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## JESSICA BLACK - EPISODE 1

by Tim Grahl  
# # #

A Funeral Without A Body

The casket stood empty.

Jessie was not sure if her parents picked the weather on purpose, but it worked out perfectly. The downpour made an already miserable day all that much worse.

Despite the day, she could not make tears appear.

A few people tucked safely underneath their umbrellas approached the casket a little too quickly. They dropped their roses into the puddles forming in the casket, and hurried away to their cars.

After two years, the amount of people that still cared were small. And only a few of those ventured out into one of the

worst thunderstorms the spring heat had produced so far.

Jessie glanced up at her parents a few feet away. Her dad held her mom. Not just because she was sobbing, but because she would crumble to the mud if he let go.

Somewhere deep inside she yearned to draw near to them. To have her mom wrap her arms around her. Have her dad kiss her on the forehead. Keep her dry. Keep her warm. Keep her safe.

Jessie wiped her face, tucked the strands of blond hair behind her ear, and looked back at the ground. She tightened the coat around her and stood in the rain as it beat against her.

It had all happened slowly.

First, Jessie had heard her mom comment that it had been a few days since she had heard from Ryan. So she called and left a couple messages.

Jessie had only been six years old at the time, but she new something changed after two weeks. Suddenly, there was a lot of activity. Policemen were at their house. She heard her mom crying a lot. Her dad stopped helping her with her homework and spent most nights on the phone calling people.

After a month or so, the Despair had set in. The Despair. The thing that had stolen her parents from her so completely.

As each day passed without Ryan, it seemed her mom got sicker and her dad got more quite.

Now, two years later, her dad had decided to have a memorial

for Ryan. A way to say goodbye. "Your mom needs this," he had said.

Jessie knew what that meant.

He was trying to get mom back.

She didn't cook dinner any more. She didn't go to work any more. She was so skinny. She wore her robe all the time.

Jessie had to make her own lunches.

Jessie had never really known Ryan. He was so much bigger than her and already out of big kid's school before she could remember. He would come over for dinner sometimes and talk to her, but never seemed to want to play with her.

But he was all mom had ever talked about it.

Ryan was the joy.

Jessie was the accident.

Mom loved Ryan.

Jessie hated Ryan.

Now the tears came.

Jessie wiped her eyes with her knuckles and sniffed hard.

Dad would be mad if he saw her crying.

Jessie got control of herself, and looked up at the casket again. But this time, across the cemetery, through the gate, and across the street, she saw someone standing. She pushed the water out of her eyes and peered hard through the rain.

There was a man standing there. He was covered by a long brown

trench coat with a hood that hid his face in darkness, but Jessie would have promised with everything in her that he was looking directly at her.

She looked harder trying to see more of him.

There was a splash to her right, and Jessie glanced over. A huge, black limo was pulling through the gates. As it pulled up, Jessie looked back to the hooded man, but he was gone. The limo pulled up near what was left of Ryan's memorial service.

The driver, a large man dressed in a black suit and red tie, quickly opened an enormous umbrella. He walked to the back of the limo and opened the door.

As the man stepped out, lightning flashed and thunder immediately hit. Jessie jumped at the sound. Or was it at the sight of the man?

As he stood, he towered above his driver. He was dressed from head-to-toe in black. From his wide brimmed hat, to his sunglasses, to his immaculate suit and tie. All was black. The man walked down the path towards them, with his driver walking directly behind him keeping him dry.

The man approached her parents. They both looked up at him. The man reached out his gloved hands and gently took Jessie's mom's hand in his. He began to speak to both of her parents. At first Jessie couldn't hear, so she moved closer and

strained to listen.

"... an amazing man. Certainly one of the most brilliant men that I have ever had the pleasure of working with. It so saddens me that he is no longer with us."

The man paused.

"One day we will all know the truth about where he is."

Jessie's mom's sobbing grew louder. Her dad thanked him for coming.

The man moved over in front of Jessie, and knelt down so he was face-to-face with her. His knee squished into the mud, but he didn't seem to notice. Jessie could see herself reflected in his glasses.

He stared at her for some time. Jessie shifted her feet, but held his gaze.

The man smiled.

Then, never having spoken to her, he stood and turned back to the limo. The driver got him in the car, took his place in the front seat, and the giant car pulled around and out of the cemetery.

After a few minutes, Jessie walked over and stood by the casket. The hole was already dug. She looked at the roses now moving gently in the rain water that had filled the bottom. Her face wrinkled as she push down the tears welling back up. Instead, she gathered herself and spat into the casket. That

was all Ryan would get from her.

She stood there for several more minutes making big promises that she fully intended to keep.

She was so deep in thought, the hand on her shoulder startled her. She looked up, hoping to see her dad, but instead, saw the minister. He was standing under his own umbrella.

"Honey, I think it's time for you to go."

He looked to his right over his shoulder.

Her dad, still supporting her mom, had already walked halfway back to their car. Jessie pushed passed the minister and hurried to catch up with her parents.

# # #

### New Job

Jessie finished folding her robe and placed it on the counter next to the back door. She put her cap on top and untangled the tassel to make sure it would hang straight. She stared at it the long gold string.

"Morning Jessie."

Jessie snapped out of her stare.

"Morning Dad," she said, "Coffee is ready and I made some extra eggs."

She sat down at the small scrapped up dining table and started

pulling on her shoes.

The kitchen was old and run down. Everything was still original from when it was built in the fifties. Pickled oak cabinets, now coated with grease and smoke. Peeling yellowed linoleum. Her dad had had big dreams of remodeling when they had moved in when Jessie was five. But all of that changed a year later.

Rick noticed the robe.

"Is that today?" he said.

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Would you be able to come?"

"Well..."

"How about mom? Would she come?"

There was a long pause. Jessie went back to tying her shoes.

"Exactly."

"Jessie, you know I have to work. You know I would come if I could."

"I'm not doing this dad. I didn't say anything so I wouldn't have to have this conversation."

"I am proud of you. It's amazing what you've done. Your teachers always said you were the smartest in the class, even when you were in with kids three years older than you."

Jessie shrugged, not looking up.

"A PhD when most kids are just graduating college. It's amazing."

"Yeah, I've got the debt to show for it too."

"Have you been able to find a job yet?"

Jessie stood, grabbed her cup of coffee and plate of eggs and sat back down at the table.

"Yeah, barely. I applied to a ton of jobs and programs. Seemed like none of them were interested."

"That seems weird."

"That's what my professors said too, but who knows. Maybe because I'm so young. I was starting to freak out but I finally got an acceptance letter last week. It's too a place I don't even remember applying to."

"That's great, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. It's just an internship program though. It pays, but not a ton. I'm just hoping I can use it to pad my resume so other places will actually be interested in me."

"What's the name of the place?"

"DrekCorp. It's right downtown. Just two bus stops..."

Jessie jumped in her chair at the crash.

She looked up. Her dad was standing frozen staring at her. His mug was shattered on the floor. Coffee was soaked into his socks.

His mouth was moving open and closed like a fish laying on a



dock.

"What?" Jessie said.

"I... How..."

"What's going on?" Jessie's mom called out.

Betty came around the corner into the kitchen, tying her robe.

The permanent circles under her eyes were darker than normal.

Dried saliva was around the corners of her mouth. Her blond

hair was pulled into the same dirty pony tail it always was.

Looks like her dad hadn't been able to convince her to bath

this week.

"What was that noise?"

She looked at the coffee mug, then to Rick, then to Jessie.

"What'd you do Jessie?"

"Nothing, I just told Dad about my new job and..." she

gestured at him.

"What job?"

This finally snapped Rick out of his stare.

"Nothing honey! Nothing! She just got a job and I was excited

for her. Go on back to bed. I'll come check on you in a

minute."

Rick stepped carefully towards Betty, avoiding the glass.

Jessie stared with a perplexed look on her face.

Betty's eyes narrowed at Rick. She pushed him away.

"Where'd you get a job Jessie?"

Jessie opened her mouth to answer, but her dad turned and screamed at her.

"Shut up! Keep your fucking mouth shut!"

Jessie's eyes went wide. She didn't know what to make of this. Her dad was always so stoic and soft spoken. Jessie shut her mouth, not sure what to do.

Rick started trying to herd Betty out of the room, but she would have nothing to do with it.

"What are you hiding from me? Why can't she tell me?" Betty said.

"Don't worry about it Betty, she just got a job. That's all."

"Stop it Rick!"

Betty pushed him back. She turned to Jessie.

"You tell me right now where you got a job!"

Rick put his hand on Betty's arm, but she swatted it away.

Jessie looked at both of her parents. Her dad's eyes pleaded with her not to say anything. But her mom was obviously not going to let this go.

She had no idea was going on. Why would her getting a job cause such a violent reaction from her parents?

"Um," Jessie said. "I, uh, got an internship at this research and technology company. It's called..."

Jessie hesitated. She looked at her dad again.

"Honey," Rick said, once again touching Betty's arm. "She's

going to work at DrekCorp."

Jessie would never forget the sound that came out of her mother. It was something she imagined could only come from an animal. An animal getting ripped apart.

Betty lunged at Jessie screaming and spitting. Jessie fell back out of her chair to avoid her. Rick grabbed her mom off her and started dragging her away to their bedroom. Her mom was screaming and crying and yelling.

Jessie sat in the floor stunned.

What had just happened?

After a few minutes, the noise from her mom calmed down and Jessie thought it was sad to get back into her chair. She didn't keep eating though. She just sat there waiting.

Twenty minutes later, her dad came around the corner back into the kitchen. He had some towels in his hand and he silently knelt down and started cleaning up the broken mug and coffee.

"Dad?"

No answer.

"Daddy?"

Rick stopped moving, his back to Jessie.

"Why?" he said. "Why DrekCorp of all places?"

Jessie didn't know how to answer at first.

"I don't know dad, it's the place that hired me. Why is it so bad? What is going on?"

Rick finished scooping the pieces of the mug into the waste basket and wiped up the rest of the coffee off the yellowing linoleum.

He sat down across from Jessie.

"You really don't remember do you?" he said. "How could you I guess. You were only, what, six when he disappeared?"

Jessie nodded.

"The weeks leading up to Ryan's disappearance, he was getting more and more stressed out. He wouldn't talk about it, but we knew something was weighing on him. We're pretty sure it had something to do with work. He was a brilliant engineer and working on something top secret. We're not sure what it was, but it had to be important. He was really smart, like you, and was recruited heavily straight out of his own PhD program."

"Anyway, he was losing weight, and we kept pressing him to tell us what was going on but he wouldn't tell us. He kept asking questions about the future. He asked a ton of questions about you too. The last time we saw him, he had come over for dinner and it looked like he hadn't slept in days. Your mom and him got into a huge fight. She wanted to know what was going on and he wouldn't tell her. It ended with him storming out of the house. That was the last time we saw him."

"Your mom is convinced to this day that it had something to do with his job. And now -"

"I'm going to work for them." Jessie said, finishing his sentence. "Ryan was working at DrekCorp when he disappeared."

# # #

### Money

Jessie immediately regretted coming.

She had witnessed at least three drug deals on the bus ride. Now she stood in front of a door with no markings to notify the general public what it was. She tried the door, it was locked.

Jessie stepped back, looked up and down the street again, then double checked that she had the right address.

This was the part of town your parents always warned you about coming alone. Weeds grew up through all of the cracks in the sidewalks. Windows were either barred or boarded up. Far too many people hanging out on their porches in the middle of the day.

If it wasn't for her general anxiety of being alone in this part of town, she may have gone straight back to the bus stop and gone home.

She banged on the glass with her fist. It rattled in the door frame.

"Oye!" a yell came from inside. "Coming!"

The blinds on the door window slid up.

"You Jessie?"

She nodded.

The blinds slid back down, and the door opened.

The man was short with thinning hair. He was a cross somewhere between Danny Devito and that "inconceivable" guy in The Princess Bride. But younger.

"Come on in."

Jessie stepped in and looked around the small reception area. The desk where a secretary should be sitting was overflowing with magazines and books. There was a phone, but it hadn't been used in awhile. Everything looked like it hadn't been used in awhile.

"Thanks for coming." he said.

"Yeah. Of course."

There was a long pause.

"Um." Jessie said looking around.

"Oh right! Sorry." he reached out his hand. "Richard Stevens. Call me Dick though. Everybody does."

I'm sure they do. Jesse thought.

"Look, Dick, I'm still not clear on what I'm doing here."

"Hungry?" he said.

"Uh..."

"Look, I know this is a shit hole. There's a diner down the street. Let's grab a bite. On me. And we can talk."

"Ok."

They walked quickly down the sidewalk. Dick kept blabbing the whole way talking about the neighborhood, his favorite diner, etc. But Jessie couldn't really pay attention. She kept waiting for someone to jump out and stab her at every alley. A few blocks down they made it to the diner, which wasn't much of an upgrade from his office, and sat down. After coffee was ordered, Dick leaned in.

"How're you doing Jessie?"

"Dick, I rode the bus down here to meet with you, and now we've walked through you drug infested neighborhood to what I can only assume is a roach infected restaurant. You say you're a lawyer, but there wasn't even a sign on your door and I couldn't find you in the yellow pages. So why don't you tell me why you called me and I can decide whether it's time for me to leave or not."

Dick glanced over his shoulder to make sure the waitress wasn't close, then leaned in.

"I knew your brother."

Jessie's face hardened and she sat back in her booth. She folded her arms.

"And?"

"How well did you know him?"

"How well can a six year old know anybody?"

"So you weren't close?"

Jessie let the silence hang.

"Dick, why don't you get to the point."

Dick cleared his throat.

"No matter how many times I've gone over this conversation in my head, I've never figured out a good way to start. Even with years to prepare."

He laughed nervously.

Jessie remained stoic. Waiting.

"Ok, before your brother... disappeared... he made some arrangements. He was very concerned about you in particular."

Jessie's eyes narrowed, but she remained silent.

"Ryan built up quite a bit of money early on. I'm still not sure how. I always joked with him about playing the stock market or lottery, but he never let on to anything."

Dick looked at Jessie sitting like stone across from him and laughed.

"Anyway, I knew Ryan way back in high school. We were friends. Or, I guess I should say, he looked out for me. Kept the other guys from messing with me. We lost touch after high school when he went off to Duke and I stayed here and went to a community college then law school. Then out of the blue, after not talking for eight years, he called me and we got together."

"Why you?"



Dick shrugged.

"I wasn't in his life. He was pretty secretive about everything. Kept making us meet in different places. He was determined to make sure nobody in his life knew about me or our meetings."

"So? What was he having you do?"

"Look Jessie, I don't know what happened to your brother, but he knew something was coming. He got his will written up. He transferred a bunch of assets to me to control for him. The only thing I had to do was maintain my law license and stay under the radar. I get a percentage of the total each year that's enough to make me comfortable. My job was to keep the money safe, grow it, and make sure you were taken care when the time came."

"What do you mean 'taken care of'?"

"Well, all that debt you've got from school? That'll be gone. I also can't assume that internship is going to pay much at first."

"How'd you know about that?"

Dick shrugged.

"I'm good at what I do."

They stared at each other for a moment.

"So, like I was saying, you'll need some money for a place to live to get you out of your parents house and, pretty much,

anything else you need."

"Just like that?"

"Yep."

Jessie let out a bitter laugh and shook her head.

"What?" Dick said.

"Ryan has done nothing but destroy my life for the last fifteen years. He's a ghost that never leaves and constantly affects everything. I barely have any memory of him. And now... what?... he comes in my life and fixes a bunch of things? What am I going to tell my parents?"

"Nothing. You can't tell them anything. What I've been doing for your brother isn't exactly legal. I've got ways of making sure this money shows up for you without being detected or traced back to me, but if it does it will burn down everything your brother went through a lot of effort to setup and protect before he disappeared. Your debts will get paid off. Money will show up in your account. But you can't ask questions and you can't tell anybody where it came from."

Jessie's face reddened slightly and her eyes filled with tears.

"Dick, please tell me. What happened to Ryan?"

Dick slid his hand across the table and held Jessie's. He looked her straight in the eye.

"I have no idea. I wish I did. Your brother was the only

person in my life to ever truly care about me. It broke my heart when he disappeared. Even though he told me it was coming, I didn't want to believe it. And despite what you may feel about him, he was a good man, and he loved you very much."

Jessie jerked her hand back and pushed the tears off her face.

"Look. Whatever. Thanks for your help with this. I won't say anything to anybody."

Dick's face fell some.

"Good."

"Are we done here?"

"There's one more thing."

Dick bent over and rifled through his briefcase and came out with a small manilla envelope. It was taped closed and had her name and a date scrawled on it that had to be just a few days before Ryan disappeared.

Jessie took the envelope and looked at it. A letter from her brother? What would it say? What could it say?

She ripped back the tape and tipped it up to let the contents fall into her hand.

It wasn't a letter or note at all. Instead, a small, white rectangular piece of plastic dropped out. It was a bit bigger than a credit card and had some odd etchings on it.

"What is this?" Jessie said.

Dick shrugged.

"I have no idea. I always wondered what he put in there."

Jessie sighed and stood.

"Look Jessie, I'm here for you. I'm indebted to Ryan in ways you can't understand. You have my number. You call me if you need anything."

Jessie nodded and walked out of the diner.

Dick pulled his mobile out of his inside suit pocket, tapped in a few keys, then slid it back inside. He waved the waitress over to order.

# # #

### Coffee

Jessie closed the door to her new apartment and took the elevator down to the first floor. The doorman held open the door as she stepped out onto the street.

She loved living in the city.

Growing up in that shitty house outside of the perimeter, Jessie had always dreamed of being apart of the excitement of being in downtown Atlanta, but assumed she'd never be able to afford it.

Now, with her new-found wealth, she was able to have her pick.

She rented the nicest high-rise apartment building on Peachtree Street. She had asked for the highest floor she had, and every night she had finished her day sipping wine and looking out of her floor-to-ceiling windows across the city. Even the giant cranes looked beautiful in the sunset.

The DrekCorp offices were downtown, but it was just a half hour ride on the 110 bus to get her there. Way easier than it was to get to her classes from her parents house.

And who knows, with her brother's money funding her life now and her pay from DrekCorp, she may go ahead and get a car so she wouldn't have to worry about it.

Jessie began the walk to her new favorite coffee shop. There was a Starbucks a little closer, but she preferred the feel of a local place.

A block into her walk, her phone rang.

Her dad was calling.

She stared at the phone as it continued to ring. Her thumb hovered over the "ignore" button, but she finally accepted the call on the fourth ring.

"Hi dad."

"Jessie, I just wanted to checkin with you. See how you're doing."

"I'm fine dad."

"How's the new place?"

"It's good. It's not too far, so I can come by if you need me for something."

"That's good."

A long pause.

"Please don't do this." he said.

Jessie let out an exasperated sigh.

"Dad, I'm not having this conversation again."

"I just don't see why you have to go work there of all places."

"Again, it's the only place that responded to my inquiries.

What am I supposed to do? I've got a PhD and nowhere to work."

"I know. And I know you have all that debt to pay off. I still feel guilty we couldn't do more."

Jessie remained quiet.

"But your mother. She's relapsed all over again. She's staying in bed all day. It's like it's your brother all over again."

Jessie's anger seethed.

"Dad. This is my life. I've lived in Ryan's shadow since I was six years old and I'm sick of it. Mom is not my responsibility. If she's too weak to pull her shit together and you want to keep propping her up, that's fine. But I'm done. Why do you think I've moved out? I can't do it anymore. So either get over it or stop calling."

"Dad?"

He sniffed on the other end.

"I know honey. I know."

She hated when her dad cried.

"Just be careful. Please. I don't know what I would do if something happened to you."

"Dad, it's just a job. I'm just an intern. There's nothing scary about this. I'll be working in a boring lab running routine tests all day. Just relax. I'll be fine."

"Ok hon. Good luck today. Please at least text me when you're done for the day."

"I will dad."

"I love you."

Jessie paused.

"You too."

# # #

### Coffee cont

Jessie kept replaying the conversation in her head as she walked down the sidewalk. She checked her watch again. Plenty of time to stop in for coffee and get a few things done before she'd have to leave for DrekCorp. She still had some furniture shopping to do for her new place.

As much as she felt uneasy about the source of the money, it was nice to finally be able to buy some needs, and even some wants.

Jessie looked up as she approached her usually coffee spot. Something caught her attention. There was a guy dressed much too formally for this part of town. And he was just sitting out front. He had a newspaper but something about it made Jessie feel like he was there for a reason other than catching up on the news. As she walk by, he looked up and nodded at her. She nodded back and pushed through the door inside. A locally owned place, it had become her favorite place to work. All through her studies, she would spend hours here getting through her course work and studying. She sometimes wondered why the only people she would consider friends were the baristas here.

It was a pretty small place. Just a half dozen tables or so. There was a hallway down he right side that took you to the back of the shop where the emergency exit was and the bathrooms.

Jay, the tattooed college student who was always working on Monday mornings, yelled out a hello and asked if she wanted her usual. She nodded and approached to pay.

As she waited for her drink, two more people came into the shop. Jessie glanced up but didn't recognize them as regulars. The first to enter was an older gentleman, balding, with glasses. He was carrying a large, black briefcase. The guy holding the door open for him was significantly younger, more



like her own age. He had sharp, hawk-like features and longish black hair that was slicked back.

Jessie stepped back and went back to reading on her phone while she waited for her drink.

The two men ordered and also stepped back to wait.

The younger man caught a glance of Jessie and stared for second.

"Jessica? Jessica Black?"

Jessie stopped reading and looked up at him.

"Yeah? Do I know you?"

"No, no. But you're starting the internship program this morning at DrekCorp aren't you?"

"Yes," she responded cautiously. She wasn't starting to get tired of people she didn't know knowing things about her.

He put out his hand.

"Hi, I'm Az. Az Brooklyn."

They shook hands.

"I'm starting the internship program today as well. Did you not sign into the online portal?"

Jessie only stared at him.

"Ok. Guess not. Well I did and it has all of the interns in the program listed there along with their pictures so I recognized you. You excited?"

Jessie nodded. She loosened up a bit.

"Just a little nervous."

"Yeah? I'm not really. But this isn't my first time at DrekCorp. My dad is pretty high up so I've been around since I was in middle school. The internship is just a formality to bringing me on full time."

Jessie glanced over his shoulder at the older gentleman.

"Oh, sorry, that was rude of me. Jessica..."

"It's Jessie."

"Oh, ok. Jessie, this is Dr. Tiberius Roe. He's head of the MechEngineering division of DrekCorp. He's one of the most highly regarded neuroscientists in the world. His work is amazing."

Jessie shook hands with him.

"Nice to meet you sir."

He only responded with a tight smile then put his hand back in his pocket.

"I just picked him up from the airport." Az continued. "He's just coming back in from Washington D.C. so he can be here for the intern's orientation."

Dr. Roe retrieved his drink and went and sat down.

Az continued talking to Jessie.

"I'm surprised you didn't get through the online portal to check out the competition. It really is appalling who they've let in this year. It's almost like the pool of participants is

getting worse.”

“Not you of course though. PhD at 21 years old. Not too bad. I probably would have finished then, but I decided to focus in two fields instead of one. It set me back a bit, but gets me even more ready to move up fast inside of DrekCorp.”

“What was your focus again?”

“Molecular biology.”

“Right, right. I remember now. With a focus on rapid cell regeneration and healing. It’ll be interesting to see which team you get placed on. Obviously Dr. Roe’s is the most prestigious, but you can make your mark wherever you land.”

Jessie nodded as if she knew exactly what he was talking about.

Dr. Roe and stood and approached them. He cleared his throat loudly.

Az glanced back at him.

“Oh, right. We have to get going. I have to get Dr. Roe back early.”

Az leaned in close to Jessie and lowered his voice.

“Look. Anything you need. Let me know. It’s important early on to align with the right people so you make it through the early cuts.”

Cuts?

“So let me know if you need anything. I’ll see you later on!”

Az turned and opened the door for Dr. Roe and they both stepped out into the sunlight.

After the door closed, Jessie went back up to the counter, and got Jay's attention.

"You ever seen that guy before?"

"What guy?" Jay said.

"That tall guy, with the slicked hair."

"Hm, no. Never seen him before. Not sure. Why?"

Jessie stared at the door.

"No reason. Just wondering."

She went over to the side of the small coffee shop and picked a table towards the back. She pulled the laptop out of her bag and opened it up. She went back to Ikea and started working on her wishlist again.

After a few minutes she stood and walked back towards the bathrooms. Just as her hand grabbed the knob, the emergency exit door whipped open. Before she could even see what happened, hands were on her dragging her outside.

# # #

### Detour

The man wrapped one arm around her neck and put his other hand over her mouth so her screams were muffled. He dragged her out into the alley behind the building and kicked the door closed.

She was pushed against the wall, a rag was stuffed in her mouth, and the man pulled her hands behind her and zip tied them together. He moved close enough that she could feel his body pressed against her and his breath on her ear.

"Stay silent. Don't fight me or I will break you."

He grabbed her by the neck, turned her around, and pushed her down the alley. She started walking. He kept a hand on her neck like a vice and continued to lead her down the alley.

About thirty yards down, he stopped at another door. Jessie looked up and recognized it as one of the burnt out buildings yet to be gentrified in the neighborhood. It'd been sitting empty for as long as she could remember.

The man, still holding her neck, reached out and pushed the door open.

True terror hit Jessie for the first time. She was being kidnapped and taken to a place where she wouldn't be found for a long time. She suddenly bucked against his hand and then dropped to the ground. This got her out of his grip.

Jessie flipped onto her back.

This was the first good look she'd gotten of her attacker.

He was tall -- over six feet -- and broad. He wore a long brown trench coat, with a hood that he had pulled up over his head. She couldn't see anything of his face.

Jessie kicked out violently at his left knee. The man was too

quick though. He caught her foot easily and then dug his thumb deep into her ankle. Jessie wasn't sure what he hit, but it was like liquid fire had been poured between the bones. She screamed into the rag and kicked at him to release his grip. He pushed harder.

Finally she stopped fighting. Tears flowed down her face from the pain.

He released the pressure.

"Are you done fighting?"

She nodded vigorously.

"Good."

He reached down and grabbed a fistful of the front of her blouse and easily picked her back up onto her feet. He pushed her gently to the door and Jessie walked in without a fight.

# # #

#### Detour cont

Jessie sat against the wall with her hands jammed underneath her. The rag had been removed from her mouth with a promise to return it if she screamed or said anything other than answering his questions.

The large warehouse was dark except for the single light hanging above where the man was working. He had retrieved her phone from her pocket and plugged it into his small laptop while he worked for a few minutes. He had now unplugged her

phone, retrieved a small pouch full of tools, and began working on the phone. She couldn't tell what he was doing. He'd pushed the hood back off his head. She could see now, he was older. His hair was mostly grey and, while he was handsome, his face showed a lot of wear and scars. He pulled out a small leather case from one of his pockets, unwrapped the string, and laid it out in front of him. It was full of small tools. He selected one and started working on her phone.

"So, Jessie, big day for you huh?"

Jessie didn't answer.

"Of all places Jessie, why would you go to work for DrekCorp?"

More silence.

"The last place your brother was seen. Why would you pick that place to work?"

He looked up at her.

"You better answer me."

"I didn't pick it. I didn't even know that's where he had worked. It was the only place that had called me for a job placement."

"A little strange don't you think?"

"What?"

"The only place that is interested in a brilliant young PhD student with top marks and extremely promising early research

can't seem to find a job except for DrekCorp. Strange?"

Jessie shrugged.

"I hadn't thought of it like that."

The man laughed.

"I'm sure you haven't."

He popped the back of her phone off, removed the battery, and pulled out the sim card. He took out another phone from his pocket and inserted her sim card into the back and closed it back up. He then plugged it into his laptop and tapped at some more keys.

"Who are you?" Jessie said.

"My name is Cylis. Cylis Goode."

"Why are you letting me see your face? And telling me your name? I always heard that was a bad sign if you were kidnapped. Are you not planning on letting me live?"

"Well that would defeat the whole point wouldn't it. What if I go to the police?"

"I'm not too worried about that."

Silence fell again as he tapped away on his laptop.

Finally he walked over and knelt down in front of her.

"Here's the thing Jessie. DrekCorp is an evil organization that is doing more damage to this world than you can even imagine. And you're going to help me infiltrate them and bring them down."



Jessie's eyes got big. She started to laugh then caught herself.

"I think you've got the wrong person." she said.

Cylis smiled.

"I doubt that." Then his smile dropped. "Don't you wonder what happened to your brother?"

Jessie's face hardened and she cursed bitterly. She banged her head against the brick wall a couple times.

"That mother fucker won't leave me alone."

"What do you mean?"

"He's done nothing but destroy my entire childhood and the moment I think get out from underneath him, I get pulled right back in. Look Cylis, I don't give a fuck who you are, what your vendetta is against DrekCorp or why you think I would help you, but I can assure you you got the wrong person. All I want is a good job doing my research and to be left alone."

Cylis nodded.

"That's fair. I'll make you a deal ok? I've no interest in keeping a hostage so I'm going to let you go. You can absolutely call the police and report me, though it won't do much good. And you can just show up for your first day this morning and get to work and forget about me."

"All I ask is one thing."

Cylis held up a small flash drive in front of her face.

"Take a look at this before you make any decisions."

He tucked the drive into her front pocket.

Next he held up the phone he had been working on. It looked exactly like her old one, but there were a couple additional ports on the side and it was modded in a way she hadn't seen before. He pulled out the plastic protective case from her old phone and put it on.

Now you couldn't tell any difference from her phone and the one Cylis had switched it for.

"I've transferred your phone number, contacts, and files from your phone to this one. It's important that you take this phone with you to DrekCorp. They are going to scan your phone when you get there and it will allow them to track you and everything you do. This phone has the ability to block them and spoof your location and activity. I've also put my own contact information in here under 'C Goode'. Only use this phone to contact me. Anything else will put us both at risk."

He tucked the phone in her pocket alongside the flash drive.

"The next move is up to you Jessie. I'm going to pack up, cut you loose, and leave. You can step out and immediately call the police if you want. But all I ask is you take five minutes to look at that flash drive on your own. It might change your mind."

Cylis closed the laptop, slid it inside of his coat, grabbed

the small tool pouch. He helped stand Jessie up, snipped off the zip ties, and turned towards the back door.

She stood frozen as she watched him pull up his hood and exit.

She stood alone in the dark warehouse.

# # #

### Hidden Phone

Jessie finally broke out of her stupor and frantically dug the phone out of her pocket. She dialed 9-1-1 and then pauses with her thumb hovering over the green dial button.

She reached into her pocket with her other hand and pulled out the small, silver thumb drive.

If she called the police, they'd show up, confiscate the phone, and take the flash drive. She'd never get a chance to know what Cylis thought was so important for her to see.

Jessie looked back and forth between the phone and the drive.

Finally, she exited the call and put both into her pocket.

She walked to the back door, and pushed it open tentatively.

She looked around and stepped out into the alley. She walked back to the back of the coffee shop and found the door wedged open so she could enter the same way Cylis had grabbed her.

She opened the door and peered down the hallway.

