

Veritas



Jaime A. Heidel

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It's 8:59am on a misty morning in Chicago. Despite the humidity, I'm decked out in my leather jacket, collar pulled up Elvis-style against the wind. I gaze up at my destination. The tall grey building blends into the sky. All of the metal in my skin is humming and that can only mean one thing; it's going to pour.

I'm greeted with the usual furtive glances as I walk into the main lobby of the hospital.

The clerk looks up at me over half-moon spectacles and smiles. "Good afternoon, Sir."

I grimace and give the old lady a curt nod before heading toward the elevator. I chuckle to myself. It's not so strange that Methuselah's grandmother has continued to call me, "Sir" for the six months I've been coming here. Still, she should know what time of day it is. Her grasp on reality is growing more tenuous as the weeks go on but she hasn't been replaced. Then again, having tenure that dates before the days of Christ must have its perks.

I push the button for the seventh floor. My stomach lurches as I ascend. I hate enclosed spaces.

Ding.

The elevator doors slide open. It's time for the big walk down the main ward.

Look out everybody, there's a circus missing its freak.

I can't help the sneer curling onto my lip as an older woman, young child in tow, nearly topples into a food cart as I pass. The little girl turns back to look. She manages a shy smile before being yanked out of sight.

"Hey, don't rip off my arm!"

You go girl.

An elderly man shuffles by, the wheels of his portable IV drip squeaking on the waxed floor. He raises a bushy eyebrow in my direction and continues on.

I suppose I should explain lest you think, dear reader that the stares and my hospital visit are due to severe burns or a sudden outbreak of flesh-eating bacteria.

Alas, no. The reason for all the bug-eyed gawking is my choice of style. A head to toe inventory if I may; my hair is dark with streaks of red and has a habit of falling into my eyes. Each ear has six earrings, an assortment of studs and skulls ending at two gauged, silver-lined holes. My face is unmarked save the labret and nose ring

but no tattoos. I've been told my face is too handsome for them. Not pretty. Even as a kid parading around, rather unhappily I might add, in pink dresses and matching hair bows, I was never called pretty. I wear a bondage collar almost every day. I'm nobody's slave but it's fun to keep them guessing. Today, I think I'm kind of conservative in a black wife-beater and ripped jeans. However, based on the looks I'm getting I'm in the minority on that assumption.

So, as you can see, I don't blend. Still, the way people jump away from me as though I'm carrying the bubonic is a bit ridiculous.

"Glad you decided to join us, V."

Dr. Marcus Bingham taps his Rolex as I walk past him and through the door in which he's leaning. I once asked him how a first year resident could afford such a luxurious timepiece. He never answered but I know now. I know more now than I ever wanted to. Even the hungriest of scholars would want to dive into the nearest sensory deprivation tank to live out the rest of their lives in blissful isolation if their minds were every half as crowded as mine.

This isn't me being boastful. I took the MENSA test out of sheer boredom once and the rather benign score of 190 caused the members to believe I'd somehow cheated.

Perhaps it was the shit-kickers and bondage pants I'd worn to the interview that excluded me from membership into their elite little club. I don't care.

What I mean when I say most people wouldn't want to rent space in my mind is simple; I can read minds. Oh, and no matter how many times you've wished you had the gift, believe me, you don't want it.

"You need to be on time, V. You're going to muck up my results."

Marcus's tone is scolding but he favors me with a smile as his guinea pig takes a seat. He fills a syringe and taps the glass with a gloved finger. The shot is just a little pinch, followed by a slight burning sensation that travels up my arm.

"New ink?" Marcus asks, eyeing my shoulder.

I follow his gaze. "Nope, I just got it touched up." I turn my attention back to counting holes in the ceiling tile.

"What does it stand for again?"

Marcus has his back to me now, fiddling with some instruments on the tray.

I roll my eyes. "Shit in a box."

“Fascinating.”

He’s not listening. I feel another jab.

I begin counting aloud, backwards from twenty. By the time I get to six, it begins to happen. It’s as though a pair of industrial strength earplugs have been pulled from my ears and the volume of the air around me is amplified.

“I think she’s cute.”

The voice is female. Young.

“I bet she’s terrified of magnets.”

This voice is female as well but dry. Older.

“Lord, you always say that!”

“Well, if you’re so into her, ask her out then.”

There is a tingling now, an opening I can only describe as a type of expansion of my brain.

