “Our man’s going down.”

“Shit. What’s he? . . .” Jake, holding Cal’s underwear in his hand, reached for the desk chair sliding it. “He’s not.”

“He is.”

“No.”

“No!” They both screamed at the same time.

“Shit.” Stan stood up. “Shit. I know what he’s up too. This was going to be good too.”

Jake moved the chair closer to the alarm. They watched him stand upon it, open the cover to the smoke alarm, smile brightly, wiggle his fingers, shove Cal’s underwear in and shut the cap. Monitor two went black.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
September 4 - 3:15 A.M.

The thunderous rolls and cracks of lightening jolted Cal from her deep sleep. Flashes of silver light were seen coming through her small window. The beating of the pouring rain smacked against the pane of glass. It was the first time there that it had rained. It was frightening how severe the storm that brewed outside was. Half asleep, Cal lifted her head slightly from the pillow to the high pitch wind that howled outside. Her heart raced from the sudden awakening, or at least half awakening. As she went to lay her head back down on the pillow, another deafening crack brought a bright flash of light into her room, illuminating a shadowing figure standing at the bottom of her bed. "Jake?"

"Hmm." His voice, deep, raspy came from behind her ear.

Cal rubbed her eyes, the figure was gone. She must have been dreaming. Resting her hand on the arm that draped over her, Cal laid back down and closed her eyes.

^^^

Was it still raining? Cal didn't want to open her eyes, she knew it was morning. She could still hear the thunder and the rain pouring down upon the metal roof that sheltered the building.

She didn't want to get up, her eyes were tightly closed. She felt drained. As she went to lift her shoulder, she realized that she could barely do that, not due to sore muscles, but because she seemed to be neatly and tightly tucked beneath the sheet and blankets. *Jake*. Through her grogginess the reality of what happened the night before hit her. Her stomach twitched warmly when she thought of it. She extended back her leg to feel for him, there was emptiness. "Jake?" Opening her eyes and fighting the tightness of her covers Cal sat up. Jake wasn't there. "Where the hell . . ." As her eyes glanced around the room looking for him, she saw it. Placed upon her pillow, a single wild flower. Smiling with an 'ah' Cal picked it up.



Wondering where he went, she scratched her head as she swung her legs over the side. He had fallen asleep with her. She remembered that.

Standing up from bed she noticed the time. A little after seven. "I guess we're not working out today." Cal, with chills, gathered her clothes and headed to take a shower. She laid her clothes down on the sink, knocked on Jake's door, opening it. "Jake?" She poked her head through. His room was empty. "God I hope I didn't scare him last night."

Kicking off his shoes as he walked in his room, Jake heard the water running. "Shit, she beat me to the punch." He wanted to shower up first, then wake her. Nicely. Then again Jake was a little apprehensive about facing her. Cal could wake up full of regrets. Then he'd end up for six months, sleeping in the next room, remembering their one great night together. But what if it wasn't great? It was time to face the music.

Running his fingers through his soaking wet hair that was getting just long enough to start to look curly, Jake tapped on the closed bathroom door, then opened it just a little. "Cal, you're up."

"Obviously. No work out today?"

"Have you seen that weather? It's bad."

"Can you shut that door, you're letting a draft in."

"Thanks." Jake stepped in and closed the door. As soon as he saw her figure through the shower door, he smiled. Visions of the night before flashed in his mind.

"Where were you?" Cal asked.

"Running."

Cal slid the shower door open a crack peeking out, wiping the water off her face with her hand. "You're soaked. You're gonna get sick." She shut the door. "Thank you for the flower. You did put that flower on my pillow didn't you?"

"Yeah." Jake rubbed the corner of his eye.

"You're owing up to it?" Cal was shocked.

"Hey, I owed up to doing a sappy thing like filling your bed with flowers, I figure one bud is not going to kill my reputation with you any more. So . . ." Jake leaned against the door. "The storm woke you up last night? You called my name." Jake pulled at his drying tee shirt to stop it from sticking to his skin.



"Get this. I hear the storm right? I open my eyes, I could have sworn I saw someone in the room. I thought it was you but you were laying . . ."

"You saw someone in your room, while we were in bed?" Jake sounded shocked.

"It was a dream, it was gone when I looked back at you."

"Jake it was a dream. But . . . I'll let you know next time. Are you O.K.? You seem weird."

"I'll feel better after I take a shower."

Cal slid open the door. "Wanna conserve?" She nodded her head in.

"You want me to take a shower with you?"

"Sure. You are awfully messy." She raised her eyebrows running her hand through her hair. "You don't want to." Cal pulled her head back in and shut the shower door. She rolled her eyes at herself.

"No Cal. I'd love to take a shower with you. But . . ."

"But it's not on the Jake agenda?"

"No!" Jake snapped. "I would never put sex on my agenda. That would be presumptuous of me."

"Then what is it then?" She heard his silence. "Never mind. Forget I asked. I obviously read our situation wrong. I'm sorry."

"What?" Jake opened the sliding door. "No. I was just afraid that you . . ." He got lost in his thoughts when he really took notice of her naked body. "I was afraid you were having regrets or were disappointed in last night."

Cal was surprised. "No. Are you?"

Jake fluttered his lips staring at her from the neck down. "Are you kidding, I loved last night."

"So did I." Reaching out to him, she grabbed tightly to his tee shirt and pulled him in the stall with her, shutting the door.

"Cal, I'm still dressed."

"So what." She brushed her lips against his.

"Damp clothes are impossible to get off not to mention. . ."

"Jake." Cal lifted his wet shirt off, as the water beat upon him. She grazed her mouth sensuously across his neck as she tossed his shirt over the stall. It's wetness smacked hard on the bathroom floor as it landed.

"Oh, now that'll leave mess."

"Jake, shut up." She kissed him as her soapy hands moved across his chest, down to his waist, lowering his shorts.



“Oh God.” He tilted back his head, allowing more space for her to move her lips up and down and across his neck. He felt her naked body. “Pinch me I’m dreaming . . . Ow . . . not there.”

^^^

On his floor, Fr. Dan sat. He leaned against the bathroom door, his head pressed against it as he held tightly to his folded up knees. “Rickie, I am sorry. I know you can hear me. I was wrong, son. Wrong.”

Rickie stared into the mirror, trying to avoid listening to Fr. Dan. The pleading sound was hard to ignore.

“Rickie, I know you’re in there. You have to understand, I just lost it for a moment. Hasn’t that ever happened to you? Haven’t you ever gone nuts for no reason except for stress?”

“Yeah.” Rickie hated to admit it. But the one incident when he worked at ice cream store shot to the forefront of his mind. The one time when the three hundred pound woman couldn’t decide what flavor she wanted and Rickie shoved her cone in her face. “Yeah, I guess I have.” He walked to Fr. Dan’s side and sat on the floor next to the door. “But what can I do?”

“You can let me out.”

“Oh no, padre. They told me to stay away from you. They said you’ve lost it.”

“Do I sound like I’ve lost it, Rickie? If they keep me in here I sure will lose it.”

“Maybe I can talk to everyone, you know, like tell them you’re all better.” Rickie suggested.

“Could you? That would be so great.” Fr. Dan stared at his trembling hands. “But I need to get out of this room. You could let me out through your side.”

“I can’t, padre.” Rickie shook his head.

Frustration and anger filled Fr. Dan, he was grateful that Rickie couldn’t see him. “Rickie. No one has to know. You can let me out at night while everyone is sleeping. Just so I can walk around. Besides, how could you get it any trouble if they find out?”

“That’s true. However they may hate me.”

“I wouldn’t. And Rickie. I pray for you. I pray for you every night. That’s all you need is God. At least if you let me out. You’ll know God is



on your side.”

“Whoa.” Rickie nodded his head. “That’s a tough force to have.”

“So will you? Please?”

Rickie swished his lips from side to side. “If I do this for you at night, you can’t tell anyone when they do unlock your door.”

“I won’t, Rickie.” With a sigh of relief, Fr. Dan’s body relaxed. “I won’t. God bless you.”

“Thanks.” Rickie smiled at the bonus benediction, and he didn’t even sneeze.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
September 6 - 2:25 A.M.

Cal couldn't get comfortable in her bed, she told Jake he would hog up way too much room. It seemed like every time she would fall asleep, he would move and she would awaken. The night was dragging on as she laid in the silent room awakened by his roaming hand that seemed to be stuck on her breast. *Why is he touching me, is he sleeping?* His hand let go and she felt it move across her neck. As his fingers grazed, she felt the odd feeling of a pinch, a painful pinch that immediately flung her eyes open. She lifted her head and placed her fingers to her throat, it was wet. *Blood?* Trying to catch glimpse in her dark room she saw the shimmering across the room. The bright moonlight from outside the small window cast a backdrop off the shadowing figure who stood there. The moons rays reflected in his hand.

"Shit." She rolled her body to her side. "Jake, wake up. Jake." She shook him as he laid on his side. "Someone's in the . . ." Shaking hard enough, Jake rolled to his back. His eyes wide open, his pillow bloody. Jake's throat had been slit. "No!"

Breathing heavily Cal jumped up to a sitting position. It was a dream. It was all a bad dream. She was alone in her room, her dark quiet room. With her heart beating out of control, she ran her hand over the empty spot next to her. "Maybe I should have let . . ." Tightly it pulled at her, something around her neck. It choked her, burned her and took her breath away. Desperately trying not too struggle too much, Cal slipped her finger between the thin rope and her neck. She fought for air, and with every ounce she had in her, against the pulling that occurred, she cried out. "Jake!" The rope loosened.

There was something about Cal's call to him that frightened him awake. She sounded desperate. Jake flung off his covers and jumped from the bed in the same motion. Charging through the bathroom into Cal's dark room, he heard her heavy breathing. "Cal."

"Someone was in here." She pointed to the door. "They ran out."

"Fuck." Jake stormed passed her and to her door, flinging it open. He



ran out into the hall. It was dark. No one was around. "Cal." He walked back in her room. "Are you sure you weren't dreaming?"

Cal reached out her hand and turned on her light. She positioned herself better in bed, holding her throat. "It felt real."

"It's just that no . . ." Jake saw it on the floor. The two foot section of clothes line. He picked it up clenching it with anger in his hand as he sat on the bed. "Did you see who it was?"

"No." Cal rubbed her neck.

"Move your hands." Jake lowered them and looked to the burn on her neck. "Son of a bitch!" He stood up and charged to his room. "I'll be back." He came back in, stepping into his pants. "Stay here!" Jake locked the door and pulled it closed.

Cal sat on her bed trying to shake the fogginess she felt. Her head was light. And all she kept thinking was the past couple weeks. Jake telling her someone had been in her room. She didn't listen. Swinging her feet over the bed she could hear Jake. His loud bellowing voice calling out. First she'd hear the banging of knocks, then Jake call out. 'John get up! Dining area Now!' Then he'd move to the next door and do the same thing. Bang and call the name. She wondered if she should go to the dining area, but she decided against it. She was a little shaken and not a state she wanted people to see her in.

^^^

John was the last one to straggle into the dining area. His hair stood on edge, and he wore an awful shade of blue sweat pants. They were bright, and wrinkled,. John rubbed his head and pulled out a chair at the table that everyone except for Jake sat around. "What is it Jake? All of the sudden you decide you need friends?"

Jake's face was stern, his lip twitched as he glared at all of them, staying quiet. Then, scaring and surprising them, he slammed down his hand on the table with a loud bang. Everyone jumped. He left behind the clothes line. "One of you were in Cal's room. Any of you care to own up?" He waited. "I didn't think so." Slowly, with arms crossed over his bare chest he walked behind each of them. "I'm just going to tell all of you this. Guilty party listen up. From this moment on I will be in Cal's room. So if you want to chance coming in there again. Be my guest." Jake stopped head



of the table. "I'm waiting for you." He laid his hands on the hard surface and leaned into those seated around speaking eerily calm "If I find out who you are, if I catch you, there will be no discussions, there will be no pleading. I won't just kill you. I'll tear you apart with my bare hands." He slammed his hands on the table and stepped away.

^^^

Cal breathed in reassurance when she heard Jake open his side of his room. "Jake?"

"Yeah." He stepped from the bathroom. "I'm sorry. I didn't ask you. Are you all right?" He walked over to her.

"I'm fine. Did you find out who it was?" She grabbed the hand that reached to her.

"Nope. And we won't." He led her to the bed. "Whoever it was is well aware I know about them."

Cal sat down. "I don't understand, Jake, we've only been here a little over a month. Isn't it too soon for someone to be snapping?"

"It seems to be. But we have to understand, the people running this, they're helping push things." Jake sat down next to her running his hand on her leg. "If they chose weak people to verse the strong, you're going to have that. Unless of course they knowingly placed someone in here that's dangerous."

"Why would they do that?"

"Yep. A ringer. Someone to throw us through a loop. It's just a guess so take it for what it's worth. But take a look at the mental states that some of these people were in."

Cal's eyes lifted to him. "Griff? He has a history . . ."

"I doubt it's Griff." Jake tried to be reassuring. "Whoever it was ran when they heard you call my name. Griff is deaf."

Cal couldn't believe she didn't think of that. Her face showed it. "Sorry for the momentary lapse of stupidity."

"Forgiven." Jake stood up. "Now get some sleep. I have a feeling they may not bother you again." He rested his hand on the side of her face, he brought his lips down, but stopped. "Good night."

"Jake." She grabbed his hand as he backed up. "Why didn't you kiss me?"



“Am I allowed? I didn’t know if I could do that, you know, just kiss you when I felt like it. Can I?”

Cal had to laugh. She was grateful for the tension breaker. “Absolutely.”

“Thank you.” He kissed her quickly and went to his room, moments later he came back. His trusty blanket and pillow. “Goodnight, Cal.” He laid them down on the floor.

“Jake what are you doing?”

“I don’t want to hear it Cal. I’m staying right in here. From now on. Like it or not. I should have stayed in here after we . . . well, you know . . . but no, you kicked me out. So no arguments. I’m staying.”

“Jake, I’m not telling you to leave.” She folded down the other side of the blanket. “I’m trying to tell you not to sleep on the floor.” She laid in bed on her side, scooting closer to the edge.

Glad for her suggestion--the floor wasn’t he first choice to sleep--he slipped into bed with her. Reaching around her, Jake shut out the light and let his arm fall over her as he closed in comfortably behind her to sleep.



Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
September 6 - 1:10 P.M.

“Aldo come in.” Dr. Jefferson stood from behind his desk walking toward the angry appearing investor. “Have a seat.” He tried to seem pleasant. “What can I do for you?”

Sounding as angry as he looked, Aldo lit up a cigarette and sat in the black leather chair across from Dr. Jefferson. “Why don’t you tell me what’s up. What is this fuckin shit I’m hearing about? I come in for a visit. I stop in the observation room to pick up my poll winnings and they tell me about what happened in Cal’s room this morning. Plus . . . they said it wasn’t the first time.”

“No.” Dr. Jefferson said. “I’m sorry to tell you it wasn’t.”

“Dr. J. Don’t you think it’s a bit early for this shit to be happening?”

“I certainly do. We didn’t expect it. Not yet that is.”

“This person . . .” Aldo puffed frantically and crossed his legs. “Is this person *the catch*.”

“I’m afraid so, yes. Why Cal is chosen. I don’t know.”

“This soldier guy. He can take *the catch*?” Aldo asked.

“Right now . . .” Dr. Jefferson wiped the ashes off his desk. “*The catch* is no match for Major Graison. *The Catch* however, will give him a run for his money in a small amount of time. She’s in good hands though. You couldn’t ask for anyone better to look out for her.”

Aldo sat back running his hand down his mustache. “But this Graison guy, does he like her enough to *really* watch out for her?”

“Like her?” Dr. Jefferson stood up. “We believe *like* is an understatement. Watch Major Graison carefully. If anyone can do it. He’ll unwillingly ensure your win in this game.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” Aldo smiled and smoked away.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
September 7 - 8:20 A.M.

“Cal?” Jake had to slow down as they made their way back to the building from their workout. “What is up with you? You’re dragging.”

Cal’s head hung low, she lifted it, speaking softly. “Sorry. I guess I just don’t feel like working out today.” She spoke as if she didn’t even want to talk.

“What’s up with that? We have to stay in shape, Cal. Winter’s coming. It’s going to be impossible to get a full work out then.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure out a way.” Cal said.

Jake watched her, she sniffled about three times and she stared past him. “Are you sick?”

“No.”

“Are you mad at me about something?”

Cal gave a sad smile. “No. Not at all.”

“Good. All right. Let’s go to breakfast and . . .”

“I’m going to pass on breakfast. I don’t feel hungry.”

“And you’re not sick?” Jake was confused by her mood. “All right.” He shrugged. “I’ll grab something, bring it back to the room, and figure out something.” They reached the door to the building, Jake opened it for her. “What do you feel like doing today?”

Cal stepped through. “Dying perhaps.”

Cal’s response to him shocked Jake to the point where he just froze. He stood speechless still holding the door as she kept walking. He followed behind her as she walked through the gathering room to the hall, and then into her room.

Jake hesitated for a moment, caught his bearings and opened her door. Cal sat on her bed. “You wanna tell me what that statement was for?”

Cal lifted her hand to him. “Don’t take me literally. Please. I’m having a bad day.”

He sat down on the bed next to her and grabbed her hand. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”



“No, Jake.” Cal looked at him. “I’m having a bad day because . . . today is Jesse’s birthday.” Cal could feel the lump forming in her throat. “It’s the first birthday, since she died.” Her eyes closed.

Jake moved closer to her pulling her into him.

Cal fell into him. As soon as she touched him, as soon as she felt his arms, she lost it. “Jake, I can’t believe how much I miss her . . . I’m sorry.” She wiped her eyes and tried to pull away.

“No Cal.” Jake pulled her back. “You go ahead. It’s a hard day to face. I know it is.” He cupped his hand on the back of her head, holding her tightly to his chest.

“I just don’t know how I go each day. It’s not getting easier. It’s getting harder. I keep expecting to see her, hear her. And she’s not coming back. She’ll never be back.”

Jake could feel her tremble. “I know it doesn’t seem like it, but it will happen. You’ll go on. You are going on. You’re strong. And you have to let it out at times, like this. If you don’t, you’ll get hard and cold. Trust me. I know.”

“You’re not hard and cold, Jake, not like you think.”

“With you I’m not.” Jake pulled her back into him.

Cal let out a breath, wiping her eyes as she moved back. “You know, I don’t know how I think I’m going to make it through this project. I can’t even make it through this day without breaking.”

“This day is different. And you will make it through this project. If I have to drag you, or stand before you to make sure nothing gets to you, I will. I refuse to end this thing alone. Now . . .” He ran his hand down her face, he saw she seemed better. “Whether you like it or not, you have to eat. I’m going to head down to the dining area and I’ll bring something back.”

“I’m not hungry. But you can go down and eat. Don’t feel you have to eat in here with me.”

“Are you kidding?” Jake waved his hand at her as he stood up. “I hate them fuckin’ people. I look for any excuse not to be around them. I’ll be back.”

“Why do you do it? Why do you worry so much about my eating. You always have.”

Jake shrugged his shoulders. “You mean aside from the fact that I’m crazy about you?” He saw Cal show a blushing smile. “Eating is important. Not just for survival. But for the mind.” He placed his index finger to his



temple. "A strong body builds a strong mind."

"Is that on the same lines as milk does a body good?"

"Somewhat yes." Jake headed to the door and stopped when he realized she was making a joke. "Good one." He smiled and pointed. "I'll be right back." He opened the door.

"Jake?" Cal stood up, she had caught his attention. "Are you really . . . are you really crazy about me?"

"Yeah, I am." His hand gripped the edge of the door. "I have been since the second I met you. Why else do you think I was so mean to you?" With a laugh he closed the door.

^^^

Thinking that he refused to bring her another granola bar, Jake looked to the shelves to see what he could possibly give Cal that she would semi eat. He grabbed two bags of cereal, and two bowls. He set the pouches in the bowls to get a large glass to carry milk back with him. He reached upward towards the cups.

"Hey, handsome."

Jake heard Jennifer's voice. He paused momentarily in his reach then continued.

"Jake, I'm talking to you." She pestered.

"Oh." Jake turned around, she was right there. "Excuse me." He walked to the table setting everything down. "Spoons." He snapped his finger and went to the utensils. "Excuse me." He moved past her.

"Do you have a minute?"

"Yeah." Grabbing the spoons, Jake opened the refrigerator and pulled out the milk. He began to pour it in to the glass, leaving room so he didn't splash on his way back.

"Jennifer began to get dizzy watching him move about. "Jake, could you stop for a second. I have to ask you something."

"Make it fast." He stopped.

"Thank you." Jennifer leaned on the table facing him. "We need to talk to you about . . ." She stopped, squinched up her face and placed her finger to her ear. "About . . ." She shook her head, still holding her ear. "About . . ."

"About what for crying out loud!" Jake yelled.



“Fr. Dan. We want to let him out. What do you think?”

Jake snickered. “I don’t give a fuck. Do what you want.”

“Don’t you care? You are part of this group.”

“No I am not part of this group. I’m part of the experiment.”

Jennifer started to get antsy with him. “You need to voice an opinion.”

“I need to get back to my room.” Jake moved passed her. “I’m getting my stuff.”

“Aren’t you concerned that he might be dangerous. We don’t want you angry if we let him out.”

“Don’t worry about me, or Cal for that matter.” Jake was going to attempt the balancing act. “I have that covered.”

“No!” Jennifer shouted loudly.

Jake jolted his head to her shaking it. “I’m out of here.”

Jennifer looked to her right, her head tilted down, her words mumbled as if she were hiding them. “I said shut up. Just shut up. No. Just shut up.” She gritted her teeth at the thin air.

“O.K.” Jake arms full, and holding the uncovered milk began to leave.

Mumbling to herself a little bit more, Jennifer shrieked out in her loudest manner at Jake who began to leave the room. “Where do you get off!?” Jennifer chased him, keeping up to his quick pace. “I am talking to you. You just think that you’re the big shot don’t you?” She continued shouting at him. “Answer me! Answer me!” She poked him in the back with her index finger.

Jake ignored her, he merely carried his and Cal’s breakfast, occasionally stopping to put his finger to his ear.

“Everyone has tried to be nice to you.” She picked up a book in the gathering room as they walked through it. “You just give everyone shit.” She hailed the book at him.

Jake felt it slam into his back. “Son of a bitch.” He turned his head and saw her arms full aiming at him as she followed. He picked up his pace.

“Then you have the nerve . . .” A missed toss. “. . . to wake us up in the middle of the night.” Another throw as they walked to the sleeping rooms. “Because your girlfriend tells you one of us was in the room.” She nailed him with her last book. “Maybe it was you.”

Jake was at his wits end. He opened the door to Cal’s room and walked in, calmly. “Breakfast.” He made sure the door was locked.

Cal’s eyes shifted from the door to Jake who put the food on the desk.



“Is Jennifer yelling?”

“Yep. And throwing books at me too. She’s gone.” He turned to Cal, hands on hips. “Wanna eat.”

Cal placed her ear closer to the door. “Who is she talking to?”

Jennifer’s voice could be heard from the other side, she spoke loudly. “Do it. I can’t I’m not strong enough. You can’t take his attitude. What am I supposed to do. I can’t. Step aside.”

Cal gave an odd look to Jake almost laughing. “What is she . . .” A loud rumbling bang hit into the door, making Cal’s ears ring. “Jake?”

Jennifer’s shouting and the banging grew louder on the other side. “Jake! Jake! Let me in there! I’m not done with you!”

Cal covered her ears at the continuous banging. “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing. I was even civil.” He fixed the cereal. “Let’s have our . . .” Jake walked to the door. He slammed his fist on it. “Knock it off, we’re trying to eat.” He shook his head. “Dumb broad.”

With a loud scream the door shook from another blow by Jennifer and then there was silence.

Jake shrugged. “Must have worked.”

“Jake, I don’t think.” Cal went for the door, this time beating Jake’s reach. She opened it. Jennifer laid on the floor, her head bleeding. “Oh my God Jake, she knocked herself out. We have to do something.

“No we don’t.” He looked down at Jennifer then shut the door. “If she banged against the door until she was unconscious what does that tell you?”

“That she’s not in the right frame of mind?”

“No. It means she’s fuckin gone.” Jake reached to the desk. “Now eat. And . . . get used to it Cal. It’s only gonna get worse. That’s two down.” He slid the desk chair to across from Cal, grabbed his cereal and sat down. “And it’s only been a month.”



OVER THE EDGE



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Investor's Meeting - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
October 6 - 8:00 A.M.

Aldo tried not to look like he was gloating while he sat with Thomas, the investor who had Jennifer. But he did. He even let his moustache grow a bit longer for the meeting because he knew he was doing well in the game. Reaching his hand to Thomas who sat next to him, Aldo rested it on his back. "Things could turn around."

"I doubt it." Thomas brought his lips down to his coffee cup, slurping it up to him. "I highly doubt it. What happened? It hardly seems fair. Especially that they would still be going on with her."

Dr. Jefferson who had been listening, interrupted. "I beg to differ." He spoke. "Yes we went after Jennifer. The same way we went after Fr. Dan, Cal, and Griff. Cal beat hers, she was the only one. . Now Griff, *we* can see what is happening to Griff, but he is too smart to let the other's see yet." Dr. Jefferson moved his way to the head of the table and pulled out his notes. "What we were doing to Fr. Dan, Griff, and Jennifer. We stopped. What has been happening to these people in the past two weeks. Is them, not us."

Thomas lifted his head. "So you basically pushed her over the edge?"

Dr. Jefferson shook his head. "Not exactly, we pushed her to the edge. It was hers decision to take the leap."

"So I'm out?" Thomas asked. "Just like that?"

"No." Dr. Jefferson answered. "She's still in the game. There's still a chance she may come back. I do have to remind you, all of you." Dr. Jefferson peered around the group. "We're getting ready to head into the next phase. Not only mentally, but physically the tolls are taken. Cabin fever will start to set in, combine that with the elements and what we have in store . . ." He gave a shrug to his shoulders. "Ask any of the vet investors. It will be quite fun."

Aldo sat certain through the meeting that he would make it through the next phase. The entire time that Dr. Jefferson spoke, Aldo gazed at Stewart. He had Major Graison and looked as cocky as Aldo. With Fr. Dan



breaking, Jennifer gone, and Griff, according to Dr. Jefferson well on his way. That left Carlos, Rickie and John. None of them, though seemingly mentally strong, had the physical attributes to withstand what would soon happen.

After the meeting Aldo had to do it. He had to speak to Stewart. As the other investors, some looking glum, some hopeful, walked about, Aldo perched himself in the seat next to Stewart. "So, Stew. Looks like we may be splitting the pot in the end."

"Highly doubtful." He took another drink. "Your girl is nothing with out my guy. Wait, he'll tire of her and he won't carry her."

"She doesn't need him to carry her. She's tough on her own."

"But not strong enough physically." Stewart pointed while holding his glass. "She'll need him at one point and he won't be there. My horse, will prevail. He's better."

"And what happens if they both make it?" Aldo asked. "That's a possibility."

"You knew the rules, Aldo." He swished the ice in his glass. "You've been here before. If it comes down to it. We can force the experiment to push it to the end. And I will do that. It's eight million dollars. That's a lot of money."

"So is four asshole." Aldo went to stand up and stopped. "You know, care to make a little wager? Say a hundred grand, my girl makes it to the end?"

"You're on." Stewart agreed.

"Good. I'll have my men draw up some papers." Aldo, grabbed his own drink and slipped away from the table. Yes he knew the rules, and he knew a single winner could be forced, but Aldo knew he would do what it took to make sure, this time, he walked away a winner. Looking back one more time at Stewart, Aldo saw something in him that he didn't like. Yes all the investors were there because of greed, but Stewart, he was there because of something else. Deadly Greed. And to Aldo, that could take away all the fun.



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
October 6 - 8:10 A.M.

"I tried to tell you, but every time I brought it up you changed the subject." Cal told Jake as they stood before the door in her room.

"That's because I don't like her."

"Then see, you miss the fun. Jennifer's personalities have emerged again. You just have to watch. Maggie tends to flip her hair quite a bit when she speaks, Rosemary hunches. Of course I don't know the other ones, Rickie said there's four of them. You know *I* knew this and I see her not even five minutes a day." Cal started to laugh. "I cannot believe you. God, Jake, are you losing your edge?"

"What did you say?"

"Losing your edge." Cal opened her door. "I'm actually hungry this morning, you want to come with me or not?"

"Yeah." Jake followed. "Do you really think so?"

"Jake. Stop. You're not."

"Cal." He halted her. "I'm being serious. This isn't good. What if I am. How did I miss the Jennifer thing? Maybe I am so wrapped up in using my instinct, I'm not using my head."

"And how is that bad?" She folded her arms.

Jake took a moment to try to think of how best to explain it to her. "Things aren't as clear when you don't use your head. Things are not going to get easier, what if something happens and I react wrong. It could be costly."

"To who? To you?"

"More so to you."

"Then don't worry about it." Cal stepped forward and started to walk again. "Don't worry about me. You put too much emphasis on that. Worry about yourself."

"But I can take care of myself."

"And I can't?" Cal was upset by that remark.

"You can . . . to an extent. But let's face it Cal, if the physical elements stack up against you, you're . . ." He motioned his hand out to her. ". . . you're . . . without me you're basically screwed. Look at you."



Cal's mouth dropped open, she began to walk the other way back to her room.

"Where are you going? I thought you were hungry."

"I feel an argument brewing. And I refuse to stand in the hall and have it." She opened her door. "In Major Graison." Her orders were serious. Once he walked in, Cal slammed the door. "I never told you to protect me. I never wanted or needed that. You chose to do that on your own. Is that clear?"

"Yes it is." Jake rolled his eyes at her.

"You've taken it upon yourself to be my guardian angel. I came up here on my own Jake. I don't expect you to protect me. Nor would I be mad if you decided not to. Got that."

"Right. I'm suppose to just stand around and let something happen to you. Something I can prevent?" He fluttered his lips at her. "Yes I chose to watch over you. Because I want to. But aside from that, don't you think it's my responsibility to do that, because you're a woman . . ."

"Oh . . ." Cal was dumbfounded. "Oh . . ." She waved her hand about. "Protect Jennifer. She's a woman."

"I want to protect you. You need me to . . ."

"I just refuse to discuss this anymore with you. If something should happen to me, Major Graison and I can't handle it, it is my loss not yours."

Jake made a loudly buzzing sound. "Wrong! It is my loss if something happens to you. You know it. I'm involved with you, Cal. And what if it's that involvement that is the cause my losing my edge. It's that involvement that is making me think with my heart instead of my head when it comes to you. That's wrong."

"Jake!" Cal sounded annoyed. "Do you hear how stupid you sound? It's human, human nature. Deal with it. And to help you along . . ." She walked back out of her room. "Quit protecting me."

"I can't do that." He shut her door and followed. Once again they would attempt to go to eat. "I like watching out for you, it has great benefits. Besides, you wouldn't know what to do if I didn't pester you or follow you."

"No, you're the one who wouldn't know what to do. You're the one who latched on to me, probably just so you could get laid." Cal joked.

"No, no. Sex with you, was the farthest thing from my mind . . . the . . . first couple days. But, I could keep occupied."



“Really?” Cal stopped center of the gathering room. “Why don’t we see who folds first, me or you. Let’s have a break up”

“A break up? What does that include or not include. I need some basic ground rules.”

Cal held out her hand, flicking out each finger, tapping on it as she spewed forth her list. “No working out. No meals together. No talking. No games. No taking walks. No spur of the moment drinking games. No showering . . . together. No sleeping in the same room and no sex.”

“Forget it.” Jake stopped her line of talk. “I concede right now.”

“You never concede.”

“On this I do. And why is Rickie following us?”

Snapping his finger, out from a doorway Rickie jumped. “Dude, you spied me. Hey, can I hang out with you two. I like when you fight.”

“No.” Jake answered in his walk.

“Yes.” Cal stated.

“Cool.” Rickie tagged along. “Oh, dudes, did you know?”

“Know what?” Jake asked then noticed Rickie pointing into the diningroom. “Shit. They let him out.”

Fr. Dan sat alone at a table, slouched and seemingly sunk into his own world along with his cereal.

“Rickie,” Jake whispered. “Do not say anything to him. I’m not in the mood to pull him off of you again.”

Rickie gave a thumbs up and walked into the diningroom with Jake and Cal. He felt bad ignoring the padre, especially since he delivered all those blessings to Rickie through the locked bathroom door. So to be cordial, Christian, and also to irk Jake, Rickie sat with Fr. Dan.



Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
October 6 - 9:00 P.M.

Aldo pushed the doors open with his backside, his arms filled. Two large pizza boxes rested in his right, a bottle of soda in his left. "Dinner, boys." He tossed the boxes to the table, they slid.

Stan smiled as he lifted the lid. "Aldo you are like the coolest. Isn't he the coolest Lyle?"

"The coolest." Lyle took a look. "Hey Aldo? Any plates?"

"I'm getting them." Aldo strutted over to the refreshment area and retrieved plates for the three of them. "Munch." He himself decided to indulge as he took a seat next to Stan. "Anything yet?"

"Depends. Rickie has Maggie high right now, and John is getting perturbed because he keeps knocking on the door, and Jennifer keeps saying that Jennifer is not there."

Aldo laughed and played with the cheese on his pizza. "My girl?"

Stan shook his head. "Still has not spoken to Graison since this morning. He got aggravated because she didn't eat, and he stole he goodie stash. She's hanging with him, but not talking. He's pissed."

"What else is new?" Aldo said sarcastically and walked over to the monitors. "The catch hasn't gone back into the woods then I guess?"

Lyle shook his head and wiped his mouth. "Nope. He hits the woods about three in the morning. Infrared picked him up going there. Unfortunately sometimes he goes too deep for the cameras. He has everything ready in his room. That's what's scary."

Aldo tapped his fingers nervously on the table. "How long did they say he's been digging?"

"He's been digging since the beginning, but more so the past three nights." Lyle answered. "We think the carved wood is going in the bottom of his so called pit. He's kept it covered pretty well. Those spikes look ready. We think he's setting it tonight."

"Son of a bitch." Aldo slammed his fist. "Is it my girl that he's going after, or anyone in general? I mean only three people walk those woods regularly. Cal, Graison and Jennifer."

Stan shook his head. "We think it's anyone. He needs the thrill of the catch. And don't forget, you know something no one else knows. You



know about the experiment. That's starting to take effect and that is causing a lot of it too."

"I see." Aldo looked down at his watch. "I'm heading back to my hotel. I want to be here in the morning to see if anyone gets caught in it. Call me, no matter what time, if something happens."

"We'll do that Aldo," Lyle answered. He saw Aldo snatch up another piece of pizza and grab his jacket to head to the door. "You shouldn't look so concerned."

"I am." Aldo said. "How can I not be. The way Graison and my girl tromp through those woods in their own private games, one of them are going to hit it. I feel it."

"Then maybe it will be Graison." Stan spoke.

"No!" Aldo snapped back. "Neither of them. If it's Cal I lose. If it's Graison . . ." he exhaled. "I lose too."

CHAPTER TWENTY

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
October 7 - 8:15 A.M.

She had to stop. Out of breath would be an understatement. Needing just a rest, Cal dropped to the ground at the top of the hill before they headed down to the buildings. The ground was hard, it still had frost on it, and her finger tips were getting numb from the cold.

"Keep moving." Jake walked up to her and reached his hand down. "Now."

Cal raised her hand and showed him her middle finger.

"Very nice. Very nice." He rested his hands on his hips, his breath visible as he spoke. "Let's move. We'll be down there in a minute. You're dragging today."

"I'm not dragging. You're working out like you have something to prove."

"Oh, she speaks." Jake pulled at his ear.

"I spoke to you last night."

"Yeah, to call me a dick."

"It's still speaking to you." Cal began to get up, she swiped away the hand he held out to her.

"You can't still be mad at me."

Cal rolled her eyes at him and started to walk. "I'm not mad at you." She pulled the sleeves to her sweatshirt down to cover her hands. "Even though you went over board on the running and climbing."

"I did not. Winter's coming and . . ."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm tired of hearing it. And give me back my food. I just really want to know who appointed you king of my dietary needs."

"And I want to know why you're being so indignant about this."

Cal slowed up her walking, that always angered Jake. "It's my food. My body. Why do you have to have things your way all the time? It's Jake's way or no way."

"That's the best way."

"Oh, God you frustrate me." Cal growled her words out.



"And you walk too slow."

"Then go ahead." Cal motioned her hand at him. "Walk without me."

"I think I will." Jake sniffed loudly walking backwards. "You can't keep up with me anyhow. I thought for sure being that I'm older than you. God are you acting old." He turned around, laughing and began to walk.

"Old? Did he call me old?" Figuring she'd show him, run up to him and pass him in a challenge, Cal took off. She veered to her left to the steeper but shorter route down. Running and picking up speed she made noise. Noise that made Jake turn around.

"She's challenging me?" He smiled, then turned back.

Ready to call out to him, merely ten feet from him, Cal felt the weakness of the ground beneath her. It gave way and with a loud shriek she fell though. She felt like she was falling forever as she desperately reached out her hands to stop herself. What she grabbed onto frightened her. The sharp wooden point edged inches from her face as she came to a halt, feeling a painful ripping in her leg.

"Cal!" Jake spun around. He didn't see her. "Cal!"

"Jake!" Cal called, the earth four feet above her. She looked down. Four or five of spikes laid another five feet below. "Jake, hurry." She tried to free her bleeding leg which was now wedged in a branch.

"Cal." Jake followed her voice. He saw it as he approached. The indented brush. His heart sunk. A trap. "Cal." He rushed to the hole sliding to his knees, looking down and seeing her.

"Jake, help me." She looked up at him. "I can't hold on."

"Grab my hand." Jake laid on his stomach and reached down.

"I can't let go. I'll fall."

"I won't let you. Just reach for me." His hand extended further.

Holding her breath, she reached up to him, her finger barely touched his when she felt the safety of the grip of his strong hand.

"I have you." Jake brought his other hand down bracing her arm and lifting her up. "Are you hurt?"

Cal grunted some in the freeing of her wedged leg, "I'm all right. Pull me up." Using her legs to help, she felt being lifted to safety.

"Holy shit." Jake stood up lifting Cal to her feet. "Are you O.K.?" He placed his hand on her face.

"My leg." Cal lowered her hand.

"Fuck, you're bleeding really bad." Jake squatted down to look at the



gash. "This is bad." He stood up. "I'll carry you."

"No I can . . ." Before she knew it, she was in his arms. " . . . walk."

"I can't believe I let this happen." Jake upset with himself, carried Cal quickly back down the hill. Only this time, watching for anymore traps.

^^^

Bringing Cal into the bathroom, Jake set her down on the commode. He knelt down before her resting her leg on his knees. Extending his long reach, he turned on the sink and grabbed a towel. He wet it while balancing her injured leg. "How bad does it hurt?"

"My legs were cold. That helped." Cal tried not to show the actuality of her pain.

Jake wrung out the towel and brought it down. He wiped off the blood surrounding the wound, then the wound itself. The four inch gash bled despite his attempts to hold it closed. "This needs stitched."

"Then I guess I'm out of luck."

"Not necessarily." He brought his damp bloody hand up and touched her face.

Cal felt the wetness. "Thanks, Jake." She knew he left a mark.

"Hold this tight." He stood up and went into her room.

"Where are you . . ." A bottle of Jack Daniels was set on the sink before her as he walked into his room. " . . . going?"

"I can't say it'll be good . . ." Jake set a clear plastic pouch on the sink next to the bourbon, then knelt down again before her, grabbing her leg. "But it'll work."

"What is in that pouch?" Cal lifted her eyes.

"Sutures."

"No." Cal fought to retrieve her leg. "No, Jake. I'm not letting you stitch my leg."

"Cal." He braced her. "What choice do you have? Bleed or heal. You have to heal. You can't take a chance on infection."

"I can't let you stitch my flesh."

"I've done it before." He grabbed the pouch and opened it. The sutures were already prepared and wrapped in gauze was a tiny tube of antibiotic ointment. "I always come prepared."

"Who have you stitched before."



“Myself.”

“It’s the facial scar isn’t it? Because that’s a really bad one.”

“Cal, please.” He grabbed for the Jack Daniels. “This is going to hurt.” He unscrewed it with his teeth then poured some over her cut onto the towel.

Cal, who had been holding back diligently, screamed loudly.

“Sorry.” He pulled out the sutures. “Just hold still. I’ll do it as quickly as I can.”

Cal reached down and stopped his hand moments before he inserted the needle into her leg. “Do it correctly instead of quickly.”

“Now watch carefully, you may have to do this to me.”

“You’ll stitch yourself.” Cal took a quick breath as she watched him work. The blood seeping out from her gash as in some final hurrah as he tugged the thread, pulling the gap closed. She grew skirmish. “Oh, that’s gross.” Despite the fact that it wasn’t even nine in the morning, Cal reached for the Jack Daniels and took a long drink. Then she took another.



Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
October 7 - 8:45 A.M.

Aldo knew when he returned that morning that something was up. The way that Barb and Tina both turned their chairs around to him when he walked in the door. The glum faces they made at him. Not the excitement he expected to see when he walked into the room with their promised Eggs Benedict breakfast. "What's wrong, Barb?" Aldo set the Styrofoam containers down gently.

"Cal fell into the trap." Barb watched him sit down slowly, covering his eyes. "He pulled her out."

Aldo slid his eyes above his finger tips. "Graison?"

"Yes." Barb answered. "She was bleeding badly. He carried her into the bathroom."

"She's alive though." Aldo sat back in relief.

Tina indicated to Cal's monitor. "Jake's going in her drawers. He must be getting her clothes." They watched as Jake pulled something out for Cal to wear and take it into the bathroom.

Aldo leaned forward. "He looks frazzled. Can you turn up the sound?"

Tina tried. "It's as loud as it goes. The bathroom is next to impossible to hear anything in. Maybe if we're quiet."

Aldo stood from his seat and walked to where the speaker was. He listened as best as he could. Upon hearing Cal bitch at Jake that she could clean up and dress herself, Aldo re-faced Tina and Barb. "She's complaining. She's fine."

Barb let out an audible sigh of relief. "I'm very glad for you, Aldo. You deserve this luck."

"Thank you." He walked back to the table and passed them their containers of breakfast. "Now, if Graison is as smart as we hope he is, he'll scour them woods for traps. And at the very least . . ." He turned back to the screen that showed an empty Cal's room. "Make it safe for them to be out there." He opened his own container. "Let's hope."



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
October 7 - 9:00 A.M.

"Jake, really, I'm fine." Cal, with his help, hobbled to her bed. "The Jack helped a lot."

"Yeah well, don't complain come four o'clock this afternoon when you're hung over." Jake lifted the pillows for her back to lean on. "Here, set this ice under your leg."

"I'm not drunk. Trust me, the pain eliminated that." She scooted over to center of the double bed.

Seemingly down, Jake sat on the edge of the bed next to her. He rested his hand on her knee, it glided up and down her leg as he spoke to her. "I feel really bad about what happened today. I feel like it's my fault."

"It's not." Cal moved her face to his. "And I won't let you blame yourself. So don't even do it." She lifted his chin. Softly she touched her lips to his.

"If I would have been more alert I would have seen it. It was obvious. But no, I was too busy worrying about making up with you."

Cal rested her head back on the pillow. "I appreciate how you helped me. Can you leave it at that and not make it into a mind argument within yourself."

"All right." He started to pull his hand away. "We didn't eat yet . . ."

"There you are with the food thing."

"Hey you're the one drinking on an empty stomach."

"Two drinks. And it was only to help with the agony you put me through while you played Dr. Graison." She saw his head lower. "Jake, stop this." She lifted it, then grabbed his hand and placed it on her thigh. "Thank you for playing doctor with me."

Jake's stone face finally cracked a little as her lips met his. He pressed his mouth harder to hers as he kissed her back against the pillow.

"Dudes!" Rickie called through the door, pounding.

Jake separated slowly from Cal. "Impeccable timing that kid has."

"Dudes, come on!" Rickie knocked louder and more frequent.

Jake slid from the bed, tucked in his tee shirt and opened the door. "What is it Rickie?"

"What's up, Sarge?" Rickie walked right by him. "Cal-babe, I heard



you had the most severest of accidents.”

“Yes, I fell in a hole.” Cal told him.

“Was it a big one?”

“Pretty big.”

“Whoa. Anyway I brought you a gift. Hold out your hand.” He waited for Cal to do so. “Here you go babe.” He placed in her palm a pink pill.

Jake was watching. “Wait a minute.” He opened Cal’s hand. “What are you giving her?”

“Chill Sarge. It’s only a Percocet. I brought them with me. It’ll take the edge off the pain.”

Jake snatched up the pill. “She’s been drinking, she can’t take this.” He placed it on her dresser. “But we appreciate it Rickie. If she needs it later, I’ll make sure that she gets it.”

“No problem. You guys want me to leave now?”

“Actually . . . No.” Jake pulled a chair over for Rickie. “Stay here for a minute until I get back. I want to get us something to eat.”

Rickie sat in the chair. “I’ll babysit the Cal-babe.”

“Thank you.” Jake rested his hand lightly on Cal’s knee, leaned close, quickly kissed her and stepped to the door. “I’ll be back. And, Rickie, don’t let her take that pill.”

“Aye-Aye Sarge.” Rickie saluted.

Jake paused before stepping out. Not only did Rickie have the wrong rank, he had the wrong branch of the service again as well. Stopping himself from saying anything, chalking it up to Rickie’s love for irking him, he left the room.

“Sarge is tense.”

“Yes, he is.” Cal agreed.

“O.K., now that he’s gone.” Rickie pointed backwards with his thumb. “You want your pill?”

^^^

Before his bed, Fr. Dan knelt. His arms flat out extended, his forehead lowered to the softness of it, indenting in the loose fitting covers. “Dear Jesus.” He lifted his eyes, praying out loud with emotions. “I’m weakening. Weakening. Through your grace the nightmares have stopped, but the feelings are so strong. So strong.” He shook his head, eyes welling up with



tears. "Is this your will, are you telling me that what I feel inside is not wrong? Give me the strength to make the right decisions. I've been faithful to you. I know you've forgiven me of my sins. Help me not to repeat them." Backing up, Fr. Dan blessed him self and stood up slowly using the bed as his leverage. He exhaled loudly walking over to his desk. He opened the drawer and lifted out the three photographs that were in there. He set them down staring at each one, one at a time. Then seeing it, he pulled it from his drawer. The box. The wooden box, the size of a cigar box. It's avocado color swirl design stared at him from the lid. It was the box that was missing from his room. The same one that mysteriously reappeared after his mind breaking confrontation with Rickie.

Was it there all along or did Rickie put it back? He slowly lifted the lid to it. He had opened it everyday to remind him of why he was there in the first place. Pulling out the papers one at a time, he read them. "You." He spoke to his papers. "Are to help me ignore this." He lifted the three photographs. "I've not been honest with any of these people. What would they think of me if they knew?" He tossed the papers to the side then lifted the three pictures. "Do you know? Is that why you left these for me? To taunt me, to tease me, to tempt me?" He slumped forward sitting down covering his eyes, peering against his inner will at the three pictures that were left for him. Pictures he did not ask for. Pictures of Rickie.

Quickly his head lifted to the sound of running water in the bathroom, Fr. Dan rose up and slowly made his way to the door.. He listened to the shower door slide open, then shut. He waited until he heard Rickie begin his awful singing of seventies songs. Then Fr. Dan did what he had been doing. He cautiously opened the bathroom door, just a creak. Quiet enough so his presence would not be known. Just wide enough for him to see the reflection in the mirror, Rickie as he showered.

Fr. Dan leaned in the doorway gaping, sweat beads forming on the bridge of his nose. And he would stay there until he no longer--because of the steam on the mirror--could distinguish Rickie's young body.

^^^

Cal's chin rested on her hands which rested upon Jake's bare chest. She glanced up at the clock as they lay in her bed. A little past nine P.M., the day had been a quiet one, and wasted one. Her leg wasn't throbbing as



bad, Rickie's pill helped. Of course that knocked her out for three hours. She watched Jake as he laid there, one arm stretched behind his head holding it up as he stared at the ceiling.

Her fingertips ran across his chest hairs, then she placed her lips to him, softly, holding them there, her eyes never moving from looking at him. "You want to get dressed and take our cover off the smoke alarm?"

Jake cleared his throat. "No." He answered almost inaudibly. "Not yet." Bringing his other arm up he traced his fingers from the small of her back up to her hair. "Just a few more minutes."

Cal scooted her body up some, bringing her lips to his, which barely responded. "Are you O.K.?"

"Yeah." Jake seemed to be so deep in thought. "I'm fine." He didn't want to talk, he just pulled her closer to him. He let himself relax. "You know, this is what I really like best. Don't get me wrong. I love when we're together. But . . . Don't laugh." Jake ran his hand down his face. "I just think this is great. Laying here like this. Being with someone you just feel so comfortable with. I never had this. It's all so new to me. It's still a little scary."

"Tell me about it."

"Who you?" Jake lowered his head placing his lips to her. "I would think being with someone is second nature to you."

"Yeah, being in relationships was second nature. Was." She let her hand go up and down his chest as they talked. "However, when Jesse died, I shut out everything and everyone that stirred any feelings in me."

"Is that when you broke up with David?"

"I'd . . . really rather not talk about David with you."

"Do you still love him?" Jake asked, fearing her response.

Cal looked up at him. "Why would you ask me that?"

"I think it's something I would like to know."

"I let my walls down with you, Jake. I never thought . . ."

"You aren't answering my question." Jake cut her off.

"It's not as simple as a 'yes' or 'no' answer." Cal lifted some from him.

"I think it is, Cal. You love him or you don't." Jake watched her stare at him. "Forget it. I got my answer." From the hold that had released, Jake slid from bed.

"Jake." Cal sat up.

He lifted his shorts from the floor and put him on.



"I can't believe you're angry about this." Cal stepped from bed and grabbed her shirt. "You asked the question." She continued getting dressed. "Giving you a straight answer is not that easy."

"Yeah it is. Do you still love the guy."

"I will always love David but . . ."

"Then what was this all about?" Jake asked with angry emotions as his hand pointed to the bed.