Everything was the same. She could hear Jay taking someone's order from the front and even see her laptop and bag sitting untouched where she had left them.

Jessie walked to the front of the coffee shop. She glanced outside and saw the same large man in the black suit reading the same newspaper, obviously in no hurry to leave. She sat at her table, plugged the drive into her laptop, and double clicked the icon to open the contents. She began reading through them.

# # #

### Big Decision

Jessie was walking aimlessly down the street in no particular direction. She was going slow enough that people had to walk around her to get where they were going. A few times people shot her dirty looks, but she didn't notice.

Her eyes stayed on the horizon, staring through the buildings, shuffling along down the sidewalk.

She hadn't even gotten halfway through all of the material on the drive before she snapped.

She'd slammed her laptop closed and then shoved all of her stuff haphazardly into her bag. She had stood unsteadily, her head swimming, before stumbling out the door.

Jay had called after her to see if she was okay but she had ignored him.

What was she going to do now?

She wasn't sure what everything she saw meant, but it was big. Far bigger than she could have imagined.

First of all, her brother was involved in a top secret project for DrekCorp.

Ryan had gone to Georgia Tech on a full scholarship right out of high school. He was one of the few in the state that scored a full 1600 on the SAT and treated the Advanced Placement courses at his high school as if they were elementary courses. He finished his double major in chemical and mechanical engineering in two and a half years. He had planned on going straight into his PhD but DrekCorp stepped in and had offered him a position that he couldn't refuse.

Her mom and dad had rarely opened up about Ryan, but this was always where it stopped. It was around two years later that he had disappeared.

Obviously, up until recently Jessie had never even known where he worked and now her dad had made it clear that they thought Ryan's disappearance had something to do with DrekCorp.

And from what Jessie had just seen, they were right.

There was nothing that proved that DrekCorp had killed Ryan, but it was obvious he was in deep.

What Cylis had given her was pieced together bits of things that showed many of the projects her brother was working on when he disappeared. Projects that Jessie was sure couldn't be legal.

Jessie's own Biomedical Engineering masters degree didn't help

her understand all of it, but she could make out enough to show her that these were weapons that were far beyond what any government or organization had or was even close to working on.

Bio-nano diseases that multiplied through the bloodstream.

Advanced, precision nuclear weapons. Mind control devices.

Jessie stopped walking several blocks from the coffee shop and ducked into a narrow alley between buildings. She dropped her bag and put her hands on her knees, focusing on not puking.

What was she going to do?

There was no way she could go to work for a company like this.

She didn't want to contribute to this kind of research.

But at the same time, maybe she could uncover what really happened to her brother. She could finally put that ghost to rest.

The phone in her pocket started ringing, but she barely registers it.

There was a short pause after it rang to voicemail, then it started ringing again.

She dug it out of her pocket and it showed "C Goode".

She answered.

"What?"

"Look up now, toward the street."

Jessie turned around and looked back to the street she had

just stumbled out of. The big man in the dark suit that had been sitting outside of the coffeeshop came into view. He looked down the alleyway just as Jessie ducked behind a large garbage can. He looked around for a few more seconds then kept moving out of view.

"What the hell was that?"

"That, Jessie, is why I grabbed you the way I did out of the coffeeshop. They've had people on you off and on since you accepted the internship. They're watching all of you. For me to do my part, I have to remain unseen."

"And what is your part in all of this Cylis? Why'd you show me all of that shit? Why'd you grab me? What are you getting out of this?"

"I have my own reasons for wanting to take DrekCorp down, but for now, all you need to focus on is the only way you'll ever find out what really happened to your brother is to show up for your internship this morning and get started."

Jessie started sobbing.

All these years of pushing back the tears, knuckling down and getting to work, all of that came roaring to the surface.

"I thought this would be over." she said. "I just had to escape from my parents house and I could leave them and Ryan and all of this shit behind and now I'm deeper than ever. Why should I care what happened to him? I have my own life to

live.”

“That’s still your decision Jessie. Call the police. Tell them about me mugging you, give them the phone and the drive and your part will be done.”

Jessie paused for a full minute, composing herself again.

“This is too big for me Cylis. What can I possibly do against a multi national conglomerate like DrekCorp? I’m not a spy. I’m not some rogue agent. I’m just a nerd who needs a job.”

“You don’t have to worry about that for now. Just go to work, act normal, and keep a low profile. I’ll get in contact with you when there’s something that needs to be done.”

“So what’s it going to be Jessie? Are you in or not?”

Jessie let out a big sigh.

“Yeah, Cylis I’m in. Let’s bring these fuckers down.”

“That’s my girl. Now you need to be at DrekCorp in 52 minutes and you look like you’ve been mugged or something. Go clean yourself up and get to work.”

The line disconnected.

Jessie looked up quickly and squinted way across the street and another building. She thought she saw a hooded figure just drop out of sight.

# # #



Starting at DrekCorp

Jessie stepped out the alley and looked around. The neighborhood was still new to her and she needed anywhere with a public bathroom and a mirror so she could straighten up. A few blocks down she saw the bus stop and the bus approaching. She checked her watch.

"Shit."

She shoved her bag under her arm and took off running. This was the last 110 bus that would get her to the DrekCorp office in time. She made it just as the bus was closing the door, but she must have looked sorry enough because the driver reopened the door and let her on. She dug through her mess of a bag, found her bus ticket, and scanned herself on. She found a seat and dumped herself in it.

Jessie looked out the window as they were pulling away just in time to see the big man in the black suit turn the corner to the bus stop.

She sat back, breathed a heavy sigh, and allowed herself to relax for a minute.

She opened her eyes again and looked around.

What she used to love about the city suddenly felt oppressive. Instead of the eclectic makeup of the passengers exciting her, she wondered who was sent to follow her. Instead of the big buildings downtown making her feel exhilarated, they seemed ominous. What secrets were they hiding? What evils were they

producing in the bowels of all that steel and concrete?

She dug into her pocket and pulled out the modded phone Cylis had given her. It was definitely made well. She would have never known by the outside that it was any different than her real phone.

She turned on the screen and swiped through her apps looking for anything different.

On the last page, there was a single new app titled Centipede. She tapped on it, and it opened up what looked like an old game she'd seen in one of those arcades with all the old stand up machines. In this one, you had this snake that chased around little dots and kept getting longer.

She played it for a few minutes then shut it down.

Weird.

She put the phone in her pocket just as the bus pulled up to her stop. She moved to the front, thanked the driver again for stopping for her, and stepped out onto the street.

The DrekCorp office is a couple blocks away.

She checked her watch.

She was cutting it close, but there was no way she could show up looking like she did now. Between Cylis dragging her around, her losing her shit in the alley, and then sprinting to catch the bus... she wasn't exactly on track to make a great first impression.

She saw a Starbucks just down the street and rushed down the sidewalk towards it. She would straighten up best she could in the bathroom and then get to DrekCorp right after.

She rushed through the door without looking and bumped right into a guy coming the other way. His coffee hit the floor and exploded. Luckily, most of it hit the floor instead of people. "Shit. Watch where you're going!" Jessie said.

The guy looked up at her. He was pale and wearing an ill-fitting suit and thick glasses sitting on the bridge of his nose.

"Oh. Um. Sorry." he said.

"Ah, jeez, here."

Jessie dug around in her bag and put a ten dollar bill in his hand, then turned and rushed to the back of the store to the bathroom. She tried the handle for the girl's bathroom, but it was locked. She glanced over her shoulder then pulled open the door to the men's room and locked it behind her.

She leaned hard against the fake marble sink catching her breath.

When she finally looked up at herself, she was appalled at what she see saw.

Jessie was never one to worry to much about her looks. Makeup was a rarity and her hair was in a perpetual bun. But this was still a knew low.

And on her first day at a job too.

She quickly pulled her hair down and re-did her bun to put the crazy fly-aways in place. She wetted a paper towel and rubbed off the dirt and smudges on her face. She pulled at her shirt to straighten out some of the wrinkles and tucked it tighter into her jeans and wiped them as clean as possible.

She took a deep breath, blew it out and looked at herself in the mirror.

An hour ago she was waltzing down Peachtree Street from her fancy apartment to buy some snobby coffee. Now she was heading off to the corporation that murdered her brother to play spy. How did this turn so fast?

She put her bag on the counter, straighten out the contents, then put it back over her shoulder. On her way out, she got more than one dirty look, but Jessie didn't notice. She had a new job to get to.

# # #

#### Starting at DrekCorp cont

Jessie stood outside of the DrekCorp building and looked up to take in it's massive size.

The DrekCorp building was the largest in downtown Atlanta.

DrekCorp had offices in most of the major cities around the world, and even additional satellite offices her in the city, but this was the main hub of operations.

Jessie had come down town a week before just to see the building she would be working on. At that time the building had seemed powerful and exciting, but now it seemed to be an ominous monster waiting to devour her the first chance it got. She glanced at her watch and started walking quickly to the front doors. She was already a few minutes late.

She approached the front desk and the receptionist about where the interns should be. The older woman pursed her lips.

"Running late on your first day?"

"Yes mam. It's been quite the morning."

"Well honey, they don't take much to excuses here. You better clean that up if you plan on sticking around. The room you're looking for is down the hall to the right. It'll be labeled 'Room 104'. Go in the second door, not the first cause it'll squeak and announce your late arrival to the whole room."

"Thank you so much." Jessie said.

The woman nodded at her and Jessie hurried down the hall.

She kept checking her watch, willing the minute hands to go backwards. Maybe they would still be doing a meet-and-greet and she didn't miss anything.

Jessie finally got to Room 104, grabbed the door, and just as she pulled remembered what the receptionist had told her, but it was too late.

Sure enough, the door let out a loud squeak and two-thirds of

the people sitting in the room turned to look at her. The woman speaking at the front paused and stared back at Jessie for a full five seconds, which seemed like an eternity. Finally, the woman began speaking again, the rest of the interns turned back around in their chairs, and Jessie closed the door as quietly as possible. There were only a few chairs available in the entire room, but thankfully one was at the very end at the back row. She quickly walked over and slid into the chair, and let out a sigh. She looked to her left at the other intern she sat next to, forcing a smile, hoping to find a friend, and her face immediately fell.

The glasses, the ill fitting suit... it was the guy she'd bumped into rushing into the Starbucks.

He smiled meekly at her.

"Oh my god," she whispered hastily. "I am so so sorry. I was freaking out because I was a mess and I was late and it was totally my fault and I was a such a bitch and..."

He held up his hand to stop her and put a finger to his lips to shush her. Jessie stopped blabbering.

He leaned over and whispered much quieter.

"Look. It's ok. I get it. No need to draw more attention to yourself."

Jessie gave a smile of relief and mouthed out Thank You.

He shrugged and put out his hand.

"Ernst." he said.

Jessie took his hand in hers.

"Jessie."

Ernst held her eyes for just a moment, then looked away, embarrassed.

Jessie smiled at him a bit longer, before looking up to the front trying to catch up on what she missed.

# # #

### Orientation

Now that Jessie was settled, she could actually notice what was happening around her. The room was bigger than a meeting room but smaller than a conference. The hundred interns just about filled it out. The walls were bare except for the occasional DrekCorp logo.

Up front was a small, glass podium and a projector screen that came down from the ceiling and reflected the slides the woman up front was going through.

The presenter was in her mid forties, black hair, and gorgeous. She wore a tight white blouse and a black skirt that came to just above her knees. Her heels added another few inches to her height. Jessie guessed all the men in the room weren't minding the presentation.

"Let's go over a few of the rules for the DrekCorp Internship program." she was saying.

Ernst leaned over.

"That is Rebecca Rohn. She's the head of the program and makes all of the final decisions. Each of the department heads report directly to her. From the sounds of things, she's going to be tough."

"All of the rules are mandatory and non-negotiable. Any breaking of the rules will result in immediate expulsion from the program."

"First, every single thing you see or hear is confidential. You'll be signing a non-disclosure agreement in a few minutes, but I want to reinforce that it is iron-clad and we will prosecute to the full extent of the law. We will make no exceptions on this, and there are people currently sitting in prison because of breaking this rule."

"DrekCorp is working on hundreds, if not thousands, of top secret projects and our secrecy is what keeps us at the top of our industries and makes sure we don't lose our ability to stay that way."

"To draw a hard line, here is what you are allowed to say: 'I work at DrekCop'. Anything else about what you do, the position you hold, the projects you are working on, etcetera, is all confidential."

"Second, you will submit any mobile phones, laptops, or other devices that you bring into DrekCorp to a thorough scanning



and examination. Also, at anytime your devices can be confiscated and checked without cause."

"Lastly, today you we be put through a short physical to ensure you are in the best of health and able to handle the rigorous environment of the DrekCorp internship program. Break yourselves into groups of three then get in line to checkin and begin."

"Here at DrekCorp you get the opportunity to work in cutting edge science on projects that change the course of this world. You get paid well and work with the greatest minds in science. For that opportunity, we ask for your loyalty, secrecy, and dedication."

"As you get assigned into your various departments, you'll learn more from your department heads, but I'll end with this."

"There are currently one hundred of you as part of this program. There are only twenty jobs available at the end of the three month internship. That means eighty of you will be let go. Each of your department heads and myself will be watching your work. Everything is taken into account. The hours you put in. The way your research is organized. The number of trials you run. All of it is taken into account. We will give you everything you need to succeed, it's your job to show us what you can do with it."

"Good luck."

The interns broke out into applause, but Jessie just sat there.

Applause? Has everyone started kissing ass already?

As the applause died down, Jessie began packing her bag and gathering her things. Ernst pulled out his iPhone and started scrolling through his Twitter feed.

"Hey, have you seen this?"

Jessie looked up.

"Looks like something happened at the airport this morning.

The place is swarming with FBI."

Ernst showed her a video clip obviously taken on someone's phone standing in the crowd.

There were dozens of FBI agents running around. It was hard to tell in the video, but it seemed like they were blocking access to the terminal.

Ernst pulled back his phone and tapped a couple times.

"Listen to this. 'While there is no official word yet as to the reason for the heavy FBI presence, we are hearing word that someone broke into the secured area of the airport. We are unsure if it was a terrorist attempt or something else, but the entire airport has been shut down with no flights taking off or landing.' Crazy huh?"

"Yeah, that's weird. Is the FBI usually called in for stuff

like this? Seems a bit overkill."

"I dunno."

"Hey there."

Both Ernst and Jessie looked up. A guy with dark hair and eyebrows had turned around in his seat in front of them.

"Hey." said Jessie.

Ernst sat silent.

"Can I be your third?" he said.

"Third?"

"Yeah," he pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "The lady said to break into groups of three, and I don't want to get stuck as the one left over, so I want to throw in with you two."

"Um, sure." Jessie said.

"Great! My name is Alex." he said putting out his hand.

"Looking forward to getting poked and prodded with you."

# # #

## Orientation Part 2

Jessie, Ernst, and Alex worked their way down the corridor with the other interns. Jessie hadn't known about the physical exam, but she seemed to be the only one. She kept getting this

sense that all of the other people in the intern program were further along than her. They knew more about what was going on and she was obviously one of the youngest in the program.

As they moved through the DrekCorp offices, Jessie couldn't help but notice the money that had been poured into everything. Every door had a high end keycard access system. Many of the rooms they walked by had floor-to-ceiling windows installed, and she could see all of the equipment in each room.

Coming from the university setting, it seemed like they were always trying to beg, borrow, and steal the money to get the equipment they needed. And what equipment they had, was always being overused by all of the students.

Here it was completely different. The nicest of everything was available.

Despite everything she had learned in the past couple of hours about DrekCorp, Jessie couldn't help but get excited about working here. There was so much opportunity to advance her research. At the university, she was constantly held back by funding and course work. Here she would be free to, even encouraged, to spare nothing in pursuing her work.

Maybe she could make a difference working here after all. Maybe Cylis was being paranoid with everything he had said. These all seemed like good people working in an environment

setup to learn and advance science.

Alex and Ernst had been talking as they walked, and they now pulled Jessie into the conversation.

"Where do you think you'll get assigned?" Ernst said.

Jessie gave him a blank look.

"What do you mean?"

"The department you'll be assigned to. It's based on the intake exam you took along with your previous research and expertise."

Jessie struggled to keep her face straight.

What intake exam? I didn't taken any exam. The welcome letter just arrived in the mail and I showed up.

"I'm not sure. Where do you think you'll end up?"

"I'm really hoping for the Biotech team. It seems to be the part of DrekCorp that is focused on really helping people. I'm definitely avoiding the MechEngineering as it sounds like a fancy way of saying 'building bigger bombs'. There's also CompEdge which I'm more than qualified for or the SocioCivil department which is just fancy sociology research."

Ernst shrugged.

"Who knows really."

"You just want to make sure you're on the winning team," Alex said.

"Winning? How do you win at research?" Jessie said.

Alex shot her a side long glance.

"You're not in the university anymore Jessie. DrekCorp is a business. They want to make money. The entire internship program is built around finding the best minds to build new shit that DrekCorp can profit from. So our job is to show we can do that. That's why there'll only be twenty of us left at the end of a year. If we can produce in this kind of high stress environment, you're cut quickly."

"However, from what I've heard, they treat each team of interns as a whole to their department. So if your department is doing well, then you're a lot less likely to get cut."

"How do you know all this?" Jessie said.

Alex shrugged.

"You pick up things here and there."

By this point they'd reached the front of the line and the three of them moved forward to check-in.

There was a plump rosy cheeked lady that looked to be in her late fifties was manning a standing desk. She was working on what looked like the latest version iMac.

Even the secretaries have nice equipment here.

"Hello there. I'm Betty." she said. "Let's get you checked in and moving. Go ahead and give me your IDs."

The three of them fished their IDs out and handed them over.

"Ernst Kelley."

Betty tapped on her keyboard for a bit.

"Ok, I have you here. Any allergies, medications, or health issues not already reported? Great."

She switched the IDs over.

"Alexandros Milanos."

She went through the same short process with Alex then waved him through.

"Ok... who have we got here."

She turned the last ID over.

"Jessie..."

Betty paused and looked up at her.

"Black?"

"Yes."

Betty stared at her for a long moment. She seemed to be deciding something.

"Did you have a brother?"

Did? What did she say 'did'?

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

Betty pursed her lips, trying to keep from saying anything else.

"No reason. I think I may have met him at some point."

"Here? At DrekCorp?"

"No, no, no. It probably wasn't even him. I'm sure there's lots of Blacks in the phone book."

Betty handed back Jessie's ID.

"Ok, move along that's good."

"You didn't even ask me about my medical stuff."

"Oh, right, well I'm sure our info is good. Go ahead."

"But..."

Betty's tone changed drastically. The jolliness disappeared and it was replaced by fear.

"Please, just move along. It's nothing."

Jessie slowly took back her ID, but couldn't break eye contact with Betty. Betty shook her head slightly then looked up to the next group of three interns.

"Next please."

Jessie moved on through check-in and rejoined Ernst and Alex.

"What was all that about?" Alex said.

"She knows something," Jessie said, still lost in her own thoughts.

"About what?"

"Look, this isn't public knowledge and I don't want it getting around, but my brother used to work here."

"So?" Ernst said. "What does that matter?"

"Right, exactly it shouldn't. The issue is he disappeared while he was working here and nobody has seen him since. I didn't even know until... recently... that this was the company he worked for at the time."



"Did DrekCorp have something to do with his disappearance or something?" Alex asked.

"No, of course not."

Jessie had answered a little too quickly.

"I mean, there's no reason to think that. There was no big police investigation and nothing that I know of ever pointed at DrekCorp. I was only eight so who knows what my parents didn't tell me. But again, it shouldn't be a big deal right? My brother was just one of thousands of employees here.

But..."

"What?"

"I dunno. Betty acted really strange when she saw my last name. And she asked if I 'did' have a brother. Like past-tense. Like she knew exactly who he was and that he's not around anymore. But when I asked her about it, she just played it off and acted like it was nothing. I tried to press her a little more, but it seemed like she was terrified to talk about it."

The three stood for a bit in silence.

"Next!"

They looked up and the next part of the line had opened up and they hurried forward.

# # #

Processing

Panic rose up in Jessie like bile as she approached the next station.

It looked like they were being run through some kind of high-tech airport checkin, except the people manning the machines weren't the sad looking bunch that make up the TSA. The people dealing directly with the interns seemed nice enough, just like Betty had, but there was plenty of security around too. Jessie started emptying her pockets into her handbag. She paused briefly with the phone.

What had she been thinking? Some random guy kidnaps her, gives her a phone, then promises it will be fine? What if she gets caught with a modded phone? What if he put a bomb in there or something?

She set her bag down on the conveyor and stepped back. It moved through the X-ray machine and she stepped to the other side waiting on her bag to come through.

She tried to stand still and wait without bringing attention to herself, but she was having trouble. Every time one of the guards shifted, she startled and wanted to sprint for the door. Of course, she was far too deep into the DrekCorp bowels now that there was no way she could easily find her way to the front door.

Her bag passed through the scan. One of the attendants picked up her bag.

"Is this yours?" she said.

Jessie couldn't get any noise to escape her throat so she merely nodded.

The woman took her bag to a table and opened it up. She pulled out Jessie's laptop and laid it on the table. Then she started rummaging around in the bottom.

Jessie longed to scream, flip over the table, and run.

Finally the woman pulled out Jessie's mini voice recorder.

"Oh, that was it," the woman said. "We weren't sure what was popping up there."

She put the laptop back in, dropped in the recorder, and handed Jessie's bag back with a smile.

Jessie forced a smile and grabbed her bag. She turned to walk away quickly and bumped directly into the back of someone.

"So sorry," she said.

The man turned and she immediately recognized the slicked back hair and lanky frame.

"Oh, hello again," said Az in his oily voice. "Good to see you made it in alright this morning."

"What do you mean by that?" Jessie asked suspiciously thinking about the man following her this morning.

"Nothing," he said. "Merely making conversation. Let me introduce you to a couple colleagues of mine. This is Axil and Tad. They came up with me through my PhD program and I got

them in for then internship program.”

Jessie nodded at them. Axil looked just as slimy as Az but a blond version. Tad looked more like a bodyguard than a scientist with this thick build and menacing stare.

Ernst appeared at Jessie’s side after coming through the screening.

“Hiya, my name is Ernst.”

He held out his hand to Az.

Az looked at his hand then took all of him in with one glance and turned back to Jessie. Ernst, looking embarrassed, lowered his hand.

“So Jessie, any idea what department you’ll be assigned to?”

he continued without waiting for an answer. I’ll, of course, be in MechEngineering. My father is the head of the entire division and can’t wait to have me on his team. That’s the whole reason I’m going through this formality of an internship program anyway. Jessie, I could put in a good word -- Alex!”

Jessie followed his eyes over her shoulders to see Alex coming through the screening adjusting his bag back onto his shoulders.

“Hey Az, great to see you!”

Az brushed past Jessie and gave Alex a hug.

“Yeah I didn’t see you in the orientation, I wondered if you bailed.”

"No, just slipped in right at nine so I sat in the back. It's great to see you though. Thanks again for getting me that letter of recommendation from your dad. Definitely helped put me over the edge."

"Of course, of course, anything for a fellow Brewer."

They both caught and turned back to Jessie.

"I was just saying to Jessie here that I could put in a good word for her to get her into MechEngineering. It's by far the most profitable wing of DrekCorp and they always keep more interns on than the other departments."

Az put his arm around Alex's shoulders.

"What do you say Jessie?" Az said. "Want to join Alex and I in MechEngineering?"

Jessie was quiet just long enough to make everyone uncomfortable.

"Do you think you could get Ernst here in with us?"

Az looked at Ernst and back to Jessie.

"I'm not sure why you're so attached to this guy," he said, once again ignoring Ernst's presence. "He barely graduated out of his online master's program and flunked out of the software engineering PhD program at Tech. Not sure he's the one you want to be throwing in with. Not exactly a great first career move."

Again, Jessie let the air between them hang empty. Ernst

shuffled his feet nervously.

"You know Jessie, he's probably right --"

Jessie held up her hand to silence him and Ernst went quiet.

"You know Az, I really appreciate your advice. And I'd like you to take it, roll it up really tight, and shove it up your ass."

Az's mouth dropped open. Axil stifled a laugh, but composed himself quickly as Az shot him a look. Tad looked as if he wanted to wring Jessie's neck.

Az dropped his arm off Alex's shoulder and took a step towards Jessie, but she held her ground.

"You better be careful who you call friends," he said in a low, barely controlled whisper, "and, more importantly, who you call enemies."

Jessie leaned in until they were almost nose-to-nose.

"And you," she said at full volume, "should suck my fat dick."

Ernst barked out a loud laugh. Other interns milling around within ear shot all turned to look at Jessie and Az. More than a few of them were laughing.

Az blanched and looked as if the top of his head was about to explode.

He pushed past Jessie and Ernst angrily and Axil and Tad followed after.

Az got about twenty feet away before he turned back to Jessie

and opened his mouth to speak.

Jessie put up her finger to stop him and said, "Ah, ah," then pointed to her crotch.

This time, the other interns roared with laughter. Az turned and stalked away.

She looked at Ernst, and they both burst out laughing.

Alex came up.

"Not sure that was a such a good idea Jessie."

"Why's that? Don't want me hurting your buddy's feelings?"

"It's not that..."

"I'm surprised you didn't head off with them. Seems you two are best friends."

Alex moved in close to Jessie.

"Look, I get it. You think Az is an ass. But you're new to DrekCorp and don't exactly know how it all works. If I were you, I'd keep a low profile until you get your bearings.

There's no reason to piss off people with power on day one."

Jessie tried brush off what he said like it was no big deal, but she remembered what Cylis had said about keeping a low profile. Publicly embarrassing one of the department head's sons probably didn't fit that direction pretty well.

"Ok, yeah I hear you," she said. "Come on, let's get the physical over with."

With that, the three of them headed down the hallway to their

next stop.

# # #

Processing Part 2

"Seriously, what is the point of this?" Jessie said.

The three of them had been ushered into a small, square room.

The walls were empty and white with the exception of a large two-way mirror on one of the walls. The nurse that had ushered them in assured them there was no one on the other side of the glass.

The only thing in the room was a table sitting against one of the walls with three folded up hospital gowns.

Their job was to change into the gowns.

"Do they really need to do physicals on us or is their way of driving home the point that we get no privacy when we work for DrekCorp?"

Alex shrugged walked over to the table and started removing his clothes. Jessie, not to be out-done, stepped up next to him and pulled off her shirt.

Ernst, for his part, picked up one of the gowns, went to the corner of the room and turned his back to the other two.

Alex started unbuckling his pants while Jessie kicked off her shoes.

"So Alex, what's the story with Az?"



Alex shrugged.

"We went to high school and college together. Were on the debate teams together, though not partnered up. He was one of those guys that seemed to be everywhere. It doesn't hurt that his family drips with money and doesn't mind spreading it around to make Az's life easier."

"You two were close?"

"I don't think anyone is close to Az. But being in his shadow has perks. My family wasn't the wealthiest but both my parents worked their asses off to put me in the best schools. Being in good with Az was the most pragmatic way to get the most out of their investment."

By this time Jessie was down to her bra and panties and Alex was in his boxer briefs. Ernst was hopping on one foot trying to get a sock off.

Jessie tried to avert her eyes, but she couldn't help noticing Alex's tanned Greek skin and obvious abs.

Alex caught her looking, and she glanced away clearing her throat.

"Could you be more noncommittal?" she said.

Alex dropped his boxers and unfolded one of the gowns.

"What can I say? Az isn't my best friend but running in his crowd has always worked out well for me. I made it through my PhD program by the skin of my teeth while working two jobs. My

grades weren't impressive enough to make it into this program, but one call to Az made it happen. I'm not really in a position to be picky."

Jessie and Alex both turned to check on Ernst, naked under their hospital gowns. Ernst finally turned around, tying it behind him.

"You're supposed to be naked under there. What's with the underwear?" Alex said.

"Fuck 'em," Ernst said, "the tighty-whities are staying on."

# # #

#### Sorting - MIDDLE BUILD

Jessie ascended the steps to the front of DrekCorp for the second time. She had been nervous getting ready this morning. She changed several times, finally deciding on the more comfortable black skinny jeans, black and white striped dress shirt, with a light sweater over top -- also black. She ditched the heels for flats though since her job would be mainly working standing up in a lab.

For some reason, day two at DrekCorp seemed so much more real than the first day. She'd had time to worry about what department she had been assigned to and about any blowback she'd get from needling Az. And the stress of having Cylis lurking in the background was starting to get to her. What was he going to ask her to do? She had texted him last night just

to touch base, but he had never responded.

She pushed through the front door, this time a full thirty minutes early, and checked in at the front desk. The receptionist checked Jessie's ID and then handed her an envelope and pointed her down the hall. Jessie opened the envelope as she began walking and a badge slid out. It had her headshot from the day before and "BioTech" across the top. So she was BioTech.

It makes sense.

Her biomechanics major with a focus in rapid healing seemed to fit well with the BioTech department. She still wondered, though, at the comment Alex had made about the exam. Jessie hadn't taken any exam. In fact, she didn't remember even applying for the DrekCorp internship. She had assumed it was in the stack of the many places she had applied to or her resume had gotten forwarded along. But all of the other interns seemed to have gone through a much more rigorous process of phone interviews, exams, and complicated applications.

All Jessie had ever seen was the acceptance letter.

She shook it off and continued down the hall. When she found the correct door, she tried to pull the handle but it was locked. There was a flat black pad next to the handle on the wall, so she swiped her badge across it. The small red light

flicked to green and she tried the door again. This time it swung open.

Jessie stepped in to an almost empty room. She was the first intern to arrive, but an older man turned around when she entered. He was tall, well over six feet, and thick through the middle. His lab coat was open in the front and she could see his pleated khakis and wrinkled plaid button up shirt. He had thick red hair, thick red eyebrows, and thick glasses perched on his nose.

"Good morning," he said, "I'm the head of the BioTech department, Craig Castle."

"Hi. Good morning. I'm Jessica Black. Jessie."

They shook hands.

"Great to meet you Jessie. Very excited to have you be a part of our team here. This is the year BioTech outstrips MechEngineering, I'm sure of it," he smiled at her.

"By the way, I knew Ryan while he worked here. Not very well since we weren't in the same departments, but I met him a few times. Seemed like a very nice man, and, by all accounts, brilliant. I'm excited to have you here though. Should be fun to work together."

Jessie didn't answer. She wasn't sure how to answer. Betty would barely act like Ryan ever existed and here was Craig talking genially about him.

"Whatever happened to Ryan though? I'm assuming he left DrekCorp because I stopped seeing him around. Where is he now?"

Jessie opened her mouth to answer, though unsure of what to say, but before she could speak the door beeped and several more interns filed in. Craig seemed to immediately lose the thread of conversation and approached the others to introduce himself.

Jessie stood rooted in place.

The ghost had followed her.

No matter how much she had tried to leave her brother's ghost behind at her parents house, it followed her to her new job and he had already come up twice. When would she ever be able to escape him and just live her life?

Over the next several minutes, the rest of the interns trickled in. Ernst was one of the next to arrive and Jessie made a beeline for him. They made small talk until right at nine the door opened a final time and Alex stepped in.