Images. Wow. Okay. This is new.

I’m now in a film starring myself. The elevator doors open and I exit. I appear to be engulfed in my own private breeze as it billows through my trench coat. Wait, trench coat? The pretty young Medical Assistant stares at me. The clipboard in her hand falls to the floor with a clatter. Our eyes lock. She gapes at me, a deer caught in

headlights. I reach over the counter, grab her, pull her to me and...a phone rings.

“Ow!” I jam both palms over my ears.

“I’ve been modifying the formula. How far were you able to hear this time, V?” The doctor’s face is anxious, expectant as he leans over me. He’s close enough for me to know he’s had eggs for breakfast.

Averting my head to take a cleaner breath, I force myself to concentrate on my body in the chair. The noises and images begin to fade.

“Only to the nurse’s station still,” I tell him.

“What were they discussing?”

I grin. I can’t help it. “Me.”

Marcus rolls his eyes. I think he’s jealous. As he turns to his computer, I let my mind slide open, like raising one strip of a blind.

Useless. I’ve doubled the dosage. Nothing more. Worked for months. Terminate?

“Let’s try again next week,” Marcus says, packing up his gear.

“Rest for a while. I’ll give you a voucher so you can grab something from the cafeteria, okay?”

Cindy, the Medical Assistant whose fantasy I'd starred in moments before is standing at the station when I walk past. She has her arms crossed over her chest, a scowl on her face as she watches TV. Noticing the motion in her peripheral vision, she turns. I wink before hanging a right toward the cafeteria.

I smile. Though I've disappeared through the double doors, I can feel the heat rising in her face as though it were my own. I sense a mixture of confusion and pleasure. I've never noticed her before. I've been too preoccupied.

Who the Devil let that thing loose in here?

The thought belongs to a pregnant woman. She averts her eyes and skitters by me as I pass.

My dad would kill me if I dressed like that.

This reflection comes from a girl no older than sixteen seated at a table in the far corner. An old man sits across from her, slumped to one side. The girl looks as though she'd rather be anywhere else.

Here comes the dyke all dressed in...

Okay. Enough.

I shut down. Glancing along the rows of rectangle tables and Sunny Delight colored chairs, I realize I'm going to have to find him the old fashioned way.

Where is he?

I grab my meal and hand the cashier my voucher. Her smile is genuine. She sports a lip-ring and a rebellious streak of pink in her dark brown hair. We're kin.

Whack!

I turn and run full force into something soft yet solid. Two massive hands grab my shoulders and steady me before my tray ends up on the floor.

I smile, looking up into a pale face the consistency of Play dough. The eyes, dark and watery, dart like minnows behind thick, plastic glasses.

Melvin.

"Sorry about that," I whisper. "Didn't sense you. Had to switch off."

Melvin's head gives a little jerk and with that, he's off, lab coat flapping in his trundling wake as he pushes through the cafeteria doors.

I follow.

A couple of twists and turns, a glance or two over the shoulder and we're there. I hear a beep as Melvin's card-key slides open a metal door. Our footfalls echo off the concrete walls as we descend two flights of stairs.

Swipe. Beep. Swipe. Beep.

Out of necessity, rather than courtesy, he allows me through the final door first, and then pushes a series of numbers into a keypad to lock us in.

Petri dishes and glass beakers are lined up like soldiers in formation along smooth black countertop. Two workstations, complete with latex gloves, glass slides and a microscope sit in the center of the room. The space is dark save the bare fluorescent bulb above a small and crowded desk. A laptop at its center boasts a Bezier screensaver.

Melvin slides his considerable bulk into the leather desk chair. I grab the rolling stool and sit across from him.

I slide back the panels in my mind. "Alright. Hit me."

I feel a momentary sense of expectation, as though teetering at the top of a rollercoaster just before the downward plunge. Then, it

happens. My mind begins to expand, exploding outward, stretching like a tire given one too many pumps of air. Something shatters and I hear the tinkling of what sounds like wind chimes rushing past my ears.

I'm on my feet now, eyes closed but seeing all.

Melvin hands me slides and I look into the microscope and take notes. The lines, letters and numbers flowing from the pen are written in a language that would have been foreign to me moments before. I'm now drawing something that resembles a horse and I find myself stifling a laugh.

Melvin shoots me a glance. *Right. Concentrate.* The dose Dr. Bengham gave me is already halfway to wearing off.