"You know, if you would let me finish answering you."

"I think you answered it all. What more can there be to say?"

"How about this. Fuck off."

"Excuse me?" Jake tilted his head offended. "Do you care to . . ." He grunted loud when he heard the banging outside of his door. "Goddamn it. What the fuck?" He stormed to the door. As he opened it, he saw Rickie and John in a twisted fight, rolling in the hall. "Hey! Knock off the noise." Jake shut the door. No sooner did he tried to continue his discussion with Cal, there was a knocking on his door.

Fr. Dan called with desperation. "Jake! Jake! We need you out here. We can't break them up. It's getting bad. Rickie's in trouble."

Jake shook his head. "Get Griff. He's strong enough."

Fr. Dan continued his pleading. "Griff's ill. Has been all day. Please, Jake."

Irritated, Cal limped to the door. "I can see you're not going to do anything."

Jake stopped her. "And you are. Oh, yeah, fuckin hop along Cassidy to the rescue. Stay put. I'll handle it." He opened the door. Stepping into the hall he was nearly pummeled by Rickie who was tossed by John. "Knock it off." Jake disgusted, grabbed hold of John by the back, lifted him from Rickie and slammed him into the wall. "Knock it off goddamn it." He saw through the corner of his eyes Rickie fisting up. "Don't!" Jake held his hand out. "No cheap shots." Placing his hand on his head he looked at the two men. John looked distressed. Rickie, like he had take the brunt of John's emotions. "Now can I go back to my room or will I have to be subject to this shit?"

"Sarge." Rickie shouted out. "He started it."

"He's been sleeping with Jennifer." John pointed.

Rickie's hands shot up in defense. "No, no, dude you have it all wrong."



“Wrong?” John screamed. “I just walked in on you.”

“No.” Rickie said. “No, I wasn’t with Jennifer, she’s yours. I was with Maggie. So we’re cool right?”

Jake threw his head back. “I don’t believe this. Rickie! Are you that . . . never mind. This isn’t worth my time. And I cannot believe you two are fighting over a woman. A woman? It’s degrading gentleman. You don’t beat each other up over a woman. Learn some self discipline for crying out loud.” Shaking his head Jake walked back toward Cal’s room. When he walked back in Cal looked just as displeased as she did when he left. “Now, back to you.”

“Fuck you.”

“OK. What the hell did I do now?”

Cal gasped. “Out there. Why did you do that? Why do you take the tone that a woman is less than a man.”

“Oh you’re nuts. I didn’t do any such thing. That is so female of you to say that.”

“See.” She pointed at him and limped to the desk chair sliding it to the smoke detector.

“Don’t. I’ll get that. You’re gonna get hurt.”

“Fine.” Cal walked away from the chair. She moved to the platform city, then sat on the floor beside it.

“We were in the middle of something, Cal. Or didn’t you notice?”

“I’m a little aggravated with you, Jake. Or haven’t *you* noticed?”

“Why are you giving me attitude?” Jake asked with edge. “I think I was well within my rights to ask that question.”

“If you were normal.” Cal snapped.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, if you were a normal man.” She stood back up. “You aren’t. You ask. I tried to tell you, but before I can explain . . .”

“Explain what? What is there to explain?”

“See! See! You do that!” Cal readied to say more, but frustrated she only made a snarling sound.

“Oh. What? Are we growling at me now. Very attractive.” Jake shook his head.

“You know Jake, you ought to grow up.”

“Me?” Jake taunted. “No, I should just go to my room.” He turned.

“Yeah and while you’re at it, why don’t you just try to think of more



reasons to end this thing between us.”

Jake stopped cold and turned around. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” Cal barked then deepened her voice. “I’m losing my edge. I’m thinking with my heart. What if I screw up. Am I too close to you to see clearly. What if I miss something. Do you love David. The trap. The trap. I should have seen the fuckin trap!” She blasted.

Jake blinked. “Are you done.”

Cal just stared at him.

“I think, right now, you are too far gone under the repercussions of alcohol and drugs for you to even be rational. I’m going to my room.” He shot up his hand to silence her from speaking. “I have no intentions whatsoever of breaking this thing off. Unless . . . that’s what you want.” He stepped to her. “IS that what you want, Cal?”

Slowly Cal looked up at him. “No.” She tossed her hand out in defeat. “I’m just . . . I’m upset. You’re upset. I’m in pain and premenstrual.”

Jake cringed. “Did I need to hear that.”

“Oh, absolutely.” Cal cracked a partial smile. “And I don’t love him anymore than a friend.”

Jake took in a breath. “Why couldn’t you say that before?”

Cal chuckled and lifted her finger. “Don’t. Don’t. I tried. You wouldn’t let me.”

“You’re right. So . . . no more breakup talk?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Thinking about it. Breaking up would be pretty dumb. I mean you really only have to deal with me for what? Four and a half months.”

“Wait a second.” Jake moved closer to her. “Did you just imply that we wouldn’t be together after the experiment?”

“Did you think we would?”

“Well . . .” Jake flubbed through his words. “Yes. I’m sorry, I did. What Cal, were we just going to go our separate ways after it was over with? What about all those dinners we planed to have? The trip we want to take? You coming when I get promoted. Were they lies?”

“No they weren’t. I fully intended on staying close to you. Friends. But realistically speaking, Jake . . .”

“No. I don’t want to hear realistically speaking. Was this your attitude



all along?” Jake questioned.

“Yes it was. But . . .”

“If that was your attitude, why did you sleep with me?”

“Oh stop it, Jake, I’m afraid to answer you. You won’t let me finish my sentences. I slept with you for the same reason you slept with me.”

“I don’t think so, Cal.” Jake stepped back. “I slept with you because I was falling in love with you. I mean . . . I was . . . I . . . never mind.” Jake ran his hand over his head to his neck.

Cal tried to hide the smile that crept on her face, she moved closer to him. “That was nice.”

Jake only grunted. “I didn’t say that.”

“I didn’t hear anything. How about this for a better reason not to break up . . .” Cal soften his voice. “You’d never be able to handle it. You may be too dependant on this. Two weeks.” Cal walked to the platform city. “If that.”

“Two weeks?” Jake followed her, sitting next to her on the floor. “Two weeks before what?”

“Before you folded.”

“Ha.” Jake scoffed. “I lived a long, lonely life, Cal. I highly doubt it.”

“But you’re like a crack addict with sex. I’m telling you. Two weeks. You would be begging.” Cal shrugged. “I’d feel sorry for you . . .” She smiled. “It would be pitiful.”

Jake laughed. “Listen to you. I can go longer than two weeks.”

“I’m telling you. You’ll break.”

“You think?” Jake placed his hand on the floor behind her back, leaning to her.

“I know.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Care to take it . . .” Cal turned her head to him. He was right there. She spoke softly. “Major Graison.”

Jake moved his eyes up and down, looking at her, his face so close to hers. He smiled. “You’re on.”

Cal moved even closer, sliding her hand slowly up his inner thigh as she brought her lips so close to his. “Then it’s a bet.” She brought her lips just to the point of kissing his, waited for him to be ready to respond, then backed up a foot. “A bet you’ll lose.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
October 16 - 1:00 P.M.

Cal walked a little further, side by side with Rickie. Stop. Then walk again. She could actually smell the fall briskness in the air. "It's really great out here." She looked back at the buildings and stopped afoot the wooded hillside. "I expected it to be much colder."

"Cal-babe." Rickie walked hands in his front pockets of his baggy Levi's. "Hey like, I really appreciate you guys letting me hang out with you so much. Everyone else is starting to give me the creeps. Besides, Sarge is like my big hero for saving my life."

"He appreciates that Rickie."

"So like, am I cramping the comfort time between you two? I know he's always trying to kick me out."

"No, you aren't cramping anything. The Ma . . . Sarge and I are no longer having, comfort time as you put it."

"Whoa." Rickie brought his shoulders up. "What happened? Don't you like the Sarge anymore?"

"Actually I'm crazy about the Sarge. It's a temporary break up. I told him he couldn't handle it if we did, he said he could, now I'm trying to get him to fold." Cal shrugged. "It's not working."

"Have to get tough. He's a dude. And how can he refuse you. You're pretty cool, Cal-babe. I like you."

Cal smiled. "I like you, too, Rickie. In fact . . . I've enjoyed your company." She turned and faced the woods again. "It keeps my mind off of killing Jake. But I'm sure watching us is boring."

"Nah. I wish the Sarge would let me play with you when you guys mess with the Lego sticks. But it's like better than hanging with the rest of those people. They make me all weird in side. Carlos is no longer sociable. Griff . . ." Rickie laughed. "He doesn't speak at all . . . sorry . . . but he like never comes out of his room. John, all he does is tap away and he's not writing anything. Jennifer, she's like . . . a crowd."

"Well that leaves you Fr. Dan." Cal noticed Rickie, stopped smiling



and turned away. "What's wrong with Fr. Dan?"

"Don't think I'm like all smoked out O.K.? But he looks at me strange. He has this look in his eye when he stares at me."

"What kind of look Rickie. Hatred, mistrust . . ."

"Lust."

Cal broke into a loud laughter. "Oh, Rickie he does not . . ."

Rickie turned away.

Cal pulled him back. "You're serious. Just don't worry about it Rickie. If you're really feeling that from him, I'm sure you will set him straight so to speak." Cal smiled.

"I appreciate it . . ." Rickie screamed loudly and fell to the ground covering his head. "No! Don't shoot me! No!"

Jake, carrying two rifles, shook his head in disgust, his eyes rolling as he did. "Rickie, get up!"

"Chill Sarge." Rickie lifted himself off the ground. "I'm teasing."

"Cal I thought I told you to wait inside for me."

Cal looked down at her fingernails. "You did. Rickie and I wanted to take a walk."

"Dude. I know you won't mind since you and her aren't being nightly anymore, thought I'd try for her myself." He threw his arm around Cal's shoulder. "You know what they say about us young guys."

Jake, throwing the rifles over his shoulders glared at Rickie. "Leave. I want to be alone with Cal."

Rickie shook his head. "So do I guy. Man are you tense. Cal-babe, the Sarge is tense."

"It's because he hasn't had sex in a week."

Jake's mouth dropped open.

"Dude, that like really sucks. Hey my offer for those magazines still stands."

"Go!" Jake pointed, Rickie ignored him, Cal laughed. "Cal, I'm glad you think this is so funny." He stepped closer to Rickie. "Remove your arm and go." He placed his face close to his. "Go!" Closer. "Go!"

"I'm leaving." Rickie, smiling, raised up his hands and headed back to the buildings.

Jake, grunting, roughly rubbed his hand on his face. "Let's go."

"Where?" Cal asked.

"Up the hill." Jake laid his hand on her back, Cal scooted away. "I'm



going to teach you how to shoot, and shoot well.”

“But Jake . . .”

“No buts about it.” He spoke very seriously. “You have to learn to shoot. Winters coming, anything, wild animals, are going to start to smell us and you have to be able to hit your target.”

“Fine.” Cal shrugged and continued to walk up with him

Once at the clearing on the top Jake pointed at a distance away. “I set some targets up for you this morning.”

Cal peered out. “What are they, beer bottles? They’re so far away.”

“Ten of them. And I know it sounds tough, but it’s great practice.” Jake slid a rifle off his shoulder and handed it to Cal. “This is an M-16.”

“Really?” Cal felt it lay in her hands. “Wow, it’s heavy.”

“O.K. hold it like this.” Jake set it correctly in her arms and stepped behind her. He brought his arms around, laying his hands over hers. “Here is where you put the ammo.” He moved closer, sliding his cheek across hers as he looked over her shoulder. He stopped moving and gripped her hands.

“Jake.” Cal called softly. “Back up. I think I can figure it out.”

“Go ahead.” Jake stepped back, giving her room to turn around and face him.

“Give me the bullets.”

“Clip.” He handed it to her. “Now it goes . . .”

“I got it.” Fumbling with the rifle, Cal dropped the clip and it fell to the ground. “Whoops. I dropped my bullets.”

“Clip.” Jake, hands on hips, stared down at her.

“I’ll just . . .” She stepped within an inch of his body. “Go down.” Placing the butt of the rifle to the ground, and staying so close to him, she lowered herself to her knees. “I can’t believe how clumsy I am.”

Jake tried not to look down, but seeing Cal like that, just raced so much through his mind. Still standing strong, Jake looked up. He bit his bottom lip. Yes, he could handle her down there, and he could even handle what she was trying to insinuate. But what he couldn’t handle was the fact that she used his leg for support. Her hand moving further and further up. Slow, soft. “Cal.” He reached down and grabbed her arm lifting her. “Enough.” Tired of waiting, Jake took it and loaded it in for her. “Here. Now, can I show you?”

Holding the M-16 awkwardly, Cal peered up to him. “Are you going to stand behind me. I bet the men you train love when you do that.”



"All right, mouth." Jake lifted his hands up. "I won't say anything. Just don't shoot me."

"What do you want me to hit?"

Jake laughed. "Anything, if you can." He stepped back further and placed one finger to his ear. "Whenever you're ready."

"How about all ten?"

"Sure, Cal, you go right ahead."

"O.K." She shrugged, shifted the clip on the M-16, lifted it and fired. That one moment, that first aim was the only hesitation she had. Without stopping, Cal fired and fired again. Ten times she shot off her weapon. Each time hitting her target dead on. When she had finished, she cleared her throat and handed the rifle to Jake. "How about something a little more difficult, Major Graison?"

"Cal . . . holy shit. Where'd you learn to shoot like that?"

"My step father. He taught me well."

"I'd say." Jake stared at what was left of the targets.

She saw the stunned look on Jake's face. "Jealous?"

"No. Turned on."

Cal smiled and chuckled once at his very serious remark. "Are we done. You can see I don't need to learn."

"Oh you are just so cocky." He handed her back the rifle. "Get ready." He started walking across the clearing.

"Where are you going?"

"Setting it up again. I'll show you shooting."

"Ha!" Cal laughed. "You just have to beat me in everything. Line 'em up. You're about to meet your match."

Jake marched back to her. "Sweetheart." He poked his index finger on her forehead. "You're on. And you'll pay." He backed up. "Big time."

"What are we shooting for?" She watched him walk further away. "Jake? Jake!"

^^^

"No. Jake No." Cal held her hands up as she stood center of her room.

"Cal. You lost." He pulled out the desk chair and sat down, he held a bottle of beer.



"I am not stripping for you. You said you wouldn't fold.."

"I'm not. I'm watching." Jake took a drink. "A bet is a bet. You ran your mouth and you lost."

"You just want me to take off my clothes. Pervert."

"Cal, please." Jake held his hand up. "It's guy thing. Look, Rickie even lent me his player. Press play. Go ahead."

"You want me to strip for you. That's it?" She raised her eyebrow. "And you can handle it?"

"Sure." Jake raised the beer bottle to the smoke alarm. "Even blocked their view. It's just you and me. Whenever you're ready." He adjusted himself comfortably in the chair, beer bottle between his legs.

"Fine. This won't take very long." Cal walked to the cassette player and pressed play. "This Rickie music sucks."

"Feel the music." Jake smiled, lifting the bottle to his mouth, never taking his eyes off of her.

Cal walked behind his chair, stopping Jake from looking back at her. She kept placing her hands on his face and turning his stare forward. She dropped her shorts, then lifted her left leg, her bare leg and placed her foot on his thigh. She swung herself around to the front of him, standing before him--literally. Her legs straddled over his as she lifted off her shirt.

Jake held tighter to the beer bottle, staring at her flat stomach. He took a deep breath.

Cal moved closer, reached down and undid his belt. Slowly she pulled it from the loops and hung it over her neck. "Can you handle it, Jake?" She moved her hands behind her back to undo her bra. "You know, you can fold at any time." She brought her lips down, grabbing his hands and placing them to the clasp on her bra. "I won't . . ." She breathed softly on his lips. "Think any less of you."

"Stop!" Jake slid his chair backwards out of her range. "Bad idea. Bad." He stood up, took another drink and shut off the music. "How about something else instead?"

"O.K." Cal bent down and picked up her clothes, immediately putting them on. "Chess?"

"Sounds safe."

^^^



Fr. Dan stared down at the photograph of Rickie. He sat in his chair, rocking back and forth in self confusion. Another picture showed up. Another one. Where did they come from? It had to be Rickie. Fr. Dan noticed the looks lately. The long stares. It wasn't his imagination. Fr. Dan was always aware of those things. He had been in the past. But he was certain. It was an invitation. It had to be.

The shower. The sound of running water started. It was his signal. It was his daily routine. Fr. Dan hurried to the bathroom door, listening. He waited for his time, and he opened the door.

He watched Rickie emerge himself into the water. The thin body. The young body. Fr. Dan stirred within himself. His own hands wandering, roaming about his own body, mimicking the motion he was now watching Rickie do.

Rickie had to know. He had to know he was watching. Licking his lips, feeling the heaviness in his chest. He knew it was time.

Rickie let his singing words gurgle as the water beat down on his mouth. It was a game. Letting his mouth fill up with the warm water and singing it out of his mouth. He sudsed up. Totally lost in his shower routine. So engrossed that a startling twitch hit his stomach when he heard the shower door slowly slide open. Was it Jennifer? Rickie smiled. "Surprising me, babe?" He was ready for her.

"Yes, I am."

The deep male voice sent a shiver through him. Afraid to turn around, he glanced his head back to see a naked Fr. Dan. "Shit. I got to get out of here." Rickie could not move. Briefly he was frozen in shock. Nervously his hands shook. As he moved to his left, reaching quickly for the door, he felt a strong grip on the back of his head and his arm grabbed and twisted to his back. The wet hard surface of the tile shower stall met his face in a crash, as Fr. Dan slammed him hard against the wall. Rickie felt the searing pain to his cheek as his face was crushed between Fr. Dan's firm hold and the wall. "No!" Rickie knew he had to fight. He had to fight with everything he had. But before he knew what was happening, Rickie had an even more difficult situation to fight his way out of.

^^^



"Jake! Will you *please* make your move!" Cal ordered as they sat on her floor. The small chess board the only distance between them as she sat up, one leg out to the side, and he lay on his side propped up on his arm. "Today please."

"I'd go faster if I wasn't so distracted." He motioned his hand out. "Must you sit like that?"

"Right. Sweat pants are so inviting. Jake . . . if it bothers you, don't look. Make your move."

"Fine." Huffing at her, he lifted his eyes to her face, moved his castle to the end of the board nearest her. "Check." As he lifted his hand from his game piece he let it brush softly over her body which was right there.

"You touched me like that on purpose."

"Cal, I mean, the board is right there. If it bothers you . . . move back."

"Jake this is stupid." Cal lifted the board and set it off to the side.

"What are you doing?"

"Jake." She lowered her voice, almost to a whisper. "If you want to touch me . . ." She slipped her leg through the triangle that formed between his chest and his arm. "You can." She moved her body closer.

Jake swallowed as she inched her way to him. "I have to be honest. I'm really close to folding."

"How close?" Another inch.

"How many days are we into this break-up?"

"Nine days." Her foot touched his calf.

"You gave me two weeks. So six more days." Jake nodded.

"It's all right to lose Jake." Cal was nearly against him. "All you have to do is say 'I concede'."

"I . . . uh . . ." Jake's lips moved closer. "Can't."

"Sure you can." Cal's mouth moved around his, not touching. "Say it." She whispered. "Say it."

"I . . ." Jake took a deep breath. Placing his hands firmly to her face he began to lower her back. "Con . . ." Just as his lips were about to sink into hers, just as his body was about to press against her, three soft knocks came on the door. "Saved." Jake released Cal and backed up, running his hand over the top of his head. "A moment of weakness . . . saved.."

There were two more knocks, and an odd sound happened. Rickie called out softly. "Cal. Can I come in?" He asked, barely able to be heard.



“Sure. Hold on.” Cal started to get up.

“Is um . . . Is Sarge with you?” Rickie asked.

“Yeah he is.”

“Could you . . . could you see if he could leave. Please. I need to talk to you. Please.”

Cal looked down to the floor at Jake, surprised at Rickie’s request.

With a concerned look on his face, Jake mouthed the words ‘something’s wrong.’ He stood up speaking so Rickie couldn’t hear him. “Go ahead. I want to get something to drink. I’ll leave through my side.”

Cal moved closer to the door. “He’s leaving now Rickie. Hold on.” She waited for Jake to walk out through the bathroom and she opened the door. “Rickie?”

The young man slumped in the doorway, his head down, his wet hair hanging forward. He was bare foot, only wearing jeans.

“Are you . . .” Cal stopped asking when Rickie lifted his head and she saw his face. Blood on his swollen cheek, his face and eyes red. “What happened.” She pulled him inside and shut the door.

“Cal.” Rickie spoke with no emotions.

“Rickie what’s wrong, what happened to you?”

Rickie dropped to his knees releasing an emotional sob. He grabbed hold of Cal, clinging his arms to her waist. Burying his head into her stomach like a scared child with his mother. “I tried. I really tried. I can’t believe . . . I let.” He broke down and started to cry again.

“Rickie” Cal ran her hand down the back of his hair, then lowered herself to be at his level. Placing her hands on his cheeks she lifted his face to look at him. It was at that moment she saw how young he was. The frightened look in his eyes. “What happened? You have to tell me?” She felt his head fall into her chest. She cradled him, she listened as he mumbled so heartbreakingly.

“I thought I could get away. I fought. I tried. Fr. Dan came in.”

“What did he do to you?”

“I was in my shower. He came in. He . . .” Rickie couldn’t speak anymore.

“Oh my God.” Cal pulled him closer. “He can’t get away with this.” She pulled Rickie from her. “He can’t get away with this.” She stood up, helping Rickie to his feet.

“Cal, it’s too late.”



“No!” Cal, feeling herself moving with velocity out of control, held her hand out. “I have to get Jake..” She headed to the door.

Rickie reached out in desperation, grabbing her arm. “No, Cal. Jake can’t know. He just . . .” Rickie’s head dropped. “. . . can’t know. Please..”

“Then I’ll deal with him.” Cal charged through the bathroom into Jake’s room, she came back out, rifle in hand.

“Cal stop.” Rickie grabbed her again. “Don’t.”

“Rickie!” Cal pulled away. “I’m just gonna deal with him.” She opened her door. “In a way he’ll understand. I’ll be right back.” With a slam of the door, Cal stormed down the hall.

She stood before Fr. Dan’s room for a few seconds. She took calming breaths, letting her pounding heart beat more naturally. Holding the rifle, she turned it, butt first. She reached up and knocked lightly on the door. In the phoniest, sweetest voice she could muster up, Cal called to him. “Fr. Dan? Could I speak to you a moment please?”

“Sure, Cal.” He answered. Surprised Fr. Dan opened the door, he was not greeted with the smile or pleasantries he expected, he was greeted with the end of a rifle, smashing into his face.

Cal plowed into his room, slamming the door closed with the back of her foot. “You sick fuck.” Holding the rifle like a baseball bat, she swung forth with fury at Fr. Dan who had just managed to make it to his feet. His head flung back with his body, and he met the floor again. She marched to over top of him. As she went to nail him again, Fr. Dan roll out of the way. He stumbled to his feet. “What did you do to Rickie?” She swung at him, plugging him in the gut.

“He . . .” Fr. Dan coughed in pain. “Wanted me.”

His words burned in Cal, a man, sick, completely in denial of the violent act he had done. “No.” She brought the rifle down, this time he caught it, grabbed it and stopped her.

“You think you’re stronger than me, Cal?” He snatched the rifle from her. “You’re wrong.” He aimed at her.

“Go ahead shoot me. You think I’d bring a loaded weapon in here?”

Fr. Dan clicked back the hammer, shot, nothing happened. In his desperation he swung it at Cal, she ducked. He kept swinging. She kept ducking.

Taking a chance, she threw her small body into him, knocking him into the wall, sending the rifle sailing across the room.



Fr. Dan felt a blow to his ribs. He grasped her hair, lifted back her head and with all his strength, knuckles white, he punched Cal in the face, sending her down. But not without her legs catching his, swooping forth and bringing him with her.

Jake had given Cal and Rickie long enough. What if Rickie really wasn't upset? What if he was dangerous? Though Jake knew that was next to impossible, he had to get back to Cal's room. He opened the door, calling out to let them know he was back. "Cal?" He stepped in, still holding the door open, he saw Rickie on the floor, head down. "Where's . . ." He saw Rickie's face. "What happened to you?"

"Jake." Rickie sprung to his feet. "She went after Fr. Dan."

"Cal?"

"Yes. And she took a gun."

"Fuck." He slammed his hand on the archway of the door and raced down to Fr. Dan's room. As soon as he hit the door he heard the scurrying and crashing inside. "Shit!" He grabbed the door knob--locked. "Cal!" With his shoulder, Jake crashed in the door.

Cal was on her stomach, hand reaching out for the rifle. As her fingertips grasped it, Fr. Dan lifted her to her feet by her hair. She didn't see Jake or him charge to help her. It all happened so fast, not even Jake realized it.

Rushing backwards, Cal's back pressed to Fr. Dan's, she felt a sudden dead end as they smacked into the wall. Holding the rifle, she sent it back, butting him in his hip, causing him to cry out. By the barrel she held the weapon outward, spun around, grunted out loudly and delivered one more final blow to Fr. Dan. Spraying blood shot from his mouth as his eyes rolled, knees buckled and he fell to the floor. Glaring down at him, his eyes fluttering, Cal whispered harshly. "You're not dead now. But the next time I see you out of this room . . . you will be." Out of breath she stepped back. As she went to leave the room she saw Jake. "Lock him in here Jake." She gave him his rifle. "Lock him in here so he can't get out." Cal walked to the door, catching the dripping blood from her nose. "Oh Jake . . ." She turned and faced him. "Thank you for letting me finish that." She walked out.

"Did I have a choice?" He shook his head. Amazed at how Cal brutalized Fr. Dan, and still wondering what the hell happened, Jake, with



the keys that never left his body, secured the padlocks he had previously placed on the doors. Leaving a bloodied and beaten Fr. Dan to fend for himself in a room he could not escape.



The basin of the bathroom sink was filled with warm water. Water that once was clear, now was pinkish from the mixture of her blood and soap. Cal looked one more time to Rickie who laid on Jake's bed. She splashed her face and reached blindly for a towel.

"Here." Jake handed her one. "Let me see." He turned her to face him, taking the towel back. "Christ." He dipped it in the water, gently cleaning her face even more. Dabbing and touching her injuries. His fingers probed around her eyes. "These will be black tomorrow." He gently pressed on the bridge of her nose. "It's not broken. Did you get the clot out?"

"Yes, Jake."

"Are you teeth loose. Because your lip is swollen."

"I know. And no they're fine."

In disgust, he tossed the towel harshly in the sink splashing the water. "What the fuck, Cal? You care to tell me why you felt you couldn't come to me? You shouldn't be getting into physical confrontations with men twice your weight. Twice your size."

"He may have got me a few times." She spoke quietly. "But I walked away."

"That you did." Jake ran his hand down his face. "Cal, you took a chance, a big chance. Now what was so important that you had . . ."

"Shh." She motioned her head.

"Shh what?" Jake, whispering, looked. "Why is he laying on my bed?"

"Because. He can't go back to his room. In fact I want you to get his stuff for him. You can put your stuff in my room, I don't care, he needs a place to . . ."

"What is going on!"

"Lower your voice."

Jake did. "What is going on?"

"I can't tell you. I made a promise"

"Fuck that. You *will* tell me. I think I deserve to know why I have to see you hurt like this. Why you took a beating, winner or not. Don't I?"



Cal brought her finger to her lips and shut the bathroom door. She led Jake into her room. “Rickie came in here Jake. And he wasn’t the Rickie that we know. He cried. In fact, he held on to me for help like no one has. I saw a kid. A frightened kid.”

“What happened to him?”

“He doesn’t want you to know. Maybe he thinks you’d blame him too. I don’t know. All I do know is that a scared and hurt young man cried out. I was furious and sought justice. And trust me, the justice I delivered was far less than deserved.”

Jake was piecing it together, little by little. Rickie not wanting him to know. Rickie crying, upset. Fr. Dan did something to him. A sickening feeling hit Jake. His stomach turned.

“Jake, Fr. Dan . . .”

“Don’t.” He held up his hand and reached backwards for a chair. “Don’t say.” He slowly set himself down. “I understand.” He lifted his arm grabbing Cal’s hand. “And you kept your promise to Rickie. You didn’t tell me.” He brought her hand, bruised and red to his lips. He laid his lips on her skin. “We’ll take care of it.” He stood up. “I’ll help you help him the best we can.”

“How Jake?” She squeezed his hand. “How do we help him?”

Letting out slowly the long deep breath he held, Jake lifted his shoulder and didn’t speak. He didn’t have an answer, because he didn’t know. He just didn’t know.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
October 16 - 1:55 P.M.

Totally impressed with their ability to make it into the observation room in enough time to allow Tina and Barb to leave, Stan and Lyle, looking like they were the champs of kindness, strutted in.

Stan raised his hand high, tossing his brown bag lunch on the counter. "Hey girls. guess who's here on time?" He pulled out the chair next to Barb. "What's wrong with you two? You're awfully quiet." He looked at Barb, a usually stone and calloused woman. She had tears in her eyes. "Barb? Did someone die?"

"Fr. Dan got Rickie." She answered. "He's not dead. In the bathroom. Rickie was his victim."

Stan shook his head. "I don't understand, did he beat him up? What?" His eyes widened. "No."

Barb nodded her head. She rose slowly from the chair. "Look at him, Stan. He's in Jake's room."

Lyle peered at the monitor. "He went to Jake?"

"Cal." Tina answered. "He went to Cal. Look at Fr. Dan." She showed them Fr. Dan who laid on his floor, motionless. "He's barely moved in the past four hours. Look at Cal." They watched as Cal walked into the room with Rickie, sat on the bed next to his laying body and replaced the cold cloth on his face with a fresh one. "Look at her face."

Stan zoomed in. "Were they duking it out? Where was Jake?"

Tina nodded subtly as she slowly rose from her chair. "He wasn't around when she went after Fr. Dan. When he broke down the door, Cal was handling the situation. Watch the tape. We saved it. We think Aldo would be proud of her."

Lyle pressed play on the tape monitor. "Holy hell. Proud?" He watched the struggle between Cal and the priest. "He's gonna want to hire her."



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
October 16 - 4:10 P.M.

Gathered around a table in the diningroom John, Jennifer, Carlos and Griff, huddled and whispered as if in secret.

Jennifer, fanatic, wrung her hands. "I want him out." She told the group. "Who appointed Major Graison warden,"

Carlos shook his head. "I disagree. We should just stay quiet."

Griff slid a piece of paper John's way.

After reading it, John looked up. "Griff says he's betting it has to do with Rickie. When do we know Rickie not to show up to irk us during a meal."

Carlos agree. "Where was he. I'm telling you all. It was bad. Whatever it was, it was bad." Slowly he stood up. "Do what you want. But this time, I side with Graison." No more being said, Carlos walked away.

^^^

Jake watched Cal walk into her room, closing the bathroom door as she slowly moved. Her arms were crossed, her head low. "How is he?" Jake asked as he sat up.

"Not Rickie." Cal leaned against a wall and rested her head back. "He says he's in a lot of pain."

Jake opened his mouth as he stood, closed it tightly and breathed heavily through his nose. His head tilted slowly.

"He said he's bleeding. Bleeding, Jake." Cal held her arms tighter. "Do you think he's O.K.?"

Jake walked closer to her, he rubbed his hand harshly down his face. "It's hard to say. This is a young kid. We don't have any doctors . . ."

"Doctors?"

"Yes, Cal. It's conceivable . . ." Jake paused trying to place his words correctly. "It's possible that damage could have been done. It depends on what all took place."

Cal understood what he meant, and only Rickie held the answers to that. "Jake did you see him. I just don't know what to do for him."



"It's a tough call." Jake rested his hands on her shoulders. "What happened to Rickie is not something he's gonna want to talk about, deal with. Let alone admit to. We just have to let him alone, to sort through it. He came to you with it, so . . . that tells me he trusts you. And you did good going to his defense." He lifted her chin and laid his hand on her cheek. "Though I wish I didn't have to look at this beautiful face all beat up, I'm proud of you." He lowered his head and brought his lips closer, Cal moved from his way.

"I feel so horrible, Rickie just commented this morning about the way Fr. Dan looked at him. I didn't even think twice about it."

"Why would you. There's no way . . ." Jake reached out his hand turning her face to him, holding her chin. "No way you would have seen this. Trust me."

Cal slumping, moved to her bed. "I feel so bad for him. He's just a kid Jake. A kid. He's no more than a few years older than what Jesse would have been."

"I know. And that is playing a big part. You're protective instincts just kicked in."

"So . . ." Cal brought her legs up Indian style as she sat on the bed. "What do we do about Fr. Dan?"

"I think, and you know it. He's done. He's too far gone and he's a danger to everyone. So . . . as far as he goes." Jake patted his pocket with the keys. "He's not getting out. I will open that door once a day only for someone if they want to slide him in food. But personally, I could care less if the man dies of starvation."

"It's cold, but it's how I feel too."

"That's because you and I are a lot alike. More so than we realize." Staying away long enough he walked to the bed, almost cautiously.

"No." Cal shook her head. "I've realized how much were alike from day one. Why else do you think we fight so much?"

"I chalked it up at first to an abundance of sexual tension." He saw that brought a smile to her face. A smile that made her cringe afterwards. "Hurts huh? I'm going to be looking at you with some black eyes tomorrow."

Cal smiled at him. "If it bothers you . . ."

"I know, I know. Don't look."

"Jake. I appreciate you understanding about Rickie having to stay in



your room. I kind of moved you out, huh?”

“That you did.” Jake sat down on the bed next to her. “However, I think I’ll leave my dresser in there with his, I’ll just bring my mini arsenal in here.”

“What about your neat compulsion. Rickie is a slob. Worse than me.”

“True.” Jake laid his hand on her knee. “But Rickie is eighteen, he’s easily trainable. You however are too far gone.”

Letting out an emotional sigh, Cal leaned and rested her head against him. She quickly lifted her head when Rickie slowly stepped into the room. Cal stood up. “Rickie. I thought you were sleeping.” She stood and walked to him.

“I needed to talk to you.” Rickie shrugged. “And I didn’t want to be alone.” He shifted his eyes to Jake sitting on the bed. “Sorry I interrupted you two.”

Cal flung out her hand. “We’re broke up anyhow. No biggie. However, I think you should rest though. Try to sleep. It was a horrible experience you had.”

“And you ruled.” Rickie faced her. “I hope he didn’t hurt you too much.”

“I’m tough. Though I have to admit, I don’t feel quite so attractive at this moment.”

“Let me tell you.” Rickie sounded almost drugged as he talked. And it was the first time since they had been there that Rickie was completely straight. “All this.” His index finger swirled around her face. “It can’t cover up what you look like. And what you look like comes from in here.” He touched her chest. “What you did for me, Cal . . . no one has ever gone out on a limb for me in my whole life. Hell, my own mother left me when I was six.”

Cal’s head dropped, she lifted her eyes to the young man. “Then that was her loss Rickie. Not yours.”

“I just wanted to like tell you . . . thanks.” He leaned forward kissing Cal on the cheek.

Before he pulled back, Cal felt it. She didn’t let him get far, she drew him back in, wrapping her arms tightly around him. Head dropping to her shoulder, Rickie consumed the embrace. And during that quiet moment, Jake slipped out.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
October 23 - 4:55 A.M.

Carl wasn't a big man, but even at his average height and weight to be hurled across the control room lab took more strength than he estimated. The chesty growl was the forewarning he had little time to heed before the angry reach snatched him up sent him on a painful journey.

Into the wall Carl smashed falling hard to the table of data.

It wasn't so much the unexpected beastly noise that sent Hawk scurrying into the control room, it was the pummeling smash of furniture. Hurrying to aid, he reached to the desk drawer opened it up and pulled out a revolver.

"Stop." Carl yelled out, stumbling to a stand. "Look at him."

Hawk did. He watched the shoulders of him rise and fall in heaviness. He still kept aim.

"He only wants the injections, Carl said over the gurgling breath. "He needs his injection." After a trip of his feet over toppled papers and such, catching his breath, Carl sought out what the experiment's catch needed.

Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
October 23 - 8:55 A.M.

All Dr. Jefferson wanted to do was enjoy his McDonald's coffee while it was too hot to drink, eat his take out breakfast sandwich and watch a little of the night before's experiment activity.

What he didn't expect to hear about was the disruption in his very on control room up at the experiment. Disruption that caused immediate concern in him. After rubbing the tip of his nose that was burned from the steam that seeped through the hole in the lid, Dr. Jefferson did something he never had to do before.

A memo. Immediate issued, and handwritten in black marker. There would be no delay. The controllers, unlike the participants, weren't not visually monitored. So for safety's sake, and peace of mind, Dr. Jefferson wanted his monitor's to do hourly check-ins with the controller in Canada. No matter how much of an annoyance they seemed, they were necessary. A certain amount of fear was brewing in Dr. Jefferson. And it was the first time he ever could recall in his whole involvement with the Iso-Stasis, the he actually feared for the well being of his people.

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
October 23 - 12:10 P.M.

Cal, hands freezing, fingers turning numb, stood next to Jake looking down the hill. "I don't understand this. We worked out this morning. It's really cold, Jake."

"No, it is not. You'll warm up. Besides, I needed some alone time with you. Our time has been limited since Rickie's moved in." Jake held up his hand. "Not that I mind. He doesn't get on my nerves as much."

"Rickie is not the same."

"Did you think he would be?" Jake asked.

"I hoped."

"He's doing better, Cal." Jake touched her back. "You've done good. You've been there for him." Jake gave a single clap of his hands. "So . . . you ready to compete. We haven't done the chase in awhile."

"No we haven't. I get stuck with clean up all the time." Cal said agitated.

"I was hoping we'd wager on something different." He stood in front of her.

"Jake, you have this weird look in your eye. What is it?"

"O.K., Cal . . . I think we should closely re-examine our physical situation between the two of us."

Cal laughed loudly at him stepping back. "You want to have sex?"

"I'm ready to concede. You can do that torture thing you've been doing to get to me."

"No way."

"No way?" Jake's head snapped back.

"You held off to prove you could for two weeks. Tough now Jake, you've won that bet. There's no fun in torturing you anymore."

"I can still concede."

"Nah." Cal waved him off. "Too late. I'm used to being broke up now. Sorry."

"You're kidding right?" Jake asked.

"No not at all. I kind of like being the free woman again."

"Stop it. You're being facetious."



"But you waited until the two weeks were up to admit it because you didn't want to lose. Sorry, you've lost." Cal moved away from him. "Now are you ready to do this or not?" She placed her hands on her hips. "We'll chase for . . . the bed. If I win. You stay on the floor. If you win, you can have the bed tonight."

"How about this. If I win . . . You sleep in bed with me tonight."

"You're on."

"Good." Jake clapped his hands then rubbed them. "I'll even give you a fifteen second head start." He glanced down at his watch. "Ready . . . go." With eyes going from Cal to the second hand, Jake gave exactly fifteen seconds and he did his normal thing. He went the route she never knew he took, the route that always brought him out ahead of her. Cinching his victory, Jake sped through his route, this was another bet he had no intentions on losing.

Emerging forward from his deep brush, Jake leaped out, expecting to see Cal coming down, and that 'oh shit' look she always gave. As he flung himself into her path he saw nothing. No Cal. Not a sound was heard, no footsteps, no running. Quickly he turned back looking down the hill. He didn't see her running. He knew Cal wasn't fast enough to have made it to the buildings.

Where was she? Jake could feel his heart start to beat faster. "Cal!" He called out. "Cal!" He didn't see her. "All right!" He yelled in his loudest voice. "I concede! You win this one. Come on out!" He listened . . . nothing. "Cal! This isn't funny." No sounds. "Cal, goddamn it! Come out!" The only thing he heard was his own voice as it echoed back at him through the deadness of the woods. "Shit!" He ran his hand over his head. Something wasn't right.

The building. Before he went looking in the woods for her, he had to check the building. As fast as he could, he ran down there. He opened the door calling out her name. "Cal!"

Jennifer looked up from her book. "She's not in here."

"Are you sure?" Jake headed toward the hallway. "Maybe you didn't see her."

"I've been sitting here an hour."

"Thanks . . . Cal!" He raced down the hall and opened his door. "Cal!"

Rickie stood up from the floor. "Sarge, what's wrong. You look weird."



"Have you seen Cal?" Jake grabbed Rickie's shoulders. His words rushed. "We were racing. I can't find her. Did she come back?"

"No . . . shit."

"I have to find her." He raced to Cal's room and pulled a duffle bag out from under the bed. He grabbed his revolver, and checked to make sure it was loaded. "I'll be back."

"I'll help you. What if there's trouble?"

"You're right." Jake stopped at the door then reached to the duffle bag he left on the bed. He grabbed a rifle. "It's loaded." He removed the safety and handed it to Rickie. "Don't shoot it unless you know what you're shooting at."

"You think something got her? An animal or something?"

"I don't know. Let's go. We've wasted enough time." Jake took off, Rickie following close behind.

Outside they charged up the hillside. Calling Cal's name, over and over they received no response.

Jake looked at his watch. "Five minutes. She's been gone five minutes . . . Cal!"

"Sarge. I don't have a good feeling. What if something's happened to her?"

"We'll find her . . . Cal!" Holding his revolver tightly, Jake paused to think. "Rickie, you go over that way by towards the stream. I'm going to scour this hillside again."

"Got it." Rickie took off running. He headed in the direction he was told, calling out Cal's name. As he raced, bubbling watery sounds ahead of him, Jake's calling voice began to grow faint.

Jake marched up the hill, moving his foot through every brush. Searching. Calling. Fear began to hit him. An emotion he was not accustomed too. Headstrong to find her, he continued until he heard Rickie.

"Sarge!" Rickie's distant voice screamed. "Oh, God, Sarge!"

"No." Jake spun in that direction. There was something about the sound of Rickie's voice. "No."

"Sarge! Oh, God!"

Please. Please, nothing be wrong. Jake's mind pleaded as he made it to the



stream. Coming forth from the woods to the stream, his heart sank deeper as he saw Rickie.

Rickie looked up. "Sarge."

"No." Jake spoke "No!" He raced over to Rickie who knelt above Cal untying her hands which were bound behind her back. Her hair was wet, as she laid motionless on her side in the mud. "No!" Jake cried out with all his heart as he dropped to his knees before her.

With tear filled eyes, Rickie turned to him. "She's dead."

"Oh, God." Jake lifted her into his arms. "Cal." He grabbed her chin shaking her head. "Cal." He felt for a pulse. Nothing. "Cal. Please." He pressed his lips to her cheek, holding her. She didn't respond. Raising his head up, holding her tight, Jake let from the depths of his heart and soul, an emotional cry out. A bellow that rang through the woods and shot it's way through the trees, carrying over and over again through the distance. "No." He laid her on the ground. "You will not die on me. You will not." He tilted back her head and mouth to mouth, Jake began to give his all to resuscitate her. He'd breath, then listened. Nothing. "Come on." Again he tried. "Cal, please don't do this."

"Sarge, she's . . ."

Jake ignored Rickie. He kept trying to revive her. His mind in total focus on doing so.

"Sarge."

"No." As he brought his lips down to hers for his final attempt, he felt Cal jolt violently. Her back arched up and water shot from her mouth. "Thank God." Jake quickly tilted her head to the side.

Cal began to cough uncontrollably. Water coming--from her lungs which had filled--with each cleansing cough she took. Finally, her eyes rolled and her head fell back.

"Cal." Jake lifted her up. Pressing his lips hard to her cheek, he pulled her to his chest.

Cal gasped, opening her mouth to take in the air. She coughed again and grabbed on to him.

Jake, feet sinking in the mud, picked up his revolver, lifted himself up, and in his arms he held Cal. "Rickie, I have to get her back. Run to the building, get the shower hot and ready. Hurry."

"Right away, Sarge." Rickie ran his hand across Cal's arm and took off.

"Then just go ahead. Give me a moment."



“You got it.” Rickie pointed and ran, he wanted to tell everyone what Jake had done.

Jake walked slow back to the buildings. Holding Cal, never taking his eyes off of her.

Opening the eyes that were hard to control, Cal rested her head on his chest. Her arms clung to his neck. “I watched you.” Cal felt her body bounce as he walked with her. “I watched you save my life . . . thank you.”

“Cal, who . . .” Jake looked down at her. She had passed out.

^^^

Watch out.” Jake kicked Cal’s door wider with his foot. “I have to get you out of these clothes . . . Rickie.”

Rickie ran from the bathroom. “I have the shower going. Waters hot.” He handed Jake a towel.

Jake laid Cal on the bed, his eyes not leaving her. He brought the towel to her face and began to wipe the mud from her. “Cal. Cal, wake up.”

Cal opened her eyes.

“Cal. Who did this to you? Tell me. Who did this to you?”

Cal coughed, her voice raspy. “Griff.”

Jake raised his eyes to Rickie, and Rickie saw it. Complete rage. Slipping his arms from under Cal, Jake stood up. He closed his eyes, adjusted Cal on the bed, and looked at his weapon. Speaking no words, he reached into his duffle bag and pulled out what he needed. With his revolver held tight, he walked to the door.

“Sarge.” Rickie called out to him. “What are you doing?”

With absolutely no emotions, Jake grabbed the door knob as he stepped into the hall. “I’ll be right back. Stay with her.” He pulled the door closed and calmly walked down the hall stopping before Griff’s door.

Reaching with eerie, calmness he turned the knob that was unlocked. Before he walked in, Jake placed the silencer on the barrel of his revolver then slowly pushed open the door.

Griff sat on his bed, back facing. A smile was on his face as he turned and stood up looking at Jake. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

It was the first time Jake had heard his voice. A voice that Griff wasn’t supposed to have. Pushing the door closed, Jake locked it. Never losing eye contact, he stepped closer to Griff and extended out his arm. Clicking back



the hammer, not allowing time to think, he fired and kept firing until the only sound Jake heard was that of an empty chamber.

Taking one more look at the bloodied body seemingly torn apart, Jake lifted his head, took a deep breath and left Griff's room, locking the door once more.

^^^

The feeling of water, warm water coming down at her snapped Cal from the semi-conscious state she was in, to a nightmarish reality. She gasped as she awoke, her body jolting.

Jake whispered in her ear, "I have you."

Cal's eyes opened and she saw where she was at. The spraying shower nozzle, the tan tile, all was still blurry. "Jake?" She felt his arms wrapped around her from behind. He held her tight against him.

"I need to warm you up. I don't want you getting sick on me." He reached outward for a wash cloth and began to wipe her off.

"I can hardly stand." She spoke groggily.

"Don't worry about it. I have you. Just relax."

"Please get me out of here, Jake. I've had enough water for today."

"Humor me. Just a little bit longer." He brought his lips down to her cheek and kissed her softly.

Cal let her arm drop, she reached behind and felt. He had left them on. She smiled, a tired smile and let him hold her in the warm water's stream slipping in and out of consciousness the whole time.

^^^

Rickie watched from a short distance as a wet Sarge tightly tucked in a sleeping Cal. A part of him felt impressed. What he had witnessed . In fact what he had witnessed in the past week. Human nature. What people do or say when they really care.

He guessed what surprised him the most as he watched Jake, was the fact that someone so strong, so independent, could look so grateful just to be able to look at someone they thought they never would see again. It seemed out of character for him. Rickie supposed that Jake wouldn't let everyone see him like this. Perhaps at this moment, Jake didn't care.



Dressed in his fatigues, looking so intimidating. Yet, there he sat, brushing Cal's wet hair from her face with his hands, sitting in a chair close to her bed. Watching and staring into eyes that were closed. And every couple minutes, closing his own eyes and leaning down to kiss her. Was this the same guy who looked like a madman when he returned from seeing Griff? A man whose stone cold face was splattered with blood when he calmly walked in the room, put away his revolver and took Cal to the shower.

"Sarge?" Rickie stepped closer speaking low. "You think she'll be fine?"

Jake, startled from his thought, turned his head. "Oh, Rickie." He stood up. "Yes, I do. I think she may have hypothermia. What we have to watch for is pneumonia. You know with her lungs getting water in them and all. She's not coughing all that . . ."

"How do you know all this?"

Jake shrugged. "Years of experience I guess. I don't know. Look . . . with all that's happened, I did not get a chance to thank you." He extended his hand to Rickie. "Thank you very much."

Rickie shook the large hand that seemed to bury his. "For what?"

"You played a big role in saving her life. If you weren't with me looking, I wouldn't have found her in time."

"Dude, you did it. That shit you did, I didn't even think was real. I thought that was something they only did on television."

Jake smiled at him.

"When you were getting dressed . . . she uh, . . ." Rickie motioned his head to Cal. "Was talking about Griff."

"What did she say?"

After a blink of hesitation, Rickie answered. "Kinda of pointless. Said he's not deaf. He's crazy. He told her he was . . . indestructible." He hid a slight snicker. "Sorry."

"He sure died as easy as any other man, huh?" Jake raised an eyebrow. "Rickie, you are welcome to work on our city if you want."

"Dude, I might just do that. Thanks." Rickie smiled and watched Jake sit back down in his chair. "Hey, Sarge, are you gonna sit there all night and watch her sleep?"

"No, Rickie. I'm gonna sit her all night . . ." Jake grabbed Cal's hand. "And watch her live."



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
October 24 - 6:45 P.M.

Stormy and rough weather made for a bumpy flight on his private jet from Las Vegas. Aldo's stomach turned some and he awaited the smooth ride in the limousine from the airport to the research center. The limo that was always packed and ready to go with remedies to help his queasy stomach. Of course Aldo always had a queasy stomach after flying. No matter how bumpy or smooth, private plane or commercial, flying was not one of his favorite pastimes.

He didn't know why they wanted him back so soon after his mini vacation especially since he was going to be at the institute in a few weeks for the investor's meeting. But Dr. Jefferson said it was important.

With curiosity piqued, Aldo fueled his private plane and headed east. Clearing his meetings for a single day visit, Aldo arrived jet lagged at the research institute.

"Sit down." Dr. Jefferson told him. "Please." They were alone in the observation room.

Aldo looked at the monitoring wall. Not one monitor was lit. "What's going on?"