"What are you doing here?" Jessie said.

"What do you mean?"

"I figured you'd be in MechEngineering with your buddy Az. He said he'd put a good word in for you."

"Maybe I wanted to be in BioTech."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

Alex looked at Ernst.

"After our physical I decided I'd follow that bony ass anywhere."

Alex smiled and winked at Ernst.

Ernst's eyes went wide. He started to stammer out an answer but Alex start laughing. Jessie rolled her eyes.

"Alright y'all," Craig said, "gather around here."

All twenty-five of the BioTech interns crowded in to hear their new boss.

"Each of you were selected because you showed promise in your particular research field and DrekCorp thinks you can be an asset to our team. I hand selected many of you to be in my department. The goal is keep DrekCorp at the cutting edge of bio-technology research. I, in particular, am interested in pushing forward the edge of what we can do in the medical field. In other departments inside of DrekCorp they're looking to build bigger and better weapons, but here in BioTech we want to help people."

"Now here's the thing. There are twenty-five of you here today. In three months, there will be twelve. At the end of the six month program, I hope to keep five of you on, but even that is a stretch."

"This laboratory is yours to use. It's available 24/7. We have bunks and shower facilities available if you end up working

through the night. You can access the current status of research on the various BioTech projects and I'm here to help as much as I can. You can also strike out on your own and do your own research projects, but keep in mind this important fact -- DrekCorp is a business. If you want to impress the higher ups, keep your focus on creating something that will move the overall company agenda forward. This isn't about research for research sake. You're not in the academic world anymore."

"Ok," Craig clapped his hands together, "it's time to get to work. Let's see what you can do."

With that, the meeting was over. The interns all looked a little shell shocked. Their directions were pretty vague.

"Move the DrekCorp agenda forward." It was also pretty obvious that they wanted them working around the clock to get ahead.

Jessie could see how this would quickly become her life.

She tapped Ernst on the arm and motioned for him to follow her. Once they were out of earshot of the other interns,

Jessie huddled up with him.

"I was working on something towards the end of my PhD program that was starting to look promising, but I ran out of time and budget. I don't think that's going to be a problem here and it's definitely something that DrekCorp would be interested in."

"What is it?"

"It's going to sound crazy..."

"Try me."

Jessie looked over her shoulder instinctively to make sure no one was listening.

"What do you know about sea sponges?"

Ernst's eyes narrowed.

"Not much."

"Sea sponges are one of the few species on the planet that can regenerate."

"What? Like a lizard re-growing it's tail?"

"No, way more than that. If you cut off a sea sponge at the base, it will regrow stronger and more vibrant. If you chop up a sea sponges and then let it settle back to the ocean floor, it can reattach and grow a whole new sponge. Hell, in the right conditions, just a handful of the sponges cells -- any of their cells -- will transform into the pinacocyte cells that form the basis for an entirely new sponge."

Jessie was getting excited now.

"This means a sponge can experience an enormous amount of physical trauma and then completely regenerate."

"Is this new research?"

"No, they've known this since at least early last century."

Ernst nodded, but stared at Jessie blankly.



"I don't get where you're going with this."

"What if we could transfer these properties into humans? Think of the implications. Humans could survive almost any kind of physical trauma if they were able to regenerate new cells rapidly. We could potentially even bring people back from the dead. If someone's heart stops and we could rebuild a new heart for them, it could keep them going for years longer."

"And you actually think you can do this?"

"I don't know yet. I had just started following the thread of research when it got shut down but I was definitely showing early signs of progress."

"I don't know about this," Ernst said, "It sounds pretty science-fiction. What if the whole thing tanks? We'll be the first ones out of the intern program. We'll probably be laughed out of the building."

"Yeah," Jessie said, "it's definitely more risky than some of the other projects you could throw in with. But this is why I became a scientist. I don't want to iterate on old discoveries. I want to do something new."

Ernst chewed on his lip thinking. Jessie had looked up at the rest of the room and missed the long looks Ernst had staring at her.

"Ok." he said. "I'm in."

Before Jessie could answer, Alex spoke up. He had walked up

behind Ernst just in time to hear him.

"Great! In for what?"

Jessie and Ernst shot each other looks. Alex was definitely far from trustworthy, but they could use his research experience and help. Jessie also remembered his speech about making friends instead of enemies.

"Ok, I'll explain it again. But I warn you, you're gonna think I'm nuts."

Alex smiled as he listened.

# # #

### Getting Worse

Jessie struggled to get her key into the deadbolt. She was exhausted. Another eighteen hour day in an almost two week stretch of long days since the internship had started. She had immediately gotten to work with Alex and Ernst. The first thing she did was share all of her initial research, which wasn't much, that she had done on her own. The first thing they needed to do was start isolating the specific cells that started the regeneration process in sea sponges. They had to have enough of them to start their experiments.

Unfortunately, they were having to share all of the equipment with the other interns. While DrekCorp had top-of-the-line everything and the best experimental equipment money could

buy, that didn't mean there was unlimited capacity.

This meant they kept having to submit their jobs to be run through the processes and wait sometimes twelve hours for the results. This was especially frustrating if there were mistakes in their calculations. They'd wait for their processes to be run and the results were basically a dump of everything they did wrong. Then they were back to the original experiment looking for their error so they could run it again. It was the type of work that made time fly, but Jessie's body could only take so much. It was pretty obvious DrekCorp was pushing them to see what they could handle. Jessie got the feeling the cut wasn't going to just be on merit of work. It was also going to be how much you are willing to sacrifice any kind of life outside of the company.

She noticed Craig worked just as many hours as the interns and he had been there for twenty years.

You got paid well and got to work on the cutting edge of science with full funding for everything you needed.

But you give your life in return.

Jessie thought about her brother.

Sometimes that was literal.

Jessie finally got the deadbolt open, closed the door behind, her and peeled off her shirt to reveal her black bra and dropped the shirt on the floor as she walked across the dark

living room to the kitchen. She opened the fridge and grabbed a beer.

Just as she closed it, the lamp turned on in the living room. She jumped, startled, and turned to find Cylis sitting on the couch. She spit out the mouthful of ale.

"What the fuck?" she said, her hand cupped under her mouth

"I need to talk to you."

"God, could you be more creepy? At least take your hood off."

Cylis pushed the hood down.

"You want to put your shirt back on?"

Jessie waved him off.

"If that's what you were after I don't think we'd be having this conversation. What do you want?"

"We need to talk."

"Yeah no shit. I've tried to text you several times the last couple weeks, even called you once, and you don't answer.

What's the deal?"

"I told you I'd get ahold of you when I needed to. I'm not your babysitter or your therapist. I'm not interested in your texts about having a tough day. We have a job to do."

"Yeah, I have an actual job to do. I work there remember?"

Cylis dropped a newspaper on coffee table.

"Seen this?"

"What am I? Eighty? Do you really think I read the paper?"

Cylis sat quietly so Jessie picked it up and read the story. It was a follow up on the airport incident Ernst had showed her on their first day when the FBI was swarming. According to this article it was all a mixup. Just the result of an over sensitive TSA agent. Apparently he saw someone entering the restricted area of the airport and, instead of investigating or reporting it to his supervisor, he immediately called it in to the FBI. As for the reports of something being stolen, those were just rumors and speculation. Nothing was stolen and the person TSA agent saw was question and released. He was just a janitor and had the clearance. He was just doing his job. The TSA agent had been let go.

Jessie turned the paper over.

"This is over two weeks old. Why are you showing me this?"

"Don't you think it's odd? All of that fiasco as a result from nervous TSA agent?"

Jessie shrugged.

"I dunno. People are pretty sensitive about terrorism these days."

"Take a look at this one."

This paper was from today.

A man was found murdered in his Buckhead apartment. There was no sign of a break-in and the only reason he was found was because the neighbor kept hearing his cat's shrill meow and

finally called the landlord.

Jessie did a double-take when she saw the name of the victim.

She picked up the other paper and compared.

"This is the TSA agent."

Cylis nodded.

"What is this supposed to mean?"

"He was killed to keep quiet."

"About?"

"What really happened at the airport two weeks ago. The DOD was transferring a new top-secret device and it was stolen while in transition at the airport. It was heavily guarded all along the way, and somehow it went missing. What's being fed to the paper is a cover up."

"What does this have to do with me?"

"DrekCorp is behind the theft."

"How do you know that?"

"Let's just say I have a strong hunch right now. I need you to find out if it's true and what the device is and why DrekCorp needed it so badly."

"Oh yeah, and how the hell am I supposed to do that?"

Cylis stood and shrugged.

"That's your problem, not mine. The codename for the device is MindEcho. That should give you a start."

Cylis walked to the door.

"Cylis."

He stopped and turned around.

Jessie's arms hung next to her, her shoulders slumped. Her eyes were red all around the edges.

"What are you getting me involved in? My brother disappeared and now a TSA agent winds up dead. I didn't sign on for death sentence. I want to figure out what happened to Ryan and help stop DrekCorp, but I'm just an intern. What are you really sending me into? Are you going to get me killed?"

Cylis held her gaze for a several moments, then opened the door and walked out.

# # #

### The Fight

"We'll get it right on the next one," Ernst said.

Jessie waved him off.

They were walking to the cafeteria. Even with the exhaustion of her work schedule, Jessie couldn't sleep after Cylis had left her house. She had laid in her bed tossing and worrying about being at DrekCorp. Everything in her subconscious screamed for her to throw in the towel, quit DrekCorp, leave Atlanta, and get as far away as possible.

After a couple hours of this, she'd gotten up and spent awhile searching through all of the news reports about the incident

at the airport. If it was a cover up, it was being executed perfectly. There was nothing to indicate that the whole thing was anything but a trigger happy TSA agent. It still bothered Jessie though that no one else had seemed to connect the dead guy in Buckhead to the airport incident.

After hitting nothing but walls with that, she switched to digging into this MindEcho device that had apparently gone missing.

Again, nothing.

Frustrated, she waited until 5am and texted Ernst and Alex to meet her at DrekCorp. If she couldn't do anything at her apartment and she couldn't sleep, she might as well be working.

But only more frustration met her at the lab.

The processes they had submitted the night before had melted down and they got nothing as a result. Now they had to rework the their formula and get back in line for the equipment.

Ernst was trying to cheer her up as they headed for their morning coffee. Alex just looked annoyed to be awake.

As they turned into the cafeteria they came face-to-face with Az, Axil, and Tad.

"Oh, hello there Jessie!" Az said, far to excited to see her. Jessie only glared in return.

"It's so good to see you. I wanted to congratulate you on your



research. I've heard it's going really well, and it's only a bit embarrassing that, not only is your premise crazy, but none of your experiments seem to be working out for you."

Tad and Axil chuckled behind Az.

"Fuck off," Ernst said.

Az looked at him and his face clouded.

"How dare you speak to me that way? You're just a little twerp that has no business being in a program like this. It's no wonder everything keeps failing for you Jessie when you have an asshat like this on your team that couldn't even cut it in his graduate program."

Jessie balled her fists at her side and opened her mouth to say something.

"Alright Az," Alex said stepping forward, "we get it man. Can we just grab some coffee and be on our way?"

Az seemed to see Alex for the first time.

"How'd you get stuck with these two Alex? I said I'd put in a good word for you and get you into MechEngineering where you belong. I don't why you're in BioTech with these two."

"I dunno man, it's where I was assigned, but when you mess with them you're messing up my team. Can we just let this go and move on?"

"Sure absolutely. All I need is an apology from Jessica here for embarrassing me a couple weeks ago."

Az looked at Jessie.

"What do you think?" Az put his hands on his belt buckle like he was going to undo his pants. "You want to get on your knees and beg me for forgiveness?"

"You sick fuck," Ernst said.

"Aw, you jealous?" Az said. "We all see how you look at her.

If only you had a big enough dick to do something --"

Az's words got cut off by Jessie's fist. A loud crunch escaped from his nose and he staggered back, part from the force of the punch and part from complete surprise, and fell to the floor. Tad and Axil watched him fall without doing anything, completely shell shocked at the sudden violence.

"You bitch!" Az roared as he started to get up.

Jessie stepped forward, brought her knee up and connected with a crack against Az's cheekbone. This time, Jessie followed him on the way down. She jumped on him and started throwing wild punches at his head. Az pulled his hands up trying to block as many of the punches as he could, but several landed against his ear, neck, and various parts of his face. Blood was pouring from his nose and the gash that had opened from Jessie's knee.

He was screaming for help as Jessie's assault continued. It took much too long for the people watching to jump into action. This wasn't a group used to physical violence erupting

in front of them.

Finally, Alex jumped in and grabbed Jessie around the waste. At 5' 4" and 120 pounds, he yanked her back easily. Jessie was still swinging and kicking as she was pulled back and she managed to connect one last kick with Az's stomach, which left him doubled up on the floor, still trying to cover himself up from any more blows.

Alex put Jessie down, and she immediately turned to go back after Az. He grabbed her arm hard enough to get her attention and practically dragged her out of the cafeteria with Ernst following close behind.

Once out in the hall Jessie shook off Alex's hand and start stalking down the hall in the direction of he BioTech lab. Both Ernst and Alex kept opening their mouth to speak, but couldn't figure out what to say. Both of them had never seen a fight like that growing up, much less be involved in one. Their academic careers had kept them with people that solved their issues through gossip, back biting, and passive aggressive attacks.

The explosion of violence from Jessie had taken everyone by surprise.

Jessie stalked down the hallway in silence with Alex and Ernst following directly behind her.

I've really fucked it up this time.

# # #

### The Fight Part 2

Jessie sat in the overstuffed chair across from Craig's desk and empty chair. She studied the blood specks on her white lab jacket as she waited for him to come in.

They had only been back in the BioTech lab ten minutes when the door slammed open. Craig walked in, his face red from his collar up.

"Jessica Black!" he yelled, "Get to my office right now."

"Welp," she said to Ernst and Alex, "I guess this is it. I'll give you a call later. Maybe we can meet up for coffee once you guys are off or something."

They only looked sadly at her.

They knew what was coming. There was no way DrekCorp could allow an intern to attack someone and not immediately fire her. She wondered if there had ever been another assault from one employee on another one, especially among the scientists. It had just been too much though. The stress from not sleeping, Cylis's surprise visit, and then their experiments constantly failing. Az just pushed her too far.

Jessie had grown up taking care of herself. Her parents were checked out and, as she kept advancing faster and faster through school, she was always the youngest in her classes

and, therefore, the focus of every bully that came across her path.

She had learned pretty quickly there was no use trying to engage with the bullies and her parents only advice was to "ignore them" which was complete bullshit in real life.

The only thing Jessie had figured out that worked well was to be too much trouble to deal with.

She had started going crazy on any of the bullies that messed with her. She'd just attack at the first sign of any kind of advance from one of them and acted completely insane. She had take a few beatings along the way, but pretty quickly the bullies realized she was not worth the effort and would leave her alone.

Once she had entered called and advanced studies, she'd just kept to herself and everyone left her alone. She hadn't need to attack anyone in years.

Unfortunately though, Az hit all the right buttons and her old habits literally came screaming out of her.

The door opened behind her and Craig came in the office. He dropped a file folder on his desk. Some of the red had drained from his face thankfully, but his lips were still pursed together pretty tightly.

Instead of sitting in his chair, he stood directly in front of her and leaned against the desk.

He spoke quietly.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Jessie paused for a bit then said, "Sure."

Craig burst out laughing, then quickly tried to compose himself and asked, "How did it feel to punch that little son of a bitch?"

Jessie was struck dumb. She couldn't figure out how to answer. Was this some kind of joke?

Craig was laughing again. His face turning redder than before.

"Oh man," he said. "I really wish I could have seen it."

Craig stood and walked around his desk and flopped into his chair, still trying to control his laughter.

"Um, Dr. Castle, uh." Jessie struggled with what she should be saying.

"God Jessie, you have no idea how much I hate Dr. Broolyn, Az's father. He's such a complete Dick and I'm always having to deal with him because he's one of the department heads. You have no idea how many times I have wanted to punch him, so you attacking Az is almost as good."

"Um, I'm still getting fired though right?"

Craig waved it off, trying to suppress giggles again.

"No, no, no. I took care of all of that. I explained that you had been under a ton of stress and apparently enough of the other interns had overheard him and said what Az had said

could easily be seen as sexual harassment in the workplace. I talked to Dr. Roe, who was fuming as well by the way, and said 'I will happily fire Ms. Black, but I'll have to insist Mr. Brooklyn be let go for sexual harassment as well.' Well, Dr. Roe has no interest in being the person who fired Dr. Brooklyn's son so he agreed to talk it over with Az and let the whole thing go, assuming you aren't interested in pushing the sexual harassment claim."

Jessie shook her head.

"That's what I thought. So needless to say, let's steer clear of Az Brooklyn and it'd probably be best not to attack him again, but you don't need to worry about this incident. I've got it covered."

Craig started laughing again.

"Oh man, I so with I could have seen it." Craig said. He tapped the folder he had dropped on his desk. "But I got all of the witness statements as to what happened and I'll have a good time reading them with a glass of whiskey. You can go Jessie. We'll touch base later."

Jessie stood and left the office, flabbergasted at her luck. She headed back to the BioTech lab where Ernst and Alex would be quite surprised to see her again.

# # #

Az's research

"This is going to be excruciating." Jessie said as they all filed into the conference room.

Every week the interns were gathered together for a meeting and update. New research and progress was shared, announcements were made, and they got a chance to see their dwindling numbers. Just over a month in and a dozen interns had already been cut from the program. A few of them were from BioTech, though Jessie hardly noticed. She was so focused on their own research, she barely noticed the people moving around her, even Ernst and Alex sometimes.

The truth was Jessie was getting afraid that she was next on the list to get cut, which means Ernst and Alex would probably get thrown out with her.

Why had she dragged them into her idiotic research project? How did she think that hew, a twenty-one year old fresh PhD graduate would be able to make real progress in such a far fetched area of science?

That last two weeks had shown failure after failure in progress.

Every time they attempted to isolate and culture the cells, everything would fall apart. If they pushed to hard on them, everything would die. If they didn't push hard enough, they couldn't separate out the cells they needed.

Jessie was feeling more and more like it was a lost cause.



Just a month into it and everything had already failed.

Meanwhile, she was sure all of the other interns around her were making huge breakthroughs while laughing at this bullshit project Jessie had chosen.

To add insult to injury, Az was being highlighted in this week's intern meeting. He'd apparently made some kind of big breakthrough and he was going to share it this morning.

Just what she needed.

Jessie slumped into the chair in the back row flanked by Alex and Ernst.

Even the guys were quiet this morning.

Ernst was always quick with encouragement when Jessie was getting overwhelmed, and Alex always seemed to be able to lighten the mood. But not this morning.

Alex might be sullen too because Jessie had snapped at him this morning before the meeting. Her nerves are still on edge and when he told her about Az's breakthrough this morning she'd made a dumb comment.

"Don't worry Alex, when he gets promoted and we get cut you'll be able to lick his boots and keep your job."

Jessie knew she should apologize but she couldn't bring herself to do it. She was still unsure where Alex really stood on things. He never seemed to have a bad thing to say about Az, even after what he'd said to Jessie and Ernst before she

had jumped him.

Jessie sunk lower in her seat as Rebecca Rohn took the podium to begin the meeting.

"Alright, good morning everyone. We're going to jump right in to make sure we use our time wisely and let you get back to work. First order of business, you may have noticed that our numbers are already dwindling. We're now down to eighty-five interns still in the program. This competition is fierce and those that are clearly not cutting it are the first to go. Make sure you stay on top of your research and move it forward. There's just two months left until we make final decisions of who moves forward and who isn't."

"Ok, moving on, this morning we are having Aza'zel Brooklyn share his most recent findings with the group. He's made great progress and two days ago make quite the breakthrough that has some promising applications. He'll go over it briefly here, and then the rest of his findings will be on intern research network with all of the other research you have access to. I encourage you to take the time and go through it all to get a feel for the kind of work we are looking for here at DrekCorp."

"Az, would you like to come up?"

Az took the stage, hooked in his laptop, and started his presentation.

As soon as he started speaking, Jessie did everything she could to tune him out. She pulled out her iPhone and started thumbing through her Twitter and Instagram feeds.

Several minutes later she glanced to her right and noticed Ernst leaning forward and listening intently. She looked up to Az's slide which was dense with equations and bullet points.

Jessie rolled her eyes and looked back down at her phone.

Jessie was broken out of her social media blitz by applause.

Az was done and the other interns were all clapping politely.

Jessie knew they were all seething though. Even if they didn't share her own hatred for Az, she knew they all hated that another intern was making great progress. That was one less spot for each of them.

Rebecca took the podium again and briefly thanked Az, encouraged the interns to keep working hard, then released them back to their work.

Jessie immediately stood to leave, but Ernst stayed seated and dug into his bag and pulled out his laptop. He was locked into whatever he was doing and Jessie knew she would just have to wait on him. Alex left without a word, she watched him go feeling guilty again, then pulled her phone back out.

"What'd you think of my presentation?"

Jessie looked up to see Az standing in front of her. His nose was back to normal, but the gash she'd left on his cheek was

still healing. He'd probably be left with a scar.

This made her smile.

"Oh, did you present this morning?"

He smiled his shit eating grin.

"You know," he said, "I was going through the intern research this morning and you've yet to submit any findings. Everything going ok for you? I'd hate to see you cut from the program. Such a young promising career cut short by complete incompetence in the real world."

"You keep campaigning for another ass kicking, you're gonna get elected Az."

"Lay another finger on me and even hiding behind Craig's lab coat won't save you from being fired. My father and Dr. Roe were both furious that you weren't immediately let go."

"Where I come from, boys that hide from girls behind their parents are called pussies. Are you a pussy Az?"

"Threatening me again with physical violence? It's too bad you're such a poor scientist that you've got to throw your fists and resort to vulgarity to get any attention."

Jessie's back stiffened and her fists balled up at her sides.

Just then Ernst slammed his laptop shut.

"Oh man this could work!"

He shoved his laptop back in his bag and stood.

"Jessie, I think I got it!"

He finally noticed her rigid body language and then looked at Az for the first time.

"Oh."

Silence hung in the air as tension continue to grow.

Finally Ernst pushed Jessie out of the row of chairs, which seemed break her trance.

"Let's go," he said, "I think I got our next thing we can try. Leave him be."

Az snickered as they pushed past him and left the conference room.

# # #

### Progress

Jessie couldn't help it.

The tears streamed down her face. She hated herself for it, but it was just too much.

Too little sleep, too much fruitless labor, too much stress.

All of her layers had been stripped away over the last six weeks. The wall between the outside world and her emotions was nothing but a thin membrane.

Alex was laughing. Ernst's smile looked like it was going to break his face.

But Jessie couldn't only lean back in her chair and let the tears flow.

It had all started after Ernst had pushed her out of that conference room to keep her from attacking Az again. While she was busy ignoring Az's speech and building towards her next physical assault, Ernst was actually paying attention.

Jessie didn't want to know why they were doing biological research in the department of DrekCorp that was only thinly veiled weapons manufacturing, but Az had been focused on radiation treatment targeting at a cellular level.

Basically, the code he had cracked was how to target specific types of cells with high levels of radiation while leaving the other cells alone. This, of course, was the problem they were running into with their own cell manipulation inside of sea sponges. Every time they attempted to isolate specific targets, they would melt down everything around it.

It had taken two weeks of constant of trial and error, but they had finally pulled it off. Jessie, Ernst, and Alex were all staring at the first positive results of their ongoing experiments. They were finally able to isolate the specific cells that, after major trauma, would transform and being regrowing the new sponge.

It was the first thing they needed to do in order to start building towards initial trial tests.

"You know what this means?" Alex was saying. "This is it. This proves that your theory isn't complete science fiction

bullshit.”

Jessie wiped the tears out of her eyes.

“Heh, thanks Alex.”

“Seriously. This is it. This is what we needed. This just saved our asses from getting cut from the program.”

“What if this could actually work?” Ernst said. “What if we could use this in humans down the road? We could regrow limbs. We could rebuild someone’s heart. Even if it’s only applicable in a handful of situations, this will revolutionize the medical field!”

Jessie finally smiled.

The real work was just beginning, but the future was no longer an unassailable brick wall.

This is why I became a scientist.

# # #

### Dinner

Jessie stood in the middle of the cafeteria nodding along as another intern -- Tom was it? -- blathered on about her breakthroughs and what it meant for his own research.

“Jessie,” Alex had appeared at her side, “we need to get our dinner done so we can get going.”

Alex looked at Tom.

“Sorry, Jessie has to go.”

"Oh, ok, no problem," Tom said. "I'd love to go over my research with you though and maybe help out with your team."

Jessie just turned and walked away with Alex.

"God, this is getting old," she said.

"Yeah, I saw. That's why I came and rescued you."

"A couple of weeks ago I was the weak member of the herd they were hoping got picked off. Now they all want to be my best friend."

Alex laughed.

"That's what happens when you have major breakthroughs in your research. You're now the celeb."

Jessie rolled her eyes and sat down next to Ernst and Alex sat down at his plate across from them.

"Seriously though, everything could still fall apart. We've barely made anymore progress. It's only been a week since our initial breakthrough."

Alex shrugged.

"Yeah, but we only have five more weeks until the first big cut," Ernst said. "Everybody is going to get desperate now. They've got to prove themselves somehow or they'll be out."

Jessie took a few bites as the chitchat continued.

"Excuse me, Jessica?"

Another intern had approached her table.

Jessie stopped with her coffee halfway to her mouth, and



looked at him. She barely recognized him from the weekly meetings. He wasn't even in their own BioTech department. "I'm just wondering if I could go over some of my research with you really quick. I think I could help out on your team." "God damn it!" Jessie said and slammed her cup back on her tray splashing coffee across the table.

She stood, pushed passed the intern standing gaping at her, and left the cafeteria.

I can't even eat a fucking meal.

She stalked down the hallway towards the BioTech lab, then stopped and ducked into one of the doorways that led deeper into DrekCorp. She pulled out her phone and began texting Ernst. She'd just have him bring some food to the lab and she'd eat while she worked. She needed to get some more experiments queued up anyway.

As she tapped on her phone, a movement caught her eye. She looked further down the hall and saw Dr. Roe standing stock still. He was looking around as if making sure nobody was around. Jessie realized she was in the shadows where she stood, and quickly turned off her phone and sunk deeper into the shadows.

Something about Dr. Roe's body language made her feel like he was trying to go unseen. So of course, Jessie wanted to see what he was up to.

Dr. Roe turned and continued down the hall away from Jessie. He was heading to part of DrekCorp that was off limits for the interns. Everything was controlled by their badges anyway, so it wasn't like there were guards with guns manning all of the doors. There were guards that patrolled the building, especially in the evenings when there was less activity, but with the sophistication of the security system, they weren't as visibly present.

Dr. Roe turned a corner about fifty yards down the hallway, and Jessie hurried to catch up. As she got to the corner, she peeked around.

Something is definitely up with him.

Now Dr. Roe was standing in front of a door looking to his left and right.

Finally, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out something and stuck it into the keycard reader.

Why is he not using his badge?

The door opened and Dr. Roe stepped through. Jessie checked once over her shoulder to make sure no one was watching her and broke into a run down the empty hallway. She reached the door just as it was about to latch, and stuck her foot out so it hit gently against the rubber sole of her shoe.

She looked quickly through the window and saw the next door shut. Dr. Roe had already moved through the next room. Jessie

glance down at the keycard reader.

This was a level 5 security door. She wasn't fully sure what this meant, but it had to be high up. As an intern she only had access to level 1 areas inside of DrekCorp. Level 5 had to be some kind of top secret clearance.

Jessie checked the hallway again to make sure nobody could see her, and she slipped through the door and let it close behind her.

The room she entered was small and empty. It looked like just an entryway to the next room. It was probably built this way to ensure people like her -- people that weren't supposed to be here -- couldn't access the room. She looked through the small window in the door to see where Dr. Roe was going next. From what she could see, there were at least two doors to other labs off the next room. Over each door was a security camera looking down so it was impossible to enter the room without being recorded. Jessie saw the familiar red light blinking on the camera. She saw this every time she came into the building and scanned her card to enter the BioTech department lab.

Dr. Roe was standing on his tip toes reaching for the camera. After a few seconds, he had attached a cord somehow to the back of the camera. The cord ran into the lightning port on his iPhone. He tapped on his phone for a few moments and the

red light on the camera stopped blinking. He unplugged the cord from the camera and his phone, coiled it around his fingers and slid it into his pocket.

Once again, he ignored his badge and pulled something out of his pocket and inserted it into the keycard device, which turned green to indicate it had been unlocked. He put his hand on the door handle to the lab, and paused. Jessie ducked just in time to stay out of his gaze as he checked one more time over his shoulder.

Jessie peaked back through the window as she watched him enter the lab.

# # #

### What is going on?

Jessie forced herself to slow down and walk normally. It was a battle. She felt like she couldn't get out of that wing of DrekCorp faster.

She made it to the BioTech lab and pushed quickly through the door. It slammed open loud enough to catch everyone's attention. All of the other interns glanced up at her. Jessie kept her eyes on the floor and walked quickly back to her work station.

Ernst and Alex had returned from the cafeteria by now and Ernst came over to check on her.

"You ok?"

Jessie sat back in her chair with that far off look up close on her face.

"Hey," Ernst snapped in her face, "everything ok?"

Jessie snapped out of it and looked up at Ernst.

"I don't know."

"Yeah, you were pretty pissed when you left the cafeteria."

Jessie shook her head.

"No it's not that. Here, sit down."

Ernst grabbed a seat and scooted it close to Jessie.

"How much do you know about Dr. Roe?"

"Besides him being one of the assholes that runs MechEngineering? Not much."

Jessie sat silent for a moment chewing her lip.

"What is it? Did something happen?"

Jessie gave Ernst a quick run down of what happened.

"What do you think that could be about?" Jessie said.

"I don't know. Definitely sounds like he's up to something."

"Who's up to what?"

Alex had come over and caught the end of the conversation.

Jessie turned back to her workstation.

"Nothing," she said.

"It doesn't sound like nothing. What's going on?"

Jessie cut her eyes at Ernst.

Since day one of the internship Ernst and Jessie had had many conversations about Alex. How much could they really trust him? He defended Az every chance he got and it sounded like he had ridden his coat tails all through school and into DrekCorp. Even ending up in BioTech was suspicious. Why would he get into the department he knew Az despised? Jessie suspected that Az had sent him to watch her and try to steal her research. But there didn't seem to be any indication of that.

When Jessie was honest with herself, there was no indication at all that he wasn't trustworthy. Sure, he used his connection with Az to get ahead. But that could just be a pragmatic move by a guy from a lower middle class family with less-than-stellar academics.

Ernst remained pretty neutral on the subject, and often played the devil's advocate to her complaints.

Ernst shrugged as if to say "What could it hurt?"

Jessie waved at a chair and Alex sat. She leaned in and recounted the whole story again.

"So what do you think?"

"I dunno," Alex said. "It could be something, but Dr. Roe is pretty high up inside of DrekCorp. I'd guess he has clearance to just about anything inside the building."