As I watch the test tubes, now full of sky-blue liquid spinning in the agitator, I begin to feel the effects of the drug beginning to ebb away. I stare, letting my gaze go blurry. I slow down my breathing and try to hang on for a few more minutes.

My being here right now has been a strange twist of fate. Unlike eager-beaver college kids and some of my house-challenged brethren, I had never even considered donating any part of my body to science. When I ran away from home two years ago, I got luckier than most. I

met a guy named Nick my first day out. He was a sage twenty-four to my wide-eyed and passing-for-innocent sixteen. He showed me places I could crash, taught me how to dumpster-dive, and showed me the ropes of life on the streets. Two weeks out some guy approached me some about back-alley “modeling”. Word got to Nick. The guy disappeared. The camera got me twenty-five bucks at the pawnshop.

I’d been couch surfing for a couple of weeks when I got the news that Nick had died. Overdose. I was on my own.

I’d been sitting out a drippy Sunday under the eaves of Molly’s, the restaurant that had closed down a week prior. I’d nicked a paper off a Dunkin Donuts counter and had been using it as a makeshift umbrella before I’d located my days perch. It was sheer boredom that had made me flip through the sodden pages. That’s when I saw the ad. It was huge. It took up the whole page.

Volunteer for a clinical research study.

Earn up to \$2,500.

Healthy males and females.

18-55 years of age.

There was a number. I called.

There were six of us in the study. We got paid once a week to pop pills, take injections and answer questions. Within a few weeks, we were down to four. Two of the volunteers had an allergic reaction to the drugs and had to be taken off the study. One found a real job. By the end of the month, it was just me and an older man named Terry. Then, it was just me. I was different. Special. According to the tests, my body was reacting to the drugs the way they had hoped. At the time I was told I was taking a clinical trial drug that was supposed to improve memory function and concentration. For me, it worked. I was told it might have something to do with my high I.Q. It was at the end of the second week that my hearing began to go all Bionic Woman. I was sitting alone in the testing room, working on the computer when a bang behind me almost made me fall out of my chair. When I turned around, nothing had fallen over. I resumed my test. Five minutes later, I heard the sound of glass against concrete exploding in my ear. I thought there must have been a car accident in the street but there was no window to see.

I was still standing in the middle of the room, eyes darting around when Marcus walked in. Without preamble, he asked me what I'd heard. It didn't dawn on me until after I'd blurted out the

information that the room I was in was supposed to be soundproof. When I asked Marcus how he knew, he pointed to a sprinkler head in the corner of the room. I'd been being watched. My sense of foreboding grew with each new turn as I followed him down unfamiliar corridors.

I was led into a dark room where two other people waited. One was a woman, introduced to me as Dr. Andrea Bowman. The other was Melvin, heavy and silent as a paperweight in a corner. As soon as Dr. Bowman began to speak, I knew that Marcus's presence beside me was not that of advocate, but of guard. If I'd tried to run, I'd have been restrained.

I kept my features impassive, swallowing my mounting panic as she explained.

A decade prior, they'd begun a clinical trial to test the effect certain drugs had on memory and concentration. They'd been testing a series of subjects when one of them, a woman in her twenties, had begun to exhibit what they called, "super hearing." Realizing the potential of their find, they'd retained their subject for continued experimentation and closed the study off to the public. However,

within weeks the drug seemed to have little to no effect on their so-called “super girl” and she’d been discharged.

Spending the next ten years refining the drug, they began testing a new batch of people, myself included and I, like the other girl, had developed “super hearing”. They wanted to keep me. I was offered five hundred thousand dollars and given a contract to sign.

Dr. Bowman’s grin was demonic. “You do realize you’ll have to continue to be homeless until the experiment is over, correct?”

I had a pen poised over the contract when Marcus spoke up. “The other girl showed some signs of being able to read minds. Have you been able to do that?”

Say nothing.

The voice had come in a whisper that seemed to have been blown into the back of my head. I’d frowned, my gaze flitting over to the pudgy technician whose name was then unknown to me. His eyes up until that point had been glassy and unfocused, his jaw had been slack.

When I looked up, he was glaring at me, a fierce, all-knowing intensity in his eyes.

You can do more than you know. Say nothing. Nothing.

Realizing I'd let my eyes rest on Melvin's face a beat too long, I squinted and then broke away, giving Dr. Bowman and Marcus the same exaggerated look.