"There's something we must show you." Dr. Jefferson, with the remote, turned on one monitor only. A wooded area with a stream was shown. "You'll find this interesting."

Aldo, sitting back, puffing a Marlboro, saw a dark dressed figure emerge in the woods. "Is that the catch?"

"Yes it is. Watch."

"Shit." Aldo stood up, Griff, was dragging a kicking and fighting Cal. "Holy shit." His hand went to his head. "Where is Graison?"

"At this particular moment, he's realizing she's gone."

"Why is she having so much trouble with him?" He witnessed Cal's struggle, a vain struggle, her blows, her attempts were futile. "This isn't the same woman who kicked the perverts ass."

"It is." Dr. Jefferson placed his finger to his lips to shush Aldo. "He's



had the treatments, Aldo. He's very strong. No match for her at all. As you can now see . . ." With a press of a button the screen played in slow motion.

"Oh my God." In horror he observed as Griff, holding Cal's hair, knelt one leg on her back and emerged her head in the stream. "Where's Graison!" Aldo breathed heavily through his nose, his heart beat as he saw Griff lift Cal's head then dunk again. On the third time he held it in the flowing water until her body stopped moving. "No." Aldo's face reflected his disgust at what he saw. He snarled as Griff took off through the woods. "She's dead." He blindly felt behind him for his chair, then sank into it.

"Please, Aldo. There's more. Keep in mind, the nearest we could figure out, Griff took off running when he heard Graison and Rickie." The screen went fuzzy then it reappeared. "We edited the four minutes of nothing. Ah, here . . . here it is."

"Rickie?" Aldo leaned forward. "What is he saying?"

"The sound isn't picked up. We think he's screaming for Graison."

"Graison is gonna flip." Aldo's head tossed side to side, then perked when Jake appeared in the monitor and drop to his knees. He quickly looked at Dr. Jefferson when he noticed Jake lay Cal on her back and begin to try to resuscitate her. "Does he?"

"Watch."

Dropping his head in relief, Aldo relaxed and spoke softly. "Yes." He stood up watching the Major hold his girl. "He saved her. He saved her life."

"Never in the history of the Iso-Stasis has a participant ever brought another person back to life, let alone attempted it."

"I can't believe he did that. She was dead."

"Yes Aldo, you were out of the game and he helped . . ."

"Fuck the game." Aldo moved closer to the screen. "I like this girl. He saved her life. Did he take care of the bastard? Did he blow his fuckin' brains out?"

"As a matter of fact . . . several times."

Extending out his finger, breathing a short breath with every point, Aldo indicated to Jake. "I like this guy too."

Dr. Jefferson flicked on the rest of the monitors. "That's all I wanted you for. I really thought you needed to see how the odds are stacking in your favor. Graison's investor saw this last night. He's not happy."

"Graison's investor can suck off for all I care. Fuckin' worm."



“Yes . . . well.” Dr. Jefferson glanced at his watch. “Look at the time. I must be headed home.” He handed the Remote to Aldo. “I’ll send Stan and Lyle back in. Feel free to watch again.”

Then the second Dr. Jefferson walked out, Aldo watched.

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
October 24 - 9:30 P.M.

"Bed!" Jake ordered as he returned to Cal's room and he spotted her sitting on the floor.

"No Jake. Let me work on the city."

"Cal." He marched up to her, took her arm and lifted her to her feet. "One more day of rest. No cold floors. I don't want you sick. Humor me."

"All right, all right. For as much as I humor you, I should be doing stand up on HBO." She let him lead her to the bed. "Can I at least just lay on top of the bed?"

"With covers I'll allow it." He helped her on the bed. "You keep forgetting, you died yesterday."

"Oh I didn't die." Cal lifted her legs on the bed. "I just think that God merely had me in a certain limbo just so I can realize how much I really don't want to leave this earth."

Jake smiled as he covered her with a blanket. "I think God had you in that limbo just so I can see how much I need . . . I need you." He fixed her pillow and laid her down.

"Need me? Please Jake, I'd be dead if it wasn't for you." Cal sat up and placed her hand on his. "I owe you my life."

"I wouldn't go that far. How about just owing me your body instead."

"That'll work for me." She let her fingers run softly across the back of his hand. "I'm surprised you want this body. It's taken some knocks up here."

"Are you kidding? I love this body." He ran his hand up her leg. "Bruised or not bruised."

"Of course why is it *you* haven't taken anything but a punch since we've been here?"

"You don't thing anything happens to me? Cal, every time you take one of those knocks, something happens to me. I may not feel it physically, but trust me, I feel it."

"Oh, listen to you."

"I'm being honest. Yesterday . . ." He lowered his eyes. "When that happened. I was scared. I was really scared. Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've been scared about anything? The last time was in the



third grade. I had to be an elf in the Christmas pageant.” Jake, who was being very serious was somewhat disturbed when Cal burst into laughter. “Why are you laughing? This is not funny.”

“I’m sorry.” Cal covered her eyes. “It’s just that . . . you had to be one big elf.”

“I was. I towered over the other kids. I looked ridiculous. My mother brought out pictures of that to embarrass me all the time. Even when I was sixteen.”

Cal smiled and rested her head back. “What were you like as a teenager?”

“Rickie.”

“You’re kidding right?”

“Nope not at all. I lived life back then. I never cared, fun was all that mattered. When my parents were killed my senior year in high school, all that changed.”

“So you enlisted.”

“Yep.” Jake edged his way closer, looking solemn. “I was alone, the service became my family, and my life. It’s all I had, so I was determined to do it right. I guess doing things right has become a compulsion for me.”

“You aren’t kidding.” She slid her hand down his face and moved closer to him. She placed her lips softly to his. “I’m finding it hard to believe the man that is sitting here used to be like Rickie.”

“I grew up. I like to think that I have values, old fashion at times, but values.”

“You do.” Cal bent her knee up and rested her chin on it as she hugged her leg. “You, Major Graison have a very strong sense of morals. That’s to be commended. I think if you ever find the right woman for you, you are going to be a great husband. You’ll protect her, take care of her, and you will never stray on her. That’s what I believe. You may not be the most affectionate husband, but you’ll always be there.”

“I really think I may have found . . . I’m not affectionate?”

“Between the sheets you are. But otherwise . . . it seems like it’s awkward to you.”

“O.K., it is.” Jake moved even closer to her. “I’m trying.”

“You are. But you’re the type of person Jake that will always be awkward with spontaneous affection. Like now. I think you’d like to kiss me, but you just won’t. So I’ll just . . .” Cal lifted her head and moved her



leg out of the way for him. She grabbed a hold of his shirt pulling Jake to her as she laid down.

Jake's luck wasn't with him. He had been waiting to kiss her since the bet, and there he was, and then there was Rickie.

"O.K." Rickie yelled loudly as he walked into the room with them. "I've had a Rickie revelation."

Jake sat up, cleared his throat and scratched his head. "Rickie."

"Guys, if you are like wanting to do the wild thing, you gonna have to shut the door. A closed door will keep me away."

Jake faced him. "It never has before. Now what is your Rickie revelation?"

"O.K." Rickie walked closer to the bed and pulled the desk chair to join them. "Here it goes. I have decided to walk the straight and narrow. Lead a different life."

Cal looked upon him curiously. "What is bringing this on?"

"A lot of things, but mostly, yesterday. When I saw the Sarge, and what he did for you. That's what I want. I want to help people. Be able to do that. If I don't, I'll never get the respect that he is getting right now from me."

Jake was shocked when he heard Rickie say that. Of course Rickie was still calling him Sarge. "Thank you, Rickie."

"No problem. So . . . like this soldier stuff you do. Are they hiring?"

Jake laughed. "Always. Are you wanting to join now?"

"Yep." Rickie sat up. "I want to do what you do."

With a closed mouth Jake nodded. "You want to be a Ranger? If at the end of this thing, you're still serious, I'll see how I can help you. Get you down at Fort Bragg with me."

"Thanks, dude." Rickie reached out and slapped Jake in the arm. "One more thing. Will I have to have a hair cut like yours? Not that it isn't a stylish do on a man of your size. But I like my locks."

"You'll have to lose the hair Rickie."

"What if I'm like only part-time. You know Monday, Wednesday . . ."

"Rickie." Jake groaned.

Rickie closed his mouth and pretended to lock it. "So, Cal-babe, did you know the Sarge breathed you back to life?"

"Yes I did." She smiled at Jake. "I saw him."



“Whoa.” Rickie moved his chair closer “Were you like hanging up above our heads looking down?”

“Sort of.” Cal answered. “At first there was darkness and I was moving. Then I felt like I was being pulled, and the next thing I knew I heard Jake cry out. I was standing right there with you guys. It’s odd, since Jesse died I never could care less if I left this world. Yet there I was, the opportunity at hand to see her agin, and all I wanted to do was live. I stood over Jake’s shoulder begging him, ‘please bring me back, Jake. Please bring me back’.”

Rickie’s shirked was shuddering. “Oh! You’re giving me chills.” He stuck his arm between the two of them. “Look goose bumps.”

Jake couldn’t take his eyes off of Cal. “You were telling me that?”

Cal nodded. “I put my faith in you Jake. You didn’t let me down. I thought I was a goner.”

Rickie had to get his two cents in. “You were. And . . . if it was anyone else trying to save you, you wouldn’t have come back.”

Both Cal and Jake turned their heads at the same time to him.

“Serious, dudes. It’s a Rickie theory. You came back Cal, not because the Sarge just saved your life. But because he gave you a part of his life. He had to give up a part of his, in order for you to have yours.”

Cal’s eyes widened. “Rickie that is too, how can I put it so you understand, deep?”

“Hey what can I say? I’m a modern type of guy. I say what I feel.” He placed his hand to his chest. “I’m sensitive. But to add a little to my Rickie theory, Sarge you’re probably not going to live as long as you were supposed to before. Maybe you won’t see forty. Wait . . .” Rickie scratched his head. “You’re past that right. Fifty then.”

“Rickie.” Jake snapped. “I’m not forty. And I’d like to sit alone with Cal now.”

“Fine, I’m going.” Rickie moved to the bathroom and stopped. “One more thing.” He ignored Jake’s moan. “That stuff you said, Cal, about getting a chance to see your kid.” He waited for Cal to look at him. “As much as they miss us too. They like don’t want us cramping their style. They want us here. We’ll see them when it’s our time.” With a short wave Rickie shut the bathroom door.

Cal stared, stunned by the profoundness of Rickie. “Is this something new or has he always been like that?”



“Maybe Rickie is changing..”

“Dudes!” In a bang, the bathroom door flung open. “One more thing. Check out this tune.”

In the blasting of distorted guitar music, in defeat Jake dropped his head to Cal’s leg. “Maybe not.”



TRAPPED



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Investors Meeting - Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
November 16 - 8:30 A.M.

There was one less investor at the meeting. Aldo expected there would be. Fr. Dan's investor conceded to the fact that his horse has been declared mentally incapacitated. It doesn't matter if your horse walked away or was carried out barely alive. If they were declared mentally incapacitated, then they and the investor were out of the game.

It irked Aldo to the point that his back hairs were standing on edge. That weasel Stewart, Graison's investor. He stood there, his skinny balding self, rubbing his nose with a overused tissue talking to Jefferson. And in Aldo fashion, he eavesdropped.

Stewart rolled his ice around his drink. "There has to be a way, Dr. Jefferson."

"To be honest with you we've never laid ground rules down on something like this. We've never had one participant make it the objective to protect another participant because they were in love with her."

"We don't know that." Stewart argued.

Just about the time Aldo rolled his eyes in a 'yeah right' fashion, he heard Dr. Jefferson counter-comment.

"I beg to differ, Stewart. You've watched. He's fallen fast and hard. Now Cal . . . we're still guessing on her."

"But it just doesn't seem fair. The only reason she's still in this game is because of him. He's a shoe in to win alone. I'm demanding that those controllers up there do something about this. Break them up."

Aldo had heard enough. "You will demand no such thing."

Stewart wasn't threatened at all by Aldo. "You just need them together so your horse can finish. She's weak."

"Bull shit. You saw her with that priest. Beside, she could kick you sniffing little ass in a heart beat. You will leave their relationship alone. What the fuck is wrong with you."

Dr. Jefferson quieted them. "Gentleman please, I would like to start this meeting." After gathering up the other five investor's to the table, Dr.



Jefferson faced them. “September was interesting, wasn’t it gentlemen. But October, October was a blast. We have one down. As you can see on the monitor. Fr. Dan. And even though she’s reverted to eight personalities, we’re keeping Jennifer in. Because . . . Jennifer in a sense. IS still sane.. Now . . . for those who keep asking me . . . Griff is not out of the game. He is the catch. He is the subject . . . the heart of the Iso-Stasis experiment.” Dr. Jefferson adjusted all monitors so they showed Griff’s room. “Yes Major Graison shot him. Yes Major Graison unloaded his entire weapon into the body of our dear Griff. However as you can see, Griff is far from out of the game. Let’s just say he’s in limbo. Our good Major, returned to that room to open the windows and lock it up. Making it a cooler so to speak. What Graison didn’t realize was that instead of killing Griff, he merely hurried things along.” He zoomed in. Where Griff’s dead body once laid, was a large egg shaped object. Covered with a hair like substance, it throbbed, pulsated, and deep breath sounds emanated from it. “Yes . . . Griff is in there. He has cocooned. In order for the metamorphosis from our treatments to occur, Griff had to be dead. He would have died on his own in another four weeks. Major Graison just shot us into another phase rather quickly..”

Stewart raised his hand, like a school boy. “Dr. Jefferson, when will he hatch so to speak.”

“A few weeks, definitely before Christmas.”

Hand still raised, Stewart had another question. “And how tough will he be to beat?”

As a response, Dr. Jefferson smiled snidely.

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
November 16 - 9:40 A.M.

Restless would be an understatement. Jake laid on top of Cal's bed. He'd look to the closed bathroom door, then to the clock. He had plans he wanted to achieve with Cal. She promised him quality 'alone' time. However nothing would happen if she did not emerge from that bathroom soon. "Cal." Jake got off the bed, walking to the door. He knocked. "You almost done in the bathroom?"

Cal sounded distant. "I'm not in the bathroom Jake, I'm with Rickie."

With a dropped open mouth, Jake shook his head and opened the door. "Fuck." He heard them laughing as he entered what used to be his room. "I appreciate you telling me you were in here."

Cal, smiling turned her head to him as she folded one of Rickie's shirts. "I'm sorry. Rickie needed help."

"Don't be doing his laundry." Jake walked over and took it from her hands. "He has to learn responsibility. It's bad enough that we include it in ours, at least he could do is fold it." He shoved the shirt to Rickie. "Here . . . and do it right."

"Sarge, you make me always keep this room clean, but like I can just throw my clothes in the drawer. No big deal, guy."

Cal tilted her head to Jake. "There you have it."

"There I have it." Jake held out his hand to Cal. "Can we go hang out together please. You promised me time before lunch. I've been waiting."

Rickie, who sounded like he was giving them permission, slid off his bed. "You go ahead, Cal. I'll be here . . ." He sighed. "All alone, just sitting. But . . ." He hurried and caught up to the leaving pair. "Know it makes me feel weirded out when I hear you doing the wild thing in there."

Jake stopped cold. "Rickie, you shouldn't be listening. Be polite."

"Dude, I can't help it. You're loud."

Jake's head snapped to Cal. "You told him to say that."

"I did not." Cal pulled his hand. "Let's go . . . bye, Rickie."

Jake walked with her, he looked back at Rickie who laughed. "This isn't funny. And Rickie the door will be closed. I don't want you banging on it or yelling. Bang one time." Jake held up his finger. "You're bald."

"O.K., Sarge." Rickie, not really paying attention, nor caring, stood up

and shut the door on him.

With a grunting ‘hmm’ Jake followed Cal into the room.

“Jake you have to stop being so serious.”

“Why?” Jake shut the bathroom door, then locked it for privacy. He went over and plopped on the bed.

“I don’t know. I didn’t expect you to say ‘why.’” Cal went over and sat on the bed next to where he laid. “You’re just so serious at times with him.”

“Frustrated at times.” Jake corrected. “I feel like a parent, I think. I don’t know.”

Cal giggled. “Maybe it’s the inner you wanting to be a father.” She lost her smile when he immediately glanced up at her. “I’m sorry. That was wrong. Insensitive. I forgot.”

“No. It wasn’t insensitive. Are you kidding me? I’m fine with it.”

“Did you ever want kids, Jake?”

“I never really gave any thoughts to having kids. But . . . what if the person I would like to be with for the rest of my life wants kids, then that makes me less than a man.”

“Oh, it does not. That’s silly. You’ll adopt.” Cal stated matter-of-fact.

“Do you, Cal? Do you want to have another child?” Jake asked.

“Why are you asking me Jake? It shouldn’t matter if I want one or not.”

“I . . .” Jake’s mouth moved but he said no more. “Never mind. Just forget everything I said.”

“No.” Cal answered softly. “No I never want to have another child.” She laid next to him. “Having another child means taking a chance that you could lose that child. I never want to know that pain again. There’s no greater pain. And I am very happy that there no chance I’ll be getting pregnant.”

“Then I guess I’m with the right person.” His hand slid up her leg.

“That’s what you say now.” She brought her arms around his neck. “We’ll see how you feel in a few months. You’ll change your mind.”

“You really haven’t a clue, do you?” He slipped his hand under her back and pulled her to him.

“About what?”

“About . . .” Holding her tight he lowered his hand to her thigh, lifting her leg to his waist. “How I feel.” He inched his lips to hers. He stared down into her eyes, then closed his, stealing a simple kiss. “That I . . .”

“Dudes!” Rickie knocked on the door.

“I knew it.” Jake pulled away sitting straight up. “Rickie!”

“No, no. Don’t open the door. Check out this song. It’s you guys.” Rickie pressed play for them to hear. “I’ll just leave it against the door for a little mood music.”

The screaming electric guitar followed by the rapid playing drums and the ‘wished he could sing’ heavy metal singer, made Jake spring from the bed in utter disgust. “Not only does he knock on the door, Cal, all the time. But now he’s blasting that God awful noise at us.” Jake rushed to the bathroom door and unlocked it, he tried the knob. “Fuck, he has the other side locked . . . Rickie!” Jake pounded. “Rickie! Shut off the goddamn music!” The music stopped. “Thank you.” Jake, grunting, leaned against the door, hand on his head.

“Jake, my God, calm down.” Cal laughed at him. “Come back to bed.”

“No, Cal, he ruined it. Why does he do that?” Jake began to pace. “I really think he does that to irritate me.” He’d stop every couple steps, shake his head, leave out a disgruntled breath, then pace some more.

“Why are you so upset? Jake?” Cal jumped from the bed.

“No, Cal . . . I have every right to be mad. There I was, getting ready to do something very, very difficult for me and he had to go and do that. I told him not to knock. Goddamn it I’m shaving his hair off while he’s sleeping tonight.” Jake pounded on the bathroom door. “You hear that Rickie? You’re a bald man tomorrow!”

“Jake . . .” Cal couldn’t stop laughing at how upset he was. “Calm down. And what is difficult?”

“telling you, I love you. But he went ahead and ruined it.”

Cal stopped laughing. “Jake . . .”

“Please, forget I said anything.” Jake dropped to the bed, pouting. “I feel stupid.”

Smiling gently, Cal walked slowly toward him. “I’m sorry he ruined your moment.” She crawled on the bed.

“No, don’t worry about it.” Jake played with the covers on the bed. “It was really out of character, and an entirely inappropriate thing for me to do. It would put you in an awkward position.”

Cal threw her hands up. “God, Jake.”

“Cal, I apologize for my outburst. It was uncalled for.” He moved from her way and stood up. “I’m calmer now . . . excuse me.” He walked to



the bathroom and opened the door that Rickie had unlocked.

“Jake? Where are you going? Jake?” After watching him disappear into the bathroom, she heard the clicking of the door’s lock. “Jake!” Clumsily, and tripping, Cal jumped off the bed fearful. Her fears were reconfirmed when she heard the soft buzzing sound coming from the bathroom along with Rickie’s screams.

^^^

Jake had no intention of feeding the six of them lunch. None what-so-ever. He wanted to do something nice for Cal. Surprise her, make an extremely early lunch, sneak Cal in the diningroom and have a meal outside of her room alone. So where did he lose control? It had to be when Cal found him in the dining area, then, like dogs, Jennifer, John, and Carlos followed the scent and just helped themselves before Jake could get a word in edge wise. They’d say ‘thanks Jake, this was really great of you’ and then totally ignore his huffing as they filled their plates.

“Be nice.” Cal whispered in his ear as she sat next to him. His expression of annoyance with everyone said it all as he ate his food.

“They’re sitting with us, Cal.” He whispered back. “You know . . .” He noticed Jennifer staring. “What!” He blasted at Jennifer.

She waved her finger back in forth in a ‘no-no’ fashion. “It’s not polite to tell secrets in the company of others.”

“Like I care what you think.” Jake snapped back.

Jennifer gasped and turned her head to the right, speaking to no one. “See, I told you he wasn’t going to be pleasant.” She swished her head back. “Ignore him, that’s just the way he is. Should we tell them?” A turn of her head. “You do it, they’ll think I’m nuts, and I don’t . . .”

“Knock it off!” Jake grabbed his head. “Fuck. See, Cal . . .”

John snickered. “Jake, if you ate in here with us more often, you’d be quite used to it. It actually gets pretty funny.”

Jennifer flicking her hair to the side, folded her hands in front of her empty plate. “We’ve been hearing something.” She told Jake.

“What?” Jake asked. “Voices? Trust me that’s not a news bulletin.”

“No.” She waved her hand for everyone to bunch in closer. “Noises. Coming from next door.” She nodded. “Griff’s room.”

Jake dropped his fork. “Are you’re nuts? All of you’re personalities are



nuts. There's no noise coming from that room."

"I'm telling you . . . what are you doing here?" Jennifer's voice changed to a deeper sexier voice. "I'm tired of you keeping me hid. I wanted to see him." Her hand reached across and laid on Jake's.

Jake peered up from his plate. "Get your hand off of me." He quickly turned his head when Cal laughed. "You see. This is why I don't like to come down here. It's too crowded." He started to eat again.

Jennifer rambled on, changing voices as she did so, totally being disregarded by the others at the table. In the middle of her argument with Maggie, all heads turned, forks dropped--except for Jake who didn't even look up--when Rickie stepped into the room. His crew cut hair, so short, he almost looked bald.

Cal's hand immediately covered her mouth. "Oh, my God Jake." She stood up. "Rickie, did he do this . . ."

"Yes!" Rickie rubbed his head and pouted. "Just when I was starting to like the Sarge too."

"You were warned." Jake stated. "Were you not?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Then don't whine. It's not becoming. And . . ." Jake winked. "I think it looks good."

"You would." Rickie turtled his way to the shelves and grabbed a plate. He dished up some lunch. "Don't think I don't see you people laughing at me. I'll just take my blue plate, my cheesy macaroni and . . . leave." He cradled his food. "I don't feel like being the entertainment. And . . ." He stopped as he was about to walk out and stared at Jake. "I'm not making my bed. So there." In a stewing march, Rickie left.

Jennifer in a sexy manner, ran her hand across Jake's hair. "I think you did a wonderful job on Rickie. He looks like you."

Jake, removed her hand. "Don't touch me."

"Oh." Jennifer motioned her head to Cal. "It's because she's here, isn't it? I get it." She stood from her seat. "We would truly appreciate if one of you men would come by and investigate the noise. Anyone?"

John stood up and walked past her.

"Carlos?" Jennifer asked.

Carlos, silent, followed John's lead.

"Fine. Then think I'm crazy, I don't care." With a flip of her hair, Jennifer stormed to the door. "I'm not."



“Oh, no, she’s not fuckin gone.” Jake said sarcastically with a slight roll to his eyes. Then, finally he smiled, as intended, he was alone with Cal. He could enjoy his lunch.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Davis Airfield - 30 miles outside of Winnipeg, Canada
November 19 - 1:30 A.M.

“Yo, Davis!” The heavy set older gentleman stuck his head out the glass door. The wind whipped what little hair he had, as he held up a black phone. “Davis! For you!”

Davis trotted toward him. His black leather jacket loosely fitting on his large muscular frame. It was his airfield, passed down from his father. Used more for deliveries and parcels. Davis made his living mostly from the Iso-Stasis Experiment. Making the runs they requested and using the expert flying experience that he had. “Thanks, Grossman.” Davis sniffled and grabbed the phone. “Yes?” He carried it into the building, the noise from the engines running made it impossible for him to hear. “Yes, Dr. Jefferson. My plane is running and ready to go. It’s loaded.” He peered out the window. “Nah . . . wind is high but they aren’t calling for snow in that region, not yet.” He walked over to the clipboard that hung on the wall. “Yes, sir . . . that run is scheduled for the day after tomorrow. I have three planes ordered, pilots and all. I don’t foresee any. We have the expert aboard just incase.” Davis wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “Yes, sir . . . I’m leaving now. I want to be there at daybreak. Thank you.” He hung up the receiver and handed the entire phone to Grossman. “I don’t care how much money the man is paying me . . .” Davis zipped his jacket up all the way. “He’s a pain in my fuckin’ ass.” Shaking his head, knowing well that he knew his business better than anyone, Davis returned out to his plane which sat waiting for him on the runway. The beginning of the Iso-Stasis experiment’s next phase aboard in his cargo area.



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
November 19 - 6:30 A.M.

Cal pulled at her boot laces, she looked at her hands and clenched them. "Jake . . . have you noticed it's getting colder in this building?"

"Yeah." Jake answered from the bathroom. "There's electric space heaters in the storage building. Remind me to get them."

"Thanks for letting us sleep late."

Jake poked his head out the bathroom and pulled the toothbrush from his mouth. "We were up pretty late. Hating to admit it, Rickie was pretty funny with all those damn stories he was . . ." he emerged from the bathroom, his toothbrush hanging out of his mouth. He noticed Cal lifting her head. "You heard it too."

"Yeah I did. A plane?"

"What the hell is it doing up here."

"Wanna check it out." She finished her laces.

"Yeah." Jake ran to the sink, spit, rinsed and wiped. In a single action he grabbed their jackets, passing Cal hers.

"Commercial plane?" Cal placed on her black jacket.

"Nah. That was a twin engine cargo plane." Jake zipped his coat.

"Aren't you the plane expert?"

"Well yes . . . I am. Let's go." He opened the door for her and they headed into the dark hallway.

^^^

Jake peered up at the sky which just was starting to lighten. "I don't see it." He stopped walking halfway up the hill.

"Maybe it was just off course."

"No, it hovered. For a little. But it's gone now."

"O.K. so we were wrong, it wasn't dropping something off. Can we head back now?" Cal pointed down the hill. "I'm freezing."

"Yeah, it's even cold for me." Jake began walking with her.

"Hey it's early, you wanna go back to bed?"

"Nah. I'm not tired. You go ahead though."



"No, Jake. Do you want to go back to bed?"

"Cal . . ." Jake took on a pacifying tone. "You go ahead. I'm not tired."

"Major Graison, I will ask you one more time, after that you're out of luck. Do you want to go back to bed?"

Jake laughed a quick 'ha' and wrapped his arm around her neck tugging her to him. He kissed her on the cheek. "I knew what you meant." He kissed her again before releasing her. "And, I would love . . ."

"What's wrong." She noticed he had stopped.

"Do you smell that?" Jake turned his head to her. "It smells like a wet dog."

"Yeah I do. It's strong."

"I wonder where . . ." Jake's eyes widened when he caught glimpse of it following them. "Shit."

"What . . . shit." Cal turned around also.

"Don't move." Jake held his hand out. "Don't run."

It growled at them, snarling loudly as it watched them. A silver back wolf. Its mouth open, excessive saliva dripping from its white fangs.

"Cal. No sudden movements." Jake had her walking slowly backwards. "Don't look him in the eyes." Moving his hand slowly, Jake reached behind his back for his pistol. It wasn't there. "Fuck. I left my gun in the room."

"Well, Major Graison, care to tell me how we're getting out of this mess?"

"Just move slow . . . God, that is the biggest wolf I have ever seen."

Cal noticed, for every step they took, so did the wolf. "He's gonna get us, isn't he, Jake?"

"I don't think. Just keep moving very . . ."

With a loud chesty growl the wolf opened his mouth and leaped forward straight at Cal.

Cal saw it charge her. She smelled its foul breath. Moments before its seeking, dripping jaws sank. At the split second he opened his mouth inches from her face, Jake's instincts sent his hand outward, snatching the wolf by the throat and instantly snapping its neck. After a high pitch yelp and a crack, he dropped the wolf to the ground.

"Holy shit!" Cal grabbed her chest. "Did you just do that?" She looked down at the dead wolf then up to a concerned looking Jake. "You are incredible. You save my life."

"Let's just head back."



“Do you think there’s more.”

“Cal . . .let’s just move.” He took hold of her arm and began to lead her.

“What a rush! Whoa.” She shook her head in amazement.

“Cal . . . listen to me.” Noticing they were twenty yards from the building, Jake leaned his head to her as they walked. “When I say run . . . you move those skinny legs as fast as you can.”

“Oh no.”

“Run!”

Cal sped forward, her legs charging on the cold hard ground. Jake running--not at his top speed--right behind her for safety’s sake.

“In the building!” He charged out.

With all her weight, Cal flung open the main doors in her forward run. Barreling in right behind was Jake and they closed the door together. The slam of the door may have shut out the ensuing wolf, but it did not stop its pursuit. Hard the wolf slammed against the door causing the hinges to shake.

Jake leaned against the door to hold it closed. The banging grew louder and he bounced with every strike the wolf made. He reached for the bolt. “Shit it’s frozen. Cal, go get me my shot gun. Hurry.”

Running as fast she could to her room, Cal retrieved the weapon. She loaded it as she hurried back to the gathering room. As she slid to a stop inside, Jake was stepping from the door.

“I finally got it . . .” Through the thin build of the door, the wolf came crashing through, splinters of wood flew about as he noisily lunged for a unprepared Jake.

A click-click of the pump, Cal fired one shot sending the wolf right back through the huge hole it had just flung itself through. “Are there any more?” Cal stepped forward holding the shot gun outward as she gaped through the hole. Another snarl, another growl, and another wolf’s head poked through the hole. Cal fired as soon as she saw it. “We are gonna have to fix that hole.”

Lifting himself straight, eyes going from the hole in the door to Cal, Jake paused, then stared in awe at her. He was so shocked at what had just transpired. So charged up from what she did for him, he did something out of the ordinary, he smiled brightly at her. “You weren’t kidding when you said what a rush. You saved *my* life.”



"It's about time. I still have two more times to catch up to you." Cal checked the shot gun, then Jake. "Gees, Jake you look weird."

"I just . . ." Jake shuddered. "Wow. I never expected that. It felt excellent."

"Isn't that a really great feeling? Moments from death and to be snatched out of it unexpectedly? The shock leaves you breathless."

"You aren't kidding." Jake stared greatly at her eyes as he continued to step to her. "And incredibly turned on." He took hold of her face and kissed her intensely. "Let's go." He slid his hand down grabbing hers, leading her.

"Wait, the hole in the door."

"Oh." Jake glanced around to see what he could grab for a quick fix. He spotted the bookshelf, ran to it and slid it over the door. He retook her hand and quickly began to escort her from the room. He wouldn't even allow for them to slow down when Jennifer, John, and Carlos came running to the hall claiming they heard shots. Jake merely told them 'wolves' as he hurried Cal past them into her room.

^^^

Cal looked up at Jake as she sat on the bed retying her boots. She watched him through the tops of her eyes as he put back on his shirt and tucked it into his still unsnapped pants. "So what now, Jake?"

Jake snapped his pants. "I'll have to fix that front door. Then I want to check, just incase another wolf or two is hanging around out there."

"I hope."

"Me, too. Finally a little excitement.."

"Tell em about it." Cal placed her foot on the floor and ran her fingers through her hair. "Jake, could you hand me my shirt. You threw it somewhere over there."

Searching, Jake bent down, picked it up when he found it. He handed it to her.

"I really do think we've found your nitch" Cal put on her shirt. "Some people are turned on by leather. You, you're turned on by being near death."

"No, no." Jake shook his head. "That is not it. I have been at death's door before but I think, no, I know, it has to do with the fact that it was



you that was there. You, little lady impressed the hell out of me, and no one has ever done that. You act fast, think fast. And you aren't afraid. That with the fact you used those qualities to stop something from happening to me, made me . . . made me . . ."

"Want to stop everything have sex?"

Jake grinned.

"So, Major Graison. Feel like wolf hunting?"

"I would love to go . . ."

"Dudes!" Rickie, in his normal timing, knocked continuously on the door.

Jake immediately jolted his view to the door. "What's he have? Radar?" Annoyed, he opened the door. "What?"

"Dude . . ." Rickie walked in. "Check this out. I was like going to get some nourishment and I was walking through the livingroom. There's like Carlos, Jennifer, and John all leaning against this bookshelf. So, I'm like, 'Guys, why you moving furniture?' And then I heard this noise, right? I notice, cause I'm the perceptive guy, the bookshelf is moving. Sarge, we have some serious mammal problems "

"Shit." Jake, grabbing his shot gun, moved to the hall. "Cal, grab the M-16." He raced down the hall. As he stepped into the gathering room he could hear the growling of the beast outside the door. Jennifer, John, and Carlos tried with diligence to hold the bookshelf against the door.

Pumping the chamber on the shot gun, Jake raised and aimed it, prepared for when he told the three that held back the wolf--to move. He heard the click of the M-16, Jake turned his head with a smile to see Cal standing side by side with him. "On my call, Cal."

"Whenever your ready, Major."

Jake prepared to bark his order but hesitated. "Wait up." He lowered his weapon.

John, who was breaking a sweat, yelled frazzled to Jake. "What are you doing? We can't hold this back much longer." Upset he looked to Rickie who was jumping up to try to see out the only window in the room. "Could you give us a hand?"

"Dude, I'm trying to see how many." He jumped again, but couldn't make it out.

Jake moved to the window and gently moved Rickie out of the way. "Go hold back the shelf." Jake, with ease, peered out the window. "O.K.

we have wolves.”

John was visibly upset. “No shit, Jake. How many? It feels like two of them.”

“Definitely more than one.” Jake turned his views to Cal.

Cal knew by the look on his face, the twitch in his eye, that something was wrong. “Jake?”

“All right.” Jake grasping his shot gun, walked center room. “You four hold that shelf. I can’t take them out from here. I have to go up. Cal . . .” He looked at her. “You game?”

“Lead the way.”

“Excellent.” He placed his hand on her back and led her from the room. Stopping before going down the hall, he faced the struggling four. “Give us a minute. I have to get rope from my room.” He turned, then stopped. “And uh . . . good thing that shelf is metal huh?” Jake marched out.

John turned suddenly to Carlos who was bouncing around as much as he was. “He’s such a dick.”

^^^

“Jake . . . found them.” Cal emerged from the bathroom carrying two rolled up ropes. “Why do we need ropes?”

“Just in case.” Jake made sure both weapons were loaded and he handed Cal the rifle. “All ready.” He took the ropes, throwing them over his shoulder.

“How are you fixed on ammo?”

“Oh I’m fine. I came prepared.” Jake opened the bedroom door. “You and me Cal, we’re hooked up.”

Cal followed him down the hall. “And where are we going? The gathering room is that way.”

“To the roof.”

“Can I have the shot gun?”

“No, you have an M-16.”

“Come on, Jake I feel real cool with the shot gun.”

“The M-16 is cool. No Cal, the shot gun’s mine.” He looked up at the ceiling as they reached the end of the hall.



“Please.”

“All right . . . here.” He exchanged her weapons and turned the M-16 upside down. With the butt of it he pressed up to the ceiling, opening a hatch. “The roof.” Extending up his arm Jake jumped once. As he came down he pulled with him a sliding ladder. He motioned his hand to it for Cal.

“How did you know this was here?” She stepped her foot on the first rung.

“Did you really think I didn’t scope this place out. Now up. Hurry.” Nudging her by her backside, Jake gave her a boost up. He watched her climb and then he followed. He could hear as he took the ladder, Cal running across the roof.

“Shit Jake.” Cal peered over the edge. “There’s . . . one, two . . . seven of them.”

“I know. Now keep your voice down.” Jake joined her, then he pulled her down to sit. “Here’s the plan.”

“We have a plan?”

“Yes.” Jake snapped. “You have the shot gun. You concentrate on the close range. They’re gonna scatter when we fire so, I’ll try to catch them. Try to be accurate.”

“Me? You. Let’s just do this.” Cal brought herself to her knees to peer over the ledge. “They are a determined bunch.”

“Probably hungry. Look . . . when you hang over the edge, be careful you don’t fall. O.K.?”

Cal scoffed with a laugh. “What are they gonna do jump up . . .” Cal shrieked as the snarling jaws of a wolf lunged within a foot of her face. She jumped back. “Fuck.”

“Satisfied, Miss mouth? Are we ready now.”

Still in a little shock, Cal nodded and slowly raised her weapon again. “I’m ready.” She visually charted out which wolf she would go for first, then second. Within moments they began to fire upon the small pack of wolves.

^^^

It appeared to weigh nothing as Jake carried it into the gathering room. The heavy door he had taken from the bathroom in Rickie’s old room. Jake



carried that, a hammer under his arm, nails in his mouth. "Cal." He spoke muffled, lifting his chin to her to remove the nails. She did. "You guys can move away from that shelf now."

"Hey, Sarge." Rickie spoke up. "Like that's my door, can I have my poster back before you block the hole with it."

After giving a sneer to Rickie, Jake walked up to the bunch, resting the door he carried against the wall. He slid the shelf out of the way, whistling when he saw the blood stained door and the huge hole center of it. "That's a big hole."

John's mouth dropped open. "No shit, Jake. And you just left it there."

"I put the shelf in front of it." Jake slid the new door over the old one and lined up a nail. He pounded it twice, driving it in, he took another nail from Cal's hand.

"A lot of good it did though." John continued. "All you say is wolves, and you leave the shelf to block the door."

"I thought it would hold them back." Jake placed in another nail.

"Jake!" John snapped at him, he noticed Jake's glare and at that moment didn't worry. "The wolf put a huge hole in the door, did you really think the shelf would stand on its own?"

"John! Why are you bitching at me?" Jake halted in his pounding to stare him down. "It's not wise. Trust me." Without looking Jake reached his hand out for another nail.

"I don't mean to bitch at you Jake, but common sense should tell you if the wolf was strong enough to go through a wooden door, it was gonna knock the shelf over. You should have at least warned us of that possibility, before you ran off."

"At the moment I ran off, I really didn't care." Jake slammed the hammer into the final nail so hard it rang in everyone's ear. "I still don't."

Seeing he was getting nowhere with the hole issue with Jake, John tried another line of questioning. "So, do you think there are more. Do you think they'll come back."

"How the hell should I know. I'm a *Ranger*, not a fuckin' Forest Ranger." Jake looked at his completed project. "Done, and you can still open it." He turned to knob immediately viewing the scattered carcasses. "Oh man do they stink." Jake covered his nose with the back of his hand and shut the door. "We killed them." He laid his hand on Cal's back. "You



people move them.” Amongst the moans that emanated from the group, Jake smiling snidely, walked out with Cal.

Sand Dune Casino - Las Vegas, NV
November 19 - 8:22 P.M.

Between the forefinger and middle finger of his left hand, Aldo clenched the cigarette. Phone gripped between his ear and shoulder, his right hand rested just above his eyes as he sat behind his desk. "I'm listening."

"Virus Bread." Barb explained over the phone. "New this experiment. Eighty percent fatal. Someone weak won't beat it at all."

Exhaling long, Aldo sat back and rubbed his head. "Damn it." He took a moment to think. "So, as long as they don't get bit, they're fine. Right? Graison and my girl, are they doing good taken them out?"

"For the time being." Barb answered. "His arsenal isn't that big."

"How many are we talking about."

Barb hesitated before answering. "Over the next two weeks? Maybe two hundred."

"Fuckin Jefferson>" Aldo snapped forward. "He wants to keep the pot again this experiment doesn't he."

"Absolutely. And he'll try anything. After all . . ." Barb said. "We don't have the catch this time."



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
November 22 - 7:30 A.M.

“Sarge, please.” Rickie pleaded with Jake. “Let me go and shoot with you today.”

“No, Rickie. We have to conserve my ammo. I can not take a chance on you wasting it.” He tossed Cal the rifle. “Cal, don’t ask . . .” He saw her mouth shut. “I get the shotgun today. You’re already winning the wolf count.”

Cal smiled as she took the rifle. “Cal ten, Jake seven.”

“Don’t rub it in.” Jake tried to move around the room to get ready to go, but Rickie followed close behind. “Rickie. Out.”

“Sarge, I can do this. You have that cool gun that shoots that red light first . . .”

“Out.” Jake opened up the bathroom door for him. “Give us a moment. We mentally prepare for this.”

“Fine. Gun hogs.” Rickie jumped as Jake slammed the door on him.

Cal snickered as Jake locked the door. “Mentally prepare?”

“Oh, what does he know.” Jake sat down on the bed with her, shot gun between his legs. “Should be anytime now.”

^^^

From the watching of the monitor of Cal’s room, Hawk shook his head in utter annoyance at Carl. “Graison’s so arrogant. I just hate him.”

Carl gave an upward nod of his head. “Do it. Hit the homing device. Let’s get him.”

Ornery was the grin that graced Hawks face just as he reached for the button unto the counter and pressed.

^^^

“What the fuck?” Jake slowly stood from the bed.



It started as a soft rumble, an odd sound they hadn't heard before. It grew closer. The deep sound, almost too thick to be real. Not what they expected, not what had happened the previous two mornings. Like the motor on a large truck rolling down the road, the sound came into ear focus. There was growling, more growling than they had ever heard.

The moment Jake ran to the window to see, it started. A single bang turned to two, then three. Soon it sounded as if sledge hammers, many of them were being pounded against the metal walls of the building. Everywhere the banging came. Loud, continuous.

Jake sharply, gripping his gun, turned to Cal. "What's this shit?"

"I think we may need more ammo."

In a huff of 'you aren't kidding,' Jake flew out of the room, Cal right behind him.

At the end of the hall, hysterical and holding on to her ears, Jennifer raced toward them. "They're everywhere!" She screamed. "Everywhere."

Carlos and John grabbed her under her arms and lifted her to her feet.

Out of his room, Rickie came flying. "It's sounds like night of the living wolves."

The noise level increased. How many were there, Jake wondered. To be attacking so fiercely walls they could not penetrate, there had to be a lot. "We're going to the roof!" Jake shouted, then noticed Carlos leading Jennifer into her room. "Stop. Don't take her in there. Secure all the bedroom doors. Stay in this hall." He trotted to the end of the hall and lifted the butt of his rifle to open the hatch. The loud crash and breaking glass halted him from jumping for the ladder. With a stern concentrating look, Jake zoomed in on the sound. It came from Fr. Dan's room. He raced down to his door.

Screams. Fr. Dan's tried to scream painful cries for help, but loud snarling, and struggling drowning them out.

Jennifer grabbed on to Jake's arm as he watched the door. "Get him out of there. Get him out."

Cal pulled Jennifer's hand from Jake. "No, Jake. Don't."

Carlos pleaded also. "Jake, it's not a way to die."

"No!" Cal argued as she saw Jake reach for his keys. "Jake, no!"

Jake turned to Rickie who stood staring, frightened at the door. He held up the keys to him. "Rickie, it's your call."

Rickie, briefly glanced at the keys, with an angry look he stepped back.



“Let him die.”

“Yes!” Jake gripped the keys and stuck them back in his pocket.

The steady thumping against Fr. Dan’s door slowed down. The cries for mercy, for help. Cries in anguish stopped. Jennifer’s long shrill scream and pointed finger proved the end had come for Fr. Dan, as she indicated to the pool of blood that slowly seeped from the bottom crease of the door.

With the pumping of the chamber, Jake moved to Rickie’s door. “He’s in here.” Jake listened. Trying to hear the heavy animal breathing through the pounding that still occurred on the outside walls of their building. “Cal, back me up.”

Slowly, feeling the tension, Cal moved behind him, holding her rifle high. Blocking out the sounds of the pounding desperate wolves, she concentrated on the door.

Jake reached his hand slowly to it, feeling the locked door. In a whisper he spoke. “I’m stepping back.” With a heavy kick, he pounded the door open to the vision of the large wolf, gnawing on what seemed to be Fr. Dan’s arm. The wolf spotted Jake in the same instant Jake had him in his aim. With a monstrous growl, the wolf leaped outward, and in a single shot, the huge furry body flew backwards across the room smashing into the wall. He left a bloody trail as he slid down. “Cal, to the roof.” Jake ran from the room down the hall. Leaping up he brought down the ladder and he and Cal climbed up.

Lifting himself to the roof he heard Cal firing. Shot, yelp. Shot, yelp. He ran to join her. “You had to get really ahead of me.”

“Why not . . . why are they running.”

Jake shot out, but they were out of his shot gun range. He lowered his weapon when not a wolf could be seen. “Did you see how many?”

“A ton. Forty. Maybe fifty. What are we going to do? If we want, we can take them out.”

“Yeah, I know, but the thing we have to worry about is . . . how many more are there?” Letting out a deep breath, Jake reached out and pulled Cal into him. He wanted to hold her. Resting his chin upon her head, he peered out. Through the edge of the trees, courtesy of the shining sun, Jake saw them. Eyes. Reflecting eyes, more than he wanted to see, all peering back at him.

^^^



“O.K., here’s the situation.” Jake stood in the gathering room before everyone. “I hate group efforts. But the way I see it is you have a choice. You can go along with me on this one or you can starve. There’s forty or fifty wolves out there, they’re hungry, they want in. We’re their food. It’s not going to be long before they get into our storage building. If they get in there, they get our food. I’m going into storage and getting food. If you choose not to come, you won’t touch what I bring out. If you do come, then we can carry much more in, and all of us can be secure in the fact that at least we can eat. We have two rifles in storage, and a few boxes of ammo. Not much. So they will be the least of our worries. Carlos . . . John . . . in or out?”

Considering they really didn’t have much of a choice, they agreed. Then they listened to what Jake had to say.

^^^

Checking Cal’s weapon, Jake stood bottom of the ladder with her as she raised her foot upward. “You know what to do, right?”

“Yes. Rickie will keep me loaded, I keep them off of you guys while you run for supplies.”

“Don’t waste ammo, they don’t scare. Rickie . . .” Jake looked at him. “We have ropes secured up there, I am trusting that you will not let her suspend herself from the roof to shoot. She’s been wanting to do that and I won’t let her. Those bastards can jump.”

“Cool.” Rickie gave a thumbs up to Cal. “No Sarge, she’ll stay on the roof. Unless she falls off.”

“Don’t even joke about that.” Jake patted the knapsack that Rickie held over his shoulders. “We only had enough bottles for four Molotov’s. Cal, you know when right?”

“Jake.” Cal stepped off the ladder. “Rickie, go on up.” Cal folded her arms and took the shotgun and the rifle from Jake. “I know what to do. Now what is up with you? Would you feel better if you were on the roof, because I sure as hell don’t mind sprinting for supplies.”

“No, Cal. You’re getting this all wrong. I’m just going over everything for you, that’s all. We may not run into any trouble. But I’m gonna guess as soon as they see us, their gonna make their run for us.”



“Then I’ll be ready.” She threw the armory over her shoulders and grabbed on to the ladder. “Jake, you’re gonna be out there. I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will.” He reached up placing his hand over hers. “Don’t think I don’t trust you Cal. I trust my life with you and I wouldn’t say that to just anyone.”

“Thank you.” Cal, leaning off the ladder kissed him. “Be careful.”

Waiting until she was on the roof, Jake cleared his throat and headed to the gathering room where Carlos and John waited by the door. “All right,” he handed John the broken broom with a cloth wrapped on top. “This is doused so be careful when you light it. Carlos.” Jake handed him a jug. “You’re our oil man, follow behind me, lay it down where I lay down the gasoline. I figure once we step out those doors we have about thirty seconds and they’re gonna be all over us. You know what you have to do. Any questions?”

Jennifer raised her hand. “What am I supposed to do? You haven’t given me an assignment yet.”

“Um . . .” Jake stuttered. “You stay back with the girls. Keep them calm.”

“Got it.” Jennifer gave a thumbs up.

Cringing, Jake moved to the door and readied the gasoline can. “Get ready. No wasting time. John, as soon as I step out, you light.” Jake opened the door. “Good luck.” He darted out.

Straight out about three yards he ran, keeping what he hoped would become a wall of fire, safely from the building. Drawing a line, his hand pouring the gas close to the ground, Jake ran to the supply building, dropping the empty can as he pulled out the keys. Through the corner of his eye he could see Carlos almost to the supply building. John still fiddled with the torch. “John, light it.”

John flicked the lighter. “It won’t work!”

“Light it now!” Like a stampede, the rumble began. The heaviness of the paws running against the hard ground while the wolves snarled the whole way to them. “John, now!” Jake could smell them. He got the door open but the wolves rushed in. Twenty yards. Fifteen yards. Ten . . .

Cal held the Molotov cocktail in her hand ready to light. “What’s the hold up? Come on.” She beckoned, seeing the wolves. Five yards . . . “Fuck it Jake, sorry to waste you cocktail.” Cal lit it, sooner than she was supposed to, and readied to throw. “If I ever hit anything . . .” The homemade bomb



sailed down seconds before the wolves reached Jake, Carlos, and John. With the crash of the glass, bang of the explosion and whoosh of the flames, the wall of fire roared. "Yes!" She smiled as she saw Jake at the storage holding up his thumb. "Rickie, the M-16."

"Cal, awesome aiming." He handed her the rifle.

Over the edge Cal perched herself. Rifle resting in her hand as she squatted, peering through the scope at the wolves on the other side of the fire.

"They're coming out with the first trip." Rickie told her. "The fire's dying." He handed her another Cocktail. "It's time."

Trading the rifle for the bomb, Cal quickly lit it, tossed it and restarted the raging fire. She took back her rifle. "Come on. Hurry." Cal watched the last trip. John, huge box in hand, Carlos, arms loaded followed. "Jake get out of there." Then Jake emerged. "It's over." She began to lower her weapon. "They did . . ." Cal saw through the corner of her eye, Jake headed back to storage. "What the fuck ? Rickie, another."