"Yeah, but why not swipe his badge like the rest of us? What

did he use to get in the door?"

"Maybe there is a special keycard for Level 5 security."

"I don't think so," said Ernst, "I've seen Craig get into high level security areas just using his badge. We could just ask him."

Jessie shook her head.

"No way. There's no good reason for an intern with Level 1 security to be asking that question. He'd want to know why we're asking. And even if it is a different keycard, why shut down the cameras? If he's allowed into that part of the building, why would he need to hide it?"

Alex shrugged.

"I still think you're making a big deal out of something small. And even if you think it's shady, what are you going to do about it? Report him? To who? I can't imagine that turning out well for you, especially if there's a completely plausible reason for him to be there. It'll just give another reason for everyone in MechEngineering to hate you which is not something you need right now."

"Here we go." Ernst said. He had been tapping away on his laptop while Jessie and Alex discussed.

"What?" Jessie said.

Ernst turned the laptop around and showed the two of them.

It was Dr. Roe's complete DrekCorp profile including current

research, past projects, and security clearances.

"Um..." Jessie said.

"How'd you get this?" Alex said.

Ernst didn't meet their eyes.

"Don't worry about it."

Alex pushed back in his chair to put some distance between himself and Ernst's laptop.

"Oh shit man, did you hack into DrekCorp's private network to get this?"

Again Ernst didn't answer.

"Fuck this man, I don't want anything to do with this. If you get caught, getting fired will be the least of your worries."

Alex stood and walked to the other side of the lab. Jessie leaned in closer to the laptop.

"See anything interesting?" she said.

"Not really. Dr. Roe does have Level 5 clearance..."

"Which doesn't explain why he didn't just use his badge to enter or why he shut down the camera."

"True. But it means he's allowed to go in there, so reporting him seems pretty dumb."

"What is he working on currently?" Jessie said.

"It's a little cryptic, but it's something around neuroscience and memory manipulation."

Jessie perked up.



"Memory manipulation? In what way?"

Ernst scanned around on the laptop some more.

"It doesn't say and none of his current research is in the private network, not that I can find anyway."

Jessie sat back in her chair.

"That guy has creeped me out since the first day I met him. It didn't help that he was with Az."

"When was that?"

"The first day of our internship actually. I was getting some coffee and Az walked in. He recognized me from the private group we were all in. He introduced himself and then Dr. Roe, who he had just picked up from the airport."

Ernst's head shot up from the laptop at this.

"This was the first day of our internship? The day of orientation?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Remember the FBI raid on the airport? The one that supposedly was a false alarm? The news of that popped up while we were in orientation. That means Dr. Roe was at the airport while everything was happening."

Jessie's thoughts exploded in her head. She'd never discussed the dead TSA agent or the MindEcho device that Cylis said had been stolen. If what Ernst was saying was true, that means Dr. Roe was there at the exact time the MindEcho was stolen. And,

the whole time he was at the coffee shop, he had that briefcase in his hand. She had wondered why he never set it down, even to mix in the cream and sugar with his coffee.

"Hey Ernst," she said leaning back in lowering her voice to a whisper, "How deep into DrekCorp's private network can you go?"

"It's probably best if you don't know. Why? What do you need?"

"Could you hunt around for any reference to something called MindEcho? See if you can find anything about it."

"Why? What is it?"

Jessie smirked at him.

"It's probably best if you don't know."

Ernst laughed.

"Sure, I'll take a look and let you know if I find anything."

Just then the door to the BioTech lab beeped behind Jessie and a couple seconds later, the entire lab went silent. Before she turned around, a cold chill climbed Jessie's spine and dread covered her like a blanket.

She slow turned in her chair and, when she caught sight of who answered, somehow lost her ability to take a breath.

# # #

What is going on? Part 2

Thirteen years couldn't erase the memory.

The man in black.

Suddenly, Jessie was back at the cemetery. Back in the rain. She could hear her mom sobbing into her father's chest. She could see the empty casket.

"You ok?" Ernst whispered.

Jessie nodded, but couldn't get words to escape her throat. The man stood just inside the lab scanning the room. He was dressed exactly the same as thirteen years earlier. Black wide brimmed hat, black suit, black shoes. The only thing missing was the sunglasses.

Two large men dressed in black suits and red ties flanked him. They had earpieces in and a bulge in their suit jackets that could only be one thing.

A woman stood just to the left of the man in black. She was gorgeous. Jet black hair pulled into a tight bun. High cheek bones. Tall. She was what every woman hoped she'd still look like in her fifties.

She too was dressed in all black and held an iPad under her arm and an iPhone in her hand. She leaned over and whispered something into the man in black's ear. He nodded.

Craig was scurrying across the lab towards him. He got to him and did everything but a deep bow.

"Who is that?" Jessie managed to croak out.

Ernst shot her an odd look.

"That's Tim Drek. He's the founder of DrekCorp. He apparently

almost never makes an appearance anywhere. His office is on the top floor and he does all of his business through his secretary. Everyone calls her Jet. I have no idea if that's her real name or not, but nobody else knows her by anything but that."

Craig and Tim finished their talk and they both looked over at Jessie. Jessie felt the man's gaze bore into her.

Did he recognize her? Did he have any idea who she was? Did he remember that rainy day thirteen years ago?

Craig gestured for her to come over.

Jessie didn't -- couldn't -- move.

Craig's eyes went big, pleading and he waved her over again. Somehow she found her strength and made it out of the chair and walked across the lab. It felt like her legs had turned into stilts.

She stood in front of the group, but couldn't meet anyone's eyes but Craig's. Jet stepped forward.

"Mr. Drek has noticed your research and is very impressed," she said. "We're going to move you into your own private lab to continue your research. This will give you access to all of the equipment you need without having to share it with the other interns. Mr. Drek is very interested in what you are able to come up with unhindered."

Jessie stared at her. Jet glanced at Craig who moved up next

to Jessie and put his arm around her shoulders.

He laughed nervously.

"Um, she's just excited," he said, "I'm sure she can't wait to get moved in."

Jet nodded.

"You may also take Dr. Kelley and Dr. Milanos along to continue aiding in your progress. If you need anything else, anything at all, just let Dr. Castle her know and he will pass it on to me and I will make sure you get it."

Jessie nodded and finally managed a slightly audible "Thank you."

Jet nodded.

"Mr. Drek is extremely interested in your research and will be watching your progress closely. Good luck."

One of the body guards opened the door and Tim Drek left the room followed closely by Jet and the guards.

Craig was beaming at her.

"Congratulations!" he said.

# # #

### The New Lab

"I've never seen someone freeze so completely," Craig said. "I mean, I know he's the owner of the company and carries quite the presence with him, but you took the saying 'cat got your tongue' to a whole new level."

Craig was leading the way down the hall with Jessie, Ernst, and Alex in tow. He was waving his hands around a lot as he talked.

"Doesn't matter though. This is quite the promotion for you and it's the first time something like this has happened inside of BioTech. The fact that they are committing these kind of resources to your research is huge. It means they believe you're onto something. I don't want to overstate it or put too much pressure on you three, but it really is a big deal. Oh, here we are!"

Craig stopped at a door, swiped his badge, and pulled the door open to let the three interns enter.

Jessie let out an audible gasp when she entered.

It was gorgeous.

She swore the equipment was twinkling in the light it was so new. While the square footage wasn't near what they had in the BioTech intern lab, it was packed with everything they needed to do their work. Computers, confocal and electron microscopes, a fully equipped cold room, ultracentrifuges, microspectro-photometers, and...

"Oh hell." Jessie said stepping to past the beaming Craig, she walked to the back of the lab.

"How do we get one of these all to ourselves when the entire BioTech intern program has to used a shared one outside of our

lab?"

"I guess they believe in your research," Craig said.

Ever since they were able to put Az's research into practice, their progress had accelerated in huge ways. However, the biggest bottleneck had been the wait time for the radiation chamber. His research had given them ability to highly target specific cells with the radiation, but they had to constantly wait in line to have their experiments run.

However, that was all over now.

"I can't believe we have our own." Jessie said.

She looked back at Ernst, who had a smile just as big as Craig's, and Alex who was shuffling his feet nervously. He looked very uncomfortable.

"Ok," Craig said, "I'll let you get to it. Your badges have already been updated to give you access to this lab so you're good there. Go ahead and head back to our lab and grab your stuff and get moved in. Don't spend too much time gawking, we expect you to use this lab to get work done."

He smiled again and shot the interns a thumbs up then left.

"This is crazy!" Ernst said.

"I know!" Jessie replied, "I had no idea..."

Alex just shook his head and turned to leave.

"What's with you?" Jessie said.

Alex turned back to face her.

"You think this is great, but you have no idea what is going on. This lab doesn't come without strings attached. You heard Craig, they've never done this before. Why now?"

"Because our project shows promise," Ernst said.

"Yeah, maybe that's it," Alex said, "I just don't know.

Something is off here. We were making great progress with the other interns, so why put us off on our own? It doesn't make any sense."

"Seriously, what the fuck Alex?" Jessie said, "This is a great opportunity and it shows that DrekCorp is loving our research. It basically guarantees we'll make the final cut of interns and all get to keep our job. How is that a bad thing?"

Alex opened his mouth to answer but Jessie cut him off.

"You know what I think it is? You're scared to be in the spotlight. Your whole plan is to fly below the radar and ride other people's coat tails. Now that you're out front, you're afraid you'll be seen for what you are -- a fraud that's terrified of actually trying at something."

Alex's face clouded and he opened the door and stalked out.

"Come on Jessie, give him a break," Ernst said.

"No, I'm sick of it. Every time Az is an ass he defends him. Every time I get excited about something, he's throws water on it. When it's so obvious Dr. Roe is up to something, he belittles it. I regret letting him in on this project. He's



such a pain in the ass.”

“Ah forget it, let’s go get our stuff moved in so we can get to work.”

Jessie and Ernst were walking quickly down the hall, both lost in their own thoughts, when they turned a corner and just about ran into Az.

“Where are your henchmen?” Jessie said, “I’m surprised you feel safe walking around without them.”

Az didn’t even respond, he just pushed past them obviously in a hurry to get somewhere.

“Sorry,” Jessie shouted after him, “We’re just getting moved into our new lab.”

Az stopped, his back stiffened, and he turned.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh not much. Just that Tim Drek visited BioTech this morning and singled out our research and moved us into our own private lab. It’s great. Outfitted with brand new equipment and we’re the only ones that have access to use it.”

Az’s face had turned red and it looked like he was working hard to keep the top of his head from exploding.

“You know, we should really thank you for this,” she said, “it was your research presentation that gave us the breakthrough we needed to get us here.”

Jessie paused and put the biggest shit eating grin on her face

she could muster.

"So thank you Az. We couldn't do this without you."

Jessie turned to leave, Ernst flipped Az his middle finger before turning to follow Jessie. As they turned the corner and got out of ear shot, they couldn't help but breaking down in giggles.

Could the day get any better?

# # #

The Key.

Jessie gently set down the vials on the small table adjacent to the small glass box that stood in the middle of the room. It was about waste high and big enough to hold two dozen small vials. She only had six for this particular experiment. She slowly loaded in each vial, closed the lid to the box, and turned to leave.

Outside, she sat down at the terminal that was dedicated to the radiation chamber that was housed in their lab. She yawned and glanced at her watch. 4:03 AM. She'd already been at it for a half hour.

She began the safety procedures to begin the process. There was a literal checklist she had to go through, physically touching the screen to check off each item.

No, there were no people in the chamber.

No, she did not leave anything behind in the chamber other

than her experimental items.

No, she did not have any history of dizziness or memory loss.

And so on for another dozen checks.

From there she had to physically hold down a button while typing in the phrase "BEGIN EXPERIMENT".

The sirens began and the mechanical voice began the countdown.

"Three minutes until chamber closure."

It would sound off every twenty seconds for the first two minutes and twenty seconds. Then every five seconds until the final ten second count down.

Jessie watched as the final ten seconds counted off. The door then began to close and lock, which took a full thirty seconds on it's own. Once that was done, there was a minute countdown until the chamber was filled with radiation. After the experiment was over, it was another five minutes while all of the post checks happened to make sure there were no leaks or irregularities.

After that, the chamber would open and Jessie got to start the tedious part of examining the contents of her vials to see the results.

This was the part that they used to have to wait in line for twelve hours. Now they got immediate access. Somehow, even still, Jessie got annoyed with how long the entire process took. The actual radiation part took just a couple seconds.

The process from start to finish took almost a half hour. She knew she shouldn't be frustrated, but she was anyway. Jessie held down the button and typed in the instructions to begin the process. She leaned back in her chair and pulled out the small plastic card that Dick had given her almost two months ago now.

She carried it with her everywhere. She still wasn't sure why. A therapist would probably make some connection to the fact that it used to be her brothers. All she knew was every morning when she left her apartment, she'd grab it off the counter and stick it in her pocket.

The door to the lab beeped and Alex came in. They nodded to each other and Alex dropped his bag at his work station and went to grab a cup of coffee in the back of the lab.

Jessie leaned over and started playing the card, spinning it on the table while listening to the chamber go through its procedures.

Everything had been off since their fight on the day they had gotten their lab. Usually after their disagreements, they got shrugged off pretty quick and kept working together. Something about their fight a couple days ago had gotten wedged between them. As much as she hated to admit it, it really bugged her. She liked Alex, but something kept her from letting onto it. Ernst kept pushing her to apologize, but Jessie didn't see the

need. She didn't say anything she didn't really believe or question about Alex. Why should she apologize? He was the one that needed to explain himself.

She heard Alex drop into his chair behind her and start tapping on his keyboard.

The chamber just finished up zapping her vials with radiation -- once again based on Az's research.

This made Jessie smile.

Five minutes until she could get a move on.

She continued playing with the card as Alex stood to get something spitting out of the printer. He was scanning the page as he walked towards her.

"Hey Jessie, have you seen the figures from last night's experiments? Something..."

He stopped mid sentence, which caused Jessie to look up at him.

Alex's mouth was hanging open. He was staring down at the table where Jessie was playing with the card.

"Where'd you get that?" he said.

"What? This?" she said, holding up the card.

"Yeah, that. Where'd you get it?"

"Why?"

"Do you have any idea what that is?"

"No."

"That's one of the DrekCorp Skeleton Keys."

Jessie stared at him.

"Shit, you don't know anything about this place do you? You've never heard of a Skeleton Key?"

"Well yeah, I know what a skeleton key is. I'm not sure why you keep saying it though."

Alex dropped in the chair next to Jessie and snatched the plastic card out of her hand. He turned it over and looked closely at it. Then he dropped it on the table as if it had suddenly turned hot.

"You have to get rid of that thing."

"How do you even know that's what it is? There's barely any markings on it."

"I've seen one before. Well, a picture of one. Az sent it around as a kind of joke. He overheard his dad talking about this key that could open any door in the place. Apparently there's only five in existence. They can even get you into Tim Drek's office. It's one of those rumors that get passed around and nobody really believes. However, Az said he did some digging around and found a picture of one that he sent to a bunch of us. Again, as kind of a joke, that if happen to see one laying around, make sure we pick it up."

Alex sat back in his chair and sighed heavily.

"And I swear-to-god it looked exactly like that."

Jessie stared at the card sitting on the desk in front of her.

"Seriously Jessie, where the hell did you get that thing? If you get caught with it, you are so seriously screwed, you don't even know."

Jessie glanced at her watch again.

4:13 AM.

She stood suddenly, pushing back her chair. She grabbed the card and slid it into her pocket, then walked to the front of the lab.

"Where are you going?" Alex yelled after her.

She ignored him, but paused at the door. She walked over to their little locker area and opened the long door with a clang. She pulled out her bag, squared down, and rummaged through looking for something.

"What are you doing?" Alex had followed her over and stood behind her.

Jessie found what she was looking for and shoved it into her pocket alongside the keycard. She stood and walked back to the door.

"Jessie!"

She opened the door and hurried out. She heard Alex one more time as the door shut.

"Jessie, stop!"

# # #

### The Break-in

Jessie walked at a fast clip down the hallway, constantly checking over her shoulder, retracing her steps from when she followed Dr. Roe a few days before.

She was going to find out what was in that lab and why he was sneaking around to get in there.

She approached the door and looked through the window. All of the lights were off. She checked up and down the hallway again, reached into her pocket, and pulled out the ball cap she'd found in her bag. She kept one in her bag for when it'd been a week since washing her hair.

Jessie shoved her hair up and pulled on the hat. She kept her eyes on the floor, and then took out the keycard and slid it into the bottom of the key system. This is exactly what Dr. Roe had done instead of waving his badge in front of it.

The red light on the access pad blinked green and Jessie opened the door.

As she entered, the motion sensor lights clicked on. She was now in the small room she'd followed Dr. Roe through. She looked through the window and saw the small hallway that led off to other rooms that she assumed were labs based on the doors.

She put the keycard into the access pad, and again it clicked



green and let her through.

The lights flicked on and now she was in sight of the video camera above the door. She kept her head down so the ball cap would obscure her from sight.

For the third time, she slid the Skeleton Key into the access panel, and for the third time, the red light clicked green.

As she stepped through, the motion sensor lights clicked on again. She saw the room open in front of her. It was small, smaller than their own lab, but had several access doors off of the main area.

A lot of the equipment looked similar to her own lab, but this place had a specific job. A lot of the equipment looked like it belonged in a high tech hospital. In the center of the room was a contraption that was a cross between an operating table and a restraint device. There were metal cusps that closed where your ankles and wrists would go. There were also straps for the chest and waste.

Jessie moved closer, looking at it. There were several lights over the contraption that were connected to the ceiling by what looked like hydraulic arms. They had handles on them. It reminded her of the light that her dentist would use to peer into her mouth.

The whole thing creeped her out.

Why would their be an operating room at DrekCorp? And why

would Dr. Roe be accessing it?

Jessie shook her head.

Stay focused.

Jessie went to the back of the room and began opening cabinets and searching through. Nothing out of the ordinary. She moved to the back of the room. There were three doors leading to other rooms. Only one of them had a lock though.

She went towards that door. Instead of keycard access though, it had a full-size keyboard and a fingerprint scanner.

Jessie just stared.

How was she going to get in there?

She tapped the "Enter" key on the pad and the small screen lit up. There was nothing on the screen except four dots. She typed in 1-1-1-1, which showed up in place of the dots. She hit "Enter" but nothing happened.

Jessie laid her index finger against the fingerprint scanner, which immediately lit up. A blue light swirled around her finger as it scanned, then it and the screen blinked red. The screen went back to four dots.

Jessie did the math quickly in her head.

A standard QWERTY keyboard had 94 characters. 95 counting the space bar. A password with four characters meant there were 7,737,809,375 possible combinations. That wasn't even counting the fact that her fingerprint probably didn't match the

security checks.

"Shit."

Jessie eyed the door handle.

Would a hammer get her through? Sometimes these nerds got so caught up in technology that they didn't make it strong enough to withstand a beating.

She tested the handle, pulled the door back and forth. It was solidly in place.

The more Jessie thought, the more convinced what she was looking for was sitting behind the door.

After she had seen Dr. Roe sneaking around and Ernst had put it together that he had been at the airport the same day that the MindEcho went missing, she had texted Cylis about it.

That got him to respond.

He felt like the evidence was pretty thin, but wanted her to figure out what was in the lab Dr. Roe had sneaked into.

At the time she had rolled her eyes at his response. How was she supposed to do that? She had gotten Ernst to search through DrekCorp's private network, but he couldn't find anything. There was a directory of labs, but no real information about what was housed in each one.

Jessie had given up on the notion.

Then Alex had let her know she'd had access along.

Now that she saw this room and the extra layer of security,

she was more convinced than ever that Dr. Roe had stolen the device and stashed it here. Now she was just a couple feet from it and couldn't get in.

Jessie heard a door close softly.

She turned around and ran to the door. She looked through the window and saw a guard opening up the second door.

### The lights.

The guard must have seen the lights on and was coming in to check.

Jessie turned, desperately looking for a place to hide. She ran to the back of the lab and tried the other two doors, but they were locked too. There was no where to go. She ducked behind the operating table, knowing she was still in full view of anyone that looked directly at it.

The door to the lab beeped and started pushing open.

# # #

### The Savior

The guard was tall, well over six feet. He was dressed in the black uniform that every DrekCorp security guard wore. The coiled wire snaked up to the radio in his ear and the his right hand was back resting on the gun attached to his hip. He was relaxed but ready, not expecting anything, but his training was automatic. His eyes first went to the security door Jessie had spent so much damn time standing in front of.

His eyes began to sweep across the room. Just as his eyes came to where Jessie was crouched behind the operating table, there was a loud crack.

Jessie looked up and saw Alex standing, breathing heavy with a fire extinguisher in his hand. The guard was laying at his feet unconscious with blood beginning to seep from the back of his head.

"Alex! What..." she couldn't find her words.

"Come on, let's go," he said.

Jessie nodded and began to move towards the door, but glanced back over to the secured room.

Maybe he just bought me some more time.

She turned and walked back to the keypad and thumb print scanner. Alex had dropped the extinguisher and was wiping off his finger prints.

"You think you could help me with this?" she said.

Alex got to her side in three quick strides and grabbed her arm and yanked her around.

"What the hell are you doing? We have to get out of here."

Jessie jerked her arm out of his grasp.

"Why? You took care of the guard. Give me a couple more minutes to see if I can get in here."

"Damn it Jessie, we have to go now! Every guard her is wearing a biosensor that checks in via WiFi every sixty seconds. As

soon as his does it's going to report abnormalities and then--"

Alex didn't get to finish his sentence. He was cut off by a blaring alarm.

"Shit!"

Alex grabbed her arm and started dragging her to the door, but this time Jessie was more than willing.

They burst out of the lab, back into the hallway. They looked both ways and then took off running towards their lab. They reached a corner, and Alex stopped and peeked around. He grabbed her arm again and began running back the way they had come. At the first door, he grabbed the handle and ducked into the room. Jessie and stayed by the door and watched as a group of three guards ran by. Alex had pulled out his phone and dialed.

"Ernst! Still in the lab?" he raid.

"Ok, fucking Jessie just broke into a level 5 lab in the east wing of the second floor. I had to knock out a guard to keep her from being caught, which is why these alarms are blaring. Both of us had to have been seen by security cameras along the way. You have to hack into the private networks and keep them from seeing that footage."

There was a pause.

"I don't fucking care what you have to do. Do whatever it

takes. Now. Pulling that footage is going to be the first thing they do after they find the guard. You have to stop them or Jessie and I are screwed."

Another pause.

"Just god damn do it Ernst. Fuck your whining. We'll be there in a few minutes."

Alex hung up and put the phone back in his pocket. He pulled Jessie back from the door and looked out himself. He opened the door, looked both ways again, then pulled Jessie out and they began running again. At each corner Alex would stop them, peer around the corner, then drag her into a run again.

The alarm had stopped sounding by then, but that didn't mean anything. Jessie was sure the guards were still on the hunt.

As they turned into the hallway that led to their lab, Jessie and Alex slowed to a fast walk and tried to look as nonchalant as possible as they approached their lab. Alex swiped his badge, pushed the door open, then sprinted over to Ernst's station.

Ernst was leaned in close to his monitor. Sweat was beaded on his brow and sliding down his neck.

Jessie stood back some, away from Ernst and Alex, who was now hovering over the hacker.

"What'd you find?" Alex said.

"I was able to block their access to the footage, but I'm

having trouble getting it deleted. They have a lot of measures in place to make sure everything is backed up in two places as soon as it's filmed. I'm working on getting them deleted while trying to make it seem like it's a network glitch that is blocking their access."

"You need to fucking hurry Ernst. They're going to have everyone on this after they found the guard I knocked out."

"You don't think I know that?" Ernst yelled. "Just shut up and let me work!"

This seem to snap Alex out of it and he took a step back. He stood with his arm crossed watching the screen as Ernst deftly input commands, moved screens around, and kept at least three things in motion at any given time.

"Almost there," he muttered a couple minutes later.

Thirty more seconds passed.

"Ok, ok. It's all deleted. I've just got to back out of the system slowly so they aren't able to trace me."

Another couple minutes later and Ernst sank back in his chair and sighed.

"Ok," he said, "It's done. I deleted the footage every where I could find it and managed to hide my own access at the same time."

He looked up at Jessie, sweat glistening off his face, and smiled.



"Thanks," she said quietly.

Alex spun on her.

"That's all you've got to say? You should be on your fucking knees. To both of us. What were you thinking breaking into a Level 5 security room? And what were you even trying to do? What was so important in that secured room?"

Jessie shrugged and didn't answer.

"Look," Alex said, "I know you haven't exactly trusted me up until this point, but I just put my ass on the line by assaulting a DrekCorp security guard and helping you escape. I think the least you can do is tell me what the hell you were trying to do."

Jessie glanced at Ernst. He nodded.

"Ok, find," Jessie said, "But you're going to think I'm crazy."

Alex just cocked his eyebrow at this as if to say, "Like I don't already?"

Jessie gave the short version of what was going on. Dr. Roe, the MindEcho device, her belief that he was trying to steal it for something. She left out anything about Cylis -- Ernst didn't even know about him -- but told him everything else.

"Ok, I get it. I still don't understand how you even know about the MindEcho and how you got that Skeleton Key in the first place."

Jessie only shrugged.

"Fine. That's fine, you don't have to tell me, but in the future, please at least consult with Ernst and me about whatever nut case plan you are brewing. Maybe, if we can't talk you out of it, at least keep you from getting caught. Can you at least trust us with that?"

Jessie smiled and nodded.

Alex nodded too and dropped into a chair next to Ernst, who looked like he was ready for a nap.

"And Alex," Jessie said.

Alex looked up at her.

"I'm sorry. I've been a real bitch."

Alex laughed, and patted Ernst on the shoulder.

"It's alright. We'll survive won't we bud?"

Ernst just laughed and leaned back his head and closed his eyes.

# # #

### Aftermath

Alex, Ernst, and Jessie stood huddled at the back of the room. The emergency intern meeting had just finished. Everyone was standing around talking nervously. Rebecca Rohn had called them all in first thing this morning. Again, their numbers had dwindled noticeably.

She had read them the riot act. Someone had broken into a level 5 secured laboratory and viciously attacked one of the DrekCorp guards. Since this hadn't happened in the history of the company and the interns were housed on the same floor, there was some certainty that one of the interns had done it. "If any of you know anything about the break-in or attack, it is your duty to report it," she had said. "And those responsible will be punished severely and dealt with in-house at DreCorp."

All of the department heads were standing at the front behind Rohn as she gave her speech. Dr. Roe looked as if his head was about to explode. His anger poured out of him.

The trio did their best to look just as shocked and dismayed as the other interns around them, but it was a struggle. After the meeting had broke, they congregated, speaking in hushed tones, each trying to clam the others down.

Ernst in particular seemed on the edge of a break down. Jessie was beginning to worry that the quantity of sweat that was covering his body would give them all away.

As they turned to leave the meeting room, Jessie heard raised voices coming from the front. Dr. Roe was speaking with another scientist, one she didn't recognized. His hands were flying around and he was obviously furious.

"I'll catch up with you guys," she said, and began walking to

the front.

"Where are you going?" Alex whispered angrily, but she ignored him, and kept making her way to the front.

Alex turned and pushed Ernst towards the door. They both exited just as Jessie got within earshot of Dr. Roe's conversation. She could make out what he was saying even though his back was to her. She pulled out her phone and acted like she was checking something as she took in what was being said.

"-- increase security measures. It is absolutely ridiculous that someone, especially an intern, would be able to break into the lab. There wasn't even any sign of damage on any of the doors, which means they either had a key, which is highly doubtful, or they were able to hack their way in. Either way, it's a nightmare and unacceptable. My whole operation could have been put in jeopardy. It's lucky that guard came along. What if they had been able to break in and steal the --," the other scientist held up his hand to cut him off.

"Best not to speak here Tiberious," Jessie couldn't help but look up. She knew that voice. Ah, the slicked hair. The pale complexion. This must be Dr. Brooklyn, Az's father.

"No need to risk being overheard."

Dr. Roe immediately glanced back over his shoulder. Jessie tried to look back at her phone, but it was too late. He

stalked over to her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he said.

"It was an intern meeting wasn't it?"

"Bullshit. I saw you hiding out in the back. What are you doing up here?"

Jessie just shrugged. She wasn't sure what to say.

"You don't think I saw you sneaking around the other day?"

"Think you're clever trying to follow me? You know what I think? I think it was you who broke into that lab," he said, pointing a finger in her face. "And I'm going to find out for sure and when I do, getting kicked out of the program will be the least of your worries."

Dr. Roe moved even closer to Jessie, leaning over her, attempting to intimidate her. As much as she hated to admit it, it was working. Her mouth dropped open to speak, but again she didn't know what to say. She was sure anything she said would just increment her.

Dr. Roe took in a breath to continue berating her.

"That's enough!"

Craig moved between Jessie and Dr. Roe, forcing the scientist to back off.

"Do you have any evidence pointing to Ms. Black?"

Dr. Roe just glared passed Craig, drilling holes in her with his eyes.

"I didn't think so. So you're verbally abusing one of my interns with no evidence to back it up merely because she happened to be standing near you or walking down the same hallway as you."

"The next time," Criag continued, "that you want to speak with Ms. Black or any of my other interns, you can go through me Tiberious. It might be a little harder for you to intimidate me."

Dr. Roe turned back to Dr. Brooklyn and they both headed for the exit.

Craig turned around to face Jessie. He smiled in big goofy grin at her.

"Just can't get enough of making enemies of the MechEngineering folks can you?" he said.

"I'm sorry Dr. Castle," she said, "I'm really not trying to cause trouble on purpose. It just seems like they've got it out for me."

Craig put his arm around her shoulder and began walking her to the exit.

"No worries dear, we'll get it sorted out. You're doing great work. Just keep it up. That's what really counts around here anyway."

Craig walked her back to her lab, patted her on the shoulder in that lovingly, fatherly sort of way of his, and then turned

back towards the main BioTech lab.

Jessie watched him go, smiled to herself, she swiped her badge to enter. Alex and Ernst looked up from their monitors.

"Oh thank god," Alex said. "I was just waiting for the alarms to go off again."

"No, no worries," she said, "but I do have something interesting."

She came and sat down with them.

"I overheard Dr. Roe referring to an 'operation' that he's a part of and it could have all been screwed up if someone was able to get into the secured room. So something in there is important and we have to figure out what it is."

Alex let out a loud sigh.

"What?" Jessie said.

"Why is this our responsibility?"

"Well you don't have to be a part of it if you don't want."

"No, I mean, 'our' as in you too. Why are you sneaking around Dr. Roe, breaking into labs, and generally assuming everybody is up to something. Maybe Dr. Roe is just uber paranoid about his research."

"There's just too many coincidences," Jessie said. "Dr. Roe at the airport the same day the MindEcho device goes missing. Then he's sneaking around a level 5 security lab, using a Skeleton Key to hide his movements and now, he wasn't talking

about research. He was talking about an operation he had going on. That's something bigger. He needs that MindEcho device for something, but we still don't know what it is or what it's for."