"Nope," I said with a grin. "No telepathic powers yet."

I signed the contract and left.

No. I'd been *allowed* to leave.

Melvin had saved my life that day and now, six months later, I'm returning the favor more than ten fold.

The machine stops. I blink as Melvin passes two vials into my hand. The liquid is clear now. I know also that it will be odorless and tasteless as well. Glancing down at the clipboard on the desk, I'm struck by the complexity of the notes, all written in my own hand. Now that the effects of the drug have worn off, I can't decipher a word of it.

I don't even flinch at the sharp sting in my left arm. As I continue to gaze at the paper, the strange symbols and numbers once again form into a cohesive structure in my mind.

Melvin withdraws the needle. His smile is apologetic. *Sorry.*

I shrug.

If Melvin and I are to communicate, it is necessary for him to continue to inject me with the same experimental drug Marcus has been using on me for months.

“They’re thinking of terminating the project.”

Melvin’s nod is solemn. He takes off his latex gloves and slumps down onto a stool beside me. It squeaks in protest.

“Does it matter?” I ask, slipping the vials into my pocket. “We did it. We have everything we need.”

Melvin’s eyes cloud, his gaze lingering on me for a beat longer than is comfortable. *I couldn’t have done this without you. You never had to do this.*

My expression hardens as I read his thoughts. “Yes, I did.”

Do you know what you have to do?

I nod. “Break into the factory, get through security by crawling through the air ventilation ducts and slip the compound into the water supply. Sure. No problem. Did I happen to mention I’m claustrophobic?”

His smile is gentle. *Every time.*

I smirk.

Tough chick like you should be able to handle it though, right?

“Dude, you’re starting to sound like me,” I tell him. “That’s creepy.”

What does my voice sound like?

That catches me off guard.

It dawns on me that the question is a valid one. Melvin has never heard himself speak aloud.

After my first encounter with Melvin, he began to send me strong telepathic messages whenever I was getting injections. I’d be sitting in the chair, concentrating, answering Marcus’s questions but another part of my mind would be locked into Melvin’s thoughts. At first, I found the dual concentration difficult, almost disconcerting, but after a while, it came naturally.

I’ll never forget his first communication with me.

I know you can’t respond. Please just listen. I need your help. The world needs your help. I’m working on something that will have a fundamental impact on this planet. I don’t know if you’ll believe me but I hope you will keep an open mind. The government is controlling us. Every decision we make. The government controls everything we buy, everything we do, and everything we watch. It’s

not just reality TV and Big Brother. It's something you may have never suspected. It's food, V. It's in the food.

Marcus had been communicating with another technician down the hall via instant message to test my hearing. The guy down the hall would drop a pin or squeeze some bubble wrap and I was to report to Marcus what I had heard. When I identified them correctly, Marcus would beam at me like a proud father.

It was during our second day of tests that Melvin asked me to come and meet him.

I hope you've had time to think over what I've said. If you believe what I've told you, take the stairs at the end of the corridor and go down past the morgue. Take a left at the fire extinguisher but don't go farther or you'll be spotted on camera. I pray you'll come.

And come I did. I didn't even think to question him. There was no question.

"Dude," I'd said when I'd gotten to his office and closed the door behind me. "Of course the government controls our every move." I held my arms out. "Do you think I'd dress like this if I wasn't just a *bit* of an anarchist?"

He'd laughed then, a strange, uncertain sound emanating from atrophied vocal chords.

When I asked him why he couldn't speak, he didn't blame his being mute on genetics or a childhood illness. His mother had been part of a clinical trial at this same hospital when she had been pregnant with him. By the time she'd realized she was expecting the damage had already been done. The ironic thing was the drug had done nothing to impair Melvin's mind. He was a genius. A regular Stephen Hawking in hiding.

I don't want too many people knowing what goes on up here. Melvin had thought to me, tapping his misshapen head. I have so many ideas, thoughts on how to change, mold and reshape this world into a better place. The problem is, I can't get them out. I can't even write them down. It's worse than the most severe case of dyslexia. When the experiments began ten years ago, the "hearing" experiments or whatever they're calling them these days, I met one of their test subjects, a girl who began to be able to read minds. She could hear my thoughts. I had a way to communicate. Dr. Bowman became suspicious. She must have threatened the girl because the next day, she began failing tests on purpose, saying she could no

longer hear anything beyond the normal human range. I was in the room that day. I can still remember the way her eyes pleaded with me not to reveal her. I didn't.