Rickie, lit it for her. "He's locking the door."

Cal, still holding the rifle, tossed the Molotov. She re-aimed. "Let's go, Jake."

Jake looked up to Cal, then began to head back. On his third running step, he heard the loud, long, angry growling bark and before he knew what happened, leaping bravely though the flames came a wolf. He held up his arm in his defense, only to have it snatched and gripped in the beast's jaws.

"Oh, my God." Cal clicked back the hammer on the rifle. The animal was so close to Jake's body. Trying to aim, her heart dropped, out through the flames lunged another beast. Lifting her rifle slightly, she caught that wolf mid air, then returned her aim to the one that had Jake. She knew what she had to do.

With his free hand he struggled for the neck of the wolf, trying to grasp it, trying to break it, all while fighting not to be pummeled. The warm rotten breath of the wolf along with spraying saliva hit him in the face as he tried to move his head away. He felt the teeth sink into his skin and Jake's jaws clenched in pain. It was a struggle he wasn't prepared for. Then in one split second it was over. The jaws of the wolf released when with a ringing through gunshot, and the head of the beast exploded before his eyes, showering Jake with his blood.

An instantaneous rush of excitement filled Jake, as his adrenaline



pumped and he harshly ran his hand down his face swiping off the blood so he could open his eyes. "Cal! Yes!" He called out with enthusiasm, seeing her climb down the rope, drop to her knees, pick herself up and race right to him.

"Oh my God, Jake, are you all right?" She jumped in his arms.

Jake took a second to touch her face and smile at her. Cal's feet nearly dragged as he carried her with him, running to the main building. "Unbelievable!" He slammed the door as they ran inside. "Did you guys see that?"

"Jake." Cal tried to see his arm. "We have to get this . . ."

"I know, I know." Jake turned to everyone who stood, out of breath, and stunned. "I'll be back." Clutching Cal's arm, he ran with her to their room.

"Jake." Cal immediately followed him into the bathroom. He was turning on the water. "Let me see your arm."

"It'll be fine." He emerged it under the hot water and immediately began scrubbing fiercely with the bar of soap. "Just fine. Thanks to you. God, Cal. Unbelievable marksmanship, I *knew* there was a reason I loved you." He scrubbed his arm harder then looked at his wound. "Looks good." Shaking off the excess water, Jake grabbed a towel. "I'll tell you what." He reached behind her neck, pulled her to him, and kissed her with a smack. "Excellent."

Cal smacked her lips cringing her face. "Oh, Jake." She wiped her hand across her mouth. "Wolf blood."

"Sorry." Jake splashed his face with water. "I forgot. Do you mind if I jump in the shower?"

"No." Cal held up her hand as he stepped to her. "Not at all."

"Thanks." Jake reached in and turned on the water. "I have to do something first." He ran into his room and came back out with a syringe in his mouth. He uncapped it with his teeth.

"What is that?" Cal asked.

"Rabies vaccine. I told you I came prepared." He plunged the needle into his upper arm.

Cal winced. "Jake. How can you just stick yourself like that?"

"And this is coming from a woman who did what you did?" Jake took off his shirt. "I'm proud of you." He spoke upbeat and fast. "What you did

took a lot of guts. A lot.” He dropped his pants to the floor stepping out of them. “Do you realize how close that wolf was to me? You did realize that, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did. What choice did I have.” She watched him stand totally naked in front of her and slide open the shower door. “The wolf had you. I figured, either way, if I missed the wolf, you were a goner. So I shot. . . Why don’t I wait until you’re done?”

“No, I’m talking to you. Stay in here.” Jake spoke loudly through the running water. “We got a lot of supplies out of there, Cal. With proper rationing we can make it the next three months, even with The Howling gang hanging out there. Though between you and I, we can take care of the problem, or start to. We can make it a game. Go up to the roof every morning. What do you think?”

“Sure.” Cal had less the enthusiasm that Jake did. She leaned against the sink, arms folded.

“How bout this, to pull them from the hill, we can get Rickie to open the door and stand there until they charge.”

“Jake that’s terrible.”

“It would work.” Jake scoured his head, letting the chunks of wolf remains fall through the drain. “Only one mistake you made. You came off the roof. For your safety, you should have stayed there.”

Cal immediately slid open the door. “I came off the roof because I was worried about you. Christ, you scared me. What were you thinking? You were safe. You ran back out to lock the door? When in the world did wolves learn to turn door knobs? You scared the hell out of me Jake!”

Jake rinsed the soap from his eyes. “Are you done?”

“Yes.”

“Well can you shut the door please, you’re letting in cold air.”

Cal did shut the door--with a slam.

Jake, really not paying attention that she slammed the door for a reason, continued in his shower.

“Cal.” Wearing a towel, Jake came out of the bathroom and looked to Cal who sat on the bed. “I was thinking about what you said.” He shut and locked the bathroom door. “If the wolves hit against the door enough, wouldn’t it have been better and safer if the door was secured. Also, I think



we should secure these windows too, after what . . .”

“Jake!” Cal stood up. “I told you I was worried. You worried me. Didn’t you hear that part?”

“Yes I did. Cal, that just goes with the territory. In fact, now you know how *I* felt when you *died* on me. But that’s besides the point . . . don’t lessen what you did by being mad at me. O.K.?”

“I’m just concerned, Jake. I’m sorry I bitched at you.”

Jake walked over and sat next to her on the bed. “I guess that’s just part of being a couple. We are a couple, right?”

“Jake, we broke up for two weeks. We had to start all over again.”

“No, we did not.” Jake rested his hand over hers. “Thank you for what you did. In the words of someone I think very highly of . . . I put my faith in you, and you didn’t let me down.” He brought his lips closer to hers. “Of course when you do shit like that, you excite me like you don’t believe.” He kissed her.

“Jake . . .” She felt herself being led down. “Not now . . . Jake . . . this isn’t a good time . . . Jake.” She was flat on her back as he buried his lips on her neck. “There are wolves outside.” She heard him growl softly in her ear. Knowing she was defeated, Cal gave in and stopped fighting. “Tell me Jake, is Rambo your equivalent to a porno film?”

Jake didn’t answer, he just removed his towel.

Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
November 22 - 11:45 P.M.

Stan zipped his jacket up as he emerged from the research center wanting nothing more than to just go home. Not much had bothered Stan through the whole experiment. Not much at all. But he knew, as he headed to his tiny blue compact car, that when he returned for his shift the next evening, things would be a lot different.

Of all the participants, Stan knew who he expected to be the surviving victim of the wolf bite. In his mind it wasn't Jake.

Jake had his size and strength in his favor for the obstacle he was about to go up against. Stan knew that, but sadly Stan also knew that Jake planned ahead. And what he was about to face Jake could not have planned, nor ever expected it. All the observers had favorites, and Jake was Stan's and he went home that evening truly bothered by the thought of what he would see when he came back the next day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
November 23 - 7:00 A.M.

His eyes felt extremely heavy when he opened them, lifting his head over Cal's shoulder to see the clock. Finding it hard to believe he slept that late, Jake slid his hand up Cal's leg and softly placed his lips to her cheek. His throat felt thick, he cleared it. "Cal . . ." Jake's voice was raspy. He cleared his throat again. "Cal, come on get up." He kissed her one more time as he lifted the covers from his body only. "Cal?" He waited for her signature grunt, and he knew she would get up. Swinging his legs over the bed, he planted his feet on the cold floor. As he stood, he felt as if all of his blood rushed to his head. The room moved ahead off his focus. Jake stopped in his walking, leaning down with one hand to the bed. He rubbed his eyes, caught his balance then moved to the bathroom.

Flicking the light on in the bathroom was the wake up call for the headache that slumbered in Jake's head. Piercing pain pressed against his eyes causing him to grip the edge of the sink. Jake turned on the faucet and began to splash his face. He moved through his normal morning routine, but Jake moved slowly.

"All yours." Jake spoke to Cal as he walked from the bathroom. She stumbled from the half sleep state she was in, flicking on the already prepared coffee pot, then to the bathroom, her hair all over the place. Jake looked around for his clothes that he put out the night before. He rubbed his arms as he searched Cal's dresser. Seeing them, he went to retrieve them. As he reached out his hand, they seemed to turn into a blur. "Fuck." He whispered, rubbing his eyes once more.

He could barely move. His legs felt so heavy it was if they weren't a part of his body. *It has to be lack of exercise.* Jake thought as he began to get dressed, planning in his mind what he could do to remedy that.

Cal never said anything when she first woke up. From the bathroom to the coffee pot was what she normally did. Pouring herself a cup, smelling it, then sipping it. "You want coffee?" she asked.

"Uh . . . please."



Cal grabbed his mug, poured some and handed it to him. "Morning." She reached up and kissed him. "How's your arm?"

"Fine." Jake sniffled and sipped the coffee. "This is cold."

"No it's not. Let me see." She peered at his arm. "Looks good. It's not even red."

"No . . ." Jake cleared his throat again, looking down at his arm. "It's not. Cal, are you cold?"

"Nope." She set down her coffee and grabbed her shoes. "My turn or your turn for the shot gun?"

"Um . . ." Jake set down his mug turning to Cal. She went out of focus. His blinking was pronounced as he looked at her. "Yours." He squinted.

"Jake, are you all right? You look tired." She finished lacing her boot.

"I have a headache. But I'm fine."

Cal stood from the bed stepping closer to him. "You look really tired."

"I'm fine. Let's just get up there."

"Weapons?" Cal looked around. "You usually have them out."

"Sorry." Jake grabbed the duffle bag.

"Jake?" Cal laid her hand on his arm, it was warm to the touch. "Jake, stand up." When he did she felt his neck. "You are really warm." She looked at his injured arm. "Are you sure . . ."

"Cal, please." Slowly he removed her hand from his neck. "Let's just go." He handed her the shot gun, grabbed his coffee and opened the door for her.

Pausing as she passed him, Cal took a long look at Jake. His face seemed pale, his eyes darker. Her immediate gut reaction told her it had something to do with the bite, infection possibly. But his arm looked clear. No redness at all. If it was an infection, surely it would be visible there. Without any further agitation to Jake, Cal walked ahead of him down the hall.

^^^

"All quiet on the western front." Cal, kneeling, looked through Jake's binoculars. "They're just sitting in the woods. Maybe we *should* use Rickie as bait. What do you think? Do your idea Jake?"

Leaning with his back against the edging, rifle between his bent up



legs, Jake barely turned his head to her. "Sure." He tried breathing deeply, trying to shake the headache, the sluggish feeling.

"I don't understand." Cal laid down the binoculars. "I was prepared for a big . . . shit!" The all too familiar rumble. The rumble that signified what was going to happen. Aiming her gun on the ledge Cal readied herself. "Jake!"

Jolting back from his daze, Jake quickly spun himself from his sitting position, up. Raising his rifle, the floor he knelt on swayed and Jake began to lose his balance. Hurriedly, without notice from Cal, he caught himself and clicked back the hammer. He could hear Cal fire as his finger began to depress. The wolves started to scatter, making it harder for him to focus. Shifting his eyes trying to find a target, the grey overcast of the sky seemed to get darker, and soon everything in Jake's view began to blacken out. He rubbed his eyes fanatically. Vision back. Shooting at his target, he merely nipped the hind leg.

"Jake come on, you're better than that. Wake up." Cal fired. Taking one out.

"I'm trying to . . ." Jake's fingers locked, they stiffen immediately up. Quickly he removed them from the gun and stared at his hand, it too went out of focus. "Fuck."

"What's wrong?"

Trembling. Trying to click back the hammer on his gun was next to impossible. Jake's hand began to tremble so bad he couldn't control it. Cal's voice began to fade in the back of his head. She sounded as if she was calling him from an echo chamber. So faint, so distant. What was happening to him? Jake's hands weakened and his rifle began to topple. He stopped it, and stood up. Raising up, Jake felt as if the world around him was swopping from under his feet. Suddenly there were two of Cal, both of her out of focus. And the pain. Sharp, eye watering, daggering straight from his eyes to his ears. Grunting to himself, Jake backed up. He saw Cal stop shooting and turn around. She called to him. She called his name. Why was it so deep. So far away?

With a trembling body, Jake dropped his weapon. His stomach began to knot in fear that he was going to pass out on that roof. Knowing that he was more of a hinder to the situation rather than an asset, Jake stepped back. "Keep . . . keep shooting, Cal." Stepping aimlessly for the hatch, Jake lowered his legs. He slid down the twelve feet barely holding on. The



hallway was rippled. Holding on to the wall for support, Jake staggered his way to Cal's room. He shut the door behind him, and pressed his palms deep into his eye sockets. Attempting again to focus, to stop shaking, Jake raised his eyes. The room began to turn black. Jake reached for the bed, felt for the softness of it, and collapsed.

"Jake . . ." His name slowed from her mouth as Cal burst the door open. "Oh my, God." Shutting the door, dropping her weapons, Cal fell to her knees to Jake who was face down and half off the bed. "Oh God Jake." Cal laid her hands on his back to roll him over. "You're burning up." Using all her might, she managed to get Jake to face her, his legs dropped all the way and he slid to the floor. Cal used what she had to hold him up right. His head flung back over her arm. "Rickie!" She called as loud and desperate as she could. "Jake . . . Jake." She shook his chin. "Rickie!" Cal mumbled to herself. "I have to do something."

"Cal!" Rickie flew into the room pulling on his sweat pants. "What happened to Sarge?"

"Rickie he's sick. He's really sick. He's burning up. Go into the bathroom and wet me a towel hurry . . . and not too cold." Cal rested him back against the bed and lifted his shirt. It was a struggle to even begin to get his arms out. "Jake, wake up."

"Here." Rickie handed her the dripping cloth.

"Thanks. Help me with him. We have to get him awake and in the shower." She waited for Rickie to support Jake and she lifted off his shirt. "Jake . . ." She wiped off his face and neck. "Jake . . . it's me."

Jake's eyes opened slightly. "Cal." His head went back.

Cal panicked. "Jake you have to help me help you. Please." She kept wiping. "Jake . . . Rickie, we have to get him up. We have to get something in him. Anything."

"Want me to get John and Carlos?"

"No!" Cal answered abruptly. "He wouldn't want anyone to see him like this . . . Jake."

Jake parted his eyes slightly lifting his head. He reached his trembling hand out blindly to Cal. "I can't . . . see you."

"I'm right here." She led his hand to her face. "I'm right here." As his head began to fall back Cal stopped it. "Jake, you have to help me. You have to stand up. I can't carry you. Jake?" She grabbed his chin, shaking his



head. "Jake . . ."

With rolling eyes Jake lifted his head. "I'll stand."

"Good." Cal smiled, bracing under his arm. "Rickie, grab his other arm." She placed her face directly in front of Jake's. "Listen to me, Jake. On three you have to try to stand. Got that?"

"Three." Jake spoke groggily.

"One . . ."

"I love . . . I love you." Jake reached his hand out. His fingers touched her face. They ran weakly from her nose across her lips as his head began to sway.

Cal clutched his searching hand and brought it to her mouth as a rush of emotions hit her. "Prove it, Jake. Stand up for me. Please." She kissed him, then nodded her head to Rickie. "One, two, three." With a grunt, all of them awkwardly rose to their feet. Jake's huge body swayed back and forth. He could barely walk.

Feeling the not-so-steady ground beneath his feet, Jake clung to Cal as if she were his only pillar of strength. "Did you doubt me?" He asked weakly.

"Not for a second." Cal helped to lead him into the bathroom. "Rickie, the water."

"Do you have him?" Rickie asked.

"I hope." Cal used the wall for support. "We're gonna have to get him in the stall like this. I'll worry about his clothes later."

Rickie took hold of Jake's arm. "Cal how are you going to hold him up in there?"

"Can you give me a hand?" She asked humbly. "Please."

"Without a second thought." Rickie opened the shower door, helping Cal inside with Jake. It was a good thing for the both of them, that even though he was half out of it, Jake helped out. They stood with the lukewarm running water, fully dressed, holding Jake.

As soon as Jake felt the water, he awakened some, shaking his head at the water that hit him. "It's cold."

"No." Cal stood behind him speaking soothingly. "You're just fevered. We have to bring it down." She lifted his right arm placing his hand flush against the wall for support. She looked at Rickie who held on to Jake with everything he had. With her arm wrapped around his waist, and the other bracing his shoulder, Cal saw Jake's head drop forward. She pressed her lips



to his back, leaning her head against it. A lump in her throat, and eyes that felt misty, because Cal was deathly fearful of what was wrong with him.



Using the large pot Rickie had brought for her from the kitchen, Cal sat in the chair next to Jake. So close she sat, feeling his warm breath as he lay sleeping, breathing heavy. She wiped him off, almost continuously. Around his face, under his arms, his chest, and behind his neck. Over and over. Constantly changing the cool water in the pot because it kept getting warm every time she wrung off the cloth. She reached for the glass of water on the night stand, it had it's own cloth. She grabbed the rag, dabbed it and brought it gently to his lips, lips that were beginning to blister, and she moistened them. Through all her fussing over him, Jake never awoke. The only movement that he made was the trembling of his body as his system desperately tried to fight off what was getting him.

Rickie knocked only once before he walked in. Not wanting to disturb Cal too much. "Cal." He moved slowly into the room. "I brought you some dinner." He held a large mug in his hand and set it on the night stand. "You know how the Sarge is about you eating."

Cal was already on the verge of tears, Rickie being so thoughtful, wasn't helping her to stay calm. "Thank you, Rickie. I'll eat it in a little bit."

"Oh, here." Rickie handed her what seemed to be a cap to a prescription bottle. "I crushed some aspirin for you. There's two in here. I'll crush some more in a few hours."

Cal looked inside the cap at the white powder. "How am I supposed to give it to him. He's out Rickie. He's really out."

"O.K." Rickie nervously rubbed his head. "Put it under his tongue with a little water. His reflexes should like, cause him to swallow, but if it's under the tongue, it'll go through his blood stream faster. And like I have an idea. But you have to promise me you won't yell a mother type of yell at me for suggesting this."

"If it will help Jake, I wouldn't yell."

"See those research people left us supplies. They gave us penicillin. But you can't get him to take it. What if I crushed that, and melted that down. You said he gave himself a rabies shot. Maybe he has another needle and you could inject him with it. I mean, I don't mind crushing the stuff, or



heating it.”

“Rickie, that is a great suggestion. Why would I yell at you.” Cal looked at him impressed.

“Because of how I know all this stuff.”

“Well at least now you can say some good came out of your past mistakes. We’re gonna get the medication in him he needs. Sit with him.” Cal stood up. “I’m going to check his things for another syringe.”

“Cal.” Rickie called to her. “What if it’s not an infection? The penicillin won’t work.”

“Why not?” Cal asked as she walked to the bathroom.

“I learned from my past clinic experience . . .” Rickie whispered away from Jake. “Antibiotics do not rule over viruses. What if he has a virus or something?”

“He couldn’t have, wouldn’t more of us have it too? “It has to be an infection. I’ll go check his stuff.” Cal didn’t know where to begin when she stood before Jake’s so-neat dresser. She opened up the first drawer, everything was perfectly folded and placed inside. She ran her hand over his green tee shirts that set to the right of the drawer. Being careful not to disrupt his things, Cal placed her hand under every item, in every drawer that she rummaged. It lay in the next to the last drawer she checked. A drawer without clothing, just his emergency pouch and a few other items. “You aren’t kidding you come prepared.” She looked inside the foot long leather-like bag, and found the only other syringe. Hating to take the last one, but knowing she had to, Cal laid it on the dresser. As she went to close the drawer, it caught her eye. To the left, set neatly in the corner, were things Cal would have never have guessed he had. Small slips of paper, some folded in fours, some left open, all stacked on top of each other. Slips of paper that had scores from games they had played. Cal smiled when she saw the one that laid on top. Jake must have beaten her in whatever they played, for written across the score rather big, in her handwriting, was ‘Jake is a jerk’. Cal suddenly remembered when she did that, that was early on, before they intimate. But why did Jake keep such things? She even smiled a little when she saw the stick men she had made out of twigs from their city. Stick men having sex. Jake yelled at her and took it from her. But he didn’t throw it away like he scolded he would do. A part of Cal was touched, Jake’s self claim to not be sensitive was proved right then and there to be wrong. The slips of paper, the stick men, the label she pulled off her bottle

of beer, the condom Jake bought from Rickie just to shut him up when he kept preaching safe sex. He kept them, like everything else. Like they were his tiny pieces of a puzzle that would eventually all fit together to show the picture of what they had done and become. The things in that drawer showed her an even other side of Jake. And she thought she had seen them all. Taking a breath, closing the drawer, Cal took the syringe to Rickie. "Here. Don't ruin it, it's the last one."

"I won't." Rickie handed her back her chair. "I have to go down to the kitchen and get a spoon, can I borrow your lighter?"

"It's on the dresser." Cal sat down., sliding her chair closer.

"I'll be right back."

"And Rickie . . . if you run into anyone, please don't mention, for Jake's sake, how sick he is. O.K.?" Waiting for that look that told her he already knew that, Cal grabbed the powdered aspirin that Rickie made. She had to get Jake to take it. She hoped that maybe it would kick in by the next time she sponged him down.

Las Vegas, Nevada
November 23 - 6:30 P.M.

“Well how sick is he?” Aldo asked Stan as he spoke to him on the phone pacing around his home office. He stopped to hold up his index finger to his sixteen year old daughter who had poked her head in his door, mouthing the words ‘Dad, come on.’

“We don’t know, Aldo.” Stan answered.

“You don’t know?” Aldo’s voice raised. His annoyance grew worse when Alison poked her head in again whining her father’s name. “Hold on Stan . . . Allie, I’ll be with you in one minute. Shut the . . .” Slam! “. . . door. Sorry Stan, that was my kid Anyway, what’s this shit, you don’t know how Graison is?”

“Aldo, we watched him collapse and Cal came in. Her and Rickie took him into the bathroom, when she brought him out, she blocked out the smoke alarm. We can’t see anything in that room.”

“Can you hear?”

“Nope. She covered it with something. Everything’s muffled.”

“Damn it.” Aldo grabbed his cigarettes and lit one. He could hear his daughter stomping her heeled feet up and down the marble floor outside his office. “Keep me posted on Rickie’s demeanor. That should tell us something.”

“Will do.”

“Oh and Stan? I appreciate it.” Staring for a moment in thought Aldo hung up the phone. He rang his driver to bring the car around and walked to his office door, flinging it open. “And what’s this stomping shit?” He sternly asked his daughter. “I was on the phone. I find one scuff mark on my floor, one. *You’ll* be scrubbing it, not Grace.”

“We’re late.” Alison flung her thick black hair, folded her arms and quickly walked away.

“That’s it. You’re going to boarding school.” With a lot on his mind, Aldo followed his spoiled daughter.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
November 24 - 1:00 A.M.

Rickie wasn't asked to go back in Cal's room, but he couldn't sleep. The last he saw was when he brought another penicillin base for Jake. Cal still sat at Jake's side, her arm woven through his, her head rested on the bed as she sat. The food Rickie brought her still sat in the same place he set it down, untouched. "Cal." He whispered out softly. "If you want, I can like sit with the Sarge. You can sleep in my room."

"No, Rickie, thanks." Cal raised her head. "I can't leave him."

"Still the same?" Rickie took a step into the room.

Cal nodded, sitting her body upright in the chair. "I don't . . ." She paused, closing her eyes. "I don't know what else to do for him. I'm scared. He's trembling, he won't wake up. Why won't he wake up?" Her head fell back down to the bed.

Rickie could hear her sniffing. "The Sarge is strong." Afraid to, Rickie reached out his hand. He rested it on her back.

Cal lifted her head and wiped her eyes. "Wake up, Jake. Please wake up for me." Staring at his closed eyes, Cal prayed for a response. She hoped her heart felt pleas would be heard. They weren't. Jake didn't respond.

^^^

Cal knew the longer Jake stayed out, the worse things looked. Day break had come and still nothing from him. His temperature was high and his shaking grew worse around three A.M., so bad Cal feared that Jake would go into convulsions and there would be nothing she could do to help him.

It wasn't her coffee that have her the jump start. She barely slept enough to need it. It was the noise. The rumbling that caused vibrations on the top of her coffee when it began. It was a situation she hadn't given much thought to in the past twenty-four hours--the wolves.

Rickie came flying into the room. "They're coming."



"I hear them." Cal, calmly, reached under the bed for the duffle bags.

"You have to get out of this room."

"Right Rickie." She looked at Jake, when a pounding began at her door.

"Cal, come on, get out of there!" John called to her.

The banging, the normal banging of the determined wolves against the metal walls started. It was becoming such a common place that it no longer seemed so loud.

"I'm not leaving here." She responded.

"Then give us a gun. We'll shoot at them." John yelled.

"No fuckin' way." Cal made sure the shot gun was loaded. She jumped when she heard the banging against her wall. She ignored John's pounding at the door.

Rickie stepped closer. "I'll stay in here with you. Unless . . . Cal-babe, I'm like the king of videos. Let me go up there with a rifle. All I have to do is show myself, they'll book. I promise, I won't waste bullets. I promise. I ruled in Area 51."

Cal looked to the open duffel bag. "Jake, would kill me . . ."

"Yeah but if we don't scare them away, they can get in."

"Take it." Cal motioned her head to the bag and lifted her shotgun. "Take it and hurry."

"Excellent." Rickie grabbed the top one and flew out the door.

Through the banging of the rumbling, Cal could hear Rickie shouting as he ran down the hall.

John made another attempt on the door, he pounded his fist hard. "Cal, please. They can break through the glass. You and Jake have to . . ."

"I'm not leaving him!" Cal shouted and turned in horror to see it. A wolf leaping up to try to get in. His every attempt was unsuccessful. But for how long? Cal raised her shot gun, aiming at the window. Watching the rearing jaws of the wolf every time he jumped. And each time she saw his head, her heart skipped a beat. "Try it you bastard."

Gun shots from above her head were heard, followed by stomping. Rickie probably hit one. He fired again. Cal kept her aim steady. Then, like an earthquake dying down, so did the wolf stampede. The firing sent them scattering and eventually, the wolf at the window gave up as well.

Cal's head sank forward at the same time she lowered her gun.

"I got two!" Rickie ran back in the room excited. "Two of them. They



saw the Rickie-Miester and said ‘no man, we don’t want . . .’ He moved closer. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s so vulnerable.” Cal faced Rickie. “It would kill him if he knew how vulnerable he was.”

Rickie reached out to her and to his surprise, Cal rested her head against his chest. He put his arms around her, trying to do the best he could to be so reassuring. “He’s not vulnerable. He has you.”

“Cal.” Weakly Jake called out her name.

Without hesitation Cal ran to his side, dropping to her knees before him. “Jake, I’m here.”

Jake’s eyes opened--barely. “Cal?” His voice trembled as much as his body. “I can’t see you Cal.” Jake reached his hand up. A tone of panic took over. “I can’t see.” he closed his eyes and passed back out.

^^^

How much longer would it be? Cal wondered. Another day neared an end, and Jake hadn’t gotten any better. Fear started to hit her, fear that possibly he never would. The thought of that angered her. She entered the experiment with no intentions of talking or being with anyone. She had *every* intention of doing it alone. And as time has passed, she couldn’t imagine finishing it without Jake. Dipping the cloth into the water, Cal raised her exhausted arms to his face, wiping him off slowly. She brought it down to his lips which were getting worse. They showed the effects of the fever that ravaged him.

“Cold.” Jake moaned softly. Feeling the cloth go to his neck, he tried to swipe it away.

“Good. Fight me.” She moved his hand, so she could continue.

“Rather see you.”

Cal swallowed the lump in her throat. Jake opened his eyes, then closed them quickly. “You will.” She brought her lips to his cheek kissing him. “Then you’ll get sick of me.” Cal smoothed the wash cloth over his chest.

Jake shook his head, it lacked the control he wished he had. “Don’t baby me.”

“I’m not.” Cal wrung out the cloth. Her voice stayed calm. “I’m trying to break this fever.” She dropped the cloth. “Done . . . for now.”



“You shouldn’t be here.” Jake kept his eyes closed tight. “Sick.”

“Too bad. You think that bothers me?”

“Bothers me.” Jake spoke through his short, quick breaths. “Please leave.” Jake tried to push her away when he felt her presence.

“Quit pushing me away. If you want to fight Major, I’m not what you should be fighting.”

“I’m cold.”

“I know.” Cal walked over to the other side of the bed, she slid in pressing her body tight against his back. “I’ll warm you.” She ran her hand down his arm, and brought her lips to his ear. “Please fight this Jake. You have to fight this.”

“I’m trying.”

“I know you are.” She grazed her hand across his face, kissing him again. She held him tighter when she felt him shake more. “I need you to fight because . . . I need you.” She waited for Jake to say anything, he was quiet. “I never thought I’d need anyone again, Jake. I never thought I’d feel again.” She rested her hand on top of his hand that laid flat on his thigh. “Don’t let me face this alone. Please. Don’t take away what I never thought I’d have in my life.” Her eyes watered up as she stared down at a quiet Jake. “More than all the battles you ever won, I need you to win this one. I love you, Major Graison. Fight hard.” Cal thought he was sleeping, that he didn’t hear her. Jake did. He spread his fingers wide allowing for hers to slip in the spaces between his. Then he gripped her hand bringing it to his chest. He gripped tight.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
November 25 - 7:10 A.M.

It was Jake that awakened Cal. Not his voice, not his normal nudge to her backside, but the eeriness that surrounded him. Still laying against him, holding him, Jake had stopped trembling. He lay quiet, the pronounced breaths he took inaudible. And no longer did she feel the heat against her chest. Frightfully, she brought her hand up his arm, sliding it to his chest. Where was the fever? He no longer felt like he was on fire. Cal's eyes widened, her heart beat faster. An awesome fear struck her. She feared that perhaps Jake had not made it through the rough night that he had. "Oh God."

Cal was afraid to move, afraid to call his name, afraid to see if he was still alive. She just let herself lay against him, as she did, she placed her ear to his shoulder blade. Slow long breathing and a no longer rapid heartbeat echoed in his chest. Grateful and relieved, Cal raised her eye up to the ceiling in a quick prayer. She pressed her lips to his shoulder before sliding out of bed and covering him back up. Jake's fever had broke.

It had to have been the greatest thing Jake had ever seen, the moment he opened his eyes. Blurry, but still great. He could see Cal, *see* her. And even though it looked as if he was looking through someone's very strong eyeglasses, Jake knew he was getting better. He laid there in the bed, his body feeling much more heavier than it actually weighed. Cal didn't even know he was up. She checked the shotgun while occasionally sipping her coffee. *Morning*. Cal looked like she did in the morning. Messy clothes and her hair in that thing Jake hated on the top of her head. Just because he was sick shouldn't be any reason for her to revert back to wearing a ponytail. It was time, Jake knew, to try to get out of the bed. He felt weak, but he would only get weaker if he stayed on his side. Even though he was clueless on how long he'd been out of it, he wasn't clueless to the fact that he was out of it long enough to have to go to the bathroom so bad, his bladder hurt.



Lifting his head would be the first step. He remembered the headache he had before he passed out. That was gone, and he didn't feel quite as cold. *And why is Rickie just walking in this room without knocking?* Jake squinted trying to gain his focus. *No! She's not. She's giving him a gun?* That was all the incentive Jake needed to rush his rising. With all of his reserve strength, he sat straight up, the rush of blood made him immediately dizzy and he fell back down the other way. "Fuck."

"Jake!" Giving Rickie the shotgun, Cal raced over to him. "What are you doing? Stay in bed."

"Don't." Jake held his hand up to her to stop her, he placed it on the bed and lifted himself to sit. The room spun in front of him and Jake rolled his eyes.. "Don't give him a rifle."

With a shriek of excitement, Cal grabbed his face and kissed him on the cheek. "You're better." She looked at his eyes which seemed to be bouncing. "Sort of . . . Rickie." She called to him. "Get him some water."

"No water." Jake shook his head and leaned closer to Cal. "Not yet. I have to piss really bad."

"I'll help you." She stood up and braced his arm.

"I can make it." Jake argued.

"I know, but just let me guide you."

"O.K." Jake rubbed his eyes and motioned his head to Rickie.

Cal knew what he meant. "Rickie, why don't you take the roof."

Jake shivered with fear. "No! He can't have a gun."

Holding up the rifle, Rickie showed Jake. "Sarge, I'm cool. I don't waste bullets."

"Shells."

"Whatever. Sarge . . ." Rickie walked to the door. "I'm glad you're better."

Jake's head dropped as he looked at Cal. "I can't believe you armed that kid."

"Do you have to use the bathroom Major Graison, or would you rather bitch." Cal smiled at him. "Which by the way I am very glad to hear."

"Bathroom." On his own, Jake tried to stand, he swayed from front to back, then side to side.

Cal braced him, one hand on his back the other on his stomach. "Just don't fall too fast Jake."

"I'd crush you."



"You haven't yet."

With one hand extended out, Jake counted on Cal to lead him correctly to the bathroom. Once inside he planted his feet, resting his left hand on the wall behind the commode as he leaned in. "I'm good now."

"O.K." She ran her hand down his back. "I'll just wait right . . ."

"Cal. When I look down, everything moves." Jake turned his head to her speaking almost embarrassed-like.

Cal stepped back into the bathroom. She peeked her head under his arm and around to his front. "You're good. Fire away."

"Can you . . . This is humiliating."

"Oh stop it, it is not." Cal assisted as best as she could, being a sense of support as well as guidance, until she heard he was done.

Using the wall as a guide, Jake slid his way over to the sink and turned on the water. He washed his hands than splashed water on his face, lifting it to the mirror. "My lips. What the hell happened to my lips?"

"Fever blisters. Actually they look a lot better than I thought they would."

"They look a mess. I look a mess."

"You were really sick, Jake." Cal rubbed her hand up and down his back as he brushed his teeth. "In fact, you shouldn't even be out of bed. I won't be able to take another relapse."

"After I get cleaned up. I'll feel better if I let the water run on me."

"I'll agree to that. Let me take care of you Major, instead of you always taking care of me."

"Don't get too used to it." Jake rinsed his mouth. "And don't you ever tell a soul you helped me go to the bathroom."

"Never." Cal walked over to the shower stall, opened the door and turned on the water. "Ready for our shower Jake." She saw his puzzled look. "Unless you think you'll be able to on your own."

"You can help me take a shower . . . wait . . . the wolves."

"The wolves are going to have to attack . . ." Cal looked at her watch. ". . . without me. In fact they're late." She began to undress.

^^^

Rickie was ready for them, but they didn't come. His enthusiasm to play hero atop the building was in vain. It surpassed seven-thirty and they



still hadn't attacked. But the wolves acted different this time. They swarmed like bees at the bottom of the hillside. Not peering through the trees as usual, waiting to attack, waiting for someone to step back. The wolves wandered around in one small area, almost as if they were planning a new course of attack.

^^^

Cal stood behind Jake in the shower as he let the water fall upon him. He was still wobbly, and Cal could see that, whether he chose to admit it or not. "Is the shower helping?"

"Some. I still feel like I'm in the fog. God I hate this." Jake turned slowly to face her. "I know what you did for me. It may all seem like a dream, but I remember. I'll never forget it."

"You'd do the same for me. You have done the same for me." She handed him the soap.

"I'm sorry . . ." Jake began to get dizzy, he took a moment to let it subside. "I'm sorry you had to see me like that. That's not how I want you to see me."

"I still saw you as strong, Jake. I think that's how I'll always see you." She placed the shampoo in his free hand. "I thought you were dying. I was scared. Wash your hair." She raised up his arm.

"Is that why you said you loved me. Or did I dream that?"

"No you didn't dream it. I said it. I said it because I meant it. Is that why *you* said it? Did you think you were dying?"

"Nah." Jake tilted his head back slightly, letting the water run across his face. He lifted his head weakly wiping the water from his eyes. "I didn't think I was dying. I said it because I was too sick to worry if you thought I was being a sap." He reached for her. "It was weird hearing it, Cal."

"I'm sorry. If it makes you uncomfortable, I'll not say it again."

"No." Jake shook his head as his hand slid from her face with less than the control he would like to have had. "I haven't heard those words since before my parents died. It felt . . . good. Thank you for that."

Cal smiled as she held on to his waist reaching behind him to turn off the water. She looked at him as she handed him a towel and she thought how sad what Jake just said made her feel. How sad it was for someone to go that many years of their life without anyone telling them something



positive about the way they felt about them. That explained to her why he was like he was. Noticing as she wrapped the towel around his waist that he was weakening again, Cal grabbed a towel for herself and opened the shower stall. "Let's get you back to bed Jake."

Though Jake would rather not, he knew his body was telling him otherwise. "Just for a little bit." Jake's words started to slur as he stepped with Cal from the shower. "I promise I won't make you deal with me like this much longer."

"Are you kidding?" Cal escorted him slowly back into her room. "I'm loving it. I'm keeping score Major Graison, and guess what? We're tied."

^^^

"You're right, Rickie." Cal lowered the binoculars from her eyesight, as she stood on the rooftop with everyone but Jake. "They seem different." She handed them to Carlos. "Take a look, what do you think?"

Carlos looked through them. "They definitely aren't as desperate as they seemed before." He passed them to John.

John shook his head. "They look like a fur rug on the hillside. Are they eating something?"

Cal snatched up the binoculars. "That's maybe why they aren't attacking. It looks like, two maybe three deer they got. Explains why they aren't coming after . . ." Cal looked up to the sky when she felt the sudden sensation of wetness on her nose. "Damn it." Soon, almost instantaneously, huge snowflakes began to fall. "This will make it near impossible to see them if we have a storm."

Rickie stuck his tongue out trying to eat the flakes. "This is cool. It's like that song, over the river and through the woods." He licked his lips. "It's like perfect."

All heads turned to him at once.

Cal snickered. "Rickie, why is it perfect?"

Shrugging, Cal returned her views o the woods. "I wonder if they still will charge. I mean if they don't, we can sleep a lot easier . . . You know what?" Cal picked up the rope that was secured on the roof and handed the rifle to Rickie. "Cover me."

They all screamed 'wait' at her as they saw her go over the side of the building.



Cal blew them off. Climbing down quickly and setting her feet on the ground, she looked up to those who stood on the roof peering down at her. She lifted her hands and shrugged. Nothing happened. She paced back and forth, never straying far from the rope--her lifeline to safety. The stampede never started, perhaps they didn't see her. She wondered if she should call out, but figuring everyone on the roof looked like they were having a heart attack--the way they were pointing and all--Cal knew it was time to go back. She enjoyed her brief moment of freedom on the grass outside the building. She looked up to Rickie, gave a thumbs up, wiped the snow from her face and reached for the rope.

A growl. Heavy breathing and growling. Slowly, as her hand extended, she turned her head to the sound. There, not three feet from her perched one of the animals waiting to attack. His front paws ready, his mouth open. "Oh, shit." With a leap she jumped to the rope clenching it seconds before the wolf's snap took hold of the other end. In a fierce tug of war, Cal verses the wolf, she climbed. "Hold the rope up there!" Cal yelled as her body whipped back and forth into the metal building. Her climb was slow and painful. A fight to get to the top. Yet, in her own way, she found the climb masochistically enjoyable.

Jake's eyes popped open on the first bang of aluminum. It wasn't the normal thunder, or continuous pounding. He could hear voices shouting above him, muffled, and hard to make out. His body jolted with the gunshots, and he sat straight up in bed. "I have to get up there." Swinging his feet over to the floor, Jake, forgetting he was still recovering, stood up. Blindly, he stumbled his way to the other room to get his clothes.

Feeling the dresser he could barely focus on, Jake stopped in his clothes retrieval when he heard Cal yelling as she opened the other door.

"I don't give a shit!" Cal yelled to John and Carlos. "Nothing happened." With a loud slam, she closed the door. "Damn." She turned to face the room, and an empty bed. "Where's Jake?" She asked herself out loud. "Jake?" She headed to the bathroom. "Not in here." She walked through, seeing Jake standing at his dresser, a look of total frustration upon his face. "Jake, what are you doing out of bed? You promised me."

"I did no such thing. I told you I would rest for a little bit. It's been hours."

"Jake get back to bed. You still aren't well."



"How am I supposed to get well if all I do is lay around."

"Exactly." Cal took hold of his arm. "Bed."

"No." He pulled his arm away. "What happened up there? I heard shouting. Was it the wolves?"

"Sort of." Cal reached in his drawers. "What do you want to wear? Sweats or fatigues."

"I can pick my own clothes out." Jake rubbed his eyes to focus. "And what do you mean--sort of?"

"I mean, the wolves aren't charging us anymore. They're watching."

"But I heard banging."

"That was me. I am going to have one hell of a bruise on my elbow. Look." She twisted her arm to show him.

"It sounded like it was coming from the sides of the building."

"That was me. I climbed down from the roof to bait them, they didn't charge. There was one wolf though, he was hanging out. He grabbed the rope when I was climbing back up." She pulled Jake's shirt immediately as he placed it over his head. "Made for one tough climb back . . ."

"Cal!" Jake removed her hands. "Don't mother me, all right?"

"I'm sorry I was just trying to help you."

"I don't need the help. Please." Jake stepped in his pants, it was obvious his balance was still off. "Please. I'll be all right."

"It's just that . . ."

"I'm not Rickie."

All expression dropped from Cal's face. "You're right. You aren't Rickie." She turned, leaving him alone in the room.

"Cal." Jake walked slowly back into her room, holding onto the wall as a guide. "Do not think I don't appreciate what you have done for me. I want to take care of myself. I don't like to see you so catering. It bothers me. I hate the thought of you looking at me like I cannot take care of myself. That's the last thing I want. And that's exactly how you look at me."

"How do you know?" Cal peered up at him. "You squint when you look at me." She stood. "You can't possibly see my face, because I don't look at you like that . . ." She poked him in the chest. "Asshole." Calming herself, she moved further away from him. "I don't know why this is bothering you so much, but it does. I refuse to fight with you, Jake. So, I won't *mother you*, as you put it, again."

"Thank you. I would appreciate that." Almost stumbling, Jake made



his way back to the bed. He sat down on it, realizing as he did, how weak he still was. Yet, he was bound and determined he wasn't going to let Cal know. They were a team in this project, and as far as Jake was concerned, he wasn't pulling his weight. Sick or not sick, that was something he couldn't have.

After standing with her back to him, tapping her fingers against her folded arms, Cal had to leave. "Excuse me." She brushed by him, ignoring his hand that reached to her. She closed the door and paused in the hallway that felt so cold. "O.K." She walked slowly down the hall passing Fr. Dan's boarded up room, the light odorous smell that protruded from it. "I will not let this get to me. Why I even let myself get close like that I don't . . ." Cal stopped. A noise had grabbed her attention away from her self-bitch session. It sounded wet, a crackling noise. Almost as if someone's hands were working and squeezing wet clay. She tilted her head to let her ears listen closely. She looked up to where she stood--Griff's room. Leaning her head to the door, she heard the noise again. "Oh shit." She reached for the knob, then stopped. Darting off, a little frightened of the eerie noise, she ran back down the hall to her room. She slid stopping at her door. "No, I can't run in here and tell Jake that. Besides, why am I getting weird about this?" Looking back, she knew she had to check one more time. Back to Griff's room she walked. His door getting bigger, her heart beating stronger, with each closer step she took. Placing her shoulder close to the door, she listened. Nothing. Shrugging it off to her imagination, and high blood pressure at the moment, Cal continued in her calming walk.

^^^

The words on the pages may not have been the most interesting ones, but they were clear. And ever since Jake woke up that morning and could see, he decided he was going to read that book he started. Of course, Jake knew had he not had lost his sight, that book would have sat half read. Reading was something for him to do, the continuously falling snow outside made it impossible to go out.

Jake had to admit to himself that he had been less-than-pleasant to live with his first day of being well. Maybe that was the reason for the cold treatment he got from Cal. He would assume it was Cal, but she was far from being cold to Rickie. In fact, they sat on the floor afoot of the bed he



laid on, talking away. Their chattering and laughing made it nearly impossible for him to get into a book he didn't want to read in the first place. Then he heard it. The sentence, 'I bet you were a great mother' coming from Rickie. Placing down that book, Jake closed his eyes, dreading Cal's response. He opened his eyes in surprise when Cal didn't bite Rickie's head off for talking about Jesse. She answered him calmly.

"I guess I was." Cal's fingers smoothed against the carpet in nervousness. "At least I thought I was. I doted too much though."

"You make that sound bad. I wish I had someone that doted over me."

"It's not that it's bad. It gets to be too much." Her eyes lifted to Jake, who quickly pretended he was reading. "Jesse was my whole entire life. I had her when I was still a teenager. So anytime she got ill, or was hurt, I fell compelled to do things for her. Which was fine, she was my kid. I just tended to go overboard. And she always let me. Laying in bed even when she knew she was better. I guess I liked to do that."

"When I lived with my grandmother she was neurotic when I went out. Always making me wear my Saint medal. Were you like that? Were you neurotic, always thinking something was going to happen?"

Jake's protective instincts for Cal kicked in without any thought. "Rickie."

"Dude, I was just asking her about the way she was. I mean I know how she is with me."

Jake sat up, leaning forward. "But don't you think that's just a little insensitive?"

"No." Rickie shrugged. "Not compared to some of the shit *you* say to her. But . . ." Rickie faced Cal. "Cal-babe, if I was being insensitive, I'm sorry. I was just trying to have a little idle going with you."

"No. Rickie that's fine." Cal rested her hand on his. "I'll answer you. Yes, I was neurotic. I was neurotic every time she walked out that door. But being neurotic can't stop something from happening."

"No. It can't." Rickie looked up to Jesse's picture. "She would have been one bitchin' babe when she got older. I would have dated her."

"And you probably would have been the type of boy she liked." Cal laughed. "Her and I would talk about guys for hours."

"You and I can talk for hours."

Jake, without them seeing, nodded his head and scuffed his face. *Don't*



I know it.

“Cal-babe.” Rickie took a serious tone. “I think that we should continue this thing after the project. I think, you should let me live with you.”

Cal laughed. “I don’t think Joyce would appreciate that. I live with her in her attic.”

“Cool. You mean like the disfigured child. Hidden away, locked from humanity?”

“No.” Cal kept laughing. “I moved in with her after I sold my house.”

“But you have me now.” Rickie said. “We’ll get our own place. I can move in with you. Nothing romantic. You save that for all the guys you’ll date . . .”

Jake cleared his throat. “Rickie, I’m uh, I’m getting tired. Do you mind?”

“Sarge, no, not at all.” He picked himself up off the floor. “Cal-babe you want to come in my room and we can finish talking while the Sarge snoozes?”

“Sure Rickie.” Cal stood up. “Goodnight Jake.”

“Cal.” Jake slid off the bed, stopping her before she left. “Don’t go.”

Cal looked at Rickie. “I’ll see you tomorrow Rickie.”

Jake, sighing in relief, shut the bathroom door and pulled Cal away from it. “Thank you. You and I need to talk. I think that maybe you’ve taken something I said totally out of context. I think . . .”

“What! Right Jake. Tell me how I can take ‘mothering you’ out of context?”

“Cal I was sick. I was irritable. I may have sounded worse than I wanted to.” He saw she really was giving him an, I-don’t-care-attitude. “I’m trying to apologizing here. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.”

“Now can we stop this?” Jake moved closer to her. “We were getting along so good before I got sick.”

“That’s right. And you pissed me off you big jerk. I was worried about you. Really worried. And you made me feel like shit. I didn’t mean to make it seem like I didn’t think you could do it. I just wanted you to rest and not worry, so you could get better. No, but you had to be an asshole about it.”

“I thought you accepted my apology.”

“I did.” Cal stated and sat on the bed.



"Then why are you going off?"

"Because I'm a woman and it's my right to go off about things even if you think we're done with it. You better learn that one, Jake, if you want to be in a relationship."

"There seems to be a lot I don't know. So . . ." Jake walked over and sat down next her, very seriously. " . . . you think you could take a few minutes one of these days and write down some of these hidden rules? I'd like to know them. I'd like to do things right."

"You're serious. You want me to make you a relationship tip sheet?" Cal tried not to laugh.

"If it's not too much trouble."

"I'll just work on that right away."

"I'd appreciate that."

Cal let out a deep sigh and plopped backwards. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Understand why I get like I get." He lay on his side next to her. "This whole sickness bothered me. I've never been sick like that in my life. And to have someone have to sponge bathe you, help you go to the bathroom, shower and dress you . . . you are the only person in the world I would let do that. But being like that, is not how I want to be seen. Especially by someone I would like perceiving me as strong." He so-lightly, rested his hand on the side of her face. "And look, I can't even kiss you. I have this mess on my lips."

"I can kiss you." Cal brought her lips up kissing softly around his mouth, then his neck, she watched his eyes close and she rested her head back down. "And Jake . . . I never saw you as anything less than strong. To me that's how I'll always perceive you. I had this dream once, I dreamt I was telling my daughter about you. And that you were so strong, I told her, that you could almost take it all away."

"And can I?" Jake leaned up. "I'm sorry that is really putting you on the spot."

"You have pulled me through more than you know. And I'm not talking about just the project." She extended out her arms and sat up. "And speaking of pulling through. Pull me through withdrawal. It's been a few days since we've competed." She stood up, walked across the room and grabbed a box. "Battleship?"

"Right now?"



“In your words--humor me.” She handed him his board.

“What are we playing for?”

Cal sat across from him on the bed. “Shot gun for a week. Best out of five.”

“Sounds good.” Jake lifted the lid to the game and began to move about the pieces.

“Jake? I heard this strange noise the other day. It was coming from Griff’s room.”

“Do I have to call you Jennifer? What kind of strange noise.” Jake hardly lifted his eyes, seeming barely concerned.

“Wet.”

“Wet?” Jake sort of laughed. “Cal we’ve had really bad weather. You think that might be it?”

“Possibly.” She shrugged. “I haven’t heard it since. I just wanted to tell you.”

“O.K. Well . . . thank you for that.” Jake raised his eyebrows, blowing off what she had said. “Let’s just forget noises in Griff’s room. Let’s watch me annihilate you instead.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
December 3 - 10:45 P.M.