Jessie turned to Ernst.

"Think you could hack into the Department of Defense's network?" she said.

Ernst's face went an even paler white than usual.

"Oh come on Jessie," Alex was saying, "Why are you going to do that to him?"

Jessie ignored him.

"What do you think?" she said.

Ernst nodded.

"Yeah. Yeah I think I can do it," he said. "What are we looking for?"

"Anything you can find about MindEcho or the device that was stolen from the airport. We have to figure out what that thing is before we can figure out what Dr. Roe is up to. It's only a matter of time before he puts whatever this operation is into motion."

"Ok," Ernst said, "I'll get to work on it."

Jessie nodded and looked at Alex.

"You ok with this?" she said.

"Am I going to be able to stop you?"



Jessie smiled at him.

# # #

### The Ultimatum

Jessie was once again sitting in Craig's office.

Unlike previous visits though, she had no idea what this meeting was about. She hadn't physically assaulted anyone and hadn't been caught eavesdropping on any other scientists.

In fact, she'd kept her nose clean and her head down in her work. They had decided to lay low while Ernst was doing his work on the DOD server.

Not that her dedication to her work mattered much.

They had hit another wall, and this one looked to be more insurmountable than the last.

They had managed to separate out the cells from the sea sponges, and amp them up with the radiation. The goal was to produce a solution that would at least show some healing or regeneration progress. They had even begun trials on mice, but over the last few weeks all they had to show for it were a lot of dead mice and zero forward progress.

The Ben Franklin cliché about "finding a hundred things that didn't work" was great, but it was bullshit in the real world. Besides her own pressure to move, Jessie wasn't too worried though. Their progress was still head-and-shoulders above

anyone else's inside of the BioTech department intern program.

Plus, Craig seemed to have her back at every turn.

Jessie felt that now familiar swell in her chest when she thought of Craig.

She'd taken enough under grad psych courses to know that she was transferring her longing for a protective caring father to Craig. She knew it wasn't healthy. Probably not even true. But damn it, she'd spent her whole life taking care of herself because her father was completely obsessed with her mother. It was nice to have an older man looking out for her for once.

The office door opened and Craig came bustling in.

"So sorry I'm late. Seems to be a habit of mine."

Jessie just smiled at him.

Craig plopped in his office chair and straightened a few things on his desk.

A bit of worry crept into Jessie's mind.

Was he avoiding eye contact with her.

"So what did you need Dr. Castle?" she said.

Craig finally stopped shifting around and met her eyes, although uncomfortably.

"Look Jessie," he said, "here's the deal. I'm not even supposed to be telling you this, but I feel like it'd be wrong not to."

He paused. Jessie held his gaze.

"If you're not able to show some progress, you're going to use your lab."

Jessie's eyes widened and she opened her mouth to speak. Craig held up his hand to stop her.

"Here's the thing. That lab is expensive and they're in limited supply. It was given to you so you could move quickly on your research, but nothing has happened since you moved in and there are... others that want use of it."

"Who?"

Craig sighed and his eyes darted back down to his desk.

"Dr. Roe. He wants it for Az Brooklyn."

"Son of a bitch," Jessie said. "Where do they hell do they get off--"

"Az's research has continued at a good clip. While the payoff isn't as big as what you're working on, he is at least showing progress and that's just the ammunition Dr. Roe needs to convince Rohn and the others to turn the lab over to them."

Jessie had dropped her head in her hands.

How could this be happening?

"There's something else."

Jessie looked up and met Craig's eyes.

"Look, there's no easy way to say this so I'm just coming out with it."

Craig let out a big sigh.

"In the DrekCorp intern program there is only one way to move. Forward. There is no going backwards. That means if you lose the lab, you don't go back to the BioTech department. It means you, Alex, and Ernst are all out of the program."

Jessie sat, shocked.

"I'm doing everything I can to hold it back. I obviously don't want this to happen and think you deserve more time, but I only have so much sway with what's going on around here.

Bottom line: If you don't so some significant progress in the next week, the three of you will be out of the program and MechEngineering will take over you lab for you."

"So what am I supposed to do? It's not like I'm slacking off and now I'm actually going to work hard."

Craig shrugged.

"Do your best. Don't hold anything back. If there's anything you've been waffling on trying because, I dunno, it seems risky or farfetched, now's the time to swing for the fences."

Jessie nodded.

"And let's not share this with Ernst and Alex. No need to worry them as well, and, honestly, I could get in a lot of trouble if it got out that I told you about this. Is that ok?"

"Of course."

Craig got up from his desk, came around in front of Jessie, and knelt in front of her. He took her hand in his.

"I know I'm not supposed to have favorites, but I have truly enjoyed working with you and hope to work with you for many years. I'll continue to do all I can to help you and you have my full support. If there's anything you need, just say so."

Jessie nodded, and they both stood. She turned to the door, but, despite herself, turned back to Craig and gave him a hug. He laughed in that grandfatherly awkward sort of way, then squeezed her and patted her on the back.

Jessie let go, turned quickly to the door, and wiped the tears out of her eye as she exited.

# # #

### The Attack

Alex opened the biohazard disposal lid and dumped the latest batch of syringes, vials, and dead mice in the tub. He shut the lid and headed back to where Ernst and Jessie were standing over her terminal.

"I don't know," Ernst said. "We have three more combinations of the latest batch to try before we move on."

"They're not going to work though," Jessie said. "We know that right? We keep incrementally going through each section and nothing is changing. We keep running the same radiation process, get similar results, and it does nothing but kill the mice in some kind of horrific way. The last ones were shitting

blood by the time they died. Somehow I don't feel like that is getting any closer to what we're looking for."

"That's science," Alex said. "What do you expect. We're working through all of the combinations and versions. We have to do that before moving on to something else."

"No I get what Jessie is saying," Ernst said. "It's obviously not working and what is the 'something else'. Unless you two have something special you're keeping secret, we're getting to the end of our hypothesis."

"Right. So what's next?" Jessie said. "What can we try? Think big here guys. Now's the time to try the crazy shit. We've got to do something here."

Alex and Ernst gave Jessie a funny look.

"What's with you? You know how this works. We just keep plugging away." Alex said.

"What if that's not good enough?" Jessie said.

"Good enough for what?" Ernst said.

Jessie rubbed her temples and shook head.

"Never mind."

"We're all exhausted." Alex said. "It's almost 1am and we've been at it since six this morning. Let's grab a few hours of sleep and meet up again in the morning. We can put are heads to it with some fresh rest and see if we can't come up with something new."

"Yeah," Ernst said. "Banging our heads against this on no sleep won't get any results."

Jessie sighed and sat back in her chair.

"Yeah." she said. "Yeah, you're right. Let's head out for the night."

The three of them headed to the lockers, pulled out their bags, shoved their laptops and research folders in, shed their lab coats, and headed to the door.

"Oh shit, I forgot to send our progress update to Craig." she said.

"Want us to wait for you?" Ernst said.

"Nah, you guys go ahead. I'll just be a couple minutes behind you. I have to get this to him tonight."

"Alright."

The two of them pushed open the door and headed out.

Jessie watched them go, waited a few seconds to make sure they weren't returning, then went back to the lockers. She pulled her computer out, put her lab coat back on and returned to her terminal. She put in her ear buds, turned on her K-pop work music, and slipped her iPhone back in her pocket.

She sat down and tapped out a few keys and the printer started up. She pulled off the paper and studied it for a few minutes then went back to the centrifuge.

She put the print out in front of her and began mixing out the

next round of vials. She had one done, and began work on the next one when she peered closer at the printout.

"Shit." she muttered under her breath, and pulled out the first vial she had worked on.

"That'd kill them for sure."

She took out the biohazard tape and put it over the lid to the vial to indicate it was to be thrown out. She slipped it into her pocket and began going through the process of preparing the vials for the radiation treatment.

After she had the half dozen done, she headed towards the back of the lab.

Jessie wasn't going to wait until the next day to finish out the three combinations. Those would be done tonight so they could start fresh in the morning. She didn't want any excuse to put it off any longer.

Her talk with Craig was already three days old and she kept feeling the noose tighten further around her neck.

She knew what she was going to ask Alex and Ernst to do and she knew they weren't going to like it. If there were any other avenues left before them, they would fight hard for them. So Jessie was going to end it that night. No more excuses. No more experiments they all knew would fail. Craig had said to pull out all of the stops, and now was the time. Jessie set the vials down in the radiation chamber and



returned to the terminal and began working her way through the checklist. She thought she heard a faint beep of the door behind her, pulled out her earbud and checked over her shoulder.

Nothing.

It was probably in her head. She was pushing a twenty-four hour day after weeks of barely any sleep.

She finished up the safety checklist, held down the safety button, and typed in the command to begin the process. She stood to watch as the computer voice announced the beginning of the countdown sequence.

At the first thirty second announcement, she turned to go back to her terminal when she felt something jab into her neck and the white hot lightning of a high voltage stun gun coursed through her body. She went rigid for a split second as her bladder loosened then she flopped to the floor like a landed fish and blacked out.

# # #

### The Chamber

"Thirty... twenty-nine.... twenty-eight..."

The sound filtered in before anything else. At first she thought maybe she was playing a round a hide-and-go-seek and forgotten to hide.

I've gotta hide!

She opened her eyes, but everything seemed far away and too close at the same time. It was all blurry and swimmy.

Jessie rolled over on her side.

"Twenty... nineteen..."

She got panicky now.

She really had to find a place to hide before it got to zero or she'd be the first one found. Jessie saw something above her and reached up to grab it. At first her hand slipped off. She tried again, and this time her grip caught. She struggled to stand.

The blurriness was starting to fade into sharper images.

Where am I going to hide?

She looked around. The room was too small. She'd definitely be found here. She looked down by her hands and there was a small stand with several vials sitting vertical in them.

What are those for?

"Nine... eight...."

Jessie looked around frantically for the person counting.

Maybe she still had a chance to hide. Her eyes swam across the thick door to the radiation chamber and everything slammed back into her mind at once.

"Five... four... "

Jessie looked around frantically for the emergency shut off button. She couldn't force herself to remember where it was.

Finally, she saw it. It was just a few feet away next to the door. It was big. It was red. It just took one slap to turn it off.

Jessie let go of the podium, took one step towards it, and her legs immediately gave wave and she collapsed to the ground. She tried to crawl, but knew it was too late.

"Two... one..."

She struggled to her hands and knees and reached a hand towards the button when she heard the familiar whirring up of the radiation treatment. She looked out of the small window in the chamber door and saw the tail of a DrekCorp lab coat and someone turned to leave. She struggled to focus in on the back of the person, but couldn't make them out.

Everything went white.

Jessie collapsed to the floor.

Everything went black.

# # #

### Death

Once again, Jessie slowly swam back into consciousness. This time, though, there was no mechanical voice counting down. There was only silence. She kept her eyes closed. She prayed. Prayed it was all a dream. That she's going to open her eyes and see her dark apartment around her.

But she knows that's not the case. She can feel the cold metal floor of the radiation chamber against her cheek. She can feel her clothes pressing in on her body as she lay face down.

She opened her eyes to see the radiation chamber door standing open. She can see out into the lab, still empty. Ernst and Alex are back at their respective apartments, asleep in their bed. They still had a couple hours left to sleep before their alarms would drag them out of bed and send them back to DrekCorp.

Jessie mentally went through each part of her body. Nothing felt too off. She felt a bit flu-ish. Like the onset of food poisoning or something. Maybe it wasn't as bad as she thought. Maybe she was safe after all.

She pulled up her arms and both her palms down on the floor and pushed.

It took far too much effort to raise off the floor.

She was able to get up enough to turn over and back against the wall so she could set up straight.

She took a deep breath, then felt something that tasted like bitter metal roll over her lips and into her mouth. She raised a hand to her nose and wiped wetness away. She looked at her fingers, which were now smeared with blood.

She looked down at the front of her to check to see if any had gotten on her lab coat, which ended up being a mistake. It was

like a faucet turned on and blood gushed out of her nose. She pressed one hand to her nose and then the other as she tried to staunch the bleeding while weakly removing her lab coat. She figured out pretty quickly it was no good pinching her nose because the blood merely backed up and poured into her throat.

Once she removed the coat, she balled it up and pressed it to her nose to catch the blood. She reached up with her free hand and tried to pull herself to a standing position, but her head immediately swam and her stomach lurched, so she lowered back to her knees.

Crawling it would be then.

She kept the coat pressed against her face as she slowly crawled out of the radiation chamber. She was just a few feet clear when her stomach lurched again. This time there was no holding back. She pulled the coat away from her face as she began vomiting.

What little she had eaten that day came out along with thick mixture of blood and bile. Her stomach kept lurching spraying more blood and bile across the floor. At some point right arm gave out, and when she tried to catch herself with her left, it went into the slick pool of bloody vomit and she slipped falling face first to the floor.

She finally stopped heaving.

Unsteadily she got back to her hands and knees and began crawling again to her terminal, still pushing the soiled lab coat against her face to slow the blood from her nose.

She reached her chair. As she reached up to the arm rest, her stomach pushed again and she opened her mouth again, but she only dry heaved. Nothing but a long string of red saliva slid from her mouth. She wiped it with the back of her hand and struggled into her chair.

Jessie leaned back, dropped the lab coat into her lap, and began to cry.

She knew what was coming.

She had forty-eight hours at most. With how quickly the symptoms were setting in, twenty-four hours was probably more likely.

She ran her hand through her hair, and looked down at her open palm. It was thick with strands of hair.

Definitely twenty-four hours.

Jessie set her jaw, pushed the tears back down like her dad had taught her and dug through the nasty lab coat until she found the phone Cylis had give her. She typed in her passcode and then pulled up a message to Cylis.

"You'll have to take DrekCorp on your own. Someone must have figured out what I'm doing because they just killed me. I'll be dead in the next day. Clean out my apartment so nothing

gets found. Check the false bottom of my closet. Sorry I wasn't enough."

Next she pulled up Dick's number.

"I screwed up and looks like I'll end up like Ryan after all. Use the money to take care of my parents. I guess that's what he would want."

She sent both messages and then scrolled to her Dad's contact info. She tapped the message button and pulled open a new text message. She hesitated, started to tap in a message, then deleted it and clicked off her phone.

Blood continued streaming freely from her nose. Jessie kept blowing air to spray off the blood and keep it out of her mouth. She lifted the lab coat again to her face, but this time felt something else hard in the pocket. She dug around and found the vial she had mixed wrong. It still had the tape across the top marking it as toxic. However, before it had been a faint yellow and now it was a light green. It almost seemed to glow on its own.

Jessie put her head back and clutched the vial.

She wanted to be angry. Vengeful. She should hate whoever did this to her. But she couldn't muster the energy. What was the point? She'd be dead soon anyway. All she had to do was wait for her insides to finish liquifying under the radiation and die an excruciating, horrific death.

She looked down at the vial again.

Yes, it was definitely glowing.

If it wasn't toxic enough before, it was now.

Maybe she didn't have to wait for the excruciating death after all.

Jessie weakly pushed her feet against the floor, forcing the chair to roll across the room. She bumped into one of the equipment cabinets, and turned herself around. She opened a drawer, felt around inside then pushed it closed. She opened the next one, felt inside and her hand closed against what she was looking for.

She pulled it off, ripped the paper off with her teeth and held the syringe up in front of her. She held the vial in one hand and pushed the needle point through the tape and plastic lid of the vial. She pulled up on the plunger and filled it to capacity with the green liquid until it was gone. She threw the vial on the floor, held out her right arm, and focused hard to get a bead on her blue vein pushing against the surface of her skin.

She said one last prayer that her aim would be true. That's all she wanted from God at this point.

He answered her prayer and the needle went directly into her vein. She pushed the plunger slowly down emptying the contents into her system.



Jessie dropped the plunger on the floor, closed her eyes, and waited for the sleep to come.

She didn't have to wait long.

# # #

### Life

Jessie was seven when she first learned how to ride a bike.

Just like every other kid, she struggled with the balance.

Fell off, cried, tried again.

Unlike every other kid, she was all by herself.

She had wanted a bicycle for so long, but her dad never had the money for one. Then, not long after her fifth birthday, while he was dropping their trash off at the dump, he found a bike in the trash and saved it from the compactor.

He brought it home, put it in the driveway, and yelled at her on his way down the hall to check on her mother that he had gotten something for her and it was in the driveway.

Jessie had loved the bike as soon as she had seen it.

Later, when she was older, she could think back and see the flaws in her memory.

First of all, it was blue with lightning bolts down the side -- obviously a boys bike.

Then there was the fact that it was far too big for her. She could barely reach the ground with her tip toes if she

stretched them out.

And finally -- probably the reason the bike was in the trash in the first place -- the front wheel was bent so when she ride it, it wobbled a bit.

But none of that had mattered to Jessie.

She had a bike.

Finally, just like all the other kids in the neighborhood, she'd be able to ride around with freedom and not be locked into just the places her feet would carry her to.

She began to get the hang of it on the first day, but it was the second day that it happened.

Jessie had decided to venture out into the street with her bicycle for the first time.

This wasn't too dangerous as they lived on a pretty quite street with drivers that rolled slowly down and liked to wave at the neighbors doing yard work.

The only real problem is their house sat at the top of a hill, which means both directions were downhill.

She through her leg over the bike, pushed up with her feet, and quickly smashed them on the pedals to get her moving. She took off, feeling her balance pretty well, and then she suddenly realized she was gaining speed.

Fear gripped her and suddenly she couldn't remember how to stop. She froze and her little knuckles turned white as she

gripped the handlebars and kept going faster.

She suddenly jerk the handle bars, just to do something, and slammed into the front of a maroon Pontiac parked on the road.

The force of the impact threw her chest into the handlebars.

She did a sort flop over the bars and landed on the pavement.

The shock of suddenly staring at the sky, turned into horror as she tried to take in breath and no air came.

She tried again and nothing.

It seemed like all she could do is take little teaspoon size breaths in, but nothing would go out.

She heard yelling and feet and saw grown up faces swim into view as she kept sucking in her little spoonfuls of air.

Finally, the carbon dioxide had won out and she slipped out of consciousness.

This memory is what her mind pulled up when she started hearing her name called. Just like then, there were people yelling her name, and she could feel them close, but it seemed to be coming from so very far away.

"Jessie!"

Over and over.

Someone was shaking her now, yelling her name again.

The voice got closer.

It was coming from inches away now.

Jessie's eyes popped open and she sat up suddenly off the

floor. Her forehead smacked into Alex's nose. He let out a yell and fell back, holding his nose gingerly.

Jessie looked around the lab.

It was like a scene from a horror film.

Everything was a mess. Chairs were knocked over. Supplies were scattered on the floor.

And the blood.

Dear god, the blood.

It was everywhere.

There was an obvious trail leading from the radiation chamber to where she laid now, next to her overturned desk chair. She looked down and saw her close were covered in blood.

And the smell.

The smell was worse than the sights.

That copper, sweet smell of blood mixed with the putrid odor of bile and vomit.

Alex had fallen back and his butt sat in some of the sticky mess. Ernst stood a few feet back, his hand over his mouth, streaks on his face where recent tears had fallen.

Everyone was silent. Ernst and Alex stared at Jessie as she got unsteadily to her feet.

She went through her mental checklist again from her head down to her feet.

Everything seemed normal.

She flexed her fingers, pushed against her stomach, moved her neck around.

Nothing. No pain.

She turned and walked to the back of the lab where the large industrial sink stood. She turned on the cold water and left it running, then looked up at the mirror.

Another horror movie scene.

Her face was covered in blood. Her hair had been pushed up and caked with the blood and the bile when she had fallen down, and it had dried in a weird angle.

Her shirt was also stained a dark red.

She reached down and pulled her shirt over her head and threw it in the sink and stood in only her black bra in front of the mirror. She grabbed some paper towels, wetted them, and began cleaning off her face. She wiped the blood off her abdomen and chest where it had soaked through. Lastly, she put her head under the faucet and rinsed it out the best she could.

When she stood and looked back in the mirror, she saw herself again. The real Jessie. The one she was used to looking at in the mirror.

She grabbed another paper towel and blew her nose hard. Old, caked blood came out but it was all that blackish red color. No new blood. There wasn't even any pain.

She looked at the reflection behind her and Alex and Ernst

stood a few feet behind her. Ernst held a towel and one of her extra shirts from her locker.

She dried her hair, donned the fresh shirt, then walked over to a desk and sat down.

Alex and Ernst followed her and sat down across from her.

She looked at her feet for a long time. She sat still, but her mind was blazing, desperately trying to put the pieces together.

Her mind kept trying to tell her it must have been a dream. A nightmare. Getting radiated by your own equipment. Surely she wasn't the first scientist to deal with this.

But then she would flick her eyes towards the chamber and see the gruesome scene and realize, it was all too real.

How am I alive? How do I feel completely fine?

Finally, Alex cleared his throat.

"Um," he said, "Jessie, what happened?"

She didn't answer for a full minute. Her brain still whirling around.

What was she supposed to say?

If she told them about getting trapped in the radiation chamber, she would have to give some kind of explanation for why she was ok. Not to mention, someone had obviously dragged her in there to kill her.

But here she sat, alive and well even though she could see far

too much blood on the floor for her to be alive.

She looked up at Alex and Ernst.

Again, Ernst was crying. He was fighting hard to keep it down, but the tears were pulled at the bottom of his eyes.

"I'm not sure really," she began. "I was setting up the chamber for another experiment, the next in our plan, and I, uh, I got bad nose bleed. I tried to staunch it with my coat, but it just kept coming. And, then for some reason, I just started throwing up. Maybe the Thai we had for dinner didn't sit well with me or something."

"A nose bleed and some bad Thai?" Alex said.

Jessie shrugged.

"I guess."

Finally Ernst spoke. His voice cracked a bit, but he pushed out the words anyway.

"And the used syringe on the ground? What was that about? And I checked the logs while you were cleaning up. The radiation chamber ran through it's process. If what you say is true, you never got a chance to turn it on."

Jessie just stared at them both.

"Fuck this," Alex said. "I'm calling Craig. He can come in here and sort this out."

"No!" Jessie yelled suddenly.

Alex and Ernst both startled.

"We have to report this Jessie." Alex said. "Even if your explanation wasn't total bullshit, look at this place. We can't just act like this never happened."

Jessie stood up.

"Look at me. I'm fine."

"You shouldn't be!" Ernst said. "There's enough on the floor that you should be dead just from blood loss."

"But I'm not!"

Jessie held up her hands, turned around so they could see her.

"I'm fine. I feel fine. It was just a fluke."

Alex pointed.

"That is not a fluke!"

"Ok, whatever, don't believe me, that's fine. But here's the truth. We are this close to losing this lab and getting kicked out of the program."

"What?" Alex and Ernst said in unison.

"Dr. Roe and Az are gunning to take it from us because our research has stalled since moving in here. Craig told me three days ago. If we don't show significant progress soon -- as in the next few days -- they'll take the lab from us, give it to Az, and we'll be out of DrekCorp. Is that what you want?"

The guys stared at her.

"So take this to Craig, and what is he going to do? He'll have to report this. They'll do an investigation and even if they



found that nothing went wrong, we'll still be out on our asses."

"It's your call, but look at me, I'm not sick, I'm standing upright, I'm fine. Let's just clean up the mess and get back to work."

There was a long pause. Alex looked livid. Ernst just looked bewildered.

"Fine," Alex said.

"On one condition," Ernst added. "You go see the medical staff as soon as we're done and get checked over."

"Deal," Jessie said. "Now, where's a mop bucket around here?"

# # #

Alive?

# # #

MindEcho

Jessie picked at her food, barely eating it. She moved it around the plate with her fork more than anything else.

The lunch crowd bustled around her and Alex, but they barely noticed as they sat in silence, Jessie lost in her thoughts, Alex lost in his wondering about Jessie's thoughts.

"What's your deal? Why the melancholy?"

"Seriously? We're gonna get kicked out of the program any day. Our research is still stalled. Nothing is moving. And you're wondering 'why the melancholy?'"

"Yeah, but didn't you say Craig seemed reassuring?"

"He smiled and gave me a thumbs up, that's it. That doesn't mean anything. He said I had a week, it's now been a week and a half and he hasn't said anything else. He must be doing a good job stalling Dr. Roe."

"Maybe it's all blown over. Maybe Dr. Roe is distracted by this operation of his."

Jessie shrugged and moved some more food around her plate. She sighed in frustration.

"We're missing something. We're so close, but still missing it."

"Missing what? What are you talking about? We're trying everything aren't we?"

"Well," Jessie paused, nervous, "I had an idea --"

Just then both of their phones lit up and buzzed.

It was from Ernst.

"Get back here NOW."

Without another word, they both stood leaving their food behind and walked quickly out of the dining hall. The door beeped as they entered the lab and Ernst looked up at them with a big smile on his face.

"I got in!" he said.

"In where?" Jessie said.

"The DOD. I got into their system and I found what went

missing from the airport."

Jessie hurried over to Ernst, but Alex was slower.

"Oh man," he said. "Why do you two keep getting me involved in this shit? I don't want to know this stuff."

"The leave," Jessie said without looking back at him.

Alex sighed and walked over to join them.

"What'd you find?"

"The device is called MindEcho, at least that's the project codename the DOD refers to it as. It's some sort of mind control device. But not like you turn somebody into a robot. You just put them in a state where they are highly suggestible."

"Here's the thing. Our military spends a billion dollars to invade a country and take down its evil, dictator, shithead leader. The problem? The country falls apart. It has no leadership. The people hate us being there. We get stuck in this place that we can't leave because there'll be a power vacuum that, if we do leave, will be fought over by a bunch of shitheads that are just as bad as the one we just killed."

"So, what to do about this?"

"What if instead, we could figure out a way to control the leader. And not a strong arm kind of way. Just make him... open to our suggestions let's say."

"Like stop raping your women and cutting journalist's heads

off?" Jessie said.

"Exactly," said Ernst.

He continued.

"The research is going well. Seems to be working. The biggest problem is, while the procedure itself is pretty quick -- it can be done in a couple of hours -- it leaves the subject, well, pretty loopy for a couple weeks. In the highly-illegal-but-we-did-it-anyway human trials the DOD did, the subject was pretty inert for forty eight hours after the procedure and not back to themselves for almost a week."

"Which," Alex said, "would make it pretty hard to pull off on your average despot. People may get suspicious if he disappeared for a couple hours and came back drooling into a cup."

"Right," Ernst said. "But, needless to say, the DOD is pretty keen to get their device back. Apparently they had a couple outside consultants build the device for them and, now that it's stolen, can't exactly go back to them and say 'Um, yeah, we lost that. Can we have another?' and so they are stuck."

"Well, who built it for them?" Jessie said.

Ernst chuckled, tapped a few keys, then turned the monitor so Jessie and Alex could see it.

Alex whistled.

"DrekCorp built it?" Jessie said.

Ernst nodded.

"Yeah, along with a couple other companies."

"So let me get this straight," Jessie said. "The United States Department of Defense hires weapons and research consultant corporation DrekCorp--"

"Plus two other outside consultant firms," Ernst interjected.

"--and spends taxpayer dollars -- I'm assuming a lot them -- to build a mind control device. Then, when it's done and delivered, DrekCorp steals it back from them knowing the DOD won't be able to do anything about it."

"Exactly." said Ernst.

"And now," Alex finally chimed in, "it's sitting in a locked room down the hall from us waiting for god-knows-what operation that Dr. Roe is planning."

"Holy shit," Jessie said. "This is big."

"Right!" Ernst said, "And it's the only one that's every been built and it can't be built again because it was proprietary research the DOD purchased from three different parties. The only way they could have another one built is to take the egg on their face and admit it went missing, which they'll never do.

Ernst looked between the two of them as if he was expecting something else.

"What?" Alex said.

"Have you not put it together yet?"

"Put what together?" Jessie said.

"Oh man, it was the first thing I thought of." Ernst said.

"Ok, what, you're smarter than us, fine. Out with it." Alex said.

"What research has Az been working under Dr. Roe's guidance?"

"Rapid and direct cell manipulation via radiation."

Ernst nodded, waiting again.

"Damn it Ernst, what?" Jessie said.

"And what research has President Drek himself directed to have all the funding and space it needs to continue?" Ernst held out his hands motioning at the lab around them.

"Oh my god." Alex said.

"Exactly." Ernst said.

"If they can increase the regeneration of cellular growth, they could shorten the recovery time from the MindEcho device. Even if we are marginally successful, it could shorten it from a week to a day or two." Jessie said.

"Yep," Ernst said. "We're helping DrekCorp use a device that they stole from the DOD to hijack someone's brain."

"But the question is, who?" Jessie said.

# # #

### Frustration

Jessie kicked off the covers of her bed and turned to her

side. She laid staring at the wall. Once again she closed her eyes and wished for sleep knowing none would come.

In fact, it'd been a week since Jessie had slept.

Ever since... whatever happened in the lab.

The whole thing was so much like a dream, Jessie kept trying to shove it down and pretend like it was a dream. But there was too much about it that her mind kept screaming at her to figure out.

She had been radiated. There was no doubt in that. She heard the machine start it's process. She showed all of the immediate and classic signs of radiation sickness. The symptoms had been drilled into her throughout school. There was no doubt what happened. And the levels of radiation they were using on their project were high enough to cause that kind of reaction.

Pushing passed that part of it, there were two more things her the alarms in her head wouldn't let up on.

First, why was she healed? How do all of the symptoms of radiation poisoning disappear like it had never happened?

Second, who had knocked her out and trapped her in the radiation chamber? Who was trying to kill her?

Jessie flipped back on to her back and pulled the covers over her again as a chill hit her skin. Now she stared at the ceiling.

And why couldn't she sleep?

She wasn't tired. She never got tired anymore.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. After a long day she would start to feel worn out. But she would sit down, drink a cup of coffee, and after fifteen minutes feel refreshed and ready to work again.

Jessie squeezed her eyes shut.

Although she didn't dream in the traditional sense anymore, that didn't mean her mind didn't force images into her consciousness still.

She once again trying to shut out the fear and repulsion that rose in her as she remembered all of the blood and vomit that had poured out of her in a matter of a couple minutes.

Death had been imminent.

She knew it was over.

She had said goodbye to Cylis and Dick.

That had been fun to explain later. She wrote it off as she had just gotten drunk and sad but they didn't buy it.

But what had happened.

Jessie finally sat up in her bed, put her feet on the floor, and braced herself against the memory.

She let the entire scene wash over for the first time since it happened.

Waking up in the radiation chamber, disoriented, not making it



to the emergency stop button. Seeing the lab coat billow behind someone as they walked away. Then white then black. Waking up, crawling across the floor, the blood and vomit, texting Cylis and Dick, leaning back in her chair to die. Wait, there was more.

Ernst had said he found a used syringe.

The vial!

She had forgotten that vial of toxic substance she had put in her pocket to dispose of. It had been glowing.

It had been radiated too.

That's what must have changed the contents from a light yellow to the lightly glowing green. She had found a syringe and injected herself with it thinking it would poison her and get her to death faster.

Was that what had saved her? Is that what had healed her? Was it still working on her? Is that why she couldn't sleep?