I'm gazing at him now, trying to figure out how best to answer his question. Then, a word pops into my head. "Elegant," I say. "Your voice sounds elegant."

A small clock in the corner chimes the hour. Melvin is expected elsewhere in the hospital and it's time for me to go. I recheck my pocket and exit via my usual route out the back alley door. Nobody has bothered to repair the camera designed to guard the area when it "mysteriously" begun to malfunction months ago.

Cheapskates.

I look up at the sky. The rain has abated and the sun is peeking out from behind soft, puffy clouds. I'm just about to cross the street when I hear a voice behind me.

"What does V stand for?"

I whirl and a million excuses as to why I am still loitering by the hospital die on my lips when I see who has spoken.

The Medical Assistant smiles. I bite back a grin as the memories of her fantasy about me in the billowing trench coat resurface in my mind.

I walk toward her. "It's Cindy, right?"

She smiles, a slight flush creeping into her pale cheeks. She tucks a strand of auburn hair behind one ear. "Yeah. You're V but...what does it stand for?"

"Truth."

She frowns.

"Listen, I was just heading to the park to scare the general populace and maybe feed the ducks. Care to join me?"

Her momentary quizzical look turns into a grin. "Alright."

She moves into step beside me. We're quiet for a while, an odd couple to the passersby.

"V stands for Veritas. It's the Latin word for truth."

"Were your parents hippies?"

I laugh. "No, it's not my real name. I kind of adopted it."

"Veritas." Cindy sounds out the word. It's beautiful, almost mystical, coming from her lips. "I like it."

"Thank you."

“So, where did you get it?”

I sigh and smile. “It’s kind of a long story.”

“I’ve got time.”

We enter the park and it’s only now Cindy realizes how people are staring at us.

“Doesn’t this get annoying?” Cindy whispers, her shoulder brushing mine. She turns to look behind us then her eyes are resting on my face.

I shrug. “You get used to it.”

“You have beautiful eyes.”

Her own eyes widen a bit. Her mouth closes and she returns to her former distance from me. I guess she hadn’t expected to give the compliment.

“Thank you.”

“So, tell me about the truth.”

“The truth is many things and nothing.”

I love speaking enigmatically. Chicks dig it.

“Yeah?” Cindy raises an eyebrow. “Is that how you see yourself?”

My smile is sheepish. “My sister gave it to me. The name, I mean.”

“Oh...”

She sounds almost disappointed. Maybe she had wanted the mystery to continue. Damn the short shelf life of my mind-reading abilities!

“She died a couple of years ago,” I tell her.

There’s a rock by my feet. I kick it harder than intended and send a goose flapping to get out of its path. I swear it gives me an indignant look before settling down once more in a new patch of grass. The rock plunks into the lake and disappears.

“Whoops,” I mutter, sending a nervous sidelong glance toward Cindy.

“How did she die?”

We choose an empty bench and sit down. I gaze out over the water. She gazes at me.

“It was an accident,” I say, not taking my eyes from the lake. “I was taking a home economics class at school. It was a requirement that we take recipes home and try them out. I made American Chop Suey because it was the easiest. I figured I could fool the teacher if I added a few extra ingredients. My little sister was only four and I was

babysitting. I'd given her some crackers as a snack but she wasn't having it. She wanted to try some of the pasta."

I swallow down the lump that is beginning to form in my throat and stay quiet for a long moment. "I didn't know she was allergic to cayenne pepper."

Cindy gives a little gasp beside me. When I muster the courage to look at her, I see there are tears in her eyes.

"By the time the ambulance came, it was too late."

"I'm so sorry." Cindy's words come in a whisper thick with emotion. She clears her throat.

"I left home a week later. I just packed up and left."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"So you're being homeless is a kind of self-inflicted punishment?"

The look I shoot her must be a glare because she flinches.

Her eyes soften and she surprises me by passing her fingers over my forehead, brushing my hair. "I'm sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have said that."

When she takes her hand away, the absence of it makes my chest feel as though it's caving in. I hadn't realized how long it's been since another human being touched me so tenderly. I'm hit with a simultaneous urge to burst into tears and bolt from the secrets I've just revealed.

I do neither.

"You know, we can't feed the ducks without any bread."

I spread my hands and grin, grateful for the shift in topic. "You have a point. Should we get some?"