Sitting back in his desk chair, Dr. Jefferson watched through his window as the rain fell. He rocked back and forth, a simple dim light on upon his desk. In his hand he held the Dictaphone. His eyes shifted from his notes to the window as he began dictating. "Linda, date this for December 4th please. Have it start, dear investors. Can you . . . no scratch that . . . here we sit four months into the project. We have seven viable participants remaining. However we can not look at those numbers as a failure in what we would like to accomplish. We have succeeded in mentally breaking three of four participants. As we approach the next phase of the project, our participants are in the break phase as you were informed. We feel confident that within one week's time, with the awakening--Linda, this is all one sentence--so near, that we will see drastic changes., changes that hold an impact for the game. Period, new paragraph. The next holding meeting is scheduled for the fifteenth of this month. I look forward to that event. Enclosed please find for your records our most updated status chart. In closing, I would like to say I look forward to an end to the experiment soon. Linda I know you'll change that so use your discretion. And sincerely, blah, blah, blah." Dr. Jefferson shut off the Dictaphone placing the microphone down. He rubbed his head listening to the severity of the storm that whipped against his window. It was time for the next phase. Time to move on. It was out of his control when that would start. They had the wolves held at bay until then. But the beginning of the next phase was out of his hands. It laid now . . . in Griff's.



THE EXPERIMENT



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
December 5 - 7:10 A.M.

The last thing Jake wanted to do was get out of that warm bed. He'd been up for over an hour, laying there, nodding off, waking up. He wished he could see outside, but the boarded up window made that impossible. He knew it had snowed again, the silence told him that. Whenever it snowed things seemed to get quiet. Jake hated the snow, rarely did he see it in North Carolina. When he did, it was nothing like what he was witnessing. At least for the time being, they were able to move somewhat around the buildings. The wolves acted as if they were bored with everyone. Scanning the building from the hillside, probably communicating in their own way, some other skillful way to devour those who dwelled inside.

Even with the thin carpet on the floor, it was cold. Jake would have rather have stayed where it was ninety-eight point six degrees, right in that bed with Cal. But it was time to get busy, keep moving.

"Cal." Jake called her name from the side of the bed. "Cal." He didn't get an answer. Annoyed, he reached back and with his knuckles nudged her backside. "Get up."

The normal Cal grunt, but she followed it with words. "No." They were muffled as she buried her head in the pillow, pulling the covers up more.

Jake stood from the bed, keeping his arms close across his bare chest. "Cal . . . get up."

"Jake." Cal lifted her head, eyes squinting. "No."

"You can't stay in bed all day." He walked around the bed. "You have to work out, if you don't, you'll get weak."

"You'll get weak. I'll get flabby."

"All right. But any wolves I pick off go on my score card. You've defaulted today." Jake adjusted his boxers and headed to the bathroom, he slowed down at Cal's desk and at the picture of Jesse. He quickly turned back to Cal when the realization of what day it was. "I'm going in the bathroom, Cal. When I get out. I want you out of bed. Understand? You

aren't laying in bed all day. Period." He flicked on the coffee pot for her and went into the bathroom.

Cal said nothing to Jake when he emerged from the bathroom. She merely set down the mug of coffee she stole from the pot before it was done brewing and walked into the bathroom.

Jake himself waited until he heard that final suctioning of the last drop to flow into the grinds. Seven minutes wasn't too long to wait for him. Jake pulled out the rifle and the shotgun, and their gloves, all while he sipped his coffee waiting for Cal to finish up. He expected her to move slower, he let himself be patient with her.

"I'm ready." Cal spoke almost monotone. "I can't believe I jumped out of bed at your request." As her arm extended past him for her mug, Jake stopped her.

He slid his hand up her arm to behind her head. "Cal." He spoke softly. "You'll make it through this day, I promise you. *We'll* get through it together. Just . . . know that I'm here. O.K.?"

Raising her eyes to meet his, Cal saw it. Jake knew. She hadn't a clue how. She never mentioned it. But the date must of set in Jake's mind. Somehow Jake knew that exactly one year ago, Jesse was killed. Cal couldn't speak. She fought her lips that began to pout. She leaned forward leaning her forehead to his chest.

"It's O.K., we'll stay busy. We'll talk. Whatever you need."

"I don't want to do anything, Jake."

"I know." Jake pulled her closer. "But trust me, staying busy helps. It really does." He stepped back, sliding his arms down to grab her hands. "Come up to the roof with me. Put those emotions, and that energy to work for you, not against you."

Cal lifted her head to him and just nodded.

^^^

Jennifer let out a loud frustration grunt, at the same time she slammed the book closed. The groan she released made Carlos stop playing guitar, Rickie stop tearing tiny sheets of paper, and John from typing on his lap top. Her head and eyes both raised to look at the ceiling. "I can't take it."

Carlos laughed and began to play again. "Ignore it."

"I can't." Jennifer opened her book again. "Maggie is so right. Those too are demented." Again she lifted her head to the ceiling, to the routine



that repeated itself over and over. The banging coming from the side of the building, the thump-thump-thumps across the room, the squeaking sliding down the other side of the building. Then every other time, the thumps would stop on the roof and there would be gunshots. "How can they do that, every single morning."

Carlos, removed the guitar pick from his mouth as he tuned his guitar. "Jake is an exercise freak, and Cal, well, Cal is his drone."

"Dude!" Rickie jumped in very defensively. "That's like way off base. Do a negative about my friend again and you won't have strings on that guitar you sleep with."

"Oh, Rickie, don't scare me." Carlos laughed at him.

"Fine. I'll just tell the Sarge you're ripping on his woman."

"I can't take it." Jennifer slammed her book again. "Stop it!" She yelled to the ceiling. "Maggie, you tell them . . . Thank you." Jennifer started walking out. "Between their thumping and running, John's tapping, Carlos' awful guitar playing and Rickie's humming of seventies tunes. We're out of here." Not realizing she was doing everyone a favor, Jennifer left the room. "I'll just go to our room. What do you think? . . . I think that's a good idea. I also thing we should cut that rope . . ." Jennifer slowed down at Griff's door, the door before her own. "Shh. Do you hear that?" She asked her counter personality who was keeping her company. "So do I. But don't say anything, they think we're nuts as it is."

^^^

"You hardly ate any dinner." Jake told Cal as he laid on her bed. Propped up, feet extended, watching her as she just sat at her desk staring at Jesse's picture.

"I really wasn't hungry Jake." Cal reached up and grabbed Jesse's photo. "I had a nightmare last night." She turned to look at Jake. "Is it O.K. if I talk to you about it?"

"Don't insult me by not."

"I dreamt of the night I got the phone call. I can still hear David's voice as he answered that phone." Cal swallowed and closed her eyes. "It was the middle of the night, and you know how when the phone rings in the middle of the night, you know something is wrong. All I heard him say



was ‘Oh my God’ and he kept saying it over and over.” Cal slowly set down the picture and walked to the bed with Jake. She grabbed his hand he held out to her, and she slipped on the bed facing him. “I can still see that expression on his face. It was as if all the pity in the world was in his eyes when he looked at me. And I knew. I kept thinking this is a dream. Last night it was and I woke up into the reality that it really did happen. I don’t know why I just didn’t die when that happened. How I went on. I just wish . . . this is going to sound so stupid. But I wish I would have met you years ago.”

“Why do you say that? Not that it’s a bad wish.”

“I really needed someone like you to get me through that. You would have been so strong, Jake. You would have been what I needed to make it through I’ve never talked about Jesse’s death with anyone, until you. Thank you so much for listening to me.”

“Hey.” Jake grazed his hand down her face, bracing her chin between his thumb and fingers. “Whenever you need me to, I will. I may not be the best talker, but I can listen.”

“You sell yourself short, Major Graison.”

“Why do you do that? Call me Major Graison all the time?”

“I like to. I’m proud of who and what you are. I think it’s great.”

“You know at this moment . . . I’d really like to tell you I love you.”

“Why don’t you?”

“I don’t think I know how. At least without sounding rehearsed or deliriously ill.” Jake smiled. “But . . . know that I do. O.K.? I really do. I wouldn’t imply it or let myself be with you like this if I didn’t.”

“I know how you feel, Jake.” Cal leaned closer to him. “And know . . .” She brought her lips to his ear and whispered softly how she felt for him. She kissed him before she backed away.

Jake smiled widely, rested his head back and closed his eyes. He let her words sink into his head, “Cal?” His hands wandered down to her legs. “I didn’t know you lived with David.”

“I didn’t.”

“It’s just that you implied that it was the middle of the night and all.”

“No, David didn’t live with me. He used to spend the night when Jesse was away. That seemed to be the only time we could . . .” Cal bit her bottom lip and closed one eye. “Sorry. And why are we talking about David? I feel like, I don’t know, guilty for having been with him?”



"A part of me wished you weren't. I guess it's jealousy. But I think it's my competitive side too."

"What you and I have is very different Jake. David and I were a couple in the real world. You and I are here, no outside stimuli to disrupt us. What attracted us together up here, may not breed the same feelings when we're done with the experiment."

"Don't do that. You piss me off when you imply that. And you do that a lot." Jake released the hand she grabbed. "It's very insulting to me. You make it sound like when this is over, so are we."

"Jake." Cal grabbed his hand again. "Let's just forget I said anything."

"Is it, Cal?" Jake looked in her eyes. "Is it over when the experiment is?"

"I don't want it to be."

"That's not the answer I'm looking for."

"It's the only one I can give you. How can you say for sure you'll feel the same way for me?"

"Because I don't give my feelings away freely.. *I* wasn't married before. I never lived with anyone until you. Hell, I never even went to sleep next to a woman until you . . ."

"Stop." Cal covered his mouth with her hand. "I'm not going to talk about this with you anymore. It's inane." She removed her hand kissing him softly. "Not tonight. Please, I don't want to fight with you tonight. I need you tonight. Just know . . ."

"Sarge . . . whoa. If you guys are gonna be having bedtime practice sessions, you're gonna have to lock the door. That way I won't walk in when I have a brilliant light bulb burning in my brain."

Cal lifted her eyes to Jake. "Want me to get rid of him?"

"Nope. Rickie spilling his brilliant idea is just what you need today." Jake moved his view around Cal. "We welcome your presence. What is it you want?"

"O.K." Rickie pulled up a chair. "You know how you two are always playing games against each other. I've invented a game. It's called--get this--Rickie Pursuit. It's the new way for you two to go up against each other."

Jake ran his hand down his face. "Rickie Pursuit? What exactly is Rickie Pursuit?"

"O.K. it's . . . Trivia." Like he was pointing to a marquee, Rickie ran his hand across the air. "The world according to Rickie. My questions, my

way, my answers.”

Jake snickered at him loudly and obnoxiously. “Sounds interesting. But we prefer to play something that is at least a little bit of a challenge.”

“My game’s challenging. I know things.” Rickie was insulted.

“Right.” Jake got off the bed. “You don’t even know what branch of the service I’m in.” He headed to the bathroom tucking in his shirt. “Cal I’m getting a beer.”

Rickie shook his head at Jake. “I know what branch he’s in. He’s a um . . . Air force guy.”

Cal cringed hunching her shoulders, shaking her head. “No Rickie, he’s in the Army.”

“The Army? The Army’s like the boring branch of the service.”

Annoyed, Jake hollered from the other room as he came back. “I heard that.” He handed Cal her beer. “Rickie, we appreciate the effort on your part . . .”

“I cut up all the questions into little squares and all.” Like a disappointed child he held up the abundance of cut note book paper, lifting it from the shoe box. “I worked real hard. You just don’t want to play because you know Cal-babe will rule over you.”

Nearly choking on his beer laughing, Jake wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Oh she would not.”

“What do you mean I would not?” Cal snapped. “Oh that’s right, you’re the, I-know-all-guy.”

“It has nothing to do with it.” Jake argued. “These are Rickie questions. A third grader would be an, I-know-all-guy.”

Cal shook her head. “Rickie, I’ll play your game. He underestimates you.”

“Thanks Cal-babe. You want me to get Carlos?” Rickie started to get up.

“Stop.” Jake held out his hand. “I’ll play the Rickie Pursuit. What are the rules?”

Rickie smiled. “I’ll keep score. If it’s your turn, and you’re right. Ten points. Five if you answer it when the other person gets it wrong. Simple.” Rickie slowed down his talking speed. “Do . . . you . . . under . . . stand?”

Jake breathed outwardly with a grunt. “Yes Rickie.” Jake took a drink. “Fire away Rickie.” He pointed the bottle at him.

“Cool.” Rickie laid the small notebook on the bed, and closed his eyes



reaching into the box. "I'll ask you the first question, Sarge, you're at a disadvantage." He pulled out the first slip. When he read it, he began to laugh at it. "This is cool."

"Ask the question, Rickie." Jake barked.

"O.K., In the Batman series. The good one where the old guy in the leotards is running about, which villain is it, that the actor who played him has a salad named after him?"

"What the fuck kind of question is that?" Jake snapped.

"Answer the question please." Rickie held up the paper.

"There's no villain with a salad named after him."

"Wrong!" Rickie looked to Cal. "Babe, do you know it?"

Cal smiled. "That would have to be the Joker."

"Ding, ding, ding." Rickie grabbed a pencil. "Five points for Cal-babe."

"What!" Jake looked at them. "How in the world?"

Cal rolled her eyes. "Joker, played by Caesar Romero. Caesar salad."

Jake's mouth opened. "A Caesar salad is not named after the guy that played the Joker."

"Ignore him, Rickie. Ask me the next question, it is my turn right?"

"Correct-a-Mundo." Rickie grabbed a question. "Name the really weird guy, in the Partridge Family, that Shirley was secretly banging."

Cal with confidence answered. "Reuben Kincaid."

"Whoa." Rickie pointed his pencil. "Excellent. Cal-babe is the trivia ruler."

"Wait a second." Jake interrupted. "You can't give her points for that. Reuben was the manager. He wasn't sleeping with Shirley."

Rickie tilted his head at him. "Dude, are we being a sore loser. Anyway, your turn Sarge." He grabbed a question. "You should get this one. When taking out a babe for the very first time. What is a sure fire way to impress her?"

"I don't know." Jake raised his hand and let it fall to his thigh with a slap. "Spend a lot of money on her?"

"Buzz. Dude, no wonder you never got laid. Cal?"

Ignoring the disgruntled look from Jake, Cal answered. "Make sure you show up a in a cool ride."

"That is correct." Rickie added more to her score. "Your question. What did Charlie Brown's teacher say to him when he was in the spelling

bee?”

Cal laughed and answered the question. “Waa--Waa--Waa--Waa.”

Jake grew more perturbed, especially when they laughed and Cal kept saying ‘good one.’ “What the hell kind of response was that Cal? That wasn’t an answer, that was a noise.”

“Sarge, Charlie Brown’s teacher didn’t speak. Cal was correct, and she’s winning thirty, nothing.”

Cal looked arrogantly at a baffled Jake. “You really aren’t getting it are you. These are Rickie questions and Rickie answers. You have to think like Rickie.”

Grunting, Jake finished his beer and turned to Rickie. “I can do this, I was young once. O.K., I’m ready now. Ask away.”

“All right.” Rickie pulled out another slip. “*Ab . . .* Sarge . . .” He cleared his throat. “What is the approximate relative atomic weight of Iodine?”

Jake’s mouth dropped open “Rickie . . . Christ. You don’t know that answer.”

“I do too. See?” He showed then hid it fast. “I’ll have you know, I aced chemistry. The question, Sarge. Time is ticking.”

Jake’s mouth fell again, and his annoyance grew with every note to the theme of Jeopardy that Rickie sang. “I’ll get it. Wait, I think I know it.” Jake scratched his head with the hand that still held the empty bottle. “I got it, is it . . .” A startling, long, blood curdling scream coming from the hallway disrupted his answer. “Fuckin’ Jennifer.” Jake looked to the door. “Is it . . .” He noticed Cal jump and bolt to the door. “Cal, come on we’re playing a game here.”

Cal opened the door. “Jake, that scream didn’t sound right.”

“Cal.” Jake leaned forward shut the door and pulled her back down. “Jennifer is not right. Rickie, back to the game, is it . . .” His name, screamed by Carlos and John, sounding so desperate, was called over and over and grew closer to the door. “Son of a bitch.” Jake faced the door. “We’re busy here.”

Without knocking Carlos came bursting in the room. “Jake!” The look of desperation on his face said it all. He breathed heavily, his face was flush. He spoke quickly. “It’s Jennifer, something’s wrong. Something has her. It’s, it’s making this noise.”

“A wolf?” Jake asked as he lowered himself to his duffle bag.



"It's no wolf, Jake." Carlos took off running down the hall.

"Cal, grab the M-16." With the shot gun in his hand Jake followed. "I hate when I have to do this shit." Bitching down all the way down the hall, he stopped at Jennifer's door. There were no more screams. "It's quiet." Jake placed his ear close. "What exactly did you hear, Carlos, besides her screaming?"

Carlos wiped the sweat that formed on his head. "I can't describe it. Me and John were in the gathering room. We heard it first, then she screamed."

Cal arrived with Rickie. "You think she's O.K.?" She asked.

Jake, rolling his eyes, shrugged. He lifted his hand to the door. "Jennifer?" He knocked. "Are you all right." The silence was broken when an answer was given. A 'thump' at the door. It caused Jake to jolt back. "Rickie, Carlos, John, step into the gathering room. Cal, get ready, back me up."

Cal raised the rifle stepping back to the wall of the hall.

Jake's hand turned the knob on Jennifer's door. He peered to his left, making sure that Rickie and the others were out of range. With his left hand turning the knob, he raised his shotgun with his right. The door opened with ease into the room. Jake's eyes widened in shock as the room immediately came into focus. His whispering words were heard only by Cal. "Holy shit."

Gasping, Cal covered her mouth to stop from gagging as she stood in the door with Jake. "What happened?"

"Keep you weapon up, Cal. And stay back." Jake stepped into the room aiming. It was silent. Splattered blood like thrown paint covered the walls. Jennifer laid on the bed, and on the floor and everywhere else in that room that pieces of her body could be tossed. "What the hell did this?" As Jake took another slow and apprehensive step forward, his foot touched down in a substance that squished as he did. Lifting his foot to see, a long slimy clear substance followed the sole of his boot from the ground. He looked around the room. Still boarded up. Still closed off. "Cal, join the others." A bad feeling hit Jake, it surged into his gut, and it was the type of feeling he did not get often. Walking backwards, slow and ready, Jake pulled the door closed as he stepped from Jennifer's room.

"Jake?" Cal called from behind him. "What did that?"

"I told you to get with the others." Jake held his gun up, backing her



with him toward the gathering room.

Carlos, John and Rickie, heard Jake's voice. They ran into the hall with him and Cal.

"Jake." Carlos called out as he stayed close to the other two men. "What happened, is she all right?"

Jake's head tilted. "Shut up." He pumped his shotgun. "Something is in . . ."

The cry out came first. A loud bellowing gut roar, the door to Griff's room exploded in splinters and the Catch stepped into the hall. Its arms outward in attack mode, standing over seven feet tall. Barely interpretable human features on a grotesque muscular body was covered in grey downy hair from head to toe. It snarled, it's yellow eyes peering forth, an almost slime-like, dripped from it's jaws.

Without hesitation Jake began to fire. Cal's weapon echoed his as they stood nearly side by side firing into the beast which was still stained with Jennifer's blood.

Determination glared on Jake's face as every shot he blasted didn't phase the creature that stepped forward. "Get back Cal, he's not going down!"

Cal ignored and kept firing, she could smell the thing as it moved fearlessly to them.

"Cal, get . . ."

The thing reached outward smacking the rifle from Cal, it spun from her arms on to the floor. Stepping into Jake, he reached with one hand, and with ease snatched the shotgun from the strong mans hands, dropping it out of the way. The Catch lunged. Gripping Jake single handed, lifting him from the floor, he turned and tossed Jake with ease down the other end of the hall.

Jake slid, on his back at first, then rolling from the force of the throw until he crashed thunderously into the far wall.

Carlos, shaking, leaped forward to get Cal. "We're fucked."

Jake shook his head, he could see his shotgun, Cal's rifle, and the glaring look of the beast that all but said, 'try it.' Almost in a taunt, the Catch stopped watching Jake and reached for Cal.

"No!" Picking himself from the floor, Jake, in an emotional rush, charged forth at the creature. Raging like a bull, he ran as hard as he could, snatching up the first weapon he could grab in his run, and barreling into

the creature with all of his two hundred and sixty pounds. The floor vibrated as Jake and the thing crashed together not three feet from the others. Knowing he had stunned it, Jake jumped to his feet, stood one foot on the chest of it, and emptied the six remaining shells of Cal's M-16 into the head of the huge destructor. Jake didn't flinch, didn't move, until the empty chamber clicked twice.

Cal stepped closer, still in shock from the sudden chain of events. "Jake, is it . . ."

Jake poked the motionless thing with the end of the rifle, moving its body, looking for a response. "I think it is."

Carlos and John, knowing it was safe, moved to get a closer look.

John looked to Jake, who still stood atop the beast's chest. "What the hell was it, Jake?"

"How the fuck should I know." Jake looked back at the room three feet away, the room the thing charged from. Jake didn't want to say what was going through his mind. He was too much of a realist to believe it. "Let's just get it out of here. I'm sure the wolves would like some dinner."

"Dude." Rickie finally came from behind everyone, he gaped at the bloodied thing. "You know what? You killed Bigfoot."

^^^

Cal was worried about him, perhaps that was why she disobeyed his request to search him out. She found Jake where she thought she would, standing before where Griff's door used to be, standing amongst the dried blood, wood chips, sour smell. He leaned in the archway, elbow up, hand resting downward on the back of his neck. "Jake?" She whispered, running her hand down the crease in his back. "What are you doing?"

"Cal." Jake brought his hand down. "I uh, I thought I told you wait in the room."

"That was fifteen minutes ago Jake."

"I'm sorry. I've been standing here thinking."

"So, I see." She wrapped her arm around his waist leaning into him. "You left me with Rickie. He was really rattled. Him, John and Carlos are camping out in John's room. He keeps rambling on about Bigfoot." She smiled, a nervous smile. "Jake . . . you don't think that in a way he's right do you?"



“No, Cal. It’s not Bigfoot.” Jake faced her, a serious look on his face. “It’s Griff.”

“What?” Cal gave a disbelieving laugh. “Griff is . . .”

“Come here.” Jake took her hand and led her in the room. “Look at this.” He indicated to the brownish, hairy mound, seemingly broken on the floor. “Look at it. It’s shelled out in side. And this ooze.” Jake lifted his boot to show her how it was so similar to glue. “It’s everywhere, it’s in Jennifer’s room. It’s the same shit that dripped from his mouth.”

“You think he hatched from there?”

“Sounds unbelievable, but, yes, I do. This is a scientific experiment. Suppose they gave something to him before he came up, something that was going to make him like this.”

“Jake, I find this so hard to believe.”

“Me too. But this is a cocoon Cal.” Jake shoved it with his foot. “This is exactly where Griff fell when I killed him.”

“That’s right, Jake, you killed him. So how can it be Griff.”

“I don’t know. I know I unloaded my entire revolver into his head. I also know this room was sealed. And this blob of a thing was not in here. It’s Griff Cal, they did something to him.”

“It’s over though. He’s dead.”

“Thank God for that.” Jake led Cal from the room. “It was strong, whatever it was. I’m a big man, and it threw me like I weighed nothing. I’ve never been thrown. I’ll tell you Cal, that thing was frightening.”

“Then you hid it well.” Cal started walking with him. “You didn’t look scared in the least.”

“I wasn’t. I said the thing was frightening. I never said I was frightened. Please . . . and do you think I’d let you know it if I was?”

“No. You wouldn’t.”

“No I wouldn’t.” Jake brought her into their room and he shut and locked the door. “I want you to feel safe with me Cal.”

“I do.” Cal leaned into his arms, letting Jake hold her.

“There’s something I want to tell you.”

“What’s that?” Cal asked.

Jake rested his chin on her head. “Since that thing was going after you. And I had to take it out, I’m counting it. I’m winning, four to three.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
December 6 - 3:00 P.M.

“Cal, this just isn’t going to work.” Jake stared around Cal’s room. The room that once had enough room to move about, now seemed crowded. “Explain to me why I had to move everything in here just so those three can huddle together in some sort of male bonding slumber party in my room.”

“No one said to move your stuff in here, Jake.” Cal began to place things under the bed. “You’re the one who didn’t want them to have access to your things. Your . . . beer.” She looked at the cases in her room as well.

“Speaking of which . . .” Jake opened the little fridge and grabbed a beer. He removed and tossed the cap in the trash. “Now . . . I’m needing to talk about this situation.”

“No, you’re needing to bitch about the situation. Tough Jake, there is safety in numbers.”

“I don’t need them to be around to feel safe.” Jake took a drink. “They should have thought about their safety before they came up here. I did.”

“Yeah well, not everyone does what you do for a living.”

“This doesn’t bother you?” Jake asked. “All of them next door? It should.”

“It doesn’t.” Cal took the beer from his hand, took a drink and handed it back to him.

“Hey.” Jake looked at the bottle. “Get your own.”

“Oh, loosen up, Jake.” Cal opened his mini fridge and took a beer out for herself. “I’ll bet you go to the officer’s club everyday after work.”

“Just about. What the hell else am I supposed to do? Go home? To what?” Jake took another long drink. “Cal when you have absolutely nothing to go home to, why go home.”

“Tell me about it.” Cal sat on the bed.

“Sometimes the peace and quiet you get is a welcome after a bad day.” Jake sat next to her. “But the emptiness can be a killer.”

“I really didn’t expect to hear something like that from you.” Cal was



surprised. "It's just so, I don't know, un-Jake?"

"These past four months have bred a lot of un-Jake moments."

"Like filling my bed with flowers?" Cal laughed. "You know, if I ever meet this Chuck guy that's your friend, I will tell him."

"Please don't. And you *will* meet Chuck. When you do, don't listen to a word he says." Jake leaned forward placing his empty bottle on Cal's desk. "He's an asshole. And . . . he'll probably hit on you."

"Is he cute?"

"Oh, yeah, Cal." Jake answered sarcastically. "He's a doll. How the fuck should I know?" Jake stood up walking to the bathroom. "I hope they don't destroy the bathroom. I cannot shower in a messy bathroom." Jake placed his ear close to the door. "And listen to them in there. Laughing."

"They're trying to take their minds off things. They're playing Rickie Pursuit. Want to join them?"

"No, I don't . . ." Jake opened up the door. He walked straight through to the other room. The laughter stopped when his presence was made. "Rickie."

"Sarge." Rickie looked up. "Are you like wanting to play?"

"No I'm not *like* wanting to play." Jake held his hand out snapping his finger. "Give me a few of those to borrow."

"Sure, Sarge." Rickie reached into the shoe box, grabbing a handful. "I got plenty."

"Thanks." Jake took the folded sheets of paper back into what would be officially his room. "All right, Cal, test me. I have to see if I can do it." He handed her the sheets of paper. "Fire away at me."

"This really bothers you that you can't do this." She opened up the first one. "Do you bowl?"

"That's the question?"

"No. I was just curious. Because, I think that's the physical sport I can beat you at."

"What bowling? I doubt it. And search all you want Cal, you won't find a physical sport you can beat me at."

"Do you bowl?" Cal repeated the question.

"I can bowl." Jake answered. "Ask the Rickie Pursuit questions please."

"I bowl every Sunday."

"On purpose?" Jake asked. "I thought only married people bowled



every week, because they had nothing better to do with their time.”

“That is insulting. Joyce and I are in a league. We’re pretty good. I guess if you don’t bowl regularly . . .” Cal’s words trailed to a whisper. “It wouldn’t be a challenge for me.”

“Right. I’d kick your ass in bowling. How can you beat me? You’re little, you probably don’t throw anything heavy. What’s your average about one-twenty?”

“One-sixty-eight.”

“Ask the trivia question.”

Cal was smiling and she smiled wider when she read what random sheet of paper was handed to her. “Oh, Jake, this is funny.” Almost afraid to ask it, she did. “Name the person who is now famous for free basing penicillin.”

“What? Free basing penicillin. Who in the world would free-base penicillin?”

“You.” Cal gave him the sheet of paper.

“Oh, when did I free base . . . you didn’t.” Jake’s eyes widened.

“I had to. You were sick. We borrowed a syringe and . . .”

“We? Oh yeah that figures. Rickie had the skills. What would make you think free basing penicillin would work? Did you not think all you had to do is try to get me to take it.”

“You wouldn’t, so I had to inject you in your butt.”

“And I thought that was my imagination. I can’t believe you guys did that to me.” Jake stood up. “That’s probably what they were laughing in there. They probably had that question.” He began to pace.

“You are just way too uptight tonight. I’m afraid to say anything to you.”

“How am I supposed to be? I’ve lost all my privacy. I have three men afraid to sleep in their own room. Men Cal, men.” Jake pointed to the door. “And my girlfriend doesn’t seem to care about that.”

“Your girlfriend?” Cal laughed.

“I’m assuming too much aren’t I?” Jake looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to call you that. I just thought since we sleep together all the time, that’s what you were.”

“No, Jake, that makes us lovers. I don’t become your girlfriend until you’ve at least spent money on me. For example, movies, dinner, sporting events. You can’t do those up here, so I can’t be your girlfriend.”



“Oh.” Jake walked back over to her. “Expensive meals, or just regular meals?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just that with the way you eat. I’m gonna hate taking you anywhere that doesn’t have a value menu.”

“Jake, you made a joke. That’s really cute.” Cal returned to looking at Rickie’s questions.

“I’m not joking.”

“Don’t tell me you’re cheap too.”

“I prefer to call it money conscious.” Jake stated.

“Lighten up, you’re getting a check for a hundred grand. You probably drive a mini gas conscious car.”

“Right.” Jake fluttered his lips. “I drive a Jeep.”

“Figures.”

“When I’m not riding my bike.”

Cal started to laugh at him as she finished her beer. “Oh that is funny. I can see you peddling around the base.”

“Peddling? Get the hell out of here, I ride a Harley.”

Cal’s mouth dropped open, she set her beer to the floor. “You just shocked me, and that rarely happens. You ride?”

“Yes I ride. What else am I going to spend my money on? If course I’ll probably have to sell it if I have to afford you.” He leaned forward and kissed her. “And look, I just did spontaneous affection.”

“Wonders never cease. You’d really shock me if you spontaneously told me you loved me.”

Jake opened his mouth, then quickly shut it. “Read a Rickie question.”



Caldwell Research Institute, Atlanta, GA
December 6 - 8:10 A.M.

Head of the institute or not, Dr. Jefferson hated being on the elevator alone when he was going down to what everyone in the research institute referred to as "The sub levels of hell". But it was something he had to do. His imagination took off on him, fear of the elevator getting stuck, himself getting stranded, days . . . weeks. No one finding him. Becoming in an essence, one of his own experiments . . . "How profound I am." Dr. Jefferson spoke out loud to himself as he waited for the doors to open. "I ought to be a writer."

He could smell them as soon as he stepped on to the floor. Though he knew for certain they were tucked away, deep and far back in the lab, their smell was predominant.

"Dr. Jefferson." The woman's voice called to him.

"Ah. Dr. Holmes." Dr. Jefferson shook hands with the dark haired woman, a bigger woman, wearing a blue lab coat. "Did you get a chance to examine the video tapes I sent down yesterday?"

"I did." Dr. Holmes nodded, escorting Dr. Jefferson with her to her own lab. "I think that you've nothing to worry about. The experiment, or rather metamorphosis, will be fine. Rejuvenating as predicted. How long, will vary."

"But my concern is, Graison unloaded six shells at close range into his head. That's not a concern?"

"Not in the least. I work with these creatures on a day to day basis. You know as well as I do there are only three ways to kill them. One, the anti-generation serum, which our Stasis people have. Prolonged exposure to warmth during regeneration or . . . severing the brain stem. Like the participants before them, I highly doubt these people will figure that one out. Unless they do, the Stasis will keep coming back."

In relief, Dr. Jefferson smiled.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Las Vegas, Nevada

December 9 - 8:15 A.M.

Concern was what Aldo had most on his mind as he sat in the office of his home. He was ready to go to work but his mind wasn't in to it. He stared ahead, grasping in his hand, photographs. Why was the experiment bothering him more than the others? He chalked it up to the fact that he had never made it quite as far in the other experiments. He never had time to get to know or care about his participant. He knew that in five days he would be back in Atlanta listening to Dr. Jefferson tell what was going to happen next. What had happened. Aldo knew what the metamorphosis was capable of and he hoped that Cal could withstand it. Not just for the benefit of his win, but more so for herself.

"Daddy?" Alison knocked lightly on the door then strutted into her father's office. She sat down on his desk. "Who's the woman?" She took from his hand a picture of Cal. "New love interest? She's pretty and all, but don't you think she's a little young to be a mother to me?"

"For your information young lady, she had a daughter near your age." Aldo took the picture back. "Unfortunately, her daughter was killed."

"Oh." Alison let her head fall. "So you like her huh?"

"No, no. It's not like that."

"Yes it is." Alison taunted. "I see that grown up gawking look in your eye." She touched his eye lid.

Aldo swiped her hand away. "Even if I found interest in her. I wouldn't get between her and him." Aldo showed her Jake.

"He's nothing." Alison tossed the picture. "You're much more handsome. And richer." Alison slid off the desk. "Anyway, the cars out front, we have to go. I'll be late for school."

"That you will be." Aldo stood up, placed the photos in his desk drawer and gave his daughter a quick hug, kissing, her on the forehead as he did. "Let's go."

Alison walked ahead of him, in what was, a good mood for her.

"Alison?" Aldo shut his office door. "You really think I'm better



looking than that guy?”

“Oh sure. In an old guy sort of way.” Picking up speed, Alison took off running down the hallway.

Aldo shook his head and followed.



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
December 9 - 11:00 P.M.

The howling wolves, whose cries out, echoed with a haunting effect through the night air, ceased to give the eerie effect to Jake. Their distant rhythmic chanting, combined with the single burning candle in the room, fed Jake. He listened with a half ear, thriving on it, almost deriving a sense of strength from the foreboding feel they added to the ambiance. The louder the wolves became, the more intensity Jake felt as he sat center of the bed, holding Cal so close atop him. His slow shallow breaths transformed into huffs as the soft grunting moans began to subconsciously emanate from him. His hands, sweaty, clutched to her back. Jake no longer sang that annoying song in his head, concentrating on the hard to understand lyrics, it was time to let go. Sliding his lips up Cal's neck he buried himself in her.

"Sarge!" Rickie called out, knocking on the bathroom door.

No, not now. Ignore him. Jake continued on, fighting the annoying calls of Rickie.

"Sarge!"

Ignore him. Jake's lips pressed tighter. "Go away!" He called out muffled from Cal's neck. The moment, the moment he strived for, nearly in achievement was being crushed by Rickie.

"Jake?" Cal whispered in his ear.

Jake shook his head at her then slid his hands to her face, using his palms as a sort of ear muffle.

"Sarge." Rickie knocked. "We need you to get over here. We hear a noise."

"No!" Loud and pissed off, Jake grunted. "Not now! I'm not . . . coming . . ." Jake stopped speaking. ". . . over." He let out a deep breath and dropped his hands from Cal's ears. Placing his forehead to hers he kissed her and without any words, they laughed softly at what had transpired. "I could just kill that kid. It's the wolves, I know it . . . Rickie quit pounding on my door goddamn it! I'll be over in a minute!" He looked at Cal who still clung to him, he whispered. "Maybe a little longer."

^^^



Coming through from the bathroom in almost a huff, hair tossed everywhere, Jake walked into the room. Rickie stood by the boarded up window, and Carlos and John, by the door. "Now you want to tell me about the noises?"

Rickie cased Jake up and down. "Dude you look like you just had sex. Did I interrupt you?"

"Rickie . . . When don't you interrupt me?" Jake threw his hands up. "What is this about a noise. And it better not be the wolves howling."

"Listen to it."

"To what? I don't hear anything." Jake listened.

"It was there before, the window was creaking."

"Rickie, the weather is bad. And the window is boarded up. I cannot believe you dragged my ass in here over this. There's no way . . ."

With a loud bang, the board covering the window crashed to the ground. Almost as if it were thrown, a wolf came sailing though.

It took everyone by surprise, even the wolf was disoriented. Picking himself up, paws sliding badly, the wolf leaped outward. Lunging, it opened it's jaws, and snatched hold of John. The wolf pinned him to the closed door as he snarled and gripped, pulling at a screaming John tightly--by his throat.

"Cal!" Jake cried out. "My weapon!" It all happened so fast. The crash of the wood, the thump of the wolf, and John crying out in agony, blood pouring from his neck. He rushed to the clenching animal.

Cal flew into the room, holding very loosely, the sheet from the bed on her naked body. "Jake . . . Oh my God." With her words she tossed Jake the revolver.

Jake caught it, placed the barrel to the chest of the wolf and fired four times. The animal's jaws opened and he fell lifeless to the floor. John followed. His body slid down against the grain of the wooden door, and as he hit the floor, legs spread out, his body trembled, almost convulsing from the pain.

Jake clasped his huge hand over John's wound. "Carlos, go get me some towels. Cal . . . my pouch. Rickie board that window back up!" Jake squatted next to John. He had no comforting words to give the bleeding man who stared at him with beckoning eyes. Eyes that looked frightened and in shock. He stared at John emotionless. The knowledge of what had



happened to him after his wolf incident was foremost on his mind. He kept that knowledge to himself, not speaking it to John. He didn't need to know about it, Jake thought. Because Jake knew deep in his gut, that John hadn't the strength or determination to pull through the death sentence the fangs of the beast had just passed down to him.

Taking the towels Carlos quickly handed him, Jake laid John on the floor. "Rickie, what do you have to calm him down. What drugs?"

Rickie held the board to the window, getting ready to pound. "I have some perks."

"Good." Jake knelt before John. "When you are done with that window, get me one . . . no, two."

"Will he be all right?" Carlos asked as he knelt across from Jake.

"I don't . . . Thanks, Cal" Jake noticed Carlos' sight had left him, about the same time that the pouch Cal got for him was handed down. Cal kneeling down, still holding the sheet to her body. Her entire right leg protruded drastically from the nearly open sheet as she bent her leg. "Hey!" Jake reached over with his free hand covering Carlos' eyes. "Cal, for Christ sake, get some clothes on."

Cal bit her bottom lip and stood up. "Sorry. I didn't want to waste time by getting clothes on."

Jake waited until she slipped away and removed his hand. He gave Carlos a stern look before retrieving a pack of sutures from his bag. "I can't believe there's a dying man on the floor and you're being a peeping fuckin' Tom."

"Jake, I'm sorry. How did you learn to do that?" Carlos asked watching Jake work on John.

"Practice." Jake stitched and pulled John's skin, ignoring the cry outs that John made. "These aren't too deep. It missed the jugular."

"Then he'll be fine?"

Grabbing the small scissors, Jake snipped the sutures, grabbed his pouch and stood up. "Can you and Rickie get him into that bed?"

"Um . . . sure." Carlos answered.

Jake walked past Rickie, laying his hand on his back. "There's more wood in the storage closet. Grab a small two by four and secure it across. Got that?"

"Yeah, Sarge." Rickie pounded. "Sarge?" He waited for Jake to turn around. "What if something happens again while we're all sleeping?"



"Nothing is going to happen when we're all sleeping. I'll be up. I'll make sure of it." Jake walked into the bathroom, slightly closing the door, and turned on the faucet to wash the drying blood from his hands.

"Jake?" Cal, now wearing jeans and a sweatshirt entered the bathroom. "How's John doing?"

"Well if it isn't the exhibitionist. John's doing." Jake scrubbed his hands.

"At least you stopped him from bleeding to death."

"I'm not so sure that's a good thing." Turning off the faucet, Jake reached for a towel that wasn't there. "He took our towels. Son of a bitch."

"Jake, why would you say that?"

"Because." He opened up the cabinet under the sink and grabbed a hand towel. "You and I both know what is going to happen to him in about twenty-four hours." Tossing the towel down he walked past Cal.

"I didn't think of that." Cal followed him.

"I know what happened to me. He's not strong enough to pull through it, he's not me."

"No, he's not." Cal watched Jake pull out his revolver, check the chamber and toss it on the bed almost in frustration. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Jake turned to her. "I'm still stuck on the fact that you exposed yourself to Carlos."

"It's nothing Carlos hasn't seen before."

"Unless he's seen you, then it is something he hasn't seen before."

"Jake, I would really think at this moment, you would have more important things on your mind."

"Like what?" Jake plopped on the bed.

"Um, John for example?"

"John's pretty much gonna end up being bait for the wolves if we need it."

"Oh Jake that's cold."

"It's reality." He scooted over and patted a spot for Cal to sit next to him. "O.K., here's the deal." He slid his hand on her leg as soon as she sat down. "I've got a bad feeling brewing in me. A feeling that tells me, things aren't going to get better. I feel like I have to shift into a different mode. Out myself more on guard. I know I'm always on guard, but this time, really in that state of mind."

"I understand what you mean," Cal said.



"I'll need you in that mode too while I sleep. I'll try to do that during the day. But I can't be too easily distracted for long. Your safety is too important. And, I'd like to kind of keep an eye out for Rickie also."

"Rickie?" Cal edged her way closer to Jake. "Jake, are you saying you like Rickie?"

"Yes I like Rickie. I don't want anything to happen to him. But don't tell him that. Besides, I'm getting his ass recruited when this thing's all over with. I want to put him in my company."

"You'll take all the fun out of him." She complained.

"That's life. You do know, Cal, we can pretty much say goodbye to our privacy. And just when I started to get the hang of this making love thing. I am getting the hang of it right?"

"You know what your doing now."

"Now? As in, not like before?" Jake asked.

"It's just that . . . it's just, you were a little rough around the edges when we started."

"I cannot believe you were just that blunt with me." Jake was shocked.

"Just think of it this way. The next woman you sleep with . . ." Cal kissed him and stood up. "You can be confident you'll make her happy."

"Wait a second." Jake grabbed her hand, pulling at her. "The next woman I . . ."

"I'll be back Jake." Cal let her hand slide from his and walked to the bathroom. As she opened the door she was nearly pummeled over by Rickie. "Rickie? What's wrong?"

Rickie's eyes were wide. "Cal-babe . . . Sarge. Come here."

Jake swung his legs off the bed and followed Rickie to the other room. "What is it?"

Rickie pointed to Carlos. "Cover John's mouth for a second. It has to be quiet. Dude . . ." Rickie pointed to the window. "Just listen."

Jake took in the silence of the room, and breaking through that, was what Rickie needed him to hear. Immediately, Jake left the room and went to the other. He grabbed the duffel bag pulling out the shotgun and the rifle. He handed Cal the shotgun. "I'll be back. Stay here." Jake opened the door. "Stay put. And stay on guard." He closed the door and marched down the hallway. He reached up lowering the hatch to the roof, then the ladder and he climbed up.

In the frigid cold of the night, wind whipping, snow falling so harsh it



almost blinded him, Jake stood on the roof. Through all the racket of Mother Nature's furies. Through the howling of the wolves that seemed so faint in the distance, he heard it. It's cry out was far away, yet distinctive enough to make out over every other sound. It wasn't a wolf, it wasn't a growl. It was a stomach shaking wail. Outcrying, deep, shrill and long. It was to Jake . . . a warning.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
December 10 - 1:30 P.M.

A mid morning nap was always the best thing to put Carl in a good mood. Especially after pulling a long night of monitoring the participants that remained. Not that it wasn't easy. It was. They gathered in just two rooms. But he pulled the night shift because he was more of a night owl and was grateful to Hawk for not minding when he snuck off for an hour or two.

Never any longer.

So why did Carl sleep four hours? Was Hawk angry with him over something. Never did Hawk fail to wake him. Perhaps nothing was going on, or Hawk fell asleep at the monitoring table. The later was more of a possibility when Carl heard nothing but silence as he headed won the hall from where he slept.

"Hey, Hawk." Carl, half out of it, scratched his head as he stumbled around the corner. "Wake up so I don't . . ." He froze. "Holy shit." The putrid stench of death pelted him at the same time the vision of a bloody lab room came into focus. Blood smeared everywhere. No sooner did he see the single arm laying center of the floor it happened. Before he could make a move or scream, a single soft growl, short, rang out right before the heavy beastly arm lunged down.

^^^

Shaking, John awoke from his dream. His neck throbbed and his head felt as if daggers were shooting through it. He opened his eyes and stared about an empty room. The last he opened his eyes, Rickie and Carlos sat on the floor playing cards. He didn't see them now. Of course seeing anything was difficult, his headache was making him near blind.

Aspirin and water. John slowly lifted the covers from his body, the air in the room was so cold it made him shake worse. His stomach knotted and felt as if it were going to turn inside out. As he placed his feet to the floor,



the strength in his legs seemed to leave, they collapsed a bit, but John straightened them up.

Somewhat disoriented, he shuffled his way to the door, opened it and walked into the icy hallway holding the wall for support. Where he was wandering to, he hadn't a clue. John just knew he didn't want to be alone, and he wanted to find someone, anyone.

John felt the blast of cold air as he stepped into the gathering room. His blinded focus could not even make out that the door was wide open. Feeling his way down the wall he found the hall to the dining area. They had to be in there, he thought. Making his way, he could smell something. His senses were off and he couldn't quite place the smell he knew was bad. "Guys?" His voice cracked as he stepped in, his eyesight getting worse with every step. "Someone?" His body trembled in fear. The smell and then . . . the breathing. "I can't see. Is someone there?" He clung his arms closely to himself. "Rickie, is that . . ." A forceful tug to his hair whipped his head back, he heard the grunting, the heavy breathing and the searing pain to the right side of his neck. The sharp burning pain caused him to scream out. The only scream John would make.

Jake kissed Cal once before submerging himself into the bathroom to wake up. He was annoyed that Rickie and Carlos were in his room. Gawking at the platform city. Hanging out in there while he slept.

As soon as he made his first step from the bathroom, he heard John's scream at the same time as everyone else. Rickie and Carlos jumped from the floor.

Cal, holding her protective shotgun, jolted to Jake. "It sounded like it came from the other end of the building."

"It did." Jake snatched the shotgun from Cal's hands. "Grab the rifle, come on." He led the group into the hall. He knew as soon as he felt the temperature change, that something had happened. "John!" He called out stepping with caution down the hall. "John!"

A loud chesty bellow was all they heard and John's limp body was tossed into the hall. It slid down to them like a bowling ball and they were the pins.

"Fuck!" Jake jumped over the sailing body and he charged forth. "Cal, back me up!" He heard the reassuring sound of her clicking back the chamber on the rifle.



Running down the hall, fearless, Jake pumped the chamber on the shotgun, readying himself for what lurked ahead. He knew what it was.

Turning the corner to the gathering room, he spotted the open door. “Rickie, Carlos, stay back!” On his last word they stampeded in, barking anger like the pack of wild animals they were. “Cal!”

Immediately, together, they fired. The perfect team. Holding the ten wolves at bay, taking them out moments before they leaped in attack. As soon as Jake heard the final yelp and saw the last wolf Cal took out, fly backwards from the force of the shot. Jake charged forward closing the front door. He was fast about it, quickly closing out whatever else could storm in. But he wasn’t fast enough not to notice-- seconds before he shut the door--the large bloody foot prints that trailed outward into the snow.

^^^

“Shut up!” Jake shouted as loud as he could in his room to Rickie and Carlos who rattled and rambled in panic over John’s death. “Just shut up! Be men for Christ sake!” He paced frantically around the room, holding the back of his neck. “I have to think.”

Cal remained calm, she cradled her shotgun like it was a baby. “Jake?”

“Fuck!” He was so angry. Jake’s face showed it. He grabbed his duffel bag and opened it, examining what was inside. He tossed it to the ground and rubbed his face. “All right.” He took a calming breath, letting it out through his nostrils. “Here’s the deal.” He leaned against the desk waiting for everyone’s attention. “All of us know what killed John. Whether it’s the same thing that just didn’t die, or a new one. We have to take it out. But we have a problem. The last time Cal and I blasted it, it took about forty rounds of ammo and it still didn’t go down. We can not defensively afford to do that.”

“So what do we do?” Cal asked.

“Figure out another way.” Jake continued. “We have two problems. The wolves and the . . .for fear of sounding like a bad fifties movie . . . the thing. We can take out the wolves one shot each. But this . . .” Jake hated to say it. “Thing.” He took a disgusted at himself breath. “It has to go down, and we can’t take it down quite as easy. We have to destroy it. Suggestions?”

Carlos looked up. “Burn it. Burn it until there’s nothing left.”



Jake's hand motioned about in that suggestion. "Yeah, good but where? We can burn it out there, but we stand a chance of it tossing itself in the snow to put out the flames. Then, we have to get it far enough away from the building and that means the wolves."

Carlos suggested again. "What about the storage building?"

Jake shook his head. "No. We need that as secondary shelter, just in case." After getting a disgusted grunt of defeat from Carlos, Jake looked to Cal. "Anything, Cal?"

Cal shook her head. "If it's the same thing, we have to ensure it can't stay alive. Take it apart maybe?"

Jake lifted his hand to Carlos who moaned. "Easy. She's just suggesting." He turned his views to Cal. "Unfortunately . . ." He shrugged. "we can't take it apart."

"Sarge?" Rickie slowly stood to his feet. "But the wolves can." All eyes brightly turned to Rickie. "They could tear it to shreds."

The brilliancy of Rickie's plan lasted a moment in Jake's mind. "No." He shook it off. "If they were gonna do it, they would have. Good thought Rickie but it won't work."

"No, Sarge. It will work. They don't attack Bigfoot because Bigfoot smells like them." Rickie nodded. "If we can make him smell like us. Man, those werewolves will be on him like you on Cal." Rickie's enthusiasm came across.

The brightness returned to Jake.

^^^

Carlos' suspicions about Rickie were confirmed. There was something entirely to be doubted about the 'always stoned' boy. Jake pounding extra security to the front door wasn't enough to block it out. Nor was the total concentration Carlos placed into mopping up the blood in the gathering room.

Rickie's singing. And Rickie didn't even sing good songs. He sang songs out of his era, and out of character for him. Not to mention at really bad times. Swishing the blood, ringing out his mop, Carlos found himself mentally joining along to Rickie's own Rendition of the song 'Warrior', in an essence it was the first tune Rickie had sung all afternoon that sort of went along with all that had occurred.