And if it was, what are the long term repercussions of it? She had injected herself with a toxic substance. That couldn't provide lasting good for herself?

She needed that vial. That syringe. But it was gone, long thrown away when she had convinced Ernst and Alex to help her clean up the mess.

What if she could reproduce the substance though?

She didn't remember exactly what she had mixed together -- it

had been a mistake after all -- but there was only a limited number of combinations that were possible.

What if she could reproduce it? What if she had stumbled onto the discovering they had been working on since the beginning. Science is only science if you can reproduce it.

Jessie looked at the clock -- 6:00am -- stood and began hurriedly dressing.

She needed to get into the lab and began retracing her steps to see if she could reproduce whatever that substance was that had somehow saved her.

# # #

Betty

Jessie was hurrying up the steps to the front of DrekCorp, digging into her bag for her badge, not looking where she was going when she bumped into a plump woman working on getting her badge to work.

"Oh!" Jessie said. "So sorry! I was just looking for my badge."

"Honey it's no problem, I'm always doing stuff..."

The woman's voice faded along with her smile when she saw Jessie.

"Hi!" Jessie said. "You're Betty right? You helped check me in on the first day of orientation."

The woman fidgeted and struggled to say something.

"Um, I'm not sure. I checked in a lot of people that day."

"No, I'm pretty sure you would remember me. I'm Jessie Black.

You remembered my brother, Ryan Black. He used to work here."

The woman shook her head quickly and glanced over her shoulder through the front glass doors of the DrekCorp building.

"No, I don't think I remember that. I don't think I've known a Ryan. I have to go. I have to get into my office."

"Wait. Why are you acting like this? It was obvious on the first day you remembered my brother. And what do you mean you don't know a Ryan? It's a pretty common name. You're saying you've never met a single Ryan in your life?"

Betty just shook her head and turned towards the door, fiddling with her badge again trying to get it up to the keycard entry.

Jessie grabbed the top of her chubby arm and turned her around, and stepped in close.

"Look Betty, you need to tell me what is going on. Why are you all of a sudden acting like you've never met me or my brother? Eight weeks ago you made it pretty clear that you knew Ryan and now you're acting all weird about it. Why can't you even admit knowing him?"

Betty's eyes were darting back and forth, looking for some sort of escape.

"Leave me alone!" she whispered harshly. "Are you trying to get me in trouble? I don't want the same thing to happen to me that..."

"The same thing that happened to what?"

Betty pursed her lips together and just shook her head back and forth.

"Listen to me Betty, I'm not going to let this go. If you know something about my brother, you need to tell me and tell me now. I won't mention you or how I found anything out, but he was my brother, and my family still doesn't know what happened to him. This wrecked my family. My parents never recovered. You have kids Betty?"

By now Betty's eyes were filling with tears, but she nodded quickly.

"What if they just disappeared? What if you never heard anything from them again? What would that do to you?"

Jessie let the silence set.

Betty glanced over her shoulder again. One of the front door guards at DrekCorp had stepped to the glass and was looking curiously out at the two of them.

"You're going to get us both in trouble," Betty said.

Jessie shrugged at this.

"It's your call Betty," she said.

"Ok fine, I'll talk to you, but not here standing in front of

the building.”

Betty glanced down the street. The familiar green sign stood out just a block away.

“Let’s part ways, act like things are normal, and I’ll meet you down at that Starbucks in fifteen minutes. Make sure you leave out of one the side exits. I’ll tell you what little I know.”

Betty sniffed a little.

“I couldn’t imagine something like that happening to my babies. I’ll help you any way I can, ok?”

Jessie let go of her arm and nodded. Betty straightened her suit top, scanned her badge and entered. Jessie followed behind her and they parted ways.

Maybe now she would find out more about what happened to her brother.

# # #

No Betty.

Jessie sat at the Starbucks drumming her fingers on the table. She checked her watch again.

She had walked into the coffee shop right at fifteen minutes, grabbed a grande dark roast, black, and sat at a table in the back.

That was forty five minutes ago.

That bitch.

Jessie stood, tossed the rest of the coffee in the trash and banged the door open as she left.

She hurried down the side walk, swiped her badge into DrekCorp and went up to reception.

She showed her badge to the receptionist.

"I need you too look up an employee and let me know what department she works in."

The woman nodded and tapped a few keys on her keyboard.

"What's the employee's name?"

"Betty --" Jessie stopped. She didn't know her last name.

"And the last name?"

"I'm not sure."

The receptionist looked up at her.

"Well I can't look someone up just by their first name."

"Really? Can't you just give me all of the Bettys that work here? All of us had to take take pictures to work here? Maybe if you just let me..."

Jessie started leaning over the counter.

"Um, no, that's not how this works," the receptionist said.

"We have over a thousand employees in this building. I'm sorry I can't help you."

Jessie glared at her.

"Fine."

Jessie walked through the corridors and entered her lab. Ernst was hunched over his laptop working on something.

"Hey Ernst, do me a favor?"

He sat up in his chair and turned to face her.

"Do I have a choice?"

Jessie laughed.

"Could you get back into DrekCorp's private network and look up an employee for me?"

"Sure. Who are we looking for?"

"Remember the plump lady that checked us in on orientation day?"

"Yeah, she reminded me of my mom."

"Right, her name is Betty. I need to know where she works in the building."

"Why are you trying to track her down?"

"It's not a big deal. Just have a question for her."

Ernst sighed.

"Ok, here goes."

Ernst worked at the keyboard for a couple minutes.

"Alright, looks like there's four different Elizabeths and Bethanys working here."

He pulled up each one individually on the screen in separate windows.

"Hm, that's weird," he said.

"What?"

Ernst turned the laptop to face Jessie.

"You recognize any of them?"

Jessie leaned over the computer. None of the faces looked familiar.

"Did you look for 'Betty' too?"

"Yep, but that's usually short for another name."

"Right, what about middle names?"

"I included that in the search."

"So you're saying our Betty is not in the system as working here?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. When'd you see her last? Maybe she quit or something."

"This morning. I came in behind her. I watched her swipe her badge to get in, which means she had active employment as of a little over an hour ago."

Ernst just looked at her.

"I'll be right back."

Jessie almost ran out of the lab and down the hall to Craig's office. She knocked, a little more frantically than she'd have liked.

"Come in!"

Jessie pushed the door open.

"Oh hey Jessie!" Craig stood as she came in. "Great to see



you. What do you need?"

"Um"

Jessie stopped. What did she need? What exactly was she here for? She needed to track down a lady that was probably someone's receptionist. That sounded weird enough. And she couldn't exactly disclose how she knew that Betty wasn't in the DrekCorp system. And Craig was sure to ask why.

"Yes?"

"I've got kind of a weird request."

"I'm sure I can handle it." Craig smiled at her.

"On the day of our orientation I had a woman named Betty check me in. She was really kind to me and, uh, I just wanted to thank her. Maybe send her flowers or something, but I don't know her last name. Do you know who it could be?"

Craig gave her a puzzled, amused look.

"Not off the top of my head, but I'm happy to check with Rebecca Rohn. Maybe she knows."

"Ok thank you."

Jessie turned to leave.

"And Jessie."

She turned back to face him.

"Did I do something to upset you?"

Jessie looked surprised.

"Of course not! Why would you think that?"

"You never sent me flowers!" he said giggling.

Jessie rolled her eyes but couldn't help laughing.

"Ok thanks Dr. Castle." Jessie said opening the door to leave.

"No problem hon, I'll let you know what I find out."

# # #

### Roe's Trip

"We haven't seen much of Az lately. I wonder what he's up to?"

Ernst said.

Jessie shuffled forward in line a little more.

"Probably too busy licking Roe's asshole to come up for air," she said.

Alex and Ernst both giggled at this.

Jessie grabbed a plate and pointed out the meat she wanted and the lady with the hairnet scooped it out to her and Jessie kept pushing down the line.

"Seriously though," Alex said. "Why haven't we heard more out of them? Weren't they supposed to get our lab if we didn't start making serious progress?"

"We are making progress though," Ernst said.

Jessie glanced over her shoulder to make sure nobody was within ear shot.

"Yeah but we're not exactly reporting it," she said.

They got to the end of the line with their food and walked out towards the tables. They found the first empty one and all

slid into the seats.

"Yeah, by the way," Alex said, "explain to me again why we're putting bullshit data into our log."

"I've got my reasons," Jessie said.

"You do understand that we don't actually work for you right?"

Alex said.

Ernst laughed.

"What?" Alex said.

"We both know we do." Ernst said.

Jessie just laughed.

"You'll have to trust me on this one. Keeping it under wraps for the time being is the smart way to do it."

"But what about Craig's ultimatum that we produce or Roe and Az are going to kick us out?"

"Who knows? Maybe Az's research has stalled out too. Maybe Roe's 'operation' has taken over his attention. All I know is Craig said we had a week and we've had three so far and he acts like we never had that conversation."

"Have you asked him about it?"

Jessie shook her head.

"I can't imagine that'd be the smart thing to do. My hope is if they do suddenly show up to kick us out we can show where our current research is and buy us some more time. We're pretty damn close to the end of the three month window. We

just have to hang on a bit longer to make it through the cut then we can breath a little easier."

"This has been a fucking nightmare," Ernst said. "I had no idea the pressure cooker I was signing on for when I took this position. I mean, the pay's great and I love you guys, but I'm gonna have a stroke at 28 if I keep this pace up."

"Maybe that's what happened to Az," Jessie said. "Growing up around this place maybe broke his brain at a young age."

"You going to kick his ass again?"

The three of them looked up. Another of the interns was standing by their table with his tray in his hands. He looked vaguely familiar to Jessie.

"Hey Greg," Ernst said. He looked at Alex and Jessie. "Greg's in MechEngineering. He's one of the few non-assholes that made it into that department."

"Don't I know it," Greg said. "On the tough days though, I just think back to watching you beat the shit out of Az and it helps me get through."

Jessie's face reddened, but the rest of them laughed.

"By the way, if you want another crack at him," Greg said, "you'll have your chance in a couple days. Dr. Roe is heading out of town so Az won't be able to hide under his lab coat. They've been pretty inseparable lately."

Jessie looked up suddenly at this.

"Why? Where is Roe heading?"

"He's doing to DC for a couple days to brief the President on DrekCorp's progress on the weapons research contracts we currently have."

"Yeah," Ernst said, "it's a pretty big deal. Apparently it's one of the only times President Thomas meets one-on-one with just about anyone. DrekCorp has it's hands in so many pies, both public and top secret, that the President gets a full day of briefing with Roe."

Jessie sat in silence staring down at her plate.

"Uh," Greg said, "anyway, I was just saying since Roe with be out of town, I'd pay good money for round two of 'Humiliate Az in front of his coworkers'."

Jessie didn't say anything, she was long gone in her own thoughts.

Greg shifted his feet nervously, fighting to hold the smile on his face.

Alex sighed.

"Don't worry about her Greg, she gets a bit autistic like this sometimes," he said. "I'll see if I can talk her into giving Az a quick kick to the balls for you."

The three guys laughed, and Greg walked off.

"Jessie, you ok?" Ernst said.

She looked up at him.

"You know what this means right?" she said.

The two of them gave her a quizzical look.

"This is the operation. This is what he stole the MindEcho device for. This is why they haven't been worried about taking our lab. He's been having Az head down in his research getting ready for this meeting. Think about everything we've found so far. The MindEcho is how you control someone while keeping them in their current leadership role."

"Oh shit," Ernst said, "and they've figured out how to significantly shorten the recovery time. Maybe even as short as a day."

"Which is exactly how long Dr. Roe is going to have President Thomas to himself."

"I dunno," Alex said, "you're still making some pretty big leaps here."

But Jessie was gone again, lost in her own thoughts.

Alex shrugged and took another bit, but before he could swallow, Jessie abruptly stood, and turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" Alex said.

Jessie turned back and leaned over Alex.

"You can sit here all you want shrugging your shoulders and pretending like nothing is going on, but I'm sick of this. I'm going to put a stop to this bullshit once and for all."

Jessie turned and stalked out of the cafeteria.

# # #

### FBI Visit

Jessie came up to the thick doors, and hesitated.

Is this what she really wanted to do? It would certainly mean the end of her job if it got back to DrekCorp. But did she really want to work for them when people like Dr. Roe and Dr. Brooklyn were the ones in charge?

Not to mention, it was time she did something about what Dr. Roe was planning.

She went to push the door open, and instead a man was coming out and opened the door for her.

She nodded nervously noticing the gun on the man's hip and slipped passed him into the lobby. The small room reminded her of the waiting rooms in the doctor's offices she had visited growing up. The same rundown chairs, peeling twenty year old wall paper, and magazines that were at least six months old. She approached the receptionist window, which was open.

"Can I help you?"

It was a guy about her age with a headset on. Jessie wondered if this is what he had pictured for himself when he had signed on for this job.

"Um, yes, I'd like to give some information on a robbery."

"While we appreciate civilian help mam, that would probably be a better lob for the Atlanta Police Department. Would you like

their nearest location?"

He reached for a post-it and a pen.

"I'm not reporting a missing TV," Jessie said irritated. "I'm talking about the robbery at the airport almost three months ago."

"What robbery at the airport?" the man said.

"Don't give me that," she said. "You know exactly what I'm referring to."

"I'm not sure what you're referring to," he said. "I remember there being some kind of incident a couple months ago, but that ended up being a false alarm."

Jessie leaned over the counter, close to the agent.

"I'm talking about the device that was being transferred through the Hartsfield International that went missing. The device the Department of Defense is so embarrassed about losing, that they made up a bullshit story to cover their tracks. I'm talking about the project codenamed MindEcho. I came to the FBI field office to let someone know that I know who stole it and where it is right at this moment. Do you think maybe someone would want to talk to me about that?"

The agent's face had lost a good deal of color as she talked.

"What was your name?"

"Jessica Black."

"Yes. Please. Have a seat. Someone will be right with you."



"Thank you." Jessie said. She turned, and sat in one of the worn chairs.

She once again pushed down her nervousness.

This was the right thing to do. There was too much at stake.

Maybe Alex was right and she was spinning it up into something bigger than it was, but there were just too many coincidences happening at once. Too many things lined up.

No, this was what she should be doing. She had no business sneaking around the DrekCorp offices, following people around, breaking into offices. She was just a nerd scientist. Let the FBI raid the offices and break down doors to retrieve the device. It would kick off an investigation inside of DrekCorp that was probably a good thing for the world at large.

"Ms. Black?"

The door to the lobby had opened and the receptionist was poking his head.

Jessie stood and followed him down a narrow hallway that matched the lobby perfectly. The grey carpet looked original to the building and upkeep was obviously not the FBI's greatest concern.

Jessie followed the man down the hallway until they reached the last office. "Director Jackson" was in gold letters embossed on the wood panel door.

The receptionist opened the door and Director Jackson stood as

Jessie entered.

The office seemed to be one of the bigger ones in the cramped building, and the wall was covered with all of the obligatory framed commendations and badges to show that this here FBI agent was serious about his job.

"Hi Ms. Black, have a seat."

He motioned to the faded and worn orange chairs.

"Jessie," she said, sitting down.

"Jessie, ok, Frank says you have some information you'd like to share with me."

"Yes, it's about the robbery at the airport a couple months ago."

The director's lips tightened around the corner.

"Ok."

"So you're actually acknowledging there was a robbery at the airport?"

"I'm merely letting you continue."

"Look, I know the Department of Defense was transferring a device through Hartsfield Airport and it went missing. I also know that it was stolen by an employee of DrekCorp Enterprises, who was a contractor on with the DOD on building the device--"

The director let out a heavy sigh.

Jessie paused, waiting. Director Jackson seemed happy enough

to let the quiet air hang.

"Why aren't you writing down anything I'm saying?"

"What exactly would you like me to write down?"

Jessie stood.

"Look, you don't have to confirm anything. That's fine. Act like I'm crazy. Just turn me back out on the street. But I know what is going on. I know the mess at the airport wasn't a 'misunderstanding'. If you don't want to hear it, I'm happy to take it to a reporter at the AJC. Maybe the one that reported on the TSA agent's death? I'm sure he'd be interested in the MindEcho--"

Director Jackson's head snapped up.

"What did you say?"

"The item that went missing, it was codenamed MindEcho."

He stood and walked around the desk and closed the door to his office.

"Why don't you have a seat Ms. Black -- Jessie."

"I've done that once before."

"Yes," he said, "but now I want to hear more about what you have to say."

"So you're confirming that the MindEcho was stolen?"

He picked up a pen on his desk and scratched a couple notes on a small pad of paper on his desk. He then looked up at her.

"I, of course, can confirm or deny anything, but it's safe to

say I am now very interested in what you have to say. What else can you tell me?"

For the next half hour Jessie walked him through everything. Meeting Dr. Roe the day of the airport robbery, seeing him enter the lab, what she overheard, even what Ernst found on the DOD server.

"And how did you come by this information?" Director Jackson said at this point.

"I'd rather not say, but I think based on our conversation, it's accurate information."

The whole time she spoke, Director Jackson furiously took notes. By the end, he had filled two and a half pages.

"So, what's next?" Jessie said.

"What do you mean?"

"Dr. Roe is leaving for his meeting with President Thomas in a few days. Aren't you going to, I dunno, raid the DrekCorp offices or something?"

"It's not that simple Ms. Black."

"Jessie."

"Right. It's not that simple. We can't just storm into their offices based solely on your word. But you can be assured this is my top priority. Go on back to work, act normal, I will be following up on this soon."

"How soon is 'soon'?"

"You'll hear from me within 48 hours. I have your mobile number. I'll call you with an update."

Jessie stood and shook his hand.

"Thank you Director Jackson."

The director stood and opened the door for her to leave. He watched her all the way down the hall until she disappeared back into the lobby.

He went back into his office, closed the door, pulled the blinds, then sat back at his desk.

He opened the top drawer of his desk and rummaged around until he found his lighter. He then ripped off the pages from his notepad and turned around to his metal trash bin. He snapped the lid and a flame jumped out of the lighter, and he touched it to the papers which immediately caught flame. He dropped them into the waste paper basket, then while staring at the growing fire, dug in his pocket and pulled out his mobile. He dialed a number and put it to his ear.

"Hello. Right. Put me through to him. It's urgent."

# # #

Alex?

# # #

TC - More middle build

I need something that gets me from the FBI visit to the attack

in the alley.

# # #

### The Attack

"G'night Ms. Black."

Jessie smiled and waved at Ray, the guard that manned the front desk in the evenings. Considering Jessie's normal work hours, he was usually there when she left for the day.

"Night Ray, see you tomorrow."

Jessie pushed out the front doors and began walking down the sidewalk towards the parking garage two blocks away.

The last three days of work inside of DrekCorp had been tense. She had, of course, told Alex and Ernst about her meeting with Director Jackson. At first she had felt relieved. After carrying these suspicions for months, she had finally handed them off to someone else to deal with. The weight now sat on someone else's shoulders.

But that weight on her shoulders had been replaced by something new.

A growing dread had settled over her.

Why hadn't the FBI showed up yet? Why hadn't she heard from Director Jackson? He had said she would hear from him within 48 hours and it's now pushing 72 hours. What could be taking so long?

Jessie had already assumed she would lose her job one way or

another. She would surely be called as a witness in the case. And even if not, who knows, something would have to come out and the fingers would get pointed at her.

Jessie had just turned the corner and was almost to the parking garage when her phone rang in her pocket.

She pulled it out, saw that it was Cylis, and silenced her phone.

She hadn't told Cylis about her trip to the FBI offices. He had checked in with her yesterday via text and she said everything was fine. She knew that he would have tried to talk her out of going. Cylis's grudge against DrekCorp ran much deeper than Dr. Roe and one operation. He wanted to bring down the entire enterprise. Jessie had reached the end of her rope though. Going to the FBI hadn't just been about stopping whatever Dr. Roe was up to, it was also admission that this thing was bigger than her. She had fooled herself into thinking she could actually find her brother and somehow thwart DrekCorp, but it was all too big. Let the people that get paid to do this sort of thing take care of it. It was time for her to opt out out of this bullshit assignment she'd accepted from Cylis.

Again her phone rang, again she sent it to voicemail.

A moment later a text message popped up from Cylis.

"URGENT: Life/death. Answer. Your. Fucking. Phone."

As soon as she had read the message, the phone rang again.

She checked all around, but the streets were deserted at this time at night.

"Hello?"

"What the fuck Jessie? What did you do?"

Jessie stopped walking and looked around again. Still nothing.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't bullshit me Jessie. I know you went to the FBI three days ago."

The blood drained from Jessie's face.

How could he know?

She forced her voice steady.

"So?"

"You still don't get it do you? How big this is? How you can't trust anyone?"

"Oh, and I'm supposed to trust you unequivocally? The guy that mugged me in an alley?"

Cylis didn't answer immediately, but she heard a sharp click come from his side of the call.

"So, what's next?"

Jessie heard a mechanical version of her own voice come through the phone. Next, she heard Director Jackson's voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Dr. Roe is leaving for his meeting with President Thomas in a



few days. Aren't you going to, I dunno, raid the DrekCorp offices or something?"

"It's not that simple Ms. Black."

There was another click. Jessie put her hand against the wall to steady herself.

"How did you get that?" she said.

"Wrong question," Cylis responded. "What you should have asked is 'If you have this recording, who else has it?'"

"Oh my god."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm walking to get my car."

"Ok, get in your car and go straight to your apartment. I'll meet you there."

"How bad is this Cylis?"

"Bad. Hurry."

Cylis hung up.

Jessie checked around her again but saw nobody. She picked up the pace walking. She kept looking over her shoulder. She felt eyes on her from everywhere. Finally, she pulled her bag off her shoulder, tucked it under her arm, and began running to the parking garage.

She could see the light spilling out of the entry way. She was less than 30 yards from it.

Just as she passed the final alley, she heard something to her

left but when she turned, all she saw was a blur, then something heavy rammed into her and fell on top of her as they both hit the ground. Jessie let out a scream.

Before she could react, hands where on her. The man picked her up, put an arm around her neck and started dragging her backwards into the alley. She kicked at the ground, trying to get her feet under her at no prevail. She also pulled at the arm, but he had too good of a grip on her.

The attacker got her ten feet into the alley before she finally got her wits about it her. She kicked hard against the ground driving her body up, then went completely limp letting her weight pull her down. This did the trick, the surprise of the heavy load allowed her to worm out of his grip.

Instead of turning to run, she new he'd be able to catch her so she immediately grabbed his knees, tackling the man to the ground. This took him by surprise and he yelped as he hit the ground, his head cracking loudly against the brick wall of one of the buildings.

Jessie scrambled to her feet.

She got a look at her attacker for the first time.

He had black pants on with a denim jacket. He was short and stocky with a round sweaty face. He was obviously dazed as he struggled to right himself after the blow to the head.

This gave Jessie all the chance she needed.

She took one long step towards him, swung her foot, and kicked the man in the face as hard as she could. There was a satisfying crunch as his nose flattened against her shoe.

The man howled with pain and both of his hands went up to his face, one to his nose and the other swinging wildly trying to block another attack that he was certain was coming, but couldn't see.

Jessie stepped away from his swinging arm, then back up to his body. She raised a foot and stomped viciously into his stocky belly. This time this sound the escaped him was a loud, gurgling woosh of air.

Before he could react, she put all her weight into another stomp on his midsection. She was aiming to do as much internal damage as possible.

The man rolled into a ball, pulling his knees to his chest, once again trying to protect from further attacks.

Jessie started backing away slowly, keeping her eyes on the man to make sure he didn't attack again. That wasn't a worry though. He'd probably be laid up pissing blood for the next week.

Just as she got to the mouth of the alley she turned to grab her bag and run, but a sharp pain appeared in her back. She reached back with her hand and hit against something hard. The hard thing jerked away, and the pain turned searing. She

turned around in a stumble and found another man, dressed all in black standing with a long switch blade in his hand.

She stumbled back towards the alley, trying to think straight again and get away, but for some reason her legs weren't working right. The man stepped forward and shoved hard against her chest and she fell hard against the ground.

Jessie pushed against the ground, but for some reason couldn't move. Her entire body felt like it was made of sand. The man moved in close to her and she waved her hands at him, trying to block any attacks. He knelt down, putting his knee against Jessie's left arm so she couldn't move it. With his left arm he grabbed Jessie's right wrist and held it down against her waist. She squirmed feebly against him, but he held her still. With the knife held firm in his right hand, he stabbed straight down into her chest. Pain exploded. Air escaped from the punctured lung and gurgled out of the wound. Jessie struggled to take in another breath.

The man watched her calmly for a few seconds then pulled the knife out and stabbed her over and over quickly. He put three more punctures in her chest, then at least four more in her abdomen.

Honestly, Jessie lost count.

She coughed and weazed as she tried to breath against the blood now gurgling up into her throat.

The man stood and stared down at her. Jessie fumbled at her stomach trying feebly to put pressure against the wounds. Her second attacker looked towards the back of the alley.

"For god's sake Pete, get your ass up. I just finished your job for you. The least you can do is help me carry her."

Jessie heard scrapping and moving behind her, along with grunting as her first attacker struggled to regain his feet. Pete's face moved into her vision as she lay staring straight at the sky.

His nose was a mangled mess and blood was still flowing, now dripping on Jessie's face.

"You bitch," he said, then kicked her viciously in the stomach. Then did it again.

Jessie's mind registered the pain, but there wasn't much of a reaction. She kept her hands pressed against her stomach trying to slow what she was sure was a torrent of blood escaping from the knife wounds.

Pete kicked her again. This time he connected with one of her arms. She heard more than felt the bone snap.

"Alright, that's enough," her second attacker said. "I don't think she's gonna get away now."

A loud rumble came from the street.

"Ok, we gotta hustle."

Pete, obviously still in pain, winced as he bent over to grab

her feet. Jessie took a small amount of joy in this.

Her other attacker grabbed her under her arms and they lifted her off the ground. Her arms fell by her side. Pain shot through the broken one, but it barely distracted her from her constant battle to pull in more oxygen.

They carried her further back into the alley.

"Ok. On three."

They started swinging her back and forth on each number.

"One... two... three!"

The two men let go and, for a short moment, she was weightless. Time seemed to freeze for just a few seconds.

For some reason a long repressed memory of her father throwing her in the air and catching her again came roaring out of her subconscious. This was before her brother left. Before everything fell apart. It was when her father still saw her. Still loved her.

Before she had to fight for herself.

And now she had lost that fight.

Time snapped back into motion and she slammed into a brick wall before tumbling down. At first she was surprised by the soft landing, before realizing that she had landed on top of several trash bags. Jessie tried to push up with her good arm, but it just sunk into the trash and she laid back down.

The rumbling got louder as it approached. Suddenly the

trashcan the men had thrown her in jerked violently, then it was being raised into the air. As it tipped over, Jessie rolled out along with the other trash and landed heavily in the back of the trash can.

The garbage truck lurched into movement.

Jessie could see the opening at the back. Maybe she could pull herself out and fall into the street where someone might find her.

She reached up her good arm and grasped the edge of truck and pulled with what little strength she had. She lifted her head and caught a glimpse of Pete and the other man standing side by side just as the truck turned the corner.

She pulled again and made it up a few more inches.

Just then, the whirring sound she'd been hearing but not registering made since as she felt pressure against her hip.

She turned around just in time to see the metal compactor start crushing the trash bag on top of her against her.

Jessie began to kick and pull as hard as she could, but it was far too late.

A whole new level of pain shot through her body as her pelvis and right femur where crushed by the metal and pistons. It dragged her broken body deeper into the truck.

Jessie looked up at the night sky and managed to catch a glimpse of a single bright star through the city lights.

That was something nice to go to sleep to. And she closed her eyes.

# # #

Where is she?

"Should we get started without her?" Ernst said.

"I dunno," Alex said. "You now how she flips out when we do anything without her. Hell, she can barely go take a piss while we're working. I keep waiting for her kidneys to explode."

"Has she ever been late before?"

"Not that I know of. Maybe she just overslept or something. Maybe her body finally gave out and she's bed ridden for a few days."

Ernst picked up his mobile and tapped "Jessie" under his favorites. It rang straight to voicemail.

"Immediately to voicemail. It must be turned off or dead or something."

The guys looked at each other. They were both thinking the same thing.

Sure, yeah, maybe she was running a little late. But she also waltzed into the FBI office a few days ago and made huge



accusations against DrekCorp. Accusations that, if she was right, had extremely far reaching consequences. Consequences that DrekCorp might fight hard against letting happen.

"Let's go check with Craig. Wouldn't be the first time she failed to communicate with everyone."

"No guys, haven't heard from her. You think she's ok?" Craig said.

They were standing in the BioTech lab where they had started. The other interns, the ones still left, milled around getting their work done. Alex, Ernst, and Jessie did their best to avoid coming here. Even though they were all in the same department, there was a good bit of animosity towards them since they got the upgrade to the new lab.

"I dunno," Ernst said. "She's never not showed up for work before so I'm not sure what to do."

"Dr. Castle can you pull her home address?" Alex said. "We'll just swing by her place and see if she's there. Maybe she's laid up sick or something. With how hard she's been working it wouldn't surprise me."

"I'm not really supposed to give that out," Craig said. "Let's just sit tight for a bit. Maybe she'll come running through the door in a few minutes."

This time Ernst spoke up.

"Please Dr. Castle. We both know she wouldn't mind you sharing that information with us and it'd make us all feel a lot better if we knew she was ok."

"She's only been missing a couple hours," Craig said. "In fact, 'missing' is even a pretty strong word for it. Why don't you two get back to work and we'll see what happens."

An hour later Ernst and Alex were banging on Jessie's front door.

Craig had sent an encrypted email to Ernst fifteen minutes after they had talked to him. The message only said "I'm worried too." and included Jessie's address.

Alex banged hard on the door for the fourth time. They had already been standing here three minutes with no response.

"She might just be sleeping," Ernst said.

Alex glanced around.

"Let's find out for sure," Alex pulled out his wallet and slid out a small sheath from inside a pocket. He pulled out a couple slender tools.

"What are you doing?" Ernst said.

"Just keep a look out."

"How do you even know how to do that?"

"I told you I came from the other side of the tracks from most of you Ivy Leaguers. We have our own kind of education."

Alex went back to fiddling with the lock.

Ernst sat drumming his fingers against his desk. He was staring off at the wall. Alex sat at his terminal pretending to work, doing all he could to distract himself.

"Alright," Ernst said standing suddenly. "Let's go talk to Craig. Maybe he has another idea."

"What's he going to say? He barely even gave us her address."

"I dunno. I think maybe he was scared of something."

"Scared?"

"Yeah, think about it. He didn't wait fifteen minutes after we came to send us the address. Why wouldn't he just give it to us right away? And he sent it over an encrypted service. That's usually only done when something is confidential. What if he knows somewhere else we could look."

"Then wouldn't he have put that in the email?"

"I dunno Alex, but I'm getting really freaked out. We usually start work at 6am and here we are nine hours later with no sign of Jessie and we haven't heard anything from her. That's more than just weird. I'm convinced something has happened to her."

"Ok, then let's go to police."