"We could. What about you? Have you eaten anything?"

"Nah. I took a couple of bites of cafeteria food but that's about it."

Cindy makes a face. "That stuff will kill you for sure." Then she asks, "Where are you staying tonight?"

I pat the rough, worn wood of the bench beneath us and smile, mask fully restored. "These are more comfortable than they look."

Cindy allows her gaze to linger on me a long moment before speaking. "Come home with me."

##

I groan and arch my back. The walls are smooth and slippery and I grunt with the effort to work my way through them. I pause a moment, listening. Nothing but the sound of rushing air greets my ears. The breeze that blows through the metal air duct I've spent the last twenty minutes winding my way through is the only barrier between me and complete hysteria. Unlike most people, I can't remember my source of claustrophobia. No traumatic stint in a stuck elevator or locked Porto-potty brought on the fear. It has always been. I turn another corner, the final one, pressing the toe of my boot against the confining wall. Pushing myself up on my hands, I look out through the grate at the churning tide of yellow and green below me.

Melvin had told me the vat would be big but I hadn't expected it to be Olympic-sized.

Beyond the bubbling cauldron is a sign bearing the Nesco-Cadbar insignia. Along the walls, conveyor belts full of potato chips, chocolate bars, cookies and snack packs lay dormant, awaiting packaging. On the floor beside them are boxes packed twelve high, thirty deep.

I slide the two glass vials from the pocket of my jeans. I unscrew the caps.

We American citizens have been told for decades that doctors and scientists remain baffled as to the cause of cancer and other degenerative diseases.

This is a lie.

Ninety percent of all pre-packaged snacks are scientifically designed to be both addictive and non-filling. Basically, the more junk food you consume, the more you crave it. When you stop eating it, you experience symptoms of withdrawal and begin to crave it even more. If most of your diet consists of fast and processed food, you begin to become sedentary and lethargic with symptoms ranging from mild depression to major illness. The problem is, the symptoms have been around for so long that we as a society view them as normal. It has gotten to the point where few people know what it feels like to be healthy. The snack and fast food companies make a huge profit from the addiction and, decades later, the drug companies get their kickbacks when consumers come down with diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, etc.

Simple plan. Horrifying in its implications. Absolutely true.

What I hold in my hands at this moment is a chemical created by a man whose genius mind was cut off from the outside world while

he was still in the womb all in the name of in the name of scientific research. I never did tell you what the experiment was that Melvin's mother had volunteered to take part in did I? Oh, this is a real kicker. Melvin's mother had been part of a control group for Nesco-Cadbar before the big merger nearly thirty years ago. They were testing an additive they touted as a "sweetener". Despite what happened to her son and the obvious symptoms of countless other test subjects, the sweetener passed regulations and is now a main ingredient in all of their products.

Melvin's formula is designed to isolate the additive that makes its Nesco-Cadbar snack foods both addicting and deadly. So potent is Melvin's creation, that just a few drops will render it inert and harmless. The snack food itself will still be a terrible choice as nourishment but the secret ingredient, the lure, will be destroyed.

He named the compound Veritas, after me.

I gave him hell about it but I was pleased. Maybe even touched. Maybe.

I pull out the stopper now and notice that my hand is trembling. I need to get this done and get out of here.

An image of Cindy flashes through my mind. Her intense gaze. Her arched back. She's beautiful. Only hours ago, she was sleeping in my arms, wisps of her long, reddish brown hair draped over my tattoos.

I moved quietly when I left her bed and dressed in silence. I hadn't realized she was awake until I heard her voice. My hand had been on the doorknob.

"You're not done paying yet, are you?"

I looked back. The dark brown of her eyes shimmered in what remained of the candlelight. I couldn't tell if there were tears in them. I didn't want to know.

She surprised me with a kind of resigned half-smile.

I gazed at her a moment longer, hoping my eyes conveyed the words I couldn't say before I was out the door, down the stairs and running.

I'm aiming the two vials over the churning vat below. The liquid pours out, separating in the air on the way down. For a moment, they seem to hang suspended. I am reminded of the NASA video I saw in elementary school. Astronauts pouring water in zero G and watching

it float around like Jell-O squares before letting it plop into their mouths.

I hear a small splash and gaze out over the yellow liquid for a moment, somehow expecting some kind of change. Nothing happens. Everything below me looks the same as it did when I arrived. Only I know the difference.