“Back.” Rickie announced as he stepped into the gathering room with Cal.

Jake stepped away from the door. “How did you guys do?”

“Excellent-a-mundo.” Rickie stole the box on the table and while speaking nonchalantly, took items out. “Cal-Babe and I went on a little perfume and cologne scavenger hunt. Found a gay magazine in Carlos’ room.”

Jake’s view went to Carlos as quickly as he dropped the mop.

Rickie started laughing. “Anyhow . . . Cal-Babe and me went through every body’s smelly stuff.”

Cal reiterated. “We took anything we thought of that caused a scent.”

“True.” Rickie nodded. “We had this bitchin’ time. Whoa . . .” he looked at Cal. “If we had fun under the extreme pressures of sci-fi death, imagine the cool times we’re gonna have when we’re roommates.”

After getting a glance from Carlos, Jake stepped to the table. “I don’t think we are going to extend the invitation to live with us so quickly..”

“We?” Cal looked at Jake. “We? As in you and me?”

“Well . . .” Jake stammered. “I meant . . .”

“Awfully presumptuous, don’t you think.” Cal asked.

Rickie intervened. “Completely understandable, Cal-Babe. He’s assuming because he’s latched on.” He took a whiff of cologne then dabbed himself with it. “Should have seen it coming, dudes always latch on to the babe they lose their virginity to.”

Cal started to laugh.

Carlos had enough. “Rickie.” He snapped. “I’m gay. Jake’s a virgin. You wanna bust on anyone else during this really inappropriate time?”

With his mouth swishing from side to side, Rickie looked up to the ceiling for a moment in thought. “Um . . .” He shook his head. “Nope I’m done thanks.”

Carlos gave up and went back to mopping.



Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute
December 10 - 9:30 P.M.

Sadly Stan's eyes raised as he placed down the receiver to the phone and looked to Dr. Jefferson. "Nothing."

Dr. Jefferson swallowed. "How long now?"

Coughing, Stan flipped a page in his folder. "Nine-forty-five this morning. That was the last hourly check in we had. We gave them till eleven and have been trying ever since."

"There are no cameras down there. Do you think perhaps there's a problem with the satellite hook up?"

"I thought of that." Stan said. "But that would be impossible. We can still watch the remaining participants. Dr. Jefferson, has this ever happened before?"

"What? Lost contact? No."

"No, that's not what I mean. I have a bad feeling. Do you think something has happened to them?"

"If it has. *Then* it wouldn't be the first time." Clicking the pen he held, Dr Jefferson placed it in his pocket. "Keep me posted."

"How can you do that?" Stan stood up following him. "How can you have a such-is-life attitude. These four people are part of our team. They're part of us."

"That they are." Dr. Jefferson told him firmly. "But they, like the rest of the participants, agreed to go. They knew the risks. They took them." Without anymore words, Dr. Jefferson walked out.



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
December 11 - 2:30 A.M.

It would become his nightly routine. Jake would make rounds through the building, checking all doors, armed and ready at every corner he turned. Armed now with something besides a gun. Hooked to his belt by the yellow trigger, was a squirt bottle that used to hold window cleaner, now it held John's cologne. Always near Cal, Carlos and Rickie, were similar items. They were ready for when the beast returned. They had their plan. It was gone over constantly, embedded into their minds on how they would lead it outside and draw the attention of the wolves. It wouldn't be long, and Jake knew it, before it would attack again.

Jake raised the ladder to the roof and lowered the hatch. He had stepped up there to listen. He couldn't see anything, the moon wasn't full enough to cast the light he so much wanted to have. Returning from the roof, Jake was somewhat disappointed. He couldn't hear it. That noise, that call out couldn't be heard. But Jake sensed he was there. He could feel it deep within his bones.

Jake didn't like to be gone, especially if Cal was sleeping. But he knew she was still up, so he allotted himself a few more moments. Unexpected, Jake turned to the quiet footsteps he heard join him.

"Hey." Cal, with folded arms approached him. "You should be inside. It's cold." She rubbed her arms. "What are you doing? Thinking?"

"Watching. Waiting." Jake pulled Cal close. "Hoping maybe?"

"Jake . . ." She raised her head to look at him. "Not to be a damper and all, But . . . I don't think we're gonna be able to trap him. He's smarter than that."

"Why do you say that?" Jake asked.

"It's hunting us." With a thinking look on her, Cal looked out again. "He's bigger than us. Stronger. He knows he doesn't go down that easy. If it wasn't a game to him, a hunt, then why doesn't he go after us all at the same time?" Cal spoke with confidence knowing what she was saying held frightening truths. "It's too easy. He wants to make us sweat. He needs that thrill. He's the hunter . . . and we're his prey."



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
December 15 - 1:00 P.M.

“Call To the roof! Now!” Jake shouted to her over the loud cries of the creature as it stood arms extended in attack mode facing Jake. Holding his shotgun, he kept Rickie safely behind him. “Hurry with that door, Rickie.”

“Right away, Sarge.” With a window cleaner bottle under his arm, a rush of excitement and fear, Rickie raced to the front door, prying off the two by fours. “One . . . second.”

Jake backed up leading the thing into the gathering room. “Come on.” He baited. “Come on. Look at you. Get me.” Jake kept moving at a steady pace. With a fury the thing swung forth and Jake jolted his head back, giving a taunting laugh. “Ha! Look how slow you are you stupid mother fucker.” He felt the blast of cold air on his back. “Come on!”

The beast stopped, knowing it was being lured, he turned around to go back in.

“Carlos, now!”

Seeing the creature heading to him, Carlos, using a lighter and Jennifer’s can of hair spray, blasted a long flame at the thing making him squeal and turn to Jake.

It was close enough that Jake could poke him with the shotgun and step back. “Rickie, out of the way.” Jake moved through the doorway, the angry beast following. The smell of the thing was soon overshadowed as Rickie began to blast him with cologne the second he went by him.

Feeling the hard ground become a soft snow, Jake, using his own trigger bottle, blasted away at what used to be Griff as he watched the door to the building close. He knew it would be seconds before Rickie and Carlos were on the roof. Jake led it further outward, but not too far that Jake couldn’t leap to the safety of the rope dangling from the roof. “A little further.” Jake beckoned it, raised his eyes, saw Cal perched on the roof and took a sense of security in that.

The thing groaned louder, the misty white breath coming from his foul



mouth making a cloud.

Cal's heart beat faster, she was ready. "Jake now?"

Jake shook his head, moving in circles not letting it go anywhere. He shifted his eyes. "Cal, fire into the hillside. Start them we can't wait."

A single shot fired from Cal's rifle and the rumbling began.

Jake avoided the swipes of the huge hands that he knew could tear him apart. He moved from his way, feeling the ground vibrating from the heaviness of the approaching stampede.

Cal aimed at the thing, her breathing grew heavier the closer she saw the wolves draw. "Jake!"

"Not yet!" Jake pumped his shot gun moving to the rope.

They were so close to Jake, one leap was all it would take. Cal knew there were too many to take out if they went after him.

The beast glimmered as it noticed Jake's attention was no longer on him. With a loud cry out he stepped to lunge just as the wolves neared within fifteen feet.

"Jake!"

"Now!" Jake began to fire with Cal. The beast's body shook with every hit it took, still it did not go down. Ceasing his fire, Jake leaped out to the rope, clinging it, at the same time the wolves launched themselves to him. They slammed against the building, missing him as he flew up the rope. Climbing to a safe distance, Jake watched as the wolves surrounded the creature, barking, growling and pulling at him.

The beast struggled to his feet fighting off the pack the grew around him. He ran pulling those who had hold of his flesh with him.

From the roof they watched the moving blur of the gang of wolves shuffle to the hillside and soon the beast disappeared within it.

Jake did not give into the celebration shouts of Rickie and Carlos as they stood behind him jumping up and down. Jake merely stood, near the edge of the roof, his main focus forward. Listening for something that would confirm the end to the creature's reign. He didn't hear it. What he did hear, he was certain no one else did. It wasn't what he wanted to hear. The distant painful yelp of the wolves, one at a time. *No*. Jake lowered his eyes, than lowered his head.

"Jake?" Cal called out softly to him, moving closer. "What's wrong?"

Jake shook his head. *No, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it did fight back, but it can't take them all. Not all of them. No way, there's too many. It's quiet now. Maybe*



they got him. “Nothing Cal.” He reached his hand out placing it behind her head and he pulled her into him. He wasn’t going to say anything. Why should he, he wasn’t sure.

Cal felt his grip, the grip that didn’t want to let go. “You sure you’re fine?”

“Positive.” He brought his lips down to kiss the top of her head, his eyes never leaving the far off hillside. “Excellent shooting today, Cal. Excellent.”

“Thanks.” She stayed in his hold. “We unloaded a lot into him.”

Jake closed his eyes and let his heart sink. “Yeah, I know.” It was a reality he didn’t want to face. How much they continuously fired, how much was wasted. Yes, Jake came prepared, more so than anyone for protection. But Jake didn’t come prepared for what they faced.

Investor's Meeting - Caldwell Research Institute
December 15 - 4:30 P.M.

Aldo watched Stewart, Graison's investor, more than he listened to Dr. Jefferson give his opening comments at the meeting with yet another missing investor. Running his finger down his mustache he wondered where Stewart's mind was. Somehow he didn't look quite as arrogant, cocky, as he did earlier. Still, he had that look of confidence on his face, a look that Ivan and Douglass, Rickie and Carlos' investors did not.

Aldo would have more confidence, if he weren't worried so much about Griff. He knew by the tapes everyone thought they killed it, everyone except for Jake. Aldo could see that look in his eye, Jake had something in the back of his mind, and Aldo would bet his fortune it was Griff.

Maybe it was the drop in Dr. Jefferson's voice that called Aldo's attention, more so he believed it to be the word 'metamorphosis' that made him listen up. Shifting his focus, and his chair, Aldo paid attention.

"The metamorphosis has made its way again to the far entrance of the controller's tunnel." Dr. Jefferson explained. "He did this for protection from the wolves and for a place to let his wounds rejuvenate. Our scientists tell us he sustained quite a bit and is now in a deep sleep stage. When severe rejuvenation is needed, the deep sleep could last some time. Our participants may have a Christmas break so to speak."

The comment 'oh that is so weak' coming from Stewart's mouth made Aldo see red. With a slamming hand he face the scrawny little man. "What is your problem? Haven't they seen enough to warrant a break? Let them celebrate the birth of our Lord for Christ's sake."

"Let's have a winner and end this game!" Stewart argued. "It's dragging on. Only one other experiment had this many people left after nearly five months. End it. It's ridiculous."

"You're ridiculous." Aldo pointed at him. "And getting on my nerves."

Stewart hadn't a response, he faced Dr. Jefferson. "Does the stasis know what he's doing?"

"Yes. He still has Griff's mind. Griff's ability to see things demented." Dr. Jefferson explained. "He is different than the last ones or the ones we have in the basement lab. Griff is brilliant. Most serial killers are. Not only

was his body metamorphosized, his mind was also. The DNA transformation is remarkable. Now up there we just don't have an unleashed beast. We have a master hunter."

Aldo, holding a pen, waved it at Dr. Jefferson. "Did you steal that from Cal? The other night on the tape she made a similar comment. Is she correct or did you just like her phrasing?"

"In an essence she is absolutely correct. They are being hunted. Only we feel it is more strategic. We believe the Stasis is hunting them one at a time. Making them hold their breath in between kills. Weakest to strongest. We think he's saving Graison for last. Realistically if he eliminated Graison now, the rest would be too easy. The thrill, the challenge would not be there. Actually Griff knows it is a game. I guarantee he wants to win."

Slumping, Ivan looked up. "So who's next? Obviously it isn't Graison."

Arrogantly, Stewart answered. "Cal. It has to be, he took her out once. And, she's a woman."

"Get the fuck out of here." Aldo shouted. "She's tougher than any of those men up there. It's not Cal."

"We don't think so either." Dr. Jefferson said. "The observer's poll has someone picked and we the scientists have to agree. We believe the next participant to meet their struggle at the face of the Stasis will be . . . Rickie."

Douglass dropped his head.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
December 24 - 10:30 P.M.

Jake had given it thought, especially the past couple days. It stayed forward in his mind along with the creature whom Jake hoped had met his demise. It had been quiet since the wolf incident. He hadn't heard the thing cry out in that taunting manner it did. Jake was starting to feel secure in the fact that perhaps he and the others actually brought it down. A part of him though, would not give in to that.

He stood there, half dressed, the top drawer to his dresser open, staring down to what he held in his hand. The grey velvet covered box, no larger than two inches by three, fit almost hidden in the palm of his large hand. He let his fingers caress the softness of it as he debated in his mind on what he should do.

Jake really wanted to give it to Cal. A part of him wanted to give her something. Something that showed how he felt. And what he held in that box summed up more than any words he had a hard time telling her. It would be so easy if circumstance were different, he could just give her it. But with it being Christmas, he didn't want what was in that box to be taken out of context. Jake didn't want Cal to feel that he searched just so he could hand her something. That wasn't it at all. Jake wanted Cal to have it, and being that it was Christmas, he now had an excuse to give it to her, not a just a reason.

The silencing of the blow dryer told Jake Cal would be stepping from the bathroom soon. Quickly he placed the box back in his drawer and shut it. He could hear Carlos and Rickie's laughter coming from the next room. He guessed Carlos laughed at Rickie, even Jake himself had to admit Rickie's singing was funny. And it helped some with the unexplained nervousness he was feeling.

"Can you hear that?" Cal stepped out of the bathroom pointing back with her thumb. "Rickie's making up words to Hark the Herald."

Jake stepped from his lean on the dresser, he heard Rickie singing badly, 'Mark and Harold made me sing, boring tunes about dumb things-- come on Carlos play the right notes'. Jake shook his head and smirked.



“Sometimes, and I hate to admit it. He makes me laugh.”

“Why don’t you go join them, Jake.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m staying with you.”

“I got all the glue out of my hair . . . finally.” Cal set her brush on her dresser and Jake moved it over three inches to a more appropriate place. Opting not to yell at him, Cal grabbed his hand and put it to her hair. “It’s soft just how you like it.”

Jake’s fingers ran through it. “It’s getting long.”

“Not all of us have the convenience of being our own barber. Why don’t you let your hair grow some?”

“Oh I hate my hair long. It’s way too curly.”

“You have curly hair?” Cal reached up to the buzz of it.

“Real curly hair.”

“Jake . . .” She moved to him.

Rickie knocked once and stepped in. “Sarge, Cal.” He cleared his throat. “You two are cordially invited to attend a most bodacious Christmas celebration in the other room. Carlos and I would like very much if you guys would join us. We’re gonna do a little concert, exchange gifts, and . . . enjoy the sparking tree we made.” He looked to Jake who watched Cal. “Cal-babe, what do you say?”

“I’m sorry, Rickie.” Cal shook her head. “I just don’t celebrate Christmas.”

“Why, are you Jewish?”

A smile broke on Cal’s face. “No . . .”

“Jehovah Witness?”

“No, I . . .”

“Atheist.” Rickie continued.

“Rickie, it’s not that. It’s just I . . .”

“Cal-babe, come on, enjoy and celebrate the birth of our savior.” He placed his hand on his chest and lowered his head. “Besides, I worked really hard on that tree. Carlos and I ran outside real fast to pull out that bush in front of the door.”

Cal felt bad. “Rickie, I just don’t want to celebrate Christmas since Jesse is gone.”

“Why? Didn’t she like Christmas?” Rickie asked.

“She loved it.”

“Sow why did you stop having it for her.”



“Rickie.” She whispered. “She’s not with me.”

“Babe, that is not true. She’s like, always here. So like, why don’t you and the big guy, come one over to the wish gift exchange and you can shower your kid with gifts.” Rickie nodded so there.

There was no more hesitation in Cal.

^^^

Jake didn’t sit on the floor with them, he stood leaning against the wall, arms still folded watching and listening.

“And finally . . .” Carlos said. “Because I’m being the generous guy this year. I’m giving you, Rickie, the entire video collector’s edition of Scooby-Doo.”

“Dude.” Rickie smiled. “That rules. Thanks. My turn.” He cleared his throat as his hands moved out pretend gifts. “Ah, yes, This is for Carlos.” He extended his hand to Carlos. “Strings for your guitar. A small case of them.”

Carlos smiled. “Thanks.”

“I’m the sensible shopper, guy. Cal-Babe. A tee shirt.”

Cal pretended to take the package. “What kind.”

“Black. Skeleton evil looking thing. A cool one. And Sarge.” Pretending Rickie tossed an ‘air’ gift Jake’s way. “Sarge, you’re suppose to catch it. It’s a hat to cover up that bald thing you got going on your head. And finally . . .” Rickie turned to the empty spot next to Cal. “Jesse-Babe, for you I give you a dozen CD’s that will drive your mother nuts.” Rickie looked up to Jake. “Sarge, your turn.”

Jake walked into the room. “I’m not the gift giving guy, so basically, Carlos and Rickie . . . you’re screwed. But Cal . . .” He moved to her and crouched down beside her. He extended the grey Velvet box and flipped the lid. “I got this five years ago for saving Chuck’s life. I always carry it. You’ve saved my life more than once up here. I want you to have it.”

Cal stared it, speechless and the room was quiet, but only briefly.

“Sarge.” Rickie spoke up. “That’s got to be like, the sappiest thing I ever saw. Weren’t you like, embarrassed to d that in front of us?”

Jake’s head lowered with a groan of frustration.

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Something was up. Wrong, Jake knew it. After returning back at the room, Cal sat at the desk, the medal before her, just staring at it. She hadn't said anything to him at all. And waiting long enough for the silence to break, Jake approached her. "Hey?" he brought himself before her.

"Why did you give this to me?"

"I never had someone special to share Christmas with. I want to do this. You know Cal, I was thinking. What I wouldn't give to have been rampaging around the crowded malls with all those rude people, just to shower you with gifts. Because, it was something I never got to do. I would have given you eventually. It's just, Christmas seemed like a good time." He watched her lift the lid.

"Jake." Cal spoke soft and lifted the small gold medal from the box. "How can I put this . . . I can't . . . I can't take this from you."

"Yeah, you can." He cupped her hand around it. "It would mean a lot to me. No one, with everything you've been through, deserves this more than you."

Cal was speechless, words couldn't even come from her mouth. She moved her lips to mouth the words 'thank you' and softly she kissed Jake. "It's a great gift." With a gentle smile she placed the medal back in the box and closed the lid. She grabbed Jake's hand and laid the box in it. "Thank you for it."

"What are you doing?" He looked down at it.

"Jake, I cannot take this from you. It wouldn't be right or fair." She cupped her hands over his. "The thought of you wanting me to have this, is a gift to me. It means so much."

Jake partially closed his eyes and his head slanted. "Cal. I need you to know how much it means to me for you to have this. I want you to take this. Please." He extended the box out. Cal just looked into his eyes, she didn't reach for it. With lowered eyes, Jake stepped back. "I apologize for putting you on the spot with this at the gift exchange. I shouldn't have done that." He turned his back to her and walked the box back to his dresser. He opened the drawer and stared at the box he gripped so tightly in his hand he could have crushed it. Jake took a deep breath and swallowed deeply before returning it to its spot. He was wrong in his thinking that giving the gift to Cal would be hard, having her not take it was even harder. But that would be for long, Jake knew. And as if it were a game, he would



win. Cal would end up with the medal whether she knew it or not.



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
January 1 - 4:40 P.M.

The gathering room wasn't Jake's choice of the day to sit. But it was where he had to be. Rickie, Carlos and Cal wanted to get out of the bedrooms. Cal, she shocked him wanting to be with them. Jake guessed shooting those ten wolves earlier wasn't enough excitement for her as Carlos playing his guitar was. Jake sat in the chair, close to them, rifle across his lap.

Carlos threw his head back and stopped playing so he could laugh. His guitar propped on the leg whose foot rested on the chair that Cal sat. It was the same foot that Jake kept knocking off because of its placement in accordance to Cal's body. But Carlos kept putting it back. And Jake eventually gave up figuring Carlos was just trying to irk him. And he did.

Carlos laughed harder, shaking his head. "Damn." He ran his pick down his strings roughly. "I cannot believe I've been here five months and I have not written one decent song."

"Sure you have." Cal said as she indulged in a chocolate pudding. "What's that one that Rickie sings. He does really good with it. Oh, I know, it's about the girl next door."

Carlos nodded. "That's not bad. It's about you."

"Me?" Cal asked.

"Cal?" Jake sprang forward. "Why are you writing songs about Cal?"

"She inspires me." Carlos smiled widely and leaned closer to Cal. "You have pudding . . . right there." He reached his index finger up and wiped the pudding from the corner of her mouth.

Jake's eyebrow twitched. "What the hell was that?"

Carlos smirked. "Lighten up Jake."

"Carlos!" Jake calmed himself down. "Don't. I don't joke around."

"Never?"

"Nope."

"O.K." Carlos started playing again and looked to Cal. "You're not actually considering staying with this guy after this experiment, are you?"



“Well.” Cal began to answer, seeing Jake wanting to hear what she was going to say.

“Fun Cal. Fun.” Carlos continued. “He doesn’t joke around. When will you have fun?”

“I didn’t think of that.” Cal joked looking at Jake through the corner of her eye.

“I am not finding any of this amusing.” Jake stated. “None.” He stood up. “And Cal, you know you won’t eat. This is what, the fourth pudding?”

“Second.” Cal stuck a spoon in her mouth.

“Still.” Jake took it. “Real food.”

“Hey!” Cal reached but Jake had walked away with it.

Carlos motioned his head to Jake. “See Cal. Forget the Ho-Ho’s if you end up living with this guy. You’re gonna have to come to New York to see my band. Hopefully I’ll still be with them.”

“Sarge.” Rickie called out grabbing an irritated Jake’s attention. “Did Carlos tell you? I’m joining his band. I’m gonna be the new front guy. I’ll be cool. The babes will love me.”

Jake shook his head. “No you’re not Rickie.”

“I’m not?”

“Nope, you’re going into the service.”

“O.K.” Rickie shrugged. “And who’s turn is it to start the food. I’m third worlding it here.”

Carlos lifted his guitar over his head. “It’s mine. And I’m hungry too.” He handed it to Cal. “Practice those chords.” He stepped away. “I’ll be back.”

Jake saw Cal set the guitar on her lap. He knew what that meant. “Cal-no.” He reached down for it. “Spare . . .” He sniffed drastically then cringed. “What is that smell?”

Rickie held his hands up. “Don’t look at me. Smelt it, dealt it dude.”

Irrked at Rickie’s remark, Jake moved his head to where the scent came from. He saw Carlos step into the hall leading to the dining area. Jake’s mouth dropped and he raised his rifle. “Carlos! Watch out!”

The Stasis gave it’s warning cry. Two heavy charging thumps of his feet and he swiped an unsuspecting Carlos up from where he stood. Using Carlos as his shield, gripping him by his head and chest, the Stasis carried him to the door. Shaking his head with a snarl, saliva dripping from his jaws, he glared at Jake who aimed at him and reached for the front door,



pulling it open, two by fours and all.

“Jake!” Cal cried out, watching the creature carry a screaming Carlos with him. “Do something.”

Jake, with one eye closed followed with his rifle high. “I can’t get a good shot.”

“Fuck that.” Quickly, without thought, Cal grabbed the revolver from the back of Jake’s belt and charged out into the snow after the beast.

Carlos, feeling the pressure of the beast’s hand to his forehead saw Cal. “No, Cal. No!”

She ran closer to the moving beast, extending her arms, fighting the snow that blocked her. She fired, once, twice, three times. All three shots slammed the Stasis in the forehead. All three shots failed to do anything but anger him.

With his furious bellow he twisted Carlos, snapping his neck loudly and dropping him. Stepping out, he knocked the gun from Cal’s hand, grabbed hold of her and hurled her through the air fifteen feet before she fell hard to the ground.

Jake, screaming out, opened fire at the creature as he tried to make it past him to reach a motionless Cal. The shooting of the beast stirred more than emotions. It stirred the sleeping wolves and they charged forth.

At the same time Jake began to fire, Rickie didn’t think. Racing outward, straight to the beast, he did his best baseball slide, gliding his small body through the open legs of the Stasis and landing at arms reach from Cal. He scooped her up and stood seeing the wall of wolves headed his way. Perhaps it was his size that allowed Rickie to carry Cal, easily by the beast, being missed by inches by his groping arms. He ran behind a shooting Jake, straight into the building.

Jake saw the wolves, so close, the Stasis before him looking as if he didn’t know where to go. When Jake heard the frightening sound, the sound of an empty chamber, he raced backwards into the building, and with everything he had he held the door closed.

He expected and prepared himself for the door to start to shake. It never happened. The wolves failed to pummel themselves to the building. They had their catch outside. The Stasis screamed, his cries grew faint, as if he were running. The occasionally yelping of the wolves told Jake, again, it would be back.

“Rickie.” Jake breathed heavily as he saw him lay Cal on the couch.



“How is she?”

“She’s fine. She’s coming to.”

Jake bolted the lock on the door. “Board this back up. The supplies are in the corner.” He walked quickly to the couch. “Thank you for what you did.”

Rickie didn’t know what to say, how to respond. He gave a half smile and walked past Jake to do what was requested of him.

“Cal.” Jake slid to his knee, dropping the rifle to the floor. “Hey.” He ran his hand down her wet face.

“Jake.” Cal tried to lift her head. “Is Carlos dead?”

“Yeah.” Jake closed his eyes and tilted his head. His frustration over what happened hitting him. “What were you thinking?” His voice raised. “Cal, you could have been killed. Don’t ever do something like that again. How can I protect you when you do stupid shit like that?”

“Don’t yell at me.” She closed her eyes.

“I’m sorry.” Jake kissed her. “God, my whole body shook when I saw him throw you. Does anything feel broken?”

Cal, eyes still closed, shook her head, covering her face with her hand.

“Come on.” Jake saw she was upset. “Let me get you back to the room.” Gently he tucked his arms under her and lifted her as he stood. “You tried your best. I’m proud of you.”

Cal rolled her body inward to him, burying her face in his chest. “You’re mad at me.”

“That too.” Jake walked with her. “But still proud.”

^^^

“Jake, really, I’m fine.” Cal swiped him away as she leaned against the bathroom sink. She stood, wearing only a pair of sweat pants and a bra.

“Will you let me judge please if you’re fine.” His hand ran down her side, touching with a firm gentleness.

“Why do you insist on playing doctor with me?”

“Call it a childhood fantasy.” He lifted her arm and snapped his eye sight at her when she moaned. “See.” He tried to rotate her shoulder but she grunted. “That was one hell of a fall you took.”

“I’m tough.”

“That you are.” He reached his hands up to her head probing his



fingers around.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking for lumps. None.” He kissed her. “You just scared the hell out of me today.”

“I thought you weren’t going to tell me when you were scared.”

“Telling you I’m scared over our circumstances is one thing. Telling you I’m scared about you, is another. Plus it adds brownie points for when you wonder if I’m a sensitive guy.”

Cal grabbed his hand, and kissed it. “Thank you so much for what you did for me today.”

“As much as I’d like to accept your gratitude. It would be wrong to do on this one. I can’t take the credit.”

Just as Cal’s mouth circled to form the word ‘who’, she got her answer before she asked it when Jake’s head notched back to Rickie’s calling as he entered next door.

“Sarge, all secure. Boarded up.” He yelled from the other room.

“Rickie saved my life?” Cal was shocked. “How?”

“I was shooting. Rickie just went out there. He was able to get to you, pick you up, get you past the beast all before the wolves hit. I was very . . .” He saw Cal walk out. “Impressed. Hey, where are you going? You’re half dressed.”

Cal smiled when she stepped into the room and looked upon an occupied Rickie. “Rickie.”

Rickie turned to the call. “Cal-babe . . .” He saw she was wearing only her bra, he covered his eyes. “I’m not peeking, I’m not peeking. I’ll just get . . .” He felt her pull down his hand and wrap her arms around him tightly. “Whoa. Is this appropriate?”

“Thank you so much.” She kissed his cheek. “Thank you for coming after me.”

“I had to. You’ve been awesome to me here.” He looked up to the clearing of the throat. “Sarge, it’s not what you think.” Rickie stepped away from Cal. “I wasn’t man handling the Cal-babe. She came on to me first.”

Jake stepped in between them, back to Rickie, he handed Cal a shirt. “Rickie close your eyes.” He helped a struggling Cal into her clothes. “O.K.” He fixed the bottom of her tee shirt. “Now you can hug him.” Jake turned to Rickie placing a proud firm grip to the back of the young man’s neck as he patted him on the shoulder. “You did great. I owe you.” Jake



stepped away, making room for a very willing Rickie to receive his embrace from a very appreciative Cal.

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Jake stared into Cal's overly red and glossy eyes as he neared his lips to hers. By the looks of her eyes, had he not known that she had been drinking, he would have sworn she sustained a massive head injury. He sniffed her mouth before he kissed her. "God Cal. How much did you drink?"

"I had a drink to ease the pain. At your orders, Major." She moved her lips to his he backed away.

"A drink Cal." Jake stood up. "You're loaded. Where's that bottle?" He found it. "Cal! Almost half this bottle is gone. I said one drink to help, not half a bottle to numb."

"Oh, Rickie had some."

"Rickie?" Jake placed down the bottle and sat on the bed next to her. "Rickie is under age. It is against the law to distribute alcohol to minors."

"Quit being so anal." She looked at Jake with question. "How come your not trying to take advantage of me?"

"Cal. I just don't when you're drunk."

Slurring a little in her words Cal stared up at him. "You're the only guy I have ever slept with that didn't want to have sex with me when I was drinking.."

"Cal, please. I would really appreciate you not bringing up your past sexual experiences. At this point in our relationship, it makes me uncomfortable, not to mention jealous."

"Relationship Jake? You mean as in how we relate to each other or as a couple?" Cal asked.

"I would hope . . ." He covered her up. " . . . as a couple. Now it's late. Get some sleep. I have to be on top of things."

Taking a shivering breath Cal sat up. "Jake? I'm really glad you want to be a couple with me." Cal spoke honestly through the courage of her bottle. "Cause I want to wake up next to you for the rest of my life." She, though drunk, saw a not-so-Jake look on his face. "Oh shit, I just scared the hell out of you."

"No. Shocked. It's just that you always imply that after the experiment,



there is no more us.” Jake pulled her into his chest. “You never talk about a future for us.”

“It’s not because I don’t want one.” Cal nuzzled in comfort on him. “It’s because I promised David after I get back, him and I would finally . . .” Cal closed her eyes. “. . . get married.”

Jake’s whole body dropped when he heard that. As his hand fell from her head, he felt her body slump. Cal had passed out. Laying her down, Jake stood from the bed. What he wouldn’t have given at that moment not to have what he just heard, be the final words Cal had spoken to him for the night. Unfortunately . . . they were.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada

January 2 - 10:00 A.M.

“Rickie . . .” Jake flung open the bathroom door. “Go away!”

“Sarge, I had this revelation.”

“Not now.” Jake glared at him. “I have to talk to Cal. Do not, unless you’re dying, knock on this door. Got that?” Jake slammed the door closed, and turned to Cal pointing at her. “You and I need to talk.”

“So you’ve said.” Cal winced her face. Her body was feeling the effects of the fall. Her head, the booze from the night before. “But could you do it quietly?”

Jake walked up to her. “No!” His voice, deep, abrupt and, of course, loud.

“Jake, please.” Cal sat on the bed. “What did you do? Wait until I got up, had my coffee, and showered, just so I could be fully awake to get yelled at.”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Cal reached for her coffee.

“You said something last night.”

“I said a lot of things last night. Do you mind being more specific?” She sipped.

Jake moved to the bed. “You told me last night that you and David are getting back together.”

“Oh, I did not.” Cal placed down the mug. “Now is that it?”

“Cal. You did. I said you never mentioned us having a future together, and you said it was because you promised David when you got back you’d marry him.”

“Oh.”

“Oh? Oh?” Jake’s voice grew. Are you engaged to the man still? Because I swore you told me you broke up.”

“We did. And . . .”

“You said you didn’t love him Cal.”

“No.” Cal held up her finger to silence him. “I said I didn’t love him



that way. But he still loves me. And he came to me before I left and we talked. He made sense. He talked about not being alone, our history together. And I promised I would give us another chance when I got back. I made that promise.”

“Break it.”

“Excuse me.”

“Break it. I earned that chance with you far more than David did.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

“I’m what?” Jake nearly fell to the bed. He was rearing for more of an argument.

“You’re right. I made that promise to not even thinking I’d meet anyone up here. David’s not the one I’ve slept with for the past five months. You are. I haven’t slept with him since before I came up here.”

“Yeah. Like almost a year before.”

“Sort of . . . I need an aspirin.” Cal stood up.

“What is sort of? I thought you guys broke up when Jesse died.”

“We did.” Cal opened up her desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of aspirin.

“When was the last time you with this guy you supposedly don’t love?”

“Before I came up here.” Cal placed the aspirin in her mouth and washed it down with her cooling coffee. She gagged when it got stuck in her throat.

“When before?”

“Jake.” Cal coughed. “I’m choking.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and faced him. “Can I be perfectly blunt with you right now?”

“Of course.”

“Good.” She set the mug down. “It’s none of your business.”

“You slept with him the night before you came here, didn’t you?”

“Jake please. And besides, I thought for sure it would be seven months before I had sex again.”

“You did.” He watched her, ‘oh well’ attitude as she re-sat. “Cal, am I going to have to deal with this man when we get back? Obviously you led him to believe you’d marry him.”

“No Jake. I’ll deal with David. And can we please drop this? Being together or not after this experiment will be dealt with later. Not now. You drive me crazy with this shit. You want things under your control at all



times. It drives you insane when you don't know exactly what's happening when."

"I'm pushing you aren't I?" Jake shook his head. "I am really sorry. I never meant to do that. I also apologize, Cal, for crossing the lines with your previous personal life. It was out of bounds. I won't bring it up again. What happened before me, is your business."

"God, Jake." Cal plopped sideways on the bed covering her head with a pillow.

Jake smiled at her and pulled away the pillow. He kissed her on the cheek. "I love you, you know that?"

Cal slowly raised herself up from her plopped down position. She stared at Jake. "That didn't sound rehearsed."

"It didn't?" Jake gave a gloating look. "See. I'm getting really good at this stuff, Cal. I just don't want you to make me stop doing it. I just assumed that you wouldn't make me stop."

"Not on purpose I wouldn't." She leaned closer to try to kiss him.

Bursting through the door came Rickie. Excited, he stood before Cal and Jake as if he were about to perform. "I had a Rickie revelation. None of us were thinking yesterday. You know, with Bigfoot knocking off Carlos and all. But . . ." Rickie placed his finger to his temple. "But how did Bigfoot get in here?"

Cal and Jake lost their ready to laugh at Rickie expressions. They turned serious when they turned their complete attention to him.

"Didn't think of that? The Rickie-Miester did. He came from the dining area. How? No windows, or door. I thought, what about the roof? But . . . he would have had to sneak by us in the gathering room. We would have smelled him. So all that leads to the big master question, how did he get in?"

Jake could have kicked himself for not even letting that be foremost on his mind. "Excellent thinking, Rickie. So tell me. How did he get in here?"

"I don't know." Rickie shrugged. "I'm asking you."

Jake jumped to his feet, groaning loudly and rubbing his hand down his face. "All right. Think. If he didn't come through the door, and he didn't break any walls or windows. And he certainly didn't come from the roof. Where . . ." With a bright look of revelation, Jake grinned.



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"If he's coming from below, he had to come in here." Jake stormed into the dining area and turned his rifle upside down. With every step he took he tapped the butt of the rifle on the floor. He listened to the solid sound all the way around the room. Two feet before the far corner, he heard it. The empty hollow sound of his tapping rifle against the floor. His eyes lit up as he raised them to Cal and Rickie. "Bingo." With almost struggling words, Jake ran his fingers along the crease in the floor. "There has got to be a way to open this."

"Sarge, what about this button?"

Jake looked up. "What button Rickie?"

"This one right here, behind the fridge." Rickie pointed. "Can I press it Sarge, can I?"

"Be my guest." Jake held his hand out.

"Cool." Rickie dramatically, while singing, pressed the button.

Jake, expecting nothing, was shocked when a four by four section of the floor by his feet slid silently open. "Oh shit." Up raised another floor. "Rickie, come on." Jake grabbed a hold of Cal's hand and they, with Rickie stood on the just raised floor. It soon began to lower. "Rickie, how did you find that button?"

"I learned from the master. Anyone who's ever watched Scooby Doo will tell you there's always a secret lever or button somewhere."

As they lowered down ten feet, the floor, that now became their ceiling, closed, and a red emergency-type lighting came on just as they stopped in front of a silver door.

"Be ready, Cal." Jake raised his weapon as the door slid open. Immediately they were smacked with the most rotten of smells.

Cal lost control, exclaiming her disgust loudly through grunts and gags. "Oh shit."

Jake ignored the smell, he and Rickie stepped off the lift. "Cal, come on."

"It smells, Jake."

"Quit being so goddamn female and move." Jake cased the room up and down, it was almost a mirror image of the dining area above them. "What is this place?"

"Sarge, its like the downstairs apartment. You think this is wear



Bigfoot lives?”

Jake picked up a CD case. “Not unless he likes the Gin Blossoms.” He tossed it down and noticed Cal still lagging behind. “What is up with you? We have to move, it may be here.”

“God Jake.” Cal leaned on the counter. “I think I’m gonna throw up.”

“You wouldn’t be like this if you weren’t such an alcoholic.”

“Me? You are such an asshole.”

“Yeah I am.” He motioned his rifle at her. “Back me up or go back up.”

“Fine.” Cal turned and headed back to the lift that brought them down.

“No you don’t.” Jake leaned back, snatching her by her arm.

“Sarge, you want me to go ahead first?” Rickie asked.

“Sure, Rickie go ahead.” Jake nodded. “Lead the way.”

Rickie stepped ahead of Jake. “It’s so much like upstairs, I know my way around.”

Cal’s mouth watered and so did her eyes. “Doesn’t this smell bother you?”

Jake turned back to her. “Breathe through your mouth, not your nose.”

“No, then I’ll taste it.”

Rickie began to pick up his decoy pace. “I’m heading to the gathering room. The smell is getting . . . whoa.”

“What’s wrong?” Jake called to him, keeping his distance behind.

“Oh gross.” Rickie yelled. “There’s like Bigfoot phlegm all over the floor. Made me slip. Be careful, it’s slippery.” Rickie walked further. “Whoa.”

“More Bigfoot phlegm?” Jake asked sarcastically.

“Worse.” Rickie answered. “More like, Bigfoot victims.”

Jake mouthed the words questionably to Cal ‘victims?’ and ran after Rickie. He slid almost all the way down the hallway on the Stasis saliva drippings that seemed to make the floor feel like ice. “Holy fuck!” Jake grabbed the door way stopping himself from going in any further.

Cal made it just to Jake’s back. She saw what was in the room. With a flip of her stomach, she handed Jake the rifle, and sped back to the dining area.

Rickie stood center of the room. Walls, once white, were splattered and dripping with dried blood. Slumped on the first table was the body of a



Hawk. Only his body, the head had been tossed like it was trash And Carl his body stayed pinned to the wall with the four legs of a wooden chair. One of the legs held him through his mouth.

Jake walked into the room slowly. "They've been watching us." Grabbing the slumping body by the collar, Jake lifted his shoulders to the folder that laid under his chest. He took the folder and dropped the body with a thump. "These are notes they were . . ." Jake paused to read. "Were going to fax." His head jilted around. He saw the two phones, the fax machine, all busted up. "They had communication with the center. They've been here the . . ." He watched Cal walk into the room. "Feeling better?"

Cal nodded. "What is this Jake?"

"According to these notes." Jake held up the folder. "A control center."

Rickie had an echo sound to him as he called out. "Sarge?" He raced back in the room. "It's a tunnel. A deep tunnel. It has to go out there. This has to be where he gets in."

Jake moved to the doorway he looked down the long, dark, dirty corridor. He cased the archway up and down. "Using, Rickie thinking . . ." His hands ran around. "Yes . . . step back." He pulled Rickie from the tunnel. With a smile, Jake watched a thick steel door slide closed, and he pounded his fist on it. "He's not getting in this way again."

A look of panic hit Rickie as his head shifted about. "Shit, Sarge, what if he's in here with us?"

Very calmly Cal answered him. "He's not." She stood looking at the monitors. "Look." She pointed up waiting for Jake and Rickie to stand behind her. "He's in the storage building. Is he sleeping?"

"Looks that way." Jake checked out all of the monitors. "Look at the wolves. Look how many." He shook his head. "O.K., let's load up our arms with all the files and papers we can. Grab everything. Rickie . . ." Jake pointed. "Start over there. Cal, grab what's on this work station. I'll hit that file cabinet."

"Sarge?" Rickie walked to his area. "The bloody stuff too?"

"Everything."

"Cool." Rickie nodded.

"And, Rickie? Don't let me forget to grab that Gin Blossoms CD."

Cal couldn't believe the way Jake and Rickie were reacting. Her stomach still flipped around, unfortunately there was nothing left in it to



bring back up. With disgust and using only two of her fingers, she began to pick up items from the table. She'd cringe, then continue on.

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Almost mesmerized, Cal laid on her bed next to Jake. A folder opened across her lap, she lifted one page at time. "So much information."

"Dudes, this is weird." Rickie stood from his Indian seated position on the floor. "Was it just me, or were we like all under the impression this was an experiment." He handed Cal a folder. "Check out the title."

Cal read the label. "Holding Event-Game status?" She slowly opened it. "Holy shit. It's a participant status sheet. Look at this, Jake. Each one of us are ranked. An investor is listed next to us. It's definitely a process of elimination."

Jake peered to see what she showed him then returned to his own folder. "Anything else is in there?"

"It's mostly faxes. Copies of correspondence." She moved her legs over to make room for Rickie to sit on the edge of the bed. "Nothing . . . wait. An investors sheet. Oh, wow . . . These guys are into the experiment for two million dollars each. Check this out." She handed Jake the sheet of paper.

Jake looked at it and handed it back to Cal. "Their investment in . . . the game. Eight investors, two million each. Half the institute, the other half makes up an eight million dollar poll."

Cal didn't seem phased. "No wonder they were doing all this shit to us. Someone has to win. One person wants that poll. It figures."

Jake was surprised. "This doesn't bother you."

"No, why should it?" Cal shrugged. "All of us joined this project of our own free will. No one forced us into this, and if you recall they were rather vague. They said it was an isolation experiment. Well, it is. So you have a few millionaires making some money off of it. I think it's kind of cool."

"Cool?" Jake asked.

"Sure. You should too. I love the thrill of competition. It's just so ironic that the whole entire time I've been here, I've unknowingly been a player in a game. But now . . ." Cal laid down her folder. "I know. And, I'm not going to lose. None of us are."



Jake rummaged through the folder. “It just makes me wonder. They want one just one of us to win. How much are they going to throw at us, to ensure that?”

“Not enough.” Cal said. “I think this Griff-thing slash Bigfoot is their ace in the hole. If we can bring it down, they’re gonna be shit out of luck.”

“We’ll be shit out of luck if we can’t figure out how to do it. It has to be . . .” Almost in excitement, Jake jumped from the bed. “Yes.” He spoke, grinned and paced around reading. “Yes.”

About the fourth or fifth ‘yes’ Cal had enough. “What!”

Jake smiled broadly and cocky. “It appears, Bigfoot, as Rickie calls it, the beast as you call it, and the thing, as I hate calling it, is actually named, The Stasis. The one thing I have always taught my men is . . . to beat your enemy, you must know your enemy. Guess what?” He held up the folder. “We now know our enemy. He’s going down.”

Caldwell Research Institute  
January 2 - 5:30 P.M.

He was ready to go home for the evening, especially after Dr. Jefferson--sitting rather slumped in his leather chair--watched the tape, for the fourth time. It was time to call it quits for the day.

The tape. Stan was so upset when he brought it up. Rightfully so. Dr. Jefferson expected the information that he reviewed on that tape, but he didn't want to hear it. They hadn't heard from the controllers in days, that told him something was wrong. But there wasn't any way of knowing. How could there be?

Just one more time, he thought as he pressed rewind and waited until he heard the machine stop. One more time. Pressing play, Dr. Jefferson sat up to watch the scene he had reviewed over and over again. The scene that gave him his answers. Jake leaning over Cal's desk writing something, occasionally holding up one finger to the camera as if to say 'wait.'

Then Jake stood, he walked slowly to the camera, closed his mouth and widened his eyes sadly. Then Jake held up a note, letting the camera focus in on it. It was his message to those he knew were watching. His message that said: *Thought you'd like to know. Your people are dead.*



## CHAPTER FORTY

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada  
January 4 - 12:00 P.M.

Cal jumped from her seat as soon as Jake and Rickie walked into the room. "I take it you didn't have any luck. You couldn't find it?"

"Oh, we found it all right." Jake threw his shotgun on the bed. "Destroyed. So . . . the Anti-regeneration serum is out."

"What now?" Cal, disappointed sat on the bed. "He's been out for seventy-two hours. We're at our window of opportunity with him. It's now or never to destroy him, Jake."

"I know this." Jake, frustrated, rubbed his face. "We have a couple options. Now we can't draw him in so he could have prolonged exposure to the indoors. We don't have the ammo left to do that."

"We don't need the storage," Cal suggested. "Why don't we burn it down, the heat will . . ."

"No." Jake shook his head. "We know now he's close to waking up because that shell is gone. If he wakes and gets out, we're screwed. Rickie . . . Rickie has an idea . . ." Jake turned to Rickie. "Do the honors."

"O.K." Rickie shifted his weight from one leg to another. "We found tranquilizers. The notes said that it can knock him out for two weeks. Sarge and I were talking. We say, right now while he's not shelled, we can hit his skin. We sneak into storage, inject him with a double dose of the shit, then sever that brain stem."

Cal liked the suggestion but had her doubts. "What if he wakes up while you're trying it?"

"That could be a problem," Jake answered. "I read over the controller's notes. Our timing has to be impeccable if not better. If the thing wakes up before the tranquilizer hits him, and if we cause any amount of damage to him without killing him, he'll cocoon again. And the problem is, the sedation prolongs the cocooning. So we'll have no idea . . . again, unless we watch day and night."

"There really isn't a choice, is there?" Cal asked. "We don't have enough defensively to sustain another attack with him. It really is now or





never.”

“It’s now, Cal,” Jake said with a certain amount of apprehensiveness. “It’s now.”

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“Cal-babe, you look totally bitchin with that scarf.” Rickie gave a thumbs up to her.

Cal smiled at him with her eyes, she stood before the wall of monitors, a black scarf wrapped tightly around her nose and mouth. “Thanks, Rickie.” She spoke muffled.

“She looks ridiculous.” Jake pulled down the scarf and kissed her, then placed it back around her nose. “You know the plan. Watch us. If by chance we run into trouble that we can’t get out of, disable the elevator lift to the storage, that will stop him from coming down. Then you secure this steel door. When the Stasis goes out, you hit the homing device for those wolves. Got that? That’s the plan. If something happens to us. The Stasis will be out for a while, you’ll have enough time to go above, get what you need and barricade yourself down here for the rest of the project. Dead bodies and all.” Jake saw that she wasn’t paying that much attention.

Cal faced him, pulling down the scarf. “You think I’m going to leave you up there in trouble. Fuck that. I’m coming up after you.”

“No, you won’t.” Jake grabbed hold of her shoulders. “You have to finish this project. You know why you came here in the first place. If we’re trapped and there’s no way for us to get away. Don’t try to be a hero. Be alive. Aside from that. Nothing’s going to happen. We’ll be back in a few minutes . . . with his head.” Checking his revolver, the only weapon he would bring, he kissed Cal, then replaced her scarf.

“Jake . . . Rickie.” She called as they stepped into the tunnels. “Be careful.”

“Cal-babe, we rule. Sarge says this is step one to being the cool Ranger.”

“Sarge is going to ruin you, Rickie.”

With a grunting look, Jake tugged Rickie’s arm and they descended into the tunnel.

Voices were kept low, and not armed with much they felt confident in their mission.



“Sarge.” Rickie checked out his tranquilizer injection gun. “Will he feel this.?”

“Doubtful. Just a pinch.” Jake could see the elevator ahead. “Rickie.” He stopped walking. “Remember what I told you. If I get into trouble, you get the hell out. Right?”

“Right, Sarge.”

“Make me a promise. Promise that if something should happen to me, you’ll do everything you can to make sure Cal makes it through this experiment . . . and after. You watch out for her then, too.”

“I promise, Sarge. Only on one condition. You make me the same promise.”

“With everything I am.” Jake spoke with confidence, leading Rickie once again to the lift. “Ready?” he stepped on the lift.

“Aye, Aye Sarge.”

Jake cringed. They began to rise and when the floor of the storage building came into view, so did the stench of The Stasis. As they rose all the way and stepped forward, they saw him, laying atop of a table, his arms crossed against his stomach. “He must know when he’s going to cocoon.” Jake spoke softly walking without noise to The Stasis.

“Yeah, he finds a place to snooze.”

“He’s out.” Jake circled the body. “Get your injection gun ready. You do that thigh, I’ll do the other.”

“Right against his fur?” Rickie’s hand shook as he pointed.

“Directly.” Jake took a firm hold of Rickie’s hand and lowered it to The Stasis, he gave a comforting look to Rickie. “On three.” Jake pressed his injection gun to the skin. “One, two, three.” A slight hissing noise, and simultaneously they injected the beast. They both shifted their heads for signs of his waking up. Nothing. “We’re in. Rickie, go by the elevator and wait.” He whispered his order, and waited for Rickie to stand by the lift. “Do you see the button that raises it?”

“Got it.” Rickie held his finger near it. “Press it now?”

Jake nodded to him, then reached behind his back. He pulled out the small ax. He knew his aim had to be right, his strength couldn’t be weak, and he had one single moment. Lowering the ax to his destination point, Jake raised his arms up readying himself to strike down.

With a growl the Stasis opened his eyes, reached up, knocked the ax to the floor and gripped Jake by the throat.



“Sarge!”