"Yeah, like she did a few days ago? That really worked out for her."

"So what do you suggest we do?"

"What I already said. Let's go talk to Craig and see if he has any other ideas. Let's get him into his office where maybe he can speak freely."

"Fine. Let's go."

Alex and Ernst reached the door to the BioTech lab but Ernst paused with his badge a foot away from the keypad. He was looking down the hallway.

Alex followed his eyes and saw Dr. Roe standing chatting with one of the MechEngineering interns. He looked to be reprimanding him in some way.

Ernst put his badge back on and began walking down the hall.

Alex hurried to catch up.

"What are you doing Ernst?"

Ernst just kept walking.

"This is a bad idea man," Alex said, but it was too late.

"Hey!" Ernst said.

Dr. Roe cut off mid sentence with the intern and turned towards Ernst. Alex kept a pace behind Ernst, trying his best to stay out of it.

"Where is she?"

"Where is who?" Dr. Roe responded with his shit eating grin plastered firmly on his face.

"You know I'm talking about Jessie. You've had it out for her from day one. I want to know exactly where she is and what you did to her."

"You need to watch your tone with me Mr. Kelley. Just because you're friend seems to be able to stalk around these offices doing whatever she wants doesn't mean I won't kick you at out of this program the first chance I get."

Ernst stepped close to Dr. Roe.

"If anything has happened to her--"

Dr. Roe dropped his smile and bared his teeth.

"Then it was probably because she sticking her nose where it had no right. I've seen plenty of Jessies in my time. They think they're smarter than everyone else and, somehow, think it is their job to hold the moral standard for right and wrong. Well let me tell you--"

Dr. Roe lowered his voice and spoke just above whisper.

"there is no right and wrong. There is power and punishment. DrekCorp is the real world and people like you and Jessie don't usually last very long."

"Now," Dr. Roe said backing away from Ernst and smiling again, "I'm not sure where Ms. Black is, but if I see her I'll let her know you're looking for her. Have a good day."

With that, he turned and started walking away, his intern hurrying to follow after him.

Ernst took a step to follow, but Alex grabbed his arm.

"Come on Ernst, there's nothing you can do about him."

Ernst held out for a few seconds then let out a heavy sigh.

They turned and began walking back to the BioTech lab.

"I'm sure she's ok," Alex said. "She probably just went to go see her parents or something. She'll turn up tomorrow with no apology and be as pissed as ever that we were looking for her instead of getting work done today."

Ernst let out a short laugh and scanned his card to open the BioTech lab door.

# # #

### Where is she? Part 2

The door beeped and opened. As soon as Alex had a foot through, Ernst yelled at him.

"We have to do something!"

Alex jerked, startled.

"What? What do we have to do?"

"I don't know, but she's still not here."

Alex looked closer at Ernst. His hair was mussed up and his clothes were wrinkled. The same clothes he had on yesterday.

"Did you sleep here last night?"

"Yeah," Ernst said sheepishly, "I was hoping she'd come in but she never did. Now it's been twenty-four hours that she's been missing. We have to do something!"

"Ok, you're right," Alex said setting his bag down on the desk next to Ernst. "I'm worried too. Let's think through our options."

Alex sat down in his chair and motioned for Ernst to sit down too. He did reluctantly.

"Craig is pretty useless," Ernst began.

"Right, he doesn't seem to know what to do. Also, for now, I think we both agree that bringing the police into this is a bad idea. It's just too much of a coincidence that she disappeared after going to see the FBI."

"So what's next?"

"Well, I've been thinking about this. The last time we saw her was two nights ago when we left and she was still finishing up a few things. That means she probably walked by herself to her car. Let's retrace her steps and see if we can find anything between here and the parking garage.

The two of them walked down the hallway, out the front doors and turned the corner to the parking garage. They went down the two blocks scanning back and forth for anything out of the ordinary. They made it to the parking garage.

"You know what she drives?" Ernst said.

"Nope."

"So we have no idea if her car is even here?"

"Oh!" Alex said digging around in his pockets. "I forgot I had

these!”

Alex pulled out a keyring with several keys on it.

“What are those?”

“I grabbed them off the counter in Jessie’s kitchen yesterday. I figured it’d be nice to have a set of keys to her apartment in case we needed to get in there again.”

Alex was flipping through the keys and came up with a black one with buttons. He and Ernst began walking through the garage as Alex hit the lock button over and over.

Finally on the third floor of cars, a blue Toyota blinked its lights and beeped.

Alex and Ernst stared at each other for a moment before hurrying over to the car. Alex unlocked it and sat down in the driver’s seat. He popped the trunk and then leaned over and began going through everything in the middle console at the glove box. He closed it in frustration and joined Ernst at the trunk.

“Anything?”

Ernst stood back. The trunk was full of take out containers and other mess.

“Nothing but the same mess we found at her apartment. God she lives like a freshman dude. When we find her we have to talk to her about the pig sty she lives in.”

Ernst slammed the trunk closed.



"What now?"

"Let's retrace our steps. We know she disappeared somewhere between here and our lab. That's a pretty tight distance.

Maybe we can get the front door security tapes pulled."

"At very least we can chat with Ray when he comes on shift and see if he remembers seeing her."

"Sounds good."

Alex and Ernst exited the parking garage and began walking the couple blocks back. Right after exiting, they passed an alley on their right. Ernst glanced in then paused.

"What's that?" he said, then went in with Alex following close behind.

Ernst kicked a box out of the way and saw what caught his eye. It was an iPhone. It had the same pink case that Jessie carried.

"Shit." Alex said.

Ernst picked it up and tried to turn it on. The Apple icon blinked on then right back off.

"No battery."

"What's it doing here?"

Ernst shrugged and pulled out his own phone. He turned on the flash to use as a flashlight and began looking around. It was mid-morning but still pretty dark in the alley. Alex joined him and they were soon sweeping back forth.

Suddenly Alex gasped.

"Ernst get over here."

Ernst hurried over and looked down at where Alex's light was shining.

"Is that what I think it is?" Alex said.

Ernst squatted down peering close. He stuck his finger in it.

"Definitely looks like blood."

Ernst touched his finger to his tongue.

"Oh man, Ernst. Sick."

Ernst spit it out.

"Yeah that's blood."

He stood and backed up adding his own light to Alex's.

"A lot of it too."

They started widening their lights to look around.

"There!" Ernst said.

There were big drops and streams of blood on the ground. They started following them and it led to one of the big trash bins that businesses dump their trash in.

Ernst got down on his hands and knees and looked underneath.

He couldn't find anymore blood there.

Alex shined his flashlight inside but it was a dingy mess. He then shined it up on the wall.

"Is that blood?" he said.

Ernst looked at it.

"Yeah. Yeah it is."

The both lowered their phones and looked at each other.

"What are we saying happened here?" Alex said.

Ernst shook his head.

"I think there's only one explanation. She was jumped on the way to her car, beaten up bad enough to lose a lot of blood then tossed in the trash can."

"Ok, now's the time to call the cops Ernst. We have to get them here looking at this crime scene. Who knows, maybe they can--"

"No! This wasn't random. We've walked here plenty of times at night and there's never been anything dangerous. And hell, if she was mugged they would have taken her phone. That's a \$600 phone. No, they grabbed her just to kill her and dump the body. This only confirms that it has something to do with the FBI. We have to find her ourselves."

Alex's eyes flitted to the pool of blood he'd found originally.

"Ernst, that's a lot of blood man. I don't--"

"Shut up Alex. We have to find her one way or another."

"Ok, what's next then?"

Ernst shined his light on the empty trash can. The name of the company and its phone number lit up on the side of the blue container.

"We know where she ended up at least."

# # #

### Where is she? Part 3

Ernst and Alex both emerged from Jessie's car and looked around. As far as they could see in almost every direction was enormous piles of trash. Off in the distance there was smoke coming from a pile of refuse that had bulldozed together to burn. The stench was surprisingly mild. They both imagined what this place must smell like in the dead of a the Georgia summer.

All of the directions on the internet had given directions to public dumping areas, but Ernst had to call and tell a few lies to get the location of the central office. Although 'office' was a pretty fancy term for crappy single wide trailer sitting in the middle of a dump.

"I can't imagine us actually finding her in here," Alex said.

"Look at how big it is."

"The guy on the phone said the dump was divided into quadrants and each day the trash is dumped in a specific place. That should cut down our search significantly."

They both still refused to state the obvious.

As if on queue, a large dump truck turned the corner and rumbled past.

Ernst and Alex opened the thin door and stepped inside the

single wide trailer.

The floors and shelves were covered with stacks of papers and folders. Several had slouched over years ago. Everything was covered with a layer of decades old neglect.

There were three desks, one in front of the other, each with monitor and tower dating back at least a decade. Only one of the desks was manned. The kid looked like he was just a couple years into his twenties and was slouched back in his chair clicking aimlessly at the computer. He barely looked up when Alex and Ernst entered.

"What can I help you with?"

"Hi," Ernst said, "I'm wondering if you can help us out with something."

"Hm?"

"I'm wondering if you can give us the location in the dump where trucks were dropping off their loads two nights ago."

"Whatcha need it for?"

"We misplaced something and are hoping to locate it."

"Not likely."

"Sure. We know the odds are pretty long, but we'd like to give it a try."

"The kid finally took notice of them."

"How'd you even get this location? This is the main office.

You should probably try--"

"We already have. I called and was sent to you so we could really use your help."

The kid's eyes went back to the computer screen. He started clicking on the mouse again.

"I can't let you go digging around in a trash dump. It'd be a liability for us."

"I'm happy to sign a waiver or something relieving you of the liability."

"I don't have one on me. Look, why don't you come back when my boss is back and you can talk to her."

"When's she due back?"

"Couple of days. Call ahead and see."

Ernst took a couple steps closer to the desk.

"Do you even know how to look up where the trucks were dumping two nights ago?"

"Sure. I take care of the scheduling."

"So you can look it up, you just don't want to?"

The kid sighed.

"Like I already said. It's a liability. You can try again when--"

"We can't wait a couple days. This is important. We need to look now."

The kid shrugged, and stayed silent.

Ernst turned and slammed the door open and started walking

towards the car.

"What are you going to do?" Alex said.

"I can use my mobile hotspot and jump online from the car. I can probably get into their system pretty quick and get what we need."

"How long will that take?"

"I dunno. An hour at least. Maybe more."

Alex looked over his shoulder at the office.

"Gimme a minute," he said, and walked back.

Ernst leaned against the car as Alex calmly opened the door and stepped in.

Almost immediately loud voices filtered through the thin walls of the trailer. There were a couple loud bangs. It was quite for a moment, then there was some more raised voices. The last thing the kid shouted was cut off abruptly and then followed by a loud scream. Then everything went quiet.

A couple minutes later, Alex opened the door and came walking out. His face was calm and he held a print out in his hand.

"Get what we need?" Ernst said.

"Yep, he even gave me directions."

They both opened the car doors and climbed in.

"That was nice of him."

"Sure was."

# # #

Alive Again.

Ever since Ryan had disappeared, Jessie had a recurring dream. Well, not so much an exact dream as a recurring theme. She was always lost and there was always something terrifying chasing her. The monster always took a different shape. When she had read Jurassic Park, it had become a velociraptor bent on slicing her stomach open and eating her entrails while she watched. When she'd watched Carrie on TBS late one night, it became buckets of blood flowing down hallways trying to choke and drown her.

The worst were the few times when it was the shadow. She didn't know how the shadow would kill her when it finally caught her, but she knew it would be slow, painful, and terrifying. She also knew in the dream that this was the same monster that had killed her brother.

This time when Jessie woke up, the tears were flowing. She kept her eyes closed tight. She was still in that space where the nightmare was terrifying but she was realizing it was a dream and not real and she could relax.

This one had seemed more real than ever though.

And this time the monsters had caught her, cut her open, and crushed her in their iron jaws.



Jessie began to move but became aware of a heavy weight sitting on top of her. It's like she was covered in a layer of fifty blankets. And scratchy, plastic blankets too.

She opened her eyes and everything was dark. She tried to move, but the weight pushed down against her. She started to panic and began thrashing and kicking and pushing. There was definitely a give to the weight but she still couldn't work out what was going on.

Where was she?

She thought back to her dream.

It had seemed all too real.

The car park. The alley. The first attacker that she had fought off. The second attacker that had calmly stabbed her over and over. She snaked her hand down to her chest and stomach. She felt around, but couldn't find any of the wounds. She thought back again and remembered being tossed in with the trash and then the crushing in the truck, the stars, and finally going to sleep.

The smell of the place finally hit her. The heavy, plastic blankets she was pushing against her.

She was dumped somewhere with the trash.

She pushed up again and the pile gave some more, though not much. She kept pushing up, wiggling, moving things around her, working her way up to the surface.

A few minutes in, she stopped, breathing hard and exhausted. She wasn't sure how much, if any, progress she had made so far.

Suddenly, she caught her breath and held it, listening. Voices.

Then she heard her name called out.

"Jessie!"

That sounded like Alex. Soon Ernst's voice joined in.

Jessie tried to yell, but she was sure it was nothing but a whisper against the trash and noise of a dump.

Now she wasn't worried about digging her way out, but just needed them to know where she was.

She started punching and pushing hard against the trash. She snaked her arm up through the bags, making room to reach through. Finally, her hand seemed to break through. She moved it as much as she could and continued to yell.

It was only a few seconds before she heard Alex curse and call after Ernst. His voice kept getting louder as he ran to her yelling her name.

It was the most beautiful sound Jessie had ever heard.

The next few minutes were filled with frantic yelling back and forth, assuring she was ok, digging her out, more yelling, more digging. Finally they pulled her free. Ernst was balling by the time she was out and hugging them. Alex couldn't stop

grinning.

She had insisted she was fine, but they all but carried her back to the car anyway. They opened the back passenger door and sat her down in the car, then Ernst knelt in front of her checking her over while Alex stepped back and folded his arms. As the relief drained, they seemed to see her and take her in for the first time. Their faces were now getting clouded with fear and confusion.

Jessie looked down at herself for the first time. Her shirt was in tatters, covered in blood and barely holding onto her body. Her khaki pants were also torn and covered in blood. She was sure her face didn't look much better.

Ernst opened his mouth to speak and closed it again several times.

"What?" Jessie said.

"It's time," Alex said.

"For?"

"For you to tell us what is really going on."

# # #

### Alive Again. Part 2

Jessie pulled her damp hair back into a tight knot on her head and wrapped it in place with a hair tie.

She stood naked in front of the mirror for a few moments

examining her body. The only thing she had to show from her attack were the handful of ragged scars on her chest and stomach. By her count, she had been stabbed nine times.

She shuffled through her drawer and pulled on some underwear and baggy workout shorts. She grabbed a t-shirt out of the closet and pulled it on as she walked out of her bedroom and down the hall.

She'd spent a long time in the shower both trying to work out what was happening to her and stalling having to talk to the guys. She promised them they would talk after she got home and had a shower.

She'd gone over every part of her body and there were no injuries she could find. She could still feel the knife going in and out of her. She could feel the searing pain. The struggle to breath against the punctured lung. Pressing her hands against her stomach trying to staunch at least some of the bleeding.

Now, there was nothing.

There were no wounds at all. She was fine. More than fine really. She felt great. Her energy was higher than ever. She felt like she'd slept for ten hours then took a small dose of Aderall.

She poured herself a cup of coffee from the fresh pot and sat down across from Alex and Ernst.

The silences stretched out.

"So?" Ernst said.

Jessie opened her mouth to speak.

"Before you start," Alex said. "No more lies. No more half truths. I think we deserve to know exactly what is going on. We've both laid a lot on the line for you and it's time you do the same for us."

Jessie bit her lip, let out a deep sigh, and began talking. She walked them through all of it since day one of the internship. She told them about Cylis and the phone. She told them about her brother and what happened to her family. She explained where she got the Skeleton Key. She told them about Betty dodging her questions then disappearing. She told them about what happened the night she got locked in the radiation chamber and injecting herself. And, finally, she told them about the attack.

When she finally finished, another silence fell over them.

Where to begin?

"What does this mean then?" Ernst said. "You can't die? You heal yourself?"

Jessie shrugged.

"I don't know what all it means. I know twice now I should have died and I woke up fine. That's it. I don't know why the first time it only took a few hours to wake up and this time

it took a day and a half. I don't know why I can't sleep any more. I don't know if I die again that I'll come back. I don't know any of this."

She looked at Alex. He just sat staring, his eyes wide.

"We did it," he whispered.

"What do you mean?" Jessie said.

"We fucking did it!" Alex yelled standing up. "This is what we've been trying to do for months! We've just been trying to show there's a possibility that you can use the healing properties from the sea sponge in other species and here you are sitting as proof."

"Yeah," Jessie said, "but I can't recreate it. I can't even remember the mixture I used. It was a mistake remember?"

"But we can study you now. We can look at your blood and tissue and figure it out."

Alex ran his hand through his hair as he paced in her living room.

"Think of what this will mean in DrekCorp!"

"What?" Jessie and Ernst spoke at the same time.

Alex looked up.

"We have to report this. This is amazing! Think what they can do with this finding!"

"You want to trust DrekCorp with this?" Ernst said. "The company that just tried to have her killed?"

"We don't know--"

"The company who Dr. Roe is working for. He's obviously the one that dragged her into the radiation chamber. He's the one that put out the hit on her. That's the company you want to turn Jessie over to? She'll become a fucking lab rat."

Alex sighed.

"Ok, so what do we do?"

"Sit down Alex," Jessie said.

Alex sat in a huff.

"You've forgotten what our first order of business should be," she said. "We have to stop Dr. Roe from taking the MindEcho to his meeting with President Thomas. First, we take care of that and then we can figure out what to do with me."

"Fine. So what's the plan?"

# # #

Craig's "help" - ENDING HOOK

"We need your help Dr. Castle," Jessie said. "We're at the end of our rope with this."

Craig shifted uncomfortably in his chair. The smile was still on his face, but she could see he was forcing it to stay there.

"Why don't you start by telling me where you've been for the past two days?"

Jessie glanced at Alex and Ernst.

They had come up with an explanation for this, but they all knew it was pretty weak.

"I, um, went to see my parents for a couple days. My parents were having a hard time and I hadn't seen them in awhile so I figured I'd go help out."

"Without letting me or anyone else know?"

Jessie didn't respond.

"You know most jobs would just fire you on the spot for skipping out on two days of work without notifying your superior."

"I figured Alex and Ernst could cover for me and it's not like I'm not putting in enough hours."

"But you didn't even tell them about going. They were freaking out."

"Right, I apologized to them for that."

"And your phone was off?"

"Yeah it ran out of batteries and my charger--"

Craig waved his hand cutting her off.

"Knock it off Jessie. You're too smart for any of that. I don't know where you were for the last two days but lying to me about it doesn't make it any better. It's best just to keep your mouth shut and not answer the question."

"So, here we are. You come to me with this thin evidence about Dr. Roe sneaking around and a weird timing with what happened



at the airport. And you want me to do what exactly?"

"Go to Mr. Drek about it. Get authority to get into that lab and see what's in there."

"You can't just 'go to Mr. Drek'. It's not that simple. Plus, if I were to take something to him, it would need to be more substantial than this. If you're so sure of it, why haven't you gone to the authorities?"

Jessie's face turned to stone. She tried to speak but couldn't. Ernst jumped in.

"Because we figure if the FBI is the one covering up the theft they may not be too interested on helping us out. Again, that's why we came to you."

"I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do. You need to let this alone and get back to work."

"But Dr. Roe leaves for D.C. tomorrow. We have to do something now if we are going to stop him."

"Stop him from what? Taking over the President's mind? Getting him to bomb Iran or something? This isn't science fiction. That's impossible."

"Fine," Jessie said standing up, "we'll just go straight to Mr. Drek. Maybe he won't help us but at least we'll have it on record."

For the first time ever, Craig lost his temper.

"Sit down!" he yelled. He stood and paced back and forth.

That wasn't his temper. He's scared.

Craig sat back at his desk. He glanced up at his closed door then took a sticky note from his pad. He scrawled on it and then showed it to the three of them. They leaned in to read.

"You have to LEAVE THIS ALONE. It isn't safe. Please."

When Jessie looked back up at Craig, he had tears in his eyes. He silently plead with her.

Jessie nodded her head, agreeing. He looked at Ernst and Alex in turn, who also nodded their assent.

Only then did he pull the note back.

Craig ripped it into tiny pieces and went to throw it in the trash can, but paused. He thought for a minute then, to the their astonishment, shoved the shreds of paper into his mouth. He chewed briefly then took a swig from the glass of water on his desk. He swallowed hard, then turned back to them, and forced a smile back onto his face.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?"

They all shook their heads.

"Ok great," he said motioning to the door. "See you later."

The three of them stood and left his office. They walked in silence back to their lab.

# # #

The Plan

"I still don't know about this," Ernst said. "Is this really our fight Jessie? Craig wasn't fucking around when he told us to back off. Didn't you see his face?"

"Yeah I saw him, but what are we supposed to do? Let Dr. Roe get away with all of this? And it's not just the MindEcho and the President. He's tried to kill me -- or did kill me -- twice! Are we just going to let him get away with that? Who's to say he doesn't send more of his goons after me? And maybe this time I don't wake up Ernst. It took me twice as long the second time. Maybe because whatever is healing me is wearing off."

"Ok..." Ernst said.

"It's not you getting trapped in a radiation chamber and stabbed in an alley. It's me. And it's not fun. Sure, I've come back, but fuck that. I'm done with dying."

"Ok, ok," Ernst said. "I hear you."

"Good," she said and turned to Alex.

"What about you? Are you with me on this?"

"Well it's a little too late to turn back now isn't it?"

Jessie shrugged.

She shivered and looked around the dark warehouse. The last time she was here Cylis had her tied up on the floor. Now she was back. Here to meet Cylis again.

"Are you sure you trust this guy?" Alex said.

"Why?" she said.

"Well, what has he done for you so far? Seems like he mugged-slash-kidnapped you. Set you against a multi-national corporation and then left you wriggling on the hook."

"He's also the one that warned me that my visit to the FBI was out."

"A lot of good that did you."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't know. It just seems weird. Who is he? Why is he working against DrekCorp? Why does he need you? Why did he even choose you? Why not Ernst or me or any of the other interns? What's so special about you?"

Jessie opened her mouth to speak, but Alex cut her off and kept going.

"There's something big going on here Jessie. Bigger than MindEcho and Dr. Roe. It goes to the top of DrekCorp. It's the DOD and FBI. Who the hell else knows? And what? You, me, and Ernst are supposed to bring all of that down?"

"No, not just you."

The three of them jumped, startled by the voice coming from the darkness.

Cylis stepped out. He was still in the same long brown trench coat. The hood was pushed back and his short choppy grey hair stood out in the light.

"If you've got questions, ask them," he said.

"You obviously heard them. Tell us what's really going on," Alex said.

"That's not for you to know," Cylis said.

Jessie stepped forward.

"Then why me? Why pick me out of all the others?"

"You're a genius. You graduated from high school two years early. You got your PhD when most people were floundering in grad school."

"You didn't answer the question. Being smart doesn't exactly set me apart in the DrekCorp intern program."

"Come on Jessie," Cylis said, "think about it. You already know why."

Jessie looked down.

"Ryan," she whispered.

"Exactly."

"He's still alive isn't he?"

"I'm positive he is, though I can't prove it. I figured if anybody would bring him out of hiding it'd be you."

"So I was just bait?"

Cylis scoffed.

"What?"

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone look so small and alone as that day you stood by your brother's empty gravesite."

Jessie gasped.

"I do remember you! I saw you standing across the street watching me!" she said. "Oh my god. How long have you been stalking me?"

"Dick wasn't the only thing your brother put in place before you disappeared. I owe a life debt to your brother and he cashed it in on watching you."

"If you were supposed to protect me, you've done one hell of a lousy job of it."

"I didn't say 'protect'."

Jessie's eyes narrowed.

"Do you remember applying to the DrekCorp program?" Cylis said.

"I applied to a lot of places."

"What about the screenings and the testing all of the other interns went through? Why didn't you go through any of that?"

Jessie remained silent.

"My job wasn't to protect you from DrekCorp, it was to get you in. Your brother and I share the same the goals, but I never signed up to babysit his little sister. He put me in charge of watching over you until you were old enough and then get you into DrekCorp to continue our work."

"And what work is that?"

Cylis smiled.

"Another question you already know the answer to."

"So all of this is a setup to get me into DrekCorp and, what, bring down the whole beast?"

Cylis stared at her, then pulled out a pocket watch and glanced at the time.

"Why'd you call me here? It's too risky for us to be meeting in person, especially in a place we've already been."

"I'm not done talking about--"

"Yes you are. We've got work to do. You can bitch and moan about it, but we both know you're too deep to stop now. Even if you could get out, you wouldn't. So I'm not going to suffer your posturing and whining. Either tell me why we're here and not, but I'm about to leave."

Jessie only glared.

Ernst stepped forward.

"We need your help. We are sure Dr. Roe is taking the MindEcho device tomorrow to DC to meet with the President and take control of him. We have to stop him."

"Christ! This is what you called me here about?"

"What?" Alex said.

"Don't you think this is important?" Ernst said.

"No. I don't. Who the fuck cares if DrekCorp takes control of

the President? And if we stop him, does that do anything to stop DrekCorp as a whole?"

They just stared at him.

"No. It doesn't. What it could do is play our hand too soon. If you get caught then everything unravels. We want Drek's head on a platter. This gets us no closer to that. Let it alone."

Cylis turned to leave.

Jessie ran forward a few steps.

"So we're on our own then?"

Cylis stopped, dug a hand in his pocket, then turned and tossed something Jessie's way. By the time she caught it, he was already gone into the dark.

"What is that?" Alex said.

Jessie turned the small cylinder around in her hand. It was the size of thick pen, completely smooth except for a green button the top.

"I have no idea."

Ernst approached and looked at it.

He laughed and shook his head.

# # #



Getting In

"You ok?" Jessie said.

Alex didn't answer. He was sitting at his desk, staring across the lab.

"Alex?" she said louder.

This snapped him out of his daze. He looked up at her.

"Yeah?"

"You ok?"

"Yeah, just trying to think back through the series of decisions that led me to this point. You ever do that? Find yourself in a weird situation like, say, you're about to break into a highly secured lab inside of a major corporation to steal something top secret. The corporation, by the way, who has given you a sweet job paying you a bunch of money to do pretty kick ass work. But somewhere along the way I made a choice to put me on this path."

He looked up at Jessie.

"So just wondering about what choice that was."

"You're regretting talking to me at orientation aren't you?"

His face turned a bit sad.

"Not at all."

Jessie wondered what he meant, but before she could ask, the lab's door beeped and Ernst pushed through. He was sweating and looked like he someone had just threatened him bodily harm.

"You need to get it together Ernst," Jessie said. "One look at you and anybody would know something is up."

Ernst looked embarrassed and walked over towards her.

"And what's with all the sweating?" Alex said. "Did you sprint down the hall to get here?"

Ernst shrugged, more embarrassed.

"I get nervous and I sweat. What can I say?"

"It's a good thing you're staying here then." Jessie said.

"Oh I agree. I'm closer to the front doors too. So when you fuckers get caught, I can make it out before they trace it back to me."

"Don't count on it," Alex said. "The first thing we'll do is send them back for you."

They all laughed nervously. They were trying to break the tension around what they were about to do. An unsteady silence fell over them.

"Let's go over it one more time," Jessie said.

"Ok, first thing is you and Alex will stay in constant contact with me through your bluetooth. I'll warn you if I see anything bad going down."

Alex and Jessie both switched on the tiny bluetooth earbuds and put them deep into their ear canals.

"Next up, all of the security guards are led by preprogrammed paths. They only go where and when their wrist bands tell them

to go. This is makes it easy for DrekCorp to make sure human error doesn't come into play with their security guards, but it also means a hacker with the clearance I've gotten can mess with the location of their guards without anyone noticing. I've already rewritten the guard paths, I just have to upload it when we're ready."

"Once it's clear?" Jessie said.

She already knew the plan by heart, but wanted to make sure all three of them were dead on with it.

"You and Alex will head towards the Level 5 lab that you broke into before. Thanks to Cylis's little gift, as long as you both stay tight together, you won't be picked up on any security cameras. It creates a five meter radius around you that will be scrambled by any cameras. Even if everything goes perfectly tonight, once they realize the MindEcho is gone, the first thing they will do will pull all the security footage for the entire building. One slip-up where either of you aren't in the camera's radius is all it will take to out all three of us."

Alex and Jessie nodded.

"The Skeleton Key will get you through the first two security doors and into the main lab. You won't have to worry about the cameras, so we're only left with the security door where the MindEcho is being stored."

"I've done a good bit of research based on your description and I believe I've narrowed down the lab's security system to what I believe is the SecTech T9-80. Based on the other security systems around here, it seems to be the go-to company and it's their only system with a finger print analysis. Thankfully, that gives us the brute force cracking capability we've already gone over. It takes some time, but mostly you just take apart the system and hardwire in. I'll be able to walk you through everything."

"Assuming all of that works, you grab the MindEcho, come back, and we're out free."

Jessie took a deep breath.

"Simple as that," Alex said.

"Are we ready then?" Ernst said.

Alex and Ernst both looked at Jessie. She nodded.

Ernst turned back to his computer and keyed in a few commands.

"Alright then, the guard locations have been shifted. Within five minutes, you'll have a clear path."

Ernst turned back to them.

"Good luck you two. I'll be on the phone the whole time and will do all I can from here."

Jessie slung her bag over her shoulder and was followed by Alex out the door.

"Slower!" Alex whispered to Jessie. She pulled her pace back some more.

"Sorry," she said. "I obviously have less experience in breaking and entering than you do."

"Well rule number one is to not look like you're up to something."

"Nobody is going to see us anyway. It's after 10pm and the guards are routed around us."

"Better safe than sorry. Nothing ever goes exactly according to plan."

"Don't say that."

They had come to the first door to the lab. Jessie pulled out the Skeleton Key.

"It's true," Alex said.

"Alright. From here on there's no turning back." Ernst said into their ears.

Jessie rolled her eyes to Alex and slid the key into the keypad. It blinked green and unlocked.

"Stay close," Jessie said and slipped through the door with Alex staying close behind.

The camera's light glowed green and Jessie prayed for the dozenth time that the video scrambler that Cylis had given them was working correctly. She looked at at the door.

"Oh shit," she said.

"What is it?" Ernst said.

"Why is there a fucking padlock on the door?" Jessie said.

Alex just laughed.

There was a huge metal slat across the door with a heavy duty padlock keeping it closed. It was one of those with a number dial you spin back and forth to different numbers to unlock it.

"This has to be Dr. Roe," Alex said. "It makes sense though."

Alex spun Jessie around and unzipped her bag.

"All of the digital locks and security measures allowed you to break in and stay hidden the first time. Something analog seems like the next obvious choice."

"You don't sound worried" Jessie said.

Alex kept rummaging through the bag.

"What? Do you know how to pick a lock with a keyhole in it?" she said.