Pocketing the vials, I wrench my body around and begin the long crawl toward freedom.

##

It's been a full forty-eight hours since I broke into the factory. After I found my way out of the confines of the air duct and tasted fresh air once more, I'd staggered to the nearest alley and collapsed into unconsciousness. I'd woken the next morning with a heaviness in my legs so profound; I'd been convinced something had fallen on them. It had taken a couple of hours for the circulation to begin moving again. Eventually, I'd been able to stand and walk around.

It's worse today. I'm sitting on the same park bench where Cindy and I were only two days before. Two mallards swim over to me, wait for a few moments and then move on when they realize they're not going to get a meal. I reach up to push a wisp of hair out of

my eyes. My hand is trembling violently. I stuff it under my jacket, self-conscious. I don't want to look like a junkie. There are kids in this park.

Melvin told me it would be sudden. That the effects of prolonged exposure to the drug would hit me one day and that would be that. I thought I'd been prepared. He'd warned me. Each time I took an injection he would warn me.

V, are you sure you want to do this?

I did. As soon as I understood the implications of what I would be able to do for mankind, I didn't hesitate. It wasn't an option.

The sound of laughter greets my ears and I look out over the lake to the playground. I spot a head of dark brown hair and a bright pink sweater. My heart jumps into my throat. The girl turns, grinning and spinning. She's Asian but for just a moment, she looked like Jayde. My happy-go-lucky kid sister with eyes the color of her name. I'd been her hero. As soon as she'd been old enough to walk, she followed me everywhere. At first it annoyed me, having my own pint-sized shadow, but she grew on me. Eventually, it felt lonely when she wasn't around, like I was missing an arm or something.

She'd tried hard to say my name. Victoria. When she'd first said it, it had come out, "Verita" and the nickname stuck. It was a friend of mine who'd been taking Latin who told me that Jayde's pet name for me had a meaning.

Truth.

People on the streets just call me "V".

A sudden, sharp sting down my left arm makes me gasp. Moments later, the pain is gone, replaced by a vague numbness that makes the limb feel as though it is no longer a part of me.

I rise from the bench and make my way along the sidewalk. Entering the tree-lined bike-path, I follow it toward the woods. Glancing around, I bend to pick a handful of daffodils. There are signs everywhere not to pick them but this bunch is worth it. Hiding them under my jacket with my good hand, I try to pick up the pace as best I can. A man and his dog pass by, heading in the opposite direction. We exchange curt nods. A teenage skateboarder whizzes past me, followed by two younger kids on bikes. I'm almost at the edge of the woods now, where the path ends and everybody with wheels needs to turn back.

It's almost dusk when I reach my destination. I kneel down in front of the grave and let the flowers slip from my almost useless hand. My trembling fingers trace the lettering of my little sister's name and slide into the small hole once occupied by a Jade stone.

**In Loving Memory of Jayde Lily Adams. Born August
20, 2002 died October 12, 2006.**

"Maybe it was pointless to run away," I tell the silent gravestone. "I didn't get far, did I?"

The rasping sound of my voice causes a pang in my gut.

A watermarked engraving of a small, barefoot child chases butterflies along the marble. I stare at the child for a long moment before rising to my feet.

I walk away from the grave, past the rows of headstones and out onto the path leading to the woods beyond. About half a mile in, I find a branch suitable to use as a walking stick. My pace slows to a crawl and I veer off the path, heading directionless into the trees beyond. I hear the rushing sound of a stream somewhere ahead. The sun has nearly set. Inching my way to a tall tree, I lay my hand on the bark. It is when I notice that I cannot feel the roughness of its surface beneath

my fingertips that it begins to truly sink in. I press my cheek to the tree, my forehead and finally, my lips. Still, all is numb.

My tongue darts out to taste the bark. I can still feel with this particular organ and I savor it.

I lower myself to the ground.

A sense of calm washes over me. I know others will have it so much easier. Melvin has made so many friends across the World Wide Web. Within weeks the formula we developed will be everywhere and nobody else will have to die for Nesco-Cadbar and its affiliates anymore.

In the darkness, I can make out the small stream and I let my gaze fix on it. As my central nervous system continues to shut down, I somehow know that my sight will be the last of my senses to go. I allow my attention to drift and wander across my surroundings, into the leaves, the grass, the trees and the stream.

As I slip away, I realize I am finally done paying.