Jake felt his body lift as the beast began to rise from the table. “Rickie . . .” With Choking words he called to him as he used his strength to kick out his legs and flip over the table the Stasis was still on. It rolled to the floor and Jake ran to the lift, grabbing the ax from the floor as he did. “Get on.” He pulled Rickie to him, firing at the Stasis as it charged at them.

Just as the lift started to lower, The Stasis reached out, grabbing hold of Rickie.

Rickie screamed loudly as it began to pull him from the elevator

Knowing the revolver was empty and the elevator went no where, Jake took the ax and swiftly swung down with force, taking off the arm that snatched Rickie by the throat. As if the Stasis was holding the elevator back, as soon as the forearm fell to the floor, the elevator lowered.

Cal let out a deep breath as she watched the monitor and the beast stood alone. It swung its arm about, blood shooting from it. It didn’t die, it didn’t go down from the sedation, but . . . it didn’t kill Jake or Rickie either.

“What’s it doing?” Jake called as he and Rickie ran in, securing the steel door.

“Being pissed off.” Cal indicated. “And destroying the elevator lift. Look at it.”

Like he was mad at the world, The Stasis stomped down over and over until sparks and smoke emerged. He raised his arms up and opened his mouth crying out.

“Why didn’t he follow you two?” Cal asked.

“He knows he’s going to cocoon.” Jake answered. “And the tunnels are warm, if he collapses down here, he’ll die.”

“Bigfoot’s got brains.” Rickie stated. “He’s making sure we can’t go up while he sleeps, and knows we won’t go out with the wolves.”

Jake placed both his hands on Rickie’s shoulders and turned him to face him. “Are you all right? I didn’t ask you.”

“Fine, Sarge, thanks for asking. You?”

“Fine.” Jake laughed and rubbed his head. “Let’s go back up. We now have to figure a way now out of this mess we created.”



CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
January 28 - 5:00 P.M.

Rickie looked exhausted as he emerged from the dining area hallway. His eyes were red, his shoulder's slumped and he yawn continuously. "All right." He stretched his arms out. "Cal-babe, Sarge, your shift now."

Jake turned his head to him, he removed Cal's legs that swung over his as they sat on the couch. "Rickie, you still have another hour to go."

"I know, Sarge, but like, I'm falling asleep down there."

Jake stood up. "You didn't fall asleep did you?" He asked harshly.

"Jake, come on." Cal rose up holding onto his arm. "The Stasis is still in a shell. Leave him alone."

"Cal, this is the only way we can survive this. Watching him down there and waiting for him to step out so we can sick the wolves on him is the only way we're safe. All it would take is ten seconds and we're done. The thing will get out and in here."

Cal shook her head giving Rickie a look that said as much as 'ignore Jake.' "Come on Jake, it's our turn to watch the sleeping beast." She pulled at him.

Jake slid his hand down and clutched Cal's. "And, young man, you are supposed to wait until we come down and relieve you."

"Yeah, yeah, Sarge. I'm going to bed. And . . . I'd like to add, I do not appreciate you two using my shift time as your designated sex time. It puts pressure on me knowing I have to play Rickie the Condom man and protect you." He headed to the other hallway. "You don't think I know. You may cover the camera but you've been forgetting about the microphone."

Jake tried to ignore him and he walked with Cal. Almost in dining area they stopped and so did Rickie, when all three of them heard it. Five loud thumps on the side of the building.

Jake flew into the gathering room. "What the hell was that? Rickie was that you?"

Rickie shook his head. "Sounds like when you and Cal used to climb on the . . ." His eyes looked up when they heard it.



“Shit!” Jake ran past Rickie down the hall and to his room. They weren’t expecting it. They had kept the Stasis at bay for nearly a month and they stopped worrying about weapons. With speed Jake flew out of his room, shotgun in hand. The hatch to the roof clamored and the Stasis dropped into the hallway with a bellow.

Jake fired once trying to hold him back as he walked as quickly as he could backwards. “Cal.” He blindly made it to the gathering room. “Down stairs, you know what to do.”

Trying not to panic, Cal darted backwards to the dining area. She knew she had to go down and wait until she saw Jake bait him out.

“Rickie!” Jake motioned his head to the door, then fired again at the beast. He only had five more shells in the gun.

Rickie charged to the door, lifted the pry bar that sat by it and opened it up. “Hurry, Sarge.”

Jake felt in his gut he didn’t have the beast’s attention. He watched as the Stasis’ eyes kept shifting to Rickie. Jake knew who the beast wanted when, with a swing outward, the Stasis knocked Jake to the ground.

He felt the force of his fall on his left shoulder as he hit the floor and the gun fired off on its own. In a race against the slow moving beast, Jake picked himself up and stormed with all of his strength at the beast just as he lunged, arms outward at Rickie. Jake fired as he ran, leaping out as the beast’s clawed hands surged for Rickie. In a hard pummel Jake landed on the back of the Stasis and force knocked both of them rolling into the high piling snow.

Cal, the homing device, the homing device, was all that ran through Jake’s mind as he laid, stunned on the back of the Stasis. He felt the vibration, he heard the rumble. The signal was off and the wolves began their decent.

Knowing he had to get to cover, Jake jumped up, firing one more shot at the head of the beast and he ran backwards into the building slamming the door. “Yes.” He shouted holding the door back, and counting to twenty. Twenty seconds was all it would take and the beast would go down, again, at the jaws of the wolves. “Yes, Rickie, close call.” Jake pounded his fist on the door still holding it closed with his weight. Holding it closed until he heard the sound of the snarling fangs clutching into the flesh of the Stasis. Jake waited . . . he heard it. “Oh, man.” He started to laugh. “I bet that thing feels like Wile E. Coyote every time we do that to him. Huh, Rickie? You’re the cartoon guy.” Jake, relieved to know they had secured



themselves again, turned around. The smile dropped from his face. His heart sunk when he saw Rickie, struggling to his feet, holding to his stomach, blood pouring profusely from a wound Jake did not know he sustained. "Oh God."

"Sarge?" Rickie looked down to his hand, and at the blood. An immediate frightened look hit him. "Sarge, help me." To his knees he fell, then face first to the floor. His body rolled immediately into a fetal position.

"No." Dropping his shotgun, Jake slid down to help the trembling young man. "No." He rolled Rickie over, placing his hand under his head. "I'm sorry, Rickie. I'm sorry." Jake's other hand laid tightly to his bleeding wound.

"It's bad, huh, Sarge."

Jake lifted his hand to look. He could see through the seeping blood that the Stasis has clawed his way into Rickie's gut. Jake clenched his jaws tightly and kept pressure on Rickie. He didn't answer his question. He felt helpless. He thought he was fast enough and Rickie was fine.

"Jake, the wolves . . ." Cal's words slowed as *she* did, when she ran into the gathering room. Seeing Jake over Rickie in a growing pool of blood made her cry out in horrific shock. "No! Rickie!" She raced over, throwing herself on the floor. "This didn't happen. Not to you." She lifted up his head placing it on her lap. "Jake, help him. Help him Jake please."

"Cal, I . . ." Jake looked down at his wound. The frustration, the sadness he felt could all be seen in his actions. He raised his shaking hands clenched in a fist to his face, shaking his head, not wanting to speak.

Rickie started to cough, a trickle of blood came from his mouth with each of his chokes. "Cal-babe. I guess I'm not winning after all, huh?" He spoke weakly.

"Rickie, Shh." She lifted his thin body more to her, cradling him in her arms. "It'll be all right." She pressed her lips to his cheek, then wiped her hand across his face.

"No, Cal-babe. It's not." Rickie closed his eyes slowly, then opened them. He felt comfort laying there seeing Jake, feeling Cal. "That's O.K. You know what?" He took a long breath. "I'm not afraid."

"You'll be fine, Rickie." Cal held him almost rocking him, knowing that her words were far from the truth. She knew the truth, she saw it in Jake's eyes. "Jake is gonna fix you, like he did John and me. You'll see. Just hold on. Jake, go get the . . ."



Rickie raised his hand to her mouth. “No. He can’t. He tried though. He did good.” Rickie fragily raised up his thumb. “Guys, you have to beat this for me.”

Jake’s hand ran down Rickie’s face. “We will. All of us.”

Rickie smiled. “See, you don’t lie well. That’s O.K.” He reached up and pulled at Jake. “Remember the promise you made me. Remember that promise . . . Major Graison.”

It took everything Jake had to stay in control at that moment. He looked into Rickie’s eyes trying to hide what he felt. “I will.” Lifting his hand to Cal, and shaking his head, Jake stood up. He ran his hand over his hair as he turned his back to a scene that was just too hard for him to face.

“Cal-babe.” Rickie looked at her. “You did so much for me. I’m gonna do something for you.”

“What’s that, Rickie?” A tear fell from her face landing on Rickie.

“When I see your kid . . . I’ll tell her you said hi.”

Cal kissed him crying harder. “You take care of her for me, Rickie, you watch her.”

“Hey, I rule. And I’ll let her know your doing good. You have the Major to watch you.” Rickie’s eyes closed. “She’ll be glad to know that.” His head tilted and he became silent. “She’ll be . . . glad.”

“Don’t you do this, Rickie.” Cal pulled him into her, burying his head in her chest. “You’ve given me back so much that I lost. Don’t take it away from me again. Don’t. Please . . . don’t.”

Jake’s heart broke as he listened to Cal cry. He closed his eyes tightly trying to block it all out. But he couldn’t. Jake knew, the moment he heard Cal’s cries transform into heart pulling sobs, that it was over. Rickie was gone.

^^^

There were no words spoken as they wrapped Rickie’s body tightly in a sheet and placed it with Rickie’s old room. The cold air helped slow the decomposition. Sadly they left Rickie there, closing the door behind them.

Jake stood in the bathroom doorway watching Cal undress. Slow, she peeled the bloodied clothing from her, staring at them--each article she removed--with her tear streaked face. He wanted to take it all away from



her, the pain she felt. The hurt. Jake wanted to take it all away from himself. He had faced death before. He had watched men die. But never had any of it ever hit Jake the way that Rickie's death did. Yet, he knew his sadness, his hurt, had to be second in importance. Cal had to be first. He had to be for her what no one had ever been for her--strong enough.

He walked into the bathroom, seeing Cal fight back the tears that seemed to come anyway. He slid his hand across her cheek to the back of her neck. "I'm so sorry." Gently he pulled her into him.

Cal buried herself in Jake, letting her sadness momentarily get lost in his strong hold. Crying the last of the tears that could flow, over a boy, a mere boy, whom she had grown so close to.

They stood for the longest time in that bathroom, holding on, coming to the realization that they were alone. Alone to battle the elements, to face what would be thrown to them, to finish the experiment. Alone except for . . . The Stasis.

THE FINAL STAND



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
February 1 - 2:10 P.M.

“Cal, it’s an option I really want you to think about before you say no.”

“I don’t need to think about it.” She stared up at the monitor watching the sleeping Stasis.

“It won’t be that bad. Rickie and I cleaned this place up. I think . . .”

“No, Jake.” Cal turned her chair to face him. “I will not hide. And that’s exactly what you want me to do. *You* don’t want to hide down here until help arrives, and don’t tell me that you do.”

“I don’t.” Jake shook his head. “There is nothing more that I want than to finish this thing swinging. I want to fight this thing to the end. But realistically we have ten shells and nine bullets for my revolver. That’s hardly enough to keep our heads above water.”

“Then what we’ll do is pack up all our stuff. Have it on stand by, and, if needed, then we’ll head down here. But only when we see no other option. Agree?” She rocked some in the swivel chair, giving hatred glares to the beast she watched. “I just really wished we had the power to end this thing with a bang.”

“I know what you mean.” He rubbed her shoulders. “Bring them down for once, instead of them bringing down us. Give the Iso-Stasis an ending they have never seen. You and me. And if we had the supplies we could do it too. We’re one hell of a team you and I.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“That we are. Unfortunately we’re a team without a defense. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“You’re right. It’s not like we can pick up the phone and call for more supplies. Of course, if the phones weren’t crushed I could call and have the shit we need here in a heartbeat. Hey, maybe if I went out wandering I can find one of those blue mail boxes and we’ll send a letter for help.”

Quickly, Cal turned her chair and stood up. “Repeat that.”

“You mean finding a blue box and mailing a letter?”



“Exactly.” Cal grabbed his face excitedly and kissed him. “We’ll mail a letter.”

“Cal?” Jake removed her hands from his face. “A letter. Honey, I wasn’t serious.”

“I am.” Cal began to race from the room. “Stay here and watch the Stasis. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you . . .” Jake sat in her chair. “Going.”

“O.K.” Cal came flying back, tucked under her arm, John’s laptop. “I cannot believe I didn’t think of this.” She laid it on the counter, plugged it in, lifted the lid. As it booted up she audibly begged. “Please. Please let it be loaded.”

“What are you talking about?”

“A browser. Internet.” Cal nodded assuredly. “Yes.” She clenched her fist. “He has one. You said you want to send a letter right? We are.” She searched under the counter. “Phone jack, phone jack.” As she stood up she pulled the grey chord that no longer had a phone attached to it, she connected it to the computer. “We are going to send email. Now who is it that you think will help us out?”

“Chuck, he could fly . . . how are we getting a letter to Chuck.”

“Do you live in the middle ages? I told you email.” Her hands worked, typing, moving. “O.K., I have my account loaded. Now to see if we can get a dial tone.” Literally holding her breath, Cal clicked on ‘connect’. She giggled like an excited school. “We have a dial tone. We can do it.”

“Do what?”

“God, Jake.” She shook her head. “All right, I suppose asking for chuck’s email address would be inane?”

“I live four houses from him and I don’t know *that* address.”

“Well what about your computer, or one at your work?”

“Cal.” Jake shook his head. “I am completely computer illiterate. Hell, I have a fax machine in my office I don’t know how to use. My secretary gets so irked at me.”

“A secretary? Is she cute?”

“Yes Cal. He’s real cute.” Jake rolled his eyes and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Is there anyone else.”

“Let me think.” Cal folded her hands in prayer, bringing them to her



nose. "I know. Joyce. She should check today, or tomorrow. She never goes more than a few days."

"A few days isn't bad."

Jake pulled out a chair next to her. "So you mail Joyce, she gets a hold of Chuck?"

"Exactly." Cal started to type. "Let me open it first . . . *Joyce. It's me. I'm still here. The experiments gone bad. Two of us are left and we need help. Supplies are needed. You must contact a . . .*" Cal stopped reading what she wrote and looked to Jake. "What's Chuck's full name?"

"Captain Charles Burgett."

" . . . *Captain Charles Burgett at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Must tell him Major Jacob Graison . . .* Jake what do we need?"

"Tell him, Major Graison says to play me Bach." He listened to Cal type. "Chuck will know exactly what that means and that should tell him what we need. Also, Cal, put down this. Approximately 50 miles, 'N' 'NW' Church Hill Manitoba."

Cal's finger pressed drastically in the last key she struck. "Now let's just hope this works." She filled in the address information and pointed the arrow to send. "Ready?" Cal took a deep breath, holding it until she knew she watched the indicator tell her the mail had been sent. "Done." her head dropped in relief.

"Done?" Jake was surprised.

"Done. It will be there whenever she opens her email."

"Now let's hope Chuck can get to us." Jake slid down some in the chair. "Email is amazing."

"It's old news. You are really going to have to learn computers if you are gonna hang with me."

"No I don't."

Cal smiled at him, resting her hand on his. She knew they had strayed their attention from the Stasis long enough. It was time to watch again. Watch and wait.



New Eagle, PA
February 1 - 6:30 P.M.

Not that Peter wasn't a fulfilling boyfriend for Joyce, he was, just a bit boring at times. Joyce really didn't need or want another man in her life, at least not physically. But there was just something about 'Herbie322' that made her day. His daily email messages of hope, smiles, and erotica were just what she needed. In fact, Joyce raced home everyday after work to get to her email.

Telling the boys pizza would be ordered as soon as she was off of line, Joyce hurried to her computer that was already booted up, courtesy of her youngest son.

The screaming modem connection always made her happy, and it was her sign to light up a cigarette. The indicator told her she had seven new messages and Joyce squirmed with delight. She opened her 'inbox' and visually scanned the senders.

Aunt Alice, Marcia, Free porno site, some guy names John and as soon as she smiled at the message from EHrbie322, Joyce's heart sunk when here eyes shifted up to the letter from John. She knew it wasn't a response to her lonely heart ad, when written in the subject line, in all caps, were the words: CAL NEEDS HELP.

Praying it was a joke, but knowing it wasn't, Joyce opened up the email. Worse than before her heart beat in desperate thumps, she printed the email, disconnected the line, and picked up the phone. There was no doubt what she had to do, no hesitation, she had to Cal Peter to make arrangements to find this Capt. Burgett at any cost.



CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
February 2 - 5:00 A.M.

His long index fingers which met together to form a triangle, pressed firmly just beneath his bottom lip. Jake leaned back in the chair eyes peeled to the monitor with The Stasis. Jake hadn't moved, not in hours, an occasional blink, or the slow moistening of his lips, was the only movement Jake made. His stare was full of hatred for the thing, full of determination. His mind was full of thoughts that he could not share with Cal.

He thought a lot as he watched the monitor, his mind never drifting so far that he wouldn't notice even the slightest twitch of the thing. He thought about the email thing that Cal did. Did Joyce actually get the message for help? Would she seek out Chuck?

Chuck would do all in his power to help, Jake was certain of that. He also knew that Coronal Roberts would do the same. Remembering his last conversation with the Coronal where he told Jake if he ran into trouble, do what he could to get word to him, gave him reassurance. Jake told *these* things to Cal. He also told her some of the things that he expected them to air drop off. Things the message 'play me some Bach' told Chuck he needed. What Jake failed to tell Cal, was that since the letter was sent, and all the time that had passed since, Jake had hoped in his heart for something other than just supplies. Jake hoped that the helicopter that Chuck would have to use would not simply make an over pass, but perhaps see Jake on the roof and lower down. Lower down so Jake could give them Cal.

Cal had to go. For as much as he wanted her by his side, he wanted her safe. With four weeks left to go in the experiment, and the unknowing circumstances that still lay ahead for them, Jake wanted to take no chances. If the money was important to Cal, he'd give her his. Anything it took to have her still be alive come March 4th. It wasn't that Cal was an anchor around his neck. Cal was his equal, someone whom he needed as much as she needed him. He wouldn't had made it as far without her, nor she without him. But more important to Jake than having her there as the strong physical support she was, was Cal being far away and safe. If Jake



was to fail in emerging from the experiment alive, so be it. He would rather go down alone, than go down leaving Cal having to fend for herself, or worse, having to watch Cal die. Jake wouldn't have that. And he knew he was going to do everything in his power to ensure that the woman he loved, the woman he'd die for, would be far away from the Iso-Stasis experiment as soon as possible.

In the quiet room, speaking in a whisper, and letting her hand slip across his shoulder as a warning not to startle him, Cal leaned her lips in. "Hey, Major."

Not moving, Jake grabbed her hand bringing it to his mouth. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Some." Cal rested her chin on his shoulder. "Go lay down now, I'll take over the watch."

"No. He'll wake soon. I want to be ready."

"I think I can handle a simple task of hitting the homing device. I did four times last month."

"I'd rather not miss it."

"Why?" Cal pulled up a chair and sat next to him. "Jake I need you to be strong for me. You can't do that if you're tired."

He didn't respond. He never took his view from the screen.

"Jake what is it?"

Jake shook his head and took a deep breath. "How are you doing?"

"A little better. And how are *you* doing?"

"I'm doing. And I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"About Rickie?"

"How can you not think of Rickie." He ran his hand down his face. "No matter what crosses your mind, Rickie is there."

Cal scooted her chair closer, laying her head against him. "I know his death affected you Jake. You worry me. You haven't said anything."

Still keeping his eyes forward, Jake raised his hand placing it on her head. "I have no intentions of saying anything either. Cal, it really hurt me when I saw how badly it affected you. You needed me to be strong. The last thing you need is to be worrying about how I feel. I'll be fine."

"Oh, Jake." Cal shook her head. "We both grew so fond of Rickie together. Talk to me Jake."

"I'd really rather not. Not yet." Jake swallowed, trying to hide his emotions.



“I understand.” Cal folded her hands on the table. “I miss him. I really miss him.”

“I do too.” He laid his hand on hers. “It’s so fucked up what happened to him. I won’t be satisfied until this thing is dead.”

“Me neither.” Cal noticed how tired he looked. “Jake, please try to get some sleep. Please. The cot is in here.” She touched his chin. “I will call you if I see him scratch. Just lay down . . . for me?”

“Promise you’ll call me?”

“I promise.”

“All right.” Sliding his chair back, Jake stood up. “Give me a couple hours.” He kissed her firmly on the cheek. Before he stepped back, away from Cal, he took one more look at her. He knew rest would be impossible. His thoughts of her, fears and concerns, would do what they have been doing, especially the past few nights. They’d slip into his dreams, magnifying what he felt. Rest for Jake would never happen, as long as the Stasis was still alive.

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
February 2 - 8:00 A.M.

A part of Joyce wished she would have gotten an earlier start, but the other part told her, how far would she get arriving at Fort Bragg at the crack of dawn. It was a long drive, especially alone. Stopping several times to devour large coffees, then stopping more to expel them. All of it added more time, time Joyce did not want to risk. She was grateful that the State trouser in Virginia let her go with a warning. Maybe he saw how upset she was, how worried. Either way, adding a speeding fine, she could not afford, to what was on her mind was minuscule. Cal was foremost.

The clerk at the convenience store was wonderful. Joyce had stopped there, mere miles from Fort Bragg. The employee chatted with her while she got her wits back, devouring that glazed donut that the donut man had just dropped off. But what Joyce was eternally grateful for was that the clerk allowed her to use the private bathroom. Brushing her hair, teeth and adding a bit more make up after she changed her clothes seemed vain, but was important. How serious were they going to take someone if they looked far from presentable and totally out of it.

Joyce looked better when she left the Stop and Shop. She felt better. And Fort Bragg was not that far away.

“Yes, I need to speak to a Captain Charles Burgett please.” Joyce told the soldier at the gate.

“And you’re name?” He asked.

“Joyce Swindle.”

He pulled out his clipboard checking the names. “Is he expecting you Ma’am?”

“No he isn’t. I need to speak with him.” Joyce’s hands began to grip the steering wheel.

“I’m sorry, you aren’t listed here. Please back the vehicle from the fence.”

“No.” Joyce spoke sternly. “I will not. I came all the way from Pittsburgh to speak to him and I will. Now do what you have to do soldier. Pick up the phone, yell across the goddamn compound for all I care. But get in touch with him. I have an urgent message for him.”



"I'm sorry. Please move your motor vehicle away from the gate."

"No. I will not." Joyce's attitude remained adamant.

"I will not tell you again. Move . . ." His voice raised "The vehicle or I will have the authorities move you."

"The authorities? Will that get me inside?" She asked.

"No it won't."

"Fine. I'll find him myself." Throwing the car in reverse, Joyce knew what she had to do.

He had his orders, Corporal Nelson did. He was nice to the moody woman when she showed up at the gate an hour earlier, but he had to get serious. One more warning, just to be the nice guy he was, and that would be it. Throwing a fit at the gate was one thing. Flagging down cars as they turned the drive to the front gate of Fort Bragg was another. He cleared his throat to a frustrated Joyce who had failed to get the attention of another passing car. "Excuse me."

Joyce turned her head, she placed her focus again on the road. "Go away. I'm not near the gate."

"What are you doing? You can't stand out here bothering every car asking them if they're Captain Burgett. Now, I have my orders to move you."

"And I have my best friend's life at stake." She faced him holding back the hair that fell from her clip. "I don't know how things run down here, but know it's imperative that I speak to this Captain. I don't know him from Adam. But I have a desperate letter from my best friend stating some major Graison wants him found."

"Who did you just say wanted him found?"

"Major Jacob Graison. . . . Here." She walked over to the car and handed him the letter.

Corporal Nelson read. "Why didn't you mention Major Graison before."

"I did, you asshole."

"No you did not. It would have made a difference. Follow me to the gate."

With a loud annoying sigh of relief, Joyce threw her head back. "Thank you." She got into the car and drove to the front gate, arriving there



before the Corporal.

Not wanting to take his eyes off the letter, Coronal Roberts indicated to a chair for Joyce. "Please, Ms. Swindle, have a seat."

"Thank you." Joyce sat. "Thank you so much Coronal for seeing me."

"You bringing this to my attention is of extreme importance." Coronal Roberts sat down.

"So who is this Major Graison?"

"One of our finest." The Coronal shook his head as he read the letter, yet another time. "All we have to do is wait for Captain Burgett to clarify a . . ." A knock interrupted his sentence. "That's him. Come in."

Stepping in tall and straight Chuck snapped an attention. "You wanted to see me, Sir."

"At ease, Captain. Shut the door."

"Thank you sir." Chuck reached back and shut it. He saw Joyce in the chair, he shifted his eyes and smiled.

"Captain Burgett, I would like for you to meet Joyce Swindle."

"Ma'am." Chuck shook her hand.

"Sit down, Captain. Miss Swindle, received an urgent message for help." He handed him the letter. "From Jake."

Pulling up a chair, Chuck nearly lost his breath as he read the letter. His eyes looked up to Coronal Roberts. "This is unbelievable." He sat.

"Tell me. Do you know what this, play me some Bach means?" Colonel Roberts asked.

"I do, sir. If I may?" Chuck cleared his throat. "About six years ago, Major Graison and myself were on special assignment for the CIA. Barring the details due to civilian presence sir. That was the code we came up with to let air control know we needed help. There were three codes. Play me some Bach was one of them. That code specified what our needs were at the time and what supplies were needed."

"And how does it fare now. What does this tell you?"

"It tells me Major Graison and this Cal person are surrounded by unforeseen forces. Forces they cannot control any longer and wish, and have to take out. They can't pull out. Mission is not complete. Meaning the experiment is not done. They're circled. It's bad."

Coronal Roberts watched Joyce's expression drop. "Captain, can you



recall what those supplies are?”

“Yes sir I can.” Chuck nodded.

“Good. Get the list together and bring it to me pronto. I’ll work on getting the clearance we need from the Canadian government to help them out. I’d like to have this mission in the air by zero five-hundred hours tomorrow, son. Feel like flying it?”

“Yes, sir, I do.” Chuck stood up. “I’ll start getting it together right now.” He stepped back and extended his hand to Joyce. “Thank you. Thank you very much for bringing that note here.”

Coronal Roberts interjected. “Miss Swindle is concerned too. Seems Cal is her best friend as well. Miss Swindle, if it helps, I’d like you to know, your friend Cal couldn’t be in any better hands than Major Graison.”

Joyce smiled. “And begging your pardon, Coronal. I’d like to say the same thing about your Major Graison.”

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
February 2 - 3:30 P.M.

Cal could smell the cleanliness of him before he even spoke. The soapy fresh smell was so welcome down in the control center where she sat. "That was fast."

"I don't want to miss anything. Did I?"

"Nothing."

"Damn it!" Jake sounded so angry. "I wished to God he would just get up. He's due."

"Jake, he'll be up soon enough. Why do you want to rush it?"

"I want this over with before help arrives."

"Over with?" Cal asked. "You mean delayed, don't you?"

Jake pulled out his revolver and checked the clip, securing it back in place. "Yeah." He kissed her on the cheek. "Sorry about the . . ." A gleam took over Jake's eye. The corner of his mouth raised. And a rush hit him. "It's time." Jake saw the Stasis move.

"Time for what . . . Jake?" Cal watched the mad look in his eyes as he swiped up the ax and stormed from the room. "Time for what?" She called, afraid to leave the spot. She had to be ready to hit the homing device.

"Time to end this thing once and for all. He's going down Cal. It's gonna be him or me. I guarantee I'll still be standing."

"Jake, no" She saw his determination. Determination that frightened her, that made her leave her post. "Jake, no." She raced to him following him to the dining area and tugging his arm. "Stop."

"Cal." Jake pulled away. "I have to get up there. I have to get him before he gets us."

"I can't let you do this. You can't go up against him." She tried harder, pulling at him to stop him.

"Back off, Cal!" He stepped back. "I have to do this. I have to."

"You don't have what you need to do this. Please I'm begging you." Cal gave her every emotional plea.

"Don't doubt me. Not now." He pressed the button for the lift and the door opened. Jake, stern looking, stepped on.

Cal jumped on with him. "Then I'm going with you."

Jake ignored her, walking with confidence, revolver in hand to the



front door of the building. "Go to the roof and wait for me. Grab the shotgun." He lifted the crow bar from the floor.

Cal, frightened, did what he asked. She took off running. Knowing there were only ten rounds, she prayed that it would be enough if she needed to help Jake.

Jake pulled off the two by fours one at a time. He listened for the sound of wolves, he heard nothing. With confidence, and without fear, Jake flung open the front door, pulling it closed behind him and he stepped into the snow. It was time to face The Stasis.

Jake saw him. He walked from the storage building. Not a raise in blood pressure or increase in heart rate did Jake experience. He was ready. Standing close to the building, clenching jaws, Jake stared at the beast that hesitated in his stride to him. "Come and get me. Come and get me now you son of a bitch. Take me down. It's you and me." Jake's words held anger. They carried his meaning across the snow covered distance between them. And the Stasis understood.

Jake was not who he wanted. But the opportunity was there.

Cal watched horrified from the roof as Jake didn't move. Jake kept his stance even as the beast closed in so near to him. She raised the shotgun over the roof.

He could smell him with every beastly step he took for him. "Do it." Jake taunted. "Do it." Not moving, nor budging Jake felt the attack time was at hand. He didn't flinch, nor did Jake change his outraged expression. as the Stasis lunged forward clutching Jake by his throat.

"Oh, God." Cal pumped the chamber. "Oh God."

Jake didn't struggle, not in the least. He looked into the glowing eyes of the beast as his towering body was lifted from the ground. The leather like fingers, long nails and all, gripped firmly to his face, waiting for the right moment to snap Jake's neck.

As the beast raised him at eye level, Jake, feeling the choke hold tighten, smiled slightly at the beast. Quickly and calmly he lifted his revolver and placed it center and aiming upward to the neck of The Stasis. He fired, everything the revolver had, without blinking and without stopping. "Die!"

The grip of the Stasis loosened and both he and Jake fell to the ground. Seeing the bleeding creature, eyes still open, Jake huffed outward, reaching behind his back for the ax. Nearly digging into his skull, Jake gripped the head of the Stasis and with a loud heart cry out, swung down



with all of his strength and severed the head from its body. His outrage echoed into the hills and became the audible homing device that the wolves desired. Jake waited, he waited as he stood out of breath for the wall of wolves to appear. When they were in his reach, in his sight, Jake grunting loudly, tossed the head of the Stasis outward to them, allowing them to have the trophy of his victory.

He looked up to Cal, who sat head slumped on her arm, eyes lifted. Then he jumped for the rope, climbing himself up to her. "It's over."

Fort Bragg, North Carolina
February 2 - 7:30 P.M.

"Thank you for the use of your couch Chuck." Joyce's stride was slow as she walked side by side with Chuck to her car.

"You know you are more than welcome to rest longer."

"Thank you, but . . . those few hours worked. You will call me right. You won't forget?"

"I promise. I'll let you know what's up as soon as I get back."

"I appreciate it." She leaned on the side of her car. "She has to come back. She wouldn't ask for the help unless she needed it."

"Neither would Jake. I can't believe they're the only two left."

"I can probably tell you why Cal is left." Joyce smiled. "She's so damn miserable that she probably scared away all the elements that tried to get to her."

"She's miserable too? So is Jake. But he's mean."

"Cal too. And she wonders why she has no other friends."

"Nobody else would put up with them."

Joyce agreed. "I've tried to find someone to do that too. I hook her up with dates all the time."

"At least you can find someone to go out with her. I can't even get a maybe from a woman to pass Jake on the street." Chuck snickered. "God, are they alike. And listen to us, ripping them apart."

"Yeah. It's fun." Joyce opened the car door and paused. "But we love them. And we'd be nuts without them, so make sure you give them what they need, so we don't have to be." Joyce slid in the driver's seat. "Thanks again."

Chuck shut the door for her and stood there until Joyce had driven from his street. He turned to go back in. As he walked up his walk, he stopped and stared four houses down to Jake's dark empty house. "We'll get you help Jake." Chuck blinked slowly, crossed his arms tighter and went back in his home.



CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
February 3 - 4:10 P.M.

“Coronal Roberts. I can see buildings up ahead, sir.” Chuck spoke loudly over the helicopter noise.

“That has to be it. Captain Burgett, do you see that? Is the ground moving?” Coronal Roberts peered out the window.

“It is sir. Looks like . . . wolves. Jesus Christ there has to be over a hundred.”

Coronal Roberts lowered the binoculars that he had. “And by the looks of that building, they’ve been trying to get in. Circle around son, I anticipate they’ll emerge on that roof. Circle around, then hover.”

“Yes, sir.” Picking up speed, Chuck flew the helicopter in and began to circle the compound.

“Yes!” Jake jumped from the bed with such force every single piece on the Monopoly Board toppled. “That’s them.”

“They sound far away, do you think they’re leaving?” Cal asked.

“No circling.” Jake reached for the door. “Let’s go.” He held out his hand and led her out the room and down the hall. The helicopter sounded louder as they opened the hatch and lowered the ladder. “Cal.” Jake stopped her from climbing up. He put his hands to her face and kissed her.

“What was that for?”

“Just because.” He released her and let her climb up.

As Jake climbed up to the roof, he watched the helicopter lower itself. Shielding he and Cal, he waited until it had reached its safe distance and he ran to the chopper. The side of the helicopter slid open and Coronal Roberts hunched there. “Coronal Roberts, Sir.” Jake saluted. “I’m surprised to see you.”

“You think I’d let Captain Burgett handle this one alone?”

“No sir.” Jake looked to the pilot seat and there was Chuck.

Chuck lowered his gasses and smiled when he saw Cal join Jake. “Jake



... you dog. She's cute."

"Nice to see you too, Chuck . . ." Jake saw the large green duffle bag. "Coronal is this our stuff."

"It is." His hand patted it. "Son, you're certain what's in here is all you need."

"Yes, sir."

"Here you are." Coronal Roberts shoved Jake the bag. "If I don't hear from you by March 5th, I'm coming back."

"I would appreciate that." Jake laid the duffel bag down. "Before you go sir, there is something I'd like very much if you would do." He took hold of Cal's arm. "I would appreciate it if you would bring Ms. Reynolds with you."

"That would not be a problem."

Cal abruptly pulled her arm from Jake. "No. Jake no."

"Cal please. Get on the helicopter. You have to go."

"No I do not. You know why I'm here. You know as well as I do that I have to finish it."

"I'll finish this for you."

Cal ran her hand over her face, and raised her voice even louder over the engine noise. "You can't do this alone! You need me here. You know that! Why would you put yourself in that position?"

"Because I love you. I love you and I couldn't bear the thought of anything happening to you. Please Cal, get on the helicopter. I am asking that you do this for me."

"And do what Jake?" She shook her head. "Go home and wait and worry that something has happened to you. I have nothing. Nothing to live for back home. I have everything to live for up here, with you. Don't ask me to leave that. I won't. I won't walk away from you."

"You're so fuckin stubborn." Jake took a deep breath then facing Colonel Roberts and Chuck, he tossed his hands up. "She's staying. Thank you for waiting. And thank you, for your help." He stepped back and saluted both men in the helicopter. "See you in a month."

Chuck smiled with pride at his friend and returned the salute.

Coronal Roberts did the same. "Good luck son." With the sliding of the chopper door, the helicopter began to raise.

Chuck replaced his sunglasses and peered down at the roof top to Jake who stood with Cal. He watched them fade in the distance. He smiled as



the began to fly back. Mission accomplished.

^^^

“Look at all this stuff.” Jake sat like a kid on Christmas, the open duffel bag perched in front of him on the bed.

“Is this cheating?” Cal asked.

“No, way.” Jake scoffed. “They said rely on the resources left with us. The laptop was a resource.” He winked.

“If I don’t get my hundred grand I’m gonna be pissed.”

“Nah.” Jake shook his head. “You don’t need. Besides . . . it’s been fun.”

Cal’s head bopped sided to side, “Well maybe.”

“See, now are you ready to take out our fine furry friends . . .” HE handed Cal a gasmask. “And have some more fun . . . Ms. Reynolds.”

“Absolutely . . .” Cal grinned. “Major Graison.”



CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Investor's meeting - Caldwell Research Institute
February 9 - 3:30 P.M.

"It's over." Dr. Jefferson told the only two remaining investors at the meeting. "Unless nature does something to intervene, we have two winners in this project's game. We threw everything we had at them. They've taken out the last of the wolves, gassed them. They've beaten the Stasis. No one has done that, ever."

Stewart just was not giving up. "There's three more weeks left. Three more weeks to leave one winner."

Aldo was ready for the end of the project. He was irritated at the greed coming from Stewart. "Why can't you just let them be. Let it go. It's done with, we split the pot."

"No." He shook his head. "I don't want to split the pot. I want a single winner, whether I win or not. Dr. Jefferson, I want to exercise my option."

Aldo slammed down his hand. "No! Let it go."

Dr. Jefferson seemed concerned. "If you mean the option to force the experiment to breed a winner, that's fine. But what do you suppose we do to them? We've used up all of our options."

"Not all." Stewart said. "You have nine options in the basement. I want to exercise that option."

Dr. Jefferson's head lowered. "I wish you would reconsider. Right now we are looking at a very viable project. Let's let it end now. We've never had to exercise an option."

Stewart didn't want to hear it. "I'm leaving here this afternoon Dr. Jefferson. I want to leave with the knowledge that you are obliging my wishes."

Aldo was disgusted. If he weren't such the gentleman he would have sailed across the table, picked up Stewart and tossed him from the window letting him fly the ten floors down. But he tried reason. "Well *I've* arranged my work schedule out of Atlanta, I'd like to watch the rest of the project with the knowledge that I'm coming into four million. So should



you Stewart. Enough of the greed. Let it go.” He faced Dr. Jefferson. “Dr. J. He’s exercising his option. Doesn’t it mean squat that I am objecting?”

“I’m sorry it does not. Unless Stewart changes his mind?” Stewart’s ‘no’ and Aldo’s immediate yelp ‘asshole’ said it all. “Then it has to be done. I’ll get on it. We’ll move on that in about three days.” He slowly walked from the room. “Oh, Stewart. Just so you know. On this one, you *can* turn back. All you have to do is say the word and we can end it.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Stewart commented. “I want to win . . . alone.”

Aldo waited until he knew he was alone with Stewart. Rushed, he rolled his chair to be beside the nervous yet cocky man. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Forcing a winner. Can’t you see what you’re doing? Do you know what those things are capable of? You seem to think your Major Graison can take them on. He may put up a fight, *Stewart*, but he can’t take them all on. Not all of them. What you are going to end up accomplishing is nothing. You’ll walk away with nothing, because there’s an overwhelming chance that they both could die.”



CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
February 13 - 8:10 A.M.

Jake adjusted the rifle on his shoulder as he walked with Cal around the building. He lifted Cal's hand, which he held to look at it. "Eighteen more days. Can you believe it?"

"Yeah, It's sort of been fun in a masochistic sort of way."

Jake laughed at her and kissed her hand. "I really think that you and I have beat this thing. We beat the Iso-Stasis Experiment." He shook his head. "You know, when I heard what it was called I said, 'what the fuck does that mean?'"

"You too? God, Jake, I tried to figure it out. But the two words didn't make sense together."

"What two words? Iso is not a word. It's not. You can't name something without a meaning to the name. Who would have known it made sense all along. Iso, an abbreviation for insolation. Stasis, medical meaning, a state of total being--our beast." Jake stopped walking with her, he turned Cal to face him. "You know what I want to do?" He reached his hand up to her face. "I want to be with you in normal circumstances. I want to take you out on a date. Will you go out with me Cal?"

"Yeah, but I must warn you, I not cheap. It's a high price tag too if you want laid afterwards."

Jake smiled and kissed her. "I can't wait to make love to you in a normal bedroom, in a house. I can't wait for that opportunity to be with you like that."

"Doesn't it scare you, Jake? Seeing each other outside of this project. Doesn't the prospect of how we'll be, frighten you?"

"No. What frightens me is the prospect of never doing . . . Fuck!"

Cal felt his hold, grip. She saw the look on his face.

Jake's eyes shifted, to the left, the right, he twisted his head to behind him. "Fuck Cal."

"Jake you're scaring me, what?"

"On my call you run." He slid his hand down to hers.



“Wolves?”

“No . . .” That was all Jake needed to say, the word ‘run’ never made it from his mouth. Being the gunshot that made them run, were the cries. Cries, not one. They synchronized themselves, almost as their attack signal. As Jake and Cal ran to the building, the army of Stasis followed from the trees.

They were fortunate they weren’t far from safety. Jake, nearly shoving Cal inside, slammed the door closed with his body. “This will never hold them!” Their cries grew louder outside the door.

“I’ll get the weapons.”

“No Cal. There’s too many.” Jake looked more worried than he ever did. “I can’t believe they’re fuckin doing this to us.”

“Jake what are we going to do?”

“Run to the room, Cal. Come on, we’ll get the stuff and go below.”

Cal knew if he made that suggestion, then Jake saw no other option. Jake was a fighter, and he opted to run, Cal wasn’t going to argue.

Everything was ready to go, it had been for a while. They lived out of duffels bags waiting for the moment that had finally arrived. Cal grabbed both clothing bags, Jake, the weapons and the food, and they ran with their hearts to the dining area to go below.

As they hit the gathering room, the ‘boom’ of the flying front door screamed to them.

Blocking Cal with his body, Jake shoved her, hurriedly. “The button, Cal.”

They charged to them, all nine. As if they knew exactly what they wanted. Anything that got in their way--furniture, anything--they tossed harshly to the side smashing them to pieces as if it were made from match sticks.

Cal pressed the button, the lift arrived. “Jake.” She and her bags got on the lift.

They closed in, and Jake began to fire. His numerous bullets failed to phase them. He backed up, belongings and all, to the lift. Though it began to move them to safety, it wasn’t fast enough. Halting the lift from any further in it’s journey was the torso of a Stasis. Its arms stopped the lift from going down. Its head snapped forward, reaching with its saliva dripping jaws, for Cal who was inches away.

Jake took the shot gun, immediately placing it under the Stasis’ neck.



He fire three times quickly. The head of the Stasis exploded with force, spraying Cal and Jake with it's blood and slimy body fluids. Its arms dropped and so did the lift.

"Cal, as soon as we get off, run, run and dismantle this thing. I'll hold it."

"Will it work?" They stopped and the silver door opened.

"This isn't what concerns me."

Getting ready to say 'what' but opting to wait until she secured them, Cal took off running to the control room.

Jake stood out breath, he stared up to the ceiling. He could hear them, they had to be loud. How angry they were, how determined. "Come on Cal." He beckoned quietly, hoping that what they wanted to do would stop them. He heard the soft buzzing subside and Jake stepped from the doors of the lift. He watched the lift door close, then another heavy steel door slide out from behind the wall. He knew for the moment, they were safe.

Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute
February 13 - 8:15 A.M.

Aldo picked at his bagel with cream cheese as it sat to the left of him, a folder in front and his cell phone in his hand. He'd only left the observation room to sleep. All other business was done right there. His eyes would watch the monitor, occasionally drifting to write something down or look something up. "No. I don't care." Aldo brought his coffee to his lips. "No, I don't care what the going price is. I will not hold out." Aldo shook his head raising his eyes to the screen. "No, I've been . . . Holy mother of God!" Slowly, staring at the monitors he stood up. "I'll call you back." He looked in horror to the screen watching Cal and Jake emerge into the floor while the Stasis' that were recently sent up, started to go ballistic. "This has to stop. Tina, get me Dr. Jefferson on the phone."

"No need to." Dr. Jefferson walked in. "It's worse . . ." He saw the monitors. "Than I anticipated."

"Dr. J. how long will it take you to stop this thing. To help them?"

"Aldo, I can't . . ."

"How long!" Aldo slammed his hand on the table.

"I have a team in Church Hill. Forty-five minutes."

Aldo backed up to leave. "Send them."

"Aldo . . ." Dr. Jefferson called out. "I can't just send them up. I need Stewart to withdraw his option."

"Or have him out of the game." Aldo reached for the door. Send your team up, Dr. J. I guarantee in one hour, you'll have one of the three ways needed to end this. With a huff Aldo stormed out.

After taking a calming breath and looking once more to the monitors, Dr. Jefferson picked up the phone.



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
February 13 - 8:45 A.M.

Even through the sound proofing they could hear them. Cal's eyes moved from the ceiling to the monitors watching the beasts destroy everything above. They left no stone unturned. Astonished, she was. "They look so determined to find us."

"They are."

Cal turned her head back to see Jake sliding a long table center of the room. He proceeded to unload everything they had--weapons wise--onto the table. "Jake? What are you doing?"

"Getting ready." He began to load the weapons.

"For what? They can't get us . . . can they? Jake, can they get to us?"

Jake didn't answer, he kept loading his guns.

"Jake, unless they tear the floor apart . . ." She watched him look up. "No, they can't."

"They could Cal, but that's not what worries me."

"The elevator lift from the dining area? Jake, we dismantled that, how can they . . ."

"Not that either. Even if they get down, the shaft isn't large enough for them to have enough running room to break down that door."

"O.K., so why are you making me so worried? You look worried." She walked to him. "That's a rarity."

"Cal." He stopped to touch her face. "I'm worried about . . ." He pointed to the steel door in the room. ". . . That."

"That door to the tunnels? Why would you worry about that?"

"Because that tunnel not only leads to storage but to the edge of the woods. There's no protective doorway there. If they find it . . ."

"They still have this door. It's solid steel."

Jake pumped the chamber on a shotgun. "There's nine of them Cal. Nine. Who knows together how strong they can be."

Cal let out a shivering breath moving even closer to him. "What happens if they get in? They'll kill us."

"Not without a fight Cal." He handed her a loaded shotgun. "Not without one hell of a fight."



Cleveland, OH
February 13 - 9:15 A.M.

Barely noticed, the tall man in the long black winter overcoat walked across the shoe factory floor. His dress shoes that taped against the floor could not be heard over the loud mechanical noise in the building. Across the main floor, up the stairwell, the younger man, big and brawny entered into an office.

Perturbed and projecting it as well, Stewart peered up from behind his desk. "Can I help you."

The man locked the door, then closed the blinds on the windows.

"Excuse me . . ." Stewart raised his voice. "I said."

"Sit." His deep voice instructed and he reached into his coat. Pulling out a phone he dialed. "I'm in. Yes, Sir." He extended the phone to Stewart.

He looked oddly at it then brought it to his ear. "Yes?" Stewart said.

"Aldo Connilucci." Aldo spoke on the other line. "I want you to withdraw your option."

Stewart chuckled. "No way. You think you can send your thug in to scare me?"

"Not at all." Aldo said. "I want you to withdraw your option and I will give you two million out of my winnings."

"I don't give into bribes." Stewart said cocky."

"O.K." Aldo remained calm. "Way number one out, this . . . quit the game."

Stewart laughed loudly.

"I see. All right. Let's try way number three. Put my guy on the phone."

Arrogantly and smug, Stewart handed over the phone.

To his ear the man brought it and nodded. "Yes, Sir." With a beep he hung up.

Stewart rocked back some in his chair. "I suppose that will be all."

"No sir. Not really." He answered placing the phone in his coat and withdrawing his hand slowly.

Bang.



Observation Room - Caldwell Research Institute
February 13 - 9:40 A.M.

Dr. Jefferson worried whether or not he had jumped the gun preparing everything to go. He stood with the controls watching the monitors and the total destruction of the compound. His attention was taken from that when the door to the observation room opened.

Carol, his secretary walked in. "Dr. Jefferson, line four. Important call."

"Not now." He told her.

"Sir." Carol said. "It's Stewart's. She says she has unfortunate and regrettable news for you."

Quickly Dr. Jefferson's eyes shifted to Aldo who sat calmly in the leather chair.

Aldo, hand folded, only lifted his views.

"Um . . ." Dr. Jefferson cleared his throat. "Tell her I'll be with her in a second."

"Yes, sir." Carol nodded and left.

Dr. Jefferson picked up the phone.

Aldo noticed the dialing. "Dr. J, not taking that call."

"Oh I will." He finished dialing. "After I talk to Church Hill."

Looking at the monitor, Aldo smiled.



I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
February 13 - 10:10 A.M.

“No Jake, No.” Cal argued passionately, holding tightly to her shotgun, her other hand pressing occasionally to her ear to block out the loud ear shrieking banging that occurred on the steel door.

“Cal, it’s the only way. Please. I’ll try my best.” Jake held his weapon and looked to the door. He closed his eyes at the dimpling in the steel protector that occurred. “Fire with me, but you fire backwards. It has to be done.”

“I will not walk away from you. Do not ask me. I mean it, Jake!” Cal jumped when a loud squeak bread the first frightening crack in the steel door.

“Cal, I have the explosives set. I may be able to meet you up there. Go upstairs. At least if I don’t get out I’ll know they won’t be able to get you. That’s . . .” Another crack in the door, and the beasts outside screamed louder. “That’s what matters. Please.”

“No.” With a stern look, Cal raised her weapon and held it at the door. “If you go down, I go down with you. End of argument, Major Graison. Were a team. We started this thing out as one and we will end this thing as one.” She held out her hand, still looking at the steel door. The edging around it giving way.

Jake reached over and grabbed her hand. “Besides, its not over yet.”

“No it isn’t.” Cal felt his gripping hold, took in the moment and she braced her weapon.

“Cal.” Briefly Jake lowered his shotgun. “If something should happen to me. Know that I went down loving you.”

Cal lowered her head and swallowed the lump in her throat. “Ditto on that, Major Graison.” She held it back up high. “But you aren’t going down.”

Jake raised his gun. “No I’m not. We’re gonna make it upstairs and blow these bastards apart. Right?”

The pounding increased. How that steel door withstood the pounds of pressure it was taking at that moment, Cal and Jake didn’t know. Perhaps it was fate on their side. Perhaps not. The torturous wait for their attackers to break through, would be over soon.



Jake aimed, his perspiring finger touching against the trigger ready to fire. He twitched his head to remove the trickle of sweat that rolled into his eye. He waited. Firm stance and not afraid.