"Something like that," Alex removed what he was looking for from the bag. Before Jessie could turn around there was a deafening metal bang. She turned around just in time to see Alex bring a big hammer down against the lock again.

"What the fuck is going on?" Ernst said.

Jessie had her hands over her ears.

"He's beating the lock with a hammer! Alex! They're going to here us!"

Alex slammed the hammer against the lock again. This time the front dial of the lock fell off.

"Like you said--"

BANG

"this place is--"

BANG

"deserted!"

Alex hit the lock one more time and it finally gave way. He pulled the remaining hook off the slot and dropped it on the floor. He slid the slat back and stepped away. Jessie, shaking her head, slid the Skeleton Key into the lock and waited for it to turn green before she pushed her way into the lab.

The same sci-fi medical chair was there. Everything was arranged exactly the way it was before. As Jessie stepped in, an alarm went off in her head. Something was off. She looked around trying to place the feeling.

"Something's off," Alex said.

"We're just nervous," Jessie said.

"Do you see something?" Ernst said.

"No," Jessie said, "everything is fine. Exactly the way it was before."

Alex grabbed her arm.

"Let's bail," he said. "We can try it again another night."

"There is no other night," Jessie said. "We have to do it

now."

Alex sighed but let go of her arm. They walked across the lab to the security door.

Jessie tapped the screen to wake up the computer, but instead of the four digit entry code popping up, the screen glowed green and had "ACCESS GRANTED" typed in black.

"What the--?"

She pulled the door and it swung open easily. She tentatively stepped into the the small room. The lights blinked on to show a small, empty space. In the back of the room was a small metal table that stood empty as well.

She turned to look at Alex just in time for him to let out a gurgled groan. Jessie screamed as he went rigid and then slumped to the floor. The man left standing behind him had a taser in his hand. He also had a face she would never forget. She had watched that same calm face as he put a knife into her chest and abdomen over and over.

He smiled at her.

Jessie lunged at him, but he was too quick. He side stepped her and jabbed the stun gun into her neck. She felt fire course through her muscles and she slammed into the ground. Her forehead hit hard against the floor and her bluetooth popped out of her ear and skidded under the medical chair. She put her hands on the floor to push herself up, but the man



hit her again with the stun gun which finally put her unconscious.

# # #

### The interagation

It was far to quiet when Jessie finally came to. She unpeeled her eyes slowly and took in her surroundings.

She was still in the lab her and Alex had broken into, but she was laying on her back. Not on the floor though. Her foggy brain fumbled with the explanation. Finally she realized, she was in the medical chair that was in the middle of the lab.

She glanced down and saw that she was completely naked. Both her feet and arms were locked into place with metal cuffs that were wired to the switch on the bottom of the chair.

She looked by the door and saw two men struggling with a body -- that was Alex! They were trying to drag him out of the lab. One of the men had a mangled nose and swollen face. This was her first attacker from a few nights ago. The other man was the second attacker. The one that had gotten the best of her twice now.

Jessie heard movement to her left and turned her head. Someone was hunched over one of the counters in the lab fiddling with

some equipment. She recognized the lab coat that the department heads wore.

"Roe!" she yelled out.

Dr. Roe froze and turned around. But it wasn't Dr. Roe at all.

"Dr. Castle? What--" Jessie fumbled with her words.

He smiled.

"Hi Jessie, so good to see you," he said cheerily. "Though I am sorry it's under these circumstances."

"What are you doing?" she said.

"Doing? Why I'm advancing science. That's what I'm doing."

He giggled a bit.

"And it won't hurt my standing here at DrekCorp either."

"But, I don't understand."

"Understand what, hon?"

"Why are you here? Where is Dr. Roe?"

Craig's face clouded.

"Tiberius. That meddling kiss-ass. He's been after me for years. Holding me back here. Keeping me from Mr. Drek's approval. Always one-upping me."

"But he stole the MindEcho device! He was going to use it on the President!"

"He didn't steal it from the Department of Defense. I did! I knew that device was immeasurable valuable and something we could never create on our own. I had contributed some of the

research on the project and so I was privy to it's shipping details. I knew if I could get it back and reverse engineer how it was built, it would finally show my genius and dedication to DrekCorp. He would finally take notice. Finally see me!"

"But I followed Dr. Roe here myself months ago. He came into this lab."

"Yes, yes, Tiberius had worked out that it was me that had stolen the MindEcho but couldn't prove it. He was trying to break in and steal it back so he could have it for himself."

Jessie's mind was whirling. It was Craig all along. He stole the MindEcho from the airport. He had been protecting it.

She looked back towards the door where the two men had finally wrestled Alex's body out.

That means...

"You sent those men to kill me?" Jessie said quietly.

"Oh honey," he said, stroking her cheek gently, "you didn't give me much choice did you? You went to the FBI and reported me. That's not really allowed here at DrekCorp. We tend to--" Craig looked up thoughtfully.

"Handle our affairs in house. And that was the problem. If Mr. Drek or other members of our board had found out what I was up to, then I would have been the one being handled in house and that couldn't happen. I've spent far too many years putting my

time in here and I am much too close to finally proving myself."

"And even more than the MindEcho, you've come along to help me, which I couldn't be more thankful for."

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Well according to the two fine gentleman I sent to dispose of you, they did a good deal of damage to you physically. They assure me that you should have died and, even if you did somehow survive, you would definitely be in intensive care. But!"

Craig spread out his hands wide.

"Here you are! Completely fine! Now how is that possible?"

He rubbed his fingers across the scars on her chest and abdomen.

"Just a few feint scars to show for it."

"They're lying to you!" Jessie said. "You can see how I kicked the fat one's ass. I was able to get away. They're lying to you to save face."

Craig's face instantly turned dark with rage.

"Lies!" he screamed.

He leaned in close to Jessie.

"Stop lying to me! I know exactly what is going on!"

He turned and started pacing, waving his arms around wildly while he yelled. Jessie used the opportunity to pull at her

restraints, but they wouldn't give.

"Everyone is always lying! For years I have been overlooked as people like Dr. Roe and Dr. Brooklyn get accolades. I've had my research stolen. I've been overlooked for promotions. Even though I am clearly the genius behind so many advancements here! And then last year, as the final insult, I was made the department head of BioTech. I was devastated. Everyone knows it is the shit hole of DrekCorp."

"And then," he turned back to Jessie, "you came along! The sister of the brilliant and mysterious Ryan Black. And the first thing you attempt is an amazing success. So much so that Mr. Drek himself came for a visit. I couldn't believe it! I was sure you were my ticket out the tailspin of my career. But then you started stalling! Even when I made up the threat of losing your lab and getting kicked out of the program, you kept stalling!"

He got close to her again, but this time he spoke quietly.

"And now I know why." he whispered.

Then he stood and turned back to the counter. Jessie heard the quiet clanking of metal instruments as he continued to talk.

"Because you figured it out after all! You've somehow figured out how to heal yourself. That's the only explanation for how you came back from the beating my men gave you."

Craig turned around holding a metal tray. On it were all of

the typical surgical equipment you would expect. Scalpels, bone chisels and levers, clamps, cautery equipment, and more. He laid it down on the table next to you.

He looked at her, this time sadly.

"I was trying to help you Jessie. I did everything I could to help you find success. I know your family life has been a mess, so I protected you. I wanted you to be safe with me. You were safe me with. But then--"

He paused and wiped a tear away with the back of his hand.

"You betrayed me. As soon as you walked in my office today, I knew you had betrayed me. You had gotten to the end of the research and figured out how to get it to work -- in humans no less -- and you were hiding it from me. You were going to keep it for yourself. You were going to side step me just like everyone else. And Jessie, I can't let you do that to me. I've worked far too hard to let an intern come in and put the final nail in the coffin of my career."

"No Dr. Castle!" Jessie said. "That's not true! I didn't know what was going on with me. I don't even know how this happened to me. I wasn't keeping it from you, I was trying to--"

Craig shook his head.

"It's too late for excuses Jessie. And it's too late to offer to work with me. There's only one way I can trust to get the information I need."

Craig picked up one of the larger scalpels.

"I'm going to cut you open and watch what happens. I'll do my own research and get my own results. Then, when I have figured out how it works, I will personally take the results to Mr. Drek so he will know exactly where they came from."

Craig took the metal arm that Jessie's left arm was locked to and he rotated it out so her arm was stretched out. He locked it into place.

"Please, Dr. Castle -- Craig -- please don't do this. I swear I wasn't lying to you. I'll do anything. I trusted you to help me. Please don't."

Craig looked at her sadly.

"I trusted you too Jessica. I was beginning to think of you as a daughter. But what choice have you left me?"

# # #

### More

Tears and snot streaked Jessie's face. She yelled and screamed curses at Craig. She pleaded with him. She sobbed out in her fear and pain. Nothing deterred him. It was like he had turned the part of his brain off that could hear her and consider her a human, and was merely working on a slab of meat that interested him. He had used no anesthesia and completely ignored her howls of pain.

For the last hour he had worked on her.

She looked at the counter for the hundredth time.

There were far too many vials of blood.

He had just kept pulling and pulling blood from her.

"You're going to kill me!" she had screamed.

But he had just kept working. Filling vial after vial.

And that was before he began cutting on her.

She looked over again at the gaping wound in her forearm. It ran almost the entire length from just before her wrist to just before the crook of her elbow. He had put in two small retractors to hold the incision open while he continued to cut into her arm. Blood covered her arm and dripped to the floor, but had slowed considerably since he cauterized the wound. The smell of her seared flesh still hung in the air.

Craig once again pulled down the head lamp and magnify glasses and leaned in close to the wound. He kept poking around as if looking for something.

Cold washed over her and she began to shiver.

She laid back and squeezed her eyes shut as more tears rolled down her cheeks. She tried to calm her breathing, but it still came and went in ragged gasps.

"Oh my god," Craig whispered. "There it is."

Jessie looked over at him. He was less than an inch from her arm, staring deep into his cut.

Jessie couldn't help herself.



"What?"

Craig looked up, a goofy grin on his face.

"I can see it," he said. "You're healing right before my eyes.

It's amazing. You really did figure it out didn't you?"

He shook his head.

"This is going to make me famous. Forget DrekCorp and Tim Drek, this discovering is going to win me the fucking Nobel Prize. I'm going to be the savior of the masses. People will beg to be a part of my work. No more picking at the scraps of Tiberius and the other assholes here. I'll be able to crush them!"

He was pacing again. Joy covered his face this time.

"And you helped me Jessie! Oh dear, I can't thank you enough! And when this is all over I'll make sure you are taken care of. You won't be able to go public of course. I'll need to keep my little discovery safe and hidden away. But I'll take care of you. You won't ever have to worry about anything ever again."

Craig came back to her arm as he talked and removed the retractors. He pressed the two sides of the wound together and tapped them shut. Jessie gritted her teeth against the pain. Craig turned back to the counter as Jessie took in big gulps of air, working to keep from passing out.

"So," she said, "so you're going to let me go? Let me out of

this thing?"

Craig turned around. A confused look was on his face.

"Of course not. Not yet anyway. We're just getting started. We have all night to work together."

Jessie looked down and saw what he was holding in his hand.

"What are you going to do Dr. Castle?"

"Just some more tests hon. I know a wound will heal. That's obvious from what I just saw. But we need to run more tests."

"What tests?"

"How will your body handle the trauma of using a limb?"

Jessie screamed curses at him again and began yanking against the restraints trying to get loose.

Craig looked at her sadly.

"I feel so sorry for you Jessie. I don't understand why you don't want to be a part of this. You're furthering knowledge. You're going to change the way people are cared for. Isn't that why you became a scientist?"

"Settle down now. This will be over shortly and then we can see what happens. Will your arm grow back? Will the limb continue to heal if it's not attached to your body? I can't wait to see!"

A loud buzzing started and Craig lifted the circular bone saw. He pulled the hood down in front of his face to protect him from blood spatter.

"Now hold still, I don't want to mess up this cut."

Jessie laid back and tried to brace herself as she prepared for the pain. She balled both of her fists up and waited. Just then, the clamps on her right arm and wrists popped open. She pulled her arm up and looked at Craig. He was still bent over, concentrating on the cut he was about to make.

Jessie reached across her body to the metal tray and grabbed the scalpel he had used to cut her open. She jammed it as hard as she could into Craig's neck. Blood immediately spurted out and he scream. The saw fell out of his hands, bet into Jessie's shoulder then rebounded off towards Craig.

The saw ripped a ragged line down his shin. Craig, hands clasped to his neck lost his balance at the pain and fell down.

He right side came down directly on the bone saw.

Craig let out a high pitched scream as the saw tore through his abdomen. He kicked and thrashed but he only fell into the saw more. There was a gurgling sound as the saw spayed blood across the floor, walls and ceiling.

Finally it got loose from Craig and skittered across the floor until the plug came loose and it fell silent.

Jessie looked down at Craig and he was huddled in a widening pool of his blood.

She quickly reached her arm around and felt around until she

found the switch for the rest of there restraints. They all popped open in unison. She pulled her mangled arm to her chest and slowly got down from the chair. She wobbled slightly against the head rush from loss of blood, then slowly walked around the chair until she was standing over Craig.

Craig's attention was on his stomach. He was holding one hand against the wound while feebly trying to stuff the intestines that had snaked out on the ground back into his body.

Jessie ignored the blood that was pooling around her feet and oozed between her toes as she considered what to do with him.

# # #

Dr Castle

Craig looked up at her.

"I trusted you," he said.

Jessie just stared at him.

"Look what you've done to me!" he said. "You have to fix me!"

"You have to answer a couple a couple questions first."

"No! You need to do what I tell you to do! I'm still your boss. I still care for you Jessie. I still want to help you. Please."

Jessie knelt down next to him, ignoring the blood again. Her brain went fuzzy and darkness started creeping into the edges of her vision. She steadied herself against the counter until

she came back to herself.

"I will Dr. Castle," she said. "Just tell me a couple things then I'll get you what you need."

"I think," Craig glanced down at his stomach. "I think I'm running out of time though."

"No, no," she said, "you're fine. I can't help you no matter what. It's that strong. I just need to know a few things."

He nodded his ascent.

"You sent those men to attack me in the alley?"

He nodded again.

"Because I was getting too close to figuring out that you had stolen the MindEcho?"

He nodded again.

"I'm so sorry about that Jessie," Craig began to cry. "I didn't know what else to say."

"No, it's fine," Jessie said, touching his cheek gently with her hand. "I completely understand."

"Just a couple more questions, ok?"

He nodded.

"You also were the one that put me in the radiation chamber?"

Craig looked confused.

"Right?"

He shook his head.

"Yes, that was you. You knocked me out and drug me into the

radiation chamber last month."

"No," he said, "that wasn't me."

"Then who was it?"

"I have no idea. Why would I attack you? You were my star intern! I didn't do anything until you visited the FBI."

"Then who inside of DrekCorp are you working with?"

"No one!" he said. "Everything I was doing had to be a secret."

"I don't understand. So you're saying that you're the only one after me."

Craig began to laugh then winced.

"Please Jessie, please hurry."

"I am Dr. Castle. But why'd you laugh?"

"You have no idea how deep things go in DrekCorp. The 'rabbit hole' as they say. There's a reason Dr. Roe is meeting with President Thomas. There's a reason Tim Drek rarely comes out of his office. There's a reason your brother disappeared. It's all tied together and goes deeper than you can imagine."

"So who else is trying to hurt me?"

Craig paused, his eyes darted around and then began to close.

"No, no Dr. Castle -- Craig --," she said patting his face,

"stay with me. I'm about to help you. I'll be able to heal you just like I've healed myself. Just stay with me."

His eyes opened again and then focused on her.

"Who else is after me?"

"Everybody," he said. "Everybody and nobody. You can't understand. Not yet. Before... before... he'll come... he'll be right behind you."

His eyes fluttered again and then opened wide.

"I'm dying," he rasped out. "Hurry Jessie. Hurry!"

Jessie stood slowly, still cradling her arm against her.

"Of course you are. Look at you. There's no coming back from this. Your fucking intestines are laying on the floor."

"But you did! You came back! Help me."

Jessie stood silently, waiting.

"I'm so scared," he whispered.

"I know," she said.

# # #

### The Cleanup

Alex burst into the room, holding his hand to his forehead which was bleeding freely. He looked around frantically until he saw Jessie. She was still naked, sitting crossed legged in a giant pool of blood, slumped over and still cradling her arm.

She gripped a long scalpel in the fist of her right hand.

Craig laid next to her, staring blankly at the ceiling. His hands had gone limp and lay at his side which had allowed more of his insides to spill out onto the floor.

"Jessie!" Alex said.

She looked up slowly. It took her several seconds to focus in and realize Alex was there.

"I'm just waiting," she said.

"For what?"

"To make sure he doesn't come back."

Alex began moving slowly towards Jessie like he was trying to keep from scaring a small animal.

"He's not coming back Jessie."

"But I came back. Why couldn't he?"

He did his best to avoid the blood, but couldn't avoid stepping through parts of it to get to her.

"Jessie"

She didn't respond.

He shook her gently by the shoulders.

"Jessie, we have to go. We have to get out of here. Ernst is freaking out. He was able to loose your restraint and he's still keeping the guard's rounds away, but it's only a matter of time before they find us."

She looked up at Alex.

Her eyes seemed to be focusing a little better.

"What do we do?" she said.

"I'm not sure yet. Hold on."

Alex held his hand against the bluetooth.



"Ok, Ernst said he's clearing the way to the side exit and then he'll meet us there with his van."

Jessie nodded.

"I have Craig's two morons out here in the hall unconscious. They turned their backs to me long enough. I've got them tied up, but we have to get them out of here."

"Ok," Jessie said. "What can I do?"

Alex's voice hitched and tears fell from the corner of his eyes as he answered.

"Nothing," he said. "I've got you."

Alex bent down and picked up Jessie, ignoring the blood that soaked from her into his clothes. He held her tight and carried her out of the room.

# # #

### The Cleanup - Part 2

Jessie sat slumped in the front seat of the van.

It had taken two hours to clean up the mess in the lab. Which each time Ernst and Alex had gone back into the DrekCorp building, she was sure it was the last time she would ever see them. Somehow though, thanks to luck and Ernst's bit of hacking, they had been able to sort things out and get away before anyone found them.

Jessie glanced into the back of the van at the three bodies. The first was wrapped tightly in plastic, mainly to keep the

mess from ruining Ernst's van. The other two moved every now and then to reposition, but mostly laid quietly. The two men that had attacked her twice now were tied up and gagged.

She repositioned in the seat and winced as she jostled her arm again.

Alex was able to salvage her jeans and had helped her get those on. The rest of her clothes had been cut up and ruined. Ernst had helped her get his jacket on and zip it up, doing everything he could to avoid looking at her naked chest.

The longest part of the whole ordeal had not been getting the bodies out, but cleaning up the lab. There was a drain under the operating chair that they were able to flush the blood down. But they had to completely clean everything. They couldn't leave behind any evidence.

They had also poured the vials of Jessie's blood down the drain.

Now the van sat in the dark alley behind her favorite coffee shop.

Alex and Ernst stood beside the van, waiting.

They'd been here almost an hour now.

"He's here," Ernst said.

Alex opened the door for her, and she slowly emerged from the vehicle. Cylis stood a few yards away, hood up, on the edge of the darkness.

"What happened?" he said.

"It didn't exactly go as planned," she said.

"You mean the plan I told you not to do? The plan I told you would definitely go wrong? That plan?"

Jessie didn't answer.

"So you were caught?"

"Yeah," she said, "but we were able to clean it up. We're safe. Nobody at DrekCorp knows what happened."

Cylis's eyes narrowed.

"Where is Dr. Roe then?"

"It wasn't Roe," Jessie said. "It was Dr. Castle."

"I see. Where is he now?"

Jessie nodded towards the van.

"He won't be a problem though."

"Dead?"

"Yeah."

"And where's the MindEcho?"

Jessie cut her eyes at Alex.

"We couldn't find it," Alex said.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah," Jessie said. "We got in the security vault and it wasn't there. It's either hidden somewhere else or was never there in the first place. We may never know."

"Ok," Cylis said. "Anything else?"

"Is that really it?" she said. "We were attacked and obviously injured. And all you care about is the fucking MindEcho?"

"What else do you want Jessie? Want me to bring you home and nurse you back to health? I told you not to do this and you did it anyway. I'm happy you're alive, but what else do you want?"

Jessie stayed quiet, seething even though she knew he was write.

"We do need you help with something," Alex said.

Cylis looked at him.

"What's that?"

"Dr. Castle had two men helping him. I was able to get the better of them and tie them up."

Cylis's eyes went wide.

"And?"

"We have them in the van too. We don't know what to do with them. Should we take them to the police?"

Cylis ignored him and walked to the back of the van. The three of them followed. He opened up both doors. Both of the men in the back of the van looked at Cylis with wide eyes. They sat up, waiting.

Cylis considered them for a moment, then quickly reached into his jacket. He pulled out a pistol with a long suppressor on the end.

Before the surprise could register with Jessie, Alex, or Ernst, Cylis shot each of the men three times quickly in the chest. They slumped back against one another on the floor of the van.

All three of them screamed.

"What the fuck!" Jessie screamed.

Alex grabbed Cylis's arm that held the gun. Cylis turned quickly and punched Alex viciously in the face. Alex fell back against the ground clutching his face.

Ernst and Jessie both stepped back from Cylis.

"God damn it!" he yelled. "What the fuck do you think is going on? You think this is something isolated? A one time thing? You think Castle was acting on his own? This goes so deep, you have no idea. Castle is just a jack off in management. If we're going to do any damage to DrekCorp you have to start taking this seriously."

He stared at them breathing hard.

"The first hint that Tim Drek, Dr. Roe, or anyone else inside of DrekCorp gets that you're working against them, you'll end up exactly like those men."

He pointed at Jessie.

"Exactly like your brother!"

Cylis shoved the gun back inside his coat.

"So no, you don't take them to the fucking police. You take

them out into the woods and you bury them. Then you go to fucking work tomorrow and act just as surprised as everyone else when the esteemed Dr. Castle doesn't show up for the day."

"You act like everything is fine. Perform like normal and wait for me to call before you do anything else stupid."

Cylis slammed the doors of the van closed and walked away into the darkness.

# # #

### The End

"It's weird right? The whole meeting they never even mentioned him."

Ernst looked at Jessie and she shrugged.

"What are they going to say?" she said.

"I don't know." Alex said. "Something. Somehow acknowledge that he's gone. It's been two weeks."

The three of them stood outside of the same meeting room as the day of their orientation. The room was only half full. The final cuts of the interns had taken place. The three months were up.

It turned out that Craig had definitely lied to them about the pressure on their research. Jessie, Ernst, and Alex had been honored as the standout achievement of the previous three months. Apparently, even without the concrete results they had

been trying for, the administration had been impressed with their progress. They had been brought to the front and congratulated in front of the other interns.

The applause had definitely seemed forced.

"I assume you're pretty proud of yourselves."

The three turned to find Az standing alongside the usual Axil and Tad.

"I'd gotten used to not seeing you three around. I assumed you had been cut loose from the program," Jessie said.

"Oh he couldn't," said Ernst. "His daddy wouldn't want to put up with the whining."

Az's face clouded.

"We all know your research has hit the skids the last month," Az said.

"No new progress. You're stuck. Sure, they let you stick around, even gave you an award, probably because your boss disappeared, but if you don't make some sort of progress soon, you won't last. Especially in BioTech. Now more than ever."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ernst said.

Az smirked.

"You'll see soon enough."

He turned and walked away with Tad and Axil tight in tow.

"What do you think he meant by that?" Alex said.

"I have no idea," Jessie said.

They began walking back to their lab.

"Back to before though," Alex said, "why aren't they mentioning anything about Craig? It's weird right? There's not even been a fake answer like 'He went on an unexpected vacation' or something. It's just been silence."

"Yeah," Ernst said, "when I asked Rebecca Rohn about it, she just said she would check into it and then I never heard back."

They all slowed to a stop and looked at each other.

Jessie lowered her voice to a feint whisper.

"You don't think they know do you?" she said.

"How could they?" Alex said.

"I don't know. It's just... the longer it goes the more I'm worried they've figured something out and are just drawing us out."

"What can we do then?" Ernst said.

Jessie shrugged.

"Nothing I guess. Just keep working."

They picked up the pace and got back to their lab. Alex swiped his badge to enter. They all walked in then came to a dead stop.

Dr. Roe was leaning back against Jessie's desk leafing through some of the papers.

"Oh, hello," he said. "Sorry to surprise you. I was just



checking in on your research.”

Jessie stepped forward.

“And what gives you the right to do that?”

“My new role inside of DrekCorp,” he said smiling.

He stood and walked to them.

“I’m now acting department head of BioTech. In Dr. Castle’s absence, I’ll be taking over his role.”

“Isn’t that a demotion for you?” she said.

“Not at all,” he said. “Getting to be in charge of your exciting research will be a pleasure.”

“However,” he continued, “just know the complete lack of oversight and the allowance of running rough shod over the scientific process is over for the three of you. I’ll be watching you very closely and making sure there are no... missteps along the way. I’d hate for something to come up and you be expelled from the intern program after making it this far.”

“So I assume you’re taking the lab back from us.” Jessie said.

“Why would I do that?” he said.

He motioned to the upper corners of the lab. The three of them looked around. There were now newly installed security cameras in every corner of the room.

“How would I be able to keep an eye on you if you moved?” he said.

Dr. Roe stepped close to the three of them.

His face suddenly turned to a mask of rage.

"I know you three have secrets," his voice was just above a whisper, but shook with anger. "And I am going to find out what they are and destroy you with them."

He stood back and smiled again, the rage gone just as fast as it had come.

"Ok!" he said. "I have to be going. We'll talk soon!"

Dr. Roe pushed between them and grabbed the door handle, then turned back.

"Oh, one more thing. A very curious thing." he said. "Have you heard a rumor of the 'Skeleton Key'?"

Though they fought hard to keep straight faces, the question had come so fast the three of them couldn't help but react.

After much too long of a pause, Alex finally answered.

"No, what is it?"

"DrekCorp has quite the sophisticated and complicated security system. Early on five of these Skeleton Keys were made and distributed to key individuals inside of DrekCorp. This gave them access to pretty much anywhere inside of the lab. You haven't heard of this?"

They all shook their heads.

"Anyhow, like I said, it's a curious thing. Four of them are still accounted for. I have one of my own actually. The

problem is the one that went missing. It went missing about thirteen (TC) years ago."

Dr. Roe looked hard at Jessie.

"It was your brother's key that went missing actually."

He paused briefly before continuing.

"With recent... events, it caused us to go back through our security logs with a fine tooth comb and you know what we found? After thirteen years of inactivity, suddenly your brother's Skeleton Key's fingerprint started showing up in our system."

"And that's not even the truly curious thing. The truly curious thing is your brother's Skeleton Key seems to have been cloned somehow. We're not even sure how it could be done, but there seems to be two versions of his key all of a sudden being used."

"You don't think it's us do you?" Jessie said.

"To be honest, I did think it was you. I thought you had somehow gotten your hands on the key. But then I realized, after going through the logs, it wouldn't have been you."

"Why's that?"

"Because it was used to access this very lab. In fact, it was used to access this lab about two months ago. It was the only night you never logged out to go home. You stayed here in this lab working all night. I matched up the times with the

radiation chamber tests."

Jessie went cold inside.

"Do you happen to remember someone coming to visit you that night? The night you worked alone? The logs show you didn't leave all evening."

Jessie shook her head, but couldn't speak.

"Oh well," Dr. Roe said cheerfully, "I'm sure we'll figure it out at some point. These folks that are sneaking around causing trouble always end up slipping up at some point. Have a great day!"

The door shut and left the three of them in silent shock.

# # #

### The End Part 2

Jessie glanced over her shoulder one more time. She checked even though she knew they were the only ones in this shit hole of a diner.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a small lockbox and pushed it across the table.

"I need you to put this somewhere safe," she said.

Dick nodded solemnly.

"Sure, sure," he said. "I'll take care of it."

He put it in the booth next to him.

"What is it?"

"Something I stole. Something a lot of people are desperate to get back."

"Are you going to get me killed Jessie?" Dick said, then laughed.

Jessie didn't laugh.

"You ok?" he said.

"I've had a hard couple of months," she said.

"Yeah I get that. New job. Stressful work load, Etcetera."

"Sure."

The waitress came over holding a tray full of food. She set down three different plates full of various breakfast carbs and protein in front of Dick. she tucked the tray under her arm and looked at Jessie.

"Still don't want anything hon?"

"No, I'm just good with coffee. Thanks."

The waitress nodded and walked back behind the counter. She pulled her phone out of her apron and got back to her round of Candy Crush.

"Dick, I need to ask you something, and I need you to tell me the truth."

Dick nodded.

"Sure, sure. Hit me."

Jessie locked eyes with him.

"Is my brother still alive?"

Dick cut his eyes away and sat back in the booth.

"The truth?" he said.

She nodded.

"I don't know. I thought for years that he must be dead. I mean, why did he work so hard to set everything up for him to disappear? And why hasn't he contacted me in the last thirteen years? He has to be gone, right?"

"Right," Jessie said, "but..."

"Exactly! But. Maybe it's just meeting you. Maybe it's the fact that after waiting for thirteen years, I'm actually doing what he planned in taking care of you. But something makes me think he's still out there. Still pulling the strings somehow."

"But nothing definitive."

Dick shrugged.

"Nothing I can put my finger on for proof."

Dick thought for a moment and continued.

"Here's the thing about your brother. He was brilliant. Always three and a half steps ahead of everyone else. He was also obsessive about things. Like clinically obsessive about things. That's what made him such a brilliant scientist. That's what drove his research. But it's also what destroyed every other part of his life. He had no friends. No

girlfriends. He basically ignored your family. I had a hunch that he slept at DrekCorp more than he did at his apartment."

"But you two were friends."

"No. Not friends. Yeah, he took care of me in high school. Kept me from getting my ass whooped every day. But he only connected with me again when he needed me. Sure, I was happy for the work and happy to repay whatever I owed him for the past. But he needed me and that was it."

"The thing is, his obsession switched. From talking to him, it used to be science and then it became... something else."

"What?"

Dick shook his head, somewhat exasperated.

"He would never tell me. But it had something to do with DrekCorp. By the end, he hated that place, but yet he wouldn't leave. Somehow his obsession had turned to the corporation and those in charge instead of the work there."

"But again, I don't know for sure."

Silence fell over them. Jessie stared out across the restaurant lost in thought. She absently rubbed her left forearm where a deep scar had formed.

"Jessie."

She slowly turned her head to Dick.

"What happened to you?"

"Nothing," she said. "I'm fine."

"Bullshit."

Jessie smiled sadly.

"Don't disappear on me kid. I loved your brother. I'm starting to get fond of you too."

"You know," he continued. "I could help you disappear on your own. Tuck you away down in Aruba or something. You've got enough money. Sip drinks and chase the native boys."

"Nah," Jessie said.

She slid out of the booth and stood.

"I've still got work to do."

Jessie walked out of the diner, looked both ways and began walking the two blocks to the bus stop. She pulled out her phone and sent Cylis a text.

"I'm ready. What's next?"

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