“Jake.” Cal lowered her weapon. “Jake, listen.”

Jake let his ears zoom in, the pounding began to lessen and it seemed the cries, the snarls and angry bellows that came from the tunnel started to subside. Fade, it seemed, as if one at a time they disappeared. “They’re stopping?” Without taking his aim from the door, Jake shifted his body toward the monitor. He knew it was all right to lower his weapon when he saw what happened in the screen. “Cal. They *are* stopping. Look.”

Cal gazed up, in the monitor showing the tunnel, she saw four men. They fearlessly faced the remaining Stasis creatures. The one man raised his weapon, fired only once and down went the beast. The other two fell just as easily. “They’re taking them out for us.”

Jake watched them, they nudged each of the beasts with their feet and turned as if nothing, leaving the tunnel. When they left, nine unstoppable beasts lay stoppable, motionless, in the tunnel just outside the steel door. Jake had no words, he was stunned.

Cal saw as the four men raced to a helicopter. “Who were they?”

He wrapped his arm around Cal, pulling her into him, and released in relief, the tension he tried so hard to hide from her. “Our saving grace.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

I-S.E. Twelve - Seal River Complex, Manitoba, Canada
March 4 - 7:55 A.M.

It bothered Cal staring down at her duffle bag zipped up and ready to go. Filled with clothes that she actually contemplated leaving there. Why take them, they were dirty, they weren't able to launder anything since the attack of the beasts. Her hands were filthy and rough. For over an hour her and Jake rummaged through different things left in the main building. They had lived the last two weeks downstairs, below the building that had been all but destroyed.

Not much was left. Memories of Rickie she desperately fought to find. Something she could take with her of the boy that she had cared for. The beasts left nothing. Not even his remains were there, and that saddened Cal.

She was full of confusion on what she was feeling. Part of her was sad, another part of her felt an easy feeling, glad to be leaving. But the part of her that bothered her the most was the part that was scared to leave. Scared to face a world she long since had been apart of. Her world had been with Jake over the past seven months. It frightened her like never before, on what a world with Jake outside the experiment would be like now.

Bending over in the room that Cal and Jake shared, she saw the roundness of it. The bottom of the blue mug. A mug that had been broken, smashed, yet the circular bottom still remained. Her mind reflected as she picked it up, dropping it in surprise when she cut her finger on it.

"What did you do?" Jake asked her.

"Nothing." Cal placed her finger in her mouth then picked back up that piece of mug. "This was the mug I used for the flowers you gave me. Look Jake its broke." She looked sadly at the tiny remains.

"Cal." Jake smirked at her. "I'll buy you a vase." He took it from her hand.

Cal knew it wouldn't be long before their transportation home would arrive. Going home was not something she talked about. The experiment was her escape. Though it held horrible memories for her, they failed in comparison to the horrible memories the reality of home brought. But the



compound also gave her new memories, ones that made her feel good, and she had times there that she was really happy.

“Cal.” Jake’s voice whispered in her ear. “You are really being awfully quiet. No excitement? Can’t you hear the helicopter?”

Cal took a moment to listen. “Yeah.” She gave a half smile. “There it is.” She turned to face him. “I guess I was just thinking about us. I just want to say to you, from the moment you first complimented me, I knew there was something about you. I love you, Jake. Thank you for that.”

Jake reached to her and pulled Cal close. “You sound so morbid, you act like we’ll never see each other again. Hey, listen, they’re landing. Come on.” He reached down and grabbed her hand. Then with his free one, threw her bag over his shoulder.

Cal didn’t say anything, holding his hand tight she walked with him out to the helicopter. There were three of them. From the one, Dr. Jefferson emerged.

“Cal, Major Graison.” He held up his hand, and walked to them extending it. “Congratulations on a highly successful experiment.”

Jake shook his hand. “Why the other two helicopters?”

“We have a lot to clean up, a lot of data to collect. But no need to make you two wait. Looks like you’re ready, hop aboard.” He showed them the helicopter. He caught eye contact with Cal as she passed him. “You’re going home young woman . . . smile”

Cal did, briefly. “I’m tired and hungry, that’s all.” She watched Jake slide the bags in the helicopter.

“We can oblige.” Dr. Jefferson said. “We anticipated that. While we’re waiting for the plane in Church Hill, we have fresh clothes for you two, and a meal.”

Jake held Cal’s hand and helped her into the helicopter. “And a shower, I need a shower.” He stepped up, sliding in to the seat with Cal. “Hey. We’re leaving.”

Cal turned her attention from the window she stared out, to Jake. “Yes we are.”

As the chopper began to lift from the ground, Cal felt Jake press his lips to her cheek, then brush his thumb against her chin, possibly brushing dirt away. She watched from the window as the ground moved further and further from her sight. She felt the security of Jake’s hand slide to her knee, she grabbed it, wrapping her fingers around the largeness and strength of it.



She tilted her head to rest against the window and she saw the buildings soon disappear. Feeling the helicopter tilt to its left, she knew. She was without certainty, going home.

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They sat with Dr. Jefferson at a round table at the airfield. Sipping coffee that tasted so good, eating less than the breakfast they expected. But food none the less.

Dr. Jefferson raised the pot of coffee to their cups. "So we're flying you two to O'Hara International. We have a back room waiting. But I must warn you, that this has gained a certain amount of hoopla with the science journals so to speak. Be prepared for interviews, but also remember the confidentiality papers you have signed. You can give no details."

Jake downed the last drop of his coffee. "No problem. Anything else, I'd like to jump in that shower now."

"A few things before you two get ready to go. Major Graison, Coronal Roberts has sent you another uniform. Also, an Army transport and escort will be awaiting you at O'Hara. They want to get you to Fort Bragg ASAP." Dr. Jefferson reached down to the floor. "He also sent this to you. He said to review the materials before your debriefing."

Jake ran his hand over the briefcase and set it down. "Thank you."

"Cal." Dr. Jefferson faced her. "A private jet will be waiting for you."

Jake liked that. "Excellent Cal, a private jet."

Cal only smiled, she didn't say much. Her mind was still on the fact that Jake was holding a briefcase and an Army transport was waiting to whisk him away the moment they touched down.

Dr. Jefferson snapped his finger. "And importantly, since this is the last I'll see of you two." He handed them both an envelope. "Your compensation. One hundred thousand dollars."

Jake took his envelope, opened his briefcase and placed it in there.

Cal stared at the sealed envelope. "This is the most money I have ever held in my hand."

"Another thing." Dr. Jefferson continued. "Cal . . . this is for you." He extended to her a long salmon colored envelope, sealed.

"What is it?" Cal's hand slid over the fineness of the paper.



Dr. Jefferson shrugged. "It's from your investor. It seems he has taken quite the interest in you. I have never seen an investor so taken with a participant. I haven't any idea what is in there he, it wouldn't surprise me if it was a marriage proposal." Dr. Jefferson stood up. "Now I'll leave you two. I'll be back."

Jake looked with a certain amount of jealousy at the salmon envelope. "Millionaire or not, that better not be a marriage proposal. Open it."

"I will. Later."

"You look down. Are you O.K.?"

"Jake?" Cal turned her chair to him. "Do you feel weird?"

"No. Why do you?"

"Yeah. I feel like I'm in the fog. Like all of this is surreal." Cal tried to explain it her best. The strangeness she felt being around people again. "Yeah, surreal. That's about the best way I can describe it. Almost like I've never been here before. But I'm not meaning here, here. I mean in civility. Does that make sense. Don't you feel it. Everything is different."

"Of course it is Cal. No, it's not strange to me, I've done . . ."

"Major Graison?" Dr. Jefferson called from across the room. "You have a call from base."

"Excuse me." Jake slid out his chair and stood up, walking across the room to the phone.

Cal watched him. Jake seemed to stand taller, he had that serious look as he took the phone. The same one he carried when she first met him when he wasn't plain Jake. When he was Major Graison.

^^^

The high pitch sound of the engines veering up made Cal even more nervous. She wondered as she sat in her seat looking out the window, the open salmon envelope in her hand, if she meant to choose this seat. Was it the same one she had when she flew in? Maybe subconsciously, for comfort she sat there.

She almost didn't recognize Jake when he stepped aboard the plane. And she knew why she didn't wait for him. The fear of seeing him like that. The reality of who he was, what he was, pummeled her at that moment. The moment she looked upon the man dressed in full dress uniform. Appearing so virile, his hat held tightly to his chest, briefcase in hand, as he



moved sideways down the aisle, his body almost too large to walk down any other way.

Her heart beat in her throat and she quickly turned her head to the window again. She wanted to cry. Why was she so afraid of him? She had no reason to be. Yet, with everything, she feared what he stood for, and who he actually was outside of their Iso-Stasis world.

“Cal, you didn’t wait for me.”

“Sorry. I wanted to get a seat.”

Jake laughed and looked around the empty plane before he sat down. “I can see why.” He plopped next to her. “Wow, this is eerie. Same seat. Shall I play with the fan again?” He reached up his hand to it.

“No.” Cal smiled and removed it. “You aren’t going to be mean to me because we’re sitting here?”

“I will never be mean to you again.” He felt her hand on his, the smile left his face when he felt how it seemed to shake. “Cal? You’re trembling. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She slipped her hand away. “Nervous for some reason.” She felt the plane began to taxi. Cal covered herself. “I hate take-offs.” She tried to hide the quiver in her voice as well, so she remained calm and quiet until they were in the air. “Now getting back to you being mean. You yell at me all the time. . .” She paused because she knew what she was going to call him, and he really was. “. . . Major Graison.” She swallowed.

“Someone has to keep you in line.” He lowered the tray on the seat in front of him and set his briefcase on it. He opened it up. “God, will you look at all these papers? Seven months to catch up on. You don’t mind do you? I won’t if you want to . . .”

“No go on. I just want to relax and enjoy the flight.”

“I’ll just take a little bit of time . . . hey . . . you opened that pink envelope.”

“Salmon.” She held it up. “I did.”

“And, may I ask what was in there? If I’m being too nosy just let me know.”

“You’re not. Um, fifty-thousand dollars and a certificate for a breast enlargement.”

“Excuse me? Why would he give you fifty-thousand and most importantly why is this man concerned about your breasts?”

“I don’t know.” Cal shrugged.



"Are you keeping them?"

"Yes." Cal answered. "No go back to your paper work."

"Cal you can't keep it. Especially the breast enlargement. That's very personal. He's stepping on my territory now. I like them just the way they are. And I find it offensive and disturbing to me that he has taken it upon himself to determine that they should be larger."

"I'll give the boob job to Joyce O.K.?"

"You should give the money back as well."

"No, Jake. I want the money. I need the money."

"You do not need the money." Jake argued. "You should say 'thank you' and hand it back."

"Jake. Do your work. I'm keeping them."

"Are you always going to be so argumentative?"

"Yes. Are you always going to be so anal?"

The steward cleared his throat as an introduction to his interruption. He seemed polite, quiet and feminine. "Excuse me, Ma'am, Sir. Can I get you a beverage?"

Cal smiled and adjusted herself in her seat. "You know what? I'd love a bourbon on the rocks."

"Cal." Jake spoke firmly, eyes never leaving his read. "It's ten in the morning."

"So, I need a drink."

"So . . ." Jake continued reading. "It's too early for alcohol. It won't set right with you."

Cal rolled her eyes at him, "Steward I'll have an orange juice." When she saw his acknowledgment she mouthed to word to him 'with vodka', and she reclined her chair.

Jake, while he worked reached down and grabbed her hand. "I've been thinking. Do you know what I want to do? I want us to take a cruise this summer. God, I haven't taken a vacation in forever. What do you think Cal, a cruise this summer?"

"Jake." She spoke in a pacifying manner. "We're just coming home. Can we not talk about going away just yet."

"But you have to plan ahead. A cruise would be nice." Jake leaned over and kissed her. "You're so tense. You want to talk about it?"

"No. Why don't you finish your work. We'll talk when you're done."

"I'll hurry. We need to talk."



*That we do.* Cal thought as she shifted her attention again, back out the window.



Through the flight, and the time that they talked, Cal's mind kept drifting. She wondered if she was being neurotic or was she watching a different Jake. A man that looked so excited when he was told they were over American airspace. So proud he was, so many other things on his mind. But maybe it wasn't Jake after all, that she was afraid of, maybe it was who she was. Cal felt different, she felt like the old Cal.

"Jake, what's wrong." She noticed him fidget.

His fingers slipped down into his collar, giving room. "It's been so long since I wore this."

"It's been since we first stepped on this plane. But somehow . . . Somehow you look better to me now." Cal smiled. "You know, when you walked on the plane today and I saw you, my heart skipped a beat, it literally skipped a beat."

"Why is that?"

"You look so handsome." She ran her hand down his face. "You take my breath away."

"Wow. That's one hell of a compliment. Thank you for that." He grabbed her hand and kissed it.

"Jake, I want you to know something. I want you to know how very proud I am to have known you. To stand beside you. To have been with you."

"Thanks Cal. I'm proud to know you too. In fact, a part of me can't wait to show you off. I mean as soon as I get back I want to show you off to . . ."

"Jake don't."

"What? You can compliment me and I can't compliment you?" He saw he didn't get a smile. "Hey, you want to go out for dinner tonight or stay in? I was thinking about that. I don't have any food. We could shop, but are you going to feel like it." He sounded like he was rambling, and he was, with excitement. "Oh shit, we have a problem you and I need to talk about it. How do you want to do this? I feel really bad you can't fly with me, but, you know how that goes. I have to go to that meeting. I can send



Chuck for you and he can take you to my house. Unless you would just rather wait at the airport and I'll pick you up. I won't be late." He raised his eyebrows waiting for his answer.

"Jake . . . I'm, uh, I'm going home."

Jake laughed. "Cal, we can send for your things. In fact, you have a hundred, no a hundred and fifty grand. Buy new things."

"Jake, listen to me." She rested her hand on his. "I'm going home. O.K.? I'm not going to Fort Bragg with you. I can't."

"What do you mean, can't? Are you coming down in a few days, are there things you have to take care of? What?"

"I think we should be apart."

"Like a long distance relationship? Cal, we've been living together for . . ."

"Jake." Cal just wanted this moment over with, she wished the plane would land and she could run off. "Please understand what I'm saying. I think you and I should be apart. I'll go home to Pittsburgh, and you go home to Fort Bragg and your life there."

"Where is this coming from? What do you mean *my* life there. I want it to be our life there."

"It can't."

"Explain to me why."

Cal took a deep breath. "Things are different now. Our lives are different. We're not the same people. Jake, I don't even know you outside of the project. Who you are, what you do . . ."

"Then you'll learn."

"How can we be like we were if we're learning who we are? Jake, I didn't even realize you had curly hair."

"So what Cal, no one knows I have curly hair. I've shaved my head for years. So you're breaking up with me because you didn't know I had curly hair?"

"No Jake, I'm breaking up with you because I don't think what we were during the project, can survive in the real world now."

"Bull shit!" Jake's words were harsh. "You're copping out."

"No, Jake. You aren't making this easy."

"Did you think I would? Did you? I can't believe you're doing this. Your mind can't possibly be made up."

"It is." Cal lowered her head.



“And when were you planning on telling me you didn’t want to see me again? When you never showed up in North Carolina.”

“I never said I was.”

“You never said you weren’t!” His voice was loud and carried strong in the empty plane. “How can you do this? How can you just walk away from it and never look back. Never see each other again.”

“I want to stay in touch with you Jake. You’ve become my friend.” She handed him a slip of paper she had in her hand. “I wrote down my number, my address, call me or write . . .”

“You want to be fuckin pen pals? I don’t want your address, Cal . . .” He crinkled the paper and threw it down. “I want you. You! You said you love me, was that a lie?”

“No Jake . . .”

“Then what are you doing? Come on.” His hands went up in the air and fell hard to the seat. “I love you. I took very seriously what happened between us. Call me old fashion but I thought when we said how we felt, when we slept together, that all but said that we would make it work.” He reached over and grabbed her hand. “You’re breaking my heart Cal, breaking my heart. Don’t do this to me.”

“I’m sorry, Jake. Maybe if we take some time. Maybe after some time apart and we see this was wrong then we can try again. It’s not like I don’t want to ever talk to you again.”

“I cannot accept this. I won’t.” Jake looked up to the landing bells. “Cal, let’s not get off this plane like this. Let’s settle it.”

“It is settled, Jake. There’s nothing you can do. My mind is made up.”

“Just tell me what brought you to this. What? I deserve to know.”

“I’m afraid of who you are. I’m afraid of what you are outside of the experiment. I knew *that* Jake.”

“Then you know this one. I’m the same man. If you don’t believe that then you have to find out. You have to give it a chance.”

“And what, find out it doesn’t work? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Too late, you already have.” Jake sat back in his seat as the plane came to a stop. Cal wasted no time. She stood up quickly and before he knew it she had climbed over him and into the aisle.

Cal took one more look at Jake who began to follow her. She wanted to stop, run back to him and tell him she changed her mind, but the truth was, she knew she had to go home, alone.



Stepping into the airport the scary sight of the awaiting military was there. They were there for Jake, getting ready to snatch him up, quickly and without any questions.

“Cal Reynolds?” A voice called to her, very close to her.

“Yes?” Her eyes moved to the voice, a suited dark haired gentleman stood next to her.

“I’m here to take you to the plane Mam.”

“Thank you.” She paused before she walked with him to watch Jake, who had barely stepped into the airport before he was approached by the four uniformed men that awaited him. Her eyes never left his as he walked with them, almost dragged away. “Let’s go.” She lowered her head and moved with the man to the other corridor just inside the private waiting room.

Jake watched her hit the edge of the hallway, he knew she was leaving. He felt helpless as he felt himself being tugged at a speed he fought to move at. “Wait a second.” He told his escorts. “Wait a second.” Abruptly he pulled from them, left the pack and stormed to Cal. “Stop.” He snatched her back by her arm. “Hold up. Please.” Jake looked to the man who stood aside Cal. “Can you give us a second?” He waited for the man to step away. “Cal. Don’t just walk away without saying goodbye to me. I deserve more than that. I have spent seven months of my life with you. Every waking moment was with you. I’m not ready to give that up.”

“Jake, they’re waiting for you.”

“I don’t give a shit.” He tried, he tried his best to stay calm but Jake came off as angry as he felt. “They can wait. Don’t do this.” He hunched down to her level, placing his hand on her face, brushing his lips against hers. “Don’t walk away from me. Change your mind. Tell me you’re coming home with me.” Again, he kissed her, his thumbs brushing against her cheeks.

Cal grabbed his hands softly, and slid them from her face. “I *will* call you.” She brought herself up to him and kissed him. “Goodbye.” She released his hands, walked backwards a few steps, then moved down the corridor with the man.

Jake stood there watching Cal until he couldn’t see her anymore. Before facing the men who awaited him, Jake took a long breath through his nose, stood tall, shoulders back. He placed on his hat, turned about face and walked in perfect stride, to his escort, an emotionless look upon his





face. Jake didn't look back, he held his head high as he walked from O'Hara airport.



"We'll be taking off momentarily Ms. Reynolds. We're second to go." The man who took her on the plane spoke to her. "Have a seat, make yourself comfortable."

Cal gave a sad smile. Before she looked around the private plane, before she noticed anything, she saw the military plane adjacent on the runway. She saw Jake, walking quickly, and so strongly with his escorts. The military wasted no time. Within seconds of Jake stepping on that plane, the plane began to back up. Cal watched as she stood center of the plane, Jake's transportation head to a runway. An immediate empty feeling hit her, they had reached their furthest distance apart in seven months.

Cal swallowed and finally looked at the plane she had boarded. "Wow." She commented aloud and she took her seat on the black leather bench seat against the window.

Cal rested her head back in the moment directly after they hit the air. She closed her eyes, mind never far from Jake. She snapped to attention when she heard the click-click of a door. She turned her head to the sound to see a different man walk from the back of the plane. An immediate warm feeling told her she knew him. Cal smiled at him.

"Cal." He called her name like it was a sign of relief and walked up to her. "You don't know who I am." He extended his hand warmly, when hers met his, he cupped his other hand over hers. "I apologize for the intrusion of your privacy but I just had to meet you. You don't mind, do you?"

Cal lowered her head a little in embarrassment, she slipped her hand from his. "No, not at all. Actually, I'd love company. This is . . ." She shook her head. "This is going to sound stupid, but . . . this is the first time in a long time that I've been by myself. It's a little scary. Weird huh?" Cal stepped back and sat down.

"No, not at all. I expected as much." Aldo sat down next to her, he noticed her leaning into him, almost smelling him. "Is something wrong?"

Cal smiled. "No, again, you're going to think I'm strange. But you



smell so good.”

“I try.” Aldo leaned his side against the couch, arm on the back as he faced Cal. “Here we are sitting here talking and you haven’t a clue who I am.”

“Not necessarily. Are you . . . Mr. Connilucci?”

“How did you . . .”

“Nice plane, and just the way you look, you look like you would be an Aldo.” Cal smiled. “I’m very happy to meet you. In fact, I received your gifts. They were very generous, but . . . I can’t accept them. It just doesn’t seem appropriate for me to take such gifts from a man I . . .”

“You sound like Graison, stop it.” Aldo rested his hand on her knee. “You deserve it. I will take it as an insult if you do not take it. Or that.”

Cal heard a clinking and smelled an overwhelming wonderful scent--real food. She turned her head to the cart that was being wheeled in. “For me?”

“Of course.” Aldo stood up, nodding his head to the woman so she could leave. “Thank you.” On the wheeled table were three silver covered dishes. “I hadn’t any idea what you would be in the mood for. Breakfast, lunch or dinner. I did know that you probably couldn’t wait for real food. So.” Aldo began to lift the lids. “Eggs Benedict, Lobster newburg, and Veal Oscar. Indulge.”

“Oh shit.” Cal looked at the array of food. “You are going to join me aren’t you?”

“No. It’s yours.”

“Please.” She spoke with sarcasm. “Don’t make me eat alone. Grab another dish. We’ll share.”

“I’d like that.” Aldo walked to the back and came back out with a dish, he set it on the table then sat next to Cal. “So, can I over step the boundaries and ask why you informed my man that we are going to Pittsburgh instead of North Carolina?”

“You may.” Cal placed a fork of food in her mouth and closed her eyes, it tasted so good it was almost orgasmic. She took another bite. “I’m not going with Jake.”

“Cal, you don’t know me. But I feel like I know you. I’ve watched you for seven months. I’d like to know why I feel like I just watched my favorite two characters to DAYS OF OUR LIVES, break up.”

Cal laughed and wiped her mouth. “We were up there. I’m afraid of



things not working out down here. I can't take that chance. I'm afraid of who Jake may be now, that maybe I won't . . . no, that's not it at all."

"No it's not. Your afraid of yourself. Your afraid of being happy again. You feel like your doing something wrong. Home reminds you of pain, pain you feel you have to carry."

"Wow. You must know me well."

"I do." Aldo took another bite, then a drink of water. "But I'm speaking from experience more so."

"Are you married, Aldo?" Cal asked.

"Was. I'm a widower. My wife was killed. In fact they just found the man last year. It added some closure to it all."

"Children?" Cal pried.

"A daughter, Allison. Feisty." Aldo shook his head. "A handful alone."

"I bet you do wonderfully." Cal shifted from the empty eggs benedict plate to the lobster.

"I have another gift." He shifted his body and reached to a blue box on the table next to him. "For you."

"What is this?" Cal opened the lid. "Video tapes?"

"Again, I might be assuming too much. Six tapes. All highlights of my favorite scenes that I watched. And I only picked the ones that weren't painful for you, and that you may enjoy."

"Thank you." Cal ran her hand over them. "By chance, would there be any . . ."

"A whole tape of Rickie. I made sure that second day when he told his fireman story was on there. I laughed extremely hard at that." He watched a tear fall down her face as she held the tape with his name on it. "You did good for that boy. Real good. I was proud of you."

"Thank you." Cal wiped her eye. "And thank you for this." She set down the box and started to eat again.

"Can I give you some food for thought, other than food for you belly?"

"Why do I think you're going to anyway?"

With a chuckle, Aldo continued. "I'm speaking from experience here. Cal, no one knows better than you how short life is. How quickly things that seem good can be over with. It's one thing when they are taken from us out of our control, when we still want them. It's another when we give them up when we had a choice."



Aldo captured her attention, and captured her thoughts. She was grateful for meeting this man. And though she knew she had just met him, she felt a bond to him, a bond that told her 'listen to him'.



## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Fort Bragg, NC

None of the congratulatory handshakes, well wishes, and glad you are backs, from those higher in rank, phased Jake. Even the cigarette smoke didn't irk him, he guessed it wouldn't, he had grown used to it with Cal. He sat in the meeting, listening to what he had to hear, saying what had to be said. Nothing more, nothing less. His mind wandered, unlike it had ever done. Usually he'd listen to the boring fishing and golf stories, smiling like he enjoyed them, but he didn't. He wished in his mind they would just move on with it. It was pushing five o'clock and most of the meeting was spent on idle bull. Though he sat straight up in his chair, occasional grabbing his glass of water, Jake's pencil moved about a notebook, scribbling nonsense, wanting like a teenager, just to write her name.

Jake's eyes felt heavy and it wasn't because he was tired. He wanted to close them, but only to think about Cal. He didn't fully understand why he felt like he did. Empty, angry, alone.

Jake was the last one to leave that meeting, aside from the Coronal. H figured no one would notice the change in his demeanor, he was like he always was before, stone, hard, emotionless. But they didn't know what he became, Jake didn't fully know what he had become.

"Jake." The Coronal stopped him before he walked out the door. "You don't seem as happy as I thought you'd be, finding out that promotion is coming through Monday and all."

"I'm sorry Coronal, I am pleased. I just have a lot on my mind sir. Personal things. Things I have to take care of." Jake nodded firmly.

"Anxious to get moving, huh son? Jake, I've known you a long time. I wanted to let you know, how glad I am that you finally found someone, someone to help fill that life of yours."

Jake paused, lowered his head and raised his eyes. "Thank you." He swallowed. "So am I. have a good night sir." he reached for the door knob again.

"Jake, you aren't letting this one go are you? You are going to marry her?"

Jake stopped in his reach, he tilted his head and a smile finally came



over his face. "You know what? . . . Yes I am." More confident, he left from the office.

He had made a lot of decisions in that meeting. None of them having to do with his job. That was something he supposed he'd regret come Monday morning. But no decision was as important as the one he reached seconds after he walked from the room with Coronal Roberts. Jake was a fighter. He never went down without a fight, or giving up. He wasn't about to do so. If Cal thought for one second he was giving up that easily, she was wrong. Just like that first day they met. Just like when he went into her room through the bathroom and she told him to leave. Jake didn't stop trying to reach her, he just tried another door. And he would do so again, he was going to try another door.

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New Eagle, PA

Joyce stopped arguing with Peter over how dry the chicken breast was at their dinner, to peer in amazement at her house. "What the hell is going on?"

"What are you talking about Joyce. One second it's the chicken, the next . . ."

"Lights. My lights are on, I didn't leave them on." Joyce opened the car door. "It can't be." She shook her head. "I bet it is."

"What!" Pete yelled as he watched Joyce race from the car to her house.

Cal spread the mayonnaise on the bread for her bologna sandwich. Bologna wasn't her meal of choice at that moment but it seemed Joyce failed to shop for her return. As she placed the knife in the jar for another swoop of white stuff, a loud shriek in the kitchen caused her to jump and nearly knock her food to the floor. "God, Joyce."

"Cal!" Joyce, running grabbed Cal, embraced her tightly.

Cal's arms swung around nearly hitting everything with mayonnaise. "Easy."

"Let me look at you." Joyce stepped back folding her arms. "You look great. Hey." She grabbed Cal's arms. "Are these muscles?"



“Don’t ask.” Cal licked the mayonnaise off her finger.

“I can’t believe you’re here. I didn’t think you were coming home. Not from the experiment, but coming here.”

“Where else would I go?” Cal slid the paper plate with the half made sandwich aside.

With a loud breath out, Joyce sat down. “Let me catch my breath for a moment.” She placed her hand to her chest. “Fort Bragg. I thought you were going there with that Major.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Just by what Chuck said. That when he dropped off the supplies there was an emotional thing happening on the roof. Jake started crying, really mushy stuff.”

“Oh Chuck is full of shit, that never happened. He lied.”

“Oh.” Joyce seemed surprised. “So you’re not in love with Major Graison?”

“I’m very much in love with Major Graison.”

“O.K. so why are you here. Is he here?”

“Nope he’s in Fort Bragg. My idea. I just think Joyce, we shouldn’t be together. Our lives are different now. Completely different. “ Cal slid her finger tips over the counter. “I just can’t take the chance that it won’t work. And can we please not talk about this anymore. I’m depressed. It’s all I’ve thought about since I left him. I need to take it off my mind, get Jake off my mind.”

Joyce reached out to her grabbing her hand. “And I know exactly how to do it too. We are gonna celebrate. Why don’t you go ahead and get changed. And do something with that hair too. Look presentable.”

“I’d like very much to do that. But . . . where in the hell are my clothes?”

Joyce stopped picking up the phone. “They’re packed and in your closet. I didn’t think you were coming back.” She shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Swell, I’ll go get ready.” Cal started to leave.

“And look good!” Joyce began to dial the phone. “Hey it’s me . . . Cal’s back.”

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Fort Bragg, NC



“Jake!” Chuck called out his name as he ran into his house. “Jake!” Excitedly he ran up the steps and into Jake’s room. He watched his big friend frantically run around the bedroom, opening drawers, taking things out. “Jake, I’m glad you made it back.”

“Thanks.” Jake kept moving.

“Nice to see you too.”

“Sorry.” Jake turned around and shook Chuck’s hand. “Hey, Chuck.” He returned to what he was doing.

“What’s going on? Where’s Cal? Is she coming down?” Chuck asked.

“Yep, tomorrow. That’s what I’m doing. Making room for her. I figured out how much she’ll need. Of course, I’m gonna have to put another dresser in here. But then again, that’ll be more for her to mess up. She’s messy, Chuck.” Jake didn’t face his friend.

“Man, you must love this woman to put up with something as repulsive as being messy.”

Jake finally turned his head, but only to glare.

“Anyway, when’s she getting here?”

“Tomorrow. I’m leaving as soon as I’m done to go and pick her up.”

“You’re driving. No Jake, don’t drive. I’ll fly you up. Just pay for the fuel. You my friend have a hundred grand, I am broke.”

“No problem, thanks, Chuck.” Jake continued, neatly taking his items from his space and placing them else where. He tried to close a drawer and it left its track. Instead of taking his time and fixing it. Jake began to get frustrated, his emotions started to give way and he banged the drawer over and over. “Son of a bitch.”

“Jake? Why are you getting pissed at the drawer? Just take it out and put it back on track.”

Jake mumbled as he struggled with the drawer. “I have to get my fuckin life on track.”

“What are you saying? Damn, Jake. You should be happy. Your woman’s coming down, and . . .” Chuck jumped when the drawer banged loudly and Jake yelled ‘there’. “Jake, don’t you want her to come down?”

“Of course I want her to come down. I’m fuckin going up to get her aren’t I? Whether she likes it or not. I can’t believe she fuckin did this to me.” Jake moved to the closet. He flung open the door. “Fuck.”

“Jake?” Chuck stood up from the bed. “Why am I getting the feeling





she doesn't know you're coming up to get her."

Jake just turned around from the closet, his jaws clenched, his face angry.

"Oh, boy." Chuck let out a breath. "What are you planning on doing Jake, just going up there and taking her?" He didn't get an answer. "You are." Chuck ran his hand over his hair. "Want to tell me what happened?"

"Nope." Jake moved things over, lessening the perfect two inch space between hangers to one.

"Can I give you some advice? You can't go up there with this attitude. This angry shit you're giving me."

"Why. She pissed me off. She's being fuckin stupid. I'm going to make her see that."

"Then you'll come home alone. Whose idea was it that you two aren't together right now. Obviously not yours. So you can't go up there and give the Jake, my way or no way attitude. You know Jake, maybe you just got the wrong idea of how things were. Maybe you saw more into what was there."

"Fuck you Chuck, you don't know what we had."

"Do you?" Chuck moved closer to him. "Do you even know what a relationship is? I've known you since boot camp and I never saw you involved with a woman. To be blunt with you as your best friend, you're mean, you're cold, and bitter."

Jake, stunned by the lack of niceties by his friend, clenched the hangers he held tight in his hand. "She said she loved me." He threw the clothes on the floor and went over to the bed.

"Jake?" Chuck looked down. "You just dropped your clothes." He watched his friend sit down on the bed, place his elbows to his knees and bury his face deep in his hands. "Jake come on."

Jake ran his hands up his face and over his head to his neck. "I love her, Chuck." He lifted his head, a look of desperation completely over him. "What am I gonna do? I'm going crazy here."

"O.K." Chuck reached for a desk chair and slid it to face Jake, he straddled it backwards. "Let's talk rationally here. Tell me why she isn't here."

"She doesn't think we can make it outside of the experiment. She's . . . afraid of me."

"Whoa." Chuck leaned back. "Let's look at that. Now risking getting decked, I can see why she's afraid of you." He saw the look from Jake.



“You’re the stern Major Graison. You aren’t going to be the same guy that was running through the woods fighting wolves with her. Everyone fears you, yet respects you. You live for your job. You live for the Army. She knows that. Now, can you Jake, separate the two, can you be in a relationship with this woman outside of the experiment? Not only for your job, but can you live for her too?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Then you tell her that. And it won’t fail. Because you my friend, never let anything fail without a fight.”

Jake felt better, his whole body raised higher. “O.K., let’s go.” He stood up.

“You really want to go up there right now?”

“Yeah, why? Shouldn’t I?”

“You’re emotional, she’s emotional--probably. Get some rest Jake, figure out exactly what you are going to say to make her come down here. And make it good. Official like. We’ll leave first thing in the morning.” Chuck nodded.

“Official. I can do official.” Jake walked over to his clothes on the floor and picked them up. “So meaning official, do you think I should ask her to marry me, Chuck? I’d like to marry her. But I don’t want it to be too much. You know, with me coming up there and all.”

Chuck flubbed his first few words. “Ask her. What the hell. You’re laying your cards on the table. Besides, chicks love marriage proposals and big rings.”

“How big?”

“With a hundred grand, you’d better be obnoxious.”

“I can do that.” Jake shut the closet door.

“Good, grab your check book, I know you have the money, and let’s go make some sales clerk at the mall really happy. Then we’ll grab a pizza.”

“Real fast though, I have to get back here and write down what I’m going to say.” Jake opened his desk drawer and grabbed his check book.

“You aren’t going to read it to her are you?” Chuck saw that thought had to have crossed Jake’s mind. “You were? Man, are you sure you can do this. Do I have to open the Chuck school of women for you?”

“Chuck.” Jake stopped before he walked out. “If you’re such the Einstein of women, why am I the one who’s getting ready to propose and you’re the one hanging with me on a Friday night?”



Chuck opened his mouth, mind searching for the perfect comment, but he failed. "You have a point."

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South Side of Pittsburgh

Walking past Aldo's limousine parked out front of the small but loud bar in the city's most alive section of town, Cal started to sense it. "Who's all coming?"

"Oh . . ." Joyce stopped trying to peek in the limo. "Surprisingly a lot. More people like you, than you think. You're home." Joyce put her arm around Cal pulling her close. "Of course, they're my friends."

Cal's senses were right. As soon as she started to pay her cover--which she was told a gentleman covered everyone's for the night--she knew. That sound that only he could produce. The guitar lead with style sang to her as she walked in the door, only David could make a guitar sing like that. She looked to Joyce. "David's band."

"I kind of thought since you were down, seeing David would do one of two things. It would make you see that what you felt for the Major was confined to those hills, or see what you should really do."

"You're right." Cal stepped into the bar. From behind the crowded room, over the heads, smoke lingering, she saw him. He dressed like he always did, jeans and a tee shirt. His eyes closed playing his lead as she moved closer to the stage to wave. David's head flung back, yelling something to the bass player and then his stare went straight. He saw Joyce and his eyes immediately shifted to Cal. He lit up, that made Cal feel good. And then David did something Cal had never seen him do before in the entire time she watched him play. David set down his guitar in the middle of the song, never taking his eyes off of Cal, and he stepped from the two foot high stage.

"Cal." He stepped to her, meeting her as she walked to him. David looked stunned. Stunned to see her standing there. He moved closer to her, smiling that bright smile that Cal always loved. His hands held her face. "You look incredible." He placed his hands back on her face and he kissed her, ignoring everyone else in the room, he kept kissing her. With a shuddering breath as his lips pulled from hers, David embraced Cal, lifting

her from the floor as he did. He held her tight, arms wrapped completely around her, his hand not letting go of her head that he kept pressed to his cheek. So tight Cal could barely breath.

The noise in the room seem to disappear as Cal let David hold her, holding him also. And she accepted the revelation that happened to her on that floor, crowded room and all. The moment David touched her face, kissed her, held her, Cal knew. She knew where she was supposed to be.

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Cal laughed, her smile was wide, as she nearly tipped over her drink stepping over all twelve people who had gathered that late night in Joyce's living room. She tried to make it through the maze to Aldo, who was having the time of his life. "I can't believe you guys are actually watching this stuff." Cal spoke up loudly over their comments as they watched the video tapes of the high lights of her seven months. "Now you remember I'm not forcing you to watch, so I don't want to hear that you told people you were bored watching Cal's videos from her masochistic vacation." She continued to try to get to Aldo, smiling at him. She was starting to feel the effects of the alcohol now, she let herself. Because Cal felt good, a part of her felt free. Just as she reached center room, stopping at the coffee table for a chicken wing, the loud whistles and 'whoa's' caught her attention. She turned to see what they watched and horrified she ran to cover the set. The set that showed Jake pinning her against the wall, kissing her, her legs wrapped around him. "Oh my God."

"Cal move your ass." Joyce shouted. "I want to see."

Peter tried to see. "Move Cal."

Joyce grunted. "I'm missing it because her ass is in the way . . . move!"

"Fine." Cal threw her hands in the air. "It's a good thing David's not here yet. He would die. So don't show him. And you people aren't going to see anything anyhow." She pointed.

"Oh yeah?" Joyce shouted, she got loud when she was drunk. "Why is the Major on his knees."

Cal covered her face, ignored the hooting and sat on the floor next to Aldo. She watched the television, Jake walking to the camera wiggling his fingers before blocking it out. Cal smiled when she saw that, and even gloated when the room filled with angry 'ah's'.



“You look happier now, Cal.” Aldo rested his hand on her knee.

Cal smiled back at Aldo, and she sipped her drink. “I am. My mind was foggy when I came home. Everything is clear now.”

Aldo lowered the glass she raised to her lips again. “You sure it’s not the booze.”

“Positive. Things were cleared before I took my first drink tonight.” Cal took a deep breath and turned back to watching the set.



CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

New Eagle, PA - March 5th

Jake took a nervous deep breath staring down at his watch. He raised his view to Joyce's place, two houses down from where they parked the rental car. "That's her house up there, 2717."

"You want me to pull up?" Chuck asked.

"Nah, I'll walk." Jake cleared his throat and straightened his tie, he was dressed--officially--in his full uniform, hat and all. "Let' go."

"Jake I have never seen you this nervous. You'll do fine. I know you will, I heard what your going to say to her a million times on the trip up."

"I had to practice." Jake opened the car door, stepped out and waited at the hood of the car for Chuck. "Wish me luck."

"You don't need it."

Jake gave a closed smile at Chuck and they began to walk at a steady pace, side by side, to Joyce's house.

"Jake." Chuck nodded his head to Joyce's porch. "Who do you think the guy is coming out?"

Jake looked up, as soon as he saw him, Jake knew him. *Oh my God does he look like Carlos*, Jake thought. He could have sworn it was Carlos. He knew that was David. "Don't worry about him." Jake kept walking head high. His stride and pace only slowed once, that was when he past David in the driveway. Jake swallowed nervously. His jaw clenched and his nose twitched.

David merely nodded his head to Jake, smiled and kept on walking, hands in pockets.

"Jake?" Chuck nudged him as they walked up the steps. "Was that him, the guy you were telling me about? Kind of early, don't you think, to be paying a visit. Hey Jake, you don't think he spent the night here do you?"

With a disgruntled breath Jake looked to Chuck before he knocked on the door. "Why do have to say shit like that?"

"Observing?" Chuck shrugged.

"Observe the bushes or something." Jake knocked on the door.

Joyce, thinking it was David forgetting something, opened the door for them. "Oh." She said surprised and widened the screen door. "Come



in.”

Jake cleared his throat as he tucked his hat under his arm and stepped into her entrance hallway. “Ma’am, Major Jacob Graison to see Ms. Cal Reynolds. It’s very important and if she isn’t home I would appreciate you letting me know where I can find her. If not, I’d would like to wait here.”

Joyce wanted to laugh at the seriousness of him. “She’s up the step. All the way to the top.”

“Thank you Ma’am.”

Joyce, head shaking, swung to Chuck. “Hi Chuck, what is up with his get up.”

“Oh he’s being ridiculous. Wants to be official and all. He takes things to extremes.”

“I’d say.” Joyce could hear Jake as he took the steps two at a time.

“Hey Joyce.” Chuck moved into the hall. “That guy, did he . . . spend the night?”

“Yeah.” She saw the concerned look on Chuck’s face. “But not like you think. We had one hell of a party last night.”

Cal looked around her attic bedroom as she fixed her shirt in her jeans. She stopped by her dresser mirror to check out her reflection and pick up her brush. “I look bad. This isn’t . . .” Her head turned to the knock on her door. “Yeah.”

“Cal.” Jake called her name as he stepped into the room the moment he opened her door.

The brush fell immediately from her hand when she heard his voice. “Jake.”

“Cal, listen” He walked inside. “Before you say anything . . .” He felt her arms fly tightly around his neck. He closed his eyes as her body pressed to his, dropping his hat and wrapping his arms around her.

She released her grip and set her feet on the floor all the way. She stepped back to look at him. “What are you doing here?”

“I have to talk to you. I need to tell you something.”

“I need to talk to you too. I can’t believe you’re here. Jake, I . . .”

“Cal, please. Let me say what I have to say. Then you can talk. Please? Sit down.” He led her to the bed, then he stood before her. He closed his eyes and rolled his head around, preparing. Then with a deep nervous breath, he looked at her. “Cal . . . I’m gonna screw this up . . . I’ll start



again. Seven months ago when I met you, I knew there was something about you. You were and you are, what I need in my life. I never knew what love was. I do now. Cal . . .” Jake stepped closer to her. “I woke up this morning and I was alone. For the first time in seven months, I was alone. I don’t want to wake up another morning without you by my side. Now, O.K., I admit I have a lot to learn. But work with me so I can learn them. I’ll try my best. I will. Whatever it takes. Just give it a chance. Please. And besides all that mushy stuff, you promised me you would be there when I was promoted. Well . . . I’m getting promoted Monday and damn it, you better be there.”

“Jake!” Cal spoke excited. “I’m so proud of you.” She started to get up from her seat, but Jake stopped her.

“Cal.” Jake knelt before her, he grabbed her hands. “Come home with me. We can do this thing. We can. Hell, it’s not even going to be as bad as it was up there, you won’t have to see me every single minute..” He nervously played with the hands he held and stared at. “I want you to live with me. In fact, I’d prefer if you and I did things properly, did things right, and got married.” His eyes lifted to hers.

“Jake, you’re on one knee. That sounded an awful lot like a marriage proposal. Was it?”

“Well . . . if you say ‘no’, then it isn’t. But if you’re going to say ‘yes’, then I can give you this.” He reached into his pocket and gave her the ring box.

Cal held it in her hand. “I’m afraid to open it, knowing you.” She teased, then saw the smile on his face. She opened the lid. “Oh Jake.” She smiled as she closed one eye, holding the ring far from her.

“Chuck said it had to be obnoxious.”

“It’s obnoxious all right.” She took the ring from the box. “I suppose you’d like an answer, huh?”

“If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“The best way I can answer you is to tell you to open my closet.” She saw the hesitation look on his face. “Go on.”

“This is a weird yes or no.” Jake got up and backed to the closet. He opened it. “It’s empty.”

“Exactly. I was leaving today at nine.”

Jake shut the closet. “Where . . . where are you going?”

“North Carolina. I was going because *I* refuse to spend another night



alone. I was determined, no matter what . . .” She stood up. “I was determined to find you and beg you to forgive me for giving up on us so easily. I’m sorry. Can you, forgive me?”

Jake’s head was spinning. “Yeah sure . . . You were coming down? What made you change your mind?

“David. When I felt David hold me, when he kissed me I knew . . .”

“You were kissing David last night?” Immediately Jake’s mind went to David leaving the house.

“It’s not like you think. I knew.”

“Am I allowed to think this is a yes to my question about living with me?” Jake smiled.

Cal nodded.

“The one about being my wife too?”

“What the hell?” Cal winked. “I’m up for the challenge.”

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Fort Bragg, North Carolina

“Thanks Chuck.” Cal slipped her head between the bucket seats of the open top jeep. “I appreciate you driving Jake to the airport to get me. Aldo had everything ready and I didn’t want to do that to him.”

Jake looked back at her. “Aldo, who’s Aldo?”

“My investor.”

“What?” Jake turned his body. “You flew down here with him. You failed to mention that little bit of information to me.”

Cal shrugged. “I’m here aren’t I?”

Chuck stopped the jeep at the gate. “That you are, Cal.”

The Corporal who stood on guard looked into the jeep. “Captain Burgett sir, Major Graison.” He saluted. Then noticed Cal. “And . . .”

Jake leaned forward. “You won’t find her on the sheet, but get used to her. You’ll be calling her Mrs. Graison.”

“Sir?” The Corporal looked puzzled, almost shocked.

Chuck tapped the steering wheel. “Unbelievable huh, Corporal? Yep, put those nasty rumors to rest, Major Graison has a woman.” Chuck put the jeep in drive and pulled through the gate. “Hey Cal, did he ever tell you what his nickname is. Mountain dew man.”

“Really? Is it because he’s been there and done that.”



“Oh!” Chuck exclaimed loudly. “I like her.”

Jake rested his elbow on the door, his hand to his fore head, fearful of what Chuck was going to say. “Just don’t like her too much.”

“Cal, you must really know this guy.” Chuck said. “One time, he didn’t speak to me for a whole week because I failed to use a coaster on his coffee table. A whole week because of a ring that disappeared . . .”

“Chuck . . .” Jake tried to quiet him.

“And . . .” Chuck continued. “He goes overboard, big time. Look he came to propose to you and wore his uniform. His uniform. Do you know he actually sat down and figured out how much closet and drawer space you would need by the square inches on your body.” Chuck heard Cal laugh. “And then there’s . . .”

“Chuck!” Jake shouted. “Shut the fuck up. You’re gonna scare her away.”

“I’m gonna scare her away? You my friend are, you big lug. You’re gonna smother her to death. Keep her hidden in your house like she’s your prisoner. Not letting her out until she learns how to clean it right.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Jake was relieved when they pulled up at his house. “If anything scares her away it’s because I have a friend like you.” He stepped from the jeep and held the door for Cal. “Come on Cal.” He reached in the back and grabbed her two suitcases.

“Jake.” Cal tried not to laugh at him. “Calm down. He’s only playing around.”

Chuck held his hands up. “No Cal, I’m used to it. If you need a break. I live right . . .” He pointed. “Down there.” He chuckled when he saw he got Jake to the boiling point. “Jake buddy, you need some help?”

“No.” He slammed the door, “Leave.” Jake began to walk to the house.

“Jake! I’ll stop by later.” Chuck yelled.

Jake turned and started walking backwards. “I’m keeping my door locked from now on. I don’t want *you* walking in on us.” He shook his head, feeling relieved when he heard Chuck pull away. “We’re home.” He opened up the front door for her.

“Do you always let him get to you?” Cal stepped into the living room of Jake’s house. It was as she expected. Clean, very clean. “You shouldn’t let him get to you.”

“I don’t usually. But he knows how nervous I am about this moment.”



“Jake you’re nervous?” Cal shut the door.

“Yeah I am. I want you to like it here, feel comfortable. I don’t want you to leave because you feel strange.” He picked up the long stem roses that laid in an open box on the coffee table. “These are for you.”

“Thanks.” Cal smelled them.

“Come on I’ll give you the tour of your new home.” He grabbed her hands leading her backwards. “This is the diningroom. Not much, kind of small. And this is the kitchen. Which I know you’ll get use out of.”

“Jake . . .”

“Look Cal.” He opened a cupboard. “I even bought you Ho-Ho’s.” He shook the box. “Not impressed huh?” He put them back.

“Jake, I don’t need Ho-Ho’s.” She moved closer to him. “Or the grand tour. I’m quite adverse in knowing military housing. You’re so funny, you’re so nervous.” She put her arms around his waist. “And you’re different with Chuck.”

“I’m sorry, that’s bad.”

“No It’s good. I like that Jake.” We’ll do good. We have a strong beginning you and I.” She kissed and stepped back. “Now . . . and I’m going to call you this because I won’t be able to much longer . . . Major Graison, show me where to put my stuff, and . . . I will take one of those Ho-Ho’s.”

Jake reached up and grabbed the box, giving it to her. “Not too many or you’ll never eat.” He walked past her. “I’ll take your bags upstairs.”

Cal watched him, shaking her head. “Oh this neurotic dietary shit *will* stop.” She opened the box. “Guaranteed.”



CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Fort Bragg, North Carolina **THREE YEARS LATER**

“Lieutenant Coronal Graison Sir.”

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. 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, taken a mere one month after she arrived in Fort Bragg. 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.”

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“ATTENTION!” The 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 and pulled her into him. "I'm authority." 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 thirty minutes with Coronal . . ." 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, hesitantly pulled out the envelope. He handed her the letter. "Here read."

Cal looked shocked as she saw the return address. Apprehensively she pulled the letter out and read it. "*Dear Mr. And Mr. 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. All proper channels have been taken and all preliminary interviews waived. We would like to cordially invite you, as a team, to participate in the project slated to begin August 2nd. Hope to hear from you soon, Dr. Randall Jefferson.*" 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 sweetheart, love of my life . . ." He saw her smile. "You game?"



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